

Base Account as Safe Spaces: A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Boys Love Fans Interactions on the X Account @fessthaii

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the Twitter/X base account @fessthaii functions as a safe space for Thai Boys Love (BL) fans in Indonesia, where BL consumption often encounters stigma within a heteronormative social context. While anonymity on digital platforms is commonly assumed to create safe spaces, limited research has explored how safety is socially constructed within anonymous fandom communities. This research adopts a constructivist paradigm and employs virtual ethnography. Data were collected through participant observation, online interviews with five active followers, and documentation of menfess posts, comment threads, and moderation practices. Data were analyzed using *Analisis Media Siber* (AMS) across four levels: media space, media document, media object, and media experience. The findings show that @fessthaii operates as a safe space not merely through anonymity but through continuous social negotiation involving moderation practices, community rules, peer support, and affective labour from administrators. Safety is therefore produced relationally through interaction, shared norms, and power relations rather than as a technical feature of the platform. This study contributes to digital media and fandom studies by demonstrating that safe spaces in stigmatized online communities are actively constructed through governance and collective participation.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has increasingly shifted from being merely a channel for information dissemination to becoming a digital social space where individuals express themselves, negotiate identities, and form communities based on shared interests (Lüders et al., 2022). In contemporary digital environments, social meanings are continuously constructed through interaction and repeated communication (Berger et al., 1991). However, as digital platforms expand opportunities for expression, they also intensify visibility, surveillance, and public scrutiny. Particularly on platform X (formerly Twitter), algorithmic amplification and open network structures often produce polarized debates, moral contestation, and discursive conflict. Thus, digital spaces function not only as arenas of participation but also as sites of negotiation and tension.

One prominent practice emerging within Indonesian digital culture is *menfess* (mention confess), where users submit anonymous messages through autobase accounts that are later published for collective response (Nazia & Roosiani, 2022). While *menfess* enables emotional disclosure and interaction, it simultaneously reflects broader anxieties about visibility and judgment in online publics. Anonymity is frequently perceived as a protective mechanism that allows individuals to articulate sensitive experiences without risking social sanctions.

This dynamic becomes particularly significant within the Boys Love (BL) fandom in Indonesia. Although Thai BL dramas have gained substantial popularity since 2020, their popularity in Indonesia has increased rapidly, particularly following the international success of *2Gether*, produced by GMMTV (Zhang, 2021). This expansion is reflected not only in audience numbers but also in the emergence of digital interaction spaces such as fanbase and autobase accounts on X (formerly Twitter), which provide platforms for fans to exchange information, share experiences, seek social connections, and articulate emotional responses. Indonesia is even regarded as one of the major markets for the Thai BL industry, supported by increased internet penetration and access to global digital platforms.

Boys Love (BL) consumption remains embedded in a heteronormative social order that often frames same-sex narratives as morally problematic. Boys Love (BL) fans in Indonesia still face social stigma rooted in dominant heteronormative norms. Consumption and appreciation of narratives about male relationships are often viewed as incompatible with mainstream moral values, leading fans to face ridicule, negative labeling, or social suspicion from friends, family, and surrounding communities. This situation drives many fans to hide their preferences, limit self-expression, and separate their fandom identity from their offline lives. The tension between personal interests and social expectations becomes a real problem, driving the search for alternative spaces, including on social media, to gain a sense of security, validation, and emotional support. Public discussions of BL on open platforms like X frequently encounter moral judgment, ridicule, and conflict. As a result, fans navigate a contradictory digital condition: they rely on social media to sustain their participation in fandom yet remain vulnerable to stigma and discursive hostility on the same platform.

In response to these tensions, base accounts such as @fessthair have emerged as alternative spaces for interaction. Operating through anonymous *menfess* submissions, @fessthair appears to function as a safe space where fans can share experiences, seek support, and express emotional vulnerability. However, the assumption that anonymity automatically guarantees safety remains analytically problematic. Anonymity may reduce personal exposure, but it can also produce disinhibition, provocation, and internal conflict. Safety in digital environments, therefore, cannot be reduced to technical features alone; it must be understood as a socially negotiated condition shaped by moderation practices, community norms, and power relations.

Previous studies on @fessthair have primarily examined audience satisfaction and representational aspects (Pangestika & Kusna, 2023; Mubaroka & Susanti, 2021), positioning the account mainly as a functional media tool. However, these studies have not sufficiently addressed how safe space is constructed within the socio-technical dynamics of platform X, nor how negotiation, moderation, and affective labor sustain safety amid stigma and moral tension. As a result, there remains a gap in understanding how anonymous fandom communities manage vulnerability within an openly networked and potentially hostile digital public.

