

BOYS' LOVE MANGA AS A DISCURSIVE SPACE: SEXUALITY AND FEMALE
SUBCULTURE IN KYRGYZSTAN

A thesis presented by

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Declaration of authorship:

I hereby declare that this dissertation is an original study, and no information from previous studies is used in this paper without citation and credit to the original author. This study was conducted to achieve a Master of Arts degree in the Sociology department at the American University of Central Asia.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aliia Kimsanova', written in a cursive style.

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Abstract

Boys' Love (BL) manga is a genre that depicts romantic and sexual relationships between male characters, created primarily by women for women. It has gained significant popularity among young women in Kyrgyzstan, where sexuality remains a heavily regulated and rarely discussed topic. This study examines how BL manga functions as a space for young women in Kyrgyzstan to explore and discuss sexuality, asking specifically: why do they read it, what meanings does it provide, and how does it operate as a space for engaging with desire?

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with young women from Kyrgyzstan aged eighteen to thirty who read BL regularly. The study draws on Walby's theory of patriarchal structures, Connell and Messerschmidt's hegemonic masculinity, and Mulvey's male gaze to analyze the structural conditions shaping participants' lives, and on Warner's theory of counterpublics and McRobbie and Garber's concept of bedroom culture to analyze BL as a space of meaning-making.

Analysis shows that participants' dissatisfaction with heterosexual relationships, femininity, and media representation is produced by interconnected patriarchal structures that regulate emotional life, female sexuality, and visual culture. BL emerges as a counterpublic organized around different assumptions. It offers an alternative model of masculinity and intimacy, uses the absence of the female body to create distance from the shame associated with female desire, and produces communities where dominant gender norms can be collectively questioned. The same structural conditions that silence female sexuality make BL a particularly necessary space, one where young women in Kyrgyzstan can encounter desire on their own terms.

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Introduction

The topic of sexuality in Kyrgyzstan is characterized by silence. It is considered sensitive and is rarely discussed openly. There is no sex education in schools, families avoid conversations about intimacy, and overall, Kyrgyz culture is conservative when it comes to women expressing or even admitting to having sexual desire. Silence around sexuality is considered a moral virtue, modesty or the protection of young minds. As a result, many young women are left without reliable sources of information or without safe spaces for exploring intimacy. In this context, learning about sexuality becomes fragmented and often comes with shame and fear of judgment (Janabaeva, 2018). Therefore, young women turn to informal sources, like friends and online spaces and media, to make sense of their desires.

One of the unexpected forms of media that gained popularity in this context became Boys' Love manga (Fujimoto, 2020). Boys' Love is a genre of Japanese comics that focuses on the portrayal of romantic and sexual relationships between men, created mainly by women for women. It first appeared in Japan in the 1970s as part of the hetero romance genre for girls. Since then, it has grown from a small subculture into a global phenomenon that has spread through digital platforms, fan-sub communities, and social networks (Welker, 2015). In the past decade BL has gained popularity among young women in Kyrgyzstan, with Russian translations spreading through social media and online manga platforms, and the number of manga and anime shops growing significantly in the capital. Despite explicit content and LGBT topics still being taboo, Boys' Love has become a part of the everyday digital consumption of a large number of youth in Kyrgyzstan. It functions as a space where the restrictive cultural boundaries around what can be discussed loosen, allowing young women to reflect on intimacy more freely.

Problem statement and research questions

In Kyrgyzstan young women often don't have a safe space to talk and think about sexuality. This study explores the way BL manga becomes such a space. The main research question is: how does BL manga serve as a space for young women in Kyrgyzstan to talk about sexuality? This is guided by three sub-questions: why do young women read BL? What meanings does it provide? And how is it used as a space for discussing sexuality, intimacy, and desire?

This study argues that BL manga functions as a meaningful discursive space for young women in Kyrgyzstan precisely because the structural conditions of their everyday lives make such a space necessary. Drawing on fifteen semi-structured interviews, the analysis shows that the same patriarchal structures that regulate female sexuality, produce emotionally distant masculinity, and organize media representation around the male gaze are the conditions that make BL – a genre without female bodies, organized around alternative models of intimacy – particularly resonant. BL does not resolve these structural conditions. It creates a space where desire can be encountered, discussed, and reflected on outside of them.

The study draws on two sets of theoretical frameworks. The first concerns patriarchy, gender, and representation. It includes Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchal structures, Connell and Messerschmidt's concept of hegemonic masculinity, and Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze. These frameworks serve as instruments of analysis of structural conditions that create young women's everyday lives. The second set concerns how women create alternative spaces. It includes Michael Warner's theory of publics and counterpublics and Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's analysis of girls' subcultures. Together, these frameworks allow the study to move between analysis of structural conditions and cultural practices that evolve as a response to these conditions.

Significance of the study and research gap

The field of gender studies in Kyrgyzstan has been developing for the past decades. A significant number of existing studies were initiated or sponsored by international organizations, like the UN, UNDP, and UNFPA (UNDP 2022; UN Women 2024; UNFPA and NSC 2016). These reports address important structural problems: gender discrimination, violence, exploitation, and changing public attitudes towards gender roles. They are mainly focused on macro-level issues. However, topics connected to women's everyday cultural practices, their relationship to sexuality, and informal spaces, through which they explore intimacy, stay largely unexamined. BL-culture in Kyrgyzstan, in particular, has not received academic attention before this study.

This gap exists within a broader absence in the global BL scholarship as well. Despite BL being extensively studied in Japanese, Chinese, and Western contexts, qualitative research that focuses on readers' interpretations and meaning-making practices remains limited. A large number of existing works use content analysis of manga and quantitative studies of readership's characteristics. Reader-centered, qualitative approaches – particularly outside East Asia – are rare. This study addresses both the regional and methodological gaps simultaneously.

This research contributes to two areas of scholarship. First, it brings Central Asia into global BL discourse, expanding a field that has been geographically narrow. Second, it contributes to gender studies in Kyrgyzstan by moving beyond structural problems to examine the cultural practices and meaning-making strategies of young women themselves. It explores not only the conditions they navigate but the spaces they actively create within those conditions.

Chapter Overview

This work is organized as follows. The literature review situates this study in the context of existing scholarship on BL manga and includes the history of gender and recurring key themes in the academic literature. The following chapter presents a theoretical framework and the analysis tools used in this work. The chapter about methodology outlines the epistemological approach, research design, and sampling method. The Findings chapter presents the results of the empirical material, organized around three themes: participants' experiences of romantic relationships and gender dynamics; their navigation of femininity, sexuality, and representation; and their engagement with BL as a mediated space of exploration. The analysis and discussion chapter interprets these findings through the theoretical frameworks, before a concluding synthesis brings the central argument together. The thesis closes with a conclusion that reflects on the study's contributions and limitations.

Operational definitions

Boys' Love (BL) - a genre of manga and related media that centers romantic and emotional relationships between male characters, produced primarily for and by women (McLelland 2000; Wood 2006).

Manga - Japanese comics. In this study, the term also encompasses Chinese manhwa and Korean manhwa, which share comparable genre conventions and readership practices.

Anime - Japanese animated productions, often adapted from manga source material.

Shonen-ai — a subgenre of BL that focuses on romantic relationships between male characters without explicit sexual content. The term is used interchangeably with BL in some scholarly literature.

Yaoi – a subgenre of BL that includes sexual content alongside romantic narrative. The term is also used interchangeably with Boys' Love in fan communities.

Mangaka – the author of a manga work.

Gender — a socially constructed system of roles, behaviors, and expectations associated with perceived biological sex differences (Butler 1990; Connell 2002).

Sexuality - a multidimensional aspect of human life encompassing desire, attraction, practices, identities, and meanings shaped by social and cultural context (Weeks 2010).

Heteronormativity - the assumption that heterosexuality is the natural and socially privileged norm, organizing institutions and everyday life around this default (Warner 1991).

Fantasy - an imaginative space in which readers can explore desires and scenarios outside the constraints of everyday social life (Radway 1984).

Subculture — a social group within a larger dominant culture that develops distinct values, practices, and identities, often in negotiation with or resistance to dominant norms (McRobbie and Garber 1976). In this study, BL readership among young women in Kyrgyzstan is understood as one such subcultural practice.

1. Literature Review

This chapter situates the study within existing scholarship on Boys' Love manga. It begins with a brief historical account of manga as a medium and traces the emergence of BL as a distinct genre. It then surveys the key themes that recur across the academic literature : freedom from the male gaze, gender and relationships, sexuality and reproduction, and identification and fantasy. Then, it identifies the research gap that this study addresses: the absence of qualitative, reader-centered research on BL readership outside of East Asia.

Historical background

The term “manga” usually refers to Japanese comic books or graphic novels. Its literal translation means “whimsical pictures, “man (漫) meaning “whimsical” or “aimless” and “ga” (画) meaning “picture”. Manga developed in its modern form in the middle of the 20th century, after WW2, in Japan, and has grown into a global cultural industry (Brenner, 2007). Manga is distinct from Western comics: it is traditionally printed in black and white, features simplified, expressive character design, emphasizes emotional expression through large eyes, and is created by a single author in a long serial narrative (Schodt, 1985). Today, manga is popular globally, spreading through various online platforms, social media, fan translation communities, which help reach audiences far beyond Japan (Wong, 2010).

Manga is divided into many various genres and subgenres that are often categorized demographically. One of its most popular genres is shounen and shoujo: shounen targets teenage boys aged 12 to 20 and focuses on adventure, action, and battles; shoujo targets young girls aged 12 to 20 and focuses on relationships, romance, and emotional development (Schodt, 1985). This demographic genre system is important to mention because BL genre historically originated from

shoujo and was shaped by female authors who worked on shoujo manga and wanted to rework conventional romance storytelling.

Boys' Love (BL), or shounen-ai in Japanese, refers to fictional narratives that depict romantic or sexual relationships between male characters, and is created mainly by women with women as its target audience. BL first originated in the shoujo genre in the 1970s, particularly through the work of the "Year 24 Group", a generation of new female manga authors who challenged the genre's norms and introduced emotional depth, more complex characters, and experimental topics, including male-male relationships (Welker, 2015). These early works contributed to the emergence of shounen ai (BL) and its later recognizability as a separate genre (Lee, 2017).

Although manga normally refers to Japanese comics, in contemporary digital culture, readers often consume Korean manhwa, Chinese manhua, and Japanese manga interchangeably, using the same platforms and online communities. Therefore, in this thesis, the term "manga" will refer to all three forms of comics when discussing the BL genre due to its shared stylistic features and fan consumption patterns.

