

A Multimodal Analysis of Boys Love (BL) Manga Covers

ボーイズラブ (BL) マンガ表紙のマルチモーダル分析

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Abstract

This article explores BL manga, emphasizing the intersection of affective engagement and representation in this genre. Focusing on two BL manga covers, it highlights the multimodal communication of the BL theme, balancing production and readership interests. The analysis reveals that meaning is derived not only from representation but also from the interactional function conveyed by BL characters. The compositional arrangements prioritize character visuals' salience over informative texts. This study offers insights into the appeal of BL manga within Japanese popular culture, emphasizing semiotic configurations between linguistic and visual elements.

Key words : Boys Love (BL), Manga, Character, Social semiotics, Multimodality

概 要

本稿では、BL マンガというジャンルを考察し、そしてとくに BL マンガにおける感情移入と表象の交差に注目していく。2 冊の BL マンガの表紙に焦点を当て、制作側と読者の利権のバランスをとりながら、BL というテーマがマルチモーダルな形で表現されていることを検討する。分析は、意味が表象によるだけでなく、BL キャラクターが伝える対人的機能からも導き出されることを明らかにする。構成上の配置は、情動的なテキストよりもキャラクターのビジュアルの重要性を優先している。本研究は、言語的要素と視覚的要素の間の記号論的構成を示しながら、日本の大衆文化における BL マンガの魅力についての洞察を提供する。

キーワード：ボーイズラブ (BL)、マンガ、キャラクター、社会記号論、マルチモダリティ

Introduction

In 2019, a Boys Love (BL) manga received an award at the Japan Media Arts Festival¹⁾. This national acclaim marked a significant milestone for the genre since its inception approximately forty years prior (Hori

& Mori, 2020). Since then, the commercialization of BL manga has continued to gain momentum. BL stories portray the emotional relationship between two male characters. While the content may include homoerotic elements, but BL is not treated as pornography in Japan due to its deep ties with women's manga culture (Shamoon, 2012; Ogi et al., 2019). The widespread presence of BL manga occupying the shelves of mainstream bookstores and specialty stores prompts a thoughtful consideration into the significance of the covers in attracting and connecting with its audience.

Despite BL's ever-expanding global reach and cultural impact, its thriving hub remains in Japan within well-defined commercial parameters (Mori, 2019). The BL manga industry may not have the same mainstream visibility as other genres dominating the Japanese pop culture market, but it has found success on its own terms. This is evident in the twofold increase of BL manga publication numbers in the past decade with an annual release of almost 3500 works in both physical and digital formats (SANDIAS, 2022). For popular culture products tailored to women like BL, success is contained within its seemingly modest yet expanding market that is driven by a committed core group of consumers (Yano, 2013). As BL manga becomes more commercialized, the importance of covers parallels that of the stories inside because the covers serve as the face of the genre that producers use to sell to the target audience.

This paper seeks to demonstrate the multimodal potential of BL manga covers in facilitating communication between producers and readers. At the heart of this lies a gap in understanding the multimodal combination of visual and linguistic elements on manga covers. Rather than concentrating on aspects such as representation within the stories or fan perception (Levi, McHarry, and Pagliassotti 2014), the commercial dimension of BL manga that has so far been neglected is taken into account. It is crucial to acknowledge that the cover is intricately linked to the story within the manga while also being adapted to function in the commercial context, thereby influencing the purpose behind the choices made.

To address this, this paper turns to multimodal-social semiotic theory (van Leeuwen, 2008; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) which offers a means of interpreting visual and linguistic elements according to how they function in communicating meaning within specific contexts while accounting social and cultural influences. Moving more towards rhetorical aspects of manga (Hata & Ieshima, 2014), the covers are positioned as crucial communicative tools in the commercial dynamics balancing the interest of producers and readers.

The research question guiding the analysis is "How are characters visually represented on BL manga covers?" with the initial segment examining the way characters can be categorized according to genre conventions. It is followed by considerations of how the character visuals engage with readers, fulfilling the cover's functional role. The last analytical portion integrates textual elements to explore how character visuals and text interact multimodally, preserving the overall design composition aesthetics crucial for the genre.

