

Boys Love Series and Discursive Practices of Soft Power in Thailand

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Abstract

The Thai government describes the phenomenon of Thai Y-series as soft power that generates money for the country in this article. The information is collected from the websites that have news about the Y-series from June to August 2024 to find the interviews of politicians, government officials, Y-series producers, directors, and male actors, including reading news about the marketing promotion of Thai Y-series internationally. Drawing on Young's (2008) concept of discursive practices as a framework for analysis to point out that the Thai government constructed soft power language, narration, and discourses. This article is that the Thai Y-series is a cultural product that interprets soft power for Thailand, but it is narrated in terms of economics and marketing. Under this governmental definition, the Thai Y-series has become a symbol of international business success but not a mechanism to promote LGBTQ rights and social equality in Thailand. However, the meaning of soft power exists among the interactional responses of many groups of people with different ways of thinking. Soft power's discursive practices reveal the system of power through which the Thai state controls the hegemonic truth about the Y-Thai series.

Keywords: Y-series, Soft power, Discursive practice, LGBTQ, Thailand

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Boys Love series (BL series), known in Thailand as the Y-series, has grown and gained widespread popularity. According to The Matter website, between 2015 and 2023, were 177 Y-series released (The Matter Team, 2023). In early 2024, Thailand's Department of Business Development revealed 56 registered film production businesses. It is up 12% from the same period in 2023. Most newly registered film production companies will focus on the Boys Love series (Prachachat, 2024). Compared to 2014, where there were less than 10 Y-series, to 2023, where there are almost 100 Y-series, there will be a growth of almost 1,000 percent. A survey of viewers in 2020 by the Line Insights research team found that the number of people watching the Y-series on the Line TV channel increased by 328% (RYT9, 2021). Thailand is Asia's largest producer of the Boys Love series and has a market value of more than 1 billion baht (RYT9, 2021).

Due to the popularity of the Thai Y-series in the world market, the Thai government expects it to be a cultural industry that will generate a lot of much income for the country. The awareness of this matter has caused people in film and drama industry, including directors, screenwriters, novel writers, novel translators, and people in the film production, to express their opinions about developing the Y-series as soft power. On March 9, 2024, academics discussed in a seminar on Sustaining BL/Y Studies and Creative Sectors, Academics pointed out that in 2023 when, the Thai government set up the National Soft Power Strategy Committee (Springnews, 2024). This has caused talk about the Thai Y-series in terms of cultural products that promote the Thai economy. Movies, dramas, and series are among the 11 types of soft power that the Thai government promotes. The Y-series has thus become a soft power under the rhetoric created by the government (Springnews, 2024).

However, Thai businessmen and government executives see the growth and popularity of Thai Y-

series in Thailand and other countries as part of the creative economy and commodified cultural products. The Thai government thinks the Y-series will be an export product that will generate income for the country. The economic dimension of the Thai Y-series is widely and intensely discussed. During the Y-series 'popularity, the soft power discourse influential in Thai society was a discursive practice related to the power regime and interactions between government officials, politicians, businessmen, and producers. In this article, the growth of Thai Y-series over the past 10 years and point out that the Thai government defines the Y-series in economic terms and encourages Thai businessmen to negotiate to sell Y-series with foreign countries. Therefore, economic and marketing activities are important operations that make the definition of soft power in the Thai Y-series superior to the definitions of other social groups. Significantly, the Thai state's soft power discourse does not promote the welfare of LGBTQ people.

Conceptual framework

To understand the Y-Series phenomenon in contemporary Thai society, Two elements: 1) the role of language and 2) the exercise of practice. A discursive practice approach was used in both elements to review how explanations and discourses about the Y-series are derived. The concept of discursive practice in anthropology is a method of analyzing the meaning of language in sociocultural practices whereby language gives specific values to daily actions (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998; Blommaert, 2009; Kiesling, 2001; Mendoza-Dento, 2008). According to Young (2008), practices within the meaning of language are both constructions and reflections of social realities related to individual identities, ideologies, beliefs, and power. This practice does not occur naturally through the conscious mind but is a gradual accumulation of learning through experiences and changing events. Practices under language, therefore, exist in a social and cultural context. At the same time, the language associated with all practices is not a straightforward symbol; but an extension of the societal meaning given to actions under different experiences.

Individual differences make practice a power interaction in which individuals interact to create meaning in their actions based on their different beliefs

and ideas. Social interactions also cause processes to drive and change things and events related to social and cultural meaning (Erickson, 2004). Among the differences in power of individuals, creating discursive explanations is not equal. People in the ruling class or policymakers strongly influence social perception. However, less powerful groups may also create meanings for social events and activities that differ from the explanations given by the ruling class. Disparity between people with unequal power reflects a social world that lacks stability and unity and is an ongoing social practice to a struggle for discursive meaning.

Young and the concept of discursive practice

Understanding the role of language cannot be divorced from how individuals act under social and cultural conditions and circumstances. Young (2008) points out that when individuals use language in social events, it is a meaning-making practice. Language practices and discourse include spoken words and written letters in social interactions. Young (2008) said that

"More recently, "discourse" has also taken on an extended meaning that differs from its use in applied linguistics in at least two ways. First, in the extended meaning of the word, language is not the sole system of signs to be studied as discourse; other semiotic systems are included, such as habits of dress, the built environment, and, of course, gesture. Second, "discourse" has been extended to include societal meaning-making systems such as institutional power, social differentiation of groups, and cultural beliefs that create identities for individuals and position them in social relationships." (Young, 2008, p.2)

Young (2008) states that the social context of interaction directly impacts the formation of discursive explanations for events and social actions. Creating descriptions of social events or activities relies entirely on language. The meaning of things that appear in the social world is not the same but produced by a diverse group of people. Young's ideas as a framework for understanding that the language and discourse in the Thai Y-series industry is a discursive practice of people in government and private companies. These groups have important roles and influence in guiding and

creating meaning for society regarding soft power and cultural products that will be exported for sale abroad. Making the Thai government's soft power policy a discursive practice shows how the Thai Y-series is growing and gaining international popularity. It also indicates that the Thai government and businessmen are trying to use the Y-series to advertise Thailand, hoping that the various locations and products in the Y-series will encourage foreigners to travel.

