

Redrawing the Boundaries of Gender and Sexuality: A Psychological Reconceptualisation of the Boys' Love Phenomenon

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Abstract

The Japanese boys' love genre has become increasingly popular over the past decades in Western comic culture. The term refers to visual and literary media, primarily anime, manga and video games, that portray romantic love between two men. Material with this theme is created and consumed largely by young female fans, who share their interests in active, international online fan communities.

Boys' love is generally known as a genre aimed at heterosexual women, although prior empirical findings have revealed a relatively high tendency of homosexual and bisexual individuals in the fan culture (Levi 2008; Lunsing 2006; Pagliassotti 2008). The aim of this paper is to examine this tension between theory and empirical evidence. In this discussion, we follow the psychoanalytic approach suggested by several researchers in the field of Boys' love studies (Hagio 2005; Mizoguchi 2008; Nagaike 2003). Qualitative research showed that the genre has always had a special meaning for female fans as it served as an appropriate site for projection and coping with specific gender-related struggles. First, we identify the characteristics and tropes in the narratives that facilitate the coping process of fans who have suffered particular traumas (e.g., rape, emotional abuse). Second, based on the explorative analysis of Mizoguchi (2008) and Galbraith (2015) on affective fan activities, we trace how these homonormative patterns reorganise the social connections of fans. Finally, we discuss how homonormative practices in the fan community can be associated with non-heterosexual self-identification and why is it relevant for future research.

Introduction

Boys' love is a commonly used term for a special Japanese genre that focuses on the romantic love between two young men (Kamm 2013; Welker 2015). As a main theme, boys' love can materialise in anime, manga, video games, fan fiction, fan art, audio dramas, live action movies and TV series (Welker 2015). Boys' love originates from *shoujo*, a romantic genre targeted at young women, which first featured male homoerotic themes in the early 1970s. This particular subgenre of manga rapidly became popular in Japan and expanded beyond *shoujo*. After carving out a niche for itself in the realm of Japanese popular culture, boys' love became more widespread, and finally, in the mid-2000s, was introduced in Europe and North America to a broader audience (McLelland and Yoo 2007). However, boys' love stories and visual representations of same-sex affections have changed

during the past four decades, reflecting the actual ideals and fans' needs of the respective eras; construction of the boys' love genre is still in progress (Mizoguchi 2008; Welker 2015). In the current study, we focus on boys' love manga, in accordance with most of the studies investigating the boys' love genre, and examine the role of this medium in fans' coping processes, social relations, and sexual behaviour.

Boys' love manga features romantic and erotic narratives that have become particularly popular amongst young women in the past two decades. Some tropes of boys' love stories can also be found across other manga subgenres (e.g. melodramatic elements in *shoujo* manga), whereas others are rather genre-specific (e.g. rape as an expression of overflowing love) (Mizoguchi 2008). These dramatic and sentimental stories integrate multilayered aesthetics

in the visual narration (Bollmann 2010). The general narratives involve first love, conflicts in relationships, and stressful life events (Madill 2011). The typical boys' love media narrative features two main characters: an older, dominant man with masculine physical attributes (the 'seme') and a younger, submissive partner with rather feminine physical characteristics (the 'uke') (Bauwens-Sugimoto 2011). As shown in Figure 1, both characters are highly aestheticised; they are portrayed as young, beautiful and attractive people (Mizoguchi 2008). However, the appreciation of *bishounen* characters (literally, beautiful boys) is not a boys' love-specific phenomenon. Illustrations of aestheticised adolescent boys first appeared in the 11th century in a literary work entitled *The Tale of Genji*, written by Murasaki Shikibu, and the appreciation of young and beautiful boys was part of the Japanese cultural tradition in several historical eras (e.g., military same-sex relationships in the Edo period between warriors and apprentices) (Pflugfelder 1999).

The boys' love genre embraces a wide range of emotions compared to other romantic genres.

Alongside the dichotomy of happiness and suffering, controversial feelings are also presented in the narratives, such as guilt for loving a person of the same sex, shame for engaging in forbidden love, and loneliness due to the secrecy involved (Chou 2010). It is not uncommon in boys' love media narratives either that the contradictory feelings of mutual love and hate constitute the bond between the protagonists. Due to the idealised nature of this genre, character depictions are not representative of real-life gay men (Mizoguchi, 2008). Instead, boys' love has a meaningful function for young women who find the traditional romantic genres unsuitable for their needs (Pagliassotti, 2008).

Indeed, the boys' love genre provides an appropriate site for wishful identification in a female-oriented fanbase. According to the estimation of Akiko Mizoguchi (2008), boys' love attracted one million Japanese fans in the mid-2000s, while Matthew Thorn (2004) reported that hundreds of thousands of Western women expressed their interest in Japanese homoerotic stories at this time. Parallel



Figure 1: Aestheticised depiction of the 'seme' and the 'uke' in the manga entitled *The Royal Fiancé* (written by Asuma Risai and drawn by Kamon Saeko. Year of release: 2009).

with the worldwide increase in internet access, translated and scanned manga pages, called 'scanlations', emerged in several Western countries, which had an important role in the growth of the global boys' love phenomenon (Donovan 2010). International collaborations across scanlation groups involving fans of various nationalities contributed to the spreading of boys' love material (predominantly manga) in a wide, cross-cultural context (Thorn 2004). Consequently, large, female-dominated online communities, largely formed within the boundaries of the anime-manga subculture, developed in an international context (Thorn 2004).

