Original Scientific Article

UDK 39:[821.531(519.5):177.6-055.34]
DOI: 10.51936/dr.39.102.63-84

**Aljoša Pužar**

# "BL" (BOY LOVE), "GL" (GIRL LOVE) AND FEMALE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND AFFECT IN SOUTH KOREA

*ABSTRACT*

*The main purpose of this article is to trace the destiny of the homoerotic narrative genres of BL (Boy Love) and GL (Girl Love) in the South Korean context and, more precisely, to determine the impact of this family of genres on South Korean gendered reality. The paper presents an overview and a small selection of ethnographic voices related to the genres while trying to understand the specific local conditions of the production and consumption that have ensured BL and GL have had a lasting influence in South Korea among pop-cultural audiences and female creators.*

*KEY WORDS: Boy love, Girl love, South Korea, community of practice, community of affect*

## »BL« (Boy Love), »GL« (Girl Love) ter ženske skupnosti prakse in afekta v Južni Koreji

*IZVLEČEK*

*Glavni namen članka je izslediti usodo homoerotičnih pripovednih žanrov BL »Boy love« (»fantovska ljubezen«) in GL »Girl love« (»dekliška ljubezen«) v južnokorejskem kontekstu ter, natančneje, ugotoviti vpliv te družine žanrov na južnokorejsko družbenospolno realnost. Prispevek bo predstavil pregled in majhen izbor etnografskih glasov, povezanih z žanri, pri tem pa poskusil razumeti posebne lokalne pogoje produkcije in potrošnje, ki so prispevali k vplivu BL in GL v Južni Koreji med popkulturnim občinstvom in ustvarjalkami.*

*KLJUČNE BESEDE: fantovska ljubezen, dekliška ljubezen, Južna Koreja, skupnost prakse, skupnost afekta*

## 1 Introduction

The East Asian narrative (and visual-narrative) conventions of homoerotic stories mainly produced and consumed by persons self-defined as heterosexual females have been around for half a century. Originating in 1970s Japan, the BL (Boy Love) convention, primarily in comics and fan fiction, has spread globally in both paper-based and digital formats, shaping and influencing female culture in different regions (Wood 2006; Li 2009; Madill 2021). The same is true for the genre of GL (Girl Love), albeit to a very different degree: the BL remained more popular and widespread, better defined in terms of narrative structures, and for a long time better separated from the male homosexual narratives and practices than the GL is when it comes to lesbian narratives and consumption (Madruga 2021).

BL as a wider term is sometimes overlapping in meaning with its more sexual sub-genre of *yaoi*, and indeed, confusingly, the entire BL is often known in the West under the umbrella term of *yaoi*. Around mid-1990ies the names such as "Y genre" and "H genre" (the latter meaning "Homo genre") were popularized in South Korea for materials that included explicit BL sex, and the Japanese term *yaoi* remained relatively rare among the non-cosmopolitan Korean readers and grassroots creators. GL is overlapping in meaning with the Japanese sub-genre of *yuri*, translated in Korean as 백합 (*baekap*). Both yuri and *baekap* mean literally "lily" (Lilium flower) and share the Chinese ideogram 百合, as they both imply female-to-female liaisons of varying nature (entailing somewhat wider and more inclusive spectrum of relationships than the BL, particularly in its sexualized *yaoi* form)[1]. In this article, I will use the terms "BL" and "GL" in the same way and to the same degree as it appears to be prevalent among the present majority of South Korean fans of the homoerotic genres primarily intended for heterosexual female audiences and co-created by them. BL and GL creators and fans are known in South Korea as *BLer(s)* and *GLer(s)* respectively (*bielleo*, 비엘러; *jielleo*, 지엘러), and I will use these terms when appropriate.

1. The terminology related to these genres have a long history, largely related to earlier modernist literary articulations of homoerotic motifs in Japanese context. For the sake of the strict word limitations, these histories need to remain beyond the limits of this article, but are easily available in dedicated and thorough Wikipedia articles covering BL and GL in more than one language. In this article, for both the authentic Korean words and those imported to Korean spoken norm from other languages, I have used Revised Romanization of Korean (국어의 로마자 표기법), the official South Korean language romanization system (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Proclamation No. 2000-8). Versions in Hangeul are left only for the first mention of more important terms. For Japanese words, I have used the standard Hepburn romanization system.

While homoerotic narratives existed from times immemorial across different cultures, most authors agree that these particular conventions of BL and GL have come around in Japan during the late 1960s and early 1970s with the initial divulgation and influence of the longer creative fictional narratives centered on general homosocial or platonic-romantic homoerotic stories, that were often elaborate and highly stylized. This earlier literature provided basic characters and plots, offering some legitimacy of exploiting the homosocial and homoromantic contents or motifs (Kotani 2007). BL, and to a lesser degree GL, were soon to embrace more sexual, violent, or otherwise transgressive plots, merging with narrative fashions and genres that in the West would be known as slash fiction.

At the grassroots level and in strictly pop-cultural environments, most BL narratives center on the firm convention of the erotic development between *seme* and *uke*.[2] The *seme* is usually portrayed as more masculine, older, taller, and often also socially dominant, smarter, or wealthier. *Seme*'s face is often drawn with a stronger chin, shorter hair, and smaller eyes. *Uke*, on the other hand, is depicted as more "feminine" in the conventional sense, i.e., the character of *uke* is often epicene or fluid, but not too often in some molar (structured, labeled, attracting, identarian) sense of a non-binary person, but rather in a molecular (fluid, processual, fleeting, disperse) sense celebrated by the hazy figuration of so-called "new (soft hetero) masculinity" in East Asia. While *uke* gets contrasted to and pursued by a dominant *seme*, visually or in narrative depictions they both can have some of the "soft new masculinity" aspects, with such aspects dominating the character of *uke*.

