The meaning-making of Thai Boys' Love cultural products from the perspectives of international media: A corpus-driven approach

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Abstract

Boys' Love (BL) is a genre of cultural products which features erotic and romantic relationships between men. This study seeks to examine the meaning-making of Thai BL from the perspectives of international media. Methodologically, corpus-driven discourse analysis is adopted. The 57,336-word corpus consists of coverage from 28 media outlets across 10 countries. It is sourced from content published between 2015 and 2021. The investigation is conducted at the word (keyword analysis), sentence (N-gram analysis) and paragraph (qualitative analysis) levels. Overall, three emerging themes have been captured. First, the *strong affection* theme regards Thai BL as a lyrical world replete with love and romance, outperforming its Western equivalent because of sensitivity to a romantic ideal known as "love conquers all." Second, the *determinant of audience participation* theme considers Thai BL a factor that encourages participation from fandoms. This is exemplified in the cultural phenomenon of fans learning the Thai language in order to comprehend a series without dependence on subtitles. Third, the *connection with reality* theme treats Thai BL as a reflection of various real-life situations, including LBGT issues in Southeast Asia. This "reality" is comprised of two domains: what is happening in real life and what is missing in real life.

Keywords: Boys' Love (BL), corpus-driven discourse analysis, cultural products, international media, Thailand, Yaoi

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Introduction

Boys' Love (BL) is a genre of cultural products which features erotic and romantic relationships between men (Zanghellini, 2009). It takes a wide range of forms including TV series (Wong, 2020), films (K. Xu & Tan, 2021), fiction (Zhou et al., 2018) and comics (Tanaka & Ishida, 2018). Across cultures, it is also known by other names such as *yaoi* and *shōnen-ai* in Japan, *danmei* in a sinosphere, and *slash* in the West (McHarry, 2011). Although some distinctions between these terms have been made (e.g. Tanaka and Ishida 2018), the current study treats them as linked terms under the umbrella of BL (Madill & Zhao, 2021).

BL originated in Japan in the early 1970s (Pagliassotti et al., 2013). Since then, a substantial number of studies have generated in-depth discussions about its historical development (e.g. McLelland, 2000a, 2000b; Pagliassotti et al., 2013). Its significance has also been academically appreciated. In essence, BL creates a space that permits audiences to reinterpret prescriptive social values pertaining to various issues such as gender and sexuality (Martin, 2012; Zhao & Madill, 2018) and family relationships (Y. Xu & Yang, 2013). To put it another way, BL provides audiences with a sense of fulfillment by catering to their "deeply felt needs, desires, preferences or fantasies" (Zanghellini, 2009, p. 291) which are relatively unorthodox in nature.

Several decades after its origination, BL is observed to be an internationalized phenomenon (McLelland, 2000a). Arguably, a media platform is one of the contributing factors behind this. For instance, in the form of websites, Japanese BL products are translated into a variety of European languages, and fan art based on those products is also posted (McLelland, 2000a).

Hence, it can be construed that the media is a pivotal channel wherein transnational cultural products are disseminated and consumed. Its representation affects audiences' perception and course of action (Cavalcante, 2018; Kim et al., 2008). Notwithstanding such significance, less emphasis is placed on the investigation of media perspectives. The current study, therefore, addresses such a paucity by examining the meaning-making of BL from the viewpoints of the international media.

Transnational BL from different perspectives

A multitude of studies has explored BL from the perspectives of fandoms who can be broadly divided into women and men. One of the common themes examined by scholars is the underlying motivation behind BL consumption. In terms of female fans, some reveal a particular interest in "risqué sexual content" of BL such as BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism,

masochism), as it is viewed as promoting a feeling of romance and intimacy between characters (Madill & Zhao, 2022). The concept of romance is also present in traditional BL despite a different means of expression. Unlike risqué BL which manifests romance in the form of ferocity, traditional BL maintains an everlasting romantic relationship by having characters surmount difficulties, forgive mistakes, and show a willingness to protect (Zhao & Madill, 2018).

Likewise, fans associate BL with a desire to appropriate a voyeuristic gaze at the male body characterized by aesthetic proportions. Such a practice provides erotic stimulation, fulfilling their expectation that BL is a space "for women to fantasize about men" (Zanghellini, 2009, p. 287). Notably, this perspective hints at the significance of the absence of clothes, to a greater or lesser degree, in male protagonists.

Empowered agency regarding gender and sexuality is another reason behind BL consumption. In Sweden, for example, reading BL enables women to explore their non-normative sexuality and eventually realize that they are in love with each other (Lilja & Wasshede, 2017). Since BL is a constructed world of love and romance between men, any intimate relationship apparently excludes women. Such dissociation is regarded by Japanese fans as the removal of negative constraints imposed on them including social expectations about marriage, childbearing, and their role as a nurturer of their husband (McLelland, 2000b).

Regarding male fans, BL consumption is perceived as a means to "sublimate the inherent psychological conflicts created by socially enforced masculine ideals" (Nagaike, 2019, p. 73). Such "ideals" may be associated with the notion of hegemonic masculinity which is "the most honored way of being a man" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). For instance, in the Philippines, China, and South Korea, what can be regarded as hegemonic masculinity includes being heterosexual, athletic, independent, heroic, and emotionally strong (Nagaike, 2019). Meanwhile, it is generally admitted that many men fall short of those ideals, and that can provoke deep anxiety (Pope et al., 2002). Since BL is produced in a way that, to a certain extent, flouts those commonly held values, consuming it may provide male fans with a sense of relief from the "psychological conflicts."

Apart from the perspective of audiences, BL has been examined from the viewpoints of content creators who are exposed to a range of restraining influences. For instance, BL production in China is associated with digital media and political context. Since its content defies the state-fostered values of heteronormativity, it is subject to surveillance and crackdown (Chang & Tian, 2021). Hence, digital media is perceived as a relatively safe haven

wherein BL production can be conducted with a reduction in risks of state censorship (Chang & Tian, 2021).

