

## The Characteristics of Social Media Influencers that Affect Political News Engagement among the Thai Citizens

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Received: July 3, 2025

Revised: July 30, 2025

Accepted: August 2, 2025

### Abstract

This research article examines the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement among Thai citizens. A mixed-methods approach was employed. For quantitative research, the questionnaire was selected as a research instrument for data collection from 400 respondents aged over 18 years with the right to vote in the general elections in 2023. The clusters covered 6 regions encompassing 12 provinces in Thailand. In terms of a qualitative research approach, 13 key informants who were social media influencers employed by media outlets and media freelancers presenting news on broadcast and social media channels participated in this research. Statistics applied for the data analysis included frequency, percentage, standard deviation, independent sample *t*-test, One-Way ANOVA, and Fisher's LSD method for multiple comparison. Findings showed that (1) overall, each attribute of the social media influencers' characteristics influenced political news engagement among Thai citizens at a high level. Credibility of personal brand received the highest mean, followed by celebrityhood, social networking, political opinion leadership, capability of content creation and spreading, and social status, respectively. (2) It was found that male and female respondents had different opinions toward the characteristics of the social media influencers that affect political news engagement at statistical significance of the 0.05 level, overall. In contrast, different ages and educations of the respondents had no general differences. (3) Social media influencers were significant at each step of the public policy process. Their role was to provide thorough news and information, which required innovation to develop the presentation patterns of news information in order to meet the tastes of each group of viewers. These presentation patterns could be in the use of charts, pages, or graphics that allow viewers to understand easily and quickly. Colorful presentation also enhances the viewers' experiences, encouraging more participation in public discussions about the analysis and development of future policy implementation.

**Keywords:** Characteristics of Social Media Influencers; Social Media; Political News Engagement

**Type of Article:** Research Article

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## Introduction

Public policy is an instrument for bureaucratic management, benefits management, and tax collection. The government also utilizes it to carry out social organization and conflict management that would potentially affect political groups, institutional establishment, and socioeconomic and political processes. In other words, it can be called “community’s rules and regulations” (Dye, 2017). In addition, public policy affects stakeholders, for example, people, politicians, administrators, scholars, and mass media. In this regard, politicians would formulate public policies while administrators execute policy implementation. Scholars are policy analysts and evaluators. In the end, people would follow public policies. Meanwhile, mass media are a medium that connects social perception, which functions as a party to collect the people’s opinions (Wasi, 2009). In this respect, it plays a role in providing information about the government’s work for the public. This information shapes people’s opinions about public policy issues. In this regard, mass media can influence public policy through communication of political matters, which draws people’s attention (Kraft & Furlong, 2017). In the beginning, the channel of mass media that affected public policy process was newspaper for public policy agenda setting. As time goes by, radios and televisions, the Internet, and social media (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, LINE, Instagram, Twitter, and Blog) have replaced the role of newspaper in the modern era (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016).

Nowadays, social media enables everyone to have information accessibility. It allows people to disseminate news information to the public and also influences policy decision making. Social media is a tool in scrutinizing the government’s work, providing a channel for public discussion, and facilitating community development and solutions for social problems. It, moreover, plays an essential role in public policy to serve as a channel for citizen participation in agenda setting and receiving news information about the government’s ongoing work. By the same token, political influencers on social media can persuade and stimulate people to participate in public issues on social media platforms, which lead to a shift in political attitudes, opinions, and behavior.

Therefore, this research is interested in investigating the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement among the Thai citizens.

## Research Objectives

1. To explore the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement among the Thai citizens.
2. To make comparisons of social media influencers’ characteristics affecting the Thai citizens’ political news engagement by gender, age, and education.
3. To examine the effects of social media influencers’ characteristics on political news engagement among the Thai citizens.

