

## Personalized Muslims: Homoerotic Fantasy and Indonesian Muslim Women Fans' Engagement with Thai Y Series

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### Abstract

This article explores the piety of Indonesian Muslim women fans as they engage with Thailand's Y Series (Thai Boys' Love, a genre that depicts homosexual relationships between male characters, which are considered forbidden in Islamic teachings). The rising popularity of Y Series has generated a remarkable phenomenon in Southeast Asia, particularly in Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia. Despite substantial criticism from societal and religious groups, Y Series has garnered significant popularity among Indonesian viewers, in particular heterosexual Muslim women. This paper examines the influence of Islamic piety on Y Series consumption. It finds that the majority of Indonesian Muslim women fans in this study engage with Y Series due to their admiration for the actors' attractiveness. However, this paper argues that Y Series offers both sinful pleasure and a new perspective on love that transcends traditional gender norms. When watching Y Series, Indonesian Muslim women fans can distinguish between fiction and reality, viewing it as a homoerotic fantasy that offers both entertainment and escapism. While engaging with media featuring homosexual themes, Indonesian Muslim women fans often identify themselves as "Islam KTP," implying that their Islamic identity and piety manifest only on official identification (KTP, Kartu Tanda Penduduk or national ID card) without comprehensive adherence to Islamic teachings.

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In this context, we argue that fans negotiate their Islamic piety as personalized Muslims, defined as an interpretation of Islamic teachings shaped by personal preferences and lifestyles, allowing greater flexibility in applying their faith in daily life.

**Keywords**

Indonesian Muslim women, Islamic piety, personalized Muslims, Thai Boys' Love, Y Series Consumption

## Introduction

This research examines how Indonesian Muslim women fans negotiate their Islamic piety when consuming Thai's Boys Love (Thai BL) or Y Series. Y Series is a Thai drama genre that portrays homosexual relationships between two male characters (Baudinette, 2019; Sukthungthong & Bunyavejchewin, 2019; Supawantanakul, 2023). Passion for Y Series causes Indonesian Muslim women fans to experience internal conflict due to their Muslim identity, as Islamic teachings forbid homosexuality and consider it sinful. Indonesia, being a country with a predominantly Muslim population, regularly censors various websites with content related to pornography and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)<sup>1</sup> themes, specifically through the Ministry of Communication and Informatics (Kominfo) and the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI) (Kominfo, 2016). These restrictions also limit LGBT visibility on broadcast television and mainstream media (Kompas, 2016). Indonesia's attitude toward LGBT people is influenced by the majority religion, Islam. Consequently, Y Series fans in Indonesia consume their preferred series in private.

Since the 2000s, Indonesian audiences have been familiar with Thai films, particularly horror films. Indonesian audiences consider Thailand one of the top Southeast Asian countries for producing horror films. Several Thai films, including *Shutter* (2004), *First Love* (2010), and *Pee Mak* (2013), have been successful in Indonesia. At that time, most Thai films were supplied via pirated DVDs and downloadable files distributed via flash drives, and they were sometimes shown on national television. Advances in the internet have made it easier to access Thai films and dramas through various channels such as YouTube (Rosidi, 2021) and popular streaming platforms like Viu and Netflix. Since 2019, Indonesian cinemas such as CGV and Cinepolis have screened Thai films. The Thai film *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* (2024) achieved record-breaking sales in Indonesia, attracting over 3 million viewers (CNN Indonesia, 2024). As a result of this growing popularity, Thai pop culture fandom began to flourish in Indonesia. For instance, the Mario Maurer Fans Club Indonesia, established in 2012, has over 13,800 members (Mario Maurer Fansclub Indonesia, n.d.), *Thaioverdose*, established in 2015, has over 900 members (Triadanti, 2020), and *Nanon Korapat Indonesia*, established in 2016, has over 5,900 members

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<sup>1</sup> In this research, we use the term LGBT as it is more commonly recognized in Indonesia than other terms like LGBTQ and LGBTQIA+. Indonesian media and public discourse predominantly employ LGBT, both in affirmative and critical contexts (Detiknews, 2016; TvOne News, 2022), whereas the more inclusive term like LGBTQIA+ remains relatively uncommon. Additionally, the government and conservative groups tend to adopt LGBT in legal regulations and policy discussions, further reinforcing its dominance in public discourse (Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Informatics, 2016; Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2016). Moreover, general awareness of the broader spectrum of gender and sexual identities in Indonesia remains limited, making LGBT the more widely understood and accepted term in activism and social conversations (Human Right Watch, 2016; Ridwan & Wu, 2018).

(Fans Nanon Korapat Indonesia, n.d.) The Indonesian audience's familiarity with Thai cinema has positioned Thai popular culture, or "Thai Wind" (Thairath, 2016), as a viable alternative for entertainment, alongside Western and East Asian screen productions.

Indonesian audiences have also been introduced to Y Series, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nugroho, 2020). The mandate to remain at home during the pandemic led to the digitalization of Thailand's cultural industry, enabling it to effectively reach international target markets (Baudinette, 2023), including Indonesia. Known as *Siri Wai* in Thailand, the term Y Series is derived from the Japanese genre of fictional media featuring homoeroticism, called *Yaoi* (Baudinette, 2019; Supawantanakul, 2023). *Yaoi*, a shortened form of the Japanese expression "yama nashi, ochi nashi, and imi nashi," translates to "no climax, no opening sentence, and no meaning" (McLelland, 2000; McLelland & Walker, 2015; Sukthungthong & Bunyavejchewin, 2019). The popularity of *Yaoi* in Thailand has led to the widespread use of the letter Y to categorize content relating to male homoeroticism. Thus, the letter Y is used to represent various forms of male homoerotic content, such as Y Series, Y Novels, and Y comics (Supawantanakul, 2023).

