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‘She met her (boy)friend online’: negotiating gender identity and sexuality among young Thai women in online space

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the experiences of women 15 – 24 years old living in one suburban district in Bangkok. Its objectives are to analyse processes of building and negotiating social identity and femininity in online spaces by young women; the ways in which young women express their sexuality using online technologies; connections between the ‘online’ and ‘offline’ worlds in terms of emotions as well as social and sexual networks; and traditional values regarding female sexuality reproduced through online media and how young women negotiate and resist these. Content and narrative analyses were conducted using qualitative data from 9 focus-group discussions and 14 narrative interviews. Findings indicated that the online media serve as tools that help young women develop and express their gender identities. Mobile phones and the Internet facilitate communication in order to express love, responsibility, intimacy and sexual desires. Discourse on women’s chastity, which puts pressure on women to maintain their virginity, still influences online and mobile contents, messages and images among young women. However, women also exerted agency in negotiating and expressing their sexuality, both online and offline.

Keywords

young women; sexuality; Internet; gender identity; Thailand

Introduction

Over the past 10 years, communications technology has become increasingly important, especially among youth. Young people are avid users of electronic and online communications technologies of various kinds. Common activities done with a mobile phone include messaging, sending images, downloading music, playing games and finding friends and partners online (Hjorth 2009). Such media are also used for sharing feelings and emotions with the outside world (Bosch 2011; Ngo, Ross, and Ratliff 2008; Stokes 2007). Recent national surveys in Thailand have found that mobile phone use doubled from 2004 to 2007 (National Statistical Office 2007) and that young Thai women had higher Internet and

computer literacy skills than young Thai men (Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development and United Nations Development Programme 2008).

Young women use mobile phones as tools to develop and express their femininity and sexual identities, as well as to cultivate sexual relations, display sexual emotions and communicate feelings of intimacy and desire (Bosch 2011; Hjorth 2010). In physical spaces, sexual expression by young women tends to be controlled by society and the state (Boonmongkon et al. 2008; Costa, Nogueira, and Lo'pez 2009). For example, sex education in Thai schools still mostly revolves around encouraging abstinence, especially among women, and mass media campaigns repeat the same theme (Thaweesit and Boonmongkon 2011). Online spaces accessed through mobile phones and the Internet may provide young women more opportunities to express themselves in these respects. However, the Thai state has also tried to block access to some of these spaces due to fears of sexual immorality (Chantong et al. 2008).

Research on young women's use of online media has also tended to portray them as victims or to focus on the negative impacts of media use (Chantong et al. 2008; Davis et al. 2012). This paper aims to offer explanations for young Thai heterosexual and lesbian women's mobile and online media technology use that differ from those given in mainstream studies, with an emphasis on the complexity of the relationship between young women and these technologies. This complexity is played out in how young women develop and negotiate their femininity and social identities and in the shifting ways they express their sexualities. Both elucidate how the practices of young women's sexuality interact, contradict, resist and negotiate with mainstream sexuality practice.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, we use a postmodernist perspective to engage with gender and social identities as 'hybrid and heterogeneous, made of many fragments of history and of social and personal experience' (Rutherford 1990, as cited in Weeks 2003, 123). The political economy of the body is used as a critical lens whereby 'the experience of subjectivity is bound up in orders of power and bodies are moulded and policed by social, psychic and cultural norms, and where the power/knowledge nexus interpolates the subject' (Law 2000, 13). In this analysis, a person's subjectivity is not necessarily fixed and coherent, rather it is fluid, influenced by a person's upbringing or their position within a complex system of discourses, which sometimes may contradict or compete with each other. The fluid subjectivities of young Thai women help break down traditional dichotomous constructions of their sense of self, including notions of being good or bad women and of engaging in appropriate or inappropriate sexual practices. The sociopolitical structure that organises the practices of everyday social life produce knowledge on female sexuality and influence the ways young women experience their sexual subjectivities. However, as Foucault states, although the body is a surface of inscription marked by dominant cultural norms of sexuality, it also holds the possibility of inscribing itself on social practices through resistance (Law 2000, 14). In this paper, therefore, we look at young Thai women's sexual agency, which Teitelman (2004, as cited in Bell 2012) defines as individuals' actions and decisions about their bodies and

emotions to shape and change their sexual practices including whether, when, where and with whom to initiate a sexual relationship.