Boys' love as a genre emerged at the margins of Japanese popular culture, yet it has developed into a global phenomenon. "What is socially peripheral may be symbolically central," wrote Stallybrass and White (1986) in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, and BL can illustrate that logic. Although BL can be considered a subculture within a subculture, created mainly by women for women, it has become an important area for studying gender, sexual imagination, gender performativity, and fan cultural production in different cultural and national contexts. Over the last few decades, BL popularity has gone far beyond Japan, spreading across contexts through commercial publications, internet platforms, and other networks (Fujimoto, 2020). Scholars use

BL to study how women negotiate power, desire, sexuality, and produce counter-narratives in ways that challenge the dominant heteronormative paradigm. (Pagliassotti, Nagaike, & McHarry, 2013).

In Japan BL already has an established market. By the middle of the 2000s, nearly 150 BL manga were published monthly, with more than 30 magazines, and the domestic Japanese market was estimated at 120 million yen annually (Pagliassotti et al., 2013). Recent market reporting indicates that the Japanese manga industry continues to expand and reach record sales in 2024 (Nippon.com, 2024). Although these figures refer to manga in general, they demonstrate that the cultural field within which BL circulates remains strong. BL is also maintained through fan-based production networks. Comic Market (Comiket), the world's largest dōjinshi event held twice a year in Tokyo, gathers hundreds of thousands of attendees, and BL continues to be one of the most visible categories among self-published works (Frontline Japan, 2024). The continued demand for BL in both commercial publishing and in fan dōjin production suggests that BL is not a temporary trend, but a stable cultural formation supported by ongoing production, active participation, and long-term readership.

The history of anime in Kyrgyzstan begins in 1969, when the first Japanese animated films *Cat in Boots* and *Flying Phantom Ship* were broadcast on Soviet television. In the following decades, the Soviet Union and Japan collaborated on several animation projects, including *Twelve Months* and *Adventures of Penguin Lolo*. Both of these works became widely popular and later achieved iconic status across the former Soviet republics. In 1989, Soviet viewers were introduced to anime in its recognizable modern form through the broadcast of Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro*. It was the first encounter with the style that would later define contemporary Japanese anime (Naimushina 2010).

Anime in its modern serialized form became widely accessible in the late 1990s and early 2000s when major Russian television channels such as STS, TNT, and 2X2 began broadcasting Japanese animated series for teenage audiences. *Sailor Moon*, *Pokémon*, and *Naruto* were among the first titles to reach a mass Russian-speaking audience (Naumova 2023). These series shaped an entire generation of viewers. With the rapid expansion of the Internet in the 2000s, the circulation of anime became even easier. Fan-made subtitles, voice-overs, and scanlations spread quickly online (Magera 2018). It allowed anime and manga content to circulate not only within Russia but also across other Russian-speaking countries, including Kyrgyzstan. This digital infrastructure played a central role in making Japanese pop culture accessible to Kyrgyzstani audiences.

Against this backdrop of growing global circulation and a well-established audience in the Russian-speaking world, BL has also developed into a recognized field of academic inquiry. BL studies as an academic field emerged in the 1990s with the publication of Nakajima's book called *Communication Deficiency Syndrome*. Early scholarship was produced by Japanese authors like Nakajima, Fujimoto, Nagaike and Tomoko Ayama. Later, the scholarship extended outside Japan with authors like McLelland and Hemmann, who are one of the key authors in the field as well. Aside from the mentioned authors, this study draws on quantitative research of Zsila et al. on the motives behind BL media consumption, Chang and Tian's work on female BL authorship in the context of strict governmental censorship, and Vorontsov, one of the few authors who studied BL readership in a Russian-speaking media space.

The existing literature on Boys' Love has recurring topics. Scholars seek to answer the question of why young women read BL. They aim to study the motives for reading and social and cultural factors behind it (McLelland 2010; Fujimoto 2020; Nagaike 2018). They also examine shared characteristics and views of the readers (Zsila et al 2018; Vorontsov 2022). Apart from focusing

on the readership, they also analyze the content of BL manga and the intentions and perspectives of the authors of BL manga (Hemmann 2015; Chang 2021). Overall, this body of work is primarily quantitative and is largely concerned with why women read BL. The findings can be divided into following themes: freedom from the male gaze; gender and relationships; sexuality, violence and reproduction; identification and fantasy.

Freedom from the male gaze

One of the main appeals of BL highlighted in the scholarly literature is the genre providing a space free from the male gaze and female objectification. Nakajima writes that in the world of BL manga, male gaze and society's gaze do not exist. In the mainstream media — like manga, anime, or cinema — female characters are sexualized and objectified (Hemmann 2015). They are portrayed as objects of desire, their bodies are fragmented, features are often unrealistic, and clothing is sexualized and revealing in order to appeal to the male audience. As Zsila wrote, many women who read BL express dissatisfaction with standard romances, because its female characters are "one-dimensional", their personalities are often reduced to their appearance, as well as with predictable and cliché tropes (Zsila 2018). Since BL narratives focus on male-male relationships, females are mostly absent from the story. This lack of representation gives women freedom. Reading BL, they don't need to worry about the way female characters are written and how their bodies are portrayed, they don't feel like their own bodies are exposed and are being looked at and judged. Instead, in BL, they can take a comfortable position of an observer, become an admirer of physical beauty in the opposite sex (Aoyama 1988) and focus on what they see, what they want to see and what they desire.

Gender & relationships

BL offers an alternative portrayal of gender roles and masculinity. Scholars argue that male characters in BL disrupt hegemonic models of masculinity by portraying male characters that showcase vulnerability, emotional expressiveness, submissiveness, and androgynous looks (Zsila et al; McLelland; Vorontsov). Furthermore, the absence of female characters allows women to freely associate themselves with BL manga male characters who appear to have ambiguous gender. This allows women to escape socially established roles of femininity (McLelland). In other words, rather than reinforcing rigid gender roles, BL allows diverse gender identities.

This also leads to another reason why BL attracts female readers. It is the portrayal of equal relationships. Since both partners are male, there is no traditional portrayal of a relationship, where roles are binary and divided into dominant-submissive and passive-active. Homosexual relationships allow more interpretations of dynamics in romantic relationships, since there is no gender expectation for one partner to take a certain position in the dynamic (McLelland 2015; Fujimoto 2020; Darlington & Cooper, 2010). In contrast, in traditional heterosexual romance manga or other media a woman is usually portrayed more submissive and docile, while a man takes a more active and dominant position . However, authors also admit that even in BL there is often a heteronormative portrayal of relationships. In many manga works, a character that is physically smaller and more “feminine” also takes a more submissive position in a relationship (Vorontsov 2020; Hemmann 2015). But despite this, BL still offers more nuances and diverse portrayals of dynamics in a relationship, and, as Hemmann notes, a male character taking a stereotypically feminine role in a relationship is still subversive as it denies biological determinism. Thus, Boys’ Love gives its readers means of negotiating gender stereotypes, or patriarchal expectations that are often present in other types of romantic narratives.

Sexuality: violence and reproduction

Female sexuality in mainstream media is often associated with violence, passivity or reproduction, and BL offers an alternative space of fantasy where intimacy is detached from it. (Aoyama 1998; McLelland 2015; Fujimoto 2020). Depictions of sex that are violent and intrusive has become common in media (McLelland 2015), in Japanese comics it is also heavily tied to violence (Allison 1996). Women in sexual narratives are spied on, sexually harassed (McLelland 2015) and always take passive position in sexual acts (Fujimoto 2020). In men's comics male characters are portrayed as aggressive heroes or miserable failures. Sex is depicted as a commodity men take from women by force, or it is bestowed by women on men as a pity. It is rarely depicted as a mutual exchange, a depiction that is very common in BL narratives. McLelland also argues that heterosexual sex in men's comics rarely takes place in a context of an established relationship, nor does it result in enduring unions.

In addition to violence, female sexuality in male-oriented mainstream media is also often tied to reproduction, marriage and family (McLelland 2015; Fujimoto 2020; Aoyama 1988). As Fujimoto notes, one of the reasons women turn to BL manga is that it helps them escape to a fantasy where they're free from "negative aspects of normative sexuality", which imposes child-bearing roles on women. In this context, where patriarchal structures assign strict roles on women based on their reproductive capacities, desire is limited and regulated through marriage, motherhood and family (Aoyama 1988). As Lee writes, "only a boy who loves a boy — or a girl who loves a girl — is truly free to love beyond the constraining roles imposed by the marriage-and-family system" (Lee 2017).

In contrast to these representations, BL manga portrays intimacy that is connected to violence against women and reproductive obligations. Sexual relationships in BL usually take place in a context of romantic relationships, emotional connection and mutual desire, it is less often framed

as an act of domination. Even if violence is present in BL, since it excludes women, seeing men in a submissive and vulnerable sexual position still gives women a sense of empowerment . Furthermore, by centering same-sex relationships, BL narratives remove female bodies from representation and allow intimacy to be imagined outside the marriage-and-family system. This makes BL a safe space for women to explore intimacy and desire outside of constraints of violence and reproduction associated with female sexuality in men-oriented and mainstream media.

Identification and fantasy

Another important theme in BL scholarship is identification and fantasy. BL allows women to freely identify with both positions in a relationship, both the subject and the object of desire, the absence of female characters reduces the sense of a competition, and identification with a male character rather than a female reduces the feelings of shame and guilt usually associated with women's sexuality. Thus, BL fantasy space makes desire feel safer by displacing it onto male characters.

As Lee argues, since there is no female character in BL narrative, women don't associate with any character by default. Instead, they can freely move from subject who loves to an object who is loved by men. In BL stories women become creators and admirers of male physical beauty (Aoyama 1998) and are free to identify with their "idealized self" — a man, who can love another man as equal.

The absence of female characters also reduces a sense of competition. As Satoko Kan, BL author, notes when women read stories that center female characters they have to face their own sexuality, and sometimes rejection. When female characters are removed from the story, it helps the readers to "immerse in fantasies of male homoeroticism" without direct competitors (Lee 2017).

Expression of female sexuality is often met with shame and guilt. Takemiya Keiko, BL manga author, explains that her choice to center male male characters in her stories is a way to "liberate girls from restrictions imposed on women" (Lee 2017). Therefore, as Nagaike points out, women can sublimate their feelings of guilt and shame and project their sexuality on male characters in BL narratives as a way to avoid their sexual repression. Women don't fantasize about being gay men, they want to desire men as men desire men - as equals. Fantasy here serves as a safe structure that helps escape from sexual shame and repression women grow up with. Since desire as women can be judged and shamed, women chose to project their desires on male characters in BL.

