

# SHIPPING AND FANSERVICE IN THE BOYS LOVE (BL) SERIES CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCE BY THE BRAZILIAN FANDOM<sup>1</sup>

## SHIPPING E FANSERVICE NA EXPERIÊNCIA DE CONSUMO DE SÉRIES BOYS LOVE (BL) DO FANDOM BRASILEIRO

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### ABSTRACT

Just as the idol shipping culture is important in the consumption and celebration of K-pop culture, shipping (practice of pairing fictional characters or media personalities, placing them into sexual or romantic relationships, or supporting already existing pairs) and fanservice (an entertainment practice for fans that consists of the performance of intimacy among celebrity couples created and supported by the fandom) are defining and distinctive elements of the Thai “boys love” (BL) industry and its transnational fandom. I will discuss these phenomena in the consumption experience of BL series by the Brazilian fandom and present their operation among the fans with whom I researched, paying attention to their forms of fanservice consumption and shipping practice. The results presented come from my master’s research, in which, based on the digital ethnographic method, I observed and interacted with fans on Twitter and Telegram for nine months. I conclude, among other things, that the practice of shipping and the consumption of fanservice are heterogeneous in fandom and are embroiled in moral disputes.

**Keywords:** BL series; Brazilian BL fandom; fanservice; shipping.

### RESUMO

Assim como a cultura de *shipping* de ídolos (*idol shipping culture*) tem importância no consumo e na celebração da cultura K-pop, o *shipping* (prática de criar casais entre personagens fictícias ou personalidades da mídia, inserindo-as em relacionamentos sexuais ou românticos ou apoiar casais já existentes) e o *fanservice* (uma prática de entretenimento para fãs que consiste na performance de intimidade entre casais de celebridades criados e apoiados pelo fandom) são elementos marcantes e identificativos da indústria *boys love* (BL) tailandesa e de seu *fandom* transnacional. Discutirei esses fenômenos na experiência de consumo de séries BL pelo *fandom* brasileiro e apresentarei seu funcionamento entre as fãs com as quais pesquisei, atentando para suas formas de consumo de *fanservice* e prática de *shipping*. Os resultados apresentados decorrem de minha pesquisa de mestrado, na qual, com base no método etnográfico digital, observei e interagi com fãs no Twitter e no Telegram durante nove meses. Concluo, entre outras coisas, que a prática de *shipping* e o consumo de *fanservice* são heterogêneos no *fandom* e estão envoltos em disputas morais.



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**Palavras-chave:** *fandom* BL brasileiro; *fanservice*; *shipping*; séries BL.

## INTRODUCTION

The physical and social isolation, required by the Covid-19 pandemic, further stimulated media consumption and interaction through digital social media platforms. Life did not stop, but part of it, for some people, started to be lived remotely, for example, through working remotely and attending videoconferencing classes. I went through this last experience, having studied long distance for my masters (2012–2023) in Social Anthropology at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN). In the same year, I discovered a set of productions that became my object of study: boys love (BL) series or Y series (specifically in Thailand), internationally popular East and Southeast Asian male homoerotic productions.

Before my academic interest, I started to consume them for entertainment purposes. As my enthusiasm for them increased, I inevitably saw myself increasingly inserted, through the practice of consuming a specific object, in a community with a wide and organized public on some digital platforms. Initially, as a *fan consumer* and then as a *fan researcher*<sup>2</sup>, I started participating in public groups on Telegram and following fan accounts on Twitter. On a daily basis, at different times, I visited these platforms, observed and interacted with fans, especially on the fansubbing<sup>3</sup> channels, in which they commented on the series and subjects related to the BL industries (especially the Thai one).

During the fieldwork, on the FSB2 channel, on July 29, 2021, a person commented the following regarding *Light On Me* (2021):

I find this very interesting: the series is bringing up several conflicts, developing a very complex story, presenting three characters with very different and identifiable paths, but then, in the end, people just want to know if their *ship* will work or not. (Jul. 29, 2021).

Their message was soon answered by someone, who typed: “hey, let everyone enjoy it the way they want, bestie. Everyone has their own experience.” (Jul. 29, 2021). This short dialogue highlights the obvious: the expectations that lead different people to consume the series will influence the way they relate to its content. If, in many cases, and for some, deeper issues (such as the psychological and emotional profile of the characters, and phenomena such as homophobia, inter/intragenerational and family conflicts) will be matters of analysis and appeal, for others, the focus will be completely different, for example, steering their attention towards celebrating and rooting for a couple.

At that moment, however, little did I know the relevance that this preference had in the relational dynamics of the fandom, until something remarkable happened to me just over two weeks later, on August 19, 2021,

on FSB2. I spent almost the whole day without checking Telegram. I had turned off notifications for all series-related groups because the message flow was too intense. At the end of the night, I decided to check it to see what was happening, as part of the fieldwork. Amongst the fansubbing channel messages, there was a notification from someone unknown. That person was Bruno<sup>4</sup>, and he was there to make me an invitation: “We made a separate group for those who like Shin-woo, people from FSB2, want to join?” I replied affirmatively, and on the same day, I was added to the “Shin-woo Squad” (*Esquadrão do Shin-woo*). Things happened very fast, so fast that I did not start interacting with people in it right away, waiting until the awkwardness subsided along with my shyness.

I confess that this moment was marked by my great surprise at having been noticed, recognized as a “Shin-woo supporter,” due to my comments on FSB2. I experienced at that time a common phenomenon in anthropological works of an ethnographic nature: absorption by the group with which one is researching. Nobody in the public groups with more than 500 members knew my professional and academic identity and as a consequence they also did not know about my research. However, my degree of interest in the series and commitment to interaction on the channels solidified the fan image, which provided other forms of integration.

Both the invitation and the interaction between the two FSB2 members above have a common background. From June 29 to August 19, 2021, the South Korean series *Light On Me* (2021) was being released on streaming platforms, with two episodes per week on Tuesdays and Thursdays. With 16 episodes of just over 20 minutes, it tells the story of Woo Tae-kyung (played by Lee Sae-on), an 18-year-old student who tries to make friends in the student council of his school, Saebit Boys High School. Although there was no actual love triangle, Tae-kyung would have to choose between Shin Da-on (played by Choe Chan-yi) and Noh Shin-woo (played by Kang Yoo-seok). This imminent choice generated a division in the fandom among those who supported ShinTae and those who supported TaeDaon.

As anyone else, before understanding that this division was taken fairly seriously and with deep sentimentality by some fans, I unassumingly declared support for the ShinTae ship. I was not in the fansubbing channels simply as a researcher. I would like to point out once again that I started watching these series before I developed any anthropological interest in them. This came later. Hence, I was also there as a consumer genuinely interested in the content. Thus, due to the course of events that led the characters to meet, I was already involved in rooting for the two from the beginning. And I believed (as I still do) that it would make more sense (it did), based on the story, for them to end up together.

I never imagined, however, that my role as a shipper would generate recognition and give me a sense of belonging to a group. As a shipper, I

was not just any fan, I started to incorporate another collective identity (more specific than that of “blzeiro” or “BL stan”<sup>5</sup>), I was part of the Shin-woo Squad group, I was a supporter of ShinTae. A couple whose very possibility of realization was in dispute, almost a tug of war, in which Woo Tae-kyung was in the middle and his potential partners on each end, along with their respective supporters in the fandom, pulling from both sides to see which of the two would reach the middle first. In this way, I entered the *symbolic economy of ship*, a more specific phenomenon in the fandom’s daily practice. Sharing on some level, that of engagement in a ship, the feeling of being a fan and having recognized this feeling in me, as well as the submission to the same forces that Bruno and the other fans were subjected to, I was invited to share it more closely with some “peers” in the Shin-woo Squad. Not only an abstract group feeling was created, but an actual concrete and heterogeneous group, just like the fandom, due to its composition, in which the members identified themselves with each other at first due to two factors: the taste for the BL genre and support for the same ship in a specific context.

I chose to bring this ethnographic scene, as it represented a moment of inflection in the field, in which something clicked analytically speaking and through which I was able to strengthen relations with fans through a more delimited insertion in the field and outline an understanding of the importance of two phenomena, objects of study in this text, constitutive of the “consumption experience” (Pereira; Siciliano; Rocha, 2015) of series and of the Thai BL industry<sup>6</sup>: shipping and fanservice. Despite these series still being a niche interest, there is a large number of fans in Brazil, who actively participate in the practice of shipping and consumption of fanservice. Their consumption and their implication in these phenomena have already caught the attention of both this industry and Brazilian agencies specialized in the production of concerts by Asian artists, which have publicized events with BL actors in Brazil in 2023: for example, the actor and singer Jeff Satur, who performed at the *Asia Star Festival*, held on July 7, 2023, in São Paulo; the *Wabi Sabi Love Latin Tour 2023*, in São Paulo (September 30), Rio de Janeiro (October 1) and Fortaleza (October 4), with Thai actors Boun, Earth and Santa (from Wabi Sabi production company); and the *FirstKhaotung 1st Fan Meeting in Brazil*, with the Thai actors First and Khaotung, on December 3, 2023, in São Paulo. Other events were already planned for 2024: the *Choco Milk Shake Fan Meeting Tour in Brazil*, with the South Korean actors Go Ho-jung, Lee Jae-bin, Kim Seong-hyuk and Park Seung-bin from the *Choco Milk Shake* (2022) series, in Fortaleza (February 21), Brasília (February 22), Rio de Janeiro (February 24 ) and São Paulo (February 25); and *The Dargon*, with Thai actors Moss, Bank, Fong and JJ, in Fortaleza (January 24) and São Paulo (January 27). All the events mentioned, except for the *Asia Star Festival*, are hugely popular and anticipated fan meetings in the

pop industry, especially in the Thai BL industry, which includes popular actors, commonly “couples,” in BL series<sup>7</sup>.

