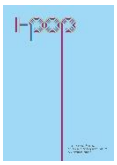
ORIGINAL ARTICLE

ISSN: 2715-0917 e-ISSN: 2745-469X

I-Pop: International Journal of Indonesian Popular Culture and Communication



Vol. 4(1) pp. 1-21, (2023)
DOI: 10.36782/i-pop.v4i1.130

Female Masculinity Representation in Still Sick Yuri Manga: Indonesian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia has an enormous manga audience and fans. One of the known genres is Yuri, a lesbian romance story. As a country with many Muslims who practice some Islamic customs, it is not surprising that this genre is often seen as controversial since it conflicts with moral teachings and is labeled as an LGBTQ+ normalization space. However, to not see the genre objectively is also a waste since it represents the actual life of women, especially lesbians, in a heteronormative society that glorifies androcentric capitalistic patriarchal ideology—something we also usually see in Indonesia. Therefore, the Yuri genre is a counter-narrative to Japanese and Indonesian society. Using Barthes' semiology with Janet Chafetz's seven traits of masculinity, we analyzed the representation of female masculinity and lesbian traits in the Still Sick manga to decode the representation of a lesbian's female masculinity in Yuri manga. This article offers a new perspective on this discriminated genre. It shows that entertainment media bears criticism against its society while helping the public, especially domestic hobbyists, understand Yuri manga and its female masculinity more. Five points can be discussed in this article: 1) the shakaijin Yuri theme reconstructs the girls' love genre and masculinity in manga and anime, 2) the negotiated power relation between lesbian households, 3) women's hybrid ikigai acts as a critique against the masculine counterpart, and 4) critic against the heteronormative-homophobic society through the representation of lesbian life in Japan. The comparison between Japanese and Indonesian popular culture is also discussed to understand the context.

Keywords

female masculinity, manga and anime, representation, semiology, *yuri* genre

To cite this article (7th APA style):

Anindita, R. M. & Yuwono, A. I. (2023). Female masculinity representation in Still Sick Yuri manga. *I-Pop: International Journal of Indonesian Popular Culture and Communication, 4*(1), 1-21. http://doi.org/10.36782/i-pop.v4i1.130

INTRODUCTION

Hiroki saw both *anime* or *manga* as post-modern products (2003 in Galbraith, 2014) since how massive and dynamic these Japanese popular cultures have become since "Astro Boy" aired for the first time in 1963 (Yasuo, Nippon.com, 2013). This indicated the trust and belief from the Japanese Government towards both *anime* and *manga* as one of their savior after the burst of economic bubble at the end of 80s (Lamarre, 2009). The usefulness of *anime* and *manga* are not limited to domestic uses, but also in promoting tourism to overseas tourist to have their "pilgrimage". As for the international politics, both popular cultures have the *soft power* to renegotiate post-war image of Japan's

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towards their former colonized territory such as China or Korea (Yu, 2015) and also Indonesia.

The growth of this popular cultures are usually known as *otaku culture* in Japan (Condry, 2011 in Reisel 2018; Ito, 2014 in Galbraith, 2014). The culture has been being a pandemic virus since 1980s as world witnessed the growth of imported *anime* or *manga* consumption to the point of domestic comics got heavily competed and sidelined from the market (MacWilliams, 2008; Yu, 2015). Indonesia's one of them. Onwards, this article mainly discuss *manga.*

Indonesia is one of the biggest manga consumer countries in the world since 1990s. Imported *manga* titles have been dominating the domestic comic market ever since. Titles like *Doraemon, Detective Conan* (in the West known as *Case Closed*), or *One Piece* are some from many which have been published domestically and almost never absent from comic shelves in every bookstore in Indonesia. This of course gives impact to the national-produced comics. They're almost in the verge of extinction before the resurrection in the 2010s.

Positively, even though it is *manga* that sidelined the national comics from their own market, it's also manga that helped the production and reemergence of national comic and comic consumption in Indonesia (Ajidarma, 2021). The rise of interest towards *manga* and national comics gave birth to lots of comic convention or comic market events for example *Comic Frontier* in Jakarta and *Mangafest* in Yogyakarta. Those events adopt the biggest comic convention in Japan, *Comic Market (Comiket)*. These cases make us cannot deny the huge impact of *manga* even it's not happened in its own country. Denison (2015 in Sugawa-Shimada, 2019) argued that *anime* and *manga* should be looked as a meaningful cultural phenomena. Something we can take as common agreement.

Although Indonesia's online *manga* discussion is in its rise as we discussed earlier, the discussion is not academic nor at least authors can say healthy. Some may publish journals that analyzed and discussed *manga* or *anime,* for example Vitriani & Budianda (2018) or Purnamasari, Pinka, and Hardianto (2021), but mostly the hobbyists of *manga* or *anime* rarely discusses it so the discussions are mostly wild as in a jungle and as chaotic as a war. Even though the growth of *manga* since 1980s has already attracted some authors to write about it overseas, the domestic discussion is far from standard. It's a post-modern problem Hiroki ever stated about *otaku culture* (2003 in Galbraith, 2014) that also impacts Indonesia's community.

This case makes the audiences rarely notice the fact that *manga* is also a medium to present representations of current Japanese society and culture such as politics, economy, families, religion, gender—also reality, myth, beliefs, and fantasy (Ito, 2005 in Seto & Kikuchi, 2021). It's a disappointment since in fact we can learn a lot about Japanese society and its culture that in authors' views have some similarities with Indonesian society since the heteronormativity and glorification to men or masculinity are the main social conforms with the root from religious teachings (Buddhist, Shinto, or Confucianism for Japan; Islam for Indonesia).

As Mathews (2002) found, Japanese society adapts Confucianism teachings as its ideology as it places the masculine gender (the husband/men) on higher position as the bread winner of a family. This ideology that is "taught" in modern post-war Japan adapted the teachings to place the salaryman in a hegemonic standing while women (feminine gender) are seen nothing more but domestic manager or second-class citizens (Iida, 2018). The ideology also makes a division in external or internal jobs and responsibilities inside Japanese families based on gender while being reeks of heteronormativity. Practically, under this ideology, masculinity has a direct connection to the power relation also to the cultural ideology which has been naturalized to the point masculinity already leaps beyond the gender discourse's belief that masculinity has

no direct connection to biologically male person (Roberson & Suzuki, 2002 in Ma, 2021).

