

## HOW DO THAI PEOPLE IN THE UK USE FACEBOOK FOR SOCIAL INTERACTIONS?

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study aims to investigate the way in which Thai people in the UK use Facebook in order to maintain social relationships across long distances when they are no longer living in Thailand. Even, there are a number of researches done about Facebook in Thailand but the topic related to Thai Facebook user in different countries, such as in the UK, has not been researched adequately and there is a gap of about the relevant variables. This study employed qualitative methodology by using in-depth interview with open-ended questionnaire as the data collection method. The unit of analysis was 25 Thai people who were living in the UK and available for the interview between June to August, 2014. The participants were recruited from Facebook Fan page related to Thai people in the UK. The finding shows that the usage of Facebook by Thai people in the UK can be categorized into two aspects which are first, social interaction on Facebook as sender and second, social interaction on Facebook as receiver. Also, it can be confirmed that Facebook has played significant roles to enable Thai Facebook users maintaining their relationships and remaining sense of social belonging through online social network platform across different time and space. Accordingly, the study explores an aspect of 'collective cultural belonging' among Thai Facebook users that should be considered for further study as one influence characteristic (or variables in quantitative study) in related topic to Facebook user's behavior.*

**Keywords:** 1) Social Interactions 2) Facebook 3) Thai people in the UK

### **1. Background and Literature Review**

Online social network platforms have become increasingly popular in modern society. It is an online social space which people get the opportunity to connect and interact with old and new friends. They share information, photos as well as videos. Nowadays, social networking such as "Facebook" is reported to have over 1.59 billion subscribers who are active users, and the number continues to increase on a daily basis (Thumbsup, 2016). Currently, Facebook is freely used by a billion of subscribers from all over the world. It is also available in 37 different languages around the world. In Thailand, there are 26

million Facebook users which are ranked as top 3<sup>rd</sup> in Asia. (Statista Inc., 2016)

According to Miller and Slater (2000) and Thompson (1995) Internet can help people to overcome both time and space' barriers. Facebook interactions, for instance, connection with friends, expression of preferences, and status updates present a trail of observable evidence. This online platform has risen up new method in order to observe human interactions (Castells, 2012). It should be considered to employ Facebook as a continuous approach of collecting data on human interactions. The data collected on Facebook is unique which is different from other types of data because "its ecological validity is higher" (Dewing,

2010). An issue of interest in order to study human interactions such as how people interact with others is possible to be examined in a new social context. The online social network site such as Facebook is also available to investigate the communication barriers such as distance between different countries. The new form of social media has been informed as accessible to numerous people globally.

It cannot be denied that interactions on Facebook such as networking, updating of status, and commenting, make the possibility for researchers to explore a different kind of human interactions. Facebook has been described as a form of self-reporting. Some researchers highlight the opportunities provided by human interaction on an online network (Dewing, 2010). According to the literature review on Facebook by Wilson (2012), the researcher can gather 412 papers discussing Facebook and categorize previous studies related to Facebook into five groups: (1) The role of Facebook in social interactions; (2) Privacy and disclosure of information; (3) Identity presentation; (4) Motivation for using the site and, (5) Descriptive analysis of users.

The topic related to human interactions and relations on Facebook have been attracting to researcher's attention during this digital era. This study, therefore, investigated how Thai people use Facebook in order to maintain social relationships across large distances when they are no longer living in Thailand. Even, there is numerous researches related to Facebook in Thailand but the issue related to Thai Facebook user in different countries has not been researched adequately and there was a gap of knowledge about the relevant variables. As such, the importance of this study is aimed to fill such a knowledge gap. Moreover, the interaction on Facebook as continuous process which goes on both online and offline through daily activities should be examined if it is a long distance relationship with a different time and space while Thai people are living in the UK.

The relevant literatures illustrate various issues related to the Internet and online social network as virtual space, which have been represented as actual global space. Castells (2012) reinforces Millers and Slater (2000) noted that the Internet space is distinctive because it has multiple functions. Castells (2012) compares the use of the Internet as being a medium of communication to a similar role played by the traditional restaurants. The Internet has represented area of community activities and employed as meeting points where members of the larger community participated in real life activities. The Internet has given a new method of communication that people do not need to come into physical space in order to communicate with each other.

