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**“DO NOT FEED THE FETISHIZERS”: BOYS’ LOVE FANS’ RESISTANCE AND
CHALLENGE OF PERCEIVED REPUTATION**

by

Hailey Rose Coleman

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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May 2021

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Most of all, I would love to thank all the BL fans who opened up to me in interviews. You all made this experience so beautiful and invigorating. I am so happy to have met you all, and I hope they continue to make BL content we can seek refuge in.

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May 2021

Abstract:

Existing research on Boys' Love (BL) fans has focused primarily on heterosexual women's consumption of the media. Queer audience members have rarely been included in BL studies. Drawing on autoethnographic materials and 36 in-depth interviews, this project documented the ways that individuals who self-identify as BL fans created, resisted, and challenged the perceived stigma that all BL fans are "fetishizers" of gay men. Respondents relied on Biographical Work to construct their identities and frame their experiences with BL media in relation to fetishizer exemplars. Some participants engaged in Identity Politics where they made claims about the wrong ways and right ways to consume BL media, thus using fetishizer exemplars to construct both individual and group identities. In the end, the wrong way was always about fetishizing, and the right way was always in the direction of connection.

Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
1. Boys' Love Beginnings	1
2. Literature Review	4
BL's Japanese Origin	4
Media as an Escape	7
LGBTQ+ Representation in Media	9
Conclusion	10
3. Autoethnography	11
4. Theoretical Orientation	20
Biographical Work	20
Identity Politics	22
Fetishism	23
Conclusion	27
5. Methods and Procedures	28
The Sample	28
The Interview	29
Safety Precautions	31
Analysis	31
Conclusion	32
6. Findings	33
The Fetishizer Exemplar	33
There is an Unacceptable Way	36
There is an Acceptable Way: West Versus East	48
Conclusion	54
Consequences for the Fetishizer Exemplar	54
Misrepresenting and Misunderstanding the Fandom	54
Lesbian Inversion	56
Conclusion	58
Ways I Connect with BL Media	58
Alternate Realities	59
Ways I Connect with Others	62
My Niche of Weird People	63
Cultural Expansion and Acceptance	65
Conclusion	69
7. Conclusion	70
Methodological Contributions	70
Theoretical Contributions	72

Substantive Contributions	73
Limitations and Future Research	74
Concluding Thoughts	77
Works Cited	82
Appendix A	88
Appendix B	90
Appendix C	91
Appendix D	96
Appendix E	97
Appendix F	99

CHAPTER ONE

BOYS' LOVE BEGINNINGS

Boys' Love (BL), a genre of media that originated in Japan with two men as the main love interests (Zsila et al. 2018), has been said to be cultivated by women, for women (Saito 2011). In the 1970s, women started creating their own platforms to explore their sexual, romantic, and emotional desires through gay manga (Japanese comics) (Fujimoto 1998; McLelland 1999; Welker 2006; Galbraith 2011; Saito 2011). Multiple articles discuss the ways in which women gain a better understanding of themselves through fan-made media (Mizoguchi 2008; Galbraith 2011; Rosenblatt and Tushnet 2015).

Research on BL media has almost exclusively investigated heterosexual women's motivation for consuming the media, with a specific focus on their sexual intentions; there has been limited research on diverse and inclusive audiences (McLelland 1999; Camper 2006; Galbraith 2011; Zsila et al. 2018). It appears to be the case that researchers have replicated the culture they live in and fallen into a gendered "deviancy bias" (Millman 1975; Chafetz and Dworkin 1986) regarding this topic. When women are sexual, it is assumed to be "deviant" and thus of research interest; when men are sexual, it is normal and expected and obviously not of research interest. This deviance bias has influenced "who" researchers are interested in investigating, which, in turn, has blinded them to other research possibilities regarding BL media and the fandom. Existing BL research focuses on the explicitness of the material and heterosexual women's motivations for consuming it, with no acknowledgment that BL as a genre has expanded to include media of varying ratings (such as PG or X).

As a BL fan myself, I have found that the online BL following is largely dominated by LGBTQ+ (or queer) fans of all genders, and it is not limited to straight women, as previous research has suggested (Wood 2006). For my study of the BL fandom, I recruited fans of BL media through the social media app TikTok. My [video](#) quickly gained attention, and I received 50+ emails from fans interested in participating in my study. In the end, I conducted 36 in-depth interviews with BL fans of varying backgrounds. By reorienting my focus to BL fans' interpretations of their experiences interacting with the media, and each other, I found they expressed a need to resist the idea that they were "fetishizing" BL media. Most, in fact, embraced themes such as connectivity, inclusion, and expanded awareness of self and others to describe their participation in the fandom.

The concept of biographical work (Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt 1994) served as a frame through which to analyze these materials. By engaging in biographical work, BL fans used verbal strategies such as *narrative resistance* (Rambo

Rambo Ronai and Cross 1997; Cordell and Rambo Ronai 1999; Presson and Rambo 2015) to form a consistent and coherent story of self in the face of perceived stigma or *discursive constraint*. Most of them expressed an awareness of being perceived as fetishizing, in one way or another, BL content. The fans also engaged in identity politics (Moon 2012), where they narrated a right and wrong way to consume BL media, so as not to be identified as a fetishist. By appealing to fetishizer exemplars as a narrative resource, they were able to construct both individual and collective identities which resisted themes of alienation in favor of connection.

Most of the existing research on BL media comes from cultural studies literature and focuses on straight Japanese women (McLelland 1999; Camper 2006; Galbraith 2011; Bauer

2013), and only one study focused on lesbian Japanese women (Welker 2006; Mizoguchi 2008). Past research has primarily explored BL manga (Fujimoto 1998; McLelland 1999; Welker 2006; Galbraith 2011; Saito 2011); however, BL has become a broad genre of media that now includes television series, movies, webcomics, and fanfiction, along with manga. In this project, participants described a greater range of experiences, intentions, motives, and identities not previously captured by past research. This study enriches previous research on BL media and audiences because of its inclusive, qualitative, and sociological approach.

There were two questions that guided my research:

1. What discourses will participants who consume Boy's Love (BL) media draw upon to describe and account for their experiences engaging with the content?
2. What discourses will participants who consume BL media draw upon to construct their own and other's identities while engaging with the content?

The next chapter will explore the existing literature regarding BL media, its audience, and general fan culture. In Chapter 3, you will read my auto-ethnography of my personal fan experiences to give perspective on the influence media can have on one's life. In Chapter 4, I will explain the theoretical orientations that underpin this study. In Chapter 5, I discuss the methods and procedures I employed to conduct my study. In Chapter 6, I will explore the findings of this research. Finally, in Chapter 7, I discuss my various contributions to the literature and bring my study to a conclusion.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

BL's Japanese Origin

BL first arose during the 1970s in Japan in the form of manga (comics) (Fujimoto 1998; McLelland 1999; Welker 2006; Galbraith 2011; Saito 2011). The original creators were all women seeking to escape sexist Japanese society, mentally and emotionally (Saito 2011). BL media's origin was cultivated by women for women (Saito 2011). Below, I explored the following themes in existing BL literature: bishōnen manga, fujoshis, and stigma surrounding fujoshis. I then discussed media as an outlet for fans. These categories were broken down into LGBTQ+ representation, escapism through fanfiction, self-exploration through BL media, and connectivity in the fandom.

Japanese women and beautiful, androgynous men

Gay men were often made out to be more desirable to women than straight men (McLelland 1999). While exploring gay men and women's relationships, specifically in Japan, McLelland asserted that some of the first gay male media outlets were generated in Japanese culture. Hagio Moto and Takemiya Keiko were two Japanese manga authors who have been credited with the creation of *Shōunen-ai*, a genre of BL, which was mostly produced and written for women (Saito 2011). *Bishōnen*, meaning "beautiful young men," became another term to describe these types of manga. These comics were first created by women, depicting same-sex love stories between two boys (McLelland 1999). These characters were often androgynous in appearance, drawn to represent both typically feminine and masculine characteristics. Bishōnen characters had the "aesthetics of nineteenth-century Europeans," with features similar to celebrities such as David Bowie (Welker 2006).

Some have argued that these BL characters were neither entirely masculine nor feminine; some interpretations suggested they represented a third gender (Welker 2011). However, BL fans and manga artists contested that while the characters were androgynous, they still represented men (Welker 2011). For the readers, bishōnen manga also came to serve as a “resistance to the heterosexual narratives” in Japan, where men’s behavior towards women was overly aggressive and sexist (McLelland 1999). Manga marketed towards boys projected a strong man who rescues the girl, while girls’ manga often told stories of love being able to conquer all obstacles (Toku 2007). As a form of escapism from the oppressive realities Japanese women faced, they created their own fantasy storylines in which the aggressive heterosexual man was distant. Instead, he was replaced by a beautiful young man whose characteristics were much more open and emotional.

Gay enthusiasts

Fujoshi was a Japanese term used to describe female fans who enjoyed media that depicted relationships between two men. Galbraith (2011) asserted that women interested in this type of media portrayal were interested more in the “fantasy” aspect of the story. A male couple was farther from reality than a heterosexual or lesbian couple to the fans. These fantasies were viewed as having a “separate set of possibilities” (Galbraith 2011). Fujoshi enthusiasts often consumed *yaoi*, a type of BL comic where male manga characters were written and drawn in homoerotic relationships. These comics originated in Japan in the 1980s and then spread to grow an international fan base in the 1990s (Zsila et al. 2018). Yaoi was typically deemed “sexier,” compared to the previously mentioned shōunen-ai and bishōnen, often depicting intimate sexual relationships between the main characters (Camper 2006). Yaoi was defined as a form of erotica for readers, due to the lack of substantial plot, minor character arcs, and the focus on sexual

scenarios (Zsila et al. 2018). While gay media in America was aimed at gay men, yaoi and all forms of gay media were almost entirely marketed for and supported by women in Japanese culture (Camper 2006). With that being said, American-produced LGBTQ+ television series were still largely viewed by women audiences; this was not to say that queer men were not the majority in these series' audiences, but that women were also huge consumers of LGBTQ+ media (Bauer 2013). Neville (2018) also claimed women make up 37% of PornHub's gay porn audience. While it was more widely accepted in Japan for women to seek out BL media, it was not as accepted in America. While men were rarely questioned regarding their attraction to lesbian media, women who sought out BL media were less accepted (Bauer 2013).

Stigmatization of fujoshis

When discussing the status of young women's interests, Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley (2012) stated:

Girls, both female and underage, have long been marginalized by the 'mainstream' culture dominated by adult men. In many historical periods and socioeconomic classes, girls were not encouraged or allowed to study and enjoy reading and writing. Even in modern times, girls' and women's reading matter, reading habits, and writings have tended to be neglected or derided. (2012:80)

Even in the present day, girls' habits and interests are scrutinized by society. For women who consume gay media, there has even been an extreme double standard; Japanese women, Fujoshis, were described as "cross-voyeurs" because of their interests in BL media (Bauer 2013). BL research was oversaturated by the "secret motivations" behind women's fascination with male slash fanfiction (gay fan-made stories), defining it as "odd," while there have been very few publications on men's interactions with lesbian media (Bauer 2013). In an online article written

by Watson and Jirik (2018), the pair explained that in Thailand, young viewers of BL series watched in secret because they were afraid of the backlash they would receive from their parents if they discovered their viewing habits.

Media as an Escape

Media was a tool fans used to escape their everyday realities; consumption of television and video games has been most frequently studied in research (Hastall 2017). Zhang (2016) specifically discussed how young Chinese fans of BL use the media as an outlet of escapism and exploration. Stenseng, Falch-Madsen, and Hygen (2021) defined two dimensions of escapism through gaming and online streaming: Self-Expansion (positive) and Self-Suppression (negative). Media marathoning, or the consumption of media for multiple consecutive hours, offered significant mental, emotional, and physical benefits for those struggling with their health (Perks 2018).

Fanfiction was also a massive supplier of BL stories. Fanfiction was fictional text written by fans who took already established characters and created their own narratives, which could often follow the existing storyline or be quite outlandish (Thomas 2011). Slash fanfiction, or slash, was a genre of fanfiction that has a more overtly sexual narrative between two men (Salmon and Symons 2004). In slash fanfiction, there was a rating scale in terms of sexual explicitness that ranged anywhere from a PG rating to an X rating. No matter the rating, the storylines still remained focused more on emotion rather than solely the physical components of the relationships (Salmon and Symons 2004). Jennifer Barnes (2015) suggested that fanfiction was not only a venue for emotional interaction with a media property, but it also acted as a form of “resistance to the source material.” In terms of resisting the source material, Barnes described

authors creating mashups and alternate universes for their characters to interact in, pairing two characters who were not previously partnered together or gender-swapping characters.

Self-Exploration through BL media

Primarily due to sexist regimes and repression of women in Japan, when BL manga first became popular, the women who consumed it often felt stigmatized by their own interests (Fujimoto 1998). Women's sexual attitudes, desires, and identities are far more likely to change over time than men's (Rupp 2012). The disruption of gender roles, also referred to as gender-bent roles, performed in BL manga allowed readers to explore their own sexuality in a positive, safe environment (Fujimoto 1998). "The genre [BL] is widely considered to offer a liberatory sphere within which presumably heteronormative readers can experiment with romance and sexuality through identification with the beautiful boy characters" (Welker 2006:858). Readers were able to identify with these beautiful, androgynous, male characters in a way that encouraged them to explore and accept their own sexualities. In fact, according to Welker, Japanese lesbians referenced BL manga as influential during their formative years. Akiko Mizoguchi (2008) noted that she explored her own lesbianism in childhood through reading yaoi. Because BL manga were more readily accessible over woman loving woman (WLW) manga, many lesbians sought sexual exploration through these androgynous, beautiful boys (Welker 2006). Women felt socially and sexually repressed and unable to understand or own their sexual desires; therefore, they created a fantasy land to project their sexual interests as women through the body of a man (Welker 2011). Fujimoto (1998) described these beautiful boys as "devices" for the readers to navigate through their own desires.

Connectivity in fandoms

Fan-made media, such as fanfiction, was a transformative tool of connection for those who created and consumed them. Because fans often came from all over the world, fandom and fanfiction provided a space for those trying to learn English or any other language (Black 2006). Media reached across cultural and language barriers; fanfiction was a perfect medium for those interested in the English language to pick up and practice skills. Reading and writing were social and interactive elements. When placed in a fanfiction or online fandom community, one could often quickly pick up slang terms, online social cues, and social awareness through their interactions (Black 2005).

By transgressing cultural and language barriers, this media allowed fans to connect, often becoming friends, even if they were countries apart. Through social media websites, English learning speakers could easily access creative writings that were engaging and connected them to their media of choice while gaining social language skills (Black 2007). Because the BL fandom was so diverse in its audience, many fans did not speak English as a first language. Ironically, BL shows were not in English, and BL manga often had to be translated; however, many fans and fanfiction writers for BL wrote their stories in English. With fans from all over the world engaged with one another in a shared social space, it was easy to see that many connections were made that would not have previously been made.

LGBTQ+ Representation in Media

Because the LGBTQ+ community has been so excluded from popular media in the past, LGBTQ+ creators often turned to producing their own works through fandom spaces, such as fanfiction and fan art (Robles 2019). Fan studies have increased in research in the past ten years, due to this field being a key site for “negotiating and extending questions about media audiences,

gender, and sexuality” (Carter, Steiner, and McLaughlin 2014:14). Over the past thirty years, there has been a rise in LGBTQ+ consumers, an increase in media representation of sexual minorities, and a spike in the variety of queer media (Sender 2003).

Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) found that role models in media were characterized as a source of “pride, inspiration, and comfort” for fans, specifically in the LGBTQ+ community. Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo (2005) found that viewers often had more empathy for and were drawn to characters that were similar to them in identification; this led me to believe that fans of BL, no matter their gender, found some kind of self-identification and connection to the characters in these series, ringing even more true for fans that were in the LGBTQ+ community.

