

Exploring the Representation of Male Homosexuals in Thai Boy Love Series through Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This academic article presents the portrayal and impact of the Boy Love (BL) series within the Thai media landscape, and the social influence on the Thai Boy Love genre. The article explains the representation of Thai Boy Love series through referencing theoretical frameworks and concepts of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Norman Fairclough, illustrating how they can be used in interpreting texts and visuals. Additionally, it discusses the role of media portrayal, audience engagement, and broader cultural impacts on the discourse surrounding the Thai Boy Love series. The reproduction of the sexual traits and roles of male homosexuals, which are argued to follow the binary gender norm in Thai Boy Love series, are also explained. Last but not least, the article elaborates power dynamics, ideological positions, and societal norms embedded in this genre, in hope that the genre of Thai Boy Love and the representation of male homosexuals are explained in a broader aspect, which may lead to a more creative adaptation and realistic portrayal of Thai homosexuals in the of the genre. Despite the insights gained, significant gaps are thought to remain in investigating local cultural and linguistic contexts in the Boy Love series, especially those relating to sexual performativity.

Keywords: representation in boy love series; gender and language; Queer theory; Critical Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

The rise of Boy Love (BL) series in Thai media has generated significant cultural and societal interest, with these narratives often positioned at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and media representation. While much attention has been given to the growing popularity and economic success of this genre, less focus has been placed on the deeper ideological and cultural implications embedded in these narratives. The portrayals of protagonists in Boy Love series often challenge traditional gender norms and heteronormative ideals, offering alternative perspectives on romance and identity. However, these narratives simultaneously reflect and negotiate the societal tensions and power dynamics that shape their production and reception.

This article is to reveal the representation of male homosexuals in Boy Love series, and their contribution to broader discourses on gender and sexuality in Thai society. It also aims to understand Boy Love narratives, revealing the underlying power structures, ideologies, and cultural norms they reflect and reproduce. To better understand the portrayal of male homosexual protagonists, let us first examine the Boy Love genre.

1.1 The Boy Love Genre

The genre of Boy Love has become more popular, especially in countries where sexual equality is flourishing. It is suggested that this genre has gone through much difficulty before being accepted and enjoyed by the audience, some of which are their loyal fans. The initial unpopular reception on Boy Love stories is that they feature androgynous boys who love each other, rather than the typical male-female dynamic. Offering readers a fantasy escape, these narratives often take place in a romanticized setting. The "*beautiful boy*" character is neither strictly male nor female, and while he loves other boys, his attractions aren't limited to homosexuality (Welker, 2006).

This portrayal, as appeared in the genre, challenges traditional gender roles and offers readers a non-conventional perspective on romance and sexuality. In the eastern world, gender performance such as that in Japan has quite a long history, with some acceptance of same-sex love in certain contexts. However, in the 1970s, when discussions of same-sex desire were taboo, the beautiful boy characters in Boy Love manga, a style of comic or graphic novel that originated in Japan covering a wide range of genres and its distinct art style, emerged as a symbol of rebellion against heteronormativity. This genre provides a safe space for readers to explore romance and sexuality outside societal norms through identification with these characters (Welker, 2006).

Boy Love stories have depicted romantic relationships between men and gained significant attention from scholars in the past twenty years. This results in a wealth of theoretical analyses and both qualitative and quantitative studies have emerged, focusing on aspects such as the media's portrayal of Boy Love characters and their audience. Despite growing English-language research on Boy Love (BL) media, much remains limited to Japanese sources, complicating cross-disciplinary synthesis. While the genre's features and fan preferences evolve, some themes remain consistent. Boy Love narratives inspire fans' creativity, enabling self-expression through art, fosters global fan communities, and offers women a space to explore fantasies free from societal constraints. They also promote more positive attitudes towards LGBTQ+, with studies showing that BL engagement motivates women to support such causes (Zsila, 2017). Thus, Boy's Love functions as more than just a form of entertainment; it is a social phenomenon that challenges gender norms, fosters creative communities, and amplifies marginalized voices. This foundational understanding sets the stage for examining how fans, especially in diverse cultural contexts, actively shape the genre's global evolution and popularity.

1.2 The Influence of Fans to Popularize the Boy's Love Genre

Building on the ground of social construction, the influence of Boy Love (BL) media extends beyond the narratives themselves, deeply involving fans in shaping its global popularity and cultural adaptation. For Instance, Pagliassotti (2008) states that fans of Boy Love manga in the West read and engage with the genre together online, challenging the idea that reading is a solo activity. However, its western fans are different from their Japanese counterparts, as they include people of various genders and sexual orientations, and they often see their reading as supporting gay rights. This raises questions about cultural differences in how reading is perceived and its importance.

In the Thai media context, Boy Love (BL) series have surged in popularity recently, particularly those produced and broadcast in Thailand which are known for its distinct qualities, as Prasannam (2023) claims that Boy Love series are now sold globally, including in Europe and Asia, as shown by the numerous fan meetings. These series have also reached the Chinese-speaking regions, South Korea, Japan - the birthplace of Boy Love culture - as well as North America and Latin America. Additionally, in 2022, Sutheesathaporn, Managing Director of Mediaplex International Company Limited, noted that the global fame of these series is largely due to the impressive performances by the actors and the uniquely distinctive scripts that emphasize the life styles of Thai students and cultural experience.

