

Reading YAOI Comics: An Analysis of Korean Girls' Fandom¹

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I. Introduction

Male homosexuality began to flourish as a subject of girls' comics² circa 1995 in Korea. The Donga Korean Dictionary (1990) explains homosexuality as an "abnormal sexuality between the same sex," indicating that a majority of our society still regards heterosexuality as a value of tradition and normality and homosexuality as a symptom of deviation and abnormality. However, the homosexuality in girls' comics is described as an ideal relationship between pulchritudinous boys, therefore insulating female readers from any resulting feelings of rejection.

Such girls' comics featuring male homosexuality constitute a genre called *YAOI*, which originated in Japan. *YAOI* has quite a long history. Song (1997) wrote that the

¹ This academic writing sample is a summary and translation of the special project paper on fandom, which was originally written in 1998 and revised in 2001. I presented this paper in the regular fall academic conference of Korean Society for Journalism and Communication Studies in 1998.

² Matt Thorn, who studies Japanese girls' comics, chooses the term "manga" to denote "comics", because he thinks that the English terms "comics", "comic books," or "cartoons" fail to do justice to this medium. I agree with him, but use "comics" in this paper. Incidentally, "manga" is a Japanese pronunciation of Chinese characters, "漫畫." It is pronounced "manwha" in Korean.

bimonthly magazine *JUNE* published in 1978 was the first YAOI magazine in Japan. The term YAOI consists of three Japanese words: *yamanashi* (without climax), *ochinashi* (without ending), and *iminashi* (without meaning). YAOI was first used to refer to amateur comic artists' works (parodies of professional comics), because they had neither climax, ending, nor meaning. As more and more amateur artists focused on male homosexuality, however, the concept of YAOI evolved. This term now covers a sort of genre of male homosexuality that is rooted in girls' comics (Ogi, 2001).

YAOI is a genre of romantic fiction that aims to entertain primarily female readers. As it grew more popular in Korea, the media reported and analyzed the YAOI phenomenon in girls' comics (*Cine21* February 27, 1996; *Sisa Journal* December 4, 1996; *News Plus* January 23, 1997; *TV Journal* February 19, 1997; *BUDDY* April, 1998). Additionally, homosexuality became a hot issue amongst comic fans. Most members in online comic forums discussed the plethora of homosexuals in girls' comics and why the homosexuals in comics were not female but male (La, 1995). In these online discussions, female readers appear to be more tolerant of homosexuality than male readers.

The differences between the portrayal of homosexuality in YAOI and actual homosexuality must be clearly defined and understood. Park (1998) criticized the fact

that YAOI focused on splendid love affairs between handsome young men, which are alienated from everyday life: accordingly, the subject of homosexuality in YAOI might be abused for sensational commercialism. Shin (1998) also noted that YAOI took homosexuality as the means of expressing ultimate love without having to justify the prejudice against inborn homosexuals, as the male figure in YAOI often says, "I was not born to be homosexual. I would love you whether you were a boy or a girl." Not without controversy, the homosexual magazine *BUDDY* condemned YAOI for distorting the reality of homosexuals.

Should the loyalty of female fans to YAOI thus be regarded as mere fantasy resulting from the misunderstanding of homosexuality? Although YAOI is not realistic, it is valuable to pay attention to the fact that heterosexual female fans do enjoy reading YAOI, thus raising the question of why female fans like to read YAOI. Here, I will try to examine what female readers think YAOI is and what kinds of pleasure they obtain from reading YAOI.

II. Literature Review

This paper aims to explore the connotative meaning of women's reading of YAOI comics, as a unique facet of fandom in girls' comics. We must note that the

current phenomenon which transfers the leadership in popular culture from the domain of producers (stardom) to that of consumers (fandom) emphasizes both the active and positive aspects of fandom. According to Jenkins (1992), “fan” is an abbreviated form of the word “fanatic,” which has its Latin etymology in “fanaticus.” “Fanaticus” originally indicated “of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee,” but later implied something more negative: “of persons inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy” (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*). Likewise, the negative images of fandom as social and psychological pathology appear in popular as well as scholarly accounts of fans and fandom (Jenson, 1992).

However, as researchers became more and more interested in the active and positive aspects of subcultural groups, the studies on fandom began to investigate fans’ resistance to hierarchy and their pleasures from insider’s viewpoint. Jenkins (1992) recognized fans as “active producers and manipulators of meanings.” He asserted that fan’s response involved not only fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism. Therefore, fans become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings. In order to characterize such active reading, Jenkins cited the term “poaching,” originally expressed by de Certeau. Via “poaching,” fans possess the mass-produced texts and take control over their meanings.

