

Lessons of Love from Asian Boys' Love
Investigating the Influence of Asian Boys' Love on Fans'
Views and Experiences of Real-life People and Relationships

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Abstract

The research in this thesis deals with the lessons that fans absorb from consuming media of the genre Boys' Love (BL) from Asia. BL that is produced in Asia is a genre of love stories between two men that attracts many young women in Asia and across the globe. As many young people's only source of material and information on male same-sex relationships, they become an influential space for knowledge production. The research into this topic contained one-on-one interviews and an online survey with participants from Vietnam, a country that has not received as much attention as other Asian countries on this subject. Through these interviews and its associated survey the attitudes of the fans reveal how open this group of Vietnamese fans is to absorbing elements from BL and transferring them to real life. Working with self-reflective comments and observations of other fans, their attachments to the characters and narratives showcase their understandings of fiction and reality and how they can be connected. Misconceptions about same-sex relationships are present in many stories and while some problematic elements stand out to the attention of some fans, other aspects go unnoticed. BL affects their lives by influencing how they view people in real life and how they view and build certain relationships. Fans learn to accept and normalize certain views and behaviors that stem from the BL narratives and the BL fandom. This thesis investigates the different fans' awareness of the fictionality of BL and in which knowledge from BL they transfer to real life.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research topic

The research topic of this Master's thesis is the Vietnamese fandom of the genre *Asian BL*. *BL* is short for *Boys' Love* and encompasses entertainment containing narratives of male same-sex romantic relationships. *Asian BL* is *Boys' Love* produced in Asian countries, mostly Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Vietnam and Thailand. Manga, novels (including fanfiction), games, music videos, songs and cosplay (Yang/Xu 2017: 3) as well as movies and series make up the media containing *Asian BL* and are consumed by a worldwide fandom. Young women are the main body of this fandom (Martin 2019: 5), though there are also men who consume it. Most notably, the stories are written and also produced by women (Jacobs 2012: 158). Added together, there are hundreds of thousands if not millions of women in Asia participating in the fandom and the fan activities such as consuming the stories, creating them, discussing their favorite stories, discussing fictional and real-life couples (Martin 2017: 195 ; Jacobs 2012) and attending fan meetings of movies and series where they can enjoy the actors' affectionate interactions, e.g. as seen in "(MeanPlan) – 2Wish Fan Meeting in Vietnam ♥♥" on YouTube. This video contains a compilation of moments with interactions between two actors who played a couple in a Thai series and their interactions with the attending fans.

1.2 Origins and spread of the genre

The genre originated in Japan in the 1970s (Martin 2019: 7) in the form of manga containing male same-sex relationships. Although there exist earlier works of literature containing homoeroticism from Japan (Angles 2011), it is the manga written by women in the 1970s that launched what became the current *BL* genre. These manga were written by women for young women and were imported to other Asian countries, gaining popularity through the spread of Japanese culture (Yang/Xu 2017: 3). The Japanese stories have also influenced the *BL* emerging in other countries, as Thomas Baudinette already states in the title of his article "*Lovesick, The Series: Adapting Japanese 'Boys Love' to Thailand and the creation of a new genre of queer media*" (2019), what became a very popular series in Thailand emerged as a story adapted from the more established Japanese narratives. After spreading to other countries through the imported manga, *BL* took hold in Taiwan in the 1980s (Martin 2019: 7), in China and Thailand in the 1990s (Baudinette 2019: 116; Zhou 2017: 93), with South Korea

and Vietnam most likely following a similar timeline like China and Thailand, though there is less literature on those countries.

To summarize, the emergence of BL and its introduction to multiple countries in Asia has its origins in Japanese manga and happened alongside the Japanese culture and entertainment spreading on the continent (Yang/Xu 2017: 3). However, the main expansion of the genre and the “formation of fan identity, the building of fan community” (Yang/Xu 2017: 4) took off with the development of the internet. Connecting with people and disseminating stories became continually easier and actions such as translating stories facilitated their spread to multiple countries.

1.3 Societal context

Most Asian countries still have a conservative society and same-sex relationships are often discriminated against or barely tolerated. Naturally there are also many people who accept same-sex relationships outside of the BL fandom, but a BL fan must live with the fact that most people around them would react badly to the content they consume. Stories of love between two of the same gender are frowned upon, socially unacceptable and even in some countries illegal. In countries where it is illegal, fans need to take care how they access the material at the risk of being prosecuted. As Katrien Jacobs points out in the context of China in “It Runs in the Rotten Family: Queer Love Amongst Animation Fans and Costume Players”, opposing parties such as governments and religious groups calling to censor or ban LGBTQ content make no attempts at trying to understand the fandom (Jacobs 2012: 160). In China and other more southern Asian countries, people can get fined by the government for accessing illegal content on the internet or arrested for producing what is considered provocative material.

However, this censorship does not mean a complete expulsion of BL. Fans have developed ways of acquiring the material in borderline legal ways and authors have managed to bypass censorship by utilizing code words in their novels (Yang/Xu 2017: 11), and drama producers have shifted the dynamics of the main same-sex relationships to more implicit expressions of affection. The element of risk and discrimination that consuming LGBTQ content holds in Asia is not a deterrent for the consumers, it simply moves the consumption into secrecy and hiding. For some it has even taken on a form of activism and mild rebellion, to be a fan of something that the majority around them would condemn.

BL is referred to as a genre by many of the authors I quote on Asian BL in this work (Martin, Baudinette, Jacobs, Chiang, Nagaïke). However, these authors did not explain in their texts why narratives of same-sex romantic relationships make up a genre or delineate its limits. While it is widely considered a characteristic of BL that it is made for and by women, the term has also been used for narratives that were not targeted towards women. In that regard, *BL* is also used as a term for all male same-sex related material in Asian entertainment and through that has become a label for a more general content. While it is clear to me that in themselves same-sex relationships in entertainment should not be treated differently than straight relationships, I will continue to call *BL* a genre in the context of Asia, because these stories are not simply narratives of same-sex relationships, they are embedded in a social phenomenon. *Asian BL* is an international genre which has inspired “subgenres” and “subcultures” (Martin 2017: 196), has sparked discussions and debates on various aspects of the content (Chiang 2016) and even brought about governmental involvement to enact censorship and regulations on it (Jacobs 2012: 160). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that next to the general male same-sex content which constitutes all the media in that category, *BL* is a signifier for a multi-layered phenomenon made up of fans with a profound attachment to male same-sex relationships.

1.4 Terms

There are several important terms around BL and Asian entertainment in general which require explaining. *Manga* are comic books and graphic novels originating in Japan (Merriam Webster). Based on what I have learned from observing the fandom, in the Asian context the word *series* is hardly used and instead most people say *dramas*. While I use the term BL, *yaoi* from the Japanese language, which refers mainly to BL manga, is also a word used in English to refer to BL content (Jacobs 2012: 153). The Chinese term for BL is “dan mei” (Yang/Xu 2017) and one of the Vietnamese terms for BL, which sometimes is meant to refer only to BL from China, is “đam mỹ”. From speaking with fans of BL, I have learned that some Asian fan communities use several terms for BL to differentiate between different types. The distinguishing features can be the stories’ country of origin, what type of media they are, etc.

There have also been different versions of what *BL* is short for. Katrien Jacobs used the words “Boy Love” in an early work on BL, Baudinette in his article above clearly wrote “Boys Love” and Chiang Feichi used the same version I do, *Boys’ Love*. *Boys’ Love* appears to be the

more common term, especially in recent years. The distinction between utilizing or omitting the genitive carries no weight as to the use of the acronym *BL*, but the connotation when reading Boys' Love implies that the love between the two boys is at the center of its meaning. As for the fandom, many women call themselves *fujoshi* (Baudinette 2019: 120), a word which also originated in Japan and has extended to China with *fu nü* (Zhou 2017: 93), meaning "rotten girl". The male equivalent *fudanshi*, meaning "rotten boy", is also in use (Nagaike 2019: 69). The fans in Vietnam call themselves "hủ nữ" and "hủ nam", meaning BL fangirl and BL fanboy respectively.

When it comes to the fans' enjoyment seeing or reading about two men being together, they use the verb "to ship" to express the fact that they like the relationship and the content around it. The fans can ship a couple in fiction or real life and they can ship two people who are not a couple, but who still have an intimate dynamic that an observer might enjoy seeing their interactions or might confuse them with a couple.

