



Portrayal of Thai Soft Power in Thai Series: A Case Study of I Told Sunset About You

Xin Fan^{a*} and Salas Supalakwatchana^b

^aBangkok University International, Bangkok University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

^bSchool of Communication Arts, Bangkok University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

*Corresponding author. E-mail address: xin.f@bu.ac.th

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Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of Thai soft power in “I Told Sunset About You”, focusing on its role as a cultural export aligned with Thailand’s “5Fs” strategies (Food, Fashion, Film, Fighting, and Festivals). Through qualitative textual analysis, the research explores how the series integrates Thai cultural elements such as language, cuisine, festivals, and regional settings in Phuket, while addressing universal themes of identity and LGBTQ+ representation. By blending cultural authenticity with emotional storytelling, the series enhances cross-cultural understanding and empathy. Its depiction of Southern Thai identity and nuanced narratives positions “I Told Sunset About You” as a tool for cultural diplomacy, boosting Thailand’s global reputation, tourism, and soft power. The findings underscore the transformative potential of Thai BL media in promoting cultural exchange and inclusivity, contributing to Thailand’s leadership in Southeast Asian media and cultural exports.

Keywords: I Told Sunset About You, Soft Power, Series, Thailand, Cultural Representation, Portrayal, Cultural Communication, Boys Love

Introduction

“I Told Sunset About You” is a Thai Boys’ Love (BL) series aired in 2020 with the story centered around two childhood friends, The and Oh-aew, who live in Phuket province in Southern Thailand. The two characters later became bitter rivals after a misunderstanding then reconnected during their university admission process. As the friendship rebuilds, romantic feelings develop, leading to a complex and emotional journey filled with passion, confusion, and heartbreak (MGR Online, 2020). The series is directed by Naruebet Kuno and produced by Nadao Bangkok in collaboration with Line TV (MGR Online, 2020). Due to its excellent production quality, stunning cinematography, captivating storyline, and strong acting performances by Puttiopong Assaratanakul (Teh) and Krit Amnuaydechorn (Oh-aew), the series has received high praise from international audiences and critics with a rating of 8.8/10 from IMDb (2020). The series has won the International Drama of the Year award from the Seoul International Drama Awards 2021 (Seoul Drama Awards Organizing Committee, 2021) proving how successful it is in the international market.

In terms of the popularity, “I Told Sunset About You” has garnered a substantial fanbase, with 208,000 fans reported by Zheng (2022), and is a critically acclaimed Thai BL series that has set a new benchmark for quality storytelling in the genre (Wei & Kesaprakorn, 2023). Therefore, Thailand’s Boys’ Love (BL) industry has carved out a unique space for Chinese fans, incorporating Chinese cultural heritage into series like “I Told Sunset About You”. Unlike many BL dramas, this series is not adapted from a Y novel, making it a groundbreaking work by Nadao Bangkok (Prasannam & Chan, 2023). The narrative shifts its setting from Bangkok to Phuket, a location where Chinese popular culture, overseas Chinese influences, and Peranakan heritage converge. The series has been well-received by both Thai audiences and fans across the Sinophone world. By reimagining the cultural setting, “I Told Sunset About You” presents a diversified interpretation of Thainess, moving beyond the more limited cultural representations seen during the early stages of the BL industry’s rise (Prasannam & Chan, 2023).



Originating in Japanese manga and anime during the 1970s, the Boys' Love (BL) genre has evolved significantly, becoming a global cultural phenomenon with a particularly strong presence in Thailand. Thai BL dramas have emerged as influential cultural exports, offering a compelling blend of universal themes such as love, identity, and self-discovery, and rich cultural specificity that resonates with diverse international audiences. These dramas not only entertain but also serve as a medium for cultural exchange and soft power projection (Otmazgin, 2008).

The Boys' Love (BL) genre in Thailand has evolved significantly over the past decade, transitioning from niche productions to a mainstream phenomenon. This shift was catalyzed by pioneering works like "Lovesick, The Series", which adapted Japanese BL conventions to Thai cultural contexts, introducing a new genre of "Series Y" that reflects local tastes while maintaining elements of queer representation (Baudinette, 2019; Ramadhani & Prastuty, 2020). Thai BL dramas stand out for their high production quality, culturally nuanced storytelling, and LGBTQ+ narratives. Unlike BL content from other countries, Thai BL often integrates elements of national heritage, such as language, cuisine, and traditions, using these as subtle tools for cultural export (Baudinette, 2019; Wei & Kesaprakorn, 2023).

In the modern interconnected world, media, particularly film and television, has emerged as one of the most effective tools for projecting soft power. Through engaging narratives and authentic cultural representations, media can transcend linguistic and geographical barriers, fostering emotional connections, shaping global perceptions, and influencing international audiences' attitudes and behaviors. TV programs like "Informal Talks" is a good example, using dialogue and cultural exchange to enhance cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect (Fan & Komolsevin, 2024). In the case of South Korea, despite being the 13th largest economy in the world and possessing a world-class military, it struggles to compete comfortably with other advanced industrialized nations in the realm of hard power (Geun, 2009). One example of soft power from South Korea is a series named *Parasite* which garnered global acclaim and won the Academy Award for Best Picture, stands as a prime example of how cinematic excellence can amplify a nation's cultural footprint. This achievement is intricately tied to the broader Korean Wave (Hallyu), which has propelled South Korea to the forefront of global soft power by creating a vibrant cultural ecosystem spanning music, television, and cuisine (Lee, 2022).