Understandably, the "reduction" in risks signifies that perfect safety still cannot be guaranteed for these creators. This is exemplified in the case of Tianyi, a Chinese BL writer who publicly promoted her work on the online platform *Weibo* and was subsequently arrested. Known to her fans as an "abused daughter struggling to survive without help from family" (Bai, 2022, p. 289), she perceives BL as a mechanism for challenging the traditional power structure. This is manifested in some of her works which feature the underprivileged *seme* (the penetrator) administering various types of pain to the elite *uke* (the penetrated) such as violent sexual intercourse (Bai, 2022).

In Australia, BL has a connection with the legal context. Operating under a zero-tolerance policy, legislation against child pornography criminalizes the creation or dissemination of sexual content pertaining to underage individuals—usually, those under the age of 16 or 18, depending on the jurisdiction (McLelland, 2005). This is directly applicable to BL, especially its subgenre known as *shōtakon* or *chan fics*, of which the content typically involves sexual relationship with boys below the age of consent (McLelland, 2005). However, a counterargument to such legislation has been advanced. Unlike male pedophiles, these BL creators intend to "push the boundaries of acceptable representation, to challenge narrow and hypocritical social constraints on femininity, sexual exploration and representation" (McLelland, 2005, p. 76) without any desire to inflict harm to actual children.

Taken together, it seems that one of the commonalities running through these perspectives, be it from fans or creators, is that BL is reflective of their endeavor to destabilize the status quo in a particular society. Varying according to each cultural context, it can possibly refer to, for example, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, unequal social status, and age seniority.

Domestic popularity of Thai BL cultural products

For the sake of general understanding, this section begins by presenting a broad overview of the historical background of Thai BL (for a detailed discussion, see Prasannam, 2019). The first decade of the 21st century could be regarded as the period that public awareness of Thai BL was initially developed. This is evidenced in the premiere of *Love of Siam* in 2007. It is a motion picture considered to be the first BL cultural product in the Thai film industry (Prasannam, 2019). It "swept the cinematic world off its feet"

and enabled Witwisit Hiranyawongkul, one of the primary characters, to achieve surprising popularity in China (Pravattiyagul, 2014).

The ensuing decade saw a proliferation of Thai BL, be it films or TV series. These include, for example: *Lovesick the Series* (2014), *Sotus the Series* (2016), *2 Moons the Series* (2017), *Love by Chance the Series* (2018), *Dark Blue Kiss* (2019), *TharnType the Series* (2020), *2gether the Series* (2020), *A Tale of Thousand Stars* (2021), and *Vice Versa* (2022). The commonality among these products is that a large number of them are adapted from Thai-language BL novels (Prasannam, 2019). Moreover, this growing trend concurs with the observation that the second decade of the 21st century was a period of expansion wherein BL achieved growth beyond Japan (Fujimoto, 2015).

International popularity of Thai BL cultural products

In addition to domestic popularity, Thai BL has gained prominence at the international level. It has inspired Filipino creatives to produce their own live-action BL dramas (Santos, 2020). Furthermore, according to the Director of Tourism Authority of Thailand who is based in Japan, Thai BL attracts a young Japanese audience, particularly around the age of 20-30 years old (Kasemsuk, 2021). He further reveals that *2gether the Series* and *Sotus the Series* have been broadcast on TV Osaka and TV Asahi respectively (Kasemsuk, 2021).

2gether the Series, which consists of 13 episodes, has English subtitles and garners over 10 million views in all episodes on its official YouTube channel (GMMTV Official). Moreover, the Instagram accounts of the two main protagonists, Vachirawit Chivaaree (@bbrighttvc) and Metawin Opas-iamkajorn (@winmetawin), have more than 7 million and 5 million followers respectively.

Another example of Thai BL which shows its increasing international prominence is *TharnType the Series*. On Line TV, the subtitles are available in English and traditional Chinese. In addition, the "fan" tab shows over 350,000 subscribers. On Facebook, various international fan pages are created including those from Vietnam (@Gulfvnfans), the Philippines (a public group named *TharnType Philippines*) and South Korea (@MewGulf_ KRFC) with over 47,000, 17,000 and 3,700 members respectively.

Arguably, Thai BL displays unique qualities which contribute to its internationally acclaimed status. One such quality is the fact that the romantic relationship between the actors portrayed in Thai BL is often not limited to what is witnessed on screen, but rather carries over into their everyday life. For instance, they are seen "visiting each other's parents on important dates, paying homage at Buddhist temples during national holidays, and

going on vacation together, preferably to a foreign destination" (Zhang & Dedman, 2021, p. 1041). Such "hyperreal love" blurs the distinction between on-screen performance and everyday reality. This, in turn, spurs Thai and international fans alike into following them on various media platforms, developing an intimate familiarity with the couples both in offline and online settings, as well as detecting and curating every emotional moment by means of subtitling/ translation, video-making and gossiping practices (Zhang & Dedman, 2021).

Methodology of the Current Study

While previous studies have concentrated on the meaning-making of BL cultural products from the viewpoints of fandoms and content creators, this study extends the discussion by examining the meaning-making from the perspectives of media practitioners. In other words, media in the present study is not merely an inanimate space but an animate agent capable of representing BL cultural products. Additionally, to expand scholarship beyond the Western and East Asian contexts, this study focuses on such products which are originated in South East Asia. Given the international prominence of Thai BL as mentioned earlier, it intends to investigate the perspectives of international media toward Thai BL cultural products.

There are several predominant features characterizing the methods adopted in previous studies, both quantitative or qualitative. First, studies that concern textual analysis treat BL as a text in its own right and directly investigate it through the lenses of various disciplines such as gender studies, law, sociology and psychology. Second, studies that concern interaction with participants such as interviews and ethnography are conducted with emphasis on the perspectives of BL consumers or creators.