1.5 Research question

Through this research I aim to gather knowledge on the impacts of consuming Asian BL on the fans of the genre in connection with gender. What have the fans learned from Asian BL and how has it shaped their perspectives on and experiences of gender and sexuality? Asian BL is fiction and comes in different forms of media, so what are the fans' relationships to fiction and media and how do they translate them into real life? How critical are the fans of what they consume and how aware are they of the positive and negative themes in Asian BL and the fandom? More specifically, how have their relationships been affected and how might they perceive people differently?

1.6 Overview of thesis

This thesis is made up of five chapters, including this first chapter introducing the topic of research. a chapter with the relevant literature and theories on the topic, a chapter on the methodology of the research, a chapter with the analysis of the research data and a conclusive chapter on the research and the methods used. After this introduction, Chapter 2 – Theoretical Approach describes the concepts and approaches in academic literature which informed the research topic and provided a background to the research question. This includes a definition of gender and sexuality, other studies within the topic of Asian BL and

similar research concepts to the one used for this research. Chapter 3 – Methodological Framework explains the main components of the research: the research question, methodology and epistemology, research participants and research methods. These components assisted in clarifying the research process and maintaining proper research standards. Chapter 4 – Analysis goes into depth on the data collected in interviews and one survey while responding to the research question. This lengthy chapter is split into three subchapters “Relationship to BL as fiction and media”, “ Lessons from Asian BL” and “Relationships”. In Chapter 5 - Conclusion, I reflect on the research process, the analysis and how the research could be expanded upon in potential future work.

1.7 Academic relevance

The impact of Asian BL on its fandom is relevant to academic research because this aspect has not been explicitly studied yet. Some scholars have touched upon it in their works, but so far none have taken the time to extensively look into it. Doing research on the change of attitudes and views is especially important when it is on a subject which is stigmatized by the majority of a society and when the influence for this change comes from the media and popular culture. The BL fandom may very well be an important source for a growing acceptance of same-sex relationships in Asia because it brings same-sex content to people outside of the LGBTQ community. While this has not been proven and is not specifically part of this research, the potential for the fandom could mean a great deal for LGBTQ acceptance.

My interest in this field of study from an academic perspective has emerged during the time I spent immersing myself in this area of entertainment and gaining experience and knowledge of the phenomenon as a fellow - though geographically distant - consumer. Through observation I have learned many things about the western fandom of Asian BL and a little about the Asian fans. I have previously already done some research on the topic of Asian BL and its Asian viewers, because that is where I felt I needed to learn more. My former research gave me an insight into the Asian fan’s relation to BL and raised more questions in my head. In this research project I set out to answer some of these questions.

2 Theoretical approach

2.1 Definition of gender and sexuality

While the main focus of this research is Asian BL, the research question is aimed at experiences of gender and sexuality within the topic. It is therefore necessary to explain how I understand these terms in this research. I distinguish between sex and gender, wherein sex contains all aspects of the body which give indication to the sex, and gender contains all social aspects which make up gender. Gender is understood to be socially and culturally constructed and “is neither the causal result of sex nor seemingly as fixed as sex” (Butler 2002: 10). This means that someone’s gender is not determined by their sex, but by the surroundings in which they grew up and were socialized. Sexuality encompasses all aspects which have to do with a person’s sexual desire and attraction to other people and does not depend on their sex or gender.

In the context of Asian BL, there appears to be very little discussion among the fans on the distinction between sex and gender. Similarly, the topic of gender outside of the binary structure of man and woman has also not been observed in the fandom. However, many fans engage in discussions about real-life societal roles and expectations laid on men and women (Martin 2017; Nagaike 2019). Furthermore, there are different types of masculinities represented in the stories, for example the roles in a relationship of “seme” (top) and “uke” (bottom), which have been subjects of discussion among the fans (Yang/Xu 2017). In the stories themselves, the characters are often not referred to as homosexual or gay and the men express their feelings for other men without necessarily making a reference to their sexuality. The fans are therefore aware of the multiplicity and unfixed state of gender and sexuality, but are not aware of the discussion surrounding the relationship between sex and gender.

2.2 Existing literature of the BL fandom in Vietnam

The existing literature about Asian BL is full of studies with a wide range of subjects. The topic lends itself to many different aspects and interests which can be explored. The researchers and authors originate from both Asia and outside of the continent. However, the case studies are geographically concentrated within the countries of Japan, China, Taiwan and Thailand. I was not able to find any literature or articles about Vietnamese fans of BL or BL

that is produced in Vietnam. This does not mean, that no BL stories have been produced in Vietnam, but that these stories and the Vietnamese fan community have not received much attention from academics within Asia or from outside. This research is therefore at the beginning of the knowledge production of the Vietnamese BL fans.

2.3 Research into Asian BL

Despite the fact that the research in this paper is uncovering untouched ground, the most common inquiry into the subject of Asian BL in other countries will not be addressed here: why (young) women are drawn to narratives of male same-sex love. It is important nevertheless to describe the research which has been done in other countries and the published studies based on that question to gain insight into some of the researchers' findings. In texts about Japanese BL and its fandoms, it is described that for some women the consumption and creation of BL has a "sexually and socially empowering function" (Martin 2017: 199). BL becomes an outlet for them and their choice of sexual and emotional expression. In the context of Taiwan, Martin conducted interviews where the women explained how they projected the social repression they were experiencing in their families and their schools, and the resulting feeling of rebellion into the stories they consumed. In a lighter sense, these couples in love provide a break in the "established heterosexual norms in the mainstream culture" (Zhou 2017: 96). They offer novelty and an alternative to what might be considered very rigid societal roles based on normative heterosexuality.

What this understanding of BL and the function it fulfills for the fans does not take into account, is that producing BL is also a form of knowledge production. I argue that consumers learn from the material and may apply their knowledge on BL to real life, even though it is fiction and researchers call it that as well (Jacobs 2012; Jacobs 2019; Martin 2017; Chiang 2016; Yang/Xu 2017; Zhou 2017). This can be seen in case studies where the fans began to blur what was fantasy and what was real. A common pastime for the more passionate fans is to imagine that two men, who in real life are usually heterosexual and therefore not romantically involved, are in fact a couple (Zhou 2017: 93). More often than not these two men are celebrities, but fan might also create couples from their own circles.

In line with this subject, in "Counterpublic but obedient: a case of Taiwan's BL fandom" (2016) Chiang Feichi analyzed a particular dispute which took place on an online BL platform in Taiwan. The dispute was over whether stories of imagined couplings of real people should

be allowed on the site next to stories of fictional characters. Chiang puts this dispute into the context of scholarly work where BL fandom is referred to as “counterpublic” or at least “resistant” (Chiang 2016: 223). In this case study, Chiang describes an interesting understanding that the fans have of BL. Those opposed to the real-person couple stories being added to the fictional character stories reasoned that these real life couples did not belong within the genre of BL because BL should only contain fictional characters (Feichi 2016: 229). At the same time, these women were arguing that since the characters came from real life, the couples were also real life couples. This means that the fans were ignoring the fact that the couples were made up by the authors and the real life people were most likely not even homosexual.

Feichi did not always address this point critically, though, and focused more on how the opponents of real life characters insisted on containing BL within the realm of complete fantasy and were therefore displaying what she described as “a refusal to become part of a counterpublic” (Feichi 2016: 224). A “counterpublic” refers here to what academics have called communities who are drawn to BL because of its resisting and rebellious nature towards strict heterosexual societies (Feichi 2016). While this might be true for fans who did not want to move out of their fantasy worlds, the understanding that a character in a story is equivalent to the person who they were inspired by in real life, is an erroneous equation to mention casually as a fact. Some of the fans have recognized the fictionality of BL, though, and Feichi mentioned certain actors who spoke out critically of the BL fandom (Feichi 2016). This complicated dynamic shows how the fans’ relationships to reality based on the stories they read is a fruitful starting point for research into the fan’s relationship with BL.

