

THE LILY FESTIVAL IN BANGKOK: THE INTERPLAY OF YURI/ GIRLS LOVE, BOOK CULTURE, AND SAPPHIC LITERARY COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

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Since the late 2010s, the female homoerotic romance genre known as Yuri or Girls Love (hereafter GL), which originated in Japan, has been experiencing significant growth in Thailand and the broader Asian region. Despite this expansion, the role of literary festivals in sustaining GL's cultural and community dimensions remains underexplored. This research examines the Lily Festival in Bangkok, which has run since 2018, as a contested terrain where the economic imperatives of digital platforms and commercial publishers intersect with gender-as-agenda driven by sapphic organizers, writers, and publishers. Drawing on feminist book history and critical event studies, and employing in-depth interviews with festival organizers, publishers, writers, illustrators, GL series production company representatives, and stars, this study traces the festival's evolution from a subcultural Comic Market-style event into a literary festival. The findings demonstrate that this transformation is not merely commercial but ideological: the festival functions as both a marketplace and a sanctuary, where sapphic literary communities are built and sustained through the very contestation between capitalist platforms and queer publishers. This study contributes to the underrepresented scholarship on gender and contemporary book culture in Southeast Asia, highlighting the Lily Festival as a dynamic site where literary production, queer activism, and the Thai GL ecosystem are intertwined.

Keywords: Girls Love; literary festival; feminist book history; sapphic; Thai literature

1. INTRODUCTION

The literary industry met activism at the Bangkok Pride Festival 2025, guided by Thailand's soft power policy and its creative industries. The Bangkok Pride Forum was organized as an extension of the Pride Parade, which is common in Pride movements across the world. One provocative topic of 2025 was "The Universe of BL/GL Literature and the Power of Diversity." The invitations were extended to editors, authors, scholars, policymakers, and publishers, including Sapaan Publishing, which specializes in lesbian works. At the Pride

Forum, participants came together on stage to discuss the phenomenon of homoerotic literary and media genres proliferating in Thailand, Asia, and beyond. Since the beginning of the 2020s, the Thai BL genre has gained momentum, thanks in part to the state's policy on the creative economy. Starting in 2022, the genre expanded to include Thai Yuri, or Girls Love (GL) series that depict female homoeroticism on screen. Moreover, Thai studios have become Asia's leading producer of GL television (Li & Pang, 2025).

In 2024, the Publishers and Booksellers Association of Thailand (PUBAT) reported an increase in both the number and sales of Yuri/GL novels at the National Book Fairs, which they attributed to the rise in the number of GL TV series. Publishers who previously focused on BL novels have begun to publish GL works. The book market in Thailand is valued at approximately 17 billion Thai baht, with the value of novels around 8 billion Thai baht, or about 45%. Of this, BL and GL novels account for around 30%, or approximately 2 billion Thai baht (Prachachat, 2024).

Another significant phenomenon behind the expansion of the GL genre was the emergence of a niche festival in 2018, known as the "Lily Festival: Girls Love Only Event."¹ Defined by the organizing team, Lily Festival is an event selling products related to GL, including opportunities for the general public to showcase and sell handmade items, such as comics and novels. Additionally, there are games and various activities, as well as many guest appearances that add vibrancy to the event, specifically for those who love sapphic creativity (Lily Festival, 2025). As a result of the festival, the term "sapphic" has gained more currency in the Thai context. In 18th-century Britain, the term "sapphic" signaled specific desires between women that went beyond friendship (Klein, 2021, p. 9) and is much better received than the term "lesbian" among women who like women in Thailand.²

The launch of the Lily Festival is quite recent compared to its counterparts in Thailand's popular culture. For example, the inaugural festival for BL-related creative works was held in 2009 through the collaboration of writers and readers (Lertwichayaroj, 2017) and was officially called Y Book Fair, although some smaller gatherings of Thai *fujoshi* can be traced back to the 1990s (Vinitphol, 2023). *Doujinshi* (derivative works by fans) group festivals, such as Comic Avenue, were first held in 2013, and the Comic Square festival was first held in 2017, among others (Comic Avenue, 2025). While similar events take place in Europe, North America, and other places in Asia (Friedman, 2022, pp. 175–177), there is a gap in scholarship on Yuri/GL-focused events in Thailand.

The Lily Festival serves as a ground where contemporary book culture and the sapphic community meet and interact. It involves a rotation of people taking on various roles, creating and maintaining the culture and ethos of creative individuals and corporate actors alike. Recognized as a community of (and for) women who love women, the festival embraces the diversity of genders and sexualities. To understand the impact of the festival on the GL industry in Thailand, this study has the following research objectives:

- 1) To investigate the Lily Festival as a cultural space that has driven and nurtured the GL industry in Thailand.
- 2) To examine the interrelationship among participants within the network of the festival since the late 2010s.

