

# Gender Roles and Female Sexuality in the Thai Teen TV Drama *Hormones, The Series*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Teenage sexual activity and the negative consequences of unsafe sex have received public attention in Thailand. Most research to date conceptualizes premarital sexual activities as risky behavior and reflects a hegemonic discourse that disapproves of the sexual activity of teenage girls. Despite the large body of research on sexual behavior of Thai teenagers, little is known about the ways in which teenagers engage in what is conceptualized as risky behavior. Therefore, the author sees the need to research the topic from the teenager's perspective. *Hormones, The Series* is acclaimed as a TV series that explicitly portrays teenage life as lived by Thai youth today and includes counter-hegemonic representations of sexually active youth. This research project aims at analyzing the series through the lens of youth as a cultural construct, with a focus on intersections with Thai social constructs of gender roles and feminine sexuality. Textual analysis is employed to analyze the depiction of the main female protagonists.

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The author comes to the conclusion that seemingly counter-hegemonic representations of sexually active teenage girls in *Hormones, The Series* still favor moralizing messages about femininity and teenage sex. The representations of female adolescents in the series can be conceptualized as part of a cultural discourse on adolescence that carries larger societal implications. The research discusses the implications of a hegemonic discourse of sexual innocence imposed on teenage girls in a social reality where a large proportion of the teenage population is engaged in an activity that is labeled as deviant.

## Introduction

In contemporary Thailand, a conservative hegemonic discourse that disapproves of teenage, especially feminine, sexual activity, persists even though the social reality of teenagers is different and the negative consequences, such as teenage pregnancies and increasing HIV rates among teenagers, have received public attention.<sup>3</sup> Induced by the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1990s, sexuality in Thailand has become a huge field of study funded by governments and NGOs in order to come up with action-oriented recommendations. The main findings of studies on teenage sexual behavior and norms, in both rural and

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<sup>3</sup>In this article, the term “hegemonic” is used to refer to the discourse on teenagers that is disapproving of teenage sexual activity, especially sexual activity of girls. The Cultural Surveillance Center (a government body under the Ministry of Culture) releases *The Journal of Cultural Surveillance* that is distributed to Thai embassies worldwide, as well as foreign embassies in Thailand. In this, the official discourse and framing that is represented by the Ministry of Culture becomes evident. “Progressive”, in a very broad sense, refers to a discourse on teenage sexuality that is not disapproving of teenage sexuality, especially sexual activity of teenage girls. As well, discourse will be understood in the sense of Foucault’s discourse theory according to which knowledge and power are interrelated in discourse. Knowledge within a discourse therefore is always related to the interests of those in power to produce knowledge. Foucault, *Power*, 132.

urban settings, are as follows. In Thailand, there is a cultural taboo of discussing matters of sexuality within families.<sup>4</sup> In addition, premarital sexual activity among teenagers is traditionally regarded as socially unacceptable, and the older generation disapproves of premarital sexual activity among teenagers.<sup>5</sup> However, there is a gender double standard with regard to premarital sexual activity.<sup>6</sup> Due to idealized gender images, premarital sexual activity is more acceptable for teenage boys. In contrast, girls are expected to be passive, obedient and submissive, as well as to retain their virginity. Within the large body of research on teenage sexuality in Thailand, as well as in media reports and policy interventions, there is a tendency to conceptualize teenage sexual activity as a problem. Most of the research focuses on the implications of Thai social ideology with regard to gender roles, Buddhism, the sexual double standard and ideal sexuality, but does not critically question the very concept of adolescence. Still, adolescence, like gender and sexuality, is socially constructed. The adult-imposed construction of the sexually innocent teenage girl however does have consequences on the lives of teenagers that have not yet been addressed in research so far.

This research aims to address this gap through the analysis of the Thai television series *Hormones, The Series*. The series gives an insight into the lifeworld of teenagers in Thailand.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to

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<sup>4</sup> Thato, "Predictors of Condom Use among Adolescent Thai Vocational Students".

