

“Their skirts are too short!” and “He’s gay!”: Backlashes on Transnational Popular Culture Consumption in BlackPink and Bright’s Case Studies

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Abstract

The internet era has facilitated online streaming and social media platforms to burgeon, causing the flow of transnational pop cultures across regions and also offering diverse consumption of media content from around the globe. In Indonesia, the discussion on pop culture has often been centered on the proliferation of K-Pop's popularity among local audiences. Besides, the Boys Love (BL/Y) series from Thailand has also gained considerable interest in the last couple of years. While the consumption of K-Pop and Thailand's BL series in global mediascape is widely accepted without much controversy, incongruous feedbacks are present among Indonesian audiences, particularly pointing at the clash of ideological perspectives between its Muslim conservatives and the youth. The conservative group considers the media contents "vulgar" and "too liberal," while the latter defends them as part of contemporary youth culture and the freedom of expression. This paper then examines two study cases: Shopee's advertisement featuring the K-Pop group, BlackPink, and the case of Ruangguru's ambassador from Thailand, Bright Vachirawit. This paper uses qualitative textual analysis to focus on the two contested ideas (global versus local). The findings illustrate how BlackPink's female bodies and Bright's fluid identity as a lead actor in the BL series have been stigmatized and adjusted to become more acceptable commodities among pious audiences. This study helps to reveal the complexity of global consumption in a Muslim majority country where audiences' cultural identity construction has always been contested. Furthermore, it provides a glimpse of Indonesian society's current perspectives on gender and tolerance.

Keywords: Boys Love; gender fluidity, ideological disjuncture; K-Pop; transnational popular culture

Introduction

*“Halo, Semua! Blibli brand ambassador, Park Seo Jun-*imnida.*”
[Script of blibli advertisement taken from (blibli.com, 2020)]*

The twenty-three-second advertisement from one of the most prominent Indonesian e-commerce, Blibli.com, displayed a Korean male actor known as Park Seo Jun. As its newest brand ambassador, he showed his speaking skills in both Indonesian and Korean languages. It

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is a common sight nowadays, flipping through the television or YouTube channels to find Korean figures in the local media, considering the K-Pop (or Hallyu)'s popularity among audiences in Indonesia. As a result of globalization, media convergence and world interconnectedness have allowed regional cultural acts to break through the previously predominant western media's influence within Asia and Southeast Asia. The success story of the K-Pop group named BTS, for instance, works as an unprecedented case of regional culture's domination of the global media scenes in the last few years. The success story is often treated as a cultural anomaly, yet it continues to gather millions of fans offline and online today.

The proliferation of the Korean Wave, known as K-Pop in short, has become the subject of scholarly discussion in the last few decades. The studies on Indonesian audiences consuming transnational popular culture are also nothing new. Iwabuchi, Muecke, and Thomas (2004) explain the influx of regional cultural products, often called the "Trans-Asia cultural traffic" phenomenon, as the contra-flowing to the dominant flow of Western media into Southeast Asia (meaning Indonesia included as well as a part of the region). The flow observably started in the late 1990s to early 2000s. In the case of regional cultural expansion, Japan, through its "Cool" Japan policy, regardless of critics of its effectiveness, has been at the forefront with products such as anime, comic books, and J-drama. Then it was followed by Taiwan, South Korea, and recently Thailand, which slowly shifted from consumer to producer of pop culture.

The internet and web 2.0, as part of youth cultures, have become a prominent medium for exchanging information and shared interests, specifically in pop-culture consumption. Youth are usually tech-savvy, and (social) media is often discussed for its mixed influences on young people as their primary users during the formative years. It can convey certain beliefs, perspectives, or crucial agendas. The flow of regional pop culture products across national boundaries, such as K-Pop and Thai Series, whose audiences are essentially younger generations, has been compelling in contemporary culture consumption and shaping ideological views. The significance of global pop-culture consumption among youth is heavily supported by their time in the virtual world. It is even notably increasing since the early Covid 19 pandemic in late 2019.

Based on the survey conducted by globalindex.com (Kemp, 2020), the percentage of online and digital activities has increased as more people are forced to stay at home. The survey reported the proliferation includes the following actions: watching shows and films on streaming services as high as 57%, spending time on social media 47%, using messenger services 46%, listening to music on streaming services 39%, spending time on mobile apps 36%, playing computer and video games 35%, creating and uploading videos 15%, and listening to Podcast reached 14% increase. Various pop-culture contents, including K-Pop and Thai series, are some of Indonesian youth's most widely consumed content. In Southeast Asia regions, the ASEAN Post (The ASEAN Post Team, 2019) survey has reported concerns and fears from parents over their children's social media safety, with 68% for inappropriate content, 56% for potential negative influence, 47% for cyberbullying, and 34% for cyberbullying % for general well-being.

