



## **Voices and Dialogic Discourse: Intertextuality and the Framing of Intersex in Online Public Comments**

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### **Abstract**

Understanding of intersex in Thai academic discourse remains limited. Even within the LGBTQIA+ movement, intersex voices and their discursive representations remain largely unheard. Although the intersex movement in Thailand was established in 2021, the voices of its activists have not yet gained significant recognition. This study raises the question of how discursive voices construct meanings of the intersex body in online public comments. It follows a qualitative methodology and examines the multiple voices in public comments through the lens of intertextuality. The findings show that intersex variations discussed in public comments emerge through interactions among multiple discourses. Medical discourse and binary gender discourse remain central in constructing explanations of intersex variations in Thai society. Meanwhile, Buddhist, Islamic, and pop culture discourses act as supporting forces that reinforce the meanings shaped by medical and binary gender discourses. Together, these discourses emphasize the idea that intersex is a deviation or abnormality from the natural sex. In contrast, global intersex discourse offers a counter-narrative to these hegemonic meanings. However, this discourse remains marginal in public comments, and the voices of intersex activists are absent. To shift the meaning of abnormality toward perspectives that embrace biological diversity, it is essential to form discursive alliances. Intersex activists should collaborate with interdisciplinary experts to construct forms of knowledge that are legitimized by institutional authority. Such an approach would not only enhance credibility but also cultivate broader and more inclusive understandings of intersex within the Thai public sphere.

### **Keywords**

Voices, Dialogic Discourse, Intertextuality, Intersex, Online public comments

## Introduction

The notions of bodily autonomy and variations in sex characteristics among intersex individuals have become part of the human rights movement since the late 1990s, particularly in the context of North America and Europe (Amato, 2016; Holmes, 2009). Intersex activist groups have reclaimed the definition of intersex from medical pathologization and recontextualized it within a diverse spectrum of sex characteristics, including variations in physical traits, genitalia, reproductive anatomy, hormones, and chromosomes (Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). These biological variations were previously classified within medical discourse as “disorders of sex development” but have since been reframed as “variations of sex development.” This paradigm shift has allowed individuals with such variations in sex characteristics to be collectively referred to under the term “intersex,” thereby positioning them within the broader LGBTQIA+ movement for sexual and gender diversity.

Intersex people are those born with sex characteristics that do not fit typical definitions of male or female bodies. The term intersex refers to natural bodily variations. These characteristics may be visible at birth, may only become apparent during puberty, or may never be physically detectable, such as in cases involving chromosomal differences. Experts estimate that intersex people make up approximately 0.05 percent to 1.7 percent of the global population (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016). Descriptions of intersex conditions illustrate the range of bodily diversity. For example, an intersex child might be born with a large clitoris, or with a small penis and a scrotum that resembles labia. Some individuals may have mosaic genetics, in which some cells carry XX chromosomes and others carry XY. These examples suggest that intersex is a socially constructed category arising from biological variation (Saenz, 2021).

Due to biological characteristics that do not conform to socially constructed meanings of male and female bodies, intersex individuals are often stigmatized and subjected to multiple human rights violations. These include violations of their rights to health and physical integrity. One major concern is non-consensual sex-normalizing surgeries, which are performed to make their bodies conform to male or female norms. These interventions can have long-term health consequences, such as urinary incontinence, loss of sexual sensation, and psychological distress (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016).

Human rights organizations working on intersex issues in Asia, such as Intersex Asia, have issued strong statements asserting that “We affirm that intersex people are real, and we exist in all regions and all countries around the world, including all countries of Asia. Thus, intersex people must be supported to be the drivers of social, political, economic and legislative changes

that concern them" (Intersex Asia, 2023). However, such knowledge and practice have not yet taken root in Thai society, particularly within public discourse, which is a crucial space for shaping shared understandings of social issues.

Although in the past seven years there has been a group of intersex activists in Thailand working to promote new understandings of intersex identity through self-representation, organizing events, and providing public information, the voice of this group remains limited in terms of policy influence and public awareness. Meanings of intersex associated with the notion of biological diversity have yet to be represented in educational content, official documents, mainstream media, or public online discussions. Moreover, state policies concerning intersex individuals continue to be based primarily on medical perspectives. For example, a regulation issued by the Ministry of Interior in 2012 stipulates that intersex individuals may change their title only if they provide medical evidence confirming a condition of "ambiguous sex," and must undergo sex reassignment surgery at a state-approved medical facility in order to align their birth sex with the officially recognized gender, in accordance with formal social norms (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). Similarly, the National Health Security Office (NHSO) has declared that individuals with ambiguous sex conditions may access surgery under the national health insurance scheme to make their physical sex correspond to their gender identity.

An examination of how intersex is discussed in Thai public discourse, particularly in public comments, reveals a notable social phenomenon: understandings of intersex in Thai society are fragmented and markedly differ from the paradigm shift observed in Western intersex activism. Most Thai people understand intersex variations through a medicalized lens and refer to them as "ambiguous sex conditions." This form of understanding separates intersex variations from both the category of typical biological sex and that of social identity. Some groups refer to intersex individuals as "kathoey," drawing from historical sources in which the term has been translated as "true hermaphrodite." Others associate intersex bodies with Buddhist classifications of individuals who are prohibited from monastic ordination, such as "napumsaka-pandaka" and "ubhatobayañjanaka." The term "napumsaka-pandaka" refers to a person whose sex is not clearly identifiable as male or female at birth, while "ubhatobayañjanaka" describes a person who possesses both male and female sexual characteristics in a single body (Mahanarongchai & Chatsuwan, 2024).

Public comments tend to support medical intervention. Such procedures do not appear to promote the well-being of intersex individuals or affirm the legitimacy of their existence. Rather, they aim to modify the body so that it clearly conforms to either the male or female category. In doing so, the body is brought into alignment with socially recognized gender roles. This assumption is reflected in comments such as:

"There is someone like that in my neighborhood too. They were born with both sexes, but the doctor suggested choosing the sex that their body was developing more toward. They had surgery as a child, and now they are just living a normal life."

(C-13)

"Try checking whether the urethra connects in a way that aligns more with male or female anatomy. Then focus on that aspect. It will make treatment easier."

(C-14)

The examples above suggest that the commenters rarely address health-related concerns. Even basic issues such as urination and sexual well-being are not mentioned. Instead, the comments tend to recommend medical procedures as the only viable solution for intersex individuals to lead a "normal male" or "normal female" life. At the same time, voices from intersex activist groups are almost entirely absent. This situation permits the inference that notions of intersex variations have yet to gain visibility in mainstream discourse in Thai society. This silence stands in stark contrast to the growing momentum of intersex advocacy at both national and regional levels.

In considering public comments as texts that engage with intersex individuals in Thai society, they may at first appear to simply reflect differing personal opinions about intersex. However, when examined through Bakhtin's perspective (1984; 1986), it becomes evident that the meanings of intersex in public comments do not exist in isolation; rather, they emerge through dialogic interaction with pre-existing voices and discursive positions. The language used by commenters to describe intersex bodies does not merely reflect their own voice but is saturated with traces of other social discourses. The presence of these voices interwoven into the commenters' utterances reflects the heteroglossia inherent in public discourse, where multiple ideologies and social positions intersect and contend. Thus, the meaning of intersex becomes a site of dialogism, revealing the movement of meaning within a social context marked by overlapping layers of power, knowledge, and belief.

In linguistic approaches to critical discourse analysis, the examination of different voices and their interrelations within a discourse can be conducted through the concept of intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992; 2003). The appearance of multiple voices in a given discourse is not merely a textual phenomenon; it also reveals broader social processes involved in the production

and interpretation of discourse. These processes are commonly termed discursive practice. The concept of intertextuality demonstrates that any text invariably carries traces of or borrows ideas from other sources. Such traces may be visibly marked through the use of quotation, reference, or reported speech. However, in many cases, these traces are embedded more subtly, having been integrated into the discourse at the level of genres, discourses, and styles. Investigating these dialogic relations reveals the order of discourse that dominates a particular society at a given time. This order may either promote or suppress the voices of certain groups.

