



Article

“I Can See Myself in Them, but They Are Not Me”: Asian Boys’ Love (BL) Drama and Gay Male Viewers

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Abstract: Recent years have witnessed significant growth in research on the phenomenon of Asian Boys’ Love (BL) dramas, a new entertainment genre that features male characters who engage in same-sex love relations. However, much of this research has focused on, among others, heterosexual female viewers in terms of their knowledge of BL and their consumption patterns and motives. The present study aims at addressing this knowledge gap by gathering the views of gay male viewers regarding the BL that holds a place in their lives. In-depth interviews were conducted with six gay-identified participants living in Malaysia, with the study informed and guided by the framework of audience uses and appropriations of BL, and with the data collected and analyzed following the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) procedures. The findings revealed, on the one hand, polarized consumption patterns and, on the other hand, homogeneous motives, and reasons for consuming BL, including pure escapism, self-identification, and pure entertainment. The findings also revealed the participants’ views on whether the BL drama represented their identity and the real-life struggles of being a gay man in a country where homosexuality is still condemned and made illegal. These findings have implications that are relevant to the discussion of the role of the homoerotic media as a source of identity and livelihood among gay men.

Keywords: boys’ love; drama; audience; gay; Malaysia



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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a phenomenon called “Boys’ Love” (BL) that has emerged in East Asia and subsequently spread globally. It has its roots in the Japanese yaoi manga, which refers to comics or graphic novels depicting same-sex love relations between men that are created by women authors for female readers (Mitchell 2020). This unique phenomenon is driven by the immense popularity of Asian BL drama series produced in both television and web formats by top producing countries such as Thailand and Taiwan. By the same token, Asian BL dramas are consumed by viewers of different ages, genders, and sexual orientations for several reasons, including the romances between male characters that are played by “handsome actors with good on-screen chemistry” (Wong 2021), and the easy accessibility of these drama series via “smartphones and social media” (Sukthongthong and Bunyavejchewin 2019) as well as free-to-view digital platforms (e.g., YouTube) and Video-on-Demand (VOD) portals (e.g., Netflix, LINE TV) (Campus 2021). Most importantly, Asian BL dramas have been found to have an impact on viewers (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning in particular) through their consumption of BL, ranging from how this entertainment genre has helped them to accept their identity and sexuality (Mitchell 2020) to how it affords comfort and solace for those living in countries where homosexuality and other forms of gender and sexuality are still condemned and made illegal (Wong 2021). Malaysia is a case in point, given the ways lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) individuals and communities are being treated. Based on the previous research mentioned above, the study presented in

this paper hypothesized that if BL drama could help many LGBTQ people accept their sexuality and identity and provide them with solace and comfort for being different from the norm, this new entertainment genre could then have the same force and effect on LGBTQ individuals in Muslim countries who face injustice and ill-treatment because of their sex, sexual, and gender differences. To address this hypothesis, the study sought to answer the following research questions by focusing on the views regarding BL drama among gay male viewers in Malaysia: (1) How do these men consume BL drama? (2) What are their motives for consuming BL drama? (3) What are their views on BL drama as a source of identity and livelihood?

Before proceeding further, we provide a brief review of the field to illustrate BL drama and its impact on identity formation among viewers.

1.1. BL Drama and Audience Consumption

As earlier discussed, the Boys' Love (BL) phenomenon has taken hold in East Asia and has now spread throughout the globe. It has attracted significant research interest in recent years, with studies examining different facets of the phenomenon that include, among others, BL drama creation and production (Baudinette 2019; Prasannam 2019), audience reception, and perception of BL drama (Sianturi and Junaidi 2021; Iman et al. 2021), as well as BL fandom and BL fan-industry interaction (Prasannam 2019; Zhao and Madil 2018). Another key facet that has been the focus of recent research is the motives for consuming BL materials. In their review of the literature on the BL phenomenon, Zsila and Demetrovics (2017) pointed out the various motivations among BL audiences for consuming BL materials (e.g., stories, books, movies, artworks). These include the materials' entertaining, inspiring, and sexually arousing characteristics (Chou as cited in Zsila and Demetrovics 2017). These characteristics corresponded with those found in a study by Zhang (2014) on the key motives for consuming BL fiction among audiences (i.e., Chinese women in particular). One of these motives relates to the function of BL materials as a means for entertainment and escapism. The respondents viewed *yaoi* (also known as Boy's Love) serves as an "entertainment in leisure time" or "spice of life", which explains why they consumed it for relaxation and passing time (Zhang 2014, p. 33). Furthermore, the respondents perceived *yaoi* fiction as a form of escapism from traditional romance texts with its portrayal of stereotypical heterosexual characters (e.g., virile men and submissive women). The respondents found such texts displeasing and full of heterosexual romantic clichés compared to *yaoi* texts because "there are fewer tears and less over-sensitivity" and the portrayal of non-heterosexual/same-sex characters that are more straightforward and easily identifiable (Zhang 2014, p. 34).

