

**ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF  
A THAI FAN COMMUNITY**

**Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
at the University of Leicester**

**by**

**Pan Nilphan**

**Department of Media and Communication  
University of Leicester**

**January 2006**

## Acknowledgements

I wish to express my thanks to many people who have made this thesis possible. First of all, I would like to thank Anders Hansen, my supervisor, for guiding me through each phase of my study, and for tirelessly reading and commenting on my drafts. His valuable advice on academic matters has broadened my perspectives and I have learnt so much from him.

I am grateful to all the members of the *Petchprauma* online fan community for agreeing to be interviewed, and for providing information and friendship during my fieldwork. I would also like to thank the staff, lecturers, and my colleagues at the Department of Media and Communication at Leicester University, who have contributed to a pleasant experience during my study there. I particularly appreciate friendship and support from Nuwan Thapthiang and Hiu Hung Chong.

Many thanks to all the friends whom I have met in Leicester, especially to Suparade Kalaluck, Vee Chayakul, and Supruet Thavornyutikarn for their great help during my stay. I would also like to thank many friends in Thailand for their cheerful attitude. I owe special thanks to Su Yon Yim, Naruemon Thabchumpon, Kota Yoshitome, and Angela Wilson, who offered help at the time I needed it most. I am especially indebted to a lifelong friend, Lousie Lin-Ching Choo, for giving support and encouragement in accomplishing my thesis.

My very special thanks to my sister, Pad Nilphan, for giving so much guidance, for always listening and caring, and for being with me both in happiness and tears. My most special thanks go to my parents, Sahat and Chireerat Nilphan, for their love and dedication. Their enthusiastic support, positive attitude towards life, and most important of all, their belief in me, have built a profound basis for my life, given me confidence and inspired me to follow my inclinations.

I used to wonder what would it be like at the end of this journey, but now I have discovered that this is a beginning to another chapter of life. Everyone needs their own cheering team and for me, all these people have been it. I will always be thankful for their contributions to my achievement.

## **Abstract**

### **Title**

**Online Communities and Social Networks:  
an ethnographic study of a Thai fan community**

### **By**

**Pan Nilphan**

This thesis investigates how the social networks of Thai fans can be expanded through participation in an online community. We examine not only practices within online communities and social networks, but also broader contexts of the Internet which include fandom. Examining a Thai case illustrates how the use of the Internet is influenced by local contexts and cultures. Thai cultural values are used to explain the online social interactions of the Thai people.

An online community of fans of the Thai novel, *Petchprauma* is selected for study. This community represents a ‘critical case’, where theoretical ideas concerning a decentralised role of the Internet, online fandom and relationships can be studied. This research was conducted using an ethnographic approach. The key methods comprised of non-participant observation, participant observation, textual analysis, and face-to-face interviews. This approach involved intensive participation as a *Petchprauma* fan both within the online and offline environments of the case study. The data collected from these different viewpoints was triangulated in order to ensure the validity, reliability and consistency of the research findings.

This thesis argues that fans can expand their social networks through participation in on and offline activities. However, the degree of social network expansion is dependent on the fans’ positions in the hierarchical structure within the community. The difference in status of the community’s members results from the members’ levels of participations and personal characteristics. This finding also reflects the influential role of the Internet as social technology and as part of people’s daily lives, and as decentralised medium. The original contribution of this thesis is not only the study of the empirical data which provides original information for Thailand where there are a limited number of Internet studies, but also the use of particular analytical tools. Additionally, this thesis examines factors that contribute to different social status within online fan communities to explain the different degrees of social networks expansion of fans.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	ii
<b>Abstract</b>	iii
<b>Table of Contents</b>	iv
<b>Tables</b>	vii
<b>Pictures</b>	vii
<b>Figures</b>	vii
<b>Abbreviations</b>	viii
 <b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	 <b>1-13</b>
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Research rationale	4
1.3 Research question	8
1.4 Thesis structure	10
 <b>Chapter 2 Expansion of social networks in online fan communities</b>	 <b>14-68</b>
2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 Context of the Internet	15
2.2.1 Defining the Internet	15
2.2.2 The Internet as a decentralised media	17
2.3 Contexts of online communities	18
2.3.1 Defining online communities	18
2.3.2 Rationale for online communities	22
2.3.3 Debates on online communities	23
2.4 Contexts of online fandom	32
2.4.1 Debates on fandom	32
2.4.2 Online fandom	35
2.4.3 Collective power of online fans	37
2.5 Social networks in online communities	38
2.5.1 Defining social networks	39
2.5.2 Creating social relationships online	42
2.5.3 Hierarchy within online communities	44
2.6 Practices within online communities	49
2.6.1 Observing the practices of fans	49
2.6.2 Communication online	50
2.6.3 Knowledge and social discussions in online communities	55
2.7 Local Internet use	63
2.8 Conclusion	67
 <b>Chapter 3 Research approaches and methods</b>	 <b>69-126</b>
3.1 Introduction	69
3.2 Introduction to the PPU online fan community	70
3.2.1 Story line of the <i>Petchprauma</i> novel	71
3.2.2 History of the PPU online fan community	75
3.3 Formulating research ideas for this thesis	78
3.3.1 Developing the research questions	78
3.3.2 Choosing the ethnographic research approach	80

3.3.3 Selecting the case study	83
3.3.4 Becoming a PPU online community member	89
3.4 Collecting empirical evidence	96
3.4.1 Data collection strategy	96
3.4.2 Methods of data collection	98
3.4.3 Personal experiences as an ethnographer	116
3.5 Critical and reflexive processes	118
3.5.1 General issues and criticisms	118
3.5.2 Issues relating to bias of data collection	120
3.6 Conclusion	125
<b>Chapter 4 The <i>Petchprauma</i> online fan community</b>	<b>127-158</b>
4.1 Introduction	127
4.2 Thai cultural values	129
4.2.1 Social harmony	130
4.2.2 Fun-pleasure orientation	132
4.2.3 Social connections in Thailand	133
4.3 Introduction to the Internet in Thailand	134
4.4 Rationales for the PPU online fan community	137
4.4.1 Common interest in the <i>Petchprauma</i> novel	138
4.4.2 Different degrees of interests in the <i>Petchprauma</i> novel	139
4.5 Characteristics of the PPU fans	145
4.5.1 Fun-loving characters	146
4.5.2 'Experts'	149
4.5.3 General information on the PPU fans	150
4.7 Conclusion	156
<b>Chapter 5 Practices within the <i>Petchprauma</i> online community leading to the expansion of social networks</b>	<b>159-209</b>
5.1 Introduction	159
5.2 Discussions within the PPU online community	160
5.2.1 Popular discussion topics	160
5.2.2 Knowledge discussions	168
5.2.3 Social discussions	176
5.3 Expansion to face-to-face activities	188
5.3.1 Types of face-to-face activities	188
5.3.2 Evidence of face-to-face activities	189
5.3.3 Developing relationships in face-to-face environments	193
5.4 Nature of the relationships of PPU fans	196
5.4.1 Characteristics of the relationships of PPU fans	196
5.4.2 Connectivity in spite of differences	197
5.4.3 Fast development of relationships	199
5.4.4 Family-like relationships	201
5.4.5 Different strengths of relationships	203
5.5 Conclusion	206

<b>Chapter 6 Study of the Hierarchical Structure within the <i>Petchprauma</i> Online Community</b>	<b>210-252</b>
6.1 Introduction	210
6.2 The hierarchical structure within the PPU online community	211
6.3 The PPU team	212
6.3.1 Role	212
6.3.2 Status	214
6.3.3 Power	219
6.4 The Core group	224
6.4.1 Roles	224
6.4.2 Status	225
6.4.3 Power	233
6.5 General members	234
6.5.1 Roles	234
6.5.2 Status	234
6.5.3 Power – Collective power of the PPU fans	235
6.6 Managing the hierarchical differences between the PPU fans	237
6.6.1 The reaction to power and how it is exercised	238
6.6.2 Encouraging self-disclosure	240
6.6.3 Encouraging smooth relationships	246
6.7 Conclusion	251
 <b>Chapter 7 Conclusion</b>	 <b>253-267</b>
7.1 Introduction	253
7.2 Re-examination of the research questions	253
7.2.1 How were the social networks of the PPU fans expanded?	254
7.2.2 How did the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community affect the expansion of social networks of the PPU fans?	256
7.2.3 Can the social networks of the PPU fans be expanded through participation within the PPU online community?	258
7.2.4 What role did the Internet play in facilitating the expansion of social networks of the PPU fans?	259
7.3 Original contributions of the thesis	262
7.4 Re-visiting the thesis and issues for future research	264
7.5 Conclusion	266
 <b>Appendices</b>	 <b>268-272</b>
Appendix A Electronic resources from the PPU online forum	268
Appendix B The name list of interviewees	270
 <b>Bibliography</b>	 <b>273-283</b>

## Tables

Table 1	Activities of the researcher within the PPU community	95
Table 2	Activities of the researcher in face-to-face meetings with the PPU fans	101
Table 3	Demographic profile of the interviewees	112
Table 4	Date and place of the interviews	113

## Pictures

Picture 1	PPU website	76
Picture 2	PPU online forum	104

## Figures

Figure 1	Internet penetration by location and its growth in Thailand	136
Figure 2	Numbers of the PPU fans, 21 July 2003-30 June 2004	151
Figure 3	Gender of the PPU fans	153
Figure 4	Age range of the 33 interviewees	154
Figure 5	Number of threads on different boards on the PPU online forum, Information collected from 21- July 2003- 30 June 2004	163
Figure 6	Percentage breakdown of the different types of messages posted on the PPU online forum, Information collected from 21- July 2003- 30 June 2004	164
Figure 7	The trend in the number of knowledge posts and social posts, Information collected from 21- July 2003- 30 June 2004	165

## Abbreviations

AIT	Asian Institute of Technology
BBS	Bulletin Board Service
CAT	Communications Authority of Thailand
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
HTML	Hypertext Markup Language
ISP	Internet Service Provider
IRC	Internet Relay Chat
LAN	Local Area Network
MUD	Multi-User Domain; Multi-User Dungeon
MOO	Multi-User Domains Object Oriented
NECTEC	National Electronics and Computer Technology Center
PPU	<i>Petchprauma</i>
URL	Uniform Resource Locator
WANs	Wide Area Networks
WWW	World Wide Web



## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how a group of Thai people expand their social networks through participating in an online fan community. This study is based on a case of an online fan community of a Thai novel *Petchprauma* (PPU).<sup>1</sup> The central emphasis of this thesis is to analyse the impacts and consequences of the practices that fans of the novel follow and how these practices help to create relationships and expand the social networks of the fans. In order to understand this interplay, I explore certain issues involving the expansion of a social network online, in addition to examining the practices that take place within the online community. I also discuss broader and general contexts concerning online communities, online fandom, and, the local dimension of Internet<sup>2</sup> use, and examine Thai cultural values.

‘Social network’ is an alternative term for a community where relationships are created among individuals. Without the Internet, relationships have long been created face-to-face and by other conventional communication technologies, such as telephone (Queralt, 1996, p.227). In recent years, the Internet has become a part of everyday life for many people around the globe. The Internet has had great success in attracting millions of people to engage in its functions and applications, as it has not only increased the speed of interactions, but also reduced limitations of space. It is likely that the Internet will continue to grow in popularity.

Advances in technology have helped this global computer-mediated communication to develop. The nature of the Internet as a medium for both information and communication brings about significant changes in people’s ways of life. In terms of

---

<sup>1</sup> Petchprauma is one of the most famous adventure novels in Thailand. The Petchprauma online community (<http://www.petchprauma.com>) has its own fansite in the Thai language. All participants are Thai. In this thesis, ‘PPU’ is used to abbreviate Petchprauma when referring to the Petchprauma online community and the Petchprauma fans.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Internet’ in this thesis is spelled with a capital ‘I’ according to many scholars (e.g., Gurak, 2004; Castells, 2001). However, in some literature on the Internet, the uses of the lowercase ‘i’ is increasingly found due to the ‘ordinariness’ of the Internet in the current age (Thurlow *et al.*, 2004, p.42).

sharing information, the Internet is capable of sending and receiving an extensive amount, which provides enormous benefits to its users. As a communication medium, the Internet plays a major role in helping people to make connections with one another. Online communities are among the many different types of facilities that aid international communication and socialising.

Having recognised the importance of the Internet, the role of the users in using the technology is also important to bring to attention. It has been noted that 'The internet is not only a resource to consume, but also a means to access and use opportunities. It can be a gateway to informational, economic, cultural, and social advancement' (Chen, Boase, and Wellman, 2002, p.109). Thus the way people 'consume' such technology could lead to different possibilities to their lives. Another scholar has noted that a distinctive feature of the Internet is its 'self-evolving development'. The fact that the Internet does not belong to anyone and is neither owned nor controlled by any single organization uniquely influences its operation. This means that the future of this medium is unknown and truly depends on how its users utilise it. Internet users have the power to transform the technology and become the producers of the technology, adapting the technology to their uses and values and ultimately shaping the whole network (Castells, 2001, p.27). This is why this thesis attempts to understand the actions, attitudes, and perceptions of users towards the Internet and how they benefit from the Internet.

Yet, when it comes to studying the Internet, we need to focus on examining the individual elements that make up the Internet. Gurak (2004, p.28) has commented that '[...] saying 'the Internet' is like saying 'the world''; therefore, 'Research about the Internet as a social, psychological and linguistic communication site is most fruitful when it is based on the specific case at hand'. Similarly, another scholar has stated:

The analogy of the Internet as a forest composed of thousands of separate and unique trees is appropriate, but we are still at the point where we have to gain a better understanding of the trees themselves, before the forest makes any sense (Costigan, 1999, p.xxiv).

By understanding that the Internet is a broad topic to be studied, this thesis serves as a micro-study – observing practices of a group of fans within an online community in Thailand – in order to help understand the current wider picture regarding the role of the Internet in people's lives.

In Thailand, the Internet was first established in mid-1987. By 1995, the Internet was commercialised and to a great degree expanded to the general population so that it was available and more easy for a wider audience to access (Sirin *et al.*, 1999, p.8). In addition to this, online communities are currently rising in popularity. Since the Internet has formed a part in the everyday lives many Thai people, and assuming that it will continue to do so in the future, it is important to understand Thai people's perceptions to this growing technology. It is also important to know how the Thai people benefit from their online social interactions and also understand what practices the Thai people follow in their online communications.

The main argument of the thesis is that the participation of fans in online communities enables them to develop social relations as well as to expand their social networks. I also argue that the difference in status of the community's members, as a result of the members' levels of participation and personal characteristics, influenced the degree of expansion of social networks. By focusing on a specific online community with a particular content and context, I found certain characteristics of relationships like fast-development and being family-like, which certainly explains the way the social networks can be expanded. The Internet thus serves as an alternative communication medium that facilitates the connections among individuals. The key difference between the Internet and traditional media with regard to fan communities is that the Internet provides space for fans to draw attention from media producers while it is difficult to do so via traditional communication medium. In this thesis, the impact of Thai cultural values as a local dimension in relation to the global picture of the Internet will also be examined.

It is hoped that the thesis's discussions may serve as a good base for other studies, which also attempt to understand the social networks within online communities and the role of the Internet as an embedded part of people's daily lives.

## 1.2 Research Rationale

There are several rationales for why this thesis was conducted. They are comprised of my personal and genuine interests in the rising trend of Internet studies, the lack of being able to find similar studies in Thailand and from this, the aim is to fill an academic gap and to add generally to the literature on online communities and social networks and online fandom. The following paragraphs discuss these in detail.

My personal background in mass communication studies motivated me to select the research topic about the media. I became interested in the Internet as it is a new type of media and a new medium of communication (Silverstone *et al.*, 1992, p.15). A common issue that is raised in many texts concerning the Internet involves the linkages between this new medium and people's behaviour. This thesis provides an understanding of the Internet by reflecting on how people use the technology and engage the technology in their lives. The thesis analyses an online fan community - one part of the Internet's functions - and attempts to understand people's practices and the way they benefit from the community. To do this, the thesis not only focuses on a specific case study but also reflects on the Internet in general which will later produce a body of knowledge to add to my background in mass communication studies.

The Internet has attracted interest from academic scholars as well as popular presses since the early 1990s, and even more so throughout the last half of the 1990's (Silver, 2000, p.19). Researchers across different fields of study such as linguistics, rhetoric, psychology, cultural studies, management studies and communication studies began to explore different aspects of the Internet (Gurak, 2000, p.26). The development of Internet studies has been in line with the development of the technology itself. The Internet received much criticism in its early development about its negative consequences, particularly from the press (Silver, 2000, p.20). However, growing numbers of Internet studies in a later period perceived the Internet in a broader sense: they not only noted its advantages, but also considered the Internet as a complex and ubiquitous technology. Thus, recent research studies have attempted to put the Internet in social contexts rather than perceiving it as a single influence on communication (Gurak, 2004, p. 28; Baym, 1995, p.139). This thesis is one of the

studies which has been brought up at a period of Internet boom and thus does not ignore taking the social context into account. After all, it needs to be noted that this thesis was conducted not only when Internet technology was on a popular rise, but also at a critical time to pursue academic research. One of the aims of this thesis is to add generally to the Internet literature.

Moreover, this thesis touches upon the issue of fandom - the context of media audiences which has long been a subject of mass communication studies. However, this thesis aims to examine the issue of media audiences in a new context: interactions of fans online. In contrast with the traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers where their centralised role has long been recognised and receivers have limited opportunities to give feedback, the Internet provides more opportunities for the audience to have their say and make their opinions known to the general public. This is because the Internet has the capacity to provide space for information exchanges and communication channels for the audience to discuss online. Thus, the issue of this thesis, fans' discussions within an online community, will certainly bring an understanding to the issues of media audience interactions with the Internet.

In particular, this thesis examines the online fandom outside the western context. There are few studies examining the fandom in non-Western contexts (e.g., Darling-Wolf, 2004, Parameswaran, 1999), as Darling-Wolf (2004, p.508) who studied an intercultural dimension of an online fan community noticed. One study that observes fans of a fiction novel outside the Western context is the study of Parameswaran (1999), but it observes fandom offline that is not relevant to the Internet context.

Another key rationale of this thesis is to contribute to the study of social networks in online communities. This is a particularly important exercise for Thailand, as there is no study examining the issue of social networks in online communities. This thesis is the first study which tries to understand how Thai people expand their social networks through online communities. The infant stage of online community studies in Thailand makes it fascinating as well as essential to conduct this thesis. Aiming to explain practices of the Thais within online communities, the thesis contributes not only to the study of social networks in online communities in Thailand, but also

learning that the Thai cultural norms have an impact on the way Thai people uses the Internet. The empirical findings of the thesis support the studies of some scholars who discovered that local Thai culture has an impact on how the Thai people use the Internet (see Hongladarom, 1998a; 1998b; 2003; Panyametheekul and Herring, 2003). However, due to a limited number of intensive empirical studies, this thesis serves as one among the first which provides comprehensive empirical evidence on the influence of local Thai culture and the way Thai people use the Internet.

As a broader context, the study of social networks in online communities has been developed by several scholars (e.g., Wellman, 1997; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). Through their eyes, online communities help people to connect with each other and develop social relationships, which they perceive as embedded in the social networks (Wellman, 1997, p.181). The social network analysts examine the patterns and networks of social relations in order to find out what effects they have on people or organizations (Garton *et al.*, 1997). The studies of social networks provide useful viewpoints for understanding relationships within online communities. However, Wellman (1997, p.198) has noted the shortcomings of social networks studies – that there are too many arguments in the literature of social networks, and that not enough preliminary studies have been done to gain answers towards many questions raised. This thesis attempts to compensate for some of the shortcomings of the social network studies.

Contemporary social network scholars have discussed status hierarchies as well as the small groups that exist within social networks and also the fact that these elements might produce different social outcomes (Garton *et al.*, 1997). However, there is no evidence from existing social networks analysts of how the hierarchical structure and the existence of small groups within online communities are created. There is also no evidence to explain how the existence of small groups within online communities would influence the relationships and the expansion of social networks of online community members. Previous research in this area has focussed on the pattern and structure of relationships among network members, not on the factors affecting hierarchical structure within online communities.

Following my review of the literature both concerning and related to my topics of interest and also observing the limitations in research studies with similar study objectives, I decided to employ MacDonald's (1998) analysis regarding online fan communities in this thesis. MacDonald (1998, p.136) noted several factors such as knowledge, level of participation and access affecting fan hierarchies within online fan communities. However, the study of MacDonald (1998) did not use the discovery of fan hierarchies to observe the development of different strengths of relationships among the fans and the way personal social networks of fans are expanded in different ways. Combining these approaches together serves as an original analytical tool. Therefore using this tool, this thesis aims to answer the question of whether or not and how the social networks of online community members can be expanded through an individual's participation in online communities.

Additionally, there is another key limitation of the existing social networks in online communities studies which this thesis aims to rectify, that is, a shortcoming of ethnographic studies, an ignorance to the 'social context' in much of early research regarding online communities (Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.170; Wellman, 1997, p. 198). To avoid such a shortcoming, this thesis uses an ethnographic approach to gain an understanding of how the social networks of community members within a Thai online fan community are expanding. By immersing myself into the field and participating as a member of a community, I gained rich and deep insights. I also analysed the social context – Thai cultural values – that influenced the practices and the social outcomes of online community members. In this case, the thesis contributes to the literature on social networks in online communities, as one of the studies that emphasises the necessity to understand an online unit at a deeper level as well as taking into account its social context.

The above aims of the thesis underline the importance of conducting this thesis, since it will contribute extensively and intensively to a wider academic context. Additionally, taking all of these related academic issues into account will help us to understand specifically how Thai fans engage in online communities, and how such commitment contributes to their social networks expansion. To find out more about these questions is the key aim of the thesis.

### 1.3 Research question

Research questions are developed according to the rationale outlined above. It is important to remark that this thesis's focus is twofold: it has both primary and secondary functions.

The thesis's primary focus is online fan communities and social networks. However, observing an online fan community leads to the secondary, broader focus, which is the role of the Internet. There are other interesting and relevant issues, such as fans as a media audience, and the effects of local culture on online communities. The Internet, as a new communication medium, provides a fresh context for such topics.

The main research question of the thesis is formulated with regard to my primary focus:

- Can the social networks of the PPU fans be expanded through participation within the PPU online community?

In order to answer the main question, two subordinate questions are considered:

- How are the social networks of the PPU fans expanded?
- How does the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community affect the expansion of the social networks of the PPU fans?

The main research question is to investigate whether or not the social networks of the fans can be expanded via the online community. The key focus of the thesis is the participation and practices of the fans which result in the expansion of social networks. It also aims to discover how the fans' online behaviour affects the strength of relationships, hierarchies, and the benefits the individual gains from the community.

There are two subordinate questions to guide the answers to the main research question. The first subordinate question is to examine how the PPU fans expand their



social networks through participations within the online fan community. This question aims to find out practices of the PPU members both on and offline. It is also interesting to explore the nature of relationships occurring within the online community. In order to understand online relationships, it is important to learn the contexts of the community and about the object of fandom, as well as the general characteristics of the participants.

The second subordinate question involves the hierarchical structure within the online community. The analysis seeks to investigate different degrees of social network expansions of the fans by observing the influence of the hierarchical structure within the community. The difference in status, roles, and power of fans are examined to explain the different results concerning the social networks' expansion of the fans. It is interesting to see the different ways fans' social networks expanded and to compare those high up in the hierarchy with those lower down. I also aim to investigate the factors which affect the way the hierarchy is set up.

Regarding the secondary concern, I also attempt to examine a broader context and the role of the Internet, based on a micro-study of the PPU online community. With this objective in mind, another question is developed:

- What role does the Internet play in facilitating the expansion of the social networks of the PPU fans?

In observing this question, the thesis aims to discuss the role of the Internet at present in facilitating social interactions, and to find out how it dominates/ encroaches upon people's daily lives. There are four main roles of the Internet that this thesis will further investigate. They are as follows:

First, the functions of the Internet – providing information and social connections, as well as expanding users' social networks – will be examined. I also aim to observe the role of the Internet in linking like-minded individuals.

Second, the thesis is set to observe the role of the Internet in people's lives in general. The question is whether the Internet is embedded in people's daily lives. I also aim to observe the boundaries between online and offline space.

Third, it is interesting to examine the role of the online fans as media audiences to the new technology. I aim to explore how the fans use the Internet to pursue their social network expansion, as well as how the Internet plays a different role – or provides the fans with different functions than traditional mass media.

Fourth, this thesis aims to explore how this global communication medium fits into Thai local culture, which is obviously quite different from the West. The thesis will explain how the distinctive cultural values of the Thai people affect their Internet use. To answer these questions, this thesis introduces Thai cultural values as a key element in order to better investigate and explain the social interactions of the Thai fans.

The answers to these questions will give a comprehensive understanding not only of online communities and their role in expanding social networks, but also of the Internet as a communication medium in general.

#### **1.4 Thesis structure**

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows:

#### **Chapter Two**

This chapter provides a review of literature that forms the background of the empirical analysis for the thesis. Since this thesis focuses on the expansion of social networks through the online fan community and the practices of the fans, studies on social networks and practices within online communities are discussed and serve as the key literature to underpin the thesis. However, to completely understand the whole picture of this study, general issues on online communities, online fandom and local Internet use are also examined. The discussions aim to provide a broad understanding of the issues before empirical analysis is conducted.

### Chapter Three

The chapter starts with an introduction to the *Petchprauma* novel and the PPU online community. The description of the content of the novel is given. I also discuss how the PPU community was first established. The chapter then moves towards a discussion on the development of the research question and a description of why the ethnographic approach is used. I then discuss why the case of PPU online community is selected. This chapter also discusses the approaches, methods and the tools I used to collect the empirical data that this research study is based upon. I explain the rationale behind my choice of methods and approaches. The benefit of the ethnographic approach is to gain rich and deep data, which provides answers to the research question of whether or not and how fans expand their social networks. In this chapter, I also describe my role as an ethnographer and personal experience in the field. Mainly, I use four data collection tools comprising of non-participant observation, participant observations, textual analysis of online discussions, and face-to-face interviews. The data from these four sources is triangulated to ensure validity and reliability. Finally, since every research method has its own weaknesses, the last section of this chapter discusses the critical and reflexive process of the research methods.

### Chapter Four

This chapter introduces the case study of the PPU online fan community. In this chapter I present Thai cultural values, which will be used to analyse the behaviour of the Thai fans in later chapters. The situation of the Internet in Thailand is also given to provide general background of the case study. The chapter then moves toward the empirical parts of the thesis by describing the rationales of the PPU fans in joining the community are observed. Although the common interest in the *Petchprauma* novel is noted, the fans are found to enter with either for information pursuits or fun-pleasure and social pursuits. In the broader picture, the influence from mass media in Thailand, or what I term as *Petchprauma* trend, also serves as a reason increasing the popularity for entering the online community. Then, I observe the characteristics of the novel fans. In the community, fun-loving characteristics of the fans were dominant and there were certain fans whose expertise on the novel was highly

recognised. These relevant contexts are to be used in conjunction with the empirical analysis in chapter five and six.

## **Chapter Five**

This chapter answers the first subordinate question: how are the social networks of the PPU fans expanded? I show data that the PPU fans developed their interactions from online discussions ranging from knowledge about the novel to social issues. The social discussions were found to be higher in number than the knowledge discussions. The social discussions lead to the gaining of fun and pleasure as well as being a social support for the fans. The activities of fans were also found to expand to online chatting and face-to-face activities, which enabled them to increase and speed up their affiliations. As a result of these practices, the fans' relationships with one another were rapidly developed. Their social networks therefore expanded. The chapter further explains the unique characteristics of the relationships of the fans and the discussions in this chapter add context to help comprehend how social networks of the fans are expanded.

## **Chapter Six**

This chapter answers the second subordinate question concerning the influence of the hierarchical structure on the social network expansion. The hierarchical structure was divided into three groups comprising the PPU team, a core group and general members. The different roles, status and power of each group are clearly investigated. The hierarchical status influenced the social networks expansion of the fans. The PPU team who were situated at the top of the hierarchical structure were found to expand their social networks to a higher degree than those at the lower end of the hierarchical structure. However, the fans manage hierarchical differences in a modest way and these characteristics of relationships within the community in part show the Thai cultural value norms.

## **Chapter Seven**

The last chapter re-examines the main research question, which concerns whether or not the expansion of social networks of the fans can be accomplished through the PPU online community. The answer to this main research question and its relevant subordinate questions are drawn from the findings of the empirical analysis in previous chapters. The main discussion concerns how the fans can expand their social networks through the development of their practices from online discussions on topics of knowledge to social themes, to online chatting and face-to-face activities. Such interaction allowed the fans to develop unique relationships among other fans and helped their social networks to expand. However, it was found that the fans expanded their social networks unequally: those with higher status were more likely to expand their social networks to a greater degree than those who were at the bottom of the hierarchical structure. The secondary focus on the role of the Internet in facilitating the social networks expansion is also discussed. The chapter evaluates original contributions of the thesis in both analytical and empirical terms. Finally, the chapter re-evaluates the approaches used in this thesis and points out possibilities for further studies.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Expansion of Social Networks in Online Fan Communities**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In order to set a background for understanding the context of this thesis, a review of the literature is provided in this chapter. As well as putting the thesis into perspective in terms of interpreting the results obtained from the case study of the thesis, this review of the literature gives a baseline for making comparisons and drawing out similarities to other research work undertaken in this area of study.

There are six bodies of literature that are relevant to this thesis: literature about the Internet, online communities, online fandom, social networks and social relationships in online communities, practices within online communities, and local contexts of Internet use. The above literature can be divided into two groups according to whether it is more relevant to the first or second research focus. The literature that helps to answer the thesis's main research question and underpins the thesis's major argument comprises studies on social networks and social relationships, and practices within online communities. The literature which deals with the Internet's contexts, online communities, online fandom, and local Internet contexts serves as a background to this thesis and helps to answer the secondary question.

This chapter is divided into seven main parts. The first part discusses about the Internet in general. In this part, the term 'Internet' is defined and its role in connection with mass media is discussed. The second part examines a more specific context: online communities. As the idea of online communities has emerged with the Internet, they are considered a new type of community, and there are several relevant key issues to be debated and discussed. Changing perceptions towards the Internet and in particular online communities are described as the results of early research investigations of the Internet are examined. Additionally, the weaknesses and limitations of these early Internet research studies are considered. Comments on the current perceptions of the Internet as part of everyday life and the notion that online communities are an alternative to society are also presented.

Thirdly, the specific issue of online fandom is discussed as a particular type of online community. This theme of online fandom is examined with an aim to understand how the issue of fandom relates to the gathering together of people within online communities. The influential role and collective power of the fans are one of the interesting factors discussed in the empirical chapters.

Fourthly, the issue surrounding the expansion of social networks through online communities is discussed. The term ‘social networks’ is defined. Views from a number of scholars are presented to give a picture of how social relationships can be created and how social networks can be expanded through online communities. In this part, hierarchies within online communities are also examined. I aim to discuss the factors that contribute to different social levels within the community, and which may lead to different social outcomes for the fans.

The discussion of fans’ online behaviour is important, and thus will be presented in the fifth part. This part aims to observe the extent to which individuals’ social networks can be expanded through online communities. Two types of online discussions, based on knowledge and social themes, are analysed.

Sixthly, I discuss the importance of local cultural values and their effect on the use of the Internet in general. This local dimension of Internet use is discussed with a view to specifically understanding this issue in the context of Thai culture, which forms the basis of the thesis case study. The last section of this chapter will summarise the various ideas and issues presented.

## **2.2. Contexts of the Internet**

### **2.2.1 Defining the Internet**

When starting to do research on the Internet, one should bear in mind that not everyone shares the same perception of the Internet (Costigan, 1999, p.xviii). Before trying to understand the role of the Internet and its importance in people’s

lives, the term 'Internet' needs to be first defined and its development needs to be understood.

Internet studies used to be known as computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies (Gurak, 2004, p.25). These terms are now used interchangeably in related literature. In this thesis, I mainly use the term 'Internet'. However, in some parts of the thesis where early studies of the Internet are mentioned, the term CMC will be applied. According to one scholar, the Internet is defined as a 'global network of interconnected computers' (Gauntlett, 2000, p.4): the first technology to facilitate many-to-many communications on a global scale (Castells, 2000, p.2). The possibility of connecting computers around the world by one system enables the Internet to expand its new frontier infinitely: there is no limitation to the locations that can be added to the web of communications (Costigan, 1999, p.xxiii).

The Internet became popular in the late 1990s when stand-alone microcomputers and mainframes were shifted to interconnect information-process devices in multiple formats (Castells, 2000, p.52). One of the merits of the Internet is its user-friendly interface, the World Wide Web (WWW or Web), which includes data, links, graphics, and multimedia components (Gauntlett, 2000, p. 5-6). However, Gauntlett (2000, p.5) emphasised that the Web and the Internet are not the same thing: the Web runs on the Internet. Nevertheless, the importance of the Web to the Internet is increasingly great because interactions on the Internet these days are mostly web-based (Thurlow *et al.*, 2004, p.29). Interestingly, the changes on the Web make current Internet studies different from what early scholars focused on in their debates. For example, old text-based applications such as newsgroup<sup>3</sup>, Multi-User Domain (MUD)<sup>4</sup>, and Multi-User Domains Object Oriented (MOO)<sup>5</sup> that used to be studied by media scholars are now unknown to the mainstream Web users, who started using the Web in the late 1990s (Gauntlett, 2004, p.8). This point signaled significant changes and development in Internet studies, which I will talk about later in this chapter.

---

<sup>3</sup> Newsgroup is 'an electronic version of a notice board or bulletin board' that an individual can post a message on. Anyone visiting newsgroup can read or post a response (Bell *et al.*, 2004, p.176).

<sup>4</sup> 'MUDs use computer databases to construct virtual text-based world in which participants interact' (Bell *et al.*, 2004, p. 135).

<sup>5</sup> 'Moos is different from MUD in that their participants can construct the environment of the domain such as building rooms or making objects instead of pre-set structure' (Bell *et al.*, 2004, p. 134).



### 2.2.2 The Internet as a decentralised media

This thesis is part of the field of mass communication studies. I aim to examine the role of the Internet as a mass medium. This categorisation accords with that of many scholars, who considered the Internet a new mass medium (see Silverstone *et al.*, 1992, p.15; Morris and Ogan, 1996, p.42; McQuail, 2000, p.118; Wicks, 2001, p.163, 168).

According to Morris and Ogan (1996, p.42), the Internet is a ‘multifaceted mass medium’, in which they classed four communicative forms according to its operative functions: one-to-one asynchronous communication; many-to-many asynchronous communication; synchronous communication; and asynchronous communication. Similarly, Silverstone *et al.* (1992, p.15) discussed that the Internet can be viewed as media because it is able to provide both communication and information opportunities to the public. The technology also provides links between households and individuals and provides a link between public and private areas.

However, the Internet is different to traditional mass media such as television or radio. In these traditional forms of mass media the role of audiences is typically only involved in acting as a one-sided receiver (Mitra and Cohen, 1999, p.186; McQuail, 2000, p.120). By comparison with traditional forms of mass media, the Internet is a ‘decentralised communication system’ where the users are both the consumers and producers of information (Kitchin, 1998). According to McQuail (2000, p.120), ‘the audience member is no longer really part of a mass, but is either a member of a self-chosen network or special public or is an individual’. This leads to greater autonomy and more fragmentations and segmentations within audiences because of the interactivity of the Internet. Internet audiences are seen as having more choices and having more opportunities to play an interacting role in choosing their media texts.

In particular, one of the most significant features that illustrate this wealth of choice and opportunity is the feature of ‘links’ on the Internet. ‘Links’ on the Internet provide the users with the ability to choose their own pathway to find information.

Thus Internet users can take an active role in creating and customising the ‘non-linear text’ that they access and absorb (Mitra and Cohen, 1999, p.187).

In addition to this, the global reach of the Internet provides users with the opportunity to become the ‘author’ of their own messages and be able to ‘broadcast’ these messages to numerous audiences around the world (Rheingold, 1993, p.131; Kitchin, 1998; Slevin, 2000, p.74). This chance of the audiences to have their voices heard and this opportunity to have greater control of the transmission process sets Internet users apart from the audiences of traditional media (Slevin, 2000, p.74; see also Rheingold, 1993, p.131). Nevertheless, Wicks (2001, p.189-190) noted that the use of such technology depends on the audiences’ will and ability to make their own effort to interact. However, if the Internet is actively and constructively used, it could be used as a powerful tool to enhance the quality of one’s life and experience.

Having recognised the Internet as a unique communication medium, it is interesting to explore the interplay between it and its mass media audience. The way in which online fans benefit from the Internet will be investigated in the empirical part of the thesis.

## **2.3 Contexts of online communities**

### **2.3.1 Defining online communities**

This section aims to discuss the context of online communities, which will serve as a general background to the empirical part of this thesis. First of all, the term ‘online communities’ is defined.

Before the invention of the Internet, the term ‘community’ was generally associated with physical communities. These were groups of people living in places that were defined geographical units such as cities, towns, villages, or neighbourhoods. Often people in communities were found to share common ties and they were found to engage in interrelated activities in their daily routines. This early concept of community was therefore commonly known as ‘locality-based communities’ (Queralt, 1996, p.223). However, due to the development of technology in both

transport and communications, this idea of ‘community’ has shifted accordingly. Instead of this traditional idea of individuals being confined to interact within a specific local area, a relatively new notion of ‘community’ where distance is no longer a major barrier has developed. Telephones, interactions via the Internet and travel opportunities by various modes of transport have helped individuals to minimise the effect of distance barriers and maintain of ties and relationships with others (Queralt, 1996, p.227).

In addition to this, the traditional concept of ‘community’ has been challenged and redefined by Wellman (1988 quoted in Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.169) and the term ‘social network’ has been suggested as an alternative definition of the term ‘community’. By using the term ‘social network’, the community is no longer limited to exist only within a specific special locality, but instead it can allow the involvement of any number of people who share particular common interests, characteristics, or similar organisational or associational ties (Wellman, 1988 quoted in Queralt, 1996, p.224).

Taking account of the fact that space or area restrictions within locality play a relatively little role in the concept of community nowadays, ‘online communities’ where interactions commonly take place without physical locations can be legitimately recognised as a type of community. This claim fits in with the definition of ‘social network’ that was proposed by Wellman and Gulia (1999, p.169) who noted that online communities are ‘social networks’. The role of online communities is equal to other traditional place-orientated communities. Additionally, the ‘social networks’ that are formed in relation to online communities tend to be based on strength of individuals’ social relationships rather than only relying on the chance of individuals’ sharing common localities as in the traditional location-orientated communities (Wellman *et al.*, 1996 p.221; Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.169). This thesis uses the term ‘social networks’ to refer to an online community and the relationships that are developed via the community.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See section 2.5.1 for further discussion on the definition of the term ‘social networks’.

Having considered the development of the concept of ‘community’ throughout different periods in time, this thesis focuses mainly on the theme of the ‘online community’. The term ‘online community’ is used by many scholars (e.g., Baym, 1995; Kollock and Smith, 1999; Kollock, 1999). However, often the term ‘virtual community’ is found to be used interchangeably with the term ‘online community’ (e.g., Rheingold, 1993; 2000; Wellman *et al.*, 1996; Donath, 1999; Smith, 1999; Gauntlett, 2000). However, in this thesis, the term ‘online community’ is preferred since the term ‘virtual’ can be misleading, as it seems to deliberately differentiate between two terms: ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ (Wilbur, 1997, p.5). This point has been addressed by Watson (1997, p.129) as he argued that using the term ‘virtual’ could imply that online community is not a ‘true’ community.<sup>7</sup>

Specifically, Rheingold (1993, p.5) has defined the term online communities as:

[...] social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussion long enough with sufficient human feeling, to form web of personal relationships in cyberspace.

The above definition has suggested the importance of communication, subjective feeling as well as the spending of a length of time to create personal relationships within an online community. By using ‘human feeling’ to help define an online community, this means that this new type of social formation created on the Internet can be considered as ‘real’, as the feelings of people play a big part in the formation of an online community.

However, Rheingold’s (1993, p.5) definition of online communities raises concern about the vague measure of feeling. In particular, this brings up the question of how much ‘human feeling’ will be ‘sufficient’? (Wilbur, 1997, p.7; Watson, 1997, p.104-105). According to Wilbur (1997, p.7), both feelings and communication are also ‘key ingredients’ to understand a community (see also Reid, 1999, p.113). Watson (1997, p.104) has emphasised that communication creates, recreates, and maintains community. In his own words, ‘Without ongoing communication among its participants, a community dissolves’. Communication is therefore vital to communities both online and off. In the same way, Jones (1995, p.2) has also

---

<sup>7</sup> See section 2.3.3 for discussions on debate about ‘virtual’ world of the Internet.

recognised that the sharing of information across distances contributes to the creation of online community. A sense of community created on the Internet largely depends on activities within a community. Similarly, Baym (2000, p.22) has termed this action as ‘communicative practices’ in online communities.<sup>8</sup> This thesis considers both the ‘feelings’ and ‘communication’ aspects that comprise an online community by observing both perceptions of the online community members, and their online discussions. These two aspects will be analysed in the empirical part of the thesis.

Indeed, there are various activities within online communities, divided according to different forms of communications, such as electronic mail (email), distribution lists (i.e., listserves), Usenet, Bulletin board systems (BBSs; also known as online forums), text chat, MUDs and MOOs, World Wide Web (WWW) and graphical worlds (see Kollock and Smith, 1999, p. 4-8; Wicks, 2001, p.168). This thesis investigates a Web based community, where online interactions and activities are carried out mainly on BBSs and text chat. By understanding these online activities, Rheingold (1993, p.3) has clearly noted, ‘people in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind’. Therefore, in order to understand online communities, which are computer mediated in nature, it is important to note that communications and interactions that occur there are somewhat limited and different from what people do in their face-to-face interactions. Some people feel better or more able to communicate via the Internet because it avoids face-to-face contact and it minimises the impact of any possible social rejection (see Walther, 1996, p.17).

Norris (2004, p.40) has discussed the role of online community in both ‘deepening’ and ‘widening’ the experience of community of people. Individuals can ‘deepen’ their experience as the online community helps to reinforce and strengthen the existing social networks. Additionally, people can ‘widen’ their experience of community by connecting to other individuals with different beliefs and backgrounds. In this regard, the Internet sustains both strong and weak ties of relationships (Wellman, 1996, p.221-222). This thesis focuses on the expansion of social networks amongst weak ties, that is, community members who have never met

---

<sup>8</sup> See section 2.6 for discussion on the practices within online communities.

before their entrance into the community. The role of the Internet in ‘widening’ the social experience of the community members will be shown in the empirical analysis.

### **2.3.2 Rationale for online communities: common interest**

The above discussion of the term ‘online community’ has highlighted the difference between an online community and a traditional physically-defined community. This section aims to discover the rationale for the creation and maintenance of an online community. In other words, why are people logging on to online communities?

Instead of restricting themselves to their physical geographical locations, people who log on to online communities often gather with an underpinning motive to share common interests (Rice and Love, 1987, p.91; Rheingold, 1993, p.27; Jones, 1997, p.17; Porter, 1997, p.xii; Sproull and Faraj, 1997, p.35; Watson, 1997, p.104; Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.185; Lyon, 2002; Gauntlett, 2004, p.16; Norris, 2004, p.35, 37). Porter (1997, p.xii) pointed out that there is no difference between those who gather in social places, such as bars or coffee machines at work, from those who log on to online communities, both groups all want to come to talk and listen on topics of their shared interests.

In general, the sharing of common interests in online communities provides opportunities for people to meet others who are different to them not only personally, but also socially. As Gauntlett (2004, p.16) noted:

Now, regardless of where they are in the world, people with similar interests, or with similar backgrounds, or with similar attitudes, can join communities of like-minded people, and share views, exchange information, and build relationships.

However, it should be noted that although the Internet serves as a means of several circles of people at a global level, only those with similar interests share a same circle of connections (Lyon, 2002). This view is similar to Wellman and Gulia (1999, p.185) comment:

Despite the medium's potential to connect diverse cultures and ideas, we suspect that people are generally drawn to electronic groups that link them with others sharing common interests or concerns.

Furthermore, by sharing interests, it is possible that relationships between individuals can be enhanced. Walther (1996, p.17) noted the existence of “‘hyperpersonal interaction” – CMC that is more socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel FtF [face-to-face] interaction’. In his view, when individuals believe that they are in a group relationship, they tend to think that they share a ‘social self-categorization’ and ‘greater similarity’ with other group members. Moreover, Baym (1995, p.147) has found that mutual interest not only draws the online fans together, but also triggers conversations and discussions which can be categorised as ‘collaborative interpretation and distributing information’ and ‘sharing perspectives on socioemotional issues’, which could lead to sharing perspectives on other socioemotional issues beyond the fandom context. This point will be investigated in empirical part of the thesis.

With the rationale of common interest for online communities in mind, this thesis will explore the Thai online community context. Understanding why people join a community will help to illuminate participant's online practices and the extension of social relationships of the community members. These latter issues are the key interests of the thesis.

### **2.3.3 Debates on online communities**

In this section debates about online communities are considered in order to give an understanding of how views of the Internet were shaped and also how different perceptions of the social interactions that take place within online communities have developed. The key feature of this debate on online communities is the development of literature on the Internet from the early period when the Internet was in its infancy and associated with a ‘virtual’ world to the current period where the Internet has a more widespread use in various parts of everyday life.

This section is divided into four parts. The first part discusses the early perception of online communities that was associated with the ‘virtual’ world of the Internet;

online communities were viewed as creating superficial relationships and separating people from 'real' life. The second part examines the weaknesses and limitations in early research studies on the Internet and its use. The third part discusses the later perception of online communities as an integral part of everyday life, in which online and offline space are not distinctively separated. The fourth part considers online communities 'an alternative to society'.

### *Early perceptions: Criticisms of the 'virtual' world of the Internet*

During early 1990s when the Internet was in its infancy, critics and early research on the Internet often referred to the negative side of the Internet usage and online communities (Silver, 2000, p.19-21). Several scholars and the press focused much of their criticism on the potential damaging effect of the Internet on social relationships. Several scholars observed that many negative comments accused the Internet of creating distances between people and 'real-life' situations (Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.168; Castells, 2001, p.116; Silver, 2000, p.20; Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 2002, p.31). As a result of this, often the Internet was treated as a separate 'virtual' world. This concept of the Internet as a 'virtual' world or 'cyberspace' was also often used to describe Internet communication, which was also seen as an illusion and not part of the 'real' world.

Shield (1996, p.1) stated that '[...] the Internet has been called the first true 'cyberspace''. 'Cyberspace' once explained as the public space created through the confluence of the Internet, in which communication among people is created without the shared physical or bodily co-presence (Bell *et al.*, 2004, p. 50-51). The term 'cyberspace' originated from a science fiction novel - 'Neuromancer' written by William Gibson. The term is coined by Gibson as 'a consensual hallucination' (Gibson, 1984 quoted in Kitchin, 1998, p.2). This view of the Internet as a form of illusion that was not situated in the 'real' world illustrated how the Internet was not seen to be part of people's daily lives.

In the results from early CMC research, several scholars argued that a lack of social cues, such as body language, in CMC brings about less friendly, impersonal



relationship (Hiltz *et al.*, 1989, p.227; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986, p.1508; Stoll, 1995, p.17, 24). The comparison between CMC and face-to-face interaction suggested that CMC have weaker social context cues (Sproull and Kiesler, 1986, p.1509). According to Rice and Love (1987, p.87),

One basic assumption about computer-mediated communication is that they transmit less of the natural richness and interaction of interpersonal communication than face-to-face interaction. Therefore, users of CMC systems exhibit fewer of their natural communication behaviors.

Apart from the lack of social context cues, ‘social presence theory’ which assumes that each communication medium has different degrees of social presence was also used as an argument in this debate. Electronic media is claimed to have ‘low social presence’, thus limiting the ability to transmit information such as facial expressions and nonverbal cues. This in turn results in impersonal communication (Short *et al.*, 1976, p.65). Besides the nonverbal cues of CMC, it is also claimed that the use of CMC brings about uninhibited behaviour of hostile messages or ‘flaming’ (Sproull and Kiesler, 1986, p.1508; Hiltz *et al.*, 1989, p.227).

Media richness theory shares the same technological deterministic theoretical perspectives of the social presence theory. Daft and Lengel (1984)’s media richness theory argues that different communication medium in organizations suits certain tasks differently. Media richness hierarchy ranges from high to low degrees of richness. Face-to-face is the richest, followed by telephone, addressed documents, and unaddressed documents. This hierarchy is classed by four criteria: the availability of instant feedback, the capacity of the medium to transmit multiple cues, the use of natural language, and the personal focus of the media.

As a result of such negative criticisms of CMC, online communities were also criticised for being illusions or unreal communities (Beniger, 1987, p.354; Stoll, 1995, p.23-24). Beniger (1987, p.354) claimed that the growth of the ‘pseudo-community’ brought about by CMC was based on superficial interpersonal relations. It was argued that such ‘pseudo-community’ were the result of the development of computer technology and a hybrid of mass and interpersonal communication. Stoll (1995, 24) criticised the lack of commitment on the Internet, ‘Electronic

communication is an instantaneous and illusory contact that creates a sense of intimacy without the emotional investment that leads to close friendships'. These arguments represented the negative perceptions towards the concept of Internet communication within online communities. Additionally, these arguments illustrate how online communities were not seen to be 'real'.

### ***Early Internet research: Weaknesses and limitations***

The results from early CMC research made the separation of cyberspace and the physical world visible since they often suggested that online communities created superficial relationships and brought about social isolation (see Beniger, 1987, p. 366, 369; Stoll, 1995, p.23-24). However, early research studies on CMC have been criticised for its weaknesses and limitations. Many scholars have found contrasting and inconsistent results from early CMC research investigations (Fulk *et al.*, 1992, p.17; Walther, 1992, p.53, 59; Walther *et al.*, 1994, p.461; Castells, 2001, p.116).

In the early stage of the Internet development, computers were not in common use and many of the early research studies were therefore experimental laboratory research studies that were conducted by focusing on the users of computer networks in organizations or workplaces (e.g., Hiltz and Turoff, 1978; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986; Kraut, 1987; Hiltz *et al.*, 1989; Finholt and Sproull, 1990). When CMC scholars moved their experimental research from the laboratory to real-life situations, results that were inconsistent to their previous findings in the laboratory were found.

Contrary to their previous findings, researchers observed that interpersonal relationships could be maintained via CMC and that online communities could be found to be meaningful and genuine (e.g, Hiltz and Turoff, 1978, p.101; Rheingold, 1993, p.2). At this point, Walther (1992, p.53) noted:

[...] the effect of CMC as a whole on interpersonal interaction appear inconsistent, and the characterizations of CMC born from experiments on groups seem contradictory to the findings of CMC in field studies.

Castells (2001, p.117) noted three main limitations to the early research on online communities. Firstly, due to the limited availability of CMC, there were few experienced users to be observed. Secondly, there was not enough evidence from the empirical research on the actual use of the Internet. Thirdly, answers to the questions accumulated were rather simplistic and misleading. In early CMC research, the studies conducted were based on experimental laboratory research instead of observing the uses of CMC in real-life locations that involved the actual interaction of the study participants. The time taken to conduct these early research investigations was criticised as being too short and only a small group of research participants involved. These details in the research methods used limited the results of this early research into CMC use (Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 2002, p.5-7; Castells, 2001, p.117). As a result of these limitations, the conclusions of these early investigations could not be relied upon to be the same for real-life scenarios.

It has been argued that it was only following the expansion of the Internet that researchers would be able to collect substantive evidence to analyse and interpret online behaviour (Castells, 2001, p.117). This argument follows the view of Haythornthwaite and Wellman (2002) who have pointed out that the Internet is in fact not different from many other technologies, such as television, that received social attentions and concerns for its social consequences since the early development. Baym (1995, p.139) added that the assumption that the computer is the sole influence on communication outcomes is misguided.

In the later development of research investigations into CMC, there has been a shift from using technological determinism theories to seek 'generalizable hypotheses' to explain behaviour interactions in CMC towards trying to gain an understanding of the social context around the mediated communication (Fulk *et al.*, 1992, p.7-8). Social context is considered important in the determination of the effects of CMC since this does not make a judgement based on the absence of physical and nonverbal cues alone (Spears and Lea, 1992, p.30; Spears and Lea, 1994, p.452-453). However it is worth noting that Walther (1992, p.80) predicted that the effect of CMC on relational communication would be reduced as users begin to adopt the social information process, such as the use of language and textual behaviours to send out social information (see also Walther, 1994, p.465).

An awareness of the limitations faced by early Internet researcher sheds light on old views of the Internet and online communities. The following section discusses a current perception of the Internet.

***Later perceptions: The Internet as a part of everyday life***

In contrast with the early perceptions of the Internet, which distinctively separates the Internet from situations in daily life, a later perception in which the Internet is seen as a practical tool that is integrated with everyday life has emerged.

The popularity of Internet use has increased considerably from the early period. Haythornthwaite and Wellman (2002, p.5-7) noted that the illusion of the Internet seems to gradually disappear as the Internet has interacted with people around the world, not anymore a medium for elites in North America, and that the technology is no longer an isolated sphere of people's everyday live. Furthermore, as lives of users both online and offline are not seen as distinct and divergent and there are blurred boundaries between both the online and offline lives of people (Kitchin, 1998, p.x). Thus, many scholars started to perceive the Internet as an embedded part of people's everyday life (see Robin, 1996, p.18; Parks and Floyd, 1996, p.94; Shields, 1996, p.6; Baym, 1998a, p.63; Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.182; Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 2000, p.5-7; Miller and Slater, 2000, p.4-9; Castells, 2001, p.118; Howard et al., 2002; Wellman et al., 2003, p.2; Howard, 2004, p.2, 19; Orgad, 2005, p.53).

Likewise, Howard (2003, p.2) named the Internet as an 'embedded' medium with the same reason that it becomes deeply embedded in the personal lives of people and that people increasingly use the Internet to do a variety of daily activities such as banking and shopping. Besides, online and offline relationships are found to be connected rather than divided (Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p. 182).

According to Wellman and Gulia (1999, p.182):

[...] people do not neatly divide their worlds into two discrete sets: people seen in-person and people contact online. Rather, many community ties connects offline as well as online. It is the relationship that is the important thing, and not the communication medium.

Watson (1997, p.129) also revealed his experience:

My experience has been that people in the offline world tend to see online communities as virtual, but that participants in the online communities see them as quite real.

There are several studies conducted in the current period which have confirmed that the Internet takes part in people's daily lives around the world and showed the overlap between cyberspace and the world outside the Internet (Baym, 1998a, p.63; Howard *et al.*, 2002, p.50-51; Chen *et al.*, 2002, p.74; Miller and Slater, 2000, p.7-8).

Howard *et al.* (2002, p.50-51, 67) found from a survey study of the Internet users in the USA that the Internet was a common tool for both home and the workplace. It was argued that the Internet brings about social contacts rather than social isolation. For instance, the use of emails increases the level of communication among families and friends. Besides this, the survey found that experienced users were more enthusiastic and familiar with finding useful resources on the Internet than newcomers. Similarly, Chen *et al.* (2002, p.74) compared the use of the Internet around the world and also commented on the positive experiences of users.<sup>9</sup> This study showed that, although there were differences in the characteristics and experiences of the users around the world as well as differences in terms of the inequality of Internet access in developing countries, the positive experiences such as creating more connections between friends and relatives were often found. The study also noted that there was an association between the number or development of the relationships formed and the frequency of usage. Additionally, the participants who used the Internet more frequently commented on feeling a greater sense of online community (Chen *et al.*, 2002, p.106).

---

<sup>9</sup> Chen *et al.* (2002) conducted their research by using data collected from the National Geographic Magazine Web survey 2000 (Chen *et al.*, 2002, p.82-83).

In a case study of the use of the Internet in Trinidad, Miller and Slater's (2000, p.7-8) ethnographic research found that the Internet is very much part of everyday life, as people continually engage in both online and offline forms of communication. They argued against the idea of seeing Internet as virtual, as they noted:

The notion of cyberspace as a place apart from offline life would lead us to expect to observe a process in which participants are abstracted and distanced from local and embodied social relations, for example becoming less explicitly Trinidadian. We found utterly the opposite. Trinidadians –particularly those living away –invest much energy in trying to make online life as Trinidadian as they can make it, to see the Internet as a place to perform Trini-ness.

Apart from being against the idea of the virtual community on the Internet, Miller and Slater (2000) also argue the existing of local cultural dimensions on the Internet. The fact that the 'Trini-ness' is shown revealed the differences of usage of the Internet between different cultures. This idea will be further discussed in section 2.7 in relation to a Thai context.

Moreover, an ethnographic study of online community on an online community called 'r.a.t.s.'<sup>10</sup> conducted by Baym (1998a, p.63) has discovered that the context of offline and online interaction are pervasive and online relationships of community members also moved offline, she suggested:

Online groups are woven into the fabric of offline life rather than set in opposition to it. The evidence includes the pervasiveness of offline contexts in online interaction and the movement of online relationship offline.

Thus, many scholars in the later period challenged the early perceptions of the Internet. Watson (1997, p. 129) argued that the notion of cyberspace is a 'fictional conception' which only aims to discriminate on and offline space. Shields (1996, p.7) called this distinction a 'crisis of boundaries' in which online life and life outside of the Internet is separated and disconnected and that the 'real' and the 'virtual' are distanced. Shields (1996, p.6-7) further argued that journalists' criticisms on the online activity as being anti-social were incorrect and that in fact both space between online and offline are closely connected to activities of everyday life. Since online

---

<sup>10</sup> 'r.a.t.s.' stands for rec.arts.tv.soaps – a Usenet newsgroup of soap opera fans (Baym, 1997, p.1).

communities are part of the Internet, the same arguments can be used to justify that online communities are also ‘real’ especially with their role in helping to develop relationships between people.

The above debate on the role of the Internet as part of people’s daily lives and this current perception on the Internet will be examined in a Thai scenario illustrated in the empirical chapters.

### *Online community as an alternative*

In analysing online communities, it needs to be borne in mind that this thesis is not setting out to debate whether or not the expansion of social networks through online communities is better or worse than the experience of everyday life of people in society. This non-polemic attitude toward online communities fits in with what Kollock and Smith (1999, p.4) have suggested: the phenomenon of online communities is complex and one does not need to take sides in the ‘utopian’ versus ‘dystopian’ debate over online interactions. The online social space is not perceived to be good or bad, but this choice of social place makes a difference to human social interaction and organization. Similar views are held by several scholars (Robin, 1996, p.22 Jones, 1997, p.17; Haythornthwaite *et al.*, 1998, p.213; MacDonald, 1998, p.151; Castells, 2001, p.124-125; Norris, 2004, p.40).

For this thesis, the online community is neither viewed as an alternative community nor as a replacement for community, but it is rather as Robin (1996, p.22) put it ‘an alternative to society’. This view can also be observed from the argument of Haythornthwaite *et al.* (1998, p.213), as they suggest:

Just as modern neighborhood ties do not fulfil all of a person’s community needs, membership in a single online community rarely meets all of a person’s needs for information, support, companionship, and a sense of belonging. Virtual communities are only part of a person’s multiple communities of interest, kinship, friendship, work and locality.

The fact that people engage in different communities in their life leads to the reminder of MacDonald (1998, p.151) that our practices in everyday life could still

affect our online community. MacDonald states, 'CMC is neither a utopia nor a dystopia, but a way of communicating that is vexed, fraught with many of our old ways of negotiating social spaces'. Indeed, in the case of Rheingold (2000, p.330-331), his overtly positive perspective on online communities has changed since his early study of the WELL (Whole Earth 'Electronic Link) online community in 1993, with whom he experienced seeing some negative aspects of the community.

It is difficult to predict what the full consequences of the Internet might be as it is in fact still an evolving medium (Norris, 2004, p.40). Similarly, Castells (2001, p.124-125) pointed out that the diffusion of the Internet usage leads to difficulties in formulating conclusions on the effects of the Internet on sociability and whether or not the Internet is a factor in bringing about social isolation. The examination of these effects of the Internet falls outside the scope of this thesis.

