

Evolving Thai Homoeroticism, Male Nudity, and Multiple Masculinities in Gay Magazines Since the 1980s-2010s

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Received: August 2, 2022 Revised: November 1, 2022 Accepted: November 24, 2022

Abstract

This article details the masculine imaging of young male nude models. They posed for the homoerotic photos published in Thai gay magazines from the 1980s to the early 2010s, analyzing how these images reflected patterns of male homosexual desire. We consider how Thai gay men perceived these masculine images and how the representation of male nudity responded to and sustained Thai gay men's sexual imaginations. It is not only the textual forms of discourse in the articles published in Thai gay magazines that tell us about the country's gay culture and history. The images of the naked men photographed in these magazines tell us much about the culture of masculinity in Thailand, and the roles of media and the market in the formation and evolution of Thai gay culture. Drawing on visual sources, we investigate the relationships between male nudity, homoeroticism, and gay men as they were linked to one another in the consumer culture that formed the matrix within which modern Thai gay identity evolved over the three decades from the 1980s to the 2010s. Five male body types are identified in gay Thai magazines across the three-decade period of this study: the natural body, the muscular body, the metrosexual body, the full-frontal nude body, and the male body with tattoos and earrings. We explore the cultural and social contexts behind these homoerotic relations and the changing representations of the masculinity of the Thai male body. This article details Thai gay men's desire for masculine sexual partners, drawing on the images in gay magazines to gain insight into the changing types of masculinity that Thai gay men have regarded as sexually desirable across recent decades.

Keywords: Homoeroticism, Masculine body, Male nudity, Thai gay magazines, Homosexual desire

Introduction

The history of homoerotic images in Thai gay magazines contrasts with situation in the West. The full-color erotic male centerfolds that were a mainstay of Thai gay magazines from their inception in the early 1980s tell us much about the ideals of masculinity in the country. Most notably, the diversity of the imaging was published in the many commercial gay magazines released onto the Thai market. The years following the publication of the country's first commercially successful magazine for gay men, *Mithuna Junior*, in 1983 revealed that

there are multiple ideals of masculinity in Thailand, not just one hegemonic form of masculinity (Duangwises & Jackson, 2021). These various ideals are related to class, notably, working class versus middle class, and ethnicity, mainly Thai versus Chinese versus Caucasian. Ideals of masculinity have also changed in response to the international cinematic media circulated in Thailand, such as the muscular, gym-toned Caucasian male body typified by Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the lithe East Asian male body on display in the movies of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Further factors influencing changes in masculine ideals have been changing fashions following in the wake of economic development, such as the metrosexual and the rise of tattoos and body art, as well as the impacts of both Western and Asian gay tourism in Thailand.

Notable changes in the styles of masculinity imaged and reflected in Thai gay magazines over the decades are transitions from the masculine style of Thai boxers and athletes to the metrosexual and, more recently, to that of the bodybuilder. The history of changes in the sourcing and origin of male models in Thai gay magazines also tells us much about the changing patterns of the commercial gay scene in Thailand. In the first Thai gay magazines in the early 1980s, the male models mainly were sportsmen, while in the second half of that decade most models were male sex workers from gay bars. In the 1990s, the models for gay magazine centerfolds were men from the evolving fitness and gym culture. In comparison, in the early 2010s, the newly established commercial modeling agencies became a significant source of the magazines' models. Moreover, from the 1980s to the early 2010s, there was a trend toward more sexually explicit images and representations.

The history of homoerotic images of male nudity in Thai gay magazines the situation in the West. In Western societies, especially the United States, the dominant masculinity found in gay porn magazines and movies has typically been represented through the big-muscled male body. This type of hypermasculinity reflects ideas that the muscular male body is seductive and sexually, attractive. In the 1940s, Bob Mizer's Athletic Model Guild influenced Western gay culture. His male models all had big muscles developed through bodybuilding and were photographed for the magazine *Physique Pictorial*, first published in 1951. While ostensibly presented as a male health magazine, this publication was especially popular among American homosexual men at a time when same-sex relations were still illegal (Cagle, 2000; Esco ffie 2009; Poirier-Poulin, 2021; Waugh, 1996). In mid-20th century Western gay cultures, bodybuilding and muscular male physiques became central to the imaging of homoerotic desire. At this time same-sex relationships existed under a heteronormative regime that often labeled homosexual men as being mentally, sexually perverted, and effeminate (Warner, 1993; 1999). As a result, gay people felt guilty and tried to create a more masculine presentation in avoid and counter social opprobrium. This social condition of widespread homophobia led many gay men in Western societies to exercise to develop bigger muscles. This development of the gym culture among gay men also challenged the norms of heterosexuality and binary gender representation. Muscular gay men exist between the gender culture poles of strong masculinity and soft femininity and, as such, da Destabilize the binary upon which heterosexual norms are constituted (Lahti, 1998; Pronger, 2000). In this study, we contend that the male models represented in Thai gay magazines do not focus on big muscles like bodybuilders but rather emphasise forms of masculinity based on notions of being good looking and charming.

Methodology

This study is based on data obtained from gay magazines published from the mid-1980s to the early 2010s. The selected gay magazines include *Mithuna*, *Morakot*, *Midway*, *Neon*, *Male*, *Weekend Men*, *GR Male*, *Male Mini*, *Grace Male*, *Door*, *Door Dek*, *Heat*, *H*, *K*, *Body*, *Need+*, *Step*, *Stage*, *Born*, *Hey*, *Firm*, *KFM* and *Full*. In this article, notes from these magazines' editors, interviews with the male models, and readers' letters are also used as sources of information. These data have been selected and analyzed in accordance with the topic studied. We detail the sexualized representation of the male nude in different social and cultural contexts, tracing how the body images of the male models from whom Thai gay men came to understand their homosexuality reflected changing ideas of masculinity from the 1980s to the early 2010s. As masculine ideals evolved across the decades, older forms of the masculine male body were not superseded but rather remained as alternatives in an increasingly complex gender culture of multiple masculinities that came to exist as options and matters of taste and preference for different gay men. In Thailand, the homosexual desires and imagination of gay-identified men have been formed within a consumer culture of sexual commodities. In the period covered in this study, gay print media magazines were the main source of homoerotic images and materials for Thai gay men. It is in relation to the published record provided by these magazines that we can understand the experience of homoerotic feelings among Thai gay men. Gay magazines also form an archive of the cultural history of the Thai male nude and its intimate association with the country's modern gay culture. Although mainstream Thai society and the Thai police have typically seen gay magazines as pornographic publications, they nonetheless represent and reflect cultural attitudes toward the masculine body within the country's complex gender culture. The multiplicity of masculinities and body images represented across the three decades in which gay magazines were the dominant media form in Thai gay culture reflected different ages, classes, ethnicities, and social and economic backgrounds. The dominant masculine body image at each point in time reflected the social and cultural transformations and the changing lifestyles of Thai gay men at that historical moment.

Conceptual framework

This study uses the theoretical framework of queer studies to understand the diversity of gay culture that exists in a non-Western society. It is argued that Western gay culture is not directly reproduced in other societies, and we demonstrate that under the capitalist consumer culture that dominates and facilitates the formation of modern gay identity in Thailand, there are no fixed gay stereotypes. We draw upon Pereira and Ayrosa's (2012) observations on gay and heterosexual aesthetics as a framework for understanding Thai gay culture. Pereira and Ayrosa (2012) detail how homosexual men try to live well with heterosexual men in conflict-free situations. Their study is based on gay life in Brazil, where there can be different possible interactions between heterosexual men and gay men. Within Brazil's consumer culture gay men seek sexual pleasure in gay bars while forming friendships and living with heterosexual men in public life. When applied to gay men in Thai society, it is found that in the 1980s, Thai gay men showed themselves in gay bars and sought sexual pleasure from bar boys as well as enjoying the pleasure of looking at naked male models in gay magazines. At that time, heterosexual masculinity in Thai society was an important commodified product that fueled the imagination and sexual pleasure of gay men. It can be said that the aesthetics of the masculine male body was the form of beauty that Thai gay men used to satisfy their sexual emotions and to find happiness and well-being as self-accepting gay person.

