

## Wide Y World: Understanding Cultures and Perspectives of Young Thai Boys' Love Fans in the Glocalized Context

Narut Supawantanakul \*

*Faculty of Learning Sciences & Education, Thammasat University, Thailand*

Received 17 August 2023; Received in revised form 10 December 2023

Accepted 14 December 2023; Available online 28 December 2023

### Abstract

Boys' Love (BL) media, emerging from Japan, has spread across different countries, including Thailand. Globalization has catalyzed the widespread accessibility of BL, fostering an environment wherein fans can create culturally hybridized BL cultures. Drawing on the glocalization and queer hybridization frameworks, this research analyzes the narratives of 13 young Thai BL fans. The objectives of this study were: firstly, to understand how fans engage in recreating BL cultures blending elements from both foreign and local origins, and secondly, to understand their viewpoints concerning gender and sexuality. Unlike the Thai BL of the previous two decades, which predominantly drew on Japanese influences, contemporary Thai BL blends its Japanese foundation with the Thai context and additional foreign components, particularly Korean pop culture. Culturally hybridized BL has notably heightened the visibility of male-male romance within mainstream Thai media, offering an alternative representation of sexual minorities beyond the third sex (เพศที่สาม—phet thi sam) stereotype. However, certain aspects of BL, such as the perpetuation of fixed gender roles within male-male relationships, reinforce conventional gender norms in Thai society. BL, an example of ongoing interplays of gender and sexuality concepts across varying locations and periods, expresses a complex product of these multifaceted interactions.

### Keywords

Boys' Love, Glocalization, Thailand, Japan, K-pop

## Introduction

In this research, I explore the growing trend of Boys 'Love (BL) media in Thailand. Thai people refer to fans of this genre as *sao-Y* (สาววาย—*Y girl*), which is the Thai equivalent of Japanese *fujoshi* (腐女子—*rotten girl*). Both terms connote female BL fans who invest a significant amount of their resources in their interests to the point of being less concerned with their physical appearance (Baudinette, 2019; Pagliassotti et al., 2013; Progressive Movement, 2021). During secondary school, I observed that the BL culture seemed to be exclusive to particular groups of youths. Most of my female classmates, for instance, were BL fans, studying Japanese, and interested in Japanese popular culture (J-pop) or Japanese rock music (J-rock). Some even pursued cosplay (costume play) as a hobby, dressing up as male characters from anime (アニメ—Japanese animation) or as their favorite male idols. At that time, Thai society did not accept BL, and we could not watch any BL in the mainstream media. I recall that my classmates had to have personal connections to read Japanese BL manga (漫画—Japanese comic books), as bookstores in Thailand did not typically sell them due to their explicit content (Progressive Movement, 2021; Singhakowinta, 2017).

Over the past twenty years, BL culture in Thailand has undergone a transformation. It has become increasingly popular in the Thai mainstream media. Thai girls no longer need to go to the back corners of bookstores to buy BL manga. Instead, they can now watch beautiful young men engaging in romance on various media platforms. Additionally, I have noticed that the current version of Thai BL culture differs significantly from the Japanese style I was familiar with. This shift in the cultural landscape motivated me to delve back into this phenomenon. In this research, I examined the communities of young Thai BL fans, exploring their cultures and their points of view on different topics. This research focused on the personal experiences of youths in shaping their identities, cultures, and communities within the context of globalization. Furthermore, it aims to gain insights into the perspectives of young Thai BL fans regarding gender and sexuality. As I will discuss below, cisgender heterosexual women are the primary driving force behind the creation of male homoeroticism in the BL world. While BL cultures display unconventional romance, they develop upon a foundation of heteronormativity. This contradictory characteristic of BL cultures motivated me to study how young Thai BL fans comprehend gender and sexuality as members of BL communities.

## Literature Review

### Origin of Japanese BL

This section provides a brief history of Japanese BL, starting from the basics and then presenting an overview of various versions of BL in different Asian countries. According

to the works of Mark J. McLelland (2000a; 2000b) and Dru Pagliassotti et al. (2013), *shōnen ai* (少年愛—love between young men) emerged as a genre in Japan in the early 1970s and gained significant popularity by the 1980s. Male homoeroticism became a common theme in Japanese young-female-oriented comic books, known as *shōjo manga* (少女漫画). The appeal of this content led to the creation of *ani-paro* (アニパロ—anime parody), or pairing male characters from mainstream media. Since these pairings did not occur in the original story of popular comic books or animation series, they relied on the creations of amateur artists. In the past, regulations and social values prevented professional artists from depicting certain content, such as same-sex romance or erotic scenes between male characters. This condition allowed works by amateur artists to be well-received and capable of catering to fans' desires. Consequently, some amateurs later became the early generations of professional artists in *dōjin-shi* (同人誌—magazines for like-minded individuals), producing artworks to satisfy people with the same interest (Pagliassotti et al., 2013). In the 1990s, the term *bōizu rabu* (ボーイズラブ—Boys' Love) gained prominence in Japan before spreading to other countries (Pagliassotti et al., 2013).

In addition to *shōnen ai* and Boys' Love, *yaoi* (ヤオイ) is another popular term used to describe male homoeroticism in *shōjo manga*. McLelland (2000b), Kazumi Nagaike (2012), Att Bunnag (Progressive Movement, 2021), and James Welker (2015) have discussed that *yaoi* is an initialism of "*yama-nashi, ochi-nashi, imi-nashi*" (山なし、落ちなし、意味なし), which translates to "no climax, no ending, no meaning." Nagaike (2012) explains that the term *yaoi* does not directly reflect the content of male homoeroticism but emphasizes the storytelling nature that only focuses on sexual interactions between two beautiful boys. Moreover, compared to *shōnen ai*, many fans perceive *yaoi* as more erotic, resulting in fan interpretations that *yaoi* stands for "*Yamete! Qshiri ga itai!*" (やめて、お尻が痛い!), meaning "Stop! My butt hurts!" (McLelland, 2000b; Nagaike, 2012). The popularity of *yaoi* led to the widespread use of the letter Y to categorize manga with male homoerotic content. In Thailand, the letter Y (เ ย ร) became representative of male homoeroticism in various compound terms, including *series-Y* (ซีรีส์เ ย ร—BL series), *niyai-Y* (นิยายเ ย ร—BL novel), *cartoon-Y* (การ์ตูนเ ย ร—BL comic book), and *sao-Y*.

Moreover, Bunnag (Progressive Movement, 2021) and Welker (2011) also discuss another possible origin of the relation between the letter Y and male homoeroticism. During the 1970s in Japan, a gay men's magazine named *Bara-Zoku* (バラ族—Rose Tribe) became popular. The term *bara* (バラ) in Japanese means *rose*, so this flower became the symbol of gay men in Japan. Shortly after, the term *Yuri-Zoku* (ユリ族—Lily Tribe) became the counterpart of *the Rose Tribe* and the symbol of Japanese lesbianism. Among readers of Japanese manga, *yuri* is a popular genre with female homoerotic content. Although people generally understand *yuri* as a symbol of female homosexuality, it also includes women with

other unconventional sexual desires, namely those who are attracted to homosexual men or sexual interactions between men. Based on this theory, the letter Y stands for *yuri* instead of *yaoi*. This interpretation also emphasizes that BL targets female readers who have unconventional preferences.

