



Current Contents

Past Issues

□ Pagliassotti, Dru:

'Reading Boys' Love in the West'

Particip@tions Volume 5, Issue 2 **Special Edition** (November 2008)

Reading Boys' Love in the West

Abstract

“Boys’ love” is used to refer to male/male homoerotic texts, particularly manga, created by women for women. Originally developed in Japan, boys’ love is now a global phenomenon, but little is known about its Western readership. A 2005 English-language survey of 478 boys’ love readers and a 2006-7 Italian-language survey of 313 boy’s love readers provides detail about readers, what they think of boys’ love, and their activities as consumers and producers. Although the focus and cultural context of this paper is on boys’ love as it is received in the United States, the broader survey results provide a snapshot of boys’ love readers throughout the non-Asian world.

Keywords: Yaoi, reading, audience studies, reception studies, fan studies

Being a fan can be a solitary, private pursuit — or a richly collective sociality. (Kelly, 2004)

Fandom functions as an alternative social community. (Jenkins, 1992, p. 280).

Reading is usually considered a private act, in what Radway (1994) characterized as the “ideology of the solitary reader.” This ideology suggests that “solitary reading is valorized as contemplative, meditative, and educational, and above all, as serious” (p. 278). Taking issue with this ideology, Radway argued that reading is “an activity that takes place within a specific social context” that includes social characteristics and “a set of deliberate and complex strategies engaged in by communities of people” (p. 276).

Reading that has *never* been considered contemplative, meditative, educational, or serious by the U.S. mainstream includes the reading of romance and comic books. Romance as a literary genre has been so often criticized and defended that it virtually forms an academic sub-discipline of its own, revolving around the question of whether female readers’ enjoyment of romances is an empowering oppositional act of textual appropriation or a disempowering acceptance of the dominant, heterosexual, patriarchal model of love, courtship, and marriage. Similarly, comic books, in the United States, have been demonized since the late 1940s, and despite the success of some adult-oriented graphic novels (for example, the Pulitzer

Prize-winning 1973 novel *Maus*), comic book fandom is still disparaged by U.S. mainstream culture^[1] as the province of children, social misfits, and nerds. Europe and Japan have treated comic books and their readers more seriously; for example, Italian comics became adult fare in the mid-'60s with the publication of adult-oriented *Linus* and the widespread success of Hugo Pratt's *Corto Maltese*. Japan has a long history of comic art, with its cross-generational successes starting in the late 1940s with the widely popular work of Machiko Hasegawa and Osamu Tezuka.

In the United States, given the social stigma placed on readers of romances and comic books, and on consumers of sexually explicit material, not to mention the controversy over gay relationships, it wouldn't be surprising if readers of the homoerotic Japanese comic book genre collectively called "boys' love" might choose to keep their consumption of the genre private. However, two surveys of Western boys' love readers show that many share a strong and mutually supportive subculture; they enjoy communicating with each other about their passion, they create new boys' love works or share existing works with others, and they are actively engaged with boys' love publishers in requesting the import of specific titles. Moreover, although they are engaged with a genre that originated in Japan, the surveys provide preliminary evidence to suggest that Western boys' love readers may be more diverse in sexual orientation than readers in Japan and that they may also be more likely to link reading boys' love and supporting gay rights than are Japanese readers.

Boys' Love Manga in the U.S.

Boys' love manga — *manga* is used in the West to refer to Japanese comic books — have had a Western following for at least a decade and are now a rapidly expanding niche within the U.S. manga publishing boom. Boys' love stories revolve around the romantic tension between two or more men and are usually written and drawn by heterosexual women for what has been assumed to be a relatively young heterosexual female audience. The stories may range from the sweetly romantic to the violently sexual and from the fantastic to the contemporary. Gay manga, with which boys' love is often confused in the West, differ from boys' love in several significant stylistic aspects (see McClelland, 2000; Elfodiluce, 2004; and Lunsing, 2006, para. 20).

Boys' love may be referred to in the U.S. and Italy, variously and with different shades of meaning, boys' love, *shōnen-ai*, *juné*, and *yaoi* (for details on the differences between these terms, see Mizoguchi, 2003; Sabucco, 2000; and Aestheticism.Com, n.d.). In this paper, the genre, which embraces manga, movies, television shows, computer games, and novels, will be referred to simply as 'boys' love' (BL).

The first work of BL *per se* is generally agreed to be *Koibitotachi no ori* (*The Lover's Forest*), published in 1961. Women-written stories about young men in love with each other began to proliferate in *shōjo* (girls') comics in Japan in the 1970s (Aoyama, 1988; Mizoguchi, 2003), around the same time that the first women-written homoerotic Kirk/Spock stories were being printed in *Star Trek* fanzines in the West (Jenkins, 1992, p. 187). Although Japanese BL and Western slash are often compared, it's unclear whether they arose independently or if one genre influenced the other.

The first manga to be translated into English and published in the U.S. were aimed at boys. However, manga distributors soon realized that *shōjo* manga appealed to young women in a way that U.S. comics did not and began to expand that marketing niche. Boys' love, which is an offshoot of *shōjo*, is a relatively new import.

Italy received its first licensed and translated BL manga several years before the United States, with the release of *New York, New York* in 1999 by Marvel Italia (Sabucco, 2000, p. 124). Today, Kappa Edizioni is the primary source for licensed Italian-language translations of Japanese BL, starting with its release of *Kizuna 1* in 2001.

By comparison, BL publishing began to take off in the United States in 2004 with Be Beautiful's publication of *Kizuna 1*, Digital Manga Publishing's *Juné* line of BL manga, and the founding of Yaoi Press, dedicated to publishing original English-language BL manga.

In 2005, the presence of BL manga in the U.S. became stronger as publishers observed the success of several series featuring male-male romance, such as the aforementioned *Kizuna* and titles like *Fake* and *Eerie Queerie!* In addition, discussion panels dedicated to yaoi at mainstream anime and comic-book conventions; the enthusiasm of fans who demanded more BL material at conventions such as Comic-Con International, Sakura-Con, and Yaoi-Con; and the profusion of bootleg scanlations on the web indicated that there was an audience hungry for more material. By 2007, BL had succeeded so well in the U.S. that Media Blasters decided to drop its *shōnen* manga, geared to young male readers, and increase the number of BL titles in its list (Cha, 2007).