## **2.4 Contexts of online fandom**

Since the empirical case study of this thesis focuses on investigating an online community of a group of Thai novel fans, this section aims to understand the contexts related to online fandom. First of all, the debate on fandom is explored and the characteristics of fans that make up an online community are analysed. Issues in online fan culture are presented with the concept of the collective power of online fans particularly explored.

### **2.4.1 Debates on fandom**

'Fandom' is described as the social and cultural environment of fans (Harris, 1998a, p.4). Studies on fandom have suggested a shift away from the 'passive audience' paradigm in which fans are stereotypically viewed, particularly by critics and journalists, as a helpless and vulnerable audience who are directly affected by media messages (Jenkins, 1992, p.208; Harris, 1998b, p.42; see also Jenson, 1992, p.9-11; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.508; Pullen, 2004, p.82). It has been observed that none of the usual stereotypical images of fans characterise these people as a normal everyday cultural or social phenomenon (Jenson, 1992, p.13). Jenson (1992, p.11, 13-14) has argued that the images of fans who are obsessive, lonely, violent, irrational, and out



of control are deviant. It is argued that these negative stereotypes have arisen due to the concern for the power of the mass media in early twentieth century. However, the shift of notion from passive to 'active audiences' has suggested an alternative view of fans as people who create their own meaning and interpretation of the texts and find pleasure within them (Jenkins, 1992, p.208-209).

Status and class differentiates fandom from other forms of audience environment (Jenson, 1992, p.20). Fiske (1992, p.30) noted that fandom is '[...] associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race'. The distinction between popular culture and 'high' culture are criticised for developing and demonstrating a 'cultural hierarchy' (Jenson, 1992, p.21; see also Fiske, 1992, p.32; Grossberg, 1992, p.50). Fiske (1992, p.31) noted that 'high' culture tends to have a promoted status and also benefits from formal acceptance and support through institutions such as art galleries, concert halls, museums and so on. By contrast, popular culture tends not to receive such institutional support.

Furthermore, Jenson's (1992, p.19) arguments separate fans from 'aficionados' in two different aspects: the 'objects of desire' and the 'modes of enactment'. For 'objects of desires', it is argued that if it is relatively inexpensive, popular with the lower or middle classes and widely available, then it is called 'fandom'. If it is popular with wealthy and well-educated classes or if it is expensive or rare, then it is called 'preferences', 'interests' or 'expertise'. In a similar way, the 'modes of enactment' show that fans are believed to be obsessed with their object, while rational evaluations are seen to be displayed in more measured ways (Jenson, 1992, p.20). Nonetheless fandom is argued to be 'a matter of taste' and by such a definition, it should not be judged by strict criteria (Grossberg, 1992, p.51; see also Fiske, 1992, p.30; Jenson, 1992, p.23; Harris, 1998b, p.51). Jenson (1992, p.23) further argued that in general, people have different personal preferences particularly in the way in which they develop deep interests. People may invest different quantities of time and money in their interests according to the personal value that they put on these interests.

Moving from the former criticism of fans as groups of extremists, fans are perceived as a special category of media audience who are seen as having more active role than other types of audiences (Jenkins, 1992, p.209-210; Harris, 1998a, p.3, Harris, 1998b, p.41; Pullen, 2004, p.80). Pullen (2004, p.80) has discussed that fans interpret and respond to the media text 'more aggressively and sustainedly' than others audiences. Jenkins (1992, p.214) has noted, '[...] fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate'. Moreover, fans are seen as displaying interests, affections, and attachment towards particular programmes, genres, or figures (Jenson, 1992, p.9-10; Jenkins, 1992, p.209). Pullen (2000, p.53) concluded:

Fans are not fringe extremists with an unhealthy and unrealistic interests in a particular media text, but savvy consumers who are unable to use popular culture to fulfil their desires and needs, often explicitly rearticulating that culture in unique and empowering ways.

Jenkins (1992, p.209-213) has suggested a model of fandom, which operates on four levels. Firstly, 'fans adopt a distinctive mode of reception', that is, they not only continually engage in the media text, they also produce meaning and interpretations out of such text. Secondly, 'fandom constitutes a particular interpretive community', that is, fans share their interpretative of text then actively seek contact with programme producers and in order to debate their preferences. Fandom is therefore seen as institutional or personal matter. Thirdly, 'fandom constitutes a particular Art world' that is fans create their own distinctive art production that draws raw materials from the media. Fourthly, 'fandom constitutes an alternative community', that is, fandom offers a community of shared common interest regardless of personal differences, such as race, gender, profession, and so on.

Giles (2000, p.61-65, 2003, p.188) discusses 'parasocial interaction'. 'Parasocial interaction' refers to the ways in which the media audience responds to media figures such as newsreaders and soap stars as if they are 'real' persons or as if they 'know' them in person (Giles, 2000, p.61-65; see also Giles, 2003, p.188). Giles (2000, p.61) notes that people do form relationships with 'celebrities' (those who are well-known through the media).

It is argued that the use of the term ‘parasocial interactions’ is more valid than the term ‘identification’ to explain the people’s affiliation with media figures. The latter term is mostly used in early research on the relationships between film stars and viewers. Examples of ‘parasocial interaction’ are when people treat the stars as if they are close friends, or when people develop deep attachment and devotion to the stars. In the most extreme forms of ‘parasocial interaction’, the harmful behaviour of certain type of fans, such as stalkers, towards media figures can be seen. Such alarming behaviour is a cause of concern (Giles, 2000, p.196).

The above theoretical discussion of fandom will later be applied to the empirical case study, as it helps to make sense of the public-images and behaviour of fans.

#### **2.4.2 Online fandom**

It should be noted here that this thesis takes account of the links between fandom and personal interests. This thesis used the term ‘fans’ to refer to any individuals who have a particular interest in their object of fandom and come into an online fan community to discuss about it. Thus, in this thesis, the term ‘fans’ refers to every user/member of the fansite who involved in the online fan community. However, the term ‘fans’ does not include the ‘lurkers’ - those who only read but do not participate in the online forum since it is obvious that from the very nature of ‘lurkers’, I would find it difficult to interact with the ‘lurkers’ of the PPU online community or making prolonged active contact with them.

The development of the Internet has led to growing interests in studies about online fan communities (e.g., Baym, 1995; 1997; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; MacDonald, 1998; Clerc, 2000; Pullen, 2000; 2004; Darling-Wolf, 2004). For media scholars, online fandom provides another way to investigate culture of fandom since online discussions can be electronically recorded. This therefore provides better opportunities for researchers to naturally observe interactions of the fans as they occur over an extended period of time (Baym, 1998b, p.111, 113; MacDonald, 1998, p.132). The growing availability of access to the network also enhances fandom, since there are no time or space restrictions for interactions to take place.

Additionally, there are typically a great many opportunities for Internet users to gain access to fan activities (Baym, 1998b, p.111; Pullen, 2000, p.56; Pullen, 2004, p.80). The Internet allows more objects of fandom such as television programmes, celebrities, and films to be considered as fan activity (Pullen, 2004, p.80). However, Pullen (2000, p.60) stated that online fandom is a complex phenomenon. Different types of fans focus their interests differently, for example, producing different assumptions about the meaning of the show. In this case, fan activities cannot be assumed to be the same.

Several previous studies discovered that online fandom broadens and facilitates socialisation among fans (MacDonald, 1998, p.151; Baym, 2000, p.119; Clerc, 2000, p.222; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.515, 523). Without the Internet, fan activities can be limited to small groups of long-term committed fandom (Pullen, 2004, p.80). For offline fans, they create letterzines or newsletters for a fixed number of people within the groups, which means no lurking is allowed. Online fandom extends such relationships to a larger number of people and their social networks are more open as they conduct their discussions in many forms of newsgroups, mailing lists, mails, and fansites (Clerc, 2000, p. 216-217). Baym (1998b, p.127) has found that the online discussions that fans have can provide the basis to establish a community, which moves beyond the discussions about relevant media text to their own lives. In this sense, the object of fandom serves as a departure point for discussions about emotional, relationships and selves. Online fan community can therefore be a potential domain for expanding social networks of individuals.

The practices of online fandom and offline fandom are not different in terms of content, as they often talk and discuss extensively about their common interests (Clerc, 2000, p.216; Pullen, 2000, p.54). Pullen (2000, p.54) has noted:

[...] Web-based community becomes the distribution and production of fan-created texts and the sense of community talking about a favoured television programme can impart, even to viewers separated by thousands of miles.

Moreover, fans also benefit from immediate responses to their interpretations of media programmes (Pullen, 2000, p.54). This point leads to a discussion of the power of online fans.

#### **2.4.3 Collective power of online fans**

When people are gathered as a group on the Internet, it provides the ability to raise one's voice. For example, Mele (1999, p.292) has shown that disadvantaged groups can benefit by using the Internet as a powerful mechanism for their collective action. Such groups can be empowered by ways of creating a collaborative on the Internet with other individual and community organizations, searching online resources and raising the awareness of their concern to others. Rheingold (1993, p.27) described the experience of feeling of the sense of power once his online community started to conduct physical conference in which certain issues were implemented, instead of only sharing feelings or exchanging information online.

Offline fans often find empowerment in their consumption of popular culture in some unique ways, such as resisting or challenging dominant ideologies from media producers by making choices of their media messages, creating their own meanings and interpretations of the text, or being actively involved in the media texts by giving feedback to the producers (Harris, 1998b, p.43, 51). In the same way, the gathering of online fans can provide a collective power for the community as a whole. The power of fans is recognised as people in media industries have particular interest in listening to the voices of the fans (Watson, 1997, p.102; Baym, 1998b, p.128; Clerc, 2000, p.225-226; Pullen, 2004, p.89). Apart from being anonymous individuals, fans can also enhance their power by collectively gathering their voices into a group (Baym, 1997, p.119). As a result of this, the group is strengthened and can extend its power beyond those of its individuals (Watson, 1997, p.102).

Indeed, Clerc (2000, p.225) has pointed out that the discussions with actors or someone who produces a TV series is one of the most popular activities of fans. The presence of a producer in a newsgroup means a lot to fans, since they want to talk and receive his/her attentions. A sense of connection and participation in the series gives fans a sense of having power. Moreover, by acknowledging the presence of a

media producer, fans can benefit from a strong feeling that their voices might be heard.

Pullen (2004, p.89) highlights examples of the interactions of media producers and online fans, listing Western movie projects, such as 'The Blair Witch Project', 'A.I.', and 'Lord of the Rings'. The most notable new 'synergistic relationships' between film and the Internet was seen in 'The Blair Witch Project' movie, since it established enormous Internet presence with a detailed and interactive website. The movie had generated fans even before the movie was produced. This same technique was copied in the website of 'Steven Spielberg's A.I.'. Similarly in the case of the 'Lord of the Rings' movie, the film's director, Peter Jackson, was often found 'courting the fan community while developing the movie's Web presence'. The official website of the movie developed enormous information about the movie. From these examples, Pullen (2004, p.89) has noted the importance of online fans in attracting media producers and Webmaster.

With the influence and collective power of fans in mind, this thesis's empirical chapters will examine how the selected group of fans act and use the Internet to advance their power.

## **2.5 Social networks in online communities**

As already stated, the main aim of this thesis is to explore the expansion of social networks through an online community. This section presents the primary literature, which underpins the thesis's key argument. I set out first to define the term 'social networks', and then discuss the benefits and limitations of the social network analytical approach. Next, I present the argument for the online community helping to bring about the creation of social relationships. Then, I discuss the hierarchy within online communities, mainly focussing on the factors which bring about the different status of online community members.

### 2.5.1 Defining social networks

The term ‘social networks’ that is used in this thesis derives from the concept of community of Wellman (1997) who proposed the use of social network analysis to explain online communities (see also Wellman *et al.*, 1996, p.124; Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.169). According to Wellman (1997, p.179), the term ‘social network’ is:

When a computer network connects people or organizations, it is a social network. Just as a computer network is a set of machines connected by a set of cables, a social network is a set of people (or organizations or other social entities) connected by a set of socially meaningful relationships.

The term ‘social network’ is different from the term ‘group’. The latter is only one kind of social network, which is representative of close relationships in which almost all the members are directly linked with each other (Garton *et al.*, 1997; Wellman, 1997, p.180). The use of the term ‘group’ overlooks the complexities of the relationships as well as hierarchies within the CMC (Garton *et al.*, 1997). By contrast, the ‘social network’ represents a sparsely knit formation with more open relationships where many different members have the potential to enter and leave a group over time (Wellman, 1997, p. 180-181; Garton *et al.*, 1997). To see what social networks look like, Wellman (1997, p.180) asserts that a social network tends to ‘ramify out in many directions like an expanding spider’s web rather than curling back on themselves into a densely knit tangle’.

Wellman (1997, p.181) further argues that it is useful to look at broad social networks online rather than the ‘two-person dyads’ which many studies of online relationships focus on. Similarly, Wellman and Gulia (1999, p.169) note that studies of online communities undervalue the social networks approach and therefore have rather small foci and treat the Internet as an ‘isolated social phenomenon’ (see e.g., Rheingold, 1993; Hiltz and Turoff, 1993; Stoll, 1995). Indeed, most of the studies of online communities often use the term ‘relationships’, which incorporates a number of more specific terms such as ‘personal relationships’, ‘social relationships’, and ‘online relationships’, to describe the benefits individuals gain from online

communities (see e.g., Hiltz and Turoff, 1978; Rheingold, 1993; Jones, 1995; Parks and Floyd, 1996; Reid, 1999; Miyata, 2000; Turner *et al.*, 2001).

### ***Social networks analysis***

Social network scholars differentiate between ‘relationships’ and ‘social networks’: relationships are only part of social networks. Social network analysis is a ‘structural analysis’ that investigates ‘patterns of relations’. Social network analysis takes into account ‘relations’ and ‘exchanges’ between social actors: ‘exchanges’ are presumed to bring about social relationships. For social network analysts, ‘relations’ are characterised by content, direction and strength. Therefore, they are not interested in characteristics, such as age, sex or religion, instead they observe the ‘broader context’ of relations by looking at, for example, the ‘circularity of hierarchy’ or the strength of relationships (Garton *et al.*, 1997).

In social network analysis, ‘social contexts’ are not considered important, and the ‘structural analysis’ used by social network scholars is employed to observe the ‘patterns of relations’ or to trace the flow of information, with the aim of discovering the effects of such relationships and networks on people and organisations (Garton *et al.*, 1999, p.76). To do this, social network analysts use quantitative data such as the interaction frequency between network members, the number of relations and the diversity of relations. These data are generated by computer programmes and can be displayed as visual presentations – ‘network models’ or ‘sociograms’ – of complete social networks. The meaning behind such ‘structural patterns’ of relationships is then interpreted (Wellman, 1997, p. 179; Garton *et al.*, 1997; Garton *et al.*, 1999, p. 93, 96).

A quantitative method such as this one offers valuable information, but even the social network scholars themselves admit that the best approach utilises a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Garton *et al.*, 1997). This implies that ‘structural analysis’ offers only a limited explanation of the creation of relationships within social networks. Wellman (1997, p.198) has noted various shortcomings of social networks studies, including a lack of preliminary studies or detailed ethnographic studies of social networks in online communities (see also



Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.170). Thus, instead of using the ‘structural analysis’ in this thesis, I adopt the ethnographic approach. This approach differs from the above discussed method, and its advantages will be discussed in the next chapter.

Although I note the difference between social network analysis and online relationships research, I value both accounts in my thesis. The benefit of using the term ‘social network’ is that it offers a broader view of relationships: it does not look at relationships at an individual level but explores patterns of relationships in a whole community. A social network perspective allows me to recognise the ‘structure’ of social networks, which consists of different ‘strengths of relationships’ and ‘social outcomes’ (Wellman *et al.*, 1997, p.181; Garton *et al.*, 1999, p.76). Understanding these contexts is important because this thesis’s objective is to observe how the structures of social networks – such as hierarchical structures – within an online community lead to the different levels of relationships and social outcomes, that is, the expansion of social networks. Nevertheless, to answer the question ‘how?’ the thesis also takes into account ‘social contexts’. This is because the method of social network analysis as a tool to explain how online relationships develop is limited.

### ***Social relationships analysis***

The limitations of social network analysis make the work of those scholars who explain the role of the Internet in creating ‘social relationships’ still vital and worth discussing. Scholars who use the term ‘relationships’ do not observe relationships in the sense that social network scholars do. Lea and Spears (1995, p.199) note that personal relationships are ‘socially situated’: they take into consideration the ‘social context’ which influences people’s behaviour. Studies about online relationships examine the questions of, for example, how online relationships develop, how common online relationships are, and what factors affect the relationships’ development (see Rheingold, 1993; Parks and Floyd, 1996; Turner *et al.*, 2001; Yum and Hara, 2005).

In this thesis, ‘social relationships’ are considered as smaller components within established social networks. Social network scholars see components of social networks and social relationships as inseparable because the latter is embedded in the

first (see Garton *et al.*, 1997). Because of this intimate relationship between social relationships and social networks, this thesis will necessarily tackle both. The following section discusses the way social relationships are created online.

### **2.5.2 Creating social relationships online**

Previously in this chapter, the concern of some scholars of the impersonal relationships developed on online communities and their limitations was discussed (see section 2.2.3). This section examines how people create their social relationships in online communities.

Although there are differences between the social networks and social relationships approaches, they share the belief that people are able to create relationships in online communities. Several studies have found that social relationships can be created and maintained in online communities (see Hiltz and Turoff, 1978, p.101; Rheingold, 1993, p.1-2; Jones, 1995, p.16; Parks and Floyd, 1996, p.85; Kollock and Smith, 1999, p.3; Reid, 1999, p.113-114; Miyata, 2000; Castells, 2001, p.124; Turner *et al.*, 2001, p.245-246; Yum and Hara, 2005). In particular, scholars who have studied online fan communities have found that meaningful relationships are created and developed among fans (see MacDonald, 1998, p.151; Baym, 2000, p.119; Clerc, 2000, p.222; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.523).

Social relationships can be created on the Internet because the Internet provides a new social space of interactions and communication. People can therefore link together to meet and interact with one another (Kollock and Smith, 1999, p.3). This, according to what Jones (1995, p.16) has noted, means that the Internet is an 'engine of social relations'. However, the way people create their social relationships on the Internet is different from the face-to-face situation. Rheingold (1993, p.26) once mentioned:

The way you meet people in cyberspace puts a different spin on affiliation: in traditional kinds of communities, we are accustomed to meeting people, then getting to know them; in virtual communities, you can get to know people and then choose to meet them.

The above discussion of Rheingold (1993, p.26) emphasises the exchange of conversations over the Internet as a way of getting to know people and thus creating relationships. This fits in what Reid (1999, p.113-114) has found in the study of MUD communities. This investigation found that communication among community members could lead to familiarity, intimacy and deep feelings of attachment as the MUD users developed a sense of friendship which made them feel that such relationships were as real as those that grow out of face-to-face interactions.

Parks and Floyd (1996, p.92) confirmed that evidence of the development of relationships through online communities can be commonly found. In their survey of the development of personal relationships in Internet newsgroups, over 60 per cent of people had formed personal relationships on the Internet.

According to Baym (1995, p.138), the online community is a “dynamic and rich community filled with social nuance and emotion”, as people found pleasure in interactively creating the growing social world through a Usenet newsgroup. The study of Hiltz and Turoff (1978, p.101) on ‘The Network Nation: human communication via computer’ found that participants in their study developed feelings of attachment and experience various level of intensity of involvement with one another via the CMC. Some participants expressed their feeling of closeness to and connection with their online friends in the electronic group even though they have never met before.

Social Identity De-individuation Effects (SIDE) theory developed by Spears and Lea (1994) can be used to explain how people form impressions of one another when interacting online. The SIDE theory argues that despite the absence of physical and nonverbal cues in online communication, communicators can pick up small cues about others and create stereotypical impressions of others. For example, they perceive themselves and others in the same group as representatives of social groups instead of individuals because there is limited social information of individuals in CMC (see also Spears and Lea, 1992). This point corresponds with the ‘hyperpersonal interaction’ hypothesis of Walther (1992, p.17), which states that de-individuating effects of CMC, such as anonymity and selective self- presentation, can create ‘social self-categorization’ and positive impression towards other

communicators. For such a reason, Walther further observes that more social discussion and deeper levels of intimacy can be developed when interacting online than in face-to-face communication.

### ***Expanding social relationships from online to offline***

In addition to sustaining online relationships via the Internet, people can further develop their relationships by moving offline (see Rheingold, 1993, p.2; Parks and Floyd, 1996, p.92; Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.182; Clerc, 2000, p.217; Turner *et al.*, 2001, p.247; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.517).

Parks and Floyd (1996, p.92) noted that relationships that begin online rarely stay there but are found to move to other settings, such as direct email, telephone, and face-to-face communication as nearly two third (63.7%) of study respondents were found to have used other communication channels to contact other people who they met originally online. This finding demonstrates two aspects. Firstly, the limitations of the computer-mediated communication can be overcome. Secondly, people do not draw sharp boundaries between the relationships they have online and offline. Parks and Floyd (1996, p.91) have found that people enter their online contacts in pre-existing social circles – ‘real-life’ social links develop as they introduce one another to their friends or family.

Additionally, the face-to-face meetings among those who met originally on online community can even intensify the involvement in online community activities (Turner *et al.*, 2001, p.247). Rheingold (1993, p.1-2), who found deep attachment from his online community, also commented that the feeling of community as a ‘real’ community increased after he developed his online relationship through having a face-to-face interaction.

### **2.5.3 Hierarchy within online communities**

Hierarchical structure within online communities is an important issue, as it is responsible for the different strength of relationships of people in ‘network groups’ (see Garton *et al.*, 1997). Social network scholars have discussed status hierarchies,

and small groups within online social networks and the fact that these elements might contribute to different ‘social outcomes’ for different people (see Garton *et al.*, 1997). However, there are only limited applications of such ideas in this thesis because social network analysts do not explain how the hierarchies and small groups are created, nor how their existence influences the relationships of the members. In this regard, the above social networks theories leave a gap, which this thesis aims to fill. As well as the question of whether the social networks are expanded merely by joining the online community, this thesis aims to provide responses to questions: how are online hierarchies developed and how do hierarchies influence the expansion of social networks of the members? Several studies provide leads which are useful when looking at the first question. The following paragraphs review what other scholars in the field have found and argued on this hierarchy issues.

Opposite to the idea of democracy in online communities (see Rheingold, 1993, p.131), or complete freedom in cyberspace, a system of social control in online communities has been found to exist (Reid, 1999, p.107; see also MacDonald, 1998, p.139; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.515). Although in online communities there is typically no evidence of the existence of this structure in physical appearance, it has been argued that people in online communities are not only judged by the ‘merit of their ideas’, but also by their status in these hierarchical structures (Kollock and Smith, 1999, p.9). Hierarchy in online communities is observed to correspond with different levels of status, power, control and influence of different community members (Reid, 1999, p.118, 130).

Reid’s (1999, p.126) study illustrates the hierarchy of users in both adventure and social types of the MUD system in different degrees.<sup>11</sup> There are different privileged levels of users. For example high-level users such as Gods and Wizards may post messages, which demonstrate that they have more power than other users as they perform special roles through which they have more control in certain areas than other users. Indeed, attention and recognition from other users reflect the hierarchical structure among social MUD users.

---

<sup>11</sup> Adventure and social MUDs are generally different in terms of style of operating systems and social interaction (Reid, 1999, p.109). ‘Social MUDs are less focused on game-playing, and instead provide a general social setting for interaction, often modelled on a house or a town’ (Bell *et al.*, 2004, p. 135).

In order to become well known, MUD users need to socialise with others and spend a large amount of time creating interesting environments in the programmes which are useful for other members. The amount of time, effort and devotion given to the community and helping other users is recognised as a way to increase an individual's hierarchical status and popularity. In turn, this reward of popularity and status within the hierarchical structure of the community encourages users to continue being involved within the community (Reid, 1999, p.128-130). This study also shows that the style of communicative system influences the way hierarchical status is organised. Since Reid's study is focused on MUDs, the imaginative game playing styles were found to influence the practices and interactions of MUD users. The understanding of the observations of the hierarchy in social MUDs and also within other online communities is important to the observation of the practices of the online community studied in the empirical part of this thesis.

MacDonald's (1998) study of the online communities of 'Quantum Leap' fans identified different dimensions that define or lead to changes in the hierarchical status of fans: hierarchy of knowledge, fandom level, access to 'inside' knowledge, leaders, and control of venue (p.137-138).<sup>12</sup> These factors were found to determine the positions of individual fans within the hierarchy of the online fandom. First of all, the 'hierarchy of knowledge' is directly relevant to the amount of knowledge each individual fan has to offer to the group. By contrast, the 'hierarchy of fandom level' is related to the level of an individual fan's participation in the community both online and offline. The 'hierarchy of access' is determined by a direct access to actors, producers or production personnel. A 'hierarchy of leaders' is developed when smaller subgroups of fans exist within a main group. This hierarchy allows certain people to be viewed as 'leaders' while other people are viewed as 'followers'. Finally, the 'hierarchy of venue' is established through the power and control that fans have in organizing online mediated spaces, such as email discussion lists or chat areas.

---

<sup>12</sup> MacDonald spent more than four years studying fans of the television show 'Quantum Leap' on Usenet and electronic mailing lists (MacDonald, 1998, p.132).

The concept of fan hierarchy introduced by MacDonald (1998, p.136-138) will be used in the empirical discussion of this thesis. MacDonald's study helps to explain how a hierarchical structure is created within online communities. However, it should be borne in mind that Macdonald only focuses on the factors which contribute to the hierarchical status of fans, without discussing how this status affects the development of social relationships. Further research is thus necessary. Do different positions in a hierarchy imply different social outcomes? I will answer this question in the empirical chapter of the thesis.

Additionally, Baym (1997, 112) recognised the 'skilled performances' of online community members whose posts stand out. The four criteria that contributed to making the posts stand out were described as: humour, insight, distinctive personality and politeness. Baym (1997, p.111) also noticed that other members recognise these 'skilled performances' in various ways such as responding to their message, expressing gratitude and offering explicit praise. The posters who receive such positive responses are encouraged and motivated to improve or increase their frequency of performance in the hope of receiving more of these rewards. These four criteria of Baym's (1997, p.112) study will also be used in the analysis of the case study of this thesis.

It is worth noting that the 'insight' that Baym (1997, p.112) recognised is not different from the 'hierarchy of knowledge' that MacDonald (1998, p.137) found. This suggests the importance of knowledge for being distinctively recognised within the fan community. Correspondingly, Fiske (1992, p.43) noted that fans' knowledge not only distinguishes a particular fan community from others, but also distinguishes oneself within a fan community. It is further observed that, 'The experts – those who have accumulated the most knowledge – gain prestige within the group and act as opinion leaders. Knowledge, like money, is always a source of power'.

Similarly, Darling-Wolf's (2004, p. 515) ethnographic study of an online community of fans of a Japanese male singer and actor, Kimura Takuya, also found a similar result. It is argued that the quality of collective knowledge produced in the fan group can be seen as a source of pride to the group. Apart from this, the Webmaster who has extensive knowledge about the celebrity and often performs an expert role in

answering questions about the celebrity as well as having the power to enforce site policies, is recognised as the top of the group's hierarchy. Most fans recognise and show their admiration for and appreciation of the knowledge of the Webmaster.

*Degree of online involvement and the creation of social relationships*

In addition to recognising hierarchies based on the level of fandom (MacDonald (1998, p.137), several studies have shown that different levels of participation by online community members have resulted in relationships of varying strengths (Baym, 1995, p.157; Parks and Floyd, 1996, p.93; Miyata, 2002).

A study of offline fandom by Harris (1998b, p.48) notes that different degrees of involvement in fandom lead to different outcomes: the fans who are more involved in the practices of an online community receive the most significant outcome so that they believe that they have more potential personal influence or they feel that they have more power or control over the object of their fandom.

In the same way, in online communication, Parks and Floyd (1996, p.93) point out that the experience and length of time that Internet users devote are important factors in developing relationships online. For example, it was found to be more likely for people who posted messages more often or those who have been posting for a long time to develop personal relationships online. This corresponds with what Baym (1995, p.157) has found that the heaviest posters on the newsgroup were more likely to develop 'interpersonal alignment of the interaction' than those who post less often. Normally, the role of heavy posters is opposite to the role of 'lurkers', who are readers of the posted messages but rarely contribute any messages or discussions to the community (Baym, 2000, p.8).

Moreover, the study of an online community of a specific interest of Japanese mothers in Japan conducted by Miyata (2002) has discovered the same point that those who are more active participants seem to receive more social support as well as better opportunities to create social relationships with others in the network than those who do not contribute to the community. The mothers who actively communicate to the groups seek out social support from the group and therefore



fulfil their needs by gaining recognition, information and pieces of advice from other members.

Although the studies of Parks and Floyd (1996) and Miyata (2002) noted the level of participation to the outcome each member received, they are surveys which provide only statistical data in which no detail is given on how the members participate in the activities of online communities both on and offline, unlike the study of Baym (1995; 1997; 1998a; 1998b; 2000) which described insights of how participants interacted. By looking at the actual activities of participants within an online community, this thesis will employ a similar investigative approach to explore how participants interact.

## **2.6 Practices within online communities**

Earlier in this chapter, the definition of an online community where communication sustains a sense of community was previously discussed (see section 2.2.1). Additionally, the rationale for the gathering of online communities as the sharing of common interests among individual people was noted (see section 2.3.2). However, simply the bringing together of shared interests is not enough to sustain a strong sense of community and many scholars feel that the practices that are developed within an online community are also vital to a continuation of that community (see Jones, 1995, p.2; Baym, 1997, p.139; Wilbur, 1997, p.7; Watson, 1997, p.104; Reid, 1999, p.113). This section presents a general discussion on the observation of communication practices used in online communities with the aim of reviewing some of the common practices that exist within online communities.

### **2.6.1 Observing the practices of fans**

‘Communicative practices’ are important to investigate as Baym (2000, p.22) noted, ‘[...] if one wants to understand a community, then one should look to the ordinary activities of its participants’. Since the aim of this thesis is to observe whether or not the social network of fans can be expanded through their involvement within an online community and also to examine to what extent such an expansion of social

networks can occur, exploring the practices of community members of both online and offline are key to this investigation.

The importance of observing the practices in online community started to become an important focus with the work of Baym (2000, p.21-24) who took the ‘practice approach’ to examine the r.a.t.s. online community, Baym’s (1998, p.113) research question focused on exploring the kind of purposes the fans of r.a.t.s. had in their discussion topics. Baym employed the method of discourse analysis to examine the online community’s structures and to also explore the meaning behind the social and cultural messages posted by the fans. By observing the online community as a ‘community of practice’, Baym noted the importance of language practices.

Baym’s (1998, 2000) study is important to this thesis because it shares the same approach (ethnographic) to observing the ‘practices’ of fans within an online community. However, it should be noted that the research question and scope of Baym’s work and the research question and scope of this thesis are different. The investigation carried out by Baym was focused on the practices of the audience as the key to understanding and drawing out the purpose of the fan group. By contrast, this thesis has a smaller scope and also has a particular focus on a research question that explores the expansion of social networks among the online community members.

Although the observations of the fans’ behaviour as ‘media audiences’ are not the main subject of interest in this case study, they provide an extra dimension to this investigation of the expansion of social networks. In other words, observing fans’ behaviour within online communities is important for this thesis, as it broadens and deepens our knowledge of them and enable us to better answer the question – to what extent are their social networks expanded?

### **2.6.2 Communication online**

Communications within online communities are clearly different from face-to-face interaction because of the computer-mediated system. This section lists certain characteristics of online communication that could affect social network expansion. However, to a different degree from the ‘cues filtered out’ perspectives, which

influenced the early CMC studies (see Walther, 1994, p.462), this thesis does not look at the role of Internet as a major source of influence on the practices of community members. However, the understanding of the difference between online communication and face-to-face interaction is still needed to be clarified in this context. There are four main points to observe regarding the communications within online communities: lack of social context cues, identity play, self-disclosure and conflicts.

### ***Lack of social context cues***

The social cues in face-to-face interaction, such as clothes, voices, bodies, and gestures, are signal messages showing status, power, and group membership. People pick out these cues and formulate a sense of identity as well as the intentions of the speakers (Kollock and Smith, 1999, p.9). It is argued that all communication media reduce social cues to at least some degree. For example the telephone produces no visual information about the communicator. Online interaction also does not produce these kinds of cues and signs that normally appear in face-to-face interaction. However, since online communication is computer-mediated, the communication is faceless and has no sense of human contact. As a result, the online communication via CMC is known as having no social context cues or at least having social context cues that are greatly reduced to a minimum. This lack of social context cues deprives the communicator of knowing with whom they are interacting with (Sproll and Kiesler, 1986, p.1496-1497).

Nevertheless, having a reduced number of social cues in online communications does not prevent social information from being sent and received. In fact, Internet users have learnt to adapt to the medium and enhance their usage. The ways people customise technology to their specific purposes vary. For example, it has been reported that customised email addresses and signature styles are used in order to deal with identity cues (Donath, 1999, p.30). Moreover, in the textual interface of MUD game-playing type, people adopt their use of textual description in order to interact with one another and create imagined reality and specialized relationships, even without physical appearance (Reid, 1995, p.182). Furthermore, Baym (1998a,

p.52) has found that after the discussion among the r.a.t.s. community participants created a group-specific meaning, such as creating expression through ‘emoticons’, abbreviations, and inside jokes. ‘Emoticons’ is a term used to refer to icons that represent facial expressions. ‘Emoticons’ are used to add the expression of emotions to written text. For example,

:-) represents Smile

:-( represents Frown

These forms of expression are adopted as a new type of expressive cues. Similarly, Watson (1997, p.106) discovered that in-jokes are also found in the group of Phish.net fans.

### *Identity play*

Relating to the lack of social cues, the Internet creates an environment for anonymity and disembodiment (Donath, 1999, p.29). Turkle (1995, p.14, 49) has maintained that Internet users are able to create their own self-identity or recreate multiple identities because there is no restriction of physical appearance. For Turkle (1995, p. 180) and Rheingold (1993, p.148), the Internet is a social laboratory for experimenting with self-identity and going through stages of re-invention. However, in the view of Donath (1999, p.30-31), identity plays a vital role in online communities because an individual’s credibility and reliability can be assessed and the sense of community is based on this fundamental common trust in other participants. Therefore, the ‘identity deception’ is argued to be highly damaging for certain people seeking important information, especially in Usenet newsgroups, which is not a fictional type of interaction as in MUD programmes.

However, the identity and role-playing on the Internet is argued to have changed according to Castells (2001, p.119) as he concludes that, ‘[...] role-playing is a telling social experience, but one that does not represent a significant proportion of social interaction on the Internet nowadays’. In support of this argument, the study of Baym (1998, p.55) has discovered that anonymity in the r.a.t.s. group is discouraged. In particular when people increasingly discussed socio-emotional issues, the self-discloser becomes evident and real names are contributed to this intimate

environment. As a result, online and offline identities are involved. Offline identities are an important influence in the formation of online identity of the members, because the fans often straightforwardly interpret texts through reference to their own lives. Therefore, honest self-representation becomes a norm for the community members (Baym, 2000, p.157).

### *Self-disclosure*

The importance of identity in online communications is demonstrated by the fact that self-disclosure – the revealing of one's true self-identity – is found to have a dramatic impact on the development of relationships online. Parks and Floyd (1996, p.88-89) observed Internet newsgroups and found that when personal relationships developed online, people tended to have more breadth and depth of interaction – they revealed more important and risky personal information as well as expanding conversation to include various topics and activities. The levels of intimacy increased as a result.

Walther (1996, p.19) points out that because there are many fewer cues in online communication, people do not need to think about their non-verbal behaviour. They can more easily present themselves in a good light and create favourable impressions. Besides this, without having to be concerned about appearances, people can focus on their inner selves. Communicators may find it easier to express their thoughts or reveal things about themselves online than they normally do in everyday life. This explains why a lot of personal feelings and thoughts are found in online messages (Walther, 1996, p.22-23).

The experimental study of Lee (2004) on the effects of visual representation on social influence in CMC suggested that visual representation of online communicators have effects on the 'deindividuation' among the communicators. Individuals are found to increase in depersonalises themselves and conformity to group norm when showing similar virtual appearance of CMC partners. The study of Lee (2004) thus supports the SIDE theory which argues about the increased in social influence within online communication due to the reduced social cues in CMC (see

Spears and Lea, 1992; Spears and Lea, 1994). However, it should be noted that the study of Lee (2004) used cartoon characters not genuine pictures to represent the characters of people interacting. Additionally, such experimental study only observed in the online environment where no face-to-face interactions involved. In my research study, I will observe both online self-disclosure norm of the community and the offline interactions of the participants. Nevertheless, it is interesting to find out how the fans in my case study perceive themselves and others in the group and whether the 'deindividuation' effects can be found.

In a cross-cultural comparison of relationship development between Korea, Japan and the United States, Yum and Hara (2005) reveal that the cultural differences between the three countries significantly affect to the way online relationships develop. The study found that cultural differences influence the self-disclosure of the participant of the community and in turn, this affects the level of relationships. In general, American self-disclosers seem to be more positive than the Japanese and Korean. Interestingly, it is found that the more an individual discloses oneself, the more likely these participants would experience the benefits from personal relationships. This is because self-disclosure can be important to the degree of intensity of relationships.

However, the observation of this self-disclosure practice does not correspond in the case study of an online community examined by Watson (1997, p.107-108). In this study, the experienced users of the Phish.net online fan community could strategically control nearly all qualities of their identities, because the medium did not have interpersonal cues such as face-to-face interaction. Watson stated that race, gender, and sexual orientation do not affect the presentation of identity in online communities. These findings illustrate that different online communities have different norms of identity constructions and self-disclosure. Construction of identity and self-disclosure are intriguing elements which will be explored in my case study.

### ***Communicating conflicts***

Smith (1999, p.15) has noted that social conflicts that occur in online communities can be more difficult to manage and resolve than in physical communities. Due to the nature of the Internet, which normally deals with text-based communication, anonymity, cultural diversity and disparate interests of participants are common features of an online community. Early research investigations of the Internet suggested that the practices of ‘flaming’, which initiate conflicts between people within online groups, are often found (Hiltz *et al.*, 1989, p.227; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986, p.1508).

However, Lea *et al.* (1992, p.89) have challenged these comments, stating that flaming is also a normative social behaviour that could happen in any social context which is mediated via computer. It is argued that flaming in CMC is context-dependent and relatively uncommon behaviour. This idea corresponds with what Baym (1995, p.158) found in her study as she asserted that the no-flaming norm could be a result of the dominance of female fans in the online community. In general, the sense of friendliness that filled in the group was found to influence the way people interacted with one another, as the group are found to explicitly value friendliness (Baym, 1998, p.48; 2000, p121-123). This practice of conflict management and how the online community deals with conflict between its members will be later observed in the case study of the thesis.

Having recognised the aspects of online communication that are relevant to social network expansion, I will now focus on two types of online discussions – those on knowledge, and those which centre around social themes.

#### **2.6.3 Knowledge and social discussions in online communities**

In general, there are two main forms of common online interactions that take place within online communities. These online interaction themes are typically classed as knowledge discussions or social discussions according to their different objectives.

Knowledge discussions offer information opportunities for members whereas social discussions offer opportunities for socialising among members.

Several studies have recognised that online communities offer both knowledge and social opportunities (see Rheingold, 1993, p.56; Baym, 1995, p.147; Wellman *et al.*, 1996, p.219-224; Sproull and Faraj, 1997, p.36). These two main discussion themes illustrate what Sproull and Fajaj (1997, p.36, 38) have recognised as the two main roles of the Internet: 'information technology' and 'social technology'. Sproull and Fajaj describe the Internet as not only a technology for providing access to information or serving as information tools, but also a social technology for like-minded people to sustain their social connections.

Similarly, Rheingold (1993, p.56) adds that people enter an online community for two types of needs: information and social aspects. As he noted:

Virtual communities are places where people meet, and they also are tools; the place-like aspects and tool-like aspects only partially overlap. Some people come to the WELL only for the community, some come only for the hard-core information, and some want both.

The following pages describe these topics of knowledge and social discussions in detail.

### ***Knowledge discussion in online communities***

Since the Internet is recognised to be a great information source for its users (see Rheingold, 1993, p.13, 57; Rafaeli and LaRose, 1993, p.223; Wellman *et al.*, 1996, p.219; Sproull and Fajaj, 1997, p.36; Kollock, 1999, p.226), the first practice in online communities is often related to the exchange of knowledge. This thesis uses the term 'knowledge discussions' to emphasise the importance of such information exchange, giving knowledge to community members.

Generally, the nature of the Internet effectively supports the exchange and the flow of information. Additionally, the Internet increases the potential capability to access



information (Wellman *et al.*, 1996, p.219). This practice of information exchange was once called ‘gift economies’, from which both strong-tie and weak-tie can benefit (Rheingold, 1993, p.57). The availability of information is also called ‘public goods’ since any piece of information posted to an online group can be used by anyone in that group (Kollock, 1999, p.226). Anyone with access to an online community can collect and benefit from information without any formal or informal need to return the same amount of information back to the community (Rafaeli and LaRose, 1993; Kollock, 1999, p.223). Kollock (1999, p.222) stated that social relations drive the ‘economies of gift ‘and’ public goods in online communities in one’s social networks because such gifts of information and advice are given to a group as a whole. However, Kollock (1999, p.236) does not provide any reason why such gifts are given or any speculation about what motivates an individual’s decision to give information to others.

In this regard, Baym (1998b, p.116-117) discovered that the process of knowledge discussion of the fandom, for example the interpretations of stories and updates about the shows, leads to the creation of ‘public identities’ or ‘public personas’ of the online fans. Often, people gain pleasure in giving out information as well as receiving it, as they are rewarded by expressions of praise and gratitude by others in the community (Baym, 1998b, p.118). Moreover, Rheingold (1993, p.59-60) found that those who produced more information seem to be well noticed for their generosity. Such ‘philanthropists’ benefited from gaining more help in return from other members. In particular in online communities that consist of fans, the accumulation of knowledge seems to be a principle necessity. Those who are experts on specific topics are well recognised and perceived to be part of a ‘hierarchy of knowledge’ compared to others (MacDonald, 1997, p. 137; see also Baym, 1998b, p.122; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.515).<sup>13</sup>

The sharing of ideas and information in online communities accumulates large amount of specialist knowledge and expertises based on shared interests of participants (Rheingold, 1993, p.57-59; Baym, 1998b, p.118). Interestingly, Rheingold (1993, p.57) stated, ‘If you need specific information or an expert opinion

---

<sup>13</sup> See section 2.5.3 for a discussion of fan hierarchies concerning the ‘hierarchy of knowledge’ (MacDonald, 1997, p.113).

or a pointer to a resource, a virtual community is like a living encyclopedia'. Baym's study (1998b, p.116) found that since according to the characteristics of a soap opera, r.a.t.s. had many episodes to follow, this required the exchange of in-depth knowledge discussions in order to create a rich interpretation of the show. It was also pointed out that these interactive soap discussions of the fans in the r.a.t.s. community did not only provide resources for insights to the show, but it also enhanced the viewing pleasure of those watching the soap. Additionally, this also provided an opportunity in the online community for viewers to engage with each other (Baym, 1998b, p.118).

In Baym's (1998b, p. 115-126) study, it was discovered that the soap opera fans in r.a.t.s. performed four 'communicative practices' which were related to the soap opera content. Baym divided these four types of discussions into themes of: informing, speculating, criticizing and reworking. 'Informing' posts were described as the types of messages that provide soap-relevant knowledge of the show. Fans accumulated and used such messages in order to develop a deeper understanding and also to help create rich interpretations of the show. 'Speculating' posts were described as types of messages in which fans made predictions of what would happen in the next episodes of the show. Baym also observed 'criticizing' posts where highly critical assessments of the stories were made. 'Reworking' posts where fans showed and added their own creative input to the stories as well as their wit, and interpretive insight were also common.

However, it needs to be understood that in examining this American case study, the discussions and interactive practices of the fans remained solely in the soap opera context rather than extending outside this domain. Although social-emotional discussions did take place, these were still motivated and developed in the context of the soap opera rather than in the context of real-life situations.

The activity of exchanging of information and knowledge within online communities is noteworthy since it represents the levels of expertise of online fans have and reveals their common interests concerning the subject of fandom. This type of knowledge discussion will be observed later in the case study of the thesis. In particular, Baym's (1998b) study provides this thesis with an interesting comparison

on the communicative practices. However as mentioned earlier, both the scope and the research objectives of Baym's study and this thesis are different. Additionally this thesis looks at the practices of online communities within a Thai context, which may give different or similar results compared to Baym's work on an American case study.

### ***Social discussion in online communities***

Social discussions in online communities represent the exchange of information that could lead to the creation and maintenance of social relationships among community members. By viewing the Internet as 'social technology', Sproull and Faraj (1997, p.38) also view people as 'social actors'. These actors enter electronic groups on the Internet to seek out affiliation, support and affirmation. This view corresponds with Wellman and Gulia (1999, p.173) who suggested that when people enter online communities, they do not only seek out information but also companionship, social support, and a sense of belonging. As they further noted, "If the Net were solely a means of information exchange, then virtual communities played out over the Net would mostly contain narrow, specialized relationships" (Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.172). Social discussions are therefore another important issue in addition to the knowledge exchange in online communities.

By participating in social discussions, members of online communities can increase their familiarity with one another. As a result of developing this familiarity, the way in which the social network is expanded can be affected. Baym (1995, p.147) has discovered that via the sharing of interpretations and perspectives on 'socioemotional' issues on the soap opera, members of online communities increased their sharing of personal issues and the development of their friendships have increased overtime.

Similar to Baym's findings on these personal conversations, MacDonald (1998, p.149) has mentioned that often online fans are found discussing 'off-topic' conversations in which they exchange private issues among like-minded people. In the same way, Darling-Wolf (2004, p.513-515) also maintained that fans of the

Japanese idol in her study do not enter the community only for information, but also for pleasure of holding relationships with each other. This pleasure is described among other positive factors of 'the feelings of presence', 'proximity' and 'connection' to the media texts about the actor. These findings illustrate that the initial interaction and objective around the content of the fandom can trigger the tighter and closer personal acquaintances.

This reflects another influential role of online communities, apart from being a place restricted to being based around the formal discussion on specific topic. Baym (2000, p.119) has revealed her finding:

People start to read online discussion groups because they are interested in the topic of discussion. When people first start reading rec.art.s.tv.soaps (r.a.t.s.), they are attracted primarily to the wealth of information, the diversity of perspectives, and the refreshing sophistication of the soap opera discussion. Soon, however, the group reveals itself as an interpersonally complex social world, and this becomes an important appeal in its own right.

The above discussion has recognised a shift of discussion on the topics, which shows a creation of social relationships among the members. This shift of communication patterns will later be observed in the case of the PPU online community in the empirical analysis of this thesis. The recognition of social discussion as a type of communication that could lead to the expansion of social relationships within online communities is important as social discussions may evolve beyond just a purely informative context. The knowledge discussion, which originally attracted the shared interests of online community members, then can also be recognised as a root of social network expansion.

In addition, there are many ways online community members negotiate the maintenance of good social relationships within the community via their social communications. Although Baym (1998b, p.118) found that the participants gain pleasure from their discussions on the context of the soap opera, 'humor practices' is an extra context that was discovered to help create social meaning among fans. The entertaining posts created by fans added fun to the community participation and created recognitions as well as establishing the identities of those who wrote such

posts. Baym (1997, p.112) discussed that participating in r.a.t.s is for pleasure and that the fans also wanted to share this fun with each other.

This concept of the fun-seeking aspect of the online fan community is supported by MacDonald (1998, p.132) as she recognised online community participants as the 'pleasure' time activities of fans. Baym (1997, p.113) further discussed that humour discussions not only keep the fans entertained, but also helps to create a 'friendly and open environment' that encourages participants to join in the group and discuss with others. A good sense of humour is found to make a successful 'poster'<sup>14</sup> as the individuals who post humorous messages are often found to be praised for 'making others laugh'.

In addition, the study of Howard *et al.* (2002, p.47) discovered that the younger Internet users in America tend to use the Internet for participating 'fun' forms of communication and information gathering such as becoming involved in chat rooms, downloading popular music and finding out more information on movies, books and other leisure-time activities. Younger Internet users have more likely to adopt practices that offer convenience to their lifestyle such as online banking, arranging travel and doing school or work-related research than older Internet users.

Furthermore, according to Clerc (2000, p.220), approval from other fans in online communities is important for the social practices in that online community. The observation on public mailing lists and newsgroups showed that fans perceived a lack of response to their first message as a sign of not being welcomed into the community. Additionally, fans may find an increase in their confidence in making their posts when they 'find familiar names waiting for them on-line'. Baym's (1995, p.157) study also found that those who are heavy and experienced users tend to mention the names of other individuals when responding to their messages and acknowledging of the perspectives of these individuals more often than other less-frequent or experienced users. The use of such familiarity thus also leads to the development of better relationships with others.

---

<sup>14</sup> The term 'poster' is used refer to a person who posts messages on the electronic discussion board (see Baym, 1997, p.103; MacDonald, 1998, p.146).

Such social discussions are important, because the exchange of this type of message brings about social relationships among online community members, these types of messages will be observed later in the case study of this thesis.

### ***Information and social supports online***

In addition to the two types of online discussions discussed above, Wellman *et al.* (1996, p.219-220) differentiate between two types of online support, one form that is information-based and another that is social. These supports help to sustain the relationships of both strong and weak ties in online communities (Wellman *et al.*, 1996, p.219-224; see also Constant *et al.*, 1997, p.303; Turner *et al.*, 2001, p.245-246; Mickelson, 1997, p.157; Miyata, 2002, p.543).

For the type of online communities created on the basis of weak ties, the sort of benefit people might gain are the relationships with people who they might almost never meet or have a chance to know in their everyday life. Wellman and Gulia (1999, p.175) discussed that people could strengthen their relationships by creating 'specialized relationships' for the purposes of obtaining information, support and companionship. Thus a sense of belonging can be well maintained. Social and information support from the group with weak ties are advantageous from the point of view of the expansion of the social networks of individuals.

On the one hand, information support in weak ties community is seen as useful for seeking help that might not be available from those of strong ties, such as friends and family (Constant *et al.*, 1997, p.303). On the other hand, social support is also found in addition to a support from face-to-face interaction – for example, Turner *et al.* (2001, p.245-246) found in their study that patients seeking for support on specific types of illness can benefit from alternative support they received from online communities.

This type of support may not have been available from those with whom these people had strong physical or emotional ties or connections. The same observation is noted by Mickelson (1997) who found that in a study of groups of parents who seek

for social support of their ill child. The study concluded that '[...] the Internet is a social setting in which strangers can exchange useful support' (Mickelson, 1997, p.157). Similarly a study conducted by Miyata (2002, p.543) found that a group of Japanese mothers seek out both information and social support from a community of weak ties. The study noted that the social support received from the online community helps to promote the psychological well-being of the members.

## **2.7 Local Internet use**

This section explores the Internet uses in local contexts. General studies on the relationships of the use of the Internet and the culture of the users are described. The main aim of this section is to present the contrasting roles of the Internet between serving as a global medium providing worldwide connections and also allowing the attachment of local cultural values by its users.

The Internet is used by an increasing number of experienced users around the world (Chen, Boase, Wellman, 2002, p.2). However, Lyon (2002) argues that the Internet is used differently in different places. It is argued that various factors such as differences between countries, genders, regions, ethnicities, and classes should be taken into account, as it is believed that the local culture plays a part in how the Internet is used. Baym (1995, p.141) observed 'multiple external contexts' where interactions, social understandings and practices are developed simultaneously. National and international culture plays a part within the CMC and since different groups of members share a common language, understanding, access, immediate situations, and subculture. Thus, it is argued that:

It is essential to treat telecommunications and computer-mediated communications networks as *local* phenomena, as well as global networks. Embedded within locally specific routines of daily schedules and the 'place-ballets' of individuals, Internet has been shaped by its users (Shields, 1996, p.3).

Therefore in order to understand the practices of online communities developed on the Internet, it is important to develop an awareness of the culture of the individual users who make up an online community.

From various studies about the use of the Internet worldwide, cultural values have emerged in the context of Internet use (Hongladarom, 1998a; 1998b; 2003; Miller and Slater, 2000; Hjorth, 2003; Liu *et al.*, 2002; Gottlieb & McLelland, 2003). It is pointed out that:

[...] despite the fact that the Internet is often discussed in terms of its “global” reach and its “borderless” frontiers, it is important to remember that individuals who log on are real people in actual locations with specific purposes; the meaning of the Internet, which is part defined by technology, is thus also partly the product of diverse social contexts (Gottlieb & McLelland, 2003, p.2).

For example, a study on ‘User Behavior and the “Globalness” of Internet: from a Taiwan users’ perspective’ discussed the general patterns of Internet use in Taiwan, including online activities for communication, information access, and e-commerce (Liu *et al.*, 2002). The study suggested that the behaviour of Internet users is very much local despite the fact that the Internet remains ‘global’. The actual place where users originate from and where they feel a sense of belonging plays a particular impact on their practices. These Internet users view any venture out of the local context as short-term or purpose-driven wanderings used only to satisfy certain goals and needs. Such diversions are still ‘based’ locally more than globally (Liu *et al.*, 2002).

In a study of the use of the Internet in Japan, Hjorth (2003, p.51) illustrated that the Japanese added elements of their own distinctive culture to their way of using the Internet. For example, the Internet is widely used in mobile phones rather than on PCs by young Japanese people. This practice shows the unique character of the Japanese in adopting the technology and using it in their everyday lives. Moreover, the ‘cute culture’, such as ‘cute’ graphics on online messages, is found to be associated with Japan’s youth culture (Hjorth, 2003, p.53, 57-58).

In Trinidad, Miller and Slater (2000, p.7) observed the linkage between local culture and the Internet uses in everyday lives of the people. Local cultures are distinctively shown in the Internet contents of the local people. The study suggested that although the Internet is a global communications network, the technology enhances and



strengthens local cultures rather than encouraging a single global culture where local identity becomes lost.

In addition, because of different natures of a country development, the uses of the Internet differ greatly from country to country. In case of Jamaica, which is a developing country, its infrastructure of Internet technology is not adequate to accommodate the modern computer technologies provided by the developed World. This shows how broader socio-economic contexts play a part within the applications of technology in the country (Dyrkton, 1996, p.50-54).

The above discussion clearly shows the significant influences of local culture on the use of the Internet. Next, I discuss existing studies about local Internet use in Thailand.

### ***Internet use and local Thai culture***

In Thailand, there are few studies that illustrate the influences of local Thai culture on people's Internet uses. One of these studies, however, is Hongladarom's (1998a; 1998b; 2003). He employed a 'philosophical analysis' to understand the relationship between the Internet and Thai culture. The study argues that the use of the Internet is connected to the local culture and area, which makes it different from Internet use in other countries. Hongladarom (1998b) investigates discussions in a Usenet newsgroup – soc.culture.thai – questioning how the perceptions of the Thai people on the computer-mediated communication technologies are affected by their cultural presupposition.

The findings of this study show that the local and national characteristics of the Thai people are commonly found within the online discussions or the selected newsgroup. The author argues that the Internet reinforces the existing Thai local culture rather than undermining it or replacing it with a global culture. In other words, local Thai cultural presuppositions exist together with imported Western cultural values. In fact, the notion that the Internet might automatically lead to social change according to Western culture is challenged by this fact that the local culture of Internet users

exists alongside Western ideas. When and how new attitudes are adopted is dependant on the users' objective in using the Internet. In this regard, the place where communications is created needs to be taken into account.

The study of Hongladarom (1998a; 1998b; 2003) while providing a useful insight into the existence of Thai cultural values online, does not explain how local Thai culture actually influences Thai people's social interactions on the Internet. In his article 'Global culture, local culture and the Internet: a Thai example', Hongladarom (1998b) selects only two threads from a Usenet newsgroup to analyse Thais' online discussions. Thus there is still a need for more empirical evidence of the influence of the Thai culture on Internet use.

Another study which observes the influence of local Thai culture is the study of Panyametheekul and Herring (2003) on 'Gender and Turn Allocation in a Thai Chat Room'. It is found from the study that the Thai cultural values of 'politeness' and 'civility' are reflected in the way Thai people chat on the Internet. Sexually explicit subjects are perceived as rude and users may be judged negatively. Thus such 'crude' topics are hardly found in Thai chatrooms. This explains why Thai women may feel comfortable communicating in chatrooms, especially when the topic is casual socialising. However, Panyametheekul and Herring (2003) have suggested that further research to observe a form of Thai chat and other activities on the CMC in relation to Thai culture is needed.

Apart from these, there are few studies on online communities in Thailand, and they tend to focus on subjects other than that of this thesis; for example, Esteen (2005) illustrates how the discussions on a Thai website provide opportunities to challenge the dominant and stereotypical image of Thai women, and Taylor (2003) talks about the establishment of Buddhist communities online which defy the space limitations of urban Thailand.

The above-mentioned studies of Internet use in Thailand illustrate the lack of empirical research in this area. Thus, it is this thesis's intention to further examine the effects of Thai cultural values on Internet behaviour, and to provide a complement to the above studies. In chapter 4, Thai cultural values will be discussed,

in order to help put the case study of Thai Internet users into perspective (see section 4.2).

## **2.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has performed two main tasks. First, it discussed the primary literature on the expansion of social networks through online fan communities and the behaviour of fans online. These issues are central to my thesis; the primary text help to answer the questions of how, and the extent to which, the social networks of the fans expanded via the online community. Second, the literature on online communities, online fandom, and local Internet use provides a general background and macro-context for the thesis's discussion.

In my discussion of the primary literature, I define the term 'social networks', and then introduce a key argument that online communities are not only used to exchange information, but that they also help to create social relationships as well as expand social networks. I discuss texts which have shown that although online communities do not provide physical locations where their members can interact, social relationships have been created and maintained. In addition, I examine the literature on hierarchy within online fan communities and the factors it identified as contributing to the different amounts of power held by fans. This combination of social network analysis with studies on hierarchy within online communities creates a solid background for further analysis of the Thai case.

I look at interactions in online communities and their development, this is vital when researching online communication and how it helps to sustain a strong sense of community. In this chapter, the two main types of online conversations are classed as 'knowledge' or 'social' discussions. As the themes of discussion topics shift from knowledge towards social ones, the object of fandom can be seen as a point of departure from which the fans' social networks can be developed and expanded. In addition, it is important to note that the lack of social cues on the Internet may influence the way people conduct themselves.

Indeed, the review of the literature provided in this chapter has shown that there is an interplay of social relationships and between practices within online communities, and that the relationship between these two can be complex. This chapter clearly suggests that the latter (practices) influences the former (relationships). It is intriguing to further analyse this point with reference to Thai Internet users.

The second set of literature, on online communities, online fandom and local Internet use, is also important. It provides a broader context in which to situate this thesis. This chapter illustrates that online communities, according to current Internet research, can be valid providers of alternative ways to create social relationships and expand social networks. Some important points are: that now the Internet is considered a part of people's everyday lives, that online fans benefit from the Internet by speaking out and creating their own collective power as a result of the Internet being a decentralised medium, and, finally, that Internet users tend to adapt to the technology and use it in their own ways, often according to their own local cultural values.

Having described the analytical tools used in recent studies and provided a general background of relevant studies, my next task is to discuss my own study's methods of gathering empirical data.

## Chapter Three

### Research Approaches and Methods

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research approaches and methods used to gather empirical data for the case study of this thesis. A description of how the main research question was formulated is given. The ethnographic approach can be used to understand and examine the meanings behind the practices of the members within an online fan community in Thailand and in doing this, find out how the social networks of Thai fans are expanded in the PPU online community. In fact, the ethnographic approach can be used to look at not only the behaviour among the online community members and gain information from the actual participants, but ethnography can also be used to look at the ‘broader social contexts’ such as mass media, fandom and the use of Thai cultural values in general social interactions. Thus, in adopting an ethnographic approach, the meaning behind the behaviour of the online community members and the broader contexts can be investigated and understood.

The first part of this chapter discusses the *Petchprauma* novel and the novel’s content as an introduction to the case study. *Petchprauma* is one of the most famous adventure novels in Thailand. The creation of the PPU fansite is also described in order to provide an introduction to the PPU online community. This chapter also gives an explanation of the thought processes that led to the case study of the PPU online fan community being chosen for being the subject of research for this thesis. The PPU community is the ‘critical case’ in which theories on Internet studies, online communication, and online fandom can be further investigated and reflected upon.

