

DO THAIS ENJOY SOCIAL MEDIA JUST FOR FUN?

Evolving Social Media Trends and Thai Digital Citizenship



The online sensation that is “Moo Deng” the Pygmy hippo and the hashtag #ไฟไหม้รถบัส (#BusCaughtFire), around vehicle safety standards following an accident that killed over 20 primary school students, show the dynamics in the Thai social media - raises an important question of how social media - as it evolves from a source of connectivity and entertainment into a pivotal tool for activism and civic engagement - can contribute to “digital citizenship” in Thailand.

The internet and digital technology are integrated into the everyday lives of Thais. In early 2024, the Internet penetration index was 88% and 68.3% of the population had at least one active social media account. In the same year, Facebook was the most popular social media platform, used by over 90% of internet users, followed by TikTok (83%), Instagram (64.5%) and X (formerly Twitter) (49.6%). Thais utilise social media primarily as a source of information and communication.

Given this, understanding social media trends is crucial to grasp contemporary digital behaviours and explore the broader dynamics of Thai society. Social media not only mirrors cultural interests and lifestyles but also underscores the concept of “digital citizenship” - the active engagement of citizens with society, politics and governance through digital means.

This article introduces a study conducted by Wisesight, a social media analytics company, which monitored Thai social media trends from 2022 to the first half of 2024. The research was supported by the Thai Media Fund through its “Media Alert” project. Thai Media Fund is a public agency dedicated to promoting media literacy and responsible media use.

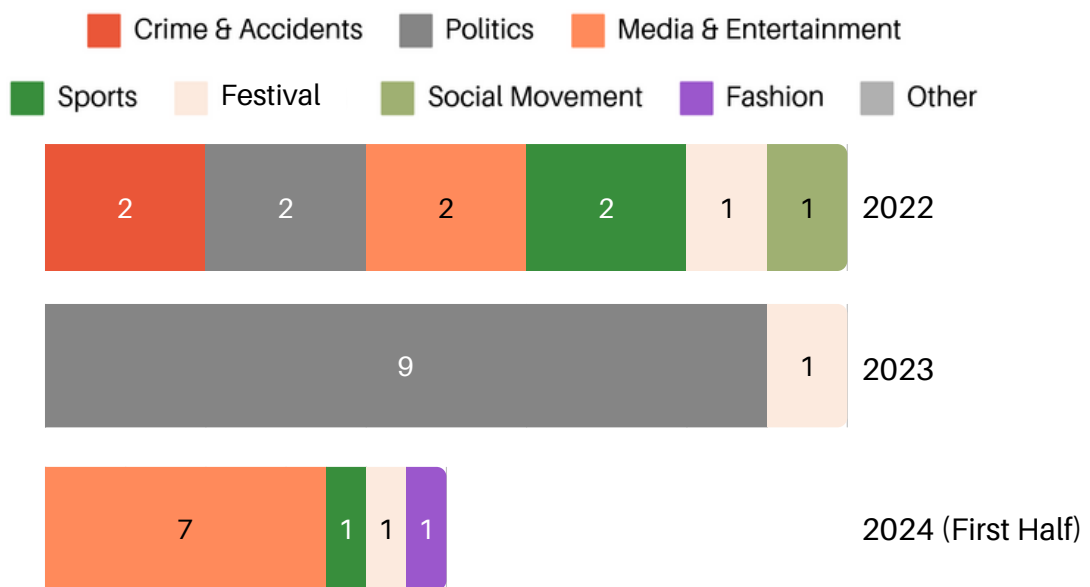
The study provides an examination of how digital platforms influence public engagement in Thailand, focusing on the types of content that have dominated discussions and generated significant engagement

during this period. Furthermore, the article explores the intersection of social media and socio-political advocacy, presenting some key findings from the research that illustrate how these platforms can shape public engagement and foster digital citizenship.

