

Online Risk Awareness and Exposure of Young People in Thailand

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Abstract

Research in online behaviour in less developed countries (LDCs) especially in South East Asia are very few and far between. This pilot study asked 206 school aged students in Nong Khai province in the North East of Thailand about their online interactions. In particular, from where they connected, what they did while online, how often and if they had any negative experiences. It was found that 90% of those surveyed had a smartphone and this was their chief window into the online world. Facebook and Facebook Messenger are the dominant social network and instant messaging platforms respectively. Not all interactions were positive as two thirds reported being upset by an online interaction. Over half had been cyber bullied and just less than that had been the one who was doing the cyber bullying. Incidence of viewing potentially harmful content like discussions of self harm was also very high. There was evidence of mediation by parents and teachers, but its effectiveness is debatable. The findings will feed forward into the design of an education programme addressing online safety and awareness raising requirements of this user community.

Introduction

In Thailand, as in other less developed countries (LDCs) research work tends to focus on social and economic factors such as, education, health, industry and environment. Less investigated is the impact of technology on society, especially access to the Internet and the multitude of services on offer. And without good evidence based research to inform educators and policymakers education and policy outcomes will be less than optimal.

In the last few years Thais have taken to the Internet and to social networking at an incredibly rapid pace, more so than other LDCs. In a country of 68 million the Tech in Asia website in 2013 reported that Thailand had gone from 18 million Facebook users in May to 24 million in just 3 months. They go on to say that, “16 million Facebook users access the social platform through their mobile device. This is not a surprising number, as we’ve seen that mobile penetration in Thailand has already exceeded its population” (Sakawee, 2013). Bangkok Post picks up on this last point and says, “as of December 2015, Thailand had 83 million mobile subscribers” (Leesa-Nguansuk, 2016).

The Internet World Stats website (2016) state that as of June 2016, Thailand had 41 million Internet users and 41 million Facebook users (i.e. suggesting that almost everyone connected to the Internet also had a Facebook profile). The fact that 60% of the population is now online has both social and economic implications. However, very few studies have been undertaken in this area especially on young people’s online experiences.

Much of the research in this field has been carried out in the developed countries, the most notable being the ongoing European Union’s Kids Online project. It encompasses all countries of the EU plus Russia, Norway Switzerland and, from the 3rd phase. It is now in its 4th phase and has widened to include Australia and Brazil - the last of which is the only one that can be described as an LDC. As well as being the leading project of its kind, they also provide useful resources for researchers. They have written extensively on the methodology they use and how it has evolved over the years (Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2015) and have provided question sets for others to use in their own studies.

As no study of this kind had been conducted in Thailand before a baseline study was undertaken to find out how young people engaged with the online world. This is a necessary step as one should not assume or guess their online interactions. The study aims to provide evidence-based information that will help, in the first instance, educators wanting to design online safety education material, and maybe later be used to inform education policy.

This paper details how the survey was constructed and carried out. Following this is an analysis of the data looking at the online interactions of the young people. In particular, what activities they are most engaged with, the potentially harmful interactions they have and lastly if there is any mediation by parents or teachers.

Methodology

To make it easier to compare with the European Kids Online studies it made sense to use the same question dataset as they did (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Unlike their survey, which interviewed children and parents in their homes, it was decided to use an online questionnaire to gather the data. The main reason for this was to do with language. Not only do you have to translate from English to Thai but it also has to be understandable to children. So with the help of Thai native teachers and students the questions were carefully translated into the Thai language making sure the meaning stayed as close as possible. If we had carried out 1-1 interviews the process of translating back and forth would have taken longer.

The model employed was adapted from the Kids Online research, see Figure 1. As in the European study, the questions were grouped into 3 main categories

- Access and Use: From where do they access, what device they use and for how long?
- Activities and Skills: What applications/services they use and their technical aptitude.
- Risks and Outcomes: What risks they have been exposed to. Did they seek out advice or receive any guidance on how to be safe online?

With respect to the model the Thai study focused on the individual and social level. Country level factors will be looked at more closely in later studies.

