

Fandom in Action: Online Mobilisation of Thai Youth in the 2020-2021 Anti-Government Protests

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Abstract: The convergence of social media with political communication and the emergence of celebrity politics have significantly altered the landscape of political participation, particularly among the younger generation. Yet, comprehensive research on online political fandom remains limited despite its critical intersection with politics and digital media. This study addresses this gap, focusing on the in-depth case study of the 2020-2021 Thai anti-government protest. It scrutinises how tech-savvy Thai youth, propelled by political fandom surrounding Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, a Future Forward Party opposition leader, harnessed social media and pre-existing online networks to organise these anti-government protests. Despite lacking a formal hierarchy, their organisational prowess, especially in information dissemination, highlights the intricate interplay of political fandom, social media, and youth mobilisation. By employing a trace interview method and conducting semi-structured interviews, the study explores how political fans transitioned from online engagement to active protest participation. The evidence contributes to a nuanced understanding of how fandom culture shapes their political judgment and behaviour. Participants in this study are political fans who publicly engage with politics on social media and participate in large-scale protests offline. They were recruited through a two-step process: first, the Twitter API identified users with high engagement in political fandom and anti-government hashtags. Then, a snowball sampling method extended the participant pool based on referrals from initial interviewees. A thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts. The initial findings indicate that the influence of charismatic political figures, the empowerment of the fan community, and the belief that online political expression is ineffective draw participants toward offline participation. The resemblance between the political fandom of Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and the more mainstream popular fandoms highlights the importance of considering the role of popular culture influences in shaping people's political behaviours, particularly in contemporary digital communication technologies. In conclusion, this study aims to uncover the intricate relationship between political fandoms, social media, and offline activism and to emphasise the pervasive influence of popular culture on political behaviours in the digital age.

Keywords: Political fandom, Social media, Youth mobilisation, Thai protest, Hashtag activism

1. Introduction

In the early months of 2020, a series of youth-led protests swept through various universities and campuses across Thailand. These demonstrations were primarily sparked by the dissolution of the Future Forward political party, which had gained significant support among the younger generation due to its charismatic leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, and its effective online campaigning (Chattharakul, 2019). This move results in many of its supporters feeling marginalised in an attempt to express their opposition to the perceived politically motivated decision to disband the beloved party (Phoborisut, 2020). However, the protests soon evolved to encompass broader democratic themes and demands beyond the party's dissolution, such as the dissolution of the parliament, revision of the constitution, cessation of all forms of harassment against peaceful protestors, and amendment of the *lèse-majesté* law (McCargo, 2021). The youth-led protests were notable for their immediate and decentralised nature, involving individuals who assemble rapidly in a public space, perform a brief act, and then disperse. Furthermore, the lack of a hierarchical leadership structure indicated a leaderless movement. The protests were organised spontaneously using Twitter, resulting in impromptu gatherings with specific hashtags (Sinpeng, 2021). Following the initial event, many protests have arisen nationwide, with Twitter serving as a fundamental mechanism for organising and mobilising activism. The youth-led protests mark a substantial shift in Thai politics and digital landscapes.

Given that the protest movement was mobilised around anti-government and anti-establishment themes, it is essential to understand the factors that first drew protestors to participate. Many protestors who joined the anti-government protests were political fans of Thanathorn, namely *Fah* (BCC Thai, 2020). It is crucial to comprehend the intersection of politics, digital media, and fandom to better understand youth political participation in the digital age, as Dean (2017) recommended that researchers examine this relationship to better understand how people participate in politics today. Furthermore, many studies have suggested that emotions and affective factors also have an impact on individuals' public participation, in addition to rationality (Hinck and Hardin, 2023). To highlight this argument, this study draws on political fans around Thanathorn and the 2020-2021 Thai anti-government protests, examining how political fans transitioned from

online engagement to active protest participation and uncovering the influence of popular culture on political behaviours.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Youth Protest Participation in the Digital Era