With that being said, in this article, I will discuss shipping and fanservice in the “consumption experience” (Pereira; Siciliano; Rocha, 2015) of BL series by the Brazilian fandom; I will present the operation of these two phenomena among the fans with whom I researched, paying attention to their forms of fanservice consumption and shipping practice. The results presented here derive, as previously mentioned, from my master’s research, in which, based on the digital ethnographic method (Hine, 2020; Leitão; Gomes, 2017), I observed and interacted with fans on Twitter and Telegram between June 2021 and February 2022<sup>8</sup>. The sections are divided as follows: in the first, I will present the definitions of shipping and fanservice, their nature as historical elements of fan culture in the West and East, and their functioning in the Thai BL industry and in the Brazilian fandom; in the second, I will present the relationships between shipping, “textual productivity” (Fiske, 1992) and imagination, and the concept of the *symbolic economy of ship*; in the third, I will present shipping through the concept of “contested market” (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016), in order to think about the moral regulations that cross its consumption and practice.

## FROM SHIPPING TO FANSERVICE

The fandom was in an uproar, on December 1, 2021, when GMMTV announced 21 productions for 2022, among which were eight BL series: *Star & Sky*; *Cupid’s Last Wish*; *The Eclipse*; *Moonlight Chicken*; *Never Let Me Go*; *Vice Versa*; *My School President*; and *Be My Favorite*. The *GMMTV 2022 Borderless* event, streamed live on the broadcaster’s YouTube channel, reached an average of 110,000 viewers. In Brazil, the hashtag #GMMTV2022 ranked first in Twitter’s Trending Topics, accounting for more than 545,000 tweets. The ceremony brought together the entire cast of the channel. As expected, the ships presented themselves as such, appearing in couple pictures on the red carpet. Regarding this, a fan commented, in a joking tone, that unlike media events in the West, in which celebrities appear in heterosexual pairs, in Thailand, they presented themselves as an imaginary couple created by the fandom and supported by the company through shipping and fanservice.

This comment and the observations made during the fieldwork reaffirm what the literature on the subject already points out: just as the “idol shipping culture” is important in the consumption and celebration of K-pop culture (Baudinette, 2023b), shipping and fanservice are defining and distinctive elements of the Thai BL industry and its transnational fandom (Baudinette, 2023a, Prasannam, 2019). Therefore, in the Brazilian fandom, they also have their importance. Shipping consists of pairing fictional characters or media personalities (actors and actresses, singers,

etc.), placing them into sexual or romantic relationships, or supporting already existing pairs (Baudinette, 2023b; Prasannam, 2019). It is known as slash or shipping in the English-speaking context, *keoppeuling* in South Korea, *kappuringu* in Japan, and “[...] *long ruea* [boarding the boat], *phai ruea*, and *jaew ruea* [rowing the boat]” in the Thai fandom (Prasannam, 2019, p. 66, emphasis in original). The ships are named *khu-y* (*yaoi* couple) or *khu ship* (couple ship), and the act of shipping, that is, creating couples or supporting ones that already exist, is called *khu'gine* (imagined couples) in Thai (Prasannam, 2019). The result of this practice (shipping), which involves combining their names (or parts of them) to create a third term that will define them, will be called ship (short for “relationship”).

In the West, slash culture, through the production of fiction by pop culture fans, stood out as the context that originated shipping. Their engagement in writing texts that creatively appropriated characters from films, series, etc. favored the development of a subculture based on the creation of homoerotic literature. Characters who had no sexual or romantic involvement in series and movies from mainstream media and the film industry were then inserted into homoerotic relationships in slash fictions (Bacon-Smith, 1992). The difference between these and South Korean fan fiction lies in what will be depicted in these stories. “Unlike Korean fanfic that features celebrities in reality, slash fiction usually fictionalizes homosexual affairs mostly between male characters from TV or film.” (Kwon, 2015, p. 98).

In South Korea (from 1990 onwards) and in Japan (from the mid-1970s onwards), engagement in *yaoi* culture by young female consumers of BL manga played a primary role in the learning of shipping and in its expansion to K-pop consumption (Baudinette, 2023b; Glasspool, 2012; Kwon, 2015). Their incorporation of the *yaoi* gaze resulted in a *yaoi* reading of their idols, and they began “[...] imagining the members of their favorite bands in romantic or sexual relationships.” (Baudinette, 2023b, p. 249). The changes, however, did not occur only on the fans’ side. Developments in the K-Pop industry since its inception have included the consolidation of shipping as a commercial strategy for companies (Kwon, 2015). This incorporation produced what is now known as fanservice when companies began to encourage their artists to “perform intimacy” (Baudinette, 2023b) through “[...] the affectionate display of friendship between members, and ‘skinship’ (*sukinshippu*) or the expression of closeness through physical touch,” practices that in the J-pop industry constitute what is called “*member-ai*” (Glasspool, 2012, 120–121, emphasis in original).

Fanservice (respectively, *paenseobiseu* and *fan sabisu* in Korean and Japanese), according to Glasspool (2012, p. 120), is a “[...] deliberate performance for the purpose of fans’ pleasure [...]” that emphasizes homosociality and in which “[...] a space is maintained where fans may interpret the homosocial as homosexual if they wish, creating a continuous

spectrum between the two.” In the context of the Thai BL industry, it consists of an entertainment product for fans and a commercial and promotional strategy adopted by companies in the field. It is based on the reproduction of the shipping practice, created by the *yaoi* fandom, which came to be supported and commoditized by this industry (Prasannam, 2019). GMMTV’s investments in popularizing this phenomenon in Thailand and other countries in East and Southeast Asia deserve special attention. The production company and talent agency, a subsidiary of the conglomerate GMM Grammy Public Company Limited, produced variety programs, such as *Earth Mix Space* (2021), events, such as fan meetings, and reality shows, such as *Safe House* (2021–2022), for fanservice production and stimulus to shipping (Prasannam, 2019).

Broadcast between September 13 and 19, 2021, on the GMMTV YouTube channel, *Safe House* brought together nine artists from its cast: Gun\* Atthaphan Phunsawat<sup>9</sup>, Tay\* Tawan Vihokratana, Earth\* Pirapat Watthanasetsiri, Mix\* Sahaphap Wongratch, Luke\* Ishikawa Plowden, Pond\* Naravit Lertratkosum, Phuwin\* Tangsakyuen, Khaotung\* Thanawat Ratanakitpaisan and Neo\* Trai Nimitawat (Safe..., 2022d). The launch stirred the spirits of Brazilian fans, who, even without fluency in Thai (because it was live, the reality show did not have English subtitles), watched, with varying levels of assiduity, the lives that occurred at three different times during the day (according to Brasília time): from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., from 10 p.m. to 11 p.m. and from 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. Even those who did not keep up with it directly, were not immune to gifs, photos, and fragments of videos of the event published by fans on digital platforms, especially on Twitter and TikTok.

Reality shows were a new investment format for GMMTV to promote its artists and BL content, with which it has been able to stand out nationally and internationally. If the blurring of the line between fiction and reality has been an integral part of the Thai BL industry’s strategy (Baudinette, 2020, 2023; Prasannam, 2019), this new venture by GMMTV, following this trend, not only made actors live together, but incited, from the interpersonal relationship between them, the idea of “couples beyond the screens.” Not unreasonably, some well-known ships like EarthMix and PondPhuwin were summoned to the attraction in its first season. What until then was encouraged in their profiles, on digital platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter and TikTok), during and even after the broadcast of the series in which they participated, gained another outline and breadth in *Safe House*. This new approach intended to reinforce parasocial relationships<sup>10</sup> (Garcia; Moura, 2019; Giles, 2002) and, obviously, profit from the consumption of the series and by-products derived from the ships, since they are also hired to advertise food, technology and beauty products.

