

NEGOTIATING SEXUALITIES: ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE AS THE GATEWAY TO LGBTQ+ ACCEPTANCE

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Abstract

The development of technology now has brought a lot of space for people to express their thoughts. Today, social media is a major platform for sharing ideas and facilitating the exchange of thoughts among people. In recent years, Alternative Universe has become a part of fan fiction that has attracted many young people. As a popular culture, Alternative Universe can generate interaction among fans in online communities, especially on the X platform. By using the netnography research method, this paper will explore and look deeper into the production and dissemination of homosexual AU until readers accept them. This paper will also try to explore why many readers are interested in reading and accepting homosexuals in fiction but not in the reality. The findings of this study show that the majority of homosexual AU readers are female. For them, AU is a medium that serves to express feelings related to objectification that is often experienced, as well as a space to explore their sexuality. In a fictionalized context, readers can create and consume narratives that challenge social norms such as gender stereotypes and taboo sexual relationships. The findings of this study are expected to provide greater insight into how social media and popular culture can influence young people's views on sensitive issues such as homosexuality.

Keywords: Alternative Universe, social media, objectification.

INTRODUCTION

The massive development of technology has made social media able to provide various features that ultimately serve to improve digital literacy skills, especially in adolescents. One of the efforts to improve digital literacy is through fan fiction in a thread known as Alternative Universe (AU) (Febriyanti & Ekomila, 2023; Nikmah & Hidayat, 2024) in the form of fake chat screenshots equipped with photos or videos of idols from real life. One of the social media platforms used as a place to share stories is X (Twitter). The acceptance of fan fiction stories as popular culture among fans is because it can help them see a world they have never seen before, because sometimes the writing is made against the rules, so they establish their own subculture and special interests (Thomas, 2011).

Currently, the most popular fan fiction is Alternate Universe (AU). Through AU stories, idols will be portrayed as characters that are different from their real life including their background or identity. On the X platform, AUs are created in the form of threads in the form of fake chats. To facilitate the visualization of the story developed, it is not uncommon for authors to use certain characters such as K-Pop idols. The existence of this AU then gave rise to a lot of creativity from writers to develop their

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stories based on the visuals of their idols. They can freely write themes and determine the character of each idol. Of all the genres and themes of AU fanfiction, homosexuality is the most popular these days.

The number of fans who read homosexual AUs can be seen from the existence of bases on X as a forum for exchanging AU BXB information such as @vkookfess which has 78.6 million followers and @aubxbfess which has 211.7 million followers. This phenomenon then affects the internalization of a new understanding of sexuality for readers because it seems to support idols having gay partners. This reality shows that fan fiction has brought about the acceptance of same-sex romance on social media. In the AU BXB story, readers will be presented with another side of men who do not have masculine traits and tend to have female-like traits. Some stories even add the m-preg (male pregnant) genre where men have wombs so they can get pregnant. However, the acceptance of same-sex relationships in the real world is quite the opposite. Based on a search through the X platform, several accounts were found that revealed this, such as a tweet from the @ffu***** account which stated;

‘I’m also a shipper who likes to read au bxb but I’m still sane.’

Tweets with similar intentions can also be found on the account @ket****;

‘I also like bxb my au reading is mostly from bxb but if my idol is dating a girl I’m even more happy because that’s how it should be right?’.

This then indicates that there is a duality of fan perception, where they accept same-sex relationships, especially BXB, in a fictional context but reject them in the real world. Normatively, reading same-sex relationships is not justified in the teachings of Islam, nor has it been recognised in Indonesian state law. However, the emergence of many fans in the realm of homosexual fanfiction makes this topic interesting to study more deeply. On that basis, this paper will explore the reasons why fans are more accepting of homosexual stories in fanfiction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Fan Fiction and Popular Culture

When we talk about popular culture, we usually refer to various forms of culture that are accessible to a wide audience, such as film, digital media, and music. Storey (2018) explains that popular culture is a space where economic, political, and social forces meet and influence each other. In the context of popular culture, fan fiction has emerged as one of the most significant forms of creative expression among fans, especially in K-Pop fandoms. Fan fiction refers to narrative works created by fans based on the world, characters or storylines of existing works of popular culture, such as novels, films, TV series or music groups. Through this process, fans become not only passive consumers, but also active producers who contribute to the cultural ecosystem (Thevenin, 2019). (Henry, 1992) states that fan fiction is part of participatory culture, where fans can produce and distribute new works fuelled by their love and appreciation of the original text or culture. This participation offers an opportunity for individuals to interact with their beloved works of popular culture in greater depth, changing the storyline, expanding the narrative world, or incorporating new elements that reflect their personal views and experiences (Trier-Bieniek, 2019).