## Conceptual Framework

Following the synthesis of the relevant literature, the factors used to measure the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement among Thai citizens were derived. (1) Credibility of personal brand is an individual’s attempt to build themselves to be different from others (Brems, Temmerman, Graham, & Broersma, 2016) and to make memorably fascinating appearances, establishing unique images or

showing their essence of the true self in order to draw attention from social media users noticeably (Abdulmajeed & El-Ibiary, 2020; Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). (2) Celebrityhood concerns the influencer and the ability to convince the target market that is followers or subscribers with niche characteristics to decide (Senft, 2008; 2013). Having interactions with followers or subscribers on YouTube and creating a close relationship with followers or subscribers enable social media influencers to function as an intermediary media (Nouri, 2018). In this context, social media influencers cannot reach public spaces at a broader level, but it is adequate for them to mobilize people and create social movements (Cunningham & Craig, 2017). (3) Political opinion leadership is an ability to disseminate political opinions aimed at modifying people's opinions, attitudes, and behaviors (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). It possesses political interests and political participation (Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015), coupled with personal interests in political issues that enable social media influencers to produce media content (Vochocová, 2018) and with practicing knowledge through a system of thought that enables social media influencers to become expertise, to have deep knowledge, and to express their opinions (Jung & Kim, 2016; Schach, 2018). (4) Capability of content creation and spreading is the ability to know media trends and forms of modern media. In this regard, social media influencers can utilize political issues or emergency situations to produce political media and spread their content (Rego Rey & Romero-Rodríguez, 2016). Political language is also included in the capability of content creation and spreading. Examples of political language are messages, body language, and political expression through resistance on social media platforms that lead to the front page of social media (Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019; Fischer, Kolo, & Mothes, 2022). (5) Social networking means respect from the public, having innovations and public participation at a substantial level (Rogers & Cartano, 1962). It allows social media influencers to become an intermediary media or to have absolute control over social media users (Giansante, 2015). In this regard, social media influencers anticipate to exert their influence on political opinions through the use of social media platforms and through filing complaints as the center of society that would result in establishing networks in the online context (Kadushin, 2012). By doing so, intense interactions with followers or subscribers along with arguments is required (Wegener, 2019). (6) Social status is an attempt of individuals to create unique content to build reputation and to become community expertise (Kadushin, 2012). Those with the positions of news reporters, mass media, and politicians dominate the political class. These people provide information and report news, including political criticism (Broersma & Graham, 2013). Social status is a supportive factor that affects reliability (Kolli & Khajeheian, 2020). Therefore, conceptual framework is defined and displayed in Figure 1.

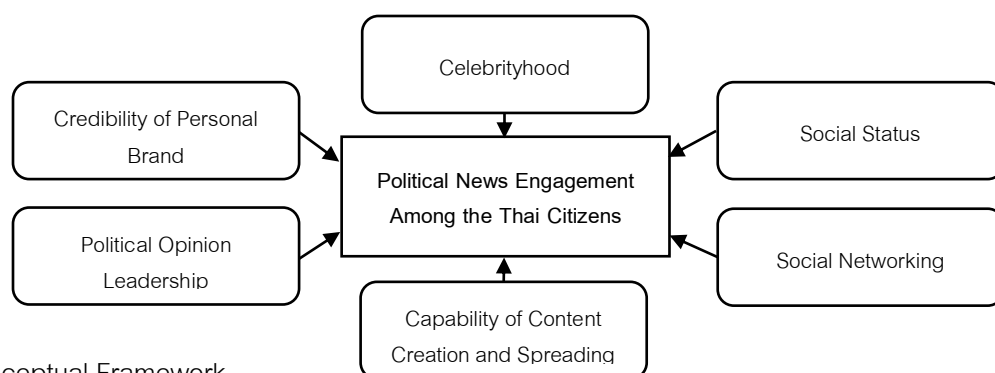


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative strategies to provide a holistic understanding of the research questions. Quantitative research methods were used to explore the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement among the Thai citizens, and to make comparisons of social media influencers' characteristics affecting the Thai citizens' political news engagement by gender, age, and education. Qualitative research methods were used to examine the effects of social media influencers' characteristics on political news engagement among the Thai citizens.

### 1. Quantitative research

#### 1.1 Population and sample

(1) People with the age of over 18 years and with the right to cast their votes in the 2023 general elections held on 14 May 2023 were treated as the population in this research. As of 2023, there were a population of 52,195,920 that had the rights to vote (Office of the Election Commission, 2023).