<sup>5</sup> Chompootaweep, "A Study of Reproductive Health"; Ford, "Destinations Unknown"; Ngamprapasom, "The First Sexual Intercourse of Thai Men"; Phothisita, *Youth in Contemporary Thailand*; Yamarat, "Sexual Partnering among College Students"; Prasartkul, *Rural Adolescent Sexuality*; Yoddumnern-Attig, *Changing Roles and Statuses of Women in Thailand*; and Yoddumnern, "Premarital Use of Family Planning".

<sup>6</sup> Aeusrivongse, *Talk about Sexuality in Thailand*; Ford, "Destinations Unknown"; Muecke, "Mother Sold Food, Daughter Sells Her Body"; Vuttanont, "'Smart Boys' and 'Sweet Girls'"; Phothisita, *Youth in Contemporary Thailand*; Sridawruang, "Attitudes of Adolescents and Parents towards Premarital Sex in Rural Thailand"; Yoddumnern-Attig, "Conjugal and Parental Roles"; and Yoddumnern, "Premarital Use of Family Planning".

<sup>7</sup> Due to its urban upper middle class setting, the TV series cannot be understood as representing Thai youth in general. However, with regard to the cultural and ethnic variety of people living within the border of the nation state of Thailand, it is questionable if there is such a thing as "the Thai youth".

mainstream offerings in Thai television, *Hormones, The Series* portrays real-life problems that youth spectators can identify with. The series features, at least on the surface, counter-hegemonic representations of Thai teenagers: “high-school teens who have sex because they want to, those who had sex because they thought it was love, as well as those who are wondering which gender they should have sex with.”<sup>8</sup> As such, this series can be used as an object of study to analyze critically the impact of the adult-imposed hegemonic discourse of sexually innocent girls that is defined by hegemonic mainstream discourse as the norm, and on the social reality of the teenage protagonists.

### **Theoretical Concepts: A Constructivist Approach to Sexuality and Adolescence**

In the following paragraphs, the theoretical foundations of this study will be presented as the framework within which the series and representations of teenage sexuality have been analyzed and discussed. The main argument of the author is that the valuation of sexual innocence for teenage girls has to be understood as a recent discursive construct that reflects middle-class values, and is not in accordance with the realities of many people in Thailand, but imposed on them. This partly explains why social practices are not in accordance with the ideal behavior of sexually innocent girls.

### **The Social Construction of Sexuality**

The regulation of sexuality is conducted not only through prohibition and sanction, but also through definition and categories that people utilize to make sense of their existence and experience. People internalize these meanings, standards, and rules as part of the self.<sup>9</sup>

Notions of normal and legitimate sexuality are mostly thought of as natural and are seldom questioned. Foucault deconstructs this notion of the naturalness of sexuality and defines sexuality as a

<sup>8</sup> Vichitsorasatra, “Hormones: Thai Series Tackles Teen Issues Head-On”.

<sup>9</sup> Songsamphan, “Political and Gender Power Relations”, 160.

discursive construct.<sup>10</sup> Beliefs around normal sexuality therefore reflect power relations and aim at the regulation of the behavior of people in a given society. Sexuality is discursively constructed through hegemonic discourses, along the binaries of normal and deviant behavior.<sup>11</sup> Foucault refers to this particular form of power as bio-power. Bio-power creates a body of knowledge/discursive practice that defines what is normal/deviant with regard to sexuality. Various feminist scholars have shown that “bio power frequently assumes a gendered form.”<sup>12</sup> This is also the case in Thailand, where according to the sexual double standard, more strict rules apply to teenage girls than boys.

