Boys love Comics as a Representation of Homosexuality in Japan

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í japönsku máli og menningu

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Abstract

This thesis will focus on a genre of *manga* and *anime* called *boys love*, and compare it to the history of homosexuality in Japan and the homosexual culture in modern Japanese society. The *boys love* genre itself will be closely examined to find out which tropes are prevalent and why, as well as what its main demographic is. The thesis will then describe the long history of homosexuality in Japan and the similarities that are found between the traditions of the past and the tropes used in today’s *boys love*. Lastly, the modern homosexual culture in Japan will be examined, to again compare and contrast it to *boys love*. 
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Introduction

Ask a group of Westerners what they think embodies the country Japan and you will inevitably hear answers such as ‘sushi,’ ‘geisha,’ ‘technology,’ and of course ‘manga’ and ‘anime.’ Manga is the Japanese word for comic and anime means an animated cartoon and there is no denying that both of those phenomena are significant in Japanese culture. When I spent a year there it was present all around me, from advertisements and warning signs in the train stations with a cute cartoon figure, to grown men in suits reading unbought manga in convenience stores, it was evident that there was a much bigger emphasis on these drawn comics than in my own native country. It is also no wonder that manga and anime is popular there. While Western comics are mainly action-packed adventures with the target groups of kids and young adults, anyone can find a genre they like in Japan. Whether it be slice-of-life or a post-apocalyptic military school girl cyber punk comedy, the options are endless. Since there is a large variety of genres, the convention is to organize them into bigger categories based on the main target demographic. For example, the shōnen (e. young boy) manga and anime are mainly for young teenage boys and are filled with ninjas or pirates, and the protagonist is more often than not a young lad with a huge sword who has to battle opponents in order to save the world. The shōjo (e. young girl) manga and anime however focus more on emotions and exploration of the human relationship, and has been described as being intensely personal in nature (Thorn, 2001, p. 44). While the topics and themes vary wildly within the genre, romance is without a doubt the biggest part of the shōjo category. Though it is usually between the heroine and her male love interest, another similar but distinctly different kind of shōjo romance drama is hugely popular as well. A romance between two men. This particular genre is generally called boys love (pronounced boizu rabu in Japanese) and is a hugely popular section of the manga and anime industry with over $5.5 billion market share in 2009 in Japan alone (Syed, 2011). This genre is very multifaceted and gives an insight into Japanese attitude toward male homosexuality. In Japan, homosexuality is still a somewhat taboo subject, and gay people often feel the need to hide their true feelings. Even so there exist thousands of stories about them and their love, read every day by a large portion of Japanese populace! Love stories such as these are usually not based so much on reality as on fantasy, designed to present an escape from reality to the reader. It may therefore be that the readers of the boys love genre content themselves with regarding the characters as
imaginary beings and not giving much thought to homosexuality in real life. Many of the elements in these stories are indeed fantastical but some of the tropes and themes commonly used must come from the real world and are in some way reflected in Japanese culture. After all, nothing exists in a vacuum, and literature will always mirror the author's reality in some ways. Given that the Japanese society has a long and complex history of practicing homosexuality, can a comparison be made between the homosexual traditions of the past and the tropes used in today's boys love? Furthermore, does the boys love genre accurately represent Japanese homosexuality? This dissertation will attempt to answer these questions by first examining the boys love genre closely, then by delving into the history of homosexuality in Japan and comparing it to the boys love of today, and finally by examining today's Japanese homosexual culture and how it is reflected in boys love. By reviewing these aspects of Japan and its culture, hopefully some light will be shed on the boys love genre and its place and effect in Japan's present day pop culture.

Japanese words will be italicized and written according to the Hepburn transliteration system. For example, shōnen is read as shounen. While anime is a huge industry in Japan and other countries, and many anime boys love shows exist, most of them are based on preexisting manga. Therefore in order to keep this dissertation concise it will only focus on the manga aspect of the genre. Furthermore, although there exists a similar genre of female-female love called yuri, this thesis will only focus on male homosexuality. This is not done in order to reject the existence of lesbians in Japanese society, but to offer a concise subject and avoid an excess of information. For the sake of simplicity, the words 'homosexuality,' 'gay,' and 'lesbian' as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary will be used in this thesis. That is, homosexuality is a "sexual attraction or the tendency to direct sexual desire toward another of the same sex: the quality or state of being homosexual," gay is of, relating to, or used by homosexuals, and lesbian is of or relating to homosexuality between females.
**Boys love: History, tropes, and common controversies**

A love that can overcome gender has always been a cherished thing.