Therefore, this study asks: how is a sense of safe space socially constructed and sustained within an anonymous fandom community on platform X? While anonymity is often assumed to protect marginalized or stigmatized groups, the processes through which safety is negotiated through interaction, moderation practices, and community norms remain underexplored. By examining the everyday dynamics of the base account @fessthair, this

research explores how digital safe spaces are actively produced in a networked public environment where visibility, stigma, and collective participation coexist.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how the Twitter/X account @fessthail serves as a safe space for Boys Love fans through everyday digital interactions. Adopting a constructivist paradigm (Berger et al., 1991) and employing virtual ethnography combined with *Analisis Media Siber* (AMS), this study examines how safety is socially produced across media space, media documents, social structures, and lived experiences. Unlike previous studies that treat base accounts primarily as informational media tools, this research emphasizes the relational and negotiated processes through which safe space is constructed within anonymous digital fandom communities. By situating BL fandom within broader tensions of digital visibility and heteronormative discourse, this study contributes to digital media scholarship by demonstrating that safe space is not an automatic outcome of anonymity but a negotiated social achievement.

METHOD

This study employed virtual ethnography to examine how safe space is constructed within the digital fandom community of the Twitter/X base account @fessthail. Virtual ethnography allows researchers to explore social interaction, cultural practices, and meaning-making processes within online environments (Hine, 2000). The research was conducted over one year, from January 2025 to January 2026, enabling prolonged observation of recurring interactional patterns, conflicts, rule adjustments, and community responses within the fandom space.

Data were collected through participant observation, online interviews, and documentation. Participant observation focused on interactions within @fessthail, including menfess posts, reply threads, quote tweets, and moderation interventions. The unit of analysis included selected menfess posts that generated significant engagement, visible moderation actions, and discussions related to vulnerability, conflict, or rule enforcement. Meanwhile, online interviews were conducted with five purposively selected informants who met the following criteria: (1) self-identified Thai BL fans, (2) active participants in menfess interactions, and (3) members of the @fessthail community for at least two months. The informants (Lia, 20; Vita, 17; Reska, 20; Eca, 19; Rahmayanti, 31) provided experiential insights regarding anonymity, moderation practices, peer support, and perceived safety within the community.

Data were analyzed using *Analisis Media Siber* (AMS) (Nasrullah, 2019), which examines digital phenomena across four levels. The media space level focused on platform affordances and the structural configuration of the base account. The media document level analyzed menfess texts, reply threads, and community rules as digital artifacts. The media object level examined social roles, power relations, and moderation practices between administrators and followers. Finally, the media experience level explored how users interpret and experience safe space in relation to offline stigma. Analysis followed an iterative process of data reduction, thematic categorization, cross-level comparison, and interpretation, while triangulation across observation, documentation, and interviews strengthened credibility. Ethical considerations were maintained through anonymization and protection of sensitive personal information.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Media Space Level: @fessthail Account in Media Space

At the media space level, the @fessthail account can be understood not merely as a Twitter/X page but as a socio-technical configuration embedded in a networked public environment. As a public account, @fessthail is fully accessible: any user can follow, read, repost, and circulate its content without prior approval. This openness lowers barriers to

entry and enables geographically dispersed fans to gather around shared interests in Thai Boys' Love (BL). However, it also exposes the community to broader platform dynamics such as algorithmic amplification, cross-fandom visibility, and moral scrutiny. In line with Jenkins' (2016) discussion of participatory culture, digital participation occurs within networked publics shaped by visibility, scalability, and uneven power relations. Thus, openness not only enables participation but also increases exposure, making fandom interactions more vulnerable to contestation and surveillance.

Within the framework of Analisis Media Siber (AMS), media space refers to the infrastructural and technological environment that shapes the possibilities and limits of interaction (Nasrullah, 2019). In this context, @fessthaii operates within a platform architecture prioritizing visibility and virality over privacy. Participation through reading menfess, replying, reposting, and quote-tweeting creates collective visibility, but also places the community in a wider discursive arena where BL content may face stigma and moral judgment. From an AMS perspective, this shows that the platform environment does not automatically guarantee safety; rather, it creates a structural context in which visibility and vulnerability coexist. Therefore, the media space of @fessthaii is marked by a tension between enabling communal gathering and exposing the community to potentially hostile digital publics.

