

Exploring Indonesian Female Viewers' Identity Projection in Thai BL Series

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Abstract

Thai boys' love (BL) series portray male-male romance relationship with females as their primary target audiences, though the series tend to avoid depicting women. In the series, both male characters known as *seme* (dominant) and *uke* (submissive) possess a mixture of masculine and feminine traits. Using their gaze, women have freedom to choose their gaze's position whether as *seme* or *uke*. This article explores how Indonesian women especially Thai boys' love series fans, perceive their gender identity when given the freedom to engage with Thai boys' love series. Through an investigation using qualitative survey, this article shows Thai BL series fans, especially Indonesian females tend to pick their gaze as *uke*, a male submissive character with more feminine features than the *seme* one, a male dominant character with more masculine trait. However, there are some fans who stand in *seme* position. Each preference is caused by two main factors: their own gender and how they behave in their love relationship.

Keywords: Thai boys' love; fans; gender identity; *seme*; *uke*

Abstrak

Serial boys' love (BL) Thailand menggambarkan hubungan romantis sesama pria dengan perempuan sebagai target utama penonton mereka, walaupun serial tersebut cenderung menghindari penggambaran wanita di dalamnya. Di dalam serial, karakter kedua pria yang disebut sebagai *seme* (dominan) dan *uke* (submisif) memiliki campuran sifat maskulin dan feminine. Dengan menggunakan pandangan mereka, Perempuan memiliki kebebasan untuk memilih posisi pandangannya, antara sebagai *seme* atau *uke*. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana Perempuan Indonesia, terutama penggemar serial BL Thailand, memahami identitas gender mereka Ketika diberikan kebebasan untuk menonton serial BL Thailand. Melalui sebuah investigasi menggunakan survey kualitatif, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa penggemar serial BL Thailand, terutama Perempuan Indonesia cenderung memilih pandangan mereka sebagai *uke*, karakter pria yang submisif dan memiliki lebih banyak ciri feminine dibanding *seme*, karakter pria dominan dengan lebih banyak ciri maskulin. Walaupun begitu, terdapat beberapa penggemar yang memilih posisi pandangan *seme*. Setiap pilihan disebabkan oleh dua faktor utama: gender penggemar sendiri dan bagaimana berperilaku dalam hubungan percintaan mereka di kehidupan nyata.

Kata Kunci: Boys' love Thailand; penggemar; identitas gender; *seme*; *uke*

INTRODUCTION

Boys' Love (abbreviated as BL) or *yaoi* is a term widely adopted since the mid-1990s, encompasses literary works, graphic novels, and associated categories like gaming, animations, and cinema, portraying romantic involvements between male characters. These creations often contain explicit sexual content and are commonly crafted by women to resonate with female spectators within the Japanese setting.

The romantic relationship in *yaoi* is usually compared to top-bottom roles in male homosexual partnership. In *yaoi* texts, top (or dominant) is called *seme* and bottom (or submissive) is called *uke* (Wood, 2006). The *seme/uke* trope is also linked to the roles of an attacker and a receiver in Japanese martial arts (Turner, 2018). Conventionally, the trope is represented in the media through physical attributes of the male couple. The *seme* tends to be older, taller, and more masculine (or less androgynous) than *uke*. In addition to physical differences, *seme*s are often portrayed engaging in activities that are normatively considered masculine, such as playing soccer, majoring in engineering, and being popular among women. On the other hand, *ukes*, with a physical appearance that tends to be shorter, fairer, and more beautiful, are shown engaging in more feminine activities, such as joining cheerleader communities, gossiping with their female friends, or often becoming the target of bullying by other groups of women.