Social Media Trends in Thailand, From 2022 – First Half of 2024

Social media serves as a platform for discussions on a wide array of topics. Some of the most discussed subjects from 2022 to 2024 (first half) are those that revolve around the media and entertainment industry, social issues (particularly crimes and accidents) and politics. Then there are instances of event-specific content like festivals and sports. Figure 1 shows the diverse interests of the Thai population and highlights how social media acts as a barometer for public sentiment. See below what categories appeared in each year’s top ten lists of content most engaged.

Figure 1: Number of Content Categories Appearing in the Top 10 Engagement List Each Year



Taking a broader look into the top 120 content each year (top ten monthly for 12 months), 60 for the first half of 2024 (Figures 2–4), no singular topic “dominated” the social media sphere. “Crime & Accidents” accounted for 30% of total social media engagements (encompassing views, likes, shares, and comments). This was followed closely by “Politics” and “Media & Entertainment”, both at 21%. Notable events that sparked significant engagement include the sudden death of Thai celebrity Nida Patcharaveerapong (or “Tang Mo”), which captivated the public with suspense and intrigue. Similarly, the Bangkok gubernatorial election and other political developments generated heightened interest in domestic politics. In addition, international events such as the World Cup and the Russia-Ukraine war also captured social media attention. For a detailed overview, refer to Figure 2 below.

In 2023, the social media landscape in Thailand underwent a significant transformation, largely influenced by the electoral cycle that occurred from April to August. Throughout the year, election-related content accounted for 58% of all engagements on social media, with nine out of the top ten trending topics in the year focused on political matters. Discussions encompassed a wide range of issues, including electoral campaigns, election results and government formation. After this period, the social media dynamics mirrored closely the dynamics seen in 2022, as “crime” and “media” saw an uptick in interest. See Figure 3.

Figure 2: Social Media Engagements in 2022, Categorised by Theme

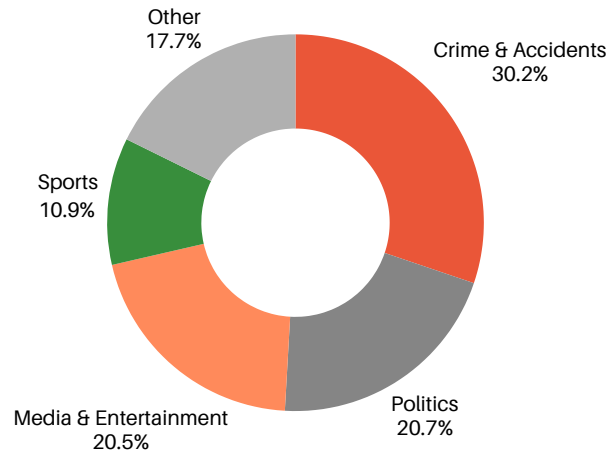
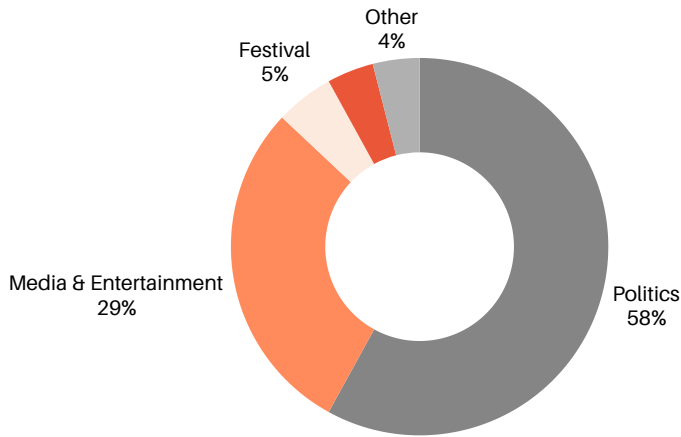
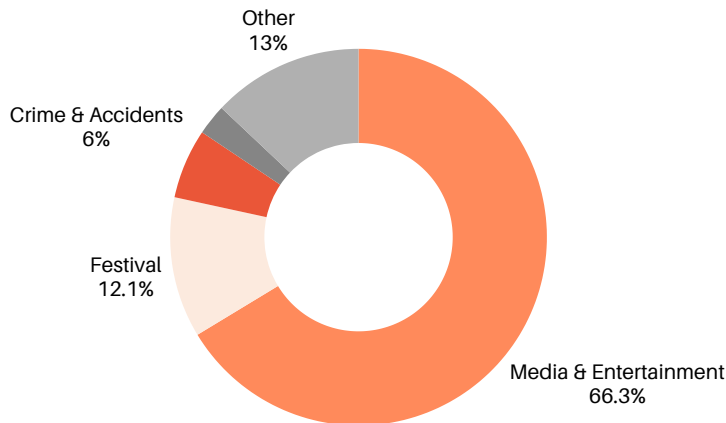