Many subsequent variations of this main relation were proposed by creators, with characters such as the badass *uke*, the clueless *uke*, the sadistic *seme*, the romantic *seme*, etc. Among the characters-types of particular interest for gender and queer studies is also the "pregnant *uke*" (or the *uke* that can be impregnated), from the overlapping speculative sub-genre of Omegaverse, whose notable presence in both global and South Korean BL has popularized the triadic distinction between a dominant "alpha", a neutral "beta", and a submissive "omega" BL character.

Korean terms for *seme* and *uke* are *gong* (공, a dominant or top character) and *su* (수, a submissive or bottom character), with Japanese terms still being widely used. Due to the primary focus on the main male characters, female characters are either less important or even completely absent from the pop-BL or *yaoi*. This narrative convention or the basic set of relations is fully preserved also in

2. Following Japanese male gay slang, seme refers to the top position in anal sex, meaning "to attack," while uke refers to the bottom position, meaning "to receive".

the original local professional South Korean work competing with translations from Japanese, and in the world of grassroots creativity.

In GL *(yuri, baekap*) sub-genre, this convention is somewhat more rare, due to the ongoing dominance of romantic plots. While the narrative of an innocent schoolgirl vs. a predatory lesbian, the general top and bottom dynamics, but also the usual distinction in lesbian styles or figurations between a *butch* and a *femme* (Pužar 2019: 160–162) occasionally appear in GL, the entire genre is traditionally less sexualized than pop-BL or *yaoi*, and more flexible when it comes to the main relations between characters (Nagaike 2010). Also, GL remains more open to the transgender and queer figurations, beyond the surreal or fantasy-related Omegaverse figurations, in part also thanks to the queer GL creators that operate outside of the fetishistic and crypto-heteronormative frameworks more typical of BL (Park 2022).

The purpose of this article is to offer a brief overview of activities and feelings of those people (mainly self-defined as female) that appropriate and partly co-create BL and GL, and whose agency is celebrated through somewhat outdated cultural studies fantasies of developing subcultural styles, claiming freedoms, and resisting hegemonic or dominant modes of expression (Noh 2001; Kwon 2019). I hypothesize, in addition to this understandable vision of positivity, that these movements of culture remain more ambiguous, and rather form loops or strings of discourse, affect, and materiality, spiraling between the institutionalized capitalist producers, state regulators, and the ranks of fans, but also between the socio-cultural realms of the patriarchal-hegemonic and the liberatory-emancipatory. This paper intends to reveal but a small part of this ambiguity, using the author's ethnographic archives and field observations.

Ethnographic portions of this article are based on my fieldwork in Seoul, South Korea, which lasted from 2011 to 2015 and was part of my second PhD project, under the academic and ethical supervision of School of English, Communication and Philosophy (Cardiff University, UK). All ethnographic materials used here were obtained following the standard procedures of informed consent, data anonymization, with briefing and debriefing of the interlocutors. No legal minors or members of vulnerable social groups were part of this research. My Korean ethnography engaged with urban and largely urbane South Korean young women living in the broader Seoul metropolitan area, but often coming from other regions of the peninsula. The main method was the pre-arranged unstructured online conversation (digital chat). Some interlocutresses delivered written testimonials on selected topics. My two research assistants at Yonsei university delivered introductory overviews on BL, and facilitated my visits to the comic book joints. Ethnographic materials coming from 23 interlocutresses were admitted to become

part of the research archive. This article uses only a small portion of this archive.[3]

This older ethnographic data was cross-checked or triangulated for the purpose of this article with more recent (digital) field observations and sampling of materials available online. Secondary sources (books, articles and academic dissertations), and recent digital materials in public domain (public forums, boards, platforms) were consulted and accessed throughout 2022 and 2023. Additionally, I briefly took a look at the publicly available users' statistics for some popular BL and GL titles on Aladin (알라딘), one of the largest online bookstores (and second-hand book chains) in South Korea. Due to the registration procedures (that in South Korea often entail full identity disclosure), this publicly available data includes indications of age and gender. This source broadly confirmed that what we know about the consumption of BL and GL still holds– audiences are mostly female and largely adolescent and young adult (with teens being anecdotally included, but statistically invisible due to the impossibility of their official registration). The recent (in part quantitative) study on GL (Yora 2020; Yora 2023), confirmed these basic premises, as did the comparable studies from other environments (for instance: Pagliassotti 2008; Zsila et al. 2018). While not in any sense crucial or exhaustive, these secondary and quantitative clues allow for the ethnography and field observations to also entail some additional awareness of the general cultural trends.

This descriptive ethnographic work encompasses three tasks: to showcase the complexity and ethical ambiguity of the phenomenon, to amend the existing literature by defining South Korean BL and GL creators and fans as the "community of practice" and the "community of affect", thus replacing the usual discussion on the emancipatory politics of these genres by the more neutral capture of their layered, heterogeneous and often paradoxical affective patterns (patterns of intensity or proto-political potentiality). Additionally, where the ethnography allows it, the work will capture subtle generational changes in these practices and affects.

## 2 Communities of Practice and their History

A large transnational community of BL and GL lovers can be for all intents and purposes considered a multi-layered and complex community of practice as theorized by the anthropologist Jean Lave and education theoretician Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998).[4]

3. For more complete insight into this ethnography that covers various topics in Korean gender and youth studies Slovenian readers can consult Pužar 2019.
4. I am grateful to Dr. Natalija Majsova for introducing me to their work.

BL and GL creators and fans share concerns or passions, patterns (and topics) of learning, and regularity of interactions. At the same time, they are not institutionalized in any traditional sense. That makes them a large community of practice, entailing many sub-communities, specific societal boundaries, and a large and active periphery, all in the sense theorized by Wenger as a "node of mutual engagement that becomes progressively looser at the periphery, with layers going from core membership to extreme peripherality" (Wenger 1998: 118). While this community reaches so-called global audiences and local ones alike, it is still very usual to observe its subsets at the national level, or the one defined by the national languages and markets, as is also the case with this article focusing on South Korean female *BLer(s)* and *GLer(s)*.