(2) For sample size, this research employed a minimum sample size determination table introduced by Yamane (1973) at a 95-percent confidence level. As a result, there were 400 respondents that would be recruited in this research. To reach those respondents, the research began with a stratified cluster sampling, followed by multistage and convenience sampling. Based on the sampling techniques applied in this research, there were 6 clusters in 6 regions covering 12 provinces throughout Thailand. 12 provinces were Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Nakhon Ratchasima, Mukdahan, Chonburi, Trat, Bangkok, Samut Songkhram, Kanchanaburi, Phetchaburi, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Ranong.

1.2 In terms of research instrument, the questionnaire was chosen and, subsequently, developed on a 5-point rating scale. It was based on literature review. Its quality was reviewed by the experts through the index of item-objective congruence (IOC), and the results of the IOC were 0.67-1.00. Then, the questionnaires were pretested by 30 non-targeted respondents to derive the item-total correlation with the discriminant values of 0.97 to 0.82. Next, reliability of the research instrument was performed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient with the results of 0.93. Afterward, data collection was carried out based on the assigned proportion of samples for each selected province. The questionnaires were distributed to the targeted respondents by using convenience sampling.

#### 1.3 Data analysis

(1) The respondents' general information that included gender, age, and education were analyzed by frequency and percentage. The results were presented in tables along with an explanation.

(2) In this research, mean ( $\bar{X}$ ) and standard deviation ( $SD$ ) were applied to analyze the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement among the Thai citizens. The results were, subsequently, presented in tables with an explanation for the overall and the factors. The levels of agreement were interpreted as the following (Likert, 1932; Lindner & Lindner, 2024, p. 152).

Mean ranging from 4.51 to 5.00 indicates the highest

Mean ranging from 3.51 to 4.50 indicates high

Mean ranging from 2.51 to 3.50 indicates moderate

Mean ranging from 1.51 to 2.50 indicates low

Mean ranging from 1.00 to 1.50 indicates lowest

(3) The data about comparing the respondents' opinions toward the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement by gender were analyzed by independent sample *t*-test, followed by One-Way ANOVA for age and education. When statistical differences had been found at the 0.05 level, multiple comparisons were conducted between groups by Fisher's LSD method.

#### 1.4 Statistics for data analysis

(1) Basic statistics included frequency, percentage, mean ( $\bar{X}$ ), and standard deviation (*SD*).

(2) Statistics used for reliability of the research instrument were the index of item-objective congruence (IOC) for content validity and Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the research instrument reliability.

(3) Statistics for different comparison included *t*-test, One-Way ANOVA, and multiple comparisons were conducted between groups by Fisher's LSD method.

### 2. Qualitative research

2.1 In this research, key informants were political influencers on social media who are employed by media outlets and who are media freelancers. They present news information on broadcast and online channels. Purposing sampling was applied to select the key informants based on the principle of Creswell (2014, p. 190). The principle suggests that the qualification of key informants should be those that present political news information or discourse on social media continuously. Those should be known and followed by the people interested in politics and be able to influence followers' opinions about political news on social media. Based on this principle, 13 key informants were recruited in this research included (1) M.L. Nattakorn Devakula (2) Mr. Sondhi Limthongkul (3) Mr. Pongkasem Satayaprasert (4) Mr. Winyu Wongsurawat (5) Mr. Yukhon Wisetsang (6) Mr. Danai Ekmahasawat (7) Mr. Chainon Hankhirirat (8) Mr. Panthep Phuaphongphan (9) Mr. Puwanart Kunpalin (10) Mr. Teerat Ratanasevi (11) Mr. Phudit Kamnerdploy (12) Mr. Sirote Klampaiboon (13) Miss Lakkhana Panwichai

2.2 Interview form was employed as a research instrument to collect the data from 13 key informants. It was designed in the form of open-ended questions to provide opportunities to the key informants to express their opinions, attitudes, and views independently. The interview form was reviewed by the experts; subsequently, it was used for data collection.

2.3 Content analysis was adopted to organize the information gathered from in-depth interviews. A word-of-word transcription from the recorders was applied to reduce the data in order to classify and select related messages. Then, conclusion and interpretation were made.

### Results

The results of social media influencers' characteristics that affect political news engagement among the Thai citizens are presented in the following tables and explanations.

