



Volunteering through social media in Thailand

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 29 October 2021

Revised 28 December 2021

Accepted 3 January 2022

Available online 12 October 2022

Keywords:

online volunteering,
participation,
participatory communication,
social media,
voluntary work

Abstract

This study set out to explore the potential of social media for solving social problems by drawing on the experiences of volunteer organizations that use popular social media sites. A participatory communication framework was used, with semi-structured interviews with volunteering organization administrators, and online questionnaires of volunteer organization members as method. The study found that respondent demographics and social media usage affected the degree of online participation on the volunteering organizations' social media sites. Most respondents participated at a low level. Nevertheless, their activities brought direct and indirect benefits to the organizations and themselves. Most respondents thought that their online volunteering was efficacious at least in the short-term. Social media volunteering also prompted online volunteers to contribute to further volunteering both online and offline, and met some requirements of participatory communication. Its development may provide even further opportunities to expand such participation in interactive and collaborative ways.

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Introduction

Volunteer work was explicitly included in the National Economic and Social Development Plan of Thailand in 1972, two years after the United Nations General Assembly agreed to establish an international group of volunteers within the UN system. Since then, Thai volunteer work has contributed to many dimensions in Thai society, including health, economics, culture, the

environment, and disaster recovery. The emergence of Web 2.0 and its later generations, designed so users could easily create and share ideas and communicate and collaborate with others, have enhanced the potential of this volunteer work, particularly via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, the most popular social networking sites (SNSs) in Thailand. The importance of volunteer work through these sites in promoting and enabling online participation to help solve social problems and generate on-site collaboration was very evident during the 2010 floods in Thailand, where people were encouraged to help flood victims (Khopolklang et al., 2011, p. 30), homeless persons and

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<https://doi.org/10.34044/kjss.2022.43.4.17>

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animals. This suggested that online volunteering through volunteer organizations that use social media platforms had the potential to produce both direct and indirect benefits to Thai society, and to promote as well as meet participatory communication principles.

Participation is emphasized in the development communication literature (Naidoo, 2010). *Participatory communication*, a paradigm of development communication, emphasizes that participation should consider the “cultural identity of local communities and of democratization” (Servaes & Malikhao, 2005) in communications. This public-oriented conception of participation has gained the attention of media and communication scholars. The emergence of Web 2.0 has contributed to the rapid growth of such research (Rice & Fuller, 2013, pp. 370–371), although it remains “immature” (Alcaide-Muñoz & Alcaraz-Quiles, 2018). As a particular networking application of Web 2.0, social media shares in both its ideological and technological aspects, allowing the easy creation, generation and sharing of content among users either individually or through groups (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This kind of social software has participation, social interaction, connection, and the formation of culture at its core (boyd, 2006). But how effective is it as a form of volunteer work, and as participatory communication? This study examined online volunteering through or on behalf of volunteering organizations that utilize social media or social software, to consider its efficacy and participatory communication value.

Literature Review

In participatory communication, participation is “the process by which public concerns, needs, and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision making. It is two-way communication and interaction with the overall goal of better decisions that are supported by the public” (Creighton, 2005, p. 7). Essentially, it is about involving affected residents in evaluating the needs of their local area, developing consensus on the best action to take, and putting agreed plans into practice (Driskell, 2002, p. 32). It is therefore strongly oriented towards collaborative action to bring about change.

Participatory communication has various interpretations. However, there are two main principles, one from the dialogical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, the other from ideas discussed in the UNESCO debates on participation in the 1970s. For Freire, dialogue should be a means to transform social relations (Cadiz, 2005, pp. 147–149). For UNESCO, this dialogue must be accessible, participatory, and self-managed (Jouet, 1997, p. 3–5; Servaes, 1996,

p. 17). Participatory communication must also include consideration of participant personality, organizational capacity, participatory media characteristics, equity of participation, message attribution, and social cohesion (Musakophas, 2015). However, central is “the empowerment of citizens by their active involvement in the identification of problems, development of solutions and implementation of strategies” (Tufle & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 7).