Earlier research on the BL consumption motives among audiences was conducted by Pagliassotti, who identified ten distinct motivational dimensions of such consumption research (as cited in Zsila and Demetrovics 2017). These dimensions consist of, among other things, BL's "melodramatic/emotional elements" that captivate the audiences, particularly those who crave materials that elicit strong emotional responses within them, and the "pure escapism/lack of reality" dimension of BL, as evidenced by its fictional characters and settings that enable the audiences to flee the real world and escape real-life problems (Zsila and Demetrovics 2017, p. 7). Pagliassotti's motivational dimensions of consuming BL materials became the basis for developing the *yaoi* Consumption Motives Questionnaire (YCMQ). Zsila et al. (2018) developed this multidimensional survey instrument to assess the BL consumption motives among audiences from different age demographics, genders, and sexual orientations. The findings revealed some key consumption motives. The motive dimension of arousing/sexually titillating was prevalent among audiences, particularly male audience members who consumed BL materials for their sexual content. The audiences, especially female audience members, scored the motive dimension of a female-oriented romantic/erotic genre highly because BL materials afforded them the ability to resist patriarchy and stereotypes of gender that were common in non-BL materials. The motive dimension of melodramatic/emotional elements, however, was lowly ranked

among the audiences, notably younger audience members compared to their fellow older counterparts. This was because young consumers of BL materials possessed higher levels of sensation-seeking tendencies and, therefore, would be less likely to be motivated to consume BL materials that displayed intense emotions.

Socio-cultural reality is another motive that may influence audiences' desire to consume BL materials. [Edris \(2020\)](#), for instance, posits that the motivations of audience members in consuming BL materials are shaped by the social and cultural reality of a particular society, which relates to the environment or surroundings in which they live. Using the BL drama series from the Philippines as an example, [Edris \(2020\)](#) argues that these series are not only consumed by audience members but are also produced by the people in the Filipino BL industry (e.g., writers and producers) based on the social reality and the context in which the Filipinos live their lives. This is evidenced by first, the key role of the family in pervading both the mediated/fictionalized and the real/non-fictionalized versions of the Filipinos' lives, and second, the fact that the people in the Filipino BL industry are majorly made up of LGBTQI-identifying writers and directors. All these, as [Edris \(2020\)](#) contends, influence the production and consumption of Filipino BL among Filipinos in the ways that the BL drama series that have been produced so far address the role of the family and portray a positive image of homosexual men.

Social-cultural reality may also explain the popularity and acceptance of BL drama series in Thailand. This can be seen in what [Chan \(2021\)](#) observed as the Thai cultural concepts relating to the family that were portrayed in the Thai BL drama series (also known as BL *lakhon*). Using the popular BL drama series *Love by Chance*, [Chan \(2021\)](#) argued that the *lakhon* not only featured images of Thai families that were familiar among audiences but also portrayed the role of the family in the lives of Thai queer individuals, as evidenced in the themes of familial dynamics and parental acceptance of the same-sex relationship. These, as [Chan \(2021\)](#) further maintained, opened "[a] space for subtle challenges or changes to the heteronormative structure as plotted in *Love by Chance*, even as the *lakhon* continues to uphold national and patriarchal principles that deny overt expressions of homoerotic romance" ([Chan 2021](#), p. 81).

1.2. The Current Study

Notwithstanding the significant contributions that the above-reviewed studies have made to our understanding of the motives for consuming BL dramas, these studies tend to focus on audiences in contexts where homosexuality is accepted. Furthermore, these studies tended to focus on female viewers because *yaoi* or BL materials are commonly produced by women authors for a female audience. So far, few studies have been conducted to assess the consumption patterns of BL materials among viewers (particularly LGBTQ individuals) where homosexuality is rejected. This is especially true in the case of LGBTQ people living in Muslim-majority countries. Reports written by the Pew Research Center, namely, [The Global Divide on Homosexuality \(2013\)](#) and [The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists \(2020\)](#) revealed that acceptance of homosexuality remained low among adherents of Islam in countries with large Muslim populations, such as Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Palestinian territories, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Lebanon, and Turkey. Such a condition can have a significant adverse impact on LGBTQ people's lives, precisely when homosexuality and non-normative sexualities and genders remain subject to social rejection and legal regulation and control ([Jerome 2021](#); [Luhur et al. 2020](#); [Mohd Sidik 2018](#)). Scholars such as [Jaspal \(2016\)](#) contend that homosexuality in Pakistan is a threat to the Pakistani culture that is intricately linked with Islamic tradition and the socio-cultural expectations of gender roles and functions. Such a culture, as [Jaspal \(2016\)](#) maintained, places great emphasis on the concept of *izzat* (cultural and personal honor) that is expected to be fulfilled through the cultural expectation of heterosexual marriage. Any acts or practices that go against cultural norms (e.g., sex norms by being gay) are seen as a threat to Pakistani culture, with grave implications for those who commit such acts or practices ([Jaspal 2016](#)). As the following Pakistani gay man explained about how gay men in the country would spend their life:

Most gay men spend their life in guilt, carrying a burden of sins. In our society, they only have two options: one is to come out of the closet and live a horrible life and being bullied; the other is to conceal their sexuality for the rest of their lives. People usually choose the second option. They get married and start a dual life: one for the family and society, the other for their own satisfaction. This makes life very pathetic and an under continuous threat of being caught. Very few men come out and even if that happens, they get very little support from family and society. (Colibri 2018, para. 5)

The same can be said of homosexuality in Muslim-majority Indonesia. Khoir (2020), among many other scholars, maintained that, akin to other Muslim-dominated countries, Indonesia adheres to conservative Islamic ideologies that view homosexuality and same-sex relationships as a sin against God and an offense to Shari'a. Being a homosexual for gay Indonesian men is difficult due to the many sexual and religious-related problems that they face because of living in a homophobic and heterosexist society. Such problems include discrimination, stigma, prejudice, feelings of isolation, rejection, and loneliness. As some of the following gay male participants in Khoir's (2020) put it:

So, in Islam, we are part of the story of the Prophet Lot, if Islam said that homosexuality is wrong, so it is wrong. (P2)

Many Islamic teachers, when I was in middle and high school, spoke about homosexuality, and it is forbidden in Islam, contrary to human nature. They used the story of the Prophet Lot to justify this prohibition. So, I can't deny that homosexuality is forbidden in Islam. (P7)

It's like there's something weird with me. Why I was like this, why I was like this. Then my best friend at the time of elementary school graduation advised me to consult my problems to psychologists, 'try to go to a psychologist!' (P3) (Khoir 2020, pp. 8–9)

Being a homosexual man in a Muslim-majority country such as Malaysia is similarly strewn with obstacles and challenges, mainly because homosexuality remains subject to social-legal containment and condemnation. Many scholars, including Jerome (2013, 2019), maintain that many Malay Muslim gay men face difficulties in coming to terms with their same-sex sexual orientation and sexual identity following the prohibition of homosexuality and homosexual practices by Malaysian Sharia laws. To complicate matters further, Malay Muslim gay men run the risk of either being perceived as 'songsang' (abnormal/invert) or as un-Malay and un-Islamic for going against the socio-cultural expectations of gender roles and functions (Jerome 2013, 2019).

These obstacles and challenges, however, may not completely obliterate the creation of identities and communities of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and queer/questioning individuals in the said countries, particularly in the virtual/cyber world that has provided an alternative space for them to flourish. Many Indonesian gay men, as Syahputra and Yuliana (2016) observed, utilized the gay social application, Jack'd, as an alternative method for interacting openly with each other despite the restricted communication among them within the heteronormative and homosexual-averse society. Moreover, Indonesian gay men, as Triastuti (2021) posited, utilized a range of strategies in reclaiming homosexual identity in the virtual/cyber world, and fending off in the process the stigmatization and social exclusion that they experience because of their sexual orientation. These strategies include queer literacy (e.g., discussing and making sense of sexuality and self-disclosure online) and social community activism (e.g., establishing peer networks to create knowledge and awareness about HIV/AIDS). Gay men in Malaysia, on the other hand, turned to social networking spaces such as Twitter, which, according to Mohamad Tuah and Mazlan (2020), served as a safe avenue through which they could identify themselves as gay men. For these men, Twitter made it possible for them to be their authentic selves without fearing the judgment of others, and to disclose and discuss aspects of their personal lives with no inhibition. Furthermore, the Jerome and Hadzmy (2022) found that mainstream social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram) and gay dating applications (i.e., Grindr and Blued) provided young gay men in Malaysia the opportunity to explore