This creates distance from the female body and guilt. Thus, male characters become symbolic containers for desire (Lee 2017). In other words, BL fantasy represents "the absence of a socially acceptable object for female desire" (Nagaike 2018).

Research gap

Overall, existing literature on Boys' Love frames the genre as a space where women can negotiate gender, sexuality, intimacy, and desire as mainstream heterosexual media is men-oriented and offers limited representations. Taken together, existing scholarship describes BL as a space free from male gaze, rigid gender roles, sexualized violence and reproductive expectation imposed on female sexuality. These studies provide valuable insights into why women turn to Boys' Love and what it represents (Aoyama 1988; Fujimoto 2020; Nagaike 2018; McLelland 2015; Zsila 2018) , most of the existing literature is focused on content-analysis of the manga (Hemmann 2015; McLelland 2015; Lee 2017), the authors' intentions and interpretations (Lee; Chang and Tian) and generalized characteristics or patterns among the BL readers, often relying on quantitative approaches (Vorontsov 2020, Zsila 2018). However, little attention has been given to the way

readers themselves interpret BL manga and its meanings and how they actively negotiate with the genre. This gap highlights the need for a more qualitative, reader-centered approach that focuses on readers' interpretations and meaning-making, which this study aims to address.

2. Theoretical framework

The concepts discussed in this chapter form the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The first framework will be based on patriarchy, gender, and representation using Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchal structures, Connell & Messerschmidt's concept of "hegemonic masculinity", and Laura Mulvey's definition of "the male gaze". The second framework is used to understand the alternative ways of creating meaning and cultural practice for women. It draws on Michael Warner's concept of publics & counterpublics, & Angela McRobbie & Jenny Garber's research regarding girls' subcultures & bedroom culture.

2.1 Patriarchy, Gender, and the Gaze: Structural and Representational Frameworks

Sylvia Walby (1990) theorises about the structure of women's subordination and she begins with the theory of patriarchy by giving a structural account of how the male dominated social structure subjugates, oppresses or exploits women. She also argues that gender inequality is not the result of individual attitudes or biological differences but is rather a result of a patriarchal system of social structures and practices through which men control and dominate all that women do. Walby asserts that patriarchy cannot be reduced to just one cause, and instead is made up of six relatively autonomous but interrelated and mutually reinforcing social structures: Patriarchal relations in paid labor ; in the housework; the patriarchal state; violence against women; patriarchal institutional relations in sexuality; and a patriarchal culture. Each structure has its own underlying logic and law: however together they form the structure of social conditions in which women are subject to patriarchy throughout their daily lives.

Walby's examination of domestic life and the influence of the culture is highly significant to this work. Within the home, the work that women do with their families is being taken without value.

Women perform many of the tasks associated with keeping a family together: providing love, support, and care for their children and all the other responsibilities that need to be done for families to function. The way that women provide these services (with no pay and little recognition) is not by chance but is a systemic issue. This situation creates a negative impact on women's options and identities throughout society. Walby points out that the cultural structure (including the media, religion, and education) actively participates in continuing to create gender inequality. The cultural system of the state provides non-verbal and verbal cues to the appropriate behaviours for each gender. This causes women's subordination to become normal; thus, impacting how women depict their own identities in the world.

According to Walby's framework, a main point is the distinction between public and private patriarchy. In the case of private patriarchy, women were controlled by men in their roles as wives and mothers within the home during earlier times in history. Men, as husbands and fathers, benefited from women's work in these settings. However, with contemporary society having predominately operated under the structures of a public or "modern" patriarchal society, women now exist as part of the public sphere through education and work, but they are also subordinated in these spaces as well. Women are not excluded from being a part of the public sphere, they have been included; but only on an unequal playing field (i.e. segregated into jobs that are lesser than men's jobs, subjected to regulatory state policies affecting their ability to support their families, and constrained by cultural norms defining femininity in relation to male roles). Although a woman may no longer be controlled overtly by one male patriarch, she is still subject to collective institutionalized forms of male power; thus, the transition does not free her, but only puts into place a different form of control.

Within Walby's framework, the notion of sexuality is equally important. Patriarchal relationships within sexuality are sustained through the institution of compulsory heterosexuality and the sexual double standard, which means that women are subject to more restrictions than men for their sexual behaviour. Therefore, women's sexuality is not freely constructed, but rather is constructed through structures that normalize male desire while establishing norms for examining and judging female desire.

According to Walby's perspective of cultural institutions, gender relations are shaped and sustained by media and representation. This is related to Connell & Messerschmidt's (2005) understanding of hegemonic masculinity, which is the version of masculinity that dominates a particular social context as well as supports the subjugation of females by giving legitimate authority to males while denying legitimacy to other expressions of gender. Hegemonic masculinity is not what most men are in actuality but provides a normative ideal that organizes and justifies gender relations. Hegemonic masculinity exists as both a social force and a normative ideal; it creates expectations for male and female behavior, appearance and relationship through a combination of violence and cultural acceptance. The media and popular culture continuously recreate, circulate, and validate these ideals.

The relationship between representation, power, and gender is theorized in Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze (1975). Analyzing mainstream cinema, Mulvey argues that visual pleasure in cinema is built around an active male subject who looks and a passive female object who is looked at. Women, according to her, are coded for visual and erotic impact. They are displayed, fragmented, and made available for the pleasure of a male viewer. It is not just special characteristics of certain films, but a reflection of a broader organization of looking in a patriarchal social order, where pleasure from looking is divided based on gender. Active and male on one

side, passive and female on the other. Male gaze world works through scopophilia — pleasure from observing others as objects, and through narcissistic identification with a male protagonist on screen. Together, these mechanisms put women in a position of an object of representation, not a subject with their own desires and point of view.

While Mulvey's concept mainly focused on cinema, it was later extended to media and cultural production overall. Walby (1990) also theorizes patriarchal gaze, that is built into cultural institutions, a gaze that evaluates and constructs women through gendered power relationships. Both of these concepts focus on representation not being neutral. It is both formed through patriarchal structures of society and reproduces these structures. For women who consume media produced under these conditions, the act of reading or watching always involves some negotiation with a representational field that consistently positions them as objects rather than subjects of desire.

2.2 Counter-Spaces and Cultural Practices: Publics, Counterpublics, and Girls' Subcultures

While the previous section detailed the way in which women's lives can be conceptualized as a result of their relationship to social structures, this section addresses the conceptual framework in which one can understand how women make meaning and develop cultural practices based on the restrictions imposed upon them. This section will use Warner's theory of publics and counterpublics (2002) and the analysis by McRobbie and Garber of girls and subcultures (1981) as the two primary theoretical approaches.

Warner's primary claim is that the public is an entity of discourse rather than a social group with prior existence. This means that the public comes into being when discourse is circulated through texts and then taken up actively as a result of that circulation. The public is different from an

audience (based on physical presence) or a citizen (based on legal status or the recognition of membership in a state), because a public is self-organized, creating itself through its members' orientation toward a common circulation of text and recognition of shared membership in that addressed text. Warner identifies two types of membership in the public – formal and informal. Formal membership in a public is based on an established relationship between an individual and the addressed text – formal affiliation. Informal membership means that one is considered part of the public by attending to, listening to, reading, or otherwise engaging with the discourse circulating among the public. This idea has significant social implications; it means that all members of the public are available to outsiders. And it means that attending to a text is itself a socially participatory act.

According to Warner, the recognition of people's faith in themselves and each other is what defines the freedom of all people. A public, as defined by Warner, is not formed through a single event but rather through the compilation of many texts and events into a singular continuum of events that create an ongoing flow of communication that helps define a common understanding of the world around them. Communication is defined by poetic world-building in that it creates and constructs the world described in the texts as opposed to simply defining the pre-existing social construct. Creating and defining a public and its corresponding social structure can be achieved through communication.

This concept of a counterpublic is built on the framework of a discursive space that has tension with the dominant public. A counterpublic is not a small group of people or a specific type of audience; it is defined by the relationship that the members have to the dominant public. Counterpublics create spaces for people from traditionally underrepresented groups to forge opposition against the dominant public by creating new interpretations of who they are and how

to meet their needs, using speech, ways to communicate, and ways of being social that may not be accepted or understood by the dominant public. The subordinate nature of a counterpublic is not just shown through the content of its discourse, but it is also a part of the foundation of what it means to be part of a counterpublic. To participate in a counterpublic means to be in a position of risk and alienation, and to be part of a community that does not know what other members will respond to. On the other hand, members of the dominant public consider their norms to be universal or natural and therefore do not acknowledge the particular assumptions that make up their way of relating and communicating with others.

Warner's theories can help understand how underrepresented groups, like individuals whose identities/desires are not acknowledged or are actively stigmatized within the dominant culture, construct their own discursive communities and alternate forms of sociality. The counterpublic is more than simply an escape, it is also an alternate way of engaging with the public sphere, which challenges dominant public norms. However, it continues to be oriented towards the broader social world.

The analysis by McRobbie and Garber (1981) of girls and subcultures adds to the sociological study of youth culture. Their work is a deliberate entry point into an area that has been historically neglected in relation to young women. In particular, they expose that although young women were not acknowledged in many of the classic studies of British post-war youth subcultures, they did participate in those youth cultures. The absence of girls from these studies was not because they weren't participating in it, it was because most of the research was conducted with a masculine bias and thus excluded girls' cultural practices. According to McRobbie and Garber, girls do not occupy a marginal position within youth subcultures. They hold different structural positions to boys; they are more restricted in how they use public space, under more scrutiny due to the moral

panic over female sexuality and more organized around the home and the domestic sphere than boys. Girls' involvement in cultural activities is impeded by the double standard, which allows for acceptance or anticipation of male sexual behavior, while girls face an ongoing danger of being forever damaged by their sexual history.

To illustrate the way girls have created their own cultural forms in reaction to this limitation, McRobbie and Garber define a cultural form they call 'bedroom culture'. Rather than being a part of public subcultures that are based on the street, girls typically participate in cultural activities in more private or semi-private places, such as in the home, in the bedroom of a peer, and in small groups with their peers. Within these environments, girls participate in many different types of cultural activities, including experiencing popular media, talking about relationships, and figuring out their own identities. Bedroom culture is not simply an area for girls to consume as passive participants but is also a location of active production of culture by girls in that it provides a location for them to develop their own understandings of the social world, and establish their own position within it, although this latter point will be constrained by structures that limit their opportunities.