1. Results of the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement among the Thai citizens (see Table 1)

**Table 1**

*Overall results of social media influencers' characteristics affecting political news engagement among the Thai citizens in mean and standard deviation*

(n = 400)			
Characteristics of social media influencers	$\bar{X}$	SD	Interpretation
1. Credibility of personal brand	4.44	0.71	High
2. Celebrityhood	4.28	0.78	High
3. Political opinion leadership	4.15	0.77	High
4. Capability of content creation and spreading	4.15	0.78	High
5. Social networking	4.26	0.75	High
6. Social status	3.89	0.80	High
Total	4.19	0.57	High

Table 1 reveals that overall results of social media influencers' characteristics affecting political news engagement among the Thai citizens are at a high level ( $\bar{X} = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ). For each factor, it was found that they are at a high level: credibility of personal brand ( $\bar{X} = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), celebrityhood ( $\bar{X} = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ), social networking ( $\bar{X} = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ), political opinion leadership ( $\bar{X} = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ), capability of content creation and spreading ( $\bar{X} = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 0.778$ ), and social status ( $\bar{X} = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ), respectively.

## **2. Results of comparing the respondents' opinions toward the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement by gender, age, and education.**

2.1 It was found that different genders had different opinions toward the characteristics of social media influencers at statistical significance of the 0.05 level, overall. Moreover, almost all factors that measured the characteristics of social media influencers showed differences in gender. Those factors included credibility of personal brand, celebrityhood, social networking, and social status. This is because the thinking system that had been created defined the gender's role and status differently. In addition, values are given to each gender unequally. In this regard, gender is treated as an existing instrument that has been transmitted to gender system. This is the role that determines authority, status, and value, including difference and inequality between genders. These are inherited through institutions in society, such as family, culture, tradition, religion, mass media education, and regime, all of which influence the respondents to have different opinions toward the characteristics of social media influencers affecting political news engagement. However, different genders are found to show no differences in the capability of content creation and spreading. This could be because both male and female viewed that social media influencers had to have the ability to create and spread the content. It was expected to provide complete information for the people who follow political news to make decisions.

2.2 In addition, it was found that the respondents of different ages showed no overall different opinions toward the characteristics of social media influencers, including the factors that measured the characteristics of social media influencers affecting political news engagement among the Thai citizens. Currently, information technology in terms of politics offer a wide range of channels for people to follow. This allows everyone to be

accessible to information, which affects decision making on different issues. Thus, people's opinions can be in line with ages' intervals.

2.3 In terms of education, it was found that the respondents with different education showed no overall differences in the characteristics of social media influencers affecting political news engagement. When each factor that measured the characteristics of social media influencers affecting political news engagement was closely examined, it was found that almost all factors showed no differences in the characteristics of social media influencers affecting political news engagement. Those factors included celebrityhood, social networking, capability of content creation and spreading, and social status. This could be because receiving political news information was essential, and everyone could access it. People with different educational levels ranging from elementary school to higher education and those without education could participate in political processes, especially in the elections. This is considered the rights and duties that affect public policy making. It could be said that although people with different educational levels were exposed to complete news information, they could express their corresponding opinions about the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement. In this research, exceptions are also shown in credibility of personal brand and political opinion leadership were statistically different at the 0.05 level. Although people with different educational levels could be exposed to political news information from social media influencers, different education reflected complicated thinking system that stemmed from experiences and methodological education. As a result, people's opinions about credibility of personal brand and political opinion leadership toward the characteristics of social media influencers for persuasion were different.

### **3. Results of analyzing the effects of social media influencers' characteristics on political news engagement among the Thai citizens.**

From the results of in-depth interviews with 13 key informants who are political influencers on social media, who are employed by the media outlets and media freelancers, and who present news on the broadcast channels and social media platforms, it was found that;

3.1 credibility of personal brand is regarded as individuals' reliability that attempted to create themselves to be different. These individuals establish themselves to be clear and recognized with exclusive images or expressions of the essence of the true self. In this respect, reliability depends on their past positions and experiences of each individual. Those with the maximum reliability can influence people's opinions mostly. Grace is essential. Stances and sets of thoughts which show self-political ideology are clear and frequent. Credibility also demonstrates through adherence to universal principles, along with sincerity and bravery to present what other people cannot do it. Credibility of personal brand results in quality content and the way people recognize influencers.