One of the Y Series that has attracted the attention of Indonesian audiences was *2Gether the Series* (2020) (Nugroho, 2020; Triadanti, 2020). Featuring Bright Vachirawit and Win Metawin, *2Gether the Series* (2020) was available for viewing in Indonesia on YouTube and Netflix. Indonesian audiences were immediately enthralled by the attractive appearance of the actors and the humorous plot, even before realizing that it belongs to the homoerotic genre. The success of *2Gether the Series* (2020) greatly influenced the popularity of Y Series in Indonesia, particularly among young people. Some Y Series titles that are popular in Indonesia include *Cutie Pie* (2021), *KinnPorsche* (2022), and *Cherry Magic* (2023).

Y Series is becoming popular among heterosexual Indonesian women and gay men (Nugroho, 2020). In Indonesia, Y Series is commonly referred to as "Thai BL," and fans identify themselves as "Thaienthu" and "BL Stan." In 2020, the IDN Times conducted a survey to determine the popularity of Thai artists in Indonesia. The findings revealed that 78.3% of Indonesian fans of Thai Wind are females in their teens and twenties (Triadanti, 2020). The same survey found that Y Series actors such as Bright Vachirawit, Win Metawin, Mew Suppasit, and Tay Tawan are the most renowned Thai actors in Indonesia (Triadanti, 2020). Indonesian fans find Y Series to be a source of entertainment and a means of escapism, as well as facilitating the acceptance of Indonesian homosexuals, despite the country's prevailing anti-LGBT sentiment (Nugroho, 2020).

Although Boys' Love series are produced in various countries such as Japan, China, and the Philippines, Thailand's Y Series continues to capture the attention of Indonesian audiences. One key aspect that sets Y Series apart from Boys' Love productions in other countries is the concept of the "jin couple." Derived from the phrase "imagination couple" the term refers to on-

screen pairings that audiences strongly desire (Baudinette, 2023; Chatlertmongkol, 2021). In the context of Y Series, a “jin couple” consists of two actors who are officially promoted by their agency to enhance their commercial appeal (Bintang, 2023). These actors are frequently cast together in multiple Y Series projects, make joint appearances at fan meetings, and engage in curated, affectionate interactions at various events, further strengthening their connection with fans.

The presence of a “jin couple” not only enhances the popularity and engagement of Indonesian audiences but also reinforces the illusion of romance between paired actors, ultimately fueling the growth of *shipping* culture—a phenomenon where fans imagine and actively support romantic pairings between musicians, celebrities, and male idols (Bintang, 2024). Several “jin couples” widely shipped by Indonesian fans include Bright Vachirawit-Win Metawin, Tay Tawan-New Thitipoom, and Ohm Pawat-Nanon Korapat (Bintang, 2023). Fans not only support their favorite “jin couples” through acting projects, but also actively promote them on social media, attend fan meetings, purchase official merchandise, and even defend them against criticism or controversy. The presence of “jin couples” in Y Series not only brings captivating love stories featuring attractive actors but also creates an interactive experience that allows fans to feel deeply involved in shaping the off-screen narrative of their favorite couples.

Through social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok, Y Series has managed to build a sizable fan base in Indonesia. Y Series has garnered significant enthusiasm, leading to the frequent hosting of fan meetings and concerts in Indonesia since 2022, featuring popular Thai actors including Bright Vachirawit, Win Metawin, Ohm Pawat, and Tay Tawan (CNN Indonesia, 2023; Santosa, 2023). To avoid controversy and bans from the government and Islamic groups, the organizers introduced Y Series actors as Thai actors and singers. Apart from that, the organizers also called Y Series a Thai drama without mentioning it as a same-sex romance genre.

The primary means of distributing Y Series in Indonesia is through subscription-based streaming platforms such as Netflix, iQiyi, and Viu. While the government has banned the broadcast of LGBT content on television and radio (Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia, 2016), it has been unable to block content on paid platforms like Netflix and Viu (Antara, 2020). This is because the government’s detection tools named AIS, which rely on keyword-based detection (e.g., porn and LGBT), have limitations that prevent them from effectively monitoring these platforms (Antara, 2020). Thus, public reports primarily initiate the block against pornographic and immoral content on paid streaming platforms (Antara, 2020). Even after implementing blocking measures, new sites continue to emerge, making it difficult for the government to eradicate all homosexual content from websites. Furthermore, the government can only block LGBT-related websites if they contain explicit sexual content and actively encourage individuals to engage in that sexual orientation

(Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Informatics, 2016). As a result, Y Series continues to circulate without significant government scrutiny due to its distribution on paid platforms, the absence of keyword detection, and limited public reporting.

In the midst of the rising popularity of Y Series, criticism has emerged from Islamist groups due to its explicit portrayal of homosexuality. Both cultural norms and Islamic teachings oppose same-sex relationships. Despite facing significant criticism from Indonesian religious group and the government, Y Series has managed to garner a substantial audience among Indonesian heterosexual women (Nugroho, 2020), particularly among hijab-wearing women. This study primarily focuses on how Islamic piety influences the consumption of Y Series among Indonesian Muslim women fans.