A description of how I became a member of the PPU community as well as a detailed account of my activities and interactions with people in this online community is given. To this end, my experiences as an ethnographer in the field study are presented.

In addition to this, the four key methods of data collection used in the selected empirical case study of this thesis are described. These methods are: non-participant observation, participant observation of both online and offline activities, face-to-face interviews and textual analysis of the online discussions of the members. In this text, I also discuss the use of the Thai language in online communications. In particular, I describe how this shows the way the use of the Thai language in Internet communications is influenced by Thai culture. An explanation of how data was collected using these methods is given. Additionally, an overview of how, through the combination of the above methods, the data can be triangulated in order to maintain validity and to give rich and reliable information, is presented. Finally, the critical and reflexive processes of the research approach and data collection methods are considered.

### **3.2 Introduction to the *Petchprauma* Novel and the PPU online fan community**

Before explaining why and how the PPU fan community was selected, it is important to provide a general background of the case study. The understanding of how the online fan community is created helps to identify the ‘broader social contexts’ of the community being studied. The linkage between the PPU online fan community and other websites related to the *Petchprauma* novel also shows the nature of the Internet that is connected by the ‘links’ feature (see Mitra and Cohen, 1999, p.187). Beside this, the knowledge of the storyline of the *Petchprauma* novel helped me as a researcher in the process of analysing the online discussions of the fans. For example, knowledge about the novel’s characters or the locations in the novel helped me when I acted as a ‘lurker’ to follow conversations that were held amongst members. In addition to this, it also helped me to understand the context which the fans discussed particular topics relating to *Petchprauma*.

Knowledge of *Petchprauma* was also important to have in order for me to be able to differentiate between discussions about the novel to discussions about social issues, which are the key themes for my analytical framework (see section 3.4.2 for more discussions on the textual analysis). For example, the knowledge about the characters from the *Petchprauma* novel allowed me to tell the difference between conversations

amongst the members where fans were discussing about the novel characters or the other members of the online forum.

The following section first explains the story line of the *Petchprauma* novel and discusses the creation of the PPU fansite.

### 3.2.1 Story line of the *Petchprauma* Novel

The *Petchprauma* novel is the object of fandom that creates mutual interest among the PPU community members. Interest in the novel serves as a legitimate passport for joining the group. Before learning why people are attracted to the *Petchprauma* novel (see section 4.4), it is important to understand the characteristics of the novel itself; its narrative styles, the structure of its stories, and how it is classified. Thus this section describes the content, or story line, of the novel which can be related to the characteristics of the fans.

*Petchprauma* is a famous adventure fantasy novel written by a well-known Thai writer, Chatchai Visedsuwanpoom, whose pen name is *Pranomtean*. The author was born on 23 November 1931, and has published several types of books and novels. The height of his writing career was marked in 1997 when he was awarded the ‘country’s finest artists in literacy’<sup>15</sup> by the Thai government.

*Petchprauma* is one of the longest stories in Thai novel history, with 48 volumes comprising 18,063 pages. The novel was begun on 19 May 1965, and it took the writer 25 years, seven months and two days, until 22 June 1990, to complete the whole story (*Manager*, 29 October 2004). The novel was first published by *Parnfapittaya* in 1965. The story has continued to be reprinted until recent days. In current publications by the *Nabanvannagum* publishing company, the story is divided into 48 pocket-size books. Within those 48 books, the story of *Petchprauma* is divided into 2 main parts. The first part has 24 books and is divided into 6 episodes. The second part has 24 books and is divided into 5 episodes. The story is

---

<sup>15</sup>The award is given yearly to artists of the country in many areas such as literacy, painting, music, etc. The Thai term is ‘*Sinlapin Hang Chad*’.

only written in Thai and has never been published in other languages (PPU website, accessed 4 August 2003).

Upon the publication of the first series, the story become hugely popular among Thai readers, so much so that the writer had to extend it, and write a second series. Readers of the *Petchprauma* novel are of all different age groups. The fact that the novel was written between 1965 and 1990, and has been re-published in various publications up until today proves its popularity among both young and old readers. Also, the story of *Petchprauma*, which includes excitement, fantasy, love, wisdom, and local knowledge, easily attracts both young and old readers (Manager, 29 October 2004).

I will now give a brief summary of the novel's storyline.<sup>16</sup> It takes place in a mystical forest deep in Thailand. The story of *Petchprauma* is not simple adventure that offers only excitement to its readers; the plot also involves friendship, love, and knowledge of how to survive in a jungle. The basic story line is that a group of characters goes into a forest to find a missing man. During their journey, they face mysteries and exciting incidents. By the end of their journey, two main characters have fallen in love and the group has found hidden treasures.

As mentioned earlier, the story is divided into two main parts, each covered in 24 books. In the first part, *Rapin* is a skilful hunter who lives and works by trading wild animals with a businessman. *Chedtha*, a rich and respectable gentleman, comes to meet *Rapin* and ask for his help because he wants to track his younger brother, who earlier went missing in a mysterious forest. *Darin*, *Chedtha*'s sister, and *Chaiyan*, a close friend of *Chedtha* and *Darin*, also wants to join the journey. *Rapin* agrees to be a caravan leader and take the travellers into the mysterious forest, although he knows that the journey into the mysterious forest will be a risky one. As they travel deep into the forest, they have to face many difficulties, such as battles with different kinds of animals and mysterious myths of the jungle. The travellers have to follow the trail of a manuscript, which finally leads them into a gold mine. The first part of

---

<sup>16</sup> The brief storyline of the novel was provided on the PPU website ([www.petchprauma.com](http://www.petchprauma.com)), accessed 4 August 2003.



the story can be read on its own; although the second part is an extension created due to the popularity of the original.

In the second part, *Rapin* has to return to the mysterious forest again, where an American airplane has gone down. *Rapin* has to lead a group of both Western and local travellers to find the missing plane. When *Chedtha* and *Darin* find out about *Rapin*'s journey, they follow to offer some help. Finally, the group of travellers finds the missing airplane and *Rapin* and *Darin* who have been long separated are together at last.

The plot of *Petchprauma* is believed to derive from the story of King Solomon's Mines, by a British writer, Sir H. Rider Haggard. *Pranomtean* admitted that King Solomon's Mines was an inspiration for the story of *Petchprauma*, but claimed that it was only a small influence. *Petchprauma* was set in the varied scenery of Thai and Asian forests. The story of *Petchprauma* was, for the most part, imagined by the author who was inspired by his own experiences in the Thai forest and old folk stories he had heard since he was young. *Pranomtean* explained that due to his imagination, the story could be expanded to other series (PPU website, accessed 10 March 2005).

Although the *Petchprauma* novel is very popular among Thai readers, there is very little research related to it. Suparucha (1998), conducted 'A Comparative Study of Adventure Novels: from King Solomon's Mines, to *Long Plai*<sup>17</sup> and *Petchprauma*', which aims to compare the influence of King Solomon's Mines on the story of *Long Plai* and on *Petchprauma*, as well as studying the characteristics of the *Petchprauma* novel.

Suparucha (1998) concluded that all three novels share certain characteristics; they are all adventure novels which involve journeys into the forest, and in which the main characters are divided into two groups: employers and hunters. The travellers have to go to unusual places for various reasons. The journeys are all also very dangerous and the travellers almost die towards the end of their journeys. Suparucha

---

<sup>17</sup> *Long Plai* is a novel written by *Pranomtean*

comments that the influence of King Solomon's Mine on *Petchprauma* is slight. She suggests that the novel is unique because the author drew on his own experiences and many areas of knowledge when writing the story. A combination of excitement and unusual knowledge makes the novel interesting for the readers. The novel appeals to a large number of Thai readers, as its continuing recognition has shown (Suparucha, 1998).

*Petchprauma* is full of diverse knowledge, which it makes a unique and interesting read. There is information about wild animals, ways of living in the jungle, weapons and guns, Thai literature, Thai songs, and international songs, which all allow readers to gain some extra insights. The plot of *Petchprauma* is fast-paced and exciting throughout. The story is well-developed and full of fantasy and unexpected scenes. Although the novel has an outstandingly long story, the writer is yet able to keep reader's attention as the story is unpredictable and creatively written (Suparucha, 1998).

Moreover, the content of the novel is accessible to both genders and all ages. In an interview with a newspaper, the author talks about his feeling towards the popularity of the novel:

Although I started writing *Petchprauma* more than 30 years ago, the novel still inspires readers. Teenagers and children of only 9 or 10 years of age now read my novel. Amazingly, people of every age and every social level read *Petchprauma*. [...] I'm pleased to know that they do, because the novel could actually help to make people aware of the environmental issue and conservation in this country (*Komchadluek*, 6 December 2003).

The author's perspective is clear: the novel was not written only for elderly readers. People at different ages and of different social strata can read and appreciate the story.

The *Petchprauma* novel has a number of characters and a variety of subplots, situations and storylines that can explain its appeal to the fans. For example, the love stories between the main characters could lead to a further discussion by the fans. There are many points in the story from which the fans could speculate about the

characters' behaviour or motives. Such social issues in the story could form the basis of an interesting discussion topic among the fans. The story of *Petchprauma* also triggers lots of questions from readers due to the great amount of knowledge imparted and the length and complexity of the plot. The PPU online fan community seems to be a great place to gather, ask and answer questions, and discuss different points they are interested in. Thus the novel's lengthy character could affect the fans' practices. This point will be further investigated in chapter five.

### 3.2.2 History of the PPU online fan community

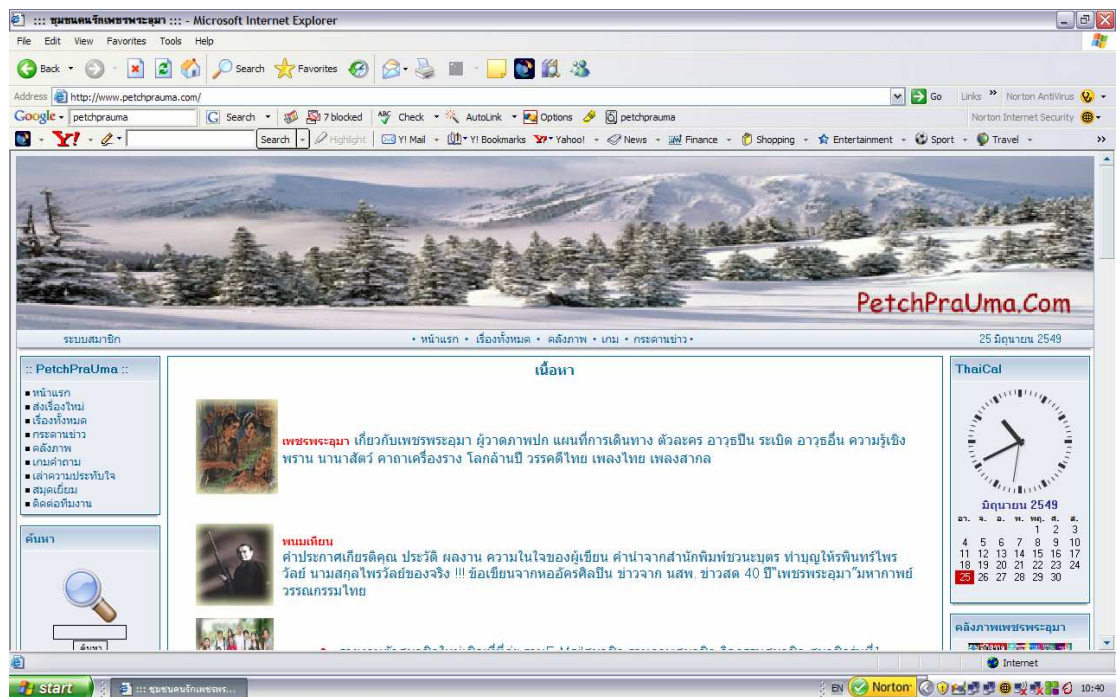
The *Petchprauma* online fan community was named in Thai '*Choom Chon Kon Rak Petchprauma*', which is literally translated as 'a community of people who love *Petchprauma*'. The *Petchprauma* online community has its own fansite in the Thai language. All participants are Thai. The PPU website was designed to be dedicated to the story, the writer, and discussion of the novel. Although there are several Thai websites related to the '*Petchprauma*' novel, the selected online fan community for this study is located at '[www.petchprauma.com](http://www.petchprauma.com)'. In section 3.3.3, I will discuss the reason behind the selection of this case study. In this thesis, 'PPU' is used to abbreviate *Petchprauma* when referring to the *Petchprauma* online community and the *Petchprauma* fans.

The 'PPU fans' refer to those people who share an attraction to the *Petchprauma* novel and who were gathered as a group by way of Internet technology. I use the term 'fans' to mean the members of the PPU online community. In the PPU online community, the members had to apply for membership to use the online forum therefore their memberships illustrates their intention to become part of the fan community. It has been discussed in the literature of fandom that fan activities are related to the interests of individuals (see section 2.4.1), it is therefore assumed in this research that the users of the PPU online forum, who enter the PPU online community to discuss their common interest on the *Petchprauma* novel, are fans. Therefore, the term 'fans' and 'members' are used interchangeably in this thesis.

The PPU online fan community was initially established on the Internet, although later the relationships among the members grew considerably and their interactions

moved towards face-to-face meetings. This movement of social networks from online towards offline settings will be investigated in later chapters. One member commented on the gathering of the PPU fans: ‘We do not really know if there was any kind of gathering of *Petchprauma* fans before this, but our group was drawn together for the first time by the Internet’.<sup>18</sup> Similar opinion is shared among the interviewees. There is no existing evidence that there was any offline community related to the *Petchprauma* novel before the creation of the PPU online community. In part, this point demonstrates the role of the Internet in creating online communities in addition to the locality-based community (see section 2.3.1).

The following picture illustrates the first page of the PPU website.



Picture 1: PPU website

Source: [www.petchprauma.com](http://www.petchprauma.com), accessed 23 June 2006

The PPU fansite is rooted in the original discussions about the *Petchprauma* novel, which occurred on the *Pantip* website (<http://www.pantip.com>), which is regarded as Thailand's leading website for online forums (Panyametheekul and Herring, 2003). Several PPU members noted that the early postings about the *Petchprauma* novel had started in the 'library room' at the *Pantip* website, where several *Pantip*

<sup>18</sup> Personal interview with Darimeya, 14 July 2003.

members began to post various forms of fan fiction or ‘fanfic’<sup>19</sup> on the *Petchprauma* novel. The postings became popular among the *Pantip* members and the continuation of such postings led to a first gathering of the group of *Petchprauma* fans and those who were generally interested in the discussions about the novel.<sup>20</sup>

Over the course of time, the older messages began to be removed from the *Pantip* website because of limited space, and were replaced by newer messages. At this point, a *Pantip* member called *Pink*, who later became the Webmaster of the PPU fansite, created a website and copied older postings of *Petchprauma* fan fiction on to a free web hosting homepage known as *Joinwriter* ([www.geocities.com/joinwriter](http://www.geocities.com/joinwriter)).<sup>21</sup> This site originated many discussions among the fans of the novel. From online discussions on the *Joinwriter* website, a few face-to-face meetings among small groups of people were arranged and some of these people who got to know each other face-to-face initiated the plan to create the PPU fansite. This group of PPU website creators called themselves the ‘PPU team’ (see section 6.3 for the discussions on the roles of the ‘PPU team’).<sup>22</sup>

The PPU fansite (<http://www.petchprauma.com>) was first launched online on 24 April 2003 under the management of the ‘PPU team’ (the creator of the website). Interestingly, the domain name of this website was received favourably by the novelist’s son who also participated in the process of creating the website.<sup>23</sup> The Web creator team visited the novel’s writer several times and asked for advice of the novel’s writer about the content of the Website before the Website was launched for the general public online.<sup>24</sup> The PPU website had two main sections: the first part was information about the novel, including the writer, the short stories of the *Petchprauma* novel, pictures from the book covers, pictures from a previous movie production, general knowledge about the stories and so on. The information part of the website provides a good depth of knowledge about the novel and is a great information source for the site’s users (see Rheingold, 1993, p.13, 57; Wellman *et*

---

<sup>19</sup> ‘Fanfic’ is fan’s own version of stories originally inspired by their object of fandom or media texts.

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview with *Darimeya*, 14 July 2003; *Wai Cha Kun*, 21 August 2003; *Nu Mu*, 15 June 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Online interview with the PPU Webmaster, on 18 June 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Personal interview with *Darimeya*, 14 July 2003.

<sup>23</sup> For reasons of privacy, the domain name’s owner is omitted here.

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview with *Rapin* 30 August 2003.

*al.*, 1996, p.219; Sproull and Fajaj, 1997, p.36). The second part of the website is an online forum which provides space for communication between the PPU fans. The next section discusses how the research ideas are formulated.

### **3.3 Formulating research ideas**

#### **3.3.1 Developing the research questions**

My background in the study of mass communication research gave me a particular interest in studying the interaction of the Internet and fans. In order to develop a general background and perspective for my research area, I conducted a literature review of Internet culture, online community and online fandom. After reviewing literature on Internet studies, I found very few research studies that focus on a Thai context. Therefore, I felt that by examining an online community of fans in Thailand, my research could help to fill a gap in the area.

From this process of conducting literature reviews on subjects related to my area of interest, several possible research questions emerged. The basic question that I used as a guide through the process of formulation was: how are online fan communities created in Thailand? Following brainstorming sessions, this question produced several other subordinate questions that considered different aspects of online communities. The subordinate questions were developed to understand issues of, for example, why members joined online communities, what practices exist within online communities and how online identities are established.

However, as a result of my interactions with members of the PPU online community, I discovered rich contexts of social relationships within the online community. This motivated me to seek answers to additional research questions. I re-formulated my research questions to consider questions that were related to social relationships. In other words, after I had been involved in the field for a while, the focus of my research questions shifted according to the specific case of this particular empirical study (see Machin, 2000, p.166). As I collected more information from the fieldwork this encouraged me to refine my research questions and this played a major role in deciding the direction of this research investigation.

Therefore, eventually my research questions were refined at a later period. As I collected more information this encouraged me to shift the focus of my research questions and investigate these alternative ones further. It was intriguing for me to understand the meaning behind the social networks of the online community members and the reason of why they could advance social networks to a high level. As a result of this, my main research question became:

*Can the social networks of PPU fans be expanded through participation within the PPU online community?*

To answer the main research question above, two subordinate questions were raised:

- How are the social networks of the PPU fans expanded?
- How does the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community affect the expansion of the social networks of the PPU fans?

In addition to this, the research's secondary focus on reflecting a broader issue on the role of the Internet as a communication medium was developed. Thus, another research question was introduced:

- What role does the Internet play in facilitating the expansion of the social networks of the PPU fans?

It should be noted here that the term 'social networks' used in this research study follows Wellman (1997, p.179)'s definition of social networks. The use of the term social networks allows me to examine the relationships within the online community in a broader sense. Thus, this research does not examine the relationships between 'two-person dyads' but investigates the complexity of relationships and hierarchies within the online community (see section 2.5.1 for the discussion on the definition of social networks).



A similar change in the focus of a research question was reported in the study of the online fan community conducted by Baym (2000, p.24) as she noted, 'I began with a set of research questions knowing that as I moved among observation, data analysis, and theory, I would end up taking paths I had not foreseen'. Additionally, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p.37) have noted, 'the development of research problems is rarely completed before fieldwork begins; indeed, the collection of primary data often plays a key role in that process of development'.

Accordingly, further literature regarding social networks and hierarchy within the online community were chosen to be reviewed as they were relevant to the case study. This additional review of the literature complemented the background reviews that I had conducted on the general issues of Internet studies, online communities, online fandom and Thai cultural values. This background was important to help me develop the basic understanding of this research area. The practice of going back and forth between the literature and the analysis of empirical data occurred constantly throughout the research process. At one point, it helps to ensure that the empirical findings were not predetermined by the existing literature (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.36).

### **3.3.2 Choosing the ethnographic research approach**

After the general research questions were formulated, the ethnographic approach was selected. According to Brewer (2000, p.30), ethnography takes part as a method of the humanistic model of social research – naturalism. Naturalism proposes to study the social world in its natural setting, rather than in artificial ones (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.8). By comparison on the other hand, positivism is more concerned with the testing of theories, the controlling of variables and the standardising of procedures to produce a body of knowledge. It is the choice of these methodological two perspectives, positivism or naturalism, that determines the methods, the style of research and the type of data collected (Brewer, 2000, p.31). Both of these positivism and naturalism methodological approaches contain some elements that are useful to research and the contribution of knowledge (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 17).



As it was mentioned in chapter two about the ‘structural analysis’ - used by social networks scholars to view the networks established online. The analysis is inclined to use quantitative data collection tools. Such a method has some limitations as it fails to take account of the social contexts and to describe how relationships within social networks are created (see section 2.5.1). In this thesis, having recognised limitations of the ‘structural analysis’, I select ethnography as a key approach because this thesis aims to find out about actions, attitudes and behaviours of a group of people in a particular setting, the practice and manner need to be carefully observed and be understood in a specific way. Quantitative data alone would not be adequate to answer the research question.

However, in this thesis, the qualitative and quantitative methods are complementary to one another rather than two distinctively separate approaches. This thesis relies more on qualitative methods regarding the collection and analysis of information. Quantitative methods are sometimes used to summarise data as well as provide relevant information such as the number of online community members or the number of online discussions topics.

Brewer (2000, p.11) has pointed out that ethnography is ‘a style of research’ and not a specific data collection method. The ethnographic approach originated in anthropology. The aim of anthropology is to understand the cultural practices of people in societies (Machin, 2002, p.17). However, ethnography has also been used in the mass communication discipline.

Hansen *et al.*, (1998, p.39-40) state that ethnography is one of the methods used in mass communication studies. For instance ethnography was used to observe the news-making process. Moreover, the use of ethnography in media audience studies provides a way to reveal how the media has become an integrated part of the everyday life experiences of people in the world. Machin (2002, p.10) notes that there are two main assumptions in conducting an ethnographic research in audience studies. The first assumption is that human behaviour can be understood by observing it in different contexts at different times. The second assumption is that the reason which people use to explain why they do things may not reflect their true motivation. Therefore it is important to recognise ‘broader cultural representations’.

With these assumptions, ethnographic research helps to understand the relationship of ‘the voice of the media’ and people’s lives in a broader sense in order to capture valuable insight into this complex situation (Machin, 2002, p.10).

According to Machin (2002, p.2), ethnography is about:

[...] Locating a particular slice of social action into something larger into a whole way of life. The behaviour of a person must be looked and put in a broader context equipped with a range of cultural standards and values and engaged with others’ mind in their society.

Therefore, ethnography is a way to understand the meaning of human behaviour in different cultures and what these behaviours patterns mean to the people (Machin, 2002, p.17). In general, ethnographic research methodology looks at the routine ways in which people make sense of the world in everyday life (Hammersly and Atkinson, 1995, p.4). Using ethnographic methods provides a way to understand the everyday life of people in their own natural surroundings. Therefore, one advantage of ethnography is that it can reveal features of the social world that other methods cannot do (Machin, 2002, p.6).

The objective of ethnography is to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given ‘field’ or setting or situation. Ethnography aims to find reasons ‘why’ people do certain things in their everyday life how people’s behaviour are affected and guided by different factors. Moreover, the ethnographer tries to explain society and social behaviour by observing naturally occurring events or behaviours (Machin, 2002, p. 2; Brewer, 2000, p.11). Brewer (2000, p.10) stated:

Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the settings, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.

Ethnographers have to be aware of people’s cultural sets of rules and social meanings behind their actions. The observations of the culture in which these people live, people’s beliefs, and the nature of their society and their social interaction are all included. Machin (2002, p.7) noted that ethnography could be seen as a little

different from participant observation as the latter method does not require that researchers immerse themselves in a culture or create ‘a comprehensive cultural map of the world of the observed’. However, these two terms can be sometimes used interchangeably since they both aim to observe people’s behaviour in their natural settings.

In my role as an ethnographic researcher I had to be closely associated with and often participate in the study setting, adopting the habits of the natives in order to achieve my aim to understand their behaviour. Having access to the cultural world of people in the study allows me to learn to interpret the world in the same way as the people in the study and to begin to understand their behaviour (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995. p.8, 22). Therefore, to study people in their natural setting or ‘field’, ethnographers need to participate directly and explore social meanings and behaviour from the inside (see Fontana and Frey, 1996, p.366).

In the light of this thesis’s objective, immersing oneself into the community is one of the best ways to learn about the online community members’ behaviour and perceptions. From my direct experience, building trust and taking part as a participant are important factors in conducting ethnography research, however, they are time-consuming (Yin, 2003, p.11; Orgad, 2005, p.58). However, it was worthwhile since I was able to gain rich data to fulfil the research objectives as well as to fully understand the research participants in their natural setting.

### **3.3.3 Selecting the case study**

Before understanding how the case study is selected, it is important to understand the definition of “case study”. Stake (2000, p.19) noted that case study is a method in social inquiry. Yin (2003, p.1-2) suggested that case study is a research strategy which is used to understand complex social phenomena and the investigators are allowed to retain ‘holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events’. Yin (2003, p.3, 8) compared case studies with other research strategies in the social sciences such as experiment, survey, and computer-based-analysis of archival records and argued that case studies are the preferred research strategies when ‘a

‘how’ and ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control’.

Therefore, the case study approach correlates with the aim of the thesis in exploring the way or how people currently use the Internet and how the social networks of the PPU fans expanded. Moreover, the case study helps to fulfil the thesis’ objective since it serves as a method to study a phenomenon in its real-life context where ‘the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’ (Yin, 2003, p.13). In this thesis, I intend to understand the online community in its real setting. I participated in the community with a willingness to take account of the occurrence which is circumscribed by its context.

This thesis is categorised as a holistic single case study design (Yin, 2003, p.40). A single-case study is often criticised for the risk of not being able to generalise the findings, especially along the line of scientific generalisations (Yin, 2003, p. 10; Gomm *et al.*, 2000, p.98). Although I was aware of this risk, I chose to commit to a single case study because of two key rationales: feasibility and theoretical reasons. Firstly, this study chooses specifically ethnographic research approach, which requires a considerable amount of time for fieldwork and that a focused single case study is thus necessary. Secondly, my rationale for a single case – the PPU online community - is based on theoretical ideas or what Yin (2003, p.40) stated that ‘one rationale for a single case is when it represents the *critical case* in testing a well-formulated theory’. In the same way, Gomm *et al.* (2000, p.105) have suggested one way to do the ‘empirical generalisation from studied to unstudied cases’ is about selecting cases by basing on theoretical ideas.

In this thesis, theoretical ideas are used as one of the rationales for the case of the PPU online community. Referring to the literature review process which I have done during the first stage of my research, there are many theories concerning the decentralised role of the Internet, online fandom, and online relationships. In part, this thesis aims to ‘confirm, challenge, or extend’ the theory further (Yin, 2003, p. 40). By taking account of relevant theories, the PPU online community stands as the ‘critical case’ to be studied. The conclusion chapter will show how the case of the

PPU online community represents these relevant theories. The following paragraphs discuss how I relate theoretical ideas with a case.

Unlike several scholars who selected a case based on their fandom of particular media (see Baym, 2000; Clerc, 2000), I did not have any particular fan objects. Therefore I had to use my own criteria to select an online fandom to be studied. I set up three main criteria to select a case. Firstly, based on my study's objective, the selected site had to be an online community of fans where the participation of members was noticeable and openly encouraged.

Secondly, in order to study the interactions between mass media and the online fan phenomenon, the site had to have relationships with a broader context, that is, links with other types of media. An advantage of this linkage is not only that other types of mass media could help in the process of finding the information of online communities in Thailand, but the case would also reflect what many scholars have noted about the Internet as one type of mass medium and its blurred boundaries with other types of mass media (see Silverstone *et al.*, 1992, p. 15; Morris and Ogan, 1996, p. 42; McQuail, 2000, p. 118).

Thirdly, regarding the studies of online fandom, several scholars have discussed about the Internet as a decentralised medium and its ability to empower the fans to draw media producers' interests (see Kitchin, 1998; McQuail, 2000, p. 120). Since this thesis aims to understand the relationship between Internet and fans, it is interesting to select a case which presents this type of relationship.

After the recognition of the above theoretical ideas, I started the process of case selection. While I was conducting fieldwork in Thailand, I encountered many Thai online fan communities through the *Sanook* website (<http://www.sanook.com>) which is a Thai web directory site that stores the web addresses of various Thai websites. From the *Sanook* website, I accessed the 'Web Index' page (<http://webindex.sanook.com>) to gain information about different types of Thai websites and online communities that existed at the time. There were a wide range of websites categorised into different themes, for example, governmental agencies, educational institutions, travel and leisure and entertainment. Since I was interested

in finding a fansite that was related to the Thai media, I selected an ‘entertainment’ theme from which I discovered lists of websites related to media fandom, such as, stars and singers (29 websites), books and writing (154 websites), movies (71 websites), music (180 websites), cartoon (137 websites).<sup>25</sup> I accessed and explored these various websites but found that not all these websites consisted of active online communities since some of the websites only provided general information and had no on-going discussions among their fans.

After browsing online and through examining various online communities, I was able to grasp a bigger picture of online communities in Thailand. This observation follows what Gomm *et al.* (2000, p. 106) noted about the ‘systematic selection of cases’. This process helps to make the generalisation of the findings of case studies possible. However, it is difficult to gain information from all of the online communities. I found that each online community has a variety of different topic contents and contexts. There are online communities for nearly every aspect of life, for example there are online communities for health-related subjects, finance-related subjects as well as entertainment-related subjects. At this stage, it was difficult to make a selection of one particular case to study. Gomm *et al.* have noted about impracticality that is often related to the availability of information. Specifically for the Internet research, the difficulties in gaining certain data that can be used to generalise research findings are often recognised (see Orgad, 2005, p.58). To solve this problem, I opted to selection a case study in the following way.

From my literature review process, I became interested in the theoretical ideas concerning the decentralised role of the Internet, online fandom, and online relationships. My aim was to find the case that could be studied in relation to these particular issues from the literature. Therefore, by focusing in particular on the topic of entertainment and looking for a case study that would appeal to many Thai people and looking for a case study that had a lot of mass media exposure, I sought to obtain a case study that would reflect Thai popular culture. Since I particularly interested in the unique role of the Internet in giving a power to online fans to have their voice heard by those who produced the media, the case of the PPU online community

---

<sup>25</sup> Data gain from the access to Sanook website (<http://webindex.sanook.com>), 2-7 March 2003.

triggered my interest because of its relations with other type of mass media at the time of my discovery of the site. Besides this, the relationships among the PPU fans seemed to present an interesting opportunity to investigate the theoretical ideas in the literature concerning online relationships. This point about the interplay of the PPU online community and the mass media in Thailand is to be further discussed in the following section.

However, it needs to be considered that what I have found from the browsing through various online communities in Thailand remains: the PPU online community that I selected to take part as one of the communities in *Sanook* website - a well-known Thai web directory site. This partly confirms its typicality: it provides as equal opportunities for any Thai individuals to gain access into the community as other online fan communities.

After the initial stage, I started to research on several websites and online communities while taking account of the theoretical ideas. Among these online communities, I found websites related to the *Petchprauma* novel on the *Joinwriter* website (<http://www.geocities.com/joinwriter>). This *Joinwriter* website later became the PPU fansite (<http://www.petchprauma.com>).<sup>26</sup> In addition to this, many other fansites related to the *Petchprauma* novel were also found to exist.

Whilst still attempting to select an appropriate fansite with an active community, I came across the *Pantip*<sup>27</sup> website (<http://www.pantip.com>) and found several threads in the *Chalermthai*<sup>28</sup> room talking about the *Petchprauma* movie production. The topic about the movie had become one of the most popular topics in the online forum.<sup>29</sup> One of the key reasons why this issue was popular was because the threads

---

<sup>26</sup> At first the PPU fansite was known as *Joinwriter* (<http://www.geocities.com/joinwriter>), however the domain name was later changed to '*Petchprauma.com*' (<http://www.petchprauma.com>) on 24 April 2003; see the discussions about the history of the PPU online community in section 4.4.1.

<sup>27</sup> *Pantip* is one of Thailand's largest websites, specially designed to cover all topics of discussion, ranging from politics, business, computers, entertainment, health, sports, and so on. Internet users can access the website and follow 'links' to different 'rooms' according to their interests (see also Panyametheekul and Herring, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> *Chalermthai* is one of the online forums in *Pantip*. The discussions are based around the theme of entertainment media includes television, movie, music, cartoon, etc.

<sup>29</sup> Several times, the threads about the *Petchprauma* movie went on the top three lists of recommended topics voted by *Pantip* members thus shows the popularity of the topics; from observation on *Pantip*



had been posted by a famous Thai movie director. This reflects not only what I termed ‘the PPU trends’<sup>30</sup>, but also demonstrating the power of fans in using the Internet to draw media’s interests and accords with what many scholars have discovered in their studies (see Watson, 1997, p.102; Baym, 1998b, p.128; Clerc, 2000, p.225-226; Pullen, 2000, p.54).

These discussions about the *Petchprauma* movie production found on the *Pantip* website, not only discussed the movie, but also the *Petchprauma* novel. However, I did not want to conduct the study on *Pantip* website because this website is one of the largest online communities in Thailand and consists of a great number of discussions on many different general topics rather than focusing on any one particular object of fandom. Nevertheless, from these discussions about the *Petchprauma* novel on the *Pantip* website, I found another link to the PPU fansite (<http://www.petchprauma.com>).

However, it was only when I recognised the PPU fansite on a television programme called *Fan Pan Tae* (The Fan) that I began to consider the PPU online community as my choice of fansite to base my empirical study on. Following the *Fan Pan Tae* programme’s mention of the PPU fansite on its show, as well as my earlier observations of the popularity of discussions involving the *Petchprauma* novel and movie from the other two sources, my interest was triggered and I started to observe the PPU community.<sup>31</sup>

Bruckman (2002, p.3) suggested that the broader ‘social context’ and ‘offline component’ cannot be avoided in the Internet research. From this experience, the appropriate sources to find a fansite to study were not limited only to the Internet but also other mass media sources such as Thai newspapers, magazines and television programmes. This linkage between traditional media and Internet triggers the theoretical proposition to explore this case further.

---

online forum from 9 March 2003 and data gain from the achieves of the threads available on *Pantip* website.

<sup>30</sup> The ‘PPU trends’ will be further discussed in section 4.5.2.

<sup>31</sup> The linkages between the fansite, television programme, and the movie production will be further discussed in chapter 4 and 6.



Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p.37) also stated that it cannot be sure that the selected case study would be appropriate or could offer answers to the preferred research questions, especially to the ethnographer. After I had selected a particular case to investigate, I preceded to the second stage by joining the PPU community. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 37) noted that, ‘when a type of setting has been decided on, it is advisable (if possible) to ‘case’ possible research sites with a view to assessing their suitability, the feasibility of carrying out research there, and how access might best be accomplished should they be selected’. By becoming a PPU community member, the process of conducting research there was relatively straightforward and promising. The following section discusses the process in detail.

### **3.3.4 Becoming a PPU community member**

After selecting the PPU fansite as a case study to be observed, during the first stage of exploring the *Petchprauma* fansite, I wondered what the PPU members would be like and whether I would be able to fit into this group, be able to join in their activities and be accepted as a member of their group.

The first thing I did with the PPU community was to observe the activities that were going on at that time, so that I could get to know my way round this new setting that I had never experienced before. I started by observing interactions within the PPU community in order to understand how people in this group interact with each other and what types and styles of conversations they exchanged on a day-to-day basis. Through my method of ‘lurking’ on the PPU fansite and quietly observing the interactions of the members, I had a similar approach to Orgad (2005, p.54), who stated that the ‘lurking’ process is vital for gaining familiarity with online culture. At this point my role can be defined as a non-participant observer since I only observed the community but did not fully participate in it. At this time, my aim was to observe the normal social patterns of the fansite in order to obtain an insight into how this particular online community worked and also how the members of the PPU group interacted with one another. My other purpose for lurking was to gauge whether the PPU online community could be a case study that would be a good representative example of Thai popular culture.

Although at the time I did not know exactly what the *Petchprauma* novel fans were like, I felt that the process of getting to know the PPU fans and gaining access to their community would not be too difficult. However, I had never read the *Petchprauma* novel before and therefore, my knowledge about the novel was very limited when I first entered the PPU online community. Nevertheless, since reading different types of books and novels is one of my personal interests, this made me feel confident that I would be able to join in discussions with the members of the PPU community. Apart from reading the novel, I also found out more about the *Petchprauma* story from the fansite, which was a good source of information about the *Petchprauma* novel. I hoped that my knowledge of the story of *Petchprauma* would help me be better able to communicate with and be accepted by other members of the PPU community.

However, this process of learning more about the novel also helped me to understand why these fans were so attracted to the novel as well as understand the context of discussions about the novel. Thus, by reading the novel before entering the field, I hoped to fulfil my role as an ethnographic researcher and participate with the study setting and become part of the group.

In this respect, my experience is different from what Baym (1997, p.104) who had been one of the fans of the soap opera before she started to investigate the r.a.t.s online community. She mentioned that she was ‘thrilled’ to discover the community. In my experience, I discovered that not being a reader or a fan of the *Petchprauma* novel initially helped me to differentiate myself from the PPU members whenever I wanted. Having this ability to disassociate oneself from the study setting is important in order to check and balance as well as minimise the bias to the data collected (Brewer, 2000, p.60).

The ‘lurking’ process helped me to learn about the social norms of the PPU community and become familiar with the practices of fans before I entered the community as a full member. This was important information to learn in order to understand what I would need to do in order to introduce myself into the PPU community and gain the acceptance of the group. Therefore, once I introduced

myself to the PPU community as a member, I conformed to their social norms of identity disclosure.

After that, I started actively participating in the activities of the fans. Thus, my role became a participant observer. In the first message that I posted, I followed the norm of the PPU group by posting a lot of information about myself in the self-introductory thread title, 'New members, let's report yourself' created by a member of the community.<sup>32</sup> In performing this practice, I followed what Joinson (2005, p.22-23) called 'prosocial behaviour' on the Internet, that is, I used the PPU community's 'self-disclosure' practice as a means to help to build 'intimate relationships' with informants in the field. All information that I gave was real, however I was reluctant to post my picture at first but eventually I was encouraged by the thread owner to post a picture of myself into the online forum. I did not at that point tell the group that I intended to do my research project on their online community. I was excited to get a quick response – the welcome message - from the thread owner. It was the first time that I felt accepted by the group even it was only a small discussion between the thread owner and me. After that initial involvement, I started to participate in some other threads.

In my role of a participant observer, I acted as an 'online listener', making appropriate comments in the right places, but basically letting others lead the discussions. Only on the online chatting was I actively trying to develop relationships with the members for the purpose of investigating how feasible it would be for a 'new' member or outsider to join in and be accepted into the social group. Initially I limited my posts to a minimum because at the time I was aware that my identity as a researcher was not known to the community and that I had to find my opportunity to do so. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p.226), the ethnographer's identity is important in the field as it poses a question of ethical practice between ethnographer and informants. It is important that the ethnographer lets people know what they are doing in the setting and evaluate how much the participants should know about the research. The visibility of researcher in ethnographic research is clearly more than many other types of research.

---

<sup>32</sup> The self-disclosure norm of the PPU community will be further discussed in section 6.6.2.

It is observed that the researcher takes a fieldwork identity and, simultaneously, may also be 'given' another identity by research participants.

From the discussion forum that I had joined, I discovered that the members had formed a chatting group via the Microsoft MSN programme. By adding one person's email address, I had a chance to chat with other members - a whole group of people - who were online at the same time. From then, I began to know more people and I began participating in online chatting almost every day during my fieldwork. Soon after that, the chatting group grew bigger and I had a list of 32 people from the site in my MSN contact list. Online chatting was a major tool of interactions between myself and other members of the group who were active in the chatrooms. The speed at which trust and relationships developed was faster than I expected. From this first-hand experience, the online chatting was a significant tool of communication among the active members, which also allowed me to make personal contact with other members in a quick pace. In the chat room, I discussed the possibilities of conducting a research study. The people from the chat room suggested that I email some key members of the community and go to a fan convention to meet the 'PPU team', who had founded the PPU fansite.<sup>33</sup>

I therefore took the chance to join in a fan convention among the PPU members so that I could meet with a larger number of people face-to face. At the convention, I got to meet the 'PPU team' and so I discussed with them about my research and my data collection plan. I also took the opportunity in the meeting to inform every member about my research and asked for their personal contact details so that I could interview them later. This process was another important way that I developed relationships and trust with my case study subjects (see Brewer, 2000, p. 59).

To inform the group about my research, I posted a message on the online forum describing my plan of conducting a research study within the community and the type of data I would collect. I got a total of 38 replies from the PPU members regarding that post and all of them agreed to support my project.<sup>34</sup> At this point,

---

<sup>33</sup> Fan conventions are formal meetings for the community members (see section 5.3.2).

<sup>34</sup> From PPU online forum (a), 26 June 2003; In this thesis, messages collected from the PPU online forum are written in italics style.

my identity as a researcher was revealed to the whole community. Since I had been actively participating in online chatting and meeting PPU members face-to-face, I had discussed my project with a lot of people and many people in the community already knew about my intention to interview them. Therefore after I posted my message, I was able to gain a lot of support from the other members. One of the members responded to my message on the online forum:

*I'm raising my hand up to give all my support to you, Pan. If there's anything I can help you with, please tell me. I'm very happy and glad to help you. By the way, do come to chatrooms more often if you can, I miss you a lot.*<sup>35</sup>

The above message shows the type of reaction I got from my post. It also illustrates how I developed relationships with others as well as a result of becoming part of the community. Nevertheless, in developing the relationships with other members, I was also aware of the 'risks of going native' (see Fontana and Frey, 1996, p.367). This point will be critically discussed in section 3.5.2.

After participating in the online chatting areas, I was invited to join in almost all their face-to-face small-group meetings. Therefore, I took these opportunities to interview the people as well as observe their offline activities. As a result, my intention to participate as a member of the PPU community as well as a researcher was fulfilled and so was my role as an ethnographer. To me, my experience as an ethnographer helped me to gain inside information about the community as well as allowing me to be able to observe the behaviour and interactions of members of the PPU group from inside the community.

At this point, the difference in my role as a non-participant observer and a participant observer is noted. In this later period, my role was to fully engage in the activities of fans and I was given an identity as one of the PPU fans. The two stages of the experience as a researcher both being a non-participant observer and a participant observer allowed me to view the practices of the fans within the online community on two levels: as an outsider and insider. When I was observing the online posts as an outsider, despite reading the novel, there were many contexts about the PPU

---

<sup>35</sup> From PPU online forum (a), Message Posted by *Pa Tae Chae Im*, 26 June 2003.

online community that I could not understand. In particular, I did not get the sense of the reasons for joining into the community of the fans, nor the reason why they could advance such relationships created online to the offline scenes. These questions encouraged me to find out about the practices of the fans further.

However, after interacting and interviewing the fans, I was able to gain the insights on the opinions of these people and how the practices within the online community were integrated into their everyday life experience. The questions that occurred at the time that I was ‘lurking’ proved to be a useful tool for me to help me direct and focus my research however I was unable to find out the answers to these questions without participating with the PPU community and thus gaining more insight into the data collected. Therefore, became more able to interpret the data after I adopted my role as a participant observer. I was able to study the practices of fans from the standpoint of practical real situations. This process represents the aim of the ethnographic research as previously discussed in section 3.3.2.

However, I also guarded against the possibility of being biased to the data through my change of roles from ‘lurker’ to being a full member of the community and back to being a ‘lurker’ at the later period before leaving the field. This process helped to ensure that my presence identity as a researcher in the community did not effect the data. I wanted to make sure that my interpretations to the data remain validity for the two stages of being participant and non-participant observer. For example, I checked and collected the statistic of online posts and observe the trend of such posts for the period of one year (from 21 July 2003 – 30 June 2004) to make sure that my interpretation was not biased at any one particular period of time. From my observation, the fans’ behaviour did not change after I did not have an active presence in the online community.

The following table illustrates my activities and the development of my relationships with the members within the community. These activities reflect my attempt as an ethnographer to develop familiarity with the research participants and to observe day-to-day practices and the meaning behind those practices (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.204).

Date	Activities
21 March 2003	<p>Watched the <i>Fan Pan Tae</i> programme focusing on the the <i>Petchprauma</i> novel and including a short feature presentation about the ‘<i>Petchprauma.com</i>’ fansite</p> <p>Entered the PPU website for the first time</p>
21 March – 1 June 2003	<p>‘Lurked’ on the PPU website for research purposes</p> <p>Read the PPU novel</p> <p>Started to collect messages from the online bulletin board</p> <p>Observed other websites related to the <i>Petchprauma</i> novel in order to evaluate the ‘<i>Petchprauma</i> trend’</p>
2 June 2003	Posted my first self-introduction message on the PPU fansite
8 June 2003	Chatted on MSN with several members of the PPU online community
12 June 2003	E-mailed the Webmaster and ‘PPU team’ about my intention to conduct a research study based on the PPU online community
15 June 2003	Joined an official offline meeting of the PPU community
16 June 2003	Chatted on MSN with the Webmaster and obtained the formal authorisation to conduct my research study
26 June 2003	Posted a message to the PPU community telling members about my research project and asking for their opinions and permission
14 July – 26 September 2003	Joined more offline activities and started conducting in-depth interviews with the PPU fans
1 October 2003 – July 2004	Left Thailand. Continued observing the PPU online forum but reduced my role from being an active participant to a ‘lurker’
31 July 2004	Left the field. Stopped collecting data from the PPU online community

**Table 1: Activities of the researcher within the PPU community**

*Source: Author*

I spent one year and four months conducting ethnographic research. The duration of my research was separated into two parts. In the first part, the first seven months period (from March 2003 - September 2003) in Thailand was used mainly to create relationships with the informants and observe both on and offline activities.

After a period of lurking in order to observe the PPU community and learn about their social practices and pick up other useful insights into the fansite, I became a full member of the PPU group and introduced myself to the community. At this early period, I participated fully in the activities of the PPU fans. I also collected secondary data such as the online posts and the statistical information from the online forum. I participated in offline activities such as fan conventions and small meetings. Apart from this, I conducted the face-to-face interviews with 29 research participants.

In the second part, I spent another nine month period (from October 2003 – July 2004) after leaving Thailand, to continuously observe online discussions within the PPU community. However, I limited my role from being an active participant to become a ‘lurker’. Thus my role is defined as a non-participant observer. The details of the methods that I used to collect data will be discussed in the following section.

### **3.4 Collecting empirical evidence**

#### **3.4.1 Data collection strategy**

It has been noted that conducting the case study needs ‘all-encompassing method’. This is because the case study deals with many variables of interests, relies on multiple sources of evidence, and benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions. This makes a case study a comprehensive research strategy which helps to understand the real-life situation, which in turn requires appropriate tools and strategies (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Several methods of data collection are relevant to access social meanings, observe behaviour and work closely with the informants. A mixture of research methods or what is termed a ‘kitchen sink’ approach to data



(Miller, 1997, p.24 in Brewer, 2000, p. 76) or ‘mixed-method’ research (Mann and Stewart, 2000, p.96) can be employed for data collecting (Brewer, 2000, p.11).

In this project, four main tools were used: non-participant observation, participant observations, textual analysis, and in-depth interviews. Data gathered from multiple sources like interviews, observations and online texts helped to triangulate and check the validity of data and information collected. The process of observing different interactions of the fan community both online and offline also helped. This accords with many studies regarding the Internet where a combination of online and offline data is considered important (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 231; Orgad, 2005, p.53).

Apart from this, I also observed the broader contexts of both online and offline interactions that were related to the *Petchprauma* novel and its fandom at the time. This ‘ethnographic gaze’ – mapping a phenomenon into wider social meanings – is important because it is critical that the researcher does not take individual instances in isolation (Machin, 2002, p.10-11). For example, I observed the Internet forum on *Pantip* and other websites related to the *Petchprauma* novel or newspaper so that I could speculate about the general trend about the *Petchprauma* fandom in Thailand, which is considered as a ‘broader context’ of the fan community (see Machin, 2002, p.2). I also interpret the meaning behind the interactions of the community members with wider social contexts that demonstrates the effects of Thai cultural values in general social interaction.

In my thesis, the triangulation method is used to check and rebalance the data to ensure the validity and reliability of analysis in bringing out the research answer. According to Hansen *et al.*, (1998, p.45), the triangulation of data can be carried out across time, space, personnel, settings, organisations, methods and researchers. Mainly, the process of data triangulation is continuously done until the researcher is certain that the interpretation of the situation is accurate.

### **3.4.2 Methods of data collection**

#### ***A) Non-participant observation***

My role as a non-participant observer occurred in two stages. The first stage began at the point when I initially ‘lurked’ on the PPU online forum during the process of selecting the case to be studied. During this period, I began ‘lurking’ for the purposes of ‘casing’ possible research sites (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.37; see also section 3.3.3). Then, after I decided to use the PPU community as my case study, I continued to observe the members of the PPU fansite in order to gain familiarity with the community and its social practices and the interaction of their members (see Orgad, 2005, p.54; see also section 3.3.4).

The second stage occurred after I introduced myself to the PPU community and began to fully participate in the field. My activities during this period consisted of acting as an ‘online listener’, making appropriate comments in the right places, but basically letting others lead the discussions. Only on the online chatting was I actively trying to develop relationships with the members for the purpose of investigating how feasible it would be for a ‘new’ member or outsider to join in and be accepted into the social group. In addition to this, I conducted the interviews with some PPU fans in Thailand.

After this period of time, I disengaged myself from the community and in particular the offline activities, because I had to leave Thailand in order to return to the UK. I therefore gradually reduced my role from being an active member of the community participating in the online discussions. However, I continued to observe the online posts as a ‘lurker’ and collect the statistical information from the online forum to ensure the validity of the data.

As previously discussed above that the ‘lurking’ process was vital for enabling me to access the PPU online community. This non-participant observation process helped me to first, gain familiarity with the online community so that I was able to act according to the norms of the community and as a result enabled me to quickly develop my relationships with other fans; second, it helped me to have a critical

distance on the community practices and this led to many questions being raised during the observation process; third, the lurking process helped me to ensure that my data was not biased as I was able to observing the PPU community in different contexts and in different stands of observation at different times.

The following explains my involvement with the PPU online community after I disclosed my role as a researcher to the community.

### ***B) Participant observation***

Participant observation is one of the key methods of data collection used in this study. By participant observation, in this ethnographic approach, I mean the involvement of the researcher as one of the participants or members of the community that is being studied. The key to ethnography is that researchers have to immerse themselves in a culture and in order to create ‘a comprehensive cultural map of the world’ like those people who are being observed (Machin, 2002, p.7). Relationships with research participants are important to ethnographic research. Hine (2005, p.20) states that the researcher requires ‘new sociability skills’ in order to successfully gain important data. Orgad (2005, p.58) also presents a similar view that ‘contractual relationships’ between informants and the researcher have to be built gradually as both parties allow trust to be established over time.

Since ethnographic fieldwork relies very much on levels of access to research participants as well as the relationships between the researcher and the informants, I tried to ensure that I maintained a close relationship with the members of the community. My experience as a PPU community member allowed me to observe the members’ communications. In the PPU online community, I observed the activities of the PPU fans both on the Internet and in real life situations. I participated as a member of the fan group in as many activities as possible. For example, I started reading the novel and I also joined the community and started communicating with the members of the PPU community through the online discussion board and the online chat rooms as well as joining in some face-to-face activities. In doing this, I became recognised by the research participants as one of the members of their

group. During this time that I was interacting with the PPU fans, I was observing and learning more about the different characteristics of the fans and their interactions with one another both in online and offline scenarios.

My active participation within the PPU online community enabled me to be seen as a full member of the community and therefore enabled me to gain access to many community members. This access and acceptance into the community allowed me the opportunity to build up trust and relationships with other members (Brewer, 2000, p. 84). As a result of using this method of participant observation, I benefited from being able to collect important and useful data from such connections.

According to Machin (2002, p.3), the ethnographic gaze is to relate to and makes sense of both the person's behaviour and their cultural environment. The job of the ethnographers is to observe what people do in the world and the way they communicate about the world. Researchers also need to think about the culture in which these people find themselves. A way to observe people is to look at how they behave in different settings. When the informants reveal their opinions on the subjects of investigation, the researcher needs to understand the context of broader discussion that is related to the culture that surrounded these people.

A key issue in using the participant observation method of data collection is the careful balance of the dual role of part-insider and part-outsider (Brewer, 2000, p. 59-60). Gold (1958 in Brewer, p. 84) noted four levels of participation in the field. I participated as an observer at the second level: participant-as-observer where I was researching the field while participating fully in it. Regarding the issues of covert and overt research, I remained open about my intention and role as researcher. For example I conducted interviews with other members openly during the small group meetings of the members. I also revealed my identity as a researcher as well as my topic of research on the online forum. However, it is impossible to evaluate the degree to which every community member was open to or aware of this information about my role as ethnographic researcher of the community since I only gained feedback from those PPU fans who communicated with me via the online forum or online chatting and those who met me face-to-face.

***Participant observation in face-to-face meetings of PPU fans***

The following table shows the details of the offline meetings I attended during my participant observation period.

Date	Type of activities	Place	Number of participants
15 June 2003	Fan convention	Book Café restaurant, Bangkok	45
14 July 2003	Small group meeting	Dreamworld, Bangkok	15
20 July 2003	Small group meeting	McDonald, Bangkok	12
27 July 2003	Small group meeting	McDonald, Bangkok	9
9 August 2003	Small group meeting	Major Cineplex, Bangkok	7
21 August 2003	Small group meeting	Prommitra film production company	3
24 August 2003	Small group meeting	Baan Laos restaurant, Bangkok	13
30 August 2003	Small group meeting	Baan Suan Din Pao, Chiangmai	8
7 September 2003	Small group meeting	Black Canyon restaurant, Bangkok	8

**Table 2: Activities of the researcher in face-to-face meetings of PPU fans**

*Source: Author*

As discussed earlier, during the participant observation period, I took part in some offline activities of the PPU fans. Through these offline activities, I was able to make connections with some of the key members of the PPU community and such connections led to me obtain inside data. I also took the opportunity to conduct face-to-face interviews with some of the fans. My participation with the fans offline allowed me to learn that their activities are not only limited within the online environment. The fans also engage in social activities with one another in their daily lives as for example, they casually have meetings together. By observing this context between the online and offline environment of the fans, I was able to gain insight into their social interactions. I will provide more details about the evidence of the

fans' practices in face-to-face meetings in section 5.3 (Expansion to face-to-face activities).

From the nature of the Internet, that is, it contains both public and private communication, I was unable to observe or know about all the personal conversations amongst all the fans. Many of the social connections among the PPU fans developed from the members' participation in the PPU fansite. However examining the depths of such relationships or how such relationships lead to long-term outcomes in 'real' lives of the fans is beyond the scope of the thesis.

### *C) Textual analysis*

From the discussions of the online community members in the online forum, I collected messages to analyse their discussions. In face-to-face offline interactions, discussions between individuals tend to be lost or not recorded and the use of language and the study of behaviour is not emphasised very much in offline communities. However, in online communities, messages allow a recorded trail of social interactions which can be easily examined. In addition to these tools, I used fieldnotes during my observations and collected statistical information from the online forum to keep a record of the number of messages posted on the online forum.

However, Mann and Stewart (2000, p. 196-197) argue that without the points of reference to these types of online textual information, it can be difficult to make sense out of these particular forms of dialogue. Thus, the interpretation of textual language, especially without references to other information of a social context of the particular individuals involved can be problematic. This is the disadvantage of using data from text. In the particular case of this research investigation, I used textual analysis to complement the data collected from face-to-face interviews and both online and offline participant observations. In this empirical case study, the collection of online messages helped me to identify the main themes that were popular among the group and confirm my findings with the data obtained from conducting face-to-face interviews with the fans and via participant observation. For example, I found a higher number of social messages than the knowledge related

posts. The following empirical chapters will later provide an evidence for this. This resulted in a shift in the direction of my research, so that I started to focus on the topic of social relationships and the social networks of the community members.

### *The analysis of the online posts*

Before explaining how the posts from the PPU online forum were analysed, I will describe how the structure of the online forum was set up. Originally when the online community was set up, the structure of the online forum did not give any suggestions or guidance about the types of messages that should or could be posted there. The threads were posted by posting queues, in other words, on a first come first serve basis. The newest threads were at the top while the oldest threads were at the bottom of the online forum.<sup>36</sup>

Eventually, the Webmaster of PPU online forum made changes to the online forum structure and organised the various messages from the PPU fans by different themes and also introduced a new system of member registration.<sup>37</sup> On this new forum, once the fans clicked to access the forum page, they found that they could then choose to click on one of six different boards to see lists of discussion threads. These new boards were organised under the following sub-heading titles:

1. About *Petchprauma* novel
2. Free talk
3. Member zone
4. Literature zone
5. Uses and recommendation (for system maintenance)
6. About *Petchprauma* movie<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> The old forum was used from 23 April 2003 – 14 August 2003.

<sup>37</sup> The new forum was opened on 22 July 2003.

<sup>38</sup> The 'About *Petchprauma* movie' board was later created on the 29 October 2003 to discuss directly about the *Petchprauma* movie production, From PPU online forum (c), accessed on 25 February 2004.



The following picture illustrates the PPU online forum.



### Picture 2: PPU online forum

*Source: <http://petchpraua.com/webboard/index.php?board=3;action=display;threadid=1608>, accessed 7 February 2004*

In this thesis, I conducted a discourse analysis using the online messages collected from the PPU online forum. Approximately 16 months worth of text was analysed. From the observation of the structure on the PPU online forum and the type of messages discussed in there, two themes emerged. Thus, the thematic basis of the discourse analysis of these online posts was primarily divided into two main classes. These types were described as either knowledge-based posts or social-based posts. Knowledge-based posts were defined as the online posts from members of the PPU community which discussed aspects from the *Petchprauma* novel, movie or characters. Social-based posts were defined as the online posts from members of the PPU community which discussed issues which were not directly related to the *Petchprauma* novel, movie or characters. Examples of social-based posts were items in which members of the PPU community talked mostly about themselves or their lives. These themes arrived from the nature of the PPU online forum in being the



community for discussing about the topics related to the novel but also other social issues. In chapter five, the evidence of these two types of post will be given and discussed in more detail.

It should be noted here that because the type of messages posted on each board are partly control by the creators of the website, the norm that the fans followed is that they posted messages according to the sub-heading of each board. In case that the messages were posted in the 'wrong' category, these messages would be moved to the appropriate board by the website creator. Such power of the website creator and team in controlling the venue online messages will be discussed further in chapter six. Therefore, according to the specific type of messages posted on each board, my collections of messages thus follows this norm. That is I chose to collect the messages from the specific board that are relevant to my analysis. The knowledge posts are selected from the 'About *Petchprauma* novel' board and also the 'About *Petchprauma* movie' board since the issues related to the novel are discussed here. The social posts are selected from the 'Free talk' and the 'Member zone' boards because these two boards are highly popular among the fans. These boards are where most of the social relationships among the group are initiated. The discussions in other boards that are the 'Literature zone' and the 'Uses and recommendation' are categorised as 'Other issues' because messages posted on these boards fulfil neither knowledge nor social purposes.

Regarding the analysis of the 'knowledge posts', by which I mean the online discussion messages that are relevant to the *Petchprauma* novel (see section 5.2.2), my analysis is conducted differently from what Baym (2000, p.21-24) did in her studies of the r.a.t.s. online fan community. The aim of Baym's study is to examine the purposes of fans in their online discussion, thus in her studies, she divided the analysis of online posts into four themes – informing, speculating, criticizing and reworking (see Baym, 1998b, p. 115-126). However, my research aim is to find out how the participation of the fans in an online community could result in the expansion of the fans' social networks. In this regard, I do not only examine the online posts of the fans but also the offline activities of the fans. I also conduct in-depth interviews with the fans. I analyse the online posts based on two themes: the novel-related posts and social issues related posts. These distinctions of themes

between the online posts enable me to illustrate how the fans expand their participation in the online discussion topics and develop close relationships with one another as a result. However, I did not go into the specific details of what purpose the fans have in discussing their ‘knowledge posts’ (see my other points of discussions on the difference between my studies and Baym’s in chapter two).

