

MORE PERFORMING, LESS PROTESTING:
EXPLORING THE MEDIATED POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF THAI MIDDLE CLASSES

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Abstract

This study explores the mediated political engagement of middle classes in Thailand. Using an ethnographic approach that includes interviews, participant observation and digital ethnography, the study explores the ways in which Thai people used social media to reinforce class divides. The three middle classes – upper-, middle- and lower-middle classes – used their social class disposition as a base in expressing their views on politics. Lifestyle as a form of political identity allowed upper-middle-class and elite people to distance themselves from other middle-class groups, while low-income groups who supported Thaksin used a variety of strategies, including the grass-roots revolution, inequality discourse and social mobilisation. The upper-middle class used social media to display aspirational qualities in legitimising their political opinion. On the other hand, the middle- and lower-middle class used social media to discuss their political opinions with similar-minded friends as a part of their sociality.

Similar to the findings of scholars such as Fenton and Barassi (2011) and Grömping (2014), this thesis argues that social media form echo chambers and rarely facilitate dialogue and deliberation. Social media also enhance unconventional political participation, which leads to symbolic action and lifestyle politics more than conventional political participation. This study also argues that class analysis is important in media studies of Thailand, where social practice is still strongly framed by social class and social culture. Finally, traditional Thai sociocultural norm such as Kreng jai inevitably creates different social media mediated practice. This conclusion supports to the argument that social and cultural frame impact how Thai middle class consume and are mediated around social media.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background of the research

In July 2013, social media was used as a prominent political medium in Thailand for the first time. The “V For Thailand” movement was a response to the launch by Yingluck Shinawatra’s government of the amnesty bill in March 2013. This so-called “White Mask” group initiated their first movement against the government, and also indicated that the anti-Thaksin movement in Thailand continued to exist.

In a matter of days, the number of “Like” clicks for the V For Thailand Facebook page increased from a few thousand to more than 70,000 (The Nation, 2013). The page borrowed its symbol of fighting for freedom – a white Guy Fawkes mask – from the film *V for Vendetta*, a political thriller. Their activity started with a post encouraging people to join a rally at the Central World shopping complex and Lumpini Park. The number of people who joined the group’s protests at Central World multiplied very quickly, from 200-300 to 2,000-3,000 (The Nation, 2013).

Their rallies were seen as pioneering forms of cyber protest in Thailand (Wattanayagorn, 2013, quoted in Sinlapalavan, 2013). Thai academics and activists believed the anti-government social media group would become a part of street politics, and a development that has greater power than the mainstream media (Katasila, 2013, quoted in Sinlapalavan, 2013). V For Thailand’s Facebook page was an early sign of growing social media usage in expressing political opinion in Thailand. Altogether, a new type of political action, where people could share political views as well as reference global political symbols, such as Guy Fawkes masks, was also observable.

The phenomenal success of the V For Thailand movement inspired the later movement, the #Thaiuprising, which lasted from November 2013 until May 2014 and was framed as the biggest anti-Thaksin cyber movement. They referred to themselves as the Great Mass of the People, who represented the majority of Thai citizens. The bird’s-eye-view images of large crowds of people taking to the streets were shared around social media to support the claim. Facebook pages were filled with pictures of people attending the protest. For a while, selfies taken at the protest sites were posted on Facebook in order to represent the user’s political

identity. Protesters who joined the Thai Uprising employed social media as their key communication channel and created real-time contact with others by using #Thaiuprising (Pornwasin, 2013). Politicians and activists who were connected to the Thai Uprising encouraged people to tell the world using the same hashtag throughout their demonstrations.

On the other hand, the pro-Thaksin movement, made up of low-income people who support Thaksin, also pushed its “inequality discourse” and challenged the anti-Thaksin elite groups with online strategies of their own (Jeerapongsuwan, 2013). A video clip they uploaded to YouTube, “นี่คือเหตุผลที่ทำไมคนไทยต้องเท่ากัน” (This is why Thais should be equal), told the story of a country woman, who had written a letter to complain that her inability to access the internet prevented her from participating in politics. The video was shared and reposted on Facebook and Twitter by the pro-Thaksin campaign against the Thai Uprising movement.

Although they have been framed as lower class, with limited social media access, the pro-Thaksin faction, contrary to what has been suggested, are mostly lower-middle class. The pro-Thaksin middle class was emerging due to Thaksin’s populist policy (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011). The main body of the anti-Thaksin faction, on the other hand, are upper- to middle-middle class. As a result, the social media scene in Thailand is divided and filled with heated conversation, rather than being homogenous and only containing the opinions of the anti-Thaksin movement. The social media scene in Thailand, as a result, comprises two groups of middle classes, who have a shared socio-economic status, but disagree on politics.

What makes middle-class people behave differently on social media, when they have a similar socio-economic status? Does this political division affect their political participation practice on social media? Or, in fact, do social media amplify the division among them?

During the period of demonstrations, a big cloud of disagreement covered Thai society. Though Thaksin supporters and anti-Thaksin factions had been caught up in intense political contestation since the 2006 coup d'état (Ungpakorn, 2008), the cyber movements in 2013 represented an even more extreme political polarisation.

A *Bangkok Post* report claimed that this heavy social media political campaign became a big test of some relationships. From romantic relationships to friendships, people with different political opinions were not as trustful towards their friends with opposing political views as they had been before (Post reporters, 2014). In fact, from the study of Media monitor organisation, hate speeches had been found on both political websites and political satellite TV channels long before the movements (Rojanaphruk, 2012). The two factions had launched their own satellite TV channels, websites and community radio stations, which focused on communicating their political propaganda to their followers. However, the enmity reached a new level on social media, as the two factions broadcast different content on the same space.

Social media have been welcomed as a major tool for mobilising people to participate in recent protests. Around the world, from the Green Revolution and the Persian Awakening (Keller, 2010) in Iran to the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia (Howard and Hussain, 2011), social media have been praised as being influential tools in political regime changes. However, with Thais' awkward political expression and the country's political division, what opportunities do social media present? Does Thais' social class and cultural context affect their political participation on social media?

What makes the usage of social media in Thailand the way it is?

The relationship between social media and political participation in Thailand under this specific circumstance is the main issue I would like to discuss in this thesis. Academics have praised social media for its role in supporting equal and democratic societies, but the usage of social media for political participation in Thailand that I have witnessed suggests otherwise. Thailand's social and cultural context is an important factor that affects social media usage. The social class structure in Thailand, which initiates other inequalities, also results in some unique social and cultural behaviour that can both encourage and discourage political engagement. Moreover, the social hierarchy that results from this social class structure creates some unique Thai social norms, such as "Kreng jai", which prevents Thais from frankly expressing their opinions. These aspects of Thailand's social and cultural context also affect social media usage in the country.

Similar to what I have observed in Thailand, recent studies of other countries have found there to be an inconsistent relationship between social media and political participation. While there has been increased usage of social networking sites in digital political participation recently, such as in the Arab Spring in 2011 and during the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns, the results of this recent phenomenon do not give any significant sign of how social media might affect political participation. The relationship between social media use and political participation is still uncertain.

1.2 First glance at social media and political participation

The various uses of social media for political participation have been investigated publicly by leading scholars in various fields. In social science, the direction of these trends focuses on how social media contribute to various types of political participation, including conventional participation, social mobilisation and political engagement. In investigating this topic, academics have not yet reached a consensus on exactly how social media influences political participation. In general, among those who are investigating the social media phenomenon and its relationship to politics, there are two significant camps: sceptics and utopians. These camps hold opposing views on social media's relationship to major types of political participation, from social mobilisation and conventional participation to political engagement.

The most discussion about the benefits that social media have brought to political participation has related to the mobilisation of social movements. Despite the fact that social network sites (SNS) were not created with activism in mind, they have become a ground for digital protest (Markham, 2014). Social media are credited with facilitating collective action (Shirky, 2008) and enhancing political democracy (Hacker and van Dijk, 2000). Howard (2011, p.145) claimed that digital protest is “the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline”, the goal of which is to tell the story of political injustice via technology.

The most notable social movement that moved forward due to social media is the Arab Spring. The first Arab social movement to prove the potential of social media in mobilising support was the Green Revolution, or the Twitter Revolution,

in Iran (Keller, 2010). Thousands of people organised a protest against Ahmadinejad's suspicious election victory. Another notable Arab movement that proved the effective mobilising capability of social media was the Tunisian revolution in 2010 (Mersal, 2011; Timpane, 2011). It started when a man set himself on fire to protest against the police and the lack of justice in the country. After the news reached social media, millions of protestors set up a street protest against their president's corruption.

Though social media have been praised for promoting citizen participation and providing the ability to mobilise support and recruit participants for actual participatory action (Harlow, 2012; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2012), there are also doubts about how genuine and sustainable this virtual form of political participation is.

Markham (2014) accused academics of exaggerating social media's ability to mobilise support. He suspected that the majority of the content circulated during the Arab Spring movement was not authentic, and argued that social media protest is more about telling people what has happened, rather than focusing on social change. Fenton and Barassi (2011) also found in their empirical research that the mobilising effect created by social media encouraged self-centred participation rather than supported the sustained collective movement that is essential for the continuation of a democratic society.

Regarding voting and conventional political participation, scholars have investigated the effect of social media in various ways. Mostly, they have looked at social media's role as a platform for recruiting citizens to join in political activities or voting campaigns. They have suggested that social media play an important part in facilitating people with voting as well as improving the relationship between citizens and politicians.

Social media have been discussed for their potential to contribute to a political campaign as a tool for mobilising and facilitating citizens to engage in the campaign, which eventually affects the voting turnout and even the result (Westling, 2007; Williams and Gulati, 2008). An empirical study has shown that social media also have a positive influence in connecting people, for example by serving as a common platform for citizens and politicians to participate and engage in political activities (Grant, Moon, and Grant, 2010).

On the other hand, sceptical academics propose that the relationship between social media and conventional political participation has different results. Many claim that social media have limited or no effects on voting turnout (Gerber, Green and Larimer, 2008; Nickerson, 2008). Enli and Skogerbo (2013) argue that instead of promoting a political campaign and voting turnout, social media promote a personalised campaign that puts more emphasis on a person and his charisma than on the party policy and campaign.

Finally, political engagement such as information seeking, political talking and other civic engagement is another topic of interest in the investigation of political participation on social media. Many works intend to compare the effects of offline and online political participation (Schlozman, Verba and Brady, 2010; Shah, McLeod and Lee, 2009). Overall, the studies find two different sets of results.

On the positive side, social media is found to promote citizen participation by providing civic engagement space. The use of social network sites also contributes to another important element of a healthy democratic society: social capital and civic engagement (Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe, 2007; Gil de Zuniga, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012). Sharing news and engaging in political conversation on social media have been highlighted as increasing users' social capital and opportunities for political discussion (Bode, 2012; Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe, 2007). Political identity and civic engagement has been enhanced by the feeling of community among users.

Sharing news on social media sites, such as posting news on a Facebook page, also gives users an active role, as they have politically participated by sharing news with their friends (Singer, 2014). The availability of news and information helped to recruit participants into political activity and participatory acts, as it reduced the time and expense required for participation (Bimber, 2001; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2012).

Other studies, however, have not confirmed the relationship between social media and political participation. Baumgartner and Morris (2010) found that although social networking sites can provide users with the information resources that they need, they do not have any direct impact on users' behaviour. This is because the type of news gathering from social media does not have any influence on or add anything to their democratic discourse. In addition, van Dijck (2012)

points out that social media is not a public sphere that can accommodate democratic engagement and discussion, as this new space is more complicated, with a mixture of public and private spaces, and therefore also relates to norms and other social connectivity.

The mixed response to the role of social media in political participation among academics may arise from the multiple approaches chosen to investigate the relationship. I will apply a more critical approach to existing research on this topic in my theoretical framework in chapter three.

As well as differences in methodology, the context of a research might also influence the result. The particular culture in which the research takes place and a broader social context of that society should also be considered.

1.3 Development of the argument

Since there is no consensus over the relationship between social media and political participation in the results of empirical studies, the notion of different approaches to the internet and social media also needs to be understood. The first wave of social studies concerning online political participation started following the launch of the internet during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Although there was intense debate and critical engagement regarding the establishment of the online space for accommodating political participation, studies yielded different results.

The debates in the early literature mostly centre on the potential of the internet to nurture a public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Graham, 2009) and the emergence of online deliberative forums (Stromer-Galley, 2007; Albrecht, 2003; Wright, 2007; Wright and Street, 2007). On the positive side, intellectuals praise the internet's capacity for and facilitation of information gathering by arguing that the internet allows more equal opportunities for online political participation (Best and Krueger, 2005). The internet is also applauded for lowering the cost of democratic participation (Klein, 1999; Jensen, 2003; Jaeger, 2005; Thorseth, 2011), allowing participation in many-to-many communication (Klein, 1999), increasing social capital (Dahlgren, 2005; Skoric, Ying and Ng, 2009) and bringing in structures, representation and

interaction in countries where democracy is limited and such concepts are traditionally absent.

On the other hand, some scholars believe that the internet might have a negative effect on democracy, especially in terms of participation (Davis, 1999; Bimber, 2003; Schuefele and Nisbet, 2002). It is criticised for not being the right tool to bring about public involvement in politics (Davis, 1999), as using social networks alone does not drive an inactive person to engage in more political participation (Gustafsson, 2012).

In fact, the internet is only a tool that can help to engage citizens, which is the most crucial factor of participation. As Coleman (1999, p.70) stated: "The new media offer a virtual public sphere for the enhancement of democratic citizenship; but democratic culture is not built in to the software packages or digital systems which constitute the new media." For Coleman (2004), the principles of community and citizenship are a vital part of the social world, as they allow people to connect to or disconnect from each other and binding ties of citizenship. In order to minimise the internet's risks and maximise its benefits, institution-building is required (Blumler and Coleman, 2001).

Coleman (2003, pp.34-37) contends that in connecting people, technology does not create political participation; it just makes people more aware of politics. The sense of interaction on interactive media varies from person to person, and is about more than just embracing technology (p.37). It is also a right not to participate as well as to participate. Moreover, those super-active participants might simply be what he calls political junkies, who, in fact, are driven by the technology factor of media engagement rather than by the actual nature of political participation per se.

Similar engagement appears on social media for political purposes. On the one hand, utopian scholars have praised social media for its potential to engage people in a similar way to the internet, but the networking system it offers has gained more attention. Clay Shirky, who argues that the internet has created a new "architecture of participation" (Shirky, 2008, pp.148-153) where traditional barriers of time and space are collapsed and individuals from different places are able to gather and share information, is among the advocates of social media.

On the other hand, social media do not generate actual political transition for some scholars. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that although digital media have a strong influence on collective action and encourage high levels of organisational resources and the formation of collective identities, digital media could not influence the core dynamics of the action. It rather just influences dynamics of connective action based on personalised content shared across media networks. In their book, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*, Bennett and Segerberg (2013, p. 211) investigate how digitally networked action works in an era of increasingly personalised political participation. They introduce a concept of connective action as a form of contentious action based on sharing personalised content via social media. They suggest that, in fact, the challenge for connective action networks is how to turn that sharing action into public engagement. In this light, digital media do not present the long-term commitment that is needed in political engagement.

Another challenge facing social media is the socially entrenched norms and practices that impact citizens' social practice. Varnali and Gorgulu's empirical work (2014, pp. 1–16) on political participation on Twitter indicates that social variables such as social identity and group norms play a significant part in political expressive participation on Twitter.

In the book *Misunderstanding the Internet* (Curran, Fenton and Freedman, 2012), in relation to political involvement of citizens, Fenton argues that instead of offering a space for serious public debate, social networks only offer a psychological impression of belonging that can be easily dismissed: "In other words, rather than the internet signalling a newly viral oppositional political culture, we are witnessing an era of easy-come, easy-go politics where you are only one click away from a petition; a technological form that encourages issue drift whereby individuals shift focus from one issue to another or one website to another with little commitment or even thought; where collective political identity has a memory that is short lived and easily deleted" (pp. 149–150).

The results of empirical works and theoretical approaches concerning social media's potential to accommodate political participation remain unclear. The element left out of most empirical research on social media is the influence of

social and cultural factors, especially in media studies, which concentrates on how social media act as a mediated agent for political participation.

In exploring social media for its mediated function, I argue that everyday social media consumption needs to be understood as a link to democratic communication as one form of the social and cultural reproduction process. As media consumption relates to people's identity and background, especially social class (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007), empirical work exploring its mediated function needs to include social and cultural factors. The social and cultural aspects of each society could lead to different results. Most of the empirical works in this area concentrate on investigating social media as an agent in politics and society, instead of its function as a part of sociality and cultural reproduction.

To fill the gap in academic literature, I intend to investigate the relationship between social media and political participation, with more focus on the social and cultural context of the society where the relationship has taken place. The social class and cultural background of a person is an important influence on his or her social practices, including media consumption. In order to investigate beyond current empirical works on the subject of political participation and social media, I address the notion of sociality and social hierarchy, which results from users' original social class, as another factor that influences users' social media practice. The notion of sociality and class hierarchy among them could put more pressure on their behaviour towards this networked society that gathers friends and family with acquaintances. As a result, I have chosen people from a similar socio-economic status to be the informants, and the research aims to explore and compare their sociality and interaction among their social media friends. Their online relationships with a diverse group of people could differentiate the practice within different social settings and class backgrounds. While online relationships and social practice could impact their political social media practice, their offline relationships should relate to such practice too.

In order to understand such a complex social setting, I adopt ethnographic research as the methodology. The ethnographic approach not only gives us an opportunity to access the data beyond traditional quantitative methodologies (Sade-Beck, 2004), but also helps the researcher to discuss the notion of a particular culture within a broader social context (Wolcott, 1999). Ethnographic

research is the best methodological approach to use in order to understand the social and cultural factors embedded in middle-class Thais' social media practice. I will explore the chosen methodology in more detail in chapter four.

1.4 Social media study in the Thai context

This section introduces the study of social media in Thailand, in particular what local scholars have observed in relation to mediated political participation. It also highlights what areas are missing from the study of social media and political participation in Thailand.

Social scientists in Thailand have mostly applauded social media for its potential to enable social movements and political participation. However, most studies disregard the most important factors that Thailand has offered, such as the nature of Thais' political participation and the issue of differences in social, cultural and political aspects that relate so much to their social class. Some arguments have been put forward by international scholars regarding the differences in the social and political aspects in Thailand. But most of the studies, local and international alike, ignore the area of social and cultural factors. In media studies in particular, the mediated role of social media is neglected.

In Thai society, though the social class structure is loose in terms of being able to move up and down the strata, the social hierarchy and social and cultural norms are firmly established. This social hierarchy impacts the everyday social behaviour of Thais. The uniqueness of social discipline exists in every society so that anthropological study uses it to affirm other practices that appear in each society (Miller, 2011). One significant traditional social concept underlying Thai interpersonal behavioural patterns is "Kreng jai". This sense of being aware of others' feelings can either make or break successful political and social participation. Social class can also indicate political preference among Thais (Ungpakorn, 2009). People in different social classes tend to have different political preferences, ideas and frames. This impacts political participation practice in Thailand. This frame of social and cultural uniqueness is also manifested in Thais' social media practice.

Most social media research in Thailand has focused on the political conflict between the supporters and opponents of Thaksin Shinawatra, although Thai

researchers have also been interested in the internet's impact on political demonstrations (Kanchanaudon, 2010). The research topics on online political participation in Thailand include its usage for institutional political engagement, such as elections (Jiengpeth, 2000; Methewacahranon, 2010); the internet's role in anti-government political engagement (Kanchaaudom, 2010; Dhiraparbpatrakul, 2007); and its role in political assembly (Kulnarong, 2007; Puntip, 2009).

During the course of the #Thaiuprising, local scholars came forward to praise social media, especially Facebook, for its role in mobilising social movement even though the movement was against the elected government. The movement had been framed by local media and academics as a pioneering social media movement in Thailand, similar to the Arab Spring (*Bangkok Post*, 2013a). Teera Knokkanjanarat, a senior analyst from Frost & Sullivan, suggested that social media do not serve as applications anymore, but as tools for sharing and as a political tool (Achakulwisut, 2014).

On the other hand, the movement was accused by international intellectuals of representing a regression in democracy, and of being a movement of the elite against the peasants (Beker, 2013 quoted in Sinlapalavan, 2013; Farrelly, 2013; Sinpeng, 2013a). For example, Grömping (2014) concluded that the social media scene in Thailand caused users to be more polarised because they would find similar-minded people online. Due to the nature of Thailand's social media scene, there is less chance for it to be used as a deliberative political space, which was seen as being key to democratic sustention.

Furthermore, Sinpeng (2013b) showed concern that the government's control of internet space in Thailand represented a regression of democracy in the country. She also pointed out that the most significant factor of the state coercion was that its success was due not only to the power of its authority, but to the fact that the people in the country allowed the state to wield this power without challenging it (ibid., p.423). Sinpeng (2014) also suggested that the power of persuasion in turning political rivals against each other is the key to sustaining the Thai junta government. The military government launched a dangerous tool by allowing citizen surveillance, which entailed tagging, posting or identifying by other means those who opposed the military regime on social media.

Such social aspects, which have been raised by international academics, have been disregarded by most local studies. Thai academic studies of the relationship between social media and political participation have concentrated more on the potential of social media usage to mobilise social movement than on its use in engaging Thais in institutional politics and general political engagement. Furthermore, most of the literature has left out the classic issue of social class, which is deeply related to Thai politics (Forsyth, 2001; Englehart, 2003; Hewison, 2014), and its impact on social media and political participation. The division of social class and the differences among people who share the same socio-economic status in Thailand is one key issue of this thesis. This study intends to investigate further how social class and class disposition have impacted Thai politics for a long time, and therefore may also have impacted the political practice of Thais and their social media practice.

The background of politics in Thailand and the nature of social practices, such as Kreng jai, in the country, which are quite different from Western democratic countries, have also been ignored. This social structure, which has been left out of most social media studies in Thailand, is, in fact, an important factor in media literature, especially the mediated role of the media, which has served as a transmitter between the public world and a person (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007a). In understanding this concept of social media in Thai politics and society, the social and cultural context needs to be included (Miller, 2011). This study will contribute to Thai social media literature, which has neglected the classical factor of social class in political participation as well as the impact of social and cultural factors on social media political participation in Thailand. Moreover, regarding the lack of an ethnographic approach among the majority of survey research on this subject in Thailand, this study will hopefully fill a gap in the research as well.

1.5 Research questions

RQ1: What is the quality of mediated political participation of middle-class Thais?

I intend to understand middle-class Thais' mediated practice that relates to their political participation by exploring the following questions:

- What is middle-class Thais' social media consumption like in general?

- How does their class position shape their political participation through their media consumption?

RQ2: What is the quality of their political participation?

With regard to their use of social media for political participation, I will explore:

- How do they perform their political participation in their everyday life?
- What type of political content are they after?
- What is their reaction to politics on social media?

RQ3: What is the relationship between politics and sociality in Thailand?

On the additional aspect of sociality, I will examine:

- How do they include mediated practice in their everyday sociality?
- How does sociality practice among middle-class Thais, such as Kreng jai, impact their political practice, on and offline?
- How do different political interests impact their sociality practice, on and offline?

RQ4: What is the impact of digital media on their political participation?

To understand the impact of digital media on middle-class Thais' political participation and sociality, I will explore:

- How do middle-class Thais engage with politics online and offline?
- How do middle-class Thais participate socially online and offline?
- What kind of relationship is there between their offline and online political participation?
- What kind of relationship is there between their offline and online sociality?

In answering these questions, I will explore media consumption in Thailand that relates to politics as a social practice that can be influenced by the social and cultural background of the consumer. Existing research focusing on political participation on social media in Thailand mostly explores only the aspect of using social media as a tool for political participation, and disregards social media consumption as a practice. Though most studies are concerned with the layout of politics in Thailand, which is closely associated with the social and cultural

background, they have not identified the relationship between social and cultural background and media consumption. In regarding media consumption as one practice that relates to how people connect to politics, I would like to follow in the footsteps of the “public connection” project proposed by Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007a).

The public connection project tried to understand how people engage in media in their everyday and political life by not assuming that citizens have a shared orientation to the public world that relates to their interest and attention. Citizens connect to this public world by their consumption of media, which Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007a) framed as their “public connection”. Both parts of the assumption they have suggested refer to a mediated public connection.

Mostly, the public connection to politics can last only as long as it gets attention from citizens, such as during an election. A satisfactory answer to the disconnection part has not been found by social science. Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007a) suggested that by understanding the practice of media consumption and how it fits into people’s everyday life, we will understand the problems with this short-term public engagement. In the process, democracy becomes a form of social and cultural aspect that can be reproduced by media.

As a result, this thesis will explore middle-class Thais’ everyday social media consumption, their everyday social practice, their social class background and their social media consumption and practice that relate to their political participation. Ethnographic research is the best methodology to adopt in order to do this. Ethnographic research allows the researcher to explore the informants’ life and social practice as a dynamic. As Madianou (2015, p.2) suggested: “Because ethnography uniquely combines a wide lens and a microscopic attention to detail, it is perfect for capturing environments and their contexts but also the microdynamics that produce them. Ethnography does not assume what is social media, but rather highlights their social uses according to context.” Therefore, ethnographic research provides the best means of capturing social and cultural factors that are embedded in social media practice.

1.6 Summary of the thesis

Chapter two starts with the political background, social class structure and social mobility in Thailand and their impact on political cleavage among citizens. The chapter also outlines the key players in the series of protests from 2006 to 2014. Then it explores each faction's media use in recruiting, maintaining and mobilising its supporters in order to provide the background of mediated political participation in Thailand, which is intricately connected to social class and polarised political crisis.

Chapter three continues with the theoretical framework. It provides the thesis framework, which is structured around three main bodies of theory: social class, political participation and social media. The chapter looks at the concept of participation, from classic approaches to it, to more contemporary ones. The chapter also identifies the concept of class based on formation of taste and classifications other than socio-economic status. It goes on to review empirical studies that have explored social media and political participation, and proposes that this area of study needs social and cultural engagement as well as a methodological approach that presents a clearer view of social media political participation as media practice.

Chapter four outlines the methodology chosen for the thesis. It explains how and why ethnographic research has proved to be a suitable methodology for investigating social media practice that is associated with political participation. The research design is also discussed.

The chapter discusses the qualitative research design; the process of recruiting the informants; data collection methods; analysis of the data; and the researcher's role. The theoretical framework that supports the ethnographic research design is also discussed, as well as the significance of adopting a qualitative research design to study political participation and social media.

Chapter five is the first data chapter. It reveals middle-class Thais' social media practice in everyday usage. The chapter examines how their class position affects and frames their sociality and lifestyle on social media. The normative social media practice that is framed by social class is also revealed. This concept of normative social practice, which is also presented in relation to social media

practice, will play a big part in the discussion of the political discourse in the Thai political scene in the next chapter.

Chapter six concentrates on class division and political preference among Thai middle classes. The social class gap has been transferred to a political gap under the Thai political scene. It explores how social class plays a role in social media practice, and how each faction interacts both with their own and with others' political groups on social media. Furthermore, it shows how the differences in political interest impact middle-class Thais' sociality both online and offline.

Chapter seven focuses on the significance of class and social divisions among Thais and the cycle of street demonstrations and coups. It indicates the impact of prolonged side-taking on middle-class Thais and how this political group division impacts other parts of their life. This chapter examines political symbolic action in Thai politics both offline and online and looks at how they interact with each other and how this action impacts on Thai society as a whole.

Chapter eight presents the conclusion of the thesis. The summary of the argument is given side by side with the findings from the data results from chapters five to seven. The chapter underlines the main argument of this thesis regarding how classical factors such as social class and personal influence impact political participation practice on social media. The chapter declares how social media, in the context of the deep cleavage in Thailand's political circumstances, divide or gather citizens via their political engagement on these platforms. All in all, it contributes to media studies concerning mediated political participation on digital media, as well as to political participation and social media study.

Chapter two: The political background in Thailand and its connection to social class

This chapter will review the political background of Thailand and its deep connection to social class and inequality. Factions among Thais have tended to be related to social class background. Thailand has enjoyed an elite-led democracy since the beginning of democracy in the country. However, world political changes as well as social changes in Thailand have initiated a new democratic journey among Thais. In fact, the introduction of populist politics and a pro-poor policy from Thaksin and the Thai Rak Thai Party were the most important factors in precipitating a new chapter in Thai politics.

Media have been used by political factions to gain support, frame political identity and encourage people to join social movements. This has caused more polarisation than ever. Without doubt, media play a vital role in Thai politics. The impact of social media, a new media platform in Thai politics, will be discussed in terms of its role in Thailand's political crisis, especially with regard to the issue of social class and its relationship to Thai politics.

2.1 Class and ideology underlying the factions

Thailand has never been a fully democratic country. The divisions in social class and political ideology have occasionally been aggressively presented. There have been disagreements among leaders and between leaders and citizens throughout the history of Thai politics. There were divisions of class in Thai politics after it started its new democratic journey in 1932, which led to the student-led ideological confrontations of 1973-76, the events of "Black May" in 1992 and the long confrontation among class-divided Thai citizens from 2006 to the present. Several issues can be identified as sources of the present-day lack of consensus, such as social class, class hierarchy, changes in social order and globalisation. All in all, these issues reveal a complicated picture of political division among Thais at the present time.

Against this political background we will see the development of the main characteristics of Thai politics. Social class division initiates practices that affect

Thai politics. and impacts Thai political practice and participation, such as elite politics, the patron-client system, and rural and urban divisions, as well as the violent protests.

2.2 Social class and its impact on Thai politics: a gap in social class turns into a political gap

Social class in the Thai context has its roots in locally adopted Buddhism. Thai social class might not be established as firmly or taken as seriously as the caste system in India, but parts of it are influenced by Hinduism as well as by many other religious or ceremonial rituals that spread into Thailand at the same time as Buddhism. Originally, in the Sukhothai Dynasty (1238-1438), with its absolute monarchy and devout religious practices, social class division was considered natural.

Thai class stratification is determined not by one or two aspects, but by a number of socio-economic factors, ranging from family, pedigree, position and social status to economic status, education and profession. For example, salary alone cannot define an individual's class without also considering family name, position and profession.

Funatsu and Kagoya (2003) suggest that the class structure in Thailand is loose and people can move up and down in rank. Class position in Thai society is not permanent; it can change through education, marriage, career and financial circumstances. Class stratification and class formation in Thailand are fairly flexible; for example, with opportunity, education and hard work, one can always move up the ladder of Thai social classes (Evers, 1966). However, the social mobility process of lower class in moving upward the social class sector is limited (Funatsu and Kagoya, 2003). Similar to other Asian cultures, some social hierarchies have continued, such as age, gender and ancestral line or family name.

Based on the background of social class in Thailand, Bureekul *et al.* (2003, p.5) declared that Thais may have varying levels of political participation according to their economic and social status; their location (urban or rural); their understanding of politics; their cultural background; and their reliance on and satisfaction with the government. Similarly, Buthahoon (1998, pp.166-167) stated that being in a different social group – such as social class, communal groups,

neighbourhood groups and other small factions – impacts the extent of Thais' political participation. Since Thai society still relies so heavily on localism, the patronage system and similarity within groups, people tend to participate politically in line with those who share a similar social class, education level and social status. Also, people of a higher social class, education level and social status enjoy a higher volume and degree of sophistication of political participation, as they tend to possess more resources regarding politics (Limmanee and Pimsuth, 1979, pp.20-36).

Class struggle in Thailand can be understood, with reference to elitism theory, as the circulation of the elites, where the old elite fights with the new elite to dominate the ideology of the society, rather than as the struggle of the labour movement to dominate the elite, which has been commonly experienced in the West (Suracharttumrongrat, 2007). There have been groups of elites in Thailand since the first revolution in 1932: feudalists and aristocrats. However, a new elite, of capitalist entrepreneurs, was formed when capitalism and a democratic system was instigated after the uprising in 1976.

In the past, political preference in Thailand was not divided firmly by social class. It had not been the main issue in Thai politics until the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party (Kongkirati, 2014). With main policies that were grounded in socialism, populism and the reformation of traditional Thai politics, TRT gained enormous support from rural citizens (Ungpakorn, 2008). Their numerous election successes have confirmed marked divisions between social classes. The lower class idolised Thaksin Shinawatra's policies for addressing their needs; on the other hand, the higher class questioned his morals. This political divergence resulted in a further gap between social classes.

Social class can also indicate political preference among Thais (Ungpakorn, 2009). People in different social classes tend to have different political preferences, ideas and frames. The inconsistency of democracy in Thailand, which has resulted in a series of protests, coups, junta governments and military dictatorships, is one of the origins of social class cleavage in Thailand (Ungpakorn, 2009). The fragile democratic system and the emergence of capitalism in Thailand have helped to create division even among those with a similar socio-economic status. Thai

middle classes have sprung from two different origins: feudalism and capitalism (Anderson, 1977; Phongpaichit and Baker, 1999; Eawsriwong, 2013).

2.2.1 Political participation in the context of Thai social class: when Thais Kreng jai each other

The social class system in Thailand is still strongly related to religious beliefs, mainstream norms and Thai social ideologies (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1999). The social class system and Thai culture create social hierarchy. Though resisting this social hierarchy might not result in physical punishment, acting against it can cause serious social sanctions. Therefore, traditional social and cultural practice remains in contemporary Thais' social practice and behaviour. Some basic social rules include the degree of superior-inferior, as well as of intimate or familiar-unfamiliar, relationships. Thai social behaviour is created and framed according to this social hierarchy. According to the different degrees of status discrepancy and familiarity, Thais behave differently towards someone else.

One significant traditional social concept underlying Thai interpersonal behavioural patterns is "Kreng jai". According to Klausner (1993, p.199), Kreng jai is "an attitude displayed towards one higher in the rank, social status or age scale. It is diffidence, deference and consideration merged with respect." In fact, it is a difficult concept for foreigners to comprehend. It prohibits Thais from being frank and expressing their feelings in a direct manner. As the concept of Kreng jai means to be considerate to others' feelings, Thais are socially bound to take others' feelings into account, which results in their reluctance to express their own feelings.

In fact, Kreng jai is a concept and practice that has mostly been used to describe Thai culture as a whole (Knutson *et al.*, 2003). As a result, the concept of considering others' feelings controls some other social practices. Social hierarchy that frames Kreng jai practice has been seen in many social interactions, especially where younger people are reared to be respectful and to defer to their elders. Age difference is not the only factor that determines Kreng jai practice: social position, professional status and some authoritative positions can also frame Kreng jai practice. This practice includes a stance of extreme politeness, silence and indirectness. For example, Kreng jai is even found in the health care business,

where patients, even when they are in pain, need to maintain Kreng jai, which serves as a barrier to enlisting help from health professionals (Jongudomkarn *et al.*, 2012).

Kreng jai represents the existence of the social hierarchical structure of Thais, which is strongly rooted in religion and social class (Podhisita, 1985). Another common manifestation of Kreng jai that is well known among Thais and foreigners who work in Thailand is in the workplace. Kreng jai creates an awareness of social position in the workplace and ensures workers behave appropriately according to their present social position (Holmes and Tangtongtavy, 1995). The senior staffs are aware of their position of seniority, while the junior staffs are aware of the obligation they have towards the senior staff.

As a part of social practice, Kreng jai is also present in the political life of Thais. The most common type of Kreng jai that has been observed in Thai political participation is the perception of gratitude and the patron-client relationship between politicians and villagers. The feeling of Kreng jai that villagers have towards the tokens of generosity that have been given by the politician causes them to vote for that politician. The villagers are framed by social practice to realise their indebtedness and need to return the favour (Holmes and Tangtongtavy, 1995). This feeling runs so deeply in the form of loyalty and reciprocity between politicians and voters that vote buying has become a common form of political practice in Thailand, especially in the countryside.

In other forms of Thai political practice, the social practice of Kreng jai prevents Thais from expressing their political opinions and dealing with public or direct political discussion. In social life, there are some conversational taboos that should be avoided, as they might cause embarrassment or disagreement or damage social relationships. Religious belief, age and weight, and political preference are regarded as conversational taboos. As a result, politics is generally considered to be a private matter and a delicate topic that should be discussed only by close peers or family members (Yangyuen, 2006). This prevents Thais from being familiar with political talk.

On the other hand, though Kreng jai is a social frame for acceptable social practice, nowadays acceptable social practice loses some of its effect in public space. People – especially adolescents and young adults – tend to be less Kreng jai

towards those they do not know personally. Recent works concerning young adults deemed that this group of people care less about others in public space, hence expressing anti-social behaviour in building their identity among friends (Chumnansuk, 2008; Klatookwan, 2011). In fact, online space, such as a social media page, is the place verbal violence among adolescents occurs and becomes a social problem (Samutachak and Satararuji, 2015). Similarly, adults express less Kreng jai towards strangers in public spaces as well, especially on politics (Rojanaphruk, 2010). Due to the political conflict among Thais over the last decade, Thais regularly attack strangers regarding their political opinions, which can result in physical or verbal violence (Media Literacy, 2012).

However, these loose social hierarchies create informal social dos and don'ts that people, especially those with conservative ideals, abide by strictly. Different groups of people are treated differently according to social hierarchy. The practice of being considerate to others' feelings, or Kreng jai, is still one of the core social practices that result from these loose social hierarchies. The highest in the social strata or the closest in social ties receive the most Kreng jai from their acquaintances.

2.2.2 Gift exchange and reciprocal exchange

Similar to Kreng jai in Thai cultural practice, there are concepts in Western society relating to returning favours as a social practice requirement. Gift exchange is one of the rules in social interaction in many societies, including Western ones. Originally the term used to explain reciprocal relationships between individuals and organisations was social exchange theories (Blau, 1964), which referred to the reciprocal practice of exchanging gifts as a form of sociality. The famous version of this framework was introduced by Marcel Mauss (1990), who analysed Melanesian and Polynesian societies. He argued that the gift-exchange system plays a structured role in Melanesian and Polynesian societies to maintain fundamental unifying processes in the society.

Mauss stated that this act of giving bonded society together with three related obligations: to give, to receive and to reciprocate. This would sustain mutual trust as well as relationships. Symbolically, the gifts translated as a way to continue the cycle of giving, accepting and reciprocating. At first, gifts between

groups seemed to be voluntary in nature; however, eventually, it was also represented as obligatory and viewed as being a reciprocal practice. Eventually, this reciprocal practice became a normative approach of the society. Mauss emphasised that the process of simultaneously giving and receiving established relationships that rested on both the voluntary and obligating aspects. Each type of gift was interpreted differently, from creating a sphere of approximate equivalences and mutual indebtedness, and endlessly feeding mutual indebtedness and obligations, to building a reputation through the value of the gifts that had been given. This pattern of gift exchange clearly referred to the French tradition of Mauss's time as well as similar forms of social interaction that can be found in every society.

Other academics have looked at the same pattern of reciprocal relationship and analysed gift-exchange practice as a form of social relations. In relation to symbols and the unconscious, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1987) recognised the need to analyse myths to decode fundamental mental forms. Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) took it further in according reciprocity a prominent position. His work related to symbolic goods also concerned the practice of gift-giving. He argued that exchange of gifts is a barter agreement, with gifts and counter-gifts being given. He also took the subject seriously in presenting it as the source of social uncertainty. In terms of the habitus of the gift-giver, who does not engage in calculation but rather obtains a symbolic surplus, the gift is not a gift but a barter.

In the view of Erving Goffman (1967) in his theory of interaction rituals, gift exchange was viewed from a microsociological perspective. Mutual gifts can be presented in many forms, such as actual gifts, politeness and face-saving, in keeping the rules of self-respect and a fundamental characteristic of social interactions. According to Goffman, these small sacrifices created the dignity of the modern individual, which led to unequal exchange, the possibility of extensive redistribution between societal groups and a positive acceptance of redistribution. As a result, from the perspective of academics, gifts and reciprocity are fundamental for the cooperation of society and establishing social order in general, as well as being symbolic of social capital. Similar concepts relating to exchanging a favour in order to sustain social relations can also be found in many other cases. Malmendier and Schmidt (2012) found that, based on models of reciprocity in gift

exchange, gift-giving strongly affects the recipient's opinion in favour of the gift-giver. The obligation to do a favour for the gift-giver can go further at the expense of a third party. Similar to this result, Currie et al. (2013) found that, in Chinese hospitals, gift-giving can be both positive or negative for the third party depending on the giver's social distance to the third party. Further, Charness and Dufwenberg (2006) addressed the guilt aversion arising from reciprocal behaviour by assuming that if the gift recipient could not live up to the expectations of the gift-giver, there would be a strong feeling of guilt.

This form of reciprocal giving and gift-exchange could also explain the system of Kreng jai in Thai society, where Kreng jai also acts as a rule of mutual social relations among people within the same social class and from different social classes

Political participation in Thailand reflects similar concepts of tradition, social class, Kreng jai practice and weak democratic structure. Thai politics has its own traditional values and nature, which have continued to be a core element in local politics for longer than those in other countries in the same region, as Thailand managed to escape from the colonial influence that could have disrupted its traditional governance (Leifer, 1997; McCargo and Zarakol, 2012). The long-standing social class structure among Thais has a big influence on politics and political participation in the country. The traditional values and characteristics include a "loose social structure, political passivity, military and bureaucratic domination of politics, the significance of culture and personality, the role of tradition, and weak extra-bureaucratic influence" (Wilson, 1962 cited in Hewison, 1997, p.4).

Thai academics, despite adopting the Western concept of democracy, frame political participation with reference to the traditional nature of Thai politics. In conceptualising political participation, influences of social class, political passivity and the patronage system are noticeable. Bunbongkarn (1999, pp.36-38) refers to political participation as activities in which only citizens can be involved and which affect the government's or leaders' decision-making.

To summarise, social class has a strong impact on political participation in Thailand. Thais are familiar with military coups, corruption and the concept of an elite politics. Citizens mostly play a passive role in political participation, while

opinion leaders, politicians, bureaucrats and political pressure groups influence the direction of political participation. Social class and place of origin impact Thais' political participation practices and signify a separation between rural and urban Thais.

The next section addresses how social class creates the characteristics of Thai politics, such as the patron-client system, the division between urban and rural areas, and violent protest.

2.3 Elite politics in Thailand

The elite politics of Thailand can be traced back to Khana Ratsadon (the People's Party), which led the first revolution. Then it was handed down to the military leaders who took turns in controlling the country during the first ten years of revolution. The nature of the elite changed again during the semi-democratic period of Prem Tinsulanonda's government, when bureaucrats, Chinese-Thai businessmen and professional politicians formed the elite, which was still in place until recently with the rise and fall of Thaksin Shinawatra. Nonetheless, the top-down power system in Thailand did not change.

Thailand had been ruled solely by the Chakri dynasty since the inception of the Rattanakosin Era and the city of Bangkok in 1782, without any interruption from social revolution or colonial oppression. This resulted in the strong conservative royalism, religious adherence and shrewd leadership of the Chakri dynasty (Tejapira, 2001). With its long conservative history, strong monarch-aristocrat-servant relationships were built and sustained.

The first Thai revolution, on 24 June 1932 was not entirely a people's movement. It was very much based on the feudalism concept, as the revolution was brought about by an elite group of military personnel and civilians, the Khana Ratsadon (Kongbenjaputh, 2010). The revolution did not grant democracy in Thailand; rather, it was a transfer of power from one elite "nobility" to another of "military and educated scholars" (Dheppunya, 2005). After the Siamese revolution of 1932, there were five groups of people that could consider themselves elite: the original elite of monarchy and aristocracy, and the new elite of bureaucrats, traders, politicians and intellectuals (Kasetsiri, 1992).

The Thai elite, then, changed from comprising only the royal family and nobility to including leading commoners with higher education and military rank or bureaucratic titles. However, the political system did not change. After the revolution, it was still a top-down system of politics (Dheppunya, 2005), with power over Thai citizens changing hands and passing from the royal family to educated or titled commoners. The change in Thai politics during this first phase of revolution resulted from disagreements among elites, followed by a series of coups and military dictatorships.

Since 2001, businessmen have shifted from financial support for political parties to becoming politician themselves: for example, Thaksin Shinawatra. So, government policy is heavily influenced by trade concerns. This challenged the established elites as well as the old liberal-democratic model (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008).

The constitutional reform after the Black May incident in 1992 gave way to modern politics, as Thais had become impatient with old-style Thai politicians (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008, p.66). The party's election strategies and populist pro-poor policy won TRT a majority of seats in the House of Representatives in the 2001 election. However, it sparked some frustration among old elites, intellectuals, the middle class and civil society groups (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2004). The policy of developing the relationship between grass-roots supporters and the TRT party (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008, p.78), the increasingly centralised power of the government, its absolute control over parliament (Yoshifumi, 2008, pp.247-248) and the expansion of Thaksin's and his inner circle's business empires, combined with their ability to punish their opponents (Pathmanand, 2008, pp.133-136), started to position him and his alliance as a new elite.

Since the fall of Thaksin in 2006, Thailand has been caught up in intense political contestation between two major factions of the Thai ruling class (Ungpakorn, 2008). The old elite comprise military, bureaucratic and royalist conservatives, while the new elite are drawn from Thaksin and his alliance, which thrived as a consequence of his parliamentary domination for many years. The protests that occurred during the political unrest from 2006 to 2014 were initiated by these two groups of elites and supported by the rural masses, who back the exiled Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and the urban anti-Thaksin faction,

which is a loose collective of the pro-coup royalist military and advocates of the Democrat Party.

2.4 Role of the patron-client system

The patron-client system is one of the oldest social practices derived from social hierarchy in Thailand. In politics, the patronage system creates an interest group that impacts political participation and political practice through, for instance, vote canvassing, vote buying and other reciprocal electoral benefits. Instead of equality among citizens in political participation, interest groups that are the result of prolonged patron-client relationships in Thailand engage in politics to protect their interests (Kumnurak, 2000). The system also prevents Thais from gaining independence in political participation and practice.

The patron-client system in Thailand can be traced back to the Ayutthaya Kingdom (1767), when the enactment of a patronage bill made the patron-client system official (Lertpanichkul, 1995, p.112). For example, if a commoner wanted to ask for help from a nobleman, the commoner needed to present a gift to gain the nobleman's assistance. Thais were so familiar with bribes for favours that they embraced patronage as normative behaviour from a subordinate towards a principal.

After the 1976 uprising, when the military dictatorship ended, politics depended even more on businessmen and their resources for funds and influence. The patronage system in politics continued to rise, especially around the 1969 election, when Thailand's exports boomed as a consequence of the Vietnam War. The business sector grew steadily, as did the patronage-based relationship between business leaders and political leaders (Ockey, 1994). As a result, a group of trade affiliates were able to lobby the government and affect policy by funding political parties. This class of middlemen emerged among magnates, community organisers and local government bodies, and they still have an important influence on present-day rural Thai politics, as vote canvassers (*hua khanaen*) (Ockey, 2004). The importance of these figures grew, as after the 1973 uprising, no rural candidate could obtain a seat without them (Ockey, 1994).

Their power might have declined somewhat during the period of military dictatorship; however, a new peak was reached after Thailand embraced Western

capitalism. During the Chatichai Choonhavan government (1988-1991), the vote canvassing system and vote buying outweighed the outdated patron-client networks for the first time (Ockey, 1994, 2004). Within the constraints of multi-party government, negotiation occurred, and alliances were formed among parties to gain a quota of seats (Ockey, 2004, pp.25-26, pp.38-40). As a result, businessmen held a certain influence over policy, as they were able to lobby the government by funding political parties during this period of heightened promotion of international trade. As a result of the patron-client system, commercial and other interest groups endorsed policies through the political party they supported.

Meanwhile, political parties endorsed the use of money and gifts via vote canvassers, the opinion leaders of their rural communities, to ensure their electoral success. Phongpaichit (2005) characterised this practice of money or gift endorsement for voter turnout in Thailand as a part of "Money Politics", the process of money being spent by business owners and politicians to seal their seats in parliament. She framed financial investment in politics as financial investment in business, as both were spending for the sake of the subsequent profit. The profit in politics is the opportunity to lobby for governmental policies that favour business.

