

Constructing Thai Boys' Love (Y) Series as Soft Power through Thai Online

News Media ¹

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Abstract

This study examines how Thai online news media construct Thai Boys' Love (Y) series as soft power within the broader discourse of the creative economy. While previous studies have primarily focused on the content, audiences, and fandom of Thai Y series, less attention has been paid to how news media shape public understandings of Y series as cultural and economic resources. Drawing on agenda-setting and framing theories, this study investigates how Thai Y series are framed in Thai online news media in relation to the creative economy and soft power, and the communication processes through which online news media construct Thai Y series as soft power. The study employs a convergent mixed-methods design, analyzing 966 news articles published by 15 Thai online news platforms between 2020 and September 2025. Computational social science techniques, including topic modeling and word-frequency

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analysis, are combined with quantitative and qualitative content analysis to identify patterns of news coverage and media framing.

The findings indicate that online news coverage of Thai Y series is dominated by general news and press releases, while explicit references to soft power remain relatively limited. Nevertheless, news linking Thai Y series to the creative economy, tourism, national image, and soft power increased during 2023–2024, suggesting a gradual shift in media framing. Rather than functioning solely as entertainment reporting, online news media increasingly position Thai Y series within broader narratives of cultural industries and national development.

The study argues that the communication of Thai Y series as soft power follows a predominantly bottom-up process. Rather than originating primarily from state-led communication, soft power discourse appears to emerge through the commercial success of the entertainment industry before being amplified and interpreted by online news media and subsequently incorporated into broader policy narratives. These findings contribute to communication scholarship by highlighting the mediating role of online news in transforming commercially successful entertainment into nationally recognized cultural resources.

Keywords: Boys' love, Y series, soft power, creative economy, computational social science

Since the mid-2010s, Thailand has experienced slower economic growth alongside structural economic challenges, while the COVID-19 pandemic further affected several sectors of the economy (SCB EIC, 2025). Within this context, policy discussions have increasingly emphasized the creative economy and soft power as strategies for generating economic value and enhancing Thailand's international cultural profile (British Council, 2023; Moonsarn, 2025). As a result, the media and entertainment industries have increasingly been viewed as potential drivers of economic development by transforming cultural assets into products with both commercial and symbolic value.

One of the most prominent examples of this development is the emergence of Thai Boys' Love (Y) series, a genre portraying romantic relationships between male characters. Originally regarded as a niche entertainment genre, Thai Y series have evolved into cultural products with expanding domestic and international audiences (SCB EIC, 2025). Their influence extends beyond television and streaming platforms to include fan meetings, merchandise, location-based tourism, celebrity branding, and transnational fandoms. According to SCB EIC (2025), the market share of Y series within Thailand's entertainment production industry is projected to increase from 0.7% in 2019 to 3.9% in 2025, representing an estimated market value exceeding 4.9 billion baht. The broader Thai entertainment industry was also projected to generate approximately 126 billion baht in 2025 (SCB EIC, 2025), reflecting the growing economic significance of creative content.

However, the growing influence of Thai Y series cannot be explained solely by their narratives, production quality, or commercial success. As Nye (2004) argues, cultural popularity does not automatically become soft power; cultural resources acquire soft power only when they are interpreted and recognized as having broader cultural and national significance. This suggests

that communication processes play an important role in transforming successful entertainment into cultural resources associated with the creative economy and national development.

In this context, online news media may serve as important communicative intermediaries by increasing the visibility of Thai Y series, interpreting their broader significance, and connecting entertainment news with discussions of culture, the creative economy, tourism, and public policy. Rather than functioning solely as channels for disseminating information, online news media may influence how Thai Y series are understood within broader public discourse through repeated reporting, interviews, feature stories, and analytical coverage.

From the perspective of communication theory, online news media influence public understanding not only by determining which issues receive sustained public attention but also by shaping how those issues are interpreted. Agenda-setting theory explains how repeated media coverage contributes to the public salience of particular issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2005), whereas framing theory examines how media emphasize particular perspectives that influence public interpretation (Entman, 1993; Weaver, 2007). Together, these perspectives provide an appropriate theoretical framework for examining how Thai Y series are positioned within broader discussions of soft power and the creative economy.

Although scholarship on Thai Y series has expanded in recent years, existing research has focused primarily on content, audience reception, fandom, representation, and consumption practices. Comparatively less attention has been paid to how online news media participate in constructing public understandings of Thai Y series as cultural and economic resources. This distinction is important because the communication of soft power involves not only the production of attractive cultural content but also the media processes through which that content is framed,

circulated, and connected to broader national narratives. Understanding these communicative processes requires attention to the agenda-setting and framing functions of news media, which influence what issues become salient and how they are interpreted by the public. Against this background, the next section presents the research objective and research question that guide this study.

