



## THAI BOYS' LOVE: QUEER REPRESENTATION AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THAILAND'S SOFT POWER STRATEGY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

<sup>1</sup>Roy Setiawan, <sup>2</sup>Ansgrasia Jenifer Nyarimun, <sup>3</sup>Naslika Amalia

<sup>1</sup>Department of International Relations, Universitas Sriwijaya

<sup>2,3</sup> Department of International Relations, Universitas Satya Negara Indonesia

\*Corresponding Email: [roysetiawan@fisip.unsri.ac.id](mailto:roysetiawan@fisip.unsri.ac.id)

Submission: June 30, 2025 | Revised: October 9, 2025 | Accepted: October 13, 2025

### ABSTRAK

*Genre Thai Boys' Love telah menjadi medium diplomasi budaya yang efektif dalam membentuk citra Thailand sebagai negara progresif dan inklusif di Asia Tenggara. Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana representasi queer dalam Thai Boys' Love digunakan sebagai alat soft power dalam hubungan internasional. Dengan menggabungkan teori queer, studi media, dan diplomasi publik, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi hubungan antara narasi media populer, penerimaan regional, dan kebijakan budaya. Analisis dilakukan terhadap tiga serial Thai Boys' Love populer yaitu Love Sick, 2gether, dan KinnPorsche serta survei daring terhadap penonton di Indonesia dan Filipina. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa representasi queer dalam Thai Boys' Love cenderung normatif dan estetis, menampilkan karakter cisgender dari kelas menengah urban dengan konflik personal. Strategi distribusi digital dan keterlibatan komunitas penggemar regional memperkuat daya jangkauan Thai Boys' Love sebagai produk budaya transnasional. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Thai Boys' Love berfungsi sebagai instrumen diplomasi budaya yang membentuk afiliasi emosional dan persepsi positif terhadap Thailand di mata publik regional.*

*Kata Kunci: Diplomasi Budaya, Thai Boys' Love, Representasi Queer, Soft Power, Asia Tenggara*

### ABSTRACT

Thai Boys' Love has emerged as a powerful medium of cultural diplomacy, shaping Thailand's image as a progressive and inclusive nation in Southeast Asia. This study examines how queer representation in Thai Boys' Love is deployed as a tool of soft power in international relations. Using queer theory, media studies, and public diplomacy, the research explores the intersection of popular media narratives, regional reception, and cultural policy. The analysis focuses on three popular Thai Boys' Love series: Love Sick, 2gether, and KinnPorsche, alongside an online survey of viewers in Indonesia and the Philippines. Findings reveal that queer representation in Thai Boys' Love tends to be normative and aestheticized, featuring cisgender characters from urban middle-class backgrounds with personal conflicts. Digital distribution strategies and active regional fan communities have amplified the transnational reach of Thai Boys' Love as a cultural product. This study concludes that Thai Boys' Love functions as a form of cultural diplomacy, fostering emotional affiliation and positive perceptions of Thailand among regional audiences.

**Keywords:** Cultural Diplomacy, Thai Boys' Love, Queer Representation, Soft Power, Southeast Asia

---

## BACKGROUND

Over the past two decades, cultural diplomacy has undergone a significant paradigm shift, particularly with the growing role of popular media as an instrument of soft power in shaping national images and influencing public opinion across borders. Asian countries, including Thailand, have increasingly utilized contemporary cultural products as strategic tools to expand their regional influence. One of the most prominent phenomena in this context is the transnational expansion of the Thai *Boys' Love* (BL) genre, which has emerged not only as a form of entertainment commodity but also as a potential vehicle for cultural diplomacy. Thai BL series such as *2gether: The Series*, *TharnType*, and *KinnPorsche* have gained widespread popularity across Southeast Asia, particularly in countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. This popularity not only reflects the success of Thailand's entertainment industry but also provides the country with an opportunity to project a progressive and inclusive image through queer representation.

The primary focus of this study is to address the question: "*How is queer representation in Thai BL utilized as a strategy of cultural diplomacy by Thailand within the Southeast Asian region?*" This question not only directs the analysis toward the narrative construction within popular media but also opens space to examine how the state employs queer aesthetics as a soft power instrument in shaping a progressive and inclusive national image. Taking into account the diverse socio-political contexts of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, this inquiry becomes crucial for understanding the effectiveness of Thailand's cultural diplomacy in reaching regional audiences, as well as for identifying the extent to which queer representation in Thai BL transcends the realm of entertainment and functions as a strategic instrument in international relations. Furthermore, this research seeks to explore the tensions between the image projected through media and the domestic policy realities toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities,

---

thereby producing a more critical and reflective analysis of contemporary practices of cultural diplomacy.

Cultural diplomacy, as articulated by Nye (2004), constitutes a component of soft power strategies that enables states to influence other actors through cultural appeal, values, and policies rather than coercion or economic incentives. Within this framework, Thai BL emerges as a complex and multifunctional medium: it offers romantic narratives that transcend heteronormative boundaries while simultaneously serving as a symbol of Thailand's cultural openness toward issues of gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, the deployment of BL as an instrument of cultural diplomacy also presents a paradox between media representation and the domestic realities of LGBT policies, which continue to face various structural and social challenges (Jackson, 2011; Chao et al., 2024).

The interdisciplinary approach adopted in this study integrates theories of international relations, media studies, and queer theory to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of representation and cultural diplomacy. Queer theory is employed to analyze how sexual identities are constructed and negotiated within Thai BL narratives, while soft power and cultural diplomacy theories are utilized to examine how such representations are strategically mobilized by the state to shape national image and regional influence. This approach enables a deeper analysis of the complex relationship between popular media and foreign policy, particularly in the context of non-Western states that employ popular culture as a diplomatic instrument.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative approach through content analysis of several Thai BL series that have gained popularity within the ASEAN region. The selection of series is based on their level of popularity, regional distribution, and the prominence of queer representation. Although the limitations in primary data present certain challenges, this research seeks to integrate valid secondary sources, including audience statistics, media reviews, and relevant

---

academic studies. To strengthen the analysis, the study also takes into account the socio-political dynamics of ASEAN countries, including LGBT policies, the reception of foreign popular culture, and each state's cultural diplomacy strategies.

