Original article

Subjective well-being, self-esteem, and attitude towards imagined couples of yaoi fangirls in Thailand

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Background: A number of studies on yaoi fangirls, who are interested in homoromantic/ homoerotic relationship between men, is increasing all over the world, but there are only few studies of mental health on yaoi fangirls in Thailand.

Objectives: To study subjective well-being, self-esteem, and attitude towards imagined couples of yaoi fangirls, and to determine factors associated with subjective well-being of yaoi fangirls in Thailand.

Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted among literate Thai yaoi fangirls, aged from 18-year-old in August 2018. The instruments were online questionnaires, consisting of general information, Imagined Couple Attitude Scale, Self-esteem Inventory, and Thai Happiness Indicator (THI-15). Statistics used to analyze data were descriptive statistics, Chi-square test, Pearson correlation, One-way ANOVA, logistic regression, and multiple linear regression.

Results: Of the total 1,745 participants, 70.5% had their attitude towards imagined couples categorized as moderate level of imagined couple worship, 46.6% had moderate self-esteem, and 38.8% were as happy as general Thai population. There was a strong positive correlation between self-esteem and subjective well-being ($r = 0.745$, $P < 0.001$), while low negative correlations were found between attitude towards imagined couples and self-esteem and subjective well-being. Of all other factors, self-esteem seemed to be the major one that can explain the 55.5% of the variance in subjective well-being.

Conclusion: Most of yaoi fangirls in Thailand were found to have normal level of imagined couple worship, self-esteem, and subjective well-being. Self-esteem was a factor that could predict subjective well-being and attitude towards imagined couples. The results of this study would be beneficial for understanding yaoi fangirls in Thailand, and providing the appropriate care.

Keywords: Subjective well-being, self-esteem, attitude, imagined couples, yaoi fangirls.

One of the most important goals of human being in life is to be happy. Happiness can be evaluated with subjective well-being that reflects a person's subjective evaluation of the quality of his or her life as a whole. Subjective well-being is a positive outcome that is meaningful for people and for many sectors of society.[1]

Societal attitudes toward homosexuality vary greatly across different cultures and historical periods. Much of the world has become more accepting of homosexuals, including Thailand, even it used to be considered as exceptional, against religious beliefs, and contradictory to social norms and traditions.[2] Of all, most of those who acknowledged their self-expressions are female, or those called 'yaoi fangirl', which means 'a female who is pleased and interested in relationship between two male youths who are often referred to as bishonen (beautiful boys)'.[3, 4] The term 'yaoi', originating in Japanese manga in 1970s, is an abbreviation of 'yamanashi, ochinashi, iminashi' or known as 'no peak, no foreclosure, and no meaning'.[5] Such term is used for a female-oriented genre of popular culture, which describes romantic and erotic relationship between men, and is widely accepted and commonly used not only in Japan but worldwide.[6]

The number of yaoi fangirls has increased throughout the period in compliance with social

dynamics on sexual diversity. This creates the trend of imagined couples or ships, meaning of those guys who were paired off by fangirls. By having such appreciation, together with yaoi contents flourishing in the medias and publications, the popularity of boy's love is then broaden and widespread.[7] The existence of yaoi fangirls was, therefore, linked and tied with those male homosexuals.[3]

While Thai society has better perspective on homosexuality, yaoi fangirls are doubt as some think that such preference is wrong and inappropriate.[3] Many fangirls argued that these loves, attitudes, and preferences are the universal things that people can have,[8] but others raised that this queer interest may probably result from low self-esteem and dissatisfaction in their identities and sexualities.[9]

Moreover, Donze E.[10] explained that yaoi fangirls tended to imagine being in a relationship in which they are treated like an equal without being bound by gender expectations or risk of pregnancy. She also added that girls were not making their imagined couples gay, they were fantasizing about being equal, which is consistent with Wilson B, et al.[11] However, the former Deputy Director of Department of Mental Health, Tawee Tangseree, stated that such preference is not considered as mental illness or mental disorder.[12]

In recent years, yaoi studies have been increasing [5 - 11, 13, 14], but the researches on mental health in yaoi fangirls are scant in Thailand. Therefore, this study was conducted to evaluate the subjective well-being, self-esteem, attitude towards imagined couples, and associated factors with subjective well-being of yaoi fangirls in Thailand.

