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A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF DISCOURSES IN FAN
COMMUNITY, /r/BOYSLOVE

by

JESSICA LIN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2022

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Jessica Lin

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

A Qualitative Exploration of Discourses in Fan Community, /r/boyslove

by

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The Boys Love (BL) genre, which tells stories of male-male romantic and sexual relationships, and originates in Japan, has made strides through transnational and transcultural engagement across countries, aided heavily by the internet age. I examine the development of the BL genre from its controversial beginnings to its feminist response as well as queer reception. Over the course of fifty years, the genre has exploded in popularity, becoming a more progressive medium of social change. As BL has become more diverse in content and broken with older conventions of the genre, what are the current discourses among the BL fan space? I answer this question through thematic analysis of r/boyslove, a community on the popular social media platform Reddit. The generated themes were: (1) Don't Yuck my Yum, (2) Fantasy vs. Reality, and (3) Progressiveness in the BL space. Fan discourses highlight an enduring sense of shame for fans' enjoyment of BL. In these conversations, participants deliberated the functions of consuming BL purely as fantasy and the importance of critically reading BL, keeping in mind real life consequences for gender and sexual minorities. The r/boyslove community acknowledged moral and political concerns around BL but also see the genre as a medium of change. Ultimately, discourses among BL fans show how the personal becomes political.

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Section 1: Introduction

Boys Love Phenomenon

The genre of Boys Love (BL) depicts male homoerotic stories and was popularized by Japanese writers and readers. This might give the impression of tolerance towards gay men in Japan, but closer inspection of the creation and consumption reveals that BL is only tangentially linked to the lives of gay men (McLelland & Welker, 2015). In Japan, it is assumed to be a genre that was exclusively created by and for heterosexual women. Later researchers found that this widely held belief is not entirely accurate (McLelland & Welker, 2015). Starting in *shoujo* manga (girl's comics), stories of male-male romantic/sexual relationships caught the attention of publishers. BL stemmed from the early 1970s subgenre of *shoujo* manga called *bishounen* (beautiful boy) comics which told stories of beautiful, androgynous teenage boys falling in love, often in a European setting (Mizoguchi, 2003). While *shoujo* manga targeted a readership of girls and young women, the actual audience includes men and older demographics (Mizoguchi, 2003). Later in the 1980s, the Japanese word *yaoi* (やおい) was used in the subculture as a self-deprecating remark. The term was an abbreviation of *Yama nashi, Ochi nashi, Imi nashi* (山場なし, 落ちなし, 意味なし) meaning no climax, no resolution, and no meaning (Mizoguchi, 2003). At the time of creation, the term specifically referred to *doujinshi* (amateur published parody works) that utilized characters from popular culture and were often pornographic with generally poor storytelling. *Doujinshi* were the most common noncommercial channel of BL distribution and included media in the form of webcomics, games, and anime. Commercially, manga and light novels were the most common form of BL, but other forms of distributed media include live action movies, audio dramas, anime and video games (McLelland & Welker, 2015). In the 1990s, commercial magazines specializing in male homosexual fictions emerged; however, the characters

were no longer androgynous teenage boys like in “beautiful boy” comics, and therefore publishers then coined the term “Boys love” or “Bii Eru/BL” (Mizoguchi, 2003). While *yaoi* has predominantly been used to refer to noncommercial works, and BL has been used to refer to commercial publication, there have been overlaps of term usage (McLelland, 2015). In its country of origin, the genre is at the present, most commonly referred to as ‘BL.’ Fans are often called and call themselves *fujoshi* (腐女子), a self-ridiculing title that modifies the polite term for women and girls to mean “rotten girls/women.” *Fujoshis* acknowledged their obsession with BL as socially abnormal and embraced their rottenness (McLelland & Welker, 2015). In Japan, BL-related goods and media brought in approximately twenty-two billion yen or 219 million USD in annual domestic market sales in the 2010s (Yano Research Institute, 2017). Since the 1980s, BL has popularized and expanded to other countries around the globe, dramatically increasing the number of fans and creators, especially in the current century with the help of social media and web communities (Welker, 2022). Publishers in the United States were slow to adapt the term “Boys love/BL” as it contained suggestions of pedophilia in Western culture. “Yaoi Con,” an annual convention in the United States founded in 2001, solidified the use of the term *yaoi*. Both terms started being used interchangeably by fans to refer to all content depicting romantic and sexual relationships between males that targeted female audiences (Mizoguchi, 2003). However, for fans today, the word BL has emerged as the more popular umbrella term when referring to any male-male fictional romance, while *yaoi* contains a more erotic connotation. Although born in Japan, BL has since expanded through global online and offline communities of international fans who create, share, and discuss BL media.

BL as Contemporary Media

The Boys Love (BL) genre, which tells stories of male-male romantic and sexual

relationships, and originates in Japan, has made strides through transnational and transcultural engagement across countries, aided heavily by the internet age. I examine the development of the BL genre from its beginnings of controversy to its feminist response as well as queer reception. Over the course of fifty years, the genre has exploded in popularity, becoming a more progressive medium of social change. As BL has become more diverse in content and broken with older conventions of its genre, what are the current discourses among the BL fan space? I answer this question through thematic analysis of r/boyslove, a community on the popular social media platform Reddit. The generated themes were: (1) Don't Yuck my Yum, (2) Fantasy vs. Reality, and (3) Progressiveness in the BL space. Fan discourses highlight an enduring sense of shame for fans' enjoyment of BL. In these conversations, participants deliberated the functions of consuming BL purely as fantasy and the importance of critically reading BL, keeping in mind real life consequences for gender and sexual minorities. The r/boyslove community acknowledged moral and political concerns around BL and see the genre as a medium of change. Ultimately, discourses among BL fans show how the personal becomes political.

Traditional Characteristics of BL

BL has been a perplexing genre with misalignments. Its stories often excluded women or contained misogynistic portrayals (i.e., crazy ex-girlfriend, creepy stalker), despite most creators and consumers being women. It also celebrated male homosexuality without participation of gay men. It is a relatively new genre that rose in the age of the internet but follows established romance structures of deprivation, conflict, and repair. BL narratives generally feature a dominant, physically masculine character who plays the top in sex (“*seme*”) and a passive, physically feminine character who plays bottom in sex (“*uke*”). Following *bishounen* traditions, they are often depicted as aestheticized, attractive, and beautiful boys. The genre embraces emotions of

happiness, suffering, feelings of guilt, shame and loneliness that occurs with loving a person of the same sex. Contradictory feelings of love alongside hate may forge the bond between the main couples in BL. Some key characteristics comprising BL narratives include sexual and emotional abuse, traumatic life events, mental health issues and suicide (Mizoguchi, 2008). Mizoguchi (2008) conducted a structural analysis of BL stories from the late 1990s and identified four tropes: (1) rape as an expression of excessive love, (2) maintaining heterosexual identity despite homosexual activities, (3) fixed seme/uke roles corresponding to masculine/feminine role, (4) sex almost always involves anal intercourse¹. Outside of this formula, she also discussed additional emerging trends in BL: more protagonists possess a clear gay identity, increase in graphic/realistic depictions of male bodies, and lesbians as brethren to the main couple (Mizoguchi, 2008). Further developments in BL conventions will be discussed later. While BL, with its melodramatic and sexual elements has received much love among fans, there has also been plenty of controversies surrounding aspects of the genre, such as unrealistic gay representation.