Similarly, France has long harnessed the power of cinema as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy. French films, often imbued with sophisticated storytelling and rich cultural imagery, have successfully communicated the essence of French identity to global audiences (Niwon, 2020). For Thailand, leveraging its rich cultural heritage through film and other creative industries presents a promising pathway to deepen global engagement, enhance its soft power, and achieve sustained cultural and economic impact. However, there are many scholars stated the wider populace has been raised over the Thai Boys Love series since the 2010s, especially in China (Prasannam, 2019; Zhang & Dedman, 2021).

The term soft power is defined by Nye (2004) as the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, relying on culture, political values, and foreign policies to achieve its goals. Unlike hard power, which relies on military force and economic dominance, soft power draws from a nation's cultural appeal, political values, and diplomatic practices. The scholar also noted that U.S. culture, spanning from Hollywood to Harvard, has a greater global influence than any other. The country has consistently leveraged global media as a cornerstone of its media industry (Nye, 2004). Thailand has various phenomena that demonstrate the use of soft power to develop and build a reputation such as Thai boxing, mango sticky rice, Pad Thai, Thai films, the "Land of Smile" concept, and tourist attractions (Roongsangjun, 2023).



Thailand's strategic focus on the entertainment industry as a cultural export aligns with the global rise of cultural diplomacy as a key instrument of international relations (Vivatanapaiboonlap & Pham, 2024). During Gen. Prayuth Chan-o-cha's government, the "5Fs" strategy was introduced as part of Thailand's soft power strategy, centered on Food, Fashion, Film, Fighting, and Festivals, exemplifies the deliberate use of cultural artifacts to strengthen nation branding. These elements not only highlight Thailand's unique cultural identity but also position the country as an attractive destination for tourism, investment, and cross-cultural engagement (The Nation, 2023). In 2023, Srettha Thavisin as the new prime minister of Thailand continued to promote Thai culture as part of Thailand's soft power strategy, establishing the Thailand Creative Content Agency (THACCA) to implement strategies, policies and the development of Thailand's soft power through creative industries, resulting in these policies being continued entirely upon the establishment of the new government leading by Paetongtarn Shinawatra, and the soft power policy remains an essential policy in the current Thai social discourse (Panyawutthitham, 2024).

The internationally acclaimed "I Told Sunset About You" stands out in this genre for its exceptional storytelling, emotional depth, and nuanced portrayal of LGBTQ+ experiences. The series delves into the complexities of adolescent life, exploring themes of friendship, ambition, and the tumultuous journey toward self-acceptance. Its characters are portrayed with authenticity and depth, allowing viewers to connect personally regardless of their cultural background (Ramadhani & Prastuty, 2020). Hence, this series is selected as the sample of this study.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the cultural representation in "I Told Sunset About You" in terms of narrative themes and character depth.
2. To analyze how Thai culture is portrayed in "I Told Sunset About You" through food, fashion, fighting, film, and festivals.

Literature Review of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy in Media

The concept of soft power developed by Joseph S. Nye refers to the ability to influence others without coercion, operating through attraction and persuasion (Roongsangjun, 2023). The major resources of soft power consist of the following:

1. Culture, when one country's culture is aligned with the interests and values of another country.
2. Political Values, when a country's political values are consistent with those of other countries.
3. Foreign policies, when a country's policies are seen as legitimate and morally sound by others.

The "4A 2R" framework used for the implementation of soft power can be divided into 2 sides, active (4A), and passive (2R). The active side consists of Agenda, Actor, Asset, and Action, while the passive side consists of Reaction and Result.

Table 1 4A 2R Framework

Active Side		Passive Side	
Agenda	The agenda of the country is often divided into secret and public agendas.	Reaction	The reaction may be in the form of consumption, cooperation, and building a network to support power users.
Actor	Power users are government, private sector, citizens, non-profit organizations, etc.	Result	The results of the acceptance of power include changes at the state, private or public levels.

**Table 1** (Cont.)

	Active Side	Passive Side
Asset	Power capital including charm, culture, education, assistance, etc. At the same time, asset also means capital.	
Action	Actions or strategies that will help achieve the expected use of power.	

Source: Adapted from Roongsangjun (2023).

Soft power is increasingly exercised through film and television, which serve as accessible cultural artifacts. Thailand's strategic use of media to promote its image emphasizes cultural storytelling as a diplomatic tool. The global success of films like *Parasite* and French classics such as *Amélie* demonstrates how cinematic narratives can transcend cultural boundaries and serve as effective tools for nation branding. These works not only entertain but also offer audiences an intimate look into the cultural fabric of the countries they represent, fostering empathy and understanding (Lee, 2022; Niwon, 2020). Thailand has developed numerous soft power assets including Thai food, tourism, festivals, and Thai films. The historical success of Thai films such as "Ong Bank", and "Shutter" gained international recognition and served as an original model that helped introduce Thai cinema to global audiences (Roongsangjun, 2023). Present day, Thai BL dramas have emerged as a medium for showcasing the nation's cultural and social landscape. By intertwining cultural motifs with universal themes, these dramas offer a unique lens through which international audiences can engage with Thai culture, creating a ripple effect of cultural appreciation and dialogue.

