

Effective Use of Mobile Instant Messaging App business tool LINE@ Empirical Evidence from SMEs in Thailand

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Abstract

Many companies in Thailand are using social media & mobile instant messaging (MIM) application tools for Social Commerce aims, and in their marketing communication channels and digital marketing, promotions & sales strategy. Some companies' aims are to directly increase sales as a result of the use of MIM, and this study analyzes the effectiveness of the use of the mobile instant messaging tool LINE@ by messaging application LINE corporation in increasing sales, and also its effectiveness of increasing customer segment marketing knowledge & preferences, customer communication, and CRM. The authors of this paper find that this commercial messaging tool, especially developed for SMEs, has marked results on customer communication and feedback, including public relations, target market and customer segmentation, and customer acquisition and sales. Moreover, the tool was found effective in integrated marketing and sales efforts in some cases. The study further showed that the best results were obtained by those companies that used the tools consistently and regularly, though consistently positive results were obtained in all cases. Furthermore, this study tangentially touches on the importance of the emerging MIM Platforms, and their complementary effects.

Keywords: LINE, LINE@, MIM, SMA, social media app, Thailand, instant messaging application, mobile instant messaging app

Introduction

Globally, with the wide availability and use of smartphones, mobile instant messaging (MIM) has become pervasive, and in fact, the combined user base of the top four messaging or chat apps is larger than the combined user base of the top four social networks (BI Intelligence, 2016). The world's most widely used messaging app is Facebook-owned WhatsApp - used in 109 countries, followed by Facebook Messenger – used in 49 countries (Schwartz, 2016). QQ and WeChat are the world's 3rd and 4th most used chat apps by active users, however, their market is almost exclusively one market: China. LINE is the most used messaging app in Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, and Indonesia. Thailand is LINE's second largest market in the world after Japan (Phoosuphanusorn, 2017). In Thailand, LINE is the market leader comprising over 53% of the total population. With more than 41 million users in Thailand, 94% of them, or 44 million, are mobile internet users. However, importantly, LINE is the most frequently used of any mobile chat applications in Thailand with over 33 million monthly active users (Phoosuphanusorn, 2017; DI-Marketing, 2016). For these reasons of pervasive LINE chat messaging use by consumers, this study focuses on case study companies in Thailand using its LINE@ platform service as a Business-to-Consumer (B2C) commercial chat tool for promotion, PR, marketing and sales tool to reach and interact with their customers who use LINE Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM).

Messaging apps have over 4 billion monthly active users worldwide

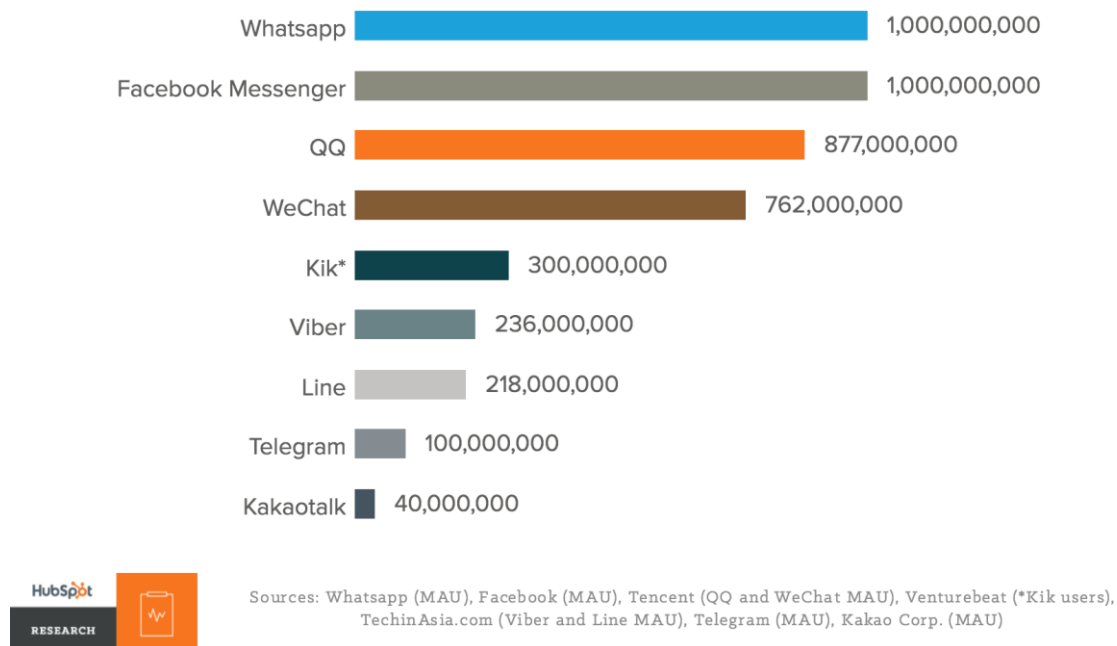


Figure 1. Monthly average users (MAUs) of messaging apps worldwide in 2016. HubSpot Research. (2016). Messaging apps have over 4B monthly active users. Retrieved April 14, 2017 from <https://research.hubspot.com/charts/messaging-apps-have-over-4b-monthly-active-user>