Although the current study pertains to the textual analysis strand, it makes a methodological contribution by employing a method known as corpus-driven discourse analysis. Relatively novel to the analysis of BL-related text, it examines a particular linguistic phenomenon in a corpus and attempts to capture emerging theoretical concepts, hypotheses or examples as the analysis proceeds (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001). Unlike traditional discourse analysis, which is purely qualitative in nature, this method integrates statistically significant data derived from quantitative computation into qualitative analysis, thus reducing criticism of cherry-picking the investigated text based on a preconceived belief. Moreover, unlike that of previous studies, the text which is dissected in the current study is not BL but the media coverage focusing on BL. The following steps were adopted in order to conduct corpus-driven discourse analysis.

Step 1: Corpus collection

Since the objective of the present study is to scrutinize the meaning-making of Thai BL from the perspectives of international media, building a corpus from a portal is a workable solution. This is because it contains a collection of entries retrievable by a topic-based search. Accordingly, three popular web portals, Google, Yahoo and Bing, were used (Murray et al., 2016). The search words used were: *Thai*, *Boys' Love, BL,* and *Yaoi.*

Despite being controlled by the search words, not all the results met the research objective. Hence, the following screening criteria were established. First, the coverage pertained to Thai BL. Second, it was produced by media outlets not based in Thailand—this information could be verified in the "About Us" section. Third, it was published in English. And fourth, a publication date was clearly indicated for ease of reference.

Subsequently, the content which satisfied the aforementioned criteria was compiled and converted into a machine-readable format (.txt) as detailed in Table 1. The corpus program used in the current study was AntConc 3.4.4w (Anthony, 2019). Altogether, the corpus consisted of 28 media outlets from 10 countries, with a total number of 57,336 words.

Table 1. Overview of the corpus

Media	Place of origin	URL	Date	No.of words
ABC	Australia	www.abc.net.au	16Jun18	967
ABS-CBN	The Philippines	https://news.abs-cbn.com	16Jun20 27Oct20 7Dec20 22Mar21 12Apr21 14May21 21Jun21	724 528 287 142 533 585 508
Annyeong Oppa	The Philippines	https://annyeongoppa.com	3Apr20 14Jun20 13Jul20 22Mar21	1,261 216 1,578 194
Asia One	Singapore	www.asiaone.com	11Oct20	1,083
Asia Gay	Singapore	https://asia.gay	15Feb21 2Jul21	573 562
CNN	The Philippines	https://cnnphilippines.com	8Apr20 1May20(1) 1May20(2)	2,453 1,624 3,260
Cool JP	Singapore	https://cooljp.co	23Jun20	1,159
Cosmopolitan	The Philippines	www.cosmo.ph	4Apr20 20Apr20 23Apr20 8Aug20 30Aug20 19Apr21	547 518 721 340 519 610
CTV News	Canada	www.ctvnews.ca	24Sep15	297
Dizi Mania	Turkey	https://dizi-mania.com	21Jun19	2,351
Esquire	The Philippines	www.esquiremag.ph	27Apr20	1,321
Film Daily	USA	https://filmdaily.co	7May20 14May20 26May20 27May20 27Jun20 15Dec20 16Dec20	910 538 583 326 543 631 701
Global Times	China	www.globaltimes.cn	2Jan20 8Mar20 14Apr20 21Jun20	312 457 613 593

Media	Place of origin	URL	Date	No.of words
Globe	The Philippines	www.globe.com.ph	29May20	430
i-D	USA	https://i-d.vice.com	8Jul20	1,255
Kake	USA	www.kake.com	26Jan21	1,160
Nikkei Asia	Japan	https://asia.nikkei.com	14Nov20	747
Nippon	Japan	www.nippon.com	24Sep20	2,097
Philstar	The Philippines	www.philstar.com	30May20	1,080
Rappler	The Philippines	www.rappler.com	16May20 11May21	321 367
Refinery	USA	www.refinery29.com	1Jul21	830
The Diplomat	USA	https://thediplomat.com	24Jun21	1,560
The Jakarta Post	Indonesia	www.thejakartapost.com	26Oct20	1,191
The New Yorker	USA	www.newyorker.com	17Jul20	2,927
The New Lens	Taiwan	https://international.the-newslens.com	8Jan16	1,611
Tribune	The Philippines	https://tribune.net.ph	11Jan21 25May20 1Jun20 15Jun20 17Jun20 29Jun20 3Jul20 18Oct20 25Mar21	863 1,211 1,201 1,890 228 1,242 178 239 603
Unpublished-Zine	USA	www.unpublishedzine.com	14Feb21	935
Vice	USA	www.vice.com	17Jun20	1,502

Step 2: Keyword analysis

A keyword is a word that occurs in a particular text on a salient basis when compared to another reference text (Baker, 2008). In this study, the compilation of a reference corpus (59,194 words) was predicated upon similar parameters to those of the corpus in Step 1 except for the following: (1) the search words used on the three web portals did not include *Thai*, and (2) the coverage pertained to BL of any cultures except Thailand. In short, the fundamental difference between the reference corpus and the current study's corpus was that the former did not include the meaning-making

of Thai BL cultural products while the latter did. Therefore, the keywords in the current study's corpus were anticipated to reflect cultural specificity regarding Thai BL.

To enhance validity, two statistical measures were concomitantly employed. First, log-likelihood (LL) indicates the significance of a keyword. In this study, the cut-off keyness score was established at 6.63, equaling p < .01 (Gabrielatos & Marchi, 2011). Second, %DIFF specifies an effect size. The larger effect size signifies the more outstanding importance of the keyword (Gabrielatos & Marchi, 2011).

Once the system generated the results, the top 10 keywords were presented. Since the investigation pertained to a group of keywords, this step was considered a word-level analysis.