Social media has become the primary mode of political communication among young people despite the concern that youth have become apolitical. Major global political and social movements in recent years, such as Black Lives Matter, the Arab Spring, and the Umbrella Movement, are driven by youth and social media. The advanced features and possibilities of popular platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have made it easy for activists and youth to mobilise and coordinate political activities (Chan et al, 2016; Lane et al, 2017; Zhu et al, 2019). With a platform that is easily accessible and information that can be disseminated quickly, social media has become a crucial instrument for political participation among the younger generation (Skoric and Poor, 2013). Additionally, the advent of social media has transformed the nature of political participation. Instead of engaging with politics through traditional practices like voting or joining a political party membership, individuals can participate in politics via online petitions, networking, and digital activism (Loader et al, 2014). Essentially, social media has introduced a novel form of political participation characterised by personalised and expressive online engagement (Livingstone et al, 2005).

Numerous studies have shown that online activism can encourage individuals to participate in political activities offline (Boulianne, 2015). By utilising social media platforms, people are exposed to political news and information (Gil de Zúñiga et al, 2014), can share their opinions and information (Boyd, 2010), engage in political discussion (Yamamoto et al., 2013), consume user-generated content (Östman, 2012), and join online communities (Ito et al, 2009). This fosters the development of authentic relationships, provides access to information about social movements, and allows individuals to align themselves with a particular cause (Gilbert and Karahalios, 2009; Dalton et al, 2009). Ultimately, these factors motivate and empower individuals, leading them to become involved in traditional forms of political participation and protest in the physical world (Chen et al, 2017; Valenzuela, 2013). However, there is a debate going on about whether online activism has a significant impact on offline activism or not. Some argue that it only occurs in specific cases or to a limited extent, while others believe it leads to significant political participation. Aldrich et al. (2016) discovered that social media does indeed play a role in youth political participation, but traditional methods, such as direct contact from parties, are still more effective in mobilising people. In some cases, social media can increase offline activism in specific events, such as attending offline events promoted on online platforms (Veccari et al, 2015), and have a minimal effect on specific events, such as elections (Boulianne, 2015). These studies showed that different factors might influence offline activism, and the outcomes could vary by event.

Besides social media, youth's political participation is shaped by the experience gained through networks and communities (Loader et al, 2014). Wray-Lake (2019) suggested that young people develop political awareness by connecting with communities and seizing opportunities in their daily lives. With the prevalence of social media, it has become a platform for young people not only to socialise but also engage in political activities. This shift towards using social media in political activism underlies how social media creates a novel form of political participation. It further underscores the significance of communication as a means of uniting individuals, especially among young people, in social movements and protests, as opposed to conventional hierarchical structures to organise and preserve collective identity (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011).

2.2 Political Fandom

The context of fandom has been originally studied by fan scholars; nevertheless, the intersection of fandom and politics has garnered significant attention among researchers in the political science field due to the rise of digital media and celebrity politics (Sandvoss, 2013; Dean and Andrews, 2021). Social media has revolutionised the relationship between politicians and people in a more personalised, private, and intimate way (Wilson, 2011; Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Stanyer, 2013). This has resulted in blurring the lines between traditional politics and politics as a form of entertainment, making politics more accessible and engaging for all (Sandvoss, 2013). Furthermore, politicians have used entertainment-driven strategies to improve their public image and popularity, turning politics into a show business where politicians are celebrities, and people are consumers (Street, 2004; Scammell, 2007). To this point, the integration of fan practices has expanded from the entertainment business to politics, suggesting that fan practices have become a part of daily life (Sandvoss, 2005; Hills, 2017). Political fandom results from this shift, underscoring the transformative way people participate and communicate in politics (Erikson, 2008; Sandvoss, 2012; Lee and Moon, 2021).

The use of social media in political communication has led to the formation of virtual communities, where individuals with similar beliefs congregate to form communities, including fandom. In fan studies, fandom is defined as “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 8). Given that political fandom shares a resemblance with fandoms of popular culture, fandom can provide a better understanding of expressive political behaviours (van Zoonen, 2004; Dean, 2017).

