

From Screen to Reality: How Fans Give Meaning to Thai Boys Love Couples

A Study of How Fans of Thai Boys Love Media Give Meaning to the Celebrity Couples and
How This Impacts Engagement with the Series They Star in

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ABSTRACT

Boys love (BL) is a genre of original works portraying relationships between gay men usually targeted towards women, which was popularized in Asia over the recent decades. In the recent years Thailand became the centre of BL, releasing more BL series with each year that passes. What separates Thailand's approach from other countries' approach to BL is that the actors who perform in the series are made into celebrity couples. These couples, most of whom are heterosexual, perform homoerotic acts off-screen during fan events and promotions, while using their own names instead of the names of their characters. If successful enough they go on to star in multiple series together. Since the first series from which such a couple was created came out in 2016, there has not been much research focusing on Thai BL couples. Therefore, present research aimed to answer the research questions *How do fans of Thai Boys Love series give meaning to the celebrity couples of Thai BL? And how does this influence their engagement with the series?* The data was obtained through 11 semi-structured interviews with fans of the couples BrightWin, TayNew, ZeeNunew, OffGun and JoongDunk. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. Three themes emerged. Impressions of couples and actors, Fan service, and Parasocial relationships. The study found that participants interpreted the relationships between couples as authentic through determinants such as care, comfort and friendship. Less often the relationships were perceived as romantic. Participants preferred friendship dynamic over romantic ones, as they felt that couples with romantic dynamics tend to blur the lines between reality and fiction too much, which often leads to toxicity in the fandom. Most fans were emotionally invested in couples, which was expressed through feelings of happiness, pride or fear for the couples. Furthermore, fans expressed being more involved in Thai couples' lives than those of other celebrities. Queerbaiting was not seen as an issue by most participants, which was attributed to the culture Thai BL media originates from. When it came to the series the couples starred in, fans expressed that they would watch a series if it did not star their favourite couples, however having an established rapport with the couples added to their enjoyment of the series. Behind the scenes disputes made the series more difficult to watch. Theoretical and

practical implications, as well as limitations and implications for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Thai BL, Boys Love, Yaoi, Fandoms, Audience Reception*

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1. Introduction

The number of queer media has been increasing in the recent decades, both in the West, and in East and Southeast Asia, and Boys Love (BL) is a part of this broader expansion of queer representation around the globe (Baudinette, 2023, p.103). BL is a genre of media texts originating from the Japanese yaoi culture (Prasannam, 2019, p.64). Both BL and yaoi present queer stories of two men falling in love and they are mostly made by women for women (Zsila, 2017, p.7). Originally, yaoi was a form of fan fiction, similar to slash fiction in the West. Slash fiction is a genre of fan fiction portraying same sex relationships between existing fictional characters. It is believed to have started in the 1970s, when fans started writing stories about Star Trek where Spock and Kirk were involved in a romantic or sexual relationship (Neville, 2018., p.385). Similarly, yaoi's origins are in ani-paro (anime parody), which was popularized in the 1980s, where fan favourite anime characters were placed into intimate sexual relationships, with stories for both men and women. However, those targeted towards men were about heteronormative relationships, while those targeted towards women contained stories with gay men (Galbraith, 2011, p. 217). Fans could read, respond to, and rewrite the stories, with most of those involved being women. The genre was named yaoi as a reference to the meaninglessness of the genre, as yaoi is an abbreviation for the expression “no climax, no punchline, no meaning “(Galbraith, 2011, p.212). Furthermore, women who enjoy yaoi and BL are often referred to as fujoshi in Japan. This word literally translates to “rotten girl”. These fans used to be considered rotten because the media texts they indulged in portrayed fantasies of same sex relationships which could not lead to reproduction (Galbraith, 2011, p.215). The term has since been taken in by the community and is not seen as a derogatory term, but its roots cannot be disregarded when discussing the history of yaoi and BL (Prasannam, 2019, p.67). The main difference between yaoi and BL today is that BL is typically a category of commercially published original works. It also tends to be more accepted as it is more regulated than yaoi (Galbraith, 2011, p.218).

Although it originated in Japan, in recent years Thailand has become the centre of BL media in Asia, with the number of BL series produced increasing each year. In 2015 this number was five, in 2019 it was 25 (Prasannam, 2019; p.67), while in 2023 it was at least 68 (*2023 BL Dramas - List of BL Series in 2023*, n.d.). This increase in popularity saw a sharp rise during Covid-19, when the most famous Thai BL series to date, *2gether* came out in February of 2020 and was a massive success with millions of people tuning in to watch it every week (Lizada, 2022, p.137). In 2020 it was the most watched BL series on the

streaming platform LINE TV (Koaysomboon, 2020, para.5). In 2021 the first episode had 16 million views on YouTube (Lizada, 2022, p.137), and this number continued growing until the series eventually got taken off YouTube and moved to Rakuten Viki in 2023, which is where it can be found today (*2gether the Series | Viki*, n.d.). Furthermore, recently, there has been a trend of Thai BL series trending on social media platform X. For example, the series *Only Friends* which aired from August to October of 2023 (Panichraksapong, 2023) was trending on X weekly, with episode one reaching number four worldwide, as well as trending in Thailand, Poland, Mexico, and Italy among others (GMMTV, 2023). Furthermore, there have been more articles appearing in the West about actors of Thai BL series. For example, they have been seen attending New York fashion week as well as Milan fashion week (thaimazingmnl, 2023; Ap, 2023).

However, what separates the Thai BL industry from others is its approach to the actors (Baudinette, 2023, p.85). In Thailand, when two actors star in a BL series, they often become more than just on-screen lovers. The couple becomes a celebrity “couple”, also called “yaoi couple” and “khu jin” or “khu-y” in Thailand (Baudinette, 2023, p.85; Prasannam, 2019, p.66). They are made into what Baudinette (2023, p.85) calls queer idol celebrities and they regularly do live shows and sponsorships together, participate in variety shows, do fan meetings, and livestreams in which they participate in fan service, performing homoerotic acts also called skinship. If successful enough, these couples go on to star in multiple series together. An example would be the couple OffGun (Off Jumpol Adulkittiporn and Gun Atthaphan Phunsawat) who have been together for almost a decade, with their first series being *Senior Secret Love: Puppy Honey* in which they were the second couple, while the lead couple was heterosexual (Baudinette, 2023, p.83, Panichraksapong, 2016-2017). A MyDramaList page shows that as of 2022 they worked together on 22 shows, out of which 13 were scripted dramas and nine variety shows (*All the OffGun (22 Shows) - MyDramaList*, 2022).

Baudinette (2023, p.89) notes that even though Thai BL adopted its management practices of shipping couples from similar Korean and Japanese practices in K-pop and J-pop, the Thai media companies such as GMM innovate them by not letting the relationships emerge organically, but instead cultivating them artificially. Baudinette (2023, pp.89-95) explains the six-step process used by these companies to cultivate talent. First, the companies find attractive actors who fit the aesthetic of Korean and Japanese idols. These actors are put through acting workshops where they learn to act on-screen as well as perform off-screen homoerotic acts. These workshops are often recorded and shared on social media to get the

fans excited about the new talent before they debut. During the third step the couples debut officially through a BL series, but they also do promotions, go on talk shows, appear in magazines and sometimes work with YouTubers. The fourth step is product placement, which is usually effective even if it is quite obvious. The couples also attend promotional events for these products. The fifth step are fan events which usually start after the conclusion of the BL series. Here the couples perform scenes from the BL series they starred in, as well as homoerotic skits unrelated to the series. They also respond to fan desires to help the fans get to know them. Especially in the later stages GMM focuses more on actors which may later star in other series together as the focus is on establishing the celebrity couple as opposed to the characters. Finally, the couples participate in variety shows and the most successful couples are given their own variety shows such as *OffGun Fun Night* (*OffGun Fun Night Season 1*, 2017) or *TayNew Meal Date* (*TayNew Meal Date*, 2018). Throughout this, the couples develop a dynamic, which can and does not need to coincide with the BL series that they act in. In this way they can also distinguish themselves from the BL series they star in and create their own brand (Baudinette, 2023, p.122).

While there is research on yaoi and BL more generally, there is currently not much research about Thai BL. Especially when it comes to fandoms and audience reception of the couples and their dynamics. Although there is not much existing literature, some literature focusing specifically on the couples exists, such as Prasannam (2019) and Baudinette (2020; 2023). Since Thai BL became a worldwide phenomenon only recently, this research has focused on fans from Southeast Asian countries and there has not been much research done on international fans. Furthermore, while it has been shown that West-residing fans tend to incorporate the media and fan practices of the originating culture in their own repertoires, there is a lack of research in Asian pop culture with anglophone fans in general (Morimoto & Chin, 2017, p.178). This lack of research when it comes to Thai BL is most likely due to it still being a relatively new phenomenon with the first BL series in which a couple of this sort was created being SOTUS, which came out in 2016. (Baudinette, 2023, pp.45-46).

Therefore, the research questions this master's thesis will be addressing are:

How do fans of Thai Boys Love series give meaning to the celebrity couples of Thai BL?

How does this influence their engagement with the series?

The thesis is structured into five chapters. The theoretical framework summarizes relevant theory and connects this theory to Thai BL, as well as reflecting on previous relevant research. Next, the methodology chapter explains and justifies the steps taken in conducting the research, as well as delving into the ethics and credibility of the research. Following the

data analysis and the identification of themes, the findings are reported in the results section. Finally, the discussion chapter summarizes the findings once more and connects it to relevant literature to answer the research questions. Theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations are discussed.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Fandoms

In the 20th century, fans were often seen as extremely devoted followers with extreme attachments, focusing on the fanaticism in the term's etymology (Reijnders et al., 2017, p.1). In *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins, 1992, p.15) Henry Jenkins talks about how fans of media texts are often the target of ridicule. According to Bourdieu (1979, p.1), there are certain tastes that are considered better than others. Therefore, taste can function as a marker of class. The people who like the acceptable, "better" tastes tend to position themselves as superior and reject what they view as the lower, coarse or vulgar tastes (Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 6-7). To the bourgeois these fans may seem as out of control, and undisciplined (Jenkins, 1992, p.18).

Even though fans enjoy their fan activities and the media they consume, they often find themselves arguing from a position of weakness and defending their liking of the media text. They often fight against stereotypes, claiming that they are "normal" and can in many aspects conform to the norm (Jenkins, 1992, p.21). This can be connected back to fans of BL and yaoi. Yaoi was always viewed as an anomaly, especially since it was often written by women, and those holding hegemonic values could not understand why women would have this kind of a fascination (Galbraith, 2011, p.212). Therefore, othering is not rare within the communities. Some fans proclaim themselves as fans, but still view themselves as not obsessed but just casually enjoying the media text (Jenkins, 1992, pp.19-21) with even the article by Galbraith (2011, p.212) arguing that most fans are not crazed with yaoi but instead live heteronormative lives.

However, in recent years, since the rise of the internet fans have become more celebrated. Participatory culture is no longer underground as it was in the 1990s and fans are central to how culture operates (Jenkins, 2006; p.1-2). Fans were also among the first people to go online and create communities (Reijnders et al., 2017, p.4). This is important for the present research as many international fans only experience Thai BL and the idols through online channels, as they have less opportunities to meet them in person than fans who live in Southeast and East Asia.

Two aspects of fandoms often considered to be crucial are creativity and collectivity. Creativity refers to the creation, for example, making fan fiction, while collectivity refers to a sense of belonging to a group (Reijnders et al., 2017, p.3). Fans create spaces both offline and online, where they can enjoy their preferred media. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ adolescents tend to rely on media personae for social support during the development of their identity (Bond,

2018, p.474). Therefore, media focusing on LGBTQ+ inclusive entertainment is important for validating identities of queer individuals.