Naked young male models and Thai gay people. Those old and that gay.

Young men of diverse sexual identities became male models in Thailand's gay magazines. In the 1980s, interviews accompanying magazines' photospreads of the models for the cover and centerfold of each issue revealed that models were typically from lower-income working-class backgrounds, had an average age of 18 to 25 years, and many identified as bisexual (*bi*) or straight (*phu-chai*) (Duangwises, 2003). This indicates that these young men were often comfortable working with gay people and being photographed for gay magazines, suggesting a degree of sexual flexibility and adaptability. This has also been the case in the Thai gay bar scene since the 1970s, with many young working-class heterosexual and bisexual men coming to work as *dek bar* or rent boys (Duangwises, 2010). Many working-class young men with limited education qualifications entered the forms of a homosexual community centered on commercial bars because of the economic opportunities provided. This phenomenon reflects the type of patron-client relationship between upper- and middle-class gay men, on the one hand, and working-class bisexual and straight men, on the other hand, that was at the center of Bangkok's commercial gay sexual culture in the 1970s and 1980s (Duangwises, 2010). In the 1980s, the Thai gay male "gaze" was structured by class difference, whereby the customers of gay magazines were middle class while the images of male bodies that they consumed were of working-class men. This form of visual consumption had a similar class structure to the male sex work that dominated Bangkok's commercial gay scene in this period, where working- *Mithuna* magazine provided the following brief introduction to the *deck bar* which was the cover and centerfold model for that issue.

Class men sold their bodies to middle-class men in gay venues. In the 1980s, middle-class gay men consumed working class male bodies, both visually in gay magazines and in practice through sex work. For example, in one 1988 issue:

My name is Tum. I'm working at Adam Bar in Soi Rong Nang Pradiphat. It seems like I'm a twentieth century Adam. I don't have any lover as my Eve, but actually that doesn't worry me. My Eve could be anybody, and not necessarily a woman. You, gay people, could be my lover. If you feel the same way, come talk with me at Adam Bar. I'll take you to Eden, the heavenly garden where Adam and Eve made love. (*Mithuna* magazine, 1988, p. 98)

The fact that a young man posed as a model for a gay magazine cannot itself be taken as an indicator of his sexual identity. Many models viewed posing as models as an economic opportunity, not as an expression of their sexual identity. In the interviews published in gay magazines, many models described posing for the photo shoots as "challenging" (*tha-thai*) while also viewing it positively as a "new experience" (*prasopkan mai*). Many stated that they were "impressed" (*prathap-jai*) when working with gay people, although they had no previous experience with homosexual relations. In videotape interviews of male models, they expressed an adaptable attitude to learn from different sexual experiences and an openness of mind to learn from gay people.

1980s to late 1980s: The aestheticism of the natural male body

During the 1980s, Thai gay magazines often represented male nudes in artistic settings in combination with poetic stanzas eulogizing the male body and masculine beauty. These poems invoked loneliness, quietness, and calmness as dominant themes in providing a discursive context that sought to guide viewer-readers' interpretations of the feelings of the photographed model. Models were often posed with natural landscapes as backdrops, such as forests, mountains, rivers, lakes, seashores, and rice fields. They were also presented in urban settings such as sports stadiums, swimming pools, office buildings, street scenes, and studios. To add interest, the models were also often dressed in traditional Thai costumes, cowboy hats, boots, and sports wears. These costumes constituted a visual narrative for an implied story within which the model was a presumed actor.

According to the interviews published in the first issues of the gay magazines, the models were young straight men whom the magazines' editors had usually met by chance -- such as when commuting on the bus, eating at food stalls, shopping in a mall or when walking along the street -- and invited them to be amateur models. Some of the men interviewed stated that they were friends with other young men who had already posed as models, and who subsequently introduced them to the magazine editor. Some were contacts of the magazines' house photographers, who invited men they met jogging and exercising in public parks and at swimming pools to work as nude models. In addition to finding male models by happenstance encounters, some magazines also invited readers to apply to become models by sending in a nude photo and profile, when they might be invited to do to a photo audition.

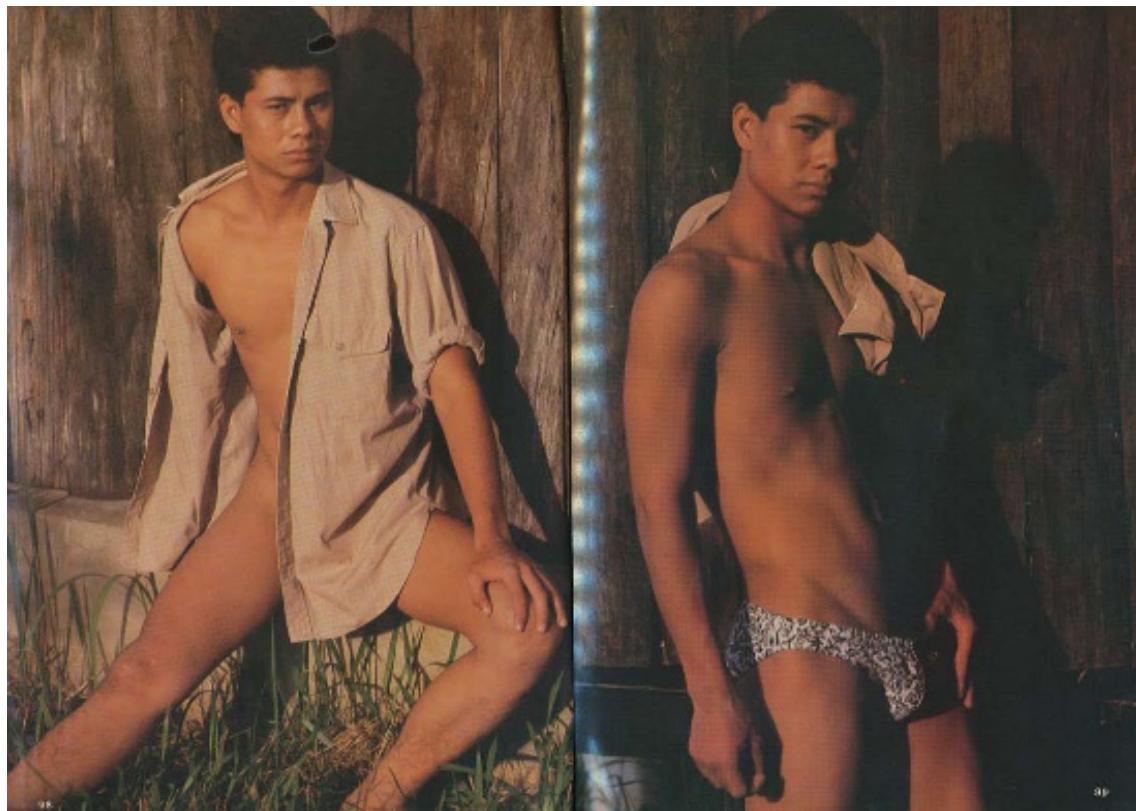


Figure 1 Male centerfold models in early issues of *Mithuna Junior* magazine

Source: *Mithuna Junior* magazine (1985)

In the late 1980s, the magazines' male models were increasingly drawn from *dek bar* or rent boys who worked at one or other of Bangkok's expanding number of gay bars. The photographic and interview profiles given to *dek bars* sex workers helped the bars that they worked at to attract more customers and may also have contributed to the model himself gaining more personal customers. *Dek bar* sex workers were usually young straight men who identified with the label *phu-chai* or *phu-chai thae*, and whose masculine presentation was attractive to gay customers. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Thai gay culture was dominated by attitudes and notions of effeminacy, with many gay men identifying themselves in feminine terms. At a time when notions of gay masculinity had yet to form and consolidate, gay men's desires for masculine sexual partners were fulfilled by commercially mediated relations with heterosexual men. Masculine *dek bar* rent boys responded to the sexual needs of gay men who saw themselves, as well as other gay men, in feminine terms, which meant that these feminine-identified men did not regard other gay men as attractive sexual partners. It was because many gay men excluded other gay men as possible sexual partners, because they saw them in feminine terms, that masculine heterosexual men, including *dek bar*, were the sources of sexually attractive male models in the Thai gay magazines of the 1980s.

