

Discourses on media, LGBT+ representation and the representational effects of boys love (BL) series in the Brazilian fandom¹

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Abstract: Discussions about politics and media, reality and fiction, going over topics such as support for the LGBT+ community and assumption of sexuality, have been recurrent among boys love (BL) fans both in Brazil and abroad. I will address part of the discourses on LGBT+ representation in BL series by the Brazilian fandom and offer an overview of how some of these debates have unfolded both in East and Southeast Asian countries and in Brazil, and what they may mean, seeking a better understanding of the nuances that surround them. For that, I have used as a basis ethnographic and digital fieldwork in the Brazilian BL fandom and literature that explores this dimension of the consumption experience of BL series in other East and Southeast Asian countries, such as China and the Philippines. Among the conclusions, I highlight that, despite the mistrust of the representational potential of BL series, they are presented by fans as a space of alternative representation and experimentation of other possible worlds.

Keywords: boys love series; Brazilian boys love fandom; LGBT+ media; representation.

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Boys love (BL) series are a recent phenomenon in the West, in terms of popularity, but it can be traced back to a history of literary production that disrupts hegemonic patterns of masculinity and femininity in Asian countries, even if with its limitations. The *yaoi* literary genre, which appeared in Japan around the 1970s, was the kickoff for what today is conventionally called, at least in the West, BL. As its name might suggest, it is a literary genre focused on narratives of male homoerotic romance. These texts appear early among fan circles engaged in the parodic production of *yaoi* zines, but reach popularity in Japanese *shōjo* magazines. Until then commonly referred to as *shōnen'ai*, *june*, *bishōnen manga*, *tanbi*, and others, depending on the time and type of production, they came to be addressed by the anglophone name from their creation and dissemination from the early 1990s onwards. Thus, both the amateur productions (*yaoi dōjinshi*) of groups of anime and manga fans and the commercially oriented texts published in *shōjo* magazines and magazines dedicated to the genre, came to be gathered under the umbrella of BL (MCLELLAND; WELKER, 2015; WELKER, 2015).

In Thailand, it was even considered “obscene media” (*sue lamok*, in Thai) and faced state censorship. Following the digital culture of consumption, production and circulation of BL texts, Thai women writers and readers boosted *yaoi* culture, allowing its expansion beyond the literary format, with the genre becoming audiovisual as well. With its establishment in Thailand and gradual insertion in mainstream media, in television shows and successful movies from 2004 onwards, the “playful appropriation,” one of the characteristics of the Japanese *yaoi* spirit, has been preserved. It consists of the practice, very common among BL series fans, of creating homoerotic male couples based on celebrities or fictional characters (PRASANNAM, 2019).

By maintaining, encouraging, and taking advantage of the playful appropriation, GMM Grammy Public Company Limited stands out as the leading producer of BL series (popularly known as “Y series,” “ซีรีส์วาย,” in Thai) and promoter of the genre,

making it, with the work of fans across the globe, an international and transnational phenomenon (PRASANAM, 2019). From 2014 to current days, the BL industry has been growing exponentially, with more and more BL series being produced annually by different countries besides Thailand, such as South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Despite the common genre, fans often point out how each country manages to imprint its own identity in their series, creating styles that can be easily identified through the recurrence of scripts, stories, tropes, plots, or even the quality of the actors' acting, etc. However, there are several other ways to separate and classify BL styles beyond the reference to nationality, which suggests knowledge arising from intercultural communication made possible by South-South media flows (SILVA; RANGPONSUMRIT; LEMOS, in press).

Thailand, South Korea and Japan are definitely the leaders in BL series production. Neither of the latter two, however, come close in production numbers to the former, which, as presented above, produced approximately 65 BL series in 2022 alone (THAI..., 2022). South Korea has stood out with an increase in BL series produced: between 2017 and 2022, 31 were produced in the country (KOREAN..., 2022). Japan and Taiwan follow close behind with, respectively, 27 and 23 productions between 2018 and 2022³ (JAPANESE..., 2022; TAIWANESE..., 2022).

The remarkable success of BL series internationally has led the Thai government to compare their popularity to that of K-pop, aiming to make them as recognizable a phenomenon as K-pop is (ENOMOTO; HASHIZUME; KISHIMOTO, 2022; KOMSANTORTERMOVASANA; LEESA-NGUANSUK; WORRACHADDEJCHAJ, 2022). Considered a source of soft power by entrepreneurs, producers, directors, and actors, the BL industry is equivalent to more than ฿ 1 billion (approximately US\$ 28,5 million)⁴ according to government data, also reflecting on the boost to tourism in the

³ The numbers were obtained according to the BL Watcher website list combined with the suitability of the narrative with the BL concept.

⁴ Quote (1.00000 THB = 0.02838 USD) and conversion made on June 25, 2023, at Wise.

country (ENOMOTO; HASHIZUME; KISHIMOTO, 2022). According to Baudinette (2019), BL series represent the creation of a “new queer media genre.”

Curious to understand this unique phenomenon, between the years 2021 and 2022, I researched the consumption of BL series by the Brazilian fandom, using Twitter and Telegram as digital research environments. The fieldwork (Jun. 2022 to Feb. 2023) was carried out on the discourse and practices that constituted the “consumption experience” (PEREIRA; SICILIANO; ROCHA, 2015) of BL series by Brazilian fans. I used the digital ethnographic method (HINE, 2020; LEITÃO; GOMES, 2017) and the technique of systematic and individual participant observation (MARCONI; LAKATOS, 2003), through which I both observed and interacted with different fans, fansubs, and news pages on the two digital social media platforms (henceforward digital platforms). The choice of the pages was made by evaluating the number of followers and their interaction with the pages. The direct and indirect collaborators were not chosen by any parameter, except as a result of the perambulations (LEITÃO; GOMES, 2017) made by me in the Brazilian fandom and due to my gradual insertion and participation in it.

In the initial period of the fieldwork, when I read websites, articles, comments on Twitter, opinion articles on pages dedicated to them, some observations stood out in my first contact with BL series. I soon shared them with two friends, as a way to release all that academic anxiety: Felipe⁵, who brought me closer to this object (if it was not for him insisting that I started watching the “gay asian series,” I certainly would not have had such an anthropological interest in the subject) and Victor⁶, with whom I had been working in other research project and who did not know BL series. The first observation was related to the little to no representation of the problems of the LGBT+ population in

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Thailand, a point routinely discussed by its activists. Certain people, among female fans, the target audience of these productions, and also among LGBT+ people, questioned the discourses that stated that this content was useless just because it did not touch on this issue. The opinions were diverse and not always on the side of exclusively defending or criticizing Thai BL series. There was a balance between what could be extracted that was positive and what still needed to be reviewed and improved.

The second observation was related to the topic of the script, still in the realm of representations, since they have been reinforcing, most of the time, a gender stereotype involving men who have relationships with men. In BL series, there is often the relationship between a more masculinized character (the *seme*, top/dominator) and a more feminized one within the narrative (the *uke*, bottom/submissive). This can be seen in the assignment of temperaments, colors, and even in the flirtatious relationship between them. The former has a tendency to be more direct, incisive, the one who sets out to “get” the other. The second is usually in search of the male figure. In other cases, he may even refuse him because of a supposed desire for another, which is usually nothing more than momentary emotional confusion, but he continues to be sought out by the first, who does not give up until he achieves affective reciprocity. Other problems were found over the course of the stories, such as the presence of trivialized representations of abusive relationships (e.g., moral harassment, statutory rape, drug-facilitated sexual assault, sexual harassment and violence), the stalking confused with flirtation, going from flirting to explicit sexual harassment, and the romanticization of these phenomena widely criticized in the Brazilian fandom.