The previously discussed issues regarding intersex in Thai society lead to two key research questions: how the meaning of intersex is represented in public comments, and what discursive voices are reflected in the construction of those meanings. This article aims to examine the multiple voices and dialogic relations present in public comments through the lens of intertextuality. It further seeks to identify which discursive voices play a dominant role in shaping the meaning of intersex. Although this study does not aim to provide concrete or measurable outputs, its findings are intended to offer insights into why the voices of intersex activists have not been recognized as part of the mainstream discourse in Thai society. It also aims to explore what constraints have hindered the shift in public understanding of intersex from a medicalized discourse to one grounded in human rights and a diverse spectrum of sex characteristics.

## **Literature Review**

### **Contextualization of Intersex**

The understanding of intersex began to take shape through the perception of bodies with ambiguous sexual characteristics as a “threat,” due to their disruption of the binary sex order in modern Europe. Political theorists such as Rousseau supported the idea that men and women held distinct social roles rooted in their biological traits. In this context, references to the body served to reinforce fixed social functions. During this period, intersex individuals were labeled “hermaphrodites” and stigmatized for possessing sexual characteristics that diverged from those of men and women. They were viewed not only as disruptive to the social structure but also as bodies requiring correction to maintain societal stability (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, medical science began to systematize knowledge about biological sex through the examination of gonadal anatomy. In 1876, Theodore Klebs proposed that human sex should be determined based on internal reproductive organs, such as the testes or ovaries (Dreger, 1999). This notion posited that each body contains a “true sex” located internally; thus, the ambiguity of external genitalia could be resolved by examining internal reproductive organs, allowing the body to be reclassified within the binary sex system (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, John Money shifted the explanation of intersex away from physical genitalia toward what he called psychosexual identity. He argued that intersex children are born with a neutral sexual orientation, and that parents could assign them a male or female identity through upbringing, accompanied by surgery. However, he emphasized that this assignment should be completed within the first 18 months of life. This became the foundation of the treatment protocol for intersex individuals, which involved early genital surgery in tandem with the strict socialization of gender roles. In most cases, intersex infants underwent vaginoplasty to be raised as girls, since the technical procedures involved were considered less complex than constructing a penis (Eckert, 2009).

John Money's treatment approach for intersex children became the global standard for several decades until it was severely criticized in the case of the so-called "twin case." In this case, the child was unable to maintain the female identity assigned by doctors, eventually suffering severe psychological consequences (Colapinto, 2000). This incident paved the way for activist groups under the name of the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA)<sup>1</sup> to mobilize and call for an end to non-consensual genital surgeries performed on children. The group issued statements asserting that intersex is not a sexual disorder but rather a condition constructed by biomedical practices in complicity with heteronormative ideology. ISNA activists disseminated historical accounts of intersex existence through newsletters to raise public awareness and to critique medical procedures that violate intersex individuals' bodily autonomy (Holmes, 2009). Between 2000 and 2005, a growing number of intersex individuals began to publicly share their experiences of repeated genital examinations and the psychological distress they endured throughout the course of treatment.

In October 2005, an international conference was held in Chicago, United States, to establish standardized medical protocols for the care and management of intersex conditions. Two key documents were presented: the Consensus Statement on the Management of Intersex Disorders and the Clinical Guidelines for the Management of Children Diagnosed with Disorders of Sex Development (DSD). The main content emphasized avoiding unnecessary genital surgeries during childhood, urging physicians and parents to postpone sex-assignment procedures until the patient is able to participate in decision-making. Importantly, the documents proposed replacing the term intersex with disorders of sex development in order to reframe intersex within the scope of a clinical condition and detach it from identity politics (Spurgas, 2009). This reframing implies

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<sup>1</sup> After the closure of ISNA in 2008, its mission was carried forward by interACT: Advocates for Intersex Youth. This nonprofit organization has been actively engaged in several key areas, including the dissemination of historical archives, legal advocacy to secure the rights of intersex children, and the development of intersex youth leadership.

that patients with such conditions are still either male or female, but with congenital conditions affecting sexual development, which require ongoing medical management. In other words, the replacement of the term intersex can be interpreted as an attempt to depoliticize its socially constructed meanings, reducing it to a purely clinical classification and thereby disconnecting intersex variations from the identity politics and histories of the intersex movement.

However, the introduction of the term Disorders of Sex Development (DSD) has generated significant controversy within intersex communities themselves. Many intersex individuals and activists argue that this terminology pathologizes intersex bodies by framing them as medical abnormalities. The use of such language not only removes intersex from the domain of identity politics but also erases biological diversity and reinforces conformity to the binary sex system. The replacement of the term intersex with clinical terminology directly contradicts the goals of intersex activism, which seeks to liberate intersex from pathologizing discourse. (Carpenter, 2016; Davis, 2015). In response, many activists and scholars reject this practice, criticizing it as a collusion between medical capitalism and binary gender discourse. Some activist groups have proposed alternative, non-pathologizing terms such as intersex variations, differences of sex development, or variations of sex characteristics. These alternatives aim to promote the acceptance of bodily diversity and to restore dignity and recognition to intersex individuals (Holmes, 2009; Spurgas, 2009). This discursive tension has led to a situation in which the term intersex and disorders of sex development are used interchangeably in contemporary discourse. In most cases, intersex appears in the context of social movements and human rights discourse, while DSD is predominantly used in clinical and medical settings.

Although the concept of intersex may appear to be a relatively recent issue, Thai society has long possessed explanatory terms to describe sex characteristics that fall outside the male-female binary. Historically, such complexities have been represented through three terms: *kathoey*, *ubhatobayañjanaka*, and *napumsaka-pandaka*. These appear in classical legal texts such as the Law of the Three Seals and early Rattanakosin-era dictionaries (1835-1873). The term *kathoey* was used to describe a person who possesses both male and female genitalia, or someone with only a urinary opening but lacking clearly identifiable sex organs. Legally, such individuals were categorized as unqualified to testify in court, based on the belief that their ambiguous genitalia signified an unstable mental state. Furthermore, they were often associated with Theravada Buddhist notions of karmic retribution. According to this interpretation, being born with genital abnormalities was viewed as a consequence of violating the third precept concerning sexual misconduct (Chonwilai, 2019; Romjumpa, 2002).

In Buddhist scriptures, individuals with sex characteristics diverging from the male-female norm were referred to using two terms: *ubhatobayañjanaka* (a person with both male and female sexual traits in one body) (Mahanarongchai & Chatsuwan, 2024), and *napumsaka-pandaka* (a person whose sex is not clearly identifiable as male or female at birth) (Chonwilai, 2019; Satta-Ariyasup, 2022). According to the Vinaya Pitaka, individuals in both categories were prohibited from monastic ordination, as their bodily ambiguity was considered an obstacle to observing celibacy and maintaining the strict gendered organization of the Sangha (the Buddhist monastic community), which separates monks from Buddhist nuns. Sexual ambiguity was thus viewed as an imperfection disqualifying one from entering the monastic order.

Jackson (1998) explains that the term *kathoey* in Thai society encompasses a broad set of meanings, functioning as a category that includes a wide range of individuals whose sex characteristics, gender expressions, or sexual behaviors deviate from prevailing social norms. In this sense, *kathoey* may refer to persons with ambiguous genitalia, individuals possessing both male and female traits, gender non-conforming persons (both male-to-female and female-to-male), and even those who engage in same-sex relationships. Jackson argues that the traditional Thai understanding of *kathoey* reflects a typology of “types of persons,” a notion embedded in the body and akin to a form of social labeling that organizes individuals into distinct categories. This classificatory logic plays a key role in shaping one’s social status and access to rights. The fact that multiple groups are subsumed under the term *kathoey* stems from the perception that they are neither fully “men” nor “women.”