Obsessive female fans of the boys' love genre self-identify as 'rotten girls' (*fujoshi*) (Galbraith 2011). Studies using qualitative research methods revealed that fans perceive heterosexual romance through the lens of homosexual affections and create fantasies about homosexual couplings and encounters (Galbraith 2011; Meyer 2010; Suzuki 2013). This perceptual mechanism drives members of the boys' love fan communities to engage in affective interactions with each other (Galbraith 2015). They share personal information about themselves such as their preferred boys' love character types, sex roles within this genre, and fantasies about fictional characters or popular media personalities. Sexually stimulating conversations also inspire fans to create and consume genre-related stories and artworks (Pagliassotti 2008). Moreover, they often engage in boys' love role-plays with each other to act out male homosexual interactions outside the boundaries of the fan community (Galbraith 2011).

Several studies aimed to explore what is so inspiring in the boys' love genre for young women that they choose to cherish male-male homoerotic fantasies instead of identifying with heroines in romantic novels or choosing charismatic protagonists from other literary genres. Mizoguchi (2008) pointed out that the members of boys' love fan communities create a unique, highly confidential atmosphere in which censure and restriction of erotic thoughts do not exist. In boys' love fan communities, members are allowed to act out repressed sexual desires through their art without being judged (Fujimoto 2007b). By projecting lust onto male characters, these

women dissociate themselves from desires that cause tension. They decrease their cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), which occurs when a person experiences the inconsistency of two or more beliefs, ideas or values (in this particular case, when boys' love fans create sexual fantasies which contravenes the commonly held gender expectations for women to be chaste and repress erotic thoughts (Galbraith 2011; Fujimoto 2004).

Furthermore, fans can accumulate experiences of various sexual behaviours without real-life consequences (Früh 2003), which facilitates their sexual development (McLelland and Yoo 2007). Indeed, this female-oriented genre provides a safe and supportive environment for women who seek sexually stimulating media content that conveys a positive message of gender equality in highly emotional stories (Chou 2010).

Contrary to most heterosexual romance narratives, the key features of boys' love media comprise traumatic life events, sexual and emotional abuse, suicidal ideation, and mental health problems (Maddill 2011; Mizoguchi 2008). As Moto Hagio (2005) noted, the incorporation of specific dramatic elements in boys' love narratives has a therapeutic function for fans who suffered similar experiences. However, these problems are highly related to issues of gender, as many researchers pointed out (Fujimoto 1998; Hori 2013; Mizoguchi 2008). Indeed, scholars in the field of boys' love studies emphasise that the reason for creating the genre is a collective nonconformity relating to restrictive, socially constructed gender roles (Nagaike and Sukanuma 2013; McLelland and Welker 2015). The boys' love genre provides an appropriate site for projection for those women who wish to dissociate themselves from disadvantageous gender constructs (Hagio 2005; Welker 2011). Accordingly, boys' love is sometimes considered to be a feminist genre that criticises patriarchal society for its conservative gender system (Nakajima 1991). Yukari Fujimoto (1998), on the other hand, views the origin of the genre as the self-contempt of the female fans, who create a fictional masculinity to act out gender-equal sexual needs. In line with this, James Welker (2011) has pointed out that the boys' love genre embraces a wide range of gender-related struggles in a positive

and supportive form, and offers an inventory of coping potentials to deal with individual and collective difficulties in a safe and idealised environment. However, to our knowledge, no studies investigated how these genre-specific components in the narratives facilitate successful coping strategies for gender-related problems within the female fan community. Yet the exploration of psychological mechanisms mediating between the use of boys' love media and the coping process would make an important contribution to the understanding of the boys' love phenomenon.

Another interesting aspect of this phenomenon is the question of sexual orientation in light of the aforementioned gender-related problems. Recent empirical findings have not supported the common assumption that the vast majority of boys' love fans are heterosexual women (Levi 2008; Pagliassotti 2008; Zsila, Bernáth, and Inántsý-Pap 2015). These studies reported relatively low proportions of heterosexual fans in the samples (from 47% to 66%; the proportion of female fans was between 82% and 91% in these studies). Moreover, Wim Lunsing (2006) emphasised that several lesbian boys' love creators participate in related fan activities in Japan. James Welker (2006a) also remarked that gay, bisexual and lesbian members are vital parts of the boys' love fan community.

The motivation of homosexual fans to consume boys' love media is an unresolved question that calls for future research. Knowing that lesbians have a sexual preference for women, it is not obvious what attracts them to a sexually arousing genre that depicts the romantic love between two beautiful young men. In a similar vein, the question remains why homosexual male fans would immerse themselves in a female-dominated fan community devoted to a media genre created for women, and despite the fact that male consumers reported having identification problems with the stories and characters (McLelland and Welker 2015).