In *Textual Poachers* (1992, pp.22-23), Henry Jenkins talked about the difference between the casual fan and the devoted fan. He does this using the example of the study of *Watching Dallas* by Ang. Ang (1982) researched what kinds of people watch *Dallas* (1982) and how they interpret the show. Jenkins then compares how most of these fans while enjoying the programme were watching the programme in their own homes and did not have contact with other fans, so they could therefore be considered fans in a narrow sense of the word. While fans of *Star Trek* often talked from a point of a community almost like they were speaking for the collective and not just themselves. Fans can find strength and courage from identifying with others (Ang, 1982; as cited in Jenkins, 1992, pp.22-23). Similarly, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1992) created a typology where fans are those who have attachments to the media text but are not in contact with others in the community. Cultists are those who have a stronger connection to their fan object, as well as the community. Finally, enthusiasts are those who are the most active in the community, perhaps engaging more with the activities rather than the media or the stars (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1992, pp.138-139; as cited in Reijnders et al., 2017, p.4-5).

Despite the big focus on collectivity and creativity, a study by Sandvoss & Kearns (2014, p.102-103) found that academic literature had been focusing too much on the minority of more visible fans who engage in fandom practices regularly, while they found that most fans were just casually involved with the fandom. They called these fans ordinary fans. Fandom still played a big part in the lives of these fans; however, it was not a priori progressive role. This further goes to show that fans may have different interpretations based on their level of involvement with a media text.

Furthermore, fandoms are known to actively produce meanings through creation of fan made content (Jenkins, 2006, p.2) which is integral to Thai BL culture, since many of the Thai BLs in the past were adapted from content produced by fans (Prasannam, 2019, p.74). Another kind of material produced by fans are OPVs, which refers to original promotion videos, where fans can reimagine the relationships of characters through music videos. Although these are typically produced by fans, the company GMM started producing their own OPVs to promote their couples, therefore in a way appropriating the culture of fans. This is something that is commonly seen in Thai BL, as media companies take fan culture and turn it into profit. These are however often of better quality than the fan made ones and are used

as promotional material (Prasannam, 2019, pp.76-78). This raises questions of issues about fan culture being appropriated by corporations, for profit.

2.2. Meaning Making of Audiences

Before the 1940s the literature of media texts largely focused on various forms of media influencing people, often positioning the audience as a passive entity internalising whatever they were presented with (Barker, 2021, p.185; Naguim et al., 2023, p.2). Through this, various forms of media were often portrayed in a bad light. They were therefore also villainised and shown to be a bad influence, often leading to moral panics (Nekola, 2013, pp.407-409). After countless studies that failed to prove the negative effects of cinema and television on audiences, the views of active audiences were developed (Barker, 2021, p185.).

One of these models that emerged is the encoding and decoding model by Stuart Hall. According to this model, producers encode a certain meaning, but then audiences have the power to decode those meanings in the three ways based on their own experiences and backgrounds (Hall, 1973, p.4; Barker, 2021, pp.186-187). However, it is not a closed system, as the producers draw topics, events, and images of the audience from wider sociocultural and political systems of which they are a part of. Hall (1973) explains how some codes are so widely distributed within a culture that they appear to be naturally given. However, each culture has a dominant, imposed classification of sociocultural and political issues. The way the meaning is encoded does not necessarily mean it will be decoded in the same way (Hall, 1973, p.3).

Audiences decode messages presented by television. They are not passively soaking up the content they are presented with (Barker, 2008, pp.326-327). Hall (1981) presents three different decoding processes. The first one is acquiring the dominant code which accepts the preferred meanings. In this case there is a perfectly transparent communication between producer and audience. The second is the negotiated code where the audiences accept the dominant encoding in the abstract, but they make their own rules under specific circumstances. Finally, there is an oppositional code, where audiences reject the preferred hegemonic meaning and decode in a completely different way. Furthermore, the interpretations of audiences differ based on the discourses they draw from, meaning that people from different walks of life, different ages, races, genders, or sexual orientations may interpret the same message differently (Hall, 1981; as cited in Barker, 2008, p.328).

However, there is the question of what becomes a dominant or hegemonic code. Hegemonic view is the dominant understanding of a media text that may be seen as common-sense or obvious by the audiences. His view is then internalized and accepted by most of the audiences. Furthermore, the audiences that accept the hegemonic meaning often defend it by asserting its absolute position and invalidating any other opinion. This hegemonic reading, however, does not need to be the same as that intended by the producers (Barker, 2008, pp.328-329).

When queer stories first started appearing in the media, they were celebrated for bringing exposure to queer relationships, however, more recently the idea that the mainstream media is exploiting sexual minorities has become prominent, especially in the West (Baudinette, 2023, p.103). This led to the coining of the concept of queerbating. Queerbating was originally seen as the act of hinting at a queer subtext without ever realizing it. However, more recently it has been used to refer to a broader range of issues, such as LGBTQ marketing or celebrities hinting at queerness while stating they are straight and cisgender. In both cases, the mainstream media uses queer representation for the purpose of economic gain or exploitation (Woods & Hardman, 2021, pp.2-3; Baudinette, 2023, p.103). As mentioned earlier, yaoi and BL are often considered to promote heteronormative ideas of male-male romance and they do not pay attention to discrimination faced by the LGBTQ community while trying to satisfy female desires. This is the case in scripted series and movies, but also in live performances performed by the couples. This can be considered the appropriation of representation and in the case of the couples, they feed female fantasies to sell products and services. Furthermore, a part of the issue is that the producers and actors working on these shows are usually not queer themselves and have not experienced the discrimination queer people often face, but they profit off of it (Baudinette, 2023, p.104).

In his work on Asian fandoms, Thomas Baudinette (2020, pp.109-110) investigated a Filipino fandom of Thai BL, which is the largest market for Thai BL outside of Thailand. He found that the Filipino fans had a different reading to the dominant one. As mentioned previously, yaoi and BL are often viewed as a female centred genre perpetuating stereotypes of femininity and masculinity associated with dominant and submissive roles in gay relationships, promoting rape culture and a hurtful representation of gay men (Garg, 2019, p.165). Even in the description of the subreddit for Boys Love, it is stated that it is a genre mostly made by women for women (Reddit, n.d.). However, in the Philippines there was an abundance of both male and female fans, with many of them a part of the LGBTQ community. They interpreted the storylines as well as the live performances as taking a stand

for gay rights, normalising queer relationships and they felt empowered by these couples. Furthermore, the Filipino fans' differentiating yaoi and BL, presenting yaoi as a genre made for women which portrayed unrealistic relationships, while they claimed that Thai BL was more accurate, disregarding that it originated from yaoi (Baudinette, 2020, pp.107-108). Therefore, exploring the experiences of fans from different parts of the world might bring about different interpretations. Furthermore, most research has been done on Southeast Asian fandoms. And as those fans come from countries where LGBTQ rights are still not as progressive as in many countries in the West, their encodings may differ to those of fans from Western countries (Wilkinson et al., 2017, pp.6-7).

Similarly, queer Thai fans also expressed that watching the couple KristSingto interact made them realize that queer love was normal and common, and they saw it as a positive development. Furthermore, they felt empowered and not exploited by the representation (Baudinette, 2023, p.105). Especially since before the emerging of Thai BL, Thai media censored sexual minorities as they were considered to deviate from the traditional idea of Thainess (Baudinette, 2023, p.43). However, since queerbaiting emerged in North America, where the legal rights of sexual minorities are more established, it may be a concept more reasonable to research in the West. Furthermore, this shows that the needs and encodings of individuals may differ based on the culture and background they come from (Baudinette, 2023, pp.104-106).

Another framework coming out as a response to the lack of view of audiences as active is the uses and gratifications paradigm (U&G). According to U&G, people search out media that can fulfil their needs and lead to gratification (Barker, 2021, p.185). In the case of BL and yaoi, it has been theorized that fans enact their fantasies through stories and characters (Galbraith, 2011, pp.227-228). Furthermore, fans identifying with the queer community may feel accepted in a space where queerness is accepted, as Thai BL often portrays the world as very accepting of the characters (Baudinette, 2020, p.105).

Naguim et al. (2023, pp.1-2) looked at what needs the transnational fandoms of K-pop satisfy through online interactions. They used the U&G typology by Katz et al. (1973, pp.166-167) who separated the needs into five groups: first group is related to information, knowledge and understanding and can also be called cognitive needs, second are affective needs which are related to strengthening aesthetic, pleasurable and emotional experience. Third are integrative needs which are needs for strengthening credibility, confidence, stability, and status. Fourth are the needs related to strengthening contact with those close to us and the world, and these perform an integrative function. Finally, there is the need to

escape or release tension. Naguim et al. (2023, pp.7-8) found that fans engaged in constant use of K-pop media content, and this is what differentiated them from regular users. The constant consumption satisfied the needs of fans. More specifically the needs satisfied were the cognitive needs or information about the world since they learned about the Korean culture through K-pop. The second was social needs through a sense of community with other fans and identification with other users who consume the same content. Finally, they used the media to satisfy their need for escapism from daily pressures and boredom. Therefore, this study showed how people may use media in order to satisfy their various needs. However, it is also interesting how one piece of media can satisfy different needs in different ways (Naguim et al., 2023, p.7-8).

Despite being two different theories, both the encoding / decoding model and the U&G model contribute to the active audiences paradigms but take a different perspective on it. Therefore, they can be used as a tool to further explore and get a more comprehensive view of the meaning making of audiences.

Despite the popularity of active audience models in the recent decades, there is some criticism that cannot be disregarded. Critiques of active audiences try to emphasize the importance of producers and the media text, as well as the constraints of meaning making. It would be naïve to assume that audiences are passive and cannot reject or criticise the proposed meaning. However, the critics propose that audiences are still bound by the text, which influences their interpretations (Gibson, 2000, p.256). Similarly, active audiences are often considered a politically driven audience, however, it has been shown that active viewing does not always equal political resistance (Gibson, 2000, p.256).

2.3. Kayfabe and Suspension of Disbelief

Thus far, Thai BL idols have been compared with K-pop idols as they share many similarities since they both belong to the idol culture. However, the way in which Thai BL couples operate can also be compared to kayfabe in pro wrestling. Kayfabe refers to that which is fictional or deceptive (Fontaine et al., 2022, p.4). In pro wrestling it is considered an ongoing present in which reality and fiction, authenticity and illusion are ambiguously entangled. The wrestlers create a performance of emotional labour which creates emotional responses from the audiences (Fontaine et al., 2022, p.7). Kayfabe requires the audiences to suspend their disbelief. According to Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication (Chandler & Munday, 2020) suspension of disbelief is an idea that in order for the audiences

to become emotionally invested in a narrative, they need to believe that the events that are unfolding are reality, despite knowing they are not. However, similar to Hall's theory mentioned earlier (Hall, 1973), it does not necessarily mean that each member of the audience will decode the situation in the same way, and it may happen that a person is out of sync and feels the kayfabe breaking in some situations (Fontaine et al., 2022, p.8). Even though the fans are mostly aware of the non-realness of the fights, they are still emotionally invested and play their role, as kayfabe can be seen as an unwritten contract between the performers and the audiences where both need to play their part in order for the show to go well (Reinhard et al., 2022, p.149). Kayfabe can also be considered a kind of a hyperreality. Hyperreality refers to a construction of reality that we are trying to portray as real although we know it is fictional (Reinhard et al., 2022, p.149). In the case of pro wrestling as well as Thai BL the performers need to be able to sell the performance in the moment and to improvise, as well as make it a part of their persona beyond the fictional media they are acting in (Reinhard et al., 2022, p. 150).