2.4 Research on popular culture

This research investigates the impact of popular culture on people’s views and lives. The research question is based on the assumption that popular culture has an influence on its consumers and that through investigating people’s opinions and experiences of the media they consume, one can learn about their values and views. The latter is a research approach similar to Ien Ang’s published study “Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination” (1985) about the American soap opera *Dallas*. In the 1980s, Ien Ang conducted a survey in the Netherlands about what people thought about the soap opera *Dallas*. Ang gathered reactions and opinions of *Dallas* through a public letter in a newspaper and analyzed

the values behind their responses. The research for this paper uses a similar approach of collecting and evaluating data, though my subject is an entire genre, namely *Asian BL*, rather than a singular work.

Susan Emanuel puts her work into context of cultural studies and the emerging interest in mass culture in "Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*" (1992). Her work with the viewers' responses belongs within the research on popular culture, which at the time of publishing was becoming more recognized in the academic world. Ang's focus was less on whether the viewers' lives had been changed, but more on how their reactions to the soap opera reflected their ideologies (Emanuel 1992: 22). She also did not direct her line of questioning specifically to viewers who pronounced themselves as fans. But her work touched upon the question of how the viewers perceived the reality of the soap opera. Emanuel describes Ang's analysis of how the viewers position the soap opera in relation to reality and fiction (Emanuel 1992: 23). While the viewers were aware that the narrative in the series was overly dramatized and exaggerated, they still connected with the "values and ideals" (Emanuel 1992: 23) which they saw in the series. The aspects of reality and fiction are very prevalent in my research and what the fans' attitudes on this topic mean for the broader fandom.

Despite their controversial perspective on many subjects within Feminism, Postfeminist works about popular culture ring similarly to certain research previously mentioned about Asian BL, in that they focus on women as consumers and their freedom to consume at leisure (Negra/Tasker 2007). While Postfeminist culture is considered to be "white and middle class", it also works to create "the figure of woman as empowered consumer" (Negra/Tasker 2007: 2). This can be applied to the fans of BL, who become empowered by the consumption as well as the production of narratives that allow them to fantasize about relationships outside of their strict normative experiences.

Fan culture belongs within the field of popular culture, and research into it has provided many insights into the influence it can have on the fans. Heather J. Meggers' "Discovering the Authentic Sexual Self: The Role of Fandom in The Transformation of Fans' Sexual Attitudes" (2012) provides an example of the change in attitude which the individuals experienced through their fanhood. The study was based on an online survey targeted towards online media fans "to investigate the positive and negative sexual correlates of participation in online media fandom by women" (Meggers 2012: 59). She describes how fandom intersects with

sexuality, and the impact the two have in combination on individuals. The exposure to stories of same-sex romances lead the fans to become more accepting towards different sexualities. The participants described an increased openness, acceptance towards their own and others' sexualities, increased visibility and knowledge about different sexualities and enjoying the diversity of their online community in terms of lifestyle and sexuality. Through reading the fanfiction, the readers were "able to adopt the perspective of an out-group member" (Meggers 2012: 63) and learned to empathize with them. Some of the acceptance also came from engaging with community members with different sexualities, but some participants named fanfiction as a strong influence on their attitudes.

In the context of the Asian BL fandom, Jacobs documented similar statements from fans: "(...) the Boys' Love fictions helped me realize the diversity of genders and to respect gay people and to explore my own sexual orientation, to know that I have more options than going with heterosexual men" (Jacobs 2019: 45). The inquiry into the changing of attitudes towards different sexualities is a part of this research, though the question is not only whether the fans have become more accepting towards different sexualities through their fan activities, but also how they view the sexualities and the genders of the people around them through the influence of the genre.

3 Methodological framework

The structure of this chapter is based on the five steps detailed in Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr's first chapter of "Sozialforschung: Ein Arbeitsbuch": "Erkenntnisinteresse" – research interest, "methodologische Positionierung" – methodological positioning and Methoden – methods split into method of data collection and method of evaluation (Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2013). They intended these steps to be posed as questions the researcher should clarify before they began their research. These steps make up a comprehensive break-down of research projects and as I have used it to structure my methodology I have expanded on them to feature all relevant aspects of my methodological framework.

3.1 Research question

For the research, I am particularly interested in gaining more of an insight into the way the Asian fans of Asian BL experience the genre. The question which compels me to do this research is directed at how the fans of BL relate the content to reality and how it influences their views on gender: What have the fans learned from Asian BL and how has it shaped their perspectives and experiences of gender and sexuality? To be clear, rather than seeking to set up a timeline of changes in attitude before and after becoming a fan to detect a change, this question is a starting point to look at current views and behaviors which have their root in BL consumption. Because of the fictional nature of the media they, it is necessary investigate into their relationship with fiction and media, inquiring how true to life they consider it to be. What is their relationship to BL media and how do they translate it to real life? These questions depend on the awareness of the consumers, but this research aims to go a step further and probe the fans' ability to think critically about the media they consume and the fandom they observe. Therefore, how aware are they of the positive and negative themes surrounding gender and sexuality in Asian BL and the fandom? This question assists with answering the main question of the impact of Asian BL on its fans, because it can show how people have been influenced and uncover the values they have in connection with BL. To get closer to their experiences with gender and sexuality, it would require investigating the relationships they have and how they view people in their life. How have their relationships been affected and how might they perceive people differently?

3.2 Methodological positioning

Here I describe my methodological standpoint and the epistemology of my work. For a definition of methodology I turn to Lykke (2010: 144), who describes it as “*rules, principles and procedures* for the production of knowledge”. These methodological “rules” shape the method that is used in research, determining steps like choosing which material to include or exclude, what type of questions are necessary and here more specifically, keeping the subject of gender and sexuality present throughout the whole process. My methodology implicitly defined my research from the conception of my research question.

The research question and its sub-questions are broad questions which would yield subjective and personal responses. Because many of these views cannot be expressed in short responses, they require allowing for long explanations to be given and taking a close look at them afterwards. What is more, it is not possible to predetermine groups based on the question and topic, and commonalities only become recognizable when multiple people have shared their views. It is therefore necessary to mainly use qualitative research methods and evaluation methods. However, in this research I also made use of quantitative research methods to gather research participants and ask them certain questions on a large scale. While it was important in my research to search for personal experiences and changes in individuals, I also wanted to attempt to find out whether these experiences were echoed in a larger sample.

Quantitative research usually relies on a large number of cases, has deep roots in statistics and operates through cross-case analysis (Goertz/Mahoney 2012). Qualitative research usually, though not necessarily, engages with low numbers of cases in order to analyze individual cases in depth and use knowledge about a specific case only in relation with that case (Goertz/Mahoney 2012). My research question clearly necessitates a qualitative approach, but as Goertz and Mahoney point out, while quantitative and qualitative “traditions” are “alternative cultures” which are “associated with distinctive research procedures and practices”, they “are not monolithic blocks” (Goertz/Mahoney 2012: 7). In spite of the fact that many researchers keep quantitative and qualitative methods of doing research apart, I pursued my research questions with the methods which I considered were appropriate for the work I set out to do. A strict separation is hardly feasible and methods can spill over into either kinds of research.

When it comes to the epistemology of my work, which Lykke explains as “*criteria* for what constitutes scientific and scholarly knowledge” (Lykke 2010: 144), the main research question was conceived so that the “*criteria*” for the search of knowledge were connections to gender and sexuality, the relationship to fiction and its application to real life, and perceptions of people and relationships and the way these perceptions change. During my work, the research question and its sub-questions guided my perception of what scholarly knowledge was. My knowledge of the topic of Asian BL is influenced by my experience in consuming it and speaking with other fans about it. However, while different BL elements influence the individual fans, my research was not about discovering more about the genre itself, and because I was moving within the same topic throughout my whole research, there was no need to set up criteria to identify what constituted BL.

3.3 Target group

To be able to gather information I needed in order to answer the research question, it was most effective to address the fans themselves and ask them questions directly, instead of searching for comments and interactions on online forums. The fandom in the country of Vietnam proved to be the most accessible, as I had a Vietnamese contact there who could connect me to participants through Facebook groups. The Facebook groups where she shared my research project were “Erasmus Mundus Vietnam”, “Nhóm tìm việc làm và học bổng tại UK và EU - Find jobs and scholarships in UK and EU” and various Vietnamese fan sites such as “Hủ nữ - BL Fangirls” and “Ngôi Nhà Chung Đam Mỹ - Hủ Nữ - Common House for BL and BL fangirls”. These sites were chosen by her, since I did not know where the news of my research could spread more easily.