Social media are participatory media that empower Internet users to connect to others through sending and receiving multi-messages via the network (Rheingold, 2008). Two key characteristics make it consistent with the idea of participatory communication: its interactivity, and horizontal form of communication (Tufle & Mefalopulos, 2009, p. 11). These characteristics empower people as Internet users (Lister et al., 2009) because they can easily contribute content themselves (Friedman & Friedman, 2008), as well as be both senders and receivers (Kioussis, 2002). Social media also provide for collaboration through the ability to create online communities (Friedman & Friedman, 2008), so that users can communicate with others sharing the same concerns (Banbersta, 2010). When social problems arise, users can work with others towards solutions, support others who are working on solutions, seek support in solving a problem, or offer and exchange knowledge, skills and experiences in order to seek solutions. People-centeredness, equality of communication, personal control of communication, and collaboration are all critical elements of participatory communication, potentially making social media ideal for online participatory communication through online volunteering. Participatory communication was therefore used as a framework to generate questions relating to horizontal communication on two dominant SNSs, Facebook and Twitter, to examine the participatory communication elements affecting online volunteering regarding solving social problems. The following factors were considered: volunteer member demographics and social media use; the level of participation available/engaged in; the presence of the participatory communication elements outlined above, especially in relation to developmental capacity (access to other organizations and/or volunteering opportunities); direct and indirect benefits to volunteering organizations/members; and member views of the efficacy of their volunteering. The aim was to capture the overall experience of grass-roots volunteering on these platforms, and to consider the capacity of these platforms for promoting “social learning” (Kim & Ellison, 2021, p. 2) in ways that encourage further volunteering, either online or offline.

Online volunteering means volunteer work completed in whole or in part through the Internet, from a home,

workplace, or public access computer. It may encompass “cyber servicing,” telementoring or teletutoring (Ellis & Cravens, 2000, p. 1; Cravens, 2006, p. 16), online advocacy, assessment, and consultancy. It may be conducted by offline volunteers, online volunteers for offline projects, online-only volunteers, or online volunteer teams for online projects (Peña-López, 2007, pp. 146–148).

Methodology

Purposive sampling was used to select volunteering organizations that utilized Facebook and/or Twitter, had created social movements, and had enabled changes in Thai society. A snowball technique was employed, starting from The Mirror Foundation, an organization that had notability in national mainstream media. Twelve organizations engaged in a range of volunteer activities were selected as suitable. These were divided into two groups: *volunteer coordinators* (information centers/exchange platforms for volunteers and organizations, mainly about offline activities), and *volunteer initiators* (groups that initiated volunteer work both online and offline). The administrators of all twelve selected volunteering groups were approached. Seven responded and consented to be interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted either at the organization’s office or at a place convenient to the administrator, such as their routine workplace. Based on these interviews, two organizations were determined to be *volunteer coordinators* and five *volunteer initiators*. Volunteer sampling was then used to reach members of the twelve groups, and an online questionnaire was distributed. Responses were received from 408 people: 177 members from the volunteer coordinators, and 231 members from the volunteer initiators. Of these, 279 used Facebook and 129 used Twitter.

The questionnaire and interview questions were tested for content validity for question relevancy and comprehension according to the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC), then subsequently modified and pre-tested for understanding with 30 people similar to the respondent group. Pre-test data were tested for reliability using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. The result was 0.969, well above the 0.50 minimum acceptable reliability threshold.

A five-point rating scale (highest/always to lowest/never) was used to rate responses. Resulting data were calculated for arithmetic means and interpreted by Srisard’s criteria (1996, p. 68). Interview data were analyzed using descriptive analysis; the questionnaire data were

analyzed by descriptive statistics (percentage, frequency, and mean). The relationship between research variables was analyzed using t-test statistics and one-way ANOVA statistics. If $p < .05$, the relationship was statistically significant.

Results

Volunteer Member Demographics and Members’ Social Media Usage

Statistics on the demographics and social media usage of questionnaire respondents are in Table 1. Almost half the respondents were 26–35 years old (47.55%); over a third were corporate employees (36.52%). Most held diploma, high vocational certificate or bachelor’s degrees (61.76%). They participated in their organization’s social media as Internet users interested in issues supported by the organization (60.29%), had been volunteers on social media for less than one year (44.85%), and visited volunteering social media sites one to nine times per month (76.72%).

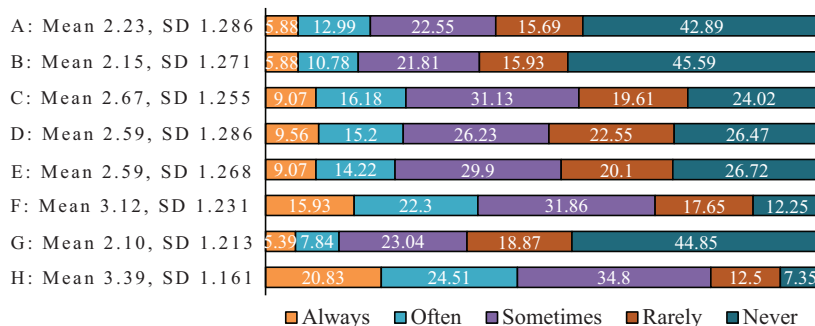
Most had never volunteered before (65.93%). Educational background ($f = 3.789$, $p = .011$), member status ($f = 3.557$, $p = 0.030$), duration of membership ($f = 4.362$, $p = .008$), frequency of volunteering organization social media usage ($f = 5.430$, $p = .001$), and experience as a volunteer ($t = 3.094$, $p = .002$), all affected members’ online participation on their organization’s social media sites. Age and occupational factors were not found to affect their online participation.

