"WITCH HUNT" IN SOCIAL MEDIA :
A PHENOMENON IN CONTEMPORARY THAI SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

"Witch Hunt" in social media is a contemporary phenomenon in Thai society that a group of people formed in cyber society by using social media in order to justify a deviant or immoral case in the society. It involves insults, attacks on the target's reputation, exposure of personal information, and even threats of physical harm in some cases. This research aims toexplain patterns of social media witch hunting in Thailand by examiningfour case studies, the first of which occurred within the business world, the second and the thirdin the entertainment industry, and the fourth in the political sphere. The research employs phenomenological methodology byusing netnography approach. Data in social media has been collected since analysis.

The research findings; Four cases were identified which could be described as social media witch hunts. These cases were focused in four different areas, including the retail sphere (7-112 Nov 2013-22 May 2014(PDRC), May 3, 2015-May 31,2015(7-11), Feb 5 2015- Feb 9,2016(VRZO)/Jan 8,2016-March 8, 2016(DjKeng) and examined by content analysis and discourse), entertainment sphere TuptimAnyarin, (VRZO)/DJ Keng, and political sphere (PDRC). Each of these four cases had a different cause, butthey followed a similar process, which might be varied from other case studies. After the completion of data collecting and analyzing processes, the research revealed the patterns of social media witch hunting in Thailand, its effects and measurements for whoever concernsin preventing and solving when occurs.

Keywords: social media, internet, witch hunt, online harassment, sociology, politics

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บทคัดย่อ

"การล่าแม่มด" ในโลกของโซเชียลมีเดีย เป็นปรากฏการณ์ร่วมสมัยในสังคมไทย ซึ่งมีกลุ่มบุคคลได้รวมตัวกันในโลกไซเบอร์ เพื่อตัดสินเหตุการณ์ที่เกิดขึ้น โดยการสร้างวาทกรรมการเกลียดชังขึ้นมา รวมไปถึงการด่าทออย่างรุนแรง การทำลายชื่อเสียง การเปิดเผยข้อมูลส่วนบุคคล หรือแม้แต่ขู่ทำร้ายในบางกรณี

บทความทางวิชาการนี้ มีวัตถุประสงค์ในการรวบรวมรูปแบบในการล่าแม่มดในโลกของโซเชียลมีเดีย โดยใช้กรณีศึกษา 4 กรณี ทั้งในโลกธุรกิจ โลกมายาหรือโลกบันเทิงและเหตุการณ์ทางการเมือง โดยใช้การวิจัยทางอินเตอร์เนตในแนวปรากฏการณ์วิทยา (phenomenologic study) บนโซเชียลมีเดียที่เป็นที่นิยม เช่น เฟสบุ๊ค และเว็ปไซด์พันทิป ซึ่งมีปรากฏการณ์ล่าแม่มดอย่างมาก แม้ว่าเหตุการณ์จะไม่เหมือนกัน แต่เมื่อนำข้อมูลทั้งหมดมาวิเคราะห์ (content analysis) เพื่อหารูปแบบการโจมตีอย่างมีระบบ สามารถสร้างทฤษฎีจากข้อมูลนี้ได้ (grounded theory study) ผลการวิจัยได้เผยรูปแบบการล่าแม่มดในประเทศไทยที่ชัดเจนและสามารถนำไปประกอบการทำแผนรับมือและคะเนผลกระทบ เพื่อใช้ในการแก้ปัญหาเมื่อการล่าแม่มดในเกิดขึ้นกับตัวหรือองค์กรต่างๆอย่างมีประสิทธิภาพ

คำสำคัญ: โซเชียลมีเดีย อินเตอร์เนต ล่าแม่มด การคุกคามทางอินเตอร์เนตสังคม การเมือง

