

# แนวคิด Micro-celebrity และข้อสังเกตปรากฏการณ์ในประเทศไทย

## The concept of Micro-celebrity and its phenomenon in Thailand

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### บทคัดย่อ

ประเทศไทยถือได้ว่าเป็นหนึ่งในประเทศที่เน้นการใช้ celebrity หรือ ดาราและบุคคลมีชื่อเสียงในวงกว้างเป็นหลักในพื้นที่สื่อ แต่การเกิดขึ้นของ social media นั้นทำให้เกิดการเปลี่ยนแปลงในพื้นที่สื่อ ซึ่งผู้บริโภคได้หลีกเลี่ยงจากอิทธิพลสื่อการถูกครอบงำจากดาราและ บุคคลมีชื่อเสียงในวงกว้างแบบดั้งเดิม โดยผู้บริโภคนั้นได้รับอิทธิพลจากสื่อออนไลน์มากขึ้นจากบุคคลธรรมดาทั่วไปในชีวิตประจำวัน หรือที่เรียกว่า micro-celebrity

บทความนี้มีจุดประสงค์ในการอธิบายกรอบแนวคิดของ micro-celebrification หรือ การที่บุคคลธรรมดาทั่วไปสามารถเป็นผู้มีอิทธิพลในสื่อออนไลน์ได้ (micro-celebrity) ผ่านมุมมองทฤษฎีทุนทางวัฒนธรรมของ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) ในการกำหนดกรอบแนวคิดใหม่ในการทำความเข้าใจ micro-celebrity ผ่านมุมมองว่าจะไร้อยู่ภายใต้กระบวนการที่บุคคลธรรมดาทั่วไปกลายเป็น micro-celebrity ในสังคมออนไลน์ขึ้นมาได้ และ กระบวนการเหล่านั้นสามารถส่งผลกระทบเชื่อมโยงและสร้างอิทธิพลต่อผู้ติดตามได้อย่างไร โดยผลสรุปของบทความนี้ต้องการเสนอแนะแนวทางใหม่ให้กับบริษัทที่เกี่ยวข้องกับสื่อในประเทศไทยในการเผชิญการแข่งขันอย่างสูงและการอยู่รอดในยุคสื่อดิจิทัลอย่างยั่งยืน

**คำสำคัญ :** สังคมออนไลน์ / ทุนทางวัฒนธรรม / micro-celebrity

### Abstract

Thailand has been considered as one of the celebrity-centric country. The advent of social media causes a transition into the media landscape in which consumers are invading from traditional media sphere by as they are exposed to and influenced by normal everyday people as micro-celebrities. This paper attempts to conceptualise how ordinary person can become micro-celebrity or the process of micro-celebrification through a lens of Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital. The use of cultural capital has shaped a new way to look at the understandings of micro-celebrities from what underlie their celebrity status and how they can relate and influence their followers. As a result, the paper gives a new implication on how Thai media companies should be acted in order to survive this competitive digital era in a sustainable way.

**Keywords :** Social Media / Cultural Capital / Micro-celebrity

### Introduction: The Rising of Micro-celebrity in Thailand

The year 2015 saw a large move of Thai television towards digitalisation away from terrestrial television.

Of the 24 operators of television in Thailand, the vast majority have faced economic problems and challenges within their enterprises. Bangkok Post (2017) reveals that as a result of the high competition over digital TV licences which has led to businesses reducing spending on production and as a result of a large proportion of TV audiences watching online, there has been a significant transformation of the operation of the media landscape in Thailand.

In 2018, one broadcaster in Thailand, MCOT, reported on its new approach to digital media, focusing its resources on more on digital platforms and less on traditional media (Thai Examiner, 2019). Furthermore, the broadcaster has decided to invest in online advertising. Accordingly, this change of TV from traditional to digital has caused much change within the industry, in both media businesses and in advertising.

