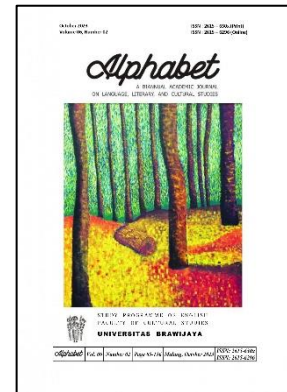


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Abstract

This study investigates the complexity of gender and sexual identities portrayed in LGBTQ+ series, *2gether the Series* (Thongjila, 2020), by applying Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory. The series is chosen due to its discourses that portray sexual and gender identities. This study is a qualitative research, so this study focuses on the dialogues and discourses. Therefore, gender and sexual identities are investigated to find out how popular culture like *2gether the Series* represents them in contemporary media. The result shows that the series challenges the traditional norms regarding sexual identities present in scenes that highlight fluidity, gender roles, and coming out. The researchers also find that several scenes in the series reinforce some of the stereotypes by embracing them in the discourse among the characters. Then, the researchers applied representation theory to analyze the data. This study concludes that gender and sexual identities in *2gether the Series* are depicted in a complex manner, challenging traditional norms while also perpetuating certain stereotypes, which highlights the ongoing evolution of perceptions and acceptance in contemporary media.

Keywords: gender identities; sexual identities; representation; *2gether the Series*

It is often assumed in same-sex relationships that there should be a clear separation of gender roles, although there are no intrinsic sex distinctions between partners. This widely held belief holds that in any romantic relationship, one must play a traditionally masculine role while the other plays a traditionally feminine role. This perspective ignores the fluidity and diversity of gender and sexual identities. By acknowledging this idea, society neglects the experiences that people in same-sex relationships can provide. It means that it fails to recognize that gender roles are produced by societal expectations rather than being innate or fixed.

For instance, society often perpetuates the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which portrays men as tough, aggressive, self-reliant, emotionally inexpressive, and more dominant (Eggerberger et al., 2021). This undermines the understanding of masculinity, putting unnecessary pressure on individuals in same-sex relationships by imposing expectations that may be incongruent with themselves. As a result, Eggerberger et al. (2021) state that situations such as expressing emotions of vulnerability or needing another person's help may create gender role conflict for some men. These conflicts emerge

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from the dissonance between societal expectations and their own experiences and desires. However, they are not indicative of any deficiencies in same-sex relationships, rather, they are the result of restrictive gender norms that society has enforced.

People's sexual orientation, who they are attracted to, who they have intercourse with, and the labels they use to define their sexual orientation can all change. This is referred to as sexual fluidity, which means the potential for individuals' sexual orientations and attractions to change over time. According to Katz-Wise (2022), while anyone can experience changes in their sexual orientation, sexual fluidity is more common in younger individuals and among the LGBTQ+ community. This notion challenges the assumption that individuals in same-sex relationships should adhere to predetermined gender roles. Its portrayal in mainstream media, such as the Thai Boys' Love series, is one instance where this challenge to traditional gender roles becomes apparent. Thai boys' love refers to a drama genre that depicts homoerotic relationships between male characters (Koaysomboon, 2020). These series have grown in popularity due to their dialogue of queer themes and portrayal of various gender and sexual identities. They offer a forum for investigating the complexity of gender and sexual identities within same-sex partnerships. However, most of the BLs are still notoriously popular for their stereotypical representation of queer men. Agarwal (2022) states that the leads always have a masculine gender expression and reinforce the heteronormative idea of a relationship. These series often portray that there must be one character that is hypermasculine while the other has softer masculinity. Nevertheless, all the criticisms that the production companies of BLs have led to a more inclusive representation of queer men in that they depict characters who defy traditional norms by displaying a wide range of emotions, vulnerabilities, and strengths while challenging conventional expectations, which previously are considered to be weaknesses (Petersson & Plantin, 2019).

Thai boys' love series have played an important role in confronting and debunking harmful assumptions and prejudices about same-sex relationships. They provide narratives that dive into LGBTQ+ people's experiences, shedding light on their problems, achievements, and the nuances of their relationships. These series contribute to the larger effort of removing cultural preconceptions about gender roles by showing a diverse spectrum of gender expressions and relationship dynamics. An excellent example from the genre is *2gether the series* (Thongjila, 2020), a Thai BL series that was released in 2020. It follows a story of two college boys who go from being in a fake romantic relationship into a real couple. One of the most impressive parts of *2gether the Series* is how it depicts the characters' resistance to traditional gender stereotypes. Moreover, Tine and Sarawat as the main protagonists of the series challenge the typical assumptions of male protagonists in romantic stories. They display a spectrum of emotions, vulnerabilities, and strengths, a more nuanced portrayal of same-sex relationships. Wikipedia states that the series has emerged as one of Thailand's most successful boys' love series internationally by gaining 793 million views on GMMTV's official YouTube channel