Although Italy received its first licensed translations of BL manga several years earlier than the U.S., the genre has not enjoyed such widespread growth there, and licensed Italian-language translations of BL manga remain relatively scarce.

Who's Reading Boys' Love in the West?

I put an English-language survey of yaoi readers online from June 28 to November 21, 2005, that attracted a total of 478 respondents. For four months from 2006-2007, two Italian researchers, Simone

Castagno and Veruska Sabucco, replicated the survey in Italian, attracting a total of 315 respondents. Their results are reported here with their permission. The purpose of the surveys was to gain a broader view of *who* is reading boys' love outside of Japan, *how* they read it, and *why* they read it. Results will be differentiated as coming from "the English-language survey" or "the Italian-language survey," but survey respondents as a whole will be referred to as "Western readers." All respondents were anonymous.

Description

The two online surveys seem to have attracted different reader populations. Respondents to the English-language survey came primarily from those countries in which English is a majority language — 80% ($n=381$) of those reporting their primary country of citizenship came from the U.S., Canada, the UK, or Australia. The remaining 20% were scattered through South America, the rest of Europe, and other countries. None came from Japan, and only four came from Italy. By contrast, in the Italian survey, 95% ($n=189$) of those reporting their primary country of citizenship came from Italy; one came from the U.S., one from China, and none from Japan. Although almost half of the Italian-language respondents did not list their country of citizenship, it seems probable that they also came from Italy or nearby countries — Italian is a majority language only in Italy, San Marino, the Vatican, and parts of Switzerland, and it is a less common second language than English.

The audience for BL manga in Japan is almost always described as being primarily women (e.g., Suzuki, 1998; McLelland, 2001; Mizoguchi, 2003). As Table 1 shows, women also make up the majority of BL readers in the West, although an interesting minority of men read the genre.

Table 1: Basic Demographics

	English-language survey	Italian-language survey
# responding	478	315
Female	89% ($n=350$)	82% ($n=297$)
Male	11%	13%
Under 18	Not applicable ($n=478$)	14% ($n=313$)
18-24	55%	54%
25-34	19%	29%
35-44	6%	2%
45-54	2%	0%
Some college/universitario education or higher	78% ($n=392$)	50% ($n=313$)

Note: Because questions were not mandatory, responding populations are subject to change. Percentages have been rounded.

The Universal Press Syndicate (2005) reported that, overall, U.S. manga readers are young; about half in the 12-17 age range and half in the 18-24 age range. Readers of BL manga, however, seem to be older, falling primarily between ages 18 and 34. Because a considerable amount of BL is sexually explicit, it might be expected to have a more mature readership than manga as a whole. These surveys' results might be skewed, however, because the English-language survey was only open to those who reported their age as over 18, due to institutional review board restrictions. The Italian-language survey wasn't so restricted, however, and it, too, found that the majority of BL readers were between 18 and 34.

Half or more of both surveys' respondents reported some level of college education or higher, which is consistent with the higher age range of the respondents. These results may also have been affected by the fact that the surveys were online; internet access is correlated with higher income and educational levels.

Table 2: Reading Age and First Encounter

	English-language survey (results in percents)	Italian-language survey (results in percents)
Age began reading BL:		
5-9	1% (n=391)	1% (n=304)
10-14	15	18
15-19	46	47
20-24	21	24
25-29	7	7
30-39	6	2
40+	4	0
First encountered BL		
Online	68% (n=392)	46% (n=299)
In a comic shop	9	30
From a friend	15	19

Note: most questions were not mandatory, so populations for each question may change. Percentages have been rounded.

Most respondents began reading BL in their teens and early 20s, and most first encountered BL manga online. However, in the Italian-language survey, comic book (*fumetti*) shops came in a close second to the internet as a location for readers' first encounters with BL manga.

Consistent with the fact that most of the English-language survey respondents first encountered BL online, about half (51%, n=392) said they still obtain most of their BL online through free, fan-provided scanlations. Younger readers seemed particularly inclined to do so; 39% of the 18-24 age group reported getting most of their BL manga this way. The second-largest category (27%) reported buying most of their BL in bookstores from licensed English translations. It seems likely that more readers are buying their BL manga in print now, as the availability of titles in English has surged over the last two years.

These findings are somewhat different in the Italian-language survey, in which 50% ($n=302$) of respondents reported buying most of their BL manga from traditional or online bookstores and 37% obtained most of their BL manga from online scanlations. Ten of the Italian-language respondents noted that they bought their BL manga from Japan in Japanese or from other countries in other languages.

One reason BL readers may be attracted to scanlations is that they can be downloaded for free, while the price of licensed and printed BL manga in the U.S. currently runs from \$10 to \$17 a volume; some series contain ten volumes or more. In Italy, Kappa Edizioni's boys' love line currently runs around €9.50 per issue. A number of write-in Italian-language responses complained about the high price of BL manga in Italy, one commenting, "...8,50 for a volume isn't a price but attempted murder...."

Another reason online sources may be preferred is the scarcity or illegality of BL manga in some areas — several respondents to the English-language survey wrote that they relied on scanlations because they couldn't buy BL manga in their countries. Nobody in the Italian-language survey made this observation.

Respondents reported a number of considerations that affected their decision to buy, borrow, or download a particular issue of BL manga. The most common reasons — the categories were nonexclusive — in the English-language survey were familiarity with the author (78%), appreciation of the inside art (73%), and reading an interesting online description of the issue (67%). Other reasons cited by over half of respondents included liking the cover (56%) and a friend's recommendation (53%).

In the Italian-language survey, results differed. By far the largest reason for picking up a particular issue remained familiarity with the author (66%), followed at a distant second by a description on the internet (47%). Close categories were a friend's recommendation (37%), liking the cover (34%) and "I read all the boys' love manga I can find" (35%), which may reflect the relative scarcity of BL manga in Italy.

Respondents were very likely to re-read their BL manga, with 46% (Italian: 39%) reporting that they re-read the same manga 'sometimes' and 40% (Italian: 43%) reporting "often." A large majority of readers (90%; Italian: 89%) reported keeping their copies. Only three of 392 respondents in the English-language survey, and two of 282 in the Italian-language survey, reported discarding their manga. Qualitative responses to this question noted that readers might scan and distribute their manga, save zip files of scanned manga for later re-reading, or simply delete scanlations once read.

