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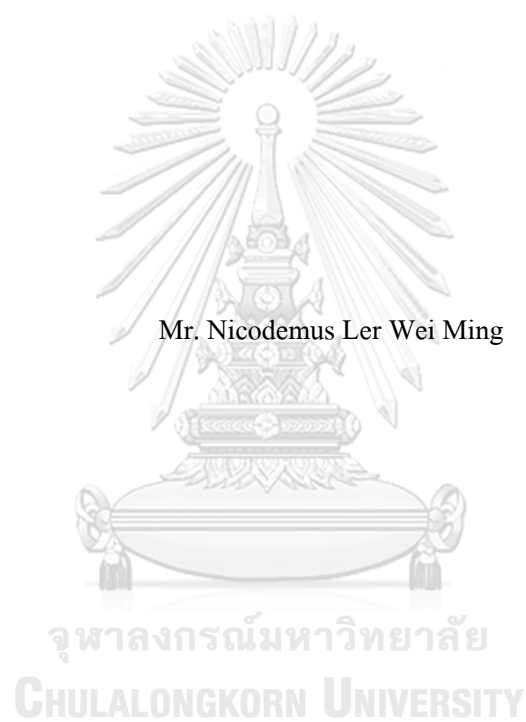
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Influencers and Hashtags: Thai Youth Identities in Social Media



Mr. Nicodemus Ler Wei Ming

An Independent Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts in Thai Studies

FACULTY OF ARTS

Chulalongkorn University

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สารนิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาอักษรศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต  
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By	Mr. Nicodemus Ler Wei Ming
Field of Study	Thai Studies
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Nicodemus Ler Wei Ming

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media is collective and has “shaped new, modern forms of tribal allegiances”<sup>92</sup>. Hence, this paper will further argue that social media is the collective power of the users and that the hashtag, which is a crucial component of almost every social media platform, has become a symbol of that collective power on social media.

Therefore, as social media continues to be increasingly popular in Thailand, the youths in Thailand will continue to be exposed to all sources of information, resulting in a united generation, that is more aware and ready to address social justice. This will be manifested on their social media platforms due to the blurring of the boundaries between private thoughts and public life and will be explored by this paper through the activities of the influencers in the next section.

### **Thai Youth Identities in Action**

The advancement in technology and the rise of social media have changed the daily lives of individuals with the easy and constant access to information. As the use of social media continue to increase, users become increasingly exposed to both alternate viewpoints and social issues, such as inequality, giving rise to a generation that is committed to social justice. Another aspect of social media, which was mentioned previously, is that the social media ecosystem has facilitated the users to become more collective as it emphasizes on the network. In a collectivist culture, followers “are expected to more readily internalize their leader’s vision”<sup>93</sup> as “there is typically a high level of

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<sup>92</sup> D. Miller, “*How the World Changed Social Media*”, London, UCL Press, 2016, p.185

<sup>93</sup> D. I. Jung and B. J. Avolio, “Effects of Leadership Style and Followers' Cultural Orientation on Performance in Group and Individual Task Conditions”, *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 42(2), p.209, 1999































political activism with the street protest, and in doing so, show their political allegiance that is constructed based on their identities. The Thai youths today are aware of social issues, such as inequality, and know that there are available solutions found in other countries/societies. Hence, they are firm believers of social justice and will not just sit still and accept blindly what the ruling authorities have to offer. The youths have access to information in order to evaluate if these proposed solutions are feasible and will not hesitate to call out and take action to make the situation right.

### **Thai Youth Identities and “The Thai Society Going Forward”**

Advances in technology and the rise of social media have altered the social environment and given rise to new Thai youth identities, which in turn will have impact on the society going forward. Despite the different perceived identities of each generation, the youths continue to hold an important position in the hearts of the Thai people as they “are generally regarded as the future of the nation, and the last hope by the Thai”<sup>171</sup>. As such, the youths have always been a key priority of the Thai government who have often taken a hard stance to ensure the youths are properly guided. For instance, in the 1940s where etiquette and decorum was of utmost importance, “a guidebook on etiquette was written and training sessions were prioritized”<sup>172</sup> when “there was a perceived

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<sup>171</sup> T. Wongyannava, *“Policing the Imagined Family and Children in Thailand: From Family Name to Emotional Love”*, Mekong Press, 2008, p. 38

<sup>172</sup> P. Chaoumdee, *“Photographs and Middle-Class Teenagers Lives in Bangkok from the 1960s to the 1980s.”*, p. 79, 2017, Master’s Thesis, Chulalongkorn University





period of time before the success of these changes can be seen, but it would definitely rely heavily on the government willingness to listen, openness to feedback, and flexibility to make changes.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined how the identities of the Thai youths today are reflected and manifested in their online activities. Social media has become an integral part of the Thai youth's lives and has significantly altered their mindset, behavior, social norms, and concepts of the Thai society, creating a brand-new generation of youths that identify themselves differently from the previous generation. Influencers are the ideal persona for the youths of Thailand today and hence would be a good representation of how the Thai youth view themselves and provide insights into the Thai youth identity.

The advancement of internet technologies and rapid adoption of social media will also impact the lives and behavior of individuals, especially youths who are the bulk of social media users. Social media provides an avenue for users to create and share user-generated content, while fostering interaction and collaboration among participants. It has also become a medium where one's private and real thoughts are publicly displayed for all to see. Furthermore, it provides the users with increased exposure to alternate viewpoints, coupled with constant access to information, users now have better access to reliable information. In addition to the access to the no holds barred information available online, social media has also attracted a diverse range of users leading users to be exposed to and made aware of social issues such as inequality resulting in users that are well

informed, committed to social justice, and willing to fight for it. However, it is noteworthy to mention that social media have also made the users less individualistic and less autonomous because it reinforces the individual's facility to network socially. Social media is the collective power of the users and the hashtag, which is a crucial component of almost every social media platform, has become a symbol of that collective power on social media.

Milli and Penguin are 2 influencers that were examined to gain insight of how the Thai youth identities are constructed in relation to the influencer's persona. It was found that youths orientate to Milli's social media activities where their identities are expressed through the interaction with her post and Penguin's online activism has inspired the Thai youths to show their political allegiance, which is constructed based on their identities. The Thai youths today see themselves as a separate new generation and are aware of social issues, such as inequality. As the youths know of available solutions found beyond Thailand, they are firm believers of social justice and will not just sit still and accept blindly what the ruling authorities have to offer. The youths have access to information to evaluate if these proposed solutions are feasible and will not hesitate to call out and take action to make the situation right.

Youths have always been a key priority of the Thai government who have traditionally sought to manage the youths by controlling them through education, censorship, or by force. This method of control would not be effective with this generation of youth as they have access to information and the outside world all the time. Attempts to control by censorship or by force in the online setting have proven to be unsuccessful and have backfired on the Thai government instead.

Perhaps it is time to let go of the old ways and explore alternative avenues such as open dialogues, inclusive communication, and the encouragement of active citizenship, to be in touch with this generation of youths, whose identities are reflected in influencers and hashtags – the Thai youths of the social media era.



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