Conventional histories of female communities of practice encompassing female BL and GL fans start in the late 1970s with the Japanese *dōjinshi* community. *Dōjinshi* is a Japanese term for self-published compositions – normally magazines, *manga*, or novels – often created by non-professionals or at the grassroots creativity level. *Dōjin* (同人), literally meaning "the same person," is a term used to represent a group of people sharing a common objective or interest, meaning very close to the standard definition of the community of practice. BL and GL *dōjin* produced many sexualized parodies of popular homosocial or platonic homoerotic narratives. Overall, the initial *dōjin* activity introduced simpler plots, made them more edgy or transgressive, and engaged largely with simplified narratives and visual styles.

The Korean term for *dōjin* is *dongin* (동인) a name for a large and multilayered community of practice that from the early 1980s to this day consumes and co-creates pop culture under the constant influence of Japanese fashions and genres, including BL and GL, while at the same time developing local styles and practices, also as a consequence of more recent national and international dominance of Korean pop in its many ramifications (Kwon 2019).

In 1982, the comic circle KWAC (Korea Woman Amateur Comics) self-published a *dongin* magazine, the very first notable project of its kind of South Korean origin. Authoritarian military regimes of the early 1980s, with stringent censorship on publications, that concurrently exhibited a high degree of anti-Japanese sentiment, contributed to these early steps remaining rather informal and smaller in scale, verging on underground activity. With the collapse of these regimes, and upon the general societal opening marked by the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Korean cultural industries started to bloom, presenting an important source of materials and motifs for the *dongin* creators (Kwon and Kim 2013).

Local economic growth contributed to steadier cultural consumption that included pop narratives and visual narratives pertaining to BL and GL. Japanese

cultural influences and local reinventions started to move online, upon the popularization of the commercial Korean "PC services" that existed in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a separate online communication system that merged with the global Internet only in 1995. While the imports of many products of Japanese pop culture were still legally prohibited, PC communication allowed for the pirated versions of Japanese comics to be easily accessible in South Korea followed by *dongin* fan-made parodies and other derivative grassroots creations. The first wave of South Korean online communities (Chon et. al. 2005) assured what now seems to be a historical heyday of Korean comics. The first genre to take root in South Korea, and to develop a local style was *sunjeong manhwa* (순정 만화) or "romance comic", that in terms of styles and audiences laid the groundwork for the thriving BL and GL culture of the subsequent decades. At that point, the activity was already largely female and targeted at other females.

BL and GL community of today includes professional and non-professional creators (with anything in between) of original and/or derivative BL and GL narratives, ranks of their readers/spectators/followers, and even larger ranks of pop-music (J-pop, K-pop, etc.) fans (along with fans of other pop products) that regularly "ship" their idols of the same gender (coupling them in the homoerotic sense), all the way to the occasional or sporadic onlookers. Sometimes, they are readers and writers in a traditional sense; sometimes they digitally self-fashion themselves as idols and exchange lascivious BL messages with other such digital selves or avatars; sometimes they even form monogamous digital homoerotic couples under the narrative influence of BL or GL without considering themselves to be anything but heterosexual (Pužar 2019:162–164); sometimes they choose to play digital games inspired by the genre. At times, BL or GL narratives present the central focus of their popular culture consumption, sometimes they are but a small part of it, in which case fans belong to the wide peripheries of the related community of practice.

The variety of forms and sub-practices proliferate at an uncanny speed. In the following ethnographic narrative, one finds female-to-female exchanges and transgenerational activities, the birth of the derivative grassroots creativity, along with early capitalist operations related to the initial offline romantic comic book boom in South Korea:

> *I don't remember exactly when I saw comic books for the first time... I was maybe 5 or 6 and my cousin who lived with us had some of them... she was already in middle school... Also, my mother worked in a bookstore for a while. She said to me that she reads all the comic books first, and only then detective stories. When I was in my first elementary, school kid, she used to buy me comic books. Later, I would buy them myself, from when*

> *I was 7 years old (1992) until I was 10 (1995). In front of our school in [the small provincial city on the outskirt of Seoul metropolitan area] there was a paper shop with school stationery and toys, and in one corner they also had some books. And there were also those comic books. The price was 4,000~5,000won (3–4 dollars). I collected "Nana" which was a monthly magazine of comics. After it went out of print, I was buying "Mink"... a sister magazine of "Wink". Wink was more adult in describing love... including BL. My cousin was reading it, and she later started to be a cartoonist herself* (Y, female, b. in 1984; raised in a working-class smaller urban setting, Buddhist).

Once individual overseas trips were allowed in the early 1990s, more affluent Korean fans started to visit Japan in person, bringing in Japanese *manga*, *anime*, and games, a practice existing to this very day:

> *Yeah, I went to Japan and bought things... I really liked them as it was hard to get them in Korea, so they felt special. I really wanted to get things from gacha machines that spit plastic capsules... Cos we had something like that when I was in elementary school but only the cheap toys... it was such an upgrade when I went to Japan haha* (X, female, b. in 1995; raised in an upper-middle-class urban setting in the broader Seoul area, Catholic).

Within the spectrum of Japanese pop genres hitting South Korean shores, the sexualized BL or *yaoi* generated a particularly enthusiastic Korean fandom. Ozaki Minami's homoromantic and mildly homoerotic titles *Zetsuai 1989* (released in 1990) and *Bronze: Zetsuai Since 1989* (released in 1992) were acclaimed as "the entrance to *yaoi*" contributing to the general acceptance of BL culture among South Korean pop audiences and creators (Kim 2013).

Several local artists were soon to gain prominence. The visual artist (cartoonist) Lee, Jung Ae (b. in 1963), that debuted in 1986, remains known for introducing the main characters that identify as the third gender. The series "Have Spring Come to Mr. Louis?" (루이스씨에게 봄이 왔는가), first released in 1990 in the influential magazine Renaissance (which existed from 1988 to 1994), caused a huge sensation among the readers for directly depicting the gay characters' love life. For this breakthrough, considered audacious, Lee Jung Ae earned the reputation of the inventor of "Korean *yaoi*" (Kim 2013).

