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PROMOTING AGRITOURISM THROUGH CONNECTING YOUNG FARMERS USING MOBILE TECHNOLOGY IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Thailand is known as a kingdom of farmers and its food products are recognised all over the world. However, the number of young farmers leaving their farms is increasing gradually due to reasons such as attitude (boredom), poverty (debt), economics (low income) and hardworking. On the other hand, tourism industry is one of Thailand's main economic sectors (6-7% of its GDP) (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2016). Agritourism as pathway of farm business development, is a promising area for young farmers to include a working farm environment and a commercial tourism component. This study proposal investigates using mobile network technology to share and exchange knowledge and experience between young farmers in Thailand to promote agritourism. The study methodology is mixed method, including online survey and one-to-one interview with young farmers. The expected outcomes of this network are creating knowledge exchange community between young farmers through engagement, collaboration and partnerships to promote and enhance their current and future career plans. Concurrently, promoting agritourism will reflect positively on both farming and tourism industries.

Keywords: *agritourism, mobile technology, network, young farmers*

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

To explore young farmers' opportunities and challenges to improve their living from agritourism

To explore young farmers' implementation of innovative technology in managing, maintaining agricultural and in promoting agritourism.

To investigate the affordance of mobile technology to enhance capacity of young farmers

To investigate the obstacles of implementing mobile technology to promote agritourism

To enhance capacity of young farmer to generate income from agritourism

To initiate global network among young farmers in Thailand to promote and sustain agritourism

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What current challenges do young farmers confront in their current career as farmers?

What are the available opportunities for young farmers to increase their income?

What are young farmers' future career plans?

What is young farmer's understanding about agritourism?

What is the young farmers' current utilisation of mobile technology?

How can mobile technology help in networking young farmers to share their knowledge?

How can mobile technology enhance the young farmer capacity to promote agritourism?

STUDY BACKGROUND

Young Farmers in Thailand

According to the Department of Agricultural Extension, 40% (14,7 million) of Thai employment is in farming. Their age demographic distribution, 75 % (10 million) of Thai farmers are over 46 years old, 3 million are between 20 and 45 and 1,700 people are under 20 years (Kamsow, 2018). This imbalanced-number across ages between Thai farmers is partly due to a massive career shift. The number of farmers leaving their farms increasing gradually due to reasons such as attitude (boredom), poverty (debt) economics (low income) and hardworking (Tapanapunnitikul and Prasunpangsri, 2014). Consequently, this ageing society is highly likely to pose a serious threat to rural agricultural society.

In 2008, the Department of Agricultural Extension launched an initiative to build the capacities of young people in terms of farm production, business management, and information technology. In 2014, the program title was changed from "Young Farmers" to "Young Smart Farmers" and focused more on sharing farm experiences and building networks to farm visits and seminars (Department of Agricultural Extension, 2016).

However, According to Kamsow, (2018) young farmers consider themselves to be only a supplier. In contrast, farmers should think more creatively to be producers. Therefore, the revolution in agricultural technology such as internet and information technology has unlocked new opportunities for the improvement of farmers' livelihood and to embrace those technologies to become "Young Smart Farmers".

Agritourism in Thailand

Agritourism can be characterized as businesses conducted by farmers within their working agricultural operations for the enjoyment and education of visitors (Srikatanyoo & Campiranon, 2010). Typical attractions at farm destinations include farm tours, pick your own farm produce, educational demonstrations, farm shops, picnic areas, and farm stays (Srisomyong & Meyer 2015). The traditional agritourism concerns just vacationers staying in farms where farmers offer the farms' natural tourism resources for tourists. Therefore, traditional agritourism is offering additional but modest income for the farmers. Sznajder *et al.*, (2009) addressed the need to experience agriculture and rurality that develops creative innovation technology to enhance agritourism provider.

