

*Leiden University*  
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## Master Thesis

### **BL as Female Pornography: A Fertile Ground for Sexual Discovery? Intimate Interviews with Conflicted Feminist Readers**

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# Table of Contents

- I. Introduction ..... 3**
  
- II. Envisioning Female Pornography ..... 6**
  - Defining Pornography: An Ideological Minefield ..... 6
  - Women as Pornographers: Female Pornography or Feminist Pornography..... 10
  
- III. Boy’s Love as Female Pornography ..... 17**
  
- IV. Case Study: Boy’s Love as a Tool for Sexual Discovery ..... 27**
  - Basic Information on the Participants..... 28
  - First Contact with Boy’s Love: Attraction to Alternative Representations ..... 29
  - Changing Perspectives on Boy’s Love: Accommodating Feminist Consciousness..... 33
  - Engaging with Boy’s Love: From Text to Action ..... 41
  
- Conclusion ..... 43**
  
- Bibliography ..... 46**
  
- Appendix: Questions for the Interviews ..... 54**

## Introduction

We live in an age of infinitely available pornography. No longer forced to confront the shame of going to rent a steamy VHS at the local rental store, or to insert a coin to glimpse a few minutes of peep show, any human being who owns a device connected to the internet can now instantly access material which would satisfy more fetishes than a single mind can probably conceive. Porn comes in all forms and shapes: text, image, video, sound. And its codes are transpiring into the mainstream, influencing advertisement, music videos... (see Attwood 2009). Yet, a quick search for “porn” on the internet will give an idea of whom is intended this pornographic ocean: men, mostly. As pornography became increasingly visible in the public sphere following the sexual liberation, increasing concerns were raised about the role pornography played in upholding patriarchal oppression and normalizing sexual violence. These concerns started to become a core issue for radical feminists starting in the mid-70’s and culminating in the 80’s with the much-publicized positions of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon (Bronstein 2012, 1-9). Such concerns are grounded in the depictions of women as relishing in abuse, and the fear that they might set an example to be followed in real-life. Such criticism of pornography will be the starting point of this thesis, by exploring how hard a neutral definition of “pornography” is to achieve. What is included or excluded from the term often heavily depends on the ideological values of those who attempt to define it. Investigating the definitions of pornography allows us to reach the conclusion that it can hardly be considered neutrally and is intimately tied to its gendered aspects. And those include the fact that while women have often been associated with textual manifestation of eroticism, men have had greater access to its visual pornography, with the experience of women going to stores where such

material was sold being a nervous and shameful one (Ms. Naughty 2013, 77). The internet, however, changes everything, by making it easier than ever for women to access and produce porn. But while material constraints have been for the greater part lifted, it remains a male-dominated industry in which female-oriented alternatives are still niche. These female-produced forms of pornography are present over an array of different media, and challenge early criticism of pornography. If women are making it, is it still a genre which bases itself on female degradation? In this thesis, I want to look at alternative voices which claim that far from being something which should be fought against as a tool for patriarchy, it can influence the dominant discourse on sexuality and be beneficial to society. Is there such a thing as “female pornography?” And is that the same thing as feminist pornography? Such theoretical considerations are the foreground for an analysis of the specific form of female pornography which I will focus on: Japanese boy’s love manga (hereafter abbreviated BL manga).

In the four past decades, BL has attracted much scholarly attention, mostly focusing on the reasons why heterosexual women should become so passionately attached to a medium which depicts love stories between men, often charged with explicit scenes. BL manga is not only avidly consumed in Japan, it is also meeting great popularity in the US (Wood 2006), Europe (Malone 2010), and Asia (Fran 2012). I will not only consider the specificities and appeal of the genre, but attempt to draw a broader picture of what BL can offer its readers as a form of pornography, how that relates with common complaints of mainstream (meaning heterosexual and males-oriented) pornography, and to what extent it allows its readers to escape the conflicting experience of reading it. It is well known that BL targets women, but can it be called feminist pornography? Finally, the purpose of this thesis is to

connect theoretical considerations on BL to the lived experiences of some of the women who read it. With this goal in mind, I consider a small sample of women who were open to sharing their experience of reading BL over a long period of time<sup>1</sup>. My decision to focus on such a limited number of individuals (four women) stems from my dissatisfaction with larger scale-surveys (see Pagliassotti 2008a; Zsila et al 2018; Noh 1998) which while they highlight trends among readers fail to convey a more nuanced view of how readers can experience their engagement with the genre and the significance it holds in their personal history. Although I had a set of questions which expressed the themes I wanted to focus on (see appendix), I voluntarily left as much space as necessary for discussion and broader reflections on gender and sexuality. Through these interviews, I hope to show the ways in which BL can influence the readers' perceptions of sexuality and gender, and how these changing perceptions in turn influence what readers expect from BL and pornography in general. I also want to make the point that analyzing BL material only becomes meaningful when combined with real life experiences of readers, who might not engage with BL in the ways theoretical analysis attempt to predict. By interacting with the readership, further insight can be gained into some of the issues which young women face when confronted with pornography and the ways in which they strive to satisfy their desires while respecting their values. Although my sample does

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted over the course of the 2019 summer and all women consented to them being recorded and used for the purpose of this thesis. The interviews were conducted in French, transcribed and translated by myself for the quotes. For privacy issues, their names have been changed. Three of the women were recruited through a small-scale questionnaire (N=35) shared on two French-speaking Facebook pages dedicated to yaoi as well as on my personal Facebook page. I contacted the 4<sup>th</sup> one, referred to as Fanny, because I knew she was the founder of a group dedicated to BL and considered her story to be a valuable addition. The other women happened to be acquaintances, whose liking of BL I was mostly unaware of. I believe that our acquaintanceship turned out to help the smooth course of intimate conversation.

not have the pretention of being representative, I believe that it holds value in giving detailed illustrations of how BL is experienced by some readers, and that these examples consider a worthwhile addition to the existing literature on both BL in itself and on its readership.

## **I. Envisioning Female Pornography**

### **Defining Pornography: An Ideological Minefield**

Boy's love manga as a genre does not exist in a vacuum, and this why it is important to insert in in larger considerations on pornography and women's relationship to it. Although BL is often studied as a unique and self-standing topic, in this thesis I want to emphasize how considerations on other forms of pornography and erotica might impact the readers' decision to turn to BL as well as their enjoyment and their perception of it. In order to situate BL in the pornographic sphere and have a clearer idea of what it can or cannot offer as opposed to other forms of pornography, it is first necessary to take a closer look at how exactly pornography is defined and why considering it as a female subject becomes problematic. Rather than addressing the broader history of pornography, which would be beyond the scope of this thesis, I will focus on the criticism which were addressed to it from the mid-70's on, as it became ever more present in the public sphere. First, however, we need to understand the meaning of "pornography."

According to the Oxford dictionary, pornography is defined as "printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate sexual excitement."<sup>2</sup> On a practical level, the fact

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<sup>2</sup> *Lexico*, s.v. "pornography," accessed December 5, 2019, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/pornography>

that this definition focuses on visual and printed material already means that it fails to include some forms of pornography which however define themselves as such. One might cite as an example Voxxx, a feminist “audio-porn for women” website (Voxxx 2019), or closer to our field of inquiry: BL Drama CD’s, the very often sexually explicit audio adaptations of BL manga. This already highlights the difficulty of composing a “neutral” definition and drawing the boundaries between what is or is not considered pornography. Furthermore, while in theory such a neutral definition presents a democratic and matter of fact vision of the concept of pornography, in practice it fails to evoke one of the most crucial problematics brought about by the increasing availability and visibility of pornography: whose sexual excitement is it intended to stimulate? Looking at mainstream pornography, women are on display to seduce the hypothetical male viewer. Considering the gendered aspects of pornography, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon (1998, 201), both prominent figures of the movement joined forces to compose an alternative definition to pornography: “the sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words.” Pornography is read as a tool of patriarchy which women as “whores”, as being essentially dirty and available to men for degradation and humiliation (Dworkin 1989, 199-202). The aim of their campaign was not simply to denunciate pornography as noxious for the image of women, but to allow women who can prove that pornography did them harm to take legal action against those who made it (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988, 29-30).

