

# RETHINKING CULTURAL PROXIMITY: TRANSNATIONAL TASTE FORMATION AMONG INDONESIAN FEMALE AUDIENCES OF BOYS' LOVE MEDIA

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**Abstract.** This study examines how Indonesian female audiences construct cultural proximity toward Boys' Love (BL) media through transnational exposure rather than local cultural affiliation. Although BL has gained significant popularity in Indonesia through Asian productions, locally produced BL content does not automatically achieve cultural closeness among audiences. This research addresses the gap in cultural proximity studies by questioning the assumption that local media inherently resonates more strongly with local audiences. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving two groups of Indonesian women: fans of Asian BL and non-viewers of BL. Participants were exposed to selected clips of Indonesian BL content and invited to share their interpretations, emotional responses, and evaluations. The data were analyzed thematically with cultural proximity as the primary analytical lens, supported by reception theory. The findings reveal that cultural proximity among BL audiences is shaped more by repeated exposure to transnational BL media, particularly from Thailand and Japan, than by national or cultural similarity. BL fans developed transnational taste standards related to narrative style, emotional tone, and production quality, which influenced their evaluation of Indonesian BL content. In contrast, non-viewers tended to rely on local moral and cultural frameworks when interpreting BL media. This study concludes that cultural proximity in the digital media environment is increasingly transnational and affective, suggesting the need to rethink cultural proximity beyond national boundaries in contemporary audience research.

**Keywords:** cultural proximity; transnational taste; Boys' Love; audience reception; Indonesian media

## I. INTRODUCTION

The global circulation of Boys' Love (BL) media has intensified in the last decade alongside the expansion of digital platforms and streaming services. Originating from Japanese manga and fan cultures, BL has developed into a transnational media genre with strong production centers in countries such as Japan, Thailand, China, and Taiwan [1], [2]. Through online platforms, BL media has reached audiences beyond its original cultural context, enabling viewers in countries like Indonesia to access, compare, and engage with diverse BL productions across national boundaries [3].

In media studies, audience preference for particular media texts has often been explained through the concept of cultural proximity. Straubhaar [4] argues that audiences tend to favor media content that reflects their own language, values, and cultural experiences, suggesting that local media possesses an inherent advantage in generating audience closeness. This framework has been influential in explaining media consumption patterns in national broadcasting systems. However, the relevance of this assumption has been increasingly questioned in the context of globalization and digital media flows, where audiences routinely consume

foreign content and develop familiarity with transnational cultural forms [5].

The rise of platform-based media environments has significantly altered the conditions under which cultural proximity is formed. Algorithms, streaming services, and social media recommendation systems expose audiences to repetitive patterns of content that may originate outside their national culture [8], [9]. As a result, cultural familiarity is no longer limited to local media traditions but can be cultivated through sustained exposure to transnational narratives, aesthetics, and genres. Scholars have noted that this condition challenges static understandings of culture and calls for a rethinking of audience preference in a globalized media landscape [15].

The emergence of Indonesian BL productions provides a critical case for examining these theoretical tensions. Despite being locally produced and culturally situated within Indonesia, BL content from Indonesia does not automatically achieve cultural closeness among audiences who are already familiar with transnational BL media. Existing studies on BL in Indonesia have largely focused on regulation, censorship, and moral discourse surrounding LGBTQ-related representations [6], [7]. While these studies offer important insights into structural and ideological constraints, they pay

limited attention to how audience taste and cultural proximity are shaped through long-term transnational media exposure.

This study argues that cultural proximity in contemporary media consumption should not be understood solely as a function of national or local cultural similarity. Instead, proximity is increasingly constructed through transnational taste formation, shaped by repeated exposure, affective familiarity, and comparative evaluation of media texts [5], [8]. Indonesian female audiences who regularly consume Asian BL media develop expectations and evaluative standards that transcend national boundaries, influencing how they interpret and assess local BL productions.