In 1995 Wink magazine started to publish "Let Dai" (Let 다이) a BL work by Won Soo Yeon (b. in 1961), one of the most prominent creators of Korean *manhwa*, especially in the romantic genre. The layered story of the pathological or evil *seme* and "normal school boy" (not to mention: previously straight) type of *uke*, along with some secondary female characters, and the usual repertoire

of dystopian landscapes, rape, and betrayal, became very popular, and it was serialized until 2005.

> *For many of us it was huge. For me and my friends that used to go to manhwa rental shops* (M, female, b. in 1983; raised in a lower-middle-class suburban setting, Religion unknown).

Here we see the historically strong printed comic book rental industry that allowed for the divulgation of various genres beyond what would normally be affordable or allowed by parental oversight, and that was subsequently largely forced out by the Internet revolution. Of some interest here are female-to-female intergenerational influences (through shared ownership, borrowing, swapping, and sharing) that marked older offline consumption of the genre, as, in part, testified by this ethnographic account:

> *I never actively searched for BL, and it was not very easy to see it around the late 1990s and early 2000, at least not in the book rental shop in my neighborhood. But they got it, eventually, so I could read it. The first BL book I remember (or that strongly remained in my memory) was an adult BL comic book. I read it when I visited my mother's younger sister. She had them. I was a middle school student. Recently, the industry of webtoons (including BL) became huge in South Korea so I started to read BL genre a lot* (Y, female, b. in 1984; raised in a working-class smaller urban setting, Buddhist).

Indeed, the developments in online communication expedited the spread of BL and GL in Korean culture. The pirated version of comics as well as the information related to the purchase and sharing of BL and GL material were actively and fervidly divulgated and discussed in Korean online communities. This early heyday was temporarily curbed by the increased State regulation and censorship, entailing anti-Japanese, anti-homosexual, and overall moralistic overtones, that temporarily changed the destiny of BL and GL. Yet, the creators and audiences protested, and the regulation was subsequently made more lenient (Kim 2013; Kwon 2019).

When as late as in 2016, during my fieldwork on South Korean BL, one of my research assistants and I visited one of the large *manhwa* cafés in Seoul (a joint uniting older concept of the comic book rental store and the space of so-called "room café") the nervousness of the employees that we asked about BL (I didn't, at that point, study GL) was palpable. The percentage of the "transgressive" genres on the shelves was disproportionally low, compared to anecdotal knowledge and available audience studies, but also to a few existing quantitative markers of the genres' success.

What was under pressure or was not readily available offline moved fully to the digital realm, especially within the newly bloomed K-pop fandom. Despite various regulatory pressures and censorship, the ranks of K-pop fans not only embraced and divulgated but also strongly increased and stabilized the production and consumption of BL and GL grassroots creations (Kwon 2019).

The fandom-propelled grassroots creation did not fully bloom until the early 2000s, though, with the debut of the second generation of K-pop idols - groups such as Shinhwa, god, and TVXQ. [5] This generation of fans already established specialized online fan cafés exclusively dedicated to secondary/derivative creations dominated by BL and GL.

> *I got to know about the BL genre through friends in middle school. It was a girls' school and there were a small group of girls who were into anime... we carried our own sketchbook everywhere and often took a look at others' notebooks and drew in them too. Something like the sketchbook for graffiti practice. We had a few favorite anime (both cartoons and paper books) and there was a sub-genre of imaginary BL couples. There were plenty of secondary artworks from the fans... I was mainly the audience. On the other side, there was a whole new BL fandom of K-pop idols (TVXQ, Big Bang, Super Junior...) – and I was introduced to this genre as I started to like the K-pop groups. Fans were making so-called "love lines" and produced secondary photos and video clips (ex. when the two singers were hugging, fans would snip out the moment and make it look like the couple thing). But in early 2000 fans were also writing BL novels, so-called "fanfic". I would download the novels from blogs... surely there was a fandom community but I was a shy audience* (R, woman, b. in 1994; raised in an upper-middle-class setting in the larger provincial city on the south of the Korean peninsula, Catholic).

This ethnographic account already shows the layers of group influence, personal creation, pop consumption (and fandom), and the combination of various offline and online activities. Also, it testifies to the interesting fact that in South Korea "fanfic" (*paenpik*, 팬픽) represents a standard local name for longer and usually homoerotic (BL and GL) narratives, with "fan fiction" (*paenpiksyeon*, 팬픽션) used as a term for the general broader genre of derivative fiction, often western in origin.

The complexity of BL and GL narrative worlds, along with complicated dynamics between individuals and groups, and between various activities, with

5. I use the official English names of these K-pop groups here, that roughly correspond to the Korean versions.

effects of different infrastructures and technologies affecting generations differently, precludes one straightforward and all-encompassing way of capturing the "politics" of BL and GL communities in South Korea, be it "emancipatory" or otherwise. In the next chapter of this article, I shall, therefore, outline those affective patterns that, at least according to my ethnographic archive, crucially shape the proto-political dimensions (political potentialities) of this community.

## 3 Communities of Affect and the Proto-Politics of BL and GL

The purpose of this chapter is to outline some major accents in the overall organization of affect that transpire from the available ethnography and field observations. The community of practice is seen here as the community of affect, and as such it entails various tensive points, nexuses and plateaus of intensity. Such simple delineation of the affective dynamics might contribute to our fuller understanding of the complexities of BL and GL, and its potential "politics". With that, I have in mind the attempts of Brigitte Bargetz and her combining of Sedgwick's and Ranciere's views on the affective distributions to show their ambivalence, and to go beyond the sheer optimism of liberation and pessimism of cultural anchoring, towards the idea of the emancipatory that transcends such polarizations (Bargetz 2015), as lives of *BLer(s)* and *GLer(s)* unfold under the aegis of immense complexity.

