

## **HOW GAY, BI, AND STRAIGHT MALE STUDENTS AT CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY USE FACEBOOK?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The way in which people with different sexual orientations use certain types of media is an important topic of interest among communication scholars. Understanding the communication patterns in Facebook use among gay, bi, and straight people could shed light on differences in communication in this digital era. The objective of this study was to evaluate Facebook use among heterosexual and homosexual male students. Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data from 400 undergraduate male students at Chulalongkorn University. Overall, male students were less actively engaged in conversations on Facebook compared to their female counterparts. Our results showed that approximately 1 out of 5 participants indicated that they liked to or used to have sex with men. Compared to straight men, gay and bisexual men are more active Facebook users. This group more frequently updated their status, commented on their friends' photos, posted photos and messages on their friends' pages, and showed support for others. We also found that gay and bisexual men gave advice to their friends on Facebook, as well as shared their personal problems. These results suggest that gay and bisexual men use Facebook to escape stress, entertain themselves, and cope with problems compared to straight men, who did not use Facebook to satisfy those needs and were found to be more reserved and less communicative.

**Keywords:** Chulalongkorn University; Facebook; gender; gratification; use

## **INTRODUCTION**

Facebook is the number one social networking web site with a variety of users from every age and sex.<sup>1</sup> In Thailand, Bangkok has the highest number of Facebook users (15.4 million people), accounting for 55% of total Thai Facebook users. In 2014, a social media analytics web site found that users feel that they can freely express themselves, their opinions, and their perspectives on a variety of issues on Facebook.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a notable topic frequently discussed online is sexual orientation.

10% of the total world population consists of homosexuals, including gay men (6%), transgendered and bisexual people, and lesbians. There are both homosexuals and heterosexuals among the 31,542,000 males in Thailand.<sup>3</sup> In this study, the participants included male bachelor degree students (18 to 23 years old) from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand's first higher education institution with 19 bachelor degree-level faculties.<sup>4</sup> Since the university is located in the heart of Bangkok, where city-dwellers are generally more accepting of different sexual orientations, the chosen sample was expected to be a good representation of the population. Findings from this study are important for educational sectors in Thailand, such as the Ministry of Education, higher education educational institutions, and student affairs groups to help further develop communication among people with different sexual orientations.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do male students use Facebook?
2. Are there differences in Facebook use between straight male and gay or bisexual male students?

If so, what are the differences?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Societally, males are defined as “men” but gender can be defined in many ways, as its definition has evolved from various factors, such as historical context, geography, societal status, nationality, culture, age, marital status, sexual orientation, and individual differences. Thus, the definition of “male” has not always been a stable one, but one that has progressed through time and been determined according to set laws.<sup>5</sup> Brannon and David<sup>6</sup> and Lindsey<sup>7</sup> proposed that males can be categorized into five groups: (1) “No Sissy Stuff” – Masculine males who do not exhibit “weak” behavior, (2) “Big Wheel” – Males that exhibit their masculinity through their ability to earn income, (3) “The Sturdy Oak” – Enduring and strong males, (4) “Give ‘em Hell” – Males that are ready to defend themselves and fight back when attacked, and (5) “The Macho Man” – Men that are interested primarily in sex.<sup>7,8</sup> This categorization is similar to Tuncay<sup>8</sup>’s definition of “male”: (1) A person who is interested in physical attractiveness, (2) A person who values family, love, and children, (3) A person who has thoughts about being a leader and obtaining respect and power, (4) A person who values monetary and material success, and (5) A person who is interested in women and sex.<sup>9</sup> In this study, the definition of “male” exclusively refers to “men who like women.”

“Queer” is a relatively new term that defines a different type of sexual orientation. Examples of different types of sexual orientations include lesbians, gay men, homosexuals, bisexuals, heterosexuals, abstinent people, undecided people, and people who have both male and female reproductive organs.<sup>9</sup> A study by D’Augelli and Grossman<sup>10</sup> 53% reported that they realized their homosexuality between the ages of 11 and 20 years; the most common age of sexual realization was 14. Moreover, 35% of participants reported that they realized their sexual orientation at 10 years of age or younger, 4% reported between 21 and 40 years of age, and 3% reported 40 years of age or older.<sup>11</sup> In this study, “gay” refers to homosexuals.

