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**BUILDING PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP IN THAI CARTOON
CHARACTER**

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Abstract

Cartoon characters are digital content appreciating for people in all ages. The relation between cartoon characters and fan clubs are parasocial relationships. It can create or extend human appearance. Especially, cartoon characters represent human or can reflect human's ideas. The technology development changes the society. The coexistence with digital technologies makes the new society. The new appearance may be created in the social world, and it makes the changes of behaviour, society, and digital culture. To study the processes to make cartoon characters which make the parasocial relationships with cartoon characters and factors making this relationship. This study used the qualitative research methodology, collecting data with in-depth interviews, participant observation through activities of cartoon characters in the online social society, and studying from relevant documents. The research result found that the processes to create cartoon characters make the parasocial relationships with cartoon characters. (1) The design appearances were attractive and could be easily remembered so that they would be impressed at the first sight. (2) The clear presentation of characters' personalities was unique and isn't as same as others. (3) The story presentation could make the emotional and mental relationship. (4) The story propagation, the perception creation, and the factors making the parasocial relationships with cartoon characters were (1) things presenting in the physical appearance, such as appearances, personalities, and behaviours of cartoon characters, using verbal and nonverbal communication, and costumes, (2) the story communication through cartoon characters, and (3) having stories or experiences with cartoon characters.

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1. Introduction

Today, cartoon characters have become a part of people's daily lives. These characters can be seen not only in TV shows but also in other media such as movies, games, comic books, and toys. Nowadays, audiences are increasingly popular to watch animated movies. One of the key marketing aspects of animated movies is the characters. The characters are not just the main selling points of animated movies. It also involves in the successive marketing of animations after the end of the screening of the film in a character licensing and merchandising that will generate a lot of revenue for the producers. Therefore, designing cartoon characters for various mediums does not depend solely on the aesthetics of designers. Instead, it must be designed to meet the marketing needs that will use the characters and be applied to other products. Hence, designers must strike a balance between these factors to achieve the best results while still adding value.

Character merchandising is a market that generates revenue for animation industries. For example, Disney's princess costume cartoon character. It earned only the North American region \$1.5 billion, although most of the films of these princess characters are no longer screened in theatres. These cartoon characters are created as model toys, games, and licensing to be used in advertising materials in consumer goods and clothing and utensils, not limited to children's groups anymore. In addition to children, the group of women over 20 years of age is also an important customer of this character Turczyn (2003).

Why do we love and pay attention to these cartoon characters? That is because these cartoon characters are made to be liked and desirable for more than humans. It is not surprising that we pay more attention to those cartoon characters than our fellow human beings (Vermeule, 2009). Characters like Mickey Mouse can reach and dominate people's heart all over the world with fun, courageous, friendly personalities and helping friends in times of trouble. In addition, Mickey Mouse represents happiness and support, which is what people of all genders do. All ages and ethnicities are understandable (Farrell, 2003). Aliyeva (2013) found that children aged 18 months begin to take short-term interest in television. After 30 months, they were able to mimic the characters of the cartoons or media they were consuming.

Cartoon characters will be famous and well-established, it is essential to have the support of their fans. Fans of cartoon characters are different from fans of other groups because they have no lives, but human interest in following these non-real-life cartoon characters is also important in supporting the work of cartoon characters and products. Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. (2014) explained expanding a person's identity through fictional characters in the research of Self-Expansion Through Fictional Character. It is no different from building relationships with real people, as well as having the opportunity to create a shared experience with fictional characters in the story and be able to expand their identity. Moreover, it has developed people to personal growth, especially for those who see the character as representing themselves or reflecting their thoughts (Gannon, 2018).

Today's digital technology developments have diversified the format of cartoon characters, the content is improved to be in the form of digital content and in accordance with the communication technology devices via animation, game, e-book, line sticker, webtoon, etc. Furthermore, the development of digital technology contributes to the transformation of society, life, work, which is necessary to live with digital technology. It contributes to digital ecology and digital culture. There are no time limits and no

limits on how many communicators there are. Coexistence with digital technology creates a new society, a virtual reality society, which may or may not be like a real-world society. There may be a new identity created in the social world. Besides, creating social networks such as Facebook and Twitter where so many people come together in this fantasy world leading to a greater number of communications, exchanges, and sharing of information resources (Putnam et al., 2011). Despite the advances in technology and communication, humans are still the source and destination of communications. Human behaviour influenced by the development of digital technology has resulted in the transformation of society and digital culture.