Combined with the original Thai patron-client practice, which values the gratitude for the reward or benefit granted by the endorser (Dhiravegin, 2007), the end result is that the citizen who receives tokens of generosity from a politician will indefinitely vote in favour of that politician and stay loyal (Laothammatas, 1994). Also, the Thai predilection to value dependence, patronage and loyalty over rights and responsibilities (Anderson, 1977) lowers the desire to voice ideas or take an active role in participation.

After the new populist policies promoted by the Thaksin Shinawatra cabinet were introduced in 2001, the patron-client system in Thai politics changed from vote buying or tokens of generosity to a more sustained system of patronage. Populist policies such as universal healthcare, the SMEs bank and village funds helped billionaire Thaksin to install himself as the alternative patron for the Thai majority (Saxer, 2011). Thaksin promoted more direct connections between his political aides and rural citizens, an example being the newly introduced

Subdistrict Administrative Organisations, which were elected from among the community. However, the patron-client system continued largely uninterrupted.

The patron-client system in politics also favours personalised politics over party politics (Lertpanichkul, 1995, p.105). Citizens will vote for the politician they have a personal relationship with rather than for the policy they like, and though it is a common understanding between the two parties that patron-client politics is a reciprocal practice, Thais tends to frame patronage as an obligation to return loyalty (Eawsriwong, 1993, pp.171-172). The patron-client concept that has been embedded in Thailand since the Ayutthaya Kingdom still plays its part in Thai politics, and it inevitably impacts Thai political practice and participation. It deters public spiritedness as well as lowering citizens' political awareness and, as a result, it discourages Thais' political participation and democratic practice.

2.5 The division between urban and rural areas

The political conflict that has dominated Thailand for more than a decade is claimed to be the result of differences between the political interests, values and practices of rural and urban Thais (Pintoptang, 2010; Phongpaichit and Baker, 2000). The notion that rural people failed to keep up with political developments, leaving them unable to comprehend the concept of democracy, has been challenged by the movement of pro-Thaksin peasants. However, the fact remains that Thailand is still caught up in the political cleavage between rural and urban Thais.

The idea of differences between rural and urban Thais has long interested Thai academics, who have tended to explain the differentials between the vote blocs of rural and urban Thais in terms of social, cultural and socio-economic background (Sengpreecha, 1980). One significant difference between rural and urban Thais that influences their votes and political participation is the relationship between politicians and the citizens of the two respective areas, which affects how their MP is chosen (Albritton and Bureekul, 2007).

In *Two Cities, Two Democracies*, Laothammatas (1994) argued that the difference between rural and urban populations will lead to a political crackdown. His theory asserts that the rural masses are easily manipulated by politicians or vote canvassers when casting their votes. Though the politician will win the

election by virtue of the sheer volume of votes from rural areas, they will be challenged, and even expelled, by the urban middle class from the Bangkok Metropolitan Region. The difference between urban and rural Thais' perspective on democracy and politics will cause division and confrontation in politics as long as Thailand fails to lower or eliminate the poverty and lack of access to public goods in rural areas.

This argument used to be the prevailing perspective on the division between rural and urban people in Thailand. However, after the political movement of pro-Thaksin support in rural Thailand, some academics have recently promoted a new concept of division, which argues that there is democratic comprehension among rural peasants and which, contrary to the popular view, puts the urban middle class in the category of a backward, primitive community.

Walker (2012), for instance, denies the old concept that puts Thai rural peasants in a passive relationship with politics, claiming that a new middle-income peasantry is replacing the rural peasant. These new middle-income peasants fully understand democratic concepts of how to engage with political power sources as well as being ready to pursue new political agendas. They are no longer confined to receiving small tokens of generosity during an election campaign; rather, they interest themselves in productive policies that mitigate rural disadvantage. During Thaksin's two terms in government, many middle-income peasants emerged and became a new middle class, or, as designated by Thabchumpon and McCargo (2011, p.999), "urbanized villagers".

Furthermore, the middle class, as conceptualised in *Two Cities, Two Democracies*, has less impact on Thai politics. Since the success of the populist policies of Thaksin's government, rural citizens have been fighting for their right to vote. The urban middle class, the military and NGOs have played a lesser role in influencing Thai politics, especially since the 2009-2010 unrest, which resulted in confrontation with rural middle-income peasants who rallied throughout Bangkok to protect their elected government (Tejapira, 2013 cited in *Bangkok Post*, 2013a).

However, after the 2014 coup that put a military junta back into power, the concept of how the urban middle class disagree and later rally to expel the government, which has been elected mostly by the rural masses, is once again

applicable. Phongpaichit (2005) argues that the difference between rural and urban Thais remains; however, this time there is a shift in roles. While rural masses gain more understanding of democratic concepts in winning a mandate and being ready to exercise their power, the urban middle class goes back to applying primitive concepts of good governance, a sufficiency economy and religious belief. Yoshifumi (2013) argues that the concept of rule by moral right, as proposed by urban people and royalists, is actually an excuse not to obey the democratic concept of voting as exercised by rural peasants, and a ploy to preserve their class advantage. The goal of the agreement between royalists and the urban middle class is to protect their advantage while limiting others' rights by accusing Thaksin of corruption.

All in all, Thai politics had been divided into two major factions long before Thaksin arrived. No matter which concept defining division between rural and urban Thais is correct, there is a definite cleavage among the two groups of Thais. There had always been a separation between rural and urban populations according to their respective voting blocs and their influence on the establishment of governments. The votes from rural areas, being larger in number, had always dominated elections, while the urban middle class in cosmopolitan areas could manipulate establishments that they had not voted for. This served to create a cycle of establishment and overthrow of successive Thai governments that lasted for decades. The conflict of interest between Thaksin supporters and the anti-Thaksin alliance would inevitably result in confrontation, which created a deeper cleavage between citizens based on political rhetoric, ideologies and social class differences.

2.6 Cases from neighbours: international comparison

The impact of social class, elite politics, the patronage system and the division between rural and urban areas on politics is not unique to the Thai political scene. Rather, similar struggles are observable throughout Asian political history. For example, in Burma, local ideologies confronted Western liberalism during and after the colonial period; in India, the caste system still influences the country; in Pakistan, patronage plays an important part in this complex ethnic society; and in

Turkey, military and elite politics frame its politics in a way that is not so different from Thailand.

Burmese society is pluralistic and based on ethnic, linguistic and religious affiliation (Lissak, 1970). This social stratification relates to occupational category, political status and relations between strata. There are also differences in culture, norms and traditional interaction among the citizens. This background created social stratification among its citizens long before the colonial period. The confrontation between the original Burmese ideologies and Western liberalism occurred from 1824 to 1948, when the British ruled the country and replaced the Burmese monarchy (Englehart, 2011). Nowadays, this background of separation in ethnicity, religion and ideology results in stratification of Burmese politics and society.

Meanwhile, the patronage system in Pakistan has a strong influence on elections and politics. For example, during the election period, the elite landowners can exert their power over the rural population who work on their land through tenancy relations, patronage and coercion (Martin, 2009). This elite-led patronage system results in members of the landed elite controlling voting during elections by enforcing debt-bondage on their rural Pakistani Punjabi workers and forcing them to vote in favour of the landed elite. The tighter the social connection among this group of elites, the greater their power in establishing their networks in politics and economics (Harris-White and Prakash, 2010).

The caste system in India, which is more rigid than social class elsewhere, results in tension that is manifested throughout India's society and politics. For example, people do not have an equal right to choose their occupation, as there are occupational boundaries that cannot be crossed or altered (Fuller, 1996). Social position is fixed, and requires more than just education or money to change – for example, legitimate authority, such as that of a religious leader, is necessary. Its strict bond with Hinduism means that Indian society, at both ideological and institutional levels, contends with deep inequality (Fuller, 2004, p.256).

It also results in gaining urban higher caste in ground in contemporary India, particularly in the political, economic, and legal fields so that Hinduism and conservative ideologies become predominantly. Smith et al. called it "morally

orienting collective identity" (Smith et al., 1998, p.90) which similar to collective identity of elite Thais that have gained from their social capital.

A similar phenomenon to the rise of conservative ideologies in Thailand can be found in Turkey, where conservative ideologies and far-right supporters dominate the voting scene (Carkoglu and Kalaycioglu, 2009). Since the 1950s, Turkish voters have come under the influence of ideologies, so that their voting behaviour has become less pragmatic and more ideological.

Turkey is another good example of divisions in location among the country's citizens, as the non-Turkish peoples of a vast geography across Turkey have been denied the right to a mother-tongue education (Mehmet Şerif, 2013). The suppression of minorities in Turkey has been even tighter since the coup d'état of 1980, when the Kurdish language was suppressed and Kurdish activists faced torture and persecution.

Another example of differences between urban and rural areas in sociality and status can be found in China, where the gap between developed and underdeveloped areas is significant (Tang, 2013). As the income gap widened after the economic reforms of the 1990s, accommodation became a symbol of high status, a privileged lifestyle and belonging to an exclusive social group (Wu, 2005). China's urban life nowadays is comparable to Western life standards, whereas the rural lifestyle is far lower in quality. While urban people live in safety and in comfortable gated communities, the urban poor and migrant workers are struggling with the allocation of commercial housing.

2.7 Violent protest

Roughly speaking, in the public's and academics' eyes, from 2006, Thailand was ravaged by the battle between two dominant colour-coded players: the middle-class Yellow Shirts and the lower-class Red Shirts. In 2013, a new force emerged. They called themselves "Muan Maha Prachachon, 2013 Thai uprising" (the great mass of people) and led the movement that resulted in the 2014 coup. Though they have different names according to when they were founded, in essence there are still two major political sides in Thailand: Thaksin supporters and the anti-Thaksin alliance. The debates and violent protests initiated by the two factions are mostly ideologically driven and related to social class. The factions' leaders have chosen to

frame their political rhetoric according to Thais' established political characteristics in order to motivate their followers.

Table 2.1 Factions in Thai protests

	United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD)	People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)	People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC)
Faction	Pro-Thaksin	Anti-Thaksin	Anti-Thaksin
Colour theme	Red	Yellow	National flag
Social class	Majority: lower class Minority: middle and upper class	Majority: middle and upper class Minority: lower class	Majority: middle and upper class Minority: lower class
Main ideology	Equality, democracy, left and liberal	Right-wing, conservative, support the monarchy	Fight corruption, support monarchy, oust Thaksin
Background	Rural: north and north-east of Thailand	Urban: Bangkok metropolitan area	Urban: Bangkok Rural: south of Thailand
Operation	2006 to 2014	2005 to 2014	2013 to 2014
Leaders	Former and current members of Thaksin's party	Royalist civil servants	Former Democrat Party MPs
	Members of Thaksin's own family	Aristocrats and members of the military	Activists, university lecturers
	Liberal and left activists	The Democrat Party and authoritarian royalists	State enterprise trade unionists

As shown in the table above, there is one pro-Thaksin faction and two anti-Thaksin factions. The two factions working against Thaksin and his alliance are similar in most ways and differ only in small details, such as their main leader and dates of operation. Henceforth, this research will refer to them together as anti-Thaksin factions.

The Thaksin supporters formed an alliance from an association of grass-roots supporters, mainly from the north and north-east of Thailand and other provinces, including some lower-middle-class Bangkokians (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011, p.997). On the other hand, the anti-Thaksin factions were a loose collective of the pro-coup royalist military, the Democrat Party and authoritarian royalists who led the Bangkok middle class and the urban middle class in other provinces (Connors, 2008, p.488); conservative forces and businessmen who were not part of Thaksin's inner circle (Pye and Schaffer, 2008, pp.40-41); and NGOs with grass-roots bases, such as workers, farmers, Octoberist activists, university lecturers and state enterprise trade unionists (Wangkulam, 2010, p.107, pp.118-120).

The first actions against Thaksin started after the rise of his party in the 2001 election, which saw Thaksin become highly popular among the grass-roots majority. His politics and systematic corruption created dissatisfaction, however, among the urban middle class, civil society organisations and radical social movements (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008). The main attack on the powerful, corrupt regime of Thaksin was the accusation that he was an anti-monarchist who wanted to establish a republic (McCargo, 2009, pp.14-16). In early 2006, when Thaksin faced a tax avoidance scandal, the first street protests aiming to oust him started.

During the first anti-Thaksin movement between 2005 and 2006, Thaksin's supporters founded a counter-movement to oppose the anti-Thaksin factions (Cheangsan, 2011). Their main idea was to support Thaksin and his party. Their first attempt failed after the 2006 coup. Their real fight for democracy began during the movement against the military government coup in 2006. They later adopted liberal democracy and more radical elements (Cheangsan, 2011) to combat the royalist and conservative ideologies promoted by anti-Thaksin

factions. Their rallies stopped after the general election in 2007, in which Thaksin's nominee won another landslide victory.

However, after the anti-Thaksin group succeeded in ousting this elected government in 2008, pro-Thaksin rallies became more violent. The violent clashes between factions caused annoyance among the residents of Bangkok, who urged the military to attack. Moreover, incidents such as hospital invasions, the burning down of official buildings, multiple explosions and warnings of civil war led to hatred between middle-class Bangkokians and the rural masses. Mainstream media was also accused of framing the pro-Thaksin faction as violent, poor and uneducated, which sparked wider divisions between middle-class Bangkokians and rural Thaksin supporters (Mediamonitor, 2013). Somjittranukrit (2012) stated that one incident that demonstrated the hostility of middle-class Bangkokian behaviour towards rural rallies was "Big cleaning day", which occurred four days after the military attack. He argued that the action symbolised Bangkokians' negative feelings towards the invasion of their space and their homes by rural people.

The difference among social classes was widened with the next wave of anti-Thaksin factionalism in 2014. It was framed as the first time that middle-class people, business entrepreneurs and young people who had never participated in any colour-coded politics had wanted to take part in a demonstration (The Asia Foundation, 2014). It was acclaimed by mainstream media as "People of the year" (*The Nation*, 2013). It was also the first rally that was funded by large donations from Bangkokians (*Bangkok Post*, 2013b, p.1). As a result, the anti-Thaksin movement was successful again in ousting Thaksin's sister government and replacing it with another junta government.

2.8 Media practice in the movement

During the political crisis in Thailand from 2006 onwards, the media was used as a tool to recruit, maintain, communicate with and mobilise the respective movements. Social class ideology and discourse that projected and ideated merely as rhetoric formed the content targeting each faction's ideal supporters. The tactics and strategies used in pursuing political goals were communicated between leaders and their followers in effective and organised ways. All benefited from

most kinds of media; however, usage of media varied according to the social class character of each faction.

2.8.1 Pro-Thaksin faction: the impact of the people's network

The pro-Thaksin faction, whose main body consists of rural lower- to lower-middle-class supporters, is strongly organised and prefers operating face to face and through print media and personal media rather than broadcasting and digital media. According to their social class base, the group has less access to technology in operating media, but takes more advantage of its close-knit rural community links so that members become key messengers of their political agenda. The tightness of rural communities increases the strength of perceived connection among the group as well as a sense of trust and discretion. Their keys to success are people, community and strong personal connections.

Though there were a number of small groups fighting for democracy during the Council of National Security (CNS) government in 2006-2007, none of these groups had access to mass media. When they merged with Thaksin's party, which enjoyed big budgets and access to other resources, People's Television (PTV) was founded to facilitate and broadcast political programmes. The groups' core leaders were among the management board of PTV. During Samak Sundaravej's government, the pro-Thaksin faction produced the *Truth Today* programme on National Broadcasting Services of Thailand (NBT), the government's own television channel (*Thairath*, 2013).

In parallel with the programme, UDD alliances also took the programme to the street, as *Truth Today Family*, in order to counter the anti-Thaksin rallies outside parliament. The *Truth Today* broadcast from the Thunder Dome Muang Thong Thani on 11 October 2008 was the first time the organiser asked the audience to attend wearing red shirts (Cheangsan, 2011). It was their first usage of T-shirts to symbolise their political interest in a way that emphasised the visibility of the wearers and their political agenda (Penney, 2012).

The content of the show promoted liberal democracy and opposed what the producers of the programme framed as the "double standards" of the "ammart" (aristocratic bureaucrats) against the "prai" (peasants) (Cheangsan, 2011). The pro-Thaksin faction became a symbol of the democratic uprising against

nationalist, royalist and anti-democratic ideas. They adopted an agenda of class struggle and inequality. Their political rhetoric – such as “eye-opening”, “invisible hand”, “Royal Prime Minister” and “ammat/prai” – provided a new framework for the movement (Mukdawijitra and Cheangsan, 2012). Furthermore, they identified themselves as a lower class struggling with class suppression, even though many of them were in fact low- to middle-income peasants and small business entrepreneurs.

Aside from their top-down media plan in mobilising the movement, the most important element in the movement was the network of community leaders and/or pro-Thaksin politicians and vote canvassers (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2010). It was a network of members who would recruit their friends, family and associates to join in every activity created by community leaders. Their political participation took place all year round, and not only at times of political crisis. Personal media, community radio and network organisations were the key communication tools, which were designed to reach targeted supporters more effectively than other media. Socialisation was another core factor in their social mobilisation, through UDD political schools, UDD political participation and community socialism.

The Asia Foundation (2013) found that most pro-Thaksin protesters joined the movement via organised groups and that they learned about the rallies mainly from radio, television and group members. Television, radio and mobile phones were more important to their engagement than the internet and smartphones. Thabchumpon and McCargo (2011) confirmed that traditional personal media, the UDD television channel, community radio and direct printed media were their main channels for political information.

However, the main key to their success was in building up the network of politically engaged rural lower-class support via the political school and the establishment of “Red Shirts Villages”.

The political school was a two- or three-day course arranged by the leaders. The leaders confirmed they had taught at least 16,700 participants (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2010, p.1009). The graduates went back to their villages to either set up their own group or join the current UDD group. These people were considered the key contacts in the UDD rallies. Moreover, the school also played its part both

as a gathering point for every rally and in the recruitment and expansion of the network (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2010, pp.1009-1010).

The school, the villages and the network of members were key distribution points for political information and other resources, such as CDs and photocopies of hard-copy newsletters and printed media. In addition to cable and satellite television channels run by the leaders – such as PTV, Spring News, Voice TV and the UDD channel – and *Red News*, the UDD newspaper, community radio was another outlet for covering political news and putting forward a political agenda (Sitti, 2015). The DJ was not just a disc jockey but also a speaker, an opinion leader and/or a lobbyist for the community. The programmes consisted of country songs, self-help talk shows and political discussion shows which were broadcast in regional languages. The radio stations also acted as depots for distribution of CDs and hard-copy newsletters (Sitti, 2015). Community radio also broadcast live speeches from the assembly of the movement, meaning that Thaksin's voice could be heard by the audience at home. Interestingly, though most of their lower-class supporters did not have internet access, they had access to online and social media via locally produced photocopies of printouts from the internet.

For online and social media, as the pro-Thaksin agenda and activity were mostly monitored by the government, they depended on international proxy and complicated encrypted html for their communication. In cyberspace, leaders and educated upper- and middle-class members used advanced technology to bypass government blocks of their websites and blogs (*Bangkok Post*, 2010). The technology prevented the government from blocking the websites of UDD and many of its allies. Nowadays, Thaksin supporters with internet access can still enjoy content and information relating to their political engagement via various forms of online media – terrestrial television, satellite TV, cable TV, IPTV, analogue radio and internet radio – just by downloading and installing the special toolbar to access dedicated websites. The software also prevents anyone from identifying their IP address.

2.8.2 Anti-Thaksin: a movement with media endorsement

Though the anti-Thaksin factions mainly comprise upper- and middle-class urbanites with advantages in resources, their middle stratum and their urban

lifestyle could not bond them together as strongly as their lower-class opponents. However, their social class advantage allows them to gain access to more channels of communication than their lower-class opponents. As a result, the anti-Thaksin movement applies a variety of media in influencing audiences to join the movement as well as to maintain their political agenda of conservatism, royalism and ousting the Shinawatra clan.

Their early development in late 2006 revealed a well-organised movement with advanced media management. During this period, they started using yellow shirts as their symbolic outfit, since it was the time of the King's 60th jubilee celebrations. Yellow shirts had become a wardrobe staple for most Thai citizens as part of these celebrations. The anti-Thaksin faction quickly adopted the shirt and made it their outfit, to symbolise the fact that its members were protectors of the King. Yellow shirts became another tool in mobilising the movement. Similar to the red shirt adopted by their rivals, the T-shirt symbolised political identity, engagement and their political agenda (Penney, 2012).

Since the original leaders of the protest were experienced in the mass media field, the internet, cable and satellite television were used for wider publicity (Rattana, 2009). All in all, they tried to frame Thaksin as an anti-monarchist motivated by the intention of establishing a republic (McCargo, 2009). Kasian Thechapheera (Prachatai, 2007) saw this as a plan to pave the way for a coup and an end to democracy. In fact, the main content broadcast during the protest contained new words, metaphors and an ironic style of language that was selected to frame the agenda against Thaksin's administration (Dhiraparbpatrakul, 2007).

The most effective strategy was 24-hour live broadcasting through satellite television and the internet in the form of a reality show. It helped build their network and gained widespread interest and engagement from their followers (Behnjharachajarunandha, 2011). All in all, their media strategy in having a satellite television channel that broadcast continuously for 24 hours without being blocked or disturbed, having trusted leaders as message senders and having a well-framed agenda along with a strategy that gave the public a feeling of unity helped to encourage people both to join the rally in person and to monitor events from home (Reng A-rom, 2010).

In the latest movement from 2013 to 2014, their symbolic politics gained an online presence with social media and then went viral as a fashion trend of wearing national-flag-themed T-shirts and accessories (*Thansettakij*, 2006). It was not just their supporters who were eager to own the T-shirts; less politicised observers susceptible to social media influence also followed this social trend. Compared to Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts, which were heavily framed as a political statement, national-flag T-shirts had additional appeal as a fashion item. This served as another promotional tool for the anti-Thaksin faction, as people would wear this politically charged item of clothing around town.

At the beginning, their movement in 2013 against the elected government was ignored by most public media, but social media, as well as satellite television channels, fulfilled their needs in terms of mobilising supporters (Yongcharoenchai, 2013). However, after the success of the V For Thailand Facebook page, which activated a social media movement against the elected government (Sinlapalavan, 2013), middle-class social media devotees flooded Facebook with their digital acts of protest.

2.9 The rise of contemporary symbolic political action in Thailand: when the colour of a shirt is not just the colour of a shirt

In a political situation where people want as little to do with politics as possible, symbolic action can be the best alternative to political participation (Dhiraparbpatrakul, 2007). Since Thais are not familiar with direct political participation, they need to be convinced if they are to be recruited to join a political campaign. The PAD rallies in 2005-2006 were a breakthrough in contemporary symbolic political action in Thailand (Wangkulam, 2010).

To support and deliver the idea of “saving the monarchy”, PAD adopted yellow, which is the King’s colour. The wearing of the yellow shirt began in June 2006, around the 60th anniversary of King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s accession to the throne (*Thansettakij*, 2006). The event organiser informally asked Thai citizens to wear royal yellow T-shirts with the celebration’s special emblem to commemorate the occasion. Some organisations officially asked their employees to wear the yellow T-shirt on every Monday for the whole year. Every Monday for the rest of 2006, groups of commuters in yellow T-shirts filled the streets of Bangkok.

The yellow T-shirts were so popular that they rapidly sold out, and large numbers of new orders were requested. Equally popular were yellowish rubber wristbands inscribed with the words "We love the King", and featuring photographs of the ceremony. Though the ceremony ended in June, many people still wore yellow shirts for weeks afterwards. Yellow T-shirts had become the symbol of those who were loyal to the monarchy.

When the PAD started its original rally with weekly public broadcasts of *เมืองไทยรายสัปดาห์* (*Thailand Weekly*), which was also an early webcasting show in Thailand, the audiences came in to each recording wearing yellow T-shirts they had bought at the ceremony (Wiriyothai, 2009). The audiences of the show were the original source of symbolic action, by wearing the T-shirt to express their loyalty to the monarchy (Wangkulam, 2010). After it lost its time slot, the show hit the streets of Thailand, Sondhi and his ASTV-Manager multimedia group launched satellite television, internet television, community radio and other types of media. Furthermore, along with the campaign, instruments, gears and props were created and sold as merchandise to the audiences, and then to the masses (Wiriyothai, 2009).

Many kinds of symbolic action, symbolic equipment and brand promotion were used to promote a common goal-oriented policy to oust the Thaksin regime. They also promoted a political movement and style of participation at the core of the movement which was likely to attract the middle class (Wangkulam, 2010). Furthermore, their brand came with symbols such as the yellow shirt, to convey royalism, and hand-clapping rattles, which represented non-violent protest. There were also headbands, scarves, wristbands and themed music to complete the outfit and the campaign. In addition to these symbols, the protesters were called "brothers and sisters", connecting their brand with a sense of unity (Wiriyothai, 2009).



Photo 2.1: Picture used by PAD, depicting the complete outfit for a supporter of the movement

Since most of their followers were elderly, they framed their movement as non-violent. They performed symbolic protests through civil disobedience, seizures, road blocks and other methods. The most popular form of protest was Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha method of non-violent resistance (Wiriyothai, 2009). During the 2006 protest, the protesters offered flowers to the policemen, prayed on the ground and meditated. Their actions represented the familiar upper-class manner, which gained support from most of the educated middle class (Wangkulam, 2010). Most PAD supporters came from an upper- or middle-class background, which allowed them to give the movement their time and money. By having their satellite television channel, which broadcast continuously for 24 hours without being blocked or disrupted, PAD enhanced the feeling of unity among the public, and encouraged people both to join the rally in person, and to monitor it from home (Larpnimitchai, 2010). The home-monitoring concept suited most Thais' style of political participation. The strategy of PDRC, another anti-Thaksin movement, in their 2009-2010 protests was not so different to that of PAD in their 2006 protest.

The pro-Thaksin movement started with a counter-attack, echoing the tactics of the PAD movement. Starting with the red T-shirt, some Thaksin supporters claimed that (in Thailand) red represented the nation, which is the agenda they believe and which brought them together. Others assumed that red is the opposite colour to yellow due to the striking colour clash. One reasonable claim

from a Thaksin-supporting informant was that the red T-shirts originated from the campaign which an NGO organised to reject the new 2007 constitution, as it was written by a military-appointed committee. The Council for National Security (the military government) campaigned for people to approve the draft using the colour green, which means “go” or “yes” (Sangdad, 2007). As a result, for their campaign the opponents had chosen red to mean “no” or “reject”. Red thus became the colour which represented rejection of the military government, leading to its later adoption by Thaksin supporters.

The pro-Thaksin style, its content and the audience were fairly different from the upper- and middle-class composition of PAD. Most of the pro-Thaksin protesters came from the rural areas of Thailand (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011). They were gathering, not due to the consumption of a television programme, as was the case with the PAD movement, but on the strength of word of mouth among their neighbours and opinion leaders, such as vote canvassers and politicians from Thaksin’s party (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011). The organisation of the pro-Thaksin movement was more effective than PAD’s, as the protesters were already members of Thaksin’s party or supporters of his politicians. The pro-Thaksin leaders did not need to use much persuasion.

Though they had planned their movement to be non-violent, the protest gradually evolved into a violent one due to the aggressive tone of the speeches and political rhetoric on the stage (*Matichon*, 2013). The pro-Thaksin techniques of political communication were framed to satisfy the protesters, the majority of whom were provincial people with a lower-middle-class to lower-class background. Strong words, that were easy to follow, and provocative language were chosen to communicate with the protesters (*Nationtv*, 2014). The protest escalated into prolonged violent confrontations between the protesters and the military.

Apart from provocative language and vibrant colour, other symbolic actions were used to motivate the movement in a similar manner. PAD had hand-clapping in their demonstration; foot-clapping was created by the pro-Thaksin movement as a derisive response (Buchanan, 2013). Since in Thai culture the foot is considered to be an impolite and aggressive body part that should be covered, using it as an object that is waved around is unacceptable. However, foot-clapping

seemed to suit the nature of the demonstration due to its inappropriateness, lower-status connotations and sarcastic intent. The foot-clapping rattle symbolised the lower status of the pro-Thaksin protesters as well as representing their unorthodox ideology and maintained the intensity of the pro-Thaksin demonstration.



Photo 2.2: Full pro-Thaksin outfit: foot-clapping rattle, “We love Thaksin” T-shirt in red

Other symbolic actions that were taken by the pro-Thaksin protesters also represented their extreme agenda, which was considered impolite, lower in taste and inappropriate by upper- and middle-class Thais (Forsyth, 2010). One such symbolic action was to draw the protesters’ blood, which was poured in front of significant places around Bangkok. The leaders claimed the blood symbolised the bloodshed that was required to protect the nation. The *Christian Science Monitor* (2010) branded this action as one of the ten most unusual protests. The pro-Thaksin extreme symbolic actions did not stop at drawing and pouring blood; there were other radical symbolic actions in the protest. The pro-Thaksin demonstration represented a rather theatrical, attention-seeking form of protest (Forsyth, 2010). There were groups of motorbikes driving around residential areas in Bangkok.

All in all, the political movement of Thaksin supporters represented their main agenda and main political discourse of class stratification in Thailand (Ungpakorn, 2009). The main discourse was to frame the Democrat Party government, the military and the monarchy as *ammart* (aristocrats) based on their background as upper to middle class and political elites. Pro-Thaksin followers framed themselves as *phrai* (serfs), who were from the lower class and working class (Buchanan, 2013). They presented themselves as rural-born poor, who were

being exploited due to their class. The class-centric collective action helped the demonstration to gain support from rural areas as well as the urban poor. The manner of their political movement was resented by urban educated people and the middle to upper classes. It amplified the social class gap among Thais and divided them into groups based on their social class, ideological beliefs and location (Ungpakorn, 2009).

2.10 Conclusion

Thai politics has developed and changed over time; however, the main characteristics of Thailand's social and cultural history have remained. This history gave Thai politics some negative characteristics, such as elite politics, the patron-client system, differences between rural and urban communities, and the cycle of protest that evolved around social class and ideological differences among the factions. It also affects citizens' political practice and their political participation.

At the same time, media are used in political communication mainly as channels to promote each faction's political ideas, main concepts and ideology so that they can gather sufficient followers to engage in their social movement. Rather than functioning as alternative channels of political communication, most Thai media are partisan tools of political factions designed to influence people's opinions.

All the background concerning the political situation in Thailand, including its effect on media distribution, usage and consumption, helps us in understanding the cleavage in Thai political practice. It also helps to shape our understanding of how Thais tend to mediate politics in their current media consumption.

The next chapter explores the mediated political practice of Thais by looking at their social media political practice. The chapter also reviews existing literature on social media and its connection to political participation.

Chapter Three: Theoretical framework

In order to further my argument with regard to political participation and the use of social media by the middle class in Thailand, the theoretical framework of political participation, social class and social media is presented here, together with a review of some significant literature related to the issue. This chapter starts by reviewing existing scholastic exploration of the concept of participation, identifying issues related to political participation and approaches to its study. Then, other forms of political participation emerging from social change are introduced, along with exploration of the factors required for successful political participation.

The chapter looks at the role played by classical factors such as social class and political interest in influencing contemporary political participation. As one of the main focuses in this study is the social strata background of the informants, the chapter goes on to explore how social class and other new types of social division affect the process of participation. It also raises issues of class that go beyond socio-economic status to include identity, lifestyle and subculture. This leads to a tighter focus on the effect of social stratification as a social aspect that impacts political engagement.

The study then turns to another main agenda, that of media consumption. Here, the research investigates the significance of social and cultural implications for political participation. This links back to how the social and cultural background of users impacts their media consumption and usage. As mediated information becomes a part of political engagement, users' personal background, identity, and social and cultural setting are important for them in terms of how they comprehend the wider context in which their political participation is taking place.

The next section begins with a review of academic interest in political participation and social media. This is divided into three different types of political participation: voting and election campaigns; protest and mobilisation; and political talk and civic engagement. This section explores empirical works debating the pros and cons of the impact of social media on political participation.

The final section of this chapter summarises the argument raised in this thesis regarding the impact of social and cultural influences on political participation in social media. The argument points out the gap in existing academic study concerning political participation and social media, in terms of both the agenda of social and cultural influences on media consumption and the choice of methodology when looking at political participation in relation to social media, that this thesis aims to remedy.

3.1 The concept of political participation

The definition and core concept of participation varies according to the context or particular field of study in which the word is used (Dahlgren, 2013; Carpentier, 2011, p.15). Moreover, most disciplines debate how institutions and agents in society should give more consideration to citizens' participation and the extent to which citizen involvement should be allowed (Livingstone, 2013).

The definition, meaning and core concept of participation, however, are still lacking in consensus and clarification among academics (Carpentier and Dahlgren, 2011), as some focus on participatory practices while others concentrate on the condition of participation. From the media perspective, Sonia Livingstone states that participation *per se* is easily identified as "to take part in something" (Livingstone, 2013, p.3); the important part to underline is "something", which would determine whether or not one decides to take part in it. The democratic perspective of participation refers to the key ingredient of citizens' inclusion in the political and decision-making process (Held, 2006, p.3). Within democratic theory, participation can also be an indication of how healthy and stable democracy is in the society.

The definition of political participation has evolved over the years. In the famous work of Verba and Nie (1972), *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*, political participation was defined as behaviour designed to affect the choice of government personnel and/or policies made by government personnel (pp.2-3). This reflects how the concept was framed in the 1970s, when other types of passive engagement such as mobilisation and civic engagement were excluded, and the concept was narrowed down to considerations of voting behaviour only. From then on, definitions of political

participation started to broaden and encompass other factors including cultural setting. The focus of political participation has changed from actual voting to other types of political activities, ranging from petition signing to donating money and volunteering in political campaigns (Kenski and Stroud, 2006). For example, Norris (2002, p.16) defines political participation as “any dimensions of social activity that are either designed directly to influence government agencies and the policy process, or indirectly to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behaviour”. It is also considered as a concept that is intertwined with civic activities (Macedo *et al.*, 2005).

3.2 The importance of political participation

Political participation is mostly considered with approval, as one of the basic prerequisites of a healthy democracy (Verba *et al.*, 1995, p.2; Norris, 2002, p.5). Regardless of the model of democracy, even in elite forms of democracy the political process requires participation to gain consent. Public involvement in the political process is vital within traditional democracy (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Participation in the decision-making process is a prerequisite for proper democratic governance (Dahl, 1998).

The possibility of access and interaction are the prior conditions for the establishment of participation (Carpentier, 2011), though, all in all, the decision-making process is the most vital part of participation. To this end, the participation concept has been a source of long-term debate within the fields of politics, media and communications, and digital media; the question that has preoccupied every field is how and to what extent the structure of participation should provide access and decision-making to everybody (Held, 2006; Carpentier, 2011; Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013).

Political participation, whether or not it can empower citizens in the decision-making process, has the goal of including people in political or civic engagement (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013). As Dahlgren (2013, p.19) states: “Political talk (that actually engages with the political) such as in a face-to-face discussion, or in an online forum or on Facebook, would be seen as participation; it is the enhancement of the public sphere, where opinion can take shape.”

As most political theorists agree that equal opportunity for individuals to influence the decision-making process is an important factor in political participation (Verba *et al.*, 1978), Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere is introduced here to address the question of public opinion and the space whereby such activity can be conducted. Habermas (1989), concerned mostly with public opinion in the political system, used the term "public sphere" to refer to a place for rationality and democratic discourse. For him, the public sphere is a realm of social life where the exchange of opinion, gathering of information and discovery of public opinion takes place. This space for private citizens to join freely and equally together for an open debate on political and social issues in turn helps the political system and supports democracy.

3.3 Other forms of political participation

The trend of investigating electoral turnout and voting has declined, since theorists have explored alternative activities in order to gain a more accurate understanding of influences that shape decision-making processes (O'Toole *et al.*, 2003). More new types of political participation have been introduced (Inglehart, 1997). The urgent need of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) to accommodate public engagement has brought in other forms of activities and a new set of political participation practices. These new forms of political participation acts are related more to the lifestyle and personal identity of citizens, rather than being fixed to traditional political identity (i.e. leftist or rightist) (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967).

Dahlgren (2009) points out that this new trend might attract more citizens to participate in politics. Since the public sphere is shared by numerous factions of new group identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity and age, society has become pluralistic. This individualism became increasingly noticeable and eventually helped to create and support a new form of engagement, no longer based on political ideology but related to an individual's lifestyle, personality, values and personal issues (Dahlgren, 2009). This concept of individualism, personal lifestyle and subculture will be further outlined in the next section, which looks at the possible development of a new class based on political participation.

In this sense, political participation could include other forms of civic engagement by citizens, for example demonstrations, seizures or dance music

(Dalton, 2008; Riley *et al.*, 2010). Demonstrations, petitions and boycotts of products have increasingly become acceptable forms of political participation. Though formal political participation, such as voting or lobbying, has traditionally been the focus of academic investigation, other, non-institutional forms, such as protests or seizures, have become an area of academic interest in recent years. Based on the idea of the public sphere, demonstrations and other political engagements have become more and more acceptable as forms of political participation (Dalton, 2008).

Marsh and Kaase (1979, p.59) are among the pioneers of the notion of unconventional political participation, distinguishing political behaviour by citizens into two sets. “Conventional” participation refers to institutionalised modes of political action, from voting and campaigning to political discussion, while “unconventional” participation refers to other involvement in politics outside institutionalised forms, such as demonstration, boycotting and signing petitions. In recent years a decline in voting turnout has been seen around the world and become a concern of political theorists, while simultaneously the number of people engaging in politics by demonstrating or protesting, in order to voice their disagreements with governments, is increasing Norris (2002) has perceived this as the real site of engagement in politics, rather than a sign of political apathy.

3.3.1 Lifestyle as political participation

As mentioned previously, the act of political participation might relate also to an individual’s lifestyle, personality, values and personal issues (Dahgren, 2009). This could offer a more lifestyle-orientated form of participation which moves away from conventional political participation (Stolle and Hooghe, 2011; Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2005). Such unconventional engagement in politics – for example, demonstrations, seizures or dance music (Dalton, 2008) – demonstrates lifestyles and consumption that embody everyday politics as lifestyle is fundamentally a representation of identity, lifestyle movements (Wahlen and Laamanen, 2015) and participation in lifestyle politics (Bennett, 1998) can turn one’s engagement in everyday life into one’s political expression.

Lifestyle politics encompasses the politicisation of everyday life, such as modes of living (Bennett, 1998; Giddens, 1991). By the importance of people's everyday decisions, which could have global implications and vice versa, lifestyle politics became a form of politics (Giddens, 1991). This type of approach brings with it the promise that an individual can support social and cultural change through their lifestyle, so that the act of lifestyle politics is on the rise (Bennett, 1998; Stolle and Hooghe, 2011). Lifestyle politics and lifestyle movements have become regarded as one of the most demonstrative types of political action in the late modernity. Recent contemporary social movements that have involved boycotts, seizures and campaigns based on addressing social challenges include Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring and LGBT rights protests.

Furthermore, in Foucault's work, although his ideas developed and changed over time with regard to the influence of external and internal forces on human behaviour, the person's concerns to themselves remain significant to their identity. In volume two of the History of Sexuality, Foucault (Foucault, 2000, p.263) refers to "ethics" as a general code of morals that explain how a person cares about and is concerned with himself, which will set the standards of how he will behave. This concept is similar to Anthony Giddens's notion of lifestyle. Once the ethics are set, they rule that person's personal and subjective choices, whether or not these are accepted by the society. Foucault argues that this is not an individual choice, but a characteristic of modern liberal democracies that came from powerful and subtle forms of "governmentality" (Foucault, 1979).

Lifestyle as a set of social practices can transform an individual's everyday consumption into political mobilisation. Lifestyle movements are conceptualised as a combination of private and public forms of enacting based on lifestyle and identity that might go further than a political agenda (Haenfler, Johnson and Jones, 2012). They could also challenge cultural and social practice with the goal of bringing about social and cultural change. As a result, the centre of lifestyle movements is the personality or identity and lifestyle choices. Since politics requires the formation of collective identity in order to fulfil the goal of social or political change, such as demonstrations against authority or even against corporate misconduct, lifestyles and consumption can act as a starting point of civic engagement.

To complete this indirect organising of lifestyle-mobilised political movement, a common identity is required in order to recruit like-minded citizens and provide them with a sense of belonging. Symbols such as colours, signs or practices could provide a sense of common identity to the group as their shared civic culture. Though it might lack a long-term structure for formal political participation, this civic culture has an impact on mobilisation and recruitment for demonstrations (Mascheroni, 2013). Symbolism as a partial bond of civic identity is currently used via social media in organising and mobilising citizens beyond spatial boundaries.

3.3.2 Symbolic action as political participation

Due to the social norm of Kreng jai, which was outlined in chapter two, political participation in Thailand has traditionally tended not to perform in a conventional way, through open debate or exchange of opinion in public spaces. Rather, the act of political participation in Thailand has involved many unconventional actions, such as themed protests, political accessories and coloured T-shirts. In order to understand political participation and contemporary symbolic political action that is extremely popular in Thailand, this section introduces some symbolic political actions that have served as alternative forms of political participation.

The use of symbols in politics is nothing new, as many types of symbols have been used by politicians and political parties to communicate their political identity and engage with their voters during political campaigns (Woon and Pope, 2008, p.282). In political campaigns, people are second-hand consumers of symbolic politics. Mass media have, for a long time, been a medium in transmitting this political message from politicians to voters. Mass media create and interpret political symbols and also give the recognition and identity to politics (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1997). Symbolism, as a result, played an important part in gathering like-minded people, just as Lasswell and Kaplan (1950, p.119) once claimed that symbols “arouse admiration and enthusiasm, setting forth and strengthening faiths and loyalties”.

In citizen-level political expression, the commercialised forms of politics open up space for civic activism that uses commercial marketing and popular culture, such as “green” consumption-based activism (Hearn, 2012). This

unconventional political participation is increasingly being accepted as a form of political participation. It is an alternative way for citizens to understand political issues by being exposed to media, gaining information and framing their own opinions (Kim and Kim, 2008). The T-shirt movement, which is a political identity movement that emphasises the visibility of the wearers and their political agenda, is another example of contemporary symbolic political action (Penney, 2012). The contemporary political-cultural activism is opening up new opportunities that enable all citizens to engage in political activity.

The internet enables citizens to discuss political and social issues in their everyday lives too. In fact, everyday political talk within the public sphere is where the lifestyle notion of politics emerges (Graham, 2009). The internet's discursive role also allows wider engagement in political participation (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001), which symbolically justifies civic engagement (Bucy and Gregson, 2001) and informal online discourse (Dahlgren, 2005). Therefore, the internet is engaging more in lifestyle and identity politics (Bennett, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009). Such a notion engages people in considering a shift in political participation.

The new platforms of social media, such as Facebook in this research, also provide a contemporary political environment that enables a new type of symbolic political participation (Bucy and Gregson, 2001). Social media are often designed around the existing social network of a person (Gustafsson, 2012). The space allows an individual to express their personality as well as their identity. Such an action of symbolic activity on social media is fairly unique among other forms of political participation. This action serves to represent the personal sense of the participant while also enhancing his or her social status. Political participation on social media, therefore, relates also to the person's personality and social background. Engagement in media participation also enhances the user's social position among their network of friends (Bucy and Gregson, 2001).

Political participation practice via symbolic action on social media is no longer merely a political statement, but is another level of symbolic political debate and discourse (Grömping, 2014). The process of sharing and broadcasting one's political statement on social media allows two-way communication in attacking and counter-attacking the opposing side's political discourse and campaigns. The

phenomenon of clicktivism (Lee and Hsieh, 2013), which relates to political statements and actions on social media, could be a new form of political participation as well as another symbolic action in sharing and posting political material on Facebook. This could lead to wider forms of political participation in the future.

3.4 Factors influencing political participation

As well as various definitions, there have also been numerous variables linked to the investigation of political participation. In social contexts, political participation is a fluid and evolving social phenomenon with a number of factors related to it. Many factors have been identified as being related to efficient participation. In traditional studies of political participation, the effects of other traditional political variables, such as political interest, political efficacy and socio-economic status, have been examined in order to understand political participation and its antecedents. Verba *et al.* (1995, p.269) indicated three core components of political participation – “resources”, “psychological engagement” and “recruitment” – while the primary reasons for non-participation were “because they cannot”, “because they do not want to” and “because nobody asked”. In other words, Verba *et al.* (1995) concluded that choice affects participation.

Since political participation is actually a choice made by individuals who are motivated, informed and capable of participating, the motivational and informational variables are among the factors that influence participation (Eveland and Scheufele, 2000). Information regarding politics is considered an important variable in the decision-making process. It can facilitate individuals in connecting to political values, policies and candidates (Zaller, 1992, in Robison *et al.*, 2015, p.1). Niemi and Junn (1998, p.1) claim that political knowledge promotes successful political engagement; even a basic understanding of the political system makes a considerable difference. People who are better informed tend to be more politically active and to participate more (McLeod *et al.*, 1999). Those who are well informed in one area of politics are also keen to access information regarding other areas of politics too (Delli, Carpini and Keeter, 1996).

On the other hand, other social circumstances, such as age, race, gender, ethnicity and location, can also affect civic engagement in political participation.

Males, and people with a higher education, along with older people with greater life experience, tend to participate more in politics, so gender, education and age are identified as the main variables of political participation (Stolle and Hooghe, 2011). Though the gender gap in political participation now tends to be narrower (Conway, 2001), the education level of participants plays a vital role in participation (Verba *et al.*, 1995).

All in all, among other factors that influence political participation socio-economic status (SES) has the greatest effect on “who” participates (Verba and Nie, 1972, pp.18-22). Verba and Nie (1972, pp.263-264) found that socio-economic status correlates strongly with participation. People with a higher SES are more capable of developing their set of civic attitudes and engagement, which leads to a higher rate of participation. SES also corresponds with affiliation with voluntary associations; people with a lower SES tend to be less involved in voluntary activities. This increases the gap in civic engagement and political participation. Other research supports this finding, stating a strong correlation between political participation and social/economic class (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Bimber, 2001). Higher degrees of participation mostly come from those in higher education, with more wealth and with a higher social class status.

Scholars have found that political participation of individuals is regularly related to their social class or occupation (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba *et al.*, 1978; Beeghley, 1986; Paulsen, 1991; Ong and Cabañes, 2011). This socialisation aspect of political participation has impacted understanding of political participation, even in the US, where the political arena is open to all citizens (Beeghley, 1986).

3.5 Social class and political participation

According to the classic concept of the standard socio-economic model (Verba and Nie, 1972), socio-economic status has been shown to have a large influence on conventional political engagement. Socio-economic status can indicate the rate of political participation in most conventional forms of political participation, such as voting. People with higher education and incomes and white-collar workers are more likely to participate in politics than people with a lower socio-economic status. Similarly, unconventional acts of political participation are related to socio-

economic status in the same manner, while education seems to have the greatest influence on conventional political participation.

However, from the 1980s onwards, sociologists and political scientists have argued that social class has less power over political participation. Pakulski and Waters (1996) stated that social class was nothing more than a purely historical phenomenon which had a minimal effect on contemporary politics. A theory of postmodern society (Pakulski and Waters, 1996) claims that class inequality has been replaced by value commitment, identity, belief, symbolic meaning, taste, opinion and consumption. Meanwhile, risk society theory (Beck, 1992) supports the idea that class-based politics has faded as a result of the rise of individualisation and the break-up of traditional social bonds. The new form of inequality among citizens, therefore, is based more on "individualisation of social risks" and "individualisation of social inequalities" (Beck, 1992, p.100).

