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Understanding Networked Affect in Online Appeals for Giving in Thailand

Pattamanan Poonseripipat

A thesis submitted to the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research of University of Kent for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, April 2022

Word Count: 90,577

Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that:

1. This thesis has been composed entirely by myself
2. It is solely the result of my own work
3. It has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or professional qualification

Abstract

This thesis explores networked affect in online charity appeals, focusing on the nature and implications of digital representations of suffering. It contributes to theories of affect and emotion, charity and philanthropy, and cultural and media studies. Specifically, it introduces a transdisciplinary approach to explore the affective mediation of proximal suffering from a transnational perspective, with an empirical focus on South East Asian Buddhist culture. Using as a case study the Thai celebrity philanthropist Bhin Bunluerit's Facebook fan page and its regular emotional appeals for fundraising, the thesis is empirically grounded in the context of Thailand and makes use of digital ethnography to gather information and affective material to understand how digital media users engage with and respond to these appeals and the wider cultural and socio-political implications of this engagement. I develop an analytical framework that identifies key features of networked affect – including multiplicity, accessibility, virtual collectivity, and indexicality – to bring into critical conversation three key academic areas: celebrity philanthropy, the mediation of suffering, and the logics of gift-giving. The thesis argues that the modes of affect operating within Thai online charity appeals and public responses to them reinforce social hierarchies and asymmetrical power relations between philanthropic individuals and beneficiaries, which are embodied within Thai Buddhist belief systems and reproduced by insufficient welfare governance and support structures.

The empirical analysis suggests that the Buddhist ideology of power legitimises and sacralises Bunluerit's celebrity philanthropist and hero status while supporting the operation of the patron–client-based affective bond of gratitude (*khun*) and punitive correction (*dej*) that allows him to exercise ideological influence over beneficiaries and fans. Bunluerit regularly

mobilises graphic representations of vulnerability and suffering to induce *songsarn*, a Thai form of compassion often associated with Buddhist giving (*dāna*), to elicit donations through the commodification of pain. Beneficiaries consequently become 'abject subjects' within ongoing processes of inclusion through exclusion that shore up the sovereignty of the Thai state. That is, beneficiaries who have been epistemically excluded from the state through being culturally stigmatised as *ngoa, joan, jeb* (stupid, poor, sickly), are, through Bunluerit's charity, brought back into the affective space of the nation in ways that nonetheless underscore the capacity of celebrity philanthropy to adjudicate the boundary of what it is to be Thai. The digitally mediated *dāna* which Bunluerit's fan page facilitates is, I argue, a 'transaction of compassion' underpinned by patron–client reciprocity. These relations of reciprocity are enacted by *khun*, wherein beneficiaries (clients) offer visual imagery of their extreme vulnerability, which symbolises their submission to donors' (patrons') power in order to receive the gift of their donation. Donors, in turn, benefit from their digital *dāna* through accumulating merit – a supernatural force believed to produce positive consequences in this and the next life – while also experiencing the self-serving joy of giving, which can pass for a real contribution to beneficiaries' well-being in ways that elide the more complex factors that reproduce social suffering and inequality in Thailand.

By examining the affective dynamics of Thai online giving and celebrity philanthropy, the thesis enriches and extends Euro–North American-centric theories of affect, charity, gift-giving, and the representation of suffering. It underscores how digitally mediated giving in South East Asia comprises complex entanglements of the supernatural, patron–client culture, normalised depictions of embodied vulnerability, class-stratified accounts of Buddhist merit-making, and affective dynamics that reinforce submission to cultural and religious authority.

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Glossary

amnaat: 'Coercion'. Coercive power established by force or derived from status

anumodāna, sathu, or a combination of them: Words uttered to show rejoice at the good deed of other people.

barami: 'Charisma'. Charismatic power found in individuals who are believed to have accumulated a significant amount of good merit in their previous life so in this life they have the power to influence other people.

brahmavihāra: The Buddhist principle which advises how individuals should feel towards other people in order to make the world a sublime dwelling place. *Brahmavihāra* consists of four notions: *mettā*, *karuna*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*.

dāna: Buddhist practice of giving.

dāna barami: One of the ten stages in the perfection process that individuals should undergo to attain nirvana.

dasa kusala karma: Buddhists' list of ten wholesome actions.

dej/decha: Punitive and coercive authority that induces fear.

dukkha: Suffering.

jai boon: Having a good heart, especially because you perform lots of meritorious acts.

jao kam naii wen: '*Karma* holder, master of retribution'. A person, animal, or ghost that is linked to an individual by a negative *karmic* bond in a past life and will bring retribution on the

individual in this life. If the individual contributes the merit made to his or her *jao kam naii wen,* it is believed that the suffering caused by such retribution will be relieved.

karma: An intentional action of body, speech, and mind. Every action has a consequence; if individuals perform good deeds, they will be rewarded with good consequences (merit), and bad deeds lead to negative consequences (demerit). This logic of cause and effect is known as the law of *karma*.

karuna: A notion in *brahmavihāra* that describes compassion or a feeling of sympathy and a desire to alleviate the suffering of those in distress.

katanyu: The feeling of indebtedness towards a person who has done good things for you, as well as the feeling that you want to attempt to return such kindness. According to Buddhist teaching, *katanyu* is considered to be a quality of a good person.

khon Thai jaidee: Thai people are kind/generous.

khon Thai mai ting gun: Thai people leave no one behind.

khor dāna: 'Beggar'. *Khor dāna* stays in public places and asks passers-by for money using their vulnerable conditions to justify their request

khun/bunkhun: Benevolence that creates the feeling of indebtedness.

kilesa: 'Stains'. The spiritual defilement of individuals created by engagement with sensual pleasure, ignorance, desire, and false views.

kraab: A namaste posture with a bowed head made to the lower part of the body of the person who is greeted in a similar manner to *kowtow*, or prostration.

merit-making: Doing good deeds in the hope of good consequences or *karmic* rewards.

mettā: A notion in *brahmavihāra* that describes kindness or a mind that wishes for peace and happiness for all beings.

muditā: A notion in *brahmavihāra* that describes appreciative joy or a joyful feeling when one can see others being happy.

naa songsarn: Deserving compassion.

nak leng: A type of traditional Thai leader who is charismatic and loyal to friends but at the same time is very tough with their foes.

ngoa, joan, jeb: 'Stupid, poor, and sickly'. A derogatory phrase used to describe people in need or lower-class people.

nirvana: A state in which individuals are no longer in the *karmic* cycle and are relieved of desire, suffering, and their sense of self.

pi: Big brother/sister.

pikarn: Disabled.

plong asubha: A Buddhist practice of contemplating the repulsiveness of a dead body.

pread: A kind of ghost that lives in pain as a result of bad *karma* in a previous human life. It is believed that *pread* appear to ask for merit from human beings to escape from the suffering they endure. The term is also used as an offensive word for people who are always asking for food or money from other people, similar to the way in which *pread* plead for humans' merit.

sakdina: 'Dignity marks'. The class system used in the late 1700s to divide people into four groups based on their rank in the legally authorised hierarchy. These groups consisted

of *chao* (lords) and *khunnang* (nobles), which were considered to be the ruling class, *phrai* (commoners), and *that* (slave), regarded as the subordinates.

saksit: Having supernatural power.

saksri kin mai dai: Dignity is inedible.

samsara: An endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

saparn boon: 'Merit bridge'. A person who encourages people to make merit by telling them about potential beneficiaries. The person is considered to achieve *karmic* gain from giving people a chance to make merit.

sawasdee: A Thai greeting.

songsarn: The feeling of compassion or the desire to alleviate the suffering of others.

taewada: Male angel.

taewada dern din: Male angel walking on earth.

tham boon: To make merit by giving to monks or people in need.

tham dāna: To make merit by giving to people in need.

tham dee: Doing good deeds.

thi phueng: Benefactor.

upekkhā: A notion in *brahmavihāra* that describes equanimity or an unwavering calm when facing happiness or sorrow.

wai: A namaste posture with a bowed head adopted as a greeting or to show respect.

wassana: Synonymous with *barami*.

Introduction:

Networked Affect in Online Appeals for Giving

> Hello friends on my fan page! Yesterday I helped the family of 62-year-old Luck. She just learned that she had gastric cancer last July. The cancer developed when she worked as a seamstress and [she] had to skip meals to sew clothes for 5 baht [around 12p] each. Luck has two children. The eldest is the woman in the images below. She now works in her mom's stead and gets paid very little for it. There are days when both have nothing to eat. Luck can no longer swallow or chew food, so a hole was made on her stomach for milk intake. The cancer spread to every part of her body. She is very weak and emaciated. Every time her daughter sees Luck, she cannot hold her tears… If you want to help her, wire the money to…
>
> We may be born differently but we can all do good. Whether helping a man or animal, it is noble. Thank you. ***(Bunluerit's post on 30 September 2018)***[1]

The above fragment forms part of a donation appeal made by Bhin Bunluerit, a Thai celebrity philanthropist, to more than nine million followers via his Facebook fan page. Accompanying the appeal are several photographs, including one of Bunluerit holding Luck's hand while she lies on a bed with her blouse pulled up, showing her bare swollen stomach with a feeding tube and a long surgical wound. Media scholars Heide Fehrenbach and Davide

[1] All of the text used in this thesis that was originally written in Thai has been translated by the author, including Bunluerit's and users' posts, interview transcriptions, and archival materials concerning the case study.

Rodogno (2015: 1154) argue that the humanitarian photograph 'tells us more about us, the purveyors and observers of images, than about those whose suffering we depict, bemoan and re-tweet'. Here the dramatic description of pain and deprivation, the image of the beneficiary that is almost pornographic in the way it shows Luck's body, the seemingly compassionate act of Bunluerit holding Luck's hand, and the didactic tone of the plea tell us important things about the celebrity philanthropist making the appeal and the milieu in which they are located. These messages concern the relations of power linking the celebrity, beneficiaries, and spectators, as well as the social, cultural, and emotional contexts that condition and influence suffering, its representation, and responses to it. These themes form the key topics that this thesis will concern itself with.

By focusing on the Thai cultural context, this thesis endeavours to understand how digital charitable appeals centring on and interacting with representations of suffering affect media users and vice versa, and their consequent socio-political impact. This thesis draws on interdisciplinary theories of networked affect to study these phenomena. I define networked affect, following Susanna Paasonen (2015), as intensities that are generated through encounters between people, objects, and technologies. Affect has the potential to move bodies and bring about effects, whether physical or mental (Clough 2018), while digital technologies provide an interactive and real-time platform for affect to circulate within 'human and nonhuman networks of influence and interrelation' (Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 2015: 3). My use of the term 'networked affect' here should signal a wider and more dynamic meaning, extending further than the affective intensities found on digital platforms and incorporating the 'intersection of sensation, intensity, and materiality' (Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 2015: 4) informing the flow, exchange, circulation, and interruption among 'the subjective and the cultural, individual and social, self and other, inside and outside' (Koivunen 2001: 8). Theories

of affect will be used in this research project to illuminate the intertwined realms of charitable giving, celebrities' philanthropic engagement, media and representations, and Thai culture as they play out across human and non-human bodies on digital platforms. Particular attention will be paid to the way networked affect shapes and in turn is shaped by Thai cultural and religious norms and beliefs, and how it propels these entanglements of practices, intensities, and forms of mediation.

Bhin Bunluerit's Facebook Fan Page and Thailand as a Case Study

In essence, this thesis brings together three main strands of scholarly analysis within social, cultural, and philanthropic studies: 1) the rise of celebrity philanthropy; 2) the mediation of suffering; and 3) practices of gift-giving and examines them through a specifically Thai Buddhist lens. I selected Bunluerit's Facebook fan page as the case study to guide this project because of the ways in which it allows me to explore and demonstrate how these strands of literature converge. The fan page comprises celebrity-endorsed charity appeals foregrounding representations of suffering, and online interactions surrounding gift-giving. To carry out the project, I employed a digital ethnography consisting of participant observation through real-time participation in live-feed encounters between Bunluerit and beneficiaries, archival research using material from posts made by Bunluerit and users on his fan page, analysis of celebrity news and media interviews, and semi-structured interviews with donors and page followers.

Bunluerit is one of the most renowned celebrity philanthropists in Thailand, the third most followed person on Facebook in the country, and the only one in the top ten most followed celebrities to use their page for charitable purposes (Socialbakers 2020). Before

Bunluerit began his online charitable work in 2011, he was the first actor in Thailand known for his philanthropic involvement as a rescue volunteer helping accident and disaster victims. Accordingly, when people are asked to think of celebrities who do 'good deeds', Bunluerit is often the first name they recall. Because he is the epitome of the Thai celebrity philanthropist, selecting him and his charitable work as a case study will offer me an insight into how celebrity philanthropy works in Thailand. Also, with millions of followers, his fan page has become a site where a multitude of online interactions in relation to charitable giving take place; for example, donation transactions, Bunluerit's appeals in the form of posts and live streaming, and comments with regard to gift-giving and spectacles of suffering. His fan site thus provides fertile ground for empirical materials to be employed in my analysis of the working of networked affect in celebrity-mediated appeals for giving.

I chose Thailand for this case study for several reasons. First, because I am a Thai woman I can perceive subtle cultural nuances that may remain undetected by researchers unfamiliar with the context. This located viewpoint may help me develop a deeper and more precise understanding of the complex phenomena under investigation. Second, the nation's political and economic situation highlights the significance of and emphasises the need for charitable giving, and enables fieldwork that is suitable for an empirical enquiry into gift-giving. Though extreme, the deprivation described in the introductory extract is far from unusual in Thailand. Over the last two decades, Thailand has transitioned from being a lower-income country to an upper-middle-income one due to the country's impressive economic growth and the increase in its gross national income per capita from the 1960s to the late 1990s (Anand and Hayling 2014). As a result, Thailand receives less support from international funding organisations (KEPA 2011). However, Thailand remains plagued by poverty and inequality that are largely driven by an unstable and undemocratic political system, a long-term economic

recession, a high level of vulnerability in the income level of households, the lack of a strong welfare system, a rapidly ageing population, and a low quality of education (Phongpaichit and Baker 2016; World Bank Group 2020). People are largely left to their own devices to deal with the immediate and long-term suffering arising from deprivation, forcing them to rely upon donations and charitable gifts. It is estimated that in 2017[2] the amount of individual giving in the country totalled 2.6 billion GBP, with 96 per cent of Thai households spending around 2.6 per cent of their income, or an average of 126 GBP, on donations to religious and non-religious causes (SCB Economic Intelligence Centre 2019). In the global context, Thailand has often featured as one of the top five countries in the Charities Aid Foundation World Giving Index list, all of which have the greatest likelihood of giving money to charities compared to other countries (Charities Aid Foundation 2015; 2016; 2017; 2019). This proclivity for giving is expressed in the well-known Thai saying '*khon Thai jaidee*', meaning 'Thai people are generous'.

This recourse to gift-giving is similarly influenced by the Buddhist belief in *dāna*. This is understood as meaning that people who give will in return obtain merit – a supernatural force that generates good things in the life of the giver (Guruge and Bond 1998; Chaisinthop 2014). Consequently, gift-giving motivated by a belief in its meritorious effect cannot be claimed to be guided by goodwill towards others alone. The discourse of *khon Thai jaidee* is therefore less likely to reflect the true nature of Thai giving behaviour, and I will critically unpack this throughout this research. Similarly, Thai society defines a concept called *dāna* as a gift driven by an immediate and compassionate impulse, with donations made spontaneously in response to the sight of suffering (Bornstein 2009). In this sense, it is the representation of vulnerability that induces *dāna* rather than worthy causes or fundraising appeals specifically, and therefore,

[2] Statistics on charitable giving in Thailand are scarce, incomplete, and not produced regularly. The figure presented here is the latest published data available.

the appeal-making greatly relies on the use of images of suffering to encourage impulsive donations. In the Thai context, representations of suffering are used to stimulate emotion to provoke or shock people into giving. Therefore, it is more common to see lurid and graphic visual and discursive depictions in Thailand than in many Western milieus, where laws concerning publishing material deemed to be obscene and differing social norms around the mediation of vulnerability are more likely to discourage the distribution of graphically distressing materials (Home Office 2015; Department of Justice 2020).

In addition to the politico-economic situation and cultural practices, the growth of social media use and digital appeals in Thailand make the country an appropriate and interesting case to study. The widespread use of social media across the country has led to the expansion of online individual fundraising. Social media is used by 78.7 per cent of the total population, and Thai people regularly spend nearly three hours a day on such platforms, placing Thailand among the top twenty nations worldwide with respect to time spent per person daily on social media (We Are Social and Hootsuite 2021)[3]. YouTube and Facebook are the most used social media platforms, with 94.2 and 93.3 per cent of users respectively reporting using them during the preceding month. Facebook is popular for individual fundraising purposes, partly because it is easy to share and broadcast appeals there but also because of its potential for connecting with wider networks of potential donors. Although there are no reliable statistics related to online philanthropic activities in Thailand, their significance can be observed through news reports about particularly large sums of money being raised through online fundraising. In one instance, a 72-year-old taxi driver received the equivalent of 207,500 GBP in donations overnight after a video clip was shared on social media

[3] We Are Social and Hootsuite are companies that provide digital marketing services. They collaborate annually to publish a report on social media usage in countries around the world.

of him speaking tearfully about his insufficient income during the COVID-19 lockdown (Matichon Online 2020). The frequency of this type of news demonstrates the magnitude of online charitable activities and presents digital philanthropy in Thailand as a significant phenomenon warranting further investigation. The socio-economic conditions of Thailand producing a high supply of and demand for charitable giving, the cultural context shaping the giving behaviours, the widespread use of graphic depictions of suffering, and the use of social media for digital appeals constitute a salient and compelling research setting that provides important and distinctive dimensions for empirical analysis.

Key Research Questions

As I have outlined above, this research will explore digital appeals on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page through the lens of networked affect. Networked affect is defined as the visceral forces that emerge out of encounters and relationalities between people, objects, and technologies and that drive interactions both on digital platforms and in non-digitally mediated environments. The extract at the beginning of this chapter suggests that affective or emotional elements entwine relations and encourage interactions between Bunluerit, his beneficiaries, and the users who engage with appeals. Looking at the way online affective intensities 'activate and deactivate' users might help us to understand the social and cultural relations that shape, mediate, and influence interactions on the fundraising fan page alongside underlying power relations (White 2017). As a means to explore the workings and implications of networked affect in this context, my first research question asks: **What modes of affect are involved in Thai online charity appeals centring representations of suffering and the digital responses they generate?** This question generates several others: what forms of affect circulate on the

particular social platform under investigation and what role do they play in animating charitable activities? How might affective relations form differently via social media platforms and how do such digitally mediated environments involve the interplay of 'online' and 'offline' dynamics and practices? What are the effects of digital representations of suffering on shaping affective responses and actions?

This last question highlights the significant role of representations of suffering in Bunluerit's charity appeals. As discussed earlier, discourses and images portraying suffering are integral to Thai donors' decisions to give, partly due to their affective power to drive impulsive *dāna*. Apart from eliciting donations, representations of suffering draw various comments and feedback on Bunluerit's fan page that signal not only prosocial affective responses leading to gift-giving, but also aversive feelings like disgust. The study of digital affect in this context thus involves a careful investigation into both so-called 'altruistic' responses by, for example, critically unpacking the impulse of Thai compassion, and unsympathetic, if not hostile, reactions through theoretical engagement with concepts such as social abjection (Tyler 2013) and related social class divisions.

As studies of celebrity philanthropy suggest, the fact that the appeal maker at the centre of my case study Facebook page is a celebrity shapes how people respond to his appeals and their decisions to support sufferers. Consequently, the thesis asks: **How does the celebrity status of the appeal maker in Thailand influence public responses to philanthropic discourses and representations?** Several related questions are discussed in the attempt to answer this query: how can we understand the relationships linking Bunluerit and those involved in his charitable acts, including those between donors and beneficiaries? How is trust in Bunluerit developed and how do the digital affordances of the Facebook platform play into this process?

How is online Thai celebrity philanthropy different from that in Western contexts? Pursuing these questions will provide insight into the role of the celebrity philanthropist in the Thai context and the affective power relations in which they are enmeshed.

The Thai cultural context provides an empirical focus for understanding interactions that take place on the case study fundraising platform. Consequently, I ask: **How does Buddhism-based Thai culture shape online charitable appeals and responses?** Taking into account cultural, socio-political, and religious particularities not only allows contextualised insights into the digital phenomena that this thesis aims to investigate but also adds depth to the understanding of online affective intensities that emerge as both culturally shaped and culturally shaping (Lutz and White 1986; Gunew 2009). While digital affect knits together my three key areas of study, particularly regarding the operation of power relations, the Thai context particularises these networks of interaction and interrelation. For example, Buddhist values inform judgements about the trustworthiness of celebrity philanthropists, influence people's understanding of suffering, and shape power relations linked to gift-giving in salient ways. Critical engagement with the Buddhist culture will reveal the working of legitimised power relations in the Thai socio-cultural context that is linked to the research question noted next.

Finally, this thesis will explore the wider implications of the emotive calls for charity posted on and circulated via Bunluerit's Facebook page by asking: **How does an analysis of networked affect in appeals for giving contribute to our understanding of the relationships between philanthropic individuals and beneficiaries and the wider power relations embedding them in Thai society?** Scholars who study gift theories maintain that power is inherent to gifting (Godelier 1999; Mauss 2002). The affect and actions surrounding gift-giving, including

compassion, sympathy, pathos, and other prosocial emotions, charitable work, and philanthropic efforts, also entail the enactment of power relationships. This insight lies at the centre of the three key areas – celebrity philanthropy, the mediation of suffering, and gift-giving – this thesis investigates, whether the power relations at stake operate between celebrities and beneficiaries, between the sufferers represented in donation appeals and the users interacting with such representations, or between the donors and beneficiaries. Online affective intensities interweave power relations among celebrities, beneficiaries, and users with various emotions like trust in celebrity, compassion aroused by representations of suffering, or gratitude as a result of receiving a gift; channelled through these powerful emotions, power enables one (or more) party in an affective relationship to have effects on the other. These effects can be in the form of coercive control, a positive influence, or productive forces. This last research question will interrogate the power relationships between the aforementioned social actors in the three areas being investigated to understand the wider affective, socio-political and ethical impact of the digital appeals published on Bunluerit's Facebook page.

Exploring these questions enables me to develop the main argument of this thesis, which is that the modes of affect involved in online charitable appeals foregrounding celebrity-mediated representations of suffering legitimise the entrenchment of economic, social, and ideological hierarchies in Thailand. My analysis builds on long-standing critiques of the 'sticking-plaster' effect of charities that serve as a smoke screen to preserve the social and economic privilege of dominant groups (Niebuhr 1932; Marx 2008; Žižek 2011). I elaborate on and contextualise these arguments by drawing out the particular workings and implications of such affective relations in the context of contemporary Thai Buddhist culture. I consider, for example, how the concept of Buddhist merit works in digital giving to establish and legitimise

relations of domination between donors and beneficiaries, and how the Thai cultural value of affective bonds between givers and recipients shapes the workings of coercive and productive power within gift-giving. In this way, I am able to not only engage with the critiques of the sticking-plaster effect of charities, but also to provincialise[4] (Chakrabarty 2008) the discussion of these critiques within the context of Buddhist Thai society, which allows me to offer an alternative narrative and understanding of these long-standing arguments.

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks and Contributions

This thesis expands on previous research in philanthropic and media studies in at least four respects. Firstly, it brings theories of affect and emotion into the discussion, not only concerning the spectacle of suffering but the entire process of online fundraising. While much of the literature on the mediation of suffering focuses on 'production' (looking at the way messages about suffering are produced and the assumptions underlying the production process) (Benthall 1993; Orgad 2013), 'text' (studies of discourses which mediate vulnerability, focusing on the symbolic construction of distant suffering) (Orgad 2008; Joye 2010), or 'reception' (examining how audiences respond to the mediation of suffering in various forms of representations) (Seu 2010; Scott 2014; Ong 2015), this project considers these three elements of mediation *together*, addressing the interactions of the celebrity philanthropist who makes appeals (production), the representations within them (text), and the donations and comments made in response (reception). Moreover, theories of affect are woven into the

[4] I use the term 'provincialise', used by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008), to refer to the way I apply the Western-centric theories (which are widely, though arguably, thought to be universal) to the specific context of Thailand.

critical investigation of these three fields of inquiry, introducing a novel perspective from which to engage with these areas of investigation.

Secondly, this study extends nascent research on the role of digital platforms in constituting and shaping affective representations of and responses to suffering. While much of the research on the mediation of human vulnerability explores representations in traditional mass media – such as on television or in newspapers – these formats rarely allow for real-time responses from users. This study considers the impact of the interactive features of networked technologies that enable users to engage affectively with representations of suffering in more 'live', immanent, and unfolding ways via social media platforms. It asks how affect circulating on interactive digital platforms contributes to users' reception of and responses to charitable appeals and what difference networked affect makes when compared to affective responses and interactions in offline environments, while appreciating the ways in which traditional online/offline distinctions become increasingly blurred or untenable in contemporary mediated social life. Although literature examining the digital representation of suffering has recently emerged and is gaining increased attention from interdisciplinary research communities (Von Engelhardt and Jansz 2014; Scott 2015; Gajjala 2017)[5], I offer a distinctive interpretation of this social phenomenon that is inextricably intertwined with Buddhist Thai culture.

With its focus on digital appeals and interactions within the Thai context, this thesis paves the way for the exploration of 'proximal suffering' (Ong 2015), or the study of how suffering in the Global South is represented by domestic media or fundraisers and consumed by its users. Apart from a handful of studies (Ong 2015; 2017), most research into the

[5] See also Pantti (2015) and Schwittay (2015).

mediation of human vulnerability deals with how people in need in less economically developed countries are represented to audiences and potential donors in wealthier nations. This type of research tends to centre geographical distance and differences in culture, socio-economic status, and living conditions between the mediator and the mediated. By contrast, this thesis explores the mediation of suffering closer to home whereby affinities rather than differences characterise the mediated, while also acknowledging that within this domestic realm, differences in class, social standing, and economic status remain wide. One might argue that the differences generated from geographical locations of the mediated form the rationale for research into the mediation of suffering since they are believed to affect the moral decisions of audiences who tend to see sufferers as 'other' and therefore not part of a wider 'us' (Chouliaraki 2006). However, closeness to the site of suffering does not necessarily entail a moral commitment from domestic audiences; geographical proximity does not necessarily reduce or remove the psychological distance that inscribes an 'otherness' onto a suffering fellow citizen. This thesis seeks to examine this under-investigated area of representation of domestic vulnerability and offer novel insights from bringing the endogenous perspectives on affect and Buddhist Thai culture into the analysis.

Finally, as discussed earlier, to explore topics previously investigated using Anglo-American-centred theoretical approaches, this thesis offers an empirical perspective that considers the particularities of online appeals for giving within the Thai context alongside the relevant transnational relations and translations involved. In this way, I am able to draw out key elements which are less likely to be used in Euro–North American literature, such as Buddhist beliefs or Thai cultural values, into conversation with theories of affect, celebrity philanthropy, the mediation of suffering, and gift-giving. For example, I bring in Buddhist belief in *karmic* law and Thai patron–client culture to unpack the theory of celebrity philanthropy and

demonstrate how this belief and cultural value enables Bunluerit to gain a highly revered status among Thai people.

In addition to its theoretical contribution, this thesis employs a range of practical considerations regarding online qualitative research. Over the past two decades, conducting qualitative scholarship on digital environments has increased in popularity as digital platforms and interfaces provide new objects and contexts for social and philanthropic research. Yet the ever-increasing variety of online cultures and communities demand more practical explorations regarding how qualitative work is conducted online. The methodological approach this thesis offers is noteworthy because it combines relevant ethnographic methods to explore the processes of mediation of suffering, appeal making by celebrity philanthropists, and online practices of gift-giving. My engagement with the affective elements of fan page interactions as well as my analysis of the particularity of online appeals – the live-streamed charitable visit – also render the methodology section compelling due to the often elusive and transient workings of affect. Meanwhile, studying the form of the live broadcast necessitates an investigation into real-time participation and its potential effects on users. By comprehensively describing and carefully reflecting on the methods available to address these challenges, it is hoped that the thesis contributes to a better understanding of how ethnographic research on social media platforms can be conducted.

Chapter Outlines

The first three chapters form the literature review section of this thesis. Chapter 1 develops a theoretical framework for understanding affect and networked affect. The first part of the chapter conceptualises affect and highlights the distinctions and overlaps among affect,

emotion, and feeling. The latter part characterises networked affect in relation to intensities found in offline environments, suggesting four defining characteristics of online affective intensities: *multiplicity*, *accessibility*, *virtual collectivity,* and *indexicality*. While the first chapter addresses the main theoretical tools employed to carry out this research project, Chapter 2 examines one of the three key strands of literature that the thesis engages with: the mediation of suffering. The first part concentrates on the two main components of mediation, content and technology. The last section addresses affective responses to the mediation of suffering. Chapter 3 focuses on two additional areas of literature that are key to this research, gift-giving and celebrity philanthropy, which are embodied in the Thai context. The first part sets the scene for the study by outlining the socio-economic, cultural, and political elements of Thai society. The second part links Mauss's gift theory to Thai giving, which needs to be understood in relation to Buddhist beliefs in *dāna*, merit-making, and *karmic* consequences. The last section addresses celebrity philanthropy in the Thai context and underscores the importance of the Thai notion of trust and power.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the methodology of the research, beginning with a discussion of the digital ethnography approach and its methods. I also discuss methodological debates regarding researching networked affect and live events. In the second section, I consider my position as a researcher and its implications for the research. Towards the end of this chapter, I outline the methods of analysis and consider the potential ethically relevant issues arising from my empirical research.

The first chapter centred on my empirical findings, Chapter 5, focuses on celebrity philanthropy. The chapter starts by introducing Bunluerit and his charitable activities, describing the self-image he projects, the roles he plays in his fundraising efforts, and the way

he earns trust from fans and donors; all three processes are interrelated and complementary. The chapter then looks at the celebrity-related practices which are adopted as strategies to maintain public attention and Bunluerit's relationship with fans and donors. Following a devastating flood in Thailand in 2019, Bunluerit's fundraising efforts earned him 'hero' status. This chapter investigates the cultural elements that granted this status by comparing Bunluerit to the late Captain Sir Tom Moore, who became a fundraising hero for the NHS during the Covid pandemic in 2019. I argue that although celebrity philanthropy and a discourse of heroism can help alleviate the immediate suffering of some beneficiaries, they invariably relocate a social problem from the structural level to an individual responsibility of the Thai neoliberal subject. Towards the end of this chapter, I discuss the relationships between Bunluerit and his fans and beneficiaries, arguing that they play a role in reinforcing the hierarchical Thai social order.

While the previous chapter highlights the role of the celebrity philanthropist, Chapter 6 focuses on the primary tool Bunluerit employs to makes charitable appeals, that is, the mediation of proximal suffering. The chapter describes how he represents beneficiaries' suffering – their pain and poverty – in the form of a spectacle. I pay particular attention to how the process of communicating bodily pain through (moving) pictures becomes intelligible to media users. The chapter then examines how the beneficiaries of Bunluerit's charitable efforts and their close circle endeavour to make sense of their suffering, comprehending their experiences through Buddhist and cultural beliefs. I argue that Bunluerit's representation of suffering is an attempt to commodify pain, dehumanising the beneficiary by reducing them to a series of painful-looking body parts. This prompts discussion around the ethical dilemmas of using such images of the beneficiaries. The latter half of this chapter considers the processes of abjection through which beneficiaries are turned into 'objects of disgust' through a

representation of vulnerability. I argue that the objects of this disgust are constructed to legitimise the power of people with privilege to govern, utilising compassion to control the abject subject.

The final empirical chapter, Chapter 7, addresses the responses to celebrity-mediated charitable appeals that use representations of suffering, specifically in the form of gift-giving. The first part of the chapter discusses the way the power of the gift manifests itself on Bunluerit's fan page as online reputation and supernatural merit. It then draws on the previous chapter's discussion of pain commodification to argue that the charitable giving evidenced on the fan site can be perceived as a transaction of compassion, with gifting more comparable to mercantile exchange than to altruistic help. The later part of the chapter considers *dāna*, or Buddhist giving, by comparing it to the capitalist logic of accumulation and Marx's commodity fetishism process. I argue that *dāna* has a self-serving goal, with donors profiting most from the transaction through reputation, merit, or joy in gift-giving, while beneficiaries become merely 'tools to do good deeds with'.

The Conclusion discusses the research's theoretical and empirical contributions. It highlights these in the key areas engaged in by the thesis, including networked affect, celebrity philanthropy, philanthropic relationships, representations of proximal suffering, and the politics of compassion. The chapter ends with a speculative reflection on how affect enables us to think of other possibilities that could provide an alternative to the hegemonic structure of normativity.

Chapter 1:

Understanding Networked Affect

At the heart of this thesis is the affect that activates, mediates, and reproduces the embodied relationships between human subjects and digital non-human actors. What affect has to offer here is that it 'pays close attention to the subtle, elusive, dynamics of everyday living and touches the textures of social life' (Anderson 2014: 7). This thesis is about everyday life in a networked era: how we go about living in the digital media-saturated world, how we feel and interact with suffering people represented through networked technologies, how we see ourselves in relation to them, and how our relations with them tell us about the wider social world. With its ability to orientate inquiry to the dynamics of everyday living and relations between life, mediation, and technologies, affect takes centre stage in this thesis and provides a theoretical tool for conducting the research project. I focus on interdisciplinary theories of affect in this first chapter to lay the theoretical groundwork that is key to understanding how online celebrity-mediated charitable giving induced by depictions of suffering works. The theories of affect outlined here also provide an insight into the basis of the methods the thesis employs that draw, in part, on the affective experiences I had while engaging with the case study.

I begin the first section by examining theories of affect and considering how we might most generatively understand the overlapping concepts of affect, emotion, and feeling. My aim here is to provide the basis for understanding the nature and operation of affect as well as to offer clear definitions of the important terms used in the thesis. The second section

considers how affect circulates online. I discuss how networked technologies shape our cognitive and sensorial experiences using media ecology theory and then consider how networked affect becomes a proxy for the co-constitution of humans and digital technologies. In this section, I also flesh out an analytical framework for interpreting the role and characteristics of networked affect which addresses the concepts of *multiplicity*, *accessibility*, *virtual collectivity*, and *indexicality* and discuss the challenges and potentialities that online affective intensities may bring about when present in charitable appeals and digital content and the responses they elicit.

1.1 Affect, Emotion, and Feeling

Over the last decade, affect theories have gained wide currency in academic enquiry as a result of, among other things, a growing challenge to the binary opposition between emotion and reason (Heaney 2011; Pedwell and Whitehead 2012; Ahmed 2014). This surge of interest in affect and emotion and the purported differences between them, which is widely recognised as 'the affective turn', has encouraged further study of affect across a range of fields, including psychology, sociology, education, philosophy, history, media studies, cultural studies, literature, politics, and feminist, queer, critical race and decolonial studies (Cvetkovich 2012; Pedwell and Whitehead 2012). To many researchers, defining 'affect' is a difficult task, since different theorists in the field give it different meanings (Linnenbrink 2006). As theories of affect have been adopted in various fields of study, the term 'affect' has been reinterpreted and redefined to take account of the tenets of a particular discipline. Yet there are some distinguishing characteristics which constitute the core of 'affect' and differentiate it from other relevant academic concepts, including 'emotion' or 'feeling'. Carolyn Pedwell (2014)

contends that the fundamental features that characterise 'affect' are fluidity, ephemerality, and plasticity. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010: 2) also describe 'affect' in relation to these qualities. They contend that affect 'is born in in-between-ness and resides as accumulative beside-ness'. In this way, affect is the virtual; it is the flux of 'unactualised capacities to affect and be affected' (DeLanda 2002: 62). Rather than being a stable or recognised entity, affect unfolds as virtual potentialities (the in-between-ness and the beside-ness) that can be actualised into something else. The absence of an entity and the possibility that affect could be actualised into anything may be why it is hard to define this potentiality.

In addition to finding it difficult to define 'affect', scholars of affect debate whether 'affect' is different from 'emotion'. Brian Massumi (2002: 61), whose theory has been developed from Spinoza's philosophy and Deleuze's reading of it, defines affect as non-conscious intensities that are immanent both within and between bodies with 'an ability to affect and a susceptibility to be affected'. He emphasises the autonomous and asocial nature of 'affect'. Significantly, Massumi separates 'affect' from 'emotion', which enables him to emphasise the non-socially determined dimension of 'affect'. To Massumi, 'emotion' is 'the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience'; it is affect which has been 'semantically and semiotically formed' into a narrativisable action imbued with function and meaning (Massumi 2002: 28). Other affect scholars, however, do not agree that 'affect' and 'emotion' can be separated along these lines in any straightforward or discrete way. Sara Ahmed (2001; 2014), for instance, argues that emotion and affect are inseparably entangled as part of the process of feeling. Although individuals can sometimes experience affect at some less-than-conscious level as if having a 'direct' feeling, which Ahmed (2014: 40) describes as that which 'may burn the skin before any conscious moment of recognition', this seemingly 'direct' feeling

is mediated by past experiences that are incorporated in bodily repositories. Affect is thus not an absolutely autonomous force since individuals inevitably draw on bodily memories to sense present intensities.

My understanding of affect draws significantly on Ahmed's definition. While seeking to grapple with networked affect in online appeals for giving, I concentrate on exploring how affect involves varying states of (non-)consciousness and (in)attention as it is shaped in relation to social and cultural dynamics, rather than understanding affect as pertaining solely to pre-conscious intensities. The term 'affect' used in this thesis can be defined as 'coexisting circuits' of the affective virtual and the actualised virtual (Deleuze and Parnet 2012: 112). In these 'coexisting circuits', the affective virtual is the flux of 'unactualized capacities to affect and be affected' (DeLanda 2002: 62). The actualised virtual is the outcome of the materialised affective virtual: 'the concrete instantiations of this flux as perceptions and anticipated actions' (Brown and Tucker 2010: 236). In the process of actualisation, the actualised virtual is created from virtual potentialities using bodily capacities – for example, memory, the bodily repository, or cognitive functions – for a specific purpose and with certain features relative to the positionalities of perceivers and relevant contexts. To illustrate, I will discuss the working of 'coexisting circuits' in relation to the affective experience of the mediation of suffering. When individuals encounter people suffering, unconscious forces, or virtual potentialities, affect their bodies. Past experiences or memories help people to actualise these forces or, in other words, to feel. Witnessing the same situations of suffering, individuals may actualise the forces differently depending on their bodily capacities, ongoing interactions between bodies and histories, and the material, social, and cultural environments that they are in. Hence, some people may feel sadness in response to particular scenes of suffering while, for others, anger

may take affective prominence.

This process of being affected by the affective virtual and the actualisation of unconscious forces takes place seamlessly and simultaneously, such that, in material practice, they cannot be separated into two entities – unconscious forces (as affect) and actualised intensities (as emotion) – as Massumian's model of affect suggests. However, when engaging with affect in this project, I make contingent analytical distinctions between affect, emotion, and feeling to align with the elusive nature of intensities circulating on digital platforms (this point will be discussed further in the next section). While I use the term 'affect' to incorporate a range of conscious and less-than conscious processes, I perceive emotion as 'limited and contained expressions' of affect that are subjectively felt and socially and culturally recognised (Grusin 2010: 81). 'Feeling' is another term that needs clarification regarding how it is different from 'affect' and 'emotion', since the three are often used in the same context. Like Ann Cvetkovich (2012), I use the term 'feeling' to refer to 'the undifferentiated "stuff"' that does not clearly distinguish between affect and emotion, or between less-than-conscious embodied sensations and cognitive experiences. The intentional ambiguity of the meaning of feeling in this definition allows me to discuss a range of conscious and non-conscious sensorial experiences in a more flexible manner.

Although I argue that in material practice, affect and emotion are intertwined in the process of feeling, for analytical purposes, I distinguish these terms to highlight the fluidity of the affect generated and circulating on digital platforms. Accordingly, I define affect as a range of conscious and less-than conscious states with unbound potentialities to bring about effects. I use the term 'emotion' to mean contained expressions of affect that are socially and culturally mediated and subjectively felt at the conscious level. In my use of the term 'feeling', I stress

the ambiguous openness of its meaning. In this way, feeling incorporates both less-than-conscious intensities and consciously recognised or named emotions. Retaining this ambiguity in meaning will be useful when I discuss sensorial and cognitive experiences with particular reference to the Thai Buddhist culture.

1.2 Networked Affect

Drawing on the work of Susanna Paasonen (2015), I define 'networked affect' as affect, feelings, and/or emotions that emerge in encounters between bodies, signs, objects, and technologies. In the dynamics of networked affect, media, or technologies of mediation, play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of intensities and users' interactions at the cognitive, behavioural, and less-than-conscious levels (Karatzogianni 2012; Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 2015). Athina Karatzogianni (2012: 55) argues that the interaction between users and contemporary media, including digital technologies and television broadcasts, is 'operating beyond the representational' and at 'semantic and semiotic levels'. Media not only represent the world but also create that world in our perception down to the unconscious level. Adopting Massumi's (2002) definition of affect, Karatzogianni thus suggests that the correct term for referring to the intensities which emerge in interactions with digital media should be 'affect', not 'emotion'. Although my choice of the word 'affect' in 'networked affect' does not portray affect and emotion as fundamentally discrete, as Karatzogianni does, it is intended to highlight the often less-than-conscious elements of the intensities that circulate on digital platforms.

Paasonen et al. (2015) hold a similar view regarding how digital forms of mediation work beyond the informative and cognitive domains. They write (2015: 2): 'Intent, agency, and affect thereby become to some extent contingent outcomes of the network itself rather than

of human agency alone.' In this sense, the function of networked technologies is more than just offering representations of the world. These technologies also affect, nudge, or manipulate users by employing algorithms to create or channel drive and desire, encourage interactions, or influence decisions. Karatzogianni's and Paasonen et al.'s observations about the significance of technologies of mediation that go beyond a representational function resonate well with the view of media ecology offered by theorists such as Marshall McLuhan (2013) and Neil Postman (1970), who argue that the technology of mediation and the way humans perceive the world are mutually constituted. Media ecology is the study of co-constructive relationships between people and media technologies (Lum 2014). Media shape how human subjects cognitively and sensorially experience the world around us, and, in turn, we direct our use of media to fit with that worldview. From books to television to digital platforms, different technologies of mediation entail different biological sensoria and conceptualisations of reality[6].

I see the relations between media technology, networked affect, and users' interactions (at the cognitive, behavioural, and less-than-conscious levels) as interwoven. In this relationship, online affect works as a 'mediating and mobilizing force' that links humans to non-human subjects and allows technologies to exert influence over our interactions (Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 2015: 3). Put another way, networked affect can be considered a proxy for the co-constitution of humans and digital technologies. At the same time, digital technologies presumably shape the characteristics of online intensities that have effects on users through networked affordances. One of the key affordances that renders digital communication a distinctive medium is its ability to connect human and non-human bodies in

[6] By arguing that media supposedly construct the reality of users and audiences, I do not intend to support the 'technological determinist' view that sees no role played by human subjects who use the technologies (Williams 1990). Rather, I presume that the relationship between cognitive habit, affective response, and media technologies is relational and co-constitutive.

the same network beyond the constraints of space and time (Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 2015). Felipe Massa (2017) explains this networked connection in terms of increased 'interconnectivity', or the ability to be in contact with anyone at any time, and 'interactivity', or the ability to interact with the other or many others in real time that is similar to face-to-face communication. These Internet affordances predominantly constitute the features of networked affect which, in many aspects, differ from those relating to non-digitally mediated affect. I argue that networked affect has four defining characteristics – multiplicity, accessibility, virtual collectivity, and indexicality – that render it different from affect that occurs outside online platforms and contribute to its capacity to connect, mediate, and mobilise human and non-human actors. In this thesis, I will mobilise this theoretical account of networked affect to investigate charitable giving prompted by the representation of suffering on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page, while arguing that the modes of affect, which are socially and culturally shaped by the Thai context, circulating in the charitable endeavour naturalise structural inequalities in subtle and unconscious ways.

1.2.1 Multiplicity

The first defining element of networked affect is multiplicity. I use the term 'multiplicity' to refer to how networked intensities can include and affect a large number of people transnationally. Around 63 per cent of the world's population uses the Internet (International Telecommunication Union 2021). These users are potential audiences, participants, and co-creators, or what Alvin Toffler (1981) calls 'prosumers'[7], of any message posted online and, at

[7] Digital technologies make the line that separates producer from consumer progressively more blurred, as users who consume digital content are also the same persons who produce and disseminate it. The term 'prosumer' refers to these consumers who also produce what they consume (Toffler 1981). In this sense, users of digital platforms are not merely passive audiences but also active co-creators.

the same time, they are potential subjects who may experience, become engaged with, perpetuate, or intensify the affective force generated by such a message. If affective intensities are immensely powerful, they can touch and move a multitude of bodies to an extent that could never be achieved by non-digitally mediated affect. Although affect circulating in literature, on television, or in radio programmes may reach millions of people, it tends to dissipate easily because the platforms on which it plays out do not offer affordances that allow the perpetuation and intensification of intensities through content-forwarding or real-time feedback responses. Multiplicity is enabled by the technology of Web 2.0, where digital platforms can facilitate the interactive application and co-creation of content by prosumers (O'Reilly 2012; Beer and Burrows 2007). Put more simply, Web 2.0 promotes the expansion of interconnectivity and the interactivity of digital content.

Users' engagement with digital platforms, especially social media, generates forms of stimulation that 'drive' them to continuously use the platforms (Dean 2015); as affective intensities multiply, so does the use of social media. I use the term 'drive' as Jodi Dean (2015) does to describe the repetitive process of seeking satisfaction from engagement with affective stimulation. Basing her argument on concepts used in psychoanalysis, Dean suggests that the subject propelled by drive can never reach the ultimate satisfaction since what makes them satisfied is continuously seeking it. The platforms themselves also promote multiplicity in the way that they encourage users to engage with digital content more and for longer through algorithmic systems that elicit continuous social media use on the basis of the operational logics of 'more is better' (Bucher 2018: 12). In this way, users' drive as well as media platforms and their underlying software and infrastructures enable networked affect to be endlessly multiplied.

Consider, for example, the iconic image that was widely circulated online in 2015 of Alan Kurdi's[8] body, which had washed ashore in Bodrum, Turkey. Within 12 hours of the photograph being published by a Turkish news agency, it was estimated that almost 20 million people worldwide had seen the image on the Internet, as the photograph was widely shared and forwarded via networked media (D'Orazio 2015). Many viewers, affected by the image, searched for more information about the boy as well as the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, making the volume of global Google searches for the term 'refugee' in September 2015, the month when the photo was published, the highest ever (D'Orazio 2015; Bozdag and Smets 2017). The multiplicity of networked affect in this case can generally be seen in the way the image became viral[9]. Affective intensities presumably drive users to forward the photo to people around them and, as a consequence, it reaches millions of viewers within a short time. Unlike TV or radio, where a message is communicated by broadcasting (a one-to-many communication basis), viral content is disseminated by forwarding (a many-to-many communication basis). In such a case, the users who forward the message contribute 'a tiny affective nugget' (Dean 2015: 90) to the relational processes of clicking, forwarding, sharing, commenting, or tweeting. It is not only the photograph that gets forwarded; a small amount of affective energy is added, which multiplies affect in terms of quality at the same time as quantity.

Linking back to the focus of this thesis project, when a charity appeal is made, this function of multiplicity helps spread information about a cause as well as the affective jolt

[8] The picture of Alan Kurdi, a 3-year-old boy fleeing the Syrian war, was widely circulated online during the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015. Its emotional appeal purportedly stirred up worldwide sympathetic responses and arguably influenced the decision of European countries' leaders to accept a larger number of refugees at that time (Drainville 2015; Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015).

[9] Virality is a process in which a certain message in the form of a catchphrase, video, or image is distributed from one person to another via digital platforms with great speed (Shifman 2015).

attached to it to more media users or prosumers. This increases the opportunity for organisations or individuals who make an appeal to generate more attention for their cause and ideally to secure more donations. However, it is not always the case that affect-laden content will engage or inform users, or provoke them into particular forms of action. Although moral appeals can induce intensities that propel charitable giving or voluntary involvement, they can, on the one hand, also invite neglect and denial, where multiplicity is less likely to function, or, on the other hand, they can promote communicative actions in which multiplicity works but not to benefit philanthropic endeavours.

Media theorists have, in this vein, conceptualised disengagement with emotional appeals and attempt to explain its causes. Stanley Cohen (2001: 188) argues that as audiences[10] are bombarded with information in a media-saturated world, they apply 'selective oblivion' to the pain and suffering of others, 'shutting out' the knowledge of its presence. At the same time, they are less likely to 'feel emotionally moved or compelled to act in response' to what they see (Cohen 2001: 13). Relatedly, Bruna Seu (2003: 190) points to complex psychological threats that audiences feel, including the threat to their self-image as 'good people'[11], the threat to the idea of the world as a safe place, and the threat of the realisation of their complicity with suffering when they are actively 'looking away' from humanitarian campaigns. Roger Silverstone (2002a: 776, 777) maintains that this 'denial in the face of human

[10] Since the works of the media theorists mentioned here discuss the moral appeal as taking place in the form of one-way communication from media producers to recipients rather than on interactive digital platforms, the term 'audiences' is used instead of 'users'.

[11] Seu's (2003) research participants explained to her that the reason that they looked away from humanitarian advertisements showing or hinting at human rights abuses is that the information is intolerable to the 'ordinary person' and that it is hard to learn that people of the same species as them can do this to other human beings. Basing her arguments on psychoanalytic literature, Seu suggests that participants need to distance themselves from what they consider to be monstrous acts to live up to the ideal of being an ordinary person with a benign and moral human nature. The advertisements challenged the self-assessment and self-image of participants, and the act of looking away is a defence mechanism which ensures that they can live up to this ideal.

suffering' is a result of less-than-conscious collusion between audiences, producers, participants, and subjects of mediation as they fail to challenge the representational practices and media power configurations that prevent us from engaging meaningfully with 'the other'. Whether it involves the 'shutting out' of information, the 'looking away' from the pain of others, or the 'collusive denial' of the others' suffering, audiences often deny any involvement with a moral appeal even before it starts its appealing process, let alone its engagement with multiplicity.

But even if digital content affects a large number of people and multiplicity operates effectively, users' interactions with it do not always translate into philanthropic contributions or useful[12] activism. People's interaction with charity appeals in many cases is considered to be a public display of morality with low-commitment political engagement known as slacktivism. Slacktivism is defined as 'actions that are performed through the Internet in support of a social or political cause but are viewed as requiring little time or involvement' (Jeffreys and Xu 2017: 251). Slacktivism has attracted criticism with respect to its purported superficiality and the minimal effort it requires (Kingston and Stam 2013; Jeffreys and Xu 2017). Critics argue that this practice, with its low-commitment engagement, is less about making a real impact on society and more about virtue-signalling and generating a feel-good effect (Christensen 2011; Bartholomew 2015; Cabrera, Matias and Montoya 2017). Aside from slacktivism, users' interactions with digital appeals can be a form of users' 'enjoyment attached to communication for its own sake', described by Dean (2015: 96) as 'communicative capitalism'. Communicative capitalism consists of the networks of information and affect that rely on users' production and consumption of online data (Dean 2015). Using the term

[12] Although I use an evaluative term here, I am aware that what constitutes 'useful', positive, or beneficial action/activism in a given context will always be open to contention and debate.

'capitalism', Dean points out that users' engagement with data driven by affective stimulation serves the capitalist economy by generating profit for multinational corporations that own social media platforms. The more data generated via clicks, shares, and 'likes', the more profit these corporations made from users' labour. The loop of the 'drive' entraps users in these networks of information, where they take pleasure in engaging with the 'endless circular movement of commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in new friends and followers, layering and interconnecting myriad communication platforms and devices' (Dean 2015: 90). This circular movement constitutes 'a profound passivity' that is often misread as active involvement (Dean 2009: 31), and slacktivism, I argue, can be considered to be another form of this passivity passing for activity.

While social media platforms have technological affordances that make political actions more convenient by adopting '(virtual) discursive interventions and symbolic demonstrations of solidarity for causes or groups' (Miller 2017: 254), it is argued that such platforms are the media channel that turns activity into passivity and activism into slacktivism mainly due to their purpose, which is related to conviviality. Vincent Miller (2017) suggests, in this vein, that social networking structures and environments are a less than conducive platform on which to promote productive activism that is moving towards making a social change. While the principal aim of social media is to establish and maintain connections, the communication on these platforms tends to entail a superficial sociality with an emphasis on 'the expressive and/or connective function of communication' that is inconsistent with the purposeful dialogue and conversation required to develop political action that might lead to wider socio-political transformation (Miller 2017: 259). Carolyn Pedwell (2017), however, offers a different view on the capacity of visual media on digital platforms to produce potentially transformative effects through habituated affect. She argues that networked affect could attach users to

particular images or visual environments and prolong their relationships with such images in ways that do not necessarily or inevitably lead to disaffection. Rather, this extended period of engagement may encourage users to 'inhabit [give attention and thought to] the sensorial intensity' of their encounter and 'its critical implications' (Pedwell 2017: 152). As a consequence, affective intensities generated through engagement with digital platforms might be 'turned into an activity' that has the potential for transformation 'at the level of habit' by directing users' attention to gaps in their 'patterned perception' (Pedwell 2017: 163) – which might create opportunities for the improvisation of new forms of action or practice.

The crucial point here is, I want to suggest, 'what counts as change' (Pedwell 2017: 163). While Miller (2017: 254) sees change as being initiated through '"real-world" activism' where people gather physically together to protest or call for action, Pedwell (2017: 153) views change as 'more progressive and enduring forms [of] social transformation' fostered at the level of embodied and socio-political habit. In the latter sense, political gestures on social media that seem superfluous and phatic in intent, like memes and/or Graphic Interchange Format files (GIFs), can contribute to wider forms of change as users become attuned to 'alternative possibilities' and 'tendencies to become otherwise' (Pedwell 2017: 165). However, as Pedwell points out, activating this potentiality requires 'affective inhabitation' that is a result of users' protracted relationship with online visual environment. I argue that to engage in such inhabitation, a degree of perseverance, determination, or sustained attention on the part of users is needed. The viral nature of multiplicity, where intensities affect a large number of people in a short time and quickly dissipate, can hamper this inhabitation process, especially when users are less engaged with images or the visual power is not strong enough to sustain attention.