Materials and methods

A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted in August 2018. The subjects were Thai yaoi fangirls with aged from 18 years who could access to internet and online questionnaires. They were able to understand Thai language, willing to participate in the study, and pass all the inclusion criteria, of which were carefully sorted out and screened by the researcher. Purposive sampling was employed by sending out online questionnaires to target social network communities, and the online questionnaires were closed when the sample size was reached. The calculated sample size was 405, but the study had gained much attention from target population. Out of 2,133 respondents within 24 hours after opening the questionnaires, the final subjects were 1,745 Thai yaoi fangirls with access to internet and online questionnaires. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University COA No. 602/ 2018. Every participants implied consent by action without written informed consent.

Measures

Demographic information (such as age, education level, occupation, status, income), behavioral characteristics of being yaoi fangirls (regarding time spending, frequency of following, meeting, or giving gifts to favorite imagined couples), and other relevant information were assessed.

Attitude towards imagine couples was assessed by Imagined Couple Attitude Scale, modified from Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS). The CAS was developed by McCutcheon LE, et al.[15] and the Thai version of CAS was developed by Paladsing K, et al.[16] The responses are on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from '1 = strongly disagree' to '5 = strongly agree'. The total score is obtained by summing raw scores across 33 items that can range from 33 to 165, and were categorized into 3 levels of imagined couple worship: 33 to 77 indicate mild; 78 to 121 indicate moderate; and 122 to 165 indicate high. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this test was 0.93.

Self-esteem was assessed by self-esteem inventory. This inventory was translated and developed by Kongsri S.[17] for her research from the self-esteem inventory of Coopersmith S.[18] The inventory consists of 25 yes-no items, composed of both positive and negative statements, and recoding score on negative statement items should be done before calculating the total score. The positive statements are items number 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 14, 19, 20 and the negative statements are the rest items. The total score can range from 0 to 25, and were categorized into 3 levels: 8 or below indicate low; 9 to 17 indicate medium; and 18 - 25 indicate high. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this inventory was 0.81.

Subjective well-being, the scientific term for happiness and life satisfaction by using one's own cognitive and affective evaluation, was assessed by Thai Happiness Indicator (THI-15), developed by Mongkol A, et al.[19] as they inferred in another study that happiness and well-being are the same in the context of the Thai society.[20] The questionnaire comprises 15 items on 4-point Likert response from '0 = not at all' to '3 = mostly'. The scale is composed of both positive and negative statements, and recoding

score on negative statement items should be done before calculating the total score. The negative statements are items number 3, 8, 12 and the rest are positive statements. The results from sum of the total items range from 0 to 45, and were categorized into 3 levels: 26 or below indicate lower than normal; 27 to 32 indicate normal; 33 - 45 indicate higher than normal. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this inventory was 0.7.

Statistical analyses

To summarize the characteristics of the participants, descriptive statistics, percentage, and frequency were used for categorical variables. Mean, and standard deviation (SD) were calculated for continuous variables, Chi-square test, Pearson correlation, One-way ANOVA, multiple linear regression, and logistic regression were used to explore the relationship between attitude towards imagine couples, self-esteem, subjective well-being, and other variables. All statistical tests were considered significant at $P < 0.05$.

Results

Demographic and behavioral characteristics of the study sample are shown in Table 1. The mean age of the participants was 22.63 ± 4.66. The majority of the respondents had no lover (86.5%) and no mental illness (91%). More than half exposed themselves to others as yaoi fangirls. Most of them spent 6 hours or lower per day on their favorite imagine couples (82.6%), and followed their updates everyday (78.1%). Most of them had never met their beloved imagined couples in person (60.1%), nor given them any gifts (79.1%). Of the total sample 1,745, most of them seemed to have moderate level of imagined couple worship (70.5%), medium self-esteem (46.6%), and the same level of subjective well-being as normal Thai people (38.8%) as presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Demographic and behavioral characteristics of the participants (n = 1,745).