Sexual fluidity, which could be read as bisexuality or pansexuality, is represented as something natural in the narratives and is another remarkable aspect of BL series. The fact that a male character, who has had a heteroerotic relationship at some point, becomes interested in a boy is something ordinary. Friends tend to understand this as something expected. However, women, as former, current or potential

emotional partners of a character, do not always accept being “left” for a man, presenting something similar to rivalry between women. Although, in some cases, ex-girlfriends react without surprise to this change of object of love. There is an openness to the experience of sexuality without the need for a label. Bisexuality appears as something inherent to people, although the characters do not self-identify as bisexual, nor as gay. However, there is a strong incentive for the permissive transit of desire. Regarding this, Felipe expressed:

I wanted to know if for the gays there, daily life is really like this, because generally when we think about Asia, we think about a lot of prohibition, I don't know... We don't think about this issue that the series, that the BL shows portray. I've never looked it up, I also have to see how the gender issue is in Thailand. I have no idea. (WhatsApp message, Jun. 16, 2021).

From another point of view, there were those who believed that there was no tacit or explicit political motivation in this representation of sexuality, but a commercial interest in maintaining a certain appeal to the popularization of these productions. In the same vein, Victor, when I commented on my interest in BL series, replied with curiosity the following: “the only thing I had heard about Thailand and the LGBT circle until now was the issue of surgeries. I thought that being gay or lesbian there was something that was frowned upon. But if this is such a big success, I don't know, right?” (Jun. 16, 2021). Confronting us with an ever-increasing production of this genre, he brought up a central point: the image we have of Asia, of the East, in relation to issues of gender and sexuality. He then added:

I paid so much attention to this cultural issue, of what is, after all, explained about what is consumed there, that we think we are, westerners, superior and ahead in everything. And it would be nice if we humble ourselves a little, take a few steps back, look at the fact that we are in Bolsonaro's Brazil, and there's Thailand making fag stories for straight girls to consume. (Message on WhatsApp, Apr. 16, 2021).

Victor's comment points to a conflict with our perceptions on these issues, suggests a self-assessment of our "orientalism" (SAID, 2003 [1978]) and provokes us to get to know how they play out in East and Southeast Asian countries, how people there receive these productions and where they circulate. Taking the example of Brazil, the fans are part of a very small but noteworthy niche of those who consume Asian culture, especially from South Korea and Japan, with anime, manga and K-pop. But as Victor observed (and I agree with the sentiment): "I was curious because I had never heard of it, and it's an issue that apparently is not so small, right?" (Jun. 16, 2021).

Given this, all the observations alluded to here cannot be understood without taking as background the people, society and culture of origin of these productions. However, the situated character of my research, which has as its object the "consumption experience" (PEREIRA; SICILIANO; ROCHA, 2015) of BL series by the Brazilian fandom, does not allow me to answer some questions with greater accuracy, such as: "what relationships permeate the reception of BL series by the Thai LGBT+ movement?" But I can partially answer the same question applied to my object, observing the discourses on media and LGBT+ rights and the representational effects of BL series in the Brazilian fandom. Something that was only possible due to a greater immersion in the field as well as a deeper and more comprehensive literature review on *yaoi* culture and other "consumption experiences" (PEREIRA; SICILIANO; ROCHA, 2015) of BL series.

Considering that discussions about politics and media, reality and fiction (including topics such as support for the LGBT+ community and assumption of sexuality) have been recurrent among fans both in Brazil and abroad, I will address, in

this article, a burning issue in the Brazilian fandom: LGBT+ representation in BL series. I will offer an overview of how some of these debates have unfolded both in East and Southeast Asian countries and in Brazil, and what they may mean, seeking a better understanding of the nuances that surround them. For that, I used, as a basis, ethnographic and digital fieldwork (carried out between June 2021 and February 2022) in the Brazilian BL fandom (HINE, 2020; LEITÃO; GOMES, 2017) and literature that explores this dimension of the “consumption experience” (PEREIRA; SICILIANO; ROCHA, 2015) of BL series in other East and Southeast Asian countries, such as China and the Philippines (BAUDINETTE, 2020; FERMIN, 2013; ZHANG, 2021).

Thus, in the first section, I present different perspectives on LGBT+ representation in BL series from literature on Chinese and Filipino fandoms, comparing them with the Brazilian one. In the second, I present discourses of fabrication and appropriation of BL series by LGBT+ people and how they represent them as an escapist alternative to reality and a “resource of hope” (BAUDINETTE, 2020).

Comparative perspectives on representation and representational politics among BL fandoms

Browsing through my Twitter feed on December 13, 2021, I came across a tweet from Murilo in which he argued that if BL series were made for the LGBT+ community, we would not need to read criticisms such as that it has not been represented by them. Again another person was engaging in the distinction between LGBT+ and BL media in fandom. At issue there was a judgment of value according to which one would be better than the other, that is, the former versus the latter, from a political point of view, when compared. However, this was not an impediment to its consumption by him and those who shared the same point of view. Also in focus was the glocalized criticism, since BL

series had no commitment to the LGBT+ reality as lived and understood in the West, because they would be designed for a different audience.

Most of the responses that followed his tweet went along the lines of agreement, but one person (whose other interactions on Twitter have already been the object of my attention and analysis, notably for his geographic location as a resident in Thailand) caught my attention. Tauan replied to one of the replies to Murilo's⁷ tweet, which, in agreement with it, added that BL series, besides not being created for the LGBT+ community, were mostly made by straight people. Disagreeing, he emphasized that this idea of heterosexuals being responsible for production "has become a myth," since this has not been the reality for a long time (Dec. 14, 2021). In order to paint a comparative picture, when faced with Murilo's answer about the cast not being LGBT+ for the most part, Tauan argued that the scenario of hiring artists in the Western entertainment industry, in which it was also still "common for straight people to play LGBT+ roles," was not so far from the Thai one (Dec. 14, 2021). Murilo agreed, but reinforced that, as much as we do not differ so much in this respect, this phenomenon was still something to be criticized. However, it seems to me that presenting it as a sort of Thai exceptionalism is not the most coherent way to criticize it.

⁷ The research data were obtained by different means of interactions with fans, sometimes with more proximity through dialogues, sometimes just as an observer. Not all individuals of the research were direct interlocutors, since I had indirect collaborators, who entered in it through my observation of their interaction through posts and comments concerning BL content on Twitter and Telegram. That being said, I was unable to gather data to create a sociological profile of each interlocutor or collaborator, and that is the reason why some individuals cited in this article have a sociological description and others do not. Furthermore, given the difficulty of obtaining some personal information, the pseudonyms were assigned to the individuals mentioned in this research considering different aspects. When it was possible to get access to their pronouns and their names on social media platforms, I maintained consistency between them and the pseudonym. For example, if someone was named Pedro or Ana and had "he/him" or "she/her" in their profile, I opted for using a "male" or "female" pseudonym respectively. If the person did not provide their pronouns but had a "male" or "female" name, I also chose a name which fits their displayed name. If the person did not provide their pronouns and did not have a name in their profile, I chose to use a neutral pseudonym such as Ariel and Ota. These choices were made to respect the gender self-determination of individuals and to avoid misgendering.