The objectives are to analyse: (1) processes of building and negotiating social identities and femininity among young Thai women in online spaces, (2) the ways in which young Thai women express their sexuality using online technologies (courtship, relationship building, emotional expressions, expressions of desire), (3) connections between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ worlds in terms of emotions as well as social and sexual networks and (4) traditional values regarding female sexuality reproduced through online media and how young Thai women negotiate and resist them.

Methods

The study site was a district in the outskirts of Bangkok, which has two state universities and several institutions of secondary education. The qualitative data, on which this paper mainly draws, were collected through focus-group discussions and narrative interviews conducted in 2011. Participants were asked about their Internet and mobile phone use, gender and sexuality, as well as online and offline experiences of violence. The focus- group discussions were grouped according to gender and age, lasted approximately 1.5 h and had two facilitators of the same gender as the participants. All discussions were audio recorded and later transcribed. Discussions with students were conducted in empty classrooms or a small meeting room at the institution conducting the study and those with out-of-school youth were conducted in community locations where participants’ privacy could be safeguarded. Participants received a 150 baht (5 USD) incentive. Narrative interviews were conducted one-on-one, either in the same locations as the focus group discussions, in cafeterias or common areas of the participant’s institution. Interview participants also received the 150 baht incentive. Content and narrative analyses were conducted on the qualitative data.

Supporting quantitative data were collected with a custom-built computerised survey. The study was reviewed and approved by institutional review boards at Mahidol University and the University of Pittsburgh.

Study sample

The inclusion criteria for participants were that they had to be 15 – 24 years old and study, reside or work in the study area. While both men and women were sampled, women are the main focus of this paper. The quantitative sample size was 1234, comprising 633 male and 601 female participants. The qualitative data were collected through 19 focus-group discussions, each with 3 – 6 participants, comprising 9 groups with 43 female participants and 10 groups with 51 male participants, as well as through narrative interviews with 12 male and 14 female participants. The 43 female focus-group discussion participants comprised 10 university students, 20 secondary students, 5 non-formal education students and 8 not currently studying. The participants for the qualitative and quantitative datasets were sampled separately, and not all participants who provided qualitative data took part in the survey. However, participants for narrative interviews were selected from focus- group discussion participants based on the richness of the information they provided during the focus-group discussion. Not all female participants identified as women, nor did all male

participants identify as men. However, in other sections of this paper, the terms ‘men’ and ‘women’ are used for the sake of convenience and do not imply a heterosexual preference as their equivalents would do in Thai.

Findings

Mobile phone and online media contexts

Our survey data from young suburban women indicates that 13.2 years was the mean age for obtaining their first mobile phone. The qualitative findings indicated that those with wealthier parents obtained their first mobile phone earlier, from their parents. First mobile phones were used mainly for playing games and contacting parents.

Participants generally switched to more technologically advanced and expensive models with more functions every 1 – 2 years. Most (69.3% in the survey) already used smartphones (phones that can access the Internet). Some were online through their phone all the time, while others only logged on at night to keep the costs down. Having a smartphone was highly desirable for these young women. Instead of just one, some had two or three phones and several SIM cards. Those who had smartphones, especially an iPhone or a BlackBerry, used their phones almost constantly, even in the classroom, where their phones could be used for playing games or text-based chatting. Those who focused mainly on their studies or student activities used theirs less, while those who had steady or casual partners were the heaviest users in terms of phone calls and chatting. Young women used their phones to contact their friends and parents by calling them and by exchanging messages or chatting with them. They took photos, downloaded music, listened to the radio, downloaded video clips and, in particular, used online applications like Facebook, Twitter, Hi5 (www.hi5.com – an older social networking site) and MSN (Microsoft Network Messenger, www.msn.com – an online chat programme) to communicate with their social networks constituted through these applications. Some used their phones to perform data searches, do their homework or use Google Maps when they were lost. Thus, mobile phone use forms a part of their everyday lives from the moment they wake up to the time they go to sleep. One young woman commented that if she had to choose between forgetting her wallet and her phone, she would rather forget her wallet because if she had the phone, she could call her parents or friends to lend her some money.