Unlike personal accounts, @fessthaii employs an autobase mechanism in which followers submit messages to administrators for publication. This system creates a triadic interactional structure among the sender, the administrator, and the audience. At the media space level, this arrangement demonstrates that access and visibility are not entirely horizontal but are mediated by infrastructural gatekeeping. The existence of unpublished submissions indicates that certain boundaries regulate what becomes publicly visible. This selective publication process reflects an attempt to manage visibility within an otherwise open network, illustrating how platform affordances are strategically adapted to mitigate potential risks of public exposure.

Consistent with Hine's (2000) conceptualization of virtual communities, repeated interaction and mediated presence contribute to the formation of collective continuity and shared belonging. Twitter/X affordances such as threaded replies, reposts, and multimodal content facilitate the rapid circulation of micro-interactions that accumulate into sustained communal engagement (Basit et al., 2025). Autobase environments also generate shared jargon and linguistic markers that reinforce in-group belonging (Zena et al., 2022). However, these affordances do not automatically produce safety. Studies of LGBT-related discourse on Twitter demonstrate that digital publics often function as ambivalent spaces in which support and hostility coexist (Locatelli et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2025). In this sense, platform affordances provide the conditions for interaction but do not determine the social meaning or emotional climate of those interactions.

Therefore, at the media space level, @fessthaii operates within a contradictory digital ecology. The community relies on the openness and visibility of platform X to sustain fandom participation, yet these same conditions expose users to external judgment and discursive hostility. Consequently, the safe space observed in later AMS levels cannot be understood as a direct product of platform design. Instead, it emerges through strategies of moderation, boundary-making, and collective interaction developed within this structurally exposed environment. From an AMS perspective, the media space thus establishes the initial condition of tension that necessitates ongoing negotiation, governance, and affective labour in the subsequent layers of digital interaction.

Level of Media Documents: The Internet as A Digital World or Cultural Artifact

Within the framework of *Analisis Media Siber* (AMS), the media document level refers to digital texts and artifacts that circulate within online environments and function as cultural objects (Nasrullah, 2019). In the context of @fessthaii, media documents include menfess

posts, reply threads, screenshots, and community rules. These artifacts do not merely transmit information; rather, they structure interaction, define discursive boundaries, and materialize shared norms within the community. From this perspective, safety cannot be understood simply as a subjective feeling among participants but must be examined through the textual and discursive practices embedded in these digital artifacts.

One of the primary digital artifacts shaping this process is menfess (mention confess), which allows users to submit anonymous messages through an autobase system for collective response. While technically simple, virtual ethnography conceptualizes menfess as a culturally embedded communication practice that structures how users seek information, negotiate identity, and manage social risk in online environments (Hine, 2000). Research by Widiatmika (2024) shows that menfess has evolved into a social question-and-answer platform for sensitive or ambiguous topics. A similar pattern can be observed within @fessthail, where users often seek collective interpretation rather than authoritative answers from a single source. In line with broader digital dynamics, social media platforms accelerate the normalization of discussions surrounding previously sensitive topics, enabling users to articulate concerns that might remain unspoken in offline contexts (Taliu & Sukmono, 2025).

Anonymity plays a central role in enabling menfess practices by increasing users' confidence to express emotions and experiences that might otherwise be suppressed. As shown in Figure 1, users were able to send and reply to posts on the menfess account, where the shared content sometimes strayed from the main topic but still aligned with the audience's views and discussions about Boys Love. Studies on institutional-based menfess indicate that anonymous autobase accounts facilitate help-seeking behavior and emotional support among participants (Caroline & Triana, 2025). Drawing on weak-tie theory, anonymity enables users to reach wider audiences that remain socially distant yet emotionally responsive (Kim & Fernandez, 2023). Within fandom-based environments marked by heteronormative stigma, anonymity also operates as a discursive strategy that enables selective self-presentation and identity negotiation (Juniati, 2025; Malik et al., 2024). Through this mechanism, users can disclose sensitive experiences while maintaining boundaries between their fandom identity and offline social life.



Fig. 1. Menfess sent on @fessthail and the replies
Source: Twitter/X (2025)

However, within the AMS framework, *menfess* must be interpreted not only as expressions of individual vulnerability but also as media documents that organize collective meaning-making processes. The screenshot responses illustrate how followers actively construct meaning through the comment section. Participants normalize, challenge, and contextualize the sender's concerns by drawing on shared fandom values and experiences. This interactional pattern aligns with Zahra's (2025) findings that Thai BL fandom communities engage in continuous discursive negotiation when interpreting fandom-related experiences. In this context, the comment thread extends the original text, transforming individual confessions into collective interpretive processes.