During the later 1980s, *Midway* gained a reputation as the gay magazine that consistently included photos of the most handsome men. Thai gay readers expressed the view that *Midway* was good at choosing handsome men to be its nude models. *Midway*'s models were often from the south of Thailand, a region known for men with dark tan skin tones and sharp, intense (*khom-khem*) facial features, similar to ethnic Malay men from neighboring Malaysia. Thai men from different regions and ethnic groups have different skin tones, which in Thai are described as existing along a continuum from "dark" or "intense" (*khem*) to "white" or "fair" (*khao*). Thai men from the south of the country are regarded as having "dark" brown or tan skin tones, while Chinese men, as well as ethnic Thai men from the north, are described as having "white" (*khao*) skin. Skin tone is a constant topic of conversation in Thailand, and as a society in which men's complexions extend across a wide range from dark to fair, particular skin tones also become objects of sexual preference for many Thai gay men. As the number of Thai gay magazines increased in the second half of the 1980s, different magazines found their market niche by emphasizing models with a particular ethnic look or skin tone, whether dark or fair. While *Midway* tended to choose darker-looking men as their models, *Morakot*, by contrast, tended to select fair-complexioned younger-looking men who often exemplified the ethnic Chinese look that in Thai is called *ti*, derived from a Chinese dialectical term for a boy or youth.

Midway magazine also featured men who had won prizes at "handsome man" male model contests on its cover and in centerfolds. In the 1980s, male model contests were organized by gay bars as activities to promote their business, with the events proving highly popular with Bangkok's gay men, who often flocked to see the male beauty parades. The contestants were usually working-class men, not necessarily *dek bar*, who needed the additional income that could be won from the prizes that were awarded. The winners of these contests were also approached by gay magazines such as *Midway* to be cover and centerfold models. Because of its success in engaging the winners of gay bars' handsome man contests. Its models, *Midway* magazine became the best-selling gay magazine in the early 1990s, with the editor proudly reporting his magazine's premier market share in the editorial of one issue in 1991.

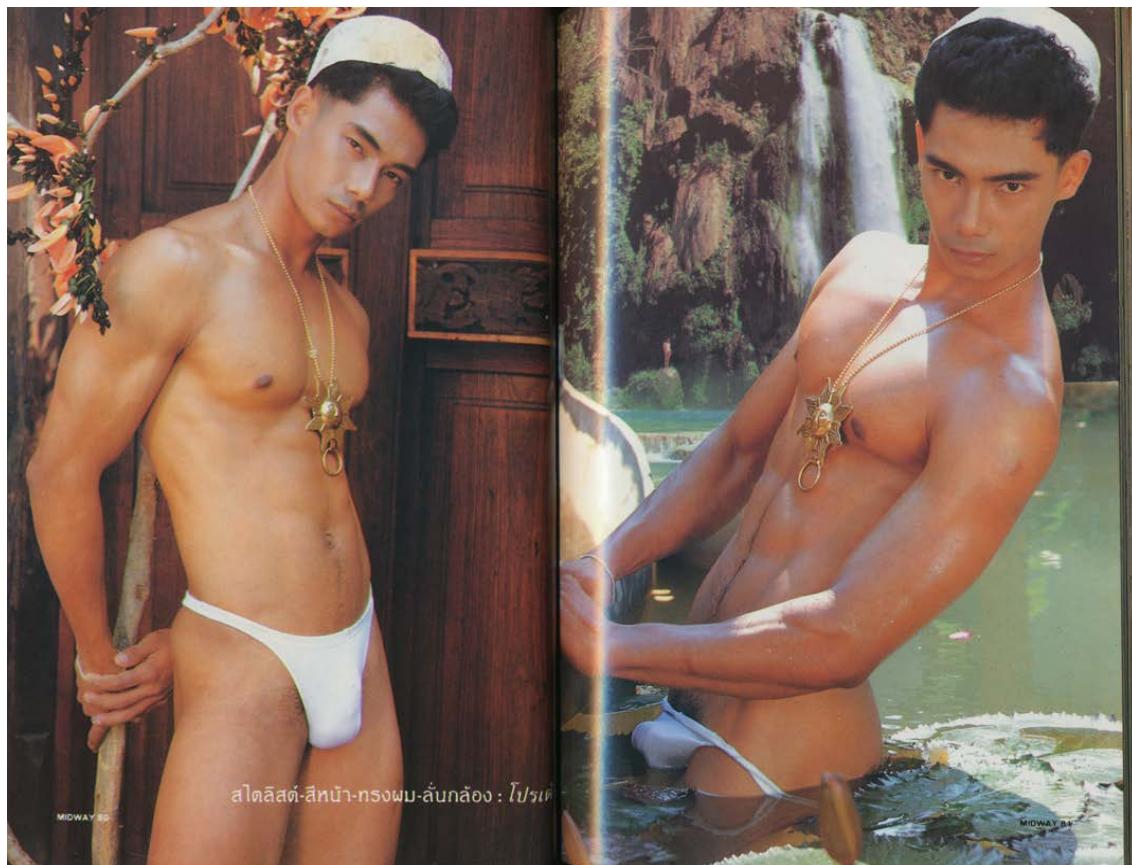


Figure 2 Photos of the dark, tanned (*khem*) look that characterized many of the models in *Midway* magazine

Source: *Midway* magazine (1989)

The early 1990s to mid-1990s: The arrival of muscular male models

As the Thai economic boom continued into the first half of the 1990s, growing numbers of gay magazines were published and competed for a market share in the country's increasingly well-off gay communities. There were some differences between the older magazines that had started publishing in the previous decade and the new-comer publications. As the number of magazines increased, competition for gay marketing advertising intensified. The prime indicator of a successful magazine had consistently handsome models, with those magazines with the most erotic poses of handsome, sexy men selling the most copies.

Some of the first generations of gay magazines, such as *Neon*, adapted to the increasingly competitive marketing environment by approaching muscular bodybuilders (*nak klam*) to pose nude for its centerfolds. *Neon* also published a special "secret" mail order-only volume; *Top Male Models Laid Bare* (*Pleuay yort nai-baep*), that included full-frontal nude pictures of its bodybuilder male models, revealing the penis that Thai anti-pornography legislation prevented from being visible in the openly marketed editions of the magazine. This kind of secret volume was very popular among Thai gay men, although it was also very expensive, with readers needing to pay from 200 to 400 baht for this type of album, several times more than the cover price of a standard issue of *Neon*.

