

Identity, Community, and Fantasy

Exploring Transnational Boys' Love (BL) Consumption in the American Midwest

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Abstract

This study explores how global media flows and digital storytelling influence the transnational consumption and participatory fandom of Boys' Love (BL) media from Asia among young people in Midwestern America. BL, a genre centered on romantic and sexual relationships between male characters, primarily targets a female-identified audience and spans diverse media forms, including manga, anime, novels, films, TV series, webtoons, and video games. Drawing on survey responses from eighty-eight participants and ten in-depth interviews, we analyze audience engagement with BL through three conceptual frameworks: queer identity, imagined community, and personal fantasy. Our findings reveal that the consumption habits, motivations, and fan practices of Midwestern BL consumers closely mirror those of their Asian counterparts, despite national, geographic, and cultural differences. By situating these insights within queer studies, fan studies, and cultural studies, this research offers a nuanced understanding of how BL audiences interpret, navigate, and connect with this genre of global storytelling.

Keywords: Boys' Love (BL), digital media, queer, identity, imagined community, fantasy.

Introduction

The growing influence of transnational texts and practices from Asia on American teenagers and young adults has elevated Boys' Love (BL) to a position of notable significance, particularly within the realm of digital storytelling and its cultural engagement. BL, a genre primarily targeting a female-identified audience, depicts romantic and sexual relationships between male characters across a wide range of media, including manga, anime, novels, films, television dramas, webtoons, video games, and other forms.¹ These originally Asian narratives have attracted a rising number of young Americans who, through digital platforms, actively participate in reading, creating, discussing, and even reenacting BL stories, forming a vibrant and ideologically complex participatory pop culture.² This transformation from passive consumers to active contributors—a process scholars term “co-creative labor”³—empowers fans to dynamically shape and sustain global BL culture, underscoring the inventive potential of digital media in redefining transnational culture exchanges.

1. Yukari Fujimoto, “The Evolution of BL as ‘Playing with Gender’: Viewing the Genesis and Development of BL from a Contemporary Perspective,” in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, ed. Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaïke, Katsuhiko Suganuma, and James Welker (University Press of Mississippi, 2015): 76–92; James Welker, “A Brief History of Shōnen'ai, Yaoi and Boys Love,” in *Boys' Love Manga and Beyond*.
2. Fran Martin, “Girls Who Love Boys' Love: BL as Goods to Think with in Taiwan (with a Revised and Updated Coda),” in *Boys' Love, Cosplay and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan*, ed. Maud Lavin et al. (Hong Kong University Press, 2017).
3. See John Banks and Mark Deuze, “Co-creative Labour,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 5 (2009): 419–31; Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (Bloomsbury, 2013); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006); John Michael Roberts, “Co-creative Prosumer Labor, Financial Knowledge Capitalism, and Marxist Value Theory,” *Information Society* 32, no. 1 (2016): 28–39; Sae Shimauchi, “Thai Boys Love Drama Fandom as a Transnational and Trans-subcultural Contact Zone in Japan,” *Continuum* 37, no. 3 (2023): 381–94.

Drawing on original survey data from eighty-eight respondents and follow-up interviews with ten college students in the Midwest, this study explores how young consumers articulate pleasures derived from Asian BL content and interpret its narratives. Existing scholarship on BL has largely focused on the genre's feminist and queer politics as well as its genesis as a women-led countercultural movement that challenges patriarchal and heterosexual norms.⁴ Earlier research also examined the reasons behind BL's popularity and young women's fascination with male homoerotic fiction, often centering on readers in Japan and theorizing the global circulation of Japanese popular culture.⁵ More recent studies have expanded this focus to include the reception of BL in other Asian contexts.⁶

4. See Divya Garg and Xiaofei Yang, "Beyond a Queer Utopia: Interrogating Misogyny in Transnational Boys' Love Media," *Continuum* 37, no. 6 (2023): 770–82; Xi Lin, "Breaking the Structural Silence: The Sociological Function of BL Novels in Contemporary China," in *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, ed. James Welker (University of Hawai'i Press, 2022); Eve Ng and Xiaomeng Li, "Brand Nohomonationalism: *Guofeng* ('National Style') Framings of Boys' Love Television Series in China," *Asian Studies Review* 47, no. 3 (2022): 613–30; Ágnes Zsila and Zsolt Demetrovics, "Redrawing the Boundaries of Gender and Sexuality: A Psychological Reconceptualization of the Boys' Love Phenomenon," *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media* 9 (2017): 34–49.
5. Uli Meyer, "Hidden in Straight Sight: Trans*gressing Gender and Sexuality via BL," in *Boys' Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-Cultural Fandom of the Genre*, ed. Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaïke, Katsuhiko Suganuma, and James Welker (McFarland, 2010); Akiko Mizoguchi, "Male-Male Romance by and for Women in Japan: A History and the Subgenres of 'Yaoi' Fictions," *U.S. Japan Women's Journal* 25 (2003): 49–75; Kazumi Nagaïke, "Queer Readings of BL: Are Women 'Plunderers' of Gay Men?" in *International Perspectives on Shōjo and Shōjo Manga: The Influence of Girl Culture*, ed. Masami Toku (Routledge, 2015); James Welker, "Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent: 'Boys' Love' as Girls' Love in Shōjo Manga," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 3 (2006): 841–70; James Welker, "Flower Tribes and Female Desire: Complicating Early Female Consumption of Male Homosexuality in Shōjo Manga," *Mechademia* 6, no. 1 (2011): 211–28; Andrea Wood, "'Straight' Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counter Public," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1/2 (2006): 394–414.
6. Thomas Baudinette, "Creative Misreadings of 'Thai BL' by a Filipino Fan Community: Dislocating Knowledge Production in Transnational Queer Fandoms Through Aspirational Consumption," *Mechademia* 13, no. 1 (2020): 101–18; Erwin James A. dela Cruz, "Raikantopino: Globalization of the Boys' Love Genre in the Philippines," *South-east Asian Media Studies Journal* 4, no. 1 (2022): 77–97; Nattawaj Kijratanakoson, "The

Building on these foundational works, our study examines the intersections between BL storytelling's discursive frameworks and its transnational reception among American consumers—particularly in the Midwest, a region whose cultural milieu contrasts sharply with BL's narrative worlds and primary audience. Often called “America's heartland,” the Midwest is shaped by its Germanic and Scandinavian immigrant roots, with an identity forged through industrial grit, sprawling farmlands, and unassuming attitude. This contrast makes its reception of BL media a compelling lens for analysis. While scholars have noted differences in how Asian and Western audiences take on homoerotic texts,⁷ the extent, nature, and even existence of these differences remain underexplored, sparking our curiosity and serving as a central impetus for this inquiry. By analyzing the interplay of global digital media flows, we aim to illuminate the role of BL in shaping transnational cultural consumption and participatory fandom among this group of young individuals.

This study employs a thematic analysis to interpret interview and survey data, focusing on the BL experiences of Midwestern college students. By systematically coding keywords, concepts, and narratives that reflect participants' thoughts and behaviors, we identified three recurring themes: queer

Meaning-Making of Thai Boys' Love Cultural Products from the Perspectives of International Media: A Corpus-Driven Approach,” *Plaridel* 20, no. 2 (2023): 59–89; Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, “Chinese Danmei Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below,” in *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, ed. Maud Lavin, Liang Yang, and Jing Zhao (Hong Kong University Press, 2017).

7. For instance, Mark McLelland observes that in Japan, BL manga—despite depicting explicit homosexual relationships and graphic illustrations of sexual intimacy—are not typically categorized as “gay and lesbian” or R-rated materials. Although Japanese society may not be significantly more accepting of openly homosexual identities than many Western countries, male-male love stories, when framed as a fantasy genre for women, are often embraced as beautiful and idealized forms of romance. Hence, mainstream bookstores in Japan frequently carry a wide selection of BL manga, making these narratives easily accessible to the public, including high school girls. Mark McLelland, “No Climax, No Point, No Meaning? Japanese Women's Boy-Love Sites on the Internet,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (2000): 287–88; also see Wood, “‘Straight’ Women,” 394–414.

identity, imagined community, and personal fantasy, each of which will be examined in detail. These findings are also discussed in relation to existing research in queer studies, fan studies, and cultural studies, revealing this group of BL consumers' discourses, practices, and engagements with this form of digital storytelling. Of course, what exactly is BL, and how does this genre intersect with Asian popular cultures? To contextualize our analysis, we begin with a brief overview of BL media, tracing its historical development in Asia—namely, Japan, China, Thailand, and South Korea (Korea hereafter)—alongside its major characteristics and tropes.