Regardless, as media convergence seems to enforce a relatively homogenized consumption, transnational pop culture and, in this case, its media personalities are often used as a marketing strategy to boost the commercial products' promotion. Brands in Indonesia, such as Shopee and Ruangguru, have decided to hire transnational media personalities (Korean and Thai) as their brands' representatives. Wherein the culture is consumed in different localities, the potential clashes between global and regional ideologies are often overlooked. This paper

then aims to narrate the disjuncture and backlashes resulting from consuming various transnational pop culture products within Indonesian society, which has been getting Islam-centered since the reformation era in 1998. Also, it looks closely at how different negotiating strategies are employed through the two study cases. The following research questions are addressed: How is transnational pop-culture consumption contextualized in Muslim-majority Indonesia? What do BlackPink's Shopee advertisement and Bright's appointment as Ruangguru's ambassador imply about Indonesians' views on morality standards and tolerance? This study will try to enrich the discussion on how transnational contents are consumed and adjusted while consumed in different localities. Moreover, this study will give insight into how the female bodies, gender fluidity, and tolerance issues are contested in either participation or resistance under the Islamization hegemony.

Contextualizing transnational and transculturality of pop culture consumption

Transnational perspectives on global popular culture's consumption have been utilized by many scholars (i.e., Jung & Shim, 2014; Siriyuvasak & Hyunjoon, 2007) to understand the cultural and socio-political contexts when consumed across national borders. The viewpoints mostly correspond to the advancement of (social) media platforms as a digital mediation, specifically in studying fan practices that allow transnational cultures to flourish as a subculture within different cultural settings. Ritzer (2015) mentioned three dominant theories in analyzing global cultural flow: cultural differentialism, cultural convergence, and hybridization. Differentialism refers to the concept of a culture that is stubbornly unaffected by globalization and that there is a preventive barrier to the cultural flow. Convergence, in his book, is defined as a perspective based on the argument that globalization and cultural flows create sameness and growing similarities due to the weak barrier. The third theory, hybridization, is central to this discussion, referring to the cultural hybrids resulting from local-global cultural flow interactions.

Appadurai (1996, in Ritzer, 2015) proposed the concept of 'scapes' to analyze the global flow. The suffix '-scapes' states that the idea is heterogeneous rather than homogenous. The first category is called ethnoscaping, or the mobilization of groups and individuals in the world we live in today. As the second concept, technoscapes means the global flow of technology and information. The third concept, finanscapes, is defined as the rapid movement of money and funds across the nation. Mediascapes particularly pointed out the capability of electronics and media to create and disseminate information. Lastly, the ideoscapes concept is primarily political images and contains state-produced ideologies used to gain/remain in power. The concept of 'scapes' helps to analyze that the cultural flows can be seen as an independent process from a nation-state and can occur within the disjuncture.

This paper also analyses the cultural flow within the disjuncture by focusing on the hybridization approach. Although hybridization has been criticized for its loose application across multiple study fields, it is a valuable framework for studying global consumption. Michaels (in Abu-Er-Rub et al., 2021) elaborates on hybridity as a term stemming from a Latin word meaning "...the off-spring of a tame sow and a wild boar, hence a half-breed or bastard." While it was initially associated with rather a negative connotation, the meaning of hybridity has transformed into a critical term in postcolonial theory. Jin (2018) explains hybridization "...of transnational popular culture should be understood as to how local cultural players, including governments and cultural producers, negotiate with global culture, utilizing them as resources

through which local actors create their unique spaces.” Hence, this paper contextualizes hybridity in the discussion on transnationalism and globalization.

Furthermore, while transnationalism is essential, critiques mentioned that it has failed to include other aspects such as age, gender, sexuality, fan culture, and the meaning-making and effects outside the context of nationality in the investigation. Thus, the perspective of transculturality is also needed to understand “... these flows of culturally specific meaning, affect experiences, and contexts across borders (Morimoto and Chin 2017; Annett 2014 in McLAREN & Jin, 2020). Transculturality (Abu-Er-Rub et al., 2021) works as an antipode to the post-colonialism approach. Post-colonialism approach mainly focuses on the center-periphery dichotomy and its Eurocentric tendency and determining ‘cultures’ as a geophysical entity based on national borders. Transculturality, on the other hand, enables us to rethink ‘culture’ from a different point of view, for instance, by considering regional acts and peripheral phenomena as a site for theory and understanding that culture is constantly changing and exchanging beyond the state’s borders.