This research seeks to develop the scholarship on GL series (Li & Pang, 2025; Media Rocket Lab, 2025), which has overlooked the role played by GL book culture in contributing to the growth of the genre through activism and promoting sociocultural sensitivity about sapphic culture. This research article argues that the Lily Festival operates as a contested terrain where economic imperatives embodied by digital platforms and commercial publishers intersect with gender-as-agenda driven by sapphic co-organizers, writers, publishers, and attendees. It is through this contestation that sapphic literary communities in Thailand are built, disrupted, and rebuilt.

Understanding the Lily Festival requires an examination that goes beyond the academic discourse within literary festival studies, an interrelated domain of sociology of literature, book history, and publishing studies. Despite work on National Book Awards for short story collections (Yan, 2015), novels (Huang, 2021),

¹ In Japanese, *yoo-ree* or *yuri* stands for the lily flower (Friedman, 2022, p. 253). The term is connected to the history of the female homoerotic genre in Japan, which used to be published in a section of a women's manga magazine. The Lily Festival in Thailand is thus named after the Yuri genre in Japan. The term Girls Love (GL) is an analogue for Boys Love (BL), used by Japanese publishers to create a new category in bookstores (Friedman, 2022, p. 249). The term "GL" is somewhat commercially driven. However, this research uses the terms "Yuri" and "GL" interchangeably.

² In this study, the term "sapphic" refers to female same-sex desire manifested in creative works and elicited in readers (Klein, 2021). In this context, sapphic identity is based on the concept of sapphic possibility (Klein, 2021), which is defined by individuals in the sapphic community as extending beyond female physical bodies or biological sex. However, depending on the preferences of the informants, this study uses the terms sapphic, lesbian, and women-loving-women interchangeably.

and pre-adolescent fiction (Khantama, 2002), literary festivals are largely overlooked in scholarship on Thailand's publishing history. So too is the role that gender plays in contemporary book culture.³

To unpack the interplay between contemporary book culture and gender, our study combines feminist book history and studies on women and practices of fiction reading (Taylor, 2019). Feminist book history seeks to uncover women's long-running, diverse, and deeply embedded work in modern publishing across a range of functions (Wilson, 2025, p. 32). While feminist literary criticism focuses on female authors, including rewriting literary history by unearthing non-canonical female authors, feminist book history highlights the work of women in the book industry. While scholarship produced in the Anglophone world routinely overlooks women in publishing in Southeast Asia, their labor and networks are also underrepresented in scholarship in Thai literature, Thai studies, and in the eyes of policymakers who regulate the creative industries in Thailand.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP, AND METHODOLOGY

Literary festivals constitute an integral aspect of contemporary book culture; their examination falls within the domain of book history or publishing studies. However, we can extend the examination of literary festivals to the domain of event studies. The Lily Festival functions as a distinctive event space where commercialism, gender politics, literary industry, media industry, fan culture, and the public sphere intersect. Weber (2018, pp. 9–10) critiques four main categories of existing research in literary festival studies: 1) historical descriptions of specific festivals, 2) the dichotomy between commercialism and culture, 3) theoretically sophisticated analyses lacking sufficient empirical data, and 4) empirical research accompanied by theoretical discussions. Utilizing five selected festivals in the United Kingdom and Australia as case studies, Weber (2018) integrates empirical data from interviews with theoretical frameworks, specifically Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, which is generally classified within sociology. Her research aligns with a prevalent area of literary festival studies that illuminate the experiences and engagement of participants (Johanson & Freeman, 2012; Driscoll, 2015).

Feminist perspectives have also contributed to the scholarly corpus on literary festivals and publishing. While Robert Darnton's communication circuit model (1982) primarily emphasizes the individuals involved in the processes of book production, dissemination, and reception, Levy (2014) critiques his model through a gender lens that brings into focus women's labor and contributions. Unfortunately, the scholarship on feminist book history is primarily grounded in the book culture of the 18th century and earlier periods, rather than the contemporary context.

Meanwhile, in her concise article, Howsam (1998) advocated for feminist book history that treats books as gendered objects. Indeed, the book serves as a focal point in scholarship on women's engagement with fiction reading practices, such as Janice Radway's seminal work (1991), on women who read romance novels. Likewise, Adam and Barker (1993, as cited in Howsam, 2006), expand Darnton's circuit model from individuals to events, that is, activities associated with books. For example, Helen Taylor (2019) conducted interviews with female writers and professionals in the publishing and media sectors. Because the questionnaires were distributed to women broadly via the internet, her study expanded the number of women informants beyond that of Radway's study. The perspectives of women participating in literary festivals were crucial to the research design. In particular, Taylor (2019) observes that women's participation in literary festivals exceeds that of men, noting that such festivals offer "surroundings that are congenial for women alone or in groups" (p. 204). The intersection of women's experiences and literary festivals reveals feminist perspectives that better acknowledge women's contributions and labor.