In the case of Thai BL, the fans are encouraged to "ship" the actors or idols and not the characters, by calling the ship according to their real names as opposed to their fictional names of the characters (Baudinette, 2023, p.94). This may be because this way the couple gets traction and the fans become fans of the couple as opposed to the fictional characters. The fans know that the reality is constructed and that it might be based in objective reality, but it is someone's subjective interpretation of objective reality. Furthermore, they may not see it as entirely fake, but rather as a different kind of reality (Lane, 2001, p.100). Despite the fact that during live events the couples dance, sing and act, some fans expressed that they were there for the homoeroticism and not other parts of the show (Baudinette, 2023, p.120). Therefore, for fans this hyperreal act the actors put on is the main draw of the shows. The live events present an imaginary world where fans can lose themselves in the homoeroticism produced by the couples. (Baudinette, 2023, p.121) Therefore, despite Thai BL and pro wrestling being from different spheres, pro wrestling is used here as an example to illustrate that the idea of this veil between the real and the fictional is not unheard of in media.

2.4. Parasocial Relationships and Queer Idols

Parasocial relationships (PSR) are defined as meaningful attachments to media figures which can be experienced despite the seemingly impenetrable boundary between the social and parasocial, and between the media figure and the audience (Giles, 2023, p.34). The

reality status of the figure is not the leading factor in the strength of the PSR. PSRs can develop with a real celebrity, a dead celebrity, or a fictional character. Digital media has somewhat blurred the boundaries between the social and parasocial, but this will be discussed further later.

Giles (2002) proposed a framework based on three levels of PSRs based on the potential of a real relationship developing, where the first order has high social potential as the celebrity is a living human being representing themselves in the public sphere. The second order is when a living human being is representing a fictional character where a relationship would be possible with the actor. Finally, third order is a situation where the real-life interaction is not possible as the object of projected PSR is either dead or not human. Furthermore, PSRs can emerge from different motivations and hence those PSRs that are purely textual may elicit different kinds of experiences than those with living humans (Giles, 2002, p.294; Giles, 2023, p.36).

According to Elfving-Hwang (2018) K-pop idols are created in a way that makes them an object of consumption and parasocial interaction. Although they are celebrities, they are not made to be looked at from afar, but instead there is structured engagement with fans in ways which foster PSRs for economic gain (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p.190). Not everything mentioned in this article applies to the example of Thai BL, since even though the parallels between the two can be drawn, it is not a one-to-one relationship. However, one aspect of making a K-pop idol that also applies to Thai BL idols is the cultivation of a persona. In the beginning of their career, narratives and characteristics that define each idol are cultivated (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p.193). The idols then perform the roles assigned to them, and this persona is maintained in social media presence, fan meetings and other promotional events. The idols are often also showed in more private settings, for example, in shows portraying behind the scenes moments of idols' lives (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p.194). Management companies utilise the PSRs of fans to build a loyal customer base (Elfving-Hwang, 2018, p.199). Similarly, because of the connection the Thai BL fans develop to their idols, fans are eager to promote their idols online and use the hashtags made by the companies or other fans, even when they know that the companies may be exploiting them (Baudinette, 2023, p.121).

King-O'Riain (2020, p.2821) found that Western fans felt emotionally closer to K-pop idols than to Western celebrities, despite being culturally and geographically closer to the latter. This emotional closeness motivated fans to engage more with their idols. Live streaming played a big role in the relationships between idols and fans in Europe and the US. They also found that fans perceived the behaviours displayed online as authentic since they

were consistent across platforms, as well as in live performances. They also displayed strong belief in the authenticity of emotional actions of idols. They concluded that emotional action and investment of fans is central to the success of these platforms and the authentic link between idols and fans is the key to success (King-O'Riain, 2020, pp.2835-2836).

As with other idol cultures, the Thai BL culture provides ample opportunity for fans to form PSRs. Fans can gain access to their idols through live performances, small venues and special events where fans can communicate with them (Galbraith, 2018, p.202). In the instance of K-pop, where idols often have followings too big to host small events, they use online platforms to livestream for fans who watch to interact with their idols in real time. Therefore, the essence of being an idol remains (King-O'Riain, 2021, p.2822). This produces co-presence, a sense of intimacy produced through co-existing in the same space or by direct interactions with the idols. Co-presence can be produced even in online spaces (Jenkins, 2010; as cited in Baudinette, 2023, p.111).

Thai BL actors are what Baudinette (2023, p.85) calls queer idol celebrities. They are media personalities that are highly produced and promoted whose appeal is in explicit homoerotic performance both on-screen and off-screen. However, these idols are not queer because they are a part of the LGBTQ+ community, but because their staged performances go against the heteronormative Thai celebrity culture (Baudinette, 2023, p.85). These couples are made to be shipped by the fans. Thai BL adopted their shipping practices from K-pop, where fans started shipping members within boy groups. However, in K-pop this practice originated organically through fans, after which the producers started contributing to the fans' fantasies, as was the case when the production house of the group TVXQ that held an official fanfiction contest targeted at imagining the members in couples with one another (Baudinette, 2023, p.89). However, in Thailand, this has become central to the business model of Thai BL produced by GMM, one of Thailand's largest media companies, as well as many others who followed in their footsteps (Baudinette, 2023, p.44). The queer idols within their management are taught to perform homoeroticism, and during fan events the couples perform all kinds of homoerotic acts. They often play couples games, embrace each other or kiss (Baudinette, 2023, pp.122-123).

Furthermore, at these events, the parasocial relationships are enforced and fans are encouraged to focus on the couple not only as the characters they play, but also as actors (Baudinette, 2023, pp.93-95). Intimacy is underlined and shipping is presented as a spectacle (Prasannam, 2019, p.78). This can lead to fans developing illusions of knowing the idols. Therefore, fans may perceive the personas portrayed by the actors in live events as their real

personalities. There is evidence that some fans struggle to distinguish between the actors' real personas and the characters they portray in shows, despite many actors identifying as heterosexual (Baudinette, 2020, p.105). Another example of GMM cultivating PSRs would be a recent variety show they produced where six actors, all from BL couples spent two days cooking for their fans. They learned to cook selected dishes and then cooked them for their fans in Japan. They also served everything themselves and entertained the guests. This caused a very intimate closeness with the idols to develop. Fans could buy tickets like it was a fan meeting (*Fully Booked*, 2024; GMMTV, 2024).

It is also interesting to look at how audiences negotiate the cognitive balancing between the actor and the characters, as there have been instances of actors being disliked for the actions of the characters they portray. For example, Tukachinsky et al. (2019, p.10) found that whether an actor is shown playing a positive or negative role can influence the probability of the audience perceiving the actor as charitable. The audience's opinion of the actors was influenced by the attributes of the character they portrayed. Therefore, in terms of the present research, it would be interesting to research how audiences of Thai BL series and couples navigate this boundary between the two and if there is any spill over from the series as well as the live performances, into fans believing the sincerity of the acts.

While most research on PSRs focused on one-way relationships that were more common before the digitalization of the world, Kowert and Daniel (2021, p.2) specifically focused on the relationships that fans develop with twitch streamers. They called this the one-and-a-half sided relationship as opposed to the one-way relationship usually talked about in terms of PSRs. They note that the literature on PSRs does not account for these kinds of relationships as most fans of streamers report having some kind of a reciprocal interaction with the streamer.

Similarly, Zhang (2022, p.1118) researched a social media platform developed by the entertainment company SM in South Korea during lockdown in which fans could get behind the scenes glimpses as well as directly communicate to their idols in a texting manner similar to how one would text their friend. These interactions were paid for and limited to three texts, however, it is clear that social media has complicated PSRs, often making them what Kowert and Daniel (2021, p.2) call a one-and-a-half sided relationship, since the reciprocity exists, although the interaction is clearly paid for and sought out by the fans. This is similar to the practices in the Thai BL industry. Therefore, this somewhat reciprocal interaction exists in some cases.

From the literature, it is clear that the idol industry thrives on developing PSRs between idols and the audiences as this leads to higher emotional engagement and profit on the side of the management and entertainment companies, and Thai BL idols are no different.

3. Method

The research for this thesis set out to look at ways in which fans perceive Thai BL couples and answer the research question: “How do fans of Thai Boys Love series give meaning to the celebrity couples of Thai BL?” And “How does this influence their engagement with the series?” This chapter explains how the research was conducted and it delves into the reasoning behind each of the steps taken to conduct the research. The chapter consists of the research design, sample, operationalization, data analysis, ethical concerns and credibility.

3.1. Research Design

To discover how fans of Thai BL perceive the relationships between the couples and to answer the research question, this study utilized qualitative research. Qualitative research is heavily based in the constructivist approach which claims that reality is socially constructed and sees individuals as active meaning makers and not passive conduits of knowledge (Brennen, 2017, p.29). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not focus on hypotheses, variables, measuring or replicating findings. Instead, it focuses on asking research questions, searching for meaning and looking for ways to talk about experiences within specific cultural, historical, economic, or political contexts (Brennen, 2017, p.15).

As the aim of the study is to understand the in-depth opinions and understanding of fans, the research was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews with fans of Thai BL. Furthermore, interviews are useful when little is known about the subject of the study, as they provide a deeper understanding than quantitative methods and allow for varied answers (Gill et al., 2008, p.292). In a qualitative interview the researcher asks questions and listens while the respondent answers. It focuses on understanding the diversity of meanings and values created in the media and the relationship between society and media, striving to understand the context and meaning of information, opinions and interests while exploring the feelings, emotions, experiences, and values within the inner world of each interviewee (Brennen, 2017, p.29). Participants are seen as meaning makers and not just passive beings retrieving information (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, Chapter 4, p.2). This resonates with the audience reception theories discussed in the theoretical framework. Furthermore, the insights are used to derive interpretations and not facts (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, Part 1, p.2). Therefore, in-depth interviews were the most appropriate method to gain insights into fans’

interpretations of Thai BL couples. Analysing pre-existing materials such as comments would not bring about such deep insights into the fans' understanding which can be obtained through interviewing.

Semi-structured interviews differ from both structured and unstructured interviews in that they are not entirely naturalistic, but they are also not entirely strict in their structure (Brown & Danaher, 2019, p.77). They therefore allow for insights to be brought up which may not have been originally considered before the interviews were conducted. (Gill et al., 2008, p.292). Since semi-structured interviews require prepared topics and questions, an interview guide was created before the interviewing of participants began. Questions were compiled to be simple, direct and open-ended to encourage interesting and authentic answers (Brennen, 2017, p.35). This will be further discussed in operationalization. The order of questions was varied, and the researcher probed into topics which the interviewee found most relevant to them.

The couples included in the research were BrightWin, TayNew, OffGun, ZeeNew and JoongDunk. These couples were chosen to allow for a diverse fan base. TayNew and OffGun were chosen as they are included in what fans often referred to as the “holy triumvirate” of Thai BL (Lizada, 2022, p.135), KristSingto, the third couple of the “holy triumvirate” was not included since they have not been a couple since 2020 and have since moved on to different couplings. ZeeNew and JoongDunk are more recent couples that have both been together since 2022 and gained a lot of popularity and are continuously at the tops of fan polls on different websites (Netizens Report, 2022), therefore they may have more recent fans of Thai BL. Furthermore, all of these four couples are still together and have starred in at least two BLs together. However, due to the continuous popularity of BrightWin, as well as the fact that the BL *2gether* that they starred in is the most watched Thai BL to this day, as was mentioned in the introduction, they were included in the research although they are not a couple anymore.

3.2. Sample

The sample was obtained through convenience sampling. Convenience sampling leads to a sample from a source that is accessible to the researcher (Andrade, 2021, pp.86-87). The sampling was done by posting a thread on Reddit to r/ThaiBL. In the post, the aim of the study was explained, and the members were invited to comment if they wanted to participate.

The first inclusion criterion was that all participants were required to be fluent in English. The next inclusion criterion was that all participants had to be 18 years old or older. They also had to self-identify as fans of at least one of the five Thai BL couples used in the research, as well as having seen at least one show they star in, as the research tries to connect the meaning making of couples to the engagement with the series.