Step 3: N-gram analysis

An N-gram is a lexical bundle or a multi-word unit (Kithulgoda & Mendis, 2020). It is another useful parameter prompting discourse analysts to be cognizant of the common communicative practices in a corpus (Coimbra-Gomes & Motschenbacher, 2019). Consequently, analyzing significant N-grams was anticipated to provide additional information regarding the meaning-making of Thai BL cultural products.

Based on Kithulgoda and Mendis (2020) and Coimbra-Gomes and Motschenbacher (2019), a selection of significant N-grams was conducted according to the following criteria. First, it was a 5-gram lexical bundle, meaning it contained five orthographic words. Second, the frequency of occurrence was at a minimum of three. Third, the range of such frequency was distributed across a minimum of three texts to avoid idiosyncrasies.

Since N-grams were inherently a phrase, analyzing them in isolation did not produce a meaningful result. Besides, unlike Step 2, the number of the significant N-grams was too limited to group semantically. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, expanding the investigation to a broader co-text was immensely helpful. In this case, the co-text was defined as a sentence containing those significant N-grams. Hence, this step was considered a sentence-level analysis.

Step 4: Qualitative analysis

Data extracts were scrutinized by means of clicking the top 10 keywords in AntConc. Doing so would automatically direct the author to their concordance lines. Subsequently, clicking on the concordance lines would link to their location in the full text. The data extracts were observed for emerging themes regarding the meaning-making of Thai BL. Since the investigation concerned a string of text which contained significant keywords, this step was considered a paragraph-level analysis.

Additionally, while browsing through the data extracts, the author discovered that there was a fair amount of keywords which satisfied the criteria of being statistically significant but did not belong to the top 10. This prompted the author to aggregate them under the "miscellany" group.

Keyword analysis

The top 10 keywords are displayed in Table 2. In the analysis, the words in bold refer to the significant keywords.

Table 2. Top 10 keywords

Rank	Keyword	Frequency	Keyness	%DIFF
1	Thai	334	382.05	2,733.66
2	Gether	188	253.18	19,039.93
3	Thailand	173	198.84	2,835.46
4	series	593	197.17	186.12
5	Bright	110	144.53	11,098.89
6	dramas	130	128.32	1,370.56
7	BL	541	128.30	132.39
8	Sarawat	98	120.83	4,888.60
9	Tine	101	118.83	3,327.54
10	TV	124	106.07	871.09

Notably, some of the keywords bear a semantic resemblance. For instance, **Thai** (no.1) and **Thailand** (no.3) pertain to a "country and nationality" theme. **Gether** (no.2), **Series** (no.4), **dramas** (no.6) and **BL** (no.7) are associated with a "cultural artifact" theme. Furthermore, proper names in the Thai BL series are noticeable. **Bright** (no.6) is the nickname of Mr. Vachirawit Chivaaree who is cast as **Sarawat** (no.8) in *2Gether the Series*. In a similar vein, **Tine** (no.9) is the name of **Sarawat**'s boyfriend. Meanwhile, **TV** (no.10) is a media outlet wherein BL is broadcast. Taken together, these emerging themes are a point of departure that can be expandable to additional groups of other significant keywords as displayed in Table 3.

Regarding the "miscellany" group mentioned in Step 4, several sub-themes can be captured. For example, **lockdown** and **COVID** belong to the "pandemic" theme. Meanwhile, certain keywords are associated with "emotional expression" such as **laugh**, "*kilig*", **love** and **cheesy**. Moreover, the theme "gender and sexuality" is also discernible as exemplified in **gay**, **straight**, **heteronormative**, **coming** and **LBGT**.

Table 3. Expanded significant keywords (arranged by the keyness score)

Group 1: Cultural artifact

Keyword	Frequency	Keyness	%DIFF
Show	203	89.77	262.58
Drinks	9	12.64	1,732.54
Merchandise	7	9.83	1,325.31
Songs	11	7.02	459.94

Group 2: Geographical Regions and Ethnicities

Keyword	Frequency	Keyness	%DIFF
Philippines	68	86.44	6,822.95
Asian	41	57.59	8,248.26
Philippine	23	32.30	4,583.17
Taiwan	35	49.16	7,026.57
Korea	32	44.95	6,415.72
South	30	42.14	6,008.49
Southeast	16	22.47	3,157.86
Indonesia	20	21.42	1,936.16
Filipinos	8	11.23	1,528.93
Wuhan	5	7.02	918.08

Group 3: Media outlets

Keyword	Frequency	Keyness	%DIFF
GMMTV	61	85.69	12,320.59
YouTube	59	62.96	1,902.22
Twitter	44	48.09	2,139.77
ABS	26	36.52	5,194.02
CBN	26	36.52	5,194.02
Instagram	18	25.28	3,565.09
Channel	25	23.59	1,172.60
iWant	14	19.66	2,750.62
Sina	12	16.85	2,343.39
Weibo	12	11.17	1,121.69

Group 4: Miscellany

Keyword	Frequency	Keyness	%DIFF
LGBT	62	58.37	1,162.42
Gay	247	56.59	128.60
Said	88	45.52	326.62

