

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

**INTERACTION RITUALS IN PARENTHOOD DISCUSSION
FORUM RaisingKids.co.uk**

- Entering Rituals, Rants and Prayer Requests

A Pro Gradu Thesis in English

by

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INTERACTION RITUALS IN PARENTHOOD DISCUSSION FORUM RaisingKids.co.uk
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Vuorovaikutusrituaaleja virtuaalisessa yhteisössä on tutkittu tähän mennessä erittäin vähän. Tässä tutkielmassa sovelletaan Goffmanin vuorovaikutusrituaalimallia vanhemmuuteen keskittyvään keskusteluforumiin nimeltään RaisingKids.co.uk ja pyritään vastaamaan seuraaviin tutkimuskysymyksiin: 1) Millaisia vuorovaikutusrituaaleja parent-to-parent-nimisessä foorumissa esiintyy vuorovaikutustapahtuman tasolla? 2) Millaisia nämä vuorovaikutustapahtumat ovat ja millaisista vuorovaikutusakteista ne koostuvat? 3) Millainen yhteisön jäsen voi osallistua kuhunkin vuorovaikutusrituaaliin? Lisäksi tavoitteena on kuvailla yhteisöä kokonaisvaltaisesti ja dokumentoida jäsenistön kielenkäyttöä, jotta sitä voitaisiin myöhemmin verrata vastaaviin näytteisiin.

Tutkielmassa käytetään kommunikaation etnografian menetelmiä: havainnointia, osallistuvaa havainnointia sekä tarkempaa vuorovaikutustapahtuman analyysiä, jossa eritellään mm. osallistujat ja vuorovaikutusaktit. Vuorovaikutusrituaalit on tunnistettu vertaamalla vuorovaikutus-tapahtumatyyppeihin kategorisoituja viikon viestiketjuja Goffmanin malliin, jonka mukaan rituaali voi olla arkipäiväinenkin, mutta siinä osallistujat ovat fyysisesti läsnä, keskittyvät vuorovaikutukseen, pyrkivät sosiaaliseen solidaarisuuteen ja kunnioittavat yhteisölle tärkeitä asioita. Rituaalin sääntöjä rikottaessa seuraa hämmennystila, jonka voi korjata tarkoituksenmukaisilla rituaaleilla, kuten anteeksipyyntöillä. Rituaalissa on kyse ensisijaisesti vuorovaikutuksesta, ja se toistuu enemmän tai vähemmän saman kaavan mukaan.

Foorumista löytyi kolme rituaalia: liittymisrituaali, vuodatus ja rukouspyyntö. Liittymisrituaali esiintyi uuden jäsenen esittäytyttyä asianmukaisella tavalla yhteisölle, vuodatus silloin kun jäsen oli vahvasti negatiivisessa tunnetilassa ja haki sympatiaa. Rukouspyyntö taas tuli esille jäsenen ollessa huolissaan läheisensä terveydentilasta. Rituaali oli vuoropuhelua viestiketjun avaajan ja muiden jäsenten kesken. Samassa vuorovaikutustilanteessa saattoi olla kymmeniä osallistujia ja viestejä. Viestit koostuivat yleensä useista samankaltaisista toistuvista vuorovaikutusakteista, tai aktien ketjuista, joskin variaatiotakin esiintyi. Osallistuminen rituaaleihin on sallittua kaikille, tosin eri aktiivisuusryhmät osallistuvat rituaaleihin eri tavoin. Goffmanin malli oli sovellettavissa virtuaaliseen ympäristöön ja sen käyttö näiden yhteisöjen tutkimisessa jatkossakin suositeltavaa.

Asiasanat: interaction ritual, Ethnography of Communication, computer-mediated communication, virtual community

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1 Introduction

This is a study of interaction rituals in a virtual community called RaisingKids.co.uk (RK), where mothers, fathers and grandparents meet and discuss issues concerning parenthood. Interaction rituals are interaction patterns that serve to maintain social solidarity and socially valid things, such as an individual him/herself (Collins 2004:25, Goffman 1967:91). They are symbolic and important part of everyday encounters, for example, greetings, apologies and compliments (Goffman 1967:56-57). As the Internet has become part of everyday life and a way to meet people, at least in wealthy countries, it seemed to me in the beginning of this project that interaction rituals existed most probably also in the virtual world.

My personal interest in the topic grew in December 2005, while observing the community, RK, for a course project. The discussion in the forum concentrates on parenthood, and since I am a mother of two little boys, I became involved with the group immediately. After some time, I became aware that the interaction followed surprisingly strict rules and certain communicative patterns. Consequently, when I joined a graduate seminar group, I started to read about virtual communities and the interaction in them. However, even if virtual communities have been studied actively in recent years (e.g. Rheingold 1993, Baym 1999 and Cherny 1999), interaction rituals seemed to have been ignored: after an active search, I managed to find only three studies focusing on rituals in a virtual world. As the possibility of finding genuinely new information felt appealing and as there was clearly a need for the present study, I ended up with the following topic: interaction rituals in a parent-to-parent discussion board in RK at the level of communicative events.

The research questions in present study are: 1.) what kinds of interaction rituals take place in the RK discussion board parent-to-parent at the level of communicative events, 2.) what kinds of events are they and what kinds of acts do they include, and 3.) for what kind of a member it is appropriate to participate in the ritual events? Additionally, my purpose is to give a more or less holistic description of the community and to document its discourse so that it could be later compared to other samples of language in use.

As a method, I used Ethnography of Communication which focuses on interaction in a community. First, as discussed in section 3.1, I made sure that RK can be identified as a community. Second, I observed the forum and participated in discussions. I asked for a permission to interview the members but was not allowed to do so. However, to compensate the interviews, I analysed the discussions very carefully with the methodology discussed in chapter 4 and made some calculations to increase the reliability of the results. Additionally, I made efforts to gain expertise of this forum by participating in different kinds of activities in the forum.

The results of this study show that there indeed are some communicative events that can be taken for interaction rituals. Thus, it seems that the Internet, or at least the RK forum, is not only used for information exchange. People genuinely meet each other in order to interact, to build solidarity in a group and create a self image in a community with the help of interaction rituals. The virtual communities and their cultures, especially interaction rituals, should receive much more interest in research. The Internet conceals new, different cultures that the explorers of our time have not yet found.

2 Background

In this chapter, I will discuss the background of my study: the main concepts and the previous studies relevant to my topic. The main concepts are community and interaction ritual. I have made an attempt to find and describe the interaction rituals in a discussion forum, and, thus, obviously, it is crucial to define the term thoroughly. Additionally, as I used Ethnography of Communication as my method, it is important to discuss what is meant by a community in general and to illustrate different kinds of communities. After all, ethnography concentrates on analysing a community, in this case a virtual one. Thus, in this chapter, I will first discuss what is meant by a community. Second, I will review interaction ritual model launched by Goffman and what counts as an interaction ritual. Third, I will introduce previous studies on the subject.

2.1 Community Defined

In this section, I will discuss the characteristics of a community. For my study, it is important to go beyond the notion of basic community and consider also what is meant by a virtual community. In addition, as Ethnography of Communication concentrates on speech communities, I will discuss two different kinds of communities approached from the point of view of discourse. These community types are speech community and discourse community (Johnstone 2002:115-116). Later on, in section 3.1 I will relate the forum under study, RK, to these definitions.

There seems to be one thing that sociologists agree on when they talk about the term '**community**'. They agree that it is defined in too many ways and its meaning varies depending on who uses it (Cherny 1999:247-248 and Jones 1997 Internet). However, even if the definitions differ in a number of aspects, according to Hillery there actually are some points where sociologists agree on (1955: 111-118 as quoted e.g. by Cherny 1999:248, Hamman 1999 Internet¹ and Mowbray 2001 Internet). Hillery compared 94 definitions and found that the majority of them (69) agree that the defining features of a community include **social interaction**, **common tie** and **area**. Area excluded, there were 73 definitions that included social interaction and common tie. In other words, a community is "(1) a

¹ Internet included in a reference means that the source in question is an Internet source and the page numbers are unavailable.

group of people (2) who share social interaction (3) and some common ties between themselves and the other members of the group (4) and who share an area for at least some of the time” (Hillery 1955, cited in Hamman 1999 Internet, original bolding of numbering removed).

The term ‘**virtual community**’ is often used “to describe long term, computer-mediated conversations amongst large groups” (Erickson 1997 Internet). One of the most frequently quoted definitions of a virtual community is offered by Rheingold (1993 Internet). He describes virtual communities as being “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace”. His definition has raised objections among sociologists. For example, Delanty claims that Rheingold (1993) gives an impression that virtual communities offer an alternative, more ideal reality compared to previously existing ones (Delanty 2003: 173-175). Furthermore, for example, Weinreich has even questioned the existence of virtual communities (1997 Internet). In short, Rheingold’s definition is popular and it has stimulated discussion about virtual communities. However, it is rather vague and romantic: It is no wonder that it has provoked criticism.

Another definition of a virtual community is offered by Jones (1997 Internet). He suggests that we should make a distinction between “a community and its material in order to determine when a series of group-CMC demonstrates the existence of a virtual community”. In short, all instances of group CMC are not connected to virtual communities at all and thus, group CMC is not equal to a virtual community. For this reason, it is important to make a distinction between a community and its material. Furthermore, Jones argues that the virtual settlement, that is, the virtual place where the community’s activities take place, and the communities themselves should be distinguished. He claims further that “the existence of a virtual settlement demonstrates the existence of an associated virtual community” (Jones 1997 Internet). Thus, in his opinion, it is crucial to define virtual settlement to find out if a virtual community exists. For him a cyber-place has to have certain features to be a virtual settlement. These features, which resemble the features of a community discussed above, are **a minimum level of interactivity, a variety of**

communicators, a minimum level of sustained membership and a **virtual common-public-space** (Jones 1997 Internet).

Next, I will illustrate what Jones means by each of these features. First, the messages sent to the CMC system in question are related to each other (Jones 1997 Internet). In other words, **interactivity** “is the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages” (Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997 as quoted in Jones Internet). In short, the messages are not only read by the members, they are answered and the answers comment on the previous posts of the thread in question. Second, for being a virtual settlement, a cyber-place has to have a **variety of communicators**: There has to be more than two participants who post to the shared common-public-space. Fewer communicators would not allow interaction and two participants would not form a group (Jones 1997 Internet). Third, Jones maintains that a virtual community needs a **common-public-space** for its interaction. For example, two people sending emails to each other’s inbox do not have a common-public-space. This condition is based, for example, on definition of virtual community by Fernback and Thompson (1995 Internet): “social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place (e.g., a conference or chat line) that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest.” In short, this means that “virtual community needs a virtual-space” (Jones 1997). Fourth, as a **minimum level of sustained membership** is required, there has to be some stability in membership for a cyber-place to be a virtual settlement. As the definition by Jones is fairly clear and succeeds to define a virtual community in a neutral and systematic way and since it helps to separate communities from a common group-CMC, I will use it in my study. However, I will discuss the **minimum level of interaction**, not interactivity, since interactivity is “an inherent feature of the medium, which allows the users to experience a series of exchanges by means of the technology” (Sutton 2001:225) not the reciprocal social process that it is meant to illustrate in this definition. In section 3.1 I get back to the conditions discussed above and relate it to RK.

In this study, my interest in communities lies in their discourse practices and thus, I will now introduce two types of communities approached from the point of view of discourse.

These can be called **a speech community** and **a discourse community** (Johnstone 2002:115-116).

Speech community is the unit of focus in ethnographic study (Saville-Troike 1982:17 and Hymes 1972: 54) and thus, a central concept to define. It is not simply viewed as a group of people speaking the same language (Hymes 1972:54). Furthermore, according to Gumperz, members of a speech community can in fact speak different language varieties (Gumperz 1972:16 and Di Luzio 2003:2). However, to give a clear idea of what is meant by a speech community I will now quote two well known scholars, Gumperz and Hymes. First, Gumperz (1968: 219, cited in Patrick 2002 Internet) defines a speech community as being “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage”. He also adds that “speech varieties employed within a speech community form a system because they are related to a shared set of social norms” (Gumperz 1968:382 as quoted in Patrick 2002 Internet). Thus, for a group to be defined as a speech community, “all that is required is that there be at least one language in common, the rules governing basic communicative strategies be shared so that speakers can decode the social meanings carried by alternative modes of communication” (Gumperz 1972:16). Similarly, Hymes (1972:54) defines a speech community as “a community sharing rules of conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for interpretation of at least one linguistic variety”. In other words, both these scholars agree that members of a speech community must share a language but that is not enough. Another requirement is the set of rules that make the members able to communicate in an appropriate way within the group. Consequently, to be a member of a speech community, an individual needs to have communicative and cultural competence specific to the group. An individual who does not possess the group-specific communicative and linguistic rules is an outsider of the group and may have difficulties in conducting in an acceptable way (Hymes 1972:54). A member has communicative resources that make him/her aware of who can speak when and what is acceptable to say and how it should be said.

Discourse community is another type of a community, when approached from the point of view of linguistics. Swales (1990:24-25) gives six criteria for a group to be a discourse community. First, it should have **common public goals**. They can be academic or everyday

goals, such as growing better roses in your garden. Second, the group has to have **mechanisms of intercommunication**: for example, magazines of a community or email-lists. Third, Swales claims that membership is used mainly for **providing information and feedback**. Fourth, a discourse community has to have one or more **genres**. A genre is "a set of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes" (Swales 1990:58). The fifth criterion for a group to be a discourse community is that it should have some **group-specific lexis**, for example, acronyms. Outsiders have difficulty in understanding this lexis but group members think of them as normal. The sixth criterion is that a discourse community should have a threshold level of **members who have context and discourse expertise**. In short, members of a discourse community are oriented towards reaching goals that are public and known by everyone in the group. A discourse community has to have members with context and linguistic behavioural knowledge, who are familiar with the genres and the group-specific lexis of the community, and are able to use them in order to provide information and feedback to the other members through the mechanisms of intercommunication the group uses.

2.2 Interaction Ritual Defined

In this section, I will discuss what is meant by the terms '**ritual**' and '**interaction**' in this study. Then I will review the **interaction ritual** model launched by Goffman. These definitions and the model together form a frame for my analysis and will be helpful in understanding the study of RK culture.

2.2.1 Rituals

When analysing rituals the first question to be asked is naturally what exactly is meant by a **ritual** in the study in question. There are no easy answers, since the term is one of those blurred ones that can be understood in several ways depending the approach. However, the term is important when studying communities: "One of the social adhesives that sociologists and anthropologists agree is essential is ritual: stylized social behaviors that are repeated frequently, and which establish and maintain social bonds and boundaries" (Rheingold 2005 Internet). Now I will focus on how the term is understood in sociology and anthropology.

Some sociologists see rituals in a rather restricted way, considering only festive and official events. For example, Saville-Troike (1982:46) states that “rituals are made up of routines, but these are given far greater cultural significance for being part of a ritual context, rather than everyday encounters”. Goffman broadened the rituals as something that can take place as well in informal and secular activities as in formal and official ones:

I use the term “ritual” because this activity, however informal and secular, represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while in the immediate presence of an object that has special value for him (Goffman 1967:57).

The valued object is situational and most often the individual him/herself (Collins 2004:25). Thus, for Goffman, at the level of an individual, rituals have usually to do with impression management. An individual has to control his/her behaviour in order to present himself in a way that he wants to be seen by others (Goffman 1967:5-45). Moreover, according to this view, at the level of the group, a ritual builds solidarity (Collins 2004:7): it is “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership” (Durkheim and Goffman as quoted in Collins 2004:7). Thus, rituals shape an individual’s self in the eyes of others and generate solidarity in the group. In this study, I will treat rituals in a Goffmanian way: as something, whether formal or informal, that generates solidarity and shapes individual’s self image in the group. In other words, rituals, in this study, are “stylized social behaviors that are repeated frequently, and which establish and maintain social bonds and boundaries” (Rheingold 2005). They form a game of impression management and are a feature that organizes characteristic communication between the members of a community. Goffman’s definition of rituals suits well in this study, since the RK virtual community has only few official events and Goffman broadens his view to comprise also secular events. I will connect RK to Goffman’s view on rituals in section 5.3.

2.2.2 Interaction

At his point, to make my goal more explicit, it is crucial to define **interaction** in this study. According to Suh, Hasan and Couchman (2003 Internet) interaction in communication has two main characteristics: It is social and reciprocal. Firstly, interaction happens between

humans, not inside an individual. Secondly, interaction is reciprocal since it refers to such ongoing processes of exchange as mutual understanding, exchanging information, or cooperation (Suh, Hasan and Couchman 2003 Internet). Reciprocity is crucial for the existence of a community since without it the social rules and reality could not be shared by individuals (Suh, Hasan and Couchman 2003 Internet). Thus, interaction can be defined as “the process of continuous interchange between human beings” (Suh, Hasan and Couchman 2003 Internet). According to Riva and Galimberti, interaction gives individuals a setting for using their communicative competence (1998 Internet). Interaction does not require physical co-presence and can occur in virtual reality as well as through telecommunication (Riva and Galimberti 1998 Internet). However, the utterances are co-present and thus, the interlocutors may influence each other’s actions and the nature of the communication (Riva and Galimberti 1998 Internet). Computer-mediated interaction is somewhat more restricted than face-to-face interaction, since there is only a restricted number of channels in use. Thus, in computer-mediated interaction, the social cues have to be communicated through emoticons and creative keyboard use (Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic, 2004:52-53). In section 3.2.1 I will get back to the issues that define interaction in mediated situations.

Furthermore, now that the term interaction has been defined, I will make a distinction between interactional and transactional language use. Transactional language use concerns the expression of content while interactional language use the expression of “social relations and personal attitudes” (Brown and Yule 1983:1). Interactional language use seems to have an important role in virtual communities: Rutter and Smith (1999 Internet) found in their study of rituals in a newsgroup RumCom.local that “interaction takes priority of transaction”. Similarly, Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997 Internet) claim that “communication is mostly about and for the purpose of interaction”. Of course, a community means different things for its different members and there are also those who only seek information (Paccagnella 1997 Internet).

2.2.3 Goffman's Interaction Ritual Model

Now that I have defined what the terms 'ritual' and 'interaction' mean in this study, it is time to review Goffman's model of **interaction rituals**. Goffman discusses bits and pieces of the model in several of his texts. He makes interesting points but in a rather unclear and incoherent way. However, his work about rituals is summed up by Collins (2004:23-25) and I will use his summary here as a frame for my review to give a holistic and clear idea of what Goffman meant by an interaction ritual. Additionally, I will also quote Goffman directly inside the frame given by Collins. The model consists of five points: **situational co-presence, focused interaction, pressure to social solidarity, honouring socially valued objects and moral uneasiness caused by violations of ritual behaviour**. These five points are presented in more detail below.

First, "ritual takes place in a condition of **situational copresence**" (Collins 2004:23, bold added, italics removed). For Goffman, people construct social reality but the situation sets the limits for that construction (Collins 2004:16). In other words, the situation serves as a starting point for interaction. Thus, the rituals are determined not only by qualities of the individual members but also, and to a large part, by the situation. It affects the interaction and consequently, cannot be left out of the study.