Popular culture consumption amidst the intensification of pop Islam and Islamization in Indonesia

Korean Pop culture, known as K-Pop/Hallyu, must be understood as a hybrid product. Korean Pop music, for instance, takes concepts and influences from various cultures/genres, such as western R&B, hip-hop (rap), and EDM, combined with its traditional Korean music and typical Japanese idol culture (Parc & Kim, 2020). It first entered the Indonesian market around the late 2000s with TV dramas such as *Hotelier*, *Full House*, and *Princess Hour*. It was soon followed by Korean music, which received massive popularity among local audiences. The acceptance of K-Pop as a subculture was proven through many appropriations in the local production, which created a pastiche or hybrid pop culture, such as the emergence of Indonesian boy/girl groups (SMASH, Cherrybelle, etc.) and TV drama adaptation (see Tambunan, 2018).

Moreover, the recent admiration for Thailand’s Boys’ Love/Y (*wai*) series has shown the expansion of global pop culture consumption among Indonesian youth. Notably, the new genre of Thai mediascape, the Boys’ Love/Y (*wai*) series, has become increasingly popular among middle-aged and younger female fans. Baudinette (2019) stated that Boys’ Love (BL) is a genre of homoerotic media originally from Japan, often named alternatively as ‘yaoi’ (usually found in comics and anime), whose storyline is centered around *bishonen* (handsome males) aimed at heterosexual female audiences. In the Thai television drama or often called *lakhon*, the representation of queer sexuality is often treated as a side story until the emergence of series, such as *Love of Siam* in 2007 and *Lovesick the Series* in 2014-2015 that broke the mainstream contents of the contemporary Thai mediascape (Habibah et al., 2021; Baudinette, 2019). MyDramaList (in Baudinette, 2019) reported that from 2015 to 2019, forty-seven Boys’ Love-theme TV series were broadcasted in Thailand. The queer-themed series continues in recent years, including the internationally famous *2gether* series, starring Bright Vachirawit as its lead actor. This series, followed by *Still 2gether* and *2gether The Movie*, has made Bright Vachirawit a prominent figure locally and internationally. Contrary to popular belief that the success of queer media representation can be translated to gender inclusivity, any sexual expressions that deviate from the heterosexual system persist in being chastised within Thailand society.

With K-Pop and Thai’s Boys Love series gaining public recognition, what about the controversy of their consumption in Indonesian then? To discuss the consumption of

transnational pop culture in Indonesia, we shall include the intensification of Islam as one of the political and ideological forces that have manifested rapidly into the local media since the end of the New Order era. As the previous regime heavily controlled the flow of information and media contents, the reformation era in 1998 brought a cultural vacuum that allowed Islam to seize power quickly, as Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country. Heryanto (2014) has coined the term 'Islamization' as an intricate set of processes between religious piety and global capitalism, resulting in the contemporary Islamic lifestyle. 'Pop Islam,' in the context of Indonesia, was observed through the emergence of Islamic literature, such as *dakwah* (preaching), Islamic-themed films, religious songs, and many more contents displayed on various platforms. *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*, for instance, has become the most successful Islamic film in Indonesia, which influences the latter media production to incorporate more Islamic values into their content.

Nevertheless, the proliferation of Pop Islam has become an aspiration toward the modern Islamic lifestyle and the new standardized piety and morality within its society. Akmaliah (2020) noted the shifting perspectives of Islamism in many Islamic states pushed by the rise of new authorities, such as Iran, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern nations, since the 1900s. The political outlook has transformed "... in the form of individualization that concentrates on the shaping of 'modern Muslim lifestyles,' which signifies the transformation of Islamism from a political ideology into its use the embodiment of personal piety." In Indonesia, as Islamization emerges, the growth of the population, as well as the easy access to technology and social media, has resulted in a phenomenon where the Islam hegemony can mobilize the society's narrative on personal piety. Such observation is visible in how Pop Islam is negotiated in what should be the private sector. Then the commercialized version of religion is internalized into audiences' Muslim identities.