Fiske (1992) proposed three categories of fans' productivity: *semiotic productivity*, *enunciative productivity*, and *textual productivity*. Semiotic and enunciative productivity signify the production of meanings of social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity. Semiotic productivity is essentially interior, while enunciative productivity is acquired as a public form when the meanings are spoken and are shared within fans.

This research particularly focuses on the idea of textual productivity, meaning "not only do fans take part in and with the original industrial text but they exceed and rework it by inserting fan-written lines of dialogue that change the meaning of the original (Fiske, 1992)." For example, fans create their unique pleasure and accumulate their own cultural economy through the creation of parodies.

The above theories give the clues to explain the fandom phenomenon pertaining to YAOI. Fans' active attitudes toward YAOI cannot be explored by the traditional reception theories. Further, it must be considered that this specified genre will appeal to a specified people who have certain specified variables. Because the form and content of a specified genre are determined by the emotions and feelings of a specified reader groups, the gendered culture comes into being. The comic market in Korea is bisected by gendered tastes and girls' comics have flourished especially in Asian

countries such as Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Yim (1996) advocated the existence of spontaneous women's voices (girls' comics), while not measuring their value, because comics, as a media, are rare in that they share women's cultural experiences. The phenomenon of the preference of women for YAOI must be positioned in the broader context of fandom in girls' comics.

III. Methodology

Ethnographic Interviewing

This paper used ethnographic interviewing as the main method of analysis. Accounts thus did not come from an objective analysis arranged by a researcher standing apart from and above the phenomenon, but rather from an analysis by an avid female reader of comics in unison with the lively voices of fans.

First, I searched the articles on bulletin boards of online comic forums by the keywords "YAOI," "homosexuality," and "Y-story" to find YAOI fans and reviewed their comments. Throughout the process, I selected prospective interviewees from those who identified themselves as YAOI fans. I also visited the online YAOI club but was allowed to read only the index page because the forum is open only to the members. Therefore, I just checked names and email addresses of sysops appearing on index page

and regarded them as YAOI fans. I chose 27 female readers and asked for interviews with them via email. Eventually, ten of them complied with my request.

Throughout two weeks of online, in-depth interviews conducted from June 13th to 25th, I met ten female YAOI fans who were members of online comic forums. Each interview, mostly in one-on-one settings and one in a group setting, took approximately three hours. I avoided face-to-face interview, for this research is closely related to one's sexuality, a sensitive and subtle theme. I logged onto online service ten minutes earlier than appointments, created confidential chatting rooms, and invited the interviewees. They talked to me in a very friendly and frank manner, perhaps because they saw me as a YAOI reader like themselves and also because the way in which I interviewed them allowed enough privacy for candor.

During the interviews, I recorded all the screen accounts with the consents of the interviewees. I saved them as text files, edited them, and finally had nine main scripts to analyze. After finishing all interviews, I conducted additional surveys to confirm demographic characteristics, usage of online services, and so on.

Interviewees and their characteristics

Here are brief descriptions of ten interviewees. I used aliases and their online

screen names in order to conceal their identities.

1. Baeksu Kang (ID: DEVIL69): 27, Freelancer
2. Haebin Lee (ID: Bronze): 24, Government employee
3. Hangyul Jung (ID: Nachalnaco): 22, Undergraduate student
4. Hyunjung Park (ID: masiceye): 24, Undergraduate student
5. Hyunyoung Kim (ID: khy74): 25, Graduate student
6. Joonhee Nam (ID: ballad): 26, Graduate student
7. Sangyeon Shin (ID: ophdia): 26, Journalist of magazine
8. Seowon Choi (ID: mokuren): 24, Undergraduate student
9. Sunmin Kim (ID: mariner): 21, Undergraduate student
10. Youjin Sun (ID: DRAGON): 23, Undergraduate student

All interviewees were in their twenties, most of them singles with college-level education. They have been members of the online comic forums for over five years and visit the forums every day. They utilize online services to maintain and fortify their zest for the entire comic genre as well as YAOI. They devote themselves to the online comic forums by writing articles, chatting or exchanging emails with other members, and participating in the off-line meetings.