Four areas through the discursive practice framework. The first area is the discourse about the Y-series as Thai soft power is a governmental explication that establishes cultural truth. The second area is that the soft power discourse arises in the context of the marketing success of Thai Y-series and the emergence of Thai and foreign fan clubs. The third area is the soft power discourse, the interaction and reaction between the Thai government, businessmen, and Y-series producers. The fourth area is the meaning of soft power, and the Y-series in Thai society is not fixed and unified, but different groups of people reconstructed it. These 4 areas will help expand the understanding that the policy to promote the Thai Y-series as soft power is a social action that occurs under the direction of the Thai government, which does not confirm that this policy will help promote the life quality of Thai homosexual who are portrayed as characters in Y-series business.

Literature reviews: Thai boys love studies and its implication

Academics may have first considered Thai Y-series in 2017. This was a time when producers were creating more Y-series. Researchers can divide recent studies of Thai Y-series into the following four approaches:

1) Audience's thoughts and behaviors

This study focuses on viewers and audiences who admire the Y-series, follow their favorite young actors, and express their opinions about the love that the characters in the Series communicate to society. Amornsriwong and Sawanyawisut (2019) said that the Y-series fan group "Sao Wai" follows Y-series on Twitter is an online media that creates their community. Sutheepattarakool (2020) collected data on 10 Y-series released from 2015 to 2019 and interviewed 15 viewers to see their attitudes. He explains that male characters

in the Y-series will be good-looking and masculine teenagers. Homosexual relationships and intimacy are accepted by friends and family. The stories in the Y-series will end with a fulfilled love story that will impress viewers. The studies by Mokbua (2020) and Mongkol (2021) explained that young audiences of Y-series highly favor male actors because of their good looks and sexual attraction. Including that actors have appropriate behavior and benefit society will gain the attention of fans. Viewers also accept male-male relationships and think that Y-series will be a medium that promotes sexual diversity.

Bunyavejchewin et al. (2024) said that the number of male fans of the Y-series will likely increase even though most fans are still women. It also points out that the people who watch the Y-series are still middle-class people who live in the city. Like the stories in the Y-series, it also focuses on the lives of middle-class characters and lacks representation of the lives of the lower classes. Chonsap (2020) said that viewers of Y-series who are 18-40 years old are open to love stories between men. Saejan and Paithayawat (2022) stated that the Y-series fan group is quite interested in the private lives of the actors and thus reveals fan behavior that may invade the actors' privacy.

2) Content and story approaches

This study is interested in the stories that appear in the Y-series. Issues regarding sexuality and social acceptance were analyzed to reflect that Thai Y-series are revealing sexual and gender diversity. Mueansungnoen (2023) explained that the reason why Y-series has received so much attention is that it presents a story that is different from heterosexual love dramas. The Y-series tells the story of a homosexual's life, making fans feel sympathy and wish for the male characters to find fulfilling love and gain acceptance in society. Kumsabha (2022) stated that the plot of the Y-series reflects the social lives of homosexual men in Thailand. The directors and fan groups that created YouTube channels to reflect the stories of the Y-series are important people who will drive society to accept the rights of gays and transgender people.

Somyat (2018) stated that the Y-series tries to present the lives of homosexual men in a positive way, different from the past, which often presents problematic images of gay men. However, the story in

the series is instead a fantasy that only depicts the love of a wealthy and good-looking young man. A poor elderly man would not be the main character in a Thai Y-series. Baudinette (2019) pointed out that the Thai Y-series *Lovesick*, the first released in 2014, was a combination of the Thai drama genre and the plot of the Japanese Boys Love, resulting in the storytelling in the Thai Y-series having male characters that can have relationships with both women and men. Santawee (2022) said that because the Y-series comes from a novel written by a woman, the story that occurs is a fantasy that does not reflect the reality found in the Thai gay community. Promma (2022) explained that the trend of Thai Y-series would have a variety of content, not only romantic love but also mystery, horror, and murder. In addition, Thai viewers are still more interested in Y-series from Thailand than Y-series from Japan and Korea. Ketyoi (2021) explained that in the production of the Y-series, they also pay attention to photography, costumes, and the expression of the characters' emotions, which all have hidden gender and sexual meanings in various events.

3) Socio-cultural contextual analysis.

Studying the power dimensions of global capitalism and neoliberal individualism in Y-series raises questions about the social context that makes Y-series not only entertainment but also a tool of repeating gender norms according to binary paradigms. Singhakowinta's study (2017) pointed out that Y-series have presented the masculine body as a cultural commodity, causing male actors to be naked to play love scenes and sexual activities. The Y-series portrays male bodies as a reproduction of heteronormative standards, glorifying ideal masculinity and reinforcing the male image constructed by the beauty industry. Duangwis (2017) stated that the Y-series that presents love between male high school students reflects Thai society during a time when consumer culture and neoliberalism have penetrated everyday life, causing the new definition of love called "men love men" to be separated from previous gay relationships. Homoerotic relationships in the Y-series respect normative masculinity and do not favor gay identities in male characters.

