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Identity and Youth Politics in Thai Online Communities*

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Abstract

This article examines the interplay between identity and youth politics in Thai online communities. It argues that digital platforms have become central spaces for political expression, enabling young people to construct, negotiate, and contest their identities through memes, hashtags, and performative acts. These online spaces foster solidarity and participatory citizenship while also exposing youth to risks of surveillance, harassment, and legal repercussions. By analyzing the dynamics of self-presentation, community building, contestation, and cross-platform diffusion, the article highlights how digital culture is reshaping political legitimacy, democratic practices, and civic education in Thailand.

Keywords: Youth politics; Identity; Online communities; Thailand; Democracy

Introduction

In the past decade, digital media has become a central arena for youth expression and political engagement in Thailand. Platforms such as Twitter (now X), TikTok, Facebook, and Pantip serve as spaces where young people not only consume information but also create and circulate political narratives, memes, and counter-discourses. These online platforms enable new forms of visibility, community, and activism that often bypass traditional institutions of political participation (Papacharissi, 2015; Lim, 2013). In particular, Thai youth have utilized digital media to articulate their frustrations with hierarchical social structures, rigid cultural norms, and restrictions on freedom of expression, especially during the waves of student-led protests in 2020–2021 (Suwannakij, 2021). Thus, online communities provide not just a communicative infrastructure but also a symbolic space for constructing and negotiating political identities.

The study of youth political participation in Thailand requires close attention to identity formation in digital spaces. Unlike earlier generations, contemporary Thai youth encounter politics through **networked publics**, where identity markers—such as hashtags (#FreeYouth, #MilkTeaAlliance), avatars, or

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creative use of language—signal both belonging and resistance (boyd, 2014; Chadwick, 2017). Political participation is therefore not limited to formal institutions such as elections but extends to identity performances that create solidarity and contest authority. However, these practices are embedded in tension: while online communities empower youth to experiment with political selfhood, they also expose them to surveillance, harassment, and legal risks under laws such as the Computer Crime Act and lèse-majesté provisions (Haberkorn, 2021; Streckfuss, 2011). This duality makes identity work both a resource and a vulnerability in Thai youth politics.

This article aims to explore how identity is constructed, negotiated, and contested in Thai youth online communities. It examines how digital platforms facilitate the performance of political identities, the formation of collective belonging, and the contestation between youth-led publics and their opponents. Drawing on theories of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), performativity (Butler, 1990), and networked publics (boyd, 2014), the discussion situates Thai youth politics within global debates on digital participation while attending to the specific socio-political context of Thailand.

The article proceeds in four main sections. First, it reviews conceptual foundations of identity, youth politics, and online communities, focusing on both global and Thai contexts. Second, it introduces theoretical perspectives relevant to identity and digital participation. Third, it analyzes the dimensions of identity and youth politics in Thai online communities, including self-presentation, community building, contestation, and cross-platform dynamics. Finally, it discusses the implications for Thai political culture, democratic participation, and digital rights before concluding with reflections on future directions.

Conceptual Foundations

1.1 Identity in the Digital Age

Identity in the digital era is increasingly understood as fluid, performative, and relational. Unlike static notions of identity rooted in essentialist categories, digital identity is continuously reshaped through interactions, representations, and negotiations across online platforms. Giddens (1991) describes late modern identity as a reflexive project, constantly revised through everyday choices and mediated experiences. Butler's (1990) theory of performativity further emphasizes that identities are enacted through repetitive acts, such as the use of memes, hashtags, and visual aesthetics in online communities. These practices allow individuals to signal belonging, resistance, and political orientation, often in playful or experimental ways (Cover, 2019).

Online communities thus function as "identity laboratories" where youth test, remix, and negotiate multiple selves. boyd (2014) refers to such spaces as "networked publics" that afford visibility, scalability, and persistence, enabling identities to gain traction and recognition. In these contexts, political identity is not merely expressed but co-constructed through community interactions, algorithmic amplification, and audience feedback (Papacharissi, 2015).

1.2 Youth and Political Agency

Youth have historically been positioned as both a political problem and a political promise: seen as vulnerable to manipulation yet simultaneously as drivers of innovation and change. In political science, youth agency is often framed through participation, activism, and resistance (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006). In the Thai context, young people have long been critical actors in social movements, from the 1973 student uprisings to the digital protests of 2020 (Haberkorn, 2021).