Yulius (2021) found the similar model was also adapted in Indonesia when the New Order Government made a not-written ideology of "*Ibuisme Negara*" (nation's motherism) in a nuclear family model. The gendered division clearly gave the position of domestic manager to the mothers while the public spaces was the husbands. As the findings in Japanese nuclear family, women in Indonesia were also domesticated and depoliticized in a heterosexual nuclear family. Much as the Japanese counterparts, their responsibilities are in form of serving their husbands or teaching their children under the name of "fate". It was also naturalized through various mediums such as media, schools, or wives' organizations (PKK). Unfortunately, Indonesia didn't have the power of manga as how Japan did back then to counter against it.

The practice of the ideology becomes the target of *manga* which provides counter-narrative through satire caricatures to challenge the glorification of salarymen as the ideologies and capitalist system's pillar (Dahlberg-Dodd, 2018). The salarymen, who were framed as national's "new hero" in various media of post-war Japan, were often illustrated pathetic both in work and in domestic, for example is Nohara Hiroshi in Crayon Shinchan manga.

This satire functions shows that *manga* is a powerful medium to blow critics against the heteronormative Japanese society even enough to give lots of space for representation and positive images to marginalized people such as queers, gays, and lesbians in socio-cultural, economic, or even politic which are struggling under the homophobic society of Japan (McLelland, 2000). One of the spaces is the *yuri* genre of *manga*.

Since its rebirth at the end of 90s and its growing-to-adult phase in the 2010s, *yuri manga* has become the nest for lesbianism and feminism issues even if they're not shown as blatant as how the West does. Like how the nest does, *yuri manga* also acts as home for the exclusivity of women's world which is under the threat of the Japanese's active heteronormative ideology. One of the biggest marks is how *yuri* genre is mostly written by female authors. The freedom the authors have in the making of *yuri manga* guarantees them to voice their opinions or views through their own creation.

Yuri manga shows colorful of characters from children, adolescents, and even more recently, adults who are in love each other's. Their stories are not limited on talking about their romantic life, but also how their stories act as tool to counter the masculinity values as both in the real society outside the narrative or in a more micro scope, inside the world of *manga* itself. Often, female characters are shown independent and capable to accomplish many things or jobs so they're on par with their male counterparts. Even more, some of these characters are capable in playing masculine role in act or even in physicality. Interestingly, they always success to do it positively.

From various titles presenting the "masculine-female" characters, author picked *Still Sick* (Akashi, 2018) as object of discussion in a mission to answer how female masculinity is represented in lesbian relationship in *yuri* manga. This title tells the story of Shimizu Makoto, a career woman, in her late 20s accidentally met her colleague, Maekawa Akane who was also a former *mangaka,* in a comic convention she attended as *doujinshi* or self-published book—whether it's parody from popular titles or an original—author. At the end of story, the two adult women was shown married, more than just domestic relationship between lovers.

Other reasons why authors picked the title is because of the power relation between the two is shown clearly. Meanwhile, the fact that both Maekawa Akane and Shimizu Makoto were in their 20s means both of them are a fully-functional adult (*shakaijin)* in a heterosocial society of Japan's end of Heisei era that marching towards the new Reiwa. It also becomes "the indirect sign" of Japan's new views

on same-sex marriage in Reiwa era. The new views as the birth of the legalization of same-sex marriage presents new possibility of *yuri manga* to explore the new happy ending which both characters can have their marriage life in the end of story, something we couldn't (or rarely) see before the late 2010s (Maser, 2013). At the same time, both the genre and the *Still Sick* itself give the traditional masculine values which has been rooted in Japanese society challenge from the younger generation—especially women. As the younger generation sees, the masculine gender should also present in the domestic needs (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2019).

These reasons explain why this article's goal is in harmony with the practice of masculinity presented in *Still Sick*. With the help of Halberstam concept of female masculinity (1998 in Nabilla & Novianti, 2019) and seven traditional values of masculinity proposed by Janet Chafetz (1974 in Sari, *et. al.,* 2019), this article tries to dismantle the female masculinity practices in this *manga*—more details will be explained later in the method section.

Other authors and research had already researched the theme such as Shamoon (2012) or Maser (2013), but they never touched the "female masculinity" topic. Maser's findings actually provided lots in this article, but the socio-cultural context also the actuality of the *yuri manga* titles Maser discussed we saw need some more "nourishments" even though she discussed the three locusts, producer, consumer, and also content itself. We found that Bauman's article on Anime News Network (2021, August 18) were the most actual, however sadly that was not an academic products nor journal. Interestingly, research on *yuri manga* were less popular than the *boys' love manga* for example the research of Lilja's and Wasshede's (2016).

Yuri manga is also often seen in a not serious manner by lots of eyes even authors' confident to say that it's almost never touched by other Indonesian researchers. The domestic *anime* and *manga* communities themselves are usually showing opposing views on this genre which can be translated as how society in general looks the homosexuality contents in medias.

This article will provide one more view in domestic *anime* and *manga* research. A "new" topic which is considered taboo for most of Indonesians, that is homosexuality—even more, between women. Yet, these facts justify the importance important of studying it since the society should not overlook and at least understand the existence of them while at the minimum standard reforming and liberating the idea of independent, strong women which was usually repressed by patriarch both in society and sadly also in representation in media.

Figure 1. First Chapter of Still Sick Shows the Two Main Characters, Shimizu Makoto (Right) and Maekawa Akane (Left); Volume 1, Chapter 1, Page 2 (Akashi, 2018).

