



**Sexual politics in YouTube: Shifting values in femininities
and women's empowerment**

By

Porranee Singpliam

Under Spearhead Strategic Program on Social Aspects of Khonchai 4.0

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ABSTRACT

This paper consists of a review of the existing literature on the concept of gender identities and femininities. The paper first discusses the works on what constitutes Thai femininities as a result of the plurality that has existed in Thai society since time memorable. The notion of Thai femininity, as many scholars have argued, should be viewed as something that has manifold characteristics depending on distinct classes, historical periods, and socio-economic shifts. Only when it is manipulated by the Statist discourse, femininities become defined as a notion that is singular and restrictive. Through the conceptual framework of performativity as argued by some scholars, the gendered notions and femininities can be viewed as a contestable area where rigidity can never be expected. Gender as a performative, requires repetitive material acts for gendered notions to be produced and maintained. It is this concept of Thai femininity as a performative act, that the notion can be seen as something that is changing due to the division of labor that is not rigorously gendered.

The conclusion of this paper proposes that the notions of femininities be examined through the new media, YouTube, where distinct case analyses are explored. It seeks to investigate how and why new media, more so than traditional media, can act as a potential site where gendered notions are debated and challenged, contributing to the way in which we can perceive the tendency for change within Thailand's male-led gender order.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความฉบับนี้รวบรวมบทปริทัศน์แนวคิดเรื่องเพศอัตลักษณ์และความเป็นหญิง โดยเริ่มจากการอภิปรายงานเขียนเกี่ยวกับความเป็นหญิงแบบไทยอันเป็นผลมาจากความเป็นพหุที่มีอยู่ในสังคมไทยมาเป็นเวลานาน นักวิชาการจำนวนมากได้กล่าวว่าการมองแนวคิดเรื่องความเป็นหญิงแบบไทยว่าเป็นสิ่งซับซ้อนหลากหลายขึ้นอยู่กับชนชั้น ยุคสมัย และการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางสังคมเศรษฐกิจที่ต่างกันไป แต่เมื่อแนวคิดดังกล่าวได้รับการควบคุมโดยวาทะกรรมรัฐนิยม ก็จะมีการเอนเอียงไปเป็นแนวคิดที่เป็นเอกพจน์และจำกัด นักวิชาการบางกลุ่มได้อภิปรายว่ากรอบความคิดว่าด้วยการสวมบทบาท (performativity) เป็นวิธีที่ช่วยให้เรามองความเป็นหญิงซึ่งเป็นแนวคิดที่กำหนดเพศว่าเป็นพื้นที่ที่โต้เถียงได้และไม่ตายตัว การมองเรื่องเพศเป็นการสวมบทบาทนั้นต้องประกอบด้วยการกระทำอันมีสารัตถะที่เกิดขึ้นซ้ำๆ อันเป็นเหตุให้แนวคิดที่กำหนดเพศเกิดขึ้นและคงอยู่ กรอบความคิดนี้เองช่วยให้เห็นว่าความเป็นหญิงแบบไทยยังเปลี่ยนแปลงอยู่เนื่องมาจากการแบ่งแยกแรงงานที่มีได้มีการกำหนดเพศอย่างเข้มงวด บทความนี้เสนอว่าการพิเคราะห์แนวคิดเรื่องความเป็นหญิงผ่านสื่อใหม่อย่างยูทูป (YouTube) ด้วยการวิเคราะห์กรณีศึกษาจำเพาะ โดยมุ่งเน้นการศึกษาว่าด้วยวิธีใดและเพราะเหตุใดสื่อใหม่จึงเป็นแหล่งที่เหมาะสมต่อการโต้แย้งและคัดค้านแนวคิดที่กำหนดเพศยิ่งไปกว่าสื่อแบบดั้งเดิม อันจะนำไปสู่วิธีการสังเกตเห็นแนวโน้มการเปลี่ยนแปลงในรูปแบบทางเพศของไทยที่เพศชายเป็นใหญ่

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Sexual politics in YouTube: Shifting values in femininities and women's empowerment

Porranee Singpliam

Introduction

This paper reviews the existing literature on the discursive construction of Thai femininity, the challenge, and negotiation with the dominant discourse under shifting economic rationales. It explores the emergent discourses on Thai femininity in the contemporary Thai society that transgress from the conventional values that may be delimited to women and other genders in the present time. By reviewing the existing literature, this paper is divided into three main parts which are the overview of femininity which includes the historical trace of femininities to the hegemonic femininity in Thai society and the expectations placed upon women. Next, it looks into the conceptual framework on how the discourse of femininity is formed as a performative that both relates the norm and allowing negotiation process to take place. This paper ends with the review of the study that has been done regarding the new and fragmented subjectivities among women and gender diverse individuals in the new media, particularly social media that paves way for the effective resignification of gendered identities and gendered expressions to emerge.

