Internet-based Media Use and Nv-tong-zhi Empowerment in Taipei:

An exploratory study

based on interviews with 9 nv-tong-zhi individuals

Author: Cheng Gong
Thesis Supervisor: Cecilia Strand
Master Thesis
Submitted to the Department of Informatics and Media
Uppsala University, June 2015
For the Master's Degree of Social Science
In the Field of Media and Communication Studies
Abstract

Media impact on LGBT people’s empowerment is not a new topic to media and communication studies, however, the extent to which lesbians’ use of internet-based media have contribute to their empowerment in a non-western context remains under-researched. This research attempts to respond to the question with an exploration of the relation between nv-tong-zhi’s use of internet-based media and their empowerment by the lens of their own lived experiences in Taipei.

An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) method was applied in this research, and thematic analysis was conducted on the data gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that nv-tong-zhi individuals’ use of internet-based media have brought about increases in self-efficacy, self-esteem and competence as well as active engagement in empowerment interventions by providing more valuable information and more convenient and accessible social interactions. However, the contribution of using internet-based media remains contextual and temporary. In some cases, using internet-based media may bring in subjective sense of insecurity. Furthermore, there has emerged a paradox between psychological empowerment and collective empowerment that deserves further explanatory studies in the future.

Keywords: the Internet, ICTs, empowerment, lesbian, nv-tong-zhi, Taipei
Acknowledgements

First and Foremost, I am grateful to all of my informants and participants, who generously shared their knowledge, cherished memories and life experiences with me.

I want to thank my examiner Else Nygren, who has offered valuable advice and encouragement. Also, I want to thank my supervisor Cecilia Strand, who has taught me how to independently conduct a research.

Furthermore, I express great thankfulness to Xiao-Qun Wang, Xiaoyun Gong, Xin Wang, Yang-Yi Zheng, Zejin Yin and Juliana Stawe, for being inspiring and supportive, even some of them are miles apart.

Finally, I owe my deepest gratitude to my parents who never gave up on me.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 1

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... 2

Table of Figures .................................................................................................................... 5

List of Abbreviations ......................................................................................................... 6

1. INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 7
   1.1. Nv-tong-zhi: An Appropriation of Lesbian Identity in Taiwan ........................................... 9
   1.2. Previous Research ........................................................................................................ 11
       1.2.1. Media Impact on LGBT Empowerment .................................................................. 11
           1.2.1.1. Traditional Mass media ............................................................................... 11
           1.2.1.2. Internet-based Digital Media ......................................................................... 12
       1.2.2. Media Impact on LGBT Empowerment in Contemporary Taiwan ....................... 14
       1.2.3. The Significance of Media in Lesbian Empowerment in Taiwan ......................... 15
       1.2.4. Concluding Thoughts ....................................................................................... 17
   1.3. Research Purpose and Research Questions .................................................................. 19
   1.4. Outline of The Thesis ............................................................................................... 20

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS .................................................................................... 21
   2.1. Empowerment: Theoretical Understandings ............................................................. 22
       2.1.1. A Cross-disciplinary Framework ......................................................................... 22
       2.1.2. Psychological Empowerment ............................................................................ 25
   2.2. Information, Communication and ICTs in Empowerment ........................................ 28
       2.2.1. ICTs and Empowerment .................................................................................. 29
       2.2.2. The Internet ..................................................................................................... 30
   2.3. Media Impact and Media Use: Audience-centered Tradition and Interpretative Perspective ......................................................................................................................... 34
       2.3.1. Transcending the Uses and Gratifications Approach ............................................. 36
       2.3.2. An Interpretative Action Theoretical Perspective .................................................. 37
       2.3.3. The “Media Use as Social Action” Approach ...................................................... 39
   2.4. Summary ..................................................................................................................... 41

3. METHODOLOGY .............................................................................................................. 43
   3.1. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) ........................................................ 43
       3.1.1. Research Design: Case study ............................................................................ 44
       3.1.2. Research Method: In-depth Semi-structured Interview ......................................... 46
   3.2. Research Procedure: Data Collection ......................................................................... 48
       3.2.1. Approaching Participants .................................................................................. 48
       3.2.2. Preparations for Interviews .............................................................................. 49
Table of Figures

**Figure 1:** Overview of Opportunity Structure – Agency Framework ...... 23

**Figure 2:** The Process of Defining the Situation........................................... 38

**Figure 3:** The “Media Use as Social Action” Model........................................ 41
List of Abbreviations

BBS          Bulletin Board System
Hotline      Taiwan Tong-zhi Hotline Association
ICTs         Information and Communication Technologies
IPA          Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LGBT         Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
Ptt          Ptt Bulletin Board System
1. INTRODUCTION

Empowerment cannot be passively enjoyed, but has to be actively achieved and guarded.

(Hamelink 1995, 12)

Empowerment as a term refers to “a feeling of self-confidence or agency”, “the ability to make choices and enact them” and “the way of groups and individuals being perceived and responded to by others” (Arnold 2012, 78). A number of empirical studies have substantiated that increases in empowerment, in terms of voice, participation and civil liberties, are associated with development outcomes in terms of economic growth, social change and governance enhancement (Narayan 2002; Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006). Therefore, many development agencies, such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have shown growing interest in incorporating empowerment objectives into the agenda to reduce poverty, secure gender equality and protect human rights (Narayan 2002; Narayan 2005; Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006; “Communication for Empowerment: Global Report” 2010).

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been clearly highlighted as a key catalyst in promoting empowerment in the reports and strategy papers of these development agencies. For instance, “connectivity through telephones, radio, television, and the Internet can enable the voices of even the most marginal and excluded citizens to be heard, promoting greater government responsiveness” (Narayan 2002, 73), and “radio and mobile telephony are potentially and increasingly important for the disenfranchised in least developed countries” (“Communication for Empowerment: Global Report” 2010, 17–18). In line with the increased focus on “media for empowerment” in development discourse, researchers in the field of media and communication studies have paid increasing attention to investigate the relation between
empowerment for the marginalized people and the development of ICTs, in terms of different media forms and communication types (Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop 2004; Leung 2009).

As a revolutionary development of ICTs, the Internet allows the communication of many to many on a global scale for the first time and has opened up a new world of communication (Castells 2001, 3–4). The Internet has created a social vacuum of anonymity, which assisted sexual minorities to grasp an unprecedented opportunity to present and participant in the struggle against oppression, marginalization and exclusion because of their sexual preference. However, the conceptual and western-oriented understanding of the Internet for queer empowerment has cast a strong suspicion – can this global cyberspace established by virtue of the Internet be really useful to empower LGBT people globally, namely in a variety of transcultural contexts (Ho 2011, 103)?

This study attempts to respond to the question via an exploration of internet-based media’s contribution to lesbian empowerment in the particular context of Taipei city, the capital city of a mature capitalist Chinese-speaking society, i.e. Taiwan, and also one of the most prosperous and progressive gay-friendly cities in East Asia ("Taipei Hosts Asia’s Largest Ever Gay Pride Parade" 2014; “Taipei LGBTs March Proud and Loud in Asia’s Largest Gay Parade” 2014; “Taipei: A Rising Star for Gay Travelers - Taipei Times” 2014).
1.1. Nv-tong-zhi: An Appropriation of Lesbian Identity in Taiwan

As a developed capitalist society, Taiwan has witnessed a great progress in LGBT empowerment in recent decades, e.g. Taiwan is the first to put same-sex marriage bill on the agenda of legislative session in East Asia (“First in East Asia, Taiwan Parliament Reviews Gay Marriage Bill” 2015); Taipei, the capital city of Taiwan, has held the biggest gay pride parade in Asia every year since the year of 2003 (“Taipei Hosts Asia’s Largest Ever Gay Pride Parade” 2014; “Taipei LGBTs March Proud and Loud in Asia’s Largest Gay Parade” 2014); Taipei was voted by LGBT websites as one of the favorite cities for gay travelers (“Taipei: A Rising Star for Gay Travelers - Taipei Times” 2014).

In this context, lesbians in Taiwan however, up to present have to face discrimination throughout their life time from five social institutions - the medical profession, by introducing a discourse which is constantly pathologizing homosexuality; the family, which underlies the marriage imperative for women; the school, where exists an all-level supervision system from elementary to secondary education, so that teachers are possible to discover students’ same-sex relationships and are obliged to interfere their relationships by taking them to counseling services and reporting to their parents; the workplace, where one with deviant sexual preference is subjected to harassment by coworkers; the state, which has not yet passed antidiscrimination legislation for sexual minorities, approved same-sex marriage and guaranteed same-sex couples’ rights (Sang 2003, 231–235).

The multilayered institutional stigmatization forced female same-sex sexuality to stay invisible from the public as a collective identity and remain “situational”, “temporary” or “pseudo” as a personal identity. For this reason, lesbians in Taiwan takes public visibility as the primary and major goal of their development (Castells 2011; Lin 2013). In order to fight against discrimination and define themselves in positive terms, lesbians in Taiwan have had to ally
with feminists as well as gays, who are also against traditional gender norms but have been allocated much more social resources (Sang 2003, 235).

Some studies suggest that the western-dominant postmodernist identification of homosexuality is not fully applicable in Chinese-speaking societies, because the articulations of same-sex identity are constructed constantly through contextualized social hierarchy and class relations (Engebretsen 2005; Ho 2008). The term *lesbian* failed to reflect what it actually means to be a female homosexual in Taiwan. The erotic representation and problematic publicity of lesbians in mainstream mass media have gradually shaped the public imagination and perceptions of female homosexuals in Taiwan (Sang 2003, 247). The identity of *lesbian* thus leads to misunderstandings of female same-sex sexuality in Taiwan’s context. Hence, female homosexuals in Taiwan to some extent has shown resistance to the label of *lesbian*, which reduces them to “one-dimensional beings in the popular imagination” (Sang 2003, 247).

Tong-zhi, as an umbrella term for queer identity, includes all non-heterosexuality and even “straights who are critical of hetero-normativity” and denotes the all-inclusive strategy of sexual identity politics in Taiwan and other Chinese-speaking societies (Sang 2003, 236; Jolly 2000, 82–83). Therefore, the term of “nv-tong-zhi (female tong-zhi)”, which is a derivate of “tong-zhi”, has been accepted by many female homosexuals in Taiwan in recent times. In this research, nv-tong-zhi (female same-sex sexuality) is adopted as the appropriation of lesbian identity in the context of Taiwan society.
1.2. Previous Research

This section reviews recent studies concerning the empowerment of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the research topic in the field of media and communication studies, and to identify the under-researched area of nv-tong-zhi empowerment in relation to internet-based media. Given that this research is situated in the specific context of Taipei, relevant literature is addressed.

1.2.1. Media Impact on LGBT Empowerment

In general, there exist two strands in media and communication studies in regard to LGBT empowerment: traditional mass media, which are often seen as mainstream and dominant; and digital media that are developed with the advent of the Internet, seen as alternative and transformative.

1.2.1.1. Traditional Mass media

Media impact on LGBT activism has been associated with the audience reception of the representations of LGBT people in the field of mass communication studies. For example, findings from nationwide survey studies suggest that affirmative representations of queer people in mass media, such as TV programs “Real World” and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” that contain a number of gay or lesbian characters, have encouraged young LGBT people to be “more or less comfortable with their sexuality” (cited by Cagle 2007, 182). However, the oversimplified linear cause-effect logic embedded in this kind of studies has been questioned (Cagle 2007, 176–177). Although visibility is the primary goal of LGBT empowerment, no evidences has substantiated the causality that an increase in LGBT visibility in mass media results in the progressive empowerment of LGBT people. Furthermore, the attempt to
assimilate LGBT identities into heterosexual culture via large exposure to mass media so as to legitimatize sexual minorities are fundamentally contradicted to the principles of LGBT empowerment (Cagle 2007, 178–179). Mainstream mass media usually assume queer identities like gay and lesbian as unitary and stable as the heterosexual identity in the heterosexual world, and intend to portray queer identities into fixed categories and consequently create “normative” stereotypes that are harmful to self-identification and social recognition of LGBT individuals in the setting of everyday life (Cagle 2007, 178–179).

1.2.1.2. Internet-based Digital Media

A number of Internet studies suggest great positive potential in internet-based digital media as a tool to empower LGBT people across a wide spectrum of contexts (McKenna and Bargh 1998; Mitra 2010; Ho 2011; Craig and McInroy 2014). In an early research, McKenna and Bargh (1998) discovered that sexual minorities were allowed to interact with others “in a relatively anonymous fashion”, so that they were more likely to gain self-acceptance from online participation and even to come out to their family and friends in reality.

Similar findings have been presented in a recent grounded research on influences of internet-based digital media on young LGBT people’s identity formation in urban Canada (Craig and McInroy 2014). It was learnt that the Internet enables young homosexuals to “access resources, explore identity, find likeness, digitally engage in coming out” and consequently develop queer identities into offline lives.