Including images of muscular and completely naked men was an innovation of Thai gay magazines in this period. Thai gay magazines began to be interested in representing the muscled bodies of sportsmen and bodybuilders who worked out in fitness clubs and gyms. This differed from earlier images of more lean-bodied men who, while fit, had athletic musculature developed from playing sports rather than bodybuilding. The new look of more muscular Thai male bodies followed Western bodybuilding practices of gym training and weightlifting. In the early 1990s, male models began to talk more about their interest in bodybuilding in their interviews, such as the following excerpt from an interview with a centerfold model in a 1991 issue of *Midway* magazine:

I love to exercise and go to the body building club at university every day. Actually, I have a slim, tall body. My muscles aren't any bigger than guys who have a shorter, broader physiques. While I've been exercising doing weight training, I haven't got big muscles yet, so I'll need to keep training for a longer period. (*Midway* magazine, 1991, p. 91)

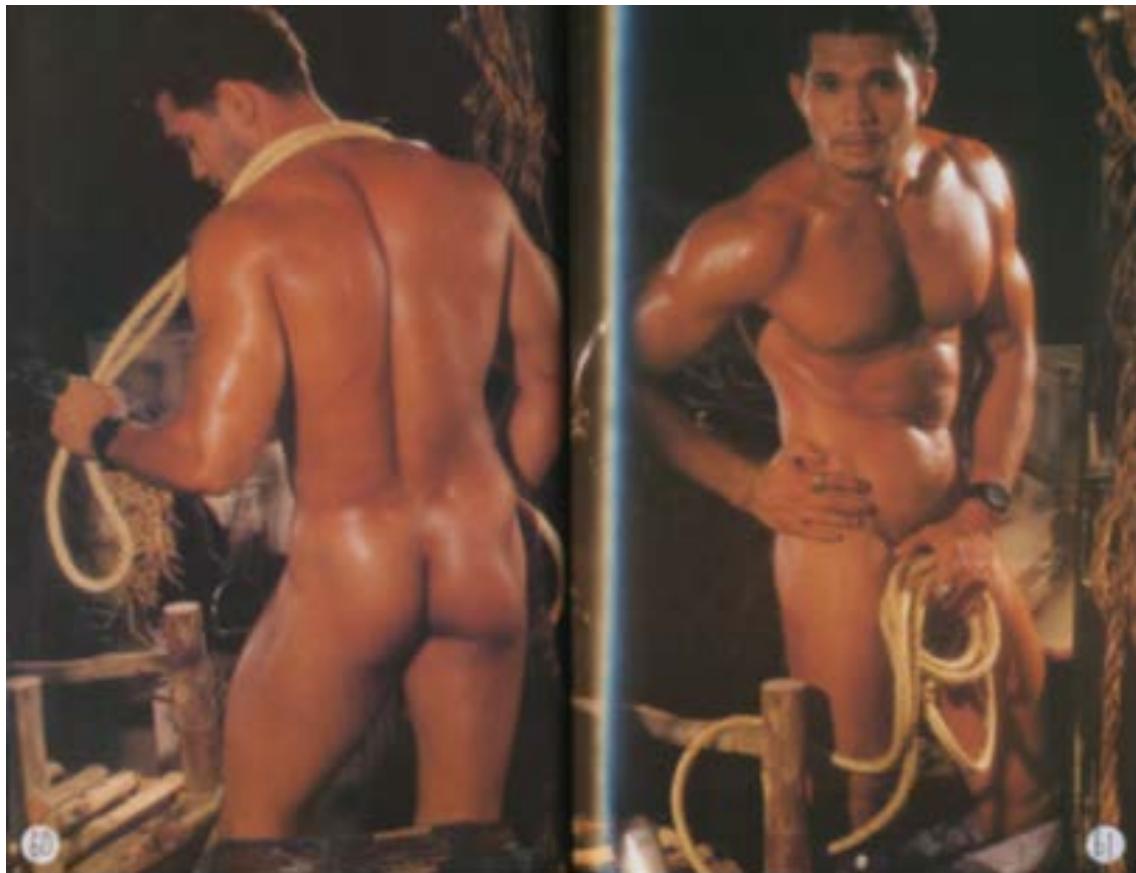


Figure 3 Muscular body of a male centrefold model

Source: *Neon* magazine (1990)

Also in the 1990s, gay bars began organizing muscle man (*nak klam*) contests, with men with gym-developed physiques wearing bikini briefs also performing A-Go Go dancing. Most of the male contestants were *dek bar* rent boys who worked in gay bars, especially A-Go Go bars, and who developed their physiques by training and working out in the small fitness rooms that increasing numbers of gay bars installed on site. *Dek bar* needed to build up their bodies to attract gay clients. One male model interviewed by *Neon* magazine in 1990 related that he wanted to have muscles like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Hollywood movies were highly popular among Thai audiences and stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose movies *Total Recall* (1990) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) were high-grossing releases in Thailand, had a major influence on Thai men's masculine images. Arnold Schwarzenegger was a significant inspiration for bodybuilding (*phor-kai*) in Thailand, and in the 1990s, many Thai men viewed him as a masculine idol.

The growing interest of Bangkok gay men in developing muscular bodies found expression and support in the rapid expansion in the city in the number of gay saunas, where Thai gay men could find sexual partners. Saunas became highly popular in Bangkok in the first half of the 1990s, being much sought out venues where gay men could meet for sex and explore their sexual fantasies. Many saunas opened in Bangkok at the beginning of the 1990s. Nine saunas opened in 1992 alone, including GG, Boss, Volt, Babylon, Adonis, Harrie's Gym, Colour, Otoko, and Colossus. Another new sauna, Colony, opened in 1993, followed by Obelisk in 1994. In advertising in gay magazines, these saunas were represented as men's health clubs and they introduced gyms and workout exercises to increasing numbers of Thai gay men beyond the older and much smaller community of Thai bodybuilders. All the new gay saunas included exercise and fitness rooms where gay patrons could work out and do weight training to develop their physiques. The gyms in gay saunas were venues where desirable muscular bodies were on display, becoming sites where gay men could perform a new, more robust image of Thai masculinity and where a big chest and a six-packs abdomen became commodities in affirming gay men's absolute maleness and sexual attractiveness.

In addition to saunas with gyms, the Tawan Bar located on Surawong road became the first Bangkok gay venue where muscular men worked as *dek off* male sex workers. The male sex workers at Tawan Bar developed their bodies by working out and weight training, often spending their days before going to work in the bar training in the open-air gym in the nearby Lumpini Park. Because this gym in Bangkok's biggest public park was free, it had already been a focus for working-class body builders in the city for several decades. Some of the *dek off* at the Tawan Bar, which became known colloquially as a *bar nak-klam* or "muscle man bar", were pictured as models in gay magazines.

Another new trend in the early 1990s was for gay magazines to sell videotapes that gave a behind-the-scenes look at the photo shoot for the centrefold model for each issue. These videos typically showed the model naked and included masturbation and a money_ shot ejaculation scene. However, the models were only filmed alone and the videos of photo shoots did not include any oral or anal sexual intercourse between male models. *Midway* magazine called its videos "Sneaking a Look at the Male Model" (*aep du nai-baep*), which sold for 600 Baht, while *Male* magazine's photo shoot videos were sold for 700 Baht. As the decade of the 1990s progressed, the videos of magazine photo shoot of single models evolved into a local form of pornography. Later in the late 1990s, Thai gay magazine videos showed two or three male models having both oral and anal sex.

Nude male models were central to the success of the new gay magazines published at this time. Among the new publications that competed in the increasingly crowded Thai gay

magazine market in the early 1990s, *Male*, *Weekend Men*, and *GR* were notable for representing increasingly muscular Thai male models. *Male* magazine also included a regular column interviewing famous sportspeople and athletes, who talked about exercise, personality, and masculinity. *Male* magazine also published articles about sports and health to guide Thai gay men in developing their exercise regimen and perfecting the musculature of their bodies.

