

New study suggests female paraphilias are “hiding in plain sight”

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Yaoi manga in Japan. (Photo credit: Timothy Takemoto)

Interest in male-male sexuality appears to be a common yet overlooked paraphilia among women, according to new research published in the [Archives of Sexual Behavior](#). The study examined Boy Love, a genre of erotic fiction typically created by women that depicts romantic relationships between men. The genre, which is also known as *yaoi* in Japan and *danmei* in China, has grown in popularity since the 1980s.

“I am a fan of Boy Love/*yaoi*. As an academic psychologist, I am also extremely interested in human behavior and experience,” said study author Anna Madill, a

professor at the University of Leeds and head of [Project Resilience](#). “I was puzzled about my liking for male-male erotica — particularly that created by-and-for-women — and, fortunately, due to my training have the research expertise to be able to explore questions around Boy Love/*yaoi* professionally.”

“My co-author Yao Zhao did her PhD on *yaoi/danmei* in China under my supervision and introduced me to the topic of cultural differences. Contrasting the English-speaking and the Chinese-speaking world has been incredibly interesting in pushing forward understanding about women’s erotic writing.”

For their study, the researchers asked 1,922 Chinese-speaking participants and 1,715 English-speaking participants what type of Boy Love/*yaoi* content they enjoyed in particular. BDSM-related content emerged as the top attraction among both Chinese-speaking and English-speaking participants, followed by animalistic content (such as humanoid beings with animal features).

The findings provide evidence that “our current understanding of what might be thought of as more unusual sexual interests has tended to overlook those of women,” Madill told PsyPost. “This might be because women with unusual sexual interests may be more likely than men to retain these as fantasies rather than act on them, so have not drawn much public attention.”

“A major unusual sexual interest of women is male-male erotica and this has influenced mainstream entertainment because TV and online series incorporating a sexually-inflected central male friendship can draw a large female audience,” she added.

The researchers also found that content related to rape and underage sex were fairly popular. “There are major caveats around the legal and ethical implications of Boy Love/*yaoi/danmei*,” Madill said. “For example, some online materials may be illegal in some jurisdictions and, even if not illegal, there are ethical issues about content that might romanticize things like dubious sexual consent.”

“We need to understand better if, and if so how, women might benefit from exploring sexual interactions through the medium of fantasy male-male erotica, for example, as a relatively safe way of processing their own anxieties. More generally, young

women are the biggest growing group of pornography consumers and the reasons for and implication of this are important to understand.”

Previous [research has indicated](#) that it is common for women to watch gay pornography. But Madill and Yao noted that little is known about paraphilic interests among women. The vast majority of research has examined the atypical sexual interests of men.

“Yao and I are really grateful to all the *yaoi* fans who have completed our surveys,” said Madill, who is still collecting data using the [English](#) and [Chinese](#) versions of the questionnaire. “This is the biggest data set of its kind and really allows us to understand this community better. For example, an interesting cultural difference is that Boy Love appears to be a popular but niche interest in the English-speaking world, while it is a broader but more casual and passing interest among young Chinese people.”

The study, “[Are Female Paraphilias Hiding in Plain Sight? Risqué Male–Male Erotica for Women in Sinophone and Anglophone Regions](#)“, was published November 22, 2021.

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