Education, culture, and peer networks play crucial roles in shaping youth political agency. Formal education exposes young people to civic knowledge, while informal networks—such as friendship circles, online fandoms, and activist groups—offer spaces for critical discussion and mobilization (Bangkok Post, 2020; Sinpeng, 2021). Thai youth often blend popular culture with political messaging, demonstrating how fandom logics (e.g., K-pop fan organizing) can be repurposed as political tools (Liew, 2021). This highlights the ways in which youth mobilize not only through formal channels but also through cultural repertoires and affective solidarities.

1.3 Online Communities in Thailand

Online communities in Thailand constitute a vibrant but contested field of political expression. Platforms such as Twitter/X and TikTok have become central for fast-moving conversations, memes, and mobilization, while Facebook remains important for broader community discussions and Pantip provides longer-form deliberation (Sinpeng, 2021). These spaces are crucial for constructing solidarity among youth, particularly in relation to issues such as democracy, monarchy reform, gender equality, and social justice.

At the same time, online communities are also spaces of contestation and surveillance. Youth-led movements face resistance from pro-establishment groups, coordinated online harassment, and state monitoring. Streckfuss (2011) and Haberkorn (2021) note that legal instruments such as the lèse-majesté law and the Computer Crime Act have been used to suppress online dissent, forcing young people to develop strategies of anonymity, coded language, and platform-switching. This dual role of online spaces—as both enablers of political participation and sites of repression—underscores their significance in shaping the contemporary political landscape in Thailand.

Theoretical Perspectives

1.1 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), provides a framework for understanding how individuals derive a sense of self from group memberships. In the context of Thai youth politics online, SIT explains how political identities are reinforced by in-group and out-group dynamics. Youth activists signal belonging to pro-democracy communities through hashtags such as **#FreeYouth** or **#MilkTeaAlliance**, while simultaneously positioning themselves against pro-establishment groups. This process of categorization strengthens collective identity and mobilization (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). Importantly, online interactions intensify these dynamics because digital platforms amplify symbolic markers of belonging—emojis, avatars, slogans—that visually distinguish “us” from “them” (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

1.2 Performativity (Butler)

Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity highlights that identity is not fixed but enacted through repeated acts. Applied to digital politics, this perspective suggests that Thai youth create political selves through the performative use of memes, hashtags, aesthetic choices, and linguistic creativity. For example, adopting satirical nicknames for political elites or remixing pop culture images into political memes becomes a way of "doing" politics rather than merely commenting on it. Such performances are both playful and subversive, enabling youth to undermine dominant hierarchies while building solidarity (Cover, 2019). The performativity framework also emphasizes vulnerability: repeated performances risk surveillance, misinterpretation, or co-optation.

1.3 Networked Publics

The notion of *networked publics* (boyd, 2014) and *affective publics* (Papacharissi, 2015) underscores how digital environments shape collective identity and mobilization. Platforms such as Twitter/X, TikTok, and Facebook afford visibility, persistence, and virality, which amplify youth political voices. Memes and hashtags circulate rapidly, transforming individual expressions into collective identity markers. In the Thai case, viral hashtags such as **#WhyDoWeNeedMonarchy** illustrate how visibility creates both empowerment and backlash. Networked publics also highlight tensions between horizontality and hierarchy: while platforms enable bottom-up mobilization, algorithms privilege certain voices, often turning micro-celebrities or influencers into de facto leaders of youth movements (Tufekci, 2017).

1.4 Cultural Politics

Finally, the framework of cultural politics situates youth identity within the broader tensions between traditional Thai values and digital subversion. Thai social norms emphasize **kreng jai** (deference and consideration) and hierarchical respect toward elders and authority (Mulder, 1996). Yet online spaces allow youth to challenge these norms through humor, parody, and irreverence. The circulation of memes mocking political elites, or the adoption of global protest repertoires (such as the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games*), reflects how cultural politics enables subversion of hierarchical traditions (Winichakul, 2020). At the same time, this subversion provokes counter-movements and state responses, showing how identity construction online becomes a contested terrain of cultural legitimacy.