Second, when a ritual takes place in a situational co-presence, there is **focused interaction** (Collins 2004:23). Focused interaction according to Goffman is:

Joint spontaneous involvement is *unio mystico*, a socialized trance. We must also see that a conversation has a life of its own and makes demands on its own behalf. It is a little social system with its own boundary maintaining tendencies; it is a little patch of commitment and loyalty with its own heroes and its own villains (Goffman 1967:113-114).

In other words, in focused interaction, participants respect firstly the situation or reality of the communicative event in question, secondly themselves and thirdly each other and thus, make commitment to the social rules of the interactional reality of that moment (Collins 2004: 23-24). They keep the topic going and change it smoothly by transition rituals (Collins 2004:18). However, as Goffman (1967:113-114) mentions, not everyone commits himself to that focused interaction and its rules. They can break the ritual equilibrium and become somewhat unaccepted villains in the community (Goffman 1967:113-114).

Third, “there is a pressure to keep up **social solidarity**” in a ritual (Collins 2004:25, bold added, original italics removed). In other words, in interaction rituals there are pressures for conformity and the participants manifest their membership by answering these pressures (Collins 2004:25).

The fourth point is that “rituals do honor what is socially valued” that is **sacred objects**. These socially valued things are “transient and situational” (Collins 2004:25). Accordingly, the individual self is the most common socially valued object and the self is honoured with the help of different avoidance and presentational rituals: “the self is in part a ceremonial thing, a sacred object which must be treated with proper ritual care and in turn must be presented in a proper light to others” (Goffman 1967:91). Presentation rituals are “acts through which the individual makes specific attestations to recipients concerning how he regards them and how he will treat them in the on-coming interaction” (Goffman 1967:71). These everyday acts, such as salutations, invitations and compliments, are often seemingly minor but have a great impact on the image a member gives of him/herself and tells about his/her self-respect and additionally define if she/he will be respected by the others in the community. Avoidance rituals, in contrast, are acts that lead an individual to keep distance from the recipient (Goffman 1967:62). Avoidance can be realized by, for example, a formal style in communication, proscription or interdiction (Goffman 1967:73). For example, a formal style does not encourage a recipient to continue interaction and, thus, leads to a greater distance between interlocutors.

The fifth and final point in the interaction ritual model is that “when the ritual properties are broken, the persons who are present feel **moral uneasiness**” (Collins 2004:25, bold added, original italics removed). This can be manifested by a scorn or disgust, or in extreme cases as stigmatizing the ritual violator as a mental case. In these cases, it is possible to restore the ritual equilibrium by apologies, which themselves are rituals (Collins 2004:25).

To sum up, Goffman’s interaction ritual model, according to Collins, includes situational co-presence, focused interaction, pressure to keep up social solidarity, honouring what is socially valid, moral uneasiness in case of ritual violations and the possibility for restoring

ritual equilibrium. For Goffman, rituals can be minor acts that take place in everyday situations. Participants cooperate with each other and try to maintain ritual equilibrium. The problem of this model is that it does not consider mediated interaction. On the other hand, this is understandable since Goffman's work was written before CMC. On the other hand, he fails to consider telecommunication as a possible situation for a ritual interaction by requiring situational co-presence. However, this model is usable, since it is holistic: it includes secular as well as official rituals and considers the rituals from the point of view of an individual as well as that of the group.

2.3 Previous Studies on Rituals Issues in CMC

There is a large number of studies on interpersonal issues in CMC. These studies address four topics: language use, identities, relationships and communities (Baym 2001:66). In the area of language use, humour has been the topic of several analyses (e.g. Baym 1995). Researchers, such as Yates, Orlikowski and Rennecker (1997) as well as Erickson (1997, 2000) are interested in genre analysis and Baym (1999) has done ethnography on soap opera audiences paying some attention to the discourse of the group. These are only some examples of studies in the area of CMC. Consequently, the study of CMC language use has already covered many aspects and yet there is plenty to do in the field. For example, interaction rituals in CMC have not received enough attention. They are mentioned in some papers (for example, in Beaudouin and Velkovska 1999c) as one issue among many others but the term ritual is usually used carelessly without a definition. As a result, these rituals should be studied systematically and in many types of CMC. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the few studies I was able to find on the topic.

Rutter and Smith (1999: 113-22) studied ritual aspects in the RumCom.local newsgroup, which offers its members a place for meeting and having a discussion. The topic of the community is not restricted. The hypothesis of the study is that there must be something far more important than the exchange of information that motivates the members to participate in RumCom.local. They argue against the view that a shared object or goal would motivate and organize CMC, as it is often assumed by group ware researchers. Rutter and Smith interviewed the participants face-to-face and through CMC, asked the members to fill questionnaires and analysed a rather large corpus of messages (900 threads, about 17000

messages). They approach rituals from a sociological perspective and use the work by Simmel and Goffman on interaction order as their framework. They suggest that “newsgroup sociability [...] has a significant ritual aspect” and that “ritual directs attention to the culture of a given newsgroup the methods through which the selves of posters are honoured” (Rutter and Smith 1999:117). The rituals Rutter and Smith found were salutations, broadcast requests and chain of communicative acts that followed them, jokes and orientation to sociability threshold, which means that the participants avoid bringing their deepest personal qualities to the interaction. They suggest that netiquette is a factor that offers the basic code for conduct in the forum. It is interpreted by the members and its points are negotiated to fit the forum. This leads to the feeling of community and development of virtual boundaries around the virtual group. Furthermore, according to Rutter and Smith, the role of information exchange is to maintain social relationships and to be a means of sociability itself. Thus the study shows that CMC is not always motivated and organized by shared objects and goals and that interactional aspects of CMC are important and should not be ignored in research.

Danet (2005) conducted an ethnographic study on play, art and ritual on an Internet relay chat (IRC) called #mirc_rainbow (Rainbow). This group communicates mainly via colourful images although words are also used. The images are composed of letters and other symbols found in the keyboard. As data collection methods she used participant observation and semi-structured interviews, which she conducted through email. She also captured approximately 6000 images. Danet views communication in the IRC group as a secular and ritualized play. She claims that Rainbow communication meets the requirements of a ritual (defined by Tambiah 1985). Accordingly, a ritual is “constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangements are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition)” (Tambiah 1985:128). First, Danet argues that communication in Rainbow is repetitive: typographic symbols within images, bilateral symmetry, greetings and honourings are repeated continuously. In addition, the figures used in images are often repeated, although with minor changes in them (e.g. teddy bears). Second, there is invariance in interaction. Strangers and old friends communicate in a similar way, although, friends may sometimes add personalized text in the exchange. Third, Rainbow communicative acts have a

restricted repertoire: there are 1) opening greetings, 2) acknowledgements, 3) any-time honorings, 4) requests for love, attention or friendship, 5) invitations, 6) goodbyes or partings and 7) thank yous. Fourth, Danet claims that there are canonical beliefs in Rainbow: Rainbow is seen as a good and safe place, unlike the real world. According to Danet, participants are taken as equals both as individuals and as artists. Furthermore, the study argues that virtual attachment is as valid and valuable as that in real life and all participants are loved unconditionally. Danet's study is very interesting, although her conclusions about Rainbow as a perfect place with its unconditional love, seem to be somewhat idealistic and naïve. In addition, she fails to follow the description of a ritual in a clear manner. She first gives the description of a ritual and then, inconsistently, combines other components than those in the definition to her description. The outcome is perplexing, although she still manages to give a thorough image of ritual aspects in communication of Rainbow.

In his article, Hardey (2002 Internet) discusses four dating sites. His goal is to provide an understanding of how virtual identities and relationships are negotiated in virtual space that is meant to offer opportunities for individuals to meet each other online to form a relationship also in real life. Hardey used email questionnaires as a method for collecting data. He asked participants to fill in questionnaires that included yes/no questions and open-ended answers. The questions were about relationships, dating sites, Internet, experiences in contacting and meeting others and questions about background information, so that Hardey could profile the participants. As many as 437 individuals participated in the study, 294 men and 143 women. Hardey describes his method as ethnography. Hardey argues that according to the answers, the openness of the virtual environment is beneficial when entering a dating site: when an individual wants to add an advertisement of oneself to the site he/she can choose the content and length of the text. Furthermore, one can decide whether to include a photograph or not. When an individual wants to contact another one, she/he answers an advertisement. The one who gets the answer can decide whether to continue the contact or not. However, these steps of contacting another person and building a relationship and an acceptable face in the eyes of another are guided by widely shared norms. As Hardey states: "users' experiences of establishing and maintaining interaction with others approximated much more closely to Goffman's view that interaction proceeds via rituals and norms that protect the self rather than to a vision of the Internet as a

revolutionary social space” He also claims that the features of virtual relationships which are authenticity, reciprocal revelation of personal details, building of trust, turn taking, and dialogical establishment of intimacy, are the key to interaction rituals. In addition, Hardey maintains that online relationships steer the attention away from the physical characteristics of the participants. Instead the relationship concentrates on the written exchange that is guided by interaction rituals. Hardey’s study is very interesting, although the rituals are not studied systematically. He fails to tell what the rituals are like and how they are used. However, his goal was to provide an understanding how identities and relationships were negotiated, not to list and describe interaction rituals.

As can be seen, interaction rituals in a virtual environment have been the focus of some studies. However, they have not been paid enough attention in research and there is not enough knowledge of them. In addition, there actually are pleas by scholars, such as Donald Ellis (1999 Internet), who has suggested that Goffman’s term interaction ritual should be revitalized since “Interaction rituals are the empirically available behaviors that constitute structure”. For these reasons, I will make an attempt to conduct a systematic analysis in order to find the interaction rituals in a specific virtual community, describe their characteristics, such as what they are like, when they are used and who participates in them.

3 Data

Now that I have discussed the background of the study by illustrating community theories and Goffman's interaction ritual theory, it is time to introduce the data: A discussion forum called RaisingKids.co.uk (RK). RK advertises itself on their webpage as follows:

Raisingkids.co.uk is here to offer support, information, and friendship to everyone who's raising kids - whatever your circumstances or income
(http://www.raisingkids.co.uk/1st/1st_01.asp).

Indeed, this site is a rich source of information for anyone who needs to know something about raising children of any age. In addition, the page is very interactive, you can chat, ask experts for advice or simply discuss parenting with other parents or take part in competitions if you are from the United Kingdom. In this chapter, I will first introduce the data. In other words, I will discuss RK as a community and illustrate the communicative situation that affects the discussion in RK: its CMC system, interface and the board under study. The introduction of the data is rather detailed which is necessary since I wanted to offer a holistic picture of RK and the communicative situation in it. Second, I will discuss the complicated ethical issues of the study. The data collecting methods will not be discussed here. They are the topic of section 4.3 since they are connected to the Ethnography of Communication, the approach discussed in chapter 4.

3.1 The Quality of RaisingKids.co.uk Community

My goal here is firstly to show that the RK forum can be taken for a community. Then, since there is a lot of group CMC that takes place without forming any kind of community (Jones 1997), I will show that RK can be categorized as a virtual community. Furthermore, I will show that RK, as judged by its discourse, is a certain kind of virtual community. In other words, in this chapter my main goal is to define RK as **a virtual text-based speech community**.

RaisingKids.co.uk as a community

As discussed in section 2.1, the features that sociologists agree on when defining a community are **a group of people, social interaction, common tie and area** (Hillery 1955,

cited in Hamman 1999 Internet). Now it is time to consider RK and ask if it could be taken for a community in the first place. First, there certainly is a group of people. RK has 55223 members, although the majority of them do not participate in discussions at all. However, there is an active core group that keeps the community alive. Second, the members interact with each other, that is, they react to each other's posts and it is actually hard to find an unanswered message. Third, parenthood seems to work as a common tie between the members of RK. However, parenthood is not the only tie. For example, English as a native or second language is an important tie that enables interaction between the members. Additionally, all the members are from relatively wealthy areas, since they have access to computers connected to the Internet. The fourth criterion listed above is somewhat complicated: Does RK group share a common area or not? My answer is that yes they do. They have a virtual place for their interaction, an address for their meetings.

Thus, RK can be approached as a community. Now I will show that RK meets also Jones' criteria of a virtual community discussed in section 2.1. To illustrate it, I will discuss further the conditions set by Jones and compare them to the features of the cyber-place where RK operates. The conditions are **a minimum level of interactivity, a variety of communicators, a minimum level of sustained membership** and a **virtual common-public-space** (Jones 1997 Internet).

RaisingKids.co.uk as a Virtual Community

First, **the minimum level of interactivity** has to be met (Jones 1997 Internet). In RK, the activity is based on interactivity: First, as illustrated in the example 1, there is an opening for a thread:

Example 1. Opening of a thread

i just came across this site, didn't think they were doing it this year, well i filled in the questionnaire and i am a bit gutted with the results but hey i spose it gives me reason to diet now.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/bigchallenge/>

Then, as shown in example 2 below, the opening is responded to:

Example 2. A response

Thanks for that MIT!!

I've just filled in the questionnaire and it just confirms what I already knew,

a) I need to eat better

b) I need to exercise more

c) My BMI is right for my height (thank goodness!)

Actually gave me a bit of a boost as I was convinced I was overweight. Just need to get exercising and toning, bring on the sunshine, it might help to motivate me!!

nickname xx

In this way the discussion goes on for some time. Sometimes an opening message receives high interest and leads to a long discussion. At other times a message gets only one or two responses, but it is extremely rare that an opening message is completely ignored by the other members. Thus, the condition of the minimum level of interactivity is clearly reached in RK.

Second, in order to be a virtual settlement, a cyber-place has to have **a variety of communicators**. This is also met in RK: there are tens of thousands registered members of which hundreds are more or less active. It can certainly be said that in RK, there is a variety of communicators and thus, the second condition of the model is clearly fulfilled.

Third, a virtual community needs **a common-public-space** for its interaction (Jones 1997 Internet). The RK group has a discussion forum in a web-site on the Net. Thus, they have a virtual space where a significant portion of their interaction occurs. Additionally, they can communicate through private messages, chat, emails, or in every other way individuals communicate, but to be an active member of RK, they have to interact in the common public forum.

Fourth, the requirement of **a minimum level of sustained membership** is also well fulfilled in RK. The list of members in the web-site shows the date when a member has registered to the group and the number of posts he/she has written during this time. There seems to be a number of participants that have stuck to the group for years and sent thousands of messages during this time. In April 2006, the most active moderator had sent

9825 messages since her registration in 2002 and the most active member had posted 5191 times since 2004. This shows that membership is sustained enough in RK for it to be taken for a virtual settlement.

As shown above, RK meets the conditions set by Jones (1997 Internet) in his model of virtual settlement. Consequently, RK is an example of a virtual community. Now, as my method of analysis is Ethnography of Communication (discussed further in the next chapter) and the focus of the approach is a speech community, the need arises to define the RK community further to illustrate that it is a speech community, and not, for example, a discourse community.

RaisingKids.co.uk as a Speech Community

The terms **speech community** or **discourse community** overlap partly; however, as discussed in section 2.1.1, there are also significant differences. Consequently, I will have to categorize RK by comparing its characteristics to the features of these two types of community.

In some aspects RK resembles a **discourse community**: First, there are members with high context and discursive knowledge who interact with each other through the forum. For example, some members are experts in child caring and many of them know the discursive practices of the group. Second, they use group-specific lexis and different genres. Third, the goal of the forum is to provide support for parents and the site is full of information about parenthood. However, when observing interaction in RK, it becomes clear that membership is not only used for providing information. The active participants are at the site mainly for social interaction. There are word games, jokes and requests for expression of solidarity or support. While RK can function as a source of information for some members, it is not mainly that for those who form the core group of the community. As a result, RK does not meet all the criteria set for a discourse community (Swales 1990:24-25).

RK seems to be closest to a **speech community**. The RK group has a distinctive way of using language. As seen in the example 3 below, the language is not immediately clear for a newcomer:

Example 3. A reaction to the RK lingo

Topic: Nice but Dim

Hiya guys! I'm fairly new here and I just haven't quite figured out all the RK lingo..... Some I know cos they go way back from my chat room days (and nights!!) but some I'm really not sure about.....

Ta everso!!

[nickname]

In addition to group specific language use, RK has social norms that define discourse and with the help of which the members interact appropriately and interpret each other's messages. These norms are listed in the forum guidelines available in the board [Help, FAQs & Notices](#). These guidelines, and many unwritten ones, have a large impact on the discussion and to be able to apply them appropriately requires cultural as well as linguistic RK knowledge and interaction skills. When I first began to observe the RK community, I had serious difficulties in understanding what the discussion was all about and what was going on. Now that I have been a member for over six months, I am starting to get the message of the posts without paying much effort when reading them. However, even now, I am not always sure, when it is appropriate to participate. From time to time someone is incompetent in RK and, consequently, behaves in an unacceptable manner. Once a new member introduced herself and in the same message gave a "rant" in a very emotive way and she got insulted by the other members. After a while peace was re-established and members commented on the newcomer's opening: *I understand what she meant, [clarification of the newcomers opening]. It was written a bit like a reply to a thread but it could have been queried in a more civilized manner.* Thus, RK has a distinctive way of using language and the members need to have communicative and cultural knowledge and also group specific interaction skills to be able to participate correctly in RK activities. This demonstrates that the RK community can be classified as a speech community, even if the communication is text-based. To

sum up the whole section, RK can be viewed as **a virtual text-based speech community**.

3.2 Communicative Situation in the RaisingKids.co.uk

The communicative situation in RK is composed of CMC in a chosen discussion board in the RK interface. In other words, the specific CMC system in RK, the interface and a chosen board together form the communicative situation. Now I will discuss the CMC system, the interface and finally the board I have chosen to analyse in this study.

3.2.1 RaisingKids.co.uk as a CMC System

RK interaction is not easy to define in terms of written, oral, mass or interpersonal communication. This seems to be a somewhat common problem in research on CMC since, for example, Baym (1999:13), O'Sullivan (2005 Internet) and Caplan (2001 Internet) discuss the problem in their work. Baym (1999:13) claims that CMC, at least in Usenet, is a hybrid of writing and speech, and of interpersonal and mass communication. The messages are text-based and communication is slower than face-to-face talk but faster than, for example, exchange of letters (Herring 2001:614). However, the members describe their communication as talk. To give an example, one of the members stated in a written conversation that *i was going to say the same thing* (underlining added). In CMC an author cannot always be certain of the size or quality of his/her audience (Herring 2001:614). Even if a message is addressed to a particular member, it can be read by a large audience (Baym 1999:13). Caplan (2001, Internet) suggests that the whole system should be viewed as a new form of communication rather than a combination of the older ones. Either way, it is easy to characterize CMC with the help of comparing it with speech, writing and mass and interpersonal communication. Thus, I will use comparison as a technique to illustrate my points, rather than a statement that CMC is somehow a lesser version of these older categories of communication. There certainly are many medium effects in CMC that make it a system of its own. Furthermore, CMC is not one system but a heterogeneous group of different communication systems. They can be described with the help of media variables that have an impact on them (Herring 2001:614). In other words, CMC is not a

homogenous unity, on the contrary, it includes different types of CMC systems, for example email and chat. In this section I will introduce the medium variables relevant in RK: level of synchrony, transmission type and physical limitations. Furthermore, I will use these features in the description of the CMC system in RK.