Pornography becomes a meaningful battlefield once one connects representation and real-life perceptions of sexuality. Basing herself on Foucauldian theories of discourse and sexuality, Schauer (Schauer 2005, 46-47) stresses the importance of pornography, as it has the power to shape which practices are

perceived as pleasurable and which are not. As early as 1977, Robin Morgan (2014, chap. 4) writes her famous slogan that “pornography is the theory, rape is the practice”, seeing a connection between the rise of pornography and the rise of marital violence and rape. And concerns around sexual violence in pornography remain in contemporary times. A study on a selection of 50 highly popular videos between 2004 and 2005 found that 89.8% of them contained either verbal or physical aggression (the most common one), with women comprising the overwhelming majority of the targets of such violence (Bridges and Wosnitzer 2010, 1075-76). In fact, much of the criticism made against pornography in the 70’s and 80’s is still valid today, which is why it will serve as the point of departure of my analysis.

Furthermore, the extreme-feminist position is interesting because it makes apparent the fact that women producing and enjoying pornography cannot be taken for granted. Can pornography really be rejected as a whole? Smith (2007, 35-36) warns against Dworkin’s influential approach to pornography as fundamentally obeying the same principles no matter what the time or material considered. In addition to that, by considering pornography as a coherent ensemble which is fundamentally noxious to women, anti-pornography feminists simultaneously shape expectations of what women like or don’t like, and emphasize their status as victims of male desire rather than creatures possessing desires of their own (Smith 2007, 46-47). This is very apparent in Morgan’s (2014, chap. 4) book, where she comments on the rise of female-oriented pornography in an almost offended tone, “as if our sexuality were as imitative of patriarchal man’s as Playgirl is of Playboy.” This message suggests that pornography is too base for women, no matter what form it takes. Such a position, however, stifles the possibilities offered to women,



who Morgan (chap. 4) argues would rather turn to higher forms of erotic thrills such as *The Tale of Genji* or *Wuthering Heights*. Such advice rests on the common assumption that erotica is for women, and porn is for men. In our attempt to define pornography, we cannot overlook the shaky and blurred distinction which is often made between “pornography” and “erotica.” In an essay on this nuance, Steinem (1977, 220) links pornography with “images of sex in which there is force, violence, or symbols of unequal power” while erotica, which she strongly associates with women, is based on a “shared sensuality” and consent. The association of erotica with pleasure, respect, mutual enjoyment and women, while pornography is associated with violence, degradation and men sets heavy expectations on the kind of material each gender should produce and enjoy. This dichotomy can be closely related to that which Gayle Rubin (2011, 150-5) presents through her concept of “good” and “bad” sex. Some sexual practices, (which are closely related to heterosexual monogamy) are seen as good, in the sense that they define the idea of what sex should be like. On the other side, some practices such as homosexual sex, fetishism, and intergenerational sex are seen as bad. These conceptions change according to the system of thought (154), but they are still useful in understanding the dilemma that is posed by female pornography: the assumption that it should fall in the “good” category. In her essay on the distinction between pornography and erotica, Kappeler (1986, 36-48) points out the naiveness of assuming that women will automatically produce material which is closer to fine arts, as feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Deidre English did. She denounces the bias which leads feminists to celebrate some female-produced works which they would have heavily criticized had they been produced by men (39-40). Roach (2017, 110) points out that precisely because erotica is used to imply a more sophisticated, lady-like

approach to sex, recent feminist porn creators tend to prefer the term pornography in order to challenge stereotypes that women are not interested in more hardcore depictions of sex. While a clear-cut distinction between erotica and pornography is hard to achieve, others, such as MacKinnon (1998, 91) argued that there simply are no boundaries between erotica and pornography, because both are based on male fantasies of female subordination, which highlights the lack of consensus even among feminists who oppose pornography.

What can be understood for sure, is the lack of consensus on a definition of either erotica or pornography, and the ideological battles which often underlie endeavor to define either. Such distinctions are interesting with regards BL manga, because it is characterized by a great variety in degrees of explicitness, far from choosing the side of “erotica” or “pornography”, it has been shown that readers consume works which occupy diverse end of the explicitness spectrum (Pagliassotti 2010, 60). In that sense, should one draw a clear line between the two concepts, it would most likely be crossed repeatedly by the same subject.

### **Women as Pornographers: Female Pornography or Feminist Pornography?**

In her analysis of female pornography, Schauer relies on Judith Butler’s (1997, 163) concept of insurrectionary speech to illustrate the power female pornography can have in unsettling dominant ideas in the sex industry (Schauer 2005, 60-61). This is one of the most interesting ways to look at female pornography, by acknowledging that they can produce material which not only is different from problematic mainstream pornography, but also has the power to question and influence what is mainstream (CJ and Susanna 2004, 12). But the debate does not stop at recognizing that, Steinem (1977, 222) for example, defended that through erotica women could

“rescue sexual pleasure,” which implies a sort of pornographic battle where women should overpower men’s pornographic productions by producing respectable and high-quality erotica. But is erotica devoid of sexual violence really what women want?

One of the facts which make audiovisual but also visual (such as BL) pornography a valuable topic, is that it has typically been assumed that women were more interested in textual erotica than in visually explicit material. Indeed, written fiction has historically been the preferred dreamscape for female sexual fantasies, but according to Juffer (1998, 5) it is not because women are inherently drawn to words rather than images but simply because their access to production and consumption of print erotica was greater than that to other media. Studies correlate this idea by showing that physical reactions to pornographic material indeed do not vary according to gender (Mitricheva et al. 2019), but while for men physical arousal tends to match psychological arousal, females can experience physical arousal while reporting negative feelings about the material (Ogas and Gaddam 2011, under The Mind-Body Problem). Precisely because material access is such an important variable in determining engagement with pornography, the internet came in as a true game-changer by offering what Cooper (1998, 1) defines as the “Triple A”: access, affordability and accessibility. Once the stigma of having to buy a pornographic magazine, rent a DVD or going to an erotic cinema is gone, all men and women who possess a device connected to the internet become equal. If Juffer’s theory is valid, there should be no material constraints preventing the consuming and the making of pornography by women. This leads us to ask, do women consume visual pornography?

According to a recent study by PornHub, the third most viewed porn website worldwide (SimilarWeb 2019), female viewers comprise 29% of the world's internet porn traffic, a percentage which has been on the rise for the past few years (PornHub 2018). A 2005 survey by Marie Claire in the US finds that 31% of the +3000 women surveyed reported consuming porn every week or so, and goes more in depth about the ways in which they experience it. The most popular medium was internet porn, followed by erotic stories. Of those who felt negatively about pornography, 59% cited as a reason that "I'm very concerned about how the industry treats women and/or I feel it perpetuates stereotypes" (De Cadenet 2015). Ogas and Gaddam (2011, under Misogynistic, Immoral, and Squicky as Hell) have argued that while it contains cues for male desire, it also contains "anti-cues" which cause distress among female viewers, and stress the fact that while women do watch porn targeting males it does not mean that they watch it with unmitigated enjoyment. While concerns relating to the performer's treatment are specific to forms of pornography where real human beings are involved, worries over representation can be expanded to include any other form of erotic or pornographic work, including drawn material. So what happens when women get behind the camera or take up the pen to draw pictures of the sex they want to see?

As far as audiovisual pornography is concerned, while there is a stereotypical idea of what female viewers want to see, which draws on the romantic pornography of pioneer director Candida Royalle, and according to porn director Ms. Naughty (2013, 78-79) is still what sells, the variety of the forms which female pornography takes challenges the idea that there should be a category such as "female pornography" which would contain common characteristics that all women would enjoy by virtue of their sex. It would also be dangerous to assume that female

pornography necessarily is devoid of sexual violence or other problematic aspects. The argument I aim at making, and which will serve us when considering BL manga is that not all female produced pornography fits the criteria of “feminist pornography.” This concept is defined by contemporary feminist director Tristan Taormino (2013, 261) as a form of porn where “female desire, pleasure, and orgasm are prioritized and celebrated ... Sex is presented as joyful, fun, safe, mutual, and satisfying.” While not considering herself a feminist, director CJ (2004, 12) has a similar opinion, tying “women-positive” porn to pleasure and consent. It is important to point out that these “feminist” characteristics are not always connected to feminist directors, and that several mainstream porn companies uphold similar standards of consent and fair treatment of performers (Zeischegg 2013, 268).