LINE is a product of South Korea's Naver Corporation and was developed in South Korea and Japan. As a MIM platform and application, it offers free one-to-one and group messaging, as well as free domestic and international voice and video calls, as well as numerous additional features and services, such as the LINE Official Account, LINE Shopping, LINE Business Connect, LINE@, LINE Webtoon, LINE Games, and LINE Today. These platform services are becoming the supporting pillar for LINE to become a smart portal. Line's vision is not only to bridge connection between users but to also give access to a wide range of information and services, anytime, anywhere. Since its launch in June 2011, the LINE application has grown into a global service utilized in 230 countries and ranking number one in the free app category in over 60 countries (Kim, 2016). Line's users are concentrated in four main markets—Japan, Thailand, Indonesia and Taiwan. Together, these four countries account for more than three-quarters of the service's monthly active users (MAUs) (Chadha, 2017).

LINE Corporation enjoys a very loyal network of users that creates opportunities for business looking to capitalize on this loyalty. The users in LINE's strongest four markets are more engaged than usual because so many of their friends and family use the Line app, and they use it regularly for social communications. Line stated in documents that 61 percent of its monthly active users are on the app on a daily basis, but that figure jumps to 73 percent in Line's four biggest countries. High engagement like that gives Line and its LINE@ platform service business users an opportunity to use the app as a robust social and business platform which goes beyond chat to include services and value-add beyond just messaging. That's

crucial for not only LINE making money from messaging but also for its corporate customer users to profit, as it keeps users in the Line app ecosystem (or platform) rather than in competitor app platforms (Russell, 2016). Evidence of high engagement by users in Thailand is (illustrated in figures 2 and 3), which show that LINE is the most frequently used chat app in Thailand.

This study focuses narrowly on the business mobile instant messaging (MIM) platform service tool LINE@ in Thailand. LINE@ is a service provided by LINE to allow businesses to communicate with their customers and potential customers (nominally referred to as friends). LINE@ allows businesses to send messages to all users who added their LINE@ account as a friend. Some of the important features of the service which are relevant to this study are:

- Feature allowing businesses to use LINE@ as a marketing, sales, and communication push message tool to send rich messages such as Broadcasting messages coupons & promotions, notices, event notifications, and just-in information.
- Business accounts can further communicate with clients via rich broadcast messages, 1:1 chat, and Timeline posts
- Answering of customers' inquiries in real-time through 1-on-1 chats.
- Use of the Auto Reply feature when company personnel are unavailable to respond.
- Post various types of content (photos, videos, etc.) to the business LINE@ Home page to advertise their company.
- Allowing businesses to create content that invites users to participate, such as questionnaires and polls. Business can conduct surveys on their products and services to gain information on user attributes based on gender, age, and other factors.
- Statistics allow tracking of information obtained, including checking changes to the daily number of users who have friended the company's account, responses to company's Timeline, and allowing tracking by specific time periods.

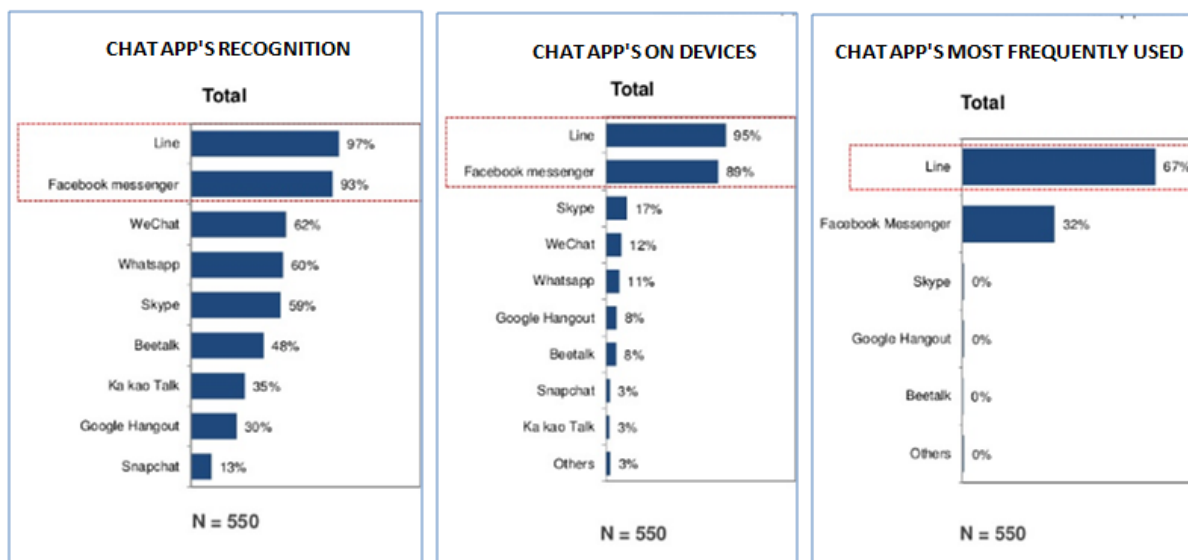


Figure 2. Survey of Chat Apps recognition in Thailand in 2016.