The Level of Synchrony

First, CMC can be **synchronous** or **asynchronous** (Herring 2001:614-615). In synchronous CMC, such as chat, both the sender of a message and the person the message is addressed to have to be signed in at the same time (Herring 2001:615). The messages come and go and are not stored to be read afterwards. The participants have to react quickly to be able to communicate with each other. In asynchronous CMC, on the other hand, messages are stored, so that the addressee can read and answer a message even after a long period of time (Herring 2001:614-615). RK is an asynchronous CMC system, since messages are saved under the discussion lists and it is possible to read posts that have been sent a year ago, although four months old topics are closed and cannot be responded to anymore. However, the fact that in asynchronous CMC participants can consider their words, and the words sent by another person, expands “the potential for interpersonal engagement” (Baym 2001:64). In other words, participants are able to take their time and consider the appropriateness of their words in the situation. The possibility to take one’s time in editing a post “leads to a better organized and better thought out statements than occur face-to-face” (Baym 2001:65). Thus, the interaction in an asynchronous CMC system, such as RK, is built up of more or less premeditated messages.

Transmission Type

The transmission type is another medium effect in CMC (Herring 2001:615). In other words, simultaneous feedback may be available, if transmission is **two-way**, or unavailable, if transmission is **one-way** (Herring 2001:615). In face-to-face communication persons taking part in the conversation are able to give feedback to the speaker by, for example, nodding or short sounds (Gumperz in Cherny 1999:182). These are called **back channels** and they tell the speaker if he is really listened to, how his message is received and when another person wants to take a turn in a conversation (Crispin, Lengel and Tomic 2004:60).

However, unlike face-to-face or telephone conversations, most of today's CMC makes use of one-way transmission: a message is sent as a whole and the receivers do not know of its quality or of its existence, before it arrives (Herring 2001:615). This applies also to the RK communication. The message is first written and after that, it is sent to the forum. The members do not know of its existence until it is sent, and thus, are unable to give feedback while the message is formed by its author.

Physical Limitations

The third variable particular to CMC is its physical limitations. There are the limits of **the message size**, **the persistence of the text**, **the possibility to quote previous messages** (Severinson-Eklundh and Macdonald 1994, quoted in Herring 2001:615), **the level of anonymity allowed by a system** (Selfe and Meyer 1991, quoted in Herring 2001:615) and **the availability to use also other channels of communication** than text (Yates and Graddol 1996, quoted in Herring 2001:615), to mention only those having an impact in RK communication.

First, in RK, **messages** are allowed to be **long**. I have tried to test the limits but I have been unable to write a message that is too long for the system. The length of the posts varies considerably: there are short posts with only ten words and then very long ones of more than 1000 words. If the posting is a very long one, the writer has usually warned about it in the heading: had *a really bad week (long)*. Mostly, however, the messages are from thirty to a few hundred words, which might be slightly longer than in some other forums, for example, the parenthood board in www.suomi24.fi. However, the point is that the message size in RK does not constrain self-expression: long writings are allowed by the system. A member has plenty of room for his/her writing. However, the messages are often so long that the content has to be noticeably interesting for a reader to go through the whole message.


The persistence of messages is the second physical limitation on the list above. Persistence is the time the postings are available in the CMC system (Herring 2001:615). As mentioned earlier in this section, the persistence of messages in RK is considerably long: even one year-old posts are accessible for anyone interested and it is possible to

answer a four-month-old message. This feature allows the members to check out if one of the participants is giving contradictory information of him/herself. As a result the members have to be careful to be consistent if they do not want to be publicly questioned as in example 4 below. In the example, a member finds it hard to believe what another has written when comparing it to her earlier messages:

Example 4. A member is publicly questioned by another member

I'm curious as to what your apologising for (nickname). Are to we assume you are a recovering heroin addict. or possibly a Policewoman or the mother of triplets, personally I cant keep up with you, what excatly are the mistakes you have made today that you are aplogising for.

Thus, the persistence of messages in RK, together with the possibility to run searches for the previous comments of the members, may have an effect on the content and form of communication in the forum. It creates social pressure for the members to give consistent information about themselves and to pay attention to the tone of their writings. Additionally, this feature adds a historical dimension to the community with its membership and activities.

The possibility to quote previous messages is the third of the physical limitations in CMC (Herring 2001:615). If one wants to quote some of the previous messages in RK (which actually happens quite often) one is offered an inbuilt quoting system in the heading of each message. There is a button with help of which members can quote easily each other's messages: . Therefore, one does not have to know how to copy and paste with the help of a keyboard or a mouse, although they can be used as well. However, quoting is frequently used in RK and it increases the feeling of interactivity in the conversations.

Fourth, **the level of anonymity** allowed by a CMC system has an impact on the communicative situation in RK. It is possible to read messages as **a lurker** without announcing your identity in the community. It is possible to do this with or without registering as a member. If one wants to participate in communication, one has to register as a member and when writing, his/her nickname together with the number of previous posts and the date of registration will appear in the heading. Additionally, this information is added to the list of members, where any other registered member is allowed to read it. This by itself gives some kind of an identity to the participant and the level of anonymity

decreases. In addition, the heading includes, for example, a link which leads to a search page with the help of which one can run searches of previous messages of a particular member or of the possible discussions about this member. Consequently, the anonymity of the virtual self is low in RK, at least in the case of active members. However, if one is not willing to reveal anything from one's real life in the forum, it is possible to do so. One may restrict one's communication to impersonal issues and comments and, thus, avoid losing one's anonymity. However, in that way one's membership in the community is unlikely to develop very far.

The possibility to use also other channels of communication than text is the fifth variable in CMC. In RK, text is the main channel of communication, however, the keyboard is used in a very creative way. Punctuation, capital letters, colours, various fonts and font sizes are used to make text more expressive. There is, for example, yelling or emphasizing in capital letters: *NO!!* or *SORRY FOR RAMBLING BUT PLEASE HELP!*. Additionally, the members use hypertext to connect the discussion to some other site. Also different kinds of emoticons are used and easily available in the message editing window of the forum. These are used, for example, for soothing: *i wish* 😊. The members may also add images or small scale animations to illustrate messages:



In addition, the forum contains a discussion list called “kids gallery”, where the most active members send photographs of their children. The gallery is open to everyone but has not received great popularity among the participants. In conclusion, RK includes some channels of communication other than text. However, text is used creatively and should not be underestimated. Text, with its many qualities, together with hypertext smileys, images, animations and photographs works well and does not necessarily require any additions.

To conclude, one of the features that form the communicative situation in RK is its CMC system: asynchronous communication, one-way transmission, no limitation to the message size, long persistence of the messages, possibility to quote others, to stay relatively anonymous, to use images and animations and to use the keyboard in a creative way. Now

that I have discussed CMC medium variables in RK, it is time to move on to the next issue that creates the communicative situation in RK: the interface.

3.2.2 The Interface of RaisingKids.co.uk

The Interface of the main page is a portal-like construction of links to different places within the RK site and only a few links to external sites (http://www.raisingkids.co.uk/homepages/homepage_default.asp). There are some images, icons and animation but the text seems to be the main issue. The first impression the main page gives about the site is that there is a great amount of information clearly organized and easy to find. The actual discussions-section has a list of different discussion boards, for example, *Parent-to-Parent*, *Support & solutions for difficult circumstances* under which the topics or threads can be found.

In the header of every message there is information about the member, the date and time of the comment and also buttons with the help of which one can find some information about the writer, search his/her previous messages, quote the writer, add him/her to your list of friends and send him/her private mail. One can see how long a writer has been a member and how active he/she has been in the discussions. The header seems to give the writer some kind of an identity which has also a historical dimension.

3.2.3 RaisingKids.co.uk Discussion Boards

The chosen board is the third element that contributes to the communicative situation in RK. The set of activities in each board is different, and thus, the situation in, for example, *Parent-to-Parent* is different from that in *Take Time Out*. In this section, I will first try to give a holistic but short description of the discussion boards and then explain my choices for the data. Finally, I will introduce the board I chose and the set of activities that takes place in it.

The RK discussions can be found at the following address in the Net: <http://www.raisingkids.co.uk/forum/default.asp?ForumID=0>. In the address, there is a list of discussions, including 49 different discussion boards categorized under seven titles:

General Discussions, Ages & Stages, Pregnancy, Members' Area, Support & Specialist Groups, Frequently Asked Questions and Restricted Area. The most active discussions go on under the areas of General Discussions and Ages & Stages, which include 12 boards. Of these two, General Discussions is noticeably more popular and thus, when narrowing down my data, I decided to concentrate on some of the boards there. Still, I had seven boards left and consequently an unmanageable amount of data. The discussion board Parent-to-Parent is most active if defined by the number of topics (2287) and Take Time Out if defined by the number of posts (37641). On the other hand, Parent-to-Parent is the second in the activity defined by the number of posts (28448) and Take Time Out being the second if defined by the number of topics (2026). As I had already spent time observing the board Parent-to-Parent, I decided to choose it as my main set of data. In addition, I chose to look at newcomers' messages that often appear in the forum [What's New At Raisingkids?](#) since they form one of the most important rituals of the community. The image 1 below contains a list of General Discussions and statistics given about it.

Image 1: General discussions with statistics

	Discussions	Topics	Posts
General Discussions			
✉	Talking Points & In The News Have your say!	1572	26191
✉	Back To The Table Talk about our annual mealtime is realtime campaign here	87	997
✉	What's New At Raisingkids? Keep up-to-date with what's going on	161	1788
✉	Parent-to-Parent Support & solutions for difficult circumstances	2287	28448
✉	Take Time Out Have a laugh, have a break, have fun!	2026	37641
✉	Last night's TV See something on telly that you want to talk about...?	324	6427
✉	... And Now For The Good News Are you a proud parent? Tell us why!	184	1339

In the board, Parent-to-Parent (as well as in all the others), there is a list of topics that includes information about the thread, “a chain of interrelated messages that respond to each other” (Barnes 2003:20). As can be seen in the image 2 below, there is the title of the thread, topic starter, number of replies and views and date and time when the thread has

received its latest post and information about who it is from. There are ten topics per page and a little selection slot underneath the topics where a reader can navigate to another page in order to find previous topics.

Image 2. List of topics

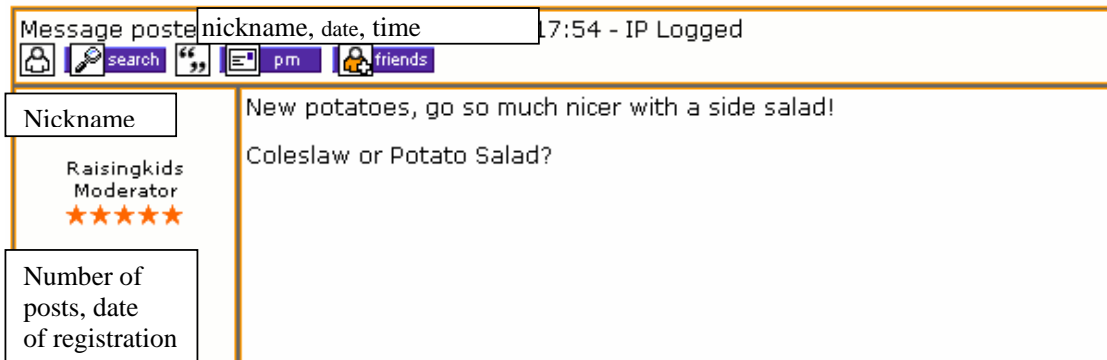
The screenshot shows a forum interface. At the top, there are navigation links for 'All Discussions' and 'Parent-to-Parent', and a 'Private Message' button. Below this is a filter for 'Show topics from the last month' and a 'New Topic' button. The main content is a table with the following columns: Topics, Topic starter, Replies, Views, and Last post. The table lists ten topics, each with a topic icon, a title, a topic starter name, the number of replies and views, and the date and time of the last post along with the poster's name.

Topics	Topic starter	Replies	Views	Last post
Your Birth Stories 1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Editor	67	1803	18 May 06 at 22:4 by 2tinytearaways
in laws, advice needed, help... 1 2 3	angelic	23	350	24 May 06 at 19:0 by Kay1978
am i being unreasonable/hormonal?	CharliesMummy	8	63	24 May 06 at 18:0 by CharliesMummy
Friend's Way of Disciplining	Rebecca11	3	68	24 May 06 at 18:0 by spacehopper
strange rash 1 2	mammaX1	17	159	24 May 06 at 17:0 by Ursula
Bed Wetting 1 2	Huggypopsbear	12	242	24 May 06 at 14:0 by marita
faced wtih 5 kids...please help!	rmtsinclair	7	172	24 May 06 at 14:0 by muminusa
Potty nightmare	realiolie	2	21	24 May 06 at 13:0 by realiolie
MMR Hoo ha 1 2 3 4	Rachli	39	696	24 May 06 at 13:0 by Katy1
please help! 1 2	charlieboo	13	236	24 May 06 at 07:0 by Clare73

At the bottom of the page, there is a 'Jump to another Discussion' field and a 'Page 1 of' indicator with a 'New Topic' button.

When reading the threads, there is more information about the participants included in the headings of the messages. This can be seen in image 3 below:

Image 3. A message with its headings



The topics of the discussion board Parent-to-Parent relate to issues of family and parenthood: for example, potty training, cooking, schools and in-laws. The title of the forum states that the forum offers *support and solutions for difficult circumstances*. The members seem to respect this definition and the majority of the topics are requests for help, opinions, advice, support or prayers. On the other hand, different kinds of “rants” and updates on real life situations of the individual members are also common. The openings of the threads in the Parent-to-parent normally receive supportive and sympathetic comments and thus, the description of the board gives a correct idea of the activities that take place there.

Now that I have introduced my data by defining RK as a community and by illustrating the communicative situation controlling RK communication, I will move on to ethical issues of the study.

3.3 Ethics of the Study

The ethical issues have proved to be very problematic when studying RK. First, in the Frequently Asked Questions forum there is a strict statement: “No surveys”. This restricted my information collecting methods but left me with other ways to get data. Second, my efforts to be ethical were not appreciated by the RK moderators and administrators. As I tried to inform the group about my study, asking if anyone wanted to deny the use of

his/her posts in the analysis, my post was quickly removed. In a short while, I got a private message from one of the moderators informing me that the post had been pulled, since RK does not allow student postings because they would be drowned in them if they would. Consequently, I contacted the administrator to ask for the permission to continuing my study by observing the discussion. They allowed this but all interviewing through the forum or private messages were denied.

As I was not allowed to warn the community about the study or ask acceptance by individual members for the use of their posts, I had to be particularly careful to be respectful and disguise the members' identities. Thus, I used the ethical guidelines for online research, provided by Bruckman (2002 Internet) and the web site: "The ethics of research in virtual communities conference" (1997 Internet). First, I took action to protect the RK members' identities. Consequently, I categorized members in terms of their activity level and did not use their pseudonyms. In short, I treated the pseudonyms as if they were real names. Similarly, I removed the posting date and time and all the links in the heading of every message, since they would have lead to personal information about the poster. Furthermore, if a post contained personal information, such as place names or names of family members, I removed or changed them. Additionally, I avoided using messages that included harmful information for the poster. However, in order to carry out the analysis, I used direct quotes and I revealed the name of the group even if this information enabled identification of some members if someone were motivated enough to find out who they were.

In addition, I made sure not to deceive the RK members in any way. I did not try to get information out of them by private messages or ask questions in the boards. As I could not inform the group about my study, my participation could not be experimental. In other words, even if participation could have been used in testing hypotheses by breaking the rules of interaction and watching how the community reacted, it was not ethical here. My participation had to be restricted in building understanding of the RK interaction in a very polite way, without causing trouble.

Avoiding deceiving anyone and protecting the members' privacy were crucial for the ethics of this study. The third point was to make a distinction between private and public

communication. Private messages are private and thus, were not used in the analysis. In contrast, the discussion in the RK forum is public and for that reason, could be used in the study.

4 Methodology

The data introduced, it is time to move on to methodological issues. First, I will introduce my research questions. Second, I will explain the analytic framework of the study by discussing Ethnography of Communication and its use in this particular study.

4.1 Research Questions

The general goal of this study is to find out as much as possible of the interaction rituals in RK. They are numerous and their quality varies in many ways. In order to learn about the characteristics of ritual interaction in RK, I have to find answers to the following three questions:

1. What kinds of interaction rituals take place in the RK discussion board Parent-to-Parent at the level of communicative events?
2. What kinds of events are they and what kinds of acts do they consist of?
3. For what kind of a member it is appropriate to participate in the ritual events?

These questions are intertwined and the answers to them form an important part of the underlying rules of interaction and norms of interpretation in RK. The knowledge of these norms and rules is part of the communicative competence of the RK members. In order to find answers to my research questions, I have analysed a large amount of data. In section 4.2, I will discuss my analytic framework and then, in section 4.3, I will go on to describe the data collection methods and finally, in section 4.4 the methods of analysis I used in this study.

4.2 Ethnography of Communication

My goal in the study is to do topic focused **Ethnography of Communication** on the RK forum and thus, I will now discuss the general characteristics of the approach. In other words, I will introduce its history, focus, method and units of analysis.

History

Ethnography of Communication is an approach that was developed by Dell Hymes in the 1960s when he noticed a gap between research on language and that on culture (Saville-Troike 1982:1, Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:341 and Fitch 2004:324): The linguists at the time were mainly interested in describing the abstract structure of language and ignored the context to a large extent (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:341). The anthropologists, on the other hand, were not paying enough attention to the communicative conduct (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:341). Furthermore, Hymes realized that even anthropological linguists and linguist anthropologists did not succeed in giving enough attention to the patterns of language use in communities (Saville-Troike 1982:1). Consequently, to fill the gap between research on language and that on culture, Hymes developed a new approach: Ethnography of Communication (Saville-Troike 1982:1). The new approach rendered it possible for researchers to concentrate on the ignored issues (Saville-Troike 1982:1). Furthermore, Hymes distinguished “three types of ethnography: general, topic focused and hypothesis testing” (Hymes 1978, as quoted in Saville-Troike 1982:114). In this study, ethnography is topic focused, focusing on the interaction rituals in the RK community.

Focus

The most important goal of ethnography is “to describe naturally occurring human behavior” (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:328). Ethnography of Communication focuses on a speech community and how communication in it is organized (Saville-Troike 1982:3). Thus, it describes naturally occurring communicative behaviour. Language use in a community is patterned as systems of communicative events and these patterns are related to the social life of the community in question (Saville-Troike 1982:3). In short, “Ethnography of Communication [...] focuses primarily on the construction and negotiation of culture through communicative means and meanings” (Fitch 2004:323). The central issue in this approach is to find out what kind of communicative and cultural competence is needed in the group (Saville-Troike 1982:2-3, 23-26). In other words, what kinds of knowledge or skills a member of a community needs to be able to behave appropriately and to interpret correctly communication in the community (Fitch 2004:324). However, even if the most central issue of Ethnography of Communication is to find out what skills and knowledge is needed for appropriate participation in the group, it is a holistic approach and includes also

descriptions of the world view and membership of the community as well as understanding and documenting the language so that it can be compared with that in similar documents in the future (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:336).