1. Introduction

Of the approximately 7.2 billion people in the world, more than 2 billion maintain active social media accounts, and they spend nearly 2.5 hours per day, on average, using social media websites and microblogs (Kemp, S.,2015) In Thailand, 44 million people (around one-third of the nation's population)now use Facebook, 4.5 million use Twitter, and 1.7 million use Instagram, and Thais spend an average of 3.7 hours per day on social media (Sakawee, S.,2014) Social media websites are now a key component in the public's response to crises(Huang, Y. L., Starbird, K., Orand, M., Stanek, S. A., & Pedersen, H. T.,2015) and although they can be used to achieve positive goals, they may also be used to support witch hunts. A witch hunt involves the labeling of individuals or groups as deviant or immoral [1](Fog, A.,1999) Targets of witch hunts have their reputations attacked and are subjected to harassment (Phillips, A.,2014)

The widespread use of internet technology should, in theory, promote democratization by providing the information citizens need to make rational

decisions. However, in Thailand, social media has been used to support human rights violations and the suppression of democracy (Suriyawongkul, A.,2011) and this suppression has taken the form of political witch hunts in recent years (Paireepairit, I., 2012)

The aim of this research is to investigate patterns of social media witch hunts. The geographical scope of this study will be limited to Thailand, and the time period will range from one year before the coup d'étatto the time of this writing. The analysis will focus solely on social media.

A review of the literature did not identify any studies of social media witch hunts, and only a small number of journal articles in which the phenomenon of social media witch hunting was discussed. Therefore, this research will make a unique contribution to the literature within a relatively new field of inquiry.

2. Literature Review

Social media can have a profound effect on behavior in the modern digital age. In Thailand, the posting of information, opinions, and videos on social media websites has been instrumental for encouraging participation in political groups and protest movements (Chia, J.,2015) However, despite social media's potential for furthering democratic aims,it can also be used for purposes of harassment and repression. According to Mehta the primary difference between social media stories and those appearing in traditional media such as television, newspapers, or radio is that the latter are normallyverified using multiple sources due to legal requirements and journalistic standards. When stories are spread via social media, there are no standards governing how they are reported, so they can trigger social media witch hunts. Fog (1999) defines a witch hunt as a moral panic that occurs when people label an individual or group as deviant by exaggerating an existing issue, labeling a behavior as deviant that was formerly accepted (shifting the boundaries of normalcy), or creating an imaginary deviancy through the spread of misinformation. When used for political goals, the witch hunt aims to either create new ideologies or maintain existing ones. While witch hunting once focused on fears of magical harm doing, in modern times, witch hunts typically occur in

response to beliefs regarding political deviance, drug use, criminal behavior, or sexual behavior.

Digital witch hunts often occur in response to a crisis. When the community lacks access to information, people are inclined to fill in the gaps with subjective impressions, rumors, and other misinformation because those who feel threatened have a need to make sense of the situation, manage risk, and cope with uncertainty through the development of a common understanding, even if that understanding is wrong (Huang, Y. L.,2015) Thailand's political crises have contributed to greater social media participation, and this participation has led to a number of witch hunts (Suriyawongkul, A.,2011)

Witch hunts, which can trigger panic and flare up repeatedly over the course of many years, often have devastating consequences, both for their targets and for society overall. Victims of witch hunts may be persecuted or even imprisoned and executed, and those who are not can still suffer emotional trauma that persists well beyond the hunt's conclusion. Moreover, witch hunts can waste the resources of law enforcement agencies, which must sacrifice time to investigate unsubstantiated rumors and deal with vigilantism (Bartholomew, R. E.,2001) When witch hunts occur in the digital world, they typically take place on social media. Ling (1996), who was among the first to discuss the phenomenon in a journal article, lists factors that contribute to mass hate campaigns online.   One is patterned labeling whereby an individual is classified as a deviant and subjected to a public degradation ceremony. Another is the appropriation of a social apparatus by the witch hunters, who use it not only to persecute the target, but also to suppress dissenting views. In the case of digital witch hunts, the degradation ceremony occurs online in the public world of social media, and the apparatus that is appropriated is a collection of social media channels.

Because social media creates "a virtual space for those who are feeling emotionally proximate to converge," it increases the likelihood of emotional contagion There are two types of social media groups that form online: the regular social network (for example, Facebook friends) and groups of unrelated individuals whogather to share information about topics of interest . The latter type may form around things they like (for example, dog lovers or sports fans), hobbies (running,

quilting, etc.), academic pursuits (typically student groups), and political issues. In Thailand, prominent political groups have formed around the Red Shirts, the People's Democratic Reform Committee, and the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship. Members of any type of group may participate in a social media witch hunt, though political issues have been particularly likely to spark witch hunts in recent years.