The first such accent or plateau of intensification stems from the replacement of conventionally female figurations in romantic and erotic narratives with male ones in BL, and from switching from hetero-romance to homo-romance in GL. In androcentric patriarchal and prevalently heteronormative environments, such changes cannot be affectively irrelevant or empty, as shown by various testimonies and confirmed by the best available literature that is trying to capture the affectivity of BL and GL in the South Korean context (Noh 2001; Yang and Bao 2012; Kwon 2019; Park 2022).

Let us take a look at one of the written testimonials by a female BL fan reported by Noh in 2001:

> *Because I am constantly infused with the value of chastity, I unconsciously avoided stories of women cheating on their husbands. In Harlequin Romances, heroines are virgins, but heroes have lots of sexual experiences. However, in yaoi, because the heroine is also male, I don't need to feel uncomfortable. For example, if a girl in pornography seems to have an orgasm while she is raped by a group of boys, I am not excited but abashed. However, if the raped one is a man, I can enjoy it more easily* (Noh 2001: 9).

This testimonial confirms the empowering or liberatory move of swapping the narrative bodies – changing the underprivileged/unprotected for the privileged/protected patriarchal body. At the same time, the statement is showcasing the full preservation of the narratively shaped patriarchal power structures and of the affective organization that normalizes sexual violence, rape culture, and underage erotica.

Some of these patternings are already conventionally contained within the BL genre, and to a somewhat lesser degree within GL. While both genres stem from romantic novels and comic books, they more often than not entail additional reductions, simplifications, and melodramatic intensifications, not to mention (especially in BL) direct pornographic additions and, most importantly, the conventional polarization between active "macho" and passive "flower" masculinity, a distribution that is by all means next-to-heteronormative, rather than "queer", despite the contemporary optimistic readings, especially related to "flower masculinity" (Jung 2011; Lessard 2019).

The normalization or glamorization of sexual abuse, violence, and rape, which are regularly interpreted in positive terms, with rape scenes in BL barely ever defined as criminal, remains another important dimension that deserves affective unpacking. A *seme* raping an *uke* operates as a literary device that signifies uncontrollable love, rather than violence. Rape scenes are often written in a way that emphasizes the innocence and fragility (also: pseudo-femininity) of an *uke* to contrast it with the masculinity of a *seme*. When asked about it, my interlocutresses seem to be aware of the issue, but the problem doesn't produce a lot of negative or anxious engagement. BL and GL fans certainly have full awareness of the political dimension of these narratives (in terms of partaking in generational sensitivities and the overall societal focus on the politics of gender equality), but there is also a sense of distance and awareness of the self-standing autonomous nature of narrative worlds and mental narrative worlds alike:

> *I strongly think BL is just fantasy. These serious concerns were discussed in earlier stages of BL history. But it's not wrong for people to have sexual fantasies of raping and violence. If they don't do it in real life. I have noticed that some viewers put bad comments about it, but also a lot of people support the freedom of fantasy worlds. I support all fantasies since it's not real* (G, female, b. in 1987; raised in a lower middle class suburban setting, No religion).

> *Rape? Back then I thought it was more of an instrumental element in the storyline. Lack of political correctness haha...* (X, woman, b. in 1993; raised in an upper middle class setting in the larger city of the Seoul Metropolitan Area, Protestant).

The debate on this problem is ongoing in Korea and beyond (Noh 2001; Kwon 2019; Paasonen 2021), while there is also an attempt at the medicalization of some types of female desire related to BL, i.e., its interpretation within the tricky psychiatric discourse on paraphilias (Madill and Zhao 2022). This latter line of inquiry remains interesting here only insofar as it opens debates on how various states of desire and related expressions of societal moral panic remain differently gendered.

For a long time, considering mass female participation in the consumption and creation of these genres, especially by the girls in their formative years, I used to assume a type of transgenerational affective contagion that contributes to the core of melodramatic articulations of love in South Korea, regardless of the narrative pornographic reductions (Pužar 2022). Still, when asked about it ("do you think reading these narratives prompted you or programmed you for certain types of relationship dynamics, emotionality or intimacy"), my interlocutresses remained silent or inconclusive, i.e., the ethnography as of yet could not yield such insights.

> *Yeah, for sure this would influence the readers but I can't say to which degree. Doesn't Disney fairytale fantasy get ruined as we actually experience love relationships? lol...* (R, woman, b. in 1994; raised in an upper-middle-class setting in the larger provincial city on the south of the Korean peninsula, Catholic).

What can strike any ethnographer as peculiar or of different intensity is hierarchical or rank-based order within the communities of BL and GL creators and fans, including strict administrative or managerial regulations, that amount to ones expected among freemasons or other secretive exclusive societies, as seen in the following written ethnographic account, by a young female intellectual who in her teens used to be a fervid fan of the K-pop group Girls generation (also known as SNSD and *Soshi*, from the Korean name of the group *Sonyeo sidae*[6] /소녀시대/) and member of female-only communities that cherished heteronormative romantic love fanfic involving members of the group, but also occasional openly erotic GL narratives that would regularly spur heated debates, and often would provoke expressions of prescriptive prudishness and homophobia.

> *Those fanfic sites and communities, compared to other "official" and "public" fan sites, are extremely hard to get in. You have to know they exist in the first place to start looking for them and they are hard to find, since it's an unspoken rule that you don't speak about that "yin" (eumji,*

6. The official English name of the group is used here, along with RR of the Korean name.

> 음지, *shadowed land) stuff in other sunlit communities of SNSD. And it's even harder to be a member. Some of them have an entrance examination, I'm not kidding. In order to be able to actually read the postings, you have to write a poem using the first letters of SNSD members' names or parody a sijo [*시조*, traditional lyric poetry] to express your love of Soshi, etc. There are even communities that branch out from there, forming even smaller groups. In order to get in some of them, you have to upload a picture of an SNSD album you bought or their solo concert ticket. The register automatically rejects males, with the 7th number of social ID being 1 instead of 2. The atmosphere is free and the way some people talk there is shocking, compared to the way they talk in the usual communities. It's almost a transformation that rivals that of Dr. Jekyll* (S, cis-female, born in 1990, raised in an affluent upper-class setting in the nation's capital, Agnostic, coming from an extremely conservative Protestant background).