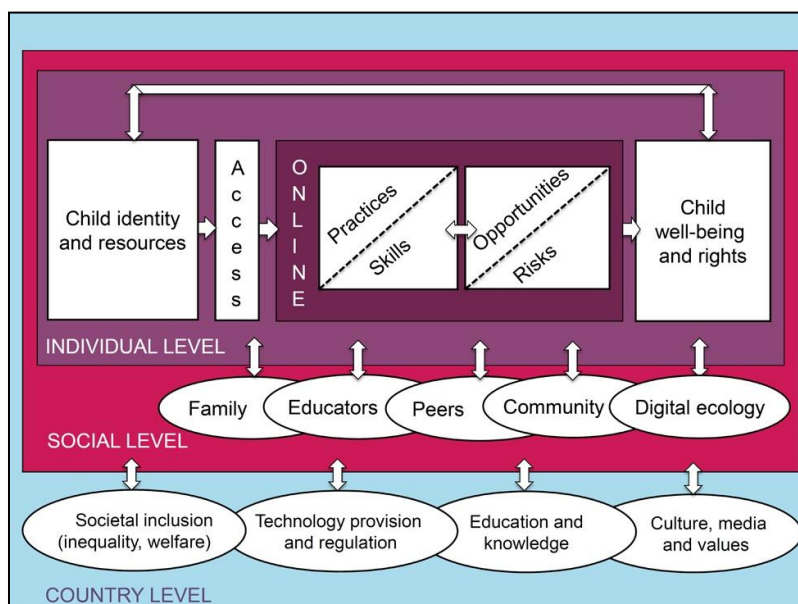


Figure 1. EU Kids Online model

(Livingstone et al., 2015, p. 10)

Many of the questions were adapted to include apps that a Thai student would be aware of. For example, the inclusion of LINE, one of the most popular instant messaging apps in South East Asia. As Facebook has such an extensive presence in Thailand a section was devoted to activities relating to just this one social network. It was then piloted (using a paper questionnaire) with a few young people to check that it was easy to follow and understand.

To make it available online the open source survey builder LimeSurvey was installed on a private web server in a protected folder. This was to keep the data secure, even though no personally identifiable information would be recorded, i.e. no names, addresses or date of birth. Once the survey was up and running it went into the last round of testing and fine tuning.

For this first phase a goal of at least 200 completed questionnaires was set. In the event, 206 responses were recorded. Much care was taken in constructing the survey along the same lines as the European studies in order to make a comparative analysis easier. There are though a few differences that we should keep in mind

- The EU Kids online surveyed over 25,000 children and Net Children Go Mobile 3,500. In contrast this survey was only 206.
- The European studies included young people 9 - 16 year olds. The Thai study was 12 - 18.
- The European studies were in-home 1-1 interviews. The Thai study was by an online questionnaire.
- As mentioned above some questions were updated and adapted to fit the Thai context.

All students as well as their parents had to sign a consent form to take part in the study as some questions were sensitive. For example, “has someone acted to you in a hurtful way online?” The survey was conducted in-school and on school provided computers connected to the internet. At both schools there were many free periods and students, usually in form groups, came to sit the online questionnaire. This sat behind a protected server with only the researcher knowing the password. As well as the researcher a teacher was present to help answer any questions. All students were told explicitly that they did not have to take part and that they could stop at any time. In the event, only a few did not complete the survey and that was due to bad internet connection problems.

It is hoped that the study will be a springboard to more extensive research in this field and provide valuable evidence based information for educators and policy makers.

Analysis

A total of 206 students aged between 12 and 18 took part during the months of November and December 2016. They came from 2 schools in the North East of Thailand commonly known as Isan and it is one of the least developed areas of Thailand. The two teachers that assisted with this study helped to organize the survey in their respective schools. One school was in Nong Khai a provincial border town. 83 of the 120 students took part in the survey. The other school was in a village just outside the town of Phon Phisai. Here 123 of the approximate 500 students took part. Students of both schools came from mostly lower socio-economic backgrounds, their families mainly being rice and livestock farmers, shop and restaurant workers. Many children as well as going to school will do some kind of work as well, for example, working in their family’s restaurant in the evenings.

Table 1
Student Breakdown by Age and Gender

		Age							Total
		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
Gender	Female	4	13	28	24	17	15	6	107
	Male	3	24	19	20	11	12	7	96
	Transgender			1	2				3
	Total	7	37	48	46	28	27	13	206

Access and Use

Even though they are from a low socio-economic background, as can be seen in Table 2, 90% of young people in the survey had their own phone. This is due, in part, to the proliferation of cheap and second hand smartphones and also the relatively good mobile and Internet services to be found in Thailand. There was also a gender difference, 94% of girls had their own smartphone compared to 85% of boys.