As a recent development in the field that incorporates poststructuralist perspectives and critical theory, critical event studies also offers an important avenue of research on literary festivals. Though the field primarily concentrates on event management and has connections to tourism and leisure studies, feminist perspectives enhance the analysis of events by incorporating gender issues alongside commercialism and spatiotemporal dimensions (Spracklen & Lamond, 2016).

Our research design is based upon feminist book history and critical event studies. In addition to Taylor (2019), our methodology follows Grabher (2022) which categorizes informants into three groups: political actors, cultural actors, and observing participants, the latter recruited using purposive sampling. This fruitful approach enables her study to move "away from the stakeholders towards the practices of gender equality" (p. 26). Also useful is Lamerichs's (2014) examination of fan conventions in the Netherlands, which brings fan studies into conversation with critical event studies. In particular, her study examines the characteristics of affective space within fan conventions to reveal how the event space is characterized by imagination, social construction, and queerness.

³See more of the gap in Working Group on the History of Publishing in Thailand (2006).

Our research project on the Lily Festival carried out in-depth interviews from December 2024 to February 2025 with eight informants who took on various roles related to the festival, including organizer, publisher, writer, illustrator, series production company representative, and actress. The chosen informants consisted of both experienced organizers and newcomers, highlighting the importance of their multiple perspectives as stakeholders and as women (Grabher, 2022). Informants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across the festival's key stakeholder groups. Interview data were analyzed through feminist interpretive analysis, attending to recurring themes across the festival's spatial politics, commercial dynamics, and sapphic community building.

By tracing women's various roles within this literary event, our research contributes to a deeper understanding of the Yuri/GL genre, particularly its interplay with sapphic literary communities. The findings elucidate the thriving nature of the Yuri/GL genre in the 2020s, amid the influence of Thailand's soft power policy, Thai society's transition towards valuing gender diversity, and the continued prominence of the BL genre as one of the key elements of Asian popular culture.

3. SIZE AND SOUND: THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE LILY FESTIVAL

The "Lily Festival: Girls Love Only Event" began in Bangkok in 2018. This festival convenes many stakeholders within the Yuri/GL industry network. Prior to the festival's debut, the distribution of GL works in literary festivals and other cultural venues, like the Y Book Fair, was limited. This conclusion corresponds with the view of informant number 7 (Ploy), who asserted that the Lily Festival united the writers of GL works: "It used to be tough to keep up with this genre, and a lot of writers weren't really recognized since their works were spread out online. But you know, with the Lily Fest happening, it was wonderful to see writers and creators of GL works come together. It really opened our eyes to the fact that there are way more Thai GL works out there than we ever realized" (Ploy).

Table 1: The Informants⁴

No.	Pseudonym	Festival-related role	Participation frequency and year(s) of participation	Month and year of interview
1	Dao ⁵	Festival organizer; publisher	5 times as a festival organizer (years 1–5) 3 times as a publisher (years 3–5)	December 2024
2	Duean	Festival organizer	5 times (years 1–5)	December 2024
3	Ice	Representative of GL production company	1 time (year 5)	January 2025
4	Apple	GL star	1 time (year 5)	January 2025
5	Chomphu	GL writer	2 times (years 4–5)	December 2024
6	Noon	GL writer	4 times (years 2–5)	February 2025
7	Ploy	GL writer	2 times (years 4–5)	December 2024
8	Petch	GL illustrator	2 times (years 4–5)	December 2024

This section discusses the common features of the Lily Festival. The festival's organizational timeline is divided into two distinct periods: the pre-transformation phase of the GL mediascape, covering the first and second years of the festival (2018–2019), and the post-transformation phase of GL media, which includes the third, fourth and fifth years (since 2022). The primary characteristic is the transition from an exclusively subcultural setting to a hybrid space where the effects of Comic Market (also known as Comiket or Comike) or YuriCon, which stem from Japanese popular culture and literary festivals, intertwine. The notable change following 2022 suggests the enhanced status of Thai GL works in both socioeconomic and aesthetic dimensions.

The first informant (Dao), representing the festival organizers, provided background information on the event, indicating that Lily Festival originated from an alliance of friends from diverse fields, including comics, novels, and other professions: "A lot of them are from the (sapphic) community, all sharing a love for GL, and they came together to make this event happen. It seems like GL events have been around for quite a

⁴ The period of 2020–2021 experienced a global outbreak of COVID-19. The Lily Festival consequently refrained from organizing the event. Instead, the organizers promoted the work of certain writers and illustrators via the festival's digital platforms, encouraging followers to purchase these works via personal and publisher contacts.

⁵ Dao participated in the interview as an organizer and publisher associated with the festival. In the analysis, Dao is consistently differentiated between these two roles.

while, but there hasn't really been one that pulls together various production lines in the same way that other events do" (Dao).