According to some other portions of this large testimony, along with this unexpected formalism and prescriptive impulses, there is a perceived and lived tension between the label or orientation of "lesbian" and the love for the non-identarian (non-labeled in terms of identity politics) GL homoerotic content. Open expressions of homosexual or homoerotic interest or arousal, around the year 2010, still produced censorship and strong homophobic backlash within these self-regulated female communities.

> *A female SNSD fan, as oppressed as she is in a patriarchal society, might be just enjoying a less dangerous version of heterosexuality by reading fanfics. However, the boundary between a fanfic fan and a "real" lesbian itself is blurry to begin with. When I suggested this in a serious, un-joking-mannered post that I purposely wrote to get a reaction, it really offended some people. The regulator deleted it before I could copy and paste the comments. But one of the bluntest denials to this "accusation" was: "Liking SNSD and reading fanfics is NOT equal to being a lesbian. How can you even suggest it? Let me spell it out for you because it looks like you're not going to give up anytime soon. (...) Being a lesbian means that you want another girl's fingers in your vagina. I don't. Now, will you leave?" Well, I was suspended for 3 days for posting that, but my retort would have been: do you have to want another man's penis in your vagina in order to be a heterosexual? I'm guessing the answer is no* (S, cis-female, born in 1990, raised in an affluent upper-class setting in the nation's capital, Agnostic, coming from an extremely conservative Protestant background).

This account of blatant homophobia, so different from more optimistic descriptions of SNSD Chinese fans by Yang and Bao (Yang and Bao 2012) opens one of the crucial questions that persists for both BL and GL, and that is the relation of this community of practice and affect to the lives within LGBTQ+ community in what remains a distinctly homophobic environment, despite considerable societal changes towards the acceptance in the last decade (Hong 2021).

As BL and GL often openly deal with homoerotic motifs, genres are sometimes superficially perceived as homosexual. Also, there is an apparent increase in homosexual consumption of these pseudo-homosexual genres (Kwon 2019; Park 2022). That said, BL and GL were often criticized by the LGBTQ+ community as being nothing more than escapist fantasies, lacking realism and societal awareness in featuring and depicting homosexual motifs (Madruga 2021). Genres often fail to address prejudices against people that self-define as homosexual or gay, showing persistent and strong narrative and ideological attachment to the intimate worlds and needs of heterosexual women.

When asked about the tricky relation of BL with real-life homosexuality and its slow normalization in a homophobic society, ethnographic voices turn quite detached and largely inconclusive:

> *I don't know really, but I doubt that it helped the public image of real homosexuals. Not much, maybe. I remember one male gay interview, and he said that people don't accept ugly gays. I think real GL couples in many schools helped those girls more than those webtoons did. And boys rarely read BL* (P, female, b. in 1983; raised in a middle-class smaller urban setting in the South Korean North-East, No religion).

The younger interlocutress is of a somewhat more optimistic opinion, that might be interpreted not only with regards to these popular homoerotic genres but also as a trace of the general spirit of changing times, when it comes to South Korean homophobia, and quite possibly of the class difference:

> *In a long term, I guess this opened our minds to be more open about homosexual motifs. Because we were picturing two men (or women) kissing in our heads* (R, woman, b. in 1994; raised in an upper-middle-class setting in the larger provincial city on the south of the Korean peninsula, Catholic).

Present popularity and openly public presence of more recent BL and GL media products in South Korea reveal fuller generational integration and normalization of homoerotic motifs, among both heterosexual and homosexual audiences, along with the overall increased acceptance of the non-heteronormative articulations of gender and sexuality. Yet, most of the complaints directed to BL and GL in the past by real-life homosexual spectators remain unaddressed, from

the fantasy-bound perfection (aesthetic and ethical flattening) of the situations and characters to the superficiality and decontextualization, to the normalization and even glamorization of inequality and various levels of verbal and physical violence and abuse.

The case in point is "Semantic Error" (시멘틱 에러), a line of narratives and media narratives showing a full circle of production within the community of practice and affect. An online book uploaded to the large online community of pop-culture consumers and creators in 2018 under the pseudonym Jeo Soo-ri (저수리), that was soon taken over by commercial publishers and transformed first into a web-based *manhwa* series and soon after into a four-episode anime (cartoon motion picture), both during 2021. In February of 2022, a live-action drama with eight episodes (directed by Kim Su Jeong /김수정/) was released on popular streaming platforms (Watcha, Viki, and Gagaoolala), and was, in the meantime, combined and edited into a feature film.

The story is of the relatively uneventful university campus life that accommodates an (un)expected homoerotic affair between Chu Sang-woo, a rational, competitive, ambitious, and order-loving junior computer science major student, and an older more erratic figure: a popular and stylish design student Jang Jae Young who, frustrated by his academic failures, first appears as Sang Woo's bully, but then the romance between the two ensues.

Fans of the "Semantic error" immediately took upon creating derivative work, as it is shown in the following example of the recent fan work by the creator working under the name of Morona_ER, which involves five different characters and encompasses both BL and GL scenes.

The translation of the conversation between the cis-male couple is: "Sang-woo, what do you want to eat tonight? Pasta? Sushi? Or me?" "Outside, please shut up!" In the second row: "You were also eating it up yesterday..."

The cis-female couple's exchange is: "Our Ji-hye is so pretty that *eonni* [언니, older sister, the usual way for girls to address an older female friend] can't get her graduation work done. Anxious." "This is the fifth time *eonni* changed the reason for not being able to do the graduation work." In the second row: "Brutal honesty is cute too."

A single character in the middle of the second row (named Hyeong-taek), states: "Damn CCs!" (CCs standing for "campus couples").