Although I agree with Pedwell regarding the affective potential of visual media to propel change, I see it as less capable of establishing 'alternative possibilities' (Pedwell 2017: 165) and more capable of re-entrenching dominant discourses, because the latter asks for less effort from users already habituated to the hegemonic social and political norms. By exploring multiplicity in digital appeals for giving on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page, the thesis attempts to further this debate about the potential of networked affect in ongoing forms of social change. While I do not focus specifically on social media activism, my discussion of the critical implications of charitable endeavours enabled by the digital and affective affordances of the fan page addresses the wider topic of social transformation as it relates to the cultural, socio-political, and economic particularities of digital, celebrity-mediated, charitable giving in Thailand.

1.2.2 Accessibility

The second feature of networked affect is accessibility. I define accessibility in this context as the ability of networked affect to enable bodies to experience intensities from sources where non-digital access is difficult if not impossible. Accessibility consists of two main elements: *empathetic imaginary* and *affordances of technology*. Importantly, the term 'empathetic imaginary' is not intended to imply that there is an altruistic connotation of this element of accessibility. According to Amy Coplan (2011: 4), empathy is 'a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation'. In this sense, 'empathy' here has a wider meaning than sympathetic feeling or compassion. The definition stresses the psychological process involved in the empathetic imaginary that may encourage various feelings, including, but not limited to, sympathy. The empathetic imaginary presumably enables users to imagine what

those empathised with feel in a certain situation. In the field of psychology, empathy is understood to have two primary dimensions: cognitive and affective. Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand another individual's point of view, intentions, and emotions, whereas affective empathy is the ability to experience, share, and respond to the feelings of another (Davis 1980; Stansfield and Bunce 2014). People who have cognitive empathy can understand what others feel but do not necessarily have to share the same feeling. For example, schadenfreude can be understood as an emotion predominantly borne out of cognitive empathy but without affective empathy[13] (Heilbrun 1982; Wang, Lilienfeld and Rochat 2019).

Affordances of technology have an important role to play in this imaginative process as they potentially enhance the capability of imagination through audio-visual or interactive media, making it easier for users to understand or relate to other people's situations or feelings. Consider, for example, interactive digital affordances that aim to create the same sense of continuity in an interaction that a face-to-face situation would have, or multimedia technologies that allow users to engage with more sensory depth (quality of sensory information) and breadth (quantity of sensory dimensions being presented by information) than textual communications (Steuer 1992). The role of technological affordances that enhance affective experiences and empathetic imaginary can be explained by Adi Kuntsman's (2010; 2012) concept of 'cybertouch'. Kuntsman (2012: 3) develops an analysis of the 'cybertouch of war' to explain 'the emotional and informational intersections' between the violence of war and the affective charge that digital technologies enable in the mediation of

[13] By saying 'without affective empathy' in this context, I do not mean that schadenfreude is devoid of affect/feeling/sensation. Instead, I mean that individuals do not experience the same affect as the other person/group.

wars and conflicts. Cybertouch is defined here as the way in which bodies, events, and signs can touch users through the screens of computers and mobile phones, bringing distanced experiences closer. This is carried out either literally by the touchscreen technology which allows users to physically touch virtual experiences, or figuratively by overwhelming users with affective intensities that arouse 'an immediate emotional response' (Kuntsman 2012: 3). In literal terms, far-off experiences are brought onto screens, allowing users to touch, swipe, pinch, and zoom in embodied ways. The distance between users and real-world events appears to be lessened when they can physically touch or manipulate the digital content of such events. In figurative terms, networked technology enhances the quality of digital content via, for example, multimedia tools or rich audio-visual representation. This quality-enhanced digital content, in turn, can generate powerful forms of networked affect that arouse strong sensations in users.

I argue that both literal and figurative means of 'touch' can make the virtual feel real. An affective charge that emotionally moves users to feel for someone can create the sense of a 'felt reality' of experience. It appears that 'accessibility' is intertwined with the 'felt reality' of experience or 'indexicality' (another feature of networked affect, which I discuss later in section 1.2.4). Networked affect can provide virtual experiences that may be difficult for some users to physically gain; however, this virtuality does not necessarily diminish the sense of reality that the users feel or experience (Deleuze 1991; 1997; Boellstorff 2014). Whether the affective experiences at play are physical or virtual, they are essentially real to users. Accessibility therefore tends to bring about virtual experiences that are not less real than physical ones.

Empathetic imaginary and cybertouch, I argue, provide users with virtual access, via digital affect, to Bunluerit and the suffering experiences of those being represented in his charity appeals. Unpacking these virtual experiences of feeling mentally and physically closer to the celebrity philanthropist and mediated suffering can be helpful when trying to understand how charity appeals on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page can activate or deactivate users to respond to the appeals, and, specifically, how accessibility is played out in Thailand where celebrity-endorsed charity appeals foregrounding representations of suffering are deeply influenced by Buddhist beliefs and Thai cultural values.

1.2.3 Virtual collectivity

While accessibility can reduce psychological distance between users and digitally mediated experiences, virtual collectivity creates a sense of being mentally close to the experiences in both time and space. Virtual collectivity concerns how networked affect appears to make users feel that they are with another person or other people despite being alone. Digital platforms are often considered to provide 'gathering places' where users connect with friends and new people for work or leisure purposes (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002; Soukup 2006; boyd 2014). Even though users are usually alone surfing the web (or figuratively alone, as users usually concentrate on a computer or mobile screen so are oblivious to their physical environment), they tend to be virtually connected to many other users with whom they have online interactions simultaneously. These connections and interactions can provide a sense of collectivity that allows users to experience the company of others without their physical presence. Virtual collectivity also deals with emotional proximity as accessibility (as discussed in the previous section); however, by involving the simultaneity of users'

participation in an event, virtual collectivity offers a sense of gathering with other (both human and non-human) bodies which is absent in accessibility.

The simultaneity in virtual collectivity can provide the intensities of 'effervescence'. Émile Durkheim (1995) uses the term 'effervescence' to describe the state wherein participants in ritual assemblies have heightened collective emotional excitement. In the context of digitally mediated environments, this effervescence is borne out of the knowledge that users are participating in an event at the moment of its unfolding with the mediated presence of other participants. Virtual collectivity is key in driving this effervescence. The characteristics of effervescence can be seen by considering, for example, the differences between watching a live broadcast football match and a recorded one. Even if the audiences do not know the result when they start watching the recorded match, the two experiences are markedly different. The audience of the live broadcast can conceivably feel that they are part of the event. While watching the live match, they are exchanging some affective jolts in relation to the spectacle at the same time as other viewers. The live broadcast seems to be more enjoyable than the recorded one as viewers experience affective intensities and return 'a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it' (Dean 2015: 90) to the spectacle. The added intensities are blended back into the spectacle and, in turn, the audiences receive enhanced affective jolts and give back the surplus stimulation (Dean 2015). This give-and-receive process continues throughout the match. The recorded version lacks the effervescence and the perceived collective presence of other audience members which constitutes the high level of affective intensities.

Virtual collectivity is an important element that has contributed to the popularisation of social media. Users generally hope that by spending time on social media, they will find

virtual company with whom they can interact, socialise, and/or share information without a physical co-presence (Debatin et al. 2009). The paradox between being physically solitary and being virtually with many may blur the boundary between the public and private spheres. Social media users sometimes reveal personal matters to 'invisible' collective audiences, wrongly assuming that the information disclosed will be contained in a specific context that is similar to their physical condition, which later may become problematic. Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011b) call this situation 'context collapse'. Context collapse occurs when users provide information on social media platforms and audiences with various norms and values respond differently to such information, causing tension. Examples abound, ranging from being dismissed from employment for inappropriate posts to being incarcerated under the lèse-majesté law in Thailand because of defamatory posts concerning the king[14] (BBC 2015; Matharu 2015; Freedom of Expression Documentation Center 2018). I see virtual collectivity and context collapse to be two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, users can make use of the non-physically present crowd to enjoy others' company or engage in social interaction. On the other hand, they can be ignorant about how different members of this virtual collectivity will react or think, resulting in tension due to context collapse.

I will use the concept of virtual collectivity to explore Bunluerit's charity appeals, especially the live broadcasts of his charitable visits. As virtual collectivity plays an important role in making users digitally co-present with Bunluerit and suffering beneficiaries, I will be able to unpack how this reorientation of time and space affects users' reponses to the appeals situated in the context of Thai Buddhist practices and culture. Additionally, the phenomenon

[14] Thailand's lèse-majesté law, which prohibits insulting the king and the royal family, is considered to be one of the harshest laws of this kind in the world (BBC 2017). Anyone who breaks this law will be punished with a jail term of between three and 15 years (Freedom of Expression Documentation Center 2019).

of context collpase will also be examined in relation to the dissemination of representations of suffering online and how it can be problematic to the beneficiaries being represented, especially in terms of privacy violation.

1.2.4 Indexicality

While the role of 'multiplicity' lies in the multiplication and intensification of affective force, and 'accessibility' and 'virtual collectivity' concerns the reorientation of space and time, indexicality works more as the resultant effect of these three functions, rather than as an attribute playing a distinctive role in and of itself. It is the perceptive and affective sensation enabling users to instinctively grasp and become attuned to Baudrillard's (1994) hyperreality where multiple realities coexist and the distinction between the real and the imaginary no longer matters. I borrow the term 'indexicality' from the work of Tom Boellstorff (2014) to portray the relation between what is happening offline (the actual or the real) and online (the virtual). I use the term 'indexicality' to consider how networked affect, derived from the engagement with the virtual, can form another reality that coexists with the reality we perceive through our senses. The empathetic imaginary works with these perceptual senses to take in the other reality, or what I call the 'felt reality' – that which is not physically real but is emotionally real. However, this felt reality is qualitatively distinct from the physical experience; it has its own significance that is independent of the real-world phenomenon.

Boellstorff (2014) uses the term 'indexicality' to explain the relation between the virtual and the actual, especially in the context of MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games). Drawing on the work of Alessandro Duranti (1997) in linguistic anthropology, Boellstroff argues that the virtual and the actual have indexical relationships in which each points to the existence of the other in social practice. In this sense, the virtual is

not only something that points to the existence of the actual. The virtual also has significance in itself. It is, in a way, a felt reality among multiple realities, 'multiple contexts, multiple worlds' and 'multiple bodies' (Boellstorff 2014: 53). For example, Boellstorff compares the relationship between the virtual and the actual with the relationship between smoke and fire. Smoke not only points to the existence of a fire but also exists as an object in itself and, at the same time, it is 'connected, spatio-temporally and physically' to the actual while acquiring meaning from that connection (2014: 51). In this sense, the virtual not only orients or shapes the physical but also becomes a distinct identity with meaning that is co-constituted by the interplay between the two.

I find Rob Shields' (2003) distinction between the concrete and the virtual useful in explaining this indexicality. Shields argues that both the concrete and the virtual are real; the concrete can be perceived by our perceptual senses as real while the virtual is experienced as real. Examples of the concrete are things, events, actualised ideas, and anything that embodies memories, whereas virtual things are memories, dreams, or intentions. The virtual is not tangible, yet it can be actualised to become tangibly concrete, for example actualising memory through a ritual which makes that memory happen in the present. Indexicality is the condition that exists in Shield's 'the virtual' that points to the concrete present. It manifests itself alongside the concrete and offers users another reality to take in.

Boellstroff's and Shield's views on the virtual resonate with that of Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze (1991) contends that the virtual as a genetic ground of the actual cannot resemble the real and cannot be a limited version of the real (Smith and Protevi 2018). Rather, the virtual is, and he quotes Marcel Proust, 'real without being actual, ideal without being abstract' (Deleuze

1991: 96). That is, the virtual has a separate entity from the actual. It is not the simulated version of the actual, nor is it inferior in quality. Deleuze (1994: 212) argues that

> [t]he actualization of the virtual … always takes place by difference, divergence or differentiation. Actualisation breaks with resemblance as a process no less than it does with identity as a principle … In this sense, actualisation or differentiation is always a genuine creation.

I understand this difference in terms of how individuals create their own felt reality by employing their 'repertoires of affective and embodied dispositions' (Tremlett 2016: 1164), such as memory, bodily capacities, or cognitive functions, that are unique to each of them. 'A genuine creation' of reality is thus varied, distinguished, and different for each person.

Linking back to this thesis project, the discussion of indexicality is integral to the understanding of the way users make sense of the reality they see in Bunluerit's charity appeals. Although individual users grasp different realities based on their affective repositories and embodied sensations, these multiple realities are guided by the spectacles and digital content on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page that articulate a certain set of views and values. As many media theorists argue, because media not only represent but also produce users' perceptions of the world (Van Loon 2008; Karatzogianni 2012; Kember and Zylinska 2012), what is mediated on the fan page can become hegemonic constructions of truth that cognitively and affectively reinforce specific worldviews which maintain relations of domination and exploitation. In my analysis, I will examine the kinds of realities constructed via networked affect in my case study and how they signal ongoing tensions and fraught power relations in Thai society.

Conclusions

Through its engagement with key literatures in interdisciplinary affect studies, this chapter has sought to develop an interpretive approach for thinking through how affect operates in charitable appeals for giving on digital platforms. I have outlined a conceptual framework for investigating the characteristics and roles of affect in digital encounters that includes *multiplicity*, *accessibility*, *virtual collectivity*, and *indexicality*. *Multiplicity* refers to how digital affect online can impact multiple bodies and multiply its intensity along the route of its circulation. While *multiplicity* can move those being affected, I argue that it can also leave people unmoved as users can refuse to engage with appeals or the site of affective stimulation. *Accessibility* provides the kind of intensities from digitally mediated experiences that are difficult to engage with in offline environments. Accessibility, consisting of the empathetic imaginary and digital affordances of cybertouch, can reduce the distance between users and the represented experience, encouraging them to feel for the subject or group whose suffering is digitally mediated. *Virtual collectivity* creates a sense of co-presence in time and space with other users. I argue that even without face-to-face contact, *virtual collectivity* can promote 'collective effervescence' through the acknowledgement that the event in which users are participating is unfolding in real time and that they are being joined by other mediated participants. *Indexicality* is the condition in which an online encounter is experienced as one reality among multiple others. As affect has been employed in this chapter to guide an inquiry into the relations between human subjects and digital non-human actors, we have seen how closely integrated our lives are with digital media and how networked affect as the mediating and mobilising force linking life and technologies together is indispensable in our attempt to understand the dynamics of our everyday life in the digitally connected world.

I will use this conceptual framework to investigate the flow of affect in online encounters between users, the celebrity philanthropist (Bunluerit), appeals or representations of suffering, and mediated beneficiaries, and in responses from users in the form of comments and charitable giving. This framework will be useful for engaging with various features of Bunluerit's digital appeals that include virality where appeals can be shared and forwarded (multiplicity), interactivity where live broadcasts enable real-time interactions between Bunluerit and beneficiaries and followers (accessibility and virtual collectivity), and constructions of reality where the charity appeals reinforce a certain view on power relations that users understand as fact (indexicality). In the next chapter, I will examine theories concerned with the representation of suffering, while exploring a range of affective responses that might be induced by such mediation. The discussion will be contextualised in relation to socio-cultural traditions in Thailand, specifically in relation to the Buddhist view of suffering and affective responses to it.

Chapter 2

The Affective Mediation of Suffering in Thailand

While the previous chapter outlined the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis, this chapter focuses on the social phenomena and interactions that theories of affect will be employed to study, particularly the representations of suffering regularly mobilised to elicit donations on Bhin Bunluerit's Facebook fan page. The study of representations of suffering has gained increased attention over the last two decades from scholars in various disciplines, including media and communications, psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, moral philosophy, political science, and arts and literature (Huiberts and Joye 2014; Huiberts 2016). In this chapter, I will explore key theories about the mediation of suffering by drawing on the media studies literature. Particular attention will be paid to the role of the mediation of suffering in bridging the psychological distance between users and sufferers and in the workings and implications of networked affect in this endeavour.

The chapter proceeds by first considering the two main aspects of the mediation of suffering: content, or the politics of suffering, and form, or the social role of media. The politics of suffering examines how negative imagery (representing the helplessness and vulnerability of sufferers) and positive imagery (depicting the agency and dignity of beneficiaries) are used to invoke moral responsibility that can drive users to donate (paying) or engage in political activism (speaking) to address the suffering and injustice being represented. I maintain that negative imagery is widely used in Thai digital charitable appeals and suggest reasons behind this. The social role of media addresses the way technologies of mediation create relations of

moral commitment between viewers and those being represented. Borrowing key ideas from the media literature that examines television as a particular technology of mediation, I further the discussion by considering how digital platforms used to represent vulnerable people can affect users' perception of the moral distance between themselves and those suffering, as well as how these networked communications can encourage or undermine charitable actions. The second section discusses possible affective responses that users may have when witnessing the mediation of suffering, which I broadly divide into engaging and aversive responses. I pay particular attention to the specific ways in which Buddhist ideologies and Thai cultural values mediate and shape feelings and affective responses. This chapter, working as the intermediary chapter connecting the theoretical basis of this thesis in the previous chapter with the next, contextual framing, chapter concentrating on the Thai particularities, offers an insight into the mediation of suffering that links internal affective states of individual users to the suffering others and the external socio-cultural forms of values, beliefs, and norms surrounding the practices in gift-giving. It explores these links by looking at the content of mediation, the technologies used in this process, and the affective responses induced by such mediation. The chapter argues that the mediation of suffering shapes and influences users' affective responses to people who are suffering at both conscious and less-than-conscious levels, and in a manner deeply embedded in the Thai social and cultural milieu.

2.1 The Mediation of Suffering

The representation of suffering is at the centre of Bhin Bunluerit's Facebook fan page, as it links Bunluerit, sufferers, and page followers or donors in charitable efforts to aid people with severe health problems and/or who are living in poverty. Unpacking the affective and

representational dynamics at stake in my case study thus requires understanding key relevant theories, debates, and concepts in media studies regarding the representation of suffering. In a way, the discussion of 'representations' portrayed in the mediation of suffering begs the question of how networked affect, which is often considered to be 'non-representational' or 'beyond the conventional, the cognitive and the discursive' (Wetherell 2012: 52), aligns with talk, text, and stories in representations that require discursive interpretation. According to Margaret Wetherell (2012: 52), Brian Massumi sees texts or discourse as 'having an almost antagonistic relationship' with affect as they tend to tame and codify affective intensities, while other theorists see the relationships between them as more blurred or complementary. For example, Ian Burkitt (2002) suggests that affect needs discourse to provide its meaning. Without meaning, affect loses its significance to individuals and becomes an autonomous bodily response that appears and then vanishes. What I focus on in foregrounding networked affect here is the meaning and social consequences that affect entails. By engaging with representations, I look at how, and with what critical implications, affect articulated in the form of the stories, images, or video clips that comprise the digital mediation of suffering elicits meaningful responses within the Thai socio-cultural, religious, and politico-economic context.

The discussion of the mediation of suffering in this section mainly draws on studies in the field of media research that look at 'the mediation of human vulnerability as a cause for action' in the distant 'contexts of need and risk' seen as separate from the Euro–North American comfort zone inhabited by audiences (Chouliaraki 2015: 708). In the mediation process, media not only enable communication between groups of people using tools and technologies; they also shape people's 'resources for judgement' when dealing with the world and their sense of responsibility towards others (Silverstone 2007: 44). The study of representations of suffering thus involves the discussion of moral ethics, especially the way the

media affect the moral sentiments and obligations of audiences towards people who are suffering that can become 'a cause for action' (Chouliaraki 2015: 708). Research on the mediation of suffering can be categorised in many ways, including that which focuses on production, text, and reception, as discussed in the Introduction chapter, and one centring on moral ethics relating audiences to people who are suffering, classified as 'textual ethics' and 'audience ethics' (Ong 2014). I employ Maria Kyriakidou's (2011) categorisation, which pays attention to two main elements of the mediation of suffering, the representational content being mediated and the technologies or forms used to mediate such content, to guide the discussion on key debates in this field of study and how they have related to the norms and practices surrounding suffering and its representation in the Thai context.

2.1.1 The politics of representing suffering

The study of the politics of representation considers the moral claims embedded within charitable appeals, humanitarian campaigns, and the use of photographic imagery aiming to raise awareness or fundraise donation money. A key question asked in this literature is whether particular depictions of those who are suffering can be considered primarily negative or positive. In this vein, Lilie Chouliaraki (2010, 2013) identifies two types of imagery often found in representations of vulnerability. Negative imagery depicts sufferers as passive, helpless, and vulnerable victims who are worthy of aid. These sufferers are sometimes shown naked or half-naked and devoid of agentic human qualities when they appear to be merely emaciated body parts. These body parts are fetishised (Hall 2009) as they 'do not reflect real human bodies but curiosities of the flesh that mobilize a pornographic spectatorial imagination between disgust and desire' (Chouliaraki 2013: 58). Chouliaraki (2010, 2013) argues that such negative appeals inform 'an ambivalent form of moral agency' as, on the one hand, audiences in affluent

Western contexts are affected by the moralising force through a logic of complicity resulting from the legacy of the colonial past of the West and the inability to take responsibility for the misfortune of the distant others the West has witnessed. On the other hand, how sufferers are portrayed and the aid relationship between rich countries and recipient states enact 'this complicity in the power relations' despite the rich countries' purported aim to expose and redress this collusion (Hattori 2003).

Unlike in negative appeals, positive imagery concentrates on sufferers' agency and dignity. Such representations often depict beneficiaries as happy, confident individuals or as groups capable of taking care of themselves. Chouliaraki (2010, 2013) argues that the moralising function of positive imagery relies on a 'sympathetic equilibrium', where the appeal is oriented towards a balance of emotions between sufferers and audiences as potential benefactors. The happy, smiling faces of beneficiaries and their direct eye contact signal their gratitude towards audiences who are being empowered by the imagery as they feel that they can make a difference and bring a smile to sufferers' faces. A positive appeal, although attempting to address the drawbacks of negative imagery by emphasising beneficiaries' agency, still does not avoid the pitfall of maintaining the dominant power relations structuring global philanthropic relations: beneficiaries are made to perform gratitude and a sense of obligation towards donors, while the narcissistic self-contentment of donors may remain un-interrogated.

In the Thai context, negative imagery is, I want to argue, more often employed in charitable appeals for giving. This is evidenced in various television programmes whose main purpose is to raise funds for those in need by showcasing their impoverished lives (Vongvorakarnvit 2008). It is also underscored by the prevalence of *khor dāna*-style appeals on digital platforms. For many years, *khor dāna*, or beggars, who wait in public places asking

passers-by for money using their vulnerable conditions to justify their request, were a common sight in Thailand's major cities. In 2016, however, the Thai government issued a law prohibiting the practice of *khor dāna* (Matichon Online 2016), yet *khor dāna*-style appeals foregrounding negative imagery can be seen widely online. While televised appeals foregrounding negative messaging are restricted and controlled by various gatekeepers including editors, producers, and television broadcasters, digital appeals are less restrained in showing graphic imagery. Severe injuries, wounds, and bodily vulnerabilities are shown without any censorship, and these lurid images of suffering are often circulated via social media to solicit donation money.

In addition to the lack of a gatekeeper, there are at least three factors, I argue, that support the less inhibited use of distressing images in digital representations of suffering in Thailand. First, there is no clear law regulating the ownership and distribution of obscene materials. In the UK, the Obscene Publications Act 1959 and the Protection of Children Act 1978 are enforced to control the publication of photos that are deemed extreme in nature, and in the US, the Federal Law on Obscenity has the same effect (Home Office 2015; Department of Justice 2020). Thailand, however, does not have any specific regulation that restricts the use and distribution of graphic pictures. Instead, it adopts the Computer-related Crime Act B.E 2550 (2007), which covers a wide spectrum of issues and is less applicable in practice when dealing with distressing images or appeals (Thai Netizen Network 2016).

Second, the Buddhist cultural value that accepts pain, death, and suffering as part of life shapes the way Thai people feel about seeing the suffering of others (Young-Eisendrath 2008). The Buddhist teaching of *dukkha*, or suffering, views the body as impermanent and prone to deterioration; a body is a bag consisting of pus, blood, urine, and faeces, and once it becomes a corpse these fluids will come out of all the openings of the swelling body (Thavaroh

1989). Buddhists are therefore encouraged to see the deterioration and ugliness of the suffering body as normal. Indeed, in one strand of meditation practice, they are trained to contemplate a decomposing body to realise its impermanence (Crosby 2014). This does not mean that Thai people are able to see a suffering body without flinching or that they enjoy witnessing the pain of others. Rather, they are less likely to consider a distressing image in relation to the right to privacy and more likely to see it as a natural course of life that does not need to be hidden from the eyes of others. When it comes to charitable appeal-making, Thai people thus tend to see a distressing image as evidence of suffering taking place rather than perceiving it as dehumanising or destroying beneficiaries' dignity.

Finally, negative imagery that stresses the stark contrast between privileged healthy audiences and helpless, suffering 'quasi-humans' is aimed at creating a maximal distance between them (Chouliaraki 2013: 58). Chouliaraki (2010, 2013) links this gap to Roger Silverstone's (2002b: 283) concept of the 'immorality of distance', which proposes that audiences find themselves to be so removed from the lives of distant others that they are 'beyond the reach of meaningful or productive action'. Silverstone uses this concept to explain the separation or alienation between affluent Western or Northern audiences and sufferers in the underprivileged Global South. However, as the negative imagery used in the Thai context shows, the immorality of distance can be established within the same geographic region between privileged upper- and middle-class media users and lower-class sufferers who are unable to provide for themselves. Chouliaraki (2010, 2013) further argues that this distance of immorality contributes to the logic of complicity that moves audiences to respond to appeals. In Thailand, I suggest that the logic of complicity, unlike that which may compel Western spectators, has little to do with colonial history but is more concerned with the responsibility

that comes with wealth and prestige, and the immorality of distance induced by a negative appeal reminds socially and economically privileged subjects to assume this responsibility.

The discussion of positive and negative imagery in this section will be used to explore representations of suffering employed in Bunluerit's charity appeals. My examination of the extensive use of distressing images in the Thai digital context provides background and a rationale to understand Bunluerit's adoption of negative imagery. Here we see how the use of negative imagery within digital calls for charitable giving is influenced by Buddhist beliefs in suffering and its representation, as well as Thai cultural values surrounding gift-giving – observations which will also inform further critical engagement with the mediation of suffering in my analysis chapters.

2.1.2 The social role of media

The study of the social role of technology in mediating vulnerability concentrates on the role of particular forms of media, particularly television, in establishing 'relations of moral commitment' between those being represented and those seeing/watching the mediation (Kyriakidou 2011: 22). Chouliaraki (2006) asserts that the process of mediation that takes place through television shapes the way audiences feel about representations of suffering by manipulating spectators' sense of proximity, allowing them to connect with sufferers. She suggests two types of narratives that describe the influence of media on spectators' perceptions: optimistic and pessimistic narratives. Although Chouliaraki discusses these narratives in relation to how the television media shapes audiences' perceptions of proximity to sufferers, I am particularly concerned with how such dynamics play out in both similar and different ways with respect to the affordances of digital media.

The optimistic narrative

The optimistic narrative suggests that television can reduce the perceived or felt distance between differently situated people across the globe. I argue that the optimistic narrative produced by digital technologies works through two affordances, which overlap in their functioning: interconnectivity and interactivity (See Chapter 1.2) (Massa 2017). Through interconnectivity, networked communication allows sufferers to connect with users and potential donors with 'a high degree of disintermediation', that is, without the need to depend on intermediaries, including media corporations and traditional gatekeepers like television broadcasters (Madianou 2013: 250). In this way, sufferers are able to speak for themselves, which, in turn, can increase the authenticity, veracity, and legitimacy of charitable appeals (Madianou 2013; Scott 2015). Martin Scott (2015) argues that as sufferers can voice their concerns freely, their assertions, to some extent, can address power asymmetries in the relationship between users and distant others. However, while traditional gatekeepers may be bypassed by interconnectivity, new intermediaries come to the fore and are key in shaping the mediation of suffering (Madianou 2013) as well as in constituting users' perceptions of relevant power relations. I argue that even with interconnectivity, intermediaries remain important, especially those who have large social networks since they can communicate charitable or social causes to a larger group of people. In the case study of this project, Bhin Bunluerit assumes the role of an intermediary, using his celebrity status to make charitable appeals receive wider attention.

The affordance of interactivity offers novel ways to portray distant suffering in a more complex, dynamic, and efficient manner as digital technology enables better visualisation and provides more information through links and online resources to help users understand more

about sufferers and their distressing situations (Kennedy 2009). However, the architecture of social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, and the size and velocity of information being put on these platforms do not tend to encourage lengthy engagement with available online resources (Lim 2013). In this respect, the potential of interactive platforms to provide a better understanding of sufferers through nuanced and informative portrayals may not be fully exploited. Aside from depicting suffering, interactivity also enables new ways of 'acting at a distance' (Kennedy 2009: 3), including signing online petitions or forwarding and sharing information. However, what seems to be most attractive for fundraisers like Bunluerit is the convenience that digital technologies offer regarding facilitating financial donations, as online charitable appeals are 'only a ''click'' away from their (users') all-important credit cards' (Madianou 2013: 250).

The affordance of interactivity can also intensify the affective force of representations of suffering through 'immediacy', or the sense of being present with distant others in time and space (Tomlinson 1999). Despite having a distinctive quality when compared to a face-to-face encounter, immediacy can nonetheless powerfully connect people. It can be compared with *virtual collectivity* (as discussed in the previous chapter) in terms of how both processes bring about a sense of co-presence. Bunluerit's mediation of suffering on his fan page makes use of immediacy by live broadcasting the encounter between him and beneficiaries to accentuate the sense of proximity between users and sufferers. The engagement with representations of suffering in digital media, I argue, can entail different levels of perception, including both conscious and less-than-conscious processes and cognitive and affective ones, that provide 'a kind of intensification or reduplication' of affective intensities circulating around human and non-human bodies (Grusin 2010: 96). At the conscious level, akin to mediation through television, digital platforms demand cognitive labour from viewers to translate the visual coded

signs communicated to make sense of their meaning within specific social and cultural contexts (Hall 1973). At the less-than-conscious level, users repeatedly engage with digital media using their bodies (i.e. clicking a mouse and or touching a screen). As the technologies respond to their haptic commands, the action creates a cross-modal (sight, sound, and touch) affective patterning or mapping that develops and perpetuates what Richard Grusin (2010: 111) calls 'cyborgian affects' circulating among humans and non-humans (Grusin 2010: 111). I argue that during this repetitive process of cross-modal affective mapping, users' bodily sensing, feeling, thinking, and acting are attuned to certain affective intensities flowing in networked communications. This attunement and intensification hark back to the argument I made in the previous chapter concerning *multiplicity*, where affective energy is multiplied as users interact with digital content through clicking, sharing, or forwarding. Affect, in this sense, is intensified not only through human-to-human exchange on digital platforms; the platform itself also adds to the intensities through a cyborgian affect.

In the optimistic narrative, the theory of media witnessing can inform how audiences are moved by the spectacle of suffering to the point that some of them will act in response to a moral cause, either by 'paying' – donating to help sufferers – or by 'speaking' – expressing opinions through elections or revolts – including protests – that can put the institution concerned under pressure to intervene on behalf of the sufferer (Boltanski 1999). Media witnessing theory holds that as audiences see the suffering of others through different media, especially those which allow people to view events in real time, such as live streaming on Bunluerit's fan page, their witnessing of suffering imposes a moral obligation that provides 'an aching sense that something must be done' (Ellis 2002: 11). As John Peters (2001: 708), a key theorist in this area, argues, '[t]o witness an event is to be responsible in some way to it'. John Ellis (2002) maintains that this feeling of responsibility derives from the act of looking. To look

at suffering without doing anything implies complicity to the extent that the onlooker is, in a sense, allowing the unfortunate event to happen. A moral obligation is therefore imposed on media users who witness the event of suffering.

The pessimistic narrative

The pessimistic narrative suggests that television appears to bring audiences closer to sufferers, but actually it creates a distance between them. Chouliaraki (2006) argues that television contributes to the pessimistic narrative in two significant ways: via the 'domesticity of reception' and via the 'intervention of technology'. In the domesticity of reception, the environmental frame of watching television on a small screen in the safety of one's own home or living room interrupts the spectator's connectivity with distant sufferers. The same can be said of digital technologies, as the screen becomes even smaller, down to the size of a smartphone. However, I argue that the way people are 'more intimately and intensely engaged in affective relationships with their phones' suggests a different view on users' perceived connection with what is represented there (Grusin 2010: 115). Many users perceive their smartphone as the device that connects them to families and other close circles. Considering the affective proximity that users have with their mobiles and the people whom the phones mediate, the psychological distance perceived between users and sufferers represented in the smart device may not be as significant as that in television.

Regarding the intervention of technology, it is argued that television distorts the authenticity of the represented event due to its inability to 'mediate a broad spectrum of physical senses and bodily sensations', including smell, touch, and discomfort (Chouliaraki 2006: 24). Television thus cannot represent a full embodied reality that incorporates more dimensions than the imagery shown. Scholars also argue regarding the intervention of

technology that the visual editing techniques used in representation, such as a sound track, slow motion, or fast tracking, increase the distance between spectators and sufferers, and the ability to change channels or switch off the television enhances the sense that audiences are in control of the technology (Chouliaraki 2006). As a result, the distinction between fiction and reality when it comes to the spectacle becomes blurred, causing the representation to lose its authenticity as well as its ethical appeal.

The concept of the intervention of technology, when applied to networked technologies, is, I argue, the flip side of cybertouch and *indexicality*, where the affective charge generated by quality-enhanced digital content cannot convince users of the spectacle's authenticity, making them reject its hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994; Kuntsman 2010). The advanced digital technologies used in imagery and moving pictures, instead of encouraging users to perceive the online spectacle as more real and reducing the distance between users and sufferers, tend to achieve the contrary effect due to the excessive and unnatural alterations they entail. As users can control and manipulate digital representations in many more ways than are possible with television – zooming in and out, and cropping, copying, or changing various elements of the (moving) pictures – the sense of 'ritualistic awe', or what Walter Benjamin (1968) calls 'aura', is destroyed, making the representation lose its authenticity. Aura is the power emanating from objects, nature, or people that have a value that comes from their effervescence, originality, and history. This power makes spectators feel in awe of the auratic object. Aura incorporates a sense of proper distance between spectators and the object: not overly close to the point that the auratic object can be manipulated and lose its awe, and not overly far such that it cannot attract respect and admiration. Auratic power can be found in natural phenomena, original works of art, and human figures (Bolter et

al. 2006). The control that users have over digital representations of suffering arguably shatters this proper distance and awe, resulting in the loss of authenticity.

Mirca Madianou (2013) argues that when suffering is represented through social media, it is not only the content (how sufferers are depicted, as in positive or negative imagery) but also the wider network architectures that need to be investigated in order to understand the way digital technologies shape users' affective engagement and potential action. This section has explored these roles of networked communication in shaping the dynamics of moral relationships between media users and people who are suffering being represented. While attending to the logics of the optimistic narrative enables me to examine how relations of moral commitment are established through the mediation of suffering in Bunluerit's digital charity appeals, addressing the workings of the pessimistic narrative informs my investigation into how this technology of mediation can discourage these relations. The study of the social roles of digital media is important when considering how Bunluerit's use of digital platforms benefit as well as disadvantage his fundraising endeavours in terms of practice (ability of beneficiaries to express themselves, convenience of donation-making,) and affect (reduce/increase the psychological distance through representations). In the next section, by drawing on the literatures on the mediation of suffering, affect studies, and psychology, I will explore possible affective responses to representations of suffering and vulnerability that may (or may not) lead to philanthropic action.

2.2 Affective Responses to the Mediation of Suffering

While the previous section focuses on the cultivation of moral sentiment through the engagement with content and the form of the mediation of suffering, this section will unpack

the affective states that bridge this process of engaging with representations of vulnerability with the formation of moral obligation and the actions of 'paying' and 'speaking'. Although much of the literature on the mediation of suffering discusses this moral obligation to act, less of it elaborates on how this impulse is formed and propels philanthropic endeavours, especially in terms of the emotions involved in the process. This section strives to carry out this task of exploring these affective responses. However, as discussed in the pessimistic narrative, the mediation of suffering does not always entail proximity with sufferers nor a sense of responsibility towards them. This section will thus also look into modes of affective aversion that undermine the prosocial motivation that representations of suffering seek to cultivate. In the discussion below, I broadly divide the modes of affect in response to the mediation of suffering into 'engaging' and 'aversive' to address both positive and negative emotional states. The section will argue that aside from the content and technologies surrounding the mediation, Thai cultural norms and Buddhist values also influence users' responses to emotive calls of representations of suffering.

Engaging Responses

In the optimistic narrative, the immediacy that brings users closer to the suffering represented makes them feel 'the aching sense that something must be done' (Ellis 2002: 11). Chouliaraki (2010: 6) argues that this aching sense can be derived from witnessing negative imagery that evokes 'the affective regime of guilt, shame and indignation'. While guilt and shame are associated with the moral claim of 'tender-heartedness', which capitalises on the presence of the benefactor with the goal of alleviating suffering by way of charity, or 'paying', indignation generates more extroverted and assertive modes of feeling that focus on the presence of the persecutor and aim at addressing the injustice of suffering, especially through

the political means of 'speaking' (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2010: 6). As this thesis focuses primarily on networked charitable giving, I will thus pay more attention to engaging responses that align with the moral claim of tender-heartedness.

Guilt is an emotion individuals feel when they believe that they have violated particular norms, regulations, or moral principles (Basil, Ridgway and Basil 2006). A sense of guilt can also arise when people become aware of the difference in well-being between themselves and those less fortunate and feel the compulsion to help, which, I argue, resonates with the idea of complicity in media witnessing theory as well as Chouliaraki's (2010, 2013) discussion of negative imagery. Shame is considered to be a more social emotion than guilt as shame seeks approval from others while guilt is generated from an individual's failure to meet their own moral standard or principle (Cohen, 2001). However, some scholars do not see much difference between the two emotional states as both can motivate acts of amending and reparation, such as gift-giving, to assuage these negative feelings (Silfver-Kuhalampi 2009; Chouliaraki 2010).

Another engaging response that is widely associated with charitable giving is compassion. Compassion is defined as 'the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help' (Goetz, Keltner and Simon-Thomas 2010: 351). Compassion is often used interchangeably, or alongside, related terms including empathy, sympathy, and pity. Empathy (discussed in the previous chapter in the section on *accessibility* in relation to 'the empathetic imaginary') incorporates an altruistic sense of having a cognitive and affective connection that allows the empathiser to share and respond to the sufferer's feeling. In its early use, sympathy was considered analogous to compassion, that is, having a fellow feeling or a sense of suffering together (Garber 2004). However, compassion later came

to be perceived as an emotion felt by someone in a superior position (because they are free from suffering) towards people who are in distress, while sympathy is generally understood to be felt in relation to people who are equally positioned or with whom there is an affinity (*Ibid*.) In this sense, compassion has a close meaning to pity, where the person feeling pity is assumed to be in a superior position. Yet pity tends to generate a stronger sense of condescension, or even contempt. Compassion is sometimes considered to be pity 'accompanied by strong feelings of wanting to alleviate pain and suffering' (Geller 2006: 194; Gerdes 2011; Ure and Frost 2014).

In the Thai context, the feeling of compassion is generally known as *songsarn*. People who feel *songsarn* are often in a better situation, on the basis of age and social status, than those to whom *songsarn* is directed (Naemiratch and Manderson 2009). *Songsarn* is sometimes associated with condescending attitudes, like the word 'pity'; however, the term itself does not convey such a sense. It depends on how and in what context *songsarn* is used. The Royal Institute[15] (2011b) defines *songsarn* as 'being sympathetic towards another person who is in distress' and 'caring about others with *mettā* and *karunā*'. The latter definition links to the Buddhist principle of *brahmavihāra*, which advises how individuals should feel towards other people in order to make the world a sublime dwelling place (Habito 2002; Crosby 2014). *Brahmavihāra* consists of four notions: apart from *mettā* (kindness or a mind that wishes for peace and happiness for all beings) and *karuna* (compassion or a feeling of sympathy and a desire to alleviate the suffering of those in distress), mentioned earlier in the definition of *songsarn*, *brahmavihāra* also includes *muditā* (appreciative joy or a joyful feeling when one can see others being happy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity or an unwavering calm when facing

[15] A government office in Thailand responsible for publishing the standard Thai dictionary.

happiness or sorrow) (Guruge and Bond 1998; Habito 2002; Crosby 2014). Here, *songsarn* is similar to compassion in the way that it is combined with the urge to alleviate suffering. Just as compassion is argued to encourage an act, like 'paying', in response to suffering, *songsarn* also tends to bring about *dāna*, or Buddhist gift-giving, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

It is striking to note, however, that *songsarn* has another meaning which is related to Buddhist theology. *Songsarn* can also mean the *karmic* cycle or samsara (Brahmagunabhorn 2016). In Buddhism, it is believed that all beings (both human beings and animals) are interconnected in this *karmic* cycle as they all have to experience suffering that comes in various forms (birth, illness, death, and being away from what or whom one loves, to mention just a few) in the same samsara until they have reached nirvana[16] (Guruge and Bond 1998). Douglas Hollan (2017) argues that empathic-like sentiments in different cultures tend to include the feelings and sentiments that go beyond the first-person perspective, taking on other people's behaviour, as found in the Euro–North American understanding of empathy, and focusing more on social and pragmatic consequences rather than experiential and perceptual qualities. Hollan's observation is apparent in Thai *songsarn*, which has the moral aim of creating a peaceful and harmonious community. At the same time, the definition of *songsarn*, which is related to the *karmic* cycle, points to the other-worldly character of the term that highlights its religious origin and concerns the beliefs behind this moral.

[16] Nirvana, considered to be the final goal of Buddhism, is a state in which individuals are no longer in the *karmic* cycle and are relieved of desire, suffering, and their sense of self (Conze 1953; Crosby 2014).

Aversive Responses

The spectacle of suffering in the pessimistic narrative tends to entail an improper distance between users and sufferers that brings about aversive responses. In Chapter 1, section 1.2.1, I discussed the disengagement with emotional appeals centred on audiences' denial of involvement, with the appeals either becoming subject to 'selective oblivion' (Cohen 2001: 188) or involving users actively 'looking away' (Seu 2003: 190) or maintaining 'denial in the face of human suffering' (Silverstone 2002a: 776). The aversive responses discussed in this section concern indifference or negative emotional responses to sufferers occurring predominantly as a result of engagement with the spectacle of vulnerability. Susan Sontag (2004: 95, 97) addresses the numbness and 'deadening of feeling' that occurs when audiences are overwhelmed by images of suffering, noting that, '[f]looded with images of the sort that once used to shock and arouse indignation, we are losing our capacity to react. Compassion, stretched to its limits, is going numb.' Constant exposure to spectacles of suffering, from this perspective, desensitises viewers and numbs their responses to the distress they witness.

Drawing on George Simmel's (1950, 2004) analysis of city life and money, Keith Tester discusses a similar indifference to Sontag's deadening of feeling, which he calls a 'blasé attitude'. The blasé attitude refers to the way individuals have lost 'the feeling for value differences' and how everything is experienced in 'an equally dull and grey hue' (Simmel 2004: 257). In relation to distant suffering, audiences with a blasé attitude feel indifferent to television pictures of horror, as the suffering is 'out there to be observed from afar' at a safe distance; it becomes merely an 'abstraction' rather than a reality (Tester 1998: 90). The blasé attitude is arguably attributed to the abundance of and easy access to representations of suffering, as Simmel (2004: 258) observes: '[T]he more the acquisition is carried out in a

mechanical and indifferent way, the more the object appears to be colourless and without interest.'

Compassion fatigue is another aversive response caused by being inundated with spectacles of suffering. Tester (2001: 13) defines compassion fatigue as the feeling that occurs when individuals become 'so used to the spectacle of dreadful events, misery or suffering' that they stop caring and noticing. They are left exhausted to the point that they feel that nothing can be done to help. In this respect, I argue that compassion fatigue is different from numbness of feeling in the way that it incorporates a sense of powerlessness and a feeling that one does not have the ability to alleviate suffering, in addition to the experience of desensitisation. Distance, which can be either geographic or moral, can aggravate this sense of fatigue (Hanusch 2007). Cohen (2001) suggests that what actually causes compassion fatigue may not be the abundance of images of suffering but the psychological distance that makes viewers care less about faraway sufferers. When audiences feel connected and truly care, their compassion is less likely to lose its passion.

While emotional numbness, a blasé attitude, and compassion fatigue are responses that take the form of indifference, feeling disgusted by the 'abject person' or the sufferer is the negative impression that users can have when encountering a representation of vulnerability. This feeling of disgust can be explained by the theory of abjection (Kristeva 1982; Bataille 1999; Tyler 2013). The theory discusses processes of inclusion and exclusion that create abject subjects who are seen as moral outcasts, or what Imogen Tyler (2013: 20) calls 'waste populations', and considered to be objects of disgust. My rationale for employing the concept of abjection is related to my sense that the feeling of disgust involved in the abjection process is embodied in the affective responses users have towards representations of suffering

in Bunluerit's charity appeals. This sense of disgust is often expressed along the lines of social class and is similar to the repulsion that some upper- and middle-class individuals feel towards people of a lower class in the UK, who are deemed by some to be abject subjects and can be called', with disgust and contempt, 'chavs[17]' (Lawler 2005; Skeggs 2005; Tyler 2008). While feelings of disgust towards people of a lower class in the UK do not necessarily involve representations of suffering, feelings of repulsion towards people at the lower end of Thai society are sometimes directed at people in need who are asking for help through charitable appeals. '*Ngoa, joan, jeb*' (stupid, poor, and sickly) is a derogatory phrase used to describe people in this situation (Kongkirati 2014). The term '*jeb*' (sickly) has a negative connotation of helplessness and laziness, as sufferers are viewed as using poor health as an excuse for not working to feed themselves and to keep asking for help and donations from others.

In addition to feeling of disgust, the concept of liminality in the theory of abjection provides an interesting angle when examining the representation of proximal suffering. The abject subject is in a liminal zone where they threaten the order of the state from within but cannot be fully expelled (Kristeva 1982; Tyler 2013). Instead, the abject subjects, or 'waste populations', are 'included through their exclusion' (Tyler 2013: 20). Abjection is argued to be the 'imperative force of sovereignty' that through exclusion constitutes 'a part of the population as moral outcasts' (Bataille 1999; Tyler 2013: 19). In the Thai context, lower-class sufferers can be compared to the waste populations that are included through exclusion in the sovereignty of the state. Considered unproductive, demanding, useless, and a burden, such subjects are marginalised and treated with disgust in a demeaning manner; they are excluded

[17] Many people would find this term offensive/derogatory, including both people who would say they are working class and those from other classes (Jones 2016).

from being dignified Thai citizens. However, it is impossible to totally expel them from being Thai, and hence they are left to be 'the dregs of people, populace and gutter' (Bataille 1999: 9).

This section has discussed a range of affective responses, though not an exhaustive one, that can be induced by representations of suffering in Bunluerit's charitable appeals. I have shown how a range of engaging affective responses can arise from seeing representations of suffering and can drive the philanthropic actions of paying and speaking; meanwhile, affective aversion discourages people from getting involved with the digital appeals. I have argued that the Thai cultural norms and Buddhist values shape users' reactions and inform their affective responses. The discussion of affective responses in this section provides a context for and a deeper understanding of the way in which Thai users perceive and emotionally react to the sight of suffering.

Conclusions

Silverstone (2007: 109), a leading scholar in media and communication studies, contends that 'mediation is both technological and social'. As this chapter has shown, the mediation of suffering concerns not only how digital technologies shape users' responses and relationships both within the media environment and between users and sufferers. It also entails the practices of media content producers and users that are 'embedded within specific social, cultural, historical, and economic contexts' (Kyriakidou 2009: 486). This chapter has sought to unpack these practices of producing and prosuming the mediation of suffering, and affective states brought about by representations of vulnerability, as embedded in Thai Buddhist cultural norms and values. It has offered a contextualised insight, for example, into the way Buddhism informs the attitude of Thai people towards suffering and how it is

represented, how emotions rooted in Buddhist virtues like *songsarn* shape affective responses to representations, and how the class-related stigmas *ngoa, joan,* and *jeb* influence the perception of sufferers. All these insights are key to understanding how representations of suffering work in Bunluerit's charity appeals, which are culturally grounded and contextually driven.

Although the main aim of the mediation of suffering in appeals for giving is to foster affective proximity between media users and those being represented in order to cultivate moral sentiments and obligations towards sufferers, as I have discussed previously, it has not always been successful in this respect. Rather, such forms of mediation bring about dichotomous responses that may increase or diminish the emotional distance between them. Indeed, the discussions in this chapter are based on dichotomous views on how suffering is represented, the way technologies influence users and their relationships with other bodies (human and non-human), and how users respond to the mediation. These contrasting views point to the dynamic nature of mediation that is contingent on the media use and practices of producers and prosumers as well as on social, cultural, and contextual factors informing these usages and practices. In the next chapter, I will explore another two important elements that are integral to understanding Bunluerit's online charitable appeals, which are practices of gift-giving and the operation of celebrity philanthropy.

Chapter 3

Thai Charitable Giving and Celebrity Philanthropy Within Patron–Client Relations

This chapter will move away from theoretically led discussions to more context-focused considerations of social inequalities, giving behaviours, and celebrity philanthropy in Thailand. The chapter addresses several separate topics in an attempt to provide a critical review of the primary causes of social suffering in this setting, the means of alleviating it through gift-giving, and the role of celebrities like Bunluerit in mobilising the resources to do so, and the common thread that weaves all these topics together is the Thai context. Although much of the discussion revolves around Thai socio-cultural norms, values, and religious beliefs, theories of 'the gift' and celebrity philanthropy will also be critically engaged with, especially by examining how these theories are played out in Thailand and how affect figures in our understanding of these contextualised theories.

The chapter begins with background information about poverty and inequalities in Thailand to help address why Bunluerit's charitable endeavour is widely welcomed and appreciated by the Thai public. It will also discuss class stratification in the Thai context, which, I argue, is deeply embedded in historical, political, and socio-cultural practices. The second section discusses how the Thai concept of giving (*dāna*) links to the concepts of *karma* (good/bad consequences of one's action) and merit-making (doing good deeds in the hope of

good consequences). I compare *dāna* with Christian understandings of charity to outline the distinctive characteristics of Thai giving and argue that *dāna* is premised on particular forms of reciprocity, which I unpack, drawing on Marcel Mauss's (2002) theory of 'the gift'. The reciprocal relations underlying *dāna* are likened to the patron–client relationship, which I argue is embedded in Thai society and Buddhist ideologies of power and expressed via everyday cultural and affective norms and expectations. The last section draws on the concept of celebrity philanthropy to understand how Bunluerit's fame – and his status as a Thai hero – benefits his fundraising endeavours through the mobilisation of particular affective practices and relations of power linked to both Buddhist values and Thai masculinist notions of authority. These three sections offer an insight into the Thai Buddhist culture and values that would enable the parochialisation of Euro–North American-centric theories of affect, gift-giving, and celebrity philanthropy in order to develop a contextualised understanding of the networked affect circulating in Thai celebrity-endorsed charity appeals

3.1 Inequalities in Thailand: A Source of Suffering

As noted in the Introduction, although Thailand is considered to be an upper-middle-income country, with an average income per capita of 4,957.50 GBP[18] (The World Bank 2011; The World Bank 2019), it nonetheless faces considerable social problems of poverty and inequality. Over the last 30 years, Thailand's poverty rate has significantly declined, from 65.2 per cent in 1988 to 9.85 per cent in 2018 (World Bank Group 2020). However, Thailand is the only South East Asian country to face multiple increases in poverty from 2000 onwards; the

[18] An upper-middle-income country has average incomes per capita of between 3,072 GBP and 9,521.25 GBP (exchange rate at 0.75 GBP per 1 USD).

poverty rate increased from 7.2 per cent in 2015 to 9.8 per cent in 2018, and from 6.2 per cent in 2019 to 6.84 per cent in 2020, which reflects how vulnerable Thai households are to a range of shocks and poor economic conditions (World Bank Group 2020; Prachachat 2021). According to the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (Prachachat 2021), in 2020, the number of people living in poverty with an income of less than 5.5 USD a day was 4.8 million, and around 1.4 million Thai households or 5.51 per cent of the total households were considered to be below the poverty line. Moreover, Thailand is among the world's top ten countries with the highest wealth inequality, which can be defined as an uneven distribution of valuable possessions including cash, stocks, or property (Sanguanprasit 2019; Jitsuchon 2020). The top 10 per cent owns around 80 per cent of the total wealth of the country (Hewison 2019). The top decile of all land holders (both individuals and juristic entities) owns more than three-fifths of all land in the country and the bottom 10 per cent has only 0.07 per cent (Laovakul 2016). These economic inequalities result in further disparities of power, social position, and access to tangible and intangible resources including education, justice, healthcare and other public goods (Phongpaichit and Baker 2016).

State policies are argued to play a significant part in causing or perpetuating inequalities (Hewison 2014; Jitsuchon 2015; Sanguanprasit 2019). Kevin Hewison (2014) suggests that there are at least three ways in which socio-economic policies contribute to inequalities. First, the investments in infrastructures, social welfare, and education are unevenly distributed and highly concentrated in the urban areas. In 2016, the per capita budget for people living in Bangkok amounted to 54 per cent of the country's total budget (Sanguanprasit 2019). This uneven distribution of the budget resulted in unequal income opportunities as people living in the north-eastern region had nine times less income than those in Bangkok (*Ibid*.). Second, the unjust taxation policies further widen the economic inequalities. There are several gaps in the

taxation laws which allow people with a high income from sources other than salaries to avoid paying tax; for example, income from foreign countries does not need to be reported or taxed if it was brought into Thailand in a different year from that in which the income was generated (Phongpaichit et al. 2017). Tax deduction criteria allow rich people to obtain a tax refund from their investments, such as profit earned from stock exchanges or the purchase of long-term equity funds (*Ibid*.). Finally, the state and banks are less likely to provide credit for small enterprises, farmers, and the informal sectors. At the same time, big businesses can influence the state's policies, especially those that promote a low wage/high profit economy and prevent smaller businesses from entering the market. At times in this thesis, I will use the terms 'status quo' to refer to these inequalities in power, wealth, and access to resources where privileged people take advantage of the pro-rich policies to maintain their higher social status.