The researcher thus has foreseen that cartoon characters are not just toys; they can also be something that reflects a person's behaviour. Whether it is a child or an adult with a character-tracking characteristic, comics. Some people see cartoon characters as best friends, playfellows, and friends who are by their side in times of fear, discouragement, or grief as a symbol of identity through consumption instincts. Whether it is in the form of merchandise, collecting, liking, and following those cartoon characters. Therefore, analysing the process of creating cartoon characters that produce parasocial relationships with cartoon characters, and factors that contribute to parasocial relationships with cartoon characters, can be useful for Thai cartoon character designers. The results of this research can be used as references to creating new cartoon characters to be a favourite and understanding the behaviour of fans towards cartoon characters.

2. Problem Statement

Today, it seems like cartoon character has become part of our live. Not only we enjoy cartoon character as an entertainment, but also, they have become part of our way of communication and self-expression. We show and express our interest or even obsession with cartoon characters that same way as they are a human being or friend. This relationship between human and cartoon character is parasocial relationship (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2014) which could be the fundamental of every cartoon character's success. Parasocial Relationship is an interpersonal relationship that occurs only on one side. It is like creating an imaginary feeling with a particular person. Although the relationship that occurred the characteristics of quasi-truth society are divided into three aspects as follows: 1. Social relation are half-truths of thought, 2. Social relation are half-truth of feeling, 3. Social relation are half-truth of behaviour.

Cartoon Character licensing and merchandising is very promising new business, especially with the rising of digital communication technology. However, the business is very competitive, for Thai creator the chance to build and success in this business are slim, but there are some famous Thai cartoon characters are able breakthrough and become successful and own the respectable number of fans. Researcher believes that there are factors and method which will be the key to create the parasocial relationship between the cartoon character and fans which can be very useful information to Thai cartoon character and related business such as animation, game, and children product.

3. Research Questions

- 3.1. How to build a successful cartoon character, there should be a process and factors that contribute to a strong character that beloved by people and be able to build its fan based?

4. Purpose of the Study

1. To analyze the process of building cartoon characters in Thailand towards parasocial relationships in cartoon characters.
2. To analyze the factors that contribute to parasocial relationships between fans and Thai cartoon characters.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Scope of the research

In the research entitled Building Parasocial Relationships in Thai Cartoon Character, the researcher used the research methodology as qualitative research, used data collection methods for an in-depth interview, and engage observations through cartoon character activities via social media. Details of the research method are as follows:

In this study, the researcher focused on studying fans of cartoon characters who are fond of Thai cartoon characters for selecting the population and samples of Thai cartoon characters as the followings:

1. Thai cartoon characters who are non-human fictional characters, have a clear identity, represent themselves, and do not represent artists or cartoonists. The elements are as follows:
 - Thai cartoon characters are over 10 years old.
 - Well recognized by public.
 - There are communicating channels both traditional and new media.
 - Have character merchandising.
 - Have character licensing.
 - Have Fan Community.
2. 30 fans of Thai cartoon characters with a specific sampling using focus group discussion methods with the following selection criteria:
 - Must be a fan who tracks the communication channels of cartoon characters.
 - Have a product of that cartoon character
 - Have attended events held

5.2. Methods of conducting research

This research used qualitative methods. The researchers studied data from reviews, collecting information from various sources, fielding to both observe or participating in character related events. In-depth interviews with creators of cartoon characters and fans of cartoon characters. At the time of the interview, external personality traits and behaviours of the fans were observed, and the information obtained was classified for descriptive analytics.

In-depth interview with 30 fans of Thai cartoon characters who are engaged Fans or advocated fans of fan level pyramid. Meaning, fans who purchase and use character products and actively engages with character community. The researcher selected fans through observation of each character's social media

community channel for actively participate fans, created a short list, then confirmed the level of fans participation with Community owner before requested for interview.

