

## **A Relational Equality Bias: Women’s Narrative Engagement in Reading Chinese BL**

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Boys’ Love stories (BL) are a genre of male-male homosexual romance in China. The readers of BL typically are heterosexual young women. BL readers usually argue that they are fighting against traditional gender roles and at the same time promoting liberal social attitudes toward gay men. Some gay men and LGBT scholars criticize BL for reinforcing stereotypes. The current experiment assigned women participants to read either BL or heterosexual romances with identical plots and then self-report their reading experiences. Results suggest that women have a pro-BL bias, meaning they believe BL naturally depict more relationally equal romantic relationships than heterosexual romances. This bias leads to greater identification with characters and ultimately increases the narrative engagement with BL. These findings have important implications for understanding the effects of BL on stereotypical perceptions of gay men in Chinese society.

*Keywords: BL, identification, narrative engagement, perceived equality*

Boys’ Love stories (BL) comprise a genre of male-male homosexual romance that occasionally depicts sexual activities between the characters that is popular throughout East Asia. This genre is popular

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throughout East Asia but originated in Japan and has existed in China for decades. Like slash fiction, BL are usually both published and read online. This latter feature facilitates the exploration of an otherwise taboo topic within Chinese society.

BL readers claim this genre depicts idealized romantic relationships that lack traditional masculine/dominant and feminine/submissive gender roles seen in typical heterosexual romances (e.g., Y. Li, 2009; McLelland, 2000; Pagliassotti, 2010). Readers believe they contest heteronormativity and the prevalence of traditional gender roles in society by deriving enjoyment from a narrative about a romantic relationship thought to be characterized by the equality of its participants, and by embracing a socially liberal, supportive attitude toward homosexuality (e.g., Y. Li, 2009; S. Y. Li, 2018; Pagliassotti, 2010; C. Zhang, 2016).

Despite (or because of) such potential, BL is controversial in Chinese society. The BL subculture is a burgeoning and highly commercialized element in the cultural industry (R. Li, 2017); even as mainstream Chinese media treat homosexuality as a taboo and a threat to Chinese traditions, culture, and social order (R. Li, 2017; Yi, 2013). Some scholars as well as LGBT groups also contend BL readers hold unrealistic perceptions of gay men and care little for issues that actually matter to them (e.g., H. F. Zhang, 2012; C. Zhang, 2016; Zhao, 2014). For example, many BL fans believe the most common character types (*seme* and *uke*) in BL are applicable to the real gay community (Zhao, 2014), and many BL fans can only accept relationships between beautiful men (H. F. Zhang, 2012). BL readers usually feel that romantic relationships depicted in BL are “pure,” regardless of gender, age, socioeconomic status, or the pressure for reproduction (C. Y. Zhang, 2017; Zheng, 2017). When relationships between actual men are not as perfect as depicted, BL readers demonstrate avoidance or even disgusted attitudes (H. F. Zhang, 2012; C. Zhang, 2016).

The current study seeks to connect BL readers’ idealization of relational equality in the stories to identification with characters in BL and to further investigate how factors that make this genre popular among heterosexual women may encourage negative social stereotypes of homosexual men. As an online experiment, it explores how the genders of protagonists (story type) and the degree of relational equality depicted in story content influence women’s reading experience. The results show that women readers hold a pro-BL bias of the relational equality depicted in BL. This bias leads to their identification with gay men characters and their narrative engagement with reading BL. The results contribute to the ongoing discussion of how BL may influence heterosexual women readers’ perceptions of actual gay men, as well as hetero- and homosexual romantic relationships in society.

### **BL and Its Readers in China**

BL are popular in China, despite the stigmatization of homosexuality in society. In 2014, nearly 700,000 heterosexual romances and about 370,000 BL were available on Jinjiang, a major website for disseminating Chinese-language romances (Zhao, 2014). The most popular BL received more than 27 million views between 2005 and 2009 (Ge, Pang, Cai, & Liang, 2009). Even major foreign media like the *BBC*, *The New York Times*, and *The Economist* have reported on the ongoing popularity of BL in China as a cultural phenomenon (“Gay Love Theory,” 2014; “Slash Fiction Click Bait,” 2015; Tatlow, 2014). BL are sufficiently

popular that they influence Chinese Internet users' perceptions and attitudes toward gay men, even if they are not fans or consumers of these stories (Wei, 2014).

Due to the sensitive nature of BL content, there is no representative data regarding BL readers in China. Based on previous nonrepresentative surveys, the vast majority of frequent readers are women (96.8%, Song & Wang, 2011; 87.5%, Zhao & Madill, 2018). Readers usually are teenagers or young adults, tending toward the latter (age ranged from 11 to 28; 60% were between 18 and 23; Song & Wang, 2011; ranged from 17 to 28, average 19.4; Zhao & Madill, 2018). Most of the readers self-identify as heterosexual. Only one of the 14 interviewees in Song and Wang (2011) and two of the 20 interviewees in Zhao and Madill's (2018) study self-identified as homosexual or had such potential.

