

Queer dialogues with the global south: Western fans and the appeal of Thai boys' love

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Nora Viikmaa¹ and Amporn Jirattikorn²** 

Abstract

Contra-flows from Asia to the West have occurred for many decades. The recent popularity of Thai boys' love dramas, which depict homoerotic relationships between male characters, invites further investigation into their impact on Western perceptions of gender diversity and queer identity. This article examines the appeal of Thai boys' love to Western audiences and its potential to influence or challenge Eurocentric perspectives on queer discourses. Drawing on a survey of 118 participants and in-depth interviews with 10 individuals residing in Europe and North America, the study finds that most Western fans of Thai boys' love self-identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, which shapes their interpretations and reception of the content. Using the "Asia as method" and "inter-referencing" framework, this article explores how popular culture from the Global South, like Thailand, can serve as "a point of reference" for reshaping or subverting Western queer discourses. In this sense, Thai boys' love offers a reflective space through which Western audiences engage with alternative imaginaries of gender and sexuality without entirely displacing their own cultural frameworks.

Keywords

Asia as method, inter-referencing, queer discourses, Thai boys' love, Western fans

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“Asia as method” is a concept developed by Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010) which challenges the dominant Western-centric perspectives that have long shaped academic knowledge. Chen encourages Asian scholars and thinkers to draw from Asian experiences, cultures, and histories as frameworks for producing knowledge. The past decade has seen Asian popular culture, ranging from Japanese *manga* and *anime* to K-pop and Korean cinema, gain recognition in Western markets. However, Thai boys’ love (BL) dramas, which began to gain popularity among some Western viewers, stand out for their unique potential to impact Western perceptions of gender diversity and queer identities. Unlike earlier waves of Asian contra-flows, Thai BL’s positive portrayal of queer romance presents a compelling case for examining how “Asia as method” might extend beyond Asia, shaping new perspectives among Western audiences.

BL as a genre that depicts homoromantic or homoerotic relationships between male characters has been a vibrant subculture across Asia for more than two decades. It has only been a decade since Thailand began capitalizing on it, emerging as a leading producer of BL drama series. Over the past decade, studies show that Thai BL’s influence has firmly taken hold across Asia, particularly in China, Japan, Taiwan, and various Southeast Asian countries (Baudinette, 2023; Shimauchi, 2024; Welker, 2023). Only recently has Thai BL begun to expand its reach to other regions, including Latin America (Torres, 2024), Europe, and North America, cultivating dedicated fanbases in these new cultural spheres. Although no prior research confirms that Western audiences have begun watching Thai BL dramas, our online survey received over 100 responses from European and North American participants who had engaged with this content and were eagerly willing to respond to our survey. In addition, GMMTV, a leading production company of Thai BL series, organized Europe tours for its BL celebrities in January 2025 (GMMTV, 2024).

This article explores how Western audiences engage with Thai BL media. Prior research shows that the BL genre is consumed and interpreted differently across socio-cultural contexts (see Lin, 2023; Santos Fermin, 2023, for example). While BL often challenges heterosexual norms in parts of Asia where LGBTQ+ content is restricted, such barriers are less present in Europe and North America. The widespread and accessibility of queer cultural content in these regions raises important questions: What draws Western audiences to Thai BL? How does it influence or challenge Euro-American-centric understandings of queer discourses? And what does its popularity tell us about the role of popular culture in shaping perceptions of Asia?

When talking about “Asia,” it is important to acknowledge that it is not a homogeneous region devoid of hierarchical status in cultural production and consumption. Within Asia, Southeast Asia has long been positioned as a recipient of dominant East Asian cultural flows, particularly from Japan and Korea. However, the global rise of Thai BL significantly positions Southeast Asia, specifically Thailand, as a producer of influential popular culture. Nonetheless, this circulation of Thai BL is not an isolated phenomenon. It exemplifies inter-Asia referencing where Asian societies use each other as points of cultural inspiration and exchange (Chen, 2010; Chua, 2015). Originally adapted from Japanese BL, it incorporates elements of Korean idol culture and K-pop’s model of “soft masculinity” (Baudinette, 2023). But as Baudinette has argued, Thai BL has been dislocated from Japan and reconfigured as a fundamentally Thai phenomenon. This article

extends the ideas of “Asia as method” and inter-referencing framework to examine how Thai BL, popular culture from the Global South, can serve as a reference point for Western audiences, reshaping or challenging dominant Euro-American-centric queer discourses.

Literature review: boys’ love and inter-referencing beyond Asia

Boys’ love as a genre originated in Japan as a form of *manga*, depicting romantic or sexual relationships between male characters. Within BL scholarship, it is commonly argued that these texts challenge heterosexual norms, allowing women to experiment with gender and escape oppressive female roles (Fujimoto, 2004; Ishida, 2015). Initially directed toward heterosexual adolescent girls as a form of expressing female sexuality, today there seems to be no clear line between BL and LGBTQ+ media (Welker, 2023). As Welker argues, outside Japan the line between BL and LGBTQ+ media and fans is blurred as BL becomes “queerer and queerer” (Welker, 2023: 2). Particularly in the era of live-action BL series, featuring human actors, the impact of BL dramas has been significant. In countries like China, Malaysia, and the Philippines, where homosexuality faces condemnation and legal repercussions, BL offers a form of empowerment for queer individuals, enabling resistance to local heteronormativity (Baudinette, 2023; Jerome et al., 2022; Jirattikorn, 2023).

Regarding the transnational aspect of BL media, previous literature highlights how the global spread of BL fosters solidarity among fans, inviting them to unite across cultural and national borders in a shared recognition of the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community (Xu and Yang, 2023). In *Queer Transfigurations*, several authors also highlight BL’s role as a disruptor of gender and sexual norms in various contexts (see Welker, 2023). However, when discussing BL’s broader impact on gender and queer discourses, it is important to recognize that these discourses are far from hegemonic. Just as the influence of cultural products like Japan’s *anime* and *manga*, the UAE’s Al Jazeera, and Korea’s K-pop and K-dramas varies globally depending on who is sending and receiving them, queer discourses are similarly complex and multifaceted.