The Lily Festival's spatial arrangement reflects the event's positionality and transformation. The inaugural festival took place on the 35th floor of the ITF Silom Palace Place building in Bangkok. The space layout of the first and the second festivals is almost identical and comprised four distinct subareas: 1) the domain of individual creators (A and B); 2) the domain of corporate groups; 3) the stage activity area; and 4) the area designated for the co-organizers: Meb (Mobile E-books), ReadAwrite, The Kloset, and Zenshu.



Figure 1: The circle plan of the second Lily Festival in 2019 (Lily Fest: Girls Love Only Event, 2019)

In the circle plan of the second year (Figure 1), the areas labeled A and B are where individual creators and self-published writers were located. In order to participate in the festival, this group of exhibitors still needed to invest in renting space at various rates. According to Dao: "For a single space (1 SP), the cost will be 700 baht for an area measuring 90×60 cm. If you opt for two spaces (2 SP), the price will be 1,400 baht for a larger area of 180×60 cm. Should you choose to secure four spaces (4 SP), the cost will amount to 2,800 Thai baht for an expansive area of 360×60 cm."

Aside from spaces for rent, the organizing team has always sought additional funding for the event through ticket sales and by accepting co-sponsors. In the initial phase of the Lily Festival, co-sponsors comprised a combination of comic and novel publishers and distributors, including the online literary platforms Meb and ReadAwrite, comic-focused publisher Zenshu, and The Kloset, a venue for GL enthusiasts and the woman-loving-woman community. Co-sponsors are permitted to occupy two sub-areas: their designated area and the stage area.

The stage area in the Lily Festival remains a strategic space reserved for sponsors who have co-hosted the event to promote their products and business. Because the stage area is an "amplified" space in a literal sense, meaning the sound from the microphone is clearer than in other smaller areas, it provides some attendees and sponsors more opportunities to go on stage to publicize their work for all attendees to hear, something not (or less) available to individual vendors. In response to this set-up, informant number 7, who is one of the individual creators, expressed the counter wish that "I'd love for the organizers to create some space for self-published works at this event so that they can promote their own creations" (Ploy).

Lily Festival combines the characteristics of a literary festival and a *doujinshi* market fair featuring works of amateur creators, which is strongly connected to Japanese manga and anime culture as well as "Yuri-focused doujinshi events" (Friedman, 2022, p. 175) in Japan and elsewhere, particularly from the 2000s on. Since 2018, *doujinshi* elements have manifested by referring to individual participants (regardless of gender and age) who set up booths to sell their works at the festival as "circles." These circles are not professionals sponsored by corporations or their representatives, i.e. companies, publishing houses, and foundations, to

name a few (Lily Fest: Girls Love Only Event, 2021). The term “circle” is widely used in the same manner in the context of Comic Market (Aida, 2016). The convention of *doujinshi* events is closely associated with the use of menus and cutouts to promote works sold as Japanese-style manga. Therefore, the circle area for GL novels sold at the first festival in 2018 was smaller than the one for *doujinshi*. However, the second event in 2019 witnessed an increase in the number of original GL novelists.

Despite the event’s dual character and certain organizers’ backgrounds as *doujinshi* enthusiasts, the organizing team’s vision is oriented towards creating the atmosphere of literary festivals. For example, there is one important aspect of *doujinshi* events in Japan and elsewhere that the Lily Festival chooses not to follow: cosplay. Since 2018, the cosplay of fictional characters has been prohibited, as it might disturb other participants (Dao). Although the regulation was relaxed in 2025, there are specific rules for cosplaying, including: 1) Cosplay is reserved for characters that fit the event’s theme only (women loving women), 2) Refrain from wearing revealing or inappropriate attire in public spaces. Refrain from posing for and taking sexually suggestive photos, 3) Military, police, and civil servant uniforms that were previously or are currently worn are prohibited, and 4) No cosplay photography outside the event venue (Lily Festival, 2025). Still, based on the empirical observation of the 6th Lily Festival on August 30, 2025, it was found that only a small number of attendees were cosplaying. This suggests that cosplay is not a primary objective for creators or attendees of the festival.

Arguably, distancing from *doujinshi* or the comic side of the festival has intensified since 2022, likely as a response to the “Black Hole” incident in the Thai comic scene in 2005. TV Burapha’s production of the show *Black Hole*, which featured an episode on a new genre of comics known in the Thai language as *cartoon po*, or pornographic cartoons, was legally deemed obscene. Artists, writers, and even cosplayers had their works destroyed by their families, who did not want their children to be involved with so-called obscene media. Consequently, comics were regarded as the lowest-status media in Thai society at that time (The Matter Culture, 2021; Vinitphol, 2023). For these reasons, the Lily Festival was refashioned not as another comic con but as a more sophisticated literary event. Furthermore, the organizers might not want comics to be interpreted as the gist of GL works in Thailand since they are perceived as “immature” and “uncritical” compared to GL novels, which are still the dominant form of GL texts in Thailand. GL novels also play a crucial role in GL screen adaptations, which enhance their visibility in both the Thai and international markets (Phumithammarat & Prasannam, 2025).