In the ASEAN context, the use of Thai BL as a soft power strategy is particularly compelling given the region's cultural, political, and policy diversity regarding issues of gender and sexuality. In Indonesia, for instance, the reception of Thai BL reflects an ambivalence between high levels of media consumption and social resistance to queer representation (Hidayat, 2024). In the Philippines, by contrast, Thai BL has been received more openly, in line with local popular culture that also accommodates queer narratives. These differences indicate that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy through Thai BL depends not only on the quality of the media products but also on the socio-political contexts of the recipient countries.

Moreover, Thailand faces challenges in maintaining consistency between the image projected through BL and the domestic policy realities concerning the LGBT community. Although Thailand is often regarded as a country relatively open to gender diversity, legal frameworks and protections for LGBT individuals remain limited. This creates a gap between media representation and social reality, which may influence public perceptions and the overall effectiveness of soft power strategies (UNDP, 2019).

To strengthen its theoretical contribution, this study proposes an analytical framework that integrates three key dimensions: queer representation in popular media, regional reception of Thai cultural products, and the diplomatic impact of soft power strategies through BL. This framework enables a more systematic analysis of the interconnections between media, identity, and foreign policy, while also opening space for comparative studies with the cultural diplomacy strategies of other ASEAN countries. For instance, South Korea has effectively employed K-pop and K-drama as instruments of cultural diplomacy, whereas Japan has utilized *anime* and *otaku* culture to construct a distinctive national image (Otmazgin, 2013; Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008).

---

By developing this analytical framework, the study not only contributes to the scholarship on international relations and cultural diplomacy but also expands the application of queer theory in the analysis of foreign policy. This approach is crucial for understanding how non-Western states employ popular culture as a tool to shape regional influence, as well as how sexual and gender identities become integral components of broader diplomatic strategies.

The novelty of this research lies in several key aspects. *First*, its regional focus on Southeast Asia offers a perspective distinct from the dominance of Western-centered studies on cultural diplomacy. By positioning Thailand as an active non-Western cultural actor, the study broadens the scope of soft power analysis within the Global South context. *Second*, the integration of queer theory into the study of international relations provides an innovative and critical approach to examining the dynamics of identity and power in cultural diplomacy. *Third*, the use of Thai BL as a strategic case study demonstrates how popular media products can be consciously mobilized by the state to construct a national image and expand cultural influence. *Fourth*, the development of an interdisciplinary analytical framework that combines queer representation, regional reception, and diplomatic impact enables a more systematic and applicable analysis. *Finally*, the contribution to media studies and public policy opens avenues for the formulation of cultural diplomacy policies that are more inclusive and grounded in social realities.

Thus, this study not only provides an empirical contribution to the understanding of Thailand's cultural diplomacy through Thai BL but also offers a theoretical and methodological framework that can be applied to analyze the soft power strategies of other countries in the Southeast Asian region. This approach is expected to enrich the academic literature on international relations, media studies, and queer theory, while also laying the groundwork for the development of cultural diplomacy policies that are more responsive to the dynamics of identity and representation in the digital era.

---

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In addressing the research question of how Thai BL dramas are employed as instruments of public diplomacy to construct Thailand's image as an LGBT-friendly nation, the author adopts several complementary theoretical frameworks and conceptual approaches. This literature review encompasses theories of public diplomacy and soft power, the concept of media representation and gender identity, as well as interdisciplinary approaches within the study of Southeast Asian popular culture.

### Public Diplomacy and Soft Power Theory

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye (2004), serves as a foundational framework for understanding how states influence global perceptions through cultural appeals, values, and favorable policies. Nye emphasizes that soft power is non-coercive, operating instead through persuasion and symbolic attraction. In the context of Thailand, the Thai BL genre represents one form of soft power employed to construct the image of a progressive and inclusive nation concerning gender and sexual diversity.

Melissen (2005) expands this concept through the notion of new public diplomacy, which emphasizes the importance of direct engagement with foreign publics through media, culture, and two-way communication. Public diplomacy is no longer confined to the domain of governments but also involves non-state actors such as the entertainment industry, celebrities, and online communities. In this regard, Thai BL series such as *2gether* and *KinnPorsche* serve as effective media for conveying Thailand's national narratives to international audiences, particularly within Southeast Asia.

---

## Media Representation and Gender Identity

To analyze the content and meaning of Thai BL dramas, media representation theory is employed, highlighting how gender and sexual identities are constructed within popular cultural texts. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that representation is not merely a reflection of reality but an active process in shaping social meaning. In the context of Thai BL, the representation of same-sex couples is often framed within idealized romantic narratives, which can reinforce positive imagery but also risk oversimplifying the complexities of LGBT identities.

The concept of queer visibility is also relevant in this context. According to Gross (2001), the presence of LGBT characters in mainstream media can serve as an important tool for normalization and social recognition, yet it may also become trapped within stereotypes or commodification. In Thai BL, male couples are often portrayed as *bishōnen*—young men who are androgynous and visually appealing—reflecting market-driven aesthetics more than the lived realities of queer communities (Lizada, 2024).

## Queer Theory and the Politics of Representation

The queer theory approach is employed to critique heteronormative norms and to explore how sexual identities are negotiated within cultural and political contexts. Judith Butler (1990), through the concept of gender performativity, emphasizes that gender is not an essential attribute but is constituted through repeated acts and representations. In Thai BL, gender performativity is frequently articulated through the *seme-uke* (dominant–submissive) dynamics, which originate from the Japanese *yaoi* tradition but are adapted within the local Thai context.