(Kurahashi, 2016, p. 25)

This quote is from a recent boys love manga which tells the story about a relationship between a young Japanese man named Haruma and a male god (j. kami) of harvest. Haruma finds a small run-down temple near his house and proceeds to clean it and prays. The god comes to his house later that night and exclaims that he will become his lover. Haruma strongly objects (“No, no, no, I like girls!”) but reluctantly agrees to the god moving in with him. As the manga progresses so does their relationship, and in the end they both confess their undying love for one another. This type of a manga story is extremely popular in Japan despite it only having existed for a couple of decades. Although both shōjo and shōnen manga can be traced to the late 19th century, the boys love subgenre didn’t emerge until the early 1970s, when amateur manga and literature became widely available. Hitherto shōjo manga had been for the most part stale and uninteresting, largely written by men who depicted the heroine as a passive character who frequently needed a male character to save her from various predicaments (Thorn, 2004). Those who longed to read and create new forms of expression in manga were forced to turn to amateur production since the large publishing companies stopped systematically producing radical and stylistically innovative manga series due to declined interest of the mass audience (Kinsella, 1998). Among these amateur manga artists were a number of young, talented, female authors who revolutionized the shōjo genre with their fresh narratives and graphics. Since most of them were born in the 24th year of Showa (1949), they became collectively known as the ‘Year 24 Group’ (j. nijūyonen gumi). Weighty and difficult concepts that had never before been touched upon, such as teen pregnancy and abortion, depression, and transgenderism, became the centerpieces in their creations (Thorn, 2004). Many gender-challenging motifs that involved among other things gender crossing and male homosexuality were introduced for the first time and the new genre that became to be known as ‘shōnen-ai’ (e. boys love) was formed (Taylor & Francis, 2013). The works of the ‘Year 24 Group’ were often highly literary and were soon picked up by the mainstream publishing companies. The first of these stories were placed in highly romanticized European settings and were featured by beautiful adolescent European boys (Welker, 2015). This genre quickly grew in popularity, in part thanks to a public convention called ‘Comic Market,’
which from its inception in 1975 was held several times a year and steadily became more popular. The first Comic Market was attended by 32 amateur manga circles and 600 individuals, but by 1993 the numbers increased to 16,000 manga circles and more than 200,000 individuals (Kinsella, 1998). Today, while the Comic Market remains popular, most readers prefer to read the stories on their mobile phones, rather than buying hard copies, a development that is noticeable all over the world. While this makes it slightly hard to find out precisely how many are consuming the genre, research shows that the genre is ever expanding and gaining a larger audience (Ingulsrud & Allen, 2009). Now boys love is one of the biggest manga genres in Japan and as of 2006 holds a share of roughly 11.9 billion yen (US$144.5 million) (Sihombing, 2011).

The boys love genre has since its inception obtained a number of labels to better define each subcategory. The above-mentioned “shōnen’ai” is often used to refer to the commercially published manga from the ‘Year 24 Group’ and others from the 1970s and 1980s. These stories tended to focus on romance and the complexity of human emotions. This term is no longer used in Japan and most published stories regarding male love is called boys love – pronounced bōizu rabu – and is often abbreviated “BL.” On the other hand, self-published works is often called yaoi, which is an acronym for yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi, the meaning of which is “no climax, no point, no meaning” (McLelland & Welker, 2015). Another element of yaoi is that these stories tend to focus on the sexual acts performed by two males rather than their emotional relationships. The difference between shōnen-ai and yaoi can be described as:

shōnen-ai manga tend to emphasize elaborate romances that contain imagery more suggestive than sexually explicit. A palpable thread of erotic tension is, however, present and maintained, predominantly through visual cues such as sudden longing looks, unexpected caresses, suggestive body language, and intimate kissing scenes. Typical panels are often erotically charged as readers catch a glimpse of a tongue here and a wandering hand there, ultimately leaving more to the imagination than meets the eye. In contrast, the often pornographically explicit boy-love manga known as yaoi generally forgo coherent plot development in favor of using every available opportunity to get the beautiful male characters in bed together. (Wood, 2006, p. 395)

In essence, shōnen’ai stories are about exploring the human relationship and values, while yaoi is purely about sexual intercourse. The next chapter will explain how exactly sex and the characters themselves are presented in the manga stories.
Stylistic appearance and Seme Uke in boys love

The boys love manga can be summed up in one word: fantasy. The male characters in these stories are not only supposed to not represent ‘gay men,’ they do not represent ‘men’ either. Instead, they are referred to as *bishōnen* (e.g. beautiful boys/youths) and are drawn in a highly androgynous way. In general they have tall, slender bodies, pointed chins and high cheek bones, wide eyes and long flowing hair.

Furthermore, at least one of the two main romance leads tends to behave in a rather feminine manner and express his vulnerability and emotionality which is often associated with female characters (McLelland, 2000a). Thus relationships and power balance between the two characters roughly reproduce the male-female binary (Hartley, 2015). Zanghellini expands further on this and state that typically the relationships between the two male characters in the boys love involves one of them being a *seme* and the other an *uke*. These terms originate from Japanese martial arts and in broad terms can be defined as *seme* meaning attacker and *uke* meaning receiver. Usually the *seme* is more masculine and aggressive while the *uke* looks and behaves in a more feminine manner. The terms ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ which are often used in western gay male pornography have similar meanings though there are some subtle differences. In the western pornography, the ‘top’ ordinarily has the power and dominates the ‘bottom’ with anal sex, and the ‘bottom’ usually shows his submission by giving oral sex. In the boys love genre however, often it is the *seme* that fellates the *uke* in order to make the *uke* fall in love with him. When anal penetration happens, while the *seme* penetrates the *uke*, they usually face each other. Furthermore, the *seme* proclaims his devotion and vows to always protect the *uke*, thus showing tenderness with his aggression (2009). Although *seme* characters are essentially masculine and *uke* characters are essentially feminine, Nagakubo has found by analysing 381 *yaoi* fiction works that both *seme* and *uke* characters display a mixture of masculine and feminine traits (Yukari, 2015). What is more,
the roles of the characters would fluctuate and change depending on who their partner is. “No matter how much a *seme–uke* couple may appear to imitate traditional masculine–feminine gender roles, the differences between them are no more than idiosyncrasies brought about by grouping the two together. The couple is, therefore, free from the oppression of sexual difference.” (Yukari, 2015, p. 84). Although the line between femininity and masculinity is blurrier in *boys love* compared to the usual male-female romance *manga*, in general the *seme* – the masculine character – is dominant in the relationship and often uses force when expressing his love to the *uke*, often going so far as to raping him. The reason for this is that:

the phenomenon of of rape as an expression of love may be explained by the lack of acceptance of a homosexual identity by the *seme* or *uke*. Because the *seme* does not (or cannot due to societal standards and pressures) label as “gay,” he is conflicted and does not know how to express his romantic feelings for another man. Unlike rapes that occur in reality, rape in [*boys love*] is not driven by non-sexual frustrations. Instead, rape is the means, however violent and non-normative, by which the masculine *seme* expresses his love and ignites romance in his feminine *uke*. Rape as a plot device may be seen in several *anime* and *manga*, ranging from dubious consent, vague depictions, to the explicitly violent and frank. (Frennea, 2011, p. 492)

She explains further that after being raped, the *uke* does not distance himself from the *seme*, and instead starts to display affection towards him instead. The justification behind it is that the *uke* secretly enjoys being raped and it was merely a way for him to be violently pleased without feeling guilt from societal pressure. In extreme cases, the *seme* goes as far as to excuse the rape by blaming the *uke* for tempting the *seme* or being insensitive to his feelings. The rape or rapes in most cases end up bringing the two men together in a romantic relationship and serves as a function to speed up the process of falling in love while providing sexual scenes to pleasure the reader. Once the two characters are in a relationship the need for a plot-based rape disappears and the intercourse between the *seme* and *uke* are thereafter entirely consensual (Frennea, 2011).

**Boys love Readers’ Demography**

*Boys love* is mostly made by women and read by women (Isola, 2008). This has fascinated many researchers and many papers have been written about the reasons why Japanese women seem to enjoy the genre so much, especially what it means about their sexuality and Japanese culture in its entirety. These women that maintain a habit to read the *boys love manga* are generally looked down upon and are are regularly referred to as *fujoshi*, which literally means
‘rotten girls’ in English. According to Sugiura, these women are described as rotten because they are interested in fantasies of non-reproductive sex, which is abnormal in Japan’s patriarchal society (as cited in Galbraith, 2011, p. 212). Most fujoshi consider their queer fantasies nothing more than play however, and typically lead heteronormative lives (Galbraith, 2011). Many of them not only read boys love manga produced by professional artists, but produce their own versions as amateur artists of popular works as parodies (Tanaka & Ishida, 2015). This is parallel to the ‘slash fiction’ that has been popular in the West for many decades, in which well known male protagonists such as Spock and Kirk from the Star Trek Universe are shown in erotic settings in written or drawn stories by female amateur artists (Bacon-Smith, 1992). The boys love manga genre serves a couple of purposes for the heterosexual women who read it: firstly, when the manga books first started gaining popularity in the 80s, they reflected “the tendency for women to ridicule male sexuality, perhaps as a form of revenge against the male-dominated society” (Suzuki, 1998, p. 263). Japan is a highly patriarchal society – and was even more so in the 80s – and women were not expected to initiate, be in control of, or even especially like sexual acts with their partner (Robertson, 1998). The men that had so often sexually harassed and objectified women before in the real world were now themselves harassed and objectified in much the same way, at least in their imagination. Later on though, the relationships in the genre evolved from being similar to stereotypical heterosexual relationships – that is, the stereotypically more masculine male having all the power and being effectively in charge, while the more feminine male remaining subservient to him – to being more egalitarian. Some women wanted to experience relationships where both partners were of equal standing and there was no inherent imbalance in power. They satisfied that need by reading the boys love books (Suzuki, 1998). Nevertheless, a seme – uke relationship remains the most popular trope in the genre to this day (Sihombing, 2011). Another reason for females liking male-only sexual relationships to such a degree might be that the women could more easily fantasize themselves as the characters in those situations without having to deal with anxieties relating to their gender, such as getting pregnant or having to marry their partner and becoming subservient to him indefinitely. By imagining themselves as a feminine man instead, they can explore their own sexuality without any worry (McLelland, 1999).
Since the genre is made by women and largely for women the representation of gay men is hardly accurate. *Boys love* has been harshly criticized by some Japanese gay male activists, who argue that the stereotypical portrayal of gay characters is detrimental to the gay community. As Nagaike and Aoyama write:

According to Ishida [Hitoshi], self-identified gay characters in BL are generally portrayed in terms of the deviant, pathological other. He notes how gay characters are never depicted as protagonists since it is the self-identified heterosexual male characters (who accidentally fall in love with other men and have sexual intercourse with them) who always assume this narrative role. Ishida also points to numerous strongly homophobic statements appearing in BL narratives. (2015, p.124)

The presentation of homoerotic male love in the *boys love* stories is certainly narrow and may in some ways affect people’s view on homosexuality.
History of male homosexual relationships in Japan and the modern Boys love genre

Although not obvious in modern media, there once existed a similar tradition for homosexuality in Japan as there was in ancient Greece. Pederasty, or the sexual relationship between an adult male and an adolescent boy, was socially accepted and within the samurai warrior society perceived as a normal part of life until the twentieth century, when the modernisation and industrialization of Japan began. This custom especially flourished from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century when the samurai class was in power and Japan’s traditional culture was at its height (Watanae & Iwata, 1989).

