

Representations of Polyamorous Relationships in Thai Online Media

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Abstract

This research article aims to explore how polyamory is represented in Thai online media through language, and how the representations reflect Thai society, by employing qualitative content analysis, agenda-setting framework and theory of representation. The sources of the data included 22 publications of Thai online media between January 2018 and February 2020. It was found that there were both negative and positive portrayals of polyamory which could be categorized into seven categories: unrelated to cheating or other non-monogamous practices, intricacy, the revolution of sexuality, deviance, infidelity and immorality, viable alternative, and better. These findings reflect that Thai people are not yet familiar with and do not accept polyamory since Thais strongly adhere to the norms of monogamy. They also believe that polyamorous practices are against the doctrines in Buddhism which Thai people have a strong faith in. Moreover, there were 11 linguistic strategies, including lexicalization (modification, verbs, and terms of address), rhetorical question, presupposition, referencing, metaphor, negation, modality, repetition, proverb, imagery and idiom, employed by the media to construct and to spread discourses, influence, manipulate and persuade audiences to believe in what is being represented.

Keywords: polyamory, content analysis, representation, agenda-setting, linguistic strategies

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ภาพแทนความสัมพันธ์แบบ ‘พหุรัก’ (polyamory) ในสื่อออนไลน์ของไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาภาพแทนความสัมพันธ์แบบ “พหุรัก” (polyamory) ที่ปรากฏในสื่อออนไลน์ของไทยจากการใช้ภาษา และศึกษาภาพสะท้อนของสังคมไทยจากภาพแทนที่สื่อออนไลน์ได้ประกอบสร้าง โดยใช้วิธีการศึกษาผ่านการวิเคราะห์ตัวบท (content analysis) ทฤษฎีกำหนดวาระข่าวสาร (agenda-setting theory) และทฤษฎีภาพแทน (theory of representation) แหล่งที่มาของข้อมูลประกอบด้วยสิ่งพิมพ์ของสื่อออนไลน์ของไทย 22 รายการระหว่างเดือนมกราคม 2561 ถึงกุมภาพันธ์ 2563 ผลการวิจัยพบว่ามีกรอบสร้างภาพแทนความสัมพันธ์แบบมีคนรักหลายคนทั้งในเชิงบวกและเชิงลบ โดยสามารถจัดกลุ่มได้ 7 กลุ่ม ได้แก่ *ไม่เกี่ยวข้องกับการมีคู่หรือการมีคนรักหลายคนในรูปแบบอื่น* *ความซับซ้อน การปฏิบัติวัฒนธรรมทางเพศ* *ความเปราะบาง* *ความไม่ซื่อสัตย์และผิดศีลธรรม* *ทางเลือกของความสัมพันธ์ที่สามารถปฏิบัติได้จริง* และ *ดีกว่าความสัมพันธ์รูปแบบอื่น* ซึ่งสะท้อนว่าสังคมไทยยังไม่คุ้นชินและไม่ยอมรับรูปแบบความสัมพันธ์ประเภทนี้เนื่องจากยังคงยึดมั่นอยู่กับความสัมพันธ์แบบรักเดียวใจเดียว อีกทั้งยังเชื่อว่าความสัมพันธ์ประเภทนี้ผิดหลักคำสอนของพุทธศาสนาที่คนไทยนับถือเป็นอย่างมาก นอกจากนี้ยังพบว่าสื่อใช้กลวิธีทางภาษา 11 รูปแบบในการประกอบสร้างภาพแทนความสัมพันธ์แบบมีคนรักหลายคน ได้แก่ การเลือกใช้ศัพท์ (การขยายความ การใช้คำกริยา และการใช้คำเรียกขาน) การใช้คำถามเชิงวาทศิลป์ การใช้มูลบท การอ้างถึง การใช้คำอุปมา การปฏิเสธ การใช้ทัศนภาวะ การใช้คำซ้ำ การใช้สุภาพิต การใช้มโนภาพ และการใช้สำนวน โดยสื่อออนไลน์ได้ใช้กลวิธีทางภาษาเหล่านี้เพื่อสร้างและเผยแพร่วาทกรรม และเพื่อโน้มน้าว และชักจูงผู้อ่านให้เชื่อในสิ่งที่สื่อนำเสนอ

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Introduction

A polyamorous relationship is a type of non-monogamous relationship that is distinct from a normative relationship in that numerous people are involved. According to Susan Winter, New York City relationship expert and author, a polyamorous relationship is generally identified by an initial couple that openly engage with other romantic partners with mutual consent (Ritschel, 2019). The word polyamorous first appeared in an article, “A Bouquet of Lovers,” by Oberon and Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart which was published in May 1990 in Green Egg Magazine, as *poly-amorous*. *Poly* comes from Greek which means ‘many,’ and *amor* comes from Latin meaning ‘love.’ The word polyamory is defined as the love of many or the emotional, relationship-focused end of the consensual non-monogamy spectrum (Anapol, 2010).

