

## Love Between Women: Historical Discourse Analysis of Lesbianism in Thai Media from 1996 to 2020<sup>†</sup>

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### Abstract

Despite its reputation as a paradise for gender diversity, discrimination against LGBTQAN+ in Thailand still exists, especially in the situation of lesbian visibility. This article traced movements of lesbianism in Thai media's text from 1996 to 2020. The article demonstrated how macrosocial relations of power are obscured in the micropolitics of media's text and affect being a lesbian. As a subject of patriarchy, homophobia, heteronormativity, and gender binary in the context of psychoanalytic knowledge, morality, and capitalism, lesbianism was formed as a sexual fantasy, perverse relationships, tragic stories, and fashion trends. Various forms of violence against lesbians were taken for granted in the media. Lesbians may seek social space by embodying social norms, however, it can create a dilemma in their existence.

**Keywords:** Lesbian, Discourse, History, Thailand, Media studies

### Introduction

The current academic interests in human rights, and gender diversity place Thailand today in the national LGBTQ+ rights movement. People have begun to promote the "Same-Sex Marriage Law". (Pairchaiyapoom, 2016; Newman et al., 2021) Various Thai pop-culture media also introduce positive stories of same-sex couples, especially drama series about boys' love stories (Baudinette, 2019). These dynamics have given rise to hopes of freedom and non-discrimination against LGBTQAN+ in Thai society.

However, it cannot be ignored that discrimination against LGBTQAN+ in Thailand is still problematic. There are still no laws that specifically address sexual orientation or gender identity. The 2007 constitution's anti-discrimination provision was not expanded to cover sexual identities. Only men and women are mentioned directly in existing marriage laws. (UNDP & USAID, 2014) Thai attitudes toward LGBTQAN+ people might be characterized as tolerable yet unaccepting. (Ocha, 2013) There was a high prevalence of negative attitudes toward LGBTQAN+-identified students in Thailand. (Shrestha et al., 2019) The stigma and prejudice that LGBTQAN+ people face in Thailand severely impact their quality of life. They are unable to achieve their full potential as employees, students, and community members due to discriminatory attitudes and beliefs. (UNDP, 2019).

Also, the situation of lesbian visibility is still problematic. The situation of Thai lesbian rights and movement is fragile and weakening. In the discussion on the draft of Thailand's First Wellbeing Plan for LGBTQAN+ 2021-2023, on September 22, 2020 (Bangkokpost, 2020; Global Education News, 2020), there was a debate about the bitter truth of lesbian issues. Sulaiporn Cholwilai, a scholar from the Association for Sexuality Studies, noted in the discussion that lesbian identity is also invisible in the Thai LGBTQAN+ movement. While larger gay groups can access more funds to improve their empowerment, smaller lesbian groups are less likely to receive funds. The Anjaree Group, Thailand's largest lesbian activist group operated since 1996, had reduced its roles and became dormant around 2011. The new emerging group, The Sapphic Pride, was attacked on Twitter and still unable to set an agenda in the socio-politics space.

Moreover, lesbians in Thailand still struggle against invisibility in academics. Since the 1950s, numerous gender-based activities and studies of Thai sexuality emerged from contexts in which same-sex relationships have been prefigured as a social problem. Jackson (2008) However, most studies have focused

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solely on the gay male. Thongthiraj (1994) Despite the growth of Gender and Sexuality Studies and Feminist Theory in Thai academics during the decade, women's sexuality and lesbian studies were only mentioned as some small part. Enteen (2007) After currently trying to search the research database in Thailand, it was also found that studies on contemporary lesbians in Thai are almost non-existent. Chetamee (1996); Chonwilai (2002); Asa (2019) There are many more academic articles about Thai women who love women in English than in Thai (Thongthiraj, 1994; Enteen, 2001; Somswasdi & Alycia, 2004; Sinnott, 2004; Jackson, 2011; Doungphummes & Sangsingkeo, 2020).

Although there is a strong presence of LGBTQAN+ in media, the main characters in most pop-culture media are gay men, and love stories between lesbians are much less popular. Even though there is widespread talk about gender diversity and human rights, some scenes in Thai drama series involving lesbian love have been censored for immorality. Daily News team (2021) Several Thai studies have found prejudices and negative stigmas against lesbians in Thai media (Pinijvararak, 1984; Jongsomjitt, 2007; Samitinantana, 2010; Kajitrabin & Wonfthreerathorn, 2020).