This homosexual love was termed shūdo (Watanae & Iwata, 1989) or nanshoku (Leupp, 1995). Shūdo is an abbreviation of wakashūdo and means the way of the youth, and nanshoku is literally translated to male colours but has the meaning of male erotica (Watanae & Iwata, 1989; Leupp, 1996). Shūdo was considered to be more gracious and noble than heterosexuality and was encouraged, especially within the samurai class (Watanae & Iwata, 1989) but its roots are much older (Leupp, 1995). The custom is believed to originate in the Heian era (794-1185) in monasteries and during that time it was considered normal for monks to have sexual relationships with acolytes known as chigo (McLelland, 2005). The typical nanshoku relationship was characterized as between an adult monk and an adolescent boy serving as an acolyte. The boys’ families were often upper class that sent them to the temples to either receive training to enter the clergy or obtain instruction in sutra-chanting and scripture as part of their education. The acolytes often began their training very young, or 9 to 11 years old, and often would start their relationship with the older monk when they became adolescent. From the twelfth to seventeenth century it was common to call the monk nenja and the acolyte chigo but later on they began calling themselves older brother and younger brother, and called the relationship a “brotherhood bond.” The couple ritually swore loyalty to one another and in later times even documented their relationship with a written oath. Intercourse between them was mostly anal, and the chigo was always the receiver (Leupp, 1995). It appears that the acolytes frequently acted as surrogates for females since, due to being thought of as unclean in the Buddhist religion, women were altogether denied access to monasteries (Junko & Glassman, 1993). For example many jokes from the Tokugawa era imply the conflation of women and boys, and of the vagina and anus, in
monastic society. Also, some monks shaved off the eyebrows of their *chigo* – which was customary for women at that time – powdered their faces, and dressed them in women’s clothing. Although the young boys appeared as female to some extent, they were not trained to imitate female behavior, and did not speak in a feminine way. Furthermore, most of the arts that they cultivated (such as flute playing) were considered to be exclusively masculine pursuits. For those reasons, they came off as somewhat androgynous, which may have charmed some men more than feminine allure. However, it is evident that the absence of women in the lives of the monks contributed to the evolution of the *chigo* role (Leupp, 1995).

Although the tradition of homosexuality in Japan started with the monks it was not long until another powerful societal group established the practice as well. When the samurai gained power in Japan and became the ruling class at the end of the 12th century, due to many of them having received their education in monasteries, as well as a general lack of women in Japan, *shūdo* quickly became popular amongst them as well (McLelland, 2005). Just as in the monasteries, relationship between the samurai and the adolescent was cherished greatly, and was not thought of as merely physical. The relationship is described as:

> the adult male lover (called a *nenja*) was supposed to provide social backing, emotional support, and a model of manliness for the boy. In exchange, the boy was expected to be worthy of his lover by being a good student of samurai manhood. Together they vowed to uphold the manly virtues of the samurai class: to be loyal, steadfast, and honorable in their actions. (*Schalow, 1990, p. 27-28*).

The *nanshoku* tradition was indeed an admirable and sacred thing for the monks and samurai. Later however, at the start of the Tokugawa era (1603-1867), the common people came up with their own version of *nanshoku*. Instead of recreating the brotherly bonds that the upper classes prided themselves in, the commoners’ *nanshoku* turned into prostitution, where the older male supported and took advantage of defenseless young boys without promises of longterm commitment. Extensive and spectacular pleasure districts were built, where a customer could for a price enjoy the company of a female or male partner for a few hours without committing emotionally (Leupp, 1995). Soon prostitution became closely tied with the *kabuki* drama as well, and flourished in city wards with *kabuki* theaters (Leupp, 1995). The origin of the *kabuki* drama can be traced to skits and dances performed by women in Kyoto early in the seventeenth century. These plays were called womens’ *kabuki*, but shortly
thereafter a *wakashu* (*e.* youth) *kabuki* was added, where only young boys and men participated. Both types became immensely popular and before long the government officially prohibited women to act in theirs since violence between men that lusted after the same actress became common. The *wakashu* version quickly gained so much popularity that even the word *wakashu* went from meaning an adolescent male that was not yet a full-grown adult to bear the meaning of an adolescent male that raised a sexual interest in adult males. This version of *kabuki* held its popularity until it too was banned in 1652 for similar reasons as the womens’ one (Schirokauer, Lurie, & Gay, 2013; Leupp, 1995). Until the bans however, it was common for the young actors and actresses to use the theaters to promote themselves as prostitutes (Leupp, 1995).