According to Klesse (2011), polyamory is defined as the practice of intimate relationships among three or more partners, and with the agreement of all partners involved. It describes a philosophy of relationship, or the sexuality and intimacy approach that is grounded on the notion that it is genuine and worthwhile to have more than one sensual or loving relationship. Thus, polyamory is not cheating because everyone is aware of the other partners, and is not polygamy (marriage of many) or polygyny (one man married to multiple women) because polyamorists do not always marry and usually in those relationships, the women are not allowed to have additional partners (Sheff, 2013). In contrast, polyamory allows women to have multiple partners as well as men. Anapol (2010) also suggests that polyamory, as a consensual approach to non-monogamy, upholds responsibility and ethics based on equality, honesty, integrity, and respectful decision making. Moreover, people who identify themselves as polyamorists accept an open relationship with a conscious management of jealousy (Klesse, 2011), so even they feel jealous, the polyamorists have to deal with it consciously and discuss with their partners beforehand.

The practice of polyamory has been gaining recognition in the West since the 1970s (Easton & Hardy, 2009). The recognition of the polyamory in the West could be easily noticed as the media have been discussing it for decades. The media more or less play a role in representing polyamory and thus media representation can be influential in shaping people’s opinions, transmitting views, and representing power regimes or opposing it (Schastneva, 2016). The way the media portray particular discourses, such as polyamory, through language is significant as it is a powerful force for re-establishing power relations and distributing beliefs (Hall et al., 1980 cited in Schastneva, 2016). The language of media is considered one of the most effective ways to challenge, preserve, and spread discourses because of its large audience size (Baker, 2014). Thus, the media can be considered the predominant source where people gain general knowledge about what is being represented.

Though it seems acceptable and people are aware of its existence in the West, polyamory is new, and is still something on the outskirts of societal acceptance in a country like Thailand,

where its people are shaped to adhere to monogamous relationships, and led to believe that love and romantic relationships are only about two people (“Polyamory ≠ Cheating,” 2019). Therefore, polyamory along with other consensual non-monogamous relationships are often viewed as on the fringes of sexuality and particularly threatening to the norms. This can be seen from the use of language by the online media, for example, the use of the modifier “ไร้ศีลธรรม” ‘immoral’ in describing polyamorous practices (Yodhong, 2019b), the use of rhetorical question “มันจะปกติได้ยังไงถ้าต้องมีแฟนมากกว่า 1 คน” ‘how can having more than one partner be normal?’ (V.yada, 2019), and the use of verb “คุณอาจจะแอนตี้หรือรับไม่ได้กับพฤติกรรมเหล่านี้” ‘you probably hate or do not accept these behaviors.’ in explaining how society would react to polyamorous practices (rao sam khon khwamsamphan bæp Polyamory thirak dai mak kwa nung [Three of us: Polyamorous relationships that allow us to have more than one lover], 2019).

Polyamorous relationships have progressively been represented on Thai online media after the love affair of a well-known pop singer, Pongkool Suebsung, who secretly dated two women at once. Many online media tried to link it to polyamory and represent it to the audience. For example, Nongpol (2019) wrote about polyamory as an advice article informing that people can have more than one lover and that is not wrong as long as all partners consent. Yodhong (2019a) represents polyamory as a way out of polygyny in such patriarchal society as Thailand because polyamory suggests equality and consent. In addition to Pongkool’s case, another famous Thai pop singer, Chalalit Tantiwut, is openly married to two men at the same time, but there are no articles representing polyamory mentioned in connection with Chalalit’s case though it seems to be within the scope of polyamory more than the other case.

Due to the certain view of the mainstream and its rising recognition in Thai society, the representation of polyamorous relationships in Thai online media provides a basis for studying how Thai online media portrays polyamory. However, only a small amount of literature exist regarding media representation of polyamory or other kinds of consensual non-monogamous relationships. Mackaman (2014) studied the representation of non-monogamy on feminist blogs to see how the blogs challenge compulsory norms, and what information is presented and neglected about non-monogamy. Results show that non-monogamous content rarely appears to be discussed in a dismissive or negative manner by authors. They are often about how the relationships work for the authors. Also, the non-monogamous articles often include queer people, jealousy and infidelity, marriage, and the effects on gender dynamics. Additionally, Antalffy (2011) conducted research on polyamory and the media. She found that most mainstream articles mentioning polyamory focus on infidelity and depict polyamory as an unacceptable alternative on account of its commonalities with cheating. Moreover, polyamory is negatively portrayed due to the fear that it will harm the validity and value of two-person traditional marriages. There are also positive articles about exploring polyamory in depth, making an effort at recognizing its intricacies, and generally presenting polyamory in an acceptable way.

Though, the study of Antalffy (2011) could be related to the present study, its research methodology remains unclear and its data was based on Western media and culture.

This study aims to examine how the Thai online media represent polyamorous relationships through language, what linguistic strategies are used in the representations, and how the media representations of polyamory reflect Thai society. A qualitative content analysis will be employed, along with agenda-setting framework (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002) and theory of representation (Hall, 1997), to examine the portrayal of polyamorous relationships by Thai online media between January 2018 and February 2020.

Research Objectives

1. To study how polyamory is portrayed in Thai online media through language
2. To investigate what linguistic strategies are used by the media to portray the images of polyamory
3. To discover how media representations of polyamory reflect Thai society

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative research study in which representations of polyamorous relationships in Thai online media, linguistic strategies used in the media, and the reflection of the society in the media portrayals will be investigated. The steps of analysis are as follows.

1. Data collection

The data were collected from online media sources as the notion of polyamory in Thailand has been represented widely online and hardly mentioned on offline media. To identify online media sources, a search for the term “ความสัมพันธ์แบบ polyamory” (polyamorous relationship) was conducted using Google search engine. All publications, both video-based and text-based sources, mentioning polyamory that came out between January 2018 and February 2020 were included in the analysis. 57 publications were found, but only 22 of them (18 articles, three videos, and one podcast) corresponding with the concepts of polyamory were gathered for the analysis.