Table 2
Access and Use: Comparison between EU Kids Online 2010 study and Young People Online: Thailand 2016 Student

Activity	EU Kids Online 2010	Young People: Thailand 2016
Own a smartphone	31%	90%
Use a computer to go online	58% shared PC 35% own computer	26% (At least once a week)
Use a notebook to go online	24%	22% (At least once a week)
Go online at home	87%	82% (At least once a week)
Go online in their bedroom	49%	71% (At least once a week)
Go online at school	63%	55% (At least once a week)

To reinforce smartphones as the main device for accessing the Internet just over a quarter, 26% used a computer to go online and 22% a notebook. This compares to the Kids online data from 2010 (Livingstone et al., 2011) whereby 58% accessed the Internet via a shared computer and 35% via their own personal computers.

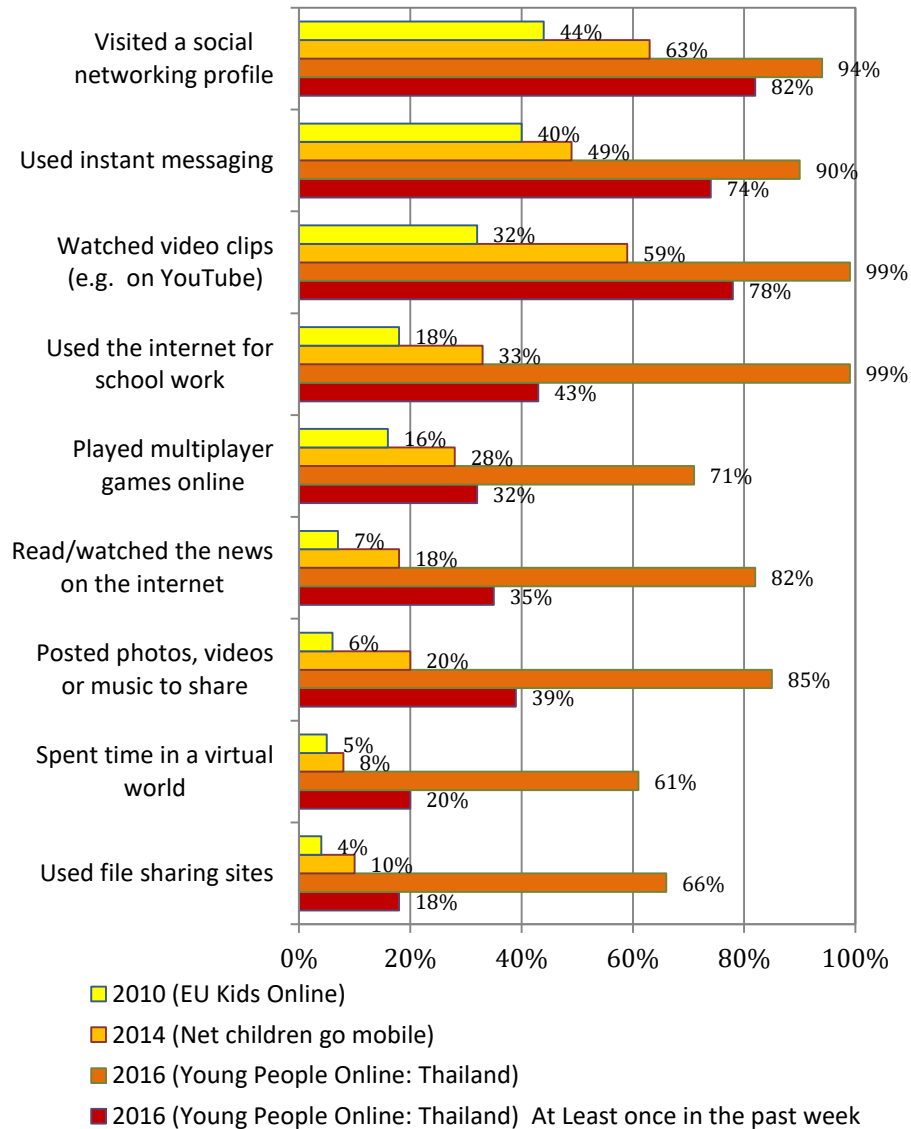
In the Thai study the most common place they went online from was in their own home, 82% (71% in their bedroom) followed by 55% at school. The corresponding data in 2010 shows that young people went online at home more, 87% but fewer from their bedroom, 49%. From school the figure was 63%. The EU data given here are averages whereas in reality there was a wide variation between countries and different socio-economic groups within those countries. As an example, access from school in the UK in 2010 was 91% whereas in Italy it was only 36% lower than in Thailand.