Negotiating femininity and social identities: the role of mobile phones and online media

The young women in this study used smartphones to develop their identities. For them, having a smartphone and many application icons on their phone screen made their lives feel more vibrant, modern, trendy and affluent. Nim (all names are pseudonyms) explained to the research team that ‘if you use a mobile phone that’s not a good model, you’ll look like you don’t have any status’.

In addition, mobile phone brands express gender identity. These young women tended to believe that BlackBerries are used by women because they fit women’s habits and lifestyle, namely constant chatting. Our survey findings confirmed that BlackBerries were more popular among women than among men (19.1 versus 13.9%, $\chi^2=6.14$, $p=0.01$).

Even the usernames young Thai women choose on Facebook reflect their identity. Many do not use their real names but rather choose pseudonyms that reflect how they perceive themselves, for example Kalayani (literally means a good woman) or FROG. Noi said that according to her friends, she does not know how to smile, and so her facial expression looks as indifferent as if she were a frog. So, she uses the word FROG as her username.

Social identity construction and negotiation among young Thai women also takes place through their attempts to increase their number of Facebook friends. They believe that having many Facebook friends shows how interesting a person is. Most accept the request to be added as a Facebook friend from just about anyone. However, some do choose whom they accept to add as a Facebook friend. Participants said they had from 200 to over 3000 Facebook friends. Having many Facebook friends makes them feel in demand and popular, and so feel proud and self-confident. Jaeng is a case in point:

Interviewer: In choosing whom you accept to add as a Facebook friend, do you consider their looks or the character they portray?

Jaeng: I always accept them. Their looks don't matter. Old women, old men, I accept everyone, I don't choose.

Interviewer: For what reason?

Jaeng: It's our rating, like how many people want to be friends with us. The more friends we've got, the more interesting we are. If we check them out and they've got lots of friends, it's a kind of a trend that shows they're hot, they've got lots of people who want to be friends with them. So, now I accept everyone, whoever it is that asks. Who cares? Most people who ask to be added as my friend won't come to chat with me, though. They also want to have a good rating, so they'll keep me as their friend to make it look like they've got lots of friends. Interviewer: And so, if you've got thousands, tens of thousands, how will you feel?

Jaeng: Proud.

Young women's expressions of sexuality through mobile phones and the Internet

Mobile phone and Internet use play a major role in the sexualities of young Thai women. Asking for someone's phone number or BlackBerry PIN number is often the event signalling a new relationship, which is then built further through mobile phone calls, text messages or chats. In the world of smartphones and online media technologies, the ways of initiating a relationship are ever more complicated and diverse.

Facebook, Hi5, Skype and sexual relationship formation

Young women's experiences of sexuality online were diverse, ranging from chatting, flirtation and dating to having sexual relationships. Women who used Facebook said that roughly 60% of their Facebook friends were men. Both male and female participants often used their real names as their Facebook usernames. In the context of cultivating intimate relationships, heterosexual young women generally said they would accept Facebook friend requests from young men, whereas lesbian youth preferred having tom or dee (masculine and feminine lesbian identities, respectively) as their Facebook friends. The intense and

incessant Facebook chatting among heterosexual young women also took place with men more than with women, except with their close female friends. Facebook chatting with men was characterised by half-serious flirtation, asking how the other person was doing, as well as general talk of various matters. It might culminate in a request for a phone number and a subsequent date.