Gender Diversity Concept

Gender diversity refers to the spectrum of gender identities that do not align with traditional binary concepts of male and female, encompassing identities such as transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming (Rubin et al., 2020). The concept of gender diversity has evolved significantly in the 21st century, transforming from binary categorizations to a more inclusive and dimensional understanding of gender, recognizing sexual identities beyond traditional norms, such as transgender, nonbinary, and intersex identities. This paradigm shift challenges the historical view of gender as a fixed, binary category tied to one's designated sex at birth, and reflects broader societal changes, including increased visibility for gender differences and the expansion of language to describe diversity (Rubin et al., 2020; Hammack & Wignall, 2023).

The representation of gender diverse groups in media has increased in recent years, often through celebrities, supporting characters, and in gender diverse focused shows but significant challenges remain, yet portrayals often rely on narrow stereotypes and narratives that fail to reflect the diversity of the gender diverse group's experiences. (Mocarski et al., 2019). With the rise of digital technologies and social media, greater representation of gender diversity is enabled through online streaming platforms and social media, providing spaces for stories that might not find support in traditional media channels (Hammack & Wignall, 2023).

The Boys' Love Phenomenon

The global rise of the Boys' Love (BL) genre underscores its pivotal role as a bridge for cultural understanding and acceptance. Originating in Japanese manga and anime, the genre has grown into a transnational phenomenon, with Thai BL media emerging as a prominent contributor to this cultural movement (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017). Studies have highlighted the genre's ability to connect with diverse audiences, emphasizing its role in fostering cross-cultural dialogue and empathy (Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017). The emotional depth and relatability of BL



narratives encourage viewers to reconsider preconceived notions about gender and sexuality, promoting a more inclusive understanding of human relationships. As Thai BL media continues to gain international acclaim, it exemplifies the genre's growing influence in shaping global perspectives on love, identity, and diversity.

“I Told Sunset About You”

“I Told Sunset About You”, a Thai BL series originally aired on Line TV, an online streaming platform, offers a profound exploration of gay culture and identity as depicted through the characters Teh (Putthipong Assaratasakul) and Oh-aew (Krit Amnuaydechorn). The series delves into the emotional and social complexities of same-sex attraction, including the bittersweet process of discovering one's feelings, the pain of rejection, and the fear of societal acceptance. By doing so, the series provides a nuanced portrayal of LGBTQ+ experiences, blending universal themes of love and identity with culturally specific elements (Ramadhani & Prastuty, 2020).

Through its rich narrative and deeply human portrayal of LGBTQ+ experiences, the series contributes to a broader understanding of gay culture. As Ramadhani and Prastuty (2020) argue, *I Told Sunset About You* transcends its role as entertainment, becoming a vehicle for cultural reflection and dialogue. By showcasing the complexities of gay identity and relationships, the series fosters empathy and understanding, positioning itself as a landmark work in LGBTQ+ representation within Southeast Asian media (Ramadhani & Prastuty, 2020).

Previous Studies on “I Told Sunset About You”

Miao (2022) examined the cinematographic techniques in “I Told Sunset About You”, focusing on the use of close-up shots to capture emotional subtleties, symbolic colors (red for Oh-aew and blue for Teh) to reflect relationship dynamics, and montage sequences to depict transitions in their emotional journey. The innovative use of lens language and color composition sets the series apart, elevating its storytelling impact.

Taemphimai et al. (2021) analyzed the narrative structure and semiotics of the series. Key elements include a five-part plot progression and symbols like coconut water (purity), hibiscus (courage and marginality), and flashcards (trust). The study highlights how the series achieves authentic LGBTQ+ representation and balances cultural specificity with universal themes of love and self-discovery.

Wei and Kesaprakorn (2023) explored the series' influence on Chinese youth, focusing on its storytelling techniques. Visual aesthetics, plot depth, and emotional resonance were praised by Chinese viewers, fostering empathy and acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities. While the series did not directly change cultural norms, it encouraged dialogue and reflection among audiences.

Previous Studies of Other BL Series

Zheng and Common (2024) discovered that a Thai BL series named “KinnPorsche the Series” have also gained popularity among Chinese audiences. The actors from “KinnPorsche the Series” have plenty of adoring fans with 177,000 fans on social media page, behind 833,000 fans of BillkinPP, “I Told Sunset About You” actors, social media page. This demonstrates a rising trend of Thai BL series' popularity in China.

Methods and Materials

Methodology Overview

This study employed a qualitative textual analysis to examine “I Told Sunset About You” as a cultural artifact. By focusing on dialogues, and visual elements on each episode, the research explores how the series represents Thai cultural heritage, addresses LGBTQ+ themes, and fosters emotional resonance.



Framework for Analysis

1. To examine the cultural representation in “I Told Sunset About You” in terms of narrative themes and character depth.

Cultural Representation: Analyze how the series incorporates Thai and Chinese cultural elements, including language, festivals, and visual symbolism, to project a multifaceted cultural identity.

Narrative Themes: Examine themes of self-discovery, LGBTQ+ representation, and identity struggles, focusing on how these narratives foster emotional resonance and cultural understanding.

Character Depth: Explore the emotional and psychological development of the main characters, highlighting their relevance to local and global audiences.

Cinematography: Assess the use of settings, to enhance narrative depth and cultural authenticity.

2. To analyze how Thai culture is portrayed in “I Told Sunset About You” through food, fashion, fighting, film, and festivals.

Analytical Process

The analytical process involves selecting every episode of “I Told Sunset About You” that highlights cultural representation, narrative themes, and character development. Through close reading of dialogues and visual elements, the analysis focuses on linguistic features, such as languages, and visual symbolism, including color palettes and settings. Recurring themes like identity struggles and self-discovery are categorized to uncover narrative patterns, while audience reception data is reviewed to assess the series’ global impact, particularly in promoting cultural understanding and Thailand’s soft power.

