

The boys' love phenomenon: A literature review

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Abstract: The genre of boys' love has become increasingly popular over the past two decades, and has quickly become a global phenomenon in media across the world. This Japanese genre, which portrays the romantic love of two men, often in a sexually explicit form, appears in anime, manga, video games, and textual and visual pieces created by fans. The growing interest of young female enthusiasts in male homoerotic narratives inspired the formation of large fan communities in the mid-2000s and received increasing attention from academics. A large number of theoretical essays, qualitative and quantitative research articles emerged, focusing on either boys' love media or the fan culture associated with it. In this paper, we provide a review of boys' love literature based on genre-specific characteristics, fan culture and motivations, critiques from gay society, and the possible social implications of boys' love media in an intercultural context.

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Introduction to the boys' love phenomenon

The increasing popularity of boys' love media has received growing attention in academic fields over the past two decades, resulting in a wealth of exploratory studies focusing on either the media or the fan community (Galbraith 2009). "Boys' love" is an umbrella term for Japan-specific media – primarily anime and manga –, which thematize the romantic love of two men, often in a sexually explicit form. The representation of male homosexuality appears in video games, movies, series, and other original or fan-created visual (fan art) and textual pieces (fan fiction) (McHarry 2011). Boys' love originates from shōjo manga in the 1970s, created for young women, which depicted romantic encounters, mainly between heterosexual couples. However, representations of male homosexuality began to appear in these stories, attracting female enthusiasts (McLelland and Welker 2015, 4). The growing popularity of stories centering on male homosexual encounters contributed to the independence of this emerging genre, which was later divided into two subgenres. Shōnen-ai, which literally means "boy love", portrays the romantic love between two men by focusing on emotional aspects, whereas yaoi[1] presents male homoeroticism in a sexually explicit form (Welker 2015, 42).

Stories thematizing the romantic love between two men have always been popular among young women not only in Japan but also in North America and several European countries (e.g., Germany, Italy), where movies and books depicting homosexual romance attracted many fans in the late 1970s (Welker 2011, 211-228). However, American gay movies and books never managed to create as expansive a space for fans as boys' love did. Slash,[2] which can be considered as the Western counterpart of boys' love, emerged in the 1970s in North America (Saitō 2011, 172), and established an active fan culture. Nevertheless, slash communities remained relatively small, closed groups that did not wish to draw attention from outsiders due to copyright concerns in respect of their non-original works (Thorn 2004, 174). By contrast, the growing popularity of anime and manga outside Japan resulted in boys' love transcending the boundaries of the manga industry, and related materials (e.g. video games, visual novels) gained the attention of Western fans in the mid-2000s. The positive reception of boys' love, which preserved most of its cultural specific features in the international adaptations, inspired the formation of large, online fan communities (Thorn 2004, 174). As the Internet became more accessible, manga fans with this special interest in boys' love could meet online and contribute to the creation of fan-made pieces (e.g. fan fiction, fan art), establishing large, international collaborations (Thorn 2004, 174).

The global boys' love phenomenon consists of three components: professional and amateur creators, consumers, and boys' love materials (Mizoguchi 2003, 49-75).The extensive online fan communities and their wide range of activities provided an active,

international background for this phenomenon, and publishers and policy-makers also contributed in the comics market. According to Mizoguchi's estimation, there were approximately one million Japanese boys' love fans in the mid-2000s (2008, 44), whereas Thorn reported that hundreds of thousands of women had been engaged with the boys' love phenomenon (2004, 174).

Parallel to the global expansion of the boys' love manga industry and fan activities, further subgenres emerged due to the growing interest in male homoerotic stories. For instance, "shōta"[3] became popular in Japan, which portrays pre-adolescent boys in sexually charged situations as objects of attraction (McLelland 2005a, 15). However, this subgenre received mixed reception from boys' love fans, since the portrayal of underage boys in erotic scenes was strongly associated with child abuse (McLelland 2005a, 2). In contrast, the male counterpart of yaoi, termed "bara"[4], was appreciated more among sexual minorities, although it never managed to transcend the boundaries of gay culture (McLelland 2000, 136). Bara materials are created by and for gay men, and feature masculine characters in more realistic story settings. The underlying reasons for men and women showing an interest in male homosexual narratives are sharply different. Bara is primarily related to gay culture (McLelland 2000, 35-136), whereas its female-oriented equivalent, boys' love, has created a unique space for women to share a collective fantasy in which they can dissociate themselves from gender constructs and social restrictions (Hori 2013).