their sexuality and identity in the virtual/cyber world. Jerome and Hadzmy (2022) observed that the anonymity and ease of use that these men assumed online enabled them to create various strategies of self-disclosure on social media, such as being out and proud, being out and discreet, and being closeted, depending on the social networking platforms and applications they used and their target audiences. It is in this virtual/cyber world that LGBTQs in the said countries can consume homoerotic media such as *yaoi* or BL materials through social media, free-to-view platforms, and VOD portals. A study by Lau (2020) is worthy of mention here as it examined the consumption of BL materials among a group of homosexuals from Muslim-majority Malaysia. Using the popular Taiwan BL mini web series, *Right or Wrong*, Lau (2020) analyzed the show's portrayal of homosexuality and its effects on the perception of homosexuality among the group members. The study revealed several key findings, including the group's ability to connect with the homosexual characters, their positive perceptions of how these homosexual characters have been portrayed, and how the BL mini web series brought home the fact that homosexuality was (and still is) as normal as heterosexuality (Lau 2020). While this study sheds some insights into BL materials and LGBTQ in Muslim-majority Malaysia, more needs to be known about the patterns, motives, and reasons for consuming *yaoi* or BL, and the impact they may have on the formation of LGBTQ identity and their livelihoods. The present study seeks to do this by gathering the views of gay men living in Malaysia who are viewers of the Asian BL drama series.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

To examine the motives for consuming BL drama among gay male viewers, we apply Kamm's (2013) proposed framework for analyzing the diversity of use and appropriation of BL among audiences. Three concepts make up this framework, namely, BL as entertainment, an active audience, and use patterns and users' categories (Kamm 2013). According to Kamm (2013), *BL is a form of entertainment* in that it allows audiences to find self-expression and break taboos by 'participating' in fantasies of tabooed activities such as sexual acts between the male characters. BL drama not only entertains viewers but allows them to experience a sense of accomplishment and identity formation. This is evidenced by the ways viewers can cope with a range of emotions in their consumption of BL and create and affirm a particular sense of identity through their engagement with BL (e.g., becoming the sympathetic female viewer). Engagement can occur through the parasocial interaction between BL and its audience, which may include the acts of "empathizing or commiserating with a character, sharing in the character's joy, or along with that character, gloating over and hating another".

This brings us to the second and third concepts of the proposed framework, namely, *active audiences* and *their consumption patterns and categories*. For Kamm (2013), BL can be consumed differently (e.g., read, watch) in separate locations (e.g., at home, at a cafe). Additional contexts, such as personal and social, availability, and accessibility, can also influence the audience consumption of BL. The extent to which BL can be consumed in a variety of ways at various locations has led to the creation of the following categories or use patterns among BL audiences: (1) *the connoisseur* (e.g., those who show a keen interest in sexual matters and identify with or feel affection for the male characters); (2) *the con girls* (e.g., those who enjoy going to BL conventions to get in touch with like-minded viewers and even authors of BL); (3) *the net girls* (e.g., those who wish to communicate with other like-minded viewers over or via the Internet); (4) *the sporadic* (e.g., those who are collectors of BL artworks, enjoy consuming BL without caring for the title, engaging with BL on an irregular basis). It should be mentioned that use patterns may evolve and change depending on numerous factors, such as the availability or accessibility of BL, and whether the BL materials satisfy viewers' needs over time. Since Kamm's (2013) proposed framework was developed based on the findings of his study on BL consumption among female Japanese audiences, we adapted and extended the said framework by following the aim and objectives of our study.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Instruments

We employed the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) in understanding BL drama and gay male viewers from Malaysia. This approach was appropriate because it enabled us “to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith and Osborn 2008, p. 53). Moreover, the IPA is phenomenological in both scope and nature. This is so for the following reasons: first, “it involves a detailed examination of the participant’s world”; second, “it attempts to explore personal experience”; third, “[it] is concerned with an individual’s perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself” (Smith and Osborn 2008, p. 53). We also employed the semi-structured interview as the primary data collection instrument, which has been described as the best method for IPA. Interviews allowed us to engage with our participants in a dialogue where initial questions were modified in the light of their responses.

2.2. Participants

Participants were 6 gay-identified men who were based in two major cities in Malaysia at the time of the study. The participants were aged between 20 and 30, well-educated, and represented the different religious faiths and ethnic groups in Malaysia. All participants resided in urban areas. The sample size follows Daniel’s (2012) recommendation on the “typical sample sizes for various types of research design”—in this case from 6 to 10 participants for phenomenological research that uses non-probability sampling (p. 243).

Table 1 provides further information on the participants’ demographic information.

Table 1. The participant’s demographic information.

Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Religion
Syed *	23	Malay	Muslim
Fendi *	27	Malay	Muslim
Jeff *	27	Chinese	Buddhist
Daniel *	21	Malay	Muslim
Chen *	30	Chinese	Buddhist
Stanley *	30	Iban	Christian

* Pseudonym.