Some would begin to build a relationship by chatting over MSN and then intensify it by switching to Hi5 because they felt that the latter was more suited for decorating their messages and sharing photos. Some used Skype to talk with a steady partner living in another province because it enabled them to see each other's faces through their webcams.

Many young women who chatted with men over Facebook already had a partner but hid their true relationship status and stated they were single instead. They felt entertained by the expressions of interest from their male Facebook friends. However, some young women with a steady partner were looking for casual partners in addition to friends through Facebook. When they accepted a Facebook friend request, if the person who requested to be added as a friend had good looks, they would begin to build the relationship by thanking that person for adding them as a friend, then ask for their real name and school class and gradually progress to expressions of love or even being intimate partners over Facebook. When either party happened to have a birthday, this would provide the other an occasion for sending a happy birthday message and ask to meet them in the physical world so they could deliver their birthday present. The two might then meet up at a shopping mall, dormitory or entertainment venue and eventually have sex. Young women's expressions of sexuality online are diverse, as the following four narratives show.

Nong Aun: a teenage girl seeking romantic and sexual partners online

Aun, age 19, was born in Northern Thailand, but moved to the outskirts of Bangkok some 10 years ago. She lives with her parents and studies at a non-formal education centre, she is now in her final term. Aun's first sexual experience was at the age of 12, when she was in her second year of *mathayom* (6-year secondary school). A friend had recommended a 19-year-old man for her. She mostly just wanted to try it out. The morning after the night they first had sex, the man told her the 'relationship' was over. Aun felt sad for 2 or 3 weeks and then found a new boyfriend. This time she cultivated a mindset of not getting too attached to anyone. From the time she met the first man with whom she had sex to the time of the interview, Aun had been in relationships with 31 partners, 30 of them men and one a tom. Currently, Aun has four concurrent steady partners. She has two sons with the first one, the oldest about 2 years old, the second 10 months. Her first partner is 17 years old and is still a secondary school student in Bangkok. Aun and he meet only from Friday to Sunday. The other two partners are 20- and 21-year-old men. The fourth is a 26-year-old tom. All three live near Aun. She says she copied from men the pattern of having several partners simultaneously and looking for more online. She has also witnessed her uncle, father and brothers all being unfaithful to their wives or girlfriends, having more than one at a time, so she decided to imitate the men by having multiple partners. This way, she protects herself from becoming heartbroken again. Aun has adhered to this principle since she was 14. Besides being a full-time student, she does homework for her classmates at the non-formal

education centre to earn extra income. Previously, she worked as a bar waitress. None of her three male partners know of the others, the only one who knows is the tom. Aun has three different phone numbers to call and receive calls from different male partners. This makes all three think that she only has one phone number. Aun contacts her tom partner through the same number as her boyfriend (the father of her two sons). If the tom calls while Aun is with this boyfriend, she does not risk being caught because the caller has a feminine voice. Aun says she presently spends roughly 9 – 10 hours with her phone each day. Both of her phones can be used to access the Internet, but she is online only from 10 pm to 1 am and pays 17 satang (0.17 baht) per minute for calls, or just 10 baht (0.33 USD) per hour. She uses MSN and Hi5 through her computer and her phones. Her Internet use is mainly aimed at finding male friends and partners to chat and go out with, but she also goes online to do her work and to send completed homework back to her teachers. Though she already has four steady partners, she still looks for more in Hi5 and Postjung (a Thai website for finding friends and partners through one-line ad messages). In her Hi5 profile she states she's single, but she does show her children in the photographs she uploads, noting that she would like men to accept both her and her children. In Hi5, men frequently ask her for sex, but she usually declines, only choosing those she really likes. She feels that people met offline are more sincere than those only met online, but continues to meet men online to combat her loneliness. When she agrees to go on a date with someone online, she will ask him to meet her at a public park. If she does not like him, she will end the contact and also block him from contacting her online. But if she likes him, the two might go to eat together and later agree to have sex, usually at the man's place. Sometimes she asks the man to have sex the first time they meet. Her partners range from those her own age to those older than her, up to age 45. For contraception, she uses a combination of male and female condoms as well as regular and emergency contraceptive pills, based on how she and the man feel each time. For example, if the man does not like to use condoms, she might take emergency contraceptive pills afterwards or wear a female condom. She also likes to download porn video clips from 4shared (a file-hosting website) to keep in her mobile phone and watch for sexual stimulation, but she has never taken explicit photos of herself because she is worried they might be leaked. In Hi5, she has over 1000 friends and on Facebook around 400. She thinks the latter number is very small because she feels she does not really know how to use Facebook.