One important aspect of fan fiction is its ability to be a transformative work. In many cases, K-pop fans adapt elements from the idol world to create a different narrative-for example, by changing the

gender, race, or sexual orientation of a character. These transformations allow fans to explore themes that are more relevant to their identities, especially identities that are often marginalized in mainstream media. Finn and McCall (2016) point out that the Alternative Universe (AU) gives fans the freedom to customize characters and relationship dynamics in ways that better suit their personal identities or fantasies. For many fan fiction writers and readers, these works serve as a safe space to express themselves in relation to the objectification they often experience, explore their sexuality, and create and consume narratives that challenge social norms such as gender stereotypes and taboos regarding sexual relationships.

Through fan fiction, fans can challenge conventional boundaries and create narrative worlds where they feel more represented. In K-pop fandom, fan fiction often depicts relationships between boy group members with various dynamics that stir the reader's imagination. This is in line with the idea that fan fiction serves not only as a form of entertainment, but also as a tool for individuals to explore and redefine their identities in a more inclusive context. As such, fanfiction offers an avenue for fans to construct more progressive narratives, both in terms of gender and sexuality, that may not be visible or accepted in mainstream works of popular culture.

1.2 Theories of Gender and Sexuality

Our understanding of gender and sexuality can vary from one culture to another, as well as from one time period to another. In the context of fanfiction, gender and sexuality theory provides a lens to explore how fan-generated narratives can serve as a form of resistance to established norms. Many fanfiction writers create characters with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, which are often underrepresented in mainstream media. These works often explore the dynamics of queer and non-binary relationships, and provide diverse alternatives for readers to understand and identify with. Through these representations, they make space for more inclusive identity exploration and champion the recognition of marginalized experiences and perspectives (Thevenin, 2019). For example, research by Finn & McCall (2016) shows how fan fiction writers utilize the Alternative Universe to create relationships that are not bound by heteronormative norms, allowing readers to imagine different possibilities in a freer context. On the other hand, fanfiction can also be an arena for questioning and deconstructing gender stereotypes. By changing the characters from the original text, fan fiction writers can elaborate on themes such as femininity, masculinity, and sexuality in ways that challenge traditional understandings. Thomas (2011) observes that fan fiction allows fans to create narratives that reject stereotypes and expand the definition of what is acceptable in gender and sexual representations.

1.3 Social Media and Online Communities

The role of social media in disseminating and facilitating the production of fan fiction cannot be overlooked. Platforms such as Tumblr, Archive of Our Own (AO3), Wattpad, and more recently, X, have become places for K-pop fans to share their work and engage in discussions about representations of gender and sexuality. Online communities give fans a place to interact and collaborate with each other, creating a rich ecosystem for the exploration of new ideas. In fanfiction, writers and readers can share opinions, provide feedback, and participate in creative challenges or collaborations. This not only strengthens relationships between community members, but also encourages innovation in narratives and approaches to relevant themes. As (Trier-Bieniek, 2019) points out, active participation in these online communities allows individuals to feel more connected and empowered in cultural production.

One of the positive impacts of social media is its ability to reach a wider audience and diversify the voices in fanfiction. When readers from different backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender identities

come together in one community, they bring diverse perspectives that can enrich the resulting narrative. Kuo et al., (2022) note that fandom communities often create inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ fans, giving them the opportunity to freely express their identities and experiences through the fiction they produce. However, while social media can be a positive space, challenges also arise. There is a risk of harassment and stigmatization of fans who express identities that are considered ‘different’ or unconventional. Therefore, it is important for online communities to build a culture of support and mutual respect, where individuals feel safe to share and express themselves. In this context, moderation and supportive policies on social media platforms are crucial to maintaining the integrity and inclusivity of the community. With all its advantages and challenges, social media plays a crucial role in shaping the way fans interact with each other and the works they love. In the world of fan fiction, social media serves not only as a distribution channel, but also as a space where dialogue about sexuality, gender, and identity can take place.