Along with the booming economic growth in East and Southeast Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, came new fashions in sport sports and health that accented muscular male bodies. Having gym-built musculature became increasingly central to notions of attractive masculinity. In addition to American male body culture influences via Hollywood, Thai male fashion also changed in response to Asian fashion and lifestyles optimized by Hong Kong movie star influential in Thailand the Chinese-American Michael Wong, who came to work in the country in 1993 and 1994. The handsome Wong was a sex idol of many Thai women and gay men, and in 1994 the Domon men's underwear company had been a consistent advertising sponsor of *Mithuna Junior* from the magazine's inception, published a special magazine of its male models in the nude, including Wong. Wong's masculine body was also shown in music videos, movies, advertising, and fashion magazines. In the popular 1994 Thai soft-core porn movie "Chaophraya Dragon" (*Mangkorn Chaophraya*), he played a nude love scene with Thai sex symbol actress Morakot Maneechai. Wong's masculine image impacted the style of many Thai men, who became increasingly interested in taking care of bodies and learning to build muscle mass.

The mid-to late 1990s: The rise of the new metrosexual man

The second decade of male nude centerfolds in Thai gay magazines in the latter half of the 1990s was influenced by the new sense of the trendy Thai metrosexual man interested in fashion, personal grooming, and beauty. The metrosexual look was a new trend in urban lifestyles reflected in clothes, personal grooming, healthy food and lifestyle, cosmopolitan tastes in music, movies, entertainment, and travel. This kind of urban lifestyle was reflected in modern characteristics of charming male models and gay magazines published in this period often photographed models whose style reflected the trendy metrosexual image. Information about fashion and lifestyles expanded rapidly with new communication technologies, pagers, mobile phones, and the Internet increased in Thai society. The first commercial Internet service in Thailand was initiated in March 1995 by Internet Thailand Public Company Limited, now known as INET. This context reflected the changing ways that Thai people received and responded to an expanding variety of sources of information, moreover, the Internet also allowed gay foreigners, both from the West and from East and Southeast Asia, to learn about gay entertainment in Thailand. Thai gay men could contact foreign gay men directly through the internet, which gave Thai gays the opportunity to quickly access information about trends and events in Western and Asian gay communities.

The male models and sex workers who worked in the gay bars in the Silom and Suriwong areas of Bangkok predominantly sought out clients from Western gay men. These young go-go boy sex workers often came from Northeast Thailand and had darker, tan skin tones, a body image that, rightly or wrongly, was widely believed to be appreciated by and attractive to gay men from the West. Darker skinned models often appeared in Thai gay magazines in the 1980s. However, from the mid-1990s, these local young men were marginalized within Thai gay print media as not being sexually attractive in terms of the new urban lifestyle trend of the metrosexual gay man. Within Bangkok's middle-class gay culture, darker-skinned Thai men were often discriminated against because of stereotypes that they

were poor, uneducated rural men who made a living from sex work for gay tourists. With the rise of the metrosexual look, fairer-skinned men gradually came to be perceived as more sexually attractive because they symbolized more sophisticated urban middle-class lifestyles. With the rise of the metrosexual, darker-complexioned male models from Bangkok's gay bars were seen as outdated and were looked down upon as fairer complexioned models became more popular as symbolizing a more highly educated gay man with good taste.

In response to these trends, gay magazines published in the second half of the 1990s increasingly turned to fairer-complexioned men for their male models. This change was paralleled by a declining interest among Bangkok gay men to symbolizing in gay bars, which had been the main venues of Thai gay social life in the previous decades. Gay bars and rent boys declined in popularity and came to be seen as old-fashioned gay venues that catered primarily to Western gay tourists. The new preferred sites of Bangkok's gay social life were the increasing number of saunas where younger gay men could meet sexual partners. Symbolizing in saunas, many of which included restaurants, gyms, and organized special events, came to be perceived as characteristic of the gay metrosexual lifestyle in which urban gay men could present their sexual identity and meet fairer-complexioned educated friends and partners. Gay university students and higher income professional gay men together in saunas, which became sites for embodying a new set of masculine images that reflected a concern for exercise and personal health care. Consequently, many gay magazines in this period published images of fairer-complexioned male models in accordance with this new sense of masculinity and sexual attractiveness.



Figure 4 Tony Sandstrom, a popular 1990s male model who appeared on the covers of *Male* and *Grace Male* magazines
Source: *Grace Male* 1990

Grace Male was a new magazine that began publishing in the mid-1990s and became well known for its Eurasian or *luk-khreung* models from mixed Thai-Caucasian backgrounds, whose fair complexions reflected the increasingly popular metrosexual look. Chinese-looking male models also became increasingly popular in gay magazines in this period, viewed as attractive and symbolizing international recognition. Magazines such as *Male* and *Grace Male* also included Chinese male models from Singapore and Hong Kong among their centerfolds. The gay magazines published by Male Company, including *Male*, *Male Mini*, *GR*, and *Grace Male*, were all prominent in selecting male models who represented the metrosexual look. Tony Sandstrom was a viral male model among Thai gay audiences in the mid-1990s because of his Asian looks and gym-toned body. Publication of his nude pictures in issues of *Male* and *Grace Male* led to these magazines selling out quickly. The Male group of magazines introduced a new sense of the Thai gay man as someone who keeps in touch with new trends and evolving urban lifestyles. Metrosexual men's fair complexions were seen as clean and masculine. This new masculine ideal was of a man of good taste, higher education, a healthy body, more money, and who worked in the city. This model of gay manhood was deemed appropriate for the 1990s urban gay lifestyle that was based not on paying for sex with rent boys at gay bars but rather socialising in saunas, discotheques, karaoke cafes, fitness centers, and other entertainment venues where one could look for metrosexual men of similar backgrounds as sexual partners. Metrosexual gay men wanted to see more mature-looking male models of working age. This style that contrasted with the younger-looking rent boys who had dominated the centerfolds of Thai gay magazines in the previous decade.

The *Male* magazines broke the mold set by the gay magazines established in the 1980s and presented local male models from working-class backgrounds and gay bars. *Male* and its sibling gay magazines responded to the new era of the Internet and the information society, with their models presented in metrosexual and trendy fashions that reflected the mainstream consumer culture of Thailand's booming capitalist economy in the first half of the 1990s. The male models of the 1990s were more mature men who were represented as having good jobs and owning their own houses and car. Tony Sandstrom, who was of mixed Norwegian and North American native Indian background and worked as a male model in Bangkok and other Asian metropolises, exemplified the metrosexual man who was the gay ideal of the 1990s. In the 1990s, an increasing range of sexy underwear was advertised in gay magazines. Sexy fashions in underwear, swimwear, bikini briefs, G-strings and short pants were a significant dimension of metrosexual gay men's erotic lives, a self-confident sexually attractive male body. Sexy underwear was an expensive product that only middle-class men could afford.

Some of the older gay magazines did not adapt to the new metrosexual environment and the shift of Thai gay life from bars to saunas, consequently finding themselves with progressively declining market shares. *Neon*, *Mithuna*, *Midway* and *Morakot* magazines all ceased publication in the second half of the 1990s. In addition to maintaining their original focus on gay bars, these magazines were also the first victims of print mediums' confrontation with the new information technologies of the internet and online communications. Gay websites presented new challenges to traditional print media, operating at a much lower cost and creating new channels for younger gay men to chat with other gays and find sex partners much more quickly. Print magazines faced increasing costs. It costs to pay professional male models to pose for centerfolds, even more if the model is famous, such as Tony Sandstrom. Rent boys from gay bars were a comparatively low-cost source of models, but in the 1990s they were not regarded as attractive as famous Eurasian male models. There were notable physical differences between Thai rent boys and mixed-race professional models. Many rent

boys had smaller, slimmer physiques and tan skin, while mixed-race models were taller and of fair complexion. Also, in the 1990s, Thai gay readers were more interested in seeing national athletes and the winners of the increasingly popular male model contests in erotic poses as centerfolds models. The dream man contest of the Thai version of *Cleo* magazine for women was also viral among the younger generation of Thai gay men. Men who participated in this contest represented the trendy new metrosexual lifestyles, with many being media celebrities and famous people with higher education and high income. Certainly, sexy men in this contest would be attractive to Thai gay men.