The respondents were our friends and acquaintances, and they were contacted via their social networking spaces (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). They were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) they were born and raised in Malaysia, (2) they identified themselves as gay men, (3) they formed the younger generation of gay men in the country (all under 30 years of age), (4) being the younger generation they were more familiar with the current trends in social media use, (5) they are active on social media compared other members of the gay male community in the country, and (6) they possessed some knowledge of BL drama. The exclusion criteria include non-Malaysian gay men and gay men who do not have any knowledge of BL drama. We initially invited more than fifteen gay men to participate in the study, with the hope that this figure could represent the various ethnic communities in Malaysia (e.g., Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kadazan-Dusun, Orang Ulu). Unfortunately, only six accepted the invitation while others declined for personal reasons including concerns over their safety and privacy.

2.3. Ethical Protocol

We conducted our study following the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Protocol Code: HREC(BP)2020(1)/02; Approval date: 8 December 2020). We obtained informed consent from all our participants before administering the interviews.

2.4. Interview Process

As earlier mentioned, our interviews followed the IPA semi-structured interviewing process through which we (1) established rapport with the participants, (2) paid less attention to the ordering of the questions, (3) probed interesting areas that may arise during the interview, and (4) gauged their interests and concerns (Smith and Osborn 2008, p. 58). We constructed the interview questions based on the IPA questioning techniques including the use of “prompts” and “funneling”, as well as neutral, open-ended, and less technical questions (Smith and Osborn 2008, pp. 62–64). Table 2 shows the questions that we asked the participants during the interview sessions.

Table 2. Interview Questions.

Questions
1. When was the last time you watched a BL drama? What was the title and from which country? Which social media platform/channel broadcasted/streamed this drama
2. On average, how much time per day/week do you spend watching BL dramas?
3. Tell me what makes you watch BL dramas (the one/ones you mentioned earlier)?
4. The following are some of the motives for watching/consuming BL dramas among different viewers. Which one of them reflects your motive for watching/consuming BL dramas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Because the partners are equal in it/the drama” (Motive: “Pure” love without gender) • “Because gay men have equal rights in it/in the drama” (Motive: Pro-gay attitude/forbidden and transgressive love) • “Because it gives me an opportunity to better understand my feelings” (Motive: Identification/self-analysis) • “Because it evokes deep emotions in me” (Motive: Melodramatic/ emotional elements) • “Because heterosexual romance is boring” (Motive: Dislike for standard romances/shoujo) • “Because it expresses erotica in a way that is more enjoyable for women” (Motive: A female-oriented romantic/erotic genre) • “Because I can temporarily escape from reality” (Motive: Pure escapism/lack of reality) • “Because it is aesthetic” (Motive: Art and aesthetics) • “Because it is entertaining” (Motive: Pure entertainment) • “Because sex between men is arousing for me” (Motive: Arousing/sexually titillating)
5. Let’s talk about the representation of gay identity in BL dramas. Is it a true reflection of your identity as a gay man? Do BL dramas reflect the reality and nuances/subtleties of your life as a gay man?

The interviews were conducted at locations based on the participants’ choice and were carried out both in English and the national language, Malay. We (first and second authors) explained the full purpose of the study and administered full consent procedures. We assured our participants of confidentiality regarding disclosed information and explained that their involvement was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any point during the interview. Recording began once we obtained the participants’ consent. During the interview, we posed our participants some probing questions that allowed them to (1) clarify what was said (e.g., Can you elaborate more on that point?); (2) provide examples to support what was said (e.g., What other examples of BL drama that you watched?); (3) to evaluate the topic of discussion (e.g., Does BL drama matter to you?). We ended the interview when the participants’ responses revealed no new or further patterns or findings.

2.5. Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed following the IPA interview data analysis procedures: (1) looking for themes in the first case (i.e., interview), (2) connecting the themes, (3) continuing the analysis with other cases (i.e., other interviews), and (4) preparing the final write-up (Smith and Osborn 2008). These procedures are quite akin to Braun and Clarke’s (2012) thematic analysis of qualitative data, beginning with familiarizing oneself with the data, generalizing the initial codes, looking for the themes, revising potential themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the final report. We read the

transcripts several times and made ourselves familiar with the entire body of data. Next, we coded the transcripts individually by hand and highlighted the key words and phrases that the participants repeatedly used to convey their thoughts and experiences based on the questions asked. We then collated all codes, went over them carefully, and determined the ones that captured the gist of the participants' thoughts and experiences. We combined these codes into initial themes, revised and renamed them by making sure that (1) they represented the participants' responses in a condensed and accurate manner, and (2) they fitted the research questions that guided our study. We validated the results by employing Creswell's (2013) validity strategy, namely, *member checking* to reduce bias and ensure the accuracy of findings. This was performed by showing summaries of findings to the participants and checking with them whether the findings precisely reflected their insights and individual experiences. We also conducted an investigator triangulation (Peoples et al. 2019) during the coding process that allowed us to discuss our views about the overall data and the way we individually coded the transcripts. This triangulation method not only substantiates interpretations from various perspectives but also assists the validation of data via cross-verification of the phenomenon under study (Peoples et al. 2019).