Peter Jackson (2011), in his work *Queer Bangkok*, demonstrates that although Thailand projects an image of being tolerant toward LGBT communities, in reality, there remains considerable ambiguity in both social and legal acceptance. Queer representation in the media is often more readily embraced as a form of entertainment

---

rather than as recognition of civil rights. This creates a tension between the inclusive image promoted globally and the still-conservative domestic realities.

### **Popular Culture and Cultural Diplomacy in Southeast Asia**

In the Southeast Asian context, popular culture has become an important instrument in shaping cross-national relations. Lizada (2022) highlights how Thai BL series constitute part of transnational cultural circulation that not only delivers entertainment value but also carries political and diplomatic significance. The adaptation and reception of Thai BL in countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines demonstrate that media can serve as an effective bridge for cultural diplomacy, although it also encounters resistance from local norms. An interdisciplinary approach that integrates international relations, media studies, and queer theory is therefore essential to grasp this complexity. By combining discourse analysis, cultural semiotics, and audience studies, this research seeks to reveal how Thai BL not only represents queer identities but also functions as a strategic tool in shaping Thailand's national image in the eyes of regional publics.

This study offers novelty by focusing on the specific role of Thai BL dramas as a medium of public diplomacy—a topic that has rarely been explored in depth within international relations and media studies in the Southeast Asian context. Rather than merely addressing the concept of soft power in general terms, the research traces how queer representation in BL dramas is strategically employed to construct Thailand's national image as an inclusive, progressive, and LGBT-friendly country—an approach that is increasingly relevant in the context of non-Western states. By integrating popular culture studies, international relations, and queer theory within an interdisciplinary framework that is sensitive to local and regional contexts, this study opens new analytical space for understanding how states shape identity diplomacy through entertainment media.



---

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with an exploratory design to examine how queer representation in Thai BL is utilized as a strategy of cultural diplomacy by Thailand within the Southeast Asian region. This approach is chosen because it enables an in-depth analysis of the narrative, symbolic, and ideological constructions in popular media, as well as how these elements interact with the regional socio-political context. In contemporary studies of cultural diplomacy, qualitative methods provide the space to capture the nuances of representation and public perception that cannot be fully explained through quantitative measures alone (Otmazgin, 2013).

The primary objects of this study are the Thai BL series with significant regional distribution and explicit queer representation. Three series analyzed in depth are *2gether: The Series* (2020), *TharnType* (2019), and *KinnPorsche* (2022). The selection of these series is based on systematically established criteria, namely their popularity on regional streaming platforms such as LINE TV, iQIYI, and YouTube; thematic relevance to queer issues and cultural diplomacy; and audience responses in ASEAN countries as traced through media reviews, online forums, and viewership data. These series not only present romantic narratives between male characters but also embed cultural symbols and social values that can be associated with Thailand's national image.

The data collection techniques were conducted through two primary channels, namely secondary data and limited primary data. Secondary data included academic journal articles, policy reports, media reviews, and audience statistics from digital platforms. These sources were utilized to understand the context of distribution and regional reception of Thai BL, as well as to construct the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis. In response to reviewer feedback regarding the limitations of primary data, this study also integrates limited primary data in the form of an online survey of BL viewers in Indonesia and the Philippines (n=50), along with an analysis

---

of public comments on social media and discussion forums such as Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube. Although not statistically representative, these data provide insights into audience perceptions of queer representation and Thailand's national image, as well as how BL narratives are received and interpreted within local contexts.

To analyze the content of the Thai BL series, this study employs a systematic content analysis protocol with thematic and semiotic approaches. The analysis was conducted gradually and iteratively, beginning with the identification of queer representational elements in characterizations, relationship narratives, visual symbols, and dialogues. Subsequently, the narratives of cultural diplomacy were examined through the construction of Thailand's image as reflected in the aesthetics, values, and social representations within the BL series. The third dimension of the content analysis concerns regional reception, which was traced through public reactions in ASEAN countries, including comments, reviews, and viewership statistics. Each episode was analyzed using a thematic matrix encompassing dimensions of representation, social context, and diplomatic potential, thereby producing a comprehensive narrative mapping.

As part of methodological strengthening and in response to reviewer recommendations, this study also conducts a comparative analysis of the cultural diplomacy strategies of other ASEAN countries, particularly South Korea and Japan. Although not the primary focus, this comparison is employed to assess the effectiveness of Thai BL as a soft power instrument in contrast to K-pop, K-drama, and *anime*. The works of Otmazgin (2013) and Chua & Iwabuchi (2008) serve as key references in understanding how East Asian countries have utilized popular culture as a structured and deliberate instrument of cultural diplomacy. This comparative analysis provides a broader context for situating Thailand within the regional landscape of cultural diplomacy, while also opening space to evaluate the uniqueness and challenges of a queer representation-based approach.

---

To ensure the validity and credibility of the analysis, triangulation was conducted across media data, academic literature, and online public responses. This triangulation enables cross-verification of findings obtained from multiple sources and strengthens the arguments developed in the discussion. Nevertheless, the study also acknowledges existing methodological limitations, particularly concerning broader access to primary data, such as interviews with content creators or Thai cultural policy officials. These limitations were addressed by expanding the scope of secondary data and systematically reinforcing content analysis, as well as by formulating a critical reflection on the implications of such limitations for the interpretation of the research findings.

Overall, the methodology employed in this study is designed to capture the complexity of the interrelations between popular media, queer representation, and cultural diplomacy within the Southeast Asian context. By combining content analysis, a limited survey, and a comparative approach, this research seeks to provide both empirical and theoretical contributions to the study of international relations, media, and gender, as well as to address the research questions comprehensively and reflectively.

## DISCUSSION

### Thai BL as a Transnational Popular Cultural Product

Over the past decade, the Thai BL genre has undergone a significant transformation from a fan-based subculture into a well-established popular culture industry with substantial regional influence. Rooted in the Japanese *yaoi* tradition, Thai BL has experienced a complex process of localization, in which narrative elements, aesthetics, and characterizations are adapted to Thai cultural values and domestic market preferences. The series *Love Sick* (2014) marked a critical turning point, signaling the transition from amateur productions to a professional industry

---

supported by major production houses such as GMMTV and *Be On Cloud* (Baudinette, 2023).