The rise of Asian media globally over the past two decades underscores how these contra-flows can challenge the Western center of cultural production. However, beyond simply “decentering” and “recentering” globalization (Iwabuchi, 2002) by producing and exporting their own narratives globally, we must critically examine the precise nature of these influences. What are these flows producing—new perceptions of beauty, identity, or social values? To better understand the dynamics of exchange between the West and Asia, we propose utilizing the framework of “Asia as method” along with the concept of “inter-referencing” to explore how Thai BL drama series can generate new sources of knowledge that challenge dominant Western queer discourse.

Chen’s (2010) concept of “Asia as method” emphasizes inter-Asia referencing as points of cultural and intellectual exchange. Chen encourages scholars to shift their focus from relying on the West as the primary reference point, and instead, engage in intra-Asian dialogues. The concept involves “decentering” the West and invites us to use

Asian-derived frameworks to rethink global categories of knowledge (Chua, 2015). This idea aligns with Ong's concept of "inter-referencing," which includes citation, allusion, aspiration, comparison, and competition to diversify sources of influence (Ong, 2011: 17). Applying the Asia as method framework, Yue (2017) explores various aspects of transgender identities. Among Yue's case studies, the Singaporean "tomboy" boyband exemplifies an Asian butch style, self-fashioned through a blend of K-pop music and fashion, alongside performance styles and gender expressions from China, Singapore, Thailand, and other Asian countries. Emerging from inter-Asian referencing, these Asian tomboys draw ideas and aesthetics from across East and Southeast Asia, providing new insights into queer identities that emphasize regional, rather than Western, influences on queer expression.

Recently, scholars have advanced the "Asia as method" approach by theorizing "queer Asia as method" (see Ge et al., 2025; Lim, 2025). This perspective challenges the tendency to treat Asian queer media as merely marginal "case studies," instead recognizing queer Asia as a generative site of theory and critical praxis. Recent scholarship surrounding queer Asia as method illustrates how hybrid languages in Indian films become a metaphor for queer fluidity, how digital platforms in China shape queer female entrepreneurship, and how affect and precarity mark the teaching of queer studies in Indonesia (see Ge et al., 2025). Through these diverse cases, media technologies and cultural flows are shown to not only shape queer subjectivities in Asia, but also to disrupt Euro-American LGBTQ+ frameworks by centering intra-Asian dynamics, horizontal exchanges, and the negotiation of queerness in regional and transregional contexts. This approach aligns with our analysis, which, we argue, offers new imaginaries of queerness. However, our study takes a step further by examining whether "Thai queer method," referring to the ways queerness is represented in Thai BL, can ultimately shape Western perceptions of queerness.

With BL media, scholars use the Asia as method framework to examine how the transnational spread of Thai BL fosters LGBTQ+ awareness across contexts. Baudinette (2023) challenges the idea that its international appeal stems from cultural difference or national origin, arguing instead that Thai BL's power lies in its positive, normalized portrayals of queer romance. His interviews with Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino fans show that viewers are drawn less to Thai cultural markers and more to its queer narratives, suggesting a form of inter-referencing, where Asian societies look to one another rather than to the West. While this dynamic is significant in Asian contexts where queerness is stigmatized, it raises questions about how Thai BL is interpreted in the more LGBTQ+-accepting West.

Scholars also discuss the political potential of Thai BL, noting its capacity to challenge social norms and advocate for marriage equality (Baudinette, 2023; Shimauchi, 2024). Shimauchi (2024), in a study of Japanese fans of Thai BL (*tai-numa*), shows that fans are engaging not only with the shows but also with their political messages. Through inter-Asia referencing, Thai BL encourages Japanese viewers to reconsider LGBTQ+ issues and social inequality, with some joining Pride marches, online campaigns such as #TaiNumaPrideMonth, and advocating for same-sex marriage legislation. For *tai-numa* fans, Shimauchi (2024: 394) contends, "watching BL implies facing LGBTQ+ rights."

The political function of Thai BL, as noted above, seems to align with the Western notion of the LGBTQ+ movement, which emphasizes legal recognition and protection of sexual minorities such as marriage equality, anti-discrimination laws and visibility for queer identities in mainstream society (see Newton, 1994; Rimmerman, 2002). Western societies have increasingly embraced gender diversity and queer identities through frameworks rooted in individual rights, liberal values, and a focus on equality and social justice. Without denying the political potential of Thai BL, we argue against attributing overt political messages to it. Of more than 200 Thai BL series produced between 2014 and 2024, only a few explicitly address marriage equality or focus on legal recognition. Instead of framing LGBTQ+ issues within activism or rights-based movements, Thai BL dramas present a softer, more idealized portrayal of same-sex love, which we term “everyday queerness,” emphasizing the integration of LGBTQ+ relationships into daily life without the need for activist framing. This does not mean that discussions around identity are entirely dismissed; rather, they are addressed and, in most cases, accepted by parents and surrounding society. As we show, European viewers interpret this “everyday” presentation of queerness as normalized, where queerness exists as a natural facet of life. This contrasts with Western LGBTQ+ narratives, which frequently frame queerness through a lens of struggle, pain, and negative portrayals (McDermott, 2021; McInroy et al., 2022).