This study thus refers to political fandom as “the emotional investment in and active support for political figures, parties, or ideologies” (Le Clue, 2023, p. 3). Individuals’ political activism is driven by the emotions associated with a political entity rather than affiliation with a particular political ideology or party (Sandvoss, 2012). This definition emphasises the role of fandom in shaping political participation and good citizenship nowadays (Hinck and Hardin, 2023) and how the form of political engagement has changed (Hinck, 2019). However, political fandom can be understood and studied in two ways: (1) political *fandom* as fans of popular culture who leverage their fandom to participate in political activities or *fans-as-citizens*, and (2) *political* fandom as political activists who harness fandom or fan behaviours to mobilise citizens or *citizens-as-fans* (Reinhard et al., 2022). Accordingly, *Fah* is examined from the perspective of *citizens-as-fans*.

It is worth noting that using the term *fan* to describe political supporters and activists has become more common in recent years (Sandvoss et al, 2017). Fandom has become a common mode of activity in our daily lives, including political participation and communication (Hinck and Davisson, 2020). Through interviews with political fans, I examine the processes of political participation in fandom to understand how they decide to participate in anti-government protests and how fan communities amplify their political activism. To do this, the context of the *Fah* fandom is discussed.

2.3 Defining Fah

During the Chula-Thammasat Traditional Football Match held in February 2019, a male student recorded himself calling out to Thanathorn, “Fah Rak Pho!” (Fah loves daddy). The video, which lasted eight seconds, quickly went viral on Twitter under the hashtag #FahRakPho. It is important to note that the phrase “Fah Rak Pho!” originates from a famous Thai soap opera, *Dok Som See Thong*, in which *Fah*, the main female character, is romantically involved with an older businessman whom she affectionately calls “Pho” (Daddy), or a sugar daddy. This incident sparked conversations about Thanathorn’s public image and whether his fans viewed him as a charming older man or a sugar daddy (McCargo and Chattharakul, 2020). The hashtag became more viral at the end of that day when Thanathorn tweeted, “I went to #TUCUBALL73 today. Many people said “#FahRakPho” to me. I do not understand it much. But thank you for all the cheer. Do not forget to vote #FutureForward”. Not long after, he created a new hashtag, #PhoKorRakFah (Daddy also loves Fah), to respond to his supporters. These tweets gained a hundred of thousands of retweets (Figure 1). Thanathorn became “the darlings of Thai voters” (McCargo and Chattharakul, 2020, p. 49), and *Fah* became a term for his political fandom.

The emergence of *Fah* was a clear indication of Thanathorn’s growing popularity and the desire for a heroic figure in Thai society, particularly amongst the younger generation (Chattharakul, 2019). *Fah* played a crucial role in assisting Thanathorn and the party in promoting their campaigns by sharing user-generated content under #FahRakPho and Future Forward hashtags. Consequently, the party officially formed *Futurista*, a group of party supporters and volunteers, after witnessing the enthusiasm of *Fah* and other followers (McCargo and Chattharakul, 2020). In turn, the party organised various events to keep its supporters, including *Fah*, engaged and connected with the party. For instance, the party used contemporary places for party gatherings, changed the seating plan from a traditional speech on-stage to a circular one, and introduced its brand merchandise for the supporters to purchase and display their allegiance (Jiajanpong et al, 2022). Their high engagement with the party and effective use of social media resulted in the remarkable success of Future Forward in the 2019 general election in late March. Despite being a relatively new entrant in the political arena, the party secured third place in the election (Sinpeng, 2019; Chattharakul, 2019; Ricks, 2019).



Figure 1: Thanathorn acknowledged #FahRakPho

In addition, McCargo and Chattharakul (2020) made interesting observations about *Fah's* high engagement and passion closely resembling fandoms of popular culture, especially K-pop fandom. Numerous fan art and drawings were circulated among *Fah*, displaying unwavering support for Thanathorn. Furthermore, several works of fan fiction were published, often centring around the bromance relationship between Thanathorn and Piyabutr, a party secretary-general. South Korean popular culture has significantly impacted Thailand, with its influence observable in various aspects of Thai society. K-pop, in particular, has gained a massive following among Thai fans, who engage in fan practices and social media activities. This trend is most evident on Twitter, where K-pop fandom is among the most active Twitter users and always dominates conversations and hashtags (Smutradontri and Gadavanij, 2020). The community of fans and social movements thus have become closely linked on Thai Twitter. Unquestionably, *Fah's* user-generated content and behaviours demonstrate a significant confluence with the K-pop fandom, indicating that *Fah* leveraged K-pop fan practices to engage with Thanathorn and the party.