In addition to this, citizens of Thailand are increasingly using social media platforms. The country has been placed at number eight worldwide in terms of its number of Facebook users and its city Bangkok has the highest level of activity on the site (Bangkok Post, 2018; Thai Examiner, 2019). The social media site Instagram is beginning to gain in popularity among young people, as well as LINE application has achieved great success among all age groups in Thailand. As digital media is constantly evolving and developing, it is impossible to stay true to a particular marketing communication. Especially, due to a growing interest in consumer activity in social media, consumers have become active in their creation of data and knowledge as a result of this increase in focus on social media users and their actions (Stewart and Pavlou, 2002)

One important way in which to achieve public interest is done through celebrity and influencers on social media. Nouri (2018) states that by using these influencers, marketers can improve the reputation of the brands they work for. Berthon et al. (2007) argue that many users of media participate in a variety of activities such as conversations with other users, the

consumption of media content and the input towards the activities of other users. As users of media become more active in their consumption due to the availability of such a variety of content, traditional celebrities are becoming less influential as micro-celebrities become increasingly influential (Kutthakaphan and Chokesamritpol, 2013; Nouri, 2018).

Shao (2009) suggests that there are two types of consumers: active and passive consumers. Active consumers often contribute to the content they consume whereas passive consumers often consume without contributing. Accordingly, it is possible for consumers to build a massive following list on their social media and become a micro-celebrity with an engaged fan base by using the right content delivered at the right time. As media companies are trying to get consumers' attention, being able to understand what makes a normal person become a micro-celebrity is essential for them to utilise these platforms, minimize marketing costs, and draw in large audiences. As such, this paper will draw on the understanding of micro-celebrity, discussions surrounding conceptualisation of how a normal person becomes micro-celebrity in Thailand, and the implications for media companies in practice.

## **What is Micro-celebrity ?**

It has been found that concept of celebrity has significantly changed, now being more achievable to the average person and not just an exclusive position (Boyd, 2011). Senft (2013) suggests that the term micro-celebrity is an ordinary person with an above-average number of followers across varying social medias. Micro-celebrities are those who have the ability to affect members of the public as a result of their status they have created through recognition, association, admiration and aspiration (Marwick, 2013; Kutthakaphan and Chokesamritpol, 2013). It is argued that the rise of the micro-celebrity has occurred as a result of the perceived closing of distance between the person who is a follower and the celebrity, both spatially and temporally (Marshall, 2016). Therefore,

the relationship between fans and the micro-celebrities they follow differs from the traditional fan to celebrity relationship as there is often some shared community culture which often involves a higher level of interaction between the micro-celebrity and their audience via the comments section. This makes the micro-celebrity appear more relatable and closer to the audience. Nouri (2018) suggests that as a result of this, micro-celebrities are more likely to have a larger impact on the opinions of their followers than a traditional celebrity would.

A micro-celebrity arguably presents to their audiences an authentic personality yet still involves a belief that they are a celebrity (Marwick, 2013). To be more specific, when a person vlogs, they often talk to the camera as if it were the audience and create a following his way through their own video creation and editing skills (Jerslev, 2016). Duffy (2010) states that audiences appreciate the physical aesthetic of this content and admire the authentic quality of the content they consume. This authenticity and sharing of private information seen in micro-celebrities has caused a transformation of the concept of what is public and what is private.

Moreover, the micro-celebrity is distinguished by the closeness that they represent which is reinforced through continuity and connectedness (Marwick, 2013). This argument is further supported by Nouri (2018) who believes that this closeness creates a bond between two or more people that may be temporary or may stand the test of time. These bonds can be strengthened through a shared common interest, through affection and through social factors that can be explored through the features on social media that allow people to interact with one another (Berryman and Kavka, 2017). As such, continuity is vital in terms of these bonds and relationships for followers to remain fans of the micro-celebrity (Nouri, 2018).