Thai BL has developed not only as an entertainment genre but also as a medium of identity expression and cultural diplomacy. The growth of this genre has been strongly shaped by the active engagement of fan communities, particularly young women, who construct a participatory ecosystem through fan art, fan fiction, fan meetings, and digital interactions. Distribution platforms such as YouTube, LINE TV, and iQIYI enable Thai BL series to reach cross-national audiences, positioning them as transnational cultural products that transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries (Khang & Toaditthep, 2025).

In the Southeast Asian context, Thai BL has gained extraordinary popularity, particularly in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam. In the Philippines, the reception of queer content is relatively more open, even inspiring local productions such as *Gameboys* and *Hello Stranger*, which adopt the aesthetics and narratives of Thai BL. In Indonesia, despite facing social resistance and broadcasting regulations, online communities remain active in accessing and discussing Thai BL series through social media and fan forums. In Vietnam, fans voluntarily translate and disseminate Thai BL content, reflecting the existence of horizontal, affective-based cultural networks (Khang & Toaditthep, 2025).

The popularity of Thai BL as a transnational cultural product is also shaped by commercial strategies that emphasize visual aesthetics, romantic narratives, and idealized characters. These series not only provide entertainment but also contribute to shaping perceptions of Thailand as a country open to gender and sexual diversity. However, this success also presents challenges, particularly regarding the authenticity of queer representation and the diversity of identities portrayed. Dominant representations tend to feature cisgender male characters from the urban middle class, with conflicts framed at the personal level rather than addressing structural issues such as discrimination or marginalization (Jackson, 2011).

To strengthen this analysis, a content study was conducted on three Thai BL series that have had significant transnational impact: *Love Sick*, *2gether*, and *KinnPorsche*. The selection of these series was based on regional popularity, cross-border distribution, and international audience engagement. The analysis was carried out using a qualitative approach focusing on narrative elements, characters, themes, and distribution strategies. The results of the analysis are summarized in the following table.

**Table 1.**  
**Characteristics of Popular Thai BL Series and Their Transnational Distribution**

| Series Title       | Year | Production House | Distribution Platform | Main Theme            | Target Audience            | Primary Receiving Countries  |
|--------------------|------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Love Sick</i>   | 2014 | GMMTV            | LINE TV, YouTube      | Coming-of-age, school | Teenagers and Young Adults | Thailand, Philippines        |
| <i>2gether</i>     | 2020 | GMMTV            | YouTube, iQIYI        | Campus Romance        | Teenagers and BL Fans      | Indonesia, Vietnam           |
| <i>KinnPorsche</i> | 2022 | Be On Cloud      | iQIYI, YouTube        | Mafia, Queer Romance  | Youth Adults               | Japan, Philippines, Malaysia |

Sources: Baudinette (2023); Khang & Toaditthep (2025)

Distribution strategies that rely on digital platforms enable Thai BL to reach wider audiences without geographical constraints. YouTube and iQIYI, for instance, provide free or paid access with multilingual subtitles, thereby enhancing the appeal of these series in non-Thai countries. In addition, international fan meetings held in Manila, Tokyo, and Jakarta demonstrate the existence of direct and emotional cultural interactions between BL actors and regional fans. This phenomenon reinforces affective-based public diplomacy, wherein transnational relations are shaped through the consumption of popular culture (Nye, 2004).

To empirically support this analysis, the study also integrates primary data in the form of an online survey of Thai BL viewers in Indonesia and the Philippines

(n=50). The survey was conducted in July 2025 through fan communities on Twitter and Reddit. The findings indicate that Thai BL is consumed not merely as entertainment but also as a medium that shapes cultural perceptions and fosters emotional affiliations with Thailand.

**Table 2.**  
**Summary of the Survey of Thai BL Viewers in Indonesia and the Philippines**

| Aspect                        | Indonesia                               | Philippines                               | Description                                                |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Frequency of watching Thai BL | 82% watch regularly                     | 88% watch regularly                       | The majority watch more than three Thai BL titles per year |
| Main platform                 | YouTube, Netflix                        | iQIYI, YouTube                            | Digital distribution facilitates cross-border access       |
| Main reasons for watching     | Emotional storylines, Attractive actors | Queer representation, Visual aesthetics   | Differences in audience Motivations exist                  |
| Perceptions of Thailand       | 68% report a positive image             | 75% express interest in visiting Thailand | Thai BL functions as cultural diplomacy                    |
| Community engagement          | 54% are active in local fandoms         | 62% are active in online communities      | Online communities strengthen transnational affective ties |

Sources: Internal online survey (July 2025); Lacap (2023); Khang & Toaditthep (2025)

These findings reinforce the argument that Thai BL operates as a form of Thailand’s soft power. The complex representation of queer characters, emotionally driven narratives, and distinctive visual aesthetics generate cross-cultural appeal. In the Philippines, for instance, 75 percent of respondents indicated that they were interested in visiting Thailand due to the inclusive image portrayed in the BL series. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, despite a more conservative social context, 68 percent of respondents still expressed a positive perception of Thailand as a country producing BL content. Audience engagement within online communities also demonstrates that Thai BL is not merely consumed passively but has become part of active cultural practices. Thai BL fandoms in both countries create spaces of affect, discussion, and even advocacy for more inclusive queer representation. Thus, Thai BL functions not

---

only as a product of popular culture but also as a transnational medium that shapes collective imaginaries of gender, identity, and Southeast Asian culture.

As a product of popular culture, Thai BL not only reflects the dynamics of the entertainment industry but also constitutes part of Thailand's cultural diplomacy strategy. The Thai government actively capitalizes on the inclusive image constructed by BL in its tourism campaigns and international promotion. The *Go Thai Be Free* campaign, for instance, specifically targets LGBT tourists by projecting Thailand as a welcoming and open country. In this context, Thai BL functions as a soft power instrument that shapes national image through media and popular culture (Nye, 2004).

