

Spatial Solidarity: The Social Construction on a Local Supermarket through Social Media Expression in Phuket, Thailand

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Abstract: Since the last few decades, Phuket has been notable as the tourist destination in which inspire all the modern ways of life to the city. Most small groceries (*raan show buay kanaad lek*) have been effected by this rapid transition and some had to be winded up due to the business struggle with foreign franchised supermarkets or department stores. However, a survivor supermarket named 'Super Cheap', owned by a descended Chinese-Phuket family, has stood out as the local shopping place under the slogan 'wholesale and cheap price' for almost two decades. By utilizing the research method of participant observation in the real place and online media, the researchers attempt to explore how this supermarket is portrayed as the spatial localities bounded the Phuket residents from different classes, races, and ages in the sense of social identity. As the complex expressions cannot be understood without its context, the use of qualitative method is selected to deeply clarify the situations occurred on both public spaces. The image of 'local mentality' was clearer shown when an unexpected circumstance of conflagration covered all over the supermarket building. This situation illustrates the extended phenomena of community protection on this local supermarket through social media usages.

Keywords: Public space, Social construction, Social media

1. Introduction

The first locally-Phuket supermarket 'Super Cheap' established since June 2, 1995, registered as the enterprise of Thailand trademark with initial investment of five million baht. The general consumer goods are the prevailing target of selling, seemingly in forms of local and worldwide product. The supermarket was founded by the second generation of a Chinese-Phuket family named 'Anantajarunwong', the initiator is known as Boonsom Anantajarunwong. His father was the Chinese migrant from Fujian area in the Southeast China [1]. He started his small retail grocery with a location of 50 rai (approximately 84,000 square meters) residing on the center of Tepkrasatree Road, the longest road in Phuket directing from north to south and the main route of logistics transported goods from other provinces to Phuket. Successfully emerged within 10 years, 'Super Cheap' become the biggest local supermarket in Phuket by the numerous support of local communities and the power of Phuket residents' consumption. This prolonged trustworthy supermarket has gradually shown out the revolutionary ways of trading performance among the tremendous grocery competition. This study aims at examine the changes of reciprocal pattern expressing on the public space, especially social media, considering as the new type of community space. As expected, the results can raise the better understanding of authentic context and meaning happening to the local supermarket from the public opinions. Social media is the representation of public space, reflecting how the locals can openly state their argument without restriction of the authority, social class, membership, and gender. The originality of this study is to analyze the expressions of the locals' opinion on web 2.0 (people can directly connect through the public space by web technology). Apparently, the advent of technology emerges in Phuket society and changes the new way of personal interaction of local community.

2. The characteristics of domestic shopping mall

An outstanding exemplary of the first Thai department store in Bangkok is 'Central', launched by Chirathivat family or former Chinese family named 'Jeng'. Willson (2004) shows the development of their business from a small shophouse in *Talad* (market) to the large-scale of department store all over Thailand

and neighboring countries or 'rags-to-riches'. During the process, we can see how this Sino-Thai family could adjust their Chinese identity to be more flexible on the national and transnational cooperation and passed on their ideology of intimate economies, by presenting the business trademark of Thainess and sensibility of sympathetic partnership, to the next generation [2]. What are the most significant criteria of maintaining this business or mobilizing the high rank of these local enterprises to contest with the competitive markets? In anthropological aspect, it can be noticed that these domestic shopping malls characterize as 'local ownership', 'vicinity', and the representative of provincial/national distinctiveness visualizing particular economic activities of the localities. McMillan and Chavis (1986) explains the concept of 'sense of community' in the perception of "capture both a territorial as well as a relational cohesiveness"[3]. In this regard, Super Cheap can officially be the representative of community belonging and devotion.