Although some of Thai BL series, for example, *Not Me the Series* (2021), *Dark Blue Kiss* (2019), and *I Told Sunset about You* (2020), address issues related with LGBTQ rights, the challenges of coming out in a conservative society, or emotional complexities of coming to terms with one’s sexual identity, these themes are presented in a more natural, queer-centered narratives. The appeal of Thai BL thus lies in its ability to normalize same-sex love within a utopian setting, without directly challenging social hierarchies or questioning established gender norms as forcefully as some Western queer narratives do (see Ahmed, 2010; Warner, 2000, for example). Queer theorists, particularly Ahmed (2010), advocate rejecting normative ideals such as marriage and parenthood, promoting “unhappiness” as a critique of social norms and neoliberal values. Although this “Thai queer method” resonates with Snediker’s (2009) notion of ‘queer optimism’—emphasizing love, affection, and emotional connections between men as natural and celebrated—might seem to reinforce heteronormativity, it offers Western viewers a vision of a future where queerness is embraced with happiness.

This article examines how Thai BL dramas shape Western viewers’ perceptions of queerness, using “Asia as method” and inter-referencing as productive frameworks. We argue that within this transnational encounter, Asia as method is operated through viewers’ engagement with new aesthetics and narratives of Thai BL. Western audiences turn to Thai BL not merely for entertainment but as a new point of methodological reference that allows them to imagine queer life beyond Western paradigms. While some viewers continue to frame these representations against their own societies’ more established LGBTQ+ rights, sometimes reinforcing Western progressivist hierarchies, Thai BL nonetheless unsettles familiar norms of queer representation. Through this engagement, Asia as method enables Western viewers to rethink queerness beyond Euro-American frameworks, opening new affective and epistemic possibilities for knowing and representing queer life.

Thailand and boys' love

Thai BL series are typically adapted from web novels created by young Thai women authors, whose novels were later published as paper books (Jirattikorn, 2023; Prasannam and Chan, 2023). Early Thai BL stories usually revolve around everyday life in school or university settings, where both male leads were typically portrayed as heterosexual men who happened to fall in love with another male character. However, a notable shift appears in more recent series, with characters who may openly identify as gay. In addition, homoromantic or homoerotic relationships among male leads have become increasingly normalized in recent Thai BL series. This normalization, or homonormativity, is reflected in the acceptance shown by the surrounding society, including family and friends of the male leads. Examples of this can be seen in *Cutie Pie* (2022), *KinnPorsche the Series* (2022), *2Gether the Series* (2020), and *Bad Buddy* (2021), among many others.

While discussing homonormativity in Thai BL series, it is important to acknowledge that these texts do not always address LGBTQ+ socio-political issues. Concerns have been raised by LGBTQ+ groups in Thailand regarding the stereotypical portrayal of gender in Thai BL series (Koaysomboon, 2020). Many scholars argue that the Thai BL industry does not aim to subvert the mainstream narrative of heteronormativity; rather, it often fetishizes and commodifies young male bodies while portraying formulaic sexual roles, such as the dominant “*seme*” and submissive “*uke*” characters, akin to a heteronormative couple (Koaysomboon, 2020; Prasannam and Chan, 2023). This practice of “queerbaiting” fosters sexual fantasy and perpetuates homophobic stereotypes (Prasannam and Chan, 2023). However, some BL content, such as *Not Me the Series* (2021) engages with political activism and contributes to the visibility of the LGBTQ+ rights movement (Zhang and Dedman, 2021). Hence, we argue that Thai BL series serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, its focus on homoeroticism clearly challenges heteronormativity. On the other hand, its formulaic usage of sexual roles, characters, and plots reinforces conservative and conventional norms. This inherent duality in Thai BL presents an opportunity to explore how the transnational spread of Thai BL, which has recently gained traction among Western audiences, influences their perspectives on gender representations and queerness.

Methodology

We began this project with an online survey distributed on European-based platforms. A Google form was used to gather demographic information, including participants' age, gender, and sexuality, to understand the broader tendencies within the fan community. The survey also sought more in-depth reflections on participants' perceptions of Thailand, Thai people, and the LGBTQ+ community. It was shared across Thai BL fan communities on platforms like Tumblr and Reddit, as well as through participants' personal networks. Conducted in October 2023, the survey was voluntary, and only essential data was collected. We were pleasantly surprised to receive an overwhelming response, with 118 respondents willing to participate in the survey.

The survey results revealed several demographic trends within the Thai BL fan community in Western countries. The majority of participants were in the 26–35 age range, indicating that most respondents are young adults or early middle-aged.

In terms of gender, the majority were female, aligning with existing scholarship that notes the BL genre's appeal to women. However, only 9 of the 118 participants identified as heterosexual, with bisexuality being the most common sexual orientation. Although LGBTQ+ viewers remain a smaller portion of the overall BL audience, our survey shows they make up a significant majority among Western fans in this study. Notably, all heterosexual respondents were female, with no heterosexual male participants. In terms of ethnicity, most respondents identified as white, which may influence their cultural perspectives or interpretations of Thai media within predominantly Western racial and cultural frameworks. In addition, participants primarily resided in the USA and Germany.

Based on the survey results, 18 participants were contacted, and 10 agreed to participate in video call interviews. The selection process was purposive, aiming for maximum diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, and geographical location. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. Following a semi-structured format, the interviews were guided by an interview protocol to ensure consistency and depth in data collection. Of the 10 participants, 6 reside in Europe, while the other 4 are based in North America. The interviews were conducted in October 2023 and June 2024.

We acknowledge that this small sample does not represent the full heterogeneity of audiences in Europe and North America. We do not intend to suggest that “Western audiences” constitute a homogeneous cultural bloc and our findings are not intended to be generalized. We use the term only to refer to shared socio-legal and cultural contexts shaped by particular histories of queer knowledge production and the institutional recognition of LGBTQ+ identities and rights in Europe and North America (see Newton, 1994; Rimmerman, 2002). We explore how viewers situated within these socio-legal and cultural contexts engage with Thai BL as a transnational media form, and how their interpretations reflect cross-cultural curiosity and localized understandings of queerness.