Despite the controversy surrounding the sexual orientation of the target audience of the boys' love genre, the sexuality of fans has received little research attention. However, an exploration of the associations between pre-existing sexual preferences, the influence of boys' love media, and sexual behaviours

would be necessary to draw a more nuanced picture of the dynamics of the boys' love phenomenon.

Previous research in the field of media psychology revealed that the media have a notable effect on viewers' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours through the process of cultivation (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, and Shanahan 2002). Empirical evidence has shown that the cultivation effect is content dependent (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, and Smith 2007; Grabe and Drew 2007). Thus, viewers of different genres are exposed to different, sometimes conflicting, images of reality, which have different effects on their attitudes and behaviours (Cohen and Weimann 2000). Regarding exposure to sexually explicit media content, a positive association was found between the frequency of viewing sexual content (e.g., sexual music videos, television shows, pornography) and increased sexual activity (Malamuth and Impett 2001), having multiple sexual partners, and holding negative attitudes toward safe sex (Wingood, DiClemente, Harrington, Davies, Hook, and Kim 2001). In a similar vein, we might consider that frequent exposure to boys' love media has an impact on the sexual behaviour of fans.

This study endeavours to investigate the association between boys' love media exposure and sexual behaviours within the context of homonormative fan practices. By exploring this association, we address the gap which lies in the contradiction between empirical findings and theoretical presumptions regarding the sexual orientation of boys' love fans. In order to draw a more nuanced picture of the mediating mechanisms between boys' love fans' (creators and consumers) media use practices and sexual behaviours, which we believe are strongly associated with certain coping strategies, we have used a new theoretical approach. Based on the theoretical framework of Fujimoto (1998), and drawing on the cultivation effect (Gerbner et al. 2002), we propose that fans consume and create boys' love works in order to increase their self-esteem, which has been damaged by various gender-related problems, and that boys' love media provides an inventory of supportive resources through specific tropes and characteristics that reframe negative experiences. However, coping strategies built on boys' love media consumption and

creation can be either adequate or inadequate. In the latter case, boys' love fans might transfer homonormative behaviours from the genre or the fan community itself, and this mechanism could possibly be an explanation for the relatively high proportion of homosexual boys' love fans.

Based on the literature, the aim of the present study is twofold:

- (1) To explore the underlying psychological mechanisms that mediate between boys' love media use practices and coping with gender-related problems.
- (2) To describe fans' coping strategies transferred from boys' love media, and examine the associations between coping and homonormative sexual behaviours.

Boys' Love Narratives: Tricks, Traps, and Tropes

To investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying the use of boys' love media, first we need to identify the potential for providing coping strategies hidden in specific tropes. We explore these genre-specific characteristics on the basis of content analyses in the existing literature.

Characters

In boys' love, both the *seme* and the *uke* are young and beautiful, with ages ranging from early adolescence to late twenties. It is not uncommon that they come from the upper classes and have good family backgrounds (Bollmann 2010). Furthermore, they are often admired by others for their sporting achievements or musical talent, accompanied by good social skills. As a consequence, male characters in the boys' love genre generally have an influential status among their peers for being prominent students or famous stars (Mizoguchi 2008). By contrast, female characters in boys' love stories are often presented in negative roles and their appearance evokes stress and negative feelings in the fans for destabilising the relationship between the male protagonists (Fujimoto 2004).

The active/passive roles of the protagonists usually correspond to their physical appearances (Mizoguchi 2010). The dominant partner is characterised by strength, confidence, and masculine physical characteristics. He is often depicted as a cold-hearted

and strong-willed person, who can be cruel in order to achieve his goals, even towards his partner. Despite the apparent toughness of the dominant protagonist, his weak side is uncovered in the course of the plot. The vulnerability of the stronger character is often illustrated through an early stressful life event. Indeed, in the majority of boys' love narratives, the *seme* suffers from the uncontrollable outcomes of an early-life trauma after experiencing happiness with a loving partner, and the passive character supports him during the coping process (Gibbs 2012). This trope is one of the key features of the popular boys' love anime and manga entitled *Gravitation*,¹ in which the dominant character's confrontation with the demons of his past destroys his relationship with his partner. The story is centred on the love between a famous singer and a successful writer. The writer, Yuki Eiri, experienced sexual abuse when he was a child and suffers from negative psychological outcomes due to the unprocessed trauma.

The passive character is often portrayed as an emotional and sensitive person with slightly feminine physical characteristics, who suffers physical and psychological abuse in the majority of boys' love narratives (Mizoguchi 2008). Creators tend to depict passive characters as dependent individuals who are devoted to their partners in spite of being aware of the destructive nature of their relationship. This trope is a dominant feature in the anime entitled *Ai no kusabi*,² which is set in the future. The two main characters live on a planet where young human males are the pets of an elite group, and the dominant character keeps his pet for sadistic sexual purposes.