### **The Spread of Japanese BL across Asia**

The popularity of Japanese BL has spread across many Asian countries, leading to cultural hybridization. An example mentioned by Romit Dasgupta (2006) is the film *Měi Shào Nián Zhī Liàn* (美少年之戀), also known as *Bishōnen*, released in Hong Kong in 1998. Dasgupta (2006) describes how this film represents the blending of BL romance from Japan with the darker storytelling style of Hong Kong, making the film more pessimistic than general BL. Fran Martin (2012) explores how the Japaneseness of BL constructs an imaginary world in contrast to the actual setting of Taiwan, making it popular among young Taiwanese girls. Wen-ling Lin (2018) refers to "*The New Member*" (新社員—*Xīn Shè-Yuán*), a successful Taiwanese BL musical that incorporates various elements from Japanese manga that Taiwanese BL fans are familiar with. For instance, the stage recreated the experience of reading Japanese BL manga using 2D drawings and dialogue boxes. The characters on stage wore Japanese student uniforms, and the location resembled a Japanese school building more than schools in Taiwan. However, "*The New Member*" also delved into contextual issues in Taiwan, such as the fear of BL fans or *fūnǚ* (腐女—Mandarin rendering of *fujoshi*) who must conceal their interests to avoid judgmental reactions from friends and parents. Lin (2018) describes that incorporating such content allowed this musical to resonate with Taiwanese BL fans. A similar phenomenon also exists in the Philippines, where Nagaïke (Japan Foundation Bangkok, 2021) notes that young Filipina BL fans commonly use Japanese terminology like *fujoshi* and embrace the Japaneseness associated with BL.

The representation of beautiful young men in BL media has had a strong influence on the new wave of Korean pop (K-pop) culture. According to Sun Jung (2011), Japanese *bishōnen* (美少年—*beautiful young man*) has served as the foundation for the popularity of *kkon-mi-nam* (꽃미남—*flowering gentleman*) around the 1990s. The rise of metrosexuality and androgyny among Korean male idols has challenged traditional Korean masculinity shaped by the experience of war. These beautiful young men have become the faces of the blossoming plastic surgery and cosmetic businesses in South Korea since the 2000s. Both *bishōnen* and *kkon-mi-nam* represent a shared cultural flow of soft masculinity among women in Asian countries.

### **Hybridized BL Culture in Thailand**

Like other Asian countries, the original Japanese BL strongly influences Thai BL culture. Thomas Baudinette (2019) compares the similarities between Thai sao-Y and

Japanese *fujoshi*. BL fans in both countries gather to discuss male-male couples, known as *moe banashi* (萌え話). In Thailand, Orawan “MAME” Vichayawannakul, a well-known BL author and producer, describes the same action as *jin* (จิ้น), derived from “*imaGINation*,” or *ship* (ชิป), derived from “*relationSHIP*” (We Mahidol, 2020). In addition, Thai BL fans also adopt Japanese words, namely *se-me* (攻め—offense) and *u-ke* (受け—defense), to describe the masculine penetrator and the feminine counterpart, respectively. As I will demonstrate in subsequent sections, Thai BL fans commonly use *me* (เม) and *ke* (เค) to determine whether a character is a *ruk* (รุก—the insertive one) or a *rap* (รับ—the receptive one) in male-male relationships (the latter two terms are more commonly used among Thai gay men in general). These examples underscore the Japanese influence on Thai BL.

In addition to examining the influences from Japan, this research also explores the impact of other foreign cultures and the expanding interpretation of foreign cultures in Thailand. According to Dredge Byung’chu Kang (2017) and Megan Sinnott (2012), the rise in popularity of K-pop, known as K-fever, in Thailand during the late 2000s contributed to the increased familiarity with male metrosexuality and representation of romantic male characters from Korean series. The influence of K-fever has made Korean masculinity the symbol of beauty and romance in Thailand. As discussed in the work of Jung (2011) above, the concept of soft masculinity in K-pop shares common characteristics with the Japanese *bishōnen*. Thus, when Thai BL developed from Japanese BL culture and incorporated elements of Korean soft masculinity, it became influenced by multiple foreign sources.

Thai BL is not merely a product of cultural borrowing. It can also spread its influence to other countries. Att Bunnag (Progressive Movement, 2021) explains that the aesthetic beauty and physical attractiveness of young Thai actors help to increase the popularity of the Thai BL series in other countries. In Japan, for instance, some BL fans describe their obsession with the Thai BL series as *tai numa* (タイ沼) or *Thai swamp*, which they fall into and cannot climb out of. Additionally, cultural uniqueness, such as the portrayal of customs in Thai universities in the series, adds to its appeal among foreign viewers. The widespread popularity of the Thai BL series demonstrates that Thailand does not simply play a passive role in cultural exchange, but rather blends foreign cultures into its art and creates interpretations that also attract viewers in other countries.

Regarding gender and sexuality aspects, it is noteworthy that heterosexual women constitute the main population of Thai BL communities. Att Bunnag (Progressive Movement, 2021) speculates that previous generations of *sao-Y* have played a significant role in the growth of Thai BL in the present. Over the past two decades, Japanese BL cultures have captivated young fans who have now grown up and ventured into the entertainment and media industries. With their newfound influence, they can reintroduce and popularize their beloved culture. Baudinette (2019) and Jaray Singhakowinta (2017) discuss the role of BL

media in catering to the desires of heterosexual women. Thai BL series often maintain ambiguity around the sexuality of male protagonists and rarely label them as “gay.” Additionally, these male characters are sometimes in romantic relationships with women. Baudinette (2019) and Singhakowinta (2017) emphasize that the portrayal of male characters in these series focuses on their physical attractiveness, masculinity, and adherence to heteronormative gender roles prevalent in Thai society. On the other hand, characters such as effeminate *toot* (ตุ๊ด— as in the title of the film “Tootsie”) or transgender women (กะเทย— *kathoey*) are usually included in the series for comedic purposes only, which reproduces common representation usually found in Thai mainstream media (Ünaldi, 2011).

Similar information emerged in an interview with Nonthapat Sriwichai, a producer of *series-Y* (The Modernist, 2023). Sriwichai shed light on why all actors in *series-Y* are heterosexual men (ผู้ชาย—*phuchai*), offering both producer and business perspectives. Sriwichai explains that producers must respond to the demands of their main customers, namely heterosexual women aged from around 16 years to mid-30s. These audiences are attracted to conventional masculinity and are less likely to find *toot* or *kathoey* characters appealing. Actors must accept the condition of protecting the characters they portray in the series and refrain from publicly disclosing their relationships with girlfriends. Disrupting the fantasy of their fans would have a negative impact on their careers and sponsorships. Furthermore, Sriwichai elaborates on how the content of *series-Y* has been adjusted and developed per viewer demand. This information demonstrates that while *series-Y* in Thailand revolves around male homoeroticism as its central theme, its production primarily responds to the desires of heterosexual women rather than reflecting the experiences of sexual minorities in Thailand.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Glocalization and Queer Hybridization**

In this research, I selected two theoretical frameworks, namely **glocalization** and **queer hybridization**, to highlight the agency of Thai BL fans in interpreting cultures based on their experiences. As mentioned in the previous section, fans play major roles in developing their BL communities. For example, fans with artistic skills can produce their own works and later become professional BL artists. With the increasing popularity of BL, fans' demands also influence the content of upcoming BL series. The impact of fans on the growth and direction of BL media has encouraged me to pay attention to their engagement in their fandom.