Thai GL television series have had a particularly large impact on the Lily Festival. After the first Thai GL series was released in 2022, the Lily Festival changed its venues to event rooms located at JJ Mall in the Chatuchak area of Bangkok. The change to a larger and more accessible venue with various transportation options, including BTS (sky train) and MRT (the underground train), signifies the expansion of the sapphic literary community. The move has resulted in a significant increase in both individual and corporate participation. In 2024, the Lily Festival featured 67 circles and 12 corporate booths. Among the corporate participants were series production companies bringing GL stars to promote merchandise and participate in stage activities. The festival also attracted a larger number of attendees. As a result, after 2022 significant changes in the organization of the festival took place, which coincided with the emergence of new players in the field, such as GL literary publishers, GL series production companies, GL stars, and fandom. All these new factors contribute to a more literary-oriented festival that acknowledges the interplay between book and screen cultures at the very core of both the Thai BL and GL industries.

4. LILY FESTIVAL AS A CONTESTED AND CAPITALIZED TERRAIN

Before 2022, the stage area was the most contested space, as sponsors occupied and made use of it for promotional practices. Meb and ReadAwrite, two main sponsors, have served as brokers of the literary industry in Thailand since the late 2010s. Publishers with a focus on GL only entered the space later.

The same owners, Chai—Raviwar Mahasith and Ko—Kittipong Saelim, founded both the Meb and ReadAwrite platforms. Their initial endeavor involved establishing a small publishing house, followed by the application of their engineering expertise to create an online platform in partnership with B2S, one of the largest bookshop chains in Thailand. Meb was established in 2014 with a registered capital of 5,000,000 Thai baht. In 2017, the executives launched the ReadAwrite platform (Hiranprasertsuk, 2022). Both platforms enable members of the general public to become writers more easily. Meanwhile, contemporary readers are progressively engaging with digital literature as they encounter challenges related to the storage of physical books. The growth of online platforms such as Meb and ReadAwrite can be quantified through the company’s total revenue of 1,939.19 million Thai baht for the year ending December 31, 2023, and 2,206.93 million Thai baht for the year ending December 31, 2024. The figures indicate a 13.81% increase from the previous year. Sales and services account for the majority of the company’s total revenue (Meb Corporation, 2025).

The Meb website reported significant statistical data regarding the platform's expansion: over 11 million digital literary works and more than 10 million registered users. In 2022, the company transitioned from a limited company to a public limited company. In 2023, it was listed on the Market for Alternative Investment—MAI (Meb Corporation, 2025). It is no surprise, then, that Meb and ReadAwrite had greater economic capital than other entities in the Lily Festival space. The second informant, Duean, representing the organizers, explained that the involvement of Meb and ReadAwrite in the Lily Festival was initiated by the organizing team. The organizers saw that the platforms had already set up booths at the Comic Avenue event, which serves as a marketplace for original novels and comics. Since Meb primarily sells original e-books, Duean determined that the inclusion of these platforms in the Lily Festival would yield substantial marketing benefits. Activities run by Meb and ReadAwrite at the Lily Festival include consultations for writers on publishing their works via the platform, readers' services, and free literary promotions aimed at increasing downloads and platform registrations. Furthermore, they offer, among other activities, options for readers to correspond with their preferred authors and facilitate on-stage interviews with writers.

Individual writers, corporate groups, or publishers that do not directly sponsor the event generally receive reduced stage allocations. By extending invitations to GL novelists to participate on stage, Meb and ReadAwrite exercise their significant economic power over individual writers. Nevertheless, writers also use these platforms to assert their presence in the "amplified" area, even while adhering to the platforms' emphasis on marketability over the sapphic qualities of their works.

Since 2022, the positionality of the Lily Festival as a GL literary festival has grown. The invitation of several GL-dedicated publishing houses also contests the prime space ruled over by patriarchal capitalist forces embodied by Meb and ReadAwrite. Some of the publishing houses include Lily House, Liberty Publishing (closed in May 2025), Sapaan Publishing, and Ladys and Moonscape.



Figure 2: Lily Festival 6 on August 30, 2025 at JJ Mall (Photo taken by the first author)

Among the publishing houses devoted to sapphic literature, Lily House is the largest. Established in 2020 with a registered capital of 1,000,000 Thai baht, Lily House began, according to one of the founders, "as a small dream shared by a group of people who wanted to support independent writers and create a welcoming space for readers in the LGBTQ+ community to discover the books they're eager to read" (Kittisurin, 2023). What the founders shared is "a liking for sapphic works, whether in films, series, novels, comics, or anime" (Kittisurin, 2023). Since its establishment, this publishing house has functioned as both a publisher and a bookshop, fostering works in the GL genre.