Thus, as a transnational cultural product, Thai BL plays a significant role in shaping cross-cultural relations, strengthening Thailand's image in the global arena, and opening spaces of visibility for queer identities. However, this success must be balanced with a commitment to diverse representation and social justice, so that the cultural diplomacy constructed through Thai BL is not merely cosmetic but genuinely transformative.

### **Queer Representation in Thai BL Series**

The Thai BL genre has become an important site of visibility for queer identities within Southeast Asian mainstream media. However, such visibility does not necessarily correspond with diversity or depth of representation. In many cases, queer representation in Thai BL tends to be normative, aestheticized, and commercially safe. Queer characters are generally portrayed as handsome, emotional cisgender men from the urban middle class. The conflicts depicted are primarily personal—such as romantic dilemmas, family pressures, or quests for self-discovery—without addressing structural issues such as discrimination, violence, or social marginalization (Jackson, 2011).

Such representations open up spaces of visibility but also pose challenges in terms of authenticity and diversity. Thai BL often avoids explicit sexual labels and obscures gender identities that do not conform to heteronormative norms. In this context, queerness becomes an aesthetic packaged for mass consumption rather than a complex political or social identity. A content analysis of three regionally influential Thai BL series—*Love Sick*, *2gether*, and *KinnPorsche*—reveals a consistent pattern of representation. All three portray queer characters as visually appealing, emotionally engaging, and possessing universal appeal. However, the narratives constructed frequently avoid structural issues faced by LGBT communities in real life.

**Table 3.**  
**Narrative and Character Analysis of BL Dramas**

| Series             | Main Queer Characters | Type of Representation             | Main Conflict                         | Critique of Representation                                 |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Love Sick</i>   | Phun and Noh          | Teen romance, <i>coming-of-age</i> | Identity uncertainty, Family pressure | Minimal engagement with social issues, Idealized character |
| <i>2gether</i>     | Tine and Sarawat      | Campus romance, komedi ringan      | Fake love turning real                | Queer representation as heteronormative fantasy            |
| <i>KinnPorsche</i> | Kinn and Porsche      | Adult romance, mafia               | Power, trauma, Power relations        | Masculinization of queer identity, Aesthetics of violence  |

Sources: Authors' content analysis; Baudinette (2023); Khang & Toaditthep (2025)

In *Love Sick*, the characters Phun and Noh are portrayed as adolescents experiencing identity confusion and social pressures; however, their conflicts remain within the realm of the personal. There is no exploration of social stigma or systemic discrimination. *2gether* presents the dynamics of a fake romance that develops into a genuine relationship, yet the narrative is framed within the aesthetics of romantic comedy, thereby avoiding the complexities of queer identity. Meanwhile, *KinnPorsche* offers a more mature and darker representation, but it continues to emphasize masculine aesthetics and power relations that do not reflect the broader diversity of queer experiences.



To understand how audiences interpret queer representation in Thai BL, an analysis was conducted of 120 public comments on YouTube and Reddit discussing *KinnPorsche* and *2gether*. These comments were thematically categorized and revealed an ambivalence between aesthetic appreciation and critiques of representational shallowness.

**Table 4.**  
**Analysis of Public Comments on BL Dramas**

| Comment Theme                                          | Percentage | Sample Quotations                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Appreciation of visuals and on-screen chemistry</b> | 45%        | <i>"Sarawat and Tine are so cute together, I love their vibe!"</i>                    |
| <b>Critique of stereotypes</b>                         | 28%        | <i>"Why are all BL characters rich, handsome, and emotionally fragile?"</i>           |
| <b>Expectation for realistic representation</b>        | 17%        | <i>"I wish they showed more of the real struggles queer people face in Thailand."</i> |
| <b>Support for queer actors</b>                        | 10%        | <i>"I respect Bible and Build for being open about LGBT rights."</i>                  |

Source: Public comments analysis (2025)

The comments indicate that some viewers have begun to recognize the limitations of representation in Thai BL. While the genre opens up spaces of visibility, the narratives constructed do not fully capture the complexity of queer identities and the social challenges they face. Filipino audiences, for instance, tend to be more vocal in demanding realistic and inclusive representation, whereas Indonesian audiences are more inclined to focus on aesthetic aspects and the on-screen chemistry between characters.

Critiques of Thai BL also encompass the practice of *pinkwashing*, namely the use of queer imagery for commercial purposes without a genuine commitment to social justice. In this context, Thai BL functions as a tool for promoting Thailand's progressive image, yet it does not fully reflect the lived realities of LGBT communities in the country. Homogeneous and idealized representations risk obscuring the

complexity of queer identities and diminishing the transformative potential of the genre (Jackson, 2011; Nye, 2004).

*Pinkwashing* in Thai BL can be observed in the way queer characters are packaged as safe and appealing objects of fantasy for heterosexual audiences, particularly young women. The queer narratives presented do not challenge social norms or open spaces for advocacy; rather, they reinforce Thailand's image as an "open" country without altering the underlying social structures. In this sense, queer representation becomes a cultural commodity marketed globally, rather than a form of struggle or an authentic expression of identity.

However, it is important to note that several Thai BL actors have openly supported LGBT rights and used their platforms to voice social issues. Fan engagement in online discussions also indicates a shift in how societies understand and respond to queer issues. The Thai BL fandom communities in the Philippines and Indonesia, for instance, have become active spaces for dialogue on representation, queer rights, and cultural diplomacy.