The poverty and inequalities in Thailand cause households at the bottom of socio-economic hierarchy to suffer from financial hardship, especially when families have dependent members such as young children, elderly people, or people with disabilities or chronic diseases. Although the government provides social welfare for various groups of vulnerable people, these monthly allowances cannot cover individual basic subsistence needs[19]. Thailand spends only 3.7 per cent of its GDP on social protection, lagging behind Vietnam and China, which spend 6.3 per cent on welfare (Ariyapruchya et al. 2020). Moreover, unlike other upper-middle-income countries like Malaysia or Mexico, the country does not have a generalised safety net programme providing assistance to help improve the lives of poor people in the form of, for example, cash transfers, fee waivers, or school meals programmes (*Ibid*.). As a result,

[19] The most allowances an individual can claim per month total less than 2,100 baht (≈49 GBP) (such an individual must be over 90 years of age (1,000 baht), have disabilities (800 baht), and have an annual income of less than 30,000 baht (≈300 GBP)). This amount is still lower than the average monthly expenses of the population with the lowest income, at 2,966 baht (≈69 GBP) (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council 2018).

households in poverty with vulnerable dependents find it even harder to feed and take care of their families. Bunluerit's charitable endeavour is an attempt to tackle this lack of social support by providing financial relief to these vulnerable households.

The poverty, gross socio-economic inequalities, and inadequate welfare support highlight the class division in Thai society. According to Akin Rabibhadana (1996 cited in Thongsawang, Rehbein and Chantavanich 2020), the concept of class first evidentially emerged in Thailand in the late 1700s, when people were divided into four groups based on their rank in the legally authorised hierarchy called *sakdina* (dignity marks). These groups consisted of *chao* (lords) and *khunnang* (nobles), which were considered to be the ruling class, *phrai* (commoners), and *that* (slave), regarded as the subordinates. The *sakdina* system not only defined the status of people in this pre-capitalist period, but also informed their roles and interactions towards each other as the subordinates were supposed to register with the ruling class and spend six months a year serving them, while *chao* and *khunnang* had to look after the welfare of the subordinates in their care. Sirima Thongsawang, Boike Rehbein, and Supang Chantavanich (2020) argue that this stratified *sakdina* structure continues to form the basis of social classes in present-day Thai capitalist society, which they categorise into five classes: the marginalised, the labouring class, the lower-middle class, the upper-middle class, and the upper class.

I argue that in addition to these class cleavages, the social stratification system in Thailand in later years also derived its core values and beliefs from the patron–client relationship that informs the affective bonds and interactions between the upper ruling and the lower subordinate classes, as well as from the Buddhist ideology of power that legitimises the status of the dominant groups in the *sakdina* structure. The patron–client relations and

Buddhist notion of power, I want to suggest, work through gift-giving, which in the Thai context masks the dominating power of the upper class as an act of morality and compassion. In this sense, the social division of class in Thailand not only concerns socio-economic inequalities but is also intricately linked to the political and historical backgrounds, religious beliefs, and cultural values that contribute to the maintenance and strengthening of these inequalities and class hierarchies. In the next section, I will explore gift-giving in relation to Buddhist beliefs and the patron–client culture that I have argued influence the affective relations and legitimacy of class cleavages in the Thai context.

3.2 Thai Charitable Giving of *Dāna* and Patron–Client Relationships

Individual giving is the most pervasive form of charity in Thailand (Anheier and Winder 2007; Anand and Hayling 2014; Phaholyothin 2017). The practice is grounded in deep-seated Theravada Buddhist beliefs, which have been central to Thai culture since the religion planted its roots in Thailand more than 2,300 years ago (Kusalāsai 1965). Today, Buddhism is considered to be a de facto state religion, with almost 95 per cent of Thai people identifying as Buddhist and the king traditionally adopting Buddhism (McCargo 2004; National Statistical Office 2014). Giving is profoundly influenced by the Buddhist beliefs of *dāna* (selfless giving), *karma*, and merit-making (Chaisinthop 2014; Phaholyothin 2017). This is reflected in the way Thai people use the term '*tham boon'* (or merit-making) interchangeably with 'giving' (Bowie 1998; Prayukvong and Olsen 2009; Kanchanachitra 2014).

According to Buddhist teaching, *karma* is an intentional action of body, speech, and mind (Crosby 2014; Phaholyothin 2017), and every action has a consequence; if individuals perform good deeds, they will be rewarded with good consequences (merit), and bad deeds

lead to negative consequences (demerit). This logic of cause and effect is known as the law of *karma*. To enjoy the benefits of good *karma*, which can range from warding off misfortune and having good luck to being born with a silver spoon in one's mouth in the next life, Buddhists mostly seek to make merit by carrying out various meritorious actions. *Dāna* is considered to be one of the meritorious acts described in Buddhists' list of ten wholesome actions (*dasa kusala karma*) (Crosby 2014). For the most part, *dāna* is a gift, which usually comprises basic necessities including food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, offered to monks. *Dāna* also refers to a gift given to people in need; however, this charitable giving is of less significance in terms of merit-making. In light of these views, some Thai people distinguish between giving to monks (*tham boon*) and giving to people in need (*tham dāna*) and accept both religious and non-religious giving as their Buddhist duty (Domingo 2010; Phaholyothin 2017).

Dāna, in many ways, is similar to Christian charity. By pointing out these similarities next, I will further unpack the defining characteristics of Thai charitable giving. I argue that both faith-based forms of giving share three main characteristics: they are affectual, instrumental, and provisional. Regarding the first aspect, both Christian and Buddhist charitable giving are, it has been argued, emotionally based as they are generally spontaneous and induced by affective stimulation. The origin of charity in Europe derived from religion through the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which the principle of agape encouraged charitable giving in the form of alms (Sznaider 1998; Rice 2011). Agape is 'a love bestowed on all without regard to the beloved's merit or to any expectation of reciprocity' (Miller 2006: 52). It is 'spontaneous, unconditional and unmotivated' and 'indifferent to the value' of beneficiaries (Sznaider 1998: 122). Agape drives compassion for suffering and active responses to those in need. We see a similar affective element of spontaneity and impulsiveness in Buddhist *dāna*. *Dāna* is described as impulsive ad hoc giving where the plight of the beneficiary supposedly drives the charitable

gift (Bornstein 2009). As discussed in the previous chapter, *dāna* tends to be based on the feeling of *songsarn* that incorporates the desire to alleviate the immediate suffering (*karuna*).

The second dimension, instrumentality, refers to the way in which both Christian almsgiving and *dāna* are used as a means to achieve religious goals. The aim of Christian charity, according to Ernst Troeltsch (1931: 134) – an established Protestant theologian – was 'not the healing of social wrongs, nor the endeavour to remove poverty' but the revelation and awakening of the spirit of agape. In Buddhism, *dāna* is a religious principle that applies to both worldly and other-worldly pursuits (Guruge and Bond 1998; Chaisinthop 2014). On the one hand, *dāna* is a way of making merit to achieve a good life through *karmic* consequences while participating in worldly pursuits. On the other hand, the aim of Buddhism is to renounce worldly pleasure to reach nirvana, and *dāna* is an act that allows an individual to free themselves from the desire or *kilesa*[20] that prevents them from attaining nirvana (Wannapok 1999; Chaisinthop 2014). In both Christian and Buddhist charity, gift-giving is arguably a form of religious practice with the aim of benefiting donors rather than recipients.

The provisional aspect of both forms of religious gift-giving is, in part, a result of their instrumental role. As givers are motivated by the possibility of their own religious benefits, the long-term outcome of gift-giving on beneficiaries is not necessarily their primary concern, thus leaving the help they provide provisional and unable to resolve long-term issues. The Christian doctrine urges people to feed the hungry, alleviate the pain of sufferers, and treat strangers with kindness, yet it does not entail political or moral principles nor defend sufferers' right to

[20] Buddhists believe that all beings are trapped in samsara, an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, because their minds are tainted with *kilesas* (stains) that are created by engagement with sensual pleasure, ignorance, desire, and false views (Crosby 2014). To escape samsara or to reach nirvana, a person needs to purify his or her mind from these *kilesas* by meditation and detachment from worldly matters (Crosby 2014; Chaisinthop 2014).

a standard of living that includes adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services (Sznaider 1998). The same is true of Buddhist charity. *Dāna* to people in need aims at alleviating beneficiaries' immediate suffering without addressing the gift's long-term effect (Bornstein 2009). Scholars thus argue that *danā*, which is prevalent in Thai giving, tends to be short-sighted charity – it purportedly provides an immediate reprieve but does not necessarily eliminate the root cause of problems (Anheier and Winder 2007; Anand and Hayling 2014; Phaholyothin 2017). The notion of *brahmavihāra* (mentioned in the previous chapter) and the law of *karma*, I argue, also encourage short-sighted charity, as a desire to alleviate the suffering of others (*karunā*) should be kept in check to maintain calmness (*upekkhā*) when learning about the (whether satisfying or unsatisfying) result of gift-giving. People with *upekkhā* are not overly concerned about the outcome of their help because in the long run, the sufferers presumably need to face their difficulties, directed by individual *karma*, by themselves.

These characteristics of religious giving in both Buddhism and Christianity are often criticised for their ineffectiveness in dealing with structural issues, especially when compared with philanthropic effort. Here, I think it is pertinent to unpack the distinction between the notions of charity and philanthropy in order to highlight the charitable nature of Bunluerit's fan page. The distinction between religious charity and 'scientific philanthropy' began to be recognised in the late nineteenth century, when charity in academic literature was often associated with the alleviation of the immediate suffering of people in need and philanthropy was considered to be getting at the root of social ills and emphasised the long-term effect of help (Sulek 2010; Daly 2012). Some scholars distinguish these two notions by arguing that charity is more likely to involve compassionate, person-to-person donations whereas philanthropy implies rational and institutionalised giving (Gross 2002). Gift-giving on

Bunluerit's fan page, according to the above distinction, is charity. Although the term 'philanthropy' is sometimes used in relation to the activities on the fan site, for example regarding specific theoretical concepts like celebrity philanthropy, my analysis of the fan page focuses more on emotionally induced individual giving that aims to alleviate immediate suffering. The charitable giving on the fan page has the three characteristics of *dāna* mentioned above: it is affectual in the way that it uses negative imagery to induce spontaneous and impulsive giving, instrumental, as much of the giving is made with religious intention and Bunluerit sometimes stresses religious motives in his appeals, and provisional in its aim of relieving current suffering rather than tackling root causes.

I see charitable giving on Bunluerit's fan page as reciprocal, because donors receive something back from their giving in the form of immaterial benefit whether from beneficiaries or in relation to religious feeling. In this context, I find Mauss's (2002) theory of reciprocity useful for understanding digital gift-giving on the fan page and the relationships that the gift establishes between Bunluerit/donors and the recipients. Defined as goods or services given to another person without a guarantee of return, gift-giving, which in Mauss's research might include anything from valuable objects to labour services, is considered to be a basic mode of social interaction that provides the foundation for solidarity and social order in a society (Caillé 2000; Mauss 2002; Adloff 2010). Mauss's gift theory is often framed as conceptualising a reciprocity-based approach to gifting due to its emphasis on the shared obligation to reciprocally gift (Adloff 2006; Barman 2017). Giving a gift initiates a cycle of giving, taking, and giving back simultaneously, thus maintaining relationships between exchange partners and establishing solidarity among them. This cycle is enabled by the inalienability of the gift. That is, the gift has a power that is inalienable from the giver and this power impels gift recipients to give back and perpetuates the cycle of reciprocal exchange (Godelier 1999). In this way, the

gift creates a debt that binds the giver and recipient together over time, because when the recipient responds to the gift with a counter-gift, it does not cancel the debt. The presentation of a gift will prompt further gift-giving in the future.

While Mauss's theory is mainly applied to gift-giving in face-to-face environments, charitable giving on Bunluerit's fan page takes place on digital platforms. The shift of the context in which a gift is made entails some differences that need to be taken into account when conducting the analysis. First, the transactions made on the fan page involves a form of charity that includes many donors and one beneficiary in one appeal. These donors' identities cannot be known or verified, whereas the information about the beneficiary is publicised widely. By contrast, a gift exchange in the anthropological tradition occurs between tribes or their members, and tends to be made between two parties whose identities are known to each other. Additionally, the exchange is more likely to take place between individuals or groups of equal prominence. Second, donations on the fan page are considered to be mediated gifts. Givers and recipients may never meet and the exchange tends to be mediated by the affordances of the digital interfaces involved – suffering is made visible via social media platforms and money is given through digital banking. Of course, gift-giving in traditional societies occurred face to face. The encounter enables the cycle of giving and the affective ties that obligate reciprocation to operate when both parties in the gift relationship know towards whom they have the obligation. Despite these differences, gifting on Bunluerit's fan page is similar to that conceptualised by anthropologists in the sense that it remains person-to-person giving without the bureaucratic intermediary[21]. It might be said that gift-giving on the page is

[21] Bunluerit asks users to donate money directly to a beneficiary's account; he is not involved in the donation process.

unmediated by bureaucratic processes but is intermediated by digital technologies that make the person-to-person giving at a distance possible.

Aside from the environments where the reciprocity takes place, the socio-cultural background in which gift-giving is embedded is another important element shaping giving behaviour and informing the way we understand charitable giving on Bunluerit's fan page. I see Mauss's account of reciprocity at work in Thai charitable giving in two key respects. First, according to Buddhist beliefs, donors receive merit in return for their gift. Although the merit donors attain is not a counter-gift from recipients that can perpetuate the cycle of exchange between both parties, it can at least prompt further gift-giving to other recipients and create an optimistic feeling of solidarity within the community of gift-giving, for example, the ideal of '*khon Thai jaidee*' (Thai people are generous) mentioned in the Introduction chapter. The second respect concerns the way that a gift entails indebtedness that binds both givers and recipients and maintains their relationship, which, I argue, resonates with the concept of the patron–client relations discussed in the previous section as the legacy of the *sakdina* structure that helps maintain the Thai class culture. The patron–client relation describes the relationship between a patron, who occupies a superior position, and a subservient client (Terwiel 1984). In this relationship, the patron is supposed to give the client resources which can be material, such as cash or food, or non-material, including employment, access to public services such as education, physical protection, and bureaucratic or legal intervention (Semenova 2018). In return, the client offers respect, gifts, and services to ensure continued favour and support from the patron (Selby 2012).

In the gift relationship on Bunluerit's fan page, donors, including Bunluerit and users, are considered to be patrons and beneficiaries are clients who cannot reciprocate with a gift

of the same value and therefore become indebted to givers (Godelier 1999). The relationship between patrons and clients is ideologically supported by the Thai cultural norms of affective ties of *khun* and *dej* (Mulder 1979; 2000). While *khun*, or *bunkhun*, is benevolence that creates the feeling of indebtedness, *dej*, or *decha*, refers to punitive and coercive authority that induces fear in clients. A patron usually applies both *khun* and *dej* to get clients to comply with their wishes. By themselves, *khun* and *dej* cannot compel clients to follow patrons' orders. The Buddhist ideology of *katanyu* and power play an important role in bolstering the working of both affective ties. *Katanyu* is the moral of gratitude, that is, feeling indebted towards the person who has helped you or been good to you and having the urge to repay this debt (Komin 1990; Mulder 2000). Holding this Buddhist value, beneficiaries of charitable giving tend to feel the *khun* of Bunluerit and donors, and attempt to make a counter-gift in a form that is affordable for them, for example showing respect and a subservient attitude towards patrons.

While *katanyu* promotes the use of *khun*, the Buddhist concept of power supports the working of *dej*. There are three kinds of power in the Thai context: *amnaat* (coercion), *barami* (charisma), and *saksit* (supernatural power)[22] (Jackson 2010). *Amnaat* refers to coercive power established by force or derived from status. *Barami* is the charismatic power found in individuals who are believed to have accumulated a significant amount of good merit in their previous life so in this life they have the power to influence other people. *Saksit* is often associated with supernatural forces. While those who have *amnaat* may be viewed as possessing *barami* as they have vast influence and power over many people, they are less likely

[22] One might argue that *amnaat* and *saksit* do not appear in the original Buddhist teaching. However, the way that Thai people use *karmic* consequences to explain the source of power encourages some scholars of Thai culture to consider them as Buddhist concepts. After all, Buddhism in Thailand incorporates several other creeds and ideologies such as animism and spirit cults (Siani 2020), and has been intricately woven into Thai culture to the point that it is hard to distinguish what the original Buddhist principles are and what has been added or changed so far.

to be considered to have *saksit* unless the individuals are purely virtuous (*Ibid*.). The Buddhist concept of power can be used to explain the religious justification of hierarchical class structures and why the ruling class, in the hierarchy of *sakdina*, and the upper class, in Thai capitalist social stratification, deserve their wealth, prestige, and status. In the case of Bunluerit, the notion is used to justify his status of patron. As a celebrity philanthropist, he has *amnaat* to decide who are going to be his beneficiaries and how much money he will give to them. His long-term engagement with charitable works has made people believe that he has *barami* that enables him to successfully solicit money from many donors. Some people even see him as *saksit* since he is seen as virtuous and carries out lots of good deeds.

Bunluerit's power and his *khun* and *dej* are instrumental in building people's trust in him. Specifically, in the Thai patron–client culture, where people have interpersonal trust (trust in a person based on an emotional bond) more than institutional or system trust (trust in the functioning of bureaucratic processes, especially in the effectiveness of their sanctioning and safeguarding mechanisms) (Luhmann 1979; Lewis and Weigert 1985), his power, which is based on Buddhist ideology, helps legitimise his status as a philanthropist and also makes him appear more trustworthy, to some donors, than bureaucratic charitable organisations. Thongchai Winichakul (2015), a Thai scholar who is an expert on the cultural and intellectual history of Thailand, contends that Thai people are more likely to rely on person-based relationships than impersonal social institutions including law, regulations, standards, and professionalism. This is so partly because historically, personal relations took priority over other institutions. For example, law was applied according to a person's *sakdina*; the impersonal system was not applied equally to everybody but was selectively enforced depending on a person's rank in the social hierarchy. A patron–client system that flourishes in an environment where formal institutions are weak and inefficient in delivering goods and

services also underlines the importance of interpersonal trust (Wolf and Silverman 2001). Clients unable to access necessary resources seek support from patrons through relations of personal dependence that eventually supersede the operation of impersonal institutional services. These clients therefore have more trust in individuals and personal ties, which are considered to be successful means for obtaining needed services and resources.

The discussion of Thai giving behaviour and its orientation towards reciprocity in this section provides the background and cultural context that are needed to understand the workings of digital *dāna* on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page as well as charitable relationships between donors (including Bunluerit and page followers) and beneficiaries. I described how trust tends to be placed in individuals rather than organisations in Thailand, which is helpful for understanding the considerable success of Bunluerit's fundraising endeavours while prompting further consideration of how, and with what critical implications, Bunluerit makes use of this interpersonal trust in his charitable work. The next section examines the concepts of celebrity philanthropy and 'the hero' in the Thai context to lay the groundwork for further analysis of Bunluerit's status as a celebrity hero and how this status contributes to the affective force of his charitable endeavours.

3.3 The Affective Politics of Online Celebrity Philanthropy in Thailand

Bunluerit's celebrity status has been instrumental to his fundraising efforts as his fame draws people's attention to his various charitable causes. According to Koen Panis (2012: 14), celebrity philanthropists are 'individuals who enjoy public recognition, known primarily from areas other than that of their societal engagement, using their fame to advocate or lobby, create awareness of, and/or help raise funds for a social cause or non-profit organisation'.

Scholars associate the rise of celebrity philanthropy with at least two main sets of factors (Littler 2008; Jeffreys and Allatson 2015): first, politico-economic factors include the decrease in welfare support in countries or in foreign aid, the increasing adoption of neoliberal policies that reduce the role of the state in providing a social safety net and leave this responsibility to individuals or the voluntary sector, the increase in socio-economic inequalities, and the expansion of the power of corporations and marketing-led strategies in relation to the public sector. Second, techno-social factors involve technological changes underpinning the globalisation of information technology, the growing newsworthiness of celebrity affairs, and the competition for funding among charitable organisations that rely on publicity and media interest.

In relation to techno-social factors, the proliferation of social media is key to enabling celebrities to become more involved in various forms of social engagement as these platforms allow them to mobilise the resources they need for charitable acts and to publicise their good deeds, which will in turn benefit their image in the public eye. Crucially, social media provides a key platform for celebrities to enhance their 'affective power' (Marshall 1997) or celebrities' influence over fans, which is mainly derived from a personal connection that fans feel towards them. This personal relationship is developed through the 'perception of proximity' that is facilitated by the disintermediation of digital technologies (For the meaning of disintermediation see Chapter 2 section 2.1.2). The terms 'perception of proximity' (Beer 2008), 'parasocial relationship' (Horton and Wohl 1956; Giles 2002), and 'intimacy at a distance' (Thompson 1995; Chouliaraki 2006) are used to indicate a mediated illusion of intimacy that fans feel towards public personalities. As social media allows interaction between celebrities and other users, the latter assume that the person directly communicating with them under their idol's username is actually the person they admire, and this non-reciprocal intimacy is

accentuated (Marwick and boyd 2011b). The perception of proximity can help celebrities to mobilise resources for philanthropic purposes as it is easier to ask for donations from fans who feel that they are friends or in the close social circle of the famous individual. This is supported by Adam Corson-Finnerty's and Laura Blanchard's (1998) concept of friend-raising, where soliciting donation money from networks of friends made online benefits charitable organisations more than asking for donations from strangers.

Direct communication with celebrities through social media increases a sense of closeness as well as the perceived authenticity of the stars (Bulck 2018). Authenticity is defined as the open expression of private feelings and a hidden inner life filled with passions and anguish (Trilling 1972; Sennett 1986). Fans expect that in the so-called unmediated communication on social media platforms, celebrities will express themselves 'directly and authentically' and show their 'real' self (Marwick and boyd 2011a; Bulck 2018). Scholars argue that celebrities' persona consists of three main aspects: the professional aspect, which concerns engaging with their entertainment work, the official private life, deliberately presented to the world, and the real private life, which the paparazzi attempt to reveal (Holmes 2005; Bulck 2018). This last aspect of celebrities' persona is what fans expect to see in the star's social media account, even though, in practice, what is conveyed there is a cultivated authenticity that has been through a careful process of design, selection, and modification.

Some strategies that aim for authenticity require celebrities to reveal their seemingly 'genuine' self, especially their ordinary, vulnerable side, so that their audiences can identify with them. One such strategy is the 'celebrity confessional', which consists of revelatory acts that combine reflexivity about 'the business of being a celebrity, emotional interiority and self-criticism' (Redmond 2008: 110). Fans are invited to take part in these revelatory acts and share

celebrities' feelings. In philanthropy, the celebrity confessional is often employed to help fans to understand the difficult situations sufferers are facing and, more importantly, to feel empathetically or compassionately towards them (Goodman and Barnes 2011). Celebrities serve as proxies, or 'para-selves', that link fans' feelings and understanding of sufferers (*Ibid*.). The celebrity confessional not only benefits the mobilisation of resources for philanthropic purposes but also enhances the image of celebrities themselves by confirming their status as 'truthful, emotive, experiential beings' in whom fans can invest (Redmond 2008: 110).

I argue that networked affect plays an important role in these processes of enhancing celebrities' affective power on social media platforms as it widens and deepens the imagined personal relationship between the famous people and their followers. Multiplicity expands the perception of proximity, allowing more fans to connect and be close to their admired celebrities. Accessibility and virtual collectivity intensify the feeling of intimacy with the stars through social media. Specifically, by developing the stars' authenticity and performing a celebrity confessional, accessibility and virtual collectivity encourage and enhance the effects of revealing the star's real self. The two elements work through the perception of proximity to lead fans to believe that they are actually seeing celebrities expressing their private feelings and true inner lives based on the intimacy at a distance they feel they have with the famous people and the (seemingly) direct channel of communication between them on social media. Finally, indexicality creates a constructed reality of virtual friendship with famous people that fans believe they have.

The dominant Western notions of celebrity philanthropy, as well as the Western-originated concept of philanthropy, are largely unfamiliar to Thai people (Phaholyothin 2017). When translated into the Thai context, celebrity philanthropists can be understood as famous

people who do good deeds (*tham dee*) or choose to perform meritorious acts (*jai boon*) by donating, fundraising, campaigning, or volunteering. Unlike their counterparts in the West, Thai celebrities who tend to be recognised as *tham dee* or *jai boon* are those who carry out charitable activities rather than engaging in activism such as campaigning or creating awareness of a social cause. I argue that this is partly because Thai people tend to appreciate and be more familiar with *dāna*, where the immediate suffering of beneficiaries is relieved, than with philanthropic activities, where their positive effects cannot be seen in a short period of time. My use of the term 'celebrity philanthropist' therefore predominantly refers to Thai celebrities working for the public good by carrying out charitable activities, which reflects the way most Thai people understand celebrities' good deeds.

Although Thailand has many celebrity philanthropists, only a few are recognised as a national hero and Bunluerit is one of them. In the 2019 flood in Ubon Ratchathani, Bunluerit fundraised more than 10 million GBP[23] to help the victims (Khaosod Online 2019). Because of this charitable effort, he has been elevated to hero status. Heroes are broadly defined as those who help people in need or protect societal ideals; they proceed despite recognising the considerable risk and cost, and do not expect an external reward for their deeds (Franco, Blau and Zimbardo 2011). The concept 'hero' tends to share characteristics with other related terms, such as 'celebrity', 'leader', 'champion', and 'martyr' (Kinsella, Ritchie and Igou 2015; Keczer et al. 2016). I argue that in patriarchal Thai culture, the idea of a hero is intertwined with male authority and it is mainly men who are given hero status. The Buddhist ideology of power contributes to this hegemonic masculine ideal of a hero in which *amnaat*, *barami*, and *saksit* are considered to be predominantly reserved for men. Specifically, women are thought of as

[23] Normally, Bunluerit would ask users of his fan page to donate money directly to a sufferer's bank account, but for the 2019 flood relief fund, he used his account to receive donation money.

hindrances to holiness that can pollute *saksit* since they are viewed as a threat to the celibacy of monks[24] (Mulder 2000; Crosby 2014). Women are therefore less associated with hero status since they cannot assume all of the Buddhism-endorsed power.

The discussion of celebrity philanthropy in this section provides the framework within which to further consider how Bunluerit's celebrity status influences users' responses to his charity appeals and how he manages to use celebrity-related strategies, including a perception of proximity, authenticity, and celebrity confessionals, to maintain his affective power through networked intensities and to benefit his fundraising effort. Celebrity philanthropy when applied to the Thai context incorporates the concept of *dāna*, where celebrities not only carry out charitable work but also make merit (*jai boon*), and the Buddhist ideology of power that informs the patriarchal notion of 'the hero'. These contextualised insights will facilitate analysis of how, and with what implications, Bunluerit exercises masculinist authority in his philanthropic works and charitable relationships.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have shown how Buddhist beliefs are central to our understanding of social inequalities, gift-giving, and celebrity philanthropy in Thailand. While some gift theorists view certain forms of gift-giving, for example blood donation or a gift given to strangers, as an altruistic act that donors have no chance of getting anything in return for (Titmuss 1971; Silber 1998), I have argued that charitable giving on Bunluerit's fan page that is embedded in the Thai Buddhist context has a reciprocal nature that calls for a counter-gift in the form of merit and

[24] In Thai Theravada Buddhism, monks are required to take a vow of celibacy and are not allowed to touch women. Women are banned from entering some religious memorials where relics of Buddha are enshrined because it is feared that their presence will destroy the *saksit* element.

beneficiaries' indebtedness that furthers the patron–client bonds between givers and recipients. In this reciprocal exchange, affect works to establish and maintain these bonds through the relations of *dej* and *khun*. These affective relations also strengthen the class structure as the relations keep individuals at peace with their class positions and the Buddhist concept of power ideologically legitimises and justifies the class-based social inequality. Celebrity philanthropists in the Thai context who deal with gift-giving also need to be justified by the Buddhist ideology of power to gain trust from both donors and beneficiaries. The central stage taken by Buddhist ideologies in the notions of class, gift-giving, and celebrity philanthropy, I want to argue, is enabled by the fact that the religious beliefs construct and inform affective relations among different actors regarding these social phenomena, including relations between people from different classes, givers and recipients, patrons and clients, celebrity philanthropists/donors and beneficiaries.

As highlighted in the Introduction chapter, my focus on the Thai context renders this thesis distinctive, especially in the way that it both extends and interrogates Euro–North American-centric theories of affect, gift-giving, and celebrity philanthropy. Working towards the aim of parochialising Western-centric literatures in these areas, this chapter foregrounds the Thai cultural, religious, and socio-economic circumstances from which I can further develop a contextualised analysis of celebrity-endorsed charity on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page. Moreover, the critical engagement with *dāna* and Buddhist beliefs in this chapter points to the significance of affective relations that are embedded in the patron–client culture which can be used to inform further investigation into charity-related relationships and wider power relations in Thai society. The next chapter will address the methodological aspects of the thesis, including the methods used to carry out the research, reflexive considerations, and ethical concerns.

Chapter 4

Methodology:

Using Digital Ethnography to Study Affect

> So what of research methods? Our argument is that these are performative. By this we mean that they have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover. (Law and Urry 2004: 392-393)

This contention from John Law and John Urry in a bid to call for a change in the methods used for social inquiry provides a pertinent opening to this chapter. Not only does the contention clearly reflect the nature of social science and its methods posited by the epistemological tradition to which this project subscribes, it also resonates with this chapter's interest in demonstrating how realities are constructed in this project itself, what methods are used to do so, and how these research tools shape what they bring into being. The methods discussed in this chapter perform realities related to networked affect in charitable appeals for giving endorsed by the Thai celebrity philanthropist Bhin Bunluerit. The following key research questions are used to guide the study:

1. What modes of affect are involved in Thai online charity appeals centring representations of suffering and the digital responses they generate?

2. How does the celebrity status of the appeal maker in Thailand influence public responses to philanthropic discourses and representations?

3. How does Buddhism-based Thai culture shape online charitable appeals and responses?

4. How does an analysis of networked affect in appeals for giving contribute to our understanding of the relationships between philanthropic individuals and beneficiaries, and the wider power relations embedding them in Thai society?

The chapter discusses how the performative methods employed in this research both examine and construct realities concerning affect in digital charity appeals. The first section will address digital ethnography as the approach employed to collect data and affective material. Outlining the project's key case study, Bhin Bunluerit's Facebook fan page, I discuss the key methods that comprised my digital ethnography, including participant observation, archival research, and semi-structured interviews. The second section will consider my positionality as a researcher, addressing how my social background as a Thai woman facilitates and shapes the empirical analysis, especially in terms of socio-cultural dimensions, and, in turn, how having viewpoints from people unfamiliar with the Thai context can be helpful in finding the right balance between 'insider positioning and stranger perspective in search of insights' (Hine 2015: 85), especially when outsider viewpoints offer a new angle that can be used to interpret a phenomenon that insiders are accustomed to. The third section will outline the analytical techniques employed to interpret my empirical data: thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. The final section will offer an ethical consideration of the project, addressing how research involving digital environments, where the lines between public space and the private sphere may become blurred, raises ethical concerns in relation to data privacy and the use of personal data available online without individuals' consent.

4.1 Methodological Approach: Digital Ethnography

My digital ethnography sought to explore the affective dynamics at play in the digital charitable appeals on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page for a period of six months – from 1 September 2018 to 4 April 2019. Below I detail the key elements of the case study, why digital ethnographic methods were chosen, and how they were carried out. I also discuss some of the epistemological and methodological challenges involved in studying networked affect, which tends to be elusive and ephemeral in nature.

4.1.1 Case study: Bhin Bunluerit's Facebook fan page

With more than 9.3 million followers, Bunluerit has become widely recognised for the charity work he carries out on Facebook (Bunluerit 2021). On his fan page, he solicits help for people facing economic problems in addition to donating his own funds. The majority of his beneficiaries are individuals with disabilities and/or chronic diseases[25]. However, Bunluerit also helps people who have young and/or older dependents. In each post featuring a particular person, he includes their bank account details (or those of their families) so that his followers can make donations directly to those in need. There are two methods that Bunluerit uses to make charitable appeals on his fan page: Facebook posts and the live feed function. With the first method, he simply posts pictures of a sufferer, outlines their needs, and provides their bank account details. This kind of post is sometimes made after he live feeds. Bunluerit uses his mobile phone to live stream his visits to beneficiaries' homes. The live feed shows beneficiaries' living quarters, Bunluerit's conversation with them about their difficulties and

[25] Although Bunluerit's beneficiaries, who receive health services for their disabilities/diseases do not have to pay for their medical charges, they have other related expenses that are not covered by state welfare, including travel expenses to see a doctor and/or the cost of healthcare equipment and supplies, such as wheelchairs and adult diapers.

the help they need from him, and a gift of cash made by Bunluerit to them. Bunluerit often ends his broadcast by making a wider appeal for beneficiaries, asking followers to transfer money to their account or to send words of support using the Facebook comment function. Some page followers donate money directly to Bunluerit so that he can use it to help other people as he wishes.

His charitable appeals can attract over 10,000 likes and 1,000 comments and shares. I selected the fan page as the case study around which to orient my analysis not only because of the significant number of followers Bunluerit has but also because of his fans' active and ongoing engagement with the platform and the descriptively rich data shown in posts and comments (Kozinets 2010). Additionally, I chose the site because its philanthropic activities reflect the typical style of charitable giving in Thailand. As discussed in Chapter 3, *dāna*, or a donation, intended to relieve the immediate suffering of beneficiaries, who are represented as helpless and vulnerable, has been popular among Thai people for a long time. This charitable behaviour has been widely adopted and reinforced in the mass media. Several television programmes showcase this type of charitable practice where the suffering of people in need is broadcast along with pleas for donations (Vongvorakarnvit 2008). It could be said that Bunluerit's fan page reproduces similar dynamics on a digital platform, and this may be why his fan page attracts so many followers.

The kinds of social and sensorial exchanges that take place on the site provide fertile ground for initiating critical reflection on networked affect. As mentioned throughout the previous chapters, affect interlaces interactions and social phenomena on the fan page – from the affect-laden charity appeals that invoke engaging and aversive responses to an impulsive *dāna* that establishes and maintains affective bonds of gratitude and obligation between

Bunluerit and his beneficiaries and fans. Affective intensities are apparent and salient in various elements of the fan page, including the imagery mobilised in charitable appeals, the way in which Bunluerit describes the suffering of his beneficiaries, how social media users articulate their feelings towards Bunluerit and the representations of suffering his page showcases, and affective norms inherent in beneficiaries' behaviour and interaction with Bunluerit. These affective dynamics and interactions become generative sites for interrogating the workings and implications of networked affect in Thai digital appeals for giving.

4.1.2 Digital ethnography approach

Digital ethnography is one of several methodological labels attached to the activity of studying online cultures and communities using an ethnographic approach. The approach has been described by various terms, including 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000), 'netnography' (Kozinets 2010), 'cyberethnography' (Teli, Pisanu and Hakken 2007; Robinson and Schulz 2009), 'Internet ethnography' (Sade-Beck 2004), and 'discourse-centred online ethnography' (Androutsopoulos 2008). Among all these labels, 'digital ethnography' (Murthy 2008) is used most widely. This is not only because the word 'digital' has become a buzzword in today's Internet of things but also because the term 'digital ethnography' has acquired a wider meaning than an ethnographic engagement with the Internet alone. Some scholars apply the term 'digital ethnography' to the study of social worlds by means of electronic equipment and/or the study of relations between people and digital devices (Pink 2016). I use the term to mean an Internet-mediated ethnographic approach employed to study online cultural forms and practices and their mediated social worlds, which, in my case, involves a focus on affective dynamics, practices, and relations.

The digital ethnographic approach explores how technology is experienced when it is used and how users assign meaning to those experiences (Hine 2000; Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz 2014). By probing the visual, semiotic, and affective aspects of online social practices and providing in-depth and situated accounts of digital experiences, I aim to understand and convey users' lived reality through 'thick' description (Geertz 1973; Varis 2016). 'Thick' description refers to rich and detailed accounts of the context of the phenomenon being studied and how this shapes ongoing socio-cultural and embodied practices and interactions (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Bryman 2012). This kind of description is indispensable in ethnographic enquiry since it provides the basis from which to meaningfully interpret what I and a range of social media users experience, and allows the reader to make sense of the object of study and make judgements about my analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Bryman 2012).

Thick description is also an important medium for evoking sensory responses that can help me and the reader to affectively grasp the situation described as if we are present in the field (Denzin 1989; Creswell 2007). As affective intensities, which are the key element that this research focuses on, can elude the capture of reason and empirical observation due to their fluidity and ephemerality, attending to the sensorial is a way of grappling with the traces of affect that 'live on in thought and in the body' (Hickey-Moody 2014: 81; Deleuze 1988). While participants' thought processes are accessible, at least partly, through posts on the fan page and the interviews I undertook with social media users, to make sense of the affective dynamics I drew on elements of Sarah Pink's (2009; 2016) approach to sensory ethnography which enabled me to employ my own senses to engage with data in a reflexive and self-conscious manner. The descriptive portrayal of what happened in the field is thus instrumental in inviting sensory engagement that can provide an understanding of affective dynamics on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page.

Ethnography is methodologically flexible and adapts to whichever environment it is applied to (Blommaert and Jie 2010; Varis 2016). Because it does not have strict rules and procedures, ethnography enables researchers to be responsive to emergent and unpredictable situations in the field (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Boellstorff et al. 2012). Christine Hine's (2000) use of the term 'lived craft' to describe ethnography illustrates its dynamism and flexibility well. It also highlights the way in which ethnographers are required to be imaginative and reflexive as they work through the liquid and evolving process of research. At the same time, these aspects of ethnography facilitate the study of affect that is, itself, always changing and unfolding. Specifically, in digitally mediated environments where, without physical presence, sight and sound are the only two senses left to connect with the affective intensities circulating on the platform, the 'lived craft' of ethnography, with its emphasis on creativity and imagination, can enhance my capacity to sense and make sense of particular affective dynamics. In this vein, Anna Hickey-Moody (2014: 82), elaborating on Baruch Spinoza's (1996) and Gilles Deleuze's (1988) ideas about the body, contends that 'the materiality of sensation is the part of our imagination grounded in our body. To feel or sense is to imagine.' Conceived in this way, imagination plays an important role in feeling and sensing. It can amplify the effects of sensorial engagement with online intensities as it links my bodily feelings with participants' affective forces.

I employed digital ethnography to grapple with networked affect in relation to Bunluerit's Facebook fan page in two key ways. Following Hickey-Moody's (2014) account of affect as residues of experience that are left in thought and in the body, I, firstly, studied discursive information including posts, comments, and interviews to access affect through thought, and, secondly, I employed elements of sensory ethnography, using my own bodily senses and feelings, to connect with the affective experiences of beneficiaries and

philanthropic individuals. With respect to the first approach, one might ask how thought, if considered to be a cognitive process, can help us understand affect, which is often understood to be more somatic and less than-conscious. In response, it is important to emphasise that feeling cannot be completely separated from thinking, as having an idea about something is to form an emotional relationship with it as a mode of sense-making (Spinoza 1996; Gatens and Lloyd 1999; Hickey-Moody 2014). Rather than approaching affect (only) as autonomous bodily intensities, a key interest of this project, as discussed in Chapter 2, has been to investigate how, and with what socio-political implications, affect is imbued with meaning, particularly when it is given discursive form.

In the second approach, I used my imaginative capacities to elicit a fuller sensorial appreciation of the affective dynamics at play in the mediation of vulnerability and suffering on the fan page. For example, when I could only see beneficiaries' injuries and hear the description of them in Bunluerit's video clips, I imagined how the wound would smell and how the pain would feel – practices which resonate with Amy Coplan's (2011) account of empathy, as discussed in Chapter 1, where imaginative processes help to simulate the psychological state of another person in ways that allow us to gain some understanding of how others think and feel. Digital ethnography that emphasises the employment of thick description and creative involvement with objects of investigation thus facilitates the combination of these two approaches when grappling with networked affect. In what follows, I discuss in further detail how particular digital ethnographic methods and techniques were applied in practice.

4.1.3 Methodological techniques

The digital ethnography adopted in this thesis consists of three main methods: participant observation, archival research, and semi-structured interviews. These methods

were used to gather empirical material from four main sources: (1) live streaming of Bunluerit's encounters with beneficiaries; (2) posts, made by Bunluerit and users, on his Facebook fan page; (3) information about Bunluerit from Thai celebrity news media and his public interviews, and (4) interviews I conducted with donors and/or followers of Bunluerit's fan page.

Participant observation

Participant observation is indispensable when undertaking ethnography. Tom Boellstorff et al. (2012) argue that without participant observation, practices adopted to collect data from digital platforms, even if they include in-depth interviews with users, cannot be called digital ethnography. This is essentially because other techniques do not allow researchers to have an embodied understanding of what participants do, only what they say they do (Malinowski 2002). For example, interviews, as an elicitation method, tend to generate empirical material from participants, giving an account retrospectively of their experiences. As culture is not only constituted of objects 'present to consciousness', by obtaining material only from the account of experiences, researchers may miss the unarticulated components of the phenomenon (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 87). Participant observation enables researchers to have embodied engagement with their research subjects' practices and meaning-making and to gain insight into their 'lived realities' as they unfold (Boellstorff 2014).

I adopted the method of participant observation to explore participants' mediated lived realities 'at the moment of their enacting' (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 105). Specifically, participant observation allowed me to grapple with affective intensities circulating via interactions in Bunluerit's live streaming. 'Live streaming' here refers to any video clip that is (or was) broadcast live by Bunluerit and posted on his fan page. Generally, Bunluerit live streams once a week in the late morning or early afternoon. Each streaming session lasts around ten to

twenty minutes. Most live feeds show an encounter between Bunluerit and a sufferer or person in need, but some of them concern his wider philanthropic activities. As many discussions in my empirical chapters are based on experiences of beneficiaries showcased in live streaming, their backgrounds and difficult situations are briefly described in Appendix A. In the empirical chapters, I use the descriptor '*Live streaming field note*' followed by the pseudonym of the beneficiary to indicate the source of the material.

I carried out participant observation by watching Bunluerit's live streaming in real time and writing down not only what happened in the live feed but also how I felt, what my body sensed, and what my impressions of the encounters depicted were. Bunluerit normally starts his live feed by telling his followers what he has done in the past week and sometimes also comments on public issues that he is interested in. He then gives some information about the beneficiaries before visiting them in their homes. The conversation between Bunluerit and the beneficiaries mainly revolves around their background and the difficult situation they are in. If beneficiaries are suffering from physical disabilities or diseases that are physically visible, they are asked to show their affected body parts to the camera so that users can viscerally connect with the suffering beneficiaries face. Towards the end of each live feed, Bunluerit can be clearly seen giving a gift of cash into the hand of beneficiaries. He also instructs beneficiaries on how to use the money wisely and how to be economical.

As I watched each live stream, I made notes on Bunluerit's speech and his interactions with beneficiaries, along with my ongoing observations of what was taking place. To engage with affective elements in the live feed, especially in relation to the pain and suffering that beneficiaries often expressed, I noted what I sensed and how I felt as an encounter unfolded.

Below is an example of a fieldnote made while I was watching the live streaming of a beneficiary suffering from liver cancer, which caused her stomach to swell.

> Bhin zoomed his camera on the patient's stomach. It looked glowing because her skin got stretched so much that her belly could reflect the light. I felt uncomfortable for her. My body used to swell because of the syndrome I have. Even I got only 4kg of swelling, I felt lethargic, heavy and puffy all over my body. Compared to her, this would mean nothing. *(Live streaming field note, Duen)*

I also drew on my memory and bodily repository to imagine how Duen might have felt in order to articulate the affective intensities circulating around her suffering. The ways in which I used my own body to mediate, access, and make sense of such affective intensities rendered the research highly autoethnographic. This is combined with the fact that Facebook's algorithmic modes of personalisation that shape Facebook also shape my research site by selectively showing some (and hiding other) content in a specific order, making my digital experience of the fan page different from what others would have experienced on their Facebook pages. In this sense, the algorithmically customised content that I adopted as empirical material can be considered highly subjectivised.

Autoethnography, which is defined as a form of autobiographical narrative exploring the author's experiences, has been criticised for its overindulgence in the researcher's own insights and the neglect of corroborative evidence (Hine 2015). I found that this reliance on my affective experiences was, at times, problematic in my interpretation of what I saw in live broadcasts. That is, my interpretations, especially in relation to affective exchanges, relied heavily on how I felt at the moment of viewing. When I experienced an extreme feeling (very happy or terribly sad), I tended to perceive the material according to the predominant affective state I was in. In one instance, feeling anxious and upset about a personal problem I was

experiencing, I made the following fieldnote about a live broadcast concerning a beneficiary who had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, which reflects how I felt at that moment.

> She said, 'Sawasdee' to Bunluerit first. He answered the greeting with the question 'Are you alright?'. He sounded gentle. Suddenly I cried. This is not because of the beneficiary but I can truly feel the power of his words. I just called back home to talk to my mother about my worries. I was very upset with something today. When I heard the question, I came to understand how it feels to just hear someone showing care to you when you feel down. *(Live streaming field note, Ann)*

In this example, the line between, on the one hand, using my body to sense affective intensities and, on the other hand, projecting my own feelings onto the event under investigation is very thin. Although Bunluerit often greeted his beneficiaries with the same sentence, 'Are you alright?', in other live feeds, I had not noticed it before or been affected by it until I became personally distressed and made this field note. Although the researcher's affective state is inevitably entangled with their interpretation and critical engagement when writing an ethnographic account and making an analysis, in my case, the intense emotion I was feeling became overly dominant in my understanding of the situation, to the point that I was no longer able to critically reflect on what was happening in the live feed. By projecting my own overwhelming feelings onto the beneficiary, I risked presuming that she was also in this same affective state.

To mitigate this risk of affective projection, I also drew from a range of other sources such as interviews and posts by Bunluerit or users to support my autoethnographic observations. As Hine (2015) argues, the effect of autoethnography's impartiality can be counterbalanced if it is interpreted alongside the accounts of other participants and findings arising from using other available methods. Using various sources of data enabled me to

expand and enrich my interpretation by bringing into the conversation differing views and perspectives concerning a particular issue, situation, or encounter. This is exemplified by my argument about the hyperreality of digital media (see Chapter 6, sections 6.1 and 6.3), in which my own sensory account of the beneficiary Tum's psoriasis blisters is analysed alongside fan page users' comments concerning their perceptions of his pain and my interview participant Som's reflections concerning how she could imagine the pain of sufferers at the centre of Bunluerit's online charitable appeals. Juxtaposing the material from these three sources allowed me to reflect on the way multiple realities coexist alongside one another.

Returning to the practicalities of employing participant observation as a key method in my digital ethnography, I used Facebook settings to get notifications on my mobile phone whenever Bunluerit was live. Since Thailand is seven hours ahead of the UK, time differences became the main reason for being unable to participate in real-time. During the six-month period of fieldwork, Bunluerit live streamed 35 sessions, which included his encounters with beneficiaries and his other charitable activities (see Appendix B). I was able to watch 14 of them live. I found small differences in the appearance of the live streaming screen on Facebook's mobile application[26] between the live broadcast and recorded streaming. When watching live, there were small signs saying 'Live' and a number appeared at the top of the screen indicating the number of people watching. Neither of these features appeared in the recorded version, although users could still see (and make) comments and select 'emojis'[27] which rose up from the bottom of the screen while the video was playing.

[26] The appearance of the Facebook Live streaming screen on desktop computers is also different from that on its mobile application.

[27] Facebook Live features allow users to comment and give reactions in the form of emojis (a small digital icon used to express an idea or emotion) during (and after) the live streaming session (Nieva 2016). Once users post comments or emojis, they will be displayed as a message or an icon rising from the bottom to the middle of the screen on top of the ongoing content of live streaming before disappearing.



Figure 1: Screenshot of Facebook Live broadcast on the mobile application

The most significant difference between live and recorded videos on the fan page, however, emerged in the way users perceived and affectively experienced the live streaming. As discussed in Chapter 1, section 1.2, the effervescence of a real-time mediated presence can make live broadcasts feel more engaging or thrilling than pre-recorded videos. I argue that this is not only because of the 'virtual collectivity' that offers a sense of gathering and networked 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 1995), but also because of the feelings of vulnerability, fragility, or danger generated by not knowing what the present will become. While recordings have a durability that lasts across space and time, presence is fragile and has various virtual potentialities that can be actualised (Peters 2001). John Peters (2001: 719) compares the present with gambling, where 'no one knows what the future holds, and the gambler infuses

the present with the diceyness of the future'. Even though the thrill in watching Bunluerit's live broadcast may not be as great as watching a football match where the level of unpredictability is higher, real-time engagement still provides a sense of 'diceyness' as users never know what exactly will happen next or how their own participation (making comments and adding emoticons) will change the course of events (for example, sometimes Bunluerit verbally responds to comments he sees while broadcasting).

One of the advantages of engaging with Bunluerit's live feeds is the ability it provides to catch off-guard moments that can inform what is happening behind the mise en scène of an encounter between Bunluerit and his beneficiaries. For example, in one live feed, Bunluerit was heard whispering to his staff, telling them to ask the beneficiary to take off his shirt to show his psoriasis patches. Although these off-guard moments were not part of the real-time aspect of the broadcast, they are useful for my analysis in that they provide an insight into the mediated production and affective choreography of representations of vulnerability at play here. I discuss this example further in Chapter 6, section 6.2, where I link it to the commodification of suffering and the exercise of paternal power over beneficiaries' bodies in digital charitable appeals.

In another example, in one of my real-time participations with one of Bunluerit's live feeds, in which he broadcast a match of the junior rugby team he financially supports[28], allowed me to experience the effervescence of the game. I wrote the following fieldnote:

> While he was talking, I sent many 'Like' and 'Heart' emojis on to the live stream. It was quite fun to do so, probably because I felt like being in the game too. And instead of cheering loudly from the sports arena, I sent these emoticons … I also sent several comments, feeling engaged with the excitement in the field. When I heard the screams,

[28] In 2018, Bunluerit directed a movie about a junior rugby team with a cast of real players, and hence he helped pay for some of the expenses of their tournament.

> the jeering, the roar of the crowd, I felt excited with them. The comments and stickers went from the bottom of the screen to the top all the time. This could point to the liveliness of the page. Activities were taking place and people were engaging with the game. *(Live streaming field note, A rugby match of the team Bunluerit supports)*

Although this engagement with effervescence is not directly related to the focus of the thesis, digital charitable appeals, it emphasises the role of real-time participation in heightening the feeling of immersion in the event live streamed on the fan page. Based on this embodied understanding that emerged from this experience, I went on to develop arguments in relation to the experience of virtual collectivity and how this form of networked affect can enhance users' sense of the authenticity of the suffering depicted on the fan page, as well as Bunluerit's authority as a celebrity philanthropist. In hindsight, I felt that I become more connected with a sense of effervescence in live streams in which Bunluerit was not the main actor than in those in which he dominates the mise en scène. This is partly because I felt that even though his charitable visit was live streamed, it had been, to some extent, constructed to underline the heroic and altruistic image that he consistently projects, and hence attenuating any sense of diceyness. This feeling tended to prevent me from feeling deeply involved with the effervescence of the activities he was involved in or the affective intensities that he attempted to elicit. This feeling can be compared with going to a concert of an artist that one is not a fan of; though one can feel the effervescence of the performance and environment, one is less likely to feel fully immersed in the intensities of the show.

As the above examples illustrate, real-time participant observation enabled me to connect with affective encounters as they unfolded and to gain an embodied insight into how the experience of effervescence derived from a live broadcast can create a sense of deeper involvement for media users. Although I reflected on how my preconceptions of Bunluerit

hindered an intensive emotional engagement with his live streams, this reflexive consideration prompts me to consider other possible sensorial experiences that Bunluerit's fans may have. That is, for followers who particularly admire Bunluerit, the effervescence of the affective encounters he stages can heighten rather than impede intensities. This reflection also suggests that the effervescence is likely to operate more effectively among those with similar affective dispositions towards the main actor, or the action, in the event being live streamed.

Archival research

While the real-time component is what distinguishes participant observation from textual or discourse analysis, and was particularly useful for following affect as it unfolded, my digital ethnography also employed archival research, which involved the analysis of recorded videos of Bunluerit's encounters, posts made by Bunluerit and users on the fan page, and other media related to Bunluerit, whether from his televised interviews or entertainment news reports. For the recorded live feeds, I used the same method employed for the live broadcasts: writing down field notes while watching them. Although I could not claim that I was doing participant observation and grappling with intensities unfolding in real time, engaging more closely with the recorded videos over time provided me with insight into other important components of these mediated encounters, such as cultural values, contextual giving behaviours, and the nature of the charitable relationships between Bunluerit and his beneficiaries.

I analysed Bunluerit's Facebook posts and those of users paying particular attention to the affective dynamics at play in celebrity-mediated charitable giving and the representations of suffering employed on the fan page. The term 'post' here refers to texts, pictures, and video clips (excluding those from live streaming) posted by Bunluerit on his fan page. Bunluerit's

posts can be divided into two main categories: first, posts concerning beneficiaries who may or may not be showcased in his live streaming (those relating to live streams are usually made after the broadcast to provide more details, including the beneficiary's name, age, carer(s), income, the difficulty they are facing, their bank account details, and how Bunluerit has helped them so far). Occasionally, Bunluerit posts an appeal for beneficiaries who have not appeared in his live streaming. Second, posts that do not involve sufferers are mainly about Bunluerit's wider philanthropic activities and sometimes about his personal affairs, such as his relationship with his mother and his opinions on issues in the public domain. All posts from Bunluerit's fan page are, in the chapters that follow, labelled '***Bunluerit's post***' followed by the date when the post was made.