Dimensions of Identity and Politics in Thai Online Communities

1.1 Self-Presentation and Political Signaling

Thai youth employ digital platforms as spaces of political self-presentation, using hashtags, avatars, and linguistic codes to signal identity and affiliation. Hashtags such as #FreeYouth, #SaveParit, or #MilkTeaAlliance serve as both rallying points and markers of belonging (Suwannakij, 2021). Avatars—often featuring symbolic colors, protest imagery, or pop culture references—reinforce these affiliations. Linguistic codes, including satire, double meanings, and the creative use of English or romanized Thai, allow users to circumvent censorship and surveillance while still signaling dissent (Streckfuss, 2011).

Youth often blend fandom culture with political activism, creating what Jenkins (2006) terms "participatory culture." For example, Thai K-pop fans have mobilized fan networks to fundraise for protests, flood hashtags used by pro-government supporters,

and remix idol culture aesthetics into political memes (Liew, 2021). This blending of fandom and activism transforms entertainment logics into tools for political communication, making self-presentation not only symbolic but also practical for movement-building.

1.2 Community Building and Belonging

Online platforms provide youth with opportunities to cultivate solidarity, safe spaces, and sometimes echo chambers. Solidarity is strengthened through repetitive sharing of memes, stories of protest, and expressions of collective emotion (Papacharissi, 2015). Safe spaces—such as private Facebook groups, Discord channels, and encrypted Line chats—allow youth to exchange information with reduced risks. However, these spaces can also become echo chambers, where homogenous views reinforce political polarization (Sinpeng, 2021).

Generational dynamics are central to community belonging. Online communities often frame youth politics as a confrontation with older generations who are perceived as defenders of hierarchy and conservatism. This produces both bonding (among young activists) and intergenerational tension, as youth challenge norms of kreng jai (deference) and hierarchy embedded in Thai society (Mulder, 1996; Winichakul, 2020). In these digital publics, the construction of belonging is not only about shared identity but also about redefining the moral legitimacy of youth voices in Thai politics.

1.3 Contestation and Resistance

Despite their emancipatory potential, Thai online communities are also spaces of contestation. State authorities closely monitor digital platforms, and youth activists have faced charges under the lèse-majesté law (Article 112) and the Computer Crime Act for online posts (Haberkorn, 2021; Streckfuss, 2011). Surveillance produces chilling effects, encouraging strategies of pseudonymity and coded language.

Trolling and counter-movements further challenge youth activism. Pro-establishment groups and royalist cyber networks engage in harassment campaigns, brigading, and reporting of activist accounts, thereby shaping the risks of identity expression online (Sinpeng, 2021). These practices highlight the precarious nature of digital identity: while it empowers youth to speak, it simultaneously exposes them to legal repercussions, cyber harassment, and reputational damage. Thus, resistance in online communities is never one-directional but emerges from the constant negotiation of power between activists, counter-groups, and the state.

1.4 Cross-Platform Dynamics

Identity work in Thai youth politics extends across multiple platforms, each with unique affordances. Twitter/X provides rapid-fire commentary and hashtag activism; TikTok enables short-form creative protest performances; Facebook remains crucial for mobilization among broader demographics; and Pantip supports long-form deliberation (Sinpeng, 2021). The diffusion of identities across platforms demonstrates how political messages evolve as they travel: a satirical TikTok clip may be reposted on Twitter, then debated in a Pantip thread, before being shared in Facebook groups.

Influencers and micro-celebrities play an increasingly important role in cross-platform dynamics. They act as cultural brokers, amplifying youth political messages beyond activist circles (Tufekci, 2017). In Thailand, musicians, YouTubers, and fan accounts have lent visibility to political movements, demonstrating the blurred boundaries

between entertainment and politics. This highlights how networked publics transform personal brands into political vehicles, linking cultural capital to political legitimacy.

Implications

1.1 For Political Culture: Reconfiguration of Authority and Legitimacy

The rise of youth identity politics in online communities signals a profound reconfiguration of political authority and legitimacy in Thailand. Traditionally, political legitimacy has been rooted in hierarchical authority, reverence for elders, and deference to established institutions, underpinned by cultural norms such as **kreng jai** (Mulder, 1996). However, digital activism challenges these cultural foundations by empowering youth to claim moral legitimacy through collective identity and cultural creativity. Online spaces allow young people to question dominant narratives about monarchy, democracy, and social hierarchy in ways that were previously unthinkable in offline settings (Winichakul, 2020; Haberkorn, 2021). This shift underscores how authority is increasingly negotiated not only in formal political institutions but also in digital arenas, where legitimacy emerges from participation, visibility, and resonance with broader publics.

