



BL/*yaoi*: Its Heterosexual Male Audience and Critical Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper will examine the Japanese genre BL/*yaoi* and its straight-identifying male audience. Since BL/*yaoi* is mainly written by and for women, most research is focused on women, leaving its male audience - specifically its heterosexual male audience - neglected. This paper will therefore focus on its straight-identifying male audience. To begin, the paper presents the relevant terminology and briefly examines BL/*yaoi*'s history. Following this, I investigate potential reasons why heterosexual men engage with BL/*yaoi* content, which display gay relationships that are often sexual in nature. I also explore how identifying as a straight *fudanshi* can be perceived as problematic, while also challenging hegemonic masculinity and gender and sexual norms. Lastly, I explore the *yaoi ronsō* and how this debate brings up some concerns and criticism about BL/*yaoi*. This debate shows both sides of the argument and their reasons for liking or disliking BL/*yaoi*.

Key words

Boys' love; *Yaoi*; Sexuality; Japan

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Introduction

Since the internet was invented, it has become widely used by people all around the world. This has made it substantially easier to obtain information about things that were happening on the other side of the world. This is also how *boys' love* (BL/*shōnen ai*), something hugely popular in Japanese entertainment, could become such a big phenomenon in the West. Boys' love is a genre of anime, manga, games, dramas, *dōjinshi*, etc. that focuses on male same-sex relationships, mostly directed by, and for, women (Zanghellini, 2009). It started in the 1970s, when it was referred to in Japan as *bishōnen*, literally meaning "beautiful boys". Later, around the 1990s, the term *bōizu rabu* (boys' love) was coined and it is still widely used to this day in Japan and in the West (Mizoguchi, 2003).

While BL (*bīeru*) focuses mainly on the romantic side of this relationship, something called *yaoi* focuses on the sexual side of this relationship (Zsila, et al., 2018). The term *yaoi* originated in the 1970s, and was used to refer to *dōjinshi* (self-published works) of amateur artists that made parodies of already existing anime or manga characters, depicting them in sexual ways without any regard to character development or story. This is very fitting, since the term *yaoi* can be broken down into *yama nashi*, *ochi nashi*, *imi nashi* which roughly means "no climax, no plot, no meaning" (Mizoguchi, 2003; Olsen, 2022). The term *yaoi* is also still used, with *yaoi* and BL sometimes being used interchangeably, although most fans do distinguish between the two in the way I just described. This is also how I will use these two terms when it is relevant to distinguish between the two.

BL/*yaoi* depicts its male characters in a more feminine way, thereby challenging how society normally perceives masculinity and gender and sexual norms. They specifically challenge hegemonic masculinity by portraying subordinated masculinity in their characters through defying sexual and gender norms. This could explain why even men might enjoy consuming BL/*yaoi* content, even though this media is made by and for women. Naigake (2018) talks about *fudanshi* ("rotten boy") and how their reasons for consuming and liking BL/*yaoi* are in line with this view of challenging hegemonic masculinity and gender and sexual norms. She mainly talks about *fudanshi* that identify as straight which is unexpected because BL/*yaoi* depict male same-sex relationships.

Research on BL/*yaoi* in regards to its female audience is in abundance so that is why I want to focus on their straight male consumers and look at the motivating factors behind straight men liking and consuming BL/*yaoi* while still maintaining their straight identity. I also briefly touch upon why the term *fudanshi* could render gay sexuality invisible. Furthermore, I would like to look at how the concept of *fudanshi* can have positive effects

as well, as it provides a queer space in which gender and sexual norms are challenged. Lastly, this paper will look at some criticisms that BL/*yaoi* have received from queer Japanese men by examining the 1992 *yaoi* debate (*yaoi ronsō*).

Motivating factors for straight identifying *fudanshi* to consume BL/*yaoi*

In 2008 and 2010, an online survey was carried out examining self-identifying *fudanshi*. What was notable was that around 15% identified as straight (Yoshimoto, 2008, 2010). Another study was carried out in 2018, examining the motives for consuming BL/*yaoi* in Hungary including men and women and all different sexualities. They found “Arousing/sexually titillating, Art and aesthetics, A female-oriented romantic/erotic genre, and Identification/self-analysis” to be the most important factors explaining why some people engage in BL/*yaoi*. There were some notable differences in the outcomes for the male straight and non-straight participants, namely, straight *fudanshi* seemed to prefer BL/*yaoi*’s sexual and aesthetic aspects over its pro-gay message (which was a big factor for non-straight participants) while non-straight participants generally scored higher on the identification/self-analysis factor (Zsila, et al., 2018). These results imply that one of the reasons why straight men consume BL/*yaoi* could be because it is sexually arousing for them and they like how it is depicted. This seemingly is contradictory to the fact that they identify as straight, but Tagame Gengoroh, a well-known gay manga artist, notes:

The question is, which puts less pressure on men, coming out as gay or as a *fudanshi* who loves BL? Perhaps self-identifying as a *fudanshi* creates less pressure. Those who would have identified themselves as gay in relation to ordinary gender categories may now be inclined to say something like: “No, I’m not gay, but a *fudanshi*.” It would be problematic if the deep-rooted homophobia attached to gay sexuality per se could be easily evaded (or covered up) by the word *fudanshi*. (Yoshimoto, 2010, p.60)

Tagame Gengoroh brings up a worrying point as he hypothesises that the term *fudanshi* could render gay sexuality invisible, reflecting internalised homophobia and discriminatory attitudes towards gay men.

