

“Gay-ray” Boys: A Study of Gay-ray Masculinities Among High School Boys in Thailand

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Abstract

Gay-ray masculinity is a phenomenon that has had a novel, unlikely impact on Thai high school boys' masculinity practices in recent times. Within the historical context of the student political movement in 2020 that challenged the ideology of heteronormativity in the schools, this article aims to demonstrate the impact of gay-ray masculinity in the alteration of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative practices among high school boys by utilizing multiple lenses of masculinity, internet meme studies, and queer transformative spaces theory. This study used school-based and online-based ethnography with focus group interviews of five self-proclaimed gay-ray boys as data-collecting methods. The results unveiled the influence of gay memes in their everyday practices, like the online communication and the peer interaction called “gay play.” The gay plays required the contexts of intimacy and disclosure to perform, which affected their homosocialization within the group. These practices may be interpreted as having a negative impact on gender equality ideology, but they also shed light on the new possibility of creating new spaces for queering the school's heteronormativity and question the attachment between sexuality and gender.

Keywords: gay-ray masculinity, internet memes, hegemonic masculinity, queer transformative spaces, homosociality

Introduction

Heteronormativity has long been embedded in Thai society through the education system, affecting Thai high school students' school life. Hegemonic masculinity, femininity, and non-conforming genders as variations of “others” or “deviants” have been cultivated through school mechanisms and practices. This situation normalized the unequal social structure and gender division among students, encouraging some to assert their gender-based superiority against others, which resulted in a form of gender-based discrimination. This discrimination has been ignored by school officials, causing gender-diverse students to suffer and struggle (UNESCO, Plan International, Mahidol University, 2014; Dhedchawanagon, 2020).

However, since 2020, waves of change have arrived as part of a massive political movement in Thai history. Students and youngsters led protests with the hope of bringing about changes in virtually every aspect of life. The issue of gender equality was raised during that time with parodies and festive themes, such as a huge rainbow banner in the massive rally in Bangkok in September (Khaosod English, 2020) and the Drag Queen fashion show (The Standard, 2020). The Bad Student group was established and played a crucial role in the movement related to the Thai education system. They raised awareness

about gender inequality in the school textbooks and curriculum through symbolic actions (SpectrumTH, 2020a, 2020b) and accompanied students in at least 16 provinces to occupy their schools for the white ribbon campaign and the three-finger salute¹ (BBC Thai, 2020). The key demands of their movement addressed rights concerning the lives and bodies of the students, educational equality, and the establishment of safe spaces for students to participate in major-scale politics (Nakrua et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, internet cultures have been having a massive influence on Thai netizens. The popularity of Yaoi or Boys' Love² genre contributed to the mainstream normalization of male-to-male romance in the mass media (Prasannam, 2020). The mass recognition of male-to-male romance appeared alongside the subculture of Gachimuchi³ masculinity that originated from the remixing of gay adult film scenes with popular songs. These remixed music videos of muscular half-naked men performing sexy gestures became internet memes that spread virally across the globe. These later-called, gay-ray memes annexed to the Thai internetscape and somewhat altered the perceptions of masculinity. The term gay-ray⁴ is derived from the popular remix of the memes with the song entitled *Chai-Ke-Re* (ใจเกร or delinquent heart), which was used by Thai netizens to represent the memes and referred to the feeling of *khwa-m-wai* (ความหวั่นไหว, literally "heart-shaking" or excitement) between male same-sex friends (INNnews, 2021). The mainstreaming of the term also caused online communities to criticize the appropriateness and heteronormative consequences of it in Thai society. Statistics from the Electronic Transactions Development Agency (2020) indicate that in 2020, Generations Y and Z had used the internet at the highest rate of more than 12 hours per day. Additionally, the rate of surfing on social media was 95.3 percent in 2020, and watching online videos, 85.0 percent in 2020. It tended to increase year by year with Facebook and YouTube as the two most popular platforms, 98.2 and 97.5 percent, respectively. The high rate of usage of social networking platforms among the young generation made them familiar with the nature of virtual spaces, including various memes, as digital assets circulated within their online communities. Gay-ray memes were recognized and have become popular among male teenagers who were still studying within the strict heteronormative education system. The imitation of gay-ray memes by boys wearing school uniforms can also be found on social media, and is also spreading globally.

Even though the political movements ended due to the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, turmoil still lingered within the schools. While awareness of gender equality and LGBTIQ rights was rising, this research focused on gay-ray subculture among self-proclaimed straight masculine boys and its effects on masculinity and heteronormative ideology in school settings. The emergence of this alternative masculinity might contribute to the shift in the construction of masculinity within the environment with unique characteristics like internet cultures, which can challenge heteronormativity in real life.

¹ The white ribbon campaign was a political movement led by secondary school students in 2020. Those who participated in the campaign attached white ribbons, instead of the colors permitted by school regulations, to their hair and personal belongings as a sign of protest. Meanwhile, the three-finger salute was the main symbolic gesture of the 2020 Thai political movement, derived from the symbol of revolution in *The Hunger Games*, the popular novel series and film franchise. During the Thai student movement in 2020, students raised the three-finger salute during the morning assemblies as a sign of protest.

² Yaoi, or Boys' Love (BL), is a genre of popular media that includes novels, manga, television dramas, films, and other forms of media depicting romantic relationships between male characters.