DI-Marketing [8] DI-Marketing. (Aug 2016). Study about Chat App Usage in Thailand. Retrieved on Mar 21, 2017 from <http://www.di-online-survey.com/en/2016/08/08/chat-apps-usage-in-thailand>

Monthly Active Line Users in Select Countries in Asia-Pacific, Q4 2014-Q4 2016

millions

	Indonesia, Taiwan and Thailand	Japan	Total
Q4 2014	62	51	113
Q1 2015	70	54	123
Q2 2015	76	55	130
Q3 2015	81	57	138
Q4 2015	87	58	145
Q1 2016	91	61	152
Q2 2016	95	62	157
Q3 2016	98	64	162
Q4 2016	101	66	167

Note: numbers may not add up to total due to rounding

Source: Line, "Q4 2016 Earnings Results," Jan 25, 2017

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www.eMarketer.com

Figure 3. Monthly Average Users (MAUs) of Messaging Apps in Select countries in 2016.
Chadha, R. 2017 eMarketer. (2016). Monthly Active Line Users in Select Countries in Asia-Pacific, Q4 2014-Q4 2016. Retrieved April 11, 2017 from
<https://www.emarketer.com/Article/Lines-User-Base-Falls-Social-Messaging-Space-Gets-Crowded/1015126>

Literature review

Three authors recently undertook and published an extensive systematic literature review of the implications of social media marketing. One of the main results of that review focuses on how companies are able to extract the maximum possible value from utilizing such channels for managing their relationships with clients. That comprehensive review confirms that businesses are increasingly and rapidly adopting effective social media and social messaging applications to communicate and market to their customers. (Alves et al., 2016).

The *Customer engagement process* can be broadly defined as repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in various activities between the companies and users (Vivek et al., 2012). With respect to B2C or consumer-facing businesses, many studies have successfully argued that consumer engagement is an important strategy for firms to be more competitive, and to increase sales and profits (Porter et al., 2011; Neff, 2007). Online social media serves as a technology-driven application for such frequent interaction in the customer engagement process.

The development of Instant Messaging applications with social media continued the frequency and regularity of that interaction, and with the prevalence and wide availability and usage of smartphones, *Mobile Instant Messaging* (MIM) has continued this technology-driven trend for frequent customer interaction and engagement. Companies, observing the rise and prominence of online social networks, and later mobile social networks and messaging, have been using social media for customer engagement in their communications, promotions and marketing, CRM, and sales efforts for decades. In the early years, companies mostly used these networks for building brand reputation, communicating with customers, creating customer relationship, or measuring customer satisfaction (Harris & Rae, 2009; Jansen et al., 2009).

In fact, social media was noted in the early literature as the one of the biggest phenomena in communication seen in the last few decades (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Saavedra et al., 2014). Businesses have traditionally managed their customer engagement through the use of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) methods. But the rise of social media, and mobile instant messaging have given consumers and customers much more interactivity and power in their relationships with vendor companies, and businesses have to look at new models of CRM in the age of social media and MIM (Malthouse et al., 2013). Today, companies recognize that they need a social CRM strategy, and are increasing their use of social media apps; including mobile instant messaging (MIM) tools as well.

There has been a clear indication in recent literature of the rapid adoption by companies of mobile instant messaging apps (MIMs), sometimes also referred to in the literature as social media apps (SMAs). Many of these apps, including LINE@, can be used both on mobile smartphones and non-mobile devices, such as PCs (Wang et al., 2016). Furthermore, there have been studies into both the adoption and effectiveness of social media tools by SMEs. However, very little empirical research has focused on SMEs in this respect, and especially in the B2C space (Wamba et al., 2016).

In a recent study, there were documented improvements in communications and business performance by SMEs in their use of SMAs in the B2B part of their businesses. Among those business performance enhancements, specific improvements were noted in the use of SMAs for business communications, establishing visibility & deeper two-way communication among present and potential customers. Clear improvements were also noted in targeting customer needs, which leads to innovation in product and service offerings (Wang et al., 2016).

These clear developments and increasing adoption of social media apps and mobile instant messaging apps are part of an emerging and developing trend towards customer-centric digital communications strategies by companies. The tools available in social media platforms and recently developed tools, such as LINE@ provide for catering to an increasingly connected and informed customer base (Lokteva, 2015).

Facebook, as the largest competitor with the broadest penetration worldwide in the MIM space, (as noted in Figure 1) (HubSpot Research, 2016), and owner of Messenger, WhatsApp, and Instagram, presents perhaps the greatest global competitive threat to all other MIM platforms in the near-medium term. In 2016, Facebook released its 10-year strategic plan, and as (Figure 4) indicates, from 2016-2021 that plan is squarely centered on strengthening 6 elements of the platform, 3 of which are in the MIM space.