In the discussion on cultural globalization, concepts such as cultural homogenization, cultural imperialism, and Americanization have emerged as examples to describe this global phenomenon (Appadurai, 2000; Axford, 2013; Kwok-bun, 2007; Tomlinson, 2003). From this perspective, cultural imperialism, in the form of globalization, prompts resistance among those fighting to preserve their local, indigenous, and national cultures (Axford, 2013; Fang & Sun, 2009; Kwok-bun, 2007). Postcolonial thinkers have seen globalization as a

form of cultural imperialism and exploitation, with corresponding resistance from locals. This perspective describes foreign influences as harmful to local authenticity (Altman, 2001). However, Kwok-bun (2007) illustrates how globalization has blurred the boundary between cultural authenticity and commercial culture. I agree that in the globalized context, cultures have become more open to interpretation, making it increasingly challenging to conserve original cultures. In this research, I focused on cultural blending to understand how Japanese BL interacts with Thai cultures and other foreign influences that became prominent in the Thai context. As discussed in the previous section, the BL culture from Japan has spread and influenced different Asian countries. The Thai BL culture also derived some components from the Japanese original version and later blended with other foreign cultures, in particular K-pop. This process shows that Japanese BL adjusts itself to the local context, contributing to hybridized BL cultures. Baudinette (2019) and Pagliassotti (2009) describe that global expansion of the Japanese BL to different countries, or *gloBLization* (*glo-bee-el-ization*), creates a hybrid of Japanese BL and the culture of the host country. To understand the current Thai BL culture, I employed the concept of **glocalization** to demonstrate the complexity and transformation of the Thai BL culture.

According to Roland Robertson, **glocalization** is derived from the Japanese agricultural principle of "*Dochaku-Ka*" (土着化), adapting farming techniques to local conditions (Robertson, 1995). It was later applied to global localization in the Japanese business sector (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012). Giulianotti and Robertson (2012) describe glocalization as "the constant interdependence of the local and the global rather than the simple opposition of these two terms" (p. 437). This framework moves beyond categorical oppositions by suggesting the perception of mutual interactions between the two sides of the division: the global and the local, homogeneity and heterogeneity, or universality and particularity (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012).

In this research, glocalization serves as a helpful framework to emphasize the role of the local context in shaping foreign influences like Japanese BL culture. This framework allows me to pay more attention to how Thai BL communities have adapted the original BL culture to fit the Thai context in different periods. As I will discuss in later sections, the younger generation of BL fans has blended the BL culture, strongly influenced by Japan, with Thai culture and K-pop which has become increasingly popular among their generation. Glocalization consequently supports the analysis of how Thai BL fans have changed their cultures over the past twenty years.

To describe the ambiguity of male representation in BL media, I employ **queer theory** as a complementary approach. Queer theory developed from feminism and deconstructionism, rebelling against the essentialist concepts of gender and sexuality that emerged in Western societies around the late 19th century. As a postmodernist concept,

queer challenges the binary of masculinity and femininity, and the division between sexual normativity and deviance (Ball, 2001; Hall & Wolfreys, 2002; Kirsch, 2000; Nagoshi et al., 2014; Namaste, 1994; Penney, 2013; Ruffolo, 2009). It interrogates dominant norms and rejects explanations that posit fixed gender and sexual identities (Ball, 2011; Hames-Garcia, 2006; Kirsch, 2000; Nagoshi et al., 2014), providing a concept for complex identity groups marginalized by traditional heterosexuality, cisgenderism, and normativity of any gender/sexual groups (Jagose, 1996). However, given its origin in the Western context, it is important to adjust queer theory to study unconventional genders and sexualities in non-Western countries (Jackson, 2003).

Scholars of Asian queer studies, such as Jackson (2011), Martin et al. (2008), and Suganuma (2012), propose hybridization to comprehend Asian queer cultures, which incorporate Western and local elements. Like glocalization, **queer hybridization** serves as a middle ground between global homogenization and local essentialism (Martin et al., 2008), surpassing the binary between the two. Queer hybridization suggests that Western and non-Western cultures of gender and sexuality have interacted, mutually transforming from the interaction. This framework challenges Anglo-centric biases and sexual Westernization. As discussed by Martin et al. (2008), the application of Western frameworks proves inadequate in comprehending the nuances inherent in gender and sexuality within Asian contexts. For instance, in Japan, the term *hentai* (変態) encompasses a wider spectrum than its English equivalents “perverse” or “queer,” extending beyond homosexuality to include various fetishes within the Japanese context (McLelland & Suganuma, 2010). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, *yuri* serves as an umbrella category encapsulating women with diverse unconventional desires, ranging from lesbianism to attraction towards homosexual men. Similarly, in Thailand, the term *kathoei* (กะเทย) encompasses a broad spectrum, from transgender women, cross-dressing men, and effeminate homosexual men, making it difficult to fit this label into Western categories of “gay man” or “transgender woman.” This complexity highlights the challenges of applying Western concepts to Thai contexts. In this research, queer hybridization suggests the importance of understanding the local context of gender and sexuality in Asian countries, such as Japan and Thailand, given that the popularity of BL has contributed to interactions of gender and sexual cultures in various Asian countries, as elaborated above.

Employing queer hybridization in this research, I applied a postmodern framework to analyze gender and sexuality. Japanese BL, functioning as an artistic portrayal of romantic relationships between homosexual men through the perspective of women, defies definitive categorization within “heterosexual” or “homosexual” cultures according to Western categorization. The queer framework helped me to understand BL's inherent ambiguity, self-contradiction, and fluidity. As I will discuss in the next sections, the adaptation of Japanese

BL to the Thai context blended itself with traditional Thai gender roles while transforming the mainstream representation of homosexual men. Consequently, I interpreted BL as free from rigid labels, recognizing its potential for instigating changes across diverse gender and sexual identity groups. This perspective further motivated an exploration beyond the predominant binary representations of "cisgender-heterosexual females" and "gay males." I intended to transcend this binary in the examination of BL within the Thai context.

By employing **glocalization** and **queer hybridization** as frameworks to analyze Thai BL culture, I aim to challenge the stereotype of BL as a nonsensical subculture of youth corrupted by foreign influences. On the contrary, Thai BL culture represents a continuum of evolving cultures, comprising elements from local values and contemporary international trends, all related to gender and sexuality. These theoretical frameworks collectively illustrate how Thai BL culture signifies the reinterpretation, reproduction, and response of Thai youths to the cultural heritage of previous generations while also adapting to the globalized world.

## Objective

There were two primary objectives of this study: 1) to explore how young Thai BL fans engage in the recreation of their culture by blending foreign and local elements and 2) to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives on gender and sexuality.

## Methodology

### Participants

This research collected information through in-depth interviews with 13 young Thai BL fans (Table 1). To understand the present generation of Thai BL fans and the transformation over the past two decades, this study attempted to recruit a diverse pool of participants. The research aimed to maintain a broad scope in defining BL fandom, enabling a study of varied groups of fans. Participants, irrespective of their gender identities, sexual orientations, or preferred forms of BL media, were eligible if they had been BL fans for a minimum duration of one year. The participants were between 19 and 23 years of age at the time of the interviews. The majority, comprising 10 participants, identified as female or *phuying*<sup>1</sup> (ผู้หญิง). Some had previously been in romantic relationships with girls, but at the time of the interviews they expressed a preference for men. To represent the minority within the Thai BL fandom, I recruited three more participants, namely two gay (เกย์) men and an "asexual transgender man" (participant's self-definition).

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<sup>1</sup> The term "*phuying*" (ผู้หญิง), which translates to "woman" or "female," refers to cisgender heterosexual females within the Thai cultural context. It does not encompass LGBTQIAN+ individuals identifying as female, including lesbians, transgender females, or other queer females.

