



# The S-CP2D model: The process of building the intimate relationship among MSM -Men who have an intimate relationship or sexual intercourse with men- within Twitter

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## Abstract

In Thai society, MSM issues are presented in almost every area of mass communication. The challenge for the MSM group is to reveal their identities and build an intimate relationship in an offline space. However, the problem was not framed appropriately according to Thai traditions. As a result, the MSM group has sought to find spaces and communication channels to present their identities and intimate relationships. Most of the research topics are regarding the expression of identities, behaviours, and relationships in a specific space on the internet, but no researches focus on the process and content of the communication for building this intimate relationship in the online area. This is an essential aspect of the exposure and pursuit of friendship from the online to the offline space. Hence, this research aimed to study the process of revealing an intimate relationship through Twitter. The data collection method was Netnography with in-depth interviews with well-known accounts and diverse sexual preference. Then, data were analysed and discussed based on the concept of an intimate relationship. Four levels of building intimate relationships were revealed as the S-CP2D model, which is as follows: (1) Self-Creation; (2) Self-Presentations; (3) Self-Disclosure; and (4) Self-Decision to building or breaking a relationship. Moreover, this research found the development of an intimacy relationship concept in the middle of the online and offline context, which is a result from the change of the current communication channel.

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## Introduction

In Thailand, the issue of MSM - referring to men who have an intimate relationship or sexual intercourse with men - remains a sensitive issue for society. While there is no legal punishment for MSM, many societies do not accept MSM as a sexual orientation. If accepted, it will always be associated

with some conditions. As a result, many MSM groups are trying to find new areas to reveal their identity. This paper aimed to highlight the flow of gender identity because, in the research area, it is found that the currently-fixed identity rarely appears in MSM. The researcher chose to define the term of identity as a character or nature of MSM and building relationships on social medias or online applications that include: Grindr, Jack'd, Hornet, Growlr, Blued. However, these channels seem to be less popular than Twitter, according to such phenomena as follows: The Bangkok Metropolitan Authority announced the use of the

E-mail address: [tirapalikab@gmail.com](mailto:tirapalikab@gmail.com).

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park at night being prohibited in order to prevent MSM sexual activities. Moreover, news in the print media reported that some of the MSM groups post their dating on their tweets. The appointment location is neither a hotel nor a room, but under an expressway in Bangkok. (Khaosod, 2018). Some gas stations reported that they saw some MSM groups use the toilet area at the gas station to have sexual intercourse. Besides, videos were recorded by some MSM themselves and published on Twitter to invite other MSMs to join their sexual activities or to enjoy watching the clip freely. Moreover, many foreign tourists can come to meet by making an appointment through Twitter. It is obviously seen that sexual diversity issues and sexual activities are often ignored in Thai contexts. Although this phenomenon is being talked about in printed media, as far as the literature reviewed goes, it was found that there have been many studies on MSM's communication issues, such as the behaviour of using applications designed for MSM to use, like Grindr, Jack'd, Growlr, Blued for dating. (Fungfueng, 2014) or the study of using Twitter to date or have sex. (Dongthong, 2016; Tirapalika, 2020). However, no studies specific to the process or process of communication to establish relationships or find sexual partners have emerged.

The information mentioned above shows that Twitter has been implicitly building channels for MSM groups. As a result, some features on Twitter were applied by MSM for inter-communication. For instance, Twitter does not require users to identify themselves, and providing an email is sufficient. The above features serve as an aid to MSM groups to remain anonymous until they are satisfied. Anonymity is a method of secrecy from society. If the social circle knows who a particular user is, it will affect their livelihood and reputation especially those whose careers require masculine identity in Thai contexts, such as police or military. Although, masculinity may not necessarily include sexual orientation, in the Thai context, masculinity is often tied to heterosexuality.

The researchers noted that MSM focus on communicating through Twitter nowadays. There is also a research gap in MSM communication issues on Twitter. This research paper studied how MSM create an intimate relationship. An intimate relationship is just for sexual activities, but other details of the content that MSM use to communicate with each other still need to be discovered.