Since the information on the Internet can be stored as an ‘archive’ for a long period of time (Hine, 2000, p.22), I was able to collect the messages posted by the PPU fans since 23 April 2003 to the end of my research period on 30 July 2004. At the beginning, I collected 762 threads<sup>39</sup> from the PPU old board. After the new board was introduced, I collected the online posts only from selected sub-heading boards. The collections of online discussion messages in this new board were divided into two themes: knowledge and social discussions. I collected 32,112 threads for the knowledge themes and 63,803 threads for the social themes. In total, I collected 96,677 threads from the old and new boards. I collected the messages every week and saved them on my computer. Since the messages from the forum already contain both date and time on their pages, I saved the messages by setting them in number order. However, the collection of messages posted some problems since I found that the messages can be removed from the online forum at anytime.<sup>40</sup> However, the combination of data from different sources helped to give deep explanations of the online behaviour of the PPU fans within their online and offline interactions and their views of the phenomenon (Kendall, 1999 quoted in Mann and Stewart, 2000, p.96). Apart from this, I also collected the statistical information of the online forum from the statistical page provided from the PPU website. This data provided an overview of the trend of the discussion messages over a period of time.

### *The analysis of Thai language in online communications*

In chapter two, I discussed the lack of social context cues in Internet communications, and the importance of knowing social identity in order to make sense of who one is interacting with (see section 2.6.2). Western studies have shown

---

<sup>39</sup> A thread indicates each topic discussion; the numbers of reply thus varies.

<sup>40</sup> See further discussion on the control of online forum venue in section 6.3.3.

that the creation of identities in online communications can be created by the use of language (see Turkle, 1995, p.180; Rheingold, 1993, p.148). Additionally, Baym (2000, p.22-23) has noted the importance of ‘discourse analysis’ in explaining the situation online; this language differentiation and use according to Thai culture is worth observing in the case study.

In Thailand, the official national language, which is spoken by the majority of the Thai people, is Thai (Office of the Prime Minister, 2000, p.3). On the Internet, the Thai language was found to make a difference to gender cues. Panyametheekul and Herring (2003) have observed a Thai chat room and found that the Thai language has a particular influence on the recognition of the gender of participants. Three unique characteristics of the Thai language are discussed: the use of ‘sentence-final particles’, first person pronouns, and nicknames. Thai chat has sentence-final particles which denote gender. The distinctive final particles for men and women are *kháp* and *khà* respectively. Another gender classifier in Thai language is gender-specific first-person pronouns, such as *phom* for males and *dichan* or *chan* for females. Apart from these, Thai nicknames, such as *Jay* for male and *Namfon* for female, can also indicate gender.

In Thai society in general, one of the clear signs of the respect of juniors for those having superior status is that when speaking with older people, they use the words *khà* and *kháp* at the end of each sentence. This ‘polite speech’ of the speakers for the other party; and these good manners demonstrate the respect ‘social harmony’. Also, calling others ‘*pee*’ (elder sister or brother) or ‘*nong*’ (younger sister or brother), and ‘*Lung*’ (Uncle) or ‘*Pa*’ (Aunt), reflects the fundamental culture of Thais: first, the level of familiarity; second, the respect paid to elders; and above all the definition of clear lines of hierarchical status.

The above discussion on the Thai language use in online communications is useful to provide a context in which analyse the online discussions of the fans. In particular, it is useful to find out whether or not these important linguistic features of the Thai cultural values are represented in the online discussions of the fans. In particular, the recognition of such linguistic features enables us to notice ways in which the use of the Internet can be adapted by local people to reflect their cultural behaviour.

#### *D) Face-to-face interviews*

Apart from conducting an ethnographic study based on the non-participant and participant observations of both on and offline activities of the PPU fans, I conducted in-depth interviews with the PPU fans. This method of data collection helped enrich the data gain from the ethnographic approach.

I conducted interviews with 33 people from the PPU online community. These interviews were carried out from 14 July to 7 September 2003 in Thailand. Originally I only aimed to use face-to-face interviews in this research investigation and the PPU fans who were invited to be the interviewees were selected at random. In other words, I took every opportunity to interview the members who participated in the face-to-face meetings or activities according to their individual availability. The interviews were conducted during small group meetings organised by the members. Therefore, only the members who participated in offline meetings were interviewed.

The interviews that I conducted were a mixture of 29 face-to-face and individual interviews, three telephone interviews and one e-mail correspondence. Due to the difficulties in arranging to meet with the latter four interviewees, the informants requested to answer the questions via telephone and email correspondence, although I had originally met them face-to-face. I found that the interviews that were conducted via e-mail correspondence were inefficient since the interviewees were quite reluctant to answer my questions and the answers given were very brief. From my experience, I found that face-to-face interviews have the advantage of allowing interviewees with the opportunity of providing more detailed answers (see Orgad, 2005, p.58, 61; Turkle, 1995). In the majority of cases, informants were willing to answer face-to-face interview questions and reveal their personal information to me.

The interviews were conducted on one-on-one basis. I did not conduct group interviews because I had already captured many of the group discussions on the online posts and for that reason I chose to capture the opinions and experiences of the individual regarding the PPU fansite and participating in the online community. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio-recorder. I then transcribed

the interview content as soon as possible in the days following the interview. This process helped me to ensure that I could remember the context of the interviews conducted and be able to revise how effective my questions are. I then conducted a discourse analysis using the resulting interview scripts.

In general, my interviews were aimed to value the participants' views. This view fits with what Heyl (2001, p.375) has termed the 'relationships of informants and reporters' and is a way to strengthen the relationships between researcher and study participants. The advantage of developing this type of relationship is that I benefited from a great detail of information and the members of the PPU community who I interviewed felt at ease with revealing their feelings and 'naming' the term specifically use in the field (Heyl, 2001, p.275).

On the point of specific jargon used by the members, I found no difficulties in understanding those terms. There are two reasons for this: first, my online interactions and observations helped me to familiarise myself with specific terms. This accords with what Orgad (2005, p. 60) found that online interactions also helped her to get used to the specific terms and later facilitated face-to-face interviews; second, the terms used by the fans of the PPU community are not so group-specific that I could not understand. This is in contrast to what has been found out by Orgad (2005, p 60), who observed a group discussion on breast cancer related issues where more specific terms are expected.

Additionally, Turkle (1995) noted that the face-to-face interviews with research participants who originally met online reflect more on the person's lives. My first-hand experience also confirmed the above point, as my participation online very much facilitated the interviews I made offline. I found no gap between informants' level of articulacy and informants' openness and collaboration in online or offline contexts (see Orgad, 2005, p. 59-60). There are two points to explain this: first, the PPU community members are generally quite open and second, my participation as a member of the community was successful and my identity was clear to the research participants. Thus, their reactions towards me both online and offline provide no gap.

Different types of interviewing techniques are suited to different situations (Fontana and Frey, 1996, p.373). The type of interviewing technique I used to ask questions to individual PPU members was the in-depth interview or what is termed the ‘unstructured’ interview (Brewer, 2000, p.67). In this type of interview, the interviewees were asked open-ended questions in an informal manner so that the respondents can answer and talk freely about various relevant issues for as long as they wanted. Each interview generally lasted between 40 minutes to one and a half hours. These types of interviews can be seen as ‘conversations with a purpose’ since they are ‘an important means to access life on the ‘inside’ and to represent it accurately’ (Brewer, 2000, p. 67).

In order to maintain an interview structure, I used a set of routine questions to help me to keep focused while I allowed the interviewees to speak and tell their stories (Seidman, 1991 quoted in Mann and Stewart, 2000, p.75). The set of questions that I used during the interview were determined according to some issues that arose from the literature reviewed in chapter two as well as my own research questions. However in the actual process of interviewing following from the responses of the interviewees, other questions of interest emerged. In particular, as previously mentioned when discussing the development of the research question, I found that my involvement in the field as an ethnographer helped to develop the research in a more focused way. My research questions shifted from observing general basic issues of the Internet towards the social interactions and social relationships of the members of the PPU online community (see section 3.2).

### ***The Interview questions***

The following list illustrates the questions I used during my interviewing process. During this process, I intended to ask for example, the reasons why the fans participate in the PPU online community as well as to learn more about their social practices within the community, the relationships that PPU fans create from the community and the outcomes of such participation.

Initially I began with the general questions before asking more detailed questions. I finished the interviews with the more general questions and thank the interviewees for their participation. This process was used is to make sure that the interviewees feel at ease to talk with me.

***Lists of Interview questions:***

- **Reasons of participating in the PPU online community**
  - How did you first encounter/ participate in the PPU?
  - How many time you access/read/post on the PPU Webboard?
  - What attract you to stay in the community?
  - In your opinion, what is the main purpose of the community?
  - Could you explain how to become a member in this online community?
- **The fans' experiences with the Internet**
  - How long have you been using the Internet?
  - How do you normally use the Internet for?
  - Have you had any experience in other online community/ or other (off-line) fandom? / What are they?
  - How different/ similar of those communities to the PPU community?
- **Relationships of the PPU fans**
  - What do you think of other people in the group?
  - What kind of relationships that you have with them?
  - Do you feel a part of the group? / Do you see yourself as a member of the group? / Do you feel that you 'fit into' the group? / Why?
  - Do you have to adapt/adjust yourself to be able to fit in the group?
  - Do you take the relationships created online into your real life?
  - Which ways of communicating with other people in the group, other than the Internet? (Telephone, Email, Chat, Face-to-face)
  - How do you feel meeting with people you have known from the Internet?
  - Why did you decided meeting them in real life activities?
  - Do those offline activities improve the relationships between you and the others?
  - How different between online friends and real life friends for you?
  - How do you trust in your online friends?
  - How do you feel of having more and more members into the group?
  - Could you describe the characteristics of people within the group? Do you think that the group characteristics changed after a long period of time?
- **Practices of the fans within the PPU community**
  - When you decide to post something on the Webboard, what factors you think of/ be careful about?
  - Do other people's opinion effects your posting?
  - What would you normally do if you find messages that you do not agree on? / How do you manage disagreement within the group?
  - Have you ever experiences problems communicating online? / How do you solve those problems?
  - Which kinds of online posts you particularly like to read and/ or reply?
  - What types of messages/ styles you normally post to the Webboard?
  - Do you think you have your own unique or distinctive styles of posting?

***Lists of Interview questions (continue):***

- Since the Internet promotes the creation of new identity, have you ever considered of keeping the privacy of your identity? How much do you open yourself to the group?
  - What you do think of your personality, identity, and/or participations within the group? / Do that online identity reflect your real self? (If not, why?)
  - Can you describe other people's personality through the reading of their postings?
  - Who are the core/key persons in this community? How important are they to the community? / What are their roles/identities within the community?
  - What types of messages are there in this community? / Do you think that the types of messages changed after a long period of time?
  - What are the norms/ rules within the group/ or what should it be?
- **Outcomes of the fans in participating in the online community**
    - What do you get out of participating in this community?
    - What do you think about the discussions of the PPU movie joined by the *Petchprauma* director?
    - What do you think about the voice of people from this community in relation to the vote of castings in the movie?
    - How long you think you will participate in this group?
  - **The role of the Internet as a communication medium**
    - What is your opinion towards the Internet as a communication medium?
    - How the Internet helps the activities of fans?
    - How important is the Internet to your life at the moment?

The following shows the details of the interviews and the demographic profile interviewees.

**Demographic Profile of the Interviewees**

Gender		Age		Occupation	
Male	9	20-25 years old	16	University students	15
Female	24	26-30 years old	6	Public sector	13
		31-35 years old	5	Civil servant	5
		36-40 years old	2		
		40-45 years old	4		
Total	33	Total	33	Total	33

**Table 3: demographic profile of the interviewees**

*Source: interviews with the PPU members, 14 July - 9 September 2003*

This interviewees represent a mixed-gender and a mixed-age group of the PPU online community (see figure 3 showing the gender of the PPU fans for a comparison). Although I was able to interview more female interviewees than male



interviewees, in general I did not find any difference between the answers of male or female interviewees. For example, most of the interviewees expressed their active participation with the community and in particular they were keen on participating in offline fan activities and meetings with the other fans in ‘real’ life.

The distinguishing characteristic of these of 33 interviewees is that they are active participants of the PPU group who participate in the offline activities of the PPU online community. Since I chose to conduct face-to-face interviews with members of the PPU online community, I needed to arrange to meet these members in some way. However the organisation of such face-to-face meetings, by their nature tended to mean that the members of the PPU online community that I was meeting were active members rather than ‘lurkers’ of the PPU fansite for example. However, I am aware of the criticisms regarding the choice of the interviewees. This point will be further discussed in section 3.5.2. The following table gives the details of the interview including the interview date, and place of the interviews.

Date of the Interviews	Places of the Interviews	Numbers of interviewees
14 July 2003	Dreamworld Bangkok	4 face-to-face interviews
20 July 2003	McDonald, Siam Square, Bangkok	6 face-to-face interviews
27 July 2003	McDonald, Siam Square, Bangkok	3 face-to-face interviews
6 August 2003	-	1 email correspondence
17 August 2003	-	2 telephone interview
21 August 2003	Prommitra film production company	1 face-to-face interview
24 August 2003	Baan Laos restaurant, Bangkok	4 face-to-face interviews
25 August 2003	-	1 telephone interview
30 August 2003	Baan Suan Din Pao restaurant, Chiangmai	5 face-to-face interviews
7 September 2003	Black Canyon restaurant, Bangkok	6 face-to-face interviews

**Table 4: Date and place of the interviews**

*Source: interviews with the PPU members, 14 July - 9 September 2003*

The above figure shows date, place and numbers of the interviewees. The setting of the interviews took place in restaurants around Bangkok. I consider this type of setting based on the practicality of being able to access the interviewees. In general, it was more practical to meet interviewees in public places such as restaurants so that the meetings could take place informally.

Many of these interviews took place as a result of me having been invited to attend small group meetings of fans. These small group meetings provided me with a good opportunity to be introduced to other PPU members. In addition to this, since my interviews took place during the small group meetings organised by the active members of the community, these types of events allowed me access to research participants during their normal activities with the community.

In my experience, I found that my relationships with the PPU community members followed the group's norm of developing quickly. One explanation for this rapid development of relationships was my active participation in the community. I believe that it was my regular and frequent interaction with other PPU members that influenced how my social networks and my relationships with other fans grew significantly compared to when I first joined the community. I regularly interacted with the PPU members in a range of both online and offline activities. The initial contacts I made in online chatting helped me to initiate relationships with some participants, and that led me to several face-to-face meetings. In the face-to-face meeting, I found that my relationships with the participants were developed quickly and that I was able to gain access to the people's real lives. In particular, I found that my interactions both on and offline were crucial for an understanding of the context of Internet use in the context of the everyday lives of the participants.

In 'moving relationships from online to offline', Orgad (2005, p.53) has noted that the use of the Internet is deeply embedded in the everyday experiences of the research informants. Therefore, Orgad (2005, p.54) has argued that the knowledge about the offline context provides better opportunities to understand the online behaviour of the research study participants. In the same way, I discovered that from the experience of the PPU community members, their use of Internet was deeply engaged and associated with their everyday life and routine. Observations of only

the online interaction of the PPU fans would not be able to provide a deep understanding of their behaviour (see Miller and Slater, 2000, p.7-8). The interactions in both spaces contributed to the validity of my interpretations of the data collected. In addition to this, although Kendall (1999, p.71) noted about the usefulness of information gained from the connections between online and offline activities, he pointed out that some difficulty in accessing offline environments remain. However, the problem of access to the PPU community's offline activities was not a problem for this research investigation. In general, the PPU community members were quite open to make friends. Moreover, the polite and humble personalities of the Thai people and their tendency for maintaining smooth relationships with others also contributed to allowing me easy access to the PPU group (see Suntaree, 1990, p.160-167).

The interview process did however have some limitations since only 33 interviews were conducted with those who actively engaged with the online community. Therefore, those fans who only 'lurk' on the forum were not represented in my sample. There was a limitation of getting in touch with 'lurkers' and people who did not read the particular message I sent notifying the PPU community about my research investigation. This is because it is difficult to trace the latter group.

However, this limitation is typical of Internet communications which are computer-mediated in nature (see Orgad, 2005). Conducting online ethnography can be problematic in terms of identifying of the informants. Since people can play with their online identities, this can lead to difficulties for researchers to make inferences from the online environment (Mann and Steward, 2000, p.89). The awareness of this problem led me towards using offline methods of data collection, that is, face-to-face interviews and offline observations to combine with the online participant observation. This research practice of the check and balance of data contributes to the validity of the data in this case study. I will further discuss this point regarding the choice of the interviewee, in section 3.5.2.

### 3.4.3 Personal experiences as an ethnographer

Since this research investigation adopts an ethnographic approach, it is important to describe my personal experiences and interests as an Internet user as well as my involvement in the field. Brewer (2000, p.44) has noted that the ethnographer's experiences provide the major contribution for the research at every stage of investigation. Therefore, ethnographers have to reflect upon the way in which their personal experiences, 'personal values', or even personal beliefs have affected their interpretations of what they are studying (Brewer, 2000, p.44; Johnson, 1975, p.23 in Heyl, 2001, p.372).

In the same way, Machin (2002, p.88-89) has noted that 'reflexive' stance of the ethnographer is important since it has to present how the researcher responds to the process and how others respond to them, to reflect things about researchers that might influence the way that they see things, since they all have what has been called 'cultural baggage'. Hansen *et al.*, (1998, p.36-37) also have emphasised the self-reflection and reflexivity of one's own intellectual and emotional responses as key to participant observation research in order to gain insights into the norms and unspoken rules, customs and values of what is observed. In observing online interactions of participants in a breast cancer group, Orgad (2005, p.54) also noted that her own research experience as an Internet user was vital.

My first experience with using the Internet started in 1997 when I was a university student in Thailand. At the time, my main use of the Internet was only for sending electronic mails and searching for information from a few websites. As the interface of the Internet dramatically improved over the years, I have accessed the Internet more often and have developed more familiarity with Internet applications and uses. However, during 2001 to 2002 when I started the research and the fieldwork, my experience with online communities was restricted within a small group of friends: I only participated within online communities of my high-school and university. I regularly 'lurked' around in a couple of Thai large public discussion board websites, but I had never made any contacts with those people whom I perceived as strangers. In short, my Internet experience was only to serve the purpose of communicating with those who I already knew.

Therefore, communicating online with unknown people from the Internet was a new experience for me. I was sceptical about meeting people on the Internet at first. With my previous values and experiences, I often asked questions of how could people become friends through the online communication alone, why do people who participate in online communities feel able to connect with someone who they never met before and why would they even want to do this in the first place. These questions helped me to differentiate myself from the rest of the group. However as an ethnographer, I needed to keep in mind that I had to also participate as part of the group in order to observe their practices and the meaning behind them (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.1). Therefore by joining the PPU group, my perspective of online communities started to change. My first-hand experience as one of the participants in the online fan community brought me some understanding towards the practices of these people's activities and behaviour.

In addition to this, it is worth noting here that before my experience with the PPU community, my initial thought was that one of the important requirements of becoming a member was a detailed knowledge about the novel. This perspective was changed after I participated with the community for a while since I discovered that knowledge of the *Petchprauma* novel was not important in order to be considered a member of the PPU community. I found that by actively participating in both online and offline activities within the community, I was able to create social connections with many other members. This point will be further explored in the following empirical parts of the thesis.

Moreover, I found that the participation with research informants in Thai society requires a lot of skill and knowledge of certain cultural values such as being polite and humble, considerate to others, acknowledging the superiority of the elders and avoiding overt self-confidence. The avoidance of conflicts also contributes to the success of developing smooth interactions and relationships with research participants (see Suntaree 1990, p. 206). Being Thai, I benefited from understanding the Thai culture and also being able to ensure that my interactions with the informants followed the rules of the Thai cultural values. Therefore, I had the advantage of accessing the field in my own cultural background where I was able to

understand the language and social practices in the setting as well as interact and naturally follow the behaviour that is consistent with the Thai people's outlook and way of life. This is termed 'researching familiar cultures' (Mann and Stewart, 2000, p.201).

Overall, this section reveals my personal experiences as an ethnographer as well as an Internet user, which not only reveals how data was collected, but also contributes to the analysis of findings.

### **3.5 Critical and reflexive processes**

All research methods have weaknesses or 'blindspots' (Hansen *et al.*, 1998, p.46). Despite the strengths, earlier mentioned, of the ethnographic research approach, many criticisms remain. In order to minimise the criticisms, it is important for social researchers to present reflexivity at every stage, in other words, the relationships of the researcher with those being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.17; Williams, 2003, p.83).

#### **3.5.1 General issues and criticisms**

##### ***Criticisms – Small Community***

In the studies of ethnography and community, certain criticisms were raised during the 1960s and 1970s (Goulaner, 1971 quoted in Brunt, 2001, p. 88). Critical remarks include the definition of 'community', and the bias towards studying small isolated communities, which are therefore criticised as 'exceptional'. Some criticisms are focused on the unscientific nature of the community studies and that they are unable to make a comparison (Bell and Newby, 1971, p. 13, 14, 32 quoted in Brunt, 2001, p. 89). Therefore in a similar way, it could be argued that focusing only on one single selected case study of fans of the Thai novel *Petchprauma* will not be able to compare and contrast the selected community with many other online communities that are already established on the Internet at this particular time.

However, the nature of the ethnographic methodology itself and that generalisation is not a primary concern (Hammersly and Atkinson, 1995, p.42). Additionally, Brewer (2000, p.77) argues that in qualitative research, 'Depth was sacrificed for breadth'. Therefore, by selecting a case study of a small online community, the thesis focuses on gaining a deep understanding of the behaviour of this particular group of research participants. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier in section 3.3.3 regarding the selection of the case, the recognition of theoretical ideas, concerning the role of the Internet as a decentralised medium, the power of online fans and online relationships, partly allows the PPU online community to be defined as the 'critical case' to be studied. This will later provide certain generalisation back to the concerned theories.

Apart from this, the benefit of studying an online community of a particular group of Thai fans illustrates the local context of Thai Internet use. Current research in this area is limited. Therefore, this research investigation could not only contribute to the body of literature concerning the localisation of the Internet users, but also to the study of Internet use in a Thai context.

### ***Criticisms – Popularity Trends***

Questions concerning the process of the selection of this case study can also be raised. At the time that my fieldwork was conducted, there were very dominant trends in popularity of the *Petchprauma* novel. At the time of selecting the PPU online community as my case study, I felt that the advantage of studying this online fandom would allow me the opportunity to understand the broader context of online communities in Thailand. However, media trends in popularity can change at anytime and my selection was only limited with the period of my fieldwork in Thailand (from 1 March – 26 September 2003).

The perception of trends which are popular and have many followers can vary from time to time and from one's interpretation to another. Depending on an individual's access to different media sources, the opportunities to be opened to the different sources of media at any one time could be very different. In particularly for the Internet access, the way individuals are open to variety of sources can be very segmented since the feature of 'links' allows the users to become the author of their

own media texts (see Mitra and Cohen, 1999, p.187). Therefore, my own perception about this trend was partly influenced by the content that I accessed and was exposed to at the time.

However, by taking account of theoretical ideas, such as a decentralised role of the Internet, the power of online fans and online relationships, this has helped to partly allow the PPU online community to be defined as the ‘critical case’ to be studied. The PPU fansite appears to appeal to many Thai people. In addition to this, the novel, the movie and the television game show have helped to give the PPU fansite a high profile in Thai popular culture. There are several advantages of studying the PPU online community (see section 3.3.3). However one of the main advantages of selecting this online community for further study was because this fansite appeared to be a widely known example that is representative of Thai popular culture. Further, it was hoped that the choice of such an case study would provide a good basis for generalisations of the observations of research findings to be made. To reduce the criticism on the case selection, my experiences and perceptions have been critically reflected. These in part justified my position as a researcher.

### **3.5.2 Issues relating to bias of data collection**

#### ***Criticisms – Risk of ‘going native’/ Bias***

By developing close relationships with the research informants, another issue that arises is how researchers can distance themselves from what they observe and remain objective and free from personal perspective or having biased ideas (Brewer, 2000, p. 62). This problem which is often referred to as the risk of ‘going native’ (see Fontana and Frey, 1996, p.367) is often raised as a criticism of participant observation. The concern of being biased, arises when the researcher becomes too involved with the field or when personal opinions are also taken into account when in the field and during the process of data analysis.



Orgad (2005, p.56) found in her study that it is difficult to:

[...] balance the attentive and empathetic to informants on the one hand, while maintaining distance and appropriate researcher-informants relationship on the other. Once a certain degree of trust had been gained, informants would often treat me as a close friend, disclosing very personal issues, and sending email messages on a highly frequent basis.

Orgad (2005, p. 57) managed this risk of ‘going native’ in her research by using a certain degree of formality in email correspondences. In my case, I also found some difficulties in balancing the role as a researcher on one hand and being a member of the online community on the other hand. If I distanced myself from the community by, for example, participating less actively or not joining their casual meetings offline, the relationship I have established with them would be weakened. Apart from this, my time in the field was limited and I realised that I have to build trusts and relationships with the informants as much as I could while I was conducting the offline fieldwork in Thailand.

My solution to this problem involved deciding to leave the field and stop participating in the community after I had accumulated a considerable amount of data from the field. Therefore, the actual process of data analysis involved only me as a role of the researcher and minimised any personal bias from participating as a member of the community. My practice is similar to what Baym (2000, p.177) did in her studies in order to avoid introducing bias to the data. This process of leaving the field represents the time of ‘disengagement’ which helped to ‘regain a sense of critical distance’ (Hansen *et al.*, 1998, p.58). In addition to this, as previously mentioned I was not a fan of the novel or the movie before joining the community, therefore I did not feel too involved in the fandom. This helped me to set me apart from the other members of the community.

Although at some stage during the course of this research I adopted the identity of a PPU fan and participated with other members in the online community, throughout this time, I was fully aware of my task as a researcher. Apart from this, the time that I spent interacting with the community was limited this prevented me from ‘going native’.

Another sign that I avoided ‘going native’ is the fact that I did not begin this study as a regular user of online communities and since then, I have also not been involved in online communities. Therefore, I feel that I have managed to remain objective and dispassionate about online communities and fandom.

In addition to this, my initial and final stages of lurking on the PPU fansite helped me to ensure that I avoided ‘going native’. My observations of the PPU community and its social norms and behaviour of its members were made while I was still a ‘lurker’ and these did not appear to change even after I presented myself as a member of the PPU online community and later as a researcher. Subsequent interviews with other members of the PPU fansite only helped to confirm my observations of this online community and answer the questions that I had raised during my initial lurking time. Furthermore, the behaviour of PPU members did not change before or after my active participation with the PPU community and its members.

### ***Criticisms – Researcher’s Identity***

Some concerns about the difficulties if a researcher’s identity and purposes are discovered by participants are often raised (see Mann and Stewart, p. 90). I am aware that my presence as an ethnographer may also have an effect upon the way participants act (Williams, 2003, p.54, 66). Therefore, although I was open to the community members about my research, I did not bring up this issue as a dominant topic of conversation when casually meeting or participating in their activities, both online and offline.

Since identity disclosure is one of the social norms that I observed in this particular online community, I had to make a decision as to whether or not it was better to follow the social norm and risk contamination of the social situation whilst gain acceptance into the community or to try to stay anonymous, avoid contamination of the social situation but risk social displeasure or aggravation within the community. In the end, I made the former choice as being honest appeared to be the best course of action in order to gain confidence in fellow members of PPU online community and avoid future possible social problems as I asked my questions.

Apart from this, I found that the community did not show their concern or anxiety about me observing or interviewing them. Since my insider role as a member of the community and the creation of relationships with the informants were strong, the research was able to be conducted smoothly. Certain members of the community once openly talked to me about my interviews: ‘We were chatting about you interviewing us, we all feel like we are superstars. When are you going to interview us again?’<sup>41</sup> After the conversation, they sent me an e-mail attached the records of their MSN chatting messages, in which they mentioned their impressions of my interview. This practice of the members shows that they are ‘honest’ and ‘open’ to me (see Brewer, 2000, p. 65). In addition, I was often offered some help from the group who recommended other interviewees. This practice of the members also shows that social connections are important and count in Thai society (see Suntaree, 1990, p.206; Christensen, 1992).

Although the participants appeared to be ‘honest’ and ‘open’ to me because of my ability to develop relationships with them, I was aware that my appearance in the field might affect their behaviour or attitudes towards me. To prevent the data being bias or contaminated by my presence, I combined the participant observation process with the non-participant observation. My initial observations of the community and their social norms were made while I was still a ‘lurker’ and these did not appear to change even after I presented myself as a member of the PPU online community.

### *Criticisms – Ethical Issues and anonymity online*

A key responsibility of ethnographers is to protect research participants from harm and respect their rights (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001, p.339). Additionally, the ethical issues of the virtual ethnography are somewhat problematic in many aspects. Rutter and W.H. Smith (2005, p. 88-89) have pointed out that the presence of the ethnographer in the field is difficult because of the virtual environment of the online communications. In particular, the speculation of the numbers of research participants is also impossible. It is further noted that the analysis of public

---

<sup>41</sup> From fieldwork notes, personal conversations with Vee, Nu Mu and Tamachan, 17 August 2003.

discussions is considered not a public place and the analysis of such texts are sensitive.

Therefore, making a promise to offer the research participants' anonymity is considered an important procedure to show respect of the researchers in cyberspace. In this thesis, I use their electronic bulletin board usernames, instead of their real names to protect their anonymity. This is because privacy is an essential concern, especially in a virtual environment (see Mann and Stewart, 2000, p. 74, 91).

### *Criticisms – Choice of Interviewees*

Furthermore, the choice of interviewees could bring criticisms about the data being biased. As previously mentioned, since I chose to conduct face-to-face interviews, I only had a chance to interview the active members of the community who participated in the offline activities. Therefore, the perceptions of the interviewees tend to be those who had expanded their social networks more widely and created more relationships than other members who are less active (see Orgad 2005, p.58).

However, I guarded against the possibilities of the biased information by identifying the different hierarchies within the group so that the understanding of the practices of the community members and the different levels of relationships of the members could be followed with the positions within different hierarchies (see section 6.2). The benefit of gaining insight into this active group of fans is that it allows me to gain access to them and observe how they use the Internet in their everyday lives and also to discover how they extend their social networks to a greater degree.

Another frequent problem with conducting interviewing is that one can never be certain that the given reasons of why people do something or how they perceive something are always accurate (Machin, 2002, p.84). Moreover, there can always be a problem in asking about people's tastes and attitudes because they might prefer to present themselves in a certain way (Machin, 2002, p.82). I am aware of these points that the interviews might not be as direct or able to clearly show their perceptions or behaviour. To check whether or not the data and information collected from these interviews are valid, I also observed other practices within the PPU online

community in order to discover topics which may be lacking from the interviews. This point motivates the effective use of both online and offline methods to validate the interpretations of the data (see Orgad, 2005, p.53).

### 3.6 Conclusion

The initial interest of this thesis was to study the interaction of the Internet and fans. The research interests gradually became more focused and the research questions were formulated as a result of the process of literature review and interactions with members of the online community. The case of the *Petchprauma* novel fans was selected and the issue of social relationships expansion emerged. Since the research question of this thesis aims to understand ‘how’ the PPU fans expand their social networks through the online community, the case study and ethnographic approach are appropriate for gaining the answers to the research questions.

In previous studies related to the creation and maintenance of relationships within online communities, the use of quantitative methods, such as questionnaires or online surveys, have provided evidence that relationships can be established via the Internet (see e.g., Parks and Floyd, 1996; Chen *et al.*, 2002; Howard *et al.*, 2002). However, only quantitative methods would not be able to fulfil the thesis’s objectives, and this is why this thesis has to use mainly qualitative approach. Specifically, the ethnographic research helps to gain deeper levels of understanding of the meaning behind the interactions within the online communities (see e.g., Baym, 2000; Darling-Wolf, 2004).

The ethnographic approach involved intensive participation as a *Petchprauma* fan both within the online and offline environments of the case study. For example, during the non-participant observation stage, I acted as an online ‘lurker’ and during the participant observation stage; I acted both as a participant online as well as a participant in the group’s offline activities. Indeed, the role of the ethnographer is to observe the research participants within the online community from the view of the ‘insider’. My first hand experiences including active participation as a member of the community for one year and four months allows me to gain insights into the norms and customs of the members.

This thesis employs four key methods of data collection: non-participant observation, participant observation, face-to-face interviews, and textual analysis. My activities involve with both online and offline, such as ‘lurking’ on the website, online chatting and joining several small group meetings. The data gained from various methods and from both online and offline sources were used to check and balance and that to remain the validity of data.

Although many criticisms remain for most social research, the main strength of this thesis lies on a number of facts: the ethnographic approach helps me to gain rich and deep data; data from multiple methods and from both on and offline activities and from various collection tools were triangulated; and the strength of relationships of the researcher and the research participants in the field helped in the process of conducting this research. Moreover, my critical and reflexive process as well as my experiences as an ethnographer was described, and they should ensure the transparency of the research methods and processes, and also to serve as a useful direction for future researchers. The next chapter introduces the case study and paves the way to a deeper level of investigation in the other empirical parts of the thesis.

## Chapter Four

### The *Petchprauma* Online Fan Community

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims firstly to examine the broad context of the PPU online fan community, which includes a background of Thai culture and the Internet situation in the country. Secondly, it aims to provide specific information about the PPU online fan community, which includes characteristics of its members as well as the triggers which have inspired fans to participate in the online community. In essence, discussing both the broad and specific contexts helps to a better understanding of the empirical part of this chapter.

At a macro-level, this chapter examines Thai cultural values and provides a general picture of Internet use in Thailand. It shows roughly how this thesis's specific case – the PPU online fan community – fits, as a micro-study within the broader context of Internet use in Thailand, and how this context has an impact on the practices of fans within the online community.

In chapter three, I highlighted the definition of the term ‘fans’ which is used in this thesis to refer to individuals who have interest in the *Petchprauma* novel and who came into the PPU online forum to exchange their views about it (see section 3.2.2). In this chapter I will examine the rationales of the fans in coming into the PPU online community. In other words, I will look at what triggers the fans’ interest in participating in the PPU online community. In this chapter, I show that while the PPU fans are initially brought together by their common interest in the *Petchprauma* novel, belonging to this online community can lead to an increase in familiarity of other members and the development of other discussion topics which are not necessarily directly related to the *Petchprauma* novel.

In addition to this, I will look at the different degrees of the fans’ interests in coming into the PPU online community. In particular, the rationale of the information

pursuits and fun-pleasure pursuits are highlighted. Additionally, during the time of my study, there was a growing public interest in *Petchprauma*, due to its release as a film, which this thesis identifies as the '*Petchprauma* trend'. This trend, created by other mass media, is partly responsible for the growing number of members joining the online fan community. This interplay between the Internet and other mass media shows how different media can be linked and how the Internet's role differs from that of other media. It should be noted here, however, that the rationales mentioned in this chapter only represent the different degree of interests in the *Petchprauma* novel the fans had as well as the different trigger reasons for coming into the PPU online community in general.

It is not the aim of this research to examine each individual fan's motive in coming into the community. It is possible that individual fans may have more than one motive in coming into the community. In the remainder of this chapter, I will show evidence for the different possible rationales that may trigger the interests of the fans in coming into the PPU community (see section 4.4).

Additionally, I will discuss in this chapter the common characteristics of the PPU fans. I will also observe what type of common characteristic features the fans perceive themselves to have. This perception of the fans characteristics are based only on personal opinion. Therefore further investigation will be needed in the next chapters in order to determine whether or not the fans' opinions about each other provide a true reflection of the way the fans conduct their practices within the PPU online community.

This chapter is divided into five main parts. The first and the second part give a broad context; Thai cultural values and the development of Internet use are discussed. An understanding of this broader context helps to explain how the PPU fansite draws its members together. The third part explains the reasons for the fans' interests in the online community. The fourth part discusses the characteristics of the fans and gives general information regarding their number, gender and age ranges. These discussions pave a way to an analysis in following chapters. The final part lists my conclusions about the PPU online fan community.



## 4.2 Thai cultural values

By taking into consideration the ‘broader context’ when looking at the practices of the PPU online community members, this thesis takes into account the local culture which may be represented in the Internet uses of individuals in Thailand. As previously discussed in chapter two, several scholars have found that local culture plays a part in how people use the Internet (see Hongladarom, 1998a; 1998b; Miller and Slater, 2000; Hjorth, 2003; Liu *et al.*, 2002; Gottlieb & McLelland, 2003; Panyametheekul and Herring, 2003). An understanding of Thai cultural values is important, as they represent the values held by PPU fans in general. Presumably the fans’ ‘Thainess’ has affected their behaviour and reactions within online communities.

The context of cultural values in relation to different nations is provided by Schwartz (1992). In attempting to understand cultural differences, Schwartz (1992)’s research on content and structure of values in 20 countries proposed ten motivational types of values that argues to be recognized within and across cultures and used to form value priorities. These values content are, for example self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, power, security, conformity, etc. (p.5-13). Values are perceived to be ‘the criteria people use to select and justify actions and to evaluate people (including the self) and events’ (p.1). By revealing a variation of values in different countries, the study helps to provide important value context in further studies in specific culture. With a shift of focus from observing the differences to the similarity, a cross cultural study of value hierarchies by Schwartz and Bardi (2001) reveal that certain values (e.g., honesty) are perceived more important than others (e.g., pleasure).

An example of how Thai cultural values are different from other nations’ values can be seen in the study of Callister and Wall (2004). The value differences between Thai and U.S. are shown in a comparison study of communication mediator between the two countries. Thai mediators’ behaviour appeared to be guided by the value that the Thai society places on harmony and face saving. By comparison with U.S. mediators, Thai mediators seek harmony for disputants more frequently. Although Schwartz (1992) provides a general understanding of the importance of different values across different cultures, it is too crude to apply to the Thai case. Thus, the

need to describe and examine specific Thai cultural values is needed. The following review of literature will observe the particular Thai cultural values that are relevant to the case study in this thesis.

Regarding the Thai national character, Suntaree (1990, p.160) noted nine value clusters. These nine elements are considered 'group norms', 'instrumental values' which Thais use to achieve goals, and 'patterns of social interactions'. However, she states that every person in the culture does not necessarily have all these characteristic dimensions. The nine elements comprise ego orientation; grateful relationship orientation; smooth interpersonal relationship orientation; flexibility and adjustment orientation; religio-psychical orientation; education and competence orientation; interdependence orientation; fun-pleasure orientation; and achievement-task orientation. Of these nine elements, there are a number that will be found within the empirical case and that are worth exploring in detail. The discussion of Thai cultural values will pave the way to understand how the PPU community members represent their local values within the Internet society.

The following section discusses three cultural values of the Thai people – social harmony, fun-pleasure orientation and social connections. These values are relevant and will be used in the empirical analysis of the thesis.

#### **4.2.1 Social harmony**

Thai social values were claimed by the book 'Thailand into the 2000's', published by the Office of the Prime Minister (2000, p.81-82), to be 'spontaneous warmth' and 'compassion' to friends and family, including extension of hospitality to strangers. These concepts originate from Buddhist teaching and typical Thai village culture. It was further noted that Thais believe in 'social harmony' and tend to avoid any unnecessary frictions in their contacts with others. The Thai people are said to rarely express their anger outwardly nor be inclined to strong public displays of emotion, which sometimes leads to outsiders misunderstanding the culture.

Suntaree (1990, p.167) pointed out that a sense of 'ego-orientation' is the basic interpersonal social rule, which allows one to preserve one's 'ego'. This orientation

happens at the continuum of familiarity-unfamiliarity and that of superior-inferior, which means that self-placement is not limited only to the framework of hierarchical status, but happens across many varied situations (Suntaree, 1990 p.167). Based on this social rule, Thai people pursue the value of 'face-saving', which means that they often find an indirect way to soften a negative message that would make other people lose face. This also produces other values - 'criticism-avoidance' and 'consideration'. These values tie in with the Thai behaviour of avoiding conflicts, strong criticism expression of ideas and arguments (Suntaree, 1990, p.161-167).

In addition, the emphasis on smooth interpersonal relationships is related to the idea of 'face-saving' and 'criticism-avoidance'. Often, these values are observed by a 'non-assertive, polite and humble type of personality'; which is often expressed through appearance, manners and interpersonal approach (Suntaree, 1990, p. 174). Interestingly, the issue of surface-smooth and pleasant interpersonal interactions aiming not to hurt others' feelings and egos is claimed to be unique, and hardly found in American culture (Suntaree, 1990, p. 174, 177).

On the same point, Mulder (1990, p.47) has pointed out that Thai society treasures smooth interaction and the avoidance of overt conflict. Regarding presentation in everyday life polite behaviour, such as a smile and polite speech, is often observed. The importance of smoothness comes from genuine kindness and concern towards the other party; however, Mulder has recognised that such kindness is not deeply instituted and does not necessarily represent commitment. This behaviour is, therefore, what has been termed 'superficial interaction' (Mulder, 1990 in Unger, 1998, p.32).

Another Thai social value which differentiates the country from Western societies is rooted in rural village life. The structure of houses, with several generations living under one roof or several rooves within the same compound, provides little privacy and forces a communal life style. Thus, social harmony, compromise and tolerance are vital for living in Thai society (Office of the Prime Minister, 2000, p.77).

#### 4.2.2 Fun-pleasure orientation

Furthermore, Thai tourist boards often proclaim Thailand is a ‘land of smiles’ and its people have a talent for *sanuk* (spontaneous fun) (Unger, 1998, p.28). In Mulder’s (1990, p.48) analysis, Thai smiles are important in interactions and are a necessary part of a peaceful and pleasant atmosphere. As it is stated:

To present a smile to a distant person neutralized his potential harm, while to smile to an intimate is an expression of good humour, trust or benevolence; to show respect to a powerful superior is a technique to be safe, to show respect to an elder is to acknowledge his benevolence, and express one’s gratitude (Mulder, 1990, p.66).

These objectives of smiles accord with what Suntaree (1990, p.174) has noted above about the smooth interpersonal relationships orientation.<sup>42</sup>

*Sanuk* (spontaneous fun), as discussed by Unger (1998, p.28), is defined by Suntaree (1990, p.233) as ‘to have fun, to enjoy oneself and have a good time’. This *sanuk* has long represented the character of the Thai people, in its simplest aspect, as ‘fun-loving’ or ‘pleasure-loving’. The word also means a ‘deep interest in something, momentarily, to the exclusion of all else’. As one scholar put, ‘The Siamese are a pleasure-loving people, as is shown by their ready laughter. The people they like are those who can make them laugh’ (Landon, 1939 in Embree, 1950, p. 11).

On one hand, this fun-loving and pleasure has been argued to have originated in the agricultural, non-industrialised city, where a relaxed way of life is treasured (Suntaree, 1990, p.233). This attitude is very different from the competitive and hard-working one necessary to make in the Western industrialised world (Benedict, 1943, Embree, 1995 in Suntaree, 1990, p.233). On the other hand, the fun-loving behaviour is seen as originating from the importance of smooth face-to-face interactions. This fun-loving or light behaviour can be found in all kinds of Thai social interaction, for example: small talk, gossip, joke, teasing one another, making fun of all kinds of non-personal inconsequential things and events, and playing with

---

<sup>42</sup> Suntaree (1990) and Mulder (1990) sometimes interpret the cause of the Thai national character differently, as the first is interested in culture while the latter is interested in political factors such as the struggle for power, and concerns of rank and status. Whatever the cause, however, they describe the Thai national character in the same way, and that is what this thesis is interested in.

words. The fun-pleasure is, however, not an end in itself, but considered as a means to maintaining the more important interpersonal interaction value (Suntaree, 1990, p. 234).

However, one should not infer from this presentation that Thais have no conflicts and pursue smooth interactions as an end. This smoothness is often considered ‘superficial interaction’ or ‘surface harmony’ (Suntaree, 1990, p.174); and it sometimes does not represent commitment, as already noted above.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the study of Hongladarom (1998b) found that one of the favourite behaviours of Thais in his studied Newsgroup was ‘flaming’ against the government and politicians. This seems to prove that Thais vary their behaviour in different situations. Thais’ social interactions will be further observed in the empirical part of the thesis.

Interestingly, the *sanuk* character of Thais corresponds with the term commonly used by them to refer to internet use: ‘play’, instead of ‘use’ or ‘access’. In this sense the Internet is presumably not considered a serious business among certain Thais.

#### **4.2.3 Social connections in Thailand**

Moreover, Thai people commonly observe the relationships between superiors and inferiors, or what they often call ‘phuujai’ and ‘phuunooj’ (Mulder, 1990, p.48; Suntaree, 1990; McCargo, 2000, p.53). The idea of superior and inferior originates from historical times when Thailand was dominated by patron-client relationships (Kasian, 1996, p.246). The concept is related to hierarchical expectations. It affects social behaviour; Thais attempt to discover, even during casual encounters, others’ social ranks and positions to determine relative social distance. Once this is known, the ‘right’ language can be chosen to allow smoothness of interaction (Mulder, 1990, p.48). Because hierarchical status is taken seriously, it is important to make the ‘right presentation’ to those with greater power (Mulder, 1990, p.158). In other words, to challenge a superior only harms the relationships and opportunities of the juniors.

---

<sup>43</sup> This thesis is interested in the presentation of Thais in everyday life only, since the fundamental understanding of the pressures hidden under the pleasant presentation, or the ‘deep self’, is difficult to examine and it is beyond the scope of the thesis (see discussion of negative consequences of the polite and proper presentations of Thais in Mulder, 1990).

In Thai society, where patron-client relationships - or hierarchy - plays a part, a culture of personal ties, or a patronage system, remains within the society and its organisations (see Christensen, 1992). Suntaree (1990, p. 205) has described the 'flexibility and adjustment orientation'. Such flexibility, often, means corruption to the point that law enforcement hardly works in Thailand. This is because people tend to be concerned with 'who the person is or whom the person knows' or what is termed the 'law of relationship'. This widespread recognition in a society affects the practices of government officials towards corruption. As it has often been noted, 'a web of social networks' in Thailand is created by those with money and power (Suntaree, 1990, p. 206). In this sense social connections are considered important by the Thai people, as they are a means to gain money and power.

Hongladarom (1998a) has accepted that the belief in hierarchy stands as an important part of traditional Thai culture. However, in relation to the Internet, he argues that it helps to create a new Thai culture, which tends to be more egalitarian. This does not necessarily mean that Thais will completely forget the old beliefs, but as it is difficult to practice them on the Internet; he suggests instead that old beliefs are kept in traditional ceremonies and rituals.

The above discussion has suggested how different degrees of power, based on hierarchical status, money or networks, are counted in Thai society. Thus, social networks expansion via the Internet is a new way to extend people's social relationships. However, whether the old cultural values – the patron-client relationships or culture of personal ties – existed in the PPU community, they should be examined in the empirical chapters.

These points – concerning social harmony, fun-pleasure orientation, and social connections – are important when examining the Internet practices in a Thai context, and thus will be discussed in relation to the empirical case study.

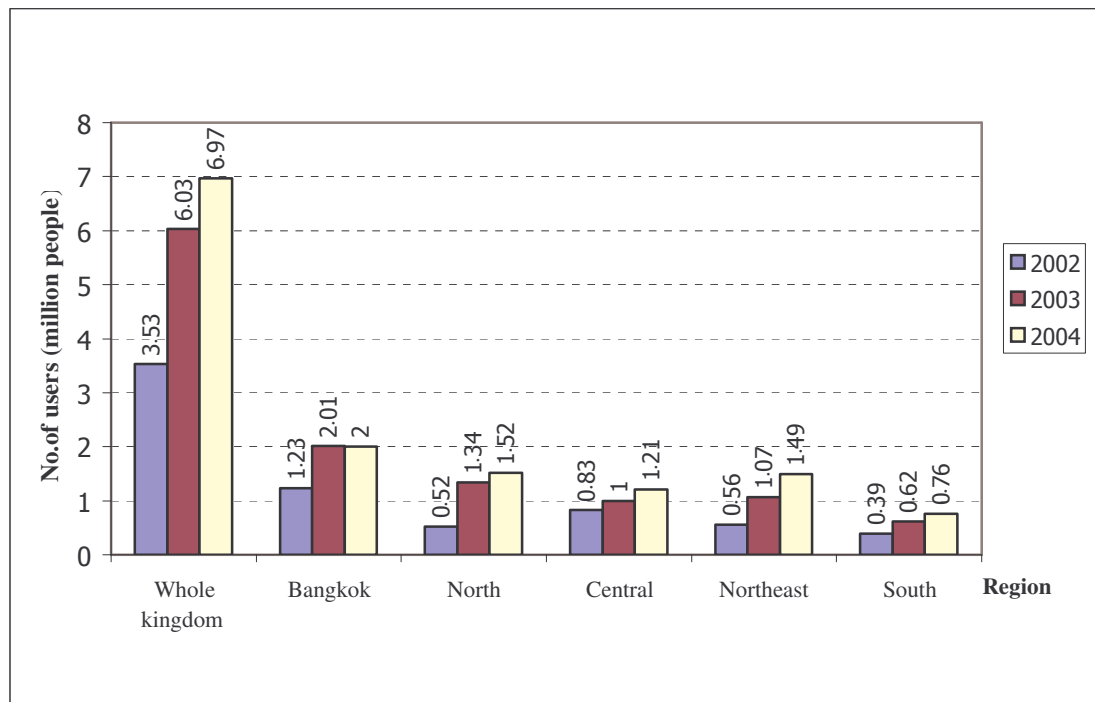
### **4.3 Introduction to the Internet in Thailand**

An understanding of a wider context of Internet uses in Thailand provides a place for the PPU community to fit in, as well as paving a way to an understanding of how the

PPU online community was established. Currently, it is undeniable that Thailand has to face the forces of globalisation and the Internet as a key means of communication. This section describes a macro-picture of the Internet in Thailand.

The Internet was first developed in Thailand in mid-1987 initiated by a test of two faculty members of the Asian Institute of Technology's (AIT) computer science department. In later years, the Internet became widely known initially within the universities. In 1991, a UUCP network was established at five universities in Thailand. By 1995, the Internet was commercialised and expanded to the general population as well as the academic communities. This development clearly illustrates that the Internet is not only a tool for information sharing among academics and students, but also an alternative media and a new business opportunity for Thais (Sirin *et al.*, 1999, p.8). Currently, there are 22 Internet Service Providers (ISP): 18 providers operating as commercial ISP and four as public service providers (Somkiat, 2001, p.3).

By the year 2002, Internet users in Thailand ranged across the whole country, but were particularly concentrated in the capital city, Bangkok. A gap in the number of Internet users exists between urban and rural areas (NECTEC, 2002, p.16). The following table illustrates the concentrations of Internet users in different regions in Thailand.



**Figure 1: Internet Penetration by location and its growth in Thailand**

*Source: NECTEC, 2002; National Statistical Office, 2004*

The number of Internet users in Thailand is much less than in developed countries like the USA, the UK, and Australia, as well as less than in many countries in Asia, such as Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Malaysia. For example, in Thailand, there were 5.64 users per 100 people, while the USA, the UK, and Australia had 59.75, 55.32, and 52.49 respectively. In Asia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia had 37.20, 49.30, 46.40, and 16.98 Internet users respectively (NECTEC, 2002, p.18). These figures show the extent of the ICT trend in various countries, and that Thailand is still lagging behind. A major factor is the monopoly of the telecommunication sector by the Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT): all domestic ISPs have to connect with the CAT's network in order to link with global Internet, and are charged with prices that are not competitive (Somkiat, 2001, p.6).

In Thailand, however, it is claimed that the Internet has become a crucial part of the everyday lives of many people (Somkiat, 2001, p.3). A national survey has profiled Internet users in Thailand. With regard to age, the most users are between 20 and 29, accounting for 49.1 per cent of users, followed by those between 30 and 39, accounting for 21.5 per cent. Generally speaking, Internet users in Thailand are from a middle class background. Those with a monthly household income between 30,001



and 50,000 baht account for the highest number of users at 22.4 per cent. In terms of level of education those with bachelors' degrees or higher account for the highest, at 60.3 per cent. On the issue of employment those situated within the two highest ranks are 47.8 per cent (employed), and 28.3 per cent (full-time students). The survey also revealed that about 49.3 per cent of households with Internet users accessed the Internet from their homes, while the remainder accessed it from the office, school, and Internet cafés (NECTEC, 2002, p.36-56). These figures provide a general background with regard to the Internet situation in the country, which paves the way to an understanding of the empirical part of the thesis. The next section discusses the question of why these people decided to participate in the community.

#### **4.4 Rationales for the PPU online fan community**

In this section I will discuss the practices of the PPU fans within the online community in more detail. In particular, I will look at how the fans' participation in the PPU fansite can lead to the expansion of their social networks. In the next chapter, I will also provide a quantitative data summary of the online posts that appeared on the PPU online forum as evidence to support my research. This quantitative data summary of the online posts is an integral part of the analysis that is conducted in the next chapter (see section 5.2.1 on popular discussion topics).

This section discusses the rationale for members participating in the PPU online community. It reveals the 'group purposes' or their primary goals in joining as members (see Baym, 1995, p.146). A key motivating factor that attracts these individuals to the PPU online community is a common interest in the *Petchprauma* novel. However, when looking at why individuals decided to enter the community, three other reasons emerge: a genuine interest in the novel; 'fun-pleasure' orientation and the social nature of the fans; and the '*Petchprauma* trend'.

Obviously, these rationales for the fans' participation in the community are merely points of departure, and how they lead to other activities will be discussed in the following chapters.

#### 4.4.1 Common interest in the *Petchprauma* novel

The PPU online fan community has been created for one important reason: the gathering of people who love *Petchprauma*. The rationale for individual fans to join the PPU community is special interest in the novel. In one interview, a fan explained her fascination with the novel:

I started reading *Petchprauma* because I was wondering why so many people are addicted to it. I like this novel because it has never been outdated. The story is very exciting. It perfectly matches with my preferences. I don't know about others, but I like this type of story. I can just say that I'm in love with this novel.<sup>44</sup>

The interviewee said that the novel 'matched perfectly with her preferences'. But when questioned on this issue, the fan was unable to describe the exact reasons why she had such preferences. This exemplifies an important aspect of fandom: people's enjoyment of a given piece of entertainment is very much due to their personal tastes, which obviously vary greatly from one person to another. This point about fandom has been noted by several scholars (see Grossberg, 1992, p.51; Fiske, 1992, p.30; Jenson, 1992, p.23; Harris, 1998, p.51).

Furthermore, having this similar interest in the *Petchprauma* novel made the unknown individuals gather as a group. A member of the community stated:

With this group, I feel that we have something in common, a common point of interest that brings us together. I was impressed with the group at first and it made me want to join in. If we didn't share the same interests, I don't think we'd have many topics to talk about with each other in the first place. At least for me, because I'm not very talkative.<sup>45</sup>

The interview shows that the fan joined the community because she considered the group to share her interest, and that encouraged discussions. The importance of the common interests of the PPU online community is emphasised by another fan:

We gather here because we love the same thing. People here have different ages, different social status, different careers, but we can talk with each other as if we've known each other for so long and there's no

---

<sup>44</sup> Personal interview with *Pa Tae Chae Im*, 24 August 2003

<sup>45</sup> Personal interview with *Phu Sao Meuang Yod*, 17 August 2003

boundary that can push us apart. Sometimes even our opinions are not matched, but we still have one thing in common that we love the same thing. It's like we talk to someone who knows our hearts, and understands exactly what we think. Since I entered this community, I've only met good people, with whom I can keep in touch, talk to and trust.<sup>46</sup>

We understand from the interview that interest was a common tie that brought the fans together, regardless of their different social backgrounds. The fan also points out that the sharing of common interests leads to the understanding of each other and a harmony of community. This point is similar to Walther's (1996, p.17) observation that people tend to like those who share 'greater similarity' with themselves. Beside this, the interview illustrated the nature of the online group as open to people of different backgrounds and social status. In this sense, the role of the Internet as linking like-minded individuals is confirmed.

Although we could assume that the fans' motivation to participate in the community is that they all share a common interest in the novel, at a deeper level there are three different degrees of interest. The following section discusses these three ways of entering the online community as reflections of different degrees of interests in the novel.

#### **4.4.2 Different degrees of interests in the *Petchprauma* novel**

This section discusses three levels of the PPU fans' interest in the *Petchprauma* novel. Rather than attempting to explore each individual's reasons for joining the PPU community, this section examines the main possible rationales that could inspire or trigger the interests of the fans to enter and participate in the PPU online community in general.

In this section it is also recognised that individual fans may not have one sole purpose in coming into the online community. In fact, individual fans may have a variety of different reasons for joining the PPU fansite. In addition, it could be the case that the fans have blurred boundaries of what they are expecting from belonging to the PPU community.

---

<sup>46</sup> Personal interview with *Rapin*, 30 August 2003

Whether or not the motives of the fans influence their practices within the online community will be examined in the next chapter.

### *Information pursuits*

A primary reason for PPU fans to become members of the PPU online community is in order to express their interest in the novel and to share this fascination with others with the same interest. Many fans tend to access to the PPU online community directly for information on the novel and matters relating to the novel such as the movie. Many of these fans discover the fansite by searching for the word *Petchprauma* on search engines on the Internet. The following interview with a fan illustrates this point:

I read the novel and I felt very good about this novel. So, I thought there must be a website related to this novel and I started off by searching on the *Sanook*<sup>47</sup> website. At first I found the *Joinwriter* website and I've participated in the group since then.<sup>48</sup>

The fan's original intention was clearly shown. Moreover, the use of the Internet to advance her own interest demonstrates an important role of the Internet in providing information to segmented audiences. This role of the Internet as a provider of information for its users has been observed by several scholars (see Rheingold, 1993, p.56; Rafaeli and LaRose, 1993, p.223; Wellman *et al.*, 1996, p.219; Sproull and Fajaj, 1997, p.36; Kollock, 1999, p.226).

With another fan, a similar process of entering the community is shown:

At first I didn't like the Internet at all. I used to join a chat room and I had no clue what they were talking about. After that, I started reading *Petchprauma*, and I searched the Sanook website to find interesting websites related to books. There I found the *Petchprauma* website, so I started entering the web just to 'lurk' at first.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> *Sanook* is a Thai's search engine website that is widely popular among Thai Internet users, similarly to 'Google' or 'Yahoo' websites.

<sup>48</sup> Personal interview with *Pan Vat Tae Vi*, 20 July 2003; *Joinwriter* is the previous domain name for the PPU community (see section 4.5.1).

<sup>49</sup> Personal interview with *Nai Nit Tra*, 24 August 2003

The interview shows that the fan had no preference for Internet communication at first but that interest in the novel was an impetus for the fan to use the Internet and to enter into the community. The fact that the fan later engaged actively with the community both on and offline proves that the Internet had an impact on her life. This point is yet to be further discussed in the next chapter.

### *Fun-pleasure and social pursuits*

The second group of fans who entered the community did so for fun and with social aims in mind. Below, one fan gives her initial reason for joining the community:

At first I did not post anything on the Webboard. I only read the online messages. But as I read those messages, I got to feel that the people in this group were really friendly. They also sounded very funny. So, I put up my first posting and asked them how I could apply to be a member. Some of the people answered my questions, and I have been participating ever since.<sup>50</sup>

Although the fan's interest in the discussions about the *Petchprauma* novel is shown by the way she 'lurked' in the community, the trigger for her participation was the friendly and fun environment created by the other PPU fans. Similarly, Baym's (1997, p.113) study shows that the 'friendly and open environment' of the community encourages participants to join in the community.

Another fan adds:

When I was lurking online, I was afraid of posting anything because I thought that the others had been talking to each other for so long, and how could I start talking to them? But their posting were really funny. Then I just thought, well, why not? So, I started talking, and now we get closer and closer day by day. I'm glad that I did decide to start talking with the others because it has opened up my world quite a lot and I haven't had any problems whatsoever since I joined this group.<sup>51</sup>

This fan clearly decided to participate in the community for social purposes; the people in the community attracted him. This point confirms Walther's (1996, p.17)

---

<sup>50</sup> Personal interview with *Nai Nit Tra*, 24 August 2003.