In this article, I used pseudonyms to refer to the participants involved in the study. While *sao-Y* or BL fans generally do not experience discrimination in Thai society, as elaborated upon in the subsequent sections, some individuals harbor negative prejudices toward them. As a result, to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, I decided not to disclose their real names or any other personal information in this research.

**Table 1** Participants

Pseudonym	Identity	Interview	Ways of Participation in BL Cultures
Aim	Woman	Individual	K-pop Fandom, Series, & Fanfics
Belle	Woman	Individual	K-pop Fandom, Series, & Fanfics
Cream	Woman		K-pop Fandom, Series, Novels, & Manga
Dream	Woman	Group	K-pop Fandom, Series, & Novels
Eve	Woman		K-pop Fandom, Series, & Fanfics
Faye	Woman	Group	K-pop Fandom & Dōjinshi Manga
Grace	Woman		K-pop Fandom, Series, & Dōjinshi Manga
Hana	Woman	Individual	K-pop Fandom, Series, & Novels
Ice	Woman	Group	Manga & Series
James	Gay Man		Manga, Series, & Novels
Kim	Trans Man	Individual	Western Fanfics & Novels
Love	Woman	Individual	K-pop Fandom, Series, Novels, & Manga
Max	Gay Man	Individual	Novels & Series

### Data Collection

I recruited participants using an online poster that provided details and eligibility criteria, such as having been a fan of BL for at least one year. Snowball sampling was also employed to recruit additional participants, ensuring that diversity within the community was represented among the participants. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured to facilitate comprehensive exploration of the topic. The focus of the interview questions was twofold according to the main research objectives: firstly, to delve into the re-creation of BL culture by young Thai fans, and secondly, to understand their perspectives on gender and sexuality.

Opening interview questions centered on the beginning of their interest in BL media, their immersion within BL cultures, and their view of the world as BL fans. The interviews provided a platform for participants to share insights into BL communities both domestic and international, and articulate how their perceptions of gender and sexuality, previously shaped by traditional heteronormativity, had transformed. Furthermore, probing questions aimed to obtain additional details, such as the inspiration drawn from BL media for learning new skills, the diverse factions within online BL communities, disagreements among fans regarding the content in BL media, and the misconceptions harbored by older generations concerning BL. For gay participants as well as the sole trans man participant, I designed additional questions to extract further details, facilitating comparisons and contrasts with the experiences of the majority of BL fans, such as how they form their identity and how they feel about the representation of romance between men in BL media. These questions were instrumental in understanding their unique experiences, distinct from those of cisgender heterosexual female fans. I interviewed six participants individually and others in groups (Table 1), as some requested to have the interviews conducted with their peers. Although individual interviews could perhaps provide more honest answers due to the lack of peer pressure, group interviewing had its benefits. During the group interviews in this research, participants felt comfortable sharing their opinions. They also helped brainstorm to provide examples or related cases for the discussion.

With the limited participant pool, data triangulation was employed as a strategy to increase the validity of the information. This approach involved sourcing data from multiple sources beyond the direct interviews conducted with participants. To complement the interview data, informal observations were made within various online BL fan communities across diverse platforms. Additionally, discussions were undertaken with colleagues and acquaintances familiar with BL media. These supplementary measures aimed to cross-validate and corroborate the information from the primary interviews.

### **Data Analysis Method**

In this study, I employed narrative analysis as a tool to examine the information derived from participants. Employing the frameworks of glocalization and queer hybridization, I used a thematic analysis of participants' narratives, wherein they assumed pivotal roles, providing personal insights into cultural blending and recreation of BL within multicultural contexts. The thematic approach is intended to capture the collective and diverse experiences of young Thai BL fans. It is noteworthy that while each narrator has the freedom to construct their narratives, the shared stories collectively influenced how each group member narrated their experiences (Brown, 2006; Squire et al., 2014). Besides the thematic approach, the examination of narrative context offered an analysis of specific settings (Squire et al., 2014). Hence, I employed a contextual approach to analyze the experiences of the

current generation of young Thai BL fans in contrast to those from the previous generation. Initially drawing from insights collected from literature reviews of BL fandom, these foundational understandings guided the analysis of narratives shared among BL fans. However, to encompass the diversity among young Thai BL fans, I also focused on analyzing the experiences of minorities within their communities without imposing their narratives of the majority. This deliberation aimed to comprehend the narratives of BL fans from varied perspectives, including those not identifying as cisgender heterosexual females and those belonging to alternative BL communities outside the mainstream Thai BL fandom.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Following the principles for conducting research with human participants, as set out by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Thammasat University, which reviewed and approved the research project (reference number: 114/2562), I provided detailed information to all participants about the procedures involved, potential harms and their rights to withdraw from the interviews without facing any consequences. Each participant provided written consent after carefully considering the potential risks. I informed them that their identities would remain undisclosed, and their information would be presented using pseudonyms. I did not use incentive payments to recruit participants. They were unaware of receiving any money for participating in the interviews. However, recognizing that all participants were students, I decided to distribute research funds of 500 baht per person to cover their transportation costs.

### **Findings**

#### **Sao-Y and the Big Picture of BL Fandom**

At the beginning of the interviews, I discussed the definition of *sao-Y* with participants. The discussion explored their opinions regarding the term used by Thai people to describe BL fans, the stereotypes associated with them, and the common characteristics observed within this fandom. Some participants perceived the term as neutral or somehow positive. For instance, Hana informed me that “I think the term is positive. It’s about girls who love daydreaming, getting lost in fantasy, or just enjoying seeing others being caring towards each other. I actually use the term to describe myself too.” Her interpretation of this word highlights the characteristics of *sao-Y* who are attracted to romance and fantasy. Hana described that “girls are into beautiful things and the fantasy world of the entertainment industry. I don’t think guys are as much into soap operas or romantic series as girls are.” Grace and Faye gave the same opinion that “Girls become friends when they discover they like the same things. They’ll talk about their favorite songs and idol groups.” “Yeah, guys will bond over playing soccer. They’re not gonna discuss these topics.” Responses from Faye

and Grace demonstrate that the content of BL media aligns with the interests of young girls, making this demographic group the primary audience for BL media.

Other participants believed that people outside their communities possibly understood the term as negative. Aim clarified that “I don’t think people who love BL media are bad at all. But personally, I won’t label myself with that term. I feel like others might judge me if I introduce myself as a *sao-Y*, you know? If I’m meeting a guy for the first time and identify as *sao-Y*, he might think I’m weird.” Ice also shared a similar idea — “guys think girls who read BL are kinda creepy. They see BL as porn and think girls who read it are, like, perverts.” Max, one of the gay male participants, also explained that “personally, I think it’s a pretty negative term. I’m on Twitter [now called X], and it’s common to come across dramas related to *sao-Y*.” According to Max, people seemed to know *sao-Y* for their defensive behaviors. When they had to protect their favorite male idols or male characters from negative comments, people thought that *sao-Y* did not hesitate to engage in unnecessary fights.

In addition to the term *sao-Y*, participants were asked for suggestions regarding words to describe BL fans belonging to other gender groups. While some participants acknowledged that individuals from LGBTQIAN+ communities (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Non-Binary, and more) also consumed BL media, they were uncertain about a term to describe them, as *sao-Y* was only associated with cisgender heterosexual females (ผู้หญิง—*phuying*), leading to the invisibility of LGBTQIAN+ fans in BL communities. Although this discussion did not result in the identification of a more inclusive term to describe BL fans from LGBTQIAN+ groups, it shed light on the distinctions between BL and gay-oriented media within the Thai context. James described that “some gay guys watch BL series, but it’s not as common for women to watch gay men’s programs.” Ice added that “gay guys are fine with consuming any media that shows male-male romance. They’re into stuff like *yaoi* or *bara*<sup>2</sup>. But girls, on the other hand, mostly stick to BL where the characters match their preferences.”

