Representation of *Kathoey* in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

Thanawut Sreejak

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Khon Kaen University, Thailand

Abstract

This study examines the representation of *kathoey* identity in Thai song discourse, comparing songs by kathoey and cisgender singers. Using a combination of corpus linguistics and queer linguistics, this study concentrates on linguistic patterns and thematic representations in two sub-corpora of Thai songs from 2004 to 2024. Key findings reveal that while cisgender singers' songs frequently rely on stereotypes and external observations, kathoey-authored songs offer more nuanced portrayals of community dynamics, identity struggles, and lived experiences. This study uncovers novel themes such as intra-group discrimination, hierarchies within the kathoey community, and ageism. Additionally, this study critiques the perpetuation of cisgenderism in Thai song discourse, highlighting how language use can both challenge and reinforce existing power structures. Moreover, the increased use of the term kathoey in kathoey singers' songs suggests an active linguistic reclamation process.

Keywords: Kathoey identity; Thai song discourse; corpus linguistics, queer linguistics; cisgenderism; gender representation

Introduction

Recent Thai studies have directly investigated the representation of *kathoey*, broadly referring to transgender women and feminine gay men (Käng, 2012; Wisuttipat, 2023), in Thai songs across local dialects and genres. These studies highlight a positive shift (e.g., self and social acceptance) and persistent negative images indicative of gender discrimination (e.g., unrequited love in heterosexual relationships; Kothdee et al., 2024; Sakyai, 2022; Thipphana, 2022). However, the unwarranted involvement of heteronormativity in producing kathoey-related meta-narratives has been less emphasized, underscoring critical controversies over sociopolitical apparatuses vis-à-vis cisgender women and men whose gender matches their birth sex (Aultman, 2014)— the non-kathoey (Ocha, 2023) singers. Arguably, cisgender men appear to be the dominant singers of the subject matter, such as the song titled *Sai Lueang* ("Backdoor

Goers"), perpetuating patriarchal concepts in Thai society (Roopsa-ard & Jantarangsee, 2021). Nonetheless, this study contends that the (mis)representation of kathoey individuals in Thai songs also involves female privilege associated with cisgenderism (Lennon & Mistler, 2014) based on the small yet existing number of contributions from female singers.

This study posits that cisgenderism ingrains unhealthy habits of further marginalizing and silencing kathoey individuals, perpetuating a distorted perception through unnecessarily homogenized preconceptions of their identity. This language-based critical study thus aims to scrutinize the potentially dominant singers responsible for perpetuating previous representations by comparing two sub-corpora of Thai songs contributed by kathoey and cisgender male and female singers focusing on divergent language patterns and thematic perceptions of kathoey identity. To explore the intersection of language, gender, and sexuality, this study employs the combination of corpus linguistics and queer linguistics (Moschenbacher, 2018). The research questions are:

RQ1: How do the linguistic patterns and thematic representations of kathoey identity in Thai songs differ between self-identified kathoey and non-kathoey cisgender singers?

RQ2: What do these differences reveal about the perpetuation of cisgenderism in Thai song discourse?

Literature Review

Corpus Linguistics and Queer Linguistics

Baker (2014) defines corpus linguistics as a methodology studying language through large collections of authentic texts, with Baker (2018) noting its suitability for examining discourses of sexuality and revealing subtle prejudices. However, Motschenbacher (2011) argues that quantitative corpus linguistics may reinforce categorization, potentially obscuring problematic cases. This recognition justifies integrating quantitative corpus analyses with qualitative examinations in queer linguistics, which critically examines how language constructs normative notions of gender and sexuality (Leap, 2015; Motschenbacher, 2011). This integration supports a mixed-method analysis to provide complementary perspectives in the examination of discourses (Motschenbacher, 2011, 2018).

While recognizing culturally specific non-heterosexual, gender-diverse identities like kathoey in Thailand (McCann & Monaghan, 2019), it is crucial to understand their interaction with queer theory as the underlying fundament of queer linguistics. Jackson (2011) notes that non-normative kathoey has emerged as the quintessential representation of queer identity in Thailand. While referring to kathoey as non-normative—transcending the male-female binary (Kang, 2012; Saisuwan, 2016), this study acknowledges the complex interaction of normative and non-

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

normative components in kathoey identity performances (Leap & Motschenbacher, 2012).

This study combines queer linguistics with corpus linguistics (Motschenbacher, 2018) to uncover power structures in Thai song discourse about kathoey identity. It conducts collocation analysis and examines co-occurrence patterns, emphasizing unique lexical items to capture minority patterns (Motschenbacher, 2018). This study also analyzes concordance lines to elicit thematic representations without imposing rigid categorizations (e.g., as positive, neutral, or negative), reflecting a commitment to avoiding binary discourses. Despite challenges, this research aims to contribute to both corpus and queer linguistics by demonstrating new ways of identifying and analyzing marginalized discourses in Thai language and culture.

Cisgenderism

Having established this study's methodological approach—a combination of corpus linguistics and queer linguistics—it is worth introducing the concept of cisgenderism as a critical lens through which this study interprets the linguistic patterns and thematic representations found in the analysis of the two sub-corpora of Thai songs related to kathoey identity. Heavily drawing on Lennon and Mistler's (2014) discussion of cisgenderism, this concept encompasses the denial, denigration, or pathologization of gender identities that do not align with those assigned at birth, creating a hierarchy that privileges cisgender identities and expressions. Notably, the concept of cisgenderism appears to interlink with the term heteronormativity used elsewhere in this study. According to Barnett et al. (2021), failing to identify with or be viewed as heteronormative or cisgender may result in encounters with heterosexism or cisgenderism, phenomena that favor conforming heterosexuals while marginalizing LGBTQ+ individuals and those with non-cisgender identities or manifestations.

This study explores how the songs reflect or challenge the rigid beliefs and rules about gender that cisgenderism enforces. By comparing linguistic patterns and themes between the two sub-corpora, this study uncovers subtle or overt ways in which kathoey identity is portrayed as deviant, immoral, or threatening, or conversely, how they are validated and celebrated. In addition, the analysis can shed significant light on how the pervasive nature of cisgenderism in Thai society may influence both kathoey and cisgender singers in their lyrical expressions, potentially revealing internalized biases or acts of resistance against this systemic ideology. This study examines how Thai songs, as a cultural institution, may either enable or challenge prejudice and discrimination against the kathoey community. By including both queer and non-queer—specifically kathoey and non-kathoey (Ocha, 2023)—perspectives, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how these songs reflect broader societal attitudes and power structures.