McRobbie and Garber highlight the kind of quasi-sexual ritual as a defensive retreat. By using fantasy figures, such as pop idols and fictional characters, girls can explore romantic and desire themes while distancing themselves from potential harm associated with real-world sexual contact. Fantasy acts as a medium for girls to displace their feelings and experience desire: girls have the opportunity to practice their fantasies in a relatively isolated and secure environment, as compared to when they engage in sexual experiences on a direct basis. That said, McRobbie and Garber believe that quasi-sexual engagement is not just a form of escaping reality; rather, it is an important

cultural activity wherein adolescent girls are negotiating their socially subordinate status and are creating some autonomy from the structures that contain them.

Taken together, the frameworks in this section provide tools for understanding how women who are excluded from or subordinated within dominant cultural spaces create alternative communities and practices of meaning-making. Warner's theory illuminates the discursive and social dimensions of these spaces, how they are constituted through the circulation of texts and the address of strangers, while McRobbie and Garber draw attention to the gendered constraints that make such alternative spaces both necessary and significant.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the epistemological approach and research design. It explains why the interpretative qualitative framework aligns with the research question, describes the use of semi-structured interviews as a main method of data collection, and presents in detail the sampling strategy. The chapter ends with a brief note on the limitations of the study.

This study adopts an interpretative epistemological approach. The central question — how young women use BL manga as space to talk about sexuality — requires understanding of subjective experiences and individual meaning-making processes. Sexuality, desire and shame are deeply rooted in personal experiences and cultural context. Therefore, it cannot be adequately understood using a quantitative approach. Interpretative method holds that social reality is constructed through meanings, not observable facts. And the aim of the researcher is to understand how participants understand and what meaning they give to their experiences in a specific cultural and social contexts. This approach is particularly appropriate in this context, where sexuality is heavily regulated and is rarely openly discussed. It gives participants the opportunity to talk on their own terms, rather than react and respond to already existing categories.

The study uses qualitative semi-structured interviews as a main method. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for exploring sensitive topics. It is structured well to keep the conversation oriented toward research questions, while allowing participants the flexibility to raise topics and parts of their experience that a fully structured interview might not anticipate. The topics of the interviews included participants' reading practices, their experiences with gender norms and femininity in their daily lives, sexuality, intimacy, and the role of BL-communities in their social lives. The interview ranged from sixty to one hundred twenty minutes.

The study focused on young women from Kyrgyzstan aged eighteen to thirty who read BL on a regular basis. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling and the snowball method. Purposive sampling ensured that recruited participants aligned with the research's main criteria. Snowball sampling was used to reach individuals connected through BL fan communities and social networks, which are not publicly visible and cannot be accessed through recruitment channels. Fifteen interviews were conducted in total. Participants came from several regions of Kyrgyzstan, including Chui, Naryn, Issyk-Kul, Jalal-Abad, and Osh, though all were living or visiting Bishkek regularly. This regional diversity broadens the study beyond a strictly urban sampling, while the shared context of Bishkek as a site of cultural consumption remains relevant.

4. Findings

This chapter presents empirical results that were gathered in the course of semi-structured interviews with fifteen young women from Kyrgyzstan that read BL on a daily basis. The results are organized around three main themes that were outlined during the interviews analysis. The first theme talks about participants' experience in romantic relationships and their persecution and views on men in the Kyrgyzstan social reality. The second theme examines the way young women navigate femininity, sexuality, and representation in a conservative cultural context. The third theme deals with BL manga directly, the way participants engage with it and what role they give to it in their social reality. All the themes combined help understand why BL functions as a meaningful space, where young Kyrgyzstani women can engage with themes of sexuality and talk about it on their own terms.

4.1 Romantic Relationships and Perceptions of Men in Kyrgyz Social Reality

In the reflections about romantic relationships, participants often turned to their experiences of interactions with men in their daily lives. Across all the interviews, women described heterosexual relationships in Kyrgyz society as shaped by emotional disconnection, insecurity and uneven gender expectations. This experience formed an important background for understanding their dissatisfaction with the existing relationship dynamics and their interest in alternative representations of intimacy in media.

Although individual experiences differed, participants repeatedly described similar patterns in their interactions with men. It included difficulties with establishing emotional and intellectual connections with men, insecurities, objectification, and dissatisfaction with traditional gender norms that shape the culture of romantic relationships.

Emotional and intellectual disconnection

One of the most consistently recurring themes across the interviews was the perception that communication between women and men lacks depth. Conversations with men were often contrasted with interactions with female friends. Female friendships were described as intellectually and emotionally rich; these relationships encouraged conversations that could develop with time and include various viewpoints.

In contrast, interactions with men were often characterized as monotonous, surface-level, and intellectually passive. Several respondents expressed disappointment that conversations with men rarely go beyond general topics and phrases. According to them, men usually expressed less interest in reflection, emotional dialogue and critical thinking.

The perceived gap in communication was often interpreted as a broader gap in intellectual and emotional development. One of the respondents described this disappointment, stating that the thoughts that men share oftentimes are familiar or processed long ago:

“They say some thoughts, and we’ve been thinking about this in the first grade of school and they’re like, ‘oh yeah, that’s what I think.’”

This disconnection was often linked to gender socialization in Kyrgyz society. In their opinion, men are often brought up to suppress their emotional expression, which makes deeper communication difficult. As a result, women felt that real emotional and intellectual connections with men are rare.

One participant summarized this perception through a striking comparison between fictional characters and real-life interactions. For many participants, this lack of emotional openness created

a sense of distance in relationships and contributed to their broader dissatisfaction with heterosexual dating dynamics.

Insecurity and Vulnerability in Interactions with Men

Beyond emotional disconnection, young women also often described a strong sense of insecurity in their interaction with men. These concerns ranged from uncomfortable experiences in dating to stories about harassment and coercion, which they or women from their close circles faced.

Some participants mentioned that their earliest experience with male attention, especially in social media and dating apps, was often negative. Unwanted messages, sexualized comments, and aggressive behavior were described as common, which contributed to respondents' expectations of male behavior.

In some cases, insecurities extended even to romantic relationships. One of the participants told a story of her friend, whose boyfriend pressured her sexually despite her refusing. Her friend was too scared to respond aggressively, and only by staying soft and calm did she avoid sexual harassment.

Such stories contributed to a broader belief and perception that women's bodies and boundaries are not always respected, even in the closest intimate relationships. As was pointed out by one of the respondents, such experiences lead to feelings that women "cannot feel safe even with those whom, supposedly, they should trust the most".

This sense of vulnerability also influenced the way women interpreted daily interactions with men. Some of them shared that men often failed to understand why women would feel unsafe and scared

to travel somewhere alone or to meet strangers. This lack of understanding was understood as a broader gap between men's and women's social realities.

This sense of vulnerability also affected friendships. Some of the respondents shared stories when their male friends eventually expressed romantic or sexual interest, which made them feel objectified rather than valued as friends. It resulted in gradual distancing from male friendships.

One participant summarized the cumulative effect of these experiences by saying that being a woman in a relationship with a man is considered degrading in her friends' circles. Although not all participants expressed such a strong view, this illustrates the depth of frustration and disappointment some women associated with heterosexual relationships.

Traditional Gender Norms and Double Standards in Dating

Participants discussed how their displeasure with men was also due to broader expectations around how dating should work in Kyrgyz culture. A lot of participants expressed that heterosexual relationships in Kyrgyz culture tend to have rigidly-defined roles in which men are dominant and women are submissive. Many participants said that women usually wait for men to initiate a relationship with them. They felt that initiating a relationship would result in negative evaluations of their character. One participant shared how women in romantic relationships are expected to be passive:

“You're not allowed to make the first step... you are meant to just stand and wait like you're a trophy that needs to be won.”

Many of the participants in our study also reported having encountered very clear examples of sexual double standards, with men having substantial amounts of liberty when it came to sexual

activity, while women were expected to be modest and chaste. An overwhelming number of stories of women being ridiculed or shamed for having prior sexual experiences were shared.

One participant mentioned their frustration regarding the inconsistency in their expectations; they noted how men can expect women to be virgins, yet do not expect themselves to adhere to this same standard. Other participants mentioned how these expectations come from the reinforcement by certain religious or conservative cultural narratives. Additionally, a number of women felt that these culturally-based expectations legitimated male authority and diminished female-controlled autonomy.

Besides revealing how women experienced unequal distribution of emotional responsibility from sexual expectations in relationships, participants highlighted that women are typically expected to be responsible for communicating, resolving conflict, and keeping relational/emotional connection present while men appear to stay more emotionally unavailable. Further evidence of this gendered pattern was observed in the family dynamic with most emotional and organization duty performed by mothers and daughters, thereby supporting the notion that emotional labour is essentially a female dominated category.

The collection of participants' narratives creates a cohesive picture of the construction of heterosexual relationships in Kyrgyz culture, as characterized by emotional detachment and physical vulnerability. These are not discrete experiences but rather common trends forming a collective social reality, leaving numerous women feeling unsatisfied and unrewarded within existing relationship models. Hence, it provides an important context for understanding how women engage with alternative representations of intimacy and masculinity.

4.2 Experiencing femininity, sexuality, and representation

Beyond reflecting on their individual experiences with boys and men, the participants shared their wider experiences of navigating through femininity and what it meant to be a woman in Kyrgyz society. They described how young women are expected to manage other people's expectations about their appearance, how they should behave sexually, and how they present themselves as being feminine – these expectations often conflict with their own identities and therefore create a feeling of constraint. This theme is organized around three dimensions of that experience: femininity as a socially regulated role, sexuality as a taboo subject shaped by double standards, and the limited or distorted representations of women in popular media.

Femininity as a Regulated Role

Participants consistently described femininity not as something they inhabited freely but rather as a social position that is dictated by external demands. They reflected on their teenage years when they wanted to be a boy, not because they rejected femininity itself, but as a response towards social constraints that are associated with girls' social position. As one participant put it: "I heard that the secret of every woman is that she would want to be a man". This feeling was very common among respondents and, according to them, in their social circles. It was understood not as a statement about identity but as a response to social constraints.

These constraints became very particularly visible in romantic relationships. Several participants described the pressure they felt to perform femininity in ways that felt socially required, like adjusting their appearance, behavior and self-representation according to societal expectations. They described facing much higher beauty standards compared to men, a burden that felt especially strong during adolescence. This is when external norms were internalized as physical insecurities.

Many recalled feeling embarrassed about their bodies, linking this not as much to personal flaws, as to asymmetric beauty standards that they had to face from a young age.