BL Across Different Borders

The fascination with beautiful, delicate, and androgynous young men, along with the celebration of male same-sex erotica, is not a modern phenomenon but one with deep historical roots that can be traced back to Imperial East Asian cultures and possibly earlier. In Edo Japan (1603–1868), it was epitomized by the ideal of the “beautiful youth” (*bishōnen*),⁸ while in Ming China (1368–1644), it was reflected in concepts such as “male beauty” (*nanse*) and “male vogue” (*nanfeng*).⁹ Although contemporary BL culture and fandom originated in Japan, it has since grown into a global phenomenon and captivated audiences worldwide. As the genre has spread, it has been reinterpreted and reshaped by different countries, each infusing it with unique cultural flavors and nuances.

8. Jeffrey Angles, *Writing the Love of Boys: Origins of Bishōnen Culture in Modernist Japanese Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Welker, “Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent,” 841–70.

9. See Sophie Volpp, “Classifying Lust: The Seventeenth-Century Vogue for Male Love,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 61 (2001): 80–81; Giovanni Vitiello, *The Libertine's Friend: Homosexuality and Masculinity in Late Imperial China* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); Ka Wong, “The Anatomy of Eroticism: Reimagining Sex and Sexuality in the Late Ming Novel *Xiuta Yesbi*,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 11, no. 2 (2007): 284–329.

A comparable case in the West is “slash fan fiction,”¹⁰ which first gained traction through stories pairing *Star Trek* characters Kirk and Spock as a romantic couple, created and shared privately by predominantly female fans.¹¹ The rise of internet culture dramatically increased the accessibility, visibility, and proliferation of slash fiction, expanding its scope to include a wide array of subjects—from canonical literary heroes and blockbuster movie characters to K-pop idols and real-life celebrities. Similarly, the recent surge in young adult novels, webcomics, and television series featuring young gay, lesbian, and queer characters—such as Alice Oseman’s *Heartstopper*—offers a Western counterpart to the BL genre. To better understand Midwestern college students’ enthusiasm for and engagement with Asian BL, the following section traces the evolution of the genre across Japan, China, Thailand, and Korea—the four principal BL-producing regions most popular among our respondents—with particular attention to digital media’s transformative role.

BL in Japan: A Cultural and Historical Foundation

BL emerged in Japan in the 1970s as a subgenre of *shōjo* manga (girls’ comics), offering a platform for women to explore themes of love and sexuality outside of traditional societal expectations.¹² Created by *dōjinshi* (amateur

10. It is widely accepted that “slash fan fiction” first emerged in the late 1960s within the fan community of *Star Trek: The Original Series*. This genre began with “Kirk/Spock” stories, primarily written by female fans of the show, which were shared privately among friends to avoid intellectual property and copyright issues. The term *slash* derives from the use of the forward slash (/) in references to “K/S” during the late 1970s, denoting narratives where Kirk and Spock were portrayed not only in romantic but often also physical relationships. The concept of slash soon expanded beyond *Star Trek* to other fan communities.

11. See Mirna Cicioni, “Male Pair-Bonds and Female Desire in Fan Slash Writing,” in *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*, ed. C. Harris and A. Alexander (Hampton Press, 1998); Anne Kustritz, “Slashing the Romance Narrative,” *Journal of American Culture* 26 (2003): 371–84; Mark McHarry, “Identity Unmoored: Yaoi in the West,” in *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*, ed. T. Peele (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Joanne Russ, “Pornography by Women for Women, with Love,” in *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts: Feminist Essays*, ed. J. Russ (Crossing Press, 1985).

12. Welker, “Flower Tribes and Female Desire,” 211–28.

manga fanzines) and pioneering artists known as the Fabulous Forty-Niners, early BL works introduced the *shōnen'ai* (youth love), which tells the more emotional and sentimental aspects of male-male relationships, and *yaoi*,¹³ which features more sexually explicit homoeroticism, among many others, each exploring different aspects of Boys' Love romance.¹⁴ Keiko Takemiya's "In the Sun room" published in the monthly *Bessatsu shōjo komikku* (Magazine of girls' comics) in December 1970 was considered the first BL narrative.¹⁵ Gradually, BL rose to prominence as a favorite manga genre among young women, with its creators gaining widespread admiration within the industry. It became more commercialized and less marginalized over time and its storylines increasingly rooted in Japanese instead of foreign settings.¹⁶ BL also developed diverse storytelling conventions, including the *seme* (aggressor) and the *uke* (receiver) trope, which assigns masculine-dominant and feminine-submissive roles respectively to the two male protagonists that echoes the dynamic of a heterosexual couple. As BL evolved, the genre also gained acceptance within mainstream Japanese culture and began to influence neighboring countries and global media. Among our Midwestern audience, Japanese BL media remains the dominant force, with nearly nine out of ten participants in our study consuming content originating from Japan.

BL in China: Danmei and Censorship

In Mainland China, BL developed in the 1990s through the underground circulation of Japanese manga and anime, eventually evolving into *danmei*—a

13. The term *yaoi* was an abbreviation of *yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi*, meaning "no climax, no resolution, and no meaning." See Mizoguchi, "Male-Male Romance by and for Women in Japan."

14. Mizoguchi, 49–75; Welker, "A Brief History of Shōnen'ai, Yaoi and Boys Love"; Zsila and Demetrovics, "Redrawing the Boundaries of Gender and Sexuality," 34–49.

15. See Welker, "Flower Tribes and Female Desire," 211–28.

16. Welker, "A Brief History of Shōnen'ai, Yaoi, and Boys Love."

term borrowed from the Japanese *tanbi*, often interpreted as “aesthetic literature.” Heavily molded by fan communities and online platforms, early writers and artists in this Sinicized form of BL shared their works on forums and digital spaces, fostering a vibrant subculture despite government censorship.¹⁷ The rise of platforms like Jinjiang Literature City allowed creators to blend fan-driven narratives with commercial opportunities.¹⁸ By the mid-2010s, viral BL web series like *Addicted* (2016) had gained such explosive traction that they inevitably drew scrutiny from the authorities—and, ultimately, a ban.¹⁹ Subsequent BL adaptations like *Guardian* (2018), *The Untamed* (2019), and *Word of Honor* (2021) brought the genre to mainstream audiences with massive commercial success, though strict censorship required the omission of explicit homoerotic content. Today, BL in China navigates a complex landscape of regulatory challenges while maintaining considerable popularity, showcasing its cultural resilience and flexibility.²⁰ Many of the previously mentioned Chinese BL titles are indeed favorites among our respondents.

BL in Thailand: Globalization and Soft Power

Thailand’s embrace of BL, generally known as the “Y” genre (derived from *yaoi*), illustrates how transnational media forms are adapted and commercialized for the local masses. BL gained momentum with television series

17. Jin Feng, “Addicted to Beauty: Consuming and Producing Web-Based Chinese Danmei Fiction at Jinjiang,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2009): 1–41; Yang and Xu, “Chinese Danmei Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below.”

18. Sheng Zou, “When a Subculture Goes Pop: Platforms, Mavericks, and Capital in the Production of ‘Boys’ Love’ Web Series in China,” *Media Industries* 9, no. 1 (2022): 109–27.

19. As China’s first globally breakout BL media, *Addicted*—adapted from Chai Jidan’s web novel *Ni Ya Shangyin Le?*—achieved viral success with over one hundred million views within a month. However, its popularity also drew government scrutiny, resulting in an official ban that prevented the series from airing its finale.