Keywords: women, femininities, consumerism, sexual politics, values, gender

Part one: A review of Thai femininities

To begin, it is of importance to note the diversity of women's roles in Siam/Thai society. In their work titled "The Status and Role of Thai Women in the Pre-Modern Period," Tantiwiramond and Pandey (1987) state that there had always existed diverse statuses and roles amongst women in Siam/Thailand. In their historical trace of women's roles and statuses, the authors divide their data in these a few notable realms. The first is the pre-modern era where women and men's roles were quite divisive: "political men and economic women" (p. 128). In another domain, the banning of women from the Sangha order resulted in the lack of women's literacy as men were the only ones allowed to receive those. "As a result, Buddhism became legitimizing agent for the Thai patriarchy to affirm and sanction the role of women which was limited to reproduction and economic production . . ." (p. 132). Following the political transition period, post 1932, statuses and roles of the citizens in the state became both "hierarchical" and "patriarchal" (p. 134). Women in the upper echelon became more dependent on the division of the sex roles due to the institutionalized administrative role as they are expected to rule over their subordinates as well. Contrastingly, within the very same period, women of lower class were subjected to different kind of patriarchy. Women were powerful in their economic decision in addition to how their labor and support during the time when corvee labor existed all resulted in "sexual equality" (p. 138) more or less. Or, in Tantiwiramond and Pandey's words, the society was structured under "matrifocal kinship" (p. 137) yet women are still powerless under a larger feudal social order.

In a similar vein, the heterogeneous character of gendered roles or how to be and how to perform women can be found in Thomson and Bhongsvej (1995)'s statistical data on women

and the national development plan. On gender relations in Thai society, the authors observe that women's roles and their performances had shifted in the latter half of the 20th century (the Seventies onwards) in a much more elevated manner. These factors including economic situation of the country, better health and well-being amongst women, their higher education, and an increased in employment and salary rate saw their move from agricultural sector to commercial one and to the service sector (where the latter is occupied by women). This is evident then that gendered roles, duties, and responsibilities that women in Thailand had to carry and perform had never quite been monolithic. Instead, women had contributed to the economic growth especially in the exportation and tourism industry (Thomson & Ghongsvej, 1995, p. 67). The reality of their womanhood and feminine selves during this time could be said to be mobile and driven by the economic drive. Nonetheless, as the statistics and data had shown, the authors still maintain that while in reality women did perform roles that are somewhat complimentary with their male counterparts (in the dominant binary data that was gathered), in the decision making process or in the determining of the country's directly, women have always had less important role (p. 67)

Furthermore, in Thai society, there exists a dominant modality regarding how to be a proper feminine Thai woman. One that is deemed appropriate by the Thai society, its culture, and the nation. In *Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia*, Hidalgo and Royce reference Costa and Matzner's work (2007) that there exists "standards for femininity and womanhood" (Hidalgo & Royce, 2016, p. 64). This standardized version is "formed" as part of the "Thai notions of womanhood [as] informed by a division between 'good' and 'bad' women. . ." (p. 64). It is of significance to note how, in the contemporary epoch, the notion of

feminine performances or ideals have the tendency to become quite homogeneous, especially when they are practiced as part of the discursive construction of appropriate Thai woman. In Hidalgo and Royce's words, they explain that "this ideal permeates mainstream Thai culture and constitutes what sociologists refer to as 'hegemonic femininity'" (p. 65).

In another book, *Thai Sex Talk*, Laphimon re-introduces the discursive construction of word *kunlasatri Thai*, which means "a 'proper,' 'genteel,' or 'ladylike Thai woman,' which every Thai woman is expected to be" has been widely circulated and accepted by many in the society (Laphimon, 2012, p. 34). According to Laphimon's (2012) work entitled "Rak nuan sa-nguan tua: To be chaste," to be a *kunlasatri Thai* is closely related to sexuality where the sexual relations between the opposite sex is upheld. This further demarcates the sexual principles between that of women and men. Laphimon (2012) writes the following:

It is noteworthy that while the Thai term for a "gentleman" or a "son of a noble or illustrious family," *kunlabut*, is not linked with ideas of sexual virtue, virginity or celibacy, the parallel term for a "gentlewoman" or "daughter of an illustrious family," *kunlasatri*, is intimately linked with ideas of *rak nuan sa-nguan tua*. (p. 34)