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## Literature Review

As mentioned above, the studies involving the intimate relationships of MSM in the online space in the field of communication are very few. The researcher noted that MSM issues and sexual activity are often concealed and disappear from society because the Thai context still does not accept much of the expression of MSM in public areas. A study in the Thai social context found that the starting point for establishing a persona for conversations for the first time often used "pseudonyms" (Muangyom, 2004)

and Sawadisevee (2002), indicating that the use of pseudonyms was more likely to reflect the person himself. In particular, in MSM chat rooms, users will use the pseudonym that reflects their sexual characteristics. At the beginning of the conversation, there was no personal discussion. As well as being careful in expressing themselves, it is popular to use symbols or an emoji in their conversation instead of expressing their feelings verbally in order to maintain their image. Periodically, testing relationships by the criterion for relationship shifting, Chanvisat (2016) pointed out that such was due to a sentiment of "Be friendly" or resemblance, but that necking was only a result of hyperpersonal communication. An intimate relationship requires a long period and several stages. Based on an analysis of the concept synthesizing the research of Berger (1978), Brehm, Miller, Perlman, and Campbell (1992), Kelly (2005), Munroe (2005), Taylor and Altman (1987), and Bruett (2019), it was found that it is a long process and takes a long time. Therefore, the researcher summarized the concept of building an intimate relationship, called The PICNIC model, as follows: (1) Primary impression stage - The first step of getting to know each other, sharing information, and a feeling of distrust since the other person is a stranger; (2) Interpretation stage - After establishing the first impression, and exchanging superficial information, they start to have a conversation and become interdependent; (3) Cultivation stage - During the conversational stage, they start to exchange and share emotions, caring and gaining trust from each other. They start to see each other as friends; (4) Notion stage - As they become close friends, private information is shared and they start talking about their dreams, beliefs, expressing and sharing emotions through activities they can do together; (5) Interrelation stage - More responses are shared between them, deeper trust in their communications. More outdoor activities as close friends; and (6) Confidant or Intimacy stage - Revelation of pain, good and bad memories, feeling each other as close friends. At this stage, the relationship can develop and they can become partners or lovers, which leads to courtship and sexual activities

Hence, in building intimate relationships, courtship, it was found from the literature review that such relationships were often time-consuming and complicated. Moreover, this step usually occurs in families and couples. Although courtship does not only include sexual activities, reviews of literature indicated that intimate relationships are frequently associated with sexual activities, especially when MSM relationship occurs on social media. Besides, posting forums to find lovers, exchanging information, seeking advice, and giving comment on sex and physical issues and topics related to sex can reveal prejudice and gender discrimination, and dating. (Thongmuang, 2008). Also, sexual activity, sex toys, or sexual experiences were shared (Farditree, 2014; Fungfueng, 2014; Nithiubat, 2015; Soontravaravit, 2010; Suntivutimettee, 2017; Tirapalika, 2020). Moreover, Young et al. (2013), said MSMs abroad currently use social media to find a partner for anal sex,

oral sex, including adjusting their lifestyle to keep up with the changing world. Some studies have found dialogue related to daily life combined with sex (Tirapalika, 2017). Furthermore, the research by Bouhoutsos, Holroyd, Lerman, Forer, and Greenberg (1983) describes that intimate relationships are a psychological consciousness, which may not include sexual activity. However, there is no denial that sexual activity is more likely to arise from intimate courtship in both persons. Besides, sexual relationships can arise from physical actions rather than love actions. (Preston Ni, 2013). As a result of all literature reviews, the researchers asked to include sexual activity as part of an intimate courtship. It can be seen sexual activity became part of the research, and it was also found sexual activity was a part of building intimate relationships. Therefore, this study aimed to find a pattern for building an intimate MSM relationship in Thai society through the Twitter area because the research was concerned with how building an intimate relationship between MSM is limited and incompatible with social change.

The literature review revealed The PICNIC model, but such steps are not applicable in the Twitter area. On the other hand, based on local research, the S-CP2D model can describe the process of building an intimate relationship between MSM and Twitter more completely than The PICNIC model. The findings are presented and discussed below.

