

Feminism or Homophobia:
An Analysis of Discourse on Female Yaoi Readers
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Abstract

While research on the anime and manga community as a whole has been published, it is of note the sheer scale of interest shown towards women who read the yaoi genre. For every one paper written on men reading yuri, or lesbian anime/manga pornography, there is a dozen written on women who read yaoi. This extent to which these women draw attention means that the academic research on them is both widespread and intense, and the discourse on them equally so. What is of interest with the discourse on these women, known as “fujoshi”, is the dichotomy found within. This paper categorizes the discourses found within academic works published on the topic of “fujoshi” into two categories: “Fujoshi-as-Feminist” and “Fujoshi-as-Homophobic”. In describing the various arguments made by these two discourses, the paper will show the various ways each side tries to support their claims. Finally, the paper analyzes how the idea of “otherness” may have led to the creation and support of these two discourses and their opposition to one another. Each discourse is based around a group with a distinct social identity and their common beliefs. This strong self-identification has led to each group and thus discourse having strict considerations of who is a member, and who is considered an outsider or “other”. It is upon this that the dichotomy between the two discourses is built.

Keywords: Yaoi, Fujoshi, Feminism, Homophobia, Discourse

To understand this paper, one must have knowledge of three terms: fujoshi, yaoi, and discourse.

Fujoshi

The term “fujoshi” is a play on the word with the same pronunciation that means “respectable woman” (婦女子). But by replacing the first kanji with a similar sounding one that means “rotten” (腐), they are reinterpreting the word to show the “rotteness” of women who read yaoi. It originated in Japanese online messaging boards in the early 2000s, being specifically attributed to the website 2channel. Fujoshi, in its original form, referred to “a girl or woman who proactively read things in a yaoi fashion, discerning romantic relationships between men where such relationships were not originally intended” (Suzuki, 2013). It referred to women who would imagine existing characters in homoerotic relationships with one another, when the original stories had no such relationships. However, modern definitions tend to use “fujoshi” as a term for any woman who consumes the genre of “yaoi” (Hori, 2013).

Yaoi

“Yaoi” is used to denote sexually explicit male-homoerotic material of Japanese origin, generally manga or anime (Kamm, 2013). This is different than the term “boys love” or “BL”, which is an umbrella term that covers all male-homoerotic material regardless of explicitness. Discourse on boys love tends to focus on yaoi, with little focus on “shounen-ai” or non-explicit material. This may be due to an assumed association of sex with BL, likely caused by greater presence of yaoi both within the anime community as well as commercial stores for manga and anime compared to the presence of shounen-ai.

Discourse

Discourse as a term has both the benefit and drawback of having a plethora of definitions. In its purest form it refers to purely verbal communication. However, the definition that I will

most closely follow comes from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, which defines discourse as “formal and orderly and usually extended expression of thought on a subject” (n.a.).

One of social theorist Foucault’s requirements of discourse was that it must be “groups of utterances which seem to be regulated in some way and which seem to have a coherence and a force to them in common” (Mills, 2004). What makes “discourse” the correct term to use when analyzing discussions on the topic of “fujoshi” is the fact that they generally fall within two patterns of thought. That is, there is a coherence in how fujoshi are researched and explained.

The two discourses found when discussing the implications of fujoshi are that of “Fujoshi-as-Feminist” and “Fujoshi-as-Homophobic”. Most academic papers on fujoshi either fall within these two categories or cover and explain the beliefs of both discourses. Academics and fujoshi within the west and Japan come from different cultures, but the two discourses have strong similarities within the two cultures. Distinct differences, however, will be noted as applicable.

Fujoshi-as-Feminist

Many papers analyze the existence of fujoshi in terms of social structure. They focus their interest on the reasons why these women read yaoi, and how these reasons are results of social structures that disempower women. The “Feminism” discourse draws from this viewpoint, and argues that fujoshi, in reading yaoi, are actively expressing feminism by opposing traditional patriarchal and heterocentric values. These values traditionally disempower women, and by opposing them fujoshi are empowering women. Surveys in the west place the percentage of yaoi readers at around 82-89% female (Zsila et. al., 2008). In Japan, however, this percentage is assumed to be higher (Madill, 2016). It is also commonly accepted that yaoi-writers are generally women. This places women in power within the genre, both as creators and consumers.