Figure 3: Social Media Engagements in 2023, Categorised by Theme



In the first half of 2024, there was a notable resurgence of interest in “Media and Entertainment” on Thai social media. This trend encompassed a variety of discussions surrounding movies, TV shows, concerts and news related to celebrities and the entertainment industry. Trending hashtags were either in reaction to news related to individual celebrities, or specific events such as the launch of highly anticipated movies and TV shows. Such content accounted for around $\frac{2}{3}$ of all engagements in the year. See Figure 4.

Figure 4: Social Media Engagements in 2024/1, Categorised by Theme



Socio-political Advocacy on Social Media Platforms

One of the key highlights of the study, as already alluded to in the previous section, is the visibility of political content on social media, which fluctuated significantly between electoral and non-electoral periods. In the months leading up to the general election on 14 May 2023 and in the subsequent months, Wisersight's research found that political content dominated online discourse. Especially in May of 2023, "politics" was effectively the only topic discussed online. The surges in political engagement during these politically charged periods reveal a latent enthusiasm for political discourse among Thais. A similar surge was observed in May 2022 during the Bangkok gubernatorial election. These patterns underscore social media's role as a powerful tool for public participation in political affairs.

Conversely, in non-electoral periods, discussions labelled as "politics" were significantly less prevalent. In 2022, political content accounted for only 20.7% of overall online engagement for the year. In the first half of 2024, political discussions constituted only 2.6% of total engagements. Significant events, such as the Senate election taking place from May to June 2024, failed to generate traction in online discourse.

However, while engagement levels for explicitly "political" content surge during key events like elections, social media also serves as a platform for sustained advocacy on broader societal issues, even outside these periods. For example, online engagements during Pride Month celebrations in 2022 and 2023 extended beyond typical corporate campaigns and celebrity endorsements to include discussions around LGBTQI+ rights. These conversations, often linked to legislative reforms of the same-sex marriage law, culminated in its passage in June 2024. By embedding these discussions within a wider social context, advocates not only bring visibility to crucial issues but also pressure policymakers to address the rights and concerns of the LGBTQI+ community. This demonstrates that, outside election cycles, social media remains a potent tool for raising awareness and shaping public discourse around important social matters.