Later in the period of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (approximately 1932 to 1957), the Thai state imported the ideology of modern nationalism from the West and began promoting the image of a civilized nation. This project involved defining the ideal behavior, manners, dress, and gender roles of citizens, all of which were categorized strictly along male and female lines. Any deviation from these gendered ideals became a matter of public concern. Society collectively monitored gender non-conforming behaviors, which were viewed as threats to the nation. As a result, the term *kathoey* became increasingly associated with visible gender or sexual deviance from the heterosexual binary. In contrast, more complex forms of sex variance, such as ambiguous genitalia or intersex variations, gradually faded from public perception due to their invisibility in everyday social interactions.

Nevertheless, the biological meaning of *kathoey* continues to appear in Thai medical and bureaucratic contexts, where it is classified as a disorder of the genitalia (Panich, 1981). The Thai bureaucracy still uses the term “rok kathoey” (kathoey disease) in Ministerial Regulation No. 74 (1997) to identify a disqualifying condition for military service. Similarly, the National Health Security

Office (NHSO) uses the phrase “persons with ambiguous genitalia” to refer to individuals eligible for state-funded gender-affirming surgery upon receiving medical certification (Meevatha, 2010). Since 2021, a group of activists under the name “Intersex Thailand” has sought to introduce knowledge from the international intersex movement into Thai society. They argue that intersex should be recognized as a form of biological diversity, not a disorder. According to this perspective, intersex encompasses at least five dimensions of sexual variation: chromosomes, external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, gonads, and hormone levels.

However, in its early stages, intersex activism in Thailand has faced definitional ambiguity. Terms used to refer to intersex individuals vary widely, including intersex, persons with ambiguous genitalia, Hermaphroditus, and those with indeterminate biological sex characteristics. Many of these terms still carry clinical or alienating connotations. Moreover, knowledge about intersex rooted in activist perspectives remains limited in circulation. The voices of intersex individuals themselves are often subsumed under the broader LGBTQIA+ umbrella, leading many in Thai society to mistakenly conflate intersex with gay men, kathoey, or transgender.

### **Dialogism and Intertextuality**

Dialogism is a concept proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). It suggests that language never exists in isolation, as every utterance we make is, in part, shaped by the voices of others and constitutes a space of multiple voices (polyphony). Each act of speaking or writing reflects a response to pre-existing discourses, while also inviting potential responses in the future. Bakhtin argues that meaning is not something the speaker or writer can fully determine alone, since every utterance relies on a social context already saturated with other discourses (heteroglossia). Meaning, therefore, is unstable, dynamic, and often negotiated between dominant discourses and alternative or previously marginalized voices. In this sense, language becomes more than a tool for communication; it is a site of ideological struggle and discursive interaction.

Julia Kristeva developed the concept of dialogism into a semiotic framework for textual analysis in her seminal work *Desire in Language* (1980). She proposed that no text exists in isolation; rather, every text is a permutation of texts, a process she termed intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980, as cited in Allen, 2000). That is, a given text is constructed from fragments of preceding discourses, which may include cultural, institutional, political, or religious discourses. These discourses may manifest in the form of speech, quotations, or even structures of thought. To illustrate this, Kristeva analyzes a sentence from Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826):

“England, seated far north in the turbid sea, now visits my dreams in the  
semblance of a vast and well-manned ship, which mastered the winds and  
rode proudly over the waves.”

From Kristeva's perspective, this passage is not merely a literary representation of "England" within the fictional world. Rather, it implicitly invokes 19th-century colonial and nationalist discourse. The metaphor of the nation as a grand ship that "mastered the winds" and "rode proudly over the waves" directly echoes the imperial ideology of British supremacy that circulated in pre-Victorian society. Shelley did not invent this discourse herself; it already existed within the cultural milieu of her time and became embedded in her writing through the intertextual nature of language, as Kristeva argues.

Norman Fairclough adopts Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, integrating them into the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). For Fairclough (1992; 2003), intertextuality does not refer merely to the act of referencing other texts. Rather, it highlights how a text is constructed through the incorporation of other discourses in ways that either establish or contest power. Intertextuality is a process through which power is negotiated at the textual level, involving the selection, adaptation, or silencing of particular social discourses. This process entails recontextualizing existing discourses. For example, when government policies employ scientific language to justify economic decisions, scientific discourse is used to legitimize the discourse of governance.

Fairclough (1992; 2003) categorizes intertextuality into two main types. The first, known as manifest intertextuality, refers to the explicit appearance of voices from other texts or discourses within the current text. This is linguistically marked by features such as quotation, citation, or reported speech, which indicate that external voices are being clearly introduced. The second type is constitutive intertextuality, or interdiscursivity, in which external voices are incorporated without clear boundaries. This occurs when genres, discourses, or styles are blended together. For instance, although universities have traditionally been institutions for producing academic discourse, in the era of neoliberalism, business discourses have increasingly shaped academic practices. As a result, academic discourse now frequently adopts terms and concepts from advertising discourse such as "productivity," "performance indicators," "output," and "efficiency," and universities produce promotional materials resembling commercial marketing.

This process reflects more than discursive practices; it illustrates broader social transformations. The integration of discourses from different domains often occurs during periods of structural change. Interdiscursivity plays a crucial role in allowing discourses from one order of discourse to be transferred into another. When this process becomes widespread, it may lead to a systematic transformation of the original order of discourse. Unlike manifest intertextuality, interdiscursivity does not always appear at the level of individual words or sentences. Instead, it operates at the level of ideological structures and the underlying structure of social organization.

Identifying such integration requires contextual and systemic analysis, rather than surface-level observation.

### Intersex in public discourse

In recent years, a number of studies have examined the representation and understanding of intersex individuals in public discourse in order to investigate the extent to which intersex voices have a place in the public sphere. The findings consistently show that the voices of intersex individuals hold little to no role in public discourse, even when they concern personal life narratives.

Lane (2018) examined media coverage of the M.C. v. Aaronson case in U.S. online media using a framework that combines feminist critical discourse analysis with critical intersex studies and queer feminist science studies. The study found that the media continued to reinforce the binary notions of sex and regulate the discussion of intersex as a purely medical issue. There was no critical engagement with medical authority, as seen in the use of phrases such as “surgery to become a girl,” and outdated terms like “hermaphrodite.” At the same time, the voices of intersex individuals and activists were minimized, and the study also identified the erasure of M.C.’s racial identity through the choice of imagery, in which a white child was depicted instead of a Black identity.

In a similar direction, Fields (2018) investigated media portrayals of intersex athletes, particularly in the cases of Semenya, Walasiewicz, Stephens, and Chand, using agenda-setting theory and rhetorical discourse analysis. The study found that the media played a role in reproducing the framing of these individuals as “men in disguise” or “sexually advantaged,” based on biological evidence such as high testosterone levels and masculine physical features. The media continued to limit and uphold the definition of femininity through biomedical knowledge, while simultaneously pressuring international sports organizations to restrict the rights of intersex athletes.

Smith and Hegarty (2021) reviewed research on public understanding of intersex and genital surgery in children. The study found that public opinion tends to accept medical authority and reinforces the classification of variations in reproductive or sex anatomy as a “medical condition.” Most people are more likely to support surgical intervention than to acknowledge intersex as a legitimate category within biological sex. The study also found that although the term *intersex* has long been included within the broader LGBTQIA+ movement, there remains considerable misunderstanding. A number of people mistakenly perceive intersex as a form of transgender identity. This reflects the ongoing limitations in public understanding of intersex. In addition, the study suggested that decisions regarding intersex should not be determined solely by medical professionals but should involve an interdisciplinary process.

In the context of Thai society, there is an evident lack of research on public perceptions of intersex. Furthermore, the term intersex itself is rarely found in formal academic work. Existing

research is not only limited in number but also tends to use the term ambiguous sex instead of intersex. Most of these studies are situated within the medical field and focus on the clinical diagnosis of conditions and the follow-up on gender assignment of patients. Therefore, this study serves as an important starting point in exploring public perceptions of intersex in Thai society through the analysis of discourses that appear in public spaces. It aims to shed light on the status of knowledge concerning intersex and the patterns of public perception among the Thai population.