A study by Martin, Miller and Slater (2002) explores how people use Facebook in their daily activities. The study found that the direct actions participated by Facebook user includes messaging, wall posts, chat, tagging of photos and comments. On the other hand, people engage in indirect actions when they explore friends' profiles or read through their friend's status. Marlow and Lento (2013) also present the effects of social media on self's contraction. They concluded that people who generally spend time in order to view other people's profile and read their comments without commenting or responding tend to remain their privacy through online society while people who are more active in Facebook tend to be more social and outgoing (Cunningham, 2013).

People who apply indirect actions while using Facebook do not feel dissociated from their society. The users are able to create their sense of belonging when they go through other people's status update. However, Facebook has also been criticized for creating a sense of fear for users who sending friend requests to other and need to see if there is a rejection from other called an unaccepted for friend request (Martin, Miller and Slater, 2002).

Facebook usage has been broadened where there is no limitation as to who should qualify as a user. In the early year of Facebook, the member register was restricted to college students. Later, the register was passed on to a small group of friends networking, and the trend has continued (Duhel, 2012). Today, there are no strictly qualifications to join Facebook, only limited to people who aged over 13 years old. Only one requirement is a computer or devices that can access to the Internet. New registered users are supposed to create their own profiles by responding to a few questions and providing some personal information. However, people may provide irrelevant and incorrect information because there is no any criterion for justifying or checking the information provided.

Facebook is one of online social platform through which friendships and social connections are started and maintained around the world. Especially in Thailand where is considered as collective culture and society which have more sense of community compared to other western society (Keawthep, 2009). This is the reason why Facebook user is widely spread in Thailand in recent year. Moreover, it is also interesting to explore the case of Thai people in different context apart from Thailand. Then, the research question could be present as if Thai people have to move to live in other country for a year or more such as the case of Thai student, worker or permanent resident in the UK, how do they use Facebook for social interactions and maintaining relationship? As, one of the greatest advantages of this media technology is to maintain distant relationships despite there are space and time barriers. People have opportunity to interact through overseas friendship on Facebook. This is a kind of online interaction is made simpler and the world made smaller by the Internet. This study is also expected to explore new criteria for further study related to Facebook as well.

In addition, there are some important key terms used on Facebook in related to online interactions as follows:

**Add friend** refers to the action of requesting or accepting a request from another Facebook user in order to add them to your list of friends. The users are notified of such activity on their timelines.

**Unfriend** refers to removing someone from your friend's list. Normally, they are not notified of this act.

**Comment** is a responding action that user can comment to other users' post if they allow to. These Comments are easily shared and seen among other Facebook user depending on the privacy level.

**Share** or share link, share post involves sharing another webpage or attachment of information that the users aim to share with their Facebook friends or networks. These links are normally located on other websites. Sometimes, it is secondary data from other Facebook account or page.

**Tag** is an action when Facebook users aim to create mutual information (or tag) with their Facebook friend. The specific post or photo that you tag that the user in is added to their 'timeline' (a list of interactions which they have undertaken).

**Like button (as presented while the data was collected in August, 2014)** show appreciation or recognition of a photo, comment or status given by user. There is an expression of "Like" which presented in the form of "thumbs up" icon.

## 2. Methodology and Data analysis

Social interactions and relations are part of human existence and learning. Recently, online social network site such as Facebook have been part of this human relationship whereby people meet, connect and maintain their relationship through the form of social media. The key informants were the 25 Thai people who are Facebook user and now living in the UK. They were recruited from several Facebook page related to Thai people in the UK. An in-depth interview with open-ended questionnaire was taken place between June to August, 2014.

There are two types of research methods used in social science research, the qualitative and quantitative methods. In this case, the qualitative research method was employed. This is because the results acquired through this method did not require statistical testing; instead, it was expected to explain the social phenomena through collecting the perspectives and opinions from key informants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). According to the research findings, it could be seen that the advantage of the qualitative method was that the findings could be discovered by means of in-depth investigation of the phenomena, it is called the collection of subjective data, which was not limited to defined variables.

Accordingly, another reason why quantitative approach was not employed in this study was because it was considered not as appropriate as the qualitative method according to its focus on statistical data, definable variables and survey methodology (Given, 2008). However, this study aimed to collect the data from Thai people who living in different country away from their home country which had been considered as unclear variables. Therefore, quantitative methods are not appropriate. Instead, the qualitative approach was considered for exploring in-depth answers for the research question in order to explore clearer aspects related to the research topic.

