FROM MEDIA EXPOSURE TO USES AND GRATIFICATION: UNDERSTANDING CHINESE FEMALE AUDIENCES' PERCEPTION OF THE THAI Y SERIES*

Tsz Ying Shum[1] and Lucksana Klaikao[2]

[1-2]College of Communication Arts, Rangsit University, Thailand

Corresponding Author's Email: tszyingshum96@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study aimed to study the media exposure, psychological gratification, and perception of Chinese female audiences when they engaged with Thai Y series content. It also explored the way it influenced their perception of gender, sexuality, and the LGBTQ+ community presented in the Thai Y series. This study adopted media exposure, uses and gratifications theory, and audience perception as the primary analytical framework. It also applied the concept of female gaze and queer as supporting perspectives.

This study adopted a qualitative research method of in-depth interview with ten key Chinese informants. They were female audiences who had watched at least one Thai Y series and participated in online interaction and discussion. The research used semi-structured in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis was used.

The findings showed the following points, 1) The exposure of Chinese female audiences to the Thai Y series did not constitute incidental or passive

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encounters, but selective exposure characterized by agency, continuity, and cross-platform uses, 2) The sustained engagement of Chinese females with the Thai Y series was not merely based on entertainment but was related to diverse gratification, 3) The influence of the Thai Y series on Chinese female audiences' perception of gender, sexual orientation, and the LGBTQ+ community differed, but the key informants did not deny the meaning of these issues encoded in the series and tended to accept all or part of them.

Keywords: The Thai Y Series, Chinese Female Audiences, Media Exposure, Uses and Gratification, Audiences' Perception

Introduction

In 2020, the popularity of 2gether the Series elevated the Thai Y series to the global level. Observing from GMMTV's official YouTube playlist, 2gether the Series has over 1.04 billion views. Through Over-the-top (OTT) platforms, such as YouTube and Netflix, the Thai Y series later reached audiences from Asian countries and worldwide. It usually gently presents love and relationships, attracting a huge number of female audiences. Among many overseas audiences, Chinese audiences are always one of the largest and most influential groups of audiences.

Table 1: The Popularity of Thai Y series during 2020-2025 on Weibo Supertopic (Source: Sorted by the researcher from Weibo)

Thai Y Series	The Popularity of Super Topic (Views)	Year
The Next Prince	10,580 M	2025
My StandIn	980M	2024
Pit Babe The Series	230M	2023
Cutie Pie	1060M	2022
KinnPorsche The Series	4100M	2022

Not Me	590M	2021/2022
A Tale of Thousand Stars	130M	2021
I Told Sunset About You	1060M	2020
2gether: The Series	1390M	2020

Weibo is one of the mainstream social media platforms in China. In order to show the popularity of the Thai Y series in China, the researcher sorted the data of the representative Thai Y series from 2020 to 2025 (which has a popularity of over 1 billion) on Weibo Supertopic, which has a similar function as a hashtag in X. Table 1 shows that the interest of Chinese audiences in the Thai Y series was already high in 2020, with over one billion views in *2gether: The Series* and *I Told Sunset About You*. By 2025, The Next Prince had even reached over 10.5 billion views, which shows the widespread popularity of the Thai Y series in China.

Female audiences are the core of Chinese audiences. They tended to engage with the content of the Thai Y series through Chinese social media and streaming platforms, forming a fan culture system characterized by “shipping”, “bullet screen interaction”, “subtitle translation”, and “fan-created work” (Jirattikorn, 2025). Studies revealed that the main audiences of the Thai Y series are female. Research by Bunyavejchewin et al. (2024) and Gu (2020) also proved that the proportion of Thai and overseas female audiences outnumber than male. On the other hand, Jirattikorn (2025) pointed out that female audiences are the main force to spread the Thai Y series in China. Taweekittiviroj and Banterng (2025) argue that Chinese female audiences show more characteristics of “active audiences” due to the censorship and restrictions of the same-sex genre in China. They also argue that Chinese female audiences tend to project their emotions onto the male characters within the Thai Y series, which is able to reflect their expectation on gender and patterns of relationships. Therefore, it is significant to choose Chinese female audiences as the subject of this study.

The significance of this study lies in it regards the exposure to the Thai Y series as the media engagement process, which is characterized by constant accumulation and cross-platform expansion. This perspective can help provide additional understanding of media exposure in a digital media environment. It also explains how Chinese female audiences build their emotional connection and constant attention to the Thai Y series through viewing patterns.

Moreover, this study further expands the application of uses and gratifications theory in the context of the Thai Y series. The concept of "gratification" represents a multi-layered satisfaction in this study. It can help to understand how audiences actively use and constantly engage in the media content according to different situations and needs.