2. Analysis of portrayals of polyamorous relationships in Thai online media

An inductive qualitative content analysis was conducted in order to investigate how polyamorous relationships were represented in Thai online media. According to Krippendorff (1989), content analysis provides readers manners of analyzing such meaningful elements as texts, images, and voices. There are six steps in content analyzing which are to design, to unitize, to sample, to code, to draw inferences, and to validate. For this method of analysis, in accordance with Mackaman (2014) and Fongkaew et al. (2015), the steps of coding, creating categories, and interpreting the meaning of those categories were done. The coded data were

systematically categorized conforming to a variety of themes arising during the analysis process. Then, a group of interpreted meanings and their relations to a specific theme were investigated, and the data were analyzed to respond to the research questions.

Two theoretical frameworks, the agenda-setting theory and theory of the representation, were applied to investigate the way the media influence the saliency of topics on the public agenda. The first theory is the agenda-setting theory which suggests that media has a great influence upon audiences by instilling what they should think instead of what they do think (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). The theory concerns how issues or other topics are illustrated in the media, what are the most salient aspects of descriptions of the objects of interest, and which ways of thinking are presented. By employing this theory, the ways that media attempts to manipulate and persuade audience, and to establish a hierarchy of news prevalence were examined.

Another theory is the theory of representation. According to Hall (1997), this theory explores how media organizations choose and eternalize specific dimensions of specific groups. In the process of representation, there are two systems. The first system correlates people, objects and events with mental representations or a set of concepts that the individuals carry in their heads. Language is another system as shared concepts must be interpreted into a commonly known language. Hall also explained that the prevailing portrayals are set and advocated by groups of people who are superior in society which may discriminate, marginalize, and place the inferior targeted groups in the role of the other. By applying the theory of representation, who or what is represented, who or what is not represented, and how each social group is represented differently were explored. Also, the attempts of the media or the producers to create and convey meanings in relation to representation through stereotypes or ideology were investigated.

3. Analysis of linguistic strategies used in representing polyamory

The language used by the media in representing polyamory can be an important factor in convincing the audience how they should think. Therefore, in accordance with Phanichtrakul and Jaratjarungkia (2013), Lerlertuttitham (2015), Ongwuttiwat (2019), and Buntanon and Piangbunta (2019), the linguistic strategies used in discussions about polyamory in 22 publications were investigated by considering both forms and contents of the language. In terms of language form, the structure of language and the grammatical structures were investigated. In the matter of content of the language, the meaning of the language overall, including the individual words that are used and the meaning created when these words are combined were analyzed.

4. Analysis of how the representations of polyamory reflect Thai society

In the discussion and conclusion section, all representations about polyamory found in Thai online media will be described and interpreted in order to investigate how media representations of images of polyamory reflect Thai society.

Results

The media are regarded as a reflection of the attitudes and mindsets of dominant groups of people in the society and of the content creators themselves. In this section, the focus is on how polyamory is represented in Thai online media, focusing on seven different categories, and what linguistic strategies are employed in each category.

1. Unrelated to Cheating, or Other Non-monogamous Practices

There are misconceptions about polyamory that it is the same as cheating or shares some features with polygamy and open relationships. A number of media contents, thus, tried to inform their audience that polyamory is something totally different from cheating and other non-monogamous practices. It is explained that, unlike other non-monogamous relationships, polyamory is based on honesty, mutual consent, and strong commitment. Moreover, every partner must be aware of the existence of one another, meaning that cheating can happen in polyamorous relationships as well if one partner becomes physically and emotionally involved with another person outside the relationship. Linguistic strategies used in representing this category include the use of verb, modality, presupposition, modification, repetition, and idiom found in the following.

(1) คุณจะต้องแยกความสัมพันธ์แบบนี้จากการสวิงกิ้ง การแลกเปลี่ยนคู่นอน หรือความสัมพันธ์แบบ Bigamy ที่มีสามีหรือภรรยาสองคน (การจดทะเบียนซ้อน) ไปก่อนเลย
‘You have to separate this kind of relationship from swinging, exchanging partners, or bigamous relationships.’

(Nongpol, 2019)

(2) ชีวิตเป็นครอบครัวเดียวกันอย่างมีการดรภาพ
‘Living fraternally as a family.’

(Yodhong, 2019b)

(3) ชุดความสัมพันธ์ที่มีข้อตกลง ความรัก ความห่วงหาอาทร เอาใจใส่ซึ่งกันและกัน ตัดสินใจรวมกัน
‘It is a relationship that has agreements, love, care for each other, and joint decision.’

(Yodhong, 2019b)

(4) นอกใจไม่ได้อยู่ในพจนานุกรม

‘Cheating is not in one’s dictionary.’

(Miss P, 2018)

(5) ต่างกับ Polygamy ที่จะมีเมียหลวง เมียน้อย และพวกเธอก็ไม่สามารถมีคนอื่นได้อีก
อีก Polyamory จึงแตกต่างกับ Polygamy โดยสิ้นเชิง

‘It is different from polygamy as polygamy allows men to have multiple wives at a time, and the wives cannot have other lovers. Polyamory is, thus, completely different from polygamy.’