As a result of its involvement, the distribution of GL works at the Lily Festival has also changed since 2022. For example, "Along with hosting the event, the Lily House acts like a consignment bookshop, giving authors more chances to sell their works and maybe even inspiring them to write new pieces. The move has made this time feel more like a literary festival, thanks to the larger space available for literature compared to before" (Dao). And during the festival's third year in 2022, Lily House also leveraged its greater economic resources to add two significant dimensions that impacted the publisher's fundraising and the development of the Thai GL genre in the context of the Lily Festival: 1) it assembled a large number of its GL novelists at the event; and 2) it brought the stars from the first GL series to participate in activities.

The participation of GL series stars and production companies happened in 2022 before the release of Thailand's first fully-fledged GL series, *Thrissadi Si Chomphu/Gap the Series*. This series is adapted from the

novel *Gap: The Pink Theory* by Jao Pla Noi. Lily House invited the two lead actresses, Freen and Becky, to participate in two activities: signing autographs at the Lily House booth and joining stage activities. From the screen industry viewpoint, Lily Festival is a key venue for expanding the reception of the series and vice versa. The study's third informant (Ice) stated that the festival organizers have begun to carefully select and contact the production companies of various series. These practices showcase the cross-media nature of the GL genre, thereby expanding its reach among fans of both novels and series. The fourth informant (Apple) asserts that Lily Festival is the first and only niche festival in Thailand dedicated to the GL genre, bringing together the GL literary industry, GL screen culture, GL fan culture, and the stars within the festival space (Apple).

For their part, GL production companies participate in the Lily Festival by co-organizing the event and creating promotional spaces for the series and related merchandise. The companies utilize the stage area for promoting their series and stars, such as displaying trailers of the series. Following the involvement of Idol Factory in 2022, three additional companies— K11D, Siamsi Studio, and Identity Entertainment—participated in the festival in 2024, highlighting the growth of the Thai GL industry.

Meanwhile, since 2022, Lily House has assembled over 50 writers to appear at the festival, demonstrating the power of the publisher to cultivate trust among GL writers. Informant 6 (Noon) stated that writers who sell their works through Lily House receive very positive feedback because the publishing house has a large number of followers. The publisher promotes works using appealing graphics to enhance their visibility. The compensation of authors comes from sales of their books, with a percentage deducted to cover the publishing house's operational costs. Noon added that participating in activities with Lily House, both in selling works and joining the Lily Festival, not only increases the number of followers for the writers but also cultivates their sociocultural network. The intervention of Lily House demonstrates that GL creators and publishers can collaborate to improve their economic capital in negotiations with major investors who may not be fully committed to the GL genre.

At the same time, the Lily Festival provides writers with a bridge between economic capital and sociocultural networks. For instance, the fifth informant (Chomphu) provided information about the gathering of the group of artists/writers of GL works "called Orange Dream Whale." Made up of writers and artists who are close friends in real life, this group collaborates on setting up a circle at the Lily Festival (Chomphu). GL writers and illustrators thus see the Lily Festival as a venue for community building among individuals with similar passions.

5. LILY FESTIVAL AND THE (RE)BUILDING OF SAPPHIC LITERARY COMMUNITIES

But whether writer, illustrator, organizer, or attendee, the Lily Festival has become an important space for (re)building sapphic literary communities across different roles. Many like that the festival's name limits the scope of the work and the people who attend. Informant number 6 (Noon), for instance, reports: "I really hope Lily Fest keeps going because it provides a much-needed space for the GL community. There hasn't been a genuine space for the GL group recently, and it's important to have one" (Noon). This remark is endorsed by informant number 8: "It lets us explore works we love that we may not have seen before due to their wide distribution. It is an event where creators and readers with shared interests come together" (Petch).

Because the festival is focused around works that feature narratives of sapphic experiences, it has become, in the words of the sixth informant (Noon), "space for community and works of women who love women." As queer texts, GL works facilitate the interplay between readers (fans) or consumers of these literary works and their creators.

In an in-depth interview, Dao, the first informant and a representative of the organizers, revealed that "most of the main organizers are women, and many of them identify as lesbians or sapphics" (Dao). Thus, insiders make the festival. Among insiders, there is a shared sense of community that manages the space with an understanding of both the people and the work involved, allowing the event to become a "safe space" both for the production and reception of GL works.

The sense of community is evident, as the second informant (Duean) stated that the initial organization of this event involved collaboration among friends who contributed a modest amount of money. The Lily Festival did not accept support from the government. The first informant (Dao) commented that if government support were to arise, it could impact the expansion of this community, since accepting government assistance would allow authorities to scrutinize the festival in every aspect (Dao). The sentiment stems from the aftermath of the Black Hole incident in 2005, when authorities policed obscene comics. To the extent that this incident has been repeatedly recalled as a part of the history of BL and GL genres in Thailand, it indicates the longstanding social stigmatization of queer fan communities in Thailand and their uneasy relationship to the state as well as fans of different generations (Prasannam, 2025).