At the same time, this study regarded the perception changes of audiences as a process of negotiation rather than direct attitude change. It also helps to understand that the influence of the Thai Y series is to provide a media experience as a reference for audiences to rethink and adjust their understanding, as well as attitude.

Objectives

1. To understand how Chinese female audiences engage with the Thai Y series through different forms of media exposure and online participation

2. To understand the gratifications that Chinese female audiences seek and experience from watching the Thai Y series

3. To study how exposure to the Thai Y series influence Chinese female audiences' perceptions of gender roles, sexuality, and the LGBTQ+ community

Literature Review

1. Theory of Media Exposure

Based on the perspectives of McQuail (2010), media exposure serves as part of media use and also be the basic concept of research in communication effects. Referring to McQuail's message processing model, Slater (2004) noted that media exposure is a linear process in which audiences should have initial access to the media content before the subsequent concern, understanding, and memory. Therefore, media exposure can be regarded as the starting point of the whole process of media effect. In the digital era, media exposure has become more complicated. Due to the fragmentation of the digital media environment, audiences are able to access the same message on different digital platforms (de Vreese & Neijens, 2016).

Media exposure not only reflects the extent to which audiences encounter media content but also be highly related to their experience of media use. The study of Lee and Wnag (2023) to the users of Mastodon indicates that constantly using of users to this platform is associated with the gratifications derived from it. When audiences sustainably and actively use and engage with the specific media content, they are more likely to gain different kinds of gratification from it. Therefore, media exposure can be regarded as the essential prerequisite of gratification.

Other studies also indicate that there is a correlation between media exposure and gratification. Bhatiasevi (2024) found that, on top of the positive impact of audiences' social relationships, media experience can also influence their psychological well-being. This suggests that media exposure potentially influences social connection and psychological gratification. On the other hand, Jin et al. (2023) pointed out that the gratifications in entertainment, information acquisition, and social connection derived by audiences can influence their emotional attachment, thereby increasing their willingness to constantly use and

engage with a specific kind of media. This suggests that media exposure and gratification acquisition are mutually influential.

This study analyzed the media exposure of the Chinese female audiences to the Thai Y series from four dimensions, including frequency, attention, cross-platform exposure, and repeated exposure. There is a study that pointed out the possibility that an individual's perception change is associated with the number of his/her access to the media content (Han et al., 2022). Attention is also a significant indicator of media exposure. The reinforcing spirals model proposed by Slater (2007) points out that the attention of audiences toward the specific kind of media content can further reinforce their existing attitude and beliefs, and form a cyclical relationship between continuous exposure and media effects. On the other hand, cross-platform exposure and repeated exposure can enhance the chance for audiences to engage with media content and strengthen their understanding, memory, and emotion toward it (de Vreese & Neijens, 2016). Baumgartner (2025) also indicates that repeated exposure to same or similar media content may influence the formation and maintenance of knowledge and attitude of an individual. This suggest that repeated exposure plays a crucial role in audiences to build comprehension, fosters emotional investment and facilitates subsequent formation of perception.

2. Theory of Uses and Gratification

The theory emphasizes that media use is an active behaviour in which audiences actively engage in the media content they choose based on their needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974, as cited in Sichach, 2023). Katz et al. (1973, as cited in Kasirye, 2022) proposed five categories of needs, including cognitive, affective, personal integration, social integration, and tension-free. In this study, these categories are used to study how Chinese female audiences derive various gratifications through viewing and engaging with the Thai Y series.

Recent studies further point out that gratification derived by audiences from media content is not limited to entertainment, but includes multiple aspects of satisfaction, like cognitive, social, and self-reflective aspects. Shimauchi (2023) found that Japanese audiences gain entertainment and affective experience from the Thai Y series while actively participating in fan communities.They discussed gender bias, LGBTQ+ issues, and through this process, deepened their understanding of gender diversity and other social issues. Similarly, Rastati and Syed's (2025) study found that the Thai Y series exposes Muslim female audiences to romantic imagination that breaks traditional gender norms and facilitates them to negotiate their religious beliefs, personal pleasure, and attitude to same-sex relationships during the process of viewing. These studies indicated that gratifications derived from media use are not just reflected in entertainment but may also involve knowledge acquisition, social interaction, and self-reflection.

The gratifications audiences derive from media content may further influence their understanding and interpretation. When viewing the Thai Y series, the affective gratification, resonance with characters, and imagination of relation may make audiences more likely to immerse themselves in the situation set in the series and reinterpret the portrayal of gender, sexual orientation, and the LGBTQ+ community. The study of Żerebecki et al (2025) points out that audiences' wishful identification with LGBTQ+ characters, along with the deep similarities they perceive in characters' personalities, attitudes, and experiences, may be related to their attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community. Besides, Dajches and Barbati (2024) point out that while LGBQ+ media content fails to significantly buffer the impact of minority stress on mental health, it presents a positive correlation with identity and psychological resilience among sexual minority youth. This result helps to demonstrate that the media representations of the LGBQ+ community may influence audiences' understanding of gender and issues related to sexual orientation. Therefore, media gratification is not only

related to the motivation of exposure but may also influence audiences' perception and interpretation of gender, sexual orientation, and the LGBTQ+ community through emotional resonance and identification with characters, social interaction and self-reflection. In general, gratification can be regarded as a bridging experience that connects media use with audience perception.