(Thongthai, 2019)

The selected lexical verbs and modalities denote the misconceptions about polyamory held by Thai people. To illustrate, the modality “ต้อง” ‘have to’ and the verb “แยก” ‘to separate’ in (1) are chosen to notify the audience that polyamory needs to be separated from other non-monogamous relationships and from cheating. This helps presuppose that there is an implicit assumption about the background belief that people normally categorize as polyamorous (having more than one partner) relationships, such as swinging, partner-swapping, or bigamy.

Additionally, modification is one of the strategies found in (2) and (3). Adverbs and adjectives such as “อย่างมีภราดรภาพ” ‘fraternally’ and “ร่วมกัน” ‘joint’ are employed. These modifications suggest a strong sense of togetherness, consent and mutuality within polyamorous relationships which can hardly be found in other kinds of non-monogamous relationships. Moreover, in (4) the use of idiom “ไม่ได้อยู่ในพจนานุกรม” ‘not in one’s dictionary’ with the word cheating reinforces the fact that cheating is not a word used to describe the practices of polyamory since polyamorous relationship is based on a set of clear, mutually agreed-upon terms, and shared responsibilities. When a person cheats on their partner, they do not communicate their wish to engage in a relationship outside of their current one, and their partner does not consent to this occurring. As such, polyamorous relationships are not cheating, as all partners have consented.

In the sentence (5), the words “ต่างกับ” and “แตกต่างกับ” ‘different’ are used repeatedly in order to emphasize and create more clarity that polyamory is totally different from polygamy.

2. Intricacy

Polyamory is viewed and represented by most Thai online media as something that is complicated, and hard to understand. That is because the notion of polyamory is quite new and not so many people talk about these kinds of relationships precisely regarding how they work. Moreover, polyamory was never represented as a normal and possible romantic relationship because all the dramas and mainstream media have been all about monogamous

relationships. Also, people do not really try to understand the practice of polyamory as they are used to the practice of monogamy. This can be seen by the use of several strategies such as modification, repetition, and presupposition:

(6) ความสัมพันธ์นี้ก็ยังยียิบย่อยลงไปอีก

‘This relationship also has a lot littler details.’

(Nongpol, 2019)

(7) เรื่องของความสัมพันธ์จะเป็นเรื่องที่ซับซ้อนและต้องอาศัยความเข้าใจรอบด้าน

‘The relationship is quite complex and requires a comprehensive understanding.’

(StolenHeart, 2019)

(8) Polyamory ความสัมพันธ์รักสุดซับซ้อนที่เกิดขึ้นจริงในปัจจุบัน ลองมาทำความรู้จักรูปแบบความรักสุดซับซ้อนนี้กันดีกว่า

‘Polyamory, the complicated love relationship that is really happening today. Let’s get to know this complicated love pattern.’ (ruchak Polyamory khwamsamphan rak sut sapson thi koet khun ching nai patchuban [Get to know Polyamory, the complicated love relationship that is really happening today], 2019)

(9) อย่าเพิ่งปวดหัวไปก่อน

‘Please don’t get stressed out.’

(Nongpol, 2019)

In terms of modifications, polyamory is described as something complex and very detailed as presented in (6) and (7). The use of the adjectives “ยิบย่อย” ‘detailed’ and “ซับซ้อน” ‘complicated’ directly emphasize to the audience that polyamory is complex, and very detailed which requires deep understanding. Also, the repetition of the adjective “สุดซับซ้อน” ‘complicated’ in (8) underlines the intricacy of polyamory.

Besides, the directive sentence, as in (9), presupposes that the concepts and practices of polyamory are so complicated that the audience could possibly get stressed out. This reinforces that not only is it new and intricate, but it is also something outside the interests of most people and that they are not familiar with.

3. Revolution of Sexuality

Some articles represented polyamory as a sexual revolution since people eventually start to be aware and to realize that polyamory suits the natural instincts of human beings and monogamy is just a matter of cultures, norms, and ideology (Smith, 2016; Koonprapaisit, 2019). In these kinds of depictions, love or relationships do not need to be understood in pairs anymore.

Moreover, some points being represented in media content reinforce freedom and equality, especially for women. It can be considered a way out of patriarchy because in patriarchal society, people get to judge women who have more than one partner and seem to be fine with the men who do so. However, polyamory promotes the rights of women and of all people to freely date more than one person at once, as long as all partners give mutual consent. Therefore, this may be another aspect of polyamory that stages the revolution. People get to choose to be in any kind of relationship they want. Linguistic strategies used in representing this category include the use of negation, verb, term of address and modification found in the following.

(10) ความรักความสัมพันธ์จะไม่จำเป็นต้องเป็นคู่อีกต่อไป

‘Love and romantic relationships don't have to be in pairs anymore.’

(Yodhong, 2019b)

(11) รูปแบบครอบครัวที่แหวกขนบละครไทย

‘A family model that breaks with the tradition of Thai dramas.’

(Prachathai, 2018)

(12) เราสามารถได้เท่าเทียมกัน

‘We are able to fairly have multiple lovers.’

(Thongthai, 2019)

As displayed in (10), negation is one of the strategies used. The verb phrase “ไม่จำเป็นต้อง” ‘do not have to’ is employed to negate the social and standard norms of being monogamous. It emphasizes that the concepts of romantic relationships and sexuality are shifted, and with the rise of polyamory, which is considered an ethical non-monogamy, people do not need to follow the norms, or the mainstream beliefs anymore.

