

The Image Communication of Transgender Women through Films and Television Drama in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the influences of media, in particular, films and television drama towards the image of transgender women in Thai society. The qualitative approach has been employed, having 10 LGBT prominent advocates who are the gender diversity leaders as the focus group; and another of 10 volunteers who have contributed themselves for watching Thai transgender-woman-theme films and drama – 9 films and 1 TV drama, being released and aired from 1985 to 2019.

To be précised, the study framework concentrated on script related to the projection of transgender women image; the intention of script writers and producers; and the perception and opinions towards the characters.

The findings are that: 10 LGBTIQ leaders have suggested that positive image of transgender women should be promoted and portrayed since most of films and drama always present the characteristics of transgender women in nonsense ways – overacting, funny, inconsiderate. On the other hand, some have been presented in a tragic end cause by love poisoning, heart breaking failure. As a matter of fact, transgender women are like other sex preferences people – straight, gay, lesbian, etc., who can love and can be loved as well. For volunteer viewers, their opinions are in the same direction. Most films and television drama have been focused on minor characters – comedian; and tragic end plot. Only few films and drama have depicted a heroic role, such as *The Iron Lady*; however, the outstanding role is still fallen on straight characters. It is interesting to find that there are some modern and contemporary films that elevate the image of the transgender women in various perspectives and are widely acclaimed by critics and public, i.e. *It Get Better*.

Keywords : Kathoey (transgender women, lady boys), perception, communication, transsexual, sex, gender, image, transgender

INTRODUCTION

The diversity of sex preferences appeared and was conducted for centuries. At present, in the modern world, the expression of sex identity is widely presented in many forms, in many symbols and in many channels, aiming to voice out for equality and acceptance. The biggest movement is formed and known as LGBTIQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer.

The demand for equal rights of LGBTIQ has continuously performed. It is first widely recognized when the Hollywood film *Philadelphia* starred by Oscar laureate Tom Hank was released. Tom as *Andrew Beckett*, a successful senior in a large law firm, had to hide his homosexuality and patient status as a HIV infected. After his hidings being revealed, he was fired and the case was brought to court. The issue of discrimination was raised and the attended by public. Andrew was accepted on his sex identity by public (One Breathe, 2008). Though the case ended with victory, but he later died. The main point was that his words in court, in particular, the equal right as a human being, brought the understandings from his family and society. What he did was not in vain. This film has opened a new era of equality and the origin of “LGBT” and later “LGBTIQ.”

UNDP (2014) launched a report mentioned that LGBTIQ has been formed to voice for their rights and equality chronologically. In 1924, the first campaign by the Human Right Organization founded by Henry Gerber kicked off to protect the right of gay people in Chicago. In 1930, Leli Elbe, a Danish painter, was the early transgender woman who received the sex reassignment surgery. In 1696, there was a big demonstration by gay community at

Stonewall Inn, New York City, due to an injury of a transvestite attacked by polices. A year later, in 1970, a parade was run to commemorate the Stonewall riot, which was marked as the first Gay Pride Marches in the U.S. history. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association announced that homosexuality was not a mental disorder disease. It was in 1978 that Gilbert Baker, a San Francisco artist, created the gay pride flag, having 8 colors originally. In 1997, Ellen Degeneres, a well-known American TV show host admitted herself to Time Magazine that “I am Gay.” The Netherland, in 2001, was the first country in the world to legalize the same-sex marriage. Johanna Siguroardottir, the former Prime Minister of Iceland, was the first openly LGBT head of state. The largest Gay Pride Parade was organized regularly. The great tragic event occurred in 2016 when 49 victims were killed in gay nightclub in Orlando, the U.S. The event created the hashtag #LoveIsLove went virally on social media. Justin Trudeau was the first Prime Minister of Canada who joined the Gay Pride Parade in Toronto in 2016. Recently, in 2017, Taiwan was the first Asian country that legalized same-sex marriage (Wassamon Traisakda, 2017).