Level of Online Participation of Members and Interviewees on Volunteering Social Media Sites

Results of the questionnaire on participation are shown in Figure 1. The highest average activity was reading messages and/or clicking “Like” or “Favorite” (H), with mean 3.39 (degree of participation = sometimes). The second highest was sharing or retweeting the organization’s information to external networking (F) (mean = 3.12). These results were consistent with the findings of the interviews with the organizations’ administrators, which indicated that although a variety of activity levels were often available, volunteer organizations mainly used social media volunteers to publicize the volunteer activities of their own and other organizations, distribute useful information about volunteering, build participation networks in volunteer work, and mobilize volunteers and donations.

Table 1 Volunteering social media members: online questionnaire responses

Demographics and volunteering social media usage		Frequency	Percentage
Age	26–35	194	47.55
	13–25	129	31.62
	36–55	80	19.61
	56 and over	5	1.23
Occupation	Corporate employee	149	36.52
	Student	97	23.77
	Self-employed/business owner	63	15.44
	Government or state enterprise officer	58	14.22
	Others	21	5.15
	General contractors	17	4.17
	Retired	3	0.74
Educational Background	Diploma/high vocational certificate/bachelor's degree	252	61.76
	Over bachelor's degree	101	24.75
	High school/vocational certificate	51	12.50
	Primary school	4	0.98
Experience as a volunteer	No	269	65.93
	Yes	139	34.07
Status of members on volunteering social media	Interested Internet user	246	60.29
	Volunteer	105	25.74
	Donor/supporter	28	6.86
	Journalist	10	2.45
	Internet user needing help/support	9	2.21
	Staff of similar organizations or agencies	8	1.96
	Volunteer organization's committee/executive/staff	2	0.49
Duration of volunteering social media membership	less than 1 year	183	44.85
	1–2 years	143	35.05
	3–4 years	68	16.67
	5 years and over	14	3.43
Frequency of volunteering social media usage	1–9 times/month	313	76.72
	10–19 times/month	54	13.24
	30 times/month and over	24	5.88
	20–29 times/month	17	4.17

**Figure 1** Online participation of members on volunteering social media

Note: A: Originating volunteer activities/mobilizing self-help; B: Involved in decision-making relating to organization policy; C: Participation in various forms of volunteer work; D: Posting organizational messages; E: Responding to questions; F: Sharing/retweeting information to external networks; G: Request information from other organizations; H: Reading messages and/or clicking "Like" or "Favorite."

Presence of Participatory Communication Elements and Their Impact on Member Participation

All elements of participatory communication highly affected the questionnaire respondents' online participation on their organization's social media sites (mean = 3.81, $SD = 0.581$). However, as Figure 2 shows, the most affective element was the member's personality (mean = 4.10; $SD = 0.721$). Social media characteristics had the second highest mean (3.97; $SD = 0.701$). The third highest was online external linkages (mean = 3.88; $SD = 0.774$). The remaining elements covered a mean between 3.87 and 3.52. These results indicate that social media participation has the capacity to conform to participatory communication principles if certain characteristics such as issue salience are present.

Contribution of Online Participation on Social Media to Volunteering Communities

The organization administrators' interviews revealed that the use of online volunteers on their social media brought direct and indirect benefits to both online and offline volunteering. For volunteer coordinator groups, direct benefits included expanded public awareness of volunteer work, motivation of others to help, and increases in morale, hope and self-esteem. For volunteer initiator groups, direct benefits included enrichment of social participation aimed at helping others, and widening of organization recognition. Indirect benefits for initiator groups included easy access to volunteer work for young

volunteers. Both coordinator and initiator groups also reported that online volunteering on their social media sites had increased the number of both online members and offline volunteers.