Research Objectives and Research Question

The objective of this study is to examine how Thai online news media contribute to agenda-setting and framing public understandings of Thai Boys' Love series as soft power and as resources within the creative economy.

Accordingly, this study addresses two following research questions

RQ1. How are Thai Boys' Love (Y) series framed in Thai online news media in relation to the creative economy and soft power?

RQ2. What communication processes enable Thai online news media to construct Thai Boys' Love (Y) series as soft power?

Literature Review

This study draws on four complementary bodies of literature to examine how Thai online news media construct Thai Boys' Love (Y) series as soft power. Soft power and the creative economy provide the conceptual context for understanding the cultural and economic significance of Thai Y series, while agenda-setting and framing theories offer communication perspectives for examining how online news media shape their public visibility and meaning. Together, these

concepts provide an integrated framework for analyzing the role of online news in connecting entertainment, public discourse, and national cultural development.

Soft Power

Traditional conceptions of power emphasize the ability to influence others through political, economic, or military means. Nye (2004), however, reconceptualizes power by introducing the concept of **soft power**, which refers to the ability to shape the preferences and behavior of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. According to Nye, culture, political values, and foreign policy constitute the principal sources of soft power. Importantly, cultural popularity alone does not automatically become soft power; rather, cultural resources acquire soft power only when they generate attraction that influences attitudes or behaviors in ways that advance broader national objectives.

This perspective is particularly relevant to contemporary media environments, where cultural products increasingly circulate across national boundaries through digital platforms and news media. In the case of Thai Boys' Love (Y) series, their international popularity may provide the cultural appeal associated with soft power, but popularity alone is insufficient to explain their broader cultural significance. Understanding Thai Y series as soft power therefore requires examining the communication processes through which they are framed, interpreted, and connected to wider narratives of national identity, economic development, and cultural value.

Within the Thai context, previous studies similarly suggest that developing Thai Y series as soft power requires more than audience popularity. Srijinda (2023) argues that realizing the soft power potential of Thai Y series depends on systematic strategies and collaboration between public and private sectors. Likewise, Nuchanatand and Ramanust (2022) demonstrate that marketing

communication and brand value contribute to audience engagement and the commercial value of Y series, thereby linking them to Thailand's creative economy. Taken together, these studies suggest that the transformation of Thai Y series into soft power is a communicative process involving multiple stakeholders and strategic meaning-making rather than an automatic consequence of commercial success.

Despite these contributions, comparatively little attention has been paid to the role of online news media in this process. Existing studies have focused primarily on production, marketing, or policy, whereas the communicative role of news media in constructing Thai Y series as cultural resources has received relatively limited empirical examination. This study addresses that gap by examining how Thai online news media frame and position Thai Y series within the discourse of the creative economy and soft power.

Creative Economy

The creative economy refers to an economic system in which creativity, knowledge, cultural capital, and intellectual property are transformed into goods and services with economic value. Howkins (2001) argues that contemporary economies increasingly rely on ideas and creativity as productive resources, while the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 2001) defines creative industries as activities originating from individual creativity, skills, and talent that generate value through intellectual property.

In Thailand, the Creative Economy Agency (CEA) similarly conceptualizes the creative economy as an economic system that utilizes creativity, research, cultural capital, and intellectual property to generate economic and social value. The CEA identifies creative content and media as one of the country's key creative industry sectors (Creative Economy Agency, n.d.).

Thai Boys' Love (Y) series fall within this creative content and media sector. Recent industry reports suggest that the genre has expanded beyond television production to encompass streaming platforms, fan meetings, tourism, merchandise, celebrity branding, and international licensing (SCB EIC, 2025). These developments indicate that Thai Y series increasingly function not only as entertainment products but also as cultural and commercial assets capable of generating value across multiple sectors of the creative economy.

Agenda-setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory explains how media influence the public salience of issues. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) seminal study demonstrated that the prominence of issues in news coverage is closely associated with the issues that audiences consider important. Rather than determining what people should think, agenda-setting theory proposes that the media influence what people think about.

McCombs (2005) further conceptualizes agenda-setting as the transfer of issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. Although digital media have transformed contemporary communication environments, agenda-setting remains relevant in explaining how attention is distributed across multiple media platforms. Kitikamdhorn (2019) argues that agenda-setting continues to operate within digital media ecosystems, although interactions among traditional news media, online platforms, and social media have made agenda formation increasingly multidirectional.