Conclusion

Existing literature on BL media focused on the Japanese origin of the genre and the women who primarily made up its audience. Most studies highlighted women’s sexual intentions in their consumption and excluded most identities outside of heterosexual women from the data. Fujoshis were stigmatized for their interest in BL media, while their male counterparts were expected to enjoy lesbian media. Media served as an outlet for representation, escapism, self-exploration, and connectivity; therefore, it was possible for BL media to be a source of positivity outside of sexual pleasure for its fans.

Sometimes “showing” is better than “telling.” The next chapter is autoethnographic (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) in nature—a participant observation in which I share my own lived experience with fandoms. Many of the themes discussed in the literature review are present in my experience. At the same time, there is something “more” going on as I explore alienation, sexual awakening, sadness, and connection through BL media, fandoms, and my friends. A boy or two may have been unjustly “fetishized” along the way—BL can be dangerous like that.

CHAPTER THREE

AUTOETHNOGRAPY

When the night is coming down on you

We will find a way through the dark

Through the Dark, One Direction

The anxiety creeps up in my chest, threatening to spill over into the rest of my body, forcing me to be immobile and mute. My two best friends are depending on me; I am wide-eyed, hopeful, but scared of what is to come. I am the designated spokesperson when confronting my father with the *big* question, potentially the most *important* question in all of existence: “Will you drive us to see One Direction perform in Chicago?”

The thought of asking this question makes my pulse spike and cold sweat pool in my hands. How can I convince him to drive eight hours away to see five fairly unknown teenage boys flail around and sing onstage? We are barely 14 and have class on the day of the concert. Tears sting my eyes as I think about how badly I want to go.

No one knows them; they are our little secret we run to when we feel we are not enough. I am depressed, and I hate myself; every moment feels excruciating. The only relief I have from the hovering thought that everyone would be happier if I wasn't here or agonizing over how many calories I've eaten are the moments I am consuming anything One Direction related or on my stan Twitter account.

Having a stan Twitter where we can constantly tweet about One Direction is not enough of a serotonin fix. We need to see them live. In a weird way, this feels like the best way to thank them for always being there for us in moments we would much rather be anyone other than who we are.

My question rushes past my lips as I stand in front of my dad. All of my preparation of telling him they mean everything to us comes out in a half yell, half cry: “Will you drive us to see One Direction in Chicago?” I catch my breath, my eyes threatening to detach from their sockets, as I wait for his answer.

“Sure,” he says after a few seconds.

I am screaming; I am not making sense; I may also be crying. A million positive feelings shoot through every nerve ending in my body as I call my friends back. I rush to my iPod Touch and open up the Twitter app. We get to see One Direction! We get to meet stan Twitter fans we have only had contact with online! We get to be surrounded by people who love One Direction in person, not just online anymore!

It sounds dramatic, but I constantly feel like the world is crumbling around me, and I am simply trying to find a ledge. One Direction has been my ledge for the past year, and my grip tightens as I hold on to the anticipation of seeing them on stage.

아침은 다시 올 거야

어떤 어둠도 어떤 계절도

영원할 순 없으니까

(The morning will come again

Because no darkness, no season

Can last forever)

Spring Day, BTS

I wake up with a jolt, my chest is tight as usual, but it is accompanied by a burning sensation on the backs of my thighs. I let loose an exhale and try to regain normal breathing; this is the fourth day in a row I have woken up with hives. The heat is coming from a huge, uneven

patch of burning red skin. I quickly stand up to snap a picture and send it to my best friend, giggling at the picture because my hives resemble a scrambled version of the map of the world.

Today is one of my only mornings off from work, and I do not want to spend it in the doctor's office again. The last four months have felt like they have taken at least ten years off my life. I have never been in such an excruciatingly toxic and strenuous job before, and I am not coping well.

Not only is my employment being detrimental to my mental health, but my physical health is also taking a dip. I am enrolled in a program to help lose weight and gain muscle, but the diet plan is seriously bland and lacking. At night when I am still hungry, I swap out food for Diet Cokes. *At least I am not shoving my fingers down my throat anymore*, I think to myself throughout this process. I come to realize that I may never be completely removed from my eating disorders; I simply mask them every time they present in a new form. Every breath feels painful, and now I have hives to physically mark where my depression and anxiety have led me. I open a social media tab to see that *Times* has released their "Most Influential" list of 2019. On the cover are seven Korean men I recognize as BTS. Over a year ago, a few friends showed their music videos at a gathering, and I always meant to look more into their group, but I never did. I need something to distract myself now, desperately, and as someone who has loved boy bands her entire life, I know this could be my quick fix into forced happiness.

"I think I'm gonna get into BTS," I text my best friend.

"I told you that we should," She responds seconds later. "I'll do it with you." The rest of the day, I surround myself with BTS media. From reality shows to interviews to music videos to dance practice; I am completely entranced by any BTS content I can get my hands on. It's now

close to midnight, and I have work in the morning. The anxiety creeps back in my chest, as it always does, but this time I have a safety blanket of BTS videos to wrap around me.

꽃같이 살래 나답게

(I'm gonna live like a flower, I'll be myself)

Gashina, Sunmi

Alexandria, Virginia, is beautiful and hot in the summer. I am staying with my cousins for the month, but as a newfound introvert, I always step away during the day for alone time. I am currently binge-watching Dingo K-Beauty videos on YouTube of idols doing their fans' makeup.

Sunmi, a solo artist, appears on my laptop screen. She is beautiful, confident, and flirtatious.

I'm so glad I like girls, too, I think to myself. Oh? Oh.

This thought echoes in my head, and for the first time, I am not anxious or stressed by it. I have constantly questioned and worried about my sexuality. By the time I got to college, I felt free to explore. I claimed I was "heteroflexible," and I was known amongst friends to be open. However, this exploration only caused more turmoil: the kind that left me feeling like my heartbeat was going to burst my eardrums if I didn't run away, but with a woman sleeping soundly on top of me, I was forced to freeze. I could not handle this kind of anxiety, so I pushed it away, along with the potential to be anything other than straight.

However, in this quick moment of watching Sunmi lightly apply lipstick on her fan, my previous years of turmoil about my unknown identity are simply nonexistent. Now, in this moment, I push away any thought of being heterosexual; it feels suffocating and false, as it secretly always was.

I am walking around New York City with two of my best friends from high school. One, an out lesbian, and the other, always in the same, confusing boat I was in. There is a day left together before I go back to Virginia, and I am suddenly struck that I have not told anyone about my semi-new revelation.

“So, last week, I was watching a makeup video and had the thought, ‘I’m so glad I like girls, too.’” I am a blunt person, and as I walk beside two women I have known for years, I feel no point in having a drawn-out explanation that I am not straight.

“Oh, really? So, are you bisexual?” They asked.

“I guess so.”

“That’s awesome! Can’t say that we are surprised.”

“Yeah,” we laugh, and then the topic shifts.

Finally, being in between feels empowering. I have always felt like there were two sides of myself pulling me in different directions, and I never knew which way was the right way for me. At this moment, I know there is not a “right” way for me. Whatever way I feel in the moment is what is right for that point in time. I have never felt like I have to deny myself being attracted to men, and now, in this moment, I also don’t feel like I have to deny myself being attracted to women. I know anxiety with being on the queer spectrum will come in the future still; it is inevitable.

However, right now, I am content. I smirk, thinking that Sunmi, an idol I barely know anything about, was the woman to make me comfortable with the term “bisexual,” something that was so scary before. Slightly high, with aching feet, we walk towards the Natural History Museum as I mentally thank God for Sunmi and for KPOP.

ถ้าฉันอยู่ในนวนิยายบางทีมันอาจจะดีกว่าชีวิตจริงของเรา

(If I'm living in the novel, perhaps it might be better than our real life.)

Why R U

We are barely a month into quarantine; we should not be this bored. However, experiencing international trauma from a pandemic can sometimes lead you to resort to new forms of entertainment. My friends already know about my obsession with Thai BL series for the past year. They support me enthusiastically explaining the captivating yet often problematic plots and relationships that unfold on the screen. While they seldom know what I am talking about, they let me ramble on, knowing that this is my only outlet to discuss these shows.

There are four of us on FaceTime, attempting to distance ourselves because our new normal is no longer face-to-face. As someone who is unapologetically transparent, I feel struck at this moment to share a scene from an episode of my most recent Thai BL show.

“Y’all have to watch this sex scene from my show,” I state, unwilling to take no for an answer, immediately texting the link and time stamp to the video.

“Oh my gosh. Oh my *gosh*.” Their faces contort in confusion, shock, and intrigue. I laugh, having already seen the scene when it premiered, knowing that my reaction perfectly mirrored theirs.

“Girl,” One of them drawls. “This is soft-core porn. Wait! What did he just say?”

“I know! Isn’t this crazy? This is a TV show!” I respond, laughing uncontrollably, “It’s just this network! The most famous Thai BL network has actors who barely open their mouths when they kiss, *if* they kiss.”

The giggles and interjections go on for the remainder of the scene, a whopping five minutes. Strangely, not a second of it feels weird. We miss being able to be together but discussing our

sadness over this new life on FaceTime will only make us feel worse. We make a conversation out of the logistics of a sex scene and act like we aren't experiencing what will be an incredibly depressing chapter in a future history book. Instead, our belly laughs, and side-eye glances are our antidote for the night.

你永远不会回答我。我身上的所有这些问题都没有得到答案，所有这些感觉都没有得到解决。你为什么 not 回答我魏莹，你会回来吗？

(You never answer me back. All these questions in me left unanswered, all these feelings left unresolved. Why won't you answer me back? Wei Ying, will you come back?)

The Untamed

Okay, okay, it's not real. It's not real. My thoughts are racing as tears pour down my face. I am not crying; I am sobbing to the point of dizziness. *Oh my gosh, Hailey. It's just a TV show. This is not real!* My mind is trying to wake my heart and body up from the trance I am in, but I am locked in another universe. I send a video of my hysterics to my best friend. She is rational, maybe she will be the one to wake me from this fit. Even I have to laugh when I realize how ridiculous I am acting.

A lot of my unresolved trauma comes out when I watch television series, especially when it comes to dramas. Intense themes in shows remind me of the intense phases throughout my life I have not yet fully worked through. I am now in my bed, three hours after watching a scene where a character suddenly was killed, and I have still not stopped crying, though I am confused why it has such an effect on me. *He wasn't just a character. He was someone's husband. He was someone's father. He was so young! How are they going to move on from this? How will I move on from this?* Ah, there it is. The heaviest pain I carry is the one from which I am completely dissociated.

My relationship with death has been so overwhelming I am often unable to put it into words. My relationship with *sudden* death is even worse. I do not willingly walk into discussions of those I have lost suddenly, but when I find myself in the middle of them, I give nothing more than humorous digs at these traumatic events. And the aftermath of death? The denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are hard to coast through when everything and everyone else are moving at their normal pace.

How are these characters going to regain their normal pace? How have I ever regained my normal pace? Is there a “normal” after loss? I don’t want to cry anymore, just like I haven’t wanted to cry over the deaths I have faced in my real life. As I hit “Continue Watching,” I am struck by the reality that plays out in this fictional universe. There is no way for these characters to escape what happened, and as it happens in life, death continues to follow. That was not their first loss nor their last.

I absorb each character’s relationship with loss and trauma, and I compare it to mine. It hurts, but it is cathartic. My favorite character carries his loss silently but loyally; it completely consumes his heart, but his body continues to move. He constantly searches for what he has lost, knowing the impossibility of finding it. I find a part of myself in him, a part of me always searching for those I have lost. I look for their faces in crowds, in haircuts, in shopping malls, in libraries, in television characters, knowing nothing can measure up to the real people whose memory remains only in my mind.

A piece of me is found in this show, as it is in every show I watch. The lessons from my shows are stored in my brain, and I revisit them when necessary. As each episode unfolds, more of the characters’ hearts are revealed, along with my own.

My experiences are not representative of all fans, but I wanted to share them to illustrate the impact media and fandoms can have on an individual — the impact they had on me. After conducting this research, I found that my experiences were not unique and discovered new ways of interpreting them. Like my study participants, through the consumption of various forms of media, including BL media, I was working through feeling both connected and disconnected. While it was already documented in the literature that some of the women who consumed BL manga felt stigmatized by it, the BL fans I interviewed did not passively take on the stigmatization; instead, they actively resisted it by performing biographical work (Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt 1994), specifically narrative resistance to discursive constraint (Ronai and Cross 1997) and appealing to a term I am coining here as “fetishism exemplars” to do so.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

To understand what I observed in my interviews, it was essential for the reader to be familiar with three ideas: biographical work, identity politics, and fetishism. From biographical work, I drew on the notions of narrative resistance, discursive constraint, and exemplars (Ronai 1994; Ronai and Cross 1997) to frame my interview materials. While engaging in identity politics, which occurred at both the collective (Bernstein 2005) and individual level (Moon 2012), many study participants advocated for their stigmatized group by dictating prescriptions for correct and incorrect BL consumption. In this way, they attempted to police members' behaviors (and thus their collective identity) and exempted themselves from a stigmatized identity. Various dimensions of the concept of fetishism were explored toward the end of this chapter. As we shall see later, most of my participants appealed, in one way or another, to their own concepts of fetishism via fetishism exemplars to either narratively resist imputations of deviance, specifically, alienation, and/or to embrace themes of connection.

Biographical Work

According to Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt (1994), biographical work occurred when an interviewer and a research participant conducted an interview. The research participant consulted the past to produce an account of the self in the present. By constructing their past, the speaker made "sense" of their life experiences. The verbal management strategies that participants used to create a consistent and coherent story of self were called biographical work. Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt (1994) portrayed it as a dynamic, ongoing process, constantly subject to revision. The verbal management strategy of interest here is narrative resistance to discursive constraint.

Narrative Resistance was a term coined by Carol Rambo Ronai (1994) in her work with exotic dancers. For Ronai (1994):

Narrative resistance is an identity management technique used by exotic dancers to resist the ubiquitous imputations of deviance that they confront in their everyday lives.

Narrative resistance takes place as a reaction to discursive constraint...a term used here to describe the tendency of individuals, acting as agents for society, to offer subjects negative self-messages for failing to conform to its dictates. These imputations of deviance are...a form of domination or constraint in the sense that bodies, against their will, become dominated by ideology. (1994:197)

She further notes, “Narrative resistance is a speech behavior aimed at undermining the authority of society to dictate identity (1994:199).” Research participants, in fact “become the authors of their selves through the telling of their life stories (1994:199).” Seemingly paradoxically, they made use of “images of deviance as negative exemplars—standards of comparison—to fend off unwanted identity assignments (1994:199).”

“Narrative resistance is a response to discursive constraint which dialectically emerges from and constitutes an alternative stock of knowledge within a stigmatized group” (Ronai and Cross 1997:105). People who feel they are being perceived negatively place distance between their personal identity and their identity group. In Ronai and Cross’ (1997) study, the dancers resisted the stereotype that they were “too far into the occupation” by explaining they were paying for their education or supporting a child, and thus “not too far into it” like others. In Presson and Rambo’s study (2015), some self-injurers would state that they cut themselves but never “too deep.” Aware of the stigma associated with their identity, participants often engaged in narrative resistance to separate themselves from perceived deviance. These conversations

could also allude to identity politics and signify that there was a “right” and “wrong” way to behave.

Identity Politics

Identity politics originated during the Civil Rights Era, and aided multicultural, feminist, and gay liberation movements (Bernstein 2005). Individuals’ politics were defined by the social organizations they identified with; these identity groups could be related to race, gender identity, religion, and sexual orientation. Bernstein popularized the concept of Identity Politics by examining past research and discussing:

how to understand the relationship between personal experience and political stance, why status identities are understood and/or portrayed as essentialist or socially constructed, the strategic dilemmas movement organizers face when the identities around which a movement is organized are also the basis for oppression, when they attribute certain movement outcomes to status identities, and how to link collective action to specific notions of power to help explain the cultural and political goals at which identity politics is aimed (2005:48).

