

# CULTURE

## Boy's Love: gay series made in Thailand conquer the world

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**The Boy's Love (BL) series is racking up millions of views on the internet. These dramas, which portray an ideal image of the gay community, could also serve Thailand's soft power: their actors are adored by fans all over the world, most of them... straight women.**

Mile and Apo caused a sensation in Paris at the last Fashion Week. As they left the Dior show, these two Thai actors - Phakphum Romsaithong and Nattawin Wattanagitiphat, to use their real names - were awaited by a horde of fans. Their nicknames won't tell you

Perhaps nothing, but the luxury brand has made no mistake in choosing them as its new ambassadors: both have played the lead roles in [KinnPorsche](#), the gay Thai series of 2022. A love story between a Thai mafia heir and his bodyguard, it's a mix of romance, thriller, action film and a bit of BDSM that goes beyond the usual Boy's Love stories. Plots in this genre usually take place in the context of high school, university, sport or work.

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*KinnPorsche* is fast becoming a phenomenon on the Internet, and its actors stars, now starring in a historical film entitled *Man Suang*, released at the end of August in Thailand. They have won over a wide audience in South-East Asia, but not only there. Among their fans is Gabin Fontaine, 28, who writes reviews of Boy's Love on the [Cinématraque](#) website. He discovered the genre a year ago: *"As a queer person, it's good to finally see series with couples who are simply living their love story, to have a positive representation."* In most of these series, homosexuality is not a subject, and [coming out](#) is often quickly brushed aside or even non-existent. The plot focuses on the tumultuous love affairs of the protagonists, who are all gay, young and attractive, living in an ideal world.

## **The market for young women**

Even if the productions are clearly improving, the aficionado acknowledges that many 'BLs' sometimes resemble 'soaps', made on a shoestring budget, with uneven sound and splicing problems. *"Some are a bit kitsch, but we still watch them above all for the characters and their chemistry."* While there are Taiwanese, Chinese and Korean productions, Thailand has clearly made its mark by offering a multitude of series with *"more mature and less platonic"* stories, says Sarah, 35. On her TikTok account [@Badbarzz](#) and her podcast *Dramatology*, she comments with a great deal of humour on these series *"which give her a better understanding of this community"*.

Sarah is perfectly representative of the Boy's Love audience. This is a genre created, appreciated and distributed by women since its origins in Japan in the 70s. The "Year 24" group of female [manga](#) authors took advantage of the liberalisation of the time to explore politics and sexuality through homosexuality in their "[yaoi](#)" stories. Their inspiration: the Franco-Italian film *Mort à Venise (Death in Venice)* by Visconti, featuring a love story between two men. In the 90s, the genre arrived under the cloak in Thailand, which was still very conservative. Ten years later, this subculture gained such popularity on the Internet that publishing houses and then television channels took an interest in it.

### **From *Love Sick* to *2gether***

The series [Love Sick](#), adapted from a manga as many "BL" series still are, marked a turning point in 2014. The Thai channel GMMTV, which produced it on a shoestring budget, tapped into the market for "*young women, the driving force behind the country's popular culture consumer economy*", explains Thomas Baudinette, a lecturer in international studies at Macquarie University in Australia. He is also the author of the book *Boy's Love Media in Thailand* (Bloomsbury Publishing), published in October.

Even today, according to the academic, straight women like Sarah make up 80% of the audience, compared with 20% of men, most of whom identify as queer.

The channel repeated the experience in 2016 with [SOTUS](#), another student love story, marking its first big success. From then on, it became a '*BL machine*', as Thomas Baudinette calls it, with eight to ten series produced every year. The broadcast in 2020 of [2gether](#), featuring a charming duo, will do much to popularise the genre outside Thailand during the covid period. According to GMMTV, fans come mainly from Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Latin America. On the channel's [YouTube](#) account, the series have racked up millions of views. Fans even take it upon themselves to subtitle and promote them to the rest of the world, via extracts posted on social networks or illegal platforms.

### **The Boy's Love circus**

The popularity of 'BL' also owes a great deal to their production system, which is based on creating communities of fans/consumers around the actors. When couples become household names, they become marketing products.

They advertised everything from cosmetics to washing machines. They starred together in a number of TV series to capitalise on their popularity with the public. Their star status is exploited at numerous "fan meetings", where their fans pay up to several hundred euros to obtain "fan benefits", i.e. *goodies* or interactions with the actors, such as clapping their hands.

*"It's quite a show,"* explains Anaïs Cardot, 27, who organised this type of event in Paris last June with her brand new company, Annasia Studio Events. She brought along the star actors Mos and Bank, from the series [Big Dragon](#). Tickets cost between €55 and €250, depending on the performance. Another duo, better known, Net and James from "Bed Friends", is due to appear in November. *"These aren't just photo or signing sessions. The actors often put on a concert, dance, play games..."*, she explains. Off-screen, everything is done to play on the ambiguity of a real romance between them. The famous "fan service".

***"These BLs can help foster greater acceptance of the LGBTQI+ community, and reach out to older generations."***

These series are undoubtedly commercial successes. But does their growing popularity benefit the gay community? [Love in the air](#) and [Cutie Pie](#) end up as pleas for marriage, while [Not me](#) is considered to be the most committed, but there are few really political statements. *"It's a bit of a daydream where everyone is beautiful, young and doesn't have an AIDS problem,"* concedes Midnight Poonkasetwattana, executive director of the Apcom association, which aims to improve the health and rights of homosexuals in Thailand and the region. *"Obviously, this allows us to reach a wider audience and reinforces the image of a tolerant Thailand. It's true that we don't have tough laws against LGBTQI+ people, but we still suffer discrimination. We want laws that protect us and the same rights."* Apcom is particularly supportive of obtaining a civil partnership, [as in Taiwan](#), the first Asian country to legalise it, in 2019.

For JoJo Tichakorn Phukhaotong, one of the directors of GMMTV's new series [Only Friends](#), *"these BLs won't necessarily be game changers, but they can help foster greater acceptance of the LGBTQI+ community, and reach out to older generations who may not be as open or informed about these issues"*. And then, he points out, *"there are people who experience romances comparable to those we relate or identify with."* First Kanaphan Puitrakul, an actor in *Only Friends*, is hopeful that *"BL's soft power can help raise awareness so that people perceive homosexuality as 'normal'."*

In the future, the Girl's Love series, which already exists, should also develop. To achieve global popularity, Thomas Baudinette believes that the stories will have to address societal issues. Like the "Kdramas" such as *Squid Game*, which have enabled Korea to export its traditional rom-coms. The Thai government sees this as an interesting *soft power* tool, and has already consulted the Australian academic on several occasions. Will the "Thai wind" prevail over the "hallyu", the Korean wave? Thomas Baudinette is certain: *"Thailand will be the next South Korea"*.