

Fan Culture and Consumerism: Behind Private Events of the Thailand Boys Love Industry

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Abstract

Thailand's Boys' Love (BL) industry, as part of queer pop culture, has become a worldwide phenomenon, attracting audiences both domestically and internationally. The industry extends beyond media production; one of its major selling points is real-life fan events where audiences can interact with actors in real time. These private events include lucky fan meetings and top-spender activities. International audience is not only a passive audience, but also takes part in these events. This research uses critical ethnography, and aca-fan approaches through participant observation and in-depth interviews with international fans that win private events. The study aims to critique the industry capitalism and consumerism within fan culture. The findings reveal how the industry promotes consumerism by constructing the identity of the "ideal fan," thus pressuring fans to maintain their identity and social positioning through consumption. The industry created a capitalist environment that encourages fans to purchase products and chances to gain intimacy with actors in those private events. As the industry is heavily profit-oriented, fans are often valued according to the amount of money they spend, with the promise of intimacy with actors as the main attraction. Furthermore, the industry also creates potential problems for fans. Some events use gambling-like mechanisms to determine winners, which encourages excessive gambling behaviour among fans. In addition, the intimacy and emotional satisfaction provided during these events bring such happiness, leading fans to seek repeated experiences. As a result, some fans may resort to excessive spending in pursuit of further intimacy with the actors.

Keywords: Thailand boys love, private events, queer pop-culture, fandom, neo-capitalism

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Introduction

Boys Love is a term used to describe media products that focus on romantic and sexual relationships between males. This type of media originated in Japan as “yaoi.” As it spread globally, the term “boys' love” came into use. Eventually, each country developed its own term depending on the product. In Thailand, Boys Love became popular as a TV series. Internationally, these are known as Thailand Boys Love (Thai BL), but in Thailand, they are called “Series Y” (Baudinette, 2019). “Love Sick the Series” marked the beginning of Thai BL in 2014 by blending elements from Japanese Yaoi with Thai culture (Supawantanakul, 2023). Thai BL gained audiences for two main reasons: the cultural and traditional hybridization that showcases Thailand's identity (Prasannam, 2019), and the storylines about two young, handsome men falling in love (Baudinette & Svetanant, 2023). Over the years, Thai BL production has grown from just one series into one of Thailand's largest cultural exports, even contributing to the media industry's biggest profits (ONE Ent Yearly Report). Outside Thailand, the BL series is distributed via paid streaming services, delivering content directly with English subtitles.

Boys Love is a transnational, transcultural, and transboundary phenomenon, including its fandom (Baudinette & Svetanant, 2023). The industry is built from the creators, actors, screenwriters, producers, and more (Promkhuntong, 2025). Media companies commodify queer into BL content to cultivate loyal fanbases and maximize profit, transforming fans into consumers whose emotional investments directly benefit corporate interests (Kwon, 2015). Industry develops strategies to make fans remember, relate, and therefore support it (Baudinette, 2023). In many cases, the corporation relies too heavily on harvesting fans' emotional attachment through cultural consumption (Baudinette & Svetanant, 2023; Prasannam, 2019). It is also often exploited by the industry, with their enthusiasm being monetized at every opportunity (Shimauchi, 2024).

The Thai BL industry includes commercial brands that amplify advertisement campaigns and use romantic narratives to market their products (Santos, 2020), creating intertextual consumption that deepens fans' emotional investment, and those advertisements draw on fans' memory and parasocial connection to stimulate satisfaction and encourage fans to purchase the products (Baudinette & Svetanant, 2023). In turn, actors will provide fan services to them, including gestures, interactions, performances, and intimacy, reinforcing fans' spending habits (Santos, 2020). Nowadays, Boys Love fans intertwine commercial consumption through events that sell fan services and intimacy. Commercial consumption can be exploitative, as the Boys Love industry preys on fans' desires, turning fandom enthusiasm into a profit mechanism (Garg & Yang, 2023). Fans are encouraged to spend more money in exchange for intimate interaction with the actors, ships, and more. Therefore, this research seeks to answer the question of how participation in private fan events, as a form of transnational consumerism, influences the culture of Thai BL fans?

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Boys Love Industry and Neo-Capitalism

Capitalism is not only part of the standard industry, but also in the cultural industry. The cultural industry creates commodities from culture for mass consumption, thus generating economic movement (Strinati, 2004). While traditional capitalism views this as the audience conforming to identity, neo-capitalism views it as a new way to create greater profit while

working with institutions. Neo-capitalism creates a broader market audience, and the media industry is becoming fragmented, niche, and personalized, allowing audiences to seek their own identities. Although it could create a prosumer audience, the hegemony of power that creates that culture is controlled by the industry (Adorno & Horkheimer).