As a consequence of the global popularity of this genre, the boys' love phenomenon has also attracted the attention of academics. The English-language literature consists of theoretical studies and qualitative research in the fields of Japanese and East Asian studies, communication and media studies, cultural anthropology, and gender studies (Madill 2010). Only a few studies have conducted empirical research on large samples using quantitative methods (e.g. Pagliassotti 2008a). This paper provides an overview of the international literature on boys' love from the past twenty years regarding genre-specific characteristics and tropes, fan culture and motivations, critics, and social implications.

The genre-specific characteristics of boys' love

Boys' love works combine traditional (e.g. forbidden love) and genre-specific (e.g. "rape as an expression of love") narratives which reflect the conventional (yet undeniably problematic) tropes of heterosexual romantic literature, with the exception that this love occurs between two men (Mizoguchi 2003, 56). In the majority of cases, boys' love stories depict the first encounter of characters who fall in love with each other at first sight. Following this, certain difficulties (e.g. sexual orientation concerns, coming out to family members and friends, or past negative experiences) begin to dominate the narrative. Relationship anxieties, terminal illness, rape, incest, and other dramatic themes are often found in this genre (Madill 2011). The portrayal of such psychological traumas in boys' love stories has a special meaning for the fans of this genre, as will be discussed later in this section.

The visual representation of these stories (e.g. manga, fan art) reflects a particular aesthetic and idealistic design (Madill 2011). The early stories introduced European protagonists in idealized foreign countries (Bollmann 2010, 43). This tendency has,

however, changed in the past two decades, and the romantic encounters have been placed in a Japanese cultural setting.

General boys' love stories feature "bishōnen" characters (i.e. beautiful boys), who have exceptional physical characteristics (McLelland and Welker 2015, 6). A common couple in boys' love consists of a dominant, masculine character called "seme", and a submissive, feminine partner, the "uke" (Bauwens-Sugimoto 2011). A considerable proportion of fans prefer the uke over the seme, which can be attributed to the similarities with female gender roles that allow female fans to identify with male characters (Kamm 2013).

According to the theoretical work of Mizoguchi (2008, 152), general genre-specific tropes are (1) rape as a representation of overflowing love, (2) preserved heterosexual identity of the protagonists after being involved in homosexual activities, (3) seme-uke roles based on physical appearance, (4) fixed roles that cannot be reversed, (5) sexual encounters always involving anal intercourse. However, Kamm (2013) points out that a number of stories do not include the latter two tropes. He argues that roles can be reversed at certain points in the story or with the introduction of a new character, and the depth of a relationship can be illustrated through different types of sexual interaction. In addition, intense emotions, never-ending love, monogamy and loyalty are also important tropes in most boys' love narratives (Fujimoto 2007a, 63-68).

It is common for the uke to become a rape victim by the seme or by a third person in boys' love (Mizoguchi 2008, 152) stories. In spite of the fact that rape is a serious societal problem, the boys' love genre provides a positive reframing of sexual assault and victimization. As Hagio remarks, the (aesthetic) illustration of rape in a more supportive environment may help boys' love fans cope with similar experiences by providing a more controllable and positive situation in the narratives to relive their own traumas (2005). The seme rapes the uke in their first sexual interaction, which begins with the resistance of the submissive character. However, the seme cannot suppress the overwhelming emotions he has for his partner, which were concealed until that point (Mizoguchi 2008, 151). The uke finally accepts his devotion and expresses his approval, which leads to the satisfaction of both partners (Orbaugh 2010, 181). After this, a deep emotional bond begins to form between the protagonists, which might be contradictory in light of the fact that the uke was raped by the seme previously, but this rape is positively reframed in boys' love stories, and indicates the beginning of a passionate relationship. Indeed, same-sex relationships are portrayed as particularly deep and honest, and the partners are shown to be unconditionally supportive. For instance, if the uke is being raped by a third person, the seme provides psychological support for him (Mizoguchi 2008, 154). In reverse, if the seme struggles with the outcomes of an early life trauma (e.g. memories of child abuse), a common trope in boys' love narratives, the uke provides him with help to overcome difficulties (Gibbs 2012, 186).