Aun's story shows how the sexual subjectivities of young women are constructed utilising various discourses (Parker 2009). She lives her sexual life as she thinks men do, having several concurrent partners and thinking that if men can do it, so can she. Having several partners that she feels safe with can satisfy her sexual desires. When she seeks casual and steady, sexual and romantic partners through online programs (MSN, Postjung, Hi5), she portrays herself as single, but does not hide the fact that she has children. In so doing, she proudly presents herself as a single mother, a person that Thai society increasingly views as skilled, brave and unique. Aun subtly and successfully manages her several relationships by having more than one phone number. She does not avoid online technologies but, rather, expertly uses them for finding partners online and then cultivating the resulting relationships offline. However, she considers online-initiated relationships to be full of insincerity and thus short-lived. She also uses her phone for consuming porn but does not make her own,

realising the risk of leaked clips. She considers herself an actor in finding likeable partners through the online world. She is able to control her own body and make her own reproductive choices.

Jaeng: seeking friends online to reduce her loneliness

Jaeng, age 21, lives with her 30-year-old partner, who is an entrepreneur. She now mostly stays at home but also studies her final year of *mathayom* at a non-formal education centre. On some days, she accompanies her partner when he delivers goods to his customers. Jaeng was born in Bangkok but grew up and studied in a northeastern Thai city. After her father passed away, she was sent to live with her elder brother and his wife. Her brother's wife was an old-fashioned and very strict guardian. Jaeng was prohibited from meeting or talking with boys and going out on weekends. Not being able to tolerate such restrictions, she went to live alone on the outskirts of Bangkok at the age of 18. She found work and continued her studies in the non-formal sector. Her first mobile phone was a Nokia with a monochrome screen. She bought it in 2008, just after she had left her elder brother's house. Her brother's wife had not allowed her to have a phone of her own, being concerned she would use it to call men. She wanted to have one just like everyone else her age, so she bought herself one. Back then, the benefits of having a phone for her were talking with friends and listening to music. Jaeng now uses her two phones to call her friends, use Facebook, play games, call her partner and take photos. Her phones can connect to the Internet, so she can use Facebook and feel she has not fallen behind current trends. When she first met her boyfriend, he called her every day after work, but when the two began a steady partner relationship, Jaeng became the one to make the calls. He now calls her if he has something really important to talk about while Jaeng calls him four or five times a day. Since obtaining her new Nokia phone, she has learned to use Facebook with the help of a close friend and is now online all day. She does not feel lonely anymore because Facebook keeps her entertained. Wherever she goes, she does not need to feel lonely or fear embarrassment because she can always make herself look busy with her phone. The people she first meets in various events likewise all seem to be crouched over their mobile phones and uninterested in talking with those sitting next to them. Jaeng presents herself in her Facebook profile as single and accepts all friend requests, because she wants to 'improve her rating' by increasing the number of her Facebook friends and feels proud that it does keep growing. Roughly 60% of her Facebook friends are male, some of whom engage her in half-serious flirtation through their messages. When Jaeng knows her male Facebook friends are interested in her, she greatly enjoys it. She feels chatting is fun and alleviates her loneliness. Sometimes she shows her boyfriend what her male Facebook friends have written to her, and he is fine with it. Her female Facebook friends are less active in making contact with her and might simply greet her or talk about their work and studies. Sometimes they vent whatever they are worried about. However, private issues are not shared, just everyday thoughts and activities.