Sexuality and Sexual Politics

As noted earlier, many articles about BL in Japan characterize their predominantly female readership as heterosexual. However, slightly less than half of the English-language survey respondents, and only 62%

of the Italian-language survey respondents, reported being heterosexual.

Table 3. Sexual orientation of BL readers

Sexual Orientation	English-language survey	Italian-language survey
Heterosexual	47% (<i>n</i> =390) (180F, 3M)	62% (<i>n</i> =297) (183)*
Bisexual	25% (80F, 18M)	18% (52)
Gay	4% (1F, 15M)	6% (19)
Lesbian	3% (12F)	2% (5)
Queer	Not asked	03% (1)
Other	2% (6F, 1M)	Not asked
Not interested in sex	7% (28F)	3% (8)
Don't know	10% (38F, 1M)	8% (23)
Prefer not to say	2% (4 F, 3M)	2% (6)

**Gender breakdowns for the Italian-language survey data are not available at this time*

Although BL clearly appeals to heterosexual women, it also seems to be more popular with bisexual, gay, lesbian, and male readers than previous readership descriptions have suggested. Although in the U.S. it seems logical that readers would experience some conceptual linkage between the homoerotic subject matter of BL and their own involvement with or support of same-sex relationships, several researchers have argued that in Japan, BL readers do not necessarily feel the same.

Several English-language articles about manga have specified that manga are understood in Japan to be fantasies.^[2] “While comics can convey a message about reality, very few of them depict it realistically. And Japanese comic readers, who are very much at home in their medium, rarely confuse the two worlds,” wrote Frederik L. Schodt (1983, p. 132) about violent and sexually explicit manga; he argued that despite the amount of violence found in manga, the national crime rate in Japan was quite low and even dropping. Later, he noted, “perhaps the best illustration of the Japanese tolerance of fantasy, and of the unique dichotomy between fantasy and reality, is in stories of male homosexual love, currently popular among young girls” (p. 137). Nearly two decades later, Kinsella (2000, Chapter 4) described the Japanese “*otaku*

panic" (*otaku* implies an obsessive, geekish fan) of the late '80s and early '90s that followed the media's linking of serial killer Miyasaki Tsutomu to the world of manga and animation fandom. Suddenly it was precisely the fantasy element of manga that was perceived to be dangerous, by disassociating its fans from reality and thus making them more liable to commit crimes.

McLelland (2000), more specifically examined the history of BL in Japan and agreed with Schodt about manga's reception in Japan as fantasy. Drawing on his analysis of women's comments on Japanese BL sites and his previous research on BL in Japan that "male homosexuality in Japanese women's comics, because it is represented in such a fantastic and idealized manner, does not have the same moral valence as it would in the west" (p. 287). Similarly, Johnson (2002), in an online column describing the history of yaoi, wrote, "it wasn't following any political or feminist agenda (are you kidding? In *Japan*?)" (para. 10). She argued against politicized critiques of yaoi by Western readers, writing, "Most yaoi is fantasy pure and simple, on the level of unicorns and elves"; however, she acknowledged with dissatisfaction, "this flies in the face of western belief that the personal is political, and that a fantasy can't exist totally separate from social reality" (para. 11). Extending the argument to Korean fandom, Noh (2001) reported that in her ethnographic interviews with Korean fans of Japanese yaoi, readers "distinguish YAOI from actual male homosexuality. In other words, homosexuality has different meaning for them than for homosexuals: homosexuality is simply their fantasy, whereas it is an action and a reality for actual homosexuals" (p. 9).

The overall impression given by such descriptions is that BL, at least as created in Japan^[3], is not intended to realistically portray or support homosexuality in society and that its readers, at least in Asian countries, understand it that way.

What the previously cited studies did not address, however, were Japanese gay and lesbian readers of boy's love. Assumptions that Japanese BL readers were only, or primarily, heterosexual women have been challenged by Lunsing (2006), who also argued that that BL manga do not merely "exist in a world of fantasy":

I found that many of my gay informants were not only familiar with BLB [*boy loves boy*] manga but read them voraciously from the moment they came on the market in the mid-1970s. Even if the stories were set in alien contexts, the gay informants could relate their situation and feelings to the manga. While Satō felt that the stories were impeding a positive validation of gay lifestyles, other gay men evaluated them in a more positive manner. (Lunsing, 2006, para. 29, bracketed matter added.)

Similarly, Welker (2006) wrote, "Members of the Japanese lesbian community have, however, pointed to boys' love and other gender-bending manga as strong influences on them in their formative years" (p.

843), quoting lesbians who said they identified with the characters or claimed to have become lesbian through reception of gender-bending or BL comics. This adds another dimension to descriptions of BL readers; although heterosexual female readers in Japan may not consider BL manga to be related in any realistic way to homosexuality, gay male or lesbian readers in Japan may receive the texts as something other than mere fantasy.

This isn't to say that gay activists necessarily approve of BL. BL came under fire in the *yaoi ronsō* debate of 1992 to 1997 in the Japanese magazine *Choisir*, when gay activist Masaki protested against the genre and compared women reading yaoi to dirty old men watching lesbian pornography (Lunsing, 2006).

Lunsing also noted that researcher Mizoguchi Akiko has criticized yaoi as being homophobic because in many stories the characters reject a gay identity even though they have fallen in love with a man (paragraph 27).

In the United States, McHarry (2007) reported, "some gay-identified men have expressed unease about or opposition to yaoi" (p. 286), although he added that others enjoy the genre. Concern over or awareness of the unrealistic portrayal of homosexuality in BL was brought up by several respondents in both the English- and Italian-language surveys — for example, in the Italian survey, a respondent wrote, "I'd like to read more realistic gay love stories! That reflect the real life of gays! And not a reflection, sometimes with little relationship to reality, of women writers' fantasies."