Now that we have defined what is meant by “feminist” pornography, it becomes even more interesting to consider erotica which although it “fails the test” when it comes to living up to feminist standards, is still produced and enjoyed by women. A good example which brings us closer to our topic of interest is that of Ladies’ Comics. Although these have received considerably less academic attention than boy’s love manga, they are a pornographic genre targeting heterosexual women which enjoys a wide popularity in Japan. Ladies’ comics often feature rape, humiliation, and violence and similarly to men’s erotic comics, the female body is displayed as much as possible, at the center of attention, Shamoan (2004, 97). It is telling that ladies’ comics were studied indifferently from men’s *ero manga* in Ann Allison’s essay on pornographic manga in Japan (Allison 2000): because they are seen as similar to men’s pornography, there is a lack of interest in them as a female cultural production. Ladies’ comics appear as an example of female pornography

which fails to acquire the status of insurrectionary speech and therefore fails to receive the attention which less normative forms (such as BL) have received. It is also an illustration of the moral judgement that can pervade research on pornography, where rather than looking at what women consume and why, the material is studied with the intent on showing whether it serves to perpetuate nefarious stereotypes or not, and dismissed if lacking subversive potential.

After having considered an example of female pornography which does not qualify as feminist, it is interesting to look at the other end of the spectrum and consider very self-consciously feminist pornography which offer has grown increasingly visible over the past few years and does not fear to delve into more taboo forms of sexuality such as BDSM and anal sex (see XConfessions; Four Chambers), those which according to Gayle Rubin (2011, 150-5) were on the “bad” end of porn. However, there is a downside: taking for example a recent article by Marie Claire (Marie Claire editors, 2019) which rounds up alternative to mainstream for pornography for women, what is striking when looking at the list is that all of those which provide audiovisual content require high fees. This is very legitimate, and the fact that most pornography on the web today is to be found on websites working on the “tube” model, which offer millions of videos for free (without any credits to the people who made them or who acted in them) is another aspect of the industry which imply serious ethical problems, as feminist porn maker Ovidie (Ovidie 2016) heavily stresses. This also means, however, that people who are still unsure about pornography or lack the economic capital will most likely not have access to these alternatives, and it is therefore very unlikely that such high-quality alternatives should be someone’s first contact with pornography. Although other websites, such as ForHerTube (ForHerTube 2019) and Belessa (Belessa 2019) have

tried to copy bigger mainstream pornographic sites. These function as “filters” of the content which can be found on bigger sites for free. Their selection is still small when compared to the millions of videos which are hosted elsewhere, and their offer ends up feeling like a niche rather than a diverse ensemble to match the diverse tastes of female viewers. Because of these setbacks, it would seem that while internet porn is the most popular category, finding porn which is arousing without evoking conflicting feelings is still a struggle. To avoid these negatives feelings, one of the strategies is disarmingly simple: it consists of cutting women out of the picture altogether.

In a 2015 study, Pornhub (2015; 2017) found that gay pornography was the second most popular category for its female users, who in 2017 comprised 37% of all gay male porn viewers. One of the explanations for this phenomenon could be that it is a way of escaping the painful identification to the female performers and worries about their safety, what in her study of appreciation for male pornography Neville (2015, 198) calls the “sexual minefield.” Another issue, dissatisfaction with portrayal of men (a point which has received much less attention) might also be at cause. In most heterosexual pornography, it has been argued that unlike the female body which is on display for the pleasure of the eyes, the man is reduced to one sole area of interest: his penis (Schauer 2005, 58; Ogas & Gaddam 2011, under Boys Will Be Boys). Taking away ethical and moral considerations, it is simply not arousing to look at men who are purely stoical, clearly not the focus of the action, and whose faces and full bodies are often not even represented (Taormino 2013, 261). In her study of female pornographic websites, Schauer (2005, 57) finds out that even though they stress the heterosexuality of the models, the codes which they use rely heavily on those of gay pornography. The features which are especially

eroticized are the muscles, the back and the butt. This shows that women getting involved with men who engage in homosexual sex is a multimedia phenomenon. Another famous example is slash, the movement of male/male fanfiction writing which became popular in the 70's and is often cited as the Western equivalent of BL leadings in studies which adopt a comparative approach (see Isola 2010; McHarry 2011; Nagaike 2012). When considering female pornography, BL is especially interesting because it is so varied. So diverse, in fact, that it would not do it justice to confine it to the category of "pornography." The degree of explicitness (which can reach its peak at a mere kiss scene) varies greatly. But as Nagaike (2012, 110) flatly puts it: "insofar as these female readers consume yaoi manga as a medium through which they are sexually aroused, these texts can be defined as pornographic," an opinion shared by Otomo (2015, 142), who further argues that it can even help in making pornography a less misogynistic genre. We have already mentioned that BL consumers have been shown to consume material which varies in degree of explicitness. Authors also show a great variety in their productions on that aspect as well, often active through both commercial and non-commercial channels, which allows them to express what does not fit the requirement of the market and be as explicit as they want when producing "amateur" work (Suzuki 2015, 105, 107 ; Aoyama 2015, 233-4). Through these amateur channels, BL works can give way to multiple voices of desire and avoid the commercial pressure to conform to selling stereotypes, which Orbaugh (2010, 178, 184) argues not only questions basic concepts of what is "Author" "Reader" and "Text" but also empowers those who engage in creating these amateur texts. The lack of distinction of between amateur and professional and the means through which the audience can become involved in the production also allow for an expression of female desire



which can be read as especially authentic. And it is interesting to note that it also fits within patterns of seeking male/male love which have been studied in other media, therefore connecting it to a bigger picture. BL not only challenges assumptions about women not enjoying visual pornography, it also potentially an escape from aspects of mainstream pornography which are seen as example. But what exactly does that escape look like?

## II. Boy's Love as female pornography

Boy's love manga refers to a manga genre where homoerotic romance is at the center of the plot, usually with a good dose of explicit sex scenes. Its emergence traces back to *shōjo* manga (targeting young girls) in the 70's, when pioneer authors such as Moto Hagio and Keiko Takemiya started experimenting with young beautiful male protagonists who fell in love with each other: their narratives were influenced by high literature, focused on the emotional and psychological development of the characters, and often charged with melancholy (Welker 2015, 44; Suzuki 2015, 99). Boy's love as a genre per se emerges in the 90's, which coincides with the explosion of its popularity (Mizoguchi 2003, 50). It differs from earlier genres of homoerotic manga by its lighter atmosphere, happy endings, mandatory featuring of relatively explicit intercourse and a rigid *uke – seme* structure where the *uke* character is always penetrated during sex and the *seme* character always penetrates (Suzuki 2015, 112; Mizoguchi 2008, 41). Although initially, "boy's love" referred to officially published commercial works and "yaoi" to those of the amateur sphere, the boundaries are blurred, and many readers as well as scholars use the terms as equivalents (Mizoguchi 2003, 51). In this thesis, I will use "BL" as an umbrella term, but most of my interviewees tend to prefer "yaoi,"

which will be occasionally used with the same meaning. What is interesting about BL, and which sets a contrast with smaller-scale female pornography endeavor (such as the self-conscious feminist porn mentioned in the previous chapter) is that it is increasingly present in the mainstream sphere, with over a million readers in Japan estimated in 2008 and around 150 new titles appearing every month in 2007 (Mizoguchi 2008, vi; Kaneda et al. quoted in Kamm 2013, 2.1). In Japan, BL works can be spotted in the usual bookstore and its popularity has grown to the extent of there being a whole street dedicated to it in Tokyo, nicknamed “otome road” (maiden road) (Welker 2015, 65). The numerous conventions across the country dedicated to selling *yaoi dōjinshi* (amateur parodic works) (Welker 2015, 59; Orbaugh 2010, 176-77) increase the visibility both of the genre and of its fans. It is interesting to note that its popularity is not only local, but also global, with studies examining its impact in North America (Wood 2006; Zanghellini 2009; Pagliassotti 2008a), Europe (Pagliassotti 2008a; Malone 2010; Zsila et al 2018), Latin America (Aranha 2010) and other Asian countries (Noh 1998; Martin 2012, 2017; Chiang 2016). While some researchers such as Noh (1998) and Aranha (2010) stress the oppressive patriarchal and heteronormative norms which make BL appear as a liberation in their specific regions, geographical disparities can rarely be felt when reading international literature in BL. This suggests that although there might be slight regional variations, the appeal of BL often clusters around similar feelings which are strongly related to the experience of being female and envisioning pornography as a woman. Building up on the dilemmas of pornography raised in the previous section, I will review not only the appeal which has been identified with BL across time and cultures, but also how this appeal offers a relief from the usual complaints against pornography. How does BL position itself in the feminist

spectrum of pornography? What picture of sexuality and its gendered aspects does it paint? And through this picture, what possibilities does it open up for its readers?