The prioritization of emotions over traditional social norms, gender constructs, financial advantage and social expectations is significant in the genre of boys' love (Fujimoto 2007a, 63-68). The male protagonists are usually heterosexual men in a relationship with a woman (Mizoguchi 2000, 193-211) who suddenly fall in love with each other when they first meet. Interestingly, the protagonists are not labeled "gay", even after being involved in a homosexual relationship (Mizoguchi 2010, 157). Their social environment maintains their heterosexual image, attributing their acquaintance and strong emotional involvement to an accidental coincidence that could happen to anyone (Mizoguchi 2008, 132). The two main characters do not consider themselves homosexual either (Galbraith 2011, 213).

McLelland and Welker remarked that narratives focusing on the positive aspects of homosexuality, which avoid the presentation of stigmatization and sexual identity concerns, may suggest that it is easy to come out as gay in Japan where these stories are set (2015, 3), although theoretical (Mizoguchi 2008, 32) and empirical works (Pagliassotti 2008a) point out that the majority of boys' love fans are aware that these stories do not reflect social reality. Saitō also emphasizes that boys' love characters and settings are not representative of the real lives of gay men, but are constructed elements of a collective female fantasy (2007, 245) which has developed in the online world.

The boys' love fan community

The global accessibility of the Internet played a significant role in the international popularity of the boys' love genre and the formation of online boys' love fan communities in the mid-2000s, when boys' love anime and manga were introduced to a Western audience (Thorn 2004, 173). Since then there has been a growing interest in scanned and translated boys' love manga among young women (2004, 174). Consequently, large fan communities of female enthusiasts have developed. These anonymous, closed groups allow members to express their appreciation for bishōnen characters involved in homosexual romances (2004, 173-174).

"Fujoshi" is a commonly used expression for female fans of boys' love. The Japanese term means "rotten girls", which refers to fans' sexually-driven reading practices (Galbraith 2011, 212). Based on the prevalence of heterosexual women in fans' conversations on gay-themed magazines in the 1970s, it was assumed that the vast majority of female boys' love fans were heterosexual. However, empirical research conducted in the mid-2000s did not support this presumption. In 2008, Levi (2009, 154) found that only around 58% of North American respondents (86% female) were heterosexual; while Pagliassotti (2008a) reported that 47% of English-speaking European fans (89% female) and 62% of Italian participants (82% female) were heterosexual. Zsila, Bernáth and Inántsy-Pap (2015, 60) recently found that 66% of Hungarian boys' love fans were heterosexual (91% female). Moreover, Lunsing (2006) and Welker (2006, 841-870) also emphasized that lesbian fans were vital members of the boys' love fan community in the mid-2000s.

The vast majority of fans (93%) are both creators and consumers (Pagliassotti 2008a). Age difference, level of education and social status are insignificant in the social community of boys' love enthusiasts, and there is no clear distinction between professional and amateur creators (Mizoguchi 2008, 336-350).

It is common for boys' love fans to reinterpret general communication signs as homosexual affections (Galbraith 2011, 221). This mechanism was described by Galbraith under the term "rotten filter" (2011, 221), whereas Meyer used terms such as "yaoi-eye" and "yaoi glasses" to describe this perceptual process (2010, 232). It is common for female fans to view the world through their "rotten filter" and to imagine homosexual encounters resulting from sexually neutral objects or interactions, although imagination and reality are adequately separated and coexistent in their everyday lives (Saitō 2007, 245). They consider non-fujoshi as "normals", and themselves as "abnormals" for having this fascination with homosexual men (Galbraith 2011, 221).

“Playing gender” (Thorn 2004, 176) and experiencing sexuality in the safe confines of fantasy play a significant role in this phenomenon. Galbraith (2009) argues that boys’ love fans are always seeking “moe”, which could be defined as a strong emotional response to fictional characters. Moe is considered by Galbraith to be the most important motive for creating and sharing boys’ love materials. According to Galbraith, “moe talk” is a common activity in boys’ love fan communities. Moe talk is an affective conversation about fictional characters and couplings that evoke moe in fans (2015, 158). Two related terms should be mentioned in connection with Galbraith’s work. The first is “transgressive intimacy”, which is strongly related to the dynamism of the “rotten filter”, as it refers to romantic and erotic potentials that are perceived in sexually neutral verbal or nonverbal communication between men, and are screened out by boys’ love fans’ rotten filter after being detected (Galbraith 2011, 213). By contrast, “nioi-kei”[5] materials purposely contain hints of homosexual affection in order to be detected by fans (Aoyama 2013, 66).