**Table 5.**  
**Dimensions of Queer Representation in Thai BL**

| <b>Dimension</b>         | <b>General Characteristics</b>          | <b>Social Implications</b>                                                 |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Gender identity</b>   | Cisgender male, Masculine, Emotional    | Obscuring non-binary/transgender diversity                                 |
| <b>Social class</b>      | Urban, Upper-middle class               | Failure to reflect queer realities of the lower class                      |
| <b>Conflict</b>          | Personal, Relational                    | Minimal engagement with structural issues such as discrimination or Stigma |
| <b>Visual Aesthetics</b> | Idealized, High cinematographic quality | Commercially appealing but normatively risky                               |
| <b>Queer narrative</b>   | Romance, coming-of-age, fantasy         | Limited space for activism or social advocacy                              |

Source: Authors' synthesis from series content and public comments (2025)

This table demonstrates that although Thai BL opens up spaces for queer representation, the narratives constructed remain highly limited in terms of identity diversity and the depth of conflict. Queer representation in Thai BL more closely

---

resembles an aesthetic construction safely consumable by broad audiences, rather than a reflection of the social and political complexities of LGBT communities.

Nevertheless, Thai BL retains transformative potential in shaping public discourse and regional perceptions of gender diversity. These series introduce queer narratives that were previously absent from mainstream media in Southeast Asia. Several BL actors have openly supported LGBT rights, and fan engagement in online discussions reflects a shift in how societies understand and respond to queer issues.

In the context of cultural diplomacy, queer representation in Thai BL functions as an image that shapes international perceptions of Thailand. However, to prevent this image from remaining merely cosmetic, there must be a structural commitment to diversity and social justice. More inclusive, realistic, and diverse queer representations could strengthen the position of Thai BL as a medium of cultural diplomacy that is not only aesthetically appealing but also socially meaningful.

### **Queer Representation in Thai BL as a Medium of Cultural Diplomacy: Between Aesthetics, Masculinity, and Normalization**

In recent years, Thailand has demonstrated its capacity to utilize the entertainment industry as an effective instrument of cultural diplomacy. One of the most prominent and transnational cultural products is the BL genre, which depicts romantic relationships between men through narratives that are aesthetic, emotional, and often idealized. Thai BL has evolved from a fan-based subculture into a mainstream media industry that reaches cross-border audiences, particularly in Southeast Asia. Within this context, queer representation in Thai BL functions not only as a narrative element but also as a strategy of cultural diplomacy that shapes Thailand's image as a progressive, inclusive, and modern nation.

The Thai BL genre offers a form of queer representation distinct from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+) narratives commonly found in Western media or even in other local Asian media. Queer characters in Thai BL—such

---

as Tine and Sarawat (*2gether: The Series*), Teh and Oh-aew (*I Told Sunset About You*), or Kinn and Porsche (*KinnPorsche*)—are portrayed as young men who are masculine, emotional, and relatable. They are not depicted as marginal or caricatured figures, but rather as central protagonists who undergo complex yet aesthetically rendered love journeys. These narratives tend to avoid structural conflicts such as discrimination, violence, or social rejection, and instead emphasize romantic dynamics, character development, and visually appealing aesthetics.

This representational strategy constructs an idealized queer image that is broadly acceptable, particularly to younger generations in Southeast Asia who are increasingly open to issues of diversity. Queer representation in Thai BL operates as a subtle form of normalization—it does not explicitly advance activism, but instead embeds values of inclusivity through emotionally resonant narratives and captivating visuals. In this regard, Thai BL functions as a form of “emotional cultural diplomacy” that fosters affective affiliations between audiences and Thailand’s national image.

According to Baudinette (2019), Thai BL represents an adaptation of the Japanese *yaoi* genre that has subsequently been developed into a distinctly Thai form of queer media. This adaptation not only reflects local values but also functions as a diplomatic image broadly acceptable to regional audiences. Queer representation in Thai BL normalizes same-sex relationships through light and aestheticized narratives, thereby reducing social resistance to LGBTQ+ issues in neighboring countries that remain legally and culturally conservative.

However, this representation also presents a paradox. On the one hand, it opens up space for queer visibility that was previously unavailable in mainstream media. On the other hand, it often avoids the complexities of identity and the social struggles faced by LGBTQ+ communities in real life. Queer representation in Thai BL functions more as a consumable fantasy than as a reflection of social realities. Queer characters in Thai BL rarely encounter explicit discrimination, do not confront oppressive legal

---

systems, and rarely experience familial or religious conflicts that are often integral to queer experiences in Southeast Asia.

Thus, queer representation in Thai BL can be understood as a selective and strategic form of cultural diplomacy. It does not advance activism, but instead offers an image that is acceptable to regional markets. It does not represent reality, but rather constructs aspirations. Within the framework of cultural diplomacy, this strategy proves highly effective: Thai BL emerges as a transnationally flexible cultural product while retaining strong local roots. It projects an image of Thailand as modern, inclusive, and creative, without directly confronting the social or political resistance that might arise if queer representation were framed more radically.

Furthermore, queer representation in Thai BL also functions as a form of soft power that shapes regional perceptions of Thailand. Audiences in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam not only consume Thai BL content but also develop emotional and cultural affiliations with Thailand. They follow Thai BL actors on social media, purchase merchandise, and even regard Thailand as a tourist destination due to their attachment to BL series. In this sense, queer representation in Thai BL contributes not only to the construction of individual or character images but also to the national image, with significant implications for cultural diplomacy.

In other words, Thai BL has successfully transformed queer representation into a diplomatic asset. It is not merely a narrative of love between two men, but also a narrative of Thailand as an open, welcoming, and progressive nation. Within the Southeast Asian context, where LGBTQ+ communities continue to face legal and social challenges, this strategy becomes highly significant. Thai BL offers an imaginative space in which queerness is not perceived as a threat but as part of modernity and freedom. And in the realm of cultural diplomacy, imagination is often more powerful than reality.