Due to their popularity, many researchers have been interested in this particular genre. For instance, Baudinette (2019) examines the adaptation of “Yaoi”, a Japanese genre of homoerotic media targeted at heterosexual female audiences, into the Thai media landscape through an analysis of the series *"Lovesick, The Series"* (2014). This series marks a significant shift in the representation of queer sexuality in mainstream Thai media, introducing this new genre, which is called “series wai” in Thai. By considering the narrative of the first season of *"Lovesick,"* the article illustrates how the storytelling conventions of Japanese Boy Love are adapted to fit into the heteronormative narrative structure typical of Thai media. It argues that the series' focus on both queer and heterosexual romance and its portrayal of male protagonists as stereotypical heterosexual men, in order to cater to the preference for heteronormative romance in Thai media. However, the article also highlights how *"Lovesick"* reflects the broader influence of Japanese popular culture on Thai perceptions of sexuality, and how it introduces queer interpretations into the Thai media landscape. This research traces the emergence of a new, positive representation of queer politics in Thai media over time. Due to its popularity, the Boy Love genre then has impacts on the scene of homosexuality in the media. As such series are socially influential, they; therefore, have impacts on the Thai entertainment industry, and the call for sexual equality in Thai society.

1.3. Thai Boy Love Series and Their Impacts

Since the mid-2010s, Thai Boys Love series have gained immense popularity worldwide, particularly in China, where they have become the most popular non-animated male-male love media. Zhang (2010) examines the reception of these series in China, focusing on consumption patterns, viewer imagination, and societal dynamics and discusses how viewers navigate censorship, the appeal of the series' escapist narratives, and the stereotypes they perpetuate about Thailand and gay men. Additionally, it addresses the vulnerability of the perceived "Chinese-Thai romance" amidst rising nationalism.

Not only in China has the genre of Thai Boy Love become popular, but also in neighboring countries such as the Philippines. Take for example, Filipino audiences have developed a strong emotional connection with Thai Boy Love (BL) series, driven by cultural

similarities and proximity (Lacap, 2023). These series provide a platform for exploring societal attitudes toward sexuality, with their portrayal of homoerotic and romantic relationships fostering emotional involvement. Additionally, Thai BL media consumption is linked to increased travel motivation, as viewers express interest in visiting Thailand to explore locations from the series or experience the country as a tourist destination. Emotional involvement mediates this desire to travel.

Thai Boy Love series have also played an important role in promoting Thai soft power. Widely distributed on streaming platforms like YouTube and Facebook, they have expanded beyond a domestic audience, gaining popularity across Southeast Asia. This global reach has boosted engagement, democratized fan participation, and promoted Thai culture, benefiting the Thai entertainment industry economically. The success of Thai BL series highlights the country's cultural influence and its ability to create a regional queer market, attracting audiences interested in Thai interpretation of East Asian narratives (Lizada, 2022).

In Thai society, despite the rapid growth of the Boy Love (Yaoi) industry, mainstream attitudes remain opposed to the expression of male same-sex love. The series *"Love by Chance,"* based on the novel *"My Accidental Love Is You"*, faced such opposition when Channel 9 MCOT HD suspended its broadcast just hours before its premiere on May 28, 2018. This decision reported to avoid presenting male same-sex love stories, sparked widespread criticism for bias and exclusion. However, *"Love by Chance"* finally found a platform on Channel ONE 31, continuing its mission to raise awareness on same-sex love among male homosexuals (Doungmanee, Lerlertyuttitham & Prasannam, 2021). Interestingly, later on, the number of these series has increased up to now and will have been increasing before the *Thailand Civil Partnership Bill* will be in effect in 22 January, 2025.

Since social contexts significantly shape the characteristics and portrayals of Boy Love protagonists, understanding the underlying ideologies, power dynamics, and cultural narratives becomes crucial. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), then, emerges as a feasible and valuable tool for examining this popular genre in that it can enable readers and researchers to explore how language, media, and societal structures influence the representation of gender, sexuality, and identity in Boy Love media. By applying CDA, researchers can uncover the ways in which BL narratives challenge or reinforce societal norms, offering deeper insights into their cultural significance and impact.

The Representation of Male Homosexuals in the Thai Boy Love Genre

The representation of male homosexual characters is evolving even though many of them still follow the ideology of gender opposition, featuring a masculine top and a more feminine bottom. However, some Thai Boy Love series try to presents more gender-fluid traits of the protagonists, reflecting the queer concept of sexual performativity as proposed by Judith Butler (1990). The reference to Critical Discourse Analysis is argued to be crucial, since it helps crack the complex social phenomena.

2.1 The Representation of male protagonists in Boy Love Genre

Representation (Hall, 1997) refers to the production of meaning through language and symbols within cultural contexts. Representation is crucial in understanding media, as it determines how particular social groups, identities, and relationships are portrayed and interpreted. In this article, representation focuses on the portrayal of protagonists in Thai Boy Love series (gender identity, sexuality, and relational dynamics) and the genre as a cultural phenomenon that interacts with societal norms. These dimensions form the basis for analyzing how Thai BL narratives challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles and heteronormative ideals.

The Boy Love genre, originating from Japanese “Yaoi” has been adapted into Thai media with distinctive cultural elements. Moreover, Thai Boy Love series blend emotional narratives with culturally specific aesthetics, making them both locally grounded and globally appealing. Many of these series often portray characters who subvert gender binaries through androgynous and fluid portrayals, challenging heteronormative expectations while some of them follow the societal norm on binary opposition, which stigmatizes the roles of “top” and “bottom” to male homosexuals, creating the tension between resistance and conformity within the genre. This highlights the complexity of representation in Boy Love media, which both disrupts and reinforces established norms.