This data clearly shows that these Thai students consume the Internet mainly via smartphones from home and to a lesser extent in schools. The majority do not have PCs or notebooks which are usually only encountered at school. One implication of using smartphones is that it is a private space as opposed to using a shared PC in the living room. It might lead to riskier online behaviour as the person may feel freer and that they are not being watched over. Future studies will try to find out if indeed this is the case and

any education programme or policy regarding Internet use will need to take all of the points into consideration.

Activities

Figure 2 below compares the Thai study with the EU Kids Online 2010 data and the more recent Net Children Go Mobile data from 2014 (Livingstone, Mascheroni, Ólafsson, & Haddon, 2014; Mascheroni, & Cuman, 2014).



Base: EU Kids Online & Net Children Go Mobile – All 11-16 year old children who use the internet in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Romania, UK.
 Young People Online: Thailand – All students

Figure 2. Comparing online activities in the past month

One thing to note is that we have added activities that young people in Thailand did at least once per week as well as what they did over the past month. This gives us a better insight on how they are using the

Internet. For example, while 99% of students said they had used the Internet for school work in the past month just 43% did so every week which is still higher than the 2014 figure of 33% and 2010, 18%.

If we take the most popular weekly activities in the Thai study they are the same as the most popular monthly activities from 2010 and 2014, namely

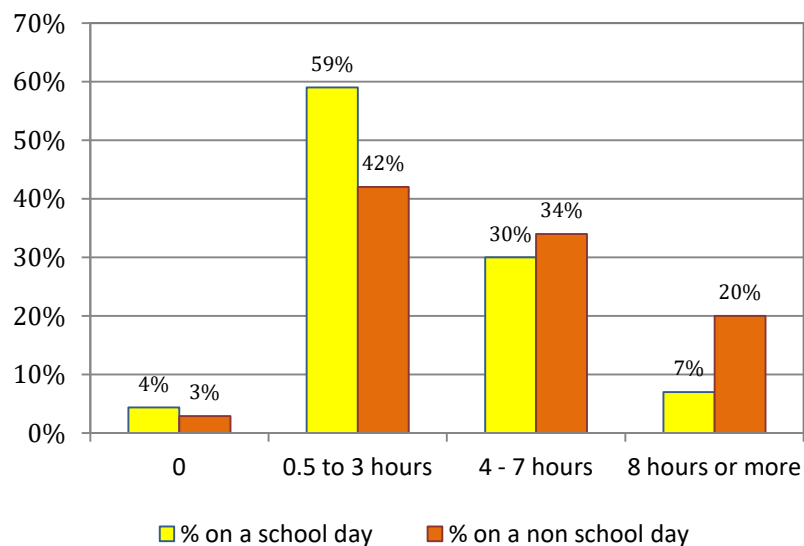
- visiting a social networking profile
- used instant messaging
- watched video clips

The first of these, “visiting a social networking profile” in the Thai case, refers to solely accessing Facebook via smartphones. 94% accessed it at least once during the month, 82% accessed it at least once a week and 65% said they accessed it every day or many times a day. This compares to 63% from 2014 and 44% in 2010. In both those studies participants were asked what activities they had done in the past month. It will be interesting to compare the Thai study to the next Kids Online study that (at the time of writing) is presently under way, i.e. to find out if European teenagers are using social media to the same extent as Thai teenagers.

No other social network comes close to the reach of Facebook in Thailand as it also has the largest presence in instant messaging with Facebook Messenger. 90% had used it in the past month with 74% saying they used it at least once a week and 60% every day. The Line messaging app is the only that comes close with 84% using it at least once during the month, 52% at least once a week and 33% every day. The European studies in 2010 and 2014 had figures of 40% and 49% respectively for all instant messaging services.

For watching video clips the Thai study uses the data “watching music and films online” to represent watching video clips online. 99% had done so at least once during the past month, 78% at least once a week and 53% every day. The figures for 2010 and 2014 are 32% and 59% respectively.

