CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results from the previous chapter are summarized here. This chapter presents the research findings in 5 parts: 1) a summary of the study, 2) a summary of the findings related to adolescents' attitude towards cyber love, 3) discussions, 4) conclusions, and 5) recommendations for further research.

5.1 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The goal of this study is to provide some ground insight into the attitude of online romantic relationships held by Thai adolescents with respect to five attributes: existence, trustfulness, safety, interpersonal relationship support, and potentiality to transform to offline relationship, focusing on the intimate relationships developed from text-based communication on the Internet only. In addition, the Internet usage of the young generation, as well as how online intimacy develops, was investigated in this research.

5.1.1 Objective of the Study

The main objective of this research study was to explore current attitudes of adolescents towards cyber love. Furthermore, the survey was composed of another three sub-objectives which were 1) To investigate adolescents' experience in cyber love, 2) to obtain the whole picture of online intimacy development among adolescents, and 3) to study the Internet usage of adolescents.

5.1.2 Subjects, Materials, and Procedures

The subjects of this study were 250 young people whose ages were between 18-25 years, living in Bangkok. The sampling design used in this survey was quota sampling where participants must be identified as Internet users. A self-administered questionnaire consisting of four main parts: demographic data, cyber relationship experience, the Internet usage, and attitude towards cyber love, was used as a data collection instrument. The questionnaires were distributed to the sample by hand in three types of areas in Bangkok: business, education, and shopping areas.

5.2 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The results of the study can be summarized as follows:

5.2.1 Demographic Information

From the study, the number of male and female respondents was almost equal, but the majority (60%) was between 22-25 years old. Most of the respondents had graduated or were studying for their bachelor degree. Approximately, half of the participants were students and almost half were working adults.

5.2.2 Experience About Cyber Love

Only 34% of the respondents had experience in cyber love by themselves; however, more than 70% of them had some indirect experience by knowing someone who had an online intimate relationship. The majority of respondents who had had cyber love held this relationship with people with the opposite sex, but only 38% intended to develop this relationship to be offline love.

Regarding the way adolescents developed their cyber love, the research found that more than 60% of the respondents who had had cyber love spent only 3 months or less to build their online intimate relationships, but they still kept this relationship. Around 77% had met their cyber mate already. After the meetings, nearly 60% maintained the degree of affection and online contact but there were 30% who increased their fondness and 30% who decreased their Internet communication.

5.2.3 The Internet Usage

The findings about the Internet usage among adolescents show that the three main purposes of using the Internet were chatting or MSN, searching for information, and e-mailing. The participants could be considered as Internet oriented people because almost 75% of them used the Internet more than 4-5 times per week and approximately 80% of the sample spent 2 hours or more online each time.

5.2.4 Attitudes Towards Cyber Love

The overall attitude of the respondents towards cyber love and other people who have cyber love was neutral, but they had negative attitudes towards two attributes of cyber love: trustfulness and safety. Nevertheless, frequency and percentage statistic show further interesting points as they demonstrate the direction of adolescents' view points more clearly.

First of all, although the participants had neutral attitudes towards the existence of cyber love, almost 60% of them agreed that cyber love is a real relationship. They also had positive attitudes towards cyber love's sensitivity and accepted that cyber love has an effect on the cyber partners' life. Secondly, the frequency statistic emphasizes that the respondents had negative perceptions about trustfulness of cyber partners undoubtedly. Next, around 36% of the participants agreed that online love is less vulnerable to pain from refusal than offline love but generally they did not think cyber love is safer than offline love. As well, the data signify that the participants did not believe that cyber love is suitable for people who have interpersonal relationship problems and people who are isolated from social relationships. In contrast, they thought cyber love makes people separate from society and go out of reality. However, 34% accepted that online love suits shy or demure people. Finally, even the respondents had neutral attitudes towards the perspective of possibility to develop cyber love to offline love; more than half of the respondents believed that it has potential to be developed to offline love and approximately 31% of the participants agreed that cyber love is possibly a true love.

5.2   DISCUSSIONS

5.2.1 Attitudes Towards Cyber Love

The attitudes inspected in this study were categorized in to five parts and each part is discussed as follow.

