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Fandom and Identity Construction: An Analysis of Thai Boys Love Fandom and Fanshipping on Social Media X

Fatma Nuraini Zahra

Universitas Islam Indonesia Universitas Islam Indonesia, Jalan Kalirang KM. 14.5 Ngaglik, Sleman, DIY Corresponding auhor, email: fatma.nuraini@uii.ac.id

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Abstract

Fandom has now become a prominent popular culture phenomenon, including in Indonesia. The growing interest in Thai pop culture among younger generations has led to the emergence of various Thai fandoms, one of which is the Thai Boys Love (BL) fandom. The majority of Thai BL fans are young heterosexual women who consume homosexual narratives through Thai series. These fans, known as sao-y, engage in shipping practices by pairing two male actors featured in Thai BL dramas. This article explores the Thai BL fandom and fanshipping practices in Indonesia, as well as the identity construction of fans on the social media platform X. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study method, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal that fans within the Thai BL fandom on X are no longer passive audiences but active participants who reproduce media texts through fanshipping practices, demonstrated in forms of semiotic productivity, enunciative productivity, and textual productivity. In terms of identity formation, the Thai BL fandom constructs cultural identity through representational practices and meaning making performed by the fans. These activities reflect the active roles of fans on social media X in sustaining and strengthening their fandom community, while simultaneously contributing to the development of a collective identity that distinguishes Thai BL fans from other fandom groups.

Keywords: Boys Love, Fandom, Identity, *Shipping*, *Sao-y*

Introduction

Studies on fan culture have increasingly attracted scholarly attention in recent years. This is especially evident in the context of fans as part of popular culture practices, such as those related to Korean Pop. However, beyond Korean pop culture, there has also been a notable rise of Thai pop culture that has fostered fan communities or fandoms among Indonesian youth. According to idn.times (2020), the popularity of Thai celebrities or idols has surged significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic, even appearing to rival the prominence of Korean Pop. Thai films and drama series have

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gained greater local audience engagement, particularly with the growing accessibility through over-the-top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix and Viu (Rastati, 2020). Storey (2007) further explains that the emergence of fan groups is a consequence of the consumption of popular cultural products. In the Indonesian context, one of the most widely recognized fandoms of Thai series consists of fans of television series or dramas under the Boys Love (BL) genre. The Thai BL drama *Love Sick* (2012) marked the initial introduction of the genre, followed by the explosive popularity of *2gether The Series* (2020), which significantly contributed to the rising recognition of Thai BL dramas in Indonesia (Yuliarti, 2024).

Thai BL fandom in Indonesia is predominantly admired by heterosexual women, who indeed constitute the primary target audience of BL series (Masrina & Chairil, 2021). Female fans of the Thai BL genre are often referred to as *sao-y*, a term that reflects appreciation toward romantic pairings of male same-sex characters in various forms of mass culture, both written and visual (Prasannam, 2019). Within the Thai BL fandom, the practice of reconstructing homoerotic male intimacy is known as *long ruea* or "boarding the boat," a concept more commonly understood as "ship/shipping," in which *sao-y* pair yaoi couples into romantic narratives based on their favorite series. This shipping practice is also commonly found among Thai celebrity fandoms in Indonesia, whose members identify as *sao-y*. For instance, the shipping of actors Bright Vachirawit and Win Metawin in the BrightWin fandom rooted in *2gether The Series*; shipping of actors Jumpol Adulkittiporn (Off) and Atthaphan Phunsawat (Gun) in Off-Gun fandom; as well as Polca fandom, which supports actors Tay and New, along with many other fandoms that continue to expand in line with the increasing production of Thai BL media.

BL fandoms are highly active in digital spaces, particularly on the platform X (formerly Twitter). One example is the fan account @fessthaii, which has gained 58,000 followers and serves as a space for interaction and discussion surrounding Thai BL fandom, Thai BL series, and Thai pop culture. As such, X functions as a social arena for dialogue, content circulation, and cultural text reproduction, positioning fandom not merely as ordinary communities but as spaces for identity formation and symbolic solidarity grounded in collective interests. Through X, women in the Thai BL fandom are able to express themselves not only as viewers who enjoy the content but also as active audiences in the era of new media. Therefore, the various activities carried out

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by *sao-y* as part of the Thai BL fandom illustrate how fans play an active role in sustaining and developing their communities, ultimately contributing to the formation of group identities that distinguish them from other fan collectives.