This concept of reserving one's body (Laphimon, 2012) is inherently intertwined with the dominant *phaet*¹ ideology that governs the Thai society. In their study, Chonwilai and Boonmongkon (2012) write that Thai society is regulated by the system of the two sexes (female and male), two genders (feminine and masculine), and one dominant mode of sexuality (heterosexual sexuality). Other modalities that deviate away from the mainstream notions

¹ *Phaet*, a Thai term that encompasses the ideas of biological sex, gender, and sexuality (and orientation/preference) (Jackson & Cook, 1999).

regarding *phaet* in Thai society, will, to a certain extent, be a subject of debate, inspected, and at times, de-legitimized by the Thai state.

The dominant mode of femininity in Thai society is unarguably singular and at times related to the nation (Haritaworn, 2011; Thaweessit, 2021). The studies that had been done in order to come to terms with what Thai femininity is, can be categorized into two strands. The first covers what Thaweessit (2021) coins as “hegemonic femininity” (p. 4) while the latter expands the traditional notion of the feminine self into something of a plurality, *femininities*, that transgress the orthodox cultural values.

The first strand, femininity that adheres to the dominant discourse aligns with the national identity (Thaweessit, 2021). This particular point concerns how a feminine Thai woman is not to be sexually associated in any way. Their bodies are to be covered, their bodily dispositions are to be upheld in such a way that is culturally *appropriated*, and that there be no sexual expressions accompanying the talk about Thai women. The de-sexualization of Thai femininity aims to preserve and disseminate the traditional social norms deemed apt by the Thai state, specifically by the Office of Cultural Surveillance under the Ministry of Culture (Thaweessit, 2021). De-sexualization of femininity has been institutionalized and valorized by the society and agents of the state from time memorable. This aspect of “women’s freedom of expression, sexual agency and sexual rights” (Thaweessit, 2021, p. 1) is thus kept to a minimum.

In a similar vein, Phakdeephasook (2009)’s study of the discourse of femininity found in Thai magazines in the domains of beauty and health also refer to the traditional concept of femininity that was once ubiquitous in the didactic literature, textbooks, and proverbs. The conservative modality of being a feminine Thai woman once included “[t]he intellectual and behavioral aspects. . . social interrelations and interaction that might be expected from a

‘desirable’ woman, such as being a good housewife, taking good care of her family, helping other people” (p. 85). These qualities and criteria are indeed the “conventional discourses” (p. 85) that once gained credence from the society and its culture. In the very same study, Phakdeephassook also asserts that the discourse of femininity has shifted and deviated away from the once dominant discourse, the hegemonic mode of being feminine, to the significance made on the bodily appearance and the caring of the individual self (p. 85). The emphasis on the corporeality and the physicality of the feminine self is of utmost importance as it signals the shift away from the hegemonic form of femininity to be the ones that are more fragmented and diverse due to the socio-cultural and economic constructs of the Thai society.

Phakdeephassook (2009) concludes the study by underscoring the ideology of femininity in contemporary Thai society where it “presupposes that women have to pay and consume in order to become desirable” (p. 86). This finding is a salient feature to note because the notion of resources and capital will be the factors in which draw the audience into following and identifying with the celebrities they see on the online platform, namely, YouTube. Phakdeephassook’s finding on the ideology of femininity in print magazine can be a foundation for which the online platform will be based on. The emphasis that is made on “th[e] ‘desirable features [that] are merely physical” (p. 85) show that women are encouraged and even urged to exercise their corporeal or bodily capital in the modern era. The physicality of the bodies thus hail women audience to identify with the discourse of “attractive looking [to] impress others and to maintain a good level of self-esteem” (p. 85), all of which could be said to be achievable through economic means.

In addition to the move away from the orthodox femininity that tends to preserve and confine women's bodily movements and their sexual agency, to reserve their "sexual respectability" (Thaweessit, 2021, p. 4), Thaweessit (2004; 2021)'s and Haritaworn (2011)'s findings emphasize femininities that can be termed as unorthodox, varied, and multiple in their characteristics. The modality of being feminine in the second strand departs from the hegemonic discourse of femininity to be non-unitary in its attributes and to be closely linked to sexuality or sexual agency as expressed by Thai women in the contemporary period.