## Methodology

The research fieldwork: this research was qualitative research using Netnography methodology, the concept of Professor Robert V. Kozinets (1998). As the researcher is MSM himself, the researcher was an insider for this research. Since having been using the Twitter space for more than five years, the researcher thoroughly understood the nature and the symbols used among MSM to communicate with others. For the accuracy of the information, the researcher continued to verify the observed and interviewed data. None of the participants in the study were known personally by the researcher at the first encounter. However, they were chosen from the recommendation of close friends. Although, this research identified 20 participants, the main area of research fieldwork was Twitter. There were multi-methods including participant observation. The researcher started by retweeting content that interests Twitter users. Afterward, the researcher had a conversation on the topics of the user's interests, such as general issues, sexual intercourse issues, sexual orientation issues, issues of behaviours using Twitter. Moreover, the researcher sent images of nudity of different parts of the body as well as general images of the researcher to the user upon request, which is common and courtesy communication among Twitter MSM users. After the discussion period, the researcher invited that user to become a research participant and to have in-depth interviews. Criteria for selecting participants included: (1) those aged between 20 and 45 years; (2) those who have been using Twitter for at least six

months; and (3) those who classified themselves as MSM. The period of field research to collect data was five months. The interview was designed and developed from a literature review. In summary, the questions included three main areas such as: (1) Questions used in the discussion for the first time; (2) How long it takes to get to know someone; and (3) What the core purpose of using Twitter was.

## Results

In the study results section, the researcher divided the presentation into two points. The first was details of the features of Twitter. The second part was the building of the intimate relationships among MSM as in the following details.

1. Elements of Twitter. When it comes to the step of creating an account on Twitter, it can be done through four elements: (1) Account name; (2) Cover image; (3) Profile picture; and (4) Bio - biography. It was found there were five types of account names the MSM group usually used: (1) Thai names or English names wherein the names contained some characters from the users' real names (2) names to tell about sexual orientation such as top, aggressive sex, BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Submission, Masochism); (4) names from physical characteristics such as bear, big cock, small bottom, only bottom; (5) names from educational institutions; and (6) names from occupations such as sex aggressive military, horny soldiers, crave soldiers, slutty police officers.

Next was the cover image. MSM groups used images to show their sexual preference. For example, if the sexual orientation was the top, they used penis photo or body nude photos, a self-portrait, and other images. Among the users of sex toys, they often used the devices as part of the cover image. Next, the profile pictures of the MSM group were usually body nudity parts rather than their portraits. And, the MSM group changed their profile picture to reflect the sexual orientation, such as the chest, abdominal V-line, cheeks, buttocks, and genital pictures.

Finally, the Bio - Biography – it was found that the texts appearing in MSM bio showed their identities as well as their requirements. For instance, the bio could reveal which age group the account holder specified, or whether the owner of the account was bottom only and had specific requirements. It also showed whether this account had diverse preferences such as bears, BDSM group, sex toys group, sugar daddy, ejaculate outside, sexual activity with secretions, fetishism, sexual fetishism, and even sexual activity in public areas or sexual activity with an addictive substance. Often there were some regulatory requirements. If any user wanted to build an intimate relationship with the other user, it was necessary to know, for example, a user account. And it was required that the profile picture showed their preferences as it appeared in the bio in order to be accepted to join the conversation. If they did not follow the rules by showing identities in the bio, they would be disconnected immediately.

2. The building of the intimate relationship among MSM. An emoji was usually used when MSM started to interact with each other in order to build an intimate relationship. This was often followed by saying “*Dee krup*” [in Thai] mean “hi” or, stating their sexual preferences, showing pictures as well as asking about the address, the place or the city they came from. From greeting, the conversation would lead to self-introduction, telling names and other information, so that the other party could consider whether they would like to continue or break the relationship. The use of an emoji instead of verbal conversation was because the speaker did not know how to start the first conversation. An emoji can help reduced the pressure the speaker has felt when he first starts the conversation. Self-disclosure with an emoji also creates a good first impression and respectfulness as mentioned by the participants. “*Stickers help reduce pressure because everyone likes to ask about age, weight, and height. I think this is rude. I don’t like it. Don’t you think? We don’t know each other, so don’t ask. It feels like they are nosy (laugh)*” (Research participant, A5). Even though asking about age, weight, and height was quite normal in the old days, nowadays, when MSM start their relationship, this has changed a lot. There was a great deal of respect for each other. When in their group, the researchers found that the group initiated a conversation politely and that they would follow the rules set by the interlocutor in order to build a relationship.