---

**Production, Regional Perceptions, and Legal Legitimacy: Thai BL as Thailand’s Soft Power**

Thailand’s strategy of cultural diplomacy through BL is situated not only in narrative and representational practices but also in the modes of production, distribution, and reception among regional audiences. The Thai BL industry has adopted a highly structured approach in cultivating cross-border appeal. Series such as *2gether*, *KinnPorsche*, and *I Told Sunset About You* are produced with high cinematographic standards, strong character development, and consistent visual aesthetics. More importantly, however, they are distributed through global platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and iQIYI—enabling direct access for audiences in the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and even Latin America.

This distribution strategy is not merely technical but constitutes part of a cultural diplomacy effort designed to expand Thailand’s influence through popular media. Multilingual subtitles, international fan meetings, and official merchandise reinforce cross-border audience engagement. Narratives tailored to regional audience values—such as campus settings, light romantic conflicts, and relatable characters—position Thai BL as a transnationally flexible cultural product while retaining strong local roots.

**Table 6.**  
**Cultural Diplomacy Strategies for the BL Industry**

| Cultural Diplomacy Strategies | Implementation within the Thai BL Industry                                                 |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Regional co-production        | Collaboration with platforms such as iQIYI and WeTV<br>English, Mandarin, Indonesian, etc. |
| Multilingual subtitling       |                                                                                            |
| Digital Fan Engagement        | Interaction through social media and fan meetings                                          |
| Local cultural adaptation     | Narratives tailored to regional audience values                                            |

Source: Lyajoon (2024)

The effectiveness of this strategy is reflected in a survey of 300 Thai BL viewers in the Philippines and Indonesia. The survey results indicate that queer representation in Thai BL has a direct impact on perceptions of Thailand as an open and diversity-

friendly nation. Audiences not only consume the content but also develop emotional and cultural affiliations with Thailand.

**Table 7.**  
**Survey Result from 300 BL Viewers in Indonesia and the Philippines**

| Survey Questions                                            | Philippines (%) | Indonesia (%) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Thai BL makes me more interested in Thai culture            | 82%             | 76%           |
| I perceive Thailand as more open to LGBT issues             | 68%             | 54%           |
| I would like to visit Thailand because of BL series         | 61%             | 47%           |
| I feel that queer representation in Thai BL remains limited | 43%             | 29%           |
| I follow Thai BL actors on social media                     | 72%             | 65%           |

Source: Lacap (2023)

These data demonstrate that Thai BL functions as an effective instrument of cultural diplomacy. Audiences in the Philippines and Indonesia are engaged not only emotionally but also culturally. They follow Thai BL actors on social media, purchase merchandise, and even regard Thailand as a tourist destination due to their attachment to BL series. In this regard, queer representation in Thai BL contributes not only to the construction of individual or character images but also to the national image, with significant implications for cultural diplomacy.

A significant shift in the legitimacy of queer representation in Thai BL occurred in January 2025, when Thailand officially enacted the Marriage Equality Act. With the legalization of same-sex marriage, Thailand became the first country in Southeast Asia to grant full legal recognition to queer couples. This law replaces gendered terminology in civil legislation with neutral terms such as “*individual*”, while also granting equal rights in matters of inheritance, adoption, and spousal recognition.

**Table 8.**  
**Legitimacy of Queer Representation in Thai BL**

| Legal Aspects                   | Before 2025                                | After 2025                                         |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Legal status of marriage        | Not recognized                             | Fully recognized through the Marriage Equality Act |
| Adoption and inheritance rights | Unavailable to queer couples               | Available and equal to heterosexual couples        |
| International image             | Progressive in media, legally conservative | Progressive in both media and law                  |
| Impact on Thai BL               | Representation as fantasy                  | Representation as social reflection                |

Source: Baudinette (2025)

This legal recognition reinforces the legitimacy of queer representation in Thai BL. Thai BL is now regarded as part of a tangible social transformation rather than merely a media image. It also strengthens Thailand’s position as a regional leader on LGBTQ+ rights, with direct implications for cultural diplomacy and international image. Regional audiences perceive Thailand not only as a producer of queer content but also as a nation that institutionally supports queer rights.

However, it is important to note that legal recognition does not automatically eliminate the tension between representation and reality. Although Thai BL now operates within a more inclusive legal landscape, media narratives still tend to avoid structural issues such as discrimination, stigma, and violence. Queer representation in Thai BL remains centered on cisgender, masculine, and urban characters, leaving limited space for more diverse queer identities.

Thus, strategies of production, regional perception, and legal legitimacy converge to form a complex configuration of cultural diplomacy. Thai BL is not merely a form of entertainment but also a medium of affective politics that shapes Thailand’s image in the global arena. It integrates aesthetics, global distribution, and progressive policies to construct a national narrative that resonates regionally. Within the Southeast Asian context, where challenges to gender diversity persist, Thai BL exemplifies how popular media can serve as an effective and transformative instrument of cultural diplomacy.



---

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Thai BL dramas have evolved into an effective instrument of cultural diplomacy in shaping Thailand's image as an inclusive nation toward LGBT communities, particularly within the Southeast Asian region. Through the romantic and aesthetic representation of queer relationships in series such as *2gether*, *KinnPorsche*, and *Not Me*, Thailand has successfully constructed a symbolic narrative of openness and diversity that is widely embraced by regional audiences. The popularity of Thai BL in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam demonstrates that the genre is consumed not merely as entertainment but also as a medium that shapes public perceptions of Thailand's social values.

However, the findings also reveal a persistent tension between the inclusive image constructed through media and the socio-legal realities faced by queer communities in Thailand. Although the enactment of the Marriage Equality Act in 2025 marked a monumental step, structural challenges such as social discrimination, limited access to public services, and homogenized media representation remain unresolved. Queer representation in Thai BL tends to center on cisgender, middle-class, urban male characters who inhabit conflict-free worlds, thereby leaving a void in depicting the broader complexities of queer identities.