<sup>51</sup> Personal interview with *Tamachan*, 20 July 2003.

that the sharing of common interests online could lead to enhanced relationships offline.

The group of fans who enter the PPU online community for ‘fun-pleasure’ and social pursuits have less interest in the novel than those who come directly for information and discussions about the novel. These different rationales will be further investigated in the next chapter in terms of their influence on participants’ behaviour in the community.

### ***Petchprauma Trend***

The third main reason for PPU fans joining the online community is what I term the ‘*Petchprauma* trend’. As mentioned in chapter three, the PPU fansite is one of many websites related to the novel. In general, these websites have ‘links’ which allow Internet users to move from one fansite to another. The feature of ‘links’ between different fansites creates an overlapping of fans between the different communities (see Mitra and Cohen, 1999, p.187). As I mentioned earlier, there exist links between the PPU online community and the traditional media. The following paragraphs describe this in more detail.

At first glance, public awareness and interest in the *Petchprauma* novel was created by two types of mass media. The first was a television programme called *Fan Pan Tae* (The Fan). The second was a movie production based on the story of *Petchprauma*. These two media created the trend in which the *Petchprauma* novel recently became popular. This shows that the traditional media have an effect on online audiences. In other words, the PPU community is related to the rest of Internet society and the mass media in Thailand.

Regarding the television programme, the *Fan Pan Tae* is a famous weekly television game show in Thailand. The main concept of this programme is to find the ultimate fan that has the most knowledge about a particular subject of interest. Each week, the programme features a variety of stories based on different kinds of fandom such as cars, movies, books, football teams, mobile phones, etc. On 21 March 2003, The *Fan Pan Tae* had a competition based around the theme of the *Petchprauma* novel. Five

contestants who were readers of the *Petchprauma* novel were competing against each other to win the ultimate price from the novel's writer. At the beginning of the competition, the programme ran a short feature presentation of information about the *Petchprauma* novel and also the '*Petchprauma.com*' fansite. The host of the television programme announced that the five contestants were representatives from the PPU community. This television endorsement greatly benefited the PPU community; its reputation was enhanced and messages were sent out to a larger audience.

An interview with a member of the online community shows the effect of the TV publicity:

At first I did not read the *Petchprauma* novel, although I already had the set at home and several friends told me that it was very good fun. After *Fan Pan Tae* was on air, I started reading the novel and have since joined the PPU community.<sup>52</sup>

The above extract shows that the television programme is able to influence fans' decisions to join the community. Another fan talks about how the television programme rekindled his interest in *Petchprauma*, which in turn caused him to enter the online community:

I read *Petchprauma* for the first time 15 years ago. I liked it a lot. Then I heard about it again on the *Fan Pan Tae* programme, and there's also news about the movie production, so I was interested in reading it again. I went to buy a whole set of books and tried to find some websites on the Internet. At first I found *Joinwriter* and I went in to only read in the forum. Then, I found the *Petchprauma* website and I liked it because there're some people who like the same things that I like and there're always questions about *Petchprauma*, so I continue to follow what's going on on the website.<sup>53</sup>

The above extract shows that the *Fan Pan Tae* programme brought the interviewee's attention back to the novel that he used to read and then to the fandom. The fan also mentions the movie production, which is another influence that creates public interest in the novel.

---

<sup>52</sup> Personal interview with *Vee*, 20 July 2003

<sup>53</sup> Personal interview with *Ka Mode Dong*, 30 August 2003

Regarding the *Petchprauma* movie, it is a project of Chattri Chalermmyukul, a well-known movie director in Thailand. Awareness about the movie production was particularly raised when the movie director posted messages on the *Chalermthai* community at the *Pantip* website (<http://www.pantip.com>) asking for opinions regarding the castings of actors and actresses for the movie. Since *Pantip* is a large community website, the postings of the movie director attracted interest from a large number of *Pantip* members. The director of the *Petchprauma* movie had continuous communication about his movie project with Internet audiences on the *Pantip* website. The postings from the movie director became so popular that *Pantip* offered a new ‘room’ for the *Petchprauma* novel and the movie discussions. Therefore in *Pantip*, there is another community gathered around the topic of the *Petchprauma* novel.<sup>54</sup>

As for the PPU fansite, it continued to attract growing numbers of fans, due to the increasing media based popularity of *Petchprauma*. Members of the *Petchprauma* community at *Pantip* and the PPU community itself are often overlapped. The PPU community also gained popularity since the general level of interest in *Petchprauma* increased at the time. The following interview illustrates this point:

At first I just browsed in *Pantip*. When I heard that *Tarn Mui* [the movie director] was producing the movie, I entered the Web more often to read the postings about it. After that, I followed the links from there to the PPU community.<sup>55</sup>

The above extract shows how a fan moved her participation from one community to another, which reflects the role of the Internet in creating links from one Website to another, or transferring people from one community to another (see Mitra and Cohen, 1999, p.187).

Similarly, another fan informed me how she entered the group:

---

<sup>54</sup> From Participant observation during the fieldwork.

<sup>55</sup> Personal interview with *Poo*, 24 August 2003



I first saw messages about the *Petchprauma* novel on *Pantip*. It was the time when Tarn Mui [the movie director] was posting about the movie. Then, from *Pantip* I followed links to the *Petchprauma* community. At the time they were just opening the new website so I joined in. In fact, I'm a member of both groups.<sup>56</sup>

This interview shows the overlapping of the fan's participation in the PPU fan community and the *Pantip* community.

These two types of mass media played a part in certain fans entering into the community. When one considers the novel was begun in 1965, and the establishment of the Internet in Thailand took place in 1987, the creation of the PPU online community in 2003 is considered rather recent. The popularity of the PPU online community can be seen from the increasing number of PPU members during 2003 to 2004, the same time as the television programme and the announcement of the movie production (see Figure 2). Such a broader context of connections between the PPU online fan community and the mass media influenced the way individual fans conducted their practices within the online community, and this will be further examined in chapter six.

The above discussion introduced influences underpinning the fans' interests in the PPU online community. Each individual has a different expectation from the community based on his/her previous knowledge of the novel. The way in which these expectations influence their behaviour will be discussed in the later chapters of this thesis. Knowing what made people enter the community in part helps to understand their behaviour and the nature of the community. This section has thus served its aims.

#### 4.5 Characteristics of the PPU fans

Since the PPU online community brings like-minded individuals together, this section will investigate what types of people participated in the PPU community. Walther (1996, p.17) noted that sharing interests tends to cause people to identify a group, a 'social self-categorization' with whose members they see themselves having

---

<sup>56</sup> Personal interview with *Phu Sao Meuang Yod*, 17 August 2003

a 'greater similarity'. This corresponds with the finding of this thesis. Beside this, Baym (1995, p.148) has mentioned that group and member characteristics are one of the key factors which contribute to the outcomes of online communities. The characteristics of those who claim to be PPU fans are therefore anticipated to influence the nature of the community and online practices, and thus will be important in next chapter's analysis.

This section discusses the two key characteristics of the PPU members. The first is a fun-loving character: many fans who gather in the PPU community seem to share this quality. The second is 'expertise'; certain fans, who have outstanding knowledge of *Petchprauma*, come onto the site as 'experts'. Additionally, general statistical information including numbers, gender and age ranges of the PPU members is analysed.

#### **4.5.1 Fun-loving characters**

The fans found themselves to have certain similar characteristics when they gathered online. They are fun-loving, easy-going, and enjoy non-serious and smooth social interactions. These characters can be described by a Thai term, *Sanuk* (spontaneous fun). This quality among the fans can be attributed to two elements: the nature of the novel as associated with fun-pleasure orientation and *sanuk* as a Thai cultural value (see Suntaree, 1990, p.174; Landon, 1939 in Embree, 1950, p. 11).

When the fans were asked questions about the personalities of their friends in the community, they often found that others had similar characters: they preferred smooth social relationships and liked entertainment. These fans were able to recognise others' personalities in two ways: from online conversations which reinforces the existence of online identities and the ability of fans to recognise them (see Turkle, 1995, p.14), and from face-to-face interactions.

A fan described the general characteristics of people in the PPU fan community:

In general, I think people here prefer to have no conflicts. You can see that their opinions usually go towards the same directions. Also, I'd use the word 'bookworms' to describe these people. I think the people here are funny and they must have some level of education because at least they can use the Internet. I think they are also quite conservative. I'm not quite sure on this point, but I sense that they don't like going out too much, or perhaps people who use the Internet are like this. On the whole, I think people here are easy-going and fun-loving people.<sup>57</sup>

The fan appears to perceive the community members as having similar characters. He seems to identify the 'social self-categorization', rather than viewing the others as individuals. This supports Walther's (1996, p.17) argument. The interview also shows that smooth social relationships are important to the fans. This corresponds with another interview that describes the *sanuk* character of the fans:

From my observation of the Webboard, I think people who enter this community are playful and love fun activities. They are very *Sanuk*. They enjoy teasing each other and often exchange funny small talks, which are also good fun for me to read.<sup>58</sup>

The fun-loving character distinctively emerges in the above interview. The interviewee identifies herself corresponding with the group because she also enjoys those *sanuk* activities. The light conversations, jokes, and amusing types of messages reveal the entertaining side of the fans' characters.

Another comment from a fan shows two different elements: fun, and an interest in exchanging substantial ideas. In her own words:

In general, I think people in this group enjoy having fun but they also have some intellectual ideas. For me, I prefer to talk with someone who has some substantial ideas, and this community has that type of people exactly. I don't like too much substance, or too little substance. I think it's good to have a balance. At least when there is enough of an intellectual side, some fun can be added.<sup>59</sup>

The interviewee implied that she enjoyed both the new ideas and the fun in participating in the PPU community. The community appealed to her because it has a

---

<sup>57</sup> Personal interview with *Wai Cha Kun*, 21 August 2003

<sup>58</sup> Personal interview with *Thung Ka Dat*, 25 August 2003

<sup>59</sup> Personal interview with *Vachimantrai*, 20 July 2003

balance of fun and intellectual characters. The above interview reflects the general characteristics of the fans.

However it should be noted that in part, it is the personal opinions of individual fans that attributes this fun-loving characteristic to the PPU fans in general. Therefore the findings based on these personal opinions of individual fans regarding the personalities of people they know needs to be treated with caution as such perceptions may be biased and unreliable. That is this observation of the fun-loving character of the PPU fans are partially attributed from the personal opinion in which the fans have towards each other. I found that such opinions are similar across the interviewees and this signals the shared opinion of the fans in identifying themselves as a group, rather than an individual. This view of the fans illustrates the 'hyperpersonal interaction' discussed by Walther (1996, p.17) and supports the SIDE theory discussed by Lea and Spears (1992, 1994).

Yet, again as these arguments are based on the personal opinion of the fans and these findings need to be treated with caution. Therefore in this context, looking beyond the perception of the fans is necessary in order to see whether or not the practices that the fans talk about reflect the actual characteristics of the fans. It is therefore the task of the research analysis in the next chapter to explore this point further. Although these personal opinions of the fans have been used to examine the behaviour and interaction of other online members, in the next chapter this data will be triangulated with the findings from other sources. From this process of triangulation it can be determined whether or not the findings from these personal opinions of the fans are consistent with the observations made using different data sources and approaches.

Apart from the *sanuk* character of the majority of the members, another significant characteristic – expertise – can be recognised in some members' contributions.

#### 4.5.2 'Experts'

It was previously discussed in chapter two that some scholars have recognised that possessing the knowledge about the object of fandom is an important element which can lead to individual fans being able to distinguish themselves within a fan community (Fiske, 1992, p.43). MacDonald (1998, p.137) suggests the importance of having such knowledge in giving a higher hierarchical status for certain fans. These observations of the recognition and appreciation of fans who are seen to be 'experts' have also been reported in other research studies on online fan communities (see Macdonald, 1997, p.137; Baym, 1998b, p.122; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.515).

Among PPU fans, there are different levels of 'expertise' regarding the novel. There is a small group of fans who have a distinctively large amount of knowledge about the novel, while a larger group of fans shows relatively little knowledge of the novel. The first group's knowledge of their object of fandom is highly valued by the group as a whole since it contributes to the level of interest of the fansite.

In the PPU online community, the distinction of 'experts' status are given to four members of the community who were contestants of the *Fan Pan Tae* television programme. The reason that these four members are highly recognised in the PPU online community is because of their appearance on this television programme and also because of their ability to answer the questions put to them on the online forum. Therefore the knowledge and status gained from this expertise by these four particular fans is more widely recognised and acknowledged by the rest of the group than the knowledge and status of other possible rival 'experts' who were not on this television programme. Therefore this group of four *Fan Pan Tae* contestants can be seen as the only 'experts' in the PPU online community since their status is most widely recognised and acknowledged amongst members of the in the PPU group.

During the show, the show host mentioned the *Petchprauma* website, and the four contestants were also introduced by the usernames that they used on the website's discussion forum. These experts attracted public interest by going on TV as they were already well-known for their knowledge of the *Petchprauma* novel. The expertise of the *Fan Pan Tae* contestants came from reading the novel repeatedly and

seeking out additional information about it from other sources.<sup>60</sup> Discussions among the experts often created new insights, which were appraised online by other fans. The online forum became, therefore, a valuable place for the PPU fans to gain more knowledge about the novel, aided by the vital ‘experts’. The different levels of knowledge among the fans could influence to a great extent their practices within the community; this point will be observed in a later chapter of this thesis. In chapter six, I will discuss this concept of the ‘hierarchy of knowledge’ in further detail. I will examine how it is this ‘hierarchy of knowledge’ which gives these ‘experts’ a special status amongst the fan community. In addition to this, I will look at how having such a hierarchical status can affect the expansion of a fan’s social networks.

At this point, it can be seen that the overall character of the PPU members accords with the character of the *Petchprauma* novel. The novel is enjoyable and exciting to read, but it also contains plenty of specific knowledge, especially on how to survive in the jungle. The novel can be read and appreciated at different levels; readers can simply enjoy the adventure or gain valuable insights from the author’s knowledge.

The two distinctive characters of the PPU fans are a result of the object of fandom. By and large, *Petchprauma* is served for entertainment. Therefore, people who join the discussions about the novel online do not intend to seriously argue or commit themselves to a political position. They come into the community to enjoy themselves. Thus, they tend to be similar, fun-loving people. To find out, how their character affects their online behaviour is the task of the coming chapters.

#### **4.5.3 General information on the PPU fans**

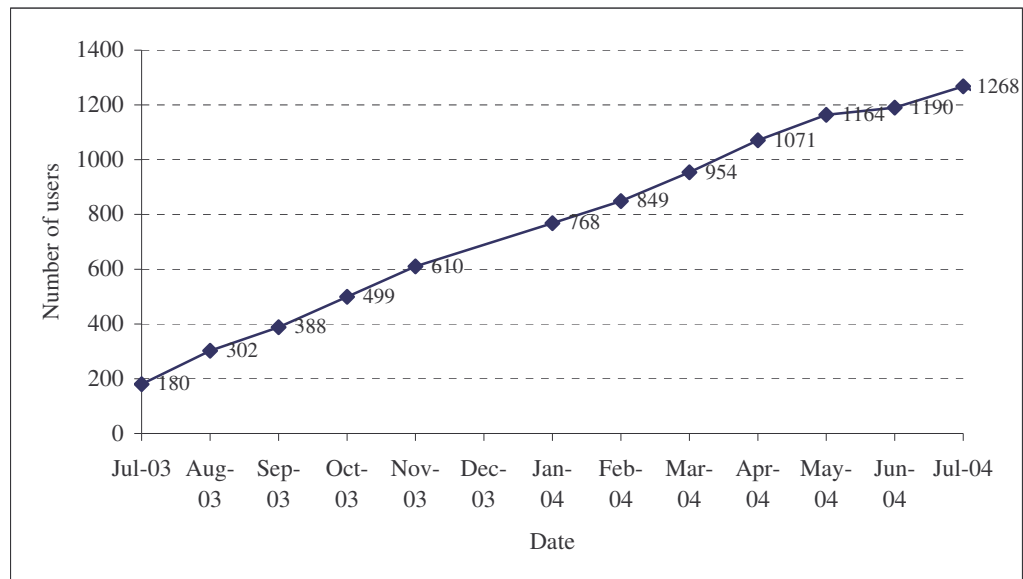
This section gives general information about the PPU fans, as the participants’ characteristics could influence the way the online community operates (Baym, 1995, p.148; 1998, p. 47-48). I will focus on number, gender and age ranges of the PPU fans.

---

<sup>60</sup> Personal interview with *Wai Cha Kun*, 21 August 2003.

### *Numbers of the PPU fans*

The size of the group is one of the key characteristics that we need to be aware of (Baym, 1995, p.148). Statistics from the registered system of the PPU online forum suggest that the number of registered PPU fans gradually increased over the course of time.



**Figure 2: Numbers of the *Petchprauma* fans, 21 July 2003- 30 June 2004**

*Source: Adapted from information provided on PPU statistical pages<sup>61</sup>*

Figure 2 shows the gradual increase in the number of registered PPU members within a one-year period. From 180 in July 2003, the number of members who registered with the fansite increased to 1,268 towards the end of June 2004. This figure shows the increase in popularity of the PPU online community; it ties in with the ‘*Petchprauma* trend’ which emerged at the same time, during 2003 - 2004.

However, the statistical information provided above is not exact, since there are often fans who only ‘lurk’ on the forum, but do not register their memberships, or those who register but later withdraw from the community (see Baym, 2000, p.8). There are also a few people who registered under several usernames to play with their

<sup>61</sup> The statistical information collected here is only concerned with the new online forum where statistical information was provided on the website.

online identities.<sup>62</sup> The difficulties in identifying the exact number of PPU members reflect the limitations of virtual methods. In addition, personal details of the community members cannot be reliably observed. This accords with a widely acknowledged aspect of Internet communication: it is faceless, and physical appearances are not taken into account (see Sproll and Kiesler, 1986, p.1496-1497; Kollock and Smith, 1999, p.9).

### *Gender of the PPU fans*

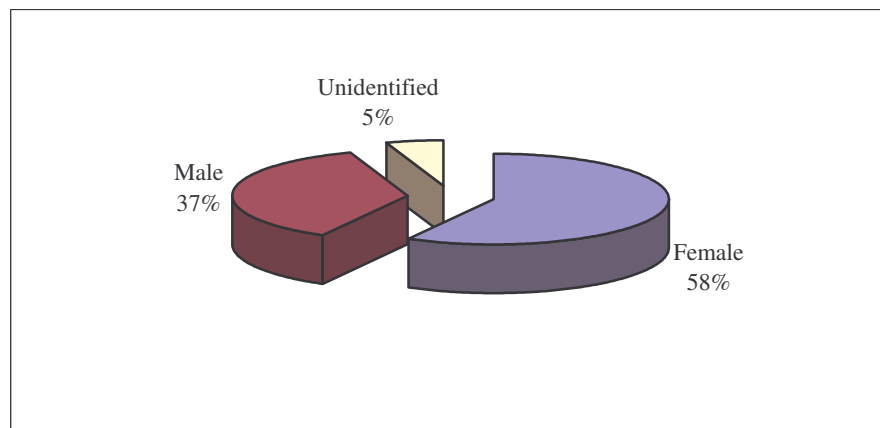
Before viewing the data regarding the gender and age of the PPU fans, it needs to be borne in mind that finding the exact information is difficult due to the limitations of the virtual methods of the Internet discussed above. The registration system of the PPU online forum did not require members to give their age and gender. Thus, it is difficult to provide information related to the members' age ranges. Even if the participants told their ages and genders to the group via the online forum, there is no way of knowing whether the given information was correct since people could play with their identities on the Internet (see Turkle, 1995, p.14).

In their self-introductory messages, some members gave their personal information and showed their photos, but there is no way to verify that type of information. Due to such limitations, the information provided here presents only a rough picture of the community.

---

<sup>62</sup> See section 6.6.2 for further discussion on the practice of online identities play of the PPU fans.





**Figure 3: Gender of the *Petchprauma* fans**

*Source: Introductory threads posted on the PPU online forum, 21 January 2003 - 27 July 2003*

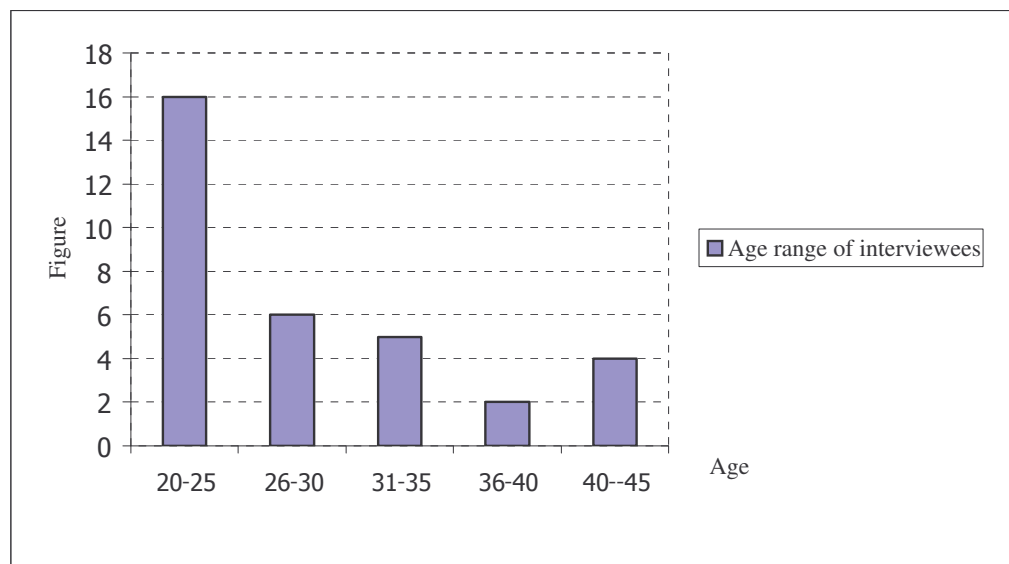
Figure 3 shows a higher number of female (58%) than male members (37%) within the online community.

The information provided here is collected from the four introductory threads in which members posted their self-introduction messages, as part of the membership process. In identifying the gender of the poster, the ‘sentence-final particles’ used in the Thai language - *khráp* (for male) and *khà* (for female) - were particularly helpful (see Panyametheekul and Herring, 2003). However, there were some members who did not use sentence-final particles or first person pronouns, so their gender cues could not be identified. In total, there were 233 members who posted self-introductory messages: 135 females and 86 males; only 12 members’ (5%) posts did not enable me to identify their gender.

This thesis does not have gender as its focus, unlike several studies about the online communities (see Pullen, 2000; Panyametheekul and Herring, 2003). However, it is interesting to note that the data shown above identify the PPU fan community as a mixed-gender group. Although the members are predominantly female, more than one third (37%) of the fans are male. This composition is different from those of other online fan communities, which have been studied, where the members were only female (see Baym, 2000; Pullen, 2000).

### *Age ranges of the PPU fans*

Group composition, or hierarchical structure within the group, is another important factor when discussing group behaviour (Baym, 1995, p.148). This section attempts to define the age ranges of the PPU members.



**Figure 4: Age range of the 33 interviewees**

*Source: Interviews with the PPU members, 14 July 2003-9 September 2003*

In this thesis, I can identify the ages of the PPU fans only from the 33 interviewees whom I have met face-to-face, and whom I asked for their names, ‘usernames’, ages, and occupations. The biggest group of interviewees were between 20 and 25 years old and were university students. Interestingly, these people were the most active members of the community and they participated in several face-to-face activities. The interviewees as a group developed close and harmonious relationships with each other, despite the fact that they had a wide age gap between them.<sup>63</sup> Such interactions and relationships among the active group will be particularly examined in this thesis later (see section 6.4 for the discussions on the ‘core group’).

To triangulate the data collected from the face-to-face situation, I observed the PPU online forum. The data clearly show the PPU community to be a mixed-age group. I found that the youngest member of the community was only 12 years old and was

<sup>63</sup> From participant observations of face-to-face activities during the fieldwork in Thailand.

an elementary-school girl. The young member, whose username was *Daranee*, posted her personal information in her self-introductory message. She and her mother were both members of the PPU community. They actively joined in both on and offline activities. Several pictures of the young member were later shown in the online forum, when other PPU members posted some pictures from their small group meetings at which she had been present. The young fan's appearance in real life proves that the online identity she gave was true.<sup>64</sup>

The age gap has sometimes raised concerns for newcomers as to whether they can participate in the community. On one occasion, an old man posted a self-introductory message including an attached photo, which revealed his concern about his age.<sup>65</sup>

*I'm very old so I'm not sure if you all would accept me as a member of the club. I really love novels like Petchprauma. Reading and travelling are both my interests. I thought that I would try to apply as a member anyway. Hopefully, I can join in activities and you might later know that I am actually young at heart.*<sup>66</sup>

This self-introduction demonstrates that age is a factor that is considered important when deciding to join the community. In this case, the poster was afraid that he would be too old for the group; he expressed his concern that other younger members might not accept him as part of the community. Although he did not mention his age in the posting, he posted his own photo. However, this member did not join any group offline activities, and thus it was impossible to discover whether the photo of a mature man attached to his self-introductory message was really him.

The way that the PPU fans provide personal information on the Internet is part of the self-disclosure norm of the group, which will be observed later in this thesis (see section 6.6.2). The mix of gender and the wide range age of the members is one of the key strengths of this thesis, which explores the behaviour and perceptions of people from different backgrounds. Interestingly, the different age groups and genders of the PPU community correspond to the characteristics of the *Petchprauma*

<sup>64</sup> From participant observation of the online forum.

<sup>65</sup> The representation of data from the interviews and the PPU online forum in this chapter (and chapter five and six) will be different. For the interview data, the writing will be shown with references to interviewees in footnotes. For the messages from the online forum, the writing will be in *italics* with the references of each thread owner put directly under the quoted message.

<sup>66</sup> From PPU online forum (b), Message posted by Rad21, 21 June 2003.

novel readers at large; as mentioned above, people of different age groups and genders read it.

#### 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the general Internet situation in Thailand as well as my specific case, the PPU online community. The description of Thai cultural values, the historical context and the nature of the Internet in Thailand all provided a macro-picture in which to place the case study. Three key cultural values are discussed as representative of the way Thais interact socially with one another. These are social harmony, fun-pleasure orientation and social connections. These ideas will be used in my empirical analysis. In Thailand, Internet development was initiated in the 1990s. The growth has been very much centralised in Bangkok. The understanding of the PPU online community is thus a micro-study of a broader picture of Internet use in Thailand.

For the fans, the *Petchprauma* novel was a starting point for gathering together. Many studies which observed online communities have found the rationale for the gathering of the fans which to be the sharing of common interests. For example, the research conducted by Rice and Love (1987, p.91), Rheingold (1993, p.27), and Gauntlett (2004, p.16) illustrate this point. In essence, the fact that the fans share an interest and a certain character may result in close affiliations among them. This idea will be further explored in the following chapters.

Additionally, the degree of interest in the *Petchprauma* novel varies greatly from fan to fan. Those who are very interested in the novel, enter the community directly via a search engine. Less serious fans enter the community for fun-pleasure and pursuit of social ends. The '*Petchprauma* trend' also supports or encourages interest in the novel via other media – a television programme and a movie project based on the *Petchprauma* novel.

The *Petchprauma* trend shows the blurred state of the boundaries between the Internet and other media. In the case of the PPU community, the fans are found to 'consume' all these different media: they read the novel, watch the television

programme, and so on. However, the Internet is different in that the individuals can be gathered together because of their mutual interest. Online, the fans are able to unite and discuss the novel. The fans' discussions will be studied in the next chapter with the aim of determining when and how these discussions bring about interesting social outcomes.

The number of members in the PPU community gradually increased from 2003 to 2004 with the increase in popularity of the novel. Generally, the PPU online fan community is a place for people of different age groups and genders, partly because the novel attracts people from various backgrounds and of different social status. Despite the difference in their social backgrounds, these people perceive that they share common personal characteristics, such as a fun-loving character, that is the fans perceive themselves as being non-serious and fond of fun activities. This entertaining quality of some fans is evident across the online community as a whole, characterises the novel, and is definitely part of Thai society's 'fun-pleasure' orientation. However, it is important to note that the perceptions and individual opinion of fans in how they view themselves as having similar characteristics needs to be treated with caution. It is therefore the task of the next chapters to find out about the practices of fans within the online community and see whether the fun-loving characteristics are reflected in their behaviour within the community. That is, looking beyond the perception of the fans is necessary in order to see whether the practices they talk about reflect the actual characteristics of the fans.

Another distinctive characteristic of certain fans is 'expertise'. This is only evident in a particular, small, group of fans who appeared in the *Fan Pan Tae* television programme. These fans are noted for being better acquainted with the novel than the other members because of their own talent and the 'expert' identity given by the television medium. Therefore, the status of this group of *Fan Pan Tae* contestants is more widely recognised and acknowledged by the rest of the group than the knowledge and status of other possible rival 'experts' who were not on this television programme.

These different characters will later be discussed in terms of their effect on the behaviour of the fans within the online community. The discussions in this chapter will help to interpret the practices of the fans, which will be examined in the next chapter in order to discover whether they bring about an expansion of social networks.

## Chapter Five

### Practices within the *Petchprauma* online community leading to the expansion of social networks

#### 5.1 Introduction

The task of this chapter is to answer the first subordinate question of the thesis: how are the social networks of the PPU fans expanded? To answer this question, the chapter aims to: firstly, identify patterns of the fans' practices that lead to the expansion of their social networks; and secondly, observe the nature of social relationships within the online community. It is worth noting that this chapter aims to understand a whole picture of how the PPU online community interacts as a group as well as the nature of relationships of the fans rather than only highlighting individual trends or perceptions.

This chapter illustrates that the PPU fans expand their social networks through the development of online discussions which focus on knowledge-based subject and social topics. With this shift of discussion topics from knowledge discussions on the *Petchprauma* novel towards social discussions, the fans can begin to form social relationships with one another. Fan interactions in social discussions often tend to lead to other social meetings online. The familiarity and relationships built upon such encounters, in turn, may lead to social meetings offline such as face-to-face encounters and activities. Participating in the online discussions, the PPU fans gain: first, knowledge about the *Petchprauma* novel; second, fun-pleasure from communicating with other members; and third, social support from the other members. As a result of these practices, relationships within the online community can develop and lead to the expansion of social networks.

Additionally, the relationships created within the PPU online community are found to develop quickly and often appear to be family-like. However the relationships created within the PPU online community vary with regard to different levels of intensity and dependency. Furthermore, since the PPU online community is an

example of a Thai case study, Thai cultural values are found to exist within the social interactions of the fans. In particular, the orientations towards fun-pleasure and smooth relationships play a dominant role in this case.

This chapter is divided into four main parts. The first part examines the online discussions of the PPU fans. The two popular purposes of the fans' discussions based on knowledge and social themes are examined. The benefits derived from these two discussion topics are found; they are knowledge expansion, fun-pleasure and social support gains. The second part investigates the face-to-face activities of the fans. In this part, the relationships developed in offline setting are examined. The third part discusses the nature of the relationships within the community in order to investigate the factors that contribute to the formation of social networks within the online community. The last part summarises the finding of this chapter.

## **5.2 Discussions within the PPU online community**

### **5.2.1 Popular discussion topics**

#### *Evidence from the online forum structure*

As previously discussed in chapter three, originally the structure of the online forum had no restrictions of which topics should be posted. Interestingly, although originally the main theme of the PPU fansite was the *Petchprauma* novel, the posting of messages to the online forum was not restricted to only those topics relating to the novel. The PPU fans started or chose to participate in a variety of discussion topics. Even at this early stage, the messages posted on the online forum of the PPU community could be divided into two main categories: discussions relating to the *Petchprauma* novel and discussions of other topics outside the context of the novel.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> The old forum was used during 23 April 2003-14 August 2003. When the new board was created, the old forum was continuing to be in used for a while until all members got used to the new system. The new board then replaced the old board permanently after 14 August 2003, from observation on the PPU's old forum during 23 April 2003 - 14 August 2003.



However, at a later period<sup>68</sup> the Webmaster changed the structure of PPU online forum to include sub-heading titles that were:

1. About *Petchprauma* novel
2. Free talk
3. Member zone
4. Literature zone
5. Uses and recommendation (for system maintenance)
6. About *Petchprauma* movie

The new structure set by the Webmaster above not only illustrated the range of topics discussed among the PPU fans, but it also showed the recognition of the ‘off-topic’ discussions among the fans. The presence of this new structure also indicated that the Webmaster saw this use of the PPU online community forum for both knowledge and social pleasure pursuits as reasonable. It could be observed that the structures of the online forum that was designed by the Webmaster shaped the community norms or set the precedent for group practice in terms of the posting the messages of the fans. From the new boards that were designed by the Webmaster, the separation of topics relating to *Petchprauma*, such as ‘About *Petchprauma* novel’ and ‘About *Petchprauma* movie’ and social topics such as ‘Member zone’ and ‘Free talk’ was clearly shown.

Alternatively, it could be argued that the number of messages posted about various topics indicated to the Webmaster the need of the community to have certain boards that were dedicated to particular topics. Another view is that the community’s perception that discussion topics other than those relating to the novel are equally as important as those discussion topics relating to the novel was clearly illustrated to the Webmaster from the volume of messages posted. Thus, the change of the online forum structure illustrates how the Webmaster was influenced by the practices of the community as a group.

---

<sup>68</sup> The old forum was used since 23 April 2003. The new board was created on 22 July 2003.

Although there was no detailed explanation or set of rules to indicate which board was to be used to discuss which types of messages, in general, the PPU members adopted this norm of posting messages according to the different headings described by the Webmaster. If messages were posted in wrong categories, the ‘PPU team’ – the group of co-founders of the fansite – exercised their control of the online forum by moving messages to suitable boards or deleting messages that were perceived as inappropriate or irrelevant to the group.<sup>69</sup>

For example, in the ‘member zone’ board, new members were encouraged to post messages in which they introduced themselves. The ‘Free talk’ board is open, without restraint, for the discussion of personal issues which are not related to the *Petchprauma* novel. On this board, jokes or friendly messages are often posted. The ‘Literature zone’ is for fans to write their own poems or short stories. However one type of message posts that are often moved to the ‘Literature zone’ board are ‘chain emails’ or ‘forwarded email’ messages.<sup>70</sup> Many PPU fans perceive such types of messages as annoying, boring or ‘not really contributing’ to any purposeful or meaningful discussion. Additionally, often such ‘chain emails’ or ‘forwarded email’ overload the forum space limits.<sup>71</sup> These practices of posting messages that are what the fans call ‘spin thread’<sup>72</sup> messages adds to the evidence that the PPU community is a place where any types of discussion can take place and that these discussions do not necessarily need to be related to the *Petchprauma* novel.

### *Evidence from the statistics of the PPU online forum*

By observing the statistics of the PPU online forum, a dramatic difference in the number of the posted messages between the topics that related to the *Petchprauma* novel and other ‘off-topics’ can be found. Figure 5 shows the number of lists of

---

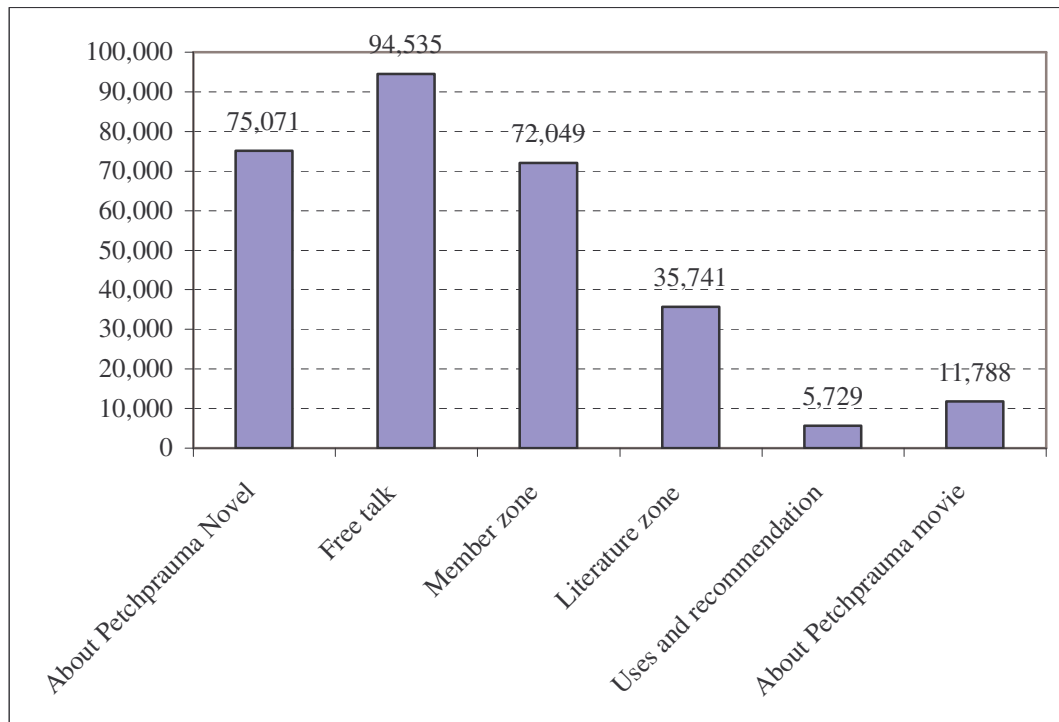
<sup>69</sup> See section 6.3 for discussions on the role, status and power of the ‘PPU team’.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Forward email’ is electronic messages containing unrelated information forwarded from one person to others’ mailboxes. This type of messages is popularly posted in the ‘Literature zone’ board. The messages sometime initiated acknowledgement of such posts and thus created some social discussions. However, the board is considered neither for social nor knowledge purposes because of such practice of ‘spin thread’; from observation on PPU online forum.

<sup>71</sup> Personal interview with *Rapin*, 30 August 2003.

<sup>72</sup> In Thai, ‘Spin threads’ is termed *Pun Kra thu*. It means the action of increasing answers in one thread aiming to increase the number of answers in those threads without any substantive comment.

threads on different boards on the PPU online forum during the period of one year from July 2003 to June 2004.<sup>73</sup>



**Figure 5: Number of threads on different boards on the PPU online forum, Information collected from 21 July 2003-30 June 2004**

*Source: Adapted from the PPU online forum statistical pages*

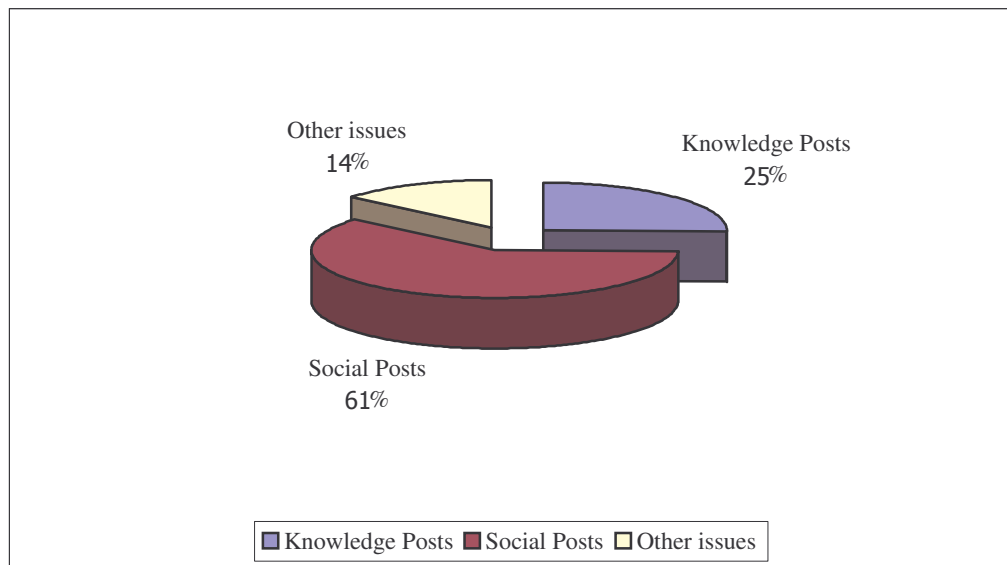
The highest number of threads comes from the ‘Free talk’ discussion board while the second highest number of threads comes from the ‘About *Petchprauma* novel’ discussion board. In the third place is the ‘Member zone’ board, where PPU fans can start to create new social relationships by introducing themselves to the PPU community and other fans can send welcoming messages to newcomers. The number of threads on the six different boards on the PPU online forum shows that although the fans gather together because they have a shared love of the *Petchprauma* novel, in general, they do not limit themselves to talk only about the novel.

As previously mentioned in chapter three about the analysis of online messages based on the structure of the forum, I divided the online messages into knowledge

<sup>73</sup> Lists of threads indicate each topic discussion title; the numbers of reply thus varies. This statistical information is gained from the new board statistical Webpage. Since the old board does not have such a statistical Webpage, the statistic from the old board is not included.

posts and social posts according to the contents of messages on different boards. It is worth reminding here that the knowledge posts were selected from the ‘About *Petchprauma* novel’ and the ‘About *Petchprauma* movie’ board. The social posts were selected from the ‘Free talk’ and the ‘Member zone’ boards. Messages from the other boards which included the ‘Literature zone’ and the ‘Uses and recommendations’ boards were categorised as ‘Other issues’.

Figure 6 shows that there is a greater number of social messages posted compared to the number of knowledge messages posted on the PPU online forum.

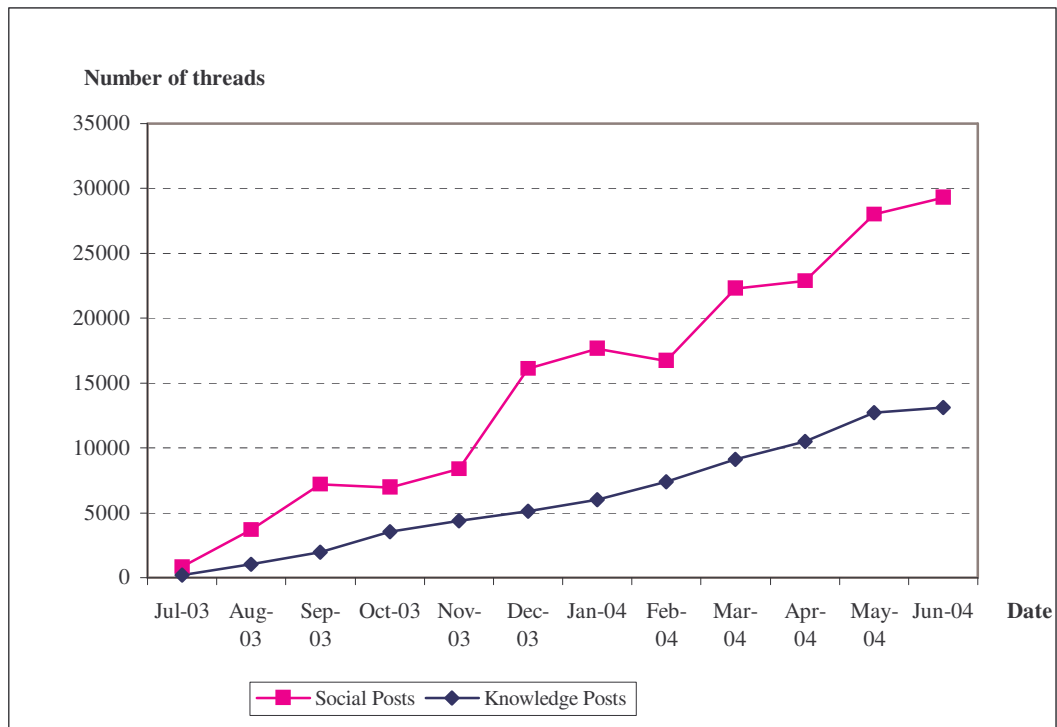


**Figure 6: Percentage breakdown of the different types of messages posted on the PPU online forum, Information collected from 21 July 2003-30 June 2004**

*Source: Adapted from the PPU online forum statistical pages*

Figure 6 shows that only 25 percent of messages that are posted on the PPU online forum are related to the *Petchprauma* novel. More than half (61%) of the messages are related to the social discussions of the members. This indicates the importance the role of the PPU online community as a space for the social interactions of the fans in spite of their initial purpose for sharing interest and knowledge about the *Petchprauma* novel.

Additionally, the dramatic contrast between the number of social posts compared to the number of knowledge-based posts can be seen in the figure below.



**Figure 7: The trend in the number of knowledge posts and social posts, Information collected from 21 July 2003-30 June 2004**

*Source: Adapted from the PPU online forum statistical pages*

Although Figure 7 shows a steady increase in the number of both knowledge-based and social posts during this time period of one year, the rise in popularity of social posts compared to knowledge-based posts with the PPU fans is obvious. It is also very interesting to note that since July 2003 when the number of social messages posted was only slightly higher than knowledge-based messages, the number of social messages has increased to such an extent that it was, in June 2004, more than double the number of knowledge-based messages.

It can also be observed from Figure 7 that the trend in the number of knowledge posts does not fluctuate as much as it steadily increases over time. By comparison, the trend in the number of social posts fluctuates a lot every few months. This periodic fluctuation in the number of social posts can be explained by the fact that the venue controllers of the social messages boards need to regularly exercise their power of being able to delete messages on the online forum. If these messages were not deleted, the message board would overload the forum space limits. The exercise

of such power to delete messages also indicates the importance given to knowledge discussions over the social discussions.<sup>74</sup>

### *Evidence from views of the PPU fans*

Within the PPU online community, the practice of discussing issues apart from the novel with the rest of the group are considered to be a normal custom. The following interview illustrates this point:

The community is like a meeting point for us to come and talk about *Petchprauma* but when we talk about it until there is nothing much left to talk about, we start to talk about other issues, which are not necessarily related to the novel. [...] I don't think what we did in PPU community is any different from other online communities that I used to join in, or it's perhaps because most of my online communities are related to books. Generally, we would start to talk with each other because we shared the interests about the books. Then the discussions move to other things like general issues, personal issues, and many more. And then we become closer with each other.<sup>75</sup>

The above extract reflects the view of many PPU fans towards the shift in the topics of discussions within the group. Typically, members of the community do not perceive such practice as something unusual or extraordinary. In the particular case of this fan, she has experienced similar changes in the topics of discussions in other online communities. The fan in this interview also acknowledges the need for carrying on conversations with other members. This view is also shared among many scholars who have made similar comments on the importance of maintaining communication among the people who participate in online communities (see Watson, 1997, p.104; Wilbur, 1997, p.7; Reid, 1999, p.113-114; Baym, 2000, p.22). The fan in this interview also points out that the shift of discussion topics from the original objective of the fan group helps to bring about closer relationships among the members of the online community.

A comment from another fan reveals how the relationships among the members of the online community are developed:

---

<sup>74</sup> See section 6.3.3 for the discussion on power of the 'PPU team'.

<sup>75</sup> Personal interview with *Phu Sao Meuang Yod*, 17 August 2003.

When more people enter the group, I think the only difference is that we have more messages circulated but the type of persons in this group is still the same. There are probably more playful messages now. At the beginning, we did not have a lot of people, I think we only had around 20 to 30, I'm not quite sure what the exact number was, but the number of messages was less at the time. People mostly asked questions about *Petchprauma* then. But we have begun to have more playful messages now because some of us get closer to each other.<sup>76</sup>

The difference in levels of closeness of the relationship is shown by their change in behaviour and the way in which they communicate with each other, for instance by increasing the exchange of playful messages. This fan noted that the development of personal relationships among certain members of the community resulted in more playful messages being posted on the online forum.

The interviewee also pointed out that the increased number of members on the PPU community has led to an increased number of messages being posted to the online forum. One interesting point to note is that the interviewee assumed that new members who join the online discussion appear to be the same 'type of persons' as those who were already in the group. This comment reflects this fan's recognition of the online identities of other members through having online interactions with them. Similar views have been observed in other research studies (see Turkle, 1995, p.14, 180; Rheingold, 1993, p.148).

Having observed these statistics from the online forum, and noticed the difference in number of posts in both knowledge and social types of online discussions, the following pages examine these two types of posts in detail. The evidence that such discussions take place in the PPU online community is investigated. Particular examples of discussion topics are given. The preferences and perceptions of the fans towards participating in particular types of discussions are also analysed and explored. The benefits and satisfaction gained by fans who interact with one another through these discussions are also considered.

---

<sup>76</sup> Personal interview with *Thung Ka Dat*, 25 August 2003.

## 5.2.2 Knowledge discussions

### *Evidence of knowledge discussions*

Before showing the evidence of the knowledge discussions, it is worth pointing out that the aim of this thesis is unlike the study of Baym (2000, p.21-24), which examines the purposes of the fans in their discussions about the fandom online. Baym's research classed the types of online posts differently (see section 3.4.2 for the analysis of online posts). By comparison, the knowledge posts analysed in this research only represents what the fans' common interest are about. This analysis does not aim to provide specific details of what purpose the fans have in discussing their 'knowledge posts'.

It was previously highlighted that the common interest of this group of fans rests upon the *Petchprauma* novel (see section 4.5.1). The PPU online community started out as a place for extensive discussions about the novel. Later, the fans were found to extend their discussions topics to include themes related to the *Petchprauma* movie and its production. These two issues of the *Petchprauma* novel and the *Petchprauma* movie are common topics in the knowledge discussions of fans.

The practice of the PPU fans to have knowledge-based discussions is consistent with the argument that the fans are not a passive audience, instead, the fans actively engage in the media context and make their own interpretation and meaning of the text (see Jenkins, 1992, p.209-210; Harris, 1998a, p.3; 1998b, p.41; Pullen, 20004, p.80). Similar to what has been found in the study of Baym (1998b, p.115-126), the PPU fans conduct the discussions that involve 'informing', 'speculating', 'criticising' and 'reworking' of the media text. However, it should be noted that, in the PPU online community, the knowledge discussion topics seem to be less popular than social discussions (see Figure 6). Evidence of the knowledge discussions that take place in the PPU community can be found in the online forum. Other activities of the fans, such as online chatting and face-to-face meetings appear to have mainly social purposes.



In the following pages, examples of knowledge discussions of the PPU fans are given to illustrate the content of the fans' knowledge discussions. Two common activities that take place are: special messages and threads which are created from the fans' creativity and their initiatives to enjoy the novel discussions in some new ways and also special messages that involve speculation about the novel.

### *A) Creativity of the fans*

One of the innovative products of the PPU fans was the creation of a map of the locations from the novel, aiming to demonstrate the journey of the characters from the beginning to the end. The fans pointed out the locations of key scenes from the novel with reference to the actual map of Thailand.<sup>77</sup> Giving that the novel was created from imagination of the writer; the fans' creation of the map demonstrates how they were so inspired by the novel that they began to develop their own distinct creative ideas. This activity not only illustrates an example of how the knowledge-based discussions of the fans were put to use, but this activity also characterises the fun-seeking nature of the fans. This example of the practice of fans in an online community corresponds with Jenkin's (1992, p.209-212) models of fandom, regarding the distinctive mode of reception, the interpretations of primary texts, and the constitutions of a particular 'art world'.

Another inventive example derived from the fandom discussions involved creating a series of questions to be asked to the online community. Questions relating to the *Petchprauma* novel are posted to challenge the fans. The format of this game is copied from the *Fan Pan Tae* programme. This game also act as a fun quiz or test for the community. The several threads regarding this kind of quiz questions are often referred as '*Fan Pan Tae* questions'.<sup>78</sup> A number of several different versions of this game have been made by various fans.

The following post from the forum shows an example of the type of question asked and reason of a fan for posting such messages:

---

<sup>77</sup> From PPU online forum (d) accessed on 28 September 2003.

<sup>78</sup> From PPU online forum (e), 31 October 2002.

*I think it has been a while that we did not post any questions for Petchprauma novel, so I'd like to post some today. I would like to share the information that I have and to re-check the correctness of the information. Those who know the answers, please come to answer the posts at your convenience. Oh, for another thing, in case those who want to compete in the Fan Pan Tae show, we can help sharing information by doing this.*

*OK, the first question is, how many publications of Petchprauma novel used to be published and with what publication house?*

*Very easy, huh?*<sup>79</sup>

After such test questions had been posted, many of the PPU fans reply and discuss the topic in order to find the correct answers. The posters of the question later reveal their answers in order to share the knowledge with the rest of the group. The way these 'experts' share their knowledge or insight with the rest of community through asking these questions as well as providing the answers strengthens the public reputation and identity of 'expertise' of these posters. Such recognition of 'experts' who provide contributions to the community's knowledge was also found in many other studies (see Baym, 1998b, p.118; Rheingold, 1993, p.59-60; MacDonald, 1997, p.137; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.515).

However, all these practices not only re-emphasise the knowledge and creativity of the fans of the online PPU community as a group, but also illustrates the fun-loving characteristic of the community as the fans continually find different ways to make the novel discussions enjoyable.

### ***B) Speculating***

Another activity of the PPU fans that is characteristic of knowledge-based discussions is the speculation about characters and plots in the novel. Often when the fans discuss the novel, different topics about the stories, locations and characters are critically observed and commented upon. The rich and detailed discussions give pleasure to the fans, especially when reading the novel. For instance, in one occasion, the fans discussed the novel characters by observing and interpreting characters' mindsets. The thread was 'the analysis of love story in *Petchprauma*'. In this thread,

---

<sup>79</sup> From PPU online forum (e), 31 October 2002, Message posted by *Rapin*.

the fans who participated discussed the love story of two characters in the novel. At the start of this thread, the fan who proposed this idea posted her query and examined different possible outcomes for the two characters of the novel:

*Have you ever thought what would happen if Choed Vut got married to Christina? I would like you to consider how much Choed Vut loves Christina. Does he only love her because of her appearance or does he just try to win her arrogant heart because it is a challenge to him? If Choed Vut truly loved Chris, what would happen if they got married and found out later that Chris's psychological problem remains? What if Chris harmed Choed Vut, would he still feel the same way for her? It's interesting to wonder whether his love would be able to get her successfully cured, if he brought her to hospital. If Chris can't be cured and has only one choice to devote herself to the religion would he let her go, given that he loves her so much?*<sup>80</sup>

Several other members answered the thread by giving out their ideas and opinions relating to the first poster's question:

*Umm...Personally I don't think Choed Vut truly loves Chris. But Chris is a beautiful and charming girl. When they made their journey in the jungle and there're only two girls. It's easy to fall for one and yes! I think it is love. However, if Choed Vut really loves Chris, and get married, I don't think she will be cured from such a damaging psychological problem because she didn't love him. If Chris devoted herself to the religion, I think he would have to accept that because otherwise it would be a sin to prevent someone going into religion. Choed Vut is a Buddhist so I don't think he would do such a thing. He might be quite sad at first, I guess.*<sup>81</sup>

Another fan responded that:

*Like Tuang said, I think there're only two choices in that jungle. Normally Choed Vut wouldn't have his eyes on Chris and I don't think they would get married because she didn't love him. There're so many sins in Chris's heart so going into the religion is the best way for her. Amen.*<sup>82</sup>

The above messages from this discussion illustrate how the fans adopted a 'distinctive mode of reception' as Jenkins (1992, p.209-210) proposes. This act of speculating about the character's behaviour and mindset is similar to Baym's (1998b,

<sup>80</sup> From PPU online forum (f), 10 September 2003, Message posted by Darimeya.

<sup>81</sup> From PPU online forum (f), 10 September 2003, Message posted by Jao Tuang.

<sup>82</sup> From PPU online forum (f), 10 September 2003, Message posted by Pra Pra Yun.

p.119-124) finding of the type of posts which she refers to as ‘speculating’. One similarity between the study of the PPU fans and Baym’s (1998b) study that was found is that by discussing these issues, the fans clearly enjoy the conversations they created with those with common interests. In addition to this, such actions of fans in speculating and talking about the characters as if they ‘know’ them in persons is corresponds with the ‘parasocial interactions’ discussed by Giles (2000, p.61-65; Giles, 2003, p.188). Such identification of the fans with the characters illustrates the appeal of the novel characters to the fans.

To triangulate both statistical data and textual data from the online forum, the following observes the fans’ perceptions towards their posting styles.

### *Fans’ preferences towards knowledge discussions*

It was previously mentioned in chapter four that some of the members of the PPU online community are considered to be the ‘experts’. Such members are seen to have more knowledge about the novel than others. For example, they are recognised from the *Fan Pan Tae* television programme (see section 4.6.2). The difference in the level of knowledge possessed by the community members affects their preferences of the online discussion topics and also their posting practices. For example, within the community, some fans appear to only participate in knowledge discussions, while other fans appear to participate in only social discussions.

Many PPU members value the knowledge posts because they can contribute to the group’s knowledge. Those fans with abilities to provide knowledge or to show particular expertises about the novel gain a lot of recognition. This leads to a quite elevated status in the group’s hierarchy (see section 6.3.2 for a discussion on the hierarchical structure within the community). The shared views and insights about the *Petchprauma* novel, as well as the *Petchprauma* movie production, are vital resources for the fans.

The fans perceive the knowledge discussions as intellectual, substantive, formal and useful. However, there are some fans who perceive the knowledge discussions as

serious and they prefer participating in the social discussions more than in the knowledge discussions. It is worth noting, however, that preferences and practices of individual fans can vary according to an individual's choice and attitude.

A comment from a fan, who is considered an 'expert' in the community, regarding her personal preferences in the styles of posts illustrates the view of how many fans perceived the knowledge and social discussion themes:

I'm not very keen to post messages on the social boards actually because I prefer to answer or contribute to the intellectual threads. I don't like to post playful messages and I found that fewer people post useful threads. Most of the time, they post something that is not very useful.<sup>83</sup>

The above interview illustrates this fan's perspective of how the posts about the *Petchprauma* novel are seen as more intellectual and useful than the social ones, which are perceived as more playful but non-useful. As a result of this, this member's participation in the knowledge-based forums is limited with 'fewer people' as the social type of posts tend to generate a higher volume of responses and participants.

By comparison to the above fan, another member of the PPU community who is also considered an 'expert' in the group shows his neutral perspective as this member joins in the posting activities of both knowledge and social discussions:

I prefer to post the formal messages relating to the novel, but if others post an entertaining message, I also play along with them. When I answer the posts, I don't do it seriously. My message is like half-formal half-playful. Yes, this is my style.<sup>84</sup>

The interviewee also illustrates Thai characteristics of being a 'fun-loving' person, especially in the way he justify his actions with his comments about not taking himself too seriously. In addition to this, this fan shows evidence of following practice values of maintaining a 'smooth interpersonal relationship' through his compromise interactions with the other members. This illustrates the Thai cultural

---

<sup>83</sup> Personal interview with *Rapin*, 30 August 2003.

<sup>84</sup> Personal interview with *Nai Ta Han Peuan To*, 20 July 2003.

values of social harmony, which have been also observed by several scholars (see Suntaree, 1990, p.46, 160; Mulder, 1990, p.47-48; Unger, 1991, p.28).

Another interview with a fan shows a mix of perceptions towards his own posting style due to the inconsistency of his answers concerning his behaviour and preferences of messages posted in the online forum:

I prefer to answer questions about *Petchprauma*. I don't do 'spin threads' but I would go to say hi to new members or congratulate people on several occasions. My style is very simple. I might tease some people but not a lot. I might give a laugh sometimes. [...] I generally like all the posts about *Petchprauma*, I would go in to answer or learn from those posts. I'm not very interested in the 'Free talk' type of messages.<sup>85</sup>

The fan sees himself as a knowledge poster but he also engages in activities of social discussions. The denial of 'spin threads' posting style contrasts with many non-substantive types of posts he chose to perform. The practices of this fan indicated how participation in the social discussions was sometimes unavoidable by the fans, especially when one wanted to make social relations with others.

### ***Knowledge expansion gain***

Following from the reasons that the fans entered the community, they have expectations of seeking knowledge about the *Petchprauma* novel as well as discussing ideas related to the novel. In return, the fans benefit from the shared insight and collective knowledge of the group members. Therefore, the PPU fansite becomes an information base for specific details and trivia related to the novel. There is a difference in the levels of expertise possessed by the people who contribute to the questions and answers being raised. However in this community, as has been observed in other study groups, a large amount of knowledge and information can be and is accumulated (see Rheingold, 1993, p.57-59; Baym, 1998b, p.118). This observation reflects the role of an online fan community as being an extensive source of information. This role confirms what several scholars have noted about the role of the Internet as a great information source for its users (see Rheingold, 1993, p.13, 57;

---

<sup>85</sup> Personal interview with *Kha Mode Dong*, 30 August 2003.