Yaoi Ronsou

Since BL does narrate stories of male-male relationships, some may assume that gay men comprise a significant part of the audience, but there has been a tense relationship between the BL community and gay community. One critique of BL was the homophobia embedded in its narratives (Hitoshi, 2015; Mizoguchi, 2008). Characters in BL regularly denied homosexuality with the trope embodied by the phrase: “I’m not gay, I only love you.” Gay identity was rejected in order to illustrate exclusive attraction between the main couple and not to men in general. Mizoguchi (2008) further analyzed this trope in the BL formula as a narrative device used to

¹ For more a more in-depth analysis of BL tropes, read Mizoguchi (2008) chapter 3.

emphasize the challenge against consummating the relationship. Narratives become more dramatic when presenting a difficult obstacle. The romance that perseveres, despite the challenges presented, would be perceived as a purer love. Regardless of social stigma, characters would still convey their affections for each other. On the other hand, some argued that this BL trope supported heteronormativity. These characters who participate in male-male romantic relationships, would deny homosexuality, and be troubled by guilt or aversion towards the idea of same sex attraction. Some argue that such narratives in BL reinforces society's heterosexism by excluding gay men (Hitoshi, 2015). Despite such criticisms, BL supporters have argued that the production and consumption of male homoerotic romance stories has had an accumulatively positive impact on the perception of possible masculinities (McLelland & Welker, 2015). The popularization of soft masculinities across Japanese popular culture is demonstrated through the success of idols and boy bands who feature men with slender frames and beautiful faces. In this way, an alternate masculinity that was previously limited to gay men, have reached mainstream representation (McLelland & Welker, 2015).

Yaoi Ronsou or "The Yaoi Debate" exemplifies tensions surrounding the BL subculture. In 1992, Satou Masaki, a gay activist and drag queen, wrote to *Choisir*, a small feminist magazine dedicated to discussion about female sexuality by women. He felt attacked as a gay man by women creating and enjoying *yaoi*. He accused the genre and its participants of generating a skewed image of gay men as young, beautiful, intelligent and regarding those who fail to fit that image as "*gomi*" (garbage) (Lungsing, 2006). Satou was concerned about the portrayal of gay characters as being unrealistic depictions of gay men (Lungsing, 2006). He additionally cites *Lucky-kun* by Takaguchi Satosumi, explaining how he enjoyed the story until to his displeasure, one character died and the partner who remained decided to marry a woman and start a family. Satou saw this as a denial of gay lifestyles and the impossibility of happiness for gay men. Later on, he admitted to enjoying BL

but remained against *yaoi* (subgenre that focused more on explicit sex) and its objectification of gay men (Lungsing, 2006).

In response to attacks on BL as a harmful distortion and misappropriation of gay life, fans defended the genre as creations based on pure unrestrained fantasy and not with the goal of depicting realities of gay men and their lives. Mizoguchi (2008) and McLelland (2006) both argued that BL stories are imaginary universes where lovers only see each other to the fantastical extent of idealized love, and that these stories are not intended to portray ‘real’ gay men nor straight men. McLelland (2000) additionally investigated Japanese gay pornography produced by and for gay men and questioned to what extent even this media actually depicted realities of gay men and their lives. He pointed out that the gay pornography, at the time, replicated heterosexual porn with the exception that the female role would be replaced by a younger male. Gay produced media largely comprised of nothing but unrealistic pornography and advice on how to get sex, as opposed to realistic narratives of gay lifestyles (McLelland, 2000). While both gay pornographies made by men, and *yaoi* by women, may depict gay men unrealistically, the trend of criticism targets the BL genre, known to have a large fanbase of women.

BL as Feminist Refuge

BL scholarship has frequently focused on the genre’s feminist politics and its origins as women’s counterculture against patriarchy. Many past studies on BL have explored the reasons underlying BL’s popularity and young women’s fascination with male-male homoerotic fictions (McLelland & Welker, 2015; Mizoguchi, 2008; Zsila et. al., 2018; Zsila & Zsolt, 2017). Researchers have pointed out a collective resistance against restrictive gender roles as a main driving factor in the creation of the BL genre (McLelland & Welker, 2015). The inclusion of dramatic elements may also function therapeutically for fans who have gone through similar

experiences (Zsila & Zsolt, 2017). As a queer, Chinese American woman, I have found that consuming BL allowed me to dissociate from traditional gender expectations by re-identifying with altered gender constructs. Unlike conventional heterosexual romance narratives, which replicated gendered stereotypes ('men lead, women follow') and sexist social structures, BL contravened expectations and depicted male-male physical and emotional intimacies that subverted gender. It helped open my eyes to new possibilities that conservative schooling, as well as mainstream cultural messaging, did not offer.

From a feminist perspective, early BL works were about women and their desires, which were strategically conveyed through aestheticization of androgynous boys (see Figure 1) and their love for each other (Welker, 2006). The combination of androgynous visualization with anatomical maleness acted as devices for readers' identification and disidentification respectively. The set-up of beautiful boys desiring other beautiful boys allowed for women to gaze from the safety of the observer position, blissfully excluded. A character may hold a stereotypically feminine role (sexually abused, harassed) in the story but his anatomical maleness prevents female readers from identifying with him and perceiving the sexual abuse on themselves. The character's maleness and homosexuality produced a shield for women, as well as a sandbox for experimentation with gender and sexuality (Mizoguchi, 2008). The anatomical maleness of characters in BL acts as a driving force behind women's disidentification from oppressive gender roles and into a fantasy of male homoeroticism.