Over the past decade, Facebook has played an important role as an online social platform for users worldwide. The use of other social networking websites has also increased; however, Facebook is still considered to be the most successful and widely used social networking website, which is largely due to the ability to use Facebook on mobile devices.<sup>11</sup> Facebook’s mission is “to give people the power to

share and make the world more open and connected.” Facebook connects friends and family and helps inform users on world news. It also enables users to share updates around the world. Currently, Facebook has an average of 890 million users per day (745 million in North America).<sup>12</sup>

Kim, Sohn <sup>13</sup>study reported that people use Facebook to find friends (36%), for convenience (13%), to gain support from others (9%), to find information (8%), and for entertainment (5%).<sup>14</sup> Lin and Lu <sup>14</sup>,s study on Facebook use between males and females revealed that females are more sensitive about expressing their opinions of other people compared to males.<sup>15</sup> In decision-making, males use more reason and less emotion, as they seem to more highly value reason; online, males seem to be more interested in entertainment. Moreover, Shaw, Timpano <sup>15</sup>reported that the amount of time spent using Facebook is correlated with social anxiety.<sup>16</sup>

Quan-Haase and Young <sup>16</sup>found that bachelor degree students frequently use Facebook.<sup>17</sup> Among that sample, 82% of the students used Facebook multiple times per day, 5% updated their status at least once a day, 22% used Facebook at least once a week, and 42% used Facebook at least once a month; use ranged from five to fifteen minutes for each session. Students use Facebook to reply to messages, look at photos or friends’ activities, follow up on other current updates or activities, or pass the time.

Joiner et al. revealed that women update their Facebook status two times more than men and post more emotional content; however, there were no differences in the number of “likes” used between men and women.<sup>18</sup> Women also used their iPhone to update their status two times more than men. Leaper and Ayres <sup>17</sup>study found that men are more talkative than women and use more confident language.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Thelwall, Willkinson, and Uppal’s (2010) study on MySpace found that women express their opinions in more positive ways than men.<sup>20</sup> Wang, Burke <sup>18</sup>also showed that women share more personal stories and receive more feedback on posts than males, especially from other women.<sup>21</sup> Men generally discuss more general issues instead of personal stories. Walton and Rice’s (2013) analysis of 3571 tweets on Twitter reveal that women post more informational, positive, and open content compared to men. The researchers also concluded that women generally care more about other people’s feelings

than men. Walton and Rice<sup>19</sup> Moore and McElroy<sup>20</sup> found that women use Facebook for longer periods of time, have more friends, and post photos and status updates more often than men; however, although women generally use Facebook longer per time, they use it less frequently than men.<sup>23</sup>

Facebook use not only differs between men and women, but also differs among homosexuals. Gudelunas<sup>21</sup> found that social networking websites play a role in gay culture in helping them find and connect with friends and lovers and reveal their sexual identity, as well as create a space for popular gay movement leaders to set an example for “coming out of the closet.”<sup>24</sup> For gay men, Facebook provides a safer online platform, as they often face difficulties in the offline world. Younger gay men are more likely to use the Internet to support their culture, while older gay men are more likely to go online to find sexual partners.<sup>22</sup>

## **METHODS**

A total of 400 surveys were distributed to male bachelor degree students from Chulalongkorn University in Thailand. The university was selected as the site of data collection because it is located in the Bangkok city center where one can expect to find a more open attitude towards homosexuality. This allowed the participants to feel more open in their response to questions about sexual orientation. Internet access is provided free of charge within the campus at all times; therefore, the cost of access to the internet had little effect on the participant’s Facebook use.

Since the number of males that are gay and bisexual is unknown, surveys were given out to male students from 18 to 23 years old. The distribution method was random, since the surveys were given out to male students from different faculties within Chulalongkorn University. Participants completed the survey on their own. The first 200 surveys were distributed to different faculties within the universities, while the latter 200 were distributed at the student common area where a lot of male students from many different faculties use the facilities to study for exams.