Importantly, the diversity of responses demonstrates that a safe space within @fessthaii does not eliminate disagreement. Rather than enforcing uniform consensus, safety emerges through discursive containment, namely the community's ability to accommodate differences without escalating into hostility. This suggests that safe space should not be equated with uniform agreement but rather with the management of plurality within shared normative boundaries. *Menfess* therefore operates as a structured site of negotiation in which individual vulnerability is externalized, interpreted collectively, and reintegrated into shared community understandings.

At the media document level, community rules constitute another central artifact. If *menfess* enables openness, rules regulate its limits. The admin articulates this regulatory logic:

"Yes, the rules were made for everyone's comfort, to maintain safety and minimize conflict." (Rahmayanti, Interview Via personal WhatsApp chat, January 19, 2026).

This statement reflects the institutionalization of norms in the sense of Berger and Luckmann (1991). Rules emerge from repeated interaction and past conflicts, then become normalized as common sense. The reflexive rule-making process further reinforces this dynamic:

"It is very effective because the rules are usually made after a conflict occurs. We evaluate it, and then the rules are created." (Rahmayanti, Interview Via personal WhatsApp chat, January 19, 2026).

Here, rules function as evolving media documents shaped by rupture and repair. Conflicts are not erased but transformed into regulatory knowledge. In this sense, safety is constructed through institutional memory rather than assumed solely through anonymity. From followers' perspectives, rules are not perceived as censorship but as protective boundaries.

"Effective." (Vita, 17).

Another informant emphasizes enforcement:

"Effective, because if anyone violates the rules, the admin will quickly report it." (Lia, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026).

These responses reveal that safety at the media-document level depends not only on written norms but also on visible moderation practices. The symbolic text of the rule gains legitimacy through consistent enforcement. Thus, media documents operate performatively; they shape expectations and produce trust through observable action. Nevertheless, safety remains contested.

"I remember some of the posts were quite provocative and unsafe to read for friends from other fandoms." (Eca, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026).

This tension indicates that media documents are sites of boundary negotiation rather than fixed guarantees of comfort. What counts as "safe" is interpreted differently depending on positionality and inter-fandom visibility. Within AMS, this confirms that digital artifacts are

arenas of meaning struggle rather than stable structures. Beyond emotional expression, menfess also function as infrastructural tools for networking and fandom mobilization:

"I used to send messages looking for mutuals who were hyping poohpavel." (Reska, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026).

"Yes, usually to promote my favorite pop group (Perses) and to find friends." (Eca, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026).

These practices show that media documents extend beyond confession into relational production. Menfess become mechanisms of connection, recognition, and collective identification. Thus, at the media-document level, safe space is constructed through a dynamic interplay among openness (anonymity), regulation (rules), interpretation (comment threads), and enforcement (moderation).

Overall, within the AMS framework, media documents in @fessthail function as institutionalized artifacts that both enable and regulate expression. Safe space does not emerge automatically from anonymous posting; it is discursively produced, textually stabilized, and continuously negotiated through evolving norms and collective interpretation. In a broader digital public where BL discourse may encounter stigma, these documents serve as strategic instruments for managing vulnerability while maintaining communal cohesion.

Media Object Level: Social Structure of @fessthail

At the media object level, *Analisis Media Siber* (AMS) focuses on the social actors, relational dynamics, and power structures that sustain digital interaction (Nasrullah, 2019). While the media document level focuses on texts and rules, the media object level examines how these documents are enacted through human agency, hierarchy, and negotiated authority. Within this framework, @fessthail operates not merely as a channel for anonymous expression but as a structured social system composed of administrators, anonymous senders, and followers. This configuration illustrates that anonymity does not eliminate hierarchy; rather, it reorganizes it. Administrators occupy a central position as gatekeepers who regulate visibility and acceptable discourse. As stated by the admin:

"If the menfess violates the rules, the post will be deleted." (Rahmayanti, Interview Via personal WhatsApp chat, January 19, 2026)

This statement reflects discretionary control over what becomes publicly visible and what remains excluded from the community's discursive space. Within a platform designed for openness and virality, such control functions as a counterbalancing mechanism that moderates potential conflict and maintains community stability. Following Rheingold (1993), virtual communities often develop internal governance systems to sustain coherence. In the case of @fessthail, governance manifests through selective publication, deletion, and continuous monitoring of user submissions. Consequently, safe space at this level cannot be separated from power relations; rather, it is produced through the authority to curate, filter, and intervene in community interactions.