Comics are their favorite media genre. Female readers in this study answered that they accepted YAOI very naturally because they were already familiar with the

peculiar aspects of virtual reality comics. Interviewees obviously distinguish YAOI from homosexuality. In other words, homosexuality has different meaning for them than for homosexuals: homosexuality is simply their fantasy, whereas it is an action and a reality for actual homosexuals.

IV. Findings

Reader's definition of YAOI

The following are excerpts of readers' thoughts on YAOI:

Sunmin Kim (ID: mariner) – “YAOI is a genre for women by women with the appearances of at least two men, beautiful pictures, supplementary sex scenes (with doubtful positions), and interesting but unorganized stories. It doesn't show real homosexuality.”

Hyunyoung Kim (ID: khy74) – “YAOI is created for women to enjoy comics that take homosexuality as subject for their sexual pleasure.”

Sangyeon Shin (ID: ophdia) – “I conclude today that YAOI is the virtual reality. After all, it is the fantastic world that imaginary men whom I will never meet have sex in a world where I will never exist. It isn't concerned with the conventions of our society.”

First of all, it should be noted that each of the interviewees distinguished YAOI from actual male homosexuality. For them, YAOI has three significant themes: firstly,

male homosexuality as simply the subject matter of comics; secondly, the sexual pleasure of women; and finally, female genre and culture. In conclusion, YAOI is a genre for women, by women, and of women, which is illuminated by the “female gaze.”

Although the interviewees are all fans of YAOI, their loyalty to it varied greatly. Some confessed that they were “addicted” to YAOI, but others said that they read YAOI just to “pass the time.” Therefore, the devotees of YAOI continued to enjoy reading it and became more interested in it; however, some fans insisted that they grew tired of the typical pattern of YAOI and criticized the potential male gaze hidden in YAOI. Moreover, a few of them did not continue their readership of YAOI, but instead converted their concerns to lesbianism.

Female readers thus receive YAOI very critically, and they present different interpretations on the same phenomena. They vary also in preferences in the degree of sexual expression. The loyal fans of YAOI tended to enjoy all kinds of YAOI, even though at times it depicts hard-core pornographic sex. But others preferred “soft” YAOI, which focuses on the emotional relationship (Platonic love) between two sweet men (boys) and does not involve much of physical relationship. Some liked the parodies of professional comics (most of them boys’ comics) more than the original works themselves. Regardless of individual preferences, it is important to take note of

the commonality between YAOI fans.

Reasons for reading YAOI – Pleasure of voyeurism and subversion

When I asked the interviewees why they read YAOI, they immediately answered “because it is very interesting” or “because reading it gives me pleasure.” What kind of concrete “pleasure” were they referring to? Answers varied, for diverse pleasures can be derived from the reading of YAOI. I could categorize their pleasures, however, into two types: pleasure of “voyeurism” and “subversion.”

The primary pleasures of the female reading of YAOI are derived from “voyeurism” or “scopophilic instinct.” The desire for sexual pleasure, according to Freud, is one of the oldest and most basic urges that all humans feel. Human beings enjoy watching various sex scenes as offered by the mass media. Therefore, sexuality has been one of the most popular themes used by the media to attract audiences. Nevertheless, Korean women are afraid of expressing their sexual desires, because of the influence of the Confucian tradition. If girls spoke their opinions on sex, they would be castigated for their assumed promiscuousness.

However, I was able to collect frank and outspoken ideas on sex from the interviewees, who unequivocally stated the two main themes of YAOI are “love” and

“sex,” two favorite subjects in all kinds of media, as love and sex are eternal themes for human beings. The sole characteristic making YAOI differ from other media is that YAOI deals with not love and sex between a man and a woman - but love and sex between two men.

Why, then, do female readers prefer male homosexuality to female homosexuality or heterosexuality? The interviewees talked about the “unintended inconvenience” of pursuing sexual pleasure. According to them, they never feel comfortable gratifying their sexual desires in Korean society, which is dominated by traditional values. Even though there are no external censorships, they often put an internal brake on their desires. Baeksu Kang (ID: DEVIL69) called it “duplicity of women,” for women may seek to satisfy their sexual desires while they are captured by the “value of chastity” and “virgin ideology.” Therefore, male homosexuality in girls’ comics has been regarded as a substitute for heterosexual relationships with women who could not face their own sexuality in a patriarchal society (Ogi, 2001).