### **Social Construction of Sexuality in the Thai Context: A Historical Perspective**

A historical perspective shows that normal sexuality in Thailand is not a constant, but has been constantly changing. This supports the argument of the social construction of normal sexuality rather than its naturalness. Contemporary notions about the negativity of sex – that regard sex as a taboo topic – are often constructed as an essential element of Thai culture. However, according to Sutham Thammarongwith, the view that eroticism should be restricted to the private domain was introduced during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), and was most likely a result of the attempt by the Thai nobility studying abroad to construct a civilized appearance. Therefore, the notion of sex-negativity was not prevalent in traditional rural culture, but introduced through the adoption of Victorian values among the upper class and later spread among the wider population.<sup>13</sup>

Several critical researchers of Thai sexuality have observed that many researchers of Thai HIV/AIDS “adopted a Western middle-class

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 68-69.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Hayden, “Teenage Bodies, Teenage Selves”, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Sutham, “ ‘Silence’ and ‘Speech’ ” in Thai, as translated and referred to in Jackson, “Performative Genders, Perverse Desires”, 15.

morality as a measure of general Thai sexual behavior”.<sup>14</sup> Fordham notes, “indigenous Thai constructions of sexuality, prostitution and notions of marital and family relationships have been largely ignored.”<sup>15</sup> This “over generalization of middle-class values”<sup>16</sup> is not only reflected in hegemonic discourse, but also in much research about sexuality in Thailand where a general Thai attitude towards virginity is assumed. The heterogeneity of different practices within Thailand among different classes, ethnic groups and regions is ignored in an approach that is both essentialising and homogenizing.<sup>17</sup>

### Discursive Construction of Adolescence

In order to take into account the specific situation of teenagers, this research builds on Lesko’s postmodernist approach to the construction of adolescence. Such an understanding assumes that “understandings of adolescence/ts are grounded in discursive and performative constructions that apply labels and expectations to youth.”<sup>18</sup> Understanding youth as a cultural construct is different from the widespread assumption that “features of youth exist intrinsically and inevitably within young people.”<sup>19</sup> The category of adolescent comes with several prejudices that Lesko termed “confident characterizations”. These confident characterizations are mostly thought of as natural, and therefore not often critically questioned: teenagers come of age into adulthood; teenagers are controlled by raging hormones; teenagers are peer-oriented; and teenagers are represented by age.<sup>20</sup> These confident characterizations of adolescence operate in education, law, medicine, social work and in popular

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<sup>14</sup> Brummelhuis, “Do We Need a Thai Theory of Prostitution?” as referred to in Fordham, *A New Look at Thai AIDS*, 183; Fordham, “HIV/AIDS and the Social Consequences of Untamed Biomedicine”, 264.

<sup>15</sup> Fordham, *A New Look at Thai AIDS*, 183.

<sup>16</sup> Tannenbaum, “Buddhism, Prostitution, and Sex”, 248.

<sup>17</sup> For more information, refer to Tannenbaum, “Buddhism, Prostitution, and Sex”, 243-260.

<sup>18</sup> Petrone, “The Youth Lens”, 507.

<sup>19</sup> Petrone, “The Youth Lens”, 507.

<sup>20</sup> Lesko, *Act Your Age!*, Introduction.

culture. These characterizations influence the living experience of individuals and create supposedly objective knowledge about and within adolescents.

The discourse on adolescence puts youth under the expectation to develop along a certain timeline, with any disruption being understood as problematic. Sexual activity is reserved for adults, and therefore teenage sexuality disrupts this expected timeline. Adolescent sexuality is defined in terms of deviance; it is not something a normal teenager should be engaged in. In order to make sure adolescents behave in a way that hegemonic discourses define for them, their bodies are subject to scrutiny by an adult gaze that is especially interested in their sexuality.

### **Adolescence as a Discourse Surrogate**

The hegemonic discourse on adolescence is a phenomenon that emerged over time. Adolescence as a cultural construct did not always exist, but emerged in specific historical circumstances. In the USA, for example, Lesko argues that the very concept of adolescence originated in the early 1900s, “in large part, to create a space to deal with anxieties about the diminishing dominance of whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity amid myriad social and cultural shifts, such as increased immigration and urbanization.”<sup>21</sup> Adolescence then was conceptualized as a “useful public problem”<sup>22</sup> to channel concerns over these other issues, without needing to address them directly.<sup>23</sup> Adolescence can therefore be understood as a construct that “often functions as a discourse surrogate for broader social, political, and/or nationalistic agendas and concerns.”<sup>24</sup> In times of great changes, youth often becomes a site to hope for, and worry over, the future of the entire nation.