METHOD

To support this article, authors found that semiotic analysis of Roland Barthes was suitable to unveil and translate the denotative and connotative meanings inside the text while using the critical perspective as the main paradigm. Barthes' analysis is a popular model to decode such semiological codes and patterns in popular cultures (Shank, 2008 in Patton, 2015). Both method and paradigm enabled the authors to gain the understandings of female masculinity

representation in a lesbian relationship in *Still Sick yuri manga.*

Barthes' analysis model divides the analysis into two levels: the denotation—the literal signs—and the connotation—meanings of the signs. The two levels give brith to systematic and unarbitrary historical myths as a result of understanding towards the symbols shown in a text (Strinati, 2004 in Sidjabat, *et. al*., 2018). His semiotics studies how humanity interprets (or his term "to signify") things. The process of signification cannot be mixed with the process of communication and has a closer meaning to how humanity signifies the meaning, communication, and structured system the sign contains. To understand the ideology and the cultural differences inside the text, Barthes presented three dimensions in his model: signifier, signified, and signification under two stages of interpretation called denotation (sensible signs) and connotation (the contextual meaning) (Okuyama, 2015; Santosa, 2013). As he argued, ideology was a connection between material objects and social actions under a coded hierarchical symbolic system (Gottdiener, 1995 in Siregar, 2018). Below, we present this article's analysis model in the form of table:

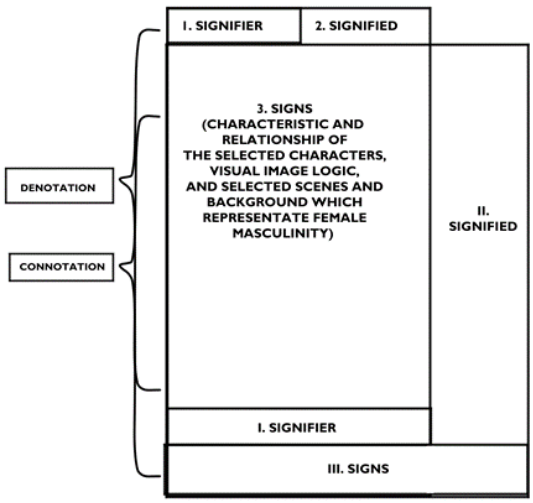

Figure 2. Research Method Table; Adapted from Roland Bathes' Model of Semiotic Analysis (Fiske, 2016).

Data sources used in this article were chosen pages from 24 chapters of *Still Sick* that we found suitable with the basis we use: the masculinity values of Janet Chafetz's (1974 in Sari, *et. al.,* 2019) and the scenes we saw containing critics against the capitalistic ideology of Japan. Janet Chafetz stated that there were seven points of traditional masculinity as: (1) Physicality; (2) Functionality; (3) Sexuality; (4) Emotion; (5) Intellectuality; (6) Interpersonally; and (7) Other points such as egoist, pride, honor, or success. This article also includes pages that showed a lesbian's life. As the result of the selections, we found eight suitable datas for us discussing four main points we will discuss in the next chapter: the image and narrative of recent *yuri* works, power relation between lesbian couple, *ikigai* of its female characters and also lesbian representation. The analysis instruments described below:

Table 1. Data Analysis Units

Researched Units	**Elements**	**Sub-Elements**
Selected female character that show the female masculinity symbols: Shimizu Makoto, Maekawa Akane, Maekawa's mother,	Physical	Character design, fashion choices, jobs, or objects around the character.
	Psychological	Characteristic, gesture, lifestyle choice, emotion, and sexual orientation.

This study also selected scenes which show the relationship between the two main characters, Shimizu Makoto and Maekawa Akane (onwards their name will be referred as Shimizu and Maekawa only since their family name are usually used in manga instead of their given name). Beside documentation process, we also used literature studies to concrete the analysis method as we read the texts and visual aspects. We used comic's visual logic to analyze the language level such as: point of view, size of

the image, the use of panels, and its closure since the logic of comic is similar to film as a sequential art (McCloud, 1993 in Wang, *et. al.,* 2021; Ito, 2005 in Seko & Kikuchi, 2021; Stuvi, 2005 in Lubis, 2017).

In the next section, we will provide the denotation and connotation analysis first before decoding the myth behind the text as the discussion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are five main points this article can find and will be discussed below:

Shakaijin Yuri: Reconstructing the Girls' Love Narratives and Masculinities in Anime and Manga

Yuri genre or we can also call it as "Girls' Love (GL)" has a long history in the world of *anime* and *manga.* Even more, the predecessor of this genre was from Japan's Taisho Era (1912-1926) in a form of girls' novel (*shoujo shousetsu).* The genre itself can be translated literally as "lily", an iconic symbol of all-girls school and the glrl's culture Taisho Japan had ever witnessed.

Japan's Taisho Era witnessed the birth of new social class as access to education for female teenagers grew vaster after various regulations legalized at that time, named as "shoujo class". The all-girls schools (whether they were catholic missionary schools or secular) established themselves as an icon of this era while introducing the white lily as symbol of purity and sacred of maidens that derived from amalgamation between Christian teachings and Japanese society after the Meiji Revolution (Shamoon, 2012).

At the same time, the birth of this new class developed its own exclusive culture known girl's culture (*shoujo bunka).* The bloom of *shoujo bunka* then provided the girls their own exclusive space to express their interest or became the consumer of "their own" culture—even if there were some interferences from men (Shamoon, 2008). The *shoujo bunka* was blooming high as ever in this era especially in these schools in form of girls' novels (*shoujo shousetsu)* and the all-girls revue troupe of Takarazuka that showed male-impersonating actresses.

The *shoujo bunka* was also marked with the development of same-sex relationship model between two girls known as *esu.* In fact, even before the birth of *esu,* Japan already witnessed a *queer* homosexual relationship between men in Edo Period (1600-1868) in its traditional all-men theater show known as kabuki and senior-junior ethic between samurais (McLelland, 2000). However, the same-sex intimacy between female never been acknowledged before Taisho. Even more, the *esu* we discuss here was "taught" through the girls' novels as its medium since they were the most popular products girls usually consume. The girls' novels narrated the practices to have a same-sex relationship between two school grils—which was only seen as a phase rather than an identity as lesbian.

In the practice, *esu* bound two female students—usually senior and junior—in a role called *onee-sama* (the dearest elder sister, the dominant and the protector) for the older student while the younger one gained the role of *imouto* (the younger sister, the submissive and someone who had to be guided by her *onee-sama).* The goal of this relationship was to prepare the girls in a platonic relationship before getting married with a man their families chose after graduating from school (Shamoon, 2012; Maser, 2013). However, it was not rare for lots of girls who already vowed their *esu* relationship to have romantic feelings towards their partner as the *esu*-themed novel showed so.

The passionate relationship in *esu* narratives depicted with flowery poetic words was the main point of why they were highly attracting girls to read and consume more. Even we can say that *esu* was the most-demanded theme in girl's novels back then even though some heterosexual novel for girls were also published. Moreover, since it was iconic, we can still find this *esu* relationship in the modern *yuri manga* with some changes to adapt with the time.