20. Jiang Chang and Hao Tian, “Girl Power in Boy Love: Yaoi, Online Female Counterculture, and Digital Feminism in China,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 4 (2021): 604–20.

like *Lovesick* (2014), which subtly introduced same-sex relationships within traditional Thai drama formats, familiarizing audiences with BL themes.²¹ Building on this success, the entertainment industry, particularly GMMTV (Grammy TV), began producing BL series such as *SOTUS* (2016) and *2gether: The Series* (2020), turning young BL actors into pop idols and making the company a cornerstone of pop culture. Streaming platforms and social media further expanded Thai BL's global reach, while the country's progressive stance, including marriage equality, effective January 2025, reinforced its reputation as Southeast Asia's most LGBTQ-friendly nation. Synthesizing Japanese influences with local traditions, Thai BL has emerged as both a hybrid cultural product and a form of symbolic capital. Its appeal to both domestic and international audiences has transformed the genre into an instrument of soft power, not only promoting Thailand's economy but also enhancing its global cultural competitiveness.²² Through digital

21. Thomas Baudinette, "Lovesick, the Series: Adapting Japanese 'Boys Love' to Thailand and the Creation of a New Genre of Queer Media," *South East Asia Research* 27, no. 2 (2019): 115–32; Natthanai Prasannam, "The Yaoi Phenomenon in Thailand and Fan/Industry Interaction," *Plaridel* 16, no. 2 (2019): 63–89.

22. According to the Economic Intelligence Center of Siam Commercial Bank, the BL series market is expected to rise from 0.7 percent to 3.9 percent, generating over 4.9 billion Thai Bhat (about \$154,750 US) in revenue by 2025. In 2024, Thailand led the Asian BL market, accounting for more than half of all BL series aired across the region. The country has overall produced over 340 BL films, series, and literature to date. As a result, the Thai BL series market helped the growth of related businesses, such as fan meetings, concerts, and launch events, benefiting the entertainment industry, venue rental businesses, the production of merchandise tied to these series and their actors, and the tourism sector. Hence, BL is deemed as a source of soft power that the government should support to enhance Thailand's competitiveness in the global market. See "The Thai Boys' Love (BL) Series Industry Has Experienced Exponential Growth and Shows Promising Signs of Continued Expansion," *Nation*, January 12, 2025. Also see Stephanie Adair, "Boys Love Series: Thailand's Hottest New Soft Power," *Nation*, October 20, 2023; Poowin Bunyavejchewin, Kornphanat Tungkeunkunt, Porntep Kamonpetch, Ketsarin Sirichuanjun, and Natthanont Sukthunthong, "Socio-Demographics, Lifestyles, and Consumption Frequency of Thai 'Boys Love' Series Content: Initial Evidence from Thailand," *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024): 1–20; Miguel Antonio Lizada, "A New Kind of 2Getherness: Screening Thai Soft Power in Thai Boys Love (BL) Lakhon," in *Streaming and Screen Culture in Asia-Pacific*, ed. M. Samuel and L. Mitchell (Palgrave

platforms like YouTube, many high-quality BL productions and popular idol couples (CP) now “freely” reach audiences worldwide, including our research participants in the American Midwest.

BL in Korea: From Underground Fandom to Mainstream Culture

The history of BL in Korea started in the late 1980s with the introduction of Japanese male-male romance literature,²³ notably manga. These Japanese BL works inspired the formation of fan communities and the creation of the early BL *manhwa* (comics) like *Has Spring Come to Mr. Lewis?* (1990). Even with societal resistance and restrictive laws on representation of homosexuality, the genre grew through online communities and cultural liberalization, with teenage girls and women in their twenties as the main fanbase.²⁴ The new millennium marked a turning point for Korean BL. The 2004 amendment to the Youth Protection Act, which eliminated the classification of homosexuality as harmful content, removed significant barriers for BL and paved the way for greater visibility. Influential films such as *The King and the Clown* (2005) and webtoons like *Perfectly Captivated* (2006) consequently emerged.²⁵ By the 2010s, Korean BL had become a significant cultural force, driven by technological innovation, fan dedication, and shifting societal norms, thriving today as both a creative outlet and a space for exploring identity and representation.

Macmillan, 2022); Shimauchi, “Thai Boys Love Drama Fandom as a Transnational and Trans-Subcultural Contact Zone in Japan,” 381–94.

23. Hyojin Kim, “Rethinking the Meaning of Boys Love in an Era of Feminism: Online Discourse on ‘Leaving BL’ in Late 2010s Korea,” in *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*, ed. James Welker (University of Hawai’i Press, 2022).
24. Jungmin Kwon, *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies* (University of Iowa Press, 2019).
25. Jungmin Kwon, “The Commercialization and Popularization of Boys Love in South Korea,” in *Queer Transfigurations*.

Gender Dynamics and Tropes in BL Media

BL's evolution across various Asian countries highlights its adaptability to local cultures while maintaining its core themes of male-male romance. The genre also appeals to the young consumers in the American Midwest, as evidenced by our study. Aimed primarily at female audiences, BL narratives often navigate power dynamics by attributing traditionally feminine traits to one of the male protagonists. This approach creates a space for women to momentarily step away from societal expectations and explore identities that resonate more closely with their personal desires.²⁶ BL stories typically follow a formulaic structure, relying on familiar plots, archetypes, and scenarios. Nevertheless, these narratives often subvert traditional gender roles while simultaneously offering their consumers a form of imaginative escape. Baudinette identifies four key characteristics of the genre: its appeal to heterosexual women fans—known as *fujoshi* in Japanese or *funü* in Chinese (meaning “rotten girls”), minimal female representation (usually as antagonists or side characters), the prevalence of androgynous aesthetics, and the use of the *seme-uke* dynamic, which reproduces conventional male-female relationship roles within male-male pairings.²⁷ Similarly, Fermin highlights several tropes in BL, such as an emphasis on romantic couplings, emotional detachment from reality, and the vilification of female characters.²⁸ Critics have also pointed out BL's tendency—notably in earlier works—to misrepresent the experiences of sexual minorities and its failure to advocate equal rights.²⁹

26. Didenfang Chou, “Exploring the Meaning of Yaoi in Taiwan for Female Readers: From the Perspective of Gender,” *Intercultural Communication Studies* 19, no. 1 (2010): 78–90; Welker, “Flower Tribes and Female Desire,” 211–28.

27. Baudinette, “Lovesick, the Series,” 115–32.

28. Tricia Abigail Santos Fermin, “Appropriating Yaoi and Boys Love in the Philippines: Conflict, Resistance, and Imaginations Through and Beyond Japan,” *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 13, no. 3 (2013). <https://japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol13/iss3/fermin.html>.

29. Bunyavejchewin et al., “Socio-demographics, Lifestyles, and Consumption Frequency,” 1–20; Welker, “Flower Tribes and Female Desire,” 211–28.

These BL tropes reflect the genre's development and its ability to resonate with changing societal norms. Fujimoto argues that the progression from *shōnen'ai* to *yaoi* to BL echoes broader cultural shifts, as the genre has transitioned from simulating established sexual dynamics to celebrating gender fluidity.³⁰ Within this context, the seme and uke roles, which blend masculine and feminine traits, represent more than traditional binaries—they embody fans' imaginative engagement with romantic coupling. Viewed positively, this evolution demonstrates BL's potential to resist gender oppression and foster a "gender-blended world" where creators and audiences can explore diverse interpretations of identity and relationships.³¹

To what extent this holds true for Asian BL consumers in the Midwest, where queer and women's rights remain complex and contested, warrants deeper investigation. LGBTQ+ inclusivity in the region varies drastically by local communities. Many Midwestern states lack comprehensive legal safeguards against LGBTQ+ discrimination in employment, housing, or public services.³² This fragmented landscape creates divergent realities for queer individuals, potentially amplifying BL's role as an alternative space for engaging with marginalized identities. Likewise, the erosion of reproductive rights may heighten BL's appeal among women exploring agency and desire outside patriarchal constraints.³³

30. Fujimoto, "Evolution of BL as 'Playing with Gender.'"

31. Fujimoto.

32. Many Midwestern states like Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Ohio offer no legal protection for LGBTQ+ communities. See "Employment Discrimination," MAP (Movement Advancement Project), accessed September 8, 2025, <https://www.lgbtmap.org>; "A Data Portrayal LGBT People in the Midwest, Mountain, and Southern States," William Institute, UCLA, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/lgbtdivide/#>.