We found that the main attraction for Indonesian Muslim women who engage with Y Series is the handsome actors and the homosexual love narrative, which is considered genuine affection. Y Series also offers a new perspective on love that goes beyond gender roles and social norms. Indonesian Muslim women fans, who consider watching Y Series to be a sinful pleasure, experience internal conflict. Nevertheless, the research participants in this study were able to distinguish between fiction and reality and thus viewed Y Series as a homoerotic fantasy that offers entertainment and escape. When Indonesian Muslim women fans of Y Series engage with the show, they negotiate their faith as “Islam KTP”, a colloquial expression meaning “Muslim only on the identity card”. The term refers to *Kartu Tanda Penduduk* (KTP), Indonesia’s national identification card, which records a person’s religion. The identification of self-piety as “Islam KTP” suggests that their Islamic identity solely manifests in official identification, which is listed on the national ID card (KTP), without a comprehensive adherence to Islamic teachings. In this context, we argue that the way fans negotiate their Islamic piety as personalized Muslims, defined as individuals who interpret Islamic teachings according to their personal preferences and lifestyles, allows greater flexibility in the application of their faith in everyday life. Y Series exposes Indonesian Muslim women fans to homosexual narratives rarely found in Indonesian mainstream media. This prompts heterosexual Muslim women to start questioning Indonesian society’s cultural taboos and Islamic doctrines. Although Y Series is widely believed to have the potential to foster inclusivity among minority groups, it has encountered persistent opposition from religious communities.

## Literature Review

### Y Series and Homoerotic Fantasy

Studies on Y Series in Indonesia have explored the meaning of love (Niko, 2022), the impact on audiences with atypical sexual orientations (Ghufron & Raihana, 2023), the motivations of female viewers to watch Y Series *KinnPorsche* (2022) (Azzahra & Esfandari, 2023), the depiction

of alternative universes in fanfiction (Yuliarti, 2024), and the purchasing behavior regarding merchandise (Marcella et al., 2024). Nevertheless, studies concerning Muslim women as Y Series audiences are limited. This study's emphasis on Muslim women who watch Y Series is significant as it highlights the viewpoints of women in a society dominated by religious doctrine and patriarchy.

The Indonesian audience's enthusiasm for Japanese pop culture also influences the popularity of Y Series in Indonesia. The generation of Indonesians who grew up in the 1990s had already been exposed to the presence of queer characters, exemplified by Sailor Uranus and Sailor Neptune in the *manga* and *anime* series *Sailor Moon* (1991) (Rastati, 2021). However, the initial exposure of Indonesian fans to the Boys' Love genre began with the underground circulation of *Yaoi* comics among the Japanese comics fan communities (Abraham, 2008; Prameswari, 2023; Sukotjo, 2022). Additionally, the immense popularity of the Korean Wave in Indonesia has introduced Indonesian fans to the practice of *shipping* culture and the pairing of members of Korean male idol groups. Because of their exposure to Japanese and Korean pop culture, Indonesian fans already harbored romantic fantasies about same-sex male couples when Y Series arrived in Indonesia. Y Series' acceptance among Indonesian audiences was possible due to their familiarity with the *Yaoi* comics and Korean idol culture.

The creation of works such as Boys' Love by women is often explained by a desire to challenge gender oppression, seek equality in relationships, and search for the ideal partner (Fujimoto, 2020). This allows Boys' Love to maintain its identity as a female-oriented fantasy of male homoeroticism (Chou, 2018). The (re)creation and exchange of fantasies about love between men by women foster a distinctive subculture. Female *Yaoi* fans, for example, mock themselves as *fujoshi* (rotten girls) because they recognize that homoerotic fantasies involving gender and other people are socially abnormal and inappropriate (Chou, 2018). Female fans engage in homoerotic fantasies by consuming media that focuses on same-sex relationships. This genre often idealizes male characters by emphasizing emotional and affectionate relationships, which resonates with female audiences' desire for romantic narratives that challenge traditional gender roles.

Women engage with homoerotic fantasies through Boys' Love to explore complex emotions regarding gender identity, societal norms, and personal desire (Chou, 2018). These fantasies, especially for women in heteronormative societies, offer an opportunity to explore non-conventional relationships and challenge patriarchal norms. Through engagement with male homoerotic narratives, female fans can explore power dynamics, emotional vulnerability, and desire beyond the limitations of heteronormative structures. Such fantasies enable women to project their emotional needs and desires onto fictional characters that provide pleasures potentially lacking in real-world relationships. These narratives offer an alternative to conventional portrayals of heterosexual romance, which frequently emphasize male dominance and female subordination.

Consumption of homoerotic fantasy, such as Y Series, facilitates the formation of female fan communities. Fan communities are becoming a space for women to explore their fantasies and desires without fear of judgment. This space is significant for Muslim women fans, as their religious and cultural identities limit open discussions or engagement with non-heteronormative content. This engagement may involve negotiating their piety with a desire to explore alternative forms of romantic and sexual expression. The notion of the “personalized Muslims,” where individuals interpret Islamic teachings based on personal beliefs and preferences, is relevant in understanding how these female fans align their consumption of homoerotic content with their religious identities.

### **Islam and LGBT in Indonesia**

Islamic piety in Indonesia has been examined from various perspectives, such as Muslim women’s participation in Indonesian politics (Dewi, 2017) and the use of piety as a political tool in presidential elections (Karman et al., 2024). Other studies have investigated expressions of piety on social media (Husein & Slama, 2018) and piety formation in online communities (Lengauer, 2018). Additionally, research has explored the potential of Islamic teachings as a therapeutic approach to psycho-moral challenges (Aljunied, 2021). Research on the intersection of Islam and LGBT cover a variety of aspects, including the criminalization of the LGBT community (Sarbini & Has, 2019), the detrimental impact of religious fundamentalism on gay and lesbian individuals (Arli et al., 2020), and the phenomenon of moral panic (Rodríguez & Murtagh, 2022). However, in-depth research on the correlation between Islamic piety, LGBT issues, and Y Series consumption in Indonesia is still lacking.