However, as the time changes, the *esu* is not the only narratives of *yuri manga.* As we mentioned earlier, the genre also grows mature in 2010s alongside the audiences. As the result, a new theme called *shakaijin yuri* was born to tell the stories of adult women in a fully-functional role in the heterosocial society rather than stories of an exclusive homosocial society of all-girls school (Baumann, ANN, 2021).

This new theme of *yuri genre* is formerly an unpopular and even looked as an almost untouchable narrative before the latter half of 2010s. Compared to the findings of Maser (2013) or Shamoon (2012) which not yet mentioned about this particular theme and more about the *sisterhood* relationship—which is understandable since the time the studies published was in the first half of the 2010s—this new theme picks an adult woman in relationships. The represented adult background the female characters have indicates the undeniable fact that there are fully-conscious female characters declaring lesbian as their identity or preferring female partners. Meanwhile, as Maekawa and Shimizu are depicted in *Still Sick,* we can also see a clearer and vaster gender and sexuality representation of female's characters compared to the past decades—which was considered a taboo. In *Still Sick,* these arguments are illustrated in these two datas below:

Figure 3. Volume 1, Chapter 2, Page 10 of Still Sick (Akashi, 2018).

Denotation: In an *izakaya* some corporate employees were holding a party as they had their "cheers" shouts. Shimizu, presented in the third and fifth panel, was holding her huge size glass of draft-beer even though she was a woman.

Connotation: An after-work party is a common tradition in corporate culture of Japan. Usually, it's held to celebrate the new recruits or deepen the bonding between divisions as it's depicted in above (Roberson & Suzuki, 2002 in Ma, 2021). Shimizu, even though a woman, was holding a huge size glass draft beer and chugging it empty. For some views, it's a common case, but in Japan's context, it's a unique point to point out her masculinity since rarely female coworkers are seen chugging draft-beers—even order them. The reasons why women rarely order them because of the advertisement and media products socially frame cocktail as "the appropriate" alcoholic drink for women since it has elegant feature and has various taste, especially sweet instead of rough-taste draft-beer (Yamanashi, 2012). We can conclude that Shimizu showed her own "socially manliness" there.

Figure 4. Volume 3, Chapter 23, Page 30-31 of Still Sick (Akashi, 2020).

Denotation: Both Maekawa and Shimizu exchange their gratitude while embracing each other. They were seen wearing matching rings at their ring fingers.

Connotation: This page shows the relationship of both Shimizu and Maekawa at the end of story as a legally married couple. The

once lived in a solitary independent life then had their happy marriage life as Shimizu adopted the masculine husband-like role while her partner adopted the work-from-home *manga* artist domestic-manager wife. This page also shows us about how Shimizu adopted the functional values of masculinity as the bread winner with stable wage job outside the house and engendered herself with Maekawa who had *manga* as her job and depended on her *manga* sales to obtain her royalty. Socially, Shimizu was the masculine one there since *mangaka* or manga artist is often seen as a blue-collar job which Japanese society looks as the suitable job for married women (Roberson & Suzuki, 2002 in Ma, 2021; Villa, 2019).

Whether the denotation or the connotation of both figures above show clearly that Shimizu and Maekawa who were independent women in the middle of heterosocial society are main signifiers of the *shakaijin yuri* theme as author discussed earlier. The life ouf the couple's is also a clear sign that the contemporary *yuri manga* has blatant differences than its predecessor, the *esu* novels, as it changes following the dynamics of Japanese latest modern society around the genre itself. The marriage between Shimizu and Maekawa also acts as representation of the domestic relationship between woman-woman couple as far as changing the vows. We can also say that it also acts as normalization to the audiences to see a happy lesbian couple who share domestic relationship.

These changes are the result of the birth of new demographic genre, *jousei,* which targets adult women with more realistic stories as its main content since 1990s and combined with the emergence of lesbian—or how Japanese name it *rezu*—characters since 2000s even if it was rare to see some titles held a happy ending between the two women (Planty, Crunchyroll News, 2020, June 25; Maser, 2013; Prough, 2011 in Monden, 2014; Shamoon, 2008). The genre's evolution has been progressing steadily until the latter half of 2010s, as Japan witnessed the end of Heisei era, *yuri* genre gave new breath in terms of narratives and issue as it sold newer and bolder narratives for lesbian and LGBTQ+ discourses. Some characters are made to be in full of consciousness and pride to acknowledge themselves as a lesbian as identity and sexuality while the happy ending for the couples are most likely more guaranteed like how Shimizu and Maekawa ended at the end of their story.

These changes are not limited to the lesbian representation narratives but also on gender exploration and experiment which has been exist since the 1980s saw the introductions of Tenou Haruka of *Sailor Moon* (Sugawa-Shimada, 2019). The recent explorations are going even wilder that it becomes more common to see female characters with more masculine traits which something that impossible to be found in *esu* novels (Shamoon, 2008). Some results of this exploration are masculine female characters who don't just appear in a dominating role as the *onee-sama* back then, but also masculine in physicality or the way they speak (using masculine *boku* for example) in a boyish manner, fashion preferences, or even lifestyle. Usually, they're called *ikemen onna* (handsome woman) or even *tachi* (top, as in a lesbian sexual relationship) adapting the *otokoyaku* (male-impersonator actress) role of Takarazuka Revue that assimilating positive values of femininity and masculinity (Yamanashi, 2012). Therefore, this kind of *anime* and *manga's* trope seen as the perfect and ideal masculinity inside a female characters' body so far the real-life *tachi* often tries to imitate. The female body negates the insecurity of "the danger" derives from the presence of male's phallus. As de Lauretis (1994 in Bolso, 2002) stated, the existence of "the handsome girls" acts as a *lesbian fetish* which can complete each partner's while being audience's escapism and longing for the perfect picture of positive masculinity.

The presence of female masculinity in *yuri* also gives an illustration about how "masculinities acted by female body" which has been believed as something flexible, elastic, and as Halberstam stated, "the unholy union" (1998

in Nabilla & Novianti, 2019). Female masculinity in *yuri manga* also performs as critics against male characters' masculinity especially in male-targeted *manga* which is often seen as hegemonic, toxic, also misogynistic practices as far as placing their phallus (penis) as the active subject symbol of absolute hegemony in a male-female or masculine-feminine relationship in the narratives.