Ethnography of Communication resembles many other methodologies and I will now discuss how it differs from them: First, Ethnography of Communication resembles traditional ethnography in that it documents and describes naturalistic behaviour in certain groups (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:343). However, it differs from traditional ethnographies within anthropology in its considerably narrower focus: Traditional ethnographies were attempts to describe all the aspects in the particular culture while Ethnography of Communication may focus on a more or less specific topic (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:343). Second, like in speech act theory or pragmatics, Ethnography of Communication is concerned with speech acts (Saville-Troike 1982:16). However, as the latter two concentrate primarily on form, ethnographers focus on the functional side of communication (Saville-Troike 1982:16). Furthermore, Ethnography of Communication differs from the two approaches since, unlike them, ethnographic description includes metaphorical and phatic uses of language (Saville-Troike 1982:16). “Phatic communication conveys a message, but has no referential meaning. The meaning is in the act of communication itself” (Saville-Troike 1982:16). In case of interaction rituals, Ethnography of Communication is a useful approach since it allows focusing on a specified topic and since it concentrates on the functions of speech acts. After all interaction rituals can for a large part be identified by recognising their functional characteristics such as pressure to social solidarity and honouring socially valued objects. Furthermore, acts in a ritual are not always referential by their meaning but are still meaningful parts of an interaction ritual in question. To conclude, the focus of the approach fits the focus of my study.

Method

Before starting the project, an ethnographer needs to choose a community to be studied, and normally a topic he/she wants to focus on in a community (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:329). There are various kinds of data in communities: for example, background information (e.g. sources of population or history), material artifacts (e.g. instruments of communication), data about social organization, legal information (e.g. laws), artistic data and data of

linguistic code (e.g. dictionaries) (Saville-Troike 1982:115-118). Data can be collected in several ways, for example, by introspection, participant-observation, observation or interviewing (Saville-Troike 1982:118-121). These methods can also be combined (Saville-Troike 1982:119). During the period of data collection the ethnographer attempts to understand the meanings of the data and, thus, part of the analysis takes place simultaneously with the data collection (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:329). The collecting continues until the analyst is able to see communicative patterns relevant to the topic of the particular ethnography (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:329). These patterns, which the analyst finds in the data, are then used in reconstruction of the social reality of the community (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:330). In other words, an ethnographer has to provide insights that are not obvious from only one instance of communication but which become visible from a holistic analysis of communication in the particular community by finding the overall structure of communication (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:329-330).

Units of Analysis

The units of analysis in Ethnography of Communication are **communicative situation**, **communicative event** and **communicative act** (Saville-Troike 1982:28).

“**Communicative situation** is the context within which communication occurs” (Saville-Troike 1982:28, italics removed, bolding added). When applying the notion to RK, the situation is computer-mediated communication in a RK discussion board in RK interface. Even if the location changed, the situation may remain the same (Saville-Troike 1982:28). In a situation, there is a consistent set of activities, even if interaction may vary considerably (Saville-Troike 1982:29). To illustrate with RK, moving from one discussion board to another, the overall situation remains the same, however, as mentioned in section 3.2.3, the set of activities differs considerably from one board to another and thus, the situation in Parent-to-Parent is different from that in Take Time Out. Thus, a situation in RK is formed by its CMC system, the interface and the discussion board in question.

Communicative event, the basic unit of description in the approach, can be defined by its “unified set of components” (Saville-Troike 1982:29). In one communicative event the general purpose of communication, topic, participants, language variety, tone or key, rules

of interaction and setting remain the same (Saville-Troike 1982:29). When the components change the event terminates (Saville-Troike 1982:29). In RK an event is often the same as a thread of messages. However, one thread may include several events when, for example, a topic changes. Sometimes a communicative event in RK is discontinuous, largely because of the asynchronicity of the CMC system.

Communicative act is a unit with “single interactional function” (Saville-Troike 1982:30). There are requests, questions, promises, warnings, insults and invitations among many others (Saville-Troike 1982:30). A communicative act may be verbal or nonverbal: an act can be expressed, for example, by raising one’s eyebrows or by silence (Saville-Troike 1982:30). In RK, one message normally contains several communicative acts. There may be, for example, a greeting, reference to previous messages in the thread in question, a joke, a question and an invitation for participation like in the following example:

Example 1. A message with several communicative acts

Hello.

Wow 2 sets of twins. I have twins aged 10 and i made sure there was going to be no more after that 🤔. How are you coping? what type of buggy do you have it must be impossible to go out on your own.

Im sure i will see you around the boards too.

Nickname

Now that I have discussed Ethnography of Communication in general, it is time to move on to explain how I applied the methodology in my study. Next, in section 4.3, I will illustrate how I collected data from RK and then, in section 4.4, how I analysed the background of the community and how I processed the data collected from RK.

4.3 Methods of Data Collecting

As data collecting methods, I used **observation** and **participant-observation**. The latter is the most common method used in ethnographic studies (Saville-Troike 1982:121) and, as I will explain later in this section, it turned out to be very useful. A virtual community offers an ethnographer an easy way to observe naturally occurring data without being too visible to the members of the speech community (Paccagnella 1997). As shown in table 1 below, the members in RK are given information about how many active users are present in the boards. There is a table concerning the statistics of discussions in the starting page of the forum. It contains real time information about the forum: number of posts, number of topics, number of boards, exact time the most recent posts have been sent, nickname of the poster, number of active users, in other words, the number of visitors and members that have signed in. By using a hyperlink *Active Users* one gets information about who is logged in and how long each user has been on the site, when s/he was active for the last time and some technical details about the users' browsers. Thus, it is not possible to be completely invisible in RK. However, I found it useful to have the possibility to choose when to sign in and let everyone know I was there and when not to sign in staying as invisible as possible.

Table 1: Discussion statistics

Discussions stats
There are 146645 posts in 12111 topics in 49 Discussions Most recent post: 19 Apr 06 at 10:44 by: nickname There are 48 Active Users , 37 Visitor(s) and 11 Member(s)

Instances of CMC are easily collected and thus virtual communities are a good topic for ethnographic study (Lindlof 2002:265). Data collecting has indeed not required much effort, since I reached the community from my home computer. The problem in virtual ethnography is the unmanageable amount of data, not how to get it. I tried to solve the problem by first, starting in December 2005, spending some time observing and participating only to get an overall understanding of everyday activities in RK. Additionally, I familiarized myself with the background information about the community

by reading and analysing the list of members and the *Help, FAQs & Notices* board. The next step was to save one week's discussions to the favourites file. Next, I categorized the posts under several categories of typical communicative events I found in the discussion boards: there were a prayer request, four requests of sympathy (two of them rants), seven requests of opinion, 28 requests of advice and nine untypical events that I was unable to categorize. As there were so few threads in each group (except for requests of advice), I collected threads under the categories I found in a week's posts, until I had an understanding of the typical structure of interaction in RK in general, and the form and the content of each of the typical events. I also added ten most recent instances of entering RK to my data since, even if the week's posts did not include any of them, they are an important interactional event in RK. This choice is based on my own knowledge of the group: new members do not enter the discussion board often but when they do, it is conventional to do it in a certain fashion. In the end, I found that three communicative events were mainly interactional and resembled the features of Goffmann's description of interaction rituals: entering RK, rant and prayer request. After saving the discussions under relevant categories, I printed and stored them for a further analysis the methods of which will be discussed in section 4.4. I analysed in detail the total of 25 threads and 524 messages: 10 threads of enterings, containing 194 posts, 10 threads of rants, containing 178 posts and 5 threads of prayer requests, containing 152 posts.

However, simple observation in a virtual world was not enough. In addition, I joined the group in December 2005 and participated in different kinds of activities in order to reach inside knowledge and proper understanding of communication in RK. This insider knowledge was crucial, since interaction in RK was not easily understood by a newcomer. Furthermore, full membership was important since I was not allowed to interview the RK members, and thus, I could not seek confirmation for my conclusions from the others and I simply needed to acquire the communicative and cultural competence specific for this particular community.

4.4 Method of analysis

4.4.1 Analysis of Background Information

Before starting the analysis of communication in RK, I familiarized myself with the site and collected background information about the community. As sources for background information I used the whole site but especially the list of members and the discussion board called *Help, FAQs & Notices*.

The Help, FAQs & Notices includes forum guidelines, helpful suggestions and advice for posting, list of most common acronyms used in the community. In other words, the board includes a list of norms and conventions of the community (forum guidelines) and information about the acronyms used in the discussions. It tries to answer the questions a new member might have about the board and how to join the community and how to participate in its activities. In short, the discussion board spells out the basic norms and conventions particular to the forum. I read carefully the threads in the Help, FAQs & Notices and, with the help of the information found there, I will illustrate the outspoken norms and conventions of the RK community in section 5.1. Additionally, I will use the information gathered from the board while participating, observing and interpreting the discussions in the community.

To find out information about membership, I firstly observed discussions and secondly, I analysed the list of members. The observation provided me with information about who can and cannot be a member, what they believe in and why they participate in the community activities in the first place. In addition to discussions, the list of members has been a useful source of information about membership. I used it mainly in the process of categorizing the members by their activity level, or should I say by their experience level in participating in the RK discussions. The list enables a member to organize the list of members either in the alphabetical order, or by date of registration as a member or the number of messages sent to the forum. Then, after reading the lists, I had to decide which one is more relevant for the study: the number of messages or length of participation. Including both the features would have made the task impossible: In April 2006, there were 55223 members in RK, of which 5660 had posted at least once. The list of members was divided in 2295 Internet pages. As

many of the oldest members did not seem to be active on the boards anymore, I decided to ignore the information about the length of the membership and to use the number of messages written. With the help of the inbuilt button in the interface, I organised the members in the list by the number of messages written. Then, I categorized the members into activity groups (could also be called experience groups) and counted how many members belonged to each category. I decided to leave out the ones who had not participated at all since they could hardly be counted as members of the community. After all, there is no proof of their participation in the interaction and as discussed in section 3.1, one feature characteristic of a community is that its members share social interaction (Hillery 1955, cited in Hamman 1999). Next, to get an overall picture of the structure of the membership, I counted the percentages: how large part of those that had sent at least one post, belonged to each of the activity groups. This categorization does not necessarily tell the whole truth about the activity level: many members with relatively low number of posting might be highly active but had joined the group recently, and thus, did not belong to heavy writers group. Thus, the members who had been in RK only for a short period of time and had not yet reached high posting numbers might be very active, but still would not be categorized as heavy writers in this study and for that reason, the categorization tells more about the experience than activity. However, I will stick to the notion “activity level”, but it should be noted that the length of the membership is not considered in this categorization. In analysing the list of members, I ended up with five activity groups to be discussed further in section 5.2. I used the groups during the analysis in order to get information about whether the activity level had an effect on participation and if it did, who could or could not participate in the ritual activities and how each group participated in them.

4.4.2 Analysis of Communication

Now I will illustrate how I analysed communication in the RK community. As a guide for my analysis I used *Outline Guide for Ethnographic Study of Speech Use* by Sherzer and Darnell, published as an appendix in a book edited by Gumpertz and Hymes in 1972 and *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction* (1982) by Saville-Troike. Both the books introduce basically the same outline for analysis of speech events, listing mainly the

same features to be analysed (e.g. participants, setting and purpose). However, since the latter is more recent, and since the first one had been written when the approach was very new and its methodology was not yet developed, I followed Saville-Troike's analytical points in more detail. First, I re-evaluated the categories found in the communication: what kinds of events there were and how I could identify the posts/threads that belonged to each of these events. Second, I printed the categories of the ritual events I found, one category at a time. Third, I identified the components of communication in each event. The components are type of event (or genre), topic (or referential focus), purpose, setting (location, time), participants, message form, message content, act sequence, rules for interaction and norms of interpretation (Saville-Troike 1982:137-138). I wrote all these components in each thread on a paper to be able to make observations, comparisons and calculations. Below is a sample of the analysis of components of an event:

Example 2. Analysis of components of an event

Prayer Request I.

Genre: prayer request.

Topic of the message: Prayers/Good Thoughts.

Purpose: To make RK community pray for a relative.

Setting: 30.3.06-2.4.06 in Paren- to-Parent

Participants:

P0 (opener of the thread)x1,

P1 (extra-heavy writer, moderator) x1,

P2 (extra-heavy writer, member) x9,

P3 (heavy writer) x2,

P4 (semi-active writer) x4,

P5 (light writer) x3 and

P6 (extra-light writer) x 0.

A total of 20 posters, 19 female, one male, 21 posts.

Form: Text, 1 image

Content: P0 invites others to pray for her relative who has health problems

Act Sequences:

P0:

- 1. Tells about the situation*
- 2. asks others to think good thoughts*
- 3. sends kisses (xxx)*

P2:

4. expresses sympathy

5. makes a good wish

6. sends good thoughts

7. signs

8. sends kisses (xxx)

P2(2):

9. sends good thoughts

10. signs

P2 (3):

11. sends good thoughts

12. signs

13. sends kisses (xxx)

P2 (4):

14. expresses sympathy

15. makes a good wish

16. makes another good wish

17. signs

P4:

18. prays

19. makes a good wish

20. makes another good wish

21. sends kisses (xxx)

This step forced me to codify acts, rendered communication into abstract form and helped in finding patterns in it. Many patterns were not instantly visible when observing discussions in RK but became clear in the process of abstraction. Fourth, I identified all the instances that could be taken for interaction rituals at the level of communicative events. This means that I observed if they were frequently repeated chains of social actions (formed of routine communicative acts) that were aimed at enhancing social solidarity and honouring socially valid objects (Collins 2004:23-25). Thus, there had to be some formula that was followed in the event and interaction had to be the main purpose, not transaction. The interaction in these rituals was clearly the main purpose and functioned as builder of social solidarity of the group and the face of each participant. (The interaction ritual model was discussed in more detail in section 2.2.3).

When I found patterns and identified them as interaction rituals, I counted participation rates. In other words, I noted who participated in it and how and who did not participate in

them or did so only rarely. I also tried to figure out why some of the members participated and why some others did not. These conclusions are based on how the different activity groups participated in the discussions. However, as I was unable to ask the members to confirm my conclusions, they are my interpretations made on the grounds of my observations, participation and analysis of the events. It should be noted that even if my interpretations are thoroughly considered I could not seek confirmation for them from the other members. However, I am a member myself and my interpretation of RK communication is based on my experiences in the group I observed for over six months and the activities of which I participated in to reach an understanding and a solid basis for my interpretations. Furthermore, even if Ethnography of Communication does not normally use quantitative methods (Leeds-Hurwitz 2004:339), I made some calculations during my analysis to make my study more reliable. However, as Saville-Troike (1982:119) recommends, I used quantitative procedures only in order to show the reliability of my qualitative observation. Thus, when it seemed necessary, I counted participation rates of each activity group, or some other details to illustrate my interpretations.

In short, the procedures of abstraction and categorizing of the data were crucial in finding answers to the first and the second research questions:

1. What kinds of interaction rituals take place in the RK discussion board Parent-to-Parent at the level of communicative events?
2. What kinds of events are they and what kinds of acts do they consist of?

The patterns revealed acts and events that could be identified as interaction rituals and abstraction helped to understand their characteristics, like in what kinds of events do they come up. On the other hand, the categorization of the members, as well as observation of the role of each of the activity groups in rituals answered the third research question in this study:

3. For what kind of a member it is appropriate to participate in the ritual events?

Now that I have discussed my research questions and how I have processed the data in order to find answers to them, I will introduce the results of the study.

5 Results

In this chapter, I will report the results of my study. First I will illustrate the background information found about the community: in section 5.1, I will discuss norms and conventions that were spelled out in RK and in section 5.2, I will move to membership issues. Second, in section 5.3, I will describe the three interaction rituals I was able to identify in RK: entering ritual, rant and prayer request.

5.1 Outspoken Norms and Conventions

The RK forum guidelines are spelled out in the discussion board [Help, FAQs & Notices](#). The guidelines are rather strict and have a great impact on the content and tone of the discussions, as well as interaction rituals, and they restrict communication in many ways. The guidelines are expected to be strictly followed and, in fact, they are respected in the boards: without them, the discussion would probably be different. I will quote the guidelines here, to give some background information about the “laws” of the community:

Example 3. Forum guidelines

- *No advertising or commercial postings but you may post links to other sites which would be helpful to other forum users.*
- *Contributions must be civil and tasteful.*
- *No disruptive, offensive or abusive behaviour: contributions must be constructive and polite, not mean-spirited or contributed with the intention of causing trouble.*
- *No unlawful or objectionable content: unlawful, harassing, defamatory, abusive, threatening, harmful, obscene, profane, sexually oriented, racially offensive or otherwise objectionable material is not acceptable.*
- *If you use multiple logins for the purpose of disrupting the community or annoying other users you may have action taken against your accounts.*
- *No spamming or off-topic material: we don't allow the submission of the same or very similar contributions many times. Please don't re-submit your contribution to more than one discussion, or contribute off-topic material in subject-specific areas.*
- *Contributions containing languages other than English may be removed unless allowed in the relevant local house rules.*
- *No impersonation.*
- *No inappropriate (e.g. vulgar, offensive etc) user names.*
- *No surveys.*

The moderators and administrators supervise the discussion and intervene when rule violations occur. They may remove or edit the posts that break the rules and, additionally,

they may or may not inform the writer of their reasons for censure. Additionally, if a member continues violating the guidelines she/he may be suspended from the forum either temporarily or permanently. The rule breaker may also be punished by informing relevant third parties like, for example, employers and schools about infringements. The forum also “reserves the right to delete any contribution, or take action against any account, at any time, for any reason.” Thus, as can be seen the norms are very strict and the moderators and administrators take their duty of supervising seriously. For example, in one thread in the discussion board Take Time Out, the discussion got heated and there were personal accusations and offensiveness. The administrator firstly copied the forum guidelines to the thread. Secondly, he/she informed that he/she did not approve of the discussion and had asked the moderators to delete inappropriate posts: *i don't think that there is a place for this kind of bickering on the forums. i've asked the moderators to remove anything personal that's posted on the thread.* Thirdly, he/she asked anyone who noticed rule violations to inform the moderator of it to by sending a personal message: *please report spiteful/cutting/personal attacks to a moderator via pm.* During the discussion posts were deleted. The members discussed also the censorship: 1. *[Nickname], your posts keep disappearing,* 2. *so do mine,* 3. *Ive noticed that too [nickname]! I hate it when I reply to someones post then it dissapears, feel like im talking to myself! lol* and 4. *try the other side you wont get them deleted i promise.* Thus, norms and conventions in RK are somewhat strict and the administrator and the moderators supervise the boards and intervene in the discussion when violations occur. This affects the interaction by making the members pay attention to how they behave.