The following are common arguments made by those who either adhere to or discuss the discourse that fujoshi, in reading yaoi, are representing a form of feminism. These arguments appear within multiple academic articles and are found within discourse in both Japan and the west.

Empowerment

To Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley, in “Girl Reading Girl”, women reading yaoi is actually an expression of actively opposing the patriarchy by placing women in a position of power over men (2009). In both Japanese and western culture, women are generally considered sexual objects of desire meant to be viewed by the male gaze. In reading yaoi, women are reversing this expectation. Instead of being inactive entities which men view in a sexual manner, fujoshi are actively sexualizing the male form. This puts them in a position of power over men, thereby opposing a form of the patriarchy.

Fujoshi are also seen within this discourse as using yaoi as a way to empower themselves sexually. In both western and especially Japanese culture, women and girls are expected to be sexually pure and innocent (Meyer, 2010). By viewing media that is sexual in nature, they are opposing this expectation. Feminist discourse on fujoshi and yaoi consider the genre to be a “safe” way for women to test and play with ideas of sexuality. Japanese academics in particular have focused more on yaoi as a way for women to safely play with their understanding of sex and sexuality (Isola, 2010). Feminist scholar and activist Ueno Shizuko has been a proponent for such a reading, and in this sense manga-creator Takemiya Keiko has stated yaoi to be a “first step towards true feminism”. Japanese culture is marked by its strong expectations for women to become wives and mothers, or “Ryosaikenbo”, and so any expression of female sexuality outside of heterosexual marriage is in opposition to traditional values (Davies and Ikeno, 2002). Within

the west there exists similar cultural values of female purity, but it is not to the same extent as in Japan.

Reclaiming Romance

Hentai, or heterosexual-based pornographic manga and anime, oftentimes contains occurrences of rape and sexual assault. Even non-explicit romance manga and anime have common tropes based upon a submissive woman and a dominant man. Women, in consuming these media, would see female characters being treated in such manners all of the time. But these tropes come about through social and cultural values that disempower women. Japanese culture oftentimes places women in subordinate positions: wives who must obey their husbands and mothers who must give their lives to their children (Davies and Ikeno, 2002).

Yukari Fujimoto in “The Meaning of ‘Boys’ Love’ in Shojo Manga” states yaoi exists due to a desire on the part of women to purify love and romance in their minds, due to the “tarnished male-female framework of heterosexual love” (1991). Women, consciously or otherwise, remember and apply cultural values of female-disempowerment and restrained desire when reading traditional heterosexual-based stories. This led to many women feeling that these heterosexual romance stories were marred by the culture that made them, and that there was always some black stain upon the story. Even if a story had a man and woman in love and did not show any overt cases of abuse, control, or dominance, there would always be that sense of gender-based power imbalance between them. By writing and reading homosexual-based stories, readers would be able to experience romance without an inherent power imbalance between the couple. In this sense, Fujoshi are considered to be escaping to a fantasy world when they read yaoi. By reading stories in which women are not actively disempowered, fujoshi are actively blinding themselves from their day-to-day lives and societies where this is commonly the case.

Anna Madill speculates that it is this fantasy-escapism that has led to yaoi's popularity amongst women (2016).

Expression of Non-Heterosexuality

James Welker, co-founder for the Society for Queer Asian Studies, argues that the rise in popularity of yaoi in the 70s and 80s was in part due to women's own homosexual desires. But due to cultural values these women would refuse to identify as lesbian, and would instead use male-male homoeroticism to express these desires (2012). This is supported by many supporters of fujoshi, who point to yaoi and shounen-ai as important in forming their homosexual identity (Isola, 2010).

This is almost in opposition to the current stereotype of female yaoi readers, where their sexuality is assumed to be heterosexual. While no data exists on the sexuality of Japanese fujoshi, there have been two studies done in the west that provide such information. Dru Pagliassotti is a professor and researcher at the California Lutheran University, and has published multiple works on the motives behind female consumption of yaoi in the west. In an online-published study on yaoi-readers, implemented in both English and Italian, she asked for respondents' sexuality. Her results showed that, in the English portion of the study, a majority (51.6%) of female respondents who read yaoi identified as purely heterosexual.

