Fujoshi in Indonesia:

Exploring Feminist Perspectives on Continuous Consumption of Boys' Love Contents.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the consumption of boys' love content in Indonesia has increased rapidly. *Fujoshi* is a Japanese term that refers to women who have an interest in manga, films, dramas, or slash fiction that have homoerotic narratives with the theme of love relationships between men, and boys' love (BL) is a romantic relationship between men packaged in the form of manga or other media. Based on previous studies, there are correlations between perspectives on gender roles and the portrayal of characters in BL content. This study aims to explore feminist perceptions among *fujoshi* women on continuous consumption of BL media with qualitative methods based on their sense of "*moe*". "*Moe*" is an expression of adoration to BL characters. There were ten informants identified as aca-fans who participated in the study. The finding reveals a shift in *fujoshi* women's perceptions regarding the gender roles depicted in BL content. These evolving views on gender roles are relevant to the feminine culture, which refers to the rejection of conservative gender roles in BL content.

Keywords: *Fujoshi, Gender, Feminism, Boys' love*

1. INTRODUCTION

Fujoshi is a Japanese term used to describe women who have a keen interest in contents such as manga, films, dramas, or slash fiction featuring homoerotic storylines with the focus of romantic relationships between men, known as Boys' Love (BL) [1], [2], [3]. The BL genre packages romantic relationships between male characters in various forms, including manga and other media [4]. The *fujoshi* community originated in Japan during the 1970s and has since expanded to many countries worldwide [5]. Importantly, *fujoshi* culture is primarily focused on entertainment and does not have any important links to political issues [1]. In Indonesia, the *fujoshi* community experienced rapid growth in 2020 [6], coinciding with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforcement of social restrictions (PPKM). During this time, BL and *yaoi*-themed manga and films started to gain popularity on various social media platforms such as Youtube, Telegram, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms, capturing the interest of Indonesian women.

In addition to simply enjoying BL contents, *fujoshi* possesses the ability to create their own BL contents that align with their personal fantasies. This allows them to engage in self-directed research within their own community. *Fujoshi* women who possess this creative capability and engage in research within their community are commonly known as aca-fans. The term "aca-fans" is short for academic fans, referring to individuals who not only have a strong preference for a particular media franchise or genre but are also actively involved in academic research related to that media. Aca-fans serve as a significant source of academic research concerning fans and their communities, and they play an essential role in connecting many consumers with decision-makers [7].

Why do aca-fans hold an important role in the community? They are important not only because they share knowledge within their community but also because many BL fandoms are new and often follow trends without fully understanding *fujoshi* culture. Aca-fans offer a clearer perspective and are less influenced by external issues unrelated to their community. They are capable of providing in-depth information that serves as

the foundation of knowledge for *fujoshi*. Furthermore, despite their status as aca-fans, they were often influenced by friends within the same community to consume BL contents for the first time. Additionally, the work of these aca-fans is widely consumed by other *fujoshi* women on social media platforms.

Many studies have observed that *fujoshi* women develop an interest in BL or *yaoi* manga due to their dissatisfaction with traditional women's roles in passive romantic relationships and societal restrictions on expressing their emotions [8], [9]. These women are often disappointed with the passive roles assigned to women, both in society and within the family [4]. The patriarchal culture can lead to physical and emotional suffering for women [10]. These women find themselves trapped in what is known as the "duplicity of women," a situation where they attempt to fulfill their sexual desires while being constrained by the values of chastity and the ideology of virginity. In essence, BL can also be viewed as a way of freeing women from patriarchal norms, gender dualism, and heterosexual expectations [11].