No question in the survey asked whether BL manga were realistic overall; however, one question in the English-language survey asked, "In general, do you think the characters in boys' love manga are like the people you meet in real life?" The responses leaned toward the skeptical side, with 55% (215) reporting "not at all," 41% (162) reporting "somewhat," and 3% (13) reporting "very." Only one person reported "almost identical." Another question asked, "In general, do you think the events in boys' love manga are like events in your life? Here a larger 65% (255) reported "not at all" 26% (102) reported "somewhat," 2% (7) reported "very," and 1% (2) reported "almost identical." Six percent (25) reported, "maybe in Japan, but not in my country," which suggests that although these respondents didn't think the events in BL knowledge were realistic given what they knew of their own culture, they were willing to entertain the possibility that the events might be more realistic in a Japanese context — Japan is where most BL manga would have originated in 2005, when the survey was administered.

The Italian-language survey broke these questions down further, asking separate questions about the realism of BL with regard to aspects of the characters' physical attraction; their feelings and behaviors; and the events in the reader's own life or in others' lives. Thirty-four percent (102) said the characters' physical attraction wasn't at all realistic; 56% (170) said somewhat, 6% said "very," and 4% said "almost identical." With regard to the realism of characters' feelings and behaviors, 23% (69) said "not at all," 59%

(179) said “somewhat,” 12% (37) said “very,” and 6% (6) said “almost identical.” Finally, the similarity of events in BL compared to one’s own life was reported as “not at all” by 64% (193), “somewhat” by 24% (73), “very” by 2% (5), and “almost the same” by 1% (4). Nine percent (27) responded “maybe in Japan, but not in my country.” The similarity of events in BL compared to others’ lives was perceived to be “not at all” by 32% (96), “somewhat” by 48.5% (147), “very” by 7% (22), and “almost the same” by 2% (6). Ten and a half percent (32) responded “maybe in Japan, but not in my country.”

Interpreting these results is a little tricky, given the differences and difficulties of the questions’ phrasing; a survey dedicated to discerning readers’ perceptions of fantasy and reality in BL would offer more insight and nuance. However, the results suggest that BL manga are not wholeheartedly dismissed by Western readers as pure fantasy, the “unicorns and elves” suggested by Johnson (2002). Although readers were less inclined to report that the people and events in BL manga were similar to themselves or their own lives, they were somewhat more likely to report that the people and events in BL manga were similar to others or more likely to befall others.

Although no question asked respondents to directly indicate their support for gay rights, voluntary write-in responses and the final question in the two surveys suggest that BL readers in the West are sympathetic toward gay rights.^[4] For example, even though many respondents noted the unrealistic treatment of homosexuality in boys’ love, several argued that reading BL supports or expresses support for same-sex love. Typical comments included:

Boys Love manga helped me to explain my reasons for supporting same-sex relationships and made my friends more accepting of the idea as a whole. (English-language)

I’m 13 years old and boys’ love was a very important part of my mental development; I’ve learned that we’re all equal; sexual orientation isn’t important. (Italian-language)

Though I realize the characters and situations in BL are not very realistic, I think that it is helpful in getting people to think about real gays and gay couples and the treatment they receive from modern society. In other words, it turns gays from a faceless ‘them’ into real people. (English-language)

I believe that BL manga, which address diverse themes within the sphere of homosexuality, can in some way contribute to the spread of more open and less homophobic attitudes on people’s parts. (Italian-language)

Other readers were more cautious about developing a link between BL manga and the reality of gay life.

The following comments are representative:

There are two sides to boy's love manga in connection with the gay marriage issue: 1) Boy's love manga promotes gay relationships and increases the amount of people who approve of said relationships, and 2) Boy's love manga devalues gay relationships by setting stereotypes and using them to get silly teenagers sexually excited. I believe that boy's love manga does both of these things and should be read with an open heart and mind to avoid the devaluing part. (English-language)

I want to make it clear that BL doesn't represent reality. It's read as a way to relax. I don't believe, even though I'd like to, that the spread of BL will help the integration of gays in our society because it isn't a true representation. In fact, it wasn't written for gays.

(Italian-language)

The final question in the English-language survey asked whether respondents thought same-sex marriage should be legal in the United States. At the time, the only state issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples was Massachusetts, which began doing so in 2004. As a result, the issue of same-sex marriage in the U.S. was on the public agenda when the survey was put online. An overwhelming majority, 96% ($n=389$), of the respondents said "yes" to the question of legalizing same-sex marriage. Of course, it's possible that the non-U.S. respondents supported same-sex marriage in the U.S. but would not support it in their own countries, weakening the suggestion that a "yes" answer to this question translates into support, at least verbally, for gay rights. Who answered "no"? Six of the 250 U.S. respondents said "no," one of the six respondents from Mexico, two of the 18 respondents from the U.K., two of the 25 respondents from Canada, one of the 12 respondents from Australia, two of the four respondents from Indonesia, and the single respondent from Iraq. Only one of the "no" respondents was male.

The question was replicated in the Italian-language survey, replacing "United States" with "Italy." The results were identical, with 96% of 315 respondents answering "yes" to the proposal that same-sex marriage be legalized in Italy. One respondent wrote in the qualitative comments, "I selected 'no,' but really it's not a true and proper 'no,' more that I think it would be impossible in Italy, which is a country where the Vatican has an influence on many legal decisions...."

Of course answering a survey question is not the same as engaging in real-world political activity.

Nevertheless, it seems that there may be more correlation in the West between reading BL and supporting gay rights than has been reported in the genre's original Japanese cultural context.

Beyond the Book: Social & Subcultural Interactions

Reading, for a fan, may occur in solitary moments, but it is contextualized by a larger social, collective framework. BL readers do not merely consume the manga; they also discuss and share it with each other, create new or supplementary works, and request it or react to it with its publishers.

Interacting with Other Readers

Survey respondents reported discussing BL most often with their friends (42%, $n=372$ [Italian: 41%, $n=267$]) and “fans I’ve met online but don’t know face-to-face” (38% [Italian: 28%]). Although the largest category of respondents said that their primary means of communication about BL with others was “face-to-face or on the phone” (32%; 120; $n=372$ [Italian: 43%, $n=272$]), the next-highest category differed between the two surveys. In the English-language survey, 22% reported that they most often discuss BL “online in boys’ love fan message boards,” 17% reported using text messaging, and under 10% each reported communicating with other readers at conventions, in email, or in chatrooms. In the Italian-language survey, the second-favorite methods of communication were somewhat different, with 26% communicating “on the internet, in a forum” (but not necessarily a BL forum) and 15% in chat. In both surveys, many respondents wrote in that they discuss BL over a variety of media.