To deconstruct the ideology of binary opposition, such as the role of a top and a bottom as represented in the male homosexual characters, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity is central to understanding these portrayals. Gender, according to Butler (1990), is a repeated performance shaped by societal expectations rather than an innate trait. Thai Boy Love series often depict protagonists who perform gender in ways that disrupt or conform to societal norms, offering a lens to analyze the interplay between individual agency and cultural structures. For instance, characters in Boy Love series may adopt traditionally masculine or feminine roles depending on their romantic dynamics, thereby reflecting Butler’s assertion that gender is fluid and context-dependent. The narrative exploration of these roles allows audiences to question the stability of binary gender norms and heteronormativity.

The Boy Love genre in Thailand, similar to those in other countries, is argued to be involved with power relation. Thus, Foucault’s theory of discourse and power can explain how societal ideologies influence the representation of Thai male homosexuals. His concept of power dynamics is particularly relevant in exploring how Boy Love narratives provide a platform for marginalized identities, reflecting the cultural hierarchies of Thai society, which suggests that one gender role has power over the others. For example, a man has the right and role to protect a woman or a top homosexual would simulate the role of a man and a bottom homosexual would take the role of the woman in a binary gender ideology. It can be argued that there is such power relation in Boy Love narratives, though sexuality is thought to be fluid (Butler, 1990).

2.2 The Construction and Representation of the Characters in the Thai Boy Love Series

Over the past decade, the Thai Boys Love (BL) series, featuring romantic or erotic relationships between young men, have become highly popular across Asia, originating from Japanese Yaoi manga. These series have expanded into novels, fan fiction, films, and TV shows, gaining significant followings, especially among heterosexual women in countries such as China, Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Despite challenging heterosexual norms in regions like China, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the Thai BL series offer content often restricted in these areas. Fans in countries such as China and the Philippines engage with Thai Boy Love series, influenced by their socio-cultural and political contexts. While criticized by members of the sexual deviant community for not accurately representing their lives, the series evoke complex interpretations from international audiences, shaped by their unique cultural and gender politics. Thai Boy Love dramas contribute to the imagination of Thailand’s representation of queerness and reflect broader socio-cultural dynamics (Jirattikorn, 2023).

To begin with, let us examine the general image of male homosexuals as the representation of unfulfilled love has been stigmatized by Thai media for quite a long time. Dounmanee, Lerlertuttitham & Prasannam (2021) examine the representation of homosexual men in the Thai Boy Love novel *"My Accidental Love Is You."* The representation is categorized

into four themes: 1) male homosexuality deviates from social norms, 2) male homosexuality must remain hidden, 3) male homosexuality brings disappointment and shame to families, and 4) male homosexuality cannot achieve true love, requiring love to be bought instead. These representations reflect societal discourses on male homosexuality. The author uses these prejudices to create plot conflicts, challenging traditional beliefs and advocating for alternative views on male homosexuality. Through poetic justice, those holding prejudices are judged, thereby educating society and readers.

Boy Love series characters differ from those in soap operas or movies, which often depict feminine traits, unrequited love, overaction, and a strong interest in men. The characters in the Boy Love genre are typically portrayed as young (from high school to early working age), middle to upper class, good-looking, with great bodies, and living in urban areas. Shared traits among these characters include hyper-masculinity in appearance and manner, transposing traditional gender roles onto two males with distinct hero (active) and heroine (passive, more feminine) roles, an idealized world where homosexual love is widely accepted, and monogamous relationships leading to a "happily ever after" ending *Suteepatarakul* (2020).

Thus, the genre of Boy Love in the Thai series has become a hit. Prsannam (2019) explores the Yaoi phenomenon in Thailand during the 2010s in particular when the industry heavily engaged with Yaoi fandom. It builds on Paul Booth's (2015) study of fan/industry interaction to expand the existing scholarship on Yaoi in Thailand. The researcher found that the current Yaoi phenomenon in Thailand is largely driven by the entertainment industry to sustain its popularity, with fan/industry practices becoming mainstream at cultural events. This approach has been adopted by other companies, exemplified by *"Reminders the Series"* (2019), which included a nostalgic fan event featuring actors from *"Love of Siam."* This event integrated the film into Boy Love cultural memory, enhancing fan/industry interactions through *"shipping,"* short for relationship (the pairing of characters or actors in romantic relationships by Boy Love fans) and nostalgia. Additionally, Chinese companies have funded Thai Boy Love series like *"What the Duck the Series"* and *"Love by Chance the Series,"* despite restrictions on homosexual content in China. These collaborations aim to boost the Thai star industry in China and other markets, including South America. This commercialization of fan culture by the business sector opens avenues for further empirical and theoretical research on Boy Love phenomena.