Users' posts are posts made by fan page followers in relation to Bunluerit's posts or live streaming. The label used for this source is '***Comment by (a) user(s)***' since these posts are made in the comment section under Bunluerit's posts. In addition to viewers noting feelings and opinions regarding the misfortune they have witnessed, many of the posts are bank transfer slips which show that a donation has been made to a sufferer's bank account, but this also means that some regular donors can be recognised. Some sufferers use this space to request help from Bunluerit and users. They usually post a picture of themselves or a close family member in a dire physical condition, give brief details of the suffering, contact information, their bank account details, and an appeal message in the comment section of Bunluerit's post with regard to other beneficiaries.

I found these sources from archival research useful, especially when some nuanced elements had escaped my attention during my affective engagement with live feeds. In one instance, I did not notice that Bunluerit was ignored by a beneficiary's daughter, which led to

him criticising her at the end of the live streaming, since the girl appeared on camera for less than a minute. I rewatched the video clip to see how he reacted to the girl ignoring him by frowning at her and slightly raising his voice to demand her attention. Without the recorded video, I would have missed this small moment, which I later interpret as an act of disobedience in Chapter 5. I also made use of users' comments with regard to the incident. Even though the girl appeared in the video for less than a minute, some users spotted her action and posted real-time comments criticising her behaviour. These comments led me to think about how women in Thai culture can be obvious targets for criticism when they are considered to deviate from patriarchal norms. I discuss these comments later in relation to gendered power relations in Thai culture.

During the six months of empirical fieldwork, I gathered 82 posts made by Bunluerit with comments by users below these posts (see Appendix C). Before entering the field, I had planned to collect these posts using data-scraping, where computer scripts are employed to collect sections of a web page and store that information in a spreadsheet or local file on my computer (Hampton 2017). However, after the Cambridge Analytica scandal[29] Facebook stopped allowing researchers to scrape data from its platform. I thus resorted to a basic method of gathering textual information by copying and pasting it into a Microsoft Word file for analysis.

Semi-structured interviews

Participant observation may allow researchers to reflexively experience affective intensities, but it is unlikely that researchers can understand how participants construct

[29] For more information on the scandal, see Meredith (2018) and Wong (2019).

meanings out of their experiences without talking to them. Elisenda Ardévol and Edgar Gómez-Cruz (2014: 13) maintain that participant observation enables researchers to learn 'the collective life, norms, values, and dynamics of a group' of participants whereas the in-depth interview brings to the fore the perceptions and meanings interviewees assign to their actions. This thesis employed semi-structured interviews with donors and followers of Bunluerit's Facebook fan page in an attempt to make sense of their perceptions concerning the fan page's celebrity-mediated charitable appeals and how they constructed meaning with respect to their affective interactions with Bunluerit's online activities. Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (2011: 94) define an interview as 'a meaning-making partnership between interviewers and their respondents'. Using the word 'partnership', they highlight how the researcher and the informant collaboratively construct a particular reality through the interview process. This means that the account given by a respondent during the interview is not a reflection of social worlds outside the talk (Rapley 2001). Rather, it is a product of interactions between the interlocutors at the moment of conversation (*Ibid.*).

Earlier, I discussed the indivisibility of affect and thinking. In my understanding, affect, meaning, ideas, and perceptions are in the realm of the virtual and can be actualised by articulation. In this way, it is possible to access affective experiences through verbal accounts as participants articulate their ideas and memories into something concrete. The interview method is also important in terms of the trustworthiness of my interpretation. By adopting participant observation, I am making a claim that my reflexive experiences offer me an insight into participants' social worlds. However, without interviews, it is difficult to justify this claim. As I noted above concerning the risk of affective projection, autoethnography is most robust and most faithful to participants' diverse experiences when it is supported by findings arising from other complementary methods.

Conducting semi-structured interviews with fan page users and donors enabled me to enrich and thicken the narratives I was gathering through other elements of my digital ethnography as a means to develop more insightful interpretations. Some research questions cannot be answered via participant observation alone because they are about viewpoints and perceptions that might not be expressed without more direct forms of elicitation. For example, by only observing Bunluerit's live broadcasts or reading public posts on the fan page, I would not necessarily have found out how users think and feel about the representation of the suffering involved. Even though I could see from the comments that many users intended to express *songsarn* (compassion), I did not have sufficient information to assess what they really meant by *songsarn*, why they felt or sought to express *songsarn*, and which specific elements of a digital representation particularly affected them, among other unanswered questions. One of the insights I developed from the interviews I conducted relates to users' perceptions of the 'realness' or authenticity of images of suffering on the fan page. For example, Som, one of the interview participants, remarked that various photographs and videos depicting pain and suffering on the page looked real to her and made her want to donate to beneficiaries. Talking to Som further about what exactly she meant when she employed the term 'real' enabled me to develop my approach to the concepts of 'indexicality' and 'felt reality' as they relate to the mediation of suffering in Bunluerit's digital appeals.

At first, I set my criteria for interview participants to require that they were active followers of Bhin Bunluerit's Facebook fan page, aged over 18, who had donated to a cause or posted relevant comments at least twice since first following Bunluerit's fan page. I planned to recruit at least twenty participants by (1) approaching individual users via the Facebook chat application, (2) posting a recruiting message on my own Facebook page, and (3) identifying further participants through a snowball sampling approach. For the first method of

recruitment, I was able to identify active followers and donors by examining users' posts and bank transfer slips. I contacted 95 followers/donors and five of them agreed to participate. I recruited 10 additional participants via the second method. However, most of the people who agreed to give interviews are my friends on Facebook who do not actually follow Bunluerit's fan page, but rather follow and donate to other Facebook pages that use similar 'negative imagery' (Chouliaraki 2010; 2013) in digital appeals. I felt reluctant to reject their offers to give interviews, even though they did not meet my criteria, partly because I thought that they might nonetheless provide information that could be useful to my analysis.

Although I did not draw on most of the interviews conducted with these research subjects in my analysis, some interviews turned out to be very useful, especially one which provided information about why the interviewee did not trust Bunluerit or donate to beneficiaries on his fan page. Since my initial criteria for recruitment only included people following the fan page or making a donation, they subsequently excluded those who were ambivalent about or not particularly drawn in by Bunluerit's celebrity philanthropist role. Fortunately, my unintentionally recruited participant (Jorm) articulated these alternative views, which allowed me to enrich my understanding of the affective dynamics of online giving in the Thai context. In our interview, Jorm said, 'In the case of Bhin (Bunluerit), to be honest, I doubt his intention whether he is really sincere in his help or not' ***(Interview, Jorm, Donor giving to other fundraising pages)***. While Jorm noted that he was not convinced by Bunluerit's charitable intent, he was also suspicious of the role of larger charitable organisations, given that he could not easily see whether the money he donates to such organisations is actually used to help beneficiaries. Here I saw the tension in the Thai cultural context surrounding the question of whom to trust – a person or an organisation – which I developed into the discussion of interpersonal trust in Bunluerit (see Chapter 5, section 5.1). As a result of including Jorm as

another key informant, I changed the parameters concerning interviewees to incorporate more generalised perspectives on online celebrity-mediated charitable giving.

I gained 9 additional interviewees from the snowball sampling approach. While I interviewed a total of 24 participants, I only drew on 12 interviews in my analysis (see Appendix D for brief backgrounds of the interviewees). The tag used for this source in my empirical chapters is '*Interview,*' followed by the pseudonym of the interviewee and their role in relation to the information given. I conducted all the interviews from the UK, using Facebook voice call with interviewees in Thailand. Some participants were living in the UK at the time of my fieldwork, so I did face-to-face interviews with some and phone interviews with others.

4.2 The Researcher's Positionality

Over recent decades, reflexivity has become a common practice within social research as part of a 'reflexive turn' in sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and related fields wherein the possibility of 'objective' knowledge was critically rejected by postmodernists and feminist theorists, among other critical scholars (Clifford and Marcus 2010; Denzin and Lincoln 1998; England 1994)[30]. Reflexivity is a researcher's continuing process of self-awareness and self-assessment of their structural and personal conditions that influence knowledge construction and power relations between a researcher and participants (Bolak 1997; Finlay 2002; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011)[31]. 'Self-awareness' and 'self-assessment' should not only lead to a researcher analysing their structural and personal influences but should also include an obligation to confront and challenge assumptions and power differentials to make sound

[30] See also Bolak (1997), Pink (2009), and Dean (2017).

[31] See also Stacey (1988), Stanley and Wise (1983), Code (1993), and Wasserfall (1997).

research decisions and foster well-founded knowledge construction (Rabinow 2010; Mason 2002; Lincoln and Guba 2011). Reflexive considerations have various dimensions. Apart from personal reflexivity, other aspects of reflexivity can be defined as disciplinary (effects of academic discipline on paradigmatic assumptions), epistemological (effects of paradigmatic assumptions on research procedures), methodological (effects of methods employed on empirical material gathered), theoretical (effects of theoretical framework on analysis), and practical (effects of practical constraints such as time and resources on research conduct and output) (Wilkinson 1988; Willig 2001; Dean 2017).

As mentioned earlier concerning my use of sensory ethnography techniques, my body, senses, and experiential point of view became important tools in the research process. The fact that these mediums are shaped in the same culture where the phenomenon of interest occurs can be beneficial and disadvantageous at the same time. As a Thai woman who lived for more than thirty years in Thailand, I have the advantage of having gained a nuanced insight into interpersonal interactions and affective experiences in the Thai context. I can see that social and cultural terrains assign meaning to entities, actions, and situations, and agree with Sneja Gunew's (2009) contention that specific cultural contexts have a role to play in shaping affect. Affect does not occur in a vacuum; social and cultural influences can be observed in the site of the encounter where affect, emotion, and feeling emerge. In other words, it is through cultural meanings assigned to entity and different phenomena that affective response is called forth. My familiarity with the Thai context equips me with the sensitivity to cultural meanings and implications that may be insignificant to people outside this context but are important in the interpretation of the social phenomena under investigation.

An example of how I used my familiarity with culturally specific modes of affective expression to inform my insights is when I noticed the dynamics at play in the bond of gratitude between Bunluerit and his beneficiaries. While the feeling of gratefulness is universal and can be found in other cultures, gratitude in the Thai context often coalesces with the mixed feelings of respect for and fear of the power of the person to whom one feels indebted, especially if that person is in a higher position in the socio-economic hierarchy. I perceived this sense of respectful gratitude emanating from how beneficiaries interacted with Bunluerit in live streaming, their postures, the way both parties spoke to each other, and the submissive attitudes of beneficiaries. Without the familiarity with affective, socio-cultural, and religious norms in the Thai context, it would be difficult to sense the particular ways in which gratitude was being felt and performed here. By identifying these context-specific forms of affect, I was able to develop the argument about the affective bond of *dej* and *khun* (see Chapter 5, section 5.4) which gives an insight into the patron–client relationship between Bunluerit and his beneficiaries.

However, the embodied and encultured knowledge I possess can also be an impediment to critical analysis. As Hale Bolak (1997: 97) argues, 'While a foreign researcher runs the risk of being culture blind, an indigenous researcher runs the risk of being blinded by the familiar'; being overly accustomed to the culture studied could stifle imaginative and critical thinking, since there seems to be nothing new in the empirical material gathered to form theoretical arguments. In this vein, I found that throughout my research, encountering perspectives from people outside my culture was helpful when trying to find a novel vantage point to look at the familiar phenomena in a new light and frame an interesting argument. While I was conducting my digital ethnography, I sometimes discussed what I found in interviews and participant observation with my supervisors, and the points they made, which

I had often not noticed before due to my familiarity with Thai culture, offered an interesting starting point for developing an argument. In one instance, my supervisors mentioned 'dignity' in our discussion about Bunluerit's gift-giving. I had never thought of dignity in relation to gift-giving before, because in Thailand, beneficiaries are expected to show *katanyu*, or gratitude, by catering to the giver's wish even if they have to perform undignified acts like showing their body parts by lifting their clothes or behaving obsequiously to the giver in public. From this point, I went on to develop the idea of a 'transaction of compassion' (see Chapter 7, section 7.2) wherein dignity became a resource that beneficiaries exchanged for the gift of donation money.

As my experiential knowing and sensing were employed as research tools to grapple with networked affect, this emphasised the importance of thinking reflexively about how my own background and experiences may have played a role in shaping the choices, decisions, and modes of interpretation that I employed at various stages of the research process. My positionality as a Thai woman both enhanced and curtailed my interpretation of empirical material in this project. On the one hand, my sensitivity to Thai culture allowed me to be perceptive to subtle affective states and cultural values behind social interactions. On the other hand, my familiarity with the Thai context at times entailed a failure to recognise distinctive aspects of my data. By making these positional dynamics explicit to the reader, they can understand the grounds on which I based my engagement with and analysis of my research material.

4.3 Methods of Interpretation and Analysis

As research methods are performative, communicating to the reader how particular realities concerning this project are enacted through the discussions of methodological approach, and an ethnographer's positionality is important not only to their understanding but also to their judgement concerning whether my version of reality is convincing and worthwhile enough to warrant further inquiry and intervention. The methods I used to manage, interpret, and analyse my data are another element that needs to be examined to reveal the process of reality construction. To code and manage the large volume and data, including live streaming field notes, posts by Bunluerit and page followers, transcriptions of the interviews, and information on Bunluerit gleaned from his public interviews or celebrity news, I used NVivo. I adopted thematic analysis to try to organise the material into a handful of overarching themes that I could make sense of. Thematic analysis is an approach, rather than a specific set of techniques, used to manage information by identifying themes and organising them in a way that 'reflects how they are conceptualised to relate to each other' (King and Horrocks 2010: 150). 'Themes' are defined here as 'recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question' (King and Horrocks 2010: 150). Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) suggest that two levels of themes can be identified: the semantic, or explicit, level and the latent, or interpretative, level, both of which were used in my analysis. While the identification of themes at the semantic level looks at the explicit or surface meanings of the material, the analysis at the latent level pays attention to underlying affects, ideas, assumptions, and ideologies that inform the semantic content. Latent thematic analysis is likened to or seen as a form of discourse analysis in which researchers investigate 'the way

versions of the world, of society, events and inner psychological worlds are produced in discourse' (Potter 2011: 188).

In practice, I found that it was difficult to clearly separate the semantic and latent levels of an identified theme since they occurred together and complemented each other. Initially, I identified themes at the latent level, but because I had an interpretative frame in mind, I found myself excluding a certain amount of pertinent information because it was unlikely to fit with what I planned. I thus combined the use of semantic-level coding with the latent analysis to include material that may not look relevant to the frame to make sure that I had not omitted anything that could be useful. My initial coding using NVivo via this method generated 92 themes (see Appendix F), which I subsequently categorised into six overarching themes: 'Celebrity', 'Deserving Poor', 'Digital Affect', 'Mediation', 'Gift-giving', and 'Technologies'. These key themes were developed into a line of argument and unfolded across my three empirical chapters focusing on celebrity, mediation (representation of suffering), and gift-giving, while the themes 'Deserving Poor', 'Digital Affect', and 'Technologies' were used as underlying elements in the discussions in those three chapters.

I employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) to engage with the empirical material after the themes were identified. CDA is an approach used to investigate 'structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak 2007: 187). It unpacks social and structural inequalities as expressed, constituted, and legitimised by language. The application of CDA harks back to the tension of relying on language-based approaches to make sense of affect, which some theorise as a visceral force that exists beyond the discursive. To deal with this tension, my use of CDA draws on material from the sensory ethnography techniques I employed to access non-representational forms of affect through my bodily sensations and feelings, especially to experience how beneficiaries may feel in

particular contexts and the flow of affect in the encounter between them and Bunluerit. That being said, the processes of analysing and reporting findings from affective material still required language as a medium. As I argued in Chapter 2, I do not see the relationship between discourse and affect as antagonistic but as complementary, because discourse allows individuals to give meaning to intensities and, with the attributed meaning, we can better understand how affect can produce social and political consequences. For this reason, it is difficult to avoid involving language and discourse in the methodological and analytical approaches in this project, especially because it aims to study the social impacts of affect.

Using CDA was helpful in exploring my research questions, especially the last one, which looks at the implications of networked affect in digital appeals in terms of power relations. CDA is used to analyse the relationship between the main actors of the phenomenon being investigated, including Bunluerit, beneficiaries, donors, and users. In each of the empirical chapters, CDA helped me unpack the relationships between the celebrity philanthropist and beneficiaries/page followers (Chapter 5), beneficiaries portrayed in representations of suffering and users (Chapter 6), and donors and beneficiaries (Chapter 7). These relationships are key to understanding the affective relations among people, objects, and technologies that are mediated through digital appeals, which this thesis concentrates on.

An example of how exactly the above processes informed my analysis is when I coded information about the deification of Bunluerit on the fan page and Thai culture more generally. In users' comments and some news pieces, he was praised as a *taewada* (male angel). In the live feed, he was treated as if he had a magic power that could cure beneficiaries' illnesses (see Chapter 5, section 5.3, the vignette about Noi). This theme of deification was included in the overarching topic of 'celebrity' and then analysed with CDA to look at the power relations between Bunluerit and beneficiaries and how such relations involve the deification of him. This

led me to bring in the idea of Buddhist power, which includes supernatural power (*saksit*) (see Chapter 3, section 3.2, and Chapter 5, section 5.3), to demonstrate how Bunluerit gains his (supernatural) legitimacy as a celebrity philanthropist and how he uses this power to guide beneficiaries and to hold them to account for the donation money they receive.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Scholars who study content on digital platforms have differing views regarding the nature of publicly available online information and the need to seek consent for its use. On the one hand, they are wary of using posts on social media without authorisation because users and information owners may perceive the online data to be primarily private or personal property (Sveningsson 2004; Markham and Buchanan 2012; Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz 2014)[32]. On the other hand, accessing readily available online information is not seen to constitute live interaction with human subjects, and therefore collecting existing records does not seem to require consent to be sought in the way that interviews, focus groups, or surveys would (McKee and Porter 2009; Kozinets 2010). In this respect, the question of what is considered public or private and by whom becomes pertinent. Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace (2016) suggest that the boundary between public and private can be established in this context by fine-tuning both users' and researchers' expectations of visibility. That is, researchers may need to think from users' points of view regarding whether what they post 'can reasonably expect to be observed by strangers' (Townsend and Wallace 2016: 10). This can be achieved by considering a range of questions regarding the degree of publicity (*Ibid*.): is the data on an open platform or within a closed discussion forum? Is a password needed to access the forum? Would users

[32] See also Zimmer (2010) and Markham (2011).

expect other visitors to have similar interests to themselves? Are there any gatekeepers? How have users set up their privacy settings?

Bhin Bunluerit's Facebook fan page is open to the public. Because it is a fundraising page, the platform is more or less public in nature; its aim is that its donation appeals reach as wide an audience as possible. No password is required to see posts, but to comment, users need to have a Facebook account. In light of these features, I did not seek individuals' consent to record Bunluerit's live streaming or posts on his fan page. However, to ensure that users cannot be identified, anonymity was preserved by the use of pseudonyms and the removal of any identifiable information in the posts. Hine (2008) argues that quoting online informants verbatim can render the individual readily identifiable as a specific piece of text can be searched for and traced online. Initially, therefore, I intended not to insert original posts in Thai in this thesis. However, without putting in the original source of the text, there seemed to be a lack of empirical evidence to show that the post was actually created by a user and not fabricated by me or other parties. I then tried to employ a user's verbatim comment to search for the original text to check whether it was possible to identify the person who had posted it using Google's search engine and the 'Search' function on Bunluerit's fan page. I discovered that it was impossible to search for a quote in the comment section of a Facebook post, although one can look for the verbatim words posted by Bunluerit. Accordingly, I decided to insert the original text of users' comments in the thesis. Consent was sought from interview participants (most participants gave consent verbally but some filled out the consent form online via Google Form) and their anonymity was adequately protected (see Appendix E for Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form). Before I began the research, my research proposal was submitted for ethical approval from the University of Kent's School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research Ethics Advisory Group to ensure that the project

had adequately identified and addressed all key ethical issues and that no harm would be done to participants.

Although one of the main topics that this research focuses on is the representation of suffering, I tried not to publish negative imagery of beneficiaries (see Chapter 2, section 2.1, for definition) in the thesis to protect their identity and avoid causing distress to the reader due to the graphic nature of the pictures. At times I felt that providing images of suffering would be a better way to describe the difficult state that beneficiaries are in or to make a point that I would like to discuss, for example to explain how an image of suffering can mislead users to feel the beneficiary was in pain even though they were not (see Chapter 6, section 6.1). I decided, however, that it was best not to republish such images, even though I could hide the identity of the beneficiary using an image tool and only show the injury, since this would promote the publication of the very negative imagery that the thesis confronts and problematises. In these cases, I have resorted to a textual description or vignettes from field notes to illustrate the suffering that beneficiaries have experienced. However, some photographs used in the thesis do include beneficiaries. Usually, these are images of Bunluerit and beneficiaries that I use to show the relationship between them or how Bunluerit approaches vulnerable people. In these cases, I blurred the faces and bodies (doing this regarding the latter only where the bodies show signs of suffering) to make beneficiaries unidentifiable.

In terms of data protection, a minimum amount of personal information was requested from participants. This included a name (any name participants wished to be called), their gender, occupation, charitable giving behaviour, religious beliefs, and views and feelings towards charity online and offline. Personal information and the other material collected were

stored on password-protected laptop computers. Backup files were kept in online file storage, which also requires a log-in password, and encrypted in an external hard disk. Paper documents were kept in secure file folders in the researcher's personal accommodation to which the researcher is the only person who has access. Once the research is completed, the paper documents will be destroyed and the necessary soft files will be stored for further reference for no longer than 12 months.

Conclusions

This chapter has given a detailed account of the methodological and analytical tools utilised to 'bring into being' what this thesis 'also discover[s]' (Law and Urry 2004: 393). It justified the use of digital ethnography in exploring affect in online appeals for giving and the adoption of thematic and critical discourse analysis in engaging with the material collected by digital ethnography. Throughout the methodological process, the effects of the research techniques on enacting realities can be perceived. My use of sensory ethnography techniques, which rely heavily on employing my own embodied experiences to imagine how actors in the live streaming might feel, predominantly constructs realities concerning affective states of beneficiaries and how these intensities relate to charitable giving and Bunluerit's celebrity philanthropic engagement. However, the construction of realities should not occur in isolation but needs to be carried out against the backdrop of shared understandings, meaning, practices, and so forth (Schwandt 2000). I thus brought in materials from other sources including interviews and archival data from posts and other media related to Bunluerit to ensure that my research reflects intersubjective realities experienced by social actors, not just my own discrete version of truth. My construction of realities through research is intimately related to

who I am and the standpoint I see the world from. In this regard, I have taken care to explicate my background and positionality in order to let the reader know how my interpretations came about. From a performative perspective, the process of interpreting data is done to offer the researcher's 'construction of the constructions of the actors' in the study (Schwandt 2000: 118). In this process, it is important to make explicit not only the methods used to find materials for reality construction but also those used to interpret the materials.

Linking back to Law and Urry's (2004) question concerning the performative role of methods, they suggest that while realities are performed, this does not make them any less real. What is more important is the way these realities have consequences that generate change and further research and innovation (Schwandt 2000). By unpacking the performative methods used to examine networked affect in celebrity-mediated Thai online appeals for giving, I offered another set of realities and suggested approaches to unpack, extend, and interrogate them, which will hopefully help advance further inquiry into the study of online affective interactions.

In the next three chapters, I will discuss the findings arising from using these methods of data generation and analysis regarding the three key themes emerging from the research: celebrity philanthropy (Chapter 5), mediation of suffering (Chapter 6), and gift-giving (Chapter 7). The arguments concerning the working of networked affect within these three interrelated processes on Bunluerit's fan page will be developed through these chapters and then finalised by considering the wider implications of these findings and some areas for future investigation in the Conclusion chapter.

Chapter 5

Bhin Bunluerit: A Thai Celebrity Philanthropy Hero

The Thai celebrity philanthropist Bhin Bunluerit is at the centre of the online appeals for giving this thesis seeks to address. Much of the success of his Facebook fan page in raising donations can be attributed to Bunluerit's celebrity status and his long-term fame regarding charitable works that have established donors' trust in him as a philanthropist. The chapter will explore the key elements that make him a Thai celebrity hero as well as the affective practices Bunluerit adopts to maintain relationships of trust with fans and donors. The Thai cultural context has an important role to play in understanding how Bunluerit became a successful philanthropist and regarded as a national hero. The chapter will thus pay particular attention to the specificity of this cultural and socio-political milieu, which includes masculine hegemonic culture, reliance on interpersonal trust (putting trust in an individual rather than an institution), and power relations between patron and client that underpin the relationships between Bunluerit, his beneficiaries, and his page followers. The main argument of this chapter is that the sensorial discourse of the celebrity hero contextualised in the Thai patron–client system romanticises and depoliticises issues concerning inequality while creating an affective bond that encourages people who are less privileged to voluntarily accept the relations of domination in which they find themselves.

To unfold this argument, the chapter is divided into four main sections. The first part introduces Bunluerit, explores his path to philanthropic fame as an endorser of people who are

suffering, and distinguishes him from celebrity philanthropists theorised in Western literatures to demonstrate what Bunluerit does and to delineate the particular cultural conditions underlying his philanthropy hero status. The second part extends the concept of celebrity philanthropy by examining how Bunluerit performs the role of celebrity philanthropist. He carries out this performance of celebrity by aligning his image with the dominant Thai patriarchal order that prefers authoritative male leaders and by showing the public that he possesses the highly regarded cultural affective value of *katanyu* (feeling gratitude). Bunluerit's image projection, in this respect, signals to followers that he is qualified to be the benefactor in a charitable relationship underpinned by values of Thailand's patron–client culture. In this section, I argue that as Thai people are required to be responsible for their own hardship or suffering, with limited support from the state, Bunluerit's charitable endeavours offer an individualised solution while discouraging the institutional and structural change required as part of a long-term solution to such suffering. Following a similar line of argument, the third section demonstrates how a Thai hero discourse formed by the intersection of authoritative masculinity, compassionate impulses, and supernatural power can thwart collective attempts to change the socio-political and economic status quo. I argue that the way in which Thai people see Bunluerit as their 'hero' provides them with a comforting illusion. This illusion helps them cope with ongoing vulnerability in which the social safety net fails to prevent them from falling into deprivation. The last section explores the relationships between the celebrity hero and his fans and beneficiaries. It illustrates the way Bunluerit's charitable relationships work through affective bonds of gratitude and obligation; these are ideologically supported by the nation's patron–client system and tend to normalise and reproduce social relations of domination in Thai society.

5.1 Building on Interpersonal Trust: Bunluerit as an Endorser of Sufferers and a Philanthropy Hero

Bhin Bunluerit's journey as a celebrity philanthropist started in 1987 when he was 25 years old and at the height of his acting career (Anutrakulchai 2015). He became an emergency service volunteer for the Ruamkatanyu Foundation after joining the foundation's team to help victims of collapsed buildings[33]. Bunluerit described his first experience of taking part in an emergency response activity in a popular Thai talk show:

> A building collapsed and help was needed urgently … I was watching TV and felt like: Hey, I want to go there. At that time, I was building muscle and I wanted to use my strength so I went to the scene … When I lifted the man's body, my heart told me that this is what I had wanted to do for a long time. I love doing this thing … I was proud of myself that I had helped someone even though he had already passed. (Anutrakulchai 2015)

Bunluerit's choice of this particular volunteer work, which requires agility and physical strength, is consistent with the macho image he projects. At the same time, Bunluerit presents himself as a moral person. His decision to dedicate his time to helping people in an emergency, sometimes involving dealing with dead bodies, appears to signal his moral and altruistic nature.

This image of what might be called 'moral masculinity' is what Bunluerit has also projected in his acting career, often appearing in action movies or television series in the 'good guy' role. He once articulated his criteria for accepting a role in a television interview:

[33] Bunluerit mentioned in a few interviews that his decision to take part in the building collapse rescue was quite spontaneous (Phakdeecharoen 2011; Petvirojchai 2019). He was at home resting when he learned from a television news report that around ten people were trapped in the collapse and needed help. He then rushed to the site to see if there was anything he could do.

> I am a little bit selective because I do acting not for money. I want my acting to promote good values and be useful to society. When audiences watch me, they can see a role model. So I will not play evil or unscrupulous roles. (Tancharoen 2016)

Even though accepting a villain role would not necessarily affect his image of moral rectitude, Bunluerit's unwillingness to take such a role points to the extent to which he carefully manages his public image.

Bunluerit's self-presentation can be explained using Erving Goffman's (1956) concept of 'social dramaturgy'. Individuals perform their roles – for example social, professional, or family roles – as expected by audiences in the 'front region'. The 'back region' is the space where individuals can allow 'the suppressed facts' that cannot be shown in the front region to appear (Goffman 1956: 69). For actors like Bunluerit, the front region consists of the 'professional aspect' and the 'official private life' (see Chapter 3, section 3.3) (Holmes 2005; Bulck 2018). The back region comprises the 'real private life' sought after by paparazzi and entertainment reporters that can reveal the 'true self' of a particular celebrity (*Ibid*.). Bunluerit, I want to suggest, attempts to show his moral masculine self in these two areas. He not only plays the 'good guy' in his professional acting work but is also the 'good guy' in real life scenarios, volunteering to help people in distress. This meticulous effort to manage the 'good guy' image contributes to the process of creating a sense of celebrity authenticity that can show the public his 'real' self in the back region. Bunluerit's choice of film roles implies that he is truly a good man and his good nature in the back region influences the professional aspect and the official private life that take place in the front region.



Figure 2: A typical photo of Bunluerit in the media showing him helping vulnerable people (Source: Aobby 2019)

By the end of the 1990s, when his acting career started to take a downturn, Bunluerit ventured into film directing. The first film he directed was released in 1999; however, it was not until 2011 that he found his first and, at the time of writing, biggest commercial success as director of the film *Panya Raenu* (Wongphudee 2016). Despite his ups and downs in the Thai entertainment industry, Bunluerit has been active in his volunteering work with the Ruamkatanyu Foundation throughout this time and was appointed head of the foundation's external activities (Tancharoen 2016; Wongphudee 2016). In 2011, while still working for this non-profit organisation, he set up his Facebook fan page and started his own charitable work of giving some of his income to people in need as well as making public appeals for them via

his page. In addition to his charitable appeals, Bunluerit runs a non-profit cattle shelter[34] and care home[35]. Rather than carrying out these activities in a more formal manner by establishing a non-profit organisation with transparent fundraising processes, Bunluerit has taken on these charitable works himself.

Despite the obscurity in his financial management practices, Bunluerit regularly receives donations from people who admire him and his philanthropic aspirations to fund his various charitable activities. The actor once told a television interview host that he spends around 500,000 baht (12,500 GBP) on philanthropic purposes each month (Jonglertjesdawong 2017). In addition to drawing on his savings and income from his acting career, Bunluerit uses donations from others to support his charitable works:

> Once a gentleman met me. He hugged me and asked me to come to his house with him as he was going to give me something. When I arrived, he handed me an envelope of 500,000 baht cash … I told him I didn't have any receipt for him. He said, 'I don't want any. I believe in you. I know you would put this into good use.' (Jonglertjesdawong 2017)

Aside from such on-the-spot gifts from people who have faith in him, Bunluerit also receives monthly financial support from a few patrons[36]. By receiving and distributing such funds, Bunluerit is, in a way, acting like a charity. However, as his charitable work is carried out under

[34] Buying cows and buffaloes from slaughter houses to let them live until they die naturally (*tai chevit ko krabue*) is a popular merit-making activity in Thailand. It is believed that the act will yield a *karmic* reward of a long and healthy life. However, after buying such cattle, merit makers do not usually have a place to keep them. Bunluerit's shelter, established in 2015, was built to serve this purpose (Yaemboonrueng 2015).

[35] Bunluerit also established a non-profit 20-bed nursing home with 24-hour on-site carers to look after homeless elderly people (Kom Chad Luek 2019).

[36] One of his patrons is the owner of the largest brewery in Thailand. He was given a van (with the company's logo on it) and receives monthly financial support of 100,000 baht (≈£2,500) (Siamrath Online 2019). Regarding other patrons, Bunluerit only mentioned their nicknames and the amount of their monthly financial support in his live feeds, so it is not clear who these patrons are and how they acquired their wealth.

his name, and not under the auspices of a registered organisation, he is not required to publicly declare his use of donation funds, nor does he voluntarily do so. Although donors do not receive any legal receipt or tax benefit from Bunluerit, they still donate money to him directly.

I argue that the main reason for this is the Thai cultural preference for giving donations to a person rather than an institution. Besides the opaqueness of institutional philanthropic operations in which donors do not really know what happens to their donation and how funds are spent, Thai people tend to find a person more reliable than bureaucratic organisations (Anheier and Winder 2007; Morshed 2018). That is, 'interpersonal trust[37]' tends to be prioritised over 'system' or 'institutional trust' (Luhmann 1979; Lewis and Weigert 1985; Winichakul 2015). This penchant for interpersonal trust stems from person-based relationships and the patron–client culture in Thailand (discussed in Chapter 3) alongside the influence of the dominant socio-economic narrative of individualisation in which citizens are supposed to find their own solutions to any hardships they face and the state's role in taking care of its people is diminished (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). I will further elaborate on this individualisation narrative, linking it to wider discourses and values of neoliberalism and how they take particular shape in Thailand, in the next section.

This faith in interpersonal trust can be exemplified by how a donor to an international non-profit organisation I interviewed expressed scepticism towards the organisation. He commented:

[37] Following Conviser (1973), Luhmann (1979), and many others, I use the term 'interpersonal trust', first mentioned in Chapter 3, to mean the trust put in a person which tends to be based on an emotional bond between individuals.

> I used to give a monthly donation to an international organisation which helps vulnerable children in the third world … When I saw their member of staff soliciting donations again at the same spot, I started to wonder whether he is a volunteer or gets paid for doing this and whether the pay he receives comes from my donation money … where my donation money goes, what per cent goes to those vulnerable children and who are these children. I don't know anything and I feel that this is not transparent …
>
> *(Interview, Jorm, Donor giving to other fundraising pages)*

For Jorm, seeing the money given directly to the person in need feels more transparent than knowing that the recipient charity has a bureaucratic process or accountability mechanism in place to manage his donation.

I argue that what Thai donors consider to be a transparent and trustworthy way of giving to charity should be able to accommodate 'impulsive gift-giving'. In the philanthropy literature, impulsive gifting involves the practice of giving help directly to a person in distress to alleviate immediate suffering (Bornstein 2009). Thai donors view this impulsive form of *dāna* (gift-giving) as more transparent because they can clearly see the positive, both affective and material, effects of their gifts in a short space of time: the smiling faces and grateful looks of recipients or how their basic practical needs have been fulfilled. The fact that such positive effects are directly (without the mediation of charitable organisations) and instantaneously shown via Bunluerit's live streaming also contributes to this perception of transparency. When donations are mediated by charities, the immediate result of gift-giving tends to be less obvious or is shown in a form that is perceived, by some Thai donors, to be less transparent, for example a donation receipt, thank you note, or progress report. For impulsive gift-giving, intermediary charitable organisations are unnecessary and viewed with suspicion. Bunluerit's method of fundraising can satisfy donors' preference for impulsive giving by encouraging them

to pay money directly into the sufferer's bank account. Interpersonal trust in Bunluerit is integral to this endeavour as he purportedly passes on this trust to his beneficiaries to solicit gifts.

Compared with other fundraisers on official online platforms specifically designed for personal fundraising, like 'GoFundMe' and 'Facebook Fundraisers', Bunluerit's responsibilities on the page tend to be diversified, covering more than charitable appeals alone. On official platforms, campaign owners, who are usually beneficiaries, their family members, or close circles, are charged with the task of 'storytelling' (Clarke 2009; Merchant, Ford and Sargeant 2010), sharing the appeal with potential donors, including their social networks, and keeping supporters updated (GoFundMe 2019; Facebook 2020a). Meanwhile, the platforms take on the task of monitoring and complaint handling to ensure that funds will be used according to stated objectives (*Ibid.*). On Bunluerit's Facebook fan page, users are led to believe that he is in charge of storytelling and maintaining transparency[38]. When he communicates a story about suffering, it is more likely that the appeal will reach a larger audience, including potential donors who admire Bunluerit for his entertainment and philanthropic endeavours. If we consider personal fundraising to be a form of 'friend-raising' where the fundraiser's social network is appealed to for donations, having Bunluerit as a fundraiser can expand this network to include several millions of the fan page's followers and increase the chance of receiving more support (Corson-Finnerty and Blanchard 1998; Burnett 2002).

Bunluerit also has to vet potential beneficiaries to screen out scammers and those whom he thinks are likely to misuse the funds. The screening process is carried out via his

[38] Although it is not clear whether Bunluerit has a media team to help him with drafting the charitable messages posted on his Facebook fan page, in which the first-person narrative from the perspective of Bunluerit is used, he has often claimed in interviews and his live feeds that he reads users' comments and requests for help sent to him via Facebook himself, implying that he is responsible for the production of charity appeals and the initial screening process concerning potential beneficiaries (Milintachinda 2017; Petvirojchai 2019).

filmed charitable visits which allow Bunluerit, as well as media users watching the event live streamed on the Facebook fan page, to see with their own eyes the extent and authenticity of beneficiaries' suffering. Conversations with beneficiaries and/or their family members concerning their income, expenses, relationships, and the difficulties they are facing also inform Bunluerit's decisions concerning how much money he will give and whether or not he will solicit a donation from his page followers. In the following vignette from my live streaming fieldnotes, Bunluerit is described as deciding the matter on the spot after seeing how the beneficiary, who is an elderly woman, lives with her grandson. He declares to those watching his live streaming:

> I will give some money to the grandma ... I won't give much because I'm afraid that a large amount of money may cause a problem. I will give 15,000 baht (375 GBP) which I think is sufficient to buy necessary items ... I will not ask you to donate to the grandson's bank account because I don't think this will benefit the beneficiary in the long run. *(Live streaming field note, Jumnien)*

His decision not to make a wider appeal for the family may imply that Bunluerit's suspects that the grandson may misuse financial support; indeed, the misappropriation of donation money by a beneficiary's family member has been a recurring problem on the fan page (I discuss this problem further in Chapter 7).

However, this decision is based on Bunluerit's speculation, and it is not obvious what criteria he uses to judge who deserves to be the subject of one of his appeals or who is likely to misuse funds. This is probably why interpersonal trust in Bunluerit is indispensable in the fundraising process as donors have to rely on his subjective judgement regarding who a deserving beneficiary is. After all, these donors are considered to be Bunluerit's network in the

friend-raising process. They donate not only because of the affective narrative about suffering itself but also because it is directly communicated by Bunluerit. Through his long-term involvement with charitable activities, Bunluerit has earned himself a high level of 'philanthropic capital' that augments his trustworthiness (Rojek 2012). Consequently, donors have confidence in his ability to screen for deserving beneficiaries and his commitment to altruistic contributions. In this sense, his role seems to go further than being a personal fundraiser. He can be perceived, I argue, as an 'endorser of sufferers' who uses his fame and trustworthiness to secure credibility for beneficiaries.

While celebrity philanthropists are known primarily for vocations other than their philanthropic engagement (Panis 2012), Bunluerit's fame in recent years comes mainly from his charitable work, which tends to overshadow his acting and directing career, especially when he became a national hero because of his success raising funds for victims of the 2019 flood in Ubon Ratchathani. Also, there seem to be nuanced differences in the way celebrity fame operates to attract support for Bunluerit. Most celebrity philanthropists in European and North American countries employ their stardom to support a cause by fundraising, campaigning, or creating awareness (Huddart 2005). Bunluerit, however, has built philanthropic fame that now eclipses his professional stardom, and this fame draws attention not (only) to causes he believes in but (also or even primarily) to Bunluerit himself[39]. In short, Bunluerit is a philanthropic brand in himself; he has become a household name as a celebrity philanthropist and charity hero. This unique characteristic of Thai celebrity philanthropy can accommodate

[39] This philanthropic fame, to some extent, resonates with that of Bob Geldof, lead singer of the Boomtown Rats, who became better known as a celebrity philanthropist, due to his significant role in organising Band Aid and Live Aid concerts in 1984 and 1985 to fundraise money to help African nations, than for his musical achievements.

Bunluerit's role as the sufferers' endorser who is highly dependent on interpersonal trust in and the philanthropic capital of the celebrity.

To maintain the public's trust and accumulate philanthropic capital, Bunluerit has to promote his visibility, especially in relation to charitable works. The next section explores how he achieves this through 'celebrity practice', or the performance of a seemingly authentic self on social media (Marwick and boyd 2011a).

5.2 Celebrity Practice: Performing the Role of the Compassionate Macho Man

As Bunluerit's entertainment career has receded (he rarely makes appearances on traditional mass media), his Facebook fan page provides an effective channel through which to maintain public attention as well as his celebrity status (Marwick and boyd 2011a). Bunluerit's posts and live feeds not only tell stories about suffering beneficiaries but also include accounts of his day-to-day life and his views and feelings on topics from films to politics. At the start of each streaming session, he updates his fans and followers on his life since his last live cast:

> I would like to say hi to everyone. Sawasdee[40] my friends... Oh, I almost forgot. The day before yesterday was my mother's birthday... Thank you for your well wishes extended to her. Many of you, my friends, more than 10,000 page followers, gave her good wishes… ***(Live streaming field note, Noi)***

Bunluerit treating his followers as if they are a close circle – addressing them as 'friends' and telling them about his private life – can be considered part of 'celebrity practice' wherein famous people present 'a seemingly authentic, intimate image of self' (Marwick and boyd

[40] A Thai greeting.

2011a: 140) on social media platforms to create a 'perception of proximity' (see Chapter 3.3 for definition) and maintain relationships with fans.



Figure 3: Bunluerit and his mother (Source: Bunluerit's post on 4 October 2018)

The perception of proximity at work here can be compared to what I refer to as 'accessibility', where digital media users, or prosumers, can experience affective intensities from online encounters that rarely take place in non-digitally mediated environments. This perception leads fans to think that they are close to the celebrity, even though this intimacy is largely imaginary (Horton and Wohl 1956; Beer 2008; Marwick and boyd 2011a). Social media has been useful in enhancing this perception, as fans often feel that they are having direct and unmediated relationships with stars without the presence of their agents, managers, or bodyguards (Beer 2008; Marwick and boyd 2011a). The fact that Bunluerit uses his mobile phone to live broadcast his charitable activities without professionalised production crews or

processes also promotes the sense of authenticity in his self-presentation that in turn accentuates the perception of proximity. Users sometimes see mistakes during live broadcasts, for example the sound cutting out, insufficient lighting, or the camera moving up and down and losing its focus. These mistakes create a sense that what is shown in the live broadcast is unmediated and unpolished and thus truly revealing of the 'realness' of Bunluerit and his direct charitable actions.

Bunluerit enhances the perception of proximity and accessibility by having online exchanges with fans. He is often seen talking to those who post comments during the live streaming:

> [*Bhin reads aloud a comment*][41] I love you so much. [*He then answered that comment*] I love you too… [*He spent some time reading comments and responded to them with 'Thank you' or 'Sawasdee'*] ***(Live streaming field note, Noi)***.

The interactive function of digital platforms plays an important part in heightening the perception of proximity through 'virtual collectivity' and 'cybertouch' (Kuntsman 2010; 2012). I have argued that virtual collectivity is a property of networked affect which enables users to feel as if they are with someone else or other people even though they are alone. Bunluerit's real-time responses to comments can create a sense of co-presence, as if Bunluerit is near in time and distance. Although accessibility, mentioned earlier, also induces the perception of proximity, unlike virtual collectivity, it is less likely to make users feel a sense of togetherness – sharing time and space with other bodies or experiences. Accessibility may make users feel that they are close to Bunluerit in a parasocial relationship, while virtual collectivity enables

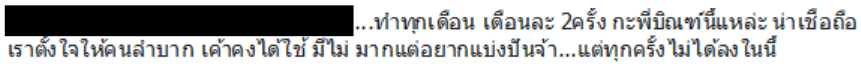
[41] Editorial comments are italicised and put in square brackets [ ] to distinguish them from the transcripts of live feeds.

users to have a parasocial interaction with him, for example to have a conversation with him or participate in his charitable visits. Cybertouch refers to how digital technologies bring distanced experiences closer either through physical touch on the screens of digital devices or through affective touch via technology-enhanced representation. When Bunluerit talks to his followers, he looks straight at the camera and viewers see a close-up of his face. This can give the feeling that Bunluerit is talking directly to each follower. In this manner, cybertouch operates by bringing Bunluerit's body closer via physically mediated touch on screens. The somatic touch works hand in hand with affective touch as Bunluerit delivers 'performed intimacy' through his account of his personal life and intimate feelings (Marwick and boyd 2011a).

Cultivating this perception of proximity is useful to Bunluerit's fundraising endeavours in many ways. Aside from maintaining visibility, the fantasy of friendship can secure fans' long-term engagement with the celebrity's philanthropic activities. Research suggests that personal relationships with fundraisers have a significant impact on the decision to give, especially on social media platforms (Payne, Scharf and Smith 2012; Castillo, Petrie and Wardell 2014; Scharf and Smith 2016b). As Bunluerit attempts to personalise the relationship between him and his fans, this performed intimacy may encourage his followers to make donations and to continue to do so whenever he makes an appeal. Kimberly Scharf and Sarah Smith (2016a; 2016b) attribute the success of peer-to-peer fundraising, where fundraisers solicit a donation from their networks, to 'relational altruism'. Donors who are motivated by relational altruism give gifts because they care more about the fundraiser, who is either their friend, colleague, or family member, than the cause. In the case of Bunluerit, I argue that the parasocial relationship between Bunluerit and the fan page followers creates a sense that Bunluerit is a friend of potential donors and enables the process of friend-raising to operate effectively. This relational

altruism also points to how celebrities' affective power (Marshall 1997), discussed in Chapter 3, can be used to mobilise the resources and support needed.

Although fans' engagement in charitable activities animated by this relational altruism is a result of their attraction to the celebrity and their wish to see their star achieve their philanthropic aims (Chouliaraki 2013; Bennett 2014; Jeffreys and Xu 2017), the amicable relationship between them, I further argue, is not necessarily the primary motive that drives donors to give. One donor, for instance, provided reasons why she gives to beneficiaries on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page:


...ท่าทุกเดือน เดือนละ 2ครั้ง กะพี่บิณฑ์นี่แหล่ะ น่าเชื่อถือ
เราตั้งใจให้คนลำบาก เค้าคงได้ใช้ มีไม่ มากแต่อยากแบ่งปันจ้า...แต่ทุกครั้งไม่ได้ลงในนี้

> I donate twice every month with Bhin. He is trustworthy. I want to give to people in need and hope that they use it. I don't have much but I want to share… ***(Comment by a user)***

Unlike relational altruism, where it does not matter what charitable activities fans are asked to participate in, as long as it is their favoured celebrity who makes the request, Bunluerit's donor clearly expresses her intention to give to those most in need. Her rationale for donating via Bunluerit's platform is more about her faith in his philanthropic capital rather than a fandom relationship. The perception of proximity, in this respect, works to secure fans' engagement that is primarily based on a shared philanthropic purpose.

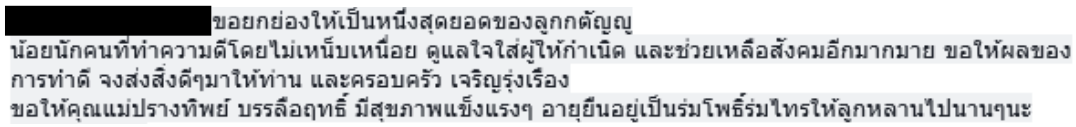
The perception of proximity can also be helpful in self-presentation. Bunluerit's talk of his personal life, especially in relation to his mother, softens his tough macho image. The masculine persona can be advantageous to his rescue volunteer work, whereas the gentle and caring image, projected in the way he is perceived as interacting with his mother, enables

donors to see a more compassionate side, which is a key element in his relationship with beneficiaries. While these qualities of being masculine and compassionate may seem, from the perspective of Western patriarchal gendered cultural norms, to be contradictory or in tension, Bunluerit's successful image as a Thai celebrity philanthropist is achieved and maintained precisely through his skill in reconciling them. These apparently contradictory qualities found in Bunluerit echo the affective relations of *dej* (coercion) and *khun* (benevolence, gratitude) which the patron makes use of in their relationship with clients. To make the philanthropic relationship between Bunluerit as the patron and the beneficiaries and page followers as clients successful and lasting, Bunluerit is required to show that he has the qualities that a patron should possess, including having enough authoritative power to indicate that he is in control of *dej*, and enough compassion to demonstrate he has *khun* so can provide the resources that clients need. Bunluerit signals the affective quality of having enough assertive power of *dej* by projecting the image of a tough macho man whose physical masculine power, to some extent (especially in Thai patriarchal society, where most leaders are male), implies authoritative power and a controlling influence. The quality of kindness that is needed to have *khun* is shown through the loving and caring relationship he has with his mother as well as with beneficiaries.

In addition to the presentation of Bunluerit's caring characteristics, the presentation of the close relationship between Bunluerit and his mother signals to media users that he has the highly regarded virtue of *katanyu*, or gratitude. As discussed in Chapter 3, *katanyu* is the feeling of indebtedness towards a person who has *khun*[42] or who has done good things for you, as well as the feeling that you want to attempt to return such kindness (Komin 1990; Mulder 2000).

[42] Thai people often say *katanyu roo khun*, meaning being grateful and acknowledging who has *khun* or is benevolent towards them.

Individuals should feel gratitude, first and foremost, to their parents (Mulder 2000; Ratanakul 2013). Bunluerit, by revealing how he lovingly cares for his mother, is implying to users that he possesses this admirable trait. Some fans praised him for having this moral quality:


[redacted]ขอยกย่องให้เป็นหนึ่งสุดยอดของลูกกตัญญู
น้อยนักคนที่ทำความดีโดยไม่เหน็บเหนื่อย ดูแลใจใส่ผู้ให้กำเนิด และช่วยเหลือสังคมอีกมากมาย ขอให้ผลของการทำดี จงส่งสิ่งดีๆมาให้ท่าน และครอบครัว เจริญรุ่งเรือง
ขอให้คุณแม่ปรางทิพย์ บรรลือฤทธิ์ มีสุขภาพแข็งแรงๆ อายุยืนอยู่เป็นร่มโพธิ์ร่มไทรให้ลูกหลานไปนานๆนะ

> I think you are one of the most *katanyu* persons. Very few people can do good without being tired, take great care of their parents and help lots of people. I hope the fruit of your kind deeds bring good things to you and your family … ***(Comment by a user)***

By presenting himself as a *katanyu* person, Bunluerit can win admiration as well as trust from fans.

According to Buddhist teaching, *katanyu* is considered to be a quality of a good person (Wijesinghe 2008; Wangwan 2014). If individuals show the virtue of *katanyu*, they are assumed to also be moral in other aspects of their lives. Being seen to have this quality enhances Bunluerit's image as a trustworthy person; those who feel grateful for the benevolence of others would never betray their benefactors or donors, nor people who put trust in them. The *katanyu* persona Bunluerit projects strengthens his role as an endorser of sufferers whose philanthropic work relies heavily on interpersonal trust. One of the reasons that *katanyu* is such an important moral value in the Thai context, I argue, is that it underlies the patron–client relationship. Gratitude binds clients to the asymmetrical power relations in which beneficiaries need to obey patrons' wishes because of moral indebtedness (Bourdieu 2005; Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). As such, the presentation of *katanyu* stresses the core value binding relationships between Bunluerit and his beneficiaries and Bunluerit and his fans. Significantly, this is the same value that helps legitimise the entrenchment of power differentials and arguably victimises sufferers in the first place.

The perception of proximity can lead fans to think that they are seeing the real self of their beloved celebrities. As a social media platform is often seen as a channel through which to directly contact celebrities via the affordance of disintermediation, what is communicated via the platform tends to be seen as having the characteristics of a confessional self-disclosure that can reveal the authentic self of the stars (Redmond 2008; King 2008; Bennett 2014). By projecting compassion and gratefulness on his fan page, Bunluerit is making sure that both the front and the back region (Goffman 1956), as well as his public and private life, convey a consistent impression of himself as a kind and trustworthy person. However, not every user is convinced by Bunluerit's self-presentation. The celebrity's attempt to keep the front and back regions perfectly in sync have prompted many to question his true self and the reasons behind his considerable effort in charitable works. For example, Jorm, an interviewee who has never donated to Bunluerit's fan page, expresses suspicions about the celebrity philanthropist:

> To be honest, I doubt his intention whether he is really sincere in his help or not … He might be like other philanthropists who work to promote their image, like putting on an act to show that he is a good person. *(Interview, Jorm, Donor giving to other fundraising pages)*

Yet this questioning of the authenticity of celebrities' self-presentation can ultimately be useful for their aims. Indeed, the business of celebrity predominantly revolves around attention, and what tends to gain attention is, more or less, contention rather than consensus (Gamson 2011). Having some fuel for gossip may benefit Bunluerit by keeping him in the limelight, as there is media space for his allegations and defences. In this sense, authenticity may not be as important as visibility. As Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011a: 144) maintain, 'Determining whether readers are watching an "authentic" individual or a performed "celebrity" persona is

not entirely the point; it is the uncertainty that creates pleasure for the celebrity-watcher.' If seeking authenticity is not the point, what, then, is the function of self-presentation via celebrities' social media accounts? Scholars also argue that the purpose of performing authenticity is to make fans recognise the asymmetrical status between stars and themselves. By consuming celebrities' glamour and superior lifestyles, fans can vicariously live out their own unfulfilled dreams (Bulck 2018; Gilbert 2004).