Kathoey Representation in Thai Song Discourse

The following synthesizes interconnected studies to offer a holistic understanding of how kathoey individuals have been represented in Thai song

discourse. Studies by Thippana (2022), Kothdee et al. (2024), and Sakyai (2022) identified common themes: romantic disappointment, comedic roles, contributions to entertainment, especially in the *Morlam* scene, an emphasis on beauty, and professions related to aesthetics (e.g., makeup artists). Sakyai (2022) further explored social alienation, stereotyping, societal negotiation, and hierarchical structures within the kathoey community based upon factors such as age, economic status, and beauty. Sakyai also highlighted regional variations in kathoey representation across Thailand, emphasizing the importance of local cultural contexts—in central regions as oppressed middle-class individuals, in northeastern areas as culturally integrated through *Morlam* traditions, in northern parts combining Buddhist and local influences for spiritual perspectives, and in southern regions where beauty and femininity are emphasized as idealized traits. Moreover, Kothdee et al. (2024) and Sakyai (2022) noted a significant development within the kathoey community: the growing movement to embrace the term with pride, rejecting its historically derogatory connotations (e.g., Jackson, 2016; Ojanen, 2009; Ten Brummelhuis, 2008) and euphemisms. This aligns with this study's political stance to employ the term kathoey as a self-referential label for the non-normative social actor and supports the argument presented in Huang's (2024) recent work.

However, this study observes that cisgenderism plays a significant role in shaping and constraining kathoey's image. The representation of kathoeys is often constructed by cisgender singers rather than by kathoeys themselves, resulting in an external perspective dominating the meta-narrative. Arguably, a notable omission in these studies is the critique of the singers perpetuating marginalization and othering within marginalized discourse. This is evident from the examples of positive song portrayals where certain cisgender singers lobby the authorities for kathoey rights or sensationalize having a kathoey child, failing to consider cisgender positionality. Thus, it can be contended that these previous studies may inadvertently understate the core debate on sociopolitical systems' treatment of cisgender individuals and admittedly support the continuation of such works by cisgender individuals without acknowledging that they may lack a genuine understanding of kathoey experiences.

Despite positive changes, such as family acceptance and advocacy for equal rights, song narratives can sometimes exaggerate or limit kathoey experiences to specific dimensions. Furthermore, given that Northeastern Thai kathoey in song discourse often shares common themes related to going out to flirt with men and drinking white spirits (Sakyai, 2022), such association with *Morlam* performances appears to reinforce overgeneralization. In particular, referencing Phraekhao (2012), Northeastern Thai kathoey choose *Morlam* performances as venues to articulate their identity and sexuality, fostering a subcultural tradition transmitted across generations. However, one should be aware of the homogenized practice wherein the *Morlam* performance space significantly influences kathoey expression, providing greater sexual freedom with men. While this reflects certain aspects of reality, it can be argued that this practice has the potential to create stereotypical perspectives on kathoey identity and experiences for those who do not align with it.

In Thai song discourse, the necessity for a more nuanced and diverse representation of kathoey is underscored by this overgeneralization. It emphasizes the need of analyzing the potential contributions of cisgenderism to these simplified representations, as well as the potential for these representations to unintentionally reinforce societal stereotypes or expectations regarding kathoey individuals. In light of this, this study aims to document the diversity of Thai song discourse and to challenge the power of cisgenderism by questioning and resisting the normative authority that cisgender individuals impose, despite never having truly experienced life as kathoey.

Materials and Methods

This study collected data using two Thai key phrases: *phleng kathoey* (songs by kathoey) and *phleng kiao kap kathoey* (songs about *kathoey*) to search on the popular video streaming platform YouTube (Airoldi et al., 2016). The selection criteria included Thai songs with titles featuring the term kathoey within the 2004-2024 timeframe, representing two decades of heightened public attention to kathoey identity across Thai society (Thipphana, 2022; see Table 1). Of note, the varying time ranges in the table, particularly the extended final period, were deliberately chosen to reflect significant social and cultural transformations in the dominant singers of kathoey-related Thai song discourse. However, this study focused on the qualitative aspects of *kathoey* representation rather than the quantitative distribution of music across timeframes; hence, this structure did not significantly impact the research outcomes.

Table 1
Summary of Dataset: Kathoey-Related Thai Songs in the Timeframe of 2004–2024

Year Range	No. of Songs	Top Dialects	Top Genres	Singer Gender Distribution
2004-2007	11	IS: 10, CE: 1	CO: 11	M: 9, F: 2, K: 0
2008-2011	4	IS: 3, CE: 1	CO: 4	M: 3, F: 0, K: 1
2012-2015	25	IS: 10, NO: 12, CE: 3	CO: 24, PO: 1	M: 7, F: 2, K: 15
2016-2019	20	IS: 15, CE: 3, NO: 1, SO: 1	CO: 20	M: 5, F: 3, K: 14
2020-2024	12	IS: 8, CE: 3, NO: 2	CO: 11, PO: 1	M: 1, F: 1, K: 9

Note. Dialects: IS = Isan, CE = Central Thai, NO = Northern Thai, SO = Southern Thai; Genres: CO = Country, PO = Pop; Singer Gender: M = Male, F = Female, K = Kathoey

This study built the final specialized corpus, which consisted of 72 kathoey-related songs, totaling 20,044 words. This study further divided this corpus into two sub-corpora based upon the singer's self-identity: 1) KA (kathoey singers): 39 songs#11,307 words and 2) CIS (cisgender singers—men and women): 33 songs#8,737 words.

Notably, while being aware of the authorship and authorial voice of the kathoey-related songs, this study focused on singers rather than songwriters for several reasons. Information about songwriters is particularly limited for older or less mainstream compositions. Moreover, the roles of singer and songwriter may converge, complicating their distinction. Of paramount importance is the consideration that even when singers are not the original composers, drawing on the historical stance of Frith (1996)

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

regarding singers as song protagonists, their choice to perform and disseminate songs concerning kathoey individuals is a deliberate engagement in the creation and distribution of kathoey-related content to the public. This decision, whether deliberated or not, demonstrates implicit acceptance and involvement in the social representation of kathoey images, which is a crucial element of this approach.