Tauan also responded directly to Murilo's main tweet, pointing out that the discourse through which BL is commonly presented as content made by and for straight women applied best to literary media. He mentioned *I Told The Sunset About You* (2020)⁸, *Bad Buddy* (2021)⁹ and *Not Me* (2021)¹⁰, as examples of productions written and directed by LGBT+ people, to show that in TV series it was not like that anymore. Starting another discussion, Murilo asserted that "BL series started to be representative" only recently, and the ones mentioned above were some of the few exceptions (Dec. 14, 2021). He stressed that even those that were directed by LGBT+ people were not focused on this group, because the target audience (of BL series in general) was mostly made up of women. However, for Tauan, there was no obvious separation between an LGBT+ audience and a straight women audience in Thailand. This distinction, in his opinion, was the result of a Western point of view. According to his observations, non-heterosexual or cisgender young people were also among the consumers of BL series, and some showed similarities with the female audience, for example, in terms of their taste for fantasy and little concern for "realism" or "representation" (Dec. 14, 2021). He further explained that, despite convergences in criteria such as these, there were also trends such as greater interest among straight women for some BL series, and LGBT+ people for others. Among the former, he perceived a greater success of *2gether* (2020), and among the latter, a greater preference for *I Told The Sunset About You* (2020)¹¹. He concluded by recommending not to follow this divide in the audience to the letter, because it was "kind of fuzzy and porous," and may make much more sense in the West than in Thailand (Dec. 14, 2021).

⁸ Written and directed by Boss Naruebet Kuno, a gay man.

⁹ Directed by Aof* Nopparch Chaimol, a gay man.

¹⁰ Written and directed by Nuchy* Anucha Boonyawatana, a transgender woman.

¹¹ These preferences pointed out by Tauan may suggest a qualitative and identity distinction between the two aforementioned series, given that *I Told The Sunset About You* (2020) was directed by Boss* Naruebet Kuno, a gay man. A gay fan, with whom I spoke at length during the research at different times, suggested that it was from then on that the BL series began to incorporate Western LGBT+ representational grammar.

I was very interested in the point of view brought by Tauan, as during digital ethnographic fieldwork I already had an inclination to think this way and agree with the part of the fandom that has broadened the concept of BL to more than that of a media made by and for straight women. I responded to his tweet in an attempt to get in touch with him. In my reply, I supported his argument and explained that I was researching the fandom and consumption of BL series in Brazil, and that the questions he posed caught my attention. I also tried to send a direct message (DM), but his account settings did not allow strangers, people he did not follow back, to send messages. I went back to the tweet and told him about the impossibility of contacting him via DM. The same day he sent me a private message. I commented again about my research interest and that I would like us to be able to establish a dialogue on the subject. Since he did not use Twitter very often, a little over a week later (on Jan. 23, 2022) he replied and sent me his contact details so we could talk on WhatsApp.

Tauan is a 36-year-old white gay man and has been living in Thailand, in the city of Pathum Thani (30-40 min. drive from the capital Bangkok) since 2019, when he decided to emigrate from Brazil. He already had an interest in the country and the East, he had always been interested in reading about Buddhism. He started watching BL series in 2014. *Hormones* (2013) and *Lovesick* (2014) were his first two. With a PhD in History, obtained in 2018, his goal was to study Thai history in person and be a university professor. According to him, as a result of the health crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the paralyzed economy, there were no openings for teaching positions in higher education. At the time of the research, he was teaching in an international school.

During our conversation via WhatsApp, I picked up on his comments on Twitter, because I wanted him to elaborate a bit more on what he had observed about Thai culture regarding the production and consumption of BL series. Let us follow his explanation:

Thai series, for some time now, have generally been directed by LGBT directors. This has been happening for a while now. Like *I Told The Sunset About You* [2020], *Bad Buddy* [2021], *Not Me* [2021]. They're all LGBTQIA+ folks. And they (even though BLs are based on books that were written by women) they don't follow the books very much, they can do whatever they want with the story. So in practice they can insert things that are more connected to the LGBTQIA+ universe, and reduce that heterosexual woman point of view. This already happens in practice, BL series don't follow the books at all. In general, they just take the idea, the plot, the names and the characters, and the rest, they change everything. So, depending on the series, it differs a lot from the book. It is up to the director, whether or not he wants to, to insert something that is more linked to LGBTQIA+ causes. Then it depends on the director or whoever. But I am talking about only the Thai context. I can't talk about Japan or the Philippines, or other countries.

About the audience that consumes BL, here in Thailand, there is no clear separation between the female audience and the LGBTQIA+ audience. Women, they will always be the majority for numerical reasons. There are many more women in the world than the LGBTQIA+ population. The LGBTQIA+ population is small, 5% or 10% of the [world] population, while women are a bigger group. So, numerically, they are always going to have a prominence. But the consumption of that content among the LGBTQIA+ audience here is widespread, it's very large. I feel like it doesn't have a discrepancy, like BL is for the female audience. You don't have that idea, here, among Thai people. They consume BL content in a general way, there is no clear separation: "ah, this is for women." There is no such thing. And young people, in general, are very fond of BL series. I have many students who watch them, I have had many students who watch these series. They are very popular here. Just today, I was in the subway, and there was a commercial for *You're My Sky* [2022]. The BL advertisements here are everywhere, it is not a sectored thing, they are on billboards, in the busiest places, they are for everybody.

So, then, I've read some interviews that despite the criticism that some BLs receive, many activists think that the outcome, on the whole, is positive. The popularity of BLs is positive, because, like it or not, it teaches diversity in some way. Even if it's a diversity that sometimes appears in a stereotypical way, sometimes that's better than invisibility. Invisibility doesn't exist. And this is something that is very different from Brazil, where there has always been a lot of talk about visibility. The visibility, here, of the LGBTQIA+ community is very big. It already was, before BLs, but it has increased much more today. And, like it or not, in their biased way or not, BLs forced the debate about this issue in Thai society. I think that if it weren't for the lack of democracy, you would already have gay marriage here, equal marriage. But then, it touches on issues that are outside the gender issue, it's a matter of politics, which, in Thailand, is very complicated. (Jan. 22, 2022, private message via WhatsApp).

Tauan oversimplified the phenomenon of female viewership by trying to explain it from the angle of a larger population, which, in fact, does not explain it, especially if we focus on the history of the genre¹². According to his reasoning, the larger female population would determine their numerical expressiveness in the audience of BL series. Under this assumption, any other genre (e.g., action, horror, suspense, comedy, etc.) would inevitably be led by a female audience. This does not hold, as there are other variables that influence audience rates by gender in different productions (SANDVOSS, 2013 [2005]), such as the "historical situation" (OLIVEIRA, 2015) of a cultural context, the distinct education and socialization of men and women, etc.

In Brazil, from what I gathered, the interpretation of some people in the fandom was based on the assumption that the idea of BL as a product made by and for heterosexual women would be a universal principle, as something that would also be established this way in Thailand. However, regarding this, he brought us a contrasting point of view and further endorsed the existence of claims and criticisms about the ways in which LGBT+ people are represented in BL series, which apparently come from groups more engaged in Thai LGBT+ activism, specifically, and Asian activism, in general. Which soon showed up in my early research on the topic on different websites.

¹² For a literature on *yaoi* culture and BL, see Angles (2011 [1971]); Levi; Mcharry; Pagliassotti (2008); McLelland et al. (2015).