Through this, Bernstein highlighted the layers of identity politics and the impact it had on individuals’ and movements’ perspectives and outcomes. Identity politics enabled groups who felt stigmatized to explain their presumed oppression in terms of their own experiences. As per Goffman (1963), stigma was a powerful negative societal label that drastically changed a person’s social identity and self-perception. When someone felt stigmatized, they were forced to negotiate their own identity as perceived by the world and by themselves. There were ways to manage the stigmatizations — one being to actively resist the negative ways one has been characterized (Goffman 1963). “Identity politics produces figurative and literal communities of

people who have experienced similar everyday effects of stigmatization and mobilizes them,” (Moon 2012:1338). Those in stigmatized communities advocate for respect and recognition of differences based on their identities (Bernstein 2005).

“Identity politics can be large-scale activism participated in by groups or small-scale activism accomplished by an individual in his or her daily interactions,” (Loren and Rambo 2019:34). Moon (2012) described how individuals attempted to create a new perception of their identity group if they felt they were being misrepresented as a whole. Loren and Rambo (2019), in a study on Atheists, stated that this version:

...explained why individuals within a group might express opinions about what constitutes good and bad behavior. Those who identified as group members saw this as important because of their stigmatized status within the larger population; they believed that through demonstrating good behavior, perceptions of the group might change and the stigma might lesson or even potentially evaporate. (2019:25)

Individuals could be aware of the conception their identity group was given and seek to dismiss or rebrand this label. This theory stated that individuals may feel the need to police behaviors amongst their peers to transform the negative image placed on their identity group. This practice of managing what was right and what was wrong in identity groups affected the “self” construction of those within the group.

Fetishism

Most study participants invoked the concept of fetishism as a narrative resource in their stories about their experiences in the BL fandom and with their individual and collective identities as consumers of BL media. The concepts of fetishism and being a fetishist were so pervasive in the interviews it became necessary to include some discussion of the concept. Being

accused of being a fetishist was a form of discursive constraint to be narratively resisted at both the individual level of identity and collectively as a form of activism on behalf of all BL media consumers. According to my study participants, there was a right way and a wrong way to consume BL media — one way led to alienation, the other to connection with the characters in the story and the fandom. In this section, I briefly explored the concepts of fetishism of commodities and sexual fetishism.

Fetishism of Commodities

Lewin and Morris (1977) claimed their discussion of Marx's Fetishism was inspired by seeing the concept used incorrectly or forgotten in research. Fetishism, Marx stated, is a "necessary feature of the social and psychological phenomena of commodity production systems" (Lewin and Morris 1977:173). Commodities were exemplars of products of human labor that could be exchanged for value. Capitalism encouraged the perception of material goods as "possessing inherent properties which by their intrinsic physical nature they cannot possibly possess" (Lewin and Morris 1977:173). People were disconnected from their products; they only interacted as buyers and sellers of commodities. Once the buyer purchased the commodity from the worker, the worker then took the profit to purchase goods and services. In a capitalist society, the buyer and the seller served no importance to one another, only the profit.

In the fetishistic world capitalists are personifications of *capital*, workers are personifications of *labor-power* (a commodity form) or of *variable capital* (the money form of labor-power) and, in general, commodity owners are personifications of *commodities*. The fetishistic world is thus a topsy-turvy world of appearance in which not the persons, but the commodity forms they personify, appear to be the basic moving realities (1977:175).

Humans and their labor were not valued as anything more than the commodity they created in a fetishistic society. Once workers were made to barter their products, the more they interacted with the impersonal forces of the market they were selling to, the more these types of interactions took place:

... the more they [lose] their sense of comprehension of their own relationships to other men, the more they [are] forced to think of the commodities they produced as possessing a mysterious money-attracting power called value. Their labor had been alienated from them in the sense that they had lost all direct social control over it; it now confronted them in the mysterious form of money and in the equally mysterious money value of their products (1977:184).

Fetishism was a form of alienation from the commodity; alienation separated the workers from their product. “[People] produce an ever-expanding array of wealth, but ironically, they experience the very things they create as having power over them. Consequently, they bow down and worship the fetish (capital),” (Donham 2018:29). Without the connection between the workers, consumers, and the use value of the commodity, one lost their social control. In alienation, the commodity is viewed as an exchange value only.

Sexual Fetishism

The term fetishism existed in multiple variations. When I Googled “fetishize,” it was defined as to “make (something) the object of a sexual fetish. Have an excessive and irrational commitment to or obsession with (something)” (Oxford Languages, N.d.). The article “Under Imperial Eyes, Black Bodies, Buttocks, and Breasts: British Colonial Photography and Asante ‘Fetish Girls’” explored Europeans’ obsession, exploitation, and exoticism of Black women’s bodies (Engmann 2012). “The so-called fetish was a tangible material object that traversed the

boundaries of the private and public realms, to be found in matters religious and social, as well as those of the state and civil society,” (Engmann 2012:48). In this, African women’s bodies seemed to be regarded as perverse objects that first sparked interest and then obsession in British Colonial photographers.

... The photographs served as tools for colonial aggrandizement, the select and bond photographic representations of ‘fetish girls’ as titillating, exoticized, and eroticized caricatures implicitly or explicitly intimate prevalent male British colonial anxieties. They enunciate and alleviate the unconscious colonial male psyche that hinges upon precise colonial ideologies and concerns that encapsulate the subtle sexual dynamics oscillating between attraction and repulsion, arousal and disgust towards Asante women as one of the central fantasies of British colonials in nineteenth century Kumase (Engmann 2012:54).

From this perspective, in the case of a person, a group of people, or a characteristic of an individual or group being fetishized, one would dehumanize the person to the point of seeing them as an object of sexual pleasure. A more recent study examined transgender and non-binary individuals' experiences with fetishization, in which they examined the negative and positive aspects of this shifting term (Anzani et. al 2021). According to this study, some members of the LGBTQ+ community have reclaimed “fetishism,” and describe it, “both as a form of sexual objectification and as a construct that refers to sexual desire and attraction” (2021:1). As Marx explained, fetishism was a form of alienation. Sexual obsession as fetishism alienated people from one another; in this case, European men and Black women. The women were not humans; they were objects. The same is to be said for non-binary and trans people in Anzani’s study (2021). When they had served their sexual purpose, they were put to the side and not regarded as

people. Their needs are not considered, valued, or catered to because they were only regarded as sexual objects.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I briefly discussed biographical work, identity politics, fetishism of commodities, and sexual fetishism. My goal in my study was to allow participants the freedom to express their own opinions and experiences. I found that participants employed biographical work to resist being viewed as a fetishizer and identity politics to police the appropriate and inappropriate ways to be a BL fan. Before discussing my findings, I turn our attention towards the methods used in this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

For this research project, I conducted 36 interviews over Zoom with fans of BL. There were only two requirements to participate: participants had to be 18+ years old and self-identify as a fan of BL media. In those interviews, fans co-constructed their biographies with me as BL consumers. In this chapter, I discuss the sample, the interview, the safety precautions, and the analysis.

The Sample

Previous quantitative studies focused primarily on straight, cisgender women in the audience. The only research I have found to be inclusive of non-binary gender identities was a study by Anna Madill (2018), which included 8% non-binary or transgender survey respondents. My project was open to everyone to expand the demographics of BL fans participating in research. The participants' average age was 24, with interviewees that ranged from 18-35 years old.

At the start of the interview, respondents were asked to define their pronouns, gender identity, sexuality, age, and race and/or ethnicity (see Appendix A). They were not given choices for their answers, as I wanted them to define themselves however they found most comfortable and representative. I collapsed a few of the ethnicities defined to create coherent categories (see Appendix A). However, to avoid excluding anyone's identity, I will break down each category more clearly in the explanation below.

Most participants were cisgender women. Women made up 69.4% of participants, while men made up 16.7%. The other gender identities represented in this study were gender fluid and non-binary, at 8.3% and 5.6%. Most respondents self-identified as LGBTQ+. Only 20% of the

respondents identified as exclusively heterosexual. The largest represented sexuality in my study was bisexual. White respondents were the majority at 36.1%, followed by Hispanic respondents at 27.8%.

Respondents who were categorized as White stated they were white or Caucasian. Most respondents who were categorized as Hispanic identified as Hispanic; only one respondent identified as Latino. Respondents categorized as Black identified as Black American, African American, or Caribbean-American. “Multi-Ethnic” was used to characterize respondents who specifically called themselves mixed or reported two or more races —these participants identified as White and Asian, Hispanic and Black, and German and Puerto Rican. One interviewee defined themselves as Asian, and the other specified they were Burmese-Chinese.

Due to COVID-19, I conducted my interviews over Zoom. Using Zoom broadened the candidate pool by enabling me to interview fans from all over the world. I relied on social media feeds to post my Recruitment Flyer (see Appendix B). I posted my flyer on my Twitter account and requested that others with more significant followings post my flyer to their accounts as well. I also made a video with my flyer and posted it on TikTok to recruit participants. TikTok was my most successful recruitment strategy. Within one day, I received 50+ emails from BL fans interested in participating in my interviews. Because my TikTok video gained so much attention, many BL fans saved and shared my flier with other BL fans through other social media platforms. My initial video created a “snowball effect,” which led to more fans being willing to participate.

The Interview

Respondents who contacted me via email about participating in my study were sent the IRB approved informed consent form to read, sign, and return to me. Once I had their informed

consent, we set up a time for the Zoom meeting to take place. I sent an email with the Zoom link attached, along with the time and date it was scheduled for. If the respondent requested, I emailed the Cover Sheet (see Appendix D) and Interview Questionnaire (see Appendix E), so they were aware of what I would be asking them. I contacted interviewees 1-2 hours before their interview to remind them of our meeting and share that I was excited to interview them.

Once the respondent had joined the Zoom meeting, I engaged in small talk to put them at ease. Any questions participants had were addressed during this time. Before the interview officially began, I asked for verbal consent to audio-record our interactions for the duration of our time. All respondents agreed; they first were asked to create their own pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. I made participants aware that I would be taking notes during their interviews and glancing back at the questions to reference; I explained that some questions might be organically answered through other responses, and if this was the case, we might skip a few of the questions laid out in the Interview Questionnaire.

Interviewees were first asked demographic questions from the cover sheet. Following this, I conducted a semi-structured interview. The first few questions focused on the beginning of their relationship with BL media: when did it start? What happened first? What does your relationship look like with BL media now? We then moved to what the participants liked and disliked about BL media, why they believed others consumed BL media, and what contributions BL media made to their lives if any. If respondents began to share something vulnerable, they were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable with and were assured that I could exclude anything from the transcript that they wished. Typical interviews lasted between 45 minutes-1 hour and 15 minutes, with the shortest interview timing at 19 minutes and 19 seconds and the longest being 1 hour and 56 minutes.

Safety Precautions

Although my topic was not directly sensitive, there were still precautions taken to ensure the anonymity and comfort of respondents. Participants created their pseudonyms at the beginning of the interview and were informed they would be referred to as such throughout my thesis. My study was considered low-risk, due to the interview centering around fans' experiences with BL media; respondents had autonomy to discuss their experiences with BL however they wished. Before each interview, I relayed that if there was a question asked that they did not want to answer, we would skip it. I expressed that their safety and comfort was a priority, so they could stop the interview or ask questions at any time.

The approved IRB informed consent form was emailed to each interviewee and required to be sent back with their signature to confirm participation. Participants and I both kept copies of the consent form with their signature of consent. All but two respondents were able to access the Zoom interviews. For the two participants who were unable to use Zoom, we instead used a Discord server to conduct the interview. Discord worked similarly to Zoom, except we were unable to have our cameras on during the interview.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded with the secure app Otter. All record files were labeled under each interviewee's chosen pseudonym in a password-protected file folder on my personal computer. Otter recorded and transcribed the interviews, and then I listened to the interviews to correct the mistakes Otter made. When transcriptions were completed, all the recordings were deleted from Otter. The transcriptions will be kept in a locked file for three years on my personal computer, at which point they will be destroyed.

There was a preliminary phase of coding where I first identified the emerging themes regarding the concept of fetishism. The secondary phase included coding, where I identified the various categories of relationships between the emerging themes. When I found the themes, I discussed them with my committee chair, Dr. Rambo. We identified that there were positives and negatives; therefore, I revisited the data to confirm this. After this, I further refined my categories.

Conclusion

The open-ended interviews yielded discourse regarding the experiences and identities of those who consume BL media. In the interviews, participants engaged in biographical work, constructing selves that resisted stereotypes that consumers of BL media engage in fetishization. In constructing these selves, they also engaged in identity politics for the BL fandom. In their narrated accounts of participating in the BL fandom, they constructed selves that actively resisted alienation by embracing themes of comfort and connectivity.

CHAPTER SIX

FINDINGS

BL fans are not a part of a social movement group; they are a part of a fandom. Fandoms at large can be stigmatized groups that seek to alter how they are perceived. In the case of BL fans, many respondents discussed their wish to be no longer stereotyped as “fetishizers” of gay media. While giving examples of the “wrong” ways and the right ways to behave as BL fans, they engaged in identity politics for themselves and the collective. They attempted to reframe how they were defined while also policing the inappropriate and appropriate ways to consume BL media by all. By giving examples of how they were not fetishizers, the fans engaged in biographical work and used the fetishizer as a narrative resource or deviance exemplar to separate themselves from the potential stigma. The variety of ways in which fans employed the concept of fetishism to resist imputations of deviance will be termed here *the fetishizer exemplar*. Fans are protective of BL stories and characters; therefore, they define people seeking out BL media solely for sexual consumption as disrespectful. In the following sections, I explored the fetishizer exemplar and both the unacceptable and acceptable ways fans determined one could consume and produce BL content.

THE FETISHIZER EXEMPLAR

The fetishizer exemplar was something to be resisted; no one wanted to be accused of being a fetishizer. Two-thirds of respondents used the terms fetishization and fetishizer during the interviews. But what was fetishization? It was never clearly defined. There seemed to be agreement amongst the BL fans in the study about who classified as a fetishizer; she was a wicked, heterosexual woman who preyed on and exploited gay men’s sexuality. They only

consumed this media because they wanted to see two men have sex. The wicked fetishizer did not value the media, storylines, or characters; instead, BL was masturbatory source material. This view that gay men were only sexual objects for the fetishizer's consumption served to alienate the gay characters in BL from their storylines. Alienation "of" the characters and "from" the characters was defined as disrespectful by the fans. The fans referenced multiple wicked fetishizer continuums to distinguish their distance from her; they were typically not on her side (though a few fans claimed they used to be her) but on the opposite side of the spectrum.

This exemplar served as a narrative resource for participants to draw on when constructing their identities as fans in the interviews. They indicated the fetishizer to illustrate, through comparison, how they were different, and in some cases, better than those who fetishize. Most of the interviewees did not think that the problem was as prevalent as the stereotype would indicate; however, they continued to appeal to the exemplar to separate themselves from the perceived wicked inappropriateness that the fetishizer embodied. Thus, fans engaged in biographical work and identity politics.

When I asked Tony why people consume BL media, he believed some people consumed it to, "[fetishize] gay couples or gay individuals... mostly straight females that watch it just for that, just [to] see like kissing [and intimate scenes], but I want to say the majority of anyone who consumes [BL] is really just interested in the story." Tony engaged in identity politics by characterizing fans who fetishize BL media as largely straight women. He went on to assure us that not all fans or even most fans fetishized. He acknowledged the fetishizer exemplar, and then he positioned "the majority" at the non-fetishizing end of the continuum.

Serena, a bisexual woman, shared, "Nowadays, there's a lot of straight women who are really into BL, but they're more into the fetishizing aspect of it. So, I understand, but I'm not one

of them.” Similar to Tony’s strategy for the group, Serena set the fetishizer as a type of BL consumer, then narratively resisted that she was one of them. In this way, she too acknowledged the fetishizer, then positioned her identity at the non-fetishizing end of the continuum.

