FEMINISM OR MISOGYNY?
EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BOY'S LOVE DRAMA EXPOSURE, THE FEMALE GAZE, FANDOM ENGAGEMENT, AND GENDER IDEOLOGY

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Abstract. The prevalence of Boy's Love (BL) drama in recent years has challenged China's everlasting state-manipulated heteronormative ideology and patriarchy hegemony. However, it remains unknown whether exposure to BL drama makes female audiences more feminist or misogynistic. This study approached cultivation theory from a perspective of an active audience to investigate the relationship between genre-specific media exposure, the female gaze, fandom engagement, and female audiences' gender ideologies. Based on a survey in China, this study found that exposure to BL drama related to both increased feminism and misogyny. However, the female gaze and fandom engagement can moderate their relationships. For audiences with high-level female gaze or fandom engagement, exposure to BL drama was associated with increased feminism. Based on these findings, this research raised a concept of 'active feminist fan audience' to depict the female audiences who view BL dramas from a feminist perspective of desire and actively engaged in fandom activities.

Keywords: Boy's Love drama exposure, feminist identity, misogyny, the female gaze, fandom engagement

1. Introduction

Boy's Love (BL, also called *Danmei*, *Tanbi* and *Yaoi*), as a genre of fantasy stories that describes male-male romance, has become one of the most popular literary and cultural practices in the digital age (Tian 2020, Zhou et al. 2018). BL originated in Japan and spread to mainland China in the 1990s. At the turn of the 21st century, benefitting from the popularization of the Internet and social media, BL has become an independently developing subculture in China (Xu and Yang 2013). Since 2016, the popularity and phenomenal commercial success of BL drama *Addicted & Heroin* (adapted from a BL novel with the same title) has spawned a wave of well-received original BL novels adapted to web dramas, which extended BL's influence from its subculture fan base to the general Internet public (Zhou et al. 2018). Even though Chinese BL drama has carefully modified the homosexual relations in the original fiction into friendships or 'socialist brotherhood' as a way of getting past censorship (Ng and Li 2020, Hu and Wang 2021), its challenge to China's everlasting state-manipulated heteronormative ideology and patriarchy hegemony has still attracted increasing scholarly attention (Chang and Tian 2021, Zhao 2020, Feng and Luo 2022).

However, although BL is a culture created by and targeted to women and is regarded as contesting claims of dominant culture (Yang and Xu 2016), whether exposure to BL drama makes the female audience more feminist or misogynistic remains ambiguous and not yet examined by empirical research. When studying the impact of TV exposure on female audiences, the theoretical perspective of cultivation theory is commonly used. However, when we examine the relationship between exposure to genre-specific media such as BL drama and the audiences' gender ideology, two questions emerge us. Firstly, drawing from the cultivation theory, frequent exposure to specific media content can nurture beliefs that coincide with the content (Gerbner 1969). However, previous studies have revealed conflicting evidence regarding BL stories' gender ideological values. Although most researchers believed BL stories are conveying feminist values, because fantasizing about male-male romance and gazing at beautiful young men's bodies can empower women to rethink and resist conventional dominant gender and sexual ideology (Pagliassotti 2008, Yang and Xu 2016). Some, however, presented alternative explanations that BL stories still convey heteronormative gender stereotype and are somewhat misogynistic, given that BL writers tend to degrade female characters by portraying them with a negative persona that wrecks the intimate relationship of the two male protagonists (Blair 2010, Zhou et al. 2018). And this seem to provide evidence that exposure to BL drama could be associated with higher levels of misogyny. The conflicting assumptions call for further research. To date, however, few studies have examined the relationship empirically.

Secondly, traditional cultivation theories mostly treat audiences as passively accepting the beliefs and values provided by TV content (Morgan and Shanahan 2010). However, the revolutionary entrance of new media has fundamentally changed the relationship between producers and audiences, and the development of

active audience research on cultivation theory has been confirmed by more and more studies (Harmon et al. 2019, Nevzat 2018). Previous studies identified two typical positive viewer behaviors in BL drama viewing. One approach is from a feminist perspective, highlighting the overturn of the traditional 'male gaze' into the 'female gaze' when audiences read and watch BL works (Blair 2010, Xu and Tan 2021). The second is from the perspective of participatory culture, focusing on the phenomenal large-scale and influential fan group that BL drama has spawned in China, who generates new meanings and interpretations by exchanging comments and creating new materials such as fan fiction and fan videos rather than merely consuming the given story (Yang 2020). So, what is the relationship between the positive behaviors of BL drama audience and their gender ideology? How do they affect the outcome of cultivation? So far, there is a lack of empirical study examining these key issues.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between BL drama exposure and female audience's gender ideology through empirical research, as well as the roles of female gaze and fandom engagement in this relationship. The current research aims to extend our understanding of the genre-specific cultivation by examining the consequences of BL drama exposure on female audiences' gender ideology.