In terms of gender representation, Wongnarathiwat (2019) suggests that diversifying the portrayal of homosexual characters and focusing on authentic gender identities, rather than traditional roles, could improve societal understanding and enhance Thai Boy Love drama production. Thai Boy Love series, which primarily feature male-male relationships, adopt an etic approach, often written by female writers, and define protagonist roles as "top" and "bottom." While these series have gained popularity, they have not significantly contributed to gender diversity movements in Thailand but have increased acceptance of Boy Love. Influenced by traditional heterosexual norms, Thai Boy Love series promote an "equal ideology," depicting romantic love characterized by passion, intimacy, and commitment. Pham (2019, 2021) analyzes the evolution of Thai Boy Love productions, comparing *"Love Sick: The Series"* and *"Love by Chance"*, and highlights how the industry has expanded its portrayal of boys' love. By examining the success of *"SOTUS The Series"* and *"Together With Me"*, a significant moment in the ongoing production of Boy Love dramas is identified. Despite their success, these series often reinforce heteronormative standards while superficially challenging them, illustrating the industry's complex relationship with mainstream norms.

2.3 The Boy Love Genre: Social Influence, Identity, and Images

Though the Boy Love protagonists in the Yaoi series have more positive images than the characters of male homosexuals as portrayed in media in the past, they still encounter plights and prejudice. BL series like *"SOTUS"* (2016), *"Gameboys"* (2020), and *"Dark Blue and Moonlight"* (2017) from Thailand, the Philippines, and Taiwan, portray various struggles of queer characters. Uy (2021) analyses these series using queer theory, coding frameworks, and textual analysis to identify, compare, and characterize the struggles depicted. The findings reveal that the main struggles are self-acceptance, acceptance by others, and managing emotions, with characters sharing similar responses to these challenges.

The plights, struggles, and challenges of the protagonists as presented in the series are usually a consequence of violence. Sirichithaporn (2022) examines gender-based violence in Boy Love series, its impact, and guidelines for ethically presenting LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, and others) content in such series. Through textual analysis and interviews with human rights and gender justice activists and LGBTQ+ community members, the study identified five forms of gender-based violence in the Boy Love series: physical violence, verbal contempt, non-consensual sexual acts, treating partners as possessions, and reinforcing gender roles. These acts are often romanticized, leading to several negative impacts which diminish the seriousness of gender-based violence, creating LGBTQ+ stereotypes, pressuring LGBTQ+ individuals to change for acceptance, and neglecting their rights. The study suggests that media content related to LGBTQ+ should be more diverse, present gender-based violence comprehensively, and involve collaboration to produce creative and ethical content. Thus, there is room for empirical studies to seek the societal and cultural elements behind such violence in that productions in the future can make use of them as reference to produce quality contents in the Boy Love's genre.

Despite their growing popularity, there is limited quantitative research on the Thai Boy Love series. Bunyavejchewin, Tungkeunkunt, Kamonpetch, Sirichuanjun, & Sukthungthong, (2024) examines the contextual background of the Y-boom, as well as the socio-demographic and lifestyle characteristics of Thai viewers. It also explores the relationship between these characteristics and the frequency of Boy Love series consumption. A survey of 200 viewers revealed that sexual orientation and following Facebook pages featuring attractive male students, known as 'cute-boy pages,' were significant predictors of weekly Boy Love series consumption. Bisexual and homosexual viewers were six and three times more likely, respectively, to watch Boy Love series content weekly compared to heterosexual viewers. Additionally, individuals who followed 'cute-boy pages' showed a higher tendency to consume Boy Love series content.

2.4 Understanding Discourse in Thai Boy's Love Series

Discourse is seen as a means for expressing and shaping social, political, and economic values and power structures (Foucault, 1972). Michel Foucault's frameworks stress how discourse reflects and reinforces societal power dynamics. In the case of forming and reproducing Boy Love characters, it is argued that societal power, which governs the gender roles in a society, is reflected as being different from the binary gender concept (male and female) and not fully accepted.

Discourse Analysis is claimed to be used in understanding the Boy Love phenomena. For example, Kumsubha (2022) employs textual and discourse analysis to examine the framing of social movements in Thai Boy Love series from 2020 to 2022, analyzing seven series and conducting 19 interviews with directors and actors, along with two YouTube reaction channels. The study reveals that Boy Love narratives are crucial in framing social movements, particularly

around gender identity and power dynamics tied to societal exploitation. These series engage audiences, including those previously unaware of MSM (men who have sex with men) issues, by facilitating frame extension. The involvement of actors, directors, and YouTube channels enhances the credibility of these frames. The study aligns with Fairclough's three-dimensional concept of text, discursive practice, and social practice, illustrating how the genre is shaped by texts and social ideologies.

In short, the Boy Love genre, particularly in Thai Boy Love series, has been observed to challenge traditional social beliefs surrounding binary genders, as supported by studies highlighting its subversion of conventional gender roles through its portrayal of androgynous characters and fluid gender dynamics (Doungmanee, Lerlertuttitham, and Prasannam, 2021; Suteepatarakul, 2020). These narratives often depict protagonists who embody traits and relationships that deviate from heteronormative expectations, though many of them continue to impose binary opposition ideologies on their characters., offering audiences alternative perspectives on gender identity and sexuality. Besides the social influence on the genre, power relation is believed to be part of forming the genre and the representation of Thai Boy Love protagonists.