Despite BL's popularity, homosexuality is stigmatized in Chinese society and depictions are censored in mainstream media (R. Li, 2017; Lin, 2020). The number of media reports on LGBT issues peaked in China at 867 pieces in 2015 (Chen & Zhu, 2018). The number then decreased in the following years, reaching 447 pieces in 2017. Lin (2020) also pointed out the discourse of LGBT groups in China focuses on STDs, which depicts sexual minorities as the enemy of public health. In the entertainment media, in 2016, the Chinese government tightened censorship of TV drama (including online formats) by branding depictions of homosexuality as an "abnormal sexual relationship" ("China Bans Depictions," 2016, para. 4). In addition, erotic depiction of sexual activities is considered pornography, which is illegal in China. Therefore, BL with such depiction will be censored and their writers may be arrested as pornography producers (Zhou, Paul, & Sherman, 2018).

The market has noticed the commercial value of BL and the purchasing power of BL fans in China (R. Li, 2017; S. Y. Li, 2018). During the commercialization process, BL and BL culture are "de-homosexualized" in order to conform to censorship expectations (S. Y. Li, 2018). Entertainment media content frequently hints at romantic sparks between male characters or male celebrities to attract BL fans, but these are characterized as "brotherhood" rather than "romance."

Censorship and commercialization lead some Chinese scholars to argue BL culture in China is becoming a superficial form of entertainment for young women rather than a revolutionary force fighting for gender equality and LGBT rights (S. Y. Li, 2018; Zheng, 2017). However, many Chinese youth and young adults still learn about homosexuality as imagined through BL, either directly from reading BL or indirectly from exposure to BL culture in other media platforms (S. Y. Li, 2018; C. Zhang, 2016). Therefore, BL content is key to understanding public perceptions and attitudes toward gay men in the Chinese society.

### **Relational Equality, Identification, and Narrative Engagement in Reading BL**

Examining the factors that influence BL readers' narrative engagement is one approach that could clarify what readers may learn from reading these stories and how these stories influence their subsequent beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Narrative engagement is defined as someone's experience of a narrative (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Originally used to examine people's experience in viewing movies or TV programs, the scale has been applied in many studies that explore reading materials (e.g., Appel & Mara, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Mangen & Kuiken, 2014). While engaged, individuals are "lost" in the narrative and

are less likely to produce negative thoughts about the narrative content (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). Narrative engagement, therefore, is a valid predictor of viewers' narrative enjoyment and story-consistent beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Green & Brock, 2000). People who are engaged are inclined to hold attitudes and beliefs that resemble those in the narrative, meaning an individual's beliefs are consistent with the story. In addition, a narrative will also form story-consistent behavioral intentions for viewers (e.g., De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2009; Landreville, & LaMarre, 2011; Van Leeuwen, Van Den Putte, Renes, & Leeuwis, 2017). Therefore, when stigmatized minority groups are positively depicted in a narrative, narrative engagement could lead to more favorable attitudes toward the group, more beneficial behavioral intentions, and more information-seeking behavior (Oliver, Dillard, Bae, & Tamul, 2012; Yan, 2019).

Previous studies indicate two significant features that may contribute to readers' greater narrative engagement with BL compared to heterosexual romances. These studies note that BL readers perceive a greater degree of relational equality within gay men romantic relationships and identify more with gay men characters in BL stories.

### ***Perceived Relational Equality and Narrative Engagement***

BL readers usually claim that BL are more radical than heterosexual romances in their defiance of traditional gender roles (e.g., Chou, 2010; Y. Li, 2009; R. Li, 2017; McLelland, 2000; Pagliassotti, 2010; C. Zhang, 2016; C. Y. Zhang, 2017). In previous in-depth interviews and surveys, BL readers explained that gender stereotypes are common in heterosexual romances: Male characters are masculine and dominant, female characters are feminine and submissive. In BL, however, both protagonists are more likely to be thought of as androgynous, complicating the application of traditional gender-based "hero" and "heroine" stereotypes. As a result, both characters supposedly participate equally in the relationship and related sexual activities. BL readers suggest this egalitarian vision of romantic relationships in BL satisfies women's pursuit of gender-equal romantic relationships and provides the motivation for women to write and read BL.

Yet this explanation overlooks the complexity of common gender role tropes within popular heterosexual romances. Radway (2009) finds that male characters in most of these stories are powerful and autonomous but are less arbitrary and misogynistic than stereotypically masculine men. These characters also exhibit some stereotypically feminine traits, such as being gentle and caring. Although women in these stories tend to be pretty and in need of a strong man's protection, they often are less submissive and silent than stereotypically feminine women. This insight means that BL may be similar to heterosexual romances if stories adopt the principles of a hetero-gendered world, in which masculine/dominant heroes are paired with feminine/submissive "heroines," even if the "heroines" are biological males.

Previous studies provide evidence that the relationships depicted in BL are less egalitarian than BL readers believe. Protagonists in BL usually fall into two categories, *seme*, Japanese for "attacker," which refers to the colloquial "top," or *uke*, Japanese for "receiver," which refers to the "bottom" in the gay men relationships (McLelland & Welker, 2015; Sihombing, 2011; Suzuki, 2015). The *seme* and *uke* seldom exchange their sexual positions (Sihombing, 2011) and BL usually pair a more masculine *seme* with a more feminine *uke* (Welker, 2015). For example, Nagakubo Yoko (1996, as cited in Fujimoto, 2015) analyzed the

*seme* and *uke* characters in 381 Japanese BL and found that both *seme* and *uke* characters demonstrated traits of both masculinity and femininity. However, *seme-uke* couples in these stories complied with the traditional heterosexual gender roles because *seme* characters were primarily masculine while *uke* characters were primarily feminine. Sihombing (2011) found that most BL manga depict physically more masculine *seme* characters with physically more feminine *uke* characters. In addition, in BL manga, *seme* characters are more likely to express power and dominance, while *uke* characters are more likely to exhibit shyness and fragility in emotional expression and actions. Pagliassotti (2010) found the *ukes* in Japanese BL tend to be more passive and objectified within the context of sexual activities and are more emotionally unstable than the *seme*. The *seme-uke* model is also found in Chinese BL. Zhou and colleagues (2018) conducted a content analysis and found that Chinese BL stories usually depict one character as highly masculine, and pair him with a highly feminine partner who embodies minimal masculine characteristics. Lin (2020) argues that the *seme-uke* rule remains strict in Chinese BL, which may reinforce the existing stereotypical impressions of gay men.