METHOD

This qualitative study uses a netnography approach to explore how the dissemination of same-sex relationship narratives produced in the form of fan fiction is shared on platform X. This approach is used because it adopts ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities through textual computer-mediated communication (Piller et al., 2012). Some netnography research analyzes user content on social media applications such as X, Facebook, Instagram and other user forums. This research will discuss the content of user comments related to AU on the X platform, especially on the base accounts @vkookfess and @aubxbfess which fans use to interact with each other. The existence of the base as an online community indirectly supports the existence of homosexual couples in the virtual world. The data collection process was conducted during June 2024 by categorizing fan interactions such as opinions, asking for recommendations, and reviews about an AU. The data that has been classified is then identified as a form of acceptance of homosexual narratives. The preparation of the representation stage will still pay attention to the applicable research ethics.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Alternative Universe: Popular Media Today

K-Pop is portrayed as a means to empower fans to act as cultural ambassadors and bridge the cultural gap between the local population in the home country and the Korean population. This translation of two different cultures supports the role of fans in playing a central role in globalizing K-pop fandom to the point of spreading Hallyu to their home regions. They often demonstrate the ability to organize large-scale collective efforts such as birthday projects, donations, fundraising, streaming to boost song ratings, and even buying giant billboards (Kim & Hutt, 2021). The amount of collective power that K-poppers have has resulted in many popular culture products being produced such as shippers. K-pop fans usually pair their idols with other idols either within or outside the group in the form of romance, friendship, and family (Paramita & Laila, 2022).

The existence of this shipper can be found through fan fiction or fanfic for short, which is a fan-produced story based on characters in the real world to narrate a new plot or contradict the original story (Abrahamson, 2013; Black, 2006; Jennifer, 2015; Thomas, 2011). Through fanfic, fans are free to write imaginary stories related to their idols outside the reality of real life. K-pop-themed fanfic can be referred to as a form of manifestation of the collective spirit of fans in expressing their love for their idols and participating to contribute greatly to their fandom (Jennifer, 2015). Quoting (Paramita & Laila 2022)

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there are five top couples who ship. In order are Taekook (Tehyung and Jungkook BTS), Jenlisa (Jennie and Lisa Blackpink), Taesoo (Taehyung BTS and Jisoo Blackpink), Tennie (Taehyung BTS and Jennie Blackpink), and Chaelisa (Rose and Lisa Blackpink). Furthermore, shipping as a popular culture is shown by fans through their social media, one of which is by writing their stories in AU-type fanfic stories.

Although there are some people who consider fanfic as a strange story, it cannot be denied that this work is actually very popular, especially among the younger generation. Thomas (2011) mentions that the reason many people like fanfic is because it has brought readers away from the concept of static and isolated texts and reminded them that all stories in the world can be changed depending on the social and cultural environment. Many people even form strong emotional attachments to the fictional characters and immerse themselves in the fictional world as a form of escape (Jennifer, 2015). AU presented in the form of fake chat threads is one type of fanfic that is currently loved by many young people (Febriyanti & Ekomila, 2023; Merawati, 2016). Through fake chat, readers are involved in real time into the story without having to read long narratives that are sometimes considered boring. The habit of chatting in everyday life supports why readers enjoy reading fake chats more. Readers are brought into conversations in the story that feel like part of their daily lives.

Just like the function of fanfic, the existence of AU also makes readers imagine the other side of their idol's life. Things that are impossible for idols to do in the real world can be presented in AU stories, depending on the author's imagination. Then the reader can imagine himself and the idol are the main characters in a story. The existence of social media such as X makes it easy to spread fanfic content including homosexual AUs. The number of homosexual story enthusiasts then affects the formation of a homosexual AU base which is used by fans to interact with each other, in particular, asking other fans for recommendations or reviews. Of the existing bases, @vkookfess with a target audience of Army (BTS fandom) and @aubxbfess targeting NCTzen (NCT fandom) and WayZenNi (WayV fandom) have the most followers. The ships that are usually used as the main characters of AU are Taehyung-Jungkook (Taekook), Jaehyun-Taeyong (Jaeyong), Jeno-Jaemin (Nomin), and Mark-Hyuk (Markhyuk). The interactions formed between readers can be seen in the following table.