In a research targeted at LGBT community at a university in the United States, the researcher has explored the functions of an internet-based mailing list for LGBT students’ empowerment (Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop 2004, 786–
As the participants of the research defined, the electronic mailing list functioned as an information resource of homophobic historical facts and LGBT-related events, the former of which increase LGBT individuals’ consciousness and awareness of social oppression, and the latter may lead to ‘out’ presence of LGBT individuals. The visibility and participation of LGBT individuals in public help them to gain “social and psychological support to themselves and other closeted members in the community”. Furthermore, it creates a space for LGBT members to socialize and bond with other members, which also is useful for them to generate a sense of belonging as part of a community and consequently enhance their self-confidence. In return, the empowered LGBT members strengthen their motivations to take part in collective activities to fight against stigma and discrimination.

In the national context of India, Mitra (2010) conducted a content analysis on the feedbacks from queer bloggers/readers/commenters on mainstream media coverage of the first national Gay Pride marches. He has drawn the conclusion that the interactivity of online media (blogs) can be utilized by queer users as a strategy of reaching out to others by publishing blogs and making comments, and queer blog users may appropriate queer-related themes presented in mainstream media by producing alternative interpretations to resist stereotypes.

Ho (2011) spent a whole chapter In Gay and lesbian subculture in urban China to examine the “gay” cyberspace in China. Taken into account the fact that little room has been made for the expression of alternative sexual identities and individual freedom because Chinese authorities have imposed strict online censorship, he documents that a number of same-sex identified Internet users in the context of mainland China considered the Internet as “a significantly new channel where they could look for friends and support”, a site to “imagine alliances with diverse same-sex identities and communities around local,
national and international borders”, a way to “appropriate notions of identity or activism from foreign sources” and to modify “global gayness” in the local contexts (Ho 2011, 105–106).

Notwithstanding, Ho (2011) notices that some features of the gay cyberspace may undermine the enhancement of sexual minorities’ empowerment. Based on his observation, the gay-oriented websites in China are generally commercialized, i.e. focusing on providing entertaining activities like online dating and interactive games, or displaying sexually-explicit images to attract potential members, due to the lack of “support from policy-makers and the wider community” and “available resources and technical expertise”. This feature of commercialization considerably results in misrepresentation of same-sex identity that “hinder[s] online representation of same-sex identity as an individual identity” (Ho 2011, 116).

1.2.2. Media Impact on LGBT Empowerment in Contemporary Taiwan

A study on the media strategy deployed by a LGBT rights movement group has shown mass media’s positive impact on raising public awareness and stimulating gay-straight communication in Taiwan Pride Parade in 2006 (Hou 2007). In line with Eyerman’s argument (see Hou 2007, 6) that “the development of mass media as central to spurring the development of modern social movement”, the researcher asserts that it is easier to gain legitimacy and support from audience and readers through dominant mass media, which are labeled as “significant instruments of social control”. Therefore, a good knowledge of the operational mechanism of mass media, such as rules of news production, is essential and beneficial for the marginalized to strategically cooperate with and intervene in mass media for visibility and de-stigmatization.

The researcher also highlights the great contribution of “alternative media” as gay and lesbian people can “assumed the control of presenting their opinions
in the public sphere of ideas without the mediation of reporters and existing media organizations” on the Internet (Hou 2007, 8). It is exemplified with the fact that the LGBT rights movement group made use of websites and Bulletin Board System (BBS) to approach and recruit LGBT individuals for the event and also to create a space for public debate over gay right issues to strengthen direct interactions between the marginalized and the broader public (Hou 2007, 20), and substantiated by a descriptive qualitative about the influence of gay websites on college gay users’ identity development carried out by the same researcher (Hou 2006).

A research on academic gay and lesbian’ motivations to use internet-based media suggests that the Internet has provided major and important information and created a safe sphere, while mainstream mass media often conceal or distort that kind of information and gay-friendly venues are “few and only located in metropolitan areas like Taipei and Kaohsiung” (Yang 2000).

1.2.3. The Significance of Media in Lesbian Empowerment in Taiwan

The mainstream mass media in Taiwan plays a conflicting role in enhancing nv-tong-zhi’s empowerment (Sang 2003; Ning 2004). Newspapers and television stations in Taiwan seem friendly to homosexuality, since they have started to publish articles concerning queer rights written by academic writers and to report gay and lesbian events (Sang 2003). However, mass media usually sensationalize and sexualize news or stories about homosexual individuals to satisfy the curiosity of the public, due to the ideologies of normativity embedded in public-owned mass media services and of commercialization in private-owned mass media outlets (Sang 2003; Ning 2004). In other words, the mass media have never ceased to produce abnormal stereotypes of homosexuality.

In particular, nv-tong-zhi subjects are often reconstructed by mass media as
erotic-exotic objects. The problematic representations could easily reduce their identity to sexual perverts and have negative impact on the legitimation of nv-tong-zhi identity. Consequently, nv-tong-zhi communities and individuals must find alternative media to liberate their identity from mass mediatized misinterpretations.

The emergence of the Internet has brought new promise for lesbians in Taiwan to deliberate from invisibility and misunderstandings (Sang 2003, 253–254). It has facilitated the radical lesbian activism to step into public view. For example, digital lesbian magazines are allowed to contain sharp remarks and purposefully “offensive” graphics that are banned in printed publications, and those online magazines, including academic journals, can reach larger audiences on a global scale (Sang 2003, 253–254).

Furthermore, internet-based communication is decentralized and interactive (Sang 2003, 254). Nv-tong-zhi individuals can directly communicate with others with similar sexual preferences and the general public as long as they have access to the Internet. In other words, the autonomy of the Internet, which provides decentralized and interactive communication, guarantees a vigorously critical space where nv-tong-zhi could achieve self-representation, exchange opinions and catalyze positive changes of their status in reality.

The optimist viewpoint of internet-based communication’s contribution to Taiwan’s lesbian empowerment has been contested by a recent study with a focus on identity formation (Hu 2011). The researcher summarizes that the Internet affects nv-tong-zhi individuals’ formation of identity in two ways: 1) by providing meaningful transcultural queer knowledge for subversion against institutionalized hetero-normative assumptions and process of self-identification, and 2) by launching “a mass-mediated interface through which diverse transcultural influences are interwoven with local sexual culture” (Hu 2011, 41). In other words, to what extent lesbians’ usage of the Internet
promotes the formation of their identity is “significantly depend[ing] on their engagements in gender and sexual cultures developed in the actual world” rather than advantages of internet-based communication (Hu 2011, 41).

1.2.4. Concluding Thoughts

Media impact on LGBT people’s empowerment is not a new topic to the field of media and communication studies. However, there remains a paucity of research about the influence of the Internet on LGBT empowerment at the personal level regardless of contexts.

The majority of existing research has put the emphasis on discovering patterns of the Internet usage by LGBT users as a unitary category of identity, for example, several studies examining the specific group of male homosexuality intend to present the findings at a group/community level. The diversity of identity and individual nuances resulted from different lived experience have often been neglected, which is divergent from the principles of LGBT empowerment as it is built upon the assumptions that “queer identity is fluid” and “the personal is the political” (Drushel and German 2009).

Moreover, the existing research focuses on specific forms of empowerment practice defined by researchers, rather than a consistent multifaceted conception empowerment made by queer individuals. For example, the researchers have explored divided aspects of empowerment such as self-identification and offline participation.

Further, most of the research has applied the logic that ICTs have effects on queer users rather than how users make use of them to achieve a higher degree of empowerment. In a way, this kind of empirical research adopts a disempowering discourse that reduces the subjectivity of queer individuals, and overlooks the significance of other factors that may influence empowerment.

Finally, the perspective of lesbian empowerment remains under-researched.
Female homosexual individuals are facing more obstacles to achieve empowerment outcomes because of the multilayered social repression against women and non-heterosexuality from patriarchal orthodoxy. Little literature has specifically elucidated the correlation between the Internet and lesbian individuals’ empowerment in contrast to that of gays.
1.3. Research Purpose and Research Questions

Obviously, a gap exists within current literature regarding understanding the role that internet-based media may play in LGBT empowerment from an individual perspective. Considering the less advantaged social status of lesbians in comparison with gays, a focus on lesbians’ empowerment is meaningful to the research area of ICTs for empowerment and development. Thus, the purpose of this study is to bridge the gap with an attempt to explore whether nv-tong-zhi individuals’ use of internet-based media contribute to their empowerment by the lens of their own lived experiences.

The overarching research question is formulated as “to what extent have nv-tong-zhi individuals’ use of internet-based media contributed to their empowerment in Taipei?” Three sub-questions are formulated as follows to address specific aspects of the research question:

RQ I: How do the participants make use of internet-based media in daily lives?

RQ II: How do the participants understand the contribution of internet-based media in their empowerment practice?

RQ III: How do the participants perceive nv-tong-zhi empowerment in the context of Taipei?
1.4. Outline of The Thesis

The thesis consists of two major parts: a theoretical study which functions as background knowledge and guidelines of this study, and then discoveries from the in-depth semi-structured interviews to answer the research question. The first part includes the first three chapters. In this first chapter, the research topic and the background information about this study are introduced, which are presented in the form of a brief review of previous research and a discussion of the knowledge gap, then the significance and potential contributions of this research are suggested. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical background in great details with regard to the key conceptions of this research. Based on the knowledge presented in Chapter 1 and 2, methodological considerations and the research design are presented in Chapter 3. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is chosen as the method of this study, which suggests this exploratory study to adopt in-depth semi-structured interviews for data gathering, and thematic analysis for data analysis.

The second part starts with chapter 4, which presents the findings of the study according to the emerged themes discovered from the data, including brief demographic descriptions of the participants and detailed thematic analysis. Chapter 5 proceeds to carry out a discussion of the findings, and conclusions are drawn in chapter 6 to summarize the significant findings of the study. Finally, implications and future outlooks of the study are presented.
2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

This research aims to find out whether nv-tong-zhi individuals’ use of internet-based media in any way empowers them in the setting of everyday practices. Therefore, theoretical understandings about three key conceptions, i.e. empowerment, the relation between media and empowerment, and media usage in everyday lives, are presented in this chapter. The theoretical underpinnings are involved as a reference to guide the subsequent research phase, namely, selection of research method, formulation of research sub-questions, construction of analytical framework, and analysis of data. In other words, this chapter not only enriches the understandings of the research topic but also lays cornerstones for this research throughout.

The first section prepares the knowledge to specify the meanings of empowerment in this research. An overview of a cross-disciplinary framework is set forth to unfold the mechanism and the dynamics of the multifaceted phenomenon “empowerment”. As the research focus is on empowerment at the individual level, psychological empowerment is highlighted among various dimensions of empowerment.

The second section demonstrates the significance of media in empowerment interventions. It starts with an insight into the importance of information and communication as related to empowerment, followed by a brief introduction of the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Since the research topic is about internet-based media, the Internet is highlighted with its distinctive features that influence empowerment at both individual and collective levels. Moreover, the critique of optimism about the role of ICTs and the Internet in empowerment practice is brought up in parallel.

The final section sheds light on the feasibility of employing media use as a proxy to examine media impact or influence, which includes empowerment outcomes. A review of existing research traditions on media impact in the field
of communication studies is presented. The audience-centered tradition is selected in this research, with an emphasis on the ‘media use as social action’ approach which values users’ agency and lived experiences.

2.1. Empowerment: Theoretical Understandings

Empowerment is a multifaceted phenomenon that is considered a form of development as well as a means of development intervention (Narayan 2005). In general, it takes place at personal, relational and collective levels, emerges in different forms as feelings, cognitions, and behaviors, and can be assessed in perspectives of self, others, and structure (Arnold 2012).

The concept “empowerment” has been used to indicate “both an outcome, in which a person or group enjoys a state of empowerment, and a process, an action that moves a group or person from a lower to a higher state of empowerment” in development studies (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006, 3). Since the concrete meaning of empowerment is divergent upon different contexts or settings within which it is discussed or assessed, specific sociocultural and political contexts are necessary to be taken into account while understanding empowerment (Narayan 2005, 15; Arnold 2012). Therefore, a cross-disciplinary framework of empowerment is useful to understand the concept of empowerment in a multitude of dimensions and contexts.

2.1.1. A Cross-disciplinary Framework

Many development practitioners deploy differentiated conceptions of empowerment to investigate “issues of gaining power and control over decisions and resources that determine the quality of one’s life” (Narayan 2002, 10–11). It indicates that empowerment entails a changing state of power relations between individuals and groups, even though its meanings are subject to contexts and analytical perspectives (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006, 4).
Therefore, power relation is a key concept for understanding empowerment.