These contradictory phenomena warn us that even in circumstances where people are seen to be free, it is still necessary to be aware of the existence of knowledge in society and pay more attention to its effect on our existence. According to Michel Foucault, the French post-structuralist scholar, individuals are products of discourse, knowledge, and power. Foucault's approach provides the investigative tool to evaluate discourses and the dynamics of their operations within a historical period. Nothing about ourselves is essential and natural but political. Likewise, our gender identity is dynamic and contingent, constructed through historically and culturally specific norms, rules, beliefs, and ways of life. Oksala (1998) Hence, any gender identity should not be defined in a rigid framework since it is infinitely constructed, reconstructed, or modified, inseparable from power and knowledge.

This article therefore not only interested in how lesbianism in Thai media is constructed, reconstructed, and modified in the social, political, and cultural dynamics but also the society's knowledge and power behind the phenomena. This article suggests that the media plays a role in transmitting knowledge about gender in society. Change of knowledge also affects lesbianism. There is a lot of knowledge in Thai society, such as ghost believing, Buddhism, modernism, and feminism, which is the melting pot of texts circulating in society through various media, that define lesbianism and affect its existence in society.

Hence, the article aims to study (1) how lesbianism has been constructed, reconstructed, and modified in Thai media, and (2) under what conditions of knowledge those constructed have occurred. These questions can be explored by tracing movements of lesbian gender identity in Thai media's texts from 1996 to 2020. Based on a post-structuralist paradigm in critical media studies, the article demonstrated how macrosocial relations of patriarchy, homophobia, heteronormativity, and gender dualism are still obscured in the micropolitics of media's text and affect being a lesbian in Thai society.

### **Theoretical framework**

While the dichotomy of agency and structure in determining human behavior is a longstanding point of controversy in the social sciences (Mouzelis, 1995; Barker, 2005; Bhaskar, 2008), post-structuralists have argued that individuals are produced in a "nexus of subjectivities, in relation to the power that is constantly shifting, rendering them at times powerful and at other times powerless" (Baxter, 2003) According to Michel Foucault, the French post-structuralist scholar, individuals are products of discourse, knowledge, and power. Foucault's approach provides the investigative tool to evaluate discourses and the dynamics of their operations within a historical period.

Foucault proposes the concept of knowledge and power. Power, as seen by Foucault is productive. It is a form of power, which makes individuals subject. Foucault (1982) In his book *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977), Foucault analyses a form of modern power, *disciplinary power*, that positively transforms docile bodies into disciplined subjects. Oksala (1998) In *History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1984), Foucault presents that while modern science transformed human beings into objects of knowledge and power, human beings have become subjects who are aware of their gendered subject positions.

We might infer that there is no substantive core behind ourselves. Nothing about ourselves is essential and natural but political. It is dynamic and contingent, constructed through historically and culturally

specific norms, rules, beliefs, and ways of life. Oksala (1998) Therefore, any gender identity should not be defined in a rigid framework since it is infinitely constructed, reconstructed, or modified, inseparable from power and knowledge. Likewise, lesbianism and its concept should be acknowledged that it is not independent of its context.

The concept can be useful in understanding the paradox in contemporary Thai society where LGBTQAN+ face bias despite the higher visibility of LGBTQAN+ people in media discourse. Reading knowledge anchored in social regulation is the possible way to conceive of power and its effects. Green (2010) This research study therefore utilizes Foucault's concept of knowledge and power to analyze how lesbianism has been constructed, reconstructed, and modified in Thai media, and under what conditions of knowledge those constructed have occurred.

## Research methodology

It should be acknowledged that researching mainstream historical evidence, such as chronicles to find discourses on gender and sexuality in Thai society is often difficult. The gender and sexuality of ordinary people, especially lesbians, often disappear in these types of historical records. Fortunately, the advent of modern communication technologies, such as television, radio, movies, newspapers, and novels has given rise to a cultural realm driven by the middle and lower classes. They provide a variety of historical records on lesbians.