These points, addressed by Tauan, lead me to think about the consumer relations of civil society and an activist (more engaged in discussions about representation and debates with the state) and non-activist LGBT+ public.

The contribution brought by Tauan allows me to reflect on the multiple forms of consumption that can take place in the market of BL series. As Sandvoss (2013, p. 32, my translation) explains, an approach to fandom by Bourdieu's *Sociology of Consumption* "[...] illustrates the shift of emphasis from texts and products to consumption practices as agents of distinction."¹³ In both Brazil and Thailand, it seems to me that we have a similar phenomenon, which expresses levels of reception and reflection upon consumption and which will differ based on each person's background, their social and political insertions and positioning, or in Bourdieusian terms, social, cultural, and economic capital. This leads us to agree that "[...] variations in fan practices—rather than the objects of fandom—are increasingly indicative of social and cultural differences."¹⁴ (SANDVOSS, 2013, p. 32, my translation).

As for this plurality of consumption, Baudinette (2020, p. 102) explains "[...] how a glocalized product further transnationalizes and potentially develops new meanings and associations through this process." In his research among Filipino fans of BL series he found a tendency to interpret them as fundamentally Thai content and different from Japanese *yaoi* texts (e.g., *dōjinshi*, fanfics, manga, light novels). A very different trend from the one I observed in the Brazilian scene, in which the Japanese origin of the BL genre was constantly recalled and reinforced by fans. He distances himself from "[...] simplistic binaries that construct certain readings of BL as 'correct' and others as 'mistaken'" (BAUDINETTE, 2020, p. 103) and from the understanding of the global flow of products that disregards the creative potential that other productions

¹³ In the source text: "[...] ilustra a mudança de ênfase dos textos e produtos para as práticas de consumo como agentes de distinção." (SANDVOSS, 2013, p. 32).

¹⁴ In the source text: "[...] as variações nas práticas fãs — mais do que os objetos de fandom — são cada vez mais indicativos de diferenças sociais e culturais." (SANDVOSS, 2013, p. 32).

of meaning about them may have for their authors in their sociocultural contexts. Taking this position of detachment, he proposes the concept of “creative misreadings” (BAUDINETTE, 2020, p. 103), to name this phenomenon in Filipino fandom that, closely associated with the “historical situation” (OLIVEIRA, 2015) of non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender Filipino people, especially gays and lesbians,

[...] represents a fundamentally queer method of engaging with texts that dislocates a cultural product from its purported history and, in so doing, opens new horizons of hopeful knowledge that meaningfully intervene in conditions of heteronormativity and homophobia. (BAUDINETTE, 2020, p. 103).

In discussing their belief in BL series and its effects on the identity assumption of LGBT+ people and the understanding of their desires, he explains that through this creative misreading, fans would produce, from their “consumption experience” (PEREIRA; SICILIANO; ROCHA, 2015) with BL series, fantasies capable of challenging their experiences of symbolic violence and their sociocultural context in which homophobia and discrimination are present.

Fermin (2013) argues, in this sense, that the meanings attributed to *yaoi* or BL media¹⁵ depend on multiple contextual factors: how they are accessed, who accesses them, and the discourses about gender and sexuality that engage their consumers, both normative and non-normative, including the politics and activism around these dimensions. Their research with Filipino fans of *yaoi* and BL texts showed how, for their interlocutors, gays and lesbians, this media had an influence on the affirmation and development of their desires. Unlike the Japanese fandom, they unequivocally associated male couples with homosexuality, under the gay identity, and addressed issues such as homophobia in their *yaoi* texts.

Like the Brazilian fans, they agreed that *yaoi* and BL were fantasies, either because the situations represented were unlikely to happen in real life, or because of the

¹⁵ They differentiate between fanfictions (*yaoi*) manga and commercial light novels (BL).

homogeneous representation of the characters and the “aspirational” (BAUDINETTE, 2020) representation of their practices and relationships. However, this understanding of the fantastical element did not prevent the interpretation of the characters as gay, in the Filipino case, or any other non-heterosexual identity, especially the bisexual one, in the Brazilian fandom. Fermin (2013) attributes this phenomenon to the formation of LGBT+ subjectivities and organizations, in the Philippines, strictly influenced by Western political thought.¹⁶

“Strategic essentialism” (SPIVAK, 2010 [2009]) and coming out are strategies that we can see reflected in these identity inferences that are practiced by Filipino, Chinese and Brazilian fans. But in the case of the former, they correspond to the representational void of non-heterosexual expressions of desire in the media of their respective societies and cultures. As a result of the popularization of the Western lexicon that gives linguistic materiality to these expressions of desire, it ends up being employed to interpellate the characters in the dimension of their identities. The discourses of these fans allow us to approach this phenomenon of identity attribution less as something individual, which indicates some isolated essentialism, than as a practice that is associated with the political history of a social movement and the strategies for achieving its goals and transnational amplitude.

Although it is not my goal to discuss in depth the landscape of the Filipino legal and sociocultural context regarding the rights and acceptance of LGBT+ persons, I believe it is pertinent to bring in some information. Even though, like Brazil, the Philippines has not legally criminalized homosexuality and does not censor the promotion of LGBT+ content and discussions, (i) they still do not legally recognize equal marriage; (ii) there is no legal permission for joint adoption; (iii) even though part of the population agrees with the need for a law protecting LGBT+ people, they still face constant discrimination in the work and school environment; and (iv) there is no

¹⁶ For a reading on LGBT+ movement and community in the Philippines, see Batocabe, 2011.

national anti-discrimination law, although there are local ordinances on the matter and the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression Equality Bill (SOGIE) is in Congress (LAU, 2020) etc. I believe that it is possible to apprehend from what I have pointed out, from the analyses offered by Baudinette (2020), Fermin (2013) and the arguments of both Brazilian and Filipino fans, the influence of material and symbolic conditions of existence in the production of conceptions about BL series in what they have or do not have as representative for the LGBT+ group, especially due to the lack of male homoerotic representation from an affirmative point of view in Filipino media (BAUDINETTE, 2020).

Notwithstanding the still existing physical and symbolic violence against the LGBT+ population on a daily basis (especially against transgender people, being the most lethal country for this population in the world) there are a number of legal frameworks that help this group in Brazil. Even if it is not as engaged in producing content on broadcast TV exclusively focused on homoerotic dramas as Thailand is, the Brazilian media would be more open than the Asian country to the political agenda of the LGBT+ population transversely in its programming. Given this, if BL series become important in the struggle for representation and social and legal equality for Filipino fans (BAUDINETTE, 2020), for Brazilian ones, even if widely consumed, they need to coincide with Western (in other words, modern) notions of LGBT+ representation, because they would still be far away.

Although there was a whole discussion about whether or not they could be considered LGBT+ content, I realized, every day in the fandom, the role they played for individuals from this community, not dismissing the criticism, but also giving credit where it is due and going a little deeper than the analytical superficialities. This panorama became more explicit to me when I read Henrique's tweet (a young non-heterosexual white man) in which he opened up and admitted, despite the judgments he might suffer, how BL series were a "refuge," something that "sustained"

him and “occupied his mind” in the moments when he “just wanted to be alone,” preventing him from “thinking about doing something stupid” (Nov. 21, 2021). Or when I talked to Lourenço, a 22-year-old gay black (light-skinned) man, who became a fan of BL series because “they are men getting it on,” for “representation” because, as he said: “before I only watched straight series, and BL was already more my ‘reality’” (Feb. 8, 2022).