Indonesia, being a predominantly Muslim country with conservative values and a lack of acceptance towards the LGBT community, makes the emergence of Y Series trend completely unanticipated. Islam regards homosexuality as a behavior that deviates from the natural order and disrupts human reproductive function. It considers LGBT identities sinful, culturally harmful, and morally dangerous (Ichwan, 2021). The narrative of Prophet Lot is employed in both traditional and modern Islamic discourse to comprehend and denounce homosexual relationships (Siraj, 2016). Within the context of the Qur’an (Islamic holy book), specifically in chapter Hud: 77-83, it is stated that the people of Prophet Lot were subjected to divine condemnation and annihilation due to their engagement in same-sex relationships. In Islamic literature, including the Qur’an, *hadith* (Prophet Muhammad’s sayings), and *fatwah* (Islamic legal ruling), it is explicitly stated that ideal sexual relationships are confined to lawful marriage between a heterosexual couple. Islam also emphasizes the importance of sexual satisfaction between spouses within marriage (Davies, 2019). Sexual activity outside the confines of marriage is considered *zina*, or fornication. Thus, Islam strictly prohibits homosexuality, extramarital sexual relations, and anal sex.



The introduction of modern values through Dutch colonialism (1816-1942) also contributed to the diminishing of traditional societal acceptance of same-sex practices in Indonesia (Hidayana, 2018). Homosexuality was prevalent during the colonial era, and the Dutch colonial government responded decisively to this phenomenon (Boellstorff, 2005; Hidayana, 2018). In the 1930s, a total of 223 gays were apprehended in different cities, including Batavia (now Jakarta), Bandung, Medan, and Makassar (Fitria, 2010). Those who were proven to be gay were subjected to imprisonment for a period ranging from two months to two years. Most of them were Europeans from respected backgrounds, including officials, police officers, and teachers (Fitria, 2010). During the colonial period, same-sex relationships were considered a threat to social structure.

The diverse range of influences has led to the redefinition of concepts of gender and sexuality based on religion and the colonial period (Hidayana, 2018). Many people often regard LGBT individuals as a group to be avoided. The gay community is frequently portrayed as distant from religion (Koeswinarno, 2017). Prior to the strengthening of Islamic influence and Dutch colonialism, Indonesia had a historical precedent of homosexuality (Hidayana, 2018). For instance, the Bugis Tribe of South Sulawesi follows a gender system that acknowledges five distinct genders (Bosra, 2020; Hasriani, 2018): *Orowane* (cisgender men), *Makkunrai* (cisgender women), *Calebai* (feminine men who cross-dress), *Calalai* (masculine women or tomboys), and *Bissu* (transgender priests who embody a gender-neutral identity and serve as spiritual advisors). This gender system has existed since before the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Homosexual relationships also occurred between *Warok* (mentor) and *gemblak* (young male protégé) within the context of the *Reog Ponorogo* traditional dance, which originated in 15<sup>th</sup> century East Java (Intan, 2022; Ishomuddin, 2019; Krismawati et al., 2018; Sudikan, 2018). Additionally, pederastic practices, referring to homosexual relations between adult men and teenage boys, took place in the Aceh community of North Sumatra during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hurgronje, 1906).

The effects of Islamic values and Dutch colonialism have shaped Indonesian society, leading to the prevalent belief that conventional romantic relationships are exclusively limited to heterosexual couples. From the state's perspective, legal marriage according to Marriage Law Number 1 of 1974 is heterosexual (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 1 Tahun 1974 Tentang Perkawinan, 1974). Even though there is no law specifically prohibiting same-sex relationships, Indonesia has a law that prohibits adults from engaging in same-sex sexual relations with minors, punishable by up to five years imprisonment (Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana, 1946).

The majority of Indonesians reject the presence of LGBT individuals because they perceive it as a social aberration that contradicts the country's religious and moral principles. Various factors believed to contribute to the development of same-sex sexual orientation include inadequate parenting practices, insufficient sexual education, instances of sexual violence,

exposure to pornography, and drug abuse (Yudiyanto, 2017). However, LGBT issues have emerged as a significant social phenomenon in Indonesia.

In the Reformation era (1998-present), globalization has significantly influenced discussions on sexuality in Indonesia. The loosening of media regulations has led to the emergence of films incorporating homosexual themes, the proliferation of beauty pageants, and the significant growth of the LGBT movement (Davies, 2019). LGBT issues in Indonesia have evolved from individual concerns to more structured and actively advocated movements. Since 2013, there have been 119 LGBT organizations across 28 provinces in Indonesia (Sukardi, 2020). These organizations construct a comprehensive narrative advocating for the legalization and societal equality of LGBT individuals. Various organizations, communities, non-governmental organizations, and campus-based organizations have participated in this concerted effort to elicit empathy and support.

LGBT groups employ various means such as book and magazine publishing, social media content creation, and advertising to communicate ideas of equality, with a particular focus on young people (Sukardi, 2020). They also engage in campaigns to achieve societal acceptance (Mansur, 2017). They employ films and popular culture as strategies to counteract discourses that seek to marginalize queer communities in Indonesia (Rodríguez & Murtagh, 2022). Regular exposure to LGBT values and narratives leads to a tolerant societal attitude. Consequently, some people have begun to view LGBT as a lifestyle, especially in urban areas (Yudiyanto, 2017).