Foucault's historical discourse analysis was conducted on the Thai media text including news reports, magazine columns, novels, films, drama series, and talk shows which were purposively chosen based on their relevant content to lesbians. The researcher then proceeded to read and review every item. All Thai media texts related to lesbians published in Thailand from 1996 - 2020 were included in the analysis. The collected data was then analyzed to trace discourses on lesbian gender identity, to analyze the power behind discourse, and to determine how lesbian gender identity is historically and culturally formed as a gendered subject.

This study focused on texts that have appeared since 1996 because it was the time when the Anjaree Group, a group of Thai lesbian feminist activists came out against the Rajabhat Institute Council's ban on "sexually deviant students" in 1996. The subject of gender diversity has been debated in a wider public space than ever before. The scope of the research continued until 2020 in the context of digital communication technology and the growth of the LGBTQAN+ rights movement in Thailand.

The data collection of news was retrieved from the "Anjaree Archive" which contains more than 1,000 pieces of news clippings, private letters, and public documents related to Thai lesbians. The list of magazines was obtained from "Thai Rainbow Archive" which has magazines on Thai lesbians including An, Anjaree Newsletter, and @TomActz. The list of 31 novels that address lesbians could be collected from past literary research and the database of Saphan Publishing, which publishes only lesbian novels. In addition, the researcher carefully examined more than 5,000 tapes of Thai films, drama series, and talk show programs and obtained a list of 61 Thai films, 67 Thai drama series, and 40 talk shows that identified lesbians.

The use of terms is another thing that must be clearly defined. Although this article used the term "lesbian" for women who love women, it is necessary to be aware of some cultural sensitivities. In Thai society, women who love women may be uncomfortable identifying themselves with the term "lesbian" since the term lesbian in Thai society implies fantasy sex between women and women in adult pornography. The well-known term used to refer to women who love women in Thai is "Tom" and "Dee". "Tom" or "Tomboy", refers to female-bodied individuals who express masculinity. While "Dee" or "Lady", refers to a feminine-identified woman who loves Tom (Sinnott, 2004). However, since "Tom" and "Dee" imply heterosexuality, Anjaree Group had attempted to campaign on other terms used, such as "Anjaree" which means "different ways" and "Ying Rak Ying" which means "women who love women". Enteen (2007); Sinnott (2004). Yet Tom and the Transmen don't want to use all of these terms because they want to reject their biologically female body. Some women who love women in contemporary contexts are comfortable using the term "sapphic" "queer" or "non-binary" to reject gender dualism. However, there is still no agreed term to describe the biologically female body with non-normative sexuality and identity. Therefore, the

term “lesbian” needs to be broadly and sensitively used in this research to include lesbians, women who love women, Tom, Dee, trans-men, queer women, and so on.

### **Finding**

This section traced movements of lesbianism in Thai media’s texts from 1996 to 2020 to illustrate how lesbianism has been constructed, reconstructed, and modified in Thai media, and under what conditions of knowledge those constructed have occurred.

#### ***Cold fingers can’t beat warm penises***

Lesbianism portrayed in Thai media as a sex object and sex fantasy is exemplary of heterosexuality and patriarchy. There is the term “Ching” (small cymbals), a Thai musical instrument which is a metaphor for the vagina. The term “Tee Ching (play small cymbals)” or “Len Don Tree Thai (play Thai musical instruments)”, is generally used to mock the sexual relationship of lesbians. This can be seen from various newspaper headlines, such as “Women dating women, small cymbals begin to be played” in Manager Daily 360 Degree published on August 19, 2009, and “New trend 2012, Women + Women = City Full of Small Cymbals!” in Thairath Newspaper on 19 September, 2012.

Lesbianism portrayed as a sex object and sex fantasy can be found in adult porn, X-rated and R-rated film (e.g., the film *Sin Sister* in 2002). Seeing lesbians having sex can make a man sexually satisfied. Some men imagine themselves having sex with lesbians. Many non-fiction media present the story of a male protagonist winning the heart of a lesbian by having sex with her. (e.g., the film *Fabulous 30* in 2011; *Blue Sky of Love* in 2009; *Ghost Station* in 2007) There are some statements: “A warm penis is better than a cold finger”; “Man change a Tom”; “Fixing Tom and Dee”. These statements explain the belief that lesbians never have heterosexual experiences. If a lesbian finds a good man or sleeps with a man, they will return to being a “normal” woman again.