Bunluerit's glamour, however, lies in his seemingly moral superiority and heroic masculine ideal rather than in wealth, luxury, or sex appeal (Thrift 2010). In a context where capitalism leads to greater economic inequality and the most vulnerable have to live on meagre welfare support, consuming the image of a compassionate macho 'hero' can soothe anxieties about an economically insecure status. Media users, I want to suggest, feel more secure with the fantasy of protector/saviour because they convince themselves that if they were in a difficult situation and receiving little help from the state, they could seek help from a benefactor like Bunluerit. This argument takes into account the Thai cultural tendency to seek help from patrons or to find a *thi phueng* (benefactor) when formal institutions cannot provide those in need with necessary resources (Rabibhadana 1975; Mulder 2000). In his live feeds, Bunluerit is seen offering himself as a *thi phueng* for those most in need:

> If there is anything I can do for you [users], please let me know … If you would like to ask for help, you can call this number. If it is an urgent matter, I will go to your place as soon as possible. Even if it is not urgent, I will go as well but you may need to wait a little bit. ***(Live streaming field note, Gun)***

The moral macho persona fits the ideal of a *thi phueng* who is able to protect vulnerable people and provide what they need.

The macho saviour character is the fantasy that those who are less privileged more likely to indulge in than that of luxury and superior lifestyles as it offers the possibility of having a *thi phueng*. For Bunluerit's fans in better economic situations, they tend to enjoy the fantasy of a caring society where people help each other in difficult times and the macho hero is always there to give support. In this vein, Nid, an interviewee, romantically portrays the dynamics of gift-giving on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page:

> This is why I admire Bhin. It is incredible that every page follower gives. If they have a lot, they give much. If they have less, they give less. Even if the donation is only 20 or 30 baht [around 50p], no one would look down on it. Everyone feels happy about it. *(Interview, Nid, Donor)*

Behind these fantasies of a macho saviour and a caring society, however, is the assumption that complex issues like poverty can be resolved by charitable giving alone. This belief is supported by the core ideology of celebrity philanthropy that sees the actions of influential individuals as the solution to social ills. In the context of the neoliberal culture of individualisation in industrialised Western countries, each subject needs to be responsible for their own life choices as well as resolving problems that may arise despite the interwoven nature of social and personal life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 2011). Underpinned by this neoliberal discourse, celebrity philanthropy provides an individualised solution to structural problems as contributions from each donor as well as philanthropic efforts led by an individual celebrity are believed to help eradicate the suffering faced by many (Littler 2008).

Celebrity philanthropy in Thailand echoes this same discourse as an individual macho hero is seen to offer a solution to what is considered in neoliberal terms a 'personal' problem.

Despite arguing that celebrity philanthropy in Thailand is significantly influenced by neoliberal individualism, I maintain that individualisation in the Thai context is different from that of the late modern Western social milieu in the way that the collective and traditional bonds still have a profound influence on the Thai neoliberal subject (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). While Thailand essentially pursues neoliberal policies that encourage its people to take on the responsibility of looking after their own lives, unlike Western industrialised societies, the country does not have the structural conditions, for example a stable economic status, the structure of a welfare state, the expansion of education, strong support for and legal protection of labour, and ample opportunity for social mobility, that undergird Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) 'institutionalized individualization'. In this narrative of institutionalised individualisation, subjects are supposedly freed from prescribed social forms, including tradition, class, stratification, family, and gender status, and are increasingly pressured to create their own biographies and self-identities from the diverse options available. In the Thai context, people are forced to have 'a life of one's own' (Beck 1992) without sufficient support from the state, so they turn to these sources to access aid to enable them to survive in the neoliberal regime, but this does not extend to being able to construct individualised biographies. The above discussion about the fantasy of a caring community provides a case in point, underscoring the significance of these collective and traditional social forms to the Thai neoliberal subject.

My analysis of Bunluerit's digital celebrity practice and its reliance on Thai cultural values like *katanyu* and on the heroism of compassionate macho men contributes to the main argument of this chapter by showing how celebrity philanthropy in the Thai context helps to maintain the economic and socio-political status quo by depoliticising economic inequities and

turning them into a personal problem that can be addressed by celebrity philanthropists and compassionate prosumers. To deal with structural issues, Bunluerit does what he has been trained to do in his acting and directing career, that is, to keep people entertained by creating a fantasy in which the macho benefactor reaches out altruistically to those who are vulnerable and people are fundamentally kind to each other. Under the influence of this fantasy, the unequal status quo and the actions of the government, which is supposed to promote the welfare of its citizens, are left unchallenged. The next section will expand on the discourse of hero that lends support to the status quo.

5.3 The Thai Fundraising Hero

Bunluerit's most successful fundraising effort to date occurred in 2019 when he raised more than 10 million GBP for the flood relief fund. This charitable feat took off when he was filmed on the brink of tears while talking about the flood situation in a live feed:

> I have seen many families put on a brave face. Some families are... [*Bhin paused. He bit his lower lip in an attempt to hold back his tears. He nodded and blinked before continuing.*] *Naa songsarn*[43]. [*He paused again and turned away from the camera to hide his tears. When he turned back, he could not say anything and sighed. He looked particularly sad.*] I don't know but I went there. I can feel and I know…. [*His voice trembled.*] I want to help but I am not that rich. [*He paused and breathed heavily to stop the tears from welling up.*] ***(Live streaming field note[44])***

[43] Deserving compassion.

[44] Although the event occurred after the empirical fieldwork period, I thought the information would be useful for my analysis, so I made an additional field note.

In this vignette, the 'celebrity confessional' is employed, making the appeal emotional, authentic, and impactful (Redmond 2008; Bennett 2014). A celebrity confessional is a practice of self-disclosure which helps 'authenticate, validate, humanize, resurrect, extend and enrich' the identity of a star (Redmond 2008: 110) (see section 3.3). Even though Bunluerit sometimes discloses personal feelings in an attempt to reveal (or cultivate) his authentic self, he has never shed a tear in his live streaming. His emotional plea caused a huge stir. Three days after the plea, more than 7 million GBP was donated to his bank account (Matichon Online 2019a) and overnight he became the national fundraising hero.

Scott Allison and George Goethals (2010: 62) identify eight traits associated with a hero: they are intelligent, strong, selfless, caring, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring. Aside from having positive qualities, a hero can, at times, be seen as vulnerable and as making small mistakes. In the same way that the celebrity confessional works to create a perception of proximity, some degree of vulnerability, I argue, helps make a hero more relatable. After all, one of the main purposes of a cultural hero is to provide a role model (Myerhoff and Larson 1965), and a too-perfect role model is unconvincing and hard to emulate. Moreover, vulnerability, in the sense of being sensitive to the plight of others, is a quality people can value in their role model. The ability to empathise with those who are less privileged and a caring and compassionate attitude are part of the reason why people admire a hero. In the case of Bunluerit, it is in part his mediated vulnerability that arouses compassion in users and thus encourages donations, especially when this is expressed as sensitivity and sympathy.

Heroic status is considered to be a part of the wider economy of respect and honour which establishes 'a system of social control that shapes much of social life' (Goode 1978: vii) and, in Thailand, this economy of respect primarily involves male authority and Buddhist

ideologies of power. By examining what makes Bunluerit a hero in the Thai context, we can better understand the social order underlying the rise of the celebrity philanthropist. This will be achieved by observing the traits of the Thai fundraising hero in comparison with a UK counterpart, the late Captain Sir Tom Moore, who raised almost 33 million GBP for the NHS during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shearing 2020). I argue that both the Thai and the British fundraising heroes possess strength, compassion, and charisma, among other heroic traits (Allison and Goethals 2010) that, when translated into their particular cultural milieus, point to the different ways people within both contexts understand these qualities and admire their heroes.

Considering my discussion earlier about the sensitivity of a hero and how Bunluerit employs this vulnerability to arouse compassion in his fan page followers, I argue that the trait of strength can be discerned as the other side of the same coin of vulnerability. A hero who possesses this quality is actually strategically projecting the right kind of vulnerability at the right time. The strength that most people saw in Moore, a 100-year-old war veteran who died in February 2021, was his determination to complete the mission of walking 100 laps of his garden during the first UK lockdown of the Covid-19 global pandemic despite having a frail body (Lewis 2020; Clifton 2020). The strength in this sense is highlighted by the juxtaposition of the physical labour Moore undertook and the vulnerability of his health. The strength seen in Thai heroes often entails more virulent physical masculinity placed alongside tender affective states like compassion, which highlights the strategic display of emotions and vulnerability. The emphasis on virulent strength again shows that the male–macho hegemony forms the dominant order in the Thai context. Bunluerit's strong-looking appearance and the intense physical activities that he is seen engaging in as part of his volunteering work point to what many Thai people prefer to see in a hero. In the predominantly patriarchal Thai culture,

very few women have been hailed as a hero. To be a hero, one has to either possess superior physical strength (a so-called macho characteristic), such as that found in Olympic medallists in sports like boxing or weightlifting, or perform a heroic act that shows devotion to a dominant male figure, such as the act of Queen Suriyothai, a historical heroine who went to war and died defending her royal husband (Winichakul 2001; Jirattikorn 2003). Since the position of authority is mostly reserved for men, the best that women can do as heroines is to support men in their power roles (Kriengkraipetch 2000).

The Thai hero is expected to be strong and tough, yet caring enough to show their vulnerable side. In the case of Moore, 'caring', I argue, refers to his honourable intention to fundraise for the NHS, which signals that he genuinely cared about those who were working on the frontline fighting Covid-19. For Bunluerit, however, 'caring' is more about showing 'conspicuous compassion', that is, making his help and kindness apparent to the public (West 2004; Veblen 2009). This involves, for instance, touching and being in close proximity to beneficiaries with contagious or unpleasant-looking diseases. Bunluerit explains why he does not mind touching such beneficiaries in a television interview:

> I don't care whether they have an infectious disease or not. All I'm thinking of is if I show them any aversion, they will feel bad about themselves … I want them to know that I am not repulsed by what they have. I am sincere in my help. I didn't just come and take pictures … Some beneficiaries hadn't showered for months. I cleaned them and cut their hair … (Wongphudee 2016)

Bunluerit's apparent compassion and his touching of beneficiaries seem to resonate with how Princess Diana and Mother Theresa, so-called feminine iconic figures, treated the sick and vulnerable. They were praised for their caring attitude but were simultaneously criticised for

using 'the poor and the sick as "accessories"' for self-promotion (Hitchens 1997: 9 cited in Hey 1999). What is different in the context of Thai celebrity philanthropy is that so-called feminine caring attributes – caressing, touching, and 'motherly' care – are incorporated into the projected self of the male macho hero. Arvind Rajagopal (1999) argues in his analysis of the roles and philanthropic works of Princess Diana and Mother Theresa that female celebrities are predominantly portrayed as empathetic caring figures that contrast with coercive masculine state power to help balance the pressure of the powerful state with nurturing and caring elements. What is distinctive about the Thai hero, then, is that while his caressing touch and close proximity to beneficiaries signal his compassionate orientation towards people in need, he remains manly and strong and has the power to mobilise enormous resources from lots of people. I argue that in this sense, authoritative patriarchal power is prevalent and has spread into almost every realm of Thai society. Even in the realm of philanthropy and care, which are often considered to be feminine spaces, patriarchal masculinity still plays a predominant role.



Figure 4: Screenshot of Bunluerit's live feed showing him embracing a beneficiary lying on the floor

Importantly, however, these benevolent and caring characteristics tend to be portrayed in a paternalistic fashion that entails authoritative supervision of a parent–child relationship. This paternalistic approach can be seen, for instance, when Bunluerit explicitly instructs beneficiaries during his live feeds to only use donation money for essential needs:

> You should spend every baht you received from donors wisely. Don't use it on something unnecessary. When you don't have money, your life will be difficult. When you have it, you thus should keep it safe and use it carefully. *(Live streaming field note, Duen)*

This close and paternalistic supervision is indicative of patron–client relations in which Bunluerit as a patron shows his benevolence and authoritative power to reassure clients that they will be taken care of under his protection. However, even the charitable relationships themselves are partly constituted by paternalism (LeRoux 2009; Barnett 2012; 2014). When these relationships are situated in the context of the patron–client system, the superior power and status of benefactors becomes even more evident and encroaches further on beneficiaries' lives. On the one hand, paternalism is perceived to be a well-intended intervention that supports beneficiaries' interests (Barnett 2014). On the other hand, it can be a means for benefactors to maintain their superiority in asymmetric power relations by suppressing the autonomy of those who are economically disadvantaged. In this way, those who are less privileged come to passively accept the exercise of power by people who are more privileged.

The last aspect that illustrates the different ways in which British and Thai people understand the heroic traits of Moore and those of Bunluerit, and by extension the wider differences between celebrity philanthropy in the UK and Thailand is charisma. I argue that charisma plays an important role in Bunluerit's fundraising as it is the main source of the

interpersonal trust that encourages people to donate money to the causes he promotes. Interpersonal trust, especially in terms of transparency in fund management, seems to be less significant in the case of Moore since the fundraising platform and the beneficiary organisation are responsible for the relevant processes. Charisma in the case of Moore therefore concerns the question of what inspires people to give, whereas for Bunluerit, there is also the question of how he earns people's trust. Charisma is defined as a certain quality that renders the possessor extraordinary, as if 'endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers' and enable him/her to be regarded as a leader (Weber 1978: 241). The concept of charisma ostensibly coincides with the Thai Buddhist notion of *barami*, or the charismatic quality attained through *karmic* merit accumulation.

Similar to Weber's definition of charisma, *barami* is often linked to supernatural force, or *saksit*. In the Thai discourse of power, *barami* and *saksit* are often used to legitimise a person's authority, that is, to convince the public to develop interpersonal trust in an individual. In the context of objective standards of bureaucratic apparatuses and institutionalised organisations being difficult to reassure people, trust needs to be based on something powerful enough to assuage doubts and opposition (Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci 2017). *Barami* and *saksit* are powerful justifications that are based on supernatural force. Significantly, Bunluerit often identifies *saksit* as the source of his legitimacy to carry out philanthropic activities. In a television interview, he claimed that he received help from a supernatural power:

> I often won the lottery. I sometimes won 7-800,000 baht (17,500–20,000 GBP) in one play but normally I got at least two to three hundred thousand baht. I know that this money was given from 'up there' to help me. I have to help lots of people. If I don't have any money, how can I help them? (Juntapun 2019)

While it may seem preposterous from a Western secular perspective to base the seemingly rational concept of legitimacy on magical explanations, these superstitious rationales align with Thai religious and supernatural beliefs, in which human actions are believed to be linked to cosmological events and celestial power under the absolute law of *karma* (Tambiah 1977; McDaniel 2011; Wattanagun 2017). Specifically, since the idea of charitable giving is considered to be closely related to merit-making and *karmic* consequences, Bunluerit's association with a holy being from 'up there' (reminiscent of the way Thai people understand power as a force flowing from celestial realms (Siani 2020)) justifies his wealth while also signalling to the public that he is morally and divinely qualified for his philanthropic mission.

Charisma is a two-way street: the charismatic hero possesses certain qualities and followers have to acknowledge these qualities as extraordinary and attribute them to the person (Allison and Goethals 2010). As Bunluerit claims supernatural legitimacy, his admirers also believe in such representation and his *barami*. More than thirty years of Bunluerit's volunteering work led many fans to believe that he had accumulated much merit and that as a consequence his *barami* had become enormous. In a live feed, beneficiaries showed their admiration for his *barami*:

> [*Noi cried while grabbing Bhin's hand and put it on her forehead*[45]*. She put her hand together in an act of wai*[46] *and said to him,*] I asked for your merit to protect me.
>
> [*One neighbour said to Noi's husband,*] Can you promise Bhin to stop drinking?
>
> …

[45] The act is reminiscent of how Christians touch their forehead in the sign of the cross to remind them of God (Andreopoulos 2010). Thai people also make a connection with the holy by touching their head or forehead.

[46] A namaste posture with a bowed head adopted as a greeting or to show respect.

> [*The same neighbour added,*] Bhin has always been a *saparn boon* (merit bridge[47]). He has *saksit* so you need to keep your word. ***(Live streaming field note, Noi)***

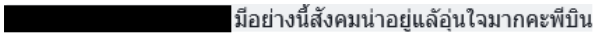
Aside from enhancing interpersonal trust among users, *saksit* in this context functions to give beneficiaries moral and spiritual support as well as to curb any undesirable (according to Bunluerit) behaviour including, in this context, the alcohol consumption of the beneficiary's husband. The husband was made to promise Bunluerit that he would stop drinking. Since Bunluerit is viewed as having *saksit*, if the promise made to him is broken, the promiser may face supernatural punishment.

In this excerpt, Bunluerit is not only associated with supernatural power that justifies his celebrity philanthropist status, but also becomes a sacred man himself. He is highly revered in a similar way to how Thai people would react to a *saksit* object or person, for example they may hold a holy object or part of the body of the person on their head or forehead, believing that doing so will mean they obtain supernatural power. What the beneficiary and her close circle see in Bunluerit's sacredness, I argue, is also linked to the affective power based on *dej* and *khun*. On the one hand, Bunluerit has *khun* by protecting Noi through *saksit* power and shares his supernatural force with her by touching her forehead. On the other hand, Bunluerit's *dej* is manifested in the way that he is believed to be able to punish Noi's husband by supernatural means if he breaks his promise to stop drinking. In this way, Bunluerit's secular authority – he is an endorser of sufferers who decides whom to give money to or whether or not to fundraise for a beneficiary – is blended with his sacred power – he is a *saksit* being who

[47] A person who encourages people to make merit by telling them about potential beneficiaries. The person is considered to achieve *karmic* gain from giving people a chance to make merit.

can use his supernatural force to protect beneficiaries but also to punish them if they do not follow his orders.

While perspectives on charitable giving in other cultures have been historically aligned with religions, for example charity in Europe has its origin in the Judeo-Christian tradition, what is distinctive in the case of Bunluerit is not the religious element per se, but that the assumption of supernatural agency is linked to Buddhist beliefs, which are used to benefit the celebrity endorser. However, the mobilisation of *saksit* can only be successful for those who believe in Bunluerit's sacredness. After all, the charismatic hero discourse tends to be more about a feel-good story rather than the unvarnished truth. It is not the hero himself but what the hero can make people feel that matters most (Frisk 2019). Whether or not Bunluerit has *saksit* is not as important as how he creates a sense of affective security and solidarity for his beneficiaries and admirers. Some followers expressed these feelings in comments on the fan page:



Having this [*help from Bunluerit*] makes our society a better place to live. I feel very safe, Pi [*Big Brother*] Bhin. ***(Comment by a user)***



Seeing Thai people helping and supporting each other, I don't feel lonely nor alone. I'm proud to be Thai. Keep going! ***(Comment by a user)***

Solidarity and a nationalistic passion concerning belonging, as shown in these comments, also play a part in the hero discourse. The love for heroes can foster a sense of comradeship and solidarity that bonds people (Cooley 1922). It is therefore not uncommon to see page followers post comments that show their nationalistic fervour. The idea of solidarity that is tied to in-group compassion can also be seen in the ideal of '*khon Thai jaidee'* (Thai people are generous)

mentioned in the Introduction chapter. This, I argue, is another romanticised concept used to soothe the fears and anxiety of people living with significant inequality and insecurity.

As an integral part of celebrity philanthropy in the Thai context, the hero discourse, I argue, functions to keep resentment against an unjust structure in check with a fantasy of heroes and solidarity within national borders, making institutional change seem unnecessary. Heroes often arise out of cultural 'moments of distress' and recede 'with the development of permanent institutional structures' as heroes make people feel secure in times of difficulty and uncertainty (Weber 1978: 1111, 1133). Thailand has never been short of heroes[48]. The frequent emergence of heroes should lead people to question the current social structure that allows regular occurrences of 'moments of distress' and the help that the government provides to its citizens to deal with difficult situations without resorting to heroic actions. Yet such questions have rarely been raised and are often been replaced by an appreciation of heroes and self-deceiving optimism.

While the last three sections focused on Bunluerit, his role as a celebrity philanthropist, and his heroic fame, the next section will focus on relationships between him, his fans, and beneficiaries that, I argue, lends support to the status quo through the affective bond of gratitude (*khun*) and coercion (*dej*).

[48] In the past ten years, significant Thai heroes hailed by the media include Sorayuth Suthassanachinda, a reporter soliciting help during the 2011 flood; Toon Bodyslam, a singer who raised money to purchase medical equipment for public hospitals in 2017; and Bunluerit, who gave money after the 2019 flood and during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic to residents in poor urban areas (Matichon Online 2017; Thairath Online 2017; Kom Chad Luek 2020).

5.4 Behind the Kindness: Patron–Client Relations, *Khun*, and *Dej*

The characteristics of the Thai fundraising hero point to a rather rigid social structure that is ideologically justified by Buddhist beliefs in *karmic* consequences and cosmological notions of power. Respect and honour are often reserved for those in paternalistic positions of power who also have Buddhist legitimacy. Underlying this economy of respect is the patron–client system that constructs and maintains social order through the asymmetrical relationship of reciprocity between benefactors and beneficiaries (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980). Patrons maintain relationships with clients through affective ties of *khun* and *dej*[49]. On the fan page, Bunluerit (patron) makes his *khun* apparent to the public by showing himself giving cash to beneficiaries (clients) even though it is safer and more convenient to make a bank transfer. In a live feed, for example, sixty landslide victims were summoned to receive relief funds in cash in person:

> [*While Bhin and his staff divided the cash into 60 stacks, the head of the subdistrict called out several names. Villagers whose names were called stood in line and waited for Bhin to hand out the cash… The live streaming showed Bhin handing out cash to each beneficiary. It took around ten minutes to complete*.] ***(Live streaming field note, Bunluerit's trip to Nan[50])***

By having underprivileged people lining up to receive gifts of money directly from him, Bunluerit creates a spectacle that users expect to see when they tune in to his live feeds; they hope to witness his heroic acts, which include showing conspicuous compassion, paying in-

[49] The affective tie based on *dej* and *khun* is similar to what Chris Rojek (2012: 61) describes as emotional responses to a charismatic leader: 'It [charisma] brings delight and awe to some. To others it delivers fear and woe.'

[50] In this live feed, Bunluerit broadcasted his trip to Nan to give money raised by him to landslide victims.

person charitable visits, and giving money directly to people in need rather than simply displaying printed receipts for his donations. At the same time, the spectacle reinforces the hierarchy of power in which Bunluerit convinces users of his status and moral superiority, whereas beneficiaries are subjected to the inferior position as the 'object of compassion' (Bourdieu 2005; Spelman 2001).



Figure 5: Screenshot of Bunluerit handing money to landslide victims waiting in line, taken from live feed

The hierarchies of power and privilege can manifest themselves in the ways in which sensorial and embodied interactions are mediated on the fan site. In live feeds, many beneficiaries are seen paying considerable respect to Bunluerit when they receive cash from him. To show their heartfelt appreciation, some donors *kraab*[51] on Bunluerit's knee. *Kraab* is a way of showing the greatest respect, as the lower body of the person who has been greeted is honoured by the action. The manner of recipients' physical interaction with donors seems to

[51] *Kraab* has the same pose as *wai* (see Footnote 46), but *kraab* is made to the lower part of the body of the person who is greeted in a similar manner to *kowtow*, or prostration. Thai people believe that the lower and upper parts of the body have different values; the upper domain should be honoured while the lower part is considered to be debased (Eawsriwong 2014).

perform and reinforce their lower position in the social hierarchy. I argue that *kraab* signifies in an affective and visceral way how beneficiaries agree to become subservient to a patron. By physically prostrating themselves, clients show submission to their benefactor. Accordingly, in Bunluerit's spectacles, beneficiaries are depicted as tamed both mentally (meekly obeying Bunluerit's orders) and physically (taking up postures that indicate their inferiority).



Figure 6: Screenshots of beneficiaries' kraab and Bunluerit taken from live feeds

Digitally publicising Bunluerit's *khun* and patron status means that this hierarchy-enhancing ideology is affectively reinforced. The expression of gratitude, or *katanyu*, can promote the acceptance of inequality, as the assertion of power through gift-giving is highly appreciated and the submission to superior power by people at the bottom of the social structure is positively welcomed as a moral virtue. At times, however, this moral principle is compromised on the fan page and the beneficiary can be seen being openly criticised or undermined. In one encounter, a teenage daughter of the beneficiary was seen playing with her mobile phone and ignoring Bunluerit's presence. Some users made comments about her behaviour.

[redacted] เด็กด้านหลัง ไม่เหมาะสม

The girl in the background does not behave properly. *(Comment by a user)*

[redacted] เด็กข้างหลังพี่บิณมาทำไมไม่สนใจพี่บิณเล่นแต่โทรสัพอย่างเดียวเลย

Why is the girl behind Brother Bhin not paying attention to him and only playing with her phone? *(Comment by a user)*

Bunluerit appeared to recognise and respond to these types of comments after his visit:

> She is too young to know what is right or wrong. She was playing with her phone all the time during the visit. In a family where no one is taking care of her, she may not have that good judgement. *(Live streaming field note, Gun)*

Feeling entitled to beneficiaries' respect, Bunluerit and his fans view the daughter's behaviour as inappropriate. Their critique is, I suggest, indicative of the two-facedness of compassion. On the one hand, compassion can bring about temporary relief from suffering. On the other hand, it tends to claim power over beneficiaries' bodies and behaviour (as well as those around them) through the discourse of gratitude. Beneficiaries, or clients, who are *naa songsarn*, or deserving of compassion, not only have to be in an abject and pitiable condition; they are also expected to act and behave in ways that signify their surrender of power and autonomy to patrons. The workings of gendered relations of power in Thai patriarchal society can also be seen here. The fact that the person who ignores Bunluerit is a young woman may also contribute to her being criticised. If a young man had played with his phone during Bunluerit's visit, the action would likely have been overlooked, as men in Thai culture are not expected to be as obedient and submissive as women (Kriengkraipetch 2000; Mulder 2000). Here, the intensity of power exercised to control clients is inherently gendered. What lies beneath the

mask of Thai kindness and compassion is a ruthless suppression of any form of challenge to the masculinist power hierarchy.

The way in which the beneficiary's daughter ignored Bunluerit can be interpreted as an act of resistance that challenges his power and diminishes the influence of the hegemonic representation of superior masculinity and the domineering control of the patron. One might argue that such a minor act of resistance is unlikely to produce results that might undermine the status quo, particularly considering how social media users shame the daughter for such an act of disobedience. However, resistance does not need to 'have the arrogance of programmatic politics' to have an impact; indeed, such minor engagements in the here and now 'refuse their designation as politics at all' (Rose 2004: 279-280). While acts like the one described above may appear modest and/or tentative, they nonetheless point to blips and gaps in everyday interactions that entail 'actionable spaces' for change (Rose 2004; Pedwell 2017). In this example, the daughter's act of disobedience, I want to argue, has an affective impact on Bunluerit such that he has to re-establish his power by pointing out her lack of judgement in failing to pay respect and attention to him in order to quell the imminent challenge to his patron status.

Bunluerit also considers his followers as his clients who are supposed to recognise and return his *khun*. In one live feed, for instance, he asks his page followers to reciprocate his benevolence by watching a film he directed:

> When I direct a movie, please go and watch it. This is the only thing I want in return of my giving … If you want to give me moral support, please do not just consider whether the movie is good or not, just go and watch it. When the movie makes money, I can have the morale I need. The profit made will be used to help other people. ***(Live streaming field note, Jaem)***

Framing clients' obligations towards a patron as 'moral support', Bunluerit instructs fans to watch his films whatever their quality. Since the users are not direct beneficiaries, their action is not influenced by the power of his gift-giving as much as that of sufferers. However, many page followers appear to accede to his request:

[redacted]จะไปดูหนังของคุณทุกเรื่องค่ะ

I will watch every movie you do. *(Comment by a user)*

[redacted]ดูทุกเรื่องสร้างเฮอะดูแล้วได้บุญด้วย

I watched every movie of yours. Just make it. Watching your movie, I can also make merit. *(Comment by a user)*

Bunluerit's plea shows how *khun* works to oblige beneficiaries to do something in return for a patron's favour. On the one hand, this plea seems to be harmless as it is normal for celebrities to ask their fans to see their works. On the other hand, the way Bunluerit frames this request as an act to return his *khun* without caring about the quality of the film risks turning into a slippery slope that could start as ignoring the merit of a work but later turns into breaking rules or laws as a personal favour. Examples where such a misuse of influence leads to nepotism or corrupt practices abound (Khan 1998; Manzetti and Wilson 2007; Miah and Suzuki 2018). In Thailand, this needs to be understood in the context of impersonal social institutions being perceived as less trustworthy (Winichakul 2015) and the moral virtue that highly regards gratitude and the return of *khun* being widely embraced.

While *khun* exercises power under the guise of gratitude and compassion, *dej* is more explicit in its operation as it exerts authority over clients. The latter may not be helpful to Bunluerit's fundraising mission as a sufferer's endorser. Yet there are times when Bunluerit

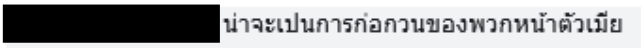
wields his authority. In one live feed, Bunluerit is seen reacting furiously to a couple he claims drove by his house to take several photos of it.

> Don't do this son-of-a-bitch thing to me. You came and took pictures of my house and then drive away … Either today or tomorrow I will get the licence plate number and I will show it to you [*users*]. They cannot do this to me because I have never had anyone doing this to me before [*sic.*] … My work is only for the public. I have never done anything out of my self-interest. What I give to people, I have never wanted a return … I am not afraid of you, bastard. ***(Live streaming field note, Jumnien)***

It may seem unintelligible to people outside the Thai context seeing Bunluerit, who has always presented himself to be compassionate and caring, express unrestrained (and, to some people, including me, unjustified) anger about people taking photos of his house. Yet such a contradictory self-presentation is not uncommon among local and, sometimes, national leaders who use *dej* and *khun* to govern their clients (Ockey 1996; McVey 2000; Chaloemtiarana 2007). The trait is called '*nak leng'* style, which describes a person 'who is gentle and kind to his friends but at the same time is very tough with his foes' (Chantornvong 2000: 54).

Dej and the *nak leng* style often elicit fear in a patron's detractors as well as in their clients (Mulder 1979; Pye and Pye 1985). This is partly because the patron can abuse his or her power, or *amnaat*, to punish those violating the norm of reciprocity in patron–client relations (Ockey 1996; Chantornvong 2000). In the vignette noted above, Bunluerit refers to his good deeds and charitable works to justify his power. He views his philanthropic activities, I argue, as an offering in patron–client reciprocity and he expects people's respect and admiration in return. He feels that his authority is being challenged by the couple's act, so he exercises his power by publicly throwing insults at the suspects and threatening to publicise their licence

plate[52]. Users are thus made to witness the public shaming carried out by Bunluerit as he purportedly abuses the power he has over his media channel to show his *dej*. Hostility and aggression are aroused by Bunluerit and intensified by enraged fans[53].



This might be a bother by some sons of a bitch. *(Comment by a user)*



These bastards! Don't be afraid of them. Keep going! *(Comment by a user)*

The critical implication of these dynamics of *dej* and *khun* in the Thai context, I suggest, is that charitable endeavours, which are based on power differentials between patrons and clients, tend to reproduce the very relations of domination whose effect they aim (or claim) to redress. However, in conditions in which it is guaranteed by the patron–client system that access to necessary resources is monopolised by a privileged few, an alternative to the unequal reciprocity relationship may not be available to people who are less well off. Eisenstadt and Roniger (1980) propose that one of the negative consequences of the patron–client relationship is a low level of institutional trust. Social trust is integral to the development of an impartial redistribution of wealth and resources that can obviate the need to resort to *dej*- and *khun*-based reciprocity (Nye, Zelikow and King 1997; Rothstein 1998; Edlund and Lindh 2013). This can seem like a chicken-and-egg situation where the patron–client relationship

[52] A few days after the live streaming, Bunluerit posted a picture of the couple's licence plate as well as a picture capturing one of the couples taking a photo of his house.

[53] What Bunluerit did by identifying the couples so that they could be digitally harassed by his followers is similar to the practice of dogpiling or brigading, which has become increasingly prevalent on social media platforms (Marwick 2021). In this practice, a social media influencer points out a person or organisation considered to have deviated from specific norms, which leads to (sometimes inadvertent) networked harassment by that influencer's followers who individually post comments attacking, insulting, or threatening the person or organisation in question.

undermines efforts to establish impartial institutional mechanisms to enable more equitable distribution of resources. At the same time, weak social institutions create the need to depend on patron–client relations. People will continue to be trapped in this hopeless situation as long as unjust reciprocal relationships and manipulating affective bonds are relied on to alleviate the symptoms of inequality without socio-economic transformations too.

Conclusions

This chapter has examined Bunluerit's path to becoming a celebrity philanthropist and national hero and the impact of this role on maintaining the socio-political and economic status quo by providing a means of social pacification and preventing any disruption to unequal power relations in Thailand. As the sufferers' endorser, Bunluerit lends his credibility to some beneficiaries, encouraging donors to financially support them and relieve their immediate suffering. However, as most critics of the logics of charity argue, such endeavours do not really address the root cause of complex social problems and thus leave the unjust structural conditions underlying these issues intact. While Bunluerit gains his philanthropic fame and heroic status by offering a sticking-plaster solution to social suffering, the issue of inequality is depoliticised and reframed as a personal problem for which a celebrity hero can deliver relief. As I have argued, the hero narrative at the heart of Thai discourses and practices of celebrity philanthropy can create a comforting illusion in which donations end poverty and kindness ultimately makes a better society. These fantasies discourage any attempt to effect wider institutional and structural change as people are affectively compelled to consent to things as they are.

Bunluerit's celebrity hero status is ideologically supported by the norms of hegemonic masculinity in Thai patriarchal society where male authoritative power is widely accepted, sometimes preferable, and where the identity of hero is mainly reserved for men. Bunluerit's self-presentation as a strong, masculine leading man thus helps draw admiration and increase his trustworthiness at the same time that it reinforces patriarchal gendered norms and relations of power. The relationships between Bunluerit, his beneficiaries, and the donors who give to the causes he champions are shaped by Thailand's powerful patron–client system. On the one hand, Bunluerit is perceived to be compassionate and caring towards his beneficiaries, similar to how patrons are protective of their clients. On the other hand, his authoritative and controlling manner, likened to that of patrons, is periodically revealed in the way that he asserts his power to guide or curb beneficiaries' behaviours. Such benevolent–authoritative relations between Bunluerit and his clients, or what Thai people recognise as the bond of *khun* and *dej*, highlight the hierarchical power relations that are produced and controlled by seemingly altruistic affective ties.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Thai charity hero, especially in the case of Bunluerit, is the *saksit* element, which is rooted in the Buddhist framework of power and intertwined with his secular influence. This sacred supernatural force that some beneficiaries believe to be inherent in Bunluerit enhances the power of the affective bonds of *dej* and *khun* and benefits his charitable endeavours. On the outside, the public see the optimistic and prosocial aspects of Bunluerit's charity appeals, including the heroic and altruistic actions of the celebrity philanthropist, a solidarity among *khon Thai jaidee* (kind Thai people), and relationships of care and support between Bunluerit and beneficiaries as well as page followers. Beneath this altruistic surface, however, lie complex relations and ideological manoeuvres that legitimise the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities. I have argued that networked

affect plays a role in this process of entrenchment through the dynamics of the celebrity hero in two important aspects. First, it enhances a perception of proximity via digital affect's properties of accessibility and virtual collectivity, which enables users to develop virtual physical and emotional closeness to Bunluerit, making the discourse of the celebrity hero more convincing. Second, networked affect reinforces the dominant ideological positions of privileged people through spectacles of charitable visits and exhibitions of conspicuous compassion. This does not mean, however, that social transformation is impossible; indeed, the very fact that Bunluerit is continually compelled to performatively reassert his affective and supernatural authority, particularly in the face of minor challenges to his control, signals the potential for everyday forms of political resistance that networked affect may both enable and amplify.

The next chapter will explore Bunluerit's fundraising efforts, considering how and with what critical implications they foreground representations of proximal suffering.

Chapter 6

Representing the Proximal Other:

Suffering That Is Seen and Sold

The use of representations of suffering in charity campaigns in Thailand often produces a contradictory effect on media prosumers. On the one hand, images of suffering need to be shocking and distressing, which tends to create aversive responses in users, to enable them to viscerally grasp the dire conditions that sufferers are in. On the other hand, the representations are required to foster a sense of affective proximity and immediacy that can elicit donations, rather than letting the aversive feelings make users turn away and reject the appeal. This chapter will consider this contradictory nature of representations of suffering through two notions: firstly, mediated distance and proximity, and secondly, auratic power, which gives a sense of authenticity to representations. The distance/proximity arrangement can induce various affective responses ranging from disgust to compassion. However, no matter how near the spectacle of suffering can bring media users to sufferers and their experiences, sufferers have rarely been thought of as part of users' own community of citizens. In the eyes of users, sufferers remain the other – the proximal other. The chapter argues that the spectacles of suffering on Bunluerit's fan page reveal and reinforce unequal power relations that alienate sufferers as the proximal other through entangled processes of compassion and abjection that take on particular significance in the Thai context through the *karmic* justification of suffering, the stigmatisation of underprivileged lower-class people as *ngoa, joan, jeb* (stupid, poor, and

sickly), and processes of inclusion through exclusion that reinforce the boundary of what it is to be Thai.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section addresses poverty and, especially, pain. It investigates how poverty and pain are spectacularised as objects of the gaze to make suffering intelligible to users in the Thai context. This section also interrogates how sufferers and their close circles make sense of and respond to suffering by drawing on cultural resources including the Buddhist belief in *karma* that enables them to be at peace with the distressing situations they are in. The second section examines Bunluerit's framing of beneficiaries' suffering in relation to money. I argue that Bunluerit's significant emphasis on financial donations and his use of negative appeals that dehumanise sufferers are indicative of the commodification of suffering. The third section concentrates on the affordances of spectacles of suffering that can shorten as well as increase the psychological distance between users and sufferers. It argues that digital technologies can enhance the objectification and manipulation effects on sufferers' bodies and underline the dichotomy between 'us' (users) and 'them' (sufferers) along the line of class, which, in the Thai context, tends to be more apparent and significant than other kinds of social divides.

The last section discusses how sufferers are simultaneously made the object of disgust and compassion in the abjection process where these affective relations simultaneously include in and exclude sufferers from the boundary of being Thai. I argue that whether sufferers are abjectified or receive compassion, their existence contributes to the reproduction of class distinctions and their representation in Bunluerit's charitable appeals promotes the acceptance of paternalistic social relations, which are so prevalent in Thai society.

6.1 Making Sense of Suffering: How Poverty and Pain are Framed

Economic hardship and bodily pain are two important elements that constitute suffering on Bunluerit's fan page. One of Bunluerit's main endeavours here is to visually and discursively document these elements of suffering to make an appeal. Using spectacle as the primary affective tool to undertake this endeavour, Bunluerit shows beneficiaries' poverty through films and photographs of their living conditions – what their homes look like, what size they are, or what items are in them. In one instance, Bunluerit panned his camera around the accommodation of an HIV-positive couple who live under a highway with their young daughter. While filming this place, he said, abruptly: 'Look at the conditions of their shelter. Have a look, my friends … This is how they sleep' ***(Live streaming field note, Oom)***.



Figure 7: Screenshots of Bunluerit's live feed showing the living quarters of beneficiaries

Even though Bunluerit did not verbally detail the poor state of the couple's shelter, the visual spectacle can tell a story of poverty and deprivation by itself. The prolonged look, or gaze,

that Bunluerit asked users to make by taking a continuous shot of the shelter is indicative of the power differential between the gazer and the object of the gaze (Mulvey 1999). As Jonathan Schroeder (1998: 208) argues, 'To gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze.' Telling users to look at beneficiaries' homes can thus bring both the gazer and those being gazed at explicitly into the wider hierarchy of power and economic stratification: look at how bad their living conditions are and how much better we live. People privileged in this hierarchy are entitled to gaze, whereas people who are less advantaged become merely objects to be gazed at. The power in the gaze is even more intensive in the representations of suffering, especially when the object of the gaze is a human body, not merely lifeless articles. Here, there seem to be two key layers of power involved: the power relationship between the gazer and the object of the gaze, and the display of powerlessness in the representation that, in turn, enhances the power of the gazer.

Bodily pain is the other primary element represented in Bunluerit's charitable appeals. Pain here refers to any physical discomfort or suffering beneficiaries experience as a result of the disabilities or diseases they have. While poverty can be measured and objectified in terms of income, wealth, or material possessions, pain, whether one's own or others', is virtually ungraspable (Ahmed 2014). Pain is a subjective experience that 'resists objectification in language' (Scarry 1985). Images of wounds and weapons are thus used to apprehend pain (*Ibid.*). On Bunluerit's fan page, close-ups of wounds and diseased bodies are the primary technique used to represent corporeal suffering. In one live feed, Bunluerit zoomed in on the wounds of an individual (Tum) with psoriasis, which looked very painful to me, as described in my field note:

I was taken aback by the large red group of blisters around his neck. The blisters were oval in shape, the size of 3-5 cm in diameter. Some blisters were around 10 cm in size and irregular in shape … I covered my eyes to avoid seeing it too close ... They looked really scary and painful to me. ***(Live streaming field note, Tum)***

Some users also posted comments confirming that they thought the beneficiary must be in pain.

[redacted]ขอให้น้องได้รักษา ให้หาย น้องคงเจ็บปวดและ ทรมาน..ส่งกำลังใจ..ค่ะ
ขอให้ได้รักษา.หายไวๆ..ค่ะ

I wish you get well soon. You must be in pain and suffering. You have my moral support. Have a speedy recovery. ***(Comment by a user)***

[redacted]น่าสงสารจังลูกคงเจ็บปวดมากขอให้หายไวๆนะคะ

Naa songsarn. Son, you must be in a terrible pain. Hope you get well soon. ***(Comment by a user)***

Although many users assumed that the beneficiary must be suffering because of these wounds, he told Bunluerit that he could not feel anything:

Do these wounds cause any burning or itchy feeling? [*Bhin asked.*]

I don't have any pain. I feel fine, [*the beneficiary replied*.]

Fine? [*Bhin's voice is filled with bewilderment*.] ***(Live streaming field note, Tum)***

Images of wounds can be misleading; they can communicate pain even though there is none. Elaine Scarry (1985) argues in this vein that spectacles of wounds can be very suggestive to the point that it is difficult to convince users that there is in fact no pain. Tum's wounds may not have caused pain but, on a fundraising page, this fact is not as important as making users

believe that pain exists or even imagining that they can sense or experience some of that pain vicariously.

In the live feeds and recorded videos featured on his fan page, Bunluerit would often ask beneficiaries who did not have any physical sign of pain to describe their pain, such as in this conversation with a beneficiary who has spinal tuberculosis:

> Can you explain where you have pain?
>
> I have pain in my legs. The whole legs below.
>
> What is it like, this pain?
>
> I can't explain it. I have pain in my bones. ***(Live streaming field note, Jaem)***

Without the image of a wound, an attempt to verbalise pain may not be very successful. Yet articulating pain is an important process not only for the purpose of charitable appeal-making but also for dealing and living with pain. By communicating pain, sufferers are able to bring it into being and give it significance so that the pain can be more than something individuals subjectively feel in isolation (Ahmed 2014). The attempt to deal with pain also includes an endeavour to attribute meaning to it, or what Gareth Williams (1984), in his study of chronically ill patients, calls 'narrative reconstruction'. Narrative reconstruction is the attempt to reorganise an individual's biography to account for the cause of their illness and their changing relationships with the world. In this process of meaning attribution, cultural beliefs play a significant role in constituting the narrative (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996; Helman 2000). In the Thai context, the belief in *karmic* consequences is what many people refer to when trying to make sense of their suffering.

Some beneficiaries or their close circles in Bunluerit's live feeds believe that they must have previously carried out bad deeds which have, according to the *karmic* law of retribution, brought about hardship and illness in this life. The following conversation between Bunluerit, Mar, and Boonmee, Mar's husband, taken from a live feed, illustrates this belief. Mar works as a ragpicker to feed the family of seven. One of her adult children became mentally ill after an assault. Bunluerit asked Mar and Boonmee about their son.

> [*Mar said,*] Someone hit him on his head then he became nuts…
>
> [*Bhin asked,*] So the man downstairs is deaf and the other son has mental illness?
>
> He talks to himself all the time, [*Mar replied*.]
>
> Who is taking care of him?
>
> Myself and my husband. He once went to a mental hospital. After taking some medicine, he could not get up and could not talk. His tongue spasmed and he drooled. So I told him to stop taking the medicine and gave him some Babbler's Bill leaves[54], *[Mar answered.]*
>
> *[The father, Boonmee, said,]* It was his bad karmic retribution. ***(Live streaming field note, Mar and Boonmee)***

According to the couple, their son was hit on the head with a hard object and after the incident he showed symptoms of a mental disorder. Despite knowing the cause of his son's illness, Boonmee preferred to understand the suffering within the frame of *karmic* law. In another instance, a grandmother who is the carer of an 11-year-old boy with serious cognitive, motor, and visual impairments told Bunluerit what she thinks about her grandson's future.

[54] A Thai herbal medicine.

[*Bhin told his followers*,] … [*the grandmother*] still has the responsibility to take care of this boy. No one knows how long he will live.

[*The grandmother added,*] It depends on his *karmic* retribution. I only have to take care of him. ***(Live streaming field note, Udom)***

Many fan page users also made comments about the boy's *karmic* suffering. For example:

[redacted] 11:12 เกิดมาทำไมแบบนี้มาใช้กรรมจริงๆเลย

Why did you have to be born like this? You were born to pay back your *karmic* debt.

(Comment by a user)

While the above comment expresses a sense of indignation at the suffering the boy has endured, both carers, Boonmee and Udom's grandmother, appear to be more accepting of their lot and that of the people under their care. This may be because they have already worked through the process of narrative reconstruction and found a way to endure the difficult situations in which they and their relatives find themselves. Although Boonmee and Udom's grandmother do not have illnesses themselves, as the carers who have to look after their loved ones for the rest of their lives[55], they also suffer with them and need to make sense of the changing relationships as well.

Suffering can be seen as a kind of injustice (why do I have to suffer but others do not?) that arouses anger. A medical or rational explanation of illness is unlikely to pacify the angry mind of sufferers since it cannot answer the exasperating question 'why me, not others?'. As Williams (1984: 197) observes, patients often find 'no meaning in the medical view and having

[55] The state welfare does not cover care services for severely ill or disabled people. If the person cannot afford a paid carer, usually a family member will take the responsibility for providing around-the-clock care.

no overarching theodicy or cosmology, [they] elaborated reconstructions of their experience in such a way that illness could be given a sensible place within it'. Accordingly, sufferers tend to find a reason for their pain in a more powerful being or a law like *karma* to justify the deservingness of their suffering. As the current worldly rationale cannot deliver the justice that they are looking for, they turn to a non-contingent supernatural power that, they believe, has absolute supremacy and impartial judgement. Once again, the core belief of *karma* that underlies the Buddhist understanding of social interactions and their consequences is at play. In the previous chapter, I noted that *karmic* merit contributes to Bunluerit's *barami* that provides him with legitimacy and trustworthiness as an endorser of sufferers. In the cases of Boonmee and Udom's grandmother, *karmic* consequences offer them the narrative reconstruction that makes suffering more bearable.

The attribution of the cause of suffering to one's own *karmic* consequences complements and reinforces the narrative of individualisation, discussed in the previous chapter (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The law of *karma* provides justification regarding why the neoliberal subject is required to be responsible for their own life. Because they have done something bad in their past life, in this life, they have to endure this suffering on their own. The government is left out of the picture when it should be its duty to provide support for vulnerable people. If sufferers cannot afford to pay for care services or travel expenses for medical appointments, they will blame themselves, believing that this is caused by their past *karmic* deeds, rather than blaming the government for not paying these costs. The explanation of personal responsibility that is based on traditional values like the Buddhist belief in *karmic* consequences points to the tension in the narrative about the neoliberal individualised subject in Thailand, as I have argued in Chapter 5, section 5.2. While individuals are tasked with self-responsibility and self-accountability, they are not free to make 'a life of one's own' without

support from 'traditional categories of large-group societies' (Beck 1992: 88), including family, community and (people of a higher) class. The dominant discourses, including those concerning religious beliefs, social stratification, family, kinship, and community networks, become increasingly powerful for struggling individuals in the neoliberal market-based environment and, as shown in the example above, they rationalise and naturalise the individualisation narrative itself.

This section discussed how poverty and pain are communicated through images and beneficiaries' testimonies. While spectacles of poverty can reveal the power relationship between the gazer and the object of the gaze, the verbalisation of pain points to people's meaning-making processes and how they are animated by particular cultural and spiritual beliefs. The next section will further investigate spectacles of pain in the commodification process where pain and suffering are put up for sale.

6.2 Commodifying Pain: *Naa Songsarn* Spectacles

Bunluerit's capacity to strategically and affectively frame beneficiaries' suffering experiences is integral to his charitable appeal-making. Although Bunluerit allows beneficiaries to talk freely about their pain and poverty, he often assumes control over the final interpretation of suffering by framing it in economic terms. In several live feeds, Bunluerit stressed the importance of money in helping beneficiaries:

> For every case that I have helped, the most important thing to give is money. Money can be used to pay for travel expenses to see a doctor, medicines and other related costs. ***(Live streaming field note, Soo)***

In his attempts to give moral support to beneficiaries, Bunluerit also foregrounds money as a way out of suffering.

> [*Thongkham wai Bhin and said,*] Help me to relieve this pain.
>
> [*Bhin answered,*] If you have money, your pain will surely subside. ***(Live streaming field note, Thongkham)***
>
> Please don't think about killing yourself again. Now you have hope and a chance to become normal again. My friends from my fan page will help you too [*by donating money to her*]. Stop thinking about taking your own life. You have some money. Just take good care of yourself. ***(Live streaming field note, Jaem)***

On the one hand, psychological research shows that money can potentially help reduce physical pain when it confers a feeling of confidence in the ability to cope with problems and satisfy one's personal needs (Zhou, Vohs and Baumeister 2009). In the case of Bunluerit's beneficiaries, some of whom had never had as much money as they received from one encounter with the celebrity, even if money cannot actually reduce physical pain, it can diminish the worry and emotional pain caused by the lack of financial resources. On the other hand, Bunluerit's repeated emphasis on the importance of money can be viewed as an attempt to commodify beneficiaries' suffering, especially when their bodies are represented in a way that cares less about their humanity than about how much money the spectacle of their suffering will raise. The main strategy Bunluerit uses when framing beneficiaries' suffering is to stress their vulnerability and helplessness to induce users' compassion, which may lead to donations. The strategy echoes the contention made by Elizabeth Spelman (2001) that if tragedy is used to draw our attention to other people's suffering, compassion is what we are encouraged to feel in order to respond. One of the phrases often used by Bunluerit to highlight

the pitiable conditions of beneficiaries is '*naa songsarn'*, meaning 'should feel sorry for' or 'deserving compassion'. *Naa songsarn* can be compared to an advertising slogan used alongside images of pain and poverty in a marketing campaign involving suffering.

By creating *naa songsarn* spectacles, Bunluerit is often seen asking beneficiaries, during his encounters with them, to reveal their wounds and physical signs of suffering in front of his camera. Then he zooms in on this part of their body for some time, long enough to allow users to gaze at it. In one example, there is an image of Bunluerit with a boy with a severe disability lying in his arms.

> [*Bhin asked the grandmother to let him hold Udom. He moved the boy from his grandmother's arms into his … He asked his staff to zoom his camera on the boy's blank eyes. He then lifted the boy's T-shirt up to show Udom's stomach. The grandmother told Bhin to turn the boy upside down so that Bhin can see the boy's backbone protruding through his skin.*] ***(Live streaming field note, Udom)***

In another instance, Bunluerit is seen, by accident, arranging a *mise en scène* to create a compassion-deserving spectacle. He is overheard telling his crew to ask someone with psoriasis to take off his shirt to enable users to see the man's blisters clearly:

> [*Bhin said to his page followers,*] I can smell the pus from the wounds. [*To his staff, in a low voice,*] Can you ask him to take off his shirt? [*He turned his camera to the wall after briefly showing the man with his shirt on. He waited for the man to prepare himself in response to his command.*] ***(Live streaming field note, Buncha)***

Bunluerit, we might say, then, exercises his power as a philanthropist to manage and manipulate beneficiaries' bodies to create the most *naa songsarn* spectacle so that it can elicit as many donations as possible.

Negative imagery that shows sufferers in helpless and vulnerable states is more effective than positive portrayal in yielding responses from users in the form of action or donations (Breeze and Dean 2012; Orgad 2013; Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015). According to the concept of 'media witnessing', this is not least because the sight of suffering can induce a feeling of guilt in users by making them complicit in such suffering merely by knowing about it (Ellis 2002; Kyriakidou 2015). As John Ellis (2002) argues, the sense of complicity comes from the act of looking without doing anything. Users who look at an image of suffering are in a position of power, and ignoring the object of the gaze is thought of as an abuse of this power while giving a degree of consent to allowing such an unfortunate event to happen. Additionally, an image of suffering carries with it an allegation of voyeurism (Chudo 2013). If media users do not respond to the spectacle in a sympathetic manner, for example by showing compassion, giving donations, or helping to alleviate the suffering, they could even be considered to be guilty of taking voyeuristic pleasure from the pain of others. As Susan Sontag (2004: 37-38) puts it,

> But there is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of a real horror. Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it … The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be.

From this perspective, I argue that the selling point of Bunluerit's representation of suffering is inducing compassion predominantly derived from a burden of guilt inherent in the spectacle. In this sense, beneficiaries are turned into objects of the gaze as well as of users' compassion.

Similar to gazing, compassion brings those involved at the giving and receiving ends into the hierarchy of power relations. Spelman (2001) suggests that having compassion or

feeling for others' suffering can be a way of asserting authority over them, leaving them no room to consider the meaning of or the proper response to the suffering. This can be seen in the way Bunluerit appropriates the right to translate beneficiaries' suffering into a reductive economic narrative of amelioration. Sufferers can talk about their suffering; however, when it comes to the tasks of interpretation, alleviation, and commodification, Bunluerit retains the upper hand. People at the centre of suffering therefore tend to be the most powerless in these representational dynamics: they are merely objects to be gazed at, or subjects to be felt compassion for, but are rarely positioned as exerting their own affective or social agency.