³ Gachimuchi is derived from the Japanese word "ガチムチ" (*gachimuchi*), which refers to a bulky male body, the body type that is muscular and bouncy.

⁴ As the word เกร (means delinquent in Thai) in this article has two definitions, this article used *gay-ray* for representing the internet meme category relating to Gachimuchi and gay-ray adult films. For the traditional meaning, I will use *ke-re*, the transliteration of the word instead.

Research Questions

1. How is gay-ray subculture practiced among boys in everyday life within a heteronormative-dominated space like school?
2. How has gay-ray subculture affected or impacted the construction and negotiation of masculinity among high school boys?

Research Objectives

1. To establish the practices of gay-ray subculture among boys in everyday life within the heteronormative-dominated space like school.
2. To acknowledge the effects or impacts of the gay-ray subculture in the construction and negotiation of masculinity among boys.

Literature Review

Thai Hegemonic Masculinities and Suppression by the Education System

Thai gender binarism was adapted as the consequence of bureaucratic transformation since the reign of King Rama V and was reinforced in the reign of King Rama VI, shifting the androgyny of men and women to distinguish and visibly address non-conforming sexualities (Jackson, 2003). Moreover, the distinction between masculinity and femininity was empowered through novels and plays as parts of the King Rama VI's nationalist project against the western colonization (Boonhok, 2024). Through periods of time, Siamese heteronormativity was linked with the etiquettes of nobility, Buddhist beliefs and morals (Jory, 2015), and then with nationhood and the invention of modern medicine, health care, and eugenics (Serirak, 2016; Kawinraweekun, 2002). The genealogy of Siamese/Thai heteronormativity also resulted in the alienation and social stigmatization of visible homosexuals as mentally ill people and the source of the AIDS pandemic, causing moral panic among citizens (Romjampa, 2002). Mass media enforced the ideology by presenting a negative view of homosexuals through news (Fongkaew et al., 2019; Mathet and Nedpogaeo, 2020) and movies (Naksing and Taiphapoon, 2013), which stereotyped them as fun lovers with effeminate gestures and an obsession with sex, or antagonists with tragic ends (Sangsoda et al., 2019). Anti-homosexual practices spread into school spaces as heteronormativity was embedded in Thai national extracurricular activities (Jansup, 2016), the teaching of sex education (Paosawas, 1970; Serirak, 2016; Smith et al., 2003), and textbooks (Wongwareethip, 2016; Jaithiangtham, 2020). The binary system of genders and heteronormative gender roles was prioritized, focusing on preferable stereotypes of girls and boys, for example, being sweet and kind for girls and being strong and brave for boys, excluding models of gender-diverse groups (Jaithiangtham, 2013). These stereotypes resulted in gender-based discrimination against gender-diverse students and the ignorance of school officials (Dhedchawanagon, 2020; UNESCO, Plan International, and Mahidol University, 2014). According to Save the Children Thailand (2023), over 70 percent of young gender-diverse persons in Thailand have had at least mild symptoms of either depression or anxiety, over 50 percent had suicidal thoughts, 16 percent had already attempted suicide, and 25 percent experienced non-suicidal self-harm.

In traditional Thai contexts, there were three types of hegemonic masculinities: 1) gentlemen, 2) breadwinners, and 3) delinquents. For the gentlemen type, called *suphap-burut* (สุภาพบุรุษ), this type of masculinity had been constructed through the inspiration of King Rama VI's Victorian influences. The common attributes of gentlemanliness included being well educated or giving importance to studying, being well mannered, reliable, and loyal, as well as respecting women, and having financial stability (Sangsoda, 2023). The breadwinner type or *luk-phu-chai* (ลูกผู้ชาย) was usually associated with the labor class, whose members achieved their manliness through hard work, being strict and disciplined, and aiming for fame and honor for themselves and their family (Kitiarsa, 2005). These two types of masculinities stood directly opposed to the delinquent type or *nak-leng* (นักเลง), who were portrayed as being alcoholic, womanizing, objectifying women for sexual desires, and having criminal tendencies such as those of gangsters, godfathers, or corrupt officials (Kitiarsa, 2005). These masculine figures were perceived as *chai-thae* (ชายแท้), authentic men. According to Jackson (1997), Thai masculinity was categorized by a hierarchical ranking, from *chai-thae* or the hegemonic one at the top, followed by masculine gays in second place, and the “unmasculine,” effeminate *kathoey* at the bottom. Jackson concluded that “the *kathoey* represent all that a masculine Thai “man” is not. In this situation, the *kathoey* is not constructed on the model of genuine femininity, but rather as a stereotype of unmasculinity” (Jackson, 1997:175). The *kathoey* as the negative other opposite masculine identity—a male person who failed to perform his masculine gender properly— might face social criticism, gossip, and other displays of disapproval as well as being stigmatized as a *kathoey*.

This social stigma was also found in other cultures where hegemonic masculinity was mostly regarded as superior and privileged. According to Pascoe's (2007) ethnographic work among American high school students, boys who adopted hegemonic masculinity tended to perform homophobic and gender-policing behaviors or gender surveillance among male peers towards suspected marginal male groups or individuals. These behaviors were to assert their masculinity through the labeling of other males, as “fags” and other inferior epithets. This behavior went along with “homophobia,” described as the fear of being perceived as gay or of non-conforming gender by peers in the youth context (Anderson and McCormack, 2018). However, the rise of gender equality movements around the globe in the digital era caused heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity to be questioned and challenged. Anderson and McCormack (2018) offered the concept of inclusive masculinity theory (IMT) to describe the decrease of overt gender-policing among boys. They stated that this was influenced by the shift in gender-based political campaigns that were run borderless through the internet as internet culture.