This belief has led to violence. Forcing lesbians to marry males is one example. It is believed that once married, the disease of being lesbian will be cured. A more serious example is that lesbians are subjected to the corrective rape. It could be seen in many newspapers that many lesbians were a victim of sexual harassment. However, journalists tended to focus on the victim’s gender identity rather than the violence and hilariously mocked the victim, such as a newspaper headline “a Tom was defeated by man” in Dailynews Newspaper on August 25, 2007.

In this case, Tom is often the subject of violence. In Thai society, the term “Tom” culturally refers to female bodies that present their masculine gender expression. Conflicts between “Man” and “Tom” often appear in Thai Media in the form of the love triangle of a man and a Tom vying for the same woman. The phrases “What a pity!” and “That’s a waste!” are usually used by Thai men to demean lesbian relationships. The phrases presume that it is unacceptable and regrettable if a woman chooses a Tom. The hatred that men have for Tom can be seen both in fiction and non-fiction media. The shocking news in December 2016 of a police officer killing a Tom is an example. The case led to an academic discussion to reflect on the problem of prejudice or hatred towards gender differences that lead to violence.

It cannot be ignored that there is also an effort to create the media’s appearance of “empathetic males” who are ready to help and support lesbian couples. (e.g., the films *Puppy Love* in 2008; *Friday Killer* in 2011) Moreover, the reverse discourse “men are terrible therefore women prefer to love women”, was found to shape lesbian gender identity. This can be found in most lesbian fiction novels. Male characters are transformed into villains with toxic masculinity (e.g., flirtatious, reckless, violent, insincere, sex-obsessed, and dangerous). So, any negative statements they said to lesbians would lose their legitimacy. Making men evil creates a new explanation of why women prefer to love women. In some drama series (e.g., the drama series *Catch a Beautiful Villain* in 1998; *World’s Top Robbers* in 2022), lesbian characters choose to love women because they have experienced the trauma of being physically abused and sexually harassed by men. The appearance of “terrible men” in these imaginary narrations is also linked to the shared experiences of Thai lesbians. In *Anjaree Saan Magazine*, there are several stories from lesbians sharing negative experiences with men, such as the story of Sao Bua, a lesbian who is often beaten and abused by her husband (Anjaree, 1998)

It should be noted, therefore, that the formation of lesbian gender identity takes place within a network of relationships with masculinity and patriarchy. It seems as if the existence of a male villain eventually is a supplement for constructing a lesbian gender identity. Also, it cannot be ignored that the reverse discourse, “men are terrible therefore women prefer to love women”, in turn, has become a double-edged sword to presume and reproduce the meaning that lesbian is only a temporary condition caused by confusion and disappointment: “becoming a lesbian because of disappointment from men.” In other words, it justifies the belief that if a lesbian finds a good man, they will return to being a “normal” woman.

### ***Lesbian love is perverse, inappropriate, and impossible***

In the 1990s, lesbian gender identity was often defined as queerness in Thai Media. The terms “creepy” “scary” “unnatural” and “oddly” were commonly used to identify lesbian’s gender identity. When a news report about lesbian marriage was presented, the term “unbelievable” was often used to describe lesbian marriage as something strange. (e.g., a newspaper headline “*Unbelievable!* Handsome Woman Marries Wife” in Dailynews Newspaper on May 17, 2019)

Lesbian gender identity was not only formed as queerness but also sexual perversion and mood disorder. The phenomena consistent with psychoanalytic knowledge dominated the Thai academy since the 1950s. Most studies in the decade come from the viewpoint of same-sex relationships as a mental health and social problem. The theory of sexual deviance was commonly used in many studies (Ngamsiri, 1989; Tansalaruk, 1990; Usaha, 1991). This viewpoint was embedded in the media space. When a lesbian was a suspect in a crime, journalists would not hesitate to emphasize that lesbians had psychological disorders due to the sexual deviant. This viewpoint can also be found in the nonfiction media. In 1981, the novel “Shadow of the Moon”, one of the earliest Thai novels with a lesbian protagonist, referred to lesbian characters as “perversion”. In the 2000s context, “perverse lesbian” still appeared through crime scenes (e.g., the film *The Victim* in 2006) and sex-obsession scenes (e.g., the film *Suriyothai* in 2001, *Sin Sisters* in 2002, and *Iron Ladies Roar!* in 2014).

