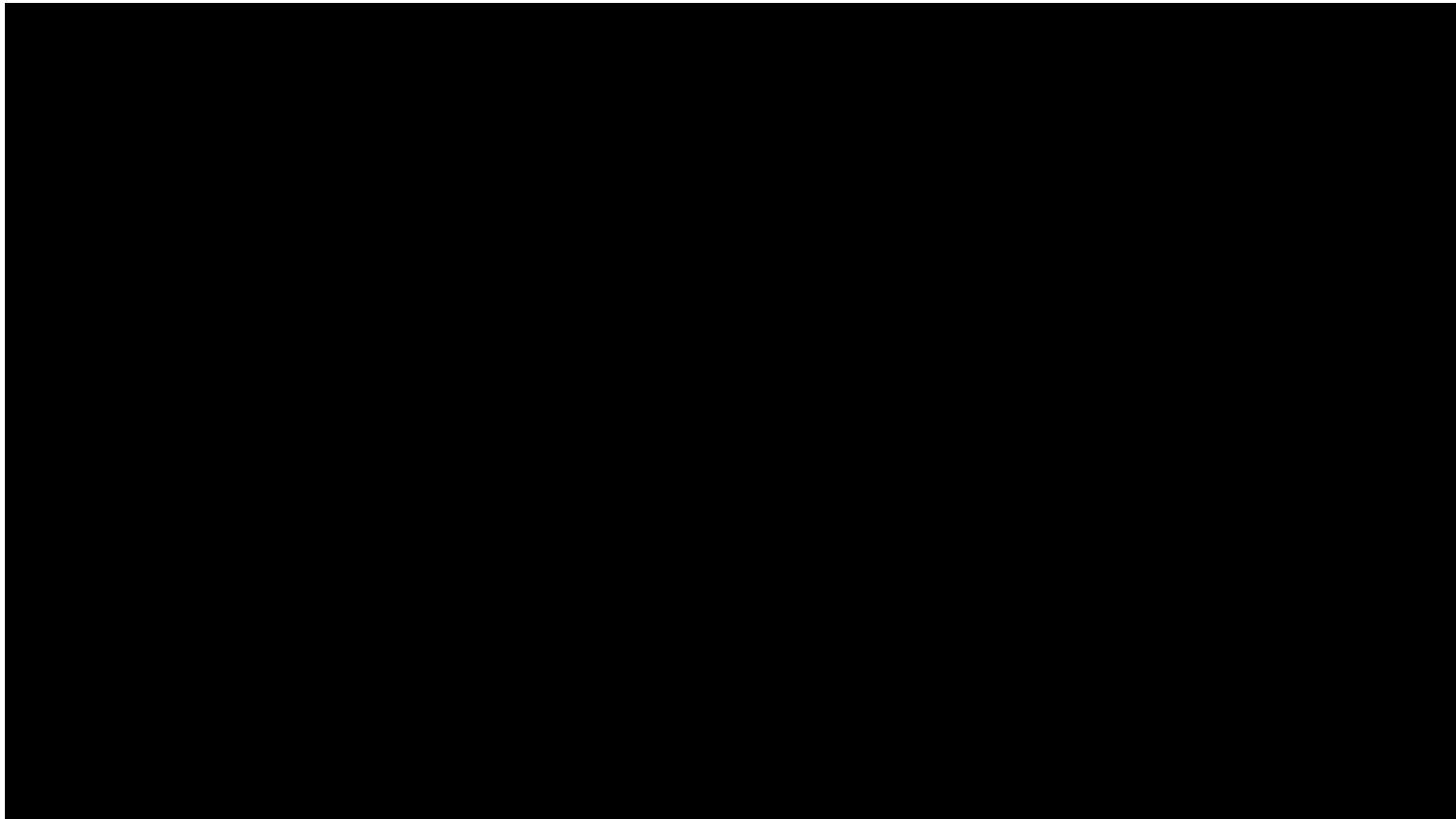


# BOYS LOVE (BL) MEDIA PHENOMENON IN THAILAND

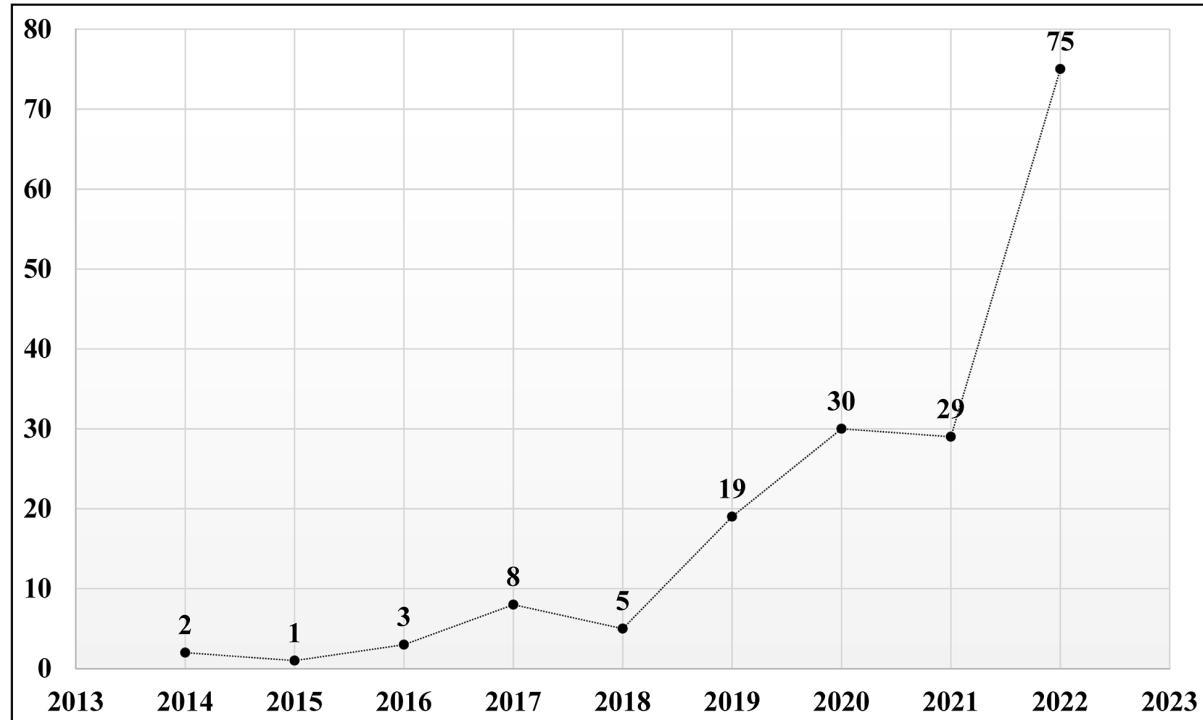


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THS441 Gender and Sexuality in Thailand  
PBIC | 21 November 2023



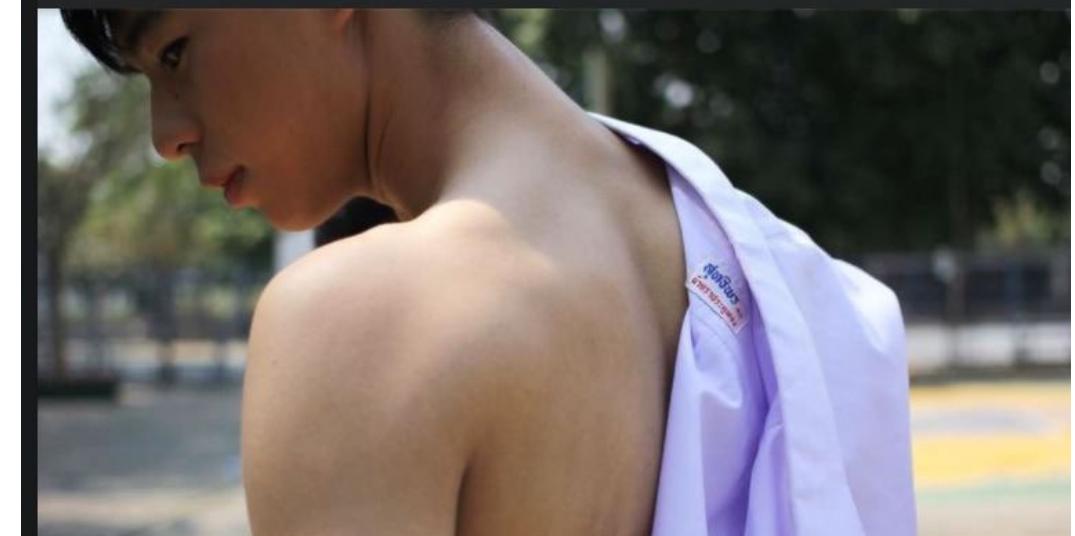
# WHY BL?



Pierre-Antoine Déjacques

February 13, 2018 ·

Believe it or not, this is a Thai advertisement for a brand of boys high school uniforms. The influence of BL style and aesthetics is extending beyond manga, TV series and romantic novels. Posts on Thai gay chat boards wonder if this ad crosses a line and will lead to a backlash from conservative authorities. Time will tell.