In the open-comments section of the survey, several English-language respondents mentioned their interaction with BL’s fan community. For example, “A lot of what I get out of it is the social aspect — interacting with other fans. It’s more important than the actual manga, and the primary reason I’m in the fan communities”; and “I participate more in BL fandom online because of the quality of the other fans. For one thing, BL fans can accept that other people have other views without getting so upset.” The female-centeredness of BL’s fandom was appreciated by some of the survey respondents; e.g., “Boys’ Love is a very community-driven form of sexual expression, empowering and invigorating for women.” Italian respondents, on the other hand, seemed less likely to characterize BL readers as a fan community or themselves as fans. One reason for this could be that there are fewer activities available in Italy to build a sense of fan community — for example, one respondent wrote, “seeing the lack of a real and proper fan base in my area, I have to be ‘content’ with the forums”; another, “I don’t know many yaoi-fans among those in my city,” and another, “A firm fan base is lacking, I think.” Although conventions are a major venue for fan interaction, relatively few respondents in either survey said that conventions were their primary form of communicating with other BL readers; only 2% (8, $n=372$) of the English-language respondents and 4% (11, $n=272$) of the Italian-language respondents.

Creating New Material

As Jenkins (1992, 2006a, 2006b) has pointed out, there is no clear division between readers and writers in a fandom. About two-thirds of the respondents to both surveys produced BL art, wrote short stories, or otherwise engaged in creative activities within the genre. The largest categories of response are listed in Table 4.

Table 4: In what ways do you contribute to the boys' love genre or fan community?

	English-language survey (results in percents)	Italian-language survey (results in percents)
Draw pictures	24%	15%
Write scenes and short stories	44	32
Write and/or illustrate boys' love doujinishi/fanfic	18	20
Roleplay BL online	20	2
Don't contribute	29	34

Note: Respondents could choose more than one category

Two in the English-language survey wrote, "I make 5-minute animations with a plot" and "my undergrad animated film was BL-inspired." Several of the Italian write-in responses commented on Italian boys' love comics and authors, with one respondent demanding, "they must make more space for Italian authors!"

Although most respondents create original BL work, a number of the write-in responses to both surveys pointed out that creating original work is not the only contribution readers can make. Ten English-language survey respondents and seven Italian-language respondents argued in their qualitative comments that buying and reading BL is a form of supporting the genre and participating in the boys' love community.

Other write-in descriptions of community participation included editing stories or translations, acting as a beta reader or reviewer, and discussing BL with others to spread interest in the genre. One Italian-language respondent reported owning a comic-book shop that sells BL, and two English-language respondents reported writing articles about BL for mainstream publications.

Reasons for creating original BL works varied. The largest category of those who do so said that they contribute to the BL genre because they like to express themselves creatively (49% Italian: 38%). The rest of the responses were split more or less evenly among the non-mutually-exclusive statements "I like to entertain other fans" (39%, Italian: 27%); "I like to keep the characters 'alive'" (30%, Italian: 30%), and "I find it sexually exciting" (30%; Italian: 14%). The Italian-language survey added the choice "To earn a name in fandom," to which 4% agreed. In write-in responses, eighteen English-language respondents volunteered that they contribute to the genre to "give back" to the BL community or to encourage further

production of BL; for example: “give what I can since others are less fortunate” and “It’s a way to “educate” the newer fans about BL.” Italian write-in responses included “I think it’s right to defend and respect homosexuality and liberty in general!”; “because in Italy it needs promotion” and “I want boys’ love fandom in Italy to become larger and more united. I envy countries more ‘advanced’ than us.”

Translations & Scanlations

Although the BL genre has been popular in Japan since the ‘70s, until recent years, English- and Italian-language translations of BL manga were unavailable in bookstores; instead, fans sought out unofficial translations online. This was true for most manga and anime, not just boys’ love; in *Dreamland Japan*, Schodt (1996) noted, “the most popular gathering spot for manga fans in the U.S. [is] the global Internet — and its offspring, the interactive, graphic intensive World Wide Web” (p. 333). With regard to BL in particular, Sabucco (2003) noted that in 1995 “there were still very few fan pages focusing on june texts,”^[5] but “by the late 1990s, URLs devoted to Japanese boys-love products, original or YAOI, reached the hundreds” (p. 73). In 2008, a quick Google search on “yaoi manga” turned up over three million hits. Thus, it’s not surprising that Western BL readers have been, until recently, centered around the internet, where they could learn about new series and read manga through either translation or scanlation (a digitally scanned and translated comic).

Fan translations usually take the form of a script that readers can peruse as they page through their Japanese-language manga. Such translations have a minimal impact on publishers; readers must still purchase the original manga in order to enjoy the images that convey the story. Readers concerned with the ethics of translations and scanlations tend to find translations less troubling; for example, one English-language survey respondent wrote, “I do translate manga and novels, but I post only the text online. [...] I think that Japanese publishers tend to pay more attention to scanlations than text translations and have indeed sent letters threatening legal action to scanlation websites to that effect.” In both surveys, 15% of respondents (English: $n=390$; Italian, $n=315$) reported translating BL manga for others either in print or online.

Scanlations, on the other hand, require scanning in the entire story page-by-page. The original text is then digitally erased and replaced with a translation, the quality of which varies according to the scanlation group’s facility with either language. The modified pages are converted to jpgs or pngs, zipped, and made accessible through direct download, internet relay chat channels, or peer-to-peer file sharing. Scanlations are almost always offered for free and, like unauthorized music file sharing, violate copyright laws.

In an attempt to emphasize their community-minded, rather than profit-oriented, intentions to other fans and publishers, most English-language scanlation sites warn readers that their scanlations are intended for private use and should not be redistributed, especially for profit. Many scanlation groups put their name on pages within the scanlation to notify the reader of its provenance. Some groups, ironically, forbid “rescanlation,” taking an existing scanlation and further modifying it to translate the text into a third language.