Research on fandom and identity has begun to receive increasing scholarly attention. For instance, a study by Parsakia and Jafari (2023) discusses the dynamics of online fandom communities, highlighting how fan engagement and fandom identity are shaped through participation patterns, identity formation, community dynamics, motivations, and the challenges they encounter. Other studies have examined the dynamics of gender identity among Indonesian *fujoshi* from a cultural studies perspective (Dewi, 2012), as well as research on how female fans interpret BL narratives in relation to sexual identity and homosexuality or LGBTQ communities (Avianti & Yunanto, 2023; Masrina, 2024; Andriani et al., 2024). Additionally, research has explored the development of strong group identity within the BL Polca fandom in Indonesia, established through shared values, support, and collective solidarity (Fauziyyah et al., 2025).

However, these previous studies primarily focus on identity formation and have yet to thoroughly examine fandom productivity and the practice of shipping. Thus, the novelty of this study lies in addressing this gap by exploring fandom and fan productivity within the Thai BL fandom in Indonesia, while also analyzing the construction of identity developed through a specific medium, namely, the social media platform X (Twitter). This study aims to explain the dynamics of Thai BL fandom in Indonesia and the identity construction formed by this fandom through social media X (Twitter), whose majority audience consists of heterosexual female adolescents who enjoy homosexual romance narratives and idolize the actors involved. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of fan and fandom studies, as well as identity construction within virtual communities through social media.

Fan communities serve as an important lens for understanding the evolution of popular culture and the implications of technological advancement in communication. This research seeks to understand how fandom practices and fanshipping activities are carried out on the digital platform X and to analyze how identity dynamics within fandom are formed, sustained, and negotiated through interactions among fans. Fandom is not merely an expression of interest toward a cultural product, but also a space where fans construct their self-identity and negotiate their position within society.

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Furthermore, this study is crucial for examining how female fans interpret cultural texts and products featuring homoerotic narratives within the Indonesian context.

Fandom

Thai BL series, as products of popular culture, have generated their own fan communities. Fans who come together within a particular group or collective are referred to as fandoms. Fans display strong interest, affection, and attachment toward their fandom objects and can be distinguished from non-fans through their sense of admiration, desire, and commitment (Jensen, 1992). In the early development of fan studies, fans were often viewed as passive audiences who merely received content or messages distributed by the media. However, with the advancement of digital media and technology, fans are no longer positioned solely as spectators. Instead, they can now actively interact, express their opinions, and even reproduce new messages directed toward their idols or fellow fans. Jenkins (2018) characterizes this condition as *participatory culture*, a culture in which audiences actively engage in communication processes and the production of meaning.

According to Jenkins, participatory culture emerges when fans can create, store, or modify media content in new formats. In other words, fans can produce content according to their own intentions, especially with the ease of access provided by the internet and new media today. Fans may express their interest in idols through various forms of behaviour. Fiske (in Hills, 2013) explains that fan productivity related to media texts on social media can be categorized into three types:

- 1. Semiotic productivity refers to the moment when fans create social meaning in their everyday lives derived from their fandom objects. For example, fans may regain confidence or feel motivated after watching their idols appear in media.
- 2. Enunciative productivity occurs when fans express their idol's characteristics publicly through their appearance or speech. Adopting certain hairstyles, makeup styles, clothing choices, or accessories becomes a way to construct social identity and signal one's membership in a particular fandom.
- 3. Textual productivity takes place when fans create new texts that originate from their idol objects. This type of productivity differentiates fans from general audiences who are not part of fandom.

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Initially, general audiences could participate in enunciative productivity simply by responding to media texts. However, with the rise of social media, fan fiction, fan-made songs, and fan videos, it has become increasingly difficult for non-fans to engage in textual production because a clearer boundary now exists between fan community identities and those who are merely casual viewers.

Early fan studies suggested that fandom was primarily directed toward popular cultural objects such as rock music, film, and sports, in contrast to what is considered high culture like classical music, visual arts, and performing arts. They also tended to associate fans with passive audiences. This perspective has been criticized for privileging media texts while overlooking the active nature of fandom, which actually elevates mass media texts to the status of popular cultural assets (Lanier & Fowler, 2013). This aligns with Jenkins' (2018) argument that fans' active participation in fandom contributes to the creation and circulation of media content within participatory culture, blurring the boundaries between producers and consumers, and generating cultural products that are not only material artifacts but also subcultural values and meanings.

Fandom Identity

Booth (2010) states that fans ground part of their identity in the fandom itself. In fan studies, identity has consistently become a central focus of scholarly inquiry (Smutradontri & Gadavanij, 2020). Some fans use their identity as a means of distinguishing themselves from general media audiences. Therefore, fan studies can help explore key mechanisms through which individuals engage with mediated worlds in relation to social reality as well as political and cultural identities (Gray et al., 2007).