Upon Giddens’ structure-agency theory of power and findings from empirical studies on empowerment (Petesch, Smulovitz, and Walton 2005; Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006), a cross-disciplinary framework of empowerment (see Figure 1) has been proposed. It generally presents that the degree of empowerment is subject to the interaction between agency and opportunity structure (Narayan 2005; Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006).

![Figure 1: Overview of Opportunity Structure – Agency Framework](Source: Narayan 2005, 7)

“Agency” is defined as the ability to make purposeful choices (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006, 10). In this framework, agency consists of two sets of assets and capabilities – the individual and the collective (Narayan 2005, 10–12). At the individual level, material wealth, including all kinds of financial
support, is labeled as “assets”, while “capabilities” include: human capabilities, such as good health, education, and productivity or other life-enhancing skills; psychological capabilities, such as belief in one’s own efficacy, sense of security, freedom, and subjective well-being; social capabilities, such as social belonging, leadership, relations of trust, a sense of identity, values that give meanings to life, and the capacity to organize; and political capabilities, for example, the capacity to represent oneself or others, access information, form associations, and participate in the political life of a community or country (Narayan 2005, 10). The possession of individual assets and capabilities could develop people’s competence, increase their sense of agency, and thus stimulate their initiatives to engage in achieving broader development outcomes.

Collective assets and capabilities enable people to gain self-awareness and legitimacy with collective solidarities so as to overcome social marginalization and to contribute to far-reaching structural change (Narayan 2005, 11). Having been excluded by social barriers, the members of marginalized groups often lack voice and power, and even internalize the social marginalization. Hence, those people are unable to effectively use their individual assets and capabilities to protect their rights. In order to change their disempowered states, they have to rely on collective assets and capabilities to “be recognized on their own terms, to be presented, and to make their voices heard” (Narayan 2005, 11). Social capitals, norms and networks are usually taken into account in bringing about such differences.

The “opportunity structure” refers to “the broader institutional, social, and political context of formal and informal rules and norms” (Narayan 2005, 6), within which actors or groups exercise their abilities to transform agency into effective action (Narayan 2005, 6–10; Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006, 11–13). The opportunity structure consists of operating rules of a society that
heavily affect the practice of empowerment. People may fail to exercise their agency due to institutional constraints rather than a lack of decision-making abilities (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006, 11-13). An improving opportunity structure may increase people’s sense of agency, and mobilize them to take actions that empower themselves. In return, their active participation in empowerment activities may accelerate the institutionalization of more equal rules, which encourages further participation in the practice of empowerment (Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland 2006, 16–17).

In sum, empowerment is a dynamic process with upward changes, which includes not only bottom-up improvement of individual/collective assets and capabilities, but also top-down structural changes/reforms.

2.1.2. Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment is considered the most important aspect of empowerment across a wide spectrum of situations, even though it has been studied the least (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006). It refers to empowerment at the individual level of analysis and includes “a feeling of control, a critical awareness of one’s environment, and an active participation” (Zimmerman 1995, 592). That is, psychological empowerment manifests itself in perceptions, skills, and behaviors; beliefs, competence, and actions that are helpful to gain mastery of situations.

According to many researchers (Wilson 1993; Zimmerman 1995; Appadurai 2004; Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006), psychological empowerment is a desirable form of empowerment that plays a fundamental role in the individual/collective empowering process.

Bandura (1988) contends that self-efficacy performs as the most productive mechanism concerning empowerment of individuals. Gains in self-efficacy often successfully foster the belief that one can achieve what he/she desires. In
addition, Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland (2006, 11) assert that a raised level of consciousness is necessary for the exercise of one’s agency. The self-empowered individuals are “autonomous”, “willing to take risks”, “concerned with providing service to others”, “open to learning from others, and “participate in open, non-manipulative relationships with others” (Wilson 1993, 729), which all signify individuals’ positive reaction to the environment in an increasingly empowering way. In contrast, without sufficient feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem, individuals will hesitate to make an effort to become more empowered even in conditions that are proper for empowerment (Wilson 1993).

Shared psyches within groups may shape the members’ preferences of choice and result in similar collective behaviors (Appadurai 2004; Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006). Appadurai (2004) explores the collective aspects of psychological empowerment on the basis of two concepts – “terms of recognition” and “capacity to aspire”. “Terms of recognition” underlies the conditions and constraints under which the less empowered people negotiate with social norms and expectations of behavior that affect their lives (Appadurai 2004, 66), and “capacity to aspire” refers to a collective asset which is associated with concrete capabilities to envision better life possibilities (Appadurai 2004, 82). A primary task for members of excluded groups is to change the usually poor terms of recognition, and then they are likely to build and mobilize the capacity to aspire so as to take action to increase empowerment (Appadurai 2004, 70–80).

Furthermore, the concept of psychological empowerment does not necessarily exclude behavioral or contextual/sociopolitical factors. Rooted in a social action framework, psychological empowerment includes not only the accumulation of psychological assets and capabilities, but also active participatory processes. In addition, psychological empowerment is a dynamic
construct that may fluctuate over time and context so that contextual and sociopolitical factors, such as “active engagement in one’s community” and “an understanding of one’s sociopolitical environment”, should be included (Zimmerman 1995, 582-583). In other words, psychological empowerment should not be simply interpreted as individualism, and its measurement should be grounded in people’s life experiences.

Noteworthy, psychological empowerment is different from real power or control, even though empowerment is related to power (Zimmerman 1995, 592). Without authoritative power, people can become empowered, in terms of taking action to exercise agency and to exert control, because they have gained confidence in their ability to take control and increased their skills and capabilities to influence outcomes.
2.2. Information, Communication and ICTs in Empowerment

*Communication underpins human development because it enables people to access, produce and transfer to others information that is important for their empowerment and progress.*

(“Communication for Empowerment: Global Report” 2010)

Despite the diverse perspectives of empowerment, information is unanimously recognized as being of great value to empowerment (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2005; “Communication for Empowerment: Global Report” 2010; Arnold 2012). Information, which conveys essential knowledge, is itself a mechanism of efforts towards increasing empowerment or disempowerment (Arnold 2012, 78). Specific information, including fundamental knowledge about the power and social structure, human rights, legal processes and etc., might benefit individuals by raising awareness of the nature of oppression, changing self-perception, increasing subjective confidence, and sharpening skills of choice-determining and decision-making, and thus mobilizing their participation in overt empowerment activities (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2005, 114). Some information that is largely restricted by rigid societal and political norms or shaped by the powerful or privileged actors, may discourage the already marginalized group to communicate or exercise power or skills so that it reinforces existing inequalities and oppressions (Arnold 2012, 79). In this sense, information could lead to reduction of a person or a group’s visibility, voice and participation, and be an affecting factor of recursive disempowerment.

The flow of information, which is referred to as communication, has the capacity to establish a mechanism for bringing about changes, reforms and eventually development results (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2005, 114; Arnold 2012, 79). In principle, people with direct and independent access to information are more likely to express their own opinions or needs so that to be heard by the
public and authorities. By contrast, those who without access to information rarely have their demands or concerns put on the agenda which influences their lives. A one-sided vertical communication often leads to recurring inequalities, whereas a two-way interactive communication could empower the disempowered people with comprehensive information and make empowerment interventions “more effective, sustainable, pro-poor and gender sensitive” (“Communication for Empowerment: Global Report” 2010, 5). Therefore, interactive modes of communication provide sources of steady individual/collective assets and capabilities accumulations for the disempowered, and invent an effective mechanism for institutional reforms.

2.2.1. ICTs and Empowerment

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) stands central in broadening access to and manipulating information especially for economically, socially, politically excluded people (Narayan 2002, 73–91; “Communication for Empowerment: Global Report” 2010, 17–18). Findings from five pilot studies on communication for empowerment present that radio and mobile telephony are potentially and increasingly important for the disenfranchised in the least developed countries (“Communication for Empowerment: Global Report” 2010, 17–18). A case of the empowerment of the poor people by making use of advanced ICTs demonstrates that even though structural inequities remain in the distribution of traditional assets, ICTs facilitate the access to basic services, improve governance, support for entrepreneurship, and financial services (Narayan 2002, 73-74).

ICTs can be disempowering because of institutionalized norms and practices within specific contexts, in which ICTs are developed and applied (Mansell 2014). Authoritative institutions usually fund experts working on establishment and revision of standards for collecting, processing and reporting information.
If institutions resist setting up standards for empowering information, the deployment of ICTs would result in reinforcement of conventional hierarchies of information management. In addition, authoritative institutions can affect the empowerment initiatives embedded in the designation of ICTs. For example, a certain form of ICTs is designed for surveillance by authorities, even if some degree of openness is granted by institutional norms, the use of ICTs will inevitably fail to empower the users; and the application of market-led innovated or proprietary ICT might exclude the disadvantaged from using them.

2.2.2. The Internet

The advent of the Internet is highlighted by its excellent performance in promoting empowerment among various types of ICTs, as the Internet “allows people to do things that they found difficult to do or were unable to achieve before” (Amichai-Hamburger2008, 1773). First, the Internet offers extended opportunities and spheres to develop users’ identities and access to knowledge at the individual level (Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, and Tal 2008, 1777–1779). The anonymity of internet-based communication helps to create less threatened spaces in which users display positive mastery of situations that they could not control previously, thus users are capable of increasing self-efficacy and consequently develop beneficial social skills via internet-based communication.

Second, internet-based communication serves as a platform to acquire social capabilities at the interpersonal level (Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, and Tal 2008, 1779–1782). Internet users can control the internet-mediated interaction for their own sake and at their convenience, which leads to higher self-esteem and potential capabilities to disclose their personalities, to form more intimate relationships, and even to promote cross-cultural dialogues regardless of
location, stereotype or social strata.

Third, the Internet fosters sustainable development of communities that are central to empowerment at the collective level (Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, and Tal 2008, 1782–1784). The highly accessed Internet creates a fertile ground for the formation of communities on the basis of similarities. Proper deployment of internet-based communication makes individuals feel like being a significant part of the community, which leads to change in the psyche such as increased self-acceptance, enhanced self-esteem, and reduction in alienation and estrangement. Individuals are more willing to support the community with active participation in collective activities, and to “express their normative attitudes against a powerful outgroup” (Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna 2008, 1783). Furthermore, the Internet offers a variety of decision-making tools that facilitate a horizontal communication mode between leaders and members, and consequently brings about increasing equities and equalities within communities.

Moreover, citizens have found “their voices more easily than they can in the offline world and can be heard much farther away” on the Internet (Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna 2008, 1786). The Internet encourages the emergence of various patterns of interaction between government and citizens in cyberspace, for instance E-voting, E-government tools, and public debate through online watchdog groups (Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, and Tal 2008, 1784). The newly emerged interaction patterns substantially yield citizens’ increased freedom of expression and ability to supervise and influence local, national and international governance. Moreover, there is increased

1 “Outgroup” is a terminology in the field of social psychology, and it refers to a group that a person identifies himself/herself does not belong (Spears 2007). By contrast, “ingroup” refers to a social group that a person belongs. People can define themselves as being members of infinite number of groups or not, on the basis of their “gender, ethnicity, occupation, economic and social position” (Spears 2007, 485). The ingroup/outgroup distinction has been highlighted as an important explanation of the psychology of social identity and intergroup relations, such as conflicts and discriminations against some groups from members of other groups, namely, ingroup favoritism and outgroup hostility (see Tajfel 1974).
utilization of the Internet to mobilize and coordinate protests and issue-specific campaigns by citizens (Gasser, Faris, and Heacock 2013, 63). Authorities consequently become more sensitive and responsive to the most concerned issue that citizens have, in the form of increasing democracy and government transparency, particularly in non-democratic regimes in an unprecedented manner (Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, and Tal 2008, 1784–1786). The Internet changes the traditional top-down citizen-government relationship and fuels the rise of civil society that initiated to empower citizens (Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, and Tal 2008, 1786).

In addition, the Internet has brought about the convergence of traditional and new ICTs, which encourages the emergence of a new category – internet-based media – that is identified as technically conforming to TCP/IP data communications protocols. This trend of convergence expands the access to information, for example, newspaper coverage is published on the website, and TV programs are streamed and uploaded online (Cunningham 2012, 209). It also increases users’ mobility and interactivity, for instance users can access and share information via smartphones (Cunningham 2012, 209). In general, it has provided great potential for the fruition of empowerment interventions in terms of “access to information” and “channels to express” (“Communication for Empowerment: Global Report” 2010, 17–18).

Overall, the Internet is more accessible in terms of location and condition, more secure in terms of anonymity, and more effective in breaking tangible and intangible barriers, i.e. physical and spatial restrictions, or social stereotypes, social hierarchy, individual psyches, in comparison with other forms of ICTs. The emergence of the Internet has not only helped users to close the information and communication gap, enhanced their self-efficacy, sharpened their social skills, and mobilized their participation from the perspective of assets and capabilities, but also brought about positive potential of profound
reform in organizational and social operating mechanisms from the perspective of opportunity structures.