Sexuality as Taboo and Double Standard

The second half of the interviews was characterized by an understanding of female sexuality that has been marked negative and taboo; hence, the majority of interviewees reflected on having grown up in spaces where they did not experience any perception of sexuality in their home, school, or even among friends. Throughout these interviews, the words "shame" and "haram" were the most commonly mentioned when considered in relation to an earlier exposure to the topic of sexuality, and, importantly, there was a general consensus among female participants that there was no discussion of things related to attraction or sexual experience in their immediate circle at any point in time. Not because they had never had these feelings but that female sexuality was thought to be inappropriate in general.

The female participants noted this as part of a larger cultural assumption that women are, in general terms, less sexual beings than men. Male desire is viewed as normal and so does not require justification, while for women their desire must be hidden, and in many cases it is denied altogether. The participants stated that boys can identify and express themselves sexually at a young age up to the point of adolescence without fear of being judged adversely for doing so, whereas the same does not apply in a similar manner for girls – thus creating a situation in which girls will never likely experience this aspect of their lives as a given or a necessity. For the majority of participants, particularly during their teenage years and into their early adulthood, shame surrounding female sexuality was deemed an immutable fact of life, and as such, it was very clear to them that this was an integral aspect of being a woman. However, the shame associated with

female sexual expression did decrease with time as they gained experience and found new and inclusive spaces to share their experiences openly.

The issue of double standards exists not just in terms of general attitudes, but with the expectation that women will behave in a certain manner when it comes to sexual experience. Several women participants discussed situations where they have been judged even though they were in their late 20s - clearly a time when those types of expectations have lost most of their power or are not relevant. Some men would end relationships because they found out their partners were not virgins. These types of situations were not viewed as unique or surprising experiences, instead they were described by a number of women participants as scenarios that are predictable and that they were already aware of. The same men expected to impose the same standards on their female partners did not impose such standards on themselves. While several women expressed annoyance with this contradiction, they were most concerned that it exists as a norm within society and not as a personal affront to them.

Religious and traditional cultural narratives often reinforce the expectations of modesty and sexual purity as moral values, rather than social values. These narratives provide an additional layer of legitimacy to the double standard and make it more difficult to confront openly.

In many cases, participants described having to look for indirect venues where they could ask their questions regarding all matters related to love and desire. Examples of this include online communities, friendships built around consuming media in the same way, and the very act of consuming the same media together. All created environments that allowed for touching on romance and sexuality in a context that was not directly tied to their own experiences. For most participants, this was the first opportunity they had had to discuss such subjects.

Female Representation and the Male Gaze

Participants linked their difficult relationships with femininity partially to what they observed in popular media. Dissatisfaction with female representation in mass media was a recurring topic across all interviews. They gave examples of movies, anime, manga, and popular romantic narratives when describing what feels alienating and frustrating to them. It is also important to note that not all media were described as problematic, but the most dominant patterns in mass culture were.

The most common complaint was female characters' sexualization. Lots of female characters from anime and other media were stated to have unrealistic body proportions – big breasts, small waist, revealing clothes. It all seemed to only serve for male visual pleasure rather than the narrative and the plot. One participant described this with particular directness, asking, “What is that? Gigantic boobs... the size of their heads”. The comment is not a complaint about aesthetics but a broader frustration with the way women’s bodies become a spectacle for mass media, something that is displayed and consumed rather than inhabited as a character who has an inner world.

The second pattern that was pointed out by the respondents almost mirrored the first one. Female characters that are not necessarily sexualized, but written as passive, naive, weak, and narratively marginal. In these representations, women mainly existed only in relation to male protagonists, as their love interest or as supporting characters.

Participants also mentioned another pattern in the depiction of intimacy. Sex scenes in the popular British TV show “Game of Thrones” were described as representing unequal dynamics.

“Sex is shown as something happens over a woman rather than with and for her”.

Rather than depicting mutual desire or female agency, such scenes seemed to reproduce an image of women as passive recipients of male attention. But this pattern was noted to be changing. Some admitted that they see a gradual shift, that there are actually more well-written female characters nowadays.

For some participants, this dissatisfaction extended into their own creative work. One interviewee who draws comics and illustrations described a specific difficulty: whenever she tried to portray an attractive female character, the act of doing so felt inseparable from sexualization. She could not find a way to draw a woman as visually appealing without the image tipping into objectification — or at least feeling as though it might. Her solution was straightforward: “Whenever I try to portray an attractive woman, it feels like sexualization... so I just draw men.” By drawing male characters, she could explore physical attractiveness without the same sense that she was reproducing a harmful visual logic. This example is telling not because it is unusual but because it makes explicit something that the other participants described more diffusely — a feeling that the representational field available for women is so saturated with objectifying conventions that even the act of creating female imagery becomes difficult to disentangle from them.

4.3 BL as a Mediated Space of Exploration

Participants described BL manga not just as an escape from dissatisfaction with social reality, but as a complex space that gives opportunity for emotional engagement, exploration of relationships, and reflection on intimacy. Across all the interviews, BL represented not only entertainment but also a structured environment where participants could explore other forms of connections, process emotions, and engage with themes that are difficult to access in everyday life. For many, BL also functioned as an affective resource — a source of comfort, excitement, or intense emotions — to

which they could turn to after a hard day or in periods of emotional dissatisfaction. At the same time, BL was never perceived as a substitute for reality. It was more of a separate and bounded imaginative space that exists alongside it. Participants were consistent in maintaining a clear distinction between what belongs in fiction and what belongs in real life.

Reimagining Intimacy and Relationships

One of the recurring themes across all the interviews was the appeal of the portrayal of masculinity and relationships in BL. Oftentimes, respondents articulated clearly what makes BL stand out compared to other media, and how it offered something other genres couldn't. One dimension that respondents often returned to was the visual and aesthetic range of male characters in BL. Compared to dominant portrayals of masculinity that they encountered in their daily lives or in mass media, male characters in BL had a wider range: physically strong, dominant, traditionally masculine, to thin, soft, and androgynous looking men whose behavior is closer to what is traditionally considered feminine. This diversity felt refreshing. An opportunity to see male characters who were visually delicate, emotionally open, or physically non-threatening was something they did not encounter often elsewhere. It was also noted by one of the interviewees that in BL, a man could be beautiful in a way that is usually expected from women, and it wasn't seen as a flaw or a contradiction.

A closely connected recurring topic was the way romantic relationships in BL are built compared to heterosexual narratives. In traditional romance, both in real life or on-screen, participants described repeating familiar and frustrating patterns: a strong man, dominant and emotionally reserved, and a soft, submissive woman. This dynamic seemed fixed and predictable, organized around gender. BL, on the contrary, seemed less determined by that binary. Since both characters

are men, there was no ready scenario that would automatically position one as dominant, the other as submissive, and so on. These dynamics seemed more fluid and open.

“In manga, there is this caring attitude toward each other, and we know their thoughts. But real men... I don’t know, maybe they have a short thought, and that’s it”.

Distance and Safety in Exploring Desire

BL also gave participants a sense of security and comfort when they explored themes related to intimacy and desire. Participants felt that this space was the first time they could encounter sexuality at all, because of the societal stigma around female sexuality in their daily lives.

One of the main sources of participant security in this context was in part due to the lack of a female body being depicted in BL. In all cases, participants compared BL to the heterosexual pornographic genre, describing heterosexual porn as aggressive, artificial, or uncomfortable. Many participants described feeling insecure or judged due to the unrealistic representations of women's bodies in mainstream media. In contrast to this, BL provided participants with no female body that they could either identify with or against, no female sexual functions to be on display, and no location of passivity or vulnerability to be filled. This absence provided participants with the opportunity to engage with and explore issues relating to desire without the shame and judgment that were associated with female sexuality in the participants' lives.

"If it were a woman, I would hate this... I would not read it. But when it happens between two men, I'm fine."

The fictional framing of BL added another level of protection from the dangers of real-life closeness and emotional involvement, allowing participants to keep an appropriate separation

between the fictional world and their actual relationships, permitting them to examine and understand complex and difficult to understand aspects of relational dynamics, like power differentials or emotional dependence, in a safe and designated environment. In addition, the use of fiction to explore such content that would be difficult or impossible to relate to in real-life contexts was possible within the contained world of BL due to reduced psychological risk.

Community, Belonging, and Social Connection

BL can be considered both a textual and a visual medium and a place of social activity, where community, fandom, and other shared conversations create a context to help participants experience personal connections and a sense of membership that has eluded many outside of their actual daily life.

When participants found out about the BL fandom, they often experienced this as an interesting community of other individuals who experienced the same cultural discontent with dominant male-female gender roles and heterosexual relationships during their teens. They were able to connect with one another through common terminology used within BL fandoms; this included terms, conventions in genre, and aesthetics of BL manga. Shared vocabulary created a special kind of connection between people, and it allowed them to engage in discussions on subjects they couldn't talk about before joining the BL fandom. In some cases, this was the first way that many participants were able to feel comfortable being themselves without having to justify or hide their interests from everyone else.

Participants found a sense of belonging in BL communities where they may not have felt that in their offline lives. In some instances, relationships developed in the community have also developed into real-life relationships.

"Through these communities I found people who understood me... and even my first relationship started there."

Across all interviews, BL was seen as a multi-layered space that goes beyond simply entertainment or escapism. It offers a different model of connection, intimacy, and masculinity. It creates a safe space where young women can engage with desire through many levels of distancing and creates a social world that is organized around similar values and a collective feeling of belonging.

Participants maintained a clear distinction between BL and reality, perceiving it as an imaginative and controlled environment rather than a guide for behavior. At the same time, their engagement wasn't uniform. Participants brought different desires, interpretations, and boundaries into their reading. BL doesn't produce the same result; it functions as a fluid space where a wide spectrum of emotions, meaning, and concerns can be explored. What united participants was the feeling that BL offered something that other dominant social environments didn't. A space where questions of gender, desiring intimacy could be faced, discussed, and reflected on their own terms.

Across all three themes, a coherent picture emerges of young women in Kyrgyzstan navigating a social environment that consistently limits, regulates and misrepresents their experiences. The first theme established that heterosexual relationships are organized through emotional distance, physical insecurity and unequal gender expectations. The second theme showed that these dynamics extend to family itself, the way women are expected to look, behave and think about their own sexuality. The second theme demonstrated that BL manga and community emerged around it function as a space where these limitations could be partially overcome, where other forms of connection and intimacy could be thought about, and imagined, where desire could be

explored without shame and where a sense of belonging was organized around similar values and not dominant social norms.