2. Literature review

2.1. Feminism, feminist identity, and active commitment

Feminism has been conceptualized as 'an ideology for promoting' either 'women's rights' or 'women's privileges' (Sudo and Hill 2006). This study viewed feminism as the former one. Instead of glossing over or presuming the actual content of feminism, our essay approached it as identity-based activism of thoughts and practices under specific historical circumstances. In this respect, Downing and Roush (1985) depicted an influential model of feminist identity, which consisted of a sequence of five stages: passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness-emanation, synthesis, and active commitment. In the first stage, women show passive acceptance of traditional sex roles and discrimination. In the second stage, women begin to question their traditional roles. Embeddedness-emanation refers to connecting with other select women. In the fourth stage, women synthesize their authentic and positive feminist identity. In the last stage, active commitment, women commit to meaningful actions and advocate for a fairer, non-sexist world.

Hyde (2002) found little empirical evidence indicating that feminist identity develops in stages. Therefore, the five stages of feminist identity should be treated as different feminist identity dimensions. Notably, active commitment is considered the most positive feminist identity crucial for psychological identification to transform into social actions (Sabik et al. 2006). Boytos et al. (2020) declaimed that the active commitment dimension was the strongest predictor to feminist self-labeling. In addition, women's increasing active commitment, but not the other four dimensions, significantly linked to several positive outcomes, such as expectations for egalitarian partnerships and shared authority, as well as perceptions of the sexual harassment

(Carpenter and Johnson 2001, Shi and Zheng 2021). Therefore, the present study selected the active commitment dimension as the presentation of feminist identity.

Written and read predominantly by women, the genre of BL was widely believed to be related to feminism. Especially in patriarchal China, under the dual repression of state power and traditional culture, BL is widely regarded as cultural production practice for women to explore themselves and challenge the conventional gender hegemony (Chang and Tian 2021). Many researchers declared that since BL challenges the existing heterosexual ideology with a centered male-male romance involving two characters sharing an egalitarian status (e.g., Madill and Zhao 2020, Zhao 2020), BL exposure will naturally provoke viewers to re-examine the gender inequality in real life (Pagliassotti 2010). Yang and Xu (2016) also found that fans on the Chinese BL forum Xianqing tend to hold progressive pro-feminist positions on women's issues. However, although many studies have discussed BL drama viewing from a feminist perspective, no study has empirically examined the relationship between BL drama exposure and feminist identity.

2.2. Internalized misogyny

Internalized misogyny refers to the cultural practice of subordination and devaluating women to retain the value of men and masculinity over women and femininity to maintain men's dominant power (Findlay and Piggott 2005). Internalized misogyny is a process where women internalize their core identities and self-concepts from the social stereotypes and distrust of females, which can result in several detrimental impacts on women, such as psychological distress and low self-esteem (Szymanski et al. 2009, Dixon et al. 2009). Drawing from the cultivation theory, frequent exposure to specific media content can nurture beliefs that coincide with the content (Gerbner 1969). Studies have revealed that media exposure can contribute to misogynistic attitudes and behavior. For example, McCullough et al. (2020) found that since games tend to diminish the abilities and worth of women and favor men over women, female video game players show higher levels of internalized misogyny. Similarly, Dixon (2009) found that consumption of misogynistic rap content will result in greater acceptance of misogynistic attitudes and behaviors.

Although BL is created mainly by and for women and regarded as contesting claims of the conventional sexual order (Yang and Xu 2016), evidence of misogyny is also found with BL works below the 'surfice feminism'. On the one hand, researchers have found the female characters are largely absent in BL works (Pagliassotti 2010). On the other hand, the limited female characters that are in BL works either play as minor characters, such as 'the bystander girl' or 'the assist girl', who are observers and catalyzers of the two male protagonists' romantic relationship (Chang and Tian 2021), or as antagonists who wreck the intimate relationship of the two protagonists (Blair 2010). Moreover, female characters in BL works are usually portrayed in less-nuanced ways, with their personalities rarely fully developed and somewhat flat (Kee 2010).

In addition, studies also revealed the female audiences tend to hold negative attitudes toward the female characters in BL stories. As Blair (2010) pointed out,

BL readers dislike the female characters because they always identify the female characters as a source of competition to the relationship between the two protagonists, a behavior that was further termed as 'female competition' (Kee 2010), which is so pervasive in mainstream culture that even a fictional woman is seen as a threat to female audiences who wish to fantasize about two fictional men.

Given that the literature reviewed above has revealed paradoxical shreds of evidence to simultaneously support the positive association between BL drama exposure and feminism/misogyny, we raised two open research question:

RQ1. *How does BL drama exposure associate with active commitment?*
RQ2. *How does BL drama exposure associate with internalized misogyny?*

2.3. Female gaze in BL drama watching

In traditional romance and erotic materials, women are primarily put in the position of the object of the gaze by men without obtaining subjectivity (Mulvey 1975). This so-called 'male gaze' has been reversed into the 'female gaze' in BL works (Blair 2010), which makes female audiences engage in active spectatorship (Xu and Tan 2021). The female gaze can empower women to subordinate men's bodies to their eroticized gaze and, in this way, overturn the conventional gender order (Li 2020, Hemmann 2020, Turner 2016). However, although researchers have revealed the positive effect of the female gaze on shaping, twisting, and dominating men's bodies and sexual energies in ways to maximize BL audiences' desires from a centered position (Zhang 2017, Neville 2015), they have not examined it by empirical research and have not distinguished the roles of different types of the female gaze in BL exposure. Based on the existing literature, this study proposed female gaze be subdivided into the traditional gaze and the erotic gaze.