The term “cultural odorless” mentioned by Iwabuchi Koichi is applicable to BL media. Iwabuchi argues that major audiovisual cultural commodities, such as manga, exported from Japan are culturally odorless in the sense that while these commodities may signify “Japaneseness,” this signification is not in itself particularly relevant to its transnational appeal. This odorlessness is enabled in part by the softening or erasure of more explicit visual references to the commodity’s country of origin (e.g. racial and bodily images) so that a particular culture is not imprinted onto the commodity (Akatsuka, 2008). This is what makes BL media easily adopted by other countries, one of which is Thailand.

Since the late 1990s, BL has become increasingly popular amongst young middle-class Thai women (Keenapan, 2001). It is thus unsurprising that media producers in Thailand began adapting the genre for the silver screen, as young women represent the typical consumers of Thai Television dramas or *lakhon* (Farmer, 2015). ‘Series Y’ (the ‘Y’ read as wai, abbreviated from Yaoi) or Thai BL series have become a significant feature of contemporary Thai popular culture (Baudinette, 2019). It hybridizes Thai understandings of sex and gender with explicitly Japanese models of reading same-sex attraction to create a ‘glocalized’ code that is becoming increasingly influential (Baudinette, 2019).

Indonesia has become one of the main markets for Thai BL media. In 2021, Thai government claimed that Thailand’s Y content market was worth more than 1 billion baht, with the key export markets including China, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Latin America, and Indonesia (Komsantortermvasana et al., 2022). Two years before the claim, Indonesian fans of Thai BL dramas are seen in Jakarta holding a gathering (Nugroho, 2020). Notably, Indonesian Twitter account base for Thai BL fans, @thaiifess had over 44K followers in 2020 (Nugroho, 2020) and rises significantly beyond 74.3K followers in 2023. Unfortunately, the account was sold and turned into a crypto account, but it has since been revived, with the number of followers decreasing to 10.9K (data recorded on 30 November 2024).

Through video streaming platforms like YouTube, since 2014, Thai entertainment media had already begun broadcasting their Thai series. However, the pandemic marked a turning point as people were forced to stay indoors to reduce the spread of the virus. People turned to the internet and ended up watching this unique media, which is the Thai BL series. Women who enjoy Thai BL series have built fan bases to discuss it online, using various social media platforms to share information about the series and its characters.

As in many other cultures around the world, being females have long been marginalized by the “mainstream” culture dominated by adult men. Desire and pleasure are absent too from academic discussions on women’s sexuality (Riyani, 2021). Indonesia is a country with a strong patriarchal system, so women are often seen as objects working in domestic spaces to support men. As it mentioned by Benneth (2005) that it is not easy for women to explore sexual desires and pleasure in Indonesia.

This research is built upon Nagakubo’s statement in her ground-breaking 2005 book, *A Theory of Yaoi Fiction* (Yaoi shōsetsu ron) that BL media offer a means to liberate from gender oppression (Yukari, 2015). With this statement in mind, I try to explore why Indonesian women choose their point of view when consume Thai BL series.

In previous research, Meyer (2008) emphasized Takemiya Keiko' claim (the author of *Kaze to ki no uta*, the first shojo manga which contained gay male sex) that the reader of BL media can adopt both roles and also express a dual personality (feminine and masculine). The meaning here is that people may, consciously or unconsciously, have two conflicting personalities in their minds. Boys play both gender roles to explore the relationship between love and sex. While love between a man and woman often highlights gender, boys' love allows a discussion beyond that limitation. In heterosexual relationships, talking about dual personalities is difficult because of real-world implications like childbirth (Masami, 2003).

The adoption of roles can be done by using "gaze". The gaze is one of the most influential concepts in the visual media studies. To gaze implies more than to look at—it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze (Schroeder, 2003).

Women are commonly sexually objectified in popular culture (Kee, 2008). As (Mulvey, 1975) introduced the concept of the "male gaze," in which the male viewer of cinema derives pleasure from looking at passive females. Meaning woman is "spectacle", and man is "the bearer of the look". However, when consuming Thai BL series, women escape from the gaze that sees them only as sex objects, and the gaze they return imbues homosocial male bonding with sexual implications. Zhang (2016) argues, such practice which positioning males as objects of female desire can be read as a form of female gaze—a kind of subversion of the male gaze.