This second narrative elucidates how sexual discourses and practices associated with 'good' women, who *rak nuan sanguan tua* (preserve their chastity), clash with those associated with women who do not follow the mainstream frame of sexuality. Jaeng's early adolescence was characterised by the intense pressure she faced from her elder brother's wife to conform to mainstream norms of feminine propriety, even forbidding her to have a mobile phone out of

fear that she would call men. Her brother's wife's practices were aimed at policing her sexuality to ensure that Jaeng would be brought up like a 'good' woman and maintain her chastity. When Jaeng left her house and started an independent life, she bought her first mobile phone. For her, the symbolic meanings of having a phone were freedom and liberation, even if what she did with it was little more than call her female friends and listen to music. Yet Jaeng has been, and still is, under the influence of mainstream discourses defining a good woman. She is wary of talking with male friends who might flirt with her and expresses her desires with restraint. Even when her current boyfriend calls her, she restrains herself and keeps the calls short and focused. However, in her sexual life and her mobile phone use, she also shows the characteristics of sexually liberated Thai women. She has sexual agency in choosing to cohabit with her partner before marriage. She actively seeks men on Facebook to chat with. She is a far cry from the archetypal homemaker Thai wife. She seeks the identity and practices of a modern woman, who has personal space and knows how to use technology. She sought and got a mobile phone that can be used to access the Internet, learned how to use Facebook, including how to accept new people as her friends, she chats with male friends on Facebook and is prepared to express her feelings, sexual subjectivity and her everyday life experiences to male online friends she likes.

Am and Num: seeking partners online

Am, age 16, hails from a city in Central Thailand. She is currently studying in the 4th year of a general state-run secondary school in the outskirts of Bangkok. She got her first mobile phone when she was in the 5th year of primary school so that her parents could call her and ask her when they needed to go pick her up from school. Recently, her mother bought her an iPhone 4, reasoning that with an iPhone she could not waste as much time chatting as she could with a BlackBerry. However, Am uses the WhatsApp application to contact her friends who use BlackBerries. She also uses Facebook, Twitter, Skype and MSN. Am has a laptop computer at home, but late at night she prefers to use online applications through her phone, because she does not want her parents to see that she is still doing it. Especially when she speaks with her Facebook and Skype friends, she uses her iPhone. When she speaks with her boyfriend, who studies in a northern Thai city, she uses Skype and WhatsApp. She also talks with a casual partner (kik), who is studying in a boys' school in Central Bangkok. She met her casual partner through an online game called Slave Online, which she plays very skilfully and usually wins. Having met each other through the game, they first started chatting within the game and then exchanged emails. Her steady partner (*faen*) was originally an older student in the same school. The two had taken the same minibus together but not talked with each other. When she later saw his profile on Hi5 and noticed it was his birthday, she sent him a 'Hello, Happy Birthday' message, which started their Hi5 and Facebook interactions. He later told her he loved her and she said she loved him too. Am explained in the interview that she was not seriously interested in him, although he was very much interested in her, despite being a shy kid who mostly focused on his studies. One day Am received a message from him asking if the two of them could go steady. She felt confused and surprised about it but agreed. A friend of a friend also once sent her a message asking, 'Can we be *faen*?' That time, she didn't go along with the request. She says that asking for the contact information of someone she likes on the Internet and then emailing them is the easiest way, easier than talking face-to-face. She feels that when communication

occurs online and she and the other person do not see each other, she will not feel as shy about building the relationship and will be more daring. Face-to-face, she does not dare ask for a guy's email address but through an online program, she does. She has 500 Facebook friends.