The first assumption about BL, which permeates the whole of this thesis so far, is that it is a genre which made by and for heterosexual women. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that the readership is not so homogenous. Surveys have tended to show that while most of the readers are indeed women, around 80% in both Italy (n=279) and the US (n=350) but there is still a significant minority of men (Pagliassotti 2008a, under Basic Demographics). When it comes to sexual orientation, research suggests that the audience is actually very diverse: depending on the surveys, the percentage of readers who identify as heterosexual range from 42% (Hungary) to 62% (Italy) (Zsila et al 2018, 4; Pagliassotti 2008a, under Sexuality and Sexual Politics, para. 1). As far as Japan is concerned, Mizoguchi (2008, 349) bases herself on her 10-year experience both as a researcher and fan to speculate that 90% of fans consider themselves to be straight. These studies suggest that the readership is more diverse than traditionally portrayed. Still, it is fair to say that BL works tend to be mainly read, and mainly created by women, and that it is valuable to keep on studying it as such while also imparting some of the academic attention to minority fan groups (see Nagaike 2015 on male fans; Mizoguchi 2008 on lesbian fans).

Women reading visually explicit material is already something which rises attention as such. The fact that female characters are not part of the action is another key part of the equation. Why would women fantasize about situations from which they are excluded? Early on, Matsui (1993, 179) postulates that the boys in boy's love might not represent actual boys. Rather, she describes them as the "girls' displaced selves" through which they can achieve the sexual agency and

aggressivity denied to them in a patriarchal society. In this sense, women are not so much excluded from the genre as present in a different body, inhabited by female subjectivity, which suppresses the need to include actual female characters (McLelland 2010, 22). This male body would offer possibilities incompatible with womanhood, such as that of expressing a sexuality which is seen as unacceptable (Fujimoto 2004, 85). Through the male body, they can escape the role of the victim, the one to whom things are “done to” and become active subjects, (87) which somehow circumvents one of the troubles of representation of women in pornography, that of always being the victims of sexual aggression. Because both characters are male, there is no female victim the female reader is forced to identify to, therefore making the experience of seeing sexual violence less painful (Pagliassotti 2010, 71). For Nagaike (2012, 113-14), identifying to these women in heterosexual pornography whom she qualifies as “abject” is a process which entails shame and guilt, and BL allows the reader to avoid these negative feelings. The ambiguous gender enacted by the boy’s creates new paths of envisioning gender and sexuality: according to Matsui (1993, 180), their masculine bodies are not eroticized for their manliness, but for their femininity, which allows the female reader to consequently see eroticism in her own body. They also allow for a representation of the sexual male which is often at odds with traditional ideas of masculinity. This is especially true of the *uke* character, who crosses lines between the feminine and the masculine (McHarry 2010, 182). BL protagonists benefit from the best of both worlds: “traditionally male social freedoms with a stereotypically feminine appearance and sensitivity” (Malone 2010, 25; McLelland 2010, 13). BL offers a space to escape from gender constraints and “play with gender” (Fujimoto 2015, 77). Kinsella (2000, 117) on her part, considers BL protagonists to be “genderless.” Through these men who

are not really men, girls can experience romance and sexuality in a way which is denied to them in real life.

While BL has been argued to allow for an escape from patriarchal and gender restrictions, it is also presented as a relief from an experience of female sexuality which is inherently anguishing, which leads Buruma (1984, 118-121) to argue that Japanese girls' most ardent desire is to escape as far as possible and through as many dimensions as possible from the fate which awaits them as women. Through the use of male protagonists, readers can escape associations of the sexual act with pregnancy and child-rearing (McLelland 2000a, 22; Suzuki 1998, 250). The fear factor in female sexuality is also closely associated with the fear of being raped. Because non-consensual sex has been such a core issue in debates concerning pornography both in the 70's and 80's and in more contemporary feminist approaches consent appears as a core value, it is worth examining the role it occupies in BL manga. Non-consensual sex is extremely common in BL, to the point that some critics lament that it has become a "cliché" of the genre (PS 2008, 96). Furthermore, surveys in Italy (n = 279) and in the US (n = 350) showed that the overwhelming majority of respondents did not categorically oppose non-consensual sex (Pagliassotti 2010, 67). Male protagonists would also allow for a dissociation between the representation the female reader sees, and rape which could actually happen to her in real life (Tan 2010, 142). It is worthwhile to mention that the way non-consensual sex is packaged in BL differs from how it is often represented in mainstream heterosexual audiovisual pornography or *ero manga*. Rather than symbolizing possession, degradation and humiliation, rape is staged as the expression of the irrepressible love of the perpetrator towards the victim and is often the revelation which leads the two characters to start a relationship

(Pagliassotti 2010, 68; Nagaike 2012, 127-8). This device is what Mizoguchi (2008, 153) calls the “rape of love,” much unlike rape in ladies’ comics (and we might also argue, in many other forms of pornography) which is rooted in a man’s aggressive sexuality and desire to satisfy his urges (Nagaike 2012, 127). When comparing heterosexual and gay pornographic manga to BL, Mark McLelland (2000b, 284) concludes that while sex is often portrayed as an aggression and a violation in the formers, in BL it is “scripted in terms of nurture and love,” which resonates powerfully with critiques made to heterosexual pornography, where sex is envisioned in terms of domination and degradation, as something which is done to the woman rather than mutually enjoyed. As Orbaugh (2010, 79) observes, even in hardcore amateur work, the building of attachment and intimacy between the characters is still a valuable element. From these observations it appears that although BL still contains sexual violence, it is permeated by romance and emotional attachment.

Normalization of nonconsensual sex is not the only aspect of BL which makes it problematic to consider from a feminist standpoint. While it has been argued that a (gender) equal romance is one of the appeals of BL (Suzuki 1998; Malone 2010; Pagliassotti 2010; Tan 2010; Fujimoto 2015), BL has also been criticized for its rigid *seme* – *uke* structure. Zhou et al. (2017) point out that the *seme* characters overwhelmingly show characteristics typically associated with men (giving financial support, initiating social contact, being older, more mature...) and *uke* with women (more emotional, likely to be in a subordinate position, more dependent...). It is true that the *seme* and *uke* can usually be easily identified, and that their appearance and personality is reflected in their positions during sexual intercourse (Mizoguchi 2008, 41). However, not all researchers see in this structure a device which

perpetuates gender stereotypes. Based on her analysis of 381 yaoi manga from the year 1996, Nagakubo (quoted in Fujimoto 2015, 84) finds that although the *uke* was typically more stereotypically feminine and the *seme* more stereotypically masculine, they shared characteristics of both genders. Furthermore, their *seme – uke* position is not in their essence, but rather created from their relationship and interaction with a certain partner. For example, in the series *Kizuna*, the character Kai displays very masculine characteristics and aggressively courts another character, Ranmaru. Although Kai is *seme* when paired with Ranmaru, once he becomes involved in a relationship with Masa, he becomes completely *uke*, showing more feminine characteristics and adopting a more passive approach (PS 2008, 98). According to that model, the genders which the characters perform are not fixed but rather situational, as exemplified by Welker's (2006, 853) argument that the femininity or masculinity of a character changes based on who that character is interacting with, becoming more masculine next to a young girl or more feminine when confronted to an older man. The fact that personality rather than sex defines their positions in the relationship is read as subversive by Hemmann (2015, 3.6), which shows that multiple readings of the gendered aspects of BL are possible. For others, while gender is excluded from the equation, it is simply replaced by other power and status differences, which constitute important factors of enjoyment for the genre (McLelland 2005, 23; Stanley 2010, 105).

