



THAILAND SOFT POWER STRATEGY THROUGH BOYS' LOVE SERIES OF LOVESICK (2014) AND LOVESICK (2024)

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Abstract

The Thailand Boys Love series has become increasingly popular worldwide. Its popularity opens the opportunity for the country to familiarize its cultural values around the world. This research aims to investigate Thailand's attempt to legitimize its soft power agenda through the Boys Love series. Lovesick, the series, serves as a window and object of study for this research to explore these efforts. This study employed a qualitative method with a psychoanalytic visual approach. The data used in this research examined the relationship between images and audience engagement. The finding shows that the Thai government, along with the cultural industry, collaborated to use the Boys Love series to familiarize their soft power. They strengthen it through the visual and remediation of queer gaze presented by two versions of Lovesick the Series. The finding revealed a transformation towards the strategy employed by the Thai government to utilize Boys Love as a tool of soft power legitimation.

Keywords: Boys Love, Thailand, Soft Power, Remediation, Queer Gaze

Abstrak

Saat ini, serial Boys Love Thailand telah menjadi populer di seluruh dunia. Popularitasnya membuka peluang bagi negara tersebut untuk memperkenalkan nilai-nilai budayanya ke seluruh dunia. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki upaya Thailand dalam melegitimasi agenda soft power-nya melalui serial Boys Love. Serial Lovesick berfungsi sebagai jendela sekaligus sebagai objek studi dalam penelitian ini untuk mengeksplorasi upaya-upaya tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan psikoanalisis visual. Data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini menganalisis hubungan antara gambar dan interaksinya dengan audiens. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pemerintah Thailand, bersama industri budaya, berkolaborasi untuk menggunakan serial Boys Love guna memperkenalkan soft power mereka. Mereka memperkuatnya melalui visual dan remediasi pandangan queer yang disajikan oleh dua versi Lovesick the Series. Temuan tersebut mengungkap transformasi dalam strategi yang digunakan pemerintah Thailand untuk memanfaatkan Boys Love sebagai alat legitimasi *soft power*.

Kata Kunci: Boys Love, Thailand, Soft Power, Remediasi, Queer Gaze

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to examine the Thai government's contribution to the development of the Boys Love (BL) popular culture within the country. Lyajoon (2024) observes that the Thai government initially viewed BL as contradictory to the



nation's ideology and status quo, as BL narratives challenge the heteronormative ideology endorsed by Thailand. McLelland & Welker define BL as a popular culture genre focused on homoerotic relationships between "beautiful" men or *bishōnen*, primarily targeting heterosexual women as their audience (2015:3). This is unsurprising, considering BL series are adaptations of Japanese *Yaoi manga* with similar story centers.

Nevertheless, Thai BL narratives attempt to follow the heteronormative themes and heterosexual relationships commonly found in *Lakhorn*, the traditional Thai soap operas. However, Baudinette (2024) notes that over time, BL narratives have countered those themes by centering queer experiences. Consequently, BL in Thailand has continued to evolve in response to the dynamic sociocultural context and the increasing acceptance of queer communities.

A key BL series that opened the door for BL acceptance in Thailand's predominantly heterosexual audience is *Lovesick the Series* (2014). Adapted from the webcomic *Lovesick: The Chaotic Lives of Blue Shorts Guys* (*Lovesick ชุลมุนกางเกงน้ำเงิน*) by Latika Chumpoo, *Lovesick* broke the traditional *Lakhorn* formula by explicitly focusing on a romantic relationship between two cisgender high school boys. It received positive attention and popularity from its first episode, which aired on July 6, 2014, and its second season in 2015 (Baudinette, 2019, p. 116). *Lovesick* became a pioneer in the BL genre on Thai television, helping to pave the way for broader acceptance of queer-themed series within Thailand's media landscape. A decade later, in mid-September 2024, Thailand produced a remake of *Lovesick* under the same title.