3.2 Celebrityhood means popularity determined by the number of followers, subscribers, likes, and interactions with followers and subscribers. Furthermore, it has niche followers and subscribers, which allows celebrities to persuade their followers and subscribers' decision making. It focuses on creating reputation through short clip video programs. These programs can attract people to follow and be interested in, which are expected to present celebrities' opinions to the receivers openly. They have unique ways to create content, which become their strengths. Frequent appearances on the public media to express opinions about different matters begin with



building images to become a true celebrity through presentation that persuade people to agree. It also requires quality content to nourish followers and subscribers' confidence and interest. Even if it is the same story with different contexts, criticisms have to be frequent.

3.3 Political opinion leadership refers to those with political interests, political expertise, and ability to criticize political matters or express political opinions. Those with political experiences and positions have the ability to express weighted opinions about the political circle. They focus on creating valuable content, being brave to present and show stance clearly, continuously, and usually. All presentations are verified. Political opinion leaders are able to present their opinions on various channels effectively. It is considered the ability to communicate political thoughts about needed issues for the public. They can synthesize information and re-present it to be understandable easily, which requires broad and deep knowledge in various aspects.

3.4 Capability of content creation and spreading is described as knowledge about modern media that is applied with political issues and emergency situations to produce political media in order to spread their content on various channels. Analytical skills coupled with sincere and unique presentation are needed. This capability also covers an understanding of technological changes in producing short video clips without special skills and large numbers of employees. It also includes having a team that helps edit and organize the content, understanding the production process deeply, and having skills of data processing and communication on different social media platforms. These skills enable individuals to work more effectively.

3.5 Social networking refers to individuals' ability to connect people within the network and broader society. These individuals are respected by the public, having innovations and participation in the public at a considerable level, and having a connection with social networks. In addition, they ensure that social networks can function as an intermediary media. It is caused by reliability and performance that can create incomes from followers and subscribers interested in the content. This allows individuals to reach information and opinions more easily, which is useful to people, followers, and subscribers. Establishing a group that shares the same ideology through the content that meets followers and subscribers' expectations allows better communication, which results in better answers.

3.6 Social status is concerned with those who are respected by their communities and societies. It can be those with political positions that provide news, information, and criticism through the use of social media platforms. They give political statements. These social influencers are originally politicians, mass media, social activists, and lecturers. In addition, they provide reliable information coupled with personality, and the methods of presenting criticism should be clear based on the information. Most importantly, expressing opinions must be based on an understanding and ability to convey stories precisely.

Therefore, policy recommendations about the promotion and development for political news engagement among the Thai citizens should be carried out through appropriate social media influencers, which could lead to participation in policy making and public administration. It is found that social media influencers play an essential role involved in each step of public policy process. In this regard, they serve as informers that provide news information to the followers in a complete manner. Therefore, it is necessary for them to create new innovations such as the development of presentation methods that satisfies the tastes of people of each cohort. For example, people, nowadays, have hyperactivity disorders, and in response to these people, charts, pages,



and graphics should be utilized for the presentation that tells a story. They allow the viewers to follow the story more easily and speedily. By this way, the story would be filled with tastes and excitement for viewers. This kind of presentation attracts people to participate in or resist through discussions about public issues that allow each policy to be crystallized, which results in policy implementation.

## Discussion

The results of social media influencers' characteristics that affect political news engagement among the Thai citizens are discussed as follows.