The non-unitary characteristic is also found in Peach's work titled "Sex or Sangha?" where the author asserts that religion and law are powerful and impactful discourses that govern individuals into "gendered beings" (Peach, 2006, p. 306). Regardless of the overlapping social categories such that of gender, class, regional difference that may determine the roles and statuses of women in a diverse manner, Peach stresses that the hegemonic discourse of Thai womanhood still exists under the umbrella of wife and mother that could be traced in the Buddhist scriptures, for instance (p. 311-312). What exists outside of this, the alternative, is thus deemed in "disparaging light" (p. 312). Peach cites the reason as to why the hegemonic or the sole expectation of femininity exists in Thai society as the existence of women in the political arenas or other domains for that matter can "challeng[e] the perceived 'male prerogative' to control women's bodies," and because "men justify the use of force as punishment for women who don't perform their duties" (p. 315). Their justification of women's control gets interwoven in the institutions such that of law and religion as Peach adamantly argues.

It is clear here that there was an evident shift in values of women and their feminine selves to be on their bodies, more so than the reductionist view that ties women to tradition. The value and valorization that was once given to women through the traditionally sexed bodies

gradually turned to emphasize the corporeality of the bodies in the study of women's health and beauty print magazine.

In Haritaworn (2011)'s study of the mixed-race women residing in Britain and Germany, the author studies the discursive construction of femininity embedded by racist notions that are attached to Thai feminine selves in the interracial families residing in the diasporic geopolitical areas such that of the West. Haritaworn's (2011) study finds that the feminized Thai bodies are closely linked with sexualities, especially when viewed from the Western (read: "colonial") perspectives. This presents a stark opposition to that of the traditional notion of appropriate Thai femininity (read: de-sexualized and attached to the traditional sexed roles). In fact, Haritaworn (2011) mentions that her interviewees often criticize, disagree with, and try to subvert their perceived feminized selves that are heavily gendered and sexualized. The author asserts that "they could never quite get away from its haunting presence" (p. 219). Unlike that conventional Thai discourse and ideology of femininity, the feminine selves seen from the Other's positionality are nothing but sexualized. In Haritaworn's words, the author writes the following:

While important in its anti-colonial analysis, this narrative nevertheless often reproduces the hegemonic discourse on Thai femininity in problematic ways. 'Thai woman' (and other discursively 'prostituted' femininities) is only ever thinkable as 'trafficked', 'prostituted', interracially coupled, and 'bride'. (p. 217)

What could be seen clearly from Haritaworn's research is that, there is another construct that is deemed as *hegemonic* discourse on Thai femininity though set in other locale that is not the Thai society. There, sexualized feminine subjects are to be attached to the Thai women so much

so that Haritaworn (2011) claims that there is an evident “*lack of distinction*” (p. 217) between the two and that it potentially prolongs the Orientalist discourse and its constitutive tendency of the Thai femininity.

The sexual subject (rather than object) is also emphasized by Thaweessit (2004)’s research that falls under the second strand where to be feminine Thai women is non-unitary. Thaweessit’s ethnographic study of Thai factory women underscores the fluid femininities and sexual subjects among Thai women. It should be noted that sexuality had been delimited in the traditional realm only. Raksachart explains sexuality in his book titled “Women, Sex and the Internet,” that sex as a discourse goes on to reproduce patriarchy through culture, tradition, and the society that valorizes the binary sex opposition. The discourse of sex delimits women’s agency and gives autonomy to men and the upheld male-led ideology and dominance. Women, in turn, are strictly monitored on their sexual values while men aren’t. Sexual identity can therefore be constructed freely on the Internet with less regulation (Raksachart, 2007, p. 20-21). This point will be of relevance to the shifting values in femininities and evident in the new media such that of YouTube.

Additionally, Thaweessit asserts that the gendered and sexual identities of Thai women are indeed “incoherent and contradictory” and that the “subjectivity² [is] even more fluid and unstable” (2004, p. 205). The author writes that the counter-hegemonic femininities take form due to the shifts in the economic contexts and geographical areas—namely in the metropolitan or urban areas that allow for women to exercise their agency outside of the traditionally deemed acceptable realm that is the domestic sphere. In her study, to be feminine Thai women bear

²How an individual is made or make themselves into a subject (Blackman, 2008).

manifold signifieds rather than a linear and singular narrative as aforementioned. In Thaweessit's (2004) own words, “[n]otions of discourse and subjectivity refute the popular view that Thai women's gender and sexual subjectivity is coherent and dichotomous: as ‘good’ versus ‘bad’, or ‘modern’ versus ‘traditional’” (pp. 205-206).

The subduing of sexuality is nowhere to be seen in the second strand of femininity. Existing research such as ones done by Haritaworn (2011) and Thaweessit (2004; 2021) all show that femininities can and at times, are made to include the sexual subjectivity. It is noteworthy to also pinpoint that, in the studying of femininities by Thaweessit (2004), the author also covers the diverse spectrum of sexualities be they cisgender heterosexual women or homosexual women in her study.