Cainzos and Voces (2010) provide empirical evidence that refutes the decline of social class in determining political behaviour. Using data from the first round of the European Social Survey, which covered 20 countries, to understand the relationship between political participation and social class, the result emphasises the impact of social class on political participation. The study also widens political participation to cover forms of activities other than voting. Moreover, the study shows dimensions of class other than socio-economic status that influence people's political participation, demonstrating how class position can shape social and political behaviour. Evidently, the various forms of capital and its disposition still impact people's potential for participation.

Though significant socio-economic factors of social class have been transformed by the emergence of a classless society (Inglehart and Rabier, 1986), other forms of social stratification have emerged. Alternative concepts of social division to the traditional socio-economic stratification have also been related to political participation (Anthias, 2001). Class stratification is not based on socio-economic status alone; it also results from the cultural sphere (Pakulski and Waters, 1996). Class-based politics has been replaced by a system based on different classifications of identity, such as race, sex, ethnicity and age (Beck, 1992). Bourdieu's (1984) approach to social class is one of a number of theories of postmodern society to argue that social class has moved from the means of

production to class consumption, and class-based distinctions in taste formation. According to this concept, class stratification can be formed around value commitment, identity, belief, symbolic meaning, taste, opinion or consumption.

In his framework, Bourdieu conceptualises class by a variety of dimensions of capital. Capital is the centre of power distribution and resources and affects the opportunities and disposition of agents in society. Bourdieu acknowledges the relation between the social and the material in his model of the social world as a form of social space (Ritzer, 2008). Bourdieu approaches social class through the analysis of symbolic systems rather than rational action theory, which normally neglects an element of symbolic analysis in its assumption of rational action (Weininger, 2012). He argues that in order for them to be constantly re legitimised through the interplay of agency and structure, cultural and symbolic capital are created as the core of power. What he calls “habitus” or the norms that guide human behaviour is the heart of this cycle.

As he states: “Habitus is the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them” (Wacquant, 2005, p.316). For him, habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but rather created by a kind of interplay between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and shape current practices and structures, and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these (Bourdieu, 1984, p.170).

Class for Bourdieu is not determined by material assets anymore but rather by social, cultural or symbolic capital. He uses the term “capital” to frame this form of value, which is beyond the notion of material assets. It plays a central role in societal power relations without any form of economic domination; however, class has been distinguished by taste, cultural and symbolic forms of capital rather than material forms of domination.

In this sense, class analysis is the analysis not only of economic relations, but also of symbolic relations. There are different kinds of capital: economic capital (economic status), social capital (connection), cultural capital (knowledge of how to practise in a particular field) and symbolic capital (prestige) (Bourdieu, 1984). In his class analysis, Bourdieu balances between social class on one side, and

culture with lifestyle on the other. For Bourdieu, status and class coexist in reality. These all lead to an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies that sets how an individual behaves.

Bourdieu indicates that habitus and capital work together in framing people's belief in the status quo and their perception that they cannot change their world; therefore, they have to give in to the surrounding external forces or structure. Bourdieu called this symbolic violence. Similarly, although Foucault disagrees with Bourdieu on how people can respond to power, his term "governmentality" indicates how to govern through tolerance and wisdom by employing rules and regulations for the citizens to obey (Foucault 1991). For Foucault (Foucault, 1980), a discourse of norms and normality is among regulations controlling the state. However, with individuals' desire to conform to such normality, individuals will eventually voluntarily control themselves with self-discipline that conforms to cultural norms.

Following Bourdieu regarding class, culture, lifestyle and symbolic aspects, Anthias (2001, p.846) argued that, in fact, social class is not only an economic relation but a social relation that involves forms of social organisation. For Anthias, lifestyle is a result of a production and consumption process that relates to cultural modes of expression. In this light, cultural and symbolic aspects of social division influence class division beyond the allocation of economic resources. Material and symbolic resources have more influence on social division than economic resources (p.852). Each person's social disposition shapes individual behaviour or their decision-making process (Bourdieu, 1977, p.15).

As a result, by framing the decision-making process as a key concept in political participation, I argue that at some point in life, when an individual makes a decision to adjust their political practice, their social disposition will shape their behaviour according to their previous social and cultural background. The various kinds of background, social class and life experience differ for each individual in strategic personal political participation. The social and cultural aspects of social division may influence people's political and civic participation more than their economic aspect. People who share similar socio-economic status but have different social and cultural backgrounds might not share similar political

interests. This should also relate to how their media practice in connecting to the public world and politics will be determined.

Concepts of social division and class disposition in political participation have also been confirmed in media studies frameworks. For example, the principle of differentiation among audiences, which has been raised by media scholars also relates to social stratification. Social stratification that works in maintaining class distinction also shows how people shape their encoding in media (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007a, p.25). Each audience group has different types of media encoding and decoding according to class, gender or age. Though other types of differences, such as gender or age difference, might disappear or fade with time and with changes in social and technological circumstances, class remains. The confirmed existence of class in media practice can be seen through a similar frame in the ways in which Murdoch (1989) and Livingstone (2002) define the audience and media according to social stratification. The next section will elaborate further on the media practice frame in relation to political engagement and social stratification in the mediated process.

In summary, the decision-making process is the key concept in the relationship between social division and political participation. Political participation is a form of civic engagement that should be explored in the social context (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007b). Social class still plays a vital role in understanding political participation in social science and political science. Participants' class affects how they choose to participate in politics as well as their political practice. Class goes beyond socio-economic status, encompassing identity, lifestyle, subculture and groups. This emphasises the influence of class position on political participation, which is one of the key arguments in this research.

3.6 Mediated political engagement: roles played by media in political participation

Media consumption is another of the many factors that affect or lead to political participation and civic engagement (Eveland, 2004). This is due to the role of the media as framed by both political science and media studies: that the media is a public space, a fourth estate in bridging citizens and politics. It is also a necessary

commitment that news media, in particular, has to provide the citizen with enough information to be able to make political decisions (Holt *et al.*, 2013).

In general, relationships between media consumption and political engagement are considered to result in mutual reinforcement. Norris (2000), for example, argued that media use and engagement work reciprocally; the more people engage in news, the more politically active they become. On the other hand, television is blamed by Putnam (2000) for weakening people's social capital, which actually is one of the keys to successful political participation (Verba *et al.*, 1995).

As previously mentioned, the concept of political participation has changed over time; this also applies to the concept of media consumption and participation. Media do not respond directly to the development of political opinion among citizens anymore. Media platforms themselves are also increasingly changing from mass media to more personalised and individualised forms. In consuming media nowadays, one needs more than reading, watching or listening skills alone; these skills are increasingly required simultaneously. Users' skills and ability, which may derive from their personal background, their identity, and their social and cultural setting, are important in determining how they engage in informed political participation. Mediated information has become a part of political engagement.

With the introduction of new media platforms, new forms of political and civic engagement have emerged in parallel with new digital networked media. As, for example, Mascheroni (2013, p.97) argues, the internet accommodates more de-institutionalised forms of civic and political engagement based on everyday life where identities are produced, negotiated, performed and practised. In this light, the perceived identity of participants is equally important to media in fostering civic and political engagement.

In fact, it is not only the realm of new media that requires this process of mediation in engaging with the public world, but the entire contemporary multimedia environment. Communication is a form of social practice that requires mediation on both sides of the process: sender and receiver. Personal factors are influential in how participants engage in media and the world around them. In addition to the factors identified above – age, race, gender, ethnicity and social class – mediation as a form of social practice also influences participation. In fact, this concept is tremendously relevant to this research and should be to other

similar work in investigating social media influence on political participation under the media studies frame. It promotes a focus on media and their process in the world of politics, rather than on politics and the political process, to determine the influence of media on participation.

In focusing more on social and cultural factors that impact mediated political engagement, Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007a) conducted a “Public Connection Project” to investigate how British citizens incorporate media into their connection to the public world. They pointed out the significance of media connection as one form of political action. The project argued that connection with media is actually a form of political action, as media is a part of politics. In connecting to politics, people are assumed to share their attention or interest, a concept they call “public connection”. Public connection is also assumed to be sustained by the consumption of media content.

However, to understand media consumption, one needs to understand its everyday practice to know how media consumption fits into everyday life, which should be linked to democracy as one form of the social and cultural reproduction process. In this sense, consuming media is not a standalone process that can be evaluated as a single issue anymore, as media consumption relates to people's identity and background, especially social class. As a result, media do not directly influence people's political behaviour anymore; rather, what media do is to inform the public on what issues they should be focused on or paying attention to. On the other hand, the direction of the attention paid on the issue in question depends on each participant's self-concern. Mostly the direction of their opinion relates back to their background, identity and personal concerns.

Besides, media consumption is not only consumption but also interpretation of media texts. Consuming contemporary media becomes mediation that needs to take into account individual social and cultural background, ability, and media literacy in measuring media influences on political participation. It requires consideration of how the process of mediated communication shapes society and culture and vice versa. Silverstone (2005, p.203) identified three concepts that need to be understood in order to investigate the mediation process: how processes of mediated communication shape society and culture, the relationship that participants have with both their environment and each other,

and consideration of how social and cultural factors (in turn) mediate the mediation (of both institutions and technology) in terms of both reception and consumption.

Therefore, in understanding such media practice, ethnographic research is chosen as the best method of investigating most audience research, including public connection. The ethnographic approach will provide a more contextualised approach to people's relationship to media in their everyday activity. The next chapter will elaborate more on the ethnographic approach.

3.7 Social media and political participation

The importance of social media in relation to political participation is widely acknowledged in various fields of study. Interest in the relationship between the two has increased significantly in recent years. A great deal of research on social media and political participation has drawn on ideas from research into the impact of the internet on political participation, which has yet to be conclusive. This section explores the effect of social media on political participation. The overall observation and review results in two perspectives: utopian and sceptical. These two perspectives have dominated the research that has investigated the capacity of new technology for increasing participation.

Since political participation has been linked to social media as a tool for engaging people in politics, scholars have been seeking to investigate this emerging relationship between political engagement and social media usage. As a result, the number of studies on the effects of social networking sites is mushrooming. Boulianne (2015) analyses 36 studies that concentrate on the relationship between social media use and many types of civic engagement ranging from voting to protesting. Her meta-analysis of all 36 studies shows an overall positive relationship between social media usage and some form of political participation.

Of the 36 chosen studies, around 80% confirmed that social media influences political participation, civic engagement and other kinds of social movements. However, a closer look reveals that only 50% of the results were statistically significant. The relationship was strongest among the young who were randomly sampled. Moreover, studies with longitudinal data analysis mostly

revealed negative results compared to cross-sectional surveys. Though the analysis is limited by the fact that all the studies selected were based on self-reported surveys, the result of the analysis presents a vivid perspective on the direction of the relation between social media and political participation. There was a strongly positive relationship between social media usage and social movement activities such as protests, marches, demonstrations, petitions and boycotts, whereas there was a more negative relationship when using social media in election campaign participation. On the other hand, the influence of social media on political engagement as civic participation was not conclusive, though in general the results were positive.

Similarly, studies of social media and political participation suggest that social media impacts differently on different operationalisation modes of political participation. Most research concerns the impact of social media on voting and election campaigning, reporting a negative relationship; on the other hand, there is a positive relationship between using social media and initiating social movements and other kinds of civic activities. Finally, the overall picture of social media usage regarding civic engagement, social capital and participation in general produces mixed results. The next section elaborates in detail on the findings from empirical studies of social media and political participation separately by mode of operationalisation.

3.7.1 Voting and election campaigns

In general, social media has been found to motivate users to connect more with institutional political agents and activities by encouraging them to join political parties and to engage more in elections. It also encourages people to join in with activities and contribute to elections, such as signing petitions and taking part in voting campaigns. The uses of Web 2.0 and social media during Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 demonstrate how social media might affect political participation. The Obama campaign has been applauded for motivating nationwide contributors, mobilising a grass-roots movement and spreading public information (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). Though areas of long-term commitment, such as deliberative argumentation and engagement in public political debate,

have yet to yield concrete results, social media is accepted as an influence on the outcome of this presidential election (Hayden, Waisanen and Osipova, 2013).

The relationship between social media and election campaigns subsequently generated interest from scholars in relation to whether social media influences institutional political participation. Some empirical evidence shows a positive relation between the two, confirming that social media encourages voting turnout and information seeking regarding the election. Vaccari *et al.* (2015) have investigated how Twitter impacted the 2013 election in Italy. The result confirms their assumption that social media impacts how citizens engage informatively with social media during the election campaign; the more information citizens gain from social media, the more they engage in the campaign. They also reject the idea of slacktivism on social media, saying that the result shows strong offline engagement as well.

In their work, the background of users did not receive proper attention. The background of citizens regarding their previous political experience can determine their reaction towards politics in general. Those who have already been politically active tend to be more active in any civic participation and activities involving politics (Verba and Nie, 1972). Moreover, the result confirmed that those who interacted most on social media and election campaigns were young people with high education and a strong interest in politics hitherto. Contrary to initial impressions, social media might not be the cause of high engagement in election campaigns.

Another study concerning the impact of social media on election campaigns studied the use of Twitter and YouTube in the UK during the European Election of 2010. The result is interesting, as it did not prove a totally positive or negative impact of social media on election and voting, but rather presented mixed results. The fact that the chosen method for this study was panel data analysis might explain the difference in results from previous research. Overall, Lilleker and Jackson (2010) reported that social media has an overall positive effect on election campaigns. The three-wave panel study was undertaken by conducting three separate online surveys. Though they have confirmed that both Twitter and YouTube were relevant to increased citizen engagement in the election campaign,

they have also acknowledged the fact that the population also engaged in offline political participation.

Their results indicated that those who had already been politically active or who were positioned as loyal supporters of a political party were most likely to report their engagement with social media. This could be the uncontrolled variable in this study. The researchers themselves raised this concern, as they concluded that social media is positive in promoting activity or amplifying the existence of an event; however, its impact on sustaining a long-term commitment was in question.

Apart from the two previous studies reviewed above, studies conducted to measure the relationship between social media and voting have, in the main, found negative relationships. For example, Enli and Skogerbo's (2013) work on the Norway parliamentary election in 2009 showed a fairly negative impact of social media on party-centred politics. They conducted a qualitative and longitudinal research study to identify emerging practices of politicians' social media strategies on Facebook. However, what they found was strongly inimical to the core party-centred system in Norway, as Facebook was more suitable for promoting an individual's personal image based mostly on the personalised and dialogical aspects of social media. In this result, social media did not complement a competitive democratic atmosphere, but rather favoured charismatic competition. Celebrity politicians and personalised politics had been promoted (van Zoonen, 2005) instead of institutional politics. The researchers argued that in fact social media increased individual presence rather than the actual party campaign during the election.

This supports one of my arguments: that using social media in political participation relies more on sociality purpose than on institutional politics. Individual users' backgrounds have more influence on how they are going to participate. Besides, according to Sunstein (2007), the impact of personal preference, and how that preference is facilitated by digital media, tends towards an echo chamber effect on users rather than giving equality of access to all political agendas. This is another concern that this study will address in investigating divided, factional political situations such as that in Thailand, especially concerning Facebook usage, which depends heavily on strong-tie networks (Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012).

Other studies concerning election campaigns and social media mostly found negative relationships between the two. Larsson (2013) reported a negative impact, or no impact, of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr on municipality government elections in Sweden. The usage of social media in a small city in Sweden did not result in an increase in voter turnout; rather, the effect was slow and decreasing. The study concluded that small cities were lacking in resources compared to big cities in following the social media trend, though Sweden's broadband and internet penetration rate was high. As a result, the digital divide (van Dijk, 2005) is another concern when investigating the relationship between social media and political participation. This research showed that even in an advanced country such as Sweden, with high education levels, a digital divide was faced; the impact of this in a nation such as Thailand, where the literacy rate is underdeveloped, is likely to be much greater.

Apart from the negative or total lack of impact on voter turnout, social media usage on a day-to-day basis did not result in long and sustained political participation among politicians or citizens (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014). Rather, those politicians who were already in their desired position rarely spent time updating their Facebook account. Only small parties and underdogs or new faces would venture into the social media world, hoping to promote their desired policies, or even be elected. In a study of Finnish elections in which usage of social media by candidates was extensive but usage by citizens was low, social media usage was found to be of modest significance to the election campaign and to have no impact on the decisions of citizens in the election (Strandberg, 2013).

All in all, social media was found not to have a significant influence on election campaigns and voter turnout. The above review of literature suggests that the division of political interest, socio-economic background and political knowledge of citizens still impact on how they use social media for their engagement with institutional politics. Lack of political interest leads to passive social media usage and political participation as well as the division of socio-economic status, which leads to a digital divide, even in advanced countries where education and internet penetration rates are high. Similar divisions and lack of political activity could be seen among the middle class in Thailand. Also, the

sociality aspect of social media, especially Facebook, could impact more on users than its political aspect.

3.7.2 Protests and mobilisation

Among the many types of political participation that have been investigated, protests, activism and other types of social mobilisation are the most promising political actions in terms of social media usage. The most significant example is the Arab Spring across the Middle East in 2011, where social media such as Facebook and Twitter were praised as leading tools in overthrowing governments (Howard *et al.*, 2011; Salanova, 2012; Dewey *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, social media also supports the dynamics of protest, though the effect can vary from Facebook, with its strong-tie network structure, to Twitter, with its weak-tie network structure (Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012). Though the optimistic camp suggests that social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook play a special mobilisation role, or at least offer the arena for such participation in low-cost political activity, the more sceptical warn of overrepresentation and the imaginative positive result of the movement.

Harlow (2012) conducted research based on interviews and content analysis of Facebook comments on Facebook groups to understand how Facebook is capable of influencing offline social movements, initiated online, to organise mass protests. Facebook pages calling for justice for lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg were analysed to find their link to the movement mobilised against Guatemalan president Álvaro Colom for murdering Rosenberg. Harlow argues that Facebook and its atmosphere encouraged and facilitated users' protest-related activities and their motivation to join the protest. One of the best benefits of Facebook is citizen journalism, which has empowered ordinary people to become reporters. Anyone who joined the protest could constantly update the public on the situation. In addition, Facebook could also accommodate hyperlinks that could take readers and followers to official news websites and journalists, and enable them to interact accordingly.

Similarly, Gaby and Caren (2012) analysed the 1,500 Facebook pages supporting Occupy Wall Street, the movement that successfully recruited over 400,000 Facebook users to join the event. They confirmed that Facebook facilities

complemented existing forms of engagement and therefore were a factor in recruiting people to engage in the activity. The action of posting and reposting messages of solidarity in the face of confrontation was clearly beneficial in spreading valued information to followers as well as reaching wider and broader audiences and potential supporters. Facebook users also utilised tools that suit social movements, such as informal polling, and posting of videos and pictures, including news stories of the event. During the investigation, Gaby and Caren found that most people who joined or started to follow the pages made their decision to join based more on pictures and videos than written content or stories posted on the pages. This confirmed that visual content has more appeal to the audience than just plain text, and that social media platforms are well equipped to accommodate such multimedia content.

With a different methodological approach, Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen and Wollebæk (2012) also found a positive relationship between social media usage and social mobilisation. Their research investigated mainly offline accounts of social media usage in demonstrations in Norway. Their result was interesting in that the research was conducted in an advanced democratic country where social and economic development was established; nevertheless, socio-economic status played some part in the extent of citizen political participation. The result showed that social media worked really well in motivating people to join a social movement, especially younger citizens and those with a lower socio-economic status. This research pointed out some different aspects of social media's relationship to socio-economic status: that while elite and upper socio-economic groups enjoyed their privileged political access, social media could enable people with a lower socio-economic status to participate in politics, too. The researchers conclude on a positive note with the hope that social media proves to be an alternative means of inclusion in democratic societies.

Interestingly, based on the circumstance of an advanced democratic country like Norway, where the penetration of the internet is high, could this frame be applicable to countries where there is still social division, inequality among citizens and lack of democratic knowledge? The situation where social media is an alternative to mainstream media in organising, motivating and recruiting the population, as in Norway, is far from becoming a reality in a country like Thailand,

where inequality is palpable. Social media complements or even extends the social division that already exists, as the inequality among Thais means that those in lower class strata do not enjoy the same opportunities to access social media as those in higher classes.

On the other hand, some studies showed negative impacts of social media on mobilisation. In their ethnographic approach to studying the usage of social media in the trade union movement in the UK, Fenton and Barassi (2011) found that, in fact, social media did not make any difference in promoting democratic types of participation; rather, it worsened the participation. In their year-long ethnographic research into trade unions, the researchers followed the Facebook groups of trade unions as well as conducting informal and formal interviews with trade union members. The study concluded that the participation taking place on Facebook encouraged the kinds of self-centred participation which later on could harm democratic society. Though this new technology empowered users in social movements, they tended to form an individualised politics. This aspect of individualism could harm democratic politics, which is based on collective social values. Most of the participation presented on Facebook announced self-communication or self-expression more than collective action.

Moreover, Fenton and Barassi added that the social media phenomenon was overrepresented, as the actual usage and what was promoted academically differed widely. Social media might be associated positively with an alternative public space that provides alternative possibilities in participation, but in reality citizens tend to choose to use social media for their own personal agenda.

The same criticism appeared in Markham (2014), whose work investigated around 150 journal articles published to represent the impact of social media on protest and political change. He argued that the assumption that social media impacts and facilitates protest movements or can be framed as a leading factor in activism is invalid. It appears that the overrepresentation by the academic world deludes people into misunderstanding social media protest under the frame of protest culture. Social media might encourage the structureless movement of protest, but it cannot accommodate historical aspects of the movement, and hence it cannot further or sustain the movement to enact prolonged historic change.

Furthermore, the phenomena of social media protest were mostly political imaginaries. For example, concerning the Twitter phenomenon, he pointed out that the content and language of some of the tweets that appeared during the Arab Spring was too neat to be produced by amateurs. He therefore suspected that some of these tweets were not genuine. Also, apart from the praise among scholars, there was no concrete result that indicated, still less concluded, that Twitter transformed politics and culture by itself. Social media may have complemented the collective movement, but its effect on long-term political movement and the sustention of democracy remains inconclusive.

Couldry (2015, pp.611-612) is more concerned about the long-term usage of social media and their effect on democratic society and institutional politics than about the short-term effect on mobilisation. He mentions the collapse of Obama's popular campaign once he was elected, highlights that the government and the military gain access to the same social networks, and discusses social practice, which has been left out by most utopian digital media academics. We cannot translate and understand how social media change political participation or sustain political action without factoring in the social context. Couldry (ibid., pp.617-618) also argues that although social media have been praised as a solution for social mobilisation, the actions of occupying, seizing and demonstrating all disrupt institutional democratic systems. As a result, he contends that social media politics is mostly regressive or disruptive to democratic action.

In conclusion, though empirical studies of the impact of social media on protest and social movements yield positive results overall, the methodology and the conclusions drawn, which fail to consider social and cultural aspects of the movement, remain a concern. In particular, the main concerns – how valid and genuine the content produced by social media is during the mobilisation of a movement, and the impact of the digital divide, which is observable even in some developed countries – are unresolved. This suggests that social and cultural aspects need to be put to the test while investigating the Thai middle class's political and social practice on social media.

3.7.3 Political talk and civic engagement

Political talk and civic engagement are the political participation activities that, when tested in terms of their relationship to social media, give the least conclusive empirical results. Increasing usage of social media or social networking sites is undeniably a global phenomenon in digital political participation. Some studies show positive relationships between social media use and political participation (Bode *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, when compared with offline participation, social media have less of an effect on other types of political engagement (Papacharissi, 2009).

The more optimistic scholars confirm that social media enable people's social capital and civic and political participatory behaviours both online and offline (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012). The use of Facebook and SNS is also claimed to contribute to another important element of a healthy democratic society: social capital and civic engagement (Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe, 2007). Social media's capacity for fostering social capital and political discussion has been highlighted as increasing users' opportunities for communicating and for engaging politically via their social network (Bode, 2012; Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe, 2007). Social media also has the potential to create a community feeling among users that enhances civic engagement and political identity (Ellison *et al.*, 2007; de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril and Rojas, 2009).

Existing research literature points out that social media enables incidental exposure to diverse news and political content (Baumgartner and Morris, 2010; Brundidge, 2010). The dynamic exchange of information increases the potential for each user to encounter specific kinds of political content and ideologies (Messing and Westwood, 2012). In the case of Facebook, upcoming events, newsfeeds and wall conversations facilitate information disclosure from online social networks to users (Albrechtslund, 2008; boyd, 2008).

Carlisle and Patton (2013, p.3) identify a similarity between the internet and social media: both play the significant role of nurturing the public sphere. They emphasise that social media has the same advantages and influence on the public sphere as the internet, but it also gives more flexibility to individuals by allowing them to have more active engagement. In fact, Robertson, Vatrapu and Medina (2010) confirm the concept of the public sphere of Facebook from content analysis

of post-2008 US presidential election participation patterns in deliberative discourse. Discursive Inclusion and Equality are among the criteria of the deliberative public sphere.

A study by Halpern and Gibbs (2013, pp.1159-1168) suggests that some social media platforms are better than others at accommodating deliberative discussion. Their research compared political discussion on Facebook and YouTube messages posted by the White House to explore the differences and affordances that shape discussion networks and influence deliberation. They found that though both YouTube and Facebook were proved to accommodate deliberative discussion among users, the anonymity afforded users on YouTube may have a negative, divisive effect on online deliberation.

On the other hand, Facebook provided more identifiability, as users revealed their personal information in their profiles. The personal information played an important part in shaping deliberative conversation, as it provided more personalisation, ensured a higher level of politeness and encouraged longer interaction among the users. This study also argued that users who had never wanted to participate in political discussion may have been tempted to do so on Facebook, as they might have encountered their friends' activity on a Facebook page and eventually have been tempted to reply to comments posted by their friends. However, I found that their result suggested that replying to friends' posts could lead to more political partisanship. More qualitative approaches to assess such a claim should be considered.

Interestingly, most of the claims for positive relationships between social media and political engagement came from research studies that employed a quantitative approach. Mostly the results were self-reported and focused on the interaction and engagement between users, which might be a form of sociality usage rather than participation. The studies that resulted in positive findings mostly came from investigation among young users with similar social backgrounds, and therefore did not involve social and cultural differences between users. The availability of information may lead to a knowledge gap between lower and higher socio-economic status populations, as the availability of information does not directly impact an individual's participatory behaviour (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, 1970).

Moreover, the research claiming that social media was an alternative space for deliberative discussion based these claims on the assumption that social media was a public sphere and did not consider the possibility that this assumption might be invalid. For example, Papacharissi (2002) suggests that social media only created a new space for people to express their political opinions. However, technology does not provide a public sphere; it only provides a channel.

On the other side of the argument, some sceptical academics doubt that this virtual activity can influence political attitudes and lead to higher participation in politics. Though social media provides enough sources of information to expose citizens to more diverse political news, it does not always lead to higher-quality democratic participation.

The relationship between social media use and political engagement outcome can vary depending on whether an individual engages politically on social media or not (Vitak *et al.*, 2011). Vitak *et al.* (2011) found that the political activity of one's Facebook network contributes to one's own Facebook political activity. As users see that their friends engage in political activity on Facebook, their online political activity may also increase. However, engagement of this kind varies from one user to another; it is far from a definite conclusion that friends' engagement in political activity will increase a user's own engagement.

With regard to technology requirements, an individual's characteristics and their technology are key factors in increasing the availability of information (Bimber, 2001; Nisbet and Scheufele, 2004). From a similar perspective, politically active people also have more potential to become members of a Facebook group and to be more active on social media (Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2009), while people who were inactive to begin with tend to lurk or to continue acting as passive users (Larsson, 2013).

Baumgartner and Morris (2010) conducted an internet survey of young adults with the aim of understanding Myspace and Facebook's relationship to civic engagement and political participation. They found that political news shared on these social networking sites was mostly reactionary to the news and generally uninformative. Using social media did not result in increased political participation, any more than the use of other kinds of media did. Furthermore, they argued that online participation found on social media did not indicate the

intention to participate offline. The offline participation was also considered lower in significance.

Similarly, Pasek *et al.* (2006) conducted a survey sample of telephone interviews to investigate the likelihood to engage in civic activities, trust in other users and gain political knowledge from social media users. They concluded that social media neither conferred a higher trust rate nor gave additional political information to users compared with non-users. The only difference was in the civic engagement rate, where users gained a much higher score than non-users. However, the civic engagement rate could also result from other offline activities, such as frequent socialising or volunteering.

In this regard, the personal voluntarism rate of each user plays a more important role in political participation among advanced users than the channel itself. As Gustafsson (2012) argued in his work concerning Facebook and civic engagement, social media is an effective tool in political participation, but the user is more important in initiating the direction of usage. In his interview and focus group research, he found that there was a difference between attitude and actual practice. Though some users had positive attitudes towards political participation on social media, social media was not powerful enough to encourage inactive users to participate more.

Social media are also more suitable for sustaining weak-tie relationships than strong-tie ones and for enabling people who normally cannot meet in person to get in contact with one another (Shah *et al.*, 2005). This weak-tie relationship has little or no impact on political engagement (Dimitrova and Bystrom, 2013). This result suggests that social networks on social media might not have a significant enough impact to influence individuals' political participation.

With regard to the debate over the significance of social media as an alternative public sphere, there have been attempts by optimistic scholars to identify them as public sphere outlets (Robertson, Vatrapu and Medina, 2010), although there are others who argue otherwise. Van Dijck (2012) tried to describe social media space as contested space that resulted from a mix of private and public interests. He argued that social media were different from the public sphere as defined by Habermas. For him, social media was a more complex space that required new forms of sociality and connectivity. He also noticed that this new

space comprised a new dynamic that might need several theoretical frameworks in order to understand and sufficiently explain it.

As van Dijk (2011) argued, social media is less a public sphere suitable for democratic deliberative discussion than a vehicle for accommodating expressive behaviour. Another study concerning the negative effect of social media on political participation suggests such a pattern of practice. Though in general Gil de Zúñiga is one of the utopian academics who support the idea of successful political participation on social media, one of his works with Molyneux and Zheng suggests otherwise. Their two-wave panel online survey on social media and political expression showed that social media fostered political expression more than deliberative participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux and Zheng, 2014). Though expression was acknowledged to be one form of participation practice, they accepted that social media had little direct impact on political engagement, other than the indirect impact on citizen self-expression.

The findings from these studies indicate that social media – especially Facebook, which is heavily used by Thais – are suitable for practices that relate to users' sociality and self-representation rather than purely for political purposes. However, the trend of using social media for requirements of sociality can also impact the directions of users' political expression, as they might have to consider whether the content of their posts would affect their relationships with their friends, particularly on social media that are used for strong-tie networking, such as Facebook or Friendster.

Another concern regarding the sociality aspect of social media is raised by Thorson (2014). Thorson analysed two in-depth interviews to understand political talk on social media. Described as high risk, most people would suppress their political expression on social media to protect themselves from arguments with friends. Social media could form another type of political participation interaction in this context. On the one hand, social media settings helped generate a more relaxed atmosphere compared to offline ones, which should encourage users to participate politically more often. On the other hand, the social media setting is a place with high levels of variation of behaviour and perception, so users chose to engage or not engage politically with some selected friends. The technology offered by Facebook helped users to arrange their own imagined audience to suit their

content. In this case, social media does not accommodate equal and wide political participation anymore; rather, it reaffirms support for the idea of the echo chamber and personalised channel, as Sunstein (2001) proposed.

3.8 “De-Westernisation” in media studies

Another significant concern that will be raised by this thesis framework is the debate between Asiancentrism and Westerncentrism. This debate over universalism and cultural specificity in researching media, communication, journalism or political communication has been raised among social science researchers for some time. While the Western social science scene is dominated by theoretical and empirical studies that are based in Western society, its lack of oriental perspective leads to these studies failing to take the Asian social science scene into account.

Chie Nakane (1967) is one of the pioneering anthropologists who pointed out the lack of fit between Asian and Western cultural concepts. She argued that although modern Japanese society has adopted some of the West's social concepts, Japan remains different from the West. Communication media theories from the West began to recognise how researchers had overlooked the rich cultural and communication traditions in Asia.

As a researcher in media studies from a non-Western country, one of the biggest challenges on this thesis is whether or not the ‘Western’ theories in these fields can reflect and frame the phenomenon of social media usage of middle-class Thais in the research. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the inevitable impact of mediation, which is influenced by cultural and ethnic background, might also impact how the participants practise around social media according to their cultural and ethnic background.

Godwin C. Chu (1986, p.5) once proposed a similar idea to explain a particular communication theory (Asian). He insisted that it was inappropriate to use a Western cultural and communication perspective to explain an Asian phenomenon. By doing so, Chu suggested that an Asiancentric paradigm of communication theory needs to address communication issues that are relevant to Asian regions, nations and communities. It also needs to tackle Asian social structures, cultural values and religious beliefs.

Similarly, in this age of paradigm shifts, Ishii (2006, p.14) proposed that researchers, especially those from an East Asian background, should recognise three foundation requirements in doing intercultural research: to believe in the thought of intercultural equality; to practise more two-way intercultural communication to prevent one-sided importation and imitation of Western cultures; and to study East Asian cultural ethos and communication, which has long been influenced by Eastern religious belief. On the other hand, Shi-xu (2009, pp.32–33) cautioned other researchers doing Asiancentric paradigm research to be aware of their own cultural biases. In order to prevent such biases, he proposed using concepts with globally minded and historically conscious frameworks, and reflecting on non-Western conditions while also conversing with Western paradigms.

With this de-Westernising in mind, this thesis focuses on Thai and East Asian sociocultural perspectives and practices. In conducting research that focuses on non-English-speaking linguistic concerns, the role of religion in the formation of culture and the alternative emergence of non-Western paradigms are included in the observation and translation of enriched Thai social and cultural capital that is embedded in the informants' social practices.

3.9 Social media and political participation in Thailand

The role of social media in Thai political participation also reflects the inconsistency of social media in relation to politics. Social factors such as social class, education and economic status create differences in social media practice and political participation practice among Thais. The internet sphere does not prove to be a public sphere that nurtures deliberative political conversation; instead, it acts as an information source in supporting users' existing political opinion (Yambubpha, 2007), as well as partisan opinion on social media (Grömping, 2014).

According to Internet World Stats (2015), 23,716,968 people out of the total Thai population of 67,976,405 have internet access. This indicates that access to the internet in Thailand is unequal. The majority of internet users are in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region and large provinces, as these are the areas where there is a higher standard of living, which includes the availability of income for an

internet data allowance and access to technology. This group of people spend an average of 52.8 hours per week surfing, and the most time spent on the internet – 58.9 hours per week – is by those in the age range of 25 to 29 (Thailand internet users profile, 2014).

Among these 23 million internet users, 17,721,480 have subscribed to Facebook. Facebook is, by far, the most popular social media platform in Thailand, with as many as 30 million accounts. YouTube comes a close second, with 26.2 million subscribers, while Twitter and Instagram have 4.5 million and 1.7 million users respectively (Vichienwanitchkul, 2015).

Thais gain access to the internet mostly via their smartphone, with 71.1% of internet users adopting this method. Almost as many (69.4%) Thai internet users have access to a personal computer, while 49.5% and 31.1% of users have access via a laptop and tablet computer respectively (The Thailand internet users profile, 2014). This background data on Thai internet users correlates with the information gained from the research informants. All 30 research respondents own a smartphone and describe it as their main form of access to social media, while around 20 of them also own a personal computer and/or a laptop or tablet.

Smartphones have become an integral part of Thais' lives. Interestingly, coinciding with the political turmoil and a struggling economy in Thailand between 2012 and 2015, consumer demand for personal computers fell due to the emergence of smartphones (IDC, 2015). With an average monthly income per household of 25,403 baht, or £508 (NSO, 2013), buying a low-end smartphone in China that costs around 3,000 to 4,000 baht (£60-80) is a better option than buying a desktop computer that costs roughly 12,000 baht (£240). As well as the consumer demand for smartphones increasing each year, the time people spend on the internet via their mobile device is also increasing.

The increased usage of the internet also indicates that people are spending less time on other media (Limpattamapanee, 2015). Rather than watching programmes on television, the participants admitted that they tend to download television programmes from the internet to watch later at their preferred time. In addition, print media, such as magazines and newspapers, can be downloaded from websites, whether the version is legal or not. However, traditional media are still popular among over-40s participants, and with some in their early 30s.

Thailand's print media now depend on an older audience (Limpattamapanee, 2015).

Access to the internet at home is, in Thailand, an advantage that only a group of people has (Paireepairit, 2012). Internet cafes still provide a competitive alternative, especially for rural youth in isolated provinces of Thailand. Upper-middle-class participants are able to own an iPhone or Samsung smartphone as well as having the option of using a personal computer or tablet. On the other hand, lower-middle-class informants rely solely on their mid-range smartphone to get access to Facebook and other internet services.

The study of social media in Thailand still shows early signs of interest in social media's impact on business (Suraworachet, Premsiri and Cooharojananone, 2012); the influence of its usage (Pornsakulvanich and Dumrongsiri, 2013); the purpose of its usage (Nararatwong *et al.*, 2012); and emerging emotional cultures on social networks (Köhl and Götzenbrucker, 2014). Meanwhile, Thai literature on social media and political participation also follows similar global trends in investigating the impact of social media on social activism (Lerksirisuk, 2011); its impact on elections (Grömping, 2014); young people and their democratic participation (Chainan, 2013); and social movements (Naprathansuk, 2014). Some literature has also shown concerns over the impact of political polarisation (Grömping, 2014) and freedom in political expression (Samphaokaeo, 2013) on social media.

The boom in using social media for political participation in Thailand started with the "white mask" movement, which launched a Facebook page called V For Thailand to challenge Yingluck Shinawatra's government. Their rallies were seen as a pioneering form of cyber protest in Thailand (Wattanayagorn, 2013). Thai academics and activists praised the anti-government social media group as a development that had greater power than mainstream media (Sinlapalavan, 2013).

Following the trend of using social media for political participation, the PDRC protest in 2013-2014 adopted social media as their main channel of communication and mobilisation. Though local media and academics saw the PDRC movement as a pioneering social media movement in Thailand similar to the Arab Spring (Wattanayagorn, 2013; Sinlapalavan, 2013), international academics

did not agree. Some accused them of being a movement of the elite against the peasants (Farrelly, 2013; Sinpeng, 2013a).

Generally, the internet and social media in Thailand has been used to criticise the government and to gather similar-minded groups of people. The online sphere is no more than another option for people's partisan usage of media (Grömping, 2014), which is the same pattern that has been found in other types of mainstream media (Media Literacy, 2012). Thais' main goal in political participation is to seek supportive comments regarding their existing political opinions, and not to look for or debate opposing views (Yambubpha, 2007). In addition, according to a profile of Thai internet users (2014), the online scene is dominated by middle- and upper-class people who can afford the technology and the expense of the connection (Yambubpha, 2007; Kanchaudom, 2010; Siriyuvasak, 2011 (cited in Lerksirisuk, 2011)).

The problem of partisanship and class differences among active and inactive social media users also leads to a regression of democracy. Sinpeng (2014) argues that the cleavage among Thai citizens can cause the authorities or the military government to start a witch-hunt to identify their political rivals.

The concept of social class difference and political cleavage among Thais triggers the main agenda of this thesis, which is to investigate the real potential of social media for political participation in Thailand. In understanding more about the impact of social, political and cultural contexts on Thais' political participation or civic engagement on social media, the arguments based on the social and media aspects of the issue have been developed.

3.10 Research concerning Facebook and political participation

A book called "How the World Changed Social Media", which has been published as a result of a global anthropological research project on the uses and consequences of social media called Why We Post, observes the political aspect of people's everyday use of social media in 11 sites.

In contrast to prior researches that have investigated politics and social media usage, this project does not look at the volume of political usage on social media, which tends to exaggerate the impact of social media on politics. The project mainly investigates the degree of political posting that appears among the

users' everyday social media use. By doing so, the dynamic of ethnographic research allows the researchers to understand social media for political usage beyond just the online practice. It includes offline practice that relates to the users' sociocultural background to enhance the understanding of the participants' social media practice.

The project displays a variety of types of political post on Facebook from many countries; however, most of the practice confirms the concept of sceptical expression rather than deliberative debate. Regarding their findings, Facebook is, in fact, a conservative space, due to users' concerns about how posting will affect their social relationships. Because of its semi-public status, Facebook is a space where people tend to control their behaviour in order to protect their social relationships as well as their personal reputations. Among these different sites of research, Turkey and India are two countries that display similar sociocultural and political divisions to Thailand.

The results from south India confirm that users' Facebook posts are a conservative form of practice, as the participants regard their social relationships as an important factor that frames the direction of their Facebook posting (Venkatraman, 2017). In Panchagrami, a small village in South India, kinship seems to be one of the layers of complexities that frame social media use, along with social factors like age, hierarchy, social status, literacy, gender, class and caste (p.53). In avoiding political confrontation with their relatives and friends, people rely on visual posting by posting political posters and satirical memes on their Facebook page as a safer strategy.

Costa (2016) conducts a research that draws on Facebook in order to analyse how people in Mardin, a city in south-eastern Turkey, experience politics. She undertook 15 months of ethnographic research that combined offline conversations and experience in the community with close observation of how Mardinites practise political participation on Facebook. Costa found that in this sceptical society, Facebook still reflects people's offline political life, where politics is not discussed and not debated. Mardinites tend to be politically inactive in order to maintain relationships with other Mardinites. They are more likely to be friends on Facebook with people who hold similar political views. Those who were keen to

be politically active would be active offline and in private until their supported candidate or party won the election or became a dominant group.

With a similar background of a long history of conflict between the Turkish State and the Kurdish minority, the division in politics in Mardin could be compared to that in Thailand. The social and cultural background of this town encourages the disappearance of politics from public spaces. Social media helps to promote political expression and performative action, rather than serious debate and discussion. “I am not interested in politics because I do not want to die young” is a normal reaction whenever politics is mentioned to Mardinites (p.129).

Politics only surfaced as a subject after two months of political campaigning. The city was engulfed by aggressive competition between the candidates, their political parties and their supporters. Most people waited until the appropriate time to present their political expression in public (p.143). Apart from that rare occasion, politics is framed as a public secret.

3.11 Chapter summary

The previous sections have reviewed concepts, approaches and academic debates around political participation and its relation to social media. Academic empirical studies were divided into three groups according to the operationalisation of the participation. Overall, empirical study so far has been concerned mainly with determining whether social media usage is shown to act as a complement to democratic society, and whether social media is an appropriate channel for political participation.

Along the way, academics have found other significant factors needing further investigation on the relation between the two.

First of all, there is the lack of attention to political participation and social media from social and cultural perspectives. Recent research concentrates only on the technological aspects of linking citizens together (Katz, 1997; Jensen, 2003; Albrecht, 2003), while leaving out how the social and cultural aspects of participation affect the participation process overall. Rather, since participation is a form of social and civic activity (Norris, 2002, p.16; Macedo *et al.*, 2005), the influences of social and cultural aspects within each social setting should be considered.

Data sharing online does not automatically mean civic engagement (Shirky, 2010, p.175). For the latter, people need a motive to join as well as persuasion to sustain that participation. Coleman (2003, pp.34-37) contends that technology just makes people more aware of politics. The type and extent of interaction on interactive media varies from person to person, and is about more than just embracing technology. Users have a right not to participate as well as to participate.

Some users are better enabled by their socio-economic advantages to access and connect to social media networks, while others are prohibited by the limitations of their device (McCracken, 2014). Digital inequality, whether inequality of access or differences in users' technology skills, could cause a new form of inequality to emerge alongside existing forms rather than minimising inequality (Robinson *et al.*, 2015, pp.569-582).

Furthermore, as Verba *et al.* (1995, p.304) point out, civic skills are the key that allow people to use time and money wisely in political life. These skills include good language skills, the ability to communicate in English, experience practising communication and organisational skills. These can vary according to socio-economic background.

Secondly, another area in need of attention regarding the relationship between political participation and social media is the social and cultural aspects of the new paradigm in new media consumption. Livingstone (2013, p.28) argues that in studying this new media practice, one should understand what modes of participation are offered in this environment and how people engage and negotiate their way around this media. Thus far, social media and political participation research has only provided us with a partial picture, which is problematic with regard to the relationship between citizens' political practices and engagement and their media consumption practices. It is also essential to understand people's social media consumption within their social and cultural contexts.

Dahlgren (2013, p.46) refers to political participation as "fundamentally a social act, based in human communication and contingent upon sociality", suggesting that effective political participation requires a degree of social skills. As social media is a forum for social interaction and communication, the pattern of social practice that occurs on social media is associated with actual social practice

in society (Dahlgren, 2013). As a result, though social media practice is a new practice and can change over time, the actual social practice of users can be used as a guideline or significant parameter of their social media use. Essentially, the sociocultural background of the user is embedded in their practices. Each person's personality is influenced by their social background, education, present and past social status, and life experience (Bourdieu, 1984). The ensemble of practices, dispositions, tastes and expectations of a particular group results from their sociocultural background and social practice. This establishes the context of their everyday lives and patterns of societal hierarchy. Therefore, differences in users' social practice result in differences in their social media practices too. According to this idea, other social relations, such as norms, values and social hierarchies, also connect to social media practice and, as a result, should not be neglected in investigation of social media practice.

The enormity and diversity of its social setting means that social media also presents challenges for each individual in strategies of self-presentation (Marwick and boyd, 2011), which might affect users' online behaviour. Since social media fosters sociality (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2011) and self-reassurance (Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2009), some scholars have suggested that in such tense circumstances, users might develop protective or avoidance behaviour, such as self-censorship, to avoid social tension or disagreement (Rui and Stefanone, 2013). Some social media, such as Facebook, also require a reciprocal relationship between users (Grant *et al.*, 2010). This creates a sense of group style that defines group norms and boundaries. In such a social setting, political talk is sometimes prohibited, as it can lead to disagreement among group members; some social group settings allow civic talk, but not discussion of politics (Eliasoph and Licherman, 2003).

As a result, this thesis focuses on the importance for political participation of the social and cultural aspects of social media usage. As applied to the particularities of Thailand, where social inequality and cultural diversity remain an important part of people's social practice, the results should be fruitful for future research on social media and political participation.

Another important issue that I will pay attention to in this thesis is the sociality aspect of social media that impacts users' media practice and

consumption. As previously mentioned, social media, which is best suited for self-expression, sociality and maintaining social relations (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2011), might affect the practice of political participation. It also makes political participation more difficult and unattractive to many people, as it establishes rules that differ from those in their everyday lives (Warren, 1996). The combination of social contacts from across a diverse variety of contexts from one's own life requires the user to focus on negotiating a self-presentation among these contacts in order to be well received and accepted across this complex audience setting. The relation between online and offline social settings is taken into consideration in this study as well.

Moreover, given the nature of the political divide among Thai citizens, the intensity of political participation could also affect decisions to join or avoid political participation online, as well as their social media practice in general. This thesis therefore investigates such a relation among a group of people who share similar socio-economic status but not necessarily similar backgrounds: the Thai middle class. The study of this group's social relations, including their intra-class relations, will also help in understanding the sociality aspect of social media.

By doing so, this research aims to fill another methodology-related gap in academic research regarding political participation and social media. Most research has concentrated on using quantitative approaches, which could be valuable for political science, but do insufficient justice to the delicacy of the social and cultural implications for such relations in media studies. The process of social media consumption could be best investigated through an ethnographic approach, as social media accommodates complex environments of communicative opportunities (Madianou, 2015). The next chapter contains further detail on the ethnographic approach and research methodology chosen for this research.

Chapter Four: Methodology

This chapter discusses the choice of ethnographic research methods in investigating the political engagement of middle-class Thais.

The ethnographic approach is increasingly popular in social media research as well as political participation research, as it gives an opportunity to access the data beyond traditional quantitative methodologies (Sade-Beck, 2004). This chapter explores the procedure of digital ethnography as a method adopted in the research. In providing a clear understanding of how the informants' life experience affects their interpretation of the world, textual analysis is brought to bear in transcribing the cultures and subcultures discovered on Thai Facebook.

