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The Influence of Social, Political, and Social Media on COVID-19 Risk Communication and Health Behaviour in Thailand

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Abstract. To combat the impact of COVID-19, the Thai government recognized the importance of effective risk communication as a means of disease control and prevention. However, due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, executing flawless risk communication was challenging. This research aims to explore and evaluate the critical factors that influence the communication and perception of risks. The purpose of this study is to assist the government in developing effective policies for future risk communication and understand the public's health protection behaviors. By analyzing qualitative data through qualitative methodology and the use of the NVIVO program, the study determined that social media and social/political factors significantly affect an individual's understanding and health protection behavior. Social factors show that people tend to behave similarly and believe information based on their surroundings, including family, friends, colleagues and others. Politically, individuals who trust the current government follow information from official sources except daily numbers of COVID-19 patients. Those who do not trust the government seek information from other sources, especially online channels, and tend to believe information sent by opposing parties. Regardless of information exposure, individuals implement health protection behaviors in high level such as mask-wearing, vaccination and hygiene.

Keywords. Risk communication; Risk perception; Health protective behavior; COVID-19; pandemic

1. Introduction

In 2020, the globe suffered a COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 was an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. The pandemic impacted many countries around the world physically, financially, and mentally. Thailand, like several other countries globally, was affected by the pandemic [1] and encountered five major waves of the virus before transitioning to an endemic state in July 2022. Each wave had a different mutation of COVID-19 with different origin and a different widespread pattern, causing different rate of infections and death toll [2]. In June 2023, it was estimated that the cumulative cases of infections reached over 4,700,000 cases while the cumulative death toll was over 34,000 cases [3]. In addition to the physical impact of the pandemic, Thai citizens, like the rest of the globe, suffered the mental

impact of the pandemic [4]. Hence, the risk perception of Thai people was also affected, especially among vulnerable citizens like elderly people [5]. Moreover, pandemic had an impact on individuals' engagement and implementation of protective behaviour [6-7]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many measures were implemented to control the situation in Thailand, for instance, social distancing, wearing masks, hygiene by washing hands, and testing, which included the daily checking temperature, inspecting COVID-19 symptoms, and employing "Thai Chana" application to enter public places. These health protection measures were part of DMHTT health protection behavior measures [8] which was very important information line for communication and it was repeated in the mass media which included offline and online channels. However, these measures were new to the public, so the public was unfamiliar with implementing them and was not able to value their importance. Furthermore, the public was not fully aware of the significance of implementing these measures throughout the pandemic. One of the effective tools to inform the public is risk communication [9] especially the bilateral communication for public engagement because it can improve the public awareness during the pandemic [10]. Furthermore, it has the potential to increase an individual's understanding of COVID-19 and improve relationships with the public, supporting and facilitating long-term implementation of risk communication [11]. It can also improve their attitude, which can affect their behaviour [12]. In other words, it can be represented as a tool to empower individuals' decision-making and behaviour to protect themselves with well-informed choices. [13]. It can be considered one of the successful factors that helped the government control the situation during COVID-19 [14] because of individuals' cooperation. Assuming that risk communication cannot be implemented effectively, the consequence can be a lack of health protection behaviour, individual protective equipment, and medication [15]. Hence, it is crucial for governments in every country around the world, health care workers, people, and other related stakeholders to pay attention and put effort into risk communication implementation to inform the public and get feedback from the public to improve the quality of risk communication [16]. Especially in developing countries, which have the challenge of implementing social, financial, and communication capabilities in an unstable time [17].

Thailand was one of the countries that paid attention to the importance of risk communication. Thailand had highlighted the topic of risk communication in its National Strategic Plan 2017–2021 by putting it as the third strategy within this plan. It had the purpose of providing data, information, and other necessary knowledge related to COVID-19 with transparency, accuracy, and on time [18] and implementing risk communication intensively through online and offline channels. During the pandemic, Thai people implemented protection behaviours at a high level. For example, COVID-19 vaccination, social distancing and avoiding physically direct face-to-face contact with elderly people^[19], taking necessary vitamins, saving food for an emergency case, checking the condition when they have similar symptoms, coughing into an elbow, etc. [20]