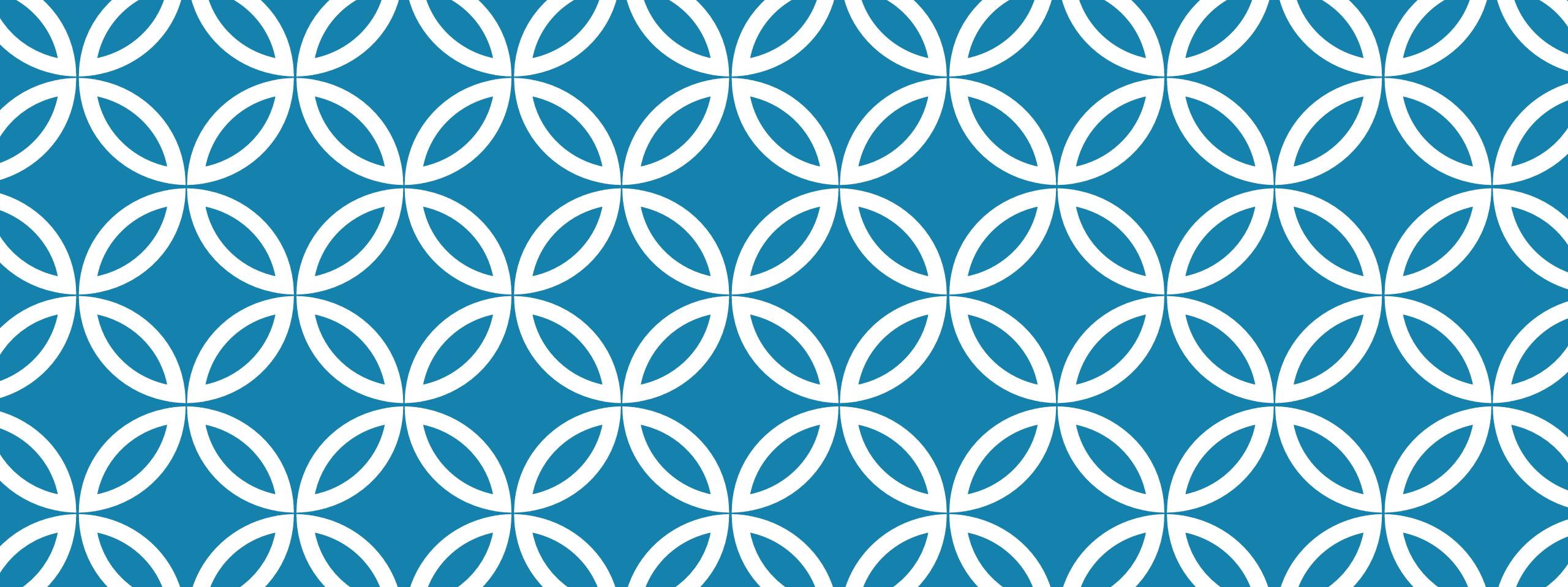
# AGENDA

- Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity
- The BL Media Phenomenon
- BL as an Agent of Change?

Pierre-Antoine Déjacques  
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Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity |

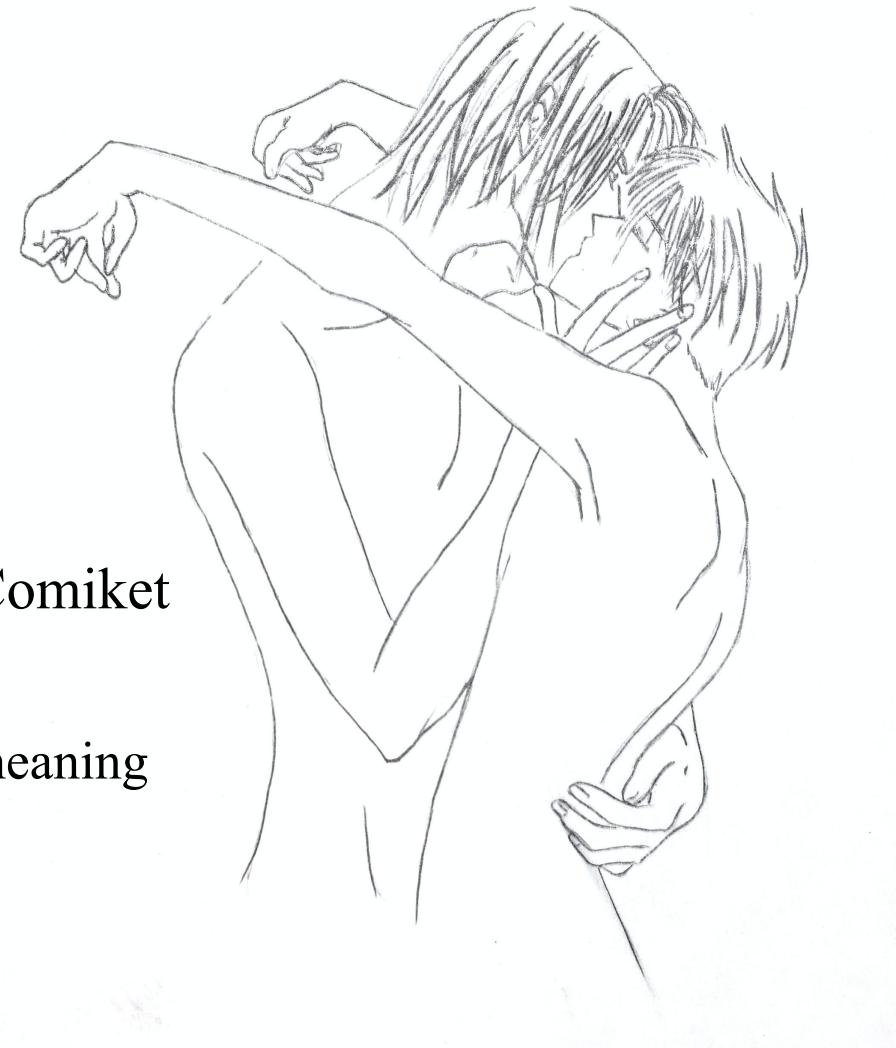
# Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [1]

- Japanese Boys Love (BL)
- Y[aoi] comics (Japanese BL comics)
- Japanese BL genre:
  - Male homoerotic stories.
  - Male–male romance and eroticism **mainly created by and for heterosexual women.**
  - Romantic and sexual relations between beautiful, stylish male characters.



## Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [2]

- Y / BL narratives as **women's fantasies**
- Y comics as **women's pornography**
- Female BL readers are called '*fujoshi*' (rotten girls)
- **Anime-parody culture** → '*dojinshi*' selling at Comiket
- **Yaoi**
  - *Yamanashi ochinashi iminashi*; no climax, no ending, no meaning
  - *Yamete oshiri ga itaikara*; stop, my ass hurts!



## Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [3]

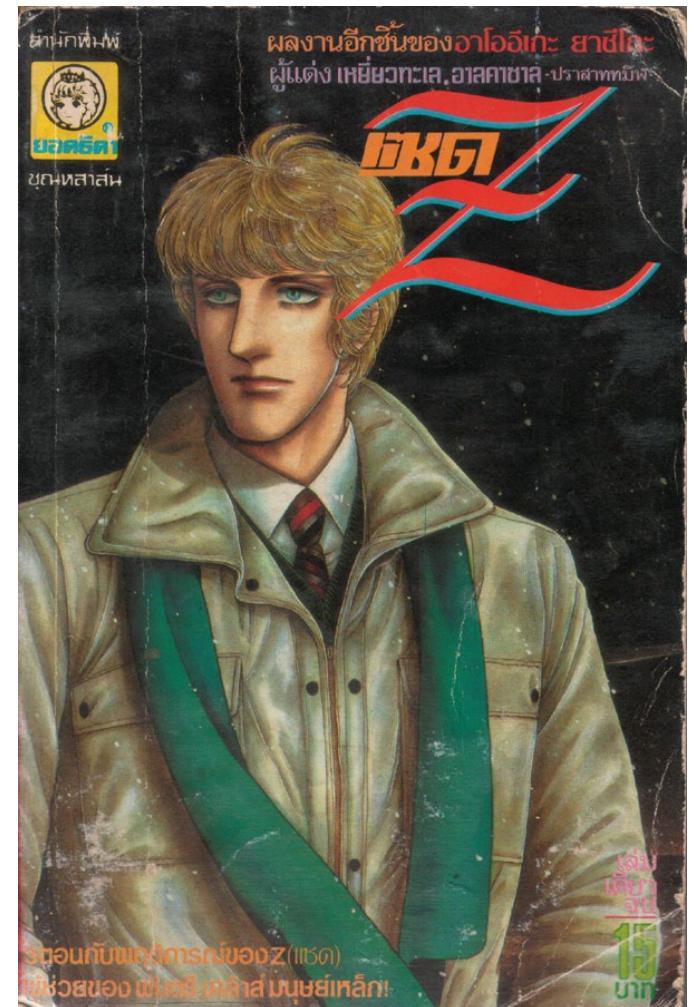
### Recurrent themes in Japanese BL comics:

- The relationship between the *seme* (the penetrator) and the *uke* (the penetrated):
  - This relationship tends to be based on the sexual roles of the heterosexual relationship.
- Both characters are usually depicted as beautiful boys (bishōnen) or stylish young men.
- Their gender attributes are often assigned according to their sexual roles.
  - The *uke* is always more feminine, more beautiful, and more vulnerable than the *seme*.
- BL narrative employs the genre conventions of the romance, “love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties.”
- BL valorizes the concepts of supreme love and partnership through the relationship between the main characters.



## Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [4]

- The arrival of Japanese beautiful boys (*bishōnen*)
- ‘*Sao-wai*’ (Y girls) & ‘*num-wai*’ (Y boys)
- The first generation of ‘*sao-wai*’
  - Upper middle-class high-school students in Bangkok during the early to mid-1990s.



# Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [5]

- 2014 online survey

<u>Age</u>	<u>Sex (n=672)</u>	
	<u>Female 89% (n=600)</u> (%)	<u>Male 11% (n=72)</u> (%)
<b>Under 15</b>	33	13
<b>15–18</b>	27	31
<b>19–24</b>	26	31
<b>Over 24</b>	14	25



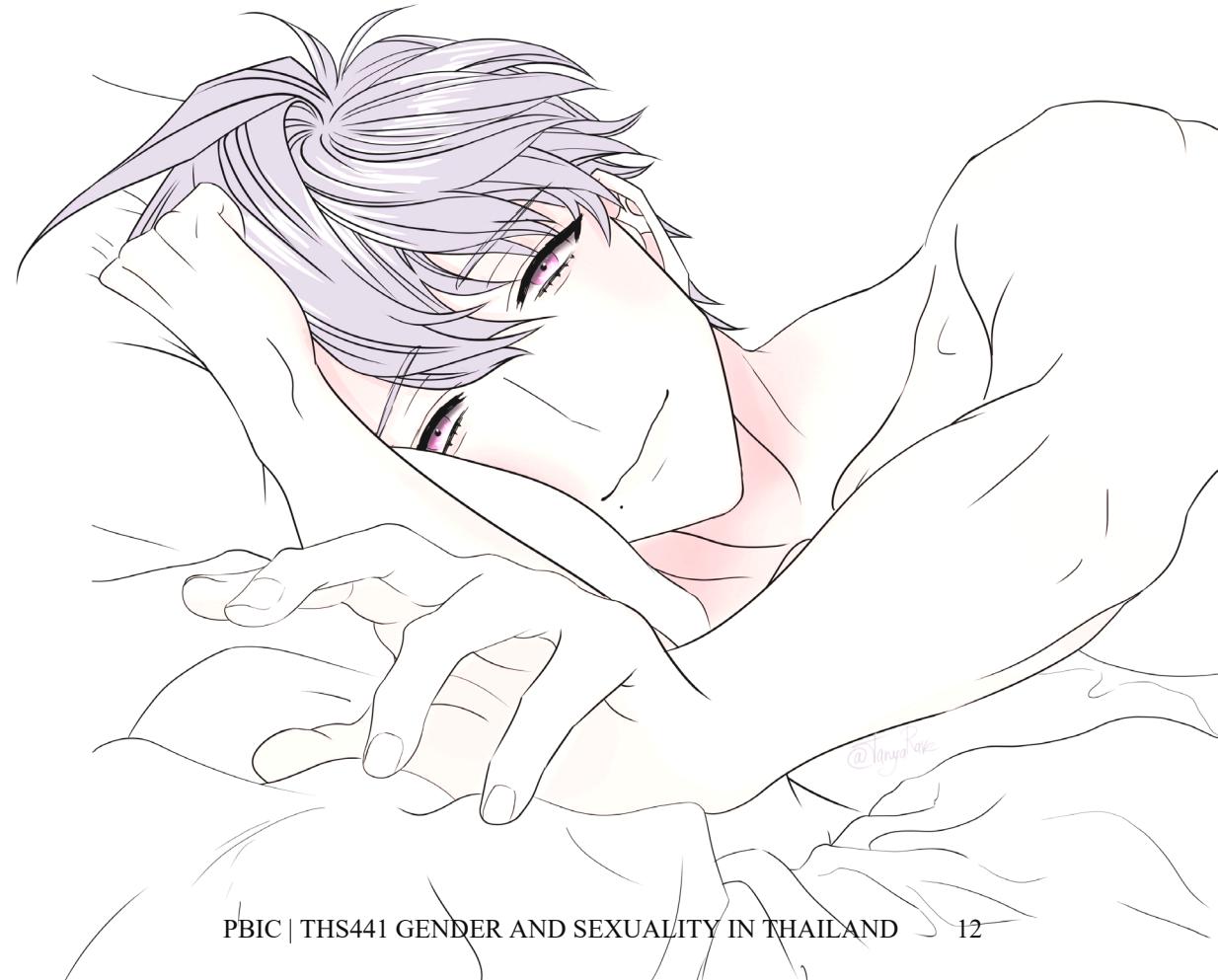
## Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [6]