2.5 Power and Discourse

Power is often viewed as a resource or capacity that some individuals or groups possess, enabling them to influence or control others. For example, political leaders have the power to shape laws and policies. Power is not only imposed but can be resisted and negotiated. The dynamics of power involve constant interaction between those who seek to exert control and those who are subjected to it. Van Dijk's (1993) categorized levels of control. These include Action Control, which is the ability to limit others' actions. For instance, laws and regulations control what people can and cannot do; for example, a top protagonist in a Boy Love series has to act in a masculine fashion. Next, Cognition Control influences how others think, such as through propaganda or media framing on the fixed characteristics of Boy Love protagonists, which can shape public opinion and attitudes towards them. Advertisements, for instance, often demonstrate how discourse can shape desires and consumer behaviors, reflecting broader societal values and power structures.

Frameworks to Analyze the Representation of Male Homosexuals in Boy Love Series

The representation of male homosexual characters in Thai Boy Love series can be effectively analyzed using Queer Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Concepts proposed by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler provide a robust framework for examining discourse within the Boy Love genre and other queer narratives.

3.1. Foucault Principles in Doing Discourse

Foucault (1972) suggests that when discussing discourse, it is not just about language but also about the actions and materials that shape certain types of speech. He explains that discourses are 'practices which form the object of which they speak' (Foucault 1969/1972: 49), and suggests that in any society, the creation of discourses is influenced by specific procedures that control, select, organize, and distribute them.

In analyzing the discourse which constructs the characteristics of Thai Boy Love protagonists, only the linguistic elements will not be enough without the consideration of the social contexts. The political spheres, social values and beliefs, and histories are vital factors that influenced the construction of the BL characters in the last two decades as binary genders; top (Phra-Ek) and bottom (Nai-Ek) roles. However, Post Foucauldian theorist such as Judith Butler argues that sexuality is performative, which means it is fluid and subject to change. Research on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can use Foucault's principles to deconstruct

the concept of binary opposition such as the top and bottom roles in the BL genre. When doing discourse, Foucault suggests following methodological principles:

1. The Principle of Reversal: Instead of examining what the discourse conveys, focus on what it excludes. Investigate what is omitted in the production of a discourse. Rather than seeking its source or origin, look for what is absent. In the Thai Boy Love series, elements which are excluded such as sexual fluidity among gay men, can be investigated to understand why it is left out in the series.

2. The Principle of Discontinuity: Remember that there is no grand narrative. There isn't a 'silent, continuous, and repressed' discourse hidden beneath the present discourse. Discourses are a series of sometimes connected, sometimes disconnected narratives. Thus, discourse analysis can only provide an alternative story, whose value is judged by ethical, moral, or aesthetic standards. It is not about presenting a truer picture, but about pointing to an alternative one. As portrayed in many Thai Boy love series, a romantic relationship and a monogamy value between the protagonists are emphasized and selected to be included in the stories, not showing the real occurrences of true representation of male homosexuals in Thai society.

3. The Principle of Specificity: The former principle is connected to the specificity principle. Since there is no such thing as "silent, continuous, and repressed" discourse, a given discourse cannot be interpreted using a previous meaning system. It is important to recognize that discourse is "practice imposed upon things" rather than anything that discourse makes comprehensible. If discourse exhibits regularity, but not due to any innate regularity; rather, it results from the consistency of this practice. There are no social laws, to put it another way, and patterns that can be found by examining language as a means of representing something but the social world is created through discourse, with no inherent 'depth' beyond the 'surface.' Likewise, the Boy Love genre, which reflects the social world of male homosexuals is created through discourse, which is imposed upon.

4. The Principle of Exteriority: Do not search for any hidden, inner essence or meaning of discourse. Instead, examine its external conditions of existence. Identify the circumstances that make a certain discourse possible and how these circumstances limit the discourse. Through this principle, investigating social phenomena and contexts which involve the production and reproduction of the Thai Boy Love genre can contribute more understanding of the genre of the representation of its male homosexual characters.

To sum up, these principles can be applied when analyzing how the contexts constitute the characteristics of Boy Love protagonists in-depth and can liberate the writers of this genre to be exposed to a new paradigm of creating BL characters.

3.2 Judith Butler's Queer Theory

Butler's 1990 theory posits that human relationships are not based on biological sex differences but on an individual's portrayal of genders or sexuality. Queer theory rejects heteronormativity, the idea that heterosexuality is society's default sexuality. The struggles depicted in the selected BL series are largely rooted in the heteronormative standards of Asian societies, which typically affirm the importance of producing a biological heir or continuing the family lineage (Raymo, et al., 2015). The major themes presented in many of these series such as *"Together"* may be challenged by this theory since their portrayal focuses on the fixed roles of top and bottom male homosexuals with stereotypical traits. To go beyond the ideology of binary opposition to develop the genre of Thai Boy Love series, sexual fluidity can be drawn to the interest of the series producers. Then, they would reflect more realities in male homosexual communities.

Finlay (2017) highlights the significant impact of Judith Butler's work on gender theory within social theory. In *"Gender Trouble"* (1999), Butler introduces the concept of gender performativity, challenging the perception of gender as innate and exposing its construction through power structures. While this theory has been prominent for queer and trans communities by interrogating binary gender norms, it raises concerns about the stability of queer and trans identities, potentially undermining their self-determination. In *"Undoing Gender"* (2004), Butler addresses these critiques by recognizing the tension between the necessity of identity for social recognition and its restrictive impact on non-normative identities. However, critical trans scholars, such as Viviane Namaste, critique Butler for abstracting trans experiences and neglecting the contextual realities of violence against trans individuals. This critique underscores the need to refine Butler's theories to more effectively represent queer and trans experiences within contemporary social theory.