**Digital Divide and Social Media**

The development of the Internet has posed challenges to empowerment, such as a “deeper digital divide” (Castells 2001, 262–263). A digital divide represents an unequal distribution of ICTs within society (McIntosh 2012, 73–75). In contrast to individuals with sufficient access to the Internet, those who are not able to use the Internet have fewer opportunities to learn and develop due to insufficient information and knowledge. The emerging knowledge gap is likely to hinder individuals from “participating in a democratic society and gaining access to agency and power” (McIntosh 2012, 75).

In addition, there exists differential usage of the Internet between the developed and developing world, because of “the huge gap in telecommunications infrastructure, Internet service providers, and Internet content providers, as well as by the strategies being used to deal with this gap”, that has stimulated the global process of uneven development (Castells 2001, 264–266).

A conception of “meaningful use of ICTs” has been proposed by Ali (2011) to expand the understanding of digital divide. According to Ali (2011, 188), a digital divide is not only about infrastructure, as referred to the physical access to ICTs and information, but also about whether ICTs can be made use of in a meaningful way or not. In other words, people with access to the Internet are likely to suffer from a digital divide due to lack of necessary internet skills. Built on this sophisticated understanding of digital divide, Ali (2011) argues that a digital divide can be closed through meaningful use of ICTs.

Using social media is considered as a form of meaningful use of ICTs (Ali 2011, 212–218). Social media are a group of internet-based applications that
have adopted “highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques” (Morgan, Jones, and Hodges 2012, 1), which include collaborative projects, blogs and micro-blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual communities (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). In general, social media are available and free to users, and require less specialized skills and training compared to using traditional media from both perspectives of content creators and readers (Ali 2011; Morgan, Jones, and Hodges 2012). In this way, social media empowers users to participate in “creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 61) and then effectively turn communication into interactive dialogues. In turn, users of social media can learn ICTs skills from content creation and enhance social interaction skills from interactive communication. Moreover, social media bring democratizing potential according to the recent stories between social media, such as blogs, YouTube, and Facebook, and democratic revolutions in countries like Egypt (Ali 2011, 218). Therefore, social media are capable of closing a digital divide because using social media “stimulate[s] content creation, promote[s] basic ICTs skills, and foster[s] participation and democratization” (Ali 2011).

2.3. Media Impact and Media Use: Audience-centered Tradition and Interpretative Perspective

Media impact has been regarded as a central task of mass communication research, which focuses on measuring, describing and elucidating the influences of different forms of media (McQuail 1987, 251; Renckstorf 1996, 18). With this commitment, media impact research has never ceased to be a critical theme to communication researchers. There generally exist three critical traditions: the media-centered, the audience-centered, and the culture-centered.

The media-centered tradition fundamentally derives from Lasswell’s (1948)
“who says what to whom in which channel with what effect” formula, and it attempts to define and inspect media impact as “what can media and/or communicators do to people” (Renckstorf 1996, 20). In other words, the communication process is perceived intrinsically linear and media-/communicator-dominant. From the late 1950s, the research focus has gradually turned to “what people do with the media” (Katz 1959). This change in research question formulation has brought about the rise of an alternative tradition, which is audience-centered. With an understanding of audience as being active rather than passive in media-related decision and action, this tradition begins a fashion of examining media impact in terms of consequences (Renckstorf 1996, 21). In the meanwhile, a culture-centered framework has come into being, which conceptualizes media impact in terms of results of media’s influence in social construction of reality (Renckstorf 1996, 22-23). (Mass) media are perceived as institutions of the culture industry and play an important role in “defining, shaping and constructing societal beliefs, the norms and values of a culture of a given society” (Renckstorf 1996, 23). Living a media-saturated life, human beings on one hand are subjects and creators, and on the other hand are objects and products of socially constructed realities (Renckstorf 1996, 24).

The media-centered tradition has been questioned for the embedded conception of “captive audience”, and the culture-centered tradition has been criticized for lacking solid empirical support due to its origins from literary criticism, semiology and discourse analysis (Renckstorf 1996, 21-23). The audience-centered tradition is the only one that perceives audience as agents actively approaching mediated materials against the background of their own perspectives, and provides insight into media impact in the context of everyday life (Renckstorf 1996, 24–25).
2.3.1. Transcending the Uses and Gratifications Approach

The “uses and gratifications theory” has received widespread academic recognition within the audience-centered tradition (Renckstorf 1996, 22). It principally assumes that media use is goal-oriented and motivation-guided, and the consequences of media use are measured as attainment of goals and fulfillment of needs (McQuail 2010, 424). The degree of gratifications as a direct consequence may influence further decision-making and action-taking, which media selection and use belong to (McQuail 2010, 424). On this basis, researchers develop a range of different use patterns with regard to forms of media and categories of user motivations to explain specific use people make of media and the wider social functions of media. The uses and gratifications approach thus has become one of the most popular approaches to explore media use patterns and impact, by virtue of its openness to the ongoing diversification of the media environment, especially to emerging internet-based media (McQuail 2010, 426).

The uses and gratifications approach also faces criticism for being “quite fragmented”, i.e. it is useful to answer questions about individual media behaviors yet unable to generate a coherent theory; and being “overly narrow”, i.e. it is a cause-and-effect theory because users’ interpretative process of media (contents) is neglected (Miller 2002, 246). Besides, the approach is based on a problematic assumption of media users as being in hold of full mastery over situations, and fails to explain some type of media use that is circumstantial, weakly motivated and less predictable (McQuail 2010, 425-426).

To transcend the uses and gratifications approach, an academic attempt to conceptualize media use from a less problematic perspective of social action, that is, an interpretative view, was made to design a “media use as social action” model by a group of European researchers (McQuail 2010, 425).
2.3.2. An Interpretative Action Theoretical Perspective

The action theoretical perspective of human life considers human beings as action-oriented, i.e. people act “on the basis of their own objectives, intentions and interests”; people are interrelated with others through interactions; and people are able to reflect upon their action and interaction with others (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 390). That is to say, as more or less socialized, human beings know how to behave or react in certain social position and under certain circumstance.

On this premise, action scholars have established a normative perspective to explain social action: human beings act under the guidance of pre-given rules, which are rooted in a set of former knowledge or experiences that can function in dealing with potential situations (Renckstorf 1996, 25). It holds true that one could be acknowledged or acquired the already existing shared experience/knowledge to be familiar with the potential situation and the appropriate reactions, and meanwhile would experience repetitive situations in his/her daily life and thus could develop a template for future action in similar situation. Since no situation is predictable or completely identical to any already-known situation in a daily context, it is not likely to fully master situations beforehand by following pre-given rules that correspond to certain mastered situations.

An interpretative perspective offers a less problematic way of investigating social action with a focus on the meaning-making activity of the actor (Renckstorf 1996, 25). Citing Schütz’s action theory, Renckstorf and Wester (2001, 391) state that human action always starts with an intention towards one or several “objects”, which include material and immaterial events, individuals, objects, considerations and questions. With this intention, people begin to observe the “objects” from various angles in order to understand the essence, to attach meanings to them, and then to take corresponding external action (See
In most cases, people could easily give an appropriate meaning to the object by the agency of their everyday “stock of knowledge”, which consists of the majority of former experiences (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 390-391). Only when “an actual experience does not readily ‘fit’ into a type at hand in the stock of knowledge”, the situation would be considered problematic to define and requires further projections (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 391).

The situation defining processes, along with interpreting “objects”, takes place by the influence of one’s subjective system of relevance and social stock of knowledge (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 392). People act and react to the objects they pay attention to rather than merely respond to whatever they are surrounded. Therefore, human action, or social action, is “carefully planned” in accordance with the acting person’s own hierarchy of relevances, more or less related to one’s social position (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 392).
In addition, the culture-specific social stock of knowledge has a great impact on the shaping of individual’s mindset and essentially affects distinguishing problematic situations and generating meanings (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 392).

In short, social action is conceptualized as dependent on the attached meanings of the “objects” they continually confront and interact within the environment (Renckstorf 1996, 25). “Media” also counts as a component of the “objects”, thereby the previously mentioned interpretative framework can reasonably be adopted to conceptualize media use as part of social action.

2.3.3. The “Media Use as Social Action” Approach

The “media use as social action” approach aims to gain insights into how people make use of mediated communication and the consequences (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 404). It views media use as a form of social action, that media users construct their external action- including media choice and use - on the basis of their own interpretation of (mass) media and messages in the situated environment.

In this perspective, media and their messages are considered as the “objects” within the environment, which require perception, thematization, diagnosis and then interpretation by media users (Renckstorf and Wester 2001). The interpretation of media and their message is a form of self-interaction, i.e. the interplay between individual experiences, the (subjective) knowledge system, and the hierarchy of relevances. Such interpretation works as a guidance for users’ further external action, which are reckoned as part of “objects” as well. Therefore, media are not only the “objects”, but also shape other types of “objects” within the meaning-producing symbolic environment.

In line with the perspective, the “media use as social action” model (Figure 3) is outlined to guide empirical research as follow
At the outset (1) we see the individual adopting or having a definition of the situation, in which experience from everyday life and interaction are perceived, thematized and interpreted. The factors of individual makeup, social position and experience (2 and 3) enter into the defining and interpreting processes. The 'route' followed is then either conceived as 'problematic' (4) or 'unproblematic' (5). If the former, action on the problem is contemplated, motives (6) are formulated and decisions about action taken (7). These can include media selection and use as one type of external action (8). The alternative, unproblematic, route can also lead, by way of everyday routines (9), to similar actions, also including media use. Whether motivated or not, media use is subject to evaluation (10) by the individual and is followed by a new sequence of definition and interpretation.

(McQuail and Windahl 1993, 144)
According to Renckstorf and Wester (2001, 399-414), the “media use as social action” approach is expected to be a rich tradition. A consistent series of empirical communication research has been formulated and carried out under its guidance, such as research projects concerning the problem of heavy viewing, and routines and patterns of TV news use. However, there remains a task to accomplish a meta-analysis of the approach to verify its capacity of integrating findings of insights. It is therefore meaningful to expand applied research topics and accumulate new insights about this approach.

2.4. Summary

Empowerment has been assessed as a dynamic process that happens within the interaction between agency and opportunity structure, as well as a consequence of such a process. In other words, empowerment can generally be perceived as a process of social action and a state of empowerment. Moreover, empowerment can be understood as an end as well as a means in development practice, because of its intrinsic and instrumental values. The intrinsic values of empowerment are usually reified as the psychological dimension of empowerment, so that the assessment of agency and subjective feelings
concerning self-confidence and self-esteem should be included as proxies for its manifestation.

Information and communication are of great importance to empowerment practice. ICTs, especially the Internet, show positive and negative potentials in promoting empowerment depending on the context. Therefore media’ contribution to empowerment remain context-specific.

The “media use as social action” theory paves an audience-centered approach to the problem of media impact. It justifies an interpretative theoretical perspective to understand media impact via media use. The user’s social role and situated context have impact on his/her social actions. Because users make decision on the basis of the meanings they attach to the “objects”, and the meanings are subject to one’s experience under the influence of one’s changeable social role and varying context. Furthermore, the users’ social action “concerns not only with external action (overt behavior) but also with internal action (covert behavior), or self-interaction” (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 395).
3. METHODOLOGY

As empowerment remains a multifaceted phenomenon, and media use is considered part of social action that are intertwined with lived experience and situations, it is difficult to elucidate the influence of specific media use on empowerment processes through generalization. This research aims to understand the contribution of internet-based media on nv-tong-zhi empowerment in Taipei from the perspectives of individual nv-tong-zhi.

A qualitative research design is deemed appropriate because it is capable to meaningfully express personal experience and to capture the details (Berg 2001, 3). Further, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach that could reflect the integration of these theoretical implications was adopted. In this research, a particular emphasis of is on individual nuances from participants’ experience in Taipei. Hence, case study and in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Empirical research procedure of data gathering, the analytical framework, ethical concerns, and limitations of data are presented.

3.1. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a recently developed qualitative research approach first described by Jonathan A. Smith (Smith and Shinebourne 2012). According to Smith and Shinebourne (2012, 73), IPA as a methodology has three theoretical building blocks: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.

As a philosophical movement, phenomenology undertakes the task “to study the ontic meanings of phenomena, their constitution as different kinds of realities and objectivities, such as entities, occurrences, processes, events, facts, and so forth” (Heinämaa 2003, 21). Edmund Husserl, the founder of the school of phenomenology, states that human lived experience is the basis of our
perception of the world which we inhabit and interact with, therefore is the best source to uncover the meanings of a phenomenon. Followed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and many other key figures in the development of phenomenology, Husserl’s fundamental conception of phenomenology has been implemented and developed into different perspectives for inspecting human experience. Nonetheless, IPA makes its commitment to the holistic phenomenology rather than a particular perspective (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 73-74). In this sense, IPA research involves an in-depth exploration of lived experience that focuses on how people are making sense of their lived experience (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 74).