Early to mid-2000s: Full-frontal nudity of male models

In the first years of the new millennium, Thai gay magazines became even more explicit in their depiction of the male body and sexual expression. New gay magazines at this time included *Door*, *Door Dek*, *H*, *K*, *Dik*, *Body* and *Heat*, all of which challenged Thai censorship laws by publishing images of full-frontal nudity and for the first time revealed models' penises and sex scenes in mass-marketed magazines. This new generation of gay magazines represented the emergence of mass-marketed gay pornography. Not only did they show models' penises, but they also used explicit language in articles about male libido and sexual relations. Terms such as *khuay* "cock", *yet* "to fuck", *tut* "ass", and *ru tut* "ass hole" were standard in these magazines' articles. Some models in these new magazines were shown with erect penis and, occasionally, having sex with other men. It was revolutionary for Thai gay magazines to include full-frontal photographs of the erect male penis and ejaculation.

The editor of *Door* wrote that the magazine promised to bring new sexual excitement to Thai gay men, stating that sex is enjoyable and everyone should have access to the pleasures of good sex, sexual attractiveness and intimacy in responding to sexual needs. Human beings should seek out new arousing sexual feelings, stated the editor, who proclaimed that reading an erotic story was not a sign of sexual addiction or obsession, as claimed by moral conservatives, but rather a source of sexual pleasure and satisfaction. In Thai, *Door* is an abbreviated form of *krador*, a crude term for the penis used among Thai men. *Door* is also a play on words, being an English translation of the Thai terms *pratu* and *thawan*, both of which mean "door" but also have the sense of an orifice of the body. The compounds *pratu lang* "back door" and *thawan nak* "heavy door or orifice", are respectively colloquial and formal terms for "anus". *Door* thus had a double meaning in Thai and English, simultaneously referring to the cock and anus.



Figure 6 Male models of *Door* magazine
Source: *Door* magazine 2000

The editor of *K* magazine, *Khom Khetkan*, said that the *Body Shot* and *Big Cock Club* columns in his publication were intended as venues for every reader to send in a photo of their penis to be published in the magazine. The name of this magazine is the first letter of the romanized spelling of the Thai word *khuay* or “cock”, with many gay men playfully evading the heavy sanctions against using this word in public by saying the English letter “K” when referring to the penis. Some men, for example, stated that they had been introduced to *K* magazine by gay men they had had sex with and after reading the *Body Shot* and *Big Cock Club* columns thought that they had a big penis and sent in photos of their cock to be published in the magazine. All the men who had the photo of their penis published in the magazine were interviewed to talk about their sexual experiences and their sexual organ. While their cock was revealed, the faces of these amateur models were usually concealed. *K* magazine, also referred to as *K-MAG*, was represented in the Thai gay community with the slogan of “underground sex” (*sex tai-din*). In these more explicit magazines, male models were usually younger-looking men with sexy bodies. A muscular, hunky body was not necessary but models should have a nice face and somewhat developed chest, legs, and arms. Importantly, the models in these magazines were photographed with an erection and masturbating (*chak wao*) and a cum shot (*nam taek*) to the camera. The male models in these magazines could be any young man from a gay bar or someone off the street. The cum shot scenes in these magazines became increasingly important selling points for this new generation of sexually explicit gay print media.

The trend of this new wave of gay magazines was to emphasize sexual arousal. *H* magazine included a column, *The Way They Were*, publishing the arousing stories of men who had had good sexual experiences. In the first issue of *Heat*, the magazine’s editor, *Tawan Songklot*, wrote that he wanted to bring happiness to gay men by presenting more sexually exciting stories. He wanted it to be as if semen flowed from the magazine with increasing numbers of photos of the penis and male models fucking being published in the magazine. Photos of masturbation, oral sex, anal sex and kissing were included to illustrate sex stories that were related using sexually explicit language. The male model for *Heat*’s first issue said he had not been shy when doing the sex scene with another man. He thought it was just a kind of work but confessed that he had felt especially horny when performing in front of the camera because he had had to get an erection in order to sexually penetrate the other male model and have him suck his cock. He also said that after the magazine was published he expected to be contacted by many rich gay people wanting to have sex with him, but he would tell them that he had a girlfriend. In fact, he lived with a gay friend and both of them had had sexual relations and had fallen in love with each other. From his story, we could understand that while male models in this period may have been photographed engaging in homosexual practices and exhibiting same-sex desire, they were often represented as having complex identities that merged straight, bisexual and gay.

New gay magazines published from 2006 to early 2010s: Tattoos, earrings and the decorated male body

A wide range of new gay magazines started publication in the second half of the first decade of the new century. These were often photo album format magazines focused on male nude pictures with significantly less written content than those published in earlier decades. These new magazines and their first year of publication were: *Stage* (2006), *Menthol* (2006), *I Am Guy* (2006), *Dude* (2007), *Step* (2007), *Need+* (2007), *Vzmen* (2007), *Real* (2007), *Born* (2009), *Hey* (2008), *The Boy Models Story* (2008), *Dguy* (2008), *Dark* (2010), *Firm* (2010),

Fresh Boy (2010), *Hero* (2010), *G Story* (2011), *Up* (2011), *Full* (2012), *KFM* (2012), and *Dophuchai* (2012). Most of these publications were soft-core porn magazines that represented attractive male models in arousing homoerotic images. A smaller number of new magazines were hardcore publications that included images of erect penises and oral and anal sexual activity. These hardcore magazines included *D Day* (2010), *Janraem* (2011), *Norngmon* (2012), *Nam Phrik Num* ("Spicy guys" 2012) and *Reuang Khorng Rao* ("Our stories" 2012). Some of the magazines published in the period 2006 to 2012 included a video compact disc or VCD with additional sexually explicit content that could be played on home computers or TVs via VCD players. The gay magazines in this period were usually sold with a VCD, which included a behind-the-scenes video of the modeling photo shoot and often included full frontal nudity and ejaculation. While of lower visual resolution quality than DVDs, VCD discs and players were much cheaper than DVD technology and in the early 2000s this visual format was the dominant video technology in Thailand, only being superseded by the rise of online visual content in the following decade. The male models who appeared in most of the softcore and hardcore magazines of this era could be contacted by gay clients, with the phone number of the agency the models worked for often being published or included on the accompanying VCD. Readers were informed that the models were available to provide sexual services. The hardcore magazines were especially up front in promoting the sexual services of their male models.

In this period, gay magazine editors could find new male models for their photo shoots by contacting the increasing number of private modeling agencies and model talent scouts, known in Thai as *maeo morng*, who were often effeminate gay men. These agencies and talent scouts often had a large number of male models on their books, many of whom were available to pose for photo shoots for gay magazines. Modeling businesses found a ready market among the large number of gay magazines that competed to find fresh new attractive young men for their copy. Most of the magazines in this period sold between 150 and 250 Baht, with male models typically paying about 10,000 baht for one photo shoot. It was a good business for both the male and the gay magazines, with handsome models with a good physique often landing many modeling or media jobs after being photographed in gay magazines. For example, Sorawit Paujirapanich, was photographed in *Need+* magazine. He was very popular among Thai gay men and worked in music videos.

In this period male body decoration became increasingly popular, with many models who posed for gay magazines wearing body paint and sporting tattoos and earrings. Although male models assumed a new look, other masculine images did not disappear. Various kinds of male body images were represented across the many gay magazines that competed in the latter years of the noughties and early 2010s. The painted body was an outstanding figure, with some male models having pictures and designs painted on their shoulders, neck, arm, chest, back, waist, thigh, leg or stomach. The fashion of body painting, tattoos and earrings also became increasingly popular among young straight men. Many young Thai men, especially working-class and vocational students, adopted the fashion of wearing decorative tattoos and having their ears pierced. This contrasted with the smooth clean metrosexual look that had been the ideal male body image in the final years of the twentieth century. The tattoos that have gained in popularity since the early 2000s are decorative designs unrelated to the religious symbolisms of the protective tattoos that Thai men have worn for several centuries and which are believed to acquire magical potency by being inscribed in the skin and empowered by ritual specialists such as monks and Brahmanical gurus. Rather than offering ritual protection, the newer tattoo designs, body painting and earrings, are regarded as aesthetic enhancements that accentuate a

man's masculine appeal and attractiveness. Tattoos on the upper arm or chest and black stud earrings have become signs of masculine sex appeal for many Thai gay men.