Past studies on BL manga

Scholarly discussions on BL manga, mainly attending to representation and fan culture, have been extensively explored (Levi, McHarry, & Pagliassotti, 2014; McLelland et al., 2015). One persisting theme involves problematizing the perceived lack of realism in male character romantic relationships represented

in stories written by women. What such criticism overlooks is that even bara manga or gay comics created by and for men, exaggerate muscular bodies to distinguish themselves from conventional BL narratives (Baudinette, 2016; Alban, 2020). Be that as it may, what sets BL apart is its broad appeal, captivating both female enthusiasts, commonly referred to as “fujoshi,” and male fans, known as “fudanshi” (Santos, 2020; Nagaïke, 2019). The multifaceted nature of BL’s reception influencing fan culture that far beyond Japan, such as the Philippines (Fermin, 2013), further highlights a devoted consumer base founded on shared common ground driving commercial potential.

BL manga adheres to specific conventions and aesthetics tailored to its primary audience. A key element is the inclusion of “beautiful” male characters, known as bishonen, contributing to a subversive narrative that is often linked to explorations of gender and sexuality (Welker 2006; McLelland et al. 2015). While questions arise about the female readership’s fascination with these characters and their relationship, Santos (2020) pointed out that affect adds a layer of complexity in the readers’ response to the homoerotic content, engaging with it on an emotional level. Another decisive feature is the complementary differences between the two characters in the pairing that remain representative of BL in general while pointing to specific varieties within the genre, signaled through visual cues for those familiar with the genre (Fujimoto 2015; Sihombing 2011). These considerations underscore the way character visuals hold considerable importance in the BL genre, particularly for producers who strategically use them on covers to captivate the target audience.

Covers in the context of BL manga offer a crucial opportunity for producers to showcase the highlights of each work in order to stand out in a saturated market and make a positive first impression on potential readers. The covers have been found to reflect evolving trends and capturing nuances in response to the genre’s growing popularity which suggests the influence of commercialization and efforts in sustaining it (Nagaïke, 2009; Suzuki, 2015). In addition, a sense of community between authors and readers who share similar preferences is fostered through the covers; in other words, the covers are informative while enhancing the overall consumer experience (Mizoguchi, 2010; Ishikawa, 2017). On a broader note, manga covers builds on from the medium’s inherent multimodality and foundation in social connections within the community, aligning with commonly accepted values that intersect with commercial interests (Yang & Webster, 2015; Kiernan, 2018). Ultimately, a nuanced analysis of culturally situated meanings on these covers necessitates going beyond surface-level interpretations of visuals and texts in use, delving into how the genre’s contemporary commercial dimension has shaped meaningful configurations of these elements.

Multimodality and covers

Multimodality refers to the use of more than one or multiple modes for the purpose of communication in which meaning is intricately shaped by social and cultural influences (Jewitt, 2009; Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Kress, 2010). This allows linguistic modes to be considered together with visual modes and how they synergize with one another to communicate meaning within specific contexts. Within this framework, Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) visual grammar, incorporating salience and framing, elucidates the interplay of multimodal features. Van Leeuwen (2008) further refined this analytical lens, focusing on the choices inherent in the “language of images” in in portraying individuals who represent and enact social practices. The combination of the two aforementioned concepts informed the analytical framework for this paper. This builds from the idea that multimodal features can be strategized, as seen in media framing (Catalano &

Gatti, 2017) and advertising (Svetanant & Okuizumi, 2019; Chen & Cheung, 2020), to create meaning that are culturally significant to a community.

Covers are multimodal in their most fundamental form, employing both linguistic and visual modes of communication. A single cover page serves various purposes, including content preview, grabbing attention, and generating interest to prompt readers' engagement or purchase (Held, 2005). The constraints of limited space on a cover necessitate meticulous coordination of visuals and text for coherence, ensuring that covers fulfill their communicative functions effectively (Liu & O'Halloran, 2009). Beyond this, covers are indispensable marketing tools, facilitating communication between producers aiming to sell a product and readers seeking entertainment (Jupowicz-Ginalska, 2018). This mediation of production and consumption sides suggests that BL manga covers in essence blend advertising and marketing in which they navigate the fine line between exerting effort to make sales and avoiding information overload that may compromise aesthetic appeal.

Previous research has delved into the multimodal potential of covers across diverse media and genres. For instance, the synergy between visuals and text on picture book covers effectively promotes narratives about same-sex parents, serving as an educational tool for children (Sunderland & McGlashan, 2013). Magazines also utilize covers to cater to both professional and general audiences to addressing scientific topics (Grampp, 2015) or utilizing visual satire for political criticism to connect with readers who share similar leanings (Prendergast, 2019). Similarly, book covers adapt their tone to align with specific political ideologies, tailoring their multimodal configurations for distinct social contexts (Yu & Song, 2017; Li, Li, & Miao 2019). While covers, in general, provide valuable insights into assumptions about target audiences through multimodal strategies, it is noteworthy that manga covers have been overlooked. This oversight presents an opportunity for a fresh perspective, particularly in the context of Japanese popular culture products.