4) Business approaches

A study explaining the phenomena regarding the business growth of the Thai Y-series will begin in 2022. Chongsuebchok (2022) stated that the main reason for the growth of the Thai Y-series is that viewers love the male actors and follow the actors' private lives on social media. Most Thai Y-series fan groups are young women up to working age. The popularity of male actors in the Y-series has made them famous, and various products have approached them to be presenters. This study also indicates that Twitter is an online media platform that helps to quickly share stories about Y-series, allowing foreign fans to receive the news the same way Thai people do. Moreover, viewers think that the Y-series is an important export product of Thailand and demand that the Thai government create a law recognizing same-sex marriage. However, after researchers published in 2022, the Thai government passed an equal marriage law in 2024. Srijinda (2024) said that developing the Thai Y-series to be a soft power at the international level requires developing scripts and production processes, promoting activities of male actors, and Thai culture presented in the series. In addition, supporters should promote fan club activities, use online media to reach more people, and encourage actors to participate in various social activities. The government must have funding and policies that facilitate marketing, invest in Y-series, and give directors the freedom to present stories about homoerotic stories.

Four approaches in studying Thai Y-series from 2017-2024: Knowledge of journalism and business administration plays an important role in determining what the plots in Y-series mean, how the audience feels and expresses their favorite male actors, as well as evaluating the business success of Y-series. It has been noticed that some Thai academics try to criticize the Y-series as a product of neoliberalism and see the growth of the Y-series as just a marketing gimmick that sells good-looking actors to Thai and international fans. Studies to highlight the gap between the Y-series and the real lives of homosexuals and transgender people in Thai society are limited. The social and cultural context behind the Y-series is less discussed than the economic dimensions and cultural merchandising and commodification.

Methodology

1) Research approach and design

This study is qualitative research based on document information published on the websites of Thai government agencies, news companies, and mass media. These document data were analyzed to understand the policies, ideas, and practices of various organizations and groups involved in promoting Thai Y-series. The information is classified to include information about the current situation of the Thai Y-series, Thai Y-series promotion policies, Y-series production companies, activities related to Y-series promotion, the opinions of the Thai government, Y-series director, producers, and actors. These data were compared to see if they were similar or different under the Thai government's policy to promote Y-series.

2) Sampling technique and Data collection methods

The selection of information about the Y-series in Thailand is based on news that appears in online media during the year 2024. Data collection was based on internet searching from June to August 2024. This was the time when I started collecting data. I have searched for information through Google search using the Thai words “Si Ri Y” (Y-series) and “soft power” as the main search terms to go into various websites displayed on Google. Websites that have information about Y-series are mostly online newspapers, entertainment and economic news, and websites of private and government news agencies. I have read news and articles about Y-series in Thai society and considered interviews from various groups of people: directors, series producers, government officials involved in promoting movies and series, and committees established by the government in accordance with the National Soft Power Development Policy. In those interviews, they express their thoughts and attitudes about the Y-series in terms of economics, culture, entertainment, and how to develop it. I have analyzed the interviews to compare the differences between those who view the Y-series from an economic perspective and those who view the development of the quality of the script and the production process. In addition, I will examine how much attention is paid to the rights and quality of life of gay, transgender, and lesbian groups in Thai society,

while the description of the Thai Y-series as soft power is mainstream discourse.

The growth of Y-novels and series in Thailand

The Boys Love series has its roots in the manga and Yaoi novels that feature love and relationships among young men, which have been popular among Japanese teenage girls since the 1970s (Otomo, 2015; McLelland, 2005; Mizoguchi, 2003; Zanghellini, 2009). Sex and love between men in Yaoi are considered to be the fantasy and imagination of Japanese women, which is different from society's attitudes towards gays and transgenders. Like the Boys Love cartoon in Thailand, which was translated from Japanese Yaoi in the mid-1990s, it became known to a small group of people who were interested in male love (Duangwises, 2017). In addition, when the boy's love novels were published on the Dek-D and Thanwalai websites in the early 2000s, it caused a proliferation of female teenage readers who were dubbed “sao wai”. The popularity of online Y novels led to the production of a television series on Channel 9 in 2014, Lovesick the Series or Rak Wun Wairun Saeb (Baudinette, 2019; Bunyavejchewin et al., 2024).

Between 2014 and 2024, the Y-series was produced continuously, and the peak period will be in 2022-2023. Over the past 10 years, the group of readers of Y-novels and viewers of Y-series has included not only female teenagers but also gay, transgender, bisexual, and male groups (Bunyavejchewin et al., 2024). Similar to the expansion of the publishing of Y-novels, where 10 years ago there were 2-3 publishers, it has now increased in response to the needs of readers. The publishing house that specifically produces Y-novels, EverY, Hermit Books, and Fu Novels is an example of the popularity of Y-novels in Thailand. At the National Book Fair in Bangkok, Y-novels are among the best-selling books, just like comic books (Narin & Pimmasri, 2020). Moreover, the holding of the first Y Book Fair in 2017 indicates that this type of business will continue to grow between 2017-2024 (The Matter, 2017).

Y-novels and series in Thai society are a collaborative relationship. People who read the novels will follow and watch the series, while people who watch the series will follow the novels as well. Today's online media is the main channel that allows Y-novels

and series to reach a wide audience and causes the expansion of fan clubs. When there are many people who want to read novels and watch the Y-series this has caused a new generation of novel writers to come and produce more novels on the website. When a publisher is interested in a novel, they will contact the writer to publish it in a book if the novel has high sales and is of interest to movie companies. The novel will then be made into a series, with the publisher acting as a mediator between the novel writer and the series producer (Thansettakij, 2017).