One can notice how the BL scene, typically, brings more straightforwardly risqué and bawdy tones, and how the GL scene appears softer, and somewhat more cutefied.

**Picture 1: Semantic Error BL and GL fan art by a creator @Morona_ER [converted to grayscale]. Available from: https://twitter.com/Morona_ER; Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).**


The remaining overlapping affective patternings of importance include those that pertain to relations between male and female figurations, to reductions and intensifications in narratives and in structural terms (packed within the genre development), to intensifications within the tensive nexus of the hetero/homo/pseudohomo/antihomo feelings and balances (including molar homosexuality vs molecular homoeroticism), to complicated relationship between liberatory and regulatory forces (outside and within the community of practice and affect).

Some patternings pertain to the sisterhood or positive homosociality of creators and fans (and fans that are grassroots creators).

The main moment in the overall organization of affect, i.e., the patterning that pervades all others, is certainly the one related to the direct and indirect pleasures and titillations, partly mixed with, but not overshadowed by, the fervor of the celebrity fandom and by the aesthetic appreciation of stories and visuals. Seeking and experiencing pleasure and titillation, and especially sexual pleasure, while in itself productive in vitalist terms (and as such balancing the Post-Neo-Confucian-postmodernity that still celebrates female chastity and politeness) remains the point of activation for various different affective and discursive formations and outcomes: from secretive and shy explorations pervaded by guilt to the louder sex-positive feminist manifestations and reparative queerings. Often interpreted in emancipatory terms, as a form of newly empowered female gaze that restructures or repairs the landscape of human intimacy in South Korea, this affective patterning remains central also across all other positions within the affective community, from passively embracing pedophilia and rape to attacking other sisters from the homophobic perspective.

> *What attracted the girls in puberty was the detailed and romanticized pornographic descriptions of lovemaking... haha... definitely raised sexual curiosity (...) I think these narratives were more of a phase in puberty. I cannot speak for the whole group but for me, it was definitely something that stimulated me sexually* (R, woman, b. in 1994; raised in an upper-middle-class setting in the larger provincial city on the south of the Korean peninsula, Catholic).

The role of these genres in the masturbatory behaviors of Koreans is underresearched, and ethnographic traces are rare:

> *I cannot know if many girls masturbate when they read BL, but I did it many times while reading BL novels or webtoons* (B, female, b. in 1986; raised in a working-class urban setting, Buddhist).

Brief online searches of Korean digital forums reveal a wide range of responses when it comes to genres acting as a direct masturbatory fuel, but also, persisting amounts of shame and mystification related to female masturbation (despite recent notable changes in public visibility of this aspect of female lives). While most of the relevant literature recognizes female excitement, desire and scopophilia, and various other forms of BL- and GL-related pleasure (Noh 2001; Yang 2018; Kwon 2019), the fully sexual channeling of the affective "grab" of these genres presently remains understudied.

## 4 Conclusion

Questions of female (especially young female) empowerment through creation and consumption, their sexual agency, the issues of affective conditioning (or emotional education) of female audiences, issues pertaining to homosocial communality of female readers, and the problems of the (in)visibility of homoerotic practices (either in separation from the molar/structured homosexual identity or not), have all been described in various studies assessing the popularity and importance of East Asian homoerotic popular narratives around the globe. Indeed, I was able to find traces of most of these dimensions in my South Korean fieldwork, in the local patterns of production and consumption of BL and GL.

The main underlying hypothesis of this paper was a simple one: This community of practice and its affective patterns cannot be legitimately read as straightforwardly emancipatory either for the women involved or for the broader field of gender(ed) relations.

The ethnography shows how the female community of *BLer(s)* and *GLer(s),* with its numerous subcommunities and wide peripheries, provides a paradoxical space that is emancipatory and hegemonic/limiting in one. Partaking in this cultural space promotes sexual agency, creativity, and even some alternative (female-to-female) homosocial bonds and emotional investments. It nurtures some anti-systemic sentiments and activities (such as piracy), forms of horizontal bonds, and grassroots operations. On the other hand, it still often reflects and reproduces the crypto-heteronormative and conventionally patriarchal distribution of the ideology and affect, with toxic monogamy and other such forms upon which the entire structure of the South Korean "melodramatic loving" depends to this moment (Pužar 2022). It also remains fetishist in the sense that, at times at least, provokes a legitimate societal debate on paraphilias and practices of violence (such as the case of the possible discursive normalization of underage rape), beyond the newly accepted permissiveness and celebration of female ludic pleasures and emancipatory transgressions.

The vision of the emancipatory process must therefore be corrected by the vision of complexity that is spiralling between the patriarchal-hegemonic and the liberatory-emancipatory, and between the restrictive and permissive poles of South Korean culture. While the overall developments indicate the rising societal acceptance of female sex agency, homosexual visibility, and overall human rights, the pop-hybrids of these processes often remain ambiguous.

All these paradoxes and ethical dilemmas notwithstanding, any large and influential pop-cultural niche created by female creators for female consumers, especially the one that entails many homosocial connections and collaborations,

deserves a special mention and an additional analysis. The logical next step in analysing this specific community would be to keep providing both historical and contemporary empirical research on how the capitalist infrastructures, the structures of the mediasphere, and the entire underlying political economy of BL and GL influence individual and communal lives of South Koreans, as only fully intersectional approaches might modulate and improve the usual cultural studies analysis of these interesting communities of practice and affect.

**Acknowledgement**

Cho Yun-ho, MA (EUACTO - Eurasian cultural trends observatory) contributed to my collection of more recent South Korean primary and secondary sources, and to translations. Hong Ye-won, MA, and Lee Su-jin, MA, my past research assistants at Yonsei University (Seoul, South Korea), contributed with BL-related reports, and with facilitating my related fieldwork. I am grateful to my South Korean ethnographic interlocutresses and to professor Christine Weedon (Cardiff University) that supervised my ethnographic work.