This strengthening and importance of Messenger for business use was confirmed by company management on April 19, 2017 (Frier, 2017). As (figure 4) shows, one of the 6 most important product & service strategies of Facebook until the year 2021 will be its Mobile Instant Messaging Services (Messenger, WhatsApp & Instagram). This disclosed strategy by the market leader in social media and messaging shows the level of importance Facebook attaches to the strategies using platform services like LINE is using with its LINE@ service.



Figure 4. Facebook 20 year roadmap 2016. Facebook. (2016). Facebook 10 Year Roadmap, 2016. Retrieved from <http://mashable.com/2016/04/12/facebook-10-year-plan/#BQEotp8eqGqF>

With respect to LINE, various studies have studied and documented the effectiveness of LINE's Official Account, which is used by companies to establish their official presence on the LINE platform. Unlike Silicon Valley-developed social networks such as Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter, which let companies join for free and then try to sell them Ads, LINE charges for official accounts on the platform. In a recent study in Taiwan, one of LINE's major four country markets, a university which set up an official account was successful in attracting more friends than any other university or college account in Taiwan. In that Taiwan study, the researchers found, among other relevant findings, insofar as in communications, that use of LINE reinforced the horizontal connections between different units of the University and publicized information to maintain internal and external relations. The LINE Official Account was found to have been able to achieve timely, two-way, and diverse interactions, and to be an important communications tool (Tien & Yen, 2016).

Similar to LINE's Official Account, but designed for SMEs and to be most cost effective for targeted use, LINE@ also allows for commercial messages to show up in the same streams as private chats, (only after a LINE user has chosen to follow a particular company or brand), and gives the SME a higher profile and their message a more personal appeal and greater sense of urgency than other forms of social marketing such as Facebook Ads and Twitter's promoted tweets. The company using LINE@ gets a direct connection to the customer. It's very powerful and offers the potential to be very compelling (McCracken, 2015). Furthermore, even though both LINE and WeChat offer language and other localization for each local market they operate in, LINE has escalated the localization concept to specifically tailoring its service in every country it enters. This includes special culture-specific stickers and other market-specific tailoring (McCracken, 2015). These localization, customization and market-tailoring aspects contribute to the personal, direct connection that the messaging app has with its users in each market area, and by extension, the companies that use LINE@.

In Thailand, one recent study found that many Thai SME companies considered social commerce platforms, including Facebook, LINE, and Instagram, supportive to their companies in terms of communicating with customers, reaching new market segments, support marketing activities and sales, and that trust, as an antecedent factor, is the most influential factor affecting both the use of social commerce and user satisfaction. Thai users are also concerned with the reliability, ability, and ethics of the system. (Vongsraluan & Bhatiasevi, 2016). These findings in Thailand, combined with the findings in the literature above, continue to point to the compelling & unique nature of social messaging platforms in dealing with customers, and in specific, the targeted appeal of MIM platforms.

With regard to the increasing importance of the platform business model (or ecosystem) in social marketing and messaging, this exact issue with respect to LINE has been recently studied. As the author of that study noted, “LINE is particularly impressive as a new platform business model because it is one of the first companies to establish a platform strategy in the MIM market, which is rapidly growing within the mobile industry.” This business model creates value for both LINE itself and its business customers (LINE platform business users). The LINE@ tool, in utilizing the LINE platform provides its MIM service to end-users (demand side) for free and then offers this secured pool of end-users to developers and content providers (supply side) to induce them to participate on the platform (Kim, 2016, pp. 6-10). Recent pronouncements by company management have verified the intention by LINE to pursue and expand the LINE platform business model and enable SMEs to leverage its power through the business tools such as LINE’s Official Account, and LINE@. In addition to the above studies documenting the effectiveness of the platform business model, LINE’s success in the Thai market has been attributed to its simplicity and cost savings. (Phoosuphanusorn, 2017).

Procedures for Data Design, Methodology, and Theory

As this research aim is preliminary descriptive research based on multiple case study methodology as described below, no separate conceptual framework or theory has been employed. It has been recommended that qualitative research should follow a four step approach that contains decisions regarding (1) the research topic, which should be new or under-researched; (2) research methodology; (3) data and transparency of methods; and (4) a theory that properly serves the research aim (Birkinshaw et al., 2011).

(1) Research topic

The topic of using social media applications and tools by business has been studied, but rarely studying the actual business practice and purposes of MIM used in businesses themselves, and there has never been a published study of the relatively new tool LINE@ by LINE Corporation.