(<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLszepnkojZI4ecxfKfnFPZfU4O5YtAQyx>). The series triggers millions of conversations on Twitter in various languages (Koaysomboon, 2020) and its popularity has contributed to greater portrayal and acceptance of varied gender and sexual identities in popular media. Despite its progressive representation of same-sex couples, the series remains a love narrative that can reinforce certain assumptions and idealizations. Nonetheless, *2gether the Series* is a step towards a more inclusive and authentic representation of same-sex relationships in popular culture. It has prompted discussions and increased desire for diverse stories that reflect the realities and experiences of LGBTQ+ people. This series, for us, is very interesting to study because it not only challenges harmful assumptions and prejudices about same-sex relationships but also

portrays diverse gender expressions, relationship dynamics, and multifaceted characters while garnering significant global attention and prompting discussions for more inclusive narratives.

The concept of representation is used to analyze the discussion of *2gether the Series* and its impact on same-sex relationship depiction. Stuart Hall (1997) sheds light on how media portrayals affect our perceptions of social identities and connections. According to Hall (1997), representation is more than just a reflection of reality, as it is a process of producing meaning through language. Hence, the concept of representation, as examined through Hall's framework, provides a lens through which to comprehend the impact of the series on the depictions of same-sex relationships. Through its dialogues and discourses, *2gether the Series* simultaneously challenges and reinforces societal norms surrounding gender and sexual identities, since it explores the complexities and contradictions, sheds light on navigating the intricate landscape of queer representation, as well as offers insights into the evolving perceptions and acceptance of diverse identities in contemporary media.

Previous studies have been conducted on the series. We refer to two previous studies to identify a research gap so that this study can offer a new perspective. The first previous study by Niko (2022) explores the meaning of love in the series from the lens of sociology, whereas a study done by Venturini et al. (2021) is a quantitative study to show the effect of the series on Indonesian women's tolerance attitude about homosexuality by employing uses and gratification theory. Those studies have shown how the series portrays love as well as its reception from Indonesian women. This study tries to provide an additional perspective that has not been discussed in previous studies by examining how the series explores the complexity of gender roles and identities. However, the 'Thai Boys' Love series, especially *2gether the Series*, is being studied to understand how it portrays same-sex relationships and gender roles. The series has characters, stories, and themes that researchers examine. It also uses concepts like gender roles,

sexual fluidity, and societal expectations to analyze the series. The concepts help researchers understand how the series challenges traditional gender roles, represents diverse identities, and addresses harmful assumptions about same-sex relationships. By studying the series through these concepts, we aim to gain a better understanding of its significance and its influences on people's perceptions of same-sex relationships in society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is such general knowledge that there are gender roles in a romantic relationship. In this case, heterosexual relationships take a big part in gender roles as they are often shown in the media. In heterosexual relationships, traditional stereotypes about sex and gender present men as assertive, aggressive, sexually adventurous, and emotionally restrained, and women as docile, passive, sexually modest, and emotionally sensitive (Siegel & Meunier, 2019). In other words, they refer to social expectations and responsibilities given to people based on their gender. This gender role is often strengthened and shown in media through advertisements and movies. An example of gender roles in movies is that it is often shown that men have a job while women take care of the house. It is also often portrayed that men are natural protectors. They are the ones who tie their girlfriend's shoes, and they are the ones who give jackets to their girlfriend. To conclude, gender roles in heterosexual relationships often follow a patriarchal model, where men are expected to be the main breadwinners, decision-makers, and protectors, while women are assigned the role of caregivers, home lovers, and supporters. This division of labor is reinforced by cultural norms and strengthened through various institutions such as religion, media, and education. Thus, society, in real life, adopts and upholds these gender role stereotypes.

2gether the Series offers a fresh take on this discourse by presenting a homosexual couple that challenges the gender norms stereotype. However, the series still also reinforces the norms of how in a relationship, one must be recognized as masculine, while the other is

more feminine. Hence, based on the research problem, this part will discuss the results of the data analysis that have been gathered from the series.

Challenging stereotypes

2gether the Series challenges the stereotype by portraying fluidity of sexuality, gender roles, and masculinity, as well as coming out in light ways.

Fluidity

2gether the Series mostly follows the perspective of Tine Teepakorn as he tries to figure out his identity. The first episode of the series opens with him narrating to the audience who the right person is for him.