The characterization in BL contents consists of two kinds of characters in a romantic relationship who have different depictions. According to Galbraith [1], These two characters play a role as a "bottom" (*uke*) and a "top" (*seme*). A "bottom" character shows passive and feminine traits who sometimes represents woman's role in the relationship, and a "top" character is built as a manly figure with dominant traits. Based on these two depictions of characters in BL romance, there is still a significant gap between the roles of characters in BL contents. The gap in characters' role indicates that a support of patriarchal culture is still depicted in the BL content. Also, many BL contents still portray heteronormative romance in the storyline [1], [12], [13]. In this study, we want to explore *fujoshi* women's perspective regarding the gender role in a romantic relationship portrayed through the character development and his role in BL contents that have been consumed by Indonesian *fujoshi*.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an in-depth interview method and an analysis of content consumed by *fujoshi* to observe the character development and the shift in interest of consumption among *fujoshi* in Indonesia. The interviews are conducted with unstructured and open questions based on the sense of "*moe*" towards BL characters consumed and created by informants [14]. There were several contents observed in this study such as movies, dramas, and slash fiction. Researchers selected four dramas, one movie, and one slash fiction which are available in social media. These contents consumed by *fujoshi* in Indonesia were The Untamed (a drama from China), Cherry Magic (a drama form Japan), 2gether (a drama from Thailand),

Red, White & Royal Blue (a movie from Western), Semantic Error (a drama from South Korea), and "Masa Remaja Kita" (a slash fiction from Indonesia). Through these contents it is easy to analyze the characterization of characters (*moe*) and current interest of BL consumption related to the sense of "*moe*" among *fujoshi* in Indonesia.

Table 1. Information of the interviewees

Informant	Profession	Duration of Being a *Fujoshi*
A	Social Media Specialist	2-3 Years
B	University Student	4-5 Years
C	Novel Editor	5-10 Years
D	University Student	5-10 Years
E	University Student	5-10 Years
F	Employee	2-3 Years
G	University Student	5-10 Years
H	Psychology Student	5-10 Years
I	Law Student	4-5 Years
J	Employee	5-10 Years

The informants in this study were aca-fans with certain criteria consisting of people with different backgrounds. Their selection was intended to capture specialized knowledge and unique perspectives within their respective community [7]. We selected our informants who actively engage in the creation of fictional narratives, drawing from their creative imaginations, on various social media platforms, including Twitter, Wattpad, Tiktok and other social media. Furthermore, some of them had previously researched the *fujoshi* community.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study is illustrating the perceptions of gender role which are seen from the evolving stories and characters consumed continuously or created by *fujoshi* in Indonesia. The stories created by *fujoshi* or fans, known as slash [12], demonstrate how the characters within narratives play a specific role that contribute to the relationship development [3]. The characters themselves, referred to as "*moe*", also represent figures idolized by *fujoshi*. Exploring concepts from BL contents consumed

by *fujoshi* in Indonesia, this study compares the analysis of contents with the results of in-depth interviews conducted with informants, with the objective of unfolding gender role perceptions among *fujoshi* in Indonesia.

"*Moe*" refers to a feeling of affection towards characters' visualization idolized by *fujoshi* [1]. *Moe* has been one of the reasons why BL content has become very popular among women, especially Indonesian women. In the "*Moe*" dictionary, there are two characters who play a main role in romantic love stories packed in BL genre. These two characters play a role as "top" (*seme*) and "bottom" (*uke*). A "top" character (*seme*) in this relationship is characterized to have dominant behaviors and masculine figures, while a "bottom" character (*uke*) is characterized to have passive behavior and tenderness.

The sense of "*moe*" towards characters in BL media is possible to be an illustration of gender role perceptions among *fujoshi* in love relationship using masculine-feminine theory developed by Hofstede [15]. This occurs because "*moe*" is an expression connected to BL characters which are preferred to Indonesian *fujoshi*. Before identifying character models which are likeable among *fujoshi*, researchers conducted initial observations about depictions of characters portrayed in the BL movies, dramas, and slash fiction that have been consumed by many *fujoshi* women in Indonesia. Movies/dramas/slash fiction focused on this research are The Untamed (from China), Cherry Magic (form Japan), 2gether (from Thailand), Red, White & Royal Blue (from Western), Semantic Error (from South Korea), "Masa Remaja Kita" (from Indonesia).