Some gay men, particularly muscle man, believe that tattoos enhance their masculinity. In the Thai context, the tattooing of sacred designs called *sak yan* has a long history as a male practice associated with sacredness, magic and supernatural potency. This a Buddhist monk carries out sacred tattooing or a lay adept called a *keji*, who is learned in incantations and magical designs. After being tattooed with a sacred design, a man would be required to respect Buddhist ethical precepts and control his behaviour. In ancient times, a man without a tattoo would be seen as a weakling, labeled in Thai as *khon orn-ae*. Thai men were tattooed to give them the appearance of strength and potency (Rachan, 2003: 19). However, in the present time, tattooing is regarded as a body art that anyone skilled in design can do, without a need for training in ritual traditions or Buddhist ethical practices (Niyomburana, 2015). Tattoos on the chest, arms and shoulders are especially popular among men who want to show off their muscles and six pack when they go shirtless or wear a sexy vest. Tattoos or painting on the exposed male body are now seen as attractive and as adding to a man's masculine charm.

This kind of fashion reflects changings ideas of the sexually appealing male appearance. The sexually attractive tattooed man should also exercise and work out in a gym or fitness studio in order to perfect the body beautiful in ways that accentuate his tattoo. That is, having a tattoo symbolizes a masculine culture of revealing the body for public display. In the early 2000s, mainstream women's fashion magazines often included sexy male models on their covers and in male fashion spreads, in the process becoming de facto gay magazines that competed for gay readers with the more explicit soft porn and hardcore magazines detailed above. Some male model contestants in events held at gay bars as well as rent boys also got tattoos to enhance their attractiveness. One especially popular male model in the early 2010s was Pirawit Pandaeng, whose muscular tattooed physique appeared on the covers of several gay magazines. Well-known in the Bangkok gay community as a sexy gay idol (*khwan-jai gay*), he also appeared in many sexy fashion shows and parties held in gay bars and discotheques.

Piercings and earrings became popular among young Thai men in this period because they believed these embellishments would make them more attractive to women. Some teenage boys expanded the piercing hole in their ear to create an open hollow in their earlobe. Moreover, some men began wearing several earrings in one ear. Young men who sported this cool trendy (*the*) look of male attractiveness were called *dek naeo*. Some men were afraid that wearing jewelry such as an ear stud would make them look gay, while others worried that wearing this fashion would make them look disreputable or like rebellious youth. There is a belief in the Thai context that having earring on the left is a sign of being gay. Nonetheless, straight Thai men like to wear an ear stud on their left ear. During this period, access to the Internet became increasingly widespread across all levels of Thai society and Thai gay men could find images of sexy male models in social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Erotic male pictures and video clips were increasingly posted and shared in cyber space and accessed from smartphones. The new information technology made it increasingly easy to access images of male models, and significantly the male nude pictures and behind-the-scenes videos that the latest crop of gay magazines marketed soon became easily downloadable from gay websites and mobile phone services. Within a few years, and by the end of the 2010s, Thai gay print media would cease publication, being unable to compete against the new online media.



Figure 7 A male model and his painted body and tattoo
Source: STEP (2010)

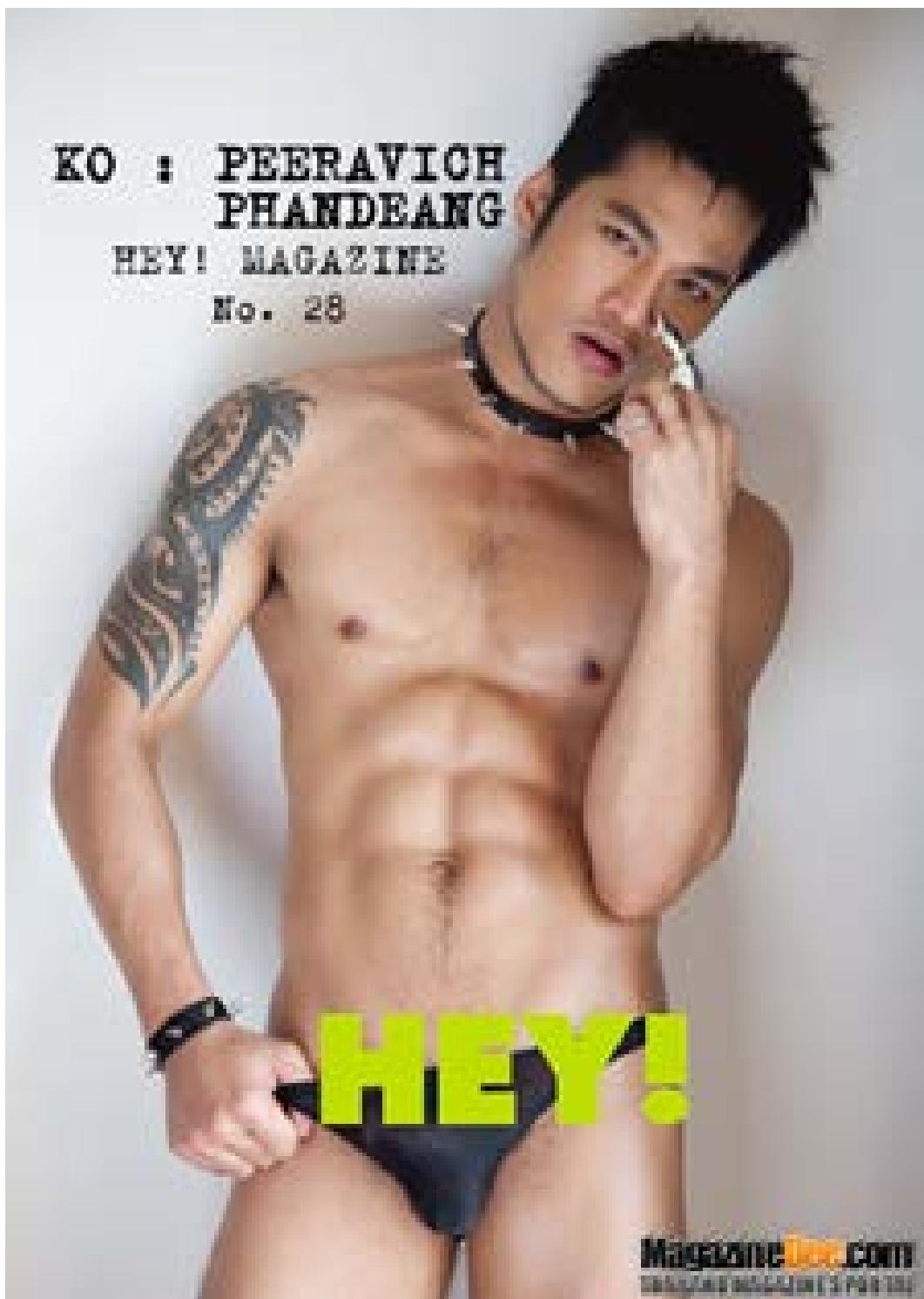


Figure 8 The photo of Pirawit Pandaeng
Source: *Hey! Magazine* 2010

The different male body images and Thai homoeroticism

The historical periods of Thai gay magazines and the different images and styles of masculinity that they represented across the three decades from the 1980s do not represent a singular model of masculine body images but rather reflect a set of changes when Thai men appropriated new forms of masculinity at the same time that older style masculine images persisted. It would be mistaken to see the new forms of masculinity as replacing the older ones. Rather, the older masculine body images developed and combined with the new ones in a dynamic process in which Thai men learnt to embody and practice masculine styles in their own experience. The following table summarizes the dominant style of masculinity represented in Thai gay magazines in different periods, which intersected with the evolving lifestyles of urban gay men and their appropriation of masculinity.