5.2 Membership

As discussed in section 4.3, I collected information about membership by observing discussions and by analysing the list of the members, included in the RK site. In this section, I will discuss what I found out; that is, information about who can or cannot be a member of this community, what the members believe in, why they participate and how they treat each other and what they expect from other members. Additionally, I will illustrate the results the analysis of the list of the members: the activity groups, their size and how much each of the groups post to the forum.

5.2.1. A Member of the RaisingKids.co.uk: Who, Why and How?

Who?

It is taken for granted that everyone is a parent, or at least, a step parent but a grandparent joining the group is uncommon. Once during my observation a grandmother joined RK and opened the entering ritual thread. It seemed that her appearance was a positive thing but, still, a surprise for the other members. The grandmother was welcomed and the others showed her respect. However, the participants are mostly parents, rarely grandparents. The view of life the members seem to share is the imperfectness of life and human beings: Bad things happen and individuals may make mistakes. No one is perfect and it is perfectly acceptable. If someone has problems he/she is supported and understood. Most of the participants are women. However, there are a couple of men among the extra-heavy writers. In other words, they have written over 1000 posts and participate actively in the forums. The fathers have their own forum called *DadZone*, however, the active men do participate in other forums as well.

Why?

Many of the participants spend some time every day at RK. The reason for this may be that they look for feeling of belonging, support, solidarity, advice, acceptance and friendship. As the forum Parent-to-Parent is highly supportive and friendly by its nature, it is no wonder that many of the members seem to prefer to seek support from RK rather than from real life friends or relatives. Members seem to have some trust for each other's reactions since they dare to discuss topics which could be met with more criticism in some other environment. In fact, if someone disagrees with another, the message is nevertheless friendly and full of apologies, as in example 4 below:

Example 4. Disagreement

Ooh, I'm hard 😊 But seriously, a bit of pain now will (hopefully) start turning them into much nicer young men, and make all your lives more pleasant further down the line.

Additionally, the anonymity of the virtual community makes it possible for the members to discuss very delicate issues that could not be discussed, for example, with the mothers and fathers on the playground of the neighbourhood.

5.2.2 Hierarchy

The hierarchy at RK is rather simple. There are administrators, moderators, members and visitors. The administrator is at the top of the hierarchy, the moderators are second, the members third and the visitors fourth. If someone breaks the forum guidelines, the moderators or the administrators may interfere, as already discussed in section 5.1. The moderators participate in the activities as if they were members, but they also keep an eye on rule violations and have the power to edit or remove messages. The members participate in discussions and can contact the administrators and moderators by personal messages or through the forums. The visitors can read messages but cannot post to the forums and, cannot, thus, be taken as a part of the community.

5.2.3 Activity Levels

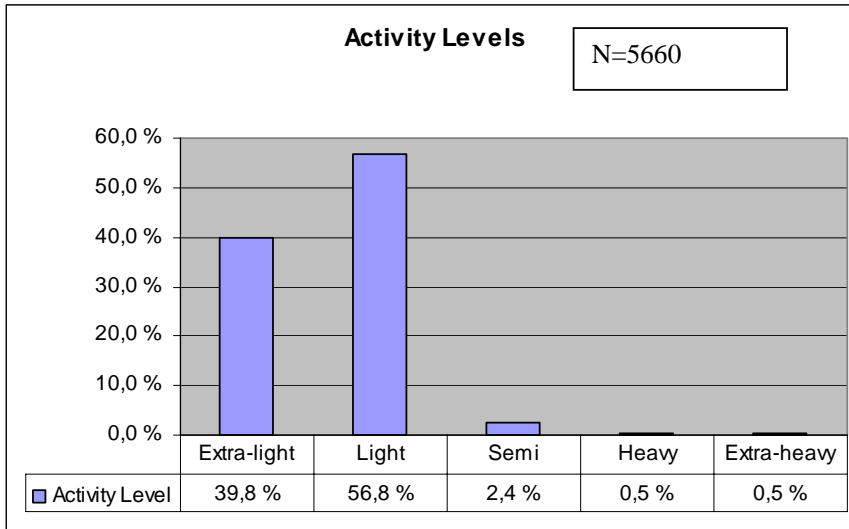
As discussed in section 4.4.1, I categorized the members of the community according to the number of posts they had sent to the forum. In the categorization, I included all the levels of hierarchy, except visitors, who cannot post to the forum and, thus, are not part of the community. In April 2006, there were 55223 members in RK, of which 5660 had posted at least once. Thus, there were 49563 registered members who had not posted at all. These were not included as real members of the community since they did not interact with other members. They were also counted out of the categorization for the same reason. The categories I ended up with were 1) extra-light writers, 2) light writers, 3) semi-active writers, 4) heavy writers and 5) extra-heavy writers. 96.6% of the members were either extra-light (39.8%) or light writers (56.8%). In short, 96.6% of the RK members had written 1-99 posts during their membership. Semi-active writers are the group who had posted 100-499 messages. This group is rather small, only 2.4% of all the members. The categories of heavy writers and extra-heavy writers both include 0.5% of the members. Among the extra-heavy writers (a total of 28 individual members) there were six

moderators. Thus, as illustrated in table 2 and figure 1, the majority of the members were not very active and the group that seemed to keep the community alive was very small, consisting of six moderators and 22 members.

Table 2. Activity levels of RK members during their membership

	Number of Posts Written	Number of Posters and Percentage	
Extra-light wri	1	2252 (39.8 %)	39.8%
Light writers	2 to 9 10 to 49 50 to 99	2544 (45 %) 566 (10 %) 104 (1.8 %)	56.8%
Semi-active writers	100 to 199 200 to 299 300 to 399 400 to 499	73 (1.3 %) 29 (0.5 %) 24 (0.4 %) 12 (0.2 %)	2.4%
Heavy writers	500 to 599 600 to 699 700 to 799 800 to 899 900 to 999	12 (0.2%) 7 (0.13 %) 4 (0.08%) 5 (0.09 %) 0 (0 %)	0.5%
Extra-heavy writers	1000 to 1999 2000 to 10000	18 (0.32 %) 10 (0.18 %)	0.5%
Total		5660 (100 %)	100%

Figure 1. The size of the activity level categories



5.3 Interaction Rituals

In section 2.2.3 I discussed Goffman's Interaction Ritual Model, which includes features such as situational co-presence, focused interaction, pressure to keep up social solidarity, honouring what is socially valid, moral uneasiness in case of ritual violations and the possibility for restoring ritual equilibrium. In the next section I will illustrate the interaction rituals I found in RK at the level of communicative acts with the help of the Goffmanian model.

5.3.1. Entering Ritual

When an individual wants to enter the RK community it is usual that he/she greets the already existing group and takes part in the very first interaction ritual in RK. I will call this **entering ritual** since its purpose is to introduce a new member to the group. In appendix 1, there is an example of a thread that includes the entering ritual event:

The Title of the Entering Ritual Thread

The title of an entering ritual thread is the starter of the ritual. It draws attention to the purpose of the post and is commonly marked by words such as *newbie*, *new*, *hello* or *hi*. To give some examples of the titles of the entering ritual in RK: *Newbie!!!*, *New kid on the block*, *Im New!*, *hello everyone im new to rk* and *hi everyone*. These are appropriate titles and make the purpose of the thread clear.

The Acts of an Entering Ritual

The basic acts of the entering ritual event include introduction, welcome and sometimes, though not always, a thank you. The act of thanking is optional and is frequently omitted. However, there are also other acts in the ritual with some variation. However, I will call the opening of the ritual “introduction”, replies “welcoming” and the reaction of the opener of the thread “thanking”, as these are the main functions of the posts. Now I will illustrate the details of the introduction, welcomes and the possible thanking.

1. Introduction

The first post’s main purpose is to introduce the new member to the group or to form an identity or a positive face in the eyes of the other members. To do this appropriately, the newcomer, who is also the opener of the thread, greets everyone in RK: *Hi all*, *Hello*, *Hi 😊* or *Hello everyone*. In some instances the greeting act is completed in the title and can be omitted from the body text of the post. Second, the opener may make a compliment to the group, give some reasons for her/his joining the group or state the expectations concerning his/her membership. These acts build solidarity and they show that the new member respects and honours the older members. Additionally, these acts help the new member to show that she/he is a nice person. To give some examples of the compliments: *I found this site today just from googling for Supernanny, and I am liking what I see! 😊, been lurkin' around for the past few days and it seems really lovely here, Ive been lurking on this site for a couple of weeks and have to say it's been really helpful !* or *This site is great*. The reasons for a newcomer’s joining the group and his/her expectations may be expressed, for example, as follows: *hope to get some idea`s and tip`s off you all, have found myself needing advise with my daughter, so Here I am..* or *I'm looking for people/friends to help me get by. I would love to get to know you guys*. Third, it is

conventional that the opener introduces him/herself to the group by giving some information about her family and life situation. For example, she/he may report the number of children, their ages and names or say something about his/her partner or ex partner. Finally, the opener signs the post. As is evident, the opening post of an entering ritual is built of several communicative acts, the order of which may vary from one opening to another. Below is an example that illustrates an introduction in RK:

Example 5. An introduction

Topic: hi everyone

New here!!

just wanted to say hello.

This site is great. I am a mod. on another site .. but have found myself needing advise with my daughter, so Here I am..

Keep up the good work!!

Nickname shortened

2. Welcoming

After the introduction, the older members welcome the newcomer to the community and by doing so they enhance the face of the opener and those of themselves. In its simplest form an acceptable welcome in RK is *Hello and welcome to RK :)*. However, the welcoming posts may be a little longer, although rarely more than 100 words even if there were some other acts than a simple welcoming in the post: Only two messages in my data with the welcoming act as a main purpose were over 100 words long. In addition to greeting and welcoming the newcomer, the welcoming may have acts like comments or questions addressed to the opener of the thread (*sounds like you need a support network just as much as the rest of us, yup it is a great site i have to agree with you there, How old are you? or are you with the father?*), a short introduction of the welcomer or an invitation to the newcomer to participate in the RK interaction (*hope to see you around the boards, look forward to seeing you around or look forward to "seeing" you around the board!*). To close a welcome, there is often a signing. The welcomes in a successful entering ritual have a friendly tone and may include also humour as in the introduction of the welcomer in example 6 below. Being friendly is shown by presentation rituals such as greetings,

welcomes and invitations discussed above that are used for honouring the face of the newcomer and for giving a favourable image of oneself. Similarly, the humour is addressed at self, the RK group or one's own family in a way that it does not offend the newcomer. For example: *Welcome to the mad house*. If the welcomer thinks that he/she has not yet reached the status of an established member, he/she includes some kind of expression of their own newness in his/her welcoming message: *welcome from a newish member and im reasonably new too*. Example 6 is a sample of a welcoming written by an extra-heavy writer. The message includes several communicative acts: greeting, welcoming, introduction of a welcomer, invitation for a newcomer to participate in the RK discussions and signing as a closure for a message that brings a personal touch to the post:

Example 6. A welcoming

Hi Nickname and welcome to RK. I'm north of the border with 1 mad husband, 1 demented 5 yr old girl and a loopy dog !!

Hope to see you around.

Nickname shortened xx

The group that welcomes newcomers are normally the extra heavy writers, who have written more than 1000 posts: 68.1% of the welcomes in my data come from them, whether moderators (17.6%) or members (50.5%). This has been noticed in RK, too. Example 7 is a post that contains a comment on the welcomers' activity level in the group.

Example 7. A welcoming with a comment on the activity level of the welcomers

Hello [nickname], Welcome.

Just looked at the people that have posted a hello and they are all in the 1000s +++++ posts LOL.

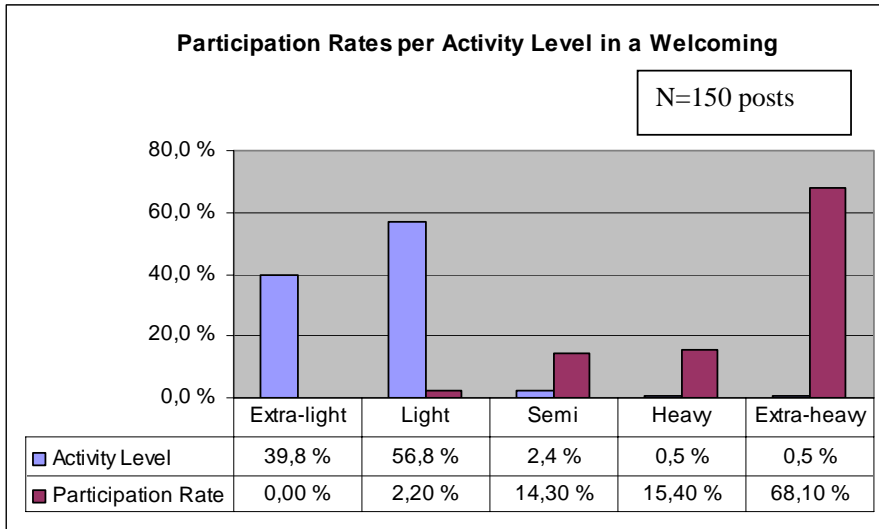
Im sure youll reach 1000 posts soon. took me over a year.

Nickname

Consequently, the welcoming members are mostly from the group of extra-heavy writers, whether moderators or members. Extra-heavy writers are the back bone of the community and they actually may have to welcome new people to RK to keep the community alive. It

also seems that the moderators in general take welcoming as one of their tasks as in every entering ritual at least one moderator expresses a warm welcome to the newcomer. Furthermore, among the extra-heavy writers there are three members and one moderator who seem to have taken the welcoming in RK as their personal responsibility. Also others participate, but these four posters do it regularly. The group of heavy writers participated in the entering ritual much less than I had expected on the grounds of my observation of RK. They were not very active in the ritual and sent only 15.4% of all the welcomings even though they formed exactly as large a group (0.5% of members) in my data as the extra heavy writers (0.5%). However, when the heavy writers participated, they did not make apologies for doing so. This could be a sign that they already felt they had a high enough status in RK to express their welcomes but yet, they did not have the duty to do so. The semi-active writers and the light writers, on the other hand, seem to have an intuition that they do not have a self-evident right to serve as welcomers in the community. The semi-active writers post 14.3% and the light writers 2.2% of the welcoming messages. Instead of welcoming, they may only greet the newcomer, or if they welcome him/her, they do it indirectly: *hope you enjoy this site*. There may also be a compliment to the group or the site included in the welcomes of these two activity groups: *friendly people, good advice, i am new here too but can i say the site has helped me so far and I love this site already and I'm sure you will too 😊*. This carefulness not to count oneself as an established member may be taken as an honouring of the status of the older members and additionally as an attempt to build solidarity with the newcomers. Figure 2 illustrates the participatory structure of the welcoming act in the entering ritual.

Figure 2. Participation rates in the welcoming



3. Thanking

The next step in the entering ritual is a direct “thank you”. The newcomer expresses his/her gratitude for the welcomes received: *Hi thx for the welcome, Thanks for all the welcomes, Thanks for your welcome!!* and *Thanks everyone for the warm welcome 😊*. Thanking may take place many times during the ritual and thus, it is not taken as the official ending of the event. Also the lack of thanks in several cases implies that it is not considered an essential part of the ritual. Thus, it is fully acceptable not to express one’s gratitude for the welcomes in RK. Below is an example of a thanking in RK:

Example 8. A thanking

Thanks everyone for replying

i am on a local chat room and sometime people dont reply for hours or days

where do you all come from

I am near bournemouth

look forward to getting to know you all

4. To Sum Up

In conclusion, the entering ritual takes place when a new member wants to enter the community. As illustrated in tables 3, 4, and 5, the ritual is an event that has three basic functions: introducing, welcoming and thanking. First, the opener of the thread, a new member, introduces him/herself setting a positive face to him/herself. The opener greets, introduces him/herself and signs. Additionally, she/he may make a compliment, give reasons for joining RK or state his/her expectations for the membership. Below is a table of the acts of an introduction:

Table 3. Acts of an introduction

Acts 1. Greeting (2. Making a compliment/ 3. Giving reasons for joining/ 4. Stating expectations) 5. Introduction 6. Signing	By the opener of the thread, extra-light writer
---	---

Second, the extra-heavy writers welcome the opener, enhancing his/her face and that of themselves: they greet the newcomer, welcome him/her and sign. They can also refer to the opening, introduce themselves or invite the opener to participate in conversation. Below is a table of the communicative acts in a welcoming:

Table 4. Acts of a welcoming

Acts 1. Greeting 2. Welcoming (3. Commenting or asking question referring the opening 4. Introduction 5. Invitation to participate) 6. Signing	68.1% by extra-heavy writers (17.6% by moderators and 50.5% by members) 15.4% by heavy writers 14.3% by semi-active writers 2.2% by light writers
--	--

Finally, the opener expresses directly her/his gratitude for the welcomes. Below is a table of the communicative acts in a thanking:

Table 5. Acts of a thanking

Acts	
1. Thanking	By the opener of the thread

The ritual is surprisingly conventional since there are no written rules for it and the new members do not yet have experience of interaction in RK. The possible universality or at least commonplaceness of the entering ritual could be the explanation for why a new member is normally able to participate in the entering ritual in an acceptable manner. Another explanation could be that some of the newcomers may have spent some time lurking the conversation to get to know the RK conventions before participating.

5.3.2 Ritualized Request for Sympathy or Rant

When a member is frustrated or angry he/she might want to get support from the other members. In these cases, he/she gives a **rant**, a heated unburdening of one's anger or frustration. This, as will be seen in this section, can be taken as a ritualized request of sympathy and support. In appendix 2, there is a thread including a rant.

The Title of a Rant

As the title of an entering ritual, also the title of a rant draws attention to the purpose of the thread. It starts the communicative event by warning the others that the tone of the opening message may be rather heated. The title is often marked by the word *rant*, or, at least it includes exclamation marks: *rant!!*, *GRRR - need to rant about h2b'e ex*, *Need to rant !!!*, *ive had enough!!!!!!!!!!* or *i need a break!!*. As can be seen from these examples, the tone of the opening message is clear and thus, the title prepares the members to the heated tone of the message.

The Acts of a Rant

A rant is usually constituted of "rant", "supportive replies" and "thank you". There is some variation in the form of the acts in the event, however, these acts are repeated in every thread in my data and thus, I categorize the event as a ritual. Additionally, as will be seen in this section, the idea of the ritual is to build up solidarity between the members: One of them confides one's troubles to the others, trusting that the answers will not threaten one's

communicative acts: preparing the audience, rant, calming, apologising, thanking and signing. Sometimes one of these acts is omitted, however, not many of them in the same message. Below is an example of a rant:

Example 9. A Rant

*I am so mad with DH, he is so bl**dy selfish!*

The kids have been really sick lately, they have gone from one illness to another and have been on various meds for nearly a month now. When people ask DH how they are he tells them "a lot better now" despite the fact that i have just come back from the doctors.

Every night it is the same, he comes home and demands his dinner, then complains that its not enough and eats half a loaf of bread and butter EVERY NIGHT, all through dinner he talks about work, himself, his ex boss, his mates, what hes doing the next day, how tired he is, how ill he is, what he has done all day! when i try to talk to him about what the kids have done he starts talking about himself again or just ignores me.