Volunteer Members' Views on The Efficacy of Their Volunteering Efforts

While nearly three-quarters of questionnaire respondents (295 or 72.30%) thought their online volunteering efforts for their organization could help solve social problems and bring about social change, they generally thought that this would only be in the short-term (less than 4 months). However, 65.93 percent of respondents were first-time volunteers who had been participating for less than a year, so the long-term efficacy of their work had not yet been tested.

Discussion

As expected, the study found that the demographics and social media usage of respondents did affect their online participation for the volunteering organizations studied, including their educational background, experience in volunteering, duration of membership, and frequency of social media usage. Educational background was the most significant. Differences in ages and occupations had little impact on respondents' online participation, suggesting a wider pool of potential volunteers for online-only work than first thought.

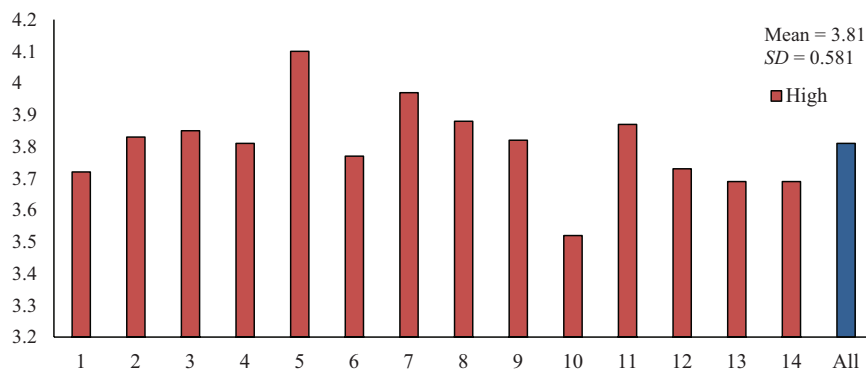


Figure 2 Effects of online participatory communication elements on members' online participation

Note: 1. Organizational capacity; 2. Accessibility to social media; 3. Equity of participation; 4. Reflection; 5. Personality of member; 6. Key facilitation skills of the administrator; 7. Social media characteristics; 8. Online external linkages; 9. Networking; 10. Relevance to problems; 11. Message attributes; 12. Information exchange; 13. Trustworthiness; 14. Social cohesion; A: average of all elements.

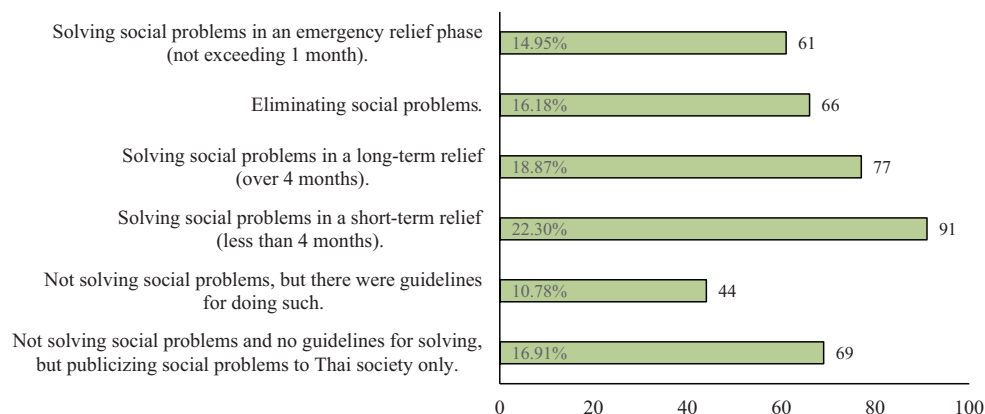


Figure 3 Ability of online participation by volunteer members on volunteering social media sites to solve social problems

Substantial forms of participation were reported in the study, including co-operative work to mobilize donations, seek new members, manage information sharing, initiate activities and engage in policy co-decision making. These kinds of participation were similar to the collaborative online offline volunteering and online volunteering for offline projects noted by Peña-López (2007), although fully online. However, the study contrasted with Mukherjee's 2011 studies of virtual volunteers using a similar methodology, which found that virtual volunteers participated in substantial participatory communication formats: writing project reports; reviewing grant proposals; preparing audit statements; advising on financial and administrative issues; exploring funding opportunities; mentoring; arranging public relations details; and updating websites. Although demographics and social media usage also had an effect on overall volunteering efforts in Mukherjee's studies, in this study, the majority of the respondent volunteer participants participated in their organization by reading messages and/or pressing "Like" or "Favorite", or sharing/retweeting the organization's information to external networks. While these are considered low levels of participation (see Nielsen, 2006), given the reach of Facebook and Twitter and the networking capacity of these activities in terms of the algorithms that determine where an organization comes up in an online search, they can still be beneficial to the organization. Even in terms of solving social problems, these forms of participation can be remarkably effective. The sharing of information about a missing child on The Mirror Foundation's social media site led to the safe return of the child to his family. Similarly, sharing SiamAsra's campaign message calling for the Thai government to declare the Animal Protection Act helped to have the Act promulgated. In both cases,