Placing BlackPink and Bright Vachirawit in the context of the discussion, their role as media spectacles or media personalities has been assumed to hold power in influencing their audiences or fans. Specifically, they can alter their views on certain notions, including how they view the world, lifestyles, their perspectives on gender, or other social issues. While most of their audiences are the younger generation, the type of media and cultural consumption is crucial in the teenage phase of identity formation. According to Judith Butler's gender performativity theory (McDowell & Sharp, 1997), gender is a performative construct besides being socially constructed. Gender is performative, where an individual normalizes the performance of gender for others and self-conviction. Also, it is reiterative as the society collectively and repetitively is doing gender. It is citational, meaning it cites specific feminine/masculine role models. Some scholars (Knights, 1990 in Hancock & Tyler, 2007) emphasize that individuals use various material and symbolic resources in their social construction of self.

Global cultural acts, such as BlackPink and Bright Vachirawit, colliding with commercialized Islamization in Indonesia, create dissonance in the local audiences' consumption. In the case of K-Pop, there are dilemmas since, apart from being a hybrid culture that receives influence from western media that encourages freedom of expression, there have been many critiques on how the K-Pop industry has promoted gender stereotypes and inequality. The female K-Pop idols have often been sexually objectified by "revealing costumes and suggestive, often erotic choreography filled with sexual innuendo...in mainstream K-pop girl idols images, music videos, and live performances" (Lin & Rudolf, 2017). The media depiction of female K-Pop idol bodies is argued to have been constructed within the sexism lens; to fit the perspective of a male-dominated society. Meanwhile, in Bright's controversy, gender

fluidity has become the focus of discussion. Gosling (2018) elaborates on gender fluidity as a perspective toward non-conforming gender neutrality expressed by genderqueer persons to challenge the gender binary dichotomy and the assignment of gender identity at birth (cisnormativity). The discussion of media personalities performing gender fluidity has received attention over the last few years.

Cultural norms and views on gender have continued to change in different regions. The more it is steeped and shaped by the millennials and new generations at a pace that has never been seen before, thanks to advanced technology and fast disseminating information. Ironically, Indonesian conservative audiences, despite consisting primarily of the urban middle-class with a more progressive and moderate outlook on globalization, are typically close-minded regarding religious norms. The problem arose as transnational products were consumed within different localities. Contrasting beliefs and perspectives on social issues, such as gender, sexuality, and morality, has become the main points in power struggles between liberalist and conservatives (Brenner, 2011). Previous studies have elaborated comprehensive literature on pop cultures using case studies in peripheral countries with various lenses, such as hybridity, transnational, and transcultural consumption. However, there are gaps, such as how the inclusion of critical aspects (such as gender, age, sexuality, etc.) is missing.

This paper aims to fill the gap by analyzing the disjuncture and gender and ideological aspects of pop culture consumption in Indonesia. Finally, my argument is that the consumption of global cultural flows from South Korea and Thailand into local Indonesian media has created ideological disjuncture and a fraction between Indonesian youth and the conservatives. 'Threats to morality,' often expressed by the conservatives regarding youth modern cultural consumption, involves liberal perspectives and the constant struggle of minority groups' sexual and gender legitimation. The Indonesian conservatives disagree with the liberal ideas embedded in the transnational products, which could affect their identity construction. Thus, some adjustments are deemed necessary to mediate both sides.

Methods

This study is analyzed using a qualitative textual analysis method to investigate the transnational pop cultures (K-Pop and Thai Boys' Love/Y (*wai*) series) consumption, ideological disjuncture, and gender perspectives. Brennen (2017) differentiates the qualitative research method in social science as "interdisciplinary, interpretive, political and theoretical in nature" rather than "systematic, precise and accurate" as it is in quantitative research. Textual analysis varies from discourse analysis, ideological critiques, historical analysis, open-ended, in-depth interviews, and case studies. This research chooses explicitly to use case studies to identify research topics. For this study, data were retrieved from YouTube (youtube.com) and other social media platforms (instagram.com, twitter.com, and other social media platforms). Kim (2009) defines *YouTube* as a website for free video-sharing, which is quite distinctive from other online forums. Twitter, for example, is considered a giant mass of texts, although it also includes other forms of social media features such as texting, messaging through DM, and image-sharing. Conducting a textual analysis on YouTube and social media platforms (Instagram and Twitter) is beneficial to get perspectives from various sources and investigate the meaning-making within a specific society's cultural and political context. Marwick (2014) also noted that the qualitative method helps to affirm issues about social norms, appropriateness, or more significant social concerns in using media and technology.