Jay, a straight woman, discussed how she was hesitant to share her interest because of the stigma that all straight women who consume BL are fetishizers: “I try to let people find out about it themselves because usually people get really turned off unfortunately when [you say] that you like [to] watch or read BLs, especially as a straight girl. You will get a lot of looks about it.” Jay noted that the stigma regarding straight women who consumed BL was so strong that she did not have many online friends that she discussed this media with. She explained that her reasoning behind her consumption was nothing more than enjoying the media and finding happiness through the storylines; thus, she invoked the heterosexual fetishizer, and then contrasted herself as being on the other end of the continuum, someone who enjoys the stories. Lilly, a heterosexual participant, stated “[BL] teaches me on how to be more of an ally for [the LGBTQ+ community].” Panda echoed Lilly’s statement, while adding the reasons why she believes so many straight women consume BL media:

We're in it for the story. We're in it for the love. We're in it for the acting. We're in it to escape the real world, to learn, because you can learn more and then, like, especially a straight person, you can learn more of like how [LGBTQ+ people] feel, because... we don't go through the same struggles.

Out of 36 interviews, only seven of the respondents interviewed identified as heterosexual women. Out of those, three drew on the negative stereotype of BL fans, particularly straight women fetishizing gay male relationships. The straight woman respondents justified their BL consumption by sharing how they correctly consumed the media. They emphasized they

enjoyed BL because of the happiness and awareness that it brought into their lives; they claimed they do not fall into the stereotype that straight woman are all fetishizers. In the next section, I discuss various fetishizer exemplars to highlight what my respondents considered to be the unacceptable ways to consume BL media.

There Is an Unacceptable Way

This section explores three versions of the fetishizer exemplar: over-sexualizing characters, morphing reality and fiction, and romanticizing rape. Each indicates a dimension of fetishization, each exists on a continuum, and almost all of the participants placed themselves and others somewhere on these continuums to engage in biographical work and identity politics. These three continuums reference what fans determined to be unacceptable ways to consume and produce BL media.

Over-sexualizing continuum

The over-sexualizing continuum was a fetishizer exemplar that served as a narrative resource to discern fans who over-sexualize BL characters or BL actors, and fans who do not. On one end of the continuum, fans described both consumers and producers as fetishizers when they threw away plotlines and only focused on the sexual intimacy between characters. On the opposite side of the spectrum, fans modeled what they determined were the proper ways to consume BL. Over-sexualizing the characters and storyline was deemed to be disrespectful of plotlines, characters, and potentially actors by many BL fans; therefore, many fans relied on this continuum to both police what was acceptable for BL fans and distance themselves from this perceived stereotype. BL fans appealed to the over-sexualizing continuum when performing biographical work by drawing upon discourse to distinguish their location on the spectrum compared to other BL fans.

Often, respondents narratively resisted consuming BL content for sexual purposes solely. Many expressed disgust and discomfort for fans who, they felt, only used BL as a source of pornographic material. “I’ve seen some people who [entirely] throw away the plot. And just completely over-sexualize [the characters],” shared Leo when he was asked if there was any truth behind this negative stereotype of BL fans and media. In this example, Leo indicated that people who relied on BL media for sexual pleasure only, entertainment purposes aside, fit on one extreme of the fetishizer continuum; throwing away the plot was complete alienation of the characters from the story. When I asked Leo if there were any positive stereotypes for BL fans, he shared, “[people who love BL] but not in the sense of... over-sexualizing it, they [like it for] entertainment and the beautiful stories and... finding the community that can talk about that too.” In this explanation, Leo both resisted the narrative of an unacceptable fan while defining what it entails to be an acceptable or real BL fan. For Leo, he located himself on one end of the over-sexualizing continuum by suggesting that consuming BL for entertainment and community is appropriate; he appealed to connection to the content and other fans.

The interviewees suggested that the fans were not the only ones that fetishized gay relationships: writers and producers of certain BL media were also the problem. Many fans claimed that the people who often write and produce the BL can be labeled fetishizers. Katekito described BL media as distasteful when “[producers] give the audience what they want, like [sexually explicit or intimate scene] ... [but] they don't really give a plot.” Another respondent, Serena, expressed similar sentiments discussing what she does not like about BL media: “when they just go at it, and it's more [explicit] than actual BL. And it's like, ‘Oh, where's the romance, you guys? Where's the love in Boys Love?’” Both Katekito and Serena referred to the over-sexualizing continuum as a form of narrative resistance. By highlighting their dislike for plots

solely focused on sexual intimacy, the respondents resisted the fetishizer exemplar. Katekito also appealed to the other end of the continuum when she shared, “if they actually put an aim to raise awareness [for the LGBTQ+ community] ... rather than just to feed the fetishizers.” In this, Katekito distinguished that BL producers do not over-sexualize, and thus fetishize, when they amplify LGBTQ+ storylines instead of the sexual scenarios. To over-sexualize the characters alienated them from the story and specifically fetishized their queerness. Katekito used the fetishizer exemplar as a narrative resource to identify what she believed was appropriate in BL media. Serena distanced herself from the narrative of over-sexualizing by explaining how she was more interested in the love between the characters and not the sex; thus, she was not a fetishizer.

There were respondents like Lance who had only heard rumors of BL fans over-sexualizing real queer people.

Yeah, I definitely saw a lot of people who were like, ‘My small beans!’ always talking about, like, who would top or who would bottom. And I think a lot of people think that if you read BL, you probably fetishize like all queer people... I used to hear people say about a lot is BL fans would, like, go up to [gay] people at restaurants and ask who would top and bottom... and I have literally never heard of that happening ever. But that was, like, one of the main arguments against BL back in like 2014.

Lance appealed to the over-sexualizing continuum when he shared that he has heard BL fans discuss which partner is the top and which partner is the bottom. Top and bottom refer to interactive roles during sexual activity between queer partners. Other than his experience

overhearing these conversations, Lance stated he did not think that fetishization was a large part of the fan base.

In the over-sexualizing continuum, participants defined what they believed were inappropriate and appropriate ways to consume BL media. In this, we also see both individual and community identity politics; the fans were policing the presumed behaviors in the fandom to redefine the reputation of BL fans. Most respondents resisted the over-sexualizing continuum by indicating hypothetical fans who only enjoy explicit scenes in BL media and contrasting themselves as the opposite. Fans felt that if you consumed BL media because you enjoy it, you gain connection to other fans, or it brings awareness to the LGBTQ+ community, then that would be appropriate fan behavior; thus, on the opposite side of the over-sexualizing continuum. This idea will be discussed later in this chapter. Respondents like Lance appealed to the continuum but did not believe that this issue was as prevalent as people made it seem.

Morphing reality and fiction continuum

The morphing reality and fiction continuum was a fetishizer exemplar that fans appealed to as a narrative resource. Respondents noted that other fans had problems distinguishing reality from fiction or even morphing reality and fiction specifically regarding BL actors. On one end of the continuum, fans were described as having too extreme an investment in actors' lives and lacked boundaries regarding a practice referred to as "shipping." Shipping occurs when a fan wants two actors or characters in a story to be in a relationship in real life. While on occasion, they are, usually they are not, and sometimes actors will act as if they are in a relationship to spark fan curiosity. The fan who cannot tell the difference will be accused of being a "fetishizer." On the opposite end of the continuum, fans claimed their behavior was appropriate by

highlighting their awareness that live-action BL actors are not the characters they play on-screen. Unlike fetishizers, they can enjoy “ships” or “fanservice” (actions done to excite the viewer, often in regards to physical contact like holding hands, hugging, or kissing) without believing that they are a real couple. BL fans appealed to the morphing reality and fiction continuum to perform biographical work by distinguishing their location on the spectrum in contrast to other BL fans, thus distancing themselves from this perceived stereotype.

Most respondents narratively resisted being characterized as a fetishizer by distinguishing their ability to separate reality from fiction. Some fans even stated that you could normally tell who was a fetishizer and who was a fan through the way they viewed the actors and storylines. “Most of the time, it's easy for me to know who's romanticizing the characters and [their sexualities] ... And that's because they will get very much into the actors' lives,” Rey offered. Leo expanded on this by sharing, “there are some people who take [BL] way too seriously... And I'm not against ships... but it's to the point where [fans believe] they have to be together... I feel like some, some just don't know boundaries.” Leo claimed to ship responsibly and respectably, which locates him on the opposite end of the morphing reality and fiction continuum. Leo explained that shipping two characters or actors is not inherently bad, but if you refused to accept that what you want or what the storyline shows does not reflect real life, that is wrong.

Kya brought up specific actors that she believes fans often:

[morph] to the point where they can't differentiate between [real life and the series] ...

Tharn and Type with Mew and Gulf. [Those are] not their actual names... Tharn and

Type are just characters that they play. If they happen to be together, that's cool, but, like,

don't over-sexualize their relationship if they're just friends... they bring their characters outside, and they just think they're nothing but those characters.

Kya separated herself from the fans who believe these specific actors are in relationships in real life. She left room for the possibility that the actors, Mew and Gulf, are together in real life, but in a way that she deems as acceptable: whether they are together or not, either is fine. Another respondent, Broccoli, reiterated some of Kya's points, namely that there seemed to be a responsible and respectful way to ship. Broccoli pointed out that some fans "[ship] people which you don't need to ship... I'm not a big shipper; I've never been that kind of person... I have my suspicions about a handful, just a handful. Everyone else? Not so much." In this, Broccoli shifted from both sides of the continuum: she distanced herself from shipping incorrectly; she stated she is not like those fans. However, she revealed that she has her own suspicions about actors who are in relationships with their costars; thus, she is engaged in shipping.

When I asked Tina if she noticed any negative changes after she became a fan of BL media, she shared that she sometimes struggles to interpret the actors' actions in real life.

I learned that in Asian cultures, skinship (physical contact) between males is a lot more normal... I shouldn't assume because if two males or females are, like, doing skinship, they're automatically gay. I have to stop [and remind myself] this is, this is normal. I just have to like reprogram myself like "no, not everything's BL" ... because I do see that a lot on TikTok comments... Someone will upload a TikTok, and it's just two guys hugging... and the comments [say] "Oh my god, my BL brain is like taking over!" Like, no... this is just two people hugging, don't [confuse] the genre... This is not a story; these are people... I want to relearn myself like, "Hey, not everything is a story."

Tina offered an interesting perspective; she policed her own behavior because she deemed it inappropriate. Because of her relationship with BL, it was easier for her to see two men touching and assume they were in a relationship; however, she noted that was not the reality in every case. Tina wanted to reprogram her way of thinking with this perspective in mind. She did not approve of, or want to be like, the fans she mentioned in TikTok comments, so she emphasized that this characteristic is negative and something she was attempting to change. Serena reiterated the idea that there is a wrong way to ship characters, even inside a story. “[There are] people who ships the most toxic ships... for the sake of shipping two men.” In her opinion, if you ship two men, it is only appropriate if they are in a healthy relationship. Serena suggested that there are fans who want to see two men together so badly that they ship characters she deems as wrong for one another. In both Tina and Serena’s statements, they both are concerned with respecting either real people or characters; Tina does not want to make assumptions based on her biases, while Serena wants to make sure the characters she ships are only those who are healthy for one another. With their concern, they are connecting to both the actors and characters; therefore, they are narratively resisting identifying as fetishizers.

BL fans appealed to the morphing reality and fiction continuum when performing biographical work by drawing upon discourse to distinguish their location on the spectrum compared to other BL fans. Participants also engaged in identity politics by defining what they believed were inappropriate and appropriate ways to engage with the actors’ lives on and off-screen. Many fans established that they enjoyed shipping characters and even the actors in real life. Still, they resisted the idea that they would ever seriously care or believe the actors were truly together, thus distancing themselves from the fetishizer. However, many of these same fans still had their own opinions about the nature of certain actors’ relationships. In this, the

participants characterized the way some fans confidently claimed the actors were dating and determined that their opinions were correct was another way to distinguish fetishizers. Shipping was not inherently bad; it was how you went about shipping that made the difference. Shipping was appropriate if one valued the BL characters as real people and not solely as puppet boys for one's enjoyment.

Romanticization of rape continuum

The romanticization of rape continuum was a fetishizer exemplar characterized by how fans viewed BL's sexual assault and rape plotlines. Many respondents denounced these plots in BL storylines, thus defining one side of the continuum. On the other side, fans referenced the fetishizer as a narrative resource to describe fans who enjoy these scenes and do not view these scenes as assault. The presence of rape and sexual assault in plotlines was not necessarily the problem; it was how the topics were dealt with in the media. The most common example of the romanticization of rape in BL media was when a character was assaulted while asleep or too drunk to consent; in most scenarios, those two characters eventually became a couple. BL fans appealed to the romanticization of rape continuum when performing biographical work by drawing upon discourse to distinguish their location on the spectrum in contrast to other BL fans.

Sixty-one percent of respondents disliked these storylines. They felt that rape and sexual assault were frequently dealt with inappropriately in BL media. Most respondents did not mind the topic in general, but it was rare for BL media to portray these interactions as assault. The rapes were never addressed as illegal; in fact, they were treated as erotic. Some participants believed if this were straight media, the creators and fans would be more condemning of these plotlines. However, the fans believed these storylines were not often looked at as sexual assault or rape since BL media focused on men in relationships. For instance, Tony stated, "I think [rape

is] romanticized [in BL] ... if it was a female and a male character, it wouldn't be romanticized, it would be [sexual assault]. But because it's BL... I think [the creators, writers, and fans] of the BL romanticize... and make excuses for it.” In this, Tony suggested that women fans make excuses for sexual assault; he believed that if one of the characters was a woman, no one would consume BL media with these plotlines.

Many shared similar sentiments to Tony; they believed that because there were women who view queer male characters as objects of their fantasies instead of as people, that they would excuse rape and sexual assault of the characters. “BL tends definitely to be marketed towards women [and can be] something that's kind of taboo and exciting to read about... I guess they can kind of imagine themselves in a situation that might be kind of exciting and different,” suggested Lance. Most of the conversations around this topic centered on women being the leading reason why these were popular storylines in BL media; therefore, most of the respondents blamed these types of fans and separated themselves from them. When they were asked what they disliked about BL media, many brought up their disgust for these storylines and hoped that they would be phased out of BL media completely. Respondents like Tony and Lance resisted this end of the continuum by attributing the problem to women consumers and BL creators; because they were watching men instead of women experience assault, it was more titillating and not viewed as threatening.

Genevieve, a straight woman, reiterated that because the characters were men, that was why there were so many assault plotlines treated as erotic scenes:

They use it so much because they know that's, like, kind of what people they are expecting guys to do that because they're not supposed to [have feelings for one another,

so] they're kind of more aggressive toward each other... For some shows, I feel like those scenes don't even have to be a part of [the plot].

Genevieve supposed that because aggression was viewed as a common trait in men, BL characters were portrayed more aggressively. She also suggested that because heterosexuality was the norm in society, the BL characters became more aggressive when in intimate scenes with one another. Genevieve did not view these scenes as necessary; therefore, she discerned her location on the continuum as appropriate consumption.

I pressed respondents on how they grappled with consuming BL media that have storylines of sexual assault and rape. Respondents approved of rape scenarios that indicated rape more realistically; as an act that had negative consequences for all the characters involved. Portraying rape as harmful was indicated as the opposite of fetishizing. Bright revealed, "There are scenes where it's treated as bad, and that's fine. If you discuss it... 'We know it's bad. Here's why it's bad; here's how to help yourself overcome.' That's different. But if it's treated as romantic. I hate that." In this, Bright indicated a correct way and an incorrect way to address rape and sexual assault in BL media. To her, the presence of the scenes was only acceptable if they were treated as sexual assault. Another respondent, Tina, also believed "[there are too many] of the nonconsensual [scenes] like I can tolerate up to a point. Because at one point the characters do feel good, and that's my main concern like, 'Okay, how are they feeling?'" Here, Tina fluctuated on the continuum; she believed there were too many sexual assault scenes, but she could tolerate them if the characters enjoyed themselves after a while. A few respondents shared similar sentiments: rape scenes are acceptable depending on the feelings of the character being assaulted.