Numerous studies have highlighted the connection between risk communication, risk perception and behavior related to health protection [21-23]. This research aims to examine the various factors that significantly influence an individual's understanding and perception of risk, which ultimately impact their health protection behavior. These factors include social, political, and social media influences, as revealed by multiple studies [24-29]. The ultimate goal of this research is to gain better insight into the target audience for risk communication, which will improve the quality of future risk communication efforts.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study design

In this study, the qualitative method was used with thematic analysis and content analysis as the main methodologies, with the purpose of studying deeply the opinions, experiences, and knowledge of individuals to support the study about factors under the individual's understanding and their risk perception of COVID-19.

2.2 Sampling process

For this study, purposive sampling was used to gather participants who have different levels of accessibility to the Thai government's risk communication in order to obtain a diverse range of opinions. The target group for this study is comprised of residents of Bangkok, Thailand, which was one of the cities most affected by COVID-19 in Thailand before the Thai government declared it endemic. These participants have all received information about the government's risk communication. A total of 14 individuals from various backgrounds such as gender, generation, occupation, education, and location in Bangkok were selected for this study.

2.3 Data collection and Data analyzation

The main tool to collect data and information is an in-depth interview with the purpose of analysing deeper opinions to represent the main reason to support their risk perception, understanding, and protection behaviour. The topics of the in-depth interview were included with the topics of social media, politics, and their opinion about the risk communication implementation to study the factors that affect their understanding of COVID-19. The process of interviewing was done in the local language with the purpose of letting participants express more information from their understanding, and the process of data analysis was done through the NVIVO 14 programme to code and summarise the information from the interview process to analyse deeply their opinion on every issue.

2.4 Ethical issues

Within the process of data collection and analysis in the qualitative method, personal information about names and other related information will not be revealed without the permission of the participant in the interview process. During the whole research, it will appear as a participant, followed by the number (e.g. participant 2).