Methodology

Data selection

The covers of two BL works that were ranked number 1 in the Best Comics category from the Chil Chil BL Award for the years 2019 and 2020 were closely examined. The rankings are based on fan voting and represent the popularity of works among the BL readership. The Best Comics category is selected as it encompasses more commercially mainstream types of BL as opposed to more niche sub-genres and themes under the genre's umbrella. The first cover is "Liquor & Cigarette"²⁾ by Zariya Ranmaru (labeled C1), and the second cover is "One Room Angel"³⁾ by Harada (labeled C2).

The analysis revolves around the visual and linguistic modes on the covers following multimodality (Kress, 2010). The characters depicted on the covers represent the visual mode, while the textual components, such as the title and author information, are considered reference points for the linguistic mode. This enables an interpretation of the multimodal aspect of BL manga covers tied to social practices and meanings embedded in context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Character visuals, when considered in conjunction with the title and author's name, collectively offer the essential information that readers seek when looking at BL covers.

Analytical framework and procedures

This study utilized the multimodal tools of visual social actor (van Leeuwen, 2008) and composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) as a guiding framework for the analysis. This is done to appropriately examine the meaning-making potential of the two modes and their significance within BL manga practices, allowing for a detailed exploration of the semiotic choices on the covers.

The first step examined the character visuals and their representational meaning by utilizing Categorization via Inclusion/Exclusion and Agent/Patient roles (van Leeuwen, 2008). This is due to the expectancy for the covers to include couples because of the romantic focus of BL manga. Nonetheless, some covers may exclude characters as part of strategy. Besides that, Agent/Patient roles is parallel to BL's Seme-Uke character formula (Sihombing, 2011). In similar fashion, the "agents" are the dominant Semes who initiate actions, while the "patients" are the submissive Ukes as the target of action. How the characters act on the cover and whether they can be categorized via action will be the point of interest.

The second step shifted attention to the interactional meaning of the character visuals using Distance, Relation, and Interaction under the Representation-Viewer network (van Leeuwen, 2008). While it is important for character visuals to reflect the genre and story inside the manga, in what ways the characters are visually presented communicate specific messages and impression is equally crucial. On the covers, BL characters symbolically interact with the target readership which is shaped by production to sell the work to the general BL audience while preserving nuances of particular preferences.

According to social semiotics, the concept of Distance in visuals figuratively establishes interpersonal connections that insinuate a sense of closeness akin to real-life interactions (van Leeuwen, 2008). For example, individuals portrayed as strangers are often depicted in a "long shot" view because when you are not close to someone you maintain some extent of distance in approaching. Meanwhile, a "close-up" viewing suggests a sense of proximity where one can get up close and personal.

In addition, Relation conveys affiliation of power and degrees of involvement. Vertical angles signify differences in power (van Leeuwen, 2008). Looking from above situates the viewer in a position of authority over the character visuals, whereas a view from below implies the opposite effect. Moreover, an eye-level perspective symbolize equality. Horizontal angles symbolize involvement or detachment, with frontal and oblique viewpoints conveying different levels of engagement (van Leeuwen, 2008).

Interaction can manifest indirectly when images avoid making eye contact with viewers, indicating an unawareness of being objects of observation (van Leeuwen, 2008). Conversely, direct address occurs when images engage viewers symbolically, often through elements like facial expressions and gestures, thereby implying some sort of demand (van Leeuwen, 2008). In other words, communication can be strategized using gaze as a way to grab attention or the decision to not use gaze in some cases.

The analysis wraps up by considering how representational and interactional meanings of character visuals coordinate with textual elements to form the multimodal whole of the BL manga covers. Compositional strategies of Saliency and Framing (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) are applied to examine the characters' (visual mode) multimodal meaning alongside the title and author's name (linguistic mode) on the BL

covers. Saliency pertains to elements that capture viewers' attention, achieved through foregrounding factors like size and color. It points to varying degrees of importance and balance in the intricate interplay of multimodal elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Framing adds on by connecting or disconnecting these elements in spatially integrated compositions, creating a sense of continuity and connectedness that contributes to overall cohesion (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This demonstrates the way character visuals and textual elements balance one another via Saliency and Framing as they share the same space on a BL manga cover.

Analysis

Categorization of character visuals

In both covers, the inclusion of two characters aligns with the expectation for BL manga covers to feature the pairing, signaling the genre and hinting at their respective Seme-Uke roles within the story. Nonetheless, the lack of overt actions enacted by the characters poses a challenge to identifying the characters' Agent-Patient role (van Leeuwen, 2008). This underscores the non-literal nature of reading BL, where the Seme-Uke roles are not always explicitly indicated by action.