BL media present us with a world where the boundaries of sexual orientation and gender are in flux and sometimes nonexistent (Meyer, 2008). In this context, this research aims to explore how Indonesian female fans of Thai boys' love series freely choosing their gaze's position, whether as *seme* or *uke*. In Indonesia, patriarchal norms pose a significant challenge that hampers the freedom of expression of women. They lack of liberation to express their sexuality openly. As Mohanty (2003) said, women are defined consistently as the victim of male control—as the "sexually oppressed".

Watching Thai BL series can be seen as a small step toward challenging the patriarchal system. BL is often considered to be a critical response to a patriarchal society (Welker, 2011), and an escapist genre rooted in dissatisfaction with traditional gender roles and related social expectations (Kamm, 2013a). In this sense, like Tan Bee Kee (2008) claimed about Japanese *yaoi* manga, I believe that also Thai BL series turns the tables for female fans who are tired of being sexually objectified and under male sexual scrutiny. By consuming the series, the audiences can adopt freely both roles (*seme and uke*) and also express a dual personality (feminine and masculine). The terms *seme* and *uke* will still be used in this study because no other terms have been considered more suitable for this case.

The purpose of the current study is mainly to explore the point of view of women fans of Thai BL series in Indonesia when consuming Thai BL series by gaining data mainly from qualitative survey. The aim is to analyze female fans consciousness using their females gaze when given the freedom to engage with Thai BL media.

METHOD

This research adopts constructivism as its paradigm to understand how Indonesian fans of Thai BL construct their reality regarding their chosen perspectives. Each individual has their own unique experiences that differ from one another; therefore, research using this paradigm suggests that how humans perceive reality is valid and should be respected from their point of view (Patton, 2002).

I conduct descriptive qualitative research and borrow some concepts from earlier research around Japan *yaoi* manga and anime, I try to put the concept and contextualize it with Thai BL series. Since its series have long history with *yaoi* manga and anime.

An online survey was conducted to collect qualitative data. Qualitative surveys offer one thing that is fairly unique within qualitative data collection methods – a 'wide-angle lens' on the topic of interest (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004) that provides the potential to capture a diversity of perspectives, experiences, or sense-making (Braun et al., 2017b). This diversity is about hearing a range of voices and sense-making, something especially useful when researching an un- or under-explored area. Also,

this wide scope is also useful when the population of interest is large, diverse, or indeed unknown. It is similar to Boys Love fans in Indonesia who stay discreet, concealing their identities with anonymous social media profiles.

Online qualitative survey research potentially 'gives voice' to people who might choose to abstain from face-to-face research due to the nature of the topic or 'might not otherwise be able to participate in qualitative research' (Davey et al., 2019, p. 12). The BL topics are considering taboo in Indonesia because it talks about the story of boys-boys love relationship.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Starting Point of Enjoying Thai BL

Indonesian female fans of Thai BL have diverse and personal reasons for how they first became interested in and started watching BL content. Understanding these varied motivations provides a deeper understanding into the cultural and emotional factors influencing media consumption, particularly in contexts where discussing certain topics like sexuality might be considered taboo.

The first reason, was fans were just curious and intrigued by the BL media genre. They watch out of curiosity about why it has gained popularity or controversy. They enjoy BL simply because it is "interesting" (Yukari, 2015). Beside that BL often sparks interest due to its novelty or distinct storytelling. For audiences unfamiliar with the genre, its unique themes, character dynamics, and cultural elements may stand out.

The second reason was because it has technical aspects such as plot, cinematography, the handsome yet androgynous visual appearance of the characters. BL series frequently include dramatic, romantic, and emotional narratives that captivate audiences. Fans may appreciate the variety of storylines, from lighthearted romances to complex, angst-filled tales. The emphasis on characters who exhibit a mix of masculine and feminine traits may resonate with audiences who appreciate unconventional beauty standards or find such portrayals aspirational and relatable.