Nova fluctuated on the continuum for reasons of uncertainty and potential cultural differences or mistakes. “I’m not into [nonconsensual scenes]. However, it is in a lot of these BLs. And so it makes me wonder what their culture is there as far as consent?... it makes me question, is it just a cultural difference?... it could also be a [mistranslation too].” Nova and a few other respondents questioned rape culture in Asian countries; was it consistent with what they were familiar with? If it was bad in the country they resided in, does that mean every country deemed the same situation as unacceptable? BL media was also often written in another language and translated to English; she suggested that some words cannot be translated correctly. Nova left room for uncertainty and possible mistranslations, in her judgment of sexual assault scenes in BL. Dankkie explained, “I think you can enjoy a piece of content and still think that is not how life should be thought of, or how we should behave in life.” In Dankkie’s mind, there was a way to consume these scenes without romanticizing the sexual assault. This was the consensus across most interviewees; they were aware enough now to be able to watch the media and critique it. Many respondents even suggested that because of this, BL had made them look at all media with a more critical eye, which set them apart from the fetishizers.

Many fans offered specific examples of BL media that had these plotlines they either avoided or consumed with the wish that the issue would be resolved. *Painter of the Night*, a popular manhwa (Korean comic) about a nobleman who held a reluctant painter captive and forced him to create erotic paintings, was referenced in interviews as inappropriate BL media. Serena divulged, “I only read it at this point [in hopes] that he runs away or gets better, but he has like Stockholm at this point. And I just want him to get better, [but] it’s already like chapter 65.” Serena fluctuated on the continuum because while she regarded the comic’s content as inappropriate, she still consumed it, hoping the storyline would improve; she distinguished

herself from the fetishizer because she connected and empathized with the character. *TharnType: The Series*, a live-action Thai BL series, was also referenced by interviewees of all genders and sexualities with conflicting feelings towards the shows. Eric explained, “to me, it felt like Tharn was grooming Type... I don't really like that because Type [was molested as a child] ... watching the first time you're just like, ‘Oh, this is [nice,]’ without... [realizing that Tharn groomed] Type.” In this, Eric fluctuated on the continuum by admitting his interest in these scenes originally, then realizing the assault and denouncing it later. Multiple respondents shared how they enjoyed *TharnType*, but they acknowledged the scenes of assault. Koda stated, “*TharnType* is one of my favorites, but it was very abusive towards both characters.” In both Eric and Koda’s interviews, they signified that they enjoyed the series even though they felt the abuse was inappropriate in the relationships portrayed. When fans acknowledge assault as assault, they resisted the fetishizer exemplar, thus placing themselves on the opposite end of the romanticization of rape continuum.

In the romanticization of rape continuum, some participants attempted to distinguish themselves apart from fetishizers. Where fans located themselves and others on the continuum depended on how they viewed sexual assault and rape scenes. Respondents like Tony and Lance resisted the fetishizer identity by rationalizing that women were the fans who typically enjoy these scenes, and they would view them differently if the interaction involved a woman. Many respondents engaged in identity politics to police how a BL fan should consume a rape or sexual assault scene. As long as they recognized the scene as assault and not erotic, they were not romanticizing rape, thus not fetishizing. However, other respondents fluctuated on the continuum by claiming to enjoy content with these storylines while admitting conflicting feelings during

their consumption. The respondents' weariness of these scenes and empathy for the characters is how they located themselves on the continuum as a non-fetishizer.

There is an Acceptable Way: West Versus East

A recurring theme in the interviews was to critique Western queer media; 23 out of 36 respondents discussed their grievances with LGBTQ+ representation in Western media. There were varying reasons for these critiques. Many fans characterized the Western media as typically fetishizing, while they claimed BL media was typically not. This section explores three versions of the fetishizer exemplar, where the West is contrasted with the East on a continuum: the validation continuum, more than accessories continuum, and another side of men continuum. Each continuum indicates a dimension of fetishization, and almost all of the participants placed themselves and others somewhere on these continuums to engage in biographical work and identity politics. I discuss these West versus East fetishizer exemplars to highlight the acceptable ways to consume and produce BL media.

It was very validating continuum.

In the "It was very validating continuum," fans claimed BL media more accurately represented the queer experience versus Western queer media, because the leads were always queer and the variation in experience each character had. Respondents described BL media as a means of representation and validation in their own queer identities. Many participants felt Western queer media heavily focused on the rejection of the LGBTQ+ community, while BL showcased more acceptance of queer identities from the public. Many fans shared a common characteristic with a character in a BL plotline; therefore, they felt connection and validation through the stories told. BL fans appealed to the "It was very validating continuum" to perform biographical work by distinguishing their location on the spectrum.

Typically, fans described how Western media emphasized having a queer storyline when in reality, there was usually only one white, gay male character whose only screen time was focused on him being sexually promiscuous and funny. To some participants, Western media was viewed as disrespectful to both the queer character and queer consumers. At least in BL, they could expect to see stories in which they were better represented. “You know that it's Boy Love, and you know that it's going to be good because they're representing [queer people]. Where [in Western media] it's like, oh there's like 17 straight couples, and there's, like, one gay guy out of the whole show,” relayed Aysu. The intrigue that BL brought was a newfound feeling for queer fans; they had not experienced LGBTQ+ stories told from varying perspectives with multiple queer characters. One respondent, Lance, stated:

If you watched a lot of Western queer media, most of it focuses on the coming out and being accepted part of being LGBT. You see a lot of people being rejected by their families, rejected by their friends, and that's a lot of the betrayal that's in media... So, I was definitely terrified that my friends and family would hate me forever, and then you watch these Eastern BL... [they are who they are], and nobody really questions it, and they're just immediately accepted. And it was very validating for me to read.

In his statement, Lance shared that his gay identity was affirmed through BL media, while in Western queer media, its content only heightened anxiety around his sexuality. Before, Lance had only seen Western queer representation that focused mainly on acceptance and rejection. When he was introduced to BL, he claimed he was able to find validation in his sexuality and affirmation that he could accept. Aysu identified as demisexual panromantic and also bisexual; she compared that to BL, which in her opinion, portrayed real queer stories, which

made her more inclined to consume them. The presence of an authentic queer portrayal was important to both Lance and Aysu.

Many respondents enjoyed that BL offered a wider range of what the queer experience could look like, which they felt was lacking in Western media. BL media resonated with some of the queer respondents and showed them that coming out did not have to be as scary as they had previously seen represented in media. “It definitely [was a way to explore sexuality] for me, and I think it is for a lot of people, not always the healthiest way to explore it, but it is definitely a way to see that you can love someone who's the same gender as you and it's okay,” Tallie Ace explained. Many respondents echoed this thinking: BL displayed that love is love, and love is normal. She noted that she had not had the opportunity to explore her sexuality before BL and was not exposed to same-sex attraction in a positive light. BL allowed Tallie Ace to explore her own queerness, which formed a bond between her and the media; she was finally able to feel represented in a more positive light. However, she noted that there were some fans who explored this in unhealthy ways. She did not consider her experience with BL unhealthy; she instead noted she used BL as a resource in her sexuality journey.

Some queer participants shared that either their sexuality or gender identity was not widely known in their families. These participants said their families would not accept BL media or their own identities due to their prejudiced views. BL was an alternative storyline where they were able to find comfort by re-storying their own experiences. Interviewees freely spoke about how emotional they could get while consuming BL. “I feel how hard it is to [struggle with your sexuality]. And, like, being afraid. Every day, when, like, your family or your friends, talk about relationships ... And you can't be completely honest with them because you're scared and ... in denial with yourself,” Kya revealed. Modern BL storylines, for the most part, showed someone

who was either struggling with accepting themselves or who did not regard their queerness as weird. There was usually a support system around them to reaffirm them. Kya expressed deep relatability to the characters who internally fought their sexual orientation; she knew what it felt like to be in those characters' shoes.

In the “It was very validating continuum,” I explored how queer respondents felt better represented by BL media versus Western queer media. Participants appealed to the fetishizer exemplar to discuss the differences between Western queer media and BL media. The leads in BLs were always queer and did not display only a monolithic experience, unlike Western queer media. Respondents described BL media as a means of representation and validation in their own queer identities. BL introduced many respondents to the possibility of being loved and accepted, while Western queer media made participants feel more fearful of sharing their identities. Because of BL, fans were able to form a connection and receive validation through BL storylines.

More than accessories continuum.

The “more than accessories continuum” was a fetishizer exemplar that served as a narrative resource to discuss how BL media portrayed more hopeful and diverse queer storylines, while Western queer media usually relied on more predictable and exploitive storylines. Participants felt that Western queer media often amplified tragic gay stories, while BL media gave its characters' better opportunities to find happiness. Queer characters were more than stereotypes and more than accessories in a BL story.

Because there is more variety in BL storylines, most of the fans shared that they could endure plots that they did not enjoy simply because they were so starved for queer content. Artie put this in perspective by saying, “most [BLs] are not part of the kill-your-gays trope that a lot of

Western media is...It shows queer people in healthy, day-to-day relationships, which was something that, like, growing up, we never saw.” A lot of participants discussed that queer media in the past had either often killed the gay characters or gave them unhappy endings; in BL, there was a better chance at seeing a unique plotline and a happy ending.

Fans disliked that the bulk of Western queer media offered representation of only a narrow perspective of what queerness could look like and often reduced that representation to side characters. “We're put to the side and really only pushed to the front when it's convenient... [we are] kind of used as accessories,” stated Tony. Many queer respondents felt their stories were not found in Western media at all or that the story of queerness shared was the same one over and over again. Artie and Tony both believed Western queer media had only exploited LGBTQ+ plotlines to gain more views and had not fully developed those characters. Artie discussed how, when they were growing up, queer characters were never shown healthy, positive examples of queer relationships; BL presented a completely new genre full of happy endings. Tony shared that he always felt that queer characters were rarely focused on in Western queer media. Artie and Tony were both appealing to the “More than accessories continuum” by describing BL as media that developed and elaborated its queer characters, unlike Western media.

In the “More than accessories continuum” category, I discussed queer participants’ connection to BL media’s portrayal of queer characters and storylines. Because of the variety of stories told in BL, respondents were able to find representation and validation through BL in comparison to Western queer media. Queerness connected these participants to the material because they could relate their own experiences to the characters.

Another side of men continuum.

An interesting pattern found throughout the interviews was that many women respondents enjoyed the portrayal of men better in BL media versus Western media. “Another side of men continuum” was a fetishizer exemplar which fans appealed to as a narrative resource to contrast the unacceptable Western portrayal of men versus what they labeled a new and acceptable way to portray men in BL media.

Some women shared that it is difficult to consume Western heterosexual media because of toxic masculinity: where men tried to fit into an archetype of masculinity which was often aggressive and avoidant of emotion. In BL media, the characters were both men; therefore, they were on equal footing and were forced to grow as characters instead of only depending on a woman character to fix them. “The toxic masculinity is often addressed... [storylines reveal] ‘Oh, they're like this because of this,’ ... [and] dismantle the [character’s image] ... and have [the] character develop past that,” explained Tina. “We get to see men in a more vulnerable situation... you get to see another side of men that you don't really see in society that often,” offered Jay. Men in BL were multifaceted characters; there was a variety of femininity and masculinity expressed through each character. A lot of the women found it refreshing to see men characterized outside of a Westernized fixed masculine persona. In these scenarios, we saw respondents idealizing their lives in BL media. Because they were able to see this different side of men portrayed, they found BL media was more enjoyable and acceptable to consume.

In “Another side of men continuum,” fans stated their disinterest in Western media’s portrayal of men and their appreciation for BL’s showing men in a different light. Because BL media stars two men, they were written as equals and with varying personality traits; respondents enjoyed the variety shown in BL media.

Conclusion

In this section, I elaborated on three fetishizer continuums that fans drew on to distinguish what they believed was acceptable in the BL media versus unacceptable in Western queer media. While this was not an exhaustive list of how BL fans appealed to the fetishizer role to compare Western queer media and Eastern BL media, these were the most dominant categories participants engaged in that I tracked across interviews. In the following section, I will detail the consequences fans face for the fetishizer exemplars.

CONSEQUENCES FOR FETISHIZATION

Fans determined that fetishization had consequences for the BL community. This is broken down into the section misrepresenting and misunderstanding the fandom and its two subcategories, erasing the rest of the fanbase and writing fetishized storylines for the fetishizer audience: making queer deviant. This section concluded with a discussion of lesbian inversion.

Misrepresenting and Misunderstanding the Fandom

This section was characterized by participants who felt misrepresented or misunderstood by assuming that BL was for straight fetishizing women. These fans wished to redefine the assumed demographic makeup of the BL audience because they believed this stigma discredited and excluded the queer contingent of the BL fandom. However, fans also suggested that because this media was centered around two male characters in love who often had sexual relations, the deviant perception was inescapable. Participants accused content creators of deliberately writing characters as deviant to sensationalize queer people and make money from their stories. Because they perceived that much of society automatically equated queerness to deviance and danger, content creators preyed on those beliefs to perpetuate this stigma and exploit queerness for

money. Fans referenced the fetishizer exemplar as a way to exclude actual queer people in the audience while demonizing queer characters.

Erasing the rest of the fanbase

Queer fans resented the fetishizer stigma and felt its presence discredited the media and the people who enjoy consuming it. Jade stated:

Saying that the only people who enjoy BLs are straight women who are just fantasizing really diminishes queer people that are wanting to participate in the BLs. It also diminishes any gay men or non-binary people who enjoy it, right? Beyond just, like, sexualities. Like, a lot of BLs are actually giving space to stories that used to be illegal to watch, much less participate in.

Jade claimed they believe BL fans' backgrounds were more diverse than others assumed; they suggested this stigma was disrespectful to anyone who consumed BL media. This response was echoed by other queer respondents. Bright stated, "you negate a whole group of people who are using [BL] to explore themselves rather than just the people who are fetishizing it... No matter what you do, no matter what kind of content it is, if it's in any way queer, then people [will see it as deviant]." Bright expressed that the queerness of the show was why people viewed BL fans and BL media as deviant.

Writing fetishized storylines for the fetishizer audience: Making queer deviant

Some fans suggested that BL content creators furthered the narrative that queer people were deviant beings. They claimed some content creators produced more fetishized content to please fetishizers, thus reinforcing stereotypes that BL was only explicit, perverse media. When I asked Siren why she thought there were so many sexual assault plotlines in BL stories, she stated: "It's because they want to... continue to paint a predatory label on the gay community."

Kya explained, “Homosexuals [are depicted] as these beasts, or like these untamed people who can’t hold themselves back.” Siren and Kya made extreme suggestions regarding the prevalence of sexual assault in BL; they believed these plotlines perpetuated the assumption that gay people were both deviant and predatory. Siren and Kya were both queer; therefore, they emphasized that this was how queer people were portrayed but not how they were. They challenged the negative representations of queer people that they perceived to be in BL media. While they enjoyed BL media, they believed it could contribute to this stigma that queer people were deviant.

Lesbian Inversion

The lesbian inversion occurred when female consumption of BL media was compared to men who consumed lesbian content. Some fans positioned women who fetishize gay couples similarly to men who fetishize lesbian relationships — both were deemed inappropriate. Other participants contested lesbian inversion as unfair; if men can do it, why can’t women? Still, others “confessed” they had viewed the media like this in the past but that they were “doing better.”

Rryn explains, “[Fetishizers in the BL fandom make] me think of, like, men fetishizing lesbians. So, it’s, like, on both sides of the spectrum...it’s not okay.” Rryn distinguished that she believed that fetishization of BL media and fetishization of lesbian porn both existed, and neither was appropriate. She determined that because men who fetishize lesbians were inappropriate, then women who fetishized gay men were also unacceptable. After Samantha explained to me why she consumed BL media, I asked her if she ever noticed other people consuming BL for reasons outside of her own. Samantha shared she believes that women who consume BL can be like the inverse for lesbian content and men: “I feel like people [seek out BL media] for fetishization purposes... It’s very talked about how a lot of times men fetishize and gravitate

towards [lesbian content]. [It also goes] the verse way.” While Samantha did not discuss this as one of her own reasons she consumed BL media, she noted that it was something she has seen in the BL fandom. Through their opinions, they appealed to the fetishizer as a deviance exemplar of how not to be a BL consumer.