These six contents have been selected because of their affection to attract many viewers from *fujoshi* community, especially Indonesia *fujoshi*. The characters in these dramas/movies/slash fiction deeply engage viewers in the storylines. The dramas and movies are adoptions of BL novels and developed according to current *fujoshi* interest. These contents have introduced changes in the portrayal of BL characters, and become some of the most consumed BL contents among *fujoshi*.

If we look at the behavior of characters in the mentioned contents, it's evident that these popular contents among *fujoshi* have main characters who exhibit unpredictable roles in a romantic relationship. It is not easy to determine which character plays a masculine role and which character plays a feminine role. Furthermore, the characters' behaviors in these contents portray assertiveness, non-assertiveness, and aggressiveness rather than adhering to traditional masculine-feminine behaviors. Although Most of other BL contents still portray characters who demonstrate feminine and masculine characteristics, the *fujoshi* interest, which has developed within BL storylines, now emphasizes equality in romantic relationships, portraying a lack of standardization in characters' roles. In terms of self-

concept, it is important to note that every individual has the freedom to express both feminine and masculine behaviors [16], [17], [13]. This perspective aligns with the insights shared by informant H, who is also a psychology student, regarding the mutuality of feminine and masculine traits within individuals.

The characterization of characters based on observations from BL content mentioned is further supported by information gathered through interviews conducted with informants. In the context of the sense of "*moe*" in creating and consuming BL content, the informants participating in this research predominantly state that the roles of "top" (*seme*) and "bottom" (*uke*) are clearly defined when these characters engage in sexual relationships only. During these interviews, the informant's perspective on character development, which applied to the stories they create, share on social media, and consume within the Indonesian *fujoshi* community, was conveyed. This perspective was stated by informant G regarding the roles of characters in romantic relationships.

The statement articulated by the informant G emphasizes that in the character development within BL stories, there is an intention to maintain a masculine portrayal of the "bottom" (*uke*) character while giving a tenderness or feminine behavior. She continued saying that masculine-feminine behaviors are not her main focus on consuming BL romance anymore. Informant H also stated the same thought that masculine-feminine behaviors have not become the standardization among BL characters to define them as a "top" (*seme*) and a "bottom" (*uke*).

Based on the statements above, characters created in BL stories by *fujoshi* do not adhere strictly to the traditional roles where the "bottom" (*uke*) character is always portrayed as passive and feminine, and the "top" (*seme*) character must always portray dominance and masculinity. Based on the viewpoints of the informants, it is very clear that *fujoshi* women are making efforts to minimize objectification in the development of male characters in BL romance, in which women do not exhibit higher levels of objectification than men [18]. This perspective is further reinforced by other informants regarding gender roles in BL content, emphasizing the importance of equality within relationships and the idea that both parties should contribute equally to maintaining their relationship, without differing one position from another.

All informants express a consistent sentiment regarding the sense of "*moe*" in their consumption of BL content. This evolving sense of "*moe*" is supported by *fujoshi* women's portrayals in idolizing their idealized male characters within the stories they create. In addition, Informant B also emphasizes that she prefers using the terms "submissive" and "dominant" rather than "top" (*seme*) and "bottom" (*uke*) to define the characters' roles

in BL romance. On the other hand, informant A, I, and F stated different thoughts about the characters' roles related to "submissive" and "dominant" terms. These informants stated that they prefer characters whose powers are equal in a romantic relationship. As informant A stated, the use of terms to define characters in BL stories is often debated among the *fujoshi* community because of their dissatisfaction towards the availability of role options [19]. while debates regarding the use of terms such as "top" (*seme*) and "bottom" (*uke*) to define the characters' roles still continue among the *fujoshi* community, researchers have found some depictions in BL characters that refer to three psychological behaviors. These behaviors are assertive, non-assertive, and aggressive behaviors, as mentioned previously.