1.1 LGBTIQ Characters in the Movie

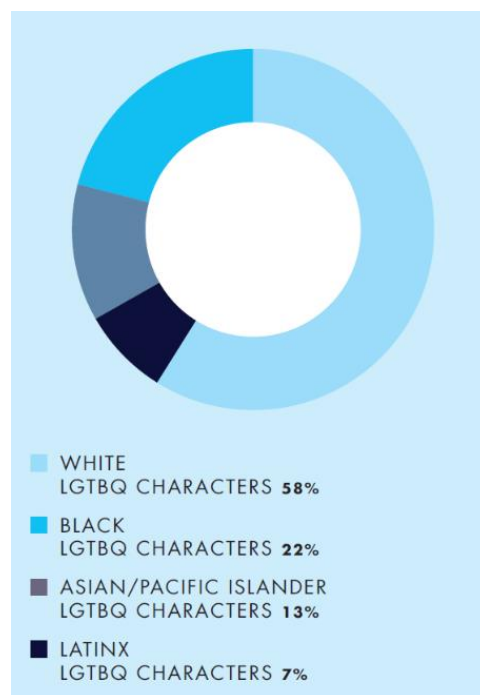


Figure 1.1 LGBTQ role in movies

Source: GLAAD (2017) Retrieved from <https://www.glaad.org/sri/2019/overview>

1.2 LGBTIQ Roles in the Movie

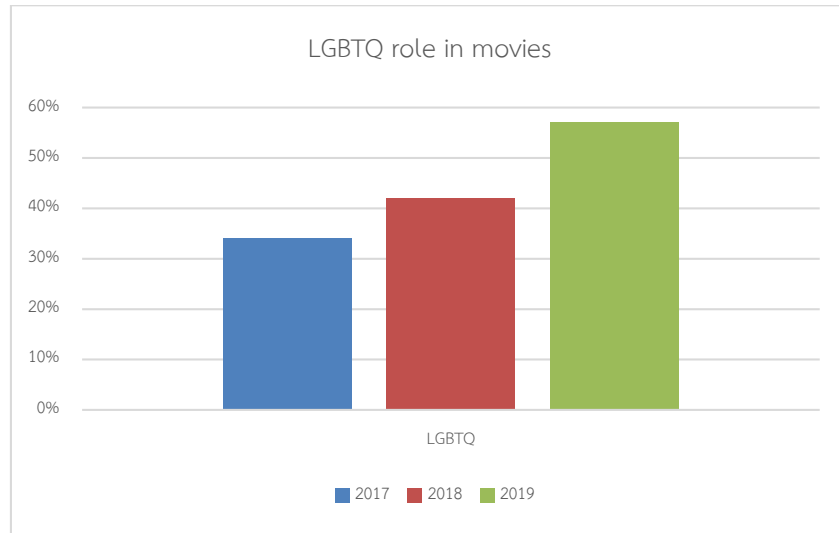


Figure 1.2 LGBTQ role in movies in 2017

Source: GLAAD (2017) Retrieved from <https://www.glaad.org/sri/2019/overview>

In Thailand, LGBTIQ has been introduced and campaigned for the acceptance of the society. Traditionally, Thai society has been known for male-dominant society; and the strong males are the leader of the families, society and the countries. The glass-ceiling condition covers Thailand for a long, long time – female is placed as a wife, a mother and a house keeper; working women are seldom promoted on top. Other forms of sex preferences have been hidden since there is no space for them. They are not accepted by their own families, communities and society. Ones who reveal themselves may be humiliated, abused and hurt in some certain way. They have to behave by force to act straight to their genders. One case study which is worth mentioned is the case of transgender celebrity Ann Jakrapong Jakrajutathip, The CEO of JKN Global Media. She gave an interview to a media that “I was born in the wrong body and I have to prove myself. I don’t want to hide my identity. Some always say being a gay or LGBTIQ cannot be successful. I have got a lot of bias, discrimination, bullying and disrespect. I have to work very hard to be successful. I want my parents to be proud of me. I can stand at this point to announce to the world that success does not depend on gender.” (Khaosod newspaper, 2018)

Table 1.1 Movies with LGBTIQ Appearances

No	Title	Year
1	The Last Song	2528
2	Tossie's Hurly-Burly	2530
3	The Iron Ladies	2543
4	Go-six	2543
5	Saving Private Tootsie	2545
6	Beautiful Boxer	2546
7	Cheerleader Queens	2546
8	Spicy Beautyqueen in Bangkok	2547
9	Kung Fu Tootsie	2550
10	The Odd Couple	2550

11	Sassy Player	2552
12	Oh My Ghosts!	2552
13	It Gets Better	2555
14	The Fallen Leaf	2562

The case of Ann is an example of the effort to call for equality and acceptance in Thai society of LGBTIQ. There are a lot of transgender women on the street who need the same floor. However, some stereotypes were wrongly perceived by public leading to unaccepted status overall (Piyalak Pohiwan, 2011.) It was obviously seen that the images of transgender women portrayed via media are humorous, sexy in appearance, flirt, unsuccessful in terms of work and love affairs, and unaccepted. This also caused the entire transgender, some with good profile, to be categorized as the third or fourth class people (Piyalak Pohiwan, 2011.) In addition, films like Oh My Ghosts, The last Song, The Iron Ladies, Spicy Beauty Queen in Bangkok, The Danish Girl, and Beautiful Boxer portray the attempt of transgender women for their spaces in the society; however, these seemed to confirm the image being prior conceived (iLaw, 2018.)