If BL do not depict truly equal relationships, why have readers repeatedly self-reported that they are more engaged with BL because of plots featuring greater relational equality? In addition, "women dominating" stories are much less popular than both BL and traditional heterosexual romances in contemporary China (Zhao, 2014), suggesting women prefer to fight against the traditional gender roles and gendered romantic relationships by creating and reading male-male romances rather than through heterosexual romances than invert typical gendered hierarchies. One possible explanation is that BL readers may have a widespread pro-BL bias toward romantic relationships among gay men. Pagliassotti (2010) argues that men enjoy more freedom and privilege than women in patriarchal societies, so women may feel that the male protagonists in BL enjoy the freedom and privilege granted by the characters' biological sex, even when the characters otherwise exhibit highly feminine characteristics. Accordingly, women readers may be more likely to idealize homosexual relationships as being free from heterosexual gender norms, and thus more egalitarian than heterosexual relationships.

Our first set of hypotheses test is the existence of this pro-BL bias. Hypothesis 1 focuses on whether women readers are more engaged in BL than heterosexual romances, as well as more engaged in stories with weaker gender roles than stories with more traditionally defined gender roles. Hypotheses 2 and 3 address the connections between the story type, strength of gendered relational stereotypes, perceived relational equality, and narrative engagement.

*H1a: Women readers have higher narrative engagement with BL than heterosexual romances.*

*H1b: Women readers have higher narrative engagement with stories that exhibit weaker gendered relational stereotypes than with stories exhibiting stronger stereotypes.*

*H2a: Women readers will believe that romantic relationships depicted in BL are more egalitarian than in heterosexual romances, even when the story contents are identical except for the names and presumed gender of the characters.*

*H2b: Women readers will perceive romantic relationships depicted in the stories with weak gendered relational stereotypes as more egalitarian than romantic relationships depicted in the stories with strong stereotypes.*

*H3: The perceived relational equality is positively associated with women readers' narrative engagement with the story.*

### **Identification and Narrative Engagement**

Some studies suggested that women readers may identify more strongly with characters in the BL than in heterosexual romance (e.g., Blair, 2010; Pagliassotti, 2010). The heightened levels of identification turn into stronger engagement experience in reading BL.

Cohen (2001) defined identification as an imaginary psychological state wherein people temporarily forget their own identity and adopt the mindset of having someone else's identity and role. Identification is highly correlated with media users' narrative engagement while viewing because media users may temporarily forget their own identities and temporarily assume the media characters' identities (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009).

Previous studies show that identification with media characters can increase viewers' acceptance of minorities (Igartua, 2010; Joyce & Harwood, 2014; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). During identification, media users may temporarily forget their own identities and experience other lives using the media characters' identities (Henning & Vorderer, 2001; Katz & Foulkes, 1962). As a result, identification will increase viewers' empathy with the minority character (Oatley, 1999), making them more accepting of the minority group. Yet McLaughlin and Rodriguez (2017) found that identification with stereotypical media characters also reinforces viewers' implicit stereotypes about how minority individuals should look, talk, and act. They argued that identification requires emotional and cognitive commitments, which reinforce stereotypical depictions as true.

Audiences are more likely to identify with media characters who are similar to them and therefore usually identify with the characters of the same sex (Hoffner, 1996). Consequently, when reading heterosexual romances, women are often presumed to automatically link themselves to female characters (Pagliassotti, 2010; Stanley, 2008; Tan, 2010). Although *uke* characters in BL are frequently depicted as more feminine than *seme* characters, both protagonists are men, complicating the same-gender identification dynamic potentially in operation for heterosexual romances. Instead, women readers may identify with either or both male protagonists. This experience of identifying with both "the desired and the desiring" might be another important reason for women readers' higher engagement in BL (Pagliassotti, 2010; Stanley, 2008, p. 105; Tan, 2010):

*H4a: Women readers are more willing to identify with main characters in the BL than in heterosexual romances, even when the story contents are identical except for the names and presumed gender of the characters.*

No previous study has explored the relationship between BL readers' perceived equality of romantic relationship depicted and their identification with the gay men characters. However, many studies find that audiences will more readily identify with media characters whom they wish to emulate (wishful identification; Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012). This wishful identification encourages audiences to learn both positive and negative behaviors (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Matthews, 2003). As most women readers claim to appreciate BL because of the stories' opposition to traditional gender roles and stereotypes, we hypothesize that women readers will prefer to identify with characters in stories with weak gendered relational stereotypes than in stories with stronger stereotypes.

*H4b: Women readers are more willing to identify with main characters in stories with weak gendered relational stereotypes than in stories with strong stereotypes.*

In addition, they will also prefer to identify with characters in the stories which they believe depict a more egalitarian romantic relationship.