The third one, was because the want to spent their free time. For some fans, BL is simply another form of escapism, akin to watching any other genre of film or television. It provides relaxation and enjoyment without necessitating a deeper emotional or intellectual engagement. Boys' love helps audience escape from real problems, illustrates fictional characters and settings that expand the imagination of fans, and helps audience forget about real life (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017).

Continuously, watching BL media is seen as something challenging and enjoyable. BL media often navigates themes that deviate from heteronormative conventions, which might feel fresh or exciting for viewers. Watching BL could challenge preconceived notions about gender roles, relationships, and representation. The genre might appeal to viewers who enjoy narratives that defy societal expectations or venture into less mainstream topics.

A tiny part of them mentions that BL series represent them as part of the LGBTIQ+ community. For some fans, BL offers rare visibility of LGBTQ+ relationships, even if the portrayals are idealized or fictionalized. This representation can create a sense of belonging or validation for their identities.

Even though some participants have their own perspectives, they do not always feel that watching BL brings about significant changes or involves deep thoughts. Out of 270 participants, 22 were unaware that BL character pairs possess both masculine and feminine traits. Meanwhile, 248 participants recognized the presence of masculine and feminine characteristics in Thai BL series couples. When they become aware of this, they tend to choose their point of view as viewers accordingly. As Julia Lesage (2022) states that there are different viewing experiences that spectators can experience when watching a film.

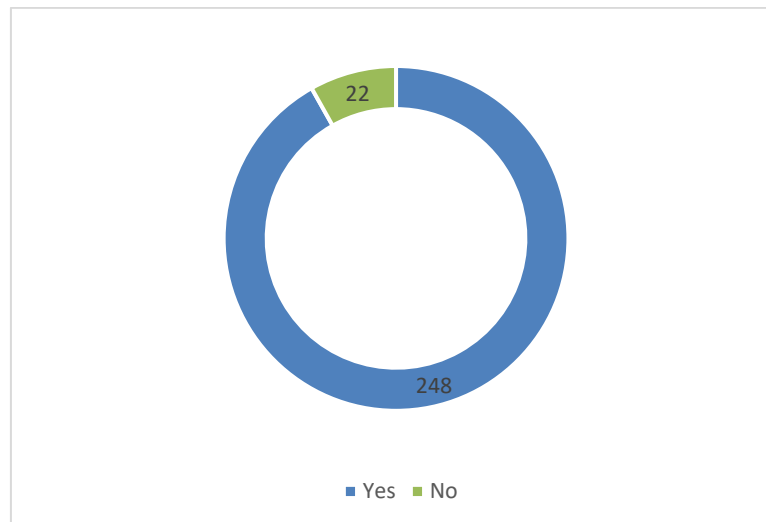


Figure 1. Participants recognize feminine and masculine characteristics in the BL characters
(Source: research result, 2024)

Woman as bearer of the look in Thai BL Series

The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures, one is scopophilia (Mulvey, 1975). Freud define it as the measure involved in looking at other people's bodies as particularly erotic objects. It built a solid psychoanalytic background to support Laura Mulvey's viewpoints about the male gaze in modern films. She suggests that the conditions of cinema viewing support both the voyeuristic act of objectifying female characters and the narcissistic act of identifying with an idealized self-portrayed on the screen.

By watching Thai BL series, Indonesian women reverse their roles from being initially seen as objects by men to becoming subjects to men. Women escape from the gaze that sees them only as sex objects, and the gaze they return imbues homosocial male bonding with sexual implications (Blair, 2008). In positioning males as objects of female desire, as Zhang (Zhang, 2016) argues, such practices can be read as one form of "female gaze"—a kind of subversion of the male gaze articulated in Laura Mulvey's classic essay—in which women become the agents of spectatorship, redirecting the objectifying gaze toward male protagonists.