Thai BL meets all the criteria for the neo-capitalist industry. Within Thai BL itself, there are also Series, actors, and ships. And every part of this industry has the same goal: to gain profit. To do that, it will rely on the audience and fans. In the neo-capital industry, the audience is both a customer and an economic metric. And modern societies see consumption as no longer about needs and utility but also about symbolic value and goods (Baudrillard, 2017). Consumption is part of capitalism, and as modernization progresses, it's no longer possible to avoid being a consumer culture (Featherstone, 2007). Commercial consumption by the media industry has increased as the line between needs and wants has blurred; the industry continues to maintain the audience's desire (Baudrillard, 2017). The Thai BL industry uses series, actors, and ships to create value and use it as a brand. It is also marketed as part of a fan's identity, creating pseudo-individualism (Adorno, 2005). The Thai BL industry aims to gain more profit as many audiences consume their product, either in the form of merchandise or the illusion of intimacy with the actors and ship in the form of events. The industry plays with fans' emotions to get them attached to this product (Ahmed, 2014). Using media and advertising, endorsed with celebrities (Featherstone, 2007), just like in Thailand Boys Love.

Critical Ethnography

The critical approach views the dynamic between industry and fans from the audience's perspective. Critical ethnography is used to see beyond the culture. Critical ethnography is not only about describing culture, but also about challenging injustice, amplifying marginalized voices, and transforming power relations in the culture (Madison, 2012). As critical ethnography looks beyond cultures to disturb the status quo and challenge the 'taken for granted' assumption, it will also examine the power and control behind those cultures (Madison, 2012). Critical ethnography will also be used to challenge the dominant ideology, including deconstructing the knowledge (Madison, 2012). One key concept in critical ethnography is that culture is performative, in which identity, culture, and social practice are enacted through language, behavior, and interaction (Madison, 2012). Performance, as used in this research, is how fans reflect their identity (Madison, 2012).

Aca-Fan Methods

Aca-fan ethnography, short for academic fandom, is an ethnographic approach used in fandom studies. It serves as a bridge between academic and fan communities, making research accessible to both (Cristofari & Guitton, 2017), and transmits knowledge from fandom to academic texts. The observed and researched subjects are members of fandom culture. This ethnography also explores media consumption practices, focusing on the target population of media culture (Cristofari & Guitton, 2017). In short, Aca-fan ethnography examines fandom culture and communicates insights to academia. Two types of data are collected: spontaneous synchronous data, gathered during events as they occur (e.g., participant observations); and triggered synchronous data, produced through initiated events (e.g., in-depth interviews).

For this research, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 international fans who won and participated in Private events. Both critical ethnography and aca-fan ethnography were used to dissect the industry's power dynamics in fandom, which is privileged, biased, and not neutral (Cristofari & Guitton, 2017; Madison, 2012).

Thailand Boys Love Events: Capitalism and Consumerism

Thailand Boys Love Events

The Thai BL industry extends beyond the screen, allowing audiences not only to watch actors in a series but also to interact with them in real time, through events and fan activities. Thai BL creates a form of hyperreal romance in which both couple interactions and fan–idol interactions are made accessible. These events are marketed not only as performances to watch but also as experiences that offer exclusive benefits to attendees. The availability and type of benefits often distinguish one event from another. This research categorizes Thai BL events into two types: public and private. The classification is based on the benefits offered, price range, and attendance system for each event.

Public Event

Public events are those that take place in public settings, such as malls, halls, or parks. This type of event is usually used for promotional purposes, either for brands or series. Public events are divided into two types: free and paid. Free one is where fans could see the artist for free, usually in an open space. These usually don't offer any benefit and are just to promote the artist.

On the other hand, paid public events are held in public spaces but require a ticket to enter. This event, such as a screening or fan concert, usually has a benefit. Benefits start from hi-bye, where fans will walk across the artist while waving goodbye without touching. The next tier benefit is Hi-touch: the same scenario, but adds a high-five (touching) with the artist. The usual highest-tier benefit for a paid public event is a group photo, where a group of fans takes a picture with the artist.