## **Methodology**

This study examines public comments that convey perspectives on the bodies of intersex individuals. It treats public comments as texts, employing a qualitative research methodology and presenting its findings through a descriptive-analytical approach. The study aims to examine the multiple voices and dialogic relations that emerge within public comments.

### **Sample Collection**

This study draws on public comments collected from the YouTube platform. The selection of YouTube as the primary data source was based on two main rationales. First, findings from the pilot study indicate that YouTube is the only platform in the Thai context that features life narratives of intersex individuals encompassing complex social dimensions. These include descriptions of sex characteristics, experiences with medical interventions, social integration, personal struggles, and intimate relationships. Second, YouTube provides a space where viewers publicly respond to such narratives, generating more than 1,000 comments per video. The substantial volume of audience interaction offers empirical indications of how intersex is perceived in Thai society.

To locate video content that features life narratives of intersex individuals, five search keywords were used: “khon song phet” (คนสองเพศ) (person with two sexes), “phet kamkuam” (เพศกำกับ) (ambiguous genitalia), “chak chai pen ying” (จากชายเป็นหญิง) (male-to-female), “rok kathoey” (โรคกะทอย) (kathoey disease), and “in toe sek” (อินเตอร์เซ็กส์) (intersex). These keywords were identified through a pilot study, which found that they were commonly used to refer to sex characteristics and individuals associated with intersex in the Thai sociocultural context.

Public comments were collected from the YouTube platform based on the following content selection criteria: (1) The program features life stories of intersex individuals who grew up in Thai society; (2) It is presented in the form of an in-depth interview; (3) It has received more than one million views; (4) The comment section is open and contains no fewer than 1,000 comments; and (5) The program was published between 2020 and 2024.

According to these criteria, two episodes from the YouTube channel 2020 Entertainment were found to meet the specified condition<sup>2</sup>. The total number of public comments across both episodes was 3,876. For the purpose of analysis, a purposive selection was made, focusing specifically on the first 250 comments from each episode, resulting in a total of 500 comments. The rationale for selecting the first 250 comments from each episode lies in their status as top comments. Such comments typically possess two key features: a high number of likes and a high frequency of replies from other viewers. These characteristics increase their visibility and likelihood of being read, making them influential within the comment section. This study includes only public comments expressed in verbal language. Non-verbal responses such as stickers, emojis, and other digital icons were excluded from the analysis, as the study does not aim to investigate meaning-making through multimodal discourse.

Although these public comments were posted in a public space, this study adheres to Human Research Ethics. Therefore, usernames and personally identifiable information are not disclosed. In the presentation of example comments for analysis, the symbol “C” followed by a reference number (e.g., “C-01”) is used to strictly preserve the anonymity of commenters.

## **Data Analysis**

To mitigate bias in the process of textual analysis and interpretation, this study adopts a theoretical triangulation approach by applying two conceptual frameworks. The concept of intertextuality is employed to analyze the texts at the micro level, following the principles of discourse analysis. In contrast, the concept of dialogism is used to interpret the texts at the macro level, drawing on the Bakhtinian philosophy of language.

At the micro level, the analysis focuses on linguistic strategies within the texts, following the concept of intertextuality as proposed by Fairclough (1992; 2003), which examines how external discourses and voices are embedded in the selected comments. The analysis addresses both manifest intertextuality, referring to voices that are explicitly cited or clearly recognizable within the text, and constitutive intertextuality, also known as interdiscursivity, which involves the blending of genres, discourses, or styles whose sources are not explicitly identified.

At the macro level, the intertextual findings are interpreted through the lens of dialogic relationships (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984) that emerge within the comment texts. These relationships reflect the dynamic interplay among multiple discursive voices, including medical discourse, religious discourse, binary gender discourse, and other circulating discourses in Thai society. This macro-level interpretation aims to demonstrate that the meaning-making processes surrounding

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<sup>2</sup> See Episode 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZ21nvBxDO8> and Episode 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPJRUZX2Znw>

intersex are shaped through dialogic interactions within a heteroglossic field of discourse. It also highlights the role of these voices in either constraining or enabling public understandings of intersex realities.

## **Findings**

The analysis of public comments reveals that the texts written by commenters do not reflect individual voices alone. Rather, they engage in dialogic interaction with multiple external discourses, including medical discourse, binary gender discourse, religious discourse, pop culture discourse, and global intersex discourse. Among these, medical discourse and binary gender discourse hold discursive authority. These two discourses shape the perception of intersex through the notion of atypical genitalia or disorders of sex development. Within this framing, intersex is classified as a medical condition that requires treatment in order to determine an individual's true sex and to assign a socially appropriate gender role in accordance with Thai cultural norms.

Religious discourse can be divided into two subgroups. Islamic discourse interprets intersex as an incomplete stage of sexual development and suggests that an individual should identify their true sex in accordance with the binary sex system upon reaching reproductive age. Buddhist discourse, by contrast, encourages the acceptance of bodily abnormality through the belief in karma resulting from actions in past lives. In terms of pop culture discourse, the bodies of intersex individuals are interpreted through representations of characters in anime and fan fiction. These characters are constructed to satisfy the sexual fantasies of niche audiences by reimagining the evolution of reproductive or sexual anatomy across male and female bodies. Pop culture discourse does not reflect an understanding of intersex variations but instead uses intersex bodies as symbolic representations of sexual transformation between male and female within a fantasy context. Only global intersex discourse demonstrates resistance to dominant discourses by promoting a view of biological diversity that is explicitly connected to intersex bodies. The following section presents a detailed analysis of each of these themes.

### **Manifest Intertextuality**

Discourse on intersex in the context of Thai society reveals the relationship among various texts. This study finds that such a relationship relies on two discursive strategies: reported speech and evidentiality. These strategies function to insert sources of knowledge from external discourses into the current text. This textual interaction can be observed through specific linguistic forms, such as noun phrases, visual evidential verbs, and embedded clauses that follow verbal or mental verbs. In this study, these forms are categorized as subtypes of manifest intertextuality.

Public comments in Example (1) and Example (2) reveal voices from medical discourse in a direct manner. The commenters in both examples use the noun phrase “thang kanphaet” (in medical terms) as a form of evidentiality to indicate that the following information is based on scientific medical facts. This phrase serves as an institutional source, rather than a marker of subjective opinion. In Example (1), the phrase indicates the source of knowledge regarding the diagnostic process and surgical interventions for intersex individuals. In Example (2), it points to the medical classification and naming of intersex conditions. This type of evidentiality reflects the stance of the commenters. It shows that they perceive intersex through the voice of medical institutions and interpret it in alignment with medical discourse.

Example (1)

I once watched a video explaining how babies develop. At first, the genitals appear female, and then gradually develop according to the chromosomes. It seems that, in this case, the genital development became completely female because the urethra and the ejaculatory duct are connected to the female genitalia. But the clitoris developed into an incomplete male genital, which is why there's no urethra connected to the male genitalia. In medical terms<sup>3</sup>, they diagnose which genital is fully developed and keep that one, then surgically remove the underdeveloped one. I once read about this in a foreign country.