(2) Methodology

The intention of this paper is to explore to what extent the MIM application LINE@ is effective when used in Thailand by SMEs. To explore this situation, a case study approach is most workable (Stake, 1995). In fact, this study employs a multi-case study design (Yin, 2008) precisely to study Thai companies’ actual practice in Thailand in using LINE@. This paper utilizes the ideas of (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) who maintain that the process of using multiple cases can lead to theory building opportunities. By further using replication logic, which dictates that over multiple cases to explore the same phenomenon, there is a greater probability to find repeatable patterns that result in some kinds of generalizations, that therefore patterns and theory that can be revealed. While traditional quantitative research can reveal some patterns, a case study can examine the depth of context and usage in actual business practice.

Moreover, due to the newness of the MIM tool LINE@ and the highly confidential nature of companies’ communications, CRM, marketing and promotions plans, proper quantitative methods are not available, except as noted in the literature above. Combined with the available quantitative studies, these case study patterns can reinforce and confirm those results. This research design was chosen here precisely because of the difficult nature of obtaining confidential and sensitive strategic information unless directly from the users of the

service (the case study companies herein); do to the newness of the studied platform service LINE@; and the availability to place the researchers as interviewers in a qualified and trusted relationship, over a meaningful period of time. Moreover, qualitative case study on this topic can best be undertaken by those situated in Thailand to observe and study the case study companies, and conduct interviews about their business practice.

(3) Data collection methods

The data sourcing process for multiple firm case studies follows the principles of purposeful or criterion sampling choosing a sample that has the characteristics relevant to the research question(s). Criterion sampling involves the selection of cases that meet a set of a priori criteria important to the research (Dimitratos et al., 2010). In this narrow project, the investigated firms had to (1) be based or operate in Thailand, (Thailand was chosen as relevant because Thailand has the second highest LINE application users in the world, and because LINE@ is a relatively new tool that was launched in Thailand among the first countries chosen), (2) use both offline and online communications, CRM, marketing, and promotions tools and methods, (3) have a business model that provides products or services directly to consumers (as consumers are the largest users of LINE application), and, (4) devote meaningful time, personnel and resources to their online tools.

Additionally, though not a specific criterion requirement, the specifically chosen firms for the case study, though all serving consumer and business customers, each operate in a different area. This was deemed important to study if there are consistencies of findings across business verticals. In each case, the researchers had full access to in-depth interviewing of responsible managers and executives. As the criteria were very specific, sensitive as to each studied firm's business strategies, and required confidentiality to observe and study, the researchers executed a non-disclosure Agreement with LINE Corporation as well as assurances of confidentiality to both LINE and its client companies who are the case study subjects of this study.

In addition to the above specific qualifying factors, in order to ensure reliable, valid, high quality data collection, case study companies were carefully chosen and vetted before introductions so as to represent cross sections of diverse businesses and to also represent willing and engaged participants in the study. As a result, the identities of all the case study companies are undisclosed in this study. Secondary information and primary information was collected about each company. Several rounds of open-ended, semi-structured interviews, structured, and in-depth interviews were conducted over 9 months at the beginning of the study and near the end of the study in an effort to understand the changes observed over time, and reasons for the changes.

All interviews were personal interviews that were conducted in Thailand, in both Thai and English languages, in-person with key responsible managers and staff using the studied LINE@ platform service. Four firms were initially selected, but one firm exited the study so those results are not included as they are not complete. The sample of three final firms located in Thailand seems relatively small but reasonable considering the precise and narrow selection standards (see the 4 criteria listed above) and the fact that the research topic involves highly confidential information rarely disclosed to outsiders in the course of business. Furthermore, the interviews and data collection occurred during the period from mid-2016 to mid-2017, so the results show contemporary and recent results collected over a sustained period of time.

Moreover, this precise topic is under researched so far. (Yin, 1994) recommended at least three to four cases for multiple case study research with literal replication. This study initially started with 4 cases, but one of the company cases withdrew so the final sample is 3 cases, which is sufficient.

Data Analysis Methods. All the case study companies were asked both a series of specific questions which were the same for all case study companies, as well as a series of tailored questions relevant to each case study company's specific business. The questions were developed to elicit both close ended and open ended responses among a set of marketing, sales, customer relationship management, and communications issues common to all industries. These questions were asked to determine whether the case study companies experienced tangible improvement or results in any of the questions areas.

These series of questions were administered both at the beginning and end of the study for comparison purposes. The interviews were also semi-structured in that the researchers engaged in deeper exploration with the companies on tangential points, common problems and issues that were related to the main topics. Both content and grounded analyses were conducted on interview answers and in-depth interviews, with patterns, common and emergent themes identified and analyzed.

(4) Theory and research aim

When using multiple-case studies, each case must be carefully selected so that it either: 1) predicts similar results (literal replication); 2) predicts contrasting results but for predictable reasons (theoretical replication); or 3) if all cases turn out as predicted, there is compelling support for the initial propositions. Replication logic procedures assume a fundamental theoretical framework for research (Yin, 2008). Thus, the underlying logic is replication, that is, the idea of treating a series of cases as a series of experiments with each case serving to confirm or disconfirm the hypotheses. In replication logic, cases which confirm emergent relationships enhance the internal strength, consistency, validity and generalizability of those relationships.