The sampling technique is the selection of a small portion of the whole population on which the actual research is conducted. This study employed the snowball sampling technique to acquire the sampling group of the study. The snowball sampling technique is one of the most commonly used techniques in Arts and Social Sciences studies. As explained in David (2008), this technique contains the random selection of a sample data set from the target group. As a result, it can be seen that the sampled group shows similar growth as that of a rolling snowball and thus bearing the name snowball sampling technique.

Snowball sampling technique was considerably the most suitable method for this research because it allowed the researcher

to select unbiased sampling group to carry out research investigation. Moreover, this technique was very useful for recruiting unknown participants who qualified the key informant's criteria. In this case, the key informants were 25 Thai people who are living in the UK, aged between 18-35 years old and being Facebook users. The first key informants had invited his friends on his Facebook network who met the criteria to participate in this research project. Then, the second and third participants had continued to give the contact details of their networks and so on, like the rolling snowballing, until there were enough participants for the data collection. It was found that participants' status in the UK and the year they have been in the UK were diverse including workers and students. However, it should be noted there was some accepted bias result from the fact that the sample may not be representative of all Thai Facebook users who are the living in the UK. It only reflects the case of small sample group of case study

In terms of the data's validity, it can be seen through the data collection process, including an online observation of Facebook usage of the key informants and in-depth interviews collected by using open-ended question. The use of different data collection methods allowed the researcher to confirm the validity of collected data. According to this study, both direct observations of participant's online social activity and in-depth interviews were employed in order to find data's similarity collected from two different methods.

This study employed both primary and secondary data. The direct observations of online activity aimed to acquire key information from the participants in order to examine their usage behaviors and interactions on Facebook. Also, in-depth interviews were aimed to collect all data from the participants such as personal perceptions. For the collection of secondary data, previous research studies and related theory were applied in order to support the validity of research findings.

Ethical considerations have been raised as the researcher strongly ensures confidentiality and privacy of the research participants. All the information gathered from will not be presented in other forms without the permission. All participants were informed prior to the study that "investigating how Thai people in the UK, who use Facebook for their social interactions" was the main objective of this study. Also, participants' privacy will be protected by keep them as anonymous throughout the research paper. Any photos or status updated by individual did not shown in this paper as well.

As Davern (2008) highlights that the researchers would be cautious when they are trying to generalize the research outcome from very small group of research participants in order to represent all of target population. This research would be categorized as a small sample study, which may not be representative of Thai people as a whole. However, the research outcome could be referred to as one small case study about the way in which Thai people in the UK use Facebook for their social interaction

The data analysis of this study will be presented according to the following mapping. According to the research data, the usage of Facebook by Thai people in the UK could be categorized into two aspects which are first, social interaction on Facebook as a sender and second, social interaction on Facebook as a receiver.

### **3. Research Findings**

The study on the entitled "How do Thai people in the UK use Facebook for social interactions" reveals interesting aspects of Facebook using by Thai People in the UK for their social interactions. Facebook provides excellent approach to investigate human behavior. The usage of Facebook by Thai people in the UK could be categorized into two aspects as follows:

1. Social interaction on Facebook as a sender
2. Social interaction on Facebook as a receiver

3. Social interaction on Facebook as a sender

4. Social interaction on Facebook as a receiver

#### **1. Social interaction on Facebook as sender**

The aspect of Social interaction on Facebook as a sender is a kind of active action by participants. It involves creating information on the Facebook site which can be illustrated in two main parts which are 1.1) Status updates and 1.2) Photo Uploads as follows:

##### **1.1 Status Updates**

Status updates on Facebook include writing and post on Timeline or called Facebook wall. Users generally express their thought and idea through their Timelines. It is not only considered as a form of communication, but also as a means of self-presentation as a part of belonging social. It can be seen that the user focus on how to manage their daily activities and social relations among the context of the modern techno-social hybrid realities that they live in. The status updates that were selected in this paper are chosen by their relevance and effectiveness to explain some of the ways in which people interact to others as follows:

The first key informant named "Tum" (male, 34 years old) who works as Assistant Manager in Thai Restaurant, said he rarely updated her status or any photos, "I rarely update my profile status or upload photo, this is because I only registers on Facebook for allowing my friends and family in Thailand to can contact me easily." He had the opinion that all information on Facebook should be private and only allows to close friends and family members.