3. Theory of Audience Perception

Perception is a significant variable in the communication process, which influence the meaning of messages received by audiences (Amodu, 2007). Interpretation by audiences can vary due to different factors, such as experience, knowledge, and social identity. In other words, audiences can construct different meanings from the same media content (Livingstone, 2008). In this study, audience perception is not simply regarded as their attitude, but rather as the process of audiences understanding, negotiating, and reinterpreting media messages after exposure to media content and deriving gratification from it. The encoding-decoding model proposed by Hall (1980) is the foundation for explaining audiences' perception. This model argues that media content contains specific encoded meaning, but audiences may not necessarily interpret the meaning according to the preferred meaning. Instead, they may adopt a dominant-hegemonic position, a negotiated position, or an oppositional position.

Recent studies on the audience of the Thai Y series also show that audience perception of media content exhibits agency and negotiation. Audiences with different identities and sexual orientations may generate different understandings of homosexual male figures in series based on their experience. The study of Japanese audiences by Pongsapitaksanti (2025) found that most of them believed the Thai Y series contributes to a better understanding of sexual diversity. This result helps to illustrate that, in a transnational viewing context, audiences may further develop their perception of gender, sexuality, and the LGBTQ+ community when they are exposed to the Thai Y series. In the study by

Michaels et al. (2024), most gay male audiences felt that Boys' Love narratives failed to reflect their real experience accurately, while most heterosexual female audiences tended to perceive them as a more accurate representation. This suggests that the representations of gender and sexual orientation in the Thai Boys' Love series may not be interpreted in the same way by all audiences. Instead, they are accepted, negotiated, or challenged based on individuals' identities.

In this study, audience perception is regarded as the meaning-construction process that follows media exposure and gratification. Audience first accesses media content and derives various gratifications from it. These experiences may further influence their interpretation of media representations and perceptions regarding gender and sexuality.

4. Concept of Female Gaze and Queer

The concept of the Male Gaze proposed by Mulvey (2006) emphasizes the male as the viewing subject and places the female as the object to be watched. In contrast, there is the concept of the Female Gaze, in which characters are not objectified and therefore, the narrative can be more equal. Content under the female gaze stresses mutual understanding and usually portrays the inner world and emotional experience among characters profoundly (Fan, 2023). In this study, the concept of female gaze serves as a supplementary perspective to help understand the affective gratification derived by audiences from the Thai Y series. The plot and characterization from series may respond to the audience's needs for emotional resonance and psychological comfort. Therefore, it can help to understand the formation of their affective gratification.

Serving as a critical perspective, queer theory aims to challenge the existing system of gender and sexuality in society. Yep (2003) noted that heteronormativity stands dominant by marginalizing non-heterosexual groups and normalizes itself as the common dating mode, and that is why any messages and contents different from the mainstream are considered outliers. The content

of boys' love is considered highly sensitive in China due to the mainstream of heteronormativity (Jirattikorn, 2025). Queer theory can provide the researcher with a perspective to understand how Chinese female audiences notice and perceive the portrayal of same-sex intimate relationships in the Thai context that does not fit with the Chinese mainstream. It can be used as a complementary perspective to understand how audiences perceive the same-sex intimacy presented in the Thai Y series and how these representations deviate from the audience's understanding of gender and intimacy in the Chinese mainstream. This theory complements the study of audience perception, helping to further analyse how audiences understand the representation of gender, sexuality, and the LGBTQ+ community outside of heterosexual norms.

5. Conceptual Framework

The researcher studied the literature and related studies to form the conceptual framework.

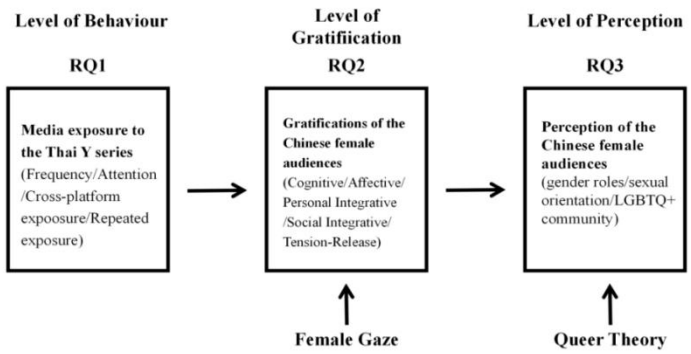


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of this study

(Source: Constructed by the researcher)

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how Chinese female audiences were exposed to the Thai Y series, the gratifications

they derived from it, and how it influenced their perception of gender, sexual orientation, and the LGBTQ+ community.