Results

Table 2 Cultural Representation, Narrative Themes, and Character Depth

Ep	Cultural Representation	Narrative Themes	Character Depth
1	The use of the Thai Language, Chinese, and Southern dialects emphasizes linguistic diversity. Scenes showcase local street markets, traditional shophouses, and shrines, grounding the story in a rich cultural setting. For example, the opening sequence features Teh interviews university by using Chinese and Thai.	Introduces themes of identity and belonging as Teh and Oh-aew reconnect after years apart. The pressure of societal expectations is subtly highlighted, such as Teh hesitating to rekindle his friendship due to unspoken social judgments.	Teh’s initial resistance to rekindling his friendship with Oh-aew hints at internalized conflict, while Oh-aew’s vulnerability reveals his emotional openness. A key scene shows Oh-Aew confronting Teh about past misunderstandings, laying the foundation for their evolving relationship.
2	Focuses on Phuket’s Old Town with vivid depictions of its Sino-Portuguese architecture to provide cultural depth.	Explores the tension between personal desires and familial obligations. Themes of jealousy and reconciliation emerge, particularly during a heartfelt argument at a family dinner.	Teh’s jealousy and conflicting emotions deepen his characterization. Oh-aew’s resilience begins to surface as he navigates rejection and acceptance. A memorable moment includes Oh-aew’s monologue about feeling overshadowed, offering insight into his struggles.



Table 2 (Cont.)

Ep	Cultural Representation	Narrative Themes	Character Depth
3	Represent temple, beach, mountain, and spiritual reflections, showcasing the role of spirituality in Thai culture. Scenic shots of Promthep Cape underscore the connection between nature and emotional introspection. A standout scene involves Teh lighting incense at a temple, symbolizing his search for clarity amidst emotional turmoil.	Themes of self-discovery take center stage. Both characters grapple with the boundaries of friendship and burgeoning romantic feelings. A pivotal moment occurs when Teh finally admits his growing affection for Oh-aew, marking a turning point in their relationship.	Teh's internal struggle becomes more pronounced as he starts to confront his feelings for Oh-aew. Oh-aew's emotional growth is evident in his willingness to confront Teh about their dynamic, particularly during an emotional exchange at the cape.
4	Depicts local cuisine, with a focus on shared meals as a symbol of community and connection. A specific scene where the characters share a traditional Southern Thai dish emphasizes familial bonds and cultural identity.	The conflict between societal expectations and personal freedom intensifies. Themes of loyalty and self-sacrifice are explored, such as when Teh prioritizes his family's expectations over his personal happiness.	Teh's loyalty to his family and cultural roots clashes with his growing feelings for Oh-aew, creating a layered emotional conflict. Oh-aew's journey toward self-acceptance gains momentum as he begins to articulate his needs more assertively, highlighted in a tearful confession during a family gathering.
5	The series culminates with vivid depictions of Phuket's natural beauty, using sunsets and ocean views as metaphors for resolution and new beginnings. A particularly moving scene shows Teh and Oh-aew reconciling during a sunset at Promthep Cape, symbolizing hope and closure.	Themes of reconciliation and embracing one's identity are brought to the forefront. The series concludes with a message of hope and self-acceptance, demonstrated in the final scene where Teh publicly acknowledges his love for Oh-aew.	Teh finally acknowledges his feelings, demonstrating significant emotional growth. Oh-aew's perseverance and openness serve as a catalyst for their reconciliation. Both characters find a sense of balance and self-understanding, as shown in their mutual decision to support each other's ambitions.

Objective 1: To examine the cultural representation in “I Told Sunset About You” in terms of narrative themes and character depth.

Cultural Representation

Language and Dialogue

The series emphasizes cultural authenticity through its deliberate use of the Thai language, Chinese, and regional Southern dialect, showcasing Thailand's rich linguistic diversity. By incorporating the Southern dialect and Chinese, “I Told Sunset About You” highlights the unique cultural identity of Southern Thailand, offering a nuanced portrayal of the characters' backgrounds and settings. This linguistic choice not only deepens the narrative's authenticity but also provides a rare platform for the representation of regional voices in Thai media, which are often overshadowed by the dominance of Central Thai.

For local audiences, the use of native dialects fosters a sense of connection and pride, as it reflects the everyday speech and lived experiences of communities from Southern Thailand. For international viewers, the series becomes a gateway to Thai linguistic heritage, offering an immersive cultural experience that extends beyond visual aesthetics. Through thoughtfully crafted subtitles, the series ensures that global audiences can grasp the essence of Thai idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and the emotional depth embedded in the dialogue.



For Thai-Chinese individuals, the use of the Chinese language enhances their sense of self-identity within Thai-Chinese families, reflecting the historical and cultural integration of Chinese heritage in Thailand. Speaking Chinese allows those from large Chinese families to connect deeply with their cultural roots and traditions.

Additionally, the series uses language as a vehicle for character development and emotional resonance. The transitions between formal and informal speech, code-switching between standard Thai and the Southern dialect, and the characters' unique ways of expressing themselves convey layers of meaning that enrich the storytelling. For instance, moments when characters revert to their native dialect during emotional exchanges reveal vulnerability and authenticity, further drawing audiences into their personal journeys.

By prioritizing linguistic authenticity and diversity, "I Told Sunset About You" goes beyond mere representation to actively celebrate Thailand's cultural heritage. This approach positions the series as a significant cultural export, using language as a bridge for cross-cultural understanding and an invitation for international audiences to engage with the depth and complexity of Thai culture.