Table 1 Fan Interaction in Base

Notes	Picture Capture
The image describes the use of the base to find moots or virtual friends.	

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The image describes the utilization of the base to request AU recommendations from other readers.	
The image describes posting a question about an AU you've read to another reader.	

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The image describes a review request from another reader for avoiding a particular genre.



The image describes the author's promotion of his work



Source: X

The table above provides an explanation if the existence of the base as a community has helped fans find their interests, publish and even get feedback on a story. The base is then used as a space for fans to interact with each other without discrimination or judgment. They can freely discuss the stories they read and give their feedback on the stories they read. The existence of the base makes it easy for writers to find readers and makes it easy for readers to find the type of story they want to read with a certain theme or ship idols. Thus, it can be seen that the base is not only used as a facilitator that bridges between writers and fans, but also encourages the development of a larger community.

Remaking the Story: Breaking Out of the Hetero Romance Cringe

Since childhood, many children, especially girls, are exposed to romance stories that depict women as the weak party while men are the strong party who can help women out of 'adversity'. These stories are often found in series such as Disney Princess. Over time, these stories have become less common. For example, in *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2014), the strongest witch is betrayed by Stefan (Aurora's father) which makes her curse Aurora, although as the story develops Maleficent feels regret because she loves Aurora so much that her focus is on protecting Aurora from all dangers. Another example is *Moana* (2016), a 16-year-old girl who is interested in exploring the ocean but is forbidden by her father, although in the end with Maui she successfully explores the ocean like her predecessor. Both films indicate that Disney is trying to recreate the 'spice' of a more modern story and strengthen the power of women to make the image of prince charming evaporate instantly.

The changes made by Disney are due to a shift in audience interest. While it may be that the purpose of changing the ingredients of the story is to continue to make their films sell well in the market due to the development of feminist narratives in society, this effort reflects a more relevant social awareness by presenting stronger female characters who are independent and empowered. This success then influenced the mindset of society, including changes in reading preferences that told similar stories including reading homosexual AUs became popular. Through homosexual AUs one can explore wider gender roles, that there are actually male characters that are still not represented by traditional stories. This gender dissatisfaction in society due to patriarchy is one of the reasons for the acceptance of stories with homosexual themes. The acceptance of homosexual AUs compared to heterosexual ones in Platform X can be seen in the following table.

Table 2. AU Homosexual and Heterosexual Genre Comments

Notes	Picture Capture
The image is a comment from several accounts on X regarding the reason they don't like heterosexual AU stories or bxc is that they feel uncomfortable or cringe.	 The screenshot shows a vertical list of seven tweets on the X platform. Each tweet includes a profile picture, a username, a date, and the text of the comment. The comments are all related to the topic of AU (Alternate Universe) stories and the feeling of 'cringe' or discomfort when reading heterosexual AU stories. The tweets are from various users, including @kittyongdln_, @jemjemint, @ukngacheong, @significanin, @nacouffee, @disiniadajurig, @tetetkooki, and @713_jpg. The tweets are dated from May 2021 to July 2022. The interface shows typical X features like reply, retweet, and like icons, as well as a share icon.