Overall, boys' love narratives generally feature two equally vulnerable main characters: a psychologically traumatised dominant protagonist and a physically injured submissive partner (Gibbs 2012).

Relationship

Emotional expressiveness is one of the most attractive features of the boys' love genre for the fans. Heterosexual romance stories are considered to be superficial and schematic, whereas narratives involving male homosexuality are perceived to be intense and emotional (Mizoguchi 2008). They often argue

that only same-sex couples can understand each other perfectly, since they are well aware of their partner's needs, and that the deep emotional bond between two men could not be compared to any sort of attention gained in a heterosexual partnership. The forbidden love, the ambivalent feelings of the male protagonists towards each other, and the mutual devotion constitute a special bond between the characters. Boys' love relationships are monogamous, the partners are loyal to each other, and their love is never-ending (Fujimoto 2007a). In order to preserve this perfection, in a few narratives, they commit suicide (Pagliassotti 2010). For instance, in the popular anime entitled *Mirage of Blaze*,³ which centres on the struggle of two reincarnated samurai warriors in contemporary Japan, the stronger character decides to end their lives at a certain point in the narrative so that they cannot be separated from one other.

Given that boys' love is believed to be crafted by and for women, it is no surprise that the storylines tactfully avoid gender-related themes that could be threatening for female fans, such as marrying or raising children (Mizoguchi 2010). In contrast, boys' love narratives could serve fans' special interests that normally remain unexpressed outside the boys' love fan community.

For instance, rape is a common trope in this genre. First, the *seme* rapes the *uke*, which is a symbolic representation of the dominant character's overflowing love for his partner. Second, the submissive character might be raped by a third person, in which case, the dominant partner reassures him about his support and unconditional love (Mizoguchi 2008). In boys' love narratives, the submissive partner shows resistance before engaging in sex, which is a symbolic permission-giving that leads to the satisfaction of both partners (Hori 2013). This apparent refusal is called 'token resistance' in the literature of women's studies; its motivational background was found to be strongly associated with particular gender-role stereotypes stemming from an expectation for the female partner to be chaste and to repress her sexual desire (Black and McCloskey 2013). Previous studies proposed that individuals who engage in token resistance wish to avoid being considered promiscuous, have moral concerns, or are endeavouring

to control the situation (Check and Malamuth 1983; Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh 1988). These reasons may provide an explanation for the motivation of female fans in identifying with characters that engage in token resistance, but further research is needed to confirm this conjecture. What we know is that there is a clear distinction between 'rape as an expression of love' (Mizoguchi, 2003: 56), and rape as a sexual assault in boys' love narratives. The fans of this genre are sensitive to the difference, as Mizoguchi (2003, 2008) argued.

The dominant partner never fails to perceive real resistance in boys' love stories, and his reactions reflect the desires of the submissive character; thus rape is supposedly based on the *seme's* understanding of the true desires of the *uke*. Careful attention is given to the physical well-being of the passive partner in each sexual interaction, and the satisfaction of both partners has a special importance in the boys' love genre (Hori 2013).

Social Environment

The social approval of homosexual behaviour is one of the key features of boys' love stories. Creators of this genre often construct an idealistically accepting society, which may lead fans to the conclusion that being openly gay is not problematic in contemporary Japan (McLelland and Welker 2015). However, societal prejudice against homosexual individuals exists in Japan as well as in Western societies, but boys' love is widely accepted as an expression of female sexual fantasies (McLelland 2000).

Other characters in the social environment of boys' love protagonists never label them 'gay' just because they engaged in a homosexual romance, and the main characters do not self-identify as homosexual either. The sudden change of sexual behaviour is attributed to emotional factors, and the first encounter of the main characters is portrayed as a coincidence resulting in true love (Mizoguchi 2000, 2010). Homosexual relationships in boys' love stories are deep bonds, which are not simply tolerated, but highly approved of by other characters. Furthermore, the emotion-based choice of the protagonists gives the impression that homosexuality is a personal decision rather than a biologically determined sexual

preference (Mizoguchi 2008).

The Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Boys' Love Media Use

Building on the conceptualization by Fujimoto (1998), we propose that fans of the boys' love genre use this medium to improve their self-esteem, which has been lowered by certain gender-related problems. Female creators and consumers dissociate themselves from the damaged part of their feminine identity, that is closely associated with social conventions and thus causes tension (Fujimoto 1998), and foster a positive self-image through identification with idealised male characters (Nagaike and Suganuma 2013). Since boys' love stories portray traumatic life events and provide a solution in the end, these narratives reframe harmful experiences in a more positive form. Therefore, the boys' love genre provides a 'safe house' for fantasies which constitute efforts to cope with certain kinds of difficulty.