Phenomenological studies nowadays frequently adopt a hermeneutic approach based on Heidegger’s claim that human experience itself cannot, in its own terms, explicitly speak out its underlying meaning in its own terms without valid interpretations (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 73). It has been noticed that such interpretation involves a double hermeneutic. First the participant tells the researcher about his/her own interpretation of their experiences, then the researcher attempts to interpret the material from a third person perspective.

In addition, IPA is an idiographic approach, “especially concerned with the particular experience of the individual” (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 74). The researcher first analyzes each case individually then “moves to look for patterns across cases but tries to retain the individual detail and nuance of the case” (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 74).

3.1.1. Research Design: Case study

IPA studies usually adopt the method of case study because a case study opens the way for discoveries (Shaughnessy and Zechmeister 1990). George Theodorson and Achilles Theodorson (1969) define case studies as,
a method of studying social phenomena through the thorough analysis of an individual case. The case may be a person, a group, an episode, a process a community, a society, or any other unit of social life. ...The case study method gives a unitary character to the data being studied by interrelating a variety of facts to a single case. It also provides an opportunity for the intensive analysis of many specific details that are often overlooked with other methods.

(Theodorson and Theodorson 1969)

In general, there are three types of case studies, exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive (Berg 2001, 229–231). Exploratory case studies are seen as “a prelude to a large social scientific study”, which prioritize conducting empirical studies under a organizational framework over defining concrete research questions, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Explanatory case studies, which employ a pattern-matching technique developed by Yin and Moore (1988), are useful to study causality. Descriptive case explorations are carried out to present a descriptive theory. The researcher is required to establish the overall framework and determine the unit of analysis in advance.

This study belongs to exploratory case studies, because the research purpose is to bridge the gap between the research topic and existing theories as well as researches. It is not desirable to assume causality, formulate hypothesis or identify variables before conducting empirical studies due to the lack of theoretical or empirical support. Hence, this exploratory study is firmly grounded in the specific context of Taipei. Preliminary findings from pre-research and the theoretical foundations presented earlier, serve as the reference frame to guide the empirical work.

**Sampling**

In line with the emphasis on particularity of IPA, *purposive sampling* is
utilized to select the research sample for case studies. A sample that has been defined as similar facilitates the researcher to focus on a particular perspective on the phenomena being studied. Further, a relatively small size of cases is sufficient on an analytical basis rather than large representative surveys. In IPA case studies, the researcher usually carries out intensive case-by-case analysis. In other words, the researcher is likely to “learn a great deal about the particular person and their response to a specific situation”, and to discover the degree of similarity or variation (or patterns) within a group through elaborate analysis of a small scale of homogeneous samples. Therefore, the credibility and validity of analysis lie at its quality of analysis rather than the scale of sample size. Moreover, conducting detailed case-by-case analysis is time-consuming, which suggests that it is not desirable or feasible to work on a large scale of cases by pragmatic considerations (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 75).

3.1.2. Research Method: In-depth Semi-structured Interview

IPA requires data collection methods that provide “rich, detailed, first-person accounts of experiences and phenomena” (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 75). Therefore, a range of qualitative methods are considered suitable to IPA studies for their ability of collecting intensive detailed data, such as semi-structured interviews, diaries, focus groups, and e-mail dialogues (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 76).

In this study, in-depth semi-structured interviewing is deemed the most appropriate for data collection. First, the research topic of this study is closely connected to personal experience and subjective feelings. Semi-structured interview is appropriate for this research, of which the purpose is to study experiences of individuals that are not obtainable through extensive methods like surveys. Second, the self-assessment is one important aspect of the
examination of each participant’s distinctive level of empowerment because “subjective measures should be may be more important than objective ones in predicting people's probability of taking action” (Narayan 2005). Interviewing offers the participant the capacity to voice his/her ideas, thoughts and memories in his/her own terms rather than being interfered by pre-given definitions, categories, or measurement in the majority of survey-based research.

Third, this study is relatively new, which means there is insufficient support from existing research or theories. In-depth semi-structured interview enables participants to involve in the construction of data about their lives instead of merely under instructions from the researcher in real time (Reinharz and Davidman 1992, 18). It indicates that the participant is allowed to talk about some issues that are important to elucidate the topic but neglected by the researcher, or unrecognized by established theories or research (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 76). In other words, in-depth semi-structured interviewing offers the researcher access to the complex meanings the participant attaches to the experience, by virtue of its greater openness and flexibility in comparison to structured interviews, surveys or questionnaires.

Guidelines

In practice, IPA sets up guidelines on how to conduct a successful interview from the perspective of techniques. In the preparation stage, compiling an interview topic list is seen helpful to “keep the focus on the specific research area, and to anticipate possible difficulties during interviews”. The formulated interview questions should be open and expansive so that participants will be encouraging to talk in details. Nonetheless, prompts are necessary because sometimes participants may need clarifications on some generalized questions.

In the interview process, beginning with a descriptive question about the
present is useful to reduce participants’ potential nervousness and anxiety in a research setting. Further, the researcher should be responsive to what participants are saying. For example, the researcher should arrange the sequence of interview questions, phrase the next question, and decide whether proceed to ask some sensitive questions according to participants’ response. In this way, the researcher could establish a professional and reliable personal image, maintain close relationships with participants and thus have access to richer data.

3.2. Research Procedure: Data Collection

In this section, the procedure of empirical work in the phase of data collection is presented. It consists of three major steps, i.e. the recruitment of participants, essential preparations for interviews and the interview process.

3.2.1. Approaching Participants

As it was mentioned earlier, *purposive sampling* was chosen to select the participants. Some basic criteria were set up for the selection: self-identified nv-tong-zhi, with experiences of using the Internet, and living in Taipei.

It remains sensitive to talk about issues regarding personal experiences of being a queer sexuality among complete strangers in Taiwan. Moreover, there exists a controversy concerning Taiwan’s sovereignty between the authority of Mainland China (PRC) and of Taiwan (ROC), the researcher, who is a mainlander, was allowed to visit Taiwan one time up to 15 days with a valid entry visa. Under these constraints, it was difficult to locate potential participants and get them into face-to-face interviews through time-consuming public wide-ranging recruitment.

Therefore, all the participants were approached through personal contacts of the researcher or a technique of *snowball sampling*. The first participant, a
part-time volunteer of Taiwan Tong-zhi Hotline Association (Hotline), is an old friend of the researcher. With her effort, the researcher had a long conversation with two organizers of Hotline. The organizers turned down my request to interview the members of Hotline, however, they offered the chance to interview the second participant, who was a full-time colleague at the organization. The second participant was willing to spread the recruitment information (Appendix 1 and Appendix 2) among her nv-tong-zhi friends and acquaintances but no positive response was reported. The third and fourth participant, both friends of the researcher, showed their generous support by introducing the fifth, sixth, eighth and ninth participants into interviews. The seventh participant was reached by a connection of a male heterosexual friend of the researcher.

**Sample Characteristics**

The final sample size of the research consists of 9 nv-tong-zhi participants, which is considered adequate to case studies as it was mentioned earlier. All the nine participants had been residents in Taipei for at least two years before the interviews. Participants’ age and education level were not considered as key factors at the outset, but revealed homogenous as between 22 and 32, namely adults born after the year of 1980, and college-educated. Out of the nine participants, two hold US and ROC dual nationality and two are from Mainland China and Macau.

**3.2.2. Preparations for Interviews**

As it was presented earlier, there is insufficient literature concerning the research topic. The researcher had to do pre-research after arrival in Taipei in

---

2 According to the description on its official website, Taiwan Tong-zhi Hotline Association was founded in 1998 and is now the oldest and the largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) organization in Taiwan (“Taiwan Tong-Zhi Hotline Association” 2015).
order to gain clearer perceptions of nv-tong-zhi empowerment and movements, and the media environment in Taipei, whereby the research questions were redefined as precise sub-questions and a tentative interview protocol was developed.

3.2.2.1. Pre-research

The pre-research of this study is comprised of a two-hour discussion with two LGBT practitioners, a conversation with a famed scholar in the field of queer studies, and the first two interviews with target participants in Taiwan. The two practitioners, both self-identified male homosexual, shared profound information regarding the history of Taiwan tong-zhi movements, media strategies deployed by Hotline, and personal opinions about nv-tong-zhi’s participation of organizational activities. The scholar, Ning, Yin-bing, who is well-known in the field of queer studies in Taiwan, provided an overview of the cultural context of Taiwan during the conversation and presented several of his works about media criticism and queer politics to the researcher. The first interview was carried out as a preliminary research of the participant’s sense-making process and understanding of nv-tong-zhi empowerment. The nearly three-hour interview with the second participant, a professional activist and nv-tong-zhi individual, contains sophisticated understandings of nv-tong-zhi’s visibility and activities in Taiwan society, in addition to personal experience of online media use and perceptions on the term “empowerment”.

Noteworthy, the term empowerment is generally translated and introduced in Chinese as “shou quan”, a noun which means “the consequence of being authorized to rights/power”. “De li zhuang da (得力壮大)” (Ning 2004, 220), which literally means “to strengthen and to expand”, is the only translation the researcher has found in Chinese-written academic literature with regard to queer issues and media impact.
Since the vague translation is unlikely to exhibit the meanings of nv-tong-zhi empowerment, it is necessary to negotiate the meanings of nv-tong-zhi empowerment with the informants in pre-research. Their feedback indicates some consistence in the interpretation as “against invisibility and stigmatization”, including earning recognition and legitimacy from inside and outside, such as generating self-awareness and self-esteem, constructing positive identity, voluntarily “coming out”, showing interests in rights-related issues and active participation in LGBT rights movements. In other words, they preferred to describe nv-tong-zhi empowerment in terms of subjective sense of empowerment and active engagement in civic activities, in contrast to other socially marginalized groups such as the poor may interpret empowerment as the outcome of economic growth. Nevertheless, understandings of nv-tong-zhi empowerment (and disempowerment) remain expansible because nuances exist in individual experiences and perceptions.

3.2.2.2. Formulating Research Sub-questions

IPA study should be guided by open and exploratory research questions that attempt to “explore in detail participants’ accounts of lived experience” (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 74), the established research questions were therefore redefined by elaborate sub-questions under the guidance of theoretical insights and preliminary findings of the pre-research.

**RQ I** *How do the participants make use of internet-based media in daily lives?*

Sub-question 1: How do the participants describe their experiences of using different types of internet-based media in daily lives?

Sub-question 2: In what contexts do their experiences of using internet-based media occur?

**RQ II** *How do the participants understand the contribution of*
internet-based media in their empowerment practice?

How the participants define the term of empowerment with lived experience is at the core to answer the second research question. Based on their descriptions of empowerment practices/processes, it is easier to situate their use of internet-based media in the discourse of dis-/empowerment, and thus feasible to examine whether their media use helps in the pursuit of empowerment.

Sub-question 3: How do the participants describe their experiences of becoming more empowered or disempowered?

Sub-question 4: How do the participants describe their experiences of using internet-based media concerning their practices of empowerment?

Sub-question 5: How are similarities and differences among individuals reflected in the participants’ accounts concerning the contribution of their internet-based media use to their empowerment?

RQ III How do the participants perceive nv-tong-zhi empowerment in the context of Taipei?

Sub-question 6: How do the participants understand nv-tong-zhi empowerment as a collective concept in the context of Taipei?

Sub-question 7: What do the participants think is the most important for nv-tong-zhi empowerment? How could it be related to the use of internet-based media?

3.2.2.3. Designing Interview Protocol

The interview protocol is important to semi-structured interviews by its organized yet expansible nature. It, on one hand, helps the researcher to involve crucial topics and questions during interviewing and enables the participant to express with a high degree of freedom. The interview protocol designed for this research remained open during the interview process, whereas it mainly covers
three aspects. The first aspect is concerning personal experience of online media use, including current and previous experience; the second aspect is about the description of individual empowerment practice within the media-saturated context, such as experiences of framing nv-tong-zhi identity, “coming out” to family and friends, and taking part in LGBT activities; the third aspect is about perceptions on empowerment of nv-tong-zhi as a group in the context of Taipei.

The interview questions were largely based on the protocol. Since the context is changing and participants’ responses and answers are differentiated, the researcher need to phrase new questions to proceed with interviews. For instance, a number of questions particularly concerning the participation of online petition and offline protests were added from the fifth interview by the influence of the outbreak of the Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan in March 2014.

3.2.3. Interview Process

The interview process took place between March 1st and August 1st, 2014. The nine in-depth semi-structured interviews last from 60 to 150 minutes. The first four were carried out as offline face-to-face interviews, and the rest were conducted via online chat applications due to a limited time and resources. All interviews were in Mandarin Chinese and audio recorded with permission from the participants.