6. Findings

Research on building parasocial relationships with Thai cartoon characters aims to; Analyze the process of creating Thai cartoon characters that produce parasocial relationships with cartoon characters and Analyze the factors that contribute to parasocial relationships with Thai cartoon characters. The researchers analyzed the objectives as follows:

6.1. The process of building Thai cartoon characters towards creating parasocial relationships between Fans and Thai cartoon characters

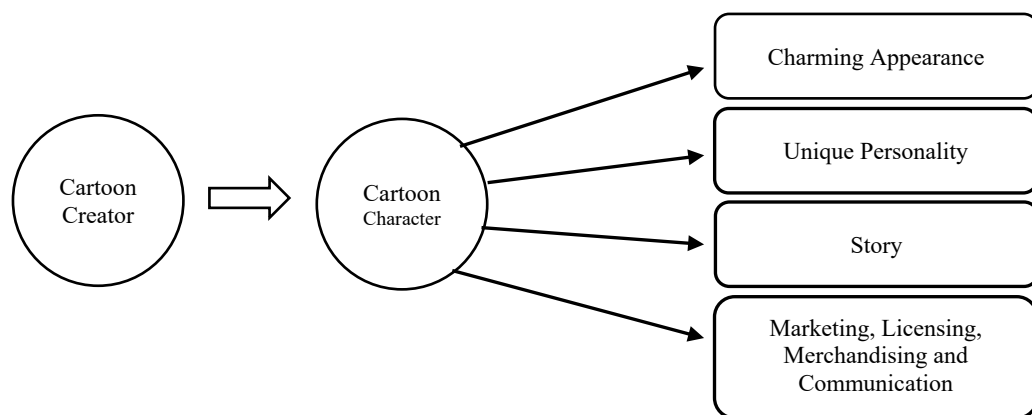


Figure 1. The flowchart of process of building Thai cartoon characters towards creating parasocial relationships between Fans and Thai cartoon characters

Creating one character to be loved and remembered by people must consist of many elements, including the creation of the history and background of the character, as well as the personality of the character to suit the target audience. At the stage of design, the designer must create the character in an interesting way, be able to express personality from the vision of both the shape, gestures, expression of the character, and the uniqueness of the character so that the audience can differentiate and recognize the character. Sometimes the characters that come out don't always have to be design-oriented, but they focus more on responding to their personality and matching their target audience preferences by using basic shapes and being recognizable. Even in silhouettes, combined with the use of colours that make a difference, the story, personality, and character design are very pleasant and memorable.

The nature of cartoon character design is that it has different design characteristics than other graphic designs, as character designs must be applied in animation or other formats. As a result, the design of the characters has many points to take into account, starting with the problem of presenting personality through cartoon characters. At the same time, it must meet the aesthetics and attractiveness of the characters to the target audience. The process of creating Thai cartoon characters that produce parasocial relationships with cartoon characters includes:

- The charming, easy-to-remember appearance design creates a strong first impression

The character's appearance is very important because the character's traits are symbols of the brand itself. In this case, it is more important than a logo or a brand, for example Bloody Bunny is a small white female rabbit with a red inner ear. The right ear has a drooping ear. There are sutures on the right ear and on the stomach, sharp eyes with a yellow outer circle and red inner circle. PangPond is a 5-year-old boy who is characterized by big eyes and 3 hair strands. Moreover, Khan Kluay is an elephant with a blue curved back and differs from the two characters above. It has 2 characteristics according to age: the character Khan Kluay in childhood and the character Khan Kluay as an adult. Khan Kluay in adulthood appears in films in both seasons 1 and 2 while the childhood character appeared only in the early stages of the first film, but it made more memorable. According to interview data, the physical characteristics of the character are very important because the character does not have physical or other practical features as an element in the buyer's decision, such as other products. Therefore, the external characteristics conveyed through the cuteness or personality of the characters are the only physical qualities that consumers will use to make decisions about buying or liking cartoon characters, which many fans or buyers start buying from their satisfaction at first sight, sometimes without even knowing the story or the name of the character.