In the context of this study, agenda-setting theory provides a useful framework for examining how sustained news coverage may contribute to increasing the public visibility of Thai

Y series beyond fan communities, positioning them within broader discussions of the entertainment industry, creative economy, and soft power.

Framing Theory

While agenda-setting explains the prominence of issues, framing theory examines how those issues are interpreted. Entman (1993) argues that media framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in ways that promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, evaluations, and possible solutions. Weaver (2007) further suggests that agenda-setting and framing are complementary processes: agenda-setting influences what audiences pay attention to, whereas framing shapes how those issues are understood.

This distinction is particularly relevant to Thai Y series. Online news media do not simply report developments within the entertainment industry; they also frame Thai Y series through different interpretive lenses, including entertainment, business, tourism, cultural industries, and soft power. Examining these framing patterns makes it possible to understand how media discourse may expand the public meaning of Thai Y series beyond entertainment and position them within broader narratives of Thailand's creative economy and national cultural development.

Computational Social Science

Computational social science applies computational techniques to large-scale social data in order to identify patterns that would be difficult to examine manually (Cioffi-Revilla, 2017). In media research, computational approaches can improve the coverage, consistency, and replicability of large-corpus analysis, but automated outputs still require contextual and theoretical interpretation.

Lewis, Zamith, and Hermida (2013) propose a hybrid approach in which computational procedures organize and summarize large textual datasets while human researchers define

categories, validate model outputs, and interpret meaning. This approach is appropriate for Thai-language news data because word segmentation, colloquial expressions, cultural references, and ambiguous uses of terms require human review. Previous computational studies of Boys' Love media have employed corpus analysis, opinion mining, sentiment analysis, and topic modeling to examine media representations and audience discourse (Aung et al., 2024; Kijratanakoson, 2023; Wen Ma et al., 2024).

Taken together, these theories and methods explain how media communication works as an interconnected process. Repeated news coverage increases the visibility of Thai Y series, while framing links them to broader cultural and economic values, particularly soft power. Computational analysis then helps identify these recurring patterns across a large collection of news articles. Therefore, this study integrates these perspectives rather than treating the four theoretical concepts and four analytical techniques as separate components.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a convergent mixed-methods design to examine how Thai online news media construct the public meaning of Thai Boys' Love (Y) series as soft power. The analysis draws on a dataset of 966 online news articles published by 15 Thai online news platforms between 2020 and September 2025, a period during which Thai Y series became increasingly associated with the creative economy and soft power. Rather than examining Thai Y series as cultural products in themselves, the study investigates how online news media frame, interpret, and circulate narratives that position Thai Y series within Thailand's broader creative economy and soft power agenda.

The unit of analysis is an individual online news article. Articles were included if they reported on Thai Boys' Love (Y) series or related topics, including actors, production companies,

streaming platforms, industry activities, tourism, international markets, and discussions connecting Thai Y series with the creative economy or soft power.

The convergent mixed-methods design combines quantitative, computational, and qualitative approaches to provide complementary perspectives on media representation. Quantitative and computational analyses identify overall patterns of news coverage, whereas qualitative content analysis provides contextual interpretation of those patterns.

Data analysis comprised four stages as follows:

First, quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002) was conducted to classify articles according to news type, information source, level of soft power references, types of soft power represented, and year of publication. Cross-tabulation was subsequently performed to examine relationships among these variables and identify patterns of media representation.

Second, topic modeling (Blei et al., 2003) was employed to identify the dominant themes within the news corpus. This technique made it possible to detect recurring patterns in large volumes of textual data and examine how discussions of Thai Y series were associated with the creative economy, cultural industries, and soft power. Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was used to identify groups of terms that frequently co-occurred across documents (Blei et al., 2003). Candidate models containing between 2 and 50 topics were evaluated. Models were run 10 times without fixing a single random state in order to assess stability across randomized solutions. Model selection considered topic coherence, followed by qualitative review of keywords and representative articles.

Third, word-frequency analysis (Manning & Schütze, 1999) was conducted to identify the most frequently occurring keywords in the dataset. Examining lexical patterns provided insight

into the semantic framework through which online news media represented Thai Y series and the broader concepts most associated with them.

Finally, qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was undertaken to interpret the findings generated by the preceding analyses. Rather than treating quantitative and computational results as standalone findings, qualitative interpretation integrated evidence from content analysis, topic modeling, and word-frequency analysis to examine how online news media construct the public meaning of Thai Y series. Particular attention was given to how news discourse framed Thai Y series as entertainment products, creative industries, economic resources, and potential sources of soft power. This integrative approach enabled the study to move beyond identifying patterns of media coverage and toward explaining how those patterns contribute to the communication of Thai Y series within broader narratives of the creative economy and national cultural development.