The Negotiated Power Relation between Shimizu and Maekawa

The *shakaijin yuri* theme *Still Sick* presents not just to give a representation of the lesbian life in the middle of working society, but also in the power relation performed between masculine and feminine (even) in a lesbian household of Shimizu and Maekawa's.

Caldwell & Peplau (1984 in Cho, *et. al.,* 2020) stated that power is someone's ability to influence the behaviors of their partner. Power usually involves someone's ownership in material sources—education, incomes, social class—so that the one who has superiority on those materials are "given the rights" to dominate the other party. Moreover, they introduce two kinds of model of power relation, the relative imbalance, and the egalitarian balance of power model. The inequal model that gives the domination towards one of the party and coercively pressure the other party under a submission to follow whatever definitions, decisions, or even the direction of a relationship. Japan, as how we discussed, gives the masculine gender bigger portion of power relation as they have wider job fields than their feminine counterpart. Indirectly, this also direct women as the feminine gendered people to adopt the masculinity values as much as possible just to be seen competent in work and more than second class citizens (Iida, 2018; Dozier, 2017). The last sentences is one of the explanation why Shimizu looked dominant compared to Maekawa in much more aspects. However, uniquely, there's a negotiation between the two in some specific aspects so that Shimizu wasn't in a complete domination in their household as we discuss below:

Figure 5. Volume 3, Chapter 20, Page 26 of Still Sick (Akashi, 2020).

Denotation: Maekawa flirted with Shimizu before pecking her neck. The third panel shows the night panorama of Tokyo Tower as the main background.

Connotation: This page shows the foreplay between the couple. Even though Shimizu was the dominant and masculine side in their routine, the same case was not applicated on the bed as Maekawa leaded the way to pleasure. Maekawa's pecking can be translated as her sign to start the sexual deeds as she was ready to do it. Moreover, pecking to the partner's neck is a sign of "ownership" in a sexual manner. Also, this page shows the sexual aggressiveness of Maekawa. As Janet Chafetz stated, sexual aggressiveness and experience are two of sexual masculinity traits—even though in this case performed in a lesbian relationship. Put the sexual things aside, the background in the third panel explains that both Shimizu and Maekawa's story are one of myriad stories and night life in the capital city of Japan whether it's heterosexual or homosexual.

Figure 6. Volume 3, Chapter 23, Page 23 of Still Sick (Akashi, 2020).

Denotation: Shimizu who was wearing suits and and shirts told her colleague, Kidoguchi, about her household situation after marrying Maekawa. Meanwhile, in the third panel, her partner was in confusion with her phone on her left ears and pen on the other side. A small picture frame was shown in the second panel before the balls of papers.

Connotation: This page can be read as their division on household's role. Meanwhile, Shimizu appeared as the bread-winner, working outside their home with formal suits, even as what Kidoguchi stated in the first panel, Shimizu was one of the major candidates to be the next CEO where she was working. At the different scene, the picture frame shown in the second panel indicates that Maekawa had already retired from her job to re-pursue her career as *mangaka* as the panel is juxtaposed with the next one. Shimizu also can be seen as the masculine one here not only in case of her function as bread-winner but also as the ambitious successful leader who showed her intellectuality and in a good position in the corporate's hierarchy.

Both data indicates that modern *yuri* like *Still Sick* provides chances for female characters to adopt masculine traits such as the bread winner in her married relationship with Maekawa. However, their relationship still gives the reeks of heteronormativity as they divided roles based on masculine-feminine gender as if happened in Japanese heterosexual nuclear family in general. Adopting the masculine role in her daily life provides Shimizu to dominate Maekawa in terms of sources—Shimizu had stable income while Maekawa depended on her royalty—even though they still held some negotiation as negating the relative imbalance model and acted more towards the egalitarian one.

Interestingly, Shimizu really depended on Maekawa under the field of sexual needs and affection. The domination over Shimizu shows her experience in doing ones as ensuring the masculine role to her in sexual aspects of masculinity. However, the domination of "masculine role" in a lesbian relationship is not an absolute one as we can find in heterosexual since the dominant party (the top) is sometimes seen nothing more but servant to her partner to reach her orgasm even though for some cases the top also feels satisfied from satisfying her partner (Bolso, 2002). This shows us that heterosexual values are reconstructed under the homosexual relationship. To make it more complex, Shimizu used her position as a "husband" to be served by her "wife" to relieve her sexual urges—something that's considered normal and natural in heterosexual relationship.

Apparently, it's still difficult to see a lesbian couple in *manga* breaking out from the heteronormativity completely. However, the negotiation and the egalitarian model between the couple gives them a more positive mark especially in the *manga* world. Importantly, the role division guarantees both women to have self-realization and actualization in work, life, also their own *ikigai*.

Women on the Run: The Female Characters' Ikigai

In concept, *ikigai* is an old Japanese teaching about the essence of life to enjoy the life itself (MItsuhashi, BBC, 2017, August 8) and knows no gender even gender's steady values. However, as Mathews found (2002), the gender division in

ideology and public-domestic life identifies gendered *ikigai* as masculine *ikigai* revolves around work life as the bread winner for the family while feminine *ikigai* is associated with managing the domestic life. Even though there are some recent changes after having challenged from younger generations and the evolution of society needs, the old gendered *ikigai* still hard to be separated from the social reality and denormalized. He also introduced three points of *ikigai* as three commitments to: work, family, and self-actualization which we can find in, interestingly, *female characters* of *Still Sick* as discussed below:

Figure 7. Volume 1, Chapter 4, Page 8 of Still Sick (Akashi, 2018).

Denotation: Little Maekawa seen having her head getting patted by his former father—before the divorce. Then, in the third panel, the sailor-uniformed teenage Maekawa called her mother while holding a lunch on her hand as she rushed out in her jacket. The fourth panel shows the first encounter between Maekawa and her opportunity to be a *manga* artist as Shimizu looked shocked in the last panel, listening to her soon-to-be girlfriend's story.

Connotation: Here, explained that Maekawa had a broken-home family since she was child. The divorce gave her mother rights of having alongside the huge responsibility to nurture her. As the results, the mother had to adopt the culturally masculine role as the family's bread winner as Maekawa managed the domestic needs. The problem for her was Japan regulated a wage-limitation and job-limitation for housewives so that enabling the dependent status on their spouses. The job-limitation then had the mother to work in various part time jobs just to fulfill the daily needs as Maekawa stated in the third panel. Her family's condition drived her to lighten the financial burden by being a *mangaka.*

Figure 8. Volume 3, Chapter 23.5 (Epilogue), Page 4 of Still Sick (Akashi, 2020).