Since the sampling was done through online platforms, the interviews were conducted in an online environment through Zoom. They were conducted through video calls in a face-to-face environment, as conducting them through only written means cannot convey the non-verbal and tonal qualities of the interview, which may help to understand the responses better (Brennen, 2017, p.30). Although in-person face-to-face interviews are best to convey the meanings of participants, due to the fact that interviewees were scouted from an online environment, and were therefore from different parts of the world, the interviews had to be conducted online. This may have caused interviewees to feel less at ease as it is easier to understand social cues when the interviews are conducted in person (Zhao et al., 2023, p.13).

The sample consisted of 11 participants, nine of which identified as female and two as non-binary. The age ranged from 20 to 52 with the mean age of 30. Seven participants were from the United States of America, with one from Bangladesh who lived in the US. One participant was Indian, one Vietnamese and one Filipino. The table with all participants can be found in Appendix A.

The data collection lasted 20 days, with a post being posted on Reddit on May 3rd, after which people who wanted to participate commented and were contacted by the researcher to schedule the interviews. The interviews were conducted in two batches, with an additional 11th interview taking place a week after the others on May 25th.

As the interviews were semi-structured, the interview guide was adjusted based on each participant's interests and answers. The interviews lasted between 45 and 85 minutes, with an average of 68 minutes. The researcher provided a Zoom link before the beginning of the interview. All interviewees were asked to read a consent form beforehand and provided verbal consent to be recorded during the interview.

3.3. Operationalization

The interviews were conducted based on a semi-structured interview guide with open ended questions, which allowed participants to answer questions openly and to focus on what they found most meaningful. However, the researcher followed a set list of questions to make

sure that the interviews were answering the research question, while maintaining flexibility based on the participants' views. The interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

The interview guide consisted of four main sections. The first section focused on interviewees general experiences with Thai BL, such as their history with it, as well as with similar genres like yaoi in order to establish their general knowledge and investment in the BL genre. They were also asked about their position within the fandom, as this may help identify and differentiate casual fans from the more invested ones (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1992, pp.138-139; as cited in Reijnders et al., 2017, pp.4-5; Jenkins, 1996, p.22-23). Furthermore, the participants were asked about what draws them to the genre.

The second section focused on the fans general view of the BL couples, as well as their opinions on the approach Thai BL companies take to creating these couples. They were asked about how they interact with Thai BL couples compared to other portrayals in the media to explore how fans view the couples and if they show existence of parasocial relationships. Emotional investment was also assessed through this (King-O'Riain, 2020, p.2821). In this section fans were inquired about how they view queerbating and appropriation of queer representation in Thai BL to explore their opinions on the exploitative nature of this kind of queer representation towards actual queer individuals (Baudinette, 2023, p.104).

The third section explored how the off-screen interactions translated to the screen. Here fans were asked about how their opinions of couples influence their views of the BL series. This part was used to explore how the business model of making the official couples by Thai media firms may be helpful in attracting viewership. Therefore, the fans were asked about the reasons that they typically choose to watch a BL series and about how their fan status of a celebrity or idol may influence that. They were inquired about their previous experiences choosing shows and how the couples may have influenced this. They were asked about how the general dynamic of the couple contributed to their choice of watching a series.

The final section focused on the five preselected couples. Fans were asked about how they view the relationships of the specific couples. They were once again asked about their investment in the fandom, but this time specifically with the couple of their choosing. They were asked about their perception of realness and authenticity of the interactions between the couples, as well as about the importance of authenticity for them, as this was previously shown to be important in building parasocial relationships with fans (King-O'Riain, 2020, p.2835-2536). They were specifically asked about how they interpret and why they like the interactions between the selected couples.

Through this approach the study could explore how fans give meaning to Thai BL couples. By separating the guide into four sections the study could reach a more comprehensive understanding, as it explored both the general investment and opinions, as well as specific views fans have of couples. It therefore allowed for the analysis of how fans give meaning to fandoms and how they position themselves within them, as well as allowing for an understanding of how they give meaning to interactions of couples off-screen and on-screen. Furthermore, through specific questions about couples, fans could give examples. Overall, this approach led to a comprehensive view of factors influencing engagement, understandings of couple dynamics, and its influence on the series.

3.4. Data Analysis

After the interviews were recorded, they were transcribed through Zoom and the data was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method used to identify, analyse, and report patterns of themes in datasets. It can be used to describe the data, but it can also be used to interpret the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). While the steps of coding differ in regard to different articles, the data for this study was analysed using the three steps of coding presented in Boeije (2010). Specifically, these steps are open coding, axial coding and selective coding. First, during open coding the data was thoroughly read through, and through open coding, fragments meaningful for the research were identified and compared with each other, after which they were grouped into categories which address the same themes and labelled with codes which expressed the meaning of the fragment to make them easier to compare (Boeije, 2010, p.96). A coding tree was created (Boeije, 2010, p. 103). Next, during axial coding the codes were checked to make sure that each fragment was assigned to a correct code, and the data was reassembled and reorganized by comparing the categories, establishing connections between them, as well as deciding if certain categories need to be merged and identifying the dominant elements. The categories were then looked at, and the fragments within them were compared for similarities and differences, after which the categories were subdivided when necessary (Boeije, 2010, pp.108-109). The main purpose of axial coding was to determine the dominant and less dominant elements in the research. The second purpose was to reduce the data, which is why synonyms and redundant codes were removed, and the codes representing the data set best were selected (Boeije, 2010, p.109). Last step of coding was selective coding, where the connections between codes were identified to help make sense of the findings and to answer

the research questions (Boeije, 2010, p.114). During selective coding, the pieces of the data from previous steps of coding were integrated. The core category was also identified by being the one that appears in the data frequently and is central to the research and therefore links to many other categories. (Boeije, 2010, p.115.).

The resulting themes were grounded in theory based on the theoretical framework. However since there has been no similar research on Thai BL couples to date, the resulting findings were contextualized within the broader context of the theoretical framework and literature, but they were also applied to the Thai BL context.

During the analysis, constant comparison was implemented, meaning that the interviews were conducted in blocks of a few at a time. Applying constant comparison ensured that the researcher can analyze a part of the data and deduce some findings and then figure out if there is anything that has been answered already, anything that still needs answering and if some questions need to be removed or changed (Boeije, 2010, p.83). Although this process usually ends with saturation, meaning when the same topics keep being repeated and there are no new insights from the participants, due to the scope of this study, the interviewing stopped after 11 interviews were conducted.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

In both qualitative and quantitative research, it is important to consider the ethics of the research being conducted. To ensure that the research was done ethically, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research beforehand and given a consent form they could read (see Appendix C). This information was repeated during the introduction to the interview. They gave their informed consent to being interviewed and recorded. The purpose of the research was explained to them, and they were informed about the length of the interview, that they could withdraw at any moment if they felt uneasy for whatever reason, as well as that they could refrain from answering any question they did not feel comfortable with. They were also assured that their private information would be kept confidential and that the data would be used for academic purposes only.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability in qualitative research differ from the same constructs in quantitative research (Silverman, 2011, p.360; Tracy, 2010, p.843). In qualitative research the focus is not on the findings being fully replicable, as with the nature of qualitative research,

the answers given by people will usually change over time. However, it is still important to ensure that the research is sound, and this can be done in certain ways.

When it comes to reliability, in the present study, the research process was made transparent and the data collection and analysis were explained clearly and in detail to make sure that in the future, the research can be replicated, even if the findings are not. Second, the theoretical lens and framework were made transparent, further adding to the replicability of the research (Silverman, 2011, p.360). Third, all interviews were recorded and transcribed, to ensure proper documentation (Silverman, 2011, p.366).

To ensure validity of the research, constant comparison was used, where the data was rechecked after each batch of interviews, this way the researcher can make sure that the data is answering the research question, and if there is anything that still needs answering, the questions can be adjusted (Boeije, 2010, p.83).

4. Results

This master's thesis set out to explore how fans of Thai Boys Love series give meaning to Thai BL couples and how this impacts their engagement with the series. To answer the research questions, 11 interviews were conducted with fans of Thai BL. Through thematic analysis three selective codes emerged. The first selective code was Formation of image of actors and couples, the second was Fan service and the third was Parasocial relationships. The coding tree can be found in Appendix D. In the beginning of the interviews, participants situated themselves within the fandom. Almost all participants expressed being big fans since they consumed a lot of BL media. However, when it came to how active they were in the fandom the results were mixed. One participant indicated being very active online, four expressed being moderately active, while the other six participants expressed not being active. Therefore, in the typology by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1992), most participants would be considered fans, four would be cultists, while only one would be an enthusiast (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1992, pp.138-139; as cited in Reijnders et al., 2017, p.4-5).

4.1. Formation of Image of Actors and Couples

The first selective code explored how fans interpret the couples in the context of Thai BL and their previous experiences with other media texts, as well as how they interpret the relationships between the couples. Here, fans talked about how their opinions on Thai BL have changed over time, which also caused them to become more involved with the genre. Participants generally interpreted the relationships between couples as close. Most often it was perceived as a friendship. Only in the case of one couple, the relationship was perceived as romantic by some fans. They talked about how they perceive relationships of the couples they liked as authentic and found this authenticity important to emotionally connect with the couple, but it was not important while watching a series the couples starred in. They enjoyed knowing that the couples had a genuine friendship or closeness. However, they understood that at the end of the day they are individuals who are doing a job and have their own personal lives.

4.1.1. Initial Impressions

First, almost all participants talked about how the couples of Thai BL were a new phenomenon for them. They therefore found it strange and confusing in the beginning. Some international participants expressed not wanting to engage with off-screen content in the beginning, with Participant 3 (Female, 39, Bangladesh) recalling her introduction to Thai BL couples “My first couple was MewGulf, and … It was just very weird, like I loved them as a couple on-screen, and just in reality it was just very, very strange. I just did not understand them at all.” However, with time participants adapted to the idea of the couples and all participants expressed engaging with couples both off-screen and on-screen at the time of the interviews. Two participants expressed being familiar with a similar concept from before. Participant 10 (Female, 36) from the Philippines was familiar with the concept of couples in Thai BL as she expressed that a similar concept exists in the Philippines, but she also had friends who were fans of Thai BL couples before she became a fan, as Thai BL is popular in the Philippines. Similarly, Participant 9 (Female, 29) from USA said that she had been a fan of K-pop for a decade before becoming a fan of Thai BL and was therefore familiar with the shipping of idols in K-pop, which she thought resembled Thai BL couples.

4.1.2. Couples as a Business

Thai BL couples were seen as a part of a business. Participants expressed understanding that the couples are primarily doing their job while they interact with each other in front of fans or in any media text targeted toward fans. Furthermore, they saw the couples as a product being sold to the fans by the companies that employ them and each couple as having their own brand. As Participant 4 (Female, 23, USA) explained “OffGun will often, you know, will be, like OffGun. They have their own light stick. They have their own logo. They, like in itself, are a brand.” Furthermore, participants pointed out how as Thai actors do not earn the majority of their income from the series they work on, they have to engage in fan service and promote themselves in different ways to earn money. However, while they mostly empathized with the actors, some participants expressed their dismay towards the companies employing the actors, as they thought they were using the actors, while not properly taking care of them and providing them with enough security. Participant 3 explained:

I don't think the studios even notice that their actors do need to be protected at all times. Even if you don't see them as people, they are, you know, a very expensive product, so try to keep them in one piece.