3. Methodology

An interview method was utilised in the study to understand how political fans of Thanathorn participate in offline anti-government protests, drawing inspiration from interview-based approaches employed by many researchers. To gain insight into fandom behaviours that may not be consciously recognised by participants, Parikh (2012) suggested that in-depth interviews are necessary, making this approach effective for exploring the interplay between politics and fandom. Additionally, the study deployed a trace interview method (Dubois and Ford, 2015), in which participants were presented with the visualisation of their digital traces throughout the interview process.

Participants were recruited through a two-step process. Firstly, I utilised Twitter API to identify users with high engagement (i.e., the users who have the most retweets and likes counts) in political fandom (e.g., #FahRakPho and #PhoRakFah) and anti-government hashtags (e.g., #WhatsHappeningInThailand, #DeadlinetoEndDictatorship and #FreeYOUTH). Participants were sent an invitation message to take part in an online survey. The survey uses JISC Online Surveys to check that participants meet the eligibility criteria. At the end of the survey, participants interested in an in-depth interview were asked to express their interest. The survey was aimed at people aged between 21 and 30 years who were self-identified fans of Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and participated in anti-government protests. The interviews were conducted over Zoom. Following the interviews, participants were asked to refer other political fans to the researcher, which resulted in the use of a snowball sampling method in the recruitment process. This approach ensured a diverse

representation of deeply engaged political fans. In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study.

NVivo was employed to conduct a thematic analysis of the transcripts. The analytical process began with creating a list of potential themes based on the interviews. Then, a thorough examination of the transcripts was undertaken, during which NVivo was used to code the identified themes systematically. Following the initial coding, I refined the themes by merging similar and eliminating redundant ones. This iterative refinement aimed to enhance the identified themes' clarity and coherence. Lastly, a comprehensive review of the transcripts was conducted to adjust the codes based on the refined thematic framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4. Preliminary Findings

4.1 'A Loss of Hope': The Role of Emotions in Political Decision

After having interviews with political fans, it becomes evident that their emotions and affection for Thanathorn influenced their decision to participate in protests. Participants frequently mentioned how *relatable* and *authentic* Thanathorn appeared to them, with some emphasising his *difference* and *freshness* compared to other politicians. This magnetic pull of charismatic political figures significantly shapes participants' inclination towards offline participation. The appeal of dynamic leaders who effectively capture the collective imagination can catalyse individuals to transcend their online presence and take concrete steps in the physical realm. This charisma fosters trust and mobilises a diverse group of politically active individuals who rally behind the leader's vision, believing that substantial change demands direct, tangible efforts. This is evident in the case of Thanathorn, where participants viewed him as their representative and someone who *spoke for them*. Consequently, when he was banned from politics, it was akin to a loss of hope, underscoring the profound personal connection participants established with him, leading his supporters to increased mobilisation.

4.2 Fan Communities: A Novel Space of Political Activism

The cohesive *fan* community is a robust driving force that propels individuals towards direct offline involvement. The shared bond among political fans generates unity, encouraging collective action that surpasses virtual boundaries. This communal dynamic becomes a crucible for exchanging ideas, strategies, and mobilisation endeavours, spurring participants towards more tangible forms of political activism. Additionally, the *fan* community provides *emotional* support, strengthening participants' dedication to their shared political objectives. Many express that participating in protests feels like socialising with friends, as everyone shares common goals. This camaraderie fosters an inclusive atmosphere, rendering political participation a socially fulfilling experience. Engaging in discussions and exchanging thoughts about the government with fellow protesters further cements their commitment to the cause.