Some participants did not consume NC (no children) or explicit sexual content. For instance, Faye tried reading an online novel with sexually explicit content but found it didn’t align with her taste. She described that “there was a fanfic I tried to read, and it was an 18+ one. I had never read anything like that before. As soon as I started reading, I decided to stop right there. It just wasn’t my thing. Now, I’m a bit hesitant to read other fanfics, ‘cause most of them seem to be 18+.” She also mentioned that BL media tend to be more cute and sweet. The general content of BL media revolves around themes of romance and fantasy. Although

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<sup>2</sup> Bara (バラ) is another sub-genre of media that portrays male-male eroticism. Compared to the styles of genres in BL cultures, namely *shōnen ai* and *yaoi*, *bara* is more sexual, realistic, and masculine. The characters in the *bara* genre are more muscular and rough. The drawings also depict detailed muscles and genitals for sexually arousing purposes (McLelland, 2000a).

some female participants expressed an interest in more erotic aspects of BL media, they were reluctant to venture into gay pornography.

### **The Internet: Entrance to the Wide Y World**

In addition to exploring the identities of *sao-Y* and the BL fandom, I discussed the participants' individual journeys as BL fans with them. All participants were born into a generation already familiar with the Internet, and they mentioned accessing BL media online. Advanced technology has facilitated access to content that does not align with Thai traditions. Ice shared her observation that "back then, reading BL comic books was a taboo. My sister had to sneak to the back of the bookstore to buy them, almost like it was an illegal drug." In the past, Thai society disapproved of BL novels and Japanese BL comic books due to their homoerotic content, making them unavailable for public sale in bookstores. As a result, those interested in reading BL novels or comic books relied on online forums or borrowed copies from friends who had access to such materials. James also shared a similar experience: "I used to read BL novels on online forums. I'm so excited to see many of the novels I read there becoming super popular BL series now. The Internet was like a treasure chest of BL back then 'cause you could find all sorts of genres there." James further emphasized that the Internet had become the primary platform for fans to share original novels or fanfics. All participants highlighted X (Twitter at the time of data collection) as a significant platform that fostered the growth of Thai BL cultures because it made communication among fans more convenient. They can ship (ชิป), or pair their favorite male idols or male characters, and discuss with fellow fans about these romantic relationships. Cream informed me that "I think BL cultures have boomed because of social media, especially Twitter. People share about their favorite BL couples online. So, more and more fans join the wagon and start shipping these idols. When the fandom talks about them, their hashtags go viral. And businesses catch on to what's hot and start selling all that fans crave."

The majority of participants in this research identified themselves as *ting kaoli* (ติ่งเกาหลี) or fans of K-pop and the Korean entertainment industry. Online communities, particularly on X, serve as a space where the worlds of BL and K-pop intertwine. Engaging in shipping their favorite K-pop boybands constitutes a significant aspect of their fandom. Some participants noted that their introduction to BL fandom stemmed from their exposure to K-pop. For instance, Faye described that "I got into K-pop during my high school days. So many girls were writing fanfics about their favorite idols. That was pretty much what we could do back then. But now that we're older and have more money, we can really dive into the world of technology and fandom." Love described the charm of BL in K-pop fandom: "I've been a K-pop fan since high school. I find the relationships between guys super cute 'cause, guys are usually expected to be tough. But when they flirt and show care for each other, it's something rare and adorable." Information from some participants also indicated

that while the current Thai BL culture has been influenced by K-pop, certain aspects still reflect its Japanese origins, such as the usage of the Japanese terms *ke* and *me*. Aim gave details on those fanfics: “The characters are always members from the same idol group. Fans get to decide who’s the *ke* and the *me*. Like setting up their roles within the story.” This information shows the hybridization process in which Thai BL culture blends Japanese influences with a newer component of K-pop.

Some participants’ interest in BL cultures was not limited to K-pop. They also discussed series from China that have gained popularity among Thai BL fans. Eve, for instance, mentioned that some Chinese BL series, such as *The Untamed* (陈情令—*Chén Qíng Líng*), has a unique storytelling style. She described that “China is still not accepting of gay relationships, so their BL series can’t show explicit male-male relationships on screen. They have to be subtle about it. And fans have to use their imagination to figure out whether the characters are in love or not.” The popularity of *The Untamed* in Thailand also made the two main actors, Xiǎo Zhàn (肖战) and Wáng Yībó (王一博), into yet another couple Thai BL fans shipped. Additionally, Eve disclosed that when she was younger, shipping members of EXO, a Korean boyband, was popular among the fans. One example of BL couples was between Oh Se Hun (오세훈) and Lù Hán (鹿晗). EXO is an example of various K-pop groups consisting of international members from foreign countries, such as China. In the case of the BL fandom, shipping the same K-pop idols in online communities has become an international phenomenon. In the example mentioned above, Thai fans can connect and exchange information with fans in China, as they share the same fandom. K-pop has thus become a starting point for Thai fans to explore BL in other countries.

A few participants in this study did not consider themselves fans of K-pop. Kim identified as a “shipper” (ชิปปเปอร์) and was more familiar with the British and American entertainment industries. Kim expressed that his favorite BL media do not conform to the characteristics typically associated with BL media in Thailand, such as being focused on romance and fantasy. Kim has explored various works of male-male romance that have allowed for a deeper exploration of diverse and unconventional forms of sexuality. As an asexual individual, Kim felt more connected to Western novels that addressed asexuality, such as *Vanilla* by Billy Merrell. He described that “It’s great how I can connect with a character like Vanilla, who’s also asexual. It’s so hard to find representation for asexual people, you know? The novel is about the conflict between Vanilla and his boyfriend, Hunter. Vanilla is asexual while Hunter isn’t.” From Kim’s perspective, Western BL media is more open to inclusiveness and diversity and less focused on unrealistic romance. Kim criticized the Thai BL fandom for its inability to embrace gender and sexual fluidity by adding that “I feel

like the Western BL fandom is way bigger, so there's more diversity in it. They're not as hung up on those fixed *po*<sup>3</sup> as we see in Thai BL."

As Kim and a few other participants noted, Thai BL fans tended to be defensive when others recreated fanfics that altered the gender roles of their favorite couples. For instance, fans of *Off-Gun* (ออฟ-กัน) had already established Off as the more masculine partner since his name was placed before Gun. Consequently, this fixed position implies that Gun should assume a more feminine role. Therefore, if someone were to rename the couple as *Gun-Off* or switch their roles by presenting Off as more feminine and Gun as more masculine, their fans would be outraged. Kim further remarked that Western BL fandoms prioritized the rights and freedom of LGBTQIAN+ individuals. Thus, changing gender positions of the couples would not cause many conflicts among Western fans. He informed me that "most Western media focus on social issues, but over here in Asia, the BL fans are mostly straight and just consume it for entertainment."

In addition to exploring BL cultures from different countries, fans can share their fantasies with fellow members on online platforms. Some participants mentioned an application called *Joylada* (จอยลาดา), which is a popular platform for reading original BL fiction and for amateur authors to showcase their works. Advanced technology has enabled more fans to start writing fanfic novels, and those with artistic talents can publish their self-made comics. The freedom to reinterpret the original BL culture allows young Thai fans to create a variety of BL fiction based on their preferences and knowledge. This process has resulted in media that incorporates elements from diverse cultures. According to Eve, in some fanfics, authors create characters based on members of their favorite K-pop groups. However, the settings are in a Thai school or university. This example of fan-made fiction demonstrates how young authors blend their experiences in Thailand with the storytelling style of Japanese BL and character designs based on K-pop artists.