3.3 Three-Dimensional Concept

Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional concept of discourse, as outlined in his book *"Language and Power"*, offers a comprehensive framework for examining the interaction between language, power, and society. This model encompasses three main dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. This three-dimensional framework can be implemented to investigate spoken and written languages as presented in the media, which include those in the Thai Boy Love series.

The text dimension focuses on analyzing the text itself, examining elements such as vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and rhetorical devices. This analysis looks at how linguistic features contribute to the meaning and function of the text. For example, vocabulary choices convey specific meanings and connotations, while grammar, including the use of passive or active voice, influences perceived agency and responsibility. Moreover, cohesion and coherence pertain to the connections between sentences and paragraphs to establish a cohesive text, while rhetorical devices such as metaphors and analogies influence the interpretation and persuasion of the discourse.

The discursive practice dimension investigates the processes involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of texts within "specific social contexts". This includes examining the context and conditions under which a text is produced, considering the intentions and backgrounds of the authors. It also looks at how texts are disseminated and circulated in society through various channels and media. Furthermore, this dimension explores how different audiences receive and interpret the text, influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds. Some of the Boy Love Series such as *"My Accidental Love Is You"* and *"Why R U The Series"* are adapted from the Boy Love novels. Thus, to better understand the representation of the Thai Boy Love series, it is also crucial to explore how the texts are presented in verbal communication within certain social contexts. Factors such as film language and settings may lead the audience to interpret a certain scene differently from the original texts.

The social practice dimension delves into the broader societal and cultural contexts that shape and are shaped by discourse. It examines how discourse contributes to the maintenance and transformation of power relations and social structures. This includes exploring how discourse reflects and perpetuates power dynamics and ideological positions within society. It also considers the institutions and social arrangements that both influence and are influenced by discourse, as well as the values, beliefs, and norms embedded in and reinforced by discourse. In summary, Fairclough's model highlights the interdependence of its dimensions. For instance, linguistic choices in a Boy Love text (Text) are shaped by production processes and the target audience (Discursive Practice), which are further influenced by broader societal and ideological contexts (Social Practice). This comprehensive approach allows for a

detailed analysis of discourse, revealing the intricate ways language functions within social power dynamics. This framework can be used to examine the construction and portrayal of Boy Love characters by analyzing their verbal and non-verbal language, the production, distribution, and consumption of texts within social contexts, and the influence of societal norms, particularly regarding sexuality. Ultimately, it shows how power relates to the construction of social norms legitimizing heterosexual practices and how Boy Love characters navigate this power.

3.4 Conducting an Analysis on the Representation of Thai Boy Love Genre and its Characters

Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) outline a systematic framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which can be effectively applied to examining media representation, including Boy Love series. The process begins by identifying the social issue under scrutiny, such as the reinforcement of binary oppositions in protagonist portrayals. Then, the social and discursive obstacles that sustain these issues, including practices that perpetuate stereotypes are analyzed. This is followed by situating the problematic discourse within its broader social context to evaluate its role in maintaining power dynamics. Subsequently, alternative discourses and strategies are explored to challenge dominant narratives and propose solutions. Finally, critical reflections on the analytical process to acknowledge biases and ensure the study's reflexivity. This structured approach enables a comprehensive examination of discourse. When considering sexual performativity, the representation of the protagonists is still stick to the norm of binary gender role (top and bottom) with specific masculine and feminine stereotype.

Let us consider an example of the Boy Love genre, which is imposed by the social and gender norms. While trying to create a positive image for the main characters, stereotypical ideas towards male homosexuals are still presented in the story. The famous series “2gether” can illustrate this to a certain extent.

The series “2gether” was adapted from the Boy Love novel of the same name. The text dimension is transferred to the verbal parts showing the stereotypes of active and passive male homosexuals. The following is an example of the conversation between the protagonists; Sarawat represents a role of Phra Ek with masculine traits and Tine represents the role of Nai Ek with more feminine traits.

Tine: *So, music or drawing?*

Sarawat: *I like drawing.*

Tine: *See? You're not being honest! Someone like you would definitely pick music.*

Sarawat: *Well, I was answering with something I hate.*

Tine: *I asked you to answer with something you like! Like seriously, when they ask what you like, they want to treat you right. If you're going to mess with me this much, then between me and those cheesy soap operas, you probably wouldn't be able to choose, huh?*

Sarawat: *I'd choose you.*

Tine: *Wow! So you hate me more than cheesy soap operas?*

Sarawat: *This time, I'm answering with something I like. Gotta go, got a football game to catch.*

(2gether: The Series, 2020, Episode 3)

From the conversation, Sarawat's responses, such as "I like drawing" and "I'd choose you," are concise and confident. This reflects a stereotypically masculine communication style, characterized by straightforwardness and a lack of elaboration. His closing line, "Gotta go, got a football game to catch," reinforces this masculine trait by associating him with a traditionally masculine activity, which is football. Moreover, Sarawat justifies his initial answer with logic, saying "Well, I was answering with something I hate," aligns with masculine communication norms, which often prioritize logic over emotion.

On the other hand, Tine's language is expressive and emotionally charged. The Phrases such as "I asked you to answer with something you like!" and "Like seriously, when they ask what you like, they want to treat you right" suggest a focus on emotional context and social expectations, which reflects feminine traits of empathy and emotional intelligence

Moreover, Tine's dialogue leans toward affectionate teasing, such as accusing Sarawat of hating him more than soap operas. This playful use of language and humor is often associated with feminine communication styles, which tend to be more relational and nurturing.