Existence – Adolescent participants of this study were neutral about the existence of cyber love but they agreed that cyber love is a real relationship. They also believed that cyber love can create sensitivity and influences on cyber partner's life. Probably the participants viewed relationships as an involvement and most people are involved with each other through communication. In other words, they may think that as long as there is communication between two persons, those persons are in some kind of interpersonal relationship. Moreover, some attributes of online communication like real-time interactivity make people feel that they are communicating with a "real" human, not a virtual one. So, an online intimate relationship was perceived as real and influential in developing a more committed relationship by the respondents.

The results in this part are quite similar to a case study of Stephen Biggs (2000). The participant of Biggs' study reported that the Internet relationship had a great effect on her life. Because of the Internet relationship, she discovered her inner feelings which influenced her attitudes towards herself and the world, so that her offline life has changed a lot in a positive way.

However, the respondents of this research did not totally agree with the similarity of cyber love and offline love maybe because when being asked about love, most people usually think of touch or attachment which, in Thai culture, is reserved for couple or partner relationships. Touch is used as one of the indicators to measure how deep an intimacy is, or to confirm whether one's relationship comes to the stage of love or of being just a close friend. Due to the lack of physical attachment, the participants may view that cyber love does not have the same characteristics as offline love.

Trustfulness – Many researchers said that love usually consists of seven key characteristics which are affection, self-disclosure, trust, caring, mutuality, interdependence, and commitment (Hinde, 1976; Derlega, 1984; R.F. Verderber & K.S. Verderber, 1992). But trust seems to be an issue people doubt about cyber love, even among adolescents who get involved with this kind of relationship. The answers from the respondents demonstrated the negative perception of trustfulness of cyber love in every question. Genuine self-disclosure, sincerity, and honesty were not perceived as online intimacy qualities. The respondents, furthermore, did not believe that cyber partners intend to keep their love long lasting. According to Muangyom's findings (อธิชา เมืองยม, 2547), freedom and anonymity of the Internet users might be the reason. The participants of Muangyom's research, chat room users, thought that if a chat room is used without a limitation, its freedom and anonymity might cause a deception or Internet addiction.

Anonymity of the Internet allows people to make stories about themselves, but no one can prove, or at least insists on proving, the truth of those stories. In addition, while the Internet laws are still on process, the laws may not be enforceable provided that there is not any real act that is against the criminal laws. Consequently, people still have freedom to lie or conceal the truth. Adolescents realize this fact and

understand that lying is common in cyber world. So it is common for them to disagree with the trustfulness of online relationships as well.

Safety – safety is another issue of online affairs which people are concerned about. Freedom and anonymity are perhaps not only the cause of suspicion on trustfulness, but also the safety of cyber love. The participants of this research study viewed that love online can cause deceit and crime, and cyber love does not provide physical safety more than offline love. These opinions are quite different from the findings of an ethnographic study of Mahdavi (2007) which says that cyber love is a safe place to have romantic relationships. It can be explained with cultural differences between Thai and Iranians. In Thailand, having a boyfriend or a girlfriend is not a prohibited activity among young population as long as they keep studying and not having premarital sex. So, "safe" in Thai context focuses on dangers of deceit and rape. In contrast, intimate relationships of Iranian adolescents are dictated by their parents and face-to-face encounters are strictly limited. As a result, an Iranian youngster focuses more on the danger of being found wrong by his or her parents. A different degree of cultural restriction has a certain degree of influence on adolescents' attitudes towards cyber love.

However, the participants of this research study agreed that cyber love is less vulnerable to hurt from denial than offline love. Considering Derlega's suggestion in Communication, Intimacy, and Close Relationships that self-disclosure can make participants vulnerable to hurt from denial (1984), it is possible for adolescents to stipulate self-disclosure on the Internet at the safe degree. Lack of attachment and face-to-face meeting of cyber love may be another reason because attachment and meetings bring people into a commitment. If partners have low commitment, they will not feel too much pain when being separated or denied.