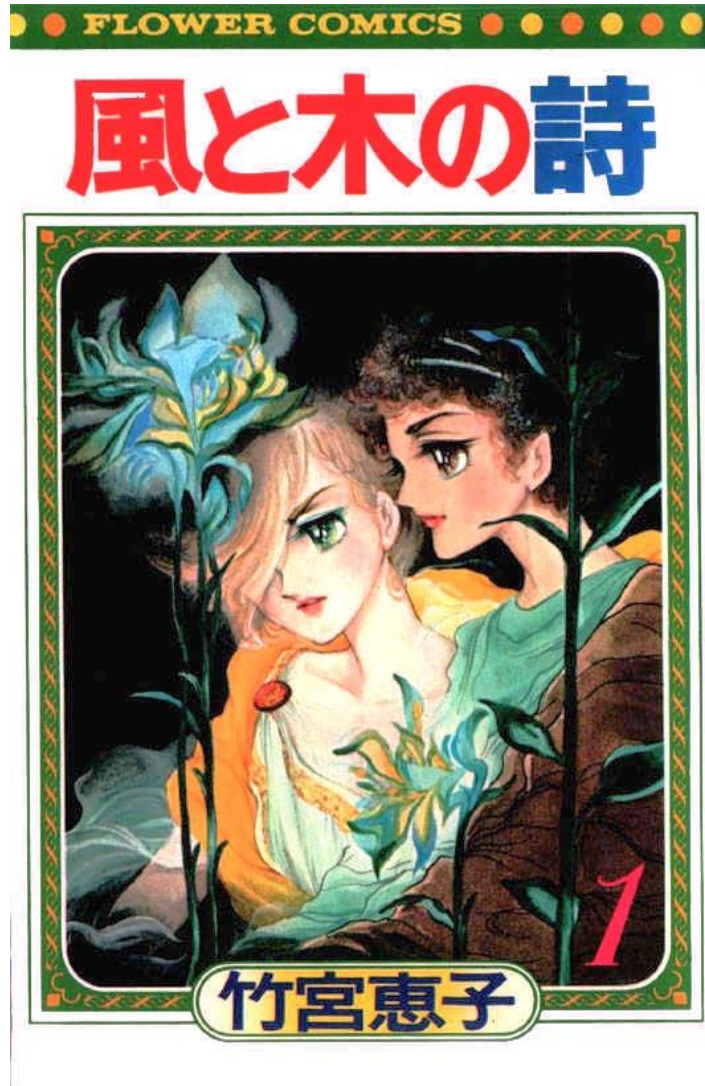


Figure 1. Cover of *Kaze to ki no uta* (Song of Wind and Trees) © Keiko Takemiya/Hakusensha bunko (1976-1984). This highly acclaimed work featuring aestheticized, androgynous boys is considered a pioneer in the BL genre.

While early BL in the form of *bishounen* comics first emerged as a function of avoidance and escape from social gender oppression, *Yaoi*, with its portrayal of male-male sexual intercourse also played a key role in the creation of the BL fandom and feminist counterculture (Saito, 2011). It shifted readers' positions from passive to active and allowed women to further play with sex and sexuality. Mizoguchi (2008) theorized BL fan communities to be a productive feminist forum where women were able to share personal thoughts and desires with fellow members. Without the

pressure of outsider judgment, they freely expressed their sexual fantasies through outlets such as creating *doujinshi* or participating in online role play (Fujimoto, 2007 as cited in Zsila & Demetrovics, 2017). *Yaoi* in particular, which was self-defined by *fujoshis* as having no point and no meaning, facilitated experimentation with sexuality, through fantasy elements and separation from reality (Galbraith, 2011). Zsila and Demetrovics (2017) suggested dissociation from gender struggles and projection onto fictional male characters as significant factors for fans' motivations. Additionally, the male-male pairings offered women with a safe zone where they were liberated and can take on the role of spectator, instead of the gendered object of the male gaze and patriarchal voyeurism that is traditional in heterosexual relationships. BL allowed for emancipation, making space for female sexuality, a matter that society frequently neglects and oppresses. Women can appease sexual curiosities without the discomfort of feeling sexually objectified. *Yaoi doujinshi*, which can be comparable to slash fictions in the U.S, established a community of BL fans who removed the lines between audience, creator, and distributor. Through published postscripts, letters or forums, content creators and consumers engage in candid discussions about sexuality in a mutually supportive manner as fans (Mizoguchi, 2008). As a result, an affective environment is produced for social fantasizing, consolidating female homosocial/erotic bonding through exchange of fantasies of male homoeroticism. This intimate community has been called a "virtual lesbian space" where women's bonds are cultivated, and "virtual sex" occurs through exchange of erotic fantasies (Mizoguchi, 2008).

In a qualitative study, Chinese female authors of BL stories reported three main discursive constructions in BL counterculture: "the idealization of intimate relationships, the deconstruction of heteropatriarchal gender norms through the female gaze, and the imagination of female power in negotiation with state discourses." (Chang & Tian, 2020, p.7). These Chinese fans, through creating male-male homoerotic fantasy fictions, produce and share a more democratic model of

romantic and sexual relationships. Furthermore, depictions of homoerotic scenes point to a confrontational stance against China's censorship and the Chinese ruling party's dominant Confucianist ethos (Chang & Tian, 2020). Thus, the BL genre becomes an imaginary space where female fans can break away from the gender hierarchy and dare to realize their bold fantasies. *Yaoi doujinshi*, in particular, where women reappropriated characters from existing texts often marketed towards male audiences, and transferred them into homosexual scenarios, including rape and bondage play, exemplified women's agency in a space traditionally reserved for men's sexual fantasies (Fujimoto, 2015). From a liberatory perspective, BL narratives freed female readers from fixed identities with the absence of female characters, allowing for erotic autonomy that is separate from any certain point of view or sexual identity. These conversations have led some scholars to argue for BL's sociocultural and political potentials in troubling heteropatriarchy (Kwon, 2021). It acts as a non-threatening safe space for female fans and at the same time, threatens patriarchy.

Other scholars reflect on the misogyny portrayed in BL narratives (Ueno, 1998). The escapism built on the anatomical maleness of characters sees the female sex as an intrusion to fantasy. This can be seen as misogynistic, as the idealization of boys' romance operates at the expense of femaleness. Researchers explain that this was the result of patriarchal society's systematic sexism making it difficult for many women to love themselves as they are (Ueno, 1998). From this standpoint, the BL genre serves practically as a means for women to distance from their own gender stereotypes through the manipulation of gender in a fantasy world. The genre has come a long way from villainizing women in narratives. Female characters still function as plot devices towards the union of the main male couple but are increasingly portrayed in a positive light, sometimes acting as cupid or an understanding family member or classmate. With shift in female characters' depictions, scholarship also moved away from focus on misogyny. Starting from feminist critique, queer analysis began to be incorporated into BL studies, a framework that

perhaps may be more appropriate for discussion of the BL world.

Queering BL

Since the 1990s, the genre of BL has only continued to expand, manifesting in a variety of media forms (i.e., video games, movies, theme cafes) and crossing regional borders into North America, Europe, other parts of Asia and around the globe. Following genre aesthetic and cultural traditions, many popular BL creations have been produced outside of Japan and gained fame globally through the internet. The BL fanbase includes many people living in heteronormative and male dominated cultures, not limited to Japan. Heteronormative societies view the standard as heterosexual, specifically the coupling of a passive cis gender women with an active cis gender male. In this case, homosexuality is perceived as the other. As homosexuality became more socially and politically accepted, overt homophobia became less permissible and homonormativity was established (Duggan, 2003). Homonormativity proscribed culturally specific characteristics of being gay that matched existing norms. In addition to reinforcing hierarchies of race and class, it reinscribed gender appropriate behaviors. The hetero/homonormative dichotomy heavily relies on fixed and stable identities of gay/straight, man/woman. In line with psychological concepts of essentialism, dichotomization, and ambiguity intolerance (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1948), this fixed hetero/homo binary model permeates Western thought (Sedgwick, 1990). The cognitive tendency to categorize and avoid indeterminacy, rejects the ambiguous nature of the diverse factors that form our sexuality and gender experience. These ignored factors in hetero/homonormative cultures are the subject of queer theory. BL media, containing a wealth of ambiguities in narratives and reception, calls for a queer reading. To queer is a way to embrace ambiguities disregarded by binary oppositions within gender and sexuality. To queer is to recognize instability, fluidity, and

difference, and welcome the abundance of counter normative expressions.² While BL has been marketed towards a heterosexual female audience, the actual fanbase is far more varied in sex, gender, and sexuality. BL has created a unique connection between men and women through enjoyment of erotic media (Brenner & Wildsmith, 2011). Past scholars have observed that male fans enjoyed the alternate views of sexual identities and masculinities, and female fans saw BL as a way to overcome and critique heterosexist gender norms (Mizoguchi, 2008; Nagaike, 2015). Mizoguchi (2010) states that BL supports a female community that cultivates more freedom in gender and sexual expression. Shifting from studies of BL as resistance for heterosexual females, queer readings examine the unconventional representations of gender and sexuality, and its queer potential.