Using the digital ethnographic approach, this thesis employs two main methods of data collection: interviews and participant observation. These two main methods are chosen in order to reduce the risk of fragmented information in ethnographic research (Hine, 2000). Face-to-face interviews are employed in order to gain a greater understanding of the informants' offline social media practice, while their online practice is observed via the online participant observation method.

The chapter also outlines the processes of sampling, recruiting the participants, data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes with the role of the researcher and the ethical concerns encountered and addressed in this study.

4.1 An ethnographic approach to political participation and social media research

This study applied a qualitative approach in order to explore the social media practice of middle-class Thais and understand their online political participation. Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand and make sense of people's behaviour and their experience of the world. This type of research is an "umbrella term" which has a number of different approaches that assist in understanding the social reality of individuals, groups and cultures (Atkinson *et al.*, 2001, p.7). Qualitative research focuses on the questions of why and how, which allows for greater understanding in the field of sociology; hence, qualitative

research is popular among social sciences such as political science, sociology, education and media studies (Creswell, 2007). In the realm of media studies, researchers incorporate various methodologies in their work, among which qualitative research helps in understanding different types of communication and the relationship between media and groups in society (Brennen, 2013, pp.4-5). Researchers who perceive communication as a cultural practice have often found that quantitative methods fail to understand communication as a "social production of meaning" (Jensen and Jankowski, 1991, p.18). Qualitative research, on the other hand, allows the researcher to answer questions that go beyond the effect of communication on its audiences to the traditions of media, the media context, people's social lives and their behaviour, language, meaning, idea and concept (Postman, 1988, p.18). In media studies, the qualitative approach that is recognised in studying audiences, media use and the performative phenomenon is media ethnography (Jensen, 2002, p.164).

The ethnographic approach was chosen for this study as it provides an opportunity for the researcher to understand the natural culture of a particular community. In studying social media as a platform that encourages digital protest and political participation in Thailand during the course of martial law, a junta government and political entrenchment and division, intimacy, discretion and deep involvement are needed to obtain inside information from each political faction. The ethnographic approach affords a more intimate approach, thereby allowing the researcher to understand the present case study through the eyes and experience of the insiders. Ethnography is also suitable for this study as it helps in exploring the beliefs, language and patterns of behaviour of a cultural group or, in this case, social media scene (Creswell, 2007, p.68). Ethnography was first associated with anthropology and other fields of cultural study, including long-term study and observation of interactions among people within the same culture or different cultures. As a result, the process of ethnography involves extended participant observation, interviews with participants, studying the meaning of their behaviour, and writing the research results. The rich data obtained during the fieldwork is the main contributing factor of an ethnographic study (Wolcott, 1999).

In this study, the ethnographic approach provided the opportunity to explore the informants' political practice on their social media accounts. The

content that appeared on their Facebook profile pages and in their communication with friends and the public on political issues showed their modes of political expression as well as the social class context embedded in their social practice. The content extracted from the informants' Facebook pages responds well to the question of how middle-class Thais' social class and political participation on social media are related. The content of the informants' Facebook status, their shared articles or news posts and their social participation with their friends and with the wider public reflect and represent their social class practice, class disposition and class identity. The ethnographic approach helps gain the necessary access to this valuable information; it also allows back and forth contact between researcher and informant to ensure the accuracy of the conclusions drawn from the observed data. Ethnographic description also helps the researcher to be a pseudo group member and to discuss the notion of that particular culture within a broader social context. Similarly, participant observation as a type of data collection widely used in qualitative research facilitates understanding of how the participants impart meaning to their lives through the observation of their daily activities. To borrow the formulation of DeWalt and DeWalt (2010, p.1), participant observation is "a method in which [the] researcher takes part in daily activities, rituals, interaction and events of [a] group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture".

Meanwhile, textual analysis is also adopted in the data analysing process, as this is the analysis that allows the researcher to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world (McKee, 2003, p.1). In this case, the ethnographic approach was used to gather information that emerged around the context of cultures and subcultures, which included not only interview content or Facebook status, but also the atmosphere of the interview, and interpretation and reaction to conversation. It is therefore most feasible to use textual analysis as a means of understanding the informants' sense-making practice in that particular culture.

In emphasising the status of media use as a form of social action and as a part of the convergence between social science and humanities since the mid-1980s, ethnographic research has become another step of media research (Jensen, 2002, p.164) in gaining a deeper understanding of audience studies. Radway

(1988, p.368) stated that in defining everyday communication practice, the ethnographic approach could fulfil the need to map the complexity of this “popular culture” sphere. Later, numerous media researchers adopted this practice as a part of media studies. The essentials of the ethnographic approach – observation and interviews to answer the questions of why and how – are a good fit with media and communication study. Similarly, the techniques of interviewing, participant observation and writing about the participants’ behaviour are also essential practices of other media workplaces, such as newsrooms (Singer, 2009, pp.191-192).

In media studies media researchers draw on the ethnographic method in their investigations of the broader context of how people use media, the process of their consumption and their experience of their media practice (Morley and Silverstone, 1991). The “ethnographic turn” (Machin, 2002, p.74) has become a regular custom in audience-centred studies. The notion of traditional cultural study and the mixture of social sciences in media research involve the need to understand cultural artefacts that are embedded in a media context, and ethnographic research design can help in decoding this meaning (e.g. Hacker *et al.*, 1991). The translation of media discourse related to ethnography is also popular in studying journalist newsroom (Travancas, 2010) and television newsrooms (Silcock, 2002), as well as media and cultural research (Cruz and Ardèvol, 2013). The ethnographic approach also helps in mediated communication research in developing a clearer view of the relationship between text, audience and media.

The ethnographic approach also has potential in examining political communication and understanding political institutions. It relies on the capability of the ethnographic approach to examine beyond traditional political participation analysis. Politics is a field that requires multiple strategies of analysis. The ethnographic approach is one channel that political scientists adopt in order to provide depth to the context and situation in their research (Auyero, 2006; Auyero and Joseph, 2007), though there is a lack of consensus about the definition of political ethnography. Moreover, the sphere of social media politics is more socially than politically orientated; the involvement of people in social media protest and political usage is based more on building up their group membership than pushing forward their political convictions (Markham, 2014). Democratic

participation and its relation to people's media consumption is also what Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007a, p.40) described as a complicated process that could not be understood from afar; individual accounts of the process are therefore needed in order to examine this phenomenon more closely.

The ethnographic approach has an advantage in studies of politics in terms of understanding meaning in social contexts: for example, each practice, and each choice a person makes, can give voice to that person's attitude. It is narrative content that makes a statement about a particular attitude. Different ways of approaching politics can also be observed through people's media consumption practices (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007b, p.2). This means of understanding people's everyday experience of political participation can reflect how they position themselves politically, their political role and their role as a citizen. The ethnographic approach helps to find the answers embedded in political processes outside institutional politics. Furthermore, it pays attention to the consumers' narrative. As a result, the ethnographic approach provides opportunities in studying forms of political engagement, such as voting, activism and movements beyond the verbal communication mode. As stated earlier, the ethnographic approach is highly appropriate for examining forms of community and social engagement, so it can be used to examine politics in another area. In using the ethnographic research method to study political communication, the mode of communication can be expanded to verbal, non-verbal and virtual communication.

There is a growing body of literature in media ethnography research, including studying activist groups, political parties, public hearings, social movements and volunteering (Eliasoph, 2011; Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Postill and Pink, 2012). This bears out the argument that the benefits of political ethnographic research also include its ability to analyse different kinds of political engagement and its principle of understanding the practice of engagement (Auyero and Joseph, 2007). It assists the researcher in understanding the ways in which political practices are constructed, transformed, expanded and reshaped. The ethnographic approach is the best option in searching for hidden practices, barely visible signs or secret habits in a micro-level political analysis (Luhtakallio and Eliasoph, 2014). With its various features, ethnography is a useful approach for

researching various forms of political communication and political participation. It guarantees results that, in terms of depth, go beyond the quantitative approach, such as surveys. In fact, political communication that takes place in political institutions and other spheres can be decoded from its context in the same way as other forms of cultural analysis (Eliasoph, 1998). The ethnographic research method, therefore, can help to examine the observable culture in forms of political participation. For this particular research, which aims to go beyond the digital protest literature into understanding and analysing the context of how people express themselves politically on social media, the ethnographic approach also allows for such analysis and understanding.

This study targets source data that relies on the context of the social field relating to the everyday practice of people online. The everyday context, data that has been gathered from a range of sources, participant observation and informal conversations all indicate the researcher's need for an ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). The rich data obtained during the fieldwork is the main contributing factor of an ethnographic study (Wolcott, 1999). Given that in this study, social media is a field that is increasingly central to contemporary everyday life, getting access to that particular field is similar to entering a community or social group. Ethnographic description also helps the researcher to be a pseudo group member and to discuss the notion of that particular culture within a broader social context.

4.2 Methods of ethnography

While interviewing is widely used in other qualitative social research methods, most research using the ethnographic approach promotes participant observation and prolonged fieldwork (O'Reilly, 2005). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p.1) stated that the characteristics of the ethnographic research method are "watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research". The choice of methodology in ethnographic research, as a result, has crucial elements, such as those related to the understanding of experience, representation and interpretation of social culture around the research field. The methodological dilemma and solution in making a decision about a specific method

for each study is one to be resolved according to the aims and objectives that guide each individual research project.

Broadly, the methods of ethnography consist of those long employed by anthropologists, such as recording field notes, participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviewing, and other visual/audio methods (Whitehead, 2005). In this study, participant observation combined with qualitative interviews was chosen as the core method. With the nature of the research being the study of political participation that occurs on social media, another crucial methodological choice was that of the nature of the field of research. Digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008, p.838), also known as virtual ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.1), is brought in to develop the connection between social media research and the ethnographic approach.

Despite these three different terms describing a similar anthropologic data collecting practice, however, virtual ethnography tends to involve conducting the research and data collection based on the virtual world without any regard to the actual world practice. For example, in Tom Boellstorff's anthropologic study set on Second Life, no contact was made with his informants in the actual world, though he knew some of them. He conducted his research entirely within Second Life.

On the other hand, digital ethnography tends to include the actual world account in its data collecting practice. For example, in Daniel Miller's approach towards Trinidadian Facebook practices (Miller, 2011), he included the actual world practice of his participants as a part of his data, as cultural aspects and the process of localisation regarding Facebook in Trinidad are crucial parts of anthropological investigation. Especially in ethnographic research on Facebook that examines a particular set of the population rather than a broad overview of the general public, it is vital to look into offline practice and actual world expression as well as online practice. For similar reasons, this thesis, with its intention to understand a diversity of political practice performed by Thai middle-class Facebook users, takes this vital part of anthropological investigation into account. The offline aspect of the case is equally important in exploring the nature of Thai political participation and practice. The relation between the online practice and offline action of the informants enables a more efficient positioning of their established political practice. Their offline social and cultural aspects help

explain and interpret their social media practice. As a result, this research adopted digital ethnography practice that is interested in both online and offline anthropology traces that complement and fulfil each other.

The practice of internet-related ethnography is increasingly popular among anthropologists and social studies scholars (Sade-Beck, 2004; Pink, 2012; Postill, 2010; Postill and Pink, 2012; Fenton and Barassi, 2011). As a result, some scholars have come up with the idea of bringing together conventional ethnographic methods and mainstream social media research methods for a clearer view and more accurate results (Humphreys, 2007; Miller, 2011; Postill and Pink, 2012). This combination of a virtual ethnographic approach with actual face-to-face conventional ethnographic practice, such as interviews and participant observation, can be an adaptation that proves beneficial, bringing a flexibility that suits cyber and conventional ethnographic methods as well as adaptive ethnography (Hine, 2009).

The interpretation of social media routine and media practice can indicate how Thai middle classes express their class distinction through their online identity and social media practice. Class culture is considered to be a complex social process shaped by experience, beliefs, ideology, education and inscription, both of the person and of his/her family. Class culture is best examined within a real-world setting. Ethnographic research allows direct observation in a real-world setting in order to understand the context in which behaviours occur. The ethnographic observation approach also helps to emphasise social phenomena rather than testing hypotheses about them (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

Additionally, the ethnographic methods of interviewing, participant observation and digital ethnography were chosen and combined to collect data concerning Thai middle classes' social media practice. The interviews explored the informants' behaviour relating to their media practice, social opinions and political performance. During the interviews, gestures that could be observed and other information relating to social context helped to identify participants' class distinctions, which come from cultural reproduction via education and family background. On the other hand, digital ethnography with textual analysis was also useful. The data drawn from the informants' status updates and other online activities on their Facebook pages helped in identifying other social symbolisation

interpretation and norms. Their social media behaviour also represents their political stance, social judgement and other forms of social practice. The same details were also found, in a more empirical manner, during the textual analysis of the content drawn from digital ethnography. The details of each method chosen in this study are discussed further in the section on data collection.

4.3 Sampling and recruiting the informants

In accordance with the research questions, there were two significant dimensions to the main criteria for participant selection in this research: social class and political advocacy. These two criteria were fairly specific and influenced the direction of the research process and the research result. As a result, it was essential to select the sampling method that was most likely to develop the research as well as relate to the theoretical framework (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). According to Dean *et al.* (1967, p.285), the informants who are most likely to be selected are those who are sensitive to the topic as well as willing to reveal information.

With all the conditions above, purposive sampling was selected to obtain the sample in this study. Purposive sampling is the technique used to identify the case that can best represent and answer the research question (Neuman, 2013, pp.273-274). The specification of the sampling gives high informative value to the data obtained. The sample is picked because the informants are appropriate to the research, which can give depth of understanding to the study. The sample in this research is identified as middle-class Thais with three different types of political advocacy: anti-Thaksin, pro-Thaksin and non-partisan.

In order to find the most appropriate sample for this research, the definition of the ‘middle class’ had to be clarified. Socio-economics alone cannot identify class distinction (Weber, 1968). Among a group of people with a similar socio-economic status, there are differences in social practices. In fact, social position, power and resourcefulness can construct a social class system and social stratification. This structured social inequality implies the existence of a long-lasting differential access to resources, income, power and social honour. However, socio-economics can be a basic condition in starting to recruit the informants before understanding their class distinctions, which was the goal in this study.

Since there are no official government statistics concerning the Thai middle class, recent research concerning the middle class in Thailand has relied more on the discussion of this term in the social research field (Laothamatas, 2003; Funatsu and Kagaya, 2003; Jager, 2012). Marketing sources, meanwhile, provide a profile of the middle class in Thailand that is similar to the middle class in other developing Asian countries – in other words, those who work as affluent bureaucrats, medium-scale entrepreneurs and educated professionals (Unaldi *et al.*, 2014). For example, in the survey undertaken by the Social Science Association of Thailand on the 1992 Thai demonstration, ‘middle class’ was the term used broadly to refer to people who are professionals and highly paid employees of private firms.

Thai social studies of class context mostly base their research on two major class concepts: Marxist and Weberian (Wangulum, 2010). Middle-class Thais can be divided, according to the Marxist concept, into the feudalist middle class and the capitalist middle class. The former rises under the shadow of feudalism, and possesses a social status similar to the bourgeoisie, while the latter rises by the capitalist concept and possesses a social status at the level of a tradesman. On the other hand, according to the Weberian concept, ‘middle class’ refers to the people who are in the middle of the class strata and social status. These people might be in various types of occupation or higher education, or have various professional skills. Some might have a well-off socio-economic status and a middle-class self-consciousness (Peampongsan, 2005).

Historical conditions, social background, economic pattern and political status also determine the concept of a middle-class Thai. As a result, Marx’s concept of class, which is built around the idea of capitalism and historical conflict between the haves and the have-nots, and Weber’s concept of class, which is built around the interplay between wealth, prestige and power, are not enough to encompass the Thai middle class. Chatawanich (1991) studies the ranking of professions in Thai society to determine the prestige of professions and how it affects class establishment. Her study describes a middle-class Thai as a person whose line of occupation supports their status elevation, such as business, professional and academic. Eawsriwong (1993) refers to a middle-class Thai as a person who does not belong to either the proletariat or the bourgeoisie. However, those persons are not totally free of class obligation as long as they still live in the

society. Peampongsan (2005) suggests that middle-class Thais are growing because of capitalism, accumulating economic capital as well as other kinds of capital, i.e. social and symbolic capital.

This sense of a combination of economic capital, social capital and symbolic capital is similar to the way in which the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu conceptualises class. Bourdieu's concept of class cannot be defined using only Marxian, Weberian or Durkheimian principles of class; in fact, he takes from them only the parts that he wants (Weininger, 2012). Bourdieu acknowledges the relation between the social and the material in his model of the social world as a form of social space (Ritzer, 2008). Bourdieu's approach to social class prioritises the analysis of symbolic systems over making use of rational action theory, which normally neglects an element of symbolic analysis in its assumption of rational action (Weininger, 2012). It means people's status and their action in social space will vary depending on their objective position stated by their economic and cultural capital. This concept of social class is closest in describing the system of social class in Thailand. Thai structured social inequality implies the existence of a long-lasting differential access to resources, income, power and social honour. However, socio-economics and occupation remain a basis for starting to recruit the informants before achieving the goal of understanding their class distinction.

Laothamatas (2003) categorises middle-class Thais into two groups according to occupation. The first group consists of middle-class Thais who work as businessmen, tradesmen or other skilled and professional persons. The second group comprises middle-class Thais who work in an academic field or academic-related field, as well as in NGOs or as other types of public servant. Socio-economically, a middle-class Thai can also be defined as a person with a diploma or higher, meaning, for the most part, a white-collar or professional person sustaining a living with a regular income (Nimpanich, 1999).

Using the description above, Nimpanich (1999) identifies middle-class Thais as those who possess at least a diploma and have a regular income of no less than 10,000 THB (Thai baht) per month, or other financial support of the same level. They tend to work in the line of occupation that offers them financial security as well as social status, preferably a white-collar occupation. Based on these terms,

this study began searching for potential informants among the researcher's personal and work-related contacts.

Setting is another important factor in ethnographic research. The nature of the setting and its significance helps in shaping how the research is developed during the fieldwork. The setting is selected mainly by the nature or the basis of the research question. The setting that best helps answer the research question should be chosen as a priority. The condition of the setting in the actual fieldwork also helps develop the study or pushes the researcher to go further in the research investigation. Similar to selecting a case study, the selection of the setting in ethnographic research has to relate to the research question as closely as possible. The fieldwork should give the most appropriate answer to the research question (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, pp.28-30).

Generally speaking, the best condition of the setting and the best-possible result for the research question help suggest the best-possible setting that the researcher should select to be the fieldwork of the study. Facebook was chosen as the main setting for this study as it proved to be the social media site in Thailand with the highest traffic. In Thailand, the significance of social media as an alternative medium started with the great flood in 2011 (Suksa-ngiam and Chaiyasoonthorn, 2015), when ordinary people used social media to communicate about the water conditions with each other and the masses (Perry, 2011). Those who were familiar with graphics and video-making created informative infographics concerning the flood that were shared widely online. Since then, the significance of social media sites, particularly Facebook and Twitter, has been immense. According to Syndacast.com (2015), Facebook is the most used social media site among Thais with the highest number of subscribers, at 30 million, while the second-placed YouTube secured 26.2 million subscribers. Twitter and Instagram have around 4.5 million and 1.7 million subscribers respectively.

To increase the chances of coming into contact with key informants, snowball sampling and gatekeepers were also added to the recruitment process. Snowball sampling is a sampling technique used to recruit informants from shared networking (Neuman, 2013, p.275). It begins with a few key people and then spreads among their friends and acquaintances. Snowball sampling has proven to be useful for coming into contact with research participants with concealed

information. In Thailand's current political situation, people tend to conceal their political preference to avoid social disagreement. Snowball sampling helped locate key informants by asking existing participants to recommend acquaintances who would be interested in taking part in the research.

In the same way, having a gatekeeper can increase the chances of contacting key informants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.104). Gaining access to potential informants is a complex matter when negotiating directly with the informant. However, with the gatekeeper's help as an intermediary, getting in contact with the targeted informant is possible. In this study the gatekeepers also acted as insiders who could both introduce the researcher to the key informant and give background information on the topic.

Recruitment started in March 2014, when the researcher asked existing contacts from previous schools and workplaces to act as gatekeepers. The gatekeeper's role is partly to introduce potential informants to the researcher. Before the recruitment process, the researcher explained the research requirements concerning informants to the gatekeepers. The brief contained information relating to the research so that the gatekeepers understood the different types and profiles of informants needed to conduct the study. However, the researcher withheld some details that might have affected the information gained from the informants. The gatekeepers understood that the study was examining political participation and social movements in Thailand.

The gatekeepers were chosen according to their capability in research, and/or their social status, which could help in gaining access to potential informants. Some gatekeepers were involved in anti-Thaksin or pro-Thaksin political movements. Their social statuses were concerned with political movements, which meant that they had access to key informants of this study. Due to the researcher's background as a lecturer in a private university in Bangkok, most of the gatekeepers were university lecturers or academics. The gatekeepers comprised three lecturers from Sripatum University; a lecturer from King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi; a researcher from the Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology; an assistant professor from Udon Thani Rajabhat University; a PhD candidate from the University of Durham; a doctor from

Thammasat University; and an assistant professor from the National Institute of Development Administration.

The gatekeepers helped to recruit potential informants for the research by inviting some of them to be friends with the researcher on Facebook. During that first period of evaluation of potential informants, the researcher had an opportunity to observe their Facebook page and social media practice for the first time. Coincidentally, there was a PDRC protest, which started in November 2013 and lasted till the declaration of martial law in May 2014. It was a period in which people showed their “true colours” in politics without considering their personal relationships. There were outbreaks of political information and expression on social media. People expressed their political beliefs and showed their political preferences, whether anti-Thaksin, pro-Thaksin or non-partisan, all over the social media site.

There have been side-takers playing their part in almost every demonstration in Thailand since 2006, whether pro-Thaksin or anti-Thaksin (PDRC and PAD respectively). On the other hand, there has always been a third group of non-partisans who are either politically inactive or non-side-takers. In order to understand how class culture, inscription and distinction impact the social media usage, political approach, political engagement and political movement of middle-class Thais from each political advocacy group, the researcher decided to set the number of participants at 30: ten from each political group.

During the first phase of recruitment, the gatekeepers introduced a number of potential informants to the researcher. After a month of observation of their Facebook activities, 17 key informants were chosen as the main participants for the research. The first 17 participants were chosen according to their social media activities concerning political participation. They proved to be unique cases who were especially informative, which is ideal in purposive sampling. After the key informants were chosen, the researcher organised appointments for interviews with the informants in Thailand. Some of the informants were contacted directly by the researcher, while others were contacted via the gatekeepers.

The second phase of recruitment started in Thailand after meeting with the 17 key informants in person. Snowball sampling was chosen to identify other potential informants via the main 17 informants' contacts. During the interviews,

the first 17 informants were asked to invite other members of their political group to participate in the study. Twenty-one potential informants were introduced to the researcher via snowball sampling. After the potential informants agreed to be friends with the researcher on Facebook, their Facebook activities were observed. During the Facebook observation, intense cases were identified. From 21 potential informants, 13 participants were chosen in order to complete the set of 30 informants. The participants were representative of three political interest groups: anti-Thaksin, pro-Thaksin and non-partisan. They were all middle-class Thais, eligible to vote, in the 18-44 age group and active users of social media.

Table 4.1: Summary of the 30 informants

	Upper-middle class		Middle-middle class		Lower-middle class	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Pro-Thaksin	2		4	1	2	1
Anti-Thaksin		2	3	3	2	
Non-partisan		1	5	3	1	

4.4 Data collection methods

The data collected explored the informants' social practice relating to their political engagement and their social class distinction. In order to study social practice or cultural practice in a social media context, the theory of practice can be successfully integrated as a framework (Postill, 2010). Digital ethnographic research fills the gap of searching social practice online. It helps in understanding social media as an ethnographic setting that is a part of, and produces, the practice. These online practices are a digital trace that can be referred to a person's social practice. Following this approach, the data collecting process consisted of two phases. The first phase involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants, while the second phase involved observing their social media practice

in a digital ethnographic manner. Participant observation was conducted during both phases.

This research used an ethnographic approach that comprised semi-structured in-depth interviews and digital ethnography. The interview data were collected from informants with three different political affiliations – anti-Thaksin, pro-Thaksin and non-partisan – as mentioned in the previous chapters. The next section provides details of the interview schedule, procedure and format. At the same time, digital ethnography was used to collect data and analyse participants' social media behaviour. The data collected by observing and reviewing the informants' Facebook usage was used to interpret the informants' political participation on social media. The process of digital ethnography that was used in collecting and analysing the data is also described in this section.

4.5 Semi-structured interviews

Interviewing key informants is one of the most common methods for data collection in ethnographic research. Interviewing is also one of the most widely used methods of data collecting in media studies (Jensen, 2002, p.240). It is useful in studying people's perspectives on media usage. Using interviews in association with online participant observation can reduce the risk of fragmented information (Hine, 2000). Interviews can accompany other methods employed in ethnographic research and are used to gain evidence of people's perspective (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.98). The oral testimony that the researcher obtains from the interview is used to complement the ethnographic observation. The oral account helps to give meaning to discursive resources. In media studies, the interviewee is framed as a representative of a cultural or social category rather than merely an informant (Jensen, 2002, p.240). The interviewee's ideas and opinions will be revealed through language. Conversation is a social interaction; therefore, it indicates people's perspectives on media and language as a primary mode of communication.

In a qualitative manner, the type of interview conducted can be determined by the type of information the researcher would like to obtain from the interview. Some structured questions could be a part of the quantitative data that are required from every participant, such as age, gender or salary (O'Reilly, 2005).

Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to ask structured questions to obtain the demographic data. Also, they require the interviewee to respond to a particular statement or define a particular concept on the research topic at the same time (Seidman, 2012). Additionally, for the unstructured part, interviews help in finding out more about the participants' behaviour, attitudes and experience (Seidman, 2006). People can tell their story and talk about their experience during the interview. They can also give examples of their behaviour that symbolise their feelings. This helps in understanding the informants' attitudes, thoughts, feelings and some past events that might not be observable otherwise.

In this research the first part of the interview primarily used Bourdieu's (1987) concept of habitus as a model to define class culture. The first part of the interview schedule was adapted from a national study of the organisation of cultural practices in contemporary Britain (Bennett *et al.*, 2009) and Bourdieu's (1987) study of habitus. It focused on patterns of cultural participation, taste and knowledge as well as the participants' life background. The questions focused on several main themes, such as housing; type of job; cultural capital and leisure activities; household activities; ideals of style and appearance; desire for social position; and exploration of visual taste. The interviews helped in defining terms and concepts and in obtaining demographic data and more details about the interviewees' taste in cultural practice. The informants were encouraged to answer questions using descriptive expression as well as narrative story.

The second part of the interview schedule consisted of questions concerning the informants' social media practice. The interview template questions investigated the informants' knowledge, ability, habits and attitudes towards social media, especially Facebook. Similar to the first part of the interview schedule, this part consisted of structured and unstructured questions. The first set of questions followed a uses and gratifications approach in understanding the user's motives in engaging with that medium, as an essential preliminary in learning something about their media-using behaviour. The informants were, first, asked to give specific answers as well as to compare, giving examples, rating their social media performance and describing their social media manner as well as providing their narrative story. The questions focused on exploring the participants' social media activities, knowledge and ability required to sustain

their account, accessibility and attitude towards social media, familiarity of usage, frequency of usage, and social media routine. In the second set of questions, the informants were asked open-ended questions related to their usage of Facebook during the PDRC protest in 2013-2014 in Thailand, such as "Were there any changes in your Facebook usage during the PDRC protest? What did you do on Facebook to support or denounce the protest?" In line with the study's aim of exploring the users' habits in relation to political content, discussion and engagement on social media, this research also included existing studies of media usage for protest-related communication as a guiding framework (Wilson and Dunn, 2011; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012).

The third part of the interview schedule focused on the informants' political views. This part had the most unstructured pattern of the interview schedule. There were guidelines as to what the interview questions would be focusing on; however, open-ended questions allow room for the interviewee to answer them with a flexible narrative and storytelling, rather than a fixed answer. At the same time, they allow the interviewer to explore interesting issues raised by the informant in more detail. By using the non-directive interviewing and ethnographic interview approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), the researcher tried to minimise her influence during the interview as much as possible so as to help the informant to express their own personal views on the topic in question. The questions in this part focused on the informant's performance, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards politics. They required the informant to talk about their political beliefs, participation and experience. The interview was treated more as a conversation than an interview at this point. This meant that some interviews lasted slightly longer than one hour. The intention was to attain, as far as possible, a relaxed and flowing conversational style.

Within the environment of ethnographic research, there is no clear distinction between participant observation and conducting an interview. It is an opportunity for the researcher to learn how to listen and persuade the interviewee to talk more expansively, and to know what they are really thinking. O'Reilly (2005, p.127) stated that interviews combined with participant observation could be similar to being told different things at different times. Unstructured interviews with open-ended questions can provide insight into interviewees' perspectives as

well as encourage the reflexivity that gives people a chance to express their opinion. A successful interview requires questions to be asked casually and spontaneously without being too demanding. Normally people's answers might be in accordance with social rules and expectations. The casual style of the interview leads to more private data, ideas and opinions and also helps in building rapport between interviewer and interviewee.

In some interview settings there is an opportunistic group discussion (O'Reilly, 2005, pp.129-131). Some interviews in this research occurred in the informant's working office surrounded by the informant's colleagues. Similar to focus group ethnographic discussion, some indirect questions were put to the informant's friends or colleagues, if they were close by at the time, in order to enhance the process of individual interviews. This helped to elicit information that the interviewer could not have got from interviewing an individual. Watching the dynamic from such a situation can be useful in seeing how a participant communicates, shares ideas and thoughts, and shapes their interactions. The dynamic leads to less control of the interview and more concentration on discussion and conversation. The observation of their conversation assists the researcher in interpreting the informant's practice and comparing it with their answers.

Each interviewee was provided with the information summary of the interview, a consent form, a brief overview of the study, assurances of confidentiality and an acknowledgement. The consent form, which was signed by the interviewee, acknowledged that he or she would be audio-taped. Each interview took place at the informant's chosen location, such as their home or work office. This was another opportunity for the researcher to observe and make participation notes that provided a record of the features of the location, location characteristics, decoration details and any other aspects that offered insights into the informant. Some informants agreed to be photographed within the location.

Key informants were interviewed between August and September of 2014. During that period, the researcher also interviewed the gatekeepers informally. The face-to-face format was used for all of the interviews. Most participants were interviewed independently of other interviewees, except for some who agreed to the presence of their trusted gatekeeper. The interview sessions lasted between 30

and 90 minutes. A list of open-ended questions was created in advance, but the researcher was free to pursue any new lead that came up as new topics arose during a session. Every session was recorded and copied on the researcher's laptop and an external hard drive. The recordings and notes were transcribed and stored in an MS Word document.

Data collected from the interview, interview notes and observation notes were transcribed for easier analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen as the method for analysing the interview material (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). The interview notes were subjected to a coding system consisting of themes that related to politics, communication practice, social practice, cultural practice and other subthemes. Coding is one of the significant steps taken during analysis to organise and make sense of textual data. Codes are categorised from the concepts that are created by the researcher; this code can be in the form of verbatim straightforward paragraph and metaphor phrases (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The informants were coded by their political groups first.

4.6 Online participant observation

Online participant observation using the digital ethnographic approach was chosen as the method of data collection for this research. According to Kozinets (2002, p.1), digital ethnography is a form of ethnographic research which has been adapted to the study of online communities. He argued that the word virtual (ethnography) is not an accurate word, as the participant is also physically real in their existence offline. In fact, digital ethnography is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through computer-mediated communications (Kozinets, 2002, p.2). The epistemological remit of ethnography that goes online is still concerned with telling the stories of the field the researcher has encountered. The major change is that, "With the introduction of new technologies, the stories have remained vivid, but the ways they were told have changed" (Murthy, 2008, p.838). In fact, there is little difference from the early stages of new technology in the field of anthropology, when anthropologists used tape recording or digital cameras to record interviews or participant observation. It is also similar to the use of a diary in the field (Alaszewski, 2006, p.12). As a result, 'new media' can, of

course, appear as more the style than the substance of ethnography. The process of digital ethnography can include email interviews, online questionnaires, digital video, social networking websites and blogs. However, in the field of media studies, digital ethnography focuses more attention on the ways that digital media forms shape, and are shaped by, users' practice in the experiencing of social space (Couldry and McCarthy, 2004; Andrejevic, 2004).

The method of digital ethnography is a combination of extremely thorough online guidelines with a spontaneous flexibility (Murthy, 2008). It is faithful to the traditional discipline of ethnographic methodology, yet contains the advantages and flexibility of technology. In the case of traditional ethnographic research that uses observation as a method of research, the researcher has the opportunity to get access to the place where the phenomenon he wishes to study has occurred (Wolcott, 2009). The degree of participation in the setting may vary, as the researcher has other options than merely observing. Observation is a well-known method for data collection in anthropological research and is extremely popular within the ethnographic research of digital environments (Hine, 2000). In the case of digital ethnography, the researcher treats the online community as a setting or a field. This could be electronic bulletin boards, independent webpages, multi-user dungeons and chat rooms, or social media sites. The chosen setting must have the most relevance to the research question, the highest traffic in terms of posting, a large membership, more data to be obtained or the most interaction between members (Kozinets, 2002, p.5). The digital ethnography approach also enhanced the scale of operation in following activists and political movements regardless of the vertical hierarchies and geographic distance (Juris, 2012). In order to understand the practice of social media that emerges online, but also relates to offline activities, digital ethnography is the appropriate approach (Postill and Pink, 2012, p.11). Furthermore, the digital tools and networking technologies enable the study to explore the emerging political and cultural ideals. New norms, forms and netiquette, combined with pre-existing modes of actual world normative control, completely transform how social movements operate and activists practise. It is also an appropriate approach within the limitations of this study, as the political situation in Thailand is an ongoing event that has been taking place since late 2013. The digital ethnography approach allows the researcher a continuing

experience that combines the realities of face-to-face and social media movements with socialities (Postill and Pink, 2012, p.2).

In this study, the observed behaviour is the participants' social media practice. The specific social media setting is Facebook, which is a group of internet-based applications that allow the exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p.60). Social media offer a chance for people to express themselves and participate in social events in a variety of ways. They also provide a means of mass communication, producing possibilities which enable people to produce informative content autonomously (Shirky, 2008). The content is constantly updated, and can be stored in the server over a long period of time, unless deleted by the creators. Computerised communication helps to place the researcher into a virtual field of study (Sade-Beck, 2004). The researcher can observe the subjects' online activity both in real time and retrospectively. Online observation enables the expansion of the field of research and covers more ground than traditional fieldwork. In analysing a past event, the researcher can only observe the past content without participating in the setting. Computerised communication, however, allows retrospective access. This gives more flexibility in following content posted at any time and in affording access to older posts related to the coup d'état that was declared on 22 May 2014.

The data obtained from digital ethnography can be divided into two main groups: the text that is copied from the site (produced by the users), and the inscriber recording their observations of the community (produced by the researcher) (Kozinets, 2002). Interaction on the internet takes place mostly in writing. It supplies a large volume of information with a high degree of accessibility (Sade-Back, 2004). The data consists of the content of the post, conversation that occurs around the post and the extensive descriptive part of the field note. As a result, web content analysis using thematic analysis could help organise this set of content data (Kwak *et al.*, 2010). On the other hand, Dicks *et al.* (2005, p.128) noted that the internet setting should never be treated as a "neutral" observation space, as it remains an actual field where there is plenty of data on agenda, social norms and personal history. That being said, the field note is still vital in recording the researcher's own observations regarding subtexts, pretexts, contingencies, conditions and personal emotions during the research (Kozinets,

2002). The descriptive part of the field note gives dimension to the information gained from the content in describing the detail of the dialogue, reflection, reaction and behaviour of the participants in the setting. Language helps people to formulate instructions on how to use media and also to interpret the actions of others. Language used in the content enables us to construct and recognise identities and social positions (Livingstone, 2008). Therefore, textual analysis that is widely used as ethnographic analysis is the main data analysis approach for this research.

In this study, data was collected from downloaded Facebook pages, while a field note was used to record activities and interactions that occurred. The online observation was a continuing process from the older posts dating back to October 2013, when the PDRC movement began, to late 2015, when the junta government had been established and controlled the country. The procedure consisted of observing and capturing visible activities of the participants using the scraping function on browsers such as Google Chrome. The data was later stored in MS Word files. The text data were also transferred to an NVivo program that assists in storing and managing the data in a more structured format. Some data, such as pictures, were stored using screen captures and MS Excel spreadsheets together with video clips, hyperlinks and photo files. The amount of data gained from digital ethnography can be enormous compared to the data from traditional ethnography, as the internet is capable of storing a limitless volume of data. Moreover, the data are also rich in artefacts other than just text, including pictures, videos and other forms of media, which need symbolic interpretation. As a result, the data analysis process involved symbolic interpretation in addition to textual analysis.

The data downloaded from the informants' Facebook pages were examined using web content analysis approaches (Herring, 2010). In response to the challenge of web content on social media, which includes diversity of form and function, the combination content analysis of web content analysis can help in the simultaneous interpretation of web format documents, HTML documents and interactive computer-mediated communication. The web content analysis approach enhances the traditional content analysis method with non-traditional blog content analysis. This approach retains the effectiveness of content analysis,

but blurs the boundaries with other methods, such as discourse analysis and social network analysis (Herring, 2010, p.234).

To complete the approach of web content analysis, both thematic and textual analyses were chosen for the data analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen for analysing the document data from observed social media practice, while textual analysis was used to analyse both document and non-document data. In this way, the text data could be arranged into themes along with clear explanations, while the non-text data could be interpreted as the observed non-verbal language.

The thematic analysis of content drawn from the informants' Facebook pages is similar to the method of web content analysis used to analyse large volumes of data from blogs and other social media sites (Kwak *et al.*, 2010). Textual analysis is widely used as a method of ethnographic analysis to analyse data on human beliefs, values and practices collected from participant observation (Hume and Mulcock, 2012), and allows researchers to collect any kind of data from numbers to narratives when they are in the field (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010). As a result, text in this sense is more than media content; it is "material traces that are left of the practice of sense-making – the only empirical evidence we have of how people make sense of the world" (McKee, 2003, p.15). This research follows in the footsteps of other digital ethnographic studies, including the qualitative textual analysis by Fenton and Barassi (2011) of the online and offline media that Cuba Solidarity Campaign activists produced in the British Labour movement, and Postill and Pink's (2012) digital research on the "messy web", where John Postill also included the tagging of web content, an advanced form of web content analysis.

The document data were analysed using thematic analysis. The entire content was read to determine the pioneer codes that were used for the coding system. The pioneer codes were created from the potential codes that were listed during the first reading. Generating the codes used in this study was a process of going back and forth between phases of data until the final themes were established. One sentence could belong to one or more codes. For example, one informant's status post could be coded as a personal post, Thai language, own words, positive, no likes, two comments. During the coding process, codes were refined by adding, subtracting, combining or splitting potential new codes. The

main agenda during coding was to arrange the document data into identified segments. The arranged data from coding were examined in terms of how they combined and related to similar or repeated patterns. Then the repeated patterns found in the coding process were given meaning by considering how relationships were formed between each segment. The meaningful patterns of their Facebook behaviour were described and put into themes.

However, the verbal and document data from Facebook alone was not sufficient for the interpretation of the data. There were also non-verbal data that had to be included in the interpretation. Each practice could suggest different meanings; for example, a hash tag (#) can suggest both self-expression and a digital bookmark (Postill and Pink, 2012). The informants' social media practice and non-text content can also be compared to non-verbal language, such as nodding or smiling, weak-ties or strong-ties. This non-verbal data and other textual forms were analysed using textual analysis.

Text is a part of a social event (McKee, 2003, p.21). The same sentence relating to a photo can result in different meanings as a result of cultural interpretation. It potentially makes each group of people view the world differently. Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world (McKee, 2003, p.1). Traditional anthropology concerns the study of exotic culture, identifying the distinct behaviour of non-Westerners, and how they make sense of the world. This can involve a mixture of different references and facets.

Discourse genre and style of language are included in the process of textual analysis, so that we can link the data back to social practice, social structure, social events, behaviour and social class. The text can be interpreted by understanding its culture and knowing how it is interpreted by the people who consume it. The understanding of the culture helps make sense of practice. Meaning that is gained from textual analysis helps make more sense out of the data than thematic analysis alone.

4.7 The researcher's role

The researcher's role in ethnographic research is considered to be vital, as it affects the whole process of the research. The ethnographer not only records what

they have observed, but also interprets the meaning of the data they have obtained from these observations. Gobo (2011, pp.71-73) suggested that the researcher should be more ambitious than just concentrating on the action which answers the research question. The researcher is compelled to look for the expected event when they have entered the field; however, the research design should be flexible enough to allow for and pursue unexpected events in the field. In this study, I had the outline of what was to be observed and expected in the field before conducting the fieldwork; however, it was just an outline to signal what to look for and not determine how it should be. For example, though there were lists of political participation behaviour that the researcher wished to discover in the field, during the actual observation other unexpected behaviour that could be considered as political participation was added to the list.

Since the ethnographer is considered to be another tool in doing ethnographic research, avoiding personal interpretation in the study is essential (*ibid.*: 76). The greatest danger of research lies in assumption and prejudice finding its way into the researcher's interpretation. In this study, I, being middle class myself, might have had class-cultural bias or prior attitudes towards any particular culture discovered in the field. The strategy used to avoid this risk was to conceptualise the topic before entering the field. I tried to give operational concepts to behaviour that I hoped to encounter in the fieldwork as far as possible. Giving operational concepts to the behaviour of the informants helped to break it into empirical observable aspects rather than see it as class behaviour. It decreased assumptions and prejudices towards particular class behaviour that might be found in the actual setting, such as impolite words.

Another problem that I encountered in this particular setting of political cleavage was maintaining an impartial status as well as gaining trust from the informants. Since politics is a sensitive topic in Thai society and, at the time, Thailand was declaring a state of martial law, politically related conversations needed to be discreet. Gatekeepers were adopted as a tool that would help in gaining social access, and they acted as guarantors who helped to foster the relationship between researcher and participant. Moreover, the decision to use snowball sampling helped in finding people in each political advocacy network

who would be amenable to participating in the research and helped the researcher to be seen as a trustworthy person.

With regard to the side-taking problem in this research, I tried to retain my impartial status as much as possible. The technique adopted was to be as non-reactive as possible during both the interview and the online ethnography. The key was to absorb all the behaviour and language and not to get involved in the action, take up any position or decide that one or more participants was right or wrong. I tried to reduce my influence as much as possible by presenting myself as an objective observer of events. During the interview, it was important to present the academic credentials of the study and promise to behave in an ethically proper way at all times. However, the researcher did not forget to exchange information as well as socialise to maintain interaction and cooperation with the participant. Regardless of how objective I was being during the interview and online participant observation, my experience throughout the political situation and protests in Thailand was taken into account during the interpretation and data analysis in order to empathise with the informants' feelings towards Thai politics.

4.8 Ethical concerns

Most of the ethical concerns in ethnographic research relate to five topics: informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation and consequences for future research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.209). To accomplish the ethical requirements, consent forms were presented to all the informants as a priority. Other than completing the requirements from the university, the trust gained from the informant was really important to this ethnographic research. As a result, the researcher decided to submit the consent form to all potential informants prior to the meeting so that they had time to read it and ask questions before they made a decision to join the research. The informants signed the form in person during the course of the interview.

When I first met them, the pro-Thaksin group were the most sceptical about the interview. It was hard for some of them to identify themselves as a Red Shirt. I took more time in the ice-breaking period with this group than with the other two. There was more stress for them in talking about their lives and political preferences, especially when I asked them to name pro-Thaksin Facebook pages

that I could follow. However, once they opened up to the interview questions and felt more comfortable with the atmosphere of the interview, they talked fluently about themselves, their ideas and their identity. Still, they did not tell me specifically which secret Facebook pages they followed. Khwanjai (30, middle-middle class, pro-Thaksin), one of the pro-Thaksin informants, kept asking me if I was pro- or anti-Thaksin during the conversation. She was convinced that I was anti-Thaksin based on my appearance, education and demeanour. On the other hand, Weera (39, upper-middle class, pro-Thaksin) and Sakda (PhD) (38, upper-middle class, pro-Thaksin) mentioned after the interview that they thought I was Red or Red-leaning.

Pseudonyms were adopted (Wolcott, 2009) in this research to protect the privacy of all informants. Owing to the period of martial law, there were some ethical concerns relating to protecting and being responsible for the interviewees. Some informants expressed fears for their well-being due to their controversial political views. Therefore, information that could reveal the informants' identity, such as the name of their education academy or address, was also withdrawn (Schostak, 2006). In addition, the researcher was careful when describing the informants' details in order to avoid revealing their identity. Due to the content of some informants' information, parts of some interviews were requested to be taken off the record. Where necessary, the researcher also went back to the informants with details regarding specific information to ask for permission to mention it in the research. If they were not comfortable about revealing the detail, the researcher agreed to follow their decision.

Unlike the pro-Thaksin informants, the anti-Thaksin group loved to talk and were easy to gain access to and interview. They were very willing to talk about themselves, their political preferences, other lifestyle activities and the movement that they had joined. They all assumed I was one of them without asking about any of my political beliefs. They were convinced, based on my profile and social class background, that I was anti-Thaksin. They kept using pronouns like we, us or ours during their interview. Though they knew nothing of my political stance, the anti-Thaksin group talked fluently about the rally, anti-Thaksin Facebook pages, their shared pictures and their anti-Thaksin friends, even admitting openly to having

private Facebook pages or LINE accounts to talk with their hardcore anti-Thaksin friends.

Non-partisans did not want any contact with me initially. They did not understand what they could do for the research and kept saying that they were non-partisan and had no political preference. However, after each interview I would find out that they actually did have a political preference, but did not want to show or state it publicly. Nevertheless, they could not tell me at the time of the interview which party they would vote for if there was an election that day. "Uncertain, subject to change in the ballot," said Kamol (PhD) (38, middle-middle class, non-partisan).

During and after the fieldwork, the online communication between the informant and the researcher continued to sustain the trust and relationship and avoid destroying the trust that had been gained. Paying respect to every informant as a cooperator in the research has also been an essential part of the whole process of the research.

Meetings with the key informants were arranged according to their availability and location. At the time, Thailand was declaring martial law; politically related conversations in public places needed to be discreet. Mostly the meetings between the informants and the researcher took place on campus, at the informant's workplace or in the informant's private residence. In some cases, the researcher agreed to travel to the informant's home province in Thailand. In their own environment, the informants were rather more comfortable with the interview. Most of the informants agreed to participate in the research and the interview because of the trust they had gained in the gatekeeper. Therefore, in some meetings the gatekeeper also made an appearance to introduce the researcher. This helped the informants feel more relaxed and confident in the interview. In addition, some gatekeepers allowed their office to be used as an interview place.

Chapter Five: How middle-class Thais' social life on Facebook reflects Thai social class and social culture

This chapter presents an overview of the Thai social media scene, accompanied by life-story interviews and data drawn from online Facebook participant observation. Through the interviews and participant observation, the data reaffirms the everyday social media usage of Thai participants from upper-, middle- and lower-middle classes. The data analysis tells the story of how their social media practice reflects the Thai middle class's social class disposition (Bourdieu, 1984). The chapter also maps the everyday media consumption among the Thai middle class in order to complement the context of their everyday social media usage.