Num, age 15, studies in the mathematics-science track on her 6th (final) year of *mathayom*. She uses a BlackBerry because it can access the Internet, for example, in order to look up words in English. Her phone can also access Facebook, Twitter and MSN. She likes Facebook most, feeling that it is fun, and everyone in her school has a profile. She has 900 Facebook friends, but most of them are not students in her school. Before she accepts anyone as a Facebook friend, however, she checks his or her photos and personal history. She met her current partner, a good-looking woman, through Facebook when she was in the 5th year of *mathayom*. Her partner greeted her first, asking what her name was, saying she was very cute and then asking to chat with her, to which Num agreed. The two meet only during weekends and not every week. When they do meet, they might go eat or see a movie together. Sometimes they split the costs, sometimes her partner pays. Num says that when women flirt with her on Facebook, she feels excited. She has been in a relationship with a man before but says she does not really like men the way she likes women. Num also thinks it is better to have a woman as her partner because as her mother has warned, 'These days, men and women don't like to get married; they just live together. If a girl is with a man she'll get pregnant and will need to leave school'.

Society tends to portray online-initiated relationships, whether as partners or just as friends, as short-lived, dangerous, full of deceit and not a part of 'the real world'. These ideas were constantly reproduced in the young women's narratives. Yet, amidst these discursive practices, there were also different stories that contradicted mainstream views, such as Am's and Num's narratives, both of whom met their partners online and were still together with these partners. Am herself thought that finding partners online and confessing one's love to them was easier and less embarrassing. For some people, it is a matter of sifting through the contents. For some, confessing their true feelings for a man or woman they love is not easy, and they steer the relationship very responsibly, such as with Am's steady partner. In both Am's and Num's cases, the connections were visible between online expressions of feelings and desire and how they were carried out in the relationship offline. For Num and her girlfriend, mobile phones also provided an opportunity to consider, identify and express their sexual orientation. In both Am's and Num's cases, online sexuality created long-lasting offline relationships.

Discussion

Young Thai women use mobile phones to communicate with their friends and parents through calls, messages and text-based chatting. The present study also found that smartphone use is an integral part of the lives of young women and of the construction of their social identities, aimed at making them feel and appear interesting and up-to-date. This finding matches the analyses of Hjorth (2009), who has called mobile phones symbols of global modernity. In young women's expressions of sexuality, as analysed in this paper, these essences of 'globality' and 'modernity' intertwine. These women accessed the Internet

both through their phones and computers to initiate and manage relationships, from asking for someone's phone number, to getting to know that person, to expressions of power in controlling the relationship and 'reserving' their partners for themselves. Similarly, in South Korea, some young women may upload a photograph of their eye on their male partner's phone screen to act as a constant reminder, like an engagement ring, that the owner of the phone himself already has an owner (Hjorth 2009). In a study conducted in the Philippines (Pertierra, Solis, and Ellwood-Clayton, as cited in Jonathan 2008), calling or sending messages to random numbers pretending to have contacted the wrong person is documented as a way to expand one's social network and to engage in flirtatious dialogue. And in Jamaica, pop songs have lyrics about the use of mobile phones in courtship, dates and other aspects of sexuality (Batson-Savage 2007). Similarly, pop culture in Thailand, including films, dramas and music also include references to mobile phones.

Online sexuality: power, control and negotiation

The social control exerted on young women's sexuality by social institutions, such as families, schools and the media, intensify young women's use of online spaces as a way to escape from the moral policing and to express their sexuality. Thus, young people not only meet new people, foster sexual relations and express their gender and sexual identities in their schools, their universities and among groups of friends, they also engage in these activities online. To an extent, this happens because such spaces are what Al Cooper (as cited in Bergstrom 2011) has called 'Triple A Engines', short for their accessibility, affordability and anonymity.

Nevertheless, young Thai women's online gender and sexual practices cannot escape the influence of Thai mainstream sexuality discourses, such as the concept of *rak nuan sanguan tua*, as clearly demonstrated in Jaeng's narrative. Parker (2009) has pointed out that there are diverse and complex relationships of culture, power and sexuality politics. Accordingly, the social system and culture partly determines young Thai women's sexual subjectivities and practices. Parker called this the social organisation of sexual interactions. In Thailand and other Asian societies, young women are expected not to express their sexual desires or interest in the opposite sex. Hence, young Thai women's expressions of sexual interest and date-making through mobile phones and the Internet have resulted in a moral panic, whereby social institutions condemn such actions and produce discourses and discursive practices aimed at explaining young women's online sexual expressions. For example, young girls who use the Internet may be branded 'not good women' (Bosch 2011; Brickell 2012). Young Thai women's online sexuality is mostly controlled by criticism of its negative consequences in the mass media or through public policies, which rest upon the assumption that young women's use of online media puts them at risk of developing sexual- and reproductive-health problems or of becoming prey to males looking to take advantage of them (Chantong et al. 2009).