- 2014 online survey

<u>Sexual Orientation</u>	<u>Female 89% (n=600)</u> (%)	<u>Male 11% (n=72)</u> (%)
<b>Heterosexual</b>	42	18
<b>Homosexual</b>	3	42
<b>Bisexual</b>	36	40
<b>Asexual</b>	19	0

## Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [7]

- 2014 online survey
- Female survey respondents' preferences
  - (a) *fin*
  - (b) absence of female protagonists
  - (c) romantic ideals
  - (d) graphic depictions of sexual scenes
  - (e) non-heteronormative space



## Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [8]

- Female survey respondents' preferences: **(a) *fin***
  - *Fin* is the symptom of the highest level of shyness mixed with happiness, and you are ready to explode with such strong emotions at any time. You feel like you're either going to wriggle, wriggle, and wriggle like an electrocuted gecko, or screeching hysterically like Godzilla. Anyway, these two expressions combined are the symptom of feeling *fin*.
  - I can't really explain this feeling. When I feel it, my heart beats really fast like it's about to explode; I feel shy; I feel sexual desire; I have wild imagination. The feeling is so good beyond description.
  - Biting my lip, digging my nails into the pillow, screaming inside my throat, smiling so widely that my face feels brittle. It feels like I was back in Junior High and reading a note from the senior I had a crush on.

## Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [9]

- Female survey respondents' preferences: **(b) absence of female protagonists**
  - Having the second lead male character instead of the lead female is the reason I prefer kartoon-y. In male-female romance manga, the lead female characters are usually weak and just keep making cute expressions (which I, as a reader, actually find “slappable”). Sometimes, they act foolishly for no good reason. But in the BL (Boy's Love) genre, even the uke characters are different from the female leads, because of course they are men. This is why I like them—they are mature and reasonable; they are not crybabies; they don't act stupidly, and they are emotionally strong.
  - It feels fin. ^^ I like hot guys to begin with. I like watching or reading anything with lots of hot guys in it. Another reason I jin [fantasize] the guys going at it among themselves is because I don't like any other girl to have them. It's like these guys are my boyfriends. It's like ...“they're mine, bitches”! But if their partners are also male then I actually feel fin instead, so it's okay.

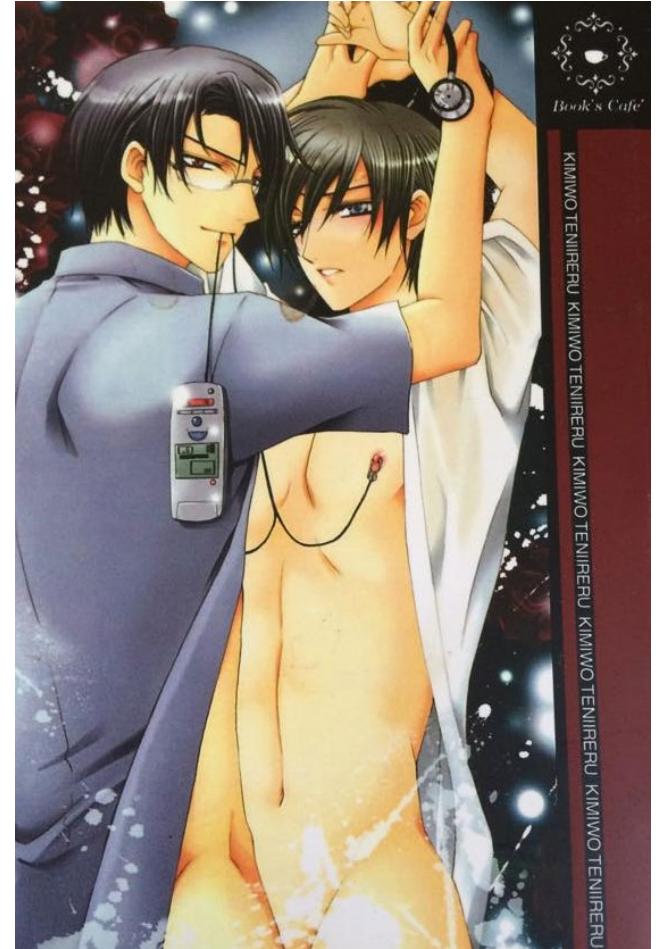
# Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [10]

- Female survey respondents' preferences: **(c) romantic ideals**
  - I feel the relationships are more equal than male–female relationships. Japanese manga normally like to present women as lesser than men.



## Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [11]

- Female survey respondents' preferences: **(d) graphic depictions of sexual scenes**
  - Because it arouses me more than normal manga. Also, I feel *fin* seeing images of naked guys. >///< Seeing them almost makes my nose bleed =.,=
  - Well, it's cute. It's so fun to see the painful facial expressions of the *uke*, haha. =;:=// It makes me feel horny!
  - I feel *fin* when I read *kartoon-y*, like in the scenes where the guys kiss or shower together, or when they have "XXX."



