



Article

“I Can See Myself in Them, but They Are Not Me”: Asian Boys’ Love (BL) Drama and Gay Male Viewers

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Abstract: Recent years have witnessed significant growth in research on the phenomenon of Asian Boys’ Love (BL) dramas, a new entertainment genre that features male characters who engage in same-sex love relations. However, much of this research has focused on, among others, heterosexual female viewers in terms of their knowledge of BL and their consumption patterns and motives. The present study aims at addressing this knowledge gap by gathering the views of gay male viewers regarding the BL that holds a place in their lives. In-depth interviews were conducted with six gay-identified participants living in Malaysia, with the study informed and guided by the framework of audience uses and appropriations of BL, and with the data collected and analyzed following the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) procedures. The findings revealed, on the one hand, polarized consumption patterns and, on the other hand, homogeneous motives, and reasons for consuming BL, including pure escapism, self-identification, and pure entertainment. The findings also revealed the participants’ views on whether the BL drama represented their identity and the real-life struggles of being a gay man in a country where homosexuality is still condemned and made illegal. These findings have implications that are relevant to the discussion of the role of the homoerotic media as a source of identity and livelihood among gay men.

Keywords: boys’ love; drama; audience; gay; Malaysia



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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a phenomenon called “Boys’ Love” (BL) that has emerged in East Asia and subsequently spread globally. It has its roots in the Japanese yaoi manga, which refers to comics or graphic novels depicting same-sex love relations between men that are created by women authors for female readers (Mitchell 2020). This unique phenomenon is driven by the immense popularity of Asian BL drama series produced in both television and web formats by top producing countries such as Thailand and Taiwan. By the same token, Asian BL dramas are consumed by viewers of different ages, genders, and sexual orientations for several reasons, including the romances between male characters that are played by “handsome actors with good on-screen chemistry” (Wong 2021), and the easy accessibility of these drama series via “smartphones and social media” (Sukthongthong and Bunyavejchewin 2019) as well as free-to-view digital platforms (e.g., YouTube) and Video-on-Demand (VOD) portals (e.g., Netflix, LINE TV) (Campus 2021). Most importantly, Asian BL dramas have been found to have an impact on viewers (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning in particular) through their consumption of BL, ranging from how this entertainment genre has helped them to accept their identity and sexuality (Mitchell 2020) to how it affords comfort and solace for those living in countries where homosexuality and other forms of gender and sexuality are still condemned and made illegal (Wong 2021). Malaysia is a case in point, given the ways lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) individuals and communities are being treated. Based on the previous research mentioned above, the study presented in