According to Hutapea [20], non-assertive behavior is when someone prioritize the interests of others due to feelings of fear and anxiety, and an act that indicates passivity [21], and assertive behavior represents an act characterized by the open and direct expression of opinions to achieve one's intended goals, and refers to an act that easily conveys dissatisfaction [22], [23], [24]. Conversely, aggressive behavior is not only an act to harm other people [25] but also an effort to be consistently present or to seize every opportunity. Someone portraying aggressiveness often ignores to acknowledge the consequences of their actions, whereas assertiveness is expressed with a thoughtful regard for the rights of others and an awareness of the possible consequences that may result [21]. The aggressiveness depicted in the character BL is more likely to be proactive aggression, which can be portrayed in both "top" (*seme*) and "bottom" (*uke*) characters. Proactive aggression itself refers to an intentional act to achieve personal goals without provocation [25], [26].

Based on our observation towards the characters in selected dramas/movies/slash fiction, the use of "assertive", "non-assertive", and "aggressive" terms reflects the variety of characters depicted in the BL content. Non-assertive term portrays a wider range of the characterization than submissive term [21], reducing a significant gap of standardization between two male characters. Referring to the informants' perspectives, both characters in BL content are not limited to just two behaviors, such as dominant and submissive, which still show differences in power in romantic relationships. Both characters can exhibit one of these three behaviors while still maintaining the natural characteristics of each character in the BL story. This also helps the viewers experience the scenes in the BL contents because the behaviors depicted in the stories are individually related to them.

The use of these three terms may facilitate the portrayal of male characters in BL content without the need to consider gender roles based on masculine-feminine or dominant-submissive behaviors. It places a stronger focus on the development of character traits in shaping romantic narratives between two men. Furthermore, this will also minimize misgendering regarding masculinity in BL content to meet a normative embodiment of sexual dimorphism [13], and reduce debates among fellow *fujoshi* about character roles that do not align with their respective fantasies. Again, these three terms will apply to the two main characters in BL romance without the need to consider who should be the "top" (*seme*) and "bottom" (*uke*), or without imposing standardization on character roles such as feminine and masculine traits. In this study, researchers agree to recommend the use of terms "Assertiveness", "Non-assertiveness", and "Aggressiveness" in depicting characters in BL contents.

Based on the theory developed by Hofstede [15], masculine culture tends to depict women as being tender and responsible for maintaining relationships, while feminine culture shows equality in relationships [27], where both women and men share equal responsibilities and attitudes in forming a relationship. Feminine culture has evolved within the continuous consumption of BL media. Equality of roles in BL has become the interest of all informants in this study. Several criteria expressed by informants regarding the characteristics of the characters in the BL contents they consume fit more with feminist culture.

The first criterion is the power of equality, which is explicitly expressed through equal roles for both male characters in BL. All informants agree that the "top" (*seme*) and "bottom" (*uke*) roles are merely symbols within the context of sexual relationships and should not be a standard for defining the characteristics or roles of male characters in BL romance. It is crucial to emphasize that the emergence of equality in BL relationships is due to the fact that both characters (*moe*) in BL dramas, films, or slash fiction share the same gender. All informants affirm that in BL relationships, portraying character roles without negating the masculinity of the actors as men can actually enhance the enjoyment of the storyline for *fujoshi* viewers, whether in films, dramas, or slash fiction. Furthermore, the presence of feminine or masculine traits in BL characters is not necessarily indicative of their roles within their romantic relationships, as these traits are often regarded as natural aspects of human behavior.

This indicates that the informants involved in this research thoroughly enjoy BL stories that showcase diversity in character traits among the players in romantic relationships, rather than solely focusing on easily predictable character roles. Gender neutrality can also be observed in the development of "*moe*" characters favored by *fujoshi*, where there is no standardization of characters as either the "top" (*seme*) or "bottom" (*uke*). When examining the contents discussed earlier, the characters featured in the stories consistently depict both players as

male without significant differences between them in terms of opportunities and responsibilities within the romantic relationship. In addition, the behaviors depicted in both characters are classified as neutral behaviors according to The Bern Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI). These behaviors include conscientiousness, friendliness, helpfulness, jealousy, likability, and secretiveness [16].