The male characters do not conform to traditional masculine stereotypes; instead, they exhibit feminized characteristics. In BL, men are feminized not just in their physical attributes, often appearing androgynous, but also in their emotional responses, being depicted as more emotionally expressive than the usual standards (Blair, 2008), especially the uke characters, while the seme characters are depicted as the ideal men for women.

The element of pure escapism or detachment from reality was evident in the responses, emphasizing that BL enables readers to break away from actual issues, introduces fictional characters and settings that stimulate fans' creativity, and assists readers in putting aside their real-life matters (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017).

In Indonesia, women should be chaste and repress erotic thoughts. Boys' love allows them to develop sexual fantasies and to express their desires in the form of creative works and social activities (Galbraith, 2011). They have the opportunity to engage in sexual encounters through the secure realm of fantasy without experiencing any actual consequence and in an enclosed, predominantly female community where individuals can freely express their erotic thoughts without constraint (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017). Since the sexual interaction takes place between two men, and thus erotic thoughts are projected onto male characters, female fans can dissociate themselves from their female desires that cause tension, given that it contravenes socially constructed gender expectations (Fujimoto, 2007).

In an all-male world in which no biological sexual difference exists, creators of *yaoi* and BL make couplings by freely combining all sorts of gender factors and power dynamics as they like. Readers, can explore and find the pairings that align with their personal preferences from the multitude of options presented. For both readers and creators, this represents the enjoyment derived from yaoi and BL: a thoroughly gender-blended world (Yukari, 2015).

BL media has established a nurturing environment for women to freely express their fantasies (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017). As Fujimoto Yukari states, “women are freed from the position of being unilaterally violated, and gain the perspective of the violator, of the one who watches. *Yaoi* fans enjoy the subversive thrill of watching males in a vulnerable, submissive position, not only sexually but emotionally. Meanwhile, BL fandom is constructive for female empowerment, by building up and strengthening aesthetic and narrative alterity through women’s “subversive, voyeuristic gaze upon men” (Zhang, 2016).

Although Indonesian women are considered to have gained independence by consuming Thai BL series, Zhou, Paul, & Serman (2017) claimed that earlier research revealed that portrayals of gay characters and gay male romantic relationships still adhered to a heteronormative framework. In this heteronormative ideology, genders conform to heterosexual norms, and human personalities are categorized as either masculine or feminine. A total of 270 female fans of Thai BL series in Indonesia who participated in the survey admitted to choosing their point of view as *seme* or *uke* for various reasons related to internal factors within themselves and external factors present in the Thai BL series they watched.

Choosing the Uke’s gaze: I think we have the same struggles

BL media are created to satisfy women audience. Even though women fans in Indonesia still consume it in covert manner, Thai BL series have their own massifs fans. Through social media X (formerly Twitter), female fans who consume Thai BL series discuss the currently airing series or the central character couples in those series.

Aside for entertainment purpose, fans think watching Thai BL series make them happy and at some point, it “heals” them. Though, fans believe that BL media have their own uniqueness which make it different from other media, Blair (2008) mentions that many BL stories can be read as mimicking heterosexual romance narratives, wherein the heterosexual fantasies of women are, in BL, simply projected onto two male bodies.