The traditional gaze is aimed to capture the female idealization of the two male protagonists. For females, such an idealization of male protagonists with homosexual relations is no different from traditional heterosexual relations. In this manner, men in BL works might be seen as the idealized men that women wish they could encounter in real life (Blair 2010, Xu and Tan 2021). Just as Zhang (2016) contended, fans indulge in BL because it allows them to 'love boys twice as much' (p. 255). In this regard, it still responds to the conservative heteronormativity and gender hierarchy. Therefore, this study proposed the traditional gaze may be associated with increased misogyny but decreased feminism. Furthermore, the traditional gaze may change the outcomes of exposure to BL drama by moderating the role between viewing and gender ideology.

The erotic gaze is aimed to capture the female gaze at male-male eroticism. That is, females tend to dominate men's bodies and sexual energies to maximize their own sexual desires from a centered position (Li 2020, Hemmann 2020, Turner, 2016). According to Wood (2006), the erotic gaze at beautiful and often androgynous young men could enable the female audiences to reject the monolithic understanding of sexual identity. Similarly, Neville (2015) revealed that the erotic gaze in watching male-male pornography enables women to explore their sense of sexual orientation

and gender identification. In this way, females create a safe zone where they can break away from feelings of guilt and shame connected with sexual exposition and ignore the danger of sex, such as sexual disease and sexual violation (Nagaike 2012). Thus, this study proposed that the erotic gaze may be associated with increased feminism but decreased misogyny. Furthermore, the erotic gaze may change the outcomes of exposure to BL drama by moderating the role between viewing and gender ideology.

> **H1a**. *The traditional female gaze in watching BL drama would be positively associated with misogyny and negatively with active commitment.*
> **H1b**. *The erotic female gaze in watching BL drama would be positively associated with active commitment and negatively with misogyny.*
> **H2a**. *The association between BL drama exposure and misogyny / active commitment will vary as a function of the traditional female gaze.*
> **H2b**. *The association between BL drama exposure and misogyny / active commitment will vary as a function of the erotic female gaze.*

2.4. Fandom engagement with BL drama

Fandom engagement is also known as fan practice. It refers to practices such as fanfiction writing, picture drawing of characters, music and video reworking of the original work, book reviews, memorial services, charity donations raising, and much more (Duffett 2013, Tushnet 2017). Jenkins (2009) described the participatory nature of fandom engagement as "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices" (p. 11). Previous studies have revealed that BL culture is essentially a fandom subculture; BL fans usually participate through practices of character pairings, posting reviews of BL works, creating and publishing fan works (fanfiction, videos, memes, paintings, and essays), attending offline activities such as cosplay and concerts, advertising the drama and leading actors, and so forth (Yang and Xu 2016, Madill and Zhao 2020, Tian 2020).

Drawing from the theory of prosumer (Toffler 1980), this study divides fandom engagement into two genres including consuming engagement and producing engagement. The first genre of consumption engagement is intended to delineate fans who merely accept information given by the producer or other fans. There are slightly different views concerning the extent of 'consuming'. In the case of BL fans, they engage in consuming practices mainly in the form of following Sina Weibo (a Chinese microblogging website) accounts of the drama, the actors, the director, and the releasing platforms, watching behind-the-scenes stories, attending offline themed concerts, and so forth (Ng and Li 2020). It is noteworthy that Chinese BL drama is 'forced' to change the queer romance in the original novel into friendships or brotherly love to avoid state censorship (Ng and Li 2020). At the same time, it tends to cut down female characters to center on a male-male love implicitly to capitalize on BL fandom. Therefore, for fans who only engage passively, such an

underrepresentation of female characters may signal that 'women are inferior to men' to strengthen fans' levels of heterosexual stereotype and misogyny.

The second genre of production engagement is intended to capture the 'prosumer' fans who engage actively and produce and publish their own interpretation from their consumption of popular mass media. The prosumer fans actively exchange comments and opinions on original BL works and gradually build an online BL community that excludes non-fans (Wei 2014). Such a community empowers the fans to temporarily escape the patriarchal system outside and abide by an alternative gender order in the BL world (Tian 2020). Scholars have identified several producing practices by Chinese BL fans, including discussing the plots and the characters on online forums or social media (e.g., Yang and Xu 2016, Ng and Li 2020), posting fan-created queer videos on Bilibili.com (a Chinese video sharing website) (e.g., Chen 2021, Wang 2020), writing fanfictions or drawing fan-comics (e.g., Yang 2020) and so forth. Most of the fans' proactive interpretation and rewriting of the original works are based on women's subjectivity. As Kearney (2006, p.13) declared, women's proactive media content production behavior is a significant way for them to establish feminist political initiatives in the digital age. Similarly, research on a Chinese well-known BL forum Xianqing found that by exchanging comments and opinions on BL works, Xianqing fans begin to reflect on their gender situation (Yang and Xu 2016). Therefore, we posited that the genre of production engagement is positively related to feminism.