Figure 1

Paid Public Event (Last Episode Screening “My Romance Scammer the Series”)



Source: GMMTV

Private Event

The private event takes place in a more secluded setting rather than in open spaces or large halls. Examples include meeting rooms, restaurants, dinner cruises, or even domestic and international trips. The benefits offered at private events usually include those available at public events. In addition, private events offer extra benefits. These may range from private photo sessions to one-on-one interactions with the artist. These conversations typically last between 30 seconds and three minutes. This allows fans to speak directly with the artist without restrictions. It's called Private Talks. Such benefits are highly valued by fans because they are rare and difficult to obtain.

Unlike public events, where fans can attend by purchasing tickets or gathering in open spaces, private events have their own selection mechanisms for choosing winners. Private events are typically divided into two schemes: top spender and lucky fan. Under the top spender scheme, winners are selected based on the total accumulated amount fans spend on designated products. Meanwhile, the lucky fan scheme usually operates through a lottery system, where a certain purchase amount grants one entry into the draw. The top-spender scheme is generally associated with fewer winners and more exclusive events, such as private dinners or trips. Meanwhile, the lucky fan scheme usually accommodates more winners and often offers smaller benefits.

Figure 2

Private Trip With Keng Namping x Dr. Ally Brand



Source: Dr.AllyBrand official X

Neo-Capitalism and Consumerism

Neo-Capitalism does not differ much from traditional capitalism. One of the key differences is how neo-capitalism aligns with institutions to pursue the same aim: profit. In Thailand, the government was supporting the Thai BL and its event. As a sponsor of certain series or events, the THACC (Thailand Creative Culture Agency), a government agency that supports Thailand's soft power movement through culture, was involved. The aim is to promote Thai culture, which will eventually drive the creative economy. Following the cultural industry, which also aims for profit (Adorno, 2005), this is evident specifically in Thai BL private events. As mentioned above about how these private event schemes are going, this also results in fans becoming consumers of certain acts and products. To get the benefit they want, they will buy

what is needed to win. Two acts of consumerism were conducted to win: buying the product and buying a chance.

Buying Product

The first act of consumerism is buying products. Most of the private events are also part of the brand's deal. Artists and agencies collaborate with brands to conduct these events as part of the brands' marketing campaigns. The aim is to increase product sales. Fans, as the main subject of this campaign, need to buy the products to join the events. This supports the idea of consumerism in both schemes. For the top-spender scheme, for example, they must buy many products, so their accumulated amount makes them one of the top 20 spenders. Meanwhile, under the lucky fans scheme, purchasing a certain number of products grants entry to the event lottery, and fans aim to obtain as many entries as possible. Therefore, based on both schemes, fans tend to buy more products to increase their chances of winning. This act of consumerism targets the feeling of not having enough (Ahmed, 2014), creating a sense of vulnerability that encourages fans to keep buying so that winning seems more guaranteed. As product sales increase, profits also increase. However, this can lead to overbuying, resulting in unused products.

Figure 3

Updated Amount of Top Spender Events



Source: Dr.AllyBrand official X

Buying Chance

The second act of consumerism is buying chance. Instead of buying the actual product to increase their chances of winning, Fans buy other people's proof of purchase and claim it as their own, or buy the product for other people and take the receipts as their own. For example, buying a receipt or a coupon to be put in the lottery box. To increase their chances of winning, they use not only their own receipt or coupon but also others'. They buy other people's chances and take them for themselves. This buying chance practice is another side of capitalism. It is not only because they were emotionally afraid of losing, but also because of their willingness to win; capitalism plays with their emotions to create spending (Ahmed, 2014). And the brands or event organizers did not stop this practice, as in the brand's eyes, this still brings benefit for them, which creates access to loopholes from the industry (Baudrillard, 2017). This creates two

sides to the effect: it may reduce unused products from excessive buying, but it also creates a new problem: fans will eventually take steps to increase their chances of winning, encouraged by brands that do not stop this act of consumerism.

Figure 4

Lottery Box and Coupon to Pick Up Lucky Fans Winner



Source: Fansaccount on X (@KxxxxnKxxx1)