The study cases are then analyzed through their contents. Shopee Indonesia's advertisement on YouTube and its official Instagram account are reviewed to capture the images of BlackPink with their controversial attires. At the same time, the pictures and Twitter users' interaction on Bright Vachirawit's Ruangguru ambassadorship are used to examine contrasting ideologies and perspectives on content preferences, gender, and religious piety, particularly between Indonesian youth and Islam conservatives. Further review of media images post-controversy is also included to explain the adjustment and negotiating strategy so that the cultural products/representation becomes accepted commodities among pious Indonesian audiences.

Blackpink's Shopee advertisement, female bodies, and accepted piety

“A group of women wearing scantily clad clothes that barely covers their aurat (an Islamic term to describe the parts of the body a person should cover up for the sake of modesty) –what kind of message are we instilling in the pure souls [of this country]?”
(Coconuts Jakarta, 2018), par. 8)

The above paragraph was a critique posted by an Indonesian woman, Maimun Herawati, on www.change.org (Change.org, n.d.). She refers to the broadcast of the 47 seconds of Shopee's advertisement featuring BlackPink, a popular girl group from South Korea, dancing to their hit song *Ddu Du Ddu Du* while promoting the e-commerce application. It was an ad to celebrate the 12.12 'Birthday Sale,' planned with a follow-up concert featuring BlackPink. Her claim was further elaborated that the ads could potentially harm the morality of the younger generation as shown on national television channels during prime time. The petition gathered 100.000 supporters from fellow Muslim conservatives in Indonesia. It also successfully urged the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI) to cancel the advertisement on seven broadcasting TV channels (South China Morning Post, 2018). In response, the Indonesian BlackPink fandom, or BLINK, and other K-Pop enthusiasts made a counter-petition by asking Maimun to leave the country, which gathered almost 45.000 votes. Regardless of the controversy, the following event, Shopee Road to 12.12 Birthday Sale concert in January 2020, was held successfully with all tickets sold out. An additional date was set to accommodate fans' demands (The Jakarta Post, 2018).

This phenomenon is an excellent study case to show potential backlashes when transnational popular culture products are consumed in different localities. Within the Indonesian mediascape, the emergence of Pop Islam—and Islamization—has helped shape public piety and the moral standard of its audiences. It is essential to note that Islam in Indonesia differs from Islam in the Middle East. Rather than fundamentalist, Islam in Indonesia can be considered moderate, tolerant, and democratic, even though the growing radical group has become a challenge in pursuing an inclusive society (Wanandi, 2002). In terms of a gender perspective on female bodies, the last few decades have shown the proliferation of the hijab phenomenon. As part of the contemporary Muslim lifestyle, *hijabization* comes from the word *hijab*, the Arabic word for a veil. Hijabisasi then refers to the shifted meaning of hijab in recent years as more of a fashion statement than Islamic practice, closely related to “...Islamic politics and current consumption (Izharuddin, 2015).” Under the conception of Islamic norms and piety, women are supposed to cover up their body parts, and those who do not conform tend to be criticized.

Once again, K-Pop is also a hybrid product and has received many cultural influences. The most noticeable one comes from Western pop culture, which emphasizes freedom of expression, including fashion and styles. In Shopee's advertisement, BlackPink members wore short skirts, revealing part of their upper legs (Figure 1). As consumed in the Indonesian context, the conservative Muslim considers the wardrobe inappropriate. It deviates from the conception of Islamic norms that are usually propagated and constructed in local media content. The clash illustrates the different ideological perspectives (*ideoscapes*) between Islam (conservatives) and liberal (youth). The fans, primarily the younger generation, have expressed dissatisfaction with the critics judging their idols' outfits. Growing up within the proliferation of Islamization, the younger generation often has to face the dilemma of their identity construction being contested. On the one hand, they want to be part of global cultures and able to consume mainstream media content. On the other hand, they must accommodate their choice of cultural consumption according to their society's accepted piety. Most of the younger audiences argued that the conservative's perception was shallow and 'close-minded.'



Figure 1. BlackPink's wardrobes for Shopee's advertisement
(Source: Instagram/shopee_id (shopee_id, n.d., p.))