However, this authority is not merely technical but also deeply affective. Drawing on Raihani & Kurnia's (2025) concept of fan labor, administrative work in fandom spaces involves emotional investment and ongoing relational maintenance that often goes unnoticed. The admin describes the psychological burden of managing the community:

"The downside is when there are messages sent that cause a commotion, or when social media is heated, and I'm not on social media, there are several direct messages and comments tagged to the complaint account that are quite demoralizing and saddening." (Rahmayanti, Interview Via personal WhatsApp chat, January 19, 2026)

This testimony illustrates that the community's stability is sustained by invisible emotional labor. Administrators absorb tension, manage complaints, and become focal points of conflict within the community. In this sense, a safe space is not merely experienced by followers but is actively produced through moderators' emotional exposure and regulatory work. As Cera (2023) notes, digital moderation often requires moderators to absorb affective risk to prevent escalation and maintain community cohesion. Within @fessthai, safety therefore depends on an asymmetrical distribution of emotional labor, in which administrators bear a disproportionate responsibility for maintaining stability. Anonymity further complicates this relational structure. While it enables users to express vulnerability, it also facilitates disinhibition that may lead to conflict. The admin explains this duality:

"It helps and hinders at the same time, because with an anonymous system, senders become bolder, more honest, and more open. But they also feel immune, so they send messages that provoke controversy." (Rahmayanti, Interview Via personal WhatsApp chat, January 19, 2026).

This observation reveals that anonymity simultaneously generates safety and instability. Rather than eliminating responsibility, anonymity redistributes regulatory responsibility toward administrators who must filter, interpret, and manage potentially disruptive content. As a result, the relationship between administrators and followers is sustained through mediated trust: followers rely on admins to responsibly manage anonymity, while admins assume the burden of maintaining order within the community. Within the AMS framework, this dynamic demonstrates that media objects are relational formations in which power, trust, and governance are continuously negotiated. From the followers' perspective, however, the social structure is primarily experienced through solidarity and peer support. One informant described the experience succinctly:

"On average, I feel supported." (Reska, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026, 2025).

These responses suggest that safe space is sustained not only through top-down moderation but also through horizontal relational ties among community members. In line with Jenkins' (2016) concept of participatory culture, emotional reciprocity and collective belonging play a central role in sustaining engagement. Comment threads frequently display reassurance, humor, and shared affect in response to vulnerable disclosures. Such interactions reinforce emotional safety and reduce the risk of isolation in participation within stigmatized fandoms. Nevertheless, this support operates within normative boundaries. As one informant noted:

"Of course, they feel supported, because they are the same, on the same wavelength, have the same interests, so they are definitely supported rather than judged. But when it comes to the actor's personal life, they are definitely judged." (Lia, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026).

This statement indicates that the community's social structure is governed not only by formal rules but also by informal moral boundaries. While enthusiasm for BL narratives is normalized, discussions of actors' personal lives often provoke criticism or calls for regulation. Safety, therefore, is selective rather than absolute. Informal norms operate alongside formal rules to delineate acceptable topics and behaviors. Through repeated interaction, these norms become internalized and reproduced, stabilizing the community's moral order.

The screenshots further illustrate how shared slang, emoticons, and fandom-specific language reinforce collective identity. These symbolic practices produce what Berger and Luckmann (1991) describe as a habitualized social reality, where repeated interactions crystallize into shared expectations. Within this structure, same-sex "ships" and BL enthusiasm are normalized internally, even as they may remain stigmatized in broader society. The community thus functions as a buffered micro-society within a wider digital public where homotransphobic discourse persists (Locatelli et al., 2023)

This dynamic also resonates with Jenkins' (2016) discussion of participatory culture in networked environments, which emphasizes that digital participation is not inherently egalitarian but structured through governance, informal norms, and differentiated roles. Within @fessthai, peer support and collective belonging coexist with hierarchical moderation and boundary enforcement. Participation is therefore both enabling and regulated: members are encouraged to express vulnerability and enthusiasm, yet such expressions remain shaped by negotiated expectations and community norms. In this sense, the social structure of @fessthai reflects a networked participatory culture in which solidarity coexists with control, and safe space is sustained through continuous relational and normative management rather than spontaneous openness.



Fig. 2. Menfess on @fessthai (Source: Author documentation)
Source: Twitter/X (2025)

As shown in Figure 2, participatory culture is reflected through a post in which a user shares a clip, demonstrating that the account functions not only as a space for information exchange but also as a venue for affective interaction, identity expression, and symbolic bonding among members. At the same time, the post reflects the base account's anonymous yet collective structure. Although the video is originally posted by an individual ("From: nani"), it is redistributed via @fessthai, transforming personal feelings into communal discourse. As an intermediary, the account enables other users to reply, repost, and engage with the content, creating a many-to-many communication pattern rather than a one-way flow.