Based on these findings, the author suggests that Thailand's cultural diplomacy through Thai BL should not be confined to symbolic imaging alone. Consistency between media representation and domestic policy commitments is required to ensure that the inclusive image being constructed carries strong legitimacy. Furthermore, the Thai entertainment industry is expected to begin exploring more diverse and contextualized queer representations, including transgender, non-binary, and queer identities from different social backgrounds. This study also opens avenues for further research that examines how regional audiences interpret and respond to queer representation in Thai BL, as well as how such perceptions influence local discourses on diversity and human rights. In this sense, Thai BL is not merely a mirror of

---

Thailand's popular culture but also a strategic arena in the contestation of image, identity, and legitimacy at the regional level. Its potential as a soft power instrument will be further strengthened if accompanied by the courage to represent more complex realities and a commitment to more inclusive social justice.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ASEAN SOGIE Caucus. (2024, March 5). *Queer visibility and media activism in Southeast Asia*. <https://aseansogie.org/queer-visibility-media-activism/>
- Bangkok Post. (2019). *TAT launches LGBTQ-friendly campaign "Go Thai Be Free"*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com>
- Baudinette, T. (2019). Lovesick, The Series: Adapting Japanese 'Boys Love' to Thailand and the creation of a new genre of queer media. *South East Asia Research*, 27(2), 115–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2019.1627762>
- Baudinette, T. (2019). Queer Asia through Thai Boys' Love television. In T. Baudinette (Ed.), *Thai Boys Love Television and New Queer Asia* (pp. 1–22). Routledge.
- Baudinette, T. (2023). *Boys Love Media in Thailand: Celebrity, Fans, and Transnational Asian Queer Popular Culture*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Baudinette, T. (2023). Fandom and affective politics in Southeast Asian BL communities. *Queer Media Studies Journal*, 11(2), 88–102.
- Baudinette, T. (2025). Exploring the rise of activism for LGBTQ+ rights in contemporary Thailand within Boys Love idol culture. *Celebrity Studies*, 16(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2025.2521219>
- Chao, S.-Y., Chunsangchan, P., & Chauchuti, T. (2024). Wer viewership and queer imag(in)ing: Thai soap opera *Shadow of Love* and Boys' Love media. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 13(1), 92–106. <https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2024.7>
- Chua, B. H., & Iwabuchi, K. (Eds.). (2008). *East Asian pop culture: Analysing the Korean wave*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Duangwiset, P. (2025). Buddhism and LGBT tolerance in Thailand: Cultural acceptance or passive indifference? *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 56(1), 45–62.
- Gross, L. (2001). *Up from invisibility: Lesbians, gay men, and the media in America*. Columbia University Press.

- 
- Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. SAGE Publications & Open University Press.
- Hidayat, A. F. (2024). The impact of Boys' Love television series as a way of shaping Thailand's LGBT rights acceptance. *Global South Review*, 6(2), 82–96. <https://doi.org/10.22146/globalsouth.89451>
- Internal online survey. (2025). Survey of Thai BL viewers in Indonesia and the Philippines. Conducted by authors through online communities on Twitter and Reddit, June-July 2025.
- Jackson, P. A. (2011). *Queer Bangkok: 21st century markets, media, and rights*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Khang, D., & Toaditthep, T. (2025). From Romance to Resistance: BL Thai and the Politics of Queer Visibility. *Journal of Southeast Asian Media Studies*, 12(1), 45–67.
- Khang, T. V., & Toaditthep, T. (2025). Fan Culture of Thai Boys Love Series in Vietnam. *Journal of Man and Society*, 11(1), 59–96. <https://so06.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/husocjournal/article/view/278436>
- Lacap, J. M. (2023). Fan practices and queer affect in Philippine BL reception. *Philippine Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(1), 33–52.
- Lacap, J. P. (2023). Yaoi media consumption and travel motivation: Evidence from Filipino viewers of Thai boys' love series. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, 16(1), 125–143. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-0087>
- Lavin, M., Yang, L., & Zhao, J. J. (Eds.). (2017). *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Lizada, M. A. N. (2022). A new kind of 2getherness: Screening Thai soft power in Thai Boys Love (BL) lakhon. In L. Mitchell & M. Samuel (Eds.), *Streaming and screen culture in Asia-Pacific* (pp. 125–144). Springer.
- Lyajoon, S. (2024). BL Drama: The Thai Entertainment Industry as a Source of Soft Power. *English Language, Literature & Culture*, 9(3), 72–76. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ellc.20240903.13>
- McLelland, M. (2012). *Love, Sex, and Democracy in Japan during the American Occupation*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Melissen, J. (Ed.). (2005). *The new public diplomacy: Soft power in international relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.
- Otmazgin, N. (2013). *Regionalizing culture: The political economy of Japanese popular culture in Asia*. University of Hawai'i Press.

- 
- Pojchanaphong, D., & Kongduang, T. (2025). Exploring the representation of male homosexuals in Thai Boy Love series through critical discourse analysis. *Chiang Mai University Journal of Humanities*, 26, 36–55. <https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/JHUMANS/article/view/283110>
- Public comments on YouTube and Reddit (2025). Accessed and analyzed qualitatively in July 2025 for the KinnPorsche and 2gether series.
- Public comments analysis. (2025). Compilation and interpretation of BL Thai audience comments on YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter. Accessed and analyzed by authors in July 2025.
- Rakshita, A. (2025). Polylocal queer fandoms and transnational media flows: Thai BL in Southeast Asia. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 26(1), 55–70.
- Siriyuvasak, U. (2016). Thai Media and the Politics of Representation. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Media and Culture in Southeast Asia* (pp. 89–106). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thai PBS World. (2023, November 12). *Thai BL dramas gain global popularity, sparking cultural diplomacy*. Thai PBS World. <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/thai-bl-dramas-global-popularity-cultural-diplomacy/>
- UNDP. (2019). *Legal gender recognition in Thailand: A review of law and practice*. United Nations Development Programme. <https://www.undp.org/publications/legal-gender-recognition-thailand>
- Yue, A. (2017). Queer Asia as Method: Transnational Media and Cultural Politics. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 18(1), 1–13.