In the face of the success of the first season, three others followed it, totaling four in the period of one year. On the second, aired in November 15–21, 2021, there were two ships: Ohm\* Pawat Chittsawangdee and

Nanon\* Korapat Kirdpan, Force\* Jiratchapong Srisang and Book\* Kasidet Plookphol. JJ\* Chayakorn Jutamas, AJ\* Chayapol Jutamas, Mike\* Chinnarat Siriphongchawalit, Off\* Jumpol Adulkittiporn, First\* Kanaphan Puitrakul, Krist\* Perawat Sangpotirat, Drake Sattabut Laedeke and Tay\* Tawan Vihokratana were also a part of the lineup (Safe..., 2022a). On the third, aired in March 21–27, 2022, there were five (and exclusively) ships: Off\* Jumpol Adulkittiporn and Gun\* Atthaphan Phunsawat, Earth\* Pirapat Watthanasetsiri and Mix\* Sahaphap Wongratch, Joong\* Archen Aydin and Dunk\* Natachai Boonprasert, Jimmy\* Jitaraphol Potiwihok and Sea\* Tawinan Anukoolprasert, Neo\* Trai Nimtawat and Louis\* Thanawin Teeraphosukarn (Safe..., 2022b). On the fourth, aired in September 5–11, 2022, there were four ships: Tay\* Tawan Vihokratana and New\* Thitipoom Techa-apaikhun, Perth\* Tanapon Sukumpantanasan and Chimon\* Wachirawit Ruangwiwat, First\* Kanaphan Puitrakul and Khaotung\* Thanawat Ratanakitpaisan, Fourth\* Nattawat Jirochtikul and Gemini\* Norawit Titicharoenrak. Also participating were Sing\* Harit Cheewagaroon, Foei\* Patara Eksangkul, Mond\* Tanutchai Wijitvongtong and White\* Nawat Phumphothingam (Safe..., 2022c).

The lineup of *Safe House*'s cast has changed throughout seasons. If in the first, there were only two ships, in the third and fourth the cast was exclusively or mostly composed of “couples.” Behaviors were imbued with a romantic meaning, as exceptional forms of attention, which were characterized by the relationship of the ships. Thus, in cracking an egg into First's noodle bowl, Khao's action was seen as an expression of care in the fourth season. Interactions between Earth and Mix, Pond and Phuwin, Ohm and Nanon (one of them discussed in the next section), Force and Book, Off and Gun, Joong and Dunk, Jimmy and Sea, Neo and Louis, Tay and New, Gemini and Fourth too were constantly interpreted in the same way. The reality show also foresaw the development of a closeness between the fans and the actors through the creation of a feeling of family, the unfolding of friendship bonds, and not only the performance of intimacy between the “couples” present.

GMMTV also promotes and profits from its ships through the sale of various products (photobooks, photocards, lightsticks, key chains, t-shirts, etc.) related to the “couples” in its online store (GMMTV Shop). Some of the most notable are the lightsticks, available for first (EarthMix, BrightWin, KristSingto, OffGun, TayNew) and second (OhmNanon, PondPhuwin, ForceBook, JimmySea, FirstKhao, FourthGemini, JoongDunk) generation ships. These items literally light up the “couples” and are used by fans (having been designed for this purpose) during ship events organized by GMMTV, especially fan meetings. EarthMix, OhmNanon, PondPhuwin, ForceBook, JimmySea, FirstKhao, FourthGemini lightsticks, announced on March 15, 2023, with pre-sale open until April 6 of the same year, cost (in *baht*, Thai currency) ฿ 1,890 (US\$ 55,21)<sup>11</sup> per unit. Each of these items has a unique design, created in cooperation with the “couple,”



and some reference aspects of the fandom of each ship, as in the case of TayNew and OffGun. The lightstick of the former was designed in blue and white colors, with a transparent globe at the top, referring to the polar cold; inside of it there were hollowed out illustrations outlined in white of a bear and a whale's tail. This is because the combination of "polar bear" and "orca," New and Tay's favorite animals, respectively, results in the word "Polca," the name attributed to their fandom. The latter, in the shape of a bottle, transparent and in white and green, was chosen due to the identification of their fandom by "Babii" (their pronunciation of the word "baby").

As for the multifandom interaction and the spread of subcultural elements to other fields discussed above, it was not just South Korean and Japanese fans or the K-pop and J-pop industries that were influenced by *yaoi* culture in their practices and commercial developments (Baudinette, 2023b; Glasspool, 2012; Kwon, 2015). The Thai BL industry also emerged from the consumption of *yaoi* texts by women in Thailand, which led to collaboration between writers, publishers and production companies, leading to the adaptation of stories originally published online, light novels and BL manga for television channels, digital platforms, such as streaming services and YouTube (Prasannam, 2019). Similarly to the process through which the "[...] *seme-uke* rule was transplanted to South Korea, where K-pop idol shippers similarly position couples as containing a *gong* (*seme*) and a *su* (*uke*) member [...]" (Baudinette, 2023b, p. 255, emphasis in original), the Thai industry appropriated shipping, as a practice of fans who previously consumed the BL genre only in its literary textual format, and reproduced the same *seme* (top/dominant) *uke* (bottom/submissive) pattern in the series, and at different levels, in the ships that started to be promoted (Prasannam, 2019). This rule defines the *seme* as more mature and older, tall and strong, with all the attributes and temperaments characteristic of standard masculinity; and the *uke*, for its joviality, fragility and sensitivity (Baudinette, 2020; Baudinette, 2023b; McLelland; Welker, 2015; Prasannam, 2019).

Some fans stated that the order of the names on the ships was defined by the *seme* and *uke* positions, which, consequently, would also mark the profile of the characters that would be interpreted by the actors in any series. This understanding did not seem to me to be widespread only in the fandom, but a common reference of the Thai BL industry, especially GMMTV, for their ships. For example, in the final episode of *My School President* (2023), in one of the scenes, when discussing the name of their ship, Gun questions Tinn about the difference between GunTinn and TinnGun. After listening to Tinn's explanation in his ear, Gun asserts, "It must be GunTinn, then." In the last scene, Tinn and Gun are in bed and fight to see who gets on top of the other, the one on top determines the order of the ship: if it is Gun, then the ship would be called GunTinn; if it is Tinn, the ship name would be TinnGun. The playful dispute (after

all, neither of them take this premise seriously) for the primacy of the name would suggest the breaking of the behavioral and sexual paradigm *seme uke*, making it possible to challenge it.

The reproduction of this paradigm is also present through the logic of age difference, in which the one who occupies the position of *seme* generally appears as the older one. This can be seen on GMMTV's first generation ships: BrightWin (25 and 24 years old), OffGun (32 and 29 years old), TayNew (32 and 30 years old), EarthMix (29 and 25 years old), with the exception of KristSingto (27 and 28 years old). In the second generation, formed by ForceBook (both 26 years old), GeminiFourth (19 and 18 years old), JimmySea (28 and 24 years old), PondPhuwin (22 and 20 years old), FirstKhao (both 24 years old), and JoongDunk (22 and 23 years)<sup>12</sup>, three of the five "couples" are the same age, and the others are one to four years apart. The channel seems, then, to distance itself from the *seme uke* age model. With regard to the gender performativity of the pair, I am not able to state whether or not there is an exact repetition of masculinity and femininity patterns linked to these categories. An analysis, which I did not carry out, of the characters played by these actors in their respective series would be necessary for the construction of a solid argument.

As for their stability, ships were characterized by their volatility. Their creation had to receive the approval of the fandom, which did not need to be total, but needed to have a certain degree of generality for the ships to be popular and well-liked. Well-established "couples" enjoyed a certain notoriety and crystallization, that is, they were impenetrable by other couple arrangements, making it almost inconceivable for an actor from a well-established ship to be part of another. Unless it was done without the approval of the fandom and at the risk of criticism and negative reception, which could impact the profitability of the fanservice business and the popularity of a series. In this sense, some "couples" were more or less legitimate or conceivable, and this was evident in the reaction of part of the fandom to the announcement of *Be My Favorite* (2023), which would star Krist\* Perawat Sangpotirat and Mike\* Chinnarat Siriphongchawalit, during the *GMMTV 2022 Borderless* event. If, for some people, this ship was everything they wanted, for others, however, it was so impossible and unimaginable that it was reason enough not to watch the series.

As if what happened was not bad enough for these fans, on September 13, 2022, GMMTV announced, on its digital platforms, that Fluke\* Gawin Caskey would replace Mike. Already dissatisfied with Krist opposite the latter, the exchange of one actor for another was seen as in poor taste. If there was anyone who should be replaced, it was clearly Krist. Amidst the complaints, in the Shin-woo Squad, Aurora<sup>13</sup>, George<sup>14</sup> and Teodora<sup>15</sup> were disappointed that Gawin's first job as a protagonist would be beside Krist. If, according to George, the situation could have been worse, for Aurora that was the peak of absurdity, and there was no way in which

it could get worse. She concluded that it would be better for Gawin to remain in the background than to pay that price. The grievances were even greater in the fandom after his performance with First\* Kanaphan Puitrakul in *Not Me* (2021), whose chemistry, as perceived by fans, left a desire for continuity of the ship in other projects, initially frustrated by this change, and not materialized until the publication of this text. First and Khaotung\* Thanawat Ratanakitpaisan, however, became a ship, having participated as the lead couple in *The Eclipse* (2023), their first series together, and being cast in *Only Friends* (2023), consolidating themselves as one of the “couples” of the new generation, since PoddKhao, formed by Plapodd\* Suphakorn Sriphothong and Khaotung, was also discontinued after *Tonhon Chonlatee* (2021).