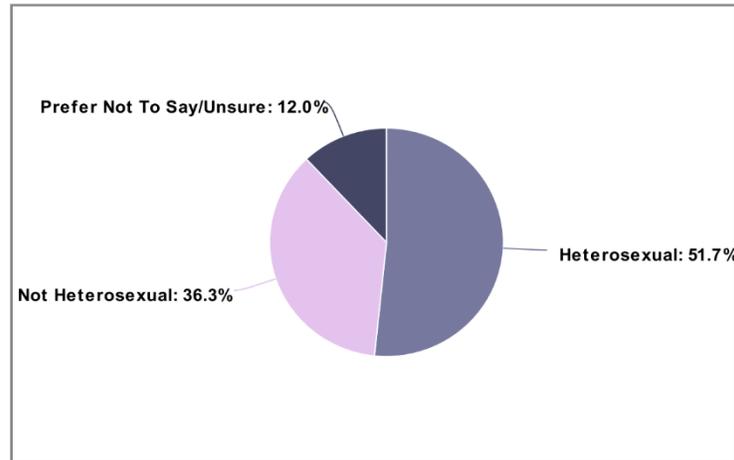


Figure 1. Female respondents' sexualities from Pagliassotti's English study

A similar study in Hungary, also run by Dru Pagliosotti, found similar results. 69.74% of female respondents identified as heterosexual.

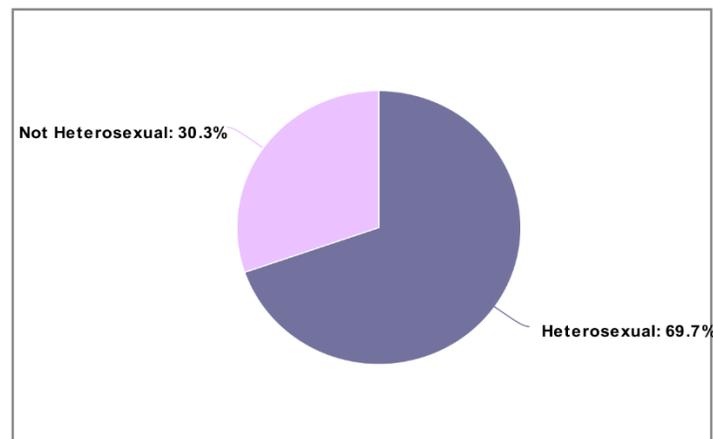


Figure 2. Female respondents' sexualities from Pagliassotti's Hungarian study

However, while these numbers appear at first glance to oppose the feminist discourse claims of fujoshi as expressing non-heterosexuality, when compared to the general population these results actually seem to support the claim. While the exact national makeup of the English study on yaoi-readers was not shown, the US was listed as one of the main origins of respondents. Comparing the sexuality of the US's general population of women to the results of the study, it is clear that yaoi-readers are actually more likely to identify as non-heterosexual.

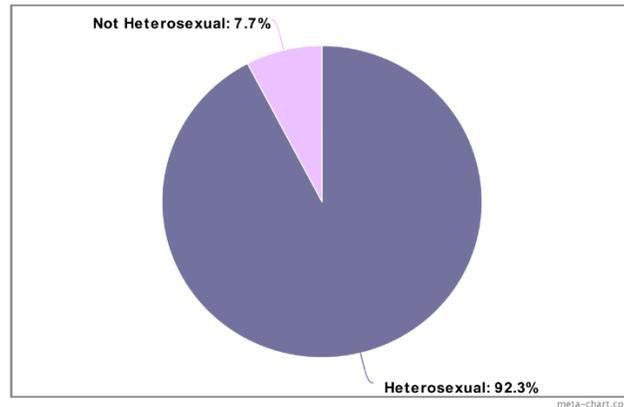


Figure 3. US female sexuality according to the National Survey of Family Growth
Compared to the US population, where 92.3% of women aged 18 to 44 identify as heterosexual, female yaoi-readers are much less likely to identify as heterosexual at only 51.7% (Chandra et al., 2016).