The stereotype makes lesbians afraid to accept their gender identity. It is also an obstacle for lesbian couples to maintain their long-term relationship. However, lesbian gender identity is not disappeared, the identity appears in the form of a love tragedy. “Forbidden Love” or “Impossible Love” became a term used to refer to their relationships. The breakup of a lesbian couple is often described as an inevitable ending. The stories of impossible love experiences can be seen in the lesbian magazine’s advice column and news interview. Many narrations narrate lesbian’s feelings of suffering from knowing that their love would not be accepted in society. For example, a lesbian couple in the entertainment industry, “Parisa Thanawiwat” and “Alice Crystal”, gave an interview to *Kom Chad Luek Newspaper* on May 17, 2004, that they had been in a relationship for 4 years, but finally decided to end their relationship because they “couldn’t stand the criticism”.

The tragedy of lesbian love reproduced as stereotypes in the media is evidence of the existence of homophobia based on gender dualism and heterosexuality. It exposes the suffering bodies in society’s iron cages. Homophobia at that time prevented lesbians from revealing themselves to society. But it was also homophobia that caused lesbians to come out of their gender identity. An important milestone occurred in December 1996, when The Rajabhat Institute set a rule on banning “sexually deviant” students from enrollment at the college. The Anjaree Group was formed as a group of lesbian feminist activists. They came out along with various gay rights activists against this discriminatory rule. The debates were covered by the mainstream newspapers in Thailand. The Ministry of Education finally rescinded the order UNDP & USAID, 2014; Sinnott, 2011). This is an important moment that lesbian gender identity has presented itself as the subject being prejudiced by homophobic society.

After extensive organizing by gender-based rights activists, there is an official confirmation by psychological knowledge that same-sex relationship is not a psychiatric disorder (Sinnott, 2011). However, the idea of same-sex relationships as abnormal is still embedded in Thai society through moral knowledge. Being a lesbian has become an object of surveillance. Some celebrities were watched by entertainment reporters. Many gossip columns gossiped about which celebrities were likely to be lesbians. Talk shows began to invite lesbians as guests. This turned out to be an opportunity for some celebrities to come out as

lesbians. The situation arises in the context of the success of *The Iron Ladies* (2000), the film that describes the story of a volleyball team composed mostly of transsexuals, gay guys, and Tom to the Thai male national championships in 1996. The revenue success made the commercial media of that time see an opportunity to offer content about same-sex couples.

The more identities of same-sex couples, including lesbians, appear in public spaces, the more waves of criticism. Being lesbian was criticized as a moral degradation and flashy fashion trends imported from the West. A clear example comes from the TV talk show program “Theung Luk Theung Khon” in an episode broadcast on February 20, 2004. The program invited a famous actress, “Ampha Poosit” to appear on the show. She shared the advantages of her lesbian relationship. The show created a trend of “talk of the town”. Various column writers in newspapers criticized that the show might induce inappropriate behavior in young audiences. A columnist in Dailynews Newspaper on February 24, 2004, for example, criticized the program show that “Story like this shouldn’t be talked about on television because children, including young people of the new generation, are watching at home.”

According to the moral and cultural concept, lesbian love is also constructed as a profit-making relationship, an ephemeral lust, and a temporary fashion trend. An obvious example is during the year 2009, “Patiya Kuntrakul” and “Sumonrat Chaya” who are celebrities, announced their marriage. The newspaper used queerness to define the couple’s relationship, such as a news headline “Sugar daddy bought a red Audi as a proof of *unnatural love*” in Bangkok Today, January 2, 2010. Various news at the time attacked both of them for expressing *too much*, such as a news headline “No matter what gender you are, knowing how to position yourself is still always effective in Thai society” in Manager Daily 360 Degree on September 18, 2010. Moral concepts at the time attempted to reduce lesbian gender identity to a mere illusion. Instead, it was a time when lesbian gender identities emerged and defined their own identity and love relationships as newspapers continued to fuel the issue throughout the year and the talk show invited both of them to the show.