I had a nightmare with the kids meds yesterday, i tried to ring him and he said the phone was breaking up too much so i said i'd tell him later, but when he got in (late 10pm) he kept talking over me (gets me mad) about himself again, eventually he stopped talking so i began and he fell asleep.

*If I have a bad night with the boys (ys slept for 1/2 an hour the other night) and I go to tell him he just says "yeah well I didnt sleep well either" even though i can hear him snoring all night, which really p's me off. He never asks how the kids appointments go, in fact he still hasnt asked about ES speech therapy app which was months ago, and he doesn't know that we are seeing a DR about a sleep clinic next month. I have given up telling him now as it is quite clear that he doesnt give a s**t about the kids he just had to have as it was the most important thing in the world!*

What really gets me is that I was leaving him a few weeks back and he had a mental saying that if we left he wouldnt be able to see his kids blah blah blah, they need him blah blah, when would he get the chance to play with them blah! and since that day he has - totally ignored them, not played once with them, not changed or bathed either of them and spent the whole time either playing spider soitaire, on e-bay, watching footie or asleep.

He has changed YS bum 2 times in 13 months and that was only because i was half dead and couldnt even move. he has never bathed him and only ever put his coat on 4 times, he has never dressed him. He will sit on his fat lazy backside and say "hun he smells".....argh!

He bitches about money all the while even though i ONLY by food and essentials and he then has the cheek to go off shooting and down the pub and buys burgers and chips and coffee all day!

He says he is stressed, well arn't we all! he says he works hard - but my job is 24/7 and not paid! He says we cant afford to take the kids out, even though they love a FREE walk in the woods. We now go to MIL every week for dinner - he says it is for a free meal! Every time he goes out for the night he says it is business!

I hate him coming home now because i know exactly how the conversation is going to go and I am so sick of listening to him drone on about himself.

In the 7 years we have been together our families have never been in the same building together, every once in a while his family might meet one of my family - they still say things like "you know the

*man with just one kid" that would be my brother - they dont know a single name from my family (how bl**dy rude!!)*

I am totaly trapped in this crappy relationship that i should never of got into in the first place, I have wonderful kids that i wouldnt change for the world but i can just see be still being miserable and getting fatter and more frustraited as the time goes on.

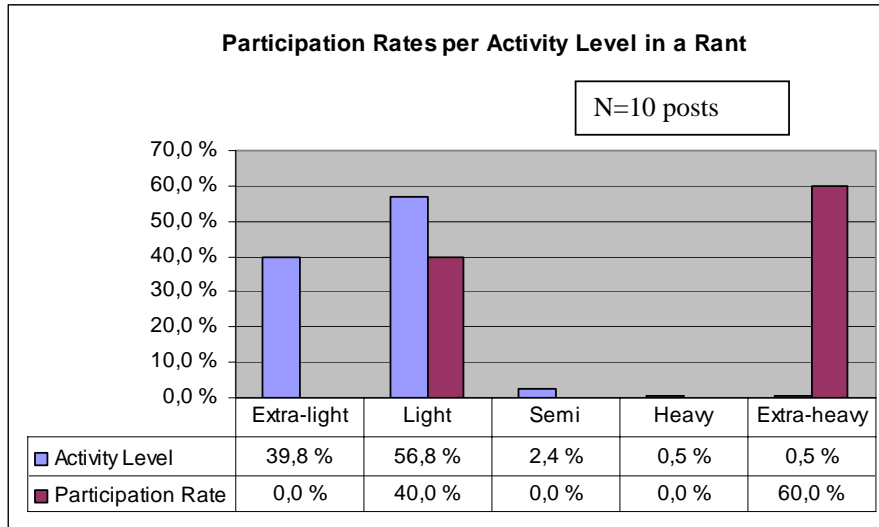
DH refuses to let me learn to drive because he is worried that i might get a life! so my brother is teaching me in secret! thank christ for wonderful families.

O.K sorry for the length of this but i needed to get it off my chest thanks for listening.

According to my data, ranting seems to be allowed to all the members, no matter what activity level they represent. In fact, in my data, one of the moderators answers to a light writer who apologises for ranting that *Come back and rant anytime you feel like, we are all expert ranters on here lol*. The extra-heavy writers are the senders in 60% of the rants in my data and the light writers are senders in 40% of them. The rants of the light writers differ only slightly from those of the extra-heavy writers. The light writers start their rant with more prudence: they prepare the audience using a more calm tone than the more active writers. The extra-heavy writers go more directly to the point, using a short exclamation as a preparation of the audience. In addition, the light writers apologise more often than the extra-heavy writers. Furthermore, the light writers apologise for the length or the rambling style of their message while the extra-heavy writers apologise for ranting. This illustrates that the light writers have to be more careful in their face work than the extra-heavy writers who probably have already reached the status of established members in the community. Additionally, the light writers may not be aware of the terminology used in RK and, thus, apologise for the length or style, while the extra-heavy writers know that ranting is a very common term in RK and apologise directly for ranting. Another point the two groups differ in the rants is thanking: The thanks are mostly sent by the extra-heavy writers while a light writer thanks the others only once in my data. This seems bizarre in the light of the other differences found in the rants. However, the thanking may simply be the sign that the established members already know the other members and thus, pay more attention and respect to them, even if they feel entitled to rant without preparing the audience. On the other hand, adding a thanking to a rant may be taken as a rather daring thing to do, as it is a presupposition that the others will read the message and actually care enough to reply it. This could explain, why thanking in a rant is common among the extra-heavy writers and rare among the newer members. Thus, omitting thanking in a rant, the new members may,

in fact, be careful in giving a positive and not too impudent image of themselves. In short, the newness of a member does not restrict the right to rant in RK. However, there are slight differences between the posts of the extra-heavy and the lights writers when they give a rant. These differences illustrate the light writers' need to be more prudent in their face work while the extra-heavy writers feel more entitled to rant and more sure to be supported by the others. Figure X illustrates the participation rates in a rant:

Figure 3. Participation rates in a rant



2. Supportive Replies

After the rant, the other members send supportive messages addressed to the opener. The communicative acts that are repeated in these replies are expressions of sympathy, solidarity or support, good wish, friendly suggestions and pieces of advice and, finally, signing. As in the rant, there is some variation in the supportive replies: all of the replies do not include all the acts mentioned above. However, these are the acts that are repeated often and some of them in a noticeably similar form. First, sympathising is normally marked by the word *sorry*: *i am so sorry to hear you are going through all of this, i'm sorry you're having such a hard time of it* or *Sorry to hear that you're having such a hard time lately*. Second, the form of expressions of solidarity and their place in a message varies considerably. However, it always conveys a message that the writer sides with the opener

or is in the same situation and, thus, understands well the rant: *been there at end of last year, know how you are feeling or Blimey, men are so incredibly selfish, i can relate to the talking about themselves bit, and also the fact that they think because they go OUT to work they must be more exhausted and obviously work harder, even though they leave their jobs at work then come home and chill, whereas we carry on all day then have a lovely night*



shift to do aswell, EVERY DAY!!!! or A fellow gaming widow!!!! . Third, supporting is often expressed by virtual hugs, which may be small animations, graphics or written: *have a hug from me, ((Big hug)), (((((((((((((((((((nickname))))))))))))))*,



. Additionally, supporting may have a form of an encouraging statement (*Good on you for learnig to drive, absolutely the best thing to have independance*), cheering up (*chin up.... and failing that... glass of wine and some chocs!*), comforting (*I am sure next week will be much better*) or compliments (*You are such a kind, caring person and you deserve better than an arrogant man who treats you and the kids like trophies*). Fourth, in the end of a supporting reply, there is often a good wish: *Hope you're ok, Good luck or Take care*. In addition, supporting replies may have suggestions and pieces of advice that are given in a very friendly manner. However, the form and content of these varies considerably, just as those of expressions of solidarity. Finally, in the end of a supporting reply, there is often a signing that gives a message a warm, personal tone. Below is an example of a supporting reply.

Example 10. A supporting reply.

oh vinny i am so sorry to hear you are going through all of this.

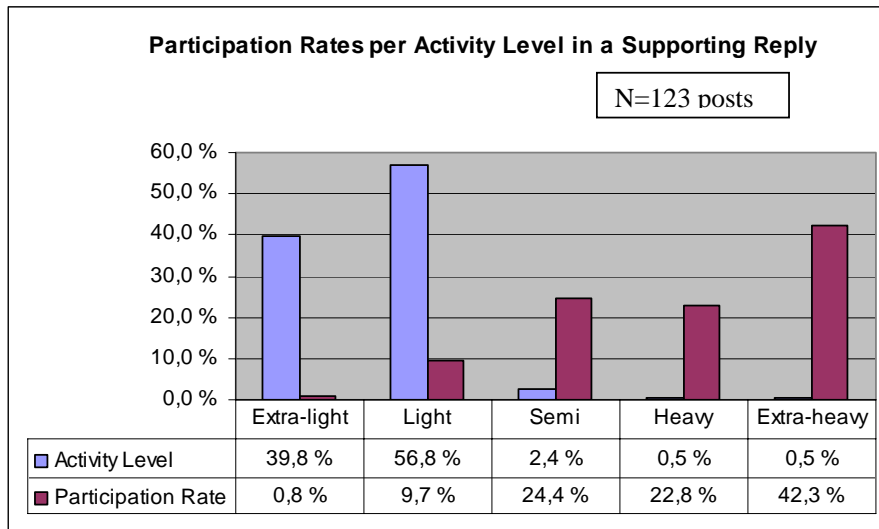
imo he soulds like a selfish rat.

you and your boys deserve far better. you need to tell him to start treating you they way you deserve

as for the driving is there any way you could save up a week bit here and there and learn do drive? have a hug from me xx

Supporting replies are mostly sent by the extra-heavy writers (42.3%). In addition, the heavy (22.8%) and the semi-active (24.4%) writers are active supporters in the group. Even the light (9.7%) and the extra-light writers (0.8%) send supporting replies, however, their messages lack hugs altogether. Probably, they do not feel close enough friends with the older members, to be entitled to give even a cyber hug. Below is a figure that shows the participation rates in a supporting reply:

Figure 4. Participation rates in a supporting reply



3. *Thanking*

The final stage of the event is thanking. The thanking message sent by the opener of the thread does not always stop the others from sending more supportive replies. Sometimes the opener may send several thanking messages during the thread and in some cases only one. It seems that if a thanking includes an additional rant or if it refers to the replies, the event will continue. While the thanking does not include them, the thanking closes the event. The thanking message includes several communicative acts and, once again, there is some variation in the combination and the form of the acts. However, the repeated acts in a thanking are thanking, (additional ranting,) (referring to the replies,) giving an update and signing. Below is an example of a thanking.

Example 11. Thanking

thanks everyone, had an early night last night so didnt even get to have a sniff of wine (boo), but at least my brains not frazzled anymore 🤔

my DD parents evening went ok, she a good all rounder bless her, tries hard but needs to stop getting distracted (yup, her to a tee lol), so at least that was a bit of good news 😊

i never mentioned options to my son yesterday, i thought he deserved a break from my nagging 🤔 hes making an appt with the careers advisor today so with any luck he'll start to think more seriously about his choices.

thanks again folks 😊

[nickname] xx

4. To Sum Up

As illustrated above, the rant is an event that takes place when a member from any activity group wants to unburden oneself to the members of the community. The main functions of the event are rant, supporting and thanking, each of which includes several communicative acts. First, the opener sends a rant: prepares the audience and rants. Then she/he sets the positive face to him/herself: calms down, apologises, thanks and signs. Below in table 6 are the acts of a rant:

Table 6. Acts of a rant

Acts	Participants
1. Preparing the Audience	60% by extra-heavy writers (10% by moderators and 50% by members)
2. The Rant	0% by heavy writers
3. Calming	0% by semi-active writers
4. Apologising	40% by light writers
5. Thanking	
6. Signing	

Second, the other members, mainly the extra-heavy writers, give their support to the opener, enhancing his/her face and also those of themselves. They express sympathy, solidarity and/or support, make good wishes and suggestions and sign the post. Below, in table 7, is a list of communicative acts in a supporting:

Table 7. Acts of a supporting

Acts	Participants
1. Sympathising/ 2. Expressing Solidarity/ 3. Supporting 4. Expressing a Good Wish 5. Making Suggestions, Giving Pieces of Advice	42.3% by extra-heavy writers (8.1% by moderators and 34.2% by members) 22.8% by heavy writers 24.4% by semi-active writers 9.7% by light writers 0.8% by extra-light writers
6. Signing	

Finally, the opener makes sure to be seen as an acceptable member and expresses his/her gratitude to those who replied. The opener thanks, gives an update of the situation and signs. She/he may also rant more or refer to the replies but these are not essential parts in the ritual. Below is a table of communicative acts in a thanking:

Table 8. Acts in a thanking

Acts	Participants
1. Thanking 2. Giving an Update 3. Signing (4. Additional Ranting) (5. Referring to the Replies)	The opener of the thread

5.3.3 Prayer Request

Sometimes, when a relative or a friend of a member has difficulties with his/her health, the member may send a **prayer request** to the community. In this section, I will illustrate the event that the request and the acts following it together form. In appendix 3, there is a thread that includes a prayer request ritual.

The Title

The title of a prayer request makes the purpose of the thread very clear. It is always marked by the word *prayer* and often by *please*: *Spare prayers please, prayers, good wishes and*

thoughts please or *Prayers / Good Thoughts*. Thus, everyone who replies to the message knows exactly what is expected of him/her. As a result, the event follows a rather static formula.

The Acts of a Prayer Request

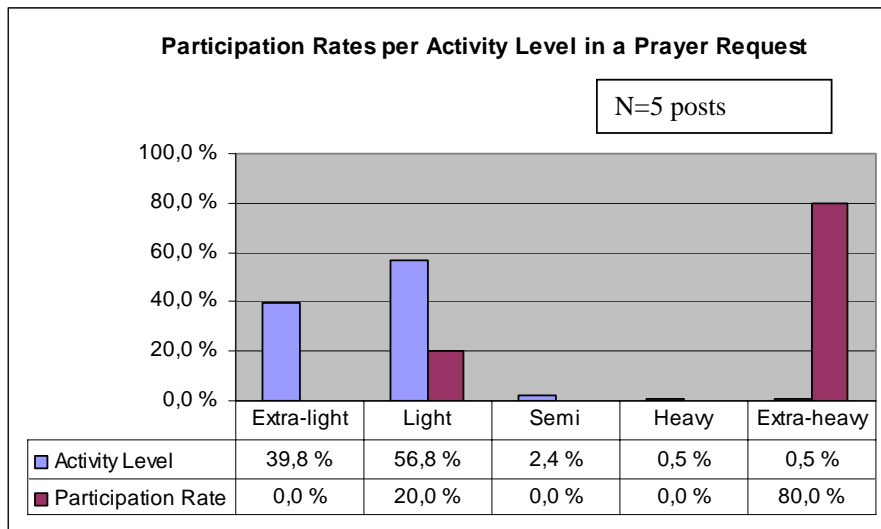
The prayer request ritual is started by the opener of a thread who sends a message with the prayer request. Then, the others offer their prayers and thoughts and finally the opener thanks those who replied. Thus, I will call the messages “prayer request”, “praying” and “thanking”. Now, I will illustrate the ritual in more detail.

1. The Prayer Request

The main purpose of the opening in this ritual is to ask others to pray for someone who is important to the opener of the thread. To make others pray for the person, the opener first explains why the prayers are needed. This is repeated in every thread in my data. As the content of these openings is always highly personal and it includes information that enables the recognition of the identity of the writer, I will not add any examples of this act to this section and I have also removed it from the example in the appendix. The second act that appears in every opening of a thread is request for prayers or good thoughts: *please pray for him, So, any spare good wishes and prayers would be extremely appreciated* or *Can someone chuck a few prayers our way, please?*. Adding request of thoughts to the message conveys that the writer is very considerate and does not threaten the face of those members who are not religious. On the contrary, he/she is still happy to get their contribution in the ritual. In addition to these two acts that are always repeated, there are three optional acts. These are signing, adding xxx (kisses) and thanking in advance. Even if signing and xxx can be left out of the post, their use make the tone of the message very personal and warm and are helpful in building a nice face for the writer. However, the use of *please* in the title and in the request for prayer work in the same manner and, thus, the signing and xxx are only optional acts in the ritual: They add extra warmth to an already friendly post. Additionally, thanking in advance is added to some prayer requests (*Ta*), however it is not necessary in any way. As illustrated above the compulsory acts in the prayer request are explaining the situation and a request for prayer.

The senders of prayer requests in my data are normally extra-heavy writers (80%). Nonetheless, even light writers post prayer requests (20%) and are answered in a similar fashion than more active writers. In other words, according to my data, it seems that prayer request is allowed to all the members, no matter the activity level. However, I had only five threads in the analysis and, thus, I am unable to draw firm conclusions of the participation rates in the prayer request. Below, in figure 5, there are participation rates in a prayer request:

Figure 5. Participation rates in a prayer request



The prayer request gives a positive image of the opener, since it conveys that the person cares about other people. For this reason, it is part of the writer's face work. Additionally, as discussed above, it gives others the possibility to look like caring persons and offer their thoughts and prayers. Thus, the prayer request values the self and the selves of the other members and, for this reason, can be taken as the first step in an interaction ritual. Below is an example of the prayer request in RK:

Example 12. Prayer Request

Can someone chuck a few prayers our way, please?

[explaining the situation removed due to its personal content]

So, any spare good wishes and prayers would be extremely appreciated. Will keep you updated.

Ta.