In order to solicit useful responses and to enable participants to talk about some sensitive topics, the researcher has to create a comfortable environment and establish a rapport and level of trust with participants (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 76).

In this case, participants decided where to do the interviews. Out of the four offline face-to-face interviews, three were carried out at gay-friendly coffee
cafes, and one at a fast food restaurant. The gay-friendly cafes had an atmosphere which made the participant “feel at home” while a fast food restaurant’s second floor at midnight provided a closeted nv-tong-zhi participant with sufficient privacy and courage to speak out “in public”.

Online interviews are usually free from the environmental impact. The five participants of online interviews all chose to make the conversation at home, which is considered “a safe location” and “a neutral yet personal location” (Hanna 2012, 241). The last three participants were completely strange to the researcher before the recruitment. To build close connection with these participants, the researcher added them as friends, observed their updates and interacted with them on Facebook prior to the interview. The actual interviews took place after several weeks, when the participants had already known and been known by the researcher.

The interviews were in the form of conversations and were generally open-ended. The researcher primarily asked questions about participants’ age, birthplace, education level, occupation, length of residence in Taipei and other relevant personal information; and then started with descriptive questions such as the recent use of online media. The guidelines mentioned in the selection of data collection method, e.g. to prepare prompts, to be trustful and responsive, were followed by the researcher. The researcher avoided cutting off the participant with unintentional interruption, whereas the researcher sometimes asked questions to prevent interviews turning into meaningless chats. The interview ended when the content approximately covered the research topic list and the participant intended to close the conversation, for instance, a face-to-face interviewed participant informed the researcher there was going to be a meeting in one hour, and one online interviewed participant asked what time it was in Sweden to remind the researcher that it was late in Taiwan.
3.3. Data Analysis: Analytical Framework

3.3.1. Preliminary Data Processing

Given that the data for this study mainly draw from the interviews, transcribing the recoded interview material is seen the primary and important step of data analysis. Since the occurrence of pauses, laughs, repetitions and recasts during the interviews may represent participants’ hesitation, awkwardness, self-distrust, or self-confidence, it is necessary to transcribe the whole interview verbatim with annotations of these signals.

3.3.2. Analytical Strategy: Thematic Analysis

IPA provides a flexible framework that can be applied to a variety of research topics (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 77). In general, it includes a four-stage analytical procedure and a thematic analysis is at the core of the analytical strategy (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 77-80):

1) the researcher immerses him/herself in the data by reading the transcript time after time; Notes and comments on “content, language use, context, and initial interpretative comments” are made to emphasize “distinctive phrases and emotional responses” that are of potential significance;

2) the notes from the first stage are transformed into themes. The researcher formulates themes on the basis of particular details and relatively higher level of conceptualization;

3) this stage involves connections between emerging themes. The researcher categorizes themes according to similarities, labels each cluster, includes relevant extract from the transcript, and finally creates a table of themes for the case. The researcher is required to travel between the original transcript and the thematic tables because the iterative process ensures the reliability of the thematized data;
4) the final stage consists of convergence of emerged themes as well as of newly emerged themes. Based on the tables of themes for subsequent transcripts established through repetition of the previous stages, the researcher combines recurring themes and their sub-themes into sections and also highlights the emergence of new themes. In light of these new themes, earlier transcripts are reviewed and checked repetitively until an integral theme map is completed. Then the researcher reduces the data according to “the prevalence of data... [and] the pertinence of the themes and their capacity to illuminate the account as a whole” (Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 80).

Following the framework mentioned above, the analysis was performed case by case in a stage-by-stage manner. As a good analysis should be rigorous and elaborate, interpretative and descriptive, and sensitive to the data (Smith 2011, 24; Smith and Shinebourne 2012, 81), the process also incorporates repeated returns to the original transcript to ensure that the interpretations anchor the participants’ accounts.

**Emphasis: the Context and the Psychological**

As noted in the chapter of theoretical background, “psychological changes” and “context” are considered instrumental to uncover the meaning of empowerment as a dynamic process and media use as a form of social action. The analysis thus lays emphasis on the psychological dimension and the context. The psychological dimension is examined with attention to the subjective feelings the participants delivered through explicit expressions and wording.

The context refers to the participant’s personal background and also the broader societal context. Thus, each individual’s demographic description, including basic personal information, occupation, financial status and living condition is presented in an separate section, in order to better understand their
points of view on empowerment and internet-based media use. The societal and institutional impacts on participants’ experiences are mainly reflected in the aspect of their perceptions concerning nv-tong-zhi empowerment as a collective concept.

3.4. Ethical Concerns

Researchers of social sciences often delve into other human beings’ private social lives, thus having an ethical obligation to the researched (Berg 2001, 39). Since the research subjects are individuals as sexual minorities in society, the researcher must be aware of some ethical principles before embarking on the research.

In the recruitment stage, potential participants were informed about the research topic, interests, purpose, and necessary disclosure of private and potentially sensitive information in interviews. Only those who gave informed consent eventually participated in the actual interviews.

At the same time, the researcher guaranteed to keep all the participants anonymous and their sensitive information confidential. Considering the particularity of this research, descriptive information of personal background will be presented to make the findings more comprehensible, but appearance of concrete names of people or locations mentioned in the interviews were avoided in the texts. Consequently, attaching the complete interview transcripts in the section of appendix was abandoned.

There is one exception. The second participant, who is a high-profile LGBT practitioner against discrimination and gender inequalities, agreed to share her knowledge and experience as working at a LGBT rights organization Hotline with a risk of leaking information about her occupation.

Moreover, the researcher took a respectful and grateful attitude to and maintained a relatively close relation with the participants throughout the
research. It is partly due to the need of building rapport for preparing the semi-structured interviews, and partly because the fact that the researcher and the participants educated each other in the process.

3.5. Limitations of Data

Before conducting analysis of the gathered data, the limitations of data should be acknowledged. The adoption of online interview from the fifth interview may result in inconsistencies in data, as participants of the face-to-face interviews were more likely to provide extra information beyond designed topics while those of online interviews tended to focus on topics raised by the researcher.

Furthermore, there exist triple interpretations on data that may affect the validity of the data: first, what participants informed the researcher during the interviews was seen as the interpretation of lived experience in their own words; second, the participants’ utterance was interpreted into texts, that is, the transcripts; finally, referred excerpts from transcripts will be interpreted from Chinese into English in the analysis stage. The researcher utilized annotations and notes to keep covert action visible in transcripts and translated quoted extracts only to avoid the distortion of meaning.
4. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from thematic analysis of collected data in two sections. In the first section, the participants’ profile and social background are briefly introduced to make further findings more understandable. In the second section, findings based on 9 in-depth semi-structure interviews are presented in three themes: 1) focus on internet-based media usage, 2) focus on individual empowerment practice and 3) focus on perceptions of nv-tong-zhi empowerment as a collective term. The first theme presents the accounts of participants’ experience of using internet-based media. Similarities and differences of participants’ empowerment experiences are summarized in the second theme, with an emphasis on internet-based media usage. The third theme presents their perceptions of nv-tong-zhi empowerment in the specific context of Taipei.

4.1. Basic Information of the Participants

Participant 1

Participant 1 was a 25-year-old accountant working at a multinational firm in Taipei. She explained that she had endured a long time hardship throughout her high school life for the anxiety over her queer identity and got chronic gastritis. She had been living in a city located in the west of Taiwan until she moved to a city close to Taipei to pursue a bachelor degree. During her college life, she had a long-term volunteer experience at a LGBT rights organization and worked as teacher assistant of a queer studies program. She was “out” to her family and close friends, whereas remained “in the closet” to her colleagues and clients at workplace.

Participant 2

Participant 2 was aged 32, working as a full-time PR manager at Hotline, which is regarded the largest LGBT rights group in Taiwan. She has been
working at Hotline to take charge of issues on public and media relation since she was graduated from one of the top universities in Taiwan. She obtained her master degree abroad in a program of Public Policy during that period of time. Consequently, she is a high-profile LGBT activist and very experienced as well as insightful in issues concerning LGBT empowerment and movements in Taiwan. From her own experience, the act of coming-out and being a LGBT activist in public was not a difficult decision due to support from her open-minded parents. She also mentioned the experience of almost 20 years’ taking care of her now passed-away younger sister who had a severe heart disease, which had created a comparatively equal relationship between her parents and her.

Participant 3

Participant 3 is a Chinese mainland, aged 24. She first visited Taiwan as an exchange student majored in Chinese literature in 2011. At the same time, she encountered her ex-girlfriend. At the time of interviewing, she was in the second semester of a master program in media production at a university in Taipei. Familiar with the society and culture of mainland China and Taiwan, she emphasized the experience as being a nv-tong-zhi at both sides. She was free to talk about her sexual preference with friends, however, not willing to announce her identity with a broader public. Although her mother knew quite well about her identity of homosexuality, she intended to avoid any conversation regarding this topic with her mother. Besides, she thought it would be possible for her to be in love with a male as well, so that “nv-tong-zhi” as an inclusive term is more appropriate for her. Several weeks after the interview, she began a relationship with one of her male friends.

Participant 4

Participant 4 was 23 years old, born in Texas but grown up in Taipei. She insisted to call herself a feminine gay (referring to male homosexuals), because
she was always obedient to norms. She grew up in a very traditional and conservative family atmosphere. According to her, that is the reason that she remained closeted to her family members and friends. However, she was “out” to other members of a LGBT community at college.

**Participant 5**

Participant 5 was 31 years old, and was a PhD student in Taiwan. She had been living in US for more than 15 year before she moved back to Taipei with her parents. She said she had never seen a single example of homosexuality before college in US, because she stayed in a district that has an Asian majority population. Without an act of coming out, she had been an “out” nv-tong-zhi for more than 10 years because of her distinctive non-feminine appearance. Days before the interview, she officially came out to her parents even though they knew it quite well already.

**Participant 6**

Participant 6 was 23 years old and from Macau. She was in her fifth year in Taipei, and doing her master program in media and journalism. She had already finished her bachelor study in journalism, which lasted four years in Taipei. Therefore, she had many critical reflections on the relation between media and human life. As active and “out”, she identified herself as nv-tong-zhi because she thought she was closer to a bisexual than a normative lesbian.

**Participant 7**

Participant 7 was 23 years old and recently ended her bachelor studies in English language and literature. During the four years’ campus life in Taipei, she joined a LGBT student community and worked as a public relations coordinator. She came out to her parents at high school. Her mother cried over it many times and pleaded with her to make a boyfriend at university. After she failed to foster a heterosexual desire, her parents gradually accepted her sexual preference and became supportive.
Participant 8

Participant 8 was aged 21, currently in the third year of an undergraduate program in financial law as well as her third year in Taipei. She was the director-general of a nv-tong-zhi college community and also a student representative at the student parliament. According to her, self-identifying as a nv-tong-zhi and coming-out were not difficult or painstaking because her mother had been constantly open and supportive.

Participant 9

Participant 9 was a 24-year-old student that majored in architecture. According to her, it was a unique experience to study at a Christian university since she had been living in Taipei until she was 21. She came out to her mother at the age of 19 because of her first relationship, whereas she kept silent to her father due to poor relations.
4.2. Individual Internet-based Media Use

4.2.1. Internet-based Media

Based on participants’ accounts, their frequently used internet-based media include social networking sites, instant messengers, Bulletin Board System (BBS), online forums, and blogs. All participants in this study started to describe their experiences of using social media such as Facebook and Instagram to express emotions and opinions explicitly, or instant-messaging applications Line and Wechat, which facilitated their communication and interaction with friends and family, frequently via mobile devices such as smartphones.

Except Participant 6 (23 years, graduate media student) who is from Macau, other participants used Ptt Bulletin Board System (Ptt) service, the most popular anonymous html-based BBS among college students in Taiwan. Participant 2 (32 years, LGBT activist), Participant 4 (23 years, undergraduate student) and Participant 8 (21 years, undergraduate law student) stated that they had kept the habit of using Ptt service every two or three days, while Participant 9 (24 years, undergraduate architecture student) said she usually read the hot issues on Ptt via the links shared by others on Facebook.

Participant 6 and Participant 7 (23 years, undergraduate student) disclosed their stories on lesbian online forums occurred at least five years ago.

Participant 7 had been writing a blog in her teens, and Participant 2 and Participant 6 were currently running professional blogs with other friends respectively to share ideas on gender issues and criticism of social problems.

Interestingly, the majority of participants mentioned their exposure to contents from mainstream mass media via internet-based platforms or services. For example, Participant 6 told the researcher she had subscribed a digital newspaper to get updates on current affairs; Participant 4, Participant 5 (31
years, PhD student) and Participant 9 reported that they read news coverage published primarily by mass media outlets but accessed from sharings on Facebook.