Currently, Thailand has many companies that produce Y-series, but there are nine companies that play an important role because they have their own actors under contract. 9 companies include (1) GMMTV, (2) Be on Cloud, (3) Mande Work, (4) M. Flow Entertainment (5) Star Hunter Entertainment, (6) Studio Wabi Sabi, (7) Rookie (Thailand) (8) Copy A Bangkok and (9) Me Mind Y. These 9 companies are the mechanism that creates work and drives business related to Y-series, including fan meeting events, concert, song, soundtrack, souvenir and products from the series. Most importantly, the male actors in the company who act as couples in the drama will be idols who become product presenters, which will generate a lot of revenue for the company.

GMMTV is a large company and has been established in 1995. It originally produced television dramas that focused on male and female characters, with many actors in the company. GMMTV began seriously interested in producing the Y-series in 2016. Popular series include SOTUS The Series (2016), Water Boyy the series (2016), Our Skyy (2018), Theory of Love (2018), Dark Blue Kiss (2018), 2gether The Series (2019), A Tale of Thousand Stars (2020), Bad Buddy Series (2021), Vice Versa (2021), My School President (2022) and Wandee Goodday (2024) Male actors of GMMTV has previously played the role of a heterosexual man and was chosen to play the homosexual role in the Boys Love series. GMMTV uses the Y-series as an export product to sell overseas and will hold concerts and fan meetings, profiting from the expensive tickets. The main premise of GMMTV's Y-series revolves around the romantic love of a high school or university student who comes from a middle-class background with a high income.

In 2020, 2gether The Series received the Fever Award as the most popular series in Thailand, along with the award for the most popular series theme song, "Kanku". It also won the 2020 Series of the Year from the Maya Awards. Received an award from the Philippines for the Phenomenal Foreign BL Series of the Year. At the 2021 International Drama Festival in Tokyo, it received the Special Awards for Foreign Dramas. The two male actors from this series are Mr. Vachirawit Chiwaaree and Mr. Methawin Opasiamkajorn. Both actors are popular among fans at home and abroad. Total views of 2gether The Series on the Line TV has 50 million views in 6 weeks and is the Y-series with the most viewers. In addition, there are subtitles in Chinese. It was dubbed in Tagalog for release in the Philippines and subtitles in Japanese. It is also available on Netflix in 18 countries. In 2021, the series was produced into a movie with new cuts to make the story more concise and fast-paced than the series to reinforce its popularity among Thai and international fans.

Be on Cloud company, founded in 2020, produces Y-series that feature mafia, hitmen, thieves, and outlaw gangs that portray men as tough and patient. The tone of the series is gloomy. The characters are paranoid, suspicious, shady, and untrustworthy, which makes the series different from the bright lives of teenagers at school. The company's famous series is KinnPorsche The Series (2022), which tells the story of the relationship between Kinn, a mafia, and Porsche, a poor young man. This series and its two male actors, Mr. Phakphum Romsaithong and Mr. Nattawin Wattanagitiphat, are popular and famous in many Asian countries. Since the Uncut version of KinnPorsche the series was released on the iQiyi application, it quickly gained mentions on social media and rose to number one on Twitter trend (Thaiticketmajor, 2022). The international popularity of KinnPorsche the series has led to claims that the Y-series is Thailand's soft power.

Mandee Work Company Limited was established in 2018, producing the famous Cutie Pie Series in 2022 and making the two lead actors, Mr. Pruk Panich and Mr. Chawarin Perdpiyawong, famous and having a large fan following. Mandee Works produced quality art production, costumes, cinematography, songs, and music, and with many male actors, the series quickly gained popularity. Mr. Kittipat Champa, the director of

the Cutie Pie Series, said he wanted this story to be a voice to demand equal marriage rights for gays, transgenders, and lesbians in Thai Society. Studio Wabi Sabi Company Limited was established in 2018 and produces the popular Love by Chance series, and a second part was produced in 2020, titled A Chance to Love. This series made actor Mr. Supapong Udomkaewkanjana famous and has many fans. To date, this series has been viewed more than 12 million times on YouTube channel.

Copy A Bangkok company was founded in 2018, and many of its management team are gay. A series called 'War of Y' will be produced in 2022 to expose the dark side of the entertainment business and the Y series, which has unethical competition. In the same year, the series Unforgotten Night was produced, starring Mr. Phusanu Wongsavanischakorn and Mr. Saran Anantasetthakul, which is popular with many fans. In 2023, it also produced Playboy, the series that showcases the lives of male sex workers and drug addicts, reflecting working-class society. The sex scenes in this series are more expressive than others. The actors were able to act realistically in kissing and making love. M. Flow Entertainment Company Limited was established in 2019 and produced a popular series, Ai Long Nhai, shown on Channel 3 in 2022. The lead actors, Mr. Nichkhun Kajornborirak and Mr. Krittanan Anchananan were very popular. They formed a fan club called Dom area86, which has a large fan following and organized meeting parties.

Me Mind Y Company Limited was established in 2019 to produce the series TharnType the series, which was very successful due to the use of handsome and good-looking male actors. Both actors, Mr. Suppasit Jongcheveevat and Mr. Kanawut Traipipattanapong have received the attention of Thai and foreign fans. The popularity of this series has led to the production of part 2 in 2020. The series has received awards from many organizations, including Best Kiss Scene, Hot Young Star (Suppasit Jongcheveevat), Best Couple, and Best Gay Series. In 2020, viewers watched this series on Line TV as many as 76 million times. What's interesting is that TharnType the series has the main character clearly reveal himself as gay, unlike other Y series that define the homosexual character as a man.