Furthermore, @fessthai's social structure also facilitates social networking and fandom productivity. One informant highlighted the practical benefits of participation:

"It's really easy to find friends/moots who are also thaienthu, and sometimes they can help a little bit in finding au that I forgot to mark." (Vita, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026).



Fig. 3. Menfess on @fessthali
Source: Twitter/X (2025)

As shown in Figure 3, the menfess feature functions as a networking tool within the @fessthali community. In this post, an anonymous user asks for mutual followers, indicating that the account is used not only to share fandom-related content but also to initiate new social connections among members. The casual, playful language creates a friendly atmosphere that encourages interaction, while the replies show how other users respond by introducing themselves or inviting further contact. This indicates that menfess serves as an intermediary space where strangers connect through shared interests in Thai Boys Love (BL), enabling mutual following practices, expanding social networks, and strengthening members' sense of belonging within the fandom community. The social system in @fessthali as a menfess account generates tangible relational benefits that strengthen community commitment and participation. The durability of @fessthali, therefore, depends not only on anonymous posting but also on sustained relational labor, clearly defined roles, and accumulated trust among participants (Goldman-hasbun, 2023; Raihani & Kurnia, 2025).

Overall, at the media object level, @fessthali reveals a layered social architecture characterized by hierarchical moderation, horizontal solidarity, affective labor, and negotiated norms. Safe space emerges not as an egalitarian condition devoid of power but as a managed relational achievement. The community's stability relies on continuous governance, emotional investment, and boundary enforcement. Within a broader digital environment marked by moral scrutiny toward BL fandom, this internal social structure functions as a protective yet regulated micro-public. Safety, therefore, is socially organized through power, trust, and relational labor, rather than guaranteed by anonymity alone.

Experiential Stories Level: Social Structure of @fessthali

Within Analisis Media Siber (AMS), the media experience level focuses on how users live, interpret, and embody digital interactions in relation to their broader social realities (Nasrullah, 2019). At this level, the analytical focus shifts from the structure of texts or roles to participants' subjective experiences, particularly how users interpret safety, stigma, and belonging in everyday life. From a virtual ethnography perspective, online interactions are not detached from reality but rather extend ongoing social practices and identity negotiations that occur across both digital and offline contexts (Hine, 2000).

For many Boys Love (BL) fans, participation in @fessthail emerges from tensions experienced in offline environments. Within heteronormative social contexts, BL consumption is often framed as morally questionable or socially inappropriate. Lia articulates this contradiction:

“It's like talking about homophobic friends in real life, like dating is okay in their eyes but watching BL/Thailand is forbidden for them, because everyone here likes Thailand, so of course we understand each other and are a safe place for each other.” (Lia, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026).

This account illustrates how digital participation is frequently motivated by experiences of exclusion and moral judgment in offline social settings. Following Berger and Luckmann (1991), dominant norms are reproduced through repeated social interaction and institutionalized as taken-for-granted social realities. When these norms restrict individual self-expression, people often seek alternative arenas where different meanings and identities can be negotiated. In this context, @fessthail functions not merely as an online discussion forum but as a parallel interpretive space where alternative moral frameworks can be collectively sustained. Rather than escaping social reality, participants actively reinterpret and renegotiate their experiences of stigma through interaction with others who share similar interests and vulnerabilities.

From the perspective of virtual ethnography, such interactions demonstrate how digital fandom communities operate as sites of emotional validation and identity negotiation. The shared experience of stigma creates a sense of collective recognition among participants, enabling them to transform individual discomfort into shared understanding. Through this process, feelings of marginalization encountered in offline environments are reframed within a supportive community context. Consequently, the experience of safe space within @fessthail is not simply derived from anonymity or platform affordances. Still, it emerges through relational processes of empathy, mutual recognition, and collective interpretation among community members.

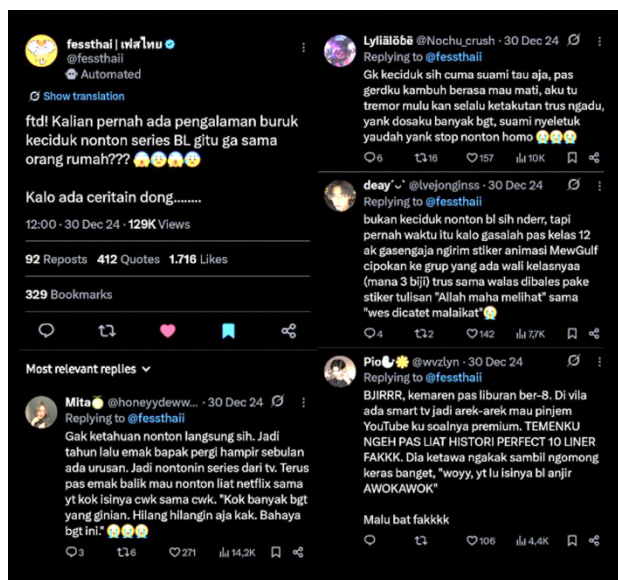


Fig. 4. Menfess on @fessthail
Source: Twitter/X (2025)