As same as, "Fah" (Female, 27 years old) who is Master's degree student said "I rarely update my status, once I do it, it is only about my activities in London which make my family and relatives know that my life here is okay". It can be seen that Facebook can enable Thai people in the UK reassure her family and link some relations

between her in the UK and Thai family at home.

As reported above, it can be seen that the key informant both acted as the sender in communication process in order to present themselves in online social network by using the status update function on Facebook.

### **1.2 Photo Uploads**

Apart from typing text, the usage of photos is also important part of social interaction on Facebook. It can be seen that the participants present themselves and interact with others on Facebook by using photo uploads with caption on their timelines. In addition, sharing information such as link or post is another form of presentation for the participants in this case study. These links contain specific information that they aim to spread across other Facebook friends, such as hot issues, sports, news, special occasions etc. as follows:

Another key informant called “Pol” (Male, 28 years old) who is studying at Master’s degree level always uploaded photos to present his activities when he has free time. He said, “I always upload the photos about my cooking, it makes me proud that I have better cooking skills even though I am a man who has good cooking skill and my friend especially from different country is very excited to see because it is Thai food which very expensive in London.”

The same situation is observed with Man, a 25 year male master’s degree student. He generally shares his cooking photos as well. He said, “to live in the UK as an international student, it is very good idea to cook, although I have never done it before when I was at home in Thailand. Cooking can help to reduce a cost of living in the UK and surely, it is good for my health. So, I am proud to upload and share how well I can cook.”

Another reason of updating new status on Facebook by interviewee is to illustrate what they have never been done in Thailand in order to represent themselves positively towards their social network.

There’s a key informant called “Ling” who is working as full time staff in famous Ling Thai restaurant, mentioned “I only uploads photos related to her special events such travelling to Europe or some special events like a meal in a famous restaurant. Sometimes I hope my family in Thailand could see it and wish they stayed with me here.

According to “Meaw” (Female, 21 years old) who is undergraduate student and has lived in the UK for 3 years, said “most of my update status on Facebook is all about my travelling”.

It is also reported by “Nam”, Thai student, she said “I am undergraduate student that have to stay in the UK longer than other master student, who come here only 9 months or a year, then I feel like my daily life in the UK is neutral and nothing special to me then I upload only special things like my travelling time”.

The similar opinion as presented above was held by another interviewee, her name’s Kwang (Female, 28 years old, a Phd student). She also supports the view that it is not necessary to update every event in their daily life, but it is necessary to keep some special events to be personal memory in the UK on Facebook. She allowed the researcher to observe her Facebook’s Timeline. Then she said that “my recent updating status is a check-in that I have just been to Spain at least my mother in Thailand know that where I am”.

The above views show that the interviewee used Facebook to share their special moments to present themselves in positive way. It is supported by the theory of Miller and Slater (2000) who confirmed the positive aspect of online communication that helps to maintain distance relations. As such, it can be concluded that Facebook as an online communicative form can enables people to maintain their relationships, interactions even in the different places.

## **2. Responding to Information on Facebook**

Another major usage of Facebook is to response information updated by other Facebook user. To response to information refers to the way in which people reacting to their friend's status or posts including photos, links, comments or status updates. Thus, the Responding to information can be categorized into three main activities (theme) which are 2.1) sharing information, 2.2) commenting on a friend's wall and 2.3) reacting on other post by emoticon using.

### **2.1 Sharing information**

Sharing information on Facebook is the way in which Facebook user response to "specific information" by clicking "share Button" then it will allow the user to share the content across their target audience. When the user shares content from a website or other Facebook pages, it will appear on their timeline and also on their friends' news feeds. Sharing, therefore, allow users to show their friends information or content which is important to them, or related to the social they belong to.

One interviewee who is permanent resident in the UK named "Milk", (28 years old, female) showed that she enjoyed viewing the information shared on her friends' wall post. She said "When I am checking my Facebook page, the first thing that I normally do is accessing on the links that my friend, mostly from Thailand, share on their Timelines such as hot issues happening in Thailand and I found that Facebook is very interesting". She also added that it seems easies when there is someone selecting special news and share it. It is also convenient to check what popular issue in Thailand is by considering of the repeating information shared on Facebook.