Whether the relationships are presented as gender equal or not, the freedom of identifying to either of the characters has received attention as one of the appeals of the genre (Meyer 2010; Pagliassotti 2010; Kee 2010), precisely because when one is not forced to identify to the victim because of a shared gender, these imbalances become easier to bear (Pagliassotti 2010, 71), although she also warns

again assuming that in a heterosexual setting women identify exclusively to the female character (69). Sexually, this translates into the possibility of identifying both to the penetrating and the penetrated party, which for Meyer (2010, 237) transgresses traditional visions of sexuality. Furthermore, some have argued that BL is indeed challenging sexual norms, notably by showing penetrating as well as being penetrated as pleasurable, challenging the idea that penetration is disempowering (Wood 2006, 401; Nagaike 2012, 115). It is important to point out, however, that while it might challenge them to some extent, BL remains heavily focused on heteronormative ideas of sexuality. Mizoguchi (2008, 41, 144) draws our attention to the fact that the anus appears as a mere transposition of the vagina, and that BL still heavily carries the idea that sex can only be complete if it involves penetration. Still, within that penetrative framework BL not only opens up the possibility of envisioning an active female sexuality (through identification to a male character), it also creates a picture of male sexuality as passive (Meyer 2010, 237). This presents an alternative narrative to the pornographic male, whom Taormino (2013, 261) describes as rarely “submissive, or passive, and rarely do they ask for directions, make their partner’s pleasure a priority, or like their butts played with,” the opposite of which are all common characteristics for BL characters. Although such characteristics might already have been circulating for a long time in gay pornography, the fact that a media which caters to female desire should pick up on them and that it should receive such broad appreciation challenges assumptions about the kind of masculinity women enjoy seeing.

While the approaches which have been mentioned up to this point tend to focus on enjoyment of BL as stemming from a real-life lack (lack of sexual agency, impossibility gender equal relationship, powerlessness in front of rape), others



critiqued these approaches and highlighted the fact that rather than looking up to the possibilities offered to men, female readers do not take them seriously and joyously play with them, especially in non-commercial media (Stanley 2010, 99-100; Fujimoto 2015, 82). Explaining enjoyment for BL in terms of gender and sexual oppression fails to do justice to the readers (especially in more recent times) who simply enjoy reading the genre without feeling the burdens of gender inequality (Fujimoto 2015, 84). Throughout the years, BL scholarship has sought to shed light on deep psychological reasons which would lead to enjoyment of male-male erotica. While we have exposed some of the theories which justify enjoyment of BL, it is important to consider the fact that BL manga might be enjoyed more casually than has been assumed. Kamm (2013, 2.9) points out that throughout his research on the fans, many of them report reading boy's love manga because "it is fun" or interesting, and more lighthearted reasons for reading should not be dismissed. McLelland (2000b, 288-89) questions the heteronormative assumption that if (supposedly) straight women enjoy eroticism which is not heterosexual, there is necessarily something strange and worth investigating about it. But it is worthwhile to stress that while fans tend to read other genres as well, (Tan 2010, 131; Pagliassotti 2010, 74), sometimes dissatisfaction with the clichés and heteronormativity in these is precisely what motivates them to turn to BL (Tan 2010, 128; Pagliassotti 2008b, 3-4; Zanghellini 2009). Aoyama (1988, 194) points out that dissatisfaction with romantic clichés and the desire to explore the potential of masculinity and androgyny is at the roots of the creation of the *shōnen ai* genre from which BL stems. For this reason, comparative approaches or focuses on the readership with a broader interest than just on the BL gender seem especially valuable, albeit underrepresented in BL research.

Lastly, an overview of the BL genre cannot be complete without discussing the highly participative nature of the genre. Because the border between amateur and professional work is very porous, the fans are likely to influence the authors or become authors themselves in the future (Suzuki 2015, 105). BL fans internationally have been described as being very active consumers, in the sense that many create pictures, *dōjinshi*, fanfictions, websites, blogs, role-play and chat through images or words with the community (Wood 2006, 405; Galbraith 2015, 158; Orbaugh 2010, 176-7; Welker 2015, 53-4). Even when they do not produce material creations, becomes a creative inspiration through what Galbraith calls a “rotten filter” (in reference to the self-derogatory term *fujoshi* [rotten girl] used to describe BL fans) (2011, 221) which distorts reality to make it fit a BL frame. Meyer talks of a similar phenomenon which she calls the *yaoi me* (yaoi eyes), through which fans seek the queer potential in any text (Meyer 2010, 234). These plays usually focus on the *uke/semi* dynamic which can be projected onto characters, real people (for example politicians), or everyday objects such as spoon and knife, shampoo and conditioner, cars and roads, cookies (Galbraith 2015, 162-63; Stanley 2010, 101-03). BL creates a space for discussion, and while these do not always focus on sexual aspects, when expressing their enjoyment for the genre fans are conscious that sexual scenes are an important part of it, and the knowledge of being surrounded by like-minded people makes them feel safe to express their feelings about it (Mizoguchi 2008, 332-36; Martin 2012, 277). Mizoguchi (2008, 336) goes as far as arguing that fans share a “yaoi sexuality.” BL can also provide a space for reflection and exploration on gender and sexual orientation, as exemplified by the column in the 80’s *shōnen ai* magazine *Allan* where readers could advertise to find a *yuri* (literally lily, term for female homosexuality) partner (Welker 2008, 49-52). BL can

become a way of acquiring more general sexual knowledge as well. Basing herself on the quantitative data from the *2011 National Survey of Sexuality among Young People*, Naoko Mori (2017) finds that about a third of the girls between 12 and 22 (n = 4262) cite manga as a source of information about sex. Her analysis gives us fascinating insight on how these manga influence the mindset of their readers, pointing out that girls who cited manga (which include mainly BL, Ladies' Comics and Teens Love comics) as a source of information tend to have a more positive vision of sex than the girls who didn't, as well as more tolerance towards different sexual orientations and sexual practices. Through its presence in the public space and the engagement of its fans, BL contributes in normalizing female desire and provides a space as well as an array of varied media through which it can be expressed and discussed. It also a tool of discursive power, when considering that amateur productions can influence commercial BL works (Hemmann 2015, 1.8), and that these BL works in turn can influence mainstream narratives (Martin 2017, 198).

What can be concluded from these considerations is that BL conventions can be interpreted in different ways, as subversive or on the contrary as perpetuating gender stereotypes. But whether one praises the way in which BL challenges gender norms and visions of sexuality or laments the numerous clichés and problematic narratives which still inhabit it, the impact it has on real-life readers is undeniable, as BL normalizes and provides a space for women to discuss desire. The next chapter aims at investigating how concretely, some women acquire sexual knowledge through BL, and to consider some of the ways in which the genre allows for deeper reflections on sexuality and pornography.

### **III. Case study: Boy's Love as a tool for sexual exploration**

Although early research tended to focus on analysis of the material itself or on the larger social and psychological context which brought it about, in the recent years several attempts to understand BL from the readers' point of view have been made. These include large-scale surveys (Pagliassotti 2008a, 2010; Zsila et al 2018) and studies of forums (Zanghellini 2009; Blair 2010). Online surveys and studies of forums, however, provide answers which often lack in depth. For example, Pagliassotti (2008b, 2) lists "self-analysis" as a motive for consuming BL but this answer fails to deliver insight into the processes and experiences underlying this self-discovery, other than a few elusive fan written sentences. While smaller interviews have also been made, other than the study on the Taiwanese readership by Martin (2012) which truly explores the meaning of the media for its readers, I found that the space provided for the answer is either too limited (Noh 1998) or the focus is on specific sub-topics such as what it means to be a "rotten girl" (Okabe and Ishida 2012; Galbraith 2015), perception of gayness (Hal 2010), perspectives from the authors (Suzuki 2015) which do not concern us as much in this thesis. Through the interviews I conducted, I wanted to shift the focus from precise questions about motives for appreciation on the genre and engage in a broader discussion of the readers' consumption on yaoi in relation to their personal development and their thoughts on gender and sexuality. Although the diversity of the BL genre and of its readers is often stressed, the evolution which these readers undergo has received little academic attention, if any. Through the following case study, I want to show that readers relationship with BL not only evolves, BL can have a lasting impact on their views on broader topics related to gender and sexuality.