Indonesian cinema has integrated LGBT themes and elements in several films and series (Martin-Anatias, 2020). Notable examples include the films *Arisan!* (2003), *Arisan! 2* (2011), and *Lovely Man* (2011). The Indonesian Film Censorship Board (LSF) imposes strict censorship on films with LGBT themes, particularly those containing sexual scenes, and categorizes such films as 17+, meaning they are intended for audiences over the age of 17. Despite successfully passing censorship and being eligible for cinema screenings, these films still risk receiving public criticism.

The utilization of cinematic productions featuring LGBT elements demonstrate the use of fictional queer realms by film characters as a strategy to question and subvert heteronormative dynamics within their urban settings (Rodríguez & Murtagh, 2022). The emergence of LGBT content in Indonesian films and drama series signifies a resurgence of, and increased artistic liberty for, filmmakers following heavy censorship during the New Order era (the regime of Indonesia's second president, Suharto, 1966-1998) (Bhagchandani, 2020; Martin-Anatias, 2020). This censorship was enforced through the state-owned broadcaster, Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI), which functioned as a governmental instrument for controlling public discourse, shaping societal perceptions, and disseminating state propaganda (Pradhana et al., 2024). However, the progressive movement advocating for sexual freedom resulted in heightened legal regulation of

sexuality through the application of religious interpretations, particularly Islam (Davies, 2019). In 2016, the Indonesian public, along with religious leaders from Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism, collectively opposed the legalization and promotion of LGBT activities, which they perceived as sexual deviance (Detiknews, 2016; Tempo, 2016). In response to these protests, the government, through the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI), prohibited transgender appearances and LGBT campaigns on television and radio (Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia, 2016; Kompas, 2016). The government justified this prohibition as a measure to protect children and teenagers from potentially engaging in what they labeled deviant behavior. As a result of the banning of LGBT content in mainstream media, LGBT groups continue to advocate through social media platforms such as X and Instagram (Ives & Suhartono, 2019; Susanto, 2019). The ban on LGBT content on television and in mainstream media has made homosexuality taboo and rarely discussed openly.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology. We collected data from in-depth interviews (Syed & Hamzah, 2012; Syed & Runnel, 2014) to understand how Y Series fans navigate their Islamic piety while watching the series. The interviews used semi-structured questions, which contained theoretical concepts such as Islamic piety, homosexuality, acceptance of foreign culture, and fans' motivations and negotiations when watching Y Series. The research was conducted from July to November 2023. We selected Jakarta as the research site because of its frequent hosting of brand promotions, fan meetings, and concerts by Y Series actors. As a result, many Y Series fans from across Indonesia travel to Jakarta.

This study received research ethics approval. Before conducting the interviews, we informed all research participants in detail about the interview procedures, potential losses, the absence of monetary rewards, the right to withdraw without consequences, and the confidentiality of their identities. Consent to participate in the interviews was obtained from all participant. Research participants were recruited through the snowball method, and recruitment ceased once consistent and saturated responses to all research questions were achieved. Some of the specific criteria for research participants included Indonesian Muslim women, Y Series fans, and over 18 years old.

We interviewed twenty-two participants, with each interview lasting between one and one and a half hours. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian and later translated into English. In this article, we use initials to refer to all participants because of the prevailing negative stigma associated with people who engage with the Boys' Love genre. To minimize potential prejudice, we do not disclose their identities, such as names, ages, or residential locations. We protected the privacy of all participants and ensured their anonymity.

Researchers used thematic analysis with inductive coding to analyze the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We transcribed and categorized participants' opinions and experiences using codes and themes derived from concepts such as the Boys' Love genre, Islamic piety, and homosexuality. In thematic analysis, researchers categorize both explicit and implicit ideas based on interview results. These categorizations were carried out to explore the role of Islamic piety in consuming Y Series among Indonesian Muslim women fans. After conducting the analysis, we divided the findings into three themes: (1) motives for consuming the Y series, (2) Islamic piety and engagement with Y Series, and (3) attitudes toward homosexuality. In the following sections, we examine and analyze each theme further. The researchers involved in this study have backgrounds as Muslims and non-fans. Even though they are non-fans, the researchers have experience watching Y Series regularly and attending Y Series fan meetings as a form of observation.

## Findings

### Sinful Pleasure: Motives for Consuming the Y Series

This study revealed that Indonesian Muslim women fans initially discovered the Boys' Love genre through two main sources: *Yaoi* comics and Y Series. Y Series introduced 13 of the 22 research participants to the same-sex genre for the first time. Initially, fans were not aware that the Y Series narrative centered around same-sex romance. They thought Y Series was similar to Korean dramas that showcased heterosexual romantic narratives. Upon their initial viewing of Y Series, they felt surprised and confused. Nevertheless, they chose to keep watching because of the attractive appearance of the actors in Y Series and the light style of the storyline.

*Watching Thai BL means you don't have to think or use your brain. There is no need to look for a storyline. Furthermore, the actors are handsome. Win Metawin is number one!* (Participant V)

Despite an initial shock and confusion among fans regarding the inclusion of homosexual content in Y Series, fans ultimately found it to be a source of entertainment and a means of escapism during times of stress and boredom. Nevertheless, due to the prevailing religious values and conservative norms that disapprove of LGBT individuals, fans of Y Series are unable to openly manifest their enthusiasm in public. Moreover, patriarchal norms and the dominant religion in Indonesia expect women, who make up the primary audience of the Boys' Love genre, including Y Series, to refrain from expressing interest in sexuality that contradicts them (Sukotjo, 2022). Finally, fans enjoy Y Series privately, only revealing it to their closest friends.