In this part, the author attempts to delineate the existing research that had been done in relation to femininities in Thai society. The first strand of being feminine adheres to the ideal, the conventional Thai femininity preserving both women's physical body (neglecting its materiality in the process) and the abstinence of their sexuality. This clearly reflects the value that the society has towards the safeguarding of Thai tradition. The second category of being feminine falls into the non-hegemonic discourse that highlights the fluid subjectivity and the autonomy of women under the new economic rationale. In the latter sense, femininity bears the remnants of the traditional characteristic—such as motherhood (Thaweessit, 2004)—while carving their autonomous agency at the same time due to the change in women's career choice and the novelty that the city center has to offer. In a word, the second strand of femininity reveals how the authoritative and dominant discourse of women still exercises its subtle power, while at the same time, women in those studies can also exercise their agency and gradually depart from

the constrained hegemonic discourse on how to be a good Thai woman. Ultimately, the second strand speaks volume as to how the shift in feminine selves may signal value change within the Thai socio-cultural setting.

Part two: Theoretical lens on the discursive construction of femininities in Thai society

To be an appropriate Thai woman and to perform an apt feminine self is a discursive construct. The existing literature on the gendered notion, particularly that of the hegemonic ideology, all assert that femininity is a product of a discourse widely shared, circulated, and institutionalized in the Thai society (Phakdeephassook, 2009; Haritaworn, 2011; Chonwilai, 2012; Thaweessit 2004, 2021). This part attempts to show that femininity that is attached to the sexed bodies of the Thai women is a performative of sort and because of that, the dominant mode or the “dominant discourse” of performing a feminine self can, in fact, be “fluid and changeable” (Thaweessit, 2004, p. 216). The changing notion of femininities that comes to gain prominence in the culture will further reflect the shifting values of Thai society as well.

First, in order to understand the constitutive nature of a Thai woman, Haritaworn (2011) suggests that Judith Butler’s seminal work on performativity is significant to illustrate this claim. In her words, she writes that “Butler’s (1991) notion of performativity is helpful here, as it helps us understand how hegemonic gender identities (‘woman’, ‘respectable’) are rendered ‘natural’ through endless repetition” (p. 219). Writing from a feminist and cultural studies’ stance, the author specifies that even with the concept of performativity that materializes certain notions through the process of reiteration, there could be contestation against the shared convention. Haritaworn asserts that “I will explore how performativity may be pushed beyond

these limits. . . . the people whom I interviewed often resisted and messed with this expectation [of being a racialized feminine Thai woman]" (p. 219).

It is of importance to ground Butler's thoughts on the notion of performativity. Here, I refer to Inda's (2000) work that perfectly portrays the development of performativity from J. L. Austin to Jacques Derrida and eventually, to Judith Butler's pioneering performative acts. Performative was originated from Austin's speech act theory where the "performative utterances, or simply performatives, are neither true nor false but actually perform the action to which they refer" (Inda, 2000, p. 84). The example would be when a pastor pronounces the couple husband and wife, the utterance of pronouncing is not merely an utterance, but it brings into being the marital bond of which it refers to. In this case, the pastor's uttering "I now pronounce you," therefore cements the wedlock between the wife and the husband.

Derrida developed Austin's performatives a step further by underscoring the success or the materialization of certain utterances. For the performatives to become successful, they cannot simply take any form, but must be ones that are repeatable. In this sense, the shared characteristic and the repeatable convention of the performative, for Derrida, makes an integral part for the effect of the performatives. In Inda's (2000) words, he writes the following:

For Derrida, too, repeatability is the condition of possibility of the performative: "Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'?" . . . in order to be possible,

[the performatives] must repeat a coded utterance, then it must be recognizable as a citation, a repetition in quotation marks as it were. (p. 85)

With this statement, it becomes clear that for a performative utterance to take effect, it has to be acknowledged based on the shared code in the society, something that can be cited or a “repetition of established ways of doing things with words” (Inda, 2000, p. 86).

Butler takes after Derridean developed idea on Austin’s performatives and focuses on the repetition of an act that will eventually be materialized. For Butler, performative act “constitutes” gendered bodies rather than *reflecting* on the gendered bodies that are pre-conceived or already in existence (p. 86). Furthering Derrida’s notion of citation and shared code as the effect of performative, Butler emphasizes the reiteration of an act in the following:

... the performative production of gender actually always takes place through a certain kind of repetition or recitation. . . . she suggests that without citationality, without iterability, the performative constitution of gender could not take place. For Butler, then, the performative constitution of the gendered body can not be seen as a one-time affair, something accomplished by a single performative act. (Inda, 2000, pp. 86-87)

Taking the development of performatives into account, it is therefore of utmost use to take after Haritaworn’s (2011) assertion that the notion of performativity can indeed be utilized as a framework to grasp how and why “hegemonic gender identities (‘woman’, ‘respectable’) are rendered ‘natural’ through endless repetition” (p. 219).