Lovesick notably mixed heterosexual relationships and representations of *fujoshi* (female fans of Japanese *Yaoi manga*) as subplots within the homoerotic relationship between the two main protagonists (Bunyavejchewin et al., 2024). Other series, such as *Love by Chance* (2018), offered progressive portrayals of queer family acceptance within Thailand's conservative culture (Chan, 2021). Moreover, queer activism through Thai BL series gained popularity around 2020, building on earlier literacy activism that focused on raising awareness of issues such as consent and sexual assault, as seen in series like *TharnType* (2019) and its 2015 web series, as well as *2gether* (2020) (Prasannam, 2023). These efforts have contributed to discourses promoting education and acceptance of queer communities in Thai society. However, simultaneously, they can be seen as promoting BL as a new cultural industry product within a predominantly heteronormative entertainment industry.



Furthermore, the process of remediation and the growing popularity of the BL series prompted a shift in the Thai government's strategy. What was once regarded as deviant by state values has now become a promising soft power tool to disseminate Thai cultural values abroad. This familiarization is inseparable from the remediation processes executed by the Thai BL series, which influenced narrative patterns and how they engage global audiences.

Therefore, this research explores the forms of queer remediation represented by *Lovesick* (2014) and its 2024 adaptation, and how this remediation facilitated the Thai government's involvement in legitimizing BL series and increasing their popularity as an instrument of soft power on the global stage.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method, drawing on Gillian Rose's visual psychoanalysis framework. Psychoanalysis as a methodological framework for visual objects relates to the relationship between images and their audience. Both sites are viewed as places of meaning production that are the focus of visual psychoanalysis (2016: 151). Modalities such as media technology, compositional elements, and social context, as described by Rose, also enrich the analysis through psychoanalysis, as there is no single, definitive way to interpret a visual work. Various psychoanalytic concepts applied to the same visual work will produce different interpretations (2016: 149) due to their intertwining with audience variations and the prevailing social context.

Therefore, the psychoanalysis referred to by Gillian Rose is a framework that explains the relationship between visual images and the mental processes of the audience in interpreting them, as well as how the two influence each other in the social context in which the visual images are produced and received. Gillian Rose's visual psychoanalysis can then answer the need for data and analysis in this study. This method also enables the exploration and analysis of the remediation of the queer gaze in the two Thai BL series, *Lovesick*. The remediation analysis is then correlated with the sociocultural context to explore how these two series can explain the government's primary interest in making the BL series, represented by *Lovesick*, a tool of soft power for this country.

Boys Love as a “Queer”



Queer refers to various elements in everyday life that, by their existence, reveal the limitations and falseness of sexual norms within particular cultural contexts (Ott & Mack, 2020). Simply put, queer is understood as everything outside the box of sexual norms, in this case heteronormativity, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identities. However, the definition of queer is not limited to sexuality but extends to behaviors that contradict the 'fixed' or dominant norms within a community. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (in Wijaya, 2021) defines queer as something that denotes openness to multiple possibilities, gaps, entanglements, dissonances, and resonances that make sexuality impossible to understand as monolithic. This diversity also encompasses various "queer" experiences that we may not have realized we have encountered before, including what we like and watch. For example, the BL series, which depicts homoerotic relationships between men, evokes queer experiences because it offers a queer gaze to its viewers. Therefore, in the context of this research, the term queer refers to all forms of fluid gender and sexual orientation diversity that lie outside dominant heteronormative knowledge. Queer in this study refers to the variety of queer experiences felt by individuals or heteronormative groups, including the predominantly heterosexual female audience of BL series. These experiences arise from watching BL, which presents a queer gaze within its narrative.

Remediation as Reality Reformation

Building on Walter Benjamin's ideas, Bolter and Grusin define remediation as the process of reshaping or rehabilitating one medium through another (1999: 56). Like Benjamin, they recognize remediation as a dynamic process. New media do not simply replace old media; they also enrich and reform them. All media are interconnected, shaping and influencing each other within specific cultural and contextual frameworks. Beyond the media themselves, Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation also includes new media technologies, which play a crucial role in how both old and new media are remediated. As media technologies evolve, they affect how updated versions of reality are presented across various media forms.

Such remediation practices can be clearly observed in the phenomenon of television series remakes. Simply put, a remake involves retelling a story—such as a film or TV series—in a new way that is relevant to current social and cultural contexts, while still preserving elements of the original version (Asenas, 2009). In remakes, television series often remediate the same version of reality at different times by borrowing or transforming content from the old medium into the new one. In other



words, remade TV series add to or subtract elements from previous media versions, updating them to fit the prevailing sociocultural context.