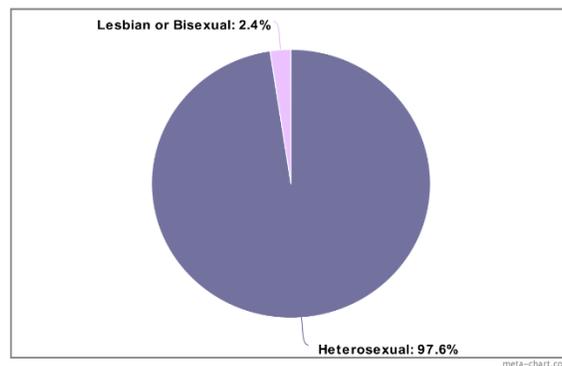


Figure 4. Hungarian female sexuality according to the Daliah Research

This difference is also seen in Hungary, with 97.6% of Hungarian women identifying as heterosexual and only 69.7% of female yaoi-readers identifying as such (Daliah Research, 2016). This supports the belief that yaoi is a way for women to express non-heterosexuality. It shows that women who read yaoi are relatively more likely to identify as queer compared to their respective general populations. However, it is important to note that this data is only readily available in the west. A lack of studies in Japan means that the same cannot be gathered about Japanese fujoshi.

Subversion of Heteroculture

Yaoi, at its most base layer, opposes traditional heteroculture by its very being as a representation of homosexuality. By representing gay relationships in a, generally, positive manner, yaoi is opposing traditional beliefs of heterosexuality as being the only acceptable sexuality. The “Fujoshi-as-Feminist” discourse argue that fujoshi, in reading yaoi, are actively saying to society “this is an acceptable form of love.”

The Hungary study by Dru Pagliassotti also compared the reasons respondents read yaoi depending upon their sexuality. Heterosexual women would say that they read yaoi mainly for entertainment and subversion of gender stereotypes, while homosexual respondents were more likely to read yaoi for its representation, escapism, and anti-gender messages than heterosexual respondents. All women would read yaoi for the fact that gender was displayed in ways uncommon to general heterosexual media.

The use of two men in a romance story is also seen as a way yaoi opposes heteroculture. Traditional values state that the “perfect couple” is made up of a subservient woman and a dominant man. Yaoi opposes this by showing that a couple doesn’t have to be made up of different genders, and that the qualities of the individuals don’t have to be based upon cultural gender differences. It brings into question the existence of heteroculture by showing heterosexuality as “simply one sexual option amongst many others” (Kee, 2010).

Fujoshi-as-Homophobic

The demographic of those who support the discourse of “fujoshi-as-homophobic” tends to be gay men within and LGBT members in the west. The following are common arguments made by those who either adhere to or discuss the discourse that fujoshi, in reading yaoi, are supporting homophobic ideologies.

Support of Stereotypes

Akiko Hori's article "On The Response (Or Lack Thereof) of Japanese Fans To Criticism That Yaoi is Antigay Discrimination" discusses the discourse that fujoshi are partaking in homophobia by reading yaoi. A common argument for yaoi as homophobic is through gay men living in Japan, who claim that yaoi as a genre has unrealistic representations of gay men; thus causing readers of it to oversexualize or stereotype real-life gay men. Even women who argue to be accepting and anti-homophobic are still consuming a media that harms real-life people. Fantasy or otherwise.