(Participant 3, Female, 39, Bangladesh)

4.1.3. Authenticity

All participants expressed believing that the relationships between couples were authentic to some extent. While they mostly did not perceive the couples' relationships as romantic, fans thought that the actors within the couples had a closer relationship to each other than to other co-stars. Authenticity was experienced through determinants like comfort around each other, genuine care for each other and consistency over time. Participant 10 (Female, 36, The Philippines) remembered seeing a video of a couple behind the scenes where it did not seem like they were very close, which made her question the closeness of their relationship off-screen. On the other hand, Participant 1 (Female, 25, Vietnam) expressed how sometimes watching couples interact seemed so natural that it made her think they were truly close. "Yeah, if they just act, like if they make me feel, like oh, maybe just, like it's natural, the way they act, like they normally treat each other like that, no matter like on camera or off, like behind camera." Some fans indicated caring about authenticity of the couples' feelings towards each other as this caused them to enjoy the series more, while others did not find authenticity important when it came to the on-screen chemistry between couples, but the authenticity still caused higher investment in the couples off-screen. Furthermore, the interactions were perceived as authentic if the fans thought that couples would act the same way behind closed doors. On the other hand, Participant 8 (Non-binary, 24, USA) and Participant 11 (Female, 20, USA) expressed believing the couple ZeeNunew were dating in real life because they perceived their off-screen interactions as very natural. Therefore, they perceived the relationship as authentic because they believed they were in a romantic relationship. However, this was also the couple which received the most backlash from those who were not their fans. Participant 5 (Non-binary, 32, USA) explained why they prefer the couple JoongDunk to ZeeNunew, both of which often engage in heavy skinship "JoongDunk feels very authentic because they're very clear with what their relationship is, and that, like what their closeness is. Whereas with ZeeNunew, it feels like they don't want us to know whether it's authentic or not."

4.1.4. Couples as a Friendship

Most participants expressed preferring a friendly dynamic to a romantic dynamic.

When asked about her preferences one participant explained:

I like a good bromance, and this is probably the United States cynic in me. But I believe more in the longevity of a friendship than I might a romantic connection. And I don't know. It's kind of fun to watch friends do things together for me. It's less fun if they're like boyfriends doing it, because I feel like I'm intruding on a date or something like that.

(Participant 7, Female, 33, USA)

Therefore, she decoded their relationship based on her cultural background (Barker, 2008, p.328). The couples who were perceived as most friendly in their dynamic were TayNew and JoongDunk, and these were also the couples participants were more likely to become invested in through off-screen interactions, as multiple fans of both couples expressed originally not being fans of the series the couples starred in. Instead, they became invested through watching their variety shows and public appearances. Participants expressed enjoying watching couples do things they would do with their friends, as well as watching their variety shows such as *TayNew Meal Date*. Participant 5 (Non-binary, 32, USA) expressed liking TayNew because they have a similar relationship to the one the participant has with their best friend. Participants Two (Female, 21, India) and Participant 11 (Female, 20, USA) mentioned how they have been noticing a change from romantic dynamics between couples towards more friendly ones, which they perceived as a refreshing change. Furthermore, the most prevalent reason for fans believing they would be sad if the couples were to separate was that they would not get to see them hanging out as friends anymore, as well as the possibility that they might end their relationship on bad terms, with Participant 4 (Female, 23, USA) stating “So, if that were to happen, I would be sad cause, like losing your best friend hurts. I've been through that.”

4.1.5. Actors as Individuals

Participants expressed their opinions about actors within the couples. They expressed being fans of individual actors as well as couples. Some participants said they had become a fan of a couple after already being a fan of the actor within the couple. Similarly, they expressed that they would support actors within couples if they went their separate ways, as long as the separation was peaceful, with Participant 1 (Female, 25, Vietnam) explaining “As long as they end on good terms, so like they don't fight, like they don't do some drama and they just separate, like peacefully. I feel like I'm okay, like supporting them as like individual.” Although this typically depended on how invested they were in each person within the couple. Actors perceived to have better acting skills, such as Gun and Zee were mentioned more often as the ones fans would follow if their couples separated. However, most participants who talked about this expressed they would be willing to try engaging with projects by other actors as well and decide if they wanted to continue following them based on the work they produce. They also acknowledged that despite their investment in the couples, they understood that these actors have their private lives outside of the couple and should not have to cater to fans’ expectations of them. For this reason, most participants indicated that they would not mind if the actors had significant others outside of their BL couples, as long as the chemistry on-screen with their BL partner remained unchanged.

4.1.6. Couples Not Influencing Engagement With the Series

Most participants expressed that they would watch a series if it had an engaging storyline, good actors, and good on-screen chemistry, even if the couple did not have good off-screen chemistry or an authentic off-screen relationship. Investment with the show was primarily dependent on the work produced and not couples who performed in them. International fans were especially more likely to say they are more engaged with the work than with the actors. As Participant 7 (Female, 33, USA) explained “I'm more interested in a person's work than like their personal life.” However, there were exceptions, as Participant 11 (Female, 20), a fan of ZeeNunew from USA indicated watching only their shows, as nothing else interested her after finding their series. Some fans also indicated not minding the behind-the-scenes disputes between couples if they happened after the filming had finished as the actors still had a good relationship at the time of filming which they found more important than if the couples were on good terms afterwards.

4.1.7. Personal Knowledge of Disputes Impacting Opinion of Series

Although it did not pertain to any couples mentioned in the research, participants talked about couples who experienced disputes behind the scenes or had a public falling-out. Some participants thought that if the couple had arguments behind the scenes, the fans were more likely to project their knowledge of this to the screen and not like the show even if the on-screen chemistry remained good. A common example was the series *Bad Buddy*, starring OhmNanon, a couple who used to be good friends before starring in the series. The series was one of the most popular series of 2021, with episode one currently having 13 million views on YouTube (GMMTV OFFICIAL, 2021). They are no longer a couple and there have been speculations about them not being on good terms, something fans also expressed noticing in some public appearances. For example, Participant 10 (Female, 36, The Philippines) remembered seeing promotional videos for their series in which one of the actors looked like he did not want to be there. Fans who expressed not being able to watch the series after the falling-out expressed not being able to watch it because the knowledge of the falling-out was constantly in the back of their minds. After the suspected falling-out, the series filmed two special episodes. Fans expressed enjoying the episodes to some extent as they felt like OhmNanon had on-screen chemistry, however, it was the fact that they were aware of the falling out that made them feel weird and sad about watching the episodes. Participant 4 (Female, 23, USA) explained “They very much have chemistry on the show. But like behind the scenes, like he didn't want to do it. He just didn't want to be there. So, because of that I can't watch *Bad Buddy* the same way.”

4.2. Fan Service

The second theme revolved around participants' perceptions and opinions of fan service performed by the couples off-screen. Fan service was seen by participants as skinship couples performed specifically for the enjoyment of fans. This was the most divisive aspect of the interactions, not only between different fans, but also within the fans, as they often expressed having a complicated relationship with fan service. Generally, participants expressed having both positive and negative feelings towards fan service. While it was seen as fun and enjoyable, especially when it came to smaller gestures, too much fan service was seen as fake. Furthermore, it made it more difficult for the participants to follow couples, and it sometimes made them uncomfortable. Participants noted how there was intense blurring of lines between reality and fiction when it came to Thai BL couples. They expressed enjoying

the fantasy, but at the same time, they found it important to know where to draw the line and realize that it is only a fantasy. The participants generally did not see a problem when it came to appropriation of queer representation and queerbaiting, which was attributed to the culture Thai BL originates from.

4.2.1. Positive and Negative Feelings Towards Fan Service

All participants expressed enjoying fan service to some extent with Participant 4 (Female, 23, USA) stating she enjoys it on a healthy level. They also tended to be more tolerant of fan service of the couples they were fans of, while being more critical of others. Fan service was seen as cute, especially when small gestures were involved. Participants expressed being more comfortable with fan service if they believed that the couples were comfortable displaying it or enjoyed performing it. On the other hand, too much fan service was not appreciated, with most finding it cringe or weird. Furthermore, fan service was seen as dangerous by fans as they saw it as a reason for fans getting overly attached to celebrities. It was also seen as a reason for speculations of whether the couples are together or not. Participant 4 (Female, 23, USA) expressed feeling guilty for enjoying fan service of OhmNanon, while the couple got harassed by other fans, which made her feel like she was a part of the problem.

Too much fan service was also cited as a reason for not being invested in a couple off-screen, as fans saw extreme fan service as a turn off. Some fans expressed being uncomfortable with the amount of fan service displayed by ZeeNunew as it made them feel as if they were intruding on a private moment. Several fans mentioned preferring the way the media company GMM utilizes the couples, as they thought the company pushes less fan service compared to some other companies. Participant 5 explained her complicated relationship with fan service and companies:

I get mad at the companies for, like pushing it so much. But at the same time that business model is also what keeps me coming back to their shows. So it's, I think that there is a fine line between whether it's positive or toxic. [...] And so, like I tend to watch GMMTV series more, because I feel a little bit more comfortable with their way of handling this business model than I do other companies.

(Participant 5, Non-binary, 32, USA)

4.2.2. Blurring of Lines Between Reality and Fiction

Participants saw the blurring of lines between reality and fiction as an integral part of Thai BL. They saw little separation between what the couples do on-screen and off-screen, with Participant 3 (Female, 39, Bangladesh) saying it was like they were blurring boundaries between a job and being in love. Participants expressed that as a fan it is natural to want to believe that a couple is together. While some fans expressed that blurring the line and indulging in the fantasy can be fun, they stated that if one indulges in blurring of said lines, they should know not take it too far. Despite the blurring of lines, as mentioned previously, most couples were perceived as being friends. However, this was not the case for ZeeNunew, which is why they make an interesting case to examine this blurring of lines. ZeeNunew were the couple seen by two of their fans, Participant 8 (Non-binary, 24, USA) and 11 (Female, 20, USA) as being in a real-life romantic relationship. Participant 7 (Female, 33, USA) said she was told they were together but made no direct statement as to whether they are in a relationship. On the other hand, this was also the couple which got the most comments from fans of other couples about why they choose not to interact with them or their fandom. They were seen as blurring the lines too much. Even Participant 7 (Female, 33, USA), a fan of theirs expressed that if it turned out that they were not dating, their interactions would seem “really fake”, as they often engage in heavy fan service both in live shows intended for fans as well as in public. However, despite ZeeNunew being the couple participants experienced most intense blurring of lines with, fans of other couples also expressed having moments where they wondered if the couples were dating. Participant 6 (Female, 52, USA) compared fan events in Taiwan and Thailand saying “Like all of Taiwan, it's just the character. But Thai, they really do have that ability to blur that line.”

4.2.3. Suspension of Disbelief

During the interviews, participants were asked if they had ever experienced suspension of disbelief while watching interactions of couples off-screen. About half of the participants knew what suspension of disbelief was, while it was explained to the other half. The findings were mixed. Two participants (Participant 3, Female, 39, Bangladesh; Participant 7, Female, 33, USA) said they do not experience suspension of disbelief because they tend to rationalize the relationships between the couples. They thought that the reasons for this were their age and experience with celebrities and media. However, Participant 7

(Female, 33, USA) mentioned experiencing suspension of disbelief in instances where the couple is performing on stage as an extension of the series they star in. Two participants (Participant 9, female, 29, USA; Participant 10, Female, 36, The Philippines) mentioned experiencing it, but only in certain moments, although one of them stated that she sometimes experienced prolonged suspension of disbelief with her favourite couple EarthMix, but not with any of the couples mentioned in the thesis. Participant 6 (Female, 52, USA) mentioned suspension of disbelief as a passive process which happens when she wants to escape from her daily tasks and be entertained. Two participants (Participant 4, Female, 23, USA; Participant 8, Female, 24, USA) mentioned not experiencing suspension of disbelief, but they indicated wishing they could because they found the couples cute. Participant 11 (Female, 20, USA) was not asked about suspension of disbelief specifically, as she was only a fan of ZeeNunew and she believed they were in a romantic relationship. However, when talking about how she would support ZeeNunew even if they were not a real-life couple she said:

I'm not questioning their relationship as much cause for me it's not the question whether they're together or not. Because for me they're together at the moment they're together with themselves, and they're doing whatever they want to do, and like whatever is happening. So, I enjoy the content that is shown to me.