It cannot be denied that the image of transgender women at present is not in the positive perspective overall. There is not much good impact although some gain big success. The influence of media in terms of beliefs and social values has wrongly standardized the image of transgender women via inappropriate contents. Watcharawat Suesat and Petcharin Sirasunthorn (2015) said that news related to transgender women were mostly in a negative way; and they were not fostered by the society. Therefore, media is a real influencer for promoting image of transgender women. There have been some efforts to elevate the image of those via films and drama, as 14 exemplified, the acceptance is still limited. The impact of globalization, the freedom outlook, as well as the role of transgender women in the society has opened more space, especially for the millennium generation. One notion is that these groups of people are existed in the society. The image promotion in order to be accepted on an appropriate way can bring a good communication and harmonious living in the society. As a result, the growing-up teens, who always imitate their idols, will automatically with well understanding.

With all afore-mentioned, the study on the “Image Communication of Transgender Women through Films and Television Drama in Thailand” is conducted, aiming to promote the LGBTIQ status to be appropriately accepted in Thai society. The clear and correct communication among members in the society can benefit the whole public, especially teens who are going to gear and move the country in a stable way.

The Communication Concept

Communication is one vital element of human life since the existence of man is partly due to communication among themselves, among unknown people. Men also receive information from various sources for their own sakes / for the society’s benefits. With this circumstance, the communicative potential is a factor to identify the quality of a certain society (Pakit Treesakul, 2013, p. 19.)

The Role and Influence of Media

Media is an institution stands between two poles: the upper pole – an unreachable body as a sender; and the lower pole – community, organizations, associations and individuals as receivers who are looking for changes in the society (Roschongpon Komolsewin and Booncharn Thongprayoon, 1997.) Media links the receivers and public, mass with other institutions, or among institutions. As a result, media seems to be the windows for opening vision, and offering good experience to audiences on the basis of non-bias. Media is also like a mirror that reflects the facts, reveals the truth, and resolves all spectacles expected by people (Sukhum Chaloeysub, 2003). Therefore, media has a string influence to direct the society.

The Image Concept

The meaning of “image” has been identified variously (Wittaytorn Torkaew, 2006.) Amnat Sukdudech (1991) identified that image, based on PR, was a mental picture on a particular object, living or non-living. Oxford online dictionary gave the second term of image as “the general impression that a person, organization, or product presents to the public”, which might best describe the word.

The Sex Diversity Concept

All mankind are created with sex identification to segment the fundamental groups: male and female. Later, environmental factor mold those to possess gender, meaning that one should behave due to gender framed by society. However, “sexuality or sex preferences has become a variable owing to the changes on social values, norms, system, mindset, desire, sexual performance, partner concept, ideal couple, and sexual conduct. These matters blended with social aspect, political aspect, economy aspect and cultural aspect, leading to sex diversity” (Krittiya Archavanitjakul, 2013.) From this concept, the variety of sex preferences has diversified the conventional groups – male and female, to LGBTIQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (UNDP, 2014.)

The study employed the qualitative research approach to survey and find out the information and data from the question being raised. Films and TV drama were concentrated in order to investigate the message being delivered from script writer or producer to the audiences. The method for collecting data was divided into two criteria: the analysis on films and TV drama with transgender women involved during 1985 to 2019; the in-depth interviews with the focus group who were LGBTIQ leaders to explore some directions to promote and elevate the image of transgender women in Thailand.

The Population of the Study

The population was categorized into 2 groups.

1. The analysis on films and TV drama with transgender women involved during 1985 to 2019 was done by the people representatives who were randomly selected to view and express their opinions towards the films and TV drama. Transgender women were excluded.

2. The in-depth interview was conducted with the focus group - LGBTIQ leaders and prominent transgender women.

The responses from people representatives towards the roles of transgender women appeared in films and drama were in positive ways. The viewers recognized the existence of this group in the society; realized how struggle they had to encounter in various forms. Primarily, most were portrayed under in negative ways – love failure, commit suicide and no acceptance. Although, the role received more recognition, it was still conditionally limited. *The Fallen Leaf*, a TV drama, was an example of change in which tragic end was originally plotted. The leading character, a transgender woman, was survived twistedly by the intention of the script writer and the producer. Some films maintained humorous and colorful characters. On the other hand, some presented good images and motivated transgender women like *The Iron Lady* and *Beautiful Boxer*.

Regarding in-depth interview, the focus group simultaneously expressed their opinions towards the image of transgender women in today’s society; 1) transgender woman *The Fallen Leaf* was focused and accepted on their outside beauty (70 -80 percent in average); 2) the real transgender women were recruited to act in film which were indifferent *The Last Song*; *The Iron Lady*; and *Tootsie’s Hurly-Burly*, and were positively acclaimed in those period of time; 3) the roles of colorful supporter, humorous guys, overacting characters, depressive and mournful person approaching to death end were constructed by the intention of the producers; 4) the image of transgender women was partly formed and illustrated by media; 5) the roles of transgender women should be various – hero, villain or everyday people, meanwhile, nonsense humorous or lusty behaviors should be avoided.

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