### **Questionnaire components**

1. Demographics
  - a. Participants were asked to choose from an age range of 18 to 23 years
2. Facebook use
  - a. Facebook use per week: none, less than 1 time, 1 to 3 times, 4 to 6 times, 7 or more times
3. Type of Facebook use
  - a. Participants choose numbers according to how much they agreed with the statements on Facebook use: not at all true of me, slightly true of me, moderately true of me, very true of me, completely true of me
4. Sexual orientation
  - a. The gender that participants prefer sexually
  - b. The gender that participants have had sexual relationships with: Men=gay or bisexual; Both sexes=gay or bisexual; Women=straight men; Do not like sex=excluded from the study

## RESULTS

Participants in the study were males aged 18 to 23 years; 85% were 19 to 22 years old, 8.75% were 18 years old, and 5.75% were 23 years old. 325 participants (81.25%) identified as straight men and 75 people (18.75%) identified as gay or bisexual.

**Table 1** shows that 80.87% of male students used Facebook more than 6 times per week. Many male students used Facebook to chat (38.60%) and to get information on shopping, eating, and traveling (37.28%); however, students only used Facebook to comment on their friends' status or pictures 1 to 3 times per week. Students also used Facebook to update their status (36.34%), post pictures on their own wall (45.11%), and post pictures or messages on their friends' walls (41.60%) less than 1 time per week. 70.50% of male students did not use Facebook for playing games. Only 1 in 10 (12.25%) of male students played Facebook games at least 1 or more times per week.

**Table 2** shows that approximately 1 in 3 male Chulalongkorn University students used Facebook for entertainment (43.75%), relaxation (43.25%), and stress relief throughout the day (32.75%). Most male students used Facebook to support and encourage others (36.75%), thank others in certain situations (32%), to participate in situations/events in other people's lives (33.50%), to use free time productively (48.50%), to express affection to others around them (35.75%), to find new trends for themselves (31.75%), to meet others of the opposite sex (32%), to make themselves look modern and in-trend (27.75%), and to help others (27.50%). Some male students used Facebook to share their personal problems with others and give advice to others (26.75%), to forget their problems (33.00%), and to meet people of the same sex (36.5%).

**Table 3** shows that both straight and gay or bisexual male Chulalongkorn University students used Facebook differently. Gay or bisexual males used Facebook significantly more than straight males ( $p=0.001$ ) for the following activities: expressing opinions on statuses and friends' pictures ( $\bar{x}=4.08$ , 3.19;  $t=4.802$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), status updates ( $\bar{x} = 2.92$ , 2.07;  $t=5.59$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), posting pictures on their own walls ( $\bar{x} =2.76$ , 2.09;  $t=5.046$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), and posting pictures or messages on friends' walls ( $\bar{x} =2.64$ , 2.11;  $t=3.906$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). In addition, gay and bisexual males used Facebook to play games significantly more than straight men ( $\bar{x} =1.83$ , 1.50;  $t=2.281$ ,  $p= .23$ ). Gays and bisexual men also use Facebook significantly more to chat and get information on shopping, eating, and traveling by a minor statistical value of 0.05.

**Table 4** shows that both straight and gay or bisexual male Chulalongkorn University students exhibited differences in Facebook use. Gay and bisexual males used Facebook significantly more often than straight males to support and encourage others ( $\bar{x} =$  , ;  $t=4.339$ ;  $p=0.001$ ), show affection for others ( $\bar{x} =$  , ;  $t=4.118$ ,  $p=$  ), help others ( $\bar{x} =$  , ;  $t=$  ,  $p\leq 1$ ), inform others about personal problems and give advice ( $\bar{x} =$  , ;  $t=3.410$ ,  $p\leq 1$ ), thank others in certain situations  $\bar{x} =3.45$ , 3.02;  $t=3.068$ ,  $p=0.003$  . for entertainment  $\bar{x} =4.24$ , 4.02;  $t=2.096$ ,  $p=0.038$  , to relieve stress throughout the day  $\bar{x} =3.63$ , 3.29;  $t=2.535$ ,  $p=0.013$  , and to forget about problems  $\bar{x} =2.52$ , 2.22;  $t=2.037$ ,  $p=0.044$  . Gay and bisexual males also used Facebook significantly more than

straight males in order to use free time relax, to make themselves look modern and in-trend, to find new trends for themselves, and to take part in situations or events in other people's lives ( $p=0.05$ ). Straight males used Facebook significantly more than gay and bisexual males to meet people of the opposite sex ( $p=0.05$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