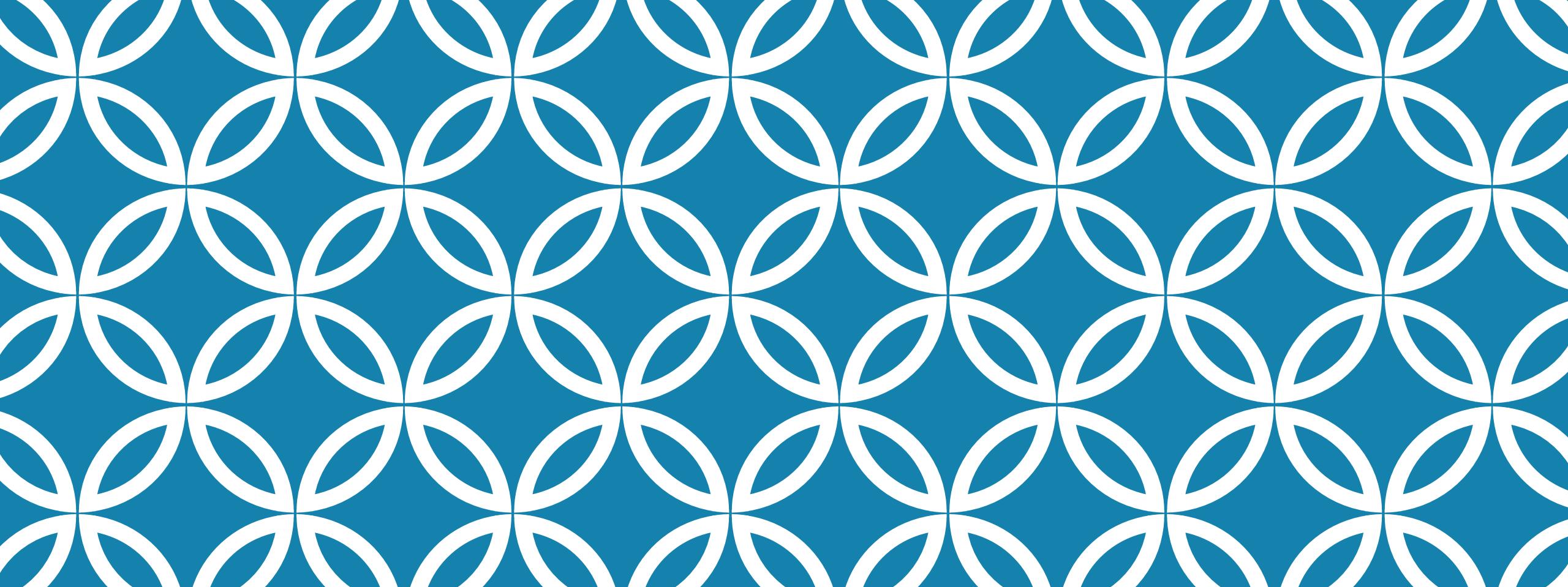
## Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [12]

- Female survey respondents' preferences: **(e) non-heteronormative space**
  - Maybe I do have a desire for the male sex myself, but because I feel confined by the tradition that taught me women shouldn't feel such desire, I end up using a male character as my own sexual surrogate.
  - I don't feel embarrassed or morally guilty about male–male sexual relationships. It's probably because I was raised in a culture which moral codes determine how female–male sexual relationships should be (whereas same-sex relationships are never really addressed). I was taught male–female sexual relationships are shameful and should be kept secret. Also, seeing naked bodies of the same sex as mine makes me feel awkward. Because of all this, I feel that male–male relationships are a more acceptable form of sexual expression.



## Y[aoi] as Gender Perversity [13]

- Legal uncertainties and ambiguities: Section 287 of the Criminal Code – outlawing obscenity
  - “anything that is sexually shameful to the eyes or offensive which is the direct opposition of artistic expression”
- In 2006 Y comics made the headlines after a conference presentation by a graduate student. The words like "perverse" (wiparit) were used to describe Y comics.
  - Social anxiety → Law enforcement by the Thai state.
  - Japanese BL genre, represented by Y comics, was perceived as harmfulness and perversity.
  - Male homoerotic visibility in the public sphere?
- In the Thai society, masculine homosexuality and masculine gay men were (or have been) not tolerated but not accepted as part of the Thainess.