The reason for the refusal toward Krist lay in different speeches considered homophobic, of which I quote two: an Instagram story, in which he answers “absolutely no” to the question “are you gay?” with, as the emojis allowed fans to infer, a high degree of discomfort and irritation; and a video in which he says he avoids homoerotic scenes, because boys would prefer not to see that kind of thing. In the face of these events, Krist became known in the fandom for being “the most homophobic actor in the industry, Thailand’s Carlos Bolsonaro”<sup>16</sup> (Dec. 1, 2021), someone who has already made several homophobic comments, but whose response on Instagram, which circulates as a screengrab, was the most memorable example of his supposed homophobia. That was made possible because the event was “memeified,” captured in an image that should be worth a thousand words (worth more than even the actor’s apologies) and endorse his cancellation, at least among some fans.

Krist’s example allows me to infer that the acceptance of a ship also depended on the behavior of the actors, on the sympathy (always mediated by their actions) that they got from the fandom. The possibility of a “couple” and the legitimacy of an actor in the BL industry of any country was not guaranteed by his youthful beauty according to some Brazilian fans. There were demands for technical quality (acting skills), although that was not the most preponderant, and moral alignment (a progressive ethical and political positioning, which was against and did not reproduce prejudices or any forms of discrimination, especially because they were actors who played queer roles). Furthermore, there were not many certainties in the shipping business. Its success or failure was not even entirely in the hands of the fandom, since other interests and variables influenced its creation (birth), continuity (longevity) and dissolution (death), as in the cases of NeoLouis, GawinFirst, NeoMark and MarkFord<sup>17</sup>.

As for the means by which fanservice consumption and the practice of shipping can be observed, we can consider the likes on the posts in which the “couple” is together, the circulation of tags, the creation of fanfics and ship edits, the conversations, comments and news about them (with attention to the social media accounts of the so-called fanbases that,

more “professionally” oriented towards “couples,” act in the dissemination of updates and in the promotion of the actors) and the engagement in their events (such as fan meetings of the *Wabi Sabi Love Latin Tour 2023* and others). The ships that are supported by the fans are quite evident even before tapping into their “textual productivity” or the “enunciation” (Fiske, 1992) about them. During fieldwork, I often saw references to the couples they shipped directly in the description of their profiles on digital platforms. It was also common to see “couples” who had not shared the screen for some time, such as BrightWin, TayNew, KristSingto, MaxTul, BillkinPP and BounPrem, but who, due to the affection fans developed for them, were still alive in their memory through the ship.

Finally, I argue that assuming that fandom consumes fanservice and ships in a delusional manner, treating them as a vertical strategy implemented by the K-pop and Thai BL industries, disregards them as products of fannish (the quality of being a fan). The ensuing relationship, however, is characterized more by the assimilation of the *yaoi* culture shipping practice and its commoditization through fanservice (Prasannam, 2019). The possibility of this is due to the interest in creating intimacy between characters of media products that already existed between *yaoi* fans and pop culture consumers in the West (Baudinette, 2023b; Kwon, 2015). Commercially extending this practice to actors can be considered a new inflection in the phenomenon, but one that is sustained only by the prior existence of a correlated phenomenon.

## SHIPPING, TEXTUAL PRODUCTIVITY AND IMAGINATION

Fiske (1992) suggests three kinds of fan productivity: semiotic, enunciative, and textual. The first refers to the process of reading and producing intrapersonal meaning; the second refers to verbal exchanges, conversations, gossip, fandom discussions; and the third refers to the material creative engagement of the fans, who elaborate literary, visual and audiovisual products based on the source texts (Fiske, 1992; Sandvoss, 2013). The fans I observed and with whom I interacted were not similar in their practices and levels of engagement in the fandom, nor in the “consumption experience” (Pereira; Siciliano; Rocha, 2015) of BL series. Most were more participative in the enunciative realm, others, to a lesser extent, textually. Those who commented on the series and shared content about them were among the first, and among the last were those who contributed to the dissemination of news about the series, who distributed their own media in the fandom (the fansubs) and who produced cultural artifacts based on them (edits, fanfics, fanarts etc.).

Shipping can be expressed in these different artifacts, which can show appreciation or other affections, and/or reinforce or recreate narratives based on the source text of the series: fanarts, fanfictions and videos

(Prasannam, 2019). As for the latter, Prasannam (2019) cites as an example the Official Promotion Videos or Other People's Videos (OPV), one of the most common and popular types of fan texts among Thai fans, created from the combination of scenes from the series and/or appearances by actors in other contexts and specific songs to allow fans to "[...] reimagine the relationship among their admired stars." (Prasannam, 2019, p. 76). In the case of Brazilian fandom and its main derivative of "textual productivity" (Fiske, 1992), edits (videos produced from cuts of different scenes from any other audiovisual content) resemble OPV, because, like them, edits are also unofficial content made by fans for fans. The difference lies in the distribution channels: in relation to the Thai fandom, OPVs are posted on YouTube and Instagram (Prasannam, 2019), whereas edits are primarily posted on TikTok (but not exclusively).

TikTok gained notoriety in Brazil between 2018 and 2020, and for me only in 2020, when I discovered the possibility of earning money through its use. Returning to it again in the same year, I found pages for BL series for the first time and saw fragments (edits) of them. A search (as of 25 Jun. 2021) for the phrase "boys love" on TikTok Lite pointed to the following results in views for the tags #boyslove (4.6 billion), #boylove (1.8 billion), #boysloveboys (65.5 million), and #boyslovethai (49.4 million)<sup>18</sup>. All of them referred, initially, to contents of male homoerotic relationships, although I could not determine that all the publications listed by the tags represent the theme to which they refer. When accessing them, however, I mostly saw content that was limited to clippings of scenes from BL series or posts from this universe involving the characters or actors. From scattered reports and responses to a questionnaire circulated in the fandom, I realized the influence of TikTok in bringing a certain number of fans closer to the series, since this platform was one of the main ones to make BL content available to new audiences. There were always reports of someone starting a series because of a video on that platform, most likely edits involving ships (one of the main materials shown in fan productions).

In fandom, edits have been usually produced with scenes from series, movies, fan meetings, interviews, stories and lives on Instagram, etc. They showcase their fictional, inventive nature, being permeated sometimes by jocular, sometimes by sentimentality. The cuts are juxtaposed with music in the background, mostly songs in the English language, as well as a few Brazilian ones. Scenes and music must converse and present the right timing, in order to attribute meaning to each other. They must convey the fan's interpretation of that ship in line with the series' narrative or a specific character. And most importantly: by placing the couple as a symbol, it must evoke emotion (Turner, 2005 [1967]) in other fans. Other edits may just denote admiration for an artist using music to express some desire or applaud their positive attributes. The duration of an edit can vary between 30s and 2min in most cases. Some may exceed this

limit, with the choice of duration, as well as scenes and music, being a subjective issue. I do not intend to describe the various functions of this resource, just to situate it as a practice and material produced by fans, which can be read through the concept of textual poaching (Jenkins, 1992) and “textual productivity” (Fiske, 1992), as they are a work of citation, textual rewriting, interpretation of a source text and fan expressiveness.

One of the creative uses of edits that I bring as an example came to me on November 30, 2021, when Taísa<sup>19</sup> shared a TikTok video on the Shin-woo Squad that consisted of an edited cut of a scene from *Safe House 2* (2022). The song that overlapped the original audio of the chosen reality show scene was *Streets Favorite*, with the verses “[...] the boy who said he’d be true [...] oh no, oh no [...]” These are often used in humorous videos, usually to express regret, or illustrate something wrong being done or something not working out; this feeling being emphasized by the second verse. In the video, Ohm\* Pawat Chittsawangdee was getting a piggyback ride from another actor. Nanon\* Korapat Kirdpan stood by and watched the scene. The actors were protagonists of the series *Bad Buddy* (2021), and were one of the main ships of GMMTV at that time. When Ohm climbs down from his friend’s back and heads towards Nanon, he seems to be irritable and acting distant. This reaction was interpreted by the fans as a demonstration of jealousy, triggering a moment of relatability or being the interpretation itself propitiated by the relatability of the behavioral and emotional response to Ohm, which the fans would tend to reproduce in their personal relationships, in similar cases.

**Taísa:** For those who don’t know me, in life I’m just like Nanon.

**Fernando**<sup>20</sup>: I’m 200% like that.

**George:** I’m spiteful. I’ll bring it up again three months later just so I don’t have to admit right away I got jealous. My ex went shopping with a boy I hated once. Two months later, I was throwing it in his face.

**Aurora:** And the worst part is that I can’t hide my ass face when I don’t like something.

**Taísa:** The best part is Ohm seeing the whole thing, going to Nanon and being like “but are you mad?”

**Carrying on with the conversation, George comments:** Nanon seems to be so quiet, right? Krist is 100% crazy just like us. I die in interviews when everyone says he’s dramatic and jealous. Mike said that in college one time the group went out without Krist to eat, and he cried.

**Aurora responds to George:** I can't stand relating to things in this group anymore.

**Taísa adds:** why go to therapy when you have this group. (Messages on the Shin-woo Squad, Nov. 30, 2021).

I observed, in this and other “social situations” (Gluckman, 2010 [1968]) in the fandom (from the simplest and least indicative of any relationship beyond the friendly and professional to those that could insinuate something more), the existence of a humorous tone that denoted this volitional, imaginary and permanently reiterative nature of the ship and reinforced the plastic, modeled dimension of the “couple.”