*When I first watched Lovesick, I was surprised and amazed. It turns out that in this world, same-sex relationships can and do exist. In the past, BL wasn't as open as it is now, but now it's normal. There are already many series with wild and uncut versions. Astagfirullah (I seek forgiveness in God). BL is an instant escape that can be sought at any time. When you're bored and stressed, there's color in life. What's unfortunate is that our country is judgmental and conservative. So, we can't be too open with other people. Only close friends know that I watch BL. Moreover, my current workplace has a stronger Islamic culture and mindset. They are really narrow-minded. I tried fishing, but their response was blunt that LGBT was disgusting. So, I gave up talking about it. (Participant F)*

*BL serves as both my escape and coping mechanism. I know the limit. I understand that we should enjoy it in private. There is no need to implement the behavior in real life. (Participant K)*

Y Series introduced Indonesian Muslim women fans to the idea that genuine love transcends both conditions and gender. Love can be experienced not only between individuals of different genders but also between individuals of the same gender. Fans view same-sex romantic relationships as a safe space where they can express themselves without fear of criticism or pressure to meet unrealistic expectations. However, consuming Y Series does not directly generate a desire for affection from individuals of the same gender, because fans still yearn for affection from individuals of the opposite gender. This demonstrates that fans of Y Series are active viewers who possess watching competencies (Syed et al., 2015; Syed & Runnel, 2014)-that is, the ability to make informed viewing choices, articulate dissenting opinions that challenge prevailing norms, and navigate the complexities of global modernity while maintaining their Muslim identity.

*There are many values that I have learned, such as loving someone unconditionally. For example, I don't care if you have to be beautiful and perfect. It's okay if you are like this (same-sex). I like you, that's all. I want to feel something like that, but from the opposite sex. (Participant J)*

Moreover, fans who cannot experience ideal romantic relationships in their daily lives perceive the love portrayed in Y Series as ideal love. Fans regard the portrayal of unconditional love in Y Series as genuine because it disregards sexual orientation and gender. Y Series explores the concept of non-conventional love, which questions conventional notions of heterosexual relationships and societal norms, particularly in Indonesia.

*The lesson I remember most after liking BL is that their love is actually not strange. (Love) is not something rigid. It doesn't have to be a woman or a man. Romantic love can be male-to-male and female-to-female. And there's nothing strange about that. If I didn't watch BL, I wouldn't understand that.*  
(Participant M)

*For today's BL fans, maybe they don't have a normal ideal partner, so they see this BL couple as ideal.* (Participant T)

Indonesian Muslim women fans felt inner turmoil while watching Y Series because they knew that watching depictions of homosexual relationship violates Islamic teachings. Fans understood that Y Series offered enjoyment and sexual pleasure, but they also recognized that this pleasure was sinful. They believed that enjoying Y Series involved objectifying the LGBT community, particularly the gay community. Fans experienced sexual pleasure from Y Series' portrayal of intimate scenes, including kissing, hugging, and sexual intercourse between male characters. Despite their regret, they found themselves unable to stop watching Y Series.

*Sometimes I wonder how long I will keep watching this, but I still do. My sins seemed to be piling up. Despite my regret, I decided to watch it again. Even if I get married and my husband forbids me from watching BL, I will continue watching it.* (Participant R)

*When there's a sexual scene, I feel a sense of pleasure. But I don't think this is right. I believe this violates Islamic principles. Morally, I also feel wrong because it objectifies LGBT people.* (Participant G)

To navigate feelings of guilt, some participants adopted a selective approach when watching Y Series. Participant F, for example, frequently fast-forwarded or skipped explicit scenes that she perceived as unnecessary for the development of the main couple's relationship. She emphasized that the storyline should prioritize essential elements that foster character growth and deepen emotional connections, rather than focusing on explicit content. Similarly, Participant E avoided sexual scenes altogether due to personal discomfort. These viewing choices demonstrate a critical and intentional engagement with Y Series narrative, reflecting a preference for storytelling that emphasizes emotional depth and relational development over overtly romantic or sexual content.

*There are many (explicit) scenes that aren't necessary to develop the main couple, so I speed through them. I don't watch everything. It should focus on essential things, like developing the relationship.* (Participant F)

*There are parts I skip because I feel uncomfortable watching them.*  
(Participant E)

The selective viewing practices show how religion and sexuality are connected in the way participants engage with Y Series. Instead of just accepting or rejecting the content, they actively choose what to watch based on their beliefs. This reflects how they reinterpret media in a way that fits their values (Wilson, 2004). Similar findings have been seen among Muslim Malay women watching non-Western soap operas. They engage with modern global media while filtering content through their religious and cultural perspectives (Syed, 2011; Syed & Runnel, 2014). By skipping scenes, they find uncomfortable, participants balance personal enjoyment with religious values, showing how they interact with the media in a thoughtful and selective way.

### **Personalized Muslims: Islamic Piety and Engagement with Y Series**

Identifying as Muslim and presenting oneself with Islamic symbols, such as modest fashion and a *hijab* (headscarf), does not necessarily guarantee that someone is religious or pious. Several aspects, including gender, age, ethnicity, and sexuality, can influence a person's sense of religiousness regardless of their self-identification as religious or adherence to Islam (Hoel & Henderson-Espinoza, 2016). For instance, wearing the *hijab* as a Muslim woman does not automatically indicate her adherence to Islamic principles. This practice may not be driven by individual beliefs but rather by parental encouragement, school influence, or peer influence during childhood.