Sangyeon Shin (ID: ophdia) – “Because I am constantly infused with value of chastity, I unconsciously avoided stories of women cheating on their husbands. In Harlequin Romances, heroines are virgins, but heroes have lots of sexual experiences. However, in YAOI, because a heroine is also male, I don’t need to feel uncomfortable. For example, if a girl in pornography

seems to have an orgasm while she is raped by a group of boys, I am not excited but abashed.

However, if the raped one is a man, I can enjoy it more easily.”

Is scopophilia the only pleasure that women find in reading YAOI? If that were the case, YAOI would have disappeared, if there were any alternative ways for women to satisfy their desires. However, YAOI still captures a large number of female fans. Even though YAOI cannot captivate the whole of female readers of girls’ comics, there are always faithful supporters of YAOI. Likewise, the subculture of adhering to YAOI is already very firmly rooted in women’s culture. What pleasure other than voyeurism can be found in the fans’ reading of YAOI ?

The pleasure of subversion is the second consideration of this study. Storey (1993) introduced Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” According to Mulvey, popular cinema produces and reproduces what she calls the “male gaze.” In that sense, woman (the heroine in the movies) is the object of men’s desire. Her theory can be applied to other media. The sexual objectification of women thrives in today’s mass media, including comics, in order to stimulate the visual pleasure of men. Therefore, female fans are enthusiastic upon their first encounter with YAOI, for it seems to deviate from the convention of androcentric society.

Hyunyoung Kim (ID: khy74) – “When I read YAOI for the first time... it seemed very... subversive. Men can behave coquettishly... Boys can be lovely and sweet like girls... I feel it shocking and interesting... I couldn’t believe my eyes that the heroes were not women. How whimpering, coquettish, and lovable the hero is! Can you imagine? Among the muscular male figures in traditional girls’ comics or Harlequins, sissy and sweet boys came out suddenly. It was really a great shock to me. That experience changed my preconception of what the heroes in girls’ comics should be like.”

It is very interesting to note that YAOI deals with homosexuality, a kind of taboo under the heterosexual custom, and that YAOI has many beautiful male figures offered to please female readers. This phenomenon appears to be the evolution of male characters in the microscopic view, and in the broader concept, it seems to be a (passive) resistance of women to patriarchal orders. Taking men as objects of sexuality provides females with the excitement of subverting tradition. In other words, women entertain themselves through YAOI by becoming the active subjects of narratives, for YAOI displays heroes as passive objects. It is the very fascination with YAOI that allow women who have been objectified by the male gaze in mass media to instead become the subjects of gaze dominating male personae in reverse. Seowon Choi (ID: mokuren) said, “Why are only female characters trifled with by men? We can also make boys our playthings.” In male-oriented pornography, women are

displayed as objects only to satisfy men's lust. However, YAOI destroy such formula of media.

Further, because the highly sophisticated images are very important factors of aesthetic pleasure in girls' comics, male figures are portrayed as more beautiful and feminine than actual men. A so-called "flowery boy" being pretty and lovely like a flower or a beautiful girl masquerading as a man in girls' comics represents the uniqueness of female readers' tastes. Especially in YAOI, because many male characters are always present, the aesthetic desire of women is fully satisfied. Such phenomenon is contrasted with the present reality of the way in which men evaluate the appearances of women.

Hyunjung Park (ID: masiceye) – "A man with slender muscular body as well as a boy with pretty and flowery face... at least two of such cool guys... because YAOI need more than two heroes... moreover, a bunch of supporting male figures appear on YAOI... I don't think it's immoral that men with pretty face and nice figure display to please women."

Women are not satiated with just their readings of YAOI. They attempt to produce themselves "YAOI texts" or "YAOI contexts." An analysis of fandom by Jenkins (1992) shows that fans must struggle with popular narratives, to try to articulate

to themselves and others unrealized possibilities within the original works, because the narratives often fail to satisfy. The interviewees told me that they put themselves in the position of creators in order to secure a better gratification. Most of interviewees clarified that they had felt a desire for “coupling,” which means the intention of fans to enjoy coupling two men, even if they are not lovers in reality. For example, Hangyul Jung (ID: Nachalnaco) said, “I unconsciously glance at pretty boys on the subway, and imagine their suspicious relationship if they seem to be very close friends. Moreover, I really get excited to find them holding hands!”