1. Informants and Informants Selection

The Chinese female audience is chosen to be the informants of this study, since they are one of the significant and core audience groups of the Thai Y series. The researcher adopted purposive selection to choose the key informants. Ten Chinese female audiences who watched at least one Thai Y series during the period 2020-2025, and participated in related interactions and discussions were invited. Table 2 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the key informants.

Table 2: Key Informants Characteristics (Source: Sorted by the researcher)

Key Informants	Age	Initial Exposure Time	Prior Knowledge of LGBTQ+
KI 1	24	2023	No
KI 2	24	2024	No
KI 3	24	2016	Yes
KI 4	23	2016-2017	Yes
KI 5	25	2023-2024	Yes
KI 6	38	2021-2022	Yes
KI 7	33	2023	Yes
KI 8	27	2021-2022	Yes
KI 9	24	2024	No
KI 10	29	2018	Yes

2. Research Instrument

The research instrument used for this study is a set of semi-structured interview scripts. The instrument used for data collection was also submitted to the consultant for review and approval.

3. Data Collection

The researcher had interviews with five of the key informants in person, while the other five were conducted by video conference. Audio recordings were conducted with the permission of key informants. All key informants were informed about the background, confidentiality, and consent procedure before the interview started for ethical consideration. Each interview lasted about 40-60 minutes. Data collection took place from January 2026 to February 2026.

4. Data Analysis

The researcher adopted the thematic analysis to analyze the data from the interviews. The analysis process included 1) Identifying several main themes based on the research focus, 2) Reading through the transcripts and finding useful information, 3) Generating initial codes and turning them into more precise codes, then grouping them into sub-themes, and 4) Putting the sub-themes under the main themes and removing the main themes that are not supported by the data.

Results

1. Media Exposure to the Thai Y Series

The result of the study shows that key informants' exposure to the Thai Y series is a constant and cumulative process of media engagement. It is collectively constituted by initial exposure, sustained engagement, stage-based attention investment, repeated viewing, and cross-platform use.

Some key informants were exposed to the initial message of the Thai Y series through Chinese social media, while some of them were exposed through interpersonal recommendation, or even or through both ways. KI 1 stated, "I

scrolled past and discovered the related message of the Thai Y series in RedNote and Douyin. Plus, some of my friends watched it, and they shared updates on their Moment. That is how I run into it."

Regarding viewing habits and patterns, most of the key informants showed a high frequency of viewing the Thai Y series and integrating it into their daily media routine. Their viewing was beyond the series itself and extended to repeated engagement, which includes re-watching behaviour, seeking supplementary content, and interaction on social media. Some key informants reported that repeated viewing allowed them to notice foreshadowing, character interaction, language usage, and even social issues addressed in the Thai Y series. As stated by KI 5, "When I re-watched some scenes, I noticed the early foreshadowing and the subsequent plot is connected. I would also notice the reaction and facial expression of supporting characters.", and KI 9, "Every time I rewatch it, I have new thoughts and insight...When I rewatched Not Me, I started to notice the characters' yearning for the legalization of same-sex marriage and their resistance against social class."

On top of that, most of the key informants showed a tendency to access the content related to the Thai Y series through different platforms. All key informants mentioned that they had watched the Thai Y series through unofficial channels such as Bilibili (one of the famous online Chinese streaming platforms) and resources released in the cloud drive by subtitle groups. Some key informants mentioned that they had used Over-the-top platforms, such as IQIYI and WeTV, to access the official resources of the Thai Y series. In addition to viewing series, all key informants also reported that they had used social media platforms to search for updated information, access fan edits, and engage with the fan community. Like KI 7 mentioned, "I had used WeTV to watch some Thai Y series, and I also looked for uploaded resources by subtitle groups, who used to share the links of resources on Weibo...I mainly used Douyin and Weibo to

access fan creations, whereas X and Instagram to watch short clips and share my feelings about the series."

Finally, some key informants' attention investment in the Thai Y series varies based on their state and the phase of viewing. They tended to pay more attention when watching a new series for the first time, but were more likely to integrate the familiar series into their daily routines. As KI 8 stated, "Sometimes I engaged in other activities when I rewatched a series. However, if it is a new episode or the series that I love, I would focus on it."