### ***It’s acceptable as long as you’re a good citizen and a good daughter***

In Thailand’s socio-political context during 1987 - 1997, there was the event of the “Phruetsapha Thamin” (Black May), the mass protests in Bangkok in May 1992, that led to the 1997 Constitution of Thailand. It is regarded as one of the first constitutions that allowed citizens to participate in its drafting and has a very democratic nature in its article. Klein (1998) Various human rights organizations in Thailand are increasingly growing in this era. Likewise, Anjaree Group was formed as a feminist-lesbian organization unofficially in 1986. Sinnott (2011) With the role of Anjaree, the human rights of women who love women have been brought up in more socio-political discourse. A wide discussion in Thai society about the draft law on marriage equality is increasingly driven to the public by the Western world movement for same-sex marriage in the context of 2007. The phrase “Right to Love” provides a tool for defining lesbian love as a general reality. However, it is difficult for human rights proclamations to challenge the conservative hegemony in Thai society. LGBTQ+’s human rights were seen as an import from the West. It was assumed that LGBTQAN+’s human rights didn’t fit in Thai society. Thai society has opened space for gender diversity. LGBTQAN+’s human rights advocates have been accused of exaggerating their rights.

However, In the context of the public debate on gender diversity, LGBTQAN+ gender identity was commodified in the media industry. Commercial journalism boosted its ratings by allowing more lesbian couples to appear in the press. Society has begun to see lesbian couples being invited as guests on various talk shows to share their sexual experiences and their reasons for dating same-sex relationships. In this context, love was described as genderless and individual liberation from a personal dimension. As the lesbian couple who held the wedding ceremony said in Khaosod Newspaper, on December 13, 2012, that “We love each other and don’t care what society sees us because love is only about 2 people”.

The commoditization of lesbian gender identity was driven in the pop culture’s context of K-pop and J-pop popularity among Thai teenagers in 2007. Young people were attracted to idols from Korea and Japan. The fandom culture of the idols gave birth to fan-fiction novels on online platforms, such as DekD.com. The novels were mostly about same-sex relationships of the idols including Yuri novels (male-to-male love relationships) and Yaoi novels (female-to-female love relationships). Although those online

novels didn't present real-life conditions of LGBTQAN+ people, they became an important space in amplifying the voice of the LGBTQAN+ people. Gay and lesbian writers saw an opportunity to produce lesbian novels and established publishing houses, such as Saphan Publishing. Some of them were successful and made into movies. "Yes or No" in 2010, is the first popular Thai film that successfully presents the teenage love story and relationship between Tom and Dee.

The increased appearance of LGBTQAN+'s people in media at that time prompted criticism that the media portrayed inappropriate behavior and fashion. Many novels were criticized for explicit sex scenes. On December 5, 2007, SE-ED Publishing published an online open letter on banning this type of novel. The letter caused widespread controversy on Facebook. Activists protested widely, leading the company to apologize. Concerns that gender diversity is an inappropriate fashion trend reflect conservative moral values that uphold heterosexual norms. Adolescents' sexuality had become a target of surveillance. The appearances of adolescents with LGBTQAN+ gender identities were seen more and more. It was in this moment of visibility that media space was created for them to share their suffering. There was a commonly used statement to resolve conflicts between conservative parents and LGBTQAN+ children that "If only your child is a good citizen and a good daughter, it should be acceptable". "Dong Dok Mei" in 2003 is an example of the first family drama series in which parents used this statement with their lesbian child. "The Love of Siam" in 2007 and "Yes or No" in 2010 are examples of the first Thai films to address this statement and were a huge success.

Hence, lesbian gender identity was subject to social norms, such as being a good daughter to their parents and a good citizen to society. This depicts the power over life focusing on the well-being of its citizens. @TomActz Magazine, the lesbian commercial magazine that was published between 2007 and 2015, provided media space to promote lesbian gender identity with ideal citizenship, such as being good at studying, multi-talented, and successful at work. In addition to being a good citizen and a good personality were also important in shaping a lesbian's gender identity.