Rookie (Thailand) Company was founded in 2019 and produced the successful series Love Mechanics in

2020, starring Mr. Wanarat Rasamerat and Mr. Anan Wong, an acting couple with many fans. Mr. Wanarat Rasamerat was chosen to be the presenter of FILA sports shoes as he represents the new generation of young men who take care of their health. In addition, both actors donate money to various organizations to help society and people in need. Star Hunter Entertainment was founded in 2020 as a company that does entertainment business, including movies, series, songs, and performances, and creates artists and singers. The most popular series from this company was Big Dragon the series in 2022, which had over 5,000,000 viewers.

The current Thai Y-series business continues to grow and receives interest from streaming platforms such as IQIYI, WeTV, and GagaOOLala TV. The story-making method of the Thai Y-series has separated itself from Japanese Yaoi novels and created its own unique style by presenting a variety of stories that include boys' love, girls' love, and heterosexual love. The important reason that the Thai Y-series popular internationally is the activities between the actors and the fan group, where the male actors are close and friendly by communicating with their fans through social media. Activities shared between actors and fan groups are, therefore, a tangible and palpable relationship. Such closeness is an important channel that allows businesspeople in the Y-series industry to use it as an opportunity to bring in popular male actors to act in the series, as well as produce products related to the series and actors.

The Thai government's view on the Y-series

The Thai government's idea of soft power arose in 2022 with the establishment of a policy committee to promote the country's image through soft power. But at that time, many Thai academics were opposed to the government taking control and setting rules for the private sector to follow. In 2023, when the Thai government, under the leadership of the Pheu Thai Party, established the National Soft Power Strategy Committee, various agencies came out in response to this policy. This committee will operate under the National Creative Culture Promotion Policy Committee, which manages the Thailand Creative Culture Agency (THACCA). The Prime Minister is the chairman of the National Soft Power Strategy Committee and aims to

create one family with one soft power. The Thai government has classified the soft power industry into 11 categories that are targeted for economic promotion. Y-series is classified as soft power in the category of movies, dramas, and series. In October 2023, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin established a National Soft Power Development Committee by appointing Ms.Paetongtarn Shinawatra as chairman of the committee. The committee approved a budget to develop all 11 types of soft power industries with a budget of 5,164 million baht. The film, drama, and series industry received 545 million baht.

The committee plans to propose a bill to promote creative culture. This will be a law that supports the establishment of the Creative Culture Promotion Office. and the Thai Film Council. The Thai government views South Korea as an example of economic success in developing creative industries, however, the Thai bureaucracy does not understand soft power and creative industries, causing some sub-committees to resign. The sub-committee for driving the drama and series industry established by the government has 16 members. From information published on the website of Thailand Creative Culture Agency (thacca.go.th), it was found M.R. Chalermchatri Yukol is the chairman of this subcommittee. The 15 committee members come from people working in television, film, drama, and series. This subcommittee is responsible for making policies and strategies to promote and develop the drama and series industry, including taking measures to solve problems, monitoring operations, and evaluating performance.

Chalermchatri expressed his opinion that he wants to solve the problem in three areas: 1) amend the outdated laws that control the media; 2) seek funds and budgets for working on dramas and series; and 3) want to give the media rights and freedom to create dramas and series (Thaipbs, 2024). Mr.Chookiat Sakveerakul, the film director, and one of the committees said that the problem with Thai dramas and series is the lack of quality content. He suggests that film and series creators should bring the diverse localities of Thai society to present to audiences around the world (Thaipbs, 2024). The thoughts of the director and producer, who are considered artistic creators, are that they are interested in content development and the production process.

In June 2021, the Ministry of Commerce organized a project to promote Thai Y series producers in Japan. There were 10 Thai companies participating in the event, generating over 360 million baht in revenue (Sutheepattarakool, 2023). Mr.Abhisit Laisattruklai, Director of the Creative Economy Agency (CEA), said that CEA has collaborated with the private sector to organize Creative Industries 2021 to provide inspiration and creative ideas to Y-series creators. CEA has also produced a documentary, Series Y Documentary, and a short documentary to reveal the secrets of the series' success, "I Told Sunset About You" by Nadao Bangkok Company Limited (RYT9, 2021).

The Thai government recognizes that male actors and memorabilia from the Y-series are items that fans will buy because fans are loyal to their favorite actors. Mrs. Auramon Supthaweethum, Director General of the Department of Business Development, said that the Y-series will also help other businesses grow as well because the actors will be influencers. Holding fan meetings will help promote other related businesses (Khetsungnoen, 2024). Government officials expect that the Thai Y-series business will be an export product to foreign countries because it has a large fan base (Mgonline, 2024). As well as Mr.Phumtham Wechayachai, Deputy Prime Minister. The Minister of Commerce supports Be On Cloud Co., Ltd.in producing the Y- series and sending it abroad to make tourists interested in Thai products (Radio Thailand, 2024).

In 2022, the Tourism Authority of Thailand started organizing tours for Japanese fans who like the male actors in TharnType The Series to allow fans to travel to locations that appear in the series. Mr.Pornwich Sila-on, Deputy Director- General of the Department of International Trade Promotion, informed that the Thai Y-series is growing abroad and will have more than three times the number of viewers in 2023 and has a higher total market value of 1,000 million baht (Jaturonk, 2023). Japan is very interested in Thai Y-series, so the Department of International Trade Promotion took Thai Y-series producers to meet with Japanese businessmen at the Tokyo International Film Festival. The Thai government expects that the Y-series will be a cultural product that will create a Thai reputation and bring a lot of money into the country.