Internet (Sub) Cultures and the Rise of Internet Memes

Internet cultures have pivotal influences on the lives of people nowadays as they can have a sense of belonging and a collective identity within online communities. Such practices of supporting ideology can be performed online and somehow in real life (Gal et al., 2015). Internet cultures inhabited within social networking platforms, where recent studies called them the extension of users' real-world relationships. The online behaviors could affect users' personal lives as their family, colleagues, peers, and others could survey them (Kruse et al., 2017). However, different platforms provided various features and flexible sociality adjustment for users to explore and utilize in order to construct their identity (Miller et al., 2019). This phenomenon shed light on the multiplicity of internet cultures in which heteronormativity can be challenged or empowered. Friedland (2019) illustrated the emergence of the “manosphere,” where

anti-feminist movements cultivated tactics to propagate misogyny within renowned online communities like Reddit and 4chan. The manosphere gave birth to the concept of *alpha* masculinity which resembles the toxic type of hegemonic masculinity whereby *alphas* assert their masculinity through physical power and sexual attractiveness. Simultaneously, the concept of *beta* masculinity, which resembles the nerdish, weak, and less attractive of the *betas*, was also informed. In spite of their weakness within the hierarchical structure of masculinity, the *betas* can achieve their hegemonic masculine ideology by the practices of spreading internet memes (Ging, 2017). Speaking of subordinated masculinity like those *betas* in the manosphere, in the East, the term "*otaku*" was popular in describing a kind of subordinated masculinity. As mentioned by Kumagai (2013, as cited in Tongkhampao, 2016:104-105), *otaku* refers to males who immersed themselves in Japanese pop culture (J-pop) like *manga*, *anime*, and videogames, appeared with nerdish looks, and are keen on communicating only with those who shared the same interests online. The *otakus* were negatively perceived online as the radicals against vulnerable minorities, and those who preferred imaginary girls over real women. These contradicted the hegemonic masculinity in Japanese culture, similar to Thai culture, when J-pop gained influence across Asia.

Internet memes, according to Shiftman (2014), are a group of digital assets that share common characteristics in the contents which can be circulated, imitated, and transformed by the users for public attention. Their contents can carry hidden ideologies glazed with a form of parody. Studies of internet memes state that they emerged as apolitical assets, but can be utilized as political tools by either conservatives or progressives (Gal et al., 2015). Although the *betas* published misogynic and sexist memes to achieve their hegemonic masculine ideology (Ging, 2017), feminist movements also employed memes to confront them publicly (Breheny, 2017). Engendering memes with parodic performances are reflected in Shugart's (2001) statement that humor in those performances resulted in three outcomes: 1) emotional relief from anxiety, 2) cognitive incongruence, and 3) the feeling of a sense of superiority over those who were parodied.

Besides the feminist presence, there are internet memes by heterosexual men to alter their masculinity. In the Chinese context, Wei (2017) found that gay buddy (*gao-ji*) discourse circulated through internet homosexual-related memes and Boys Love subculture assisting heterosexual men to alter their masculinity. The practices of male same-sex friends to act like gay couples, including sexual teasing and contact on sensitive body parts, were defined as representations of closeness and intimacy between men despite not conforming to the hegemonic masculinity model. However, Wei concluded that this phenomenon cannot be directly interpreted as the acceptance of homosexuality, but rather as the resolution of anxieties among straight men in the form of homosocial practices.

Internet (Sub) Culture as Queer Transformative Spaces

The rise of gender equality campaigns invaded many spaces, including schools. It is undeniable that school is the space where heteronormativity has been cultivated through symbolic violence in various mechanisms and practices, with peer interactions included (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Kupfer, 2015). However, Kjaran and Sauntson (2020) shed light on the emergence of queer transformative spaces (QTSs), the spaces where heteronormativity can be altered, questioned, and negotiated within a heteronormative-dominated space like school. They state that QTSs are "parallel discursive arenas," where the subordinated groups can invent and circulate their counter-discourses through various layers of spaces overlapping with the hegemonic space. These spaces can be defined as having 1) dialectic

processes of learning and unlearning to expand preexisting knowledge, 2) the ability to be aware critically and reflexively, and 3) multiple voices and views within them. The existing QTSs' spatiality which Kjaran and Sauntson presented focuses mainly on physical spaces, but they overlooked the potential of online spaces where internet cultures can be developed and impact the physical realm. In this article they gave the possibility of any kind of spaces where "queer futurities" can bloom (Kjaran and Sauntson, 2020: 212). I added the study of online spaces as cultures that can affect the transformation of masculinity in the school setting physically.

Now, in the digital era, internet cultures affect the perceptions and practices of gender and sexuality. In the Thai context, the effects can both challenge or strengthen heteronormativity, especially the hegemonic masculinity that has been dominant in general society and in schools. However, internet cultures also offer opportunities for students to occupy school spaces in which to create their spaces for challenging heteronormativity. The concept of QTSs penetrating the digital sphere can be useful to understand gay-ray practices in hypertextual and highly-digitalized contexts of interaction.