The fandom's relationship with ships also led me to think about the development of the fans' intimacy with them, the unilateral intersubjective and emotional relationships that unfold in shipping. Some interactions observed in the fandom indicated that the degree of emotional involvement with a series could not be assumed so easily and objectively. Those who are in the social position of viewers can create expectations about a production based on whatever has been released promotionally or based (if we are talking about adaptations of manga or light novels) on the source text in which the series is inspired. But that person may also be vulnerable to unexpected emotions that may be aroused in them by the pair who play the main characters, due to an emotional investment in the “couple.” This phenomenon of emotional unpredictability is very well expressed in the interaction between Taísa and Teodora, on December 17, 2021, in the Shin-woo Squad:

**Taísa:** *I don't know, really, if I have the strength to see Pran and Pat suffering.*

**Teodora:** damn... this is not good for us. I'm really scared, it makes me angry to feel like this. I was thinking of leaving it for later... but then I would have to leave the groups and just talk to you later. The thing is, I have the courage to not look at Instagram or Twitter for five weeks, but I didn't want to leave the group and not talk to you.

**Taísa:** I still don't know what I'm going to do for real, because I don't have the strength, and I don't even know if I'm going to be able to wait for the other five episodes to come out one by one without freaking out and having a panic attack. It may seem like I'm being overly dramatic, irrational, but I don't know.

**Teodora:** I've done this a lot, but I was alone.

**Taísa:** just seeing the scene of the two with crying faces already broke me.

**Teodora:** I'm not gonna lie... I felt really bad... *I can't believe I'm feeling this way.*

**Táisa:** you and me both, I said that I got super invested in the series. My emotions got too involved with both of them.

**Teodora:** I'm even thinking I'm weird, because I wasn't like that.

**Táisa:** I don't know if I can see Nanon suffer and chill until next week. I got emotionally attached to the character. And we know that it's not just a character, there are two actors behind the BL who are just as wonderful and will suffer along with the character. I feel that from now on the outbreaks will come. Nanon gives too much of himself to the character, people, *if it's Pran crying, it's Nanon suffering along with him.* (Messages on the Shin-woo Squad, Dec. 17, 2021, my emphasis).

In this ethnographic scene, they were having a conversation about *Bad Buddy* (2021), after another one of its episodes came out. In this dialogue, we observe an intersubjective exchange between fan and actor/character. If “[Táisa’s] emotions got too involved with both of them,” it is not just about Pat and Pran, but also about Ohm and Nanon, those who embody and give life to the characters. This relationship is explicit in Táisa’s outburst, in which she poses a dilemma: “I don’t know if I can see Nanon suffer and chill until next week [...] if it’s Pran crying, it’s Nanon suffering along with him.” The intersubjective link also depends on affective bonds built some time in advance between the actors, on the form and content of the personal relationship maintained between them, which are projected by the fans onto the characters: Nanon, then, was confused with Pran, and Ohm, with Pat.

In view of this, I would like to suggest the concept of the *symbolic economy of ship* to represent this system of affective and symbolic organization of couples composed of internal dynamics that regulate the creation and management of ships: the consensus, dissent, conflicts, and feelings produced and shared around a “couple.” In this system, there is an emotional engagement that is expressed in forms of “enunciative and textual productivity” (Fiske, 1992) over the ship as an object of appreciation. The above dialogue between the members of the Shin-woo Squad and the process, described in the introduction, that led me to be part of this group are elements that reflect this symbolic economy, the emotional bonds that exist between the series and the fans, especially those concerning the social and affective role of the shipping culture.

## THE CONTESTED FANSERVICE



Contrary to what some fans may believe, fanservice is not just a product for “brainless” people who fetishize gay relationships. Immersion in the fictional universe of the series presupposes a right to fantasy, to escape from reality, especially when it refers to symbolic, physical and psychological violence against LGBT+ people. Not all fans, however, agreed with this sentiment, and for those who were against fanservice, it became something “disappointing,” “annoying,” “harmful,” and “problematic.” As we can see here, it is not only the symbolic economy of the ship that involves consensus, dissent, conflicts and many other relationships that drive shipping and fanservice. As for the conflictual and moral aspect, the fandom made the limits for accepting fanservice and which conduct was acceptable within the BL industry very explicit, as we will see below.

An attempt to classify fans in relation to their positions on fanservice leads me to think of at least two categories: (i) pro-fanservice fans, who understand its commercial and fictional nature; (ii) anti-fanservice fans, who consider it a problem in the Thai BL industry, especially for actors, and advocate for its end. There are still two other categories that, although not apparent to me, may exist: (iii) fans who are indifferent to fanservice, and (iv) pro-fanservice fans who believe in it not as an entertainment service, but as a genuine expression of real love between the actors. Within the first two categories, which are no more than general typifications, there are nuanced expressions of stances in relation to fanservice; those who contest it, however, are more diverse and recurrent in fandom, and will be dealt with here.

Let us start, then, with the opinion of Lourenço, a 22-year-old black (light-skinned) gay man, who had been watching BL series for three months and with whom I spoke on February 8, 2022. Among the different subjects of our conversation, he noted that what bothered him most about the Thai BL industry was fanservice (both companies’ investment in it and fans’ relationship with it). From personal experience, he argued that “this [fanservice] builds a very toxic relationship between the fandom and the actors” (8 Feb. 2022). If fanservice was the biggest problem in fandom from his point of view, let us see the reason for it.

Because they push this couple thing a lot, the series ends, and the actors pretend they are a couple, they advertise everything as if they were a couple, they flirt. This obviously generates a lot of profit for them, but then the fans think that they are really dating, but in the end they are not...

Like Max [Nattapol Diloknawarit] and Tul [Pakorn Thanasrivanitchai], from *Together With Me* [2017]. They’ve been working together for over six years, and in those six years everyone thought they were a couple, because they built a whole narrative around it. *Then last year, Max started dating an actress, and a lot of people hated on him and her. I didn’t, but I was like, “disappointed” because they made up*

*this whole story as if they were a couple, but it was all a lie. Then this narrative they build only harms themselves, they never manage to have a personal life.*

*Before, I always said “such stupid people, to be angry about this, they don’t know how to separate real life from acting.” But as it turns out they don’t even separate it themselves. I was super upset, but I understood that it was not my fault, but theirs, who bring out these feelings in the fans. I was sad, but self-aware, like “it’s his life, he chooses who he gets with, and that’s okay.” But my affection for him has waned. Very strange, but that’s it. (Private message from Lourenço via Twitter, Feb. 8, 2022, emphasis added).*

Lourenço, at the beginning, paid attention to the critical consumption that fans should carry out in relation to fanservice. However, when he, who thought he knew how to separate “real life from acting” very well, found himself in the same place as “stupid people”, emotionally affected by what was obviously “acting” to him, before sharing responsibility for the effects of fanservice with the BL industry (producers and TV stations), the actors and the fans, assigned full responsibility to the first two. Now, if he, aware of the fanservice (which, in some way, would give him some emotional shielding), found himself captured by its affective mesh, there was no longer any reason to take responsibility as a fan. Lourenço, then, went from an interpretation of the fans as active subjects to passive ones. Fanservice took on the status of a superior entity, to which critical consumption could not offer resistance. More specifically, it was a morally reprehensible entity because it led fans to deception and disappointment, since it led them to believe in and get emotionally involved with a non-real couple and subjected them to the abrupt breakup of this affective consumer relationship of staged homoeroticism (Baudinette, 2023a). But does fanservice really have all that power? How, even though he was aware that it was nothing more than an entertainment service for fans, was Lourenço still disappointed with something that was always evident to him beforehand, that is, the fictional nature of the relationship between the actors?

I consider that, from the point of view of some fans, fanservice can be read through the concept of “contested market” (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016), which refers to markets that are morally contested and socially controversial. The moral contest can be towards commercialized goods, “[...] towards effective markets regarding marketing proposals (the “paper markets”) or simply towards the discourse in favor of commodification [...]”<sup>21</sup> (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016, p. 48, my translation). This is how we can consider fanservice, since it sells a product involved in moral controversies. This movement of moral contestation towards it aims to retain or block it, to the detriment of its continuity, because it would be

a market that constitutes a sphere that affects people's intimacy (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016).

Moral contestation questions the market on its relationship with the ideas of the common good, which concerns domains such as economic, social and bioethical (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016). In case of fanservice, it also involves the spheres of politics (representational), ethics (about what is good and correct), the intimacy and truth of sexuality (about what, by whom and under what conditions it should be demonstrated). Maintaining or questioning a product or market is closely linked to "[...] the values that the social body and governments wish to maintain or promote [...]"<sup>22</sup> (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016, p. 49, my translation). Suspicion about the undesired moral effects that may result from these markets or products prompts the emergence of "cause and moral entrepreneurs" (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016). The former act through lobbying and demonstrations to prevent the continuity or creation of these markets, transforming "[...] a localized issue into a « public problem » [...]"<sup>23</sup> (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016, p. 50, my translation). The seconds act in defense

"[...] of vulnerable populations that need to be protected by the market, or on the contrary, protected from the market. The notion of vulnerable population then appears as a central piece for understanding contested markets. It designates collectives whose existence will be or is likely to be interrupted by the rise or fall of a contested market."<sup>24</sup> (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016, p. 50, my translation).