In addition, different types of fandom engagement can bring in different outcomes of exposure to BL drama. For audiences involved in consuming engagement, prolonged passive acceptance of the information provided by the producers would make them the more exposure to BL drama, the stronger they would accept the given beliefs and values, and the more pronounced the cultivation effect would be. For producing-engaged audiences, on the other hand, they actively revise the information provided by the producers to produce new meanings, which may be able to reduce the cultivation effect from watching BL drama. Based on the above literature, this study proposes the following hypothesis.

> ***H3a***. *Fandom engagement of consumption in watching BL drama would be associated with increased misogyny but decreased active commitment.*
> ***H3b***. *Fandom engagement of production in watching BL drama would be positively associated with active commitment but increased active commitment.*
> ***H4a***. *The association between BL drama exposure and misogyny / active commitment will vary as a function of fandom engagement of consumption.*
> ***H4b***. *The association between BL drama exposure and misogyny / active commitment will vary as a function of fandom engagement of production.*

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

The survey was conducted online between August and September 2021. The participants were 563 BL drama viewers recruited online from all areas of China. All the participants were females. The questionnaire was administered to the female audiences from online communities such as Douban (a Chinese social networking website), Jinjiang (one of the earliest and most influential feminist literature websites in China), Sina Weibo and Lofter (a Chinese website for fanfiction and other fan works). Each respondent received a monetary reward for their participation. Their age, area, education, and marital status are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample demographics (N = 563)

Variables	M	Percentage	SD	Min	Max
Age	26.4		6.02	16	55
Area					
Urban		79.4%			
Rural		20.6%			
Education					
Middle school or lower		0.7%			
High school		3.7%			
Junior college		9.6%			
Undergraduate		71.4%			
Postgraduate		14.6%			
Marriage status					
Married		40.5%			
Unmarried		59.5%			

3.2. Measures

Active commitment. Active commitment was assessed by Fischer et al. (2000)'s Feminist Identity Composite (FIC). The FIC consists of 33 items measuring five dimensions of feminist identity (passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness-emanation, synthesis, and active commitment). The participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on the items of the full FIC scale, although in the current study, we only focused on the active commitment dimension. We slightly modified some statements to make them more suitable in China's context.

The active commitment includes nine items (e.g., "I want to work to improve

women's status," "I care very deeply about men and women having equal opportunities in all respects") (Cronbach's alpha = .881).

All the variables in this study were measured on 7-point scales (1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree).

Internalized Misogyny. Internalized misogyny was assessed by Findlay and Piggott (2005)'s Internalized Misogyny Scale (IMS). This scale consists of 17 items that constitute three dimensions: distrust of women, devaluing women, and valuing men over women. We slightly modified some statements to make them more suitable in the Chinese context. The items include statements of "Women exaggerate problems they have at work," "I think most women would lie just to get ahead," "I prefer to listen to male radio announcers than females," etc. (Cronbach's alpha = .892).

BL drama exposure. To assess the participants' level of BL drama exposure, a list of four popular Chinese BL dramas, i.e., Guardian (released in 2018), The Untamed (released in 2019), Winter Begonia (released in 2020), Word of Honour (released in 2021), was provided and the participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on three items about viewing ("I have watched several BL dramas," "I have watched the whole episodes of BL drama repeatedly," "I have watched some episodes of BL drama repeatedly") (Cronbach's alpha = .804).

The female gaze. To assess the participants' level of traditional gaze, we provided two statements "I like the beautiful appearance and slender figure of the two male characters" and "I like the personality and temperament of the two male characters" (Spearman-Brown coefficient = .828). To assess the participants' levels of erotic gaze, we provided three statements (e.g., "BL drama satisfies my desire to peep into the male-male sexual activities") (Cronbach's alpha = .796).

Fandom engagement. To assess the participants' level of consumption engagement, we asked the participants to indicate their level of agreement on five statements (e.g., "I would follow Sina Weibo accounts of the leading actors, the director, the drama, and the releasing platform") (Cronbach's alpha = .861). To assess the participants' level of production engagement, we provided two statements as "I would participate in the discussions about the drama on Douban, Sina Weibo, QQ group, WeChat group or other online communities," and "I would create and publicly release derivative works of the drama, such as fanfictions, fan-created comics, and videos" (Spearman-Brown coefficient = .678).