The texts reflect the Thai Boy Love genre's depiction of male homosexuals' reproductive roles, shaped by production processes, which target audience preferences, and societal norms. These portrayals often rely on binary oppositions, reinforcing traditional gender expectations.

To consider the discursive practice, let us investigate the characteristics of the protagonists and antagonist of this acclaimed series as summarized in this synopsis (2gether: The Series, 2020).

Sarawat is a first-year student in the prestigious Faculty of Political Science. Known for his good looks, he is a popular figure on campus, excelling as a football player, guitarist, and member of the music club and the band. Despite his popularity, Sarawat is calm, reserved, and prefers to keep to himself. Apart from email, he does not use any social media platforms. Sarawat is persuaded by Tine to pretend to be his fake boyfriend to help him avoid the persistent advances of Green, one of Tine's admirers.

Tine, a university cheerleader, grows tired of the unwanted attention from Green, his male admirer. To deter Green's advances, Tine thinks of a plan to fake a relationship with another guy. Enter Sarawat, a mysterious musician with a cool and aloof personality, who reluctantly becomes part of Tine's comedic charade. Together, they create a fake relationship, with Sarawat hesitantly agreeing to play the role of Tine's boyfriend.

Green, a first-year student in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, is an active member of the music club and initially in a relationship with Dim. However, due to conflicts with Dim, Green seeks a new romantic connection and sets his sights on Tine, whom he admires deeply. His pursuit of Tine turns him into an emotional and persistent admirer. Once Green reconciles with Dim, he lets go of Tine and begins a new chapter in his relationship.

As their pretend relationship unfolds, their connection deepens in unexpected ways. Both Tine and Sarawat confront their insecurities and navigate complex emotions. Along the way, they are supported by friends and family members who face struggles of their own. Eventually, Tine and Sarawat find themselves in a genuine romantic relationship, but not without overcoming the challenges that test their bond.

The social practice reflected in these characters highlights societal norms and power dynamics within the Thai Boy Love (BL) genre, which often represent broader cultural expectations. This genre frequently portrays relationships through a framework of binary roles

that align with traditional gender norms, even within same-sex relationships.

The relationship between Tine and Sarawat's reflects a dominant and submissive dynamic often seen in Boy Love narratives, where one character (Sarawat) embodies traditionally masculine traits—reserved, stoic, and protective—while the other (Tine) leans into more expressive and emotional characteristics, echoing feminine archetypes.

The characters' behaviors, such as Tine seeking protection and Sarawat being the strong and dependable figure, mimic heteronormative gender roles, which subtly reinforces societal expectations of masculinity and femininity in the series. It is therefore predicted that the concept of sexual performativity or fluidity, can shape the genre of Thai Boy Love series, leading it to a more creative and realistic representation.

Another illustrative example is found in "*Tharn Type the Series*," where Tharn embodies the role of the masculine "top" and Type assumes the more feminine "bottom." This series was also adapted from the novel before broadcasting. Notably, this series diverges from traditional Thai Boy Love narratives by attributing a typically masculine characteristic, such as being a football player, to the Nai-Ek, or the "bottom" role protagonist. However, the ideology of binary opposition is still portrayed in this series.

Selected Excerpts

1) *Tharn: "My Type is the best!"*

Type: "Can you give me a hug?"

2) *Type: "Can you hug me?"*

Tharn: "I'm already hugging you."

Type: "I want you to hug me tighter."

3) *Type: "Why do you want to get married so badly?"*

Tharn: "Because I love you. Do you understand?"

(Tharn Type the Series; Season 2)

These are just some examples of conversations between the protagonists, which portray the representation of their relationship. The conversations present a gendered contrast in emotional expression. Tharn uses assertive, action-oriented language, suggesting traditional masculine traits like confidence and control while Type expresses vulnerability and emotional need, often using requests for affection, which aligns with more traditionally feminine roles of emotional openness. The grammatical structure reflects this, with Tharn's direct statements and Type's questions emphasizing a power dynamic between the characters. Overall, the texts illustrate differing emotional priorities, with Type seeking connection and Tharn offering stability.

In many societies, including Thai society, traditional masculinity gives values to emotional restraint and action, while femininity is often associated with emotional expression and vulnerability. The dialogue between Tharn and Type reflects these cultural norms, with Tharn's assertiveness and Type's emotional openness. This discourse both reflects and reinforces these gendered roles, shaping how emotions and relationships are led to understanding of broader societal contexts.

It is hereby suggested that Critical Discourse Analysis could be an effective approach to understanding the gender roles of male homosexuals in relation to social phenomena.

In addition to texts, the audio and visual elements of Boy Love series can be explored through multimodality to interpret the portrayal of male homosexual characters. Multimodal studies rest on three fundamental principles: first, that communication inherently involves various modes—such as speech, writing, gestures, and images—and that the interaction between these modes is vital in constructing meaning. Second, meaning is shaped through these modes during interactions, and the methods we use to convey ideas are influenced by societal and cultural contexts (Kress, 2009).

For instance, the poster for the Boy Love series *"Future"* serves as one example of multimodality, illustrating the reinforcement of binary opposition through the characters' roles; a muscular and a more feminine characters.