Another motivating reason might be how BL/*yaoi* goes against gender and sexual norms. Itō (2005) says BL/*yaoi* media goes against the notion that to be a “real man” you have to behave in an aggressive, authoritative and dominant way. These compulsory expressions of masculinity are being taught to young boys in school and this environment does not give them the opportunity to explore themselves in different ways than only being aggressive or dominant. This is where BL/*yaoi* become interesting as they

give these young boys and adult men a safe way to engage in behaviour that might deviate from hegemonic masculinity. Behaviour that might be socially imposed on them by what society views as the “natural” male role but what might feel unnatural for these straight *fudanshi* to perform.

How BL/*yaoi* challenges hegemonic masculinity

Yoshimoto (2008) also interviewed a few of the participants on why they like BL/*yaoi* and some of the *fudanshi* expressed that it helps them to subvert traditional masculinity:

BL/*yaoi* was a tool that my generation (I was born in 1970) could use to liberate ourselves from the pretence that we were tough guys. (p. 60)

This answer summarises the notion of subverting traditional masculinity and also shows how this genre in media played a huge role in these men’s lives. Of course these stories were still mainly targeted at women, so common narratives normally found in romance stories could also be found in BL stories especially. These narratives always include something like “pure love” and the idea that “they were meant for each other”. This gave *fudanshi* a way to consume works with themes in them that were normally meant for a female audience as Japanese patriarchy deemed masculinity as strictly opposite from such romanticism.

Moreover, BL/*yaoi* also seem to challenge sexual and gender norms, as Yoshimoto’s (2010) survey found that the majority of straight *fudanshi* preferred to imagine themselves in the *uke* (“receiver” or bottom). Not only the *uke* characters but also the *seme* (“attacker” or top) characters in BL/*yaoi* stories do exhibit a lot of traditionally feminine traits, internal and external ones, while their biological bodies obviously look and are male. Artists draw both *uke* and *seme* characters as *bishōnen*, with pretty faces, hairless bodies, and slim but lean figures. This implies a subconscious desire for feminisation and androgyny (Nagaike, 2015).

The *yaoi ronsō* and how it criticises BL/*yaoi*

The *yaoi* debate was a dispute held within the pages of a feminist zine (CHOISIR, 1994a, 1994b). This dispute involved two parties, namely female fans of BL/*yaoi* and gay men. This debate started with a gay man arguing that BL/*yaoi* was simply a way for women to depict gay men, a sexual minority, in fantastical ways by and for women belonging to a heterosexual majority and that it did nothing for gay men at large. He also stated that BL/*yaoi* did nothing more than sexualise gay men and create a skewed image of what gay men looked like (Lunsing, 2006). A female fan disagreed and responded by pointing out that gender inequality was still a big problem in Japanese society, in which a woman’s worth came from

their looks and how well they fulfilled a traditional female role, which includes activities such as cooking and cleaning. BL/*yaoi* gave them a fantasy to escape to when they needed to escape from all the expectations weighing them down, and this was only something male same-sex romances could do (Hori, 2013). *Yaoi* novelist Kaoru Kurimoto expressed a similar opinion and guessed that BL/*yaoi* was "a place where the gaze of men and society doesn't exist, and where they themselves—always the objects of that gaze—don't exist either" (Nakajima, 1991).

Another woman added her own personal experience to the debate. She was a former BL/*yaoi* fan but stopped consuming media like that because she felt guilty about how she used gay men as fuel for her own fantasies. She also used to be an *okoge* ("fag hag", referring to a woman who associates herself mostly with gay or bisexual men) and as she got to know gay people she became aware of her own discriminatory attitudes towards gay men and stopped reading BL/*yaoi*. Another fan replied that she could not just let go of this genre, as "she herself could never be entirely free, no matter how hard she tried to resist gender boundaries" (Hori, 2013). Gender was a big discussion point in this debate. Even though this debate does not include straight *fudanshi*, based on previously covered topics in this essay I would surmise that their opinions would agree more with the perspectives of female fans, than the gay men.

Conclusion

To summarise, straight *fudanshi* seemed to consume BL/*yaoi* for a multitude of reasons such as finding it aesthetically pleasing, it being a female-oriented media and, most notably, finding it sexually arousing (Zsila, et al., 2018). Another reason might be that BL/*yaoi* goes against sexual and gender norms and also defies hegemonic masculinity by showing subordinated masculinity in its contents (Ito, 2005). This gives straight *fudanshi* the opportunity to explore themselves by consuming media that traditionally is seen as more female-oriented. Naigake (2015) also notes that because the characters in BL/*yaoi* look very feminine while still being men, it portrays these characters as very androgynous, something normally not accepted by society as hegemonic masculinity does not allow for this. Some criticisms that BL/*yaoi* has received include the argument that this media only serves to sexualise gay men for the fantasies of straight women. Moreover, BL/*yaoi* also portrays gay men in an unrealistic manner and this could create unrealistic expectations of gay men. When examining all these different points, you could say that even though BL/*yaoi* gives these straight identifying *fudanshi* a safe space to escape from the expectations hegemonic masculinity pushes upon them, BL/*yaoi* is not without its own issues surrounding gender and sexuality.

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