In C1, the two characters are positioned side by side. The character on the left, with blonde hair and a slightly tanned complexion, possesses rounder eyes and exudes a more innocent and playful demeanor. This is evident in his almost childish gesture of sticking his tongue out to lick the liquor bottle. The character Theo, the owner of a liquor store, is portrayed with a youthful appearance, suggesting a lack of power and immaturity, signifying him as the Uke. Conversely, the character on the right, with long dark hair, exhibits a more composed and confident demeanor, reflected in his sharp eyes and a cool smile while holding a cigarette. Identified as Camilo, the cigarette shop owner, he takes on the Seme role.

Similar to C1, the two characters in C2 are also not doing anything in particular to each other which did allow for role identification via action. The character standing on the left has a smaller physique, rounder eyes, and a pair of wings symbolizing innocence and purity typically associated with the Uke role. In comparison, the character on the right, who is seated and casually eating Cup Noodles, has a sturdier physical build that suggests a position of power as the probable Seme in the pairing.

This reveals that even though the Agent-Patient role (van Leeuwen, 2008) mirrors the Seme-Uke Dominant-Passive concepts, BL reading is more nuanced than literal. Seme and Uke characters do not adhere to a fixed binary of masculine and feminine traits, but the Uke is often depicted as less masculine or more feminine than the Seme (Sihombing, 2011). With the presence of two characters, their appearance offers differentiation, aligning them with the implied Seme and Uke roles, and creating representational meaning for BL readers to identify with.

Character-reader engagement

On a representational level, the character visuals carry meaning that inform the genre and the relationship dynamic in the story based on what is expected of BL. In the context of the cover, the character visuals are connected to the narrative development inside the manga but at the same time detached to stand on their own. With that, interactional meaning is added in which characters symbolically engage with viewers that

conforms to the multiple functions of a cover. The two BL covers exhibit opposing strategies when it comes to viewing distance and angle as well as the application of gaze.

C1 uses a medium social distance by presenting the characters from the waist up, creating an imagined connection between them and the viewer. This establishes a close, personal relationship, giving the impression of being a part of the characters' world symbolically (van Leeuwen, 2008). The scene on the cover is set in a bar, with the characters enjoying liquor and cigarettes. It suggests that the viewer is one of the patrons, socializing with the characters as if engaged in conversation with them, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

In comparison, C2 utilized a long shot view, showing the characters from head to toe, creating a far social distance (van Leeuwen, 2008). It establishes a perceived boundary between the characters and viewers, implying a "stranger" label. In other words, viewers are prompted to maintain a distinct separation from the characters. Despite the social distance separating viewers from the characters, the full-body view provides an opportunity for viewers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the characters.

With regards to viewing angle, C1 maintains a frontal presentation of the characters on the horizontal side as seen from positioning their chests forward. This arrangement instantly involves readers with the characters and evokes the feeling of standing in close proximity to them; hence, establishing a sense of connection and approval (van Leeuwen, 2008). Furthermore, the vertical eye-level viewing of the characters implies an equality in power between the characters and readers (van Leeuwen, 2008). This equitable distribution of power extends the initial friendly setup, which can be interpreted as a strategy by producers to foster a positive impression.

On the contrary, C2 presents the characters obliquely, implying that viewers are symbolically detached and occupy the role of bystanders (van Leeuwen, 2008). Additionally, a high-angle view of the characters is presented, granting viewers symbolic power as they look down upon the characters. This perspective endows viewers with authority over the characters (van Leeuwen, 2008), offering a bird's eye view into their lives. This indirect participation and power accorded to viewers allow for unrestricted observation.

The characters in C1 establish social interaction with the viewer by making direct eye contact. When the characters' gaze meets the viewer, they are symbolically demanding something from them (van Leeuwen, 2008). This strategy is an effective means of capturing attention for the BL manga covers. The direct eye contact creates a friendly and inviting atmosphere, accompanied by the characters' cheerful expressions.

In contrast, the characters in C2 make an indirect address by not meeting the viewer's gaze but instead, focusing on each other. When visual social actors do not establish eye contact with the viewer, they are presented as objects for impartial observation by uninvolved observers, (van Leeuwen, 2008). The disconnection from the characters allows viewers to emotionally engage with the scene indirectly. While this cover may not demand the viewer's active attention by not acknowledging them, its appeal rests in a more flexible reading.