Data Analysis

This study combined quantitative collocation and qualitative concordance analyses to elicit linguistic patterns and thematic representations using the specialist computer program Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). Despite lacking advanced features, this program provides fundamental Thai language tools such as concordance essential to this study. However, as a result of occasional inconsistencies in contextual conflation, this study had to balance the necessity for comprehensive verification of source texts with the rapidity of concordance analysis to ensure data accuracy.

In the collocation analysis, this study concentrated on verbs and adjectives (e.g., Baker & Levon, 2016; Motschenbacher, 2019), considering the contextual meanings and implications of these forms. Specifically, collocates were required to occur within five words to the left and five to the right of the node kathoey (5L to 5R) to effectively identify related words, provide a sufficient context for analysis and avoid the inclusion of unrelated terms from longer spans or the lack of collocates in shorter spans (Baker et al., 2013). Additionally, collocates should have a logdice score, a statistical measure for identifying typical word combinations independent of a corpus size of 7 or above (Rowson et al., 2023) to make the analysis manageable. Furthermore, this study used the *Thai Dictionary of the Royal Institute 2011* as the reference to verify each word's accurate verbs and adjectives.

After that, this study further expanded the parameters of lexical analysis of collocation by shifting to concordance analysis, focusing on the actual texts and conducting a close examination (Baker, 2006). To elicit the semantic preferences of the node kathoey, this study employed a bottom-up approach to enable the identification of categories within the corpus per se (Gillings et al., 2023).

Despite the significant aim of queer perspectives to deconstruct rigid categories, this study employs thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify unique themes in the data. This study acknowledges this tension and approaches the analysis reflexively, striving to illuminate complex narratives without imposing reductive frameworks. Additionally, this study aimed to balance methodological rigor with a critical awareness of how categorization may impact the interpretation of gender and sexuality expressions in the data.

Results

This section addresses the two research questions posed in this study, summarizing the findings of each substage of corpus linguistic analysis—collocation analysis and concordance analysis—while critiquing the power of cisgenderism in the linguistic and thematic distinctions between KA and CIS.

[6]

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

RQ 1: How do the linguistic patterns and thematic representations of kathoey identity in Thai songs differ between self-identified kathoey and non-kathoey cisgender singers?

Collocation Analysis

Tables 2 and 3 show that verbs significantly outnumber adjectives associated with the node kathoey, with only one adjective, *di* (good), found in KA. This highlighted kathoey's actions, states, or experiences rather than descriptive qualities.

However, the adjective *di* (good) appeared to significantly contribute to *kathoey*'s representation when looking at the semantic environments. Kathoey could be represented as a 'bad person' when the adjective *di* (good) followed the Thai adverbial *mai* (not), as in *thueng cha mi khrai khao cha mong wa phuak rao mai di* (Even if some view us negatively…) and the Northern Thai word *ba* (not), as in *ma saeo wa kathoey ba di* (Teasing kathoey is not good).

Without the negative-indexed elements, *kathoey* could be represented as a 'good person' as in *kathoey di di* (good *kathoey*). These examples might not necessarily refer to *kathoey* as individuals but to people (e.g., *phuak rao*#we)—inevitably reinforcing stereotypical perception of kathoey.

Table 2

Collocates with the Node 'Kathoey' in KA

Node	Collocate: verbs and adjectives *(translation and #LogDice scores shown in the parentheses)*
kathoey	*pen* (to be#12.41), *mi* (to have#12.04), *ma* (to come#11.91), *pen* (*Northern Thai* to be#11.72), *wa* (to say11.57), *koet* (to happen/to be born#11.09), *pai* (to go#10.96), *hai* (to give#10,71), *di* (good#10.48), *kho* (to ask for#9.97)

Table 3

Collocates with the Node Kathoey in CIS

Node	Collocate: verbs and adjectives *(translation and #LogDice scores shown in the parentheses)*
kathoey	*pen* (to be#12.62), *ma* (to come#12.03), *hai* (to give#12.02), *mi* (to have#11.67), *wa* (to say#11.35), *pai* (to go#11.29), *laen* (to run#11.22), *mak* (to like#10.20), *kin* (to eat#11.00), *hae* (to parade#11.00)

The stative verb *pen* (to be), which outnumbered other verbs in both KA and CIS, appeared to contribute to the predictivity of semantic attribution for kathoey identity. Focusing on the collocate alone provided limited insight, making it necessary to include more context, aligning with queer linguistic stance by avoiding oversimplification. While remaining aware of the dominant elements contrary to the de-

essentializing queer perspectives, this study further explored the implied meanings of the verb *pen* (to be) to elucidate the potentially embedded linguistic data in representing kathoey identity across two sub-corpora. The findings showed that the co-occurrence of the verb *pen* (to be) attributed both positive and negative qualities and states to kathoey representation in KA and CIS.

Table 4

Two Dominant Patterns of the Verb 'Pen' (to be) in KA

Pattern of the verb *pen*	Frequency	Example *(translation shown in the parentheses)*
pen kathoey (to be *kathoey*)	39	• *koet pen kathoey mai khoey sabai* (Being born as kathoey is never comfortable.) • *pen kathoey chan ko mai thoy* (Being kathoey won't back down.) • *pen kathoey mi kaanseuksaa* (To be educated kathoey)
kathoey pen (*kathoey* is)	7	• *kathoey (nan) pen mit kap thuk chiwit bon lok bai ni* (Kathoey is friendly to all lives on this planet.) • *kathoey pen tua panha* (Kathoey is a troublemaker.) • *kathoey pen sala phak chai* (Kathoey is a resting place for the heart.)

Table 4 shows that the verb *pen* (to be), categorized into the two distinct patterns in KA, appeared in both positive contexts (e.g., strength and resilience, education, and emotional support) and negative contexts (e.g., challenges and struggles). Aligning with the queer stance of nuanced linguistic interpretation, the presupposition of strict positivity was acknowledged. For instance, *pen kathoey tong satrong* (Being kathoey must be strong) might emphasize the difficulties in cisgenderism society, albeit, contextually dependently, its representation of empowerment and encouragement in the kathoey community.

Similarly, in CIS, Table 5 revealed 'ostensibly' positive contexts (e.g., loyalty in romantic relationships, cultural values—entertaining roles) and negative contexts (e.g., challenges and hardship, and perceived weakness).