33. Some Midwestern states, such as Iowa, Kansas, and South Dakota have implemented restrictions or bans on abortion access. See "After Roe Fell: Abortion Law by State," Center of Reproductive Rights, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://reproductiverights.org/maps/abortion-laws-by-state/>; "Is Abortion Still Accessible in My State Now That Roe v. Wade Was Overturned?" Planned Parenthood, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/abortion-access-tool/US>.

Data, Methods, and Limitations

Our personal and professional interests converge in examining why young individuals engage with BL media and how their enjoyment of the genre influences their self-perception. While neither of us identifies as “acafans”—academic fans who constitute much of extant scholarship on this subject—we do consume BL materials alongside our students. In spite of our non-avid fan position, or perhaps because of it, we aim to bring a unique perspective to the discussion.

In the fall of 2024, we launched an anonymous online survey focused on BL media, targeting students from two liberal arts colleges in Minnesota (appendix C). To complement our analysis, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten survey respondents who volunteered to share their personal stories and experiences (appendix B). These interviews, scheduled after survey respondents provided their contact information, lasted approximately one hour each and were conducted by the authors (appendix D).

Our study employs thematic analysis to interpret the qualitative data collected from both the survey responses and the follow-up interviews. This method enables us to identify, analyze, and report patterns—or themes—within the data, offering a structured framework for understanding participants’ experiences and perspectives. We collected self-reported narratives from the open-ended survey questions that allowed the participants to articulate their thoughts and reflections in their own words. Each narrative was carefully reviewed, and initial codes were assigned to segments of text that expressed key ideas or recurring concepts.

The follow-up interviews were designed to serve as an extension of the survey, allowing for deeper exploration of initial responses. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on important issues, share specific examples, and reflect on their engagement with Asian BL media. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve the richness and authenticity of their stories,

and the same coding process was applied to these narratives. Since the interview participants were drawn directly from the survey pool, we treated these qualitative inputs as a single dataset, enabling us to cross-reference themes across both sources.

During coding, frequently mentioned ideas and specific terms, such as queer, fandom, and fantasy, surfaced as significant focal points. These initial codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured the essence of participants' experiences. We acknowledge the limitations, particularly the self-selecting nature of interview participation, the imperfections in the survey design, and the interpretive aspects of the thematic analysis.³⁴ Still, our study offers a meaningful first step toward understanding Midwestern consumers' engagement with BL media from Asia.

BL in the Heart of Midwest America

Our survey yielded eighty-eight valid responses, 93.1 percent between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, 60.2 percent identified as female, 27.3 percent as male, and the remainder as nonbinary or preferring not to disclose. The participants reported a diverse range of sexual orientations: 37.5 percent identified as heterosexual/straight, 26.1 percent as bisexual, 10.2 percent as homosexual/gay/lesbian, 9.1 percent as asexual, with the remainder identifying as pansexual, queer, or unsure (appendix A).

Of the respondents, fifty-eight individuals reported actively engaging with BL media. Their demographic backgrounds align with patterns observed in broader fandom studies—78 percent identified as female, with

34. For the interview portion, participants volunteered after completing the survey and provided their own demographic information, including race and ethnicity. Of the ten interviewees, six identified as White, two as Asian, and two as biracial or mixed race, reflecting, to some extent, the likely racial composition of the broader survey sample. While this offers some insight into the participants' ethnic background, it is not fully representative or scientifically robust—serving more as a reference point than a definitive measure.

53 percent heterosexual, 33 percent bisexual, and 14 percent asexual. Eleven BL fans identified as male, with only one heterosexual; the remainder identified as gay or bisexual. Additionally, two participants identified as queer transgender men. The enthusiasm of the respondents towards BL also varies. Most (65.6 percent) spend 20 percent or less of their spare time on BL consumption. About a quarter spend between 20 percent and 60 percent while 10 percent spend 60 percent or more of their leisure time on BL.

The participants' entry into BL is intricately linked to digital media, often emerging through exposure to fandoms, recommendations from peers, and online algorithms that align with individual media consumption habits. The majority (65.6 percent) first encountered BL content randomly online, through social media or streaming platform recommendations (52.5 percent), friend referrals (49.2 percent), or trending titles (32.8 percent).

The primary reason participants consume BL was "entertainment and fun" (82 percent). Other motivations include emphasis on feelings over traditional gender norms (52.5 percent), escape from reality (45.9 percent), and attraction to love without gender constraints and pro-LGBTQ+ perspectives (44.3 percent). In terms of media preferences, BL content from Japan was the most popular (87.1 percent), followed by Korea (54.8 percent), China (53.2 percent), and Thailand (29 percent).³⁵

Overall, participants engage with the BL genre from diverse perspectives shaped by their personal identities, experiences, and viewing preferences, highlighting BL's unique dual role as both a source of entertainment and a space for introspection. Our analysis of coded survey responses and interview transcripts reveals that the consumption patterns, motivations, and practices of Midwestern BL audiences closely mirror those of their Asian counterparts.³⁶ The overwhelming majority of BL consumers in the

35. The participants also consume BL media from Taiwan (21 percent) and the Philippines (4.8 percent).

36. Bunyavejchewin et al., "Socio-demographics, Lifestyles, and Consumption Frequency," 1–20; Martin, "Girls Who Love Boys' Love"; Yang and Xu, "Chinese Danmei Fandom and Cultural Globalization."

Midwest are cisgender women, most of whom identify as heterosexual—a demographic resembling BL fandoms in Asia.

While existing fandom scholarship has predominantly focused on Asian and cosmopolitan audiences,³⁷ Midwestern engagement reveals how peripheral locales generate unique interpretive frameworks. Our respondents cultivate an imaginative BL lifeworld—one that stands in deliberate contrast to the region's more conservative cultural terrain—creating a reflexive space for fans to explore and articulate identity and desire. This very geographical distance and their cultural differences, seemingly even more so than for the Asian audiences, add an extra layer of freedom to the fans' imagination and expression, allowing them to navigate themes of identity with fewer reality checks and societal concerns. Their participation illustrates how global cultural flows transcend national origins and major industry players, advancing cross-cultural interactions that deepen understanding between the self and the imagined other. The following discussion will delve into three major areas that encapsulate these insights.

Embracing Queer Identity through BL Media

BL functions as a platform for exploring and normalizing queer identities within a cultural landscape dominated by heteronormative narratives. Many respondents expressed that their engagement with BL content played a crucial role in helping them discover and better understand their own queer identities. Butler characterizes queerness as “a troublesome agent of

37. Fran Martin, “Asian Boys’ Love Web Dramas: Transnational Production, Circulation, and Reception of Male-Male Desire,” in *Complicated Currents: Media Flows, Soft Power and East Asia*, ed. Daniel Black, Stephen Epstein, and Alison Tokita (Monash University ePress, 2012), 8.1–8.16; Andrea Wood, “Global BL Fandoms and Transcultural Reception: Boys’ Love Media in the Digital Age,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Communication*, ed. Marnel Niles Goins and Joan Faber McAlister (Routledge, 2021), 217–34.

rebellion,” describing it as a tool that provokes self-reflection and uncomfortable feelings.³⁸ Similarly, Edelman argues that “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one.”³⁹ For many participants, BL operates as exactly this kind of tool and disturber—fostering personal exploration and challenging norms.

BL operates as a generative “agent” in Midwestern participants’ ongoing negotiation of identity and affect. An interviewee (I6) mentioned that BL was one of the first forms of queer media they came across, which helped broaden their perspective and open their horizons: “I continued to engage with it because it . . . allowed for exploration of LGBTQ+ . . . and gender subjects.” Another contributor (S35), a dedicated bisexual BL fan, remarked: “Hetero romance is often so far removed from my tastes, what I’m attracted to, and my entire concept of love that I can’t relate at all. Only queer romance stories make me feel anything.”