Why, then, do women enjoy coupling? The visual pleasures of women can be first assumed by converting their positions into the subjects of looking. Fujimoto (1991) noted the phenomenon: “girls take boys’ love as a means for self-expression, not in the professional works but in their own works.” She analyzed that the simulation of boys’ love will be able to make female fans more familiar with the active position in looking - for the raped victim and the rapist in YAOI are of the same sex.

Such a phenomenon is prominent in the amateur artists’ parody creations. Fiske (1992) defines these fandom activities as “textual productivity.” Female fans often create new YAOI stories by subverting the male relationships in the original texts. That is to say, the relationships of friendship, rivalry, senior and junior, and employer

and employee in professional boys' comics are established as new relationship of homosexual lovers in parodies. Fiske also conveyed the argument of Heffernan (1989) that "such rewriting can, for a particular fan group, change much of the film's heterosexual clichés into more subversive homoerotic meanings." Although some fans do not publish texts at all, they can participate in the course of creation by joining as a member of relayed parodies through online forums.

Sunmin Kim (ID: mariner) – "When I first tried coupling of two men, I felt as if I were a bystander or a goddess... If there is a heroine, I often feel empathy with her even though I don't want it. However, I just enjoy coupling in YAOI without any empathy."

Hyunyoung Kim (ID: khy74) – "There were so many pregnant dialogues in the *Twelfth Night*, the play of Shakespeare. (I thought it was a kind of YAOI~~~!!!) Viola masquerading as a man became a servant of Duke Orsino, and the Duke kissed on the cheek of his servant... these all scenes were suspiciously like YAOI. And the relationship between Sebastian, a twin brother to Viola, and the pirate was so doubttable, too! He said, "For last a few months, we stayed together night and day all the time." Night and day... that made me imaginative."

In fact, the most compelling magnetic power of YAOI does not come from the interesting text itself, but from presenting women the opportunities to reanalyze the existing texts and society, both of which lay in male-centered patriarchal orders, in quite different ways. Female fans became blessed with the pleasures of reading or creating

popular cultural texts, while applying the altered perspectives to them. YAOI readers also find pleasure in adopting the YAOI point of view even when dealing with non-YAOI materials. In other words, women as a social minority find the possibility of gazing subversively at the status quo via YAOI. Female readers free themselves from the stereotype of passive audiences, and take the position of active creators. This is why even those who are bored with the typical pattern of YAOI or criticized the unreality of it find it impossible to leave the world of YAOI entirely.

V. Conclusion

This research attempts to illuminate the subjectivity and activeness of YAOI fandom as formulated by female readers, through the analysis of the phenomenon of female pleasure taken in reading the YAOI. To understand the female fans of YAOI, we first consider that they have been accustomed to the unreality of comics since their childhood. The interviewees actually defined YAOI as a genre of comics that they admired. The fact that YAOI is “virtual reality” or the “fantasy of women’s desire” is deduced from this aspect of comics. This paper has emphasized repeatedly that YAOI is an obvious female genre, because it is produced and consumed by women. Therefore, the majority of the analysis concentrated on explaining, “why YAOI is the

genre for women, by women, and of women.”

Girls take special pleasures in YAOI. Their pleasures were classified as pleasure of “voyeurism” and “subversion”. The pleasure of “voyeurism” acquired by watching in the romantic and sexual relationship of gay heroes could similarly appear in other media. However, the pleasure of “subversion,” gratified by deconstructing the present patriarchal orders, is a peculiar trait of YAOI. Consequently, the most significant reason that female fans’ readings of YAOI are worthy of note is that YAOI transforms the women’s ways of understanding the texts as well as the world.

As a result, it can be understood that YAOI fans are a very active audience and they recreate their own worlds from YAOI. Female readers become the active producers and manipulators of meaning through the act of decoding. As Jenkins (1992) pointed out, YAOI fans recognize its typical grammar while being absorbed in reading, and through this process, they gradually take the narratives under their own control. I noted that YAOI fans displayed specific acts of fandom such as writing parodies or coupling. Such characteristics correspond to the textual activity of Fiske and prove the activeness in female fans’ reception of YAOI - meaning that female readers utilize the pleasures acquired from YAOI very constructively, and they constitute a unique subculture of women.

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³ This article is obtained from <http://matt-thorn.com/fujimoto.html>

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⁴ This article is obtained from http://matt-thorn.com/what_are_shoujo_manga.html

⁵ This article is obtained from <http://matt-thorn.com/jaws.html>, which is the working draft presented at the Japan Anthropology Workshop at the University of Melbourne, Australia, on July 10, 1997.