Data Sources and Platform Selection

Platform selection began with the 20 highest-ranked websites listed by Truchits at the start of data collection. Non-news websites and sites from which historical articles could not be systematically retrieved were excluded. Thirteen news platforms were retained, and two entertainment-oriented platforms were added to ensure adequate coverage of the Y-series industry. Selection was guided by audience reach, topical breadth, accessibility of historical content, and diversity of media type.

Data Collection

Articles were located through internal site searches, manual collection, and web scraping by Python. Browse AI was used for selected websites whose structures made direct extraction difficult.

The principal search terms were the Thai and English equivalents of “Y series,” “Boys’ Love,” and “BL series.” The collection strategy aimed to retrieve all articles about Thai Y series rather than only articles that explicitly used the term soft power; soft-power references were coded after collection.

Coding Scheme

A structured codebook was developed to classify each article. The principal variables were types of news, sources of information, levels of soft power mentions, types of soft power, and publication year.

Table 1

Coding Variables

Variable	Categories	Operational principle
Types of news	General news; Press release; Analytical article; Interview; Feature; Review	Journalistic form and purpose of the article
Sources of information	Government; Private sector; Individual	Main actor or organization quoted or used as the central information source
Types of soft power	Film, Drama and Series; Tourism; Music; Food; Fashion; Books; Arts; Design; Festivals; Sports; Games	Cultural or creative sector connected with the article
Levels of soft power mentions	Low; Medium; High	Low: entertainment/reporting without a meaningful soft-power connection. Medium: indirect connection, such as overseas popularity, tourism, or market expansion. High: explicit discussion of soft power, policy, national image, cultural export, or economic value.

Results

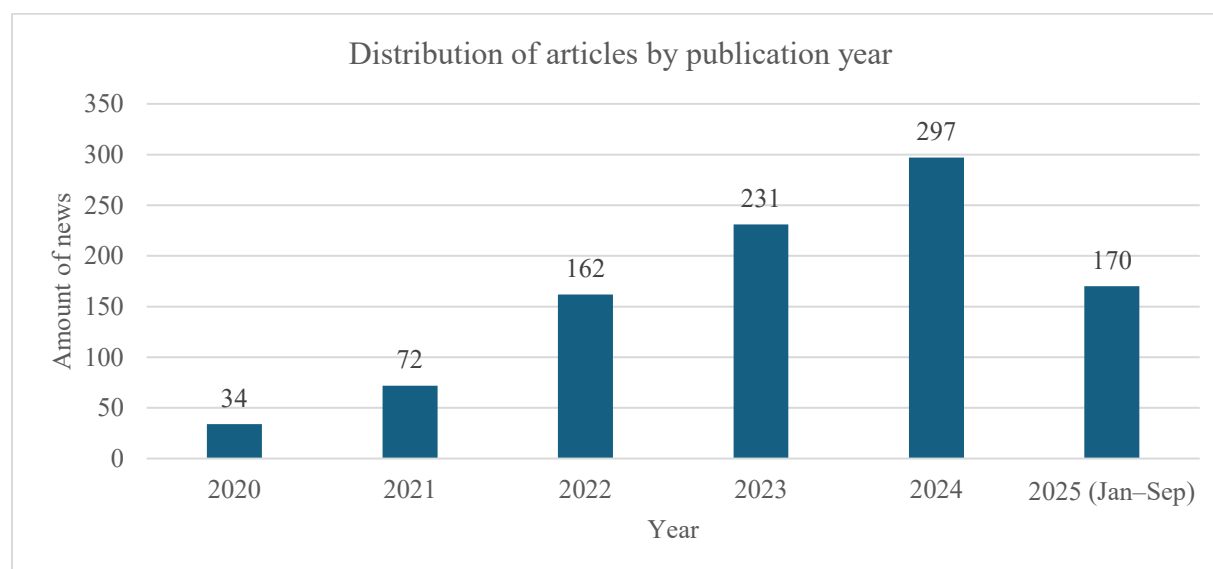
Overview of Online News Coverage of Thai Y Series

The dataset comprised 966 online news articles published between 2020 and September 2025. The largest proportion of articles appeared in 2024 (297 articles, 30.75%), followed by 2023 (231 articles, 23.91%) and 2025 (170 articles, 17.60%). This distribution indicates that media attention toward Thai Y series increased during the latter years of the study period.