BL thus inspires many coming-of-age yet confused participants. “It was only after finding BL as well as GL that I enjoyed any romantic media,” one respondent (S20) identified as a polysexual/pansexual male revealed. “I think it’s because BL and GL focus a lot more on emotions and feelings, while regular heterosexual [stories] rely on pre-established story tropes that I dislike. Reading BL and GL have also helped me discover my own sexual orientation.” A bisexual female respondent (S12) shared that they first started watching BL during the COVID-19 pandemic while “going through a lot of gender dysphoria and sexual identity crises.” They said: “BL provided an escape as well as clarification (and confusion) about my gender at the time . . . A lot of people judge the genre, which makes it more fun to watch and appreciate.” This sentiment was echoed by another individual:

38. Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (Routledge, 1993), 13–31.

39. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004).

"I happened to love it," a bisexual female individual (S27) mentioned: "Not just for the feel-good moments, but also because it's a bit taboo."

This queer embrace of dissonance serves as a potent vehicle for self-discovery and reflection. Another participant (I8) highlighted their preference for BL due to its positive portrayals of queer romance and, to some extent, its relatively egalitarian approach to gender dynamics: "I personally enjoy queer media in general because I am queer. So, I . . . enjoy BL that portrays queer romance in a kind light, especially when relationships feel realistic or even 'normalized' in our society, which is very much run by heteronormativity." They further explained: "BL may appeal to a global audience because the struggles of being queer in . . . society [are] relatable no matter what country you are from." Unsurprisingly, several participants valued BL's capacity to both disrupt dominant sexual norms and offer alternative visions of intimacy. "BL . . . was a completely new setting, with new magic systems and cultural backgrounds," one interviewee (I1) said. "I felt like I was learning new things while also avoiding some of the tropes that were wearing me down."

Additionally, some respondents expressed that BL content provided a space to explore their identities in a way that felt safe and affirming. "BL helped me understand and come to terms with being a transgender man," one respondent (S21) wrote.⁴⁰ A gay-identifying male informant (S68) shared that he enjoys BL primarily because it helps him "feel more normal." Another respondent (I3) described BL as a "safe space" where homophobia is absent, allowing for the depiction of same-gender relationships in a

40. The respondent (S21) explained in detail regarding their engagement: "I've read BL for most of my teenhood but only recently this year when reading some *manhwa* I realized I am a trans man and not non-binary, the label I have used for 4+ years. When I was younger, I hesitated to consume BL content because of the narrative that women romanticize or fetishize gay men. It felt wrong of me to read it not being a man. I don't believe this now, and I think anyone should be able to consume the content whether they are a man and/or gay or not as long as they are respecting the identities of the characters in the book. But I think that may have been a part in delaying accepting I am not a woman. . . . That took a *looong* time to figure out."

warm and accepting context. “As someone in the LGBTQ+ community,” a female-identifying participant (S38) attested, “I take all the representation I can get in [the] media. A lot of queer people I know often watch shows just because there’s a small scene with a background character who is a part of the community. I want [to see] representations where queer love is actually centered and is what the story revolves around, and BL provides that.” This representation is not only validating for queer audiences but can also be informative for others about the complexities and realities of queer experiences.

More than queerness, another interviewee (I4), a heterosexual woman, emphasized the meaningful messages they found through BL stories, stating that many BL narratives delve into nuanced portrayals of relationships, family dynamics, and societal issues, often offering insights that extend beyond the romantic plotline. This emotional depth, combined with relatable struggles and triumphs, makes BL media compelling to a broad audience. “I got introduced to BL by a random recommendation of a South Korean BL drama called *The Eighth Sense*. The story included so many more themes than exploring sexuality, such as navigating young adulthood, grappling with hierarchical social and speech systems in South Korea, as well as mental health,” one female survey respondent (S50) reported. Another individual (S38) agreed: “A lot of straight romances depict the woman as being the ‘damsel in distress’ who rarely stands up for herself. As a woman, I appreciate that BL takes away gender stereotypes and shows love that isn’t impacted by gender norms.” Certainly, one of the most significant aspects of BL media is its exploration of universal themes such as love, happiness, and personal identity. As one participant (I10) noted, BL conveys the message that “it’s okay whoever you love as long as you’re happy,” a sentiment that transcends cultural boundaries.

However, BL is not without its critics, especially related to representation issues, audience mismatches, and harmful tropes. One respondent (S39) pointed out the limitations of the medium: “I am a lesbian; therefore, I do not have the same experiences as gay people,” they claimed. “It is

more about reading other (fictional) queer experiences.” The fact that the BL genre originates from Asia might also pose challenges. “When it comes to the racial and ethnic identities of the men in [BL media], I do not align with them pretty much ever,” an informant (S21) claimed, “because I am white and Hispanic.”

While BL media is not explicitly created for queer audiences, this disjunction between intended and actual viewership can sometimes lead to mismatched expectations and subsequent disappointment.⁴¹ One of the interviewees (I6) argues that most BL content is tailored more for a straight female consumer, which can detract from its authenticity as a portrayal of queer relationships. Another (I4) explained their mixed feelings about BL and its relationship to real-life LGBTQ+ communities, emphasizing the gap between the idealized “pure emotional connections” frequently portrayed in BL stories and the “diverse” and at times challenging “realities of relationships that the LGBTQ+ community” actually faces. BL stories often prioritize romance and fantasy over truthful representations of queer experiences. After all, they are never meant to be authentic or realistic.

In some cases, BL stories might even reinforce harmful gender stereotypes. Some participants observed that early BL often perpetuated unhealthy dynamics, including the normalization of sexual assault (I6 and I9). Fortunately, more recent webtoons and manga like *Here U Are* (2017–2020) and *Sasaki to Miyano* (2016–2020) have shifted toward “healthier” narratives that pay attention to realism and thoughtful communication (I9). One interviewee (I3) further accentuated the importance of addressing real-world issues, noting that more nuanced, nonstereotypical portrayals in BL allow its readers and viewers to feel “seen or heard” in ways that validate their lived experiences. Notwithstanding these critiques, BL persists as a

41. Welker pointed out that Japanese BLs “links with homosexuality . . . were being denied, downplayed, or simply ignored significantly earlier in public discourse on *shōnen'ai*, *yaoi*’s predecessor.” See Welker, “Flower Tribes and Female Desire,” 224.

distinctive and meaningful space for transcultural queer meaning-making in America's heartland.

Engaging with the BL Imagined Community

Much like Anderson's concept of imagined communities—where shared cultural narratives, historically enabled by “print capitalism,” foster collective identity among strangers of a nation—BL fandom works through digitally mediated connections. Today's platforms, such as social media, streaming services, and online forums disseminating BL narratives allow fans, particularly in the Midwest, to imagine themselves as part of a transnational community. The geographic and cultural distance is not a problem, as these fans construct belonging through shared media consumption, bonding over stories that subvert local norms.

This digitally facilitated solidarity is evident in participant responses. Most discover BL through algorithmic recommendations or peer networks, often during middle school or early high school. Their journeys reflect how platforms not only distribute content but also cultivate affective ties—transforming isolated viewers into a self-aware community that transcends physical borders. For example, one respondent (I8) was introduced to BL by a friend in sixth grade, while another encountered BL content through YouTubers and online webtoon sites. “Prior to that, it was kind of just like shipping two male characters together without thinking too much about it,” one interviewee (I2) said. “And then I . . . was introduced to BL and . . . I really enjoyed it. And so, I went down the rabbit hole.” The role of peers was significant, which led to deeper engagement through recommended books or series (I2, I4, I7, and I8). Exposure to manga or videos of queer narratives during adolescence also sparked curiosity and exploration, as two participants reflect fondly on seeking out these stories in libraries in their youth (I5 and I6). They know they are not alone; there is a whole community out there.