Methodology

This ethnographic research consisted of gathering data by utilizing school-based and online-based ethnographies alongside focus group interviews. I utilized school-based ethnography first, to gain recognition and build rapport with the prospective participants and other agents in school. Then, when I had gained their trust, I asked permission to observe their online spaces. Finally, focus group interviews were held to collect their insights.

School-based and Online-based Ethnography

I conducted school-based ethnography between February, 2022 and February, 2023. The school was selected on the basis of these criteria: 1) it had been occupied by the student movement during the 2020 political turmoil, and 2) it was located in the lower northern region of Thailand. I started the fieldwork by announcing my existence as a PhD student and volunteer teaching assistant during the morning assembly when I first arrived. With the insight data from the school's guidance and counseling department, I selected four classes for school-based ethnography based on the differences in study levels and programs.

This selection provided me with the opportunity to gain familiarity, join class discussions, and build rapport with prospective groups of students while observing their everyday practices. Finally, 26 students volunteered to join my research project and gave me permission to access their online spaces, including Facebook and Instagram. While they varied in their proclaimed gender identities, six of them were heterosexual male, and five of these six were an intimate group who called themselves *otakus* and gay-ray boys. They permitted me to access their Discord private server, where I could exclusively observe and collect data within it. One of them, the server's owner and administrator, introduced me to all 16 members and I received welcome responses. I announced the research ethical protocol and the members acknowledged it and permitted me to collect data.

All designated online spaces from 26 students, and all gay-ray meme-related data, including 564 lines of conversation texts and 58 pictures of memes, which had been published between February 2022 and February 2023, were collected manually, following the research ethical protocol, which will be explained in a later section.

Focus Group Interviews

As the five male-heterosexual intimates mentioned earlier stood out from the rest of the volunteers and appeared well suited for the study of masculinity, I decided to use purposive sampling for participant selection in order to conduct the focus group interviews. These interviews were arranged online via their Discord private server in the form of voice-chatting-only records. The volunteer participants are listed in **Table 1** below:

Table 1 Lists of the volunteer participants

Participants' alias	Affiliated program	Level	Proclaimed gender
Van	SciMath program	3rd-year upper secondary	Heterosexual male
Sharky	SocSci program	3rd-year upper secondary	Heterosexual male
Umai	SocSci program	3rd-year upper secondary	Heterosexual male
Ricky	LibArts program	3rd-year upper secondary	Heterosexual male
Planck	LibArts program	3rd-year upper secondary	Heterosexual male

The interviews were conducted in semi-structured form with the aims of understanding their personal insights, details and purpose of their gay-ray practices in everyday life and online, and perceptions of variations of masculinity. The interviews with these five participants would help in reaffirming evidence from the online ethnographic observation.

Research Ethics

This research had been approved by the Chiang Mai University Research Ethics Committee before the implementation of the fieldwork. The possible risks, including the leakage of participants' privacy, confidentiality, and digital footprints were issued by strict protocol. All of the participants in this research project were informed officially about the research objectives, methodology, benefits and disadvantages, and possible risks through person-to-person communication and public announcements. Permission and consent from all were received officially from school officials, teachers, and prospective students before the fieldwork had been started. All personal data from the participants in this research project were gathered and secured by several methods to ensure their privacy and confidentiality. These methods included the use of pseudonyms instead of real names, paraphrasing all online quotes and texts from participants' public posts, prohibiting photographing within the school areas, banning screenshots from all social networking platforms, and securing all data within the encrypted folder.

Fieldwork Reflexivity

The year-long ethnography, both school-based and online-based, was planned with cautious protocol to maintain neutrality among the local power dynamics. Mapping the local power structures aided the calculation of possible conflicts in the arrangement of meetings, places, and times, with different groups of participants. All of the individuals in the field acknowledged my gender as a masculine gay, as well as research objectives, and research protocol. Although I had built a rapport with many participants during this fieldwork, I kept all relationships with participants confidential. I rarely made unnecessary contact

with non-participant individuals or groups so that the local power dynamics were not being affected or influenced by my actions during the fieldwork.

Results

In order to answer the stated research questions, the findings of this study are explained in two sections. The first section demonstrates the everyday life practices of the gay-ray subculture involving the usage of gay-ray memes. The second explains their construction and negotiation of the alternative version of masculinity, which can lead to the fluid and reflexive understanding of the blurring of relationships between heterosexuality, heteronormativity, homosociality, and homoeroticism.

From Gay Meme Sharing to Gay Play: Everyday Practices of Gay-ray Boys

Participants consisted of those in the collective of self-proclaimed *otaku*-like boys who are fond of J-pop, *manga*, *anime*, and light novels. They often stated that their physicality and likes did not match those of other groups of boys, especially those who were labeled “delinquents.” Despite the different types, they confirmed that there were a few differences between them and those “delinquents,” but that intentional interactions between them rarely happened.