Not only were the homoerotic sex acts themselves popular in the Tokugawa era, but drawings and other works of art depicting them were ubiquitous as well. In most of the visual depictions, grown men, usually samurai or monks, were shown engaging in sexual acts with adolescent male prostitutes while partly clothed. The boy prostitute would usually wear a female kimono, sport a female hairstyle, and would be taken for a woman if it were not for his genitals. Literature involving male-male intercourse had a large audience as well and a great deal of diverse stories touching on the subject were published in that period, ranging from brotherly love to graphic sexual descriptions (Leupp, 1995).

Although homosexual love flourished in the Tokugawa period, when Japan entered its Meiji period (1868-1912), the people quickly changed their tune. In an effort to become modern, the ruling class decided to open Japan to foreigners and emulate the West in as many ways as possible. The Western culture’s tendency of anti-homosexuality was no exception and soon it became a common view that a sexual relationship between two males was unnatural and a part of the country’s evil customs of the past (Watanae & Iwata, 1989; Leupp, 1995). Educators and sexologists claimed that “like masturbation, profligate behavior with prostitutes, or such other “unproductive” sexual practices, sexual relationships between boys were unhealthy and adversely affected the bodies and minds of those involved” (Angles, 2011, p. 8). A tradition that had been a part of Japan’s culture for a thousand years was swiftly pushed to the fringes of society and has remained there since.
Comparing traditional homosexual relations to boys love

Although the nanshoku tradition is a thing of the past, a comparison can be made between its customs and the prevailing tropes and themes in the boys love genre. The biggest similarity would be the seme uke that defines the sexual relationship between the two males. As was explained in the previous chapter, most relationships depicted in the genre are hierarchical and one partner typically has power over the other, both physically and culturally. This has a clear parallel to the nanshoku relationship where the monk or the samurai dominated their chigo lover and had all the control. Both the uke from the boys love and chigo have both masculine and feminine qualities that makes them androgynous in appearance and manner, which drives their counterpart wild with lust. This parallel can be seen in the illustrations of nanshoku made in the Tokugawa era and the boys love art made in the present. Here are two depictions for comparison:

*Image 2* An illustration from Tokugawa Period showing a customer having anal intercourse with a male prostitute.

*Image 3* An excerpt from the manga Delusion Elektel, where two men have anal intercourse.

There are obvious similarities to be found between the two pictures. Although one picture is from the 17th century, and the other from 2009, both depict two males engaging in anal intercourse. Another parallel in both of the illustrations is that the penetrator looks older and
“manlier” than the receiver, who appears more youthful and innocent. The penetrator is in control and leading the sexual act but appears to be focusing on bringing pleasure to his partner as well as his own. This is in accordance to the seme uke relationship of boys love and the traditional nanshoku relationship. While in Western gay porn, anal intercourse is almost exclusively done with the receiver facing away from the penetrator, in these depictions – as well as in most boys love and ukiyoe sex scenes – both partners are facing each other.

During the Tokugawa Period (1603-1868), homosexual stories were popular as well, the greatest difference being that they were not written nor read by women but by men. Historians refer to these stories as chigo monogatari or ‘chigo stories’ and often comprised idealized stories of the true love of samurai or monks and their adolescent youth companions (Watanae & Iwata, 1989). The most famous book from that era must be The Great Mirror of Male Love (j. Nanshoku Ōkagami) by Iharu Saikaku (1642-93). The book is a collection of 40 stories that depict male homosexual relationships in the Tokugawa era, half of which are between samurai and their adolescent lovers, and the other half of boy prostitutes who act in kabuki theater. In the samurai stories, the nanshoku relationship is depicted as ideal and the love between the samurai and the youth to be admired. These stories were written to teach the reader about the way of nanshoku and what one should and should not do when in that kind of relationship. The kabuki stories on the other hand, are more humorous in nature and are foremost made to entertain the reader (Schalow, 1990). What all stories have in common though, is that they are mainly focused on the youths, which are all described as beautiful and graceful. Like the uke in the boys love stories, the youths have a certain feminine qualities to them.

[M]ore often than not the youths [...] were paragons of physical beauty and grace, their attributes conforming to a set of conventional tropes, some of which could be similarly employed to refer to feminine beauty, others used more or less exclusively of the wakashu. Such idealized depictions not only provided erotic stimulation for the adult male reader, but also furnished a benchmark against which to evaluate the charms of youths in real life (Pflugfelder, 2007, p. 54).

Although the current boys love manga stories are made for the pleasure of females rather than males they certainly follow the same design patterns as the nanshoku stories that were written many hundred years earlier. This androgynized beauty of the uke males seems to
universally excite people, whether they be males or females, living in ancient or modern times.
Similarities between *boys love* and homosexual culture today

Acceptance of homosexuality in Japanese society

All societies have some types of preconceptions about homosexuality, and Japan is no different. Japan might at first glance not appear as a homophobic society, as instances of physical violence against sexual minorities there are uncommon (Lunsing, 2005). Furthermore,

> Actual cases of discrimination on the basis of sexual preference remain relatively uncommon in Japan. Gay, lesbian, and transgender teachers in all levels of education come out in their jobs without it leading to any problems. Similarly, the army [...] when being asked about their policy toward gays and lesbians following the U.S. debate during the Clinton presidency, answered that it was not an issue, and individuals within the forces indicated that as long as same-sex relations did not lead to fights or other trouble, there were few, if any, barriers to their inclusion in the armed services (Lunsing, 2005, p. 146-147).