### **Basic information on the participants**

	Age	First contact with BL	Current Reading frequency
<b>Anna</b>	23	13-14 years old	almost never
<b>Fanny</b>	32	19 years old	occasionally
<b>April</b>	26	7-8 years old	every day
<b>Judy</b>	25	12 years old	occasionally

### **First Contact with Boy's Love: Attraction to Alternative Representations**

One of the problems which comes with the increased availability and visibility of pornography is that one can easily be exposed to it without having asked for anything. In theory, BL offers a wide of media and degrees of explicitness which might allow the reader to control their “descent” into it, in practice readers can still discover it in terms of shock. April and Judy were both exposed to BL manga at an untimely age, respectively around 7 in a bookstore and at 12 online. While April kept a very negative image of it and associated it with feelings of disgust until early teenage hood, for Judy, although stumbling upon a hardcore BL anime was a shock, she remembers it made her feel sexual arousal for the first time and she was tempted to look for more. Anna followed a more gradual path, starting around 9 by reading non-erotic fanfictions, and then gradually shifting to more explicit male/male fanfictions around the age of 13. Because she confessed that she had not read many BL manga and had rather tended to focus on the fanfiction world, I asked her what her the reasons for that preference were. Her answer reminds of Juffer’s (1998) materialist analysis of women’s privileged relationship with written erotica. In front of family and classmates, text is much less compromising than image. Anna’s family owned a shared computer, and she did not often take the risk

to have visual pornographic content displayed on it, in case her parents should come home at a wrong timing. Fanfictions can be printed and carried into public transportation, and more importantly: they are available for free. It is likely that new generations of BL readers will have access to it on a personal device, but the financial factor still plays a role when determining whether a media is likely to become someone's first contact with erotica or not. For Fanny, the discovery of BL much later, at the age of 19, and also through the media of fanfictions.

For these women, BL seems to have echoed powerfully in terms of presenting a non-heteronormative representation of romance. Judy describes her early experiences in terms of curiosity for something she had never experienced in her social surroundings, but which echoed with her personal experience.

Back then, when I was watching it [yaoi], I didn't know any gay people, it was still very taboo. I was really interested in seeing that kind of things. I was curious so I started looking up more info about homosexuality [...] it showed me things I had absolutely never been shown before. Things which in fact, I liked. And... it's also because when I was much younger, my first kisses were with girls. And so, for the first time, I could watch stuff that I had experienced before, while at the beginning I thought it was abnormal and I kept it to myself.

For Anna, it was one of the only places where she could see LGBT people represented. She specifies "not written by LGBT people, not written for LGBT people, but still, it was representation and for me this representation had a normalizing effect." Although BL has been attacked for misrepresenting gay men (see Lunsing 2006) and so far we have rather focused on the boys in BL as rather

distant from actual men, it would seem that in a context where there is little LGBT material available it can still be read and appreciated as one of the rare occasions to see non-heterosexual romance. This echoes other experiences, such as that of researcher Mark Vicars (Vicars and Senior 2010, 195) who recalls some of his Japanese homosexual lovers who “avidly read yaoi.” Fanny also mentions the desire to see something non-normative as one of her motivations to read BL. She describes the meetings of the fan group she founded as almost exclusively populated by young LGBT kids between 14 and 16 years old, whom she describes as “alone, coming from toxic environments when it came to that [LGBT identities]” and the group as a “bubble in which they could ask their questions.” In that sense, BL provided a first contact with such material but also a safe space in which to discuss one’s reaction to it, which confirm what has been previously argued about the genre. Again, we must stress the importance of availability in this process. As Anna mentions it, had she been a young teenager today her experience would probably be very different. Firstly, because owning a personal computer or smartphone allows for more in-depth exploration of the visual (as opposed to text fiction), but also because the amount of works targeting teenagers including LGBT representation has, in her opinion, skyrocketed in recent years. Although these three women are acutely aware of the imperfection of the representation, mentioning the numerous clichés, the hypocrisy of fans (thoroughly enjoying yaoi but being homophobic in real life), the hypersexualization of gay people... they agree on the fact that it was still representation, and that this representation was a door (a metaphor used multiple times by both Fanny and Judy) to more accurate and in-depth research on the LGBT community.

When talking about what first appealed to her in BL, April has quite a different experience, since she identifies herself as completely heterosexual. Exposed to hentai around 7 as well, she talks about it as the first influence which defined her approach to sexuality. She “learned how to desire” with hentai, and for her that desire was always closely associated with disgust. For her, it came as a relief to envision sexuality in a way in which gender did not immediately define one’s role in the act. Just as the other readers, April is still very conscious of the flaws of the genre (she mentions lack of consent, gender stereotypes, misogyny) but she still considers it as a healthier alternative to hentai and really talks about it as a liberation, a discovery which changed her way of envisioning desire.

Stumbling upon yaoi... I think you could say that it allowed me to keep this way of desiring as a man, I mean, as if I were a man [referring to the way of desiring she interiorized by reading hentai], but while directing my desire towards what I actually find attractive: namely, another man. So I was liberated from this unease I had with hentai, that because the character is a woman she’ll end up in that situation

These first experiences highlight the potential of yaoi to awaken its relatively young reader to new perspectives, which can either be new sexualities or new ways of envisioning sex. Even if BL is almost never self-consciously feminist, with the rare exception of author Fumi Yoshinaga (Mizoguchi 2008, 192), by presenting an alternative to heterosexual love stories and their dynamics, it creates an alternative narrative on sex which is appreciated by its readers. Furthermore, the way readers perceive and engage with the genre changes with time, and these changes nuance the picture of the enjoyment for BL, not as a one-time experience but rather as a shifting and evolving process.



## Changing Perspectives on Boy's Love: Accommodating Feminist Consciousness

Considering that all of the women I have interviewed have been in contact with the genre for a period close to ten years, it would be unreasonable to assume that their taste for BL should stay constant and focus on the same aspects. All of them report becoming more aware some aspects which they came to consider as problematic. How do these women feel about BL as a form of pornography? Does it allow for a carefree and escapist reading, or were there hurdles in the process of enjoying it, similar to those in mainstream heterosexual pornography?

An aspect which came up among all of my interviewees and which I would like to explore more in depth is the emergence of what April calls a “feminist consciousness,” a feeling they all shared to some degree. Some of the things that they read with pleasure and without giving a second thought as teenagers became harder to bear as adults. For April, part of it is the perception of femininity which is apparent in many yaoi works. Her feminist consciousness is annoyed by the fact that rendering a character feminine becomes a way of making him appear inferior, and especially inferior to the more dominant *seme* character. She ponders on the tendency to represent femininity as “as weaker, less interesting, attractive but kind of in a degrading way.” and she is not the only one to connect low opinions on femininity to BL. Kinsella (2000, 117) states that male characters are easier to idealize, and Fujimoto (2004, 84) goes as far as to argue that *shōnen ai* was born out of women’s “hatred of females” of which they become aware them through the *shōnen ai* characters’ misogyny. I find this example compelling, because it illustrates how arguments similar to those made in scholarly analyses can spontaneously emerge from the opinion of the readers. When I ask April if her taste has changed over time, she answers that it is not so much her taste as what she calls her

“sociopolitical consciousness” which has evolved. She is now too annoyed to include some works in her reading list, because she finds them too “degrading and misogynistic.” Which interestingly shows that even if BL is a genre from which women are absent, the vision of femininity it vehiculates (as embodied in the *uke* character) can still be read as misogynistic.

April speaks very strongly about the absence of consent, citing the rising popularity of the concept of “omegaverse” (a universe where it is not sex, but the categories alpha, beta, and omega which determine one’s position in society and ability to procreate). I found this example fascinating: having never heard of it, I thought that this could precisely be an ingenious setting by which fundamental sex-based discrimination could be abolished, with men able to procreate, and women able to be leaders as “alpha”. In her analysis of a series set in a world with similar conditions, where both men and women can procreate and inseminate, Bauwens-Sugimoto (2011) similarly highlights a subversive potential. Anna, however, paints a gloomy picture of the genre: the narrative device of the omegas having periods of “heat” become a way to justify rape by the alphas and betas of society. In the same way as Mizoguchi’s (2008, 153) “rape of love” justifies non-consensual sex, having a character desire sex in spite of themselves is another narrative device which circumvents the need for explicitly stated consent. Anna speaks very strongly against this vision of sexuality.

