# Mobile Technology in the Lives of Thai Immigrants in Germany

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This paper examines the role of mobile technology in the lives of Thai immigrants in Berlin. By using qualitative research methods, this research investigates how new digital and social media applications have affected the organization of Thai immigrants on both individual and institutional levels, with a particular focus on the Royal Thai Embassy in Berlin. Mobile technologies today are widely used in the diaspora, by both individuals and social institutions, to maintain relationships with the homeland and to promote national affairs. Both individual Thai immigrants and official staff of the embassy rely significantly on Internet sites, particularly on social networking sites such as Facebook, to gain information on Thailand and to expand their networks. This paper explores changes in communication and their implications for Thais and their respective institutions in Germany.

**Keywords:** Berlin; Mobile Technology; Royal Thai Embassy; Social Networking Sites; Thai Migration

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Across continents, the emergence of new communication channels has changed the central means to acquire information. Private individuals and social organizations increasingly use mobile technologies as tools to search information and convey their message. The nature of information is also subject to change. Information acquisition has been moved from physical materials to digital media not least due to the fast pace of online connections (Harper, 2011, pp. 55-56).

Among the variety of immigrant groups in Germany, Thai people make up a large number of foreign citizens. The immigration statistics of Germany collected in 2014, reveal that 58,827 Thais reside in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2015). This number includes the first and second generation of Thais in Germany who still hold Thai citizenship. Thai immigrants have established networks and created group activities to stay connected with other members of the community throughout Germany. Before the development of widespread social media use, a large number of Thai immigrants in Berlin were only passive receivers of letters and flyers and lacked opportunities to respond. Today, these 'audiences' no longer take a passive role, but a more interactive and productive role (e.g., Chen, 2011, p. 757; Livingstone, 2004, p. 5). Individuals can now instantly give feedback or comment on a given data via social media platforms.

New media and mobile technologies have created new ways of communication that serve people in different circumstances, locations, times, and purposes.

Moreover, media ideologies point at people's capacity to interpret communicative possibilities and define the material limitations of particular channels (Gershon, 2010; Thompson, 2009). The online platforms most favored by Thai people in Germany include Skype, Facebook Messenger, LINE, WhatsApp, and different providers' operating systems such as Blackberry Message Service (BBM) and Apple's iMessage. Offering instant message services, these mobile social media platforms facilitate communication and information exchange and distribution among users equipped with portable computers and mobile phones.

This paper examines the role of mobile technologies in the daily lives of Thai immigrants and in the organization and work of related institutions such as the Royal Thai Embassy in Berlin. The main objectives of this study are to demonstrate the interplay between popular uses of mobile technologies and Thai immigration to Germany, and to explore the changes triggered by the application of new media in representative organizations and institutions. The author argues that social media have become the key channel for connecting and networking among Thai immigrants in Germany. In order to accommodate emerging online practices, the Royal Thai Embassy is now facilitating online inquiries through its website. Information dissemination has also shifted from the use of text letters or posters to email or chat messages.

As the study shows, previous offline Public Relations (PR) strategies blocked the flow of communication between Thai individuals, respective organizations, and the general public because a number of Thai immigrants were unable to fully access traditional media such as newspapers and magazines. This resulted in some Thai immigrants disengaging from the circles of the government and their activities. Instead, they relied on family and peer networks in order to gather information relating to homeland affairs. Many did not participate in national events as information did not reach them in a timely manner. Only a few had established their social networks to share information, yet their offline connection remained limited. Unlike earlier traditional practices, PR via the Internet solved many accessibility problems (Thompson, 2009). Thus, new media eventually became the solution for the Royal Thai Embassy in Berlin to reach Thai immigrants living in and outside Berlin and engage them in their activities.

Using interviews and participant observation, this paper scrutinizes current changes in the communication and organization among Thai immigrants in Berlin. Secondary data is drawn mainly from governmental statistics and documents. Interviews with the Royal Thai Embassy staff and Thai people with migration background living in Berlin were carried out in the period from June to September, 2015.