Keyword	Frequency	Keyness	%DIFF
Netizens	25	35.11	4,990.40
Viewers	57	28.72	314.50
Kilig	19	26.68	3,768.71
Siam	25	23.59	1,172.60
Straight	37	22.99	438.12
People	127	22.35	102.02
Watching	53	21.60	237.23
Announced	18	18.81	1,732.54
Hashtag	13	18.26	2,547.01
Coming	36	16.07	266.50
Popularity	51	15.77	173.27
Friday	15	14.95	1,427.12
Produce	15	14.95	1,427.12
Recently	29	14.84	321.77
Production	24	13.89	388.67
Fans	174	13.72	55.39
Trending	14	13.68	1,325.31
Love	553	12.39	24.83
Online	44	10.66	135.76
Lockdown	8	11.23	1,528.93
Nnevvy	8	11.23	1,528.93
COVID	12	11.17	1,121.69
Girlfriend	17	11.07	476.91
Plays	14	10.34	612.65
Daniel	7	9.83	1,325.31
Scrubb	7	9.83	1,325.31
Community	55	9.44	99.98
Success	34	8.96	147.24
Nicdao	6	8.43	1,121.69
Started	36	8.26	129.06
Station	9	7.51	816.27
Cheesy	5	7.02	918.08
Controversy	5	7.02	918.08
Laugh	5	7.02	918.08
Signed	5	7.02	918.08

Keyword	Frequency	Keyness	%DIFF
Watches	5	7.02	918.08
Heteronormative	15	6.98	281.78

N-gram analysis

With the search word *Thai*, the results of the significant N-grams are displayed in Table 4. In the Extracts (1) - (3), they are highlighted in bold.

Table 4. *Significant N-grams*

Frequency	Range	N-gram
4	4	Thai Boys' Love (BL) series
4	4	Thai Boys' Love (BL) drama
3	3	Thai boy love series to
3	3	Thai novel of the same

Holliday (2015) postulates that cultural practices concern the fundamental aspects of diversity and non-exclusivity. In other words, they vary according to small groups within a particular society and represent "a set of behaviors which are accessible by outsiders" (p. 30).

Based on the theorization above, the cultural practices in Extracts (1) and (2) are translation and becoming a fangirl respectively. It is logical to assume a causal relationship between (1) and (2). The translation from Thai into Tagalog permits a Filipino audience to access Thai BL and thus become a fandom.

(1) It (2gether: The Series) will be the first Tagalized **Thai boy love series to** air on Philippine TV. (*Tribune*, 17 June 2020)

(2) But all that (not considering oneself a fangirl) changed after I watched the **Thai Boys' Love (BL) drama** 2gether: The Series. (*Cosmopolitan Philippines*, 30 August 2020)

Extract (3) suggests that there are at least two groups of audiences in Filipino society: the BL audience and the "mainstream" audience. The former presumably engage in the cultural practices as explicated in (1) and (2) while the latter has yet to do so. Nonetheless, owing to the popularity of Thai BL, it seems to provide an avenue for the expansion of a BL genre to reach the "mainstream" audience.

(3) To many filmmakers and creatives, the popularity of the **Thai Boys' Love (BL) series** "2gether" among Filipinos was an indication that the local audience is ready for gay love stories to go mainstream. (*ABS-CBN*, 16 June 2020)

All in all, the meaning that the media tend to convey is that Thai BL functions as a bridge between the BL and the mainstream audiences in the Philippines. These two different groups reflect the concept of diversity as posited by Holliday (2015). Besides, the issue of language difference, which is a source of incomprehensibility between Thai and Tagalog, is settled via a cultural practice of translation. Presumably, this practice affords a greater opportunity for members of the mainstream audience, who are outsiders compared to the BL audience, to access Thai BL.

Notably, the sentence "the local audience is ready for gay love stories to go mainstream" in (3) seems to imply that prior to the popularization of Thai BL in the Philippines, this particular segment was not poised to embrace "gay love stories." This is corroborated by the viewpoint of Filipino non-heterosexual male fans of Thai BL that their society is less tolerant of homosexuality than in Thailand (Baudinette, 2020). Moreover, the representation of non-heterosexual men in Filipino media is often perceived as unrealistic. In other words, the focus of attention is on effeminate men (*bakla*) as opposed to the "manly men" commonly portrayed in Thai BL (Baudinette, 2020). This seems to suggest that by being able to make the mainstream viewers "ready for gay love stories," Thai BL may also encourage them to see non-heterosexual men from a different perspective.

Qualitative analysis

The meaning-making of Thai BL can be classified into three emerging themes: strong affection, determinant of audience participation and connection with reality. In the Extracts (4) - (15), the significant keywords are highlighted in bold.

Theme 1: Strong affection

Thai BL is capable of conjuring a lyrical world that triggers emotional reactions from Filipino fans as evidenced in Extract (4). One of them is expressed by a culturally-specific term "kilig" which refers to a feeling of exhilaration or elation in Philippine English (*Kilig*, 2017).

(4) The **Thai** Boys **Love series** has kept many **Filipinos** company throughout the **lockdown**, giving **fans** something to smile (and cry, and **laugh**, and scream in **kilig**) about every **Friday** night whenever a new episode aired on **GMMTV**'s **YouTube channel**. (*Rappler*, 16 May 2020)

An example of concrete evidence confirming the existence of such a world is the performance of the male leading couple (Sarawat and Tine),

which is capable of generating "giddiness" and "excitable frivolity" as explicated in Extract (5).

> (5) At the core of the **series**' **success** is its **production** of giddiness that makes **viewers** gush whenever the world seems to stop for **Sarawat** and **Tine**. It is about the **show**'s great ability to **produce kilig** moments - the romantic sensation that brings one to a state of excitable frivolity. It can be sappy and **cheesy** at times, but that's what one gets from a **kilig**-inducer **series**. (*Tribune*, 15 June 2020)

According to Extract (6), what makes Thai BL products more distinctive than their Western counterparts is the sensitivity to romantic ideals which are "a set of pre-existing beliefs about the necessary elements of perfect romantic relationships" (Zhou et al., 2018, p. 110). One of them includes the notion of *love conquers all*: the creation of a storyline with some initial conflict that will eventually be resolved through love, keeping the viewers' romantic fantasy intact (Zhou et al., 2018). In this context, such conflict includes homophobia and difficulty in disclosing one's non-normative sexuality.