Table 5

Two Dominant Patterns of the Verb 'Pen' (to be) in CIS

Pattern of the verb *pen*	Frequency	Example *(translation shown in the parentheses)*
pen kathoey (to be kathoey)	28	• *pen kathoey la ot yak pak mong phu sai bo tok hot* (Being kathoey is difficult, men do not fall for us.) • *koet ma pen kathoey bo dai prueksa phai* (Being born as kathoey, I did not consult anyone.) • *thueng chan pen kathoey mai khoei khit tham rai khrai* (Even though I am kathoey, I have never thought of hurting anyone.)

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

kathoey pen (kathoey is)	6	• *kathoey pen si san farang ma thiao ka pha kin yim poei* (Kathoey is colorful; foreigners come to tour and smile.) • *kathoey pen panha sangkhom* (Kathoey is a social problem.) • *kathoey pen phet on ae* (Kathoey is a weak gender.)

Additionally, some verbs appeared uniquely in each corpus. The verb *koet* (to be born), preceding the verb *pen* (to be) in both KA and CIS, implied an innate quality of *kathoey* characteristics, as seen in *koet pen kathoey mai khoey sabai* and *koet ma pen kathoey bo dai prueksa phai* (Being born as kathoey, I did not consult anyone). This linguistic construction arguably reflected societal generalizations rather than empirical reality, where not every kathoey had to experience only the trials and tribulations of life or unrequited love.

In CIS, the verbs *laen* (to run) and *kin* (to eat), followed by the noun *mai* (literally wood yet metaphorically 'male genital' in *Isan* Thai), suggested a homogenized sexual act of 'seeking out or flirting with men.' Additionally, the verb *hae* (to parade), found only in CIS, may reflect kathoey's association with entertainment. The low-frequency collocate *pen* (to be) in Northern Thai, when examined from a queer perspective, sheds significant light on the predictive nature of semantic attribution concerning specific qualities or stages of kathoey identity (see Table 6).

Table 6

Patterns of the Northern Thai Verb 'Pen' (to be) in KA

Pattern of the verb *pen*	**Examples** *(translation shown in the parentheses)*
pen kathoey (to be kathoey)	• *pen kathoey chan ko phumchai* (I am proud to be kathoey.) • *tangtae pen kathoey bo koei sia khwam borisut* (Since becoming kathoey, never lost my innocence.) • *koet ma pen kathoey bo koei kuet cha chu* (Being born as kathoey never thought of deceiving anyone.) • *koet ma pen kathoey bo koei kuet cha chu* (Being born as kathoey never thought of deceiving anyone.)
pen X kathoey (to be kathoey's X)	*Ma pen phua kathoey man bo choei* (Being kathoey's husband is not outdated.)

The findings captured the identity and self-perception, such as *pen kathoey chan ko phumchai* (I am proud to be kathoey), social experiences and relationships, such as *ma pen phua kathoey man bo choei* (Being kathoey's husband is not outdated), moral and ethical stance, such as *tangtae pen kathoey bo koei sia khwam borisut* (Since becoming kathoey, I have never lost my innocence), and existential reflections, such as *thueng pen kathoey bo chai kathoey bo tai* (Even if kathoey, there are different grades of *kathoey*). Similarly, the Northern Thai verb *pen* (to be), often paired with the verb

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

koet (to be born), as in *koet ma pen kathoey bo koei kuet cha chu* (Being born as kathoey, I never thought of deceiving anyone)*,* strongly suggested an inherent trait based on cultural assumptions.

Taken together, it could be contended that analyzing collocates' linguistic data alongside semantic environments contributed to a nuanced representation of kathoey individuals in KA and CIS. As such, this study required qualitative perspectives, incorporating contextual analysis using concordance lines for a comprehensive understanding (Motschenbacher, 2018). In particular, this approach necessitated further in-depth analysis to uncover potentially emerging themes—the unexplored elements crucial to this study.

Therefore, concordance analysis driven by data prioritized emerging themes from both sub-corpora, combining, as mentioned, thematic analysis. The following section captures the key findings of the second stage of corpus analysis.

Concordance Analysis

In this stage, the term kathoey was used to generate the concordance because it was the focus of this study, the most frequently used term in both sub-corpora, and a culturally specific term in Thai society that encapsulates a unique gender identity concept. This approach enabled a more in-depth contextual analysis, allowing this study to examine how kathoey individuals were represented in both the internal space of kathoey themselves and through the external perception of cisgender individuals.

Comparing Tables 7 (KA) and 8 (CIS), KA provides a more nuanced internal view of kathoey experiences, community dynamics, and identity struggles, whereas CIS tended to rely more on external observations, stereotypes, and assumptions about kathoey experiences. Although some areas of overlap in perceptions were noted, KA often presented a more complex and multifaceted view of kathoey identity and experiences. The following discussion addresses each sub-corpus's contribution to kathoey identity.

Table 7

Thematic Analysis of the Co-text of the Node 'Kathoey' in KA

Theme	Sub-theme	Examples of words and phrases obtained from the concordance *(translation shown in the parentheses)*
Identity and self-perception	Pride in identity	*sum hao kathoey di chai chang loei dai pen kathoey* (We kathoey are so happy to be kathoey.)
	Body dysphoria	• *chai pen ying tae kai pen chai* (Female heart but male body) • *khwam ching kathoey kathoey, bo mi mot luk yang mae ying tha khai dai faen ching ching, ma ao kathoey di kwa* (The truth is, transgender women do not have a uterus like cisgender women. If you