## RESEARCH INSIGHTS

The study showed that mobile technologies are widely employed at both individual and organizational levels. Both formal and informal communication ranging from official announcements from the Royal Thai Embassy to everyday chatting occur on social media platforms and rapidly replace more traditional media. Previously, many Thai immigrants were not able to access information provided by the embassy because relevant news resources were limited to those well-connected groups living in the city centers. As the Royal Thai Embassy in Berlin reported, while it was

its obligation to take care of its people, prior to using digital media, difficulties in information distribution platforms prevailed. The embassy facilitated Thai people's immigration, offered various services, and promoted Thai people's relations to the host country in every dimension. PR was considered the key tool to achieve these obligations; however, traditional media such as official leaflet announcements, posters, or the circulation of letters did not efficiently support the organization's tasks. The emergence of new digital media allowed a broader dissemination of information. It also affected the relations between the embassy and Thai immigrants in Germany on the whole, from communication and activities that were more interpersonal and official, to those more community-oriented and participative. The embassy now attempts to reach out to Thais overseas and learn more about them in order to promote their social welfare in the host country and keep them informed about developments in Thailand. New media worked well to serve these missions, staff reported. As mobile technologies transformed migrants' daily routes of communication, it also affected their homeland family attachments and the establishment of social networks at home and abroad. The embassy played a central role in upholding these ties.

Mobile phones today are used for various purposes, particularly for long-distance communication. Thai immigrants in Germany retain ties with their families in Thailand by connecting to the Internet via their mobile phones at no extra cost. Thus, they can stay in touch with family and homeland affairs much more often compared to previous times. Thais nowadays are far more active in using the Internet via their mobile devices (Fairfield, 2015), implying that there are more opportunities for them to automatically receive news from their social networks. In addition, portable devices such as smartphones or tablets make it possible for migrants to join family activities as if they were together. Placing tablets on the table at dinner time surrounded by family members and relatives in the country of origin is part of Thai immigrants' regular practices. Indeed, eating or having dinner together with the family is perceived as a very social pleasantry; Thais like to eat together, share food, and hold conversations while dining ("Understanding Thai Food", 2011). Thus, it can be argued that new media have changed some of the living patterns of Thai immigrants, from being physically separated from their homeland to being virtually connected via multimedia. Social media platforms allow users to enjoy talking with each other not only by sending and receiving text and voice messages, but also by exchanging pictures, video clips, and music. These multiple functions of smartphones are reported to enable ways of communication that appear more realistic and natural:

> I've been here for 11 years. In the beginning, I contacted my family using a prepaid phone card. The cost was expensive so I couldn't call that often. Now, we have the Internet; it saves a lot, yet the Internet quality in the past was not good – slow, unclear, lots of other devices needed to connect in order to make a call. Now, it is much better. The Internet quality is improved, fast, clear, and inexpensive plus we can use smartphones now. Video call is easily made from a mobile phone. It makes conversations from overseas more natural comparing to the abroad communication 10 years ago. (Vorapol, 33 years old, Thai migrant, 12 July 2015, Berlin)

Furthermore, mobile phones serve as information hubs; Thai migrants watch news, read articles, and listen to radio or music online. Reportedly, Thai institutions had to replace their traditional means of communication and information dissemination by digital resources:

> I would say numerous Thai immigrants in Berlin I work with do not seem to prefer highly informative sources. They like entertainment or merely summary of texts. We have to adjust information in the form of pictures and few sentences of short summary to communicate with Thais here. (Suree, 37 years old, embassy staff, 3 September 2015, Berlin)

A staff member of the Royal Thai Embassy reported that short messages, pictures, and group chat would better fit Thai immigrants' lifestyle and preferences since some of them had a limited ability to read and write in both Thai and German. Moreover, the increased demand for social media, and the exchange of music, news, and videos online among Thai people is likely to continue in the future, along with the arrival of the fourth generation (4G) of wireless broadband services (Suchit, 2016).