1. It is found that the characteristics of social media influencers affecting political news engagement among the Thai citizens were at a high level for overall results and for all factors. Because (1) Credibility of personal brand to be different from others (Brems et al., 2016) and to build themselves to be outstanding and memorable with unique image or the essence of true self. They believed that these could draw attention from social media users substantially (Abdulmajeed & El-Ibiary, 2020; Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). (2) In terms of celebrityhood, had the influence and ability to convince the niche market to make their decision (Senft, 2008; 2013), having interactions with users on YouTube and creating a close relationship with users in order to make themselves intermediary media (Nouri, 2018). Although social media influencers could not reach broader public spaces, it was adequate to mobilize people and create social movement (Cunningham & Craig, 2017). (3) As far as political opinion leadership is concerned, could spread political opinions aimed at modifying people's opinions, attitudes, and behavior (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). These influencers were interested in politics and political participation (Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015), having personal interests in political matters that stimulated them to produce the media content (Vochocová, 2018) and practicing knowledge through a thinking process. This practice enabled them to have expertise, deep knowledge, and expression of opinions (Jung & Kim, 2016; Schach, 2018). (4) For capability of content creation and spreading, knew media trends and forms of modern media. Thus, they could apply political issues or emergency situation to produce political media in order to spread their content (Rego Rey & Romero-Rodríguez, 2016). Moreover, they were capable of political language, for example, messages, body language, and political expression through resistance on social media that stayed on the front page of social media platforms (Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019; Fischer et al., 2022). (5) In terms of social networking, were respected by the public, having innovations, and participating in public matters at a great level (Rogers & Cartano, 1962). They transformed themselves to serve as intermediary media or have absolute control over social media users (Giansante, 2015). Social media influencers aimed to have influence on political opinions on social media platforms and to participate in filing complaints that function as the center of society that leads to social networking in the context of online world (Kadushin, 2012). In this respect, intensity of interaction with followers or subscribers coupled with arguments was needed (Wegener, 2019). (6) For social status, created their own content to build their reputation and had the need to become community experts (Kadushin, 2012). With the positions of news reporters, mass media, and politicians were those that dominated the political class. They provided information and report news, along with political criticism (Broersma & Graham, 2013). Further, social status was a supportive factor that enhanced social media influencers' reliability (Kolli & Khajeheian, 2020).

2. Comparison of the opinions toward the characteristics of social media influencers that affect political news engagement among the Thai citizens by gender, age, and education

2.1 Overall, different genders demonstrated different opinions toward the characteristics of social media influencers that affected political news engagement at statistical significance of the 0.05 level. A system of thought that had been established determined different positions and status of gender. Different genders were valued differently. Existing and conveying tools were a gender system that has shaped role, authority, status, value differently and unequally between genders. This gender system was transmitted to various institutions in society, such as family, tradition, religion, education, mass media, or regime.

2.2 Different levels of age showed no differences in the opinions toward the characteristics of social media influencers that affected political news engagement for overall results and the factors. Currently, information technology, particularly politics, offered a wide range of channels that allowed people to follow openly. Everyone in society could access such information perfectly, which led to decisions. It is obvious that political news engagement from different perspectives was not polarized. When an issue was not agreed, there were other issues that could be possibly agreed. Politics may not have only black or white. In this context, grey was also included. Consequently, opinions of different levels of age could be corresponded to each other. It could be confirmed that age and political climate could not explain all differences. This was because political nurture of specific groups was involved in.

2.3 Different levels of education showed no differences in the opinions toward the characteristics of social media influencers that affected political news engagement for overall results and the factors. Receiving political news information was basically necessary so that everyone could access it. Political participation involved people from elementary school to higher education, including those with no education. This participation could be seen during the elections. It was everyone's right and duty that affect public policy process. It could be said that although people may have different levels of education, their opinions toward the characteristics of social media influencers that affected political news engagement could be consistent with each other. In this regard, they had to receive news information completely.

3. For the analysis of the effects of social media influencers' characteristics on political news engagement, it is found that their duty was to provide news information for followers and subscribers in a coverage and complete manner. Consequently, innovations needed continuous creation. Presentation techniques should be developed to satisfy the needs and behaviors of each cohort of followers. For instance, people could not concentrate on things for a long time. Charts, pages, or graphics should be used to tell a story. This method allowed followers to understand and stay connected with the story more easily and quickly, and the story has to be full of enjoyment. Social media influencers were anticipated to lead society to participate in or show resistance through discussion about public issues in order for each policy to be crystalized. As a result, policy implementation could be executed.

## Recommendations

1. Social media influencers were highly recommended to promote political news engagement among the Thai citizens through the presentation of facts and modern knowledge. They should adhere to universal standards and their political standpoints were shown consistently. Their followers were provided with opportunities to express their opinions. Social media influencers should understand and be able to convey stories clearly in order to persuade the followers to listen, which resulted in decisions to push policies from agenda setting to policy implementation.

2. Social media influencers were highly recommended to create innovation in order to acquire new forms of news information presentation in response to different cohorts' tastes and preferences. Charts, pages, or graphics could be applied to attract the audiences, allowing them to understand the content more easily and quickly and to participate in discussion about public issues actively. Such new forms of presentation encouraged analysis and development of policies that would be implemented in the future.

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