Visual Symbolism

The series masterfully integrates visual symbolism, using traditional Thai architecture, rituals, and nature to provide cultural depth and authenticity. These visual elements not only serve as a backdrop but also play a vital role in enhancing the narrative's emotional and cultural resonance.

The depiction of traditional Thai architecture, from ornate temples to humble Southern-style homes, grounds the series in a distinctly Thai setting. These visual cues subtly convey the characters' connections to their roots and cultural heritage. The intricate designs and craftsmanship of the architecture reflect the richness of Thai history and artistry, immersing viewers in the physical and cultural landscapes that shape the story.

Rituals and ceremonies, such as Buddhist blessings and temple visits, are intricately woven into the series to highlight the spiritual and communal values central to Thai identity. These moments not only showcase Thailand's deep-rooted spiritual traditions but also reveal the characters' inner worlds. For example, scenes of Buddhist ceremonies often parallel the characters' emotional journeys, serving as moments of reflection, reconciliation, or transformation. These rituals emphasize themes of interconnectedness, mindfulness, and the pursuit of harmony, resonating with both local and global audiences.

Nature, with its vibrant colors, breathtaking views, and inspiration of power captures a memorable and enduring image of Thailand. In the context of the series, the scenes and storyline penetrate nature with special significance. Here, Phuket emerges as a symbol of love, culture, and religious harmony, enhancing its representation as a place of deep emotional and spiritual connection in Thailand.

Through its meticulous attention to visual symbolism, "I Told Sunset About You" transcends its narrative, becoming a cinematic representation of Thailand's cultural identity. By blending traditional elements with modern storytelling, the series fosters a deeper appreciation of Thai culture and heritage while creating an emotionally engaging experience for viewers worldwide.

Narrative Themes

Exploration of Identity

The protagonists' journey in "I Told Sunset About You" profoundly reflects universal struggles of self-discovery, acceptance, and belonging, making the series resonate with audiences worldwide. Through the characters Teh and Oh-aew, the narrative delves into the complexities of navigating identity, particularly in the context



of same-sex attraction, societal expectations, and personal ambition. These themes transcend cultural boundaries, offering a deeply relatable portrayal of the human experience.

Teh and Oh-aew's emotional journeys mirror the uncertainties and challenges faced by many individuals exploring their sexual orientation or grappling with societal pressures. Their evolving relationship captures moments of vulnerability, courage, and self-realization, highlighting the tensions between internal desires and external validation. The series' sensitive approach to these struggles allows viewers to connect on an intimate level, fostering empathy and understanding across diverse cultural contexts.

This exploration of identity is particularly impactful in regions such as China and Vietnam, where conversations around LGBTQ+ rights and representation are gradually gaining prominence. In these societies, where traditional norms often overshadow open discussions about sexuality and gender, the series serves as both a mirror and a catalyst for change. By presenting a heartfelt and authentic LGBTQ+ narrative, "I Told Sunset About You" challenges stereotype, encourages dialogue, and inspires greater acceptance among its audience.

Furthermore, the series integrates cultural specificity into its universal themes, enhancing its emotional depth and cultural relevance. By intertwining the protagonists' personal journeys with elements of Thai culture, the narrative creates a unique blend of individuality and universality. This approach not only amplifies the series' global appeal but also underscores its role in contributing to broader conversations about identity and inclusion.

In a world increasingly focused on diversity and representation, "I Told Sunset About You" stands out as a meaningful exploration of the intersection of culture, identity, and self-expression. Its impact goes beyond entertainment, offering a powerful narrative that encourages reflection, acceptance, and advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights across cultures.

Character Depth

Teh and Oh-aew are masterfully crafted characters whose emotional arcs encapsulate the intricate dynamics of human relationships, making them resonate with a broad spectrum of viewers. The depth of their characterization lies in their ability to balance personal desires with the societal expectations that shape their lives, creating a narrative that feels both authentic and universally relatable.

Teh's journey is marked by his internal conflict between ambition, self-discovery, and loyalty to his cultural and familial roots. His struggle to reconcile his growing feelings for Oh-aew with the expectations of those around him highlights the tension between personal freedom and societal norms. These challenges are portrayed with raw vulnerability, making Teh's character an emblem of the universal desire to find one's authentic self in a world full of constraints.

Oh-aew, on the other hand, is a poignant representation of emotional resilience and self-awareness. His openness in expressing his feelings and navigating rejection allows viewers to see the beauty of vulnerability and emotional growth. Oh-aew's journey, characterized by his longing for acceptance and his courage to embrace his identity, serves as an inspiring counterbalance to Teh's more restrained self-exploration.

Together, Teh and Oh-aew's relationship is a microcosm of the complexities inherent in human connections such as love, jealousy, fear, and hope are all intricately interwoven into their interactions. Their evolving dynamic not only explores the nuances of romantic and platonic love but also reflects broader themes of identity, belonging, and self-acceptance.



Cinematography

Setting

Series in the picturesque province of Phuket, “I Told Sunset About You” captures the island’s stunning natural beauty and cultural vibrancy, seamlessly integrating the setting into the series’ narrative and themes. The locations featured, such as the historic streets of Old Town and the breathtaking views from Promthep Cape, serve a dual purpose: as a compelling narrative backdrop and as a visual celebration of Thailand’s rich heritage and landscapes.