Denotation: Decorated lunch box (*dekoben)* is shown full-packed with decorated side dishes and rice. Shimizu looked enjoyed her lunch in the third panel. In the fourth panel, some male colleagues said that their boss had already changed.

Connotation: Of course, the lunch box was arranged by Maekawa so that Shimizu could fully enjoy her break. This signifies that Shimizu's life had already changed after marrying Maekawa. Leaving her previous single lifestyle, Shimizu became more aware with her surroundings, leaving her egocentric side and practical behavior—which one of masculine traits. The "husband" Shimizu was full of affection to her Maekawa as if the latter was part of her life essence, or we can say *ikigai.* Indirectly, the

previous lifestyle of Shimizu's was accepted by her subordinates which indicated that Shimizu's masculinity was accepted by them.

Shimizu, Maekawa, and even Maekawa's mother can be seen as female characters who own masculine *ikigai* since they fulfill one of Mathews' points of *ikigai* which is "commitment to work". However, their *working ikigai* can be read furthermore since the three of them contain critics against polarization and division based on gender role in *ikigai* concept.

In the mother's case, she's a representation of a housewife single mother, she had to balance the role of mother and a bread winner at the same time. The limitation in her access to more proper job because of the dependance regulation that limits the wage a housewives can afford up to 1,5 million yen/year (Braser & Tsubuku, The Japan Times, March 5th, 2019) offers limited option to women as to be depended on their husband so that the family does not have to pay large number of tax since the both party are working. As the results, Maekawa's mother had to apply on numbers of jobs and most of her time were used to fulfill the daily needs as she struggled to balance the domestic life and as the bread winner. Even if other regulations relieve the single mothers to large sum of tax (Yokota, Mainichi Japan, 2018, November 21), the urgency of being a bread winner is still conflicting with the dependance regulation. The positive regulation can be seen as a ruling hegemony to force the women accepting their feminine *ikigai.* However, one strong point of her *ikigai* was the fact that she did everything for her family, especially her daughter as she accomplished the mission to balance her priority and responsibility.

If the mother's *ikigai* was a sole commitment to family, Maekawa and Shimizu's are more to self-actualization model as this model even hard to be done by men and their masculine *ikigai.* In Shimizu's case she became more accepting her weakness as well as herself as a closed lesbian for a long time. The growing affection towards Maekawa in the story also gave her realization in having life and releasing her egocentric single life. Meanwhile, Maekawa came to realize that creating *manga* giving her more chance to love herself and work as well, things that she struggled for long time. The two completed each other under the same understanding and affection. Hence, the two could balance the commitment to works and family. As same as the mother, they also succeed to have a new type of *ikigai,* the *hybrid ikigai.*

The two's story "satirizes" the masculine *ikigai* which forcing men to devote their lives to works until the point of forgetting or even not keeping in touch with their own family. The former situation of young Maekawa is the best representation of the failure of masculine working *ikigai* since the dogma teaches being a bread winner and providing money to family can ensure the joy which something that's too good to be true in the post bubble Japan (Darling-Wolf, 2004 in King, *et. al.* 2021). To challenge the dogma, a new campaign of *ikumen* promotes the active role from men in domestic life—which of course pressures them more (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2019).

Shimizu's masculine *ikigai,* moreover, also can be read as critics against the patriarchal hierarchy of corporation—especially Japanese in this case. Masculine traits are badly needed for someone to escalate themselves in success of career (Dozier, 2017). Unfortunately, the adoption of masculine traits is not parallel with how a career woman identity evaluated as if she lost her "femininity" because of how masculine she is. However, in Shimizu's case, she became the embodiment of ideal views of women who want to break the gender limitation in career success—something women always crave in real life (Iida, 2018).

Uniquely, *Still Sick* provides a fictional story about a safe and conducive space for women to work, contrary with the general cases in Japan or other patriarchal society that sexist discrimination, discreditation, sexual harassment, first-to-be-blamed and first-to-be-fired, or the very least, bad perception on

women are common to be found as the toxic working culture corrupted the employees mentality and life in general (Izawa, 2000; Ellis-Rees, 2016; Iida, 2018; Kobayashi, Nikkei Asia 2018, , September 10; Mitsuhashi, BBC, 2017, August 8). Even more, as especially the case for lesbians, it's hard for them to come out from the closet (confessing their sexuality) even more to be accepted in the corporate environment (Izumo, *et. al.,* 2007). This makes the treatment both Shimizu and Maekawa got in the serial can be seen as one of the biggest graces in their life. A grace for them, a lesbian couple, in the middle of heteronormative and much more homophobic society of Japan as it represented by Shimizu Makoto's life before meeting Maekawa Akane.

Lesbian Representation in Yuri Manga Presented by Shimizu Makoto

It's undeniable that yuri manga situating itself as a box of lesbian narrative—primarily native lesbians or lesbians who becomes lesbian because environment or other things outside of political views, to engender them with political lesbians. Shimizu Makoto in this manga is the representation of those communities who are usually labeled as hentai (queer/weird/pervert) in the conservative society of Japan (McLelland, et. al., 2007). The common views in Japan or other conservative countries such as Indonesia towards them are more or less judgmental while denying recognizing homosexuals as part of society's gender since they are not socially masculine either feminine but also masculine and feminine at the same time inside masculine or feminine body (Valentine, 1997 in McLelland, 2000). To make it more complete, these views spark homophobic practices in form of bullying, discrimination, oppression, and alienation, or at the very least bad opinions to them since childhood or adolescent ages as resulting to trauma. Data below will explain how queer and closed lesbian voices represented by Shimizu. Shimizu herself in the story, had been being clueless, or more precisely denying, the fact that she felt same sex were more attractive since her teens.

Figure 9. Chapter 11, Page 10 of Still Sick (Akashi, 2019).

Denotation: Smirking, Maekawa cornered Shimizu as the third and fifth panel showing it. Maekawa's dialogue was also contributing to corner her colleague. The bird eye which is applied at the third panel giving the readers the views of Shimizu's situation, leaning her body to door. As Shimizu sit hopelessly, Maekawa, who was standing before her, interrogated, "you really are gay, aren't you?" as it's shown in the first panel.