3.3. Statistical analysis

We performed a five-step hierarchical regression analysis, with active commitment and internalized misogyny as the dependent variables. The demographic variables were examined in step one. The associations between BL drama exposure and gender ideologies were tested in step two. Then the variables of the female gaze were entered. In step four, the associations between fandom engagement and gender

ideologies were tested. The last four steps examined the moderating roles of the female gaze and fandom engagement separately. In addition, we used the PROCESS macro (Model 1) by Hayes (2013) to further tested the moderating effects.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables. In general, the participants had low levels of internalized misogyny ($M = 2.467$, $SD = .891$), which fell heavily below the midpoint of the scale. Means for active commitment ($M = 5.509$, $SD = .963$) was above the midpoints of the scales and suggest the participants' relatively high levels of positive feminism. Internalized misogyny and active commitment were significantly and positively correlated with all the independent variables except the traditional gaze.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables (N = 563)

Variable (V)		M	SD	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
V1	Internalized misogyny	2.466	.891						
V2	Active commitment	5.508	.963	-.006					
V3	BL drama exposure	4.444	1.704	.246***	.225**				
V4	The traditional female gaze	5.956	1.151	.034	.077	.335***			
V5	The erotic female gaze	3.729	1.678	.221***	.252***	.415***	.316***		
V6	Fandom engagement of consumption	4.775	1.561	.201***	.196***	.693***	.408***	.504***	
V7	Fandom engagement of production	4.024	1.802	.166***	.318***	.635***	.282***	.485***	.771***

$*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

4.2. Multiple linear regression

Regression model for active commitment. Models 1.1 to 1.4 explain active commitment significantly. Model 1.1 showed that participants from urban areas had higher levels of active commitment than rural ones ($\beta = .230$, p < .001). The addition of BL drama exposure in Model 1.2 significantly increased the model interpretation (F (5, 556) = 12.041, p < .001). For **RQ1**, BL drama exposure was positively associated with active commitment ($\beta = .186$, p < .001). Model 1.3 examined **H1a** and **H1b** partly. The erotic gaze was positively associated with active commitment ($\beta = .170$, p < .001). The addition of fandom engagement in Model 1.4 examined **H3a** and **H3b** partly (F (10, 551) = 9.554, p < .001). Engagement of consumption was negatively associated with active commitment ($\beta = −.220$, p < .01), and producing engagement was positively associated with active commitment ($\beta = .337$, p < .001).

Table 3. Hierarchical multiple regression of active commitment (N = 563)

	Active commitment							
	Model 1.1	Model 1.2	Model 1.3	Model 1.4	Model 1.5	Model 1.6	Model 1.7	Model 1.8
Block 1: Demographics								
Age	-.067	-.075	-.057	-.047	-.053	-.047	-.041	-.040
Education	-.001	.011	.010	.023	.014	.025	.029	.018
Marital status ("unmarried" = 0)	.088	.036	.016	-.010	.003	-.010	-.007	-.018
Region ("rural" = 0)	.230***	.209***	.197***	.171***	.173***	.168***	.185***	.183***
Block 2: BL drama exposure		.186***	.129**	.087	-.467*	-.090	-.390**	.129*
Block 3: The female gaze								
The traditional female gaze			-.022	-.002	-.194*	.013	.029	.025
The erotic female gaze			.170***	.138**	.135**	-.080	.127**	.121**
Block 4: Fandom engagement								
Fandom engagement of consumption				-.220*	-.198**	-.195**	-.128	-.156*
Fandom engagement of production				.337***	.338***	.327***	.305***	.304***
Block 5: Moderates								
BL drama exposure × The traditional female gaze					.634**			
BL drama exposure × The erotic female gaze						.327*		
BL drama exposure × Fandom engagement of consumption							.456***	
BL drama exposure × Fandom engagement of production								.177***
ΔR^2	.067	.030	.022	.040	.012	.006	.024	.024
Adjusted R^2	.067	.090	.109	.147	.158	.151	.170	.170

$*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.$

Regression model for internalized misogyny. Models 2.1 to 2.4 for internalized misogyny were significant. Model 2.1 showed that married participants were more likely to be involved in internalized misogyny than unmarried ones (β = 0.410, p < .001). Model 2.2, with the addition of BL drama exposure, significantly increased the explanation of the model (F (5, 556) = 16.687, p < .001). For **RQ2**, BL drama exposure was positively associated with internalized misogyny (β = 0.129, p < .01). The inclusion of the female gaze in model 2.3 examined **H1a** and **H1b**, showing the erotic gaze was positively associated with internalized misogyny (β= .131, p < .01). Therefore, **H1a** was not supported, **H1b** was partly supported. Model 2.4 showed that fandom engagement of production was negatively associated with internalized misogyny (β = −.135, p < .05). So, **H3a** was partly supported and **H3b** was totally supported.