The findings of the present study illustrate the cultural context of young Thai women's use of mobile phones and their masterful expressions of sexual agency (Bell 2012). Girls like Aun imitate Thai male sexuality by exercising their sexual agency to have multiple partners as well as using mobile phones and online technology to navigate and manipulate multiple

sexual relationships and using mobile phones to watch porn. Aun is able to fulfil her sexual desire and pleasure by practicing protected sex. Girls like Jaeng know very well how much openness is appropriate in sexual expression. In expressing her interest toward boys who come to chat with her, she uses half-serious words and phrases that enable her to navigate the moral boundaries of *rak nuan sanguan tua* by expressing some sexual restraint in able to avoid societal condemnation.

The myth that online sexualities are played out in a space that is full of deceit due to its anonymity also makes some young Thai women believe that true love cannot be found online, that online spaces put them at risk of being sexually violated and that sex with men met online is not safe. The authors beg to disagree. What we are really seeing is simply a moral panic. While online partner-seeking may occasionally involve some dangers and deceitfulness, the discourse that emphasises these negative aspects is a tactic in the social control exerted on young Thai women's sexualities and their bodies. The authors agree with Davis (2009), who has suggested that the state attempts to control and police people's sexuality in the name of public health. Davis has also argued that there is no difference between the sexual cheating that takes place online and offline (Davis 2009). As seen in the present study, some, like Am and Num, do find lasting love through online spaces and deny representation of online sexuality as deceptive and producing only short-lived relationships.

Conclusion

Mobile phones and online programmes provide a communication tool for youth to cultivate and express their social and gender identities. This is evidenced in the kinds of mobile phones and applications they use, such as Facebook, Twitter, Hi5 or MSN. Use of these communication channels is a part of the everyday lives of youth, from the moment they wake up to when they go to sleep. Young women use both mobile phones and the Internet to connect with their friends, lovers and parents and to express their emotions, identities, intimacy and responsibilities. They consider the number of their Facebook or Hi5 friends a measure of their popularity. The use of online media through mobile phones is a part of young women's self-presentation, namely, to look good and modern and to feel immune to loneliness and embarrassment in public spaces. It also reflects their subjectivity – what they are and what they would like to be.

Mobile phones and applications are used to express liking, love, intimacy and sexual desire to partners. Online social networking programs such as Facebook, Hi5 or online games act as tools to initiate relationships. Frequently, young women's profiles do not show that they already have a partner. The online flirtation they engage in, such as asking for someone's email address or phone number, is only half-serious in its intent. Though there is a widespread belief that online-initiated romantic relationships are short-lived and full of deceit due to not knowing the person's true character offline, such relationships nevertheless emerge all the time among both straight and lesbian young women. In these relationships, young women do have sexual agency, they do express their sexuality both online and offline and they do negotiate sexual activities. Some of these relationships last a long time, others do not. Some involve deception, many others do not.

This paper aims to point out that we need to question and critique our culture and everyday experiences. We need to be aware of the discourses and practices that may influence our sexual lives and how they may confine us. Young women explore and express their experiences as well as gender and sexual identities through their use of mobile phones and these activities are in themselves influenced by mobile phone culture. To promote young women's sexual rights and health, the state should respect their rights and liberties, while providing comprehensive information to them about the benefits as well as the risk of exploitation involved in their use of online media for exploring their sexualities and building relationships.

Future research might usefully also investigate the role of social class in young women's online media use and their online sexualities.

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