(C-01)

The commenter in Example (1) inserts knowledge from medical discourse into their personal comment. In this case, manifest intertextuality is realized through three linguistic forms. The first form is the use of a visual evidential verb in the initial sentence: “I once watched a video...” This verb indicates that the knowledge was obtained through visual perception, involving direct sensory experience. In discourse terms, visual evidentiality provides epistemic legitimization for the description of infant sexual development, portraying it as an orderly process shaped by the binary sex system. The commenter uses this visual input to delineate the stages of what is considered normal sexual development. Simultaneously, they conclude that the development of the intersex body under discussion is incomplete, as shown in the clause: “But the clitoris developed into an incomplete male genital.” The second form is the noun phrase “In medical terms,” which signals

<sup>3</sup> Although the English expression “in medical terms” functions as a prepositional phrase, its Thai equivalent “thang kanphaet” constitutes a noun phrase in which “thang” is the head noun and “kanphaet” modifies it nominally. This structural distinction is linguistically evident, as the phrase can appear as the complement of a preposition. For instance, in “nai thang kanphaet,” the preposition “nai” is followed by the noun phrase “thang kanphaet.” This reflects a syntactic property of Thai, where two prepositions cannot appear in direct sequence.

that the information is sourced from institutional knowledge. This occurs alongside the third form, indirect speech. Here, the commenter summarizes a medical perspective and rephrases it to align with their own evaluative stance. The use of manifest intertextuality in this example reflects the commenter's stance, which aligns with medical discourse and accepts the idea that intersex represents a form of sexual abnormality. This stance views intersex variations as involving genital features that are not fully developed according to the binary sex system. In other words, the commenter understands intersex as a case of incomplete sexual development.

The public comment in Example (2) conveys the view that the physical sex of intersex individuals is neither unusual nor new, but rather a congenital condition that has long been acknowledged. It is referred to as "ambiguous genitalia." It is noteworthy that the sex characteristics of intersex individuals in this comment are described primarily in terms of external genitalia, which are portrayed as a combination of male and female sex organs. This perception gives rise to the informal expression "khon song phet nai rang diaokan" (a person with two sexes in one body).

Example (2)

A famous American singer is also a person with two sexes in one body. This isn't something strange. There are quite a few such cases. It's just that people don't really talk about them. In medical terms, it's called ambiguous genitalia.

(C-02)

The voice of medical discourse appears at the end of the comment. The commenter in Example (2) indicates the source of knowledge through the noun phrase "thang kanphaet" ("medical terms"), in order to introduce the clinical naming of a condition associated with the intersex body. This noun phrase functions as an instance of institutional evidentiality, assigning the term ambiguous genitalia the status of scientific fact and marking a degree of detachment from the information, which reduces the subjectivity of the commenter. The placement of this phrase as the topical theme of the sentence guides the interpretation of the following statement, situating it within the epistemic structure of medical authority. At the same time, it affirms the commenter's stance in favor of pathologizing intersex. This stance links the intersex body with ambiguity, incompleteness, and the status of a medical condition. The commenter engages with the voice of institutional discourse to support the construction of meaning about the intersex body. Within this discursive framing, intersex variations are separated from the category of natural sex classification and are instead placed under the category of congenital disorders that require treatment.

Religious discourse is another source of knowledge that is imparted in public comments. The commenters in Examples (3) to (5) refer to ideas from Islam and Buddhism to point out that intersex is not a new issue, but a matter that had already been explained in religious contexts.

These commenters insert prior discourse into their comments through two discursive strategies: the use of prepositional phrases and indirect speech. However, the source of knowledge in the examples that follow does not explicitly suggest that intersex is abnormal or deficient. If the receiver or other commenters want to understand the details of intersex based on these religious sources, they must examine the doctrinal explanations of each religion in greater depth. When doing so, it becomes clear that the physical condition of intersex individuals is associated with certain social classifications that are treated as inferior to the normative categories of male and female. In Islam, as interpreted in the Thai context, intersex individuals are required to choose either male or female status. This choice is necessary in order to follow religious practices such as prayer, inheritance, and marriage. In Theravada Buddhism, although the original scriptures do not directly condemn intersex individuals, they are excluded from monastic life. The explanation is based on the doctrine of karma. Ambiguous sex is viewed as a consequence of sexual misconduct in a past life, and therefore it should be accepted as a given condition. Religious discourse in this context does not only manage the complexity of intersex embodiment, but also reaffirms the completeness of the binary gender system at the same time. This is done either through ritual norms or moral reasoning.

Example (3)

In Islam, this has been mentioned for a long time. It's called "khunsa" (Arabic pronunciation). The person has both male and female genitals. They live according to whichever one is more dominant. But if both are equally dominant, they can choose which sex to live as. Eventually, that sex will become more dominant and the other will fade away. Praying (salah), dressing, and other aspects of life will follow the sex they choose. It's not dangerous.

(C-3)

Example (4)

This might be new knowledge for many people, but for monks, novices, or those who have studied Dhamma, they would already know. The Buddha called it "ubhatobayañjanaka", a person with two sexes in one body.

(C-4)

Example (5)

In India during the Buddha's time, they were called "pandaka" and were not allowed to be ordained. In Buddhism, they're referred to as "true kathoey."

(C-5)

The public comment in Example (3) explains intersex variations according to Islamic discourse. The commenter indicates the source of knowledge through the prepositional phrase “nai Itsalam” (In Islam). This phrase functions as institutional or authoritative evidentiality, signaling that the explanation of intersex which follows is grounded in a religious knowledge system. Its placement at the beginning of the comment takes the role of a topical theme. It shows that the commenter brings an external discourse into the current utterance. This use of intertextuality frames the interpretation of the statement in terms of religious facts, rather than personal opinion. At the same time, it helps reduce the subjectivity of the commenter’s stance. In Islamic discourse, a person with sexual development in the intersex spectrum is referred to as “Khunsa”, a term pronounced according to Arabic. According to the explanation, intersex is understood as sexual development that shows both male and female characteristics. The religious practice instructs that such individuals should choose their gender based on what is most prominent and then follow religious roles either as a man or a woman. However, the religious perspective does not specify whether the gender selection must depend on medical procedures, and it appears to allow the individual to make the decision. Once the decision is made, the physical development is expected to naturally align with the chosen gender, as seen in the phrase “Eventually, that sex will become more dominant and the other will fade away.”

The explanation of the intersex body within Buddhist discourse offers a slightly different perspective. It may be assumed that this difference depends on the interpretation of the Vinaya and the Tipitaka. The commenter in Example (4) engages with the voice of Buddhist discourse through indirect speech, as in “The Buddha called it ubhatobayañjanaka, a person with two sexes in one body.” In this sentence, the referring expression “The Buddha” is placed in the subject position to indicate that the definition of a person referred to as “ubhatobayañjanaka” originates from institutional knowledge, not from the commenter’s own opinion. In this context, the intersex person is categorized as an “ubhatobayañjanaka”, or a person who has two sexes, which is an explanation based on the appearance of external genitalia. The comment in Example (5) refers to an intersex person using the terms “pandaka” and “true kathoey”, with the source of these terms marked through the prepositional phrases “In India during the Buddha’s time” and “in Buddhism”. The explanation of intersex individuals in this example is anchored in a kind of deficiency that disqualifies them from ordaining as monks under the Vinaya. As a result, the commenter clearly refers to a religious prohibition by stating that such individuals “were not allowed to be ordained.”

Through research on the terminology used to refer to intersex persons in the Buddhist discourse, it was found that “ubhatobayañjanaka” refers to a person who possesses both male and female biological sex characteristics in a single body. Meanwhile, “pandaka” or “true kathoey”

refers to a person whose sex is indeterminate, and who is regarded as having deficiencies in both physical form and behavior (Sumalee Mahanarongchai & Thanosit Chatsuwan, 2024). These differences in terminology may reflect the complexity of thought regarding intersex, which can be interpreted in two directions: one being the presence of both sexes in a single body, and the other being the absence of a clearly defined sex. This leads to different references and meanings attached to intersex people in religious contexts.

On the other hand, the public comments in Examples (6) and (7) draw on knowledge from pop culture discourses to explain intersex variations. The commenters in both examples employ prepositional phrases such as “In Japanese manga,” “In the world of fan fiction,” and “In the imagined universe of Omegaverse” to mark subcultural evidentiality. Within this discursive frame, the intersex body is associated with the physical traits of characters found in popular media, including anime and fan fiction. The relationship between intersex and these fictional characters is not only used to stimulate the imagination. In Example (7) , the commenter further suggests that these character traits are inspired by actual biological phenomena. A crucial point to observe is that the use of pop culture discourse in this context does not affirm the real-life existence of intersex individuals or the biological diversity of sex. Instead, it constructs an imaginative narrative world where male or female characters possess both reproductive systems and the ability to give birth. Within this narrative logic, differences in sex development are illustrated as a special form of evolution within male and female bodies, crafted purely to serve fantasy.