In October 2023, the Thai government brought 10 Thai Y- series production companies to Japan for

business negotiations. Mr.Chanthapat Panchamanon, Director of the Office of Foreign Trade Promotion in Tokyo, said:

“In the past, the office has been contacted by many Japanese film and series importers that they are looking for and have a desire to import or invest in producing new Y-series content from Thailand. In addition, in Japan, there will be Fan Meet activities between Thai Y-series actors and Japanese girl fans. Even though the ticket prices are high, Japanese fans are still interested in participating in many activities, so we see an opportunity to expand the value of exporting such content into the Japanese market.” (Bangkokbiznews, 2023)

March 2024, the Minister of Commerce, executives of Be On Cloud, executives of Idol Factory, actors, and the National Soft Power Strategy Committee met with Mr.Srettha Thavisin, Prime Minister, at Government House to talk about the soft power policy. During this talk, the Prime Minister emphasized that the Thai Y-series will be an important medium to advertise tourist attractions, local products, food, good culture, and traditions of Thailand to tourists around the world (The Standard, 2024).

Y-series on the business power and Thai LGBTQ people

In 2021, “GMMTV” Company, the largest producer of the Y series in Thailand, had a total net income. 1,290,435,991 baht (Sutheepattarakool, 2023.) This success encouraged other companies to become more interested in producing the Y-series. Many entertainment and media businesses see that Thai the Y-series will be a mechanism to help promote culture, food, and tourist attractions in Thailand to the world and attract tourists to Thailand. Marketers also hope to introduce products into the Y-series so that viewers around the world will see Thai products and want to buy them. Fan groups of female teenagers in foreign countries like Thai Y-series. Its popularity can be seen from the fact that Thai Y-series are trending on Twitter globally (Money & Banking Online, 2023).

Mr.Jatuphol Sutheesathaporn, Chief Executive Officer of Mediaplex International Company Limited, said that in 2023, more than 50 Y-series had been produced and distributed in 120 countries. He said,

“The important thing that makes the series famous all over the world is because of the impressiveness of both the actors and the unique script that is distinctively Thai. Fans who like the series want to travel to Thailand to undergo various experiences through the series. The growth of the entertainment industry is one of the soft powers that helps productions team earn money from making these Y-series. Including increased economic circulation in tourism, restaurant business and many other related events. Currently, Thailand can export soft power to other countries, but it still needs to expand its production value even further. At present, Thailand can pass on soft power to other countries, but still needs to expand the scope of production value even further, whether it be scripts, actors, storytelling, as well as the quality of the work. Even though there are many Y-series nowadays, not all of them are successful.” (Spacebar, 2023)

Mr.Krit Sakulpanich, Executive Chairman of Dex (Dream Express) Company Limited, saw that Japan really liked the Thai Y-series, so he collaborated with Idol Factory. Co., Ltd. will create a Y-series to be broadcast online under the Japanese TV Asahi Corporation. Mr.Supaphong Udomkaewkanchana, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Idol Factory Company Limited, said that Thai Y-series are accepted at a global level, so the quality of the series must be improved to attract Japanese viewers and to generate income for the country (Rinwong, 2024).

In November 2023, the Safe and Creative Media Development Fund, together with the Television Script Writers Association, held a discussion on “Writing a Y Y Hi-Soft Power Story”. Will Thailand be able to push Y-series to be soft power?” (Thansettakij, 2023) . Mr.Noppanat Chaiwimon, Senior Production Director, acting director, producer, and screenwriter from GMMTV, said that making a Y-series is an art that meets the needs of people, especially girl fans. The audience is, therefore, extremely important. He also said,

“ Today we do successful things. We do it ourselves at the company’s cost. Finding a market isn’t difficult. Creators can take their own content to sell. It was not caused by the government coming in to help and support anything. It will get to that point. (South Korean

style) *Yes, there must be government agency to support and set a path for us.*” (Arphonsri, 2022)

Among the popularity and economic success of the Thai Y-series, there is also a viewpoint that indicates the lives of LGBTQ people in Thai society, which is reflected in the Y-series. Rights and equality, including the quality of life of gays, lesbians, and transgenders in Thailand, may be forgotten by the government.

Peera Charoenwattananukul, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, said that:

“Driving gender equality is also soft power. Don’t forget that many years ago Thailand has previously run a tourism promotion campaign called ‘Go Thai Be Free’, attracting LGBTQ people to travel to Thailand because they feel it is a safe space for them.” (Thongthep, 2023)

Film and series director, Tanwarin Sukkhapisit said that the Y-series could be a way for Thai people to learn about gender diversity. He explained that:

“People see that a man who normally likes women suddenly likes a man. It already shows diversity. Society may not yet understand the word ‘bisexual’, and Y-series may only answer the needs of Y-girls who want to watch two good-looking men love each other. However, we feel that it is a starting point in sparking a social trend and creating an understanding of the rights of people with diverse sexualities through the Y-series. (The Mission, 2023)

“Thai Y-series talks about humans who love the same sex. Talk about the love and understanding of family and society towards this group of people. It has made more people get to know and see LGBTQ+ people in Thailand along with global awareness that our country is LGBTQ+ friendly. Does it make more LGBTQ+ people around the world want to come to Thailand? What’s still incomplete is that Thailand doesn’t have a law that recognizes people with diverse sexualities as human beings and have the same rights as other people.” (The Mission, 2023)

The international success of the Thai Y-series and the promotion of LGBTQ people in Thailand are at odds. Academics and people working in Y-series production realize that the story of same-sex love is the heart of the Y-series, which is like telling the lives of

Thai gay men. Therefore, understanding the rights of same-sex and transgender people is as important as promoting the marketing and production of Thai Y-series. Today, the Thai government has increasingly embraced the equal marriage law that academics and human rights activists have long fought for.