As a transnational hybrid product in nature, K-pop certainly brings cultural perspectives from its origins, whether the Korean Confucianism belief or western values adopted. Moreover, consumed within cyberspace expansion in which the emergence of (social) media and streaming platforms has enabled polarization of public narratives that may lead to religious (and gender) intolerance, K-Pop struggles to break cultural barriers into the Indonesian mainstream culture. Instead, it remains as subculture consumption among its militant fans. Then, BlackPink appearance in the mainstream media, in this case, Shopee ads, has caused tension (participation versus resistance) between the fans and the conservatives. As a nation with a growing population, people of productive ages (15-64) make up the audience and are mostly emerging middle class with lower education. Unfortunately, Indonesia's intensification of digital connectivity is not aligned with its citizens' digital/media literacy. Syam and Nurrahmi (2020) cite Livingstone's definition of media literacy as the audiences' "...abilities to access, understand, and critically evaluate media content and create messages in various forms." In the context of social media, media literacy is elaborated as "the set of abilities and skills where aural, visual, and digital literacy overlap. These include the ability to understand the power of images and

sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new form” (New Media Consortium in Syam et al., 2020). Indonesian audiences are prone to misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda/radical thoughts narrated through media content without adequate media literacy.

The controversial wardrobe used by BlackPink (body-fitted, short skirts, and one-piece dress) in the Shopee advertisement shows how hegemonic masculinity and misogynistic propaganda are easily internalized due to the low level of media literacy. With the plural demographic of its citizen consisting of many religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds, people wearing such fashion styles of BlackPink can be easily spotted in several big cities in the country. Nevertheless, issues on public modesty regarding clothes as identity markers are constantly debated. Muljadji and Sekarningrum (2019) write about the different treatments received by Indonesian women who wear hijabs and those who do not. Hijab, as mentioned previously, has become more of cultural, symbolic identity in Indonesia, and it is also often associated with the religious obedience of Muslim women. Negating from the pluralistic nature of its citizen, non-Muslim and Muslim women who decide not to wear hijab often receive negative sentiments, such as being compared to candy without a wrapper, a sinner, and a cause for sexual harassment. Muslim women who wear the contemporary veil style instead of the hijab (covering the chest area) are also perceived negatively by the conservatives as not eligible to be religious. Misogynistic views on women have prevailed in Indonesian society, not only in controlling female bodies but also on issues of gender stereotypes, discrimination, and gender-based violence. Therefore, the case of the BlackPink petition, although it is a pity, was not a very surprising phenomenon.

Shopee, in the end, decided to take down the BlackPink ad from significant TV channels due to the dispute. Further, to negotiate the disjuncture and backlashes, Shopee made several adjustments. The adjustments include appropriating the promotional advertisements (in billboards and printings) and animating the lower body parts of BlackPink members (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Shopee’s advertisement after censorship/petition
(Source: Instagram/shopee_id (shopee_id, n.d.))

The strategy, however, has failed to consider a more inclusive approach to resolve the cultural disjuncture. Instead, appropriating the wardrobe into animation helps impose and

validate the conservative's values to the larger society. Nevertheless, the backlash and disjuncture are inevitable in the consumption of transnational pop culture. Cultural adjustment is necessary to mediate conservative audiences and K-Pop militant fans with their liberal cultural outlook. However, careful approaches are essential to include women and other minority groups that often become the victims of a structured gender system in a patriarchal society, such as Indonesia.

Brights as Ruangguru's ambassador, and the acceptance level of LGBTQ+ in Indonesia

Another discussion on the consumption of transnational cultural products among the younger generation in Indonesia is the rising popularity of Thai pop culture, which has gathered many fans in the last few years. The Thai TV series is among the products easily accessed through various streaming platforms. In 2020, a romantic-comedy series "2gether The Series," produced by GMMTV, one of the leading Thai entertainment agencies that actively makes Boys' Love/BL/Y (*wai*) genre content, has received substantial international popularity with more than 100 million views on the LineTV platform. It gained more recognition as the series was posted on a free streaming website, YouTube.com. Since people spent more time at home during the covid-19 pandemic, many more audiences who were familiar with Thai pop culture actively looked for more content to watch, bringing them to 2gether the series. The series was made into the second season, "Still 2gether," and a movie, "2gether the Movie", which premiered in significant theaters in Japan on June 4, 2021. The series received several awards, such as the 2020 Maya Awards' Favorite TV Series of the Year, 2021 Line TV Awards for Best TV Series, Series of the Year, Most Followers of the Year, Most Hearted Content of the Year, and 2021 Nataraj Awards for Best Drama Soundtrack.