This study focused on the differences in Facebook use between straight males and gay or bisexual males and was based on previous studies on the differences in Facebook use between men and women and between heterosexuals and bisexuals.<sup>23,24</sup> Previous studies faced limitations since the number of participants available to compare with heterosexual men is usually quite small. This study both confirmed previous studies as well as raised other notable issues. We found that the percentage of gay and bisexual males to straight males is at 18.75% in this male population, indicating that gay and bisexual male Chulalongkorn University students are more open about their sexual orientation compared to the global population. Since Chulalongkorn University is a leading higher education institution situated in the center of Bangkok, we can assume that the students are more confident about expressing their true sexual orientation.<sup>25</sup>

The average age of the participants in this study was 20.31 years. Most students were heavy Facebook users (more than 7 times per week) and used Facebook mainly to chat; only 58.9% of the participating students used Facebook 3 times a week or more. Most students used Facebook to gather information and update on news and societal happenings rather than chatting or building relationships with others. Male students are more likely to use other social tools to chat, such as Line or Whatsapp.<sup>16</sup> This study found that Facebook use differs according to sexual orientation; thus, findings from this study are useful in order to further understand the differences in Facebook use between straight men and gay and bisexual men.

We found that gay and bisexual men use Facebook to update their status, post pictures on their own wall, express opinions a friend's status or wall, and post pictures or messages on a friend's wall



significantly more often than straight males ( $p=0.05$ ), indicating that gay and bisexual men use Facebook to express themselves and build relationships with others more than straight men. Facebook, being an online platform that connects many people, enables its users to better maintain relationships with others and is a convenient channel for users to meet others online.<sup>26</sup> Straight men are more prone to isolating themselves, expressing themselves as leaders, or acting as though they are above others on Facebook. Straight men also often give more importance to their own stories over building relationships with others.<sup>23</sup>

Gay and bisexual men use Facebook to support and encourage others, express affection for others, inform others about their problems and give advice, help others, relieve stress during the day, for entertainment, and to forget about a problem significantly more than straight men. It is difficult for gay and bisexual men to express their true identities publicly, often resulting in feelings of anxiety and stress.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, many gay and bisexual men strive to gain social acceptance; they also need ways to entertain themselves and relax. Gay and bisexual men often exhibit behavior that is more similar to women than straight men, such as being more adept at understanding others, adapting to others, and advising others. Like females, they are more likely to use gentle language and encouragement in order to comfort others.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that gay and bisexual men use Facebook more similarly to women than straight men. These results align with the concept of femininity, which means having qualities that are typically associated with women, such as being better able to control actions and conduct than straight men.<sup>28</sup> Bakan<sup>29</sup> also defines “woman” with the word “communion,” which is a state in which a person is in a relationship with others, having qualities of communication, openness, and cooperation.<sup>32</sup> Like females, gay and bisexual men enjoy socializing and crave acceptance from society more than straight men. Thus, this group uses Facebook more frequently than straight men in order to meet their social acceptance needs.

Gay and bisexual men use Facebook more often than straight men to develop relationships with others; therefore, these findings suggest that communications be tailored to suit men with different sexual orientations. Similar to women, information for gay and bisexual men should contain elements of entertainment rather than just hard facts, as many gay and bisexual men use Facebook to avoid or relieve stress throughout the day.

## **LIMITATIONS**

1. This study choose participants only from Chulalongkorn University, the nation's leading higher education institution in Bangkok; as such, these results may be skewed. Students in this sample were urbanites, meaning that they are likely more open about expressing their sexual orientation, as urbanites are generally more accepting of others with different sexual orientations. Furthermore, there is more technological access in Bangkok, which could possibly skew the results of Facebook use. Thus, a study of sample participants from other universities would be useful in further comparing and understanding the differences between straight men and gay and bisexual men.
2. Another limitation lies in the accidental sampling method used in this study. With this sampling method, inaccuracies in demographic information must be taken into account, as the sample is only drawn from part of the population. In subsequent studies, using other sampling methods, such as systematic or snowball sampling, is recommended.
3. Misunderstandings of the participants should to be taken into account with regards to the survey that used to study gay and bisexual behavior. In the survey, the mention of the activity of "using Facebook to meet people of the opposite sex" may be misunderstood. Gay and bisexual men may have differing understandings of what "the opposite sex" refers to — some may understand this to mean women, while others, men. In future studies, "the opposite sex" should be clearly labeled as to specify male or female.

## AUTHOR DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No competing financial interests exist.

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