I and a few same-sex *otaku* classmates are the minority of the class. While the rest of them are delinquents who play cards, gamble, and other dark-side things...we could be temporarily united when the program’s projects were assigned, but we still felt separate, not close. (ก็มีแค่ผมกับพวก โอตะไม่กี่คนที่ในกลุ่มเล็กของห้อง ส่วนพวกที่เหลือก็เป็นพวกตัวตึงเลย เล่นทั้งไพ่ การพนัน แล้วก็พวกสายคารักร้องอื่น ๆ...ก็ร่วมงานกันได้ชั่วคราวถ้ามีงานระดับห้องเข้ามา แต่พวกเรารู้สึกไม่ได้สนิทด้วยอยู่ดี ก็ต่างคนต่างอยู่กันไป) (Planck [pseudonym], 2023)

For them, sharing similar interests played a pivotal role in the making of friendships or strengthening their internal intimacy. Here, gay memes were used as their token for these purposes. Understanding the meaning and utilization of the memes was required as the main criterion for expanding their social circle with similar interests. This means that the gay-ray practices started with everyday life communications like gay meme sharing.

[for new friends]...We have to have some conversation first to see if they can enjoy talking about gay-ray topics with us. If they can, they pass the vibe check.” (มันต้องคุยให้แน่ใจว่าเขาสามารถคุยเรื่องเกเรกับพวกเราได้ไหมอะพี่ ถ้าพวกเขาคุยเรื่องพวกนี้ได้ก็ถือว่าผ่าน) (Sharky [pseudonym], 2023)

...Mostly when we were hanging out, I found some gay memes on Instagram reels on my phone, and then we watched them together. (ส่วนใหญ่ถ้าตอนว่าง ๆ กับเพื่อน ถ้าเผลอมีมเกย์ในไอจี ผมก็ยื่นมือถือให้มันดูเลย แล้วก็นั่งดูมีมด้วยกันนั่นแหละ) (Van [pseudonym], 2023)

Gay memes circulating within their private Discord server were seen in all forms of digital assets, including plain pictures without text, pictures with descriptions, and descriptive texts without pictures. The meaning and purpose of each depended on the context during the conversation, which could be used as a simple responsive method or as a mood-changing method.

Figures or cartoon characters in the poses that symbolize body language are shown in Figure 1. The body language of the memes’ figures and/or descriptive texts within them indicate the meaning and

occasions for using them. For example, the Billy Harrington meme with the text, “Umm, interesting,” in Thai was used as a reply after somebody in the chat stated something interesting. The Black Salami Thumbs-up meme was used when the users agreed with another’s statement, while the Buffed BenTen meme with Isan dialect text, “Fuck with me if you are saying this,” was used as disagreement with one’s statement and teasing him with gay-ish parody.



Figure 1 (left) Billy Herrington meme (middle) Black Salami’s thumbs-up meme (right) Buffed BenTen meme

The memes could be used as mood-changing methods during serious conversations or discussions, which varied from daily school struggles, to viral topics on the internet, to national and international politics. The aim of the usage of memes was to mock the subject of the topic with queerness, through Gachimuchi figures or cartoon characters, or descriptive texts of gay jokes. The examples of conversation in the server and memes in Figure 2 and Figure 3 below illustrate the usage of memes.

Example 1: The boys discussed the misconduct of the Thai police who used high-pressure hoses and rubber bullets against protesters during the 2020 political rallies.

A: Their actions were too brutal. It seems they didn’t care if anybody got hurt or died! (พวกตำรวจแม่งโหดชิบหาย เหมือนพวกมันไม่สนใจเลยว่าจะมีใครบาดเจ็บหรือตายอะ)

B: Right! It makes me feel so furious even today. It makes me wonder who can we call when the police commit crimes. (ใช่เลยมึง เรื่องนี้ทำกูโมโหจัด ๆ แล้วเราจะแจ้งความกับใครได้ตอนที่ตำรวจทำผิดกันวะ?)

C: [Sent Ricardo Milos and Danny Lee meme edited with police uniform with Thai text “Found gay-ray people, please call 191.” (พบคน เก ร โปรดแจ้ง 191)]

B: You bastard! Hahaha (ไอ้สัตว์ มึงนี่นะ ช่า ๆ ๆ)



Figure 2 Ricardo Milos and Danny Lee meme edited with police uniforms

Example 2: The boys grumbled about the upcoming hardship of third-year military field training, during which they would have to spend five days in a military camp instead of preparing for college admission exams.

A: My five precious days will be totally wasted, instead of being spent preparing for admission. (ห้าวันที่มีค่าของกูเม่งไรค่าไปเลย กูควรได้เตรียมตัวก่อนแอดมิชชั่นนะ)

B: Thinking about what we will face makes me so depressed—crappy showers, disgusting meals, power-crazy trainers...(แต่คิดว่าจะไปเจออะไรในค่ายก็หดหู่แล้วอะ น้ำก็ไม่ได้อาบ อาหารก็หามาไม่แตก ครูฝึกบ้าอำนาจอีก)

C: [Sent Cyberpunk Edge Runners' meme, illustrating the main character's emotionless face with the text describing it as the feeling of a pitiful boy being anal-penetrated during field training.]