Rafaeli and LaRose, 1993, p.223; Wellman *et al.*, 1996, p.219; Sproull and Fajaj, 1997, p.36; Kollock, 1999, p.226).

Knowledge is an important element for online fan communities. Many studies discuss the importance of knowledge for the fans – it draws interests from the fans who look for specific meaning behind media texts and it creates different hierarchical status among the fans (see e.g. MacDonald, 1997, p.137; Baym, 1998b, p.122; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.515). Thus, the discussions among the people who shared the same interests creates not only the specific knowledge and allows this knowledge to be available to other fans, it also create pleasure for the fans in discussing about their fandom such as the discussion about the characters or its narrative story. My key point on the knowledge expansion gain of the PPU fans is that the participation of fans on the novel-related topics gives the PPU members the opportunity to learn more about the novel and they take pleasure in doing this. The following discuss the perceptions of fans towards the information function of the fansite.

For PPU fans, the receipt of such knowledge is valuable for the individual members. One fan mentioned:

I have gained a lot of knowledge and broadened my perspectives from interacting with various people since I joined this group. Although I did not really expect to get anything much from the group at first, I'm satisfied with what the group has to offer. What I wanted was only that I could talk with other people and that we could understand what each other might be saying. But I have learnt to see things from the perspectives of many other different people such as people of different ages, sex and so on.<sup>86</sup>

The interview shows that the member considers that the sharing of many different perspectives and ideas about the novel are important to her participation in the community. Her expression of what she gained from the PPU community is matched with her practices within the community since she had also expressed that she was only interested in discussing substantive issues.

Another interview with a fan confirmed how the community is a great source of information:

---

<sup>86</sup> Personal interview with *Rapin* 30 August 2003.

I have gained a lot more knowledge since I joined the group. I get to talk with many others and it's not only about *Petchprauma* but also about other things outside the context of novel. When I joined this community, it is like I'm learning something new everyday.<sup>87</sup>

By discussing such knowledge-based topics, the individual fans benefit from gaining a deeper level of knowledge regarding the novel. Additionally, the online community as a whole collects a large amount of knowledge that is shared among the fans and this in turn generates more discussions and promotes further insights into the novel.

Having learned about knowledge discussion in the PPU online community, the next section examines the social discussions that take place in the PPU fandom.

### 5.2.3 Social discussions

#### *Evidence of social discussions*

As previously shown there is a greater number of a social post on the PPU online forum compared to knowledge posts (see Figure 6). This dominant social practice of the fans confirms the role of the PPU online community as a place for expanding the social networks of its members. Messages which relate to social discussions not only provide fun-pleasure to the fans, but also help to strengthen the relationships that are created and developed within the PPU online community.<sup>88</sup>

PPU fans interact with one another by participating in social-related topics such as exchanging greeting messages, personal news, personal messages and welcoming messages of old members to new members. These messages are not related to the novel at all and no specific expertise is required in order for fans to take part in social discussions. These types of social discussion of the fans have the distinct characteristics of being overtly entertaining, playful and non-serious. The main aim of such messages is to create fun-pleasure, or as the Thai people call it, *sanuk*. Thus

---

<sup>87</sup> Personal interview with *Pu*, 24 August 2003.

<sup>88</sup> From participant observation in the PPU online forum



the fun-pleasure orientation these social messages can be considered to be examples of the values of the fun-loving and easygoing Thai people.

The social discussions among the PPU members are held in two venues, the online forum and chatroom. The following gives examples from these two venues.

#### ***A) Personal news and messages in online discussions***

The following thread title ‘Long time no see with this home’ illustrates how the fans typically use the online forum for sending messages which contain personal news to other members:

*Hi everyone. Miss you all so much. I have been away for several days. I went to be a good daughter taking care of my mum who got sick. I have been thinking that someone might be thinking about me because I didn't tell you all before I was away.*<sup>89</sup>

The above thread demonstrates how the fan brings the context of her offline life into the online discussion. By explaining the reason for her absence from the online forum this particular member also expresses her intention to maintain good relationships with other members. Additionally, the use of the term ‘home’ instead of the community signals the familiarity and the sense of belonging that this fan feels for the PPU community. This particular thread received 17 replies from members expressing their delight for the poster’s return to the online forum. Two of the responding messages were as follows:

*I miss you, too ‘Phi’[elder brother or sister] Koi. I miss your messages as well. Ha Ha. While you were away, there was no one on the lady’s side.*<sup>90</sup>

*Has your mum recovered? ‘Phi’[elder brother or sister] Koi is such a great daughter. Welcome back. I miss you, too.*<sup>91</sup>

These responding messages illustrate how the online community has become a space for social interactions. Both of the replying posters used the Thai word *Phi* in order

<sup>89</sup> From PPU online forum (g), 9 May 2004. Message from *Kru Koi Lae Roi Yim*.

<sup>90</sup> From PPU online forum (g), 9 May 2004, Message posted by *Vanassanun*.

<sup>91</sup> From PPU online forum (g), 9 May 2004, Message posted by *Jao Tuang*.

to address the original poster and show their respect to this poster who is older than them. The replying posters' use of this form of address also shows their close relationship to the original poster. Additionally, this shows that they have identified the poster's age and compare it to their own. This familiarity with the original poster's age is a result to the practice of self-disclosure that is the norm within the PPU fan group.

Another example of the social messages posted which represent the *sanuk* character of the group members, is the thread title 'Miss PPU' by Ying IO. The thread which is written as a poem led to the organisation of a beauty competition among the group of fans. The thread started with the presentation of ten member's names and pictures and requested other members to vote for the winner. The ten members selected play along by posting messages to try to promote their rank and ask for votes from the other fans. Thus through this game, fans are provided with another incentive to develop and maintain good relationships with other members of the PPU community. This thread illustrates how the fans create *sanuk* activities within the community that do not have any direct connection to the *Petchprauma* novel. Additionally, the thread shows the creativity of the thread poster as well as her fun-loving character.<sup>92</sup> Therefore this social discussion illustrates a clear example of how the PPU community members have a fun-pleasure orientation and also shows the fans' creativity in organising this game within the online forum.

Although the social messages posted on the online forum tend to be viewed as non-substantive because the lack of knowledge contributions to the group, these social posts serve a purpose that, though different, is just as important. The number of social discussions that the fans participate in demonstrate that the social relationships of the fans have already expanded from their original shared interest in discussing the *Petchprauma* novel or the *Petchprauma* movie. The following section examines how the fans develop their relationships to another level by communicating with each other via online chat rooms.

---

<sup>92</sup> From PPU online forum (h), accessed on 25 July 2003.

### ***B) Interactive online chatting***

Apart from posting messages on the online forum which is the main activity space on the fansite, the PPU members developed a more personal type of communication in the form of online chatting. Online chatting was not primarily established on the PPU fansite, but it was the result of the development of the personal relationships of the fans. The PPU members use Microsoft's MSN programme to interactively exchange their textual conversations online. Before the interactive chatting process can begin, the fans have to know the other person's email addresses in order to add them to their own lists. This indicates the improved levels of personal relationships and trust that are created and shared among the members who invite each other to chat interactively. On the online forum, there are several threads requesting members to post their email addresses and add one another to individuals' MSN's lists. These messages requesting online chats are normally posted and organised by the 'core group' who perform an active role in both online forum and online chatting sections of the PPU website (see section 6.4 for discussion on the hierarchical status of the 'core group').<sup>93</sup>

From the use of this form of interactive communication, the PPU fans who participate in online chatting are found to open themselves up more and to get to know one another better. The following interview illustrates this point:

The group get close very quickly. I think one of the reasons is that we chat on MSN. It is even a better way of getting to know people and how they think than meeting face-to-face. Words can express more things and can let us know each other more than real live meetings. When seeing each other face-to-face we can pretend, but if we type, I think it comes straight from the heart.<sup>94</sup>

This fan's comments confirm that even without any physical appearance or physical interactions, textual discussions can create the feeling of connection with others. In another interview with a PPU member, the importance of online chatting in the creation of personal relationships is shown:

---

<sup>93</sup> From participants observation on the chatrooms during the fieldwork.

<sup>94</sup> Personal interview with *Tamachan*, 20 July 2003.

Sometimes when I chat on the Internet, I feel more confident to talk or to type about things than when I meet with people face-to-face. We feel secure enough to talk something from our mind. When we meet face to face we can't normally reveal all of those things to people, but when we type, it's easier.<sup>95</sup>

From the interview, the fan expresses the view that many other people have that it is easier to open up oneself to the other fans via online chatting. Thus, despite the fact that the nature of the Internet medium means that social context cues tend to be at a bare minimum, this perception illustrates the benefit of online communication to Internet users. This point corresponds with the argument of Walther (1996, p.22-23): some people are able to express their personal views, to put across their inner feelings, and to reveal themselves more overtly in online environments because they can be less worried about own appearances or other social context cues.

Through chatting, the relationships between the PPU community members can be observed to develop a lot. One of the heavy users of the chatting programme explained her chatting habits:

I'm very close to the people I chat with on MSN. We update each other all the time about what's happening in the community. Sometimes I call some people who were not online that day to give them updates, so that they can keep up with what's happening. It makes me believe that friendship in the virtual world is real. As we talk more and more, we feel closer. If they join the meetings, we become even closer because we know their real selves. Thus, we feel more confident to chat with them or post on the Webboard.<sup>96</sup> On MSN, we can talk about everything, like complaining about my school days, or anything else. Sometimes there can be misunderstandings because of the language that we use, that's why we also have to use telephone. [...] Chatting on MSN lets me know a lot more people in this group. Although I have just come into the community; I have got to know a lot more people than someone who has been here for years. I've got a reputation of being like the 'MSN queen' because I always keep my MSN open. If I'm not busy with anything else, I could chat in five to six rooms at one time.<sup>97</sup>

According to the above interviewee, online chatting brought the relationships of the interviewee with other fans closer. Their interactions are similar to close friends in

---

<sup>95</sup> Personal interview with *Kha Mode Dong*, 30 August 2003.

<sup>96</sup> The PPU fans use the term 'Webboard' to mean online forum or BBS system. In this thesis, the term 'Webboard' and online forum is used interchangeably.

<sup>97</sup> Personal interview with *Vee*, 20 July 2003.

real life because they feel that they can talk about anything with one another. Moreover, the use of other communication tools such as the telephone as well as having face-to-face meetings further confirm how the personal relationships created on the Internet can be developed into the daily life of the fans. Additionally, the close relationships which stemmed from the online chatting also affect the practices of the online forum. This shows how the two activities are linked. The fan's active practices on the chatroom led to the recognitions from the other fans. This fan's fast-developing relationships with other fans show that the levels of online relationship can also depend on how active participants in the group are. This result has also been observed in other research studies (see Baym, 1995, p.157; Parks and Floyd, 1996, p.93; MacDonald, 1998, p.137; Harris, 1998b, p.48).

Interestingly, the group does not necessarily chat about the novel, instead, individuals in the group engage in more personal topics. Such discussions tend to have the direct aim of creating social support and companionship. Another active member on the chatroom confirms this point:

MSN chatting helps us to know the others deeper. For example, we will know what their jobs are or where they live. If we know their backgrounds, this makes the talks become easier. When some members come in on the chatting list, we try to invite them, so that we get to know them more.<sup>98</sup>

From this interview it is illustrated that many fans feel very comfortable with revealing their self-identities. In addition to this, the interviewee's use of the word 'we' reflects how she felt as part of the chatting group. It also reflects the division line of the relationships among the members inside this chatting group and other members who do not participate in online chatting.

Moreover from this interview, the main purpose of chatting is mentioned as getting to know other members. To the Thai people, personal topics such as jobs or where people live are a few of the common topics for initial small talk. Furthermore, the Thai people often tend to use the knowledge of such information to make connections with their own background to see whether or not they share anything in

---

<sup>98</sup> Personal interview with *Nu Mu*, 20 July 2003.

common. If there are any things that a Thai individual shares with another, the knowledge of this common reference point will help to them to speed up the development of the relationship. For example, when I posted my home location in my self-introduction message, one of the PPU members replied to say that she also lived in the same area.<sup>99</sup> After that, there was a new thread posted to ask the PPU members about their locations.<sup>100</sup> There were 57 replies on that thread and the members began discussing and identifying the people who live near them and some suggested local offline meetings. The value of common ties and connection is seen to be important in Thai society. This illustration of the Thai custom of searching for common connections with other people confirms what Christensen (1992) notes as the culture of seeking personal ties in the Thai society.

### *Fans' preferences towards social discussions*

As well as fans who prefer participating in only the knowledge-based forums, in the PPU online community there are a number of fans who prefer taking part in the social discussions. As previously mentioned, most of the members of the PPU community consider the messages posted in the knowledge discussions to be intellectual and useful. The fans appreciate the benefits that they gain from reading such substantive posts. However, often one of the reasons that members give for being reluctant to post intellectual messages and join in knowledge discussions is partly because they feel that they do not have enough knowledge about the novel. This indicates that having different levels of expertise can be a factor in the posting practices or preferences that are demonstrated by fans.

The following interview demonstrates the fan perceptions towards her preferences of online discussion topics:

I normally post on 'free talk' board because I don't have a lot of knowledge about the *Petchprauma*, so I don't like to answer intellectual posts. I prefer to answer general topics. But I read those substantive issues because I think it can improve my knowledge.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> From PPU online forum (b), 26 April 2003.

<sup>100</sup> From PPU online forum (i), 5 June 2003.

<sup>101</sup> Personal interview with *Pu*, 24 August 2003.

This interview reveals that she does not like to post messages in knowledge discussions because she prefers participating in the social discussions and does not feel she has a lot of knowledge about the novel. However, the interviewee still refers to reading the messages posted about the novel as an enjoyable activity which she sees as an opportunity to improve her knowledge. Another fan explains her habits of posting social messages:

I try to post something *sanuk* to the group. For me, the intellectual posts are only for reading since I don't have any knowledge to add in reply to them. If there's anything I know, I'll answer it sometimes. Most of my posts are for teasing other members. I think it's good fun.<sup>102</sup>

For the PPU fans, social discussions are considered as *sanuk*. Thus, the members of the community gain pleasure from discussing in these entertaining social topics. Many fans consequently become attracted to such types of social posts more than the knowledge posts.

In the same way, an interview with another fan clarifies how the fan perceives the PPU online community as a fun pursuit. In the fan's own words:

I love reading stories or ideas relating to *Petchprauma* but I rarely answer those questions. I do not like to answer something too serious or substantive. [...] Coming to the Webboard is a *sanuk* activity for me, so that I get to talk, to answer and to read in the things that I like. Just reading those posts make me feel *sanuk* already.<sup>103</sup>

In the interview, the fan reveals that the posts about the novel give her pleasure. However, rather than discussing the topic that is of common interest to the people in the PPU community, the novel, the fan chose to socialise with others by participating in only social or entertaining topics.

In addition to this, the characteristics of playfulness are also demonstrated by the fans' behaviour and in the practices that they follow in the community. Apart from being able to provide entertainment for the rest of the group, playful messages can

---

<sup>102</sup> Personal interview with *Ying IO*, 30 August 2003.

<sup>103</sup> Personal interview with *Thung Ka Dat*, 25 August 2003.

help to promote the relationship of the fans to another degree in which they can talk about personal issues:

Before this, I was afraid that I did not know much about the *Petchprauma* novel because I only read it once. So I didn't know if I could talk to other people but as the time passed and we are getting closer now, I feel very comfortable to answer the messages posted, especially from those people whom I know.<sup>104</sup>

From the above comment, the fan admits that despite feeling initial shyness and reluctance, she gradually increased her confidence in posting different messages over a period of time and also after getting to know people from the group. This point indicates that increased familiarity among the fans can affect their practices in posting. In this particular example, the number of friendly messages that are posted increased as a result of the fan's familiarity with others.

### ***Fun-pleasure gain***

In general since reading the *Petchprauma* novel or watching the movie are considered by the fans to be leisure activities. In a similar way, participation in the social discussions in the PPU online community is seen as a 'fun' activity for entertaining purposes. The fans perceive such activities as *sanuk* and they are partly attracted to the community for that reason. This idea is also linked with the habit of 'playing Internet' and reflects the influence of Thai cultural values of fun-pleasure orientation that has been reported by many scholars (see Suntaree, 1990, p.46, 160; Mulder, 1990, p.47-48; Unger, 1991, p.28). Additionally, the importance that the Thai people place on keeping smooth interpersonal relationships has also been observed.

This cultural preference can be observed by the interactions of the PPU fans in both the practices that they adopt in online discussions and the characteristics of fun-loving individuals that they show (see section 4.6.1). Such practices reveal the way Thai fans 'play' within the community and easily create smooth relationships with one another based on *sanuk* practices. The PPU fans gain a lot of fun-pleasure from

---

<sup>104</sup> Personal interview with Vee, 20 July 2003.



the community. This form of fun entertainment comes from two sources, from discussing about the novel and from socialising with one another.

The fans gain pleasure from discussing their common interest in the PPU novel with other fans. When fans discuss different levels of expertise of specific knowledge, they not only accumulate a large amount of information about the fandom, but they also gain pleasure in exchanging their ideas with like-minded people. The following interview illustrates this point:

I like it that the people in this community like the same things that I like so when we talk with each other, we can talk easily. In fact, I can't talk about topics like these with anyone else. There's no one to talk to me like this group does. So, I get in here to exchange my feelings with these people. And we can exchange our interpretations of the story and tell each other what parts of the story we like.<sup>105</sup>

The interview shows pleasure in sharing of personal feelings when discussing something related to the novel. Such pleasure of discussing fandom has also been found in Baym's (1998b, p.118) study. Since the fans' preferences for practices were found to lean towards social and entertaining purposes more than knowledge purposes (see Figure 6), most of the interviewees were found to report their feeling of appreciating the gaining of fun-pleasure from the community more often than the knowledge opportunities.

In the social discussion theme, the PPU fans are found to exchange messages that are overtly entertaining and not related to the novel. In general, PPU fans value the fun-pleasure gained from belonging to the community and socialising with one another. The PPU fans perceive the online community as a mean of entertaining, socialising, reducing stress levels and relaxing. They feel that they can relax and create social relations with other members. The following interview extract shows a common perception held by fans of the community:

I got so much fun from here. I can reduce my stress. Everybody is very funny. Sometime it's unbelievable that they can be that funny. My friends always tease me that I'm in the community of people who are crazy about *Petchprauma*. They know this because my computer screen always has

---

<sup>105</sup> Personal interview with *Wan Raek*, 24 August 2003.

this website on. Sometimes, I get some good advice, too. If I have any questions, I can ask them.<sup>106</sup>

The interviewee points out that the social interactions within the community bring entertainment and enjoyment to the fan. The fun-pleasure values and the high levels of commitment to the community are shown. In an interview with another fan, the enjoyment from reading the posts and socialising with other fans are raised:

I get to relax and reduce my stress because sometimes I feel stress from my studies. Before this, I'd normally go to bed and sleep to reduce my stress but now I feel that I have someone to talk to. So, I feel better after going online to talk to my friends. Meeting and talking with people help me get a better state of mind. At least when I enter the MSN programme or read the different posts, I can feel better and become more relaxed. It moves the tensions away. I can get into wider social groups, too. In the university, I only meet people of the same age. But in here, I can meet people from different places, like those who already graduated or have jobs. I can learn how people of different generations think and how to behave myself among them. I can learn a lot about the outside world through talking with them. They can teach me something that I'd never know and I can collect those good ideas to apply in my life. It really helps me to broaden my world.<sup>107</sup>

The interview shows firstly, that the fan uses the community as an alternative way to reduce stress from her study. Secondly, the fan acknowledges the broadening of perspectives by interacting with many other people. Thirdly, the social opportunities she gains to expand her social network are also mentioned.

However, the fans not only gain knowledge and fun-pleasure opportunities in the PPU online community, the fans also gain social support from their expanded social networks. This point is discussed in the following section.

### ***Social support gain***

The broadening of social networks of the PPU fans leads to the development of social support from other members in the community. Often the social support gained online is seen as a replacement for the lack of such support in 'real' life. One fan expresses her feeling when she gains social support from the online community:

---

<sup>106</sup> Personal interview with Nai Nittra, 24 August 2003.

<sup>107</sup> Personal interview with Vachimantrai, 20 July 2003.

When I have some things that make me feel not well, I'll come and post messages here because people here are like my friends. So, if I don't feel well and I want to talk to somebody, I'll just post and post. I felt really good when people came to answer my post because I don't have many friends so when I feel sad, I only have two people to talk with and if they are not free at the time, I don't have anyone to talk with. With this group, I feel like I'm just someone whom they didn't even see my face, but they came to cheer me up, tell me not to be worried. Like one time when people came to say happy birthday to me, it's very special to have someone I don't really know do that for me.<sup>108</sup>

The interview demonstrates that fans seek out and in return gain emotional and social support from other members via the community online forum. This result is similar to those found in other studies (see Mickelson, 1997, p.157; Turner *et al.*, 2001, p.245-246; Miyata, 2002, p.543). The pleasure of 'being recognised' by other members as discussed by Baym (1995, p.157) is also shown. The interview also shows the feeling of connecting with others that created from textual discussions via the Internet. Such feeling of connecting with one another partly explains the profound relationships that are created online.

When observing the practices of the fans on the online forum when they discuss social issues, online messages that seek out for social support are often found. One of the examples of these types of posts is the thread title 'When love turns into revenge'<sup>109</sup>, in which a fan seeks advice from the other fans for her personal issue with someone she knows in 'real' life.

*Please somebody help me out. Now I feel as if I am being betrayed. It started out from a feeling of loyalty and faithfulness. I did everything for that person but I was betrayed badly. Now I feel so much pain and want to take revenge. Any of you who have experienced feelings like this please help me. How can I pass through such a feeling at this moment. Because all I feel now is revenge and I want to destroy everything. [...].*

There were 37 replies on this thread and at the end the owner of the thread posted back a reply in which she thanked everyone for their support and advice in response to her message. This type of online post illustrates how social support can be sought out and gained from the online community.

<sup>108</sup> Personal interview with *Darimeya*, 14 July 2003.

<sup>109</sup> From PPU online forum (p), 2 June 2003, message posted by *Darimeya*.

Another advantage of expanding social networks in the PPU online community is that the members feel that they can choose social relationships as alternatives to the existing social networks that they already have. The following interview illustrates this point:

Can you believe that when I went to university I did not have any friends although there were many people in my university. If we talk with each other in class, we cannot listen to the teachers, right? Before this, I was very afraid of the Internet, I did not know whom can I trust. But I think if we choose friends from online wisely, the relationship that is developed online gradual over time could last longer than the relationships with friends who meet in real life. Online we get to know each other slowly, by ways of talking with each other and getting to understand and adjust ourselves to be good friends with each other. With friends in real life, we meet and we separate because we live in different places. But with the online community, we can talk everyday. In real life, when people come to be friends with me, I don't think their intentions are very sincere sometimes.<sup>110</sup>

The interview shows firstly that the fan perceives the relationship created online as a better way of finding friends since she preferred to develop friendships with someone slowly to get to know them before meeting in real life. This point corresponds with the argument of Rheingold (1993, p.26) about the difference between creating social networks online and offline. Secondly, the fan acknowledged the advantage of the Internet in providing daily communications with other people in the community without having to travel. Thirdly, the fan created the alternative online social group as a replacement for the real life condition. The following section examines the expansion of the fan online activities to face-to-face encounters.

### **5.3 Expansion to face-to-face activities**

#### **5.3.1 Types of face-to-face activities**

The interactions of members of the PPU community are not limited to those that take place online. The fans also extend their interactions into real lives through the organisation of face-to-face activities. This practice of the PPU fans demonstrates

---

<sup>110</sup> Personal interview with *Maria*, 17 August 2003.

how the PPU fans expand their social networks from their online lives to their offline lives. Thus, their online community experience is seen as a part of their everyday lives instead of being separate.

Additionally, by choosing to communicate with others via other communication methods such as telephone or face-to-face meetings, it is obvious that for certain fans in this online community, online communications alone is not enough for them to remain in contact with others. This point corresponds with the media richness theory and social presence theory which argues that online communication has lower degree of richness and lesser degree of social presence than face-to-face communication (see Daft and Lengel, 1984; Short *et al.*, 1976).

The face-to-face socialisation of the fans can be divided into two main types. The first category relates to fan conventions organised formally among the community members. The second category relates to small group meetings organised by groups of fans who have developed close relationships with one another.<sup>111</sup> The following sections discuss both forms of social events.

### **5.3.2 Evidence of face-to-face activities**

#### ***A) PPU fan conventions***

The extension of online discussions to face-to-face meetings illustrates the PPU group norm in which the disclosure of the members' identities is considered important. To some extent, reminders of this practice need to be advertised by the co-founders and certain influential people who have the agenda to encourage the members to open the real identities.<sup>112</sup> This self-disclosure practice of the community members encourages other fans to follow such a norm and also to join the community. A comment from the fan illustrates this point:

---

<sup>111</sup> From participant observation at a fan convention on the 15 June 2003, at Book Café restaurant, Bangkok; and eight small group meetings during the fieldwork.

<sup>112</sup> See section 6.3.2 for the discussions of the power of the 'PPU team' in forcing self-disclosure norm.

Before this I had never quite believed that friends from the Internet world as sincere like this. But in this group, we can go to see each other's photos and so it's easier to come to meet them face-to-face.<sup>113</sup>

From the interview, the fan shows her hesitation in joining the community at first, however since the self-disclosure norm was developed, she feels more open. This practice of self-disclosure in offline interactions also leads to an increase in levels of relationships within the community. Such importance of self-disclosure in creating personal relationships online is observed in other studies (see Parks and Floyd; 1996, p.88-89; Yum and Hara, 2005).

The fan conventions are formal meetings for the community members, organised by the co-founder of the website – the 'PPU team'.<sup>114</sup> Every fan is invited to participate via the online forum. The objective of the meeting is to develop relationships within the group. There were five conventions among the PPU fans before I was able to conduct the offline participant observation. The organiser of the conventions declared this event the official sixth fan conventions and invited the PPU members to join in.<sup>115</sup>

As a participant in the sixth convention of the PPU community, I was able to observe the fans' activities and interactions within the group. The fan convention was held at a restaurant named 'Book café' in Bangkok. There were 45 members who attended the event. The fans shared a buffet lunch together and played quiz games by raising questions related to the *Petchprauma* novel. Since this fan convention was the sixth formal meeting, different levels of relationships of the fans were noticeable, especially among those who have attended the previous conventions and those who are newcomers. From my observation, the activities are organised mainly for social reasons. The offline interactions helped the fans to extend their social relationships to offline lives. The convention was well attended by both males and females. I did not find any difference between the male and female participants regarding their engagements with the face-to-face activities. As mentioned earlier, the events were organised for a group social gathering rather than for romantic relationships.

---

<sup>113</sup> Personal interview with *Pu*, 24 August 2003.

<sup>114</sup> See section 6.3.3 for the discussion on the hierarchy of venue of the 'PPU team'.

<sup>115</sup> From participant observation on the online forum.

The participants were the mixture of those who had previously attended other conventions and also newcomers. I was the latter- I never met anyone, although I had made contact with some people from the online forum and the chatroom. However, I did not find any difficulty in talking with the other members. Although I noticed that they were some members who are already close with each others, the participants were quite open and willing to talk to me.

Those who used to attend the other previous fan conventions were mainly from the group of active members of the community, I later defined these group of fans the 'PPU team' and the 'core group' (see more discussions about these two groups in chapter 6). I found that the fans who repeatedly attended the fan conventions were able to create more social connections with others in 'real' life and they were able to be recognised by the other fans. This is partly due to the self-disclosure norm of the community – the photos of those who attended the offline event are often shown in the online forum (see more discussions about the self-disclosure norm in section 6.6.2).

Unlike the online communication space where every member is gathered in the same virtual space, locations play a part in designating venues for the face-to-face meetings. The organised offline meetings among the fans in Bangkok illustrated limitations of access to other fans who lived in other provinces. However, private meetings were sometimes organised in Chiang Mai<sup>116</sup> by a small group of fans who live close to each other.<sup>117</sup> Thus, real life locations have an influence on the offline meeting venues, which confirms how the important and useful the Internet is in social communications where there may be physical barriers or restrictions. Such expansion of activities from the online to offline environment also reflects what many scholars found in their studies that the relationships created online can be moved to other settings (see e.g. Parks and Floyd, 1996, p.92; Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.182; Turner *et al.*, 2001; p.247).

---

<sup>116</sup> Chiang Mai is one of the largest provinces in Thailand.

<sup>117</sup> From participant observation on 20 August 2003, at the *Baan Suan Din Pao* restaurant, Chiang Mai.

### ***B) Small group meetings and activities***

Not only do the members of the PPU online community have the opportunity to attend fan conventions, but often they also have the opportunity to participate in small group meetings among members with whom they are close. In general, these latter types of face-to-face activities are limited only to certain small groups of people who are active in both the online forum and chatroom and who have developed close relationships with one another. These small group meetings of PPU fans emphasise the different levels of closeness among the fans (see section 5.4.5).

Small group meetings are usually organised via the online chatting venue among those PPU members who are active. As previously discussed in chapter three, I was also invited to some of these small group meetings via the online chatroom. The social type of discussions among the PPU fans in the online chatroom often leads to the organisation of casual meeting or social activities.<sup>118</sup> I found that the people who attend these events are the same group of ‘active’ members of the community. I will later discuss how the active participation of certain fans led them to gain a higher hierarchical status and a greater degree of social network expansion in chapter six. At each small group meeting, number of fans who joined these meetings ranged from two people to twenty people according to their availability. However, it is previously mentioned in section 3.4.2 regarding the participant observation in face-to-face meetings of the PPU fans, I do not know how many small group meetings or private meetings on one-to-one basis were held among the fans because I was unable to observe all their private conversations on the Internet.

In the participation observation element of this study, I joined the PPU chatroom and I became engaged in online conversations with many other fans of the novel. As a result of these interactions, I was invited to eight small group meetings (see table 2 in section 3.4.2). From the lists of my activities in face-to-face meetings of the PPU fans in table two, I was able to participate in the small group meetings of the fans almost on a weekly basis. These face-to-face activities involved, for example, watching a movie, having lunch and going on trips to theme parks or shopping malls.

---

<sup>118</sup> From participant observation on the online chatroom.



Such gathering of the fans at various occasions and for different social purposes helps to confirm and build up their close relationships with one another. Therefore, both the online and offline spaces can be found to overlap with each other as many of the fans can be found to be engaged in both online and offline activities on a daily basis.

### 5.3.3 Developing relationships in face-to-face environments

#### *A) Preferences for face-to-face interaction*

This interview with a PPU member illustrates the role of the online community as being a departure point for developing online relationships into relationships in an offline environment:

Actually, the Internet is only a channel to get to know people. To differentiate who we can trust and develop friendships with, we have to judge by ourselves. It does not mean that when we meet them on the Webboard, we can judge that they are good or bad. Before we can judge who is good or bad, we have to meet and talk with each other until it reaches a level that we can feel the trust.<sup>119</sup>

The interview shows that the advancement of personal relationships from online to day-to-day environment requires different levels of trust in other members. The fan notices the difference between online identities and those which are offline. Thus, where the development of trust is concerned, she prefers to meet face-to-face.

In an interview with another fan, the acknowledging of one's ability to make one's own choice of social groups via the Internet is noted:

I believe that we cannot live alone in society. We have to create friendships. When we meet people in our everyday lives, at work or while we are studying for example, we might not be able to meet someone whom we can feel comfortable with or approve as being our friends completely. Getting on the Internet, or on Webboards, or online communities are ways that we can meet people who have personalities, styles, characteristics and behaviours that we like and that match with us. But if we meet them in face-to-face in real life and don't feel right after talking to them, we can gradually fade away.<sup>120</sup>

---

<sup>119</sup> Personal interview with *Thung Ka Dat*, 25 August 2003.

<sup>120</sup> Personal interview with *To Sa Ra U*, 7 September 2003.

The interview points out the benefits of the online community in giving more choices to people to create online relationships. However, it also notes that the Internet is only the starting point for the creation of relationships. Whether or not the relationships that are started on the Internet continue depends on the interactions and decisions of the individuals in real life.

In moving their activities from engaging in online conversations towards arranging to take part in face-to-face encounters, the PPU fans take their relationships with one another to a deeper level. At this deeper level of relationships however, the PPU members tend to use different criteria in developing relationships with other members when they meet them in their 'real' life.

### ***B) Social context cues***

Social context cues such as clothes, voices and gestures that are lacking when the members take part in online communications become important to the PPU fans as they get to know other people in a face-to-face environment. The following interview shows how social context cues are important in offline face-to-face interactions:

When we talk to each other online, we still cannot see their faces and even though we can feel very close as we communicate, we still do not know how the people we are talking to actually looks. But when we meet face-to-face, we can get to see their faces and everything and judge if this person is right for us to trust, to talk or to feel close to.<sup>121</sup>

The interview illustrates the view of many members who of expanding their social networks from the PPU online community to their offline lives. Like many other PPU members, this fan sets different criteria for developing such relationships and sees social context cues as important in the decision of whether to continue or further develop relationships with other fans.

---

<sup>121</sup> Personal interview with *Vachimantrai* 20 July 2003.

### *C) Gaining familiarity from online discussions*

By contrast, some fans develop their relationships by learning about other people only from the online interactions that they have with them. However, this action of getting to know others from an online space requires ‘sufficient time’ for the relationships to be established. The following interview illustrates this point:

How much I trust others in the group depends on the time that I have known them. Our relationship started with our exchange of posts and in this way we could learn about their personalities and attitudes as they portrayed them in the forum. Somebody suggested to me that it could be dangerous to meet with people online but I am lucky that I have only met good people so far. It might be because I screen who I will meet. If I didn't trust them a little bit in the first place, I would not make contact with them in ‘real’ life.<sup>122</sup>

This interview shows that fans can learn about other members from their participation in online interactions before their relationships have the chance to move to ‘real’ life. From the interview, the fan has already had some experience in moving a few of her online social relationships to her everyday life offline environment. However, before establishing offline relationships with them in ‘real’ life, the fan developed a process of carefully selecting who to make contact with and chose only those she felt could trust to meet offline. The fan's comment is similar to what Rhiengold (1993, p.26) notes that people can get to know others on the Internet first before meeting them in ‘real’ life.

Therefore, within the PPU online community opportunities for members to expand their social network are available. Members of the PPU online community can be found to create and transfer their relationships beyond the scope of the online space to the offline space. In particular, the face-to-face socialisations of the fans show that their social networks can be significantly expanded.<sup>123</sup> In spite of the fact that some of the PPU fans meet with each other in their real offline lives and attend such face-to-face meetings, the online interactions of the fans remain important. Over a long period of time, even if the fans meet each other face-to-face and develop their

---

<sup>122</sup> Personal interview with *Rapin* 30 August 2003.

<sup>123</sup> From participant observation in face-to-face activities with the PPU community during the fieldwork.

relationships offline, it can be observed that the members of the PPU community still tend to continue their interactions with one another in their online space (see Figure 7).

#### **5.4 Nature of the relationships of PPU fans**

It should be noted here that this research did not set out to explore the quality or the long-term outcome of the fans' relationships. The analysis in this section aims to present the nature of relationships the PPU fans have and illustrate the advantages of creating social relationships via the Internet communications.

##### **5.4.1 Characteristics of the relationships of PPU fans**

The previous sections considered the expansion of discussion topics on the online forum from knowledge-based themes to social themes as well as the extension of the online interactions of the PPU fans to the face-to-face interactions of the fans. The development of such communicative practices illustrates the move towards social objectives that in turn increases levels of the personal relationships within the community. Among the group of 33 active members in the interviews, every person confirmed that their social networks have been expanded. These members noticed the broad opportunities to create, sustain and develop social relations with others in the group. Therefore, this shows that the PPU online community can be a space for the creation and expansion of the existing social networks of the members.

It is worth noting however that the expansions of social networks of the individual members of the PPU community vary according to how actively they participate in the group. Therefore, although the communicative practices of the PPU community members result in the creations of both online and offline relationships, the degrees of participations and devotions to the community of each person are different. Many the PPU fans interviewed who had created social relations with one another via the Internet belonged to the group of active members in the PPU community. Therefore they may have gained different levels of familiarity and benefited from different opportunities for developing relationships compared to other members of the PPU

community. The effects of different levels of participation and hierarchical status within the community will be further explored in the next chapter.

This section examines the nature of relationships of the PPU fans. There are four major characteristics of relationships among the PPU fans. Firstly, in spite of differences in age, background and so on, the relationships between fans were often based on the sharing of common interests and certain individual characteristics. Thus, fans share a feeling of connectivity despite any individual differences they may have. In fact, many fans welcome this opportunity to meet other people who are different to them, but still share the same interests or personality types. Secondly, the relationships of the fans tend to develop quickly. Thirdly, many members of the PPU online community describe their relationships as being family-like and close. Shared interests and personalities and the practice of Thai cultural values of showing respect to elders are mentioned as factors of the maintaining the harmony and smoothness of relationships. Finally, it is observed that there are different levels of relationships and dependency of relationships, according to the fans' levels of participations, experiences and perceptions within the community.

However, it should be noted that this thesis only tracks the situation of the PPU community within the study time frame specified. The long-term outcome of the online relationships is beyond the scope of the thesis. The following section examines the context and factors arising in the online communications of the PPU fans.

#### **5.4.2 Connectivity in spite of differences**

A common view that is expressed by members of the PPU community is that many fans feel that since the PPU online community is based on the sharing of common interest in the *Petchprauma* novel, meeting other fans online provides them with an opportunity to meet people with similar interests, who they would not ordinarily have met in their day-to-day lives. Additionally, the finding that they share of common interests makes them appreciate to finding one another more.

The following interview illustrates a fan's opinion towards what they gain from participating in the community:

I have made a lot more friends since I entered the community. Now, I know that there really are people out there who like in the same things that I like and we can talk with each other. Many of my friends from my company do not know about *Petchprauma* so I can't talk to them about it. But for now, every time when I have freedom from my company, I can go to talk with friends in here about *Petchprauma* and we can also talk about other stuff like where to go out and so on.<sup>124</sup>

This fan's comments also show that the fan has developed a sense of community and a sense of belonging in the PPU group as she believes and feels that there are people who share similar interests to her on the Internet. Similar comments about such feelings and sentiments have been observed in studies conducted by other scholars (see Rhiengold, 1993, p.5; Jones, 1995, p.17). From this interview, although the fan has been attracted to join others in this community because of their shared interests in the PPU, these discussions with other fans about the novel can lead to discussions about other issues. The interviewee shows that the online community provides an alternative way and opportunity for meeting new people and forming new social groups.

Similarly, another fan mentioned the benefits from the gaining of social relationships from the online community:

I get exposed to a much wider society. Since I am from the province and I have to come and find a job in Bangkok, my daily life is quite limited to only my home, work place and group of old school friends, who also happen to work in Bangkok. But now I get to know a lot more people in Bangkok. Normally, it would have been impossible to get a chance to know get these people in my daily life because they perhaps work in totally different fields or study in different places. So, joining the community has broadened my opportunity to get to know people of different backgrounds.<sup>125</sup>

The interview reinforces the widening of the fan's experience in expanding the social networks with people of different backgrounds. The fan's comment confirms that the online community is organised by those with similar interests, rather than those with

---

<sup>124</sup> Personal interview with *Chammy*, 20 July 2003.

<sup>125</sup> Personal interview with *Phu Sao Meuang Yod*, 17 August 2003.

similar locations. Additionally the interview points out that the fan is concerned about meeting with new people who live in the same area with her because the fan is keen to move her online social relationships to her everyday life. Thus, for the fans the online community is a place to interact with people of different ages, locations, backgrounds, and so on with similar interests.

In the following interview, a fan confirms that she can maintain relationships with the group in spite of differences in age:

What I got from this community is a lot of new friends, especially friends of different ages. I got to have this new social group that is different from the one I usually have to face in my life. For example, the social group that I have at work is different from this group and so my interaction with them would have to be different. But with this group, it is like the friends that I used to have long time ago. I used to socialise like this in my teenage years but that has gone for so long. So, I can return to do this kind of things again and be able to go out with friends from this group like I used to do when I was young. See, like today I also brought my daughter along so that she could learn how to socialise and so that she would have friends who are at an age similar to hers to play with. You see, if I were alone with my daughter, she wouldn't be able to have this kind of opportunity to travel and do things like this.<sup>126</sup>

This fan's opinion reflects the positive benefit she has gained from joining with other people in the group. The fan also shows a high level of commitment to the community as she admits that it is important to her to develop and advance the new social relationships that she has created within the online community and integrate them with her daily life. Although there is age difference among the people in the PPU group, the fan does not feel separated. This finding is an example of the harmony and smooth relationships that exist within the PPU online community.

#### **5.4.3 Fast development of relationships**

The relationships of the fans were found to develop rapidly, especially when members they shared many things in common. Firstly, the fans share a common interest in the *Petchprauma* novel. Secondly, often between themselves, they identified certain parallel characteristics such as being friendly and fun-loving people

---

<sup>126</sup> Personal interview with *Pla Pa Yun*, 14 July 2003.

(see section 4.5.1, 4.6.1). When the PPU fans gathered as the group online, their communications leaned towards the social purposes of the fans.

In an interview with a fan, he expresses his opinion towards the unexpected development of relationships:

At first I thought that we would only talk on the Webboard. I didn't think that I'd be this close with other people in the group. It's beyond my expectations. If I'm with other people outside the community, there might be some business involved and I might not feel comfortable to be friends with some of them much. But in this community, we have similar characters so I'm closest with friends in this group.<sup>127</sup>

From the interview, the social network of the fan significantly expanded from his original expectation since the social group created from the online community becomes his main social group. The sharing of similar characters is pointed out as an explanation for why the relationships developed quickly.

Similarly, another fan noticed that the relationships of the fans developed at a fast pace through the activities of social discussions via chatrooms:

The group get very close together quite quickly probably because most of the people got a chance to chat on MSN also. I still remember the first time I went to a meeting with other fans, it felt like we had known each other for so long. I mean, we can just sit down and talk. The feeling was like we were very close and very familiar with each other.<sup>128</sup>

Furthermore, another interview with a fan demonstrates how the relationships are advanced rapidly:

I was very impressed that nobody here had ever met each other before since we only posted messages on the Webboard back then. It's very strange because we had never met, but we saw each other for the first time, it felt like we had been friends for years. Even some people who had not been talking with others for a long time, they could also be very close. I think it's probably because the people here have similarly *sanuk* characters. So, when we talk with each other, we kind of talk in the same language.<sup>129</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Personal interview, *Wai Cha Kan*, 21 August 2003.

<sup>128</sup> Personal interview with *Kha Mode Dong*, 30 August 2003.

<sup>129</sup> Personal interview with *Nai Ta Han Peuan To*, 20 July 2003.



The interview shows the compatibility among the group of fans regardless of the time spent on the Webboard. The sharing of *sanuk* characters, which shows the fun-pleasure orientations of the fans, is pointed out. Interestingly, the fan admitted that the reason he first joined the PPU community was for seeking knowledge about the novel since he was one of the *Fan Pan Tae* contestants and the programme producer told him to attend the forum. However, after participating in the community, he developed relationships with other fans that were closer than his original expectations for the community. The interview points out that the relationships created from online space can be alternative way in getting to know people more closely before meeting them face-to-face. The expansion of relationships from online to face-to-face confirms no sharp boundaries between the online and offline spaces.

#### 5.4.4 Family-like relationships

The fans develop close personal relationships in which they perceive others as part of their close social networks. Many PPU fans describe the online community as home-like and that other members are as close to them as family members.

The following interview illustrates this point:

I have very good fun with this group. I get to meet a lot of groups of people, both old and young. So, I can have more friends instead of having friends at the same age in my life outside the community. In here, I feel that I have aunts, sisters, brothers, and so on.<sup>130</sup>

Similarly, another fan pointed out her feeling towards other members:

I feel like we are brother and sister. The people are very lovely and I consider them as my close friends. We can easily talk to or tease with each other. I feel very close to them and I don't even need to adjust myself to others. There is no pretending or anything. We can just go into the community and say whatever we like.<sup>131</sup>

From the interview, the close relationships of the members and the perceptions of their relationships of being family-like within the community are clear.

---

<sup>130</sup> Personal interview with *Wuan Raek*, 24 August 2003.

<sup>131</sup> Personal interview with *Pu*, 24 August 2003.

Members of the PPU community often refer to other people as such as brother, sister, or such terms which are normally reserved for relatives. Such uses of family terms to call someone who is not straight family members are common in the Thai society, particularly when the Thai people feel familiar enough with the person. Suntaree (1990, p.167) has noted that in the Thai society, due to the ego-orientation among the superior-inferior, many young people use these terms to show their respect to their elders. It was observed that PPU fans follow the same norm of respecting their elders in their online discussions. This in turn helps the maintenance of smooth relationships among them.

One PPU member explains his practice of posting messages:

In this group, most of the people are older than me so I have to apply more thought when discussing with them. If I talk with the elders, I have to be more polite. It's unlike when I'm with my friends because then we can talk impolitely. But here I have to be more careful about this.<sup>132</sup>

Similarly, another member comments on her practices under the influences of the social smoothing and ego-orientation values of the Thais:

I have to check who is the poster. If they are elders, I have to be polite. But if they are in the same generation with me, I can type something more casual.

The relationships and interactions of the PPU fans illustrate how conscious they are of the ego-orientation and social smoothing values in the Thai culture. As a result of this awareness and incorporation of these values into their online practice the relationships of the fans develop smoothly. From broader context, this also supports the argument for the use of the Internet in a local context, that is Thai cultural values play a part in the Internet use and application of the Thai people (see Hongladarom, 1998a; 1998b; 2003; Panyametheekul and Herring; 2003).

---

<sup>132</sup> Personal interview with *Tamachan*, 20 July 2003.

#### 5.4.5 Different strengths of relationships

Although the relationships that fans build from their interactions in the PPU online community tend to develop quickly and are seen to be family-like, there are different levels of relationships among the fans. This is partly because of the difference in levels of involvement and participation in the community. Apart from this, the hierarchical structure within the online community also leads to different levels of relationships among the members.<sup>133</sup>

The difference in levels of relationships that are built can be observed between those fans who join only online interactions and those fans who participate in both offline and online interactions. In the group of fans who join only online interactions, there is a limited amount of familiarity. By comparison, since the latter group has more space for interactions to take place, this leads to closer relationships.

The following interview indicates the different levels of closeness of the fans:

In this group are friends of mine who love the same thing that I like. I think I can get along well with most of the people here. Well, with some of them I am not that close with, but generally, I think we can get along well. People in this community have different ages and come from different backgrounds, so I'm not comfortable in talking to some, while I feel closer to others. Basically, I just choose to talk to people that I like.<sup>134</sup>

From this interview, although the smooth relationship of the community is pointed out, it is clear that the strength of personal relationships relies heavily on personal feeling. As a result, the fan has different levels of relationship with people in the group. Furthermore, another fan explains the difference levels of closeness within the community:

I think everybody in here is like friends in classroom. We use the same Webboard but how close we are varies. If we talk with someone more, we might be closer to that person. Just like in the classroom, if we sit near someone and talk to them more, we will be closer.<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> See section 6.2 for the discussion on the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community.

<sup>134</sup> Personal interview with *Pa Tae Chae Im*, 24 August 2003.

<sup>135</sup> Personal interview with *Thung Ka Dat*, 25 August 2003.

This interview points out that the active participation of the fans help to promote the close relationships among the fans. This difference in levels of relationships will be shown in the hierarchical structure of the fans in the next chapter.

### *Different levels of dependency*

Apart from the different levels of relationships within the PPU online community, there are also differences in the levels of dependences for the social networks created from the community. For some fans, the relationships created within the online community become their main social networks instead of the relationships established in their real lives. For other fans, the relationships of strong ties in real lives remain important. However, there are some fans who equally value both types of relationships.

Fans who view the social networks created from the Internet as their main social networks give their reasons that:

With friends here, we share our interests in *Petchprauma*. With friends at my university, I can't regularly meet them. I'm closer with this community the most. I can talk with them about anything and if I have problems, I can consult them. If with friends from university, I don't know what to talk with them about. In this community, we are like a big family, like brothers and sisters.<sup>136</sup>

This interview shows that the fan relies on the relationships he created with the community more than his existing social networks. This extreme dependency in online relationships is similar to the finding in the study of Hitz and Turoff (1978, p.101). This also similar to what Walther (1996, p.17) has noted about 'hyperpersonal interaction'. Additionally, the fan also values the social support from the other members in the PPU community and mentions his perception of the family-like relationships he has. Similarly, another fan adds that:

---

<sup>136</sup> Personal interview with *Bun Kam*, 14 July 2003.

Actually, I have few friends because I think that I'm different from other people. Outside, I might look friendly but in fact I'm really quiet. When I meet people with the same common interest, I become attached to them. That's why I'm very close to this group. If I'm with my friends in this group, we can talk about *Petchprauma* and other things. But if I'm with people outside this group, they don't read *Petchprauma* and if I bring this topic to talk with them they won't know who is *Rapin*, who is *Darin*.<sup>137</sup>

The fan shows a high regard for the sharing of common interests with other fans because it gives her a feeling of connecting with others. For that reason, she feels that she belongs to the PPU community more than other groups. This point is further emphasised by another fan's comment:

When I'm with my friends in real life, I have to try to adjust myself to them a little bit like when we go to shopping together. I have to go even though I don't like shopping. But once I came here, I don't have to adjust myself. It feels cosy here because we like the same things.<sup>138</sup>

On the contrary, those who rely on relationships established from their real lives note the importance of the time they have with their real life friends. The following interview of a fan who considers themselves less dependent on their online social networks illustrates this point further:

With online friends, we talk about books and novels but with offline friends, if we don't like the same things so we talk about other common things. For example if I go to book fair with my online friends, I won't get bored because we like the same thing. But I'm more close to friends from outside the community because we have known for 15-16 years since we were young. We meet more often. When we are online, we might not even have to say hi. They like other things like F4<sup>139</sup> or something else. They know that I'm with this community; they also have their own communities.<sup>140</sup>

The interviewee confirms the importance of common interests in the gathering of both the PPU fans and her friends in general. Shared interests form the basis of their interactions with each other. However, since there is a difference in the amount of time that has been spent knowing each other, the fan considers herself closer to her existing network of strong ties than her community of weak ties.

---

<sup>137</sup> Personal interview with *Darimeya*, 14 July 2003.

<sup>138</sup> Personal interview with *Chammy*, 20 July 2003.

<sup>139</sup> F4 is the name of a Taiwanese pop band.

<sup>140</sup> Personal interview with *Vee*, 20 July 2003.

However, there are members who view the relationships created in either online or offline space as having equal levels of closeness. This fan mentions that differences exist only in how the different types of relationships are formed:

I'm equally close with friends from both groups but it's just different. With friends that I already know in real life, we can talk about problems and they already know my background. For online friends, I can talk to them but they don't know my background or they may know only a little from what I told them. [...] I might be equally close, for example I can tell my secrets and share my problems with both groups, but I might get different advice.<sup>141</sup>

Another fan points out the difference between both types of relationships are simply due to the communication tools used:

With friends in the community, we meet on the forum or on MSN chat but with friends outside, we talk on the telephone. But there's no difference. I'm close to both groups. They are all my friends.<sup>142</sup>

Thus, the interviewee confirms the important role of the Internet in providing a space for interaction and social network expansion.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The main task of this chapter was to explore how the social network of the fans in the PPU online community can be expanded through the practices followed by the fans within this community. This thesis focuses on observing the practices that the majority of the group follow as a whole rather than examining patterns individually.

Over the course of time the PPU online forum has included more topics of discussion that have a social rather than a knowledge-based theme. The statistics from the online forum show that there are significantly more social messages posted (61%) compared to knowledge messages (25%) posted. This shows that the PPU online community is for both of knowledge and social pursuits. In participating in knowledge discussions, the fans show that they are not just 'passive' audiences but on the other hand are being 'active' in their media consumption by interpreting the

---

<sup>141</sup> Personal interview with *KkTp*, 30 August 2003.

<sup>142</sup> Personal interview with *Nu Mu*, 20 July 2003.

novel text and interactively discussing the meaning behind the novel text. This practice of the fans reflects the view of many scholars about fandom (see Jenkins, 1992, p.209-210; Harris, 1998a, p.3; 1998b, p.41; Pullen, 2004, p.80). Through such knowledge discussions, the fan community gains a deeper level of knowledge about the novel. The fans tend to perceive knowledge discussions as intellectual and substantive because they offer knowledge about the *Petchprauma* novel to the group.

The introduction of social topics to the online forum is an example of a theme that is completely unrelated to the topic of the novel. Rather than contribute to the group's knowledge, social posts have the aim of making social relationships and many fans prefer posting social rather than knowledge-based messages as some members feel that they do not have much knowledge about the *Petchprauma* novel. The social discussions of the fans not only bring about the fun-pleasure for the fans, but also social support from other members. Other studies have similarly found the practice of seeking and gaining social support among members in online communities (see Mickelson, 1997, p.157; Turner *et al.*, 2001, p.245-246; Miyata, 2002, p.543). The benefits gained from the participation of an online community are highly valued by the fans. Such benefits also lead to the enhancement of affiliations and the feeling of community among the fans.

Additionally, there are also differences in the posting styles of messages to the online forum in terms of personal preferences. Some members of the PPU online community enjoy participating in 'serious' discussions about the novel on particular topics relating to the novel's plot or characters. Other members of the PPU online community post friendly or playful 'non-serious' messages on the online forum of topics that don't directly relate to the novel. Interestingly, this finding corresponds with the characteristics of the fans as previously discussed in chapter four. The fans perceived themselves as fun-loving people and commented on the fact that there are a few distinctive 'experts' in the community (see section 4.6). The practices of the fans also corresponds with the reason the fans give for entering the community, as previously discussed in chapter four. The fans show different degree of interests in the novel and enter the community either for the purpose of gaining information or for fun-pleasure and social pursuits. Some fans also entered because they were influenced by the '*Petchprauma* trend'.

The observations of the social practices of the PPU fans correspond with the study of Baym (1998b, p.118), which similarly noted the pleasure, humour and fun pursuit of the fans. However, Baym's (1998b) study discovered that the practices of r.a.t.s. fans in discussing topics related to their object of fandom, the soap opera formed the key point of reference for the fans. Moreover, Baym found that when communicating in the community, the r.a.t.s. fans discussed their 'socioemotional' issues with references to the soap opera and created relationships from such discussions. By contrast, in the Thai case of the PPU fans, many PPU fans are not as enthusiastic about posting messages that relate to the novel because they consider such types of discussion as too formal or serious. While some 'expert' members in the group enjoy such intellectual posts, many others who consider themselves as non-experts prefer to post social topics. Therefore, in the community although knowledge discussions about the novel are considered important, those fans who do not contribute knowledge to the group can still participate by discussing social issues. This finding illustrates that the Thai people do not focus or discuss fandom as intensively as in the West; instead they prefer to be *sanuk* and maintain smooth relationships with one another. Therefore, this finding confirms that the Internet uses of the PPU fans are very much associated with the local Thai cultural values.

In general, over time the fans' interactions extend from knowledge discussions to social discussions. This finding is similar to other research studies which have noted that the shift of discussion topics from the original objective of the group to social issues leads to the development of closer relationships among the members (see Baym, 1995, p.147; 2000, p.119; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.513-515). By moving their interaction beyond the online space to face-to-face interactions, the PPU fans are able to further expand their social networks. This practice increases the levels of interactions. Additionally, the overlapping of online and offline activities of the fans suggests that the online community does not exist only in a space that is separated from the offline space, but rather it can be an integrated part of the daily lives of the PPU fans. In face-to-face meetings, fans can connect at a deeper level and use social context cues in their physical interactions to recognise the social identities of others. Thus, through the practices of the fans, their social networks can be expanded as they create more relationships with other members and interact both online and offline.



The relationships that the fans created are found to develop quickly, despite the differences in age, gender and social backgrounds of the fans. Moreover, the fans develop family-like relationships that are influenced by Thai cultural values of social harmony. However, different strengths of relationships can be observed to exist among the fans. Apart from this, the fans develop different levels of dependency of such social networks: some take the social networks created from the online community as their main social networks while for others the social networks created are only part of their existing social networks.

In the next chapter, the different levels of relationships and the different degree of social networks expansions of the fans will be examined through the study of hierarchical structure within the PPU online community.

## Chapter Six

### Study of the Hierarchical Structure within the *Petchprauma* Online Community

#### 6.1 Introduction

The task of this chapter is to answer the second subordinate question of the thesis: how does the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community affect the expansion of social networks of the PPU fans? In order to answer this question, the chapter identifies the hierarchical structure that exists within the PPU online community and examines what factors and practices of the fans contribute to these different levels of hierarchical structure. The results and consequences of such status hierarchies of different fans on their expansions of social networks are also commented upon.

This chapter argues that the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community affects the expansion of social networks of the fans. Those who are at the top of the structure are able to expand their social networks to a greater degree than those who have lower status hierarchies. The groups of fans who have higher status are able to develop close affiliations with others better than those at the bottom level.

A hierarchical structure of three levels exists within the PPU online community. Members in the PPU community can be divided into three groups: the PPU team, the core group and the general members. Each of these groups of fans has a different collective role, status and power. However, the fans' status and positions within the hierarchical structure within the online community is based on the degree of an individual's participation and personal characteristics of the members.

This chapter has six main parts. The first part observes the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community. The second part discusses the roles, status and power of the group that sits at the top of the hierarchical structure, the PPU team. The third part discusses the core group and observes their lesser degree of role, status and power. The fourth part examines the group of the general members that forms

the bottom level of the hierarchical structure. The fifth part further examines the practices of the fans in dealing with the differences in the hierarchical structure within the community. The last part summarises the findings of this chapter.

## **6.2 The hierarchical structure within the PPU online community**

This section describes and explains the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community. For this thesis, it is important to take account of hierarchy in online communities and understand how it is constructed and how it will bring benefit to the fans. It was discussed in chapter two that previous social network studies have not elaborated on this issue (see section 2.5.1).

By observing the practices of PPU community members, I discover the existence of hierarchy, and the different levels of relationships among the fans. To identify the structure of social networks and observe its social outcomes regarding the social network expansion, I use the dimensions of fandom hierarchy proposed by MacDonald (1998, p.136-138) to analyse the hierarchical structure within the online community. These dimensions were referred to as the ‘hierarchy of knowledge’, ‘hierarchy of leaders’, ‘hierarchy of venue’, ‘hierarchy of access’ and ‘hierarchy of fandom’.

In the case study of the PPU fans within their online community, these dimensions can be identified. However, in the PPU community, an extra factor, that is slightly different from those observed in the study conducted by MacDonald (1998), also influenced the status of certain fans. This factor is the personal characteristics of the individuals, in this case the entertaining or *sanuk* characteristic.<sup>143</sup> This characteristic feature was also commented upon in the research findings of Baym’s (1997, p.112) study and in particular, in her discussion on the factors of ‘humour’ and ‘distinctive personality’.

Within this hierarchical structure, the PPU fans are found to have different levels of participation, involvement, and individual characteristics, which affect their status

---

<sup>143</sup> In Thai, *Sanuk* means spontaneous fun (see section 4.2.2).

hierarchies. The levels of relationships in terms of the closeness and the familiarity that the fans create among themselves are different according to the level of hierarchy the fans have. Thus, their social networks expansion is affected by these differences.

There are three groups of fans that correspond to the levels of the hierarchical structure found within the PPU online community. These groups are known as the PPU team, the core group and the general members. The names of these groups are derived from what have been commonly used in the PPU community. The most active groups of the fans are the PPU team and the core group because they heavily engage in both on and offline activities. As a result of this, the relationships of fans within these groups and also between these groups can be observed to be closer than relationships with PPU fans who are considered to be general members. The levels of their social network expansions are therefore affected by the hierarchical structure within the community.

To examine the different levels of social networks expansion of the fans, the following sections discuss these three groups that exist at different levels of hierarchical structure within the PPU online community in detail. The different collective roles, status and powers exhibited by each of these groups of PPU fans within the hierarchy are clearly illustrated and examined. The practices of the individual fans and how they are influenced by the status or position of the group within the hierarchy are also discussed.