Lily Festival has shown solidarity with other lesbian or sapphic activities, such as joining Clubhouse with Girl × Girl Thailand (July 15, 2021). Together with sapphic communities in other spaces, Lily Festival seeks to push society towards embracing another form of equality. At the same time, the festival's growth promises to increase its economic capital while also attracting a broader range of sapphic participants. Strengthening the sense of community aligns with the role of queer media in the 2020s, a time when activism has become prominent.

Aside from expanding the festival's boundaries, the organizers also opened the space for other sapphic groups to join the festival, thereby creating "a place where everyone can truly be themselves and accept one another without any judgement" (Noon). In contrast to the YaYCon, where cosplaying is viewed as a queered performance of gender (Lamerichs, 2014), the Lily Festival gathers carefully chosen partners to create the atmosphere desired by the organizing team. This venue hosts various activities for the lesbian or sapphic community, including the following examples.

Among the lesbian or sapphic groups participating in the event from 2018 to 2019 is The Kloset, led by Kilin, the pseudonym of a writer who openly affirms her identity as a woman who loves women and is one of the co-founders of the café. The phrase "coming out of the closet," commonly associated with publicly embracing one's queer identity, inspired the café's name (Kanchanakit, 2021). The founders of The Kloset aim to make this space a safe haven for both the lesbian community and those who enjoy reading lesbian-themed literature. For example, visitors can choose to conceal or reveal their sexual orientations as they wish, without fear of judgment or criticism. She understands that in the outside world, many people are tired of hiding themselves and the café avoids awkward activities like speed dating, matchmaking, or finding a partner in favour of providing support for friendship among each other (Kanchanakit, 2021).

The contribution of The Kloset in the Lily Festival is another clear indication that Lily Festival extends beyond celebrating creative works by lesbians or sapphics to build community. Since the second year, the Kloset has taken part in the festival in three roles: 1) as a co-organizer, 2) as a stage activity organizer, and 3) as a circle organizer selling works and products. The Kloset conducted promotional activities onstage, an "amplified" area that signifies the power to disseminate works and seek additional economic capital. Interestingly, The Kloset's circle is adorned with a rainbow flag, a symbol of the LGBTQ+ community, indicating their involvement in activism.

In turn, this sense of community affects the mode of reception and preferences among Yuri/GL fans. According to informant five (Chomphu), "Some readers might wonder if a person who isn't a woman-loving-woman can really create meaningful works about queer love. If they embrace their identity as a woman-loving-woman, it'll make readers feel more comfortable and willing to support what they do" (Chomphu).

The images and practices of publishers at the Lily Festival show how they enrich the sense of the sapphic community, make use of the festival's "amplified" space, and assert their position as queer publishers. A notable example in the festival's second period is Ladys and Moonscape, a publishing house founded by two writers, Ladys and Moonscape. Though the publisher first began participating in 2024, Ladys, who identifies as "Non-binary, Panromantic" (Ruengvej, 2025), initially took part in the festival as a self-published author in 2022. Like the author's queer (rather than lesbian or sapphic) identity, the publishing house uses the slogan, "Be Queer, Be Protagonist." By publishing works related to the entire queer community, it seeks to promote equality in gender diversity: "We aim to publish queer works to let diversity thrive in literature, regardless of genre or category. LGBTQIAN+ characters can always be the main characters" (Ladys & Moonscape, 2025). Ladys's involvement in the Lily Festival has helped make the general public, including the GL community, more open-minded about sexual diversity. According to the seventh informant, the festival's atmosphere feels a lot more understanding than before: "These days, there seem to be more female transgender characters emerging in the GL genre. It looks like we might see a lot more diverse identities popping up soon, and even in non-GL works, there could be more pieces that remind you of what you find with Ladys" (Ploy).

Likewise, the impact of GL screen stories is also making an impact. The fourth informant (Ice), a corporate representative of a production company who participated in the fifth year and defined her identity as a woman who loves women, expressed her views on being part of the festival's sapphic community, which extends beyond its role in supporting the growth of GL series: "The festival organizers really benefit from this community and know how to offer services that connect well. I'm convinced that, along with the team, members of the community can really share those beautiful love stories among women" (Ice). Ice also participated in activities with Girl × Girl Thailand in 2024. She mentioned, "We're looking to chat about our thoughts on producing the GL series, the future of media in the women-loving-women community, and how we can show our commitment to this community in Thailand" (Ice). The participation of production companies and GL stars is also reflected by the seventh informant, a GL writer: "It really brings about a wonderful reaction, leaving the company and artists feeling impressed and acknowledging the strength of the lesbian community" (Ploy).