The quotation marks can be interpreted as the expression of the fantastical nature of these productions, since “these things never happen in real life.” So, he could only be realistic and not create expectations, because, as he argued, “I already suffer too much with reality. Suffering with illusion? God forbid.” (Feb. 8, 2022). BL series took him to the place of “how he would like it to be.” He was not deluded by them, but he also believed that they were not just fiction, that they had some trace of reality, some important political role, contradicting the most skeptical fans about the representational, symbolic effects of BL series.

The reality of BL is very desirable, for the most part, you know? The guys in college living the good life, then out of nowhere they fall in love, most of them always thinking they were straight find out they are not, it has a very organic process of acceptance, you know? Both of the main characters and the people around them, everyone is like “ah, he likes men too? Ok.” This is really cool, I wish it was like that in real life.

I don’t think it’s just fiction, it depends on the narrative of the series. I’m watching Not Me, and they address several social issues, about same-sex marriage rights, about capitalism and hierarchical power dynamics in society. It’s very interesting, not to mention the LGBTQIA+ rights that are addressed, right? Very good. (Private message from Lourenço via Twitter, Feb. 8, 2022).

These and other reports have strengthened the idea that BL series (and in some cases the fandom) are, to recall a category brought by Jenkins (2006), an “escape” valve from the “mundane”¹⁷ for many fans. This allows us to consider the multiple “consumption experiences” (PEREIRA; SICILIANO; ROCHA, 2015) and the diverse

¹⁷ According to Jenkins (2006, p. 42), “[...] the realm of everyday experience and/or those who dwell exclusively within that space [...]”

factors that impact their mediation and the attribution of meaning to these productions by the evidently heterogeneous groups that are created around them.

Furthermore, BL series were also a utopian dimension, a “resource of hope” (BAUDINETTE, 2020), for Chinese fans. The Chinese context offers much more specificities than the Brazilian, the Thai, and the Filipino contexts. Unlike the latter three, which could be sold and interpreted as gay paradise despite their internal political and sociocultural contradictions, China is far from being represented as such. Governmental censorship¹⁸ is a central element that both modulates the consumption of BL series by Chinese fans and more broadly reflects the sociocultural conditions of LGBT+ people in the country (CHEN, 2020; WANG et al., 2020; ZHANG, 2021). According to Wang et al. (2020), LGBT+ people who participated in a survey on discrimination reported feeling that the LGBT+ community receives less attention and are targets of biased reporting by Chinese media (mean =56.3, SD =2.7). Zhang (2021) draws attention to the contextual, porous, and ever-changing nature of the censorship’s dynamic. In her analysis, the Chinese state’s position on LGBT+ content allowed consumers to find ways around the censors, and should not be seen as more rigid or hermetic than it was in practice. In exercising agency, they produced “tactics” (DE CERTEAU, 1998 [1990]) to safeguard their consumption, ensuring their access to content and enjoyment through imagination of alternative experiences and realities that BL series offered in the face of cultural imperatives.

Considering the Chinese culture’s esteem for familial responsibility as a virtue, one such example of these imperatives might be family oppression, which manifests itself in the obligation of marriage for continuity of lineage¹⁹ and the exclusion of desire

¹⁸ A report by BBC News Brasil addressed the strategy of the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) of “[...] banning the “effeminate” aesthetic in entertainment programs [...]” and “[...] promoting what they defined as more masculine images of men [...]” (TIMMINS, 2021).

¹⁹ Wang et al. (2020) draw attention, in this regard, to the pressure that China’s one-child policy exerted on LGBT+ people with one-child status, resulting in the so-called “gay’s wives” (*tongqi*) and “lesbian’s husbands” (*tongfu*).

and homoerotic relationships as a possibility for offspring (WANG et al., 2020; ZHANG, 2021). Marriage, as an institution in this case, reinforces “compulsory heterosexuality” (RICH, 2010 [1993]) and prevents some gay men from negotiating their sexual autonomy. In BL series, the representation of freedom of desire, social acceptance, and family support were elements that sensitized the Chinese gay audience (ZHANG, 2021).

Moreover, Chinese LGBT+ people still face a sociocultural context of inequality in terms of rights without legal recognition of equal marriage, without a law against sex and gender discrimination, with censored representation in the media, etc. (CHEN, 2020; WANG et al., 2020). Thus, Chinese audiences of both LGBT+ and straight women could aspire, through BL series, to the autonomy to manage their relationships and feel the freedom to love and relate to whomever they wish, without the weight of moral and sexual regulations of their *ethos*. BL series then became a source of pleasure through the imagination and questioning of the heterosexual and heteronormative culture. Some gay men also practiced “self-feminization,” a process in which, defying their culture’s representations of masculinity, they projected themselves into the *uke* (bottom) character, being subject to the care of another man’s figure, displacing themselves from the cultural demands of strength, provision, and leadership (ZHANG, 2021).

The escapist solutions offered by BL series to the Chinese fandom were not just about the possibilities of expressing desire or gender performativity. They also dealt with the issue of class. Zhang (2021) notes that most fans demonstrate dissatisfaction with their material conditions of existence. She points out that a considerable portion of them, especially those from the lower class, face “[...] exhausting living conditions, largely because of the unaffordability, instability, and uncontrollability of housing.” (ZHANG, 2021, p. 59). She continues:

That is how Thai Boys Love series come into play by providing a utopian world for the Chinese audience to escape into and enjoy the better alternatives. These series can activate and prolong their imaginations toward what life can possibly become. Most main characters in Thai Boys Love series are from upper-middle-class background [...]. [...] They have very decent places to live in and seem not to worry about their living conditions at all. Since most Thai Boys Love series still focus on life in Bangkok, the only top-tier city and the absolute center of Thailand, their living conditions are more enviable for the Chinese audience. (ZHANG, 2021, p. 63).

Chinese fans, studied by Zhang (2021), were also aware that these representations were a kind of aspirational propaganda (BAUDINETTE, 2020). There was no tacit contradiction between understanding the fictional and commercial status of a representation and its enjoyment. Not being “real” did not imply a repressive action on the expectations and desires that were elaborated on it. But I noticed a tendency to, on the one hand, disregard any positivity from them because of their origins, and, on the other hand, reinforce an idea of passive consumption and absence of possibility of new effects of meaning. As if, because BL series were meant to be consumed by heterosexual women, there was no political benefit that could be extracted from their broadcast in the context of Thai network television, as in the case of GMM25, ONE31 and CH3. As if these productions carried an irrefutable fate of not representing the LGBT+ community to any degree or context or having positive symbolic effects on it, as if there was no feasibility of fissures in language and the reordering of the meanings of a discourse, its appropriation and redirection.

Fabulation, political appropriation and hope in BL series

PBL²⁰ shared on its Telegram channel that the South Korean movie *Made On The Rooftop* (2021) was available on a well-known Brazilian streaming platform (Dec. 16, 2021). The film features Lee Hong-nae and Jung Hwi in the lead roles. It tells the

²⁰ News page about BL series on Twitter and Telegram, where I carried out fieldwork. The abbreviation does not correspond to the actual name of the page.

story of a newly single man and a streamer who move in together, and each will have to deal with their romantic misadventures. Some people have spoken out about the production. The dialogue that follows seems to me rich to understand the contrasting meanings applied to LGBT+ and BL media:

Camila: wow, I never finished watching this movie.

Douglas: I'll never get over this shit, I went to see it in the middle of the night thinking it would be everything and I'd have a beautiful couple to make me wish for what I'll never have, I get there and...?