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

		really want a partner, it's better to choose a transgender woman.)
	Self-deprecation	• *mai mi khrai rak phuying plom plom yang chan* (No one loves a fake woman like me.) • *yon su khao bo dai* (Cannot compare to them), *chon chat* (Vagrant)
Community dynamics	Community empowerment	*bo wa kathoey sam noi sam yai hai kathoey mae du lae kathoey khuen mai sueb thot kathoey thai pen moradok khong chat* (Whether young or elderly kathoey, let the mother kathoey take care of the new kathoey, passing on Thai kathoey culture as national heritage.)
	Hierarchies within marginalized groups	• *hai kathoey mae du lae kathoey khuen mai* (Let the mother kathoey takes care of the new kathoey.) • *si pha khao wong kan ma prueksa run phi kathoey poramachan* (Will bring (you) into the circle to consult the senior kathoey masters.)
	Intra-group discrimination	• *(kathoey) haiso khuet wa ko thae no, phuchai lo lo ko khao ma wao nam* (Upper-class kathoey think they are so cool.) • *(kathoey) mueang nok loet yu laeo kha (Kathoey) Thai-laen koet ma ko pen phu-chai* (Kathoey from abroad are already excellent, while Thai kathoey was born as men.)
Societal Perceptions and Challenges	Destigmatization	• *ya pai khae suai choet na kathoey* (Do not care, be beautiful and confident, kathoey.) • *lai khrang mu hao thuk mong pen tua talok—talok ko ching tae mai talot wela mak len mak muan lang thueak ko mi yu* (Many times, we are seen as comedic figures. It is true that we can be funny, but not all the time. We like to have fun and joke around sometimes, but that is not all there is to us.) • *thueng khrai cha mong kathoey to lae tae kathoey ko khon mi khwam rusuek chep pen muean khon thuapai. Tae chiwit man lueak koet mai dai chan lueak koet mai dai* (Even if some people see transgender women as deceptive, transgender women are also humans who can feel pain just like anyone else. But life does not let us choose how we're born. I could not choose how I was born.) • *bo chai maeng bong bo tong tua kong klua wa don laeo cha khan* (Not a stinging caterpillar, no need to curl up, fearing that touching will cause an itch) • *pai ha kin mai bo ao na ya pai hai khao wao phuen kathoey tha rueang di di choen loei chat loei hao pen kathoey mi kan sueksa loet kha* (Do not go looking for men to have sex with, do not let them talk badly about us. For kathoey, if it is about good things, please go ahead. We are well-educated kathoey, excellent!)

[11]

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

	Societal challenges	*yak taek sao pho ka rap bo dai* (Want to be effeminate but father cannot accept it.)
	Powerlessness	*tae chiwit man lueak koet mai dai* (But life does not let us choose how we were born.)
Stereotypes and Expectations	Intra-group homogenization	• *mop khwam sanuk he ha khue nathi kathoey* (Providing fun and laughter is the kathoey's duty.) • *koet pen kathoey tong strong* (Being born as kathoey must be strong.) • *pen mit kap thuk chiwit bon lok bai ni* (Be friendly to all life on this planet) • *tong mi chit chai kraeng kla kwa nak rop bang rachan* (Must have a mind stronger than the warriors of Bang Rachan.) • *mi tae khwam hak thae baep fae fae hai ai thuk thi* (Only true fair love for you every time)
Life stages	Ageism	• *hen jai kathoey sung wai chan mee hua jai rak chai thuk khon lao khao jao sue hai kin* (Have sympathy for the elderly kathoey, I have a heart that loves all men, (I will) buy rice whiskey for you to drink.) • *itcha la kathoey luk ot, phu bao op kot la tae sai khang phon, tut thao hua chai on la* (Envious of the young kathoey, the men embrace and caress them over there, while this elderly kathoey's heart grows weary.)

Table 7 reveals that kathoey singers shared both positive and negative experiences. Positive aspects included pride, community solidarity, and support, albeit scant evidence, as well as the destigmatization of the preconception of kathoey identity as 'struggling,' 'exotic,' and 'uneducated.' On the other hand, negative aspects included body dysphoria, self-deprecation, intra-group discrimination, societal challenges, powerlessness, intra-homogenization, and ageism, especially between elderly and young kathoey.

Intra-discrimination and intra-homogenization, in particular, revealed intricate issues of marginalization within the kathoey community itself. Intra-group discrimination often manifests based upon prevailing beauty standards and educational attainment. Examples like *mop khwam sanuk he ha khue nathi kathoey* (Providing fun and laughter is the kathoey's duty) and *tong mi chit chai kraeng kla kwa nak rop bang rachan* (must have a mind stronger than the warriors of *Bang Rachan*) suggest that kathoey individuals who deviate from normative expectations may encounter further marginalization, perpetuating a complex hierarchy of acceptance and rejection within the group.

Table 8

Thematic Analysis of the Co-text of the Node 'Kathoey' in CIS

Themes	Sub-theme	Examples of words and phrases obtained from the concordance *(translation shown in the parentheses)*
External characterization	Othering and Stigmatization	• *bo than dai phattad dadplaeng yang pen phuchai thang thaeng ni lae kathoey phan antarai* (Have not had surgery to modify yet, still entirely male - this is a dangerous type of kathoey.) • *thai ban oen kathoey khwai hun bo khoi hai tae chai pen sao* (The villagers call me a buffalo(large) (kathoey); my body may not be great, but my heart is a woman's.) • *nuek wa hao maen phi* (Thought we were ghosts) • *yang pai sai ma hao* (Wherever I go, dogs bark) • *si thong kap kathoey* (Will get pregnant with kathoey)
	Physical stereotypes	• *klam pen lam lam* (Muscular) • *bo than dai pha tat dat plaeng* (Have not had surgery to modify yet)
Beliefs about kathoey relationship	Behavioral assumptions	• *khi thuk* (Suffering) • *tong nang sia chai* (Have to sit and be sad) • *mai khoei nok chai* (Never unfaithful) • *tha dai rak khrai laeo chai koen roi* (If they love someone, they give more than 100%.) • *phrom cha du lae ok hak ma thang ni* (Ready to take care of the heartbroken, come this way.)
Societal attitudes	Acceptance	• *mi hua chai* (Have a feeling) • *Muan muan pai loei bo mi panha* (Just have fun, no problem.) • *Rian ka di* (Study well)
Social context	Cultural differences	*Noi chai chang loei koet pen kathoey ban nok bo muean kathoey Baengkok* (Feel so sorry to be born a countryside kathoey, not like Bangkok kathoey.)
	Socioeconomic status	• *Tit ni khao* (In debt) • *Kathoey ban nok klang wen ka ok la het hai het na* (A countryside kathoey in the middle of the day goes out to do farming work.)
Perceptions of kathoey identity and experiences	Attributed Self-perception	• *Man phit mong dai* (What is wrong with being kathoey?) • *Phum chai pho chai* (Proud and content)
	Assumed internal experiences	*Plom khae phiang kai* (Only the body is fake.)