2. The Praying


After the prayer request, the other members send their prayers and thoughts to the opener and the one the opener asked them for. The praying/thanking posts convey that the others are caring persons who are willing to pray for and think about the person that the opener writes about. They offer the support they can give in a virtual community. The length of the prayer request threads varies. However, every thread in my data is considerably long. The shortest thread has 21 posts and one of them includes as many as 92 posts. The praying is conventionally formed of several communicative acts: sympathising, expressing a good wish, thinking and/or praying, signing, sending kisses (xxx) and, finally, supporting the opener by hugging. However, there can be some variation. This step in the ritual is, in its simplest form, thinking and/or praying, signing and x, as in the example 13 below:


Example 13. A Praying in its Simplest Form

[nickname] thoughts and prayers are with you and yours

[nickname] x

Nevertheless, the acts in the list above are frequently repeated, even if some act is sometimes omitted. The sympathising and hugging are optional and do not appear in every praying. Other acts are repeated very regularly. Sympathising is normally marked by the word *sorry*: *sorry about all that your family are going through* or *i'm so sorry to hear about [...]*. Sympathising can also be expressed with a short exclamation like: *Oh no [nickname]*, *Oh love* or *Aw [nickname]*. Sympathising conveys that the writer has read the opening carefully enough to understand the problem and that the opener is worth noticing. A good wish, on the other hand, is marked by the word *hope* and expressed very directly: *I hope it's not anything bad, I really hope it turns out to be nothing serious* or *Hope [a name] is okay*. Thinking and/or praying are the most common ways of expressing support in this

interaction ritual. As discussed above, the support of both religious and unreligious individuals is accepted and, thus, the thinking is taken for a form of an unreligious prayer in this virtual community. In other words, thinking, in this ritual, is an unreligious equivalent to a prayer. Sometimes thinking and praying are both in the same message and at other times they appear separately: *Thinking of you all, You're both in my prayers or Thoughts and Prayers with you all*. Praying can also be expressed with an image: . The signing is very common in the praying messages similarly as kisses that are expressed with xxx. Probably the reason for this is that the writer wants to make a message personal and warm. In other words, he/she wants to stress that he/she personally cares about the opener and the one he/she writes about and asks prayers for. Signing and xxx enhances the face of their author: he/she must be a warm and considerate person. The supporting hug, which is optional part of the ritual, is a way to express one's support mainly to the opener not to the one who is prayed for. Thus, this conveys that the one who hugs understands the feelings the opener has when a person she/he writes about is in trouble. Supporting hug can be expressed in different ways, for example, by using keyboard creatively or by a small

animation: **hugging [nickname]*, (((((hugs))))))* or . In my data, there is one instance when the ritual is broken. A heavy writer **casts spell** instead of praying or thinking. The opener communicates that she does not accept spells: *oh no [nickname] no spells you know i am not in to that stuff*. That shows that there are certain things people in RK expect when they ask for prayers and certain things they do not accept. Prayers and unreligious prayers do not insult anyone but a spell may be a very negative thing to a religious person. Below is an example of a conventional praying:

Example 14. A Praying.

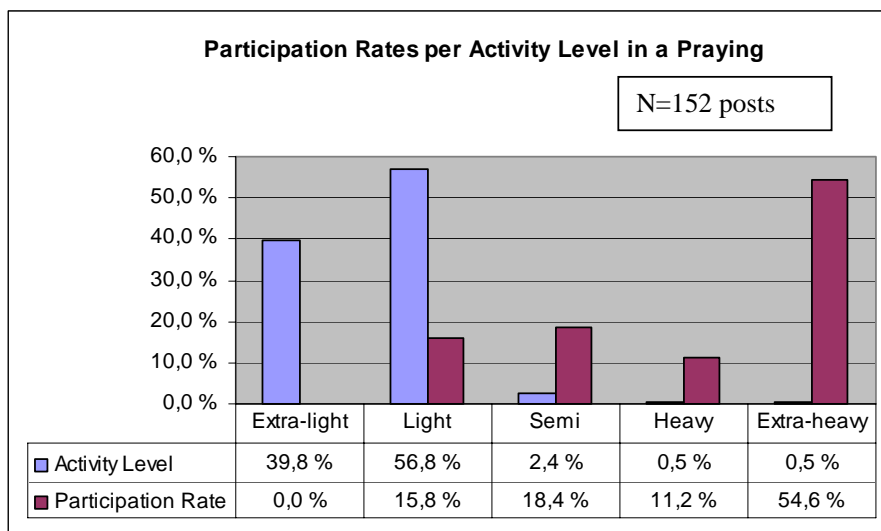
sorry about all that your family are going through, and i really hope [name] gets better. my thoughts are with you.

[nickname] xx

As already mentioned, the prayer requests receive a large number of replies. Everyone, or at least a large part of the community, wants to participate in the ritual. As can be expected,

the extra-heavy writers are highly active and, thus, write 54.6% of the praying messages. Heavy writers write 11.2%, semi-active writers 18.4% and light writers 15.8%. Thus, every activity group contributes to this ritual. However, the heavy writers post fewer praying posts than the light writers, which I would not have expected even if they formed a larger group in RK. Perhaps the light writers are this active, since they see the ritual as an easy way to participate and a good opportunity to work their image in RK. The light writers' posts differ only slightly from those of more experienced members: they follow the prayer request more literally than the older members. While the others seem to know that good wishes and thoughts are perfectly acceptable and can replace the prayer, the light writers use less good wishes and almost always include a prayer in a praying post. This is understandable, since they want to behave in an acceptable way, and thus, logically, pray when a prayer is asked for. Figure 6 below illustrates the participation rates in a praying:

Figure 6. Participation rates in a praying



3. *Thanking*

The opener of the prayer request thread always thanks the other participants. This can be repeated many times in the thread. In one example, the opener thanks the others seven times. Thus, even if thanking is the final step of this ritual event in my analysis, it does not mean that the praying would stop. This is probably due to the asynchronicity of the forum: People can react to a post even months after it has been written and the communication is

somewhat discontinuous. However, thanking is an important part of the ritual: it conveys that the praying is noticed and appreciated, the other members are honoured and the opener is indeed a very nice person. Thanking, as all the other stages of this ritual, includes several communicative acts: thanking, giving an update of the situation, kisses (xxx) and often, though not always, compliment to the group and signing. Thanking is a direct act in this ritual: *Ta you lot, And once again thank you or Thank you all so much for the support.* The next act, giving an update of the situation, means that the opener tells the others how the situation has evolved from the previous post she/he has written. I will not give examples of this, since, as already mentioned, the content of these messages is highly personal and possibly harmful for those involved. Additionally, the form of the update varies and, thus, there is no point in adding any examples of it to this study. The kisses that are often added in any message in RK seem to be particularly important here, both in praying and thanking. They give the message a warm tone and express that the writer likes the other participants. Another act that conveys the liking in thanking is making a compliment. The opener of the thread says something pleasant of the group: *This is by far the most supportive site I've come across, on so many levels, you are a bl**dy wonderful bunch of people 😊 and I am truly glad to know you all (IYKWIM) or Oooh, you lot are soooooo lovely!* Finally the opener signs the post and the event may end or continue with praying. Below is an example of a thanking message:

Example 15. A thanking

Oooh, you lot are soooooo lovely!

Thank you for your thoughts, cyberhugs and wishes - much appreciated and relayed to my mum on a daily basis!

4. To Sum Up

As can be seen, the prayer request follows a rather strict formula. In other words, there is some variation but not much: the same communicative acts are repeated in a rather similar form. First the opener explains the situation and asks others to send prayers/thoughts for a person who needs them. The opener may also sign the post, add kisses and thank in advance. However, these can be omitted. Table 9 below illustrates the communicative acts in the prayer request:

Table 9. Acts of the prayer request

Acts	Participants
1. Explaining the Situation	
2. Request for Prayers/Good Thoughts	80% by Extra-heavy writers
(3. Signing)/	20% by Light writers
(4. xxx (kisses))/	
(5. Thanking)	

Second, the other members from every activity level, but mostly the extra-heavy writers, send praying messages. These include good wishes, prayers and thoughts, which are kind of unreligious prayers, signing and kisses. The participants may also sympathise with the opener and support him/her with a virtual hug. However, the last two acts can be left out. Below, in table 10, there is a list of the communicative acts in the praying messages:

Table 10. Acts in the praying

Acts	Participants
(1. Sympathising)	54.6% by extra-heavy writers
2. Expressing a Good Wish	(5.3% moderators and 49.3% by member
3. Thinking and /or Praying	11.2% by heavy writers
4. Signing	18.4% by semi-active writers
5. xxx (kisses)	15.8% by light writers
(6. supporting by a hug)	0% by extra-light writers

Third, the opener posts a thanking to the participants. The thanking includes thanking, an update of the situation and kisses (xxx). Signing and compliments to the group are also common but they can be omitted. In table 11, below, there is a list of the communicative acts in a thanking:

Table 11. Acts in a thanking

Acts	Participants
1. Thanking 2. Giving update of the situation 3. xxx (kisses) (4. Signing) (5. Making a compliment to the group)	Opener of the thread

As discussed in this section, the ritual is for a large part about face work. The participants honour each other and themselves. They send very compassionate and supporting posts and make sure not to threaten anyone's face in any way. The atmosphere in the RK community is tolerant: both, religious or unreligious prayers are accepted as a way to support the opener and the one in trouble. This ritual is an opportunity to enhance one's face in RK.

Next, in chapter 6, I will sum up the results, discuss them in the light of Goffman's interaction ritual model, relate the results with the previous studies discussed in chapter 2 and list possible topics for future studies. Finally, I will evaluate the study as a whole project.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Outcomes of the Study

The purpose of the study was to find out what kinds of interaction rituals take place in the RK discussion board parent-to-parent at the level of communicative events, what kinds of events they are and what kinds of acts do they consist of and for what kind of a member is it appropriate to participate in the ritual events. Additionally, the purpose was to give a more or less holistic idea of the community and to document its discourse so that it could be later compared to other samples of language in use. The study was conducted with the methodology offered by Ethnography of Communication, although also quantitative methods were used to increase reliability.

As discussed in chapter 3, RK can be identified as a virtual text-based speech community. It is a genuine community, even if it exists in a virtual environment. The community has a large group of members. However, only a small part of them are active. Most of the active members are women, although there are a couple of active men also. All the members are supposed to be parents and seem to seek feeling of belonging, support, solidarity, advice, acceptance and friendship. As any community, also RK has norms and conventions. These are partly spelled out in the forum guidelines and disturbing behaviour is not allowed. Other conventions, such as interaction rituals, have developed and the members seem to be rather well aware of them, even if they are not introduced anywhere. In RK, the members meet each other in order to interact, to build solidarity in a group and create a self image in a community with the help of interaction rituals.

I found that in RK, there are certain communicative events that can be taken for rituals: entering RK, rant and prayer request. These more or less symbolic events are repeated frequently in RK and have a somewhat stable form. Thus, I will now sum up what kinds of ritual events I found in the community, what kinds of acts they included and for what kind of a member it was appropriate to participate in the ritual events.

The entering ritual starts when a new member enters the community by introducing him/herself: the newcomer greets, introduces him/herself and signs the post. The others, mostly extra-heavy writers, welcome the new member by greeting, welcoming and signing. Finally the opener of the thread may thank those who welcomed him/her. Saville-Troike claims: “the maintenance and manipulation of social relationships are importantly served by greeting events in many communities” (Saville-Troike 1982:40). Also in RK, this entering ritual shows that those who are able to enter the community conventionally will be welcomed with respect. An unconventional entering might destroy the ritual equilibrium and the reputation of a member.

The rant starts when an angry member sends a heated post about something that irritates him/her: he/she prepares the audience and rants, then changes the tone by calming down, apologising, thanking and signing. The other members, mainly extra-heavy writers, but also heavy, semi-active and light writers, express sympathy, solidarity and/or support, make good wishes and suggestions and sign the post. Finally, the opener thanks, gives an update and signs.

The prayer request is an interaction ritual that takes place when a member worries about someone or someone’s health. Then the member, who can belong to any activity group, explains the situation and asks for prayers. The others, mostly extra-heavy writers but also from a large part light writers and other groups, send good wishes, prayers and thoughts, sign the post and send kisses. Finally the opener thanks, gives an update of the situation and sends kisses.

These events fill the conditions set by Goffman’s interaction ritual model: situational co-presence, focused interaction, pressure for social solidarity, honouring of socially valid objects and some kind of confusion if the ritual equilibrium is broken.

As discussed in section 2.2.3, a situational co-presence is one of the conditions set for a ritual (Collins 2004:23). In RK, the virtual environment and CMC media effects, together with RK interface, chosen board, social hierarchy, norms and already established conventions, create the situation that restricts the ways the members can behave and construct social reality in an acceptable way. The co-presence, on the other hand, does not

exist in virtual communities like RK. However, as discussed in section 3.1, the community meets in a virtual place. They have an address to go in the Net when they want to take part in the community activities. Thus, the co-presence is here virtual co-presence in a virtual space. Furthermore, this kind of co-presence can be asynchronous when the CMC system is asynchronous. In, for example RK, the messages are co-present even if their senders are not necessarily online at the same moment. In other words, the CMC system allows a perfectly flowing interaction regardless the fact that all the participants are not signed in to the forum at the same time. The members do not have to be present in the virtual settlements at the same time, since the posts stay co-present in the forum and are a kind of representative of their author and his/her virtual self.

In RK, focused interaction takes place mostly asynchronously. The interaction is rather coherent and there is obvious cooperation between the participants. They have committed themselves to the rules of the focused interactional event, even if there occasionally is a member who breaks the rules. The asynchronicity is something that is probably beneficial for the focused interaction and ritual equilibrium since it gives time for a participant to ponder his/her words and put them in a way that shows respect to him/herself, the others and the communicative event in question.

The pressure to keep up social solidarity is an important part of a ritual (Collins 2004:25). This is especially so in a virtual community like RK. Indeed, the rituals found in RK indicate that the members have pressure to keep up social solidarity: there are greetings, compliments to the group and frequently repeated thankings. The ritual events show that the members of the group co-operate and are committed to follow the rules of interaction rituals: a newcomer gets a collective welcome when the older members send welcoming messages and the opener of a rant chooses to rant about something that would probably be irritating to anyone in the community, and gets loads of supportive replies. The prayer request gets numerous answers from the other members. All these events glow with the feeling of solidarity: the members of RK act in the same nice manner and form *a nice bunch*. In short, Goffman's point about pressures towards conformity can be applied to the events found in the present study.

Honouring socially valid sacred objects can also be found in the ritual events in RK. RK culture is full of minor acts that honour socially valued objects, especially the members' selves. The selves are mostly presented in a very favourable way in the rituals: caring, friendly and considerate. Almost every act in every ritual seems to be part of a member's face work, for example, greeting, signing, sending kisses and hugs. At the same time and for a large part, with the same acts, the selves of the others are respected: there are greetings, sending kisses and hugs and compliments. To give one example of a compliment in entering ritual: *Welcome - you must be a god-send to your children.*

Unease of some kind is experienced in RK if someone breaks the rules of the ritual event. Once during my observation a newcomer introduced herself in a different way than is taken for normal in RK. She gave a heated rant combined with an introduction, and, additionally, made several typing errors. In other words, as shown in example 16 below, she was unable to communicate appropriately in RK and broke the rules of rituals in RK:

Example 16. Rule breaking

Topic: *its not dood*

Hi, i am from australia and am married to an englishman who is divorced. it sounds as though we should all be blaming the dishonest people out ther, the MUMS and DADs, not the agencys for the probelems we all seem to have. If everyone were a bit more honest and straight forward about things and not so greddy and thought only of the kids then we all would be a lot better off than we are. or should i say the kids would be. Everyone seems to blame the agencies in every country for all the problems. Dont forget its all of us who go to them. we cant seem to work it out for ourselves. There are a very small group of people in the world who do bother to get on with things for the sake of the children but not many. Everyone is to busy trying to get back at one enother for various things. hey its not the kids fault at all and the sooner we all grew up the better and then we may not need any agencies to do our owrk for us. ????????????????

Consequently, many of the members expressed their confusion: *hi I am soooooo confused by this message!!!!!! what are you on about?????* The opener of the message got insulted and her message and typing errors were joked about: *I'm not greddy ! How dare you call me greddy ! *dissolves into inconsolable tears**. Restoring ritual equilibrium can also be identified in RK. In the thread discussed above some members and a moderator made efforts to save the opener's face and calm down the other members: *I think maybe she meant 'good', but just made a typing error!!! Come on ladies, cut some slack.* In the end the members who insulted the opener of the thread apologized:

I'm sorry too, since I kicked off the silliness... In addition, the opener of the thread decided to carry her responsibility in the confusion evolved because of her post and apologized: *Sorry again if i offended anyone.*

As shown in this section, even if Goffman's interaction ritual model is rather old, it is very applicable in the events I found in RK interaction. These rituals are symbolic and interactional rather than transactional. The formula of the three rituals is more or less the same, although there is some variation. However, the participation rates are open to various interpretations. It seems that less active writers are more careful to be respectful and participate differently than the very active writers. In, for example, the entering ritual, they make sure to spell out their own newness as members when they want to welcome an even newer member to the group. Nevertheless, it seems that there are no strict denials for any activity group to participate in rituals. In other words, everyone is allowed to post in the three rituals but different groups participate in a different manner.

6.2 Interaction Rituals in CMC: Past, Present and Future

As discussed in section 2.3, I could not find many studies concentrating on interaction rituals in virtual communities. However, I find three of them and now I will compare them to the present study. As illustrated in chapter 5, there certainly are interaction rituals in RK. The existence of these events supports the hypothesis of Rutter and Smith (1999), discussed in section 2.3: the virtual community is not only about information exchange: for, at least some members, it is mainly a place for interaction. Similarly as in RumCom.local (Rutter and Smith 1999:117), there is a significant ritual aspect also in RK. Rituals are used as tools for honouring selves of the posters and receivers of the posts. Danet's (2005) study, discussed in section 2.3, cannot be well compared with the present one, since, firstly, it focuses on acts, not on the whole events. Secondly, Danet uses a different definition of a ritual. However, as she claims that in Rainbow, strangers and old friends communicate similarly, it was not the case in RK. The different activity groups behaved differently in the rituals. The variation was not obvious when observing the group but a more detailed analysis revealed it. Thus, it seems that cultures in the virtual world have their own particularities just as cultures in real life. Hardey's study (2002 Internet) is also difficult to

compare with the present study since he approaches the rituals in a different way: he does not describe or list the rituals he found. Instead he concentrates on illustrating how identities and relationships are negotiated through CMC. However, it seems that the results of the present study support Hardey's findings. According to him, the interaction in the site he studied is guided by rituals and norms that protect the selves of the participants. Thus, the Internet is not something extremely revolutionary as a social space: similarly as in real life, people feel a need to follow familiar interactional patterns and make sure to maintain their face and that of others.

There is the cues-filtered-out theory of CMC. Kim (2000 internet) describes it as an approach suggesting that because there are no cues in CMC, there are not many social constraints or norms and the social boundaries can be broken. However, in RK it seemed to be just the opposite. Postmes, Spears and Lea (1998 quoted in Wood 2004:85-86) created the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (the SIDE model) according to which people will set aside personal identity and adopt an appropriate social identity in order to find acceptance among others. Consequently, he/she follows the rules of the community, wanting to keep up social solidarity. The interaction rituals may be viewed as support to this theory: the rituals do not leave much room for personal expression. One may sign the post, to give it a personal touch, but otherwise the messages in the rituals follow a rather stable form. However, there was a view offered by Walther (1996 Internet) that goes even further than the SIDE model and suggests that since a participant in CMC owns a great deal of freedom to control his/her self presentation, he/she is often giving a highly idealized image of him/herself to the other members and conducting, thus, hyperpersonal communication. Hyperpersonal communication means that CMC can be even "more friendly, social and intimate than face-to-face communication" (Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic 2004:52). Also this view is supported by my results. The rituals seem to build a highly positive image of its participants.

The present study concentrates on the interaction rituals in RK at the level of communicative events. There are many more topics concerning interaction rituals in virtual communities that deserve attention in the future. Now I will discuss the questions that arose during this project.