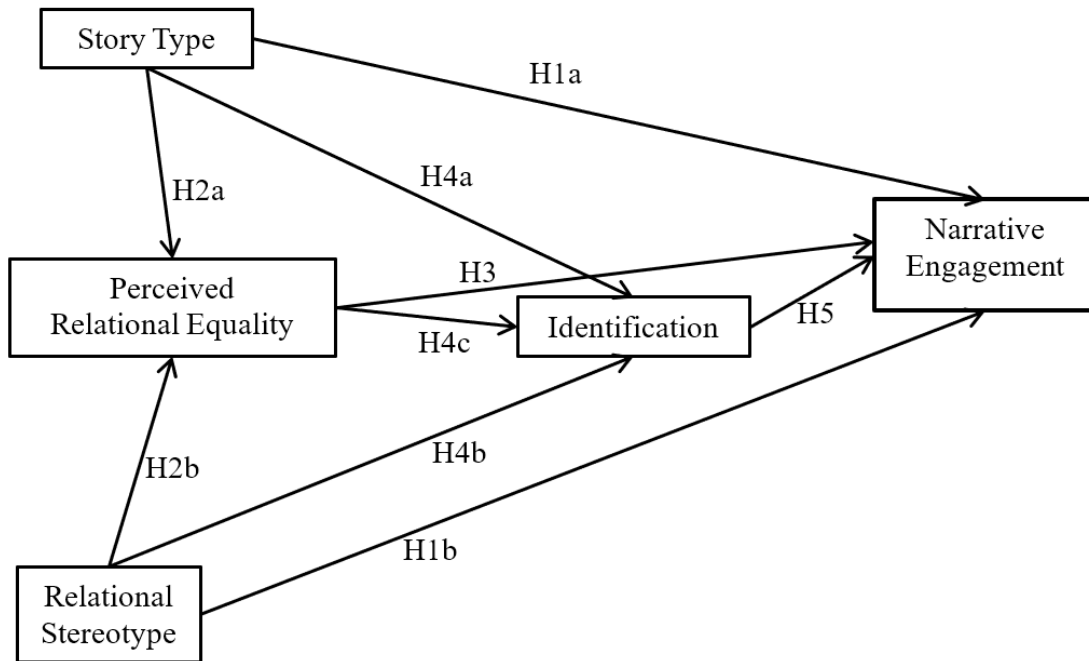
*H4c: The perceived relational equality between characters will be positively associated with women readers' identification with main characters in the story.*

As identification is highly correlated with narrative engagement, we hypothesized that:

*H5: Women readers' identification will be positively associated with their narrative engagement while reading.*

#### ***The Proposed Models for Narrative Engagement of Reading BL***

Based on previous theories and studies, we hypothesize that both story type and gendered relational stereotype will influence readers' perceived relational equality of the romantic relationship, as well as their strength of identification with the protagonists.



**Figure 1. Proposed model.**

Higher perceived equality also leads to stronger identification with the protagonists. Finally, both perceived equality and identification will contribute to readers' narrative engagement of the story. The model proposed is shown in Figure 1.

## Method

### **Procedure and Participants**

The current study used a 2 relational stereotype level (strong vs. weak) × 2 story type (BL vs. heterosexual romance) between-subject design. In total, 174 Chinese female participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. The experiment was developed using Qualtrics. The link was initially posted on several BL fans group on WeChat and QQ. Later, recruitment for the experiment was spread by word of mouth. Previous studies invited self-identified BL fans. However, BL also influence many Internet users who do not self-identify as fans but occasionally read or encounter BL content online in China (Wei, 2014). Accordingly, the current study invited any woman interested in BL to participate. Of the 174 participants, 10 (5.7%) have never heard about BL, 45 (25.9%) have heard about but never read BL, 69 (39.7%) of them read BL occasionally (once or twice a month), and 49 (28.3%) of them read BL frequently (from one to two times a week to every day). The average age of the participants is 23.79 years old ( $SD = 3.85$ ), which is slightly older than the average age of BL fans in China reported in Song and Wang (2011) and Zhao and Madill's (2018) study. This is because in China, most parents still treat homosexuality as a taboo and will not allow their children to read BL. Therefore, we could not secure parental permission for



teenagers to participate. Most of the participants are heterosexual with only one who self-identifies as lesbian. Only 36 (20.7%) of the participants have gay friends, while others either do not know any gay men or only reporting being acquaintances of gay men. Nevertheless, most of the participants hold a relatively positive attitude toward gay men. Ninety-six (55.5%) rated nine of nine (mostly positive) on the scale of attitude toward gay men, while only five (2.8%) of them rated below five. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of the eight stories designed to be used as stimuli, as discussed below. Then, each participant was asked to finish a questionnaire about their reading experience.

### ***Stimuli Preparation and Manipulation Check***

Several examples of Chinese BL, each approximately 10,000 Chinese characters in length, were selected and edited to create the experiment's stimuli. Only stories set in schools and offices, reflecting the two most common BL settings according to Stanley (2008), were selected to reduce the potential variance of enjoyment stemming from readers' preferences for other literary genres. In addition, we eliminated any plot elements that invite moral judgments against the protagonists because of explicit criminality. To avoid running afoul of anti-pornography laws in China, we deleted explicit depictions of anal or oral sex in the stimuli while limiting a few implicit depictions to less than three sentences each. The depictions only imply the identities of a *seme* and a *uke*. However, this study employs the terms *seme* and *uke* for conceptual clarity.