### **BL World: Escape, Fantasy, and Resistance**

During the interviews, participants shared their experiences in BL communities and their perspectives as BL fans. They acknowledged that BL media portray unrealistic representations and primarily cater to the fantasies of female fans. However, their

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<sup>3</sup> As described by Vichayawannakul (We Mahidol, 2020), "*po*" (โป) is derived from the English word "POsition" (and pronounced roughly like the first syllable of that word). Thai BL fans use this term to describe the roles of male characters in their relationships. For example, the partner that has a "cool bad boy" persona will fit the role of "the husband" in his relationship, which the fans describe as "po-pua" (โปหู้). On the contrary, his counterpart, who is portrayed as "cute and sweet," will be assigned the role of "the wife," known as "po-mia" (โปเมีย). According to the general pattern in Thai BL fandom, when fans form "the house" (บ้าน) for their favorite couples, they will put the name of the husband before the wife. Vichayawannakul notes that in rare cases, Thai BL fans will place the wife's name before the husband's.

perceptions of this idealistic content varied. Some participants regarded romantic relationships between attractive men as special, because it is unattainable in reality. Love added that “regular boy-girl relationships are just so bland. Nothing really exciting about them.” James described that “BL gives us that fantasy we can't find in real life. Like, we can't find that perfect guy among the people around us. Some of us are hopeless. Just watching those actors is enough to make them happy.” Some participants also highlighted that the fantasy of BL culture holds significance beyond providing a personal safe space for fans. It also has an actual impact on the entertainment industry. Eve explained that “I used to be so selfish. I couldn't handle it when my favorite idols got close to other female idols. I would get jealous. But when they were with other guys, I was fine. I guess I was just immature back then. But now I've grown up and can accept that my idol is old enough to have his girlfriend.” Eve shared that BL culture has helped many young fans who were not ready to see their favorite male idols in relationships. It was more acceptable for them to witness the pop idols flirt with fellow band members, which reduced the sense of having their beloved men stolen by other women. Eve further described how many fans would react aggressively upon learning that their favorite idols were dating women, often threatening to withdraw support or sending hate messages to the idols' girlfriends. Information shared by the participants revealed that despite being fictional, romances between their favorite male artists foster their careers, which rely heavily on support from their fans.

In contrast to others, a few participants perceived BL culture as a form of resistance or liberation from mainstream norms. Ice, for instance, acknowledged the role of BL media as a reaction to the male-dominated society. She stated “I think one of the reasons why girls are into BL media is because they want to dominate men. Like in BL, they show male characters as fragile. Just like how society often portrays women.” According to Ice, most BL authors and producers are female. They are able to exert control in creating male characters that align with their desires. This representation served as a domain where females hold freedom, in contrast to the reality where males are often viewed as superior. Furthermore, expressions of resistance are not limited to challenging male-dominant norms. In online communities, different groups of BL fans can engage in discussions and express disagreement on various issues. Some participants criticized the typical characteristics of Thai BL media. Belle commented “you know, *nai-ek*<sup>4</sup> is always portrayed as the small, fair-skinned one. He's usually in the Faculty of Accountancy. Meanwhile, *phra-ek* is taller with a darker skin and studying Political Sciences.” Similarly, Dream shared that “novels and series don't depict

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<sup>4</sup> Phra-ek & nai-ek (พระเอก & นางเอก) are the terms used in BL communities to describe male characters who embody male and female gender roles, respectively. They play with the common Thai words, phra-ek & nang-ek (พระนาง & นางเอก), describing male and female protagonists in fiction. Fans replace nang (นาง—Mrs.) with nai (นาย—Mr.) to change the sex of nang-ek to male.

what gay relationships are like. I don't think they have to conform to the roles of *ke* and *me*. In reality, the *ke* can have a mustache, and the *me* can have a cuter face than the *ke*.” Ice exhibited an interest in various genres of BL. She believed that although Thai BL media contribute to the representation of male homosexuality, most fans do not pay significant attention to LGBTQIAN+ rights issues. She also commented on the limited preferences of many Thai BL fans and that they tend to favor beautiful young men — “I don't think *sao-Y* fans read *furry*<sup>5</sup> or *bara*. I mean, just look at the covers of those Thai BL novels—all hairless, perfect pretty boys. It's kind of annoying, 'cause real guys don't look like that.”

The same notion about unrealistic representation also existed in Belle's and Kim's comments. Belle explained that “romantic scenes in public are not happening in real life. People will stare if a boy uses a napkin to wipe his boyfriend's mouth or pinch their cheeks. Or even just putting his head on his boyfriend's shoulder.” Similarly, Kim commented that “let's talk about those sex scenes in fanfics. It's pretty obvious that the writers have zero knowledge about sex. They have no idea what actual people do when they get down to it. And don't even get me started on those fanfics set in a university. They're just so hilarious. I guess the authors must be high school students and have no clue what it's actually like to be in the university.” Kim further elaborated that “there's a cliché phrase often used in the series. Like, 'I'm not gay. I'm just an ordinary guy who happens to love another guy. 'It's like they're trying to downplay their sexuality.’” These comments reflect the growing debate among fans regarding the binary gender roles and male homosexuality in BL media. As awareness of gender and sexual diversity increases in online communities, fans have become more critical of the representation of male-male relationships in BL media.

All participants agreed that BL media have played a role in increasing the visibility of gender and sexual diversity in Thai society and mainstream media. Dream referred to a quote from her favorite series: “I love one quote from *ThamType the Series* — ‘if you don't care about gender, you open yourself to a wider world. 'I think it's a powerful quote.’” James believed that “our Thai society isn't always that open to diversity, so novels, comics, and movies that explore these different identities are just the beginning. And if you can watch *series-Y*, you'll start seeing stories about lesbians, bisexuals, and more.” However, some participants also pointed out that despite being familiar with homoerotic content, some BL fans still have limited knowledge about LGBTQIAN+ communities. Dream informed me that

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<sup>5</sup> According to Ice, *furry* is another sub-genre of erotic fiction. Similar to *bara*, *furry* characters tend to have sexualized body types. Male characters have muscles, and female characters have large breasts and buttocks. However, these characters are humanoid animals, having human bodies with certain parts of animals. Some characters have the head of a wolf, cat, bird, or lizard, and some also have wings or a tail. *Furry* portrays all kinds of sexual relationships between these human-animal hybrid characters, including male-male eroticism.

"I think there are fans who ship male-male romance. But they don't support it. I remember seeing a fan complain about not wanting her favorite idols to be gay after reading some gossip. She was like, 'no way, that's not acceptable! 'And what's funny is, she's always posting about how her favorite male idols are flirting with each other."