Yaoi role-play is a popular social activity among boys’ love fans, in which two or more participants engage in a virtual, mostly chat-like sexual interaction with each other, playing the roles of gay lovers (Galbraith 2011, 227). The majority of fans have preferred roles, character types and settings, and seek role-play partners in the form of advertisements in boys’ love fan communities. The seme-uke roles, physical traits of both men, and situational characteristics are described in these advertisements. Mizoguchi calls these fans “virtual lesbians” for engaging in sexual role-plays with each other in order to act out male homoerotic fantasies (2008, 339). Furthermore, the author considers the community of boys’ love fans a sexual minority according to the way that they communicate with each other using fantasies of male homosexuality (2010, 155).

The underlying motivations behind participating in fan activities related to the genre of boys’ love have been examined in qualitative research (e.g. Chou 2010, 78-90; Pagliassotti 2008b). This has provided us with a deeper knowledge of the global boys’ love phenomenon, and helped to draw a more nuanced picture of the function and importance of this genre for the fans.

The motivation behind the boys’ love phenomenon

According to the results of qualitative research conducted on a sample of Taiwanese boys’ love fans, the main motivations behind creating and consuming boys’ love were linked to its entertaining, inspiring and sexually arousing characteristics (Chou 2010, 78). These motives were also found in Pagliassotti’s research, who systematically categorized fans’ responses based on theoretical considerations (2008b). As a result, she identified ten distinct motivational dimensions. The “*Pure*” *love without gender* dimension comprises responses emphasizing that boys’ love characters express their love for each other regardless of gender and related social expectations. *Pro-gay attitude/forbidden & transgressive love* contains responses emphasizing that boys’ love promotes supportive attitudes toward gay men, since these stories point out that the love of same-sex couples have for one another is not so different from the feelings heterosexual couples have: only sexual preferences are distinct. The *Identification/self-analysis* dimension was important for those fans who wished to gain a deeper knowledge of themselves, their emotional reactions

and sexual desires. This motive also appeared in Penley's (1992, 484) and Suzuki's arguments (1998, 243). *Melodramatic/emotional elements* attracted those fans who wished to read or view stories that evoked strong emotions in them. The *Dislike of standard romances/shōjo* factor referred to those who disliked heterosexual romance stories due to their perceived schematic structure and one-dimensional characters, whereas other respondents pointed out that they found pornography inappropriate for themselves due to its explicit portrayal of sexuality. A *female-oriented romantic/erotic genre* was an important motive for those who found this genre closer to their tastes than other romantic genres, since boys' love is created by and for women, and authors pay careful attention to the emotional impact of slightly erotic homosexual representations on female fans. The *Pure escapism/lack of reality* dimension reflected responses emphasizing that boys' love helps readers escape from real problems, illustrates fictional characters and settings that expand the imagination of fans, and helps readers forget about real life. The appreciation for *Art and aesthetics* in boys' love materials also appeared in Chou's study (2010, 87) as a motivation. The *Pure entertainment* factor comprised responses that focused on the entertaining and relaxing characteristics of boys' love media. Finally, several fans were motivated to read boys' love manga because they found it *Arousing/sexually titillating*.

Theoretical research in the field of boys' love studies has revealed that the creation of the genre was highly associated with gender issues (e.g. Welker 2011; Fujimoto 2007b; Nagaïke and Sukanuma 2013). Boys' love is often considered to be a critical response to a patriarchal society (Welker 2011, 223), and an escapist genre rooted in dissatisfaction with traditional gender roles and related social expectations (Kamm 2013). According to this, boys' love characters are considered to be representations of the ideal self-image of those women who feel that the socially constructed gender system is not appropriate for them (Fujimoto 2004, 86) due to perceived inequality in power and social hierarchy (Welker 2011, 223). In contrast, boys' love stories equalize power (Chou 2010, 88) by constructing idealized male characters with a female soul (Fujimoto 2004, 86). Female fans can therefore dissociate themselves from restrictive gender expectations by identifying with a gender construct provided in boys' love narratives that is more appropriate to their needs (Welker 2011, 223).