In addition to the survey and in-depth interviews, we also incorporate participant observation into our research methodology. The first author is familiar with the European context, having been a fan herself, while the second author resides in Thailand, where these BL series are produced. This combination of insights from both cultures enriches the participant observation. The researchers' own experiences as community members were integrated into the findings and discussion, employing reflexive analysis to position the authors within the research context.

As illustrated in Table 1, the participants in the in-depth interviews represented a diverse demographic range concerning age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and country of residence.

Thai BL dramas: a queer variety of the queer

Like their counterparts in Southeast and East Asia, Western audiences often access Thai BL through online platforms and algorithms such as YouTube, Tumblr, Facebook, and fan communities rather than traditional TV. This digital engagement stems from the

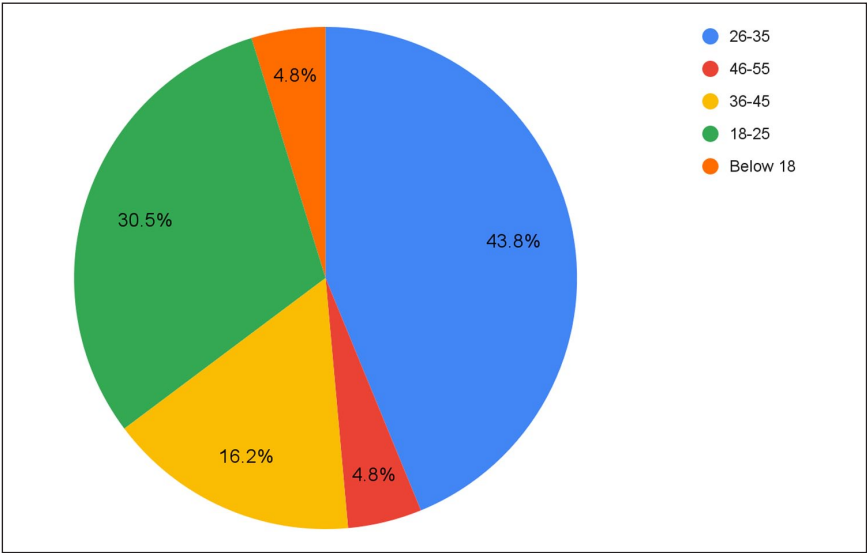


Figure 1. The age ranges of the 118 participants (authors’ survey data, 2024).

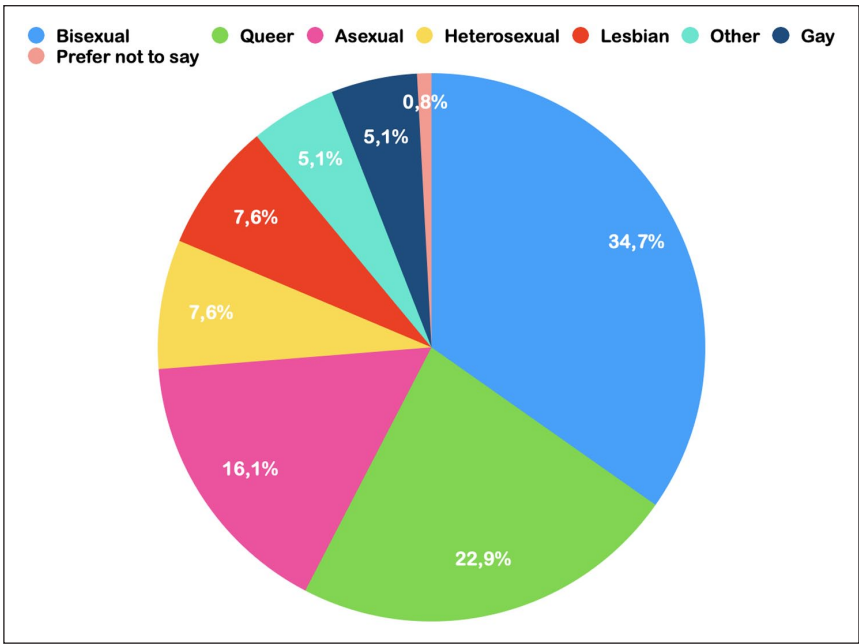


Figure 2. The preferred sexualities of the 118 participants. “Other” includes self-assigned identities (authors’ survey data, 2024).

Table 1. Demographic profile of the in-depth interview participants.

Participant nr	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Ethnicity and country of residence
Participant #1	46-55	Female	Bisexual	Finnish, Finland
Participant #2	36-45	Female	Bisexual	Jewish/Norwegian, Canada
Participant #3	36-45	Male	Gay	American, USA
Participant #4	18-25	Female	Heterosexual	French, France
Participant #5	26-35	Male	Gay	Black American, USA
Participant #6	18-25	Female	Lesbian	Jewish, USA
Participant #7	26-35	Female	Asexual	German, Germany
Participant #8	26-35	agender	Bisexual	Italian, Italy
Participant #9	26-35	Female	Queer	German, Germany
Participant #10	18-25	Female	Lesbian	Swedish, Sweden

genre’s absence on mainstream Western media, the dispersed and relatively small size of its fanbase, and cultural differences in storytelling and humor. Many fans discover Thai BL through prior exposure to Japanese *manga* and *anime* or Korean and Chinese dramas, with YouTube’s full-episode availability cited as a major draw.

Another key factor is Thai BL’s alignment with queer fan works online. McInroy et al. (2022) suggests that fan works, particularly fan fiction, play a key role in providing more realistic and inclusive depictions of the LGBTQ+ community by reimagining fictional characters from heteronormative TV shows or movies in alternative queer settings. These fan fictions typically present positive, LGBTQ+-centered narratives, as they are created by and for fan communities rather than for commercial purposes. Western fans often commented that Thai BL closely resembles these alternative queer fan fictions found online.