What connects all three themes is not just the dissatisfaction with existing conditions, but an active search for alternatives. Participants were not passive recipients of the social world that they experienced and described they were seeking and searching for spaces, media, communities that can offer something else. BL was one of those spaces and understanding what exactly it offers can be only through understanding what it offers relief from.

5. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter presents an analysis and discussion of empirical material that was gathered through interviews with young women from Kyrgyzstan. The chapter consists of three interconnected themes: gendered social reality, in which young women exist; their experience with femininity, sexuality, and representation; and BL manga as a space for exploration. To explain gender, social reality and experience of femininity, this chapter draws on a theory of structure of patriarchy by Walby, concept of hegemonic masculinity by Connell and Messerschmidt, and concept of male gaze by Laura Mulvey. To analyze BL as a space for exploration, the research uses the theory of publics and counterpublics by Warner and work on girls and subcultures by McRobbie and Garber. The chapter concludes with a synthesis that connects all three themes and formulates a central argument of this work.

5.1 Gendered social reality

There is a recurring pattern in participants' stories of their everyday life in Kyrgyzstan: gender relationships are described as a source of frustration, discomfort, and limitations. This work argues that these frustrations are not personal or random; they are produced by interconnected patriarchal structures that dictate how men and women socialize, how safety is determined by gender, and how heterosexual relationships are structured. The analytical framework for this argument is Walby (1990), who conceptualizes patriarchy as a system of six interconnected structures. Each of these structures is relatively autonomous, but it also strengthens the other three of these structures: culture, violence and household are directly talked about in young women's stories. Taken together, they don't only describe what respondents told, but also why these patterns are so consistent across different women's experiences.

Emotional and intellectual disconnection

Respondents consistently described their interactions with men as emotionally and intellectually shallow. According to Walby, (1990) this pattern reflects systematic reproduction of gender subjectivity through culture. Walby argues that cultural institutions like family, education, media not just reflect gender differences, but actively produce them through socialization. She notes that the idea of masculinity is focused on “the stunting of the ability to express emotions” as a defining feature in how boys are raised. It’s not a personal floor, but a structural result. Masculinity is constructed through suppression of emotional expression, while femininity through emotionality and cooperating. Participants who described men as cold and indifferent often explained this pattern as a result of their upbringing, acknowledging that it is something produced rather than inherited.

The gap that they describe was not only emotional, but also intellectual. Interactions with men were perceived as monotonous or lacking interest as contrasted with friendships with other women that participants characterized as intellectually, stimulating and emotionally fulfilling and layered.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) develop this argument further showing that hegemonic masculinity is constructed partially through active rejection of characteristics that are considered feminine, like emotional vulnerability, attentiveness in relationships and emotional depths. Men are not just inherently like these characteristics, they learn how to avoid them because if they express it, it can result in “social sanctions “. The consequence of heterosexual relationships is a structural asymmetry and relational capacity. Women are socialized into modes of connection, that men are socialized to foreclose. The consequence of such culture is a burden not for those who were raised to be emotionally unavailable, but for those who were left without a partner that is capable of reciprocating.

Emotional disconnection described by young women is therefore not a question of compatibility or individual preference, but a predictable outcome of a culture that produces men and women in systematic differences with different relational capacities.

Insecurity and vulnerability in interactions with men

Stories about insecurities and interactions with men demonstrate a pattern that cannot be interpreted as a series of individual accidents. What was described is better understood through the concept of male violence as an independent patriarchal structure by Walby (1990). This is a structure that operates systemically, supported by institutional mechanisms and leads to consequences that go beyond its direct victims.

Statistical data gives a good context to understand the scale of the problem. In 2021 global women's safety and well-being index named Kyrgyzstan, the most dangerous country for women in Central Asia (UNDP 2022). This study found that every fourth woman in the country had experienced workplace sexual harassment, with 70% of victims aged between 20 and 38, which is exactly the demographic of this study's participants. These numbers indicate structural conditions that are analyzed through Walby's concepts.

Walby's central argument is that male violence against women is common, repetitive and routine. It is rooted in ways that juridical institutions process it. It means that violence persists, according to its own logic, has its own institutional support and produces effects independent of other structures. Walby rejects the idea of localized reasons for violence in individual psychology.

The structure of violence described by Walby operates through two mechanisms. First, the state doesn't give women enough material resources that are required to avoid situations of danger or coercion. Second, the criminal justice system refuses to intervene, except for more extreme

situations, defining violence as a private matter that goes beyond legal competence. As a result, women stay financially dependent on those men who can pose a threat to them. The state doesn't protect women, it actively produces conditions in which escape is structurally difficult.

This mechanism can be observed in respondents' stories, even if the state does not directly take part. One of the respondents told a story of a friend who faced sexual coercion from her romantic partner. Her friend responded not with complaint or rejection, but within an attempt to de-escalate the situation. Where formal mechanisms of protection are absent or perceived as inadequate, women are left to navigate threat alone, and even that navigation is constrained by fear of escalation and its consequences. This is the structural condition Walby identifies: violence and the threat of violence function as a form of control not only through their direct occurrence but through the anticipatory fear they produce.

Another dimension of Walby's argument is that violence is not only direct harm, which is a general limitation. Its consequence goes beyond women, who experienced violence directly. It includes all women that exist in a social environment, where this violence is known and realized. Women don't need to experience violence directly to organize their behavior around anticipation of threat. Unwanted messages, sexualized comments, gradual distancing from men, distrust in every day interactions represents the regulatory function of violence structure.

Walby also notes that male violence is largely formed by other patriarchal structures. It supports a sexual structure that normalizes male sexual axis to women's bodies, and treats women's bodily autonomy as conditional. Sexual coercion in a relationship is an example. This situation is a result of normalization of broader sexual organization where male desire becomes priority and women's rejection is negotiable. Structure of violence and sexuality are not independent. They work

together, and produce this form of vulnerability that was described in respondents' intimate relationships.

What was described by respondent personal discomfort or just the way things work is according to Walby is a structure of violence. The power is in its normalization in how it becomes part of social life.

Gender norms and inequality in heterosexual relationships

Respondents described not disappointment in certain relationships. They were describing the realization that heterosexual relationships are a social institute organized on unequal terms. This pattern can be understood using Walby's (1990) structure of culture and household.

Walby argues that culture produces femininity as perceived passivity, corporation, and orientation on others, while masculinity is defined as assertiveness, initiative, and external orientation. This gender script defines how relationships begin and how they're sustained. Participants described how it is expected from women to wait to make the first step to be available rather than taking initiative. It can be directly connected to the cultural narrative that presents female restraint as virtue rather than limitation. This is defined by Walby as a result of culture that makes asymmetrical, gender, norms seem natural rather than constructed.

Participants also talked about an uneven distribution of emotional labor in relationships and family life. Women felt responsible for ensuring communication, resolving conflicts and preserving emotional closeness. Walby explains it through household structure. This is where women's labor, including emotional labor caregiving, is appropriated without salary or even appreciation. Interestingly, most participants didn't have experience of long-term relationships, but have already developed these expectations, observing families around themselves. According to UN women

(2024), women in Kyrgyzstan spend 16.8% of their time on unpaid labor, like childcare and household chores compared to 9% among men. Many perceived it as inevitable in heterosexual relationships.

Walby's framework is very useful here in showing how these structures strengthen one another. Structure of culture produces emotionally unavailable men and women who were socialized to absorb their relational cost. Structure of violence that makes safety conditional defines how women treat intimacy and closeness. Household structure that normalizes women's emotional labor, caregiving, childcare, household labor, reinforces passivity, and submissiveness that the structure of culture produces. This social reality makes different representations of intimacy, masculinity and emotional connection not just appealing but necessary.

5.2 Femininity, sexuality and representation

This section analyzes participants' accounts of femininity, sexuality, and media representation. Drawing on Walby's (1990) structures of culture and sexuality, and on Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze, it argues that the constraints women described are not personal or accidental but are produced by the same patriarchal system that organizes their relationships with men. While the previous section focused on interpersonal dynamics, this section shows how those dynamics extend inward, into women's self-perception, their experience of their own bodies, and their encounters with representation.

Femininity as a social burden

The experience of femininity by women can be understood through Walby's theoretical framework, In particular the concept of structure of culture. This structure reproduces gender subjectivities, and regulates boundaries of accepted femininity. Instead of describing femininity as

a freely inhibited space, participants deliberately described a social position that was defined by social expectations. These demands were seen as limiting asymmetric and oftentimes contradicting the sense of self.

In this framework femininity is not a natural or neutral identity, it is a socially constructed category that is produced through socialization. These processes start from early childhood and continue to persist in all social institutions, like family, friendship, education, religion, or media. Through these processes girls are taught to be passive, cooperative, emotionally available or simultaneously to be oriented toward appearance and attractive to men as the central measure of their worth (Walby 1990). These discourses of femininity are actively constructed and contested in all areas of social life. They create subject positions that women are expected to inhabit, even if they didn't choose them themselves.

It can clearly be seen in stories. Participants told about their romantic experience where some described experiencing pressure to perform femininity in ways that were socially required rather than personally meaningful. For example, having to correct their appearance behavior and self representation to live up to traditional expectations. The way women perform today illustrates what Walby sees as a wider shift in how femininity is described. Femininity has moved from being contained within the home to being focused on being attractive to men. Being feminine, then, is more than just what women do; it is also how they look to others (Santoniccolo et al. 2023). This leads to women constantly watching and controlling themselves according to an outside standard that they have not selected for themselves.

The experiences that participants expressed in relation to the beauty standards of appearance confirm this process. The disparity in the expectations of women's versus men's physical

appearance is a clear indication of the disparity in the disciplinary function that has been distributed among the genders. In comparison with men, women reported being burdened more with managing their bodies and appearance (i.e., grooming, presenting themselves physically) than men did, and this burden was particularly exacerbated during adolescence, when they were exposed to the dichotomy of internalizing social norms as they were reflected back to them in terms of insecurity around their bodies. This process of internalization is what Walby describes as the reduction of social regulation due to the inability of individuals to differentiate between individual and social experiences. Thus, when participants reported that they felt uncomfortable with their bodies, this experience was not an example of individual fragility but an inevitable result of being socialized to 'define' femininity primarily in terms of attractiveness to others.

Sexuality as taboo and double standard

Participants' stories about sexuality showcase a pattern of asymmetric regulation Walby's framework sees not as a set of cultural beliefs, but as a result of an independent patriarchal structure. Walby's central argument is that heterosexuality is a socially constructed Institute that serves petrol goals. It means that the problem is not that individual men and families hold conservative beliefs. It can be corrected through education. The problem is the organization of sexuality itself; who is allowed to have desire, on what terms and at whose expense. This structural gender inequality is reproduced through institutions and generations.