(Participant 11, Female, 20, USA)

4.2.4. Appropriation of Queer Representation

When it came to queerbaiting and appropriation of queer representation, while some fans saw an issue with the way Thai BL couples interact off-screen, they did not hold it against the couples, as they understood that they need to make a living, and it is communicated to the fans that these couples are not real. Participant 5 (Non-binary, 32, USA) who were queer themselves stated that appropriation would be an issue if a couple was trying to sell their relationship as real. They were later one of the fans to mention disliking ZeeNunew's relationship because they do not make it clear what their relationship is.

Furthermore, fans expressed not having an issue with the queer appropriation because they understood that Thai culture was different to their culture. Therefore, despite decoding the meaning in a way consistent with their culture (Barker, 2021, p.186), the fans took into

account the culture within which the couples are created. Furthermore, participants expressed not seeing an issue with non-queer actors as long as they did justice to the characters. However, some expressed that they would appreciate more representation in the industry.

Participant 1, a Vietnamese girl (Female, 25) who used to live in the Netherlands mentioned how she believed people in the West are much more sensitive to the topic of queerbaiting, while it is not really seen as an issue in Southeast Asia, and she did not see any issue personally with what the couples were doing, as she enjoyed their interactions and the content they put out. Furthermore, Participant 10 (Female, 36) from the Philippines talked about how she noticed Western fans arguing with Asian fans about queerbaiting and appropriation of queer representation through their own point of view which she found annoying as Southeast Asian culture differs from Western culture, so she felt that it was pointless to get mad over things these actors say or do in that context. The findings that Southeast Asian fans did not see the queerbaiting and appropriation of queer representation as an issue, is in line with the findings by Baudinette (2023, pp.104-106).

4.3. Parasocial Relationships

The selective code Parasocial relationships focuses on explaining fandom culture in the context of Thai BL, as well as the differences between how fans interact with fandom based on their cultural background. It also focuses on understanding the emotional connection fans feel to the couples, as well as how that connection impacts the engagement with the series. During the interviews, the participants talked about how they form connections with the couples and the actors within those couples, as well as the needs that watching the couples satisfy in them. They generally expressed feeling involved in the lives of Thai couples more than Western celebrities. This was attributed to the way the East and Southeast Asian fandom culture is structured and the closer interactions these celebrities foster with fans. This form of fandom culture was experienced as leading to toxicity within the fandoms, which often caused participants to stay away from certain fandoms or couples. The participants openly admitted to having an emotional connection to the couples, however this was also evidenced in how they talked about the couples, as they mentioned being proud of them or disappointed in them. The participants stated that watching the couples interact satisfied their need for human connection, as the couples seem like they are genuinely close, which gave them hope for finding the same kind of closeness one day. Furthermore, the couples expressed feeling happy when watching the couples interact. Finally, while

participants previously stated that they would not disregard a series because it did not star their favourite couples, they admitted that the rapport they build with the actors has an influence on whether they would watch a series that they would otherwise not watch, as well as feeling more emotionally connected to the characters.

4.3.1. Differences Between Fandom Culture in the West and Southeast Asia

As most of the fans interviewed were from the West, the comparison between fandom culture in the Western world and East Asia was often mentioned by participants while explaining how they engaged with Thai idols and fandom culture. Fans expressed that Thai and East Asian celebrity culture is made in a way where a closer connection is fostered between the fans and the celebrities, as they felt that these couples were very accessible, while they saw Western celebrities as unattainable. The participants also felt emotionally closer to Thai celebrities because of how much they publicize their lives online. This is in line with research by King-O'Riain (2020, p.2821) who found that Western fans often feel emotionally closer to East Asian idols than they do their domestic celebrities. Participant 5 (Non-binary, 32) from the United States expressed feeling that as a fan they had to watch public appearances beyond the BL series the couples starred in as otherwise they felt like they were missing a part of the context. Participants indicated following Thai couples online because they were interested in their lives, something they did not experience as strongly with Western celebrities. Multiple participants expressed following more Thai than Western celebrities. They were also more likely to buy products and endorsements by Thai celebrities as opposed to Western celebrities, as they felt like they were supporting their idols through this.

Similarly, non-Southeast Asian fans expressed believing they interact with fandom culture differently than Thai and Southeast Asian fans because of the differences in culture. While they expressed finding the concept of couples strange as this was not common in the West, they thought that Thai fans would not find this strange as it was something originating from their country. On the other hand, despite being somewhat familiar with the idea of couples who star in dramas together repeatedly, Participant 10 (Female, 36) from The Philippines experienced the Thai BL couples as more intense than the Filipino couples which did not engage in fan service in the same way. She also experienced Filipino fans as more intense, and “delusional” which she did not fully understand, as she did not feel that she herself fit in with that group of fans. However, she attributed her difference of opinion to her

age and experience with fandom culture, as she expressed being more similar to these fans when she was younger. Participant 2 (Female, 21, Indian) had a similar experience.

No major differences between how the two Southeast Asian participants interacted with couples compared to other fans in the sample. However, even Southeast Asian participants expressed believing that Southeast Asian fans tend to be stricter in their expectations of the couples as well as being more intense compared to the Western fans. They just did not think they fit that mould. Culture was often cited as a reason for experiencing the couples differently than other fans by the non-Southeast Asian fans.

4.3.2. Fandoms as Toxic

One of the most prevalent axial codes that emerged from the interviews was fandoms as toxic. This relates to opinions of fans interviewed about fandoms and other fans. Participants believed that the connection fostered by Thai BL couples and companies leads to some fans getting too attached which leads to toxicity in the fandoms. All participants mentioned entitled, crazy, or delusional fans. Participant 3 (Female, 39, Bangladesh) explained “For Thai BL specifically, I was absolutely amazed at how active everyone was, like these people were, I don't want to say psychotic. I wanna say, very devoted to their fandoms, like religiously almost. It was very strange.” Through this, participants also participated in othering of fans as mentioned by Jenkins (1992, p.19-21)

They interpreted other fans' behaviour toward the couples as fans believing they own the idols, which the participants expressed feeling frustrations and sadness over. As participant 11 (Female, 20, USA) explained “I feel like a lot of the times, like fans think, like they want to be like the puppeteer, like they wanna, like control every little thing that happens.” They believed that those toxic fans had no right to dictate how the couples should act. Despite the close connection fostered between fans and celebrities, some fans expressed feeling that actors put up boundaries which are often disregarded by fans because they feel entitled to the actors' time, especially since they often give money directly to the idols. As participant 5 (Non-binary, 32, USA) explained how fans often bring couples gifts and bouquets of money which is how they earn most of their money. Most fans expressed that they would prefer it if there was more separation between the fans and the celebrities, as they did not think the current situation is safe for the couples, and leads to toxicity. Multiple fans expressed choosing not to get involved with certain couples because of the toxicity associated with the couples' respective fandoms, as well as some fans expressing that despite being a fan

of a certain couple, they tend not to interact with the fandom as a whole, with one participant stating:

But, like with OffGun, for example, like they're so cute. I love them, you know what I mean? But I also see them as themselves, so I don't really get involved with the fandom, like I'm a fan of them, but I'm not in the fandom, if that makes sense.

(Participant 9, Female, 29, USA)

The couples that were considered to have more toxic fandoms were the ones who engaged in heavy fan service. From the couples chosen for the study ZeeNunew were considered to have the most toxic fandom by some participants. Despite this prevalent view of fans as toxic and problematic, with all participants talking to some extent about the toxicity of fandoms, none of the participants showed this kind of behaviour in the interviews. Possible reasons for this will be discussed in the discussion section of the thesis.

4.3.3 Emotional Investment

Participants expressed feeling emotionally connected to the couples. The emotional connection was stronger if the couple had a story. For example, one couple often mentioned as having a couple story was OffGun, who were one of the first couples of Thai BL and have been together since 2016, having started in a non-BL as a queer side couple. Almost all participants who were their fans talked about their couple story. Participant 2 (Female, 21, India) explained how they did not always have good chemistry as Off was not open to fan service and did not like being touched. Only after Gun threatened to leave him since their couple was not working well, Off changed, and now even initiates skinship himself. Similarly, the longevity of the couples and the amount of time the participants invested in them was associated with a stronger emotional connection to the couple as the participants thought those couples went through a lot together and chose to work together time and time again. Participants expressed that they would be sad if the couples went their separate ways, with Participant 4 (Female, 23) from the United States saying “If they were to stop all that tomorrow and just stop interacting with each other. I would be sad, maybe lowkey devastated if I'm being honest.” However, they said they would understand if that was the best choice for them. However, fans expressed that they do not want to become emotionally invested in

couples with very toxic fandoms because that leads them to being afraid for the actors' safety. Participants who met the couples at live events also expressed feeling more emotionally invested in the couples after meeting them live, especially if there was an intimate exchange. This also made them want to meet the couple again. Similarly, Participant 10 (Female, 36) from the Philippines expressed feeling like "one of the chosen ones" because one of her idols who is very active on social media answered her DMs a couple of times. This correlates to what Kowert and Daniel (2023, p.2) called the one-and-a-half-sided relationship which is fostered by fans having a somewhat reciprocal relationship with fans.

Furthermore, participants expressed their emotional investment through the way they talked about the couples and actors within them. When participants talked about their idols, they expressed feeling emotions like disappointment and pride for the couples. Therefore, talking about the couples as if they had a personal relationship with them. Participant 1 (Female, 25, Vietnam) and Participant 11 (Female, 20, USA), the two participants who met the couples in an intimate setting and had a conversation with them expressed being proud because the couples that they met were nice and seemed like good people, as this was proof to them that they should continue following them. The participants expressed being happy as long as the couple was happy, and that they would always root for them. On the other hand, multiple participants expressed disappointment in OffGun after they took on an acting role that the participants felt was beneath them as they knew the couple was capable of more. In this sense, the way fans talked about couples and actors was as if they had a personal relationship with them. Furthermore, fans expressed caring about the wellbeing of actors above all else, as they did not want the actors to be uncomfortable for the sake of fan enjoyment and wanted them to act in a way which felt most comfortable to them. They wanted the couples to be happy and comfortable with the roles they are playing in the couple no matter what that role may be.

4.3.4 Needs

Participants talked about the needs that watching the couples interact fulfills in them. The main need fans expressed being satisfied through watching the couples was hope that they might also one day find a relationship, whether it was romantic or a genuine friendship, like the one the couples have, where somebody would care for them that much and they would have as much fun as the couples have off-screen. Participant 9 explained:

It's a little bit hard for me to kind of like date and, like get out there and stuff. So, I think, like seeing that is like. Okay, well, it can happen, right? It doesn't happen easily. It doesn't happen, like right away. But it can happen. And I think that's what helps me, like emotionally and, like mentally about, well maybe this could happen later for me, right?

(Participant 9, Female, 29, USA)

Furthermore, participants mentioned feeling good and fulfilled when watching the interactions, as well as getting a boost of happiness from watching the couples interact. They also indicated watching the couples for entertainment as a form of escapism. Participant 4 (Female, 23, USA) mentioned a parasocial need that is fulfilled when she watched the couples interact, which was a part of the reason she believed she would be devastated if the couple OffGun ever went their separate ways. Despite not being associated with couples, the participants who attended live events stated that going to events made them feel as a part of a community and they enjoyed meeting other fans. With Participant 11 (Female, 20) from the United States stating that she wanted to go to another live event to experience that atmosphere in the room. Finally, Participant 1 (Female, 25, Vietnamese) and Participant 11 (Female, 20, USA) expressed learning about the Thai culture through watching the BL series and the variety shows the couples star in, which caused them to want to visit Thailand.

Therefore, in the framework of Katz et al. (1973, pp.166-167), watching the couples interact satisfied the fans' need for strengthening contact with those close to us and affective needs, as well as escapism. The contact with those close to us was also evoked by relationships with other fans, as Participant 11 (Female, 20, USA) said "I don't think you can put fans at any sort of like cliques." Finally, the content couples put out also satisfied the need for knowledge and information.