2. Gratifications for the Chinese Female Audiences

In terms of gratifications derived by key informants in this study, they obtained multiple levels of gratification that go beyond entertainment from the Thai Y series. Some key informants regard the Thai Y series as a resource for learning about Thai culture and daily life. They mentioned that it introduced them to Thai culture. Like KI 4 mentioned, "Thai food that I love, such as Tom Yum Goong and mango sticky rice, is often shown in the Thai Y series, and I think it is a good way to show the rich food culture in Thailand". And KI 8 stated, "In the campus series, one can get to learn about campus culture, like the “Moon and Star” competitions (campus pageants). They also feature indigenous deities and Buddhist elements in the horror series, like Khemjira and Goddess Bless You from Death". Besides learning about culture, the Thai Y series also offered some key informants a glimpse into Thai society and aroused their awareness of issues related to gender, sexuality, and the LGBTQ+ community. KI 7 stated, "I can see the efforts some Thai Y series have made regarding equality and LGBTQ+ issues. I also come to realize that my initial perceptions of the diverse gender groups are different from the representation in series".

Some key informants also mentioned that they would watch the lighthearted scenes as a way of emotional regulation. For example, KI 2 stated, "If I am really tired from work, I will watch some Thai Y series to cheer myself up,

since some of them are quite humorous and can lift my spirits." But at the same time, some key informants avoided watching the Thai Y series when they were in a negative state. As KI 8 states, "If I am under great pressure, even watching the Thai Y series does not cheer me up...it may make me feel more anxious and overwhelmed." Besides, some key informants mentioned that they may project their emotions and expectations of the idealized intimacy onto the characters and plots of the Thai Y series and derive pleasure from them. KI 9 stated that most Thai Y series usually offer audiences "the depiction of pure and exclusive love between two characters". KI 4 mentioned, "The Thai Y series can fulfill my fantasy of being in a relationship and make me feel happy".

Finally, some key informants regarded the Thai Y series as a medium to build and maintain relationships. They met friends who share the same interest and maintain the relationship by engaging with the fan interactions. As KI 3 stated, "The Thai Y series is a great icebreaker for me. If the others share the same interest, we can start a conversation and dive even deeper...I think it acts like a bridge for building connections".

3. Chinese Female Audience's Perception

The result finds that before the engagement of the Thai Y series, most of the key informants held a respectful, understanding, and inclusive attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community. They also had an open and non-stereotypical understanding of diversity for gender and sexual orientation. As KI 2 stated, "I have many male friends who are actually part of the LGBTQ+ community... It is all about respect and understanding that everyone has their own life and choice...and I respect all genders". After the engagement, they mainly exhibit two patterns. The first one is reinforcement and affirmation of their pre-exist openness. Like KI 9 stated, "I do not think there is a significant change, but I believe representation in the Thai Y series is similar to my ideal world, which has no restrictions of gender or sexual orientation". The other is no significant change. As KI 6 stated, "Nothing has changed. I still believe everyone is equal. The Thai Y

series does not conflict with my thoughts or strengthen them, so there is no real influence for me".

The result also shows that most of the key informants exhibited the trait of negotiated reading. They can understand and partly accept the positive representation in the Thai Y series, but retain their own judgment based on reality. Like KI 1 mentioned, "Many Thai Y series provide audiences a depiction that homosexuality is completely embraced in Thai society, but in reality, discrimination still exists". However, a minority of key informants tended to directly accept the positive meaning of equal and diverse form of relationship conveyed in series. Like KI 10 mentioned, "I think such plots make me feel that both sides are equals. I also long for this kind of love, where someone can redeem me and stay by my side".

Discussion

1. Discussion of Exposure to the Thai Y series

The result of this study shows that exposure to the Thai Y series is a cross-platform media experience driven by platform algorithms, social network diffusion, and personal interests. This finding aligns with existing studies on digital media exposure that audiences may access the same or similar media content through different channels (de Vreese & Neijens, 2016). The diffusion of the Thai Y series does not rely solely on full viewing but also on user-generated edits, social recommendations, fan community engagement, and algorithmic recommendations. These fragmented but continuous contacts may lower the barrier for audiences to have initial exposure. Before Chinese female audiences actually view the Thai Y series, they have been initially exposed to the atmosphere and relevant values through fragmented content.

Slater (2007) proposed that attention to specific media content may enhance an individual's reception and understanding of the attitudes, beliefs and

values embedded in the content. The result shows that the Thai Y series has gradually integrated into the daily media environment of Chinese female audiences. From this perspective, this sustained exposure not only increases the number of viewings but rather allow Chinese female audiences to repeatedly encounter the relevant messages, which may facilitate their subsequent comprehension of the issues related to gender, sexuality and the LGBTQ+ community. The study of Lee and Wang (2023) also shows that the sustained media use of audiences is highly associated with the gratifications they seek and derive. In this sense, the continuous exposure of Chinese female audiences to the Thai Y series provide the foundation for subsequent emotion investment, culture learning and social interaction.