3. Results

The findings revealed that all participants knew what a BL drama was, that is, romantic dramas that feature gay men or male homosexuals as the leading characters. The participants were also aware that BL dramas have gained immense popularity among viewers from Asia and beyond because of the power of social media and online fan communities. The findings also revealed the following patterns of participants' BL drama consumption: first, the materials they regularly consumed were mostly derived from Thailand and Taiwan's BL series industry. This is evidenced by the following titles they cited: *Tharn Type: The Series* (2019), *2gether; The Series* (2020), *Fish Upon the Sky* (2021), and *Lovely Writer* (2021) from Thailand, as well as *HIStory1: Stay Away from Me* (2017), *HIStory2: Crossing the Line* (2018) and *HIStory3: Trapped* (2019) from Taiwan. Second, these drama series were shown with English subtitles, and the participants spent much of their time watching them on free-to-view platforms (e.g., YouTube) and VOD portals (e.g., Line TV, Netflix) from the comfort of their homes, their workplaces, and cafes. Despite the above similarities, the participants reported different patterns of consumption. Some participants waited until the entire episodes (ranging from 4 to 20 episodes) were uploaded online, which allowed them to binge-watch the drama series back-to-back over several days or weeks. Other participants reported that they waited for each episode to air, particularly because waiting a week between each episode allowed for a mixture of feelings to build within them—hope, torture, and anticipation. Our analysis of the participants' views on the reasons, motives, and representations concerning the BL drama they consumed produced three themes.

3.1. It Is Not Just about the Cute Actors—Reasons for Consuming BL Dramas

All participants reported that they watched BL drama because of the leading actors, whom they found physically attractive, with descriptions like "tall", "handsome", "skinny", and "cute". The participants also highlighted other reasons for watching BL dramas, including (1) the desire to know what the hype about BL dramas was all about, (2) the curiosity to know more about this new entertainment genre, and (3) the ways BL dramas afforded them the inspiration to watch such materials in the first place, namely, the sweet and romantic male couples, and the soapy and fantasy love-story. Extracts from the interview are provided below, which show the following participants' views on the matter:

STANLEY: *What makes me watch BL? I can say it because of the actors ... all are handsome, tall, and skinny ... the in look now most girls and guys the look ... reminds me of Korean Ulzzang boys.*

SYED: *Sebab I tengok ... satu diaorang comel, lagi satu sebab macam sweet like even though cerita tu its just like fanstasy ... tapi I rasa I nak tengok sebab sebab I tahu yang I tak kan dapat benda tu tapi itulah ialah inspi ... inspiration I untuk tengok BL*

(translation: why I watch it . . . first, they are cute, another thing is it looks sweet even though its like a fantasy . . . but I think I want to watch it because I know I cannot get it but that's the inspiration for me to watch BL).

JEFF: . . . actors are cute so why not give it a try . . . other than that because you know every soap opera right even K drama we all like . . . I think its the fantasy and the soapiness of that dramalah I would have to say that attracts me to go and watch it . . . It's similar to K drama.

FENDI: I just want to know what the hype is all about . . . I'm curious to know why so many people love it, all all these girls and boys love BL so much . . . now that I have watched it I can totally relate . . . I can say I'm a latecomer haha!

3.2. From Escapism to Entertainment—Motives for Consuming BL Dramas

The participants all seemed to agree on the same motives for watching BL drama which include

- “Because it gives me an opportunity to better understand my feelings” (Motive: Identification/self-analysis)
- “Because it evokes deep emotions in me” (Motive: Melodramatic/ emotional elements)
- “Because heterosexual romance is boring” (Motive: Dislike for standard romances)
- “Because I can temporarily escape from reality” (Motive: Pure escapism/lack of reality)
- “Because it is aesthetic” (Motive: Art and aesthetics)
- “Because it is entertaining” (Motive: Pure entertainment)
- “Because sex between men is arousing for me” (Motive: Arousing/sexually titillating)

The participants also seemed to agree that their motives for consuming BL drama were not because of the followings:

- “Because the partners are equal in it/the drama” (Motive: “Pure” love without gender)
- “Because gay men have equal rights in it/in the drama” (Motive: Pro-gay attitude/ forbidden and transgressive love)
- “Because it expresses erotica in a way that is more enjoyable for women” (Motive: A female-oriented romantic/erotic genre)

3.3. The (Mis)Representation of Gay Men in BL Drama

A third theme is that BL dramas, especially those consumed by the participants, may or may not represent their gay male identities, as well as the reality and nuances of their lives as gay men. One participant pointed out that the BL drama was “unrealistic” and a work of pure fantasy. This was so given that BL drama regularly featured typical gay men who were “tall”, “young”, and “skinny. The participant added further that BL dramas should represent diverse types of gay men. Another participant maintained that BL drama portrayed the things that he would prefer to do with his partner that could not be achieved in public. This is because being open about one’s identity as a gay man and the open display of affection between gay male couples were not permitted by the larger public. However, one participant thought otherwise by saying it very much depended on the following content of the BL drama: some of these materials were fantasies of a romantic relationship between two gay men, while other BL dramas depicted real-life problems faced by many gay men in developing and maintaining romantic relationships and dealing with their family members who were unaware of such relationships.

DANIEL: . . . too much fiction and unrealistic, and they don't cover everyone, just represent the typical ones . . . skinny and very young. BL should be more diversified so that more gay people can be represented.

SYED: . . . yes a reflection, but it's not a reflection . . . mostly kan yang you tengok ni kan semua macam kalau BL kan mostly kan macam dua dua masculine you know, dan apa yang digambarkan dalam tu adalah apa yang I nak dan apa yang I buat bila dengan my partner tapi not in like in real life like how we're being so open ha macam tu faham

tak ... (translation: yes a reflection, but it's not a reflection ... mostly the ones you see in BL both of them are masculine you know, and what is portrayed in BL is the thing that I want and what I would like to do with my partner but these cannot be done in reality, being open, you understand me?).

CHEN: ... *I can see myself in them, but they are not me ... because, because we cannot be too open like them, like what we see in the drama the couples are in love and everyone knows and supports but, but not here in Malaysia ... in Malaysia as we know our society still close-minded, still won't allow people to be gay, let gay couple show affection, or let love between two men. It's sad lah but that's the reality.*

JEFF: ... *it's really depending on which drama was it because some drama did really portray some of the real life situations really well while some are just like fantasy ... it's really depending on yeah the story of that drama because some of the stories did aaa like act out the struggles that are happening between two different guys and what is their family's struggles their struggles between the couples and whatnot ... I know it may be not fully accurate but definitely depicts aaaa the situation that we are gay men what is happening around us.*

4. Discussion

The extant literature shows that there are various motives for consuming BL materials among heterosexual and non-heterosexual viewers. Our findings add to this body of work by demonstrating not only the motives but also the reasons for and consumption patterns of BL drama among gay men in Malaysia. The motives for consuming BL materials (in our case, BL drama) are consistent with those reported in early research, including a study by Zsila et al. (2018), namely, the motive dimensions of (1) arousing/sexually titillating, (2) art and aesthetics, (3) pure escapism/lack of reality, and (4) pure entertainment. Identification/Self-Analysis was another important motive for consuming BL materials among our participants, and this is consistent with the above-mentioned studies. However, our participants expressed a slightly different view compared to that indicated in the above-mentioned studies. Zsila et al. (2018) reported that the motive dimension of identification/self-analysis was ranked highly among their male participants, who may have sought representations of men such as themselves in the BL materials they consumed “no matter how unreal the narratives about their romantic lives may be” (p. 13). Our findings revealed the opposite.

First, the gay male characters in the BL materials the participants consumed represented their identities as gay men *only in a certain way*. Although they could see themselves in the leading male characters, particularly in terms of developing romantic relationships with other men, they were skeptical of the way the characters were portrayed as gay men on the basis that the characters were played by heterosexual actors who may not be able to feel or experience ‘real’ gayness. This differed from the previous findings in Lau’s (2020) study regarding BL’s portrayal of homosexuality and its effects on the perception of homosexuality among gay men living in Malaysia. The study, as discussed earlier, revealed several key findings, including the group’s ability to connect with the homosexual characters, their positive perceptions of how these homosexual characters have been portrayed, and how the BL mini web series brought home the fact that homosexuality was (and still is) just as normal as heterosexuality (Lau 2020).