Salience and framing

Salience is important for a cover's multimodal strategy because emphasizing every element can create confusion. Prioritizing specific elements is essential to grab readers' attention effectively. While character visuals, titles, and the author's name are fundamental information for readers, discerning their relative importance is a crucial consideration.

C1 achieved salience through the manipulation of size (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). It is attributed to the characters through their prominently large size covering the entire page, bestowing high visibility to them. The bright pink background further accentuates the characters while harmonizing with the cover's overall joyful atmosphere. In contrast, the title and author's name are presented with smaller, thinly printed text to avoid overshadowing the characters. This underscores the characters' visual importance to carry meaning that is representative of the genre while serving the promotional purpose of the cover to communicate the work's appeal.

C2, on the other hand, relies on color to accomplish salience. The highly saturated color palette which makes the cover visibly conspicuous as a whole without needing to rely on character size. The neon orange enveloping the majority of the cover page essentially put the spotlight onto the character on the left in white. The character stands out due to the contrasting bright yellow and orange hues that surround him, accentuating his angelic appearance, complete with wings on his back. In contrast, the character on the right blends into the shades of the yellow background, which aligns with the familiarity of his surroundings. The Uke character's salience stood out even more by the contrast he creates in the cluttered apartment setting, emphasizing his role as an outsider in the story.

Lastly, framing influences the continuity and connectedness that contribute to the overall cohesion of a BL manga cover. The connection or disconnection of multimodal elements yields distinct reading effects. The lack of framing in C1 sets up a less restrictive viewing for the viewers in which both visual and textual modes are not explicitly separated (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). However, intriguingly, the linguistic modes sandwich the character visuals in between. The title "Liquor & Cigarette" appears at the top of the page, while the author's name "Zariya Ranmaru" is positioned at the bottom. This concentrates the viewer's attention on the central characters before moving outward toward additional information offered by the linguistic modes.

In comparison, C2 is clear in its framing and comes in the form of a box-like structure, echoing the "one room" theme in the title. That way, C2 the character visuals and the informative texts on the cover are separated in their domain (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This box-like frame serves as a fitting representation of the character relationship's development, as most of their interactions occur within the confines of the room. With the arrangement pushing the title to the peripheral corner, it highlights the character visuals given the weight they carry in both representational and interactional meanings.

Discussion and conclusion

In summary, both covers share similarities in featuring two characters as the main couple in the story, a significant representation of the BL genre and the expected storyline. However, identifying character

roles is not limited to their actions, whether they are presented as active or passive (van Leeuwen, 2008). Other visual cues such as character appearance aided in the interpretation. The difference between closely examined covers lies in the interactional strategies, guided by the intended mood that shapes the semiotic choices. Composition-wise, the character visuals take precedence over linguistic elements, solidifying their importance. The two covers exemplify the multimodal interplay between production intent to promote the work and information that matters to readers which centralizes around the characters.

This study explored the multimodal features of BL manga covers by going beyond representation. Instead, the communicative dimensions of character visuals and their role in shaping the overall composition together with linguistic elements were analyzed. At its core, these covers serve as an initial glimpse into the BL theme and anticipated storyline, embedding vital information within their visual elements (Sunderland & McGlashan, 2013). By connecting established genre norms and background knowledge of the characters, covers can create the desired emotional tone for producers to implicitly communicate a symbolic connection with the audience (Yu & Song, 2017). The emphasis on characters over linguistic elements aligns with the notion proposed by Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013) that content is often condensed into visual imagery on the cover. BL characters visually convey the stories inside the manga in a way that readers find interesting and the design choices arrange the title in coherence to ensure that the overall aesthetic value remains.

In conclusion, this study contributed to a multimodal understanding of BL manga through the covers. It does so by illuminating conceptions and practices related to the genre as projected onto character visuals while aligning with the limited space of a cover. Through the lens of social semiotics, this research extends the application of the frameworks employed (van Leeuwen, 2008; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) within the realm of Japanese popular culture. Insights into socially constructed meanings that configure social relations between producer and reader were offered. However, this study's focus is limited to only two BL manga covers and thus its findings lack generalizability. Future research is recommended to quantitatively examine multimodal features on manga covers to reveal patterns unique to specific genres that can be compared to others in terms of context and expectations.

Notes

- 1) <https://j-mediaarts.jp/en/award/single/momomanji/>
- 2) <https://www.chil-chil.net/compNewsDetail/k/blaward2019/no/20520/>
- 3) <https://www.chil-chil.net/compNewsDetail/k/blaward2020/no/23082/>

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