When a witch hunt occurs, political extremists often take advantage of the anonymity that social media provides to attack the reputations of their adversaries without having to worry about repercussions. Such individuals spread misinformation under false identities, and may even create online identities using the names of their targets. Those who engage in smear campaigns will typically create fake quotations, take quotations out of context, or simply spread fabricated news stories (Aluweisheg, A. A., 2012) Although witch hunts occurred before the introduction of social media, they typically faded away after a short time because attacks in print media do not have the permanency of those conducted online. When witch hunters post insults, threats, and misinformation online, they stay globally accessible indefinitely, and thus can continually destroy the victim's reputation, creating "a lingering death that the subject is required to live out in public"

There have been numerous examples of social media witch hunts in recent years, such as the case of Lord McAlpine in the UK, who was the target of false pedophilia rumors (Mehta, 2013). Another was the social media vigilante manhunt that ensued in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing, which led to innocent people being accused and endangered (Potts & Harrison, 2013). In both cases, large numbers of social media users spread misinformation and called for justice against innocent targets. Other social media witch hunts have involved scapegoating after tragic events. One such case was the murder of a baby by his parents in the UK. Campaigners for justice focused their social media efforts on the female social services workers associated with the case while largely ignoring the police officers who had failed to investigate the baby's home environment on multiple occasions, the medical workers who did not identify abuse prior to the baby's murder, and problems associated with the system overall

A key characteristic of digital witch hunters is their tendency to use exaggerated language and threaten their targets with harm. Simons (2015) describes the case ofthe Edmonton Youth Council members, a Canadian student group who recommended serving vegetarian snacks during long city council meetings to reduce meat consumption and promote sustainability. Before the era of social media, it is unlikely that this story would have garnered any attention. However, given the speed with which information can spread online, news of the recommendation quickly reached a national audience and the students were soon targeted by a nationwidepro-meat social media mob. Their attackers called them names, subjected them to nasty insults, and even suggested murdering those who voted in favor of vegetarian options. Paireepairit (2012) provides tree examples of social media witch hunting in Thailand. One is the Report Thailand page on Facebook, which is used for organized Bomb Reports (massive, unsubstantiated reports made by a large number of users with political agendas).Another is the right-wing Social Sanction movement, which targets left-wing social network users. This group has exposed the personal informationof those who oppose the monarchy on Facebook. As a result of this campaign, physical threats were made toward a woman who was tracked down after a cash bounty was offered for surprising her in her home. Another social media witch hunt that occurred in Thailand was the case of WithawatThaokhamlue, a Thai singer more commonly known as MarkV11 who was targeted while participating in a popular singing contest. Social media users formed a group specifically designed to harass the singer. This group (called Confident that over one million Thais are against MarkV11) harassed the singer for his political views, which he had expressed on Facebook. MarkV11 was forced to withdraw from the contest and leave Thailand as a result of this online persecution (Suriyawonkul, 2011). Many Thais now censor themselves on Facebook due to fears about political harassment, cancel their accounts altogether, post under pseudonyms, or share only with close friends online (Suriyawongkul, 2011).

3. Research Methodology

This research is a phenomenologic study, by applying a netnography approach, on popular social media sites such as Facebook that have been instrumental in the spread of digital witch hunts. Kozinets (2015) definesnetnography as a means of conducting qualitative ethnography research online. The netnography process, which is an adaptation of traditional ethnographic techniques, involves identifying topics and communities of interest, determining which data to use from the large amount of digital information available, analyzing the data within their digital context, and addressing ethical issues that arise when operating within an internet-based research environment.Netnography is now widely used for business research, and is being rapidly adopted in other fields of research as well (Kozinets, 2015).