Besides, select lexical verbs indicate transformation as in (11). To clarify, the verb “แหวกขนบ” ‘to break with tradition’ in (11) is chosen to represent the unconventional practices of polyamory which are different from what is normally done. That is because Thai dramas rarely represent polyamorous, or other consensual non-monogamous relationships as a picture of a normal or as a possible relationship. They typically glorify the practices of monogamy (Prachathai, 2018). This idea reinforces that polyamory could be the new sexual revolution over traditional monogamy.

Polyamory can also be a new sexual revolution over other non-monogamous relationships like polygamy, especially in a patriarchal society, which restricts freedoms and equality. To illustrate, patriarchal polygamy is almost always polygynous (the marriage of one man to multiple women) where it is based on the hierarchical ranking of men over women. The wives may not have any say about what additional wives the husband may take, and they must not have additional lovers.

However, polyamory is totally opposite. It is based on the equality of all people. In polyamorous relationships, it is about the full knowledge and free consent of every partner involved. It can be polygynous or polyandrous, or it can, for that matter, be same-sex or bisexually oriented. The sense of fairness can be seen from the use of addressing term and modification in (12). The inclusive pronoun “เรา” ‘we’ suggests rapport and sameness. The adverb “ได้เท่าเทียมกัน” ‘fairly’ highlights the equality within the relationships.

4. Deviance

Deviance is defined as the fact or state of departing from usual or accepted standards, especially in social or sexual behavior (Oxford University Press, 2019). Polyamorous people are often dismissed by the monogamous mainstream as sexual deviants. Therefore, polyamorous relationships mostly were represented as if they were impossible, abnormal, and different from usual or accepted standards. They were also frequently linked with promiscuity and instability. Many stigmatizing choices of language use that discriminated against polyamorists were found such as rhetorical question, referencing, modification, metaphor, presupposition, and verb.

(13) มันจะปกติได้ยังไงถ้าต้องมีแฟนมากกว่า 1 คน

‘How can having more than one partner be normal?’

(V.yada, 2019)

(14) คนหลาย ๆ คนมองความสัมพันธ์แบบเราว่าไม่ถูกต้อง

‘Many people think that our relationship is wrong.’

(CatDumb, 2018)

(15) ความสัมพันธ์แบบมารักนี้ยังคงถูกตีตราจากคนอื่นว่าไร้ศีลธรรม มักมากในกาม ทำลายสถาบันครอบครัว และการแต่งงาน ไม่จริงจังยั่งยืน

‘This multi-love relationship is still stigmatized by others as immoral, prurient, threatening to family and marriage institutions, and momentary.’

(Yodhong, 2019b)

(16) ความสัมพันธ์ที่คนส่วนใหญ่ต้องการก็คือความสัมพันธ์แบบผัวเดียวเมียเดียว

‘The most wanted relationship by most people is monogamy.’

(StolenHeart, 2019)

(17) เมื่อมีการพูดถึงประเด็นความสัมพันธ์มากผัวมากเมีย มักจะมีการหยิบยกพฤติกรรมของสัตว์ควบคู่ไปด้วย

‘When talking about polyamorous relationships, the behavior of animals is often added along.’

(BrandThink, 2019)

(18) คุณอาจจะแอนตี้หรือรับไม่ได้กับพฤติกรรมเหล่านี้

‘You probably hate or do not accept these behaviors.’

(rao sam khon khwamsamphan bæp Polyamory thirak dai mak kwa [Three of us: Polyamorous relationships that allow us to have more than one lover], 2019)

In (13), the use of rhetorical question is found with the use of the term “ปกติ” ‘normal’ to question the normalcy of polyamorous practices which emphasizes and thus encourages the audience to accept that polyamory cannot be normal. Furthermore, the references “คนหลาย ๆ คน” ‘many people,’ “คนอื่น” ‘other people,’ and “คนส่วนใหญ่” ‘most people’ representing people in the whole society in (14), (15), and (16) are employed to claim as common facts many negatively stereotypical beliefs and thoughts of people in general against polyamory. It can be used to presume that polyamory is considered unwanted and unacceptable, which signifies prejudice and discrimination against polyamorists.

In addition, modifier choices including “ไม่ถูกต้อง” ‘wrong,’ “ไร้ศีลธรรม” ‘immoral,’ “มากเกินไปในกาม” ‘prurient,’ and “ไม่จีรังยั่งยืน” ‘momentary’ are all used to emphasize societal attitudes towards polyamory illustrated in (14) and (15). The use of modifiers by the media prove that negative attitudes and stigmatization towards those who do not conform to the norms still exist.

In terms of metaphor, the practices of polyamorists are compared to the behavior of animals as presented in (17). This totally devalues and dehumanizes the people who claim themselves as polyamorists and those who are not monogamous.

Besides, the use of verb phrases in (18) like “แอนตี้” ‘to hate’ and “รับไม่ได้” ‘not accept’ are employed to denote hatred and to emphasize the act of refusal against polyamorous behaviors.