Different boys' love media tropes focus on different sources of vulnerability. Based on our structural review of genre-specific tropes and characteristics, we explore the psychological mechanisms underlying boys' love media use that facilitate coping with gender-related concerns. For the sake of clarity, we use 'homosexual orientation' and 'homosexual preference' in our argument to describe (a) self-reported sexual identity in the case of boys' love fans, and (b) homosexual self-categorisation in the case of boys' love characters; whereas 'homosexual behaviour' refers to expressed same-sex affections without homosexual self-identification in both cases (boys' love fans and fictional characters).

Perception

Implicit personality theory postulates that personal and situational factors can bias the perceptual process of an observer when forming an impression of a person (Asch 1946). The main focus of this concept is the effect of observed traits in impression formation, which suggests that individuals do not evaluate each observed trait equally. Central traits have a strong effect on the overall impression, whereas peripheral traits are less influential in the perception of other individuals. Based on this concept, homosexuality

(either on the level of identity or behaviour) is a central trait in the perceptual process of boys' love fans. Characters' positive traits, such as beauty, talent, and success, are peripheral traits attached to the perceived homosexuality. This assumption is further supported by Patrick W. Galbraith's (2011) findings in his study on the perceptual mechanism of the fans, termed the 'rotten filter', which generates homosexual fantasies of heterosexual affections. According to this, the key to be admired and appreciated by other characters might be attributed to the homosexual behaviour (or identity in a few cases when either or both of the protagonists are identified as gay in the narrative) of the protagonists instead of their accomplishments.

Drawing on the concept of central and peripheral traits (Asch 1946), homosexuality has a central position in the way that fans form an overall impression of boys' love characters. Idealised traits are less influential in this process, although fans do use these traits to improve their self-esteem. Consequently, positive traits and personal accomplishments can be attributed to the displayed homosexual behaviours in fans' view.

The positive traits of boys' love media characters are attributed to their homosexual behaviour or identity (in a few cases), and the reverse can also be observed in relation to fans' perception. Previous findings revealed that boys' love fans held highly positive attitudes towards gay individuals (Pagliasotti 2008; Welker 2011), indicating that homosexual orientation is strongly associated with positive traits in fans' perception. Indeed, it was reported by Welker (2011) that a number of female boys' love fans wanted to make friends with a homosexual man and marry him. This mechanism is called the 'halo effect' in the literature, which postulates that positive traits in one area can obscure negative or neutral traits in other areas to get a positive overall impression (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). More precisely, boys' love fans tend to form a positive overall impression of an unfamiliar gay man, ignoring the fact that they have very limited personal information about him. Based on Fujimoto's (1998) model, we argue that fans wish to associate themselves with homosexual men to increase their self-esteem through the process of Basking in

Reflected Glory (BIRGing). The theory of BIRGing explains that individuals tend to affiliate themselves with successful others in order to share in the glory of their personal achievements (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, and Sloan 1976). Drawing on this, we hypothesise that boys' love fans wish to affiliate themselves with homosexual men to share in their perceived positive traits such as success or talent: a reflected glory that can also enhance the fans' self-esteem.

Identification.

According to the statistics of Aarinfantasy,⁴ 58 out of 102 respondent boys' love fans (56.9%) reported a preference for the submissive character in these storylines. It is perhaps no surprise, given that the passive character embodies conventional feminine gender roles in some respects (e.g., emotionality, sensitivity) (Wood 2006). Mizoguchi (2008) argues that the uke is a symbolic representation of the ideal self-image of female boys' love fans. The fictionally constructed masculinity (e.g., strength, dominance) in these narratives provides them with an advantageous perspective to act out repressed sexual desires without being forced into the weaker position (Kamm 2013; Wood 2006), since apparent weaknesses are compensated for in this genre by featuring two equally vulnerable characters. Furthermore, sex roles can be reversed in the narratives (Mizoguchi 2008). Based on this, we theorise that identification with male characters that possess desirable traits (e.g., success, talent) may improve the self-esteem of those women who find the societal pressure for gender-appropriate behaviour stressful and who face the negative consequences of damaged feminine self-image. Furthermore, these narratives are supportive for those who show a clear preference for the dominant character as well, since the *seme* is also characterised by desirable traits.

Victimisation

Hagio (2005) argued that boys' love media could serve as a coping resource for women who suffered sexual abuse, since this genre provides a supportive environment in which rape blame does not exist. Outside the boundaries of boys' love fantasies, rape

is often attributed to the provocative behaviour or 'indecent' dress of the victim (Cassidy and Hurrell 1995). Moreover, rape victims are mocked as 'damaged goods' in Japan, which refers to the loss of virginity in moral terms, and rape may undermine a victim's perceived suitability for marriage in certain conditions (e.g., religious family traditions) (Mizoguchi 2008). In contrast to these prejudices, the boys' love genre deconstructs the guilt and shame of rape victimisation by creating a dominant partner who is unconditionally supportive when the rape perpetrator is a third person.

According to prior research, in some cases, rapists claim that their actions were the result of a mistaken belief that their victim was exhibiting token, rather than true, resistance (Sims, Noel, and Maisto 2007). The dominant character in boys' love narratives never fails to perceive the signs of a real resistance, and understands his partner's true desires, thus rape becomes a choice of the submissive character. According to the arguments of Kazumi Nagaike (2003) and Hagio (2005), these conditions provide a safe environment for women who suffered sexual assault to reframe their experiences in controllable, fictive sexual situations without moral concerns.