Neo-Capitalism Creating an “Ideal Fan” of Thailand Boys Love

The key concept shared by both neo-capitalism and the cultural industry is their creation of pseudo-individualism (Adorno, 2005). The cultural industry creates identity and conformity, while traditional capitalism views this as the audience conforming to identity, and neo-capitalism views it as a new way to increase profit by working with institutions (Adorno & Horkheimer). Neo-capitalism creates a wider market audience, and the media industry, as part of the cultural industry, is becoming fragmented, niche, and personalized, allowing audiences to seek their own culture and identity (Adorno & Horkheimer). Capitalism creates this so that the audience can develop their own identity and express themselves (Kidd, 2002). This is included in the fans as the cultural customer. By purchasing and consuming the culture, they embedded the identity in themselves. Fans construct and express their identities through consumption (Featherstone, 2007). Unfortunately, this individualistic identity is shaped by capitalism (Adorno & Horkheimer). Pseudo-individualism is shaped as part of a fan's identity, which is actually how it is dictated as an ‘ideal fan’. The industry created ‘ideal fan’ identity, which standardized (Adorno & Horkheimer) how support should be, such as going to events, doing hashtag trends, and even purchasing any possible connection, such as brands and merchandise. This relates to how fans take it upon themselves and create their own identity and positioning within the fandom (Featherstone, 2007). Not only that, but also how they perceive these private events as part of the exclusive part of the fandom. Based on the in-depth interview with the winners, the identity and positioning being created is based on ‘ideal fan’ being spread across the fandom, and how they were part of the secret club.

Identity and Positioning

In the cultural industry, pseudo-individuality is created as standardization (Adorno, 2005), including in the Thai BL fandom. It includes how consumerism creates fans' identity (Featherstone, 2007). Unlike how fans were being described before, the neo-capitalist cultural industry creates the standard that unconsciously brings them profit. The emergence of the ideal fan has started. To be an 'ideal fan', fans need to support and show love by going to events, buying brand merchandise, and even trending hashtags on the internet. Emotional consumption is needed (Ahmed, 2014) to have that fan identity.

Some of the information gained from the winner, such as: "I need to show my support to him by going to events" (E, Indonesia, Mar 2026). "I feel bad if my artist event is empty, he deserves all the love" (L, Germany, Jan, 2026). "I buy the brands so they know that my artists have a good reputation" (Y, USA, Feb 2026). "If other fandoms see the support for my favorite is small, I will be embarrassed" (A, Indonesia, Feb 2026).

The support and love that fans showed prove that they, as fans, evolve not only within the fandom but also by creating their own identity and branding (Featherstone, 2007). The more they can attend, the more stable their fan identity becomes, and when fans can attend more private events, their positioning in the fandom increases and becomes more dominant. To put it simply, the support and love they constantly receive mean that, once they are winning, they become a small percentage of fans who are able to interact intimately; their positioning is increasing and becoming more dominant within the fandom (Baudinette, 2023). To maintain their positioning, they consume more and more (Baudrillard, 2017). As explained by the winners: "I think because so many of my friends are going. But now I want to go. Maybe it's peer pressure" (P, Malaysia, Mar 2026). "My own fun life. That is really good already. Like Proxie know me. They've talked to me. They've come to me themselves at the concert. They even walked back to me to talk to me" (L, Singapore, Feb 2026,). "Fans feel like they have to be the most supportive because of potentially the circle they're interacting with" (M, Australia, Jan 2026). "My favs only have private events, I have no other choice as his fans" (A, Indonesia, Feb 2026). For the last one, the industry creates an environment where fans can only meet if they spend money by having private events.

Secret Club Societies

"The Top Spender, I just, it felt like a secret club and I wanted to see what it actually was like and like being able to say I had dinner with my idol which is, is really, is really fun." (H, UK, Feb 2026)

Since only a small percentage of fans can be winners for private events, within the fandom, it has been called a secret club, and the winner that be able to be close and intimate with the artist are part of these societies. This hierarchy create differentiation between fans, and even creates social distinction (Baudrillard, 2017) within fandom, thus the emergence of the secret club. The industry created this situation to create favoritism and elite identity. The winner of the private events, especially the top spender, was known to be the top customer, they were treated like an elite by the industry and even treated differently by the artist. They know them personally, call the fans names, somehow, if able to enter these elites, they increase their rank and positioning within fandom, not only being an ideal fan but more than that.

Potential Problem of Neo-Capitalism and Consumerism

Neo-capitalist industry, including the media industry, focuses on profit (Adorno, 2005); therefore, top spenders and lucky fans were emerging. Unfortunately, this is what we want to criticize about the industry: not only was it predatory towards fans, pressuring them to consume, but it could also pose potential problems. The fans consume it not merely as customers but also as a form of identity construction (Feathersome, 2007). It could lead to competition and overconsumption in pursuit of it (Baudrillard, 2017). Moreover, since many of the event winners were decided in some scheme like gambling, this could actually lead to gambling and addiction problems for fans.