As previously noted, scanlations are very popular among BL readers, with over a third to half the two surveys’ respondents reporting that they obtain most of their BL in scanlation form. Moreover, 22% (of 393) of the English-language and 31% (of 298) of the Italian-language respondents reported that they offer manga scanlations online or through email. In the English-language survey, the majority of those offering scanlations fell in the 18-24 age range (64%).

The majority (72) of English-language scanlators reported making scanlations “because the manga aren’t available in English in any other form.” A majority (103) of Italian scanlators said the same about Italian. Write-in English-language responses explaining why fans offer scanlations generally fell into two categories: a desire to promote the genre (e.g., “builds fan-base for when they’re available in Eng.”) or the material’s lack of availability (e.g., “Where I live, BL would be confiscated by Customs”). Interestingly, almost half of the write-in responses to this question in the Italian survey reiterated that the respondent did *not* provide scanlations, something no English-language respondent felt it necessary to emphasize. Most of the remaining Italian-language write-in responses emphasized BL’s scarcity (“because of the high prices and the low availability of titles in Italian”) or expressed a desire to share BL with other readers (“because I like the idea of giving those who don’t know other languages the ability to appreciate stories that I think are worthy of being read”).

In the open comment section of the survey, a few English-language respondents denigrated scanlations; for example, “Boycott scanlations. Re-publishing an artist’s work without permission isn’t ‘fannish.’”

However, more argued that scanlations help readers decide what to purchase: “I would more likely buy a manga I’ve partially or totally read online than a manga I’ve never had access to,” and “Scans are important for deciding on potential online purchases; the costs of import shipping equal zero urge to take risks on the unknown.” In the open-comments section of the Italian survey, only one person mentioned scanlations, describing them as a way for girls to obtain BL that’s otherwise expensive and scarce in Italy. The illegality of scanlations was never specifically mentioned in the Italian-language survey although, as mentioned, a number of respondents wrote in to emphasize that they didn’t scanlate, which may have been a method of distancing themselves from a controversial act.

Providing translations and scanlations puts BL readers into the publisher's seat, at least with regard to deciding which manga will be made available in their language through underground channels. However, this also puts readers into competition with the publishers who pay to legally license and translate boys' love works. Negotiating the mutually interdependent relationship between readers, scanlators, and publishers has been undertaken with great care within the BL fandom in the United States.

Interacting with Publishers

In 1992, Jenkins noted that "fans lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production and have only the most limited resources with which to influence entertainment industry's decisions" (p. 26). Jenkins has also described numerous cases of adversarial relations between fandoms and copyright owners. However, perhaps because BL is a relatively new publishing genre in the United States and its reader base is still comparatively small, readers have been able to communicate with and influence the handful of publishers currently licensing and translating boys' love manga.^[6] This communication is carried out online and face-to-face, and publishers are interested in what readers have to say.

For example, U.S.-based manga publisher Digital Media Production (DMP) carries a BL imprint called *Juné*. According to DMP's representative Rachel Livingston, the publishing house communicates with BL readers through the forums on its website, over email, and in face-to-face at conventions (Livingston, personal communication, June 5, 2007). Similarly, Lillian Diaz-Przybyl, an editor at TokyoPOP's boys' love publishing imprint BLU, said that BLU's primary method of communication is through its website, which offers an email address to contact editors directly and a reader forum. Like DMP, BLU attended Yaoi-Con in 2006, where representatives were able to "talk to fans directly about their interests and preferences" (Diaz-Przybyl, personal communication, June 26, 2007).

Central Park Media's BL line Be Beautiful reported that its representatives receive reader feedback from email and phone calls and in face-to-face interactions at Yaoi-Con (Be Beautiful, personal communication, August 14, 2007). The president of DramaQueen, Tran Nguyen, said that DramaQueen interacts with readers in an online forum and through email, but "the most effective and fun interactions are the ones at conventions" (Nguyen, personal communication, July 12, 2007).

The relatively high level of interaction BL readers enjoy with BL publishers has led to occasions in which readers have directly influenced publishers' production decisions. For example, reader demand led to DMP's entry into the BL novel market, according to Livingston:

Only the Ring Finger Knows was one of the first yaoi manga that DMP published. We got a couple of requests from the fans to also publish the accompanying novel series. We honestly weren't sure if there was a market in the US for translated light novels. So we

posted a petition online and asked fans interested in the novels to sign it. The response we got was overwhelming so we are currently releasing the series.

Readers' biggest influence on BLU's publishing decisions "is on title selection," said Diaz-Przybyl. "There's a ton of BL out there in Japan, and having fan suggestions to help sort the wheat from the chaff is very important. Fan comments on what and why they like certain current titles also influences whether we pick up more of the same in the future, or try something a little different." She added that readers made BLU aware of their preference for uncensored books and translations that are smooth but "faithful to the original Japanese." One area where BLU has found it difficult to meet fans' expectations, however, is in ratings and content:

As bookstores become more willing to take in BL titles, they are still conservative about how we label them, and content that used to get away with an Older Teen, +16 rating, now requires a Mature, +18 rating, with a warning label and shrinkwrap. Even a fairly minor scene can cause an entire series to get the M label, and so we've heard from a few fans that it's a bit disappointing to buy an M book that doesn't really follow through on the M promise the way one might expect, but unfortunately, there's not much we can do about that. (Diaz-Przybyl)

Central Park Media's Be Beautiful also reported direct reader influence on its publishing decisions:

...we first learned of the popularity of *Midaresomenishi* by Kazuma Kodaka (Author of *Kizuna*) from a panel at Yaoi-Con. We subsequently licensed it, due to this feedback. We also ran an English title naming contest for *Midaresomenishi* on our website, and realized that the original Japanese name was very meaningful to our readers. We used the title, *Midaresomenishi - The Legend of Samurai Love*, as a direct result of this feedback from our readers.

DramaQueen's Nguyen commented, "To some extent, we heed the feedback regarding how the translation are in quality and the presentation of the book. This is useful in context of 'dialects' that we have in our publications; whether a dialect is too strong, or obscure or would impede the flow." For example, reader feedback prompted DramaQueen to tone down the protagonist's strong New York accent in *Last Portrait* by Akira Honma. However, "we usually have our in-house staff help select the titles."