However, if there is one problem that the sexual minorities in Japan have to deal with, it is not open hatred and discrimination, but rather the rejection of their existence. As Kakefuda puts it:

> Traditionally, the way of thinking in Japanese society concerning minorities, and unusual people, strange people, was not to exclude them. They were allowed into society, but society would act as if they weren't there, by ignoring them, and if that didn't work, telling them to keep quiet. So to that extent, Japanese society is not very aggressive toward minorities. Most lesbians at the moment haven't come out so they can't be seen. And because they can't be seen, society doesn't attack them, and is prepared to let them be. So for the lesbian too, that's okay. There are some unpleasant aspects, but if someone is prepared to put up with them a bit, there's not really a problem. (1992, as cited in Chalmers, 2002, p. 1)

Though this is an account from a Japanese lesbian, gay men’s experience hardly differ. A recent survey exploring attitudes among university students about coming out as gay or lesbian confirms this as well. The survey found that although negative attitudes towards sexual minorities were low – only 7% of the respondents expressed clear disapproval – most respondents also suggested it best not to come out except to a couple of trusted friends at most (Ó’Móchain, 2015). This comes into line with the Japanese people’s deeply ingrained view that one should not stand out too much or go against the established way of life. Although homophobia is not as prominent as in many other countries, Japanese sexual
minorities still face all kinds of discriminations and other hardships, both visible and invisible. A report on violence involving sexual minorities in Japan from 2004 shows that, as the previously mentioned survey suggests, although some people view sexual minorities in a positive light, mainstream society typically either perceives them in negative manner, or does not recognize them at all. What is more, it seems that the sexual minorities are only tolerated by the mainstream as long as they remain invisible to the public’s eye. Therefore most do not want to disclose their true sexual identities for fear of negative repercussions, and even if they do come out, they still hide them from their parents or their fellow work colleagues. There is also an immense pressure felt by all members of Japanese society to marry a person of the opposite sex. Although this pressure has somewhat decreased now compared to before, it remains pronounced and wide in scope. Lastly, discrimination against sexual minorities in Japan is widespread and is perceived in laws and policies, employment, housing, healthcare, giving blood, and education, among other things (DiStefano, 2004). This report is admittedly over 10 years old, and conditions have improved since then. For example, a global survey from 2013 shows that the Japanese society’s attitude towards homosexuality has slowly changed towards more acceptance. When Japanese people were asked if society should accept homosexuality, 54% answered with a yes while 34% said no. That is a 5% more acceptance rate than from 5 years prior. Furthermore, when answers are considered via age groups, it becomes clear that the younger generation is far more tolerant than the old one. 83% of 18-29 year-olds and 71% of 30-49 year-olds felt that homosexuality should be accepted, but only 39% of those over the age of 50 (Pew Research Center, 2013). It is evident that Japan is progressing into a more tolerant society. However, bigotry and intolerance are still very much at large and thus, as previously stated, most gay men choose to hide their sexual orientation. The intense societal pressure to get married has the effect that single men (and to a lesser extent, single women) often face discrimination when searching for an apartment to rent or buy. Landlords often allow only married couples as tenants since they believe others could be troublesome in some way (Ronald & Alexy, 2011) and thus many gay men decide to marry a woman and even have children together. Some do so as a total front and despite the fact that the man and woman are technically married they would live apart and even decide on a date to divorce before marrying each other. After the divorce they can say that they have tried the married life but that it does not agree with their personality,
and thus they receive less pressure to marry again (Lunsing, 2016). Another more common type of marriage between a gay man and a straight woman is the so called friendship marriage, which is described as:

The wife knows about the man’s homosexual preference but still wishes to live with him and share her life with him to a varying extent. The men may want a mate to share their everyday life with, a housewife to take care of their household and/or a mother to give birth to and take care of their children. Many homosexual men see this as an ideal arrangement and also some women choose to marry a homosexual man on these terms because it gives them the status of a married woman without much of the burden, such as demands by the husband to have sex. Moreover, in negotiations preceding marriage they are in a stronger position to exert pressure on the man to meet any demand they might have than they would be with a heterosexual man (Lunsing, 2016, p. 125).

Although there may not be the stereotypical Western ‘love’ between the married couples, not all of them understand the marriage between them to be fake. For many Japanese people, “marriage is not constructed in terms of the Western ‘companionate model’ and the reason to get married is to establish a ‘household’ (katei) which differs in many ways from the rather romanticized Euro-American concept of ‘the family’” (McLelland, 2000a, p. 465). He further clarifies that marriage is thought of being more of a practical arrangement where two outwardly compatible people fulfill their clearly defined societal roles in order to establish a family, rather than simply a confirmation of love. These friendship or sham marriages are not for everyone of course, and many Japanese gay couples would like nothing more than to marry and live openly. However, same-sex marriage is still not legal in Japan. Some cities and city wards have recently started issuing certificates that recognize same-sex partnerships as being equivalent to marriage – such as Shibuya Ward and Setagaya Ward – which allow the gay couples much of the same rights as the married ones within the city, such as renting an apartment together. These certificates are not officially recognized by the Japanese government however (Williams, 2015). There are also a couple of legal loopholes available for gay couples that want the same legal rights as married straight ones. For example, if the younger partner is adopted by the older one, which is a well established tradition in Japanese society, they have become family in the eyes of the law and therefore gain property and inheritance rights (Maree, 2004). Another way is to create a will and legally appoint one’s partner by a joint living agreement, which allows partners to make health and life-issue
decisions for the other. These alternatives were originally made for heterosexuals that did not wish to get married, but homosexuals are able to use them as well (Lunsing, 2005).