Thematic stories often contain dramatic themes such as early-life traumas (Bollmann 2010, 44) and gender-related problems (e.g. relationship anxieties rooted in sexual identity dilemmas) that represent women's collective and individual struggles (Welker 2011, 223). However, these concerns are presented in a supportive and positive form (e.g. rape blame does not exist in boys' love), contributing to a potentially more positive reframing of fans' personal experiences (Mizoguchi 2008, 154-155). As Mizoguchi (2008, 84-86) explains, the visual representation "constitutes the comic readers' psychological reality" instead of the real content. Nevertheless, a number of boys' love fans may never be able to overcome their problems through fantasy, and thus they avoid stories including certain scenarios that are close to their personal experiences (e.g. rape) (2008, 32).

There is a social expectation toward women in Japan and in several European countries that women should be chaste and repress erotic thoughts. Boys' love allows them to develop sexual fantasies and to express their desires in the form of creative works and social activities (Galbraith 2011, 213-216). They can participate in sexual experiences within the safe confines of fantasy without any real consequences (Früh 2003, 27-56), and in a closed, female-dominated community in which members do not have to restrict or censor

their erotic thoughts (Fujimoto 2007b, 36-47). Since the sexual interaction takes place between two men, and thus erotic thoughts are projected onto male characters, female fans can dissociate themselves from their female desires that cause tension, given that it contravenes socially constructed gender expectations (Fujimoto 2007b, 36-47; 2004, 87). However, thematizing male homosexuality in women's fiction is widely accepted in Japan, since these texts are considered to be part of women's sexual culture (McLelland and Yoo 2007, 18). The acceptance of male homoeroticism is deeply rooted in the history of homosexual culture in Japan. Indeed, homosexual practices are intertwined with several Japanese traditions, and a complex system of age-structured homosexual customs called "shudō" persisted through several historical periods (Pflugfelder 1997, 26). For instance, this custom established a deep emotional and personal relationship between samurai warriors and apprentices as part of the mentorship and training process in becoming a warrior (Leupp 1999, 53-54). Restrictions on homosexual behavioral practices clustered in time around the appearance of Western cultural values (McLelland and Welker 2015, 7).

According to representations of Japanese society in boys' love media, it could be concluded – incorrectly – that Japan is particularly tolerant of homosexuality compared to Western societies (McLelland and Yoo 2007, 18). However, gay men constitute a sexual minority there too (McLelland and Welker 2015, 3), and face difficulties with societal stigmatization (Herek 2009, 32-43).

Research points out that the positive representation of gay men in boys' love media and the core message of equality regardless of gender and sexual preference is of special importance for fans of the post-industrialized Anglophone world (Pagliassotti 2008b). Indeed, it is particularly important to them that boys' love media promote tolerance, which can contribute to the social acceptance of homosexual men (2008b). In a similar vein, Mizoguchi (2010, 159) highlights the importance of raising awareness of this potential among creators of boys' love, as this could be used to increase social acceptance.

Despite the positive aspects of the boys' love phenomenon (e.g. creativity, international collaborations, self-supportive resources and promotion of pro-gay attitudes), critics have stated that this genre may not serve as a positive representation of gay men. Instead, the idealistic illustration of fictional characters and controversial situations (e.g. rape as the expression of love) reflects an unreal and rather detrimental image of gay society. Furthermore, the pathologization of female fans devoted to media content focusing on male homosexuality, and censorship as an effort to control the circulation of thematic materials including controversial themes (e.g. erotic content featuring underage boys), have raised particular concerns relating to boys' love fan culture.

Boys' love critics

The "yaoi debate" (or yaoi ronsō) began in the early 1990s as a protest by gay activists against boys' love (Mizoguchi 2008, 178-180). This debate took place in a fanzine in which a provocative essay, written by gay activist Masaki Satō, was published, who wished for the decline of the boys' love genre for presenting an unreal image of gay people (Mizoguchi 2008, 179). Several heterosexual and lesbian women responded to Satō's essay, starting a debate, which expanded into a discussion on gay rights and the social perception of sexual minorities