One area in which readers and publishers don't always see eye-to-eye is over the availability of scanlations. The English-language survey showed that a majority of respondents obtain their BL from the web, which poses a direct challenge to publishers' interests — even though it seems likely that the many of the titles readers request from publishers are those they've already enjoyed in scanlation and would like to own in print.

DMP's Livingston reported that when a scanlation of one of their titles is discovered, "we send the group a friendly email letting them know that the title has been licensed in the US. More often than not, we get an apology for continuing to host the scans and they will take them down immediately." However, she continued, "A bigger problem for us is people scanning the actual DMP release of a title and distributing it

online through a service like megaupload, streamload, etc. We usually contact the hosting company and have the files removed.”

DramaQueen has encountered the same problem. “The irony is finding scanlations of OUR English production on line,” reported Nguyen. “Those, we report immediately to the service provided and ask them to take appropriate measures. We do not like to engage in legal wrangling with fans since we find that it is not productive and is not effective.” Nguyen said that if scanlations licensed by DramaQueen are found, “Usually we would email the group and politely and firmly ask them to cease scanlations once the work is published. From our experience, we find that the fans have been very respectful and supportive of the artist and DramaQueen’s production.”

BLU editor Diaz-Przybyl agreed that BL fans are “pretty good about not reposting and distributing scanlations of licensed titles,” citing fan pride and responsibility as reasons. She noted, however, that TokyoPOP, which owns BLU, has sent out cease-and-desist letters to scanlation sites carrying titles it has licensed. “It’s something that we take very seriously,” she said.

Despite such occasional problems, the interaction between BL publishers and scanlators seems to be one of mutual tolerance. For example, in 2005, DramaQueen published *Brother* by Yuzuha Ougi. On April 23, 2006, DramaQueen reported in its forum that it had decided not to publish the manga’s sequel, *Brother 2* (LadyQ, 2006). Shortly afterward, on May 28, 2006, the BL news group YaoiSuki reported that scanlation group Liquid Passion would scanlate *Brother 2*. This news was posted in the DramaQueen forum by a fan, Malaika (2006). DramaQueen’s forum administrator then edited the post to remove the link to the scanlation group but left the rest of the announcement, writing “while it’s ok to talk about scanlations, links to them are not allowed” (Administrator, 2006). This indicates a tolerance for scanlations by publishers that has not, for example, characterized relationships between illegal music file-sharers and major recording companies.

To date, Japanese publishers seem to be ignoring English-language scanlation groups. However, on March 19, 2007, Japanese publisher Libre posted a letter in Japanese and English on its *B-Boy* boys’ love website that accused Central Park Media’s Be Beautiful imprint of publishing unauthorized translations of its BL manga (Be-Boy, 2007). As of last year, according to YaoiSuki, CPM and Libre had not settled their differences (Parker, 2007). As the genre grows in the U.S. and more money is at stake, it will be useful to track interactions between Japanese (or other) BL publishers and foreign-language scanlators.

Conclusion

The Western ideology of reading as a solitary act is challenged by literary fandoms that engage with the text — or, here, an entire genre — on a collective basis. Western readers of BL manga have formed an international online subculture that allows them to act as translators, publishers, producers, and critics of both official and unofficial works. Moreover, this subculture also wields some influence, at least for now in the U.S., on the translators/publishers of the works they read, giving this fandom more power than many others have enjoyed.

Western BL readers seem to exhibit some differences from Japanese BL readers, as least as that population has been described in English-language articles. First, the Japanese BL readership has, until recent years, been described as almost monolithically heterosexual and female. Recent research has suggested that that isn't as true as has been previously assumed, but there is no question that, in the West, readers include both women and men and span a spectrum of sexual orientations. Moreover, although early descriptions of Japanese BL fans suggested they read boys' love manga without linking their act of reading to support for gay rights, that doesn't seem to be the case in Western countries. Do Westerners put more political valence on the act of reading — and choosing reading material — than Japanese readers, or have previous studies of Japanese boys' love readers been insufficiently nuanced? Further work in this area could be of great utility in describing how literary products may be received and interpreted differently by different cultures around the world.

References

Administrator. (2006, June 6). 'Brother Vol. 2.' Retrieved April 10, 2007, from

[http://www.onedramaqueen.com/forum/viewtopic.php?](http://www.onedramaqueen.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=222&postdays=0&postorder=asc&highlight=brother+yaoisuki&start=15)

[t=222&postdays=0&postorder=asc&highlight=brother+yaoisuki&start=15](http://www.onedramaqueen.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=222&postdays=0&postorder=asc&highlight=brother+yaoisuki&start=15)

Aestheticism.Com. (n.d.) 'Aestheticism's Yaoi/Slash Glossary.' Retrieved May 16, 2006, from

<http://www.aestheticism.com/visitors/reference/index.htm>.

Aoyama, T. (1998). Male homosexuality as treated by Japanese women writers. In G. McCormack & Y.

Sugimoto (Eds.), *The Japanese trajectory: Modernization and beyond*, pp. 186-204, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Be-Boy (2007, March 22). Notice on unauthorized translations by Central Park Media. Retrieved April 10,

2007, from <http://www.b-boy.jp/info17.html>.

Castagno, S. & Sabucco, V. (2006-7). Indagine manga boy's love. Unpublished raw data.