The sustained growth in news coverage suggests that Thai Y series became an increasingly visible topic within Thai online news media. Although the data do not establish why this increase occurred, the pattern is consistent with expanding public and industry interest in Thai Y series during this period.

Figure 1

Distribution of articles by publication year



Type of News Used to Present Thai Y Series

General news accounted for the largest proportion of coverage (52.07%), followed by press releases (24.74%) and analytical articles (9.73%). This distribution indicates that Thai online news

media primarily reported Thai Y series through event-driven coverage, including series launches, promotional activities, actor appearances, fan events, and new productions.

Although analytical articles represented less than one-tenth of the dataset, they differed substantially in content and emphasis. Unlike general news and press releases, analytical articles more frequently discussed the creative economy, international market expansion, tourism, cultural industries, and soft power. These articles therefore appear to provide broader contextual interpretation rather than simply reporting entertainment events.

Overall, the findings indicate that different news formats serve different communicative purposes. General news primarily increases the visibility of Thai Y series through continuous reporting, whereas analytical articles more frequently situate Thai Y series within broader economic, cultural, and policy contexts.

Table 2

Distribution of Type of News

Type of news	Amount	Percentage (%)
General news	503	52.07
Press release	239	24.74
Analytical article	94	9.73
Interview	65	6.73
Feature article	42	4.35
Review	23	2.38
Total	966	100.00

4.3. Sources of Information Appearing in the News

Private-sector organizations were the most frequently cited news sources (503 articles, 52.07%), followed by actors, directors, and other industry professionals (337 articles, 34.89%).

Government agencies accounted for the smallest proportion of sources (126 articles, 13.04%). However, references to government agencies became more frequent in 2024, particularly in articles discussing soft power initiatives and national cultural policy.

This distribution indicates that communication surrounding Thai Y series was largely represented through industry actors, including producers, entertainment companies, streaming platforms, and performers. Government sources appeared more frequently when news coverage shifted toward discussions of policy, cultural promotion, and the creative economy.

These findings are consistent with a communication pattern in which industry developments receive media attention before becoming incorporated into broader policy discussions. Rather than demonstrating a purely state-led model of cultural promotion, the results indicate that online news media frequently connect commercial developments within the entertainment industry with subsequent discussions of national cultural policy and soft power.

Table 3

Distribution of Sources of Information

Sources of Information	Amount	Percentage (%)
Private sector	503	52.07
Individuals	337	34.89
Government	126	13.04
Total	966	100.00

Levels of Soft Power Mentions

Most news articles referred to soft power only at a low level (618 articles, 63.98%), followed by medium-level mentions (232 articles, 24.02%) and high-level mentions (116 articles, 12.01%). This distribution indicates that explicit discussions of soft power remained relatively

limited within online news coverage of Thai Y series, with most articles focusing on entertainment news, promotional activities, and industry events.

Nevertheless, medium-level and high-level references together accounted for 36.03% of the dataset, indicating that a considerable proportion of news coverage extended beyond entertainment reporting. Medium-level articles typically referred to soft power indirectly through topics such as international fan communities, overseas events, and market expansion, whereas high-level articles explicitly discussed government policies, cultural exports, and the creative economy. Overall, the findings indicate a gradual expansion in the ways Thai Y series were discussed within broader cultural and policy contexts.

Table 4

Distribution of Levels of Soft Power Mentions

Levels of Soft Power Mentions	Amount	Percentage (%)
Low	618	63.98
Medium	232	24.02
High	116	12.01
Total	966	100.00

Types of Soft Power Represented

News coverage most frequently associated Thai Y series with the audiovisual sector, particularly films, television dramas, and streaming content. However, articles also linked Thai Y series with tourism, music, fashion, food, literature, and cultural activities.

This distribution illustrates that online news media frequently positioned Thai Y series within multiple sectors of the creative economy rather than treating them solely as entertainment products. Coverage of filming locations was commonly linked to tourism, actors to fashion and

lifestyle industries, soundtracks to music, and novel adaptations to publishing. These patterns indicate that media coverage increasingly represented Thai Y series as interconnected with a broader ecosystem of cultural and creative industries.