5. Infidelity and Immorality

Some media represented polyamory as something related to cheating or infidelity which is considered unacceptable on the grounds of morality and threatening to the institutions of marriage and family. Although some media contents are intended to introduce ‘polyamory’ to Thai people, they are always started with disclaimers like they do not try to encourage people to cheat or to commit immorality. This shows that polyamory is often misunderstood and stigmatized by mainstream monogamist culture. Several strategies are utilized in portraying this concept of infidelity and immorality such as rhetorical question, presupposition, negation, verb, modification, and referencing:

(19) มันก็เท่ากับการมีกิ๊กหรือมีชู้ไม่ใช่หรือ

‘It’s the same as having an affair or committing adultery, isn’t it?’

(V.yada, 2019)

(20) จะบาปไหม เมื่อรูปแบบความสัมพันธ์ที่ยึดมั่นถือนั้นในคนเดียว ไม่ใช่สิ่งที่เราต้องการ
‘Is it sinful when monogamy is not what we want?’

(Polyamory ≠ Cheat, 2019)

(21) อย่าเพิ่งดราม่าและเข้าใจว่าเรากำลังนำเสนอเรื่องราวที่ชี้ให้ผู้อ่านทำผิดศีลธรรมหรือทำตัวนอกกรีต

‘Don't be dramatic and misunderstand that we are guiding you to be immoral or be unorthodox.’

(Nongpol, 2019)

(22) ดูเหมือนแนวคิดนี้จะถูกต่อต้านโดยคนส่วนใหญ่

‘This idea seems to be opposed by most people.’

(BrandThink, 2019)

(23) ในสภาพสังคมทั่ว ๆ ไป หรือบางศาสนาก็มองว่า การประพฤติผิดในกามนั้นเป็นบาปที่น่ารังเกียจ เช่นศีล 5 ข้อที่ชาวพุทธอย่างเรา ๆ คำนึงกันดี

‘In general societies, or some religions, sexual misconduct is viewed as an abominable sin, such as Buddhism’s Five Precepts that Buddhists like us are familiar with.’

(StolenHeart, 2019)

In terms of rhetorical question, polyamory is stereotyped as infidelity which is considered sinful presented in (19) and (20). This strategy is used to illustrate the authors’ states of mind which can influence the audience and direct how they should think. The media, as an agent of the majority of people in society, plays a role in representing mainstream views towards polyamory.

Additionally, in the sentence (21), it is presupposed that people in general still believe that polyamory is associated with immorality and heresy. The authors do not want the audience to understand that they are being guided to commit immorality when they give some information about polyamory. This could be seen by the use of negation “อย่า” ‘do not’ with the verbs “ดราม่า” ‘to be dramatic’ and “เข้าใจว่า” ‘to misunderstand.’ In addition, stigmatizing modifiers like “ผิดศีลธรรม” ‘immoral’ and “นอกกรีต” ‘unorthodox’ are used to describe the acts of polyamorists.

Another strategy is referencing. The use of the terms “คนส่วนใหญ่” ‘most people,’ “สังคมทั่ว ๆ ไป” ‘general society,’ and “ศาสนา” ‘religion’ in (22) and (23) represent the mainstream and accepted beliefs that being polyamorous is protested and sinful. Moreover, the reference of “ชาวพุทธอย่างเรา ๆ” ‘Buddhists like us’ in (23) is employed to aggravate the idea of us-them. This idea reflects that those who hold to monogamy as the social norm marginalize and eliminate other different parties.

6. Viable Alternative

Some articles represented polyamory as a viable alternative. It is one of many kinds of relationships that people can choose, not just mainstream monogamy. Monogamy is something everyone is familiar with, but not the only option available. It has been the only relationship type that is widely accepted and encouraged by the majority of people for an exceptionally long time. However, there are a number of people who feel that monogamy is constraining, and thus they want to have a relationship with more than one person who they believe are their true love. This is where polyamory is considered an option and some media contents even referred to this as choosing a relationship orientation. It is the choice that makes people feel more comfortable with what they really are without feeling bad or guilty to themselves and others. This idea can be seen by the use of several linguistic strategies such as modality, rhetorical question, metaphor, and imagery:

(24) คนเราควรมีสิทธิเลือกได้ว่า ความรักแบบไหนที่เหมาะสมกับความต้องการของเรามากที่สุด
 ‘People should have the rights to choose what kind of love is best for their needs.’
 (V.yada, 2019)

(25) ‘มีคนรักหลายคน’ เพราะเราสามารถตกหลุมรักได้มากกว่าหนึ่งคน
 ‘Having multiple lovers, because we may fall in love with more than one person.’
 (Nongpol, 2019)

(26) ทำไมความรักความสัมพันธ์ของคนถึงจะต้องมีเพียงแค่รูปแบบเดียว
 ‘Why do human relationships have to have only one form?’
 (Polyamory ≠ Cheat, 2019)

(27) Monogamy ก็เหมือนกับกินมังสวิรัต แต่เพราะคุณเลือกที่จะกินมังสวิรัตไม่ได้
 หมายความว่า คุณจะไม่ได้กลิ่นอาหารอร่อยนี่นา
 ‘Being monogamous is like being vegetarian. But the fact that you choose a
 vegetarian diet does not mean you cannot smell delicious food.’
 (Koonrapaisit, 2019)

In terms of modality, polyamory is represented as a possible option that people are able to choose as displayed in (24) and (25). The use of the modal verb “ควร” ‘should’ in (25) conveys a sense of advisability that everyone ought to have freedom of choice in choosing what kind of relationship they want to be in. Additionally, the modal verb “สามารถ” ‘may’ used in (26) shows the possibility of people having multiple partners.