Phuket’s Old Town, with its colorful Sino-Portuguese architecture and vibrant street life, provides an intimate and authentic glimpse into Thailand’s cultural history. The narrow lanes, adorned with traditional shophouses, become a canvas for the characters’ emotional journeys, symbolizing both their deep-rooted connections to the past and their aspirations for the future. The juxtaposition of modernity and tradition in these settings mirrors the characters’ own struggles to reconcile personal desires with societal expectations.

Promthep Cape, known for its panoramic ocean views and dramatic sunsets, plays a particularly symbolic role. It serves as a sanctuary for introspection and pivotal moments of emotional revelation for the characters. The natural beauty of the location not only enhances the series’ visual appeal but also reflects the themes of self-discovery and transformation that lie at the heart of the story.

Sang Tham Shrine, also known as the Shrine of the Goddess of Mercy, is a significant cultural and religious landmark in Phuket. Known for its intricate architecture and serene atmosphere, it reflects the rich integration of Thai and Chinese cultural influences. The shrine serves as a place of worship and spiritual reflection, symbolizing harmony, devotion, and cultural heritage. Its presence in narratives like “I Told Sunset About You” adds layers of cultural and spiritual depth, connecting the story to Phuket’s unique identity and traditions.

Beyond its narrative function, the choice of setting aligns with Thailand’s soft power objectives by showcasing the island’s allure as a global tourist destination. The series’ portrayal of Phuket highlights not just its physical beauty but also its cultural richness, creating a compelling visual invitation for international audiences to explore the region. By leveraging its setting, “I Told Sunset About You” not only advances its storytelling but also contributes to Thailand’s broader goals of cultural diplomacy and tourism promotion.

Objective 2: To analyze how Thai culture is portrayed in “I Told Sunset About You” through food, fashion, fighting, film, and festivals.

In terms of food, the series showcases the richness of Southern Thai cuisine, particularly through shared meals that emphasize cultural identity and community. Specific scenes, such as the characters enjoying traditional dishes like Hokkien noodles during a family meal, highlight the diversity of Thai culinary traditions. The character’s name, Oh-aew, is even named after a traditional Southern dessert which adds depth to the food culture of Phuket in the series.

In terms of fashion, the characters’ attire in various settings, particularly in Phuket’s Old Town, exemplifies this blend by integrating modern styles with traditional elements. For instance, Oh-aew’s clothing features a light, look of flowing fabrics adorned with tropical patterns that resonate with the local environment, when the sea breeze sweeps, the wind blows messy shirts and hair. Thai school unique high-school uniforms and Thai floral shirts (เสื้อลายดอก) are also present in many of the scenes.

In terms of film, the series itself is a combination of emotional storytelling, beautiful sceneries of Phuket, quality production with amazing cinematography techniques, traditional food, Thai festival, and unique fashion of



Thailand. The series also portrays the concept of gender diversity through main characters who are nonbinary, departing from the traditional social norms and rules.

In terms of fighting, the series did not show the physical fighting scenes related to Muay Thai but portrayed the emotional struggles and resilience of characters, especially the main characters who are identified as gender diverse in this series, reflecting the fighting spirit of Thai people as a whole.

As for the festivals, the series showed the school application event and the university admission event which are both unique to Thailand. Unlike other countries, Thailand has a specific process that Thai people are familiar with but could be interesting to foreigners. Even though these are not the major festivals in Thailand, they occurred every year and become part of the Thai culture.

Discussion

Soft Power in the *I Told Sunset About You*

The analysis of “*I Told Sunset About You*” reveals that Thai cultural elements portrayed in the series align closely with Thailand’s “5Fs” strategy (Food, Fashion, Film, Fighting, and Festivals), showcasing these elements as key aspects of Thailand’s soft power projection.

In terms of food, the series showcases the richness of Southern Thai cuisine, particularly through shared meals that emphasize cultural identity and community. Specific scenes, such as the characters enjoying traditional dishes like Hokkien noodles during a family meal, highlight the diversity of Thai culinary traditions. This representation not only strengthens Thailand’s culinary appeal but also invites global audiences to explore its unique flavors. The other representative is Oh-aew (Thai desert) not only enriches the narrative but also promotes Thailand’s culinary heritage to international audiences. In a memorable moment, Teh and Oh-aew prepare and share a Southern-style dish together, symbolizing reconciliation and the blending of Thai-Chinese cultural identities. This depiction reinforces the cultural importance of food as both sustenance and a medium of connection.

In terms of fashion, in Thailand serves as a dynamic intersection of modernity and tradition, reflecting the country’s rich cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary aesthetics. The characters’ attire in various settings, particularly in Phuket’s Old Town, exemplifies this blend by integrating modern styles with traditional elements. For instance, Oh-aew’s clothing features a light, the look of flowing fabrics adorned with tropical patterns that resonate with the local environment, when the sea breeze sweeps, the wind blows messy shirts and hair. This approach not only highlights the beauty of Thai textiles but also promotes regional influences such as Floral shirt (เสื้อลายดอก) and the widely recognized Thai school uniform. Additionally, in scenes set against the backdrop of Phuket’s Old Town, the unique Thai aesthetic is showcased through a vibrant mix of traditional and modern fashion. This setting indirectly enhances awareness of Thailand’s design sensibilities, appealing to both local and international audiences. The popularity of Thai school uniforms has notably surged beyond borders, especially in China, where they have become emblematic of Thai culture as portrayed in popular dramas. Thus, the interplay between modern fashion trends and traditional attire not only preserves cultural identity but also fosters a greater appreciation for Thailand’s rich sartorial heritage on a global scale.