In total, 123 people participated in answering questions in a survey, and two of them also in an interview. The ages of the participants spanned between 13 and 37, with the most participants being between the ages of 18 and 30. The largest year group was made up of 23-year-olds and only a handful of people were under 18 or above 30. All of the participants were from Vietnam, though some of them lived abroad at the time of the research. None of the age groups stood out in connection with gender.

Of the participants there were 98 women, 19 men and 6 unknown. The question about their gender was left open, so they could answer how they liked. This led to some people disclosing their sexual orientation, rather than their gender, with five people writing “Gay”

and two people writing “Bi”. Among the five people who identify as gay, one of them did write in response to another question that they were a man. However, the gender of the other four people who wrote “Gay” and the two who wrote “Bi” remained unclear. Based on the knowledge of the fandom, it is more likely that those who wrote “Gay” are men, however, there are women who identify as “Gay” and might enjoy consuming BL.

To find interview candidates, I contacted people from the survey who displayed the most fluency in English and had left their E-mail address at the end of it. The content of their responses did not play a factor in the choice for interviews, so that the interview participants would be random as much as possible. After a few weeks and a follow-up E-mail I received a reply from two participants who both agreed to speak over an online call. They are both Vietnamese women studying abroad at the time of our interviews. I will continue to refer to them as Sara (19) and Amy (24), which are names I chose for them to protect their identity.

3.4 Method of gathering data

The research methods I used to collect data were through an online survey and through interviews. I utilized a questionnaire to learn about people’s opinions and views in what is called a “cross-sectional survey”, which represents “a particular population at a particular time” (Guthrie 2010: 79). I tested the questionnaire on my friend and Vietnamese contact as well as some of her colleagues, who gave me feedback and advice as to how to reach more people. At her recommendation I set up my questionnaire on Google Survey and she assisted me by translating it into Vietnamese and sharing it on Facebook. Google Survey proved to be a very useful application to set up a survey with a questionnaire which would be uncomplicated to fill out by participants and compiles the responses automatically. The survey contained “closed-response questions” and “open-response questions” (Guthrie 2010). The closed-response questions had pre-determined options such as *Yes/No*, one out of several and multiple-choice questions. My friend translated the open responses which were submitted in Vietnamese.

As previously stated, I contacted participants who appeared to write and speak English fluently or well enough to ask them for an interview. I conducted three “semi-structured interviews” (Guthrie 2010: 120), the first of which was a preliminary interview which informed and shaped the questions in the survey and interviews that followed, but which I did not use for my analysis. I prepared some of the same questions, and some individual open questions

based on their responses in the survey. During the interview I recorded our conversation on my phone and transcribed it later.

The most important criteria for choosing the research methods was the ability to ask the participants about their views and experiences (Guthrie 2010). The difficulty lay in the different kinds of questions which belonged in a questionnaire and in an interview. The survey was a very simple and comparatively short alternative to the interview, because there were more questions which only yielded *Yes/No* responses or other predefined choices and the open questions mostly yielded short typed responses. All questions in a survey context needed to be posed differently than the open questions of an interview. Many participants would rather be faced by simple questions which do not require long responses. The format and the simpler questions made the questionnaire more accessible, because it was technically unchallenging to fill out and did not require as much time or interaction with the researcher as an interview. The interview as a follow-up to the survey was an ideal chance to go into more depth into the questions posed in the survey, and to pose questions which would not fit in a questionnaire because of the lengthy explanations they required. A semi-structured interview allowed for an open, flexible interaction with the interviewee, while still producing points of comparison between the different interviews (Guthrie 2010). It also made it possible to ask questions directly related to the research question, keeping the interview within the research topic.

Protecting the identity of the research participants was very important throughout my research. I explained to the research participants that I was gathering the survey data only for my thesis, and included the use of a Form of Consent in the case of an interview. The form I prepared was a simple contract containing the agreement that all data that came from the interview could be used in my Master's thesis, and that all personal information would be altered so that it could not be traced back to the participant. Before each interview, I made sure to send this form to the participant so that we both had a signed copy, and I asked them whether they agreed to an audio recording being made of our conversation. The survey did not ask for the names of the participants, and in the survey description I also promised not to use the E-mail addresses they gave other than for contacting them, which I have held to. After storing all the data from the survey on my personal computer, I deleted it from the internet.

3.5 Method of evaluation

The interviews were analyzed from a qualitative standpoint, in order to look closely at the interviewee's words, which would allow for a personalized account of a fan's experience of Asian BL. The survey was analyzed mainly from a quantitative standpoint, so as to provide a broader picture of the fans' views. Some individual responses were also analyzed from a qualitative standpoint to bring their insightful answers to the forefront. I took advice from Guthrie (2010) to guide my analysis, though in order to stay open to the material that I was working with, I did not follow his guidelines strictly, but employed some of the steps he described in the evaluation process.

The interviews were recorded onto a phone and later transcribed into documents on a computer. The first step of analyzing the interviews was to examine the responses and mark them by topic, which created an overview over the material, as well as highlighting those passages that were relevant to the research topic. Afterwards, I marked key words in connection with the research topic such as "fiction", "character", gender and sexuality, as well as other words that were repeated, in order to investigate when and how these words were used. Then I compared the interviews for differences and similarities and also connected them back to the survey, as both women had completed it, and many questions and topics were similar. For the evaluation I intended to present the findings according to topic, and describe what was said in the interviews first and the survey in second place. This would create a more personal starting point and then move into a broader scope to create more perspective.

I set up the questionnaire on Google Survey, where the application provided certain services of evaluation. The application compiled the responses and offered the options of looking at a summary of the responses, looking at the responses to one question at a time, and looking at the individual participants' full answer sheet. I used all three options to evaluate the data and transferred what I needed onto other worksheets to produce more of an overview. In the summary version of the survey, the results were shown in tables and graphs where the responses were based on numbers and simple responses such as *Yes/No*. With certain questions belonging to the same section, I evaluated them in two ways, looking at the questions separately and in connection with the others of the same section. Singling out certain questions was important when they turned out a noteworthy proportion of *Yes* to *No* answers, for example. Re-examining them in combination with other responses provided more depth to the participants' views.

4 Analysis

4.1 Relationship to BL as fiction and media

4.1.1 Personal views

It makes the most sense to begin with the fans' relationship to fiction and media, because the content of the interviews is based on this relationship. Both of the women who I interviewed displayed a very differentiated attitude towards BL as fiction. Based on their own self-assessment when asked whether they considered the stories to be realistic or applicable to life, they mainly replied in the negative, declaring outright that they did not consider them to be real:

Sara: "It does not really happen in real life. I mean, in that way. (...) it is definitely fiction."

Amy: "For the story, I will separate it, (...) for the story I will just consider it as a story."

Reading BL was mainly an entertainment and stress reliever for both of them, and they implied many times during the interview that they separated the stories from their real life. In the survey some participants voiced similar views in response to the question of what some negative aspects of BL or the BL fandom were. The negative aspects that they named about the BL content were not aimed at all BL stories as some explain, but at the ones which they considered a negative part of the genre. The words "unrealistic" and "reality" came up multiple times:

"some stories are too far from reality" (translated)

"Too unrealistic. When the art is too far from reality, I think it will no longer be able to influence reality, whether positive or negative" (translated)

"Unrealistic description of gay relationship" (translated)

"obsession with unrealistic endings, that protagonists live happily ever after"

In response to a different question in the questionnaire which asked the participants what they had not read or seen often in BL and wished that there were more of, one participant wrote this:

“What I find lacking is REALITY. Chinese stories and movies are really illogical. Thai and VN are a little closer to reality, but the problem is the whole youth and school things. In real life, how many people love each other like that? And using dating apps, which are an integral part of gay scenes anywhere, is almost completely forgotten in BL Asia.” (translated)

This male participant evidently knew about gay scenes in real life to mention this particular aspect of meeting men. The fact that there are many BL stories which are not realistic for various possible reasons is clear to many consumers. The questionnaire contained a section titled “Story to real life” with four questions for the participants to reflect on their views of how realistic BL is. They were asked whether they thought BL stories were realistic, whether they wanted them to be realistic, whether they applied the stories to real life or whether being a fan had ever impacted a life choice they had made.