When analyzing narratives in BL, ambiguities are prevalent, obstructing stable constructions of who is what. Both sexual identity as well as gender can be questioned. Welker (2006) points out the uncertainties of gender in BL manga and anime, especially in early *bishounen* works, which constructed ambiguous sex due to or despite of “apparitions of the penis (p. 849).” In Welker’s (2006) analysis of *Kaze to ki no uta*, a pioneering work in the BL genre, he highlighted the absence of clear drawings of male genitalia, which allowed audience to see a vulva if desired. The *bishounen* was interpreted as a queer character outside the limits of our heteropatriarchal world, offering readings of any gender and sexuality (Welker, 2006). Following this argument, the *bishounens* could indeed be understood as lesbians. Giving readers free interpretation of the character’s gender supported experimentation with nonhegemonic practices of gender and sexuality (Welker, 2006). Audiences maintained the freedom to retell the story and control the genders within the narrative to their own preference. This queer perspective of BL was based on the

² See the extensive work of Eve Sedgwick and Michael Warner on queer theory.

ambiguities of content and imaginations of the audience.

Similar to Ueno (1998), Otomo (2015) discussed freeing from the female body as a feature of BL. However, Otomo did not cite misogyny but desubjectivization, a dissolution of the reader's own subject, and the resulting disembodied experience where the gendered body disappears in the BL fantasy world. She saw queer utopian potential in BL as an escapist fantasy and the opportunity for political transformation. Otomo (2015) proposed that BL was a resistant form of escapism, providing a place of respite for fans from realities of heteronormative oppression. BL can be viewed as queer in its disassembling of stable identity categories and its enabling of fluid identifications. The *seme/uke* archetype at its surface may parallel traditional man/women gender roles, supporting gender normative dichotomies. However, transposing of heterosexuality onto a same-sex couple can be read as more transgressive in the way it decouples sex from gender. Additionally, the *uke* identity is more complex and subversive, crossing between masculine and feminine realms. He maintains his biological maleness, benefiting from patriarchy while also holding a feminine object position. This female position however is not disempowering as the *uke* enjoys equally pleasurable sex from the *seme* (Wood, 2006). If read as a self-insert character for heterosexual female fans, there is still empowerment in the construction of an active, feminine presence. While the *uke* archetype may suggest a feminine object, his gender performance is more accurately a hybrid of masculinity/femininity. Female fans can also vicariously participate in BL narratives as the *seme* character. Meyer (2010) found that about one third of female fans identified with *seme* characters, subverting heterosexist expectations that female fans must identify with the submissive character. Research suggests that there are female fans who prefer to position themselves as the aggressive, dominant *seme* character who desires the submissive *uke* (Meyer, 2010). When considering the various positions of both audience and characters, the binary is expanded. The *seme* and *uke* relationship illustrates multiple counter-hegemonic masculinities,

crossing gender boundaries.

Nagaike (2015) directed attention to *fudanshi* (rotten men), male viewers of BL who were not afraid to admit their enjoyment for homoerotic narratives. *Fudanshis* did not clearly represent any specific sexual orientation. These men responded to surveys with a range of sexual orientation identities including gay, straight, bisexual, as well as asexual (Nagaike, 2015). *Fudanshis*, like their *fujoshi* counterparts, seek an escape from more dominant narratives of gender. But for *fudanshis*, they are escaping traditional masculine traits by identifying with the feminine men in BL narratives. They enjoyed how BL characters did not live up to the macho image of conventional gender norms and expressed traditionally feminine characteristics like passivity and vulnerability (Nagaike, 2015). BL creates a subversive space that allows *fudanshis* to reevaluate stereotypical masculinities and learn to accept feminine traits, which are devalued by society when expressed on male bodies, as part of maleness. In China, aesthetics and themes of *danmei* (China's adaptation of BL) are influencing even non consumers of BL. The underground distribution of BL has resulted in increased awareness of homosexuality, reshaping heteromascularity and homosociality among heterosexual men (Wei, 2022).

Further Developments in BL Conventions

Since the early 1990s, the genre has become more diverse in style and approach, while still following some traditional conventions. Mizoguchi (2008) saw a decrease in “rapes of love” and explained that it may be due to boredom towards the overused trope and mature author's feelings of responsibility as mentors for younger audiences to not excuse rape. Furthermore, “homophobic homo” characters have decreased and been replaced with more gay identified characters. Sometimes the character starts off with a straight identity but becomes accepting of his gay identity after falling in love with his same sex partner. Many such characters come out to their family,

friends, and the public. Other times, characters start off with the awareness of their gay or bisexual identity (Mizoguchi, 2008). These changes show how the BL genre has matured and how creators feel more responsibility towards fictional characters who represent a minority group, rather than just fantasy material. This may have been partly influenced by the progress in lesbian and gay rights political movements around the world at the time. For example, Netherlands was the first country to legalize same sex marriage in 2000, followed by Belgium in 2003, and Canada in 2005 (Masci et. al., 2019). There are more stories depicting BL character's coming out experience with realistic reactions from family members in the context of Japanese culture. Often times, family and friends learn to accept the protagonists' gay relationship. Stories acknowledge the existence of homophobia as a problem in society through scenarios depicting discrimination and illustrating the various ways homosexual people navigate their lives in a heteronormative culture. This is not to say that all BL stories are accurate portrayals, since there remain fantastical elements like essentialized characteristics of aggressive top/passive bottom roles or every straight character falling in love with another man (Mizoguchi, 2008). However, there have also been changes in the *seme/uke* trope, towards positions with active decision making. *Ukes* are more frequently characterized as proactive, and top/bottom roles during sex are more likely determined by factors of preference and pleasure (Mizoguchi, 2008). Traditional BL formulas do coexist with author's activist imaginations. Still, many BL authors are giving serious thought to homosexual individual's struggles in contemporary times. Authors are creating feasible scenarios where gay characters can live happier lives in an imagined society that is more progressive than reality. Another noticeable trend in the BL genre is the increased production of narratives that scrutinize and problematize the existing gender system and heterosexuality broadly, including marriage, reproduction, and traditional notions of family (Mizoguchi, 2010). *Sex Pistols* by Tarako Kotobuki (2004) exemplifies a world where reproductive technologies allow characters to birth babies regardless of

gender. The manga series provides representation for same sex male couples and same sex female couples and motivates fan discussions about concepts of family, reproduction, and romantic relationships.