## Bibliography

Bargetz, Brigitte (2015): The Distribution of Emotions: Affective Politics of Emancipation. Hypatia, 30 (3): 580–596.

Chon, Kilnam, Park, Hyunje, Kang, Kyungran, and Lee, Youngeum (2005): A Brief History of the Internet in Korea. Available from: https://net.its.hawaii.edu/history/Korean_Internet_History.pdf (Accessed 23. 2. 2023).

Hong, Boram (2021): A Study on the Relationship between Korean Women's Dong-In (Doujin) Culture and Feminism – Focusing on the discourse of post-BL(Tal-BL). (한국 '여성' 동인문화와 페미니즘의 관계에 대한 연구 : 탈 BL(Boys' Love) 담론을 중심으로). Department of Sociology. The Graduate School of Chung-Ang University (master thesis)

Jung, Sung (2011): Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols. Honolulu: Hawaii University Press.

Kim, Hyojin (2013): Korean Dong-in Culture and Yaoi: Focusing on the Changes in the 1990s (한국 동인문화와 야오이: 1990 년대를 중심으로). Cartoon and Animation Studies: 263–290. Seoul: Korean Society of Cartoon Animation Studies.

Kotani, Mari (2007): Foreword to Saitō Tamaki "Otaku Sexuality". In C. Bolton, I. Csicsery-Ronay Jr. and T. Tatsumi (eds.): Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: 47–74. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kwon, Seung-Ho, and Kim, Joseph (2013): From censorship to active support: The Korean state and Korea's cultural industries. The Economic and Labour Relations Review, 24 (4): 517–532.

Kwon, Jungmin (2019): Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Lave, Jean, and Wenger, Étienne (1991): Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lessard, John (2019): Transnational Slash: Korean Drama Formats, Boys' Love Fanfic, and the Place of Queerness in East Asian Media Flows. In P. Demory (ed.): Queer/Adaptation: 155–174. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Li, Yannan (2009): Japanese Boy-Love manga and the global fandom: a case study of Chinese female readers (Doctoral dissertation).

Madill, Anna (2021): The Yaoi/Boys' Love/Danmei Audience. In Ross, K. et. al. (eds.): The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication: 1–5. Hoboken – Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.

Madill, Anna, and Zhao, Yao (2022): Are Female Paraphilias Hiding in Plain Sight? Risqué Male–Male Erotica for Women in Sinophone and Anglophone Regions. Archives of Sexual Behavior, 51: 897–910.

Madruga, Isabella (2021): The Explosion of the 'Boys' love (BL) genre. The Daily Fandom, 11. 11. 2021. Available from: https://thedailyfandom.org/the-explosion-of-the-boys-love-genre/#the-problems-with-boys-love (Accessed 24. 12. 2022).

Nagaike, Kazumi (2010): The Sexual and Textual Politics of Japanese Lesbian Comics: Reading Romantic and Erotic Yuri Narratives. Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies, 30. 9. 2010 (article 4).

Noh, Sueen (2001): Reading YAOI Comics: An Analysis of Korean Girls' Fandom. Available from: http://moongsil.com/study/yaoi_eng.pdf (Accessed 29. 1. 2023).

Paasonen, Susanna (2021): 'We watch porn for the fucking, not for romantic tiptoeing': extremity, fantasy and women's porn use. Porn Studies. DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2021.1956366.

Pagliassotti, Dru (2008): Reading boys' love in the West. Particip@tions, 5 (2). Available from: http://www.participations.org/Volume%205/Issue%202/5_02_pagliassotti.htm (Accessed 23. 2. 2023).

Park, Bo Ram (2022): A Study on the Cultural Practices of Queer Women in the GL (Girls' Love) Community. (퀴어 여성 GL 향유자들의 문화실천에 관한 연구) (Master thesis). Department of Women's studies. Seoul: The Graduate School of Ewha Womans University.

Pužar, Aljoša (2019): Odraščanje v Južni Koreji: feministične etnografije transgresije. Ljubljana: ZRC SAZU, Inštitut za antropološke in prostorske študije.

Pužar, Aljoša (2022): "The two of us, inc." – notes on the post-entrepreneurial love. In K. Haensch (ed.): Uncanny entrepreneurship: 130–145. Hamburg: Textem.

Wenger, Étienne (1998): Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wood, Andrea (2006): "Straight" Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counterpublic. Women's Studies Quarterly, 34 (1/2): 394–414.

Yang, Ling, and Bao, Hongwei (2012): Queerly Intimate: Friends, fans and affective communication in a Super Girl fan fiction community. Cultural Studies, 26 (6): 842–871.

Yang, Sungeun (2018): A Feminist Psychological Analysis on the Playful Embracement of Boys' Love Manga (여성심리학 관점에서 분석한 남성동성애만화 (Boys' Love manga) 의 유희적 수용. Journal of Korean Cinema Association, 18 (9).

Yora (2020): 벡합 향유층의 성적 지향 및 성별 정체성 설문조서 결과 및 분석 (Baekap users' sexual orientation and results and analysis). Naver blog, 19. 01. 2020. Available from: https://m.blog.naver.com/PostView.naver?blogId=ephedra88&logNo=221777409943&referrerCode=0&searchKeyword=%EB%B0%B1%ED%95%A9%20%ED%96%A5%EC%9C%A0%EC%9E%90 (Accessed 4. 1. 2023).

Yora (2023): 백합, 이 좋은 걸 이제 알았다니 (Baekap, finally realized it's good). Seoul: Gufic.

Zsila, Ágnes, Pagliassotti, Dru, Urbán, Róbert, Orosz, Gábor, Király, Orsolya, and Demetrovics, Zsolt (2018): Loving the love of boys: Motives for consuming yaoi media. PLoS ONE, 13 (6): e0198895.

**Authors' data**

Ddr. **Aljoša Pužar**, Associate Professor
University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences
Kardeljeva ploščad 5, Ljubljana, Slovenia
E-mail: aljosa.puzar@fdv.uni-lj.si
Tel: +386 1 5805 280