Furthermore, Max expressed concerns regarding how BL media perpetuate negative stereotypes of gay men and romanticize abusive sexual behaviors. Max referred to *TharnType the Series*, and explained that "when *nai-ek* was young, he got sexually abused by a man, so he turned homophobic. But then, the story shows how *phra-ek*'s love helps him heal from that." Max believed that such content reinforces the negative stereotype of gay men in Thai society as perverted predators. Additionally, he was skeptical that love could heal the psychological trauma caused by childhood sexual abuse. Max also criticized "*Thap, Don't Lift His Skirt!*" (ทัฟฟ์ อย่าเปิดกระโปรงน้อง) stating that "this novel's all about toxic behaviors. Like, the *phra-ek* goes and lifts *nai-ek*'s skirt and calls him '*toot-dek*' (ตุ๊ดเด็ก—sissy kid). Some people commented that they had similar experiences happen to them when they were younger, leaving them traumatized. But, in the novel, *nai-ek* forgives his abuser 'cause he has a crush on that person." Max found it unacceptable that BL media portray abusive behaviors as romantic and believed that creators of BL media should have greater social responsibility before publishing their works. Max and some participants were examples of BL fans who have identified limitations in the content of BL media. Common characteristics such as binary gender roles and unrealistic male physical appearances have become topics of debate among fans in online communities, which now consist of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

## Analysis

This study examined the experiences of 13 young Thai BL fans regarding the blending of Thai and foreign cultural influences in Thai BL media, and how consuming BL media had influenced their understanding of gender and sexuality. In analyzing the findings from their narratives, I employed the frameworks of glocalization and queer hybridization. Concerning cultural blending, I argue that the advanced communication technology of today's globalized world contributes to the continuous evolution of the original BL culture from Japan and the creation of various BL versions in different Asian countries. BL, which plays with fantasy, enables creators to use foreign cultures to represent the universe outside their immediate surroundings. Japanese BL media have also explored foreignness by utilizing settings from Western countries, various historical periods, or character designs based on the physical appearance of Western males, such as being very tall, having light hair color, big eyes, and an aquiline nose (McLelland, 2000a; Welker, 2015). The fantasy world of BL became an empty canvas where creators can blend foreign cultures with locally familiar

themes. This characteristic of BL facilitates the process of cultural blending to create a fascinating yet familiar fantasy for their fans. When Japanese BL cultures gained popularity, Japaneseness represented trendiness in some Asian countries. As described earlier, BL fans in some countries, such as Taiwan and the Philippines, use Japanese cultures to recreate their fantasy world (Martin, 2012; Japan Foundation Bangkok, 2021) in a similar manner to how Western influences became ingredients in creating the world of Japanese BL.

According to the participants in this research, they accessed BL media and engaged with BL communities through online platforms. This condition enabled them to access BL media from different origins. Twenty years ago, Thai BL fans mainly consumed Japanese manga and read online BL novels by Thai amateur authors. Currently, Thai BL fans have access to wider online communities. As shown in the previous section, most participants were fans of Korean boy bands. Some participants did not read Japanese BL manga or consume any media from Japan. Those who mentioned reading Japanese manga referred to their experiences when younger. With BL becoming a popular genre in Thai mainstream media, they mostly watched Thai BL series and those from other countries, such as China and the United States. Online communities also provided them with various online platforms to read BL novels and manga, ranging from fan fiction to original works and from Thai to other languages. Although the Japanese influences, such as the terms *ke* and *me*, still linger, Thai BL culture has become more diverse and multicultural. The impact of K-pop on the current Thai BL stands out, serving as the initial gateway through which some Thai fans were introduced to BL content. Information shared by participants showed Koreanness as a symbol of romance, male beauty, and an integral component of BL media across diverse online platforms. Moreover, the accessibility of diverse online communities has notably benefited the minorities within the BL fandom. For instance, Kim, the only trans man BL fan in this study, was exclusively engaged with Western BL media and had used technology as a pivotal tool in both self-discovery and establishing connections with BL communities outside Thailand. In contrast to the BL fandom in the past two decades, the evolution of online platforms has facilitated greater access for minority groups within the BL fandom, providing them with spaces where they feel a sense of belonging. Moreover, these platforms have broadened the scope of BL fandom, welcoming diverse fan groups other than cisgender heterosexual women.

In addition, advanced technology supports creators to publish their works. The large number of amateur creators across various platforms contributes to a wide range of interpretations and recreations of BL media. Some examples mentioned by participants represent the product of cultural hybridization from different origins, such as a BL fanfic with a Japanese storytelling style, Korean characters, and the setting of a Thai location. In addition, some mainstream examples suggest that Thai BL has expanded its scope to various

locations and eras. "*I Told Sunset About You / I Promised You The Moon*" (แปลรักฉันด้วยใจเธอ 1 และ 2) showcases different settings of Thai society, from a local Sino-Thai community on the island of Phuket that exudes nostalgia to university students in the present-day Bangkok. "*To Sir, With Love*" (*Khun-Chai—คุณชาย*) depicts male-male romantic relationships in the context of a Sino-Thai family in the early 1930s. These examples illustrate that BL is a cultural domain open to people from diverse backgrounds, enabling them to express their experiences, preferences, and fantasies by using the beautiful romance between young men as the medium. The two mentioned series are also available online for foreign audiences. This easy accessibility has introduced some unique cultural contexts specific to Thai people to the broader BL communities. Within the framework of glocalization, the experiences of young Thai BL fans demonstrate the fusion of cultures from diverse origins and periods. The Internet empowers them to explore various versions of BL from different countries and exposes them to different interpretations of BL. On an international scale, cultural major powers like China, Japan, and South Korea wield significant influence over various Asian countries, particularly in the current K-fever phenomenon. However, globalization has equipped Thailand with the capacity to present its unique interpretation of BL, originating from Japan, and to blend this foreign influence with various local elements. This hybridized form of Thai BL has contributed additional creations to the multicultural BL fandom and continues to shape the evolution of BL as a shared international cultural phenomenon.

To expand the discussion of cultural blending to encompass gender and sexuality, I integrate the concept of queer hybridization into the analysis. As previously discussed, I approached the analysis of BL through a postmodern framework, refraining from imposing Western concepts of gender and sexuality onto it. Inherent ambiguity within Japanese BL has played a significant role in shaping Thai BL, attuned to its local context. Thai BL seamlessly integrates traditional Thai gender norms, garnering significant popularity among *phuying* (cisgender heterosexual females, according to Western concepts). However, its influence extends beyond mere entertainment, contributing to a transformative representation of sexual minorities within the broader spectrum of Thai mainstream media.

The opinions expressed by participants in this research resonate with the gender binary of romantic relationships in the mainstream Thai media. As demonstrated in previous sections, the portrayal of male characters in BL follows the binary constructs of masculinity and femininity, which reinforces conventional gender roles aligned with Thai values. As participants have shared, the archetypes of "tough but caring" *phra-ek* and "cute and sweet" *nang-ek*—pervasive in traditional Thai soap operas—are found in Thai BL media, with the gender roles twisted to cast *nang-ek* as male. Furthermore, the lack of an explicit focus on sexuality within BL media aligns with traditional expectations for women in Thailand. Thai society has not traditionally encouraged girls to express or explore their sexuality.

As mentioned earlier, some people have misconstrued BL as a form of pornography, casting girls who express an interest in BL as deviant. Conservative Thai elites contend that Thai youths are vulnerable to adopting unfavorable influences from foreign cultures, prompting the imposition of censorship to safeguard them from exposure to sexually explicit or violent media (Jackson, 2004; Townsend, 2019). Within the framework of Thai nationalism, the female body became the vessel of Thai national identity (Jeffrey, 2002; Vichit-Vadakan, 1994). Thai women have had to conform to expectations posed by the role of "*kunlasatri*" (กุลสตรี—noble lady) to secure a respectable standing within Thai society, embodying the traits of chastity, refinement, and gentility. These entrenched values significantly impinge upon the cultures and communities of Thai BL fans. McLelland (2000a) discusses that Japanese BL often presents sexual interactions between men as beautiful and romantic, while gay men-oriented media tends to embrace a more overtly sexualized approach. Similarly, Thai BL media adheres to the beautiful-and-romantic formula. As shared by some participants, they preferred non-sexually explicit content, primarily engaging with BL narratives that emphasize romantic interactions between characters. Some participants also noted that the predominant emphasis within Thai BL fandom lies in romance, with little inclination towards exploring the diverse spectrum of unconventional sexualities.