Seme and *uke* dynamics based on physical characteristics continue to persist in the BL genre but with a growing number of exceptions. There are a variety of different types of *seme* and *uke* characters, each having gender traits that shift according to the character they are paired with. Practices of pairing shows the flexibility of gender, allowing the imagining of possibilities outside the norm or an alternative future for the norm itself (Butler, 2004). For example, a Philippines based study showed how BL fans viewed androgynous male characters and same sex male relationships not only as different forms of masculinity but also of different forms of intimate relationships (Fermin, 2022). In China, pairing two masculine top characters together, a genre called “*hugongwen*,” builds on the concept of alternative masculinity as queer resistance and offers a form of equality in relationships (Lin, 2022).

A recent comedic Japanese BL manga series, *Zettai BL ni Naru Sekai VS Zettai BL ni Naritakunai Otoko* by Konkichi (2018), presents a deconstructive parody of common BL conventions (see Figure 2). The story follows a nameless background character as he criticizes nonsensical tropes in the BL world he lives in. Many fans can relate to the protagonist’s feelings as he ridicules typical BL manga plots. Its success among readers led to a Japanese live action adaptation in 2021. These new ventures in BL practices show that the genre is a medium of change.

Given this history of the ways BL has evolved over the years, I chose to examine how discourse reflects new developments. What conversations are taking place among the BL fandom today? To answer these questions, I look to online communities, home to countless BL fans.



Figure 2. *Zettai BL ni Naru Sekai VS Zettai BL ni Naritakunai Otoko* (A World Where Everything Definitely Becomes BL vs. The Man Who Definitely Doesn't Want to be in a BL) (p. 1-2), © Konkichi/Shodensha (2018). On the right page, the main character realizes he lives in a BL world. On the left, he points out the strangely high percentage of handsome men in his school, the blurry and plain faces of girls, and how dirty talk about girls somehow shift into 'what kind of men you would have sex with.' Translation by Jessica Lin.

Section 2: Method and Methodology

Site of Study

The BL fan community, r/boyslove, located on the popular social media website Reddit, will be the main site of study. Reddit has become a significant data source for researchers from a range of disciplines, as it allows convenient access to hard-to-reach populations, the most prominent data sources being political and mental health communities (Proferes et. al., 2021). As a platform that functions via anonymity, it gathers users and creates communities through shared interests rather than real-world connections. These communities are called “subreddits” and can be created by any user and are moderated by its own members.¹ The configuration of reddit allows people to publish candid stories and opinions, partly due to the fact that moderators are everyday people and not a corporate entity (De Choudhry & De, 2014). Additionally, unlike other platforms that require a name or birthday, creating a reddit user account only requires an email, username, and password. The large degree of anonymity of reddit has been shown to increase user’s willingness to divulge personal stories and speak freely on sensitive topics such as gender and sexuality (Ammari et. al., 2019). Furthermore, the 10,000 character limit for comments and 40,000 character limit for posts provide users plenty of room to communicate their opinions and rationale in comparison to many other social media platforms with shorter limits, giving more context to readers. Reddit’s simple point voting system divides powers equally among everyone, each “upvote” adding a point and “downvote” subtracting a point. This system pushes posts or comments that the public believes to be the most significant to the forefront, making popular posts easily identifiable. For these reasons, I chose to focus on the subreddit, r/boyslove, a community dedicated to discussion of any BL related topics.

¹ This is unlike other social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram which are monitored by a singular corporation but rather, each subreddit has their own volunteer moderators who enforce community guidelines.

Data Collection

At the time of data extraction, the r/boyslove subreddit had 35,700 members. Following Caplan and Purser's (2017) methodological guidelines for Reddit qualitative data analysis, I chose specific criteria for extraction. I opted for a central post with at least a hundred comments that would address my research question. Threads within r/boyslove were categorized using "Flairs," a tagging system to provide context to posts. Some flairs include "BL Haul", "Fanwork", "Help:Identify", "Off Topic", "Meme", "Discussion", and regional flairs (i.e., Thai BL) for location specific BL content. I filtered using the "Discussion" flair, as this tag was intended for posts looking for open-ended responses and fostered the most dialogue between members. I then sorted by "Top" posts within the past year. The top four posts were limited to questions pertaining to member's favorite BL live-action drama series or favorite pairings in those series. For data collection, I chose the fifth most upvoted post, as it was not constrained to live-action media and contained enough text to be viable. This post was titled, "In this designated BL fan space, we shouldn't have to be constantly defending our enjoyment of BL" and was published on November 15, 2021. The thread matched my search criteria as a relevant discussion thread, with over 100 comments, that is representative of r/boyslove community sentiments. I analyzed the contents of this central post to answer my research question: What are the shared experiences and conversations of the current BL fandom?

Data Analysis

My qualitative framework favors an experiential analysis in order to draw on participant's voices and perspectives. Theoretically, I follow a relativist, constructionist approach to examine the realities articulated in individual's responses. This framework does not focus on individual psyches, but rather, attempts to understand the socio-cultural conditions driving people's sense-

making, with the understanding that there is no one objective reality.

I saved the entire webpage containing the initial post and all the comments ($n = 178$) using MAXQDA's web collector function and imported the file into MAXQDA (v.20.4) to facilitate data analysis. Within this thread, I identified 55 unique users who responded in the comments section (Table 1).

Following Braun and Clarke (2006) on thematic analysis, I began with in-depth familiarization of the data. After an initial readthrough, I conducted a more in-depth review while documenting notes and ideas within MAXQDA (v.20.4). After familiarization with the content, I used an inductive approach in the initial coding, noting interesting patterns and possible themes during the coding process. Codes were reviewed and categorized into initial themes. After further developing and reviewing themes, I refined the relevance of those themes by comparing them to the data set as a whole and renamed when appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Guided by reflexive thematic analysis, my analytical process took on an organic approach within an interpretivist paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Table 1*Descriptives of data.*

Members of r/boyslove at time of data collection	35,700
Original post date	11/15/2021
Data collection date	03/10/2022
Total comments (including initial poster)	178
Total word count (including initial poster)	16,523
Total number of upvotes on original post	193
Total number of upvotes on top 10 comments	306

Section 3: Results

The following themes were generated: (1) Don't Yuck my Yum (2) Fantasy vs. Reality, (3) Progressiveness in the BL space (see Figure 3). These themes highlight the ongoing conversations and concerns among BL fans.