A dialogue, which took place on February 5, 2022, between Estela and Tauan (a Brazilian history-ing in Asia, as written in his biography on Twitter), allows us to reflect on how the fandom has been thinking of the production and consumption of fanservice and shipping in the Thai BL industry as a "contested market" (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016).

**Estela:** Does the fact that some people believe that boys love couples can be real change anything in the lives of those of you who don't believe it? It seems that people can't ship or believe in their favorite couple, given the annoyance in so many people's reactions. *Whether or not it's fanservice, what's the problem with shipping?*

**Tauan:** *The problem is that shipping encourages the fans who offend the actors when they get a girlfriend.* And don't tell me that one thing has nothing to do with the other, because it has. They have already offended girlfriends, sent them death threats. Actors get hated on when they act with someone other than their ship.

**Estela:** So yes, one thing really has nothing to do with the other, because *you are generalizing.* There are many shippers that, even if they ship a couple with all their might, when

they work with someone else, they support them, and when they are dating too. *You can't say that all shippers are toxic.*

**Tauan:** *I didn't say that all people who ship are toxic, I said that shipping perpetuates hate. If it didn't exist, and people didn't care who an actor or actress was seeing, the problem would be solved. As long as there is shipping and fanservice, things will not change.*

**Estela:** *I meant in general. You didn't talk about them being toxic. I mean in general, because it's very common for people to think that shippers are toxic. But, as I said, even if it doesn't involve shipping, it happens to many artists, because there are people who are mentally unwell and always cross the line.* (Messages on Twitter, Feb. 6, 2022, my emphasis).

In fact, sometimes it happens that new people, when entering the fandom, think that what presents itself as fanservice is a genuine representation of the relationships that actors maintain with each other. The line between the manufactured and the spontaneous when it comes to fanservice, becomes very tenuous, perhaps even porous, making it difficult to measure how much staging is at stake on a reality level. There was such a commitment from the actors to “acting in real life” in certain cases that it caused some fans to exclaim that “the fanservice is going too far” and to wonder how much further it would go.

But we cannot lose sight of the fact that the ship, not the actors, is the product of fanservice. An idea of relationship is marketed, a *fictional reality*, not the actors themselves. They are responsible for producing this good to be consumed by fans. In this case, according to Tauan's speech, we understand that the vulnerable population here are the actors, in the social position of workers, and their eventual real significant others, who suffer persecution<sup>25</sup>. According to Lourenço, it is the fans deceived by the practice of fanservice who are the vulnerable population and have their emotional state distressed by this market or product (as Lourenço himself has already experienced this emotional disturbance).

There is also a concern that the vulnerable population itself, be it fans or actors, may improve the “contested market” or product's ability to exist as they engage in its consumption or in its practice despite the negative results of that involvement (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016). This explains Tauan's stance, shared by other members of the fandom, of abolishing fanservice. Engagement in shipping must be removed from the behavior of fans, as it would strengthen offensive actions that result from some fanservice consumption relationships. Furthermore, as it was visible in different comments from fans, there is an overdetermination of the commercial interest either from the production companies, or from the actors themselves who accept to participate in the fanservice business. In this case, underlying the idea of a “contested market” is “[...]”

the existence of a “dangerous” population of traders composed of those who cannot resist the lure of gain [...]”<sup>26</sup> in the context of contemporary neoliberalism (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016, p. 71, my translation).

As for the last point, I observed that there were at least two ways in which fans attributed meaning to the participation of actors in fanservice. In the first, actors appear as subjugated by their agencies and the supposed logic of the entertainment industry. The actors would then be obliged to do fanservice to enter the Thai media market. The second recognized their implication in the service, which has a significant importance in the Thai BL industry, being its base, its “true business product” (Mar. 2, 2023). However, the thought prevailed that both the actors and the fans are at a disadvantage in relation to the excesses and commercial interests of that industry, which would override the emotional well-being of the fans and the freedom of the actors (since most would be forced to do fanservice).

A paradigmatic “social situation” (Gluckman, 2010) that generated even more concern about fanservice, reinforcing the discourse of opposition to it, was the announcement that Yoon\* Phusanu Wongsavanischakorn and Ton\* Saran Anantasetthakul<sup>27</sup> were dating. The fandom was divided in the face of this announcement. There were fans who believed in it and those who wondered whether it was just fanservice; others, without the slightest suspicion, categorically reaffirmed it. Faced with this scenario, some commented that the “big problem with fanservice” (Oct. 8, 2022) was the difficulty people had in differentiating what was real and what was not, given the disbelief in and distrust of the relationship between the two, which led them to question the actors on the subject whenever possible. As Joana commented, “if there were any limits to fanservice, the actors would have more freedom in relation to their relationships, and they would be able to date anyone, without this toxic environment” (Oct. 8, 2022). About the veracity of their relationship, I can neither affirm nor deny, nor does this consist of personal or anthropological interest. It is important for me to take this case and the discourse associated with it to think about the representations that the fans made of fanservice. Thus, in this case, it represented a risk to the real homoerotic relationships between the actors, and in its wake, a hindrance to their validity, which in a way led to a queer erasure, an erasure of real, non-staged non-heteroerotic relationships (as in, not fanservice).

Fanservice would also offer risks to the quality of the series. I observed and participated in such discussions a few times during fieldwork. Fanservice was not seen, in some cases, as the problem itself, which was in the direction taken by the Thai BL industry in merely favoring the hiring of young and handsome boys to the detriment of talent and professional experience, with the purpose of commercializing the couple (of fanservice), instead of offering high-quality audiovisual content. The opinion of some fans was that fanservice was the Thai BL industry’s “true business product,” unlike the Japanese and South Korean ones (Mar. 2,

2023). That it existed to promote the ships, and the series may have the same purpose. Other fans pointed out that it would not be just the inclination towards fanservice, as the prime object of the commercial interest of the Thai BL industry, that would impact the quality of its content, but a set of issues ranging from aesthetic preference and professional qualification and remuneration to the structure of the production companies.

As for this last point, Cainã responded to a tweet that attributed the excellence of Japanese BL series to the absence of fanservice, suggesting that Japanese actors being better paid than Thai ones would be a preponderant factor in the adherence or not to fanservice. According to him: “a good part of the fanservice problem would be solved with good wages” (Feb. 28, 2023). Lorenzo, author of the tweet, responded shortly afterwards, disagreeing: “this is not an excuse. Korean BLs are there to prove it. Most of the South Korean actors do not have an agency, the productions are low budget, and even so they manage to deliver better BL series than Thailand.” (Feb. 28, 2023). All of these statements were not supported by objective data (such as, for example, information from companies about budget), but by superficial observations of productions (in the case of South Korean ones) and conversations that arose in the fandom from statements attributed to some actors on staff remuneration (for example that Nanon would have complained about the salary of production workers).

I will not entirely disagree with the argument that fanservice is the main product of the Thai BL industry, but I must make a few observations in an attempt to avoid any reductionisms. We agree that series and shipping are inseparable in the Thai context but perhaps we drift away from each other when I suggest that this inseparability is not due to a relationship of unilateral benefit, but to its codependency. The ship needs to have an impact, be known and desired to provide financial return and media capital to those involved, and the series needs a possible successful ship to also have popularity and profit. In the Thai BL industry, ships usually do not pre-exist the series, that is, they are not well-consolidated beforehand. Although it is possible to see couples already in fanservice during the promotion period, the pre-release of a series, they will only reach or not reach consolidated ship status after their interaction and performance in it. As we can discern, many successful couples, especially those on GMMTV, are materialized after their appearance in the series (with displays of intimacy during and after their release period), with that being the most common order in the rise of a ship, especially when it has the support from the fans.

Thus far, we could reiterate the thesis that series serve to promote ships. As a product that moved more than ฿ 1 billion (approximately US\$ 28,5 million)<sup>28</sup> in recent years and more than ฿ 360 million (approximately US\$ 10,5 million)<sup>29</sup> in negotiations made through the Boys Love Content initiative (Torres, 2023), however, it is at least superficial to suggest that they are only interested in promoting ships, ignoring the propagation of

the BL industry and Thai cultural propaganda, especially the idea of a “gay paradise” (Jackson, 1999), with a view to stimulating tourism and “queer opportunism” (Torres, 2023). These goals are based on a pre-existing *yaoi* culture, on the international consumption of Asian entertainment (especially Hallyu<sup>30</sup>) and on phenomena such as *kkonminam*<sup>31</sup>, which are related to a new attention to shipping and fanservice (when the first examples of success occurred) as necessary elements in the series’ popularization strategy.