Furthermore, rhetorical question is one of strategies found in (26). The interrogative adverb “ทำไม” ‘why’ is used to guide the audience to the position that monogamy is only one form of relationship. There are more than one relationship type and people have choices.

As shown in (27), imagery is found with the use of metaphor: “เหมือนกับกินมังสวิรัต” ‘like being vegetarian.’ Monogamy is compared to vegetarianism; thus, polyamory can be assumed as non-vegetarianism. The comparison between being monogamous and being vegetarian suggests mental representation of relationship types which are as various as types of eating habits. With the help of imagery, people are able to easily understand how polyamory can be considered a practical and inviting alternative.

7. Better

A few articles mentioned about polyamory’s benefits. According to the positive categories representing polyamory in Thai online media, polyamory can be regarded as a better idea for having a relationship. It could be better than monogamous relationships in many ways, for example in terms of worthiness, high integrity, longevity of love life, lightening the burdens, and more. The linguistic strategies used in representing this category include metaphor, modification, proverb, referencing, negation, and rhetorical question:

(28) ทั้งความสัมพันธ์แบบมารักและความสัมพันธ์เป็นคู่ต่างทำให้ชีวิตรักยืนยาวพอ ๆ กัน เพียงแต่ถ้าคำนึงถึง หลักเศรษฐศาสตร์ เมนูชุด combination หรือ duo set ยังไงก็คุ้มไม่เท่า combo set เท่านั้น

‘Multi-love relationships last as long as couple relationships do. Only if considering economic principles, a duo set menu is not as worthy as a combo set menu.’

(Yodhong, 2019b)

(29) polyamory ย่อมดีกว่า monogamy ที่แอบไปนอกใจนอกกาย มือถือสาก ปากถือศีล ประกาศว่า “ผิวเดียวเมียวเดียวเป็นการฝืนธรรมชาติ” เพื่อเป็นข้ออ้างที่ใช้จะนอกใจหรือข้อแก้ตัว เมื่อโดนจับได้เท่านั้นเอง

‘Polyamory is better than monogamy since monogamists cheat on their partners, and play the hypocrite proclaiming that "monogamy is against nature" as an excuse for cheating or when getting caught.’

(Yodhong, 2019b)

(30) ผลวิจัยเผย Polyamorous ฟังพอใจในรักหลายคน ยิ่งยืนกว่าการยึดติดรักเดียวใจเดียว ‘Research finds that polyamory (satisfaction in loving multiple people) lasts longer than sticking to monogamy.’

(Workpoint News, 2018)

(31) การมีคนคอยช่วยเหลือหรือมีที่พึ่งพาถึง 2 คน มันก็ไม่แย่จริงมั๊ยคะ

‘Having someone to help or to rely on up to 2 people is not so bad, is it?’

(V.yada, 2019)

In (28), the use of metaphor is found. The monogamous relationship is compared to a duo set menu, and the polyamorous relationship is compared to a combo set menu. This comparison is chosen to explain that, though both kinds of relationship last, polyamory is better than monogamy in terms of worthiness as a combo set menu is more worthwhile than a duo one. The selected lexical modifier “ดีกว่า” ‘better’ with the proverb “มือถือสาก ปากถือศีล” ‘to play the hypocrite’ in (29) straightforwardly inform the audience that polyamory is better than monogamy in terms of honesty. To illustrate, the modifier “ดีกว่า” ‘better’ is chosen to positively represent the practices of polyamory. The proverb, however, is used to represent the negative practices of monogamists showing that they lack honesty unlike polyamorists.

In addition, the reference of “ผลวิจัย” ‘research’ representing reliable sources of information in (30) is utilized to claim the solid results from systematic studies. Thus, the audience can be convinced to believe that polyamory is better than monogamy in terms of longevity of love life.

In addition, the use of rhetorical question is found in (31). The question tag “จริงมั๊ยคะ” ‘is it?’ is used to allow the audience some time to think the way the author wants them to. They are guided by the author to the perspective that having more than one partner is fairly good. They could have someone to help them and someone whom they can count on.

Conclusion and Discussion

In summary, apart from the concept of sexual revolution which only suggests a new relationship phenomenon, polyamory is represented in both positive and negative ways by the Thai online media. Hence, the hypothesis that polyamory can still be represented as a false duality of the cheating and monogamy system, with criticisms based on moralistic grounds, and at the same time, can be positively represented was supported by the data. The findings in this research are in accordance with the related previous study of Antaffy (2011) whose works are associated with the representation of polyamory in print and broadcast media.

Positive representations of polyamory can be categorized into three categories: unrelated to cheating or other non-monogamous practices, viable alternative, and better choice. Polyamory is portrayed by some media sources as a way to explain polyamory on its own terms that it is not cheating and does not resemble other non-monogamous relationships. It is, thus, depicted by some of the media as another type of relationship which is a practical option for those who cannot conform to mainstream monogamy. It has also been displayed in an acceptable light as a better choice of relationship in terms of cultivating worthiness, high integrity, longevity of love life, and lightening of burdens.

In the matter of negative representations, polyamory can be grouped into three categories: deviance, intricacy, and infidelity/immorality. It is frequently linked to infidelity and is criticized on the grounds of morality which can be regarded as a threat to the institutions of marriage and family. In addition, it is depicted as a complex relationship which can be hard to

understand. Not only is polyamory represented as intricate, it is also represented as a sexual deviance as it departs from the accepted standard of monogamy.