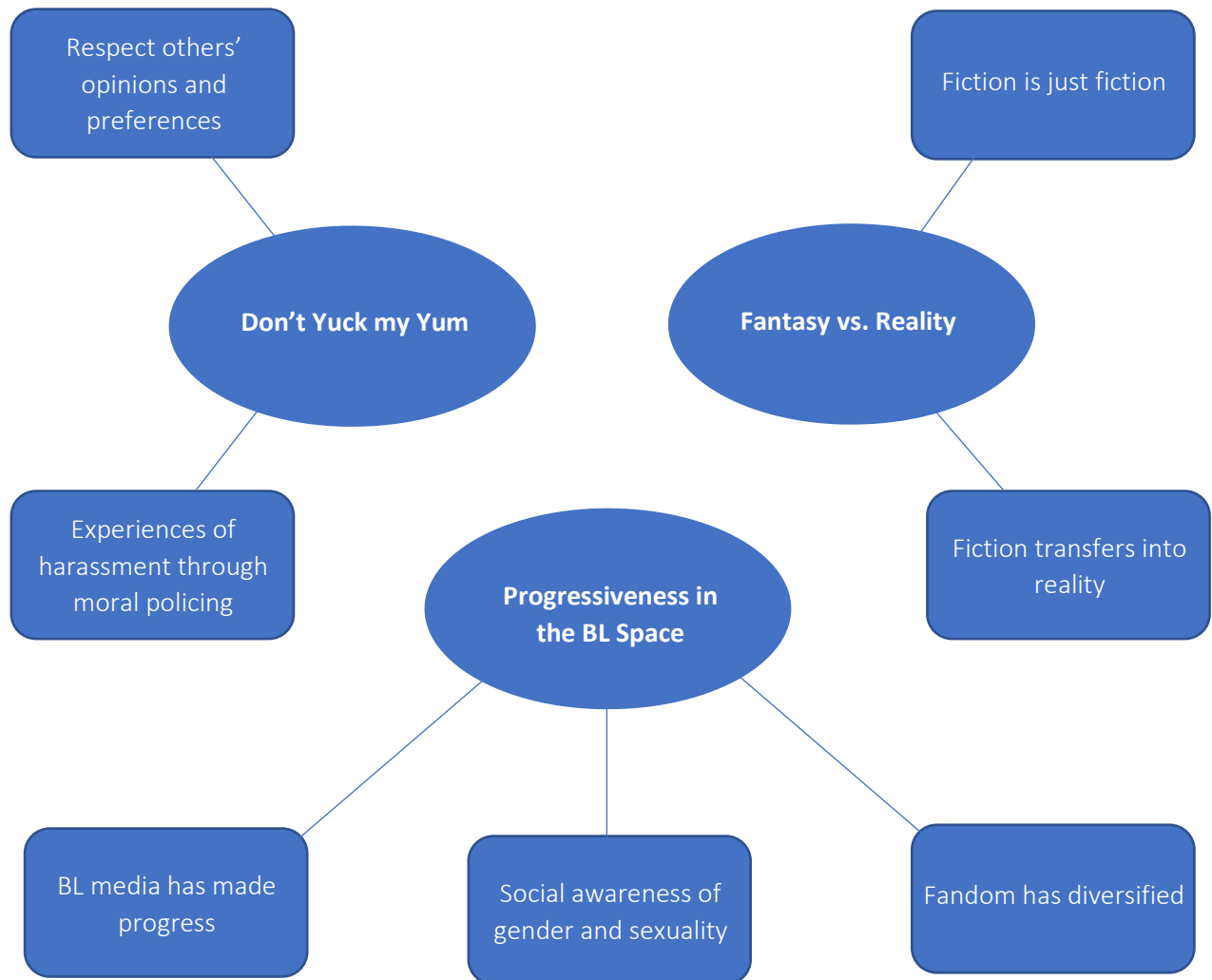


Figure 3. Thematic map depicting three main themes.

Don't Yuck my Yum

As a central statement of the initial post, as well as the top comment in the thread, “Don't Yuck my Yum” summarizes fan's sentiments against those who bash others for their media and trope preferences. Members shared instances where they encountered animosity for expressing their enjoyment of certain narratives. Complaints include, “I have been told I should go to prison for enjoying the pseudo-incest in *Friend Forever*.” And “I've had someone tell me that maybe I should be raped so that I would stop glorifying it in these shows.” Fans of Chinese BL would receive comments like, “it is censored, it isn't BL, China sucks and I will never give any of their shows a try.” Members have been unproductively criticized for enjoying “immoral” tropes such as incest, non-consensual sex, age gaps and obsessive love. Chinese BL works, which has become popularized among western media in recent years, have been condemned for being regressive and homophobic due to its prominent level of censorship. Fans adept at reading homoerotic subtext find no problems seeing the romantic relationship between male leads, while others who only see homosociality in male relationships argue that Chinese BL should not even be considered BL. The original poster rants:

...I am sick of it! Guys, this is supposed to be the space where we can enjoy this genre without judgement, *especially* from other fans. You are allowed to have different opinions, but why do we constantly have to be knocking down what other people enjoy watching? (r/boyslove, 2021)

As the genre of BL overall has generally been looked down upon and shamed by society since its origins, many *fujin* (“rotten person,” a gender-neutral alternative to *fujoshi/fudanshi*) share similar feelings of shame in some way. It is often a genre labeled and acknowledged by fans as a guilty pleasure. Consumers and creators of BL have been and still are targets of harassment and cyberbullying, due to societal misogyny and homophobia. Even within the BL fan space, people

experience criticisms for enjoying the “wrong” type of BL.

You can barely say you like a show or an actor anymore without someone coming in and telling you that there is something wrong in the show and so you shouldn't enjoy it... “well, you can like it, but at the end of the day in the grand scheme of the world that makes you a fetishist and so your opinions don't really mean much.” Or “you are probably a straight woman, you aren't a gay man enough to contribute to this conversation on the ethics of this scene.” Or “oh, you can't like that actor anymore, because one time, four years ago, he said a joke that was off-color...” And on and on. (r/boyslove, 2021)

The user expresses frustration over other users' excessive political and moral policing of BL media. Many *fujin* enjoy the emotional and dramatic elements of BL that are often connected to taboo tropes like non-consensual sex or abusive relationships. Posters suggest the rise of “woke” culture has resulted in an increase in the number of morality policing comments in the community forums. Woke culture is a modern equivalent to being “politically correct.” To be ‘woke’ is to be mindful of sexism, racism, homophobia, and general insensitivity towards others, but the label of “woke” has developed to have a negative connotation, referring to social justice warriors who condemn others ‘problematic’ behaviors in order to achieve a sense of moral superiority. The r/boyslove community exhibits more liberal leaning ideologies in alignment with what is considered “woke.” As a disclaimer, the original poster states that they are not against liberal ideologies promoting human rights. They clarify that their issue lies in the oversaturation of BL communities with real-world moral discourse when fans are trying to indulge in escapism.