Within the context of social media, which allows the users to create their own content (boyd and Ellison, 2007), this chapter examines the usage of social lifestyle posts on Facebook as forms of self-expression, sociality (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2011) and self-reassurance (Park, Kee and Valenzuela, 2009). Lifestyle posts in Thailand's Facebook scene also represent the users' wish to represent their tastes and build their cultural capital (Good, 2012). The nature of Thai culture in general, in being considerate of others' feelings and the reciprocity of Kreng jai, provides a social frame of social media practice for the social lifestyle and sociality aspects of middle-class Thais.

In addition, this chapter demonstrates the impact of lifestyle as a form of political identity (Bennett, 1998). Similar to other aspects of life in Thailand, lifestyle has been linked to political expression (Grömping, 2014). Communication on social media, especially on social issues, has divided the society into groups. Lifestyle, social norms and social practice have been branded with political concepts. The digital inequality (Robinson *et al.*, 2015) in this developing country plays its part in promoting one class disposition as the dominant social culture.

One other significant style of Thai middle-class social media usage is that of surveillance and social conformity. However, with the uncertainty of netiquette on Facebook and the level of contestation over dominant ideologies in Thailand, it was not easy for society, or individual citizens, to determine whether or not to use

offline social etiquette on social media. The principle of normativity has changed. The principle of actual world ideology has been challenged by social media ideology (Gershon, 2010). In the case of Thailand, this has created a confrontation between new and old social orders as well as new and old ideologies. Behaviour that was deemed to face social sanction offline might be acceptable online. Moreover, since "The 'public' represented by Facebook is better understood as an aggregate of private spheres" (Miller, 2011, p.175), the blurred line between public and private space on Facebook adds even more confusion to Thai middle-class social media practice.

Nevertheless, this chapter demonstrates the counteraction to the dominant social order and mainstream class culture that can be observed in Thailand's social media scene from the lifestyle movement (Wahlen and Laamanen, 2015), social media symbolic action (Penney, 2015) and class awareness (Skeggs, 2004).

5.1 Social class originates online barriers

How did I start using Facebook? Oh, let me see. That was a long time ago, you know. Do you remember the time when Facebook accounts had to be created via an invitation from previous Facebook users only? Yes, I think that long. It was still an English-only platform. (Suda, 38, upper-middle class, anti-Thaksin, interview)

Suda (38, anti-Thaksin) runs a family business in cars. Her father started this business before she was born and wanted the business to be taken over by her or her brother. During secondary school, she spent most of her summers in the US or the UK. After obtaining a Bachelor's degree from a leading university in Thailand, she decided to pursue her Master's degree in the US. She is one of the early adopters of Facebook in Thailand, as her friends and acquaintances were invited by international friends who had access to Facebook.

The fact that Facebook, in its early stage, was an English-only platform might have been an obstacle for some local users, but for some upper-class and upper-and middle-middle-class informants, it was another reason to use Facebook rather than Hi-5. Language is another form of self-presentation that people use to display their intelligence (Lee, 2014) and their cultural capital. It represents their concern over their public appearance (Bazarova *et al.*, 2012). In this way, this human

capital can carry existing social inequalities over to the online setting (DiMaggio and Garip, 2012).

Better access to digital resources can enhance digital engagement for some people, which widens the gap that economic disadvantage has already created (Robinson *et al.*, 2015). Suda (38, upper-middle class, anti-Thaksin) was given her first iPhone as a gift.

Suda: "I was working as a personal helper for the rich, and business people at that time. It was my father's idea that I should have some experience in being an employee before assuming an employer position here."

Jantiga: "Sorry, what exactly is a personal helper for the rich? I thought ... (I hesitated to say this, but finally I said) you were the rich."

Suda: "Oh ... haha Jantiga! I am not 'that' rich, you know? These guys were the 'real' rich of this country. I did some chores for them, such as I could find them a ticket for a Justin Bieber concert that had already sold out. Or book them a restaurant table in Hong Kong. Things like that. Anyway, I got my first iPhone via this process. It was a gift from one of my employers."

She explains that her iPhone is another advantage in playing games and communicating with friends on Facebook whenever and wherever. However, with its skyrocketing price, not everyone has the privilege of being an iPhone user. Though all of the participants have access to the internet and social media via their mobile device, some have no internet access at home. Most Thais participate online via mobile devices.

"If you were on public transport in Bangkok, you would observe the phenomenon of commuters all paying attention to their mobile phones rather than paying attention to other commuters or the driver." Kitti (25, middle-middle class, non-partisan) points out the significance of the smartphone in Thais' lives nowadays. He suggests this is unhealthy behaviour. "Wake up very early to be on packed public transportation, then have no time to catch up on everyday events so that they have to consume a downloaded version of everything, even the news!" He grins. "That's why I cycle to work. ... I mean, you know, I don't have to be on a packed bus or constantly on my mobile to escape from this torturing transport. It also means I do regular exercise."

Kitti is lucky enough to work for a company with a contemporary outlook that offers a shower room for cyclists and space for their bikes. I suspect that not everyone is as lucky as Kitti, or even has access to alternative transportation. The smartphone has become an item of necessity in providing escapism for Bangkokians and people in urban areas of the provinces. City lifestyles have changed in Thailand, from watching television to downloading television programmes then watching them on their smartphones.

Inequality in access is not the only difference that can be observed among the informants. The quality of the device they are using to get access to social media and the internet varies. Disadvantages in socio-economic status can cause digital inequality (Witte and Mannon, 2010) in usage and proficiency. I have encountered evidence of inequality from the informants not only in terms of access but also in usage and proficiency. Wichit (36, middle-middle class, pro-Thaksin), an agricultural salesperson, is constantly on the road, as he travels from province to province marketing his company's products in the north-east region of Thailand. Wichit does not own a laptop or a personal computer. The smartphone is an essential tool for his working life, as well as being a personal requirement outside working hours.

Jantiga: "So, you have a Facebook account? Just Facebook, or do you have other social media accounts?"

Wichit: "Erm... well ... I only have a Facebook account."

Jantiga: "Can I befriend you on Facebook? What is your account name? Your name?"

Wichit: "Erm ... erm ..."

I turn to my smartphone, open the Facebook application and ready myself to type his account name to make a new friend request. In response, Wichit does not say a word, but rather turns on his Facebook application and then shows his Facebook page to me.

Wichit: "It is a bit odd, my account name. Erm ... It might be easier if I ... erm ... send you a request instead."

On his smartphone screen, I see his Facebook page, with a relatively long username that represents his sense of humour. It finally transpires that when he first logged on to activate a Facebook account, he just mimicked an old advertising

slogan. He confessed that he had no idea that his mobile device would not permit him to change his Facebook name. Now he has to stick to his funny Facebook name until he can gain access to a personal computer to change it in the future.

5.2 The balance of self-expression, self-assurance and Kreng jai: How Thai social culture frames Facebook sociality practice

During the interviews, most of the informants suggested that their main reason for activating a Facebook page or other social media account was their social life. One-third of the participants stated that they used to have a Hi-5 account. However, they stopped using it when they found out that most of their friends were on Facebook, and now many of them cannot even remember their Hi-5 password. Like the transition from MySpace to Facebook (Robards, 2012), the informants described their transition as growing out of Hi-5 and moving on to Facebook. Although they have other kinds of social media accounts, Facebook is their main social media choice. Other social media serve them differently according to their features (boyd and Ellison, 2007). For example, informants who run their own business also create an Instagram and/or a Twitter account to promote their products.

According to a profile of Thai internet users (2014), most Thais not only allow strangers to have access to their personal space, but also risk their own privacy and safety by sharing their private personal information online. Though most of the informants set their status privacy strictly (so that only friends can see their posts), some set their privacy as open to the public or open to friends of friends. Surprisingly, there are many informants who actually add people to their friends list whom they do not know in person. An honest explanation for this from one informant was: "Some games on Facebook required me to have a significant number of friends to get through to the next round." This encourages many users to accept friend requests from strangers. These friends might have restricted access to the informants' Facebook pages and, in the end, a personal incident may eventually end their Facebook friendship. The ability to spread information on social media is an encounter between self-presentation and privacy concerns (Krämer and Haferkamp, 2011). Hesitating between sharing their posts for

sociality reasons and worrying about their privacy, the Facebook privacy setting becomes the most popular option for the informants.

Nonetheless, confusion concerning whether Facebook is a private or a public space is observable in both the interviews and the participants' online social media behaviour. New technology practices often result in complications in privacy practices (Solove, 2004). While they mostly mentioned during the interviews that they understand that Facebook is a relatively public space, they also referred to their Facebook page as "my space" several times. Compared to other types of social media such as Twitter, most of the informants stated that their Facebook account represents their "face" and "self".

During the interview, Kamol (38, middle-middle class, non-partisan) states that he owns several accounts on several social media platforms including Facebook, MySpace, Google+ and YouTube. However, he barely remembers his password for any of them except Facebook and Twitter.

Jantiga: "If you are not using these platforms, why do you have to activate the account?"

Kamol: "Well, the answer is simple. I want to reserve my name as the account name before anyone gets it."

Jantiga: "... You mean, you just logged in to create your account so that no one can use your name as an account? I have never thought of anything like that."

Kamol: "Now you know how it works. I am not going to say that I am going to be famous or anything, but I just do not want anyone to make a profit out of my name. This happens to many famous people who were too slow to reserve their name as a social media account. Some people used their name to make a profit ... Personally, it is my space with my name on it."

Jantiga: "But you just said, you understood that Facebook and other social media is a public space. That's why you do not post much of your personal information."

Kamol: "I know. But in some sense, a space with my name on it, it is also my space where I can delete, post or prohibit any unacceptable behaviour from others."

However, when asked about the content of his YouTube channel, not only did Kamol barely remember it, but he did not remember how to access it. Kamol

accepted that he treated Facebook as the social media that represented him the most by constantly updating its content, chatting with friends, and commenting on and regularly joining friends' Facebook sociality activities. Kamol is not the only person who marked Facebook as his personal space where he carried out his personal and public activity representing himself.

Regarding that concept, the informants who have more than one social media account treat them differently. Facebook is the social media of choice for their personal use. Nop (pro-Thaksin) suggested that compared to Twitter, his Facebook content was more polite and personal, as he knew most of his Facebook friends personally while he did not know most of his Twitter followers. "And I do not care; mostly I use intense and sometimes crude language. You do not need to be polite or anything. No one knows who you are, unlike Facebook where offline friends are also your online friends. You have to be very careful with Facebook posts."

Apart from ensuring that they do not post overly personal information in order to protect their privacy, they also post content that represents themselves as well as assume that Facebook is a space where other people should not write any upsetting comments or disagree with their uploaded material. In return, they commit to the same etiquette by not putting upsetting comments on others' Facebook space. Almost all the informants agreed that they always think twice before posting their own Facebook status to make sure it will not upset their Facebook friends. The Thai socialcultural frame of Kreng jai obliges the informants to adopt the offline social frame of consideration to others' feelings in their Facebook sociality practice.

In fact, most users' need for self-expression and sociality was their main reason for joining an online community (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2011). Picture uploading, content sharing and news sharing are equally important, however. Almost all of my participants confirmed that on more than one occasion they had used image-editing software or a photo-editing application to modify their photo before uploading it to Facebook. To my surprise, those informants who confessed that they did not know how to individualise their newsfeed because of their lack of knowledge of the technology were familiar with photo-altering applications. They commented that these applications are easy to use and stated

that it is important to “look good” on their Facebook page, which can be understood as the fulfilment of their need to affirm their social identity (Toma and Hancock, 2013). In fact, some contributors frankly expressed their intention to gain as many “likes” as possible from their Facebook friends. Chatchai (30, lower-middle class, anti-Thaksin) would be one good example of this.

Chatchai is a primary-level administration officer in a vocational school. With his parents’ background in construction, he positions himself as lower class regardless of his Bachelor’s degree in business administration. Though nowadays his family owns a small house on the outskirts of Bangkok and a pickup truck, he still struggles with his small monthly income. Similar to other salaried men in Thailand, in addition to his full-time job he also runs a sideline business of supplying monks so that he and his family have enough household revenue. However, Chatchai owns an iPhone5, which, at that time, in 2014, was relatively new and expensive. “It is essential to buy!” he insisted.

Chatchai: “Look at this.”

Then he shows me ‘before’ and ‘after’, pictures of a photo that has been modified using an application.



Photo 5.1: Before and after images showing the effects that can be achieved by using a photo application

Chatchai: “It is a picture of a model with and without the application. See! Now, you understand why and how people need an iPhone and other kinds of magical camera.”

Chatchai was the first interviewee who was honest enough to admit to me that he would delete his posts whenever they did not get as many “likes” as he expected. Photos and information will only be provided as a self that they wish to

present to others (Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009; Lang and Barton, 2014).

Whenever I post a photo, I secretly expect a number of 'like' clicks from my Facebook friends. Whether it is a sincere 'like' or not ... Haha ... Isn't that why we purchase top-of-the-line smartphones with the best-quality camera and world-class photo applications to choose from? If it is Android or IOS operating, there are more apps available too ... But I am not like those girls who always complain in their photo description that 'Oh! I am so tired today. I look really shabby, oh, I am disgusting!' whereas, in fact, the picture is their best selfie to which they have applied apps upon apps.

Chatchai (25, lower-middle class, anti-Thaksin)

As Chatchai's words "sincere 'like' or not" illustrate, comments and like clicks in Thailand sometimes merely represent conformity with social etiquette. As a part of being polite and Kreng jai (considerate to others' feelings), clicking "like" and posting encouraging comments on others' posts or statuses is compulsory netiquette on Thai Facebook. Without official agreement, the practice of reciprocal like-clicking is performed among middle-class Thais as their Facebook sociality practice.

Facebook, which is well known for giving social support to those who seek support when they are feeling low (Park, Kee and Valenzuela, 2009; Toma and Hancock, 2013), is where people are compelled to ask for self-reassurance. In Thailand, "those girls" to whom Chatchai refers are a type of Thai women who ask for affirmation from social media. The typical ritual of this post will start with a girl posting a selfie that has been edited by an application. She accompanies the picture with some self-pitying description stating that this is one of her bad days, that she does not look her best, etc. The main goal of the ritual is comforting comments from Facebook friends, ranking from complimentary, such as *You are beautiful* or *You look terrific*, to supportive suggestions like *Fight on!* or *You can do it!*

Though knowing the fact of the self-assurance ritual, most people will respond with a relatively polite and encouraging reaction. The protocol of Kreng jai among Thais has taken over the social practice in reaction to such

manifestations of sociality. Being polite and considerate to others' feelings is a must in Thai social culture, and the reciprocation of such practice is also essential. Clicking like and posting encouraging comments on others' posts represents not only the sociality aspect on Facebook, but also the sense of social and cultural practice in considering others in offline society.

When mentioning this self-assurance ritual during the interview, I encountered a difference of opinion between male and female informants. Female participants tended to be more understanding and Kreng jai towards the behaviour, as females normally spend more time managing their photos than males (McAndrew and Jeong, 2012). From the field note some female informants said that they have, occasionally, made similar posts to get others' approval for their own self-assurance. In fact, self-presentation on Facebook varies among genders (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014). My male informants found the behaviour to be an absurd gesture for an adult. Most of them perceived it as an embarrassing or humorous "girl thing". They even joked about it during the interview. However, despite perceiving this as an embarrassing practice, both male and female informants practised Kreng jai etiquette. Regardless of what they think about a post or a picture, they will reply with encouraging comments and like-clicking as supportive gestures.

"So many times I have come across this kind of post. I almost reply to them: 'Yes, you are so disgusting today, poor you!' But then again, I do not want to get in trouble." As a result, Chatchai, like most informants, ended up responding with an encouraging comment and a like click; sometimes, just clicking the like button was felt to be enough.

The self-portrait ritual has become essential in Thai social media posting (Weiser, 2015). Its significance encourages some trendsetters and those with higher purchasing power to go beyond a typical smartphone and to purchase a more expensive gadget. However, not everyone can get access to pricier devices. The price of a Casio ZR digital camera ranges from 23,000-43,000 baht (£460-860). It cannot upload photos directly to the internet, so it is vital to have a smartphone as a loading point, and the system only allows the device to be paired with IOS and Android. Socio-economic status has again become an advantage for some and a disadvantage for others (Robinson *et al.*, 2015).

While self-expression may be one of the reasons for activating their social media account, modes of expression vary according to the user's social class (Junco, 2013), age (Livingstone, 2008) and gender (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014). The higher the social class, the more creative the participants become in trying to acquire "likes" from Facebook friends. The middle- to upper-middle class put more effort into adding extra value to a photo by providing words, such as a famous quotation from a movie, or by giving existential meaning to the photo. The picture they have posted on Facebook also represents their taste and builds cultural capital (Good, 2012).

In terms of gender differences, female participants tend to post a higher number of photos of themselves than male participants. However, whenever male participants post photos of themselves, they seem to post a photo that represents their masculinity, such as playing sport, riding a bike or lifting weights at the gym. Females focus more on their emotions, while males focus more on their activities (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014).

Ironically, while they prefer to be unique with their one-of-a-kind posts and status updates, most of the informants express their need for others' approval via a desirable number of comments and likes from their Facebook friends. Their efforts in being independent need some approval from their peers. Though Facebook is a social network and its value lies in allowing the creation and exchange of user-generated content, thus creating a personal network (boyd and Ellison, 2007), the user, who is also the creator of the content, still depends on feedback from their audience. Social media users use their network satisfaction as a means of validation. Facebook users consider their self-image to be a priority (Wang, 2013).

Individualism is another desirable goal in social media usage that can be observed from the informants' interviews and online behaviour. Due to the facility that enables individuals to tailor their own newsfeeds on Facebook, they can choose whether or not they see posts from each of their friends. This promotes content that contains self-interest and an egocentric type of network (Rojas, 2013). Around one-third of the participants have taken advantage of this technology. They mentioned that this advantage had helped them in preventing some upsetting pictures and stories being seen by their Facebook friends.

Around two-thirds of the participants reported that they did not do anything to alter their Facebook newsfeed appearance. Most of these informants were either older than 30 or from the lower-middle class. Also, Asian collectivistic cultures, such as Thailand, have less egocentric networks than Western individualistic cultures (Na, Kosinski and Stillwell, 2014). However, after the interviews, some of the participants eagerly used their new knowledge to transform their newsfeed into a more preferable version. Their action suggested a desire to personalise their information intake (Sunstein, 2007) by making use of this feature of Facebook.

On one occasion, during my interview with Samorn (51, middle-middle class, anti-Thaksin) at her office, I became the person who set her newsfeed preference for her on her work personal computer.

"I did not know I can do this," Samorn said, standing behind while I was setting her newsfeed preference on her computer. "If I had known, I would not have to put up with some people posting inappropriate stuff ... You know, I think nowadays teenagers, and those who promote themselves as the new generation, do not have a clue about what is right or wrong."

Age is another factor that causes differences in posts. The younger informants, certainly, make more Facebook posts and in a variety of subjects. Moreover, they have a higher tendency to post offensive language, photos showing nudity and dirty jokes. They also enjoy providing all the details of their life, as if their Facebook page is their personal diary. They take more risks in sharing their personal information (Livingston, 2008). Their self-presentation indicates the explosion of their identities (Manago *et al.*, 2008) in sharing their information (Pempek *et al.*, 2009). They are also fairly protective of the way they are presented; for example, they will un-tag themselves from an undesirable photo (Lang and Barton, 2014). Though there is not much difference in their patterns of posting, older users are more concerned about their privacy and information sharing (Christofides, Muise and Desmarais, 2012). They are also more concerned by social etiquette and Kreng jai practice. They post less intimate information regarding their private life, and place more emphasis on their work, accomplishments and social life.

The difference in netiquette between gender and age also appears among different social classes. This difference in social media etiquette intensifies the sense of surveillance as well as social normative control. Thai social media society seeks to establish “correct” or “proper” practice on new media. Slightly different from the social normative control in South Korea, where society unites in identifying and condemning anti-social behaviour (Miller, 2011, p.187), Thailand has a dilemma in identifying which practices are anti-social. Some normal anti-social behaviour gets a negative response from the society as a whole. Some have been punished by social sanctions, which have been amplified by social media. However, some behaviour that used to be considered anti-social behaviour has been forgiven and/or praised as acceptable online social practice. In being confined to mainstream cultural practice, individuals will voluntarily control themselves through self-surveillance and self-disciplinary practices. The concept of self-discipline found among middle-class participants relates to a discourse of norms and normality, to which individuals desire to conform (Foucault, 1980).

For example, some Thai teen actors posted a clip where they were dancing on a subway train during their journey through Japan. At first, the clip was praised and received positive feedback from the actors' followers. However, it was then brought to the attention of wider society by a message posted on a public forum. The message asked how appropriate, or Kreng jai, these teen actors' behaviour was. From that point, floods of condemnation appeared on social media. Finally, the actors had been punished. However, the debate over whether or not their action on public transport in Japan was appropriate continued for some time, becoming heated between older and younger generations in particular.



Photo 5.2: Sample of a post related to the video clip of teen actors, expressing concern about the dancers' non-Kreng jai behaviour

Similar phenomena are visible throughout the last decade. Amplified by widely penetrated networks of social media, it seemed that people in Thailand had a divided perspective on almost every agenda. For example, the death penalty, posting others' pictures without permission on social media, criticism of others' appearance in public, criticism of others' behaviour in public and even picking up on incorrect spellings of certain words all became bones of contention.

Some people really enjoyed being a "big brother" via social media surveillance. The words "เปิดดาวรุ่ง" (referring to the practice of reposting deleted content on the internet to show others' misbehave) became a popular cyber term in Thailand. Still, the account of online social conformity has been challenged and altered. What is unacceptable offline might be acceptable online. This sense of division in approaches to social surveillance is also a continuing concern relating to social media political practice in Thailand.

5.3 Division of lifestyle: taste, class disposition, norms and ideologies

Lifestyle posts from different classes exhibit their different levels of social, cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Facebook lifestyle posts by the research participants can be summed up as representative of their lives, tastes and social norms. Socio-economic status might not be the only reason for variations in taste, as their social background, education, present and past social status, and life

experience all influence their present personality (Bourdieu, 1984). If there is any socio-economic effect on their different tastes and lifestyles, it might be caused by the unequal opportunities in acquiring a higher standard of life, especially in a developing country such as Thailand where the standard of urban life contrasts strongly with the rural one (Glassman, 2010).

Thailand, as a developing country, has a less advanced economy than developed nations, with a large proportion of the population being concentrated in metropolitan areas (BTI Thailand Country Report, 2016). The capital city, Bangkok, is 40 times larger than Thailand's second-largest city (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009). The poverty rate is still high, with inequality in income, access to and standards of health care, and educational standards (UNDP, 2015). Inequality among citizens is observable not only in the standard of living, but also in the general well-being of individuals. The unequal background of the nation also impacts citizens' overall quality of life. Patterns of lifestyle may vary based on location as well as on social class (Peteva, 2013).

This research focuses on the Thai middle class, which means that there is not that much of a socio-economic gap among the participants. Most of the participants come from large cities in Thailand. Certainly, the life of each participant may vary from town to town, but as a result of consumer culture (see, for example, Ritzer [2008] on McDonaldization), they have similar lifestyle patterns on social media. Status updates, selfies, group photos and food photos are typical social media posts that can be seen in the Thai social media scene. Nevertheless, the context of the post, the netiquette of posting and how it is received in the network will differ depending on social class, social norms and political interest.

The differences in political interest among the Thai middle class are partly a result of their social context and different points of view towards social norms (Promsawad, 2011). The informants have given voice to their different opinions on social norms in their lifestyle posts on Facebook. The responses from their Facebook friends and society as a whole are also distinctive, and complicated. Each participant does not just show who they are from what they are posting on Facebook (Wang, 2013), but also promotes their social norms, ideology and beliefs.

5.4 Cosmopolitan life with local norms vs. rural life with international norms

Comparing the number of lifestyle posts on Facebook, upper-middle- and middle-middle-class anti-Thaksin informants make the highest number of posts, followed by middle-middle-class pro-Thaksin and lower-middle-class anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin informants respectively. The non-partisan informants in all three social class groups and the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin faction make the lowest number of lifestyle posts. Between each political interest group, anti-Thaksin informants are the group with the highest number of lifestyle posts on Facebook, whereas pro-Thaksin participants come in second place and non-partisan participants make the lowest number of posts.

Though the participants share similar patterns in lifestyle on Facebook, they belong to different social classes and political interest groups. The upper- and middle-middle-class participants, who mostly live in urban areas, are more familiar with modern Western-style living (Boschken, 2003). Their socio-economic advantage also gives them a better chance in higher education, which provides them with better opportunities to obtain a solid career and regular salary. On the other hand, the lower-middle class are restricted in their standard of living by a number of disadvantages regarding their socio-economic status. Though some of them do, in fact, move to live and pursue a better life in the capital city, their standard of living in the city cannot be compared to the upper social classes. For example, while the upper- and middle-middle-class urban people live in their own homes in a housing development, gated community or condominium, the lower-middle class own a house on the outskirts or rent a small flat in the city. The inter-class difference is also intensified among middle-class individuals in the city with different class origins and backgrounds (Funatsu and Kagoya, 2003).

The offline inequality, which includes race, class and gender, also intensifies inequality online (Robinson *et al.*, 2015). With a higher standard of life and education, the posts of upper- and middle-middle-class informants showcase their glamorous life with distinctive language usage. Most of the time, they communicate with their Facebook friends in English. Errors in grammar and spelling are rarely to be found. Some of the informants from upper- and middle-middle classes in all

three political interest groups have reported that they are fairly fluent in English due to the fact that they have either studied or spent time abroad.

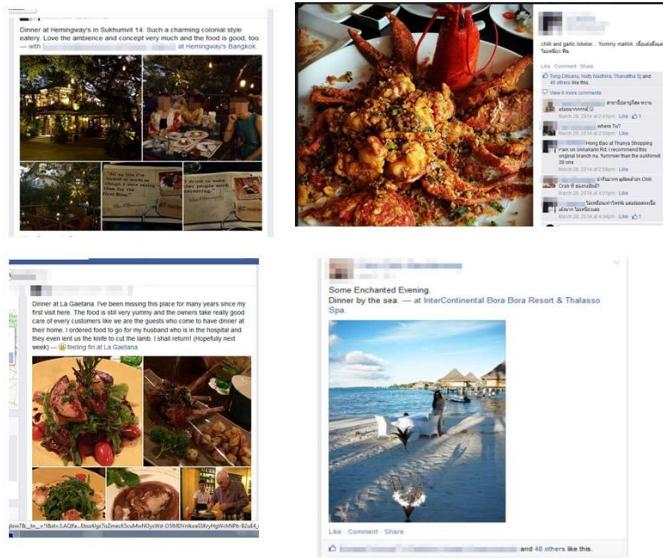


Photo 5.3: Lifestyle posts showing off the high standard of living among upper- and upper-middle classes

The majority of their lifestyle posts show, and sometimes even boast about, their city style of living. Most of their activities relate to a middle-class lifestyle, such as dining out, or even joining a luxurious sports club. The variety and level of luxury of these events and activities depends on the informant's budget. These lifestyle posts also include details of city life, such as a traffic jam in Bangkok, the time of a meeting in a high-rise building or attendance at an event to launch a product. Lifestyle posts also contain information about loved ones and family. Lifestyle posts are enriched with details of informants' background resources and their symbolic, cultural and social capital.

Similar ideas underpin their “strong work ethic”, their sense of being a “keeper of cultural value” and their “commitment to education, saving, innovation” status (Davis, 2004, p.244), though most upper- and middle-middle-class informants confirmed that they had benefited from the family support they had received in childhood.

Somkid M.D. (35, middle-middle class, anti-Thaksin) was raised by his single mother in a rural area of south-west Thailand. His mother, a retired government official, is a staunch anti-Thaksin supporter. Somkid, in his interview,

says that he did everything in his power to get himself into one of the leading public medical schools in Thailand. He started his pursuit of a higher standard of life when he was in secondary school. He asked for his mother's permission to attend a famous secondary school in Bangkok in order to get a better education. He arranged this himself, passing the tough exam, finding a dorm near the school and begging his mother to send him to Bangkok. "I literally cried like a baby when mom said she wanted me to stay at home and attend one of the local secondary schools." He was the only one in his family attending secondary school in Bangkok.

Somkid is still paying off his second car and a condominium in Bangkok while working as a medical doctor, a teacher and a researcher as well as seeking funding with his friend to open a fertility clinic in the near future. He hopes that he can bring his mother to live with him in Bangkok. "I really want her to be with me in Bangkok, but I think we need a house not a small condominium. And also I still want to study abroad. I have planned it for a couple of years now."

With family support, 100% of upper-middle-class informants and 80% of middle-middle-class informants had graduated with a Master's degree or higher. The upper- and middle-middle-class participants mostly had a very comfortable childhood with caring, attentive parents. Only a few were raised by a single parent. Their parents are either civil servants or private business owners. They come from extended families and are close to other family members. Very few informants had parents who were manual labourers or worked in farming. Interestingly, the middle- to upper-middle-class participants either come from a conservative background, or most of their family members are fairly conservative.

Now I am collecting working hours as a Certified Public Accountant. I have to work hard in order to be granted enough hours as a professional accountant as well as being a member of the Federation of Accounting Professionals and attending conference and AFA council meetings. I am often struggling with my tight schedule and do not have enough time for my family, but my parents support my decision. They allow me to live alone in a rental apartment as I can come and go at odd times. Now, with my workload and countless documents, my grandfather is helping me with funding for my own small

house, so that I can have enough space for my work. (Phanu 25, middle-middle class, anti-Thaksin)

I chose the Faculty of Pharmacy (which I think was not my best choice as I passed the entrance exam when I was in my second year of secondary school); I could have done better if I had graduated from secondary school instead of waiting another year because I am the oldest son in a poor family. I needed to do anything to graduate with a Bachelor's as fast as possible and get a job ... Now my parents are retired and my younger brother is a medical doctor, but I still work full-time like seven days a week because I want the best for my parents. I want to buy them a bigger house. I fill every minute in my life with work. I did all this work and gained myself a Master's and a PhD at the same time. (Nimitr (PhD), 32, middle-middle class, anti-Thaksin)

Most upper- and middle-middle-class participants live according to traditional Thai norms (Eawsriwong, 2013). Their behaviour is typically approved by the majority of society. They regard conservative concepts as the ideal ideology (Eawsriwong, 2013). They have faith that education and hard work are important factors in social mobility (Johnson, 1985). This group shows the most interest in social matters, such as voluntary work, seeking to improve social quality, human rights and animal rights.

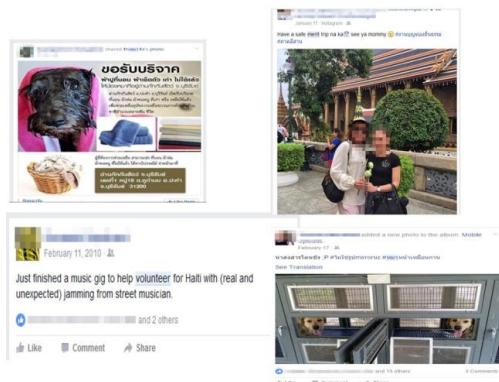


Photo 5.4: Typical lifestyle post regarding middle- to upper-middle-class interest in human or animal rights, social matters and voluntary work

Notably, a few upper- and middle-middle-class participants showed admiration for liberal and Western social norms. This liberal portion of the upper- and middle-middle classes sometimes alienate themselves from other family members and family activity. Furthermore, almost all of the upper- and middle-middle classes who showed an interest in liberal ideology are pro-Thaksin supporters, which is a minority group among upper- and middle-middle-class participants. I will acknowledge their significance in the next section.



Photo 5.5: Different perspectives towards liberal or Western ideology from middle- to upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin supporters and anti-Thaksin supporters

There was also a minority among the lower-middle class with a different outlook to the rest of their class. Regardless of their family background, this group of lower-middle-class informants shared a similar ideology to the majority of upper- and middle-middle-class participants in idolising a conservative concept of living. For example, though Dara (38, lower-middle class, anti-Thaksin) was born in a lower-class family, her parents imparted middle-class influences to their children. Her parents regarded their own poor education as an obstacle, and placed a strong emphasis on preventing their children from experiencing a similar scenario. Now Dara is working as an administrator in a leading university in Bangkok. She gained a Master's degree from a renowned university and had high hopes of pursuing a stable profession rather than continuing her parents' farming inheritance. This group of lower-middle-class informants agreed with the middle-class ideology that a good education will affect their success in life, and that they should work hard to earn money, which will eventually enhance their social status

(Johnson, 1985). Certainly, this minority among the lower-middle class followed the mainstream of the middle class in being anti-Thaksin.

Furthermore, in Thailand the concept of middle-class discipline (Davis, 2004) is combined and associated with Thai conservative social norms, religious beliefs and feudalism (Eawsriwong, 2013). Intentionally or otherwise, religious, educational and professional institutions have endorsed the social reproduction of the middle-class concept (Weininger, 2012).



Religious and educational institutions possess a solid image in performing the act of instituting on the middle class PDRC supporters, whereas the liberal UDD would blame them for distorting the Thai middle-class conservative concept.

Photo 5.6: The same article, shared with differing views by anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin supporters

All in all, the reproduction of middle-class discipline and ideology is observable in the participants' Facebook posts. Most of the upper- and middle-middle classes idolise the concepts of honour, virtue, prestige and morality (Baxter and Margavio, 2010). In fact, the concept of showing off their good intentions towards society is very popular among Thai Facebook and other social media users in every social class group. The content of Facebook posts from the majority of middle-middle- to upper-middle-class informants upholds this idea. Whether it is information on merit-making¹, giving up smoking or donating blood, participants regularly share articles on Facebook in order to display their contribution to society and the country.

This specific "approved" or "acceptable" ideology and behaviour of upper- and middle-middle classes has been standardised into the dominant norms and

¹ A Buddhist concept that refers to a type of power – merit – that accumulates as a result of good deeds, acts or thoughts.

values of society (Boschken, 2003). Foucault (1980) frames this behaviour as a mode of censorship. The desire to conform leads people to sustain their own oppression voluntarily through self-discipline and self-surveillance.

In addition to the reproduction of ideology in mainstream media, social media, which is dominated by a specific class group, serves as another way for social attitudes to be reproduced. Also, social media has become a primary news source for users in addition to news media (Barthel *et al.*, 2015). The majority of conservative ideology on Facebook serves to rebuild the collective consumption again and again once their online activities are picked up by mainstream media.

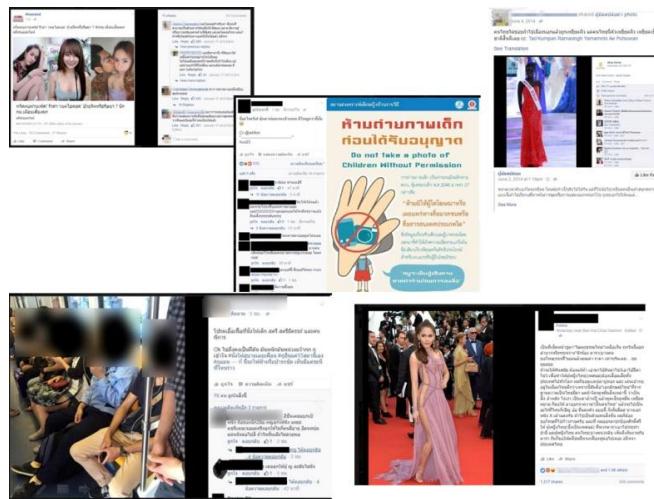


Photo 5.7: A selection of posts that have been posted on Thai Facebook, calling for social sanctions against certain public behaviour

The majority of upper- and middle-middle-class informants have welcomed a Western style of middle-class life, living in a big city and pursuing a capitalist ideal of living (Boschken, 2003). Some enjoy the privilege of studying abroad and working for leading multinational corporations. Their cosmopolitan style of life is exhibited in their language proficiency, wide-ranging knowledge of global culture and society, and interest in international affairs. They do also cling to traditional Eastern and Thai ideology (Eawsriwong, 2013). Their strong support for conservative ideals is clearly observable from their posts on Facebook. They tend to lean towards the conservative side of society rather than the liberal one. Their actions in supporting moral virtue have become the social norm and standard, as they are also picked up and promoted by mainstream media later on. Acts of

donation, sacrifice and other social contributions have been welcomed by the society at large as the kind of social life that should be promoted on social media.

On the other hand, the urban lower-middle class and some of the rural middle-middle class make distinctively different lifestyle posts to the majority of the upper- and middle-middle classes. They lean more towards working- or lower-class concepts of life. They do not have “a mission of modernisation and enlightenment” in mind (Zarakol, 2013, p.151). They are “the new bourgeoisie” (*ibid.*) or “urbanised villagers” (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011) who rise from rural origins or urban poverty, and retain similar cultural concepts to peasants. The disadvantages of their socio-economic and rural lifestyle have not enabled them to pursue a high standard of living; however, their preference for Western liberal ideology cannot be held back by these disadvantages. Zarakol (2013, pp.151-155) suggested that the separate norms of the old middle class and the new middle class in Thailand are the origin of the political cleavage between them. The new middle class have a different political outlook to the democratically sceptical old middle class. They aim to replace domestic democracy with international democracy.

The separate and distinct style of the lower-middle class can be observed through their language usage, which is not concentrated on English-language proficiency alone, but also includes a dialect usage. The most significant difference may be found in their idolisation of Western liberal ideology and liberal norms. Some of the lower-middle-class informants repeatedly expressed grudges against traditional Thai ideologies. In fact, almost all of the lower-middle-class informants who resent traditional concepts are pro-Thaksin. Political discourse starts to blend in with ideology (Buchanan, 2013).



Photo 5.8: Shared articles and posts that show disagreement with traditional Thai ideologies and mainstream concepts

The basic content of lower-middle-class informants' Facebook lifestyle posts is not significantly different from that of upper- and middle-middle-class informants. The "must-haves" of regular status updates, selfies, group photos, food pictures and travelling scenes are all there (Wang, 2013). However, they rarely show off their privileged lifestyle; rather, they seem to enjoy being "average" people and are proud to present their rural lifestyle. As opposed to their follower position in the marketing cycle, they do not follow the upper-class lifestyle. Unlike other marketing endorsement activity and products that are mainly based on fashion trends, their true identity and class disposition are represented throughout their lifestyle posts (Gidden, 1991; Della Porta and Diani, 2006). One outstanding feature is the inclusion of their regional language and dialect in the majority of their Facebook posts, which are also enriched with their own distinctive subculture. Often, linguistic corruptions, slang and accidental or deliberate misspellings can be found in their Facebook content.



Photo 5.9: Lifestyle posts showing lower-middle-class informants' down-to-earth lifestyle and avoidance of fancy urban life were most representative of their class position

However, this does not mean that the lower-middle-class participants are totally opposed to a modern lifestyle. Most of the lower-middle-class informants expressed their hope of pursuing a modern lifestyle abroad. For them, the modern city lifestyle of the local upper class is not the "right" one, as it restricts their chances of social movement (Buchanan, 2013). They idolise life in other countries, especially Europe and America. When I introduced myself as a PhD student from a university situated in the UK, my lower-middle-class informants would often

bombard me with questions, such as: "How did you go there? Is anyone able to go there? What is life like in the UK? Can you work? Do they pay good money?"

Their basic understanding of higher classes is based on concepts of social stratification, social oppression, exploitation and authoritarianism (Laolertworakul, 2010; Nishizaki, 2014). They also expressed their strong belief that Thai society does not give an equal chance to all. It depends more on a patronage system. This idea dominates their political identity, which will be covered in the next chapter. Based on their established understanding of the social class system in Thailand, social mobility will only occur through social movement or other kinds of collective group action. They have less faith in education, hard work or saving money. With their hand-to-mouth existence, this is understandable. Though they had acquired a Bachelor's degree, the lower-middle-class informants seemed to think they were a lower class in comparison to others.

The majority of their lifestyle posts are about their day-to-day activity related to their social life. They also seem to enjoy following local celebrities and local entertainment news. Interestingly, though they do not possess tremendous proficiency in English, they often post and share international news concerning Western life and liberal concepts. They also do not hide their resentment towards Thai traditional ideology in their posts on the subjects of monarchy, authority, the patronage system and their unlucky destiny in being born into a poor family (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011). Moreover, some participants express their sarcastic side in their Facebook name, such as calling themselves Lord, His Highness or Baron, giving vent to their resentment of feudal society.



Photo 5.10: Sample of status posts expressing disagreement with traditional virtue

Their opposition to traditional Thai concepts can be seen throughout their Facebook lifestyle posts. Unlike upper- and middle-middle-class participants, lower-middle-class participants do not put much effort into showing off their “virtue”. The lower-middle class rarely share informative content regarding donations, missing persons or helping the authorities in searching for criminals. This action of supporting the society is a significant characteristic of the middle class in Thailand, which has become another political discourse (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). Interestingly, the term *khon dee* (good person), which is normally used to describe an ideal person or a role model, has been brought into political discourse, partly because of the moral rectitude of the Thai upper- and middle-middle classes. In supporting and idolising traditional ideology, such as nationalism and royalism, they are condemned as fakes, pretenders and right-wing conservatives. As a result, the lower-middle class pay no attention to such behaviour. They want equality, better social welfare and more realistically achievable inclusiveness.

The lifestyle posts of the majority of middle-class informants represent their class identity, which is defined by lifestyle, taste, distinction and differentiation (Savage, 2000). The upper- and middle-middle classes embrace their middle-class identity in their Facebook lifestyle posts. They enjoy the dominance and privilege that they have benefited from due to their middle-class habitus and legitimated symbolic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Equipped with education, they have engaged in the social world with a sense of knowing, understanding and being ready to play the game (Bourdieu, 1992, p.118).

Meanwhile, the lower-middle-class informants with rural or urban poor origins (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011) show their hostility to other middle classes by connecting themselves more to their original class. Their strategy and practice on Facebook suggests that they do not regard their disadvantaged social position as a source of distress. They rather choose their class identity and style (Skeggs, 2004). Some of their choice might be regarded as “the taste for necessity” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.374), but at the same time, their choice is no longer a “forced choice” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.178) from their limited existence. They are happy with their decision and proud to present it to society. In particular, they want to be

unique in Thai society, which is still dominated by middle- or upper-class tastes. They even reject the traditional notions of “good” and “bad” that are defined by the upper and middle classes who dominate the class hierarchy. This contrast in taste plays a major part in the dissimilarities in their political communication on Facebook, which will be covered in the next chapter.

5.5 Call me an insurgent!

This chapter has looked at the main characteristics of the majority of the research’s middle-class participants. There is a minority whose distinctive style of life and social media practice relates to their political interest and preferences, which will be revealed in the next chapter. This chapter started with the participants’ lifestyle posts on Facebook, which represent who they are and the kinds of activity they enjoy. As mentioned in the previous sections about the minority middle class, these informants do not use social media to connect in a social way. These two groups are the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin supporters and those across the middle class who consider themselves to be non-partisan. These two groups of informants do not see Facebook or other kinds of social media as a space to be sociable, but rather make use of them as either an information source or a political sphere.

The non-partisan middle-class informants are the group with the fewest posts on Facebook. Though some of them are from the upper- and middle-middle classes and have easy access to social media and the internet, their personality dictates that they use social media as an audience rather than taking centre stage (Muller, 2012). Their resources allow them to have constant usage of Facebook, and they spend most of their connection time browsing among their social network. The non-partisan informants do not spend their time excessively on other social media; they would rather turn to Facebook whenever they have a work-related or hobby-related activity. Their Facebook posts are fairly formal. For example, they mostly use appropriate words, rarely post personal photos and information, rarely mention their social life, and focus only on promoting their special-interest activities (Muller, 2012).

In the interviews, the non-partisan informants mentioned on many occasions that their Facebook page is a public space. This is the group with the

highest open-to-the-public privacy setting rate. Younger non-partisan informants fill their social media space on Facebook with posts and shares related to their hobbies, while the older non-partisan informants mostly promote work-related activity, such as workplace news updates. Facebook is not regarded by them as an intimate or private space (Rau *et al.*, 2008).

In terms of their protocol in adding new Facebook friends, they welcome strangers without any discrimination. As a result, they are reluctant to put personal information on Facebook. Though they sometimes use it as a channel to their existing friends, they reported doing it via personal message rather than posting on a friend's wall. Facebook, to them, is an additional forum for communication with their existing friends (Orchard *et al.*, 2010). The non-partisan informants have the most diverse predilections in following public Facebook pages depending on their personal taste. However, they have shared a similar pattern in following as many pages as possible. Facebook's suggestions of suitable pages to follow helped the informants with their selection of new pages.

The non-partisan informants are not the only group to treat Facebook as a public space; the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin cohort share a similar trait. Interestingly, these two groups of informants have in common not only a similar style in Facebook practice, but also a similar life background. Most of them were raised in a conservative family, and they either disliked their upbringing and wanted to react against it, or experienced something that changed their attitudes and conservative way of thinking. Both groups reported having an "experience" that had changed their outlook from mainstream Thai middle class to minority middle class. Age is another differentiating factor: younger non-partisan participants tend to situate their personality further away from the typical Thai middle class than older non-partisan informants.

"I am not a Red Shirt (pro-Thaksin)," Wonchai (24, middle-middle class, non-partisan) told me in the interview. "My mum and brother often think that I am. I don't understand their misunderstanding at all. Every time that anyone does not agree with them, they have to brand that person a Red Shirt." Wonchai works in a state enterprise telecommunications company after gaining a Bachelor's degree from a private university. He actually passed the entrance exam for a leading public university but dropped out after finding that he was more interested in

computing than chemistry, the major he was studying. This decision is in direct opposition to his brother Somkid (35, middle-middle class, anti-Thaksin), who stated his desire to aim high in pursuing a better life in the traditional way. Wonchai, on the other hand, is happy living in a rental apartment next to his workplace, and hopes that one day he might have the chance to go back to live and work in the province where his family home is situated.

Wonchai is not the only odd one out in his family. Weera (39) and Sakda (38), two upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin supporters, are in a similar position. Weera suggested that he has “been rebelling all my life”, for example turning down a public university for a place at a private university, turning down the opportunity of studying abroad in order to do a Master’s degree in Thailand and riding a motorcycle rather than driving.

“I think it would be boring to do the same as my family did. I want to study something outside engineering and architecture. I want to break the mould.” Now he works in “ten different kinds of job”, making music, working in import-exports and working in a hotel, in an art gallery and as a communication consultant.

Nonetheless, his concept of rebelling cannot win every time. He failed in his first attempt to apply for his Master’s study at one of the conservative universities. “[My application] was too informal and inappropriate. I did not even get an interview.” After learning his lesson, he submitted a more traditional application as his second attempt and was accepted.

Now that he is working for a number of different businesses, he finds that travel around Bangkok on a motorcycle is most effective. By doing so, he suggests that he has looked at life in a different way. “People treat you differently when you ride a motorcycle rather than driving. The brand of your ride is an important factor as well. They also treat you differently according to what you are wearing.”

Sakda, meanwhile, grew up as a typical member of the middle class, but studying for a Master’s degree in the UK altered him. “Life as a second-class citizen in the UK showed me how important citizens’ welfare is. I had turned down financial support from my family after I decided to marry my wife, whom my family did not approve of. We moved to the UK and lived on only my scholarship, which was not enough. So, we did every job we could to stay alive there.”

The non-partisan and upper-middle-class informants might have shared some similarities in their Facebook practice in terms of not paying much attention to lifestyle posts on it, but their opinions of this space are still different. While the non-partisan participants treat Facebook as another information resource, the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin participants treat it as a political sphere. Though they share a similar attitude towards Facebook in not seeing it as a private space, where they can promote their social life, connect to their friends and claim their identity, the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin group see the advantages that Facebook, as a new democratic innovation, offers.

There is one exception, however; a number of upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants seemed to enjoy posting lifestyle posts on their Facebook space. They made sarcastic posts about the typical social media manner of anti-Thaksin supporters, whom they insultingly called "Sa-lim"². Similar to this idea, Taylor (2010) refers to food consumption as a means of ethical and aesthetic self-constitution, where one can resist these disciplines through countercuisines. To state one's own idea of resistance to disciplinary power, consumption of food that contradicts one's upbringing could indicate a form of political resistance.