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<sup>21</sup> Lesko, *Act Your Age!*, 510, 511 referring to Lesko, *Act Your Age!*

<sup>22</sup> Lesko, *Act Your Age!*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Petrone, “The Youth Lens”, 511.

<sup>24</sup> Petrone, “The Youth Lens”, 510.

## Adolescence and Sexuality in Thailand

The example of Thailand shows that assuming the social reality of young people all over the world can be reduced to the category of adolescence is indeed problematic. Childhood in Thailand used to be very different from Western models.<sup>25</sup> It is not possible to define a traditional notion of childhood in Thailand, as these vary throughout the different areas of the country. The concept of adolescence was only introduced in Thailand in the 1950s, and the construction of extended childhood in Thailand has to be understood as a recent, and urban middle-class, phenomenon, where Western notions about the special status of the child have been adopted.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the idea of extended childhood makes children dependent on their parents for a much longer time. However, dependency and control are linked, and with the creation of extended childhood, control over the lives of adolescents is extended. Along with the adoption of a new notion of extended childhood comes the pressure to make sure social practices of the newly defined teenagers comply with the new model.

## The Emergence of a Discourse on Adolescent Sexuality in Thailand

A historical perspective shows that adolescent sexuality emerged as a discourse only recently. It is now considered a problem, but was understood and interpreted differently before. This discursive arising of adolescent sexuality in the 1990s as a problem led many to believe that the phenomenon of teenage sexuality is a recent problem in Thailand. Still, there is evidence that the phenomenon itself has existed long before it was framed as a public problem. In anthropological research, Fordham found evidence that sexual activity among young women was indeed very common in the past.<sup>27</sup> The valuation of the sexual innocence of teenage girls, therefore, has to be understood as a recent discursive construct that reflects middle-class values, and is not in accordance with the realities of many people in Thailand, but imposed on them.

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<sup>25</sup> Montgomery, *Modern Babylon?*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Montgomery, *Modern Babylon?*, 57, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Fordham, *A New Look at Thai AIDS*, 149, 150.

## Counter-Hegemonic Discourse: The World of Teenagers

According to Foucault, “where there is power, there is resistance.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, even though a dominant discourse on teenage sexuality exists, it is not totalizing and oppressive. We have to acknowledge that young people are not wholly constrained by hegemonic discourse. “It is incorrect to conceive young people as completely docile bodies vis-à-vis the operation of biopower.”<sup>29</sup> In contemporary Thailand, teenagers are not solely exposed to a conservative hegemonic discourse. Due to the economic and cultural transition that Thailand has undergone during the last century, teenagers in contemporary Thailand are confronted with ambiguous social role models.<sup>30</sup> They are also influenced by modern media, their peers and partners, and often seek “modern relationships and gender roles, in which boys and girls can date, show public affection, and experiment with sex before marriage.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, teenagers in contemporary Thailand tend to have more open attitudes towards teenage sexual activity than their parents do.<sup>32</sup> Or as Yamarat states: “a sub-culture has emerged among Thai youth that accepts this behavior as the norm.”<sup>33</sup> These emerging attitudes among teenagers are in conflict with conservative Thai values that are mostly represented by adults.<sup>34</sup>

## Introducing *Hormones, The Series* as an Object of Analysis

Within the context of hegemonic conservative discourse on teenage sexuality on the one hand, and contemporary teenage sexuality on the other, the TV series *Hormones, The Series* (HTS) is an excellent

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<sup>28</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95.

<sup>29</sup> Lupton, “Foucault and the Medicalisation Critique” as referred to in Barcelos, “Producing (potentially) Pregnant Teen Bodies”, 479.