The discourse of Thai femininity does not merely gain its hegemonic position by itself. As Thaweessit (2021) claims that it is the work of the institutionalized process and as well as one that is underpinned by the conservatives or “cultural watchdogs” (p. 2). Women are to be

forever attached to the “sexual modesty and virginity till marriage” (p. 2) and this discursive construction of a good Thai woman gets circulated and disseminated through institutions, as early and as microscale as the familial institution to the macro level such that of the ministry level, will effectively materialize the embodied good Thai woman as if it is intrinsic and already in existence within the Thai culture itself. The hegemonic femininity thus reflects the values that the Thai society and culture have towards its tradition. So much so that it delimits gender expressions that may depart from the tradition to be under the risk of being judged, held accountable, and penalized. Many cases can be seen in today’s headlines that only focus on the modesty (read: de-sexualized) of women and their scantily clad bodies. Whatever deviates away from this sacred modality of being a feminine Thai woman can thus stir the public’s panic, especially when cases of “moral or normative transgressions” (p. 2) occur in the society.

The reiteration of the discourse of femininity is a materialization par excellence. The authorities support it, some women in the society in fact assimilate and internalize the notion, which can eventually “work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject” (Inda, 2000, p. 87) and in this case, a feminine Thai woman. The body of a good Thai woman or the notion of an appropriate femininity therefore is an effect of the discourse, not the cause nor the innate embodiment that exists a priori. The more it gets circulated in the society, the more Thai femininity becomes concretized and takes a material form through women’s bodies, the shared notions, and interview dialogues as seen in the research mentioned above (Phakdeephassook, 2009; Haritaworn, 2011; Chonwilai, 2012; Thaweessit 2004, 2021). Women, their bodies, and the expected feminine selves from the society therefore get constituted through a performative act, repeated, and unavoidably give weight to the “hegemonic and power discourses” (Thaweessit, 2021, p. 4).

With repeatability as a necessity for a discursive construct that “sustain[s] the naturalized effect” (Inda, 2000, p. 93), this also means that there is a “possibility of resignification” (p. 93). This part is exactly what Thaweessit (2004, 2021) mentions numerous times where under the changed economic rationale and different geopolitical areas, women as a unified category is brought into question. Effectively, their uniform subjectivity under the hegemonic discourse is thus challenged and negotiated by the Thai women themselves. Quite specifically, the contemporary economic situation coupled with the rise in consumerism in Thai society among young women (Suadmalai, 2006), the globalized influence on lifestyle, beautification, and autonomous female selves, all lead to the possibility of emergent fragmented feminine selves or subjectivities (Thaweessit, 2004; Suadmalai, 2006). Gradually emerging, the fact that existing research shows that there are other modalities to perform feminine selves that are widely shared within a certain societal context reveal a shift in the sets of values that society upholds. In the next section, it will become clear that there has been a process of resignification of gendered expectations and the gender order of the society seen through the challenges emerged in the second strand of femininity as specified in the previous section be they the emphasis on bodily appearance, the focus on consumption, or the exercise of their sexual agency (Phakdeephassook, 2009; Thaweessit, 2004; 2021).

Part three: YouTube as a site for negotiation

This part traces challenges that emerge amongst women and gender diverse individuals against the current sexual politics dominated by patriarchal ruling (Millet, 2000) and compulsory heteronormativity. As mentioned in the previous section, the discursive construction of a feminine Thai woman can be read as a performative (Haritaworn, 2011) where

the corporeal act of reiteration and repetition is of utmost necessity for the dominant (read: institutionalized) discourse of feminine Thai woman to be materialized. As several existing studies have shown above, there is a challenge in maintaining the hegemonic femininity largely due to the gender relations in terms of labor production in contemporary Thai society (Thaweessit, 2004). This particular shift in labor can be seen online as well through Abidin (2016)'s notion of gendered labor on the social media platform.