The experience of safe space becomes particularly visible through menfess posts that articulate personal vulnerability, such as confessions about being caught watching Boys Love (BL) content by family members, as shown in Figure 4. One menfess explicitly invited followers to share experiences of secretly watching BL series at home, which triggered

hundreds of replies describing moments of fear, shame, and anxiety when family members discovered their viewing histories or questioned the morality of BL content. Several replies described parents labeling BL as “dangerous,” “sinful,” or “not normal,” often grounded in religious or moral discourse. These narratives illustrate how offline surveillance within the family sphere generates emotional distress that is later processed collectively within the digital environment of @fessthii.

At the media experience level, such interactions demonstrate how anonymity functions as a protective experiential strategy. The ability to share personal experiences without revealing one’s identity allows users to articulate fear, embarrassment, and confusion that might otherwise remain unspoken in offline settings. The responses to these menfess, including expressions of empathy, reassurance, humor, and shared experiences, transform individual vulnerability into a collective emotional experience. Rather than offering direct solutions, many replies validate the feeling of being judged or misunderstood at home. In this sense, a safe space does not preexist as a fixed attribute of the platform but emerges through participants’ interactional practices of mutual recognition and emotional alignment.

This finding aligns with Amelia & Wibowo (2023) and Forberg & Schilt (2021), who emphasize that perceived safety, shared interests, and trust among participants strongly shape online self-disclosure. Within this context, the experience of safety in @fessthii is relational rather than structural: it is produced through ongoing user interaction rather than guaranteed by the platform’s technological features. Importantly, experiences within @fessthii are not limited to emotional coping. For some users, participation in the base account generates positive social outcomes that extend beyond the digital environment. As Vita explains, her online interactions eventually developed into offline friendships.

“I’ve had many positive experiences because I’ve found real friends on this site.”
(Vita, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026)

This experience demonstrates that the boundary between online and offline life is porous rather than rigidly separated. Digital interactions do not replace offline social relationships; instead, they often extend and reinforce them. Such findings reinforce prior netnographic research indicating that virtual communities often serve as gateways to sustained social ties and identity formation beyond digital spaces (Amelia & Wibowo, 2023; Salsabila & Sukmono, 2025). Within this context, participation in @fessthii allows users to transform initially anonymous interactions into more durable forms of social connection. Similarly, Reska frames @fessthii as a secure environment for sharing and belonging:

“Yes, we can share stories in a place that is safe for us to talk” (Reska, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026)

This perception highlights the affective dimension of digital participation. The base account functions not merely as an informational platform but as an emotional infrastructure that enables users to express themselves authentically without fully conforming to dominant offline expectations. In this sense, @fessthii fosters a supportive, communicative environment where participants can share experiences that might otherwise remain silenced in other social contexts.

Nevertheless, the experience of safety within the community remains situational and contested. As one informant notes:

“I remember some of the posts were quite provocative and unsafe to read for friends from other fandoms.” (Eca, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026).

This observation illustrates that safe space within @fessthii is not universally experienced in the same way. Instead, users actively interpret, evaluate, and filter their digital experiences depending on their positions within the fandom and their perceptions of community norms. From a virtual ethnography perspective, participants are therefore not passive consumers of digital environments but reflexive actors who continuously negotiate the meaning and boundaries of safety (Hine, 2000). Safe space in this context should be

understood as an ongoing social process rather than a stable condition guaranteed by platform structures.

Anonymity plays a central role in this experiential negotiation. For most informants, anonymity is not merely a technical feature of the platform but also a psychological condition that enables comfort, openness, and participation. As Vita explains:

"I don't want to, I'm comfortable being anonymous." (Vita, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026). Lia further reinforces this view:

"Why would people want to send confessions to the base? Because it's anonymous, people feel safe. If it's no longer anonymous, it's better to tweet on your own account and ask for retweets like before." (Lia, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 21, 2026)

These accounts illustrate that anonymity allows users to flexibly manage identity boundaries, creating a degree of separation between personal identity and fandom expression. Such boundary management enables participants to disclose sensitive experiences without fully exposing themselves to social consequences in their offline environments. This observation resonates with Hasgül et al. (2022), who argue that digital environments facilitate hybrid experiential realities in which emotional presence and interpersonal engagement remain authentic even when identities are partially concealed. In this sense, platforms such as Twitter/X function as mediated environments in which real emotions are experienced through virtual interaction, allowing users to negotiate identity, belonging, and vulnerability simultaneously.