Based on what has been reviewed earlier in the international popularity of Thai BL cultural products section, the two elements are explicated: on-screen and real-life relationships. The finding here provides an additional elaboration of the former. The on-screen relationship is perceived as not only romantic but also reflective of an attempt to assert the rights to love and be loved which rightfully belong to non-heterosexual men.

> (6) What makes the **Thai series** stand out among their Western equivalents is, however, that they have a rather positive outlook. The West still continues to tell tragic stories about queer **people**, emphasizing the struggle for **gay** rights and freedoms, which mostly turn out to be dismal and gloomy. And, yes, **BL series** also discusses homophobia or how hard **coming** out can be but the focus point is always romance and **LOVE**. If two **people** truly **love** each other their gender doesn't matter, they can overcome any obstacle. (*Dizi Mania*, 21 June 2019, capitalization in original)

Apart from the protagonists' performance and the romantic ideal, the lyrical world is created by the appreciation of the music featured in Thai BL as mentioned in Extract (7). Unlike in Extract (1), an ability to discern the beauty of such music is not contingent upon linguistic knowledge. This concurs with the previous findings that notwithstanding the absence of subtitles, Canadian fans are still able to savor Korean pop music through

non-verbal language such as tones, rhythms, and feelings projected in music videos (Yoon, 2019).

(7) Even if I can't understand the lyrics of the **songs** featured prominently by a real **Thai** band, **Scrubb**, I still hug the pillow I go to bed every night. I think of rose-coloured days ahead all while remembering how it feels to **love** and be loved in return, which 2**gether** the **Series plays** out incessantly. (*Annyeong Oppa*, 13 July 2020)

In relation to what has been reviewed in the transnational BL from different perspectives section, risqué BL and traditional BL have their own distinct definitions of romance. This theme has illustrated that the media tend to represent such a concept in a way that aligns more with the traditional BL strand. Besides, apart from the romantic interaction between male protagonists, the media portray additional factors such as music as an emotional element leading to what can be perceived as romantic.

Theme 2: Determinant of audience participation

Thai BL can exert a strong influence on audience participation. Extract (8) exemplifies the "participation through the media" which refers to the utilization of the media as a location wherein citizens in society can express their opinions, knowledge and experiences (Carpentier, 2011). In this context, the media is YouTube and the citizens are Indonesian fans of Thai BL. Presumably, the mediated participation occurs in an attempt to overcome what they perceive as linguistic inadequacies preventing them from gaining complete satisfaction with Thai BL consumption. Evidently, this kind of participation is more profound than consuming the translated BL products as indicated in Extract (1).

(8) Many **fans** have **started** learning the **Thai** language, fed up with **watching** the shows with English or Indonesian **subtitles**. Jazmi Nara, founder and CEO of JazLearn **Thai**, a language learning **YouTube channel**, **said** about 1,000 Indonesians had **signed** up this year. (*Asia One*, 11 October 2020)

While Extract (8) concerns an endeavor to overcome linguistic inadequacies, the "participation through the media" in Extract (9) pertains to an endeavor to express burning enthusiasm about a Thai BL series through Twitter. Such participation corresponds to what is technically termed as "a technology of fandom": the employment of social media as a backchannel to televised and streaming audio-visual events, allowing users to offer their own commentary as the events unfold (Highfield et al., 2013).

(9) As the newest and top-**trending Thai** Boys **Love (BL) show**, 2**gether**: The **Series**, finally hit the **Philippine** shores via **iWant** on 28 June, **Filipino fans** fired up Twitterverse to express their thoughts and reaction on its pilot episode. The **hashtag** #iWant2GetherPHEp1, even made it to the fourth spot of the **Philippine** trends on the same day. (*Tribune*, 3 July 2020)

Extract (10) exemplifies another form of participation known as "participation in the media" which is the production of media output by non-professionals, signifying that they actively engage in a sphere relevant to their daily life (Carpentier, 2011). In this context, the media output is the covered soundtracks along with the creation of "online pages and fan clubs dedicated to Thai BL shows." Hence, the sphere that these fans perceive as relevant to their life is Thai BL consumption.

(10) Indicators such as the **series**' original soundtracks being certified hits in the **Philippines**, **fans** doing cover **songs** of these soundtracks in English and **Filipino**, and the mushrooming of **online** pages and **fan** clubs dedicated to **Thai BL** shows are testaments to the sudden surge of their **popularity**. This is not unique to the **Philippines** though. **Thai BL** shows are also well-received (mostly) in other **Asian** countries such as China, **Indonesia**, Japan and **South Korea**. (*Tribune*, 1 June 2020)

Extract (11) exemplifies what can be conceptualized as "small culture" which is "the composite of cohesive behavior within any social grouping, and not to the differentiating features of prescribed ethnic, national and international entities" (Holliday, 1999, p. 247). In this context, social grouping takes place at Siam Station in Angeles, a city located approximately 80 kilometers from Manila. The cohesive behavior within such a gathering includes relishing Thai-style drinks and snacks in conjunction with purchasing commercial items vis-à-vis the Thai BL series. Furthermore, there appear to be no "differentiating features" between Thai and Filipino small cultures. In fact, Thai BL products are assimilated into Filipino fandom through the business initiative of establishing a café where such common interest can be shared and maintained.

(11) Customers can enjoy **Thai** street **drinks** at **Siam Station** in Angeles, where they can also buy some snacks and **merchandise** from various **Thai BL series**. Its owner Hannah **Nicdao** told **ABS-CBN** News that she wanted to share with the public, especially her fellow **BL fans**, her collection and provide a taste of **Thailand** through the **drinks** they serve. (*ABS-CBN*, 12 April 2021)

Taken together, this theme resonates with the observation that certain contextual factors contribute to increased audience participation on a transnational basis. First, the proliferation of social media enables BL fans to engage in various real-time activities (Sukthungthong & Bunyavejchewin, 2019) such as learning the Thai language via YouTube as represented in Extract (8). Second, a changing pattern of consumer behavior is discernible. Sukthungthong and Bunyavejchewin (2019) argue that smartphones have become more easily available due to a price reduction. Owning a smartphone allows users to install apps of commercial platforms, such as iWant, as depicted in Extract (9), where BL can be consumed. Such consumption is markedly different from doing so through traditional media in that there are rerun and on-demand functions that transcend national boundaries and regulatory restraints. This, in turn, permits Thai BL to reach wider audiences beyond Thailand.