Photo 5.11: Pro-Thaksin upper-middle-class lifestyle post implying a sarcastic outlook towards the upper-class lifestyle

² Insulting name for multi-coloured shirts, a group led by Dr. Tul Sithisomwong. It is a Thai political pressure group and movement that directly protests against the pro-Thaksin faction.

The Facebook practice of the non-partisan informants might just be a part of their personality (Seidman, 2013), but for the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants, their actions represent much more than their personality. Their lifestyle expression on Facebook demonstrates antagonistic attitudes towards traditional cultural forms of social activity (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). They wish to resist the mainstream middle-class identity. However, they have a middle- to upper-class upbringing. They do not have lower-class origins; therefore, their lifestyle is more similar to upper- and middle-middle-class informants than to lower-middle-class ones. On the other hand, they resent the conservative Thai norms of their own social class, especially the altered meanings of democracy, i.e. an election does not equal democracy; democracy means rule with morals and ethics, and military intervention is necessary to save democracy. As a result, they resist their own class lifestyle and try to announce their resistance via their social media posts. They do not want to project their lifestyle identity in any way that relates to their class origin; rather, they concentrate on promoting their chosen milieu, such as political events, calls for movement meetings, etc. They have turned their lifestyle into radical political resistance and an anarchistic self-identify.

Since lifestyle is fundamentally a representation of identity (Foucault, 1988), the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants utilise their action to resist the dominant social order. Similar to lifestyle movements (Wahlen and Laamanen, 2015) and social media symbolic action (Penney, 2015), the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin supporters participate in lifestyle politics (Bennett, 1998), which turn an individual's engagement in everyday life against the dominant norms. It makes sense that they choose to demonstrate their political intent in the form of informal lifestyle-based radical action on social media, where informal politics has moved away from traditional politics (Eliasoph, 1998). A part of this idea might be influenced by the fact that anti-Thaksin supporters utilised their middle-class lifestyle in their movement against the election in February 2014 (Grömping, 2014), and might also be connected to their other strategy of turning their class culture into political symbolism (Zarakol, 2013), which I will elaborate on in the next chapter.

5.6 Conclusion: lifestyle as self-expression, self-assurance, class disposition, class identity and resistance

In exploring the lifestyle posts on Facebook of the Thai middle-class participants, this chapter has provided evidence of how the middle classes' lifestyle posts on Facebook relate to their identity, social class position and political participation.

Firstly, the chapter focused on the digital inequality in Thailand that has inevitably caused unequal access to social media for the majority of Thais. A similar condition is seen in other types of media consumption. The differences in socio-economic status impact the users' ability to acquire digital technology. The digital inequality in Thailand can be seen on both the first level (accessing) and the second level (skill). Those who are from a higher social class with advantages in socio-economic status also have an advantage in overcoming digital inequality. On the other hand, socio-economic status has become an obstacle for those from a lower social class. The upper- and middle-middle classes, who are equipped with education, money and technology, have taken advantage of the online community, while the lower-middle class have struggled with language, technology and budget barriers.

The majority of lifestyle posts on Facebook in Thailand are based on sociality and the intention to express one's self. Regardless of class type, the informants reveal their desire to be known and heard. Age (Livingstone, 2008) and gender (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014) are important factors that create variations in the style of the informants' self-exposition. The younger and female informants tend to rely more on responses from their Facebook peers for self-assurance than older and male informants. The self-assurance process on social media in Thailand involves image management and attempts to improve how the individual appears.

Kreng jai, as a central aspect of Thai culture and society, takes control of the social practice of middle-class Thais both on and offline, significantly in terms of how the informants frame Facebook netiquette in Thailand. In the ritual of reciprocal Kreng jai, status posting, commenting and like-clicking on both their own Facebook page and friends' pages are based on the concept of not upsetting others and considering others' feelings. Being polite and not being too direct in their opinions is compulsory Facebook social practice. Those who are older or who

have a higher social class status, higher social position or closer relationship receive more Kreng jai from others.

Social class is the main factor that creates differences in the content of lifestyle posts on Facebook. The informants' class disposition is indicated by the ways in which the content of their posts reflects their lifestyle, taste, distinction and class disposition (Savage, 2000). The upper- and middle-middle classes tend to promote their middle-class cosmopolitan lifestyle. They have enjoyed the privileges of a middle-class lifestyle, provided by their access to social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Their expression of a middle-class image also promotes their class culture to the extent of becoming the dominant norm on Facebook, as the advantages they enjoy mean that they dominate social media. Their social class's habitus, which has given value to conservative Thai norms, also becomes the dominant social value on social media.

The lower-middle-class informants who have come from rural or urban poor origins (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011), on the other hand, refuse to go along with the mainstream. They stay true to their original class identity rather than embracing a middle-class identity. Their reaction to the dominant social value created by the middle-class majority is to express their own class identity via their lifestyle posts (Skeggs, 2004). With high hopes of replacing conservative norms with liberal norms, they fight against their language barrier in obtaining a Western agenda via their Facebook usage.

At the same time, the sense of representing a class identity and class disposition is not obvious among the non-partisan informants. Their lifestyle posts on Facebook mostly represent their lifestyle and personality rather than their class culture. This group claims to have no political bias, which is also shown in their Facebook practice. For them, Facebook is no more than just another media channel that they can tune to for information and relaxation.

Finally, the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin cohort is the group with the highest level of conflict within their Facebook practice. They employ social media as a means of resistance against the dominant social culture. For them, social media is a political tool which has the role of accommodating civic participation and political discussion. They also situate themselves differently from their fellow

upper-middle- and other middle-class informants by employing their lifestyle posts on Facebook as a symbolic form of movement against their own social class's dominance, which has given value to conservative Thai norms.

Chapter Six: Thailand's social media battleground: social media and political conflict

After revealing the social media practice in the everyday lives of middle-class Thais in the previous chapter, this chapter goes beyond their everyday engagement on social media to investigate their social media practice relating to their political participation. This chapter explores the Thai middle classes' social media practice, which might reflect a new form of political participation.

The chapter reviews how social class disposition, taste and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) influence Thai middle classes' political participation on social media. With the background of Thai politics being strongly influenced by social class and class division (Ungpakorn, 2008; Eawsriwong, 2013), this chapter explores whether social class could also affect Thais' political participation both offline and online. The nature of offline political participation among Thais, which could predict the practice of political participation on social media, is also explored. To these ends, the practice of political communication that occurs on the Thai Facebook scene is examined.

This chapter also gathers a variety of informal kinds of political participation, which have moved away from traditional political practice (Eliasoph, 1998). Against the sociocultural background of being considerate to others' feelings or *Kreng jai*, Thai political participation practice that relates to social class practice can be framed by the sociocultural aspects affecting the participant in question. Considerations of *Kreng jai* prohibit some forms of open and direct political participation. This helps to explain the avoidance that takes place in some social groups where discussion of politics is forbidden. The possibility of expressing unconventional political opinions on Facebook, which turns into a symbolic political movement (Penney, 2015) in Thailand (Grömping, 2014), is also presented.

Thailand could also present a fruitful case for an exploration of the dynamics of polarisation in social media. Heavy usage of Facebook as a political participation channel by Thais has been captured in mainstream media. It is generally believed that the country is facing extreme political polarisation (The

Asia Foundation, 2010). This condition of political cleavage in Thailand (Pongsudhirak, 2012) is an additional facet to be investigated. The possibility of group polarisation could be amplified by the user-centred condition of online media (Sunstein, 2007). The inequality among social classes and digital inequality (Robinson *et al.*, 2015) among Facebook users are other significant focuses of this chapter.

6.1 The existence of a social class gap among the informants' political perception

Each group of middle-class informants has separate norms in relation to social perception and social hegemony. The majority of upper- and middle-middle-class informants back up their middle-class virtue by favouring conservative logic (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009). On the other hand, the lower-middle class, who come from lower-class origins, gravitate towards liberal and modernist doctrines. This also impacts their political preference. Undoubtedly, most of the lower-middle-class informants were staunch supporters of the TRT party, and pro-Thaksin (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011). Similarly, most of the upper and middle-middle-class informants were traditionally supporters of the Democrat Party, and anti-Thaksin (Kuhonta and Sinpeng, 2014). The majority of the informants get their political mindset from their family. Generally, among social classes, friends and family have similar political preferences.

The family doctrine frequently becomes one's social attitude. Most of the informants reported that their family and friends had similar political preferences. The closer the family ties, the stronger the views they shared. Their family played a major part in their socialisation by giving them the fundamental social skills as well as civic skills. The informants with higher rates of interest in political activity agree that they have had political influence from a politically active family. Typically, most of the informants who are politically active belong to the lower-middle class or have lower-class origins. The lower-middle-class informants show a higher rate of political interest than those in higher classes. They reported regular involvement in local political activity. On the other hand, the informants from upper- and middle-middle classes have less interest in politics. They seem to concentrate on building their social network, enhancing their social capital and

fulfilling other life achievements. They will get involved in politics once there is an issue that relates to their everyday lives (Klinrat, 2007).

Whenever I posed the question “Are you interested in politics?” to my anti-Thaksin and non-partisan informants, I often received the same response: “I am, but ...” They would then make a series of excuses, including hard work, family requirements, not having enough time, etc. All in all, they suggested that they have other commitments in life that are more important than politics. “Not that I don’t care about politics, but we have to live, don’t we?” This sentence was among the most common excuses used. On the other hand, the lower-middle-class and middle-middle-class informants in rural areas enjoy an extremely solid relationship with politics. People from rural areas depend more on their local politician than people from urban areas do (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011). The local politician is their channel for fulfilling local requirements, such as new pavements, improvements in local transportation and overall well-being. For the lower-middle-class and middle-middle-class participants from rural areas, politics is a part of their life, while the local politician is a part of their family (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011).

Most of the informants share similar political preferences to their family, with only a few having different political ideas. The upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin group show the greatest signs of having separate political views from their family. The experiences that had affected the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants and caused them to alter their conservative views had also influenced their political preferences. After various significant episodes in their lives, they now doubted the conservative norms that they had once believed in and adhered to. Most of the upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants claimed that they were conservative, and some were even supporters of the Democrat Party, until they had experienced a failure of conservatism and/or the Democrat Party. Some of them are the only one in the family to support liberalism. Therefore, some Thaksin supporters from the upper- and middle-middle classes make concerted efforts to distance themselves from political family talk, or from family activity that relates to politics.

The non-partisan informants are another group facing political hostility from their family. The non-partisans, who have not taken any side in Thai politics,

mostly come from a conservative family background. They have been treated as aliens among their friends and family regarding their unique political interests. Some reported that their family had accused them of being Thaksin supporters, just because they did not agree with some of the conservative actions of the anti-Thaksin political movement. On the other hand, their pro-Thaksin friends did not agree with their stance and strongly recommended that they join the pro-Thaksin side. Nonetheless, some non-partisans, most notably those who work in the business world, are highly flexible and are able to vary their opinions according to circumstances. Taeng (32, upper-middle class, non-partisan) suggested that there are plenty of fake Red Shirt Thaksin supporters in the business world. "You have to act as if you were Red so that the Reds' advocacy will help you; there are many more Red supporters in business ... But personally, I don't really have political opinions. My friends and family in the US are all Red, while most of my friends here (Thailand) are all anti-Thaksin. I can live with both groups and agree with them at some level."

Though there are people from every class group in every political group, social class difference remains a source of division among those with similar political preferences. Whenever democracy is mentioned among the upper- and middle-class anti-Thaksin informants, they always conclude their statements with the phrase "with the King as Head of State". They focus on involvement in participatory democracy, with an emphasis on morality and transparency in politics without usurping state power or reducing their benefits (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009). On the other hand, the lower-middle-class anti-Thaksin informants' main agenda is "saving the monarchy", which worked particularly well as the theme of the 2005 PAD movement (Wangulum, 2010). A photograph of King Bhumibol on the wall of their house indicates their strongest affiliation. However, the main agenda gluing the anti-Thaksin informants together is the common goal of ousting the Thaksin regime (Wangulum, 2010). Class difference is also visible among pro-Thaksin informants. Though they have the shared goal of pursuing Western-style democracy and social equality, their vision is different. Pro-Thaksin liberals whose family background is middle-middle to upper-middle class do not like Thaksin himself. They are among those left-wing idealists who claimed they were not Thaksin's supporters (Ungpakorn, 2009; Forsyth, 2010a). Some called

him a “necessary evil” – someone that Thailand needs in order to move on to being a truly democratic country. They mentioned the idea of removing Thaksin once democracy is in place. Pro-Thaksin supporters whose family background is lower-middle class, on the other hand, still express some admiration for Thaksin and his party (Forsyth, 2010a). For example, some call him “sir”. These differences, which emerged from studying differences in informants’ social class, also impact their political participation and their practice of political participation on social media, as will be examined in the next section.



Photo 6.1: Sample of a lower-middle-class pro-Thaksin informant’s post celebrating Thaksin’s birthday

Social class impacts how each group of informants chooses their political side and preference. Their family background is one of the main influences on how they respond to politics. Their strong ties, such as family and friends, also characterise their political interest by affirming their political ideas, approval and support (Beeghley, 1986). Hence, the lower the class, the further away they are from conservative thinking and strong belief in the political hegemony. The upper- and middle-middle-class informants tend to support the Democrat Party (Mee Anunt, 2011), while the populism and socialism of the TRT party is very popular among the lower-middle-class informants (Nambut, 2011).

On the other hand, social class is another cause of rupture among those with similar political outlooks. For upper- and middle-middle-class informants, their middle-class virtue is obviously shown by their main agenda in political participation (Kongkirati, 2014). However, similar middle-class attitudes are rarely found among lower-middle-class informants. Though they have shared goals

in politics, their social class affects their approach. The interviews indicated that each social class group have their particular agenda, ambitions and concerns. Social class also causes informants to take separate directions in political participation, political involvement and movement (Hewison, 2014). The upper- and middle-middle-class informants emphasise a core political agenda, such as a fully fledged democratic society, the political development of the country and overall public welfare, while the lower-middle-class informants have a more sentimentally based agenda, such as supporting the monarchy, as well as one based on self-interest, such as supporting their own well-being and class mobilisation.

6.2 Avoidance in Thai political participation: the effect of Kreng jai

For a decade now Thai political society has been marked by political conflicts. The September 2006 coup d'état marked a new level of political violence. The more people engage in political discussion, the more the hatred intensifies, leading to verbal or even physical attacks (*Than Online*, 2012). According to research by the Foundation for Media Literacy (Media Literacy, 2012), hate speeches have been found on both political websites and political satellite TV channels. Since they do not know what to expect from others, most Thais have become more sceptical about expressing their political views in public.

Generally politics is not a common topic among Thais. It is deemed to be an inappropriate topic of social conversation (Aksang, 2010). Like religious belief, age and weight, political preference is regarded as a conversational taboo. Political preference is considered to be a private matter and a fragile topic that could lead to confrontation. The current political situation makes political talk even less desirable. Politics is a topic that is mostly discussed by close peers or family members (Yangyuen, 2006). This political cleavage might create more opportunities for Thais to exchange political opinions, but they are more likely to be raised among those with similar views than in a cross-group interaction. Also, the prevailing situation tends to create partisanship and political polarisation, rather than participatory engagement that might lead to searches for a solution.

The informants with similar political opinions to their peers seem to enjoy talking casually about politics. Though some are neither politically active nor

naturally interested in politics, occasional political discussion is sufficient for their social capital (Verba *et al.*, 1995). For those who are politically active, discussing politics with their family is another form of civic engagement and part of their social capital construction (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009). In fact, : during interview only a minority of the politically active informants are not anxious when talking about politics, even with strangers. In fact, most of them are Thaksin supporters. On the other hand, pro-Thaksin informants will not involve themselves in any social problem unless it relates to politics or their own welfare, while the anti-Thaksin informants cannot help getting involved in solving, correcting or curing any kind of civic problem.

During the interview, whenever they were asked about politics, pro-Thaksin informants would go directly to explaining their goal of social movement and how important politics is to their lives. The pro-Thaksin informants personally know their local politician and regularly engage in local political events. Thongchai (31, middle-middle class, pro-Thaksin) told me that local politics had interested him since he was very young. He used to go door-to-door in political campaigns and engage in political confrontation between parties, and he learned a great deal about vote canvassing and vote buying. “It is common. Vote buying is so common in Thailand,” he insisted. Once committed to local politics, the politician has to know who is who in that neighbourhood. Sometimes the candidate has to understand that he will never ever win the election in the neighbourhood, as every neighbourhood has its seemingly unassailable incumbent. Some elections are set up for the usual winner to protect his position. “It is not a bad thing. The villagers really love that particular politician. They have been together for a long time. He has been in every event of their life: birth, graduation, wedding and funeral. It is something that I think Bangkokians do not understand, and never will.” For him, politics is an additional community social activity.

Avoidance of political participation often occurs among the politically inactive informants, as well as the informants who have different political ideas to their associates (Aksang, 2010). Similar to age and weight, politics is another topic that cannot easily be brought into conversation if others’ feelings are to be considered. The form of Kreng jai that takes place in social practice also controls how politics can be mentioned in conversation. Since politics is normally a

conversational taboo in Thailand, the sense of avoiding it out of consideration for others' feelings is common among Thais.

The politically inactive informants are usually not keen on political discussion. They and their associates prefer to discuss other topics to avoid hurting each other's feelings. Their interest in politics is not consistent. They will take part in political activity only when that issue directly relates to their life (Klinrat, 2007). They will join in with debates in the street or listen to the big speeches from time to time, subject to their availability and level of interest. They avoid actual political conversation, as it could lead to confrontation. Most of the time, the practice of Kreng jai forbids them from engaging in political talk. Likewise, those informants who do not have the same political views as their associates will try not to mention politics in their conversations. Though confrontation between friends and family with different political views will not turn into violence, they prefer not to risk it nonetheless.

Compromise is the best solution for the informants who cannot avoid political discussion among their friends and family. Despite the differences in political opinion, friends and family who are considered as strong ties do not have much political conflict. Kreng jai influences strong-tie relationships in a reciprocal manner. As long as the political issue that has been brought up in their conversation is not contentious, the informal conversation can carry on. Being in the same family but having a different opinion on politics is possible in Thai society, especially in upper- and middle-middle-class families. There are always one or two "odd ones out" in the family. They may not agree on politics, but their life as a family continues without serious disruption.

I have always teased my mother, like, how's your Thaksin? Where was he when the flood came? (Heavy flooding occurred in Thailand in 2011.) Are you sure the OTOP³ is Thaksin's original idea? Mum, think twice, who started helping the hill tribe? Was it not the King? Jitra (46, lower-middle class, anti-Thaksin)

³ One Tambon One Product (OTOP) is a local entrepreneurship stimulus programme designed by Thailand's former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra during his 2001-2006 government.

My mother and I are Red Shirt supporters, but my sister is a big supporter of PDRC. She rallies around Bangkok and follows the mob wherever they go. I had to call my sister almost every day during those seven months of the PDRC movement to see if she was OK. I asked her: how is Kamnan Suthep⁴ today? Where are you going tomorrow? Please take care of yourself. Mum is so worried about your safety. Sanit (36, middle-middle class, pro-Thaksin)

My in-laws are really big Sa-lim. My wife and I will not talk about politics when we pay them a visit. Most of my alumni are Sa-lim as well. Some of them have not spoken to me for ages, but we still meet in a big group from time to time. Sakda (38, upper-middle class, pro-Thaksin)

On the other hand, political talk among family members with weak ties could lead to confrontation and consequent awkward situations or even estrangement (Mutz, 2006). The effect of Kreng jai among weak-tie relationships or strangers is thin. The informants do not care much about their reaction to strangers. However, most of the informants try their best to avoid confronting their formal friends or colleagues on political topics. In fact, Kreng jai is the prominent concept controlling Thai workplace interaction (Holmes and Tangtongtavy, 1995). The effect of Kreng jai in the workplace mostly takes place in a reciprocal manner. This situation is most likely for the pro-Thaksin informants from upper- and middle-middle-class backgrounds, who are usually different from other members of their social group. This group of informants reported that they are often singled out for their differences by their colleagues, but their work and business continue as usual. With the reciprocal practice of Kreng jai, they do not experience any discrimination from their anti-Thaksin colleagues. In fact, since the research was undertaken, two of the pro-Thaksin informants have been promoted to a higher position by their anti-Thaksin bosses. They continue not to have any negative reaction from their colleagues unless they get involved in political discussion or debate. The debate could result in a very awkward moment and lead to a difficult relationship in their workplace. Kreng jai prohibits both parties from raising political issues, thus avoiding confrontation and a sour workplace relationship.

⁴ The name given to Suthep Thueaksuban by PDRC supporters.

In the faculty (of political science), they (the lecturers) are all anti-Thaksin. I am the odd one out here. I can accept the fact that I am a minority. They treat me quite professionally. Still, being pro-Thaksin in this environment, there is a price to pay. I have been rejected by the students in another faculty. They do not want me teaching them and that's fine, I understand. Students in the faculty of social science are more objective ... I have even lost some conservative friends because of my political ideas. The peak of all this was I had a visit from the military, haha, they came into the university and asked me to stop contributing political articles. So I did. I don't want to cause trouble to the organisation. Sakda (38, upper-middle class, pro-Thaksin)

The concept of political avoidance among Thais could be compared to the reaction of the Kurdish minority living in Turkey (Costa, 2016). Politics in Mardin discourages citizens from participating in politics or even expressing political opinions. The avoidance of politics keeps them safe from harm in this city, which has a long history of conflict between the Turkish State and the Kurdish minority. Political affiliation can only be expressed at the appropriate time, following a victory, when surrounded by similar-minded political supporters who have become the majority.

In summary, most of the informants, regardless of political preference, prefer to avoid political participation as much as possible. Kreng jai is a compulsory social more than Thai society frames as a background to how one associates with others. In adopting Kreng jai to avoid breaking conversational taboos, there are only a few politically active participants who enjoy political participation. Although political talk is not a prohibited topic in family conversations, it is better to omit it in other situations in order to adhere to Kreng jai practice. If the informants share similar political ideas to their family and friends, their casual political participation can complement their social capital and social networking. Regular political expression among their social network also complements the exercise of civic skill and political participation by pro-Thaksin informants, while anti-Thaksin and non-partisan informants barely include politics in their social life. On the other hand, if

there is no agreement among their associates on political preference, occasional spontaneous political chat will not harm their strong-tie relationships.

In public, the participants are more cautious about participating in political conversation. Only a few participants would get involved in it, as it risks confrontation and even physical violence. Moreover, Kreng jai is of still more importance in formal relationships, such as in a workplace. The reciprocity of Kreng jai among colleagues controls the formal conversational sphere in the workplace; hence, direct political conversation is, mostly, tacitly forbidden. The most commonly avoided circumstance is political conversation or debate among formal associates and colleagues. The informants who do not share political views with colleagues mostly try to avoid political conversation, as it leads to confrontation and fractured workplace relationships.

6.3 Middle-class Thais' political participation on Facebook: same class divisions, similar avoidance, new similar-minded friends and a new channel of political expression

Overall, online political participation in Thailand is similar to that offline, as the informants separate their political engagement into public and private spaces. The politically active participants are comfortable with political engagement in any context; the politically inactive participants are no less sceptical than in other situations (Aksang, 2010). The principles of social practice, such as Kreng jai, also control how people react politically on Facebook. However, the features and facilities of Facebook, allowing open space for two-way communication on social media, enable the participants to choose to directly or indirectly participate in various political activities (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012). Each informant performs the political activity that suits their purposes, whether that takes the form of sharing political news, expressing political views, sending political messages directly to friends, subscribing to political Facebook pages or just quietly seeking political information.

Political participation on Thai social media has been dominated by Facebook as opposed to other types of social media (Chaiwan, 2011). Almost all of the participants referred to Facebook as their main channel of social media political participation. Their reasons for using Facebook as their main social media

for political participation vary. Most agreed that Facebook is the most popular social media in Thailand; therefore, it is the largest political resource, with a variety of information. Also, most of their associates are on Facebook (Mee Anun, 2011). Facebook is also available for every type of mobile technology, which makes it very easily accessible. Facebook supports the flow of political conversation with instant two-way communication, information sharing and personal messages for more private one-on-one conversation (Weeks and Hobert, 2013).

In similar ways to their lifestyle-related Facebook posts, anti-Thaksin informants generate most of the posts and take up most of the space on Facebook. This advantage empowers them and gives them more confidence in expressing their political identity, which they have rarely done offline. The amount of similar posts they have seen on their newsfeed reassures them of their political outlook, which helps them to be more comfortable in expressing their own views.

The most frequently recurring type of anti-Thaksin political communication posts on Facebook are those that share or repost others' posts expressing similar political views to their own or representing their ideas. Since they are the group that dominates the Facebook political scene, there is an immense amount of viral political posters, quotations and posts created for the anti-Thaksin movement. In the interviews, some anti-Thaksin informants suggested that it is easier for them to just repost the original rather than create their own, partly because they do not have enough time, but also because they have plenty to choose from and their own words might be too strong to be posted. As a result, they just repost an existing post to reaffirm their political identity and support of the group.



Photo 6.2: Sample of anti-Thaksin informants' shared photos

Some of the participants explained that some of their shared items are political information that they considered to be of such paramount importance that they wanted it to be read by others, so they decided to share it on their Facebook page. Some used their interpersonal relationships to encourage their associates to participate politically by tagging them (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995). Once again, Kreng jai controls how to react in relation to the practice of tagging. "I regularly let it be published on my Facebook page, then after a while ... erm, if, after an amount of time, the original poster has not come back to the post again, I delete the tag." Thana (32, middle-middle-class, non-partisan) confirms to me that, with Kreng jai as a guiding principle, though he does not agree with the posts with which people have been tagging him, he does not react directly to them. Similar to tagging, Kreng jai impacts like-clicking. The practice of reciprocal like-clicking based on Kreng jai that was mentioned in the previous chapter has been adopted by middle-class Thais in their political performance on Facebook too. As a result, most of the like clicks towards political posts on friends' Facebook pages might be nothing more than social protocol.

Therefore, though they might gain an enormous number of likes from their friends on a post they have shared, there is very little exchange of opinion about the post. This is backed up by the fact that most of the anti-Thaksin informants accepted that they were politically inactive, and that their social network was too. Some may be more comfortable with just identifying themselves with a political quotation, which is sufficient regular political engagement for them (Loader and Mercea, 2011). However, the anti-Thaksin informants all agreed that if there was a political activity that required their physical engagement, they would join if their time and resources permitted.

Anti-Thaksin participants are also the group with the highest rate of posting unconventional types of political participation. Since they are already very comfortable in showing off their lifestyle, they have merged their lifestyle with their political expression (Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010). Often, they have included a photo of them taken with a political celebrity or leader to show their political identity. They have also shared photos of themselves taken with their like-minded political friends engaged in various activities, wearing T-shirts and accessories featuring political endorsements, accompanied by posts with a

politically supportive caption. Since there are a myriad of political endorsements created for their political expression, showing off a new political endorsement gadget is another frequent form of unconventional political engagement for anti-Thaksin informants. Checking in at a demonstration site is another popular political Facebook activity, as is posting photos of oneself in the company of tanks and soldiers.



Photo 6.3: Sample of PDRC informants' unconventional political posts

Since upper- and middle-middle classes comprise the majority of Facebook users, their hegemony and political preference takes up the majority of space on social media. Not only are they the majority, but they possess an acceptable ideology, thus having the requisite social approval to express their views without feeling embarrassed or guilty. Though anti-Thaksin supporters are in a minority offline, they are the majority in the virtual world. This false impression gives them more confidence that there are large numbers of like-minded people in remote locations. This imparts a sense of confidence that they normally do not have offline, as most of them are politically inactive. As a result, they are not afraid to express themselves politically online.

On the other hand, the pro-Thaksin informants treat Facebook as their political channel not just for showing their political identity but also for expressing their political views. Most of their posts are originated by them. For them,

Facebook, and other types of social media, are democratic innovations or political spaces where they can express and exchange their political opinions with friends and the wider public. They often post their political status in a long sentence describing their vision of the political situation. They are also keen on political information seeking. Their offline political activity and traditional socioeconomic status reflect their online political activity (Oser, Hooghe and Marien, 2013).



Photo 6.4: Sample of middle-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants' political expression

User status:

I have always going back to this book
(*Democracy, Shaken and Stirred*:

S.E.A. Write Award in 1997) to remind me that what is our country has been through? How many coups we have seen? I believe that, like a good boxer, democracy will raise again after every falls. Hoping that this coup would teach those power hungrys what we have to loose for their power. One day after May 2014 Coup.

Since their main purpose is information seeking, they are more exposed to more diverse political information than those who are driven more by a social networking agenda (Kahne, *et al*, 2012). Though they eagerly engage in political participation on Facebook, they do not post as much as the anti-Thaksin informants on their personal Facebook pages. Rather, the pro-Thaksin informants take greater advantage of public Facebook pages and partisan political Facebook pages to exercise their political engagement. In the interviews, the pro-Thaksin informants suggested that since the military intervention, they have been more conscious of their social media practice and have decreased their rate of activity.

During the interviews, the pro-Thaksin informants were more wary of my request to be a friend on Facebook. They suggested that after the military intervention, they could trust no one. In the interviews, I learned that the real political action of the Thaksin supporters actually takes place in an exclusive secret Facebook group, which a person is not allowed to access unless they are pro-Thaksin. These Facebook page groups were created long before the coup; however, the intervention has pushed them from public to private status for the safety of

their members. At present, their political practice on their own Facebook pages focuses more on symbolic action, sarcastic content and sharing political information or articles. At the same time, they also have to avoid content that might violate *lèse-majesté* law.

The majority of the pro-Thaksin informants' political practice on Facebook comprises sarcastic posts relating to the political situation in Thailand. Sometimes, the pro-Thaksin informants share political articles, viral posters and content from partisan Facebook pages that represent their feelings. Mostly, they create their own status that contains a reference to the country's political status without directly mentioning what is on their mind. This symbolic story and action prevents them from being accused of going against the martial law, yet fulfils their intention of expressing their political views. The action may vary – for example, it may involve posting a still from a movie such as *The Hunger Games*, which symbolises citizens' movement against authority. There are many Facebook pages that have been created to provide resources for their symbolic action. This type of symbolic action can also be considered to be a social media war between anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin supporters, which I will elaborate on in the next chapter.



Photo 6.5: The three-finger salute appropriated from the film *The Hunger Games*: an example of pro-Thaksin symbolic action against martial law.

Since Thaksin supporters are the minority among the upper- and middle-middle classes, they reported unfavourable consequences of their Facebook political participation. Minority pro-Thaksin informants always self-censor (Rui and Stefanone, 2013) before they post any political content on Facebook. Political talk could be prohibited in some social groups (Eliasoph and Licherman, 2003).

Torn between desire to express their political views and being under the social frame of Kreng jai, the upper- and middle-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants could not state their political identity directly. Strong, direct political opinion and action could lead to confrontation among friends. With this negative potential outcome, they do not post political content as much as they would like. Rather, the upper- and middle-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants take their political engagement elsewhere, such as private political Facebook pages and physical demonstrations. Otherwise, they share international news referring to the local political situation every now and then.

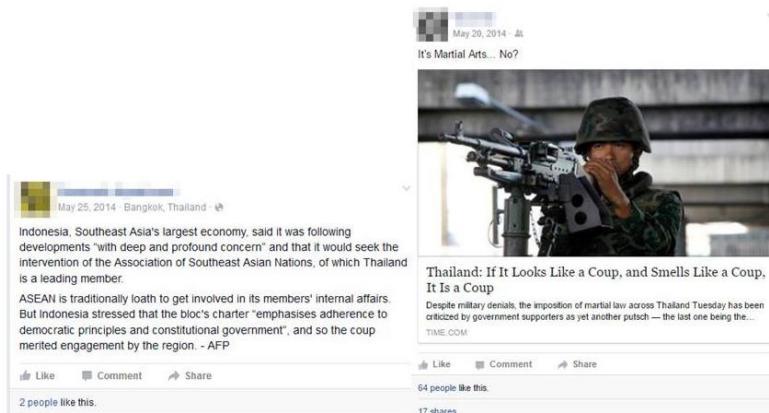


Photo 6.6: Sample of upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants' political posts

For the lower-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants, the chance of confronting unpleasant Facebook political participation is lower than for the upper- and middle-middle-class pro-Thaksin group. Similarity in social groups allows people to overcome their lack of confidence in political talk (Warren, 1996). The strong language posted on their political Facebook status indicates that they might be more comfortable in expressing their political opinion on Facebook. Their political ideas are also welcomed by many like clicks from friends, but it is rare for the comments to continue as conventional political participation, as they are under pressure from martial law. Similar to the upper- and middle-middle-class pro-Thaksin cohort, the lower-middle-class pro-Thaksin supporters have taken their political conversation to a private space.

However, the social media scenario does not only yield negativity from pro-Thaksin participants. Since social networking sites generate a sense of community for users (de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril and Rojas, 2009), the pro-Thaksin informants have developed new friendships from communicating through political Facebook pages. Interestingly, this is in a pattern of intergroup communication. The upper- and middle-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants gain a number of friends from the lower social strata. Sanit (36, middle-middle class, pro-Thaksin) and Sakda (38, upper-middle class, pro-Thaksin) are both lecturers who struggle with colleagues who are from the same social class, and who are against Thaksin. They told the story of how their students have become their political buddies on Facebook.

Around here (the university), teachers are almost all anti-Thaksin supporters. I feel like I am the outsider sometimes. We do not talk about politics, not directly. But they all know that I support Thaksin. The people whom I have political participation with are, in fact, my students. You know, in comparison, 70% of the students are pro-Thaksin, while 70-80% of the teachers are anti-Thaksin. I think Facebook is a great way to express my political opinion, which I could not do in my everyday life. Apart from Facebook conversations with students, I am sometimes invited to their political gatherings. They (students) created a political club for us to talk about politics once a month. I join them whenever I am available.

Sanit (36, middle-middle class, pro-Thaksin)

I started to depart from my 'old world' a long time ago. Since I was in the UK, I started to post my political opinions, which pushed upper-class friends away from me. They are my beliefs, I could not change them. I felt alienated, yes, but the transition helped replace my old friends with new ones. All at once I moved into a new life, a new social group and new friends.

Sakda (38, upper-middle class, pro-Thaksin)

It might seem that the two rival political groups have handled their political engagement on Facebook differently. However, some of their practices are similar. Kreng jai seems to be the prior social manner that comes to their mind before they consider posting any political content. However, with technology that enables

them to choose their audience, both groups can now select who will see what they have posted. They show some posts to the public and hide others from those with different political views. The tension among a diverse political society results in self-censorship and a continually negotiated self-presentation (Binder, Howes and Sutcliffe, 2009; Thorson, 2014). Both groups also tailor their own newsfeeds to suit their tastes by avoiding irritating material from an opposing political angle as much as possible.

Social media complements weak-tie communication rather than sustaining communication with existing strong ties (Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe, 2007). The informants do not communicate with their inner-circle friends on their Facebook wall. They would rather take their communication to a more private space, whether it is a Facebook message or other personal message application. They all agree that communication with their existing close friends and family is better in person. Moreover, when it comes to conventional matters of political importance, the informants all say they are best carried out in person, as face-to-face communication provides a clearer and safer environment for political participation given the pressure from martial law and the military government.

For the non-partisan informants, though they do not get involved in any kind of political conversation on social media, their usage shows indirect political participation (Johnson and Kaye, 2003). The fact that they do not take any side does not mean they are not interested in politics. But because they have more Kreng jai, sometimes it is harder for them to act directly. They argued that there are social consequences from the political situation.

I am not a side-taker. I don't know, perhaps because I have lost all my faith in Thai politics. They (the politicians) are all corrupt; some grab less, some grab more. The political situation in Thailand has not gotten any of my attention. I know what is going on, I just ignore it. I scan through my Facebook news feed, internet forums and other news media, just look, but don't care. I have to look out for this news sometimes as it affects my commute. I need to know whether or not there is a demonstration on my journey, and then be prepared for traffic. Well, I do not feel irritated by this stuff, actually. How would I

describe my feeling? Getting used to it, I suppose. It's been too long.

Napa (32, middle-middle class, non-partisan)

I love to read actual books and newspapers rather than this crap. Some of the shared political articles were not even cited. How could you read and take such things seriously? Lately, I have reduced my social media usage because of this stuff, I am so irritated. Those friends who tag me in their shared articles – unacceptable! (However, I am so Kreng jai that I did not confront them.) Why do you have to drag others along with you and your group? Can't I just be happy left alone? Phiphob (30, middle-middle class, non-partisan)

Facebook usage by Thai middle classes that relates to their political participation is fairly similar to their offline political participation. The politically active informants choose to add Facebook to their list of political media, while politically inactive informants enjoy its usage for non-political purposes. The effect of Facebook on political participation is quite restricted to each person's requirement (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012). The anti-Thaksin supporters still dominate the scene with their digital advantages. The majority of upper- and middle-middle-class participants consider their political ideas to be the dominant ones. In being the majority party, they have also enjoyed expressing their political opinions and gaining support from their like-minded friends. However, with their politically inactive background, anti-Thaksin informants enjoy this privilege in the comfort zone of their personal Facebook pages. On the other hand, pro-Thaksin informants, who are politically active, are happy to venture into this new public sphere for their political information, engagement and expression. In fact, though they are not a majority on the Facebook scene in Thailand, they embrace their opportunity for additional public space.

The facility of social media gives each political faction a different opportunity (Vitak *et al.*, 2011). The non-partisan informants avoid formal political information on their Facebook newsfeed, but are happy to look at some political news stories. Meanwhile, the anti-Thaksin informants enjoy multiple formats of casual and unconventional political participation, which are consistent with their

lifestyle. On the other hand, the pro-Thaksin informants can expand their political networking without intimidation from the military government. Facebook might not directly support the political participation of the Thai middle classes, but it is suitable for accommodating political participation and casual political information searching, which could lead to actual political engagement outside the social media scene.

6.4 New media, same avoidance

One significant similarity between real-life political participation and political participation on Facebook in Thailand is the avoidance of confrontation. The social and cultural frame of Kreng jai has as much influence on political participation on Facebook as it does on other areas of social practice. It is possible in the Facebook scene for users to confront others with different political opinions (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009), although the confrontation happens more on public Facebook pages than on personal Facebook pages. Since the level of Kreng jai is subject to social strata and the strength or weakness of the relationship in question, confrontation with strangers on Facebook is excluded from Kreng jai. On the other hand, on personal Facebook pages, personal relationships and social status curb arguments between rivals. A sense of reciprocal networks also helps to avoid inadvertent exposure to material that may lead to confrontation (Colleoni *et al.*, 2014).

The informants from these three groups with different political preferences state that they rarely get involved in political confrontation on Facebook. The non-partisan informants are the least sensitive to political disagreement, as they do not take politics personally. Most of their encounters are annoying but trivial experiences, such as being tagged in politically related posts on their friends' Facebook pages. The solution is easy and effective: they just quietly un-tag themselves from the post without complaining to the poster. It is similar to walking away from a political conversation.

For the two rival political groups, they enjoy being in their territory rather than crossing the border and starting a battle. While anti-Thaksin informants possess most of the space on personal Facebook pages, the pro-Thaksin informants love to venture into public Facebook pages to search for information, exchange opinions and express their political ideas (Grömping, 2014). Neither group wishes

to encounter unpleasant or awkward situations. As a result, they prefer to post their political agenda on their personal Facebook space or on their friends' Facebook pages. Their political participation mostly takes place in an unconventional form among like-minded friends, such as like-clicking friends' political activity, sharing celebrity political statuses or posting photos of themselves in the company of soldiers. Even their activity on public political Facebook pages is confined to intragroup communication.

The politically active pro-Thaksin informants enjoy exchanging opinions and encountering debate. They feel free to express their political engagement in public spaces as well as their own space. The pro-Thaksin participants enjoy engaging politically in secret groups and on private and even public political Facebook pages. They would rather keep their own Facebook pages clear of political content. The impact of sociocultural norms such as Kreng jai prevents them from openly expressing political opinions that might differ from the majority of their friends and family. Once in a while, they post a sarcastic status or symbolic poster. Normally, they continue consuming information and engaging in intragroup conversations on news media pages, political pages and partisan political pages.

In normal circumstances, the chances of encounters between anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin supporters on personal Facebook pages are limited (Grömping, 2014). Occasionally, confrontations take place on partisan political Facebook pages. Several anti-Thaksin supporters lurk on pro-Thaksin public Facebook pages, and vice versa. However, most of them stay quiet and out of trouble and are there just to gain information from behind enemy lines. The actual confrontation mostly occurs on the news media, public forums or other official public Facebook pages (Media Literacy, 2012). As being Kreng jai does not affect interaction with strangers, confrontations between two political groups often occur on public space, giving rise to threats of violence and inappropriate language that is intentionally harmful. The informants of this research stay out of this type of altercation, with the exception of a few younger pro-Thaksin informants who did not think their behaviour could result in them getting in trouble. "They don't even know who you are. Just type what is on your mind, that's it. I don't care. Are they going to find me? Haha, not a chance!"

In the event of a political confrontation on personal Facebook pages, it is unlikely that the people involved will know each other personally. Sometimes, one of the political statuses posted by the owner of a Facebook page will create a political agenda on the page. Interestingly, due to the effect of Kreng jai, the owner of the page rarely originates or responds to the attack; rather, his or her friends will generate the argument. Since the attackers are familiar with the page owner, but not each other, they do not have any social restraints. The argument could be brutal and ugly until the owner of the page decides to end it by deleting the contentious post. Once in a while, there are also political confrontations among friends or acquaintances. The incident might not end their relationship, but there will be a period of awkwardness between both the antagonists and the owner of the Facebook page. The stronger the tie between them, the shorter the period of awkwardness will last. Most of the incidents between acquaintances are resolved once they have the opportunity to meet face to face.

6.5 Class barriers in political competence

The political participation of the Thai middle classes on Facebook seems to be divided by political preference. Social class partly initiates the difference among each political faction at the beginning, so that each faction seems to have their own stereotype of being high class or grass roots. However, when taking a closer look at their Facebook practice relating to political participation, social class also impacts the context of participation and capitalisation (Brooks *et al.*, 2011). Among like-minded people, social class differentiates their political goals, engagement and behaviour.

Bourdieu (1984) argued that class disposition can be identified by habitus and taste; similarly, though some have shared political preferences, their class differences alter their ideas towards political engagement. The ultimate goal of upper- and middle-middle-class informants, even those with different political outlooks, is to improve the nation (Eawsriwong, 2013), while lower-middle-class informants want a better life, improved well-being and monarchism. Political discourse in Thailand has been designed to target the right people in a bid to gain more support (Grömping, 2014). The pro-Thaksin movement focuses on the lower

class and their alliances, while anti-Thaksin messages are directed to the upper and middle classes.

People with similar political preferences, but from different social class backgrounds, browse for different political content. The anti-Thaksin supporters from different social class backgrounds are interested in different issues. Though they want to rectify every social issue, these issues have different priorities. The anti-Thaksin informants from the upper- and middle-middle classes are more interested in corruption, legitimate government, national economics, constitutional law, the judiciary, etc. Anti-Thaksin informants from the lower-middle class are more interested in the monarchy, religion and other sentimental social engagement. Between them there are unsettling subjects such as social rights, the electoral system and the degree of people's participation in politics.

In the interviews, I observed these differences among the anti-Thaksin informants through their gestures, topics of interest and reactions when I mentioned the King. For Jitra (46, lower-middle class, anti-Thaksin), the King and his royal family are vitally important. Tears welled up in her eyes whenever she shared with me her story of the King.

"I remember when I was young. My dad told me to pray for the King every night before I went to bed." Jitra continued with her idyllic childhood memory of when she was a country girl: how her father told her to respect the royal family, how much she loves Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn and how much she regrets her mum becoming a pro-Thaksin supporter.

I really hate Thaksin. I do. He claimed the King's long-time success as his own. He is such a self-promoter ... I do not know about others' Kings. I just know that MY KING loves his citizens, always. He's worked hard all his life. Those who turn a blind eye are condemned traitors. Thaksin decreased news time slots for His Majesty's official agenda. He is such an antagonist. The King has never called farmers grass-roots people; he calls them the nation's backbone. (Jitra, 46, lower-middle class, anti-Thaksin)

On the other hand, M. L.⁵ Jumnean (37, upper-middle class, anti-Thaksin), who is, as her official title indicates, a relative of the King, did not care much about her title or the monarchy. Of course, she supports the King and the military, but she has few concerns about working as a journalist on a pro-Thaksin newspaper: “It is a job, what can I say. I do not read much of my newspaper apart from my own (sports) section.” In her everyday life, she commutes to work by public transport, which is a decidedly unusual choice of transport for someone in her position. Jumnean also does not care much for traditional ceremonies; she did not even attend her own graduation ceremony. “It is boring, the traffic, etc.” One reason she joined the PDRC movement was because she does not want the country to go in the wrong direction regarding politics, economics and the law. “With or without my title, I am a normal citizen of this country, like you. All I really want is the development of the nation. Mawm Luang (M. L.) is an ordinary person.”

I encountered the same situation among pro-Thaksin supporters from different social classes. By mentioning the name “Thaksin”, I received different responses from my pro-Thaksin informants. Most of the lower-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants would respond with a humble gesture. Not only Thaksin, but his family and members of his party would receive similar gestures of esteem. The informants rarely called them by name alone. Anan (23, lower-middle class, pro-Thaksin) suggested that the reason for this admiration is that Shinawatra and his party have done so much for them. Without Thaksin’s populist policy, Anan could not afford the high interest rates of loans. He strongly believed that Thaksin is the key to his improved life.

Sakda (38, upper-middle class, pro-Thaksin), who is a lecturer in the faculty of political science, explained this difference to me: “There are different shades of red in Thailand, which result in different agendas and goals.” According to Thabchumpon and McCargo (2011), there are several pro-Thaksin groups, from lower-class Thaksin supporters to higher-class people with left-wing beliefs. The lower-class pro-Thaksin supporters’ main agenda is to bring Thaksin back, as they truly believe that his presence would bring them a better life. The higher-class pro-Thaksin advocates only focus on democratising the nation.

⁵ An abbreviation for *mawm luang*, a royal title indicating that the person is a great-great-grandchild of a king.

However, from Sakda's point of view, as a real believer in democracy, he needs Thaksin's financial support for the movement: "For Thaksin, we think that he understands us. He listens to some of our policy direction and gives us an allowance to recruit people." The process of some kind of "gift" in exchange for their support has continued from the ballot to the political movement (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011). Regardless of that fact, the lower-middle-class pro-Thaksin informants insist that they want Thaksin's return, with or without payment for their support. They were really proud to show me a picture of themselves taken at a demonstration in Bangkok; they had paid for their journey and even contributed some money.

Distinctions of style and taste can also be found in other types of political media usage (The Asia Foundation, 2013). As predicted, most of the pro-Thaksin partisan media target lower-class audiences, while the anti-Thaksin partisan media target upper- and middle-class audiences. The distinctive style and taste is obvious to the eyes of the non-partisan informants. Khomson (25, middle-middle class, non-partisan) talked about his feelings towards partisan political media: "Being impartial, I do not watch either pro-Thaksin or anti-Thaksin partisan media because of their partisan content. However, if I have to watch it, I would rather watch the anti-Thaksin channel, as it is easier to look at. The set, the presenters, their manners, their voices and also its polite content helps me to stay watching it longer than the pro-Thaksin one ... The pro-Thaksin channel always says something rude. That kind of strong expression, I do not like it ... Well, the content might be good and truthful, but the presentation keeps people away."