From a mental health perspective, the experiential dimension of digital space becomes particularly significant. Research in digital psychiatry emphasizes that the quality of online interaction, rather than mere screen time, plays a crucial role in shaping psychological well-being (Torous et al., 2021). Within the @fessthail community, social media serves as a source of emotional validation and peer support for users navigating stigma, fear, and moral judgment in their offline social environments. Through anonymous interaction and collective responses, participants can transform individual distress into shared understanding, reinforcing feelings of belonging and emotional reassurance.

Administrators' experience also plays a crucial role in shaping the media experience. While followers often experience the platform as a supportive, emotionally safe environment, administrators encounter a different experiential reality shaped by ongoing moderation and conflict management. Maintaining community stability requires ongoing monitoring of content, responding to complaints, and mediating tensions among users. As the admin reflects:

"It's unfortunate when there are messages sent that cause commotion... it's quite demoralizing and makes me sad." (Rahmayanti, Interview Via personal DM chat X, January 19, 2026).

This dynamic highlights that the experiential benefits enjoyed by followers are sustained through invisible emotional labor performed by administrators. Consistent with Raihani and Kurnia's (2025) concept of fan labour, administrators absorb emotional risks and tensions to maintain the community's stability. Their role extends beyond technical moderation, involving continuous emotional engagement, conflict mediation, and the management of community expectations. In this sense, the safe environment perceived by followers is partly sustained by moderators' affective work, which often goes unseen but is crucial to maintaining relational harmony within the fandom space.

Finally, everyday participation in @fessthail illustrates how digital space becomes embedded in users' daily routines and emotional lives. As Özbaş-Anbarlı (2021) argues, Twitter operates as a rhythmic digital environment in which users perform everyday practices and form imagined communities with others who share similar interests. Within this rhythm of everyday interaction, @fessthail becomes integrated into users' emotional

routines, shaping how they process experiences of fear, shame, belonging, and relief. The platform, therefore, functions not only as a site of information exchange but also as an affective environment where emotions are collectively processed and socially validated.

In conclusion, at the media experience level, @fessthai functions as a space where online and offline realities are continuously negotiated. Safe space should therefore be understood not as a static attribute of the platform but as an experiential outcome produced through anonymity, emotional exchange, collective validation, and sustained community governance. From a virtual ethnography perspective, the lived experiences documented through menfess interactions and follower responses demonstrate that digital fandom communities play a significant role in mediating identity formation, emotional expression, and perceptions of safety among Boys Love fans navigating heteronormative social environments.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how the Twitter/X base account @fessthai functions as a safe space for Thai Boys Love (BL) fans in Indonesia, within a heteronormative context in which BL consumption is often stigmatized. Based on the *Analisis Media Siber* model, this study reveals how the construction of safe space operates across multiple layers of digital interaction. At the media space level, @fessthai exists within an open, highly visible networked public where participation is both enabled and exposed to external scrutiny. At the media document level, menfess posts, reply threads, and community rules function as digital artifacts that structure communication and institutionalize shared norms. At the media object level, safe space is sustained through hierarchical moderation, relational trust, and affective labor performed by administrators alongside peer solidarity among followers. Finally, at the media experience level, safety is lived as a negotiated response to offline stigma, where anonymity allows users to manage identity boundaries and collectively process emotional experiences.

Theoretically, this study extends Berger and Luckmann's concept of social construction by showing that digital safe space becomes institutionalized through repeated interaction, rule-making, and collective interpretation. It also contributes to virtual ethnography by demonstrating how online and offline realities intersect in the negotiation of stigma, belonging, and identity. More broadly, the findings challenge techno-deterministic assumptions that anonymity alone guarantees protection, emphasizing instead that safety is a relational achievement shaped by power relations, governance, and emotional labor within networked publics. Practically, the study suggests that structured anonymity, adaptive community rules, and visible moderation are essential for sustaining supportive digital communities, especially for socially stigmatized groups. It also highlights the often-overlooked emotional labor administrators perform to maintain community stability. Future research may compare different fandom-based accounts, examine changes in moderation over time, or explore how factors such as gender, religion, and age shape varied experiences of safety and risk in digital fandom participation.

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