Theme 3: Connection with reality

Thai BL is able to reflect various agendas in real life. Extract (12) voices scholarly opinions on an LGBT issue in Southeast Asia. For clarification purposes, Dr. Kristine Michelle Santos and Dr. Thomas Baudinette are lecturers at Ateneo de Manila University and Macquarie University respectively. The fact that Thai BL portrays the navigation of same-sex-attracted men in a heteronormative environment signifies its sensitivity to the challenges faced by this community in real life. Ironically, while Thai BL tends to raise social awareness of the issue, Thai newspapers are found to represent same-sex-attracted men in a way that contains negative stereotypes, as seen in phrases such as "shit-lovers," "femininity bursts out," and "spreading infectious diseases" (Fongkaew et al., 2019).

> (12) Still, Kristine believes that "Boys' **Love** is important in starting the dialogue of queerness in the region and **community**." Thomas agrees, saying that it's also important to acknowledge its positive points, like "the fact that **Thai BL series** have **recently** begun exploring issues of what it means to live as a **gay** man in a **heteronormative** society reflects the real challenges **LGBT** individuals face in **Southeast Asia**." (*Cool JP*, 23 June 2020)

Such meaning-making is reflective of the evolution of BL. From the point of origination in Japan, they were perceived as "a fantasy image both created and consumed by women [...] a picture of love which is pure and unsullied by harsh reality" (McLelland, 2000b, pp. 23–24). Approximately two decades later, BL reached heterosexual and non-heterosexual male audiences alike (Madill & Zhao, 2021; Nagaike, 2015, 2019). In fact, from

the perspective of the latter group, the distinction between BL and other media directed at them such as "gay manga" becomes less rigid as both are viewed as two aspects of the same meta-genre (Baudinette, 2017). This is corroborated by the perception among non-heterosexual Filipino male fans that it is the masculine bodily aesthetic of Thai BL actors that they find more preferable to "some girly man like in Japanese manga" (Baudinette, 2020, p. 107).

All in all, deviating from the observation in McLelland (2000b), BL in Thailand is represented as not detaching itself from the "harsh reality" especially on the issue of a struggle against heteronormativity. Additionally, it is produced in a way that male fans are more comfortable identifying with. This is attributable to the tendency that the target audience is gradually wider than heterosexual women.

Extract (13) features one of the main protagonists in a Thai BL series who has been accused of engaging in "politically incorrect" activity online, provoking an outcry from Mainland Chinese fans. Moreover, his girlfriend is entangled in this tense situation, thus becoming another target of the public backlash. Together, their actions resulted in a campaign to boycott the series. Despite such furor, his overall celebrity may not suffer from de-celebrification. As Gies (2011) argues, analyzing the incident arising from celebrities' conduct involves two contextual factors: media framing and audience interpretation. In this case, the framing and the interpretation occur within the context of Mainland China. Meanwhile, Western media documents that the actor still receives continued support from Hong Kong and Taiwanese netizens who assert that "Bright's fans are young and progressive, and the Pro-Chinese Communist Party army always make the wrong attacks" (Griffiths, 2020).

(13) Two months after being involved in a **controversy** for "liking" an **online** photo that listed Hong Kong as a "country", **Thai actor Vachirawit Chivaaree**, who goes by the name **Bright** and starred in the popular **Thai** boy's **love drama** 2**gether**: The **Series**, issued an apology for the incident on Saturday. However, a majority of Chinese **netizens** have refused to accept the apology, questioning **Bright**'s sincerity. [...] Chinese **netizens** noted that the **actor** has not yet replied to the controversies involving his **girlfriend Nnevvy**, which include retweeting an inappropriate comment about **Wuhan** and **COVID**-19. [...] Chinese **netizens** have expressed their opposition to **Nnevvy**'s retweet about **COVID**-19 and an **Instagram** comment separating the island of **Taiwan** from China by boycotting the **drama**. Related hashtags for the boycott earned more than 4.64

billion views and over 1.44 million posts on China's **Twitter**-like **Sina Weibo** in April. (*Global Times*, 21 June 2020)

While (12) and (13) link with what is happening in real life, Extracts (14) and (15) concern what is missing in real life. To begin with, Extract (14) represents Thai BL as compensation for the rather grim reality that Filipino non-heterosexual men are made to confront, including: a lack of peer support during adolescence, condemnation from the Catholic Church and the "tragic" representation of same-sex-attracted men in local media. This is consistent with the previous findings which document the pressure on Filipino non-heterosexual men to conform to heteronormativity both in a personal context such as socializing with family and friends (Baytan, 2000; Lee, 2002) and in a professional context such as working in the public sector (Gamboa et al., 2021). Furthermore, the Church is observed to put these men under strong pressure by labeling their sexuality immoral (Gamboa et al., 2021). This is coupled with the representation of them as an object of ridicule in the mass media (Lee, 2002).

> (14) 2**gether** and the other **BL series** showed what many **gay** men did not have when they were growing up at the university: groups of friends, both **straight** and **gay**, who were openly supportive. That, and a milieu where homosexual acts were not seen as bizarre, or in Catholic **Philippines**, as forms of sin. (*Philstar*, 30 May 2020)

Extract (15) features the case of an Indonesian man whose Thai BL consumption is linked to the hope that he will also find true romance in real life. This is in the opposite direction to a previous case which appertains to a Chinese male who, in his real life, has already been attracted to another man and fantasizes that he and that man could become the main characters in a BL story (Nagaike, 2019). Hence, a point of departure is the romantic feeling in actual existence which is subsequently used to make meaning in BL consumption. On the contrary, the case in the current study starts from BL consumption and it is subsequently used to make meaning by raising hopes which remain unfulfilled in real life.