**Example (6)**

In Japanese manga, they call it futanari. It means someone who has both male and female genitals in one body.

(C-06)

**Example (7)**

I'm not surprised or shocked at all, to be honest. I like reading novels, so I've come across this kind of case in stories where the writer studied it and used it to create a character. Reading it was fun and informative. In the world of fan fiction, they call it an Alpha (female) who has a penis like a man, no ovaries, but hidden testicles inside the vagina. She can get other women pregnant but can't get pregnant herself. That's in the imagined universe of Omegaverse.

(C-07)

The public comment in Example (6) indicates the source of knowledge by using subcultural evidentiality placed at the beginning of the sentence. This evidential marker reveals the commenter's background interest in anime and manga. The comment explains the sex characteristics of intersex individuals by drawing a comparison to a character type known as "futanari," which refers to a female character who has male genitalia or possesses both male and female genitalia. This character type frequently appears in hentai manga, hentai anime, or eroge (erotic games). The character is designed primarily to evoke sexual arousal. In this context, the use of the futanari concept to describe intersex does not align with the meaning found in human rights discourse or global movements for sexual and gender diversity. Instead, it is a reinterpretation based on fictional images from erotic media. These characters are portrayed with feminine bodies, curves, and behaviors, and are imagined to satisfy male sexual fantasies. They are not representations of actual intersex individuals living in society.

Meanwhile, the comment in Example (7) rejects the notion that the intersex body is strange, offering instead the rationale that such physical features can be found in fan fiction within the Omegaverse genre. The commenter identifies the source of this knowledge through the prepositional phrases "in the world of fan fiction" and "in the imagined universe of Omegaverse." Based on this fan fiction context, the commenter interprets the intersex traits in question as similar to those of the female Alpha character. They also believe that the physical characteristics of this character are grounded in biological reality, asserting that authors conduct research using real-world data before incorporating it into their fictional narratives. However, an analysis of how the Alpha (female) body is depicted reveals that such an interpretation does not affirm the real-life existence of intersex individuals or the biological diversity of sex. Rather, it serves to enhance a fantasy world that still operates within the logic of binary reproduction. This is evident in the portrayal of the Alpha character as having a penis, lacking ovaries, possessing internal testes within the vaginal cavity, and being capable of impregnating other women. These features suggest that the Alpha figure in the Omegaverse does not represent a recognition of the complex sex characteristics found in actual intersex bodies. Instead, it constitutes a fictional imagination of sexual evolution projected onto male and female bodies.

### **Constitutive intertextuality**

In some cases, the dialogic interaction between prior discourse and the current text does not clearly delineate the boundaries between them. As a result, certain public comments may appear to express individual opinions about intersex from the commenters' own perspectives. However, these comments in fact articulate with prior voices and discursive knowledge, forming a unified text. This blending of the public comment genre with pre-existing sets of ideas and linguistic styles across different discursive genres is known as constitutive intertextuality or interdiscursivity.

Findings on this topic show that a number of public comments are shaped by at least two major discourses: Buddhist discourse and global intersex discourse. In addition, these comments also demonstrate various forms of dialogic interaction with medical discourse and binary gender discourse in intriguing ways.

A significant number of public comments interpret intersex variations through the lens of karmic belief in Buddhist discourse. These comments propose that intersex individuals should accept their abnormal condition as an inescapable result of karma. The voice of Buddhist discourse in these cases appears in the form of constitutive intertextuality or interdiscursivity. Although the boundaries of this prior discourse are not explicitly marked in the public comments, the ideas related to karma, violations of sexual precepts, and karmically determined life paths, along with the use of terminology typically found in religious texts, indicate that the public comments are partially shaped by the ideological reasoning and linguistic patterns of Buddhist discourse. At a deeper level, the interpretation of intersex through karmic belief also supports the idea of a “true sex” and reinforces the naturalization of the binary sex system.

Moreover, Buddhist discourse does not contest the framing proposed by medical discourse, which places intersex within the category of disorders of sex development. Instead, it provides an alternative interpretive frame that regards intersex conditions not merely as a deviation in sexual anatomy, but also in connection with transgressions of sexual conduct in past lives.

The public comments in Examples (8) to (10) interpret the sex characteristics of intersex individuals through the lens of Buddhist discourse. Generally, however, these comments do not explicitly indicate the source of their knowledge or clearly mark the boundaries of the prior discourse they draw upon. The commenters do not specify that their views originate from any particular discourse. Nevertheless, the public comments are in fact interwoven with Buddhist discourse and form a unified textual expression. An examination of how intersex is represented in these examples reveals a shared pattern of reasoning rooted in Buddhist moral logic. This reasoning frames intersex embodiment as a karmic consequence of sexual misconduct in a past life, particularly involving extramarital relations with others' spouses. Such transgressions are believed to result in atypical sex development in the present life. This interpretive logic also legitimizes the incorporation of terminology and phrases from religious discourse into the public comment genre. These include expressions such as “phit sin” (break moral precepts), “phon kam” (karmic consequences) “phit sin kho sam” (breaking the third precept), “kot haeng kam” (the law of karma), and “wibak kam ka me” (karmic consequence of sexual misconduct). Within this discursive frame, living with non-normative sex characteristics is seen as an unchangeable condition that intersex individuals must accept as a form of karmic retribution. At the same time, the comment in Example (10) suggests that intersex individuals should uphold the moral precepts. This implies that strict religious observance may

lead to being reborn with a normative body in the next life.

Example (8)

That's why people shouldn't do bad things or break moral precepts. Don't ignore what others go through. Being born with something abnormal like this is one result of karmic consequences. In a past life, they had affairs with someone else's wife or husband, so now they're born this way.

(C-08)

Example (9)

Anyone who studies the law of karma will understand that this is a karmic consequence of sexual misconduct.

(C-09)

Example (10)

It's karma from breaking the third precept in a past life. Now you have to keep that precept your whole life and make a vow for your next one too.

(C-10)

Although on the surface, the public comments in Examples (8) to (10) may appear to be detached from medical discourse and binary gender discourse, their interpretation of intersex bodies through the concept of karmic retribution indirectly reinforces notions of deficiency and disorders of sex development embedded in those prior discourses. This discursive strategy also presupposes that only male and female sexes exist within the natural order and that these represent the normative states of embodiment and identity. In this context, Buddhist discourse aims to offer an alternative explanation while remaining discursively engaged with the medical and binary gender discourses that continue to circulate within society.

When considering how the notion of karma is expressed in each example, it becomes evident that it does not align with the traditional Buddhist philosophical understanding, which defines karma as intentional action conditioned by dependent origination, without any implication of predestined outcomes or fixed karmic results. In contrast, the notion of karma in Example (8) is associated with behaviors such as "phit luk phit mia" (having affairs with someone else's wife or husband), and similarly in Examples (9) and (10), karma is described as arising from "wibak kam ka me" (the karmic consequence of sexual misconduct) and "phit sin kho sam" (breaking the third precept). These forms of karma are understood as causal forces that lead to an intersex individual being born with a defective or abnormal body. This interpretation reflects a widely accepted view within the discourse of Popular Buddhism.

A particularly notable discursive feature is that karmic belief in Popular Buddhism tends to transform bodily atypicality into an inescapable reality. That is, it guides individuals to accept their socially defined deviation by drawing upon moral reasoning grounded in karmic retribution, suggesting that being born with such a body is a form of punishment for immoral actions in past lives. In this sense, karmic belief within the discourse of Popular Buddhism operates to foreclose critical inquiry into the meaning of intersex in Thai society. For example, this includes questions such as why intersex bodies are defined as abnormal, why society refuses to expand biological sex categories beyond the binary system, and what authoritative discourses are contested by the existence of intersex.