that might be biased by representations in boys' love media (Mizoguchi 2008, 178-184). Satō argued that women consider men perverts for expressing sexual desire, while they do the same in boys' love by misinterpreting their sexual fantasies in order to maintain the impression that they create art which, in their view, cannot be equal to pornography (qtd. in Mizoguchi 2008, 178-180). Furthermore, Satō argued that boys' love increases discrimination against gay men due to its idealized portrayal of them (Mizoguchi 2008, 181-182). He claimed that this genre only widens the perceived social distance between gay men and heterosexual individuals (Mizoguchi 2008, 180-181), since the majority of gay men are not young and beautiful but average men with ordinary jobs (Mizoguchi 2008, 181). Thus, boys' love may give the impression that gay men are generally attractive, usually develop a "proud gay identity", and have a stable, homosexual relationship (Mizoguchi 2008, 181). However, highly idealized illustration of characters can be found in many other romantic literary genres; thus, this argument could be applied to a number of works of romantic literature besides boys' love.

Satō also argued that the refusal of boys' love characters to accept their gay identity clearly shows that this genre cannot promote social tolerance but serves only as a source of private entertainment for women (Mizoguchi 2008, 181-182). Finally, Satō outlined that boys' love should not serve as an escapist genre for women but should function as a medium which contributes to the growing social acceptance of sexual minorities without portraying gay men as objects of the female gaze (Mizoguchi 2008, 186).

Regarding the sexuality of female fans, empirical research findings do not support the commonly held assumption that the vast majority of boys' love fans are heterosexual women (e.g. Pagliassotti 2008a; Levi 2009). Mizoguchi describes in her work that she became a lesbian through reading boys' love manga (2008, 164), suggesting that this genre may have an impact on the sexual behavior of fans. However, further research would be required to determine a causal relationship between sexual preference and exposure to boys' love media.

Boys' love fans may find it difficult to navigate between the heteronormative world and fictional homonormativity. According to Galbraith's (2011, 220-221) work, fans devoted to boys' love media consider themselves privileged dreamers who have an extensively developed fantasy world. They reported that nontraditional romances expand their imagination. They label themselves "abnormal" for this special interest, while consider those "short on dreams" as "normal" (2011, 221). Similarly, "normals" often pathologize boys' love fans for their attraction to gay men (Kamm 2013). A widely held assumption has also emerged that boys' love fans might be sexually-deprived women, although this hypothesis is not supported by empirical evidence (Mori 2010, 101; Sugiura 2006, 40). A number of boys' love fans might also consider their fascination with gay romance a pathological construct at the beginning, but their anxieties diminish when they get to know other people sharing the same interest (Mizoguchi 2008, 72).

The emergence of the boys' love genre, particularly shōta, raises concerns about the impact of explicit sexual content featuring underage boys on the healthy sexual development of young female fans (McLelland and Yoo 2007, 14-18). Japan seems to be more permissive in terms of placing underage characters into fictional erotic scenarios, since the appreciation of young and beautiful boys was part of the cultural tradition in several historical eras (McLelland 2005b, 96-159; McLelland and Welker 2015, 6). Although boys' love narratives containing explicit sexual representations of underage boys are legal as virtual child

pornography in the United States, these materials could be categorized as child-abuse media in Australia and countries with similar local legislation (McLelland and Yoo 2007, 15). Since several boys' love fans associate shōta with pedophilia, they remain critical regarding its content, despite the fact that these materials are targeted at young women who, as McLelland and Yoo point out, incorporate these fantasies as part of their healthy sexual development without causing harm to other individuals, particularly young boys (2007, 8).

The social potentials of boys' love

The formation of large online communities in the mid-2000s provided a space for intercultural communication among individuals attracted to homosexual romance stories (Thorn 2004, 173). Furthermore, these communities established intercultural collaborations among fans, which contributed to the spread of scanned and translated manga which had not been published outside of Japan (Thorn 2004, 173). Scanlations – i.e. manga scanned and translated by fans (Noppe 2010, 131) – provided a great opportunity for boys' love enthusiasts to improve their English language skills as well as establishing a core base for international friendships that transcended cultural differences (Nagaike and Suganuma 2013). These international collaborations contributed to the process through which individuals with the same interest met online, and their wide array of social and creative activities have expanded into a “universal psychological phenomenon” (Mizuma 2005, 20) since gaining the attention of publishers, followers and academics (Thorn 2004, 171-178).