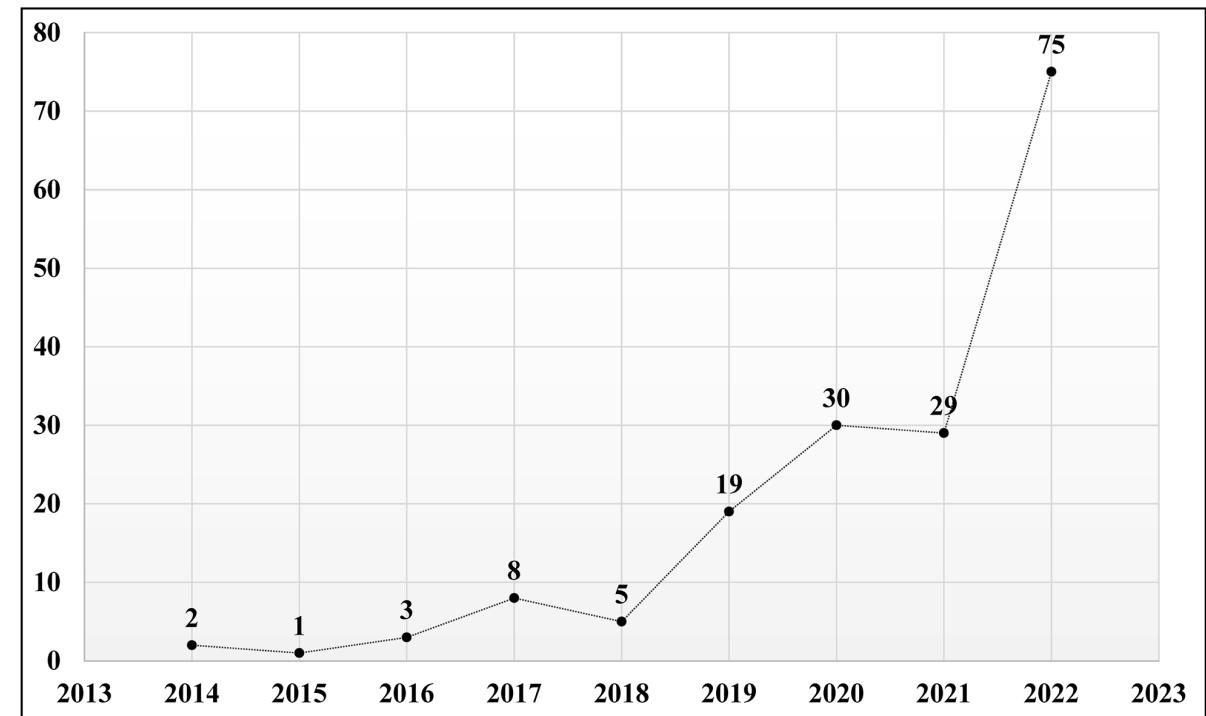


# The BL Media Phenomenon

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# The BL Media Phenomenon [1]

- The Thai media landscape experienced a significant cultural phenomenon after mid-2014 with the emergence of a local BL television series called *Love Sick The Series* (2014), which aired on MCOT HD, a free TV channel.



## The BL Media Phenomenon [2]

- ‘Three pillars’ of the Thai BL phenomenon
  - Thai BL TV drama series / mini-series
  - Fans & Fandoms
  - Thai BL entertainment industry (e.g. GMMTV)



## The BL Media Phenomenon [3]

- Thai BL genre / Thai Y genre
- Essentially, Thai BL draws inspiration from the generic themes of Japanese BL within the romance genre.
- This mimetic aspect sets this genre apart from the stereotypical Thai gay-themed media.

# The BL Media Phenomenon [4]

## Recurring tropes in Y-series—Thai BL conventions

### ▪ SOFT MASCULINE CHARACTERS

- The lead characters in Y-series are cute-boys and/or stunning young men whose faces and bodies broadly conform to the stereotypical ideals of **pan-East Asian soft masculinity**.
- They are described as ‘smooth-skinned, slim-figured, and impeccably coiffed’, akin to young male Chinese idols, reflecting the **effeminacy of Korpanese male beauty**.
- While visually young actors portraying *khu-wai* tend to be slightly more masculine compared to Chinese and Korean male pop idols, who have gorgeous, stylish, skinny, and androgynous looks, the aesthetic of soft masculine *khu-wai* in Thai BL dramas can best be described as ‘cute’ (*narak*).



# The BL Media Phenomenon [5]

## Recurring tropes in Y-series–Thai BL conventions



# The BL Media Phenomenon [6]

## Recurring tropes in Y-series—Thai BL conventions

### ▪ BINARY SEXUAL ROLES

- Similar to the *seme-uke* rule in Japanese BL, the characters of *khu-wai* are rigidly defined by their binary sexual roles.
- The *phra-ek* (lead male character, penetrator, called *ruk* in Thai) is always portrayed as more masculine, toned, and somewhat rebellious compared to his partner, the *nai-ek* (lead male character, penetrated, called *rap* in Thai), who is usually sweet-looking (*na-wan*; lit. sweet face), more feminine, less toned, somewhat tender, and slightly girlish.
- Both characters possess a fresh-faced and youthful look regardless of their age in the story. These characteristics also apply to supporting characters



# The BL Media Phenomenon [7]

## Recurring tropes in Y-series—Thai BL conventions

### ▪ FIXED SEXUAL ROLES

- Like Japanese BL, the sexual roles of the main couple (*khu-lak*) and second-string couple (*khu-rong*) in Y-series are static, with the *phra-ek* always portrayed as the penetrator and the *nai-ek* as the penetrated. There is no flexibility or versatility in their sexual roles.

### ▪ SUPPORTING CHARACTERS AND SOFT MASCULINITY

- Supporting characters in Y-series typically exhibit some attributes of pan-East Asian soft masculinity and are often cuter than supporting casts in traditional Thai TV melodramas.



# The BL Media Phenomenon [8]

## Recurring tropes in Y-series—Thai BL conventions

### ▪ ROMANCE

- Thai BL falls within the romance genre, with narratives revolving around the triumph and eternal nature of true love.
- Unlike general Thai LGBT-themed media, Thai BL avoids tragic endings such as suicide or death and instead concludes with happy, romantic resolutions.
- Thai BL narratives embody the belief that pure love can conquer various obstacles, including familial pressures and societal stigmatisation, reflecting the genre's core foundation on romance.