Like fan fiction, the appeal of Thai BL lies in its freedom to explore a wide range of settings, characters, and storylines. Unlike the often grim portrayals of LGBTQ+ lives, Thai BL offers a broad spectrum of queer experiences, ranging from innocent to sexual, realistic to utopian, and tragic to comedic. For Western viewers, this variety provides a more nuanced and comprehensive depiction of queer life. Thai BL also delivers three-dimensional characters that feel more grounded in reality, contrasting with the idealized figures often found in Japanese *manga*:

We had all gone through the media of the 2010s. There wasn’t much that was queer. And the queer content that did exist was mostly depressing, even when it involved romance. Most of the time, I’d start watching it, and while I assume I finished some of it, none of it left much of an impression. (Participant #7)

With so little queer content available, I was just happy to have more queer storylines to watch. I was willing to overlook things I might not have otherwise, just to see gay characters being happy and getting their guy. It was also fascinating to see how the tropes played out differently in Thailand compared to Japanese *manga*. It was really refreshing. (Participant #2)

Regarding queer representation in the West, McDermott (2021) highlights the difficulty in finding queer representation that does not center on “coming out or suicide or being the villain or going through a phase” (p. 846). These repetitive and negative portrayals present a misleading image of the queer community as a “uniform group,” when it is actually highly diverse. Many participants in this research expressed a preference for light-hearted, casual, and cheerful stories—not only for entertainment but also for their positive depictions of queer life. These narratives demonstrate that LGBTQ+ people are not destined to face only pain and struggle, as much of Western media implies.

Viewers from both the survey data and in-depth interviews commented that they often encounter cultural unfamiliarity in Thai BL dramas. While this initially presents a barrier, many find that these differences soon become part of the appeal. One participant remarked that although the sound effects and storytelling felt “very different” and even “funny” at first, these unfamiliar elements intrigued them. Another noted how aspects like Buddhism and Thai values, though sometimes exaggerated, offered “an authentic picture of Thai culture” that added depth to the viewing experience. Rather than deterring engagement, these cultural nuances encouraged reflection on how relationships and queerness are framed across societies. We return to this cultural interpretation in more detail later.

In sum, the appeal of Thai BL among Western audiences lies in several key factors, mainly the accessibility of free content online and a more positive and diverse spectrum of queer representations, contrasting with the often negative and tragic portrayals of LGBTQ+ individuals in Western media. Another intriguing aspect is Thai BL’s resemblance to fan fiction. Like BL, fan fiction offers the freedom to imagine fantasy-rich narratives that explore alternative power dynamics and queer-centered relationships without reinforcing heteronormativity. Although fan fiction is not always entirely democratic, as marginalized voices within fandom are often overlooked, and there is a tendency to sexualize and fetishize gay relationships through a heteronormative lens, it is nonetheless celebrated as a more inclusive, egalitarian genre of storytelling (Spacey, 2018: 9–10). It offers what Spacey describes as a critical lens to challenge what is considered “normal” and “natural.” Thai BL taps into this ethos, offering imaginative stories that range from idealized romance to more grounded realities, something viewers find largely missing in mainstream Western media.

Thai queer method: expanding queer imaginaries for Western audiences

As previously mentioned, the LGBTQ+ aspects of Thai BL are a primary draw for viewers, most of whom are in the LGBTQ+ community. While BL typically does not serve as a gateway to understanding one’s sexuality for Western viewers, many of whom already identify as LGBTQ+ and have experience with queer media, it provides an alternative to the often melancholic and hardship-focused narratives found in Western LGBTQ+ content. Beyond offering diverse queer representations, Thai BL has enabled Western viewers to gain a deeper understanding of Thai culture and the queer community, as the genre provides a casual glimpse into everyday life in Thailand. For some

Western audiences, Thai BL is closely connected to the current challenges faced by Thailand's LGBTQ+ community. Many fans noted that watching these dramas has sparked their awareness and curiosity about the realities of queer life in the country where these stories take place:

I had my own personal experience in the community in Italy, and I've seen a lot portrayed in English media. But a lot of queer spaces online are really US-centric. So, yeah, I came to learn more about what the community is like beyond what I've experienced before. (Participant #8)

Engaged is probably the wrong word, perhaps aware is more accurate. When you know someone and follow their journey, you begin to see that they're not just doing the things; they're actively involved. You start to realize "Okay. We're doing the same things: he goes to his pride, I go to my pride." (Participant #7)

Viewers often cited Thai BL series that address marriage equality and LGBTQ+ struggles, like *Not Me the Series* (2021) and *I Told Sunset About You* (2020), as examples of how media can foster empathy and broaden understanding of queer realities in regions not typically within their scope of interest. As the Thai BL industry matures, its narratives have diversified. Initially centered on school or university romances, Thai BL has expanded into sub-genres such as drama, fantasy, period dramas, and action, while also evolving from simple "boys' love" stories to more nuanced "queer romance" as characters openly identify as gay. One participant noted this shift, observing that the earlier "gay for you" storylines—where characters do not identify as gay but simply fall in love with a unique individual who "happens to be" male—have mostly disappeared: "I think there's a general improvement in terms of showing more realism after the 'gay for you' trope disappears." (Participant #2).