3. The social meaning on Super Cheap

To explain the overt depiction of Super Cheap; it is the one-storey building, constructed with the wooden poles and roofed by galvanized sheet. The interior atmosphere is fully unventilated and swelters with no air-conditioning facilitation, yet when the rainy season, the conditions might feel a little better from the fresh air outside. The construction material and architectural design have been partially criticized as 'improper' or 'unsafe' due to the reduction of structural investment and maintenance cost. As if the seemingly dangerous place, less customers complain about it but define it as the vernacular appearance. The exterior space has got a huge signboard showing the supermarket name in both Thai and English versions located in front near the main road. They paved the entrance with a good material of asphalt leading to the large-sized parking space capacitated for 50 – 70 automobiles with the rain cover provided. Noticeably, different vehicles, namely, bicycle, motorcycle, small compact car, to the deluxe Volvo or Mercedes Benz, are parked in front with the attention of security guard. Getting inside, there are different types of product categorizing in the proper sections since the target customers come from various groups of community. Thus it can be described as 'one-stop shop' supplying almost everything that the customer needs (as the Thai phrase said 'selling things from mortar to warship'). At the counter, you can see the sign saying that 'If you cannot find the product that you need, please inform us and we will make the order'. The 'local' and 'sincere' ways of serving customers can be continually discussed if it is possibly considered as one of the success keys.

On their primary purpose of serving the cheap-priced goods, the local customers seem not to expect for the high quality of product or to count on the very good services. Another point of view regarding the specific lower income group, this kind of supermarket is recognized as the suitable place for them to freely purchasing stuff without doing price comparison between shops or being worried about the class distinction. To the working classes, Super Cheap means a lot to them in the image of 'the door to opportunity'. It seems that the second-major target group is those who own the small groceries that would prefer buying the wholesale product from this local supermarket rather than purchasing from other franchised grocery stores. People who work as the staff in Super Cheap are observed in both Thai and Burmese migrants. Thai staffs mainly work in the back and front office positioned in management, account, finance, human resources, customer service, IT development, cashier, etc. Since Phuket has encountered the flux of migrants from the neighboring countries, Burmese people (and some Cambodians and Laos) tend to be another major loyal customers. There are many information signboards written in Burmese language including for the recruitment a lot of Burmese staffs working on the stock operation, product delivery, and sometime cashier (for the eligibility of Thai speaking). This local supermarket is implied as the everyday spaces for different groups of society and different functions to fulfill their desire.

Their business extension growth demonstrates a progressive ways of community-market approach. They have been transforming from a small grocery, to a larger supermarket, and ultimately expanding to approximately 50 convenient stores all over Phuket and nearby provinces. Interestingly, the new form of Super Cheap satisfy the modern lifestyle of Phuket residents with the design of logo () and lined facade in white and purple, operating 24/7 in the same concept of multiple products and cheap price. Inside the customer can feel the typical air-conditioning convenient store, comprising the café station and ready-cook food, along with smelling the fresh vegetables and seafood. Outside they open the empty space in front not only for parking, but also for those local people to rent and to sell the food vendors. As such the varieties

of lifestyle, it apparently attracts a large numbers of European customers especially in the tourist beach areas like Patong, Kata, Karon, and Rawai to experience the shopping of their everyday consuming goods in the mini Super Cheap with local clients. In the commercial path, they have been proved as one of the successful local enterprise gaining the annual profit of more than brilliant baht and light up as the sustainable model of local business. Though in the image of community, Super Cheap is decoded to the social institution for economic activities and the center of local product distribution.

4. Conflagration

At night in October 16, 2013, Super Cheap was accidentally caught on fire, devastated the whole eighteen-year building. Three hundred fire fighters worked all day all night and were threatened by the stream of heat. It took almost a week to put out the tremendous fire. Nevertheless, the largest superstore of Phuket collapsed down instantaneously and could not resist this disaster. The news of this incident was mushroomed in the morning through broadcast television and newspapers.

During the night, this situation was in a flash reported and streamed on the Internet by local Phuket people. Those who residing near the accidental site took many photos of burning construction and posted with the solicitous emotion of comments, hoping that the fire would be extinguished soon. People living in farther areas could get to know the up-to-date situation by following the online messages. This happening affair was paid attention by all Phuket residents, as well as, others who apperceive the place. Although they did not gain the impact of hazard, many people were worried about the post-flame conditions of this supermarket. Since social media was mainly used as a medium of sharing information and connecting each community from the south to other parts of country, the accident of Super Cheap became a hot issue overnight causing many discussions to the origin of mishap.