According to them [*ecchi*, *hentai* (erotic and pornographic manga targeting men) and *shōjo* manga which she argues influence yaoi], you don’t need to consent to a relationship for it to be erotic. Both don’t have to be consenting for us to enjoy the scene, and I personally find it disgusting. I can’t take that, honestly, it’s unbearable to me, I find the fact that a character doesn’t like

what's happening to them or does not want to do it deeply unerotic, it's 100% anticlimactic...

Similarly, Judy playfully states that she's too "safe" to read certain things (especially *hentai* and *bara* [pornographic manga targeting homosexual men]), and reports abstaining from buying the second volume of *In These Words* (a very dark boy's love work involving rape and psychological abuse) because it was too "creepy." She describes the changes of her perception over time.

When I was much younger, I didn't really pay attention to these things. I was like "oh, he's still happy about it isn't he?" But actually, by hell he isn't. I'd say that it bothers me now. At the beginning, it was a kind of fantasy, to go over consent, and because I'd already been done things to without my consent, I thought it was probably normal. But actually, it's not!

Fanny experienced a similar process, apparent when I ask her what influences her decision to read a certain series. While Anna speaks about evolving "sociopolitical consciousness," Fanny talks about her "militant reading grids." Mentioning her fan group's blog, she proudly states that they were the first (and only in the French speaking world, to her knowledge) to implement a "trigger warning" in their reviews of series. She describes *In These Words*, the work which Judy found too creepy to buy as "beautiful, but definitely not for everyone" and deserving such a warning. She points out the fact that it is now much easier to find works which take consent into account (an opinion shared by Anna and Judy), humorously adding that if she had paid as much attention to issues of consent as she did now, back in 2008 when she started reading the genre she wouldn't have been able to buy anything at all. She enthusiastically talks about recent series which have been published and

about how it is becoming increasingly easy to find reading material which pass her tough criteria.

In addition to having a more critical view of gender stereotypes, consent and LGBT representations, they also talk about their appreciation of works which stray from the usual plot of boy's love manga. The pattern that seems to emerge is that after an initial phase of fascination for yaoi per se, fans start to look for more original manifestations of the genre, a trend which is also quite apparent in Zanghellini's (2009) analysis of a BL forums, where fans regularly complain about clichés and stereotypical plots. Through narrating her story, Judy gives a good account to illustrate this process. At the beginning, she explains that she was curious and fascinated by the fact that there were "two guys touching each other," and that was enough to get her hooked. This makes sense, as her feelings were that of adolescent discovery and first contact with eroticism and sex. As she grew used to the genre, however, she explains that she came to focus solely on the plot. She still enjoys explicit scenes which are "always nice to see", but broadened her focus, reporting she doesn't care if it's a heterosexual couple, two girls, or two guys, as long as the plot is good. Anna also mentions seeking material, which is out of the ordinary, remembering being pleasantly surprised by a series which tackled the issue of abusive relationships. Fanny, on her part, mentions another work in which the love story unfolds between a deaf and a sound-hearing boy. April notices not only the changes in themes, but also the evolution of the drawing styles. According to her, the genre has made huge progress when it comes to the "appreciation of the male body", with increasingly detailed drawing as opposed to what she calls the "poster children" of the early 2000's (see Fig. 1). Not that the perceptions of the quality of the drawings are shared by all: when describing the aesthetics of *Junjō*

*Romantica* April mocks “ridiculous *seme* hands which are the size of the *uke*’s head, pointy chins, gross eyes,” while Fanny describes it as “expressionist drawings” which got her hooked and made her buy all the volumes of the series.



Fig. 1: The “poster children” mentioned by April<sup>3</sup>

While all of them have an idea of what they find problematic in the genre, it is interesting to look at how they feel about BL as opposed to other erotica. Is sex important for them? And if so, what do they find in BL specifically when it comes to sexuality? Although for Fanny sex is not an important criteria (she amusingly mentioned that she is one of the rare fans who doesn’t care much for it), she paints a picture of alternative pornography which I find resonates strongly with the fundamental differences between mainstream male-oriented porn and feminist forms of pornography targeting women. As seen throughout this thesis, BL does not always present a healthier vision of sexuality than other genres and still contains lots of abuse and fixed sexual stereotypes. In spite of that, what draws it apart?

<sup>3</sup> Images retrieved from the following urls: [https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/519PW2S0HSL\\_SX334\\_BO1,204,203,200.jpg](https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/519PW2S0HSL_SX334_BO1,204,203,200.jpg) ; [https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/51pZgWZraoL\\_SX349\\_BO1,204,203,200.jpg](https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/51pZgWZraoL_SX349_BO1,204,203,200.jpg) ; [https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/51KXQJ6465L\\_SX333\\_BO1,204,203,200.jpg](https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/51KXQJ6465L_SX333_BO1,204,203,200.jpg) Accessed December 14, 2019.

Fanny reflects on the feminist pornography of feminist director Erika Lust, and draws a parallel with yaoi:

It's not just about a dick and a vagina. It's about two people who meet, and yaoi is like that too. They're two individuals, and their individuality is not negated. Even in the basest dōjinshi, I think you'll still see the face of both protagonists at some point.

In fact, not only are the characters two individuals, the women I interviewed seem to relish in the alternative vision of men which BL presents. This vision applies to the characters in general, through the way in which they challenge traditional masculinity, but also specifically in bed. Far from being akin to Taormino's (2013, 261) pornographic men, who are cut out of the frame or Schauer's (2005, 58) who are reduced to a penis, both characters are depicted and eroticized in bed. For Anna that is a respite from traditional pornography, who describes her experience watching porn online in such terms:

[there a whole genre where] it's filmed from the viewpoint of the guy, so you never get to see the guy. I'm like "but... but that's too unfair!" And that's also why you never notice how sensual the male body can be, because he's just there to do his thing. I think that sometimes in yaoi the male body is sexualized in a way it's never in straight porn. It's shown as being attractive!

April arrives at a similar conclusion, describing a new generation of works which are increasingly detailed and erotic. For her, early ones tended to be "craggy" and unaesthetic (such as those which can be seen on fig. 1, which if not early in BL history were among the first to become popular in Belgium). She describes her frustration and that of her friends who are also yaoi enthusiasts as one which

ultimately led them to read manga targeting homosexual men, which contained more detailed drawings of the male body. She enthusiastically claims that “we want to see pretty nipples, we want to see ass, we want to see dicks which are not too heavily censored and all that!” She doesn’t feel represented in most erotica targeting women, lamenting that these tend to focus on a situation rather than on the physical traits of the men. As seen above, this applies to ladies’ comics, for example, where the female body is the one which is on display and the reader is encouraged to identify to her rather than to desire her partner. In this sense, yaoi comes in as a unique media in the way it displays the male body for the female viewer and for her pleasure.

The desire to see dynamics which break from the usual domination of men on women is what makes finding mainstream pornography she enjoys hard for April. She notes that in order to see those in heterosexual pornography you usually have to turn to categories tend to be very niche or fetishistic such as pegging (when a woman penetrates a man with the aid of a strap-on). For her, in spite of its setbacks BL still presents a much “healthier” alternative to sexuality than the hentai manga of which she consumes similarly large amounts. She presents them as two very different visions. In hentai, she describes the point as being in extreme, how far things can go, which echoes Shamoons’ (2004, 84) analysis of *ero manga* as deriving pleasure from “pushing the human body to extremes.” April sees BL sexuality as based on “how the characters feel, their sensuality, and maybe even on their romance” although for her this last factor is of little importance. For Anna, her first experience with mainstream pornography around 12 was a traumatic one, with websites “full of women, in weird positions, making odd faces” and showers of “ads asking for your credit card info.” She lost her desire to investigate any further. For

her, boy's love was an alternative because "when it's two guys, you don't need to be objectifying any women and that's great." Like Anna, Judy found other forms of pornography too extreme for her. She describes hentai and gay manga as being too much for her "safe" taste but is nevertheless annoyed at the sexual attitude of women in hentai who "have barely been touched and are already cumming" as well as the scenarios which she finds too basic. The bottom line is that in spite of the clichés and sometimes dubious consent, for some readers, BL does represent a breath of fresh air from traditional representations of sexuality and they proactively seek material which will fit their preferences.