Variables	Number	Percentage
Age (years) [mean 22.63 (SD 4.66), min = 18, max = 52]		
18 – 24	1,425	81.7
25 – 34	271	15.5
35 – 44	45	2.6
45 or above	4	0.2
Educational level		
Secondary or below	337	19.3
Diploma/Vocational Certificate	65	3.8
Bachelor	1,255	71.9
Master or above	88	5.0
Occupation		
University student	1,080	61.9
Company employee	306	17.5
Others	359	20.6
Monthly income (baht)		
Below 15,000	1,292	74.0
15,001 - 30,000	355	20.3
30,001 - 45,000	50	2.9
45,001 - 60,000	26	1.5
60,000 or above	22	1.3
Having lover		
No	1,510	86.5
Yes	235	13.5
Mental illness		
No	1,588	91.0
Yes	157	9.0
Exposing oneself as yaoi fangirl to others		
No	754	43.2
Yes	991	56.8

Table 1. (Con) Demographic and behavioral characteristics of the participants (n = 1,745).

Variables	Number	Percentage
Time spending on imagined couples [mean 4.59 (SD 3.79), min = 0, max = 24]		
6 hours or lower	1,441	82.6
7 - 12 hours	241	13.8
13 - 18 hours	41	2.3
More than 18 hours	22	1.3
Frequency of following imagined couples via social media		
Not everyday	382	21.9
Everyday	1,363	78.1
Frequency of meeting imagined couples in person		
Never	1,049	60.1
1 - 4 times	557	31.9
5 - 7 times	46	2.6
8 - 10 times	24	1.4
More than 10 times	69	4.0
Frequency of giving gifts to imagined couples		
Never	1,380	79.1
Rarely	243	13.9
Sometimes	108	6.2
Always	14	0.8
Reasons behind liking one's imagined couples [multiple responses]		
Their relationship	1,653	94.7
Their interaction	1,603	91.9
Their works and abilities	1,408	80.7
Their appearances and external characteristics	1,187	68.0
Relaxation	865	49.6
Others	630	36.1

Table 2. Frequency of participants by selected variables.

Variables	Number	Percentage
Attitude towards imagined couples [mean 102.13 (SD 20.02), min = 42, max = 165]		
Mild (score 33 - 77)	211	12.1
Moderate (score 78 - 121)	1,230	70.5
High (score 122 - 165)	304	17.4
Self-esteem [mean 14.91 (SD 5.73), min = 0, Max = 25]		
Low (score 0 - 8)	270	15.5
Medium (score 9 - 17)	813	46.6
High (Score 18 - 25)	662	37.9
Subjective well-being [mean 29.87 (SD 6.17), min = 8, max = 45]		
Lower than normal (score < 27)	473	27.1
Normal (score 27 - 32)	677	38.8
Higher than normal (score 33 - 45)	595	34.1

There were significant negative correlations between attitude towards imagined couples and self-esteem and subjective well-being (r = - 0.176, $P < 0.001$ and r = - 0.080, $P < 0.01$, respectively), and a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and subjective well-being ($r = 0.745$, $P < 0.001$).

Analysis using logistic regression on all significant variables from chi-square by Forward LR method in Table 3 shows that educational level lower than bachelor degree, having lover, exposing oneself as yaoi fangirl to others, spending more than 6 hours per day on imagined couples, following their updates every day, giving gifts to them at least once, no mental illness, and low self-esteem were independently associated with attitude towards imagined couples or high level of imagined couples worship.

Table 3. Logistic regression for significant variables from Chi-square associated with high attitude towards imagined couples or high imagined couple worship by using Forward LR method.

Variables	Beta	S.E. (Beta)	P - value	Adjusted odds ratio (95% CI of OR)
Lower than bachelor degree	0.560	0.147	<0.001	1.75 (1.31 - 2.34)
Having lover	0.399	0.181	0.028	1.49 (1.05 - 2.13)
Exposing oneself as yaoi fangirl to others	0.383	0.138	0.006	1.47 (1.12 - 1.92)
Spending more than 6 hours per day on imagined couples	0.790	0.150	<0.001	2.07 (1.64 - 2.96)
Following imagined couples' updates everyday	1.179	0.231	<0.001	3.25 (2.07 - 5.11)
Giving gifts to imagined couples at least once	0.476	0.152	0.002	1.61 (1.20 - 2.17)
No mental illness	0.622	0.282	0.027	1.86 (1.07 - 3.24)
Low self-esteem	0.505	0.169	0.003	1.66 (1.19 - 2.31)
Constant	-3.956	0.356	<0.001	

Of all factors, subjective well-being was significantly related to age, educational level, monthly income, having lover, exposing oneself as yaoi fangirls, time spending, frequency of meeting and giving gifts to imagined couples, self and family mental illness, imagined couple worship, and self-esteem as presented in Table 4.