The questions only had the options to answer Yes/No and both Sara and Amy replied to the questions in the same way. They did not think BL stories were realistic, though they wanted them to be, and they neither applied BL stories to real life or had made a life choice influenced by their consumption of BL. I questioned them about their responses in our interview and they expressed their expectations of stories containing realistic elements such as there not being any unnecessary drama (Sara) and the personality of the characters developing throughout the story (for Amy). In other words, while both women wanted to read about characters and plots that they could accept as realistic, in their minds they kept these stories within the realm of their own fictionality.

When fans consider even one element from a fictional work is realistic, for example a sequence of events, this could still unconsciously influence how they view people in real life despite their awareness of what is real and what is not. Taking into consideration that Sara has been reading BL more or less for five years and Amy for nine years, this will most likely have left its mark on them. Especially when their main source of information on male same-sex relationships has been BL and social media. Sara explained that beginning her studies in the UK two years ago was the first time that she had a friend who was LGBTQ and had seen same-sex couples holding hands or kissing on the street. Amy stated that she did not have any people in her surroundings who were LGBTQ except for a relative whom she was not close to. Certainly, it would be a mistake to dismiss the women’s assessment that they do not apply the stories to real life, as they probably actively differentiate between the stories and real life,

and it means that they view BL media from a critical perspective. However, it is very likely that they have absorbed certain information unconsciously.

The results of the survey showed that 84.4% of the participants wanted BL to be realistic, while only 56.6% thought that it is. Some participants later elaborated that while they do not expect supernatural stories with magic or time travelling to be realistic, they expected the relationship of the main couple to be realistic. This means that a realistic representation of male same-sex couples is important to most of the participants and probably expected of the stories, while among them the opinions differ on whether BL lives up to this. As for the latter two questions about applying BL to real life, almost the same percentage of people responded in the same way to both questions: 32% and 30.1% respectively, so a little less than a third of participants apply things they have read/seen or learned from BL in real life and state that them being a fan has impacted a life choice they have made.

As for the replies in combination with each other, Sara and Amy belonged to one of the two largest groups of participants who replied in the same way to all four questions. The largest amount of participants (22%) wanted BL to be realistic and considered BL to be that, but they did not apply it to real life or make life decisions based on it, and after them came Sara and Amy's group (20.3%). I would argue that the two most significant groups by amount echo Sara and Amy's view of BL to a certain extent. The first question is the only one where these two groups were not in agreement, and this might have to do with two problems: the problem of whether the requirements for even consuming a particular story make the story realistic, and the problem of when a story and a couple is realistic when only certain elements appear real to the viewer/reader. All of the participants wanted the story to be realistic, so perhaps those who chose to respond with *Yes* did so because they searched for and only consumed stories that appeared realistic to them based on their criteria. When it comes to the elements which are considered realistic or not, there can be aspects of couples and storylines which fulfill the criteria of the reader, but still do not lead them to consider the story as realistic. Perhaps this is because, like Sara and Amy, those participants view BL mainly as fiction and an entertainment, even if some elements appear realistic, such as this participant who commented at the end of the questionnaire:

“BL is just one way of entertainment for me, just like reading romantic mangas. Some may not be realistic, but I enjoy the plots, the arts and want to know how the artists/writers develop the stories as well as the characters' feelings. (sic)”

After these two main combinations, there were three more groups that stood out among the others. The next largest group of 18 people (14.6%) responded with *Yes* to every question. 14 people (11.4%) responded similarly to that group, with only the last question coming up negative. Another 14 replied to all of them in the negative. The two groups of participants who replied mostly in the affirmative only differed on the fact that BL had never influenced a decision they had made in life. This does not mean that the participants automatically consider all BL to be realistic. The question is whether they focus on those stories that appear realistic to them and how they assess the realistic or unrealistic elements. Some of the participants voiced critical opinions in other parts of the survey that concern certain BL being unrealistic. The participants were usually aware of the realistic shortcomings of BL stories, but to answer these questions they probably chose to focus on that which is realistic or has the potential to be realistic.

The 14 people who replied in the negative to all four questions possibly do not have any expectations of realistic storylines, and do not view them as realistic because they enjoy the fact that BL is not real. They might prefer to consume stories which are far away from their experienced reality and allow for elements which are not possible in real life. While some of the participants in this group were not fans of BL as much as others and explained in their other responses that they view BL as just another genre of entertainment, there were other self-proclaimed “hard-core” fans among them. This goes to show that the intensity of the consumers’ attachment does not appear in proportion to how they connect it to real life.

4.1.2 Views of others

Many participants wrote in the survey and spoke in the interviews about certain other fans’ behavior in response to the previously mentioned question about the negative aspects of BL and the BL fandom. Next to personal opinions and the self-reflective questions, this provided a second-hand account of those fans who differentiated less between fiction and real life. Many participants related their observations of other fans’ inability to tell fiction and reality apart:

“Some fans just don't distinguish between stories and real life”

“I see many people have misconceptions about homosexual love because they only read BL stories and apply it to reality” (translated)

Amy: “Toxic. Sometimes, they cannot differentiate the reality and stories, bring some illustration from stories to the life. Moreover, some stories will break their moral standard...”

“As for the negative issues, sometimes readers under the age of 18 have false and misleading delusions about gender identity, sexuality and homosexual love” (translated)

“people impose the stereotype of the homosexual relationship from BL stories on LGBTQ people in real life”

More specifically, what many fans do after becoming engrossed by a drama they are watching with two male lead characters, is to imagine that the two actors playing them are also in love. This gets to a point, where some of them believe that the two men are in a relationship, because they liked to see them so much as a couple in the drama. The same thing goes for two men in real life who are not actors, but every-day people who the fans meet on the street.

“they go overboard when seeing some random handsome guys together and try to put them as couple saying like ‘This one must be bot and the other must be top.’ I find that extremely rude and delusional.”

“BL fans are too passionate, ship every male couple who walk together and make people feel awkward” (translated)

“People tend to go crazy about it and start shipping men as a couple even though these men are straight.”

“Immature fans tend to force every boys in real life to be gay, therefore make non-boylove fans disgust against boylove. (sic)”

“they try to make every boys arounds be gay (sic)”

There was one fan who was aware of her own behavior in regards to shipping real-life people and its consequences.

“When I'm a BL fan, I see BL everywhere. I and my friends often ship boys for fun. However, when boys hear this, they are not happy. I'm very sorry to upset them.”
(translated)

This woman clearly understood that her and her friends' pastime went against the wishes of the men who they paired together. Even though she expressed her regret at upsetting them, she preceded this with the explanation that she saw BL everywhere she looked, which implies that she has begun to involuntarily project same-sex relationships into her surroundings.

Behind the behavior of not separating the fiction of BL from reality, which the fans describe as “overboard” and “crazy”, is very similar to that of some women described in Chiang Feichi's study. In her study, the women considered made-up couples based on real life people to be real gay couples. For the Vietnamese fans, it almost seems like all that is written becomes real to them as described by the survey participants. Evidently there are members of the fandom who do not question what they consume, perhaps due to how immersed they are in the relationships that they enjoyed. This is also likely subject to change, with more life experience the fans may learn to differentiate better.

The research participants who submitted these responses show that they can remain critical of what they are consuming and of the others who consume the same material. They are also able to recognize when others have a different sense of what is realistic compared to themselves and that their sense of reality has been shaped by the material they have consumed. They have shown that they and other fans are aware of the fact that they have been influenced by BL stories. The next step is to investigate the lessons they learn from the narratives of this genre.

4.2 Lessons from Asian BL

4.2.1 The fans' position toward learning

After examining how the consumers relate to media and how they translate it to real life, it is necessary to gather the information which they learn from BL. Some fans might consume for the purpose of learning about certain circumstances and even those who do not seek knowledge will still absorb elements from the stories. This has already been proven in the previous analysis of the fans' relationship to media. This knowledge which the fans actively or inadvertently take in will be the topic of this chapter.

Many fans are aware themselves of the fact that they can learn from consuming BL. For example Sara, who despite the fact that she declared that the storylines in BL were not life-like to her, did search for stories with characters who appeared realistic to her and from whom she could learn.

Sara: "It has a lot to do with when I read something, I want to learn why they did that. Because they have that kind of childhood, because they grew up in that kind of family, so when something happens to them they will decide based on their personality, so I always learn in that way."