- Expressing the character's unique personality

The personality of the cartoon character brand is similar to personal branding, which understands a person's personality and difference, and creates clarity and consistency in life and decisions to become a target in life. Bloody Bunny or Savage Rabbit turns itself from fearless animals into heroes with determined, strong, courageous, self-assured, and solitude-loving habits. PangPond is a Thai kid who has his own ideas, dares to express himself, seeks fun and imagination. Khan Kluay is an elephant that were raised from ordinary families, but with courage and patriotism, it contributes to efforts to achieve success. The personality of this character is clearly reflected in the products in the form of expressions, words or letters, as well as the use of colours and characteristics of illustrations. It is to create clear visuals of different characters in the consumer's mind and make a difference and recognition for each character.

- Presenting stories that can create emotional and thought bonds

The character's story is the inviting part of the fan's follow because the character will evolve and thrive, or the fan will see the character's thinking and decision-making, which creates depth and intrigue for the character. The producers will begin the creation of cartoon characters by exploring market data or market research, where producers must clearly find out about the trends and consumers trend in the market and their fan audiences to create the stories of the cartoon characters to reach the audience's feelings and make an impression and a passion in the mind of that fans.

- Publishing and communication of character stories to creating awareness

Publishing stories and creating awareness that producers are trying to communicate to their target audience in ways that can interact with each other between producers and fans. The design of cartoon characters to express and communicate stories consists of: Facebook pages, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube in the field of offline media and outings on various occasions to offer products and events to build

relationships and delight fans and the public. Furthermore, the atmosphere is designed to match the personality of the cartoon characters and create a shared experience through various activities with the aim of expanding business products as well as creating exchanges of ideas, building relationships between fans, and meeting cartoon characters in the form of mascots, exhibitions, and events in Thailand and abroad.

6.2. Analyzing the factors that contribute to the parasocial relationships in Thai cartoon characters

Research has shown that the factors that contribute to parasocial relationships in Thai cartoon characters are physical appearances, communicating stories through cartoon characters, and having stories or experiences with cartoon characters.

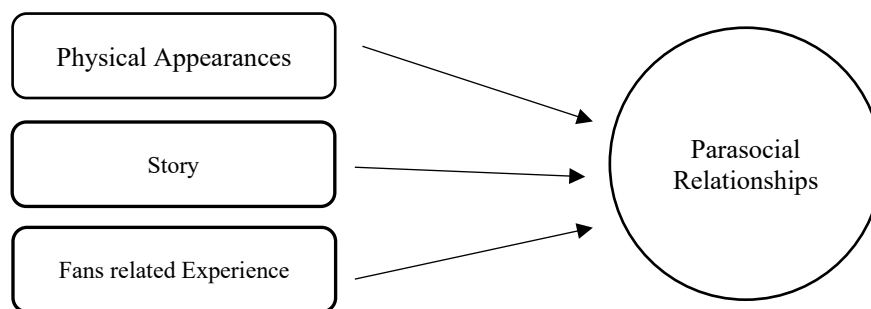


Figure 2. The flowchart of factors that contribute to the parasocial relationships in Thai cartoon characters

- Physical appearance

Visible factors such as character appearance and character-based products are based on design principles, and emphasis on character proportions and shapes, color selection, stroke selection, and drawing techniques. These are caused by the design of the producer matching the personal tastes and preferences of the fans, perhaps the popularity or just the personal preferences, the expressive gestures of the cartoon characters, the characteristics of cartoon characters, which include facial expressions and drawing techniques that create the emotions and feelings of the characters, contributing to the impression of the fan's character.

- Communicating stories through cartoon characters

Communicating stories through cartoon characters is a factor that relies on a long-term relationship between the cartoon character and the fans, with the content and story of the character creating the realism of the character within the fan's mind through the character's characteristics, such as being polite, curious, or hiding the cruelty of sweet expression, sarcastically not caring about society. It's an element to a fan's passion, especially when a fan could learn and follow a character, the character's story is the part that invites the fan to follow because the cartoon character will evolve and thrive, or the fan will see the character's thinking and decision-making, which creates depth and interest to the cartoon characters. Choosing a communication channel and creating content in the producer's communication is the most important thing

to create a phenomenon for Thai cartoon characters. It is the beginning of the Thai cartoon character's acquaintance and the first meeting and the creation of a continuous relationship with the fans.

Having a story or experience with a cartoon character.