Photo 6.7: Comparison between pro-Thaksin and anti-Thaksin partisan media

Despite his political preference as a Thaksin supporter, Sakda (38, upper-middle class, pro-Thaksin) could not agree more: “I understand why the content of the pro-Thaksin channel and online media keep people away. It is raw, rude and straightforward in communicating the actual core of what they want to communicate. No sugar coating, I suppose. But that is what rural people like the most about them. Easy to follow, and understand. The honesty of the presenters, the rawness of the sets, lighting, camera angles are all there. I do not think they would change the style for middle-class people. Personally, I like it; it is more fun than watching discreet political programmes with metaphor, ostentatiously flowery language and interlinear translation – too exhausting to watch!”

Politically partisan Facebook pages have distinct styles that are not so different from other partisan media (Grömping, 2014). The rawness of presentation, strident mode of expression and simple layout with colourful decorations are the unique style of the pro-Thaksin Facebook page, while the anti-Thaksin Facebook page is softer in colour, tone, expression and choice of words. The anti-Thaksin Facebook page also gives in-depth information about the political situation in long articles, while the pro-Thaksin page keeps it short, with some aggressive wording to convey its aims. However, there are a large number of partisan political Facebook pages to follow; one pattern that stands out is that even among people with similar political views, they do not seem to follow the same pages. Social class also affects the way the informants choose to follow political Facebook pages that represent the same ideas but use different techniques.



Photo 6.8: Comparison between pro-Thaksin and anti-Thaksin political posters

With different levels of language and interpretation skills, the lower-middle-class informants tend to like articles and Facebook pages that present literal translations and leave out complicated context. Phrases which are easy to understand and strong words that express direct opinions are popular with them. Most of the content they like leaves out metaphor and eloquence and focuses on conveying the actual content directly. Also, the language used contains a mixture of formal writing and a more conversational style. On the other hand, figures of speech, metaphors, elaborate language, eloquence of expression and an interlinear style are among the elements that are used on some Facebook pages that are followed by the upper- and some middle-middle-class informants. Though containing different political opinions, some pages that target the same social class share similar styles of presentation.

6.6 Conclusion

Generally, the political participation on social media of middle-class Thai informants shares similarities with their offline political participation. The social and cultural background of Thais, in tandem with social class and social hierarchies, frames their political practice on Facebook. A pervasive sense of Kreng jai, as a compulsory social practice in Thai society, results in middle-class Thais avoiding awkward social situations or political confrontation. As Kreng jai is a reciprocal practice among friends, family and other formal social groups, political conflict resulting from direct political expression hardly ever occurs among them.

As a result, the social media sphere does not provide greater encouragement to take part in conventional political communication (Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010); rather, it facilitates unconventional and indirect political participation (Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012). The new channel of participation could be useful for gathering political information, even for those who do not want any involvement in politics (Sweetser and Kaid, 2008). Still, it is up to the users' motives and ability to differentiate their levels of engagement on social media (Campbell and Kwak, 2010). Each political faction benefits from their political engagement on Facebook in different directions. The political communication of middle-class Thai informants on Facebook concentrates on

intergroup relations rather than intragroup communication. This environment of political polarisation could lead to further partisanship (Stroud, 2010).

Facebook and its related applications may inspire high hopes for enhancing political participation (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012). However, in the situation of Thailand, where the current political scene has been divided by a deep schism, social media does not promote an environment of free participation so much as amplify the gap, whether social or political. It is an innovation that concentrates on users' content and choice (von Hippel, 2005). So, Facebook is used for expressing political opinions rather than being an open space for exchanging political ideas. Facebook encourages users to engage in lifestyle and identity politics more than conventional politics (Papacharissi, 2010). The politically active informants use their new resource to obtain and exchange further political information, while the politically inactive participants continue their political avoidance with or without this new medium. Overall, this self-centred participation could potentially damage or distort political participation rather than increase it (Fenton and Barassi, 2011).

On the other hand, Facebook enables the development of social capital (Steinfield, Ellison and Lampe, 2008) that can support offline social interaction and other political activity (Bond *et al.*, 2012). Each political faction occupies Facebook differently according to their social needs. Anti-Thaksin informants focus more on unconventional political engagement by combining politics with social life, which results in a variety of unconventional political posts. Pro-Thaksin informants find that this trusted and private space suits their need for safer political participation and enables them to find new like-minded friends. Since both of the factions are under the frame of Kreng jai, confrontation and deliberation rarely occur between them. On the other hand, confrontation often occurs among strangers on public Facebook pages, as the influence of Kreng jai as a social restraint between strangers is very low. The hope of Facebook being a democratic innovation for deliberative conversation is still a hope, rather than a reality. Rather than expressing themselves directly in relation to politics, middle-class Thais, in order to conform to social restraints and martial law enforcement, enjoy symbolic political action to a great extent, which I will explore further in the next chapter.

Social class plays an important part in political participation on Facebook in Thailand. Social class also affects users' participation on other social media

(Schradie, 2012). Class difference not only reflects digital inequality; it also affects skill levels (Hargittai, 2008) and the ability to control the digital means (Schradie, 2011). Among political preference groups, informants from different classes show different levels of civic skills, digital skills and literacy levels. The higher the class, the higher the ability the informants have to understand clues, hints and details behind the political agenda. The lower-middle-class informants are after strong, direct and straightforward political content that is applicable to their tastes and resources.

In addition to impacting their digital ability, class also affects their political beliefs, aims and objectives. To this day, social differences still impact political goals, a sense of civic responsibility and comprehension of politics (Henn and Foard, 2014). The higher classes are more concerned about the direction of the country as a whole and the improvement of the nation, while the lower classes are more interested in their day-to-day agenda, their well-being and their beloved leader.

Chapter Seven: From colour to symbols: what do social media have to do with the coup?

The results from the last two chapters indicate that middle-class Thais' political participation on Facebook is regarded as a substitute for actual political participation. The interviews and online observation of the participants' Facebook usage revealed that though Facebook is an important new space for political participation, expression and information gathering, it still lacks impact in encouraging individuals to engage in actual political participation. Rather, the features and advantages of social media that Facebook has given to the users allow them to expand their social network and pursue their symbolic political action.

This chapter continues with the story of middle-class Thais and their social media practice regarding their political participation. Deep class and social divisions among Thais led to a cycle of street demonstrations and coups that have interrupted 14 years of electoral democracy. The ideological division between the conservative Thai ideologies and new Western ideologies is another factor influencing the deep cleavage among Thais (Connors, 2008). Furthermore, the depth of disagreement at the ideological level also impacts other decision-making, perception and interpretation that Thais have over their political action.

The chapter starts with the early stages of symbolic political action in Thailand during the first movement of the PAD, who created the contemporary mode of direct political participation in Thailand by introducing mass street rallies in 2005 (Kanpunpong, 2010). Their symbolic movement united a large number of people and marked a new age of political participation in Thailand (Wiriyothai, 2009). The colour of people's T-shirts became a significant symbol, dividing Thais into factions. Later, their political endorsement products became another significant item in Thai politics. They played a really important part in the PAD movement by creating symbolic meaning. The PAD creations were adopted by the next mass movements in Thailand (Wangulum, 2010).

Symbolic political action was transformed from the actual item used in the rally into symbolic online action that was shared and reposted to represent the users' political identity on social media (Grömping, 2014). A number of symbolic

social media actions were created to attack and counter-attack the opposition's campaign. Social class, political interest and political preference played their part in influencing the theme, content and interpretation of each agenda (Ungpakorn, 2009). This resulted in offline and online political action in which people normalised the coup, became partisan, divided into groups and moved away from the democratic system. On the other hand, it also resulted in new means of adopting both symbolic political action and personal, individualised action on social media and using them to express themselves politically during a time of martial law and a junta government in Thailand.

7.1 Symbolic political action in Thailand: from offline to online symbolic action

In chapter two I mentioned the tidal wave of contemporary symbolic political action in Thailand, and the data from the previous two chapters has highlighted the informants' use of symbolic action as an alternative to political participation. Symbolic political action is nothing new in Thai politics. All of the informants had come across the "coloured-shirt war" more than once. Some even took part in this symbolic political action. In the interviews they revealed how their different experiences in relation to offline symbolic war between Yellow and Red caused them to have different approaches to online symbolic action on Facebook.

The coloured-shirt war might be the first thing people think about in relation to Thai political turmoil; however, the political discourse supporting it came from the agenda that ignited political confrontation (Stones and Tangsupvattana, 2012). Yellow was adopted because it is the colour of the King, and the ideal of the monarchy was supported by the PAD rally. Red stands for freedom and right, the principles for which the pro-Thaksin faction are fighting. Also, red is a strong shade that can reflect strong political beliefs. The discourse and agenda are accompanied by symbolism created to support the arguments.

"I had not worn a red shirt or a yellow shirt for years, and now I have to think twice about a blue shirt or even a white shirt. Gosh! Are they going to symbolically own all coloured shirts? Should I go naked?" This is a typical reaction from a non-partisan informant when they were asked how they felt about the colour separation among Thais over the last decade. Some of the non-partisan

informants responded that they do not care about the colour war, and they wear whatever they want regardless of the colour. However, the colour of a person's shirt is a small detail compared to the extreme political expressions of the partisan political supporters, especially when previously most Thais had wanted to avoid politics as much as they could.

With the idea of showing that they were royalists, those who were loyal to the monarchy adopted the King's colour and other King-related items as symbols. Yellow T-shirts were worn initially in June 2006 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne. Thais then wore them on every Monday for a whole year, and the shirts became a political tool to support and deliver the idea of "saving the monarchy". PAD adopted the concept of supporting the monarchy and turned it into a powerful political symbol. Most of the anti-Thaksin supporters shared a similar sense of loyalty to the monarchy.

"I remember how BTS and other public transportation were full with yellow-shirted people commuting to work. I was one of them." Dara (32, middle-middle class, anti-Thaksin) told her story of the accession anniversary in June 2006: "I was one of those millions of people who were waiting on the street just for a glimpse of the King and his royal family. We did not see him, of course, he was so far away from us, but being a small 'yellow dot' that the King saw on the street was more than enough for me. I really wanted the King to know that we love him, always."

The symbolic action presented by PAD was framed to suit the educated higher-class audience (Ungpakorn, 2009). By using professional and polite language and promoting non-violent protest and civil disobedience, that could be joined remotely, PAD persuaded the educated middle-class audience to join their campaign. Just by wearing a yellow T-shirt, anyone could perform an act of civil disobedience and express their support for PAD action. Moreover, some PAD supporters from wealthier backgrounds threatened a bank run, while those supporters from state enterprises and the government section threatened a strike. Their higher positions in society allowed them to create greater impact. If supporters could not commit to attending a rally, they could always donate to support it. The movement was also amplified by a variety of media from the ASTV-Manager multimedia group.

A glimpse of a sack of ASTV natural fertiliser caught my attention when I first visited Khomsan (25, middle-middle class, non-partisan), who insisted he was a non-partisan. The evidence of an ASTV product told me otherwise, so I had to ask him again.

Jantiga: "I thought you were saying you are a non-partisan."

Khomsan: "I am a non-partisan. Trust me. I have witnessed so much bias I have had enough."

Jantiga: "But I think I just saw an ASTV product in your place."

Khomsan: "Oh! That? Haha. I think it came from those days of the PAD movement. My mum is one of the supporters."

Khomsan explained how most of the "elderly" have become PAD supporters and how they could not understand the differences between PAD and PDRC. "I think most old people do not know that they are different. For them, both PAD and PDRC have the same shared concept: ousting Thaksin and supporting the monarchy. And I think, for them, that's enough."

I could relate to Khomsan's idea, as my own mother could not separate PAD from PDRC either. "Aren't they the same? They are all anti-Thaksin," my mother used to say when I called them by their respective names.

"I thought my mum was hypnotised, then," Khomsan continued. "She bought everything – I mean everything – from the ASTV channel. You name it – shirt, hand-clapping rattle, scarves – my mum bought it all. The products included detergent, rice and other household appliances, too ... I remember she almost never turned off the television (during the 2006 PAD protest)."

The rise of contemporary symbolic political action in Thailand, starting with the first PAD demonstrations in 2005-2006, gave rise to many developments and innovations concerning political participation (Wiriyothai, 2009). One significant development was the creation of a communication campaign aimed at recruiting people into their unconventional political movement. Since the organiser was a media mogul, the PAD rallies created much of Thailand's symbolic political movement, including the campaigning, the props and other media-related activities (Behnjharachajarunandha, 2011). On the other hand, the pro-Thaksin demonstrations in 2011-2012 created another level of symbolic political communication, especially concerning sarcastic criticism of and commentary on

the monarchy and compelling political discourse, such as “*ຈຳມາຕົ່ງ-ໄພ່*” (aristocrat-servant) (Buchanan, 2013). The ongoing political movements of both the PAD and pro-Thaksin contingents have passed on the legacy to the PDRC and pro-Thaksin social media movements of 2014-2015.

The differences between the PAD and pro-Thaksin political movements, which came from their main political aims, encouraged Thai citizens to consider collective political action as class based. While the PAD's main concern was to protect the monarchy, the main pro-Thaksin agenda was equality among citizens and the cessation of class oppression. The similar interests, violence, ideology, law and immediate goals of both factions framed their main agendas as well as attracting similar-minded people to join their collective political movements (Diani and McAdam, 2003). The PAD's activity appealed to the upper to middle classes, whereas the activity of the pro-Thaksin movement attracted the lower and working classes. Symbolic actions reiterated their main political ideas and were a powerful tool in influencing the perception of their actions (Edelman, 1971). Similar patterns have been observed through the online symbolic action by anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin factions during the events of 2013-2014 too. Symbolic political action on Facebook in Thailand involved similar types of class division and gave people the impression that they belonged to a group with distinctive problems and interests.

The anti-Thaksin symbolic action on social media started during the PDRC campaign against the launch of the amnesty bill by the government (*Bangkok Post*, 2013a). The White Mask rallies at CentralWorld that took place every Sunday resulted from posts on social media encouraging supporters to turn up and demonstrate. This led to their first big rally, on 14 July 2013, and they staged rallies in many provinces (*The Nation*, 2013). On the other hand, pro-Thaksin symbolic action on social media started as political action against government monitoring and was accompanied by content from websites and blogs that had circumvented government blocks on international material (*Bangkok Post*, 2010).

In this recent movement, both pro- and anti-Thaksin supporters employed other symbols at their rallies, such as T-shirts, headbands and wristbands. The T-shirt in particular became another popular symbol of the movement. Compared to Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts, which were heavily framed as a political statement,

PDRC T-shirts were also seen as a fashion item. Furthermore, social media influenced more people to join the movement, as posting about PDRC activity on social media became a popular social trend. It was not just their supporters who were eager to own the T-shirt; normal people who were influenced by social media also followed this trend. Though this symbolic action moved away from formal political engagement, it helped spread the word about the movement and encourage people to join.

Colour theme and class-based content are still observed as the prominent messages and symbolic action on social media. The type of communication, language usage, tone and content of the two factions' symbolic actions differ. Similar to the offline symbolic actions that have been presented in previous chapters, the symbolic action on social media from pro- and anti-Thaksin camps carries a social class agenda throughout. Both pro- and anti-Thaksin informants are so familiar with the polarisation that they have developed similar mediated practice online. Therefore, the war of symbolic political action between pro- and anti-Thaksin factions has continued on Thai social media.

7.2 The Thai social media scene: symbolic political action, repeated class division and separate ideologies

The symbolic political action that has been seen throughout the middle-class Thai participants' practice on Facebook is no longer merely a political statement; the participants have taken it to another level of symbolic political debate and discourse (Grömping, 2014). Since social media allows two-way communication and one-to-many broadcasting, the participants utilise the interactive mode of Facebook to share and broadcast their political statements as well as to attack and counter-attack the opposing side's political discourse and campaigns. Engagement in media participation also enhances the users' social position among their network of friends (Bucy and Gregson, 2001).

The T-shirt statement, which was used to create public visibility and was a way for people to announce their political allegiance (Penney, 2013) during the early phase of political turmoil in Thailand, has become another tool in political campaigns as well as a resource to raise funds for campaign budgets. In the anti-Thaksin movement that lasted from late 2013 to May 2014, T-shirts acted as more

than just a public declaration of visibility (Penney, 2013) by the anti-elected-government movement; it also became another symbol of the movement, representing unity, resources and class.

When I asked how many anti-Thaksin-movement T-shirts she had bought during the demonstration, Nongluck (47, middle-middle class, anti-Thaksin) replied, “Oh! So many I cannot count. I did not only buy them for myself; I also bought a lot of them for my family and friends who shared similar political ideas but did not have time to attend the demonstration. Many people wanted to have these T-shirts, you know?”

It was, indeed, a popular trend for a while among upper- and middle-class people in Bangkok to possess one of these T-shirts. In fact, I witnessed hundreds of people waiting in long confused queues to receive a special printed design by Silpakorn University for the anti-Thaksin demonstration. I have first-hand experience of waiting in one of these long queues to acquire one of these T-shirts for my mum. People had to bring a blank T-shirt in any colour (although preferably black or white) to an anti-Thaksin main demonstration site at Ratchadamnoen Avenue and wait in long queues to receive the screen-printed design; the screening block would be destroyed after three days of the “Shutdown Bangkok” campaign. I was pushed and pulled by those who were queuing. People were yelling at anyone who tried to jump the queue. Some fainted as a result of standing for a long time in a big crowd underneath Thailand’s strong sun. There was confusion all around about which line led to which colour of design. “You have to wait in another line if you have a black T-shirt,” one of the people in the line told me. That was when I gave up, after two hours of waiting. I was not even a supporter. As I walked back to where I had parked (most people had driven to the demonstration, but the parking spaces were situated far away), I saw many merchants selling the same design of T-shirt that we were waiting to get printed. “Do you want it?” I asked my mum. She refused, as these were not the genuine article. “Fake and more expensive,” my mum concluded. That night I arrived home empty-handed. Nonetheless, my mum’s network of friends brought her many anti-Thaksin T-shirts later.



Photo 7.1: Promotion of another version of the Shutdown Bangkok T-shirt posted by Silpakorn University's unofficial Facebook page

Rumour has it that they screened over 300,000 T-shirts in those three days of campaigning. The screening price was around 100 baht per T-shirt; therefore, the anti-Thaksin movement would have raised around 30,000,000 baht for their campaign funds. Moreover, this special design from Silpakorn University was not the only anti-Thaksin-related T-shirt that people bought. During the seven-month demonstration, the anti-Thaksin movement sold more than ten different designs, all of them created by leading artists and designers in Thailand.

"A T-shirt designed by Kai boutique," Nongluck continued. "Who would not want to have one? And it was just 200 baht per shirt. So cheap! Do you know how much it would cost for a T-shirt designed by Kai and sold in his own store? It is priced at almost 1,000 baht, just for a T-shirt."

In the anti-Thaksin demonstration these T-shirts were not only a political statement; they also represented the tastes of a social class. They were produced and designed by top artists and top designers in Thailand and were worn by celebrities and top models who joined the anti-Thaksin campaign. Wearing anti-Thaksin T-shirts became an urban trend. Among anti-Thaksin supporters, T-shirts and specially designed lightning-shaped whistles were important items that they had to have. Some of these items required time, dedication and money to own. The anti-Thaksin supporters who did not have the time to wait in long queues had to buy them at higher prices from vendors. Of course, there were many unofficial T-shirts and whistles being sold on the streets around the demonstration site, but the genuine items and those that were signed by the creators were more valuable. The genuine products also fulfilled the supporters' need to pay a contribution to the anti-Thaksin rally.



Photo 7.2: Shutdown Bangkok T-shirts worn by top models to promote the event

"How much did I pay for these items? I cannot keep track, really. Sometimes I bought them myself at the demonstration site; sometimes I asked friends to buy them for me. I think I almost have a collection." Samorn (51, middle-middle class, anti-Thaksin) laughed proudly at the fact that she had bought political merchandise to show her support for the anti-Thaksin movement. During the interview with Nongluck in her office, I also had a chance to meet with another anti-Thaksin participant, Samorn, whom Nongluck introduced to me. Two more of Nongluck's colleagues, who shared not only the same office but also her political vision, were also present. They told me their stories of the anti-Thaksin demonstration site, which, according to them, was full of stylish, educated and classy people.

Samorn: "There were fashion shows by top models, I think, to raise money for the demonstration. People were gathering and watching the real top models walking past us on a street runway."

Non-participant 1: "Nongluck, how much did you pay for the auction?"

Jantiga: "The auction?"

Non-participant 1: "Yes, there were many auctions on the stage of the anti-Thaksin demonstration. The items were donated by celebrities, superstars and singers."

Samorn: "Nongluck was one of those deep-pocketed supporters, you know? Because of the anti-Thaksin demonstration, she did not go travelling abroad, as she had already spent loads of money on the demonstration. Haha."

Nongluck: "I did it for a good cause. Besides, there were a lot of quality items up for auction. There was so much great food, good music and artists painting on the street too. Somehow, I think I have met more artists at anti-Thaksin demonstrations than in galleries."

Each day, the anti-Thaksin demonstration would end with a final speech from Suthep Thaugsuban, followed by extremely long lists of donations from people, organisations, non-government agencies, etc. This was followed by an auction of signed T-shirts, signed paintings and photographs taken by leading photographers. Sometimes, they auctioned the personal belongings of Thai superstars who were anti-Thaksin. Each day there was an announcement of how much money the anti-Thaksin movement had made in total from donations, which was a fairly high amount. The events and all the daily demonstrations were broadcast on the Blue Sky Channel, which belongs to the Democrat Party. Also, the Facebook pages and YouTube channels of the anti-Thaksin and Democrat Party were closely monitored and followed by the supporters.

One online action that was very popular among anti-Thaksin supporters was to post photos of themselves wearing an anti-Thaksin T-shirt and with other anti-Thaksin accessories, such as a whistle, headband, bag or flag. In this way, the T-shirt became more than just an item that declared one's political allegiance; it also represented the taste, style and social class of the people who bought and wore it. It showed that the person who wore it was an educated, cultivated and wealthy person. Each of the anti-Thaksin T-shirts was not just a political statement, but also represented the craft of the artist who designed it. They became collectable items, especially the signed ones: their value went through the roof. Both money and connections were needed to obtain one. And once they had been purchased, they needed to be shown off on social media. A photo of a person wearing an anti-Thaksin T-shirt did not just represent their political vision; it is also projected the image of a middle-class, educated, well-mannered person with artistic tastes. That is why posting these photos was a must, not just as a political statement, but also as a signifier of social and civic engagement (Dahlgren, 2009).



Photo 7.3: A picture shared by an anti-Thaksin informant in which she is wearing an anti-Thaksin T-shirt; she has decorated the photo using an anti-Thaksin sticker application on Facebook

The online political action that has been observed in the informants' Facebook practice can be regarded as both political identification and social class representation. The concept of social class representation in social media symbolic political action is framed by each faction's political agenda and discourse. While the anti-Thaksin focus is on representing their movement as educated, intelligent and non-violent, pro-Thaksin supporters have framed theirs as a poor but assertive grass-roots movement that seeks justice and equality. Many of their campaigns were run according to these very distinctive concepts. The viral posters and other supportive social media campaigns are created and shared on the battlefield of Facebook.



Photo 7.4: Viral post shared by pro-Thaksin informants that was created to sarcastically criticise an anti-Thaksin Facebook post

Many kinds of viral poster and article have been created to address a political agenda and form a discourse that attacks and counter-attacks the opposing faction. Reposting and sharing is widespread among partisan followers of both factions. Each campaign by each side has been counter-attacked by another campaign from the other side. The concept and content of each campaign provides the current message from the group and symbolises the projected image and cultural tastes of each faction. In this chapter, three significant examples are discussed.

7.3 Shutdown Bangkok vs. heroes of the election

Shutdown Bangkok or Bangkok Shutdown was an anti-Thaksin campaign launched during the peak of their movement in early 2014. Its purpose was to shut down the everyday transactions of the country and then reboot the country for a new dawn of better democracy. It started with foot soldiers holding rallies in important places in Bangkok. The main idea of the campaign was to prevent the government and the private sector from undertaking their usual operations so that the elected government would have to resign or be dissolved. The campaign invited citizens to walk on the streets with their “sneakers and brave hearts”. It gained support from Bangkokians and anti-Thaksin enthusiasts. The organisers claimed they had reached the milestone of one million supporters on the day of the main protest on 13 January 2014. The campaign was also welcomed and promoted by mainstream local media; for example, newspapers named the supporters of the anti-Thaksin movement People of the Year 2014. Their rallies around Bangkok were publicised on front pages with impressive headlines. The anti-Thaksin movement continued with this concept until they had reached the pivotal point of Election Day on 2 February 2014. Then they created a softer and more positive Shutdown Bangkok and Bangkok Picnic.

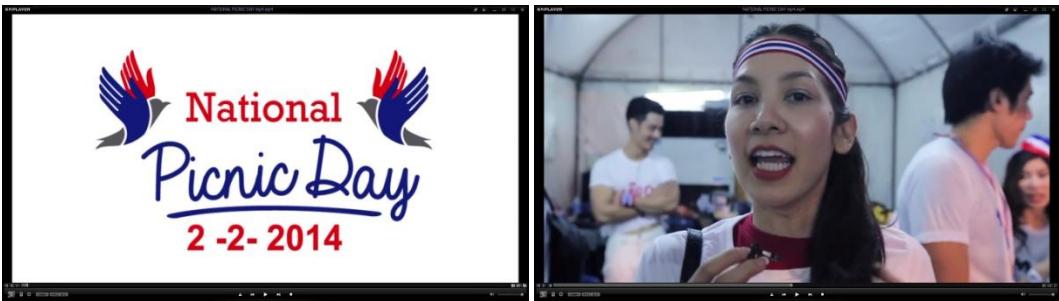


Photo 7.5: Snapshot of an anti-Thaksin Picnic Day viral video shared on Facebook

The idea behind the Bangkok Picnic, which took place on 2 February 2014, was to do something else, rather than vote. The event featured activities on the main anti-Thaksin demonstration site at Siam Centre as well as in several other places around Bangkok. The attendants could travel to each place by BTS or other forms of public transport. There were fashion shows, concerts, plays and other events to entertain the attendants. The campaign was promoted with viral posters and videos featuring models, celebrities and famous actors. The viral posters and videos were posted and reposted by PDRC supporters and the event was promoted through other mainstream media.

The main video clip promoting the Bangkok Picnic 2014 starred famous actors, actresses and models. Each of them said that they would do anything on 2 February but vote. They invited people to join them and other celebrities in leisure events around Bangkok.

Jitra (46, lower-middle class, anti-Thaksin) eagerly shared with me her experience of the Bangkok Picnic: "It was really fun. I met ... (names of actors and actresses). I took so many pictures with so many famous people. Sometimes, I think I am so lucky. See, people from this 'STATUS' become my friends on Facebook. Not only celebrities and actors – I mean normal people who are actually somebody in their field, such as famous doctors, retired generals or the richest of the rich. I could not believe that they were so normal, easygoing and so nice to me."

She also confirmed that she normally supported the democratic system. "I normally go to the ballot on every single election to vote and protect my rights. But this time I chose to protect my rights by not voting. Thaksin's party and his slut sister wanted to win the election easily by shortening the period of campaigning, giving their party an advantage. I don't fall for that!" Jitra was not the only one

who refused to vote on 2 February 2014. All ten of my anti-Thaksin informants reported doing the same.

Jitra showed me pictures of her with Joe Nuvo (a famous singer), who did a street performance on Election Day to raise money for poor farmers who had been neglected by the recent government. On her Facebook page, Jitra constantly posted photos of herself with the new friends whom she had met at the rally. Many of these people are famous or celebrities. Jitra suggested that they became friends after their time spent together at the anti-Thaksin rally. Since then, they have occasionally met for lunch or activities, especially for political activities arranged by the Democrat Party.

On the other hand, the campaign to support the election on 2 February was not initiated directly by pro-Thaksin supporters, but resulted from the actions of accidental heroes: ordinary people who supported the election. On Election Day, there were many attempts by anti-Thaksin acolytes and their allies to form barricades to prevent voters from voting. Anti-Thaksin supporters and allies were dispatched to polling stations to prevent the voting process by confiscating ballot boxes, seizing polling stations or forming human barricades in front of polling stations. People who wanted to vote on Election Day had to struggle to gain access. Some locations were not even open, as the authorities were on strike too.

Weera (39, upper-middle class, pro-Thaksin) told me about his experience of Election Day: "I was so annoyed. Why did they not tell us frankly that they were going to strike? I was so ready to volunteer. It was just an easy job, being there as witnesses to the voting process; the laws allowed citizens to volunteer as witnesses to the voting process." His discontent was fuelled by the fact that the authorities had neglected their duties; therefore he did not have any chance to vote at all. "The voting site was closed within five minutes after people swore and shouted at the authorities." Similar incidents were experienced by other Thai citizens who went to vote on 2 February 2014. It became a major issue and was covered by all the mainstream media.

Two interesting incidents relating to Election Day were promoted to the public as heroic stories: 'Aunty saves Election' and 'Anti-Thaksin violation against voter' (Grömping, 2014). The first event happened in advance of voting day, on 26 January 2014. A 50-year-old woman, who was blocked outside the polling station

by anti-Thaksin supporters, turned on her torch and directed it at the people blocking her from entering the site (*Prachatai*, 2014). In interviews with journalists she claimed there was too much dark and hopelessness, so she wanted to shine her torch to save the day (*Matichon Online*, 2014). Her action caught the attention of election supporters, who photoshopped her image so that she appeared as the Statue of Liberty. Her image was shared and reposted among election and pro-Thaksin supporters. The other incident deemed newsworthy was a picture taken by the *Nation* newspaper photographer of a male voter being gripped by the neck by an anti-Thaksin supporter at a polling station in Bangkok's Chatuchak district. This particular photo was shared many times on Facebook pages in Thailand and appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* the next day. Interestingly, only a couple of local media organisations were interested in the incident. There were also news items and photographs relating to these two incidents in local newspapers, but they did not gain much public attention.

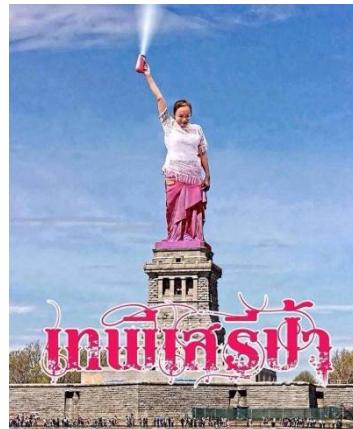


Photo 7.6: Photoshopped image of Aunty as the Statue of Liberty shared among pro-Thaksin supporters

These distinctive themes from opposite factions represented separate ideas and fashions. One had an anti-electoral message while the other supported the election. The one that opposed the democratic system came from upper- and middle-class anti-Thaksin supporters, with the result that the campaign was presented in a middle- to upper-class style. Video clips and other activities, including shopping events on Election Day, invited people to enjoy an upper-class lifestyle. The audience shared the feeling of being better and wiser as a helper of

the country. The most important concept of the Bangkok Picnic Day was ‘Reform before Election’. Another significant aspect of the anti-Thaksin themes and campaigns was that they all came with English, rather than Thai, names. This benefited the anti-Thaksin campaign by symbolising a higher class and a well-educated image. All themes and campaigns were well prepared and had high-quality production, as advantages in social class gave the anti-Thaksin supporters access to superior manpower and resources.

On the other hand, the pro-Thaksin and election supporters’ campaigns mostly came from accidental events. The main communication channels for these campaigns were television and community radio. Since their main targets were those from the lower social classes who were less familiar with online media, most of their online viral materials came from their supporters and not from the organisers. The ordinary people, who supported election and democracy but did not particularly support Thaksin, or his party, lent their support online by counter-attacking the anti-Thaksin anti-democratic campaign. These campaigns were not professional or well put together, but they were representative of the people’s actual agenda, without influence from political parties or the political elite. They symbolised the people’s movement for their own freedom as well as the grass-roots revolution against the upper class.

7.4 Respect My Vote vs. Respect My Tax



Photo 7.7: Viral posters in support of and against the election, shared by pro-Thaksin and anti-Thaksin supporters respectively

Posters, video clips and other materials have been used by both sides to promote their campaigns. Symbolic political action has been divided among social classes

and politically partisan supporters. Another significant example of attack and counter-attack campaigns by anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin advocates is that of “Respect My Vote” vs. “Respect My Tax”. The former was a campaign put forward by Thaksin supporters to attack the unlawful anti-Thaksin movement by pointing out that the anti-Thaksin rallies were against the elected government. The latter was initiated by anti-Thaksin supporters to counter-attack the “Respect My Vote” campaign by pointing out that the elected government had violated citizens’ rights by issuing an amnesty bill for their party’s leader, Thaksin.

The two campaigns ran against each other on Facebook. Users changed their profile pictures according to the campaign they supported. The action of changing their profile picture was a symbolic choice that each user made to show which faction they supported. Other small symbolic actions were taken on Facebook after this to support the two main concepts. It was an expression of their social media-based political discourse (Bucy and Gregson, 2001). Though involvement at this level could not impact the actual policy level, it allowed the users from both factions to announce their political allegiance in public.

Most of the informants who participated in the campaigns changed their privacy setting so that the public could see what they posted, though their normal privacy setting was strictly for their friends. “This is the political issue for which I wanted to show the world what I think,” said Wilai (30, middle-middle class, pro-Thaksin), explaining why she had issued this particular status so that it could be seen by the public. Similarly, Suda (38, upper-middle class, anti-Thaksin) stated the same feeling: “It helped me, at least, to make my statement of what I believe. I tried to avoid the confrontation as much as I could, but sometimes you have to stand your own ground, just like the anti-Thaksin theme that ‘we are not afraid of them anymore’. I think pro-Thaksin and Thaksin’s party had done too much violence to be accepted or forgotten.”

The significance of the different kinds of symbol that each faction chose to represent their political agenda also indicated their divided concepts of values and norms. Thaksin followers chose the democratic system and the right to vote according to that concept, while anti-Thaksin supporters highlighted the advantages of their social class in relation to the amount of tax they had generated for the country. Each concept had a different precedence, logic and agenda, which

related to their main political agenda of prioritising either the democratic system or self-justification. The difference between the factions and their symbolic actions on this competitive campaign was that one underlined their rights according to the law of the democratic system, while the other emphasised their rights according to honour and entitlement.

7.5 Three-finger salute vs. Four-finger salute

Another example of the methods used by the anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin campaigns to attack and counter-attack one another is the respective symbolic action of the “three-finger salute” vs. the “four-finger salute”. The former is a symbolic action that Thaksin supporters adapted from the film *The Hunger Games*, which was released almost at the same time as the declaration of martial law in Thailand. The latter was invented as a counter-attack to the former symbolic action. The meaning of both actions was modified from their original meanings.

In *The Hunger Games*, the protagonist Katniss Everdeen used a three-finger salute to indicate her revolt against the ruling government, known as the Capitol. Katniss used a three-finger salute to challenge the power of the Capitol by indicating her friendship with the opponents from another district, who were in revolt against the Capitol’s demands. The three-finger salute, as a result, means rebellion, and was adopted by pro-Thaksin factions as a symbolic political action. For them, the three-finger salute meant freedom, independence and peace. It was a controversial action to adopt during the early phase of martial law enforcement in Thailand, before the coup. Thaksin supporters would gather in significant public places and make their three-finger salute while putting a hand over their mouth to indicate that their right of free speech had been violated.



Photo 7.8: A post by a pro-Thaksin supporter showing that he has changed his profile picture to a photo of himself doing the three-finger salute

During the campaign, not only were Thaksin supporters captured and their protests stopped by the military, but their campaign was also attacked by advocates in the anti-Thaksin camp. Anti-Thaksin supporters attacked the pro-Thaksin movement for misinterpreting the symbolic action in the movie. They branded the pro-Thaksin symbolic action as a misuse and misunderstanding of the symbol, which they deemed as confirmation of their perceptions of Thaksin supporters being an uneducated lower class. Not only did they attack the action as an incorrect interpretation, but anti-Thaksin supporters also posted pictures of 100-baht bills with the three-finger salute stamped on them, thus alleging that people were being paid to make the salute for the pro-Thaksin cause.



Photo 7.9: Picture of 100-baht bills stamped with the three-finger salute, which was shared among anti-Thaksin supporters

At the same time as they criticised the pro-Thaksin symbolic action, anti-Thaksin supporters originated their counter-attack to the three-finger salute, called the four-finger salute. It was alleged that one of the pro-Thaksin leaders had neglected his own father, and left him to die without any care on the fourth floor of his own home. It was a profoundly resonant, albeit unproven, accusation. However, there were many anti-Thaksin supporters who believed the rumour and were willing to share and repost the viral poster carrying the accusation. For them, neglecting a parent was the worst possible action by a son, which the public should punish. The four-finger salute was thus intended as a reminder of pro-Thaksin neglect. The accusation that pro-Thaksin supporters were lower-class and uneducated people who were easily bought with money and seduced by Thaksin's populist policies was the main agenda in most of the counter-attacks against the

pro-Thaksin campaign. Anti-Thaksin counter-attacks to pro-Thaksin symbolic political action often contained bullying and mockery of pro-Thaksin followers by suggesting that they were clumsy and uneducated. Most viral posters and campaigns from the anti-Thaksin group attacked those who were pro-Thaksin not for their political beliefs or policies alone, but for who they were: their social class and their disadvantages. The rhetoric of anti-Thaksin supporters suggested that the pro-Thaksin campaigners, and their followers, were incapable of independent decision-making, or self-rule. These people were followers who needed advice, or a capable leader, while the opponents of Thaksin were educated, from a higher social class, wiser, and could help them to become more civilised in their actions and decisions.

In their attempts to attack the personality of the pro-Thaksin alliance, one counter-attack attempted to undermine the pro-Thaksin symbolic action by focusing on a mistake they had made. The pro-Thaksin campaign had asked its supporters to light candles as a symbol of peace, but those responsible had mistaken the symbol of Mercedes-Benz for the symbol of peace. When the event was publicised via social media and mainstream media, the photograph of the incorrect symbol was published. Anti-Thaksin supporters seized the opportunity to attack the campaign. The photo of the pro-Thaksin error was shared and reposted across social media and mainstream media, accompanied by sarcastic comments drawing attention to the mistake.



Photo 7.10: Image of mistaken Pro-Thaksin symbolic action, which appeared in mainstream news

"Not only do they not understand which one is the peace symbol and which one is the Mercedes-Benz symbol; they do not know what peace, real peace, is. It also indicates that they are fake, and their agenda and intentions are fake too." This

is an example of a description posted by an anti-Thaksin informant to accompany the picture of the Mercedes-Benz symbol issued by the pro-Thaksin campaign in their quest for peace. It became a funny story among anti-Thaksin supporters on social media and internet forums. The reposting and resharing of the error reinforced the image of pro-Thaksin followers as lower class, as well as being disadvantaged in social, civic and symbolic capital.

On the other hand, the anti-Thaksin faction, who situated themselves as moral and ethical, could argue that unethical behaviour or violent action was acceptable and justified. Their main concept was engaging in bad behaviour for a good cause – that bad behaviour could be claimed to be good. The viral poster of “Justice Popcorn” is an obvious example of their twisted ethical concept. The incident started with a man in black invading the anti-Thaksin stage at the Chaeng Wattana rally site. During the invasion there were a couple of masked gunmen with M16s, which were covered by sacks of Popcorn Kolk, who were helping to protect the anti-Thaksin site. There were many different rumours circulating around social media as to who these gunmen were and how they appeared at the rally site with military weapons that could not easily be bought.

No matter who the gunmen were, anti-Thaksin followers framed them as their heroes, who protected good people from the bad guys. A picture of a sack of Popcorn Kolk was used by anti-Thaksin supporters as their profile picture for a while, accompanied by such comments as “Want some popcorn?” or “Popcorn Hero”. The anti-Thaksin acolytes justified the violence, to which they were ostensibly opposed, because of the benefit their side gained from the incident.



Photo 7.11: Viral poster shared among anti-Thaksin supporters with the sarcastic comment: “Want some popcorn?”

"It is fair enough, is it not? I think it is fair enough for what they (pro-Thaksin) did to us (anti-Thaksin)," Nongluck concluded. "You have no idea of how badly wounded anti-Thaksin people were." Nongluck told me more about the anti-Thaksin "We do not leave anyone behind" programme, which would take care of those wounded or killed during rallies. She and her friends still meet every now and then to catch up and find out how the wounded victims' lives turned out. "I think they (pro-Thaksin) deserved what they got."

The profile picture of Popcorn Kolk was not the only anti-Thaksin symbolic action in support of the gunmen. There were many products featuring the yellow-green sack of Popcorn Kolk for people to buy and use, such as T-shirts, mobile phone cases and bags. Similar to their earlier social media practice, anti-Thaksin supporters posted photos of themselves wearing a Popcorn Kolk T-shirt or holding other Popcorn Kolk products on their social media pages. Pro-Thaksin-supporting Facebook pages took these pictures and photoshopped superimposed words and phrases such as "How could they do it?" as a response to this bizarre symbolic action.



Photo 7.12: Pro-Thaksin viral poster in response to anti-Thaksin support for the gunmen, asking how they could support such violence

The anti-Thaksin reaction to the incident was not too different from how they had reacted to the coup and the enforcement of martial law. They had embraced the military intervention as the goal of the rally. Many viral posters were created to post and share to support the 2014 coup, which disrupted the democratic system in Thailand. Pictures of anti-Thaksin supporters posing next to tanks or soldiers were not so strange anymore. Their symbolic action in

supporting military intervention included giving flowers to the military, offering them food and posting a high number of viral posters in support of Prayut Chan-o-cha, head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), a military junta.

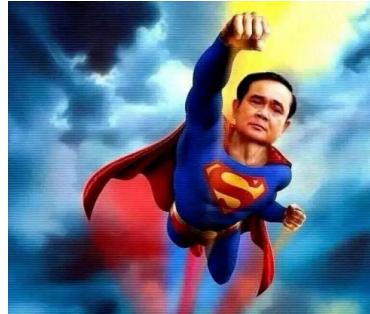


Photo 7.13: Viral poster showing support for Prayut Chan-o-cha, head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), a military junta

On the other hand, there were also extremist Thaksin supporters who went beyond a humane line in reacting to those whom they branded the opposite side. For example, the Thai Red Cross campaign to promote blood donation was attacked online by people claiming to be pro-Thaksin whose blood was “not good enough” to donate to anyone. Some of the comments accused doctors and nurses of being anti-Thaksin snobs, whom the pro-Thaksin camp did not trust as professionals anymore.



Photo 7.14: A post from an online forum accusing the Red Cross of refusing to accept blood from pro-Thaksin donators: an ironic comment on their supposed lower status

7.6 Conclusion

Though the online symbolic action that has been found on Facebook relating to middle-class Thai political participation does not yet show a positive result in terms of reinforcing formal political participation, it has shown some positive hope in promoting symbolic activity as a part of political participation. Yet the symbolic action and online political participation on Facebook in Thailand resulted in dramatic public performance rather than political participation as it has been commonly understood hitherto.

However, the symbolic action situated citizen-level engagement in mediatized and commercialised forms of politics, which could promise a new stage for political participation similar to those symbolic movements that combined civic activism with commercial marketing and popular culture, such as “green” consumption-based activism (Hearn, 2012). Since popular culture and politics are becoming increasingly blurred nowadays (Dahlgren, 2009), the use of popular-culture metaphors and symbolism that has been found on Facebook in Thailand could be considered politically oriented usage. The political symbolism in Thailand during the early stage of the contemporary civic culture movement, which started with the T-shirt movement, could also be compared to the US T-shirt political movement in 2010, which emphasised the visibility of the wearers and their political agenda (Penney, 2012). Contemporary political-cultural activism is opening up new opportunities that enable everyday citizens to engage in political activity.

The new platforms of social media, such as Facebook in this research, also provide a contemporary political environment which enables a new type of symbolic political participation (Bucy and Gregson, 2001). The T-shirt, which symbolised political identity and engagement in the PAD and pro-Thaksin movements, has been modified by contemporary and popular culture to represent additional layers of symbolism in the PDRC movement. The colour of a T-shirt did not only represent a political allegiance; it also embedded concepts of social class, symbolic capital, taste and class style. This is similar to Bourdieu’s view (1984) that differences of status and lifestyle could result in social collectivities. The power of symbolism has established boundaries between individuals from

different types of background and status. It also has the power to mobilise collective movements among those who share a similar habitus and status.

In addition to symbolic actions such as wearing a T-shirt and purchasing political endorsement accessories, the new social media phenomenon of clicktivism, which included sharing, posting and clicking like for political material on Facebook, established another form of political participation (Lee and Hsieh, 2013). Political statements and actions on Facebook – whether signing up to an interest group, posting a picture, reposting videos or changing a profile picture – could be considered to be a form of conscious political engagement. Though clicktivism is a disposable and non-committal act (Skoric, 2012), it may lead to greater political participation in the future.

The concept of turning social media political participation into more committed civic engagement in the future has been demonstrated through the Facebook civic engagement by middle-class Thais. The data shows the further commitment of the informants to taking part in actual political participation with their preferred political party, such as political meetings, gatherings and other activities, even after a campaign or movement had finished. In addition, the use of symbolic action in political communication during the time of martial law and the junta government is another impressive result of their previous symbolic online political action. Symbolism, during this period, played an important part in gathering like-minded people, just as Lasswell and Kaplan (1950, p.119) once claimed that symbols “arouse admiration and enthusiasm, setting forth and strengthening faiths and loyalties”.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion-class division in social media political participation

This thesis has focused on the growing usage of social media for political participation in Thailand. A new type of political action, in which people could share political views as well as reference global political symbols, was also observed. Drawing on an ethnographic study of Facebook in Thailand, this study has explored people's everyday use of social media and how their social media consumption affects their political participation. Due to the fact that existing research on political participation on social media in Thailand mainly focuses on social media as a tool for political participation, this thesis has tried to fill a gap in the literature by regarding social media consumption as a practice, an aspect that has been neglected by mainstream Thai social media researchers.

In attempting to explore media consumption in Thailand that relates to politics as a social practice that can be influenced by the social and cultural background of the consumer, this study devised four research questions:

RQ1: What is the quality of mediated political participation of middle-class Thais?

RQ2: What is the quality of their political participation?

RQ3: What is the relationship between politics and sociality in Thailand?

RQ4: What is the impact of digital media on middle-class Thais' political participation?

In answering these questions, the thesis includes the important formation of social class in the picture. As social class has divided Thais for a long time, which has been compounded by the recent political situation in the country, political interest is another factor that causes Thais' views towards politics and social media to be divided. As the topic relates so closely to social and cultural issues, ethnographic research was chosen to help gain an understanding of the culture within behaviour and also to help gain in-depth access to some enclosed political communities in Thailand during the time of the witch-hunts under the junta government.

In addition, in understanding how social media fits into middle-class Thais' media consumption in relation to their political participation, the theoretical framework of political participation, social class and social media is employed. Based on the country's social class structure and the fact that inherent inequality impacts social media communication, this study shows how everyday social media consumption, everyday social practice, social class background, and social media consumption and practice that relate to political participation shape political participation usage of social media, which claimed to offer freedom of expression to everyone.

Moreover, social media, which allows both partisanship and deliberative debate, is used more for polarising behaviour in Thailand, which is a result of the country's divided political background. In this study, the sphere of social media politics involves the Thai middle class in social media protest and political usage based more on building up their group membership than on pushing forward their political convictions. The interrelationship between social classes and political background also impacts social media practice on the lifestyle basis. The division of social class is amplified, while class identity can also be observed.