Apart from this, Marwick (2013) further argues that these factors of closeness and authenticity create a higher level of engagement with micro-celebrities from

reference groups. Reference groups are often a group of people who share a common element such as a shared belief or purpose (Schiffman et al., 2012). Nouri (2018) adds that micro-celebrities attract individuals due to their relatability which is rarely achieved with traditional celebrities who are often unrelatable due to their wealth and status. As a result, micro-celebrities are arguably even more crucial in the present day in marketing as they have access to and often represent emerging markets. Micro-celebrities provide an insight for marketers into how best to achieve success with audiences and consumers and Camahort (2016) states that using micro-celebrities as part of a marketing campaign is crucial in today's climate.

In terms of media enterprises, micro-celebrities should not be overlooked when creating their marketing strategies. It is important to both involve micro-celebrities when marketing and also investigate their success, as this can allow media companies to emulate this themselves, creating their own relationships between themselves and their consumers via social media, increasing their engagement and entering into important discussions that can improve the experience for both parties involved. Therefore, the process of becoming a micro-celebrity will be critically examined.

## **What is Micro-Celebrification?**

Due to the emergence of social media, the "erosion between private and public has spread beyond those who are famous and those who wish to be famous" (Senft, 2013, p. 351). This means that the making of celebrity is no longer created by large media company; in other words, "we see the process of celebrification trickling down" (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 141). Therefore, the creation of a celebrity can occur on a smaller scale and is not solely determined by large media enterprises. The term celebrification refers to the method by which the average person, who has not had significant experience in media, transitions to a celebrity by using a particular media form as their means of maintaining this status (Couldry, 2004).

Marwick and Boyd (2011) argue that the concept of celebrity has significantly changed, now being more achievable to the average person and not as distinct social position marked by an exclusive and privileged distance. Hearn (2008) further explains that this means that the average person has the ability to achieve celebrity status through platforms on social media to connect to their followers and a wider audience. Correspondingly, It has been suggested by Nouri (2018) that a broader understanding of micro-celebrification, especially how ordinary persons turn into micro-celebrities, should put micro-celebrity as a cultural and communicative practice on social medias, but still works in accordance with celebrity logic.

Dyer (2004) states that the celebrity logic creates conflict between public and private, extraordinary and ordinary. However, the micro-celebrity phenomenon has changed this as more private lives are revealed and more ordinary people attain celebrity status through having direct communication with followers on an immediate time frame (Nouri, 2018). As such, micro-celebrities possess a celebrity status, but without the celebrity title, in which they can influence their followers through the display of accessibility, presence, and authenticity through the performance of distinction.

### **Conceptualising Micro-celebrification: The Performance of Distinction**

The performance of distinction can be explained using the theory of cultural capital and taste first ascribed by Bourdieu in 1984. This theory has had a significant role in understanding of behavioural patterns. It states that an individual's wants are established through an individual's taste and that pleasures result from specific stimulus. Therefore, to understand consumers and their behaviour, it is essential to understand taste (Holt, 1998). Using this theory, micro-celebrities are placed as objects of consumption, the value of which is determined by the consumers themselves. Consumers will follow the micro-celebrities that align most closely with their own tastes, and

in turn, these select micro-celebrities will have the greatest influence over their consumption patterns. Continuing with the use of micro-celebrity as the object of consumption, such consumption can be measured by social media engagement, the number of followers of the content produced by the micro-celebrity and the adoption of similar views as the micro-celebrity. Accordingly, taste cannot be ignored when attempting to understand the increase of micro-celebrities as it provides an explanation of why certain people gain such a following online and become influencers to specific reference groups.

Bourdieu (1984) states that when examining cultural capital creation, it is necessary to address the importance of time investment and essence of training. Holt (1998) further adds that cultural capital can be the foundation for preferences and taste. Cultural capital is directly linked to practices, skills and knowledge and therefore can influence tastes of consumers and their actions which result from social factors such as family, friends and schooling (Bourdieu 1984; Alasuutari, 1997).