As Thai BL tropes have diversified, they offer a mix of socially conscious narratives alongside more conventional, soapy, and fantasy romance. Audiences appreciate both approaches: some seek out the social activism in certain shows, while others are drawn to portrayals that emphasize romantic fulfillment and emotionally rich connections between queer individuals. Thai BL stands in contrast to Western narratives, which audiences often feel portray queer characters as overly somber or stereotypically hypersexual; a "horny beast":

Very often, same-sex couples, especially male couples, are seen only through their sexuality and as sexual beings. So, it's really important to highlight the super romantic side as well. Some Thai BL series don't go beyond very shy kisses, but what truly matters is the feeling behind it. There is a deep emotional connection between these people; they are not just horny beasts like conventional Western media always portrayed them. (Participant #1)

Participants who appreciate the soapy, cheerful, and romanticized depictions of queer love in Thai BL note that Western queer narratives like *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), *Love, Simon* (2018), and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) often focus on tragic or somber themes. They value Thai BL's portrayal of joyful, idealized queer romances, which, though not always realistic, offer a positive depiction of queer experiences. More

importantly, they appreciate that Thai BL can balance social challenges with aspirational queer love stories:

Western queer media feels much more focused on being authentic. I think that's why many Westerners try to separate queer media from boys' love. Sometimes it feels like queer media is made in a bubble, and it doesn't want to engage with that utopian ideal. As a queer person, it's not as comforting. (Participant #9)

Some shows act as if society is already accepting of queer individuals. They don't fully acknowledge the real constraints that queer people face in different parts of the world. But I think Thai BL offers a mix of shows that recognize the social challenges alongside more soapy, romantic ones, allowing for dreaming. This combination is refreshing, giving the queer audience hope for a future where they can be themselves, while still acknowledging the real challenges queer people face globally. The balance between the two is really nice. (Participant #6)

For many Western fans, these portrayals offer a fresh perspective on LGBTQ+ experiences, introducing a “new reference” that includes positive representation, the normalization of queerness, and queer-centered narratives—all of which stand in contrast to the frequently negative or marginalized depictions in their own media. While conventional Western narratives either portrayed queerness negatively or silenced queer characters altogether, contemporary recurring negative portrayals of queer characters in Western media often stem from two interrelated practices: “queerbaiting” and what Cavalcante (2015) terms “anxious displacement.” Queerbaiting, commonly found in Hollywood movies, teases potential LGBTQ+ plotlines but rarely follows through, aiming to attract queer viewers without alienating conservative audiences. This tactic initially was effective in drawing in LGBTQ+ audiences, while explicitly LGBTQ+-positive cinema remained limited in comparison (Sánchez-Soriano, García-Jiménez, 2020). As Participant #7 and #8 explain,

I used to tolerate poor portrayals most of the time, or just the bare minimum, the very basics. Sure, if there's someone kissing in the background who isn't hetero, we're just like, yeah. (Participant #7)

A few years ago, we would jump on anything that was even remotely queer. Even if we watched it and didn't really like it, we were just so desperate for any scrap of representation we could get. (Participant #8)

In principle, queerbaiting refers to suggesting potential queer attraction between characters without ever confirming it, creating a tantalizing “tease” for queer audiences while avoiding genuine queer representation. While queerbaiting initially emerged as a response to the lack of queer romance in mainstream media, it can produce problematic effects. As McDermott (2021) notes, the “Bury Your Gays” trope, where queer characters are killed off to add drama or reinforce narratives of tragedy, persists even in newer media. Queerbaiting now includes portrayals where same-sex relationships are realized only to be abruptly terminated.

Cavalcante (2015: 455) introduces the notion of “anxious displacement” to describe how 20th-century Western media associated queer characters with shame, danger, and pathology, marking them as “polluted.” Although recent LGBTQ+ narratives and gay rights discourses have moved queerness into more mainstream contexts—such as depictions of gay parenthood—this normalization often confines queer representation to “white, middle-class, heterosexual norms.” Deeply subversive or sexually explicit forms of queerness are displaced onto secondary figures. Together, queerbaiting and anxious displacement result in queer representation that aligns with mainstream values of family, respectability, and emotional competence, but queerness itself is frequently depoliticized, minimized, or even erased.

In fact, the idealized and romanticized portrayal of queer romance in Thai BL has been criticized for engaging in queer baiting driven by commercial motives and disconnected from the realities of gay life (Baudinette, 2023; Prasannam and Chan, 2023). To appeal to heterosexual female audiences, Thai BL often employs a distinct form of queer baiting that is romanticized and idealized. Unlike in Western media, where queer baiting seeks to attract queer audiences while appeasing conservative ones, its Asian variant caters to female viewers, producing depictions that are overly positive yet rooted in heteronormative frameworks, rendering LGBTQ+ experiences fantastical. Moreover, BL idols are encouraged to perform “staged intimacy” both on and off screen, through livestreams, public outings, gift exchanges, and family visits to sustain the illusion of a real relationship (Zhang and Dedman, 2021). Scholars argue that such portrayals exploit homoeroticism to fulfill female fantasies and drive consumption, ultimately reinforcing homophobic stereotypes (Prasannam and Chan, 2023).

In both Western and Thai BL media, queerbaiting functions as a commercial strategy that uses LGBTQ+ subtext or token representation to attract audiences. While Western media often relies on stereotypes or tragic tropes to make queer content non-threatening to mainstream viewers, Thai BL targets heterosexual female audiences with idealized, romanticized portrayals of queer romance within heteronormative frameworks. Yet audience agency remains central in reshaping these meanings. Many Western fans perceive these unrealistic portrayals as a subtle form of social activism, viewing Thai BL as a hopeful, even utopian, space where queer love is celebrated and normalized. These positive narratives enable viewers to imagine queer relationships as ordinary and accepted, reflecting a desire for universality and optimism, even if this sometimes reproduces heteronormative ideals.

While we argue that some Western fans turn to Thai BL as a new reference point for reimagining queer relationships, it is important to acknowledge that some Western productions have also portrayed queer romance positively. For instance, *SKAM* (Season 3, 2016–2017), a Norwegian teen series, offered a romanticized and emotionally rich depiction of same-sex love. Yet Thai BL stands out for its scale, accessibility, and narrative diversity. Unlike *SKAM*, which features limited queer storylines within a single format, Thai BL encompasses over 200 series across genres ranging from school romance to historical fantasy and social drama. Although commercially driven, as Baudinette (2023: 106) notes, “their queer impact on the mediascape in contemporary Thailand cannot and must not be denied.” This thriving industry sustains the continuous depiction of diverse queer stories, ensuring the routine visibility of queer lives. Such “everyday queerness”

helps normalize LGBTQ+ identities, making queerness appear ordinary rather than exceptional.