Camila: is the ending bad?

Kevin: no, but it's not a BL cliché. It's an LGBTI+ film. It talks about relationships, HIV+ status, family, independence and other topics in a very comical way. (Messages on PBL Telegram channel, Dec. 16, 2021).

In a different moment, during a conversation in the Esquadrão do Shin-woo (Shin-woo Squad) group²¹ about *Moonlight Chicken* (2023) (directed by Aof* Noppharnach Chaiwimol and written by Jojo* Tichakorn Phukhaotong, both gay men), George, one of the members, reinforced this differentiation. According to him, commenting on what Aof had said at some point, this production would be a “gay love story,” and not a BL, since it would be “more adult content,” with “a more mature script, not a silly teen one,” that intends to “portray real life,” distancing itself from the “fanfics that we watch in BL series” (Dec. 9, 2021). This same correlation between LGBT+/realism vs. BL/fantasy content is expressed in Kevin’s comment that, in the discussion above, corroborates the idea that an LGBT+ work should address aspects of the real life of this community and issues that establish a dialogue with its agenda of rights. In this sense, the LGBT+ content would tend to stand out for stories that dramatize phenomena such as family violence, homophobia, and the psychological traumas of being LGBT+ as central components of the story. BL series, on the other hand, would have as its main distinctive element the mismatch with the reality experienced by LGBT+ people, being a “cliché,” productions that have “a beautiful

²¹ BL series fan group that I belong to and in which I also carried out fieldwork. The acronym does not correspond to the actual name of the group.

couple” (Dec. 16, 2021) and that arouse in those who consume them the desire for something they do not have or think that they will not have, since it is characterized as fiction.

This kind of interpretation was widespread in the fandom, and some interlocutors, in understanding “representation as a political act” (Jul. 2, 2021), considered BL series as mere assimilationism of homosexual identity or as apolitical works, since they would leave a vacuum in this aspect of representation. Such opinions ignored the dialogical and contextual character of the process of receiving media content and producing meanings, the multiple and contextualized forms of appropriation of a product, which were expressed, for example, in the gradual direct politicization that the series had been undergoing, regarding the inclusion of pro-LGBT+ rights discourses, especially in defense of equal marriage. In light of this, I would like to draw attention to the condition of openness and creative uses of a product, mediated by the “historical situation” (OLIVEIRA, 2015) and observing, again, the “glocalized” consumption (ROBERTSON, 2012 [1994]).

This is necessary because there is little reflexivity, by people who produce the sort of critique about the LGBT+ non-representation of BL series, due to contextual influences. Instead of disregarding their political possibilities by decrying them as a false representation for the Thai LGBT+ population, it would be more interesting to be open to the plurality of viewpoints that can appear on this issue. Anyone can say what is ideal for them when it comes to representation in the media. But how can they infer what is good or bad for the Thai LGBT+ community or even for the Brazilian one in general? Not only do Brazilian fans have no material evidence to issue general conclusions, they also cannot view the Thai LGBT+ population as a homogeneous group, as if they think alike or have the same experience of sexuality and gender, and the same social, emotional and psychological conditions of reception and production of

meanings. Can this question be answered from a single angle? I do not think so, because interpretations about BL series even among Brazilian audiences are plural.

As an example of this, PBL retweeted, on July 2, 2021, a tweet from May that questioned the prevalence of movies and other audiovisual productions in which LGBT+ characters experienced homophobia. She ended the tweet by calling for tropes like “enemies to lovers,” with nerdy boys and girls falling in love with their popular or rebellious opposite. Taking advantage of the opportunity, PBL commented in the retweet that the BL fandom often complained that BL series only feature these depictions while outsiders asked for what the fandom has in abundance. The retweet was followed by a series of responses from followers in the same tone of what had just been brought into discussion: the scripts and stories of BL series in contrast to LGBT+ ones.

Among the tweets, we found a variety of points of view. There were those who incited an exaltation of BL series and a criticism of the strict consumption of American and Western media, which would not allow us to see Asian productions in their quality and possibilities. On that side is João, who tweeted that everything people “want in queer series and movies, already exists in BL series” (Jul. 2, 2021). This indifference or ignorance, to some extent induced and intentional, would lie in the hegemony of Western productions over people’s taste. According to him, some people do not care because BL series are not Western content, but their heads “would explode” if they knew them (Jul. 2, 2021).

There were also those who questioned the categorization of BL series as LGBT+ and/or LGBT+ content. On one side, some fans defended that they could be understood this way; on the other, there were those who vehemently disagreed with the possibility. The reasoning of the latter lay in the central motifs related to the profile of the target audience of BL series and of those who produce them, with BL series being considered products to “sell ships to straight girls” (Jul. 2, 2021). To the former, on the other hand,

they did not differ from American LGBT+ series, in which, despite the call for the representation of people from the LGBT+ community in the cast, heterosexual and cisgender actors continued to act in roles of characters from this group, and the scripts would tend to reproduce and reinforce as many stereotypes as BL series.

What I observed, among the tweets, revealed a very subjective discussion of what a cliché would be. The different stances showed how this conception varied for each person, which influenced the greater or lesser defense of BL series as an answer to Mah's desires. If, for João, they had everything that one could search for in "queer movies and series" (Jul. 2, 2021), for Caio, "the engineering plot²² crap or other nonsense that you only get in BL series are not the cliché she is referring to" (Jul. 2, 2021). She would be alluding, according to him,

[...] to everyday situations that are at least part of the straight imagination, which for LGBT+ people are not, such as taking clichés and plots from ordinary comedies like Percy Jackson and Clueless and making their gay versions (Jul. 2, 2021).

However, it was to these everyday situations, much closer to a desired reality than the films cited by Caio, that some fans, among whom was João, made reference when they positioned themselves in favor of BL series as an escape from the wretched Western representation of LGBT+ experiences.

The ethnographic scene above reinforces the argument that the ideal of LGBT+ representation will not be the same among all LGBT+ people, whether or not they are consumers of BL series. We must pay attention to the heterogeneity of social groups, whose members have specific insertions, paths and social markers of difference that shape their reception of content and conceptions about representation and other issues. Thus, within the same social and geographic group (Brazilian LGBT+) the chances of

²² Caio calls "engineering plot" the BL stories that usually take place in university environments in which at least one of the protagonists, who form the couple of the series, studies engineering. "Engineering plot" would indicate, in general terms, the tendency to represent homoerotic romances among university students with repetitive scripts, tropes and narratives.

contrasting points of view are as great as between socially and geographically distinct groups. In this sense, we cannot, and we should even less, generalize an argument, taking it as a parameter widely shared by LGBT+ people in Thailand, when we still know very little in terms of research about the perception that this group has about BL series.

The notion of the tradition of the target audience (heterosexual women) of BL series has been routinely used as a discursive commonplace. This argument has been employed countless times to disassociate the product from LGBT+ people, even though, in Brazil, as I started to notice during the research, there is a significant interaction, in fansub pages, of non-heterosexual boys and men who consume BL series²³. As for two recurring assumptions in relation to these productions, pointing to a distance from reality, Ariel, in one of the discussions present in the ethnographic scene above, pointed out that the repetition of the discourse that they do not deal with homophobia and that their audience would be “young women is not true” (Jul. 2, 2021), because there are works that address this issue “and have a huge gay audience” (Jul. 2, 2021). When asked about the extent of this audience, which is presumed to be quite small, they replied that as much as the gay audience is not larger than the female audience, this does not mean that they are not watching. In their view, to suggest otherwise would be “dishonesty” (Jul. 2, 2021).