When audiences repeatedly encounter similar or the same media content, they may gradually accumulate relevant information, which may gradually influence their understanding of the specific issue (Baumgartner, 2025). On this basis, this study further finds that the function of repeated exposure in the viewing experience of Chinese female audiences not only reflects in the cognitive level, but may also shift the viewing focus from plot immersion to emotional regulation. At the same time, repeated viewing may enable Chinese female audiences to notice the detail that they may have overlooked at the first viewing. This suggests that repeated exposure does not necessarily produce a singular effect. Therefore, under the context of this study, it should not be simplified as the increase in viewing frequency of the media content or a more profound reception of media messages. It can be regarded as a media practice that serves as emotional regulation, leisure and the deepening of meaning.

Integrated messages from different sources can generate a compounding effect when audiences have access to the same content on various platforms (Han et al., 2022). The result of this study aligns with this point of view. The comprehension of Chinese female audiences of the Thai Y series does not arise solely from the series itself, but also from multiple sources such as fan-made

edits, social media commentary, fan discussions, and platform recommendations. These contents recurrently appear across various platforms and complement one another, forming additive media exposure. It allows audiences to stay in sustained contact with relevant messages apart from viewing. Therefore, cross-platform exposure under the context of this study is more appropriately conceptualized as a media experience form by the joint action of multiple sources of information, but not a simple shifting of platforms.

2. Discussion of Gratifications for the Chinese Female Audiences

Media content is the carrier of information and knowledge (Kasirye, 2022). The result shows that the Thai Y series is considered not merely as text for entertainment, but also as a crucial media resource for Chinese female audiences to derive cross-cultural cognitive gratification. This finding echoes with Pongsapitaksanti's (2025) study finds that the Thai Y series may not merely influence audiences' understanding of sexual diversity but also further extend to their perception of Thai culture, Thai image, and relevant cultural engagement. The Thai Y series provides some Chinese female audiences a cross-cultural gateway into Thai society and culture through the narratives, setting, depiction of Thai daily life and representation of Thai social issues from the Thai Y series. This allows them to encounter a concrete representation of Thailand, which further enables them to compare, revise, and reinterpret their previous impressions of Thailand. Therefore, this form of gratification goes beyond the acquisition of new information. It can be regarded as a process of reinterpretation through the experience of transnational media viewing. However, as this reinterpretation is primarily based on media content and audiences' viewing experience, it does not necessarily equal a complete understanding of Thailand. This finding also complements the understanding of cognitive gratification in UGT that audiences not merely acquire knowledge but also include their revision and reinterpretation of foreign culture and image.

Audiences can gain pleasure and release themselves when they use media content (Kasirye, 2022). The result shows that the Thai Y series can serve as a resource for psychological relaxation, relief of daily stress and emotional regulation for some Chinese female audiences. This form of affective gratification stems largely from the emotional investment of audiences in the gradual development of characters' relationships. The derived pleasure from series for female audiences is often related to the affective exchange, mutual understanding and depiction of characters' inner world (Fan, 2023). The romantic ambiguity, uncertainty, anticipation and intimate interactions presented in the Thai Y series provide some Chinese female audiences a space for romance fantasy. This form of emotional engagement and fantasy involves the audience's imagination, anticipation and emotional projection regarding character dynamics. Some Chinese female audiences may also derive a profound sense of pleasure during the process. This suggests that the affective gratification provided by the Thai Y series is not only the result of viewing, but an ongoing experience that gradually develops as audiences become emotionally engaged with characters' dynamics and plot.

Intimate scenes are a significant way for the Thai Y series to convey emotional tension and shifts in relationships. The result shows that some Chinese female audiences' attention to such scenes is on emotional responses, mutual respect, and equal relationships among characters. This aligns with Fan's (2023) point that audiences under the female gaze do not regard characters as objects for visual pleasure, but are concerned about their feeling, experiences, inner world, and emotional interaction. This helps to understand why intimate interaction in the Thai Y series is attractive to some Chinese female audiences. These interactions are not merely representations of physical intimacy, but also carry deeper meaning like emotional conflict, trust building and the desire to be understood and responded. Rastati and Syed's (2025) study also points out that female audiences' emotional investment in the Thai Y series does not necessarily

rely on explicit physical intimacy, but instead, some of them prioritize character development and emotional connection. This can help to understand the source of affective gratification for Chinese female audiences. The appeal of intimate interaction does not necessarily come from the physical presentation but the meaning of emotional validation, relationship progression, and mutual respect encoded in it, making it easier for audiences to resonate with the trust, desire, and mutual understanding among characters. Therefore, Chinese female audiences' emotional investment in intimate interactions in the Thai Y series cannot be simply generalized as interest in viewing physical intimacy or having sensory stimulation. It can be considered as a viewing experience core by affective meaning.