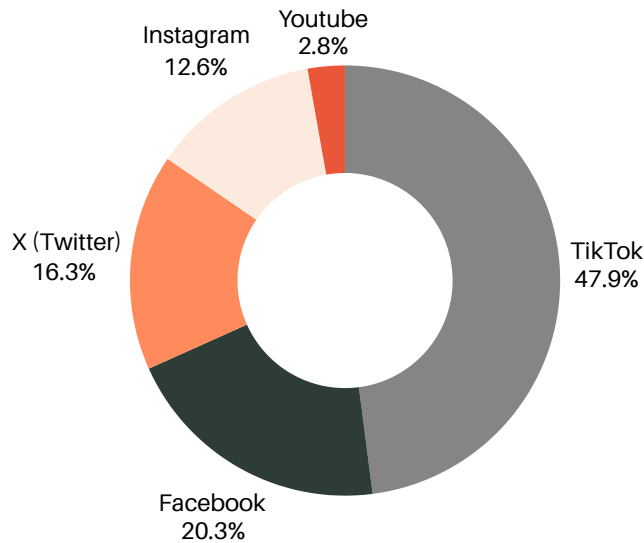
The Emergence and Dominance of TikTok

Among Thailand's social media platforms, TikTok has become a critical tool for social advocacy and political engagement. Usage data shows that TikTok was adopted by 79% of Thai internet users in 2022, growing to 83% in 2023. In 2023, TikTok accounted for a remarkable 50% of all social media engagements, substantially higher than Facebook's 23% share, despite Facebook being used by 90% of internet users. In 2024, despite a drop, it accounted for 39% of all engagements and is still ahead of other platforms. In 2024, despite a drop, it accounted for 39% of all engagements and is still ahead of other platforms. From 2023 to the first half of 2024, TikTok accounted for 47.9% of all engagements. See Figure 5.

Wisersight's research, which began including TikTok in its 2023 analysis onwards, highlights the platform's sustained popularity in engaging users across various topics, especially "Media & Entertainment," "Crime & Accidents," and "Festivals." A notable trend from the findings is TikTok's ability to capture heightened engagement during socially and politically sensitive periods. For example, despite being a video-based platform which might make it more difficult to create real-time content, TikTok nevertheless received 7.3 million engagements (following X at 7.8 million) for content related to the 2023 Siam Paragon shooting.

During the 2023 general election campaign, TikTok emerged as a key platform for political outreach, particularly for the Move Forward Party, which leveraged the platform's reach to connect with a broad voter base through compelling, short-form videos. The party's campaign content accumulated over 300 million views on TikTok, marking a transformative shift in Thai election campaigning by demonstrating the effectiveness of short, engaging video formats for political messaging. Analysing the broader trends, internet users engage with "political" content on TikTok far more than on other platforms, with 54% of all "political" content being engaged in the TikTok platform.

Figure 5: Engagement Shares Across Platforms (2023 – First Half of 2024)
(TikTok was not included in the 2022 research)



Several factors contribute to TikTok's rapid growth in Thailand. Its short, dynamic video format allows for quick content consumption, making it more engaging than traditional text-based platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), image-based Instagram, or long-form video platforms like YouTube. Furthermore, TikTok's algorithm effectively tailors user-generated content that resonates with individual users - discussed in the next section - fostering a highly personalised and immersive experience.

The Role of User-generated Content in Shaping Online Discourses

The study also underscores the significant role of user-generated content (UGC) - content created by individual, everyday internet users rather than influencers or brands - in shaping online discourse in Thailand. UGC constituted 50% of all engagements on social media. This prevalence demonstrates the substantial influence of ordinary internet users in driving discussions and public sentiment on social media. In contrast, the content generated by government authorities and political parties accounted for around 2.5% of total engagements in 2023 (Figure 6 below) and around 0.01% of all engagements in the first half of 2024 (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Share of User-generated Content on Social Media, 2023
(The 2022 research did not categorise the share of UGC content)

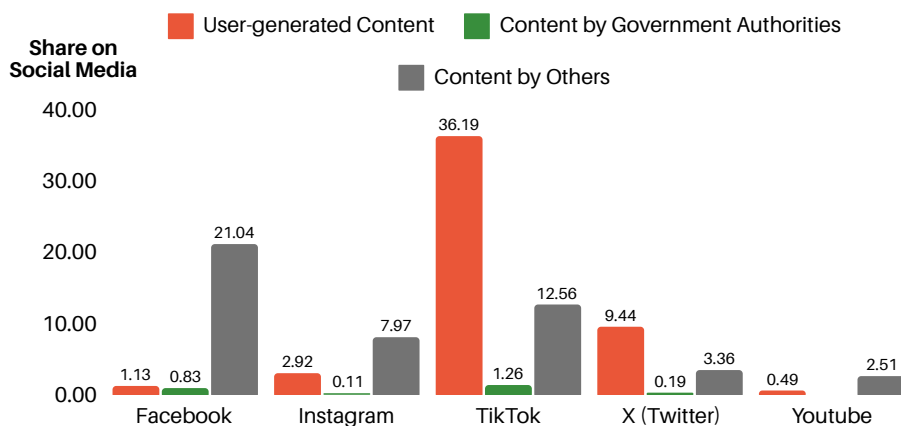
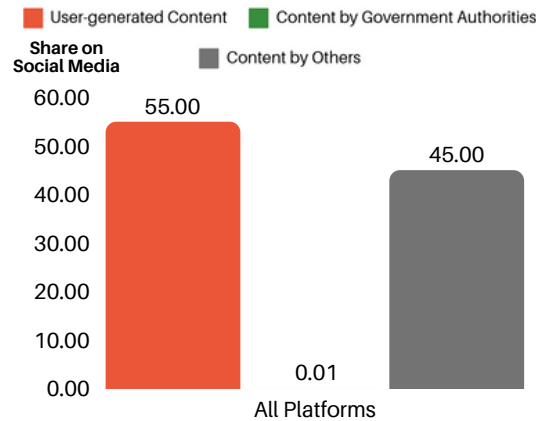