Table 8 offers a view of how kathoey is perceived by the broader cisgender society. While some positive attributes and acceptance are acknowledged, such as *phum chai pho chai* (proud and content), the CIS corpus includes negative aspects, such as explicit stereotyping and othering, as seen in phrases like *kathoey phan antarai phan an-tarai* (a dangerous type of kathoey), and the association of being chronically heartbroken and gender incongruence.

Regarding the aforementioned positive perceptions, they are viewed from a different perspective. Non-kathoey individuals, who never experienced marginalization or oppression due to cisgenderism, cannot authentically represent kathoey experiences or legitimately express their perspectives. Such portrayals occur within an oversimplified framework in a "tolerant-but-unacceptable" heteronormative Thai society, as in *chan phumijai phojai la thi pen kathoey phai si wao yok yoei ka sang thok woei ka sang thok woei pak khon roet sa yang suai baep othon bo khoei son kham khon nintha bo son dok doe* (I am proud and content being who I am. Let others say what they want, I do not care. I am fabulously beautiful and patient. I have never listened to gossip. I really do not care).

In particular, the kathoey-related songs by cisgender singers are seen as reinforcing generalizations, potentially creating intra-discrimination and intra-homogenization among kathoey themselves, as evidenced in KA.

In summary, this study also critiques the implicit power of cisgenderism in the language used in kathoey-related Thai songs by both kathoey and cisgender singers, addressed in the second research question.

RQ 2: What do these differences reveal about the perpetuation of cisgenderism in Thai song discourse?

This study revealed key distinctions between KA and CIS. While CIS relied on external stereotypes, KA navigated homogeneous environments, offering an achieved equilibrium in non-normative stances and an internal perspective on kathoey experiences. Evidence suggested nuanced perspectives on this equilibrium, with texts revealing ongoing struggles against internalized cisgenderism and discrimination. This tension highlighted the complex identity negotiation process within marginalized groups. The study recognized that these textual expressions, while authentic, reflected pervasive societal pressures on kathoey individuals. The duality in KA songs' lyrics—alternating between empowerment and social exclusion—demonstrated both challenges and resilience in creating spaces for self-expression and solidarity.

In this stage, Lennon and Mistler's (2014) discussion of cisgenderism was used to address the second research question. The analysis identified three significant themes that underscore the differences between kathoey self-perception and cisgender external perception within Thai song discourse. Figure 1 illustrates the three emerging themes derived from Tables 7 and 8. Furthermore, the following discussion addresses the interplay of these themes and their contribution to the interpretation of cisgenderism within this context.

Figure 1

Differences of Kathoey's Self-Perception and Cisgender External Perception in Thai Song Discourse
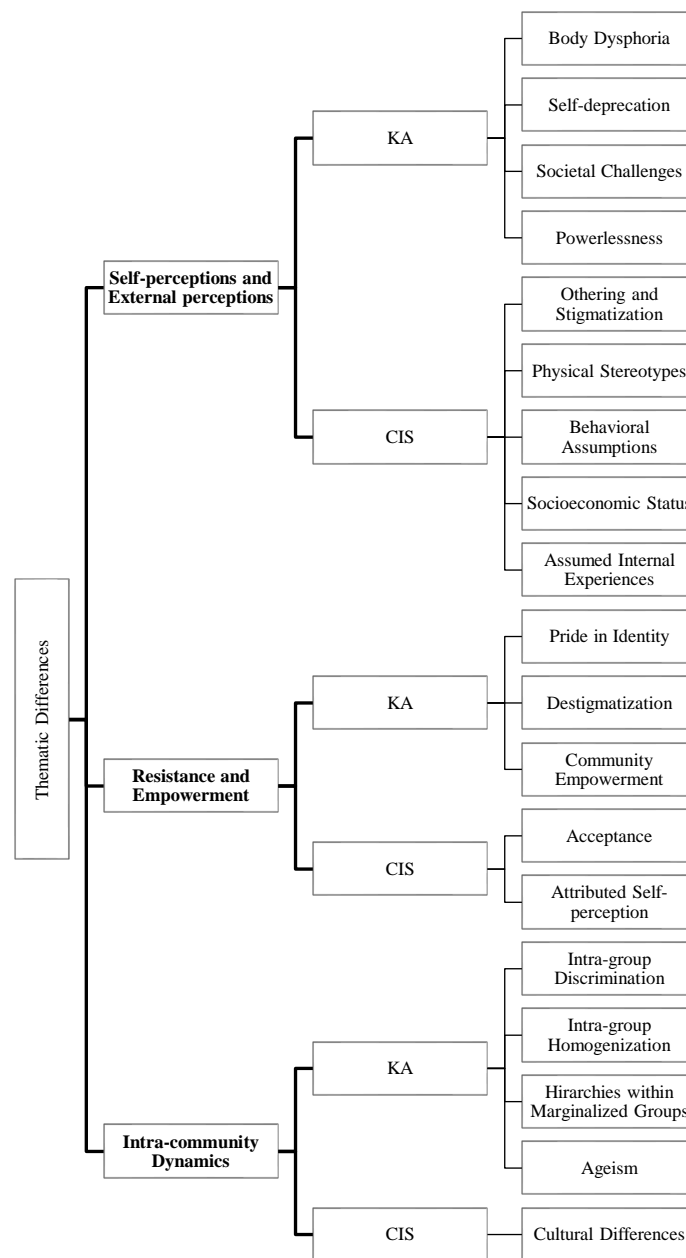
In the first theme, the perpetuation of cisgenderism differed in KA and CIS. KA showed internalized cisgenderism through body dysphoria and self-deprecation, stemming from a heternormative society that privileges cisgender bodies and expressions, leading to the pathologization of kathoey individuals within their community. Significantly, CIS reinforced the deliberate marginalization of non-normative kathoey individuals through othering, stigmatization, and stereotypical ideas about kathoey experiences, such as physical and behavioral expectations and a homogeneous 'underprivileged' socioeconomic status.

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

The second theme illustrated a conflict in the perpetuation and resistance to cisgenderism. KA expressed pride in identity, destigmatization efforts, and community empowerment as a collective political resistance against cisgenderism. These narratives challenged the pathologization of kathoey identity and affirmed their intrinsic worth and validity. While CIS showed a gradual acknowledgment of kathoey individuals, the 'attributed' perceptions suggested a lingering influence of cisgender perspectives, potentially hindering a full understanding of kathoey experiences.