The series popularity has made Bright Vachirawit, as the lead actor, become one of the most beloved actors in Thailand and the world, proven by his staggering number of social media followers (Instagram followers increased to 13.2 million in 2022). He was also a brand ambassador for local and international brands from Toyota to Burberry (Triadanti & Zakaria, 2022). In 2021, one of the Indonesian biggest Edu-tech companies, *Ruangguru*, held voting among its users to choose its next ambassador (or they called it 'study friend'). The candidates include prominent pop-culture icons, such as Korean singer-songwriter IU, Korean singer Kang Daniel, K-Pop idols Haruto Watanabe and Na Jaemin, Thai actor Bright Vachirawit, and many more (Ruangguru, 2022). Later, Bright Vachirawit was chosen as the new ambassador based on the voting results and his academic achievements, including receiving a full scholarship from Thammasat University, majoring in Engineering, and Bangkok University International majoring in Marketing (Trendmap.com, 2021).

Unfortunately, despite his achievement, his appointment as *Ruangguru's* ambassador received backlash and criticism on social media (mainly on Twitter). The critiques ranged from attacking his role as a gay man in his TV series, claiming that Bright is gay in real life, to the accusation that his role in the BL series would negatively influence the students' morality at *Ruangguru* (Figure 3). Bright never publicly identified his sexual orientation, not that it needs to be clarified anyway, so the claim is primarily baseless. Some critics also expressed dissatisfaction with *Ruangguru* for their decision to cast a BL actor. Some tweets of the critics were written as follows:

“What?? Baru tau dong kalo doi ternyata main film bl. Mana sepupuku tadi nontonin sampe jejeritan”

(Translation: What?? I just know that he starred in the BL film. My cousin was watching him and screaming vigorously)

The identity of Bright as a BL actor and his gay role in the series was stigmatized. In the series, he played the role of Sarawat, a famous university student with a love interest in a male university cheerleader named Tine. The story then revolves around the journey of Sarawat to be in a romantic relationship with Tine, who is previously depicted as a heterosexual character. In Thailand, the BL genre, which resonated from *bishonen* culture in Japan, along with growing awareness of LGBTQ+ culture within its society, has been celebrated and industrialized into “...literary festivals, new publishing houses, television series, YouTube channels, and several fan practices” (Prasannam, 2019). Meanwhile, fan practices of transnational pop culture in Indonesia, such as fans of K-Pop or fans of BL series, shall remain within the sub-culture domains. Fan activities shall be kept within the fan community unless they want to create controversy against mainstream audiences. Thus, Bright Vachirawit’s appearance in the mainstream media has been seen as inappropriate as it went beyond the sub-culture community. In Indonesian media, homosexuality—or gender-fluid character—is rarely seen being represented, except in several progressive movies, such as CONQ, a 2014–15 web series, and the 2019 film directed by Garin Nugroho, *Kucumbu Tubuh Indahku*, that promote issues on feminism and LGBTQ+. Bright’s gender fluidity depicted through his works in the Thai BL series was seen as a contrast to the morality standard in Indonesia.

The discourse on sexuality in Indonesia has been challenged since the end of the New Order regime, as the government maintained its ‘neutral’ stance towards sexual and gender diversity. Blackwood (2007) specifies that, albeit the representation of LGBTQ+ appeared in the Indonesian printed and visualized media since the 1990s, mainstream media refuses to normalize this subject. Further explained, Islamic teachings and traditional customs in Indonesia endorse the notion of ‘natural’ gender differences, and any relationship born out of a heterosexual context is improper. Boellstroff (in Maharani, 2018) explains that hegemonic heterosexuality (heterosexism) in pluralist Indonesian culture, in fact, does not entail hostility towards non-normative sexualities and shall not be misinterpreted over and above. The intersecting customs, modern culture, and politicized religion have made the discussion of gender and sexuality in Indonesia becomes problematic. Therefore, media personality, such as Bright Vachirawit, with his association with gender-fluid, homosexual character, has created a clash between Islamic conservatives versus liberalist fans, who believe in Indonesian culture’s pluralist, progressive nature. The fans then countered the backlashes by tweeting their opinions and criticizing the conservatives for being close-minded, such as:

“Masalahnya gak semua berpikiran terbuka apa lg di indo yg notabnya BEBEL mau prestasi atau sepinter apapun bright pasti kena hujat juga...padahal Bai gbbgtu acting doang. Nah disini yang lurus gak bnr aja byk”

(Translation: The problem is that not everyone is open-minded, even more in Indonesia, primarily STUBBORN, regardless of the high-achiever or how smart Bright is, people will still judge...even though he is only acting (--in the series). Here, straight people who do evil deeds are plenty)