They are also seen as objects of value in and of themselves and susceptible to other investments, starting to be exploited in the marketing industry, now not just to boost the series in which the ships will participate, but to leverage the sale of different products (cosmetics, food, technology). Shipping and fanservice have undeniably become notable (for some fans), central elements in the Thai BL industry, but their prominence is not enough to be self-explanatory of their functioning there. They can be lucrative resources for entertainment companies, but this does not corroborate per se that, although the series can serve to boost them, they are just a “showcase to sell ships” (Mar. 6, 2023). At this point, I will advocate, as I did above, for the interconnection and codependency between shipping, fanservice and series.

I would also like to note that despite being experienced in different intensities by the fans, from the beginning of my observations, I realized that shipping and fanservice, in general terms, did not seem to be innocent practices, derived from some alienation or reflection of a lack of ability for a critical consumption of these series. Although many fans were quick to direct criticism towards fanservice, they also did not shy away from engaging in its consumption, even acknowledging the influence of the phenomenon on these series. After all, it would have been partially thanks to it that they would have achieved the popularity they enjoy today, as exposed by a fan. Criticism did not imply detaching from the practice for some while for others, the negative aspects of fanservice materialized in their criticism (along with the behavior of Brazilian and Asian fans who were rejected for being fanservice consumers and supporting its exercise) was the main reason for detachment.

The indirect clashes between those most involved in the practice of shipping and fanservice consumption and those who considered themselves more reflective in the face of these phenomena were projected in the criticisms of the latter towards the former. As an example of what I just argued, Fernando commented aggrievedly, in the Shin-woo Squad, on December 15, 2021, on the delusions of fans who created narratives about a relationship between Ohm and Nanon<sup>32</sup>. If, on the one hand, I was drawn to the group by the force of the ship, as described in the introduction, my investment in it was within the bounds of fiction. The difference in the shipping that brought the Shin-woo Squad together lies in its circumscription within the limits of the series, of that fictitious story,

not being a projection onto the actors caused by the merging of the real identity with the imagined one, at least not at that moment and not with the intensity observed and repudiated by Fernando.

**Fernando:** *Brazilian shippers are becoming as sick as Thai ones. Now you can't talk about fanservice anymore that they get upset. People don't accept that these actors make a shit ton of money with this and swear to God they're great friends or more without knowing their real relationship. I think those are such crazy levels of brainwashing. I'm saying this because I was seeing some really fucked up tweets about OhmNanon. And my God, how clueless these people can be.*

**George:** It's just that OhmNanon were already friends before the series, so they already have a relationship, you know? Then people see them being close and OBVIOUSLY THEY ARE SO IN LOVE YES. Meltdowns. The only reason people won't be the same as they were with MikeKrist is because everyone is afraid of *levar lampadada*<sup>33</sup>. *They were close friends already, Nanon said once the closest to him were Chimon, Tawan, Toptap and Ohm. I think these were the only four he mentioned, but yes, obviously the whole thing is intensified by the ship.*

**Teodora:** *I admit that I fall a lot into my imagination... but I do it quietly and aware... that they make money to make it look like there's all this love involved. Am I deluding myself? Yes. Do I know I'm deluding myself? Yes. Do I like deceiving myself? Yes. Do I embarrass myself on social media by saying it's real? No way. As much as OhmNanon know and love each other, we don't know for sure what is real and what is acting based on what we see in these programs. There is no way to be sure of anything, and people keep trusting it blindly (and for nothing, because it will make zero difference in these people's lives) (Messages on the Shin-woo Squad, Dec. 15, 2021, my emphasis).*

Teodora's comments exemplify the shipping creative process, which both comes from the fandom and is stimulated by the Thai BL industry, whose intensity increases with the marketing efforts adopted by the production companies. From that, I believe it is the field of uncertainty that allows the shipping game. When official truths are suspended, there is room for the production of unofficial truths, the fruit of fan imagination subsidized by companies. Through Fernando's comment, in turn, we do not only reveal a conflict regarding the consumption of fanservice, but a valuable distinction between "sick" and "non-sick" fans, between Thai fans, who would be the prime example of pathological expression, and Brazilians, who frighteningly would be reaching the same level as their Asian counterparts. This idea is one of the reflections of the exercise of moral differentiation that I observed during the fieldwork, in the various



“social situations” (Gluckman, 2010) that I witnessed, in which fanservice and shipping also figured as catalysts for orientalist discourses (Said, 2003 [1978]) and moral panic (Cohen, 2011 [1972]).

## CONCLUSION

From the fieldwork, I realized that shipping and allowing yourself to interact with fanservice was not indisputably equivalent to ignoring that most actors would be heterosexual or falling back into invasion of privacy and digital harassment. Consumption of fanservice and engagement in shipping brought forth other meanings for the actors’ practices, which went beyond and were related to the series. The fanservice proved to be a stimulus to the imagination, consuming it and reimagining it from the fans’ point of view did not appear to be directly a problem. There was no intrinsic evil to fanservice and shipping, as long as there was balance and respect for the actors’ private lives, and no crossing of the line between real reality (personal life), fictional reality (fanservice) and fiction (the acting in the series).

Although these practices may confuse newcomers as to the real status of the actors’ relationship, the fandom itself tried to leave no room for doubt (for example, when someone asked if a ship was in a real relationship) about the fictional nature of that relationship. There was a handling of uncertainties and a playfulness with entertainment beyond (but always in relation to) the series. The issue was less about being deceived, and more about being able to play along with the actors, thus identifying themselves as a “healthy shipper,” one that preserved the limits of the actors’ privacy and their moral integrity. Therefore, criticizing or “hating on them” when they acted with other actors (other than their usual pairing), harassing them, and stalking their girlfriends when they publicly announced their relationships were behaviors of “toxic shippers.”

With regard to shipping and fanservice, my focus in this text was not on the speeches of those who supported them, considering that discussions about these themes generally appeared in terms of their contestation and extermination. But those who engaged in shipping felt uncomfortable with the repeated vigilance and moral reprimand to which they were subjected when they exercised their fan identity through the consumption of fanservice, whether through comments about the ships or the production and sharing of content (e.g., edits, images, fanfics) related to them. There was a feeling of attrition and curtailment of the freedom of imagination. There was also an explicit discomfort with the cognitive judgment that accompanied surveillance and the moral regulation exercised over them. These fans were considered childish and brainwashed, as if they did not know what they were consuming and the implications of fanservice. The fandom attributed to its members a much greater naivety than they actually had or appeared to have.

With that being said, I conclude that whoever conceives and criticizes fanservice, while considering the behavior of some fans, should criticize the behavior itself, and not necessarily fanservice as a whole. If some fans go beyond what is acceptable, invading the artists' privacy (through persecution and contact with their close relatives, such as parents, for example), this is an issue that says more about how consumption has been carried out, the disrespect and the misunderstanding of the line that separates the personal and the professional. The person doing fanservice is not asking to be monitored or restricted. It can no longer be argued that it consists of deceit or bad faith, something that was done to mislead the public, nor can it be imputed as the root of all the problems related to it.

We must redirect our judgments from the work itself to the abusive practices of both those who consume and those who promote this service. In the development of their functions, actors are rendering artistic services. The work performed does not authorize anything other than the consumption of what is being offered. Situations of moral and sexual harassment and persecution, in these cases, cannot be seen as consequences of someone's professional activity. To assume the opposite is to justify that the actors are responsible for any harassment they may suffer inside and outside their respective work environments: for example, in a restaurant, someone recognizes an actor and thinks they can touch him without consent, sexually harass him or invade his privacy and intimacy in a private moment.

If someone assumes that fanservice and shipping must end so that the harassment and persecution of actors also end, that same person must think that the above hypothetical situation stems more from the profession of the actor who was attacked, and less from who authorized themselves to attack said actor. Or both conclusions might be put on the same plane, as if there were an equivalence between them. Fanservice cannot be considered a problem in itself. Moral harassment and invasion of privacy are or at least should be. And they are not stimulated by the professional activity of the actors, but by a notion that the Other must be subject to someone and that their personal space is always available for public access, since the actors may be interpreted as media commodities due to their role in the industry. We are talking about power relations that do not originate in an isolated manner and are not disconnected from other practices.

Finally, we cannot leave out possible abuses by those who manage these businesses. We must invest more and more in discussions on ethical issues involving shipping and fanservice in a qualified manner, taking into consideration all the social agents that are involved in these phenomena.

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## NOTAS

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised and expanded version of a discussion raised in my master thesis (Torres, 2023), under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Eliana

Tânia Martins de Freitas. The article's translation and revision was made by Diana Rocha. The research from which this article derives was carried out with the support of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES).