When it comes to the audience, they are well aware of the industrial scale of the BL genre. Interviewees often highlighted this as a positive aspect, noting that the fast pace of production ensures a wide variety of series to choose from, drives improvements in quality, and, importantly, encourages narratives that are more pro-LGBTQ+ at their core. Rather than focusing on the fetishization of queer relationships, many participants expressed appreciation for the emergence of more complex storylines that resist queer-baiting and shallow fanservice. As one participant reflected:

Compared to older BLs, I noticed that the representation is kind of more honest, less stereotypical, less of that “I’m not gay, I only like you.” The characters themselves are more diversified, I guess. (Participant #8)

Others emphasized the speed of industrial change, with one noting,

It’s really almost impressive how quickly they’ve reached this point, and it’s amazing how fast it feels like they have exhausted their initial pool of popular content. Now, you see networks taking risks on original projects. (Participant #5)

These reflections illustrate how Western audiences not only notice but value the genre’s evolution, perceiving Thai BL as a space where queer representation continues to develop in complexity and inclusivity. What might at first appear to be industrial expansion instead signals a dynamic ecosystem in which creators and viewers together reshape the possibilities of queer storytelling. Each new series adds to this redefinition, showing queer identities as ordinary, diverse, and embedded in everyday life.

In this process, Western fans actively use Thai BL to critique and reimagine dominant Western narratives about queerness, signaling a shift in how queerness is known, represented, and desired. We argue that the desire to see queerness rendered as normal and everyday, as evidenced in Thai BL, closely reflects Chen’s (2010) concept of “Asia as method,” in which knowledge and meaning are produced through transnational dialogue and inter-referencing rather than measured solely against Western standards. In this sense, Western fans draw on Asian media as a productive site for generating new ways of seeing and interpreting queer experience. Thai BL thus exemplifies how Asia operates not as a secondary reference point, but as a generative epistemological anchor that opens new possibilities for imagining and inhabiting queer life.

Thailand is beautiful yet not a gay paradise

When asked about their perceptions of Thailand before watching Thai BL, most participants shared that Western media had generally painted a grim and problematic image of the country, often seen as underdeveloped. Western media tends to portray Southeast Asia through an indifferent or orientalist lens, reducing Thailand to either well-known cultural exports like Thai massage, cuisine, and tourist destinations or to exoticized stereotypes such as sex trafficking and “ladyboys.” This limited understanding of Thai

culture also ties back to the minimal attention given to non-Western countries in American and European educational systems:

I would think that most people in the US don't know anything about Thailand. There's a saying that the only way Americans learn geography is if we're bombing the country. So if there is not a major issue, nobody is going to pay attention. Pop culture can generate the interest, like K-pop fans for example, but average people probably don't even know the country exists, to be honest. (Participant #3)

[Through Thai BL], I've now learned more about everyday Thailand, normal life there, and regular people, not just those in difficult situations. I definitely prefer this perspective. (Participant #1)

After watching Thai BL, most participants said they came to understand more about Thailand. This new understanding of "Thainess" among Western viewers appeared in two main ways. First, through common cultural elements like age hierarchy, language, religion, and food. Unlike travel shows, these drama series do not aim to explain Thai culture to foreign viewers. Instead, they present it as part of the everyday setting, which often leaves Western audiences curious and motivated to research on their own. Out of 118 survey respondents, only a few reported no increased interest in Thai culture, while the vast majority said they had looked up more information to better understand what they were watching. One viewer, for instance, noted that BL dramas offered "a kind of slice-of-life look" into Thai society:

In the West, you don't really have that close family connections that they have three or four generations living in the same house. Those kinds of family dynamics are brought into the shows, and I can see that in Thailand and in other Asian societies, they're still very family oriented. (Participant #3)

Another participant explained how the portrayal of Buddhism and everyday beliefs in BL dramas sparked her curiosity about Thai values and society more broadly:

I find cultural differences so interesting—like Buddhism, its influence in Thai society, in people's beliefs, and in their values. I think these elements offer a varied and authentic picture of Thai culture. (Participant #1)

This process of discovery seems to have reduced exoticized views of Thailand, which are often shaped by stereotypes in Western media. Many also expressed a desire to visit the country. Some began to learn Thai. As one participant put it, "I've started learning a little bit of Thai. Because of BL, I definitely do want to learn Thai and visit the country" (Participant #5).

Another dimension of understanding "Thainess" came through aspects unique to BL or Thai media more broadly, such as its distinctive humor, overt product placement, acting style, and the celebrity culture surrounding BL actors. These features initially challenged participants' expectations of what constitutes "good television," particularly when contrasted with the polished or serious tone of much Western media. The quirky

and light-hearted tone of Thai BL, though seen as a cultural barrier at first, eventually became one of the genre's most appealing qualities. As one participant recalled,

At first I thought it was . . . not weird, but really very different from my country. The sounds and effects were so unexpected. It kind of surprised me, but it also felt funny and new. (Participant #4)

Another noted how the playful tone felt jarring at first, especially compared to the more somber narratives common in Western queer media: "I think a lot of American and Western queer media seems to be very tragic, and this [quirkiness] first kinda threw me off" (Participant #10).