Afterward, MSM would either ask or tell their interlocutors about their sexual preferences and show their pictures and address. When they started self-introduction, the information was not their names as we would do in the offline world, but it would be about their sexual preferences and addresses. As mentioned above, this MSM group used several techniques to ask questions that help build closer relationship with each other as well as asking about their sexual preferences with a short question like what type (are you)? Since the main point was to build the relationship, they preferred the convenience in contacting each other and the quickness to start building a relationship although some of the participants revealed that they didn’t like to be asked what type they were as mentioned here “*It’s easy. I would know what type he was so I would know if it was a deal or not. It doesn’t take long time to ask many questions. Do you want to talk, or sex? Just a deal, that’s it.*” (Research participant, A2).

Besides those participants, the researcher also found that MSM who preferred violence during sexual intercourse or BDSM usually introduced themselves by telling their interlocutor whether they were Sub or Dom as mentioned by the following participants. “*Want to be your sub, want to get hard bangs.*” (Research participant, A18, is BDSM). Another participant said “*Pictures are essential because here no one uses the real picture. If he wants to meet with me, the first thing we would exchange is their real photo. This is normal, everyone does it. It is a rule, manners. I don’t need to know real names or occupations. I just don’t care.*” (Research participant, A13). An interesting point here is that

in their conversation for self-disclosure, name and occupation were nothing important. They cared more about what type of person their interlocutor was, as well as his sexual preference and picture or self-portrait. These things are used as good information for their decision-making whether they would like to continue their relationship or not. According to the study, the researcher found that the strong point of Twitter was that it allowed users to upload any image type without blockage. This advantage has drawn a large number of MSM to join and use this application as a medium of communication. Most of them would use the photo of their upper or lower body part in nudity and genital images.

The pattern that MSM used in building intimate relationships begins with a greeting. In addition to greetings, they also send images of the body and genitals. After that, there was an appointment to meet offline to interact face to face. The interactions can be divided into two parts: (1) emotional (It is a matter of sexual activity.); and (2) psychological (Most of them involve a psychological relationship and may continue to develop into a couple.), all of which depend on sexual orientation and physical traits. For example, one of the participants said “*I would first ask whether he is a top or bottom or bi. Then I might ask about his age and weight and maybe request his picture. If he doesn’t send me his picture, I would stop talking.*” (Research participant, A4). However, if any user was worried about their social appearance, the communication pattern would be different as mentioned here “*I don’t like people asking me what type I am. I come to see you here because I am sure that you are not the person I know. We spend some time talking before we finally meet face to face because we don’t live near each other. But as you see, there are steps before we meet as I am afraid that my secret will leak and it will affect my career. I’m afraid that someone may know about my secret.*” (Research participant, A2).

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## Discussion

The results of four studies, called the S-CP2D model, of building an intimate relationship among MSM by using Twitter are discussed and summarized as follows:

1. Self-Creation: The early step of communication usually uses Bio information to inform the other about the rules, regulations, and needs of the account users. If anyone doesn’t comply with the rules, he would be rejected by the account owner. However, if that one follows the rules, or their characteristic satisfies the account owner, the relationship will develop. Moreover, in a group of BDSM, the first thing in their conversation would be about their position including clear rules and regulations. They also need to introduce themselves and agree to all the rules set by their interlocutor before getting to the next step. If the interlocutor refuses to give any information, the conversation ends immediately because their Bio information is needed for their meeting later on.



2. Self-Presentation: If any account owner has a communication purpose that meets the other party's needs, then their relationship continues. The content in their communication often starts with greetings such as saying hi, or sending stickers. Then they will start asking each other about their sexual preference along with exchanging pictures of their sex organs (penis, buttock, or parts of their body) that can be seen clearly. If they are satisfied with this step, they will move on to the next level.