### **6.3 The PPU team**

#### **6.3.1 Role**

The first group at the top of the hierarchical structure of the PPU community is the group of co-founders of the fansite. This group is called the 'PPU team'. It was previously mentioned in chapter four which described the creation of the PPU online community that the PPU team had got to know each other from the *Joinwriter* Website. This was where their first discussions about the *Petchprauma* novel originated. The group originally consisted of the Webmaster and seven co-founders

of the fansite. The PPU team also includes four fans who appeared on the *Fan Pan Tae* television programme.<sup>144</sup> Since these four fans appeared on to the *Fan Pan Tae* programme, which had competitions about the knowledge about *Petchprauma* novel, they are seen as superior because of their knowledge of the novel. Thus, their responsibility in putting contents about the novel on the fansite emphasises their role of ‘experts’ in the community (see section 4.6.2).

The Webmaster, who goes by the username ‘Pink’, has the key role of being responsible for the PPU website. This involves developing the structure of the PPU website and online forum as well as providing technical support for the community and organising the contents within the website. One of the roles of the PPU team is to maintain the smooth running of the PPU website. Therefore, the rest of the PPU team help the Webmaster by controlling the online forum and organising face-to-face meetings for the community, such as fan conventions.

It should be noted that the roles of individual PPU team members in the online forum are different, depending on the level of their participation and also their personal characteristics. The Webmaster is clearly the exception in this case since, in general, she does not get involved with most of the activities of the fans. Evidence of her involvement in the online forum was observed when some technical problems about the fansite are raised in the online forum. However, on the whole the Webmaster does not participate in any face-to-face meetings and only makes contact with the PPU team via the online forum or via interactive chatting areas.<sup>145</sup> Therefore, the power of the PPU team is mostly exercised by the other seven co-founders of the PPU fansite and online community.

---

<sup>144</sup> One of the five *Fan Pan Tae* participants is not participated in the community due to moving to a province, only four remained in their active roles in the PPU team, from participant observations during the fieldwork.

<sup>145</sup> From participant observations on the PPU online forum and face-to-face meetings during the fieldwork.

### 6.3.2 Status

#### *‘Hierarchy of leader’*

On the online forum, the status of the ‘PPU team’ is recognised by five blue stars that appear under their usernames and also the title ‘global moderator’. The PPU team exhibit the dimension of the ‘hierarchy of leader’ because of their ability to maintain multiple levels of status and power within the community. The group is situated at the top of the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community. Other members within the online community acknowledge the PPU team’s superiority and expertise as well as conform to the norms set or encouraged by the members of the PPU team. This practice of other members of adopting and following their suggestions is an example of how the power of the PPU team is shown and exercised within the community.

In the following section, the various powers of the PPU team are observed, described and discussed. There are three dimensions of fandom hierarchy that the PPU fans have: the ‘hierarchy of venue’, the ‘hierarchy of knowledge’ and the ‘hierarchy of access’ (see MacDonald, 1998, p.137-138). The following section discusses each of these dimensions in more detail.

#### *‘Hierarchy of knowledge’*

The distinctive characteristics of having expertise about the novel are recognised in the PPU community. Among the PPU team, the fans with the most knowledge about the novel are the four experts who joined the *Fan Pan Tae* programme. These four fans were often praised by other members for their expertise. Although the four ‘experts’ with the rest of the PPU team were responsible for providing content about the novel on the fansite, their degree of knowledge in the hierarchy was different. The four experts are well respected by other members, not only because of their appearances on the television programme but also because of their substantive opinions, knowledge and insights that they post on the online forum.

Despite the fact that there are other members of the PPU community, who are not part of the PPU team, who can also provide many useful views and insights in the knowledge discussions, the expertise of these fans who are not part of the PPU team are not as well recognised as those four fans who joined in the *Fan Pan Tae* television programme and were made famous as a result.

One reason for the dominance of these four members is that the television programme *Fan Pan Tae* provided these four members with the reputation for having a lot of knowledge about the *Petchprauma* novel. The *Fan Pan Tae* television programme identified these people as experts in the subject. Therefore, as a result of the television programme, the ‘hierarchy of knowledge’ among the four ‘experts’ was confirmed.

This recognition of experts in online communities is similar to what has been found in other studies (see Baym, 1997, p.112; MacDonald, 1998, p.136-138; Fiske, 1992, p.43; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.515). The overlapping of interactions between traditional media - the television programme - and the Internet demonstrates the influence of offline identities on online identities as well as the blurring of the boundaries between online and offline space.

The following interview with an ‘expert’ who took part in the *Fan Pan Tae* shows how these ‘experts’ had gained different status from the other fans:

After the programme was on air, I had a feeling of becoming the important person or something like that. It was like people could see our abilities. Especially since during the television programme, I was portrayed as an expert so other members believed that.<sup>146</sup>

Similarly, another ‘expert’ confirmed the recognitions from other members:

Although I have never showed off in that way, after I got the winning prize in the television programme I have had a lot of pressure. It’s a strange thing. Suddenly it’s like I’m a well-known person or a celebrity. I should actually have thought about that before.<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>146</sup> Personal interview with *Rapin*, 30 August 2003.

<sup>147</sup> Personal interview, *Wai Cha Kun*, 21 August 2003.

These interviews confirm that other individuals perceive these four members who joined the *Fan Pan Tae* television programme as the ‘experts’ and recognise the knowledge characteristics of the fan. This recognition of the distinctive insight and knowledge provided by these fans give them a higher status in the hierarchy than others in the online community. The way that the online identities these four experts are viewed by other members of the PPU community also shows the influence of offline social contexts, such as the offline identities presented in the television programme, on the online interactions of the fans.

Apart from this, obtaining such recognition from the other fans described by the ‘experts’ may have encouraged and driven them to contribute more knowledge to the community. Many scholars discussed this point in their studies, arguing that knowledge is one of the most important necessities for fans and that those who offer knowledge to the group are well recognised and appreciated for the generosity of their knowledge contributions (see Rheingold, 1993, p.59-60; Baym, 1998b, p.118; MacDonald, 1997, p.137; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.515).

Furthermore, there is also the recognition of different positions among the four. This difference in expertise is not only recognised by other individuals but also by these ‘experts’ themselves. One of the expert members observed his position that:

In the group of the *Fan Pan Tae*, the first person that most members give their highest respect for and view with the highest amount of credibility is ‘*Tan*’<sup>148</sup> *Wai*; the second is *Mantu* the third is *Rapin*. I’m probably in the fourth position. I’m not sure why exactly. It might be because the others have been in the community for a longer time than me. I consider myself more new to the group than the others.<sup>149</sup>

This expert clearly identifies the different position of his status and the status of the other experts. His comments also reflect the recognition of his expertise status in the community despite the fact that he considers himself to have lesser recognition than the others. Additionally, the use of the term *Tan* in front of the person’s name indicates his high respect to that person. This practice of using such terms of respect

---

<sup>148</sup> The term ‘*Tan*’ is added before person’s name to indicate high status and to show respect. This term is used by the fans on several occasions and it shows the high level of respect the fans have for one another.

<sup>149</sup> Personal interview with *Nai Ta Han Peuan To*, 20 July 2003.



also reinforces the idea that a hierarchical structure exists within the PPU online fandom.

### *‘Hierarchy of access’*

Another dimension of hierarchy that raises the high status of the PPU team is their ability to gain access to ‘inside’ knowledge from the writer of the *Petchprauma* novel as well as the *Petchprauma* movie director (see MacDonald, 1998, p.137-138). By gaining access to the novel writer, the PPU team gain outstanding kudos as opposed to other individuals who do not have such access. Praise from the other members are often given to the PPU team for this ‘hierarchy of access’. In doing this, a sense of acknowledgement for the PPU team’s role is shown. For example, on several occasions, the PPU team visited the house of the writer of the *Petchprauma* novel to discuss the creation of the PPU fansite. A thread title ‘Photos from *Khun Lung Pranomtean*’s House’ shows how the PPU team had met the author of the novel and gained access to his house in order to discuss information for the PPU website:

*Last night, we visited Khun Lung’s [the novel writer’s] house. Since the information in this Website was not completed we went to discuss further information with Khun Lung Eed. The reason we went there was because of work so we could not invite our friends here to join us. While we were there, what we did was take notes of all the information. But we have some pictures for you as a souvenir. so it will be like everyone in this Web community was there at Khun Lung’s house .*<sup>150</sup>

The above post clearly shows the PPU team’s direct access to the novel writer, which illustrates the interpersonal relationship between the novel writer and the PPU team. The use of the term *Khun Lung* (uncle) to refer to the novel writer reflects the PPU team’s respect for the novelist as well as the closeness of their relationship. Moreover, the PPU team have chosen to use the nickname of the writer instead of using the author’s real name. This use of nicknames and familiar forms of address emphasises the PPU team’s familiarity with the writer even more.

---

<sup>150</sup> From PPU online forum (j), 26 May 2003, Message posted by *Sirinapa*.

In addition to these observations, the message posted by the PPU team illustrates the significant role of the PPU team within the community and their ‘hierarchy of access’ over other PPU fans. However, this privilege of the PPU team is mentioned in an understated way. The PPU team member makes an effort to explain the reason for was not being able to invite the other fans for such visit by saying that the visit was only for work-related purposes. Interestingly, this message was accompanied with several photos. This inclusion of photos illustrates the blurred boundaries between the pleasure and work orientations. The following replies to the above thread from other fans in the community indicate how this privilege of the PPU team is recognised by other members:

*Wow. When I see those photos, I dream of going there one day. I’m cheering all of the PPU team from the bottom of my heart.<sup>151</sup>*

This reply reveals the acceptance of the superior privileges of the PPU team. Other messages demonstrate that the fans give their appreciation to the PPU team for creating and contributing to the PPU website:

*I have been away for several days. As soon as I reached home, I entered the Webboard to get the updates. I admit I miss you all very much. This thread made all my tiredness go away completely. Thank you Sirinapa for the beautiful photos. I’m so glad that you all devote yourself to the work. Thank you to everyone who makes the people who love Petchprauma have a home that is filled with insightful information and knowledge. This home is really cosy.<sup>152</sup>*

In this second message, the use of the word ‘home’ to represent the online community shows the fan’s sense of belonging in the community and feeling comfortable. Additionally, this also reflects an example of the nature of the family-like relationships within the online community (see section 5.4.4).

In response to these messages from the fans, the PPU team member who was the originator of the thread posted another message to thank the other members for their replies:

---

<sup>151</sup> From PPU online forum (j), 26 May 2003, Message posted by *Vachimantrai*.

<sup>152</sup> From PPU online forum (j), 26 May 2003, Message posted by *Nok Huk Ta Yi*.

*Phew! I'm so glad. At first I thought very hard about whether or not I should post the photos as I wasn't sure that everyone would understand us? I was afraid that everyone would think that we secretly went there and took those photos for showing off. I'm happy that everyone understands and supports us for this work. Thank you very much.*

*This website is created with 'hearts' by Pee Pink, our Webmaster, and us. The reason that we had to go there so late at night is because all of us have jobs during the day so we don't have much time to do the work on the website (That explains why our new home is not yet completed). We would like Khun Lung to help us by correcting the information we put on this Web.*

*We are trying our best. 'Tan' Wai, 'Tan' Mantu, Nai Ta Han Peuan To, Rapin, Dari, Numu, Let's keep up the good work although I know each of us don't really have much time.*

*Those who would like to face the same destiny as us are welcome!*<sup>153</sup>

From the above message, the poster emphasises the roles of the PPU team in voluntarily working on the website in the members' free time by using the term 'created with hearts'. The way the poster mentions the names of the members of the PPU team reinforces the overall importance of their status over other members. Additionally, the fan demonstrates the open opportunity for the other members to join in the PPU team but at the same time she also implies that the work is hard and therefore requires committed persons who could take on responsibilities. Interestingly, the PPU team's access to the novel writer illustrates their greater degree of social network expansion.

### 6.3.3 Power

#### 'Hierarchy of access' - as a form of power

In addition to gaining access to the novel writer, a few PPU fans had gained direct access to the director of the *Petchprauma* movie through personal connections.

Among the PPU community, *Wai Cha Kun* was the first fan to take part in the *Petchprauma* movie production. The following interview with *Wai Cha Kun* explained his involvement with the movie production:

---

<sup>153</sup> From PPU online forum (j), 26 May 2003, Message posted by Sirinapa.

I got to work with ‘*Tan*’ *Mui* [the movie director] because I intended to make contact with him actually. Since I knew the username of ‘*Tan*’ *Mui*, I started to enter the online forum at *Pantip* and actively exchanged ideas with him. At first, he only contacted me on the Internet and the forum. Then, we exchanged emails. Fortunately, I got a champion prize from the *Fan Pan Tae* programme. After the *Fan Pae Tae* was on-air on the 22 May 2003, he called me to work with him. [...] I’m now working on the script of the movie. I’m officially one of the movie crew. And indeed, this is like my dream has come true.<sup>154</sup>

The interview shows the clear intention of the fan to contact the movie director via the Internet. Since *Wai Cha Kun* was the winner of the *Fan Pan Tae* programme, his knowledge of the *Petchprauma* novel made him noticeable. The fan’s involvement with the television programme and the movie production shows an example of the individual power of the fan in gaining interest from people in the media. Interestingly, this particular fan greatly advanced his social networks created via the online community. This fan’s expansion of online social networks led to the extension of relationships to his ‘real’ offline life. The Internet can therefore be shown to be an embedded part of his life rather than a separate space.

Apart from *Wai Cha Kun* there was another fan who was also able to get a job in the same *Petchprauma* movie production team as *Wai Cha Kun*. The following interview explains how she got involved in the movie project:

I got to take part in the movie production because I went there with ‘*Pee*’ *Wai*. I help out with the script and some other things. I think it’s good that we can send out our voices out, but this might be just some of the opinions. If the director really wants to make this movie, actually he doesn’t need to listen to the fans much.<sup>155</sup>

This fan gained access to the movie production because of her personal connection with *Wai Cha Kun*. This example illustrates that for this fan the Internet is a useful communication tool as the online social networks of the fan provided her with the opportunity for extending her social connections from online to offline interactions and integrating them into her ‘real’ life. This case is also an example that shows the influence of the culture of personal ties of the Thai people as discussed by several scholars (see Christensen, 1992; Suntaree, 1990, p.206). This is when the fans help

<sup>154</sup> Personal interview with *Wai Cha Kan*, 21 August 2003.

<sup>155</sup> Personal interview with *Nu Mu*, 20 July 2003.

one another to get jobs because of their social connections. This fan also recognises the power of the fans in giving their opinions to the movie director even though she admits that this power is limited.

The hierarchy of access is also recognised by other members in the online community. Since the *Petchprauma* movie was one of the main interests for the PPU fans, questions regarding the progress of the movie production are often raised in the community. This advances the status of the fan who gets involved in the movie production as they perform a role of explaining and answering questions regarding the *Petchprauma* movie. The following thread titled 'Is there a conclusion for the movie castings?' demonstrates a typical type of question about the *Petchprauma* movie:

*Hello. I'm a newcomer. I often visit this community. It is so cosy and fun in here so I'd like to join in. Can I ask anyone who knows how it's going with the Petchprauma castings? I think 'Khun Po' seems to be a popular choice for the leading role. I'm looking forward to know who is going to take the part of 'Ngae Sai'. It's so difficult to find someone who has such a beautiful face with a strong body, isn't it?*<sup>156</sup>

The poster's message consisted of two purposes: firstly she wanted to inform the group of her status as a member of the group; secondly she wanted to discuss the *Petchprauma* movie and its casting process. Apart from these two purposes, this PPU member mentioned feeling that the online community is 'cosy and fun' which reflects the characteristics of relationships that are embedded within the community.

This particular thread got seven replies with similar types of answer such as:

*Hello. Welcome to the community. Well, if you're interested in asking questions about the movie, you'd better wait for 'Tan' Uppanikkhit*<sup>157</sup> *to answer. Anyway, I think you have to go to post those question in 'about the Petchprauma movie' room.*<sup>158</sup>

---

<sup>156</sup> From PPU online forum (k), 16 January 2004, Message posted by Yuwadee.

<sup>157</sup> Wai Cha Kun used another username as Uppanikkhit to answer questions related to the *Petchprauma* movie production. This practice of the fans also illustrates identity play among the PPU members (see section 6.6.2).

<sup>158</sup> From PPU online forum (k), 16 January 2004, Message posted by Kru Koi Lae Roi Yim.

The above message directly named a particular fan to answer the question concerning such issue. This practice confirms the recognition of the fan's better access to 'inside' knowledge than other members. In addition, this fan showed her welcome message as a sign to the newcomer to feel accepted as part of the group. However, she also mentioned that the fan should follow the group's norm in posting messages according to the different board titles.

In a reply to the above question, the fan who got to work for the movie production answered the question:

*No, the final decision for the castings has not been done because 'Tan' Cinephile<sup>159</sup> [the movie director] has another task in producing a big movie project. Oh, but there's one cast member that we're sure of, that is Sorapong Chatri who will take the part of Mantrai. But for Ngae Sai, it's so difficult that sometime 'Tan' Cinephile said that we might have to find an Indian actor to act this role.<sup>160</sup>*

From the fan's message, the close relationship between the fan and the movie director was implied as the fan gave the 'inside' information from the movie production. Such direct access to the 'inside' information from the media further emphasizes the status and power of the fan in the hierarchy of access.

### ***'Hierarchy of venue'***

The PPU team has control over the venue for the fans' activities both in the online space as well as the offline space. Such power over other members in organising fandom activities and in controlling the venue of online and offline interactions distinguishes the PPU team from the rest of the PPU community members.

On the online forum, the PPU team has the power to delete, move or edit messages that are posted there. The power of the PPU team members in controlling the online forum venue was a direct result of the fact that the PPU team helped the Webmaster to create the fansite. In the main offline face-to-face meetings and activities such as the fan conventions, the PPU team can exercise their power by organising the event

<sup>159</sup> *Cinephile* is a username of the *Petchprauma* movie director.

<sup>160</sup> From PPU online forum (k), 16 January 2004, Message posted by *Uppanikkhit*.

locations as well as the activities that take place during those meetings as well as the practices that are followed.

The following thread of a member of the PPU team illustrates how the power of the PPU team in controlling the online forum is exercised. The thread was posted by a member of the PPU team as follow:

*I am going to delete and move some messages in the Member zone so that the only messages that will remain will be the introductory messages of the members. All greeting messages will be deleted. I guess it will make those members who love 'spin threads' and who are enthusiastic about collecting their points lose many points this time. Some of you might lose more than 400-500 points.*

*Sorry if I cause you any trouble from this deletion of message, but you still have time to add more points in the near future. Don't be too serious about the points. I am doing this because I want the board to be uploaded more easily and also I want to save some storage space for our website.*

*So, I just wanted to inform all of you, but I am afraid you cannot protest against me deleting these messages anyway.<sup>161</sup>*

The above message reinforces the PPU team's assertive power over the other users of the online forum. This PPU team member also shows recognition of the 'spin threads' practices of certain fans. Additionally, the preference of knowledge posts over social posts is implied through the deletion of these messages.

The responses to this PPU team member's message from the other fans show the fans' acceptance of the PPU team member's decision. For example one of the fans replied:

*Oh! I have lost about 360 points. It is tiring to have to build up those points again but that is okay if it is for our community. Thanks!<sup>162</sup>*

Instead of taking strong action against their use of power, the members accept the PPU team as having superior roles. This fan perceives the action of the PPU team member as a necessary action that is for the good of the community and fans such as

---

<sup>161</sup> From PPU online forum (I), 24 February 2004, Message posted by *Rapin*.

<sup>162</sup> From PPU online forum (I), 24 February 2004, Message posted by *Mai Real Aun Mai*.

these do not mind their personal losses since it contributes something good to the community. Another fan comments,

*I was in the top at the points ranking system. Now I'm the in the second, losing to Wai Cha Kun. Are you helping each other somehow, I wonder? But that is fine because I am still good at posting.*<sup>163</sup>

The second comment from this fan demonstrates that she identifies *Wai Cha Kun* as one of the PPU team and she jokingly asks this other PPU team member whether or not the decision to delete the messages was a way to help the other PPU team member to gain more points and fandom status within the community. This message illustrates an example of the way that the fans respond to the power of the PPU team in a non-serious way. This view also represents the entertaining characters of the fans in this community. More responses of the fans to the power of the PPU team will be observed later in this chapter.

From the responses of these members in the online community, it is indicated that the fans acknowledge the power that the PPU team have in controlling the venue of their discussions. This hierarchy dimension, with the others mentioned the previous section provides evidence for the existence of a hierarchical structure within the PPU online community where fans have different levels of status and power and roles.

## 6.4 The Core group

### 6.4.1 Roles

The second group in the fan hierarchy is known as the 'core group'. This group consists of regular users of the PPU fansite who are participants in many activities of the online community such as online forum discussions, interactive online chatting and face-to-face meetings. Within the PPU online community, the fans in the 'core group' follow the PPU team members by taking part in the custom of welcoming new members into the community. This practice promotes the friendly atmosphere and sense of community and belonging that PPU fans often comment on.<sup>164</sup>

<sup>163</sup> From PPU online forum (I), 24 February 2004, Message posted by *Pla Pa Yun*.

<sup>164</sup> From participant observation on the PPU online forum.



The core group does not have specific numbers of members. Members of the PPU team and members of the core group tend to have distinctively close affiliation with one another since they often interact together in the activities of the online community. The levels of closeness between members of the core group depend on their levels of participation within the community and the time that they devote in engaging and interacting with other members. The level of participation among the fans in the 'core group' varies. The following pages discuss the status, power and practices of the core group in further detail.

#### 6.4.2 Status

##### *'Hierarchy of fandom'*

This section examines the practices of the core group members, which lead to the increase of their hierarchical status of fandom. The structure of the online forum provides the PPU fans with the opportunity to recognise their activity status by showing the number of posts of each user. Every member who signed up to the online community can see 'star' icons, which represents their status of fandom under their names. Each post is counted as one point and the greater the number of messages posted, the more 'stars' that appear under the fans' usernames. The heaviest posters receive five stars icons while less active posters received no stars. Apart from this, the online forum has a statistics page where the ranks of the top-ten active users of the forum are identified. This structure helps the PPU fans to identify their hierarchy of fandom status.<sup>165</sup>

The 'point' system of the online forum provides an indicator to show how active the individual fans are. The more messages that fans post on the online forum, the more points fans can gain under their usernames. Fans who post a lot of messages on the online forum are well-known for their 'active status', for example their 'public identity' can be recognised as an 'active' members by having more points from their posting or being one of the top-ten active users. This 'public identity' is similar to the identity which the fans gain from their pictures being shown in the online forum after

---

<sup>165</sup> From participation observation on the PPU online forum.

they participate in many offline activities. Such recognition of the ‘familiar faces’ and ‘familiar names’ often occurs on the online forum. The core group members dominate the online forum heavily by discussing social issues.

The evidence of how the discussion of the fans about social issues has increased more than those discussions about knowledge posts about the novel can be seen in section 5.2.1 (popular discussion topics). In the following section (see section 6.6.3), I will also present as an example how core group members take turns to welcome new members into the community as a part of their practice of encouraging smooth relationships. Therefore, it can be seen that the ‘active’ level of fandom among the core group is an important part of how these fans are recognised by the other members. As a result of this, this active level of participation affects their hierarchical status within the PPU online community.

Earlier, it was observed that the active participation of the core group members increases their hierarchical status within the online community. Since the fans in the ‘core group’ are the ones who post more messages on the online forum, other fans are able to easily recognise them. In addition to this, for those members of the core group who participate in face-to-face meetings, their photos are often shown because of the PPU community’s norm of self-disclosure (see section 6.6.2).

The members of the core group are also found to initiate small face-to-face group meetings. In section 5.3.2, I discussed the offline activities of the PPU fans. Apart from the fan conventions which were organised by the PPU team, small group meetings and activities were organised by the core group members who are active in both online forum and chatroom. Because the members of the core group have close relationships with one another, they regularly arrange meetings offline among themselves. This group sometimes posts invitations for other general members to participate in their activities or invites others to participate via online chatting. Such online and offline meetings were found to help advance the relationships of the PPU members a great deal (see section 5.3.3). In the following section, I will also illustrate how the active participation of the fans helped to increase their close relationships with the others in the community.

These active practices of the core group members illustrate their commitment to the PPU community. The following interview with a core group member illustrates how the activities of the PPU online fandom can form a part of the daily habits of the fans:

I'm a civil servant therefore when I 'play' I can 'play' only for a certain period of time. Mostly if I want to 'play', I'll arrive at my office early in the morning at six thirty or seven o'clock and I'll 'play' until eight thirty to nine o'clock. If it's the weekend, I won't be able to 'play', otherwise I can 'play' everyday.<sup>166</sup>

The interview illustrates the importance of online community to the fan's life as she engages in the activities of fandom in her daily routine. Therefore the role of the online community as an embedded part of the fan's life is confirmed.

In addition to this, the uses of the term 'play' indicates the 'fun' aspect of accessing the PPU online community, despite the fact that the fan conducted her access to the community from her workplace. The fan's comment illustrates how the Thai people often use the term 'play Internet' to represent their engagement with the online communication technology. This re-emphasises the existence of 'pleasure-loving' characteristics of the Thai people as discussed by several scholars (see Landon, 1939 in Embree, 1950, p.11; Suntaree, 1990, p.46, 160; Mulder, 1990, p.47-48; Unger, 1991, p.28).

In the same way, another active member of the core group mentions the importance of the activities within the online community to her everyday life:

At the moment the Internet is so important to my life because I can say that I'm already addicted to MSN chatting. Sometimes I don't even open the Webboard but I have to chat on MSN. However, I will eventually access to the Webboard but probably not very often as before.<sup>167</sup>

From the interview, the fan reveals that interactive online chatting, through which she engages with other members in the community, has become an important part of her daily routine. Interestingly, this fan also reported that she entered the community

---

<sup>166</sup> Personal interview with *Pla Pa Yun*, 14 July 2003.

<sup>167</sup> Personal interview with *Pa Tae Chae Im*, 24 August 2003.

because of her interest in the novel. However, once she had extended her participation within the online community, the fan chose to engage more in the social practices of the community rather than follow her initial interest. The online forum, which is the place to acquire the knowledge about the novel, has become a second priority for the fan. This view confirms the blurred boundaries of the practices between information seeking and the socialisation of the PPU fans. Moreover, the fan's practices within the online community have helped in the expansion of the social networks of the fan and raised the profile of the PPU community to an important level in the fan's everyday life.

In an interview with another fan, the lack of access to the community produced distress for the fan who was a member of the core group as she revealed:

After I changed my job, I was so busy. I had to wake up early in the morning and when I came back home, all I wanted to do was rest. Apart from this, my company does not have Internet access, so I had to disappear from the Web for a while. [...] I was feeling so empty, not to be able to get in touch with my friends, because I used to enter the Web everyday. I missed them and I wondered what would happen to them. I wanted to enter the forum so much so I have to call them instead. I usually talk on the phone with *Darimeya* and *Nu Mu*. I was not updated at the time. *Nu Mu* asked me why I didn't know about so many things that happened around the community and I was feeling like oh god, I didn't enter the Web for only three to four days.<sup>168</sup>

The interview shows that the fan was disappointed for not being able to access the online forum and get the updates of her close circle of friends. Disappearing from the fan community for only a few days had resulted in her losing touch with other members. However, this fan's comment indicates that she had created interpersonal relationships with some other fans. Such friendships were moved from the online space to their offline life. Despite the fact that the fan interacted via the telephone as an alternative communication channel, the need for her to also interact with the online community via the Internet remained. This demonstrates the importance of online communication among the PPU members.

The active practices in the online community are an important norm for the core group members. This norm is shown in the 'spin threads' practices that the fans

---

<sup>168</sup> Personal interview with *Pan Vat Tae Vi*, 20 July 2003.

participate in in order to increase their fandom status. The fans perceived this practice similar to a game that they play with their friends and the rule of this game is that those who collect the most points win. Some fans even mention that their intention to perform such practices by their posts that they just came in to make 'spin threads'.<sup>169</sup> The following interview with a member who is a 'spin threads' poster explained this norm of the fans:

I'm a 'spin threads' poster. We like to post more messages on the forum so that the numbers of the answers in the threads will increase a lot because I feel that otherwise the Webboard will be too quiet. So, I have to contribute opinions in those threads. [...] Sometimes when I can't answer anything, I go in there and send a smile.<sup>170</sup>

The practice of sending short answers with one or two words indicating their agreement or a smile icon to show their participations in the thread was found to be a normal practice of certain fans. The interview shows that the fan was not able to give substantive reason for why she had to do the 'spin threads' apart from preventing the Webboard from being 'too quiet'. Many of the fans perceive that such posts help in creating social discussions with other members and also help to maintain their relationships within the community. These practices of participating in 'spin threads' correspond with the characters of the PPU fans in enjoying playful and non-serious actions.

The core members' active practices in the group are sometimes viewed as excessive. The fact that they post too many messages, in aiming to create the entertainment rather than knowledge contributions to the group led to some criticisms regarding the non-substantive posts, which also resulted in the deletion of some messages by the PPU team. However, as the fans gained closer relationships with one another, they developed more confidence to post more messages. A fan who is a member of the core group explained her practices:

If we see someone's name who I am close with, we will go to 'spin threads' - even if there are some complaints that we always do this. They blame us that we post messages which are sometimes nonsense, but it's because we are close with some people with whom we talk on the MSN.

<sup>169</sup> From PPU online forum (m), 12 September 2003.

<sup>170</sup> Personal interview with *Nu Mu*, 20 July 2003.

When someone missed some news, we will even make a telephone to let s/he know the updates from the PPU website. Someone would also call me to ask what's going on today.<sup>171</sup>

This interview shows the close relationships of the fan to certain members in the group because of her practice of interactive online chatting. It also implies the recognitions of the 'core group' from the other members. In this sense, the practice of the core members to create 'spin threads' only contributes to the socialising discussions rather than the knowledge discussions. This points out that the membership status of the fans does not require the members of the PPU online community to have expertises in the novel. Moreover, this illustrates that the online fan community is essentially a place for the socialisations of people who share common interests.

#### *Active interaction and close levels of relationships*

The different levels of relationships among the members of the PPU online community were discussed in chapter five. The members of the core group had distinctively close relationships with each other due to their active participation within the community. In addition to this, the core group as a whole also has a close relationship with the PPU team, which has the highest status within the hierarchical structure of the community. Therefore, the social networks of these groups were expanded to a greater extent than those of the other community members.

Members of the PPU team and members of the core group often interact together in the activities of the online community. This leads to the development of close affiliations between the fans in both groups. Compared to other PPU fans who do not participate as often in the online community, the relationships among the core group members were observed to be distinctively closer. The following interview of with a fan from this group emphasizes this point:

The members in this community are a lot. But the group that is really close together is the group that talks together often. If new members would like to increase their level of closeness with others, they might

---

<sup>171</sup> Personal interview with Vee, 20 July 2003.

need to come to talk with us more or come to meet us face-to-face sometimes. So, we could develop more trust in them.<sup>172</sup>

This interview confirms that the relationships of those who were active in the group are close. This fan also mentions the openness of the group to newcomers who want to develop closer relationships with members in the core group. The fan's use of the terms 'us' and 'we' also represents the fan's sense of affiliation to the 'core group' of close acquaintances. Apart from this, the fan points out that for new members to the PPU fandom, the way to advance interpersonal relationships with other members in the community is to increase their level of involvement in the community.

Similarly, a PPU fan who is considered as a member of the core group mentions:

I'm closer with the people who I get to meet in real life and people who I talk with on MSN rather than the people who only post messages on the Webboard. Those people are less involved in our activities, so I'm not very close to them.<sup>173</sup>

This interview illustrates that different levels of relationship exist within the PPU online community. In particular, this PPU fan indicates that the practices of interactive online chatting and face-to-face meetings are important factors in bringing about the development of the fan's personal relationships.

It should be noted, however, that the levels of relationships among of the PPU fans vary not only within the whole online community but also among the members of the core group. For the newcomers who join the PPU online community, it can be initially quite scary and daunting to start posting messages on the online forum or participating in the online chatting and face-to-face activities, especially when they do not feel that their relationships with other members are that close. However, according to a fan who did not feel as close to other members of the community, she points out the need to keep up her active participation in the online community in order to maintain connections with the other members:

The numbers of members that belong in this community are a lot. We have both members who live in Bangkok and members who live in the

---

<sup>172</sup> Personal interview with *Kha Mode Dong*, 30 August 2003.

<sup>173</sup> Personal interview with *Wuan Raek*, 24 August 2003.

provinces. Obviously, we can't all meet up. So, people who are close to one another are still only in one small group. Now, I feel that I can talk with them but I feel that maybe I can't talk to them at that close a level that I can know their hearts or that they can know mine. I feel that everyone is nice and that they all have good manners and they are very kind. But sometimes I think that if I don't have Internet access, I might not be able to see or meet with them at all. At first I thought that everyone was close with each other already so I didn't know whether or not they were going to accept me but when I came to meet them, it was okay. But now I have limited access to the Internet because I'm starting a new job. So, I won't be able to join in as many activities as before.<sup>174</sup>

This interview shows the concerns of the fan that her limited access to the Internet will affect the bond she has with the community. Since the fan does not feel that close to the other fans, she recognises that the process of progressing the friendships and getting to know other members are needed to continue. The fan's comments illustrate that regular access and the devotion of time to the group is needed in order to sustain the relationships with members of the online community.

### *Entertaining characteristic*

Apart from the levels of knowledge that create an important status for certain fans, the entertaining or *sanuk* characteristic of the fans was also important. The obvious characteristics of certain members who post creative ideas and entertaining messages has gained a lot of recognition from the PPU group as a whole. This extra dimension contributed to the hierarchical status of the PPU fans corresponds with the importance of 'humour' and 'distinctive personality' discussed by Baym (1997, p.112).

Certain fans in the core group are recognised because they repeatedly post messages that illustrate their entertaining characteristics and creative ideas. However, the types of messages that are found from entertaining posters are different from those of 'spin threads' posters. The entertaining messages are mostly found to be in the form of creative stories, poems and teasing messages. The appreciation for such entertaining messages can be explained under the influence of the fun-pleasure orientation of the Thai people.

---

<sup>174</sup> Personal interview with *Nai Nit Tra*, 24 August 2003.



The following interview shows the recognitions of both types of fans, the experts and the entertaining posters:

The person that is very outstanding is *Ying IO*. She is good at writing poems and her posts are *sanuk*. There are also many people who gain recognition by posting questions about the *Petchprauma* novel. They let us join in the fun by answering those questions. It shows that they had to study those things before they post the questions.<sup>175</sup>

From this interview, firstly, it is shown that the fan can identify the person who is recognised by the group because of her entertaining posts. Secondly, the fan can also recognise the expertise of people in the group by the types of the messages posted in the online forum. This recognition of *sanuk* posts confirms the appreciation of the PPU community for such type of posts.

### 6.4.3 Power

#### *Hierarchy of online chatting venue*

The fans' online chatting practices were previously discussed in chapter five. This section illustrates how the members of the core group have a higher power in organising the online chatting venue. The power of the fans in the 'core group' exists to a different degree from the members of the PPU team. The power of the core group is only recognised in the chat rooms where they have the power to allow certain newcomers to join in the online chatting rooms.

Interactive online chatting not only facilitates one-to-one communication, most of the time the members of the core group are engaged in many-to-many communications, where for example, 10 or 15 members are in one room at the time. Since the core group members establish close relationships with one another because of their active participation in the community, the fans are able to make contact and initiate the chatrooms more easily than others.

---

<sup>175</sup> Personal interview with *Kha Mode Dong*, 30 August 2003.

Although the opportunities remained for all members to post their e-mail addresses on the specific forum in which fans exchanged their email address specifically for adding each other to online chatting venue, entering into a chatroom requires certain levels of personal connections. To join a group chatting, the active members of the core group normally initiated the chatrooms because they are more active and familiar with the venue than the newcomers or less active PPU fans. The members would start by adding the lists of the fans' e-mails in one place. This allows members who are 'online' at the time to chat among others. This reflects the hierarchy in the PPU community as those fans in the 'core group' who control the venue have more authority to activate the chatroom.<sup>176</sup>

## **6.5 General members**

### **6.5.1 Roles**

This group consists of Internet users who are registered with the PPU online community as well as 'lurkers' who read but do not participate in the online community activities (see Baym, 2000, p.8). These general members were observed to be less active in joining the activities of the other members of the online community, particularly in chatrooms or face-to-face meetings. As a result of this, their status within the community is limited.

### **6.5.2 Status**

Although the general members possess their membership status, the recognition from other fans to these general members is not distinctive. As a result of this, the general members are situated at the bottom of the fan hierarchy within the PPU online community.

The general members and the core group members are different in terms of their level of participation within the PPU online community. As a result of this, the general members, who are the largest group within the community, are seen as having lesser status and power than other members who are more active and

---

<sup>176</sup> From participation observation in chat rooms with the PPU members during the fieldwork.

participate more within the online community. Apart from this, there are not very deep interpersonal relationships between the general members and the core group/PPU team. This group, therefore, has less social network expansion than the other two groups.

To shift one's status from being a general member to having a more recognisable status, such as that of a member in the core group, one again needs to interact more actively with others in the online community. However the fan's characteristics, individual devotion and the adoption of the community's values are also important. Since the PPU community values the disclosure of real selves identities, offline meetings are an alternative way to increase the levels of social relations within the community (see section 6.6.2 for the discussion of self-disclosure norm).<sup>177</sup>

### **6.5.3 Power – Collective power of the PPU fans**

The individual power of fans who gain direct access to the *Petchprauma* movie director because of the expertises in the novel and the personal connections of the fans was previously mentioned. This section aims to discuss the collective power which every fan gains from the PPU online community.

The gathering of the fans of the *Petchprauma* novel in the PPU online community created a certain power of the fans to raise their voices to the people in the media such as the *Fan Pan Tae* television programme or those involved in the *Petchprauma* movie production. This power of 'having their voice heard' is considered as important to the members of many other fansites in general (see Watson, 1997, p.102; Baym, 1998, p.128; Clerc, 2000, p.225-226; Pullen, 2004, p.89). This recognition from the media signals the role of the Internet as a decentralised medium that can equally send out and receive media content.

For example, the online fandom offered the PPU fans the opportunity to voice their opinions on the *Petchprauma* movie production. From the observation, the movie director, Chatrichalerm Yukol, became well known for online fans of the

---

<sup>177</sup> From personal experience with the PPU online community during the fieldwork, see section 3.2.4 for the discussion on the experience of the researcher in becoming the online community members.

*Petchprauma* novel since he initiated the discussions about the *Petchprauma* movie production on the *Pantip* community. The director, who uses the username *Cinephile*, regularly updated the threads, which include the pictures and information about the *Petchprauma* movie production and the casting process.<sup>178</sup> The movie director also opened opportunities for individual participants to vote for the casts that they would like to see in the movie. The replies from many *Pantip* members demonstrated the fans' enthusiasm in giving their opinions about the movie production. For example, they suggested several possible actors and actresses to the movie director to be considered for casting. Similarly, the discussions about the movie in the PPU community were repeatedly raised. At this point, members in the PPU online community also started their own discussions about the movie since some of the members who worked for the movie production team continued to update information about the movie production in the 'About *Petchprauma* movie' board on the online forum.<sup>179</sup>

Later, the movie director applied for membership of the PPU community. Such participation of the movie director illustrates the power of the community in gaining recognition from the media. The thread title, 'Welcome the arrival of *Cinephile*' showed the appreciation of the fans after the movie director applied for the membership to the PPU community.<sup>180</sup> There were 49 replies to that thread.

The following interview illustrated the opinion of the fans towards the participation from the movie director:

I think '*Tan*' *Mui* [the movie director] sees the importance of the viewers because there are so many people who love the *Petchprauma* novel. Surely, he would like to get the cast members that the people like. Because '*Tan*' *Pranomtean* [the novel writer] has written the novel so well, we can see the images of the characters. If the director gets movie stars that are not suitable for the roles, the viewers might not like it. I think the voices of people from Internet must have some influence on the movie production because I can see that when somebody gave ideas to bring certain people to cast, the director did eventually cast them. I think that the opinions of the fans partly count and influence the director

---

<sup>178</sup> The identity of the movie director was shown since he posted his own photos and movie casting photos on the *Pantip* online forum.

<sup>179</sup> From Participant observations during the fieldwork.

<sup>180</sup> From PPU online forum (n), accessed 26 January 2004.

although the main final decision must be depend on the movie crew and him to decide.<sup>181</sup>

From this interview, the fan commented on the power of the fans' voices to influence the media. The fan mentioned the actions that the movie director took in order to listen to the opinions of the novel fans. By valuing the fans' opinions and recognising the fans' power, the sense of participation in the movie production was demonstrated. Similarly, another fan had commented on the discussions about the *Petchprauma* movie casting:

I think the voice of our group has a lot of power regarding the movie production because at least now we have few members who get a chance to be part of the production team of this movie. We also have some advantages and rights to know well in advance what's going on with the movie. I think the producers of this movie would at least listen to us because we as a group could equally represent the readers of *Petchprauma* novel because I think the producers would not be able to ask opinions from all people in the country. So, that makes our voice have some kind of power.<sup>182</sup>

The interview shows that the fan creates the sense of connection with the movie production by giving out her opinions. This result is similar to the findings of other studies, which have discovered that the sense of connection of the fans and the media increased after the fans were able to interact with people in the media (see Watson, 1997, p.102; Baym, 1998, p.128; Clerc, 2000, p.225-226; Pullen, 2004, p.89).

## 6.6 Managing the hierarchical differences between the PPU fans

Having learned about the roles, status, and power of the three groups of PPU fans that make up the hierarchy within the PPU online community, this section aims to explore the practices of the fans in interacting and managing these different levels of hierarchical status within the online community. The following discussions will firstly illustrate how the PPU team exercise their power and the reactions of other fans such power. Two ways in which the PPU team exercises its power are the forced self-disclosure norm, and, the encouragement of smooth relationships. These will be discussed in greater detail later. The following section will help to understand the

---

<sup>181</sup> Personal interview with *Tamachan*, 20 July 2003.

<sup>182</sup> Personal interview with *Phu Sao Meuang Yod*, 17 August 2003.

importance of local culture in the hierarchy and to identify the behaviour that leads to the development of close and harmonious relationships among the fans.

### 6.6.1 The reaction to power and how it is exercised

In earlier sections in this chapter, the power of the PPU team regarding their control of online forum venue, knowledge status, and access to the *Petchprauma* novel writer and the *Petchprauma* movie director were explored. The demonstration of such power of the PPU team helped them to gain recognition from the other members for their abilities and higher hierarchical status.

However, in addition to this, the power of the team was discovered to be subtle rather than concrete. The way that the PPU team exercised their power was often in a very modest manner. In an interview with a member of the PPU team, the fan was questioned about the hidden power of certain people in the community. In the fan's own words:

I know that the word 'Mafia Webboard' is often heard in the Internet society. It means that there are people who have a lot of power in a Webboard and newcomers are forced to follow whatever those people think. Sometimes some people with power would use their power to ban or anti certain people. These kinds of things happen and used to happen in many places, it depends on what the expression of those who are in the community. But we do not have this in the PPU community. We are more like sisters or brothers to each other. We have some people who are more outstanding but not to the level of being like 'mafia' people.<sup>183</sup>

This interview demonstrates a view common among the PPU team that they view the PPU community as a family and they believe that members should be having smooth family-like relationships with one another. The fan acknowledged that the strict control and harsh use of the powers that the PPU team have exists in other online communities, but not the PPU community. This interview also highlighted the fact that this PPU team member is an experienced Internet user. For example, the fan's use of the term 'Mafia Webboard' to illustrate her recognition of the existing power within several online communities in Thailand.

---

<sup>183</sup> Personal interview with *Rapin*, 30 August 2003.

In response to power of the PPU team, other members in the PPU online community were found to not confront the power but accept the power in a non-serious way. This point is confirmed by another fan:

Those who are outstanding members post a lot of messages and we go into the community to talk with them more often than the rest. But they are friendly and they tease others equally. It's not like they divide the status and behave differently for example they didn't try to make '*Tan Wai Cha Kun*' the president or something like that. They are more like friends to each other. So, I have very warm feelings and respect for this group. Different people who are the key members have different roles but they help each other well in organising things in the community.<sup>184</sup>

This fan identified the higher levels of hierarchical status of other members within the PPU online community. However, the fan did not perceive such power as being boastful or unhelpful but she recognised the benefits of having other people to take the responsibility of organising things in the PPU online community.

In dealing with the different levels of hierarchy and power within the online community, the fan performed a range of practices that illustrated how such power can be exercised and how others react to this use of power. Such practices of the PPU team members and the other members in dealing with the hierarchical differences within the PPU community confirmed the influence of The Thai cultural values concerning the 'ego-orientation' since the fans were found to preserve one another's ego and treasured of smooth interaction. This characteristic of the Thai people have been observed by many other studies (see Suntaree, 1990, p.160; see Mulder, 1990, p.47; Mulder, 1990, in Unger, 1998, p.32).

The following pages provide examples of the fan's practices in dealing with power and the fans' reaction to such power. Two distinctive performance of power of the PPU team are raised here: the encouragement of the self-disclosure norm and the encouragement for smooth relationships. These two types of actions of the PPU team have also led to the creation of the community's norm in which the other members have to follow.

---

<sup>184</sup> Personal interview with *Chammy*, 20 July 2003.

### 6.6.2 Encouraging self-disclosure

The PPU team inherently exercised their power in forcing the group to follow their directions. One of the demonstrations of power of the PPU team was shown in the forced norm of self-disclosure. The following interview illustrated how the PPU fans followed the self-disclosure norm in the online community:

This is the first website that I reveal my real name. Normally I would use different login names to enter online communities. I have never actually opened so much information on the Internet like this. I have a lot of trust in them. With this website, I tell them everything, like where my home is, what I do and so on.<sup>185</sup>

One thing from the interview that the fan indicates is that she has developed trust in other members therefore she revealed her 'real' identity. The fan emphasised how she preferred the practice of honest self-presentation in order to develop close relationships with other community members. A similar preference trend has been discovered in the findings of study of Baym (1998, p.55).

In essence, the norm to disclose the real self-identities of the fans evidently stemmed from the encouragement of the PPU team. This norm signified the superior roles of the PPU team as well as the hierarchy that exists among the fans. The PPU team often encourage the openness of the real identities of the group members, firstly by directly suggesting this practice in the self-introductions messages, which is the first crucial stage of becoming a member of the PPU community. Secondly, the PPU team take part in posting pictures of the member who has joined the fan conventions, by identifying the pictures and the usernames of each individual.

The following thread title 'New members, let's report yourself' created by a PPU team member illustrates how the newcomers are persuaded to open their identities to the group:

---

<sup>185</sup> Personal interview with *PU*, 17 August 2003.



*This self-introduction thread is the third generation of PPU members already. 'Nong' new members, you can see the lists of the older generations at the following links [...] For this new generation, we would like to request a special type of introduction that includes your own photographs to us. Ha Ha. And most importantly, don't forget to post your email address.*

*May I give you example of 'Tan' Mantu's self-introduction? This is not a new member; he's a godfather here [...]*

*[Picture of the fan and his details were shown]*

*Well, we would like you to introduce yourself in lengthy detail so that we can get to know each other. Although it's just basic information, it helps us get to know each other better. I'm sure that many people would also like to know this.<sup>186</sup>*

The poster of the above thread posted another message providing some type of forms as an example for the other members to introduce themselves. The message was as follows:

*Let's report ourselves here first. The information that we would like to get is something like this,*

*User name:*

*Real Name:*

*Birthday:*

*Education:*

*Work places:*

*Age:*

*Interests:*

*Quotes:*

*Dreams:*

*Inspiration for reading Petchprauma:*

*Email:*

*Don't be tricky, ok?<sup>187</sup>*

In the above messages, the poster from the PPU team clearly indicates the specific information she would like to get from the other members. The member of the PPU team also requested pictures as well as personal information such as work places, age, and education level. Revealing personal information of the members in this particular community is a common practice, especially for the Thai people.

<sup>186</sup> From PPU online forum (b), 26 April 2003, Message posted by *Sirinapa*.

<sup>187</sup> From PPU online forum (b), 26 April 2003, Message posted by *Sirinapa*.

Knowledge and sharing of such information encourages social connections to be made rather than being perceived as disturbing the privacy of individuals.

This practice of the fan demonstrated the norm of the group in being open about themselves and encouraging others to do the same thing. Such suggestions from the PPU members are intended to encourage newcomers to follow such norm. There were 142 replies in this thread. The replies consisted of the newcomer's introductory messages and old members' practices of sending welcoming messages to the newcomers. Many newcomers adopted the rule set by the thread poster who is a member of the PPU team and identified their personal information and included personal photos. Some members who did not follow the form of self-introduction above in their messages were reminded by the thread poster of which information they forgot to fill in and were further requested to follow the norm of the community. Several PPU team members and those in core group took turns to post their welcoming messages.

In addition to this, the use of the terms *Phi* (elder brother or sister) and *Nong* (younger brother or sister) in the message posted is typically a Thai way of creating and showing familiarity with other social members. This form of post is an example of how the PPU team enforces their power over the self-introductory message posting of the newcomers. This norm of self-disclosure is applied in many areas of the PPU fandom activities. Online chatting, for instance, is another place where the fans often reveal their 'real' identities. This self-disclosure norm is contributed to the fast-developed relationships within the community (see section 5.4.3).

Apart from this enforcement for posting personal photos in the self-introductory threads, on several occasions when the fan conventions were organised, photos from such events were posted on the online forum. Such practices demonstrated the overlapping of online and offline space of the online community since the online and offline identities became involved.

The practice of posting members' photos is a norm when the members of the PPU team organised face-to-face activities such as fan conventions. However this norm was not only restricted to the official meetings but this practice was also used in the

small group meetings among few members. The typical norm after the face-to-face meetings of fans was like this: those who organised the conventions would post photos and long descriptions of the events to let the members who did not go to the conventions know. For the majority of the photo postings, specific faces including the usernames of those who attended were revealed. For example, the thread title ‘Memento from the sixth meeting’ was posted after the sixth formal group meeting:

*This meeting is very amusing. We had 45 people who joined in. The atmosphere was beyond words. Sorry for those who couldn't come, you can see the photos here instead. Next time, you shouldn't miss it.*<sup>188</sup>

The thread signals an encouragement for the participation of those who did not come to the convention to join the group of the more active members. The typical reply messages from those who did not join the activities were mainly to show their appreciation for the photos, express their apology for not being able to join in or ask how they could join in next time. Such replies illustrate that the exercising of the power of the PPU team to force the self-disclosure norm was well accepted among the members. As a result, the fans were less likely to hide their identities from the other individuals.

### *Online identities play*

In addition to the practice of self-introductory and picture postings which were enforced by the PPU team, the PPU members were found to be unable to hide their self-identities because of the fact that their social connections had expanded into real life situations. It was discovered that some of the PPU fans had used several usernames to play with their online identities. By playing with their identities, the PPU fans perceived such practices as fun-pleasure pursuit. An interview with a PPU member explained how online identity was played:

I actually intended to use different names with different styles. I tried to control specific styles because I did not think I'd reveal myself to the group. I can't do that nowadays, but with other web I can still do it. It's because I like writing and I can write in many styles. I have been thinking

---

<sup>188</sup> From PPU online forum (o), 15 June 2003, Message posted by *Nu Mu*.

that soon I might come in again in another name and try not to make people notice.<sup>189</sup>

The comment of the fan shows that he had developed sophisticated Internet uses by applying different styles of writing to different usernames. In the same way, another fan revealed how he used the choices of name for adopting different characters relating to the characters from the novel:

I have two main usernames. *Bun Kam* is the first one that I use. I decided to use this name from the characters of *Petchprauma* but not the main characters because I was afraid that they might have already been used by other people. *In Ta Rat* is another one. [...] Mostly I use *In Ta Rat* for children or teenage style. But *Bun Kam* is for the discussions that are mainly about *Petchprauma*. The style is representing the character of *Bun Kam* from the story.<sup>190</sup>

The fan was able to clearly separate the two characters from his choices of name and applied those in different situations. This practice shows the creativity of the fan in playing with different identities. However, the fact that he openly discussed his usernames demonstrates that the identities play within the PPU online community were directed toward the fun-pleasure pursuit instead of any harmful identity deceptions.

In addition to this, there were certain fans who tried to switch their gender identities but failed to do so since they later participated in face-to-face meetings. It was found that the uses of the sentence-final particles in Thai language such as *Khráp* (for men) or *Khà* (for female) influenced the way fans play with their identities. A similar comment is noted in the study of Panyametheekul and Herring (2003).<sup>191</sup> A female fan who was using a male's name explained how the gender identities were played:

I have to say that the ideas of every post are my own but I just changed from using *Khà* to *Khráp*. Nobody had realised it until I made a mistake by sending an email address to someone in the group. Then, my real name was revealed and some knew that I'm actually a woman. Some would tease me for this. Using a male name made me have more confident to 'play'. Sometimes when a woman says something, it's not

<sup>189</sup> Personal interview with *Wai Cha Kun*, 21 August 2003.

<sup>190</sup> Personal interview with *Bun Kam*, 14 July 2003.

<sup>191</sup> See the discussion of Thai language in online communications in section 4.2.4.

nice but men can say it. After I went to several meetings, I start using *Khà* again because all of them already knew me anyway.<sup>192</sup>

Although the fan did not show her real identity to the group at first, her offline appearances made it impossible for her identity to remain hidden. The reason why she wanted to adopt a male name was because she felt more confident to say things in a more playful way than if she used her own female name.

Another member who was not successful in playing with gender identities was an 'expert' from the *Fan Pan Tae* programme. Her appearance on the television programme led to the self-disclosure because the show host had mentioned her username in the PPU online community when introducing the fan to the audiences. However, her reason for using a male's name was different because she got inspiration from a name of one character from *Petchprauma* novel. The fan expressed that:

Before this, I had to be very careful of how I post but after I went on TV, my identity was revealed. Now in my communities, they all know. But even after they had found out my identity, I still used this male style because I have 'played' in the community for quite a long time so I can separate which usernames should be used with which characters. The opinions are true but I adapt them to the way of men talk and also how men have ideas. If I present male characters in my posts, readers can't notice it. [...] I only try to represent men's ideas because I have certain characteristics and certain ideas that are similar to men. It's not like I try to fool anyone deliberately.<sup>193</sup>

From the interview, the fan did not only use the name of the leading character in the novel, she had also adopted characters of such role to her posts. Her experiences with many online communities allowed her to sophisticatedly play in different roles and also to use carefully chosen words that would not reveal her self-identity. Additionally, she did not see any down sides of such a practice because it was perceived as an alternative way for her to represent her ideas.

These examples of the fans playing with their identities demonstrate that these people did not come to the online community to expand their social networks but to join in discussions about their object of fandom. The fans did not intend to open their

---

<sup>192</sup> Personal interview with *Nai Nit Tra*, 24 August 2003.

real selves to the community at first; therefore they used several usernames or different sentence-final particles to play with their identities. However, since their interactions were developed to real life situations, they were unable to hide their self-identities from the group. As a result, the inherited need of the PPU team to encourage the openness of self-identities was fulfilled.

### 6.6.3 Encouraging smooth relationships

Apart from the encouragement of self-disclosure from the PPU team, the community members are also encouraged to create smooth and harmonious relationships with each other.

Evidence of the encouragement of smooth and harmonious relationship was observed from the custom of the welcoming to the new members to the PPU online community. The posters who wrote the most welcoming messages were the PPU team and the core group because they are more active than the other members. This practice also helped the membership status of the fans by identifying them as hosts and emphasising their sense of belonging to the community. For the newcomers who post self-introductory messages, the welcome messages are signs of friendship and approval from the other members of the community. This observation of the signs of welcoming to an online community has also been observed by Clerc (2000, p.220).

Often warm welcomes and personal messages were observed to be posted in reply to the newcomers' self-introduction messages. The following message on the PPU online forum illustrated such type of posts:

*Well, I take my turn to come to welcome all the newcomers to our group. Very glad to meet you all and very happy to know that you have come to visit this website. I hope you enjoy the Petchprauma novel every time you pick it up and read it. All the best!*

*Ps. I would like every member to give out his or her email addresses so that we can keep in touch easily. If you do not have one, it is fine or you can give your telephone number instead.<sup>194</sup>*

---

<sup>194</sup> From PPU online forum (b), 8 May 2003; Message posted by Darimeya.

Interestingly, the fan's use of the term 'take my turn' emphasised the role of the older members to perform the welcoming ritual. This type of post is also a form of social message that promotes smooth relationships within the community. In an interview with the poster of the above message, the fan revealed the reasons why she perceived the role of welcoming newcomers as important:

I try to answer every topic because when I post my questions, I want people to answer them. If no one answered my questions, I think that my topic was not interesting enough or was boring for others. So, I try to answer other people's questions and make the newcomers feel a warm welcome in here, so they feel that the members here do not just answer questions of someone we're already familiar with. I even post several answers in some topics.<sup>195</sup>

From the interview, the enthusiasm of the fan in creating smooth and harmonious relationships is clearly reflected from her practice. The fan recognised that the community consisted of different levels of interpersonal relationships, which might be scary and daunting for some newcomers. The way she welcomed the newcomers demonstrated the sign of welcome to the online community as well as a strong commitment to the community. Apart from this, the comments of the fan revealed that her objective in posting on the online forum was not only to get answers but also to get recognition from others in return.

The custom of welcoming new members has become regular practices of the PPU team and the core group. In an opinion of another fan, the welcoming gesture is a way to express their openness to the newcomers.

It's good when there're new people coming in. I think it's nice to know that there are more people who love *Petchprauma*. I'm surprised to know that some of them are so young. When I was at their age, I did not know nearly as much as they do. I'm glad to meet more people who like the same thing as I do. So, I would go in the forum and greet them, make them feel a bit more welcome.<sup>196</sup>

Since smooth relationships are considered important for the social relations of the fans, the practice of the PPU team in encouraging smooth relations and a welcoming

---

<sup>195</sup> Personal interview with *Darimeya*, 14 July 2003.

<sup>196</sup> Personal interview with *Maria*, 17 August 2003.

atmosphere in the group promotes the expansion of the social networks within the online community.

The following interview shows that the PPU team originally thought the community would be like:

For PPU team, we think the community has got out of control compared to how we wanted it to be. Only those who are active in posting have close relationships among others. The people who are close with one another are just the group who meet offline or talk on MSN.

And as for the messages posted, we wanted this place to be full of information about *Petchprauma*. We didn't want this place to be a collection of trash threads. Now there are too many types of posts. We might try to have a meeting or ask for the posts that are nonsense to be reduced, but after these meetings, we have many different topics to talk about. It might make those who are newcomers not feeling part of the group. I think the problem is that we are now too close with each other.<sup>197</sup>

This member's use of the term 'we' reinforces the different status of the PPU team and other members in the PPU community. The PPU team originally wanted the community members to have equal levels of relationships. This PPU team member realised that since it is the fans that are more active that have fans close relationships, this can be a drawback for others in the group. This is because the fan perceives that these close relationships or 'exclusiveness' among certain fans may seem to be scary and act as a barrier for the newcomers to want to join in the group's activities. Additionally, the mention of the PPU team's attempts to control 'the posts that are nonsense' represent evidence of the power exercised by the PPU team.

### ***Practices of conflict avoidance***

In addition to the encouragement of the PPU team in creating smooth relationships among the community members, it was observed that the fans also adopted their own practices to maintain a harmonious environment within the community. Rather than encounter problems or make people angry or annoyed the fans were found to avoid of conflicts. PPU fans tended to value their close relationships with others members

---

<sup>197</sup> Personal interview with *Rapin* 30 August 2003.



and seemed to prefer adopting a quiet view rather than initiating problems or arguments. The fans perceived the benefits of the good relationships with one another as more important than expressing their opinions and emotions directly.

In general, the PPU members were good at hiding their real emotions when communicating something that could lead to conflicts or misunderstanding among the people. This practice of the fans particularly illustrates the influence of the ‘criticism avoidance’ and the ‘considerate’ values of the Thai people in dealing with problems and conflicts (see Suntaree, 1990, p.160; Mulder, 1990, p.47; Mulder, 1990 in Unger, 1998, p.32).