Identity refers to the condition in which individuals position themselves within social communities while simultaneously forming an understanding of who they are (Jane & Barker, 2016). Fandom identity can be constructed through cultural identity, which emerges as a form of social construction derived from widely recognized representations. Meaning making surrounding identity may be observed through activities such as interests, perceptions, lifestyles, or participation. Cultural identity is not regarded as a fixed or natural reflection of something static, but rather as an ongoing process of becoming, continuously produced, altered, and influenced by various surrounding factors. Cultural identity may develop from myths, memories, and

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narratives, including within fandoms. Each fan community holds different narratives that function to connect members with diverse backgrounds. This unity is formed through shared symbols, imagery, and cultural practices that hold collective meaning (Jane & Barker, 2016).

Barker (2004 in Fuamalah, 2015) further explains that identity is expressed through activities that represent and are recognized by both oneself and others. How individuals see themselves and how they are perceived by others contribute to the essential meaning of identity, shaped by signs such as interests, behaviors, lifestyles, and even beliefs. The meanings developed by fans within a community are the result of identity construction processes in fandom, encompassing representational activities embedded in cultural practices. The significance of meaning-making in shaping cultural identity emerges from fans' involvement in communal cultural activities (Fulamah, 2015). Thus, fandom can be understood as something that grows from various cultural practices connected to the lives and backgrounds of its members. In the context of Thai BL fandom identity, represented by *sao-y*, such identity construction becomes visible through their cultural practices on the social media platform X.

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach using a case study method. The qualitative approach in this study is interpretive and naturalistic, in which the researcher seeks to understand phenomena within their natural settings. Thus, the researcher interprets events based on the meanings constructed by individuals or groups who experience them (Creswell, John W., 2018). The case study approach is used to examine in depth the practices of Thai BL fandom and identity construction within a specific digital context. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, literature review, and document study. After obtaining relevant data, analysis was then conducted.

Primary data in this study were collected through interviews with four female fans with diverse backgrounds who are actively engaged in fandom activities and interactions on the social media platform X. These participants were selected based on specific criteria, such as being heterosexual women who actively engage in fandom interactions, participate in fan shipping, and produce or contribute to fandom-related content on X. In addition, data were gathered through observations of posts, digital

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interactions, and Thai BL fandom content on X, while secondary data were obtained from relevant articles and digital archives. The qualitative data analysis process was carried out interactively and continuously until the data reached saturation. This process involved data condensation by selecting, focusing, simplifying, and categorizing raw data obtained from interviews and fandom digital interaction archives, followed by data display, verification, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014).

Discussion

Indonesia Fandom Productivity and Fan Shipping Practices of Indonesian Sao-y

The *sao-y* fandom refers to a group of fans who admire series or celebrities featuring yaoi or BL themes. These BL series have attracted many Indonesian fans who engage in shipping male actors featured in such works. Fans within the Thai BL fandom are commonly referred to as *sao-y*, a term that suggests appreciating same-sex male pairings in various forms of mass cultural products, both textual and visual, by engaging in shipping practices, thus making them part of a broader popular culture.

According to Jenkins (2018), fandom is understood not merely as passive consumption, but as active production enabled through participatory culture. This is also evident within the Thai BL fandom, where fans do not only passively watch TV series, but also become active and productive audiences by reproducing and transforming the media content they consume, particularly through the social media platform X. Fandom productivity can be observed through fans' participation in creating diverse interpretations of a media text (Lestanti & Kusuma, 2023). There are three forms of fan productivity related to media texts on social media, including semiotic productivity, enunciative productivity, and textual productivity (Fiske 1992 in Hills, 2013).

The first is semiotic productivity, which occurs when fans use fandom objects to construct social meaning in their own lives. For instance, fans may gain confidence or motivation after watching their favourite characters on television and social media, and this includes attributing personal meanings to the romantic relationships between two actors. Such practices are also observed among Thai BL fandom communities. Based on interview results, fans of the "BrightWin" pairing, for example, described how they feel inspired by the positive behaviour and honesty of the two actors as portrayed in media. Although they have never interacted directly with them, fans form these meanings through social media interactions and exposure to various contents

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involving the actors such as fan meetings, promotional videos, or other appearances. All interviewed fans agree that their involvement in the Thai BL fandom allows them to endure difficult times, providing them with a new passion and source of happiness.