Sara sees learning potential in reading stories where she can gain insight into how a person might react to an occurrence based on their personality. In other words, she considers the stories to be learning studies as well as an entertainment. For those consumers who are interested in gaining knowledge and do not search for stories that will only entertain, BL could be a space of positive education. This is also supported by other participants of the survey, in response to an earlier question concerning whether there was anything which they had not or rarely ever read/seen in BL, of which they would have liked there to be more.

I had originally intended this question to reveal what kinds of topics and issues in BL the fans were aware of. However, the question mostly uncovered wishes for elements that were more for entertainment than for learning. These responses contained wishes for more of certain storylines and kinds of relationship dynamics or expressed the desire for better literary quality such as character development and more meaningful themes. This does not mean that these participants do not wish to learn anything from BL, but they appear to be less aware of the potential to gain knowledge from it. A few of the responses did mention specific topics

which the fans wanted to learn about or considered to be important information that others could benefit from. Amy for example briefly wrote “History” in her questionnaire and later expressed the wish to read more historical novels containing BL storylines, because this made it easier and more enjoyable for her to learn about historical events or time periods.

Amy: “I did mention about the history in the stories, because in my country the history lectures were not that attractive, but when I read something in a Chinese story, a boy love story and they mentioned the history, I remembered that this historical event actually happened. It was very nice for me to read that in the story and I can remember it.”

The notion that it is easier to learn something while doing an activity which is fun is not new and in the case of BL it makes all the more sense that it would be easier to follow a historical event when it is embedded in a story. The same is true for other information that could be transmitted through BL. Other written responses in the survey included Sara’s contribution:

“For me, I read BL to have a better understanding of romantic relationships.”

“I wanna read more stories of building a nation, policies,... for a community (sic)”

“The announcement of LGBTQ right recognition by authorities or governments (sic)”

“Struggle of being gay in society, not just love”

Sara: “I really want to know how the character come out with family and society, if the authors can focus on psychological reaction and thoughts and the way other react when the characters come out, including parents, friends, etc) rather than only the love journey of the main characters. (sic)”

“Propaganda about STDs” (translated)

“I want comic BL mention more about safe sex and using condoms” (translated)

These are all topics which are grounded in real life issues, which not only show that the fans are seeking more realistic elements in the stories, but that they also hope to see same-sex relationships embedded in real life so that they can see how this would look. To be clear, the first quote was written by a man, the third was written by a person who is gay and the

second last one by a man, with the remaining all written by women. So if these elements were not only there for representation but also because the writers wanted to learn more about them, then that would mean that the fourth writer wanted to understand better what it was like to struggle with one's sexuality. People of both genders were concerned about the information surrounding safe sex for same-sex couples. It should be considered, though, that lessons in protected sex will also benefit heterosexual relationships in certain aspects.

4.2.2 Problematic lessons

At the core of most BL narratives is the deep bond that the men have with each other and the acts they will do for their love. Many stories fill the imaginations of the fans with images of sweet affections and passionate lovers. These are all harmless, albeit often overly dramatic expressions of emotion. I would like to focus on the more problematic images that BL spreads about romantic relationships, because these pose bigger issues when the fans project these onto men in real life. Several of the responses about the negative aspects of BL and the fandom mentioned potentially detrimental information which fans could absorb. Sara first wrote in the survey about a particular fictional element in BL which could spread misinformation if taken seriously.

Sara: "The over and incredible imagination of some author like boys can give births. It definitely makes the stories more attractive, but some teenagers may have a wrong knowledge about the gender body and anything related. (sic)"

In some stories, the authors create male characters who are able to conceive and give birth to children. These are not cases of trans-men who continue to have female reproductive organs or men who have a non-binary anatomy which exists in real life, but fictional imaginings which allow for a male same-sex couple to have a child which is biologically related to both of them. When I questioned her about whether she had observed any fans who believed that this was possible, she replied in the negative, but explained why she was concerned that young readers would learn wrong information about the male body. Sara related that although she did not come across any fans who commented on a forum who believed that men such as above existed in real life, she recalled what it was like for her as a younger woman to come across this type of character in a BL story.

Sara: “Because I was a teenager and I did not have any sexual education and that time I thought ‘wait what?’ when I read that. Then I had to do all the research again by myself, because if I had not done the research at that time, I definitely would have had the wrong knowledge about the male body. Especially when you are Asian, you do not get the sexual education as when you are in Europe, I mean, definitely not when you are thirteen or fourteen.”

According to her own words, Sara’s assumption about the younger fans learning false information is based mainly on her own experience of having once been that age and knowing the state of young teenager’s sexual education in her area. There appear to be many young women who will quickly apply what they read in fiction to real life and she is not alone with this concern. Amy made a similar statement about how young fans will learn wrong information.

Amy: “(...) the relationship between for example father and son. So it will distort a little bit the real feelings of people who have no solid personality, so they will change a little bit and they start to think that father and son can have a real relationship but it’s not true. And in a lot of stories, they will force the other one to love them (...) well they did something in secret to make the other boy be his, it’s not nice, but they will use some drug or medicine. (...) And they (the fans) will support that, believe me they really support that, without any reason, just because it comes from the stories. (sic)”

Amy was speaking about romantic relationships between a father and his son, and was describing the views of the fans whom she observed on the internet, but to whom she had not spoken personally. On these fan pages and forums the fans would be discussing the fictional couples and she was referring to those cases where they were showing their support for BL stories containing incest and forced sexual acts. Other survey participants echoed her words, voicing their apprehension over these narratives.

“There are some extreme types of BL, such as father-and-son (incest), or male characters (...) who can give birth” (translated)

“Many rape actions are carelessly looked over in BL stories. (sic)”

“In some mangas, boys are being raped by their friends, acquaintances or even strangers but after that, they have feelings and relationships with the rapers instead of reporting that crimes.”

I was aware of the many stories containing rape and other nonconsensual actions in BL, where one man, usually determined as the “top”, forces themselves sexually on the “bottom” without their consent and does other things in the relationship that are against the “bottom’s” wishes. Therefore in the questionnaire, I had also asked the participants what kind of BL they enjoyed consuming and prepared nine possibilities they could choose from. After the options “Sweet, cute relationship”, “Passionate” and “Sexually explicit” came “Forced, rough”. I intended to avoid using the word *rape* outright, because they might not see these acts as such and hoped to learn how many people enjoyed reading stories where forced and rough acts occurred in a relationship. This was differentiated from a rough storyline through adding the options “Exciting, adventurous” and “Serious, thriller”. The participants could choose multiple options and 24 of them (19.5%) chose “Forced, rough” among others. So evidently there are a considerable amount of women accept and enjoy seeing this in a story, whether they distinguish them from real life or not.

Another widespread misconception of same-sex couples is that a couple is made up of the two roles “top” and “bottom”. During my interview with Sara, she used those terms to specify types of characters who she enjoyed reading about in novels. I do not have the impression, that she genuinely thought of a same-sex relationship that way, however the characters have been conceived within these terms in so many stories, that it has become a part of distinguishing the characters from one another in BL. Other comments on this topic include:

“the guy on top is always rich” (translated)

“They get so into the visual and the plot that they had a stricly mindset of their own about LGBTQ. Dammei/BL fan mostly think that the person who look small, cute, feminine is the bot in the relationship while the one who look tall, strong will most likely be the top. (sic)”

This view of same-sex couples was hardly criticised by the participants and this is possibly because it has become so ingrained in the fans’ understanding of BL couples that they are not

aware of alternatives or that it could be a problematic view of same-sex relationships. Other participants' concern was especially directed at younger BL fans reading the stories containing narratives such as above and applying them to real life:

“I see many people have misconceptions about homosexual love because they only read BL stories and apply it to reality (...)” (translated)

“(...) sometimes readers under the age of 18 have false and misleading delusions about gender identity, sexuality and homosexual love (...)” (translated)

“fans are too young, which affects their way of thinking” (translated)

Among the survey participants there were eight who were younger than eighteen, with the youngest being thirteen years old at the time. I also asked the participants at what age they had begun to consume BL. There were many more who had begun very early, even as young as eleven years old. As it turns out, almost two thirds of the participants had discovered BL before they were eighteen years of age. There was one participant who claimed to have first come across it at nine years old, but did not search for BL content until she was twelve. The participants' concern, partially based on their own experience as with Sara and partially on the fans whom they can observe, is not unwarranted considering the numbers of young beginners explained above. Even though they might not necessarily know the age of the fans they meet on the internet, they might assume that the disconcerting views were shaped early in the fans' life. This cannot be discussed in detail here as there does not exist enough information at present, but I would argue that while it is understandable to worry about young readers, it is important to consider that so many former young readers spoke out critically and in a differentiated way about BL in the questionnaire. Age cannot be the only deciding factor as to how the stories are absorbed.