Next, two authors independently performed a content analysis on the selected stories. We calculated each protagonist's masculinity and femininity scores using the scale from Zhou and colleagues's (2018) study of Chinese BL. The scale takes into account the variability of multiple relevant indicators by measuring characters' masculinity and femininity as a composite of six aspects, including appearance and voice, professional occupations and household activities, protecting-protected role, sexual experience and acts, aggression, and marital status without privileging a subset of these characteristics.

Two school romance stories and two office romance stories were selected. Two stories have strong gendered relational stereotypes, in which the *seme* is much more masculine and dominant (at least eight points higher in masculinity score) than the *uke*, and the *uke* is much more feminine and submissive than the *seme* (at least eight points lower in the femininity score). The other two stories have weak gendered stereotypes. Although the *seme* is still more masculine and less feminine than *uke*, the difference is less pronounced than the masculinity and femininity score difference between the *seme* and the *uke* is less than four points.

After selecting and editing the stories, we transformed each of them into a heterosexual romance by altering the name and the third-person personal pronoun of the *uke* without changing any plot elements. Thus, the male characters in the heterosexual versions are identical with the *seme* in the BL versions. The female characters in the heterosexual version are identical with *uke* in BL versions, except for their gender. We assembled eight stories in total through this process.

We also asked all participants to rate the level of each main character's exhibited masculinity-femininity using Lunneborg's scale (1970). We calculated a masculinity-femininity difference score from the responses by subtracting the *uke*'s masculinity-femininity score from the *seme*'s masculinity-femininity

score. A higher masculinity-femininity difference score indicates a stronger perceived relational stereotype from the story. Results from a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that participants rated characters in strong gendered relational stereotype stories as having a significantly higher masculinity-femininity difference score,  $M = 10.42$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ , than in weak stereotype stories,  $M = 0.72$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . However, when comparing the scores for the BL,  $M = 4.94$ ,  $SD = 1.63$  with the score of heterosexual stories,  $M = 6.20$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ,  $p = 0.58$ , our participants did not identify statistically different levels. The results show that our participants perceived that gendered relational stereotyping is stronger in strong gendered stereotype stories than in weak stereotype stories. They also perceived the stereotyping as consistent among the BL and the heterosexual stories because the story content within both groups is identical. Therefore, our manipulation of stimuli is effective.

### **Measurements**

#### *Narrative Engagement*

The scale from Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) was adopted to measure audiences' overall narrative engagement while reading BL stories (e.g., "While reading this story, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed"). Narrative engagement was found highly correlated to enjoyment, so this measure could be used as a proxy to reflect audiences' enjoyment of a narrative. In the current study, we also asked participants to rate (from 0 to 100) how much they enjoyed reading the story. Two items were removed from the original 12-item narrative engagement scale because they overlapped with items in the identification scale ("When a main character succeeded, I felt happy, and when they suffered, I felt sad" and "I felt sorry for some of the characters."). All responses to the other 10 narrative engagement items were averaged to create a measurement with a high internal consistency,  $M = 4.76$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ , *Cronbach's a* = .85. The narrative engagement score is highly correlated to participants' self-report enjoyment,  $r = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ .

#### *Identification*

Participants' identification with the *seme*/male character and with the *uke*/female character were assessed separately using Cohen's (2001) scale. In Cohen's 10-item scale, two questions ask audiences' general identification with the story but not with any character. These questions overlapped with questions in the narrative engagement scale, so they were removed. Responses to the other eight items were averaged to indicate identification,  $M_{seme/male} = 4.45$ ,  $SD_{seme/male} = 1.87$ , *Cronbach's a* = 0.90,  $M_{uke/female} = 4.45$ ,  $SD_{uke/female} = 1.98$ , *Cronbach's a* = .92.

#### *Perceived Relational Equality*

Participants were asked to rate to what extent they feel the romantic relationship between the two main characters in the story was equal, using a nine-point Likert scale.

## Results

**Table 1. Zero-order Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Readers.**

Descriptive Data	1	2	3	Mean	SD
1. Perceived relational equality				3.80	2.49
2. Identification with <i>seme</i>	.45***			4.45	1.87
3. Identification with <i>uke</i>	.46***	.63***		4.45	1.98
4. Narrative engagement	.38***	.58***	.52***	4.76	1.69

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among all variables. The results indicate that all variables were significantly correlated,  $p < .001$ , with each other. Correlations among the variables ranged from 0.45 to 0.63.

Although variables like attitudes toward gay men, frequency of reading BL, and relationships with gay men in real life were considered as potential control variables, none of these is significantly correlated with the perceived relational equality, identification, or narrative engagement, all  $p > .05$ . Therefore, they were not incorporated into the final data analysis.

### **Story Type, Gendered Relational Stereotype, and Narrative Engagement**

Hypothesis 1 tested whether women readers are more engaged in stories with weak gendered relational stereotypes more than stories with strong stereotypes, and if they were more engaged in BL than in heterosexual romances. According to the result of a two-way ANOVA, participants were more engaged in BL,  $M_{BL} = 5.24$ ,  $SD_{BL} = 1.69$ , than heterosexual romances,  $M_{hetero} = 4.33$ ,  $SD_{hetero} = 1.59$ ,  $F(1,172) = 17.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ , confirming Hypothesis 1a. The results also suggest that women readers are more engaged in weak gendered relational stereotype stories,  $M_{weak} = 5.21$ ,  $SD_{weak} = 1.59$ , than strong stereotype stories,  $M_{strong} = 4.31$ ,  $SD_{strong} = 1.68$ ,  $F(1,172) = 17.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ , which supports Hypothesis 1b. There is no significant two-way interaction,  $p > .05$ .