Social distinction is often defined by an abundance of taste and as such, those with higher capital become role models and influencers of those with less capital in terms of tastes and consumption (Van Rees et al., 1999). Bourdieu (1984) states that the cultural competence exhibited by a person is related to distinction. Distinction refers to a high social status. Therefore, to maintain both cultural competence and distinction, it is necessary to acquire cultural capital. Challenged relating to status can arise from a lack of cultural capital resources (Holt, 1998).

Micro-celebrification highlights the importance of cultural capital when relating to taste. Despite all individuals experiencing cultural capital, it is especially important when examining micro-celebrities. As an individual acquires cultural capital and becomes part of the high quintile of cultural capital (HCC), their social status will also increase, and they will often become celebrities to some degree. Often, this celebrity status

is achieved by the individual having specific skills that are not found in the majority of those in the lower quintile of cultural capital (LCC). To illustrate, some micro-celebrities that have achieved such status have done so via the platform YouTube which allowed them to create videos exhibiting their skills such as beauty bloggers who provide makeup tutorials. It has been suggested that HCC individuals are decreasingly using their wealth as their symbol of status but instead using certain exclusive practices (Trigg, 2001).

Holt (1998) states that consumer behaviour and patterns are moulded by factors such as family and development, schooling, relationships with consumer goods and occupation which provide consumers with skills and experiences that are learned, repeated and reproduced every day. The type of life that a person leads can be determined by cultural capital resources. The term 'homogeneity' refers to the connection between consumption preferences and patterns and 'homology' refers to class and community creation (Bourdieu, 1984; Sintas and Álvarez, 2004). This relates to consumption as those who have similar cultural capital will often display similar patterns and preferences for consumption. Furthermore, those who are similar in their amount of cultural capital tend to follow similar micro-celebrities who have more cultural capital than them to increase their own sense of connectedness and belonging.

Bourdieu (1990) furthered added to his theory of cultural capital by introducing the idea of fields. Fields refer to specific areas of knowledge and expertise such as sociology, art and photography whereby each area of knowledge represents varying cultural capital resources (Bourdieu 1993; Benson and Neveu, 2005). Swartz (1997) uses sports as an example by proposing that a player's understanding of the game is termed the practical sense and allows them to play in a way that appears easy to onlookers. Micro-celebrities who have a large cultural capital become accustomed to the field and form habits within the field itself. In order to maintain their role and rank in the field,

micro-celebrities must continuously communicate to their audience information pertaining to their private lives to achieve a feeling in their followers of connectedness.

Bourdieu (1984) shows that cultural capital resources and taste are representative of status and therefore micro-celebrities have a higher cultural resource base. These micro-celebrities present their own cultural competency and taste to their audiences. Their audiences often share a similar cultural capital resource level and as such are often more culturally connected as they share common cultural interests. These audiences seek individuals of higher cultural resources to be role models and to achieve connectedness. These individuals, micro-celebrities, who act as role models and influencers, must nurture and maintain this feeling of connectedness within their fanbase to retain their celebrity status. This can be achieved by promoting audience interaction with one another and with the micro-celebrity. It is evident therefore, that the process of micro-celebrification relies heavily on cultural capital resources and taste.

### **Micro-celebrification and Implications for medias in Thailand**

Thailand has been regarded as one of celebrity-centric countries since Thai consumer believes in endorsement and recommendation from celebrities (de Mooji, 2014). Although traditional celebrities have not lost their influences, there is no improvement in their power together with the trend that Thai consumers gradually look out for non-traditional celebrities to influence and ensure their decision (The nation, 2015). According to Wave consumer studies from IPG Mediabrands, 15% of Thai consumers are influenced by online opinions from micro-celebrity signaling that Thai consumers prefer value the words of online influencers to the words of celebrities (The nation, 2015). Supported by Arndt (1967), word-of-mouth has the strongest effect and ability to shape consumer's opinion and consumer decision.