This is also reflected in fan posts on the social media platform X, such as the post by user @hikari228_, who expressed appreciation for BL actors TayNew from the Polca fandom when they were seen interacting with the fandom's mascot, commending their kindness.



Source: Akun X @ hikari228_

Figure 1

The interaction in which the actors give a gift to the fandom mascot is interpreted by TayNew BL shippers as an act of kindness, rather than a simple or ordinary gesture. This moment leaves a meaningful impression on the fans of the TayNew BL fandom, as the gift is perceived not only as a personal gesture but also as a symbolic expression from both actors together, directed specifically toward their fandom mascot.

The second form of productivity is enunciative productivity, which occurs when fans express their fandom publicly through various forms, whether virtually or in real-life settings. This includes certain hairstyles or makeup styles, clothing choices, or accessories as a way to construct social identity and affirm one's membership within

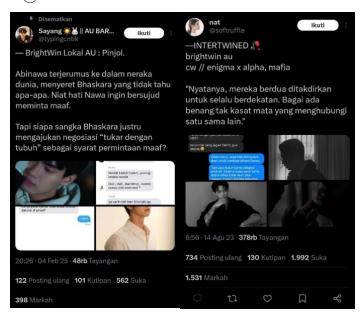
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a particular fan community. For instance, one informant who identifies as part of the BrightWin fandom reported purchasing and using products endorsed by the pair, such as Merci skincare products from Thailand or "Astro Stuff," a T-shirt brand owned by Bright. On the social media platform X, fans express their affiliation visually by using photos of Thai BL actors as their profile pictures and writing profile descriptions in Thai or including specific symbols that represent their fandom, such as fish and bear icons used by the Polca fandom of actors Tay and New.

The third form of productivity involves textual production, which emerges when fans create texts based on their fandom objects. Textual productivity differentiates fan sectors from broader non-fan audiences. According to Prasannam (2019), fan text creation, as part of *sao-y* identity construction in the Thai context, appears through fan art, fan fiction, and OPVs (Official Promotional Videos), which have been well received since the rise of the Korean Wave through OPV practices involving groups such as BTS, EXO, and GOT7. Similar practices are also found among Indonesian fans of Thai BL, who frequently produce fanfiction, particularly distributed through the social media platform X. Fanfiction on X is commonly referred to as AU (Alternate Universe), as seen in the works shared by accounts such as @typingentik and @softtruffle.



Source: The X accounts @typingentik and @softtruffle

Figure 2

Based on X postings related to the production of AUs as a form of textual productivity, these works also represent part of the shipping practices surrounding

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Thai BL actors in Indonesia. This demonstrates that Thai BL fandom continues to reproduce its cultural engagement through new media, grounded in their fandom objects, specifically the actor pairings from Thai BL series. The posts by the accounts @typingcntik, which has reached 48,000 views, and another by @softtruffle with 378,000 views, both centered on the BrightWin fandom since 2020, indicate that Thai BL shipping practices are long-term activities that involve unique relational attachments. Even though these actors have starred in different series and films, Thai BL fans continue to show their loyalty to their favorite pairs through sustained consumption, social media promotion, and ongoing participation in fandom communities. Such practices parallel what has been observed among BL fans in China, who are predominantly millennial women capable of providing long-term support for their favorite actors (KomsanTortermvasana, 2022).

Moreover, AU-based fan works shared on X reveal fans' preferences for specific Thai BL pairings, often following normative gender structures through masculine and feminine roles within the couple. This suggests that although fandom appears to challenge boundaries of heteronormativity, fan reception remains influenced by heteronormative frameworks when interpreting romantic relationships between men (Jirattikorn, 2025). Thus, the Thai BL fandom in Indonesia does not entirely break away from dominant cultural values. Instead, fans negotiate hegemonic norms by consuming and reproducing homoerotic love narratives that are personalized to meet their emotional needs and social experiences as women in a patriarchal society.

Identity Construction within the Sao-y Fandom

In the era of new media, fans increasingly follow information and communicate with each other on internet platforms such as the social media site X, rather than through frequent in-person meetings. Consequently, many fan activities have shifted from the offline world to online spaces, including fanfiction, games, and group chats. As a result of this shift, more recent studies have begun to explore fandom within digital contexts (Smutradontri & Gadavanij, 2020). This also applies to the Thai BL fandom on X. The construction of fan group identity emerges from a variety of culturally embedded activities within the fandom. These activities are repeatedly performed and continuously followed by members, making them dynamic and

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constantly evolving rather than static (Fulamah, 2015). Each fan interprets these activities differently, producing diverse identity expressions within the group. Jane and Barker (2016) argue that an individual's identity is strongly related to personal conditions and the way they attach themselves to particular social groups. In this regard, affiliation with the Thai BL fandom can be understood from multiple perspectives, including how fan communities develop through cultural activities influenced by fans' personal backgrounds and lived experiences.