However, there were participants who utilized the comparison between men consuming lesbian content and women consuming BL media as a way to explain how the fetishizer exemplar was an unfair representation of fans. These respondents discussed how men who enjoyed lesbian media consumption were seen as normal, yet women who consume BL, which may or may not be explicit in nature, were viewed as deviant. Why stigmatize only heterosexual women for fetishizing gay men while there are men who partake in similar behaviors? These respondents acknowledged enjoying the sexual interactions between the male characters, and they did not think they should be labeled as fetishizers; they disagreed with this double standard. Ash pointed out, “A lot of guys are just like, ‘Oh, I can watch like two girls make out, but [it’s weird if] two guys make out.’ And I feel like... girls-and-girls have been normalized but not boys-and-boys.” Aysu shared a similar scenario, “I’ve had a lot of guys be like, ‘That’s so disgusting! How could you ever like that?’ and then in the same breath, they’ll be like, ‘Oh, I love lesbian porn, like, [it’s so hot].”

One of the questions I asked respondents was if they currently consumed BL for the same reasons they did as when they first began. I had a few participants share that at first, they were drawn in by two male characters kissing. Tallie Ace recalled that a part of the reason she started liking BL was:

because of... two cute guys kissing. I think it comes from the same weird place that [society has] normalized guys being into two girls kissing. That’s always been a thing

that society has just, like, accepted... And for some reason, it's some new, crazy thing that girls want the same from guys.

Aysu echoed that she also first consumed BL for similar reasons: "When I was younger, I think I just liked it because... I was horny [and exploring]." These fans suggested that an initial consumption of BL based on sexual interests should not be considered bad as they were young and exploring, and no one looks at men as odd for enjoying two women kissing. They felt that they displayed normal behavior, just as young men did for their interest in lesbian content.

In this section, participants referenced the fetishizer exemplar as a narrative resource to label behavior as unacceptable or acceptable. Some participants positioned men who fetishize lesbian content as equally inappropriate as women who fetishize BL content. Other respondents signified that this stigma was unfair because men were never criticized for their interest in lesbian content. Many even noted that their initial consumption of BL media was comparable to the men they referenced, which they believed should be viewed as normal. It was their status as women that earned their sexual interest the label of fetishization.

Conclusion

In this section, we discussed the consequences participants believed fetishizer exemplars had for the BL community. This was not an exhaustive list of consequences; these were the most dominant categories participants used which I tracked across interviews. In the next section, I discuss the discourse fans engaged in to share their personal connections to BL media.

WAYS I CONNECT WITH BL MEDIA

In this section, I discussed the positive ways fans claim BL media has influenced their personal lives. My interviewees appealed to the positive exemplar of connection to alternate realities, confidence, and self-exploration. Connection may be interpreted as anti-alienation, and

therefore anti-fetishizer. While they did not draw directly on fetishism exemplars for comparison, they did appeal to the themes of alienation and connection. Because of the influence BL had on their lives, they felt allied with the media.

Alternate Realities

Fans who engaged in escape discourse about BL media described it as a refuge during difficult times. Participants felt BL offered escapism from their day-to-day lives, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. These respondents stated they fostered deep connections with BL and sought it out for a sense of safety and comfort. Escape, refuge, safety, and comfort all constituted alternate realities for study participants.

Particularly during COVID-19 and the first quarantine, BL seemed to be a means for escaping the real-world isolation we were all experiencing. Jughead mentioned, “[BL] was [a] really nice kind of thing to be like, ‘Oh! I have all these new shows to kind of invest in!’ Which has been really nice for right now with just moving in the middle of a pandemic and, like, not loving my job,” Jughead described BL as media he could invest in during the stress he was experiencing in life. Angelica joked during the interview, “seeing a psychiatrist is too expensive, but YouTube is free.” Angelica shared that BL media helped her mental state, while other methods of mental relief would have been costly.

Respondents believed BL was a form of media that allowed them to zone into a fictional world, especially when their reality was stressful. Rryn shared, “When I’m watching a [BL] show... I am completely shut off from everything around me, and I’m, like, so invested in it.” Rryn divulged that she could become so invested in a BL series, she completely turned off the world around her; she cared about the characters and plots so much that she became engulfed in the media she was consuming.

Respondents occasionally asked if they were allowed to bring up fanfiction written about BL characters or actors since fanfiction is fan-made and not produced by media outlets. When I clarified fanfiction counted as a form of BL media, respondents shared that fanfiction, in particular, was one of their favorite means of this escapism. “I’m writing [BL fanfiction] right now... It gives me a good outlet to get my emotions out, so I’m not hyper-focused on things that don’t need to be focused on,” Koda remarked. Most respondents shared that reading or writing fanfiction was an outlet for them growing up. Now, in their adult life, they still sought it out to escape overwhelming emotions, as suggested in the literature.

Overall, BL fans appealed to connection when they shared that BL was a safe space to make an escape. Participants claimed escape, refuge, safety, and comfort all served to disconnect them from alienation, negative emotions, and negative experiences. Instead, fans connected to alternate realities through reading, watching and writing BL media.

Confidence

Two-thirds of fans stated BL media enhanced their confidence. Many described themselves as either shy or unhappy before they were exposed to BL media. Once BL was introduced into their lives, they were able to find joy and confidence; connecting and identifying with the characters.

Samantha voiced, “[BL] empowers me... [if] he can just accept himself and not care what the world thinks and do what his heart wants... I should just do [what I want] too.” In this, Samantha described a connection to BL media and a particular character so strongly it empowered her to make choices she may not have otherwise made. There was a sense of camaraderie amongst the fans and the characters they cherished; they felt encouraged by their actions. When they saw certain characters, they suddenly wished to become like them. Aysu

shared:

I think that I'm a lot more confident in myself, and I think I stand up more for my own opinions... before, I would just get mad, and I was more of a pushover. And I think with Boy Love and being able to see these very strong characters and these very strong emotions and experiences that they've gone through has allowed me to kind of vicariously take some of their aspects and allow that to be part of me.

Like Aysu, many fans claimed to have embodied their favorite aspects of stories or characters. Seeing a character they were able to relate to or wanted to mimic encouraged a lot of fans to challenge themselves. Kai shared, "I've been closed off for so long because of hiding myself ... And now, I kind of feel [like I'm working] backwards... I just applied [to be a model two weeks ago], and I would have never done that." I had multiple participants tell me they would have never reached out to me for an interview a year ago, but they were so passionate and encouraged by BL media, they gained the confidence to open themselves up to more connection and opportunities.

Self-Exploration

Self-exploration was categorized by respondents who appealed to connection with a truer self by stating BL encouraged them to explore their own identities. Some participants shared they were either unaware or questioning of their sexualities or gender expressions before becoming fans of BL media. Because BL directly tackled sexuality, many of them were able to question and explore their identities for the first time.

During interviews, I asked whether the respondents agreed that some fans saw BL media as a site to explore either their sexuality or their gender identity. Overwhelmingly, participants either said that could happen, they have seen that happen, or they have experienced it

themselves. Some respondents were only intrigued by the media itself at first but later found their identities woven into the storylines. Soul divulged in their interview, “I was probably subconsciously seeking it out because I saw myself in it a little bit.” Raven, the respondent who labeled her sexuality as questioning, disclosed that BL encouraged her to explore her sexuality more. She said “It’s not like the first time I’m questioning my sexuality... when I was growing up, I had thoughts about it too, but I just always pushed [it] to the side.” BL offered a new perspective for fans who were uncertain or unaware of their sexualities, as well as encouragement for those to accept their own identities. Leo remarked:

[BL] made me realize that I was rooting for these characters... I realized I was... telling these fictional characters that... they should just be who they are, love who they want. But [I wouldn’t] allow [myself] the same. So [it made me realize] ... I’ve got to tell people [that I’m LGBTQ+], and so I feel like once I told people, I could finally admit [my identity] to myself.

Numerous respondents affirmed that BL gave them the ability to explore their own identity alongside confidence to see their own worth through the media. There seemed to be a sense of security amongst fans in seeing queer characters cautiously inspect and then proudly communicate their own identities. These participants claimed BL encouraged exploration of their identities, eschewing the alienation and shame that often accompanied gender and sexuality dialogues. In the final section, I explored the ways that BL fans claimed to connect with others.

WAYS I CONNECT WITH OTHERS

In this section, fans discussed the connections they created with other BL fans. Like the previous section, these participants did not draw on fetishism exemplars for comparison. However, they did appeal to the themes of alienation and connection. My interviewees appealed

to the positive exemplar of connection through the categories “my niche of weird people” and “cultural expansion and acceptance.” The connection the respondents fostered with BL media overflowed into personal friendship connections and interest in cultural differences.

My Niche of Weird People

My niche of weird people is a sentiment fans expressed to showcase the real-life connections they made because of BL media. Connectivity was one of the leading patterns found throughout the interview process; 22 out of 36 respondents cited that BL media and the BL fandom created friendship and connection in their lives, specifically in online spaces. In turn, respondents reported the connections they made with others deepened their appreciation for BL media. Most respondents cited that their interactions with other BL media consumers happened in online spaces; quite a few people disclosed that their closest relationships had been built online. Many noted that the best thing that BL media had contributed to their lives was friendship and connectivity with other fans. This section discusses the interpersonal connections that fans gained through consuming BL media.

Many BL fans felt they could be their authentic selves with other consumers. While they appreciated the relationships in their everyday lives, they enjoyed connecting to others they would have otherwise never met without BL and social media. “I’ve literally jumped on the plane to go meet some of these people in the middle of a pandemic,” disclosed Nova during our interview. Nova was not the only one who had traveled to visit their online friends. One respondent was even living with a friend they met online in a fandom space, years earlier. Multiple respondents shared they communicated with their online friends daily, often video chatting to watch a new BL series or even role-play some of the BL manga for a group.

“I found my niche of weird people and BL media and friends, so it's kind of cool,” shared Artie. Fans claimed they were finally in a space where someone understood what they were talking about and shared their opinions. There were some fans who originally sought BL media out of curiosity and then found themselves opening up to the possibility of their own queer identities. Having other friends in the BL fandom, some who have potentially shared similar experiences, helped fans gain perspective and courage to explore these thoughts with other people. Bright revealed:

Now, I can have discussions that I was only having sort of internally, if at all. Before, there was a lot of time where I didn't want to look at why I was watching so [many BL] movies and why I would seek that out. I didn't really want to think about why, but now that I've [found friends who like BL], I can have those discussions more in the open with other people.

This sentiment was shared in multiple interviews. When the fans were asked the positive stereotypes or qualities that they had heard about BL fans, many of them noted how BL fans were often open-minded and kind. Dankkie shared, “I always associated [BL fans] with really positive traits like open-mindedness [and willingness to explore] different topics.” Because BL could be a taboo topic since it encompassed queerness, most of the fans, like Dankkie, were open about discussing things such as sexuality and gender expression. “[If you] like a certain show that I also like, [then] I have a positive view of you ... you have this feeling of togetherness ... you can feel [a] sense of community [in the] BL world,” MBK explained.

In this category, respondents appealed to connection by emphasizing that BL brought them relationships with other people. A sense of community was felt between the fans, simply

because of their shared interests. Multiple respondents noted having met some of their best friends in the BL fandom.

Cultural Expansion and Acceptance

BL media was categorized as gay Asian media. There were different subsets of BL media, specifically in the BL comics, that were unique to each country, such as manhua (Chinese comics), manga (Japanese comics), and manhwa (Korean comics). BL television series were becoming more popular, with series produced in Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, China, and most recently, Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea. A majority of the respondents noted an interest in Asian culture that either emerged due to their consumption of BL media or began shortly before through consumption of Anime or KPOP. Multiple respondents noted they were unaware of issues in most Asian countries until they were exposed to BL media, specifically in Thailand. Many noted the increase in their consumption also led to an openness to learn more about Asian cultures and societies. In this section, I explored Global Awareness and LGBTQ+ Awareness.

Global awareness

Fans discussed a new global awareness that emerged since becoming a BL fan. They relayed how their interest in BL media had opened them up to new cultures they had never experienced before. This interest fostered a connection to the media and the countries in which they were made. Thailand in particular was brought up when fans discussed their cultural expansion. Respondents admitted they did not know what the Thai language sounded like before being exposed to live-action Thai BL shows. Live-action BL television series were a favorite amongst a significant portion of respondents for their preferred form of BL media; Thailand had produced the most BL series at the time this was written in the spring of 2021.

Rey shared how BL broadened his perspective on life in Thailand:

I knew about Thailand, but I didn't get to know [a lot] about it... Because I'm watching these shows, [I'm becoming aware of Thailand's history], especially recently with their protests against the monarchy... Especially coming from Mexico, like, I know that there's other nations out there who are struggling with their governments, sometimes you just forget that ... [these countries that produce BLs] have the same struggles as we [do].

They also have, like, bad forms of government. They're also just fighting for rights.

Rey related Thailand's struggles to the struggles his family had seen and experienced in Mexico. Because of this new awareness, he connected and empathized more with Thailand's political movement. Multiple participants discussed how following their favorite Thai BL actors on social media brought Thailand's political strife to their attention. As Rey suggested, this helped fans feel connected to a country they had rarely thought about; they were able to recognize Thai citizens' hardships and were reminded of universal problems faced by many.

Outside of this, fans also discussed their passion for the Thai language and culture. One respondent, Broccoli, even stated, "I watch it for the language." Fans laughed, discussing their shock the first time they heard the Thai language spoken and how they quickly fell in love with it. It was not uncommon for respondents to share they were studying the Thai language in hopes of becoming fluent enough to watch their series without subtitles. "I'm learning from my love of Thai culture, like, the language, what they do differently from us," FJ explained. The drastically different language and culture easily encouraged fans to consume more BL content. "It's really cool to see ... how the translations ... and [accents change]," Eunha shared during her interview. Broccoli distinguished herself from other fans by noting that her consumption was for intrigue in the language, which connected her to the location and people of Thailand. FJ shared that she was

so invested in the Thai BL shows she watched that she was inspired to learn the language. Eunha referenced the fascination with the Thai language as a motivator for consuming BL media as well. These fans determined their interests as investments in characters, plotlines, and cultural knowledge; therefore, they considered themselves globally aware fans because they cared about Thai politics, Thai language, and Thai culture.

LGBTQ+ awareness

LGBTQ+ awareness was characterized by participants' increased awareness of prejudice and oppression queer people are forced to endure worldwide. As Rey mentioned, Thailand has gone through political unrest, which has included LGBTQ+ policies. Some respondents noted the irony in BL's Asian origin, where LGBTQ+ marriage is only fully legalized in Taiwan and partially in Thailand. "It definitely opened my eyes to ... issues in just how people perceive the LGBT community," Siren asserted.

There were a few interviewees from countries where LGBTQ+ people are heavily scrutinized and taboo even to discuss. MBK shared that before BL, she had a closed-off perspective regarding the LGBTQ+ community; she had been raised to think it could only be a negative identity. Through BL, she was able to change how she viewed the queer community. "It did change my mind a lot ... It started with just the gay community and then the transgender community ... it didn't affect me personally, but it [helped] me open my mind to a lot of issues ... because I'm not in close contact with them, I couldn't understand."

These conversations were not as easily accessible in their communities, and BL was able to establish a new perspective for them. They even referred to how they learned more about their own identities through BL. For Katekito and her best friend, BL introduced the idea that "your preference is not limited to [one]... your gender is not limited to [one]." It was not until Katekito

moved to a larger city that she saw more people with open minds regarding the LGBTQ+ community; now, she does not label her sexuality because she does not feel it is necessary to categorize herself. Dankkie explained, “People that still live over here are really, really homophobic... Once I started watching BL, I started seeing that [I was still struggling] with who I was in my sexual preferences.”