Within this view, celebrity endorsements are likely

to be more superficial in Thailand in a way that their credibility surroundings online opinion is gradually perceived as a doubt (The nation, 2015). Such view is increasingly true since online consumers nowadays are likely to shape their opinions in accordance with an influencer whom they perceive as being real, knowledgeable, and easily accessed or interacted, rather than a distant one. Moreover, since internet plays an essential component of viral media through the use of social media (Goyette et al., 2010), electronic-word-of-mouth has usually associated with viral media which enhance the opportunity to spread the opinions to the wider audiences (Dellarocas, 2003). Accordingly, electronic word-of-mouth should be well managed in order to give the opportunity to transcend an online conversation from ordinary person for a larger scale (Park and Kim, 2008). Supported by Keawsujarit et al. (2013), electronic-word-of-mouth, especially within Thai Facebook users, increases the desire for information from everyone in the network, allowing people in a network to get to know each other more than in their real-world daily lives. As the level of cultural capital can enhance credibility and privileged position of individuals in terms of their knowledge and skills in particular field, it has become a crucial role for ordinary Thai individuals to build up micro-celebrity position in order to influence others in a network.

Example of Thai micro-celebrity is Cee. Cee was know as IT Princess by Thai media due to her work as a news anchor and TV host for IT and new technology in the past. However, she was not widely recognised by the general public until she has decided to create her own digital contents such as blog, vlog, and online tv programs specially on IT issues. As such, she has gained her popularity as micro-celebrity through her online identity in various social media platforms as Ceemeagain. Ceemeagain represents a high level of cultural capital on knowledge surrounding on IT and new technology, resulting in possessing million followers on social media as well

as gaining acceptance as one of the biggest online influencer in Thailand.

Cee signify a good illustration of how the process of celebrification is trickling down in which the use of mainstream media and media persona as IT Princess is not an effective method for gaining public interests. On the other hand, Ceemeagain has rather made enormous impacts on consumers and become a viable tool for achieving and influencing large audiences. This is since the need for connectivity is intertwined into the daily lives of consumers in which the use social media can steer such need in a micro level. To clarify, Cee has generated her online contents associated with various activities ranging from providing specialised knowledge-based content, allowing discussions and sharing knowledge in order to connect with consumers' activities in their daily lives. By doing so, she can gain her success and status as micro-celebrity.

PuPe\_so\_Sweet is another good case study, illustrating how ordinary person can turn into a micro-celebrity. PuPe\_so\_Sweet started his journey by creating various posts surrounding reviews on skincare products on Pantip, which is one of the biggest online community in Thai. Rather than simply reviewing about his feelings while using a particular skin care product, he tends to incorporate his expertised knowledge (a high level of cultural capital) on skincare ingredients into the review. His posts on Pantip were received widely attention, leading him to create his own contents through his own social media accounts. Currently, PuPe\_so\_Sweet's social media has reach over 100,000 followers, in which he becomes one of the top beauty bloggers in Thailand.

PuPe\_so\_Sweet's case shows that consumers are likely to look up to individuals who earn a higher cultural capital as their influencers in order to keep their cultural competency as well as group belongings. Also, PuPe\_so\_Sweet also encourage interactions with his followers by using comment section. To clarify, he always maintains conversation surrounding high

level of cultural interests through feedbacks with his followers. By doing this, it allows him to sustain his micro-celebrity position within a field.

It can be seen that both Cee and PuPe\_so\_Sweet represent a high level of cultural capital on knowledge. Since credibility and honesty are appreciated and even demanded on the social media platform (Nouri, 2018), Both Cee and PuPe\_so\_Sweet routinely exhibit their high level of cultural capital to general public through their social medias by sharing knowledge, updating news, giving truthfully reviews and opinion as well as providing suggestions to their followers. Thus, creating a sense of authenticity and connectedness which is a fundamental characteristic of micro-celebrity in order to reinforce a conviction on one another possess the least appeal.