A poster from the series *"Future"*. MCOT and Rookie Thailand. 2023

The caption *"my doctor (คุณหมอของผม)"* is used in the image as if the dentistry students were overtaken by the persona of a muscular, attractive engineering student. The poster portrays a connection between engineering and physical muscularity, while simultaneously presenting fields like dentistry through a more feminine lens. The more feminine character is depicted as shorter and physically delicate and endearing reinforcing traditional notions of femininity. This juxtaposition subtly highlights the contrasting dynamics between traditionally masculine and feminine attributes within various professional domains. The visual narrative emphasizes the crossover between physical strength and intellectual pursuits, potentially challenging conventional gender stereotypes within academic and professional settings.

Another example is from the scene in *"Still Together"* where *Sarawat*, a more masculine character, tells *Tine*, a young endearing university student *"If you keep looking at me like that, I'll kiss you until you fall."*

The way *Sarawat*, who embodies masculine traits, looks at his love, *Tine*, when saying that line.



2gether the series (2020), EP 4



Still 2gether the series (2020), EP 5

The way Tine looks back with an endearing look.



2gether the series (2020), EP 4



Still 2gether the series (2020), EP 5

From Sarawat's facial expression, he appears serious and somewhat assertive, showing determination and strength, which is associated with the concept of masculinity. This also reproduces the ideology that individuals with more masculine traits exhibit aggression, while Tine, who appears softer and more endearing, reflects a contrast. The frames illustrated suggest

that a character with masculine traits must maintain a certain level of aggression, while the submissive character is portrayed as unable to control themselves, speechless, and reactive. This reflects the notion of role division and expression within the binary gender framework, where individuals with feminine traits are expected to be submissive and gentle.

The examples from the texts, static image, and selected frames from the series show that binary gender traits continue to be reproduced in many Thai Boy Love series, despite their potential to promote fluidity and challenge heteronormativity.

Summary and Discussion

The exploration of the Thai Boy Love (BL) series can provide insight into the construction of discourse within these narratives and their profound societal impacts. This Boy Love genre, particularly in Thai media, acts as a focal point to challenge traditional gender norms, which are hereby referred to as binary opposition or binary genders, and explore a diverse range of romantic and sexual expressions though many of the Thai BL series still reproduce the concept of binary opposition through the construction of sexual roles of the main protagonists (Phra Ek with more masculine traits and Nai Ek with more feminine ones), which follows to the societal norm of heteronormativity.

It is worthwhile to investigate the portrayal of Boy Love narratives in series and to examine how audiences or fans engage with them, and understanding their broader cultural impacts. Interestingly, not only do Thai Boy Love series influence the Thai society, but they also generate income for the Thai entertainment industry since they series are popular in many countries. They have shed light on the intricate relationship between the construction of discourse in Boy Love characters and the shaping of societal realities.

While many Boy love series tend to follow the ideology of binary opposition, some are portraying a more fluidly sexual traits of the characters. Once the queer concept of gender performativity, which suggests that sexual performance varies, the representation of male homosexual characters in Thai Boy Love series may develop, contributing to the portrayal of more diverse aspects of Thai homosexual realities.

Moreover, Thai Boy Love series can act as platforms for questioning heteronormative narratives and fostering more inclusive representation of love and identity, which will potentially ignite broader discussions on the visibility of Thai male homosexuals and acceptance in media.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), along with queer concept, and media analysis, are argued to be a powerful tool for unpacking the multifaceted dimensions of the Thai Boy Love (BL) series, providing insights into the linguistic, discursive, and social complexities within these narratives. By applying CDA principles such as Fairclough's three-dimensional concept, the underlying power dynamics, ideological foundations, and societal norms that both shape and are influenced by Boy Love narratives can be explored.

It is hereby argued that the concept of binary gender, which is part of the social norms in Thailand influences the representation of the protagonists in the Thai Boy Love series, though sexual diversities have been embraced and celebrated. This notion is in accordance with the research result from Thai perception of the *Bounds of Masculinity: An Analysis of Boys' Love Drama Series* by Pham (2019), suggesting that Thai Boys Love (BL) drama series do not fundamentally deconstruct mainstream narratives; instead, they often support them. However, this observation does not negate the fact that these series provide opportunities for Thai men to explore more adaptable forms of masculinity.

Thai Boy Love series have become a refuge for fans seeking escape from a more oppressive and stressful society. However, the portrayal of the genre and its protagonists remains shaped by prevailing social norms and traditions. While the depiction of Boy Love characters has seen some progress, it is undeniable that resistance persists, driven by the social values and context that continue to influence the genre.

The theoretical framework discussed, particularly when enhanced by Foucault's concept of discourse, Judith Butler's queer concept, and Fairclough's comprehensive model, helps researchers navigate the complexities of Thai Boy Love narratives. The genre not only provides alternative perspectives on romance and desire but also mirrors and responds to the socio-cultural context in which they arise. Therefore, examining Boy Love series through the lens of CDA allows for an exploration of their role in shaping and reshaping societal norms and values.

In short, Thai Boy Love series, while offering a platform for the visibility of Thai male homosexuals, often reinforce traditional gender norms and binary sexual roles, limiting their ability to fully challenge heteronormative ideals. The reliance on conventional representation of masculinity highlights the tension between cultural progress and the persistence of societal norms. Future research should critically address these limitations, exploring how the series' influence on gender and sexuality perceptions is shaped by both social values and commercial priorities.

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