To identify the variables that predict a high score in subjective well-being, we performed multiple linear regression analysis using forward method, the results of which are presented in Table 5. Self-esteem was a factor that could explain 55.5% of the variance. When adding other variables, additional 0.6% was increased, from attitude towards imagined couples, no mental illness, and having lover, then accounted for 56.1% of the variance in subjective well-being ($P < 0.01$).

Discussion

The study revealed that most of yaoi fangirls in Thailand had moderate level of imagined couple worship, self-esteem, and subjecting well-being. The majority of the participants were aged between 18 to 24 years, consistent with the study of Maltby J, *et al.*[21] saying that the celebrity worship often conducted in late adolescence to early adult hood during which is the period of seeking their identities and peer acceptance according to the psychosocial development theory.[22] Some studies showed that those females who were interested in homosexual relationship were mostly university students and employees,[23, 24] which were in consistent with the results of our study. The imagined couple worship and self-esteem were presented as normal like related studies on Korean fans.[16, 25, 26] Most of the respondents also had their subjective well-being reported the same as the Thai population in general.[20]

However, we found that some had high borderline-pathological imagined couple worship (17.4%), low self-esteem (15.5%), and low subjective well-being (27.1%) so that awareness of these issues and providing the appropriate care, together with mental health promotion, should be concerned.

Behavioral characteristics, such as self-exposing, time spending, gifts giving, and in-person meeting with imagined couples, were linked with attitude towards imagined couples or the worship as the results from related studies.[26, 27] Most of them followed their imagined couples everyday, approximately 4-5 hours per day, but had never met or given any gifts to them before. This may result from the fact that their favorite imagined couples are foreigners, especially Korean idols and artists. Almost half did not expose themselves as yaoi fangirls as they did not want to be doubt by others that their preferences were abnormal and improper.[6] Moreover, about one-fifth spent more than 6 hours per day on imagined couples and more than half followed their updates everyday, which led to high level of imagined couple worship by 2.1 and 3.3 times comparing to spending less than 6 hours per day and not following them everyday respectively. This then indicated that spending too much time on imagined couples and following them too often may result in inappropriate level of imagined couple worship and may have impacts on relationships, thoughts, emotions, and daily lives. It would be great if there are campaigns persuading yaoi fangirls to limit their time spending and frequency of following the imagined couples' updates moderately in order to have proper level of worship.[28]

Our findings showed that there was a low negative significant correlation between imagined couple worship and self-esteem scores and yaoi fangirls with

Table 4. One-way ANOVA for all significant variables associated with subjective well-being.