In both the West and Japan, gay men are stereotyped as sexually charged. In Japan this comes through the stereotyping of gay men in mass-media. McLelland points out the differences in stereotypes held by men and women in Japan (2000). Amongst Japanese men, homosexual men are generally stereotyped as licentious and sexually abnormal. However, amongst Japanese women homosexual men are considered effeminate in ways not always tied to sex. This is reflective of the ways Japanese women view men within yaoi. Within yaoi there exist two general tropes that the main couple fall into: the uke and the seme (Pagliassotti, 2010). The uke is coded as feminine. They are lithe, have large eyes, and are submissive. The seme, on the other hand, is large, muscular, and dominant. This is similar to the assumed relationship between men in the west, where one is either a "top" or a "bottom". Or the way in which people will ask a gay couple "so which one is the wife?". This is a way in which the "Fujoshi-as-Homophobic" discourse opposes the feminist reading of fujoshi. While the genre shows non-hetero couples, it still supports heteroculture in the way it stereotypes gay men in a way that shows a feminine-masculine dichotomy. This idea is particularly strong in western discourse, where LGBT culture has a stronger focus on the non-binary aspects of sexuality. To western queer activists, the usage

of the uke and seme trope would be more strongly associated with traditional homophobic beliefs than in Japan.

Not True Representation

Within yaoi the characters' own sexuality are rarely touched upon. And when it is, it is almost in opposition to homosexuality. Within yaoi there exists the trope of a lead declaring "I am not gay, but I am attracted to you". This has led to yaoi having, rather than true representation of homosexual characters, an "aesthetic" of homosexuality (Akatsuka, 2010). Even if the main couple doesn't declare opposition to the label of "gay" or "homosexual", they still rarely face societal opposition that real-life gay men would face both in the west and Japan. They rarely face discrimination or physical assault for being gay. By showing imagery of two men in a sexual relationship, but failing to touch on the actual societal issues they would face for doing so, yaoi is showing a mere shadow of actual homosexual representation. So even if LGBT individuals wished to read yaoi as a way to see self-representation, they would not be able to find actual representation applicable to actual life.

Fantastical East vs Realistic West

In Japan, when confronted with the idea that reading yaoi is applying negative stereotypes to real life gay men, many fujoshi have argued that yaoi is purely fantastical and has no bearings in reality. This is reflected in Johnson's comments online, describing yaoi as "fantasy pure and simple, on the level of unicorns and elves" (Johnson, 2002). Frederik L. Schodt has made the argument that in Japan manga are understood to be fantastical in nature and that the manga genre yaoi is also not meant to be read as reflective of reality (Pagliassotti 2008). However, in the west, this is not so much the case. Pagliassotti's study in English and Italian found that, while a majority of western yaoi readers consider yaoi to be non-representative of

real-life, around 30% considered yaoi to have some bearing in their lives and the lives of others. A study done in a message board within a western yaoi-fan website, AarinFantasy, revealed that many western fans of yaoi used the genre as a basis upon which to understand the realities of Japan and Japanese culture (Pasfield-Neofitou et al., 2016). This means that any representation found in yaoi is more likely to have an effect on how western readers view actual gay men than Japanese readers.

Despite these findings, it is still a common argument within the “Fujoshi-as-Homophobic” discourse that women who read yaoi are internally consuming and applying any negative stereotypes found within the genre to real life gay men, regardless of their nationality and whether they outwardly declare yaoi as fantastical or not.

Feminism at the Expense of Gay Men

In the 90s, online discussions as to the reason women would read yaoi “[...] charged them with homophobia and a need to elevate themselves within a hierarchical society at the expense of homosexual men” (Kamm, 2013). That is, while fujoshi were actively raising the position of women, it came at the expense of gay men mainly via the argument that yaoi supported negative stereotypes.

The sexual nature of yaoi is also a point of contention for the “Fujoshi-as-Homophobic” discourse. Gay rights activists see yaoi as co-opting the experiences of gay men and twisting it into masturbatory material for women (Isola, 2010). The sexuality of gay men is what ostracizes them from the hetero majority, and so focusing on that and using that aspect of them for self-titilization is seen as malicious and in poor taste.

Akiko Hori, a Japanese academic and member of The Women’s Studies Association of Japan, has considered yaoi to be “a genre in which men belonging to the homosexual minority

were being depicted in a purely fantastical way by and for women belonging to the heterosexual majority” (2013). This criticism ties to the societal forces gay men feel within Japan as well as the west. To critics of fujoshi, they are part of the societal majority. They are women, yes, but most importantly they are straight. They fit within the hetero values of society. And when they read yaoi, they are oppressing and sexualizing a minority group who is constantly disempowered by society. And that is the main argument found within the discourse of “Fujoshi-as-Homophobic”: women who read yaoi are using gay men for personal gain.