5. Public Sphere and Social Media

Social media has a potential to bridge interpersonal opinions to create the field of arguments. Furthermore, it is a form of mind connection as McLuhan defined that “the externalization of our sense creates a technological brain of the world moving us into a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence” [4]. The social media is intervened with modern daily life as if it conforms essentially to our communication systems. Human mind cannot be isolated from the social commune although the interaction between individuals is not face-to-face transmission. This process affects to the way of life and considered as a part of social construction collecting members of a society.

The social media is a kind of mass-communication that influence to public sphere. People’s opinions are changed by the interaction on the medium, which Habermas calls ‘public opinion’ [5]. It can be a ‘medium for culture as an object of consumption’. Moreover, social media get a less of distraction from other authorities making profit from this public sphere; users can express their opinion freely on condition that their arguments are not poach others’ right. The information flows in the virtual space showing significant meaning when it appears in the specific place.

According to the aforementioned accident, there were many discussions on the social media from different areas of Thailand attempting to understand the situation and following the progress of the salvation. Some comments alleged that the Super Cheap owner defamed by himself to get profit from insurance. Some claimed that the store shut all doors preventing the goods stealing and did not let staffs flee, however Phuket people reacted to these comments and tried to criticize back with the positive opinions in order to protect the name of Super Cheap. Most comments encouraged the owner to finely pass this situation and fought back the outsiders. In a sense, people from other provinces somehow might not understand how the Super Cheap is important to the locals in terms of being the low-cost supplier for working-class and migrant groups. Unpredictably, bourgeois tended to show the good relationship with this local brand on the social media after this local supermarket’s reputation; they told the history of this store and shared their experiences related to the store’s vitae. Economically, this local supermarket is not necessary for those bourgeois as they are considered to have enough expense to buy households and foods at other higher-priced supermarkets. Yet they still wanted to keep their association with Super Cheap in another way. It can be observed that they desired to not being detached from this local symbol that connects to the proud

images of local collectivity. This local supermarket comprises more meaning to Phuket people than the value of economy and business.

As Shinar describes that the media has a power of ‘transformative agents’, which transmit symbols, rituals, and languages to society and affect the remembering of collective identity [6]; images and video-clip passing through the social media has a function as if it sends the meaning of collectivity of Phuket’s modern society. Conversely, the social media cannot produce the symbol by itself; Super Cheap is a representative of locality and economic power created by its history and relationship between customers and a brand. While Super Cheap acts as a symbolic agent, social media does its duty of collecting the social mind and amplifies the solidarity meaning to make a stand out characteristic of local modern trade. The social viewpoints have been changed from gossips to encouragements within two to three days although the salvation could not assuredly extinguish this conflagration. Still many people believe that Super Cheap can be restored and become a leader of local trading again. After a week of misfortune, remaining goods had been sold at the temporary tents in front of the disaster locale, which was supported by Phuket people and other merchandises. The daily use of this place does not exchange only goods and commodities, but also exchange memories, images, and the usages of material setting. These transformations of space convey symbolic meanings creating the formation that Low defines as ‘social construction’ [7]. Thus, Super Cheap becomes a representative of social phenomena emerging conflict, exchange, and control; the characteristics of society seemingly appear in public spheres on both reality and social media.

6. Conclusion

According to the social construction, distinct formations are contested on the public spheres showing the superimposed meaningful symbol due to the solidarity of local society. No matter how this significant space is modern supermarket exhibiting the form of globalization, the space can demonstrate the locality and traditional collective thoughts of Phuket townspeople. However, it is not easy to understand social minds in physical public space; social media seem to be the good open public sphere revealing complex issues inside. Super Cheap plays more functioned than we have thought as the unity of community’s sentiments. Ultimately, it is worthwhile to study social characters through these spaces without distracted by authority from the dominant outsiders.

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