The integration of BL into the Thai context has also contributed to an important transformation in the representation of homosexual men in Thai mainstream media. In earlier times, the representation of sexual minorities in Thailand was limited to *the third sex* archetype, encompassing transgender women and effeminate homosexual men. Ünaldi (2011) discusses that Thai media often cast sexual minorities as clowns for entertainment. The narrative of these characters frequently concluded in failure, with some meeting tragic ends or embracing lovelessness with a sense of pride. Such depictions of sexual minorities within Thai mainstream media perpetuated the myth that an unsuccessful love life was an inescapable destiny for *the third sex*. Thai media predominantly depicted *the third sex* characters as individuals struggling to embody femininity and inevitably failing to sustain relationships with men. This narrative reinforced the belief that if an individual was attracted to males, they should self-identify as a woman (or *kathoey*). In contrast, BL has presented a more optimistic portrayal of male-male relationships, making romantic relationships between male characters more common in Thai mainstream media. While possessing diverse tastes and viewpoints on BL media, all participants agreed that the rising popularity of BL in Thailand has significantly contributed to heightened visibility for male homosexuality within Thai society.

Insights gathered from interviews conducted with students and teachers (Supawantanakul & Metasuk, 2021) suggest that despite advancements in Thai education in terms of incorporating content related to sexual diversity, students often do not perceive their

schools as safe spaces for open discourse on matters of sexuality. Instead, they rely on self-education via online platforms. Notably, all participants in this study indicated that they had learned about male-male eroticism through the Internet and BL media. Some mentioned that BL served as a gateway to exploring broader dimensions of gender and sexual diversity. The participants in this study also showed their advocacy for LGBTQIAN+ rights, with some extending their support to same-sex marriage and the affirmation of non-binary gender expressions. Moreover, as previously discussed, some participants expressed a desire for enhanced sensitivity within Thai BL content, particularly regarding the experiences of sexual minorities and addressing issues like sexual harassment. I perceive that the conflicts and disagreements within the Thai BL fandom create discussions on unconventional sexualities and LGBTQIAN+-related issues among Thai fans. These discussions possess the potential to foster improvements in the content of Thai BL by addressing societal issues. Some participants noted that more recent BL series had improved their content by addressing the challenges encountered by gay men in Thai society. Series like *"Until We Meet Again"* (*Dai Daeng*—ด้ายแดง) have incorporated societal challenges—such as the acceptance of gay men within Thai families and the impact of homophobia on youths—as a means to foster greater awareness and understanding of LGBTQIAN+ communities.

Within the framework of queer hybridization, Thai BL represents ongoing interactions between local and foreign concepts of gender and sexuality. As an artistic medium catering to the unconventional desires of women in Japan, BL seamlessly integrated itself into traditional Thai gender role expectations in romantic relationships. Nonetheless, BL emerged as a challenge to the Thai mainstream media by presenting an alternative portrayal of homosexual men that defied *the third sex* category. Its popularity significantly heightened the visibility of Thai LGBTQIAN+ individuals and facilitated discussions among youths on matters about sexuality and LGBTQIAN+ issues. Participants in this research, viewing themselves as part of a globalized community of BL fans, highlighted the importance for Thai BL to include more LGBTQIAN+ concerns. They advocated for leveraging its potential as a media form capable of instigating societal changes. Drawing comparisons with Western media, particularly in the United States, some participants noted that BL media of Asian origin predominantly emphasized romantic narratives and suggested integrating elements that endorse rights advocacy akin to Western media. As the current generation of Thai BL fans becomes increasingly familiar with gender and sexual diversity, Thai BL, a commercial success, has evolved into a substantial platform where fans from diverse backgrounds engage in media consumption and exchange of perspectives. In the eyes of the present generation of fans, BL stands as a potential avenue for providing a platform for LGBTQIAN+ individuals to share their narratives. Thai BL, no longer confined to a solitary fantasy world for

young women, has expanded into a more inclusive space, capable of accommodating larger and more diverse audiences.

Looking ahead, I anticipate forthcoming research focusing on diverse fans within BL communities, particularly those from sexual minorities. Prevailing research on BL primarily concentrates on the dominant demographic within the fandom—namely, cisgender heterosexual women—probing into their desires and experiences. Nevertheless, as some sexual minorities, including homosexual men and transgender people, consume BL media, it becomes imperative to delve into their perspectives concerning this genre and investigate their distinct experiences. Furthermore, in the interviews with participants, the term *num-Y* (หนุ่มวาย—*Y boy*) surfaced, referencing male fans of Girls 'Love (GL) media. Although genres like *yaoi* or BL have become popular, mainstream media continues to underrepresent female homosexuality. However, it remains pivotal to acknowledge that the GL, the *yuri* community, and its male fans also offer intriguing yet relatively underexplored topics for research. Exploring the *yuri* community could pave the way for a more understanding of female homosexuality while enriching our comprehension of how male individuals engage with the realm of female same-sex romance.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The strength of this study was that it recruited a diverse group of young Thai BL fans in terms of their membership to different gender/sexual identity groups and the origins of their favorite BL media. Hence, it also gave non-mainstream BL fans a voice to share how they interpret themselves as BL fans and describe their specific cultures.

The limitations of the study stemmed from the broader research project within which this study was conducted. In the broader project, each researcher was funded to collect information from ten participants through interviews to study the group of youths they were interested to focus on, resulting in relatively small participant numbers in each study. To alleviate this issue and to increase the diversity of the participants, I decided to recruit three more participants. However, with only three LGBTQIAN+ youths among the participants, this study was unable to provide an in-depth analysis of this minority within young BL fandom in Thailand. Future studies should examine LGBTQIAN+ fans of BL media in greater depth.

### **Conclusion**

This research studied the experiences of 13 young Thai BL fans through the globalization and queer hybridization frameworks. As the younger generation of BL fans is more familiar with advanced communication technology, they possess the means to explore expansive BL fandoms online. Globalization has introduced Japanese BL to different countries, spawning hybridized BL unique to each context. This study has illustrated that

contemporary Thai BL is a fusion of Japanese origins, the Thai context, and other foreign influences, particularly K-pop. Furthermore, globalization facilitates connections between Thai BL communities and their counterparts worldwide, empowering Thai creators to share their distinctive interpretations of BL on a broader global stage. Despite adjusting to traditional gender expectations, the significance of BL extends to its pivotal role in elevating the visibility of male same-sex relationships within mainstream media, presenting an alternative representation of sexual minorities that transcends the confines of *the third sex* archetype. Globalization has extended BL's reach to diverse individuals from varied backgrounds, harboring distinct viewpoints toward male-male relationships. The dynamic interplay between different cultures and heterogeneous groups of individuals will continue to propel the evolution of BL, solidifying its status as a shared cultural entity within online communities.

### Acknowledgement

This research was conducted under the umbrella of the "Shape the Young Mind: the Different Worlds of Thai Youths in the 21st Century Project" (โครงการโลกอันหลากหลายของเยาวชนไทยในศตวรรษที่ 21), which seeks to foster a deeper comprehension of the younger generations, their cultures, and their communities. Generous support for this project was extended by Bangkok Bank.

I wish to express my profound gratitude to my esteemed colleague and friend, Timo Tapani Ojanen, whose insightful inputs and invaluable suggestions have significantly contributed to the enhancement of this article.

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