Mobile technologies foster transnational social networks and, as such, encourage migration. Facebook groups like *Thai Students in Berlin and Brandenburg* (TS Ber-Brand) and Thai Asa München offer space for potential migrants to post their questions on topics such as visa procedures, documents required for a student visa, courses available in German universities or German language schools, fees, etc. Thai immigrants who already reside in Germany can also advertise their businesses to potential migrants such as job vacancies or vacant rooms. Social networking sites are not only a space for seeking job opportunities, housing, and socializing, but also an online forum for people to set up their transnational network in order to share their feelings and experiences in the host land. For instance, the *Deutsch-Thai/Thai-Deutsch Dolmetscher/Übersetzer* (German-Thai/Thai-German Translator) network on Facebook currently hosts 812 members aiming to help migrants and potential newcomers to establish their networks by also learning German. It is an interactive online forum in which many Thai immigrants in Berlin and prospective immigrants to Germany take part.

The use of the Internet was also found to promote Thai integration. A number of websites administrated by the Thai government, for instance, www.thaiembassy.de, m.mfa.go.th, www.thaibizgermany.com/de, and dtan.thaiembassy.de, provide information on aspects of everyday life, career, language, education, and laws in Germany. Apart from these government run websites, a number of private Thai institutions take part in facilitating the process of integration, for example *Thai Articulate Their Rights Abroad (THARA)*, *Puer Thai e.V. Berlin*, *Ban Ying e.V.*, and *THK Translation*. These privately run websites aim to provide migrants with useful information with regard to life in Germany. Today, potential migrants can also learn from the experiences of other immigrants through private blogs such as *Thai Freundschaft Gruppe Erlangen* (Thai Friendship Group Erlangen) or Educatepark. The information made available on these websites prepares migrants to adjust and comply with laws in the host country, unlike in the past when they lacked both understanding and sources of information regarding regulations and decent practices of living in Germany:

> Recently, after we uploaded guidelines concerning registration, consular services, and laws in daily life of Germany on our Facebook page and website, I noticed that many Thai immigrants were more confident and brought correct and complete documents when contacting us. . . . It is much faster to proceed documents for them in the embassy now. (Maneeya, 36 years old, embassy staff, 4 June 2015, Berlin)

> Our clients do not have to physically come at the embassy to inquire. They can drop questions in our emailbox or Facebook inbox and we simply reply them in a short time manner – generally within 24 hours. For example, a Thai traveler in Germany lost his passport, I could advise him what to do on Facebook, and things were solved without requiring his presence in the embassy. (Prapapen, 35 years old, embassy staff, 4 June 2015, Berlin)

Mobile technologies had a strong impact on the working relationships between the Royal Thai Embassy staff and its clients. It replaced the old working styles of the organization by a phenomenon known as "time shifting". Now staff could even set up their own online network groups in order to convey information via LINE chat or other instant message applications. Additionally, mobile technologies reduced the communication hierarchy. Previously, when staff needed to consult their supervisors, they had to follow the formal procedure by making an appointment with the secretary first. Staff had to check and wait for their supervisors' vacant slot and ensure they were in town. In contrast, today staff had set up LINE group chats where all staff members participate. Junior staff can post their questions directly to their supervisors in the group chat. Online communication has shown to have influenced offline hierarchies in ways that allow junior staff to communicate and work together closer and faster without going through order scales.

### CONCLUSION

Thai immigrants to Germany increasingly build their transnational social networks through the use of new social media platforms. These ever expanding communication networks stimulate migration and prepare potential migrants for integration while facilitating life overseas. As in the case of the Royal Thai Embassy in Berlin, mobile technology clearly affected organizational culture: The communication hierarchy is reported to have diminished, allowing them to adopt flat organizational structures. PR via Internet channels has strengthened the organization's capacity to promote the country's diplomatic affairs. The relationship between the embassy and Thai immigrants has also changed, allowing for online social networking. Due to the short-term nature of this research, this case reveals only a limited number of aspects related to the larger project of studying the interplay between new digital and mobile technologies and Thai migration to Germany. As such, it does not meet requirement of a deeper historical, political, and social contextualization of the transnational paths of Thai migrants. Yet, these initial findings may be indicative in exploring broader questions such as modern reinterpretations of enduring social hierarchies or the medial representation of Thai politics. In conclusion, I assert that new technolo-

gies, most prominently social media, have affected Thais' lifestyles and apparently improved much of their family and institutional relations in Germany and at home.

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