A spectacle capable of haunting users with guilt needs to be shocking. In open and uncensored online platforms, information is less filtered compared with traditional mass communication channels like television and newspapers (Chin-Fook and Simmonds 2011; Singer 2014). Therefore, more shocking and distressing pictures can be shown on Bunluerit's fan page, and with less restraint. However, there were a few times when some users, serving as secondary gatekeepers (Shoemaker and Vos 2009), found an image of suffering on Bunluerit's fan page too disturbing. They reported this to Facebook and Bunluerit's account was suspended for a week. Bunluerit complained about the incident in his post.

> I remain doubtful about the image I posted. Is it that distressing? ... Cancer lumps on body parts and the penis of a 1 year and 7-month-old can be seen in the picture as well as his mother who gently strokes his hair with love and care … Have some compassion for these people. Don't be selfish by preventing me from helping these sufferers who are waiting. I understand Facebook rules but if no one had sent the picture, my account would not have been blocked. *(Bunluerit's post on 15 June 2013)*

We might view these incidents as additional moments when Bunluerit's power is destabilised or contested. In the previous chapter, Bunluerit's authority as a patron was challenged by a

beneficiary's daughter who ignored his presence. In this context, his power to frame and commodify beneficiaries' suffering was undercut. In the post just mentioned, Bunluerit dealt with this challenge to his authority by emphasising the 'wrongdoing' and 'immoral' character of those who reported his posts. However, in this case, such 'minor' instances of resistance were more damaging logistically, because Bunluerit's primary communication channel for his charitable endeavours was temporarily suspended. Although this episode did not fundamentally transform the way Bunluerit uses negative imagery in his fundraising endeavours, as pictures of bodily vulnerabilities of adult beneficiaries are still regularly mobilised, he did appear to become more wary of posting images showing child nudity.

This suspension incident, as well as Bunluerit's wider use of graphic and distressing images, raise the following ethical question: to what extent can Bunluerit exercise his power as an appeal maker to exhibit and manipulate beneficiaries' bodies? This ethical question points to the tenuous nature of Bunluerit's fundraising operation's reliance on the representation of suffering in two key respects. First, it is difficult to find the right balance between showing beneficiaries' pain and turning them into the objects of a voyeuristic gaze. In addition to translating pain into an intelligible and affecting image, the spectacle of suffering functions to assure users that the suffering is real. In a digital environment where content can easily be edited and fabricated, information needs to be verified and suffering requires images to authenticate it. Two of the interviewees in my study referred to this need for verification when asked about horrific photos of beneficiaries in pain:

> If he didn't post this kind of picture, people would not know whether beneficiaries really suffer or not. He is probably afraid of scams or just wants some realness. ***(Interview, Kaew, Donor)***

> I thought if the wounds cannot be seen, why bother taking a picture in the first place … There is a need to see whether the suffering is real or not … The more I can see what happened to them, the more I feel the impulse to help. ***(Interview, Nid, Donor)***

There is, I want to suggest, an implicit sense of mercantile transaction in this need to authenticate suffering before making a donation: *only when I am sure that they are really suffering will I make a payment*. This sense of reciprocity appears to replace the disinterested gift that people expect to see in charitable endeavours, and altruistic values may be lost along the way in this commodification process. This idea of commodifying suffering will be investigated in relation to the transaction of compassion in Chapter 7.

While showing beneficiaries' pain is considered unavoidable in charity appeals that rely upon guilt to elicit donations, the body in pain tends to be objectified and fetishised in the abjection process to create representations that accommodate the gaze of users being legitimised under the pretext of attempting to elicit compassion (Mulvey 1999; Chouliaraki 2006). Human beings are reduced to mere objects through fragmentation – a technique often used in pornography which turns the model's body into a collection of separate objects by zooming in on a specific part of their body (Hall 2009). Lilie Chouliaraki (2006: 136) calls the sufferer's body subject to representation a 'biological machine' to highlight the way people are stripped of their human properties, including dignity, power, and autonomy. Bunluerit's use of the fragmentation technique can dehumanise sufferers in this way and turn them into damaged or wounded body parts. To what extent, then, could pain be represented in this context in a way that would not dehumanise sufferers?

One might argue that, after all, the sufferers themselves are the ones who benefit from such representations in the form of financial support. This argument points to the second

aspect of the problematic nature of Bunluerit's fundraising operation. There seems to be a thin line between compassion and exploitation. This begs the question of whether an intervention that involves (and creates the possibility for further) physical and symbolic exploitation can truly be considered an act of compassion. When Bunluerit asked users who reported his inappropriate photo to have compassion for beneficiaries, what exactly is this compassion? Is compassion giving money to beneficiaries who have been stripped of their clothes and dignity for the appeal? It might be difficult to answer this question when beneficiaries themselves agree to be represented in this way to receive support. But their consent is more likely to be given out of necessity rather than choice in such conditions, which highlights the importance of Bunluerit's intervention. To many beneficiaries, it does not matter whether the intervention is an act of compassion or exploitation as long as it alleviates their immediate suffering.

While many people view Bunluerit's fundraising efforts as acts of kindness and altruism, the representations of suffering they employ seem to tell a different story. Behind the spectacles used for donation appeals is the abjection, manipulation, objectification, and fragmentation of sufferers' bodies that occurs in the process of producing a commodity for compassion. Perhaps what is more dehumanising is the fact that the government cannot provide sufficient support for its vulnerable citizens such that they have to sacrifice their human rights and dignity to find financial support themselves.

6.3 Is Their Pain Real? Moving Between Distance and Proximity

Images of suffering on Bunluerit's fan page can deliver immediacy, bringing users closer to experiences of suffering (Tomlinson 1999). At the same time, they can increase emotional distance between users and sufferers when the sufferers are turned into dehumanised objects.

Chouliaraki (2006: 41) calls the way representations of suffering can create a contradictory sense of both closeness to and distance between sufferers and users 'ambivalence of mediation'. In an interview, Som, a participant, pointed to the realness of the representation of suffering, whose meaning, I argue, can be ambivalent in terms of how the representation establishes emotional distance/proximity between users and sufferers. She said:

> … these are real images ... I work in the field of fine arts and I am familiar with edited images. Sometimes when I look at these pictures, I tried to zoom in to see whether they have been edited or not, to check if the images are real. If they are real, I even feel the need to help. *(Interview, Som, Donor)*

The 'realness' that Som mentions has, I suggest, two aspects of meaning, each of which illustrates the ambivalence of mediation.

First, the imagery is experienced as 'real' as opposed to 'fake'. Considering this realness in terms of proximity, it might be said that Som seeks to authenticate the imagery to respond morally with confidence as a witness of true suffering (Peters 2001; Ellis 2002). As digital content can easily be produced, edited, and replicated, authentication is, as discussed earlier, necessary to convince donors that suffering is really occurring and that the appeal is not a scam. However, it is extremely difficult for users to judge the authenticity of online information since the affordances of technology blur the line between real and fake; a copy of a picture is indistinguishable from its original, so how can one be sure of what is real and fake or even what real means (Shields 2003; boyd 2008)? Even though Som zooms in on photographs to check whether or not they have been edited, she cannot know whether the photograph was taken a long time ago or whether the donation recipient is the person who is shown suffering in the picture (Boyd 2008). This is where Bunluerit's role as an endorser of sufferers comes into play.

He lends beneficiaries credibility; hence, donors can be assured of the authenticity of their suffering. However, looking at this from the opposite point of view, the authentication can be a result of curiosity about and fascination with the horrific nature of the wounds depicted. Gazing at the pain of others, for some, can create a fraught pleasure – the kind of pleasure that draws people to watching horror and violent movies and circus sideshows, and makes pornography a big business (Miller 1997). Checking whether wounds are real may, from this perspective, have nothing to do with the decision to donate but is perhaps more to do with a voyeuristic impulse.

The second meaning of realness concerns the element of *indexicality*, where networked affect can make the sensation of a virtual experience feel real. Authenticity can stimulate viewers' empathetic imagination, reduce the psychological distance between viewers and sufferers, and stress viewers' role of witness. To prove that an object is 'real', we use our five senses. By watching, tasting, smelling, touching, or listening to the object, we can firmly say that the object is 'real'. To legitimise the authenticity of other people's experiences of suffering, we predominantly use our 'empathetic imaginary' (discussed in Chapter 1). 'Real', in this sense, refers to a feeling that we are able to understand (cognitive empathy) and share (affective empathy) what others feel when they are in a certain situation. In the interview excerpt below, a graphic photograph of suffering appears to help Som empathetically imagine how she would feel if she was in the same situation.

> I imagined I was in his place … like when I have a wound on my body; even if the skin of that part is tough, I can still feel pain. If I have a wound there [testicles], the pain must be much worse. In that case, the pictures were really clear. ***(Interview, Som, Donor)***

The sufferer's pain 'felt real' to Som, which affected her decision to make a donation. Again, the role of cybertouch, or the affective and informational intersections brought about by digital technology, is key in reducing the psychological distance between users and sufferers (Kuntsman 2012: 3). Som literally touched the screen to zoom in on the wounds so that she could be closer to the experience of suffering, whereas in a figurative manner, the graphic photograph elicits an empathic process that enables the experience to affectively stir and impact Som.

As discussed in Chapter 1, felt reality has its own significance that does not wholly depend on the real-world phenomenon or what is mediated on digital platforms. In this case, Som's felt reality is significant not only in an indexical sense that allows her to imagine what the beneficiary feels as a result of his wounds, but also in the way that such a reality directly affects Som and induces her response. In the hyperreality of digital media, it does not matter whether the felt reality that activated Som's compassionate response has any link to what really exists in the physical world, as the real and the imaginary can no longer be distinguished between (Baudrillard 1994). This is evident in the case of Tum's psoriasis blisters (discussed earlier), which misled users (and me) to assume that Tum must have been in pain, when actually he was not. The working of indexicality constructs reality from the spectacle out of something that does not exist in the physical world, yet this reality without an origin appears to 'be more real than the real', as the distinction between the real and the imaginary has collapsed (Baudrillard 1994: 18). Additionally, the felt reality may be preferable to the real as it is more neat, ideal, and manageable than the messiness or complexity of life as it is. As in Tum's case, the felt reality that drives donations is regarded as preferable to the fact that Tum feels no pain.

I argue, however, that if the distance between sufferers and users is too close it can destroy the aura that informs the realness of the suffering experience. Aura is an awe-inspiring force that arises from something visual and creates a distance between users and the auratic subjects despite the closeness in physical proximity between the two (Benjamin 1968) (see a more detailed definition in Chapter 2, section 2.1). Aura is central to how spectacles of suffering impel some users to act to alleviate a beneficiary's plight or to assuage the guilt of gazing. It is something that makes these images 'haunt us' (Sontag 2004: 89). However, digitised images of suffering allow media users to get extremely close to the body and the suffering experience of beneficiaries such that the haunting auratic sense as well as the force of authenticity are dissipated. For example, when the sufferer's body is zoomed in on, it loses a sense of being an auratic human subject that can induce empathetic imagination and becomes merely wounds or body parts to be scrutinised out of curiosity and fascination. This distortion of authenticity harks back to Chouliaraki's (2006) concept of the 'intervention of technology' discussed in Chapter 2, where the advanced technologies used to manipulate imagery diminish the sense of realness in representations rather than enhancing it.

I suggest that an inappropriate auratic distance can also enhance the objectification effect as users feel less inhibited to digitally manipulate – by sharing, duplicating, zooming in, or editing – the suffering body. At the same time, digital technologies enable users to do more than merely gaze at or (cyber)touch the spectacle of suffering; they can (cyber)tamper with images in any way that is digitally possible. The distinctive characteristics of 'networked publics' – the persistence, searchability, and replicability of images, and the invisibility of users – also contribute to these dynamics of manipulation, as the image of the vulnerable self is available to be seen, searched for, replicated, and reused by Internet users for a long time (boyd 2008).

The enhanced power of digital objectification is best illustrated by comparing a *khor dāna* (beggar) with beneficiaries on Bunluerit's fan page who, I argue, can be deemed to be digital *khor dāna*. Before begging was made illegal in Thailand, *khor dāna* showed their suffering to passers-by in public places and received money from people who donated on the spot after seeing a body in pain. Digital *khor dāna* have to offer their digital body for scrutiny and inspection to receive donations. The gaze from donors becomes more penetrating with the affordances of digital platforms (Mulvey 1999); it might not be possible for passers-by to look at the body of traditional *khor dāna* close up, but users can do so with digital *khor dāna* for as long as they wish to. In a more negative scenario, digital *khor dāna* can be criticised, called names, or verbally attacked through comments attached to their pictures, or even tracked down via digital footprints, whereas traditional *khor dāna* are less likely to face these kinds of harassment.

In addition to the objectification effect, the networked public and context collapse (discussed in Chapter 1) also lead to the violation of the right to privacy of sufferers whose pictures and contact information are widely circulated for appeal-making. In one instance, an interviewee, Danai, was threatened with a lawsuit for sharing a photo of a man suffering from the results of an electric shock.

> I didn't check the information thoroughly enough and I asked my followers to help share his picture in an appeal … The picture had been shared more than 100,000 times … The person in the picture called and asked me why I shared his picture … His lawyer also called … I told the lawyer that I had good intention and I didn't mean to harm the person in the picture. I just wanted to help. ***(Interview, Danai, Facebook fan page owner)***

Although Danai did not include any bank account information in the appeal, which could have led to a fraud charge, he shared the plaintiff's picture without permission. The plaintiff had already recovered from his injuries and had not wanted to seek any support even when his image appeared online in the first place. Even if the plaintiff had intended to receive support by using the spectacle, he should arguably have control over the use of his photograph. However, when images – whether they involve suffering or not – are posted online, they are often used widely without the owner's permission. Individuals' rights to privacy or the ability to control information related to them in real and effective terms can be compromised by technological affordances and networked publics, as well as the context collapse, and, in this case, also the claim that there was a good intention (Fried 1968). For people who are privileged enough to afford legal services, privacy is a right. Yet for beneficiaries who are the objects of compassion, like those on Bunluerit's fan page, it is an unattainable abstract ideal; even if they are no longer in a difficult situation, the spectacle of their suffering can always digitally resurface to haunt them.

I want to suggest that the critical implications of technology-enhanced objectification, and related breaches of privacy online, lie in the way sufferers' lives are laid bare to a greater degree than ever before with the help of digital platforms. The term 'bare' here not only references how sufferers' bodies may be stripped naked to be gazed at and scrutinised in minute detail. It is also addresses Giorgio Agamben's (1998) concept of 'bare life', in which a human life's significance is reduced to merely a biological being who is excluded from rights that enable them to live a good life. Sufferers on Bunluerit's fan page are, in this way, made bare as their dignity and autonomy are stripped away leaving only a biological life that is prolonged by users' compassion.

As a medium, an image foregrounds our visual sense and might thus be considered less effective in delivering immediacy than a video, which can offer audio-visual presentation. Some of the interviewees compared the differences between the two media:

> When I see pictures on Facebook, my feeling goes to some extent. But when I watch a video clip … especially where I can hear the patient's voice … I think it affects me a lot. I can judge how serious the case is. It's like when we read a book, we feel immersed in it but only to a certain extent. But if there are moving pictures, sounds or conversations, they affect me a lot ... I mean a lot. ***(Interview, Som, Donor)***

> I can only look at pictures. I can't stand watching videos … Videos are too depressing. They have sounds and moving pictures. They are too heart-wrenching. For me, images are tragic enough. (***Interview, Ying, Donor)***

Audio-visual material provides Som and Ying with more sensory information – not only sight but also sound and motion – that allows them to feel more fully immersed in the experience (Steuer 1992; Laurel 1993). Specifically, I argue that an experience that has been broadcast live can accentuate the sense of authenticity as users can claim the status of being witnesses who are present in time as well as in space (Peters 2001). The presence in time and space is also considered a fundamental element of aura that primarily constitutes the perceived realness (Benjamin 1968).

Bunluerit has taken advantage of interactive technologies on Facebook Live to underline the sense of presence in time. For example, during his live streaming, Bunluerit often responds to textual comments posted on the page in real time. Media users also interact with him and events in a live feed by sending emoji reactions in addition to comments. In the live

streaming sessions I examined, Bunluerit sometimes asked for suggestions from users, like in the following vignette, where he seeks advice on flooded accommodation:

> If there is heavy rain, they cannot live in the room. [*To users:*] Does anyone have any idea what I should do about this? If so, let me know in the comment box. ***(Live streaming field note, Puang)***

These real-time exchanges play a vital role in heightening the sense of authenticity as users can feel that they are taking part in the event rather than merely watching the suffering of others. Lena Kjeldsen (2016) calls this kind of media event that allows an interaction between users and those physically present in the setting of the spectacle in real time an 'event-as-participation'. The event-as-participation is possible with virtual collectivity or a sense of co-presence with other users in online environments.

In Chapter 5, virtual collectivity was discussed in relation to the perception of proximity between Bunluerit and users. In this chapter, I mobilise virtual collectivity to underscore the perceived authenticity of suffering. I argue that virtual collectivity, both in Bunluerit's celebrity practice and in an event-as participation in the mediation of suffering, creates a sense of authenticity concerning these two elements that are mutually complementary. If users feel close to Bunluerit, they are more likely to trust his representations of suffering. Relatedly, if users feel that the suffering shown on his fan page is real, they are more likely to believe in the authenticity of his role as a celebrity philanthropist. In addition to highlighting the liveness of the spectacle, virtual collectivity can foster communal solidarity among users who consider themselves to be doing good deeds. I argue that this sense of solidarity partly stems from the 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 1995) generated during real-time participation in Bunluerit's media events concerning charitable visits as the collective sense of 'us' is formed

among users watching 'them', the object of compassion, while experiencing the enhanced affective intensities in the event-as-participation. The following comments show this sense of solidarity.

[redacted]ถ้ามีกำลังพอคนพวกนี้ละที่เราอยากจะช่วยพวกเขาสงสารนะ

If I have enough money, these people are the ones I want to help. I feel *songsarn*.

(Comment by a user)

[redacted]ดูแลสุขภาพด้วยนะคะคุณบิณฑ์. ผู้ยากไร้ยังรอการช่วยเหลือจากคุณ. และพวกเราอยู่จ้า

Take care, Bhin. Poor people are waiting for help from you and us. *(Comment by a user)*

This division between 'them' (helpless sufferers) and 'us' (users and donors with moral and economic superiority) points to the way compassion brings donors and recipients into the hierarchy of power relations where 'us' are more superior in wealth, status, and moral virtue than 'them'. Virtual collectivity and effervescence have made this sense of division more apparent.

Although sufferers are fellow citizens, not distant others, the objectification and commodification processes alienate them as 'the proximal others'. Contrary to the democratic potential that early digital communication enthusiasts envisioned (Wellman 1999; Bentivegna 2002; Jenkins 2008), the networked public sphere tends to reinforce gendered, racialised, classed, and geo-political divisions by producing alienated others. As shown in this section, the digitalisation of *khor dāna*-style charitable appeal accentuates the power of an objectification process that allows privacy violation, the abusive and persistent use of online representation of suffering, and reinforces the class division between privileged people who have money, morality, and compassion and underprivileged people who have nothing but a bare life. The

next section will delve more deeply into this class division and the process that turns the lower-class proximal other into the abject subject.

6.4 From Object of Compassion to Object of Disgust

While users feel compassion and reach out to help sufferers, they also alienate themselves from these less privileged people. Aside from feeling alienation and a sense of class division, users may also show disgust as a form of aversive response. Presenting sufferers as wretched body parts makes them subject to the process of abjection that turns them into 'objects of disgust' (Bataille 1999; Miller 1997). They become 'waste populations' or 'dehumanized waste' (Tyler 2013: 20). It is very unlikely that donors or interviewees would bluntly say that they feel disgust at the sight of suffering; however, this can be inferred from the comments they make.

> To be honest, I don't like to see pictures [on Bunluerit's page] … I know that it is the truth of life … that it can be a way to *'plong asubha*' [a Buddhist practice of contemplating the repulsiveness of a dead body], yet I feel that I want to see something pleasant … if possible, I don't want to see them [pictures] every morning. It's alright. I will donate without seeing them much ***(Interview, Kaew, Donor)***

Rather than saying that she feels revulsion, Kaew mentions '*plong asubha*' to compare the pictures she has seen on Bunluerit's page with the practice of meditating over a corpse. It might thus be inferred that pictures of suffering can induce disgust in a similar way to a dead body.

Physical and psychological distances come into play when users are brought too close to the suffering body in the digital spectacle and auratic power is destroyed. In terms of

physical distance, users turn away from the spectacle. With regard to psychological distance, disgust fills the void between users and sufferers. The feeling of disgust can draw a boundary and distinction between those who experience repulsion and those who are objects of it; as William Cohen (2005: x) concisely puts it, 'That is not me.' A participant implied this boundary in the spectacle of suffering between 'us' and 'them' in an interview:

> Seeing some pictures, I didn't think Bhin would have the courage to touch patients but he did. I admired him for doing that because these patients were not his relatives[56]. To touch them showed that Bhin has a kind heart … I wouldn't have the courage to be around them because it is possible that I can be infected and they are not close family members. *(Interview, Noon, Fan page follower)*

I inferred from Noon's remark that those suffering from either a communicable or a non-communicable disease should be contained within a certain boundary to prevent them from infecting us healthy people. According to Julia Kristeva (1982: 4), people with illnesses are often positioned as liminal subjects who have a polluting presence by disturbing 'identity, system, order' and defying 'borders, positions, rules'. The liminality of sufferers speaks to the 'processes of inclusion and exclusion' of the abject subject (Tyler 2013). Sufferers are excluded as 'dehumanized waste' (Tyler 2013: 20) because they are seen as disgusting and infectious. Yet they cannot be totally eliminated as they supposedly constitute the boundaries of what is included. As Sara Ahmed (2000) argues, that which threatens the border tends to define it (Ahmed 2000). Hence, 'dehumanized waste' is included and left to disturb and pollute the social order (Tyler 2013: 20; Douglas 2001).

[56] In a kin-based society like Thailand, family members and relatives are considered to be in-group members (Kuwinpant 2002). Even if a family member has an infectious disease, touching them is viewed as less repulsive than being in contact with ailing out-group people.

Relatedly, Imogen Tyler links the abject subject to the constitution of the boundary of the state. She explains how 'waste populations are … *included through their exclusion*' by criticising British migrant policies (2013: 20, italics in original). She writes,

> British citizenship is a legal, political and social field of intelligibility that abjectifies some people outside of the realm of citizenship altogether, constituting them as illegal but also, paradoxically, fixing, capturing and paralysing them within the borders of the state. (2013: 14)

As the abject subject are included through their exclusion, they are 'transformed into a magnet of fascination and repulsion' (Tyler 2013: 26) when they are put in the public eye to be reviled and abhorred. Although most of Bunluerit's beneficiaries are legal Thai citizens, I see this process of being 'included through exclusion' and 'transformed into a magnet of fascination and repulsion' operating in a dynamic and continuous manner to frame and abjectify these beneficiaries as alien 'others' in Thai society. Because sufferers are Thai people, they are included as Thai citizens. Yet the government fails to adequately support vulnerable people, forcing them to live a dehumanised life, for example having to live under a highway (see the case of Oom in section 6.1) or suffering from a severe disease but being unable to see a doctor because of the cost of transportation (see the case of Thongkham in the Appendix). Such people are included as citizens but are excluded from the basic right to live a good life and excluded by other Thai people, who look down on them as a 'dirty' and infectious population. By becoming Bunluerit's beneficiaries, sufferers are included in the way they are put in the limelight to be objects of disgust through the exclusion process, where they are made to relinquish their dignity and autonomy by allowing their bodies to be manipulated to make donation appeals.

The abjection process takes place in this context through spectacles of suffering that aim to include beneficiaries as a 'normal' Thai people again through financial support. In this act of re-inclusion, the discourse of '*khon Thai mai ting gun*' ('Thai people leave no one behind') is employed to stress the notion that sufferers are included as part of Thai society. Along with the discourse of *khon Thai jaidee*, *khon Thai mai ting gun* is another fantasy about in-group solidarity that is built upon the alienation of sufferers. Users often praised Bunluerit and donors using this idealised image of Thai people, as shown in the following comments:

[redacted] ดีใจน้าคนไทยไม่ทิ้งกัน เป็นกำลังใจให้นะค่ะ ท่านอาสาทุกท่าน

> I'm glad that *khon Thai mai ting gun*. Sending my support to every volunteer. ***(Comment by a user)***

[redacted] ช่วยกันตามกำลังคนไทยด้วยกัน..ได้ร่วมบุญกับพี่บิณฑ์มีความสุขสุดๆคะ จำนวนเงินอาจจะเล็กน้อย แต่คนไทยไม่ทิ้งกันคะ

> I helped as much as a Thai person can help … I am so happy to be able to make merit with big brother Bhin. The amount of donation money may be small but *khon Thai mai ting gun*. ***(Comment by a user)***

In other words, sufferers are re-included within the boundaries of the Thai state once they have been abjectified to the point that they are *naa songsarn* enough to receive help from Bunluerit and his fan page followers. At one level, the discourse of *khon Thai mai ting gun* points to the re-inclusion of sufferers as Thai people. On another level, the focus of this discourse is on '*khon Thai* (Thai people) who donate or leave no one behind', as the phrase is meant to commend donors' kindness, and the reference to '*khon Thai* who are not left behind' merely complements this kindness. This phrase is reminiscent of Kristeva's (1982) and Tyler's (2013) respective arguments about liminality – that waste populations are left to disturb order

as their existence is precisely what constitutes the boundary of the state. Sufferers cannot be totally eliminated as they constitute the boundary of what it is to be Thai. Their existence as an object of compassion promotes solidarity and a nationalistic attitude among 'true' Thai people who are kind, privileged, and always included.

These processes of 'inclusion through exclusion' also resonate with how sufferers are approached and distanced through representations of suffering. As previously discussed, Chouliaraki (2006: 136) argues that sufferers are 'portrayed both as human figures and as biological machines', which 'appeals to a moral connection with the spectators and distances them from the sufferers'. As painful bodies are objectivised for users' gaze, sufferers are excluded from the group of spectators and looked down on with disgust. The exclusion takes place concurrently with the inclusion as sufferers are shown as other fellow humans whom Bunluerit symbolically, yet temporarily, accepts as part of the group through touches and embraces. Additionally, users are invited, by his frequent phrase 'This case is "*naa songsarn*"', to feel for the abject subject, to imagine what their suffering would be like, and to have an empathetic understanding that tends to bring users closer to the painful experiences. After all, I argue, this whole process of delivering immediacy takes place because distance has been brought into being in the first place when the abject subject was publicised as 'a magnet of fascination and repulsion' (Tyler 2013: 26). The representation of suffering on Bunluerit's fan page thus entails the oscillation between exclusion and inclusion while working through the simultaneous operation of distantiation and sympathisation.

Although suffering on Bunluerit's fan page is primarily domestic and is perceived as being physically closer than the distant suffering that is represented in dominant Western discourses, the concept of mental distance in terms of class remains significant. The feeling of

disgust tends to be derived not only from an infectious body but also from the low quality of life that the abject person is assumed to live. The following comment provides a case in point.

[redacted]สมัยนี้ช่วยตัวเองก่อนจะดีกว่ามั้ยตัวเองยังเอาตัวไม่รอดเรยจะไปช่วยใครเขาได้ดีแต่ขอร้องให้คนนั้นคนนี้มาช่วยทำไมไม่หาวิธีเอาเองล่ะถ้ามันถึงที่สุดจริงๆก็ขอให้ทางหน่วยงานราชการหรือกระทรวงต่างๆเข้ามาดูแลและพิจารณาตามขั้นตอนไปไม่ใช่ทำตัวเหมือนขอทานเที่ยวเร่หาผู้ใจบุนให้ช่วยเหลือแบบนี้มันทำไม่ถูกคนเราโตๆกันแร้วนะไม่มีปันยาหาวิธีแก้ไขปันหาก้อม่ายรู้จะพูดยังงัยแร้ว แร้วตอนนี้บ้านเมืองมีแต่คนจนหาเช้าแดกห่าวันยังค่ำยังไม่พอจะแดกเรยคนไทยตอนนี้ไม่มีใครเป็นเศรษฐีหรือผู้ใจบุนหรอกเค้าแดกกันจะเป็นจะตายแต่อีพวกร้องแร่แห่กระเชิงมามันทำตัวเหมือนเปรตขอส่วนบุนก้อไม่ปานอย่าไปหวังเรยสมัยนี้จะหาผู้ใจบุนมันยากนักต้องช่วยเหลือตัวเองหรือยืนเป็นหลักให้ได้ก่อนเอะอะอะไรก้อลงเฟรสหาผู้ใจบุนสมัยนี้คนเรามันหรอกลวงต้มตุ๋นกันเยอะอย่าไปหลงเชื่อกับคนพวกนี้ให้มากนักเดี๋ยวจะตกเป็นเหยื่อของพวกมิจฉาชีพเอาโดยง่ายและจะเสียเงินโดยไม่รู้ตัว

> These days, you should help yourself first. If you can't help yourself, how can you help others? You only ask for other people to help you. Why don't you find a way yourself? If you can't really find a way out, ask for help from government offices or responsible ministries. Don't be a *khor dāna* [beggar] going around to find people with kind hearts to help. This is wrong. You are already a grown-up and if you can't find a way to solve your problem then I don't know what to say. Now our country is full of poor people who live from hand to mouth [in Thai, strong language is used]. No one is a millionaire or a kind person. People have to work their fingers to the bone to find something to eat [strong language]. But you make a drama out of the situation everyone has faced and ask for money. You are no different from '*pread*'[57] asking for merit. Don't get your hopes up. It is difficult to find a kind person these days. You have to help yourself first. Don't just go around and put your story on Facebook hoping someone would help. There are lots of scams. [To potential donors:] Don't believe these people otherwise you can become a victim of a scam and lose your money. *(Comment by a user)*

[57] This is a kind of ghost that lives in pain as a result of bad *karma* in a previous human life. It is believed that *pread* appear to ask for merit from human beings to escape from the suffering they endure. The term is also used as an offensive word for people who are always asking for food or money from other people, similar to the way in which *pread* plead for humans' merit (The Royal Institute 2011a).

The tone and vocabulary used in this comment imply comtempt and indignation. At one point, the user compares sufferers with '*pread*', which shows her undisguised loathing.

This kind of vilification resonates with the concept of the 'underclass' or the 'undeserving poor' that views some poor people with animosity as 'defective, dependent, and deliquent' and undeserving of welfare support (Gans 1995: 15). Since the Thai state welfare does not appear to be sufficient for underprivileged people to live on, the discourse of the underclass in Thailand tends to be applied to lower-class people who, as described in the comment, continue asking for monetary and other forms of help. Prajak Kongkirati (2014) argues that in the Thai context, where individuals are considered to be born unequal, lower-class people or governed subjects have been stigmatised as being stupid and worthless since the time of the absolute monarchy. Even at the time of writing, when the country claims that it is democratic, the stigma has been reproduced, perpetuated, and repackaged as '*ngoa, joan, jeb*' (stupid, poor, and sickly). In the comment above, the discourse of '*ngoa, joan, jeb*' seems prevalent, especially in how the person who makes the comment describes how sufferers cannot find a way to help themselves and just ask around for money. Similar to how the concept of *karmic* consequences is used to attribute the cause of suffering to individuals' past deeds, the *ngoa, joan, jeb* discourse functions to deflect attention from structural inequities towards assumed personal flaws (Morris 1994; Levitas 2005). Again, people are led to believe that poverty and suffering are not structural problems and that it is the sufferer's responsibility as the neoliberal subject to take care of themselves.

The implication of the abjection process lies in the way it can maintain the hierarchy of power and privilege through the reproduction of waste populations that need to be controlled, governed, and taken care of in a manner that denies their rights and agency. Disgust in

abjection works to 'maintain the power relations between above and below' (Ahmed 2014: 88). In this process of abjection, the waste populations are produced in tandem with the 'clean and proper body' (Kristeva 1982: 71). The clean and proper body is interpellated and recognised only in relation to the abject person; the worthless governed subject exists because there are respectable governing bodies. The spectacles of suffering on Bunluerit's fan page create an abject subject as well as a compassionate user, both of whom are shown to have attributes that make them *deserve* the position they occupy in the social hierarchy; sufferers are *ngoa, jon, jeb* so they can never move up from the bottom of the hierarchy (the below), whereas donors and compassionate users are kind and sympathetic and so acquire social prestige (the above). Notably, many elements surrounding Bunluerit's appeals for giving including representations of suffering, a belief in karmic consequences that ideologically support individuals' economic and social status, the *ngoa, jon, jeb* stigma, and the affective relations of compassion and disgust subtly reinforce the concept of hierarchical relations – who occupies which position and what role and responsibility each position brings about. This hierarchical order of class, which is salient and pervasive in Thai society, accommodates the failure of the state to provide sufficient support for its vulnerable people while predisposing Thai neoliberal subjects to readily accept their status and embrace any form of inequality.

Conclusions

The chapter has illustrated the ways in which suffering is objectified and commodified in spectacles for charitable appeals that induce affective responses through the manipulation of the psychological distance between users and sufferers in the Thai context. For beneficiaries, suffering is an unavoidable situation brought about by *karmic* retribution which is a result of

their previous deeds. Beneficiaries' understanding of suffering as *karmic* consequences reinforces the view that structural problems like poverty or inequitable access to healthcare are personal matters and that blame and responsibilities should be put on the person rather than on structural or institutional conditions. Bunluerit's framing of beneficiaries' suffering being amenable to amelioration through economic means is in line with such a view. By reducing the scope of problems from a structural to an individual struggle for financial support, the way out of suffering is perceived to be less challenging and easily achievable via monetary donations.

In fundraising appeals to help beneficiaries, (moving) pictures of suffering are employed to communicate the virtually ungraspable pain of beneficiaries. I have argued that Bunluerit's use of negative imagery, or pictures showing beneficiaries in their worst condition, and his manipulation of beneficiaries' bodies to create a compassion-deserving spectacle (*naa songsarn*) are indicative of the commodification process wherein the pain of beneficiaries is packaged and sold for donation money from guilt-induced giving. The dehumanising representation of sufferers creates two interrelated conundrums: what is the ethical balance between communicating beneficiaries' pain and making them objects of the voyeuristic gaze? And can donation appeals involving physical and symbolic exploitation be considered to be justified philanthropic interventions? Beneficiaries' consenting to this representation renders these questions even more difficult to answer when a dehumanising portrayal seems to be a lesser evil than the suffering they endure.

The representation of suffering on Bunluerit's fan page has been investigated and sufferers are compared with Tyler's 'waste populations' who are 'included through their exclusion' (Tyler 2013: 20). At the same time, sufferers are considered to be liminal subjects

who have a polluting presence that can disturb identity, system, and order (Kristeva 1982). Yet their existence makes explicit the boundary between the 'clean and proper body' of donors and abject sufferers (Kristeva 1982: 71). Such segregation and inclusion can point to how the hierarchy of power is maintained through the abjection process where the waste populations that threaten the system or order need to be controlled and governed. Compassion is thus, I have argued, a key affective mode of controlling the Thai abject subject and perpetuating the system of dominance by legitimising the status of privileged and underprivileged people and encouraging individuals to be content with their place in the hierarchical class system.

Chapter 7

The Worldly and *Karmic* Power of Digitally Mediated Gift-Giving

The previous two chapters examined key elements of donation appeals on the Facebook fan page that are central to my case study: the philanthropist, Bhin Bunluerit himself (Chapter 5), and the primary tool he uses in his charitable appeals, spectacles of suffering (Chapter 6). This chapter will address donation-making, or gift-giving – the outcome that the appeals strive for – by taking the idea of the inalienability of the gift as a starting point for the discussion. As discussed in Chapter 3, the inalienability of the gift can be understood as the inalienable right or authority of the giver intrinsic in the gift that obliges the recipient to reciprocate (Godelier 1999; Mauss 2002). In this chapter, I will take this concept of the inalienability further by investigating the online gift on Bunluerit's fan page in relation to Buddhist beliefs about giving (*dāna*), including merit (a positive and protective force, derived from good deeds, that benefits the merit maker) and *karmic* consequences (the belief that the status of the individual and the situation they are in, whether good or bad, are the result of their previous deeds). The Thai Buddhist norms and beliefs, I will argue, enable the inalienability of gift to operate on digital platforms despite the fact that the power of the gift tends to work in face-to-face environments where a personal relationship between the giver and recipient has been established.

The chapter also concentrates on the mercantile mentality of donations played out via the fan page. It develops further the argument made in the previous chapter with regard to the commodification of suffering, likening the concept of *dāna* to capitalist ideologies about capital accumulation and 'commodity fetishism'. The aim of this chapter is to show how digitally mediated gift-giving can naturalise the asymmetrical hierarchical relations through the Buddhist spiritual beliefs and practices that operate at the level of believers' selves and bodies, making such ideology more affectively compelling than rational experiences.

This chapter is structured as follows: the first section examines how the inalienability of the gift operates when gifts are made on digital platforms. In addition to reputational rewards that donors receive from making large and frequent donations on Bunluerit's fan page, they also benefit from the power of the gift in the form of Buddhist merit. The second section further explores the effect of the inalienability of the gift on beneficiaries. It argues that beneficiaries offer images of their suffering in exchange for donations. Such an exchange operates similarly to a commercial transaction wherein relationships between donors and beneficiaries end once the images of suffering are consumed and donations are made. I call this exchange a transaction of compassion. The third section considers how gift-giving prioritises the good intention of a donor over the gift's outcome. It links this idea to the Buddhist teaching of *dāna* and its donor-centric characteristics. The last part of this chapter explores how the Buddhist practice of *dāna* is integrated with capitalist logic in two respects: its basic principle and its end result. The section also discusses self-gratifying joy derived from gift-giving, which can be compared to the affective workings of 'communicative capitalism' (Dean 2015). This last section argues that capitalist *dāna* creates a therapeutic effect that temporarily soothes the anxiety of beneficiaries concerning their immediate suffering and makes donors feel gratified that they are contributing to the greater good.

7.1 Digitally Mediated Giving: The Inalienability of the Online Gift

Scholars studying gift-giving have long argued that unreciprocated gifts tend to perpetuate an unequal balance of power (Sahlins 1972; Malinowski 2002; Bourdieu 2005). Digitally mediated gifts, like a donation made on Bunluerit's fan page, I argue, function similarly through the inalienability of the gift that symbolically and affectively enacts relations of dominance informed by Buddhist beliefs and practices. Maurice Godelier (1999: 45), a recognised gift theorist whose work extends Mauss's founding framework, maintains that the inalienability of the gift can be understood as the power in the gift, 'which works on the recipient and compels him to give in return'. I see this power of the digitally mediated gift on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page as working on two levels. At one level, the inalienability of the gift calls for other modes of counter-gift from sources other than beneficiaries, which include an online reputation legitimised by the Buddhist ideology of power, and merit – supernatural forces believed to bring about good consequences to the possessor. At another level, the power of the gift is played out on beneficiaries and demands a counter-gift from them.

Among donors on Bunluerit's fan page, Cha-em is famous for her frequent, generous donations[58]. Cha-em gave 3,000 baht[59] (75 GBP) – the highest amount I saw given on the fan page during the period of data collection – to almost every sufferer that Bunluerit made an appeal for. She seems to be popular among page followers as her posts often gain significant

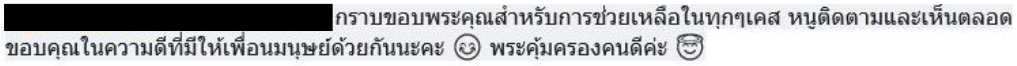
[58] Page followers are able to recognise donors' reputation through a common practice in which donors post a bank transfer slip of a donation made to a beneficiary's bank account in the comment section under Bunluerit's appeal.

[59] The minimum wage per day in Thailand is around 330 baht (8.25 GBP) (Ministry of Labour 2022).

attention from other users on the site[60]. Many page followers recognise her, including an interviewee.

> When I donate to beneficiaries on Bhin's page, I have to choose … I am not Cha-em who can donate 3,000 baht to every case. ***(Interview, Kaew, Donor)***

Every time Cha-em posted a transfer slip, other users would make comments praising her and rejoicing about her good deed.

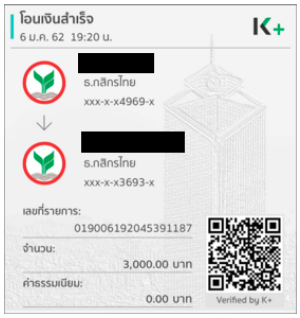


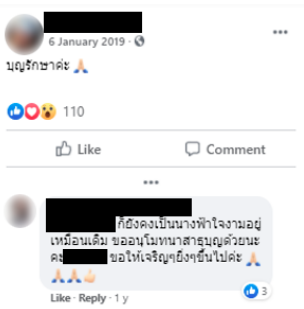
> Thank you very much for your help in every case. I have followed you online and always seen you help others. Thank you for your kindness towards other human beings. Monk (in the meaning of sacred entity) will protect good people. (***Comment from a user***)

I found this practice of other users giving compliments and special recognition to major donors rather specific to the Thai context. It is pertinent in this regard to question why page followers pay particular attention to how much they give and to whom they give it, which creates a certain reputation for donors like Cha-em. I argue that such attention reflects the dominant influence of hierarchical power relations which means that people tend to defer to those with a higher status. Here the transfer slips do not only show the evidence that donations have been made. They are also a display of class power, which is deeply inherent in the social stratification and socio-economic inequalities in Thailand. Cha-em's regular donation of 3,000 baht implies that she is rather well off and positioned in a higher social class, which is partly why she attracts online attention and fame.

[60] Cha-em's posts were often algorithmically categorised as 'Most Relevant' comment. The categorisation, in this case, is based on the largest number of 'likes' and 'replies' the comment has received (Facebook 2020b).

Other than her wealth, Cha-em's moral high ground, as perceived by users from her generous gifts, also garners her a reputation. While the above comment from a user shows appreciation of Cha-em's help, the following comment goes as far as comparing Cha-em to an angel.





[Tagging Cha-em] You have always been a *narng fah* (female angel). *Anumodāna sathu*, Cha-em. May your life be full of great success and happiness. **(*Comment by a user)***

Bunluerit himself has also been compared to a quasi-religious icon, a *taewada dern din* (male angel walking on earth) (Khunthong 2017; Matichon Online 2019b; Kom Chad Luek 2019b). Referring to a heavenly being to compliment donors' act of kindness, on the one hand, points to their high moral superiority and suggests that worldly status is not good enough for them. On the other hand, we see the hierarchical division of people on the basis of a morality which is closely linked to their wealth and ability to make a large donation. Again, the idea of 'power relations between above and below' mentioned in the previous chapter is reflected through the notion of a compassionate angel above helping suffering people below. Hailing a donor as a quasi-religious icon also points to the conflation of a moral virtue related to gift-giving, like compassion, with a supernatural element informed by Buddhist power, which, in Thai cosmology, is often associated with the celestial sphere above (Siani 2020). This conflation is enabled through the Buddhist concept of merit which, I argue, is the other form of counter-gift derived from sources unrelated to beneficiaries.

I see merit as a form of positive affect that has the potential to activate and deactivate Buddhist believers and bring about effects. While it is impossible to prove whether merit exists ontologically, such religious force is 'felt into existence by affective bodies' (Schaefer 2015: 28) and it has driven much gift-giving on Bunluerit's fan page. Bunluerit and many donors view donations as *dāna* that will bring givers merit; hence, Bunluerit uses *karmic* benefits from merit to urge donors to give. In the following post on his fan page, Bunluerit makes an appeal by explicitly describing karmic benefits that donors will receive if they donate.

> For anyone making merit by giving to people who are not brothers, sisters nor relatives, *dāna barami* carried out will yield great *karmic* rewards. They will find happiness and success both in this and the next lives. They will be free from suffering, distress and illness… Thank you. ***(Bunluerit's post on 4 September 2018)***

According to Buddhist teaching, merit can be accumulated and, as the post suggests, accumulated merit is believed to yield great karmic benefits to donors either in this life or the next (Guruge and Bond 1998; Phaholyothin 2017). Such *karmic* benefits may include wealth, good health, happiness, and power, among others (Bowie 1998; Naemiratch and Manderson 2009).

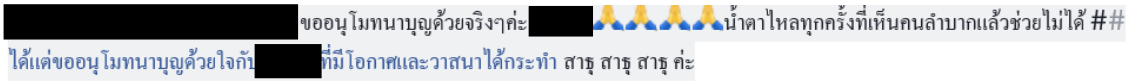
Merit works at the ideo-affective level where Buddhists feel these religious intensities through embodied experiences rather than merely conceptualising them. For example, many Buddhists believe that people with great merit have some kind of halo that is noticeable through skin's radiance, a firm voice, and a graceful demeanour (Sucharithanarugse 1982). Bunluerit's fans who met him in person also refer to this halo:

> Bhin possesses the power of goodness … Wherever you go, people around you can feel the warmth of your kind heart and an aura of merit. I can't seem to find any word to

explain this feeling but this is the truth. ***(Live streaming field note, A group of Bunluerit's fans gave him a large sum of donation money)***.

In this excerpt, Bunluerit's meritorious power is felt into existence through a sensation that affects fans' bodies at the level that exists beyond language (Schaefer 2015). I argue that such ideological affect makes the Buddhist orthodoxy especially powerful in forming the worldview and mentality of believers, as the religious intensities are the truth that Buddhists live in and the force 'flowing through the veins of their everyday experience' (Schaefer 2015: 104). While the belief in a rational ideology can change when values shift and a new discourse becomes dominant, for example homosexuality was once viewed and treated as a pathological issue and now in many parts of the world it is seen as an individual right and freedom (Foucault 1990; Crespo, Orozco and Hassan 2016), faith in ideological affect is less likely to waver as it becomes part of believers' selves and bodies that constitute the worlds they are in: it is 'a compulsory, affective web fusing bodies to worlds' (Schaefer 2015: 104). In this way, Buddhist ideologies are the convincing truth to believers no matter how supernatural and outlandish they may seem to non-Buddhists.

The concept of *barami*, the Buddhist charismatic power discussed in relation to Bunluerit in Chapter 5, is also associated with major donors like Cha-em. The following comment indicates how the donors' prestige is justified in religious terms.

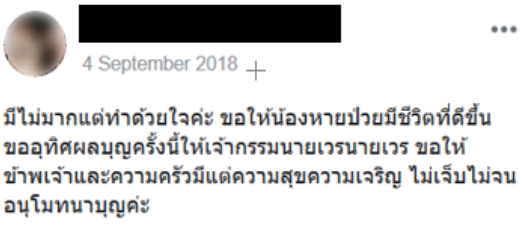


I truly feel joy [*anumodāna*] at your merit-making, Cha-em. My tear drops every time I see sufferers but cannot help. ## I can only *anumodāna* with you who have a chance and *wassana* to make merit. Sathu. Sathu. Sathu. ***(Comment by a user)***

Major donors to the site are believed to have *wassana* (synonymous with *barami*) and are thus able to give money freely without concern for their financial status. I argue that the Buddhist power of *wassana*/*barami* plays a crucial role in the status-cementing process where the higher position in the hierarchy of power is bolstered by that of the hierarchy of merit. In this process, *barami* allows access to resources which are later turned into large gifts. These gifts can show the giver's power and status. They are also considered to be merit-making, and their karmic benefit, in turn, enables givers to accumulate more power and *barami*. In this regard, people at the top of the social hierarchy also have a higher rank in the merit hierarchy. Edoardo Siani (2020), in his article about Buddhism and power, maintains that the notion that meritorious deeds bring about power and wealth and that privilege is a sign of *karmic* rewards tends to create a chicken-and-egg situation, where the superiority of privileged people is automatically legitimised. Whether *barami* leads to wealth and power or the other way around, the status of privileged people is crucially cemented by the ideo-affective force of merit.

Indeed, many donors to the fan site couple their donation slip with a post saying what *karmic* benefits they wish to gain from the donation made. Some donors state in their post their intention to contribute the merit made to other persons, animals, or ghosts.





> I don't have much but I gave from my heart. I hope you recover and have a better life. I wish to contribute the merit made from this gift to '*jao kam naii wen*'[61]. I wish that I and my family will only find happiness and success, and that we will never have to be sick or poor. *Anumodanā*. ***(Comment by a user)***

According to gift theories, the inalienability of the gift allows givers to retain some rights over what they have given that they can later claim benefits from (Godelier 1999). While posting a donation slip can be considered to be a way to express the giver's right over the gift, making a wish seems to be an act of putting forward a claim not towards the recipient, as can be found in unmediated gifts, but towards the power of merit based on *karmic* law. Although the mediation of exchanges may not allow the rule of inalienability to function properly as no apparent tie is forged to obligate recipients to give counter-gifts (Godelier 1999; Mauss 2002), *karmic* law seems to be in place to allow donors to claim their rights over their gifts. Even if recipients do not know where the donations came from and counter-gifts may not be made, donors can be ensured that their rights over their gifts in the form of merit remain with them. The publication of donation slips may thus, I want to suggest, signify an attempt to show this inalienable power in a concrete way, and the wish-making statement in the above excerpt seems to underline the donor's entitlement to such power.

Even though meritorious power is inalienable, according to Buddhist belief, it can be shared with those who feel happy about other people's merit-making (Crosby 2014). The act of sharing this merit is also believed to be meritorious; both the merit maker and other people rejoicing at the good deed achieve *karmic* gain from the sharing. Sharers often utter

[61] *Jao kam naii wen* (*karma* holder, master of retribution) is a person, animal, or ghost that is linked to an individual by a negative *karmic* bond in a past life and will bring retribution on the individual in this life. If the individual contributes the merit made to his or her *jao kam naii wen,* it is believed that the suffering caused by such retribution will be relieved.

anumodāna, sathu, or a combination of them (as seen in the previous excerpts from comments) to convey their rejoicing. The circulation of this meritorious affect can promote more *dāna*, as other individuals who are affected by joyful intensities may feel encouraged to give as well. As depicted below, some users even create a personalised picture file to be used for this purpose.

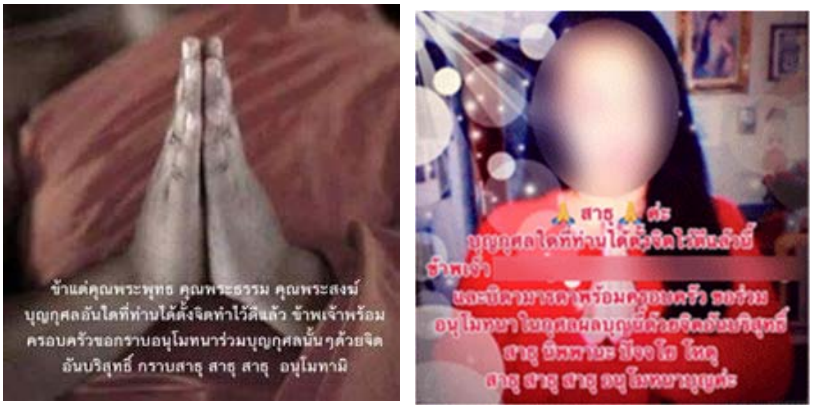


Figure 8: Examples of home-made picture files used for sharing merit. While the main idea of both captions in the pictures is similar, showing users and their families rejoicing at the merit (anumodāna sathu) that other donors have made, the image on the right has been personalised by the user, who has employed her own picture as the background and has put her name in the caption.

Waen, another interviewee, cites merit-sharing as the reason why she posts her donation slips on Bunluerit's fan page. She notes:

> Before when I donated, I didn't post donation slips. Later I felt that by posting them, people who don't have enough to donate can make merit by joining in *anumodāna*. ***(Interview, Waen, Donor)***

Givers can therefore receive a two-fold *karmic* benefit from their gift-giving: first when they make a donation and second when they share the merit derived from that donation. Additionally, the power of merit is considered to benefit virtually all people who are involved

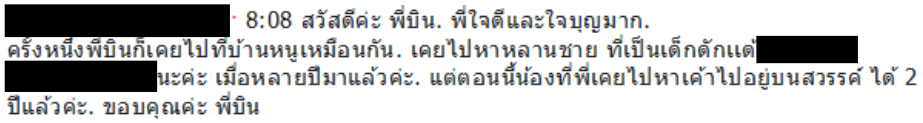
in gift-giving, including engaged spectators. Meritorious affect emits positive energy among givers and those associated with them. While seeing sufferers may induce feelings of pity, compassion, or disgust, donors seem to emanate an aura of joy, kindness, and appreciation that is conceivably intensified by users' praises and blessing. These differences in the affective force transmitted can subtly inform the higher position of givers in the hierarchy of merit where what is considered meritorious is associated with happiness and positive emotions. Here the Buddhist ideology of merit works through bodies and emotions to naturalise the inequalities in wealth and secular power, which is intricately linked to spiritual power. The firm grip of ideo-affective religion that gets 'its hooks into the flesh' (Massumi 2015: 85) of believers makes the naturalisation highly effective, especially when religion is the affect flowing through bodies rather than being merely ideas formed in the mind.

In this section, I have focused on the inalienability of the gift that brings about a counter-gift in the form of reputation and merit. Gift-giving has a special status in Thai culture. It generates a high level of prestige and special recognition for givers, and brings about supernatural benefit in the form of meritorious affect and power. I argue that gift-giving in the Thai context is highly regarded since it has long been used as the source of power to legitimise the status and authority of the privileged and dominant groups. This contention needs to be considered in relation to the Thai patron–client system that has always been the underlying relation constituting social order (Hanks 1962; Terwiel 1984). The Thai patron–client based social order operates through gift-giving and derivative affective relations to make people content with their place in the social and economic hierarchy and to interact with others accordingly. From the relationship between the king and his subjects to that between parent and child, gift-giving informs who is in power and who needs to submit to that power, which is guided by affective ties of *dej* and *khun*, the moral of *katanyu*, Buddhist concepts of *amnaat*,

barami, and *saksit*, and powerful meritorious affect. Gift-giving and linked affective relations are hence given great importance and value. In the next section, I will further elaborate on the power of gift-giving in Thai culture, particularly when it demands reciprocity from beneficiaries.