The major research aim of this paper is the hypothesis that MIM tools for business, using dominant platforms in specific markets with deep user penetration of the underlying MIM application can result in specifically measurable positive results in customer communications, increased sales, more targeted marketing and customer segmentation, and promotions. This hypothesis has not yet been documented in the literature.

Findings & Discussion

In order to utilize replication logic in multiple case studies, each case must be carefully selected so that it either (a) predicts similar results or (b) predicts contrasting results for reasons that can be anticipated (Yin, 2008). In this study, all companies selected did produce similar results to varying degrees, so that this study meets the test under replication logic criterion (a) above. Thus, according to Yin, this study is designed to predict similar results. Table 1 displays an overview of the firms selected for the study.

Total friends, (customers or potential customers) of the 3 case study firms numbered 25,000 collectively at the beginning of the study, and 36,332 at the conclusion of the study. A fourth case study's results were not included because the company withdrew from the study before the results could be compiled.

Table 1. Classification of firms selected for multiple case study

Firm Industry	Case	Annual Sales US\$ million *(2016)	Employees *(2016)	Employees in Thailand	Headquarters
1. Roaming Telecom Service company		Undisclosed	<100	<100	Thailand
2. Amusement Park		Undisclosed	<100	<100	Thailand
3. 5 Star Hotel F&B (largest global hotel operator)		10,000	240,000	Undisclosed, one of 60 hotel properties in Thailand	France

* Measured at the time the specific case studied

Table 1 provides the classification of firms selected for multiple case study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the outset of the study, and also at the end of the study period, which interval averaged 6 months/case. The increase of potential customers and customers (friends) are shown in table 2. The cases were analyzed according to the questions as replicated in Table 4.

Table 2. Analysis of friends (customers and potential customers) examined

Case Analysis (n=3 cases)	Sample Mean*	SD**	Min	Max
a) Number of friends at beginning of study	8,333	20.82	6000	10000
b) Number of friends at end of study	12,111	5334.86	6832	17500

* a) Based on 25,000 friends start of study, and; b) Based on 36,332 friends end of study

** SD=Standard deviation

As shown in Table 3, though the interviews were extensive, primary relevant examination was along five question parameters, labeled A-E, as follows: 'Has your number of friends increased from the first interview? As subject A, 'Have you increased directly measured sales as a result of LINE@?', as subject B, 'Has LINE@ helped you to research and target customers more precisely?', as subject C, 'Is LINE@ one of your main customer communications and marketing tools' as subject D, and 'Do you plan to increase your use of LINE@ from present level? as subject E.

Table 3. Research Findings results parameters

Interview Analysis (n= 3 cases)	Combined Sample % answering positive	Actual of Total positive
A) Has your number of friends increased from the first interview?	100	
B) Have you increased directly measured sales as a result of LINE@?	100	
C) Has LINE@ helped you to research and target customers more precisely?	100	
D) Is LINE@ one of your main customer communications and marketing tools?	66.6	
E) Do you plan to increase your use of LINE@ from present level?	75*	

* Comprising two positive responses, and one qualified positive response assigned a value

These research results from actual companies using LINE@ in Thailand, verify, confirm and clarify the trends we see in the literature. The results show that not only did every case study company increase friends (customers and potential customers), but that they did so in varying degrees for predictable reasons. As in the other criteria, those companies that actively and regularly use the MIM tool LINE@ enjoyed the greatest percentage of increase of friends, and in fact in the company with the most consistent use of the tool, friends increased by 95% during the six month study period. However, the study also shows that even those companies who do not commit a sustained level of effort to using the tool, enjoyed increases in friends. Following replication logic, all the sample firms conformed in producing similar results, with the only variables being the size of the percentage increase in friends, and in plans to increase usage of LINE@. In both cases of slight variance, the percentages were lower for anticipated reasons. In the case of increases of friends, those companies that continually used the LINE@ tool without interruption, experienced the greatest increases.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, all of the case study firms experienced increased sales from their use of LINE@ which they were able to directly attribute to the use of LINE@ through the measuring tools provided as part of the LINE@ service package. Among the reasons cited for the directly attributed increase in sales is the ability to research customer intentions and preferences through the use of the research functions of LINE@, which allowed them to target more precisely their market segments, and therefore, design targeted marketing and sales programs. Among the relevant findings, include the following responses from case study firms:

[CEO, Roaming Telecom Service Firm (Thailand private company), Firm 1]

We have integrated other elements of the LINE platform to drive sales via the LINE@ application. For example, we have set up our new YouTube TV show with its own LINE@ account to drive customers to the LINE@ platform. LINE@ allows us to discover the age and sex of our customers so that we can custom design targeted sales programs for these groups. Our LINE@ promotional activities directly lead to additional sales which we have verified both offline as well as through the tool. Line@ also allows us to up-sell with many customers, offering a way to increase revenue per user. We increased friends 95% in six months, and are very close to being the number one company on LINE@ in our industry segment.