### **Perceived Relational Equality and Narrative Engagement**

To test whether gendered relational stereotype and story type influence readers' perceived equality of romantic relationships, we performed a 2(strong vs. weak stereotype)  $\times$  2(BL vs. heterosexual romance) ANOVA. Even with identical plots, participants still perceived romantic relationships in BL as more equal than in the heterosexual romances,  $M_{BL} = 4.24$ ,  $SD_{BL} = 2.57$ ,  $M_{hetero} = 3.40$ ,  $SD_{hetero} = 2.35$ ,  $F(1,173) = 6.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ , supporting Hypothesis 2a. Results also support Hypothesis 2b that readers perceive relationships depicted in stories with weaker gendered relational stereotypes as more equal,  $M_{weak} = 4.22$ ,  $SD_{weak} = 2.38$ ,  $M_{strong} = 3.39$ ,  $SD_{strong} = 2.53$ ,  $F(1,173) = 6.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . There is no significant two-way interaction,  $p > 0.05$ .

The perceived relational equality of the romantic relationship was positively associated with participants' narrative engagement of the story,  $t(171) = 5.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r^2 = .14$  (Hypothesis 3). Readers

demonstrated higher overall narrative engagement in viewing BL and heterosexual romances because of perceived relational equality.

### **Identification and Narrative Engagement**

Hypotheses 4a and 4b explored the relationship between story type, stereotype, and the intensity of readers' identification with story characters. Two two-way ANOVA were conducted. The first two-way ANOVA tested the influence of story type and gendered relational stereotype on readers' identification with the *seme*/male characters, and the second one focused on readers' identification with the *uke*/female characters. Participants were more willing to identify with the *seme*/male characters in weak gendered relational stereotype stories,  $M_{\text{weak}} = 4.90$ ,  $SD_{\text{weak}} = 1.84$ , than in strong stereotype stories,  $M_{\text{strong}} = 4.00$ ,  $SD_{\text{strong}} = 1.80$ ,  $F(1,170) = 12.54$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . Participants also preferred to identify with the *seme* in the BL,  $M_{\text{BL}} = 4.82$ ,  $SD_{\text{BL}} = 1.96$ , rather than the heterosexual male characters,  $M_{\text{hetero}} = 4.12$ ,  $SD_{\text{hetero}} = 1.73$ ,  $F(1,170) = 8.14$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . Toward the *uke*/female characters, participants were more willing to identify with the *uke*/female characters in the weak gendered relational stereotype stories,  $M_{\text{weak}} = 4.87$ ,  $SD_{\text{weak}} = 2.01$ , than in the strong stereotype stories,  $M_{\text{strong}} = 4.03$ ,  $SD_{\text{strong}} = 1.87$ ,  $F(1,172) = 8.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . However, the difference between participants' identification intensity with the *uke* in BL and the female character in heterosexual romances is not statistically significant,  $F(1,172) = 2.09$ ,  $p = .15$ . There is no significant two-way interaction,  $p > .05$ . Thus, Hypothesis 4b has been supported while Hypothesis 4a is only partially supported.

Finally, Hypothesis 5 focused on the association between identification and narrative engagement. When participants reported having more identification with the two main characters, they also tended to be more engaged in the story more  $t_{\text{seme/male}}(169) = 5.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $t_{\text{uke/female}}(169) = 3.23$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r^2 = .37$ , supporting Hypothesis 5.