The context of agritourism in Thailand showed that in 2015 the number of domestic agritourists were 95.2% and international agritourists were 4.8%. Agritourism revenues were 55,3025 GBP including 20,4889 GBP from tourist services and 34,8135 GBP from sales of agricultural goods and products (Prayukvong *et al.*, 2015). According to Esichaikul & Chansawang (2015), most of the small attractions of private owners or communities are lacking the interesting presentation and integrated promotion of agricultural product.

Most research on agritourism concerns developed countries with relatively little research on agritourism in developing countries (Weaver and Fennell, 1997 and Flanigan *et al.*, 2014). However, there are some evidences of farmers' motivations in diversifying into tourism in Thailand in a study by Srikatanyoo and Campiranon (2010). The call in this study is the need to invest in using mobile technology to communicate between farmers and encourage sharing knowledge within agritourism activities. For this paper, agritourism is considered to be a kind of farm diversification which can be developed as a supplementary activity to agriculture. Worth to mention, in terms of tourists' use of mobile technology, it has become a standard accessory for all travellers who rely on mobile technology for instant information and connections to their social network. Mobile technology is playing an increasing role in transforming tourist experience and shaping a growing focus of tourism research on using mobile technology in promoting tourism (Dickinson, *et al.*, 2016).

Mobile Technology for Networking

Thailand represents an impressive case of mobile connectivity in South East Asia with mobile internet subscriptions higher than the regional average hedging similar rates than developed markets. Smartphone adoption is reflective of this growth representing over 60 % of the total mobile connections. In 2014, the government of Thailand launched the 'Digital Economy Plan', a strategy striving for a digitally inclusive society and economy 'Consumer Barriers to Mobile Internet Adoption in Asia' (GSMA, 2016).

This technology has provided new opportunities for rural farmers to obtain knowledge and information about agricultural issues, problems and its usage for the development of agriculture. Similarly, use of ICTs in agricultural extension services, especially mobile phone services in the agricultural sector, has provided information on market, weather, transport

and agricultural techniques to contact with concern agencies and department (Aker, 2011). Therefore, the opportunity to rely on mobile technology to promote agritourism, is promising.

STUDY BENEFICIARIES

This research is underpinning different beneficiaries; promoting tourism and agriculture could bring economic national benefits for wider rural communities. For young farmers, agritourism helps young farmers to sustain their livelihoods, generates new sources of income and supports a community approach to development. Moreover, technology competence opens new employment opportunities for young farmers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to enhance our understanding of activities of local actors who are young farmers in this study, an approach and a theory will be the base of this study. Actor-oriented will be the applied approach that is interpreting observable phenomena, such as human activities, rather than a means of providing causal explanation. This approach is used for the understanding of farmers' lives and practices in many studies (Wiseman (1998) and Macken-Walsh and McDonalds (2016). Each of these actors tends to have different knowledge and past experience, so, they draw upon and use differing discourses in their interactions. Therefore, the use of an actor-oriented perspective in this study will help to explain; intra and inter links between the local actors and visitors, responses and processes of change of these interactions. According to Macken-Walsh and McDonalds (2016), it will be appropriate to base our actor-oriented perspective on a theory. The theory of social interfaces is a helpful analytical tool when exploring the interactions between young farmers and various actors in the agriculture business with a view to identifying the actors who have most influence on the young farmers 'decisions and how this influence occurs (Long, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is mixed method involves collecting, analysing and integrating quantitative (online survey) and qualitative (one-to-one interview) data. Expected number of participants in the survey is 200 and number of interviewees is 20 participants of young farmers. Recruitment of participants will depend on "Thailand Young Farmers", which is a Facebook page, has more than 12,000 members. The page forms an online community of a group of young farmers gathered together across.

CONTRIBUTION

This study proposal provides an innovative empirical contribution towards networking and knowledge exchange community between young farmers for the development of agritourism. The study focuses on leveraging mobile technology to make a truly lasting impact on the lives of young farmers and promote their awareness and perception of agritourism. Long term vision, the study approach taken is broad and flexible, so that it can be applied to other areas

in Thailand and also to other developing countries where there are different cultures, society and economy.

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