As is evident from this study, interaction rituals do exist in RK and they are a complex issue. However, the members seem to play their part in the rituals with ease, even if they are sending their first post when initiating an entering ritual. Thus, it would be interesting to study, whether the interaction rituals found in RK are universal, which would explain the competence of the new members in the rituals, or group specific. At least the entering ritual may be universal, or common, in discussion forums, since it comes up in several articles concerning virtual communities. For example Baym (1999:223) mentions a genre of unlurkings in a discussion forum rec.arts.tv.soaps which she defines as “posts in which new or rare posters introduce themselves to the group”. Similarly, Erickson (1997 Internet) found in his study about the discussion forum Cafe Utne that one common topic was to introduce oneself to the group. Another topic for future studies is whether the gender of the participants has a significant role in interaction rituals. In my study, it was impossible to take the gender of the participants into account, since it would have made the study overly complicated. Furthermore, there were only a few active men in the parent-to-parent forum and thus, it would have been impossible to have reliable results of how men in general differ in their participation in interaction rituals from women. However, I suspect that interaction rituals are different in discussion forums that are aimed at men than in, for example, RK, where most of the participants are women. Thus, the gender differences in interaction rituals should be focused on. Additionally, the following topics should be studied: the rituals at the level of acts in the parent-to-parent discussion board, interaction rituals both at the level of acts and events in the other discussion boards in RK and numerous other communities. In addition, it would be interesting to study RK rituals at the level of events later on to find out if they are dynamic: do they stay the same, do they become more static or do they change altogether over time.

All these topics are still unexplored, even if they are an important and interesting part of the culture of these communities. As interaction rituals in virtual communities have been largely ignored in research, and since they are an important part of everyday virtual life, they deserve more attention in research. My study is only a drop in the unexplored ocean of virtual communities. However, it is important to start somewhere. More drops are needed to form even a basic understanding of interaction rituals in virtual communities.

6.3 Evaluation of the study

The newness of the subject is, at the same time, a merit and a challenge in the present study. It was challenging to study something that had been largely ignored in research. I had to plan the study from the beginning without the help of any ready made models: I spent quite a lot of time finding out about the methodologies that would suit the study. Additionally, I had to make decisions about restricting data collection and make it systematic enough, which was not easy as there is more than enough data available in RK and as the rituals in RK come up in different frequency. Similarly as weddings, which everyone agrees are rituals but come up quite rarely, there was an entering ritual: it is clearly a ritual, however, it happens more or less rarely. The second challenge was to identify all the rituals at the level of communicative events in the RK parent-to-parent forum to the study. Almost all events seemed to have some features that resembled a ritual. However, they sometimes appeared only at the level of acts and not at the level of events. The third challenge was to restrict the topic from interaction rituals in RK to interaction rituals at the level of communicative events in the parent-to-parent discussion board in RK. It was hard to leave out acts, since, just as ritual events, they were very interesting. In addition, I was unhappy to count out the other boards in RK since I had already observed them for some time. Other challenges were applying the framework that was developed long before the Internet to the virtual context and to ask the right questions about the subject no one seemed to know much about. However, I am glad I took the challenge: I managed to produce genuinely new information.

The main downside of the present study is that I was not allowed to interview the members of RK. Interviewing would have increased the validity of my interpretations, and, in the end, made the study fairer to the community. However, I had to respect the denial and the only way to get interviews would have been to search a forum that allowed them. On the other hand, Ethnography of Communication includes a long-time observation and before knowing about the interview ban, I had already spent a long time observing the group. Thus, a change of a forum would not have been reasonable. Another downside was the relatively small amount of the data. More data would have allowed me to draw more reliable conclusions and, perhaps, enable me to find more rituals. However, even if there

was as much data available as I would have wanted to collect, I had to restrict its amount: as this is a MA thesis, I could not spend years in doing the analysis.

As I had managed to restrict the amount of data and the topic of the study and to plan the study, I conducted the analysis. The analysis, as it is, was a micro-level analysis, and required quite a lot of time and accuracy. The codification of the acts was not always easy, even if the events followed rather a similar pattern and the acts were usually clearly marked. Similarly, defining the activity levels was difficult and different definitions could have revealed something that was left unfound in the present study. Additionally, the asynchronous nature of the discussion forum set some problems to the analysis. Sometimes a thread was equal to an event and sometimes it confined several events that were more or less mixed with each other. Furthermore, it was not easy to identify clear closings for the events, since the members continued replying to the previous posts even if the opener had already sent his/her closing message. However, despite the difficulties, I managed to do the essential, which was to find answers to the research questions.

To conclude, the present study produced new information and showed that Goffman's interaction ritual model is applicable to virtual communities. However, the freshness of the topic set a series of challenges as there was no ready made model to follow in planning the study. Different decisions could have lead to rather similar results, although they could have revealed something that was missed in the present study. The fact that the data was collected in RK, an asynchronous CMC system, was a good thing, since it made the data collecting easy. At the same time, the asynchrony made the interaction less linear and, thus, sometimes difficult to follow. However, I am glad I took the challenge and was able to find answers to my research questions and, thus, to find new information about RK. I wish that, in the future, interaction rituals in virtual communities would be noticed in CMC research, and the questions that arose during the present study, discussed in section 6.2, would be answered by CMC scholars. Perhaps, in the near future, I will also have an opportunity to increase knowledge and understanding of virtual communities and interaction rituals in them.

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Appendix 1

A thread including an entering ritual

Topic: new here

Message 1:

Hello everyone

My name is [the name], I have 3 wonderful children and one on the way. I lost my husband four months ago and I'm a complete wreck. I'm looking for people/friends to help me get by. I would love to get to know you guys. Please PM me.

-[Nickname]-

P.S. Sorry if this is the wrong forum, I didn't know where to start a conversation.

Message 2 by an extra-heavy writer/ P2:

Hi [the name of the opener], and welcome.

Sounds like you have a lot on your plate at the moment! Sure you'll find some help here – I certainly have.

Deleted:

Message 3 by an extra-heavy writer:

hi [the name of the opener] welcome to RK

I am so sorry to hear about your husband.rk will be a great place for your you get support or even a cyber shoulder to cry on.

When is your bump due? It must be a stress full time for you.

Looking forward to seeing you around

take care

[nickname]

Message 4 by a semi-active writer:

Hi [the name of the opener], good to have you 'on board'.

Sorry to hear about your husband. Do you have any support to help you and your children get through this truly difficult time?

How old are your children? I have 2 boys, aged 9 and 6. When is your new baby due?

Keep posting.

Take care.

Message 5 by a semi-active writer:

hi [the name of the opener]my name is [the name] I'm new to this to I have 1 daughter aged 3 and a half the girls on here really are helpful as I have just found out if you need help they are always there for you its likeone big cyber family. You will see when is your baby due keep posting take care

.xxx 🍌

Message 6 by an extra-heavy writer:

Hi [the name of the opener], I'm sorry to hear about your husband. How old are your kids, you must be shattered ? Do you have help from family and friends?

Message 7 by a heavy writer:

hi [the name of the opener]& [the name of the writer of the message 5]

sorry to hear about your husband [nickname]... keep on posting... we are all here for you

take care!



[nickname]

Message 8 by an extra-heavy writer:

Hello [the name of the opener]

Welcome to RK!!

Sorry to hear about your hubby, you've come to the right place if you're looking for support and

cyber hugs  and even a shoulder to cry on  when is your new baby due?

[Nickname] xx

Message 9 by a semi-active writer:

hello [the name of the opener]

im quite new here myself, but let me just say that i have had more help and advise, and support here than any where

im so sorry to here about your husband, you must be deverstated..

i have 6 kids, not all at home now, just 3 and hopefully 4 soon, not that im having a baby.

my kids are 23, 21, 16, 15, 13, 12,....

how old are your kiddies and when is baby due...

take good care and like all have said before keep posting my love..



[nickname]...xx

Message 10 by an extra-heavy writer:

Hi [the name of the opener]and welcome to RK

People on here are very friendly and helpful, and not to many of them bite...

Once again welcome and enjoy everybodys company



[nickname]

Message 11 by an extra-heavy writer moderator/ P1:

Hello [the name of the opener]

Welcome to the site, my I offer my sympathy for the loss of your husband but also congratulate you on your impending arrival!

Like everyone says, people here are always ready to offer support and help so pop on anytime you feel like a rant or just a chat.

[nickname] xx

Message 12 by a semi-active writer:

Quote: Originally posted by Nickname (the poster of the message 5)

hi liv my name is michelle I'm new to this to I have 1 daughter aged 3 and a half the girls on here really are helpful as I have just found out if you need help they are always there for you its likeone big cyber family. you will see when is your baby due keep posting take care xxx 😊

LOL!!

[the name of the writer of the message 5]aka H+C, I just read this as you have one daughter aged 3.....and half the girls on here really are helpful.....

I was wondering what you thought of the other half!!! 😊😊

Hi [the name of the opener]+ welcome. x

Message 13 by the opener of the thread:

Hello

Thank you to all that replied. My children (names removed) are still in shock of the accident. We just moved to a bigger home when I found out I was preg. so I don't have many people to talk to. My baby is due April 21st. This is so hard for me because my husband was a stay at home dad and I don't want to admit this, but I hardly know my own children. I hope to make lots of friends here.

Thank you

-[the name of the opener]-

Message 14 by a heavy writer:

Hi [the name of the opener]& a warm welcome from me too.

Sending you big hugs for all you are coping with at the moment.

xx

Message 15 by an extra-heavy writer moderator/ P1, poster of the message 11:

That's a very very good day indeed to be having a baby by the way 🤪 LOL!

Have you any names in mind for you new baby? Your other kids names are very unusual..I love [a name] and is [a name] a boy or girl?

It must be very hard for you, do you still have family nearby to help you out even though you've moved?

[Nickname] xx

Message 16 by an extra-heavy writer:

Hi welcome to RK - I am sure you will have lots of wonderful support and advice passed to you if you need it.

Congratulations on the pregnancy and I hope that you adjust to your new life in a good way. Kids aren't that scary when you get to know them. Just a bit annoying and demanding.

Welcome anyway.

Message 17 by a semi-active writer:

hi im fairly new as well and have found this site amazing even just to read the posts. i am so sorry to hear about your husband and cant begin to imagine what you are going through, i hope you feel you can get some help comfort and support on here and that you also have a good family support system x x

Message 18 by a heavy writer:

Hi [the name of the opener],

Welcome to RK hope you get all the help you need.

[Nickname] x

Message 19 by the opener of the thread:

*-[nickname of the writer of the messages 11 and 15]- To answer your question [a name] is a girl. I loved the movie 'My Girl' and fell with the name of the main character. And about baby girl names...I was think Memory, Eternity, or Fate. I have no family where I live now. We moved away from our families because of my husband's job.
-[the name of the opener]-*

Message 20 by an extra-heavy writer:

It won't make you feel any better but my girls both turn into strangers about every 8 months or so and I have to get to know them again - they take it in turns to keep me on my toes..... and they change one thing at a time, so it's sort of a rolling progression.....

They alter what they eat without warning - 'mummy I don't eat sausages', 'but you ate them last week', 'yes but I don't eat them now', 'oh, sorry' typical teatime exchange.

They sort of pick random things to change, wait until I catch up and then swap to the other sibling and do it again - it's all about checking dementia hasn't yet set in I think - or keeping me active so it doesn't I'm not sure - youngest ate lettuce last night - lettuce, she's never eaten lettuce in her life! Dh felt her forehead to see if she was sickening for something!

They change their clothing styles - on return from shopping clutching £200 of H & M suddenly you get 'oh, thanks mum' without trying anything on and with a sullen face - 'but I thought you liked boys clothes' (to youngest after last trip) - and you get 'didn't they have any girls three quarter lengths?'..... Now rather than yelling 'of course they did you stupid brat but you didn't wear them last week!!!' at the top of my voice I say 'oh, yes, I think I saw some - shall I take these back then' 'yes please mummy, I love you'.....

They change friends - apparently [a name] suddenly becomes a nerd and [a name] is my best friend EVER - 'oh, [a name] who pushed you over last week?' - yes, but she didn't mean it and she's said sorry (Not to me she hasn't let me at her!)..... 'oh lovely dear, do you want to invite her to tea?'

They change colours - mum, you know you painted my room pink? (I don't even answer those ones!)

They change logo on MSN more than I change my opinion of whether or not to diet.....

I guess what I'm trying to say is please don't be too hard on yourself about not knowing them - it's sort of an ongoing battle for all of us - they grow up, they change opinions, they learn something different - and all we can do is sort of hang on by our fingernails and try to keep up with them.....

I often think that all it takes to be a good parent is the willingness to keep moving with them, alongside them - and to let them know that.....

Message 21 by a semi-active writer, poster of the message 5:

well done [the nick name of the writer of the message 20]you have just let me know what I'm in for with my daughter [a name] oh god let me just find my armour suit.....

Message 22 by a semi-active writer, poster of the message 17:

excellent post [the nick name of the writer of the message 20], how true, ive always been at home with my kids, i do work but only in school hrs and at night for an hour when their dad is here, and i dont know them at all lol 🤔

Message 23 by an extra-heavy writer, poster of the message 20:

Not just me then - thank goodness!

Appendix 2

A thread including a rant

Topic: ive had enough!!!!!!!!!!!!

Message 1 by a light writer:

man do i need a break!! been a busy few days so havent been around, just as i was starting to get to know you all 😊, my OH has had to move back home for a few days to help his parents out with something so im on my own looking after the kids, had sons options evening the other night and instead of taking pathway 1 options (for the brainboxes), hes decided he now wants to do the pathway 4 (arty/drama) one instead 😊. we have no idea where this has come from and hes never shown any interest/enthusiasm for drama before ever!! needless to say i had a big row with him about it and probably pushed him further into his decision to do it!!

spent most of last night at the hospital with him too, he had an accident at school playing rugby and ignored it which made his arm worse so i had to get my parents to come over and look after the girls while i took him to hospital, turned out it was just badly bruised and not broken as i had thought. got parents evening for my little one tonight too and all i want to do is sit down with my feet up with a bottle of wine and a few chocolate bars as i feel soooooo knackerd at the moment 😊

hope everyone is ok, sorry if ive rambled 😊

[nickname] xx

Message 2 by a heavy writer:



not much more I can do or say.

Message 3 by the opener of the thread:

oh yes and i forgot to mention my friend isnt talking to me anymore because she asked me to babysit cos she wanted to go out as she needed a break and i said no, ive got enough on looking after my own without looking after someone elses aswell fgs!! now shes sulking with me...

Message 4 by the opener of the thread:

aww thanks [nickname] xxx

Message 5 by an extra-heavy writer:

Hiya hun



Make it 2 bottles and Galaxy's and I'll join you??

I'm just about to update my 'Work Quandry' post 😊

Ramble away, lord knows I do enough rambling..I should join my local rambling association.

At least your sons arm isn't broken so that's a blessing eh? As for options, well [nickname] is your woman to speak to there no doubt she'll be along to stick her tuppunce worth's in (usually does)...how long till he had to make a definite decision? Mine chose her last years and she didn't pick exactly what I wanted it was more of a compromise really. Maybe his teachers can speak to him if they think he's capable of the Pathway1 options they might hold more sway than mum IYKWIM?

Hopefully your little one's parents evening goes well and you hear great things..that will cheer you up no end!

((big hug))

[nickname] x

Message 6 by an extra-heavy writer:

big hugs [nickname]!

Message 7 by a heavy writer:

nice friend you've got there ahh have a break have a kitkat on me oh and dont forget the bath and a good read...

Message 8 by a heavy writer:

yep thats my perscription too! nice long hot bath with bubbles and a glass of vino on the side! forget the friend, she probablu knows you've got a lot on your plate at the mo so prob feeling guilty for asking!

Message 9 by the opener of the thread:

thanks everyone, had an early night last night so didnt even get to have a sniff of wine (boo), but at least my brains not frazzled anymore 🤔

my DD parents evening went ok, she a good all rounder bless her, tries hard but needs to stop getting distracted (yup, her to a tee lol), so at least that was a bit of good news 😊

i never mentioned options to my son yesterday, i thought he deserved a break from my nagging 😞 hes making an appt with the careers advisor today so with any luck he'll start to think more seriously about his choices.

thanks again folks 😊

[nickname] xx

Appendix 3

A thread including a prayer request

Topic: *Spare prayers please....*

Message 1 by an extra-heavy writer

Can someone chuck a few prayers our way, please?

[Explanation of the situation removed]

So, any spare good wishes and prayers would be extremely appreciated. Will keep you updated. Ta.

Message 2 by a semi-active writer

Hugs + best wishes to the [opener's nickname] family. Your dad sounds like a tough cookie. x

Message 3 by an extra-heavy writer

Sorry to hear that [the nickname of the opener]!

Hope he will be on the mend and sending (((((hugs)))))) and best wishes for a speedy recovery.

[Nickname] xx

Message 4 by an extra-heavy writer

I'm sorry to hear how bad your dad is at moment doyley. I'm sure your mum got a shock to find him like that. I hope things go all right for all of you will be thinking about you.

Best wishes

[Nickname]

Message 5 by the opener of the thread

Ta you lot. Much appreciated. xx

Message 6 by an extra-heavy writer

Thinking of you all [the nickname of the opener] and wishing your Dad a speedy recovery.

[Nickname] xx

Message 7 by an extra-heavy writer

[the nickname of the opener] thoughts and prayers are with you and yours

[Nickname] x

Message 8 by an extra-heavy writer

Best wishes and all that to all, [the nickname of the opener]. Speak soon?

Love [nickname] XX

Message 9 by an extra-heavy writer

My thoughts are with you and your family! Here is hoping that your Dad will get better asap!

Love

[nickname]

Message 10 by an extra-heavy writer

big hugs to you all & hoping for good recovery

[nickname]

Message 11 by a semi-active writer

hugs [the nickname of the opener]... best wishes to you and your dad, hope he feels better soon

xx

Message 12 by an extra-heavy writer

Thinking of you and your mum & dad!



Message 13 by a semi-active writer

hiya [the nickname of the opener], hope your mum and dad are back on the road to recovery, it sounds like your dad is a fighter anyway. Thought are with you and your family xxx

Message 14 by an extra-heavy writer

Oh [the nickname of the opener], there must be something in the water!!!! My Dad had a heart attack on Sunday morning.

Of course my prayers are with him and the family. Lets hope they both make a full and speedy recovery.

Message 15 by the opener of the thread

And to you too, [the nickname of the writer of the message 14]! We were all joking with him about how inconvenient it was for him to do this over a Bank Holiday!

Bizarre how glib worried relatives can be at times like this!!

Prayers to you and yours.

Message 16 by a light writer

Best wishes, hope the recovery is going well. Is your Mum OK? Must have been a terrible shock for her.

xx

Message 17 by an extra-heavy writer

the very best to you and yours.

Hope he feels better soon

[nickname]

x

Message 18 by an extra-heavy writer and moderator

Always spare hugs and prayers [the nickname of the opener], sorry about your bad news. I'm sending good wishes to your family and my hopes that your dad gets well.

[nickname] xx

Message 19 by the opener of the thread

Ooh, you lot are soooooo lovely!

Thank you for your thoughts, cyberhugs and wishes - much appreciated and relayed to my mum on a daily basis!