7.2 The Transaction of Compassion: When Dignity is for Sale

For recipients, the inalienability of the gift operates through the feeling of indebtedness, or *katanyu.* In Chapter 5, I argued that beneficiaries, in recognition of Bunluerit's *khun* and in their attempt to express their gratitude to him, submit themselves to his superior power both mentally, by obediently following his orders, and physically, by *kraab*, or prostrating, to signal their lower position in the hierarchy of power. In gift-giving that is unmediated by bureaucratic structures, where recipients recognise the identity of individual givers, *katanyu* can entail a long-lasting, sometimes a life-long, bond of gratitude. As Pierre Bourdieu (2005: 195) argues, 'a gift which is not matched by a counter-gift creates a lasting bond, restricting the debtor's freedom and forcing him to adopt a peaceful, co-operative, prudent attitude'. In this vein, some beneficiaries or their close circle signal a long-term indebtedness to Bunluerit even though they received his monetary support some time ago, as in the following comment:


[redacted] 8:08 สวัสดีค่ะ พี่บิน. พี่ใจดีและใจบุญมาก.
ครั้งหนึ่งพี่บินก็เคยไปที่บ้านหนูเหมือนกัน. เคยไปหาหลานชาย ที่เป็นเด็กตักแต่[redacted]
[redacted]นะค่ะ เมื่อหลายปีมาแล้วค่ะ. แต่ตอนนี้น้องที่พี่เคยไปหาเค้าไปอยู่บนสวรรค์ ได้ 2
ปีแล้วค่ะ. ขอบคุณค่ะ พี่บิน

Hello Brother Bhin! You are so kind and meritful. You once visited us several years ago. You went to see my nephew who had junctional epidermolysis bullosa. His name was … However, the boy you once visited has already been in heaven for two years. Thank you, Brother Bhin. ***(Comment by a user)***

As this example illustrates, *khun* is not forgotten but rather endures as an affective tie persistently linking beneficiaries/clients to donors/patrons. Even though the beneficiary in this comment had already passed away, his aunt still expresses her feeling of gratitude.

This enduring bond of indebtedness can maintain asymmetrical power as givers purportedly adopt the 'dispossessed self' of recipients which includes, for example, obligation, gratitude, or loyalty (Bourdieu 2005). The idea of the dispossessed self, I argue, can be understood as the way recipients allow the power of givers to operate on themselves. This may include surrendering one's autonomy, being willing to be subservient to givers, or permitting givers to ask for counter-gifts at any time after the original gift was given. Significantly, in the context where gifts are digitally mediated and the identities of givers are unclear, the offering of the dispossessed self by recipients works symbolically and in reverse order. Rather than getting gifts first, recipients offer their dispossessed self, which is in the form of a visual of their vulnerable self, to request donations.

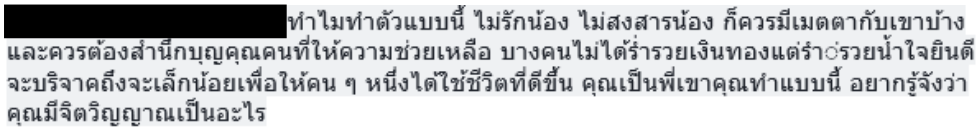


[Tagging potential donor] Please allow me to introduce myself. I suffer from many diseases including emphysema, tuberculosis and asthma. I cannot walk and need to use an oxygen device at all times. I don't have parents. I have one kid. I need diapers and some money to pay for transportation when I go to see my doctor. I don't have any money. Please help me. I live at …

(Comment from a user)

By offering photographs of their vulnerability to be gazed at, sufferers effectively signal to potential donors that they are willing to be under their power.

This reverse order of gift-giving can be viewed as transactional since its characteristics are similar to a commercial exchange wherein reciprocity unfolds between two parties previously unknown to one another and ends when each receives the item of exchange, with no further bond or attachment (Godbout and Caillé 1998). This logic of transaction links back to Chapter 6, where I discussed how the spectacle of suffering is commodified by Bunluerit; yet in this case the commodification is carried out by the sufferer. However, in some cases where beneficiaries can be tracked down and found to be misusing donation funds or otherwise behaving in a manner deemed inappropriate by donors or other supporters, the bond of gratitude is re-evoked, though such a bond is no longer effective in holding beneficiaries to account or reciprocating the gift as the gift exchange process has already been completed. This was evidenced in an incident where Bunluerit fundraised money for a man, who was blind and homeless and lived under a bridge with his sister, using the sister's bank account. Around ten days after his charitable visit, Bunluerit posted an update stating that the sister had left, taking approximately 500,000 baht (12,500 GBP) of donation money with her and leaving the beneficiary destitute and uncared for. Donors criticised the perpetrator based on the bond of *katanyu*:


[redacted]ทำไมทำตัวแบบนี้ ไม่รักน้อง ไม่สงสารน้อง ก็ควรมีเมตตากับเขาบ้าง และควรต้องสำนึกบุญคุณคนที่ให้ความช่วยเหลือ บางคนไม่ได้ร่ำรวยเงินทองแต่ร่ำรวยน้ำใจยินดี จะบริจาคถึงจะเล็กน้อยเพื่อให้คน ๆ หนึ่งได้ใช้ชีวิตที่ดีขึ้น คุณเป็นพี่เขาคุณทำแบบนี้ อยากรู้จังว่า คุณมีจิตวิญญาณเป็นอะไร

> Why did you do this to your own brother? If you don't love him nor *songsarn* him, you should at least have *mettā* (kindness) for him. And you should be reminded of *bunkhun*[62] of those who had helped. Some of these people are not rich in money but they are rich

[62] A variant of the term '*khun*'.

> in kindness. They donated money, even if it was a small amount, in the hope of bettering your brother's life. ***(Comment by a user)***

In this case, the bond of *katanyu* had been broken not by the beneficiary himself but by his sister. She was thus criticised and reminded of the indebtedness that she was supposed to acknowledge and that she should find ways to return *khun*. This example is indicative of how the bond of gratitude persists even though the mediated transaction has ended.

In addition to these persistent bonds of gratitude, power differentials between givers and recipients are another sign that indicates that the inalienability of the gift is still working in a digitally mediated environment. These power differentials are highlighted by the 'symbolic violence' that is intrinsic in the counter-gift of the dispossessed self (Bourdieu 2005). Bourdieu (2001) defines symbolic violence as invisible violence inherent in social norms and practices that maintains the domination of the socially privileged group over those with a lower status and less power. In the face-to-face exchange, symbolic violence can operate through indebtedness to morally bind recipients to remain in an asymmetrical relationship. In a digital environment in which long-term relationships between donors and recipients are unlikely, symbolic violence manifests itself in the mode in which suffering is represented and the user responses elicited. When sufferers offer a vulnerable depiction of themselves for exchange, they tend to be recognised as helpless and without pride or dignity, or even pathetic, if not disgusting. As recipients' vulnerability and dignity are turned into items to be exchanged, this implies a submission to 'symbolic forms of domination' by donors (Bourdieu 2005: 196).

The violence appears to escalate when sufferers' offerings are disregarded. When Bunluerit and donors neglect particular offerings of vulnerability, this underlines the abject state that sufferers are in; even the sacrifice of one's 'dispossessing self' cannot elicit any

attention or compassion. Giving a donation and establishing a state of indebtedness may lead to symbolic violence, but paying no attention can be a crueller form of violence. Such neglect can give a true sense of 'dehumanized waste' or 'the disposable dregs and refuse of social life' (Krauss 1996: 90; Tyler 2013: 21), as the horrible state of these sufferers does not even seem worth attention. People who are successful in eliciting help via the fan page can be viewed, in a way, as the 'deserving' abject subjects, whereas those whose offerings are not accepted become the 'undeserving' abject subjects (see example below). Such categorisation reflects the fact that in the Thai context of online fundraising, even abject subjects, who only have their vulnerability left to exchange, are not exempted from blame for their suffering, which seems to have already produced their undeservingness (Arneson 1997; Appelbaum 2001).

As I observed throughout my digital ethnography, some undeserving sufferers reproduced their vulnerable self in pictures and distributed them to various potential donors in the hope of gaining support. As the dispossessed self multiplies, its value seems to reduce. Instead of inducing compassion, excess representational mobilisation of *naa songsarn* tends to elicit annoyance and even contempt, which only reinforces notions of sufferers as abject and undeserving – as the following thread of comments from the fan site illustrates:

[redacted] ลุงบินช่วยบริจาคนมผงให้ลูกหนูนะคะหนูไม่มีเงินซื้อนมให้ลูกคะแฟนทำงานคนเดียวได้วันระ300บาทสองวันเบิกตังทีเพื่อเอามาซื้อนมหยิบยื้มใครก็ไม่ได้เขาก้กัวเราไม่มีเงินคืนหนูไม่ยากเห็นลูกหนูอดนมหนูจึงทำทีกอย่างเพื่อให้ลูกหนูได้นมกินใครจะว่าไม่อายหรือหน้าด้านก้ยอม. ขอผู้ใจบุนขอเงินให้ได้ซื้อนมสักกล่องนะคะ..เพราะหนูไม่มีจริงๆเรยต้องขอคะ.สามารถตรวจสอบได้ลงพื้นที่ได้คะเพราะหนูยากจนจริงๆไม่ได้ดอแหลคะขอเพียงได้มีเงินซื้อนมให้ลูกๆทั้งสองคนหน่อยนะคะ.

> [A mother who was making an appeal:] Uncle Bhin please give some powdered milk for my kids. I don't have any money to buy some. My boyfriend is the only breadwinner. He gets 300 baht [approximately 7.5 GBP] a day … I don't want to see my kids hungry so I have to try every way to get some milk for them even if people might say that I am

shameless to ask around like this … I really don't have any money so I have to ask. You can check that I am really poor.

[redacted]ขอแสดงความคิดเห็นนิดนึงนะ มีลูกน้อยสองคนแล้ว คราวนี้ก็ให้รู้จักคุมกำเนิดหรือทำหมันนะคะ ในเมื่อเราลำบากก็ต้องรู้จักบริหารตนเอง

[A commenter:] Can I make a comment here? You already have two little kids. Now you should learn to use birth control or undergo sterilisation. If you are in difficult situations, you should know how to manage yourself.

[redacted] ฉีดยาคุมคะพี่แต่ท้องหนูไม่มีพี่น้องที่ไหนคะหนูไม่มีจริงๆไม่มีใครช่วยเรยต้องดิ้นรนเพื่อลูกๆมีนมกินคะ.ไม่ใช่เพื่อตัวเองนะคะแต่ทำเพื่อลูก

[The mother:] I had contraceptive injection but still pregnant. I don't have any money nor anyone to help. I need to struggle so my kids can have milk to drink. I didn't ask this for myself but for my kids.

[redacted] หาทำงานสิคะบางคนเป็นแม่เลี้ยงเดียวเขายังเลี้ยงจนโตได้ไม่เห็นต้องพึ่งใครแถมมีหนี้ติดตัวมาด้วย

[Another commenter:] So go get a job and work for a living. Some single moms can raise their kids until they become adults despite being in debt and having no help.

(Comments by users)

In response to the mother's appeal for support, these site users attack her deservingness: she has too many children or she does not work to feed them. Notably, these attacks are based on the discourse of neoliberal individualisation where each person is supposed to shoulder the responsibility for their own life problems and the consequences of their life choices (Beck 2014), while the role of the state is pushed into the background. Additionally, the exercise of symbolic power over the body and behaviour of the underprivileged person is also evident in these comments.

As I have suggested, donating on Bunluerit's fan page can be considered to be a transaction of compassion. In this transaction, *songsarn*, or compassion, functions as a currency that encourages a meaningful and mutually profitable exchange between people in positions of greater privilege and those at the socio-economic periphery. People who are less advantaged offer their *naa songsarn* (compassion-deserving) representation, which primarily implies the submission of their dignity and autonomy for the purpose of securing the financial support they desperately need for their everyday requirements. Meanwhile, donors who are affected by such representations and feel *songsarn* (compassion) give donations in exchange for offerings of the dispossessed self. Even without a concrete material return, givers can profit from this transaction in any intangible form that they deem meaningful, including, for example, the maintenance of power and status (Godelier 1999), a warm glow and an altruistic motive (Titmuss 1971; Andreoni 1989), guilt assuagement (Hibbert et al. 2007), or meritorious affect and *karmic* reward.

While *songsarn*, or compassion, can be viewed as the affective force that often maintains structural relations of subordination (Spelman 2001; Berlant 2004), it can also be mobilised by subordinated groups for their own benefit. Bhensri Naemiratch and Lenore Manderson (2009) suggest in their research about the self-image of people with disabilities in the northeast of Thailand that their participants sometimes exploit *songsarn* to access required resources. A person with chronic neuropathy who was interviewed by them is quoted as stating: 'I accepted that people see me as *pikarn* (disabled)… I think it is good that people feel *songsarn* for me so they will give me jobs'[63] (Naemiratch and Manderson 2009: 483). Acknowledging

[63] One might argue that the recruitment of a disabled person in this case might stem from an intent to promote employment equality. However, in this context, I maintain that the interviewee saw her job opportunities as a result of compassion, that is, her disability gives her a better chance of being hired, rather than equality, meaning that she would be given the same opportunity as non-disabled people to be recruited.

that some beneficiaries use compassion to their advantage is not to suggest that we should abandon critical analysis of the social and economic dynamics of compassion. My aim here is to show that the dynamics of compassion as well as the inalienability of the gift can be exploited by both givers and recipients. As Marjorie Garber (2004: 26) rightly puts it, '[c]ompassion seems to waver politically between two forms of inequality: the benevolence of those who have (the power of the rich) and the entitlement of those who need (the power of the poor)'. However, whether it is gift-giving or compassion, inequality is inherent in these mediated relations and the power derived from them cannot be considered to be fair or just when it is rooted in asymmetrical exchanges.

In the asymmetrical gift relationship of *dāna* guided by the value of *katanyu* and the meritorious obligation of wealthy people, beneficiaries have less to offer in the transaction. It is therefore not uncommon to see underprivileged people willingly exchange their dignity – one of the few things left in their bare life – for donation money. A widely known Thai idiom, '*saksri kin mai dai*' ('dignity is inedible') illustrates the priority given to money over dignity. In a patron–client culture where people are believed to be born unequal (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980; Terwiel 1984), dignity is reserved for those who have enough to feed themselves and their families. Gaining respect from others as a human with equal intrinsic value may not be as important as getting resources to fulfil basic needs. It is dehumanising enough to suffer from social and economic deprivation. If a dehumanising representation is likely to bring about the support beneficiaries need, they are likely to opt for it as a way out of suffering.

A transaction of compassion is a survival strategy adopted by less privileged people living in circumstances in which the state cannot equally and adequately provide humanising care to all. Although I have argued that beneficiaries have the capacity to negotiate with givers

in this transaction, this agency is tenuous since it depends on givers' arbitrariness. It is also viewed as less legitimate when the status of sufferers is inherently devalued by dominant ideologies, including *karmic* consequence, *barami*, and *dej* and *khun*. Although donors are the persons who give in this transaction, they seem to profit more from the exchange, especially in terms of intangible returns including status, reputation, and merit or a positive affect, like a warm glow. The high status of donors in the asymmetrical exchange also allows them to make the transaction better serve their interest than that of beneficiaries. This point will be further elaborated in the next section focusing on the way *dāna* prioritises the intention of givers over its consequences for recipients' lives.

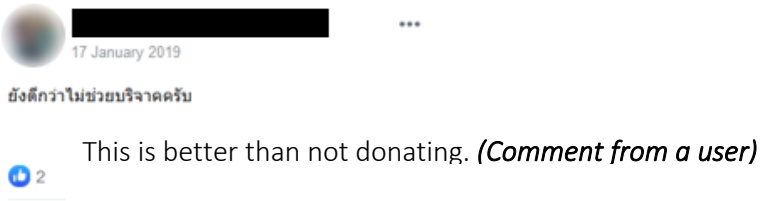
7.3 Donor-Centric Gift-Giving: Intention is More Important than Outcome

The donation amount on Bunluerit's fan page varies from 1 baht to 3,000 baht. Sometimes beneficiaries do not receive any money in return for their offering, only moral support and verbal encouragement. As Jacques Godbout and Alain Caillé (1998) argue, the idea of price is not applicable to gift-giving; the value of a gift is less important than the fact that it is offered as a gift. The irrelevance of price in gift-giving is even more clear in the case of an extremely low-value gift like the below one-baht (less than one pence)[64] bank transfer. A donor may give a one-baht coin to a *khor dāna*, or beggar, since it does not take much to spontaneously pull out some coins from their pockets and give them to sufferers who are right in front of them. Donations on Bunluerit's fan page tend to be less spontaneous as donors have to key in the recipient's bank account number and upload the slip onto the fan page (for donors

[64] The least amount of money that individuals can spend to buy something is 10 baht. This would be enough for a small packet of crisps or a bottle of water (800ml).

who wish to show their transaction). Why would one go to such lengths to give merely one baht? Gift-giving scholars argue that what makes a gift valuable is the 'labour devoted to form', including effort, care, time, gestures, and savoir faire rather than just its economic worth (Godbout and Caillé 1998; Bourdieu 2005: 194). Put another way, the emotional value of the gift is prioritised over its economic value. Therefore, if this one-baht gift is given by someone who is very poor or is a donor's well-intended effort, it should be appreciated equally. Godbout and Caillé (1998) clearly illustrate that it is the intention behind the gift and not the result of it that counts. Bunluerit also expresses this view in a television interview when asked about unintended consequences of his charitable giving and fundraising efforts. He simply replies, 'It is not my fault. I have a good intention' (Jonglertjesdawong 2017).





This is better than not donating. *(Comment from a user)*

The prioritisation of intention over result in gift-giving is linked to one of the characteristics of the philanthropic relationship that has been criticised as potentially harmful, which is a donor-led or donor-centric intervention (Ostrander 2007; Moody 2011; Kim, Lethem and Lee 2017). It has been argued that in many contemporary philanthropic practices, donors adopt a beneficiary-centric approach that takes into consideration recipients' needs and pays particular attention to the sustainable outcome of their gifts (Schervish 2007; Seng 2019).

However, less of such an attempt can be seen in *dāna*-based charitable giving like that on Bunluerit's fan page, since the intention and result of *dāna* predominantly concern givers rather than recipients (Egge 2002; Bornstein 2009; Kusaladhamma 2017). As discussed in Chapter 3, the worldly aim of *dāna* is to make merit and enjoy the resulting *karmic* reward either in this life or the next, while the other-worldly goal is to practise detachment on the path to nirvana. Accordingly, the consequence of *dāna* in relation to a recipient is of less importance to donors, and following up the effects of donations on beneficiaries is often deemed unnecessary (Phaholyothin 2017).

Bunluerit rarely reports the results of his charitable giving except when beneficiaries contact him directly or when recipients are found to be exploiting the donation money and he decides to let his followers know. Bunluerit explains why he cannot regularly check up on beneficiaries after donations are made in a live feed:

> I have to admit that there are a lot of cases asking me for help each day so I would not be able to take care of every case in the long run. After visiting a beneficiary, I can provide further assistance only when their relatives contact me to ask for help in coordinating with hospitals. ***(Live streaming field note, Soo)***

It appears that donors do not mind that Bunluerit does not report back on the progress of beneficiaries. Even when it turned out that donations were misappropriated or led to unintended consequences, they show sympathy for Bunluerit instead of questioning the charitable process he follows.

In the case of the blind beneficiary's donation money taken away by his sister mentioned earlier, Nid, an interviewee, expresses her view on the incident, which clearly shows the concept of *dāna* as a gift made in a detached manner.

> I felt bad for him [Bunluerit] … I am not angry with him or the beneficiaries. I already made merit and that's it. They have their own *karmic* consequences. Probably we [the beneficiaries and donors] share a *karmic* bond[65] … I don't think about it. What is done is done. I don't hold on to the thing that I already gave. ***(Interview, Nid, Donor)***

When asked whether they wish to know more about consequences of their gifts, other interviewees shared a similar idea about donations.

> When money or things are given, that is the end. For me, when merit is made, it ends there. That's it. Period. Whatever recipients want to do with my money, it is their concern, not mine. What I gave is already given and it's not my call anymore. ***(Interview, Kaew, Donor)***

> I just want to give and then that's it – the end. I don't want to get involved with the recipient any more … One thing I like about making merit online is… that when I make merit, I felt that it ends there … I don't know the recipient and they don't know me. I gave it to you. You take it and don't thank me because I don't want anything from you. ***(Interview, Sompong, Donor)***

Two main points that all three interviewees mention are the perception that their donations are merit-making and the belief that care, help, relations, or any other involvement with beneficiaries should end when donations are made. As for the latter, the termination of relations with beneficiaries after donations have been made seems to be in contrast with the Western perspectives on fundraising, where charitable organisations and donors are enthusiastic about seeing the impact of the funds raised on beneficiaries. Both views indicate the secular and the spiritual aspects of *dāna*. On one level, relations between the exchange

[65] People who have a karmic bond with each other are believed to have done something good or bad together in a past life; therefore, in this life, they meet and do something that will positively and/or negatively affect the other.

parties end because donors have achieved their goal regarding making merit and any further involvement with beneficiaries is unnecessary. At another level, the termination of any other engagement can show donors' detachment from their possessions, which are one of many worldly ties they have to give up on the path to nirvana. In this way, beneficiaries are merely a 'tool to do good deeds with' (Chaisinthop 2014: 405). However, these tools are, of course, real people, and the good deeds can bring about positive as well as negative consequences for their lives. To give without caring about the results, I argue, can thus be seen as ineffectual and irresponsible as much as it is viewed as 'free' and 'pure' (Bornstein 2009). It also goes against the popular narrative of philanthropy, in which gift-giving needs to be 'scientific', 'effective', and 'impact driven' (Bishop and Green 2009).

To deal with scammers and the misuse of funds, donors hold on to the belief that *karmic* retribution will befall scammers or perpetrators to be at peace with their *dāna*. This is reflected in an interview with one participant:

> I believe in the law of *karma* … If a beneficiary told me that they have last stage cancer and asked for 200 baht [5 GBP] for their meals and medication from me, I will give it to them … This is not the money for normal people … If they [the scammer who lied about having cancer] use this money, I think one day they might get what they told others they have [cancer]. ***(Interview, Sompong, Donor)***

Karmic law thus becomes a convenient justification for any *dāna* that has gone wrong. Even if donations were given to scammers or beneficiaries' relatives stole charitable money, leaving those who are vulnerable penniless, *karmic* law, not donors or fundraisers, will put things right. The notion in which *karmic* consequences take priority over the welfare of beneficiaries, I argue, is indicative of the way charitable giving is used as a tool to benefit donors, particularly to

maintain their dominance in the social order where their status, reputation, and privilege are bolstered by meritorious affect.

Throughout the chapter and in this section, I have argued that Buddhist affect is used by dominant groups to legitimise their privilege and power. In this respect, one might ask how Buddhist teaching has been used to justify inequalities that cause suffering rather than alleviating it. Some scholars even maintain that Buddhism serves the state by consecrating the status quo and perpetuating social injustice (Noriaki 1997; Shirõ 1997; Panich 2014). I argue that since the main Buddhist principles are highly abstract and can be interpreted and applied in various ways, they have often been co-opted by dominant institutions and power elites to serve political and economic ends. For example, the concept of *dāna* at first merely dealt with spiritual matters that involve freeing the self from worldly attachment in the process of achieving nirvana (Kusaladhamma 2017). It was only later, at the time of the Buddha, that the idea was secularised for the purpose of providing a livelihood for monks[66] and promoting community solidarity. Later, when societies evolved from being simple agrarian communities, where *dāna* originated, to being relatively complex societies with complicated social structures and power dynamics, the concept of *dāna* was again adapted to legitimise the secular power of dominant groups through the ideas of *barami*, *saksit*, and *karmic* merit accumulation. Additionally, Buddhist teaching primarily focuses on the path of self-transformation. The religion concentrates on the notion of changing oneself to be liberated from suffering rather than changing the world to avoid it (Loy 2003; Flores 2015). A Buddhist saying clearly articulates this principle: to avoid stepping on thorns and sharp stones, it is easier to wear shoes than to pave over the entire earth. This implies that Buddhists tend to deal with their

[66] Since monks are not allowed to work to make a living, they need to rely on *dāna* from laypeople (Crosby 2014).

own suffering and that of others in a rather self-centred manner. The next section will further explore this self-centred *dāna* by discussing it in relation to capitalist ideologies.

7.4 Capitalist *Dāna*: The More You Give, the More You Get

To some donors, the amount of any single donation is not as important as the number of recipients they give to. The interviewees commented, in this vein, that they would rather give less to more people than give large gifts to a few recipients:

> I like to distribute my donations like 100, 200, 300, or 500 baht for a recipient … Whenever Bhin makes a post, lots of people will donate. I just want to give the right amount that I feel ok with. At least beneficiaries can get a meal from my donations. *(Interview, Sompong, Donor)*

The preference for small gifts may relate to the number of online appeals, which is apparently overwhelming to the point that some donors complain of being inundated with representations of suffering – a feeling similar to compassion fatigue (Moeller 1999): 'I don't know whom to help … There are lots of sufferers. It's depressing to see' *(Interview, Kaew, Donor)*. However, this feeling does not cause disengagement or aversive responses, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. The interviewees still feel the impulse to donate and choose to give less to more beneficiaries and avoid giving to those whom they expect others will be likely to assist. As Kaew, one of the interviewees, explained:

> In some cases that I felt like many people would have already donated, I will not give … After all, appeals on Bhin's fan page always gain lots of donations because he is widely known. So I am sure that they [sufferers whom Kaew chose not to give money to] will be helped by others. *(Interview, Kaew, Donor)*

While a plethora of representations of suffering can cause some users to feel desensitised, blasé, or fatigued (See Chapter 2.2), donors like Kaew do not seem to be affected by these indifferent or negative impressions. I maintain that there are two reasons why donors on Bunluerit's fan page are less likely to feel discouraged to give by a multitude of appeals. Firstly, as argued in earlier sections, by giving, the donor is the person who profits most from the transaction. They seem to focus less on what they lose and more on what they gain from their gift, for example in terms of meritorious affect or a practice of detachment. Hence, charitable giving is seen as profitable and less likely to be shunned. Secondly, as online *dāna* does not cost much in terms of money and time, donors do not feel overly burdened to the point that they refuse to have any involvement with charitable appeals.

For some donors, what is problematic is not the overwhelming appeals but their irresistible impulse to give. This impulse is facilitated by the convenience of digital banking, which provides an almost seamless and effortless experience, from seeing suffering to feeling the urge to give and making donations. The effortless donation process that strengthens the drive (Dean 2015) to give can sometimes make donors spend too much on charitable giving, as Nid told me:

> I donated through mobile application. Since it is in my hand, the money goes out pretty fast, which is a bad habit of mine. Whenever I saw an appeal, I couldn't stop myself … I can't even remember how much I have donated each month. ***(Interview, Nid, Donor)***

The algorithmic infrastructures of Facebook also play a part in affect-driven giving as they order, govern, and shape content on donors' Facebook page according to donors' past online behaviour to stimulate more spontaneous ad hoc giving. Another interviewee, Yhok, told me that she frequently donates to help distressed animals because her Facebook page always has

a newsfeed that shows appeals for suffering animals:

> Pictures of cats and dogs in need often come up on my Facebook page. When I make merit or transfer money to help some cases, other people, who also love animals like me, would send me a friend request. So I only see pictures of cats and dogs on my page. *(Interview, Yhok, Donor)*

While Yhok frequently donates to Facebook pages that help distressed animals, she also connects with online friends with similar giving behaviour. The Facebook algorithm thus provides newsfeeds showing appeals from pages that she follows as well as those on her friends' pages. Taina Bucher (2018) argues that algorithms diminish the autonomy and intentionality of users by turning what they do on digital platforms into a potential data point regarding personalised ads and newsfeed content, and Yhok's intentionality here is shaped by an algorithmic curation that consistently arouses her impulse to give. Yhok said, 'If I don't use Facebook, I will not have to spend a baht.' In this case, affect-driven *dāna* is not only facilitated but also necessitated by Facebook's algorithmic logic.

It is not only that donors are less likely to be discouraged by overwhelming appeals; some of them even actively seek deserving beneficiaries to give to. For example, one interviewee, Sompong, connected with other donors whom he recognised as regular donors like himself on Bunluerit's fan page. They formed a 'giving circle' to share information about whom they should donate their money to (Eikenberry et al. 2007; 2009).

> We told each other that if there is any interesting case [to be donated to], we should let each other know. It's like they also want to make merit too. So if I see any case that I think they really need help, haven't received many donations already and reliable, I will let my friends know … I will give them a link and let them decide whether or not to

donate. *(Interview, Sompong, Donor)*

For these donors, giving donations is not what they consider a loss which can cause burnout, but rather a gain, as they will benefit from the *karmic* rewards in the future as a result of their meritorious deeds of *dāna*. Seeing lots of suffering is thus less likely to weary them since it is perceived as an opportunity to make merit, which ultimately serves their self-interest. In this sense, what donors are dealing with is not the compassion fatigue but an investment of compassion that will generate a return in the form of *karmic* merit.

I argue that the belief in *karmic* merit accumulation resonates with capitalist ideology[67] where the quest to gather ever more merit/capital is propelled by affective impulses like drive or anxiety. To merit makers who give in the hope of reaping a *karmic* reward in the near or distant future, the larger the number of transactions, the greater the merit and the better the future they believe they are going to have. I see Jodi Dean's (2015) drive is at play here. Capitalists or merit makers propelled by drive can never seem to find the end of accumulation when what keeps them satisfied is the never-ending process of accumulating more. Meanwhile, competition among capitalists for consumers' spending tends to create a constant anxiety over the ability to acquire resources for aggregation. This anxiety perpetuates the accumulation process to enable the generation of ever more profit and capital. A similar worry can be found among merit makers, who are concerned that their merit capital may not be sufficient for a better future in comparison with their present situation or that of their beneficiaries. Their continued merit accumulation thus becomes indispensable. As some of the interviewees

[67] Capitalism, which involves the processes of modernisation and industrialisation, has been adopted as the approach for development in Thailand since the 1960s (Tosakul 2014). Since then, the country has grown substantially. However, due to weak state institutions, short-sighted policies, and the political system that excludes the majority underprivileged groups, the economic growth is concentrated in urban areas and among upper classes. The result of the growth has not equally benefited all members of society, causing gross socio-economic inequalities, as described in Chapter 3 (Hewison 2006).

commented about their own and their friends' merit-making:

> When I saw people in difficult situations, according to my beliefs, I think they might have made too little merit or too much demerit. You can see these people are poor … Seeing them reminds me to keep making merit. When I give to people who are sick, I feel like the merit I made would protect me in the future. It's like taking out an insurance to make sure that I will not suffer like them. ***(Interview, Kaew, Donor)***

> I have a friend who likes to make merit. In this life she is rich and has a privileged status. She makes a lot of merit. She said that she was afraid that in her next life she would become poor so she needed to make plenty of merit. ***(Interview, Ying, Donor)***

The anxiety that both interviewees mentioned, I argue, is partly grounded in the failure of the Thai state to provide adequate welfare services that could give an assurance to its citizens that they would be cared for if they fell into vulnerable situations, for example through poor health or unemployment. The accumulation of merit thus becomes a strategy to cope with this uncertainty and a guarantee of a good and well-supported life in the future. Through merit-making, Thai neoliberal subjects create an individualised supernatural safety net so that they can exercise self-responsibility to replace state welfare protection, which is lacking, both in this life and the next.

In capital accumulation, commodities that substitute the social relations of labour are overly valued such that they become self-perpetuating entities that are untethered from their original purpose (Marx 1887). In this process of 'commodity fetishism', merchandise displaces relations of production, whereas in the belief of merit accumulation, *dāna* displaces asymmetric power relationships between the more privileged upper class and those less socio-economically advantaged. The commodity is transformed into something 'far more wonderful

than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will' (Marx 1982: 164). In a similar vein, *dāna* is the concept that has been transformed into the fantasies of a caring society which is represented in phrases like '*khon Thai jaidee*' or '*khon Thai mai ting gun*'. Under the spell of this concept, *dāna* for merit accumulation takes on a life of its own that no longer concerns a solidaristic aim but is about a self-serving ambition to invest as much supernatural capital as possible for a better future for donors. The quantity-over-quality *dāna* is also similar to capitalist logic in terms of the end results. As capital accumulation enables some groups of people to possess a large amount of valuable resources, accumulation of merit leads to inequalities of a supernatural force that is believed to guarantee a better future for merit makers. Merit accumulation strengthens donors' confidence that they will have supernatural support. By contrast, beneficiaries, who already suffer in this life and may not have much money to make merit, have little to hope in the future, not only in this life but also in the next. Again, the hierarchy of merit mutually supports the hierarchy of wealth and power as it ideo-affectively shapes people's hope and outlook on life.

However, for some donors, *dāna* is not necessarily meaningful only in terms of merit accumulation. I argue that *dāna* can provide a sense of self-gratification that can drive donors to continue giving. This self-gratification is constituted of the joy they experience from learning that they are doing something good despite its outcome, which is different from the oft-cited term 'warm glow' since it tends to reflect a more self-serving rather than altruistic orientation (Andreoni 1989; 1990). Such joy predominantly stems from donors' belief that they are making a real contribution, but this creates a false sense that the problem has already been solved. Chris Rojek (2014: 127), in his article concerning celebrity philanthropy, calls this false sense a 'therapeutic value' that can make 'ordinary people break from the routine experience of powerlessness and helplessness'. In Thai society, where state welfare and a social safety net

are lacking, *dāna* can provide a therapeutic effect that temporarily soothes the conscience of donors and the suffering of beneficiaries while letting the structural issues go unsolved.

One interviewee described this self-gratifying happiness arising from gift-giving as follows:

> When I donated, I felt happy. I felt that I had given some help. Sometimes it is like forsaking worldly possession for others. I felt good doing this. After donations we [the donor and recipients] go our separate ways. ***(Interview, Bee, Donor)***

Similar to in the interviews with Kaew and Sompong noted in the previous section, Bee mentioned the termination of any relations derived from gift-giving, including any follow-up on the gift's result. However, in this excerpt, Bee also expresses her happiness concerning making a gift. This joy of giving, I argue, has a self-serving quality, as when the transaction of compassion ends and donors feel happy about it, nothing else seems to matter. Another interviewee put it well: 'It's [making donations] the same feeling as when I buy things. It is like buying happiness' ***(Interview, Pam, Donor)***. Pam's definition of her gift-giving on Bunluerit's fan page clearly underlines the transaction aspect of *dāna*, which resonates with the capitalist idea of exchange.

The self-gratifying gift can also be thought of as part of a capitalist process. It operates in a similar way to 'communicative capitalism' which, as discussed in Chapter 1 (Dean 2009; 2015), involves a deluge of exchanges and circulation of online information spurred by a drive for intensities. Affective interactions on digital platforms, which supposedly constitute communicative capitalism, can pass for active involvement in promoting solidary or civic engagement. However, what these interactions actually bring about tends to be passivity. In a similar way to how communicative capitalism drives data production and consumption by

enjoyment, therapeutic gift-giving can propel transactions of compassion via self-serving joy. The joy can pass for a real contribution to a sufferer's well-being. If the highest volume of data production and consumption is considered to be the goal of communicative capitalism, the greatest number of transactions of compassion seems to be what therapeutic gift-giving aims for. In a way, transactions of compassion can contribute to communicative capitalism as gifts are made and shown via networked communication. When donors post transaction slips or users write a message of moral support, more online communication is made, which can further communicative capitalism.

The discussion about capitalist *dāna* in this section is indicative of how gift-giving is employed to make a profit or value, whether in the form of merit, happiness, status, or power, for givers rather than recipients, as evidenced in the way donors care less about the outcome of their gift-giving on beneficiaries. From the point of view of donors, gift-giving is perceived to be intrinsically good and an enjoyable action. According to capitalist logic, some donors feel that the more they give, the more merit they will get, the happier they will be, and the more people can be helped. However, what is missing from this logic is the fact that the gift by itself cannot solve the structural problem of inequalities and, as discussed throughout this thesis, it tends to provide ideo-affective justifications for the status quo. As long as these structural issues are not addressed, gift-giving is no more than a therapeutic tool that provides unequal and temporary pain relief to suffering beneficiaries and gives a false belief to donors that they are making society better. As Godbout and Caillé (1998) argue, '[e]quality brings rivalry into play, something that the gift does away with'. For some beneficiaries, the gift can also do away with their autonomy, dignity, and prospects for a better life.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have focused on digitally mediated gift-giving and its effect in terms of ideo-affectively legitimising inequalities through Buddhist beliefs in merit and downplaying structural issues by highlighting the 'therapeutic value' of donations (Rojek 2014: 127). Even though gift-giving on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page is mediated by digital technologies, the inalienability of the gift remains active in three forms. First, rather than online gift-giving bringing about a tangible gain, it can result in reputational rewards which prompt respect and admiration from beneficiaries and users. Second, the inalienability of the gift manifests itself in the form of Buddhist meritorious affect, or the supernatural force that rewards givers with good consequences. Although the effect of merit cannot be proven, the belief in its *karmic* consequences is felt into existence by many Buddhists. It provides compelling affective justification for the superior status of givers, who are thought of as having *barami*, or charismatic power that is derived from the accumulation of merit.

The final form of the inalienability of the gift manifested online is indebtedness. Due to the difficulty of repaying the debt of gratitude for donors' financial support on mediated platforms, gift-giving and beneficiaries' reciprocation have been adjusted to allow repayment online to take a form akin to mercantile exchange. Beneficiaries offer their gift in the form of a picture of their vulnerable self to potential donors first to exchange it for their donations. I call this gift exchange that can clear the debt of gratitude a 'transaction of compassion'. The findings suggest that gift-giving on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page is very much donor centric. The Buddhist belief in *dāna* that sees the end goal of giving as gaining and accumulating merit or practising detachment often leaves beneficiaries out of the picture. Sufferers, in this sense, are more likely to be a 'tool to do good deeds with' rather than beneficiaries of philanthropic aid.

Conclusions

The Mediated Politics of Compassion in Thailand

This thesis has investigated how, in the Thai context, networked affect in social media appeals for charitable giving make visible but also largely maintain and legitimise economic and social inequalities. Engaging with the three main strands of scholarly work in the fields of sociology, digital culture, and philanthropic studies – 1) celebrity philanthropy, 2) the mediation of suffering, and 3) practices of gift-giving – this study's findings make several contributions to the current literature. Firstly, the thesis brings theories of emotion and affect into dialogue with online philanthropy studies in a novel way, whereby the entire process of individual fundraising through Facebook's social media platform – from appeal-making by the celebrity philanthropist to a successful solicitation inducing donations – is critically examined through the lens of networked affect. Secondly, it offers a contextually attuned empirical analysis that 'provincialises' (Chakrabarty 2008) Euro–Western philanthropic, sociological, and media theories by considering how Thai cultural particularities inform and shape the phenomena under investigation and how affective relations and responses, in this context, are shaped by Buddhist values. In doing so, I am able to explicate these phenomena from a situated perspective that reflects Thai people's lived experiences. Finally, the research addresses proximal suffering, a topic that has largely escaped the attention of media and cultural scholars studying the mediation of vulnerability, who tend to be more concerned with representations of 'distant sufferers' in another country or geographic hemisphere. It has explored the digital representation and reception of suffering caused by poverty and/or illness within the socio-

cultural, economic, political, and religious particularities of Thailand. Moreover, while much existing research on the mediation of suffering addresses representations of vulnerability in traditional media such as television or newspapers, fewer studies to date have focused on social media platforms, which allow more user interaction with visual representations, other users, and fundraisers, and this thesis adds to that effort.

Employing a case study about the individual fundraising Facebook fan page of Thai celebrity philanthropist Bhin Bunluerit, the research utilised digital ethnography as a methodological tool, exploring networked affect and public reactions to online fundraising appeals. My empirical materials were gathered from four main sources of data: Bunluerit's live streaming of his encounters with beneficiaries; posts by Bunluerit and users; information about Bunluerit collected from celebrity news and his interviews in the media; and my interviews with charitable donors and page followers. An ethnographic approach has been particularly generative in enabling me to investigate the process of digital appeal-making and the everyday giving experiences of donors on social media. To the best of my knowledge, there is no research on gift-giving and no philanthropic studies that include digital participant observation – taking part in the mediated event as it unfolds online in real time – as part of their methods, and my attempt to do so has yielded pertinent empirical findings, including the significance of time in relation to witnessing suffering (Chapter 6) and how simultaneity influences networked affect, especially in 'virtual collectivity' (the feeling of co-presence with other users in time and space). These findings underline the importance of Bunluerit's use of live streaming in his digital appeals to accentuate the sense of authenticity within both his macho hero image and the various representations of suffering he employs to solicit publicity, support, and monetary donations from social media users.

Most significantly, my findings illustrate how networked affect, entangled with Buddhist spiritual ideo-affective impulses, circulates in online appeals for giving in Thai social media, helping to maintain an unequal societal structure through processes of legitimising and normalising hierarchical power relations. On the surface, the seemingly altruistic fundraising endeavours showcased on Bunluerit's Facebook page propagate meritorious affect – a kind of supernatural blessing – and positive feelings concerning gift-giving, and evoke a sense of social and affective solidarity between donors, page followers, and their fellow Thai citizens. However, there is a significant risk, I have suggested, that Buddhist religious affect, which to believers is an embodied experience operating at the level of life itself – that is, at a deeper level than so-called rational ideology – normalises and perpetuates particular 'truths' about hierarchical power relations, with people seen as deserving their position in the social and economic hierarchy due to their individual qualities and *karmic* merit. A key argument I have sought to unfold throughout the preceding chapters is that the modes of affect inflecting Bunluerit's online charity appeals and public responses to them involve a complex entanglements of bodies, technologies, Buddhist ideo-affective spirituality, consecrated narratives of class, and faith-based philanthropic relations, all of which inform and reinforce fundamental inequalities and exclusions within contemporary Thai society.

This central argument has been articulated through the three key areas of investigation examined in each of my empirical chapters. Chapter 5's discussion suggests that celebrity philanthropy in the Thai context works hand in hand with the patron–client culture to not only sideline the structural causes of poverty and welfare problems in Thai society by framing them as individualised issues that are resolvable through charitable donations, but also to reinforce the ideologies that maintain donors' social–cultural dominance over beneficiaries who are bound by the bonds of gratitude and obligation. The main argument of Chapter 6 is that the

representations of suffering used for appeal-making on Bunluerit's Facebook page reproduce class differences and inequalities which are ideologically supported by the Buddhist belief of *karmic* retribution and the cultural stigma of being *ngoa, jon, jeb* (stupid, poor, and sickly), making the lower-class beneficiaries abject subjects. Chapter 7 addresses gift-giving as mediated by digital technologies. Despite the online nature of the donation site on which I focused, a gift's power to demand recipient reciprocation requires the beneficiary's submission to donors – specifically by way of the Buddhist belief in *karmic* merit – enabling donors to preserve and justify their superior position in Thailand's wider social hierarchy.

In this concluding chapter, I summarise the central themes and arguments presented throughout this thesis, expanding on significant findings to elicit some key insights about networked affect in online giving appeals in the Thai context. This chapter is divided into six parts, which correspond to the major themes that emerged in my empirical chapters. Throughout I address not only the key theoretical and practical contributions my research and analysis offers to the fields with which I have engaged, but also possible directions for future research.

The Role and Effects of Networked Affect

One of the key theoretical developments of this thesis has been the construction of a conceptual framework to understand networked affect and explore its role in online charitable appeals foregrounding celebrity-mediated representations of suffering. In this framework, networked affect possesses four overlapping characteristics distinguishing it from non-digitally mediated emotional intensities: *multiplicity, accessibility, virtual collectivity*, and *indexicality*. I found that networked affect plays an important role in creating proximity and immediacy

among users and between users and Bunluerit/beneficiaries, which are helpful in Bunluerit's charitable endeavours. I argued in Chapter 5 that *accessibility* makes page followers feel close to Bunluerit in a parasocial relationship, and the affordance of cybertouch brings his body within reach of the touch screen while his performed intimacy produces the effect of affective touch. The perception of proximity felt by Bunluerit's followers benefits his charitable work enabling him to 'friend-raise' from fans who think of themselves as his close social circle. *Accessibility* is also instrumental in imposing users' sense of moral obligation towards beneficiaries as networked affect, purportedly reducing the psychological distance between them (Chapter 6). *Virtual collectivity* has a similar effect, but with the additional affordance of co-presence. I have shown that *virtual collectivity* allows fans to have a parasocial interaction with Bunluerit and to virtually participate in his charitable visits, which can underscore their sense of authenticity (both regarding to Bunluerit's role as a celebrity philanthropist and concerning the representations of suffering he mobilises on his fan page) through being witnesses present in time and space (Chapter 6). I have discussed *indexicality* in relation to the felt reality that users perceive from particular representations of suffering and how digital mediation offers multiple realities that may or may not correspond with that of sufferers (Chapter 6).

While the way in which affect operates on digital platforms to induce a feeling of closeness or a sense of authenticity can generally be found in various cultural contexts, the working of intensities on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page is distinctive in the way that it is intertwined with religious affect and practices, enhancing its power to shape the perceptions and attitudes of users. As I have discussed, the sharing of meritorious affect on the fan page by a user mentioning the word '*anumodāna*', or '*sathu*', or a combination of them or posting a picture they created and using these words alongside it (Chapter 7, section 7.1) is, in a way,

considered by the sharer to be an act through which they can obtain merit. Donors who post bank transfer slips to let other users rejoice at their good *karmic* act are also considered to be making merit. These posts and comments with regard to *anumodāna* are not merely a production or 'prosumption' of digital content but a form of online religious practice that will bring participants *karmic* merit. Here, Buddhist beliefs, digital technologies, feelings, and action are 'materially bound up together' (Pedwell 2017: 164) and affect embodied subjects in terms of feeling (being happy and satisfied with the merit made) and supernatural blessing (*karmic* rewards).

The framework for theorising networked affect I have developed can be used to unpack the working of religious intensities in this context. *Multiplicity* expands and intensifies meritorious affect as the gift gets shared and appreciated by users. *Accessibility* allows users who did not make a gift to join the meritorious affect and also reap *karmic* benefit. Although the co-presence element does not seem to be significant in the sharing of merit as users can perform the act of online *anumodāna* after the fact, being able to participate in real-time with Bunluerit's charitable gift-giving, I want to suggest, can intensify users' feeling of engagement with religious affect, especially when they witness the supernatural force at the moment of its unfolding. *Indexicality* can be perceived in the way the religious affect is 'felt into existence by affective bodies' (Schaefer 2015: 28). It validates the belief that merit and the way meritorious affect works through networked communication to distribute the *karmic* positive force are real. This felt reality fuelled by the power of merit and *karmic* law offers another set of realities that is compelling and powerful in the way it informs users' worldviews and actions.

The Celebrity Macho Hero and Interpersonal Trust

With respect to the contextual importance of interpersonal trust, Bunluerit's role as a celebrity philanthropist differs from the portrayal of charitable work carried out by prominent scholars in the celebrity studies and philanthropy literature (Huddart 2005; Panis 2012). I argued in Chapter 5 that Bunluerit lends his credibility to beneficiaries to reassure donors that their financial contributions will fall into the correct hands. By endorsing sufferers in this way, Bunluerit's assignment includes being held accountable for the recipients' use of donation funds, which with a conventional celebrity-endorsed charity would be considered a responsibility borne by or shared with relevant non-profit organisations rather than a celebrity personally. In this sense, interpersonal trust (Conviser 1973; Luhmann 1979) is integral to Bunluerit's fundraising endeavour and is secured not only through his fame in the entertainment industry but also via his philanthropic capital accumulated through his lengthy engagement with charitable causes. The way trust is placed in a person rather than in organisations or institutional systems in Thailand, I have argued, is influenced by the patron–client system that shapes the relations of resource dependency between patrons and clients, and that operates more effectively in tandem with formal institutions. To make sense of celebrities' distinctive roles in charities, the concept of celebrity philanthropy in the Thai charitable setting needs to be considered alongside the approach to trust and patron–client relations.

The characteristics of the Thai fundraising hero – discussed by contrasting them with those of a British counterpart, Captain Sir Tom Moore – are also unique to Thai celebrity philanthropy. Patrons often possess the qualities of authoritative masculinity in conjunction with paternalistic compassion, which I argue are traits that many Thai people seek in a hero. In

Thai patriarchal culture, a macho and powerful persona is highly regarded and considered a necessary quality for a patron or leader to have to command popular respect. While scholars have argued that philanthropic relationships often consist of paternalistic elements that may intrude on the autonomy of beneficiaries (LeRoux 2009; Barnett 2012; 2014), the paternalistic compassion embodied by the Thai hero is, I have suggested, intensely manipulative as it exerts authoritative control over beneficiaries through affective bonds of gratitude. This control is shown in sensorial and embodied interactions mediated on the fan page, including the manner in which beneficiaries show respect to Bunluerit through *kraab*, which symbolically signals their subservience; the way Bunluerit carefully instructs beneficiaries what to do with donation money; and how Bunluerit and users criticise beneficiaries or their family members who undermine Bunluerit's presence. To exercise such control, Bunluerit needs to be able to command a high level of respect and admiration, which is gained through an acquisition of the power rooted in the Buddhist ideologies of *barami*, power and charisma derived from accumulated merit, and *saksit* – a supernatural force believed to dwell in a person or object.

In the Thai context, I have suggested, Bunluerit as a celebrity philanthropist exercises his power in a more intensive and invasive manner than his Western celebrity philanthropist counterparts, and this power operates on many levels in philanthropic relations. The discussion of power in celebrity philanthropy studies often revolves around the symbolic capital of famous people that, on the one hand, has the capacity to convert their public profile into a powerful appeal or legitimate humanitarian message (Chouliaraki 2013). On the other hand, the reputational capital of celebrities is enhanced by the symbolic capital of the philanthropy or charitable activities with which they become involved (Dean 2020). In the case of Bunluerit, his long-term engagement with philanthropic endeavours has enriched this mutually reinforcing symbolic capital to the point that his status has been endowed with a superhuman quality. In

the worldly domain, he became one of the nation's most respective fundraising heroes, and in the realm of Buddhist belief, he is considered to possess *barami* and *saksit*. Here the celebrity's symbolic power is conflated with the Buddhist discourse of power that grants him the legitimacy and authority to control, manipulate, and sometimes abuse those with whom he is in a philanthropic relationship, including beneficiaries and his followers, as evidenced by my examples in previous chapters of how he exploited beneficiaries' bodies to create *naa songsarn* spectacle or the way he used his *dej* to publicly shame people who took pictures of his house.

Jonathan Marshall (2015) argues that celebrity philanthropy helps generate 'impersonal welfare' because celebrities in Western contexts, whose philanthropic work is often carried out in lower-income countries far away from their homeland, have no relationship with beneficiaries and are thus unable to impose an indebtedness that could inhibit the agency of the people being helped. In contrast, celebrity philanthropy in the Thai context stresses and makes explicit the personal relationship between both parties. The bond of gratitude and obligation is highlighted through the interactions, conversations, and behaviours that take place between Bunluerit and the beneficiaries, which helps to reinforce and imprint in the mind of users the power differentials between the two. At the same time, this affective bond bolsters the power of celebrities in philanthropic relationships as well as their legitimacy to apply such power. In this context, the generation of impersonal welfare by celebrity philanthropy is unlikely if not impossible.

By exploring the roles of celebrity philanthropy performed on Bunluerit's Facebook page, this thesis has unpacked the complex web of influences that contribute to the success of the star's fundraising endeavour, including trust preferences, the patriarchal and patron–client culture, and the way ideology, spirituality, and affect work together in Buddhism. Considered

a unique case study in terms of celebrity philanthropy, Bunluerit is one of only a few stars in Thailand who have acquired charitable fame and capital to the point of becoming a household name as a celebrity philanthropist. This research has taken advantage of this distinctiveness to provide an insightful contribution to the current discussion of celebrity philanthropy in Thailand and other parts of East Asia. The growing trend for celebrity philanthropy in East Asia to be fan based (Jeffreys and Xu 2017; Bennett 2014; Smutradontri and Gadavanij 2020) shows the increasing relevance of this thesis while also providing avenues to enrich and extend it. Future research could benefit from exploring this topic of celebrity-inspired philanthropy, especially currently, with fan-based activism receiving considerable attention due to its role in the country's ongoing pro-democracy movement[68] (Chetpayark 2020; Si Fa Wattana 2020).

The Patron–Client Exchange in Gift Relationships

Arguably, patron–client relations underlie the interactions on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page, including those between Bunluerit and his beneficiaries, Bunluerit and his page followers, and page followers and beneficiaries. In these different layers of patron–client relations, both parties exchange material (donation money) and affective (*songsarn*, submission to power, gratitude) resources while connecting to each other through the emotional bond of *khun*, benevolence often entailing client gratitude, and *dej*, punitive authority which can induce fear in clients. At the first point of exchange, Bunluerit as a patron gives financial support to beneficiaries, with the latter return his *khun* by paying him respect and submitting themselves

[68] Starting in 2020, student-led anti-government mass protests took place around the country calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, amendments to the constitution, and curbs on the king's powers (BBC 2020). The effect of this movement is considered far-reaching in that it has caused disruption to cultural norms and national narratives about power, legitimacy, and political institutions (McCargo 2021).

to his power. Similarly, Bunluerit acts as a patron in his relationship with his page followers, asking them to watch the movies he has directed to return his *khun* from helping beneficiaries. The bond of *khun* between Bunluerit and his followers is not as direct and clear as that with his beneficiaries, and it is perhaps incorrect to presume that users might watch his films purely out of a sense of gratitude. However, his request is indicative of the patron–client mentality that views gifts as a tool for maintaining a relationship of domination rather than altruistic action.