3. Self-Disclosure: At this level, the account owners will make an appointment to see each other offline. There are 2 purposes for their meeting: (1) The first purpose is to build an emotional intimacy relationship. The main activity for this purpose is for sexual activities and if both parties are satisfied with the activities, their relationship will develop leading to friendships, business partners, colleagues at work, or lovers. However, if the meeting dissatisfied either side, then the relationship ends afterward; and (2) The second purpose is to build a psychological intimacy relationship. The meeting with each other builds trust between them. If their needs correspond to each other, their relationship will develop and lead to a commitment and gradually becoming lovers. However, the meeting may or may not lead to sexual activity, and if one fails to build trust or their attitudes don't match, their relationship may end.

4. Self-Decision to building or breaking a relationship: After the MSM have met, whether an emotional intimacy relationship forms a psychological intimacy relationship or not, if it meets the needs, they exchange phone numbers or share details of their online community. There would be an exchange of their private information including, their real names, careers, home addresses, or other preferences building a more intimate relationship. On the other hand, if after their interaction, one feels dissatisfied, he would end a relationship by not exchanging personal phone numbers, refusing to meet next time, or even unfollowing the other on Twitter and other online media.

Building an intimate relationship has several steps that happen along with different formats and contents. Trust is built along the way. To start a conversation with each other is like starting to build an intimate relationship. Before this can take place, there must be an exchange of information first such as pictures of either self-portrait or their sex organ, which serves as an offer and willingness to communicate. The general content in their communication when it first starts is self-introduction. According to Brehm et al. (1992) and Kelly (2005), the stages of self-introduction start with revealing names and careers. It will take time to get to know each other and build trust between them. When they feel secure, they will start having sexual activities. From the literature review, 6 stages to build an intimate relationship were revealed. These stages can be presented in the timeline as follows: a relationship starts with building a psychological intimacy relationship first (getting to know each other, trust leads to becoming intimate) then it may or may not develop into building an emotional intimacy relationship (holding hands, hugs and kisses,

leading to sexual activities). This study corresponds to the work of Bouhoutsos et al. (1983), which stated that an intimate relationship may lead to sexual activities, but this conclusion might not be true if they first begin with sexual activities. This may not lead to the building of an intimate relationship.

The researcher found that there are similar patterns in seeking an intimate relationship among MSM. It usually starts with self-introduction. However, when introducing oneself, he might use his real name, nickname, or new name created for online communities such as Twitter. This self-introduction includes expression of their sexual preference. Furthermore, in their early conversation, there will be an exchange of their pictures showing a part of their sex organs. This is to be additional information for each other to consider whether they will want to continue this relationship. The results of this study are similar to the earlier work by Lever, Grov, Royce, and Gillespie (2008), which stated that heterosexuals and homosexuals often used online community to seek a relationship among their group since such community provides them with convenience and specific search for their demand as well as helps them keep their privacy before the relationship begins. When they meet their match, the next stage is to meet each other offline for different purposes, surely one of which is for sexual activities. The study by Shum (2014) pointed out the similar pattern of communication that they often exchange pictures. Yet, in this study, the researcher found that pictures that were exchanged were adapted to express the owner's sexual preference such as a picture of nudity, self-portrait. And, the group of people who prefer using sex toys is likely to show their toys in the pictures as part of their self-introduction. Furthermore, they might also send short video clips as a helper to present themselves. These video clips often contain content involving sexual activities.

Besides that, an intimate relationship among men who use Twitter as a method of communication starts from building an emotional intimacy relationship, which the person must decide about when they first meet face to face. Face-to-face meetings are a way to test whether their appearance matches the other person's preferences, attitudes, and trust. If they pass this stage, then their relationship will move on to the next stage. The researcher could not find any case where an intimate relationship was built by communicating through the online community only. Even though some couples developed intimate relationships through a phone conversation or video calls, they still needed to meet face to face to establish sexual activities. For this relationship to last, there was still a need to meet each other offline. Some research participant couples celebrated their seventh anniversary on Valentine's Day in the year 2018. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that the intimate communication of the MSM group on Twitter is the relationship that focuses on sex only. Thus, there are many different types of relationships that should be part of further studies in the future.

Hence, it can be concluded that building an intimate relationship among MSM using Twitter is “expanding” the traditional concept of intimate relationships. The results of this study have built on the traditional intimacy relationship concept and will help extend the science of interpersonal communication that the original concept needed a longer time to be “closer”. However, in this study the concept may not be sufficient to use to describe a nowadays phenomenon.

### Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest

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