Due to various interfaces of social media platform, micro-celebrity is able to provide more of a person's personality through pictures, videos and comments, in which Thai micro-celebrities also gain popularity not only because of their high level of cultural capital but also their tasteful sense of humor. For example, both Cee and PuPe\_so\_Sweet present their sense of humor by utilising a straight-forward communication to their fans, allowing them to transfer their high level of cultural capital on knowledge into entertaining contents. Previous research also asserted that the use of sense of humor has played successfully in Thai media and television as Thais love creativity and humor, reflecting from their culture (Tiwsakul and Hackley, 2006). Supported by Wells (2018), trustworthy, sincere, entertaining, intelligent, knowledgeable, outspoken, and relatable are reported as very important personality for micro-celebrity in Thailand.

Overall, in social media, there may be many people communicating about the same cultural interests at the same platform, but consumers naturally develop a sense of belonging to those whom they find particularly appealing and relating to themselves. Thus, the communication on natural extension of the micro-celebrity is suitable for micro-celebrification in

Thailand, in which informative content (high cultural capital) should be embedded with entertaining in order to appeal and relate to audiences. Such communication strategy provided by micro-celebrity is aimed at making audiences feel as if they can trust micro-celebrity nearly as friends and equal to experts when it comes to opinions and recommendations.

However, it should be noted that there has been a confusion over the term "Net Idol" and micro-celebrity in Thailand. Apparently, most of Thai media companies and marketers still treat both of them as if they are the same group of people (Positioningmag, 2016). In fact, the difference between net idols and micro-celebrities is that net idol are likely to earn their privileged status due to their high level of social capital or the large quantity number of followers, which is more about relations and affiliation through funny characteristics which pull a certain group of people together (Bourdieu, 1984). However, not every net idols can be online influencers as micro-celebrity. This is since net idols are lack of high level of cultural capital which is an important element of micro-celebrity in order to influence and shape their audiences. As such, media companies should take the understanding of cultural capital when running a campaign. If the media campaign are designed to influence consumers' decision, cultural capital should be put as a main criteria for media campaign in order to judge their partnership with particular micro-celebrity. On the other hand, if the campaign are designed to draw attention from audiences or to try to deliver message to the mass, traditional celebrity or net idol with a large number of followers might be the answer.

Moreover, the application of cultural capital in media practice can become the most powerful form for media companies in order to gain a sustainable success in a world of a fragmented viewership. For example, a routinely content with high level of cultural capital embodied with a sense of entertaining from ordinary persons can be a feature for media companies in order to make a meaningful connections to audiences

as well as to translate those viewers to a willingness one, which is far beyond loyal and engage. Although audiences reach maybe smaller, this strategy helps to build up a sustain fan based for media channels in a way that it keeps relationships in mind with audiences and makes it difficult for them to switch to other channel.

Lastly, problems surroundings hard core tie-in and sales in media content can be solved. Using micro-celebrity can help media companies to balance the needs between sponsored content and creativity. Media companies can integrate micro-celebrity as a storyteller for the sponsored content. By giving inspiration and freedom, micro-celebrities can give the right story to the right people since they know how to communicate to their segment market or followers. Also, their high level of cultural capital can solve the negative views surrounding the sponsored content. Rather than pushing hard sales to the audiences,

micro-celebrities are likely to find the way to educate and entertain their audience, giving a sense of authenticity and creditability to the sponsored content at the same time.

## **Conclusion**

As social media comes along, audiences become more fragmented in which traditional mass commutation might not be able to reach wider audiences. As such, one of the biggest task for media companies is not only about finding the biggest general celebrity, but also about associating with micro-celebrity who can contribute the biggest influencer for their specific audiences based within the wider market. Accordingly, understanding what underlies micro-celebritation helps media companies effectively apply communication strategy that is suitable for the nature of audiences in the digital world.

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