Participants also discussed increased awareness for the queer community in the United States. Jun shared that coming from a more conservative city, she did not have much access to the LGBTQ+ community: “I think [BL]... helps me be, like, more [aware of LGBTQ+ rights].” I interviewed fans from various cities in America, and the bulk of them seemed to have traditional families. Genevieve reflected, “[My] family is Christian ... I'm not, like, very absorbed in their religion, so [you subconsciously think] they're not supposed to be [together]... you just fall for the characters and the romance. And I think that's why I started liking [BL]...” Even though Genevieve had no prejudice towards the LGBTQ+ community, she still noted how her upbringing unknowingly affected her perspective. Numerous respondents shared similar experiences and how BL was their opportunity to support the queer community more than they previously had.

The discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ awareness led respondents to share how BL media had opened them up more to LGBTQ+ across the globe. Fans referred to their increased awareness as a means of connection to BL media; they were encouraged to learn from the media and also reflect on their environment. This fostered a connection that manifested in acknowledgment for the queer community and their struggles.

Conclusion

This section explored how fans claimed to connect with each other and expand their awareness globally and for LGBTQ+ issues both locally and worldwide, due to exposure to BL media. The next chapter will explore the potential contributions my study may have for the literature, and conclude this study.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

In this research, I attempted to explore two questions: what discourses will participants who consume BL media draw upon to describe and account for their experiences engaging with the content, and what discourses will participants who consume BL media draw upon to construct their own and other's identities while engaging with the content? My respondents engaged in biographical work (Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt 1994) to construct their own pasts to discuss their present selves and life experiences in the BL fandom. While drawing on biographical work, the fans also engaged in Identity Politics (Bernstein 2005) by invoking Fetishizer exemplars. Through this, fans discerned what they believed was acceptable and unacceptable behavior for BL fans; the majority of my sample vaguely defined "fetishizers" and tried to resist being branded as one. Participants also appealed to themes reminiscent of Marx's concept of fetishism (Lewin and Morris 1977) by defining their connection to BL as a way to resist alienation. The participants appealed to connection to discuss the positive impacts that BL media had made on their lives through friendships and cultural expansion. In this conclusion, I detail how my study fits into existing BL literature, as well as my thesis' methodological, substantive, and theoretical contributions. Following this, I discuss the limitations of this study, potential future research angles, and concluding remarks.

Methodological Contributions

Due to my online observations of the BL fandom over the past year, I decided to recruit interviewees through various social media accounts. The most successful social media account for recruitment was on TikTok, an app which allows you to post short videos. In my video, I shared the flyer for my study and encouraged fans to screenshot, so they would have my contact

information if they were interested in participating. I used particular hashtags in the caption for my video that I had seen popular BL TikTok creators utilize in the past, such as #BL and #BoysLove. When I first posted the video, I did not expect to get many BL fans to interact with it. However, within a few hours I had dozens of comments and emails. In the end, I received 50+ emails from BL fans interested in participating in my study.

TikTok was an incredibly useful tool in my recruitment; all but 2 of my interviewees contacted me because they had either seen my TikTok video on their “For You” page (personalized home page on TikTok) or one of their friends shared my TikTok with them. I believe that TikTok could be an important resource for future recruitment. As of January 2021, TikTok had an estimated 1.1 billion monthly active users, averaging 52 minutes of engagement per day on the platform (Doyle 2021). If you have a study for which you are aiming to recruit a particular sample, you could search various hashtags that relate to your topic to see how much engagement there has been about your topic. While I had a media-based project, there are many TikTok users who use their platforms to educate their audiences on a range of topics, such as rare diseases and disabilities, religious trauma, and oppression of different groups across the world. Finding dependable interviewees for research purposes can be difficult. From what I observed, most people attempt to recruit through flyers and email chains. While this can be successful, creating a TikTok video can help potential interviewees put a face to a project. While I do have an entertaining topic which deals with a form of media, I tried to talk about my thesis research project in an open, energized, relatable manner that would hopefully grab other fans’ attention. Even for a more traditional study, an engaging recruitment video could still draw in people. One drawback of using TikTok as a means to attract potential interview respondents is the high presence of minors on the app. A few minors reached out to me in hopes of participating in the

study, but I had to deny them. It is possible that a minor could lie about their age in hopes of being a part of a study. TikTok can also be limiting because it is not a social media account everyone has; it only reaches groups of people who have the TikTok app.

Theoretical Contributions

Each respondent shared their unique perspective and experiences during our time together. Participants engaged in biographical work by recounting their past experiences to construct their present selves and also by resisting the narrative of the fandom-defined fetishizer role. In this resistance, fans also tackled identity politics on both the individual and collective levels. The fans who discussed this topic accounted for the appropriate and inappropriate ways to consume BL media. If a fan deemed a type of consumption as inappropriate, it could be branded as fetishizing. Thus, birthed the fetishizer exemplar.

The fetishizer exemplar emerged during the coding process of this study. Two-thirds of respondents referenced this apparent group of “fetishizers” in the fandom. Marx’s (1957) concept of fetishism was also alluded to during this process; Marx stated that fetishism was a form of alienation from commodity, which separated the worker from their product. The lack of connection forced consumers to appreciate commodities only for their exchange value. The fetishizer as a reference point hearkened back to this concept; participants determined that if a fan only participated in BL media for sexual pleasure and did not care about the stories or characters, the fan was disrespecting the media. This, in turn, framed BL media as an alienated exchange value without recognizing the significance of the media to the fandom. Most of my queer respondents pointed to straight women as fetishizers. In contrast, the straight women denied their part of this group by claiming to value the media appropriately, thus resisting the fetishizer exemplar. Across sexuality and gender, participants discussed how the stigma of the

presence of fetishizers in the BL audience was greater than the actual existence of this group. To reiterate this belief, fans appealed to the fetishizer exemplar to narratively resist the label. They also engaged in identity politics to discern unacceptable and acceptable fan behaviors. Because connection is the opposite of alienation (Marx 1957), participants appealed to connection in the sections *Ways I Connect with BL Media* and *Ways I Connect with Others*. Respondents signified their connection to the media through escapism, confidence, and self-exploration. BL, according to participants, led them to connect to friends and cultures they would otherwise not.

This theory could be utilized in future research, especially if participants are recruited through social media. Often in online spaces, definitions can easily be misconstrued, reconstructed, and spread. For the fetishizer exemplar, in particular, I believe it could be useful in research on other fandoms, particularly those that are created in primarily one region of the world, have a large LGBTQ+ following, or woman fanbase. The fetishizer exemplar could be referenced in Asian media studies about either KPOP or anime, both having fanbases that have become more mainstream over the past few years. I have observed a lot of online discourse about the possible fetishization of Asian people similar to Engmann's (2012) study of Black women's bodies and British Colonialism.

Substantive Contributions

Because I did a qualitative study, I was able to see where fans directly engaged in identity politics during interviews. The majority of participants believed BL fans were perceived as only straight women who "fetishized" gay men. The respondents resented this perception and, in turn, attempted to resist the narrative by indicating appropriate and inappropriate behavior in which BL fans engaged. Other fans resisted the "fetishizer" narrative by claiming this fan-defined label

not only erased queer audience members but reinforced the double standard that women should be stigmatized for their sexual interests.

The meanings that were created in the fandom affected their choices and actions as fans. According to those interviewed, the discourses surrounding the “fetishizer” affected many participants’ behaviors. For some respondents, they viewed fans who only enjoyed BL for sexual purposes as inappropriate but also admitted they enjoyed intimate scenes in BL as well. However, they believed the way they consumed BL was appropriate compared to those they labeled fetishizers.

The fetishizer exemplar may have been referenced intensely because a majority of the respondents were bisexual women. These women had intersecting identities that put them in “oppressed” groups for both sexuality and gender identity. It was possible the intersecting stigmatizations produced some of the discussions surrounding BL media and straight women fetishizers. Since bisexual people are open to all genders as sex partners and love interests, these respondents are attracted to men and probably attracted to some of the characters or actors portrayed in BL media. Women have often been forced to feel as though their sexual feelings were inappropriate (Aoyama and Hartley 2012, Bauer 2013, Watson and Jirik 2018); therefore, these two factors could have intersected to make this sample of fans feel as though they had to actively resist being labeled as fetishizers, due to their sexual attraction and gender.

Limitations and Future Research

In my recruitment TikTok video, I specified my bisexual orientation. This might have affected who reached out to participate in my study. Because I shared my own queerness, LGBTQ+ fans may have felt more comfortable contacting me. The opposite could also be said: because I shared my own queerness, straight fans may have felt less comfortable contacting me.

Also, the large pool of bisexual women respondents could be the result of my admission in my TikTok video. However, I intended to broaden the demographics of the BL audience in research; therefore, I chose to reveal my sexuality to encourage other queer fans to contact me.

Future research could include projects that made cross-cultural comparisons regarding perceptions of BL media. BL as a genre has gained a lot of popularity on online platforms over the past few years; there is a massive international following. However, I am only fluent in English. This limited my interviews to fluent English speakers. While English was not every participant's first language, I could only interact with fans who are proficient in English. Unfortunately, this excluded a large segment of non-English BL fans from my study. Interviewing people from different regions of the world and comparing their experiences to one another would be a fascinating approach to a research study. Do fans in South America account for their experiences in the same way that fans from Australia do? Do they also appeal to the fetishizer exemplar as a narrative resource through which to diffuse stigma?

There are various forms of BL media from manga, television series, movies, books, etc. My project was inclusive to fans of any form of BL media because previous research primarily focused on BL manga. The mass of BL respondents were fans of multiple forms of BL media, but there were a few that only consumed one type. There may have been patterns between fans of BL television series versus BL manga versus BL books. I may have been able to note that fans of television series claimed to use their viewing experience as entertainment while fans of BL books would claim to use their media as an escape. However, I did not track patterns across specific BL media forms in my study as my sample size was not large enough to do so. A future research project could gather a larger sample and focus on different patterns across fans of specific BL media; it would also be interesting to see what BL media form is the most dominant.

This study was limited to media, specifically in the BL genre. Unfortunately, the genres GL (Girls' Love) and WLW (woman loving woman) have limited media. While I would have loved to study GL media, GL is not as mainstream or as easily accessible as BL media. It would be interesting to base a study on GL media and interview fans about their experiences with the media. One could also ask respondents their perspectives on why GL is not as popular or produced as often as BL media; this could be a great opportunity to amplify fans' voices and discuss issues of potential sexism in media and fan spaces. It may also be of interest to compare the biography work and identity politics of BL and GL media consumers to see if GL media consumers appealed to the fetishizer, alienation, and connectivity continuum in similar or other ways; or if they appealed to it at all. GL media consumption may have less of a perceived stigma attached to it or different (if any) stigma attached to it, thus requiring identity management strategies to be employed.

Finally, while a significant focus of my thesis was on fans appealing to fetishizer exemplars to resist the stigma of fetishizing gay men, I was not able to explore the potential intersection of the fetishization of Asian men and women. A few respondents suggested the fetishization of Asian men as a motivation for some to consume BL media; however, there was not enough data to address this idea in a findings section. Most of my participants were also active consumers of other Asian media, such as anime or KPOP. Therefore, a future topic that could be explored is the increase of Asian media popularity and the potential of fetishization of Asian bodies. If participants in my study noted this apparent fetishizer existence in the BL fandom, would fans of other Asian content notice fetishization in their fandoms? Therefore, there could be an intersection in the topic of fetishization that I was unable to explore in my study.

Concluding Thoughts

This thesis attempted to expand the demographics of BL fans represented in research and showcase fans' experiences with the media. Without Anna Madill's (2018) quantitative study of the BL fandom, there would be barely any knowledge that the BL fanbase included gender diverse people, such as non-binary and trans fans. My qualitative study adds dimensionality to her demographic research. Prior to my study, I found only two articles that addressed specifically Japanese lesbians' exploratory relationship with BL media (Welker 2006; Mizoguchi 2008), while all the rest focused on heterosexual women (McLelland 1999; Camper 2006; Galbraith 2011; Zsila et al. 2018). I believe that because researchers have fallen into a gendered "deviancy bias" (Millman 1975; Chafetz and Dworkin 1986) regarding investigating heterosexual women's mainly sexual motivations for consuming BL media, there has been limited research on diverse and inclusive BL audiences. Researchers assume that when men are sexual, their behavior is viewed as normal, expected, and not a research topic. However, when women are sexual, they are presumed deviant and therefore a topic of research. Numerous respondents reported that their interest in BL was often branded as purely sexual and deviant, even though that did not reflect their personal experience.

Authors like Neville (2018) have tried to normalize women's sexual interests and sexuality in relation to gay pornography and erotica. While I believe we need writers like Neville to challenge norms and help destigmatize women's sexual desires, the standard BL research focus on women's sexual interest in the content has contributed to the stigma more. Because the BL fandom has expanded in the past ten years, there are more genders and sexualities represented in the audience. Many do not feel it is fair that BL fans are mainly perceived as straight women and fetishizers. I believe the focus research BL has had on women's sexual

relationship with the content has othered the audience. BL studies have not intended to demean the women who do have purely sexual and exploratory relationships with BL media; nevertheless, they have done so by focusing on women's interest in BL media as something out of the norm. Unintentionally, I believe BL researchers have contributed to the stereotype that all BL fans are fetishizers. They have reproduced their own, gendered, cultural assumptions about consuming this type of media.

Based on my observations, I also believe when fans engage in identity politics, they unintentionally perpetuate this stigma. Through identity politics, an individual may draw on oppressive categories to resist the reputation they believe has been given to their entire group (Bernstein 2005). By denying their part, they "other" individuals who do not display their same behavior and therefore, continue to stigmatize the group as a whole. This replicates hurtful categories. While unintentional, I believe the fans perpetuate the erasure of queer BL fans, the belief that women's sexualities are inappropriate, and the assumption that queer sex is abnormal, by engaging in fetishizer discourse.

The majority of fans resented the fetishizer stigma they believed was associated with their interest in BL media. However, they also claimed there were fetishizers in the BL audience. While engaging in identity politics, the respondents created their own rules to follow so as not to be branded a fetishizer. According to this discourse, any outliers would be labeled as such. Some queer respondents said only straight women were fetishizers. Some straight respondents said the fetishizers were only the fans who did not support LGBTQ+ rights. For participants across demographics, there were claims that the stereotype was more prevalent than their actual numerical existence. Many queer fans were irritated by the stigma because they felt it erased the queer voices in the fandom who sought the media for representation, exploration, and enjoyment.

In fact, the majority of my respondents were LGBTQ+; I only had seven straight participants in total. Many of the queer fans felt BL fans, in general, were only categorized as straight women due to the stereotype. However, most of them believed the fanbase was made up of largely LGBTQ+ people. This idea of the fetishizer may have contributed to this erasure by focusing on straight women as a deviant group.

BL fans may unknowingly be perpetuating the stigmatization of women's sexualities by claiming straight women are the main fetishizers. If a straight woman enjoys the sex scenes in BLs, is she automatically a fetishizer? How does this differ for bisexual women or lesbian women who enjoy the intimate scenes? How do fans measure whether a non-binary or gender-fluid fan is fetishizing or not? Many of the participants that were women who discussed fetishization in the BL audience resisted that they were fetishizers themselves by either saying they could take or leave the sexual scenes or that they wished BL creators and fans would stop over-sexualizing the characters. However, later in the interviews, some of these same respondents claimed to be attracted to BL actors, admitted that was what originally piqued their interest in BL media, or discussed one of the more explicit scenes excitedly. I believe it is possible that the fetishizer exemplar emerged from "common sense" "taken for granted" mainstream cultural discourses, which assume that it is normal and expected to repress women's sexualities. Why exactly does enjoying intimate scenes in BL get a woman labeled as a fetishizer? BL was created by Japanese women who were tired of feeling taken advantage of and sexually repressed by Japanese men and society (Fujimoto 1998; McLelland 1999; Welker 2006; Galbraith 2011; Saito 2011). Given this origin of BL media, who determined that women enjoying BL for sexual pleasure or sexual expression was inappropriate? Japanese women who created and consumed BL manga were stigmatized as "cross-voyeurs," and many implied that

their sexualities were inappropriate because they were women (Camper 2006; Galbraith 2011; Bauer 2013). My study mirrors this finding and confirms that women who consume BL today are still stigmatized for enjoying anything related to sex, whether it is a peck on the lips or an X-rated sex scene.