Another important point to note is that the idea of karma in all three examples is linked to violations of moral conduct regarding sexual behavior, specifically the breaking of the third precept (kamesumicchacara), or sexual misconduct. The connection between bodily abnormality and deviant sexual conduct suggests that the commenters accept the idea that the body must be regulated in accordance with sexual behavior that conforms to the system of heterosexual monogamy. Thus, in the case of intersex individuals, their condition is interpreted as a karmic result of misusing sexuality, or it is implied that they did not follow the proper form of partnered relationships, leading to their birth in this life with an abnormal body. This interpretation is evident in Example (8), which refers to behavior such as "had affairs with someone else's wife or husband" The findings thus suggest that the recontextualization of karma ideas from Buddhist discourse into public comments functions to shape social perceptions of intersex embodiment as a form of abnormality that extends across bodily, social, and moral dimensions.

Apart from the discursive blending with Buddhist discourse found in public comments, another group of commenters articulates interpretations of intersex bodies that draw on the voices of global intersex discourse. However, this group remains extremely limited, with only two out of 500 total comments exhibiting any dialogic interaction with global intersex discourse. Within this discursive practice, intersex embodiment is conceptualized around three key ideas: bodily autonomy, diverse sex characteristics, and a critique of the binary sex and gender system. The presence of global intersex discourse in these comments can be recognized through a stance affirming the normality of intersex variations, rejecting the notion of a "true sex" shaped by medical and binary gender discourses, and employing terminology aligned with global intersex rights activism.

The commenter in Example (11) recontextualizes knowledge about intersex variations from global intersex discourse to challenge the prevailing assumption that "having sexual characteristics outside the male-female system is abnormal." This reinterpretation suggests that intersex bodies are not strange or deviant. In Example (12), the commenter draws on global intersex discourse not only to question dominant sexual knowledge in Thai society but also to propose a new understanding:

"There have never been only male or female sexes in this world," and the existence of intersex individuals clearly challenges such a binary system. In these cases, the insertion of the voice of global intersex discourse constitutes an interdiscursive interaction that reveals an ongoing negotiation of meaning between alternative and authoritative discourses within the public sphere. This discursive strategy contributes to the dynamism of intersex discourse and demonstrates that no single discourse can monopolize the production of meaning about intersex embodiment.

Example (11)

It's called Intersex. It means someone who has both sexes in one body.

It's really not a weird thing at all. Lots of people overseas are intersex too.

(C-11)

The public comment in Example (11) demonstrates a dialogic voice informed by global intersex discourse. The voice and perspective from this discourse can be observed through the use of terminology associated with the genre of intersex activism, particularly the term "intersex," which carries a specific connotation within the context of sexual and gender diversity rights movements. Notably, the commenter introduces new information to challenge a presupposition that previously framed intersex variations as abnormalities. This presupposition is negated through a statement that references international contexts: "Lots of people overseas are intersex too." This assertion functions as a strategy of generalization, aiming to normalize intersex variations as common and observable phenomena in other societies. Furthermore, the reference to "people overseas" implicitly draws a comparison with contexts perceived as more intellectually progressive. This rhetorical technique is frequently found in texts produced by global movements for sexual and gender diversity. In this example, the act of negating the presupposition not only challenges the dominant assumption but also broadens the understanding of sex and gender beyond rigid binary categories. It may be concluded that the public comment in Example (11) conveys a tone of implicit resistance toward both medical discourse and binary gender discourse as they circulate within Thai society.

The public comment in Example (12) is another case that rejects the presupposition about the binary sex system by drawing on knowledge from global intersex discourse. The commenter denies that biological sex is confined to only male or female, a view shaped by the traditional sex and gender dichotomy, and introduces another category, "intersex," to contest the binary model. This negation of the presupposition enables a reinterpretation of sexual development through intersex perspectives, linking it to natural sex variation rather than framing it as a disorder. In addition, the act of negation carries a voice that dialogically responds to other public comments expressing negative views toward intersex individuals.

Example (12)

It's called Intersex. It proves that biological sex isn't just male or female, just as gender isn't only man or woman. There are people with no gender (non-binary, genderfluid). But some people who are so sexist and narrow-minded still think the world only has two sexes, both physically and mentally. It's never been just two sexes. To me, this is completely normal. What's abnormal is the people who hate intersex folks. Intersex people have been around for a long time.

(C-12)

In Example (12), the voice of global intersex discourse is revealed through the use of terms associated with the genre of global sexual and gender diversity activism, such as "intersex," "non-binary," and "genderfluid." The appearance of these terms is not merely a matter of vocabulary; they carry discursive weight in critiquing the binary sex system, which constitutes a shared assumption in Thai society. At the same time, the commenter also negates the presupposition that humans are naturally divided into only male or female, a common ground shaped by medical discourse and binary gender discourse in Thailand. Referring to intersex individuals using terminology from global activism, together with the act of negating such presuppositions, would not be possible without the knowledge embedded in global intersex discourse. This makes the public comment an instance of interdiscursivity, combining the individual voice of the commenter with the conceptual structure of global intersex discourse.

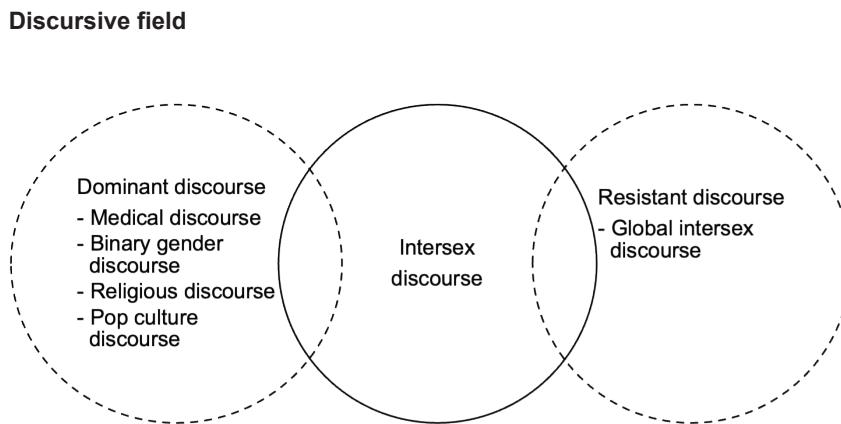
Furthermore, a close examination of the negation statements "biological sex isn't just male or female" and "It's never been just two sexes" reveals that these forms of negation not only oppose preexisting ideas but also advance new counterclaims. They allow for an expanded conceptualization of intersex, alongside other gender identities such as non-binary, as part of the diversity found in both biological sex and individual subjectivity. In this context, the negation of the presupposition gives rise to a critique of earlier public comments, as seen in expressions like "sexist people" and "narrow-minded," which directly address societal bias. The discursive strategy employed here involves reclaiming meaning by reversing the negative framing and redirecting the critique toward the source of the dominant assumption. As a result, the meaning of intersex is reframed in a more affirming and inclusive light.

## Discussion

The meaning of intersex in the context of Thai society does not significantly reflect a paradigm shift concerning the body and sex. Sexual development that differs from the binary sex system is still categorized as a sexual abnormality and considered a condition that causes ambiguity in both biological sex and gender identity. Voices from medical discourse and binary gender discourse play a dominant role in constructing the meaning of intersex in Thai society. Most people do not argue with explanations supported by scientific facts from medical science, as they believe science is the highest form of truth, and nothing can override scientific answers except science itself. The more bodily changes are explained through a biological perspective, the more medical discourse gains the highest authority in interpreting the intersex body.

The association of intersex with sexual abnormality is further supported by religious discourses, including both Islamic and Buddhist perspectives, as well as pop culture discourse. Specifically, Islamic discourse encourages intersex individuals to choose their "true sex" based on the binary system upon reaching puberty, and to then follow the social norms of being male or female. Similarly, Buddhist discourse interprets being born with intersex variations as a result of karma from past lives, further reinforcing the idea of abnormality or physical deficiency. Although pop culture discourse does not play a significant role, it still tends to frame the intersex body within the binary model and imagines intersex as a bodily evolution of male and female in a fictional universe.