All other activities were much higher than the previous studies demonstrating that being online is an integral part of their lives and very much seen as the norm. This is reflected in the number of hours they spend online each day as shown in Figure 3.



Base: Young People Online: Thailand – All students

Figure 3. Number of hours spent online

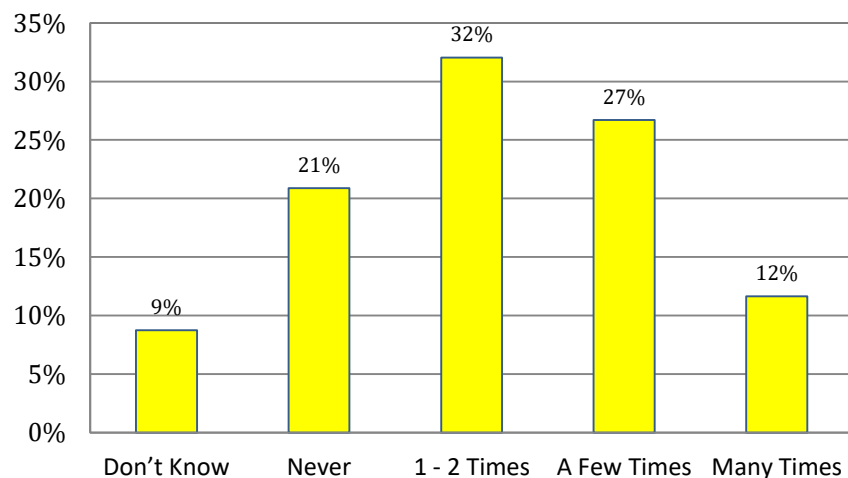
On a school day only 4% said they do not go online. Most, 59% spend between ½ an hour to 3 hours online with a further 30% between 4 and 7 hours. On a non school day 1 in 5 said they spend 8 hours or more online. If you add them to those who spend between 4 and 7 hours, it means more than half, 54% spend 4 hours or more online on a non school day.

Online Risks

Being online has many advantages like, widening your social circle, keeping up with the latest music, movies and news and improving your digital skills. However being connected all the time, inevitably, will lead to content (on purpose or by accident) that could potentially give rise to harm. Livingstone et al (2015) argue that often risks are interlinked and that

potentially harmful encounters online were as much or more a feature of the digital environment as they were a consequence of the child’s activity, and further, that whether or not the risk (factors) resulted in actual harm was a question to be investigated rather than assumed.(pg. 11)