In sum, the new sense of Thainess that emerged among Western viewers was shaped both by everyday cultural elements embedded in the narratives, and by the distinctive aesthetics and conventions of Thai BL media. Participants often moved between recognizing aspects of Thai culture and treating the series as stylized or fantastical portrayals. While they acknowledged the depiction of multi-generational households or elements of Buddhism and everyday beliefs, they remained aware of the shows' fictional and entertainment-oriented nature:

I heard also that some people who got really into K-dramas kind of started seeing Korea as a TV magical land. And I was like, I'm not gonna do that. I'm gonna step back and be like, this does not have to be representative of real life. (Participant #10)

It's TV, it's entertainment. It's clearly not an exact representation of what it's actually like in Thailand. (Participant #8)

Importantly, Western viewers' understanding of Thainess is shaped not only by the shows themselves but also through online interactions with other fans from Thailand and elsewhere. This gap between fiction and reality did not diminish their interest. Many fans were motivated to learn more about Thailand's socio-political context, often turning to fan communities and Thai activists online for further information. Several participants noted that their deeper understanding of LGBTQ+ rights in Thailand came not directly from the dramas, but from the conversations and discussions surrounding them:

I've started learning more about Thai history and protests because I'm interested in social justice. BL now feel more political, and they almost compel you to look up issues like marriage equality. (Participant #6)

Some series are very political. They have a strong message. And sometimes the actors, directors, or writers actually have a point of view they're passionate about. So, through tweets and Instagram, you can see them advocating for rights. I've learned about the LGBTQ+ rights situation in Thailand through the series and the crew members, actually. (Participant #4)

It should be noted that the series discussed in this study and in the in-depth interviews were broadcast before the passing of Thailand's marriage equality bill, which took effect in January 2025. During the public debates between 2021 and 2023, some Thai BL series

portrayed the struggle for marriage equality, fostering a sense of emotional connection and solidarity between Western viewers and Thai LGBTQ+ communities:

I'm cheering them on in this fight they have about their marriage equality. (Participant #1)

There's nothing to me that's more queer than political activism. (Participant #6)

These comments show that Thai BL not only sparks curiosity about Thai culture but also raises awareness of social and political issues in Thailand. While some forms of engagement might appear as “virtual” participation or virtual tourism, many fans’ activities, such as researching Thai history, following political debates, and studying the Thai language, extend beyond passive spectatorship, representing a methodological encounter that connects entertainment with learning and reflection.

Central to fan participation is the question of whether Thai BL can influence how viewers think about queerness, as Shimauchi (2024) and Baudinette (2023) suggest for Japanese and other Asian fans. As stated, many Western viewers are drawn to Thai BL because it offers emotionally engaging and romantically idealized portrayals of queer relationships, which we refer to as “Thai queer method,” distinct from the often negative or gloomy depictions of LGBTQ+ people in their own media. While these forms of participation may generate affect and empathy without producing any material change, we argue that engaging with Thai BL still encourages curiosity, critical reflection, and interest in Thai culture and politics. Thai BL thus becomes more than entertainment, offering a space to reflect on queerness both in Thailand and in viewers’ own societies. As viewers commented:

I think it's made me more aware of how lucky we are in Finland and in Europe, in Nordic countries at least that we have such a liberal society and so progressive society. (Participant #1)

I guess watching BL series made me realize that it is much more difficult to live in Asia . . . to live as an LGBTQ+ person. I guess I was not aware of that because in France, it's much more easier. (Participant #4)

Viewers’ responses are shaped by their locally situated cultural contexts. While we do not intend to reduce these differences into a homogeneous form, the comments above nonetheless reflect shared socio-legal and historical frameworks of queer knowledge production and institutional recognition of LGBTQ+ identities and rights in their own societies. Western audiences, although appreciating the romantic fantasy of Thai BL and supporting Thailand’s struggles for LGBTQ+ rights, do not seek to entirely displace their understanding of queer life in their own contexts. Many express satisfaction with existing legal and social conditions, but regard Thai BL as an aspirational space where queer love can flourish with emotional depth and narrative centrality. In this sense, Thai BL prompts reflection on the meanings and possibilities of queerness in ways that extend beyond the virtual. Hence, we argue that Thai BL functions as a reference point, a form of Asia as method, where viewers encounter alternative ways of imagining and representing queer life. Its appeal lies in complementing, rather than replacing, existing

experiences of queerness, providing a transnational lens through which viewers can reflect on queer life, representation, and possibility.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can revisit the reasons why queerbaiting in the West and in Thailand leads to different portrayals of queer communities and, consequently, affects viewers in distinct ways. In the West, queerbaiting often reinforces harmful, repetitive stereotypes, presenting the queer community as a “uniform group” despite its diversity (McDermott, 2021). In Thailand, while the practice centered on mainstreaming queer romance is marketed primarily to heterosexual female fans rather than a genuine commitment to queer representation, the industry’s maturity and the society’s relative openness toward LGBTQ+ communities enable more diverse and idealized portrayals of queerness. In Asia, these positive portrayals, though designed to appeal to female fans who may prefer romanticized stories over realistic depictions of gay life, have in turn inspired gay male fans with models of self-expression and openness (Baudinette, 2023; Jerome et al., 2022).

For many Western fans, who may already identify as openly queer and come from societies they perceive as more advanced in terms of LGBTQ+ rights, Thai BL is not primarily a tool for self-discovery. Its appeal lies in emotionally rich and everyday presentations of queerness as normalized, that contrast with the often moralizing or traumatic narratives of Western queer media. This contrast encourages reflection. As viewers actively compare Thai BL with their local media, they recognize it not as inferior or derivative, but as offering alternative cultural logics and affective registers.

How, then, might we rethink “Asia as method” when its influence extends beyond Asia? As Chen (2010) and Chua (2015) propose, inter-referencing within Asia displaces the traditional vertical hierarchy between the West and the Rest by situating Asian societies in a coeval, horizontal dialogue. Extending this framework beyond Asia, Western viewers engage with Thai BL as a methodological reference point. While Thai BL may not directly reshape local queer discourses, it allows viewers to encounter alternative imaginaries of queerness that are emotionally resonant and culturally grounded. Western audiences may admire the aesthetics and depictions of queerness in Thai BL while still viewing their own social frameworks as comparatively more progressive. In this sense, “Thai queer method” operates at the level of representation, inviting audiences to reflect on how queer life and possibilities might be imagined beyond their own socio-cultural frameworks.

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