In addition, boys' love fan communities encouraged members to cope with personal problems through social activities, provided a supportive environment, and helped fans become more self-aware (Suzuki 1998, 243). Thus, the intimate, female-dominated space of boys' love enthusiasts could be seen as ideal for helping fans to cope with problems and for establishing virtual friendships based on their attraction to male homosexual erotica (Mizoguchi 2008, 339). Consequently, the perceived “abnormality” of the fujoshi identity (Galbraith 2011, 221) is of positive significance in this context and reduces the extent to which boys' love fans may feel socially isolated.

In recent years, social networking sites have provided an appropriate space for boys' love fans to share material and discuss their fascination with male homosexual romances. This interactive online platform is very significant for underage boys' love fans, since their membership remains hidden in the case of secret groups where they can share adult content. They can gain knowledge of their sexual desires and act them out in a safe place of fantasy, as emphasized by Früh (2003, 27-56). Furthermore, anonymity is provided for all fans on web pages and forums (Wood 2006, 409). They therefore cannot be identified by parents or friends (Wood 2006, 408-409). Indeed, the families of boys' love fans do not know anything about boys' love in the vast majority of cases, thus they are not aware when a family member is involved in the boys' love phenomenon (Wood 2006, 409). Consequently, parents have no control over the exposure of young girls (or boys) to homosexual content, which has both advantages and disadvantages.

Finally, qualitative research (Pagliassotti 2008b) proposed that the boys' love genre could contribute to society's acceptance of gay people in a cross-cultural context (Pagliassotti 2008a) due to its positive portrayal of gay people. Although critics doubted that

boys' love media would promote favorable attitudes toward gay men, a positive association was found between exposure to boys' love media and pro-gay attitudes, irrespective of sexual orientation (Zsila 2015, 399-403). However, it is not clear whether it is the exposure to boys' love media that gives rise to pro-gay attitudes, or vice-versa. Further research is therefore needed to determine whether boys' love fans are more accepting or the frequent exposure to boys' love media has a positive impact on fans' attitudes toward gay men (Zsila 2015, 404).

Conclusion

Boys' love, which portrays the romantic love between two men, has received a great deal of attention from researchers over the past two decades. As a consequence, a number of relevant theoretical studies, and qualitative and quantitative research articles, have emerged, focusing on either the media of boys' love or its consumers. In this paper, we provided an overview of the international literature relating to boys' love based on the main characteristics of this genre, the fan culture and motivations behind it, critiques of the genre, and the possible social implications of boys' love. Although there is a growing body of English-language literature on this genre, a great number of articles are still only available from Japanese sources, making it difficult to synthesize the conclusions of different disciplines that investigate distinct aspects of the boys' love phenomenon. Moreover, both the characteristics of boys' love media (e.g. preferred settings, character types) and fans' needs change over time, as was emphasized by several authors, e.g. Bollmann (2010, 42-46); Mizoguchi (2008, 53-128); Welker (2015 42-75). However, there are a number of apparently common features across time periods and audiences. Firstly, boys' love has inspired the creativity of numerous fans, motivating them to create self-expressive pieces intertwining their desires with their art. Secondly, this genre has contributed to the formation of active fan communities, leading to international collaborations between fans. Finally, boys' love media has created a supportive space for women, who can share their fantasies without the pressure of social restrictions, and who wish to achieve the same for gay people proven that qualitative research demonstrated that pro-gay attitudes promoted by boys' love media was one of the main motives of women to be fans of this genre.

[1] Japanese acronym originating from "yama nashi, oichi nashi, imi nashi", which means "no climax, no point, no meaning". This expression refers to the focus on sexual content instead of a complex storyline.

[2] Fan-created stories borrowing characters and settings from original works (e.g. movies, TV series). The term "slash" comes from the / symbol, which refers to the romantic bond between two characters in these works (e.g. Kirk/Spock in the early Star Trek stories).

[3] Japanese term derived from the anime entitled "Tetsujin 28-go", which featured a young male character, Shōtarō, who was a symbolic representation of cuteness and charm in the story (Saitō 2007, 236).

[4] Japanese term, which literally means "rose". The expression is derived from a gay photo collection published in the early 1960s, and was revived later by a magazine for gay men entitled "Barazoku" (Mackintosh 2006).

[5] Japanese term that refers to literary and visual media that hides “nioi” (hint, touch) for the fans of male homosexual stories to detect the signs of homosexual intimacy. “Kei” is a widely used term to describe groups or categories (Aoyama 2013, 66).

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