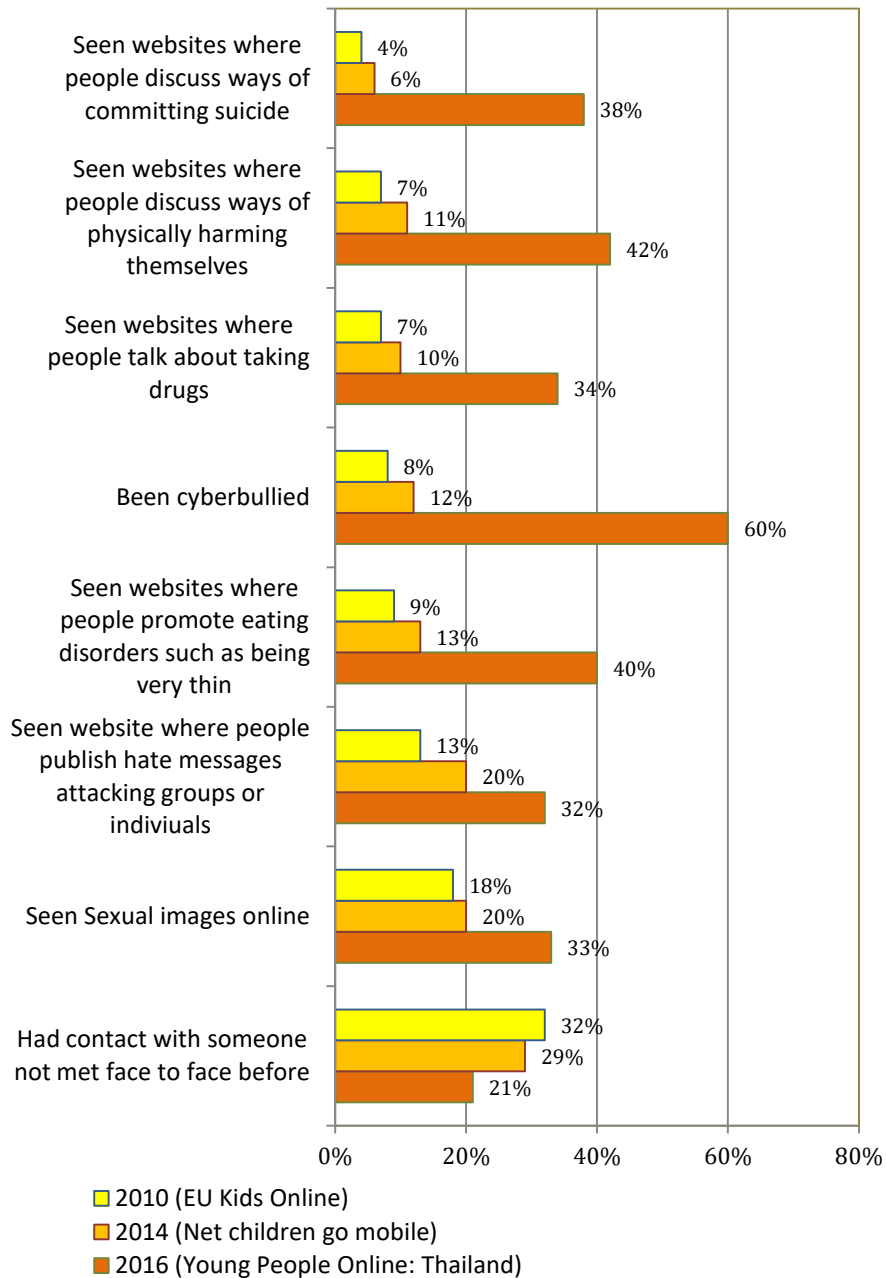
The scope of the Thai study was on just quantifying the risk factors. Outcomes, i.e. benefits and harm of being online will be looked at in later studies. What can be said is that (as Figure 4 below shows) 71% of participants in the study had been upset at one time or another during the last year and just over more than one in ten many times.



Base: Young People Online: Thailand – All students

Figure 4. Reply to “In the past 12 months, how often have you seen or experienced something online that has upset you?”

Some of the causes of these are given in Figure 5 below. As with Activities we compare the Thai study with the EU Kids Online 2010 data and the Net Children Go Mo-bile data from 2014.



Base: EU Kids Online & Net Children Go Mobile – All 11-16 year old children who use the internet in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Romania, UK. Young People Online: Thailand – All students

Figure 5. Online Risk Factors

The Thai study suggests that students in Thailand have many online interactions that could lead to harm. The standout statistic is for the proportion of participants that had been cyber bullied. It is derived from the question posed, “In the past 12 months has someone acted to you in a hurtful way online and if so, how upset were you?” 60% of participants said that this had happened, with 18% being very upset by it, 31% a little upset, and 11% not upset. When asked if they had been the one that acted in a hurtful way 44% admitted to doing so. These figures seem high but in the Thai context it is not so surprising. Sittichai and

Smith cite a study conducted by the Wisdom Society for Public Opinion Research of Thailand in 2009 that 43% of students (aged 12 to 24) had been threatened over the Internet (2013, pg. 37). And at the nobullying.com website they state that bullying in Thailand is widespread and that it is seen, “as a normal experience children go through at schools to toughen up” (2015).