Variables	n	X̄	S.D.	F	P-value	Significant Pairwise Comparisons
Age (years)				6.003	<0.001	(1) vs (2)
18 – 24	1,425	29.59	6.21			
25 – 34	271	31.04	5.74			
35 – 44	45	31.27	5.89			
45 or above	4	35.00	9.20			
Educational level				5.800	0.001	(1) vs (4)
Secondary or below	337	29.30	6.26			(2) vs (4)
Diploma/Vocational Certificate	65	28.34	6.72			(3) vs (4)
Bachelor	1,255	29.95	6.08			
Master or above	88	31.97	6.05			
Monthly income				7.081	<0.001	(1) vs (2)
Below 15,000	1,292	29.36	6.24			(1) vs (3)
15,001–30,000	355	31.27	5.73			
30,001–45,000	50	31.74	4.91			
45,001–60,000	26	30.92	5.85			
60,000 or above	22	32.31	7.17			
Having lover				19.784	<0.001	
No	1,510	29.61	6.18			
Yes	235	31.52	5.83			
Exposing oneself as yaoi fangirl to others				9.712	0.002	
No	754	29.34	6.11			
Yes	991	30.27	6.18			
Time spending on imagined couples per day				4.651	0.003	(1) vs (4)
6 hours or lower	1,441	29.98	6.13			(3) vs (4)
7 – 12 hours	241	29.26	6.20			
13 – 18 hours	41	31.59	6.34			
More than 18 hours	22	26.18	6.55			
Frequency of meeting imagined couples in person per year				6.754	<0.001	(1) vs (4)
More than 10 times	69	32.91	5.94			(1) vs (5)
8 – 10 times	24	30.79	5.02			
5 – 7 times	46	31.57	4.97			
1 – 4 times	557	30.11	5.84			
Never	1,049	29.44	6.35			
Frequency of giving gifts to imagined couples				5.391	<0.001	(1) vs (4)
Always	14	33.86	6.44			(2) vs (4)
Sometimes	108	31.09	5.73			
Rarely	243	30.60	5.64			
Never	1,380	29.60	6.25			
Mental illness				37.100	<0.001	
No	1,588	30.15	5.98			
Yes	157	27.04	7.21			
Mental illness of family members				6.251	0.013	
No	1,608	29.98	6.14			
Yes	137	28.61	6.39			
Attitude towards imagined couples				6.571	0.001	(1) vs (2)
Mild (score 33 - 77)	211	31.30	6.07			(1) vs (3)
Moderate (score 78 - 121)	1,230	29.64	6.13			
High (score 122 - 165)	304	29.79	6.28			
Self-esteem				750.952	<0.001	(1) vs (2)
Low (score 0 - 8)	270	21.86	4.98			
Medium (score 9 - 17)	813	28.96	4.64			
High (Score 18 - 25)	662	34.25	4.16			

Table 5. Multiple regression for significant variables from One-way ANOVA associated with subjective well-being by using Forward method.

Variable	r	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	P - value
				Beta	Std. E	Beta		
Constant				16.521	0.631		26.177	<0.001
Self-esteem	0.745	0.555	0.555	0.800	0.018	0.743	45.315	<0.001
Attitude towards imagined couples	0.747	0.558	0.558	0.014	0.005	0.045	2.748	0.006
Mental illness	0.748	0.560	0.559	-0.993	0.349	-0.046	-2.847	0.004
Having lover	0.749	0.562	0.561	0.785	0.289	0.043	2.715	0.007

low self-esteem were 1.67 times more likely to have high imagined couple worship compared to those with moderate to high self-esteem, which is consistent with other studies which also found negative relationship between celebrity worship and self-esteem.[16, 25] The low correlation may explain that it is not necessary for those with low or high self-esteem to have imagined couple worship. Some studies revealed that the relationship between celebrity worship and subjective well-being seemed to exist, but was better explained by other appropriated variable which was self-esteem. Self-esteem of fans might then be related to subjective well-being, regardless of celebrity worship level.[25] With high significant correlation between self-esteem and subjective well-being presented in our study, this then demonstrated the strong positive relationship between self-esteem and subjective well-being as also stated in other studies.[29, 30] Our study also showed that self-esteem, an essential aspect of emotional health, plays a pivotal role in individual's subjective well-being, including in the group of yaoi fangirls.

In addition to self-esteem and imagined couple worship, romantic relationship and mental illness could predict subjective well-being. Many studies unveiled the positive correlation between relationship and subjective well-being,[31 - 33] and it was higher among married people.[34] According to the Global Happiness Policy Report 2018, mental illness is one of the main causes of unhappiness in the world.[35] Many said that well-being depended on good mental health,[36 - 38] while some argued that many of those with mental illness also had their subjective well-beings.[39, 40] However, further studies about mental problems and appropriate mental health care should be warranted.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations that need to be considered in this study. First, the study was conducted on a sample group of Thai yaoi fangirls aged from 18 years old with internet access. It may limit the extent to which these findings could be generalized to other groups with different settings. Second, since this study was a cross-sectional descriptive design, we could not identify the causal relationship between these variables.

Conclusion

Most of yaoi fangirls in Thailand were found to have normal level of imagined couple worship, self-esteem, and subjective well-being. Behavioral characteristics, such as time spending, and following imagined couples, were associated with imagined couple worship, and self-esteem was the major factor to predict subjective well-being. The results of this study would be beneficial for understanding yaoi fangirls in Thailand, and providing the appropriate care to those low self-esteem fangirls to increase their subjective well-being.

Acknowledgements

Conflict of interest

The authors, hereby, declare no conflict of interest.

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