Second, our findings revealed that the BL drama series our participants consumed did not represent the problems they faced in the real world, such as the difficulty of being open about their sexuality and sexual orientation and the obstacles they faced in developing open relationships with other men because it is not accepted in Malaysia. This corresponds to Wong’s (2021) contention that many members of the LGBTQ community shun the BL series, due to their inaccurate representations of the community. They argue that the BL series focuses too much on romantic fantasy, consequently sweeping serious LGBTQ issues such as equality and AIDS/HIV under the rug. Moreover, our participants did not find the female-oriented/erotic genre as a motive for consuming BL materials. This is not

consistent with the findings reported in earlier research, including the study of [Zsila et al. \(2018\)](#). There are two possible explanations for this. First, this motive was highly ranked by female participants in [Zsila et al.'s \(2018\)](#) study because they viewed BL as “a means of avoiding or negotiating stereotypes or patriarchal messages that may occur in other forms of romantic narrative”. Our participants maintained that the BL materials they consumed should not necessarily be viewed as female-oriented because these materials were also produced with gay men in mind (hence the romances between boys for the consumption of similar-minded boys and men). They added that BL served as a means through which homosexual characters could now take the leading roles in romances—something that was previously unthinkable in the Asian entertainment industry.

While previous studies by [Chan \(2021\)](#) and [Edris \(2020\)](#) found that socio-cultural reality is a motive that may influence audiences' desire to consume BL materials, the participants in the study did not specifically mention or describe it as a motive for their BL consumption. However, we could tell from our participants' responses that socio-cultural reality was the factor that led them to watch BL dramas and think about or question BL's representation of gay men. Our participants contended that BL portrayed ideal or constructed realities that may not necessarily reflect the socio-cultural reality that shaped much of their lives as gay men in Malaysia. This is especially so when the participants noted that it was difficult to be openly gay, let alone be open about their romances with other men, because homosexuality is condemned and made illegal in the country. Their views remind us of those reported in earlier studies by [Jerome \(2013, 2020\)](#), [Pang \(2015\)](#), [Mohd Sidik \(2015\)](#), and [Felix \(2016\)](#) on LGBTQ individuals and communities who face difficulties and obstacles because of the religious, socio-cultural, and legal sanctions against their gender and sexual identities. Homosexuality and other forms of nonnormative gender and sexuality in Malaysia, as reports and research have shown, are subject to criminalization, police harassment, and public prosecutions under both religious and civil laws ([Luhur et al. 2020](#); [Peletz 2009](#); [Shamsudin and Ghazali 2011](#)). These reports and research also reveal that LGBT individuals and communities in general often face abuse, stigmatization, and discrimination because non-normative gender and sexuality contravene religious beliefs and moral codes as well as the norms regulating masculinity and femininity in the larger Malaysian society ([Luhur et al. 2020](#); [Peletz 2009](#); [Shamsudin and Ghazali 2011](#)).

Finally, our findings not only support but extend the theoretical framework of [Kamm \(2013\)](#) in examining the diversity of use and appropriation of the BL genre among audiences. First, our participants viewed BL drama as a form of entertainment that helped them to experience a sense of accomplishment and identity formation. This is evidenced by the ways viewers can cope with a range of emotions in their consumption of BL and create and affirm a particular sense of identity through their engagement with BL (e.g., becoming the sympathetic gay male viewer). Second, our participants were also active viewers of BL in terms of their consumption patterns and categories; how BL drama series were consumed by watching them on free-to-view platforms and VOD portals in separate locations, namely, at home, at work, at cafes. None of the participants fall under Kamm's category, although all of them can be categorized as the net viewers who normally watch BL drama series on the internet and find information about the series via platforms through which they regularly address those drama series.

Our study is not without limitations. A major limitation was the small number of gay men who agreed to participate in the interview. This presented an obstacle to generalization from the sample. The results of this study would have been greater or richer with a larger sample size. It is not inaccurate to say that this present study could serve as a pilot for further research. Since the study focused on gay men, future researchers should consider including heterosexual and other non-heterosexual viewers in Malaysia. Their inclusion would provide a better understanding of BL materials and the motives for consuming them given the effects of the BL phenomenon in the country and beyond. Another limitation is the use of Kamm's framework for analyzing the diversity of uses and appropriations of BL among audiences. While the framework has helped guide our study, we believe that

it could benefit from drawing on the use of other media theories and approaches such as reception theory to investigate the way audiences interpret media texts. This is especially true in the case of homoerotic media and the ways it is consumed and made sense of by gay men who are situated within specific social and cultural contexts. Finally, the take-home message here is that BL drama is here to stay, and so do its audiences, which are made up of, among others, gay male viewers. In this paper, BL drama has proven itself to be more than ‘just’ entertainment that meets the demands of the BL industry, viewers, and fans alike. It provides a window of opportunity for gay men to reflect on and come to terms with their sexuality, which forms an important part of the process of constructing their identities and livelihoods in a heteronormative world.

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