<sup>30</sup> Vuttanont, “ ‘Smart Boys’ and ‘Sweet Girls’ ”, 2068-2080.

<sup>31</sup> Vuttanont, “ ‘Smart Boys’ and ‘Sweet Girls’ ”, 2072.

<sup>32</sup> Ford, “Destinations Unknown”; Vuttanont, “ ‘Smart Boys’ and ‘Sweet Girls’ ”.

<sup>33</sup> Yamarat, “Sexual Partnering among College Students”, 65-86.

<sup>34</sup> Ford, “Destinations Unknown”; Vuttanont, “ ‘Smart Boys’ and ‘Sweet Girls’ ”.

site of analysis.<sup>35</sup> From a conservative viewpoint, this series depicts exactly what the alleged cultural degradation of Thai youth looks like. The series depicts counter-hegemonic representations of Thai teenagers and brings up social issues that are usually not openly discussed in Thai families, such as teenage sex, violence and drug abuse. As such, this series was heavily discussed and conservatives called for the show to be banned. In both the Thai and international press, the series has been described as revolutionary and progressive. The series claims to depict issues through the eyes of teenagers, not adults, basing the script mostly on the experiences of its teenage cast. Songyos Sukmakanan, the director, claims “what you see onscreen is about 70% real.”<sup>36</sup> As such, *HTS* can be used as an object of analysis as it provides an excellent insight into the lifeworld of teenagers in Thailand. The plot follows the lives of nine upper-middle-class high school students at the fictional Nadao Bangkok College, where the main characters (Thai grade level 5 students) attend upper-secondary school.

### **Positioning *HTS* in the Conservative Discourse on Sexual Innocence of Teenage Girls**

The main question of this research is to determine whether *HTS* is really as progressive as it was perceived by critics and the media or if it merely reinforces a contemporary conservative hegemonic discourse on the sexual innocence of teenage girls that has been outlined in the previous paragraphs. Based on a constructivist understanding of the gendered discourse on adolescence in Thailand, the analysis of both the explicit censorship in the second season and the implicit storylines shows that *HTS* is indeed mainly reproducing the image of the ideal sexually innocent girl.

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<sup>35</sup> *Hormones, the Series* has been chosen as the only data set because of its high popularity, as well as limitations of the research scope of the Master thesis that this article is based on.

<sup>36</sup> The Nation, “Stalking the Wild Teenager”.

## Censorship Analysis

The call for the series to be censored came up after the series had already screened its ninth episode.<sup>37</sup> The first season of HTS had a level 4 rating, suggesting the content was appropriate for viewers older than 13. After receiving complaints, the NBTC intervened and set up a meeting with the producers because it was allegedly violating article 37 of the Thai Public Broadcasting Act.<sup>38</sup> The NBTC was especially concerned about scenes where students were seen buying birth control pills and scenes implying sexual intercourse.<sup>39</sup> The activities of the NBTC led to harsh protests on social media channels from fans of the series. In the end, the series was not suspended, and there was no further discussion of the censorship of the series in the media. The public discussion featured headlines such as “Govt will not censor controversial TV show ‘Hormones’ ”,<sup>40</sup> implying that the series could run without any outside intervention. However, a closer look shows that the series was presented differently in the second season. Warning subtitles were added to several scenes and the overall age rating was raised to 18. During the process of self-censorship by the channel and producers, scenes that depicted content likely to be considered as inappropriate were explicitly labeled. Such scenes carry a warning that says: “The action is not appropriate for young audiences. Parents should give advice.”<sup>41</sup> These labels clearly lay out the fine line between what is considered appropriate and what is not. There are several scenes in HTS where the male protagonists have one-night stands with girls that are not part of the main cast of

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<sup>37</sup> In contrast to the censorship of films, which first need to be privately screened and rated by a censorship board prior to theatrical release (the censorship board can also ban certain films), television programs are not subject to external censorship before being aired. Television censorship in Thailand is a multi-step process that involves self-censorship by the producers and internal censorship by the broadcasting channel (blurring and disclaimers) before a program is shown on television.