A differing response expresses that they do not see the disparaging, toxic posts that others have referred to, “This is a pretty laid back place. I do notice sometimes people come in here to vent about bad experiences they've had outside of this subreddit. The ‘my friend thinks I'm trash

for liking this' thing for instance comes up.” While they highlight the existence of posts from BL fans that have experienced backlash from outsiders, they personally have not encountered many toxic posts from within the fan community and therefore do not associate intolerance with the r/boyslove subreddit. Within the “Don’t Yuck my Yum” discourse, 38 comments emphasized agreement to the original poster’s sentiment of not disparaging other fans’ for their proclivities, which contrasts the absence of counterclaims. The topmost upvoted responses within this thread, with 75 upvotes, further emphasize community agreement towards this belief.

Overall, the majority of commenters agree that no one should be shamed or insulted for their preferences, especially within a fan space that should be tolerant. They believe there should be room to discuss BL content as entertainment and as real-world related issues such as discrimination, but respectfully.

Fantasy vs. Reality

Numerous responders including the original poster, emphasized the separation between fiction and reality. One side wishes to enjoy the BL genre with its immoral plotlines and dramatic elements as pure fantasy, while others argue that BL’s toxic tropes are harmful and linked to real-world consequences.

One user supports the perspective of BL as fantasy material and highlights the significance of the fictional aspect in their personal life towards recovering from trauma.

Something can be hugely problematic and we can still love it. I read a ton of non-con and rape stories because, as a rape survivor, they help me process my stuff. I love Tharntype. Because I love the idea of a fairytale ending to something that starts with non-con. In real life I didn’t get that (and I wish I could have sent the man to jail.) But in a fantasy world?? Give me ALL the comfort after the hurt. I love it.”

(r/boyslove, 2021)

Tharntype is a highly popular 2019 Thai BL drama series based on the web novel with the same title. The series involves scenarios of non-consent and dubious consent within its first three episodes. *Tharntype* echoes a common trope of BL, in which stories beginning with non-consensual elements develop into mutual love by the end. The user emphasizes the function of such narratives as fantasies with fairytale happy endings as a way to cope with their personal struggles in reality. BL for many fans continues to act as a safe space to process difficult emotions from a distance. BL as fantasy is malleable and offers alternative narratives that some consumers say can produce therapeutic effects. Other users express that they would respond differently to those problematic scenarios if it occurred in real life.

We all know it's not okay IRL! We know that!! Most of us are adults! But I don't watch BL to have all my morals confirmed, I watch it to be entertained and TharnType entertains the sh*t out of me! (r/boyslove, 2021)

Users reason that they have the common sense to differentiate fiction and reality, to separate what they view on screen from their actions in real life. They argue that audiences should have the social awareness and ethical intelligence to enjoy fictional narratives for the thrills and recognize that problematic behaviors should not be replicated in the real world.

Others argue that realities follow fiction, voicing their concerns for young audiences who may be more impressionable. Several commentators reference skewed gay representation within BL narratives. A user states, "You know, either the dominant, borderline rapist top or the submissive, pitiful bottom. It's also quite possible they'll carry that idea with them into real life." They refer to the possible transference of BL's pervasive trope of *seme/uke* roles onto real life gay couples. Responses point out the very real influences that BL media has on the perception of LGBT individuals and not always in a positive light due to misrepresentation and reinforcement of

stereotypes.

Because BL as a genre is a representation of gay men and a lot of the times it reinforces negative stereotypes that will affect real people irl [in real life]. This might be a “fun get-away from the real world” for you, but for someone else it’s representation, whether they like it or not. (r/boyslove, 2021)

Users explain that popular fiction media consumed globally definitely has an impact on reality and the lives of young LGBT youth. They elaborate that often times, BL is the only way LGBT youth see representation, and they may internalize problematic tropes involving romanticized rape or harmful stereotypes. Ultimately, perspectives are mixed and conflicting.

Progressiveness in the BL Space

There are recurring comments that took note of the positive changes and progress in BL media for the better. Written with strong conviction and at length, users point out how there is an increase in “healthy” BL media and LGBT friendly stories:

I was so relieved when I entered this subreddit a few months ago and I found the amount of healthy media in BL that wasn’t there when I started watching BL.
(r/boyslove, 2021)

I’ve really enjoyed seeing BL become increasingly overtly merged with LGBTQ+ storytelling! And I think it was the natural thing to happen – why have two LGBTQ+/female friendly storytelling mediums doing almost if not quite the same thing, when you can just merge them – leaving room for all kinds of stories.
(r/boyslove, 2021)

By “healthy” they are referring to media that has accurate representation of gay men in healthy, consensual relationships and without forms of abuse. Members show excitement when BL narratives contain pairings that do not follow traditional *seme/uke* characteristics. They appreciate the growth in overt gender and sexual minority representations in new BL media, not just limited to gay men. In discussing a merge between BL and LGBT storytelling, the user shows understanding of the differences between the two genres as well as the history of change within BL. There is an awareness of BL’s origins as a “female friendly” mode of storytelling, stemming from *shoujo* manga that explored gender and sexuality. The r/boyslove community exhibit an overall liberal stance on gender and sexuality issues. Members show support for LGBT rights and are generally mindful of heterosexism. Therefore, they praise new BL media that provide more accurate representations of gay men. Fans commend BL actors for speaking up for the LGBT community, to eliminate prejudice against same-sex relationships and to spread awareness as influencers. They additionally welcome the growing diversity in the fan space:

BL fandom is so much more interesting and welcoming now than it used to be.

There’s a healthy mix of variations in age, gender, sexuality and life experience that makes discussing BL so much more rewarding nowadays. (r/boyslove, 2021)

While anonymity on reddit promotes more candid and authentic sharing of experience and opinions on stigmatized issues such as sexuality, it also acts as a significant limitation in methods. Lack of user’s demographic profile make it impossible to conduct intersectional analysis. However, some users may share their age, gender or sexuality in post. Within this thread, several users prefaced their response with a disclosure of their gender and sexual orientation. These users included gay men, lesbian women, bisexual men, a pansexual trans man, an asexual agender person and a queer fan. This wide range of identities within only one thread, demonstrates the surge in diversity among BL fans. When one user voiced their opinion that men should stay away from

female spaces, she was met with substantial opposition and downvotes. For this community, the assumption that BL is a heterosexual, female only space has become outdated.

Section 4: Discussion

Reflexive thematic analysis with a relativist constructionist approach was conducted from my position as a long time BL fan and situated in a queer, feminist perspective. From r/boyslove, I generated three themes that highlighted major discourses occurring among the BL fan community.