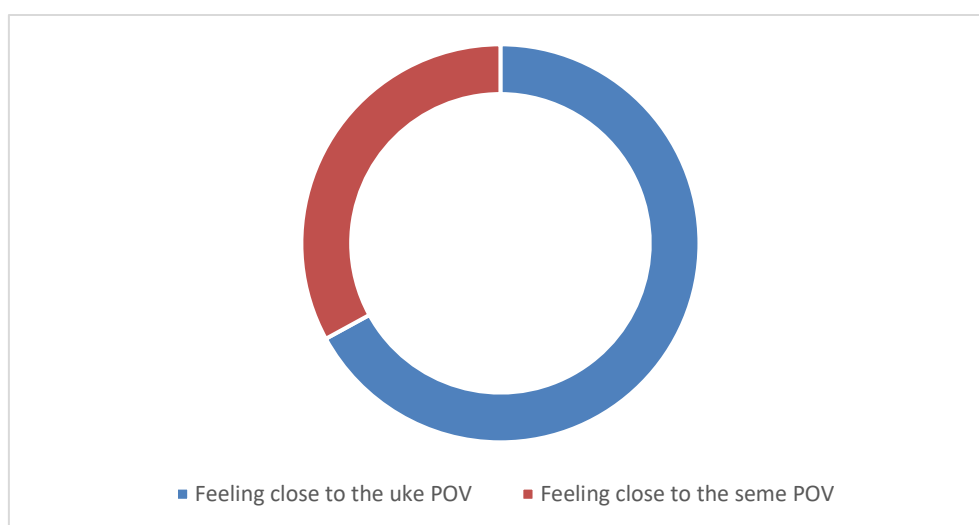


Figure 2. Indonesian Thai BL Fans' Point of View When Watching BL Series
(Source: research result, 2024)

In these studies, the majority of fans (181 female participants) wrote that they feel closer to the *uke* position. The reasons they expressed are somewhat similar. They assess emotional closeness and the feminine traits displayed by the *uke*, which tend to lead female fans in Indonesia to choose their point of view as *uke*. They see what the *uke* experiences and feels as something they also experience as women.

"Because I think we have the same struggles" @pawznnon

"Because their conditions are more or less the same as mine" @gewintang

"Their way of thinking is the same as mine" @Cherilynceri

"Most of my biases in each couple are figures that are more feminine, so I tend to pay more attention to them. The second reason might be a bit less accurate, but it seems that it could also be because I'm a woman, so the emotional connection is more 'relatable' to the feminine side, or it's more because I just like the cute ones, hehe :p" @997noir

They consider the *uke* character as a representation of themselves, someone who is often powerless, with emotions and feminine traits that are similar to women. They can see themselves in the *uke* character, so when consuming Thai BL series, they can understand the storyline from the *uke*'s perspective. Whatever the *uke* character experiences in a relationship or within a specific societal context is also experienced by female fans in Indonesia.

When consuming Thai BL series, female fans perceive the *uke* as a woman. Although it is clear that the *uke* is also a man, the traits exhibited by the *uke* make them consider the *uke* as essentially a woman. It makes fans can relate more to the story from the *uke*'s perspective.

"Honestly, I don't know either, maybe it's because I perceive a more feminine figure as a woman? This is still an assumption, for example, if I see a feminine figure with someone other than my CP, I'm fine. But conversely, if I see a masculine figure with someone other than my CP, I feel uncomfortable." @Rindiani9700JK

"It's because I see a feminine figure that sometimes really looks like a woman"
@IstriOhmPaw

Some fans mentioned that they tend to choose the position of the *uke* because they desire to be treated as the same treats the *uke*. They feel envious of the *uke* character because in the romantic relationships depicted in the story, the *uke* receives certain treatment from the *seme* that is considered kind and sweet by these female fans. They also desire to feel what the *uke* feels and to receive what the *uke* gets from the *seme*. While adult men are generally seen as being more restrained about demonstrating their emotions, many of the men found in BL are relatively open about their emotions. Even when they are trying to hide. Men in BL could be seen, therefore, as the idealized men that readers wish they could find in real life (Blair, 2008).

"Because I am a female, which makes the role of malesub more relatable to my feelings as a woman. Moreover, the affection of maledom (which is masculine) towards malesub makes me feel the euphoria of malesub (feelings of excitement, infatuation, and sexual attraction to maledom)" @Nananacimol

"I often idealize masculine figures in every BL series, and sometimes I imagine myself being in a feminine role 🥺" @tep

"Because I am a woman, I might enjoy seeing more masculine behavior if it happened to me as well" @ riejoonie

"Because I always imagine becoming the feminine figure" @drea

The majority of choices made by Indonesian fans align with Kamm (2013b) claim which most female fans prefer the uke over the *seme*, which can be attributed to the similarity with the gender role of women, allowing female fans to identify themselves with the male "uke" character.