The most important and analytical framework of Walby is the distinction between private and public forms of sexual control. In private form, there are more common and more patriarchal social structures, and female sexuality is subject to direct mail control. In search society, premarital sexual experience is heavily shamed. A woman's social status depends on her sexual purity, and

her behavior is regulated by family or public opinion. According to Walby, when women become more incorporated in public life, another public form emerges, where the mechanism or control shifts. Women's sexuality is no longer suppressed, but encouraged. The consequence is that women are more willingly tied into relationships with men and more thoroughly incorporated into heterosexual social life. However, this incorporation does not mean liberation. For women it just means new forms of regulation. The sexual double standard becomes stronger, the pressure to be sexually attractive for men becomes the central organizing norm, femininity, and women who resist or fall outside heterosexual norms pathologized. In other words, Walby argues that sexual liberation is dubious: some forms of control we can while others appear in their place.

Participants' stories show that they exist in both forms of control simultaneously. On the one hand, there is a direct private regulation of female sexuality. Discussions about sexuality that are absent in families are avoided in friends circles and were formed through the language of shame, and we just prohibit sexual status of women still defined by sexual purity. Participants described creations where women were shamed, stigmatized, and broken up with for having previous sexual experience, including women well into their mid-20s. This is a private form of control: women's sexuality is subject to community surveillance, moral judgment and drift sanction with no equivalent scrutiny applied to men.

On the other hand, the public form of control also persists. Participants described how from early teenage years they were forced into active heterosexuality when they received unwanted sexual attention online or in real life, were evaluated through physical attractiveness, and existed in a social environment where their value was defined in sexual terms, even if their own desire was considered inappropriate. This is the double trap that Walby identifies. Women are sexualized by

heterosexuality institutions, and at the same time they are not allowed to have their own sexual subjectivity.

The second effect of this double regulation is the shame that participants appeared to carry within themselves throughout most of their adolescent years. In actuality, this internalized shame did not happen by chance. It is precisely a consequence of the conforming nature of the rules associated with sexuality when they are applied uniformly across a broad range of institutions (family, friends, peers, faith, culture), so that it becomes impossible for a rule or value to be recognized as being an external imposition and, instead, are viewed as being true personal beliefs. Not only do women follow the rules regarding being sexually modest but they also feel that having sexual desire is itself wrong; even though an individual may start to have less shame as she matures and becomes more a part of the community at large, this will have been an essential part of their development. The lack of any place for women to talk openly about their sexuality, regardless of how close they are to the women with whom they are talking, encourages the development of shame in women, because women have no opportunity to develop a social consciousness that would allow them to recognize that the rules they followed throughout their lives are created by society. What participants describe as a personal shame is in Walby's terms an experience of sexuality structure. This structure organizes female desire as something to be regulated, concealed, or dependent on male approval, while male sexuality is an unmarked norm.

Female Representation and the Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's theory about the patronization of women with the male gaze in today's mainstream media can also help us understand how participants were dissatisfied with the lack of representation of women in these "traditional" media sources. Mulvey believes that traditional

visual culture is based on a gendered look of the male gaze, where women are portrayed as an object of the gaze rather than the subject of it. Since all objects contain some meaning, she views the female image as the carrier of meaning, rather than a creator of meaning, and that her image is produced and consumed based on male desire instead of her own subjectivity (Mulvey, 1975, p. 7). While Mulvey made her argument in terms of narrative cinema, the rationale for this is equally applicable to the engagement of participants with visual media forms such as anime and manga where the male gaze is still the dominant gazing form and where female images are portrayed as passive while male images are active. All types of visual media create images of women based on their consumption for male gaze rather than their own subjectivity.

Participants' accounts reflected the same structure: either female protagonists were overtly sexualized (have exaggerated and unrealistic bodies mainly for visual consumption) or female characters were passive and secondary (the only definition being women were defined by their relationships with male protagonists, and not by their own actions). Both examples of women as images on a screen in mainstream media reflect what Mulvey refers to as activity versus passivity to provide a split in mainstream representations. In typical mainstream films and television, men drive the storyline while women occupy the storyline as images (Mulvey, 1975, p. 12). The accounts provided by participants concerning intimate scenes in US television often saw the female protagonist as someone who was acted upon, rather than someone who acted – a perfect example of how the logic of the male gaze produces the subordination of female desire and agency in service to the visual and narrative needs of a perceived male viewer.

This aspect of participants' experiences relates closely to Walby's claim that the structure of culture has changed to one where femininity is defined, largely by how attractive women are to men. The media not only represent this change; they create it as they produce femininity, as a visual category,

for the benefit of the male gaze. As a result, as the participants describe, they are surrounded by representations of themselves that are either objectified or diminished, making it very difficult for them to form meaningful associations with these representations. The way in which participants feel alienated from dominant representations of women is not an unintentional product of the interaction between the patriarchal conventions of visual representation and the broader cultural structure through which feminine subjectivities are produced.

5.3 BL as a Mediated Space of Exploration

This section analyzes BL manga as a discursive space that emerges directly from the conditions described in the two preceding sections. Drawing on Warner's (2002) theory of counterpublics and McRobbie and Garber's (1981) concept of bedroom culture, it argues that BL does not simply offer escape from patriarchal structures but functions as an organized alternative to them. It operates through different assumptions about masculinity, intimacy, and desire. Three dimensions of this are examined in turn: the social communities BL produces, the alternative model of relationships it circulates, and the structural distance it creates from the shame associated with female sexuality.

Community, Belonging, and Social Connection

Warner (2002) claims that a counterpublic is far more than simply a collection of individuals who have in common a similar set of tastes or values. A counterpublic is a social entity that emerges through the circulation of textual materials by individuals not connected to each other, thus creating a social identity and sense of belonging, which does not exist before the circulation of the texts. An important distinction between a counterpublic and a public is that a counterpublic operates in a fundamentally different manner than does the dominant culture, including operating

on different assumptions, using different strategies of communication and using differing norms regarding what may be expressed and what does not need to be expressed. The experiences of the participants in this study indicate that the BL community was a counterpublic in the previously described manner. The BL community provided more than just a forum for discussing their collective enjoyment of reading. The space had its own assumptions regarding how to conceptualize gender, desire, and intimacy and these ultimately resulted in the idea of being ‘identified’ that all participants shared as something that is relatively unique to their daily lives.

BL is a private activity in a sense that it's read alone on a phone screen, typically in individualised spaces mentioned in the previous subtheme. The community created by the fans of BL makes this private act into something collective. The people who took part in compiling this material told us they discovered online communities of people who, like them, were also unhappy with their experiences with gender and heterosexual relationships and, therefore, ended up finding BL. The common vocabulary used by these fans of BL – the language, terms, conventions of the genre, and aesthetic – function as what Warner calls an idiom of a counterpublic: a set of beliefs and references that mark an individual's presence and facilitate specific types of dialogue. To speak the language of BL is implicitly to convey your understanding of the social constructions of gender and desire and to locate others who share this understanding.

In their research on girl culture, McRobbie and Garber (1981) have noted this same pattern; that small, organized female groups create their own practices of solidarity, which protect them from being judged and from the risks associated with being judged by the dominant culture. They call this form of protective solidarity “defensive solidarity,” not only being a social network but also serving as a buffer, a space where things don't have to be justified or explained. Many of the participants described their BL communities in these terms. In those spaces, participants were able

to be openly interested in BL without having to justify or hide their interest. There was no shame or judgment associated with being a female who had sexual desires that were out of the ordinary for what is typically expected in society. People just knew.

The communities established through the BL (Boys' Love) subculture provided individuals a sense of belonging. In addition to reinforcing their sense of belonging, these communities created a context for developing a more defined and nuanced understanding of gender and sexuality. For many of the participants, these communities served as spaces in which they could openly discuss ideas related to relationships, masculinity, female desire, and social norms that they would have found difficult or impossible to discuss in other contexts. Additionally, these communities provided many of the participants with the first opportunity to have a language to describe their lived experiences and frustrations. Moreover, many of the relationships formed by participants within BL communities extended beyond just discussing BL, resulting in some of the most prominent social connections in their lives; for some individuals, these relationships even developed into romantic relationships. In this way, participating in the community was a generative experience for participants. The community not only reflected participants' existing beliefs but also actively influenced and shaped participants' self-concept and social world.

Warner is specifically saying that counterpublics don't just gather people that already have a shared identity together, they also create the identity through interaction and participation. The BL community did not require that the people who participated in it come with an already defined sense of their own dissatisfaction with the norms of gender established by society. It gave them the space, language, and opportunity to reflect on their feelings toward gender; therefore, allowing the women in Kyrgyzstan to develop language to express their dissatisfaction. Women living in Kyrgyzstan that were questioning the way society defines sexuality and gender typically only have

thought to themselves or had conversation about these subjects only with people they considered friends/trusted. The BL community provided something that was wholly new structural to those women in Kyrgyzstan: a community that is based on values and perspectives that were unable to be seen in the dominant culture around them.

Reimagining Intimacy and Relationships

According to Warner (2002), a counterpublic is a discursive space characterized by different assumptions regarding how to speak, what is assumed or unassumed to be spoken about, and what types of social worlds can exist. In addition to being a gathering of people interested in a similar topic, counterpublics are created through the circulation of texts and the act of circulating those texts allows counterpublics to create new relationship worlds instead of merely describing them. Through this construct, BL manga and women's use of it takes on analytical significance.

Heterosexual participants described how their relationships are structured by a lack of emotion, rigid gender roles, and an unequal division of relational labour. In general, men are conditioned to be restrained in expressing their emotions, whereas women are expected to do all of the communicative and affective work in a relationship. These patterns are not only seen in their relationships with other people, but also appear in the media that they consume. Even in modern romantic media that tries to be more progressive in how it represents women, female characters are often seen as passive, defined by the fact that they are in a heterosexual relationship to a male partner, or presented as the weaker partner who is being dominated by a more emotionally dominant male. Some participants were looking for social networks and media that reflect their own values. BL is one such context.