Overconsumption of Useless Products

One potential problem with consumerism is overconsumption of products. As was mentioned above, the fans were buying products, a lot of them. And most of them won't use it at all. This meant that, despite overconsumption, fans understand the actions they take, actions because they want to, because of the private event, the practice of overconsumption still occurs in this industry. This particular overconsumption is not only about wanting to be part of the fandom and create identity (Feathersome, 2007), like overbuying merchandise or albums, but also about brands that host private events, where the product could actually be used if they buy in a regular amount. But since they want to win the events, fans will buy more than necessary, which ends up being a waste. Just as the winner states: "I ended up as a useless product. I go home with hundreds of lipsticks, what do I do with that?" (L, Singapore, Feb 2026). "As an environmentalist, I kinda feel bad because I buy a lot of products that end up as waste" (M, Australia, Jan 2026). "I don't waste it, I donate it to the temple or people in need, or I just give it away to friends, I don't want to bring back products" (A, Indonesia, Feb 2026).

Gambling and Addiction

It's kind of risky to claim that gambling and addiction could be problems emerging because of private events. But the winner of the events is the one who discloses that they feel this is part of schematic gambling. "It's a hard and calculated gambling. I need to calculate everything." (A, Indonesia, Feb 2026). "Kind of just going off on your own to try to figure out, like how much it is you need to spend." (E, Indonesia, Mar 2026). "So I thought I had a good chance for it. So I even had bought the, like, tickets a month and a half before the event and before I even knew if I was selected or not. But that was a kind of gamble" (Y, USA, Feb 2026). "It's purely luck. I mean like, there might be chances if you buy more and then you get it, but it would be like an unknown thing" (P, Malaysia, Mar 2026).

Gambling could not be the only potential problem that shadow fans face. When fans start gambling and then win, they become part of the secret club societies, gaining first-hand intimacy with the actors, which could lead to addiction. The fans want it more and will try to win again for the next opportunity. "And I was like oh my God, that will be my dream. I can't get enough" (Y, USA, Feb 2026).

So I would love to go to the event as many events as I could when I'm there. So, when I get a chance to see them, I want to see them. Like I, I, I know it's, it's very expensive for everybody, But I want to use the most out of it. I want to get that opportunity to see them. (L, USA, Feb 2026)

Conclusion

Thailand Boys Love, a newly emerging product of queer pop culture, is part of the media and cultural industries. The media and cultural industry is treated like any other industry in the neo-capitalist world to generate profit, including securing support from the country as part of soft power and national development. Eventually, profit-making falls into the fans' responsibility. The Thai BL industry gets a chance to not only reach fans but also go beyond, through deals, endorsements, merchandise, and real-life events that encourage interaction. They sell it as events, and the more fans pay, the better the benefits and interaction they get. That's how private events start. These types of events decided the winner with a gambling-like scheme, which could create potential problems as fans could become gamblers and addicted. The excuse is that with the money fans spend, they get back in the form of intimacy. These profit-marketed events use fans' emotions and vulnerability, create pseudo-individuality, and make fans crave more. The industry, instead of providing accessibility for its audience, created ways to prey on fans more. This is not included in how the industry also gaslights fans into believing they are responsible for their favorite actors' jobs by promoting the actors, as mentioned by the head of GMMTV in an interview with Thailand Public Show Broadcast (ThaiPBS, 2025). The industry was creating an unhealthy relationship between fans and idols. In many previous studies, fans were being told to be more responsible for their spending, to be responsible for being fans. Many of the theories are also being produced as criticisms of fans' intimate relationship with idols, stating their psychology, but in this research, it was pointed out that fans are merely responding to how the industry wants them to be. The industry created the opportunity and availability. Therefore, the possibility of deviance among fans should be a shared responsibility between fans and the industry. The deviant will not change if the industry doesn't change.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from appropriate and systematic conduct of the research.

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Appendix

List of Informants

No	Code	Country	Winner of	Interview Time
1	M	Australia	Mos - Bank	January 2026
2	L	Germany	Sailub-Pon	January 2026
3	Y	USA	Joong-Dunk	February 2026
4	L	Singapore	Proxie	February 2026
5	L	USA	Billy-Babe	February 2026
6	H	UK	Zee-Nunew	February 2026
7	A	France	Tutot - Yim	February 2026
8	A	Indonesia	Great Sapol	February 2026
9	E	Indonesia	Singto - Krist	March 2026
10	P	Malaysia	Pond - Phuwin	March 2026