The findings of this research also reflect this condition. Initial pathways through which fans become familiar with and involved in Boys Love fandom, vary from one individual to another. Some encounter BL content through posts shared by friends that frequently appear on their X timeline, others are introduced to fandom through peers who privately share AUs or BL fanfiction, and some discover BL fandom independently by watching Thai Boys Love series. Consumption of BL content or participation in producing new fanfiction is not merely a pursuit of personal entertainment, it also contributes to shaping the collective identity of the fandom. For fans, content reproduction becomes a form of cultural representation within this community. This includes creating fan art, writing fanfiction, producing memes, and even participating in trending hashtags during events or activities related to Thai BL. Through these practices, fans construct a shared cultural identity that reinforces their membership in the *sao-y* community.

Representation manifested through fans' activities on the X platform plays a significant role in shaping fandom identity. This representation becomes visible through practices of producing and consuming various forms of fan-related materials, particularly within fan shipping activities centered on favoured BL actors. The Thai BL actors who become the objects of fan ship are positioned as figures of admiration, generating a variety of cultural practices that strengthen fans' attachment and belonging within the fandom community. To meet their desire for continuous engagement with anything related to Thai BL actors, fans interact with one another, exchanging thoughts and suggestions, especially when new drama series, projects, or even new AUs are released on X.

Through these activities, Thai BL fans share information by posting status updates, commenting on and liking others' posts until certain topics or hashtags related to Thai BL and shipping actors appear among the top trending lists on X. Active fan

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groups also engage in innovative practices such as online social activism. For example, the Thai fandom base account @fessthai encourages BL fandom communities to participate in digital activism by creating posts on X that relate their fan activities to broader social concerns, such as issues affecting access to merchandise of BL actors. These actions are motivated not only by personal enjoyment but also by fans' efforts to sustain and enhance their fandom community, positioning their engagement as a form of cultural representation through collective social participation.



Source: X account @fessthai

Figure 3

Fan activities do not emerge independently, rather, they are rooted in symbolic practices used to represent the Thai BL fandom. These include the use of rainbow colors within shipping logos displayed on fans' X profile pictures, adopting BL actors' photos as personal profile images, and learning or using the Thai language in posts or profile descriptions as symbolic markers of belonging to the Thai BL fandom. Through these practices, Thai BL fans can be distinguished from other fan communities. The fandom also possesses unique characteristics, such as the dominance of heterosexual female members, which supports the continuity of activities and loyalty toward shipping male actors across different BL series and films, distinct from other fan shipping practices, such as those within Korean idol fandoms.

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The cultural activities performed by fans carry varying meanings for each individual. These meanings develop in conjunction with how fans initially encounter the fandom and engage in its cultural practices. For some, the Thai BL fandom serves as a space for escape from daily routines and as a form of entertainment to relieve stress and fatigue. Others, particularly those who actively produce and share fangenerated texts, perceive these practices as a way to support the actors central to their fandom and to strengthen social connections with fellow fans. Furthermore, in attributing meaning to the symbols and fan-produced content they engage with, fans do not regard their participation merely as a source of entertainment; they also view it as a form of awareness and recognition that the fandom and the media they consume and reproduce represent the LGBTQ community.

Conclusion

A fan group (fandom) refers to a collective of individuals who share enthusiasm for a particular cultural object. The Thai BL fandom, also known as *sao-y*, has emerged as a notable social phenomenon in Indonesia today. In early fan studies, fans were seen as passive audiences; however, contemporary perspectives recognize fans as active participants who interact with and even reproduce popular culture content. Within the Thai BL fandom, fans demonstrate this active participation through semiotic, enunciative, and textual productivity, highlighting a distinct identity that differentiates them from other fan communities.

Understanding how the identity of Thai BL fans is constructed becomes essential, especially considering that the majority of these fans are heterosexual young women who enjoy homosexual narratives and engage in shipping practices involving BL actors. This identity construction can be explained through cultural identity frameworks, where representation occurs through continuous cultural activities and meaning-making processes carried out by fans. These dynamics are particularly visible through their interactions on the social media platform X, where the Thai BL fandom expresses and reinforces its collective identity.

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