4.2.2. Experiences of Using Internet-based Media

With differential interests to different types of internet-based media, all, even including Participant 4 who was busy preparing the postgraduate admission examination so that her use of the Internet was less frequent, used words like “it is just habitual” or “like a daily routine” to describe their use of internet-based media, especially of social media which are considered relatively more interactive and responsive compared with other types of internet-based media.

Apart from “habitual”, the participants also assessed their experience of using internet-based media as “instrumental”. Based on participants’ accounts, the instrumental values can be measured from two dimensions: 1) a tool to cope with problematic situations; 2) a disclosure of one’s identity.

Furthermore, participants all showed their preference to make friends or interact with friends offline rather than online, albeit online communication, particularly on mobile devices, facilitates their interaction with other social actors in daily lives.

4.2.2.1. Habitual

Their habitual usage of internet-based media reveals the meanings of two dimensions: as a routine and meaningful action, or as a way to pass time. According to the participants, the routinely usage always results in expected outcomes, which includes:

1) maintaining established personal relationships, i.e. by sharing mundane posts about themselves, and keeping themselves connected with friends or
news of friends;

2) strengthening the sense of belonging of offline communities, for instance:

*I read updates posted by the account of the joined student society, in order to know what is going on recently because I probably don't have much time or daren't to be physically present at some offline activities.* (Participant 4, 23 years, economics student, Taipei)

3) staying in the state of connecting to the world all the time that makes them feel comfortable and secure:

*I would say each time browsing others’ comments, pictures and sharings, I’m rather enjoying the sense, that, I feel independent and powerful. You see, I’m reading alone and judging independently. However, I’m not isolated because I have some sort of connection or even sympathize with the people I’m looking at.* (Participant 1, 25 year, accountant)

While they made use of internet-based media for killing time, their action may lead to similar consequences as the routine action to the whereas some pointed out normally it is,

*a reflexive action that reduces your awkwardness when you are expecting someone in a public space* (Participant 2, 32 years, LGBT activist)

Or,

*a method to pretend that you are not an idler* (Participant 6, 23 years, media student).

In this sense, the ritualized form of media use is more conscious compared with the reflexive use as an unconscious reaction to deal with anxiety.

**4.2.2.2. Instrumental**

During interviewing, participants more or less expressed their gratefulness to
the Internet because this revolutionary technological development had offered much more solutions to deal with unexpected problems, i.e. expanding the access to information, encouraging nv-tong-zhi to gain support from similar others, facilitating communication with straight people in their own voices.

Participant 3 (24 years, graduate media student) intentionally used online media to search for specific information. For example, she looked for homosexual-themed fictions and movies online at the time when she thought she might not be a heterosexual. In recent days, she used online sources of fictions, scripts, fictions, movies and news that are associated with her future occupation as a scriptwriter. She jokingly commented that her usage was “way too pragmatic”. In addition, she once joined Ptt, the most popular anonymous html-based BBS among college students in Taiwan, while seeking for consolation because of being cheated and dumped by her former girlfriend.

Participant 6 endured many hardships when she had a huge crush on her best gay friend and when she gradually realized she could be a bisexual. She joined a private virtual community of which members were girls who liked gay men and expressed her sorrows and confusions through online posts:

\[\text{At the beginning, I just read others’ stories. I refrained myself from disclosing my experience. But shortly after, I was inspired to say it out because I saw how they gave encouragement and useful suggestions to each other even though they didn't know each other at all. It’s a place fraught with warmth and kindness.} \] (Participant 6, 23 years, graduate media student)

Likewise, Participant 7 (23 years, undergraduate student) mentioned that once she was constrained to confide her identity troubles to friends, she turned to a lesbian-based online forum for help.

When it comes to the participants also shared, produced and diffused new knowledge about nv-tong-zhi issues to a large scale of people at their
convenience. The interactivity and mobility of online communication enables them to have discussion with straight friends. Participant 1 evaluated her “real” Facebook account as a “battle field.” She explained that this particular online space had created a platform where divergent opinions could be discussed between herself, her friends, and even the members of her family.

Nonetheless, there is a tendency for the participants to abandon using some online platforms that once were helpful to them. For example, Participant 6 rarely return to the virtual community because “the problems haunted me for a long time no longer exist”, and Participant gradually stopped visiting the lesbian online forum because “it (referring to using online forum) is not the fashion”. Participant 3 expressed her comments on this phenomenon as,

*I don't search for lesbian movies or fictions as often as I used to...probably because I haven’t achieved a full recognition of myself at that time...Yes, I'm a pragmatist. Once the problem solved, I don't have to rely on it (referring to Ptt).* (Participant 3, 24 years, graduate media student)

All participants considered their online experiences as a process of self-expression or and identity formation. In other words, their representations online could explicitly or implicitly disclose their gender, professional and other identities.

Participant 1 expressed that she was “making posts on Facebook with heart and soul” because she was aware that what she said and done could represent her general identity:

*Facebook means much more than a social networking site to me. You can project my image, general personality and my life based on the information from my page. It is my name card.* (Participant 1, 25 year, accountant)

Participant 3 (24 years, graduate media student) remarked that one’s
representations online are capable to reflect his/her taste, which is an important indicator for her decision of whether “become good friends” or “drifter further and further away from”.

Participant 2 emphasized that she didn't create posts about her personal life on Facebook, she admitted that the contents she shared on Facebook were directed by her professional identity. Thus, she had to divide her identities on different platforms as,

*I have to use it (Facebook account) to influence my readers. Yes, I treat my personal account part of my job, to educate and to mobilize those who show interests in LGBT rights issues... I also use Ptt but only for the aim to know what nv-tong-zhi is concerning the most to adjust the agenda of the organization... when I’m putting up the professional identity to observe LGBT people, I keep being an outsider from involving in online interactions... I am running a blog with other queer friends to share insights into the misunderstandings and stigmas on queer identities from the perspective of everyday life, but I use a pseudonym. I don't wish to be uncovered.* (Participant 2, 32 years, LGBT activist)

Further, the frequency of using Internet-based media can influence recognition of the users. Many of the participants utilized the online representations as “an indicator” to evaluate ordinary friends. Participant 5 starkly remarked that,

*those who spend day and night on Ptt are weirdos, not only queer people and also the straight. If people have friends and social lives in reality, they are unlikely to always be there. I don't think highly of them.* (Participant 5, 31 years, PhD student)

Nevertheless, participants also expressed their concerns and sense of anxiety of using the pervasive internet-based media in daily practice, as being aware of
greater potential “danger” and the leakage of identity and other private information in the cyberspace.

Consequently, they expressed that their experience of using social media were “increasingly stressful”, for example,

 Sometimes I write on my personal blog, it is my private space. Maybe the only private space... My mom are following my news on TV or updates on social media platforms. I know she wants to show her support, but, I really need more space (Participant 2, 32 years, LGBT activist);

The cyberspace is very dangerous. I would rather to stay silent sometime if I don’t want to be criticized or attacked by other users. (Participant 6, 23 years, graduate media student);

I sometimes checked in on Instagram rather than Facebook because I don't feel like to expose myself to some people (Participant 7, 23 years, undergraduate student).

4.2.2.3. Subordinate to Offline Face-to-Face Communication

In their opinions, one’s representation online can partly disclose his/her image, personality and tastes, but offline face-to-face conversations or interactions are more “authentic” for involving more nuanced personal characteristics and more sensible individual emotions:

 You can tell she is a person likes, for example drinking herbal tea, from all his/her information on social media platforms. However, you would never know whether she prefers to stir the tea spoon in this or that way unless you meet her in reality. That's what means much more to me. (Participant 1, 25 year, accountant)
4.3. Nv-tong-zhi Empowerment: The Individual Level

In most of the case, participants shared their views of “being empowered” on personal stories about self-identification and “out” presence, such as the act of “coming out” and participation of LGBT activities. These stories commonly underline a transformation process of nv-tong-zhi individuals from “being confused with their identity” to “being comfortable to live as members of nv-tong-zhi” at the psychological and behavioral levels. In other words, an increased level of self-esteem, self-efficacy and competence, which are considered positively related to psychological empowerment that integrates “self-perceptions of competence” and “participation in proactive activities” (Zimmerman 1995), are presented.

4.3.1. Self-identification

In general, “friends” “partners/potential partners” and “community” were the most referred keywords from their descriptions on self-identification. Participants found friends the major source of support when they began to discover their “abnormality”, in particular when they were upset by peer pressure or family pressure because of their identity as non-heterosexual:

*I chose to chat with my friends when I felt helpless or belittled because of the frustrating identity framing. Or, I should say I discussed this serious issue with them. It was more like a process to look for a deeper understanding of myself from others’ mouths as well as for advice.* (Participant 3, 24 years, graduate media student)

The intimate relationship is the most important criteria for nv-tong-zhi to identify and confirm their gender identities. To be precisely, participants used the term “love” to explain the cause of their awareness on a new gender identity, because some of them had not turned their affection into real
relationships yet. Four out of the nine participants mentioned how they got to know their previous/potential partners via the Internet.

The community is key to create a space with likeness for them to find out who they really are. Participant 2 pointed out the campus community prepared the first ground for her to realize her self-identification as she found it was difficult to find likeness in lesbian-themed fictions,

*The characters of those stories often lived very miserable lives, they got severe disease, disabled or died in the end. I could not find the so-called ‘self’ from those miserable stories. It was hard to imagine I would suffer anything like that since I was one of the best student in my class at that time.* (Participant 2, 32 years, LGBT activist)

### 4.3.2. “Out” Presence: “Coming-out” and Presence at Proactive Activities

Participants regarded the family, the school and the workplace as sources of threats as well as strengthen when it comes to the experiences of “coming-out” and the participation of LGBT rights activities. Participants who had received support from the parent(s) are more likely to come out in public. However, only those who were offered friendliness from their surroundings intended to act as an “out” nv-tong-zhi. For example, Participant 1 used her “real” account to openly discuss and debate with friends on gender and social issues, whereas she had to register another account hide her identity at workplace; Participant 2 was proud to claim she is a nv-tong-zhi in public because her job is part of her gender identity; and Participant 9 tried to keep nv-tong-zhi confidential because she was studying at a conservative Christian university where homosexuality was regarded as disgraceful.

A variety of “relationship”, such as friendship, intimate relationships, family relationship and the relationship with (virtual) community and colleagues, are
highlighted because they largely influence their decisions on whether participate a LGBT rights activity or not.

Moreover, Participant 3 (24 years, graduate media student) explained the fact that she had seldom participated online or offline activities regarding LGBT rights as “those activities are far from what she is concerning with” and the resistance to “being labeled or represented as one of the community”. Interestingly, she owed her absence at LGBT protests or activities to a critical self-recognition rather than the lack of self-esteem of self-confidence.
4.4. Nv-tong-zhi Empowerment in Taipei

The majority of participants owed the success of tong-zhi movements in Taipei, including an increased public attention to nv-tong-zhi, to the specific context of Taiwan society. Participant 2 remarked that,

_Taiwan society is the most open-minded one on gender issues, compare with Mainland China and Hong Kong. Because Hong Kong society has a deep root in Christianity, and the Mainland is far from a full-fledged civil society._

(Participant 2, 32 years, LGBT activist, Taipei)

Participant 6, who is from Macau, shared similar opinions from the perspective of cyberspace in Taiwan,

_Unlike the internet users in Macau, users in Taiwan, especially the queer users, enjoyed a far more higher degree of freedom. It is not about the government censorship, but the mainstream values embedded in Macau society. Macau society was developed from a small fishery village, people knew each other very well because of the close distance. So people in Macau today value the interpersonal interaction because it creates a feeling of ‘we are familiar and we are friends’, and they are discouraged to behave as deviants under the pressure caused by being watched by acquaintances. The homosexuality is rather a recent emerged issue in Macau. But in Taiwan, almost every friend of mine has a knowledge of queer culture... It once surprised me that netizens in Taiwan could openly discuss and debate over queer issues even sometimes they were putting up their real names._ (Participant 6, 23 years, media student)

Furthermore, Participant 2 addressed the importance of community in
regard to the empowerment of homosexuals in Taiwan, which is exemplified by an unique manner of coming-out – collective “coming out”. Community becomes a shelter for the socially marginalized queer individuals and also symbolizes a representative to speak out their appeals in public.