4.3.5 Rapport With Couples Adding a Sense of Enjoyment to Series

When it came to the influence of the PSRs on engagement with the series couples star in, participants expressed that they would watch a series if the couple they like was not in it, as long as the story was engaging, and the acting was good. However, they expressed that having an already established rapport with the actors added to their enjoyment of the show.

Participants indicated watching series they would not otherwise watch for the couples they liked, as well as finishing the shows when they did not believe they were of good quality. A common example was the series *Cooking Crush* with OffGun. Participants also talked about having more appreciation for a series after becoming fans of a couple. Participant 5 gave an example of a series by JoongDunk:

So, their first show together *Star in My Mind*, which was also the first one I watched. Objectively, not the best show, but like seeing, like how they interact off-screen and then, like watching it again. Like my second watch through of it. I had a better appreciation for it, and I enjoyed it a lot more.

(Participant 5, Non-binary, 32, USA)

Some participants expressed that they saw the relationships of the characters as more real because of the couples playing them, as well as that they felt more emotionally invested in the characters if they already had an emotional connection to the actors. Therefore, having good off-screen chemistry was seen as a bonus despite not being a prerequisite for watching the shows. Participant 1 (Female, 25, Vietnam) explained how if she sees the couples being good to each other, it makes her feel like they are not just acting in the series, and it makes it feel more real for her.

5. Discussion

The research questions this thesis set out to answer is *How do fans of Thai Boys Love series give meaning to the celebrity couples of Thai BL and how does this influence their engagement with the series?* 11 in depth interviews were conducted to answer the research questions, however, it cannot be answered by a simple answer. Instead, insights from different selective codes need to be integrated. That will be the focus of this chapter.

Participants perceived couples as being a part of the business of Thai BL and saw their interactions as a part of their job. They also saw them as separate actors, with their own lives outside of the couples. Therefore, they expressed being fans of the actors as well as the couples. All couples were generally rated as authentic in their interactions with participants stating that even if their actions may not have been fully authentic in a sense that the skinship and fan service are not something they do when alone, the feelings behind the actions were considered authentic, as fans thought their idols had a genuine connection and cared for each other more than they would for other co-stars. The kind of connection this was depended on the couple and their dynamic. However, the common factors were friendship, comfort, and care for each other. An interesting finding was that out of all of the couples, the dynamic of the couple TayNew, which showed a very clear distinction between their on-screen and off-screen appearances received the least negative comments from participants. On the other hand, the most divisive couple was ZeeNunew, a couple that has been rumoured to be dating in real life. They were one of the couples with the most fans, but also the one that received the most negative comments from fans of other couples. Their relationship was perceived as authentic by their fans, some of whom believed they were dating. However there did not seem to be any conclusive evidence of their relationship online which is where some of the criticism came from. They were considered to blur the line between reality and fiction too much, as if their intention was to confuse their fans. Multiple participants expressed concern over the toxicity of their fandom and fear over exposing too much on the internet.

Overall, the Thai BL fandom was perceived to be an active and devoted one, often leading to fans developing strong attachment to the idols. Participants saw themselves as being on the rational side of the fandom. However, the othering of fans was common as all 11 participants mentioned the “crazy” fans (Jenkins, 1992, p.19-21). In the participants’ eyes these were the fans who feel like they own the idols because of their investment, especially monetary. They could not separate the couple persona or the fictional character from the actor behind it and could not be happy for the actors outside of the couples they were paired in as

they felt like the couples owed them something. While no participants showed signs of having this kind of an outlook on the couples, all mentioned the existence of such fans. Furthermore, many participants noted that what stopped them from engaging with a couple is the toxicity of the fandom behind it. Therefore, even if they liked a couple, they would not want to become involved with them. These opinions were backed by feeling bad for the actors and what they have to go through because of their fans. Therefore, fans tended to prefer a friendly dynamic over a romantic one as they thought it was safer for the actors, but also leads to less toxicity.

When it came to fans' view of themselves within the fandom, despite there being some differences in how participants decoded meanings based on their cultural background, the differences were not large, as most fans considered themselves to be rational compared to many other fans. However, both the International and Southeast Asian fans expressed believing that Southeast Asian fans generally interact with fan culture in a more problematic way. If this is true, some of the reasons for this lack of difference when it came to cultural background in the present research might have been that fans did not feel comfortable enough to express their opinions which may be seen as behaviour a "delusional" fan would exhibit. It is also possible that the Southeast Asian fans decoded the interactions differently due to other factors, such as age or education. Furthermore, since all participants were 20 years old or older, with the mean age of 30, it is possible that those toxic fans tend to be younger, as age was one of the reasons participants mentioned for why they think they differ from toxic fans. Finally, as according to Abercrombie and Longhurst's (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1992, pp.138-139; as cited in Reijnders et al., 2017, p.4-5) typology of fans, cultists and enthusiasts, most participants fell under the category of fans and were not very involved in the fandom, it is possible that the fans who are toxic stand out more as they are more active in the community, while most fans do not hold such ideas.

Fans showed emotional investment in the couples, both by explicitly stating so, as well as through the way they talked about them. They expressed being proud of them, rooting for them, as well as being disappointed and mad at them. They also expressed wanting what is best for them. Furthermore, international fans noted that they tended to be more invested in Thai couples than celebrities from their own countries and attributed this to the idol culture of East and Southeast Asia, which cultivates close relationships with fans.

Despite the fact that most participants were from the West, as well as some belonging to the LGBTQ community, most did not have an issue with queerbaiting and appropriation of queer representation when it came to the couples as they felt that the companies made it clear

these couples were not dating. However, they also took Thai culture into account, as well as thinking that as long as the actors were doing justice to the LGBTQ community, they saw no problem in the couples not being a part of the community, although some did express that they would like to see more gay representation.

When it came to fan service, which is a big part of the Thai BL couples' interactions off-screen, the opinions of participants tended to depend on the couple they were a fan of, as they tended to enjoyed fan service by the couples they liked. Generally, the fans' relationship with fan service was complicated with many noting that they enjoyed it while seeing some issues with the way it was done. Some fans mentioned preferring the way the company GMM handled fan service to some other companies.

For participants who were not from Southeast Asia, culture was seen as the factor that did not allow them to fully immerse themselves in the relationships between the couples off-screen, as their rationalization was often stopping them from suspending their disbelief with couples. Other factors to which participants attributed this were experience with toxic fandoms, as well as age. Some participants acknowledged being more able to immerse themselves in the relationships when they were younger or when they first got into Thai BL, but as they learned more about the industry, they started empathising with the actors more, which led them to wanting the actors to be happy, rather than satisfying the needs of fans.

When it came to the series the couples starred in, fans expressed that they would watch a show even if their favourite couple was not in it, as for many of them found the quality of the series more important than the actors. However, they expressed being more likely to watch a show if it was not of good quality or if it were not something they would usually watch if they were a fan of a couple. Furthermore, they tended to say they are more invested in the characters and the storylines if they are a fan of the couple or know that the couple has good chemistry off-screen as this adds an additional dimension to the series. They also enjoyed knowing they would get to see the couple star in multiple series. When it came to the behind-the-scenes disputes of the couples, fans expressed that they make it more difficult to enjoy the series, since even if the chemistry is good, they would constantly have the knowledge of the actors not being on good terms in the back of their minds.

These findings bring new insights into the couples of Thai BL, and show that there are many similarities to the way these couples are perceived to how other East Asian celebrities are perceived. In the following chapters the theoretical and the practical implications will be discussed.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

In his works on Southeast Asian fandoms of Thai BL, Baudinette (2023, pp.104-106) found that those fans did not perceive Thai BL couples as queerbaiting, but instead saw them as representing the LGBTQ community. He noted that since the discourse surrounding queerbaiting emerged in North America, it may be more beneficial to research queerbaiting with North American fans. The present research shows that North American fans could critically reflect on queerbaiting and the appropriation of queer representation, as they often noted that they understood how it could be seen as an issue. However, they also understood that the series come from a different culture, and therefore chose not to see it as an issue. Therefore, fans seem to be aware of the fact that people from different cultures may decode and encode these messages in different ways (Barker, 2021, p.186), and therefore they may show more leniency toward media texts from those countries than they would have with a media text originating in North America.

According to the work of Stuart Hall (1973) in North America the hegemonic reading of such a relationship may have been that it is queerbaiting. However, since these couples were made within a different culture, the fans may have suppressed this North American hegemonic reading and instead chose to be more lenient and accept the reading which is hegemonic in Thailand, the country of origin of the media text. In some cases, fans were still critical of the queer representation and chose a negotiated code, where they accepted the hegemonic meaning, but still saw it as problematic to an extent. Therefore, present research shows that fans may decode the media texts within the schemas based on their own culture, but they also take into account the cultural context under which the media text was encoded.

Katz et al. (1973, pp.166-167) proposed a typology of the U&G model separated into five strands mentioned in the theoretical framework. Present research found that watching the couples interact satisfies fans' affective needs through the emotions the couples' interactions elicit in them. Furthermore, needs for strengthening contact to those close to us, through giving fans hope for finding a similar connection in the future. This need is also satisfied through interactions with other fans at live events. Therefore, the chemistry and authenticity fans perceive between the couples is important for engagement, while interactions with other fans seem to boost the engagement with the live events fans who went to live events expressed wanting to go again to meet other fans. Watching videos of couples, as well as the series and variety shows they starred in satisfied the needs for escapism. And watching content couples put out teaches fans about the Thai culture, which they may not have come in

contact otherwise. Therefore, fans can satisfy various needs through interacting with Thai BL couples.

Fans expressed experiencing connection to the Thai BL couples, which they expressed both by explicitly stating that they felt emotionally connected to couples, as well as through the use of language when talking about them. All Western fans as well as the Indian fan expressed they felt a stronger connection to the Thai actors than they did to their domestic actors. The fact that the fans felt closer to Thai celebrities than those from their own countries is in line with King-O'Riain (2020, p.2821). Furthermore, because of how the East Asian fandom culture is structured as fans tend to watch more content outside of just the series the couples star in, which makes them feel more connected to the couples and their relationship, as many fans expressed having a connection to the relationship of the couple, as well as that they would experience sadness over their “break-up”. Furthermore, similarly to how (King-O'Riain, 2020, p.2836) found that fans perceived K-pop idols personalities as authentic because they were consistent across different platforms, Thai BL fans perceived the couples' interactions as authentic as they were consistent over time.

Elfving-Hwang (2018, p.190) talked about how K-pop idols as celebrities who foster engagement with fans which fosters PSRs for economic gain. The present study found that fans tend to be aware of this. However, they still choose to buy into it, as they see it as a way to support their idols, whom they often think are deserving of it, even when they do not agree with the practices of the companies. The closer the interactions were with the actors, the closer fans expressed feeling to the celebrity, as was the case with the fans who met the actors or had intimate exchanges with them through social media. Furthermore, in many cases the relationships that fans of Thai BL form with couples can be seen as a one-and-a-half-way relationship (Kowert & Daniel, 2021, p.2), as fans are not only encouraged to interact with their idols through live performances and fan meets (Baudinette, 2023, p.93-95; Prasannam, 2019, p.78), but also online with multiple fans expressing that they had in some way communicated directly to their idols online. This made them feel special.

When it comes to suspension of disbelief, the findings were inconclusive. While some fans experienced it, others did not. Therefore, it is difficult to reach any tangible conclusions about this issue. However, rationalizing was most often seen as a reason for not suspending disbelief which was a product of culture, experience with fandoms or age. Therefore, it may be tied back to how audiences decode meaning according to the encoding-decoding model by Hall (1973). On the other hand, it is possible that kayfabe and suspension of disbelief are not

as compatible with Thai BL couples, contrary to the ideas posited in the theoretical framework.