Satisfaction

Boys' love relationships are not economic arrangements but emotion-based personal choices (McLelland and Welker 2015). The intense feelings, the reciprocity, and the empathy in these relationships inspire regressive fantasies about romantic love in fans, which are typically conceived in the adolescent years. The importance of portraying loyal and devoted partners in the bond of everlasting love lies in the stability of the relationships, which helps to assuage female fans' anxiety that they invest more emotional effort in their relationships than their male partners.

The boys' love genre conveys a positive message of non-traditional gender roles by thematising the relationship between two male characters who are equal in terms of sex and gender role expectations. The satisfaction of both partners is an important trope in popular boys' love narratives, which compensates for the relatively disadvantageous position of the passive character. This trope can serve

as a supportive resource for those women who suffer from anxiety rooted in pre-existing beliefs about being unable to stay in a viable heterosexual relationship due to their gender-role nonconformity or past negative sexual experiences. The stability of boys' love relationships can thereby facilitate the improvement of their self-confidence.

Socialisation

Boys' love characters preserve their heterosexual identity even after engaging in a homosexual romance. Mizoguchi (2008) suggested that the function of this trope is to preserve the availability of the protagonists for female fans. However, we would draw attention to an additional function, which is strongly associated with Western sociocultural norms.

In contrast to Japanese cultural traditions, homosexual practices were considered deviant sexual behaviours in Western cultures for decades; thus social stigmatisation became a major concern for those who had homosexual desires (Pflugfelder 1999). The boys' love genre aims to mitigate the anxiety of women who are experiencing uncertainty about their sexual orientation and are concerned about being stigmatised for their homosexual desires. By presenting fictive societies in which individuals who openly express homosexual affections are not members of a segregated group but are constructive parts of the heteronormative community, the boys' love genre serves as a supportive resource that facilitates the improvement of readers' self-esteem. Moreover, the creators of these stories underline that engaging in a same-sex relationship is a personal choice, and homosexual desires can infiltrate the everyday lives of heterosexual individuals as well (Mizoguchi 2008).

Generalisation

The theory of cultivation suggests that frequent and repeated exposure to particular media content representing non-normative behaviours can lead to the legitimisation of them (Gerbner 1999), especially when positive reactions are strongly expressed and negative consequences are underrepresented (Huesmann 1988), such as in boys' love stories. The creators of this genre construct a fictional society in which homosexuality is a privilege, a desirable and rewarded

form of behaviour. In accordance with social learning theory (Bandura 1977), boys' love characters serve as models for the fans, guiding them through the process of coping with stressful life events. Fans learn from their success, and reproduce adequate behaviours to achieve their personal goals (Groves and Anderson 2015). It was also found in previous research that exposure to popular television programs presenting explicit sexual content had a consistent influence on the sexual attitudes and activities of young viewers (Bond and Drogos 2014). Based on the excitation transfer hypothesis (Zillmann 1971), this effect is much stronger when the sexually arousing content is accompanied by the illustration of intense emotions. To extend and repeat these experiences, boys' love fans create a space (i.e., fan communities) for themselves to practice homonormative behaviours and participate in a collective coping process in which they reconstruct the prevailing gender system into a more favourable construct. To access the coping resources of boys' love media, they transform the popular tropes of this genre into social norms in the fan community.

The approval of homosexual behaviours in boys' love narratives is adapted into the homonormative social network of fan communities in which fans can experience homosexual relationship dynamics and the active/passive roles through boys' love roleplays. Mizoguchi (2008) calls female boys' love fans 'virtual lesbians' for engaging in such online activities with each other. Gay male fans have a privileged position in this female-dominated homonormative space, wherein male homosexuality is a desirable form of behaviour. We theorise that this community might be particularly attractive for those heterosexual men in the anime-manga subculture who are unpopular amongst peers and encounter problems in socialising with members of the opposite sex. They might learn strategies (i.e., reproducing homosexual behaviours) from popular boys' love characters to get more positive feedback from their social environment, which could increase their self-esteem. However, this strategy can work only in homonormative circumstances, similar to those found in boys' love stories. Nevertheless, membership of boys' love fan communities could also be beneficial for gay anime-

manga fans for the same reasons (e.g., self-esteem improvement, popularity).