4.3. Moderating roles of female gaze and fandom engagement

Model 1.5 to 1.8 and Model 2.5 to 2.8 examined the moderating roles of the female gaze and fandom engagement separately. All the models were significant. For **H2a**, BL drama exposure × the traditional female gaze was positively associated with active commitment (β = .634, p < .01) but negatively related to internalized misogyny (β = −.562, p < .05). Among those who scored high in the traditional female gaze (+1 SD), BL drama exposure was associated with a higher active commitment (b = .089, SE = .035, t = 2.542, p < .05), but not among those who scored low (−1 SD). By contract, among those who scored low in the traditional female gaze (−1 SD), BL drama exposure was associated with a higher internalized misogyny (b = .114, SE = .037, t = 3.106, p < .01), but not among those who scored high (+1 SD) (Figure 1). For **H2b**, BL drama exposure × the erotic female gaze was positively associated with active commitment (β = .327, p < .05) but negatively related to misogyny (β = −.365, p < .05). Among those who scored high in the erotic gaze (+1 SD), BL drama exposure was associated with a higher active commitment (b = .097, SE = .040, t = 2.397, p < .05), but not among those who scored low (−1 SD). By contract, among those who scored low in the erotic gaze (−1 SD), BL drama exposure was associated with a higher internalized misogyny (b = .101, SE = .035, t = 2.875, p < .01), but not among those who scored high (+1 SD) (Figure 2).

For **H4a**, BL drama exposure × fandom engagement of consumption was positively associated with active commitment (β = .456, p < .001) but negatively related to internalized misogyny (β = −.251, p < .05). Among those who scored high in fandom engagement of consumption (+1 SD), BL drama exposure was associated with a higher active commitment (b = .157, SE = .042, t = 3.767, p < .001), but not among those who scored low (−1 SD). By contract, among those who scored low in fandom engagement of consumption (−1 SD), BL drama exposure was associated with a higher internalized misogyny (b = .096, SE = .034, t = 2.818, p < .01), but not among those who scored high (+1 SD) (Figure 3). For **H4b**, BL drama exposure × fandom engagement of production was positively associated with active commitment (β = .177, p < .001) but negatively related to internalized misogyny (β = −.104, p < .05). Among those who scored high in fandom engagement of production

Table 4. Hierarchical multiple regression of internalized misogyny (N = 563)

	Internalized misogyny							
	Model 2.1	Model 2.2	Model 2.3	Model 2.4	Model 2.5	Model 2.6	Model 2.7	Model 2.8
Block 1: Demographics								
Age	.023	.017	.031	.027	.031	.026	.023	.022
Education	-.037	-.028	-.028	-.034	-.026	-.036	-.037	-.030
Marital status ("unmarried" = 0)	.410***	.374***	.357***	.368***	.357***	.368***	.366***	.373***
Region ("rural" = 0)	-.059	-.074	-.084*	-.074	-.075	-.070	-.081*	-.081*
Block 2: BL drama exposure		.129**	.091*	.112*	.598**	.305**	.369**	.082
Block 3: The female gaze								
The traditional female gaze			-.034	-.042	.127	-.059	-.060	-.058
The erotic female gaze			.131**	.141**	.146**	.387**	.149**	.153**
Block 4: Fandom engagement								
Fandom engagement of consumption				.091	.071	.064	.040	.053
Fandom engagement of production				-.135*	-.136	-.124	-.117	-.116
Block 5: Moderates								
BL drama exposure × The traditional female gaze					-.562*			
BL drama exposure × The erotic female gaze						-.365*		
BL drama exposure × Fandom engagement of consumption							-.251*	
BL drama exposure × Fandom engagement of production								-.104*
ΔR²	.173	.015	.013	.007	.009	.007	.007	.008
Adjusted R^2	.167	.180	.190	.194	.202	.200	.200	.201

$*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

(+1 SD), BL drama exposure was associated with a higher active commitment (b = .177, SE = .045, t = 3.934 p < .001), but not among those who scored low (−1 SD). By contract, among those who scored low in fandom engagement of production (−1 SD), BL drama exposure was associated with a higher internalized misogyny (b = .100, SE = .034, t = 2.925, p < .01), but not among those who scored high (+1 SD) (Figure 2).
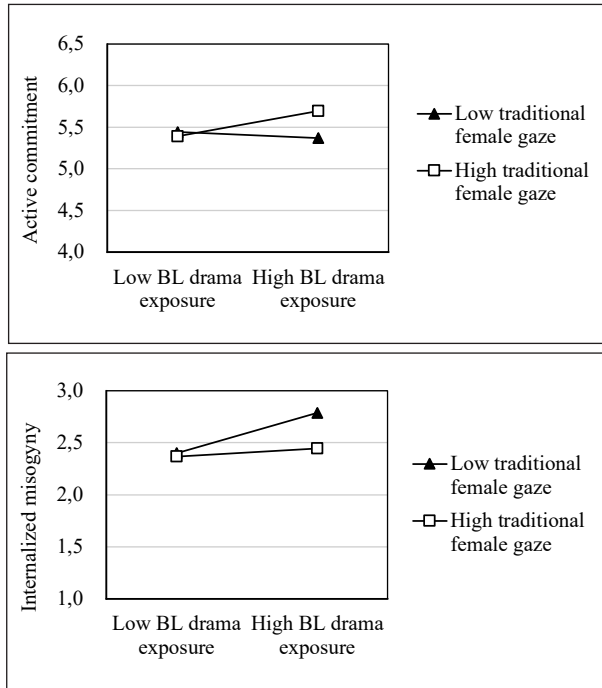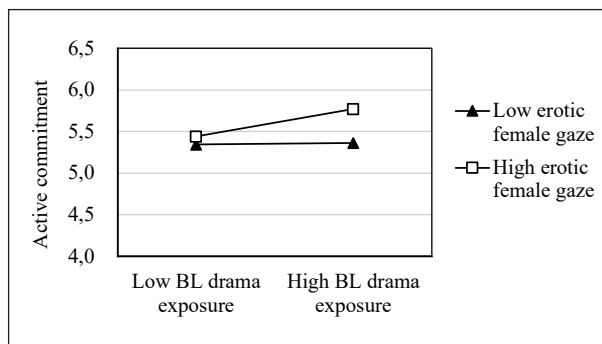