Interpersonal relationship support – Kraut et al. said that the Internet gives increasing social circles to both extroverted and introverted Internet users (McKenna, 2002) and the result of this research is accordant to Kraut et al.'s statement. This study focuses on the introverted side and the findings were broken into two ways. Some respondents did not think cyber love suits socially isolated people, or people who are unsuccessful with offline relationships; they did not even think that cyber love causes people to get away from social commitments, while others thought that

online intimacy is suitable for shy people. These infer that the participants did not perceive the Internet as a remedy for withdrawn people to have better interpersonal connections, but still believed that cyber space is a place to develop intimate relationship for demure persons. These differences can possibly describe the degree of attitudes towards the Internet of adolescents. Young people may think that the Internet is a tool which only "helps" people practice and improve interpersonal skill, as Mahdavi (2007) suggested in her study that chat room provides the chances to learn and practice courtship or dating without embarrassment, especially for young people who had hardly any heterosexual relationships. In this day, the Internet seems to be accepted as an effective channel to expand social networks. Many social network websites provide free space for teenagers and adults to place their profile and friend list. These websites enables all visitors to link to anyone in the list with just one "click". Such websites like hi5.com, facebook.com, or myspace.com, consequently, become more and more popular among adolescents. A lot of people also have new friends or mates in digital communities and the closeness in the virtual world brings about new communities offline. As the Internet is available for everyone, it does mean that the Internet can support interpersonal relationships of either introverted or extroverted people to a certain degree.

However, the Internet cannot override humans. It cannot "solve" or "cause" interpersonal problems which derive from the nature of each person. The Internet is just like a door leading people to experience the wide world. If a person does not want to open and walk through this door, the Internet is nothing but optic fiber plugging into one's screen. Likewise, if a person does not have passion to make friends, the Internet is nothing but a crowded fancy party where that person could not be a part of.

Possibility to transform to offline love – Although negative news about cyber love are frequently shown in newspapers, true stories regarding successful online love can be seen widely. In this study, half of the respondents believed that cyber love is possibly transformed to offline love, and some of them thought that it is also potentially a true love. The result in this study is concurrent with the idea of mate selection theories.

As mentioned in Filter Theory of Kerkhoff and Davis (Dyer, 1983), superficial factors such as physical attractiveness have influences on relationships only at the

beginning of courtship, while similarity among two people is the key to success of intimacy development. Cyber space is a place providing people opportunities to disclose their innermost thoughts without face-to-face encounter pressure. If an Internet user can come across superficial factors, it is easy for that person to meet a compatible mate and develop their relationship until they get through the value comparison stage. When a cyber partner finds that they are well-matched, then the last stage of Stimulus-value-role Theory takes place. At this stage, it is perhaps a right time to have face-to-face meeting because a partner needs to explore role compatibility by learning about each other's behavior and expectation. Accordingly, online love is possibly transformed to offline love at the role compatibility period. And if a cyber partner passes this step, their love is a true love which is initiated from cyber space.

5.3.2 Online Intimacy Development

From the findings of this study, there are two points about cyber love development to discuss: period and continuity of relationship development and intention to develop to offline love.

Period and continuity of relationship development - This research found that the respondents who have cyber love spent around 3 months or less to make their romantic relationship online, and nearly 70% of them still kept the relationship. These results support the idea of Ben-Ze'ev and J.W. Walther.

Ben-Ze'ev (2004) said that the Internet has many characteristics encouraging people to form romantic relationships in cyber space. Its availability, interactivity, and privacy might be the reason why cyber love can be developed in only a few months. Due to the Internet availability, people can regularly contact or keep in touch with each other with very little investment. The interactivity helps make people converse as if they were talking to "real" people. Privacy makes people courageous to unveil their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and inmost either good or bad side. Moreover, particular websites provide the profile of their users and some chat rooms have segmented the interest of people into different "rooms". As a result, the Internet users are able to select a mate who resembles their background or interest easily. Partners who are quite similar potentially develop their friendship to an intimate relationship in a short time.

In accordance with Ben-Ze'ev ideas, J.W. Walther (Anderson, 2005) suggested in his theory of hyper personal communication that "CMC [Computer-mediated Communication] allows for people to overcome certain limitations of face-to-face interaction by providing an environment where they can interact with relative anonymity and develop intimate relationships relatively quickly" (Anderson, 2005, p. 552). In addition, the respondents of this research were rather Internet oriented people spending a lot of time contacting to other people via chat rooms, instant messaging programs, or e-mail. The intensive Internet usage is probably the other reason why the participants developed cyber love rapidly and consistently.