The empirical findings showed that Bunluerit employed his *dej* to, for example, punish a couple suspiciously taking pictures of his house by revealing their identities and shaming them on his fan page (Chapter 5). It is common to see such abuses of power among patrons who consider themselves higher in the social hierarchy and who hold others under their influence using bonds of gratitude and punishment (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). As *dej* was employed to penalise and silence any challenge to the dominant authority, Bunluerit's manipulation of power over his media channel and followers indicates the inherent function of the patron–client relationship to perpetuate the status quo. As discussed in Chapter 7, the patron–client relationship between users and beneficiaries, mediated by digital platforms, works through symbolic exchanges. The bond of gratitude demands reciprocation from beneficiaries in return for users' donations. Therefore, beneficiaries offer their 'dispossessed self' or an indication of their submission to their patrons' power in the form of an image of them suffering to repay their indebtedness (Bourdieu 2005). The offering occurs prior to donation, establishing the relations of exchange and identifying potential patrons. This image of the undignified self becomes a source of symbolic violence, with beneficiaries portraying themselves as helpless, submissive, and willing to be subjected to power.

The philanthropic relationship brokered by celebrities in Western contexts is predominantly 'based in difference and incomprehension', because a celebrity acts as a 'transitional object' that creates a loose sense of connection between viewers of the appeal in the Western context and beneficiaries in other countries or the other hemisphere (Marshall 2015). This loose relationship, Marshall (2015: 68) argues, largely benefits recipients in the sense that they are freed from indebtedness and empowered to be able to demand moral obligation from privileged people. In the Thai context, I found the contrary to be the case. Personal relationships in which patron–client bonds can work to obligate the parties concerned are sought after in philanthropic relations, whether the relations are between the Thai celebrity philanthropist and beneficiaries or between donors and recipients. At the same time, similarity and solidarity (as in *khon Thai jaidee* and *khon Thai mai ting gun*) form the basis of this connection, although in the end this sense of group harmony came to demarcate differences along class boundaries that mark donors – privileged people with compassion – as being in juxtaposition with beneficiaries – the abject subjects receiving compassion. Therefore, rather than freeing recipients from indebtedness, the philanthropic relationship in the Thai context entrenches the relations of domination under the bonds of *dej* and *khun*.

The idea of patron–client ties in charitable relationships is rarely discussed in the philanthropy literature, which tends to be quite Anglo-American centric. This may in part be due to differences in cultural values, as the patron–client system, for the most part, is firmly established in Mediterranean, Latin American, Asian and African societies and less likely to be found in the Euro–North American cultures in which philanthropic studies often take place (Piattoni 2001). Some of a small collection of studies that discuss this niche area of investigation focus on patron–client relations between charitable organisations or donors in Western countries and beneficiaries in the Global South and how these relations can bring

about challenges and opportunities for foreign organisations working in the field (Fox 2003; Swidler 2009). These works include research into the financial partnerships between Western donors and Indian recipient organisations that can create unhealthy forms of dependency encouraged by the patron–client culture by Frampton Fox (2003) and Ann Swidler's (2009) analysis of the patron–client-based relations between international non-governmental organisations working in African countries and local representatives who carry out the philanthropic works. This thesis extends the analysis offered by these works by looking at the patron–client relationships that bind donors and beneficiaries within *the same* culture and concentrating on the way patron–client ties are developed between individuals through an interactive media outlet.

The differences in the contexts in which the patrons in the two studies mentioned in the preceding paragraph are situated highlight the importance of cultural elements that could constitute challenges in philanthropic operations in the recipient countries. While these research studies provide the wide-angle perspective engendered by cross-cultural considerations, this thesis offers an in-depth look into how patron–client relationships work through affective means at person-to-person level and shows the dynamic entanglements of macro social structure (class) with micro individual relations and practices. Moreover, this thesis explored patron–client relations that are played out on networked platforms. I found that the affordances of Web 2.0 allow the patron–client system to operate in a manner similar to a mercantile transaction as the one-time gift can establish a relationship of *dej* and *khun* using symbolic exchanges. I have argued that these symbolic exchanges can be turned into symbolic violence that reproduces asymmetric power relations between donors and beneficiaries. Jon Dean (2020: 32) also discusses the concept of symbolic violence in charitable relations based on Marcel Mauss's (2002) theory of the gift but does not attend in detail to

how this symbolic violence operates on beneficiaries other than them feeling beholden and uncertain of 'how the gift is to be repaid'. My discussion of the symbolic exchange of the dispossessed self sought to illuminate how symbolic violence in digitally mediated charitable gifts manifests itself in the Thai context.

My findings about patron–client bonds in philanthropic relations have relevance to other non-Western contexts, especially in societies with hierarchical social structures where there is a significant power difference between those at the top and the bottom and people have an unequal access to necessary resources like health, education, or justice. Nuanced differences can be found in the characteristics and elements that form the patron–client relations in different cultures; for example, the Thai patron–client culture is shaped and influenced by Buddhist beliefs whereas Indian patron–client relations are attributable to the Hindu caste system (Fox 2003). However, the core elements of a patron–client system, which includes the power imbalance between patrons and clients and the exchange of patrons' resources for clients' loyalty and subservience, are common among different patron–client cultures and helpful in informing the understanding of philanthropic relations in other contexts.

The exploration of patron–client relationships on Bunluerit's fan page offers a unique insight into the way gift relations – mediated through digital platforms – reproduce structures of domination whereby patrons exert power over clients both literally and symbolically. The central concern of patron–client relations is the exchange of resources based on strong elements of inequality and the obligation for reciprocation (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980). While this thesis bases much of its insight into patron–client relations on the viewpoint of patrons, for example Bunluerit's posts or donors' interviews, future research could benefit from an investigation into how clients perceive and situate themselves within these relations. The empirical findings of this thesis may indicate that beneficiaries, or clients, are subjected to

relationships of domination, but does the client perceive themselves in that way, especially in a context where the bonds of gratitude and coercion have been watered down through the mediation of digital technologies? An investigation into the patron–client reciprocity in charitable giving from the point of view of beneficiaries would be generative if it teased out the power relations between philanthropic individuals and beneficiaries in more depth.

Social Class and Proximal Suffering

The fact that in my case study, sufferers reside in the same country as donors – rather than in the other hemisphere, as in distant suffering – does not prevent the imposition of otherness onto sufferers. In the Thai context, social class is often what turns neighbours into proximal others. The lower class have long been discriminated against as *ngoa, joan, jeb* people who need to be controlled, managed, and governed (Kongkirati 2014), and their representation on Bunluerit's Facebook page largely reproduces and reinforces this notion. Additionally, otherness is imposed on sufferers through the objectivisation process as their bodies are made available for the users' gaze in the representation. The fragmentation technique (Hall 2009) – whereby a specific body part is zoomed in on and magnified – produces a dehumanising effect that can induce disgust in users. This revulsion marks sufferers as liminal subjects whose existence pollutes the order or system, yet they need to be maintained to define its boundaries (Kristeva 1982; Tyler 2013). The processes of 'inclusion through exclusion' demarcate the liminal subject, which in Chapter 6 I argued occurs on two overlapping levels: in abjection and in representation.

Although the argument about class divides in the representation of proximal suffering has already been made by Jonathan Ong (2017), the differences in socio-cultural contexts,

despite the fact that both Thailand and Ong's research setting, the Philippines, are less economically developed Southeast Asian countries, make the findings of this thesis distinctive and they shed new light on media reception of domestic vulnerability, especially regarding how religion informs users' responses to representations of suffering. I have found that Buddhism plays a significant role in the reception of Thai users, not only regarding their giving behaviour but also their affective responses to representation. One might argue that since my research focuses on charitable giving, which in many cultures often concerns religious beliefs, there was a high chance that the matter of faith would become prominent in my research. However, in the Thai context, even class-related ideologies are buttressed by Buddhist beliefs. The exploration of Buddhist values and principles is thus indispensable as they inform not only philanthropic practice but also people's perception of class differences and the social hierarchy.

Literature on media representations shows that there is animosity, often generated out of fear, and anxiety among audiences in positions of greater privilege than those from the lower class who are represented in popular culture (Skeggs 2005; Ong 2017). Bev Skeggs (2005) points out the social distance and the generation of class distinctions through disgust that are seen in the UK context, where working-class people shown on the medium of the television are associated with vulgarity, unruliness, inebriation, and immorality. Meanwhile, the upper-class audiences in Ong's (2017) research criticise the taste of the lower class in terms of their favourite TV shows as trashy, low culture, and lacking in taste. My empirical findings also show that users have aversive feelings towards lower-class sufferers as they are branded along the lines of *ngoa, joan, jeb*. However, in the Thai context, feeling disgust towards people of a lower class does not stop at 'maintaining the position of judgement to attribute' dominant values to gain symbolic control (Skeggs 2005: 977) or 'disconnecting [privileged people] from the undesirables around them' (Ong 2017: 87). I found that the aversive feelings aroused through

representations of suffering work as a means to introduce compassion that is employed as a tool for controlling the lower class by legitimising the domination of privileged people. Because sufferers are *ngoa, joan, jeb*, they need to be told what to do with donation money (see the section on Duen in Chapter 5, section 5.3), how to live their lives (see a user's comment on being *khor dāna* in Chapter 6, section 6.4), or how to manage their reproductive capacity (see the thread of comments made in response to a mother's appeal for milk for her children in Chapter 7, section 7.2). The control is exercised under the pretext of compassion and with the support of charitable donations, making the development of class consciousness among the lower class difficult to attain.

The study of the representation of proximal suffering is an underexplored subject that warrants more attention. The small amount of existing research calls for further exploration of other under-researched empirical and geo-political contexts that would shed light on how domestic audiences' responses to the mediation of suffering may vary depending on the social and cultural context. In other places and contexts, class, and religion may not have as much influence as they do on Thai users, which means it would be interesting to observe how these differences affect public responses.

The Politics of Thai Compassion

While the main argument of this thesis — that the logics of charity and the politics of compassion help perpetuate the inequalities they seek to redress — has long been articulated by scholars in social, cultural, and philanthropic studies (Spelman 2001; Berlant 2004; Lupton 2012), my analysis of the Thai context demonstrates that compassion is strongly interwoven with power and social control, with Thai people less inhibited regarding making this link explicit

because the authoritative power of compassion is legitimised by Buddhist ideologies and Thai cultural norms. Discussions about the politics of compassion from Western perspectives predominantly revolve around how compassion and the actions it encourages — like charitable activities or gift-giving — are framed, defined, distributed, and appropriated by privileged people, inadvertently depoliticising suffering and re-entrenching dominant power relations (Ure and Frost 2014). Although this thesis has extended this line of argument, it also identifies nuanced cultural differences resulting from the authoritative power constituting the Thai politics of compassion. In the Thai context, benevolence is accompanied by the power of donors, and, in the case of Bunluerit, the celebrity philanthropist to regulate, manipulate, and exploit the object of compassion physically, symbolically, and emotionally.

As illustrated throughout my empirical chapters, compassion has become an affective tool for authorising the use of power to control and govern sufferers. Bunluerit exercises his benevolence, or *khun,* in tandem with his punitive power, or *dej*, requiring that his fans and beneficiaries be respectful towards him. Using compassion as a licence, he manipulates his beneficiaries' bodies to make the most pitiable spectacle to solicit donations. In terms of these representations of suffering and gift-giving, compassion is based upon exploitation. Donations are made only after sufferers are seen in such an abject state that donors can be certain as to their manipulation either because of the neglected condition they are in that compels them to beg to survive or because of the representation that has been created to show their extreme vulnerability, stripped of their clothes and dignity, so that they are considered deserving of donors' compassion. As I detailed concerning the 'commodification of suffering' (Chapter 6) and the 'transaction of compassion' (Chapter 7), compassion in these contexts sheds its supposedly altruistic meaning to reveal its mercantile core. However, this reciprocity between donor and sufferer is not a commercial venture with both exchange parties on an equal footing

making an impersonal deal (Godbout and Caillé 1998). Rather, power differentials mean that donors are in a powerful position so they inform the exchange, resulting in a hegemony of the dominant classes through symbolic power and the expression of symbolic violence.

The charitable giving on Bunluerit's Facebook fan page very much resonates with Mauss's (2002) and Maurice Godelier's (1999) theories on gift-giving, especially the capacity of the gift to create and maintain personal relationships between donors and beneficiaries, and the mutual indebtedness and obligation that is incurred via gift-giving. Godelier (1999: 207) argues that gift-giving is 'the expression and the instrument of personal relationships located beyond the spheres of the market and the state'. However, the digitally mediated gift-giving in this study has edged closer to the market sphere where the sight of suffering is for sale and compassion is expended in the form of donation money. Although a personal relationship is sought during the gifting process, it is immediately terminated once the exchange of gifts is made. The indebtedness also dissolves since the return of the gift has been made in a transaction in which beneficiaries offer their vulnerable self in a picture in advance to ask for the gift of donation. In this way, the thesis extends the theories of the gift researched in traditional societies by showing how digital platforms shorten the duration of personal relationships between donors and recipients and the time passes before a return gift is given, meaning that the gift-giving has more of a commercial nature. Here social relations and bonds between groups are no longer the aim of the gift exchange, as in traditional societies. The transaction of compassion is aimed at self-interest, which again points to the logics of the market that is similar to the gift-giving on Bunluerit's fan page.

Compassion in the Thai context concerns politics in its rawest sense: who has the authority to control, who is in the position to govern and be governed according to their

compassion, and what can be obtained out of a negotiation whereby compassion operates as currency? In Western contexts, compassion often has a depoliticising effect that deflects attention from political affairs and actions, while Thai compassion both depoliticises and re-politicises issues concerning social and economic developments by exerting authoritative power. This re-politicisation process exists not only to make sure that any resentment towards the unequal social structure is kept at bay by using the sticking plaster of charity. It is also in place to make certain that the dominant class maintains its position of power to control and govern less privileged people under a licence of compassion that secures the status quo by political means that are supported by Buddhist beliefs and the cultural moral code.

In the Thai context, the politics of compassion work through and with many layers of ideological and cultural values, including the patron–client mentality, the Buddhist belief in power, *barami* and *saksit*, and the moral of *katanyu* – feeling indebted to the person who gives help. This deep-rooted patron–client culture normalises the affective-based reciprocity that regards a patron's compassion (*khun*) as intrinsically moral. This demands that clients return compassion with loyalty and obedience; in other words, that they submit to the patron's authority, including the coercive power (*dej*) that exists alongside compassion. As power is rooted in interpersonal relations and sentiments and is dependent on the power holder's judgement, there is always a chance that the power of compassion can become abusive. However, Buddhist belief helps prevent any challenge to the power relations that are constitutive of relations of compassion by consecrating and endorsing the status of the benevolent person with *barami* and *saksit*, making this power unquestioningly righteous. Meanwhile, the value of *katanyu* operates on the recipient of this compassion, compelling their willing acceptance of any form of power exercised over them.

This is evident in Thai politics, manifested in the events leading to the 2006 and 2014 coups in which the elite- and middle-class-led protests aiming to oust the democratically elected government called for 'good people' to rule the country[69]. In contrast with corrupt electoral politics and bad politicians, good people are considered to be on a higher moral ground as a result of their expertise and technocratic legitimacy, and such 'good people' include palace officials, the military, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary (Ferrara 2015). Their legitimacy is considered by the dominant class to be superior to that of the elected representatives, while the lower class – being the majority of an electorate – is viewed as unqualified for selecting a righteous person to govern the country due to ignorance or greed regarding vote-selling bribes (Ockey 2004; Hewison and Kitirianglarp 2010). We can see a similar logic to that discussed in Chapter 7, of denigrating the lower class to justify the need for privileged people to control and govern the '*ngoa, joan, jeb*' population – but on a larger scale. This process of re-politicisation through a discourse of 'morality', 'goodness', and 'compassion' occurs on every level, from the micro activities of an online fundraising fan page to the macro phenomena of national politics.

Networked Affect in Thai Charitable Appeals: Possibilities for Transformation

This thesis has explored the workings of networked affect in Thai celebrity-endorsed charity appeals which mobilise representations of suffering. The findings show that the modes of affect involved – which are embodied in dynamic entanglements of supernatural spirituality, Buddhist ideo-affective impulses, class-based narratives, and patron–client relationships –

[69] For more analysis on the discourse surrounding 'good people' in Thai politics, see Hewison and Kitirianglarp (2010); Sinpeng (2014); Ferrara (2015); and Funahashi (2016).

reinforce hierarchical power relations between philanthropic individuals and beneficiaries. Yet the way that affect works as potential lends itself to an alternative possibility where users and beneficiaries challenge this hegemonic structure of normativity. As shown in my findings, there are moments of resistance and subversion when the power of a patron like Bunluerit is resisted and undermined. These moments include the disobedience shown by a beneficiary's daughter who defies Bunluerit's authority by ignoring his presence (Chapter 5) and users' reports of inappropriate content on his fan page which resulted in the suspension of Bunluerit's Facebook account (Chapter 6). The moments of contestation, though seemingly minor, can prompt questioning among media users and other stakeholders concerning the current status quo and power structure, potentially paving the way for change.

Because affect is 'the realm of potential, unlivable as tendencies or incipient acts, indeterminate and emergent' (Clough 2018: 8), employing affect as the analytical lens enables us to think of other possibilities when the minor force of resistance and tension in dominant narratives reveals the unsustainable nature of the status quo. From this thought, we could consider how religious affective force could be diverted to promote a more equal society, how Buddhism, which has always been utilised to serve the dominant group, could be reinterpreted to articulate a more democratic and egalitarian vision of society, how charitable giving could be more respectful to the human rights of beneficiaries, and how we could impel the state to do more for its people so everyone can be treated equally and with dignity.

To return to the introduction in Chapter 1, the relevance of affect in this research is in the way it orientates the inquiry towards everyday life and living that are woven into social textures. As I came to the end of this research project, I found that the inquiry that affect directs is also supposed to be about what matters and makes a difference, not only in the way

that it opens up further studies and theoretical discussions, but also how it signals new possibilities and potentialities for a better life and a better way of living for all those who are woven into the social fabric of society.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Profiles of beneficiaries showcased in Bunluerit's live streaming and discussed in empirical chapters (alphabetically ordered).

- Ann (female, 25) has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; 80 per cent of her lungs are destroyed, forcing her to wear an oxygen mask all the time. I reflected on the autoethnographic field note of this live feed in the Methodology chapter.

- Buncha (male, 58) has psoriasis. He has red patches all over his body and on his hands and feet which have damaged his organs and given him a physical disability. In the live streaming, he was seen being told quietly to remove his shirt to show his condition to page followers.

- Duen (female, 40s) has last-stage liver cancer, causing her stomach to swell badly. She has to see her doctor regularly to remove fluid from her stomach which causes swelling. Since Duen is Laotian, she is not entitled to the Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS) which provides free medical services for Thai people. Her husband is the sole breadwinner of her family of four, which includes Duen, her husband, her teenage daughter, and her young grandson, whose parents are in prison. Her husband works as a manual labourer and receives 8 GBP a day, but her medical treatment costs approximately 40 GBP for each hospital visit. Some of Duen's living and medical expenses are paid for her neighbours.

- Gun (male, 30s) had a stroke causing the right side of his body to become numb so he can no longer work on his motorcycle taxi. His wife works as a cleaner with a 300-baht daily wage. She has to feed five people in the family, including her mother, their autistic son and 15-year-old daughter who is pregnant and had to leave school. In the live streaming, the daughter was criticised by Bunluerit and some users for playing with her mobile phone during Bunluerit's visit.

- Jaem (female, 51) has suffered from spinal tuberculosis since 2017, causing her to become disabled. Her daughter left her paid job to take care of Jaem. The family of four, which includes Jaem, her daughter, and two granddaughters, receive food and a small income from Jaem's husband, who was ordained as a Buddhist monk in the year Jaem became disabled.

- Jumnien (female, 84) lives with a 22-year-old grandson who has lung and lymph node problems. Jumnien cannot walk and has to wear adult nappies all the time. She asked Bunluerit for financial support since no one in the family has income to pay for food and nappies.

- June (female, 40) was diagnosed with endometrial cancer and had her uterus removed. However, the cancer spread to other parts of her body, causing her to be paralysed from the chest down. After several courses of chemotherapy, she resorted to

alternative approaches to healing, which included the use of Thai herbal medicines and body massages.

- Mar (female, 70) and Boonmee (male, 76) have to feed five family members. One of them has a mental illness and another is deaf and cannot speak. Mar told Bunluerit that she needed some financial support since she was the only person earning money. She picks waste for a living. Mar was hit by a car, causing pain in her legs so she cannot work every day. Her husband, Boonmee, suffers from various illnesses due to old age and cannot work. It appears that the suffering represented in this case is not related to an illness of a particular individual but to poverty.

- Noi (female, 54) is suffering from last-stage lung cancer. Her husband gave up his job as a bus driver to be her full-time carer. Bunluerit found out that the husband has a drinking problem. The husband was made to promise Bunluerit that he would quit drinking.

- Oom (female, 36) and her husband live with HIV. She also has cervical cancer. Oom has four children but only the youngest, her 3-year-old daughter, lives with her and her husband. The husband works as a waste picker and earns around 3 GBP a day. The family lives under a highway, using the road as their roof and a large piece of cloth as their wall. Oom told Bunluerit that her family had been told by the police to move away from the area since they were causing a disturbance to residents there. In the live streaming, Bunluerit told his audiences that he would rent a room for the family. He called an ambulance to take the family to a hospital and have the daughter tested for HIV. Bunluerit did not make an appeal for this case.

- Puang (female, 70s) lives in a small rented room with her 25-year-old grandson and 5-year-old great-granddaughter. The grandson was shot four years ago, leaving him paralysed and bedridden. During the visit, there was heavy rain and half of the room was flooded. Since their place is extremely small and could not accommodate Bunluerit and his staff, Bunluerit conversed with Puang instead of her grandson outside their room. In this live streaming, Bunluerit asked his page followers to give him suggestions for how to fix the flood problem in the accommodation.

- Thongkham (female, 55) has bone cancer and stage 3 kidney disease. Although she regularly sees her cancer doctor, Thongkham cannot afford the transportation costs to visit a kidney specialist and hence has to leave the disease untreated.

- Soo (female, 84) is bedridden because of nephrotic syndrome. She is cared for by a 59-year-old daughter and a 61-year-old son who left his full-time job to do so.

- Tum (male, 21) suffers from psoriasis. He has serious lesions around his neck and chin. Despite the severe-looking wounds, Tum told Bunluerit that he does not feel any pain. He carries on with his daily life activities, studying part-time during the day and working as a security guard at night; he wears a scarf over the lesions.

- Udom (male, 11) was born with a severe disability which includes cognitive, motor, and visual impairments. The only nutrition his body can successfully process is milk. He is taken care of by his grandmother in a 50-square-metre room where nine family members live together.

Appendix B: List of dates and live streaming files taken

No.	Date	Time (Thai time)	Watching Live	Brief Description
1.	3 Sept 2018	3.30 p.m.	✔	Helping a girl with a head tumour
2.	5 Sept 2018	10.11 a.m.	✔	Helping Oom and her family
3.	22 Sept 2018	11.42 a.m.	✘	Bunluerit watched rugby games (first day).
	23 Sept 2018	2.42 p.m.	✔	Bunluerit watched rugby games (second day).
4.	6 Oct 2018	2.20 p.m.	✘	Helping Noi
5.	11 Oct 2018	9.52 a.m.	✘	Bunluerit donated money to the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia to help victims from earthquake
6.	13 Oct 2018	1.20 p.m.	✘	Bunluerit and a group of volunteers cleaned temples' toilets to make merit to the passed King Bhumibol Adulyadej.
7.	18 Oct 2018	2.22 p.m.	✔	Helping Puang
8.	26 Oct 2018	3.15 p.m.	✔	Helping a woman with a cervical cancer
9.	31 Oct 2018	5.10 p.m.	✔	Helping a family in which the mother and son are both bedridden
10.	7 Nov 2018	1.39 p.m.	✘	Helping Buncha
11.	7 Nov 2018	3.36 p.m.	✘	Helping Soo
12.	20 Nov 2018	1.38 p.m.	✔	Helping Gun
13.	26 Nov 2018	10.16 a.m.	✘	Bunluerit was on the way to donate clothes and blankets to beneficiaries living in high land in the Northern part of Thailand.
14.	30 Nov 2018	3.27 p.m.	✘	Helping a boy with a renal disease
15.	2 Dec 2018	4.07 p.m.	✘	Helping Mar and Boonmee
16.	4 Dec 2018	4.15 p.m.	✘	Bunluerit went to see buffaloes which he planned to buy to save their lives
17.	5 Dec 2018	10.24 a.m.	✘	Bunluerit and a group of volunteers cleaned temples' toilets to make merit to the passed King Bhumibol Adulyadej.
18.	10 Dec 2018	11.46 a.m.	✘	Bunluerit held a party to welcome two albino buffaloes he bought. In this same event, he received donation money from a group of donors.
19.	20 Dec 2018	10.37 a.m.	✘	Helping Thongkham
20.	22 Dec 2018	10.37 a.m.	✘	Helping a 104-year-old lady
21.	23 Dec 2018	5.57 p.m.	✘	Bunluerit hosted a Thai musical folk play at an elderly care home.
22.	25 Dec 2018	1.26 p.m.	✘	Helping a young man having oral cancer
23.	27 Dec 2018	11.48 a.m.	✘	Helping Udom
24.	3 Jan 2019	2.01 p.m.	✘	Bunluerit shared a Happy New Year message.
25.	6 Jan 2019	5.23 p.m.	✔	Helping June

No.	Date	Time (Thai time)	Watching Live	Brief Description
26.	11 Jan 2019	2.27 p.m.	✔	Helping Jaem
27.	16 Jan 2019	3.43 p.m.	✔	Helping Ann
28.	21 Jan 2019	12.12 a.m.	✘	Helping Duen
29.	14 Feb 2019	1.28 p.m.	✔	Helping an old lady with a broken hip
30.	26 Feb 2019	1.30 p.m.	✘	Helping an immobile old man living alone
31.	26 Feb 2019	3.14 p.m.	✔	Helping a mother with the last-stage cervical cancer
32.	4 Mar 2019	10.21 a.m.	✘	Bunluerit gave donation money to 60 landslide victims.
33.	18 Mar 2019	2.29 p.m.	✔	Helping an old man with oral cancer
34.	1 Apr 2019	12.30 a.m.	✔	Helping Jumnien
35.	1 Apr 2019	3.25 p.m.	✘	Helping Tum

Appendix C: List of file names of posts collected

*Explanation of the file names: Containing folders\Date_Time (Thai time) [when the post was made]_Collected_Date_Time [when I collect the post]_No. [of comments under Bunluerit's post able to collect[70]]_from [total number of comments made] Live [whether the post is live streaming or not] [short description of what the post is about in Thai]

1 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180903_15.30_Collected_180903_18.30_No.1470 from 1482 Live น้องเป็นเนื้องอกที่ศรีษะ รอความหวังในการผ่าตัด.docx

2 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180904_12.20_Collected_180906_23.24_No.150 from 268 น้องเป็นเนื้องอกที่ศรีษะ รอความหวังในการผ่าตัด.docx

3 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180905_10.11_Collected_180907_00.08_No.1805 from 2720 เป็นมะเร็ง ปากมดลูก กำลังจะถูกไล่ที่ ไม่มีที่นอน.docx

4 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180905_17.30_Collected_180906_23.02_No.1752 from 1980 Live รอรถพยาบาล เป็นมะเร็งปากมดลูก กำลังจะถูกไล่ที่ ไม่มีที่นอน.docx

5 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180909_13.44_Collected_180911_23.47_No.450 from 699 ขอกราบเรียนเชิญเพื่อนๆร่วมทำบุญ..สร้างโรงพยาบาล.docx

6 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180913_14.10_Collected_180915_02.14_No.200 from 206 จนอยู่แล้ว..ต้องมาเจอกับโชคร้ายอีก...docx

7 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180919_17.31_Collected_180920_02.15_No.200 from 219 ขาบิดเบี้ยวทั้งสองข้าง..กระดูกสันหลังไม่เชื่อมต่อกัน...docx

8 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180921_18.43_Collected_180923_21.23_No.38 from 43 พรุ่งนี้ใครว่าง ขอแรงเชียร์ ทีม บ้านบาก ด้วยครับ.docx

9 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180922_11.42_Collected_180923_21.36_No.452 from 863 Live แข่งรักบี้ ทีมบ้านบาก วันแรก.docx

10 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180923_14.42_Collected_180923_21.41_No.300 from 532 Live แข่งรักบี้ ทีมก่อนทีมบ้านบาก วันที่สอง.docx

11 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180923_14.52_Collected_180923_21.46_No.250 from 430 Live แข่งรักบี้ ทีมบ้านบาก วันที่สอง.docx

12 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180925_14.38_Collected_180927_22.49_No.150 from 171 ภรรยาดูแลสามีจนตัวเองต้องป่วยไปอีกคนนึง.docx

13 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180928_12.42_Collected_180929_02.55_No.160 from 162 ขอกราบเรียนเชิญทุกๆท่าน ร่วมงานมหากุศล.docx

14 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180929_12.21_Collected_180930_17.30_No.1320 from 1531 ผมขอถามให้หายข้อสงสัยหน่อยนะครับ ฆราวาสทำแบบนี้กับพระเณรก็ได้หรอ.docx

[70] Facebook algorithmically showed only relevant comments so I could only collect a certain amount of comments from the total number.

15 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\180930_13.20_Collected_181001_17.33_No.350 from 368 เหลือเวลาอีกไม่มาก..แต่ป้าจะสู้จนถึงที่สุด.docx

16 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181004_08.30_Collected181005_21.37_No.3550 from 11558 วันนี้ 4 ตุลาคม วันเกิด คุณแม่ ปรางทิพย์ บรรลือฤทธิ์.docm

17 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181006_14.20_Collected_181006_03.05_No.1150 from 1968 Live เหลือแค่หลับตายาวๆ เมียเป็นมะเร็งปอด รอวาระสุดท้าย.docx

18 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181007_20.54_Collected_181009_02.31_No.350 from 351 เหลือแค่หลับตายาวๆ เมียเป็นมะเร็งปอด รอวาระสุดท้าย.docx

19 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181011_09.52_Collected_181013_22.22_No.450 from 886 Live มอบเงินให้สถานทูตอินโดนีเซีย ช่วยแผ่นดินไหว.docx

20 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181013_13.20_Collected_181014_23.15_No.1550 from 1664 ล้างห้องน้ำวัดถวาย ร.9.docx

21 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181018_14.22_Collected_181021_01.57_No.2350 from 3641 หลานถูกยิงนอนติดเตียง บ้านเช่า 1000 เป็นเพิง น้ำท่วม.docx

22 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181023_11.29_Collected_181029_18.33_No.55 from 61 ภาพเคลื่อนไหวงานพระบรมศพ ร.5 เพิ่งค้นพบ.docx

23 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181026_15.15_Collected_181029_17.54_No.1500 from 2331 เป็นมะเร็งปากมดลูก ต่อมน้ำเหลือง ฉายรังสีแล้วฉี่ไหลตลอดเวลา อยู่บ้านน้องสาว.docx

24 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181031_17.10_Collected_181105_16.37_No.550 from 1037 Live แม่ป่วย ลูกป่วย ลำบากทั้งคู่.docx

25 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181101_11.00_Collected_181105_18.22_No.400 from 415 แม่ป่วย ลูกป่วย ลำบากทั้งคู่.docx

26 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181107_13.39_Collected_181113_22.32_No.1902 from 1910 Live เป็นโรคสะเก็ดเงินจนเดินไม่ได้.docx

27 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181107_15.36_Collected_181113_22.07_No.1052 from 1065 Live คุณยายป่วยเป็นโรคไต ลูกสูงอายุแล้วไม่ได้ทำงาน.docx

28 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181110_08.57_Collected_181113_20.08_No.202 from 239 เป็นโรคสะเก็ดเงินจนเดินไม่ได้.docx

29 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181120_13.38_Collected_181123_04.54_No.1150 from 1196 Live ครอบครัวป่วยสามคน ลูกสาว จบ ป.6 ท้อง.docx

30 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181126_10.16_Collected_181127_06.07_No.1350 from 1378 Live อยู่ระหว่างทางไปบริจาคของต้านภัยหนาวของมูลนิธิร่วมกตัญญู ที่อำเภออมก๋อย.docx

31 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181130_15.27_Collected_181201_22.36_No.740 from 744 Live ช่วยน้องการ์ตูนป่วยเป็นโรคไต ท้องโต.docx

32 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181202_16.07_Collected_181217_23.42_No.802 from 818 Live ช่วยครอบครัวอยู่กัน 6 คน สติไม่ดี 1 คน เป็นใบ้ 1 คน รถชน 2 คน หลาน 16 ไม่ได้เรียนเพราะไม่มีตังค์ส่ง.docx

33 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181203_11.20_Collected_181217_00.23_No.252 from 343 สองเคสนี้แล้วแต่จะช่วยนะครับเพื่อนๆ (รวมเคสน้องการ์ตูนท้องโต และครอบครัวอยู่กัน 6 คน สติไม่ดี 1 คน เป็นใบ้ 1 คน รถชน 2 คน).docx

34 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181204_16.15_Collected_181218_03.27_No.902 from 951 Live ไปดูควาย 32 ตัวที่นครปฐมเตรียมไถ่ชีวิต.docx

35 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181205_10.24_Collected_181218_05.23_No.450 from 475 Live ล้างห้องน้ำวัดถวาย ร.9.docx

36 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181210_11.46_Collected_191218_05.38_No.730 from 800 Live รับขวัญคู่ควายเผือก และรับเงินบริจาคจากกลุ่มอาสาสมัคร.docx

37 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181220_13.12_Collected_181223_17.48_No.287 from 287 คุณยายที่อุบลป่วยเป็นมะเร็งกระดูกและโรคไตขั้นที่สาม ไม่มีเงินไปโรงพยาบาล ได้แต่นอนทรมาน .docx

38 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181222(1)_10.37_Collected_181222_17.23_No.260 from 268 Live คุณยายที่อุบลป่วยเป็นมะเร็งกระดูกและโรคไตขั้นที่สาม ไม่มีเงินไปโรงพยาบาล ได้แต่นอนทรมาน .docx

39 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181222(2)_10.37_Collected_181222_17.23_No.332 from 344 Live คุณยายที่อุบลป่วยเป็นมะเร็งกระดูกและโรคไตขั้นที่สาม ไม่มีเงินไปโรงพยาบาล ได้แต่นอนทรมาน .docx

40 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181222(3)_10.37_Collected_181222_17.23_No.402 from 405 Live คุณยายที่อุบลป่วยเป็นมะเร็งกระดูกและโรคไตขั้นที่สาม ไม่มีเงินไปโรงพยาบาล ได้แต่นอนทรมาน .docx

41 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181222_12.08_Collected_181225_21.58_No.820 from 821 คุณยายอายุ 104 ปี อยู่กับหลานสาวสติไม่ดี ลูกชายนอนติดเตียงทำอะไรไม่ได้ หลานสาวทำงานด้วย ดูแลด้วย.docx

42 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181223(1)_17.57_Collected_181226_02.00_No.358 from 358 Live คุณบิณฑ์นำลิเกไชยามิตรไชยมาฉายที่บ้านพักคนชราบางแค.docx

43 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181223(2)_17.57_Collected_181226_02.00_No.83 from 83 Live คุณบิณฑ์นำลิเกไชยามิตรไชยมาฉายที่บ้านพักคนชราบางแค.docx

44 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181223(3)_17.57_Collected_181226_02.00_No.174 from 174 Live คุณบิณฑ์นำลิเกไชยามิตรไชยมาฉายที่บ้านพักคนชราบางแค.docx

45 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181225_13.26_Collected_181227_02.16_No.973 from 973 Live น้องอายุ 16 อดีตนักกีฬาฟุตบอลเป็นมะเร็งเหงือกลามจนตาเสียไปข้างนึง.docx

46 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181226_12.33_Collected_181227_12.37_No.360 from 377 น้องอายุ 16 อดีตนักกีฬาฟุตบอลเป็นมะเร็งเหงือกลามจนตาเสียไปข้างนึง.docx

47 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181227_11.48_Collected_190104_04.03_No.952 from 953 Live ช่วยน้องโอ๊ตที่สงขลา พิการแขนขาลีบ ตาบอด ไม่รับรู้โลกภายนอก.docx

48 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\181228_10.31_Collected_181231_16.13_No.290 from 293 ช่วยน้องโอ๊ตที่สงขลา พิการแขนขาลีบ ตาบอด ไม่รับรู้โลกภายนอก.docx

49 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190101_18.56_Collected_190104_04.12_No.652 from 657 คุณบิณฑ์ทำการ์ดสวัสดีปีใหม่.docx

50 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190103_14.01_Collected_190104_04.29_No.1405 from 1411 สวัสดีปีใหม่ขณะไปไถ่ชีวิตควายเผือก 6 ตัว.docx

51 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190106_17.23_Collected_190111_19.01_No.802 from 804 Live บุญตาเป็นมะเร็งเพิ่งเดินไม่ได้มาเดือนกว่า ลูกสาวไม่อยู่บ้านดูแลแม่.docx

52 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190106_17.23_Collected_190111_19.16_No.370 from 381 บุญตาเป็นมะเร็งเพิ่งเดินไม่ได้มาเดือนกว่า ลูกสาวไม่อยู่บ้านดูแลแม่.docx

53 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190109_15.51_Collected_190111_19.19_No.24 from 24 ชวนดูโชว์ จากคำเชิญเล็กๆ สู่รอยยิ้มที่ยิ่งใหญ่.docx

54 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190111_14.27_Collected_190113_22.13_No.220 from 220 ป่วยเป็นวัณโรคกระดูก ปวดมาก อยากตาย ไม่อยากเป็นภาระใคร.docx

55 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190111_14.27_Collected_190113_22.13_No.1020 from 1043 Live ป่วยเป็นวัณโรคกระดูก ปวดมาก อยากตาย ไม่อยากเป็นภาระใคร.docx

56 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190116_15.43_Collected_190122_00.31_No.760 from 775 Live เป็นโรคถุงลมปอดโป่งพอง ต้องใส่ออกซิเจนตลอดเวลา ลูกชาย 4 ขวบช่วยดูแลแม่.docx

57 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190117_17.34_Collected_190122_01.07_No.653 from 674 เป็นโรคถุงลมปอดโป่งพอง ต้องใส่ออกซิเจนตลอดเวลา ลูกชาย 4 ขวบช่วยดูแลแม่.docx

58 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190121_12.12_Collected_190122_01.15_No.1060 from 1095 Live คนลาวเป็นมะเร็งตับ ท้องบวม ไม่มีสิทธิรักษา เพื่อนบ้านช่วยดูแลแต่รู้มาก.docx

59 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190121_12.12_Collected_190127_19.14_No.320 from 341 คนลาวเป็นมะเร็งตับ ท้องบวม ไม่มีสิทธิรักษา เพื่อนบ้านช่วยดูแลแต่รู้มาก.docx

60 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190131_12.04_Collected_190203_04.23_No.150 from 297 คุณยายอายุ 102 ปีที่คุณบิณฑ์เคยไปเยี่ยมเสียแล้ว.docx

61 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190208_15.26_Collected_190212_16.31_No.340 from 352 โลกนี้อยู่ยากมนุษย์หน้ากากมันเยอะ (เหตุการณ์การสมัครเป็นแคนดิเดตนายกของทูลกระหม่อมหญิง).docx

62 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190208_23.04_Collected_190212_16.29_No.3250 from 3309 ขอพระองค์ทรงพระเจริญ (เหตุการณ์ ร.10 ทรงยับยั้งการสมัครเป็นแคนดิเดตนายกของทูลกระหม่อมหญิง).docx

63 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190212_11.41_Collected_190216_02.22_No.402 from 468 น้องพลอย พ่อฝรั่งผ่าตัดด่วน ต้องใช้เงินสดขาดอีก 140,000.docx

64 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190214_12.20_Collected_190216_01.59_No.810 from 845 Live ยายล้มกระดูกสะโพกหัก อยู่กับหลานสองคน หลานขับวิน มีหนี้สองแสน.docx

65 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190214_13.28_Collected_190216_01.59_No.250 from 257 ยายล้ม กระดูกสะโพกหัก อยู่กับหลานสองคน หลานขับวิน มีหนี้สองแสน.docx

66 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190218_12.56_Collected_190222_00.33_No.1420 from 1439 ลงเพลงหนักแผ่นดินให้เพื่อนๆ ฟัง แล้วบอกไม่เกี่ยวกับการเมือง พวกการเมืองอย่าเสือกเข้ามา comment.docx

67 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190219_15.11_Collected_190222_00.36_No.355 from 380 ลงคลิปคริสตี้รายการคดีสีชมพูที่นางบอกนางรักประเทศไทย บอกให้เป็นคนไทยทั้งตัวและหัวใจ.docx

68 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190224_12.15_Collected_190301_22.41_No.360 from 365 โพสต์ว่าคิดถึงนะครับ แต่เป็นรูปบอกว่าคนโง่เชื่อคนจากคำพูด คนฉลาดดูคนจากการกระทำ.docx

69 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190226_13.30_Collected_190301_23.20_No.2310 from 2329 Live ช่วยคุณลุงอยู่คนเดียว ไม่มีคนดูแล นอนทับฉี่ตัวเอง.docx

70 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190226_15.14_Collected_190301_23.27_Live No.1146 from 1151 Live เป็นมะเร็งปากมดลูกระยะสุดท้าย สามีทำงานโรงกลึง กลับมาดูแลสามเวลา เป็นหนี้สองหมื่น.docx

71 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190226_17.31_Collected_190301_23.27_ No.653 from 659 ช่วยคุณลุงอยู่คนเดียว ไม่มีคนดูแล นอนทับฉี่ตัวเอง มาอยู่บ้านสุขสุดท้ายแล้ว.docx

72 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190228_10.33_Collected_190301_00.00_ No.300 from 356 เป็นมะเร็งปากมดลูกระยะสุดท้าย สามีทำงานโรงกลึง กลับมาดูแลสามเวลา เป็นหนี้สองหมื่น.docx

73 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190301_15.24_Collected_190304_14.43_No.103 from 116 ขอเชิญชวนเที่ยวงานประจำปี วัดอินทรวิหาร บางขุนพรหม ซึ่งผมเป็นประทานในการจัดงาน.docx

74 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190304_12.21_Collected_190308_01.21_No.1670 from 1692 บริจาคจังหวัดน่าน.docx

75 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190318_14.29_Collected_190321_17.12_No.1840 from 1849 Live ช่วยตายายอยู่กระต็อบ ตาเป็นมะเร็ง มีจิตอาสามาช่วยสร้างบ้านให้.docx

76 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190320_20.23_Collected_190322_18.42_No.205 from 211 น่าสนใจครับ ท่านพุทธทาสเขียนไว้เมื่อวันที่ 24 มี.ค.2495 ตรงกับวันเลือกตั้งปีนี้พอดีเลย.docx

77 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190324_07.54_Collected_190325_19.36_No.1540 from 1547 ออกมาเลือกคนดีดีกันเยอะเยอะนะครับ.docx

78 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190324_12.55_Collected_190325_19.57_No.1450 from 1453 คุณบิณฑ์หน้าหีบเลือกตั้ง ดีใจที่สุดครับ ที่ได้เลือกคนที่เรารักและซื่อสัตย์ต่อประเทศชาติ.docx

79 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190330_12.48_Collected_190402_16.30_No.160 from 192 ไม่ว่าจะเกิดอะไรขึ้น ชีวิตต้องดำเนินต่อไป เข้มแข็ง อดทน คือคนเก่ง.docx

80 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190401_12.30_Collected_190408_21.08_No.2338 from 2343 Live บ่นเรื่องคนมาตามถ่ายบ้าน จับ กท ได้กำลังตามว่าใคร ด่าว่าหน้าตัวเมีย ก่อนไปช่วยคุณยายอยู่กับหลานเดินไม่ได้ ให้แค่ 15000 ไม่ลงเฟซให้.docx

81 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190404_19.22_Collected_190408_20.47_No.1920 from 3749 ช่วยน้องเซลล์ป่วยเป็นสะเก็ดเงินที่คอ แต่ยังต้องทำงานเป็นยามตอนกลางคืน.docx

82 Z:\Data\Doc File\เพจคุณบิณฑ์\190406_21.28_Collected_190408_20.15_No.452 from 937 ผมทราบทะเบียนรถแล้ว โตโยต้า ฟอร์จูนเนอร์.docx

Appendix D: List of interviewees and their brief backgrounds

Interviewees and Background	Method of Recruitment
Bee (female, 40s) is a doctor. She occasionally donated money to beneficiaries on Bunluerit's fan page.	Recruiting ads on my FB page
Danai (male, 38) uses his fan page to post appeals for donations and asks his followers to help share the message using the slogan 'one share one merit'. He does not visit beneficiaries and gives them money like Bunluerit does. He shares information about the beneficiary that only includes their address, phone numbers, and an image of suffering, and lets donors contact the beneficiary themselves to make donations.	Snowball sampling
Jorm (male, 37) is a university lecturer. He often donated to children in need whose appeals were made online. However, he has never donated to sufferers on Bunluerit's fan page.	Recruiting ads on my FB page
Kaew (female, 35) is the owner of a retail shop. Her strong belief in Buddhist *karmic* law encouraged her to make merit by giving to religious and non-religious causes regularly. Bunluerit's fan page is one of the non-religious causes to which she occasionally gave.	Recruiting ads on my FB page
Nid (female, 41) is an active follower of and regular donor on Bunluerit's fan page. She was often seen making comments and giving gifts on the page. Nid works as a nurse.	Approached through FB page
Noon (female, 30) is a law officer in a government office. Although she has never donated to sufferers on Bunluerit's fan page, she sometimes posted comments on the page in the hope of giving moral support to sufferers.	Snowball sampling
Pam (female, 30s) is a housewife. She regularly gave donations to various online fundraising pages, including those on Bunluerit's fan page.	Snowball sampling
Som (female, 34) is an architectural designer. She occasionally donated money to beneficiaries on Bunluerit's fan page.	Snowball sampling
Sompong (male, not known) owns a business. He gave donation money to a lot of fundraising pages and Bunluerit's fan page was one of them. He is one of the regular donors on the page.	Approached through FB page
Waen (female, not known) owns a garage. She often donated a minimum of 25 GBP to almost every case that Bunluerit made an appeal for.	Approached through FB page
Yhok (female, 40s) is a market researcher. She frequently donated to pages which help suffering homeless animals. She sometimes gave to beneficiaries on Bunluerit's fan page.	Snowball sampling
Ying (female, 40s) is a market researcher. She also owns an SME business. Ying sometimes donated money to appeals on Bunluerit's fan page, but more often, she gave to online fundraising efforts to help sick or injured cats and dogs.	Snowball sampling

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Date:

Research project title:

Understanding Affective Exchanges in E-Philanthropy and Their Effects: Exploring Thai Online Philanthropy

What this project is about?

This research project aims to study the Bhin Bunluerit Facebook fan page in relation to the usage of the platform for philanthropic purpose and the exchanges occurred on the page. You can read more about this project at: https://pattamananp.wixsite.com/mysite/phd-project

Why have I been chosen?

You are invited to participate in this research project because your age is over 18. You are a follower of Bunluerit's fan page, and you have been engaged with the platform by posting comments or donating money to people whom Bunluerit had visited at least twice. As this project focuses on the users' perceptions of and interactions with the fan page, your views are highly valued and indispensable to the success of this research.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be asked to give an interview lasting 30 minutes to 1 hour by telephone, video chat, or internet voice calls. The interview will be carried out by me and I will be responsible for the expenses incurred. Questions in the interview will concern your social media usage, your attitude towards giving, your interactions with the platform, and your views and feelings about the fan page. Your anonymity will be guaranteed by the use of pseudonyms and the removal of any identifiable personal information, such as your institution, workplace or school. Your contact information will be kept in a secured place to which only I have the access.

Do I have to take part? Is there any risk if I take part? What is the benefit of taking part?

Your participation is voluntary. There is no physical risk in taking part. But if you experience emotional discomfort during the interview, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to justify the reason. In this case, your data will also be removed. There is no financial gain from taking part. I could offer you nothing, but a chance to have a pleasant conversation, in return of your valuable help with my study. After the project is completed, a short summary of the finding will be sent to you via our online contact channel. If you are interested in reading the full report, please let me know and I will send you a link to its digital copy. If you have any questions regarding the project, please feel free to ask. I will be happy to answer any enquiry.

Who is funding this research?

This research is an integral part of my PhD study in the UK which is funded by the Thai Government.

Is there any body or committee which has ethically approved this project?

The project is under the supervision of Dr.Carolyn Pedwell and Dr.Triona Fitton. It has been ethically approved by the Faculty of Social Sciences Research Ethics and Advisory Group, University of Kent. If you have any concern or complaint about this project, please feel free to contact the group at: fasoethics@kent.ac.uk

CONSENT FORM

University of Kent

Title of project:	Understanding Affective Exchanges in E-Philanthropy and Their Effects: Exploring Thai Online Philanthropy
Name of investigator:	Pattamanan Poonseripipat
Contact:	Telephone No: 078 318 80952 E-mail: pattamanan12@gmail.com

Participant Identification Number for this project:

1. I confirm I have read and understand the information sheet dated… (version…) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions (if needed to) and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. ☐
3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. ☐
4. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐
5. I agree to have my interview recorded. ☐

Name of participant	Date	Signature
Name of person taking consent *(if different from lead researcher)* *To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*	Date	Signature
Pattamanan Poonseripipat Lead researcher	Date	Signature

Copies: When completed: 1 for participant, 1 for researcher site file; 1 (original) to be kept in main file

Appendix F: List of themes coded by NVivo

Nodes\\Celebrity

NAME	FILES	REFERENCES
Criticizing Bhin	5	7
Deification	12	20
Famous	17	23
Appearance	19	28
Working in this field for a long time	5	5
Hero	10	15
Ability to manage	9	17
Being a 'good' man	3	3
Do not mind touching sufferers with unpleasant looking diseases	1	1
Experienced and knowledgable solicitor	10	12
Father figure	7	12
Have support any time he asked	9	12
Wishing Bhin be prime minister	11	16
Micro-celebrity	20	36
Acknowledging audiences	13	19
Giving suggestions to Bhin	5	6
Love and care for Bhin	8	10
Self-promotion	4	6

Nodes\\Deserving Poor

NAME	FILES	REFERENCES
Consequences of good and bad karma	9	14
Criticizing	9	23
Donation money can really help	4	13
Give blessing to K.Bhin	6	10
Gratitude	9	10
Help from community	16	30
Inequality	1	1
Me deserving help	26	45
No knowledge	5	6
No money	9	18
Not suffering enough	3	4
Strong spirit	4	4
Sufferers are well-behaved	3	4
Sufferers should help themselves too	3	5
Suffering a lot	3	7
Untrustworthy recipient	2	2

Nodes\\Digital Affect

NAME	FILES	REFERENCES
Depressing	4	10
Empathy	6	16
Thinking of oneself	16	19
Thinking of other sufferers	3	3
Feeling good learning about others' gifts	6	6
Felt real	7	10
Human rights violation	2	2
Pitiable, Deserving compassion, Should feel sorry for (Naa Songsarn)	17	24
Pity, Compassion, Feel sorry for (Songsarn)	15	31
Scary	3	3
Strongly affected by digital content	3	6
Strongly feel the need to do something	3	11

Nodes\\Gift-giving

NAME	FILES	REFERENCES
Accountability	1	1
Asking for support continuously	4	8
Bad management	2	5
Cash in recipients' hands	3	3
Check for more information before making decision	10	18
Directly ask for donation from direct message	3	7
Donation money goes directly to sufferers	8	15
Donation money was used for other purposes	4	5
Follow up	2	3
Giving small amount to avoid disappointment from scam	2	2
In-kind donations	1	1
Relatives misused donation money	5	6
Scam	12	22
Scammers will face consequences of their bad karma	6	8
Showing pictures and evidences	7	11
Trust in Bhin, need no accountability	5	7
Nan	3	4
Using sixth sense	2	4
Worried that too much donation may cause problems	2	4
Alternative medical treatment	6	10
Anumodana	16	25
Can't help everybody	3	4
Give less in each case so more cases can be helped	3	3
Give to causes that donors can relate	4	11
Give to maintain institution	2	2
Give within one's ability	9	12
Giving even though don't have much	6	8
Giving makes donors feel good	13	16
Giving money as moral support	12	17

If it is in my ability to give, I will give (Chuai gun pai)	8	19
K.Bhin as safety net	3	3
Karmic bond between donors and sufferers	3	4
Making donation is merit making	27	60
Merit Bridge	1	1
Merit-making is the end in itself	9	15
To give is to detach oneself from worldly possessions	6	8
Network	11	33
Patronizing	20	50
Egoistic	5	6
Scammers repel other donors	4	4
Sharing experiences as moral support	12	20
Soliciting help through K.Bhin	11	12
Strutural problems	2	2
Tell others to give too	1	1
Thainess	7	14
Too many donors	8	11
Too many sufferers	4	7
When we give others will give too	4	10
Worried that sufferers could be worse if I don't give	3	3

Nodes\\Mediation

NAME	FILES	REFERENCES
Advertisement	10	14
Asking for moral support	11	12
Bad living conditions	13	31
Bank account	14	16
Bhin's staffs verifying information given to him	7	9
Body	12	20
Camera angle	18	42
Checking income and expenses	7	10
Dramatic, Interesting	8	17
Equate way out of suffering with money	11	12
Feeling close, part of the family	6	7
Government's role	14	24
How Bhin uses touch to define his position and proximity	10	15
In public attention for a short time	2	2
Leading to happy ending	11	12
Learning about family problems	5	7
Making an appeal	16	25
Making direct appeal to third person	6	8
Message from beneficiary	10	17
Pain captured	10	19
Ritualistic gift-giving procedure	20	21
Separate conversations about health and support	14	25
Setting up	4	5

When appeals are in public attention, many more people will become interested	3	6
Without middle man	3	5

Nodes\\Technologies

NAME	FILES	REFERENCES
Accessible	6	7
Convenience in Donating	10	16
Facebook Live	5	6
Forward, Feed	17	27
Sharing	1	1
Not Share	5	6
Share	12	20
Smart Democracy	3	3