In particular, Participant 2 emphasized that collective action is indispensable to nv-tong-zhi empowerment. According to her, “female queer individuals are vulnerable to social oppression in the patriarchal society that defended family values”. It is more likely to achieve empowerment results, such as social equality and political rights, through collective action rather than some individual acts. If individuals fail to devote to the collective empowerment, they would easily lose the comfortable status thanks to the previous achievement:

*You may feel everything is nice on your own at this moment, however you will be rather miserable if you are exiled from the comfort zone one day.* (Participant 2, 32 years, LGBT activist)

Likely, Participant 7 and Participant 8 considered collective action part of a long-term strategy to achieve and maintain nv-tong-zhi empowerment. Participant 7 criticized some nv-tong-zhi’s absence at LGBT activities would undermine empowerment,

*I always get angry with those nv-tong-zhi who reject to participate any LGBT activities. ‘People should have the freedom and rights to do whatever they want’ is not a good excuse for inaction, because we still need to fight for rights.* (Participant 7, 23 years, undergraduate student)
5. DISCUSSION

To what extent has nv-tong-zhi’s use of internet-based media contributed to their empowerment in Taipei?

5.1. Empowerment: A Process of Social Action

Empowerment is usually assessed as a process of action as well as a consequence (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006, 3), so that nv-tong-zhi empowerment can generally be perceived as a process of social action and a state of empowerment. In this study, the researcher seeks to explore the role of Internet-based media in the dynamic process of empowerment, namely in the process of social action.

Since human action is complex and interrelated with many environmental impacts and individual traits, and media constitutes part of the environment as well as being influential in human beings’ development (Renckstorf and Wester 2001), the “media use as social action” reference model (see Figure 3) has been adopted to further illuminate the particular roles that Internet-based media plays in the social action process.

According to the “media use as social action” model, human’s external action is not instructive-driven but “carefully planned” (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 392). It is “shaped by a personal definition of the situation” and “oriented towards solving some newly perceived ‘problem’ in the social environment”, or “as an everyday routine designed to deal with unproblematic situations” (McQuail 2010, 425). The process of making “a personal definition of the situation” is an internal process of meaning-making and projection, it often leads to two sets of decision and external action, in relation to problem-solving or everyday-routine depending on the definition as “problematic” or “unproblematic”.

75
5.1.1. Internal Process of Defining and Projecting

The meaning-making process takes place on the basis of one’s social stock of knowledge and reference of relevance (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 392). Social stock of knowledge is acquired from one’s lived experience, which is intertwined and interrelated with a) the exposure to information, b) one’s social life and networks, and c) institutions in the broader socio-cultural context (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 390–391).

Participants demonstrated that Internet-based media had already become a central node to obtain information and to get informed, i.e. participants read news and updates from other websites through the shared links on Facebook. Because of the decentralized and anonymous nature of some types of internet-based media, nv-tong-zhi individuals encounter considerable “authentic” information regarding topics that were previously considered as taboo or misrepresented or ignored by mainstream media, e.g. the identification experience of being a homosexual shared in first-person account. Moreover, participants reinforced that online media had provided them unexpected knowledge about the how social oppressions on LGBT people occurred, and how LGBT groups struggled against social marginalization and discriminations in a global vision through news report, editorials on websites and blogs, etc.

The influx of information and knowledge learnt through Internet-based media intermingled with their established recipe knowledge, i.e. that associated with their educational experiences and other personal interests, that gradually influences their self-identifications and their perceptions of the surroundings, moreover, their mindsets.

Internet-based media to some degree have facilitated nv-tong-zhi individuals’ the construction of social networks and relations. In spite of the fact that the majority of participants stressed they prioritized face-to-face interpersonal communication, i.e. face-to-face interpersonal interaction with friends,
face-to-face “coming out” to family rather than digitally, all of them admitted that they kept mutually active and responsive with these social relations through internet-mediated communication that could transcend the limitations of distance. Four out of the nine participants mentioned how they got to know their previous/potential partners via the Internet. In this sense, internet-based media has paved a promising approach to accumulate participants’ endowment of social capabilities and to establish and maintain social networks that increase one’s initiatives and competence to engage in reaching empowerment and broader development outcomes.

Furthermore, as media has been portrayed as a type of institution that plays an important role in “defining, shaping and constructing societal beliefs, the norms and values of a culture of a given society” (Renckstorf 1996, 23), internet-based media may have a similar impact on the shaping of beliefs, norms and values in a society.

Another key element in the internal process is actor/user’s system of relevance. It can be probed from the interviews that participants’ motivations to involve in online/offline community activities social movements are largely dependent on their personal interests, preferences and characteristics. Some participants ascribe their establishment of the hierarchy of relevances to their experiences and social relations as “something they possess” and the exposure to information as “under certain influence.” Additionally, one’s defining and projecting process can be influenced by individual and social characteristics. Since personal characteristics is not born with but created and modified through one’s lived experience and surrounding society (Renckstorf and Wester 2001, 394), using internet-base media, as an act that affects one’s perceptions and knowledge and an act to deploy and make sense of an “object” in the surrounding society, can be seen as indirectly shaping one’s characteristics.
Furthermore, the findings evidently show that the participants who were with a degree of comfort of being a nv-tong-zhi usually had received support from the parent(s), and only those who were offered friendliness from their surroundings intended to act as an “out” nv-tong-zhi.

5.1.2. External Action: Internet-based Media Use

With an interpretation of situations and a motivation to take action/reaction, the actor puts the initiative into practice. Since the external action-taking and consequent influences are the outcomes of complicated interactions intertwined with social history, personal experience, specific contexts, and other unexpected environmental factors, it is hard to identify the factor contributes to a divided part of an empowerment intervention. However, the contribution of internet-based media in nv-tong-zhi empowerment process can be observed from participants’ subjective feelings of using internet-based media (Renckstorf and Wester 2001).

According to Bandura (1988), self-efficacy is the most productive mechanism concerning psychological empowerment, in other words, empowerment at the individual level of analysis. There are four means to increase self-efficacy: 1) mastery of experiences; 2) modeling strategies of others; 3) social persuasion; 4) changing of psychological state.

The findings present that nv-tong-zhi users make use of online media as a problem-solving tool and a habit. For instance, expanding the access to information, encouraging nv-tong-zhi individuals to gain support from similar others, facilitating communication with straight people in their own voices, or, maintaining established personal relationships; strengthening the sense of belonging of offline communities; staying in the state of connecting to the world all the time that makes them feel they are autonomous. It can be probed that the internet-based media are helpful for nv-tong-zhi users to access to
information, which is recognized as of great value to empowerment.

Furthermore, participants demonstrated that they had gained self-confidence, a higher sense of self-esteem, and confidence to live as a nv-tong-zhi from communication and interaction with their partners, friends, and other similar members of online/offline communities.

In other words, the internet-based media is positive to increase nv-tong-zhi users’ self-efficacy by increasing their psychological sense of security, providing comprehensive information to their mastery of situations, creating a site for them to practice social skill. In this sense, nv-tong-zhi’s general usage of online media and the development of self-efficacy by using internet-based media reflect the positive function of internet-based media in empowerment practice.

Nevertheless, the findings also suggest online communication had brought about sense of insecurity to the users, i.e. the potential “danger” in privacy disclosure of the pervasive cyberspace requires them to cautiously make use of internet-based media in daily practice. For example, Participant 1 used two Facebook accounts to avoid being “lifted out” at workplace.

5.2. Contribution as Contextual and Temporary

It is noticeable that some users abandoned the usage of some forms of online media because “the problems haunted me for a long time no longer exist” or “it (referring to using online forum) is not the fashion”. It suggests that the function of internet-based media in empowerment process is often situational and temporary. The definition of problematic situation is dependent on one’s lived experience. Once the situation is no longer regarded as “problematic”, the problem-solving capabilities of some types of internet-based media become meaningless to users. Thus the assessment remains context-sensitive not only in terms of socio-cultural context but also of individual nuances.
5.3. Absence: Independence or Disempowering?

In the perspective of self-assessment, the “absence” seems to be considered an empowerment practice because Participant 3 personally appreciated the “absence” as a consequence of rational thinking. However, a different conclusion could be reached if empowerment is seen as a dynamic process.

According to the insights from empowerment theories, empowerment includes bottom-up improvement of individual/collective assets and capabilities, and top-down institutional changes/reforms in practice. Furthermore, empowerment at collective and societal level can “strongly contribute to personal development by the competencies and interests that they cultivate, as well as by the social networks that they provide” (Bandura 1988). In other words, the “absence” probably represents a stronger sense of empowerment to some nv-tong-zhi individuals, but hinder the marginalized social group from further development.
6. CONCLUSIONS

The lived experience of the participants illustrated in this study, serves to further illuminate the contribution of individuals’ use of internet-based media to their empowerment. In light of empirical findings in this study, the researcher has arrived at the conclusions as follows.

First, nv-tong-zhi individuals’ use of internet-based media have brought about increases in self-efficacy, self-esteem and competence as well as active engagement in empowerment interventions by providing more valuable information and more convenient and accessible social interactions online.

Using internet-based media can affect nv-tong-zhi’s definition of situation and decision towards external actions by a more influential diffusion of information and easier maintenance of social networks. Nv-tong-zhi users’ exposure to positive information from online platforms or from internet-mediated interactions could increase their self-confidence and social awareness that has contributed to their self-identification process and presence at proactive activities. The accessibility and mobility of some internet-based media have to some degree facilitated nv-tong-zhi individual’s the construction of social networks and relations, which are considered as sources of support that have encouraged them to act as “out” agents.

Second, contribution of using internet-based media is contextual and temporary. Internet-based media use that has been perceived as empowering in some contexts and situations may be disempowering in other settings. The advantages of using some types of internet-based media, such as decentralization and interactivity, may undermine nv-tong-zhi empowerment due to the accumulation of subjective sense of insecurity and concerns about privacy.

Furthermore, there has emerged a paradox between psychological empowerment and collective empowerment from the findings. One participant
interpreted her inaction towards proactive collective activities as a symbol of independence, while others regarded the “absence” as an illusion of increased sense of empowerment as well as a threat to nv-tong-zhi empowerment in particular at the collective level.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

It is worthwhile to mention the limitations of this research, which imply the directions of future research. This research is a qualitative and interpretative research, which pays less attention to generalizations or explanations of phenomena. Thus, the findings can be used to develop large scale descriptive or hypothesis testing quantitative research, and explanatory studies of topics regarding the paradox between psychological empowerment and collective empowerment. In addition, the participants of this research had seldom experienced a digital divide in terms of accessibility and skills. They all live in an urban area of a developed capitalist society and are college-educated. In other words, a future research on nv-tong-zhi individuals who have/are suffered/suffering from the problem of digital divide will draw a completely different picture from what has been presented in this research.
Bibliography


———. 2011. The Power of Identity: The Information Age: Economy,


Drushel, Bruce, and Kathleen German. 2009. Queer Identities / Political Realities. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.


Hamelink, Cees J. 1995. World Communication: Disempowerment and


Katz, Elihu. 1959. “Mass Communications Research and the Study of
Popular Culture: An Editorial Note on a Possible Future for This Journal.” Studies in Public Communication 2: 1.


Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview Participants Recruitment Information

Hi,

The significant YOU. My name is Cheng Gong, a mainlander and master student of Digital Media and Society at Uppsala University, Sweden. I am doing a semi-structure interview for my master thesis Internet-base Media and Nv-tong-zhi Empowerment in Taipei currently, which is based on explorations of individuals’ personal experience and life stories. Basically, I am curious to know: your personal information, including age, birthplace, educational background and current occupation (the detailed information will be kept credential); your experience regarding such as self-identification as nv-tong-zhi, act of “coming out”/to, and, participating in LGBT rights or other civic activities; in what way internet-based media involved in your life path or social changes; your perceptions on nv-tong-zhi empowerment in Taipei…

If you are self-identified nv-tong-zhi (I personally define nv-tong-zhi as self-identified female and having same-sex desire), and willing to talk with me, or have any stories to share, don't hesitate to contact me. My mobile number is 000000, Facebook account is www.facebook.com/…

Sincerely,

Cheng
訪談研究計劃說明

我是龔成，中國大陸女生，同時也是瑞典烏帕薩拉大學社會科學所數字媒體與社會項目的在讀碩士研究生。目前在為我的畢業論文《網路媒體與女同志賦權》進行田野調查，大概說來，這篇論文會關注在台北的女同志的網路媒體使用經驗與自我身份認同公共事務參與，聚焦在具體的個人生命經驗，當然也包含觀察或觀點。很大程度上，這需要你我共同來完成的，所以很期待你能留出一些時間來述說和交流。

因為訪談是半結構化的，也就是說，可以自由發揮但還是有一定線索：你的基本個人信息，包含年齡、籍貫、教育背景和目前職業，細節信息都會被嚴格保密，不過我需要你給自己一個名稱或是代號；你從什麼時期開始以及如何使用不同的網路平台來建立自我認同／尋找夥伴／出櫃（不出櫃）／參與公共事務；你所體驗到的各種媒介在你生活中帶來的便利與缺陷，公私領域的經驗都可以說一說……如果你是生活在台北的女同志，同時對這個話題有興趣又恰好有時間來談談，隨時歡迎。我的手機號碼000000，臉書主頁www.facebook.com/…。

期待有幸聽到你的聲音。

龔成