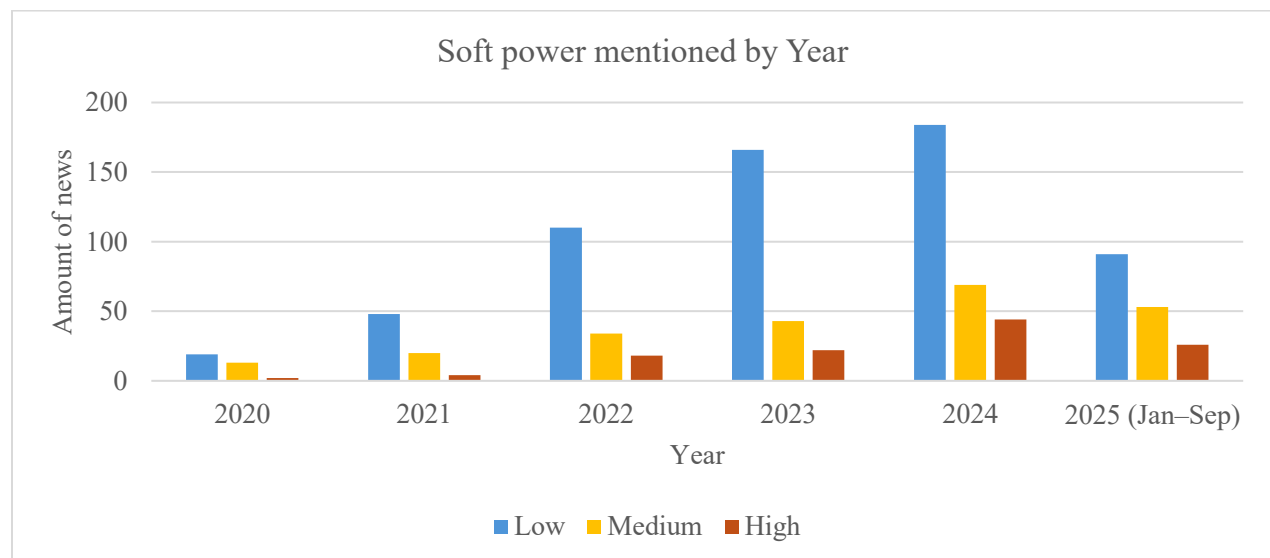
Temporal Trends in Soft Power Framing

Low-level references to soft power remained the dominant pattern throughout the study period. However, medium- and high-level mentions increased noticeably during 2023–2024.

This temporal distribution indicates a gradual shift in news framing rather than an abrupt change. Earlier coverage primarily emphasized entertainment and promotional activities, whereas later articles more frequently incorporated discussions of economic development, international markets, tourism, and national branding. The increase in higher-level references coincided with growing public discussions of soft power in Thailand, suggesting that online news media increasingly situated Thai Y series within this broader policy discourse.

Figure 2

Distribution of Level of Soft Power Mentioned By Publication Year



Relationships Between News Characteristics and Soft Power Framing

Analysis of relationships among variables revealed distinct patterns across news formats and media types. Mainstream news organizations primarily presented Thai Y series as entertainment news, whereas business-oriented media more frequently connected them to the creative economy, international markets, and soft power.

Similarly, general news and press releases were more likely to contain low levels of soft power references because they focused primarily on reporting events and promotional activities. Analytical articles, by contrast, more frequently discussed industry development, cultural exports, and the broader economic significance of Thai Y series.

These findings indicate that different journalistic genres contribute differently to news coverage. Event-driven reporting primarily documented developments within the entertainment industry, whereas analytical articles more frequently interpreted Thai Y series within wider economic and policy contexts. In addition, the greater prominence of government sources in articles containing high-level soft power references is consistent with the broader pattern observed in this study, whereby policy-related discussions became more visible as media coverage expanded beyond entertainment reporting.

Topic Modeling

The topic model produced eight topics, which were then reviewed and grouped into three higher-level themes based on their conceptual similarities. The first focused on government policy, international markets, and the creative economy, including discussions of cultural exports, business development, and national competitiveness. The second centered on entertainment

activities, such as actors, productions, promotional events, and fan meetings. The third highlighted audiences and fan communities as active participants in expanding the popularity of Thai Y series.

Collectively, these themes indicate that online news media represented Thai Y series through multiple, interconnected narratives. Entertainment reporting remained prominent, while discussions of industry development, public policy, and audience participation appeared alongside one another within the broader news discourse. This thematic diversity reflects the multiple contexts in which Thai Y series were presented during the study period.