This researchincludes four case studies of social media witch hunts that have taken place in Thailand during2 Nov 2013-22 May 2014(PDRC), May 3, 2015-May 31,2015(7-11), Feb 5 2015- Feb 9,2016(VRZO)/Jan 8,2016-March 8, 2016(DjKeng).Thethe first case is that of a business: the 7-11 chain of convenience stores. The second case relates to the entertainment industry, with a focus on the negative social media gossip targeting the Thai actress TuptimAnyarin (or known as VRZO) and a radio host, Djkeng. The third case will address social media witch hunts within the political sphere, with a focus on the People's Democratic Reform Committee. The choice was made to apply a case study approach because case studies enable the exploration of social phenomena through multiple data sources, and the data collected include critical information about the context in which the phenomena occur as well as the events themselves (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Therefore, case studies are ideal for situations in which the researcher must examine context as well as situations or events. For this research, context is critical because it is the social media environment that facilitates the modern digital witch hunt.

Using both content analysis and discourse analysis,Hsieh and Shannon (2005) describefour types of content analysis. The first, conventional content analysis, is typically used when studies focus on relatively new fields of inquiry where prior literature and theoretical foundations are limited. Categories used for

analysis are derived from the data rather than being predetermined, and the logical approach is inductive. Directed content analysis, by contrast, is typically used when applying deductive logic to examine data in relation to a preexisting theory. Keywords or phrases are predetermined in this case, and they are derived from prior research or theoretical foundations. Summative content analysis involves the identification and quantification of key words or phrases, with the goal of exploring usage rather than inferring meaning. With summative content analysis, keywords are identified prior to and during the analytical process, and predetermined keywords are based on either a prior literature review or the interests of researchers. This study will apply a conventional approach to content analysis becausenetnography is a relatively new research approach, there have been no prior studies conducted or theories advanced specifically to explain social media-based witch hunting, and this study seeks to identify the meaning of statements posted online rather than simply the frequency with which particular language is used.

Gee (2014) defines discourse analysis as "the study of language in use" (p. 8). The author notes that discourse analysis may focus onthe thematic content of language, or it may incorporate an examination of language structure and meaning. For this research, the discourse analysis will focus on the thematic content of language used in social media witch hunts. According to Gee (2014), the ways in which language is used typically relate to social goods, which are political in nature. Language shapes institutions and relationships, and discourse analysis, therefore, can yield insights into controversies and other problems in the social world, and the ways in which these issues help or harm particular individuals or entities. Thus, discourse analysis is a useful approach for examining case studies of social media witch hunts, given the sociopolitical nature of these events and the importance of language to the spread of paranoia and hostility when targeting particular groups or individuals.

4. Discussion

Four cases were identified which could be described as social media witch hunts. These cases were focused in four different areas, including the retail sphere

(7-11), entertainment sphere (TuptimAnyarin, VRZO), and political sphere (PDRC). Each of these four cases had a different cause, but they followed a similar process.

The process of the social media witch hunt

Each of the four cases followed a similar process of development. First, a legitimate issue was identified with the target. Next, there were expressions of support for the campaign, which transformed into personal or direct attacks on the target. In some cases, there were support responses, which were then retaliated against by those against the company. In most cases, the attacks dwindled over time, instead of coming to a close in a relatively brief time as occurred before social media (Phillips, 2014). Furthermore, these witch hunts still remain visible even after they have lost momentum. This could have long term consequences for the targets.   However, none of these are classical social media witch hunts identified by Ling (1996), which is directed against an individual.
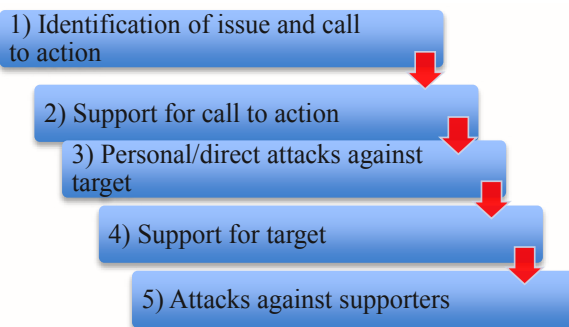

1) Identification of issue and call to action

2) Support for call to action

3) Personal/direct attacks against target

4) Support for target

5) Attacks against supporters

Figure 1 Social media witch hunt process(Finding Patterns)

Initial claim and call to action

In all four cases, the targets of the attacks were identified in social media as engaging in unfair or unjust business or political practices or making false or harmful claims. This initial claim of unfair behavior was accompanied by a specific call to action on social media. This is consistent with the literature, which shows that witch hunts develop in response to a crisis where there is limited information (Huang et al., 2015).