“The Other” and the Origin of the Dichotomy

Women and gay men have different social identities. These two identities have different experiences and interactions with society in life, and it is upon these identities that they create communities and a sense of both self and belonging. But it is also how they decide who is the “other”. It is through these identities and labeling of “others” that the two discourses on fujoshi were built.

Most if not all academics referenced in this paper have had a vested interest in the success of yaoi and fujoshi, being either members of the yaoi community (such as the shounen-ai manga creator Takemiya Keiko) or feminist academics or activists (such as Ueno Shizuko and Dru Pagliassotti). It makes sense that feminist academics would want to argue for yaoi and fujoshi as positive forces: they identify them as safe spaces for women. Most academic research on fujoshi tends to at least touch upon these ideas of women's' oppression in a patriarchal society, objectification, and so on. And this adoption of fujoshi and yaoi as a space for women is what leads to the rejection of the “Fujoshi-as-Feminist” discourse supporters of the “Fujoshi-as-Homophobic” discourse, which relies heavily on the experiences and thoughts of gay men. The fact that fujoshi and the feminist discourse face criticism from men in particular would possibly

support the creation of the feminist discourse, as it would be seen as another case of men trying to disempower women and thus a “common enemy” for fujoshi and their supporters to latch onto.

Touched upon in Hori’s work “On The Response (Or Lack Thereof) of Japanese Fans To Criticism That Yaoi is Antigay Discrimination”, fujoshi themselves would also have reason to believe in the “Fujoshi-as-Feminist” discourse. The discourse would enable them to feel assured in their decision to read yaoi and would diminish guilt over reading things deemed by the “Fujoshi-as-Homophobic” discourse as homophobic and bigoted. In a 1992 Japanese online discussion between self-proclaimed fujoshi and gay rights activists, women explained that they felt shame when fantasising and reading about gay men, but that they still read the genre because they felt that, despite the genre being discriminatory, they still gained something by reading it (Hori, 2013). But this implies that those who argue for fujoshi as representing feminism also recognize the negative impact it can have on gay men. And that is something that is parroted in many academic works, such as Akiko Hori’s works that discuss fujoshi from both a feminist and queer studies framework. It seems that the “Fujoshi-as-Feminist” discourse relies upon the acceptance of negative impacts on gay men if it brings about benefits for women.

On the other hand, the majority of criticism of fujoshi comes from gay-rights activists who see fujoshi as representative of the various societal forces that disempower gay men. Most studies analyze fujoshi with the assumption of majority heterosexuality. This assumption fuels a major part of the “Fujoshi-as-Homophobic” discourse, as many critics of fujoshi specifically criticize them through their assumed heterosexuality. Yaoi, in showing sexualized gay relationships, is considered to be a “queer-space”. Straight women are thus not meant to be in that space, as they are not part of the queer community. They are, in a sense, outsiders invading a

space meant for gay men if not the entire LGBT community. This is supported by the fact that gay men do read yaoi, but there is no discourse against them doing so by LGBT activists. They consider it to be acceptable.

It is of note, however, that within Japan reading yaoi is not associated with supporting the LGBT community while in the west there is a common belief amongst western fujoshi that reading yaoi shows support (Hori, 2013). This makes things a bit more intricate when discussing fujoshi in the west, as many fujoshi would argue that their reading of yaoi is a way to express support for the LGBT community and gay rights. And so these individuals would identify as both part of the queer community (be it as members or allies) as well as identify as women and part of that community. They would identify with each discourse, via self-identifying with both groups the two discourses are based upon.

Each discourse relies upon the existence of a group with a distinct social identification, and each discourse's arguments and beliefs are based upon whatever has a positive impact upon their respective group. The "Fujoshi-as-Feminist" discourse, in aligning with women, argues for the positive aspects the yaoi genre brings to women. Regardless of the impacts upon gay men, who they identify as "other". Meanwhile, the "Fujoshi-as-Homophobic" discourse argues against fujoshi, as they have negative impacts upon gay men. In the end, each group and their respective discourses are based upon self-interest.

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