[CEO, Amusement Park, (Thailand private company) Firm 2]

One of our goals was to double friends and customers from 10,000 to 20,000 during the period of the study, but we only succeeded in increasing to 12,000 due to service-disrupting construction and improvements we are making to the park. The push broadcast promotions on LINE@ are one of the valuable features on the LINE platform for us that have helped increase sales. The research functions on LINE@ allow us to measure precisely our LINE@ users and to also gauge effectiveness of other online and offline communication and marketing efforts.

[Director, F&B, Hotel, (single location 5-star hotel, part of one of world's largest hotel chains) Firm 3]

As a single property in a global hotel chain, we use LINE@ only for additional promotions of our Food and Beverage outlets. As these are profit centers, we must use additional tools beyond what global corporate provides for us to attract local customers. We have discovered that LINE@ is particularly effective on low traffic or low customer F&B days or periods. By using LINE@ targeting promotions during these times, we are able to supplement revenues we would not normally be able to do. Checking and measuring statistics in LINE@ is even more important for us now, as we also have to coordinate and measure our hotel loyalty program members, and our credit card and corporate and travel voucher programs, as well as other integrated marketing efforts.

The two criteria in which we saw variance of importance (though for predictable and explainable reasons) among the case study firms were regarding whether the tool LINE@ has become one of the firm's main customer communication and marketing tools, and whether they plan to continue its use at current levels or increase use of LINE@.

Concerning the question of whether LINE@ has become one of the company's main customer communication and marketing tools, the results were positive in 2 of the 3 case study companies, and in fact in one of the companies, LINE@ has become the main tool and platform for all customer communication and marketing. This result confirms the literature on platform importance. For the one case study business where the answer was negative, it can be explained by two factors: 1) this case study company, though acting as a stand-alone SME in its use of LINE@, is part of a multinational company, with competing global communications and marketing directives. In this case study, the use of LINE@ was very narrow but effective, in increasing traffic and customers to the hotel's F&B outlets.

Finally, the last question of whether the client case study firms intend to increase the use of LINE@ or not, we have a less than unanimous result, though still compelling. Two of the case study companies enthusiastically stated their intentions to increase its use, and the one slightly non-conforming case study company stated their intention to increase its use, but only in narrow, targeted promotions of one part of its business, as stated above, due to global corporate communication and marketing integration issues.

[Vice President, Roaming Telecom Service Firm (Thailand private company), Firm 1]

LINE@ is an important part of our both our integrated customer communications and marketing strategy and as a standalone product. We use the MIM tool as both standalone and complementary to our other channels and tools. We use many of the features of LINE@ and the platform abilities of LINE, and will increase our use as appropriate.

[CEO, Amusement Park, (Thailand private company) Firm 2]

LINE@ has become our main and most important tool for customer communications, promotions, and marketing. Because of the high penetration of LINE users in our target markets, LINE@ is an optimal tool for us. We use the tool complementary to other tools, as an integrated communications and marketing program, and it is not used as a standalone tool.

[Director, F&B @ Hotel, (single location 5-star hotel, part of one of world's largest hotel chains) Firm 3]

Because of our global parent policies, and our many other channels of co-marketing and promotions, LINE@ is not a main part of our overall customer communications, and marketing plan. However, because of its targeted effectiveness, we do use LINE@ in tightly focused promotional activity which we have seen lead to direct additional sales. As we have recently had a company reorganization, we do not have plans to increase our use of LINE@ until our company policies become clearer.

Conclusions, Limitations and Implications

Conclusions. These research results in business practice in Thailand, Southeast Asia, and one of the four major markets for LINE support the prevailing views and global trends in the literature of the growing importance of MIM for companies, especially SMEs. They further validate some of the reasons for the rapid and increasing adoption by firms of these social media tools. Most importantly, in the limited case studies herein, concrete and meaningful results were obtained by the companies that used LINE@ in a regular and frequent manner. The researchers' aims and objectives were to study and analyze the effectiveness of the use of the mobile instant messaging tool LINE@ by SMEs and companies in Thailand. This study successfully showed that the results from companies using LINE@ are increased sales, increased customer engagement & communication, and generally, enhancement of other online efforts as well as offline marketing and promotions efforts.

Results Somewhat Consistent with Previous Research. The results of this study, even though unique in studying the LINE@ platform service of LINE, are consistent with findings in previous research with respect to the effectiveness of other aspects of LINE offerings. For example, as cited in the literature review herein, various studies have documented the effectiveness of LINE's Official Account (Tien & Yen, 2016). Furthermore, in Thailand, one recent study found that many Thai SME companies considered the LINE app supportive to their companies in terms of communicating with customers, reaching new market segments, and supporting marketing activities and sales (Vongsraluan & Bhatiasavi, 2016). Finally, research in South Korea (Kim, 2016, pp. 6-10) also confirms the effectiveness of the platform approach, which was also observed in this study of LINE@.