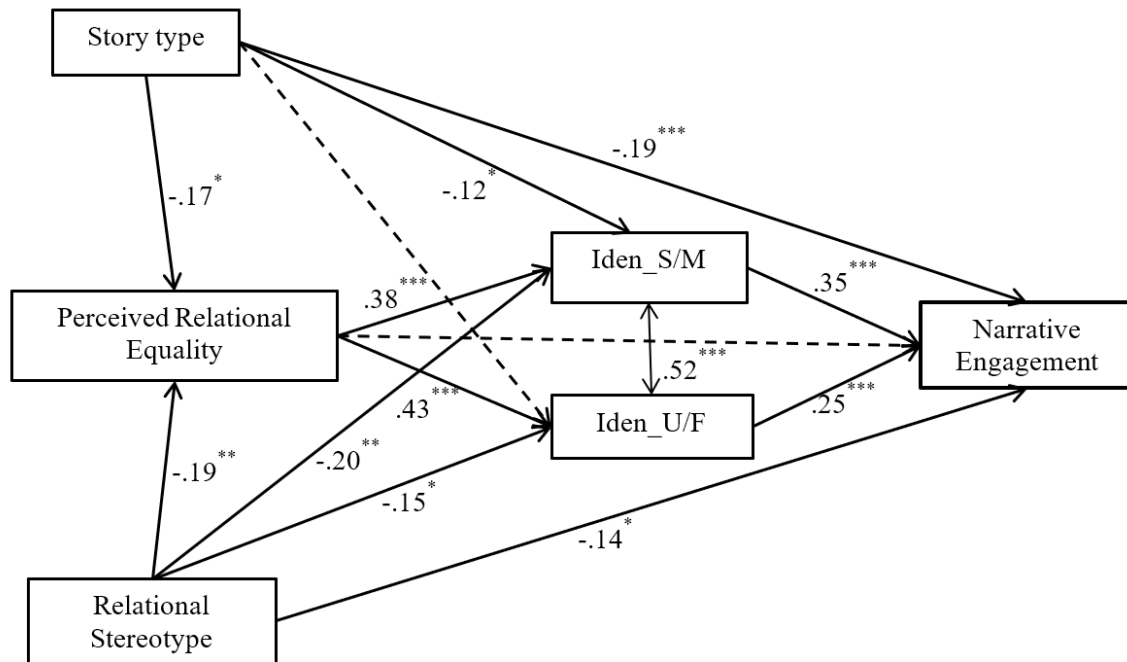
### **Path Analyses**

After checking the five hypotheses separately, they were put into a comprehensive model (Figure 2) and tested in a path analysis using an R package named "lavaan" (Rosseel, 2012). The path coefficient indicates whether or not a path from one variable to another is statistically significant. The model's goodness of fit is to be judged using a list of criteria (Schreiber, Nora, Stage, Barlow, & King 2006), including (1) a nonsignificant p-value of the chi-square test and a  $\chi^2/df$  ratio of less than 2; (2) a CFI (comparative fit index) value that is greater than 0.95; (3) a SRMR (standardized root mean square residual) whose cutoff value is close to 0.08; and (4) a RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation) value less than 0.06.

The proposed model (Figure 2) provides a very good fit of the data ( $\chi^2/df = .50$ ,  $p = 0.60$ , CFI = 1.00, SRMR = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.01). A total of 41% of the variance of participation was explained (see Figure 2).

Examining specific paths in the model, both gender stereotype and story type influence participants' perceived equality of romantic relationships in the story,  $\beta_{\text{stereotype}} = -.19$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\beta_{\text{story type}} = -.17$ ,  $p < .05$ .

In the next step, perceived equality is positively associated with the identification with both the *seme*/male,  $\beta = .38, p < .001$ , and the *uke*/female character,  $\beta = .43, p < .001$ .



**Figure 2. Path analysis of the proposed model.**

Notes. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , dotted line refers to not significant. Stereotype was coded as: 1 = low, 2 = high. Story type was coded as: 1 = BL, 2 = heterosexual romance. Iden\_S/M refers to identification with *seme*/male character and Iden\_U/F refers to identification with the *uke*/female character.

The path analysis also indicates a direct association between story type and participants' identification with the *seme*/male character, but not participants' identification with the *uke*/female character. Participants were more likely to identify with the *seme* than the male character in the heterosexual romances,  $\beta = -.12, p < .05$ . Relational stereotype is negatively associated with participants' identification with the *seme*/male character,  $\beta = -.20, p < .01$ , as well as their identification with the *uke*/female character,  $\beta = -.15, p < .05$ . Participants were more likely to identify with both protagonists in the weak gendered relational stereotype stories than in the strong stereotype stories.

Finally, both identification with the *seme*/male character,  $\beta = .35, p < .001$ , and the *uke*/female character,  $\beta = .25, p = .001$ , directly contribute to participants' narrative engagement in reading BL and heterosexual romances. From the model, we have not found the direct effects of perceived relational equality on the narrative engagement. Its effects have been fully mediated by the identification with characters.

## Discussion

Using an online experiment, the current study explores the psychological process by which Chinese heterosexual female readers enjoy BL romances. The results provide empirical evidence to popular claims in previous studies (e.g., Blair, 2010; Y. Li, 2009; McLelland, 2000; Pagliassotti, 2010; C. Zhang, 2016) that heterosexual female readers perceive BL romantic relationships as more egalitarian and identify more with the characters in BL stories. The results of the current study provide more nuanced understanding to both psychological constructs among readers.

Similar to heterosexual romances, BL typically features two protagonists. Interestingly, women readers were more willing to identify with the BL *seme* character than the male characters in the heterosexual romances, whereas there is no significant difference between the identification with *uke* character and the female characters. The result might be due to the decoupling of biological sex and masculine-feminine traits in the genre, which leaves female readers more space to identify with characters they would not normally relate to in heterosexual romances. In other words, the tendency to identify with the masculine/dominant character might be inhibited in reading heterosexual romances because such stories prepare women to identify more readily with female characters who share their biological sex. In BL, however, both protagonists are male, meaning the character's biological sex does not complicate identification with the more masculine and dominant characters. This may explain why readers' identification with the *seme* characters is significantly higher. Yet, women readers' tendency to identify with the feminine/submissive character is not inhibited in reading either BL or heterosexual romances. Thus, there is no statistically significant difference between readers' identification with *uke* and female characters. Results from the current study suggests that women readers could still empower themselves by identifying with the *seme*, even if BL still employs gendered relational stereotypes.

We also found that women readers perceive BL as more relationally egalitarian, even when all elements of the story except for protagonist's presumed gender remained constant. It is not surprising that readers regard romantic relationships in weak relational gendered stereotype stories as more egalitarian than in high stereotype stories. Yet, regardless how stereotypical the characters are, readers also believe relationships are more equal in BL than in heterosexual romances. Participants even perceived those relationships depicted in high relationally stereotypical BL is slightly more egalitarian (not statistically significant) than in low stereotypical heterosexual romances

As mentioned, women dominating stories are much less popular than both BL and traditional heterosexual romances in China (Zhao, 2014). The path model provides an explanation: women participants had a strong pro-BL bias, meaning romantic relationships between gay men characters are perceived as more egalitarian than the romantic relationship between heterosexual characters. The bias contributes to women readers' identification with characters, and finally leads to stronger narrative engagement. A related type of idealization has been observed in women's reading of heterosexual romances: women "navigate" patriarchy by creating idealized romantic partners who combine stereotypical masculine and feminine traits (Radway, 2009).