Connotation: Maekawa's dialogue in the first panel had Shimizu to accept her very nature as someone who was being attracted to same sex. Her expression and position in the third to fifth panel expresses her superiority and cynical perception against Shimizu who had still been denying "that fact" and having pressured by the environment for almost every time. Her reason to deny her nature was understandable since she was afraid to be alienated once again like her teenage life just because of writing her *yuri* doujinshi as an escapism and pressuring her interest towards same sex. As the contrast to Shimizu, Maekawa's calmness looked so clear here as she cornered her.

Figure 10. Volume 3, Chapter 23, Page 15 of Still Sick (Akashi, 2020).

Denotation: Shimizu was talking with her parents by phone. A vas of sunflowers was placed beside her smartphone. Shimizu opened her window while looking outside. "But I'm living true to myself," said Shimizu as she closed the page with big smile.

Connotation: This page can be analyzed as how Shimizu made her chance to coming out from the closet (confessing to families or relatives that someone's a homosexual). The panel where Shimizu opened the window can be interpreted as how she was brave enough to come out to the world as herself, a woman who was proud to have a lovely female soulmate like Maekawa. The last panel weighs the context more, with the bright smiling face of her as the big sign. However, coming out is not the only point can be interpreted from this page, but also other contexts like how Shimizu grabbed her independence from hegemonic pressure of environment around her as she breathed freely. Filling her heart with honest feelings towards herself, Shimizu in this page can be analyzed as someone with bravery and independence, two masculinities traits we know.

Both figures above represent the process of coming out of closet in a good context—even though in this case Shimizu had to be dragged out by Maekawa. Shimizu's long story from her teenage until having Maekawa as her marriage partner contains the representation of repression and discrimination of real-life lesbians as they struggle to accept their own sexuality and identity. Getting bullied and discriminated at school are some of the most "popular" reasons that press native lesbians to have their realization about their sexuality even until they reach adulthood. As how Shimizu acted in the story, some native lesbians repress her "nature" and adopting masculine traits to show herself doing well in the society while having her single life. Shimizu also represents the other choices for some lesbians that choosing to compromise with the norms and custom of the society as choosing to have a heterosexual marriage even if that means they choose to hurt themselves (Izumo, et. al., 2007; Sawabe, 2007). In the story, Shimizu once went out with a man, Kidoguchi, since she didn't want to be alienated in college, but never felt that she was into it.

Shimizu's interest to yuri manga since her school life also represents real life lesbians' "expedition" and "exploration" to know their own sexuality inside fictional world in manga, anime, or novels. The fictional world also gives them an escapism space to "forget" their hard life. The fictional world also presents lesbian characters they can identify as they are often seen as their ideal self as representative as possible (Nicolov, Dazed, 2016, December 2; Phekoo, 2018; Yulius, 2021). Since the formal and non-fictional books are either limited, hard-to-be-understood, pricey, unaffordable, while physical education curriculums are usually androcentric, heteronormative, and less positive in discussing about homosexuality, fictional lesbian stories assist them more to have better understanding and knowledge about their sexuality (even the sexual deeds) since it's more affordable and the presence of the characters they can identify with makes it easier for them to understand the narratives in a fictional fantasy world where they're depicted as positive as possible (Nicolov, Dazed, 2016, December 2;

Dahlberg-Dodd, 2018; Sugawa-Shimada, 2019; Soto-Sanfiel, *et. al.,* 2014).

Positive homosexual representation in Shimizu Makoto's story can be understood as a critic against the conservative and heteronormative society. As how Fürsich stated (2010 in Crees, *et. al.,* 2022), representation in media also acts as a negotiation tool for "common people" to understand the life of their outgroup, the minorities such as homosexuals for heterosexual audiences. In addition, representation also can create a new reality to normalize new views on world or ideology. As authors argued earlier, it's undeniable that *yuri manga* also has some kind of power to normalize the lesbian narrative towards its audience. Even though it's not always successful (Maser, 2013). The result is, *yuri manga* is consumed as a media product to spark queer fantasies for heterosexual audiences even though they're not supporting the LGBTQ+ campaign at all.

Yuri, Female Masculinity, and Lesbianism in Indonesian Popular Culture

Female Masculinity in Indonesian culture has been existed since long time ago. The Indonesian female athletes who earn international titles are often called Sri Kandhi. The name derives from a female *wayang* character with an unique lore about the ability to change her sex to male when the Kurawa and *Pandawa*'s war, *Bharatayudha*, broke as the climax of Mahabharata in order to have revenge on Bisma to fulfill her grudge from her previous life as Dewi Amba. The famous national comic artist, R. A. Kosasih (1919-2012), also featured her in his masterpiece, Mahabharata. In this case, female masculinity are already embraced in Indonesian comic even though it's only the physical quality of masculinity and a little bit has queer narrative since she had a temporary sex change—even though this view can be criticized a lot since the lore showed that women are prohibited to enter the *Kurusetra* (the battlefield) and was situated in 5th century BCE.

The similar case also can be found in Taguan Hardjo's (1935-2002) *Kapten Yani* (Captain Yani) (circa 1960s) which presents the masculine looking female sailor named Kapten Yani (Ajidarma, 2021). The short haired boyish woman was adept in gunfighting and had an open view about globalization, emancipation, and masculinity or femininity. The interesting point from this series and Kapten Yani herself is the feminism was not yet a trend in the Indonesia back when the comic serialized. Yet, Taguan Hardjo already represented a female character with much liberty and equality as her while Wonder Woman was created to satisfy the author's sexual fetish in female domination (Gardner, 2012).

Meanwhile, the after-Reformasi cinemas saw numerous films challenging the patriarch norms in the society even though the call of emancipation or equality in popular culture can be traced to Pramoedya Ananta Toer's novels which mostly influenced by R. A. Kartini efforts. Under the newer feminism ideologies, several films like *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* or *Berbagi Suami* shows the challenge on Islamic teachings and norms in Indonesian society (Marasabessy, 2021; Kusuma, 2012). While the former challenges it with a depiction of a free *santriwati* (female student in female-only Islamic boarding school) riding horse with turban as her necklace, the latter takes a bolder approach with lesbianism constructed as the main weapon to fight the carelessness of polygamy practice.