Intention to develop to offline love – A lot of people believe that love is destiny because they cannot explain why some partners get along very well so that their relationship flourishes to a strong one. As well, it is not easy to describe the reason why people in the cyber world intend or not intend to develop their intimacy to offline love. Nevertheless, one theory which can be applied for this issue is the compatibility of each pair as mentioned before; the other theory is perhaps love style.

Around 40% of the participants having cyber love had an intention to upgrade their relationship to offline love, while the majority of them would like to keep their cyber intimacy only in the virtual world. And after meeting, a greater part of the respondents who had cyber love did not change affectionate feelings about their cyber mate or frequency of Internet contact. It is possible that they were different in love style. According to Hendrick (1994), pragmatic lovers focus highly on qualities of their prospect mate and tend to develop a relationship realistically and patiently; therefore, they are suitable to matchmaker or computer dating service since these services provide predictable mates for their members. Once a pragmatic respondent has been satisfied with his or her cyber mate since their relationship has been online, he or she will most likely have a strong desire to develop cyber love to offline love. Storgic respondents might be another style of lovers who intend to move their online affair to an offline relationship. Romantic love of this kind of lovers is initiated from companionship. It is gradually developed from sharing, trust, and friendship, which the Internet provides chances and environment to do so. Storgic lovers may have an intention to transform cyber love to offline intimacy if they approve their cyber mate's trustworthiness.

On the contrary, ludic lovers avoid commitment of offline love because Ludus values love as a playful game. Ludus persons do not care much about self-disclosure or sincerity and enjoy having several partners. Accordingly, they try to keep space from their partner. It seems that the majority of cyber lovers are ludus and this might affect people's attitudes towards trustworthiness of cyber love indirectly.

5.4   CONCLUSIONS

This research paper aims to generate basic understanding about young generation's attitude towards cyber love, as well as their behavior related to the Internet use and online intimate relationship development. The data and discussions drawn from 250 self-administered questionnaires which were distributed in many areas in Bangkok are listed below.

5.4.1 Cyber love is quite common for adolescents even they do not experience it themselves. Young people spend very little time to form intimate relationships online and their affaire stays quite a long time. Particular unique characteristics of the Internet such as availability, interactivity, privacy, anonymity, and segmentation can be considered as the influencing factor on adolescents' behavior regarding intimate relationship development. Moreover, amount of Internet use is also a reason making young people form intimate relationships quickly.

5.4.2 However, among the young generation, the intention to develop cyber love into offline love is not so high. The majority of adolescents who have cyber love avoid commitment to offline love, similarly to ludic lovers who try to keep space from their mate. For youth, it seems that cyber love is only a playful game, providing them a lot of chances to meet and create relationships with new friends. And this may be one factor influencing negative attitudes of people towards cyber love.

5.4.3 Thai adolescents generally have neutral attitudes towards cyber love and believe that cyber love can be transformed to offline love or even can be true love; however, they negatively perceive its trustfulness and safety. Freedom and anonymity of the Internet are considered as key influences of this issue.

From all discussed topics, it can be said that communication is really important to develop intimate relationship and characteristics of communication channels are highly related to attitudes towards relationships, particularly relationship

in cyber space. The Internet, on the one hand, opens the opportunity for people to simply meet and become intimate with others; on the other hand, it has destroyed the trustworthiness of intimate relationships initiated on its land. Due to these paradoxical characteristics, the Internet has lead to the key finding of this study: attitudes towards cyber love.

In regards to cyber love, even though adolescents are common and neutral about this hi-tech relationship, they are aware of its defect. Parents and student guardians, when regarding young people's attitude, should not offend their cyber love unreasonably, but instruct them thoughtfully and with understanding about cyber love advantages, disadvantages, and limitations. Adolescents, as well, should learn about Internet's pros and cons and seek further information about their cyber partner before being fully convinced. Developing cyber love by using other communication channels filling up loopholes of the Internet under parents' superintendence could be the best way to create a secure, supportive and faithful intimacy.

5.5   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This research, although intending to provide general understanding about cyber love among the young generation in Thailand, was conducted only in Bangkok where adolescents are exposed to new technology and western culture is overwhelming. The attitudes of adolescents in other parts of Thailand, particularly in remote areas, may be highly different from those who live in the metropolis or municipality. So, further research should expand the data collection area to obtain more accurate results.