1.2 For Democracy: Online Spaces as Training Grounds for Participatory Citizenship

Online communities also function as training grounds for participatory citizenship. Through hashtags, memes, and digital campaigns, youth learn to deliberate, mobilize, and engage with political discourse. These practices reflect what Dahlgren (2009) calls *civic cultures*—networks of meaning-making that sustain democratic participation. Thai youth's use of digital spaces mirrors global patterns of *connective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), where personalized engagement converges into collective political action. In this way, online participation equips youth with civic skills—such as debating, organizing, and negotiating difference—that are transferable to offline political activism. While online engagement cannot substitute for structural democratic reforms, it fosters political literacy and a sense of agency among a generation historically marginalized from formal politics (Sinpeng, 2021).

1.3 For Policy and Education: Media Literacy, Digital Rights, Youth Empowerment

The dynamics of identity and youth politics in online communities highlight urgent needs in policy and education. First, **media literacy** programs are essential to equip youth with skills to critically evaluate information, navigate echo chambers, and protect themselves from disinformation. Second, strengthening **digital rights**—particularly freedom of expression and protection from online harassment—is vital to ensure that online participation contributes positively to democratic culture rather than exposing youth to disproportionate risks (Streckfuss, 2011; Haberkorn, 2021). Finally, education systems must move beyond rote learning to foster **youth empowerment**, encouraging critical thinking and civic responsibility. Integrating digital citizenship curricula into schools and universities can help institutionalize these practices, ensuring that online activism translates into long-term democratic engagement (Bangkok Post, 2020).

Conclusion

In contemporary Thailand, digital media has become a vital arena for youth expression and political engagement. Platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and Pantip are not only spaces for communication but also symbolic stages where young people construct, negotiate, and contest their political identities. The significance of these spaces lies in their ability to amplify youth voices in a society traditionally shaped by hierarchy, deference, and centralized authority. For many young Thais, online communities are places where political frustrations are articulated, identities are forged, and solidarity is nurtured.

Identity in the digital age is fluid, performative, and relational. Unlike static notions of selfhood, young people continuously shape their identities through online interactions, memes, hashtags, and creative aesthetics. These platforms serve as "identity laboratories," allowing experimentation with political expression and belonging. Youth politics, therefore, extends beyond formal participation such as voting and into everyday performances that signal values, loyalties, and resistance. Education, culture, and peer networks play important roles, with digital communities enabling youth to mix fandom logics, pop culture, and activism into new forms of civic participation.

Several theoretical perspectives illuminate this phenomenon. Social Identity Theory explains how young activists form in-groups and out-groups online, reinforcing solidarity within pro-democracy movements while marking distance from pro-establishment groups. The concept of performativity shows how identity is enacted through repeated practices—satire, memes, and symbolic acts—that both subvert and consolidate political meaning. Networked publics highlight the importance of visibility and virality, where personal expressions gain collective significance through digital circulation. Finally, cultural politics underscores the tension between traditional Thai norms of hierarchy and deference and the irreverent, subversive practices that flourish in online spaces.

These dynamics manifest in several dimensions. Self-presentation and political signaling occur through the use of hashtags, avatars, and coded language that both express identity and protect against censorship. Online communities foster belonging, offering solidarity and safe spaces, but also sometimes creating echo chambers and intergenerational conflicts. Contestation is constant: youth movements face state surveillance, legal risks, and harassment from counter-movements, making online identity both a source of empowerment and vulnerability. Cross-platform dynamics further complicate this landscape, as identities and messages diffuse across Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and other platforms, often amplified by influencers and micro-celebrities who bridge entertainment and activism.

The implications are far-reaching. For political culture, youth activism online reconfigures authority and legitimacy, shifting them away from traditional hierarchies toward more participatory, bottom-up forms of recognition. For democracy, online spaces function as training grounds for participatory citizenship, equipping young people with the skills to deliberate, organize, and mobilize collectively. For policy and education, there is an urgent need to strengthen media literacy, safeguard digital rights, and empower youth through curricula that promote critical thinking and civic engagement.

In sum, identity and youth politics in Thai online communities illustrate the profound transformations occurring at the intersection of digital culture and political participation. These spaces are not merely channels of communication but arenas of struggle, creativity, and empowerment. They embody both the promise and the peril of youth political agency in a society negotiating between tradition and change.

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