The first theme, ‘Don’t yuck my yum’ showed the enduring sense of shame in loving BL media as a result of societies’ intolerances. I believe misogyny and homophobia to be underlying factors behind people’s distaste for BL and its fandom. BL fans and creators have been continuously attacked, especially when reading male-male romance into popular mainstream media, similar to “shipping”¹ in slash fictions in the U.S. Critics who target *fujin* for reading homoerotic subtext into popular mainstream media, are at the same time privileging heterosexual/normative readings as the only “correct” and “normal” way to view fictional relationships. On online platforms where people can post artworks or events like Comiccon where people can sell and distribute art, BL is often pushed to the side, sending the message that it is a genre that should stay out of the mainstream. People argue that BL is discriminatory towards gay men, while there exists a much larger market with problematic portrayals of women. When mainstream anime and manga is criticized for oversexualizing and demeaning women, male creators simply dismiss concerns by citing freedom of speech and expression. On the other hand, BL is easily targeted likely due to it being a genre associated with women. Decades of research have shown that women’s participation is correlated to devaluation.² There has been a constant trend of shaming femininized interests. Female stereotyped fandoms (i.e., Boybands) tend to be belittled, while male stereotyped fandoms (i.e., Football) are often celebrated (Mendelsohn, 2020). Fields dominated by women, like teaching and care work are undervalued and underpaid/unpaid

¹ Shipping is defined as the act of pairing two individuals (often characters in pop culture) in a romantic relationship.

² See “Twenty years of gender equality research: A scoping review based on a new semantic indicator” (Belingeri, Chiarello, Cholladon & Rovelli, 2021)

(Shaw et. al., 2016). Jobs are assigned lower pay and status as it becomes increasingly associated with women (Block et. al., 2018; Magnusson, 2009). BL reception, as a genre linked to women, follows the devaluation theory based on sexism that sees less value in women produced work.

Subreddit members have cited their encounters with disparaging comments, containing assumptions on their identity as straight women, along with assumptions that they fetishize gay men. Such insinuations were used as grounds to invalidate their opinions. Many BL fans hide their hobby from family and friends in fear of such criticism, finding comfort only in online fan spaces. *Fujin* are aware of their socially subordinate status as members of this community. Amongst fans sharing the same interests, r/boyslove members agreed that no one should be shamed in this virtual safe space; differentiating shaming people from giving productive critique.

Theme two, Fantasy vs. Reality demonstrates the productive critique of BL media that is possible without use of shame. Fans debated the various functions of BL as fantasy and its effects in the real world. Many users expressed their use of BL as pure fiction and escapism. This aligns with feminist studies on BL that recognize the genre as a safe space for women to escape the damages inflicted by patriarchy. Some may argue that escapist fantasies as temporary relief is insufficient and ultimately, real social change is necessary in order to eliminate that need for escapism. However, I believe fantasy in itself should be seen as fulfilling and pleasurable, and recognized as a necessary element of our psychical reality, regardless of political utility. Many feminist and queer readings struggle with suspending political impulses to see fantasy as it is, “a pleasurable suspension of the opposition between the realist and the escapist” (Chou, 2018, p. 35).

Many other reddit responses focused on the common BL critique regarding representation for gay men, a topic that has continued from the events of *yaoi ronsou*. It is important to remember that not all BL stories are intended to be about gay men. The majority of narratives simply portray idealized, romantic love between two boys or men. The ambiguous nature of many BL narratives

allows for different interpretations based on the imagination of the readership (Welker, 2006).

Stories of two men's romantic or sexual relationship does not automatically equate to a gay identity. There exists a range of sexual orientations (i.e., bisexual, heterosexual, pansexual, queer) and the audience is free to interpret the relationship to their heart's desires. Additionally, fictional worlds are not necessarily a mere reflection of society. Fictional worlds are capable of imagining and opening up unseen possibilities and different modes of life. While there are gay identified characters in BL media, in many stories it is rare for characters to overtly identify as a gay man. A more flexible reading of BL media may be more productive and inclusive. However, society at large does associate depictions of homosexuality to gay men and therefore any media portrayal may affect the real lives of gay men, BL or not. Members of r/boyslove agree that BL can influence realities of gay men by propagating certain images or stereotypes. The frequent conversations and attention to such concerns highlight the community's awareness that BL's genre characteristics that are meant for dramatic purposes do not and should not be applied to real life. There is an abundance of people speaking up and critiquing problematic story trends (i.e., homophobia, gender normativity, rape), using it as an opportunity to spread awareness and educate younger or newer fans.

Although the mixture of problematic BL tropes and activist thoughts is complex, I think the activist power of representation in BL work does not disappear. As a queer person, discovering BL had given me hope and made it easier to imagine that fantasy world of acceptance in the near future. Some *Fudanshis* have recounted their first experiences discovering BL and expressed feelings of affirmation and validation simply seeing the possibility of happy male-male couples, at a time period when representation was limited to gay pornography magazines and comedic caricatures. Even gay-targeted content by gay creators such as *geikomi* (gay comics) do not offer perfect representation for every individual. Some gay *fudanshi* have voiced that they found the

feminine masculinities depicted by BL characters more relatable than *geikomi*, that portrayed heavy set, muscular, strong men with facial hair. The discourses that assume a singular, “correct” definition of representation of identities is exactly what queer theory aims to destabilize.

Developments in fandom highlight the progressiveness and diversification of the BL fandom as well as BL media itself. At its origins, BL was a deliberate attempt to empower girls’ agency and queer norms around female sexuality (Mizoguchi, 2008; Saito, 2011). The genre’s circumvention of gender and sexual norms attracted a wide spectrum of audiences outside of the targeted demographics. The lines of BL and LGBT media have blurred and merged as r/boyslove community members have pointed out. I believe the *yaoi ronsou* was a critical event that allowed BL to take strides in progress. Controversies and criticisms push BL fans and creators to acknowledge political and moral concerns around the genre, which can explain the expansion of content and increased genre breaking ventures that are not constrained by tropes. In a reciprocal relationship, the progressive diversification of BL media in turn attracts even wider audiences of fans, who often contribute to the genre as creators. While r/boyslove promote discussion of all media forms of BL, the rapid rise in popularity of Thai live action dramas and Chinese *danmei* is clearly evident. Thailand’s BL productions seem to have the most regional and global outreach and influence, winning more acceptance with LGBT individuals. More live action BL dramas have been providing sensitive portrayals of diverse relationships, an approach that has been well received by LGBT communities. The subreddit expresses a welcoming attitude towards the influx of LGBT fans and creators, showing tolerance and respect to fellow BL fans.

The r/boyslove community exemplifies a group that has taken their individual BL derived consciousness of social issues concerning gender and sexual minorities and become political advocates for LGBT rights. In another instance, BL fans from Taiwan actively involved themselves

in the recent successful movement to make Taiwan the first Asian country to legalize same sex marriage (Wang, 2022). Around the world, BL fans act as sociopolitical forces, engaging in local politics or online political critique, enabling the liberation of gender and sexual expression. BL has become a “transnational, transcultural” media genre with progressive potential for good through its subversion of gender and sexual norms, and accumulated support for the LGBT community (Welker, 2022, p. 4). Regardless of critiques relating to misogyny, homophobia, and the shameful nature of indulging in BL, the genre’s “queer transfigurations” across and between various countries has resulted in fandom expansion and new BL productions merging with LGBT narratives, inspiring and provoking political and social change (Welker, 2022). The current study demonstrates how fans’ personal ventures into BL can develop into social awareness of gender and sexuality through critical consumption of media and participating in public discourse with other fellow fans on online platforms, encouraging social change that respects transgressive expressions of gender and sexuality.

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