There is also another view from "Nut" (49 years old, female) who is full time worker and permanent resident in the UK. She said "I like to share the interesting information I receive from someone with those friends who are not concern of it such as health, environmental or social issues. It

is very easy sharing information on Facebook site because when I see some interesting post from a friend's wall I just click the 'share button' then it will be shared on the wall to be seen by other Facebook friends."

The above experiences are similar to "First" (male, 22 years old) who is a permanent resident in the UK. He said "Facebook is very convenient when I need to review news about Thailand or special issues. This is the reason I prefer checking Facebook to other news agency websites. I do enjoy discussing with friends through Facebook comments function; it can comment with refer or tag specific people as well".

It is interesting to note that rather than viewing news websites directly, the participants preferred to check their Facebook pages in order to engage in discussions with their friends and their networks back in their origin country of Thailand.

From the interview, it could be seen that the time and geographic location differences matter less when Facebook is used. For example, information is shared 24 hours daily and people can access the site on mobile Internet enables handsets everywhere. Facebook lead to a great extent enhanced the speed of social interaction over the recent years, compressing the social space by allowing users to virtually communicate with any user globally at any time (Routledge, 2011). In the current world, news and events spread very fast, friends interact in real time despite the distance between the population in and home.

### **2.2 Commenting on a friend's wall**

Commenting on a friend's wall is a form of information response used by Facebook users. This form of response can be seen as commenting box on photos and status updates that other user posted on their walls. When users post any comment on their friend's wall, this activity will be automatically updated to their friends News feed as well.

For instance, one of the interviewees named “Bell”, who is a 25 year-old female Master’s degree student, reported that she has been enjoyed typing comments on her friend wall posts. This activity allows her to create and maintain a relationship flow between her and her friends who living in Thailand.

When conducting the online observations, it is noticeable that Boom, a 25 year-old Male Master’s degree student, generally comments on his friend’s status while watching football. He said, “It is always fun to comment the Facebook status when your favorite team wins against your friend’s team.”

He explained that “I am in London and watching a Football match at 2.00 p.m. UK time while my friend in Thailand is also watching same match at 8.00 p.m.” He said that it was enjoyable to have a conversation through Facebook status about the match.

According to the interview, it can be concluded that people can share and interact during special events despite the distance. As seen in the case of watching football, people around the world watched and commented on the game, despite the tournament being held in very far country from their country. Facebook user could share their ideas and conversation about the same event through the site. They were not limited by time differences in different countries where the live match was being broadcast independent of time zones.

It is not global events only that are being shared on Facebook site; local events can also be posted and tagged via Facebook site. According to the online observation, most of them reported that they have been tagged on their family’s photos when their family members were together for special occasions in Thailand such as Mother’s day, Songkran day or New Year day. It could be concluded that Thai people in the UK could feel as being part of the special occasions in Thailand through online social platforms. Especially international students who have their families back at home, in

Thailand, it is not easy to join their families in such important times. That is the reason why most of participants were being tagged on their families’ photos on special event though they were not taken in those photos; thus their networks remain even there is geographic isolation.

### **2.3 Reacting on other post by Like Button.**

The “Like buttons” is the way in which users give feedback and connect with other social activity post. The button is also a unique function in the Facebook platform which enables user to express “like” by using “Thumb up icon”. When a friend clicks the Like button to react some content, the content will appear in the News Feeds of that user's network. The button also displays the number of people who have liked each post or content to rate how popular it is. Thus, the feature is important for interaction on the Facebook site which could be interpreted as to receive opinions or agreement from friends and also create some sense of belonging.

There is an opinion from “Nick” (28 years old, male) who is a part-time worker and permanent resident in the UK. He said “I click the ‘Like’ button when I am interested to take part in the discussion through comments or just observe when my friends comment about a specific post on Facebook”. It is evident that some Facebook users prefer to upload information to view comments reacted by their friends.

According to another interviewee called “Mai”, (31 years old, female) who is a florist and permanent resident in the UK. She told the researcher that she clicked the ‘Like’ button when expressing her specific interest in information [posted on Facebook. She said, “I react to my friend’s status updates by using “Like button” because I want them to know that I am still active here even I rarely leave comment. For me, I think it is a way of bridging friendship in both actual and online society.