BL opens up new possibilities not only on sexual terms, but also when it comes to depictions of gender and psychology of the characters. Again, representation of females is problematic. When drawing a comparison with *shōjo* manga, Fanny says she finds the passivity of most *shōjo* heroines hard to bear. This annoyance at female characters is not limited to my interviewees. Blair (2010, 121) especially, has researched the very negative reactions to some of the very few females appearing in BL, but concludes that rather than hating female characters in general, readers welcome female characters who are depicted as "strong and likeable." However, for Fanny, the passivity which is negatively perceived when it comes to female characters becomes somewhat counter normative when it is the male character who is depicted as passive. April, however, is still annoyed when yaoi reproduces dynamics of *shōjo* manga which she calls "toxic." She defines such dynamics as those in which men are cold and unexpressive, encouraged not to display their emotions too much and girls who are "punchy" and nice but still slightly inferior to the male character, either in popularity, grades, or social status. Although BL has been praised for depicting sex in a gender-equal way, with the *seme* focusing on his



partner's pleasure, April, who reads BL every day and has been doing so for nearly ten years, feels that just as in heterosexual pornography the female pleasure and body tends to be the centerpiece, in BL the *uke* still receives much more attention than the *seme*. Other than Nagakubo's study (quoted in Fujimoto 2015, 84), no large-scale material analysis has been conducted. Such an analysis, however, would be of great value to study whether the power dynamics in BL sexuality are as equal as they have been claimed to be. Among my interviewees, however, April is the only one to note the presence of toxic masculinities in some BL works. Describing how she first felt when encountering the genre, Judy speaks enthusiastically of her first experience with men being depicted in that way, confessing that she had a stereotypical idea of what men were supposed to be and what they were supposed to enjoy. She speaks about these early visions ("men liking soccer and stuff like that") as if confessing childish beliefs and declares that it was yaoi which "allowed me to become open to the fact that they [boys] feel the same things as us [girls]."

### **Engaging with Boy's Love: From Text to Action**

Through engagement with BL, it becomes apparent that some of the readers not only are confronted with alternative visions of sexuality through BL, the genre also has encouraged them to take action. For Judy, the curiosity sparked by BL manga led her to become more curious about sexuality in general and research some of the things she saw depicted in the manga, such as new sexual positions. While all girls talk about how the evolution of their perception of what is acceptable or not (alongside a "feminist consciousness") influenced their way of reading BL, for Fanny it is precisely BL which influenced the development of that consciousness. When I reached out to her to ask her if she would agree to do an interview, it was because I knew she had founded a fan group which regularly organized real life meetings to

discuss BL. When I asked her what had led her to create such a group I was surprised to learn that when she was in regular gatherings of manga enthusiasts, she would get “misogynistic and homophobic insults” by men who “did not think twice before binging on hentai or ecchi without it being a problem for anyone.” The experience of being personally confronted to this double standard, where male desire is taken for granted while female desire is seen as abnormal, is what played a big role in kickstarting a broader reflection on patriarchy and feminism for her. She created her fan group not so much out of a strong desire to spread and share enjoyment of BL, but out of a necessity to have a safe space for doing so. April and Judy also did actively engage in BL related activities, for April by drawing fanart and being part of a scanlation team and for Judy by displaying a classic case of Galbraith’s “rotten filter” (Galbraith 2011, 221): she playfully describes the way she and her girlfriends annoy some of their male friends by imagining them in relationships, or the way she and her sister shocked their brother by showing him what they were reading.

In all of these ways, it is apparent that BL had a strong impact on the individual trajectories of these four women. Discovering the genre was closely tied to their exploration of sexuality, gender and sexual orientation. When wondering whether BL can fit within feminist standards or not, and what tropes in it are toxic or not, there is a risk of overlooking the fact that the readers can also very consciously interact with this process by refusing the tropes which they find unpleasant or not in line with their values and welcoming those which they find healthier. It is also likely that if more readers undergo a similar process of increasing sensitivity to problematic themes, works which follow these lines of thought will become increasingly available, as Fanny and April observe is already the case.

## Conclusion

Pornography is both an important and a sensitive topic, because it has the power to influence our perception and relationship to one of the most intimate aspects of our lives: our sexuality. While it is now more available than ever, and the internet lifts much of the stigma against accessing it, from the beginning of its heightened visibilities in the 70's until today, it has sparked an array of conflicted and often negative feelings for the women who enter in contact with its male oriented productions. Dissatisfaction with mainstream (male oriented) pornography fueled the growth of multi-media female oriented alternatives. Some are very self-consciously feminist and take an almost political approach to pornography by openly promoting core values of consent, mutual enjoyment and fair treatment of performers. Others, while made and enjoyed by women, copy much of the tropes which have received such bitter criticism in mainstream pornography, as is the case in ladies' comics. If feminist pornography is pornography which respects the integrity of women, and values their pleasure and well-being, then all female pornography is not feminist, and all feminist pornography is not female. By adopting a normative idea of what female pornography should be like, one risks dismissing cultural productions which are precious in understanding mechanism of desire and sexual culture among women.

Among all this, BL is an ambiguous medium. Its tremendous international popularity, and its multi-media development both through professional and amateur channels make it hard to overlook as part of a vast ensemble of women's sexual culture. Content wise, it is ambiguous: a female pornography from which women are excluded. Through BL, and by noting that it is far from being the only

instance of women turning to male/male pornography, we can ask broader questions about what exactly is so dissatisfying about the presence of women in mainstream pornography and what is painful about identifying with them. Although BL still reproduces many dynamics which do not present a progressive, egalitarian and consent based idea of sexuality (normalization of rape, reproduction of gender stereotypes, heavy focus on penetration, misrepresentation of homosexuality) it is still a fertile ground for reflections on the subversion of gender norms, the meaning of femininity and masculinity, and factors of erotic enjoyment among women. These themes can be explored through analysis of the material on a scholarly level, but also through interactions with the readership which as I hope to have shown, can engage in profound and sometimes life-impacting reflections on the same topics.

When BL is discovered in early teenagerhood, especially, simply by showing something different from the dominant heteronormative representations, BL can kickstart interrogations on gender and sexuality. Enjoyment for BL is not a fixed thing, but rather a process which is closely tied to the personal development of the individual. While upon first discovery (especially if that discovery is made in early teenagerhood) BL can appear as fascinating and fresh merely by showing new perspectives on sex and relationships, as readers grow older they can become more critical, increasingly seeking originality and refusing works which contain tropes that are unacceptable to them as feminist women. While their “feminist consciousnesses” impact their readings, sometimes it is precisely their readings which have impacted the development of such a consciousness in the first place.

On the collective scale, BL participates in normalizing female desire and provides a creative space for discussing that desire and creating visions or

material which fits one's taste. Because of the porous borders between amateur and professional, when undergone in Japan, such expressions of one's preferences might actually influence mainstream works. In Europe, if a larger amount of readers, as the ones I have interviewed, show their dislike for works which they see as breaking important values of consent, the demand for more respectful works might influence what is published. Because both the readers and the genre's popular tropes undergo great changes, and that the study of 70's *shōnen ai* manga and its readers is already distant from today's BL and their readership, it is likely that the field of BL studies will continue to thrive and document new changes in the medium, while inserting it in broader reflections about female desire and its increasingly bold and visible manifestations.

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## Appendix: Questions for the Interviews

How did you discover the genre?

How old were you?

What did it feel like?

Was it the first time you were in contact with erotic material (and if not, what was there before and how was it different)?

What made you want to keep on reading it?

What else did you read? Anything explicit as yaoi? And did it evolve?

Is it important that the two protagonists are male?

When you choose a series, are erotic scenes an important factor? Why?

What makes a good series? And what makes a bad series?

What makes a good scene and a bad scene?

Do you think yaoi is a female genre? If yes, do you think that there are specific things do it that make it enjoyable for females if not for the rest?

Do you think yaoi played an important role in your life and self-development?

Do you still read it? If yes, how have your taste evolved? If not, why?