It should be aware that the notion of lesbian gender identity as ideal citizenship also arises under the process of commoditization and consumerization. The lesbian gender identity emerges as a subject who takes care of herself in terms of hairstyle, dress, body care, lifestyle, accessories, and material goods. It could be seen in @TomActz Magazine publishing in 2007, featuring Tom and Dee's consumer culture focused on lifestyle and material goods. The commoditization and consumerization of lesbian gender identity are also evident in the media content that aims to reach a high purchasing power consumer group, the urban middle-class lesbians. Today, the presence of urban middle-class lesbians is therefore general in media, while the presence of working-class lesbians, elderly lesbians, and marginalized lesbians still have no space.

### ***Which one in your relationship is husband or wife?***

In the context of 1990, it was not easy for lesbian couples to live together happily and openly. Lesbian relationships appeared in the form of secret relationships. Many columns in Anjaree Newsletter, an alternative communicational media space for Thai lesbian between 1990 - 2000s, reveals the sorrowful experience of a wife who loved a woman but had to hide the relationship because of the moral concepts of monogamy and heterosexuality. This moral concept has been reinforced in various media until today. For example, the drama series "Club Friday The Series, Love Crosses the Line" in 2019, presents the story of an unhappy wife who developed a deep relationship with her future daughter-in-law. Ultimately, she had to end the "immoral and sinful" relationship and be a good wife and good mother for her family.

In the context of the same-sex marriage legislation campaign and the grossing success of coming out and coming-of-age films, "Love of Siam" in 2007 and "Yes or No" in 2010, romantic love might be a conceptual tool for lesbians in seeking social space for their existence. However, romantic love, which is inherently heterosexual, also embraces same-sex relationships into heterosexuality. Heterosexuality and gender dualism are therefore embodied in lesbian relationships. That's why lesbian relationships in Thai society are often stereotyped as a "Tom-Dee", while "Tom" performs the masculine role, "Dee" performs the feminine role. Lesbians who did not perform the gender dualism of "Tom and Dee" were also distrusted and excluded from the lesbian community (Anjaree, 2000; Anjaree, 2001). This makes society not see other

forms of lesbian relationships outside of this gender dualism. A TV talk show program “Rang Chad Jad Tem” on June 15, 2015, for example, invited a lesbian couple as guests. The moderators repeatedly asked the couple that “Which one in your relationship is husband and wife, Tom and Dee?” even though the couple said that they were both women.

Thai lesbians adopt heterosexuality and gender dualism to form their own identity. Some masculine lesbians may be expected from their family and couple to perform as a normative man, and alienated from their own female bodies. This expectation undermines the relationship of lesbian couples. In Anjaree Saan Magazine, masculine lesbian’s experiences of fear and suffering are present. For example, they suffered from not being able to fully satisfy the sexual pleasure to their couples because they were not straight men. Anjaree (1996) The protagonist in the novel “Yes or No” in 2004, for another example, was in a dilemma where she was expected to be strong like a man. This pressure made her see herself as a flawed body. There is also a term that undervalues masculine lesbians, especially Tom, by labeling them as “Chai Tiam (inauthentic man)” who is inferior to a “Chai Tae (straight man)”.

However, the gendered subject is a result of the articulations between social identity and self-identity to define their unique sense of self and relationship. One example is an exhibition of Tom's photographs, “Tomboy Bangkok” in 2022. The exhibition showed a different gender identity of Tom besides the traditionally masculine man. This is an attempt to significance a new meaning for Tom. Fiction media nowadays has begun to represent aspects of lesbian relationships in a way that does not necessarily correspond to gender dualism like Tom-Dee’s relationship, such as the movie “Three Days Two Nights” in 2012 and the movie “1448 Love Among Us” in 2014.

There is a campaign by Anjaree Group, the lesbian organization, to deconstruct heterosexuality and gender dualism by using the term “Ying Rak Ying (women who love women)” to embrace unity among lesbians, Tom, Dee, transmen, bisexuals, etc. But since Tom and transmen wanted to escape from their female bodies, they did not want to identify themselves as lesbians or women. For them, the word lesbian implies cisgender. Moreover, the influence of queer theory in the present decade led to the concept of gender-fluid relationships. It has been stated that “sexual orientation does not necessarily correspond to gender identity.” This makes people aware of their gender dynamics. Lesbians also become an unstable and changeable state without a fixed definition. Being a lesbian is therefore not tied to the female-female relationship. Anyone can perform the identity of a lesbian, despite having a male body. The appearance of “Lesbian Kathoey” and “Transgender Lesbian” is obvious examples.