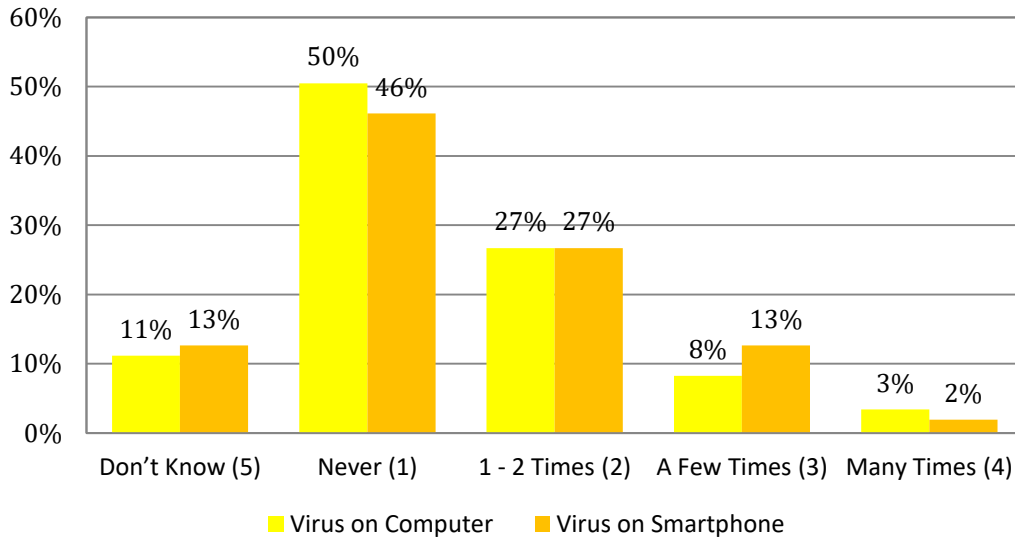
Compared to the 2010 and 2014 data the Thai study demonstrates that Thai students are exposed to more interactions and content that can potentially have a harmful effect. Two of the factors had significant gender differences. When asked if they had seen people talking about ways to be very thin nearly half of girls had, 49% whereas for boys it was 29%. For contact with strangers we substituted the question “Had contact with someone not met face to face before” with the more specific, “Sent a photo or video of myself to someone that I have never met face to face.” Just over 1 in 5 (21%) of respondents had. When they were asked if they had “Added people to my friends list or address book that I have never met face to face” 52% said yes. Girls were more likely to do this, 58% whereas for boys it was 46%.

Of the others there were no significant gender differences, i.e. for viewing sexual images, hate messages, discussions of people physically harming themselves, committing suicide and talking about drugs. However, for all these factors at least 1 in 3 of the young people in the Thai study had encountered them online. This is significantly more than the 2010 and 2014 European studies.

The incidence of people using personal details of others was also high. When asked if in the past 12 months whether anyone had used their password to access information or pretended to be them, a third replied that this had happened to them. How and why this is happening will be a focus of follow up studies – for example, are they using easy to guess passwords? Do they share their passwords? Does the anonymity of the internet give them a freedom to behave in a way that they would not normally act in the offline world? If this last one is true, it may in part, explain some of the other risk factors. As a flipside to this, a further revealing aspect was that around a fifth of respondents responded positively when asked whether they had pretended to be a different kind of person on the Internet from what they really are. While this does not directly indicate whether they had used someone else’s online ID or were just trying to convey a different persona, it does imply that the online context is making them feel at liberty to behave in a way that they would not do in the physical world – which is perhaps one of the key enablers of some of the undesirable behaviours that they are actually reporting elsewhere. As such, it highlights a potential need for further education to highlight that their online interactions and behaviours are still ultimately occurring with other people – even though they cannot see them.

Much of the above has been to do with the online safety and wellbeing of the individuals, but the survey also revealed a security risk to the devices they use. As Figure 6 shows, when asked, if their smartphone had got a virus in the past 12 months, 41% admitted to this (with varying degrees of frequency) with a further 13% who were unsure. For computers the figure was similar 38% and 11% respectively. One thing to point out though is that, as mentioned in Table 2 above, only 26% access a computer at least once a week and 22% a notebook. As such, their exposure to malware through this route would potentially be less frequent than via their smartphone.

In follow up studies we will try to find out how the devices get infected, how the students know they have been infected and whether they run anti-malware software. Even from the current findings, however, we can conclude that this represents another area in which further risk awareness and education would be of likely value.