Ariel moved their criticism away from the common place of the lack of representation, that is, the tautological discursive exercise of the impossibility of BL series being representative for gays. They criticized this discourse of representational impossibility, refuting general ideas about the content and audience of BL series. In this sense, Ariel pointed out that BL series touched on sensitive themes for gay men (albeit in a few cases) and made visible the non-heterosexual audience of this media. If, on the

²³ This is evident in my quantitative research. Among 324 respondents, 62 self-identified as men. Of these, 56 self-identified as cisgender, of which 55, as non-heterosexual and only 1, as heterosexual; and 6 self-identified as transgender and non-heterosexual.

one hand, women continue to be the majority among the general consumer public, we cannot assume that they are all heterosexual²⁴, because in fact they are not. Furthermore, during the research, even though they did not lead quantitatively, men were significant among the consuming public in Brazil. The debate about fiction and politics in BL series is intertwined with the consumer audience profile, especially regarding their gender and sexuality. This relationship has been changing rapidly, the target audience is broadening, and LGBT+ people are being increasingly visible as an audience. This can be seen in the presentation of the *Thai Boys Love Content* (TBLC) program²⁵ released and promoted by Thailand's Department of International Trade Promotion.

Based on the interactions in the PBL retweet, I could access a set of discourses that allows us to understand one of the motivations that lead to the consumption of BL series by part of the Brazilian LGBT+ audience, namely: the escape from problems. The enjoyment of a highly fictional, though not impossible, alternative reality is not annulled by this characteristic, but turns into the appeal. Ricardo exemplified this when explaining that he loved BL series for the depiction of a cliché romance, "with no real concerns" (Jul. 2, 2021). He did not want to occupy himself with the "problems of gay life" when he watched them. If he so wished, he reinforced, "I would live my life" (Jul. 2, 2021). Ota and David also started from the same principle. The former assured that "BL series have pinches of reality" superior to Western productions and that "if the point was seeing suffering, he would not be choosing escapism" by watching them (Jul. 2, 2021); the latter pondered, making an allusion to the opening theme of *The Powerpuff Girls*²⁶: "I want lots of sugar, spice, and everything nice" (Jul. 2, 2021). This interest

²⁴ As also shown in my quantitative research, 235 self-identified as cisgender women. Of these, 166 self-identified as non-heterosexual and 69 self-identified as heterosexual. There was only one transgender woman who was also non-heterosexual.

²⁵ An initiative by Thailand's Department of International Trade Promotion (DITP) under the Ministry of Commerce, held on June 29–30, 2021, aimed at encouraging companies involved in the production of BL series to distribute their content in markets in East Asian countries, such as Japan and Taiwan, and in Latin America.

²⁶ Cartoon series written by Craig McCracken and aired on Cartoon Network from 1998 to 2005.

was not equivalent to ignoring the problems that LGBT+ people go through, but it was about being able to consume narratives that did not solely recite the experiences of pain and suffering so common to and known by these individuals. To paraphrase Lourenço, it was about the possibility of fabricating the characters' "good college life" and the process of "organic acceptance" of their sexuality (Feb. 8, 2022).

Given the fandom's generational heterogeneity, some saw in the BL series an opportunity to feel represented belatedly through romances and male homoerotic romantic comedies. As Manuel tweeted, those who were born before 1990 and had "cliché heteronormative stories" as a reference throughout their adolescence, with no space for alternative expressions of desire in media, "know the delight of watching the clichéd college BL series" (Jul. 2, 2021). The generational dimension may be one of the variables influencing the audience of men over 30 (which, while not appearing to be a dominant group, could be found in the fandom). Yet other fans expressed the value of this positive representation when confronted with Brazilian and Western media in general, which is still at a disadvantage compared to the Thai industry in the regularity of productions and scripts.

The affective aspect, which assumes centrality for the fans who endorse that BL series are LGBT+ content, is in the openness to forms of representation that allow the experience, via media consumption, of positive emotions. Among them there is hope and the happiness from the happy ending that, in productions for the LGBT+ community was never complete, or at least, had to be preceded by experiences of suffering and prejudice. As one of Baudinette's interlocutors (2020, p. 113) put it, "[...] at home i can see now a happy endings for a gay like me." I observed the way in which this perception resonates in a post made on Twitter, in which Chay, jokingly, expressed that his expectations about love increased with each BL series watched, and added, "the disappointment will be huge" (Oct. 5, 2021). Regardless of whether or not they were authentic portrayals of reality, the dissonance between what was being represented and

the life of the person watching, evidenced by the humorous tone, did not prevent them from being conceived as a “resource of hope” (BAUDINETTE, 2020), even if the aspirations produced may not come true. This “consumption experience” (PEREIRA; SICILIANO; ROCHA, 2015) mediated by affection, by the creation of new meanings (especially combative to forms of discrimination) and with fantasy playing a central role, for Baudinette (2020), corresponds to an “aspirational consumption.”

Conclusion

When studying the dispositif of sexuality, from his genealogical method, Foucault (1978, p. 98–102) establishes four necessary rules that should be considered more as prescriptions of prudence than imperatives: (i) “rule of immanence,” (ii) “rule of continual variations,” (iii) “rule of double conditioning,” (iv) “rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourses.” Its object was sexuality (dispositif/apparatus), analyzed from discourses about the body of the child, the woman, the sodomite, the libertine and the madman (local center of power/knowledge), which produced practices such as the “hysterization of the woman’s body,” the “pedagogization of children’s sex,” the “socialization of procreative behavior” and the medicalization and psychiatrization of sex (over-all strategy/effects of domination) (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 104–105). I would like to take these methodological orientations applied to sexuality to understand the relation of appropriation and discursive production of part of the Brazilian, Chinese and Filipino fandoms about BL series, taking them, according to the Foucauldian scheme, as the analyzed dispositif.

In the first rule, he points to knowledge about sexuality as power/knowledge relations, in which power strategies, techniques of knowledge, and procedures of discourse operate. Similarly, what BL series are and what they represent is not established prior to power/knowledge investments (FOUCAULT, 1978). From their

origin to the changes they have undergone, it has operated knowledge strategies and procedures of discourse that have assigned them different, sometimes contrasting, meanings and values, constituting an object of controversy. From their marginalization as an object of danger to children and explicit demonstration of women's immorality to their consolidation as literature and space of resistance and production of forms of sexual and artistic experimentation (MCLELLAND et al., 2015; SUZUKI, 2013).

In the second rule, he points to the changeability of power relations, the transformations that are inherent to it, "[...] modifications which the relationships of force imply by the very nature of their process." (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 99). BL series are the object of semantic and symbolic dispute. From their source texts to their original audiovisual adaptations and productions, they have undergone changes that are still under discussion in fandom. This is due to the correlations of forces between the consumers, the companies in charge of their production and marketing, and the State, with different points of view about them.

In the third rule, he points to the relationship of double conditioning, without discontinuity and homogeneity, between a "local center" of power/knowledge and an "over-all strategy" (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 99). BL series are not, in the literary and audiovisual market, representations of the female fetish, nor can this expression summarize the representations produced in these works. In fact, given the "historical situation" (OLIVEIRA, 2015) of the moment when *yaoi* culture emerged, the fan practices that became popular, and the possibility of autonomous creative expression by women, *yaoi* literature (local center) became a means of channeling and experimenting with the eroticism of heterosexual Japanese women and, later, of other Asian countries. It acquired this status with a view to escaping the sexual discipline of their cultures (over-all strategy), notwithstanding the fact that they reproduced expressions of it in *yaoi* literature, for example, with the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. After all, their creative process did not take place outside of normative sociocultural relations,

even if on their margins. Furthermore, even what can be seen as stereotyping carries a symbolic ambiguity, as it both questions and reiterates power relations at particular intensities.