Fragile Constructions: Sexual Orientation and Behaviour

Boys' love tropes could serve as supportive resources for female fans with particular gender-related problems. For instance, anxiety related to societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, past negative sexual experiences, or uncertainty about sexual orientation can lead these women to maintain a negative feminine self-image. We hypothesise that these individuals wish to increase their self-esteem and develop a generally positive self-image, and they use boys' love media for this purpose. Coping through genre-specific tropes can be adequate as long as fans reframe their negative experiences using fantasies while consuming or creating boys' love stories. The extension of this coping process is the construction of fan community, which is an intersection of fictional homonormativity derived from boys' love media and heteronormative reality. If the individual trying to cope does not succeed in doing so through fantasies, they can develop coping strategies by interacting with other fans and using strategies which are derived from boys' love stories depicting how the protagonists deal with problems related to their sexual identity. Furthermore, fans share their experiences with each other on an unconscious level by expressing their preferred roles and situations in boys' love narratives; in doing so, they expose their own vulnerabilities inflicted by psychological injury related to gender issues. Therefore, boys' love fan communities are not simply 'playgrounds' for the members, in which they can reproduce their wishful fantasies in practice, but an appropriate platform to deal with their common problems together, using a collective fantasy. However, the coping process facilitated by boys' love media cannot be extended to real-life situations.

If coping efforts made on the level of fantasy are unsuccessful in resolving certain gender-related difficulties and the observed strategies derived from boys' love media transcend the safe confines of the homonormative fan community, the individual transfers these resources into real life for the sake of

successful coping (i.e., they adopt homosexual behaviours to get positive feedback from their social environment, which facilitates the improvement of their self-esteem). Homosexual behaviours driven by this motivation might become integral parts of the individual's conception of self when frequently and repetitively reproduced, leading to the development of a homosexual self-identity.

This process occurs when gender-related problems remain unresolved, which threatens the integrity of the self. The intrapersonal tension caused by this disintegration leads the individual to overcome these struggles by suppressing the damaged feminine part of her self-image and adopting homosexual behaviours. In line with the structural basis of the psychological mechanisms described earlier, we hypothesise that this occurs under the following conditions: (a) if the person cannot identify with socially constructed feminine gender roles and adopts masculinity instead, which is a conflicting construct in a heterosexual relationship; (b) if past negative sexual experiences (e.g., sexual abuse) lead to the avoidance of interactions with members of the opposite sex; (c) if a boys' love fan invests considerable amount of time in boys' love role-playing (in order to experience sexual intimacy) and neglects her real-life heterosexual romances due to this activity which she finds more satisfying; (d) if the adopted homonormativity of the fan community becomes an indicative norm for the person and extends beyond fan activities; and (e) if homosexual behaviours show a long-term stability as a strategy for male boys' love fans to increase their self-esteem and social acceptance.

These individuals wish to enhance their self-esteem by adapting homonormative behaviours, which leads to a more positive overall self-image, since the central trait of homosexuality is strongly attached to positive traits in their perception (e.g., success, talent). However, these strategies derived from boys' love media cannot aid the coping of an individual in real circumstances due to the divergence of fictive homonormativity and real-life heteronormativity. Expressed homosexual affections are not considered desirable behaviours in a society wherein homosexuals face the problem of stigmatisation.

Based on our hypothesis, one possible

explanation for the high proportion of self-identified homosexual fans in the boys' love fan community could be inadequate individual coping, which leads to an adopted homosexual identity in real life after a sequence of expressed homosexual behaviours are used as a permanent coping strategy. Since this preference is conceptually different from a homosexual orientation that is neither assisted nor reinforced by boys' love media, it should be termed 'homonormative lesbianism' for female fans, and 'homonormative gayness' for male fans. The term 'homonormative' refers to the consensually established norms in the fan community derived from boys' love media through the process of cultivation, which encourage the reproduction of homosexual behaviours in order to maintain the circulation of positive feedbacks among fans. Nevertheless, it is also feasible that boys' love media have an effect on the sexuality of fans with a homosexual preference, and the identification with successful protagonists showing homosexual affections reinforces their pre-existing homosexual tendencies.

Furthermore, we must also take into consideration alternative explanations for the high proportion of homosexual individuals identified when investigating the population of boys' love fans. The second possible explanation is that self-reported homosexual fans were sure about their homosexual orientation before their first exposure to boys' love materials. According to the findings of Oliver, Kim and Sanders (2006), viewers prefer watching media content that is consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and values. Therefore, boys' love media could be attractive for homosexual individuals who wish to explore their sexuality in a positive and supportive environment. However, the question remains why lesbians would identify with male protagonists acting out homosexual desires when they have a preference for women. Moreover, there exists a Japanese genre called *yuri*, which thematises the love of two young women in similarly melodramatic stories employing aestheticised character illustrations, and which encourages readers to explore lesbian potential in themselves (Welker 2006b). *Yuri* might therefore seem more appropriate for lesbian readers due to the gender-adequate representation of sexual identity

struggles (e.g., 'lesbian panic': see Fujimoto and Fraser 2014; Welker 2006b). In line with this, it is unknown why gay individuals would prefer a female fantasy with which they cannot identify, when the Japanese genre called *bara* is specially made by and for gay men. Although boys' love could serve as a supportive space for non-heterosexual individuals, the motivation of these fans to identify with boys' love character-constructs is not completely explained by this logic.