- Cha, K. (2007, March 13). Media Blasters drops shonen; adds yaoi. *Publisher's Weekly*. Retrieved May 20, 2007, from <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6423890.html>.
- "Digital Manga names new yaoi imprint: A tribute to Jean Genet" (2006, Feb. 8). *ICv2*. Retrieved October 11, 2008, from <http://www.icv2.com/articles/news/8191.html>.
- Elfodiluce, V. (2004, April 12). 'L'altra faccia di manga gay.' Retrieved May 20, 2008, from <http://www.gay.it/channel/comics/18439/L-ALTRA-FACCIA-DEI-MANGA-GAY.html>.
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall.
- Jenkins, H. (2006a). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York: New York University Press
- Jenkins, H. (2006b). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Johnson, M. J. (2002, May). 'A brief history of yaoi.' *Sequential Tart*. Retrieved September 13, 2005, from http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/may02/ao_0502_4.shtml.
- Kelly, W. W. (2004) Introduction: Locating the fans. In Kelly, W. (Ed.), *Fanning the flames: Fans and consumer culture in contemporary Japan*, pp. 1-16. New York: State University of New York Press.
- LadyQ (2006, April 22). New Yaoi Title Announced. Retrieved May 20, 2008, from <http://www.onedramaqueen.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=250&sid=a9d1f5e6a244117633d6d1d1ac7a2235>
- Lunsing, W. (2006, January). Yaoi Ronso: Discussing depictions of male homosexuality in Japanese girl's comics, gay comics and gay pornography. *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*. 12. Retrieved May 15, 2006, from <http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue12/lunsing.html>.
- Malaika (2006, June 4). 'Brother Vol. 2.' Retrieved May 20, 2008, from <http://www.onedramaqueen.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=222&postdays=0&postorder=asc&highlight=brother+yaoisuki&start=15>.
- McHarry, M. (2007). Identity unmoored: Yaoi in the West. In T. Peele (ed.), *Queer Pop Culture*, pp. 183-195. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McLelland, M. (2000). No climax, No point, No meaning? Japanese women's boy love sites on the internet. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 24(3), 274-291.

- McLelland, M. (2001). Why are Japanese girls' comics full of boys bonking? *Intensities*, 1, Spring/Summer. Retrieved September 17, 2005, from <http://www.cult-media.com/issue1/CMRmcle.htm>.
- Mizoguchi, A. (2003). Male-male romance by and for women in Japan: A history and the subgenres of yaoi fictions. *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, 25, 49-75.
- Noh, S. (2001). Reading YAOI comics: An analysis of Korean girls' fandom. Retrieved August 8, 2008, from http://moongsil.com/study/yaoi_eng.pdf.
- Parker, J. (2007, December 8). CPM breaks silence on Libre. *YaoiSuki*. Retrieved December 15, 2006, from <http://yaoisuki.net/content/view/561/27/>.
- Radway, J. (1994). Beyond Mary Bailey and old maid librarians: Reimagining readers and rethinking reading. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 35(5), 275-296.
- Sabucco, V. (2000). *Shonen Ai: Il nuovo immaginario erotico femminile tra Oriente e Occidente*. Roma: Castelvechi.
- Sabucco, V. (2003). Guided fan fiction: Western 'readings' of Japanese homosexual-themed texts. In C. Berry, F. Martin and A. Yue, (Eds.), *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, pp. 70-86. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Schodt, Frederik. *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*, Tokyo: Kodansha Intl., 1983.
- Schodt, F. (1996). *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*, Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press.
- Suzuki, K. (1998). Pornography or therapy? Japanese girls creating the Yaoi phenomenon. In S. Inness (Ed.), *Millennium Girls: Today's Girls Around the World*, pp. 243-267. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Woolfson, A. (2006, August 20). Why this gay man is creating yaoi. Retrieved April 16, 2008, from <http://www.yaoi911.com/the-sweet-yaoi-action-you-can-expect-from-me/>.
- Universal Press Syndicate (2005). 'Manga demographics.' Retrieved May 16, 2006, from <http://www.amuniversal.com/ups/features/tokyopop/demographics.htm>.
- Welker, J. (2006). Beautiful, borrowed, and bent: "Boys' love" as "girls' love" in shōjō manga. *Signs*, (31)3, 841-870.

[1] Although some U.S. researchers have been interested in comics and comic books for decades, comic books have been receiving more widespread academic attention in the United States since the 1990s. At first primarily considered a subset of popular culture studies, comic book research has become an acknowledged subdiscipline of its own since around the turn of the century, as evidenced by the recent rise of journals dedicated to comics research. For example, *The International Journal of Comic Art* was founded at Temple University and first published in 1999; the interdisciplinary comics research journal *ImageTeXt* was founded at the University of Florida and first published in 2004 (the University of Florida also offers a graduate track in its Department of English in Comics and Visual Rhetoric); and the annual journal for anime, manga, and fan arts, *Mechademia*, was founded by the University of Minnesota Press and published its first issue in 2006. European journals dedicated to comics and graphic novels are similarly recent: The French magazine *9E* has been addressing *la bande dessinée* since 1996; the Belgian journal *Image [&] Narrative* has been publishing since 2000; the German yearbook *Deutsche Comichforschung* since 2005; the Italian journal *SIGNS: Studies in Graphic Narratives* since 2007, and U.K.-based *European Comic Art* began publishing in 2008.

[2] Only English-language and Italian-language articles on BL have been read as part of this research, due to my own linguistic limitations; it's certainly possible that articles in other languages might present evidence to refute this claim about the Japanese reception of manga-as-fantasy.

[3] As opposed to BL created in, for example, the United States or Europe, where, as this survey will suggest, BL fans *are* aware of the potential political implications of their fandom and overwhelmingly support gay rights — which could in turn inform their BL work. (For example, Alex Woolfson (2006) has written several articles about why he, as a gay man, likes to read and write yaoi, and how his yaoi might differ from women's yaoi, in his site Yaoi 911).

[4] Spelling and punctuation have been corrected. Italian-language comments have been translated by the author, and any errors in translation or interpretation are entirely my own.

[5] “June” or “Juné” is another term for BL, derived from the Japanese magazine *June*, launched in 1981, which specialized in this genre (Suzuki, 1998, p. 251). The accent indicates the word's correct pronunciation and was adopted by DMP's Juné line of BL. According to an article about the imprint's founding, the name of *June* magazine and the naming of DMP's Juné imprint both pay homage to Jean Genét, “known for his post WW II novels (*Journal du Voleur, Notre-Dame des Fleurs*) depicting the subtle erotica between beautiful boys” (“Digital Manga Names New Yaoi Imprint,” 2006).

[6] An example of this openness was exhibited by the representatives of the boys' love publishers quoted in this paper; all responded to the author's questions via email and granted permission to be quoted here. Although a review of reader/publisher relations in Italy would be of interest, the author did not attempt to contact Italian BL publishers.

Contact (by email): [Dru Pagliassotti](#)

Biographical note

Dru Pagliassotti is an associate professor in the communication department of California Lutheran University. She also maintains the [Yaoi Research Wiki](#).