The articulation of multiple discourses, including medical discourse, binary gender discourse, religious discourse, and pop culture discourse, produces a dominant discourse in Thai society that separates unique variations in reproductive or sexual anatomy from the category of natural sex and reclassifies them under a form of disorder of sex development. At the same time, the binary sex system is established as inherently linked to bodily and psychological completeness. This articulation does not constitute a unified configuration but rather a temporary alignment of discursive elements that stabilizes the meaning surrounding intersex discourse. In contrast, global intersex discourse remains the only voice that resists the dominant discourse. These processes reflect a dialogic relationship in which voices from different discursive practices engage with one another to generate shifting meanings around intersex. Bakhtin (1981; 1984) explains that a dialogic relationship gives rise to double-voiced discourse, composed of voices inherited from prior discourse and voices situated within the current discourse. The dialogic interaction in intersex discourse is illustrated in the figure below.



**Figure 1** Dialogic relationship between dominant and resistant discourses on intersex

**Source:** Author's model

The figure above illustrates that the dominant discourse influencing the meaning of intersex consists of multiple discursive strands: medical discourse, binary gender discourse, religious discourse, and pop culture discourse. These four discourses demonstrate a form of interdiscursive reinforcement, meaning that they support one another in defining intersex as a form of disorder of sexual development that deviates from the natural sex binary. Interpreted through Bakhtin's (1986) concept, the voices of these four discourses together shape discursive practice through "centripetal forces" that regulate meaning according to institutional norms and dominant ideology, namely heteronormative ideology. Heteronormative ideology constructs society based on the belief that there are only two sexes. These sexes are defined by their reproductive functions and are expected to align with masculine and feminine roles. Under this ideology, biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation must correspond in a coherent and binary manner.

In contrast, global intersex discourse, which seeks to link intersex variations to a form of biological diversity, stands as the only voice that resists the dominant discourse. This discourse shapes discursive practice through "centrifugal forces" that aim to compete with the dominant discourse and introduce alternative interpretations of intersex. However, global intersex discourse lacks discursive support or alliances from other knowledge domains or institutions in society. The absence of discursive alliances results in its oppositional meaning remaining marginal and unable to significantly enter the public sphere of recognition.

The answer to the question of why the voices of intersex activists remain limited in their influence in Thai society is related to this discursive structure, which does not facilitate oppositional perspectives. If activists seek to establish discursive power to transform public understandings of intersex, they must build alliances with other discourses in society, particularly with scientific

discourse. Although science has historically contributed to the framing of intersex as pathological, it can be reinterpreted and mobilized as empirical evidence to support the recognition of intersex existence and gender diversity beyond the binary model of male and female.

Significantly, the relationship among the five discursive voices should not be seen as a binary opposition between true and false, or right and wrong. Each voice plays a role in shaping the dynamic production of meaning around intersex embodiment. Even though global intersex discourse expands meaning beyond the center, it still must communicate through references to existing prior discourses. Similarly, the four dominant discourses, though powerful, cannot fully suppress other voices. The interaction among these voices constitutes an ongoing dialogue within the discursive field, where no single voice can monopolize meaning. This makes intersex discourse a site of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984).

## **Conclusion**

This study reveals that the meanings of intersex variations in Thai public comments do not emerge in isolation. Rather, they are interwoven with voices and perspectives from various pre-existing discourses in society. An intertextual analysis of public comments indicates that the most influential discourses shaping the understanding of intersex variations are medical discourse and binary gender discourse. These discourses are further reinforced by Islamic discourse, Buddhist discourse, and pop culture discourse. These discourses collectively shape the understanding that intersex represents a deviation from the natural sex system and a condition of abnormality that requires correction. Although religious discourse and pop culture discourse may appear to function outside of a dialogic interaction with medical discourse and binary gender discourse within the same discursive field, they continue to produce alternative explanations that ultimately reinforce the ideal of naturalized sexual completeness within heteronormativity.

In contrast, the meanings of intersex variations shaped by the voice of global intersex discourse are severely limited in their access to public recognition. This is because global intersex discourse stands as the only discursive perspective that opposes the dominant discourses, and it lacks alliances with other forms of social knowledge. In order to achieve meaningful change, it is essential that intersex activists in Thailand engage with a broader range of discourses. In other words, they must collaborate with interdisciplinary experts supported by institutional knowledge and authority. Such cooperation is necessary to construct a more positive and comprehensive understanding of intersex for Thai society.

### Practical Implications

#### 1. Building discursive alliances with emerging medical knowledge

Although this study demonstrates that the meaning of intersex in Thai society continues to be dominated by medical discourse, particularly through the concept of disorders of sex development, it also reveals that the public tends to accept such interpretations. This acceptance is primarily driven by the belief that scientific explanations represent empirical truth. Therefore, any attempt to contest medical discourse through factual reasoning must emerge from within the medical domain itself. This study proposes that intersex activists should rearticulate their discourse by building discursive alliances with emerging trends in medical knowledge. These include knowledge domains such as biological diversity, bioethics, human rights-oriented medical institutions, and child and adolescent psychiatry.

The aim is not to return to traditional biomedical models, but to recontextualize medical knowledge in ways that support alternative understandings of intersex. These understandings may enhance the well-being of intersex individuals, regardless of whether they identify as intersex. This discursive strategy helps prevent activist voices from being sidelined or reduced to isolated resistance. It enables a dialogic engagement through which intersex discourse enters into dialogue with authoritative medical domains, opening pathways for broader social transformation.

#### 2. Disseminating representations of intersex through diverse media channels

This study clearly reveals that intersex individuals are almost entirely absent from discursive representation in Thailand's mainstream media. Life narratives, identity claims, and even policy advocacy are rarely visible. Compared to other sexual and gender diverse groups, such as gay, transgender, or lesbian individuals, intersex persons remain in a condition of discursive underrepresentation. At the same time, the voices of intersex activists remain limited in terms of public visibility. This limitation further constrains the articulation of alternative perspectives on intersex experiences, including the pain resulting from medical interventions, awareness of bodily autonomy and identity, and issues related to sexual health and well-being.

This study proposes that intersex activists should work to disseminate intersex representations through both mainstream and alternative media. These representations should not be confined to scientific explanations but should include lived experiences that shape intersex subjectivity. Important themes include bodily autonomy, diverse sex characteristics, intersex identity, sexual health, and the history of intersex activism. Although intersex alliances in Thailand remain limited in number, the repeated circulation of discursive representations has the potential to reach younger audiences who are more receptive to alternative media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and podcasts. The gradual introduction of intersex representations into everyday

media consumption may help cultivate socially constructed meanings of intersex in a more positive direction. Small acts of familiarity may eventually shift the public paradigm regarding intersex. This strategy does not require direct confrontation with dominant discourses and helps ensure that intersex concerns are not subsumed under the current mainstream LGBTQ+ movement, which tends to focus on gender expression and sexual preference.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Based on the data collection procedure and the interpretive framework employed in this study, there are two main limitations. First, it explores social perceptions of intersex solely through public comments on YouTube. These comments represent a narrow segment of public opinion, as the data were collected from only two program episodes. As a result, the study cannot offer a comprehensive account of how intersex is perceived in Thai society. Furthermore, most of the comments are brief and do not provide sufficient information to assess the commenter's background knowledge or understanding of intersex issues. It is therefore essential for future research to examine intersex discourse across a broader range of social actors, including medical professionals, media practitioners, intersex activists, and non-activist intersex individuals. Such expansion would allow for a more nuanced analysis of the diverse voices and discursive interactions surrounding intersex in Thai society.

Second, the study is limited in its theoretical interpretation, particularly with regard to the social factors that shape the perception and negotiation of intersex discourse. Variables such as education level, age, occupation, geographic location, and gender complexity can significantly influence individual discursive practices. The intersection of these factors should be considered in future research in order to better capture the dynamic and multilayered meanings of intersex.

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