However, society even authority often repress this kind of films author can give an example from other media. When *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Ulema Council) once forbade *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* since it was seen discrediting Islam and Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*). Meanwhile, the censorship authority cut some scenes from *Berbagi Suami* film because of *its* lesbianism elements (Erwantoro, 2011). Both cases show how society views on homosexuality in media since it is not suitable to East's culture (especially Islam as the main root of Indonesian's modern

norms). Subtly, the reaction also shows how deep patriarchal norms in Indonesian society in extent to forbid people to watch a different persona of women in entertainment media while the usual feminine role or traits are always being passive and easy to cry (Amalianandа, *et. al.,* 2017; Marasabessy, 2021).

The reaction of society above can be interpreted as how Indonesian society in general hasn't been able to grasp the idea of how media (especially entertainment one) is okay to not obey the social norms at least compared to how conservative society of Japan see *yuri manga*. As Maser (2013) found, *yuri manga* is usually consumed as a media product only, more over by heterosexual men and women, even when the consumers are not supporting the LGBTQ+ campaign at all. The similar cases also happened in various medias such as a game show with queer man as guest or even the Takarazuka Revue mentioned before that Japanese only see them as an entertainment (McLelland, 2000).

However when someone is open to various content such as *yuri* and gradually liking it, as how first author witnesses daily in his Indonesian *yuri* enthusiasts community, people tend to treat the content like the Japanese do. In most of cases, they still retain their political views about opposing gay rights—even most of them hate it with various reasons.

At the same time, some of yuri fans in Indonesia also produce their own *yuri* contents (such as fanarts) on the internet or comics sold at comic convention. It can be understood that yuri also triggers people's motivation to be creative, then entertaining others while satisfying their own. Some examples are like Webtoon *Every day by Day,* the creative cirlce of *Yuri Nakama,* etc. These examples can be read as how actually Indonesia's still a fertile soil for the lilies to bloom even if the storm always lurks for a chance to ravage it.

Unfortunately, it's still difficult to make that outgroups to understand that it's a logical fallacy to arbitrarily juxtapose someone's political views and consuming *yuri manga* as a hobby. This misjudgment can be seen as a deep-dark hatred towards homosexual and homosexuality, resulting in homophobic practices such as persecution or discrediting homosexuals as specific and even impacting them who're consuming *yuri* regularly as nothing but entertainment.

In a radically skeptical view, do they really want to open their conservative closed hearts to see it objectively and negotiating the message sent from the *manga* as medium? After that, will they not carelessly persecute their outgroups and also the *yuri manga* audiences as general judging them as "degenerates" that support "the rainbow march" with nonsensical basis of accuse? This problem needs some positive solution.

Figure 11. An Advertisement for Still Sick's Limited-Edition Postcard and Merchandises, Featuring Maekawa and Shimizu's Wedding by Akashi (2021).

CONCLUSION

As the changing of era in Japan expectedly breaths new policies and hopes on different social norms there, authors expect that there would be more actual research under the same theme to complete the academic discussion of this genre. Since the industry are expected to have more *shakaijin yuri manga* released every year that involves same sex marriage and domestic relationship. However, for the current time, we have *Still Sick* and current *yuri manga* in general that contains various kinds of representation from the lesbian narratives, woman empowerment, and critics against the masculinity narratives both in this entertainment media (which is dominated by male-targeted products) or even in real life through a satirical counter-narratives.

The depiction of masculine qualities of *Still Sick* female characters show that women's success is usually based on how they adopt the masculinity values just to adapt and survive in a patriarchal society and it's criticized by the presence of Shimizu Makoto. Ironically, they're shown more positive and stronger than the male counterparts as making a new narrative and values—such as the hybrid *ikigai* they made—of how masculinities should be performed.

The *ikemen onna* trope Shimizu had given a tendency of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity under her masculine role in her marriage life and ruins the reconstruction of a perfect egalitarian power relation. At the other side, the power negotiation between the two reconstructs the gender role division, making it much more different than the heterosexual relationship shown in *manga* and *anime*. Shimizu's gentleness and lovable character especially how deep her love to Maekawa successfully buries the misogynistic image of masculinity in *manga* and *anime* which is usually done by male characters in male-targeted works.

As how ideal Shimizu is, we have to accept that it's difficult for either traditional or new construction of masculinity to free from cultural stereotype inside media while dancing in the palm of ideal fantasies of other gender only to be poked and bullied (Nakamura & Natsuo, 2002; Yu, 2015). At the end of the day, both males and females are impossible to be as perfect as how ideal gender role asks and always shackled of obsolete traditions (Cochran, 2009 in Ma, *et. al.,* 2021). The flexibility of Shimizu's and Maekawa's masculinities are also undeniably an ideally perfect condition of lesbian's dream to be accepted as a whole and as good as possible by the society. Imperfectness in our real life is something we must accept as a normal.

In addition, for Indonesia's case, lesbians' representation in media, especially inside *Still Sick,* has the possibility to open the negotiation door for heterosexual audiences to be more understanding the "outgroup's" struggles in the middle of repression by majorities. Audiences are expected at least to have a negotiable reception on this kind of content in entertainment media and defrost the retained burning overheat towards the genre sparked by homophobic views. However, for the lowest standard, accepting the masculine qualities or empowerment elements on female characters is still understandable as *yuri* genre gives a different narrative in an easier way to understand feminism. With more *yuri* contents in Indonesia (imported or produced in domestic industry), the expectation of a better understanding about equal level between men and women, feminism, lesbianism, or at the very least "people who can distinguish reality and fiction, political views and a mere hobby" can arise.

With more *yuri* contents in the future, authors expect other parties from various studies would take part in studying this theme. There are still many different views this article hasn't brought up. As the result, the empty lands to be exploited for planting and growing the lilies are still vast enough.

To wrap everything up, even if it's an undeniable fact that this article is still reeking of masculine bias since both authors are male, authors believe that this article will offer a new point of view to see *yuri* genre objectively after so many wrong perceptions towards this genre and its audiences. Authors hoped that this article would spark more and more discussions about this genre—academically would be better—especially in Indonesia. This article provides a more comprehensive and thoughtful understanding of this genre as a critic against masculinities and a conservative and heteronormative society. It makes the academic discussion of anime and manga under this theme more animated.

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