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The picture provides a variety of reasons why readers dislike hetero AU stories because of the portrayal of women as weak, odd, and pick me. Meanwhile, men are portrayed as strong and versatile.	 20 Syhranghae @SYAARANGHAE · Mar 5, 2023 Replying to @bluniebear Tbh mau grup manapun aku sejauh ini jarang nemu yg konfliknya tuh beda klo au bxxg, alurnya tuh selalu berputar di pick me lah, ceweknya tersakiti lah, cowoknya si paling bisa lah, dan lainnya yg gt doang. Kalau au bb tuh kayak entah kenapa banyak eksplorasi ide gitu 😊 Hika #BLOOMING @quantxmleap · Jun 18, 2023 Replying to @quantxmleap pdhl gue cuma searching grup terkait terus tiba-tiba jeng jeng nongol au bxxg di for you kalo ga daddy daddy ya soal pick me atau selingkuhan Lee's @Seeksooadict · Sep 18, 2023 Replying to @08081004 Tapi asli dah emang nta akunya anti romantic apa gmana... Dari dulu ga suka au bxxg soalnya yaa bener menurut ku emang gtu gtu aja, cewe lenjeh pick me dsb wkwkwk geli. Pas nyemplung baca humu malah doyan yang fluffy anti angst 🥰 caaaaa @bocahmilkuat · Feb 20, 2022 Alasan ga suka au bxxg tu ya gitu kek ngelawan kek anjing maaf maaf mulu
The image describes the reason readers prefer AU bxxb because they can get the feel of the storyline presented.	 sahara K/IA @syaharamanisa · Jul 8, 2023 keknya gua mau coba baca AU bxxg deh tp kek blm coba aja gua udh ngerasa bakal cringe km udh terbiasa baca bxxb Jul @yourslattes · Sep 29, 2021 Dan JUJUR belom nemu author bxxg yg gak cringe sumpaaah jadi belom bisa bertaubat dari au bxxb panggilakukyt @iamksjan · Apr 27 Replying to @iamksjan Yg emosi krn gue bilang apusin aja, gaaa gaaa itu kmaa efekkk shock ajaaa tadi udahh. Jangan mrh2 yaa cantik2 kuuuu 🥰🥰 skrng diri ku sudah menerima lapang dada kalo cerita bl emang bagussss udahhh *gaga'ia @taebearvk · Apr 3, 2021 saking sering nya baca au/ff humu jd cringe baca yang bxxg 🥰🥰 pedra7 @taemybear · Jan 19, 2021 gue abis liat au yang x oc YALLAH CRINGE BANGET 🥰🥰 tp dulu gue baca bjir tp stelah baca au bxxb yallah kalo baca bxxg aneh bgtt maaf brielle @acturusnight · Oct 28, 2023 gw baca au bxxg karena lewat tl tp cringe bgt bjir mana bahasanya baku bgt gitu.. kayanya emg gw ga cocok baca au bxxg dah, ga dapet feelnya 🥰

Source: X

The table above shows the change in reading interest from heterosexual AUs to homosexual AUs. The shift in story narratives from centered on male dominance to highlighting women's strength and independence is what makes 'weak' stories less desirable, especially for women. Therefore, reading homosexual AUs is a form of dissatisfaction with the real world that often places women as the weak party, so they move to fantasy space to create a free space to escape reality. The homosexual AU is also utilized as a space to negotiate the right to an independent 'self' equal to men (Zhang, 2014). This context provides an understanding if homosexual AU provides freedom for women to further explore roles that are different from the norms determined by society because they have a more idealized and equal relationship.

AU Popular Culture as a Space for Exploration of Sexuality for Women

Popular culture provides a space where various assumptions about social life are projected, portrayed, updated, and presented endlessly. Audiences of popular culture usually accept popular culture for a variety of different reasons such as just being used as entertainment or seeing it as part of 'my life story' so that it can be true for those who feel it (Corse & Hartless, 2015: 1). The existence of popular culture is also utilized as a safe space to deepen or explore something that is believed. The phenomenon of the rise of BXB homosexual story narratives or also known as Boys Love (BL) in the lives of adolescents and young adults cannot be separated from the development of participatory pop culture regarding romances between boys and young men (Martin, 2012) which are described as ideal relationships for readers, especially women (Noh, 1998). Referring to Martin (2012) the proliferation of homosexual narratives is influenced by the grand imagination to generate pleasure, intellectual and affective engagement for readers who are mostly female. The reason why there are many female fans is because women are considered more tolerant of same-sex relationships because heteronormative culture often makes them the 'submissive' party (Mustofa, 2021). Conversely, Martin (2012) reveals that stories with homosexual themes are seen as a means of revenge for women because their bodies are often objectified in real life in a patriarchal culture.

Reading homosexual stories allows women to explore sexuality beyond their physical experiences. Referring to interviews conducted by Noh, (1998), information was obtained that reading homosexual stories was used by women to satisfy themselves in satisfying sexual desires. The dominance of traditional values that require women to refrain from satisfying their sexual desires encourages them to read homosexual stories to replace their unfulfilled sexuality in a patriarchal society. In homosexual stories, the male body is usually used as a subject to counter the view that men are dominant. The portrayal of men as more beautiful and feminist makes women's 'aesthetic' desires fulfilled because they are considered to represent women's tastes (Noh, 1998). Thus, it can be seen that homosexual stories, or in this case BXB, are used as a medium that provides freedom for women to break patriarchy, gender dualism, and fantasize about their sexuality.

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