4.3 Online Participation is not Enough

The prevailing belief that online political expression carries limited efficacy and is inherently futile plays a pivotal role in steering participants towards offline engagement. Participants discern that effecting meaningful political change requires more than virtual advocacy—it demands a physical, palpable presence in spaces of political significance. This realisation propels individuals to venture beyond pixels and screens, prompting them to participate actively in large-scale protests and other offline political engagements. While some participants even assume leadership roles within the rally, organising and guiding the demonstrations, others channel their dedication into becoming vital medical volunteers, providing essential aid and care to fellow protesters. These diverse roles within the offline movement exemplify how participants translate their online enthusiasm into tangible, impactful contributions on the ground.

Table 1: Themes of Interview Transcripts

Themes	Descriptions	Interview Examples
Formation of Political Fan Identity	Participants refer to their affection for Thanathorn or self-identify his political fan	<p>"[The reason why I support Thanathorn] is about emotion. He comes across as sincere, honest, and unafraid...It is easy to connect with him because of his character and communication style." (Participant 3)</p> <p>"I think that Thanathorn, as a person, exhibits strong</p>

Themes	Descriptions	Interview Examples
		leadership qualities... This is something I really admire about Thanathorn and his party." (Participant 17)
Evolution into Protest Participation	Participants describe their increase in political awareness and political participation due to Thanathorn's empowerment	"Being a fan of Thanathorn has significantly impacted on me... His words inspire me and urge me to fight more than ever." (Participant 1) "I typically did not follow political news, but I was well aware of the current political climate in the country... I have begun to realise its significance lately because of Thanathorn's influence." (Participant 11)
Fan Communities Empowerment	Participants describe that they joined the protests via political fandom communities	"...when <i>Fah</i> was formed, people started using hashtags to share political information about what was happening in Thailand, and I became more politically aware from that point onward." (Participant 2)
Emotional Support	Participants describe that they joined the protests due to collective power or empowerment among political fandom	"When I joined the protests, I immediately felt a connection with other protesters because of my age group. We used the same language, which created a sense of camaraderie and friendship." (Participant 8) "Going to protests is like going for fun" implies that attending a protest is not merely a recreational activity. Rather, it provides a sense of rejuvenation." (Participant 18)
Offline Participation	Participants refer to their role in the protests (e.g., a medical volunteer, a protest facilitator, a protest leader, and a security guard)	"I attended every protest and was always a volunteer because I wanted to use my potential [as a medical student] to help the protest movement." (Participant 12)
Offline Mobilisation Necessity	Participants describe that they prefer offline mobilisation	"Going out on streets for sure because those in power don't care what we have said on social media... To successfully pressure them, we must go out on the street." (Participant 13)

5. Conclusion

This study aims to uncover the intricate relationship between *political* fandom, social media and offline activism. The initial finding provides further evidence that emotions and affective factors significantly impact political participation, as shown by Thanathorn's strong influence on *Fah's* decisions. Second, the empowerment of the *fan* community suggests that Twitter has become a pivotal platform for mobilising protests and disseminating information among protestors. On Twitter, *Fah's* fandom offers a platform for inexperienced young people to participate in political discussions and develop awareness through fan practices, a more familiar form of engagement. Thirdly, although social media helps anti-government movements organise and mobilise successful protests across the country, participants believe traditional forms of activism are necessary. Many participants got involved in protests by being medical volunteers or protest facilitators, suggesting that online activism can spill over into real-world effects.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of *Fah* with prevalent mainstream popular fandoms, especially K-pop fandom, underscores the substantial influence exerted by popular culture on political conduct, particularly within the contemporary digital milieu and is seemingly particularly pronounced within Thai political culture. By embracing K-pop fan practices, many *Fahs* use fan practices, such as fan art, to express their political activism. In conclusion, this study demonstrates the necessity of understanding the fandom culture that underlines political actions and participation and digital media on youth political participation.

It is important to note that this study has some limitations. For instance, gender, socioeconomic status, geographical location, and education level can influence an individual's political participation. During the recruitment process, it was observed that a majority of the participants were female, with only six male interviewees. Future research should consider these demographic factors and aim to recruit a more diverse group, including more men. However, the findings are believed to have practical implications for political actors, such as politicians, political parties, and social movements. For example, a charismatic leader and fan practice are likely to attract individuals to participate in political activism.

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