Media is able to facilitate social connection, maintain interpersonal interaction, and enhance the sense of belonging for audiences (Kasirye, 2022). The result shows that some Chinese female audiences regarded the Thai Y series as a resource to build social connections. Shimauchi's (2023) study finds that the fan community of the Thai Y series in Japan is a transnational and trans-subcultural contact zone. Audiences may foster a shared language and value within this zone during the interaction process. Thus, it can be seen that the social gratification derived from the Thai Y series is not just meeting people with the same interests, but to form a shareable discussion discourse and framework, which surrounds the viewing experience and interpretation of series. This framework enables individual experiences to be transformed into a communal experience that can be understood by others. Thereby, it further strengthens the audience's sense of belonging and engagement.

Meanwhile, the result shows that the use of the Thai Y series for Chinese female audiences is dependent on the specific context. Lee and Wang (2023) find that media selection and sustained usage patterns of media users are often related to their needs and gratifications obtained. This indicates that gratification

is not auto-generated after media exposure, but rather highly context-dependent and subject to variation across different situations. In other words, Chinese female audiences can derive gratification from the Thai Y series, but this may not be equal across all scenarios. Even under the same circumstances, such as experiencing stress or fatigue, an individual may choose to use or avoid using the the Thai Y series as their resource of release. This indicates that media gratification is not the direct outcome of media use, but can be regarded as the result of contextualized media usage experiences constructed together by audiences' emotional state, needs, and active selection.

In general, this study indicates that the gratifications derived from the Thai Y series are an experience of contextualized media use that involves intercultural understanding, emotional investment and social engagement. This study extends the discussion scope of UGT from the types of gratification audiences obtain to how these gratifications are generated and imbued with meaning during the process of transnational media use.

3. Discussion of the Chinese Female Audience's Perception

This result shows that the perceptions of Chinese female audiences exhibit a coexistence of both negotiated and dominant readings. From the perspective of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, this study finds that some Chinese female audiences' understanding of issues related to gender, sexuality, and the LGBTQ+ community presented in the Thai Y series is marked by a negotiated reading. This suggests that they do not completely accept or reject the meaning encoded in series, but perform selective interpretation and critical judgment based on media content, personal experience, and Chinese social norms.

Riggs and Treharne (2017) suggest that each society utilizes specific norms to define which gender identities, sexual orientations, and forms of intimacy are intelligible and acceptable. If an individual's gender identity, sexual orientation, or even thoughts about them violate these standards, he or she will be

considered non-conforming and incomprehensible. In the Chinese sociocultural context, heterosexuality and norms of binary gender remain mainstream frameworks for understanding gender, intimacy, and family structure. Therefore, Chinese female audiences tend to decode the message embedded within the Thai Y series with these frameworks. They do not necessarily make Chinese female audiences reject the representation of same-sex relationships or the LGBTQ+ community, but they may remain influenced by these frameworks.

Meanwhile, issues related to the LGBTQ+ community remain controversial and ambivalent in Chinese public discourse and media representations. Some studies find that Chinese social media remains anti-homosexuality discourse, which links homosexuality with illness, as well as a threat to reproduction, social stability, and traditional values. As for news media, their representation of sexual minorities is not purely positive or negative but involves both perspectives of narratives (Zhang & Zhuang, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Even so, most of the Chinese female audiences in this study already held a respectful and open-minded attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community and related issues before being exposed to the Thai Y series. This indicates that the open attitude of these audiences is not simply a direct result of the exposure to the Thai Y series, nor entirely determined by the Chinese social context. Instead, their perception of these issues may gradually develop during the negotiation process of personal experience, existing values, exposure to media content, and social interaction. Therefore, the influence of the Thai Y series on these audiences is shown more in the validation, reinforcement, and continuation of an existing open and respectful attitude, rather than in any significant attitude changes.

However, this reinforcement of an open attitude does not imply that Chinese female audiences are going to fully accept the meaning presented by the Thai Y series. While the positive representation of same-sex relationships,

sexual diversity, and the LGBTQ+ community in series can reinforce audiences' understanding and respect for the value of diversity, it may also bear the narrative characteristics of idealization and romanticization. Some of the Chinese female audiences in this study perceive that a gap exists between the narrative in the Thai Y series and reality. Therefore, some audiences do not simply extend the values presented to reality, but rather maintain a critical judgement based on real-world situations while appreciating the narratives of diversity.