5.2. Practical Implications

Besides theoretical implications, the findings of the study also highlighted some possible practical implications. These are discussed in the following chapter.

First, most fans talked about the toxicity within the fandoms, which they believed was in large part caused by the entertainment companies pushing the idea of fan service too far. Fans also expressed finding the safety of idols as one of the most important things for them. Therefore, companies should put safety of idols first and not push the idols to do anything they do not feel comfortable with. This may be mitigated by cultivating idols with friendship dynamics, as multiple fans expressed preferring this approach, as opposed to the couples who perform a lot of fan service. Especially since fans expressed thinking that some companies do this more than others. For example, two fans talked about how they prefer GMM to some other companies because they felt that they do not push fan service as far, and they care about the safety of their actors more. Therefore, from previous examples, we can see that it has been done before, and it has worked, as GMM is the largest production company, as well as being the largest producer of BL content in Thailand (Baudinette 2023, p.44). Furthermore, the couples who perform heavy fan service should then make it clear that they are not in a romantic relationship.

However, the focus on friendly dynamics does not mean that fan service would be completely absent as it is still a big selling point of Thai BL and all fans expressed enjoying it to some extent. However, there should be a clear boundary between what is real and what is not, and actors could disclose the real relationship to the fans while still performing skinship. As it became clear from the interviews, fans can still enjoy skinship even if they prefer the friendly dynamic of the couple. Even then, they might enjoy the skinship, but it may lead to less toxic fan behaviour.

Similarly, companies should try to work on decreasing toxic fan behaviour by rewarding and emphasising the positive examples of fan behaviour and trying to cultivate a more positive environment, as well as setting guidelines for proper fan behaviour in situations where this can be controlled, for example at live events. They should also provide support for the actors to manage the interactions with fans and parasocial relationships the right way.

Furthermore, as fans expressed enjoying watching content where they get to experience the couples naturally interacting with each other, companies should continue making variety shows, where fans can experience how the couples interact with each other behind the scenes, as many fans expressed that their favourite moments of watching the couples was when they were simply enjoying each other's company, with some specifically mentioning shows hosted by the couples.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Although this research brought about valuable insights into the fans of Thai BL, it should be noted that the study had some limitations. First, it is possible that there were misunderstandings with fans whose first language was not English. It is therefore possible that these fans may not have expressed their full opinions. For example, there was a moment with the Filipino fan where she expressed finding it difficult to convey exactly what she was trying to say in English. In the future, researchers should try to conduct research in the participant's native language to ensure that there is no language barrier. Second, since this research was conducted for a master's thesis, the scope was limited and therefore, interviews were conducted with only 11 participants. Furthermore, there was a mix of international fans from the West, as well as Asia. However, it was not sufficient to make concrete conclusions on differences between how different cultures perceive the couples. In the future, research of larger scope should focus on making a comparative analysis of Western and Southeast Asian fans of Thai BL. Third, as the study was conducted through an online platform, it is possible that some of the mannerisms of the participants may not have fully come across through Zoom (Zhao et al., 2023, p.13). For these reasons, future research should try to conduct the research face-to-face. Fourth, when it came to couples chosen for the research, four out of five couples chosen for the research are from the media company GMM. Some participants mentioned specifically liking GMM because they do not push their actors' fan service too far. Therefore, it is possible that the specific cohort of fans chosen for the research are fans of these couples because they prefer a more friendly dynamic as opposed to heavy fan service. Therefore, in the future, research should focus on a larger scale study with couples from various companies with different approaches to couples to get a more comprehensive view of fans' opinions. Finally, choosing a couple like ZeeNunew may not have been the best decision, as there has been heavy speculation about whether they are dating in real life, and these have been further emphasized by the fact that multiple participants mentioned how

ZeeNunew admitted to dating at some point, after which they once again denied the rumours, which may have confused some fans beyond how an average BL couple's skinship would. Therefore, they may differ from a standard Thai BL couple. However, if they are not dating in real life, this kind of behaviour raises questions about some of the practices in the Thai BL industry.

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Appendix A: Participants

	Age	Gender	Occupation	Sexuality	Nationality
Participant 1	25	Female	Master's student	Heterosexual	Vietnam
Participant 2	21	Female	Bachelor's student	Bisexual	India
Participant 3	39	Female	Private health information worker	Asexual to Demisexual	Bangladesh,
Participant 4	23	Female	Bachelor's degree/ Unemployed	Queer	USA
Participant 5	32	Non-binary	Restaurant manager	Pansexual	USA
Participant 6	52	Female	Special Education Department	Heterosexual	USA
Participant 7	33	Female	Elementary school teacher	Heterosexual	USA
Participant 8	24	Non-binary	Associate degree student	Lesbian	USA
Participant 9	29	Female	Worker at Habitat for Humanity/ Tutoring	Pansexual	USA
Participant 10	36	Female	Dentist	Heterosexual	Philippines
Participant 11	20	Female	Bachelor's student	Heterosexual	USA

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Part 1: Introduction Round

Could you tell me a little bit about how you first started watching Thai BL?

What is your relationship with other forms of BL and yaoi (BL from different countries or manga for example)?

How would you position yourself within the Thai BL fandom?

Have you noticed a change in your participation over time?

Part 2: Interpretations of Couple Dynamics

What did you think about the way that Thai BL couples are created and how they function when you first got into Thai BL?

- What did you think when you found out that the actors who star in the BL series often engage in skinship during events and promotions?
- How do you feel about fan service couples perform off-screen?
- Was it a new experience for you or have you experienced something similar before?

How do you interpret the portrayal of Thai BL's official couples compared to other portrayals in the media?

- How does your investment in these couples compare to that of other celebrities?

What do you think makes a successful Thai BL couple?

How do you feel about the notion of queerbaiting and appropriation of queer representation within the Thai BL community?

- Do you think it is a valid concern or not and why?

Part 3: Influence on BL Series Engagement

What role does the couple's off-screen relationship have on whether you will watch a BL series?

- What role does it have on your engagement?

How does your emotional investment with a couple impact your viewing experience of the BL?

How does the couples' off-screen relationship and interactions affect your emotional investment in characters and storylines?

How do you think the way Thai media companies use couples contributes to the overall appeal and popularity of the BL genre?

Part 4: Interpretation of Couple Dynamics - Specific

How invested are you in the couple you are a fan of (from the list)?

What made you become a fan of this couple?

- How would you describe their dynamic?
- Why do you like this couple?
- What do you think is the main draw of this couple?

How do you perceive the authenticity of the couples' interactions?

- How do you assess the authenticity of their relationship?
- How important is authenticity of the couple's interactions for you? Why?

Do you feel emotionally invested in this couple?

Have you ever experienced suspension of disbelief while watching the actors off-screen?

- Does watching these couples interact satisfy any emotional or psychological needs for you?

Part 5: Closing

Is there anything you want to share that I have not asked you about?

Age, gender, nationality, education, sexuality, occupation (if applicable)

Appendix C: Consent Form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

[Lena Maric, 566374lm@eur.nl]

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about couples (khu jin) in Thai BL. The purpose of the study is to understand how fans understand the relationships between Thai BL couples and how this influences their engagement with the BLs the couples star in.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms,

- My questions will be related to your history with (Thai) BL, your experiences with Thai BL couples and how this influences your engagement and enjoyment of the BL series
- Specific questions about at least one of the following couples: BrightWin, JoongDunk, OffGun, TayNew, ZeeNunew

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio or a video recording of the interview.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information in the study. The participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc.

You are always free not to answer any particular question or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take approximately 1 hour. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the

study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— [Argyrios Emmanouloudis, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, emmanouloudis@eshcc.eur.nl.]

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name	Signature
Date	

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study:

Name	Signature
Date	

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix D: Coding Tree

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes
Formation of image of couples and actors	Initial impressions	Weird Confusing Interesting New experience
	Couples as a business	Couples as a product Couples as a job Couples as a brand Thai BL as an industry
	Couples as authentic	Authenticity as comfort Authenticity as care Authentic because consistent Behind the scenes moments add to authenticity Authentic because would act same way without fans around Couples as having a special closeness Authenticity causing higher engagement off-screen Authenticity from longevity of couple Authentic because have romantic relationship
	Couples as a friendship	Dynamic as a friendship Enjoy watching couples have fun together Refreshing change of industry towards friendship Preferring friendship dynamics Not wanting couples to lose each other's friendship
	Actors as individuals	Actors as people with lives outside of couple Supporting actors separately Separating actor from character Actors dating in real life not a problem
	Couples not influencing the series engagement	Interested in their work, not personal life On-screen chemistry more important than off-screen chemistry Watch series even if there are disputes on set Acting important when watch series
	Personal knowledge influencing	Behind the scenes disputes in the back of mind Difficult to watch after disputes Cannot watch even when on-screen chemistry good Difficulty watching if filmed when drama was happening

	ability to watch series	Distaste for actor after rumoured falling out
Fan service	Positive and negative feelings towards fan service	Positive: Enjoying fan service
		Positive: Fan service as cute
		Positive: Enjoying fan service if the couple seems to enjoy it
		Positive: More tolerant of fan service if fan of couple
		Negative: Manufactured
		Negative: Dangerous
		Negative: Uncomfortable watching when too much fan service
		Negative: Preference for less fan service
		Negative: Fan service encouraging speculation
		Negative: Bothered by companies pushing too much fan service
Blurring the line between reality and fiction	Blurring the line between reality and fiction	Blurring the line between job and love
		Wanting to believe a couple is together as a fan
		Blurring the lines as fun
		Wondering if a couple is together in real life
		If ZeeNunew not together their interactions would seem fake
		Important to know where to draw a line
		Preferring clearer separation between actor and character
Suspension of disbelief (SOD)	Suspension of disbelief (SOD)	SOD in certain moments
		No SOD because rationalize the relationships
		Cultural background as reason for no SOD
		SOD during on stage moments
		Experience more often when big fan of couple
		Wishing they could experience SOD
Appropriation of queer representation	Appropriation of queer representation	No issue with being straight if show respect to LGBTQ
		Being more forgiving when fan of a couple
		Difference between Western and Asian opinions of queerbaiting
		Seeing companies as the problem, not couples
		Difference in culture as reason for not seeing issue with it
Parasocial relationships	Differences between Western and East Asian fandom culture	Finding fandom culture weird as a reflection of growing up in a non-Southeast Asian country
		Participants believing Southeast Asian fans have a different perspective from Western fans
		Western fans as more lenient with idols
		Asian culture fosters more intimate relationship with fans
		Feeling closer to Thai BL couples than Western celebrities
		Wanting to watch everything couples put out
		Ample opportunity to be invested

		Buying products more than for domestic celebrities to support actors
Fandoms as toxic	Fans as intense	
	Frustration over fans thinking they own actors	
	Sadness over toxic behaviour of other fans	
	Avoiding certain couples because fandoms perceived as toxic	
	Fans as negative	
	Fans building their own narratives	
	Couples who do a lot of fan service have toxic fandoms	
	Preferring separation between fans and celebrities	
Emotional investment	Couple story leads to emotional investment	
	Wanting couples to be happy	
	Not wanting couples to be uncomfortable	
	Worrying about well-being of couples	
	Longevity leads to emotional investment	
	Being proud of actors	
	Having expectations of actors	
	Rooting for actors	
	Feeling encouraged from interactions with couple	
	Emotionally invested in authentic couples	
	Saddened by idea of couples separating	
Needs	Sense of hope for finding relationship like couples have	
	Watching couples interact leads to emotion boost	
	Feeling fulfilled from interactions	
	Feeling a sense of community with other fans	
	Learning about Thai culture	
Rapport with couple adding to enjoyment of series	Willingness to watch anything with couple if fan	
	Having more appreciation for a project because of couple	
	More enjoyable than other BL because know will see actors together again	
	Feel more connected to characters because already like couple	
	Emotional connection impacts how watch show	