I believe when BL fans created this definition of the fetishizer, it was only with the intention to protect queer men and their relationships. It is possible fans began to resent the origin of BL and felt that it was objectifying queer men. Since BL does have content that is only homoerotic (Camper 2006; Zsila et al. 2018), queer and straight BL fans may have felt this sexual focus sensationalized and eroticized gay relationships. As a way to combat this, they could have created this definition to combat the sexualization of gay relationships. In turn, however, by constantly policing what constitutes fetishizing, fans could inadvertently perpetuate the idea that queer sex and relationships are “deviant.” Although fans most likely were attempting to normalize queer relationships, policing fans’ behaviors only seems to sensationalize queer sex.

Gender and sexuality norms are so ingrained in our social structure we do not realize we are perpetuating a hurtful stigma of the people we are often trying to protect. While exposing microaggression and intolerance is much needed and long overdue in our society, I do believe that has led some to search for “problematic” themes where there may not necessarily be one. Through my observations of online interactions in the BL fandom, many fans have pushed back at the image of “the fetishizer,” arguing that fans were not using the correct definition, and in turn, gatekeeping BL from queer people and allies.

While participants contributed to the stigmatization of BL fans, they also highlighted the beautiful impacts this media had on their lives. Respondents appealed to themes regarding

connection to account for their experiences. Through BL, respondents claimed to make deep, impactful connections with both themselves and others. Participants sought BL as a way to escape to alternative realities and solely focus on the content instead of their life stressors. They were also able to feel inspired by BL characters, so much so they claimed it began to reflect in their own confidence. Many queer fans leaned on BL as a tool of exploration in their sexuality and gender identities; without BL, they may have taken longer to accept themselves—or worse. BL fans were also able to build friendships with those they would have otherwise never met. Multiple fans expressed joy and gratitude for the friends they had made because of BL. Others were also inspired to expand their cultural knowledge; there were fans who claimed to have made and attained newfound goals such as traveling, language learning, and advocating for the LGBTQ+ community due to their exposure to BL media.

These sweet contributions were so uplifting to hear throughout the interviews and far outweighed the discussions of fetishizers. With their focus on fetishization, they always combatted it with their lovely experiences in the fandom and with BL media in general. The respondents claimed they enjoyed and valued the content, along with the fans they had met along the way. Many participants seemed to be concerned with being branded a fetishizer; therefore, they emphasized the main reason they enjoyed BL content was because of the positivity it contributed to their lives. The sample of fans I was fortunate to interview seemed to want the best for the future of BL and for the storylines, characters, and actors to be respected. While their concern about hypothetical wicked, objectifying fans were likely born out of genuine concern and critique, I do not think the fetishizers are as “hungry” as these BL fans had once assumed.

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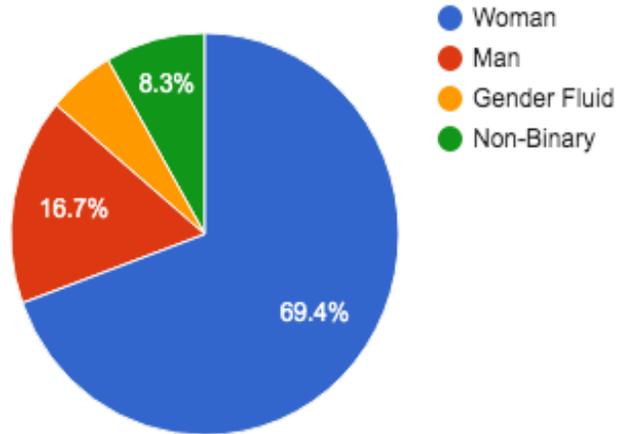
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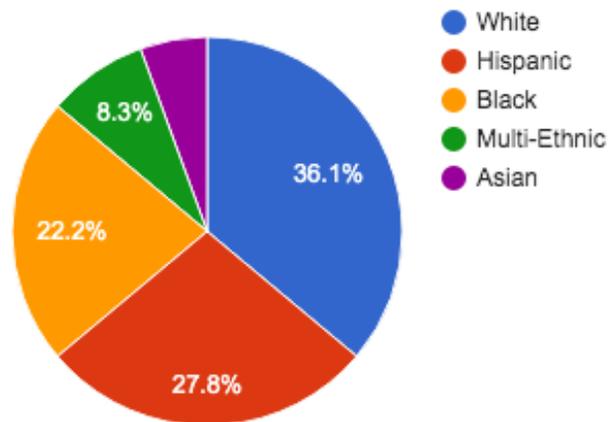
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APPENDIX A

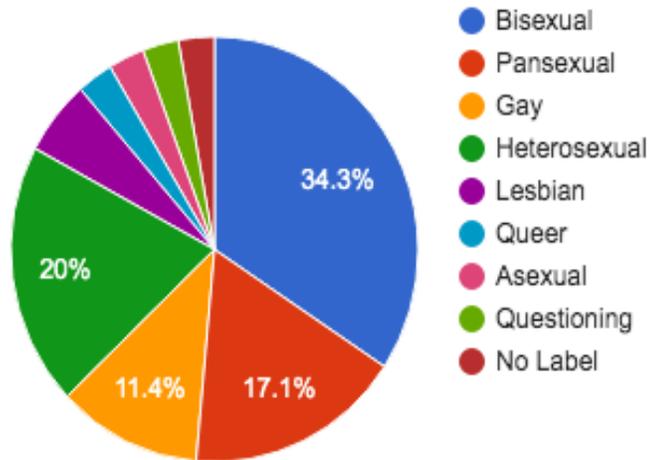
Respondents' Gender



Respondents' Ethnicities



Respondents' Sexualities



RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY: BL FANS NEEDED

So, you're a fan of Boys' Love media.



What I need:

- Interviewees!
Interviews will take place over Zoom!

Why?

- I am doing research on BL fans for my master's thesis!

Requirements?

- You must be 18+ years old.
- You must be a fan of BL media.

If you are interested in discussing your experiences with your favorite BL media, please email me: hcleman3@memphis.edu.

APPENDIX C

CONSENT

Title	PRO-FY2021-119: Map of the Soul: Navigating Identity Through Boys' Love Media
Researcher(s)	Hailey Coleman, University of Memphis
Researchers Contact Information	8705144841, hclemans3@memphis.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher(s) any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 30 people to do so.

Key Information for You to Consider

Voluntary Consent: You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.

Purpose: To broaden our social scientific knowledge regarding BL fans. We are interested in hearing fans from all backgrounds share their experience with BL media and the fandom. You are being invited to participate because you are over the age of 18 and volunteered to share your past experience consuming BL media. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about 20 people to do so.

Duration: It is expected that your participation will last between 45 minutes and 2 hours in a onetime Zoom interview.

Procedures and Activities: You will be asked to participate in a one-time Zoom interview about your experiences with BL media.

Risk: You may experience stress, emotional distress, inconvenience and possible loss of privacy and confidentiality associated with participating in a research study. However, this research is considered low-risk.

Benefits: Participating has no known direct benefits to you. We do believe this study will help us better understand the experiences of BL fans.

Alternatives: If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

Who is conducting this research?

Hailey Coleman of the University of Memphis, Department of Sociology is in charge of the study. She is being guided by Dr. Carol Rambo. There may be other research team members assisting during the study.

What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?

It is expected that your participation will last between 45 minutes and 2 hours in a onetime Zoom interview. With your permission, interviews will be recorded. Transcripts will be made for each recording, however, only a pseudonym (false name) of your choice will be used.

You will be asked demographic questions, such as your pronouns, gender identity, sexuality, and race. After you have answered those questions, you will be asked questions about your experiences in the fandom, for instance I will ask “Do you think consuming BL media has changed you?” and “Who makes up the BL fandom, to your knowledge?” If at any point you would like to skip a question, you may do so without worry or repercussion. If you would like a copy of the questions that you will be asked, please email hcleman3@memphis.edu and request the Interview Questionnaire.

The interviews will also be flexible within reason. For example, if the Principal Investigator and you are in different time zones, your schedule will be accommodated. These options allow you to choose a time that is convenient for you and allows you to assure that your confidentiality is as secure as possible. All measures will be taken to secure privacy for you on the investigator’s end of the conversation. Once the interview is over, if you would like to access the transcript to check for accuracy, please email hcleman3@memphis.edu with the request. The transcription can be sent to you once it is completed, if you request.

Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the Principal Investigator, Hailey Coleman at hcleman3@memphis.edu. If you need to report a study-related injury, or if you have questions, please contact the IRB Administrator at irb@memphis.edu or 901-678-2705. If you have any concerns regarding integrity and ethics in research and scholarship at the University of Memphis, please do not hesitate to call 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu. The confidentiality of anyone who contacts the office will be protected under the Whistleblower Protection Act. Working together we will promote the highest standard of integrity and ethics in research and scholarship. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

We will tell you about any new information that may affect your willingness to continue participating in the research. Once the research is over, you will receive an email from the Principal Investigator with instructions on how to access the finalized document.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private. The research team includes Hailey Coleman, her supervisor Dr. Carol Rambo, transcribers, and coders. Your information will not be shared with anyone outside of the

research team. Other researchers may be given access to the de-identified data in the future, subject to review and approval by the appropriate Institutional Review Board. Your contact information will be destroyed immediately after the research is completed. The transcriptions of interviews will be destroyed after 3 years.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

We promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best we can. You need to know about some limits to this promise. If you choose to participate in the Zoom interview, it is not within the Principal Investigator's ability to control the privacy within your physical location during the interview. The Principal Investigator ensures that their side of the interview will be conducted in a private setting without interruption or distraction.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. The recordings will be kept in a secure file in an application on the investigator's phone and laptop. Only the principal investigator and the faculty advisor, Dr. Carol Rambo, will have access to the transcriptions. All recordings will be transcribed by either the principal investigator or a paid transcriber and then coded. Transcriptions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and on a password protected jump drive. When the transcriptions have been completed, all the recordings will be destroyed. The transcriptions will be kept in a locked file for three years, at which point they will be destroyed.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered.

We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. We may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Memphis.

The Institutional Review Board may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your private information, if they so require.

Research team members are required to report the following if a team member suspects child abuse or neglect, or suicidal thoughts. TN Laws may require this suspicion be reported. In such case, the research team may be obligated to breach confidentiality and may be required to disclose personal information.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also ok to decide to end your participation at any time. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researchers. The individuals conducting the study may need to withdraw you from the study. This may occur if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to

you, or if the Principal Investigator decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons.

If you would like to stop participating in this research, please communicate that with the Principal Investigator immediately. If suddenly during the interview you change your mind, communicate that to the Principal Investigator, and the interview will be stopped, and any information that you already gave will not be used if you request. If at any point after the interview you want to withdraw from the research, email the Principal Investigator at hcleman3@memphis.edu.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?

There are no costs associated with participation in this research study.

What if I am injured due to participating in this research?

It is important for you to understand that the University of Memphis does not have funds set aside to pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you get hurt or sick while taking part in this study. Also, the University of Memphis will not pay for any wages you may lose if you are harmed by this study. You do not give up your legal rights by participating in this study.

Will I receive any compensation for participating in this research?

You will not be compensated for taking part in this research.

Who can answer my question about this research?

Before you decide to volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Hailey Coleman, hcleman3@memphis.edu or Dr. Carol Rambo, carol.rambo.phd@gmail.com. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu. We will give you a signed copy of this consent to take with you.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this document. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions through the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this consent document. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, my legal representative or I may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation.

As described above, you will be Audio recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio recordings will be used for transcribing the interview. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio recording as described

____ I agree to the use of audio recording.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date

Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that the participant understand the information described in this consent and freely consent to participate.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Research Team Member	Signature of Research Team Member	Date

APPENDIX D

COVER SHEET

COVER SHEET INFORMATION

Pseudonym? _____

Pronouns? _____

Gender Identity? _____

Race? _____

Age? _____

Sexuality? _____

Where are you from? _____

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Pretend you are writing a story or a book about your history with BL media. Tell me the story of how you got involved with BL media. What happened first? [Ask until the participant brings us up to the present, then ask].

Would you be willing to share examples of what makes good BL media?

[If they don't share why] Why are they good?

Would you be willing to share examples of what makes bad BL media?

[If they don't share why] What makes it bad for you?

Do you think consuming BL media has changed you?

[If yes] In what ways? [Get them to keep talking about the ways] In what other ways?

· Would you say some of the ways you were changed were good? How so?

· Would you say some of the ways you were changed were bad? How so?

[If no] Why do you think that is?

What were you like before you started consuming BL media?

What are you like now?

Do you notice any differences?

[If so/If they don't explain] How do you explain those differences?

[If they don't/ If they don't explain] Why do you think that is?

Do you know anyone else who consumes BL media?

Why do you think others consume BL media? What are some other reasons?

Are some of them like you?

[If yes] In what ways?

[If no] Why do you think that is?

[If they do not share this] Are some of them different than you?

[If yes] In what ways?

[If no] Why do you think that is?

Do you consume BL media for the same reasons you did in the beginning?

What is your preferred/favorite BL media? Why?

Why are you drawn to BL media?

What has been in the BL fandom contributed to your life, if anything?

[If they don't bring it up] Some people see BL media and stan accounts as a site to explore one's sexuality. Do you think that is the case? [If yes] Could you tell me about a time where that happened?

[If they don't bring it up] Some people see BL media and stan accounts as site to explore one's gender orientation. Do you think that is the case? [If yes] Could you tell me a time about that happening?

Has being a BL fan helped you in any way?

Some people frame participation in BL media as deviant. Have you ever heard that?

What kinds of negative stereotypes are there out there? Is there something to those?

What kinds of positive stereotypes are there out there? Is there something to those?

Do others know that you like BL media?

[If yes] How did they react to you liking this media? / How do you think they would react to you liking this media?

Who makes up the BL fandom, to your knowledge?

Do you consume any other LGBTQ+ media, outside of BL?

What do you think the future of BL media looks like?

Is there a question or topic you wished was addressed in the interview? If so, what? If you were doing my study, what question would you have in this interview?

Thank you so much for participating in this interview.

APPENDIX F
IRB APPROVAL

Date: 12-18-2020

IRB #: PRO-FY2021-119
Title: Map of the Soul: Navigating Identity Through Boys' Love Media
Creation Date: 10-8-2020
End Date:
Status: **Approved**
Principal Investigator: Hailey Coleman
Review Board: University of Memphis
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
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Key Study Contacts

Member	Carol Rambo	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	crroi@memphis.edu
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Member	Hailey Coleman	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	hcleman3@memphis.edu
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Member	Hailey Coleman	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	hcleman3@memphis.edu
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From: irb@memphis.edu <irb@memphis.edu>
Sent: Thursday, December 17, 2020 9:34 AM
To: crronai@memphis.edu; hcleman3@memphis.edu
Subject: PRO-FY2021-119 –
Initial: Approval - Expedited

Institutional Review Board
Division of Research and Innovation
Office of Research Compliance
University of Memphis
315 Admin Bldg
Memphis, TN 38152-3370

December 17, 2020

PI Name: Hailey Coleman
Co-Investigators:
Advisor and/or Co-PI: Carol Rambo
Submission Type: Initial
Title: Map of the Soul: Navigating Identity Through Boys' Love Media
IRB ID: #PRO-FY2021-119

Expedited Approval: December 16, 2020

The University of Memphis Institutional Review Board, FWA00006815, has reviewed your submission in accordance with all applicable statuses and regulations as well as ethical principles. Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:

1. When the project is finished a completion submission is required
2. Any changes to the approved protocol requires board approval prior to implementation
3. When necessary submit an incident/adverse events for board review
4. Human subjects training is required every 2 years and is to be kept current at citiprogram.org.

For additional questions or concerns please contact us at irb@memphis.edu or 901.6783.2705

Thank you,

James P. Whelan, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board Chair
The University of Memphis.