Of all my chic life, I have paired with many girls. I never thought that this time, the right one would be so different.

The line spoken by Tine above provides the recognition of his fluidity of sexuality. In the series, it is shown that Tine is running towards Sarawat when the line is narrated in the background. Tine's statement of 'having paired with many girls' indicates a certain understanding of what relationships should be. He expects girls as 'the right one' as a result of the dominant discourse that assumes heterosexuality is the norm, since according to Glick and Fiske (1996) in Thorne et al. (2020), it is historically older, more common, higher status, and reflected in cultural ideal scripts. Michel Foucault (1978) argues that sexual orientation is not inherent but rather socially constructed within specific cultural and historical contexts. Hence, when Tine highlights his surprise at his attraction to someone different this time, he suggests the fluidity that challenges the preexisting discourse.

Stuart Hall (1997) argues that all social practices have discursive aspects as they entail meaning. Therefore, the aforementioned line disrupts the conventional understanding of sexuality as fixed. Moreover, the use of the phrase 'so different' shows Tine's surprise and indicates a departure from the expected norms,

providing a form of resistance against heteronormative expectations by suggesting that sexual attraction is not bound by gender.

Gender roles and masculinity

As the episode goes further, *2gether the Series* provides a fresh perspective on challenging the norm. After Sarawat agrees to be Tine's fake boyfriend, Tine continues to ask Sarawat to flirt with him like when he does with a girl.

Do it like when you hit on girls. Buy me snacks and drinks. Take care of me.

This specific line as Tine's request for Sarawat challenges the traditional gender roles by highlighting that these actions typically associated with pursuing girls should also apply to his relationship with Sarawat, regardless of their gender. By asking Sarawat to 'do it like when you hit on girls' and replicate those behaviors in their relationship, Tine continues to disrupt the dominant discourses that dictate specific roles for different genders. However, when Sarawat finally does what Tine asks for, Tine faces doubt in his feelings. His friend, Ohm, even advises him on this matter in episode 8.

Every time you were in a relationship, you were the one taking care of your date. But now you are being taken care of and pleased, it's normal to be shaken.

The line above reflects the social practices and expectations discourses surrounding gender roles. It emphasizes that in a relationship, even though it is a same-sex relationship, there is often an expectation for one partner to be the caretaker, while the other is positioned as the one being taken care of. This line acknowledges Tine's previous pattern of taking care of his dates in heterosexual relationships and contrasts it with his current experience with Sarawat.

Laclau and Mouffe (1990) suggest in Hall (1997) that discourse is central to the construction of meaning within social configurations. It means that it does not focus on the existence of things or events, but rather on understanding how meaning is produced. The phrase 'it's normal to be shaken' suggests that the change

of roles creates a sense of uncertainty for Tine, as it deviates from the norms that he was the one taking care of his dates and not the other way around. Hence, the phrase, especially the word ‘shaken’, implies a disruption of this discourse.

Coming out

Not long after Sarawat and Tine become boyfriends, Tine is struggling to tell his friends and brother about it, as he is afraid that they will not accept him. This concern is expressed by Tine in episode 10 when he talks to Sarawat regarding their relationship.

Have you told your friends that we are together? Change of plan. Can we tell them later? I need more time.

Tine’s hesitation to come out and publicly disclose his relationship with Sarawat is a form of challenging the norm and expectations of immediate and public declaration of romantic relationships. There is an expectation in many societies that others should openly acknowledge romantic relationships, particularly heterosexual ones. They usually engage in social media and according to Seldman (2020), showing off relationships on social media serves as a means to connect to ones’ partner and to protect ones’ relationship from others who might be interested in pursuing them or their partner. However, in this case, Tine’s request to postpone the announcement of his relationship with Sarawat highlights the complexity of navigating societal norms when it comes to same-sex relationships. He expresses fear of non-acceptance from his friends and it implies that there is an expected norm of acceptance that he feels he may not meet based on his sexual orientation or choice of partner.

I’m sorry. I was afraid you couldn’t accept me this way.

Tine’s fear of rejection from his brother, Type, reveals the influence of dominant discourse in constructing notions of normalcy and conformity, which he tries to navigate and negotiate through self-disclosure. However, his coming out does not result in rejection from his brother and friends.

I’m your brother. I can accept whatever you are. I’m just worried about you.