*Wearing a hijab does not mean that you are Muslim. It's possible that you wear the hijab because your parents encouraged you to do so from a young age. During your teenage years, you may be searching for your own identity. Do not think about religion. Just focus on enjoyable things. Watching BL helps to escape from the world.* (Participant T).

Our study also revealed that Indonesian Muslim women fans adjust and interpret their Islamic practice based on their personal preferences and needs. We refer to Muslims who adapt their Islamic practices to suit their individual circumstances as “personalized Muslims.” Personalized Muslims are those who interpret Islamic teachings based on their own personal beliefs and lifestyle while still adhering to Islam's fundamental principles, which include belief in Allah (*shahada*), prayer (*salah*), giving alms (*zakat*), fasting during the holy month (*Ramadhan sawm*), and undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). Personalized Muslims navigate the complexities of modern life by attempting to balance personal beliefs with the core of Islamic teachings. This demonstrates the dynamic nature of Islamic practice among its followers in contemporary contexts.



Within the scope of this study, an example might involve engaging with Y Series while adhering to the five principles of Islam.

The concept of personalized Muslims allows Indonesian Muslim women fans to negotiate the boundaries between expectations of being a pious Muslim and their personal preferences when watching Y Series. For these fans, personalization involves balancing religious piety with personal desires, such as finding pleasure in watching shows that conflict with Islamic teachings, including Y Series. “Sinful pleasure” happens when Indonesian Muslim women fans recognize that watching Y Series is pleasurable, but at the same time they struggle with feelings of guilt and sin.

The personalized Muslims concept allows them to enjoy Y Series without feeling guilty or conflicted about their Islamic beliefs. This internal negotiation reflects their agency in deciding how much this pleasure affects their spiritual lives. They achieve this by framing Y Series as homoerotic fantasy and entertainment, separating it from their real-life values. In addition, Y Series can be seen as an act of escapism as well as a way to explore alternative narratives about love, relationships, and gender dynamics. Furthermore, Y Series offers a lens through which to question social norms, including gender roles and patriarchal structures. This personalized Muslims conceptual approach to piety and entertainment consumption allows Indonesian Muslim women fans to engage critically with the content, pushing the boundaries of their lived experiences and religious norms while still maintaining their Muslim identity.

*I am Muslim. I pray. I try to do beneficial things according to the Islamic teachings. But there are also other principles that I acknowledge. I watch BL for myself. (Participant G)*

*I pray, recite the Quran, fast, and give alms. But I continue to date and do skin ship (touching the opposite sex). Even though I wear a hijab, I am doing those things. But hijab is mandatory. Wearing the hijab does not require being a good girl. I continue to watch and enjoy BL. I have many sins. I am not perfect. But I try to recite the Quran because I am always watching BL. So, it needs to be balanced. While watching BL, I practice dhikr (remembrance), using phrases like Astagfirullah (I seek forgiveness in God) and Oh Allah (Oh God). If you truly want to be a pious Muslim, you must give up all pleasures. Let go of your addiction to Korean dramas and Thai BL. (Participant Q)*

The majority of this study’s participants were *hijab*-wearing women who practiced prayer and fasting regularly, but they all denied being pious Muslims. In Indonesia, the use of Islamic symbols (e.g., the *hijab* for women, the beard for men, Islamic names, or Arabic vocabulary in



conversation) do not necessarily indicate a person's piety. The term "Islam KTP" has gained popularity in Indonesian society as a way of mocking individuals (including themselves) who identify as Muslim on their identity card but do not adhere to Islamic values in their daily lives. Indonesian Muslim women fans who describe themselves as "Islam KTP" are aware that homosexuality is considered prohibited in Islam. However, they wish to avoid judgment and criticism for their interest in Y Series.

*I am not a devout Muslim. So yeah, Islam probably won't make me stop (watching BL). I'll stop if I'm bored. As a religion (Islam), it doesn't have much influence... A portion of the interview quotation was removed for concisemoved and clarity (Participant E)*

*Well, even though we are Muslims, there are lots of Islam KTP too. I don't expect to be understood because I like BL. I just want not to be judged that this BL is haram, etc. I want Indonesians to think that liking BL is a personal matter. There is no need to comment and consider it disgusting. (Participant D)*

#### **Empathetic Understanding: Y Series Fans' Attitudes toward Homosexuality**

This study revealed that fans perceive the Boys' Love genre, including Y Series, as a means of campaigning for the social acceptance of same-sex romance. The existence of same-sex series has encouraged numerous individuals to openly identify as non-heterosexual, expressing their sexual orientation beyond the heterosexual norm. While Y Series fans maintain that homosexual behavior is considered *haram* (forbidden) in Islam, they also demonstrate compassion toward people who are homosexually oriented. Fans argued that, as humans, we lack the authority to declare something a sin because only God has the authority to deem something sinful.