A: You will get it for sure! Hahaha (มีงโดนเน่ไอ้สัส ฮ่า ๆ ๆ)

เมื่อคุณขึ้นรถทหารกลับมาจากฝึก
ภาคสนามปี3แต่คุณนั่งไม่ได้
เพราะคุณโดนรมแซ่กตุตมาตลอด4คืน

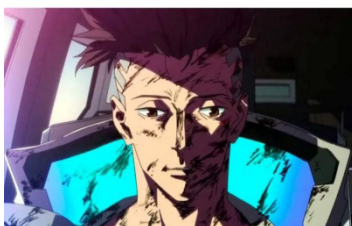


Figure 3 The Cyberpunk Edge Runners' meme

Dialogues between the gay-ray boys in examples 1 and 2 above demonstrate that the memes were used to relieve the stress that they were experiencing in real life. Military training, especially, was the hegemonic masculine system from which most of the male youngsters had to hide in order to avoid military conscription. The gay-ish parody of this unavoidable situation addressed the cognitive incongruity and sense of superiority while making fun of the military training system, one of the depictions of hegemonic masculinity overwhelming them, with unmanly parody. According to Shugart (2001), using memes as a kind of parodic performance helped gay-ray boys deal with stress by causing cognitive incongruence against and creating a sense of superiority over hegemonic masculinity by bending it towards queerness.

The boys' interest in memes fueled their curiosity about homoeroticism, which they researched through the full versions of Gachimuchi films. These films depict bulky muscular men having anal sex with BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism) fetishes. However, despite their uncomfortable feelings, the boys imitated actions they had seen in the films with their peer group. The touching of sensitive male body areas, slapping buttocks, and touching the chest and nipples were involved. They also demonstrated the posture of anal penetration and BDSM. These gay imitation practices were called gay plays (การเล่นเกย์/การเล่นก) and they had practiced them for more than five years. For them, the mass circulation of gay plays on the internet is online affirmation that the practices have been normalized.

(Gay plays) have appeared since I was in primary school and I still do them today...I think the plays are some ways of teasing other dudes. There were video memes out there on the internet that boys did together and posted online. There were such things that authentic men can do in general. (มันมีมาตั้งแต่สมัยผมเรียนประถมฯ แล้วอะ ปัจจุบันผมก็ยังเล่นอยู่ ผมมองเป็นการหยอกล้อกันระหว่างเพื่อนชายด้วยกันอะ แบบว่ามีคลิปมีมนักเรียนชายเล่นเกย์แล้วถ่ายลงกันว่อนเน็ตไปหมด มันเป็นเรื่องที่ชายแท้ทั่วไปก็ทำกันถมเออะ) (Umai [pseudonym], 2023)

I am Planck's classmate and we do the plays every day and in every class. So, I've become used to them. (ผมเรียนห้องเดียวกันกับแพลงค์ และเราเล่นเกย์ด้วยกันทุกวันและทุกคาบ จนมันกลายเป็นความเคยชินไปแล้วครับ) (Ricky [pseudonym], 2023)

Gay memes are the essential core of understanding gay-ray subculture among Thai high school boys. Understanding the memes and sharing them are the main criteria for enhancing and expanding their circle of social relations. Moreover, the memes were utilized as modes of communication within the peer group via online spaces, and imitation in the form of plays was done for homosocial purposes. The virality of memes on the internet caused the consensus among some groups of boys and men that gay-ish practices can be performed without being gender-policed and punished under the hegemonic structure of masculinity. However, these practices also have limitations and effects on the boys' perception of masculinity, as will be discussed in the next section.

Too Gay/Too Straight: Double-edged Consequences of Gay-ray Practices

In spite of the virality of the memes and their imitation in the form of gay plays on the internet, these gay-ish practices require certain conditions to prevent unwanted misunderstanding and insecurities from actual sexual abuses among others who were not following the gay-ray subculture. The conditions include: 1) intimacy; closeness of those whom one can perform with, and 2) disclosure; situations in which they can be safely performed.

The condition of intimacy, that is to say belonging to the same group, limited the circle of relations that the gay-play practices can be performed in. Intimacy is usually tied with the duration of a friendship in which they shared their likes and experiences and developed a sense of belonging. The closeness within the group set the social boundaries between them and other groups of different likes and lifestyles, such as the delinquents. Moreover, it was also proof that the plays would not become harassment or erotic expression within the group, marking the boundary of their own gay-ray space. Thus, the plays became the homoerotic imitation practices that generated homosocialization among them and reaffirmed their heterosexuality and masculine identity in a particular way.

If you know your friends well enough, you should know each other's limits. You would know whether your friends just do the play or whether they really need to fuck you... I saw them (groups of delinquent boys) do the plays once too, but unfortunately, we cannot do the plays with them. (ถ้าเรารู้จักเพื่อนเราดีพอ เราจะรู้ขีดจำกัดกันและกันครับพี่ และเราก็จะรู้ว่าเพื่อนเรามันเล่นแบบเล่น ๆ หรือมันจริงจะเอาเราจริง ๆ อะ...ผมเคยเห็นพวกมัน (กลุ่มเด็กเกเร) เล่นเกย์กันเองในกลุ่มอยู่นะ แต่พวกเราจะไม่เล่นเกย์กับพวกมัน) (Sharky [pseudonym], 2023)

For me, don't mess with my asshole and genitals. That's my limit...Anyway, some plays like sexual mocking require context. Doing it without another play before is a kind of abuse. (สำหรับผม ผมขอแค่อย่ามายุ่งกับรูตูดกับหำของผมก็พอ นี่คือลิมิตของผม แล้วก็การเล่นเกย์บางอย่างที่เป็นท่าเอาคันนี้ต้องมีที่มาที่ไปก่อนนะ อยู่ดี ๆ มาเค้าเลยโดยที่ไม่ได้เล่นอย่างอื่นมาก่อนมันก็คือการคุกคามนั่นแหละ) (Van [pseudonym], 2023)

Gay meme sharing and the plays have been acknowledged as the cause of controversy between the meme users and other students who disagreed with this subculture. Many areas of school are public spaces where the practices can be seen by many social agents within. Notwithstanding the virality of gay memes and the plays posted online, gender equality ideology has been upheld by the student movements, and performing the practices in public can lead to misleading perceptions of others. The participants stated, as they supported the movements, that to avoid that scenario, the condition of disclosure was always kept in mind with guilty feelings.