- The People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) announced a campaign against the amnesty bill in Thailand. This bill would have exonerated a number of politicians on murder charges as well as potentially allowing exiled former Prime Minister ThaksinShinawatra to return. The call to action was an invitation to protest against the amnesty bill. This is a classical witch hunt of Thai social media, which have frequently developed in response to political instability and uncertainty (Suriyawongkul, 2011). (2 Nov 2513-22 May 2514)

- 7-11 was stated to be using its position of market dominance to crowd out small traders, many of which had to close down. The company was also claimed to be using similar packaging to confuse customers and trick them into buying 7-11's products (Figure 2). The call to action was for a boycott of 7-11 from

- A social media user identified a cream marketed by singer TuptimAnyarin (VRZO) as "too good to be true", as its advertisement May 7 to 11, 2015 and the case was finalized by the end of May, 2015.claimed it could make the face look younger or change its shape, detoxify the body, and treat cerebral thrombosis and prevent bandy legs, and was safe for infants. These claims were stated as exaggerated and a response was demanded. The incident occurred duringFeb 5-9, 2015.

- PattarasakThiemprasert ,35-year-old radio host known as DjKeng had road rage in incident between   him and   Mr. KavinkanSriruecha on Mitmaitree   Road in Bangkok 's Dindang District   on January 8,2016.The incident came to the media's attention after the security footage showed the former Dj, who claimed his pickup was reversed by the other driver, had lied the real story was actually the other   way around.DjKeng   was dismissed   by his employer,89.5 Sweet   FM, after the clip of the incident went viral on social media, and drew heavy criticism. The Bangkok North Municipal Court found him guilty of deliberating ramming his pickup truck into another vehicle and   has   sentenced   him to four months   and   15 days in jail without   suspension as his actions were   considered "severe", which was reduced from   seven months   after he recanted his testimony,

confessing to charges presented   by the persecution. The Courton March 8,2016   also ordered authorities to revoke   DjKeng 's driving license and seize his black pickup truck.

Support

Following the call to action, many social network users expressed support for the call to action (such as boycott or protest). This period of support was usually relatively short, as it was the period when the substance of the call to action was addressed but before personal attacks started. The initial stage of non-exaggerated response has not been identified as a stage in the witch hunt.

Escalation and response

During the escalation and response stage, supporters of the social media call to action began to attack the target themselves, or someone associated with it (such as the Prime Minister). In some cases, supporters or the targets themselves responded, but this was often met with increased personal attacks and even threats of violence. This is consistent with previous observations, which noted that exaggerated language and even threats of violence were common (Simons, 2015). There was also evidence of the use of fabricated or exaggerated evidence (Aluweisheg, 2012).

In the 7-11 case, supporters of the social media boycott turned against 7-11 itself, stating that the company was "selfish and only think about advantages that you can take." When some other social media users supported 7-11, boycott supporters accused them of working for 7-11, using harsh language. In the case of the VRZO-marketed cream, comments like "OMG, this is crazy! This is how they do business!" were posted. In the case of PDRC, the escalation of attacks was different, because it occurred in response to the group changing its remit in response to the government cancelling the amnesty bill. Responses included "Sutep, who do you think you are? You are over our laws and regulations!" and "How many times will you announce the protests? You will never become prime minister!"

The second stage of the attack phase was a response, either from supporters or from the target of the attack. The result also shows VRZO's response, claiming that the cream was FDA-approved. This response was met by strong

negative comments like "It does not work at all. After using this cream for a couple days, there were acne and papules all over my face!" and "Tuptim does not use the cream because she had plastic surgery!"