In terms of film, “*I Told Sunset About You*” showed an example of Thailand’s burgeoning media industry and its ability to create high-quality cinematic content. The cinematography captures Phuket’s breathtaking landscapes, such as Promthep Cape during a pivotal sunset scene where Teh and Oh-aew reconcile. This integration of natural beauty with emotional storytelling highlights the dual function of the series as both a narrative and a promotional



tool for Thailand. Additionally, the series' production design, from its use of traditional Thai decor in family homes to its vibrant outdoor settings, demonstrates how film can elevate cultural motifs to global recognition.

In terms of fighting, although the series does not directly focus on Muay Thai or martial arts, the characters' emotional struggles and resilience reflect the broader Thai cultural value of perseverance, which resonates with the spirit of "fighting" inherent in Thai identity.

In terms of festivals, the depiction of Thai events, such as the school application event and the university admission event showed the unique Thai culture related to Thai teenagers and students, which foreigners, and international viewers could find interesting.

Even though the cultural elements portrayed in the series are aligned with Thailand's soft power policy, it was not planned to be as the production company and the government did not take part in the funding or production process. Yet, Thailand's "5Fs" strategy is found in, "I Told Sunset About You", demonstrating how a series can serve as a multifaceted cultural export. According to the "4A 2R" framework of the soft power concept (Roongsangjun, 2023), The government and the production company acted as different actors with their own agendas but turned out to have something in common in terms of the portrayal of Thai cultures and the 5Fs policy which is a part of the soft power policy. At the same time, the asset produced by the production company became the asset of Thailand to assist the promotion of Thai soft power through film. By weaving elements of food, fashion, film, fighting, and festivals into its narrative, the series not only enriches its storytelling but also advances Thailand's soft power objectives. This approach positions Thailand as a dynamic cultural hub, fostering global interest in its traditions, modernity, and values. Such strategic representation enhances the country's appeal for tourism, investment, and cross-cultural exchange.

The reaction and result from the audience confirm the success and popularity of the series as "I Told Sunset About You" has won the International Drama of the Year award from the Seoul International Drama Awards 2021 with Krit Amnuaydechorn (Oh-aew) winning the Asian Star Prize from the same event (Seoul Drama Awards Organizing Committee, 2021). The series become significantly popular, especially in China where "I Told Sunset About You" has received high marks on Chinese media review platforms, 9.5/10 on Douban, surpassing the scores of Netflix's Queen's Gambit and many Chinese series, capturing the heart of Chinese audiences (Global Times, 2020). The director of the Tourism Authority Thailand Chengdu office's statement also confirms the popularity of "I Told Sunset About You" which helped drive tourists to Phuket which is the main location of the series (Tortermvasana et al., 2022). As for action, the Thai government later announced the visa exemption for Chinese citizens from 1st March 2024 onwards (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, 2024).

As the Chinese government's policy towards gender diversity, and the LGBTQ+ community is not open, tourism promotion via Thai BL content was done through the Aloha application, China's social networking app for the gay community, by inviting Chinese gay couples to visit Thailand and test luxury tourism products such as yachting, said the director of the Tourism Authority Thailand Chengdu office (Tortermvasana et al., 2022). Previous studies also found that, though the Chinese government's policy is not open, Chinese people are interested in the LGBTQ+ community and their status in Thailand which is reflected in numerous social media posts about Thailand's Pride Month parade which Chinese people attended (Zheng & Common, 2024). This confirms the Thai government's soft power policy related to the gender diversity concept as the Thai government later passed the same-sex marriage law, effecting from 23rd January 2025 onwards (Tanakasempipat, 2025). This becomes another action according to the "4A 2R" concept of soft power (Roongsangjun, 2023), allowing nonbinary



couples to get married. This action could demonstrate that Thailand acknowledges the concept of gender diversity with the possibility that the perception of international LGBTQ+ community and tourists could see Thailand as an LGBTQ+ friendly destination.

Furthermore, the series exemplifies how cultural products can transcend entertainment to serve as platforms for dialogue and connection. By integrating traditional and modern elements, “I Told Sunset About You” successfully bridges cultural gaps, creating a nuanced portrayal of Thainess that resonates with global audiences while remaining authentic to its roots. By grounding its narrative in relatable human experiences while celebrating Thai culture, the series achieves both emotional and cultural resonance, reinforcing its role as a cornerstone of Thailand’s soft power strategy.

The relatability of their struggles is amplified by the series’ ability to universalize their experiences. While deeply rooted in the specific cultural context of Thailand, their emotional arcs address themes that transcend borders such as the fear of rejection, the longing for validation, and the courage to embrace one’s true self. This universality allows Teh and Oh-aew to connect with viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds, fostering empathy and understanding across audiences.

Through its richly drawn characters, “I Told Sunset About You” elevates its storytelling, transforming the series into a profound exploration of the human condition. Teh and Oh-aew are not just characters in a narrative; they are reflections of the struggles, hopes, and triumphs that define us all.

The findings reveal that “I Told Sunset About You” exemplifies how localized storytelling can achieve global resonance by blending cultural authenticity with universal themes. The series highlights the complexity of human relationships, identity, and self-discovery, resonating with both domestic and international audiences. Its careful integration of Thai cultural elements including language, rituals, festivals, and regional settings presents an authentic representation of Thailand’s heritage while engaging viewers with relatable and emotionally rich narratives.