Since 2014, The Anjaree Group has begun to cease its role due to obstacles to access to funding. The word lesbian nowadays is starting to fade away. The terms “lesbian” and “woman who loves woman” are too narrow since a woman can always change her gender identity and sexual orientation throughout her life. Some activists may also choose to define themselves as non-binary rather than lesbian. Sapphic Pride Group was formed in 2022. It uses the term “Sapphic” to include not only lesbians but also Tom-Dee, bisexual, non-binary, transgender lesbians, and transmen. However, since the group has no transgender members, the Sapphic Pride Group has been continually attacked on online community as a trans-exclusionary radical feminist or TERF. At the same time, Tom and transgender did not feel included in “Sapphic” and formed their own groups. This absence of a collective sense of being lesbian is eventually the key to weakening the lesbian movement in Thailand.

## Conclusions

The study’s findings demonstrate 4 strands of discourse concerning lesbian gender identity produced through media texts. They all were a dominant construct of sexuality defined by heteronormativity, patriarchy, homophobia, and gender dualism, and were institutionalized into rigid structures through moral knowledge and clinical psychology knowledge.

Before 2007, most of the public discourse, especially in the fields of entertainment, made the presumption that lesbians were sexually inexperienced women and that masculine lesbians were merely imitations of genuine men. Being a lesbian was therefore regarded as an illusion. Lesbians became an object of male desire. “Cold fingers can’t beat warm penises” is also an obvious example of a statement that allows

men to correct lesbians' bodies and encourages sexual violence. Such subordinate status has led some lesbians to attempt to deny their gender identity.

Lesbian erotica was depicted in general in male media consumption. Lesbian love is portrayed as being less admirable than heterosexual romantic love in Thai media. It's just a passionate love fuelled by passion and sexual desire. Moreover, it is full of obstacles, often ends in tragedy, and cannot succeed in marriage. Sometimes it's also a frighteningly obsessive relationship filled with intense jealousy. A key example is the fact that Thai news media often portrays lesbian love as jealousy crimes, perverse behavior, psychological disorders, inappropriate fashion trends, secret relationships, and tragic stories. These social identities arise from the power relation of heteronormativity, patriarchy, homophobia, and gender dualism embraced in society through moral knowledge and clinical psychology knowledge.

As stated in his "History of Sexuality", Foucault said, "Where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1984). The lesbian subjectivity emerged within that power relationship. An important milestone was in 1996 when Rajabhat Institutes banned "sexually deviant" students. Anjaree Group was formed as an alternative communication space for lesbians to challenge official homophobia and patriarchal discourses. Human rights and sexual rights language provided them with discursive tools to confront negative assumptions.

And yet, the struggle to maintain one's identity is "never in a position of exteriority in relation to power". Paradoxically, lesbians may seek some discursive space for their existence by performing social roles, demonstrating that they are ethical individuals committed to social norms in popular culture. The lesbian commercial magazine, for example, provides a popular cultural space to portray the gender binary of "Tom and Dee" as a good person and a good appearance to be accepted by society. Lesbian gender identity also emerged as a result of the idea of heterosexual romantic love since love is reconstructed as a private life and freedom of choice. The statement, "Love has no gender" is a tool for lesbian couples to recognize, accept, and take pride in their identity. An obvious example is various interviews with lesbian couples who overcome obstacles to happiness. This was evident in the context of 2007, where discussion of gender rights was on the public agenda. Commercial media has learned to take business opportunities. Lesbian along with LGBTQAN+ is commoditized in the entertainment media industry.

However, it seems as if Thai media, especially populist media and commercial entertainment media, are starting to embrace gender diversity. It is easy to interpret these changes as a step toward LGBT equality. But we could not assume that societies are open to gender diversity. In reality, the legal system is still far from gender equality and many lesbians remain invisible even within the LGBTQAN+ movement. The power may not use direct violence to punish them but deceive people into believing that society is open to gender diversity. Moreover, discourse struggles are necessary, but activism in socio-political spaces is still important. This poses a future challenge for the Thai lesbian rights movement in a setting where the movement faces not only heteronormativity and homophobia but also capitalism, commoditization, invisibility, and lack of adequate support.

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