- <sup>2</sup> The position and change of nouns (“consumer,” “fan” and “researcher”) reveal a shift in the paradigm of attention and identification. If before I consumed them with little interaction with the fandom and without academic motivation, that motivation overlaps with a ludic consumption at the same time that it also reinforces it when I take the series as an object of research and I also end up inserting myself in the “enunciative productivity” of the fandom (Fiske, 1992).
- <sup>3</sup> Refers to groups of fans of audiovisual content of Asian origin who work in its translation, subtitling and informal availability to the general public (Urbano, 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> Male, cisgender, gay, white (self and hetero-identification), from São Paulo.
- <sup>5</sup> Different ways of referring to the identity of a general BL series fan. “Blzeiro” is a particular Brazilian terminology in which the suffix “eiro” refers to a notion of collectivity, but seems to have fallen into disuse, giving way to “bl stan”, which also becomes an incorporation of the English language nomenclature.
- <sup>6</sup> The Thai BL industry dominates the market for these series in Asia. In this sense, the “consumption experience” (Pereira; Siciliano; Rocha, 2015) of the fans I interacted with mostly occurs in relation to Thai series and the functioning of their industry. However, the consumption of productions from countries such as South Korea and Japan are often producing inflections in this “consumption experience” (Pereira; Siciliano; Rocha, 2015) of Thai series and criticism of their industry.
- <sup>7</sup> In the promotion of the Latin American edition, only the ship SantaEarth, consisting of the protagonists in *My Only 12%* (2022) and *Seven Project* (2022), was present. Prem, who co-starred with Boun in *Until We Meet Again* (2019), *Even Sun* (2022) and *Between Us* (2022), for reasons I do not know, was not accompanying his partner on the tour. This, however, did not impact fan interest in the event. Two weeks after the opening of sales, more than 85% of the tickets had already been sold, according to information from Far Music Entertainment, producer of the fan meeting.
- <sup>8</sup> The research data were obtained by different means of interactions with fans, sometimes with more proximity through dialogues, sometimes just as an observer. Not all individuals of the research were direct interlocutors, since I had indirect collaborators, who entered in it through my observation of their interaction through posts and comments concerning BL content on Twitter and Telegram. With that being said, I was unable to gather data to create a sociological profile of each interlocutor or collaborator, and that is the reason why some individuals cited in this article have a sociological description and others do not. Furthermore, given the difficulty of obtaining some personal information, the pseudonyms were assigned to the individuals mentioned in this research considering different aspects. When it was possible to get access to their pronouns and their names on social media

platforms, I maintained consistency between them and the pseudonym. For example, if someone was named Pedro or Ana and had “he/him” or “she/her” in their profile, I opted for using a “male” or “female” pseudonym respectively. If the person did not provide their pronouns but had a “male” or “female” name, I also chose a name which fits their displayed name. If the person did not provide their pronouns and did not have a name in their profile, I chose to use a neutral pseudonym. These choices were made to respect the gender self-determination of individuals and to avoid misgendering.

- <sup>9</sup> Names followed by an asterisk are the nicknames by which actors, producers and directors introduce themselves and are popularly known by the public.
- <sup>10</sup> Although it emerged in Psychiatry, the concept of parasocial relationships or parasocial interactions is used and theorized in the sense provided here by the literature on media and communication. This is a way of describing “[...] the interaction between users of mass media and representations of humans appearing in the media (‘media figures,’ such as presenters, actors, and celebrities) [...]” (Giles, 2002, p. 279). These representations include the characters. According to Garcia and Moura (2014), “[...] parasocial relationships are expressed through concrete personal investments, such as dedicating time to follow the news, getting emotionally and cognitively involved with the context or scenario of action, and sometimes even disbursing financial resources to be aligned with the universe that involves ‘being admired.’” (Garcia; Moura, 2019, p. 2, my translation). They can be positive or negative, occur from three forms of engagement: cognitive, affective and behavioral; and vary in five dimensions: kinship; admiration; differentiation; social comparison and *schadenfreude* (Garcia; Moura, 2019, p. 3–2, my translation).
- <sup>11</sup> Quote (1.00000 THB = 0.02921 USD) and conversion made on Wise, on July 30, 2023.
- <sup>12</sup> Ages consulted on the website MyDramaList, on July 26, 2023.
- <sup>13</sup> Female, 21 years old, cisgender, bisexual, white (self and hetero-identification), from São Paulo.
- <sup>14</sup> Male, 29 years old, cisgender, gay, white (self and hetero-identification), from Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>15</sup> Female, 36 years old, cisgender, pansexual, white (self and hetero-identification), from Paraíba.
- <sup>16</sup> Carlos Bolsonaro, son of former president Jair Messias Bolsonaro, is known, like his father, for his prejudiced and discriminatory speeches against vulnerable social groups, especially against the LGBT+ population. Currently, he holds the position of city council member in the city of Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>17</sup> The “couple” NeoLouis, formed by Neo\* Trai Nimtawat and Louis\* Thanawin Teeraphosukarn, was discontinued after *The Eclipse* (2022), and currently GMMTV has paired Neo with Mark\* Pakin Kunaanuvit in *Only Friends* (2023), a ship that might have a short duration, especially after the investment in *My School President* (2023) and in the “couple” MarkFord, formed by Mark and Ford\* Arun Asawasuebsakul.
- <sup>18</sup> It is worth mentioning that more than one tag can be used in a video, so

the numbers obtained from views do not reflect the number of views in publications with only one of the tags. In a recent search on TikTok, the updated numbers are #boyslove (34.6 billion), #boylove (14,9 billion), #boysloveboys (612.4 million). Other tags such as #boylovethailand (791.3 million), #boylofefans (503.8 million) and #boyloveseries (189.5 million) are remarkable

- <sup>19</sup> Female, 26 years old, cisgender, bisexual, white (self and hetero-identification), from São Paulo.
- <sup>20</sup> Male, 29 years old, cisgender, gay, mixed race/white (self-identification and hetero-identification respectively), from Minas Gerais.
- <sup>21</sup> In the source text: “[...] sur les marchés effectifs, que sur des propositions de mise en marché (les « marchés de papiers ») ou tout simplement sur les discours en faveur d’une marchandisation [...]” (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016, p. 48).
- <sup>22</sup> In the source text: “[...] les valeurs que le corps social et les gouvernements souhaitent maintenir ou promouvoir [...]” (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016, p. 49).
- <sup>23</sup> In the source text: “[...] un enjeu localisé en « problème public » [...]” (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016, p. 50).
- <sup>24</sup> In the source text: “[...] de populations vulnérables qu’il s’agit de protéger par le marché ou, au contraire, de protéger du marché. La notion de population vulnérable apparaît alors comme une pièce centrale pour la compréhension des marchés contestés. Elle désigne des collectifs dont l’existence va ou risque d’être bouleversée par l’apparition ou la disparition d’un marché contesté.” (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016, p. 50).
- <sup>25</sup> Steiner and Trespeuch (2016) note that a contested market has norms, rules, social microstructures that organize interactions to ensure the development of transactions. Likewise, it is assumed that fanservice has its rules that facilitate its commercialization: for example, one of the most commented among fans would be that of not exposing relationships in public, so as not to jeopardize the sale of the ship.
- <sup>26</sup> In the source text: “[...] l’existence d’une population « dangereuse » de marchands composés de ceux qui ne savent résister à l’appât du gain [...]” (Steiner; Trespeuch, 2016, p. 71).
- <sup>27</sup> Both are protagonists in *Unforgotten Night* (2022).
- <sup>28</sup> Quote (1.00000 THB = 0.02838 USD) and conversion made on Wise, on June 25, 2023.
- <sup>29</sup> Quote (1.00000 THB = 0.02921 USD) and conversion made on Wise, on July 30, 2023.
- <sup>30</sup> Expression that names the phenomenon of circulation and transnational popularization of South Korean popular culture.
- <sup>31</sup> In literal translation, it means “flower boys.” Category used to name boys who have a delicate face and a generally thin body with fair skin, an almost androgynous gender expression due to their feminine appearance and metrosexuality (Oh, 2015). This ideal of masculinity would have emerged in the context of the Asian crisis and intensified with the 2002 World Cup, having a decisive influence on Japanese bishōnen literature (Turnball, 2009; Xiaolong, 2013). Other categories are mobilized by fans to define “[...] predominant male prototypes in



K-pop [...]” (Oh, 2015, p. 63), such as *beast boy*, which, unlike the first, represents more masculine bodies, defined by a virile demeanor and muscularity.

<sup>32</sup> Both acted in *Bad Buddy* (2021), in which the first played Pran, and the second, Pat. Childhood neighbors whose friendship was not possible due to the rivalry between their families; the story shows their path from enemies to lovers (a narrative in which the protagonists start as “enemies” and develop a romantic relationship at the end of the story).

<sup>33</sup> Being afraid of *levar lampadada* is the same as being afraid of being the victim of homophobia. *Tomar lampadada* has become an expression to refer to situations of exposure to physical risks when one is (or is mistaken for being) gay. It comes from the case, which caused a commotion in November 2010 in São Paulo, in which a man was the victim of physical assault by young people who hit him in the face with a fluorescent lamp. I would like to note how this discursive elaboration that converts an experience into action is accompanied by a playfulness as an element of confrontation with homophobia, as this expression highlights and denounces the bizarre forms of aggression of which LGBT+ people are the target and the precarity (Butler, 2016 [2009]) of their lives, which can be violated at any time, in any way and with any materials. For more information, see ‘Pensei que ia morrer’, diz jovem agredido com lâmpada na Paulista. (‘I thought I was going to die’, says young man attacked with a lamp on Paulista.) **G1**, 14 Dec. 2010. Retrieved from: <https://g1.globo.com/sao-paulo/noticia/2010/12/pensei-que-ia-morrer-diz-jovem-agredido-com-lampada-na-paulista.html>. Access: 28 Oct. 2022.