<sup>38</sup> “Govt Will Not Censor Controversial TV Show ‘Hormones’ ”.

<sup>39</sup> “Govt Will Not Censor Controversial TV Show ‘Hormones’ ”.

<sup>40</sup> “Govt Will Not Censor Controversial TV Show ‘Hormones’ ”.

<sup>41</sup> Translation of censorship label in season two of HTS.

the series. Even though there are no scenes where actual intercourse is shown, the viewer is led to believe that the characters do have sex. These scenes were not labeled with any warning. This is in contrast to scenes where sexual intercourse is initiated by girls, which is strong evidence of the incorporation of the sexual double standard into the censorship process.

### **Analysis of the Storyline**

The storylines of the four main female characters have been analyzed, looking particularly at how they negotiate the conservative hegemonic discourse on the sexual innocence of teenage girls. The aim of this analysis was to get a better understanding of the consequences of the gendered construction of adolescence on the lives of the female protagonists, and ultimately assess whether these stories reproduce or challenge hegemonic discourse.

#### **Sprite – The Price to Pay for Being a Sexually Active Girl**

Sprite is introduced to the audience in two scandalous scenes. In her first appearance she is shown walking out of a cubicle in the boy's toilet, shortly after a boy leaves the same cubicle. Their clothes are messy, clearly indicating that the two were having sex. In another scene, she storms out of a classroom because the boy does not have a condom. Moreover, more than breaking with hegemonic ideals and having premarital sex, Sprite also has casual sex, without love, outside of a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. Thai gender stereotypes restrict woman to have sex within the boundaries of marriage, or within a love relationship.

Already at the beginning of the first season, Sprite falls in love with Phai. After a while, the two become a couple, but it does not last long since Phai cannot relax around Sprite because of her past. Eventually, he breaks up with her. Phai not being able to be with Sprite and breaking up with her is a subtle, but very strong, disapproval of her being sexually active. The message is that sexually active girls cannot find real happiness. Real happiness being defined as being loved by a guy further underlines female dependence on men's approval. The

message is that easy girls, no matter how nice and beautiful they are, are not worth being loved. So even though there is none of the usual dichotomy between good girl/bad girl that is prevalent in most TV drama series, female sexual activity is still sanctioned and there are early signs that the self-confident and sexually active Sprite will not last. Sprite is heartbroken and for the first time feels ashamed of her promiscuity. Sprite turns from a self-confident, sexually active girl to regretting her past behavior and being unhappy; there is no longer the sign of her former self-confidence. In a parallel storyline, Sprite is being followed by a stalker who violently attacks her. Phai saves her and, in the end, Sprite and Phai get together again, which she seems happy about. However, Sprite's character by the end of the season has almost nothing in common with the Sprite introduced to us at the beginning. In the end, she aligns herself with hegemonic ideals. The lack of direct, external force in her alignment-process gives the impression that her behavior is not sanctioned within the series. However, the impossibility of her finding happiness as a sexually active girl and the clear lack of any sexual activity after her alignment clearly demonstrate a disapproval of feminine teenage sexuality. Therefore, in the end, the counter-hegemonic representation of the sexually active teenager is counter-hegemonic only on a superficial level. The character of Sprite within the series does not introduce new and an empowering discourse, but carefully deconstructs modern individuals as not being accepted by society and leading to unhappiness in cases where modernity is expressed through sexual activity.

However, the story of Sprite not only reproduces a conservative hegemonic discourse, it also represents a challenge to the good girl/bad girl dichotomy according to which, "a women's individual constitution has been tied directly to her sexual practices."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, a girl who has sex is automatically a bad girl. Sprite's counter-hegemonic appearance cannot be interpreted along those lines. The audience sees how Sprite is, in fact, a nice girl; this is especially demonstrated through her care and worry for Phai when he is engaged in numerous

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<sup>42</sup> Shrage, *Moral Dilemmas of Feminism*, as referred to in Songsamphan, "Political and Gender Power Relations", 171.

gang fights. Therefore, despite being sexually active, Sprite still does have a good character. As such, her story challenges the dichotomy of good woman/bad woman.