These findings show that there are many fans who lack the education and critical thinking to separate what they read from real life and there exist many problematic teachings in BL which go unchecked. Especially when it comes to stories of forced sexual acts, the fans can learn to accept rape in a same-sex relationship or even a heterosexual relationship because they assume that it is a part of them because they have read or seen it in the BL stories. The same can be said of other misconceptions about same-sex relationships. The ones that I have highlighted are the more harmful examples, the misconception about “tops” and “bottoms”

even appearing to have gone unnoticed in the most part of the survey. In my research and in all of my examples I have relied heavily on the negative aspects of BL, because I am convinced that these misconceptions have the potential to harm both people from the LGBTQ community and BL fans because of the rebuke that they might experience for spreading false information. The fans' relationships to the characters and to real-life people will be the subject of the next chapter.

4.3 Relationships

4.3.1 Views on queer people in real life

After examining some of the relationships that are affected by being a fan of BL, I would like to take a look at how the fans' perception of people within the LGBTQ community is influenced by BL. While this includes the relationships which the participants have with somebody of the LGBTQ community, not all of the fans have a relationship with somebody who is queer or are aware of a queer person in their vicinity. I would still like to discuss this topic within Relationships of BL, though, because the presence or absence of a relationship with a queer person is also relevant to this chapter.

Even though I did not ask the survey participants whether they had any queer individuals in their surroundings, based on the fact that it is very difficult to be openly queer in Vietnam in certain places, I would estimate that many of the participants have never met or interacted with an individual of the LGBTQ community. This means that BL may be the only source of information for them. Those who are not able to distinguish between fiction and reality might imagine that real-life couples are just like in the stories they read and watch. Next to the affectionate and passionate relationships that are more or less life-like, there are more problematic images of same-sex couples that they can internalize. Normalizing or downplaying rape and violence within a relationship and incestuous relationships are issues that some fans have recognized. The necessity of a "bottom" and a "top" in a relationship was hardly questioned by a participant in the survey, though.

As for the men who participated in the survey, they are more likely to meet other queer men on the internet, but for those who consume BL for the information on same-sex relationships that they have not received in other places, BL is their only impression of these relationships. While several men voiced their criticism of BL in the survey, it is not possible to determine whether all of the male participants and those who identify as gay are able to recognize what is realistic and what has been altered for fiction.

These misconceptions might be transferred to their impressions of real-life same-sex couples, but as many people do not encounter them or at least not for many years such as with Sara and Amy, same-sex attracting men could possibly continue to exist only in the media for them. Therefore the misconceptions, but also men with same-sex attraction would remain within the realm of fiction, until they met somebody from within the LGBTQ community.

In spite of the negative aspects of BL mentioned above, it is also important to inquire whether BL has made the consumers more accepting of same-sex relationships. All participants except for nine responded affirmatively to this inquiry in the questionnaire, both men and women. Of some of those who did not, they explained that they do accept same-sex relationships, but that it was not due to consuming BL. One man stated that he had chosen Yes, because he had seen a woman becoming an “ally” through BL. Sara stated in our interview that what impacted her views of people within the LGBTQ community most were the experience of studying in a country where she observed same-sex couples in public as well as her friend coming out to her and their continued open friendship. Reading BL had played a smaller part in comparison. On the other hand, one of Amy’s extended family members came out, so she experienced firsthand the troubles that occurred when many family members could not accept this person’s sexuality.

It becomes evident that personal experiences in real life have a stronger impact on a person’s perception than the media that they consume. For all those who do not have these experiences, they run the risk of not only being misinformed, but also of confining these couples to the media and their minds when they exist in a different way in the real world. While consuming BL to learn about male same-sex couples and becoming more open to them in the process is very important, BL is full of false information and many fans do not have the awareness to recognize this.

4.3.2 Relationships to fictional people

The influence which BL can have on the relationships of the fans partially depends on how strong their attachment to the genre is and how much information they absorb from it. Usually being a fan can impact especially close relationships in different ways. In this chapter I will examine the ways that BL may or may not influence the fans’ relationships in connection with the insights gained in the previous chapters.

I would like to begin with the relationships that some fans have with people who exist only in the media. Fans are likely to learn from BL when they grow an attachment to the characters, because they attach meaning to these imaginary people. Results from the survey suggest that fans can become very attached to the characters they come to know in the stories, and in the case of movies and dramas, attached to the actors outside of their roles. In order for them to reflect on their own attachment, they were asked whether they felt connected to or close to

some characters in BL, whether they ever wanted a character to be real so they could ask them for advice and whether they ever identified with a character in a story, and to name examples to any of the questions.

As for the first three questions, Sara had responded with *Yes* to the first question and *No* to the other two. In our interview she described the impact that a particular character had on her as a person to look to for support.

“(…) one of the characters there, actually he’s not really my favorite, (…), but he helped me a lot in my life when I was suffering from any sad or bad thing because he is in a bad situation (…). He is inspiring me to look forward, (…) he is not really my favorite, but he helps me a lot. (sic)”

The character she spoke about was from a book which she would read to feel better when she was experiencing a difficult time. Even though she was well aware that this character is fictional, she still valued his mentality and applied his words in her personal life. This might appear to contradict what she had previously stated about not applying BL stories to real life, however she had clarified in our interview that she differentiated between the stories and the characters being realistic and applicable to life. She did not consider the stories to be realistic, but they contained characters who were real to her and who she could turn to for emotional support.

Amy had not developed a strong emotional connection to any characters and based on her responses had only identified with one of them, which she elucidated as an admiration for his skills and an appreciation for his character. She appears to separate the BL content even more from her real life than Sara, though she still values the characters. Among all of the survey participants there will naturally be different kinds of attachments to the characters and stories, as partially evidenced by the questionnaire. To determine the exact nature of different emotional attachments through these questions is not possible, and would require an interview to give the participants the opportunity to explain their thoughts in greater depth.

Among the other participants, 62.6% responded to the first question with *Yes*, claiming to feel close to or connected to some of the characters. A little more than half (54.5%) stated that they have identified with a character, and 45.5% wished that a character was real so that they could ask them for advice. In effect, the majority of participants displayed an attachment

of some sort to characters they had seen or read about. Almost three quarters of the participants had at least a small emotional attachment to the characters. This means that a little more than a fourth did not feel connected to any characters, even though some of them still named a character they liked in the last question.

As for those who displayed a stronger connection to some characters, a third (33.3%) replied affirmatively to all three questions, meaning that they have experienced different ways of connecting with BL characters and wish to communicate with them if they could. Two people explained their views in the fourth question:

“(character), I see myself in him. I feel sympathy for him since I have also experienced the same problem.”

“Well I think I kinda have a fantasy of my future boyfriend/husband after reading BL stories (...). Not the type of ridiculously rich main actor or something, but I really value their personalities and how they react when encountering problems. (...) (sic)”

In the first of those two quotes the writer apparently had experiences in common with the male character she was referring to, which was why she could connect and identify with him. In the second quote on the other hand, the participant was not referring to who she connected with or identified with, though she had previously replied in the affirmative to all questions. Instead she declared that her “fantasies” of any future men she wanted to be in a relationship with were influenced by the personalities of the BL characters. In other words, these male characters were setting an example for her and the same-sex relationships were influencing the way she saw heterosexual men.

Overall, the gender of the participants was not a deciding factor in whether they felt an attachment to the characters. There were both men and women who chose *Yes* at least once and who chose *Yes* three times. Added to that, both men and women chose *No* three times. This means that men do not necessarily become attached to characters, even though they may have in common that they both are attracted to men. Some men might appreciate BL and like the characters solely for that commonality and because they enjoy the representation of male same-sex relationships, but for others the personality of the characters and their experience plays a stronger role in determining whether they become attached to them and learn from them.