Therefore, in this study, remediation refers to the process of reconstructing a version of reality from old media into new media. Additionally, the latest media technologies play a vital role in this process. Together with the sociocultural context, media technology adapts and shapes the remediated version of reality presented by the new medium. The goal is to provide users with a deeper understanding of reality through the intervention of this new media.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Popularization of Boys Love Series and Soft Power Agenda

The BL series has become a new source of revenue for the Thai government, generating substantial profits for the country. SCB EIC projects that the BL series market will generate more than 4.9 billion THB in revenue, equivalent to 2.4 trillion rupiah, in 2025 (The Nation, 2025). This condition has prompted the Thai government to support the BL series, which has the potential to increase the country's competitiveness in the global market.

This potential is also supported by Tortermvasana et al. (2022), who state that Thailand's tourism industry can capitalize on the global popularity of the Thai BL series. One way to do this is by leveraging the loyal fans of these series. Countries are capitalizing on the popularity of the BL series and other Thai cultural products to generate economic benefits. One of them is Japan. In Japan, the popularity of BL series has encouraged fans to visit Thailand to experience being at the filming locations of their favorite BL series. The popularity of the BL series has then spread to various countries, including China, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Latin America (Tortermvasana et al., 2022).

The popularity of BL series internationally is supported by both paid and free digital streaming platforms as a place to market and distribute these homoerotic series between men, as stated by Lizada, "More importantly, and in terms of marketability, these lakorn are referred to by fans and viewers as BL, thereby strengthening the identity of these texts as erotically sanitized commodities on the "shelves" of YouTube and other free streaming services." (Lizada, 2022 p. 132).



The BL series has gained popularity among fans and has its own unique appeal. This genre has become an entertainment commodity with homoerotic content that has been adapted and is available on streaming platforms such as YouTube and other free streaming services. The transformation of media to digital streaming platforms has also made it easier for fans to access Thai BL series. This transformation has also accelerated the dissemination of queerness, a political message of queer identity in the BL series, which is accepted by their fans.

Furthermore, as Baudinette (2019) notes, the BL series can open the door to the acceptance of queer relationships; Thailand has also become aware of the political function of these series. This awareness has paved the way for the country to make BL one of its soft powers.

Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability of a country to influence and shape the preferences and choices of other countries voluntarily. This influence is formed through attraction, both in terms of cultural values and the country's political policies. We can see this attraction in South Korea's K-pop culture, which has influenced the preferences and lifestyles of people worldwide.

Chua Beng Huat (2012) explains explicitly the application of soft power in popular culture. Chua emphasizes how a country can successfully utilize its popular culture as a form of soft power, "To achieve soft-power, the exported pop culture must be able to shift its audience's perceptions, preferences, interpretative frameworks, and emotions, i.e., a set of cognitive processes, towards a generally positive disposition and attraction to the exporting country, which is the applicant of soft-power." (2012: 121)

In other words, the success of soft power depends on the ability of popular culture not only to entertain, but also to shape perceptions and values that support the positive image of the country of origin of that popular culture in the eyes of international audiences. This success enables the country to gain broader influence and avoid being taken for granted by global audiences.

In the context of this study, the BL series *Lovesick*, a widespread cultural phenomenon, also serves as a soft-power tool, particularly for disseminating narratives of queerness to the global community. The BL series, as a tool of Thai soft power, is reinforced by the remediation process from television to digital streaming platforms, as seen in the series *Lovesick* (2024). Remediation, as seen in the *Lovesick*



series, has made BL series increasingly popular globally because it is enabled by new media platforms such as YouTube, iQIYI, Netflix, etc.

Remediation, as described above, helps Thailand present itself as a "safe" and "queer-friendly" country through its BL series. The remediated series *Lovesick*, available on the streaming platform iQIYI, offers a more inclusive portrayal of queer relationships and strives to bring viewers closer to the queer subjects presented through its cinematography. This condition strengthens the emotional attachment and positionality of the audience with queer relationships and distinctive Thai cultural values. Remediation helps familiarize not only queer messages and relationships, but also Thai cultural values that support the dissemination of Thailand's political soft power to the global arena.