The acceptance given by Type is a challenge to the societal norms that when it comes to same-sex relationships, they are not given the same amount of respect when they declare their relationships. However, Foucault (2014) in his book *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* argues that while it may be important to say ‘I am a homosexual’ or come out at a given moment, sexuality should not define one’s identity. Conversely, Type’s response aligns with Foucault’s argumentation that sexuality should not be the sole determinant of one’s identity. His acceptance of Tine regardless of his sexual orientation challenges the dominant discourse and provides a supportive and understanding perspective.

Reinforcing stereotypes

Nevertheless, there are some portrayals in the series that reinforce the stereotypes. These include the portrayal of heteronormativity and objectification that appear several times throughout the series.

Heteronormative stereotype

Heteronormative ideology, according to Thorne et al. (2020), is the belief that there are two separate and opposing genders with associated natural roles, which are in line with their assigned sex, and that heterosexuality is a given. This discourse limits individuals to society’s expectations and assumptions. Heteronormative beliefs cause an underestimation of gender and sexual identity, which leads to a backlash against those who deviate from these norms (Thorne et al., 2021). While the beliefs are now starting to accept those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, they still attempt to divide the gender roles based on the conventional norms in society, namely masculine and feminine roles. These beliefs are still popular in media, and even when it is considered a boys’ love series, the narrative still portrays that one party must ‘be the girl’. *2gether the Series* as a TV series that portrays same-sex relationships still reinforces this belief in some of its scenes, although it is often in the context of a joke. The

reinforcement of heteronormative stereotypes is seen through how Sarawat calls Tine using the word ‘mia/เมีย’ or ‘wife’ twice in the series and once refers to himself as ‘pua/พ่อ’ or ‘husband’.

Do you want to be my wife?

In Thai, those words are more informal than husband-สามี (sa-mee) and wife-ภรรยา (pan-ra-ya). In the case of same-sex relationships, those informal words refer to ‘bed position’ in which พ่อ/husband is the top, which is supposed to be the masculine party, and เมีย/wife is the bottom, the supposedly feminine one. However, Tine’s character is portrayed as traditionally masculine in terms of his appearance and behavior, even though he has moments of vulnerability and sensitivity as well, which challenge traditional notions of masculinity.

Moreover, the use of gendered terms and roles in relationships, not only limited to same-sex relationships, reinforces the dominant discourse that men and women are expected to act in certain ways. Heteronormativity assumes that a relationship consists of a husband and a wife. When Sarawat asks Tine to be his wife in the context of the dialogue above, it supports and perpetuates heteronormative norms. It implies that there must be a male and a female partner in a relationship utilizing this language, even though the characters themselves do not adhere to those conventional gender roles.

The portrayal above is reinforcing the idea that one partner should be more dominant or masculine while the other one should be more submissive or feminine. Thus, it implies that when Tine is referred to as the wife, who is also expected to take a supportive role, it aligns with and reinforces traditional gender expectations.

Objectification

Immanuel Kant (1785) defines objectification as an activity that involves regarding someone as an object, a means to fulfill one’s desires. The act treats someone, either man or woman, as an object rather than as an individual with his or her ideas, feelings, and autonomy. Objectification can take many forms, including

sexual objectification, which is when a person is reduced to their sexual attractiveness and objectified for the enjoyment of others. In *2gether the Series*, Sarawat often objectifies Tine by attempting to touch his breast.

I want to grab your boobs. Can I?

Sarawat’s line above shows how he objectifies Tine’s body parts, specifically his breasts, reducing them to mere objects of sexual desire. The word ‘boobs’ appear around nine times throughout the series, which mostly comes from Sarawat’s dialogue. Kant (1785) assumes that while, in theory, men and women can experience objectification, reality shows that women are the most common victims of this. However, in this context of same-sex relationships, it gets more complex as the aforementioned line represents a sense of control over Tine’s body, which disregards his consent. This act reinforces the discourse that in relationships, one person asserts dominance and attempts to exert control over the other.

Popular culture becomes one of the media to shape societal norms. Hall (1997:44) quotes that discourse influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. It emphasizes the idea that discourse present in popular culture like *2gether the Series* not only reflects societal attitudes but also contributes to the acceptance of diverse identities. The lines analyzed above reflect the ongoing dialogue and representation of identities in media by looking at how they both challenge and reinforce existing norms and how they contribute to evolving perceptions and acceptance.

CONCLUSION

2gether the Series is a Thai boys’ love series that explores the dynamic of same-sex relationships. This series has become a global phenomenon since it was first premiered in 2020. As a part of popular culture, the series exemplifies the journey of how contemporary media evolves perceptions and acceptance, while still reinforcing traditional norms of gender and sexuality identities in some parts. Hence, it highlights the need for critical analysis of media discourse and active engagement with diverse

voices and narratives to foster a more inclusive and accepting society.

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