I usually don't do the plays if they (gender-diverse students) are nearby because I don't know how they will perceive them. It's like we make fun out of their identities. (ผมจะไม่เล่นเกย์เลยถ้าพวกเขา (นักเรียนเพศหลากหลาย) อยู่ใกล้ ๆ เพราะผมไม่รู้ว่าจะมองพวกเขาอย่างไร มันเหมือนเราเอาตัวตนของเขามาทำให้เป็นเรื่องตลกขบขันอะ) (Van [pseudonym], 2023)

I don't think they (gender-diverse students) are different because we are all normal human beings...but, somehow I felt guilty after doing the plays...Should I do this? Or how would I feel if I were them (gender-diverse students). (ผมไม่รู้สึกว่าพวกเขา (นักเรียนเพศหลากหลาย) แตกต่างนะ พวกเราก็คือมนุษย์เหมือนกัน แต่บางทีผมก็รู้สึกผิดหลังจากที่เล่นเกย์ไปนะ แบบว่าผมควรจะทำหรือเปล่า หรือผมควรจะรู้สึกยังไงถ้าผมเป็นแบบพวกเขา) (Umai [pseudonym], 2023)

Without both conditions, the practices can be easily perceived as harassment and devaluation of gender equality is the case of a gender-diverse student group who shared memes called "Pride Flag and Question Mark," shown in Figure 4, to tease their group members in their classmates' Facebook Messenger. Their classmates misunderstood and perceived that they gender-policed others and devalued the whole of homosexuality. Finally, they received literal sanctions from their classmates instead of funny reactions and had to apologize for their toxic actions.



Figure 4 Examples of the "Pride Flag and Question Mark" meme

It is interesting to note that those gay-ray practices, including gay meme sharing and the plays, seem to become part of masculinity construction and tend to be normalized in groups of boys. Gay-ish

practices with homosexual and homoerotic imitation became their ways to socialize for becoming a man, resulting in altering the previous notion of “authentic men.” The students rejected the essentials of male sexuality as their gay-ish practices could not affect their gender identity as heterosexuals. In this sense, male socialization and group solidification through homosexual and homoerotic imitation were seen to be novel and challenging to the notion of what masculinity is.

The meaning of “authentic men?” There are none because I have these gays around me. (นิยามของคำว่าชายแท้จั้นหรือ ไม่มีนะสิครับ เพราะผมมีแต่เกย์อยู่รอบตัวเลย) (Planck [pseudonym], 2023)

These days, if you tell people you are a one-hundred percent authentic man, you are not. At least you are not the “man” that we all understood. (ทุกวันนี้ถ้าใครบอกว่าตัวเองเป็นชายแท้ 100 เปอร์เซ็นต์ คือคนคนนั้นไม่ใช่ผู้ชาย อย่างน้อยก็ไม่ใช่ผู้ชายในแบบที่พวกเราเข้าใจกันอะ) (Umai [pseudonym], 2023)

There’s a shift in our generation’s mindset. There are no authentic men anymore. (ตอนนี้มันเชื้ตคนรุ่นผมมันเปลี่ยนไปแล้วอะ มันไม่มีชายแท้่อีกแล้ว) (Sharky [pseudonym], 2023)

The utilization of memes from the online communication assets in the imitative practices altered their perceptions and understanding of hegemonic masculinity. It seems that gay meme sharing and the plays can be described as queering transformative practices that altered the meaning of masculinity, at least the hegemonic one that the school system was trying to promote within the social networking platforms and school areas. Within the right conditions, they can transform the platforms and school spaces into the QTSs to offer their ability to construct their version of masculinity as a counter-discourse against hegemonic masculinity.

Discussion

The influence of gay memes and their consequences in the form of gay-ray subculture and practices shed light on the creation of potential spaces where boys can alter their masculinity by queering it with gay-ish practices. This queer spatiality, which can challenge and transform hegemonic discourse, will fulfill the gap in QTSs theory as it existed in digital arenas where they could surpass the authority of the school. These queer practices among male students may represent a pivotal turning point where essentialist and hegemonic masculinity can be questioned and refuted, causing heteronormativity and its hegemony to lose their rigidity and to be redefined fluidly.