Figure 3. Comments and critics towards Brights as *Ruangguru's* brand ambassador
(Source: Overthink!, 2021)

If we refer to the gender performativity theory, the role of Bright (and BlackPink), as public figures and the brand ambassador of the related products, held power to influence the gender (and morality standard) construction among their viewers/fans. While the global flow has allowed them to receive international recognition, it is also possible that their identity and views on specific issues, including gender, might cause disjuncture and backlashes while it is consumed in different localities. The convergence of mass media works as a double-edged sword, either in maintaining hegemonic political ideology or as a medium for alternative political meanings. Sexual panics that emerged among the conservatives over the non-normative sexual representation in Bright's case have manifested in textual violence (such as through Twitter comments) to delegitimize the gender and sexual minority groups. According to a survey conducted by PEW Research Center (Poushter & Kent, 2020), the acceptance of homosexuality in Indonesia is the lowest in Asia, with 80% saying homosexuality should not be accepted by society. Also, peer support for the LGBTQ+ community in Indonesia is often reported as 'illegal,' and some TV programs blatantly promote the anti-LGBTQ+ movement and voice homophobia (Listiorini et al., 2019). The laws and government regulations also show discriminatory cases toward the LGBTQ+ community in Indonesia (Mahaseth & Goel, 2021). For instance, Vice-President Jusuf Kalla's 2016 request to the UN Development Program to stop the \$8M LGBTQ+-related funding. Rodríguez and Murtagh (2022) also mention the problematic draft bills, such as the 2020 draft of the Family Resilience Bill, which might include legislation to force rehabilitation programs to sexual minorities into being 'cured' of their non-normative genders and sexualities. Also, the draft of the crime bill for the Prevention and Handling of Sexual Violence (PPKS) has just been legalized since it was first proposed years ago.

To negotiate the backlashes and critiques on Bright Vachirawit's appointment, during the ROBOGURU live streaming event, Bright was seen wearing a decent blue Batik shirt to create a cultural closeness and a good image among Indonesian audiences. He also sang several English songs, *Coldplay's Fix You* and *Ed Sheeran's Thinking Out Loud*, and taught audiences the Thai language. Through the display of foreign language capabilities, the aim was to portray Bright's credentials and academic ability as the brand ambassador of an education service

platform. Howbeit, the issue of gender fluidity was not fully addressed, and it was treated as if it never happened. If we compare the strategy of Shopee in addressing disjuncture, there has not been much done in terms of gender and body politics in Bright's case. In BlackPink's case, major editing was used in the promotional ads to alter wardrobes that involved female bodies. In contrast, the strategy used in Bright's case only involved body politics at all. Is it because of gender differences between the two, as one is a group of females and the other one is a male? Does it have to do with female and male body representation (as they are produced within the male and female gaze) in media? Does it correlate with the long history of women's oppression within the patriarchal structure? These questions linger as the answers should be analyzed further through various feminist lenses. Nonetheless, I encourage further examination of this topic in future literature. Finally, the phenomenon of the backlashes and resistance towards transnational pop culture products in terms of gender, for instance, from Bright's *Ruangguru* case and BlackPink's Shopee ads, illustrate challenges in creating a more inclusive and gender-friendly media (and society). It requires collaborative efforts from different aspects of culture and is still a far-fetched future for Indonesia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the consumption of transnational pop-culture products pinpoints potential backlash and ideological disjuncture while being consumed in different localities. With Islam securing more political influence within cultural and mediascapes in Indonesia after the reformation era (post-1998), although it is a shame, the general piety and moral decency of Indonesian society are expected to be drawn more upon Islamic doctrines. BlackPink and Bright Vachirawit's cases are some examples that accentuate these ideological/generational clashes in pop-culture consumption. As more representation of gender minority and gender-fluid roles in modern mass media continues to emerge, the complexity of transcultural consumption with crucial aspects such as gender, sexuality, and politicized religion under hegemonic masculinities remains challenging to be analyzed. The globalized world has enabled media to be a powerful medium to either validate the predominant ideology or provide options for seeing gender diversity within society. Transnational pop culture, often hybrids with local cultural perceptions, will continue to flow across the nation's border. Finally, it is necessary to pay attention to cultural adjustment and negotiation to alleviate the tension and increase awareness and acceptance of minority groups, including the LGBTQ+ community. Although it might seem grandiose, analyzing and understanding the core problems of backlashes and disjuncture through cultural products will help promote the tolerance level or raise awareness for a more inclusive, progressive society.

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