The current study extends this logic to Chinese women's reading of BL: The pro-BL bias might come from women readers' belief that men have more privilege and freedom in patriarchal societies, permitting them to see romantic relationships between men as necessarily more egalitarian than heterosexual romantic relationships (Pagliassotti, 2010). This also resonates with the point made by some Chinese scholars (Liu, 2017; Zhao, 2014; Zheng, 2017) that the interest in BL reflects women readers' lack of confidence in women's power. They do not dare to imagine equal heterosexual relationships, even in a fictional world. Reading BL provides a temporary escape from patriarchy rather than a field to contest it (Zheng, 2017). The current study suggests that even when the content of stories is identical, BL becomes a desirable choice for some women readers by offering an escape from the oppression of the patriarchal society in a fictional world that explores romance without relying on female characters.

This pro-BL bias has far-reaching implication for gay equal right movement in China, where nuanced and realistic representations of gay men in the media are lacking. The pro-BL bias as a response to the need for such representation may be a double-edged sword. The results showed that readers have higher narrative engagement and identification with characters in BL stories. Therefore, they may show more empathy and elicit less negative emotion toward gay men in real life. However, the idealization that gay men romantic relationships are more egalitarian remains even when women readers are reading a highly gendered-stereotypical BL story. This idealization further leads women readers to show higher identification with the *same* characters, and finally results in stronger narrative engagement. Because of this idealization, BL readers may not recognize the stereotypical content they read, the perceptions they hold, and consequently overlook the ways in which heteronormative depictions of gay men in BL stories are not realistic representations of actual gay men in China.

By reinforcing heteronormativity, the pro-BL bias could be as harmful as negative stereotypes to members of a stereotyped minority groups because members of minority groups fear they cannot conform to such positive stereotyping (e.g., Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Cocchiara & Quick, 2004). Negative responses to such unrealistic positive stereotyping have already been documented in in-depth interviews with Chinese gay men and LGBT activists. For example, Zhao (2014) and H. F. Zhang (2012) reported that many in the gay community hold an indifferent or dismissive attitude toward BL readers. Dr. Damien Lu, who has worked with Asian LGBT people since 1980s, indicated that the idealization of the homosexual romantic relationship and the tendency to interpret gay men relationships as similar to stereotypical heterosexual romantic relationships have given "ordinary" gay men great pressure, and also lead to discrimination toward the gay community (as cited in Zhao, 2014). Interviewees in both Zhao (2014) and H. F. Zhang's (2012) studies also complained that some BL readers attempted to impose stereotypes from BL on actual gay men, which they found irksome. They complained that some BL readers think gay men should be cute, have colorful long hair, and act as shy as stereotypical women. Some BL readers even attempt to match two gay men they know only because the two meet BL-rooted expectations for a couple. One gay man interviewee in H. F. Zhang (2012) concluded that BL readers sometimes should (but may not) understand that the gay men community is not the BL world in their mind.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

A few limitations deserve attention. First, the current study shares the same limitations with other experimental studies. Stimuli stories used in the experiment have been edited to control possible confounding variables. The editing may create an unnatural experimental environment. Experimental study is also not as effective as qualitative studies in exploring the influence of individual differences on the results. Nonetheless, the current study could serve as a complement to previous critical and qualitative studies. In the future, critical and qualitative scholars could focus more on the pro-BL bias in BL readers and explore if such biases also exist in more natural settings.

Second, using a nonrepresentative sample somewhat limits the generalizability of the results. However, as homosexuality is still a taboo in China, reading BL is still a stigmatized behavior, making it difficult to locate a more representative sample.

Third, there might be other factors leading to women readers' interest in BL. Zsila and colleagues (2018) conducted a survey on motives for consuming BL in Hungary. The survey also found that identification as well as equal romantic relationships are two important motives for BL consumers. Moreover, the study also identified other motives such as seeking sexually arousing content or seeking more positive portrayals of gay men. In the current study, there is still an unexplained direct association between story type, stereotype, and narrative engagement of reading. Future studies should examine other factors influencing women readers' enjoyment of reading BL.

The current study examines mainland Chinese society, which has a relatively conservative public opinion toward homosexuality, as well as special governmental regulation relating to BL. As Zsila and colleagues (2018) suggests, motivations for consuming BL may differ across countries with different cultural context and legal regimes. Therefore, results from the current study might be unique for Chinese BL readers. In a less patriarchal society, BL readers might be less likely to hold a pro-BL bias because women in these societies might be more likely to feel they do not need to be a man to enjoy an equal romantic relationship. In a society with less censorship, BL culture may also exert less impact on people's perceptions of gay men. Consequently, future studies should be conducted to test the model proposed in the current study in other regions and cultures, to explore whether the model is universal or unique to Chinese BL readers.

Furthermore, the current study suggests that reading BL may lead to positive but stereotypical perceptions and attitudes toward gay men. Future studies should be conducted to directly examine the impact of BL on their readers' expectations, perceptions, and attitudes toward LGBT groups.



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