As a result of the research findings in this study, combined with the existing literature, and applying the theory of replication logic, it is reasonable to conclude that a sizeable percentage of SME businesses in Thailand, and perhaps in the other 3 major markets for LINE, Japan, Taiwan & Indonesia could similarly benefit from adopting and actively using LINE@. Importantly, the results of this study may be applicable to other MIM providers that have deep penetration and numerous monthly average users (MAU) in any country and with similar rich platforms and MIM features, but may not be applicable to those that do not share these characteristics. This study suggest that other companies should explore further use and development of their MIMs to produce similar results.

Limitations of Conclusions and Implications. It could be argued that the firms selected in this study are not representative of all commercial firms operating in Thailand, SE Asia, or globally, and that is strictly true. The case study companies represent only a few of the many customer-facing industries and business models. Furthermore, the replication logic model (Yin, 2008) employed in applying these research results to diverse businesses is sound, but would require more empirical studies to determine broader conclusions. However, though the case study was limited in scope, these case study firms were intentionally chosen as companies that deal with consumers who use LINE but that are dissimilar in their products or service, business models, and customers. It could be argued that, therefore, similar results would be

forthcoming for many disparate companies, subject to the conclusion limitations noted in the above paragraph as to large numbers of MAU, and as to features of the tool. Furthermore, one of the three sample firms was dissimilar the most in that it was not strictly an SME, but rather, part of a large global chain of hotels. However, for purposes of its use of LINE@, the company was chosen because its use of LINE@ was strictly limited to attracting local customers and others in increasing sales of the Food and Beverage parts of only one hotel, which smaller-scale localized focus makes it resemble an SME's use more closely. More study needs to be done of firms using LINE@ in Thailand as well as in other countries. Importantly, more study needs to be done of firms using the competitor's MIM products in other countries and for business-to-business commercial application as well.

Certainly a more inclusive Thai, Asian, and global study needs to be done regarding the use and efficacy of MIM and accompanying platforms that are emerging. Finally, again as a cautionary note for future studies, one could question the efficacy of the results in any market where the MIM platform did not have the requisite scale, in terms of Monthly Average Users (MAUs), and it would be expected by these authors that the results may be less effective where the scale of MAUs on any MIM platform did not reach a certain number or percentage, though we have not studied nor defined what that percentage might be. In this study, this factor was not an issue because LINE has massive and dominant penetration, adoption and high MAU of the consumer market.

Implications. Notwithstanding the above, the implications for businesses using MIM in platforms where there are large numbers of potential customers are considerable. These implications have been shown with respect to MIM messenger apps which are dominant in their markets. If most of a firm's potential target consumer customers are using a particular mobile instant messenger application in their daily life for social and other purposes, it follows that these customers would prefer to use that same application in their interaction with commercial providers of products and services. There may be one caveat to this assumption that customers prefer to use the same chat application for both personal and business communication: in the study, though not formally a research question and findings parameter, it was observed in some of the case study companies that, because LINE@ offers a feature to users to block their company friends messages, the case study companies developed strategies to avoid being blocked by customers by ensuring their ongoing communications had value to their customers, and were not intrusive or annoying. This could be a further refinement of the value chain where customers can clearly communicate their desires through the use of blocking communications, as well as allowing communications and creates the potential for additional rich research about customer retention and other aspects of customer engagement.

The literature review further confirms that users of a particular favorite MIM application are highly reluctant to change, due to the fact that their social networks, information networks and communications with businesses are becoming centralized on one MIM platform. Furthermore, this lends weight to the trend that existing dominant MIM platforms in each market have an inherent competitive advantage or head start on other competitors (Tang & Lee, 2015; Gloria & Achyar, 2016). This unique aspect of MIM loyalty is striking in cases like Blackberry's BBM Messenger in Indonesia. As of April 2016, the app was installed on 87.5% of all Android devices in the country, far surpassing any other country in terms of BBM use. In fact, when examining the install rate in other countries, where it might be considered obsolete, it illustrates this Indonesian loyalty to a platform that most of the world is no longer using. In the U.S., only 0.42% of Androids had the BBM app, with Australia and the UK showing slightly higher use (Schwartz, 2016).

This MIM user loyalty means that companies like LINE, which are dominant in certain markets, should devote considerable attention to capitalizing on their dominant position with respect to their business MIM products and features. Similarly, competitors like WeChat, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and the others that are dominant in some markets should emulate this strategy and either strengthen and feature-enrich their existing commercial MIM products, or develop new ones that incorporate the features of LINE@ in a platform approach. In this respect, LINE@ can be perceived as having a first mover advantage in multiple markets, at least with respect to SMEs. It was noted in the literature that WeChat is perhaps the greatest innovator in respect of features on the portal, but due to the fact that its users are largely confined to one country, China, and due to the difficulty of changing users' preference of MIM, this creates opportunities for other MIM portal firms to innovate to forestall competition and defend their important markets where they already enjoy large MAU and market share percentage.

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