This section wishes to make a case that the resignification of the discourse of genders is most prevalent online. Sangsoda's (2019) study on *kathoeys*'s resistance through YouTube illustrates two main findings which are first, how *kathoeys* (male to female transgender or transsexual individuals) voluntarily repeat the discourse of *kathoeyness* that include appearing comical and high-spirited, for instance. While at the same time, Sangsoda finds that *kathoeys* also negotiate with the mainstream discourse of *kathoeyness* by producing new meanings and engendering manifold significations that are not repetitive of the *kathoeys* tropes that predominantly exist within the media industry. In this sense, Sangsoda argues that *kathoey*s therefore embody the existing mainstream discourse *in order for* them to resist, challenge, and negotiate with the older meaning and pave way for the emergent new meanings that would authenticate their identities with the emphasis on concrete skills and professionalism despite the conventionally shared notions attached to *kathoeyness*. Sangsoda (2019) therefore refers to this process after Bordieu's notions of "consensual" and "conflicting" (p. 12) that can potentially bring what have been introduced in the previous section, the resignification process due to the instability of the mainstream discourse, into materiality. In this case, *kathoeys*' identity is negotiated by *kathoey*s on YouTube and the understanding of their identity is being rewritten by themselves.

Likewise, similar transgression can be found in the Limkangvanmongkol and Abidin's (2019) and Abidin's (2016) studies that the labor put into shaping the new modalities of how to be women in the society are evidently shown online. The study of social media, Instagram, in particular has shown that like the subjects of analysis by Sangsoda, women, too, utilize social media as a platform to further enhance their gendered labor where they gain and maximize their corporeal capital for their own ends. In the process, women subjects do *both* conform and repeat the notion of femininity (especially through the ideas of beautification, fashion, and their feminine bodily appearances), but at the same time, they also challenge but do not subvert the narrow set of attributes deemed appropriate and expected out of their gendered identities that are women. Women³ influencers enhance their feminine selves, maneuver their corporeality, while at the same time retain traditional and cultural norms and values such that of motherhood or good daughters of the families, for instance. In Limkangvanmongkol and Abidin's (2019) words, they assert the following:

... how these savvy young women enact hybrid forms of self-presentation to reconcile tensions between local cultural norms and international industry practices. Specifically, the chapter will detail how net idols negotiate pressures between Thai customs and the commercial rhetoric of their businesses, and esthetic ideals around the Thai race and regional ideas of beauty esthetics filtered through popular culture. (p. 96)

³ I use women influencers instead of female influencers because presently, there are transgender and transsexual YouTubers and influencers who choose to identify themselves as women. The category of women, in my opinion, is not to be used as a signifier that fixates on the reductionist biological essentialist notion relating to the woman's sexed body. I therefore choose to use women influencers or YouTubers to emphasize the autonomous gender expression and identity more so than emphasizing the naturalistic view of the sexed body such that of female or male influencers.

In the context of Thai media, in particular, Saejung's (2001) work on women's images in sexual media conclude her findings that in print media, electronics (videos), and karaoke, women's images and representations can be seen along these adjectives: feminized, highly sensual, emphasizing facial figures, weak and fragile, victimized by men, obedient. Further, her observation on women's images from electronic media (video) finds that women are portrayed as weak, willing, submitting, cooperative, and even paving ways for their partners. Women are also shown in the roles of wives, mothers, or mistresses in all professions possible such as students, victims, or even a young ladylike woman. Saejung's analysis of sexual media in Thailand, at the time of her research, at least reveals that sexual aspects and sexuality had always existed in the Thai media. In a word, sexually related emphasis that women are associated with is not new. My interests, however, deviate away from the existing literature in that the expected outcome would shift away from the repressed and delimited types and tropes that had been found e.g. traditionally obedient, for instance. But that the media texts that are chosen will underscore both traditionally upheld feminine self (as mothers and wives) and as well as the commodification and capitalization of their feminine (at times sexual selves) for the purpose of monetary gain. All of which would be able to explicate how, femininities, newfound ones in these YouTube channels can show that there is an internal shift (Connell, 2002) in the sexual politics in Thai culture and hence the values attached to femininities.

Women and gender diverse individuals' presence online and particularly through social media therefore cannot only be viewed through stereotypical lens that bound them to the cultural norms. Rather, their bodily presence online could be deemed as "subversive frivolity" where women and gender diverse individuals alike can exercise their agencies and show that

their “under-estimated generative power of an object or practice arising from its (populist) discursive framing as marginal, inconsequential, and unproductive” can in fact challenge the orthodox notions of what gendered notions could be (Abidin, 2016, p. 1). The scale of their popularity that Abidin discusses in her research could also reflect the values that the society upholds as well. In Abidin’s (2016) case, it is the commodified aesthetics through the beautifying of YouTubers for their own gain.