The fans’ family-like relationships were previously observed (see section 5.4.4). In the PPU community, there was no evidence of flaming or arguments. This absence of the flaming norm was also found in the study of Baym (1999, p.158). In addition to this, since the smile is seen as an important emotional expression for the Thai people, the smile icons can represent positive emotions of the poster and display friendly gestures. Smile icons were found frequently used by the members on the PPU online forum.<sup>198</sup> In fact, one fan commented that his style of posting consisted of putting many smile icons in his messages.<sup>199</sup>

The following interview confirmed that there was no conflict appeared in the community and demonstrates the way the fans avoid the conflicts:

Before I answer the threads, I’ll observe the opinions of the posters whether they have the same opinions with me or not. If their opinions are different to mine, I won’t give my comments and will just avoid those threads. I want to avoid the conflicts. I just don’t answer the threads that I don’t agree with. I won’t start conflict with anybody. So if I find that they have the same opinions as me, I’ll answer. Since I entered the Webboard, I have never seen anyone have any kind of conflicts here and I have never met any conflicts myself.<sup>200</sup>

An interview demonstrates why another fan had to be conscious in his participation in discussions in the online forum:

---

<sup>198</sup> From participant observations on the PPU online forum.

<sup>199</sup> E-mail correspondence with *Plai Wan*, 06 August 2003.

<sup>200</sup> Personal interview, with *Nai Ta Han Peuan To*, 20 July 2003.

When I post something, I am careful to avoid conflicts with other members. If I disagree with their opinions, I would not say that I disagree because it might lead to some conflicts, and I don't see the benefits of doing such things. In rare cases, if there're some outsiders whom we can see clearly that they have bad intentions for the group, I might sometimes say something against them.<sup>201</sup>

These interviews show that the fan would prefer not to give opinions which are contrary to those of others except in the circumstances when the outsiders to the community threaten the peaceful and harmonious atmosphere. This shows that this fan values maintaining smooth relationships with other members.

In the same way, another fan had commented about her style of posting:

I have to be careful of other people's feeling and consider if the messages that I post would make them feel bad or would make them lose any good feeling they have with me. [...] If I do not agree with them, I'll try to tell that I do not agree with them in a nice way. I don't want to make them disappointed. Personally, I've never had any conflicts with anyone because I never initiate the conflict. Most of the time, I agree with everyone. I prefer to stay on the entertaining side. I don't like being serious.<sup>202</sup>

From this interview, this fan clearly values the relationships that she has already created with the other fans. Thus, she carefully avoids certain practices that might lead to any form of conflict. The value of fun-pleasure orientations was also mentioned since the member prefers to be entertaining and to not take herself too seriously. This point reflects the Thai local cultural values as having been discussed by other scholars (see Landon, 1939 in Embree, 1950, p.11; Suntaree, 1990, p.46, 160; Mulder, 1990, p.47-48; Unger, 1991, p.28).

Even when fans are challenged to be in a conflict, they tend to be determined to step out of the troubles rather than encountering with the troublemakers directly, as the following interview shows:

If I feel that there are some people that are really bad or weird, I'll just avoid them. I don't think I'd blame them or anything. If they don't do anything bad or make real trouble to me, I'd just take my step back. There was one person who came to the community and made some kind

---

<sup>201</sup> Personal interview with *Pa Tae Chae Im*, 24 August 2003.

<sup>202</sup> Personal interview with *Pan Vat Tae Vi*, 20 July 2003.

of trouble, like posting irritating messages. It makes me feel bored to see those annoying posts but I just let it pass by. If it doesn't make anyone any trouble, I think it all it does is only make us feel a little annoyed. We don't need to take any action against them. I would rather just be calm and may be somebody else will blame him then.<sup>203</sup>

The way that the fans were found to avoid problems and conflicting opinions rather than directly deal with them demonstrates how much the fans value the harmony of relationships within the group. The choice of the fans to follow practices that avoids conflict illustrates the fans' commitment to creating smooth social relationships with other fans as well as a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere.

## 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter examined the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community. The finding shows that the positions within the hierarchical structure affected the fans' practices within the community as well as the personal relationships among the members. Thus, their social networks were expanded to a different degree.

Within the hierarchical structure, the PPU team has the highest status because they hold important roles in the group. The factors that result in their leading role and status are the control of venue, the levels of knowledge and the access to 'inside' knowledge. The members of the PPU team were able to gain access to the *Petchprauma* novel writer and *Petchprauma* movie director. This illustrates that the social networks of this group of fans are expanded to a greater degree than others'.

The core group is one of the most active groups and this has resulted in close relationships with one another as well as the expansion of their social networks. This group exercises power by deciding whether to admit new members to online chat areas. Besides this, the fans who have entertaining characteristics were found to be more outstanding and popular among other fans. Thus, they gained a higher hierarchical status than the other members. This is because the fun-pleasure is values within the community.

---

<sup>203</sup> Personal interview with *Nai Nittra*, 24 August 2003.

The general members were at the bottom of the hierarchy because in general they participate less in the online community and in the face-to-face activities. The degree of social network expansion of this group is less than that of the other groups. Although all the community members collectively attract the interest of the *Petchprauma* movie director as well as the *Fan Pan Tae* television programme, the general member and the core group do not have personal contact with the novel writer and the movie director as the PPU team does. This finding confirms that the hierarchical structure has an influence on the creation of relationships and expansion of the social networks of the fans.

Moreover, the ways the fans manage differences in status are significantly influenced by Thai culture. The observation of the practices of the PPU fans demonstrated that the Thai people's 'social smoothing values' and 'ego orientation' observed by several scholars (see Suntaree, 1990, p.160; see Mulder, 1990, p.47; Mulder, 1990, in Unger, 1998, p.32) have a lot of influence on how relationships are formed and maintained, especially when dealing with different levels of power. For example, fans value smooth relationships within the community and choose to avoid conflicts rather than encounter problems or initiate arguments. Also, the PPU team's encouragement of self-disclosure contributes to the development of close relationships among the fans.

In the next chapter, the conclusion, I will summarise the issue of the expansion of social networks via the PPU online community. The key research questions will be re-examined. The aspects derived from the case study of the PPU online community which might be useful in the study of other online communities will be evaluated.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion

#### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter has three main tasks. The first task is to summarise the research findings and main arguments of this thesis to demonstrate that they successfully answer the research questions. The second task is to discuss the contributions of the thesis. The third is to evaluate the approaches used in this thesis and to suggest possible ideas for future research in the area of online communities and social networks.

#### 7.2 Re-examination of the research questions

In chapter one, the primary and secondary focuses of the thesis were introduced. I set out primarily to investigate the social networks within the online community of fans of a Thai novel, *Petchprauma*. The main research question of the thesis was ‘Can the social networks of the PPU fans be expanded through their participation within the PPU online community?’. My two subordinate questions focused on the practices and the hierarchy within the online fan community. The first subordinate question was ‘how are the social networks of the PPU fans expanded?’. The second subordinate question was ‘how does the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community affect the expansion of the social networks of the PPU fans?’. The case study of the PPU community also contributed to a more general aim, to reflect in a broad way on the role of the Internet in facilitating the expansion of social networks of fans. Thus, another question based on the secondary concern of the research was ‘what role does the Internet play in facilitating the expansion of the social networks of the PPU fans?’.

Previous studies of social networks and practices within online communities were reviewed and provided a perspective from which to view the empirical data. Additionally, to be able to fully respond to the research question, the contexts of the Internet, online fandom and the local dimension of Internet use were also examined. The use of the term ‘social networks’ in this thesis encompasses broader

meaning than the term ‘relationships’. In other words, I investigate not only ‘relationships’ between individuals but also the structure of social networks – who is connected to whom and with what social outcomes – by studying the hierarchical structure within the online community. However, this thesis also benefits from previous studies of online ‘relationships’, which take account of ‘social contexts’ to view people’s behaviour as well as explain how relationships are created in the first place (e.g., Rheingold, 1993; Parks and Floyd, 1996). Analysing online social webs in terms of both ‘social networks’ and ‘relationships’ provides a comprehensive structure for understanding the behaviour of the online fans. The following sections re-examine the two subordinate questions.

### **7.2.1 How were the social networks of the PPU fans expanded?**

Started out of a common interest, online fan communities foster interactions among fans on a large scale, as they are not restricted by space. Several studies of online fan communities with different objectives and questions have found that online fandom leads to the development of relationships among fans (MacDonald, 1998; Baym, 2000; Darling-Wolf, 2004; Clerc, 2000). Baym’s (1995, p.147) study showed that an increase in the sharing of interpretations and perspectives on ‘socioemotional’ issues related to the object of fandom can lead to the development of relationships over time.

In keeping with the findings of previous studies, the empirical finding of this thesis was that the PPU fans expanded their social networks through their social interactions: from online discussions to online chatting to face-to-face encounters. As a result of the shift of the discussions from the *Petchprauma* novel to social themes, the fans developed a degree of familiarity with one another. In online interactions, the fans did not only share insights about the novel, but began to seek pleasure and social support. That these could be gained from the online community illustrates the strengthening relationships and the expansion of social networks. Indeed, such advantages, found on the Internet, are sometimes hard to find in existing social networks or physical communities.

In addition to their shared interest in the novel, the PPU fans perceived themselves as having similar fun-loving personalities. The shared interest and shared characteristics brought about close and fast-developed relationships. This is similar to what Walther (1996, p.17) has called 'hyperpersonal interaction'. For example, the fans felt instantly close to one another and that they were able to effortlessly communicate even when they had just met for the first time. Additionally, the fans described their relationships as being family-like, despite their difference in social backgrounds. Being Thai played a part in such relationships' development; the PPU fans were found to be concerned about showing their respect to elders and maintaining smooth social interactions. The online discussions within the community were also found to be fun-pleasure orientated. In particular, the number of social posts (61%) compared to knowledge posts (25%) highlights the community characteristics and the fans' values of 'fun-pleasure'.

The PPU online community thus became a space for social interaction. One reason for this was the relatively small number of 'experts' on the novel who joined the community. These 'experts' were well-recognised from the television programme *Fan Pan Tae*, a quiz show which allows knowledgeable fans to publicly share their insights about the novel. The majority of fans avoided posting about their knowledge of *Petchprauma* because they were aware of the 'experts' on the site, thus topics tended to be more social. Some fans entered the community essentially for fun and social pursuits, and only some for information. Indeed, a look at the broad context of *Petchprauma* fandom shows us that influences from other mass media- the television programme and movie production – created a trend centred on the novel, causing its increase in popularity. This popularity led to an increased number of participants in the community, while the number of 'experts' remained small.

The fact that the PPU fans talk about social issues more than the novel sets them apart from American fans, according to a study conducted by Baym (1998b, p.115-126). She found that the topics of discussions and, indeed, the enjoyment of American fans revolves around the object of their fandom. In contrast, the PPU fans were able to find pleasure merely in conversing, and their postings were not necessarily related to the novel. The fans did not perceive having an interest in discussions about the object of fandom as particularly maintaining their

memberships. This attitude exemplifies the Thai talent for *sanuk* (spontaneous fun) (see Unger, 1991, p.28).

By engaging in social as opposed to purely intellectual interactions, the fans strengthen their relationships and expand their social networks.

### **7.2.2 How did the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community affect the expansion of the social networks of the PPU fans?**

Several studies which observe social interactions in online communities have discovered that hierarchies exist (MacDonald, 1998, p.139; Reid, 1999, p.107; Darling-Wolf, 2004, p.515). Reid (1999) notes that those higher hierarchically have more leading roles, power and control than those with lower status. To achieve high status requires effort and devotion. Along the same lines, several scholars note that the level of participation within online communities influences the relationships. People who are more involved in online communities are a lot more likely to develop personal relationships than those who are less active (Baym, 1995, p.157; Parks and Floyd, 1996, p.93; Miyata, 2002).

To discuss the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community, this thesis employed the dimensions of fandom hierarchies proposed by MacDonald (1998, p.136-138). These dimensions define changes in the hierarchical status of fans within online communities. The different dimensions include, the hierarchy of knowledge, fandom level, access to 'inside' knowledge, leader, and control of venue. The empirical finding of this thesis finds that these five dimensions contributed to the establishment and advancement within the hierarchical structure within the PPU online community. Apart from the dimensions outlined by MacDonald, fans could move up in the hierarchy by being entertaining, due to the value Thais place on, fun-pleasure. This extra dimension corresponds with Baym's (1997, p.112) finding that the factors contributing to successful postings are humour and a distinctive personality.

Based on the empirical findings, this thesis argued that the hierarchical structure within the online community affected the strength of the fans' relationships and the



expansion of their social networks. The fans higher up in the hierarchy were likely to advance further in terms of interpersonal relationships and expand their social networks to a greater extent than those at the low end of the hierarchy.

In the PPU community, there exist three status groups: the PPU team, the core group and the general members. The fans' positions in the hierarchical structure shape their practices within the community and vice versa. Each of these groups has a different collective role, status, and amount of power. At the top of the hierarchical structure is the PPU team – the fansite's founders. The PPU team's power is well-recognised by community; they control the website and the online forum. The team consists of 'experts' on the novel, adding to their outstanding status. This is the segment of the community with the greatest opportunity to expand their social networks; not only do they develop close relationships with one another, they also have access to the novel writer and the movie producer, which sets them apart from and above the rest of the fans.

At a lower rung is the core group. This group is recognised and created by its active role in the community. The group has power to control online chatting venue and some members are outstanding for their entertaining characteristics. Members of the core group tend to have distinctively close affiliations with one another as well as with the PPU team, since they often interact in both on and offline community activities. I found, however, that this group does not expand their social networks to people in the media as the PPU team does.

Finally, at the bottom of the hierarchical structure, are the general members. This group comprises the people who do not initiate much social interaction within the community and, as a result, have less distinct relationships than the other groups.

Interestingly, the hierarchy does not override the cultural value placed on social harmony, and differences in status and power are maintained in an understated way. The fans encourage smooth relationships within the community and avoid conflicts. The fact that the fans' relationships and social interactions are harmonious in spite of the hierarchy is good example of how Thai cultural values influence online

behaviour. In summary, I have found that online community members high in the hierarchy are more likely to expand their social networks than those further down.

### **7.2.3 Can the social networks of the PPU fans be expanded through their participation within the PPU online community?**

Having re-examined the two subordinate questions above, the main research question can now be discussed. The empirical finding of this thesis confirms that through participation in the online community, the PPU fans could develop close relationships and expand their social networks.

Previous studies have proven that, despite the criticisms of online communities often made in early Internet research (see Beninger, 1987, p.354; Stoll, 1995, p.23-24), online relationships are now a common phenomenon (Parks and Floyd, 1996, p.92). In some cases, online relationships can be developed at a deeper level, and, be more desirable than face-to-face relationships (see Hiltz and Turoff, 1978, p.101; Walther, 1996, p.17). In addition, relationships created online often found to move to 'real life' (e.g., Rheingold, 1993; Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Turner *et al.*, 2001).

This is true for the PPU fans, whose social lives extend well beyond the Internet to face-to-face activities. This enables them to develop close affiliations and social networks created via the online community become real-life social networks. The high degree of dependency on social networks created online is made clear by certain fans who reveal that they feel closest to their group of PPU friends. However, the degree to which these individuals develop personal relationships and expand their social networks differs. I already mentioned the fans with high status expand their social networks more than those with lower status, and that the most elite group of PPU fans even developed relationships with the *Petchprauma* movie producer. This finding confirms the unique power and opportunities of online fans discussed by many scholars (e.g., Clerc, 2000; Pullen, 2004) as well as the online fan community's function in expanding individuals' social networks.

Having answered the main research question, the discussion can now move away from the primary aim of the thesis to reflect upon a broader topic: the role of the Internet.

#### **7.2.4 What role did the Internet play in facilitating the expansion of social networks of the PPU fans?**

This section focuses on the secondary aim of the thesis: understanding the role of the Internet in facilitating the expansion of social networks. Using the case study of the PPU fansite, as a jumping-off point, I discussed various roles of the Internet. The four roles of the Internet which facilitate the expansion of the social networks of the PPU fans are described in the following sections.

##### ***The role of the Internet as a ‘social technology’***

The Internet is known not only as an information technology but also as a ‘social technology’ (Sproull and Fajaj, 1997, p.38), meaning it ‘deepens’ and ‘widens’ the experience of a community of people – further connecting people who are already socially close, and allowing strangers to get to know each other (Norris, 2004, p.40; Wellman, 1996, p.221-222). The Internet changes the way social relationships are traditionally established, as physical, geographical restrictions are no longer a barrier. Thus like-minded individuals are able to be connected and share similar ideas (Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.169).

In this thesis, the expansion of the online fans’ social networks illustrated both the ‘information’ and ‘social’ roles of the Internet. Fans’ online discussions comprised both knowledge and social themes. The fans benefited from access to information relating to the novel as well as establishing social connections and gaining social support from the other fans.

As online discussions become more socially focused, the fans developed close relationships. A significant advantage of such relationships is that they link like-minded people. The fans found that they were able to develop relationships quickly, and feel familiar with each other, regardless of their different social backgrounds.

Thus from the point of view of the expansion of individuals' social networks, the Internet is advantageous. This 'widening' experience of a community of fans would not be possible without a communication medium like the Internet, which provides unlimited space for social interactions between fans.

### ***The role of the Internet as a part of everyday life***

Several scholars have taken note of the current perception of the Internet as a part of everyday life (e.g., Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 2000, p.5-7; Miller and Slater, 2000, p.4-9; Castells, 2001, p.118; Howard, 2004, p.2, 19). They have found that people do not draw sharp boundaries between the relationships they have online and offline (Parks and Floyd, 1996, p.92).

The finding of this thesis supports these assertions. The relationships of the PPU fans and the social networks they created online were integrated into their day-to-day lives rather than kept distinctly separate. Over the course of time, the PPU fans' social interactions extended beyond the online space. The fans engaged in face-to-face activities, while continuing to participate in the online discussions and chats. The fans introduce issues related to their offline lives on the online forum. Since self-disclosure norm is encouraged in the PPU community, fans tend to provide honest information about their 'real' lives to the other members and not play with their online identities. Such behaviour within the PPU community illustrates the lack of definite boundaries between the online and offline spaces.

### ***The Internet as a decentralised medium***

The Internet is identified by several scholars as a type of mass medium (see Silverstone *et al.*, 1992, p.15; Morris and Ogan, 1996, p.42; McQuail, 2000, p.118; Wicks, 2001, p.163, 168). The Internet is different from other traditional media in that users can be both consumers and producers; it is a 'decentralised' medium where the audiences are not merely part of the mass (Kitchin, 1998; McQuail, 2000, p.120).

In this thesis, the connections between traditional mass media and the Internet can be seen on various occasions, for example, the appearance of the *Petchprauma* fansite

on the *Fan Pan Tae* television programme, and the *Petchprauma* movie director's accessing of the fansite. Such interlinks and overlapping within *Petchprauma* fandom illustrate the blurred boundaries of these media. The audience consumes multiple media: fans read the novel as well as watching the television programme. However, the Internet's unique quality is that the fans are able to discuss their opinions and give them back to the media producer. Feedback on traditional media is severely limited in comparison.

### ***The role of the Internet within a local context***

Although the Internet is a global communication medium, which is able to link people from all over the world, several studies have noticed that the use of the Internet is very much based on local contexts and cultures (Hongladarom, 1998a; 1998b; 2003; Miller and Slater, 2000; Hjorth, 2003; Liu *et al.*, 2002; Gottlieb & McLelland, 2003).

The empirical finding of this thesis with regard to this topic was that the Internet use of the PPU fans is based on the local context. For one, the fans' object of fandom, *Petchprauma*, is a Thai novel, with Thai characters and mainly set in Thailand. Whatever the subject of discussion, however, Thai cultural values always inform Thai behaviour, and this thesis has proven that this is true even of online behaviour. The Thai cultural values of fun-pleasure, social harmony and social connections played important parts in the way the PPU fans interacted and established their relationships. For example, to remain in socially harmonious relationships with one another, the fans were found to pursue only fun subjects online: they did not want to discuss serious issues, avoided conflicts, and valued the fun aspects of the community. In this way, the 'local context' or social norms of the society one is living in was shown to have a greater influence on Internet use than the 'global context'.

In this thesis, I have provided answers to both my primary and secondary research questions, thus fulfilling my initial objectives. Costigan (1999, p.xxiv) has proposed 'an analogy of the Internet as a forest composed of thousands of separate and unique trees'. This thesis has now completed its task: examined a single tree in order to

make some sense of the forest. In other words, the micro study of the PPU online community is representative of the macro-context – the Internet as a whole. Nevertheless, the challenges in exploring and understanding this flourishing ‘forest’ are apparent, and future research is unquestionably necessary. The following section discusses the original contributions of the thesis, which could provide some benefits to future research in related areas.

### **7.3 Original contributions of the thesis**

This thesis provides empirical and analytical contributions to the study of social networks in online fan communities in particular, and to the study of the Internet in general. The following paragraphs discuss the two main original contributions of the thesis.

Firstly, the thesis is original in its use of particular analytical tools. It is one of the first studies to employ the dimensions of fan hierarchies suggested by MacDonald (1998) to analyse the hierarchical structure as a social network structure within online fan communities. This helps to explain how the small groups within the online fan community, which are found to have varying strengths of relationships, are established. The following paragraphs re-summarise the way the analytical approach is developed and applied.

According to social networks scholars, hierarchy is a form of social network structure. It is further noted that separate small groups within online communities – network groups – could reflect different strengths of relationships within the social networks (see e.g., Wellman, 1997; Garton *et al.*, 1997). However, ‘structural analysis’ as a method has its limitations: it cannot explain how hierarchical structures are created or how they influence the relationships and the expansion of social networks of the members.

To compensate for this shortcoming of the social network approach, I employed MacDonald’s (1998) dimensions of fan hierarchies to observe the hierarchical structure in online communities. MacDonald (1998, p.136-138) mentions five factors contributing to fans’ status. These factors are referred to as ‘hierarchy of knowledge’,

‘hierarchy of leaders, ‘hierarchy of venue’, ‘hierarchy of access’ and ‘hierarchy of fandom’.

I combined the social network approach and MacDonald’s ideas in my thesis, and applied MacDonald’s list of five factors to my case study of the PPU online community. In this thesis, the hierarchical status of the fans is determined by six factors, which are the five factors mentioned by MacDonald (1998), and the fans’ personalities, in this case the entertaining or *sanuk* characteristic. I identified personal characteristics as a factor contributing to hierarchical status after observing and participating in dialogues with the other fans. This last factor was also recognised by Baym (1997, p.112). Significantly, I found that the hierarchical structure of the PPU community does influence the expansion of social networks. This is to say that the fans who are high in the hierarchy are likely to expand their social networks to a greater extent than those with lower hierarchical status.

This thesis is also original in empirical terms. As I mentioned earlier, the primary shortcoming of social network studies is their inability to factor social background into the way online relationships develop; there are a limited number of ethnographic studies of social networks in online communities which take account of ‘social context’ (see Wellman, 1997, p.198; Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.170). In this thesis, the ethnographic approach is used. There are two main advantages of such an approach.

First of all, the ethnographic approach takes account of the social context. This thesis has contributed to the studies of social networks by bringing local culture to bear on the empirical data. Secondly, the ethnographic approach encouraged intensive fieldwork. I observed and participated in the online community for a period of one year and four months, conducted face-to-face interviews with 33 people, and analysed online texts. These two advantages allowed me to gain an insight into the way Thai people engage with the Internet in general, and specifically into the way they expand social networks.

For example, the Thai fans are found to manage the hierarchical difference according to the cultural values of social harmony of the Thais as discussed by several scholars

(see e.g., Suntaree, 1990, p.233; Unger, 1998, p.28). This important aspect of the cultural context is an element that plays particular influence on the investigation of the impact of hierarchy in social networks' expansion. The cultural values reviewed and presented in this thesis – social harmony, fun-pleasure, and social connections – provide the original contexts in explaining and analysing the Thai behaviour online.

The ethnographic approach allowed me to develop close personal relationships with the online community members, which certainly helped me to produce original data. In addition, the focus on 'social contexts' of an ethnographic approach leads to rich interpretations of my data.

#### **7.4 Re-visiting the thesis and issues for future research**

This section provides a critical and reflective review of the approach used in this thesis and proposes topics for future research. In this thesis, studies of the Internet, online communities and online fandom provided a background for a discussion of a Thai online fan community and its social networks. In particular, I also considered typical behaviour and social network expansion within online communities in a general sense, which provide a perspective from which to view my specific case. The above research helped me to make some sense of the empirical data and answer the research questions.

Additionally, I selected an ethnographic approach and a case study approach as research strategies. In doing so, I was able to use the broad context of Thai culture to try to understand the rules and social meanings behind the behaviour of a specific group of people. I considered the content of the PPU online fan community with reference to the cultural context enabling me to have a clearer understanding of the case. I found that the ethnographic and case study approaches work well in tandem, allowing me to apply cultural interpretations and insight to the empirical data and to interpret the phenomenon in its natural setting. Most important, the methods this thesis employed yielded a useful and highly applicable answer to the research questions.



This thesis's empirical findings, as earlier discussed, confirm some theoretical ideas of previous studies. For example, this thesis supports the opinion of many scholars who have stated that online communities offer alternative opportunities for individuals to expand their social networks (see e.g., Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Castells, 2001). The thesis's finding also extends the theories further. For example, I argue that the hierarchical structure within the online communities affected the strength of the fans' relationships and the expansion of their social networks.

In terms of topics for future research, it is clear that we need more studies on the role of the Internet, online communities, and online fandom. Internet studies are a recent discipline. Studies of small communities, like the PPU online community, have often been criticised, on the basis that it is difficult to make generalisations based on the study of one such community on its own. However, enough studies on different specific aspects of the Internet will eventually result in a clear understanding of the nature of this communication medium. As this thesis has not only explored in depth a particular online community, but has also made an attempt to reflect on the broader picture of the Internet. Future studies of the Internet in Thailand and beyond will be able to benefit from the analytical and empirical findings herein. Indeed, the findings of this thesis may serve as a stepping-stone for future research on online communities and social networks, or the broader issue of the Internet in general.

However, one should bear in mind that in different online communities there are different practices, norms, and cultural values. Future researchers need to consider not only online communities' cultural contexts, but also the intrinsic contexts and contents of each individual community, before choosing to an online community of interest.

Due to the fact that the number of Internet studies on Thailand is limited, future research in this particular area would be useful. From my experience studying an online community in Thailand, I can say that knowledge of the Thai cultural values will be useful for future researchers interested in conducting similar studies. It is necessarily if one hopes to understand the interactions of research participants, or to fit in (as a researcher) and behave according to accepted social rules.

By taking account of social contexts, this thesis is able to produce a new tool for analysing the structure of social networks and the different degree of social networks expansion in online communities. However, future researchers should bear in mind that they may need to independently determine which factors influence hierarchical structure within their online community, because the factors given by MacDonald (1998) are specifically tailored to the issue of fandom and might not necessarily fit in with other types of online communities. It is therefore a matter of identifying which hierarchical dimensions are appropriate for the case at hand.

Based on my experience conducting this research, the broad social context of local culture as well as the content and context of the individual online community should be reflected on. The question of whether hierarchical structure within other online communities – which may or may not be centred on an object of fandom – influences the social network expansion of individuals provides an opportunity for future researchers. The results of such investigations could be interestingly compared and contrasted with this thesis's empirical finding.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

The main aim of this thesis was to answer the question 'Can the social networks of the PPU fans be expanded through their participation within the PPU online community?' I chose an ethnographic approach and studied the PPU online fan community – a Thai fansite about a Thai novel. The methods of data collection used in this research study included non-participant observation, participant observations, textual analysis of online discussions, and face-to-face interviews. In studying social networks, this thesis takes account of 'social contexts' from the perspectives of social relationships research. The combination of these perspectives leads to a broad and deep understanding of the issues of social networks in the online community.

The empirical finding suggests two main conclusions: first, the social networks of the fans were indeed expanded by social interactions and the development of relationships with the other online community members. Second, the degree of social expansion was linked to the hierarchical structure within the community. The fans who obtained greater status expanded their networks more than the fans who were

low in the hierarchy. Fans expanded their social networks beyond the online space into their daily lives and those who expanded their social networks to the greatest degree made connections with people from the mass media. My study of the PPU online community highlighted several roles of the Internet in expanding the social networks of the fans. These roles are as a social technology, a part of everyday life, a decentralised media, and a medium which is influenced by local culture.

This thesis is original in both analytical and empirical terms. The study of hierarchical structure in relation to social network expansion not only provided an understanding of social network structure, but also constituted an original perspective from which to view social networks expansion in online communities. In empirical terms, the thesis obtained rich data and insights into the community as a result of an intensive and extensive process of ethnographic data collection. I hope that both the analytical and empirical contributions of this thesis will be used in future research observing on online communities and social networks, both in Thailand and other countries.

## Appendix A

### Electronic resources from the PPU online forum

- (a) PPU online forum, งานวิจัย เชิญสมาชิกทุกท่านเข้ามาอ่านด้วยค่ะ [My research, would you please come to read about it], 26 June 2003,  
<<http://board.dserver.org/j/joinwriter/00000324.html>> (accessed on 26 June 2003).
- (b) PPU online forum, สมาชิกใหม่รายงานตัวกันหน่อยค่ะ (รุ่นที่ 3) [New member, let's report yourself (3<sup>rd</sup> generation)], 26 April 2003,  
<<http://board.dserver.org/j/joinwriter/00000399.html0510>> (accessed on 31 July 2003).
- (c) PPU online forum, บอร์ดใหม่สำหรับคุยกันเรื่องภาพยนตร์เพชรพระอุมา [New board to talk about *Petchprauma* movie], 29 October 2003,  
<<http://petchprauma.com/webboard/index.php?board=9;action=display;threadid=1027>> (accessed on 25 February 2004).
- (d) PPU online forum, ปรับปรุงและเพิ่มเติมแผนที่เพชรพระอุมาแล้วครับ [Changes in *Petchprauma* map], 27 December 2003,  
<<http://petchprauma.com/webboard/index.php?board=2;action=display;threadid=1542>> (accessed on 28 July 2004).
- (e) PPU online forum, คำถามแฟนพันธุ์แท้ 1 [*Fan Pan Tae* Questions 1], 31 October 2002, <<http://board.dserver.org/j/joinwriter/00000324.html>> (accessed on 11 October 2003).
- (f) PPU online forum, บทวิเคราะห์ความรักในเพชรพระอุมา ตอนที่2 [The analysis of love story in *Petchprauma*], 10 September 2003,  
<<http://petchprauma.com/webboard/index.php?board=2;action=display;threadid=574>> (accessed on 11 January 2004).
- (g) PPU online forum, ห่างหายไปนานกับบ้านหลังนี้ [Long time no see with this home], 9 May 2004,  
<<http://petchprauma.com/webboard/index.php?board=7;action=display;threadid=2930>> (Accessed on 17 May 2004).
- (h) PPU online forum, Miss PPU, 15 July, 2003  
<<http://board.dserver.org/j/joinwriter/00000399.html0028>> (accessed on 25 July 2003).
- (i) PPU online forum, จัดโซนนิ่งกันดีกว่าคะ [Let's do 'zoning'], 5 June 2003,  
<<http://board.dserver.org/j/joinwriter/00000337.html>> (accessed on 28 June 2003).
- (j) PPU online forum, มีภาพมาฝากจากบ้าน "คุณลุงพนมเทียน" ค่ะ [Photos from *Khun Lung Pranomtean's* House], 26 May 2003,  
<<http://board.dserver.org/j/joinwriter/00000253.html>> (accessed on 19 June 2003).

(k) PPU online forum, สรุปตัวแสดงในเพชรพระอุมาหรือยังคะ [Is there a conclusion for the movie casting?], 16 January 2004, <<http://petchprauma.com/webboard/index.php?board=9;action=display;threadid=1736>> (accessed on 25 February 2004).

(l) PPU online forum, ลบกระทู้ครั้งยิ่งใหญ่ที่สุดในประวัติศาสตร์ ภาคนักปั่นเขี่ยยอดตัวเองด่วน [Biggest delete of threads. Those who love doing 'spin threads', quickly check your own points], 24 February 2004, <http://petchprauma.com/webboard/index.php?board=3;action=display;threadid=2139> (accessed on 25 February 2004).

(m) PPU online forum, ถ้าอยากจะเปลี่ยน จาก newbie เป็น full member ทำไงครับ [How to change my status from 'newbie' to 'full member'?], 12 September 2003, <<http://petchprauma.com/webboard/index.php?board=1;action=display;threadid=602>> (accessed on 28 September 2003).

(n) PPU online forum, ขอกราบต้อนรับการมาของจอมพราน Cinephile ครับ [Welcome the arrival of *Cinephile*], 23 November 2003, <<http://petchprauma.com/webboard/index.php?board=9;action=display;threadid=1209>> (accessed 26 January 2004).

(o) PPU online forum, เก็บมาฝากจากมิตติ้ง 6 [Memento from the sixth meeting], 15 June 2003, <<http://board.dserver.org/j/joinwriter/00000399.html>> (accessed on 28 June 2003).

(p) PPU online forum, เมื่อความรักกลับกลายเป็นความแค้น [When love turns into revenge], 2 June 2003, <<http://board.dserver.org/j/joinwriter/00000324.html>> (accessed on 25 July 2003).

## Appendix B

### The name list of interviewees

*(Name, gender, age, career, date, and place of the interviews)*

1. Malee Boontaweewasawad, Female, 42, Public sector, 14 July 2003, at Dreamworld, Bangkok
2. Prapasri Pinitchai, Female, 43, Civil servant, 14 July 2003, at Dreamworld Bangkok
3. Arita Boonprasert, Female, 23, Public sector, 14 July 2003, at Dreamworld Bangkok
4. Bundid Sukawattanasathaporn, Male, 27, University student, 14 July 2003, at Dreamworld Bangkok
5. Chayada Runpraphan, Female, 23, Public sector, 20 July 2003, at McDonald - Siam Square, Bangkok
6. Theerapong Chiarpiriyasak, Male, 41, Public sector, 20 July 2003, at McDonald - Siam Square, Bangkok
7. Chanin Muanmееvit, Male, 20, University student, 20 July 2003, at McDonald - Siam Square, Bangkok
8. Rossarin Bowornwiriyan, Female, 19, University student, 20 July 2003, at McDonald - Siam Square, Bangkok
9. Amaraporn Chittapanyapong, Female, 22, University student, 20 July 2003, at McDonald - Siam Square, Bangkok
10. Krittayawee Sumali, Female, 20, University student, 20 July 2003, at McDonald - Siam Square, Bangkok
11. Duangjai Marutphongsathorn, Female, 24, Public sector, 27 July 2003, at McDonald - Siam Square, Bangkok
12. Phenluedee Tangtisukmeesak, Female, 35, Public sector, 27 July 2003, at McDonald - Siam Square, Bangkok
13. Ussajan Pilaph, Male, 21, University student, 27 July 2003, at McDonald - Siam Square, Bangkok
14. Wasan Suriyasopa, Male, 22, University student, 06 August 2003, email correspondence
15. Sukanya Chirararuensak, Female, 30, Civil servant, 17 August 2003, telephone interview

16. Aphaphon Hunksruea, Female, 21, University student, 17 August 2003, telephone interview
17. Sorakarn Sritong-on, Male, 35, University Lecturer (Civil servant), 21 August 2003, at Prommitra film Production Company
18. Phornptimon Chokdeesrisawat, Female, 22, University student, 24 August 2003, at Baan Laos restaurant, Bangkok
19. Pasinee Phuangvijit, Female, 31, Civil servant, 24 August 2003, at Baan Laos restaurant, Bangkok
20. Pathomwan Wilairat, Female, 20, University student, 24 August 2003, at Baan Laos restaurant, Bangkok
21. Thissana Leelahapant, Female, 27, University student, 24 August 2003, at Baan Laos restaurant, Bangkok
22. Pajaree Chaisuriya, Female, 27, Private business – Public sector, 25 August 2003, Telephone interview
23. Roongrawu Chotesirithanom, Female, 33, Public sector, 30 August 2003, at Baan Suan Din Pao restaurant, Chiangmai
24. Penwarintra Khummagasigit, Female, 21, University student, 30 August 2003, at Baan Suan Din Pao restaurant, Chiangmai
25. Jongsart Chaikerd, Male, 36, Public sector, 30 August 2003, at Baan Suan Din Pao restaurant, Chiangmai
26. Janjira Panya, Female, 23, University officer (Civil servant), 30 August 2003, at Baan Suan Din Pao restaurant, Chiangmai
27. Pooriwit Sungsiri, Male, 24, University student, 30 August 2003, at Baan Suan Din Pao restaurant, Chiangmai
28. Panarat Bunkarn, Female, 21, University student, 07 September 2003, at Black Canyon restaurant- Siam Centre, Bangkok
29. Werawan Subthavorn, Female, 26, University student, 07 September 2003, at Black Canyon restaurant-Siam Centre, Bangkok
30. Ornouma Wongsutrak, Female, 29, Lawyer- Public sector, 07 September 2003, at Black Canyon restaurant-Siam Centre, Bangkok
31. Anichal Thongyai, Female, 33, Oversea purchasing- Public sector, 07 September 2003, at Black Canyon restaurant-Siam Centre, Bangkok
32. Patcharatharn Charumas, Female, 41, Broker-Public sector, 07 September 2003, at Black Canyon restaurant-Siam Centre, Bangkok

33. Luerchai Plyawatkul, Male, 38, Manager-Public sector, 07 September 2003,  
at Black Canyon restaurant-Siam Centre, Bangkok



## Bibliography

- Baym, N.K. (1995) The emergence of community in computer-mediated communication. In: Steven G. Jones, (Ed.) *Cybersociety: computer-mediated communication and community*, pp. 138-163. Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage.
- Baym, N.K. (1997) Interpreting soap operas and creating community: inside electronic fan culture. In: Sara Kiesler, (Ed.) *Culture of the Internet*, pp. 103-120. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, INC. Publishers.
- Baym, N.K. (1998a) The emergence of on-line community. In: Steven G. Jones, (Ed.) *Cybersociety 2.0: revisiting computer-mediated communication and community*, pp. 35-68. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Baym, N.K. (1998b) Talking about soaps: communicative practices in a computer-mediated fan culture. In: Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander, (Eds.) *Theorizing Fandom: fans, subculture and identity*, pp. 111-129. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press
- Baym, N.K. (2000) *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, Thousand Oaks; London and New Delhi: Sage.
- Bell, D., Loader, B.D., Pleace, N. and Schuler, D. (2004) *Cyberspace: the key concepts*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Beniger, J.R. (1987) Personalization of Mass Media in the Growth of Pseudo-Community. *Communication Research* 14 (3), 352-371.
- Brewer, J.D. (2000) *Ethnography*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Bruckman, A. (2002) [WWW] Ethical Guidelines for Research Online. [<http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/ethics>] (11 April 2004).
- Brunt, L. (2001) Into the Community. In: Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland and Lyn Lofland, (Eds.) *Handbook of Ethnography*, pp. 80-91. London: Sage
- Callister, R.R. and Wall, J.A. (2004) Thai and U.S. Community Mediation. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 48(4), 573-598.
- Castells, M. (2000) *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells, M. (2001) Virtual communities or network society? In: *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*, pp. 116-136. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Chen, W., Boase, J. and Wellman, B. (2002) The Global Villagers: comparing Internet users and uses around the world. In: Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite, (Eds.) *The Internet in Everyday Life*, pp. 74-113. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Christensen, Scott R. (1992) Capitalism and Democracy in Thailand, Paper read at Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference at Washinton D.C.
- Clerc, S. (2000) Estrogen brigades and 'big tits' threads: media fandom on-line and off. In: David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, (Eds.) *The Cyberculture Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Constant, D., Sproull, L. and Kiesler, S. (1997) The kindness of strangers: on the usefulness of electronic weak ties for technical advice. In: Sara Kiesler, (Ed.) *Culture of the Internet*, pp. 303-322. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, INC. Publishers.
- Costigan, J.T. (1999) Introduction: forests, trees, and Internet research. In: Steven G. Jones, (Ed.) *Doing Internet Research: critical issues and methods for examining the Net*, pp. xvii-xxiv Thousand Oaks; London, and New Delhi: Sage.
- Daft, R. L. and Lengel, R. H. (1984) Information richness: a new approach to managerial behavior and organizational design. *Research in Organization Behavior*, 6, 191-233.
- Darling-Wolf, F. (2004) Virtually multicultural: trans-Asian identity and gender in an international fan community of a Japanese star. *New Media & Society* 6 (4), 507-528.
- Donath, J.S. (1999) Identity and deception in the virtual community. In: Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, (Eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 29-59. London: Routledge
- Dyrkton, J. (1996) Cool running: the contradictions of cybereality in Jamaica. In: Rob Shields, (Ed.) *Culture of the Internet: virtual spaces, real histories, living bodies*, pp. 49-57. London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage.
- Embree, J.F. (1950) Thailand - A Loosely Structured Social System. *American Anthropologist, New Series* 52 (2), 181-193.
- Enteen, J. (2005) Siam remapped: cyber-interventions by Thai Women. *New Media & Society* 7 (4), 457-482.
- Finholt, T. and Sproull, L.S. (1990) Electronic groups at work. *Organization Science* 1 (1), 41-64.
- Fiske, J. (1992) The cultural economy of fandom. In: Lisa A. Lewis, (Ed.) *The Adoring Audience: fan culture and popular media*, pp. 30-49. London: Routledge.

- Fontana, A. and Frey, J.H. (1996) Interviewing: the art of science. In: Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, (Eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, pp. 361-376. Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage.
- Fulk, J., Schmitz, J.A. and Schwarz, D. (1992) The dynamics of context-behaviour interactions in computer-mediated communication. In: Martin Lea, (Ed.) *Contexts of Computer-Mediated Communication*, pp. 7-29. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo and Singapore: Harvester wheatsheaf.
- Garton, L., Haythornthwaite, C. and Wellman, B. (1997) Studying Online Social Network. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 3 (1).
- Garton, L., Haythornthwaite, C. and Wellman, B. (1999) Studying on-line social networks. In: Steven G. Jones, (Ed.) *Doing Internet Research: critical issues and methods for examining the Net*, pp. 75-105. Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage.
- Gauntlett, D. (2000) Web Studies: a user's guide. In: David Gauntlett, *Web Studies: rewiring media studies for the digital age*, pp. 2-18. London: Arnold.
- Gauntlett, D. (2004) Web Studies: what's new. In: David Gauntlett and Ross Horsley, (Eds.) *Web Studies*, 2nd edn. pp. 3-23. London: Arnold.
- Giles, D. (2000) *Illusions of Immortality: a psychology of fame and celebrity*, Hamshire and London: Macmillan Press .
- Giles, D. (2003) The psychology of the media audience . In: David Giles , *Media Psychology* , Mahwah, N.J. and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gomm, R., Hammersley, M. and Foster, P. (2000) *Case Study Method*, Sage: London.
- Gottlieb, N. and McLelland, M. (2003) The Internet in Japan. In: Nanette Gottlieb and Mark McLelland, (Eds.) *Japanese Cybercultures*, pp.1-16. London: Routledge.
- Grossberg, L. (1992) Is there a fan in the house?: the affective sensibility of fandom. In: Lisa A. Lewis, (Ed.) *The Adoring audience: fan culture and popular media*, pp. 50-65. London: Routledge.
- Gurak, L.J. (2004) Internet studies in the twenty-first century. In: David Gauntlett and Ross Horsley, (Eds.) *Web Studies*, 2nd edn. pp. 24-33. London: Arnold.
- Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1995) *Ethnography: principle in practice*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Hansen, A., Cottle, S., Negrine, R. and Newbold, C. (1998) *Mass Communication Research Methods*, London: Macmillan.

- Harris, C. (1998a) Introduction theorizing fandom: fans, subculture and identity. In: Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander, (Eds.) *Theorizing Fandom: fans, subculture and identity*, pp. 3-8. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Harris, C. (1998b) A sociology of television fandom. In: Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander, (Eds.) *Theorizing Fandom: fans, subculture and identity*, pp. 41-54. Cresskill, NJ.: Hampton Press.
- Haythornthwaite, C. and Wellman, B. (2002) The Internet in everyday life: an introduction. In: Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite, (Eds.) *The Internet in Everyday Life*, pp. 3-41. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Haythornthwaite, C., Wellman, B. and Garton, L. (1998) Work and community via computer-mediated communication. In: J. Gackenbach, (Ed.) *Psychology and the Internet: intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal implications*, pp. 199-226. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Heyl, S.B. (2001) Ethnographic interviewing. In: Paul Atkinson, Amada Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland and Lyn Lofland, (Eds.) *Handbook of Ethnography*, pp. 369-381. London: Sage.
- Hiltz, S.R. and Turoff, M. (1978) *The Network Nation: human communication via computer*, London, Amsterdam, Don Mills, Ontario, Sydney and Tokyo: Addison-Wesley.
- Hiltz, S.R., Turoff, M. and Johnson, K. (1989) Experiment in Group Decision Making, 3: disinhibition, deindividuation, and group process in pen name and real name computer conferences. *Decision Support System* 5, 271-232.
- Hine, C. (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*, London: Sage.
- Hine, C. (2005) Virtual methods and the sociology of cyber-social-scientific knowledge. In: Christine Hine, (Ed.) *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, pp. 1-13. Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Hjorth, L. (2003) Cute@keitai.com. In: Nanette Gottlieb and Mark McLelland, (Eds.) *Japanese Cybercultures*, pp.50-59. London: Routledge.
- Hongladarom, S. (1998a) On the Internet and Cultural Difference. *The APA Newsletters* 97 (2).
- Hongladarom, S. (1998b) Global culture, local culture, and the Internet: the Thai example. *Electronic Journal of Communication* 8 (3&4).
- Hongladarom, S. (2003) *Computer-Mediated Communication and Thai Culture: a philosophical analysis*, Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund.
- Howard, P.E.N., Rainie, L. and Jones, S. (2002) Days and nights on the Internet. In: Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite, (Eds.) *The Internet in Everyday Life*, pp. 45-73. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Howard, P.N. (2004) Embedded media: who we know, what we know, and society online. In: Philip N. Howard and Steve Jones, (Eds.) *Society Online: the Internet in context*, pp.1-27. Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Jenkins, H. (1992) 'Strangers no more, we sing': filking and the social construction of the science fiction fan community. In: Lisa A. Lewis , (Ed.) *The Adoring Audience: fan culture and popular media*, pp. 208-236. London: Routledge.
- Jenson, J. (1992) Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization. In: Lisa A. Lewis, (Ed.) *The Adoring Audience: fan culture and popular media*, London: Routledge.
- Joinson, A.N. (2005) Internet behaviour and the design of virtual methods. In: Christine Hine , (Ed.) *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, pp. 21-34. Oxford; New York: Berg.
- Jones, S.G. (1995) Understanding community in the information age. In: Steven G. Jones, (Ed.) *Cybersociety: computer-mediated communication and community*, pp. 10-35. Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage.
- Jones, S.G. (1997) The Internet and its social landscape . In: *Virtual Culture: identity and communication in cybersociety*, pp. 7-35. London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage.
- Kasian, T. (1996) Cultural forces and counter-forces in contemporary Thailand. In: Edwin Thumboo, (Ed.) *Culture in Asean and the 21st Century* , pp. 239-250. Singapore: University Press, The Centre for the Arts and National University of Singapore.
- Kendall, L. (1999) Recontextualizing "cyberspace" methodological considerations for on-line research . In: Steven G. Jones, (Ed.) *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*, pp. 57-74. London: Sage.
- Kitchin, R. (1998) Introducing cyberspace. In: Rob Kitchin, (Ed.) *Cyberspace: the world in the wires* , pp. 1-24. Chichester, New York, Weinheim, Brisbane, Singapore and Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kollock, P. (1999) The economies of online cooperation. In: Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, (Eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 220-239. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kollock, P. and Smith, M.A. (1999) Communities in cyberspace. In: Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, (Eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 3-25. London: Routledge.
- Komchadluek (2003) 72ปีพนมเทียนไม่เสียชาติเกิดที่เลือกมาเป็นนักเขียน [72 years of *Pranomtean*: a worthwhile experience of being a writer], 6 December 2003.

- Kraut, R.E. (1987) *Technology and the Transformation of White-Collar Work*, Hillsdale, New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lea, M. and Spears, R. (1995) Love at first byte? building personal relationships over computer networks . In: J. T. Wood and S. Duck , (Eds.) *Understudied Relationships: off the beaten track*, pp. 197-233. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lee, E. (2004) Effects of visual representation on social influence in computer-mediated communication: experimental tests of the social identity model of deindividuation effects. *Human Communication Research* 30 (2), 234-259.
- Liu, C., Day, W., Sun, S. and Wang, G. (2002) User Behavior and the "Globalness" of Internet: from a Taiwan users' perspective. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7 (2), 1-10.
- Lyon, D. (2002) Cyberspace: Beyond the Information Society? In: Armitage, J. and Roberts, J., (Eds.) *Living with Cyberspace: Technology & Society in the 21st Century*, pp. 21-33. New York : Continuum.
- MacDonald, A. (1998) Uncertain utopia: science fiction media fandom and computer mediated communication. In: Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander, (Eds.) *Theorizing Fandom: fans, subculture and identity* , pp. 131-152. Cresskill, NJ : Hampton Press.
- Machin, D. (2002) *Ethnographic Research for Media Studies*, London: Arnold.
- Manager (2004) 40ปี "เพชรพระอุมา" มหาภาพยวรรณกรรมไทย [40 years "Petchprauma" A Great Thai literature], 29 October 2004.
- Mann, C. and Stewart, F. (2000) *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: a handbook for researching online*, London: Sage.
- McCargo, D. (2000) *Politics and the Press in Thailand: media machinations*, London: Routledge.
- McQuail, D. (2000) *Mass Communication Theory*, 4th edn. London: Sage.
- Mele, C. (1999) Cyberspace and disadvantaged communities: the Internet as a tool for collective action . In: Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, (Eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 290-310. London: Routledge.
- Mickelson, K.D. (1997) Seeking social support: parents in electronic support groups . In: Sara Kiesler, (Ed.) *Culture of the Internet*, pp. 157-178. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, INC. Publishers.
- Miller, D. and Slater, D. (2000) *The Internet: an ethnographic approach*, Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Mitra, A. and Cohen, E. (1999) Analyzing the Web: directions and challenges. In: Steven G. Jones, (Ed.) *Doing Internet Research: critical issues and methods for examining the Net* , pp. 179-202. Thousand Oaks: Sage.



- Miyata, K. (2002) Social support for Japanese mothers online and offline. In: Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite, (Eds.) *The Internet in Everyday Life*, pp. 521-548. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Morris, M. and Ogan, C. (1996) The Internet as mass medium. *Journal of Communication* 46, 39-51.
- Mulder, N. (1990) *Inside Thai Society: an interpretation of everyday life*, 3rd edn. Bangkok: Duang Kamol.
- Murphy, E. and Dingwall, R. (2001) The Ethics of Ethnography. In: Atkinson, P., Coffey, A., Delamont, S., Lofland, J. and Lofland, L., (Eds.) *Handbook of Ethnography*, pp. 339-343. London: Sage.
- National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC) (2002) *Thailand Vision Towards a Knowledge-Based Economy*, Bangkok: National Electronics and Computer Technology Center.
- National Statistical Office (2004) *ICT Uptake: 2004: Thailand in the information age*, Bangkok: National Statistical Office, Ministry of Information and Communication Technology.
- Norris, P. (2004) The bridging and bonding role of online communities. In: Philip N. Howard and Steve Jones, (Eds.) *Society Online: the Internet in context*, pp. 31-41. Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Office of the Prime Minister (2000) *Thailand into the 2000's*, Bangkok: The National Identity Board, Office of the Prime Minister.
- Orgad, S. (2005) From online to offline and back: moving from online to offline relationships with research informants. In: Christine Hine, (Ed.) *Virtual Methods: issues in social research on the Internet*, pp. 51-65. Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Panyametheekul, S. and Herring, S.C. (2003) Gender and Turn Allocation in a Thai Chat Room. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 9 (1).
- Parameswaran, R. (1999) Western Romance Fiction as English Language Media in Postcolonial India. *Journal of Communication* 49 (3), 84-105.
- Parks, M.R. and Floyd, K. (1996) Making Friends in Cyberspace. *Journal of Communication* 46 (1), 80-97.
- Porter, D. (1997) Introduction. In: *Internet Culture*, pp. xi-xviii. New York and London: Routledge.
- Pullen, K. (2000) I-love-Xena.com: creating online fan communities. In: David Gauntlett, (Ed.) *Web Studies: Rewiring media studies for the digital age*, pp. 52-61. London: Arnold.

- Pullen, K. (2004) Everybody's gotta love somebody, sometime: online fan community . In: David Gauntlett and Ross Horsley, (Eds.) *Web Studies*, 2nd edn. pp. 80-91. London: Arnold.
- Queralt, M. (1996) Communities . In: Magaly Queralt , (Ed.) *The Social Environment and Human Behavior*, pp. 222-258. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Rafaeli, S. and LaRose, R.J. (1993) Electronic Bulletin Boards and 'Public Goods' Explanations of Collaborative Mass Media. *Communication Research* 20 (2).
- Reid, E. (1995) Virtual Worlds: culture and imagination. In: Steven G. Jones, (Ed.) *Cybersociety: computer-mediated communication and community*, pp. 164-183. Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage.
- Reid, E. (1999) Hierarchy and power: social control in cyberspace. In: Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock , (Eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 107-133. London: Routledge.
- Rheingold, H. (1993) *The Virtual Community: homesteading on the electronic frontier* , Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Rheingold, H. (2000) *The Virtual Community: homesteading on the electronic frontier* , Revised edn. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London and England: MIT Press.
- Rice, R.E. and Love, G. (1987) Electronic Emotion: socioemotional content in a computer-mediated communication network. *Communication Research* 14 (1), 85-108.
- Robin, K. (1996) Cyberspace and the world we live in . In: Jon Dovey, (Ed.) *Fractal dreams: New Media in Social Context*, pp. 1-30. London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited.
- Rutter, J. and W.H. Smith, G. (2005) Ethnographic Presence in a Nebulous Setting. In: Christine Hine, (Ed.) *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, pp.81-92. Oxford: Berg.
- Schwartz, S. H. (1992) Universals in the content and structure of values: theoretical advances and empirical tests in 20 countries. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 25, 1-65.
- Schwartz, S. H. and Bardi, A. (2001) Value hierarchies across cultures: taking a similarities perspectives. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32(2), 268-290.
- Shields, R. (1996) Introduction: virtual spaces, real histories and living bodies. In: *Culture of Internet: Virtual Space, Real Histories, Living Bodies*, pp. 1-10. London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage.
- Short, J., Williams, E. and Christie, B. (1976) *The Social Psychology of Telecommunication*, London: John Wiley.



- Silver, D. (2000) Looking backwards, looking forwards: cyberculture studies 1999-2000. In: David Gauntlett, (Ed.) *Web Studies: Rewiring media studies for the digital age*, pp. 19-30. London: Arnold.
- Silverstone, R., Hirsch, E. and Morley, D. (1992) Information and communication technologies and the moral economy of the household . In: Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch, (Eds.) *Consuming Technologies: media and information in domestic spaces*, pp. 15-31. London: Routledge.
- Sirin, P., Huter, S. and Wenzel, S. (1999) *The History of the Internet in Thailand*, Oregon: University of Oregon Books.
- Slevin, J. (2000) *The Internet and Society*, Malden MA: Blackwell.
- Smith, A.D. (1999) Problems of conflict management in virtual communities. In: Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, (Eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 134-163. London: Routledge.
- Smith, M.A. and Kollock, P. (1999) *Communities in Cyberspace*, London: Routledge.
- Somkiat, T. (2001) State Interventions in the Internet Market: lesson from Thailand. Bangkok: The International Telecommunication Union.
- Spears, R. and Lea, M. (1992) Social Influence and the Influence of the Social in Computer-Mediated Communication. In: Martin Lea, (Ed.) *Contexts in Computer Mediated Communication*, pp. 30-65. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo and Singapore: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Spears, R. and Lea, M. (1994) Panacea or Panopticon? The Hidden Power in Computer-Mediated Communication. *Communication Research* 21 (4), 425-459.
- Sproull, L. and Kiesler, S. (1986) Reducing social context cues: electronic mail in organizational communication. *Management Science* 32, 1492-1512.
- Sproull, L. and Faraj, S. (1997) Atheism, sex, and databases: the Net as social technology. In: Sara Kiesler, (Ed.) *Culture of the Internet*, pp. 35-51. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Stake, Robert E. (2000) The case study method in social inquiry. In: Roger Gomm, Martyn Hammersley and Peter Foster, (Eds.) *Case Study Method*, pp.10-26. London: Sage.
- Stoll, C. (1995) *Silicon snake oil: second thoughts on the information highway*, New York: Doubleday.
- Suntaree, K. (1990) National character in the Thai nine value clusters. In: *Psychology of the Thai People: values and behavioral patterns*, pp. 159-260. Bangkok: Magenta Co.

- Suparucha, S. (1998) นวนิยายแนวผจญภัย: จาก คิงโซโลมอนส์ ไมนส์ ล่องไพร ถึงเพชรพระอุมา (ภาคหนึ่ง) [A Comparative Study of Adventure Novels: from King Solomon's Mines, to Long Plai and Petchprauma], Unpublished Master of Comparative Literature Thesis, Chulalongkorn University.
- Taylor, J. (2003) Cyber-Buddhism and Changing Urban Space in Thailand. *Space & Culture* 6 (3), 292-308.
- Thurlow, C., Lengel, L. and Tomic, A. (2004) *Computer-Mediated Communication: social interaction and the Internet*, London: Sage.
- Turkle, S. (1995) *Life on the Screen: identity in the age of the Internet*, London: Phoenix.
- Turner, J.W., Grube, J.A. and Meyers, J. (2001) Developing an Optimal Match Within Online Communities: an exploration of CMC support communities and traditional support. *Journal of Communication* 51 (2), 231-251.
- Unger, D. (1998) Sociability and Social Capital: A Tale of Two Thailands. In: *Building Social Capital in Thailand: Fibers, Finance, and Infrastructure*, pp. 27-57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Walther, J.B. (1992) Interpersonal Effects in Computer-Mediated Interaction: a relational perspective. *Communication Research* 19 (1), 52-90.
- Walther, J.B. (1996) Computer-Mediated Communication: impersonal, interpersonal and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research* 23 (1), 3-43 .
- Walther, J.B., Anderson, J.F. and Park, D.W. (1994) Interpersonal Effects in Computer-Mediated Interaction: a meta-analysis of social and antisocial communication . *Communication Research* 21 (4), 460-487.
- Watson, N. (1997) Why we argue about virtual community: a case study of the Phish.Net fan community. In: Steven G. Jones, (Ed.) *Virtual Culture: identity and communication in cybersociety*, pp. 102-132. London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage.
- Wellman, B. (1997) An electronic group is virtually a social network . In: Sara Kiesler, (Ed.) *Culture of the Internet*, pp. 179-205. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, INC. Publishers.
- Wellman, B. and Gulia, M. (1999) Virtual communities as communities: net surfers don't ride alone. In: Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, (Eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace*, pp. 167-194. London: Routledge.
- Wellman, B. and Haythornthwaite, C. (2002) *The Internet in Everyday Life*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wellman, B., Quan-Haase, A., Boase, J., Chen, W., Hampton, K., Diaz, I.I.d. and Miyata, K. (2003) The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 8 (3), 1-24.

- Wellman, B., Salaff, J., Dimitrova, D., Garton, L., Gulia, M. and Haythornthwaite, C. (1996) Computer Networks as Social Networks: collaborative work, telework, and virtual community. *Annual Review of Sociology* 22 (1996), 213-238 .
- Wicks, R.H. (2001) *Understanding Audiences: learning to use the media constructively*, Marwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Williams, M. (2003) *Making Sense of Social Research*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage.
- Wilbur, S.P. (1997) An archaeology of cyberspaces: virtuality, community, identity. In: David Porter, (Ed.) *Internet Culture* , pp. 5-22. New York and London: Routledge.
- Yin, R.K. (2003) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage.
- Yum, Y. and Hara Kazuya (2005) Computer-Mediated Relationship Development: a cross-cultural comparison. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11 (1).