A standout finding is how the series uses its Phuket setting not just as a backdrop but as an active participant in the story. Iconic landmarks, traditional architecture, and local customs enhance its cultural depth and invite international audiences to explore Thai culture firsthand, aligning with Thailand’s soft power strategies.

Moreover, the series effectively integrates the “5Fs” (Food, Fashion, Film, Fighting, and Festivals), showcasing Thai culinary traditions, regional fashion, emotional resilience, and vibrant celebrations. These elements collectively project Thailand as a culturally rich and globally appealing nation, fostering international interest in its heritage and tourism. Through its authentic portrayal of Southern Thai identity and its universal narrative appeal, “I Told Sunset About You” serves as a powerful tool for cultural diplomacy and a testament to Thailand’s leadership in Southeast Asian media production.

Contribution to the Tourism and Branding

“I Told Sunset About You” has made significant contributions to Thailand’s soft power, particularly through its impact on tourism and national branding. The series’ vivid and detailed portrayal of Phuket, with its iconic landmarks such as Old Town, Promthep Cape, and local beaches, has captivated audiences worldwide, sparking a surge in tourism. Fans of the series, both domestic and international, have flocked to these filming locations, transforming them into cultural hotspots.

This tourism boost aligns with Thailand’s strategic use of media as a tool for economic and cultural growth. By showcasing Phuket’s natural beauty and rich cultural heritage, the series serves as an effective promotional



vehicle for Thailand's tourism industry. It not only highlights the island's appeal as a travel destination but also introduces international audiences to lesser-known aspects of Thai culture, such as regional dialects, traditional architecture, and local customs. In this way, "I Told Sunset About You" becomes more than a piece of entertainment as it becomes an ambassador for Thailand's cultural and economic aspirations.

Conclusion and Suggestions

As mentioned above that the cultural elements portrayed in the series happened to be unintentionally coordinated with the government's soft power policy, relating to the 5Fs (Food, Fashion, Film, Fighting, and Festivals). The findings also revealed that the gender diversity concept imprinted in "I Told Sunset About You" is also aligned with the government's implementation of gender diversity as Thailand's soft power.

Implications

The success of "I Told Sunset About You" exemplifies the transformative potential of media as a tool for advancing Thailand's cultural diplomacy and soft power. By seamlessly integrating Thai cultural elements such as regional dialects, traditional architecture, festivals, and iconic landscapes into its narrative, the series goes beyond entertainment, positioning Thailand as a culturally rich and globally appealing nation. This approach fosters cross-cultural understanding and enhances Thailand's image as a destination for both cultural exploration and creative innovation.

Regarding tourism, the series highlights the vibrant culture and natural beauty of Phuket, turning filming locations into globally recognized landmarks. Scenes featuring Promthep Cape, and Sino-Portuguese architecture not only invite viewers to explore Thai heritage but also align media storytelling with tourism promotion. This synergy demonstrates how cultural exports can generate tangible economic benefits while enhancing the nation's visibility on the global stage. This conclusion is backed by the statement of the director of the Tourism Authority of Thailand Chengdu office, crediting "I Told Sunset About You" as a force that helped drive tourists to Phuket, which is the main location of the series (Tortermvasana et al., 2022). Furthermore, the adoption of the gender diversity concept in the series also sparked interest in the LGBTQ+ community and tourists visiting Thailand, especially from China where the Chinese government's policy towards gender diversity is not open (Zheng & Common, 2024), demonstrating that Thai culture portrayed in "I Told Sunset About You" acts as soft power which helps promote Thailand as a destination with the government's action of giving the visa exemption for Chinese tourists (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, 2024) and passing the same-sex marriage law in Thailand (Tanakasempipat, 2025).

Moreover, the series underscores the strategic importance of investing in high-quality, culturally authentic productions. By prioritizing emotional resonance and authentic representation, "I Told Sunset About You" sets a benchmark for localized storytelling with universal appeal. Its success reinforces the notion that cultural exports deeply rooted in authenticity and diversity resonate more effectively with international audiences, solidifying Thailand's position as a leader in Southeast Asian media.

Finally, the series' use of digital platforms, including streaming services and social media, amplifies its global reach. These platforms enable "I Told Sunset About You" to transcend geographical boundaries, fostering international fan communities and strengthening Thailand's image as a hub for cultural and creative excellence. This digital strategy not only broadens the series' impact but also demonstrates the evolving potential of media in driving cultural diplomacy and economic growth.



Suggestions for Future Research

The success of “I Told Sunset About You” opens up several avenues for future research to better understand the broader implications of Thai BL media and its contribution to Thailand’s soft power.

For audience reception in non-Asian regions, future research could delve into how Thai BL dramas are received by audiences in Western and other non-Asian cultural contexts. Studies could explore how these dramas resonate with viewers from different cultural and social backgrounds, focusing on themes of representation, relatability, and cross-cultural understanding. This research could also examine whether these dramas influence perceptions of Thailand and its cultural identity in these regions.

For the economic impact on tourism, further studies could investigate the long-term economic impact of BL media on Thailand’s tourism industry. By analyzing metrics such as tourist influx to filming locations, local economic benefits, and the influence of BL media on travel behavior, researchers could provide insights into how cultural exports translate into tangible economic growth. This research could also consider the sustainability of media-driven tourism and its impact on local communities.

These areas of exploration could provide valuable insights into the cultural, economic, and social dimensions of Thai BL media, furthering understanding of its role in shaping Thailand’s global cultural footprint.

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