*BL can be a campaign for LGBT people to be accepted by society. In the past, when I watched and read BL, people were still secretive. But now, a lot of people are starting to be brave enough to say that love is love. They dare to come out as gay, lesbian, or pansexual. They feel more accepted because of BL's presence. There's nothing wrong with LGBT people who are Muslim. God is the one who has the right to determine a person's sin, not us. LGBT people don't necessarily engage in prohibited activities. There are also gays who try not to violate laws of nature and religion. He lived alone all his life.*

*God is most merciful and most forgiving. What God does not forgive are the polytheists and apostates. Apart from that, it's forgiven. LGBT is haram, but that doesn't mean their prayers are not accepted by God. (Participant U)*

Despite receiving Islamic education from a young age, including Quran lessons and attendance at Islamic schools, and growing up in households with close relatives who were Islamic preachers, the research participants in this study continue to watch same-sex series. After years of consumption, they started to show tolerance for the LGBT community. However, this acceptance is personal and has not been expressed openly. Continuous exposure to homosexual content seems to have the capacity to shape an individual's perspective and foster acceptance of values that were initially opposed to their beliefs.

*Since watching Y Series, I've become more open-minded. I know someone who is LGBT. Before, they made me uncomfortable, but now I've gotten used to it. I am fine with them. I hope LGBT can be accepted. At least in Thailand, they can be accepted in their country. An LGBT couple has been together for decades but can't get married. It's sad to see heterosexual couples just meeting and they can get married right away. As long as Indonesia has a Muslim majority, it will not accept LGBT people. (Participant E)*

*In Islam, they have to be eradicated. They can't exist. For me, as a human being, I want them to be accepted. LGBT people are labeled as a disease and a spreader of disease. I feel sorry for them. In fact, heterosexuals can also spread HIV. But it's hard to express myself within my religious and conservative family. And my workplace is also like that. (Participant F)*

The decreasing religious devotion of the research participants in this study towards Islam can be attributed to the emergence of negative associations with radical Islam in recent years. A string of heinous acts carried out by Islamic extremist organizations in recent years, such as the November 2015 Paris attack, the 2016 Brussels bombing, and the 2016 Berlin truck attack, has fueled the rise of Islamophobia, particularly in Western countries (Hoel & Henderson-Espinoza, 2016). Consequently, negative stereotypes associated with Islam have increased, resulting in its stigmatization and defamation (Hoel & Henderson-Espinoza, 2016).

Furthermore, extremist Islamic groups in Indonesia, including Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), and Jama'ah Islamiyah (JI) (Ansori, 2019), have engaged in acts of violence. In addition, numerous lectures delivered by hardline Islamic organizations

exhibit a severe demeanor, advocating hatred towards believers of different faiths, exerting pressure on individuals' choices, and displaying intolerance. Consequently, this creates a sense of antipathy towards Islam, even among its own followers. Instead of a radical preaching approach, fans gravitate towards a jovial, casual, and open-minded style of preaching, exemplified by Habib Jafar, a youthful preacher who has gained popularity on social media.

*I attended an Islamic sermon once, and they instilled hatred. As far as I know, Islam is a beautiful and peaceful religion. However, many preaches were extremely harsh, like infidelizing other religions, disgrace LGBT. I'll pass that thing. I like Habib Jafar's lectures because he does not propagate hatred towards Christians. Islam should be embraced. I have never found an Islamic group that defends LGBT. If I read comments on social media, the comments are racist, such as (declaring the LGBT group) to be the Prophet Lot people. That makes me not want to be close to hardline Islamic groups. Surprisingly, they have also many followers. (Participant J)*

## Conclusion

Despite conflicts with Islamic teachings, the presence of attractive actors and a simplistic storyline motivate Indonesian Muslim women fans to watch Y Series. Y Series has introduced fans to the concept of alternative love, particularly same-sex love, which they perceive as genuine and ideal. Although fans may feel conflicted about the moral implications of enjoying Y Series, they are unable to resist watching it due to its ability to serve as a sanctuary from the pressures, monotony, and stress of everyday life, as well as its capacity to provide sexual pleasure. At the same time, they engage in selective viewing, filtering out content that conflicts with their beliefs while still appreciating the emotional depth and character-driven narratives. However, fans are unable to openly express their enthusiasm due to religious and conservative norms. Indonesian Muslim women fans enjoyed Y Series despite the perception that it was a sinful pleasure. Nevertheless, fans continue to yearn for affection from the opposite sex, highlighting their confirmation of Muslim identity.

Identifying oneself as Muslim by wearing Islamic symbols, such as the *hijab*, does not necessarily reflect Islamic piety. In this research, we coin the term "personalized Muslims" to describe Muslim fans who adapt Islamic practices to suit personal preferences while maintaining core Islamic principles. For instance, they persist in watching Y Series and demonstrating acceptance for LGBT groups, despite defying societal norms and religious teachings. This research also found that Y Series serves as a platform for campaigning for the societal acceptance of

same-sex relationships. Y Series encourages increased tolerance and acceptance of LGBT values among Indonesian Muslim women fans. However, although fans may exhibit tolerance toward LGBT individuals, they have not yet actively integrated themselves into the community or openly expressed support. The phenomenon of Indonesian Muslim women fans in Y Series highlights the complexity of Islamic identity in the contemporary era.

This study contributes to the understanding of personalized Muslims, who reconcile their religious principles with the enjoyment of entertainment. Indonesian Muslim women fans preserve their religious identity by adhering to the concept of personalized Muslims, even when they interact with media that may challenge conventional Islamic perspectives. Furthermore, in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, this study offers valuable insights into the cultural and social dynamics of how global media, particularly from non-Western sources such as Thailand, influences perceptions of gender, sexuality, and identity. The study enables us to conduct further exploration into how taboo content can question or reaffirm beliefs, attitudes toward sexuality, and acceptance of diversity, providing a nuanced understanding of cultural consumption in Muslim-majority societies.

## **Ethics**

This study was approved by the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). All study participants gave their consent.

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