3. The result and discussion

3.1 The result about the process of risk communication from an individual's view

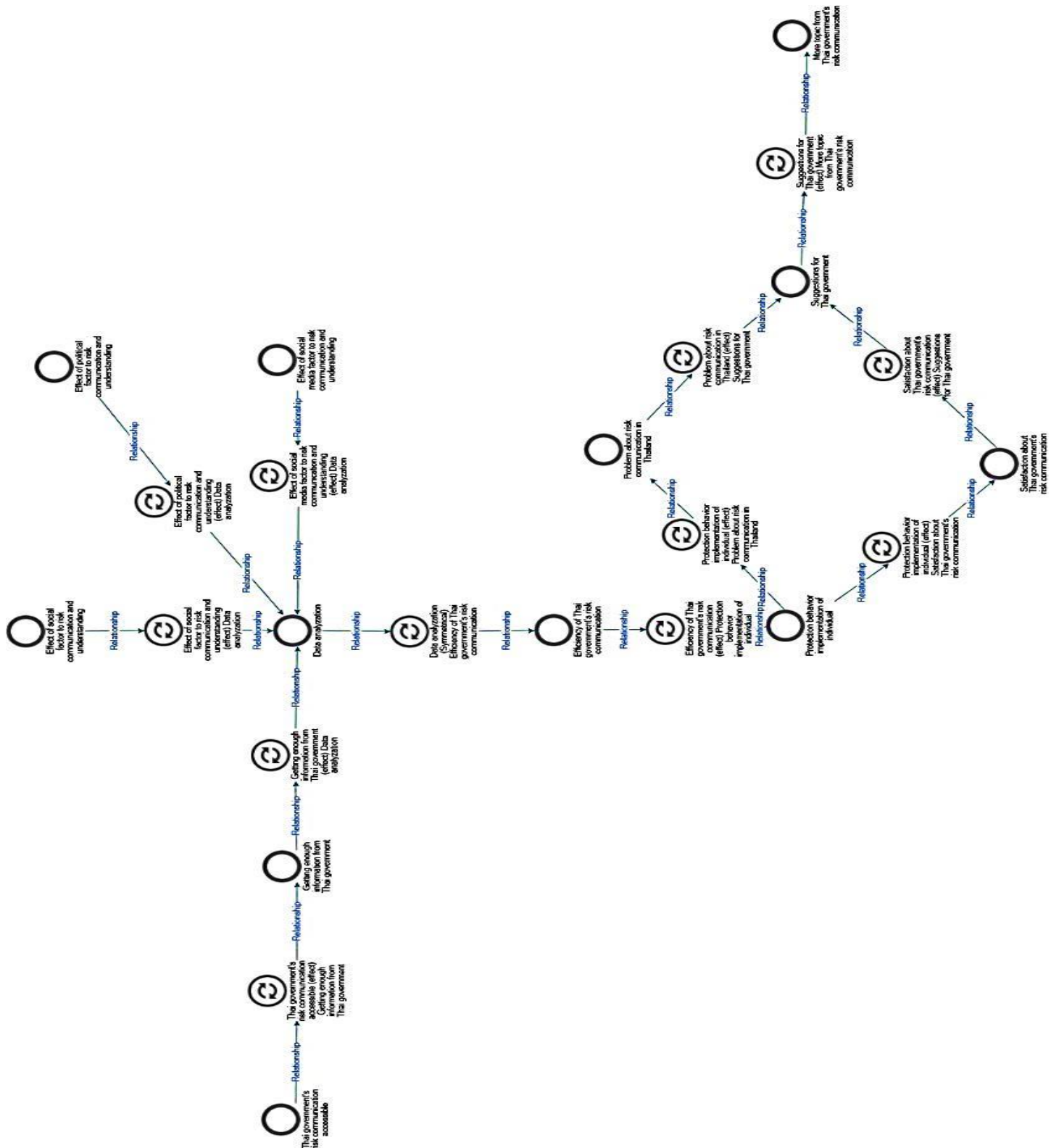


Fig.1 The process of risk communication to reach to individual

Figure 1 shows the risk communication process to reach the public. In addition, it can be seen that the accessibility of the government's risk communication to the public has a significant impact on the individual's information because risk communication represents one tool to increase an individual's understanding and their knowledge and information related to COVID-19. Moreover, individuals analyse and interpret data and information for their own understanding. Within this process, there are two factors that have a significant impact. The first factor is the political factor because risk communication comes from the government. The issue of trustworthiness in their information affected the public's understanding. The second one is about the social factor, which represents one of the channels for the public to receive information. They can learn from others about health protection behaviour during the pandemic, and the last factor is social media, which also represents an online channel to receive more information because individuals do not receive information only from the government. The government represents only one channel to deliver information to individuals. After an individual's data analysis and interpretation process, they will have the health protection behaviours from their understanding. Individuals' health protection behaviours can represent the effectiveness of the risk communication process of the government on a positive or negative side. From this point of view, individual suggestions can be made with the purpose of improving the quality and quantity of risk communication in Thailand during unstable conditions like pandemics in the future.

3.2 The results about the factors influencing risk perception, data analysis, and health protection behaviour of individuals

Based on the analysis results, it seems that Thai citizens actively seek out information beyond that provided by the Thai government, particularly through online platforms such as Facebook and Line. The study also highlights that social, political, and social media factors significantly influence individuals' perception of risk and their protective behavior. This suggests that various factors can shape people's understanding of risks and promote protective actions. Specifically, the social factor indicates that an individual's tendency to conform to those around them can influence their health protection behaviors, as they often rely on their family, friends, colleagues, and other trusted sources for information. Here are some instances of what some interview participants mentioned: "During the pandemic, I rarely went outside my house. So, family was the main source for me to have information, and I believed that they had more information." – female, 62 years old, non-worker, vocational degree.

"In the pandemic period, I followed what people around me did. For example, I wear a mask because I would not feel comfortable if I was the only one who did not wear it." male, 25 years old, student, bachelor's degree.

Regarding the political aspect, it appears that those who lack interest in politics (ignorant) and support Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-Cha's government (the government in Thailand during COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to May 2023) tend to trust and follow the government's information, except for the daily COVID-19 patient count. On the other hand, those who distrust the government have different behavior patterns. They tend to seek out information from other sources, particularly online platforms, and rely on information from opposing political parties. However, regardless of their exposure to various information sources, they still adhere to protective measures against COVID-19 such as wearing masks, avoiding going outside, and practicing social distancing.