The reason why heteronormativity can maintain its dominance is that it marginalizes non-heterosexual groups to a large extent and naturalizes itself as mainstream (Yep, 2003). Jirattikorn's (2025) study points out that within the Chinese sociocultural context, narratives of same-sex intimacy remain highly sensitive, so Boy's Love content and related fan practices are constrained by platform rules and censorship. Some Chinese audiences turn to Thai Y series due to restrictions on domestic Boy's Love content in China. Meanwhile, fans often engage with and circulate relevant content through fragmented ways, such as short videos and edited clips. This suggests that the media representations of non-heterosexual intimacy are not completely absent in the Chinese context. Still, its visibility and narrative mode are often restricted by platform environment and social norms.

In contrast, the open, affective, and positive representation of same-sex intimacy by the Thai Y series offers Chinese female audiences a viewing experience different from the Chinese mainstream context. This non-normative relationship presented in the Thai Y series is not only represented as two males falling in love, but also given a complete narrative, intelligibility, and legitimacy. For some of the Chinese female audiences in this study, their preexisting perception was conditioned by the Chinese context. The representation in the Thai Y series provides them an alternative viewing frame that different with the Chinese mainstream context, allowing them to be directly exposed to the positive preferred meanings of same-sex relationships, gender diversity, and the

LGBTQ+ community. This viewing experience gradually changed their preexisting understanding and attitudes, and they regarded non-normative relationships and related issues worth for respect and recognition. From the perspective of Hall (1980), this change can be understood as a dominant-hegemonic decoding, since they accept the preferred meaning of diversity encoded in the Thai Y series. However, this does not imply their departure from the Chinese context, but rather the Thai Y series provides them a space to reconsider the visibility and legitimacy of non-normative relationships and gender perception.

Conclusion

This study discusses the exposure of Chinese female audiences to the Thai Y series, their gratifications derived from it, and how this exposure influence their perception of gender, sexuality, and the LGBTQ+ community. The result shows key informants' access to the Thai Y series is a cumulative process of media engagement, which is characterized by initial exposure, sustained engagement, repeated exposure, and cross-platform exposure. In terms of media gratification, key informants derived multiple aspects of gratification, including cultural understanding, awareness of social issues, emotion regulation, pleasure from romantic fantasy, and social interaction. Regarding perception, the influence of the Thai Y series on the Chinese female audiences in this study is not a direct shifting of attitude or understanding, but rather a space for their negotiation between the media content and reality. Only a minority of key informants directly accept the preferred meaning of the Thai Y series.

This study supplements the understanding of media gratification. The result indicates that gratifications Chinese derived from the Thai Y series can be understood not only as different types of satisfaction for needs, but also can be seen as an experience that is gradually accumulated as well as endowed with meaning by the audience during the process of engagement with the Thai Y

series. Meanwhile, this study also adopts Hall's (1980) encode/decode model to explain how some Chinese female audiences negotiate meaning among media content, personal experience, and Chinese social and cultural norms. This can help to further understand how transnational media content is received, interpreted, and re-endowed with meaning within a specific social and cultural context.

This study also indicates that the acceptance of some Chinese female audiences of the Thai Y series is related to their cross-platform, sustained, and repeated engagement, and more importantly, their emotional investment. Therefore, the production of the Thai Y series can emphasize more on emotional narratives and the representation of diversity to enhance Chinese female audiences' acceptance. This study can also be a reference for content creators, streaming platforms, and social media platforms to understand how Chinese female audiences accept transnational media content.

Limitation

This study remains some limitations. First, it adopted a qualitative research method with in-depth interviews as the research instrument. It only involved 10 key informants, and therefore, the result cannot represent the experience and thoughts of all Chinese female audiences. Second, this study focuses on female audiences, excluding male or any other audience group with other gender identities, so it is not able to discuss the experience of different gender groups. Third, a potential self-selection bias may exist in this study, since all key informants had watched the Thai Y series and agreed to participate in this study. The result may mainly reflect the view of highly engaged audiences. Finally, this study focuses on the Chinese context, so the result remains restriction in specific social and cultural background and may not be adopted by audiences from other cultural backgrounds.

Recommendation

1. Recommendation for Producers of the Thai Y Series

They should further enhance the realistic portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community and other related elements in the Thai Y series. It can help audiences to have a more inclusive perspective and comprehensive understanding of the group.

2. Recommendation for Over-the-top Platform

They should improve the accessibility of the Thai Y series for overseas audiences and provide high-quality subtitles to overseas audiences. They should also adopt more precise genre tags for audiences to find series based on their needs.

3. Recommendation for Social Media Platforms

They should offer a discussion environment for audiences by providing a more sophisticated system. They should also further strengthen the connection between different social media platforms.

4. Recommendation for Future Studies

Perception studies regarding audiences' distinguishing media narratives and reality, such as the boundary between idealized plots, romanticized expressions, and real-life situations, can be conducted. Gratification studies focused on different media platforms can also be conducted. They can analyze characteristics of different platforms and whether these platforms meet audiences' needs or affect the gratifications they derive from the Thai Y series.

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