Choosing the Seme's gaze: I prefer to dominate others

Seme defines as the character who have masculine trait. He has dominance aura and show man temper. A total of 89 female participants from Indonesia chose their gaze as a more masculine character or seme.

"Because in my opinion, I tend to be someone who prefers to dominate. Furthermore, I also prefer someone who is cute rather than masculine." @geminidupe

"I tend to be dominant in relationships." @onwuonwoo

"Sometimes I've encountered a way of thinking from masculine characters that resonates deeply with me." @euphorrae

"Because I tend to think or act from a masculine point of view." @accsyi

"Because I tend to be more interested in characters with "feminine traits." @sen

They responded fairly uniformly that they are dominant figures and have a desire to protect others. Some stated that they were brought up in a tough manner and were not treated as "women" when they were children. Some fans who choose a masculine point of view when watching Thai BL series admitted that they have become more open and appreciative of the LGBTIQ+ community. Some others chose not to answer as they felt no significant change.

Call me Thai Enthui!

In Thailand, fans of boys' love series are called sao-wai, means y girl. Y is an abbreviation from Yaoi. It is a genre of "boys love" in Japan term. Out of the 270 participants who answered, 200 thought Thai Enthui was the right term to call women fans of Thai BL series in Indonesia. Meanwhile 58 choose Fujoshi, only 1 people think that Sao-wai was the right choice. Eleven people choose their own term.

In Japan, yaoi fans are referred to as yaoi chan (Galbraith, 2011) or by a more pejorative term—fujōshi which literally means "rotten girls." The term "fujōshi" is widely used as the female equivalent of the male otaku (obsessive fan or nerd). The yaoi fans in the Japanese context prefer referring to themselves as fujōshi as a way to reclaim their collective identity (McLelland & Welker, 2015), while the term sao-y is loosely employed among Thai yaoi fans to assert sense of community. However, unlike fujōshi in Japanese, the term sao-y does not convey an offensive denotation (Prasannam, 2019).

In Indonesia, the majority of the respondent prefer called by Thai Enthui or Thailand enthusiast. If Japan and Thailand term was more gendered, "Thai Enthui" has neutral odor. It doesn't indicate the root from Yaoi or Y culture and there is no offensive implication associated with it. Compared to Japan or Thailand, which have more fluid gender constructs, Indonesia, as a third-world country, has a more rigid approach to gender.

Instead of Thai-enthu, at first some fans want to be called them self as Raikan lovers. Meanwhile, "Raikan" is the initial word of the video clip played at the beginning of each Thai series, containing information about the recommended audience age for watching the series. So, some debated because "Raikan topeini (รายการต่อไป)" means "the following program" and does not make sense to be addressed as a fandom name. There is no consensus yet regarding the designation for fans of Thai BL series in Indonesia. However, if we refer to the survey results, the majority believed that they should be called "Thai-enthu."

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of Thai BL series in Indonesia is quite significant, especially considering that Indonesian women often have fears about discussing their sexuality. This research supports

Nagakubo's claim that BL media offer a means of liberation from gender oppression. Indonesian female fans can choose their point of view, facilitated through the female gaze. They can choose to be the *uke* or *seme* characters for various reasons, related to internal factors within themselves and external factors present in the Thai BL series they watch.

This research serves as an entry point to understanding how female fans truly engage with Thai BL series; therefore, further studies are needed. For the future research, expanding a deeper understanding of how media consumption acts as a catalyst for cultural and personal shifts in gender and sexuality perceptions in a patriarchal society like Indonesia is needed.

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