The second criterion is the improvement of relationship quality. When examining the BL contents earlier, both characters have equal roles in maintaining and building their relationship. The two characters depicted in this BL relationship exhibit care for each other without considering their positions or roles in the relationship. Furthermore, all informants involved in this study also expressed their dislike for relationships that portray characters as excessively dependent or passive towards their partners. The characters developed both in the narratives created by the informants and in the films/dramas/slash fiction they consume share equal roles in their relationships. Equality in roles here leans more towards character behaviors that demonstrate care and sympathy for one another. Dominant attitudes do not solely appear in one character, but both possess equal strength in their relationship. The stories presented in BL dramas/films/slash fiction also showcase a strong emotional bond between the characters without establishing differences in positions within the relationship. The equal actions of both characters have created a quality of relationship in which they both express their struggles, power, and strong emotions to each other.

The third criterion is the tenderness that can come from anyone within the relationship. As discussed earlier, the character development in BL content no longer adheres to stereotypes that require different positions between individuals. The "bottom" (*uke*) character does not have to show tender or feminine behavior exclusively, and the "top" (*seme*) character can also display tenderness within their relationship. Someone in the "bottom" (*uke*) role can also exhibit gentleness, just as the "top" (*seme*) can. Furthermore, Informants G and A have developed characters that remain masculine with a little touch of femininity for the "bottom" (*uke*) character. This feminine touch refers to the gentle nature of the character and is a natural behavior exhibited by individuals, as previously mentioned by informant H. This is further supported by the acceptance of all informants towards partners who appear feminine (feminine males) in informants' romantic relationships.

The three criteria discussed earlier fall within the realm of feminine culture. Based on the criteria examined, the informants involved in this study have experienced a shift in their perceptions of gender roles that point to a feminine culture in their continuous consumption of BL media. Through the perception of gender roles among *fujoshi* women in BL relationships, a rejection of patriarchal relationships can be depicted. However, this portrayal cannot be considered the main reason behind the *fujoshi* community in Indonesia supporting feminine culture in BL romance. This is because the rejection of unequal roles in BL content serves as an act to maintain the reality of the characters as men without transforming either character in a BL relationship into something overtly feminist or resembling women.

Transforming male characters unnaturally into more feminine ones in BL stories is a form of imposition that does not reflect the natural behavior between two men in a romantic relationship. Informants A and D emphasize that making men appear feminine will only reinforce the norms of heterosexuality within BL relationships, which are inherently different. According to a study on BL consumption in Japan, Japanese *fujoshi* often apply heterosexual norms to BL content [12]. However, in this study, Indonesian *fujoshi* develop BL stories with minimal adherence to heterosexual norms. The perception of feminine culture is not solely used as a rejection of patriarchal relationships but can also serve to maintain the authenticity of a story, particularly in a social context where the rejection of homosexual romance is prevalent.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the interview conducted with informants and the analysis of the sense of "*moe*" through BL content consumed on social media such as dramas, movies, and slash fiction from various countries, a shift in interest is apparent. This shift is primarily directed toward the development of characters depicted in BL narratives. The standardization of the "top" (*seme*) character, who was traditionally expected to exhibit masculinity and dominance, and the "bottom" (*uke*) character, who was often depicted as submissive and feminine, has become a subject of debate and is no longer the primary focus for *fujoshi* when consuming BL content. Furthermore, a rejection of heteronormative relationships within BL content is depicted as well in this research. Also, we can identify three criteria within feminine culture that emerge from continuous consumption of BL content. These criteria include the power of equality, the relationship quality, and the tenderness that can be from any party within the relationship. However, the shift in interest about BL characters and their roles in romantic relationships occurred gradually, with many still enjoy BL contents that portray traditional roles.

In this research, the use of the terms "assertiveness", "non-assertiveness", and "aggressiveness" has been recommended to emphasize the reinforcement of character roles within BL narratives. These three terms are clearly portrayed in popular films, dramas, and slash fiction from several countries analyzed in this study.

However, these terms still require consideration among the *fujoshi* community, and further research is also needed to explore their correlation with the characters' roles in BL relationships and changes in interest of *fujoshi* over the years.

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