Figure 1. Moderating effect of the traditional female gaze on the association between BL drama exposure and active commitment/ internalized misogyny.
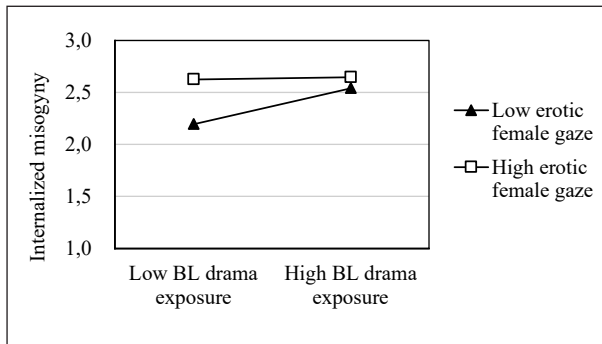
Figure 2. Moderating effect of the erotic female gaze on the association between
BL drama exposure and active commitment/ internalized misogyny.
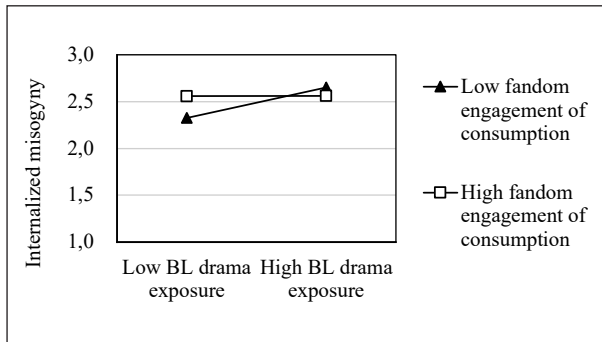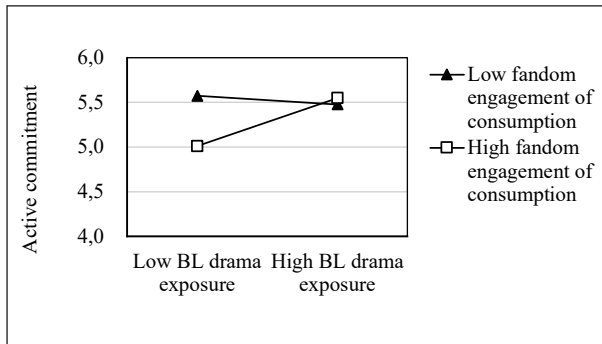
Figure 3. Moderating effect of fandom engagement of consumption
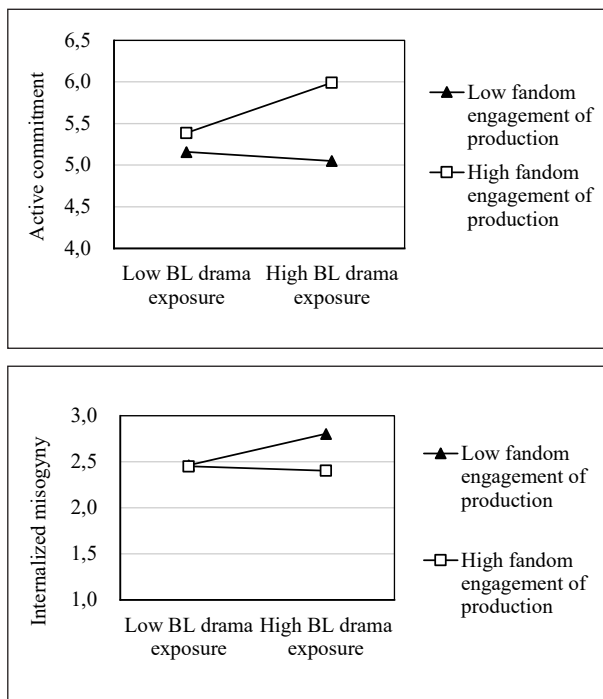on the association between BL drama exposure and active commitment/ internalized misogyny.