The mainstreaming of the global gender equality campaign has affected Thai youth’s perception vis-a-vis gender and sexuality. Gender policing, targeting gender diversity as sexual inferiority and discriminating against gays as it used to be in the tradition of heteronormative hegemonic masculinity, is currently being criticized. Instead, male students who self-proclaim as heterosexual, socialize among their peer group and construct their masculinity by adopting homoerotic practices known as gay-ray subculture and become gay-ray boys. Their practices, with restricted conditions to perform, on the one hand, have the functions of reconsolidating their sense of belonging, constructing particular masculinity, and integrating hegemonic practices (by making fun of gay memes and porn). On the other hand, their practices also contradict them and queer them by doing gay-ish practices in order to construct their version of masculinity which can be perceived as an alteration of hegemonic masculinity. In this sense, hegemonic masculinity is turning into a fluidized and flexible form by integrating with other marginals to maintain its structure (Demetriou, 2001, as cited in Ging, 2017).

However, the guilty feelings and the avoidance of feeling shame while doing the plays can be seen as the result of reflexive learning of queerness within the QTSs, calling into question the toxic forms of masculinity and the ambivalence and plural senses of memes. For this case, the gay-ray boys were not utilizing the memes to support and reproduce certain hegemonic masculine power. Conversely and simultaneously, as Shiftman (2014) emphasized regarding the meaning of the memes that can be multi-directionally reinterpreted by the users, gay memes and their imitation in the form of plays were also challenging the dichotomy between heteroeroticism and homoeroticism, that men can be *heart-shaken* erotically and sexually into homosexual intimacy. The gay-ray subculture might not be viewed explicitly as a form of inclusive masculinity, nor an overt political counter-attack against toxic masculinity (Breheny, 2017). Rather it makes us aware of how masculinity is currently shaped by male exclusive homosocialization along with gay-ish gender/sexual performance and intimacy. The blurry boundary between homo- and hetero- caused gay-ray boys to be *heart-shaken* from the thrill of being real delinquents (ເກີລ or *ke-re*) who tried to alter the hegemonic masculinity. This calls to mind Wei (2017) the study of a comparable phenomenon in the Chinese context where gay-ish practices of *gao-ji* (“gay buddies”) existed among straight boys and inspired homosocial and heterosocial interactions within their intimate group. However, there are two sides to the usage of memes for homosocialization purposes: one is beneficial for the ironic recuperation of their heterosexuality and the other is that it is harmful in that it serves hegemonic masculinity to stigmatize homosexuality.

Despite the controversy over the devaluation of gender diversity, the practices and perceptions of the gay-ray boys unveiled the lack of correspondence between sexual or erotic practices and gender identity, which blurred the clear-cut distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The phenomenon of gay-ray subculture questions the polarization of homo-heterosexual identities. This supports the view of Kinsey and Vidal (mentioned in Katz, 2001) that heterosexual and homosexual identities were historically constructed as “there is often a mixture of both homo and hetero experience” and “there is no such thing as a homosexual or a heterosexual person. There are only homo- or heterosexual acts.” In the present case study of gay-ray boys, this masculine subculture is *queering* the conventional understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality, and the casual logic that “sex is assumed to determine gender and both to determine sexuality” (Carroll, 2012). This gay-ray masculinity, in this sense, is fluidized as it can be performed by various groups with different identities, from marginalized masculine groups to hegemonic masculine groups and even gender-diverse groups.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to demonstrate the construction of marginalized masculinity within heteronormative-dominated spaces like schools and the negotiation or conformity of marginal boys against/towards the hegemonic masculinity that was cultivated within the school space. The study used the queer transformative spaces theoretical framework with ethnographic observations and focus group interviews with a marginalized group of self-proclaimed heterosexual boys, who offered a fruitful understanding of the construction and negotiation of their masculinity in both real and virtual life.

The results demonstrate that the use of gay memes and the imitations of memes through the plays for peer interaction were used in the construction of gay-ray masculinity. Gay meme sharing and the usage of gay memes in online communication were the transformative practices that were performed within the

social networking platforms, which we can qualify as a kind of QTSs. Gay plays—the imitations of gay memes—were performed for the purpose of homosocialization within the exclusive intimate male group. As the practices of the plays might seem to be controversial for those who did not understand their subculture, the conditions of intimacy and disclosure were required and necessary in order to perform the plays. In this sense, I argued that the school space where the plays can be performed with these conditions can also be described as QTSs. Despite the possibility of being misperceived, they acknowledged that their gay-ray practices can be interpreted as forms of devaluation and disrespectful acts against gender equality ideology and gender-diverse people. This normalization of gay-ray subculture and alternative masculinity helped them to subvert hegemonic heteronormative masculinity and brought guilty feelings at the same time. Gay-ray subculture indicates that there is no fixed boundary in what is defined and delimited as masculine. Such “authentic” men can perform homosexual acts without dismantling their masculinity. This gives us some clues of how masculinity has been shifted, challenged, and transformed recently by the Thai young generation and that this hybridization of masculinity is something to be continued.

These findings also offer new perspectives for QTSs. To expand the theoretical concept of queer spatiality in learning spaces, we can include 1) the social networking spaces for intimate groups, and 2) the conditioned school areas, where were fully led by students without the involvement of teachers or school officials. These newly added QTSs extend the concept and the possibility of prospecting QTSs for further studies. Meanwhile, gay-ray masculinity has been discussed as the hybridization of hegemonic masculinity, but it was for homosocialization within the intimate group rather than for political tools against gender equality ideology. Apart from that controversy, gay-ray masculinity refuted the attachment between sexuality and gender, as well as the polarization between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

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