# The BL Media Phenomenon [9]

## Recurring tropes in Y-series—Thai BL conventions

### ▪ **NORMATIVE-GENDER-FREE NARRATIVES**

- The narratives of male same-sex romance and eroticism featured in Thai BL series are substantially, though not entirely, free from normative gender expectations.
- In general, lead characters, including the *nai-ek* in Y-series, do not typically identify themselves as gay. There are a few exceptions, such as ‘Pete’, the *nai-ek* character in *Love by Chance* (2018), portrayed by Suppapong Udomkaewkanjana.
- Thai BL television series do not heavily incorporate gender norms or gendered morality based on the Thai society’s moral belief system, which may perceive male homoeroticism as deviant.
- Gender-related challenges primarily serve as obstacles that test the strength of true love, which the *khu-wai* characters ultimately overcome.
- In essence, the narratives of the Y-genre are disconnected from the reality of problems faced by sexual minorities in the Thai society.

# The BL Media Phenomenon [10]

## Recurring tropes in Y-series—Thai BL conventions

### ▪ GRAPHIC DEPICTIONS OF EROTICISM AND TOPLESS MALE BODIES

- Thai BL has inherited the convention of explicit sexual scenes from Japanese BL comics.
- Thai BL series often contain graphic depictions of sexual acts or suggestive scenes involving lead characters.
- While not all Thai BL series depict love-making between *khu-wai*, many include scenes featuring topless, toned bodies of the lead male characters in various settings, such as taking a shower or slowly entering a room with a towel wrapped around the lower body.



# The BL Media Phenomenon [11]

## AFFECTIVE ECONOMICS

- Performers as idols
- Commodifying male bodies, attachment and intimacies
- Fan events
- Selling merchandises



# The BL Media Phenomenon [12]

## Intimate interactions and the *sao-wai* market

- Intimate interactions or romantic acts (e.g., verbal flirting or light kissing) between the lead characters, as well as their topless and toned bodies, are considered essential for the popularity of Y-series.
- If today's Thai audience for Y-series resembles local BL comic readers, who are primarily young heterosexual females, they may identify with the lead characters, particularly the *nai-ek*, to vicariously experience the emotions portrayed.
- Therefore, the intimacy between *khu-wai* characters and their physical appearances can provide enjoyment, and in some cases, even arousal for the female audience, fulfilling their psychoemotional needs.

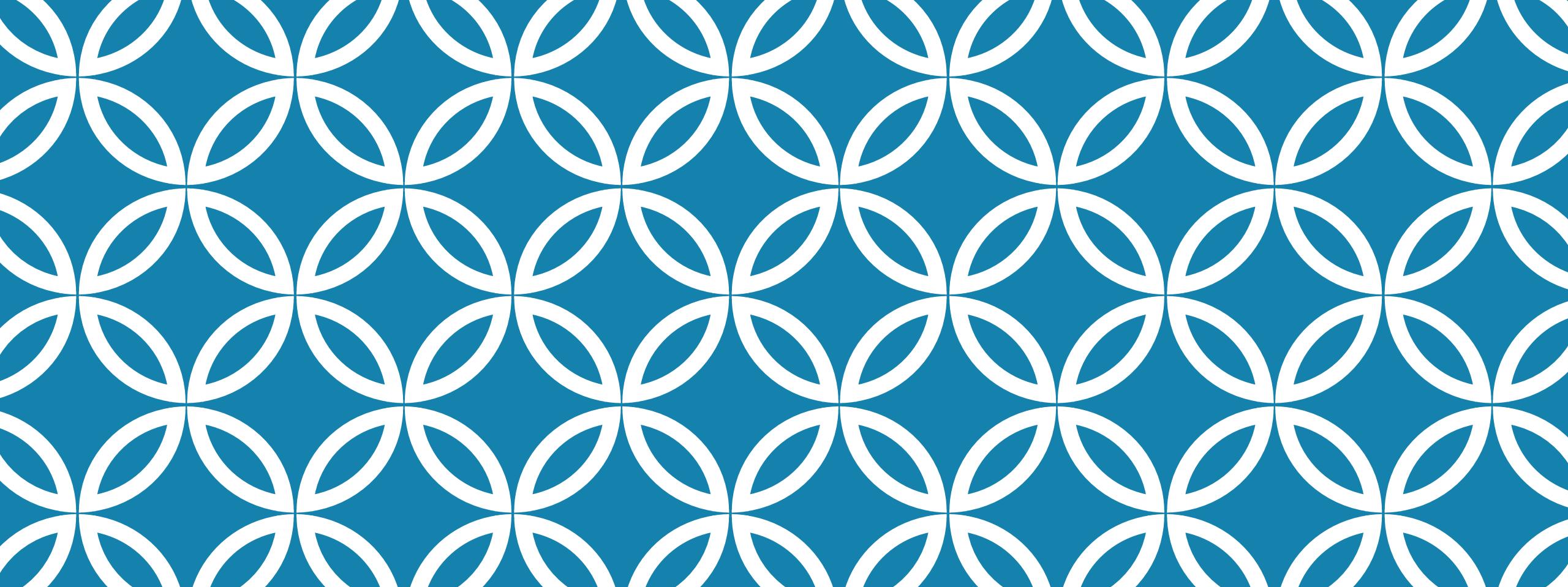


# The BL Media Phenomenon [13]

- Psychological appeal and the female gaze
  - It is worth noting that visual depictions of sex and sexually suggestive acts play a biopsychosocially pivotal role in providing vicarious pleasure through the ‘gaze’; specifically, the ‘female gaze’.
  - *Fin* feelings
  - Shipping culture

## ***SAO-WAI MARKET***

- Thai BL series initially aimed at local fans of Japanese BL comics, specifically focusing on urban, middle-class audiences.
- Thai-made Y-series have primarily targeted the *sao-wai* market, both domestically and internationally, consisting mostly of heterosexual women.
- Fan events
- Fan service



BL as an Agent of Change?

# BL as an Agent of Change?

- May be?
- May be not?