### **Dao – The Dangers of Being Sexually Active in Secret**

Dao is introduced as a naive and dreamy girl who is obsessed with Hello Kitty. Her mother wants her to be the perfect girl and is overprotective. Dao has her first unsafe sexual encounter with Din, a boy she met in her English class. He disappears after that. What follows is a seemingly endless nightmare of Dao's fears of being pregnant. It is impossible for her to talk to her mother or father, and she is confronted with negative judgments of a pharmacist and in an illegal abortion clinic. In the end, Dao is not pregnant, but her struggle is hard to watch. Dao's story shows that teenage sexual activity, even if in private, is not something desirable. Her story shows that such activity can lead to massive problems for a girl by focusing on the negative consequences in cruel detail. Overall, Dao's pregnancy story constructs teenage sexual activity as both inappropriate and dangerous and almost appears like a warning to teenage viewers. As such, this story is another element of the series that reproduces the conservative discourse on the sexual innocence of teenage girls.

However, there is another side to the story that is worth noting. Dao's inability to speak to her parents shows how turning sex into a taboo topic can make problems worse. Dao is under such pressure to perform the role of a sexually innocent girl for her parents that she is not able to seek support in a situation where she is desperately in need of understanding and advice. The viewer experiences the whole story from Dao's perspective. This kind of storytelling creates empathy with her character. As such, the story of Dao can be understood as an indirect attempt to question the common practice of making sex a taboo topic and leaving teenagers alone with the Internet to answer their questions. Dao's story is still condemning teenage sexual activity, but at the same time accepts the (undesirable) reality of it. While the ideal notion of sexually innocent teenage girls is still omnipresent, even the strongest advocates of this ideal can no longer deny that reality looks very different.

### **Toei – The Pressure of Conforming with Ideals of Femininity**

Toei is introduced as a girl who is different from other girls, does not engage in typical girly behavior and has mostly male friends. Because Toei does not fit in, she becomes increasingly distant from the other girls. Unlike the other girls, she is also not part of the dance class and is, therefore, often alone, as all the other girls are busy with dance rehearsal. Toei does have male friends, but we learn that the pattern is always the same: “He told me he loved me. I refused and he disappeared.” Over the course of her story, Toei faces many problems because she likes to spend her time with boys rather than with other girls. She gets beaten up in the school toilet by other girls who are jealous of her being close to boys. The same group of girls also write the word SLUT on her table. Toei is being slut-shamed by the other girls at school even though she is not sexually active. Only her being close to boys lead others to these conclusions about her. The story of Toei in HTS is the story of a young girl suffering from failing to live up to societal expectations of appropriate femininity. In a parallel storyline, she is nearly raped. The rape incident is an instance where the series has a clear message. In Toei’s words: “I have nothing to be ashamed of.” This is in contrast to the depiction of rape in conventional TV drama series, which often leads to love and therefore contributes to a romanticization of rape.

### **Kwan – The Price to Pay for Being the Perfect Girl**

Kwan is introduced to the series as the perfect role model. During morning assembly on the first day of school the other girls admire her: “So pretty. She is cute, good at studying, and smart, who doesn’t like her.” Sprite, her best friend, has the same opinion of her: “Kwan is a good girl, good at studying, good behavior, good everything.” Kwan is the most hegemonic representation of femininity in the series. She does not rebel and follows the rules and she is the personification of sexual innocence.