**Japanese gay men’s self-image**

In the past, men who engaged in same-sex sexual activities merely viewed them as a hobby or a pleasurable pastime and did not identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. Today, on the other hand, most Japanese homosexual men self-identify as ‘gei,’ which is the Japanese loanword for gay. However, apart from telling a few gei friends, most keep their sexual orientation hidden and do not want it to be exposed (Hawkins, 2000). Due to Japan’s societal denial over everything that is not heteronormative, many Japanese gays and lesbians deal with internalized homophobia and have or used to have negative feelings about their own sexuality and many are apprehensive about telling others about it for fear of their reactions. A possible reason for that is that “this internalization of homophobia can be related to a tendency in Japanese culture to individualize problems people may have, instead of dealing with them on a social level” (McLelland, 2005, p. 83). In other words, these gay men and women may think of their sexuality as a problem that they have to work on themselves, instead of believing that society itself should change.

Another thing that may make matters confusing for those who question their sexual identity, is that there is confusion between terms for sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender expression in Japan. The Japanese language began only recently to distinguish sex and gender by adopting the English term gender, pronounced jendaa in Japanese, to describe culturally created concepts of feminine and masculine. Before that, sei was an all-encompassing word that was used for the biological sexes, male and female, and the concept of gender (Summerhawk, McMahlill & McDonald, 1998). As a consequence, it may have been difficult for non-heteronormative Japanese people to determine their sexuality or gender. Furthermore, gay men may find it difficult to formulate a positive self-identity due to the lack of positive gay role models and by constantly absorbing incorrect and even discriminatory information on homosexuality (Summerhawk, McMahlill, & McDonald, 1998). For example, homosexual men are often understood to be okama, which literally means ‘pot’ in Japanese but originates in the metaphorical use of kama to refer to man’s buttocks, and therefore relating to anal sex, which is considered to be their main sexual act. While okama means a
homosexual man, the image it invokes is of an especially effeminate man that cross-dresses as a woman (Long, 1996). This definition is incredibly loose however, and can be used to describe any man who shows transgender characteristics. In fact, in Japan homosexuality is often conflated with transsexuality and transgenderism. The Japanese word ‘gei’ for example, while coming from the English word ‘gay,’ is more associated with cross-dressing and prostitution and the word ‘gay boy’ (j. geiboi) was used of transvestite male prostitutes (McLelland, 2000b).

The Japanese mainstream media reinforces the ‘gei’ stereotype and almost always discusses homosexuality and transgenderism in the same context. For instance, many ‘talents’ (j. tarento) in the entertainment media cross-dress and call themselves okama. They are often used either as the butt of the joke and something to laugh at, or something to investigate and examine as the opposite of ‘normal’ men (McLelland, 2000b). Although most of them do not express themselves as a sexual identity – least of all a homosexual identity – since okama remains the most prominent and recognizable representation of non-normative sexuality, most conflate the two things together (McLelland, 1999). What is more, although homosexuality has lately been given more coverage and attention, the media prefers to focus on the more bizarre and unusual aspects of the Japanese gay subculture, since Japanese gay men and women leading ordinary lives does not gain interest among the consumers (McLelland, 2000b). This has the effect that Japanese people regard homosexuality as something strange and gay men and women find it difficult to realize their true sexual identity.

Boys love’s effect on Japanese people’s views on homosexuality
These representations of homosexual men and their relationships have in some way affected how Japanese women regard actual gay men. Many articles were published in women’s magazines in the 1990s about so-called ‘friendship marriages’ between straight women and gay men and how they were objectively better than between a heterosexual man and woman. The reasons given all suggest that the writers view homosexual men as radically different from their heterosexual counterparts in fundamental ways. For example, they state that gay men are much more willing to negotiate roles within the marriage and to help with housework. In a book titled Can You Judge Men? Here are 17 Checkpoints, homosexual men are described in a way that closely resembles how the boys love genre portrays them. For
example, they are described as being always neat and smelling nice, and their clothes are fashionable and clean. Like their personal appearances, their apartments are meticulous and ordinarily contain lace curtains, rose-patterned wallpaper, or chandeliers. In its conclusion, homosexual men are labeled as being somewhat lady-like. There is a definite tendency for women in Japan to regard gay men as having more in common with women than with straight men, as well as resembling women both in their appearance and in their sensibilities. These women feel that they do not have to compete against the gay men, as they usually have to against their straight counterparts, but instead can be used to relieve their exhaustion and be nurtured much in the same way that women are expected to nurture men (McLelland, 2000a). Homosexual Japanese men, on the other hand, do not agree with the way they are represented in the *boys love manga*. Many say that the genre is in actuality about Japanese women, rather than gay men, and that the image of a tall, slender man with wavy hair and wide eyes, who wears expensive and fashionable clothes and is rich or in other ways a part of the elite, in no way represents their real life and experiences. Some have expressed difficulty in identifying their sexuality since their view on gay men have been influenced by the *boys love* genre and they feel as if they are not really homosexual since they do not look or behave like the male characters in those stories. A Japanese gay man interviewed in Yajima Masami's collection of gay life stories expresses that he got the impression from the *manga* stories that homosexuals had to be cute and pretty, and since he felt himself neither, he concerned himself over what would become of him (McLelland, 2000a).
Perceptions of androgyny as attractive