Table 5

Thematic analysis by Topic Modeling technique

Topic	Representative keywords	Themes
1	commerce, market, business, expansion, preparation	Government and economic mechanisms
2	cross-border, ranking, growth, power, promotion	Popularity via entertainment activities
3	Japan, actor, friendship, chemistry, popularity	Fans as consumers and cultural disseminators in news discourse
4	soft power, drama, production, products, Korea	Government and economic mechanisms
5	fans, shipping, China, country, show	Fans as consumers and cultural disseminators in news discourse
6	market, youth, online, tourism, film	Popularity via entertainment activities
7	millions, trend, image, achievement, attention	Popularity via entertainment activities
8	actor, love, opportunity, era, biography	Fans as consumers and cultural disseminators in news discourse

Word-Frequency Analysis

Word-frequency analysis further illustrates the semantic patterns underlying online news coverage. Frequently occurring terms clustered around four broad themes: entertainment and relationships, actors and fandom, markets and creative industries, and Thai identity alongside international expansion.

The coexistence of these lexical clusters indicates that entertainment-related vocabulary remained central to news coverage while increasingly appearing alongside economic and policy-oriented language. Words associated with markets, exports, tourism, and soft power occurred alongside terms related to actors, productions, and fan communities, suggesting that media discourse incorporated both entertainment and broader cultural-economic perspectives rather than treating them as separate domains.

Overall, the lexical patterns are consistent with the broader findings of this study, indicating that Thai Y series were represented simultaneously as entertainment products, creative industries, and cultural resources within online news discourse.

Discussion

The Agenda-Setting Role of Online News from Entertainment Visibility to Cultural Legitimacy:

The findings indicate that Thai online news media perform functions that extend beyond reporting developments within the entertainment industry. Rather than serving solely as channels for disseminating information, they appear to contribute to increasing the public visibility of Thai Y series while gradually repositioning them within broader cultural, economic, and policy

discussions. The sustained growth in news coverage between 2020 and 2025, particularly during 2023–2024, is consistent with the increasing prominence of Thai Y series within public discourse.

Viewed through the lens of agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2005), repeated news coverage may have contributed to expanding the public salience of Thai Y series. More importantly, the findings suggest that agenda-setting in this context extends beyond increasing issue visibility. As Thai Y series became more frequently covered across different news formats, they also appear to have moved from relatively specialized fan communities into broader public conversations concerning the creative economy, tourism, cultural industries, and national development.

This interpretation complements previous research by Kijratanakoson (2023), who examined how international media construct meanings surrounding Thai Boys' Love series. Whereas earlier studies have focused primarily on external representations of Thai Y series, the present study demonstrates that domestic online news media likewise participate in shaping their public significance by repeatedly connecting entertainment content with broader narratives of economic and cultural development.

Layering Frames from Entertainment News to Soft Power Discourse

Entertainment remained the dominant interpretive frame throughout the dataset. However, the findings indicate that online news increasingly incorporated additional frames related to the creative economy, tourism, international markets, and soft power.

Rather than replacing entertainment narratives, these emerging frames appear to accumulate upon them. General news and press releases continued to emphasize actors, productions, promotional activities, and fan engagement, while analytical articles more frequently

interpreted these developments through broader discussions of industrial development, cultural exports, and national competitiveness.

This pattern suggests that framing is cumulative rather than substitutive. Entertainment reporting provides the initial context through which Thai Y series gain public visibility, whereas subsequent analytical reporting expands their meaning by situating them within wider economic, cultural, and policy frameworks. In this sense, framing contributes not only to how Thai Y series are interpreted but also to how they acquire broader cultural significance.

Evidence from the topic-modeling and word-frequency analyses further supports this interpretation. Entertainment-related vocabulary remained dominant throughout the corpus, while terms associated with markets, exports, tourism, government, and soft power increasingly appeared alongside entertainment terminology. This lexical convergence indicates that policy- and economy-oriented narratives were incorporated into existing entertainment discourse rather than replacing it.

Online News as an Intermediary in the Communication of Soft Power

Perhaps the most significant finding concerns the actors driving communication surrounding Thai Y series. Private-sector organizations, entertainment companies, producers, actors, and other industry stakeholders accounted for the largest proportion of news sources, whereas government agencies appeared more frequently only in articles explicitly discussing soft power, cultural policy, or international promotion.

This pattern suggests that communication surrounding Thai Y series is better understood as a predominantly bottom-up process than as a purely state-led initiative. Rather than originating with government policy, media narratives appear to develop from the commercial success and

cultural visibility generated by the entertainment industry before becoming incorporated into broader policy discussions.

This finding complements Nye's (2004) conceptualization of soft power. While Nye emphasizes attraction as the foundation of soft power, the present findings suggest that attraction alone may not be sufficient for cultural products to become recognized as national cultural resources. Communication processes—particularly those occurring through online news media—appear to play an important mediating role by interpreting commercial success, connecting it to broader national narratives, and making it visible within public discourse.