The third theme exposed how cisgenderism permeates even within the kathoey community. KA revealed profound internalization of cisgenderism, leading to discrimination and homogenization, especially in ageism vis-à-vis elderly and younger kathoey vying for cisgender men's affection. Meanwhile, KA also demonstrated resistance to cisgenderism through mentorship and mutual support networks between elderly and younger kathoey in their community. CIS, on the other hand, accentuated divisions within the kathoey community, illustrated by the differentiation between countryside kathoey and Bangkok kathoey, implying a hierarchy of legitimacy contingent upon geographic location.

Taken together, these themes elucidated the pervasive and multifaceted nature of cisgenderism within Thai song discourse. Kathoey voices presented both resistance and internalized oppression, while cisgender viewpoints often sustained more explicit manifestations of cisgenderism through stereotyping and marginalization, particularly manifesting as instances of homophobia and transphobia within the narrative context.

The distinctions between KA and CIS discourses elucidated the mechanisms of cisgenderism at both individual and societal levels, affecting external perceptions of kathoey identity and shaping the self-perception of kathoey individuals and their community. This is due to the belief that heteronormative society has constructed kathoey individuals in this way and, therefore, must be followed. This empirical evidence of cisgenderist power necessitated changes to expand the narrow perception of kathoey individuals and address internalized feelings of inferiority within their community.

Discussion

The linguistic and thematic analysis demonstrates both empowering narratives and problematic stereotypes shaping kathoey identity. Kathoey singers represent themselves through the themes of community empowerment, internal dynamics, and challenges—including body dysphoria, societal stigma, and resilience. External perceptions by cisgender singers, on the other hand, often rely on stereotypes, oversimplification, emphasizing physical attributes and emotional traits while perpetuating cisgenderist beliefs and occasionally offering 'ostensible' positive representation within a framework of othering.

In particular, while echoing Kothdee et al. (2024), Sakyai (2022), and Thipphana (2022) regarding the emerging themes in the representation of kathoey in Thai song

discourse—such as romantic disappointment, comedic roles and contributions to entertainment, social alienation, and use of stereotypes—this study highlights novel themes that represent tectonic shifts in kathoey narratives: community empowerment, hierarchies, discrimination, homogenization, and ageism.

Furthermore, the emerging themes, such as hierarchies within the kathoey community and ageism, result in a novel paradigm in kathoey narratives, shifting the focus from gender identity representation to a more holistic exploration of lived experiences. This paradigm shift facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the intersectionality inherent in kathoey lives—encompassing sociocultural hierarchies, temporal factors, and the evolving nature of self-identification within Thai song discourse.

Additionally, this study emphasizes community dynamics, as the findings on intra-group discrimination and intra-homogenization within the kathoey community add a new dimension to understanding kathoey identity formation and community dynamics. This study contends that kathoey individuals navigate heteronormativity while being cognizant of stereotypes and often feeling pressured to prove their worth within binary gender paradigms. This paradoxical struggle to demonstrate value in a heteronormative society persists despite the inherent worth of all humans, regardless of gender identity.

The increased prevalence of the term kathoey in kathoey singers' songs suggests an active linguistic reclamation process, aligning with queer linguistic theory on language's role in constructing gender identities (Motschenbacher, 2018). Collocation analysis revealed KA more frequently associates kathoey with empowerment and self-determination terms compared to CIS. This linguistic difference highlights how kathoey individuals are reshaping the term's meaning, transforming it from a historically pejorative label into a marker of identity and pride (Huang, 2024; Kothdee et al., 2024; Sakyai, 2022).

Taken together, the analysis of collocation and concordance reveals the contrast between self-representation and external perception, underscoring cisgenderism's impact on identity discourse. Findings emphasize the importance of prioritizing kathoey voices while critically examining cisgenderist influence in both external and internal narratives about kathoey experiences. As such, this study advocates for a comparative baseline in the academic investigation of kathoey identity, examining cisgenderism (Lennon & Mistler, 2014) to understand the internal perceptions within the kathoey community. It demonstrates how language can question and uphold power hierarchies—a primary problem in the field of queer linguistics.

Furthermore, it can be contended that concordance analysis elucidates the contextual nuances of each dominant and unique collocate (Motschenbacher, 2018), revealing homogenizing tendencies in both KA and CIS discourses, as well as empowerment and internalized oppression within KA, alongside stereotypical representations in CIS that might be overlooked in a purely quantitative analysis.

[17]

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

Conclusion

This study encapsulates the tension experienced by kathoey individuals between self-empowerment and stereotypical constraints in Thai song discourse. Positive aspects include community solidarity, resilience, increased visibility, and self-representation in Thai, while negative aspects persist, such as stereotyping, othering in kathoey-related songs by cisgender singers, internalized oppression in some lyrical texts by kathoey singers, and the perpetuation of cisgenderist ideologies in the broader discourse. This study thus underscores the value of examining both kathoey insider and cisgender outsider perspectives to fully understand the complex process of kathoey representation.

Of the research avenues, future studies should explore kathoey representation across larger datasets, timeframes, the inclusion of lyrics and music videos, and consider intersectionality (e.g., class and region) for more nuanced, kathoey-centered representations. Accordingly, future research and advocacy should amplify kathoey voices and challenge cisgenderist narratives. This study contributes to corpus and queer linguistics by revealing the linguistic constructions of non-Western kathoey identity. However, challenges in balancing quantitative analysis with queer linguistic goals persist. Future research should expand the analysis of gender-related terms and incorporate more qualitative analysis of Thai song discourse.

Significantly, by addressing systemic biases embedded in marginalized discourse, both queer and non-queer researchers can work towards a more equitable and inclusive society that supports non-normative advocacy and inclusive pedagogy, where all individuals, regardless of gender identity, are afforded human value.

Author

Thanawut Sreejak (thanawut.sre@kkumail.com) (he/him) is a postgraduate student in the English program of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Khon Kaen University. He is currently interested in gender and sexuality studies and discourse analysis. In particular, he is studying the discourse of Thai trans women/kathoey.

References

Airoldi, M., Beraldo, D., & Gandini, A. (2016). Follow the algorithm: An exploratory investigation of music on YouTube. *Poetics*, *57*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.05.001

Aultman, B. (2014). "Cisgender." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(1-2), 61–62.https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399614

Baker, P. (2006). *Using corpora in discourse analysis*. Continuum.