As previously noted, most of the characters in boys love manga are a mix of feminine and masculine features; beautiful in a kind of androgynous way. In ancient Japan, the idea of a male androgynous beauty was considered ideal for a long time, and that sexually and visually ambiguous performers were popular beyond belief. This androgyny and sexual ambiguity in performance is visible in today’s time as well, as one may see it in the all-female theater troupe Takarazuka Revue, and in J-pop bands (Japanese pop music bands) whose male members dress as female on and off stage, and even in product advertising (McHarry, 2003).

Visual kei (j. vijuaru kei) is an another example of genderlessness in Japanese pop culture. It means “visual style” and is a movement among Japanese musicians, who use make-up and flamboyant hair styles and costumes to stand out. As a result, the musicians achieve a feminine look that challenges traditional gender roles and expectations (Yun [interviewee], 2006).

Not only can the androgynous style be seen in the media, but it has also become a popular fashion style in Tokyo’s Harajuku district, which is said to be the main fashion area in Japan. According to an article from 2016, in recent years designers have begun pushing the boundaries of gender conformity and the genderless style has picked some momentum in Japan. As the author explains:

The trend incorporates male and female beauty techniques and fashion styles to achieve an androgynous look, and although their styles vary greatly, they all follow the same aesthetic: slim-bodied, bright-eyed boys with flamboyant, flashy clothing and makeup. Genderless [style] should be understood as a fashion choice separate from sexuality, and most Genderless idols are actually straight. Even those who are gay are not necessarily dressing in Genderless [style] because of their sexuality. Nor are they trying to pass as women, but rather they’re rejecting traditional gender rules to create a new standard of beauty of their own (Cassano, 2006, para. 5-6).
It is unclear whether this new genderless trend has taken its influence from the *boys love* genre or whether the genre mirrors real life. The “androgy nous adolescent” has been a relatively common trope throughout Japanese history. It is hard to say though, whether the *boys love* and the current fashion trend have taken its inspiration from it, or if androgyny in males has simply always been viewed as attractive in Japanese culture.
Conclusion

The boys love manga, which depicts romantic and/or sexual relationships between attractive men, is extremely popular among female readers in Japan. The genre is based in fantasy and generally does not reflect reality in the slightest: the male leads are elegant and dazzling, with feminine and masculine traits mixing together which serves to transcend their gender and lure the reader with their androgynous appearance. Although the relationships in the genre are between two boys, they typically imitate the male-female binary. Generally, one of the two main characters looks and behaves in more feminine manner, and is dominated inside and outside of the bedroom by the more masculine one. It often goes as far as the masculine character raping the feminine one, which is supposed to be viewed as a positive occurrence.

This type of homosexual love is comparable to the custom of nanshoku and shūdo which flourished in the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. These were the customs of monks and samurai – and later of common people – to have a sexual relationship with adolescent boys. This kind of relationship was considered in some ways to be better than heterosexual ones and were heavily encouraged. Although nanshoku was regarded as a noble concept among the samurai and monks, when the common people started to follow it as well, it soon turned into prostitution. As the males in boys love, the youth lovers looked different than regular men. They styled and behaved themselves in a more feminine manner, which again, gave them an androgynous presence which for many men were regarded as more erotic than regular females. Stories about male love from the Tokugawa era (1603-1867) have many of the same tropes as today’s boys love stories, although they differ in that they were written by men and for men.

Although the tradition of male-male love thrived in the Tokugawa era, when the Japanese government decided to modernize in the middle of the nineteenth century, it quickly became considered as unnatural and unethical. In today’s Japanese society, although homophobia may not be as blatant as in many other Asian countries, sexual minorities struggle with being seen. Most gay men and lesbians stay in the closet and only come out to a few of their friends. Gay men have a hard time realizing their identity due to a lack of positive gay role models and the general view people have on homosexual males. That is, that they are mostly transvestites and something to mock. boys love has not helped the public
perception on male homosexuality either. Many women regard gay men as having more in common with women than with straight men, both in appearance and in personality, as they are depicted in the *boys love manga*. However, Japanese gay men do not that that representation of themselves is accurate. Some even struggle with coming to terms with their sexuality because they believe the misrepresentation to be true. Although androgyny is a central part of *boys love* and has in the past been the allure of young males to older ones, today those who fashion themselves in that regard are mostly heterosexual. Even though there are some similarities to be found between the *boys love* genre and the Japanese homosexual culture of the past, it has little to do with the one in the present.
References


Picture References

The following is a reference list of images used within the thesis.

Image 1: A fanart of the two main characters from the popular anime Sekai-Ichi Hatsukoi that shows the typical style the bishōnen are drawn in. Retrieved April 15th from https://www.zerochan.net/748139#full


Image 3: An excerpt from the manga Delusion Elektel, where two men have anal intercourse. Retrieved December 7, 2017 from http://www.mangago.me/home/photo/31071/