However, though polyamorous relationships are portrayed in a positive manner, most of the positive representations are still based on negative attitudes which society holds against polyamory. Within those positive portrayals, polyamory is often linked to the falsity, and to the low acceptance of people in society which somehow suggests deep societal anxieties around multi-partnering. To exemplify, in (12), “เราความรักได้เท่าเทียมกัน” ‘we are able to fairly have multiple lovers’ which suggests fairness and the positivity of polyamory, the use of the terms “ความรัก” ‘having multiple lovers’ still conveys a sense of negativity and inappropriacy. According to Punwichai and Wonsurawat (2020), the lexicalization and lack of terminology in Thai describing polyamory signify that Thai society cannot keep up with the development of human relationships and changes in society. Thus, this untitled consensual non-monogamy seems to be marginalized which shows a lack of societal acceptance. In agreement with Antalffy (2011), polyamory is still not depicted as a mainstream choice, in fact, it is displayed as a marginal alternative to monogamy. The use of the lexical selection here can conventionalize ideas, shape people’s opinions, transmit views, and represent power regimes.

According to the findings, it is found that the language used by the media plays an effective role in constructing and spreading discourses and influencing the audience (Baker, 2014). There are 11 linguistic strategies including lexicalization (modification, verbs, and terms of address), rhetorical question, presupposition, referencing, metaphor, negation, modality, repetition, proverb, imagery, and idiom employed by the media. With the use of language strategies, those images are mentally processed more rapidly and their influence and control permeate the subconsciousness of the people and society. Audiences can be easily influenced and manipulated by what they are not consciously aware of since the power of media language has the capacity to produce subliminal persuasion. Thus, negative exposure to polyamory may reinforce the beliefs of particular groups of audiences, which are against any kinds of non-monogamous relationships, that their stigmatizing ideas or prejudicial actions are sanctioned by wider society (Fongkaew et al., 2019).

The theory of representation (Hall, 1997) and agenda setting (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002) were essential processes applied while representing specific images of polyamory in Thai online media. These two processes led to selecting and perpetuating specific aspects to be apprehended among audiences, specifically the aspects that focused on practices or behaviors which are presumably different from those of mainstream beliefs. Several media sources were subjective in the way they intentionally linked practices of non-monogamy, though consensual, to negative personal behaviors to build influence on the audience that polyamorists are deviant, dishonest, or sinful. On the other hand, the positive portrayals of polyamory attempt to shift societal beliefs from obligatory monogamy to a more flexible view

that includes the possibility of an unfamiliar form of consensual non-monogamy. It is hoped that the audience will gain a better understanding about the concepts of polyamory, reduce prejudice, and be open-minded.

It is manifested that the media representations of polyamory can reflect Thai social and cultural beliefs. It is explicitly reflected that Thai people strongly hold onto the cultural norm of relationship, which is monogamy. Therefore, any behaviors that are not monogamous are automatically stereotyped to be cheating. It is often misunderstood and stigmatized by mainstream monogamist culture. Monogamy and cheating are seen as logical opposites, in which one is good and is bad (Antalffy, 2011). Polyamory is, thus, considered bad and problematic and therefore in need of fixing by means of turning back to the cultural norm. Moreover, polyamory is quite new to Thai society, so many people seem to be unfamiliar with it. They do not think that it is possible and those who claim themselves as polyamorists are regarded as deviants, or mentally disturbed (BrandThink, 2019; CatDumb, 2019; Miss P, 2019). Representations of polyamory as intricate and complex also emphasize its novelty and unfamiliarity in Thailand. Furthermore, some representations that connect polyamory to immoral and sinful acts reflect the important role that religion plays in Thai society which highlights the conservativeness of Thai people. Polyamory is described as unacceptable on the accounts of morality and potential threats to traditional family and marriage. This conservative discussion indicates profound cultural and traditional anxieties over multi-partnering and regards any deviation from traditional relationships as morally ruinous. Because polyamory does not follow the mainstream social construct of a relationship, Thai society still frowns upon it as being unfaithful. There are people who insist that one should only have one lover at a time. This can make people afraid to acknowledge polyamorous relationship and thus the practice cannot be widely recommended although there are several positive representations encouraging people to be open-minded.

LGBTQ-identified polyamorists are marginalized by society at large; in consequence, the LGBTQ community is barely mentioned in relation to polyamorous relationships among the collected 22 media sources. However, there are some points of LGBTQ that are discussed. It is said that polyamory is popular among LGBTQ communities, especially bisexuals, because it promotes non-binary identities. Perhaps due in part to the popularity of polyamory among LGBTQ individuals, parallels between the movements of LGBTQ groups and that of polyamory have been drawn. Both are often opposed and stigmatized on grounds of morality. They are commonly described as unnatural behaviors against traditional social norms and beliefs, thus excluded from the mainstream. This reflects the hideaway of those who are both LGBTQ and polyamorous avoiding double prejudice (Yodhong, 2019b).

The present results are limited both because the concepts of polyamory remain unclear and because the topic has not been widely discussed in Thai online media. With more comprehensive search terms and concepts, there could possibly be more corresponding publications regarding polyamorous relationships in many more aspects including LGBTQ for future research. Moreover, the comments under the posts about polyamory are also interesting to be investigated to see how audiences perceive what is being represented, how the strategies used by the media influence them, and how they react.

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