Rather than functioning as passive observers, online news media appear to act as communicative intermediaries linking entertainment industries, policy actors, and the broader public. This perspective represents the principal contribution of this study because it shifts attention from cultural products themselves to the communication processes through which commercially successful entertainment may acquire broader economic and cultural significance.

Opportunities and Limitations of Media-Driven Soft Power

Although the findings indicate that Thai online news increasingly associated Thai Y series with the creative economy and soft power, several limitations remain. Most articles continued to take the form of general news or press releases, while explicit discussions of soft power represented only a relatively small proportion of the dataset. This pattern indicates that communication surrounding Thai Y series remains largely event-driven rather than strategically integrated across media, industry, and government sectors.

The predominance of entertainment-oriented reporting also raises questions regarding the depth of public discussion surrounding soft power. Although international popularity, tourism, and

overseas fan communities were frequently highlighted, comparatively few articles examined broader issues such as cultural policy, industrial sustainability, intellectual property, diversity, or the long-term development of Thailand's creative industries. Consequently, media discourse appears to emphasize commercial achievements more strongly than the structural conditions supporting sustainable cultural development.

The findings further point to a potential tension between commercial promotion and cultural representation. If online news continues to frame Thai Y series primarily through celebrity culture, market expansion, and economic performance, broader discussions of LGBTQ+ representation, cultural diversity, and social inclusion may remain comparatively underrepresented. Future research could therefore examine how commercial, cultural, and identity-based frames interact within media representations of Thai Y series and how these relationships influence broader understandings of soft power.

Theoretical Contribution

Beyond documenting patterns of media coverage, this study contributes to communication scholarship by examining how online news media participate in the communicative construction of soft power. Rather than conceptualizing soft power solely as an outcome of government strategy or the international popularity of cultural products, the findings suggest that it is also shaped through communication processes that connect commercial success with broader cultural and policy narratives.

The findings indicate that the communication of Thai Y series as soft power involves a sequential process in which entertainment industries generate cultural visibility, online news media interpret and contextualize that visibility, and policy actors subsequently incorporate these

narratives into discussions of the creative economy and national development. This perspective positions online news media as communicative intermediaries linking cultural production, public discourse, and policy agendas.

The study also contributes to agenda-setting and framing research by extending their application beyond issue salience and interpretive emphasis. In the context of cultural industries, agenda-setting appears to contribute to expanding the public visibility of cultural products, while framing contributes to the gradual accumulation of meanings that connect entertainment with wider economic, cultural, and political narratives. Together, these communication processes may help explain how commercially successful entertainment becomes recognized as a cultural resource with broader national significance.

Accordingly, the findings suggest that the development of Thai Y series as soft power is better understood as an ongoing communicative process involving repeated interactions among entertainment industries, online news media, audiences, and government institutions rather than as the outcome of a single policy initiative. This perspective provides a communication-centered framework for understanding how contemporary cultural products acquire economic, symbolic, and policy relevance within the creative economy.

Conclusion

This study examined how Thai online news media present Thai Boys' Love (Y) series as soft power within the broader context of Thailand's creative economy. Based on an analysis of 966 online news articles published across 15 Thai online news platforms between 2020 and September 2025, the findings indicate that online news media perform three interconnected communicative

functions. First, sustained news coverage contributed to increasing the public visibility of Thai Y series, particularly during 2023–2024. Second, online news increasingly framed Thai Y series within broader discussions of the creative economy, international markets, tourism, national image, and soft power, while entertainment remained the dominant news frame. Third, by connecting Thai Y series with cultural industries and national development, online news media contributed to positioning them as cultural products with broader economic and symbolic significance.

More importantly, the findings suggest that the communication of Thai Y series as soft power is better understood as a predominantly bottom-up process. Rather than emerging primarily through state-led communication, soft power discourse appears to develop through the commercial success of the entertainment industry before being amplified, interpreted, and contextualized by online news media and subsequently incorporated into broader policy narratives.

This study therefore shifts attention from Thai Y series as cultural products to the communication processes through which their public meanings are constructed. By highlighting the intermediary role of online news media, the study demonstrates how entertainment, public discourse, and policy become connected through ongoing processes of agenda-setting and framing.

Finally, Thai Y series appear to have considerable potential to contribute to Thailand's creative economy and international cultural influence. Realizing this potential, however, is likely to require sustained collaboration among government agencies, private-sector stakeholders, and media organizations so that commercial success can be translated into long-term cultural value. Future research could extend this work by examining audience reception, cross-platform communication, or comparative cases from other cultural industries to further understand how media participate in constructing soft power in contemporary digital environments.

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