4.3.3 Relationships to people in real life

Due to the fact that same-sex relationships are still discriminated against by the majority of society in Asia, being a fan of consuming stories about them usually means that you have to keep it a secret. This secrecy can determine and affect close personal relationships and produce new ones on virtual platforms like online fan community. There were a few questions in the survey on this topic, asking whether they met friends and built networks in the fandom and took part in discussions and debates around BL with other fans. Most importantly, they were asked whether they kept the fact that they watch BL a secret and if *Yes*, who they did or did not tell.

Both of the first two questions could only be answered with *Yes* or *No*. Over half of the participants (58.5%) responded affirmatively to the first question and even more participants (63.4%) responded affirmatively to the second question. This means that in terms of numbers, many people engage in networking and debating with others, but among the participants overall there is still a considerable amount of people who have not built any relationships within the fandom or discussed their opinions with other fans. This might also be due to the fact that, as explained in the previous analysis of the participants' perception of reality in BL, the behavior of the fans and the intensity of their attachment to the couples or the genre are not seen favorably by everybody in the fandom.

The third question was open so as to allow the participants to be specific in explaining who they do or do not tell. 18 (14.6%) participants stated that they hide it, which most likely means that they keep it a secret from anybody who is not a fan, considering that they are taking part in an anonymous survey spread on an online BL platform. Similarly, other participants wrote that they only share the fact that they are fans with other fans. Half of the participants explained that they do not keep it a secret. Many of them tell their friends, close friends or partners, while most of them "hide it" or "do not share it" with their family, especially older generations. A couple of people declared that they had a family member with whom they could talk about it a little. 12 (9.8%) people stated that they do not actively hide it and they would be honest if somebody were to ask them about it, they simply do not "announce it" or "brag about it".

It is very likely that this is an attitude which most fans adhere to, considering that outside of the fan activities and the fan community the topic of same-sex couples is probably hardly mentioned and BL even less. There is also a difference in how the participants wrote about

their situations: “not sharing” and “hiding”. Not sharing implies more of a passive omission, while hiding indicates actively keeping the information from their peers. Depending on the participant’s living situations, and especially considering how children in Asia live with their parents until their late 20’s or early 30’s, the parents are more or less likely to find out by accident what their child is consuming. For those who simply do not share with their parents, it is not quite clear whether they might also be honest and disclose it to their parents when asked and also would not be worried if their parents found out on their own.

The way that the need for secrecy impacts a relationship is not necessarily the fact that one party does not know that the other party is a fan, because a relationship that is built up on other information might function well without knowing certain things about the person. I would argue that what impacts a relationship more is the risk of the relationship changing or breaking off should the person learn about the fan’s hobbies and possible sexuality. Based on the participants’ responses, the older generations are the most likely to react badly, though many peers might as well.

5 Conclusion

Returning to the research question: What have fans learned from Asian BL and how has it shaped their perspectives and experiences of gender and sexuality?

Starting from the point of how fans view fiction and media, the research has shown that many Vietnamese fans see BL as fiction and consider certain stories to be unrealistic. At the same time, most fans would like BL to be realistic. Among them are those who think that some of it is realistic and others who do not. For those who expressed in the survey that BL was realistic, this does not necessarily mean that they are not aware of the fact that it is fiction, but that there are certain elements which they would consider to be true to real life. At the same time, there are other fans who are not able to distinguish between stories and real life, because they are too young to do so. This overlap into life can be seen when fans pair real-life men of their choosing into couples in their imagination and express these fantasies.

There are fans within the research group who are aware that they can learn from BL, such as about relationship dynamics, historical events, politics or safe sex. They also appear to be aware to a certain extent of the fact that they also learn about gender and sexuality. However, according to an interviewee, many young women have not received a sufficient sex and anatomical education to know at a glance that male characters (who are not described as trans-men) who conceive children are entirely fictional. Elements such as incest and rape in a relationship are accepted by some fans, which would be a very harmful mentality to transfer to real life, whether to same-sex or heterosexual couples.

Many fans have never met anybody from the LGBTQ community, which means that attractions between men remain within the space of media and fiction for them. They are very likely to transfer what they have seen or read in stories to examples in real life, which includes all the misconceptions that are spread in BL. What is more, fans will very likely learn more from characters who they have connected to or identified with as well as those whom they admire. It does not matter whether the fan is a man or a woman, both genders can form an attachment to a character whose personality or life story appears relatable to them.

For some, the fan space is the only place where they can be open about their fanhood and they usually close to those they choose to talk about it. For the men and gay participants of the survey their fanhood is usually tied to their sexuality, so it is probably riskier for them to be open about it. Among the female participants, relationships with real queer people usually have a stronger impact on their views of same-sex couples and their acquaintances or friends

would correct any false information they might have learned from BL. However, BL still has the power to make the consumers accepting of same-sex attraction and love.

Being a fan of Asian BL can mean different things and the objective of this research project was to uncover the different ways that BL impacts the consumers. While there were recurring themes and opinions which made it possible to delineate groups, this was meant to facilitate an understanding of the fandom, not to generalize the individuals' experiences. The results of the research are also not intended to be applicable to all Asian fans. The research intends to shed some light on a social phenomenon and will hopefully inspire more self-reflection of the research participants and the readers concerning the material which influences their views and relationships.

After finding a space to reach potential participants, the survey and the way it was set up on Google Survey worked well for data collection. It was crucial that the questionnaire was shared on social media platforms, because that was how they reached as many people as possible. Many fans participated and the questionnaire format was simple enough for them to fill out and made them feel comfortable with sharing their information. Many participants also at first appeared to be interested in an interview and it is not clear why I only received a response from two people. When it came to the interview, though, they were very happy to share their views and respond to the questions. The survey was therefore a good starting point to find people for further questioning one-on-one.

Looking back on the research process and how it was intended to help answer the proposed question, the most consequential decisions were made around the questions that I posed the participants. Even though I thought carefully about which questions could give me information on certain topics, there were many aspects I needed to take into account. There were the issues of phrasing the questions, which words to use and how specific or vague the inquiry needed to be. They needed to be formulated differently for the survey and the interviews. Looking back, the survey might have turned up better data with more open questions next to the closed ones. Furthermore, I also needed to take into account the order in which I posed the questions, as a preceding question can give context, prepare them for similar thought processes or have the effect of confining their thoughts within a certain topic. I also had the concern that certain questions would be misunderstood, either because of language or because their knowledge lead them to think of things other than what I had intended the question to reveal.

Some participants commented on certain questions in the questionnaire which they would have preferred to be able to respond to in more detail or on certain questions which they thought were missing. While adding certain questions might not have turned up more information that was in line with my research objective, I acknowledge that it would have been possible to format it for more open questions and to expect a bit more effort from the participants while maintaining the same level of simplicity.

After some data collection and some preliminary evaluation I also came to the realization that I had assumed that I already knew certain things about the participants and their views, which it turns out I did not definitively. There were certain questions that were absent which would have been necessary to add to another question. Staying open to all information that the research can accumulate means also not assuming that certain things are already known when they have not been investigated yet.

Further research into Asian BL could be directed at examining certain groups of fans in greater depth. For the women who appear not to be able to separate fiction from reality and who absorb the relationship dynamics without questioning them, how does their education play a factor in how they translate media to real life? Why do they accept forced sexual acts in a relationship and why do some of them even like seeing this in a story? How does education play a role in how those fans who are aware of the fictionality of BL categorize what is realistic and what not? From a more practical perspective, how do queer men who consume BL relate the stories to their own lived experiences? In order to allow for more space for the participants to fully express themselves, this would entail a space where they can speak in person. It would be interesting to form groups of people to document their conversations on certain topics and then to interview them one-on-one in order to capture both kinds of interactions.

This research is only at the beginning of possible inquiries into Asian BL that can be pursued in the country of Vietnam. The opportunities have yet to be fully explored and there will always be individuals or groups that are willing to speak their minds and share their experiences on a subject that they are emotionally attached to. The gender and sexuality compositions surrounding BL and its fans represent a very fruitful area for research in Gender Studies and can reveal valuable insights into different expressions of love and sexual desire.

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Transcribed Interview with Sara

Transcribed Interview with Amy

123 questionnaire submissions