Support for the success of the Thai BL series in shaping perceptions and values that support their country's image is explained by Miguel Antonio Lizada. Lizada (2022) found that Thai BL is successful as soft power due to its ability to build a close-knit transnational community in the form of a fandom. BL also reinforces Thailand's image as an inclusive and progressive country on issues of gender and sexuality. Ironically, the BL industry also fosters an inclusive image of a "safe" space for queer subjects, aligning with Thailand's political context. Therefore, the BL series, as a form of soft power, is not only Thailand's strategy to expand its cultural influence and strengthen its position in the global arena through entertainment-based cultural diplomacy. At the same time, the BL series is also used by the entertainment industry to generate profit.

Ambivalence, as described above, aligns with Thailand's paradoxical soft-power policy. Lyajoon (2024) states that although Thailand recognizes the potential of its entertainment industry, mainly BL, as a soft-power tool, it lacks the will to maximize this opportunity. This condition arose due to fears that the queer narrative in BL could disrupt the country's ambiguous status quo. This view is supported by Cogan (2024), who argues that soft power in Thailand is paradoxical and contrary to the country's ideology, which emphasizes national integration and inward orientation. Meanwhile, soft power, as described earlier, uses cultural attractions to draw attention and shape the perception and image of the country from abroad.

Interestingly, the Thai government has granted equal rights to queer groups. Since January 23, 2025, the country has taken a significant step forward in history by legalizing same-sex marriage (Ramiah, 2025). This step was followed by the



government granting adoption rights, health services, and anti-discrimination regulations on gender expression that protect transgender groups. This situation signifies a shift in Thailand's position towards becoming a country that is inclusive of queer issues. This position also enables Thailand to utilize this political policy as another tool of soft power, enhancing its image.

Metaveevinij & Chongam (2025) refer to Thailand's soft power policy as homonationalism because support for Thailand's BL industry is closely related to the same-sex marriage bill. Homonationalism itself refers to efforts to use LGBTQ+ rights to legitimize and strengthen the nationalist agenda (Puar, 2007, 2015). Therefore, the state's involvement in Thailand's BL culture industry demonstrates that soft power is being utilized as a means of promoting national pride and economic development.

Government support for Thailand's BL industry, in relation to its soft-power agenda, has given new impetus to the remediation process carried out on the BL series. Remediation that emphasizes new media, specifically online streaming platforms, both paid and free, accelerates the process of familiarizing global audiences with the content and queerness they offer. A transnational process based on fandom then formed, creating interest in Thai culture. This interest constructed the perception and image of Thailand as a country that is friendly to the queer community and inclusive of gender diversity.

CONCLUSION

The result proves that the remediation of the queer gaze in the BL series Lovesick provides a window into how remediation can be an ambivalent strategy. BL series such as Lovesick can become a political space for queer groups through the familiarization of queerness supported by new media. However, on the other hand, the cultural industry also benefits because the BL series, which are their visual commodities, have gained wider recognition and market since being remediated through digital streaming platforms. Interestingly, this country has also succeeded in gaining a promising political position in the global arena while also benefiting in the economic and development sectors through the implementation of its paradoxical soft power.

Furthermore, the remediation of the Lovesick series is an example of how remaking Thai BL series with newer media technology is a strategy to popularize these series to a broader audience. This strategy also builds a more personal



connection between queer narratives and global audiences. Therefore, the remediated BL series offers Thailand political benefits as a form of soft power.

The process of queer gaze remediation in the BL series *Lovesick* is thus made possible by the sociocultural transformation of society, which has become increasingly inclusive of queer values. This condition aligns with the transformation of traditional media, such as television, to new media, including digital streaming platforms, during the period from 2014 to 2024. In addition, the remediation process is also driven by the interests of the BL culture industry, which opens up other possibilities beyond the identification and representation of queer subjects in BL series. The culture industry makes the politics of queer identity in the BL series a visual commodity that is desired by its audience. The government also plays an important role, primarily by using the BL series as a tool of soft power. These three social factors shape the transformation of the queer gaze in the BL series *Lovesick*. The transformation resulting from the remediation process is intricately linked to the positions of queer subjects and audiences. Both can take the position of subjects who identify with gender diversity and sexual orientation while also desiring it.

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