Analysis: Contradictory discursive practices of the Thai Y-series

I noticed that talking about Thai the Y-series as soft power is a result of the popularity of 2gether The Series, which was popular in Japan in 2021. Including I Told Sunset About You, released in 2020, stimulated people’s interest in tourist attractions in Phuket. Before that, when Love by Chance was released in 2018, the Thai government did not allow the series to be shown on Channel 9 because executives thought it presented a gay love story that was inappropriate for the organization. Mr. Siwaj Sawatmaneeekul, director of the Y-series, explained that 10 years ago, sponsors and government administrators did not support the production and distribution of gay series. Mr. Kasmananat Namwiroj, a Y-series actor who works at Studio Wabisabi, is openly gay but was warned by company executives not to display femininity. In public. He said,

“In the past, the executives said that if you have a boyfriend, don’t reveal it. I can understand that it would affect my work. But to prohibit the feminine behavior that is my identity is quite cruel.” (Paengchampa, 2024)

At that time, a group of young girls, Sao Wai, who were fans of Yaoi novels, had formed a group and monitored the adaptation of the boy’s love novels into a series. The fascination among teenage girls with Y-series ran counter to the state’s way of homophobic thinking when Y-series was just starting to emerge. Economic agencies of the Thai government became interested in the Y series when they saw income from exporting the series overseas and related activities from the series becoming a mechanism to stimulate the growth of the Thai entertainment business. Therefore, the Thai government’s support for the Y-series as soft power comes primarily from a marketing and economic perspective. This perspective makes the development of Thai Y-series focus on accelerating the production of many series and bringing in male actors to engage in activities and events with Thai and foreign fans. This

makes the material meaning of the Thai Y-series just a product of the image of a cute male actor.

Based on Young's (2008) idea of discursive practices as constructing a representation of social reality and existing under changing social situations. I will analyze the soft power phenomenon in the Thai Y-series industry with 4 considerations.

1) *Economic discourse shapes the truth about the Y-series*

According to Young (2008), social realities are linguistically/discursively constructed. As the Thai Y-series is a social reality of soft power, the language and descriptions of Y-series are created by economic discourse. In the context of the growth and success of Thai the Y-series over the past 10 years, the Thai government has tried to define the Y-series business as soft power. In this sense, the truth about the Y-series in the thought of the Thai government and business companies was created primarily from an economic and commercial perspective. This fact is explained through the statements and policies of politicians, government officials, executives, businessmen, and the National Soft Power Development Committee. This can be seen from the statement of Mr. Chanthapat Panchamanon, Director of the Office of Foreign Trade Promotion in Tokyo, as follows.

"In addition, in Japan, there will be Fan Meet activities between Thai Y-series actors and Japanese girl fans. Even though the ticket prices are high, Japanese fans are still interested in participating in many activities, so we see an opportunity to expand the value of exporting such content into the Japanese market". (Bangkokbiznews, 2023)

Soft power discourse makes Thai Y-series an economic reality that society can recognize through the production of many Y-series, concerts of actors, fan meetings, and clips of male couples. The government and businesspeople will emphasize generating income from selling Y-series overseas. The Y-series will exist as a cultural product that promotes tourist attractions, places, food, local products, culture, and stories about Thailand. The Thai Y-series will be a symbol of money and a popular global product in a market where many international young girls are the main consumers.

2) *Expansion of the international passionate girl fans*

Young (2008) points out that the context-bound nature of discourse is what links social practices to the language they convey. The context of foreign fans is, therefore, an important issue in explaining the expansion of the Thai Y-series business. In the business realm, Thai government agencies and production companies are interested in marketing and promotion. Foreign businessmen are invited to negotiate the purchase of Thai Y-series and cooperate with foreign media to distribute the Thai Y-series. Doing this Y-series business requires a large consumer base, which is a group of girl fans both in Thailand and abroad. The words of Mr. Jatuphol Sutheesathaporn, Chief Executive Officer of Mediaplex International Company Limited, clearly show that international fan groups are important to the growth of Thai Y-series, as shown in the following words.

"The important thing that makes the series famous all over the world is because of the impressiveness of both the actors and the unique script that is distinctively Thai. Fans who like the series want to travel to Thailand to undergo various experiences through the series". (Spacebar, 2023)

The growth of the Thai Y-series would not be possible without a group of fans who love boys, love novels and like the cute male actors in the series. Following and supporting male actors among female fans is an interaction that is formed through social media and fan-meeting activities. This type of relationship is a cross-cultural social network in which one side is a Thai male actor, and the other is girl fans from different nationalities. When a male actor is close and does activities with a group of female fans, it makes the fans believe in and become more obsessed with the actor. The actors and Y-series production companies are aware of this relationship and are constantly trying to maintain these fans through various activities.