Here are some instances of what some interview participants mentioned "I did not receive information directly from the government because I am not interested in the government that governed during the pandemic. The source that I used for searching for information is a

third party like new media. In addition, I always received information from politicians that I support and have trust in, believing that their information was more accurate” - male, 25 years old, student, bachelor's degree.

“"I did not believe much in the information that the government was their source because I am not interested in the government” – male, 60 years old, worker in a private company, bachelor's degree.

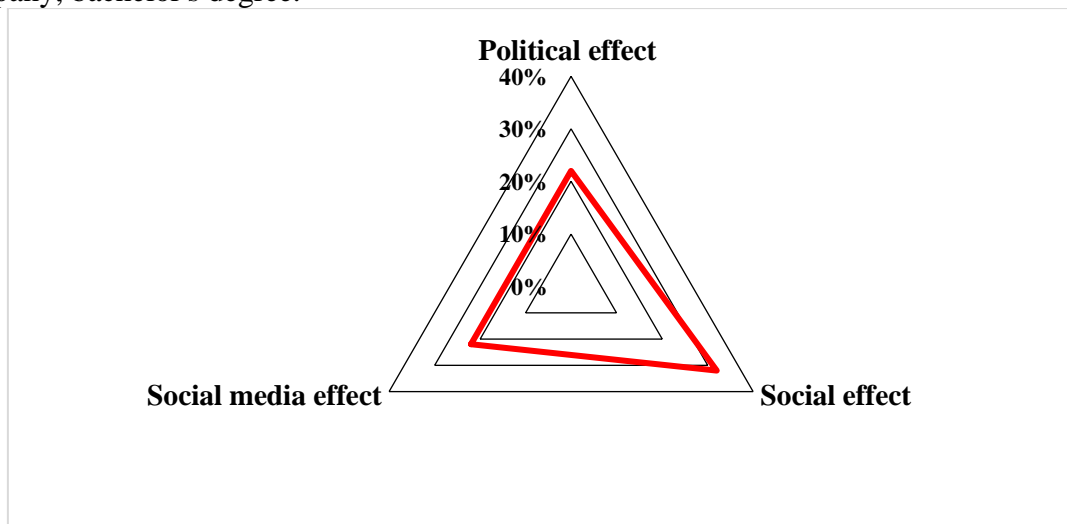


Fig. 2 the comparison on three factors on risk perception and data analysis of individual

Furthermore, the researchers conducted a comparative analysis of the impact of three factors on an individual's risk perception and data analysis. As depicted in Figure 2, the social factor has the highest weight of influence on an individual's comprehension, with the highest frequency of mention. The effects of social media and politics are positioned at the same level. In essence, this implies that people generally tend to trust and conform to the beliefs and understanding of their immediate social circle.

3.3 The result of the health protection behaviour of individuals during the pandemic

During the pandemic, individual trend to receive the information more than one sources. Government represents as one of their sources of information even though they did not receive information directly from government but they received from third parties who repeated and explained the information from government. For example, mass media. Moreover, they also trend to analyze about accuracy of data and information before believing and following. after the process of analyzation of individual, they have very high possibility to implement the health protection behavior.

4. Conclusion

Social factors, politics, and social media are important predictors of an individual's risk perception and health protection behaviour. They influence the amount of information a person receives and shape their data analysis process, affecting how they behave to protect their health. Social factors, in particular, represent trusted sources that individuals turn to for counselling and necessary information, which is communicated with honesty during unstable conditions such as pandemics. In other words, individuals learn how to implement health protection behaviours through their social networks. Additionally, people tend to choose information from

their preferred politicians and reject information from those they do not favour. Social media represents another channel for individuals to receive information beyond government sources, though the government also utilises social media as a means of communicating risk during uncertain times. However, it is crucial to recognise that today's individuals can receive information from numerous sources, including inaccurate ones, thereby creating possibility of infodemics. Therefore, the Thai government should develop risk communication policies based on these issues to provide support for individuals' health protection behaviours during unstable periods like the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also important to address the challenges presented by information crises.

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Ethical approval

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Competing interests

None declared

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