Baker, P. (2014). *Using corpora to analyze gender*. Bloomsbury.

[18]

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

Baker, P. (2018). Language, sexuality and corpus linguistics: Concerns and future directions. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, *7*(2), 263–279. https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.17018.bak

Baker, P., Gabrielatos, C., & McEnery, T. (2013). *Discourse analysis and media attitudes: The representation of Islam in the British press*. Cambridge University Press.

Baker, P., & Levon, E. (2016). That's what I call a man: Representations of racialised and classed masculinities in the UK print media. *Gender and Language*, *10*(1), 106–139. https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.v10i1.25401

Barnett, M., Fotheringham, F., Hutton, V., O'Loughlin, K. (2021). Heterosexism and cisgenderism. In V. Hutton & S. Sisko (Eds.), *Multicultural responsiveness in counselling and psychology: Working with Australian populations* (pp. 153–178). Springer International Publishing.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Frith, S. (1996). *Performing rites: On the value of popular music*. Harvard University Press.

Gillings, M., Mautner, G., & Baker, P. (2023). *Corpus-assisted discourse studies*. Cambridge University Press.

Huang, P. I. (2024). Nondualist philosophies and trans literature. In D. A. Vakoch & S. Sharp (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of trans literature* (pp. 83–92). Routledge.

Jackson, P. A. (2011). *Queer Bangkok: Twenty-first-century markets, media, and rights*. Hong Kong University Press.

Jackson, P. A. (2016). *First queer voices from Thailand: Uncle Go's advice columns for gays, lesbians and kathoeys*. Hong Kong University Press.

Käng, D. B. C. (2012). Kathoey "In trend": emergent genderscapes, national anxieties and the re-signification of male-bodied effeminacy in Thailand. *Asian Studies Review*, *36*(4), 475–494. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2012.741043

Kilgarriff, A., Baisa, V., Bušta, J., Jakubíček, M., Kovář, V., Michelfeit, J., Rychlý, P., & Suchomel, V. (2014). The Sketch Engine: Ten years on. *Lexicography*, *1*(1), 7–36. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40607-014-0009-9

Kothdee, T., Wiriyarampa, W., Pamonpon, A., Tuansrikeaw., & Supprasert, P. (2024). *Khwam khongthi lae kan plian pleng phap thaen kathoey nai bot phleng Thai bon YouTube* [Stability and change in representation of kathoey in Thai songs

on YouTube]. *Academic Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences Dhonburi Rajabhat University*, *7*(1), 30–41. https://so02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/human_dru/article/view/267372/179975

Leap, W. L. (2015). Queer linguistics as critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton & D. Schiffrin (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 661–680). Wiley.

Leap, W., & Motschenbacher, H. (2012). Launching a new phase in language and sexuality studies. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, 1(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.1.1.01lea

Lennon, E., & Mistler, B. J. (2014). Cisgenderism. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(1–2), 63–64. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399623

McCann, H., & Monaghan, W. (2019). *Queer theory now: From foundations to futures*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Motschenbacher, H. (2011). Taking queer linguistics further: Sociolinguistics and critical heteronormativity research. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *2011*(212), 149–179. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2011.050

Motschenbacher, H. (2018). Corpus linguistics in language and sexuality studies: Taking stock and looking ahead. *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, *7*(2), 145–174. https://doi.org/10.1075/jls.17019.mot

Motschenbacher, H. (2019). Language and sexual normativity. In R. Barrett & K. Hall (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of language and sexuality*. Oxford University Press.

Ocha, W. (2023). Buddhism, gender, and sexualities: Queer spiritualities in Thailand. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, *42*(5), 685–705. https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-01-2020-0025

Ojanen, T. T. (2009). Sexual/gender minorities in Thailand: Identities, challenges, and voluntary-sector counseling. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, *6*, 4–34. https://doi.org/10.1525/srsp.2009.6.2.4

Phraekhao, P. (2012). *Phet withi kathoey Isan nai phuenthi molam* [Sexuality of Isaan ladyboys in the Mo Lam area]. *SAC's Research Database.* http://sac-research.sac.or.th/research-item-search.php?ob_id=76

Roopsa-ard, S., & Jantarangsee, A. (2021). *Khwam khit hen to phleng yiat phet nai sangkhom online: Pathibatkan tok yam lae totop kan yiat phet nai sangkhom chai pen yai* [Posting opinions about sexist songs on the internet: Practices of enhancing and combatting sexism in a patriarchal society]. *Stance: The Thai Feminist Review*, *8*(1), 88–113. https://wsc.soc.cmu.ac.th/journal/issue_upload/0.85560400-1625046629.pdf

[20]

Representation of Kathoey in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

Rowson, T. S., Jaworska, S., & Gibas, I. (2023). Hot topic: Examining discursive representations of menopause and work in the British media. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *30*(6), 1903-1921. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13021

Sakyai, K. (2022). *Phap khong "kathoey" nai wannakam phleng Thai sakon* [Image of "kathoey" in Thai songs] [Master's thesis, Silpakorn University]. DSpace at Silpakorn University. http://ithesis-ir.su.ac.th/dspace/handle/123456789/4391

Saisuwan, P. (2016). Kathoey and the linguistic construction of gender identity in Thailand. In E. Levon & R. B. Mendes (Eds.), *Language, sexuality, and power: Studies in intersectional sociolinguistics, studies in language gender and sexuality* (pp. 189–214). Oxford Academic. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210366.003.0010

Ten Brummelhuis, H. (2008). Transformations of transgender: The case of the Thai kathoey. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *9*(2–3), 121–139. https://doi.org/10.1300/J041v09n02_06

Thipphana, S. (2022). *Phap lak thi sam thi prakot nai wannakam phleng luk thung Isan tangtae phutthasakkarat 2540–2565* [Third gender image appeared in the Isaan ballet literature from 1997–2022]. *SSKRU Research and Development Journal*, *9*(2), 1–18. https://so01.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/sskru-resarch/article/view/257267

Wisuttipat, N. (2024). "Keeping Condition": Gender ambiguity and sexual citizenship of queer male Thai classical musicians. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and-National Studies of Southeast Asia*, *12*(1), 60–77. https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2023.12