Figure 4. Moderating effect of fandom engagement of production
on the association between BL drama exposure and active commitment/ internalized misogyny.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The phenomenon of BL grew steadily over time in China. Today, many young women in China are engaged in reading, making, trading, and discussing BL works, creating a complex form of participatory 'queer pop' (Zhang 2017; Yang and Xu 2017). The emergence of BL drama has fostered a unique public sphere for open discussions of non-normative sexualities and doubts about the established gender conventions for its predominantly female users (Yang and Xu 2016). Especially in patriarchal China, under the dual repression of state power and traditional culture, consuming BL is regarded as 'digital feminism' to challenge the conventional gender order (Chang and Tian 2021). Although the cultivation theory revealed that frequent exposure to specific media content can nurture beliefs that coincide with the content (Gerbner 1969), the existing literature posited conflicting assumptions: while some believed BL exposure is associated with feminism, others revealed shreds of evidence of misogyny. The current study tested the assumptions empirically through a sample of BL drama viewers. Also, the roles of BL fandom engagement and the female gaze during watching BL drama were explored.

The results indicated that exposure to BL drama is significantly associated with increased feminism. That is, the more frequently females watch BL drama, the

more they would advocate for a fairer, non-sexist world in actions. Interestingly, our study revealed that exposure to BL drama is also associated with misogyny. That is, the more often females watch BL drama, the more likely they would accept the existing gender convention. This seemingly contradictory finding revealed that the cultivation role of BL drama has an extremely complex association with gender ideology. It also indicated a highly complex relationship between feminism and misogyny despite the common belief that the two stands on the opposite ends of a continuum. However, although the current study revealed that BL consumption could be simultaneously associated with both feminism and misogyny, we have to be aware that when the moderates of the female gaze and fandom engagement entered, the seemingly contradictory relationship between BL drama exposure and feminism/ misogyny would become distinct, which would be discussed later.

Regarding the relationship between the female gaze and gender ideology, the results showed that the erotic female gaze was significantly positively associated with active engagement. That means that the more women gaze at men's bodies and sexual energies from a centred position, the more they would fight for a fairer world for women. However, contrary to our expectations, the erotic female gaze was not negatively but positively related to misogyny. This may be due to the fact that the male-male sexuality in BL drama to some extent comply with the hierarchical heterosexual model in real life, especially the 'irreversibility' of *uke/seme*, which is the replica of the dominant-submissive role of men and women in heterosexuality. The relationship between the traditional gaze and feminism/ misogyny was not significant. Interestingly, the results showed that for audiences with high-level female gaze, whether it is erotic gaze or traditional gaze, exposure to BL drama was related to increased feminism. For audiences with low-level female gaze, exposure would lead to increased misogyny. Although previous studies have discussed the role of female gaze in promoting feminism and resisting misogyny (Li 2020, Hemmann 2020, Turner 2016), our research has revealed that this role does not directly occur but shapes the outcomes of cultivation by moderating the relationship between viewing and gender ideology.

Our third goal was to examine the role of fandom engagement. The results showed that fandom engagement of consumption and production played distinguished roles in gender ideology. Fandom engagement of production was positively associated with active commitment but negatively with misogyny. By contrast, fandom engagement of consumption tends to reduce the level of feminist identity of active commitment. This indicates that whether to passively accept the stories and values provided by the producers and authors or to interpret actively and even rewrite the stories plays a vital role in shaping gender ideology for the female audiences in watching BL drama. As Kearney (2006, p.13) declared, women's proactive media content production behavior is a significant way for them to establish feminist political initiatives in the digital age. Similarly, women's passive media content-consuming behavior is an obstacle to establishing a feminist identity. This reminds us that different types of fandom engagement behaviors of BL fans can bring diverse gender ideologies. However, when we examine the moderating role of fandom engagement, the results showed that for high-engaged audiences, whether engaged in consumption or

production, exposure to BL drama would relate to increased feminism. For low-engaged viewers, exposure would bring more misogyny. This indicates that fandom engagement as an active audience activity, whether actively producing new content or passively accept existing content, could moderate the cultivating to a more feminist ideology and less misogyny outcome.

This study extended our understanding of the genre-specific cultivation by examining the consequences of BL drama exposure on female audiences' gender ideology and highlighted the role of active audiences' activities such as the female gaze and fandom engagement in moderating the gender ideology cultivating outcome of the BL drama. Based on these findings, this research attempt to raise a concept of 'active feminist fan audience', which was a combination of 'active audience', 'fandom engagement' and 'feminist', to depict the female audiences who view BL dramas from a feminist perspective of desire and actively engaged in fandom activities.

The study has several limitations. First, the study was cross-sectional and cannot infer causality. Further studies should apply longitudinal or experimental designs to test this model in different samples. Second, BL is a transnational fandom, and the Chinese context is unique in this scenario due to the socio-cultural and political differences. Therefore, future studies should test the applicability of this model in other nations and areas.

Data availability statement

The data generated in this study cannot be shared openly due to confidentiality concerns for study participants. Access is restricted to protect their privacy and may be available upon request under ethical guidelines.

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