BL creates an alternate relational world based on a different set of assumptions than what exists in mainstream culture. Typically, male characters found in BL are drawn as androgynous beings, having soft bodies, being emotionally open, being expressive, and being vulnerable while diverging from all of the representations of dominant masculinity that participants encounter in their everyday lives (McLelland 2000; Wood 2006). Because there are two male characters involved in a same-sex relationship, there are no gender scripts that determine who is the giver or receiver of emotional labour or who is the dominant or submissive partner. Traits associated with femininity in the dominant culture (e.g., sensitivity, emotional openness, physical softness) are present in the male characters of BL, but are not construed as weakness. Hence, these characteristics challenge the concept that they are assigned to one sex exclusively. When Butler (1990) speaks of "gender is seen in bodies where they were not expected" this suggests that the gender binary and the way we understand gender in relation to biological sex is at times a sense of cultural construct as opposed to being an automatic or natural phenomenon. BL (heterosexual relationships) does not specifically make the argument about Judith Butler's (1990). However, BL artists (Bishounen Characters) make this argument visually and through the way they narrate the stories of the characters.

While many BL stories model a heteronormative partnership dynamic through power imbalances based on physical characteristics, they may not always hold rigidly to this dynamic in the way that heterosexual genre romances do (Wood 2006). Additionally, certain BL subgenres intentionally reverse or alter the typical gender role dynamics. Thus, BL is not considered a utopian genre; instead, BL storytelling employs different protocols, allowing for more visibility and enjoyment of masculinities and intimacy that the dominant culture marks as marginalized and, most commonly, invisible forms of masculinity.

The discursive space created through BL's aesthetics and narrative conventions ultimately reflects the dissatisfaction of women with normative representations of gender and intimacy to create a different way to imagine men, relationships and desire in the world of BL. According to Warner, a counterpublic not only reflects the values of the participants that make up that counterpublic, but also collectively creates a world through the texts that circulate in that counterpublic. Rather than retreating from social reality, these are places where individuals can experience alternative forms of engagement with others through creating new possibilities for men to express themselves as gentle and emotionally connected beings, for relationships that do not operate based on traditional roles and experiences; and spaces where intimacy is created without the requirement of the woman occupying an absolute, visible location. Therefore, the fact that BLs exist as "social places" reflects not only the desire to be able to participate in new forms of engagement, but also their existence is indicative of larger societal conditions that create the need for such spaces.

A further dimension of this concerns the absence of the female body. In BL, there is no female character to identify with or against, no female body exposed to the male gaze, no mandatory association between the reader and a particular subject position. Readers can move fluidly between identification with different characters or maintain the position of observer entirely. This absence is not incidental to BL's appeal. It is part of the same logic: a world where the burden of female representation, and the shame and judgment that participants associated with female bodies and female desire, does not apply.

Distance and safety in exploring desire

For many participants of the research, BL was not only a preferred genre, but also a first space where intimacy and sexuality could be encountered. In a social context where female sexuality is

controlled, where interest in desire is associated with shame, and where open conversations about intimacy are mainly considered taboo, a question of where this exploration might happen is especially important. It is structural. BL offered such space because it functions through many levels of distancing. Each of these levels lowers the psychological and social risks that participants associate with engaging with sexuality in more direct ways.

McRobie and Garber (1981) studied how young women, excluded from public subcultural spaces organized around men, created their own private, cultural forms. Within what they described as the culture of the bedroom, girls created spaces for cultural consumption and production away from direct social control. It is in such spaces a way of engaging with sexuality becomes possible. It is described as a quasi-sexual ritual — a form of engaging with desire in a non-direct, limited, and safe way, because it functions through fantasy and distance from risks of real sexual labeling. The “idol”, the object of desire (singer, artist, pop-star) is unreachable, the relationship is imaginary and the space is isolated. In these conditions desire can be experienced without consequences. Reading BL for young women in Kyrgyzstan functions with a similar structural logic. In the context of this study, the culture of the bedroom turned into a phone screen, and a closed girls’ circle became an online community. However, the basis of this dynamic stayed the same. These spaces let young women turn to topics of sexuality away from dominant normative restrictions. The key component is what McRobie and Garber define as “quasi-sexual ritual”. Observing romantic and sexual relationships between male characters, readers can explore their own understanding of sexuality without psychological pressure or a risk of public judgment. In the social conservative context of Kyrgyzstan, this form of non-direct experience is particularly significant.

Another level of distance that makes it possible is the absence of female bodies. This absence lets women have another level of distance, since they avoid direct identification with the female body and female sexuality. It reduces social and psychological tension women could have experienced if they engaged with these themes directly. In popular romantic and sexual media, female characters are often sexualized, their bodies are depicted with unrealistic proportions, and their positions in intimate scenes are passive and submissive. In BL, this discomfort is structurally absent. There is no female body to associate with or against, no female sexuality on display, no vulnerable position to associate with.

This absence does something specific. Female sexuality in the Kyrgyz context is associated with shame, expectations of purity, and the constant possibility of being judged or labeled. Instead of transforming it and reimagining themselves as women who have desire, BL completely erases women from the narrative and instead shifts the focus to male characters. Readers can explore intimacy and engage with their own responses on sexual and romantic representation, and nothing of it can be linked with their own bodies or identity. BL fantasy functions as a protective mechanism. It makes sexuality thinkable and discussable by creating distance from female bodies and sexual desires.

BL consumption should not be understood only as escapism, but as a social practice through which young women in Kyrgyzstan actively create spaces for engaging with desire, its discussions and understanding on their own terms, away from dominant social constraints.

This analysis approaches young women's engagement with BL manga as a cultural practice that is rooted in specific structural conditions. Analysis of gender, social reality showed the dissatisfaction that young women described in their everyday life, like emotional disconnection,

physical insecurity, unequal labor are produced by interconnected patriarchal structures. These structures organize gender relations in Kyrgyz society. Analysis of femininity, sexuality, and representation extended this analysis, showing that structures not only organize relationships between men and women but also influence women's self-perception. The structures regulate the way women are represented, how sexuality is silenced, and how women encounter their own bodies and desires through representation that is created for the male gaze. Together, these dimensions create conditions where BL becomes not only appealing but necessary.

Analysis of BL as a space demonstrated what exactly this genre offers in response. Through the conceptual framework of Warner about counterpublic and analysis of bedroom culture by McRobbie and Garber, BL emerged as a discursive space. This space is organized by different assumptions about masculinity, intimacy, and desire that the dominant culture makes marginal or unseen. It creates a distance from shame that is associated with female sexuality, gives access to models of emotional connections that are absent in everyday life, and a community where dissatisfaction with dominant norms can be talked about, shared, and discussed.

This study argues that there is a direct connection between patriarchal structures and BL popularity in Kyrgyzstan. The same conditions that make female desire difficult to express are also conditions that make genre, like BL, that shifts desire to male characters and removes female body from representation, especially resonating and necessary. BL does not solve structural inequalities that are experienced by women. Instead, it creates a space for reflection, exploration, and belonging that the dominant social environment doesn't offer.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample was limited to 15 participants, all of whom were already engaged in BL community, and were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. It means that the results of the study reflect the experience of those women, who already found BL as a meaningful space. It does not include those who encountered the genre, but decided to disengage from it. Thus, this work does not claim to represent broader BL readership in Kyrgyzstan. Another limitation is geographical composition of the sampling. Nine out of fifteen participants were born and raised in Kyrgyzstan. It means that the data may reflect the experiences of urban women more than those from non-urban areas, despite participants from other regions of Kyrgyzstan being also represented in the sample. Finally, the study's focus on young women from Kyrgyzstan limits the possibility to transfer these findings to other cultural contexts. However, this specificity is what makes this study distinct.

Conclusion

This study asked how Boys' Love manga serves as a space for young women in Kyrgyzstan to talk about sexuality. The answer it proposes is this: BL functions as a meaningful discursive space because the conditions of young women's everyday lives in Kyrgyzstan make such a space both necessary and structurally productive. Understanding what BL offers requires first understanding what it offers relief from.

The study began by establishing that young women in Kyrgyzstan exist within a social environment shaped by interconnected patriarchal structures. Drawing on Walby's (1990) conceptual framework, analysis showed that frustrations described by participants in their interactions with men are not individual, but an expected result of a cultural order that produces emotionally distant masculinity and assigns all the weight of the relational and emotional labor to women. The violence structure makes women's safety conditional. Gendered violence becomes not an exceptional circumstance, but a background feature of everyday life. The households and culture structure together reproduce femininity as a regulated social role, that is defined by passivity, physical appearance, and orientation towards male approval. These are not separate issues. These are mutually reinforcing effects of the same system.

The analysis then showed that these structural conditions also exist in the domain of female sexuality. It drew on Walby's conceptualization of sexuality as an independent patriarchal structure to show that female desire in Kyrgyzstan is not simply ignored but actively regulated through the sexual double standard, the cultural language of shame and "haram," and the absence of spaces where sexuality can be discussed openly. This regulation is particularly effective because it operates through internalization. Women do not simply follow rules about sexual modesty; they

start to feel that desire itself is inappropriate. Mulvey's concept of the male gaze extended this analysis into the domain of representation, showing that the media women consume consistently portrays them as objects rather than subjects. It reinforces at the level of culture what patriarchal structures produce at the level of social organization.

It is within this context that BL becomes important to analyze. This study argued, drawing on Warner's (2002) theory of counterpublics and McRobbie and Garber's (1981) concept of bedroom culture, that BL operates as a discursive space organized around different assumptions than those that dominate young women's everyday lives. Three dimensions of this were identified. First, BL offers a different model of intimacy and masculinity: emotionally expressive, relationally equal, and organized through different protocols than the gender scripts participants encountered in heterosexual relationships and mainstream media. Second, BL provides multiple levels of distance from the shame associated with female sexuality. The absence of the female body from BL narratives removes the most socially vulnerable element of desire. This absence allows participants to explore intimacy without any of it attaching to their own bodies or identities. Third, the communities organized around BL function as counterpublics in Warner's specific sense. Spaces that do not merely reflect shared values but actively produce them, providing vocabulary, belonging, and collective reflection for experiences that the dominant culture renders invisible.

The central argument of the study is therefore that the relationship between patriarchal structures and BL consumption is not coincidental. The same conditions that silence female sexuality, regulate femininity, and organize media representation around the male gaze are the conditions that make a genre like BL, read in private digital spaces and discussed in closed online communities, a particularly resonating and necessary space. This study contributes to the global BL scholarship by providing the first qualitative, reader-centered analysis of BL consumption in

Central Asia, and to gender studies in Kyrgyzstan by taking the cultural practices and meaning-making strategies of young women seriously as objects of sociological inquiry. The private act of reading manga on a smartphone is not trivial. It is one of the few spaces where young women in Kyrgyzstan can encounter desire on their own terms.

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