Obviously, digital capitalism played a pivotal role in connecting fans and making BL content more accessible. Respondents noted engaging with BL through social media, webtoons, and fan-fiction sites. One participant (I10) remarked, "I saw a YouTube video of the Thai series *Two Moons* . . . and now I watch BL series often." On the other hand, finding BL materials in print or other physical formats can be challenging or expensive in the Midwest. "There are just very few other avenues available to me personally, or that I'm aware of," an interviewee (I4) explained. "It's much easier to look it up online than to go to a store in person and buy a paper book."

As American BL consumers turn to cyberspace for content, they also meet like-minded individuals, leading to the formation of vibrant communities regardless of one's physical location. Many trace their interest in BL back to fandom spaces, such as shipping male characters or reading fan fiction online, which served as a "pipeline" to original BL works (I1 and I3). "I find out about a lot [of BL] through social media . . . and engage with people there about different BL works," one interviewee (I3) said. "There wasn't really anybody in my personal life who was into that sort of thing." The geographic isolation intensifies online community bonds and stresses how limited local LGBTQ+ resources make digital BL spaces vital for Midwestern fans. A respondent (I7) remarked, "Being in BL communities allows me to talk to other friends, get updates on what's happening in the BL industry[,] and a way for me to also find new BLs to watch."

Others enjoy the sense of camaraderie through less direct forms of community participation. One informant (I2) described themselves as a "lurker," explaining, "I'll read and interact with this stuff, but I won't necessarily like, comment, or post my own." This highlights the inclusivity of fandom spaces, which accommodate both vocal contributors and quieter observers. Similarly, another respondent (I3) emphasized that even passive engagement, such as "just being an observer," can still count as involvement in the community, pointing to the positive and uplifting nature of such spaces.

For some respondents, the concept of fandom extends beyond BL communities, as they engage with queer representation in broader media contexts. One individual (I8) said, “I am in plenty of fandoms where we collectively decide certain characters are queer, even if the original media isn’t necessarily romance.” This perspective underscores the fluid boundaries of fandoms, demonstrating how members actively reconstruct meaning through queering and slashing mainstream narratives—a form of cocreative labor that engages actively and critically with LGBTQ+ representation.

Within the community, BL fans appreciate the transformative nature of fandom spaces, from reimagining characters in alternative settings to exploring embodied performances through cosplay. Engagement with BL is often motivated by specific works or creators. For instance, one respondent (I5) acknowledged their involvement with fandoms started with *The Untamed*, explaining that they followed artists and writers who produced fan content for the series and accordingly made new friends from different corners of the world. To some fans, BL serves as a creative muse. “I like to draw, I like to write and to create my own stories. BL really facilitated that kind of creation,” one interviewee (I3) maintained. “Community is another big thing, not just online, but also in real life,” they continued. “I’ve met lots of friends who share my interest and that has really given me a sense of security and belonging.”

Some responses, however, reveal hesitations about fandom participation, often stemming from personal circumstances or discomfort with the social dynamics within these BL spaces. The “shipping” and romanticization of BL couples can be fragile and fleeting as well. An interviewee (I7) shared that their involvement diminished when certain creators or performers moved on to other projects. “I was a part of a BL fandom until the actors went their separate ways to focus on their individual careers,” they remarked. “I haven’t been a part of another fandom, not because I had a bad experience or don’t want to see my favorite ‘ship’ part ways, but because I haven’t been able to find another fandom that I can connect with.”

Another respondent (I4) reflected on the idea of “connection” from a different angle: “I don’t have or have rarely encountered real-life friends who are openly LGBTQ, so my understanding of these topics largely comes from online sources.” This is rather common for Midwestern BL fans who are distant from coastal LGBTQ+ centers, and especially for those who come from more conservative or rural parts of the region. This sense of detachment from lived queer experiences underlines how fandom engagement is often swayed by external factors and heavily influenced by digital media and networks. Cyberspace itself remains contested, and for many Midwesterners, BL—whether for better or worse—serves as the only key to unlock this otherworldly realm of identity exploration and imagined community.

Escaping to the Fantastic Worlds of BL

Another prominent theme that emerged from our study is BL’s role as escapist fantasies. Our survey responses show that most participants engage with BL primarily for fun and entertainment. While some contributors stress the importance of grounding BL in authentic queer experiences, as previously discussed, others contend that BL doesn’t need to perfectly reflect reality—its fantastical settings and aesthetically pleasing elements offer a much-needed refuge from the struggles and difficulties of everyday life (I1 and I8). As one participant (S32) noted, “The BL I’m specifically drawn to has to do with fantasy most of the time, like *Heaven Official’s Blessing*, but I do like anything with a good plot that can distract me from reality.”

Artistic quality and storytelling are central to its appeal as a form of escapism. The intricate artistry often found in BL works, especially those originating from Japan, elevates the storytelling experience and draws consumers into the romantic and wondrous worlds being depicted. Creative world-building and imaginative settings—whether in fantasy realms or mystical backdrops—offer a form of escapism that many viewers and readers find irresistible. One respondent (I2) expressed their preference for fantasy

BL, noting how these stories provide “a whole world that you get to learn about and immerse yourself into,” even if they are not historically accurate or realistic. “I just like romance stories,” shared an asexual, male-identifying participant (S85), “and [BL] is a subgenre of queer romance in my eyes.”

Consuming romantic literature as an escape from harsh realities is nothing new. The rise of chick lit is a case in point.⁴² It is, hence, reasonable to draw parallels between young BL enthusiasts and readers of other romance genres, particularly those that explore racier, edgier, or more explicitly erotic themes. Digital technology has facilitated the exploration of media and literature with taboo topics. Online communities provide interactive outlets for readers, writers, and fans to discuss subjects that might be socially sensitive, encouraging open dialogues, reducing stigmas, and boosting creativity. For example, the widespread appeal of *Fifty Shades of Grey* can be attributed to how women engage with its fantasy of BDSM—bondage, domination, sadism, and masochism—to navigate and interpret the highly sexualized yet repressive cultural landscape they inhabit.⁴³

BL is no exception to this trend. One female respondent (S40) shared: “I primarily enjoy BL because it brings me happiness and offers an escape from reality, while also allowing me to support and normalize the LGBTQ+ community, much like one would when consuming traditional heterosexual romance content.” Another participant (S28) reflected on their connection to BL, stating, “Since I identify as a girl, I can freely read or watch these stories without feeling like the events in the narrative are happening to me.” In fact, a common thread among the responses is the preference for experiencing BL as an observer rather than inserting oneself into the story. Many fans relish the opportunity to immerse themselves in these narratives without feeling the need to personally identify with the characters.

42. Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (University of Virginia Press, 2011).

43. Melissa Click, “Fifty Shades of Postfeminism: Contextualizing Readers’ Reflections on the Erotic Romance Series,” in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 15–31.

BL media provides a unique lens through which female audiences can explore themes of gender and sexuality while maintaining a sense of emotional and psychological safety. The male identity and homosexual orientation of BL characters act as a protective shield for them.⁴⁴ Otomo contends that BL allows women to transcend the confines of the female body, offering a form of resistant escapism that brings forth a sanctuary from the pressures of heteronormative oppression.⁴⁵ The androgynous yet physically masculine portrayal of BL characters allows women to distance themselves from restrictive gender norms.⁴⁶ By immersing themselves in fantasies centered on male homoerotic relationships, they can explore and fulfill their desires without exposing themselves to personal vulnerability.

This sense of fantastical distance enhancing the enjoyment of BL is also evident in the preference for anime, which is inherently removed from reality. “I hate watching live-action romances,” one interviewee (I9) asserted. “I don’t really like watching it with real actors. I can’t explain why, but it freaks me out. Maybe it’s because I’m a hopeless romantic. . . . For me and some people I talk to, I think these ‘local Asian’ [BL] stories appeal to a ‘global’ audience due to the [anime] art.” The more distant and fantastic the BL media—whether through its animated form or cultural origins—the more pleasurable it seems to become, at least for some respondents. Here, BL’s cultural distance operates as what Muñoz might call a “queer utopian horizon”—a space where Midwestern fans, unmoored from dominant gender and LGBTQ+ discourses, can remix desire on their own terms.⁴⁷

44. Akiko Mizoguchi, “Reading and Living Yaoi: Male-Male Fantasy Narratives as Women’s Sexual Subculture in Japan” (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2008).