Figure 3: The poster of the Lily Festival 6 on August 30, 2025 (Lily Festival, 2025)

In all, the Lily Festival opens up space for various agents, such as GL writers, most of whom identify themselves as lesbian or sapphic, as well as publishers founded by women who love women/sapphic/queer (Figure 2). Even compared to the first period between 2018 and 2019, the space feels more open since 2022. The Lily Festival has played a significant role in bringing people of the “subcultural group,” who were originally underground and online, into the light. This function is shared with the Comic Market and YuriCon (Aida, 2016; Friedman, 2022).

Another role of the Lily Festival as a literary festival is to welcome, as Taylor (2019) puts it in her study of other feminist book festivals, “many unpublished or wannabe writers” to “see how the literary world works, make contact with their role models, and network with other writers and readers” (p. 204). Subsequently, writers and publishers at the Lily Festival have also been able to participate in Thailand’s National Book Fairs, which are still dominated and regulated by government sectors and major publishing companies.

6. CONCLUSION

The Lily Festival in Bangkok was inaugurated in 2018. In its early days, *doujinshi* was the main merchandise of the festival. Following 2022, the festival has shifted toward refashioning itself as a literary festival in response to the adaptations of GL works for the small screen (Phumithammarat & Prasannam, 2025). The festival space is accessible to publishing houses, digital platforms, writers, creators, and readers. Nevertheless, the festival posters retain a manga-like aesthetic (see Figure 3). Their popularity is due to the traditional illustrations featured on the covers of Thai Yuri/GL novels and the copyright restrictions that prevent the use of GL stars or images of real individuals.

The Lily Festival consistently opposes government intervention in its pursuit of autonomy. Despite GL and BL being less estranged from the Thai public, particularly under state-led soft power and creative economy policies, the stigma associated with media labelled obscene (Vinitphol, 2023) persists within the community (Prasannam, 2025). Additionally, the majority of informants concur that the government favors major companies over sustaining GL communities.

The Lily Festival exhibits similarities with Yuri/GL-related festivals in other regions (Friedman, 2022), such as YaYCon in the Netherlands. According to Lamerichs (2014), that convention, which features both Yuri and Yaoi works, serves as a space where: “fiction creates a comfort zone that provides emotional closeness and even a space to discuss sexuality” (p. 271). Similarly, the Lily Festival is not exclusively focused on the commercial aspects of the genre; it also functions as a sanctuary and communal space for sapphic literary communities in Bangkok, Thailand. The festival has established a robust network among sapphic publishers, self-published authors, and associated individuals and communities. This phenomenon, therefore, deviates

from the contemporary book culture of the Yuri genre in Japan, where middle-aged cisgender men may potentially dominate (Kittisurin, 2023).

The Lily Festival in Bangkok thus exemplifies a productive tension rather than a simple opposition between commercialism and community. The festival's development since 2018 demonstrates that economic capital—whether wielded by digital platforms such as Meb and ReadAwrite or by sapphic publishers such as Lily House—does not merely co-opt sapphic spaces but can also be mobilized by community insiders to sustain and expand them. This dynamic distinguishes the Lily Festival from commercially driven literary festivals, where gender-as-agenda remains peripheral. Here, the sapphic community does not survive despite commercialism but navigates through it, using the festival's contested terrain as both a marketplace and a site of identity, solidarity, and resistance.

The distinguishing factor between GL and BL is the sense of community. While Thailand's BL publishing industry must compete with translations, GL novels by Thai authors still outnumber translations from elsewhere. Thai GL culture is thus a much more niche business prospect, albeit one that is continuing to develop alongside a revitalized mode of LGBTQ+ activism, as demonstrated by the enactment of the equal marriage law in Thailand in January 2025.

Our analysis of the Lily Festival through the lenses of feminist book history and critical event studies emphasizes the importance of gender as an agenda in book culture and event analysis. As a result, this study necessarily sheds minimal light on the textuality of the genre. Instead, it demonstrates that the festival functions, in the words of McKerrow (2021), as “part of an ecosystem of cooperation and exchange that [has] enabled our emerging community to communicate and organize in new and more effective ways about an array of pertinent social and political subjects” (p. 116). This investigation of the Yuri/GL literary ecosystem in Thailand thus addresses a pressing gap in scholarship regarding gender and contemporary book culture within a broader context. The research findings aim to supplement our current understanding of women and the public life of literature, book history, analysis of popular fiction, and literary festivals in Thailand, alongside the dynamics of trans-Asian popular culture.

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DECLARATION

1. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

2. Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

QuillBot was used for language proofreading to improve the readability of the manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

3. Data availability statement

All data supporting the findings of this research are included within the article.

4. Ethics statement

The Kasetsart University Research Ethics Committee granted approval for this study under the COE No. COE67/127. To protect informant confidentiality, real names have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout. No identifying information that could link responses to specific individuals is disclosed in this study.

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