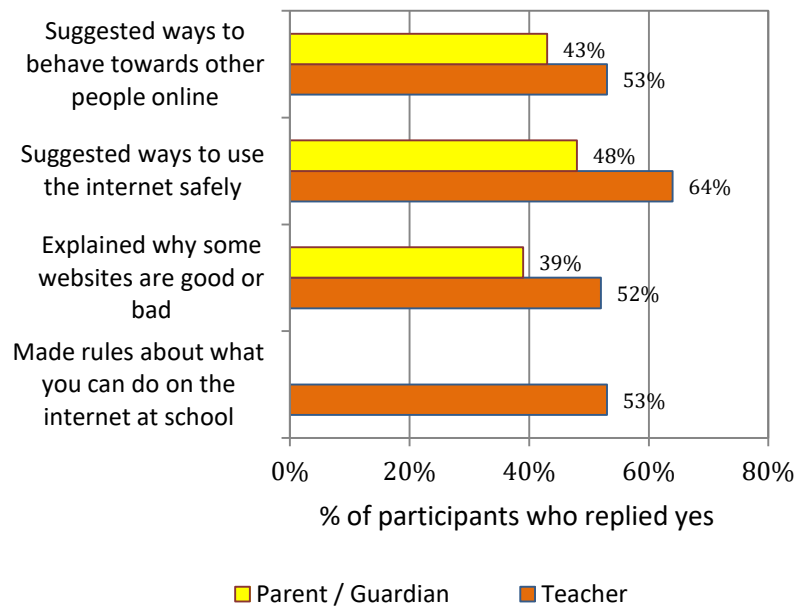
Base: Young People Online: Thailand – All students

Figure 6. Reply to “In the past 12 months, how often has any of the following happened to you on the internet?”

Mediation

When students were asked if they had talked to anyone if they got upset from an online interaction, 35% said they had talked to one of their parents and 13% to a teacher. They are, though, most likely to turn to one of their friends. Over half, 53% said they talked to a friend about their experience. In terms of education using their peers may be a good way to improve awareness of the benefits and harm of being online.

Parents and teachers do seem to play a role. Figure 7 shows a few key questions that were asked relating to this. For example, students said that 48% of parents/guardians and 64% of teachers had suggested ways to use the Internet safely. At school, over half, 53% said that teachers had made rules about what you can do on the Internet.



Base: Young People Online: Thailand – All students

Figure 7. Mediation by parents/guardians and teachers

There seems to be an inconsistency, however, between the online interactions of young people and the advice and rules they say they are receiving. As there are no national campaigns or education programmes that addresses online safety what advice rules and support that parents and teachers provide will need to be investigated in follow up studies.

Conclusions

This was a pilot study to find out how young people in Thailand interacted online. Primarily, it is to provide evidence based information in order to help design awareness raising education material. It looked at how and where they access, what apps / services they consume, potentially harmful interactions and lastly, the role of parents and teachers.

It was found that the majority of young people went online using smartphones. Facebook and Facebook Messenger are the most popular apps for social networking and instant messaging respectively and along with watching music and movies online form the basis of their online lives.

Not all interactions are positive. Bullying is a concern offline and now it is also a concern online with over half reporting that they have been upset by others. Just under half admitted to being perpetrators. Over a third of the participants had seen discussions or images relating to; sexual images, hate messages, being thin, committing suicide and taking drugs. Furthermore, a fifth had sent photos or videos to a stranger online (refer back to Figure 5). A third also had others use their passwords or pretended to be them online. Lastly, just over 40% said that their smartphone had got a virus.

When they did have a negative experience and become upset they were most likely to speak to friends about it, followed by parents and teachers. The young people did say that they got advice from parents and teachers on how to be safe online, about what websites were good or bad, and just over a half agreed that there were some rules on what they can do online at school.

While useful insight was gained on the online activities of young people in Thailand there are a couple of considerations to keep in mind. Firstly, compared to the European studies, the sample size of 206 is relatively small and, secondly, the participating students were drawn from just two (similar) schools, both catering for children from lower socio-economic families. As such, we clearly cannot generalise the

findings to the whole of the Thai population, but they are likely to be representative of a defined subset of it. What we can say is that, the results above suggests that there is a need to raise the awareness and skills of these young people to enable them to protect themselves and have good online experiences. It will be left to follow up studies and education programmes, given below, to determine the impact of the exposure to all these diverse but inter-related factors.

Further work

To address the limitations given above, the survey will expand to more schools in the Nong Khai district and elsewhere and include students from diverse social backgrounds. In this way we can discover if there are socio-economic and regional differences. Alongside this we will employ a qualitative approach by setting up one to one and group interviews to discuss some of the questions and issues raised by the study. In particular it seems relevant to investigate what usage and safety guidance they are receiving, and the rules in place at home and school that are geared to them having positive online experiences.

Using the information from the research and other resources we will design an education programme to include online safety and awareness raising lessons and workshops. An emphasis should be made on dealing with potentially harmful interactions, in particular, the issue of cyberbullying which seems to be prevalent and an example of a widespread offline problem now manifested online.

Acknowledgements

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