Figure 7: Share of User-generated Content on Social Media, 2024
(Not categorised per platform)



Platforms like TikTok epitomise the shift towards user-generated content (UGC), with 73% of all engagements on the platform in 2023 attributed to UGC. This UGC engagement constituted over a third of total social media interactions for that year. TikTok, alongside X (formerly Twitter), stands out as one of the few major platforms where UGC dominates, in contrast to Facebook, which is heavily influenced by commercial entities, limiting the diversity of engagements, especially during periods of lower social and political mobilisation when lighter, entertainment-focused content prevails.

UGC's emergence also reflects how Thais exert their digital citizenship to use social media platforms as a vital medium for social advocacy and civic participation. Unlike traditional media, which may exercise self-censorship or favour certain narratives, UGC allows diverse voices and perspectives to flourish, fostering genuine discussions on governance and societal issues. A notable example of this phenomenon can be seen in the 2023 year-end reviews conducted by mainstream media outlets, such as Matichon (a major Thai-language national daily newspaper, which positions itself as a "quality" upmarket newspaper as opposed to the usually sensationalist mass-circulation papers), which released their own top ten list. The list, however, downplayed the significance of the year's election in shaping the country's news cycle and instead gave weight to stories related to society and entertainment. In contrast, research from Wisersight revealed that political content was predominant on Thai social media in 2023. As noted above, content categorised as "politics" fills 9 out of the 10 slots in the annual list of the most engaged content.

However, this user-dominated landscape also raises concerns about the potential for mis- and disinformation to spread in the information vacuum left by the absence of authoritative sources of information. As noted above, the Wisersight study has shown that authoritative communicators - government, political parties and other credible institutions - have a markedly smaller presence in comparison to UGC, therefore limiting their ability to influence public discourse at large. This underscores the need for an integrated approach to social media, where authoritative stakeholders actively contribute to digital citizenship by ensuring the accuracy of information while fostering an informed and engaged online public.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the role of social media in fostering digital citizenship and social advocacy in Thailand. As evidenced by the significant engagement surrounding the May 2023 elections and the rising influence of platforms like TikTok, Thais have found social media useful for voicing their opinions, mobilising for social causes, and shaping public discourse.

This dynamic mirrors trends in Southeast Asia and globally, where social media has catalysed civic engagement. Internationally, movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have shown how social media can facilitate global solidarity and raise awareness around critical social issues. Regionally, online campaigns like #MilkTeaAlliance pointed not only towards calls by youths in Thailand, Myanmar and other countries for political reform within national borders but also towards broader regional solidarity.

To enhance the effectiveness of social media as a tool for social advocacy, it is essential that stakeholders – including civil society organisations, government bodies and the private sector – collaborate in developing transparent and inclusive communication strategies that empower users. Specific recommendations include investing in digital literacy programmes to equip citizens with skills to critically evaluate information. Furthermore, establishing partnerships with influencers and community leaders can further broaden engagement and facilitate dialogue around pressing social issues.

By adopting these strategies, Thailand can strengthen its civic-digital landscape, ensuring that social media serves not only as a platform for entertainment but also as a critical arena for advocacy, accountability and meaningful engagement.



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