Finally, the third explanation for fans' sexual preferences is false reporting of their sexual orientation. Indeed, we must take into account that fans do not divulge their true preferences in self-report surveys for reasons associated with their homonormative attitudes. Given that questionnaires exploring the boys' love phenomenon provide anonymity for the respondents, the declaration of homosexual orientation by heterosexual participants cannot be checked, and thus, self-categorisation can be biased by boys' love social norms (i.e., homosexual behaviours are rewarded with positive feedback). The contradiction between theory and empirical findings regarding the sexuality of boys' love fans indicates that either the definition or the measurement tools for assessing sexual orientation in this group should be revised. For instance, future research should consider using implicit measures to investigate the sexual identity of fans.

Overall, the concept of homonormative dynamics contributes to a deeper understanding of the association between boys' love media consumption, and sexual attitudes and behaviours at an implicit level, based on the structural analysis of underlying psychological mechanisms. The concept of homonormative sexual behaviours is supported by previous studies exploring the communicational dynamics of fans (Galbraith 2011, 2015; Mizoguchi 2008). The patterns of latent psychological mechanisms are consonant with the concept of Fujimoto (1998), in which the creation of the boys' love genre is attributed to the negative self-image of women. However, we should not ignore alternative explanations for the high proportion of non-heterosexual fans in the boys' love community. It is also feasible that the genre attracts the attention of homosexual

individuals, or stories presenting charismatic protagonists with homosexual affections encourage the expression of pre-existing homosexual tendencies in the case of uncertainty about sexual orientation. Finally, we should consider the possibility that fans may bias their reports about their sexual preferences. Consequently, future research should investigate the sexual behaviour of boys' love fans in more depth by including implicit approaches in the exploration.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the underlying psychological mechanisms that mediate between boys' love media consumption and coping with particular gender-related difficulties, which is strongly associated with homonormative fan practices. We investigated the relationship between the characteristics of the genre and coping efforts on the part of the fans aimed at mitigating negative self-image caused by gender-related problems (i.e., dissatisfaction with conventional gender roles, past negative sexual experiences, or anxiety about being stigmatised for having homosexual desires). The coping process assisted by boys' love media can be successful on the level of fantasies, which might be extended to practical activities within the fan community, but cannot be adopted into real life due to the divergence of fictive homonormativity and societal heteronormativity. An inadequate coping process is the result of an unsuccessful effort on the level of fantasies and activities within the fan community, which manifests in homosexual behaviours in the real world. Building on cultivation theory, this process was presented as a possible explanation for the relatively high proportion of self-identified homosexual individuals in the boys' love fan community. In addition, we discussed alternative reasons related to the fact that fans may have pre-existing homosexual tendencies.

Although the concept of homonormative behaviours is consonant with the social dynamics observed in the fan community (Galbraith 2011, 2015; Mizoguchi 2008) as well as the mechanism of cultivation (Gerbner et al. 2002), and thus has the strongest explanatory power in our discussion, there are limitations to the use of this concept. First, it remains unknown what proportion of boys' love fans are homonormative lesbians and gays and how many

of them showed a clear homosexual preference before their first exposure to the boys' love genre; furthermore, there is a possibility of gaining biased reports of their sexual orientation. Second, empirical research is needed to improve our understanding of these categories, which can lead theoretical works towards a more consistent conceptualisation of the boys' love phenomenon. Nevertheless, the use of explicit measures to assess the sexual orientation of boys' love fans should be reconsidered in future research.

There is growing research interest in media influence on the sexual attitudes and behaviours of viewers (Bond and Drogos 2014). The present study provided an important extension of previous theoretical works by uncovering the psychological mechanisms that mediate between media consumption and genre-consistent attitudes and behaviours within a specific group. The investigation of the dynamics of the boys' love fan community contributes to a deeper understanding of the association between boys' love media consumption and sexual behaviours. By revealing fans' motivations to create and consume homoerotic materials at an implicit, unconscious level, we gain a better knowledge of the use patterns that might serve as a supportive resource for women. However, raising awareness of the potential risks of involvement in this kind of collective fantasy is also important (i.e., sexual behaviour change due to an inadequate coping strategy).

In conclusion, the worldwide popularity of boys' love media shows that this genre has become an integral part of the adolescent fan cultures that focus on Japanese entertainment media. Young fans express a psychological need for crafting materials inspired by the genre, sharing their fantasies with each other, and creating a positive and supportive atmosphere to gain inspiration and strength from their collective experiences.

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Notes

¹ The original work was created by Maki Murakami. The manga series had been published between 1996 and 2002, whereas the anime series based on the comics was first introduced in 2000 to the Japanese audience.

² The English translation of the title is *Wedge of Interval*. The original anime, based on the novel written by Reiko Yoshihara, was first released in 1992, whereas the remake series was introduced in 2012, but was discontinued after four episodes.

³ The anime series was released in 2002, based on the light novel and manga created by Mizuna Kuwabara.

⁴ Aarinfantasy (<http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/>) is an international boys' love fan community, which had more than 400,000 members and 1,000,000 posts in 2016. However, statistics retrieved from this webpage may not be representative of boys' love fans.

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