Another interesting opinion was told by the interviewee named “Bill” (27 years old, male) who has been in the UK for 2 years to pursue his Master degree. He considers “Like button” can be as one of the best way for engaging in the discussion or any contents uploaded on the Facebook. He said, “I like contents in order to follow any update that will happen later because there will be a notification shown only the user who click like”.

It can be seen that the “Like Button” contains some social meaning and refer to social interaction activity that the user could express their interest and their sense of belonging wherever they are.

#### **4. Discussion**

Facebook was evidenced to be useful in social interactions and relations in the mediated world. According to theories of Meyerowitz (1985), mediated information can seal the bridge of the socializing place. Facebook has sealed the bridge by overcoming socializing barriers of space and time. As, it can be seen that Thai people in the UK can socially interact in cultural events despite they are not being in Thailand.

In addition, Facebook enables other users to react and comment on friend’s updated information as well even they are in different part of the world. For example, people update their status with information about sports, feelings, news, and daily activities. Sometimes, it makes the users receive positive feedback as well as connection between self and the society when they get a number of reaction (such as like) and comments from their friends and network.

It is noticeable that the social interactions by Thai user in this study are represented a form of collective practice which is a common aspect in Thai society, where people maintain social interaction and common activities more often compared to individual or western society (Keawthep, 2009). Therefore, people in the collective society tend to share the information and

interaction with each other even they are in the different context such as the case of Thai people in the UK.

Then, an aspect of belonging in collective cultural society can be considered as one influence characteristic (or variables in quantitative study) in order to further research study related to Facebook user’s behavior or any online social network communication studies.

It is also noticeable that the key informants who expose to Facebook’s newsfeed reported about their trust towards the news content shared by their friend or network. This is because the interviewee give the credibility to friends who perform as the sender in communication process. This findings reflects significantly change of online news consumption behavior because of Facebook’s news feed which is confirmed by Usher-Layser (2016) who studied about the role of Newsfeed and its relation with audience behavior.

According to Gidden’s time and space compression theory, Facebook has made interactions simple and the world a small village by the internet and technology. Therefore, there is a less feeling of isolation from the place that people originally belong to such as Thai people who come from Thailand to live, to work or to study in the UK. Facebook performs as a significant technological communication agent as maintaining relationships by providing “compression of time and space” (Giddens, 1991). This is evident by the case of Thai people in the UK, even they are living in the UK at least nine months or more, they still easily connecting with their families and friend who are staying in Thailand where 6-7 hours ahead of the UK time and 5,299 miles away in distance from UK to Thailand.

Castells (2012) reinforces Millers and Slater (2000) assertion on that the internet space is distinctive because it multi-functions. He writes that, though the media is primarily a technology, it is also a medium of communication. This is also supported by Giddens (1991) who noted that advancement in technology is able to

minimize the barrier of time and space between human interactions. It is evident that Thai people in the UK feel like they are still being a part of Thai networks because they can connect with other people in Thailand as usual, even it is in different time zones and geographically distance. It can be ensure that Facebook is allow for social interaction across the different time and space and play a crucial role in their social lives in terms of being connected to culture, social relationships.

Moreover, Facebook usage among the Thai populations has grown over the years, despite there is increasing distance that has resulted from globalization which people move to work and study in different parts of the world. This research analysis ensure that online social network as Facebook has enabled Thai Facebook user to remain connected to their own culture, and to maintain social relationships across large distances. This finding was supported by Miller's and Giddens's theories (1991) of human relationships and social interactions.

Facebook has been identified in this study to play main crucial roles as supported by earlier works of scholars as it ensures the continuity over time and distance in maintaining relationships while Thai people are in different part of the world.

Lastly, there is the implementation in order to develop related social science research in the future, as this study is done only with a small group of Thai people in the UK, it might be better to compare with Thai people who are living in different region such as other European countries, America, or Asian countries, or in Thailand. Also, in the social perspective, it has been observed that Thai people use Facebook for a variety of purposes such as to keep connected to Thai culture, and to maintain social relationships across large distances. This is a positive finding which exploring new aspect of being in collective culture that is a uniqueness of Thai people characteristic which may be carried out for to study in the future.

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