3) *Accompliceship of Thai government, businessmen, and Y-series producers*

According to Young (2008), meaning is negotiated in interaction. Collective practice between diverse groups results in the creation of meaning through discourse that addresses common needs and

may challenge each other. When the Thai government established the National Soft Power Strategy Committee, and the National Soft Power Development Committee, government organizations economic and marketing activities in cooperation with the business sector and Y-series producers. The Thai government believes that business negotiation with foreigners will be a way to increase Thai Y-series exports to be shown abroad. For businessmen, they see that creating business alliances in movies, series, entertainment, dramas, concerts, performances, and music will lead to business success and achievement. The cooperation between the government and businesspeople can be seen from the statement of Mr. Phumtham Wechayachai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Commerce, as follows:

“the form of cooperation that will take place The Ministry of Commerce will support companies’ work in intellectual property, including development, promotion, and protection, and will also help promote global marketing. The Ministry of Commerce is the only agency with central, regional and international offices covering the entire world. It will help bring film and series production companies to participate in pitching activities and present to copyright buyers around the world, which can meet the needs of cooperation very well”. (infoquest, 2024).

In practice, this business activity prioritizes profits by considering the Y-series as cultural commodities. The more the Thai government emphasizes the profits of Y-Series, the more powerful the soft power discourse becomes in international business negotiation events. Similarly, Thai series under the description of the Thai state are valued economically, as a source of income for the country, and as a means of promoting national culture and tourism. Missing voices from this soft power discourse and economic activity are gays, bisexuals, transgenders, and lesbians.

4) The soft power discourse of the Thai Y-series is being challenged

Young (2008) noted that discourse is social action. Meaning-making explanations are not just language but also practical actions towards goals. While the government and business created economic meanings for Y-series as soft power, there are other groups who have different interpretations of the series, as evidenced

by the Y-series directors’ statements, Tanwarin Sukkhapsit as follows:

“Y-series may only answer the needs of Y-girls who want to watch two good-looking men love each other. However, we feel that it is a starting point in sparking a social trend and creating an understanding of the rights of people with diverse sexualities through the Y-series”. (The Mission, 2023)

Under the complex social situation, there are many groups of people involved in Thai Y-series, including producers, directors, screenwriters, actors, girl fan groups, viewers, academics, human rights activists, and the LGBTQ group. These people have different ways of defining soft power and may not be the same as the economic definitions constructed by Thai governments. The group of directors and screenwriters see the Y-series as a creative work of art and an exploration of LGBTQ rights. Academics view soft power as creating awareness and social acceptance of cultural objects that have psychological and emotional value. Gender and sexuality scholars also criticize the government for being primarily economic in its interests but neglecting to promote gender equality and quality of life for gays, transgenders, and lesbians. In the gay community, it is seen that Y-series do not reflect the real life of gay men because they are just the imagination of the writers and screenwriters. Soft power discourse, is therefore, just a way of thinking of the ruling class that does not understand the way of life of homosexuals in Thai society.

The four considerations, I think, are the operations of language and discourse that are inseparable from economic, political, cultural, and media phenomena. The interaction at the center of the Y series business is the mechanism of state power that sets rules and regulations to make the Thai Y series become a national export product. In addition, the Thai government defines Y-series in terms of tourism and advertising of Thai culture. In the context of global capitalism, male actors will become the true representations of the Thai Y-series, which emphasizes that young men are cute, good-looking, white, tall, fashionably dressed, and charming. In other words, the soft power of the Thai Y-series is to sell men’s bodies that have been produced to conform to the beauty industry standards of handsomeness that the new generation of men must have to be sexually

attractive. Male actors in Y-series are, therefore, the main commodified products and female fans who are passionate about those actors are the main consumers. Hence, the power of buying and consuming masculinity in the Y-series is the essence of soft power.

While Thai Y-series is a popular culture that is widespread in many countries, the lives of gay and queer people in Thai society are still discriminated and stigmatized. Even in the Y-series industry, outstanding gay actors are often not given roles in series because producers tend to choose and prefer straight male actors (Na Nakorn, 2022). If a gay actor is cast in a Y-series, he is usually cast in a role that exhibits feminine behavior. I noted that in the Y-series industry, there are many gays, transgenders, and lesbians working behind the scenes, but the leading male actors are usually handsome men according to beauty standards. It can be said that the Thai Y-series business may be not only soft power and cultural products but also a patriarchal regime that reproduces heteronormative standards that still values straight men more than other genders.

Conclusion

I attempt to examine the actions and practices of soft power discourse in the context of the popularity and mass production of Thai Y-series over the past decade to understand the regime of Thai state power that directs and controls the discursive meaning of the Y-series in the economic dimension. I discovered that the growth of young female fans in Thailand and abroad is an important consumer group that causes the increasing number of Y-series. The cross-cultural phenomenon of the Y-Thai series is therefore viewed by the Thai government and businessmen as a soft-power cultural product of the world. Amidst the Thai state's excitement over the success of the Y-series, soft power discourse is being made to represent the presupposed truth about the Y-series. I point out that the language and descriptions of soft power released by the Thai government are related to selling Thai culture and tourism, which will allow the series to exist as an entertainment product. The needs of girl fans who appreciate in Thai Y-series are evaluated as consumer demand.

Understanding soft power discourse is not an analysis of the signification of language created by senders and receivers; but rather an examination of the dynamic social conditions and complicated interactions

of different types of actors interacting in the social world. I consider that speech acts of the soft power language associated with the Thai Y-series have become an economic reality that people perceive through national policies and marketing promotion activities. I also found that beneath this reality lies the regime of global capitalism and patriarchal norms that reproduce traditional heterosexist gender. Ideal masculinity of male actors based on beauty standards is prized above other forms of marginalized masculinity. I think that soft power's discursive practices do not promote social equality and ignore the LGBTQ community in Thailand today.

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