In the fourth rule, he points to the instability of discourse, its discontinuity and openness to appropriations, since it should be understood as an element that can be acted upon through multiple and opposing strategies, as a “point of resistance” (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 101), undermining and/or exposing power.

Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy. (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 101–102).

Thus, recognizing the productivity of BL series, understanding them as means of LGBT+ representation, and using them as objects for the demand of rights for this social group are examples of the “tactical polyvalence of discourses” (FOUCAULT, 2017). These discursive appropriations and shifts of the BL genre, in general, and the BL series, specifically, show their “tactical productivity” and “strategical integration,” which refer, respectively, to the “[...] reciprocal effects of power and knowledge they ensure [...]” and “[...] what conjunction and what force relationship make their utilization necessary in a given episode of the various confrontations that occur [...]” (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 102).

As generally pointed out by Brazilian fans in different contexts, I suggest that it is not only the fetish, from both women and LGBT+ people in relation to male Asian bodies (without disregarding that this relationship may also exist), that mobilizes LGBT+ people and straight women to consume BL series. This mobilization starts from the search for “consumption experiences” (PEREIRA; SICILIANO; ROCHA, 2015), audiovisual content in this case, that are in line with their personal, affective and political interests (JENKINS, 1992, 2006; SANDVOSS, 2013). Whether they are gay

men who seek other narratives that involve male homoeroticism from a positive point of view, in the sense of proposing representational framings that do not boil down to social negativity about the phenomenon or women who seek other expressions of masculinity, even if they do so by projecting their desires and normative arrangements onto representations of male homoerotic relationships. As an informant stated:

Your research is extremely important! It's not easy to feel represented, at whichever level in Brazil, and BLs have provided me with that! I know that some can be a bit fetishized and problematic, but what really saddens me is the fact that I have to go so far away (Thailand, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, China, etc.) to be able to feel inserted within society or in any context whatsoever. Unfortunately, we can count on our fingers the Brazilian works of this genre, but I hope that in the future this will change and many new productions will appear! (Male, cisgender, homosexual, 18 years old, black, light-skinned, from Ceará [Northeast Brazilian State]).

I would like to quote a post made on Facebook by Daniela Andrade²⁷ (a white transgender woman) who had commented on her experiences of consuming LGBT+ series or series whose themes relate to this group in the previous months. Although she was not one of the direct subjects of my research (that is, a consumer of BL series), her comment, as it came from someone distant from this consumption niche, seemed interesting and helpful to the understanding of what I have just argued:

I find it amazing how gay movies and series seem to have more female audiences than the keys themselves.²⁸
I'm following a few key series forums and I keep seeing the comments on YouTube and the like. I notice that most of the users are women.
I saw a comment on a Young Royals video and a girl wrote: I love watching two men kissing and I'm not gay, am I normal?
And lots of other women responding to her saying the same thing, that they love key series and movies.

²⁷ Daniela authorized the use of her name, relinquishing anonymity.

²⁸ Same as "gay." Informal form deliberately used.

The other day I saw that the 3rd season of the Norwegian series Skam, which has versions in several other countries, is designed to appeal to teenage girls. This 3rd season is all about a couple of boys, and it's said that 80% of its audience was women in Norway, Belgium, and France. It was such an overwhelming success among girls that they created numerous fandoms for the gay couple.

I see the same thing in the comments of Asian series with gay couples. And then you see in the series and movies the super romantic keys, in real life they are mostly the opposite of that, the gangster keys.

I believe that the woman who likes men is so tired of rotten men and men attacking women that she finds it wonderful to see romance between two men who are so cute, one fighting for the love of the other. It is the possibility to be sure that you will see something in which no woman will suffer and that will present a man who believes in love, who cries, who is sensitive, the total opposite of what men are taught to be and of what is presented in real life. (Daniela Andrade, Facebook post, Nov. 8, 2022).

Through her comment, as someone apart from these contents' consumer niche, Daniela allows us to explore other analytical possibilities, from which we can question that, if seen as the only result of BL series or of the genre in general, fetishism would be very limiting of the heuristic potentiality of the BL phenomenon. Before being something exclusive to women who are interested in this literature and audiovisual content, fetishism is a relationship that extends to multiple objects and manifests itself in different contexts and among different people. Agreeing with a comment that did not exclude "the fetish of seeing two men making out, very similar to that of heterosexual men who love to see women making out" (Nov. 8, 2022) as one of the possible causes of heterosexual female consumption of BL series, Daniela Andrade replied: "for sure, because fetishes do not depend on gender" (Nov. 8, 2022).

Given this, I believe it would be much more fruitful to take representations in their productive sense, thinking of them as power relations, which not only have a negativity, or only operate vertically in terms of domination, but positively, from tactical appropriation and productivity (DE CERTEAU, 1998; FOUCAULT, 1978). In this case, BL series also allow the opening for discursive re-articulations and the incitement of resistance, which can operate in different ways, from the micro to the macro level,

individually and collectively, since instability and “iterability” (DERRIDA, 1973) are possibilities of all representation (FOUCAULT, 1978). BL series can also be a space for experimentation with other possible worlds, even if fictional, as demonstrated here. As De Lauretis (1994) points out, we should approach cinema, the “cinematic apparatus,” as a “technology of gender.” In the same way, we can confidently state that the media in general is also a means for the reproduction of gender norms, as an ideological apparatus, being a technology for the production of standardized bodies and subjectivities, even if within dissidence, through the inculcation of values and standards of behavior. However, as the author also argues, it can be counter-used, as a tactical tool (DE CERTEAU, 1998) for contesting stereotypical, prejudiced, and/or apolitical representations, producing discourses that are antagonistic to conservative politics and moralities. Through this interpretative key, I propose that we also look at BL series, despite the stereotypes and representational misconceptions that they can still incur.

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Discursos sobre mídia, representação LGBTQ+ e os efeitos representacionais das séries boys love (BL) no fandom brasileiro

Resumo: As discussões sobre política e mídia, realidade e ficção, passando por tópicos como apoio à comunidade LGBTQ+ e assunção da sexualidade, têm sido recorrentes entre fãs de séries boys love (BL) tanto no Brasil quanto fora dele. Abordarei parte dos discursos sobre representação LGBTQ+ nas séries BL pelo fandom brasileiro. Oferecerei um panorama de como tem-se desenrolado parte desses debates tanto em alguns países do Leste e Sudeste asiáticos quanto no Brasil, e o que eles podem significar, buscando a melhor compreensão das nuances que os envolvem. Fundamento-me, para tanto, em trabalho de campo etnográfico e digital no fandom BL brasileiro e em literatura que explora essa dimensão da experiência de consumo de séries BL na China e nas Filipinas. Entre as conclusões, destaco que, embora a desconfiança acerca do potencial representacional das séries BL, estas se apresentam para as fãs como um campo de representação e experimentação alternativas de outros mundos possíveis.

Palavras-chave: *fandom boys love* brasileiro; mídia LGBTQ+; representação; séries *boys love*.

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