In studying political participation on social media as media consumption practice, the practice invariably involves social and cultural aspects. Similar to the study of other social and cultural aspects, ethnographic research is needed. Moreover, since Thailand is ruled by a junta government that imposes martial law, ethnographic research allows intimacy and discreet inside information from each political faction during a time of division in politics between people. The ethnographic approach offers an opportunity to access the data beyond traditional quantitative methodologies (Sade-Beck, 2004). It provides an opportunity for the researcher to understand the case through the eyes and experiences of the insiders. The approach allows the researcher to explore the informants' political practice on their social media account similar to the natural culture of a particular community. In this thesis, the language usage, beliefs and patterns of behaviour of a social media scene were explored.

Different ways of approaching politics can also be observed through people's methods of media consumption (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007b, p.2). Observing people's everyday experience of political participation can

reflect how they position themselves politically. The ethnographic approach directly explores people's political habits and political processes outside institutional politics. Through the ethnographic approach, the different forms of political engagement – such as voting, activism and movements beyond the verbal communication mode – have appeared. Similar to other growing literature in ethnographic media research (Eliasoph, 2011; Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Postill and Pink, 2012), the approach helps in searching for hidden practices and clarifying their relationship to digital protest in Thailand, as well as in analysing different kinds of political engagement and how they relate to the informants' social class.

The ethnographic approach revealed that the social class and class position of middle-class Thais impacts their decisions and approaches towards social media. Social class identity can be identified through the analysis of their Facebook page and their social media activity and practice. The class background of Thai middle-class informants framed their responses to social and political events. The study found that social class identity also framed their judgement towards others' social media practice as well as separated "acceptable" from "unacceptable" social media practice (Foucault 1980; Bourdieu, 1984). Different class positions resulted in different views regarding social conformity among other social values.

The different patterns of political participation observed in this research are also framed by middle-class Thais' different class positions and social class backgrounds. The ethnographic approach allows deeper engagement with their social practice as well as their social media practice. Digital ethnography and social media technology also grant access to past events. This thesis has looked at the 2013/14 political movement in Thailand, which promoted enormous social media usage for political purposes.

To summarise my findings and contributions to the existing literature, I have listed several keys points found in this research below.

8.1 Social media reinforces and/or deepens class division

Facebook and other social media applications come with high hopes for enhancing political participation (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012). However, in the situation of Thailand, where the current political scene has been divided by a deep cleavage, social media does not promote an environment of free participation as much as

amplify the gap, whether it is a social or a political gap. Facebook proved to be one factor in deepening class division, whether it is intra or inter class relations.

One significant factor in how Facebook usage has provoked deeper class division among middle-class Thais is their separation in political opinion. Since 2006, Thailand has been caught up in intense political contestation between two rival factions: pro-Thaksin and anti-Thaksin (Ungpakorn, 2008). As a result, media have already been used to frame political identity and encourage people to take sides. Social media, as a new channel, is just an alternative outlet for pre-existing divisions. The deepening of class divisions among the informants has been observed in terms of both inequality in access and how usage has further distanced the different groups from each other.

The digital inequality in Thailand has caused inevitable unequal access to social media even among similar social classes, let alone among the majority of rural Thais. While the upper- and middle-middle-class informants have enjoyed full access to social media as their social class advantage allowed, the lower-middle-class informants have suffered some digital barriers due to the limitations of their devices, data allowances and proficiency. Better access to digital resources can enhance digital engagement for some people, which widens the gap that economic disadvantage has already created (Robinson *et al.*, 2015). In Thailand digital inequality has played its part in promoting one class disposition as the dominant social culture, similar to what has been observed in other developing countries (Robinson *et al.*, 2015).

In chapter five, I found that the digital inequality in Thailand can be seen on both the first level (access) and the second level (skill). Different social class backgrounds can permit or prohibit people's access to social media and the internet. The higher the class, the more opportunities they have to access the internet and social media, due for example to the quality of their devices, better connections to the internet and larger data allowances. Disadvantages in socio-economic status could cause digital inequality (Witte and Mannon, 2010) not only in usage but also in proficiency. The upper- and middle-middle classes, who are equipped with education, money and technology, have taken advantage of social media, while the lower-middle class have struggled with language, technology and budget barriers.

All in all, digital inequality can not only create unequal opportunities in accessing social media, but also amplify a social class gap on social media, where one class with better opportunities takes the dominant position in promoting its class ideology as the dominant norm. In Thailand, where social class impacts political interest, the unequal position of class ideology is also represented in the unequal political expression. This will lead onto another issue of divided class and political ideology on social media, which I will examine further in relation to the next topic.

On the other hand, in terms of social media practice, the separation of political preference controls how the two factions separate themselves from each other. Since the political interest in Thailand is highly shaped by social class (Laothammatas, 1994), the political groups among middle-class Thais are also class based. While most of the upper- and middle-middle-class informants are big royalists whose ideas focus mainly on overthrowing Thaksin's clan, the majority of lower-middle-class informants identify themselves as members of the pro-Thaksin faction. Due to their differences in political opinion and social class ideology, the two groups distance themselves from each other on and offline.

In chapter five I observed how Facebook enables individuals to tailor their own newsfeeds, which means they can choose whether or not they see posts from each of their friends. Around one-third of the participants have taken advantage of this technology to avoid seeing what they have framed as provocative content. For example, Samorn (51, middle-middle class, anti-Thaksin) asked me to set her newsfeed preference once she realised this advantage. Trying to distance herself from what she described as "inappropriate stuff", Samorn is happy to hide or even unfriend some of her acquaintances. This promotes an egocentric type of network (Rojas, 2013) rather than encouraging exposure to all public information.

Similarly, as outlined in chapter six, Sanit (36, middle-middle class, pro-Thaksin), rather than befriend colleagues from a similar social class, chooses students with a lower-class status who have similar political views as his political buddies both on and off Facebook. The tension among a diverse political society causes people to tailor their newsfeed to suit their taste by avoiding irritating material from the opposite side as much as possible. However, the scale of disagreement ranks from avoidance to confrontation, depending on the degree of

“Kreng jai” experienced by those involved – this is an issue that I will expand on later.

The phenomenon of separation on social media from different political opinions has started to be observed elsewhere. For example, the Brexit result caused many disagreements among UK citizens. Racial abuse and calls for pro-EU and anti-Brexit protests and another vote on Scottish independence have been seen both on and offline (*BBC news*, 2016a; *BBC news*, 2016b). Furthermore, similar divisions among citizens occurred in the US after the United States presidential election of 2016 (*News.com.au*, 2016). During and after the campaign, anti-Semitic speech was frequently posted on Facebook and other social media (*USA Today*, 2016). The tone of aggressive conversation found in US social media represents how people can be distanced from each other by political social media usage.

As a result, under the new channel of social media, users’ background – in terms of their social class, identity, and social and cultural setting – still impacts their media consumption and practice. With the current situation of political cleavage in Thailand, a new type of media carries on the division among citizens. This division in Facebook consumption and practice is also observable quality of the informants’ political participation, which I will discuss further in the next part.

8.2 Class division is a distinctive attribute of political participation

As mentioned earlier, social class and ideology underpin the political factions in Thailand. The long confrontation among class-divided Thai citizens from 2006 to the present is based on differences of social class, ideologies and social order, which initiate other practices that affect and evolve around Thai politics and impact Thai political practice. The result of this research proves also that the usage of Facebook for political participation purposes shows that Thais continue their mediated political practice around their social class position and ideology. Moreover, as building their social network is one of the reasons informants use their social media account, building their social network and fulfilling other social achievements also relate to their social media practice and mediated political practice. The political participation of middle-class Thais has become a performative regulated practice.

Generally, the political participation on social media of middle-class Thai informants shares similarities with their offline political participation. Each political faction benefits from its political engagement on Facebook in different ways. According to their social class division, the informants, for the most part, separate into different political factions. Most of the upper- and middle-middle-class informants were traditionally supporters of the King; they became the anti-Thaksin faction (Kuhonta and Sinpeng, 2014). On the other hand, as strong supporters of Thaksin, the majority of the lower middle class eventually became members of the pro-Thaksin group (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011). Social class plays an important part in political participation on Facebook in Thailand. Social class affects users' participation on social media (Schrade, 2012). The political performance of the informants relates to their social class and background. Their political interest indicates how they have connected politically on Facebook. Social class also causes informants to take separate directions in political participation, political involvement and movement (Hewison, 2014).

The majority of middle-class Thais are continuing to shape their ideal of normative political practice as their mediated online political practice, especially the upper- and middle-middle-class informants. Most of the upper- and middle-middle-class informants regard conservative concepts as the ideal ideology, which was typically approved by the majority of society (Eawsriwong, 2013). Still, political groups also impact the direction of political practice among different social classes. The anti-Thaksin informants from the upper and middle classes are more interested in pursuing the best for the nation. On the other hand, the lower-middle-class anti-Thaksin informants' main agenda is "saving the monarchy" (Wangkulum, 2010).

As I discovered in chapter six, the anti-Thaksin faction focuses heavily on involvement in participatory democracy to create "morality and transparency" in politics. To promote that ideology, they have posted and shared political viral posters, quotations and posts created for the anti-Thaksin/support-the-monarchy concept. During the time of the coup, these conservative supporters also posted photos of themselves with their like-minded political friends doing various activities, wearing political-endorsement T-shirts, participating in various demonstrations and even posing with tanks and soldiers. Social media has served

their desire to identify and promote their political belief to the public without having to take part in conventional political activity. Posting on Facebook has suited the political practice of the upper- and middle-middle-class informants, who were not as politically active as the lower-middle-class informants.

At the same time, it becomes their duty to promote their class culture to be the dominant norm on Facebook. With or without their awareness, their expression reflects a middle-class image and norms. Since their socio-economic status enables them to access Facebook via better technology and internet connections, the upper- and middle-middle classes dominate Thai social media. As a result, their social class's habitus, which has given value to conservative Thai norms, and their conservative political ideas are also made into the dominant social values on social media. This is similar to Bourdieu's and Foucault's (Bourdieu, 1984; Foucault, 1991) argument that class, culture and lifestyle unconsciously frame, create and reproduce individual behaviour. Foucault's term "governmentality" and Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic violence" determine an individual's social life.

Social media also responded to their wish to fulfil their social need. Facebook political practice of middle-class Thais has combined their political participation with their sociality performance. Their posts and interaction on Facebook regarding political participation has also been seen as their sociality duty. Middle-class Thais eagerly engage in political activities if the activities can represent both their sociality practice and their political practice. This performative regulated political practice has been observed throughout their Facebook mediated political participation.

In chapter six, the thesis highlighted that rather than just posting their own political opinions, Facebook's capacity to be an open space for two-way communication on social media enabled the informants to directly or indirectly participate in various political activities (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012). Sharing political news, expressing their political views and sending political messages directly to like-minded friends became popular forms of Facebook political practice. The participants explained that they wanted others to read certain messages, so they decided to share them on their Facebook page. Some used their interpersonal relationships to encourage their associates to participate politically

by tagging them (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995). Since they are already very comfortable in showing off their lifestyle, they have engaged their lifestyle with their political expression (Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010). Facebook has turned posting political content, sharing political news and attending political events into a sociality action. Once they have engaged in political participation with their sociality practice, political participation for middle-class Thais inevitably becomes performative regulated action.

In fact, in chapter six, I also observed another example of confrontation and disagreement among middle-class Thais in relation to their mediated political participation on Facebook. Ideological disagreements between anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin supporters distance each group from the other. While the former aims for nationalism, royalism and other conservative political ideals, the latter embraces a more Western kind of ideology and supports liberalism. Interestingly, as the pro-Thaksin group is a minority among the middle class, their reaction to the new dominant social value on social media causes them to rebel against the majority performative regulated action.

In chapter five, Weera (39) and Sakda (38), two upper-middle-class pro-Thaksin supporters, who grew up as typical members of the middle class, responded to the majority performative regulated action with their idea of rebellion. They created sarcastic posts about the typical social media manner and political social media practice of the anti-Thaksin group. The concept of middle-class discipline that has been embedded in social practice has been challenged online. On Thai Facebook, this creates confrontation between the new and old social orders as well as new and old political ideologies.

This concept of rebellion goes against mainstream conservative norms and social conformity, which is another significant style of the Thai middle class's social media usage. It is essential for the middle class to correct anything that they see as wrong, unacceptable or offensive. As a result, Thai Facebook mediated political practice becomes a practice that is more like a witch-hunt than deliberative argument or debate. Similar to Thai society's determination to establish a "correct" political and social practice on new media, a strong sense of social conformity is also evident in South Korea (Miller, 2011, p.187). While social conformity in South Korea's social media scene causes society to unite in identifying and condemning

anti-social behaviour, the practice of normative social control on Facebook in Thailand results in confrontation between two political groups.

The differences in the core of their class virtue affect the quality of political participation among middle-class Thai informants. The division of social identity and ideology – where the majority of the upper- and middle-middle classes yearn for conservative norms, but the lower-middle class and their supporters from minority upper- and middle-middle classes prefer liberal values – creates antagonism and confrontation on Thai social media regarding the normative practice. The division shapes their Facebook mediated political participation and creates further deeper class division and confrontation between political groups. Social class background and the influence of class disposition shape social media mediated political practice among middle-class Thais.

8.3 “Kreng jai” as a social and cultural aspect in social media practice and political participation

Another significant result from this research in understanding the effect of social media on Thai middle-class mediated political participation is the strong impact of social and cultural factors on political participation among Thais. The traditional Thai Kreng jai concept, which refers to the attitude of deep consideration that is shown to a strong tie or superior person, prohibits further violence and aggressive confrontation. As this concept of avoidance and being considerate towards others' feelings is also closely related to social class position, social class ideology, again, proves its effect on social media mediated performance.

Though the disagreement and deep cleavage among political groups has been visible and is amplified by the usage of social media, according to the informants' reports, there is not a great deal of physical violence. Rather, the sense of avoiding conflict in politics is more observable everywhere. Thai political society has been through almost a decade of political conflicts. Therefore, Thai middle-class informants have become more sceptical about expressing their political views in public. Moreover, politics is not a common topic among Thais. It is deemed to be an inappropriate topic of social conversation (Aksang, 2010). Political discussion often occurs among close peers or family members (Yangyuen, 2006). Informants

are more likely to raise such a topic among those with similar views than in a cross-group interaction.

Avoidance of political participation often occurs among the politically inactive informants and the informants who have different political ideas to their associates (Aksang, 2010). The feeling of Kreng jai towards people who are their close associates or workplace colleagues prohibits the informants from frankly presenting their political views. Among Thais, politics, similar to religious belief, age and weight, is regarded as a conversational taboo. Therefore, Thais strongly avoid actual political conversation, as it could lead to confrontation. In fact, compromising is the best solution for informants who could not avoid political topics among their friends and family.

Research from south India and Turkey confirms a similar concept of social relationships framing the direction of people's Facebook posting (Costa, 2016; Venkatraman, 2017). In India, the concrete caste system adds further layers of complexities that frame social media usage. In Turkey, the sceptical community is confined to politically inactive practice in order to maintain relationships with others.

A sense of Kreng jai that turns into avoidance or quietness can also be observed in the informants' non-political social media practice on Facebook. As outlined in chapter 5, Chatchai (30, lower-middle class, anti-Thaksin), while confessing to me his embarrassing habit of photo editing in order to gain like clicks from his Facebook friends, said that he disapproved of similar behaviour by women. He referred to Thai women asking for affirmation from social media through photo editing as a humorous "girl thing", but said that he did not respond to those posts in a negative manner, which was how he actually felt. Instead, he went along with others who posted comforting comments because he "did not want to get in trouble".

Similar to Kreng jai in Thai cultural practice, gift exchange is one of the rules in social interaction in many societies (Mauss, 1990). The process of simultaneously giving and receiving establishes reciprocal relationships that shape social relations. In Chinese hospitals, for example, a patient who gives a small gift to the healthcare provider would receive a more positive response than those who have not given any gift (Currie et al., 2013). This gift-giving protocol could also lead

to a strong feeling of guilt whenever the gift recipient cannot live up to the expectations of the gift-giver (Charness and Dufwenberg, 2006).

Thanks to social media, Kreng jai becomes much more visible. Particular social groups become more visible to other people by the superiority of their social status or the stronger social ties they have. Kreng jai controls in-group interaction as well as a group's social media performance. Similar patterns of avoidance offline are presented in the informants' political practice online. However, the online avoidance is mostly a result of the informants' fear of political disagreement among their immediate friends and family on Facebook.

As I observed in chapter six, Sanit (36, middle-middle class, pro-Thaksin) and Sakda (38, upper-middle class, pro-Thaksin) did not experience any discrimination from their anti-Thaksin colleagues as long as they tried to avoid political conversation both on and offline. Since he had been in an awkward position among his colleagues in relation to his online political participation, Sakda learned not to get involved in social media political discussion or debate, as it could lead to difficult relationships in his workplace.

On the other hand, the informants who have similar political opinions to their peers seem to enjoy talking casually about politics. Kreng jai has another impact on their mediated political participation on Facebook. Similar to Chatchai posting comforting comments even though he did not like the original post (outlined in chapter five), informants changing their Facebook profile into a colour-theme picture as a symbolic action (as noted in chapter seven) was a result of feeling Kreng jai and not wanting to be the odd one out among immediate friends. The sense of belonging to a group causes some informants who have different political preferences from their friends to be treated with hostility. The obviousness of divisions among people in the same social class can be more visible from their social media political practice. Those who refuse to comply with the majority behaviour get some hostile treatment, though it is not an extreme social sanction.

As a result, avoidance of political participation also often occurs among the politically inactive. Though confrontation between friends and family that have different political views will not turn into violence, they prefer not to risk it. They do not agree on politics, but they still live their life as a family as usual, without

having a serious discussion on this controversial topic. As outlined in chapter six, most of the informants who have different political views from their family and immediate friends will sometimes talk politics, although they will not criticise others' political beliefs or try to change them. For example, Jitra (46, lower-middle class, anti-Thaksin), who occasionally satirised her mother's pro-Thaksin behaviour, did not criticise her mother's feelings or prevent her from supporting Thaksin.

In the event of a political confrontation on personal Facebook pages, it is unlikely that the two people involved know each other personally. As outlined in chapter six, the informants report that the owner of the page rarely originates or responds to the attack; rather, his or her friends who do not agree on political issues generate the argument, while the page owner stays silent until the argument ends. The informants, who are from three groups with different political preferences state that they rarely get involved in political confrontations on their personal Facebook page. Some younger pro-Thaksin informants boasted of getting involved in these kinds of incidents, as they did not see the immediate consequences of online fights with strangers. Among strangers, Kreng jai has limited influence on a person's behaviour, as they do not know each other personally. However, they were the exception, and for the most part, actual confrontation occurs not on personal Facebook pages, but on the news media, in public forums or on other official public Facebook pages (Media Literacy, 2012).

A similar phenomenon of a sociocultural factor having an impact on social media practice was observed in Trinidad. Miller (2011) argued that in understanding social media practice and consumption of social media, one should try to understand what a particular culture makes of it. The social culture of different places inevitably creates different social media mediated practice. Like "Kreng jai" in Thailand, the concept of "Bacchanal" in Trinidad, which is a type of disorder that derives from scandal and gossip and is often used to describe Trinidadian culture in general, tends to alter and frame people's social media practice. These two concepts, which are used to describe the general cultural frame in these two countries, impact how people in Thailand and Trinidad consume and are mediated around social media.

All in all, political talk in Thailand is prohibited in some social groups (Eliasoph and Licherman, 2003). Because of Kreng jai, both anti-Thaksin and pro-Thaksin informants prefer to take their political agenda elsewhere rather than confront their immediate friends on Facebook who have different political ideas. The tension among a diverse political society results in self-censorship and negotiation of self-presentation (Binder, Howes and Sutcliffe, 2009; Thorson, 2014). Social and cultural factors embedded in middle-class Thais' social media usage affect both their social mediated practice and their political mediated practice on Facebook.

8.4 Social media promotes an echo chamber rather than deliberative democracy

With the situation of political division among Thais since the 2006 political crisis, mass media has played a major role in fuelling the movement of people in most protests. Thai mainstream media have been used as partisan tools in recruiting, maintaining, communicating and mobilising people against each other. As a result, though social media have proved to be influential tools in political regime changes elsewhere (Keller, 2010; Howard and Hussain, 2011), the divided nature of Thai politics turned this new media into a partisan one. This new technology facilitated people to become even more partisan than usual. The Thai Facebook scene was full of sarcastic political posters and viral propaganda, rather than fruitful political participation. Grömping (2014) suggested that Thailand Facebook usage acts more like an echo chamber, rather than offering deliberation in a democratic public sphere.

Before social media, Thailand had already encountered the partisan media phenomenon, as the media was used as a partisan tool to mobilise political factions. Every political faction in Thailand had already created its own channel to communicate to its followers and supporters (Behnjarachajarunandha, 2011; Cheangsan, 2011; Magpanthong and McDaniel, 2011). Thais are familiar with partisan media, whether it is 24-hour live broadcasting satellite channels, personal media, community radio or locally produced print media. With the background of division among the supporters of political factions, some middle-class Thais have

already chosen partisan media that suits their opinion, rather than opting for a neutral one. Their social media practice is related to their previous media practice.

Thanks to social media features that allow people to filter their own search, the cleavage in their media usage deepened. Each political faction claimed their political legitimacy and that they represented the interests of the majority while selecting their own content of news that they wanted to read, channel that they wanted to follow and information that they wanted to know. Bakshy, Messing and Adamic (2015) found that Facebook's newsfeed is more likely to support a user's previous interest and to reflect the user's political ideology, and therefore users of Facebook view biased political news. The result is that Facebook acts more like an echo chamber, rather than offering a fair and balanced political conversation.

Social media is an innovation that concentrates on users' content and choice (von Hippel, 2005). The situation of political cleavage might create more chances for Thais to exchange political opinions, but opinions are in fact more likely to be raised among those with similar views rather than in a cross-group interaction. Facebook's ability for individuals to tailor their own newsfeeds promotes content that contains self-interest and an egocentric type of network (Rojas, 2013). As a result, Facebook is used for expressing political opinions rather than being an open space for exchanging political ideas. In chapter 5, most informants stated that this advantage had helped them to avoid seeing some annoying pictures and stories, mostly political ones.

The majority of upper- and middle-middle-class participants have enjoyed expressing their political opinions and gaining support from their like-minded friends, while lower-middle-class participants have tended to take their politically active habits to another level via the publicity aspect of Facebook, which enables them to control and search more widely for their political information. Both the anti-Thaksin and the pro-Thaksin political factions are happy to embrace their opportunities in this additional public space in their own way. However, their spaces do not collide unless it is unavoidable; most of the time, these collisions lead to confrontation, not deliberation.

As observed in chapter six, anti-Thaksin informants are familiar with sharing or reposting of others' political communication posts on Facebook that express similar political views to their own or represent their ideas. Since they are

a majority on Facebook due to their digital and socio-economic advantages, their political viral posters, quotations and posts dominate the Thai Facebook political scene. Since the anti-Thaksin faction is the majority in the virtual world, it gives them confidence and the false impression that there are a large number of like-minded people in remote locations. It is a confidence that they have never had offline, as normally they are politically inactive. As a result, it gives them encouragement to express themselves politically online. However, they confess that they would join a political activity that requires their physical engagement only if their time and resources permit it.

On the other hand, as seen in chapter six, the pro-Thaksin faction could only express their political opinions via symbolic action, sarcastic content and sharing political information or articles. Being the minority on Facebook, they are limited in expressing their political opinions. For example, as highlighted in chapter five, due to the privileges of being a majority, the upper- and middle-middle classes tend to occupy Facebook with their lifestyle, which tends to promote their middle-class cosmopolitan living. The lower-middle class, on the other hand, show off their class origins and identity by using dialect in their communication.

With their stronger background in political participation, most Facebook posts by pro-Thaksin supporters relate to politics rather than their social life or other issues. They are more exposed to political information than those who are driven more by a social networking agenda (Kahne *et al*, 2012). For the pro-Thaksin informants, Facebook is their political channel not just for showing their political identity, but also for expressing their political views with like-minded friends. The pro-Thaksin informants are also keen on political information seeking. Their offline political activity reflects their online political activity (Oser, Hooghe and Marien, 2013).

Overall, this self-centred participation could harm political participation rather than boost support (Fenton and Barassi, 2011). Also, it tends to create partisanship and political polarisation rather than participatory engagement that might lead to a solution. The political communication of middle-class Thai informants on Facebook concentrates on intergroup relations rather than intragroup communication. This environment of political polarisation could lead to partisanship (Stroud, 2010).

8.5 Social media facilitates more unconventional politics than conventional politics

Since the act of political participation is no longer strictly confined to conventional practices such as voting, an individual's lifestyle, personality, values and personal issues could also be claimed to be acts of political participation (Dahlgren, 2009). Middle-class Thais took full advantage of this shift towards unconventional political participation. As mentioned previously, politics is one of the inappropriate topics of social conversation among Thais, and it is therefore difficult for Thais to comfortably participate in conventional or direct political participation (Aksang, 2010). As a result, a more lifestyle-orientated politics, which moved away from conventional political participation (Stolle and Hooghe, 2011; Stolle *et al.*, 2005), became a popular choice among middle-class Thais.

For example, from the PAD movement in 2005 to the latest PDRC movement in 2013-14, lifestyle became the best alternative to political participation for middle-class Thais. The actions of owning coloured T-shirts, headbands, scarves and wristbands or of singing themed music have been used among political factions to communicate with their supporters, enabling the supporters to be politically engaged without directly stating their political opinions. As outlined in chapter six, alternative political participation has not only been popular among middle-class Thais throughout the political movement of 2013-14; it has also given them more opportunities to participate in more lifestyle-based activities, such as seizures of buildings, theatrical forms of protest, concerts, street performances and events like Picnic Day. They are more comfortable in showing off their lifestyle than talking about politics, so that they have merged their lifestyle with their political expression (Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010). As observed in chapter six, the participants are keen to post pictures of themselves taken around protest sites, offering food to soldiers or posing with a political celebrity or leader to show their political identity. These visible actions announce their political agenda (Penney, 2012).

Similarly, on Facebook, where users are encouraged to engage in lifestyle-orientated and identity politics more than conventional politics (Papacharissi, 2010), middle-class Thais have shared their political agenda via their Facebook

posts. From changing their Facebook profile to reposting political content, the informants' actions demonstrate that lifestyles and consumption embody everyday politics (Dalton, 2008).

This indicates that the social media sphere does not encourage middle-class Thais to join conventional political communication (Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010); rather, it facilitates them to engage in unconventional and indirect political participation (Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012). The new indirect political participation is also best suited to the existing political participation pattern in Thailand. For example, as outlined in chapter six, most participants confirm that they prefer to share or repost others' posts expressing similar political views to their own or representing their ideas rather than expressing their opinions in their own words. It gives them more confidence in expressing their political identity, which they have rarely done offline. Some may be more comfortable with just identifying themselves with a political quotation, which is sufficient regular political engagement for them (Loader and Mercea, 2011). Posting unconventional political content on Facebook also serves not just as a political statement, but as a signifier of social and civic engagement (Dahlgren, 2009).

Contrary to the previous perception of the new social media phenomenon as clicktivism, which suggested a minimal chance of long-term political participation, middle-class Thais' lifestyle-based political action could lead to longer-term political engagement offline. Khomsan's mother's frequent purchases of detergent, rice and other household appliances promoted by her favourite partisan television channel, as mentioned in chapter seven, and the way political partisan channels became household television channels, as highlighted in chapter six, indicated that middle-class Thais have begun to include politics in their lifestyle on a regular basis. For middle-class Thais, adding politics to their lifestyle-based activity might be more comfortable and permanent than engaging in other conventional forms of political participation. This action of choosing lifestyle-based unconventional political participation over a conventional form could be more extreme among some middle-class Thais, who have rejected conventional political participation such as voting. For example, as observed in chapter seven, Jitra, who

had voted in previous elections, boycotted the election on 2 February 2014 in order to advance her political agenda, as did all of my anti-Thaksin informants.

The performance of unconventional political participation to represent their chosen lifestyle and political identity is also played out in middle-class Thais' Facebook usage through the enormous volume of symbolic action. In fact, middle-class Thais had begun using symbolic action during the PAD rallies in 2005-2006, long before their action on social media. The action of promoting their lifestyle-orientated politics in this section will be expanded into more symbolic action of middle-class Thais in the next section.

8.6 Sociality entrenched norms and practice transform social media practice in promoting symbolic action

Though there has been political cleavage in Thailand for over a decade, the situation has not progressed to more physical violence or strong confrontations in society, as the social and cultural background, such as Kreng jai, has limited such confrontations. As a result, the same practice also occurs in middle-class Thais' mediated political participation on social media. In avoiding strong confrontation but still wishing to express their political opinions and identity on social media, middle-class Thais utilise other functions of Facebook in promoting symbolic political action. Due to its function in supporting various types of communication, Facebook in Thailand is full of viral political posters, sarcastic Facebook fan pages and many kinds of symbolic political participation.

Facebook in Thailand is not only a new channel of participation that could be useful for gathering political information, even for those who do not want any involvement in politics (Sweetser and Kaid, 2008), but also a medium that can be used for political messages. However, it is up to the users' motives and ability to differentiate their level of engagement on social media (Campbell and Kwak, 2010). Politically active people still express their political views directly without any hints or hidden symbolism, while others who are not familiar with political engagement have new options for their political expression. In fact, the features and facilities of Facebook and open space for two-way communication on social media allow the participants to indirectly participate in various political activities

(Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012) that do not restrict direct political participation anymore.

In addition to viral political posts, which are popular everywhere, middle-class Thais have expressed their political agenda via other types of symbolic action as well. For example, as seen in chapter six, they post their symbolic political activity on their social media page to represent their political interest and support. In addition to wearing a coloured T-shirt to represent their political opinion, middle-class Thais post pictures of themselves on social media wearing political T-shirts, visiting protest sites and undertaking other activities related to their political actions. The variety of middle-class Thais' symbolic action also includes creating mobile applications, online stickers, symbolic posting, and other satirical or metaphorical activities. Since popular culture and politics are becoming increasingly blurred nowadays (Dahlgren, 2009), the use of popular-culture metaphors and symbolism that have been found on Facebook in Thailand could be considered politically oriented usage, such as the three-finger salute adopted from a Hollywood movie, as seen in chapter seven.

This indicates that the social media sphere does not encourage middle-class Thais to join conventional political communication (Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010); rather, it facilitates them to participate in unconventional and indirect political participation (Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012). This new indirect political participation is also best suited to the existing political participation pattern in Thailand. From the PAD movement in 2005 to the latest PDRC movement in 2013-14, symbolic action became the best alternative to political participation for Thais. The PAD rallies in 2005-2006 were a breakthrough of contemporary symbolic political action in Thailand (Wangkulam, 2010). Coloured T-shirts, headbands, scarves, wristbands and themed music were used among political factions to communicate with their supporters. As observed in chapter seven, the informants also mentioned other previous kinds of political symbolic action performed by political movements, such as seizure movements, theatrical forms of protest, concerts and street performances.

Similarly, on Facebook, where users are encouraged to engage in lifestyle and identity politics more than conventional politics (Papacharissi, 2010), middle-class Thais have shared their political agenda via their symbolic action. In chapter

seven, I listed many contemporary online symbolic actions used by middle-class Thais in their Facebook practice. The simplest symbolic political action of middle-class Thais is sharing viral posts. As mentioned in chapter six, most of the participants felt more comfortable reposting the original rather than creating their own post. This type of symbolic action is very popular among middle-class Facebook users.

Since they focus on their social class in building social connections rather than concentrating purely on politics, the anti-Thaksin informants engage in more unconventional political engagement by combining politics with social life (Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010), which results in a variety of unconventional anti-Thaksin political posts.

Pro-Thaksin informants find that the trusted and private space they have found on social media suits their safer political participation in finding new like-minded friends. The difference is that their online political performance is a more discreet option compared to the offline one. Particularly with the enforcement of lèse-majesté law under the junta government, the real political action of the pro-Thaksin supporters is actually in an exclusive secret Facebook group rather than a public one. While keeping quiet on their own Facebook page, pro-Thaksin informants visit Facebook fan pages to explore political news and make new friends.

On the other hand, Facebook has the benefit of enabling the development of social capital (Steinfield *et al.*, 2008) that could support offline social interaction and other political activity (Bond *et al.*, 2012). As a result, Facebook could engage people online to take part in actual political activity offline, as in the example of the V For Thailand movement mentioned at the beginning of the thesis. Even after the demonstration, the relationships built online and at the protest site have gone on. For example, as seen in chapter seven, Nongluck (47, middle-middle class, anti-Thaksin) expands her symbolic political action to engage her like-minded friends and family by buying them political T-shirts. Other informants who engage in the activities confirm that they still connect politically or socially via Facebook. They have also confirmed Facebook's role in encouraging them to participate in politics, by starting with symbolic action online.

However, for some politically inactive groups, social media does not make any difference to their political engagement. Some middle-class Thai informants, especially those who are non-partisan, continue to avoid politics. As a result, the politically active informants use their new resource to obtain and exchange further political information, while the politically inactive participants continue to avoid politics with or without this new medium.

8.7 Conclusion: answering the research questions

In response to the research questions listed in chapter one, this study employed the framework of social media mediated political participation to help in understanding how social media has been a major tool in engaging middle-class Thais in their political participation, everyday mediated political participation and sociality. By framing mediated political participation of middle-class Thais as a part of their social practice (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007a), this thesis also focuses on how the social and cultural background of the middle class impacts their Facebook usage. Moreover, this thesis acknowledges how the country's social class structure and inherent inequality impact this social media communication. In fact, the deeply divided political background in Thailand is also considered in this thesis in finding out how social class and political interest can frame middle-class Thais' social media practice that relates to their political participation.

Firstly, the thesis asked: what is the quality of mediated political participation of middle-class Thais and what is the quality of their political participation? The result shows that middle-class Thais' mediated practice relates to their political participation, as their social class and sociocultural background frame how the informants choose to participate politically on and off media. Social class influences each informant's social practice as well as their media practice and political participation.

To expand the result further, mediated practice on Facebook of middle-class Thais shows that their social class constructs and sometimes curbs their social practice including their political practice. Normative discourse rules and regulates how people perceive or consent to the natural order (Bourdieu, 2001) as well as voluntarily control themselves through self-surveillance and self-disciplinary practices (Foucault, 1980). Therefore, their political and social

practice on Facebook is a result of social class recognition, social class representation and reproduction of their social class virtue. The majority simply acts according to the existing class order, reproducing discourse and affirmation of differences between social classes, while a minority declines the major structure and rebels against the dynamics of power in society.

Furthermore, this study intended to answer also: what is the relationship between politics and sociality in Thailand? And, finally, what is the impact of digital media on the informants' political participation? The previous results have revealed how social class and social culture impact on the political practice and political participation of middle-class Thais, and the latter question can be answered in a similar manner. The background of social class and social culture influences how middle-class Thais perform their political practice and is also visible in their sociality practice.

In contrast to prior researches focusing on social media and political participation, which concentrate mostly on framing social media as a political tool, by regarding social media as a practice, this thesis refuses to gain its results by observing the volume of political usage of social media. Rather, the thesis focuses more on the dynamics of ethnographic research, which allow the researcher to understand social media usage as a social practice. By doing so, the users' sociocultural and social class background becomes the central means of understanding the informants' social media practice. The result from this approach shows that not only is sociality in Thailand closely related to middle-class Thais' politics, as the division among political groups is based mostly on their social class and class position, but the sociality factor also influences how Thais perform their social and political practice on and offline. Thai sociocultural behaviour, such as consideration towards others' feelings or Kreng jai, impacts how the informants perform their mediated political participation. In addition, such divisions among social classes and class culture on Facebook reinforce and deepen class divisions among middle-class Thais instead of equalising them or their voices.

As a semi-public space, Facebook, rather than promoting equal and diverse types of practice, prohibits some practices that are against the social structure. The main concern that curbs the informants' social media practice is social relationships. This finding could be explained by the concept agreed by Foucault

and Bourdieu (Foucault et al., 1988, p.22; Bourdieu, 2000, p.217): that norms of behaviour are formed after human beings' relationships. Therefore, to protect their social relationships as well as their personal reputation, the informants are conservative in their social practice. As in this study of Thailand, research that looked at Turkey and India (Costa, 2016; Venkatraman, 2017) found that social class, social structure and sociocultural background impact users' social media practice.

Since middle-class Thais tend to use the social media sphere to build up their group membership rather than push forward their political convictions (Markham, 2014), social culture is also important to their social mediated political participation. By borrowing norms and etiquette from original Thai sociocultural concepts, social practices such as Kreng jai and being modest are among those concepts that they have valued in their social manner as well as their political manner. Therefore, instead of political confrontation, the informants have developed the practice of avoidance (Rui and Stefanone, 2013) in trying to prevent tension and disagreements with close peers. Both groups of middle class, higher and lower, might enjoy the same space with different political agendas, but they have shared similar concepts in maintaining their social and civic engagement. They have engaged more in intragroup communication than in intergroup communication.

By committing to the social structure and social norms, the informants not only perform self-surveillance and self-disciplinary practices, but also other cultural norms such as gift exchange and reciprocal exchange. Like clicking refers not only to their appreciation of their friends' posts, but also a reciprocal practice as a form of sociality (Mauss, 1990). Since the process of simultaneously giving and receiving establishes relationships that rest on both the voluntary and obligatory aspects, it pollutes their social media political practice. For example, avoidance of political argument or debate in order to sustain their relationships with others interrupts the dynamic of democratic participation.

Due to their avoidance practice, the social media sphere in Thailand is used more for a leisure type of participation – such as everyday talk, sociality and maintaining social relations (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2011) – than a political one. Furthermore, in avoiding strong confrontation but still wishing to express

their political opinions and identity on social media, symbolic political action is promoted as an alternative outlet. Since the format of Facebook can accommodate various types of communication, it helps in promoting viral political posters, sarcastic memes and other kinds of symbolic political participation. Similarly, Venkatraman (2017) found that in India, social media usage is framed by the caste system, which plays the central role in controlling social norms. People tend to rely more on visual posting, by posting political posters and satirical memes on their Facebook page, which is a safer strategy for expressing their political views. The scenario also creates conditions that encourage Thai social media users to be more polarised, as they find similar-minded people online rather than seeking political deliberation (Grömping, 2014).

However, though they have to maintain their social relationships by employing political avoidance practice so that they can survive Thailand's politically polarised society, the social media sphere allows them to create a more creative and softer way to convey their political thoughts to the public. Social media political participation practice in Thailand shows signs of being a ground for symbolic action and more unconventional political participation (Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012; Penney, 2012). Similar to offline political practice in Thailand, which is filled with symbolic action, practice and political gadgets, the social media political practice of middle-class Thais uses symbolism as its main political expression. This discursive political practice allows people to express their political opinions without causing confrontations with friends or problems with the military junta that governs the country. Political symbolic action satisfies people's political agenda, yet is discreet enough that they can avoid exposing themselves in the divided political situation.

8.8 Recommendations for further study

This thesis emphasises the concept of social media usage for political participation and engagement and considers how social class, political interest and social culture are traditional aspects of political talk (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007a; Ong and Cabañes, 2011). The concept of the internet as an extension of the public sphere, where free, equal and inclusive social space among citizens can be found (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002), has been challenged by the

effects of other traditional political variables, such as political interest, efficacy, social culture and socio-economic status, which are examined in order to understand political participation and its antecedents (Verba *et al.*, 1995). The result from Thailand has indicated that these traditional variables may indeed enhance participatory inequalities (Bimber, 2003) as well as create a contemporary type of political engagement and expression (Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012; Penney, 2012).

Due to the situation of the country, in which people have been divided deeply in their ideological concepts, the nature of the division among citizens that is already there might influence the results of the research. The limitations of the study also include the enforcement of martial law and the junta government in Thailand. The political situation did not allow group debates or other focus group practices for this particular thesis. As a result, in future studies, the inclusion of other research tools, such as focus groups and surveys, would give more in-depth results.

Furthermore, as the study is limited to middle-class citizens, as their socio-economic status allows them to have the widest usage on Thai social media, future research could penetrate more to the social inequality framing social media practice by comparing different social classes. In Thailand, lower-class political movements are normally fuelled by the distribution of printed leaflets that contain a party's political messages. It would be interesting to understand what role social media plays, if any, in these movements, and whether the form in which people receive information has any impact on their political participation.

As I finish the thesis, in 2016, Thailand is still under the control of a military government. I hope that further research regarding social media and political participation in Thailand can be done under a democratic regime, as this would create more opportunities for citizens to use social media for political purposes and enable the researcher to work in a less controlled situation.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview schedule

Class position, identification, and inscription

Could you tell me about yourself? For example, where were you from? What was your life growing up?

May I ask how old are you?

Carer's background

When you were young, who was your career? Remember your life back then, such as what was your carer's hobby or what were you or your family do in spare time? What did your parents/guardian do for a living? What kind of qualification they need to have?

Education and Economic activity

Tell me about your job? What do you do for living?

What training or qualifications are needed for that job? Where did you get your degree from? Is that your highest level of education?

IF SELF-EMPLOYED: What do you actually make or do at the place where you work?

Where do you get your first degree from? Which faculty? And before attending the university where were your primary school and your high school?

How about your sprout, what degree that he/she have? Do you know where he went to get his/her degree?

Friends and family

Who is your best or closest friend (other than your partner). Gender? What relationship to you?

Do you know what kind of job he/she do for living? How do you meet?

Accommodation

Tell me about your family, how many people in your household? What kind of accommodation you occupy now? Tell more about your household

Do you (or anyone else in your household) have another house? Tell me about it

Reading, music and leisure

What do you do in your free time? Tell me about the book you like, the music you like or any kind of leisure you do like.

Do you like travel? Where do you like to go or go often?

Which kind of restaurants or other places to eat would you like?

Do you play any sports or do any physical exercise?

Collection, possession

Do you have any hobby, if so, please tell me what it is? Collecting Music CDs, DVDs, tapes or records, book, paint?

Organization and personal control

Are you currently a member of any of the organisations?

For example, Political party, Trade Union, Environmental group, Parents'/School Association, Tenants'/Residents' Group or Neighbourhood Watch, Religious group or church organisation, Voluntary services group, Professional organisation/ Chamber of Commerce, National/ethnic community organisation, Social Club/Working men's club, Sports Club, Women's Group, Amateur music or dramatic group, Film society, Fan club, Arts or heritage organisation, Other group or organisation

Politics and class

Do you think Thailand has any social class?

Do you think of yourself as belonging to any particular social class?

What are the three most important in helping people to get a good job and achieve career success? Luck, Natural ability, Education, Hard work, Born into a wealthy family, Having good social connections, Ambition, Having good health, Having been to a private school, Social skills, Good looks/appearances

Financial information

Could you tell me the range of your total income per year before tax?

10,000 – 20,000

20,000 – 30,000

30,000 – 50,000

50,000 +

SOCIAL MEDIA

Do you ever use Facebook/Instagram? Did you ever use Facebook/Instagram in the past, or have you never used it?

Do you use other social networking sites (ie Twitter, Blogger, MySpace)

How often do you visit Facebook/Instagram per day?

What do you use your Facebook/Instagram account for? (Networking, Keeping in touch with friends, communicating with family and colleagues, business, etc.)

Have you ever posted anything you have felt was inappropriate? How was it inappropriate?

Have you ever deleted a post or untagged a photo because you realized it was inappropriate?

Who are your Facebook friends, Instagram followers? (Friends, Friends of friends, Public)

Do you use your Privacy Settings on Facebook/Instagram?

Do you use your Limited Profile on Facebook/Instagram?

How many “facebook friends” do you associate closely with outside of Facebook?

How often do you post your selfie?

What kind of picture that you post the most often on Facebook/Instagram?

What are the activities you like to do the most, second and the least on social network site, post picture, check in, comments, lurking, reading, re-post, join group... etc.

Please tell me more about these topics:

Political group joining, do you join any?

Contributed your own article, opinion piece, picture, or video about a political campaign, candidate or issue to an online news site

Forwarded or posted someone else’s political commentary or news related to a political campaign, candidate or issue

Forwarded or circulated funny videos or cartoons or circulated something artistic that related to a political candidate, campaign or political issues

Commented on a news story or blog about a political campaign, candidate, or issue

Written an e-mail or written a blog about a political campaign, candidate, or issue
Taken part in a protest, demonstration, or sit-in Participated in a boycott
Participated in an event where people express their political views (such as a poetry slam, musical event, etc.)
Been active in or joined a group that has worked to address social or political issues
Expressed support through a social network site such as Facebook, IM, or Twitter (e.g., "liking" or becoming a fan)
Is consuming of social media exposed you to different political view? What is your reaction?
If your Facebook/Instagram friend supports a color movement (red or yellow) that you did not agree, what would you do?
Do you seek political information and/or post status update relate to politics?
How?

POLITICS VIEW

How do you usually get information about political events in Thailand? For example: Online community forum, follow social networking, TV Radio Newspaper, follow politician blog, traditional media, Used Participatory News Media Only, etc.

Do you support a particular political party?

"What does Democracy mean to you?" Please descript it in the way that represent your believe or give your own description

In your view, what is the biggest problem facing Thailand as a whole?

Think about your local area and your community. What is the biggest problem facing your community?

In your opinion, is there any chance of colour fighting ending in the next two years?

How do you feel about politicians who were corruption?

How do you feel who should make laws for this country? If the citizens do not agree with the law that MP pass what should be done?

Some people say we can have strong leadership without holding elections, how do you feel?

If you know of, or notice any poor quality service of government officials (in any kind) and/or their corruption will you likely to report it to the authority?

In general, how do you have confidence in any of this organization list? The government, Member of Parliament, The media, Army, National Elections Committee, Police, The Supreme Court, Political Parties

How qualified do you think this member of the Member of Parliament is to do his/her job? Please rate him/her according to the following types of qualification: Their level of education, Their honesty in handling public funds, Their knowledge of the problems in your area.

How likely is it that a candidate who is elected to the parliament through elections will actually do what they promise to do during the campaign?

How important do you think your vote is in influencing the outcome of elections?

End bit

From time to time we do follow-up studies and may wish to contact you again. Would this be alright?

Appendix B: Consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Title: Middle class political performance on social media: case study Thailand.

Researcher: Jantiga Supapong

Contact Address: Jantiga Supapong Flat 305 The Atrium No.2, Morledge Street, Leicester, LE1 1ST Tel : 07454920209 Email: js636@le.ac.uk

Supervisor:

Dr. Jonathan Corpus Ong, Room 2.03, Bankfield House 132 New Walk, Leicester, LE1 7JA Email: jco10@le.ac.uk

Purpose of data collection: PhD dissertation and submitted for publication

Purpose of study: I am studying political and social performances appeared on social network, Facebook in particular, of Thais. To enable me to research this topic in more detail, I am interviewing Thai social media users and observing their behaviour on social network.

Details of participation

The study involves interview and be online observed. The interview contains with some demographic information and details of social media usage and political participation. The interview should take no longer than 45 minutes. During the process, digital recorder will be used to record the interview. The online observing will be commencing on your Facebook page and/or Instagram during May – August 2014. The data from your social media account will be kept in electronic form. Please feel free to ask questions now if you have any.

Confidential

All the data will be anonymous and confidential. The researcher is only one who will access to it. The specific identification number is the only way to identify. You are not required to input your name or contact information at every point of this research.

CONSENT STATEMENT

1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw unconditionally at any time from taking part in this study.
2. I am aware of what my participation will involve.
3. My data are to be held confidentially and only the researcher, her associates, and supervisor will have access to them.
4. My data will be kept in a locked cabinet for a period of at least five years after the appearance of any associated publications. Any aggregate data (e.g. spreadsheets) will be kept in electronic form for up to five years after which time they will be deleted.
5. The overall findings may be submitted for publication in an academic journal, or presented at academic conferences. My name and other identifying details will not be shared with anyone.
6. This study will take approximately 12 months to complete.
7. All questions that I have about the research have been satisfactorily answered.
8. I am giving my consent for data to be used for the outlined purposes of the present study

I agree to participate.

Participant's signature: _____

Participant's name (please print): _____

Date: _____

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