Table 1 Comparison of male body images in different periods

Period	Main characteristics of male body images presented in gay magazines	Representative gay magazines	Life in the Thai Gay Community
Mid- to late 1980s	Natural body of local straight men and rent boys	<i>Mithuna, Morakot, Midway, Neon</i>	Booming of gay bars and gay magazines
Early to mid-1990s	Muscular body of men who work out in gyms	<i>Male, Weekend Men, GR</i>	Rise of saunas, men's health clubs and video pornography
Mid- to late 1990s	Metrosexual body of urban men	<i>Male, Male Mini, Grace Male</i>	Arrival of escort services and gay websites
Early to mid-2000s	Full-frontal nudity of male models	<i>Door, Door Dek, Heat, H, K, Body</i>	Massage and spa services, booming of gay chat and websites
Mid-2000s to early 2010s	The painted male body, tattoos and earrings	<i>Need+, Step, Stage, Born, Hey, Firm, KFM, Full</i>	Sexy online video clips naked sauna coyote boys

The above table summarizes changing ideas of Thai masculinity as reflected in evolving male body images represented in gay magazines from the mid-1980s to the early 2010s. However, through these changes, the older forms of masculine body imaging were not fully replaced by the newer ones, but rather all persisted and coexisted, with each style coming to reflect the tastes and notions of masculine attractiveness of different groups of gay men. In the early 2010s, we could find the natural slim body of local young men represented in one gay magazine, while muscular sports men were represented in other gay magazines. This means that different decades are not fully categorized in terms of different types of male body images. Rather, we can see that in some periods some characteristics of male body images influenced

gay people's homoerotic perceptions. That is, the new kinds of eroticized male body images influenced the ways Thai gays understood and imagined their same-sex sexual desire. Since the beginning of the 2010s, Bangkok's gay scene has been characterized by multiple masculinities and diverse body images that are embodied and practiced by gay men of different ages, classes, ethnicities and social and economic backgrounds. That is, the dominant masculine body image that appears in different times and places reflects the social and cultural transformations and the changing lifestyles of Thai gay people.

Starting in the mid-1980s, the masculine body of Thai men was introduced to and represented within Thai gay communities by gay print magazines. It is especially important to appreciate that across the decades from the 1980s, modern Thai gay identity has been forged in relation to the consumption of mediatized erotic images of men represented and imaged as being heterosexual. This relationship developed in the context of a rapidly expanding market of sexual commodities that induced Thai gay men to identify their homosexual desire in terms of consuming eroticized attractive male bodies. Thai gays usually needed to see male erotic pictures and pornography to fulfill their sexual imagination. Thus, male nude pictures provide sources for learning about the evolution of the Thai homoerotic experiences over the past few decades.

Conclusion

Male nudity and changes in Thai homoeroticism

In the Thai context, gay magazines emerged as print media that helped Thai gay men understand their identity in favorable terms and relation to social communication and community building among other gay people. Until the 1980s, the mainstream understanding of gay people had been defined by medical and psychiatric knowledge adapted from the West in which homosexual behaviors were seen as signs of mental illness and sexual deviancy (Jackson, 1997). Editors and publishers of Thai gay magazines had learned that their gay readers needed to talk to someone who paid attention to them and acknowledged their homosexual feelings. For this reason, the editors of the first generation of Thai gay magazines sought to provide content that provided supportive social and sexual information for Thai gay men. After this initial period of engendering a sense of pride in gay identity, the male nude in gay magazines came to play an increasingly central role in the Thai gay community, with the direction of sexual emancipation in Thailand through print media that focused on male nude photographs and increasingly explicit pornography.

For Thai gay men, images of naked men, who were overwhelmingly represented as being heterosexual not gay, did not serve as confirmation of their gay masculinity or contribute to coming out strategies. Moreover, male nude pictures did not challenge the sissy stereotype, or *kathoey*, and feminine characteristics of homosexual people. Rather they served private sexual fantasies in a social setting where Thai gay men could not express their sexual emotions in the family or public spaces. How are we to understand the Thai gay print media that represented nude photographs of masculine bodies of young men as objects to be consumed by gay-identified men in private spaces? And what is the form of Thai homoeroticism reflected in male nude pictures? We seek to answer these questions by demonstrating the social and cultural context of Thai gay sexuality.

Firstly, in the 1980s, Thai gays were willing to appreciate the sexually attractive male body in terms of sexual materials that helped them to achieve ultimate sexual pleasure. It was safe for them to engage in homosexual practices in private spaces by looking at sexy male nude images. It could be understood that pictures of naked male models reflected the secret sexual

lives of Thai gay men, who could not easily find and meet sexually attractive men in daily life. To see the sexy body of handsome young men was very difficult for gay men. Therefore, turning to gay magazines was a primary choice for many gay people because they could continue to perform a normative male gender role in public while secretly engaging in homosexual activities.

Furthermore, social pressures experienced by Thai gay men are not the same as in Western societies. In Thai society, homosexual men have not had their sex lives controlled by anti-gay legal statutes or religious threats of divine punishment for sinful practices. Rather, Thai gay men have lived in a society dominated by cultural ideas of gender norms that men and women have to conform their sexual behavior to their biological sex. So, their homosexual practice could be performed in personal secret spaces. The images and pictures of male nudes were available to be used by Thai gay men in private spaces for homosexual pleasure. The masculine images of male models featured in gay magazines published from the mid-1980s to the early 2010s reinforced the male gender role of Thai gay men and also reflected the secret homosexual behaviors hidden in private spaces. Thai gay men do not need to expose their gay identity in their family and social arena.

Secondly, when compared with the origins of Western male nude photography we can see that Thai gay magazines present male nude images for eroticism and as sexual commodities. The Thai male nude did not evolve from a desire to promote male health or physical culture. In earlier years, the Thai male nude represented a more natural slim body of straight men with slight but firm musculature, published for homosexual attraction. In Thai society homosexual desire and emotion have been suppressed by the male gender and heterosexual norms which prevented homosexual attraction between men from being expressed in public. Within the dominant heteronormative Thai culture, any images that portrayed homosexual desire were considered to represent effeminate non-men and undermined masculine male gender. However, after gay magazines published male nude pictures, homosexual materials became more recognized in public spaces. This means that homoeroticism first entered the public domain through modern nude photography. After the mid-1980s, increasing numbers of nude male pictures were published in Thai print media and in following decades became widespread in cyberspace. Print media gay magazines were a primary source of contemporary forms of Thai homoeroticism, with these magazines concretizing the homosexual imagination through male nude photographs. Thai gay men came to understand their homosexual feelings by looking at pictures of the exposed male body.

Thirdly, Thai male model nude figures have consistently been represented in erotic poses. These homoerotic pictures were central to the creation of the modern sense of gay identity in Thailand from the 1980s. At this time, gay magazine editors and their house photographers played major roles in publishing male nude images that responded to the sexual needs of Thai gay men. The eroticized images of straight male models were regulated and adjusted by gay magazine editors, all of them were of middle-class backgrounds and lived in urban areas of the country. Their ideas is the sexually attractive male image came from the local experiences, in which the dominant theme was to consume images of the naked bodies of men who were represented as being heterosexual. The arrival of gay magazines provided opportunities for many straight men to take their clothes off and reveal their attractive body. However, the image of the attractive Thai man has not conformed to any single model, but rather has diversified in relation to the complex ethnicity and class structure of Thai society.

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