45. Rumi Otomo, “Politics of Utopia: Fantasy, Pornography, and Boys Love,” in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond*, ed. Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaïke, Katsuhiko Suganuma, and James Welker (University of Mississippi Press, 2015): 141–52.

46. Lin, “Breaking the Structural Silence,” 31–41; Kumiko Saito, “Desire in Subtext: Gender, Fandom, and Women’s Male-Male Homoerotic Parodies in Contemporary Japan,” *Mechademia* 6, no. 1 (2011): 171–91; Welker, “Flower Tribes and Female Desire,” 211–28.

47. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009).

Although BL media often incorporates Asian settings, literary references, and thematic diversity that can serve as a window into its culture of origin, its potential as a cultural educator is frequently constrained by its fictional and fantastical elements. While BL offers glimpses into Asian languages and cultures, many readers consume it simply as a form of entertainment. The audiences surely recognize its non-American cultural components; however, they usually remain detached from engaging with these elements on a deeper level, prioritizing the enjoyment of the narrative or characters over intellectual exploration (I4 and I9).

BL's foreignness—its geographic and cultural remove—enables “fantasy’s subversive function,” allowing audiences to reimagine desire beyond local constraints.⁴⁸ The less they know about the background, the more malleable and pleasurable the fantasy becomes. All participants consume BL materials through English translations or subtitles—therefore not experiencing it firsthand. Less than half (42.9 percent) of the respondents expressed interest in learning the original language of the media they engage with; more than a quarter (28.6 percent) said they were not interested, and an equal amount (28.6 percent) were unsure. Moreover, many participants sidestepped the question regarding the genre’s political or social impact and did not provide an answer. It is thus reasonable to speculate that linguistic divergence and social detachment, in addition to the male-male “gender” difference, further contribute to the fantastical quality of Asian BL media to the Midwestern consumers, enhancing its capacity to provide an escape from reality.

Critics within the group were alarmed by the problematic and unrealistic depiction of a rosy and dreamy BL world. An informant (I7) described the genre as merely “partial representation,” owing to its commercialization and tendency to prioritize entertainment over authenticity. Another (I3) agreed: “I feel [that] between the fictional and real world, BL in some ways exists within its own kind of sphere within Japanese culture, and then it doesn’t leave that bubble.” In the ostensibly all-loving BL universe, the

48. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (Methuen, 1981).

intersectionality of race, ethnicity, class, religion, and other identities is often conspicuously absent or superficially addressed. This lack of depth in exploring the complexities of lived experiences can result in narratives that feel one-dimensional (I3).

Yet perhaps it is exactly what BL is supposed to do. A participant (I4) doubts the necessity of embedding real-world issues into fiction, preferring narratives that provide “entirely joyful” diversion. To a gay male identifying individual (S68), “BL offers some escapism, finding romance for two men in real life can be rather difficult.” BL is their fairy tale. Sometimes a whimsical escape to the “queer utopia” is all that one asks of a story. “BL to me personally doesn’t . . . have a meaning but it’s my comfort zone,” an interviewee (I7) stated: “It’s something that has become a part of my happiness.”

Despite its shortcomings, BL remains a promising catalyst for curiosity, inspiring some audiences to explore languages, traditions, and histories beyond the surface, thereby fostering cross-cultural interest even amid varying degrees of representational accuracy. A queer transgender man (S88) opined: “BL treatment of the LGBTQ+ community is far more advanced than in the United States,” challenging the assumption that Asia is backward and America is progressive. Other participants cite the cultural information offered by historical BL, noting its incorporation of classical vocabulary, traditional musical instruments, period costumes, and martial arts. This blend of “exotic” elements not only enhances the narrative appeal but also positions historical BL as a potential cultural ambassador, showcasing the richness of heritage in a way that is both engaging and educational to a broader audience (I2 and I7).

Ultimately, BL’s role as a representation of a more “realistic” Asia and “genuine” queer experiences is defined by its dual purpose: to entertain and to advocate. While its escapist nature offers an idealized Asia and refreshing reprieve from the challenges of queer life, its impact depends on how thoughtfully it navigates the intersection of fantasy and realism. As an informant (I6) aptly puts it, BL has “a certain level of legwork inherent to the

medium,” and its future relevance may hinge on its ability to meet both the narrative and advocacy needs of its consumers.

Conclusion

For Midwestern audiences, Asian BL emerges as a genre that deeply resonates by challenging traditional norms, prioritizing emotional depth, and providing pathways for self-reflection. BL narratives often resist rigid boundaries, allowing consumers to embrace the ceaseless flux that defines life itself. Whether experienced as a means of understanding individual identity, a celebration of shared passion, or a form of escapism, BL media fosters inclusivity, community, and meaningful connection. Beyond its entertainment value, it holds substantial cultural and social significance—especially for the young American consumers in our study, where queer representation is limited or marginalized.

BL’s portrayal of unconventional romances serves as a powerful vehicle for normalization and visibility, even if such representation was not its original intent or primary target market. These faraway and fantastic Asian narratives are repurposed by Midwestern audiences not only to validate personal experiences but also to disrupt prevailing heteronormative structures, envisioning relationships liberated from traditional gender expectations. Through its diverse stories, BL not only entertains but also educates, sparking critical conversations about equality, acceptance, and the evolving nature of both individual and community. Above all, love knows no limit or boundaries. Participants often emphasized the genre’s depiction of “love without gender” and its “pro-LGBTQ+ perspectives,” appreciating its role in presenting “a positive picture of sexual minorities” and its potential to address broader societal issues.

None of this would have been possible without digital media’s revolutionary role. Online platforms have democratized access to BL content, enabling a technological shift that has transformed the genre from a niche

interest into a dynamic discursive space. Global fans now engage with these narratives, connect with like-minded communities, and participate in transnational dialogues about gender, sexuality, and cultural diversity. Thus, BL media rose above its commercial entertainment value and soft power potential to serve as a generative force for social awareness, cultural exchange, and personal growth.

Situated at multiple distances—geographically far from its Asian production contexts, culturally separate from coastal LGBTQ+ epicenters, and intellectually removed from urban academic discourse about the genre—Midwestern engagement with BL produces a particular transcultural freedom, enabling the participants to explore themes of identity and desire with less influence from real-world limitations and societal expectations. It also transcends passive viewership, constituting instead a form of active cultural labor, as audiences strategically leverage BL's cultural distance as both a protective buffer against local constraints and a conceptual toolkit for reimagining identity and community.

Appendix A

Demographic Information of the Survey Participants

ID	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation
S1	N/A	N/A	N/A
S2	18–20	F	Queer
S3	18–20	M	Heterosexual/straight
S4	18–20	F	Bisexual
S5	21–23	F	Bisexual
S6	18–20	F	Asexual
S7	18–20	F	Polysexual/pansexual
S8	18–20	F	Not sure
S9	18–20	F	Bisexual
S10	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S11	18–20	F	Bisexual
S12	18–20	F	Bisexual
S13	18–20	M	Heterosexual/straight
S14	18–20	F	Asexual
S15	18–20	Nonbinary	Asexual
S16	18–20	F	Bisexual
S17	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S18	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S19	18–20	M	Heterosexual/straight
S20	18–20	M	Polysexual/pansexual
S21	18–20	Transgender man	Queer
S22	18–20	F	Bisexual
S23	18–20	M	Bisexual
S24	21–23	M	Bisexual
S25	21–23	F	Bisexual
S26	18–20	M	Homosexual/lesbian/gay
S27	18–20	F	Bisexual
S28	18–20	F	Not sure
S29	18–20	M	Bisexual
S30	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S31	18–20	Nonbinary	Asexual
S32	18–20	F	Bisexual
S33	18–20	F	Not sure
S34	21–23	F	Heterosexual/straight
S35	18–20	Nonbinary	Bisexual
S36	21–23	F	Not sure
S37	18–20	F	Bisexual
S38	18–20	F	Unlabeled
S39	18–20	F	Homosexual/lesbian/gay
S40	18–20	F	Not sure
S41	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight

(Continued)

Appendix A (Continued)

ID	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation
S42	18–20	F	Bisexual
S43	18–20	F	Bisexual
S44	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S45	18–20	F	Asexual
S46	18–20	M	Homosexual/lesbian/gay
S47	18–20	F	Bisexual
S48	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S49	18–20	F	Homosexual/lesbian/gay
S50	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S51	18–20	M	Homosexual/lesbian/gay
S52	21–23	F	Heterosexual/straight
S53	21–23	M	Heterosexual/straight
S54	21–23	M	Heterosexual/straight
S55	21–23	M	Heterosexual/straight
S56	18–20	Transgender woman	Heterosexual/straight
S57	18–20	M	Heterosexual/straight
S58	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S59	< 18	M	Heterosexual/straight
S60	18–20	Transgender woman	Polysexual/pansexual
S61	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S62	> 23	F	Heterosexual/straight
S63	18–20	F	Bisexual
S64	21–23	F	Bisexual
S65	18–20	genderqueer + trans	Queer
S66	< 18	F	Heterosexual/straight
S67	21–23	Nonbinary	Not sure
S68	18–20	M	Homosexual/lesbian/gay
S69	21–23	F	Asexual
S70	< 18	F	Bisexual
S71	18–20	M	Heterosexual/straight
S72	< 18	F	Polysexual/pansexual
S73	18–20	M	Heterosexual/straight
S74	18–20	F	Asexual
S75	18–20	M	Homosexual/lesbian/gay
S76	18–20	Genderqueer or genderfluid	Homosexual/lesbian/gay
S77	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S78	18–20	M	Heterosexual/straight
S79	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S80	18–20	M	Heterosexual/straight
S81	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight
S82	18–20	Transgender man	Bisexual
S83	21–23	M	Heterosexual/straight
S84	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight

(Continued)

Appendix A (Continued)

ID	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation
S85	21–23	M	Asexual
S86	18–20	F	Bisexual
S87	21–23	F	Heterosexual/straight
S88	18–20	Transgender man	Queer
S89	> 23	M	Homosexual/lesbian/gay

Appendix B
Demographic Information of the Interview Participants

ID	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race & Ethnicity
I1	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight	White
I2	18–20	F	Queer	Biracial/mixed race
I3	18–20	F	Bisexual	White
I4	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight	Asian
I5	21–23	F	Heterosexual/straight	Biracial/mixed race
I6	18–20	M	Queer	White
I7	18–20	F	Heterosexual/straight	Asian
I8	18–20	F	Queer	White
I9	>23	F	Heterosexual/straight	White
I10	21–23	Nonbinary	Not sure	White

Appendix C

Online Survey Questions

1. What is your age in years?

- ☐ < 18
- ☐ 18–20
- ☐ 21–23
- ☐ > 23

2. What is your gender?

- ☐ M
- ☐ F
- ☐ Genderqueer or genderfluid
- ☐ Nonbinary
- ☐ Transgender man
- ☐ Transgender woman
- ☐ Two-spirit
- ☐ Other _____

3. What is your sexual orientation?

- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Heterosexual/straight
- ☐ Homosexual/lesbian/gay
- ☐ Polysexual/pansexual
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Not sure
- ☐ Other: _____

4. Have you ever heard of BL materials, such as manga, webtoons, TV series, films, and other media, from Asia?

☐ No

☐ Yes

5. Have you ever engaged with BL materials from Asia yourself?

☐ No

☐ Yes

(If you answer yes to the above question, please continue with the following questions. If you answer no, you may stop here. Thank you for your participation!)

6. At what age did you start to engage with BL materials?

☐ < 12

☐ 12–15

☐ 16–18

☐ 19–22

☐ > 22

7. How intensely are you a BL fan?

☐ Not at all

☐ A bit

☐ Quite

☐ A lot

☐ Extremely

☐ Other: _____

8. Do you create any BL works yourself?

☐ No

☐ Yes

9. BL materials from which cultural origin do you usually read/watch?

[Check all that apply]

- ☐ China
- ☐ Japan
- ☐ Philippines
- ☐ South Korea
- ☐ Taiwan
- ☐ Thailand
- ☐ Other: _____

10. Besides the story/characters, are you also interested in the culture(s) of the BL materials' place of origin that you engage with?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Not sure

11. Are you learning or have you learned the native language of the BL materials that you engage with?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Maybe (interested in doing so)

12. What percentage of your spare time do you spend on BL?

- ☐ 1–20%
- ☐ 21–40%
- ☐ 41–60%
- ☐ 61–80%
- ☐ 81–100%

13. The reason(s) why you start watching/reading a BL series/film/literature include: [Check all that apply]

- ☐ Family member(s) recommend it
- ☐ Friend(s) recommend it
- ☐ It's recommended to you on social media or streaming platform
- ☐ It's trending on social media
- ☐ Your favorite celebrity or influencer talking about it
- ☐ You like the creator, author, and/or actor
- ☐ You generally enjoy the popular culture of the BL's place of origin regardless of its genre
- ☐ You just randomly come across it yourself
- ☐ Other: _____

14. What are some of the main reason(s) that you enjoy BL genres/materials? [Check all that apply]

- ☐ Conventional heterosexual romance is boring or outmoded
- ☐ Feelings and emotions have priority over traditional gender
- ☐ Romantic partners are equal in the relationship
- ☐ There are no or minimal gender differences in it
- ☐ It highlights love without gender and pro-LGBTQ+ perspectives
- ☐ It promotes equal rights
- ☐ It breaks social taboos
- ☐ It's entertaining and fun
- ☐ It evokes deep emotions in me
- ☐ It portrays a positive picture of sexual minorities
- ☐ Its depiction of romanticism and eroticism is closer to my own preferences
- ☐ It's a fantasy/fairytale from another culture/country
- ☐ It helps me better understand my life events
- ☐ It provides an escape from reality
- ☐ I like particular actor and/or CP
- ☐ Other: _____

We'd be grateful if you'd explain your answer to us:

15. I engage with BL as an outsider “looking in” on the characters.

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Very Often
- ☐ Always

We'd be grateful if you'd explain your answer to us:

16. When I engage with BL, I put myself in the place of the characters.

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Very Often
- ☐ Always

We'd be grateful if you'd explain your answer to us:

17. I discuss my interest in BL with people online.

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Very Often
- ☐ Extensively

18. I discuss my interest in BL with friends I know in person.

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Very Often
- ☐ Extensively

19. I discuss my interest in BL with members of my family.

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Very Often
- ☐ Extensively

20. I am or have been a part of a BL fandom, discussion group, or community.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other: _____

We'd be grateful if you'd explain your answer to us:

Appendix D

Interview Questions

1. How did your interest in BL first begin?
2. Through which platform(s) or medium(s)—such as anime, manga, webtoons, web series, TV series, films, and/or fan works—do you typically engage with BL materials, and mostly from which places of origin (e.g., China, Japan, Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand)? Do(es) “digital” platform(s) play a role in your engagement? Why or why not?
3. What types/themes of BL content do you enjoy the most? In your opinion, why do you think these “local Asian” stories can reach and appeal to the “global” audience (who might or might not know about the cultures or languages of these Asian places)?
4. What draws you to engage with BL, and what does it mean to you personally?
5. Are you a part of a BL fandom/community? Why or why not?
6. How do you perceive BL as a form of LGBTQIA+ representation? In your opinion, how often should BL address real-life LGBTQIA+ issues?
7. Did you learn more about the sociocultural, historical, or political ideas/knowledge from BL materials? If so, can you share specific examples—such as a particular BL title and the information you learned from it?
8. Do you think BL accurately represents the culture of its origin? Has BL influenced your views on those cultures or societies, either positively or negatively? Are you interested in learning more about the places and cultures where your favorite BL materials originate?
9. If you could change one thing about BL, what would it be?
10. Are there any personal stories or experiences related to BL that you would like to share with us?