> (15) The **show** aired its last episode on May 15 but on June 1, **GMMTV announced** it would release five additional episodes in an anthology called "Still 2**Gether**". As always, **Daniel said** he will be at home in **Indonesia**, waiting for these episodes to drop every week, with the hopes that one day, he too will experience the **love** he **watches** on screen. (*Vice*, 17 June 2020)

Conclusion

The transnational flows of Asian cultural products date back to the early 1990s as evidenced in the popularization of Japanese pop culture (J-pop) and subsequently Korean pop culture (K-pop) at the turn of the 21st century (Siriyuvasak & Hyunjoon, 2007). Currently, the media have also reported widely on the international popularity of Thai pop culture (T-pop), which refers to the development of how T-pop has grabbed the attention of audiences and investors beyond Thailand (Setboonsarng, 2020). Arguably, the fact that Thai BL cultural products receive widespread international coverage is indicative of their status as part of the T-pop phenomenon.

In relation to the above trend, the current study has investigated how international media outlets assign meaning to Thai BL. The findings reveal that such meaning-making revolves around three emerging themes: (1) strong affection, (2) determinant of audience participation and (3) connection with reality.

Cavalcante's (2018) theorizing on the resilient reception provides a basis for discussion and a scholarly encapsulation of those themes. First, it posits that media's affective potential exerts not only an emotional but also a physical impact on audiences. Besides, media encounters can encourage them "to change aspects of self or the world" (p. 1191). This applies to the first and the third themes of the current study. On the first theme, it is revealed that the physical impact of Thai BL consumption includes various body movements (e.g. smile, cry, laugh and scream in *kilig*). Meanwhile, the third theme represents Thai BL as a cultural product that reflects a change in attitude towards being non-heterosexual. In other words, audiences who identify with such sexuality should not perceive themselves or be regarded as "bizarre" or committing "forms of sin."

Second, it is postulated that media encounters result in the accumulation of not only individual affective inventories but also a collective "archive of feelings" which is shared among a larger community of fans (Cvetkovich, 2003). This is applicable to the second theme of the current study. It is revealed that fans who have a similar fondness for Thai BL establish a community in both online and offline settings. In an online setting, social media such as Twitter is used to express their "archive of feelings" including thoughts and reactions to Thai BL. In the offline setting, a café specializing in drinks, snacks and merchandise from Thai BL has been set up. It is a social gathering venue where fans develop "an intertextual consumption culture expressed beyond texts but through tangible objects and physical spaces" (Santos, 2020, p. 83).

Nevertheless, it is argued that fans can be in a state of "affective disorientation," which refers to the perception that their accumulated feelings

are vague, confusing, unsettling, and unrecognizable (Ngai, 2005). In the current study, such ambiguity of feelings seems non-existent presumably because these representations are conducted by media practitioners who supposedly possess a professional skill at articulating their thoughts and eliciting an informative response from BL fans whom they interview.

Third, powerfully affective reception can be generated from the interaction between media content and extra-media forces which are "complex webs of power and influence in which individuals are embedded" (Cavalcante, 2018, p. 1193). This is applicable to the third theme of the current study. The "extra-media forces" possibly refer to challenges that gender-non-conforming individuals face in Southeast Asia. Thai BL is portrayed as responding to these challenges by "exploring issues of what it means to live as a gay man in a heteronormative society." However, whether or not and to what extent such exploration can create a "powerfully affective reception" among audiences remains unanswered. Hence, future research is warranted.

Fourth, media engender affective anticipation which refers to "the act of concentrating on, anticipating, or preparing for a potential future affective state" (Hansen, 2004, p. 592). In other words, this concept emphasizes the period before media consumption as "a rich site of meaning" (Cavalcante, 2018, p. 1193). This is applicable to the third theme of the current study. It is revealed that "affective anticipation" is the act of waiting expectantly to watch each episode of a Thai BL series on a weekly basis. Such an action is considered meaningful because it gives the viewer hope for real-life romance.

Lastly, strategies are formulated to help audiences "get through affectively powerful situations, steering them towards positive feeling states and away from negative ones" (Cavalcante, 2018, p. 1194). This is applicable to the second theme of the current study. It is revealed that Indonesian fans are dissatisfied with watching Thai BL shows with subtitles. Therefore, one of the strategies they employ is learning the Thai language. Such involvement with the target language exemplifies what Cavalcante (2018) terms as "a practice of immersion."

The aforementioned theorizing is formulated within an American context and it is conjectured whether such a framework would operate on a transnational basis (Cavalcante, 2018). The current study illustrates that it can account for the transnational trend of Thai BL. Moreover, BL is observed to have "broad implications for the study of transnational gender politics and performativity, feminist and queer readings, and fan community building, among other subjects" (Pagliassotti et al., 2013, p. 1). This study elaborates

on those subjects by examining Thai BL through the interdisciplinary lenses of communication and corpus linguistics. Furthermore, unlike a preponderance of previous studies which have adopted purely qualitative methods, this study conducts such textual examination under the guidance of quantitative data.

The three emerging themes in the present study are palpably positive. Nevertheless, the other side of the coin is that transnational cultural flows could cause tension and resentment as evidenced in the case of the dissemination of K-pop across Asia being perceived by those in receiving countries as a form of cultural imperialism (Lessard, 2019). Therefore, future studies are encouraged to explore to what extent Thai BL, given its growing international prominence, is or could be involved in such a controversial trend. A range of contributing factors and how it is represented in the media can also be investigated further.

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