Online platform should thus be taken more seriously as it paves ways for negotiations and re-consideration of the normatives that were once narrowly defined, a remark that was already carried out by Raksachart (2007). The study of online platform such that of YouTube, for instance, can enliven the discussion in the areas of genders, subjectivity, and negotiation, which allows for an understanding of the conventions and the discursively constructed character of it, while at the same time, allowing for a possibility of expanding the signification on what it is to be feminine, masculine, and others. Especially, as stated clearly that the Internet (in this case includes the new media) is a site where there exists much less scrutiny Raksachart (2007). Sex (be it sexual acts or identities or orientations) can be expressed much more freely amongst diverse genders. Women, the subject of focus in this paper, too exhibit this point similar to Raksachart’s. The chosen object of analysis can be said to have the potential to challenge and possibly shift the sexual politics where men once dominate the traditional media and ideology. The Internet, YouTube, allows for a possibility for women to exercise their sexual agency. Similarly, Sangsoda (2019) believes, the studying of online platform will be a fruitful attempt as the politics in relations to the sexes, genders, and sexualities can be reconsidered, resignification of new meanings is thus possible.

Moving forward, the author will first focus on the case studies of YouTube Channel, *Praew Magazine*, that features Sookwan Bulakul and *L'Officiel Thailand's* YouTube channel with its spotlight celebrity, Chompoo Araya, through a series of *L'Officiel Underground*, which will shed light on the values Thai society holds towards women and its culture. The new media, the selected YouTube channels, both develop from print magazines, *Praew Magazine* and *L'Officiel*, respectively and have gathered more than three hundred thousand subscribers for both channels. And as Suadmalai (2006)'s study suggests, "women's magazines have powerful effects on their readers and that they tend to provide definitions of what it means to be a woman" (p. 15). Through the notion of "perceived interconnectedness" (Abidin, 2015), it is assumed that audience who consume this information online will more or less identify with, relate to, or yearn for the lifestyle being portrayed through the two women figures.

Further, the author intends to observe another renowned woman influencer, Pimrypie, on her social media channel. This is to point out the diversity that may exist in the studying of women in the media. Sukwan and Chompoo share in common the same social class, connection to the traditional media (entertainment industry and print magazine). Whilst Pimrypie could be said to be the representative of women from another class, one whose success and affluence are self made and stem directly from the struggle with social structure, gender order, and as well as socio-economic and political one.

By analyzing these three women influencers through the new media platform, the notions of femininities can be expected to cohere with the second strand of femininity deemed as non-hegemonic. The author fully notes that in no way do these three women stand in for the Thai women as a whole and this is where the limitation lies. However, it is of importance that the research be carried out through content analysis of which will allow for the cultural studies'

practice to unveil the power relations that can possibly shift due to the changing internal gender order—the complimentary relations between the sexes—of which is emphasized throughout in the first part of this paper. Rather than compiling a large number of data and looking for repetitive trope and/or patterned and gendered way(s) women are shown in the new media, the author firmly believes that the in-depth content analysis will be of fruition for one to contest the asymmetrical relations in terms of class, region, and gender whereby some of the chosen subjects of analysis could even be deemed as at times (reviewer's comment). This, therefore, may allow for some arenas where women could be “empowered,” whilst such empowerment requires the adherence to the new societal values and that is the ideologies of heightened capitalism and individualism.

What these women share in common, however, are the fact that they all consume and make use of their physical bodies so much so that the difference between the sexes is being reiterated again—emphasizing femaleness through motherhood. Their conspicuous consumption should not be read idly either as though they all partake in the purchasing economy, their political stance very much differs where Pimrypie may be lauded as more “genuine,” “connected,” and a representative of the personal problem that is connected to political structure (class intersecting with gender and sexuality, amid male centric society).

The author thus wishes to find out what could be some of the shifted values that the society may hold from the past to the contemporary period through these women influencers? The expected outcome from this study focuses on what could be the values that emerge in the society that can be reflected from the popularity of the new media. Because the influencers' presence on YouTube, Thai audience has a glimpse into these women's lifestyle, conspicuous consumption, autonomy, and most importantly, their capability to maneuver both their

women's "role" as mothers and career women with self responsabilization while some have more exuberant resources than others. Ultimately, the author expects that there is a close link between heightened capitalism and the shifting notions on genders, on femininities. The shifting notions of femininities will ultimately reflect the values, the gender order of the Thai society as a whole, and the value that the Thai society has towards capitalism and the materiality that comes with it. It is expected that this could further reify the class stratification (that can overlook the systemic oppression), difference between the two sexes, while at the same time, expanding the capabilities of women that never before seen in the past.

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