Similar comments were made against supporters of 7-11, claiming that they supported the company or even worked for it. This stage is similar to the observations of previous witch hunts in Thailand, where supporters had their personal information revealed and/or were threatened with violence (Paireepairit, 2012; Suriyawongkul, 2011). The continued focus on the VRZO cream and exposure of additional information is similar to the harassment of MarkV11, a singer who was targeted during a singing campaign (Suriyawongkul, 2011).   In that case, the singer was targeted for his political views, forcing him to leave Thailand (Suriyawongkul, 2011).

The four social media witch hunts are still in progress, with supporters and targeters continuing to argue on social media. However, previous research has shown that the targets may have severe outcomes, even up to emotional and physical injury and even death (Bartholomew, 2011). These include for example MarkV11, who actually left both the singing contest and Thailand as a result of the harassment (Suriyawongkul, 2011).   These campaigns can also have longer term impacts on uninvolved Thai people, who may self-censor or cancel their accounts in fear of being targeted (Suriyawongkul, 2011). The consequences of these witch hunts have not yet developed.

5. Conclusions

The "patterns" of social media witch hunt in Thailand found in this research depict movements of contemporaryThai society in terms of social responsibility on morals and ethics as social media is not only a tool for communications but also a mean of socialization. Moreover, social media connects Thai citizen together as if they were in physical world. The contribution of this research could be beneficial forthe Thai government to use for monitoring the hot topics in the society and estimating the process of witch hunt in thethai society to increase the way to communicate and response the attack correctly. While private

sectors, organizations or companies can use this research "patterns" found to design on emergency plan.

This research studied the phenomenon of social media witch hunts in Thailand. Witch hunts occur when an individual or other entity is targeted in response to a perceived crisis or injustice. The witch hunt gains strength, resulting in exaggerated claims or even lies about the target as those involved continue to ratchet up pressure. While traditional witch hunts have lost momentum quickly, social media offers a platform for them to continue to develop. The consequences of witch hunts can be extreme, including reputation damage, personal emotional distress and even threats of harm and actual harm. In Thailand, they have become commonplace, driven by growing adoption of social media and political unrest. This research looked at four recent cases of witch hunts in Thailand, including one that developed around a 7-11 boycott, one directed at singer VRZO,one road rage radio host DjKeng and one that developed around the PRDC political movement.

These witch hunts showed a number of similarities. They emerged in response to a specific stimulus, with two of them focusing on a specific call to action. Although some had initially reasonable responses, they rapidly devolved into personal attacks on the target. These attacks included exaggerated personal insults and even threats, consistent with the literature on social media. These attacks also remained visible on social media even after they lost momentum. This research shows that social media witch hunts are a real danger in Thailand. They also can have extreme effects on the lives of their targets, causing emotional harm and even threats of physical violence.Thus, unavoidably excepted that social medias take a major role and have great effects both positively and negatively on everyone in Thailand and the world, Further studies on the phenomenon of social media witch hunts in Thailand on various cases and behaviors will grant a great deal of advantages for the Thai government, private sectors and companies in Thailand in many aspects and dimensions.

Implications

The problem of social media harassment is a difficult one to solve because of the openness of social media and the speed of interaction. However, it

is only likely to become more common as Internet access becomes more common. Social media use is already nearly ubiquitous in Thailand, with almost every Thai Internet user also using Facebook (Vichienwanitchkul, 2015). Thus, it is possible that social media witch hunts could continue to grow. Since Thai social media witch hunts are often associated with political unrest (Suriyawongkul, 2011), this could become even more of a problem.Only if, the recognition ofthe "patterns" of social media witch hunt in Thai society which is the significant findings of this research and appropriate practices are observed.The 5 steps of the "patterns" are;
1) Identification of issue and call for action.2) Support for call to action.3) Personal/direct attacks against target.4) Support for target.5) Attacks against supporters.

And,one possible solution could be a public education campaign on the effect of social media harassment, which has been undertaken in country like Canada, as well as public groups like Tindergrrls (Public Safety Canada, 2014; Sarkonak, 2015). This type of campaign could reduce the tendency to engage in social media witch hunts.

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