Although the factors that contribute to parasocial relationships between a cartoon character and a fan, there is a starting point from liking the exterior of the cartoon character, reflecting the image of the character that was first seen, and then leading to an openness to information, interest in the story and background of the character. It was found that the cartoon characters had personalities, habits, and beliefs. However, when a relationship is a long-standing relationship, it can create a parasocial relationships or expand the person's identity. It's no different than building relationships with real persons, having the opportunity to create a shared experience with fictional characters in the story can expand their personality in growing up with cartoon characters as well as developing people to personal growth, especially for those who see that a character represents themselves or reflects their thoughts and make expressions through posting, sharing content, and liking, as if that the cartoon characters exist.

7. Conclusion

By studying the building of the parasocial relationships in Thai cartoon characters, results can be summarized and discussed as follows:

The processes of building cartoon characters that produce parasocial relationships in cartoon characters are 1. The charming, easy-to-remember appearance design creates a strong first impression, 2. Expressing the character's unique personality, 3. Presenting stories that can create emotional and thought bonds, 4. Publishing stories and creating awareness. Besides, the factors that contribute to parasocial relationships in cartoon characters are physical appearances, such as appearance, personality and behaviour of cartoon characters, use of verbal and non-verbal communication and dressing; communicating stories through cartoon characters and having stories or experiences with cartoon characters.

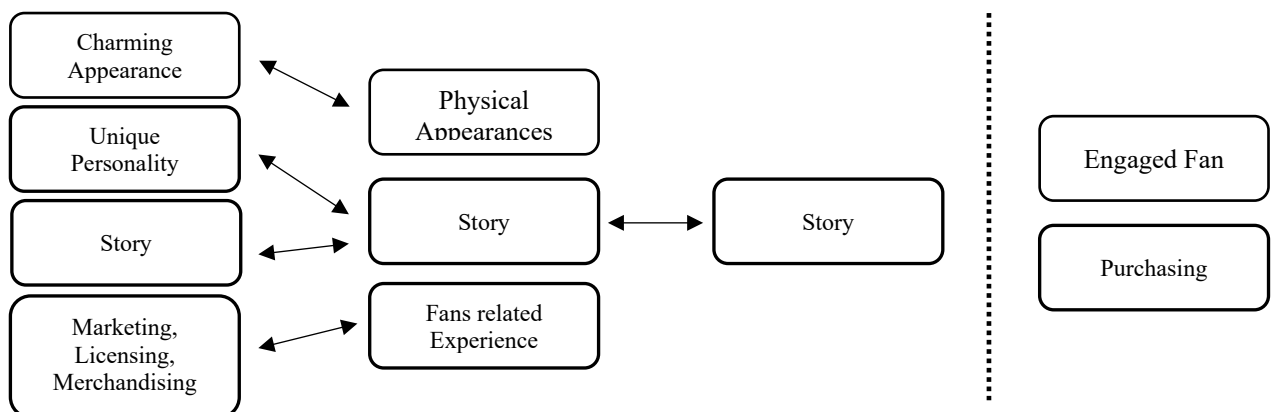


Figure 3. The model of building parasocial relationships with Thai Cartoon Characters.

The most important factor is what appears physically of the cartoon character. This factor affects the first impressions that fans have on cartoon characters. It is an important part of getting people who see it to start focusing on finding stories and personality traits of cartoon characters. The content and

communication factors of the cartoon character stories are determined by the creators of the characters to promote roles for the cartoon characters. The character's characteristics is part of the emotional connection between the fans and the cartoon character based on the parasocial relationships concept, which is a one-sided relationship between the fans and the cartoon character. This relationship will grow deeper and more cohesive when it comes to knowing the story information about the cartoon character and knowing what the cartoon character is doing or the story, trying to achieve the goals according to the beliefs of the cartoon characters. The stories of these cartoon characters will be familiar to what their fans have experienced, or perhaps what yearning or lacking in real life. Therefore, these cartoon characters and stories act as fictional friends in their fans' imaginations that the relationship between the cartoon characters and the fans will gradually evolve. The influence of communication is vital in fan building and fan networking. Communication between producers communicating to fans of cartoon characters improves the level of fan relationships. If the producers and fans with communication capabilities can take advantage of the online space, it will be able to build and expand the network to others. Also, when communication within the group is strengthened, it strengthens the relationship to be cohesive and long-lasting.

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