However, Kwan’s perfect life is turned upside down when she finds out her father has another family and her mother is the mistress. She is devastated and it takes her some time until she can stop blaming

her mother and looking down on her. Even though we do not learn anything about the circumstances of how and when Kwan's parents met, the mere fact that Kwan's mother was the second makes her the only one to be blamed. Her father, in contrast, is portrayed as a calm and kind man, taking care of two families while being a well-respected businessman. Kwan is eventually invited to be part of his other family and his first wife treats Kwan kindly. He incorporates the ideal of a charismatic, kind and successful man and the fact that he has two wives does him no harm. In the series, his behavior is sanctioned neither by society nor by his two families. While her mother, being labeled a mistress, is presented in a more negative light.

Kwan soon has her first boyfriend, Mhog, but it quickly becomes clear that she really has feelings for Win, the bad guy. Kwan obviously does not have any romantic feelings for Mhog, but she still feels obliged to be his girlfriend. Kwan is portrayed as a selfless girl, sacrificing her own happiness for the greater goal of making everyone around her happy. This becomes very clear in her conversation with Win when she says that her own happiness is not as important to her as other things: "For me, there are other things more important than my own happiness. I mean family, friends, my future, and stuff like that."

Overall, the story of Kwan shows the story of a girl trying to be perfect. Even though things have been tough for her, she does not leave the right path. A perfect girl is sexually innocent and focuses on studying; she therefore puts herself beyond others. Still, the viewer can see that she suffers from all the expectations. It could be understood as a very subtle critique, or a demand for more tolerance towards flaws.

### **Win – A Teenage Boy Has More Freedom**

In the happy end scene, Kwan is seen taking selfies with her parents, happily united as a family and sending Win a text. Kwan's happy ending scene offers an interesting point for analysis on how the sexual double standard is incorporated into the series. The sexual double standard is evident in the relationship between Kwan and Win. Win is the complete opposite of Kwan – he does not care about the rules. Win is the typical bad boy, he questions authority, has many girls

and even takes drugs. Still, (the perfect) Kwan falls in love with him, the bad guy. Win, as a guy, remains attractive despite his bad behavior. Showing Kwan as the perfect girl falling for the guy who is the exact opposite reinforces the idea that boys do have more freedom in their behavior. A girl could never get away with what Win does. The story of Sprite is a good example of this contradiction.

Overall, the depiction of the four main female characters is very different with regard to the stories and characters involved, but they do have one overlapping theme – an overall tendency to reinforce the ideal behavior of sexual innocence of teenage girls and the sexual double standard. As such, the series reproduces a conservative discourse around the sexual innocence of teenage girls and cannot be conceptualized as challenging hegemonic discourse.

## Conclusion

At first sight, *Hormones, The Series*, seems progressive with its inclusion of taboo topics, such as teenage sexuality, drugs and violence. Because of the explicit integration of counter-hegemonic content, both the Thai and the international media have perceived the series as progressive. After analyzing the series in detail, however, it becomes clear that these judgments were based on very superficial observations and do not adequately reflect HTS.

Still, the answer is more than black and white. HTS portrays the stories from the perspective of teenagers. As such, it shifts the perspective on an area that is usually silenced in the discussion around teenage sexuality – the ways in which teenagers negotiate conservative, normative requirements in their private lives. The author argues that it is not so much the explicit depiction of sexual activity that constitutes the true progressiveness of the series, but more the visibility of representations of teenagers struggling with conservative values and norms. It can be understood as an indirect questioning of hegemonic discourse. Through showing the stories from the perspective of female protagonists, the viewer is put in their position and develops an emphatic position towards these female protagonists. The viewer is with Dao when she is struggling through her pregnancy

scare, and feels with her as she counts the days desperately waiting for her period, but unable to seek help. The viewer is with Sprite when she is miserable because Phai cannot be with her, even though she was never unfaithful. The viewer is with Toei when she is brutally beaten up in the toilet, even though she was entirely innocent. And the viewer is with Kwan as she struggles to be perfect and puts herself behind everyone else. This kind of storytelling is what defines the real progressiveness of the series. It shows the private lives of teenagers and brings to the surface their struggle in keeping up with the ideal notion of being a good girl. It is then up to the viewers to make their own judgment about what constitutes ideal behavior of sexually innocent teenage girls.

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