purely online volunteering in the minimal ways described above not only had an impact on social issues, but enabled further offline participation, suggesting, as Ackermann and Manatschal (2018) argue, that online volunteering can have the beneficial side-effect of reinforcing and mobilizing offline volunteering, particularly through its capacity for social learning through the visibility of, and access to, normative models of engaged citizenship (Kim & Ellison, 2021). As well as these elements of participatory communication, it is also horizontal and interactive.

All elements of participatory communication in relation to the members' online participation on the volunteering organizations' social media were high. Although the personalities of members, and the social media's characteristics had the most effect, these worked hand-in-hand. The ease of use and shareability of social media technology arguably enables a greater range of people to be recruited for this kind of volunteer work, particularly suiting younger people just starting out at volunteering and desiring to produce social change. As Lipschultz (2018, pp. 9–11, 120–121) argues, the characteristics of social media, such as interactivity, connectedness, and mobility, make it an ideal mechanism for online participation through networking, interacting, engaging, crowd-sourcing, and sharing digital content etcetera, to the advantage of non-profit and volunteer-based organizations as well as to the volunteers themselves.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Participatory communication is strongly committed to expanding the reach and inclusion of ordinary people in their efforts to bring about social change in their

communities (Tufle & Mefalopulos, 2009). Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter appear to have the capacity to do this. Although they could be considered “mass” forms of this kind of media given their broad spread and appeal, unlike traditional mass media, social media allows horizontal communication, interactivity, and creativity. In this respect it meets the “dialogic” requirements of participatory communication, including inclusivity. Social media is also accessible, enabling participation across a wide range of technological abilities. A participant does not need to be technologically skilled to use these platforms, although those with more skill can, of course, engage in more complex ways. For the purposes of volunteer organizations, though, even simple skills can produce both direct and indirect benefits, particularly if engaged in by high numbers of motivated participants. Although the majority of online volunteers in this study participated through indicating their preferences with regard to the organizations’ activities, these simple actions not only encouraged a “volunteering” habit in the participants, but helped to promote the organization and its activities to others. When they retweeted or shared material from the organizations’ websites, the use of their personal networks also helped to expand the reach of the organizations. All administrators who were interviewed believed that their organizations benefited from this kind of volunteering, through networking, mobilization and increased visibility. Memberships grew as a result, volunteers were often motivated to do further volunteering both online and off-line, and public awareness of volunteer work in general as well as the work of individual organizations increased. In line with the findings by Kelty and Erickson (2018, p. 84), though, participation mostly fell into their second *mode* of participation, *experiential-affective*, with its emphasis on the sense of collective belonging and collective power. The majority of member participants believed their efforts were worthwhile and could bring about at least short-term social change. Seeing tangible results from their efforts was rewarding, leading to an increase in the volunteer’s morale, hope and self-esteem. It was also conducive to further participation. These are significant outcomes for participatory communication aims, as they are the key to the development of engaged citizenship norms (Kim & Ellison, 2021).

According to Tufle and Mefalopulos (2009, p. 13), the crucial question to ask of any kind of media in relation to participatory communication is to what extent it can “stimulate dialogue and empowerment processes” and give “voice and visibility” to those involved. At a time when the “space for civil society to speak and act is ...

shrinking” (Suzina et al., 2020, p. 409), social media have the capacity to both empower and make visible, particularly in relation to the two central but conflicting goals of development work, social mobilization and advocacy. Even the minimal online volunteering reported in this study proved capable of advancing these goals. Social media are tolerant of a wide range of skills, making it particularly attractive to young people, first time volunteers, those with limited time or unable to participate in more physical kinds of volunteering. Use of it as a volunteer platform is becoming increasingly attractive to both volunteers and volunteer organizations. If one of the purposes of participatory communication is to motivate and encourage social learning and a habit of volunteering and participation within a community in order to achieve social goals, then widely discussed incidences of the misuse of social media should not be allowed to detract from its value as a tool for growing volunteer organizations focused on doing good, benefiting their activities both directly and indirectly, and helping to achieve social change. If anything, the results of this study should increase the determination of participatory communication practitioners to see this powerful, social technology used for positive social ends.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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