The urgency of this research lies in its contribution to the ongoing debate on the applicability of cultural proximity theory in the digital era. As audiences operate within transnational and algorithmically curated media environments, traditional assumptions about local cultural dominance require critical reassessment [9], [15]. Understanding how cultural proximity is negotiated under these conditions is essential for advancing audience reception studies and for informing local media producers seeking to engage audiences shaped by global media circulation.

This research aims to examine how Indonesian female audiences construct cultural proximity toward BL media through transnational exposure. Specifically, it investigates how prior engagement with Asian BL productions influences audience reception and evaluation of Indonesian BL content. Based on this framework, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Cultural proximity among Indonesian female audiences of Boys' Love media is shaped more strongly by transnational exposure and taste formation than by national or local cultural similarity.

By addressing this hypothesis, the study seeks to extend cultural proximity theory within the context of digital and transnational media environments and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of audience reception in contemporary Asian popular culture.

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore how Indonesian female audiences construct cultural proximity toward Boys' Love (BL) media through transnational exposure. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because this research seeks to understand meaning-making processes, audience interpretations, and subjective experiences rather than measuring variables quantitatively [10]. The case study design allows an in-depth examination of a contemporary cultural phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly the reception of Indonesian BL content among different audience groups [11].

The scope of this research focuses on the reception of Indonesian BL media by female audiences. The object of the study is audience interpretation and evaluation of BL media, particularly in relation to cultural proximity and transnational taste formation. The research does not aim to assess audience attitudes toward LGBTQ identities directly, but rather to

examine how media texts are interpreted and evaluated within specific cultural and experiential frames.

The research focus is operationalized through three analytical dimensions. First, transnational media exposure refers to participants' prior consumption of BL media produced outside Indonesia, particularly from Thailand and Japan. Second, cultural proximity is understood as the perceived sense of familiarity, closeness, or resonance toward BL media, shaped by narrative style, emotional tone, and production quality rather than national origin [4], [5]. Third, audience reception refers to participants' interpretations, emotional responses, and evaluative judgments toward Indonesian BL media, as articulated during group discussions [12].

The research was conducted online using video conferencing platforms to accommodate participants from different locations in Indonesia. The population of this study consists of Indonesian female audiences aged 18 years and above. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select informants based on their media consumption background. Two groups were formed: (1) female audiences who regularly consume Asian BL media, and (2) female audiences with no prior experience watching BL media. Each group consisted of three informants, allowing for focused interaction and in-depth discussion consistent with qualitative research standards [13].

The main data source of this study is primary data obtained from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). FGDs were selected as the primary data collection technique because they enable the exploration of shared meanings, negotiation of interpretations, and group dynamics in audience reception studies [11]. The main research tool consisted of a semi-structured discussion guide designed to elicit participants' perceptions, emotional reactions, and evaluations after viewing selected clips of Indonesian BL content. The discussions were audio-visually recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis. The analytical process involved repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding of relevant statements, and the grouping of codes into broader thematic categories related to cultural proximity and transnational taste formation [14]. The interpretation of themes was guided by cultural proximity theory, supported by reception theory, to identify patterns in how participants constructed closeness or distance toward Indonesian BL media. To enhance analytical rigor, alternative explanations were considered during the analysis process, particularly regarding moral, cultural, and production-related factors influencing audience reception.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on thematic analysis of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Indonesian female audiences. The findings are organized according to the research scope, focusing on how cultural proximity toward Boys' Love (BL) media is constructed through transnational exposure and comparative evaluation.

*A. Transnational Exposure as the Basis of Cultural Familiarity*

The analysis shows that for BL fans, cultural familiarity was primarily developed through long-term and repeated exposure to transnational BL media, particularly productions from Thailand and Japan. Participants described these media texts as emotionally predictable and narratively familiar, allowing them to anticipate character dynamics and story progression. This familiarity generated a sense of comfort that was not dependent on shared national culture, language, or social background.

Participants indicated that emotional resonance emerged from repeated encounters with similar narrative tropes, such as slow-burn romance, restrained emotional expression, and character-centered storytelling. Over time, these elements became normalized and were perceived as “natural,” even though they originated from foreign cultural contexts. This finding suggests that cultural familiarity was cultivated through habitual media consumption rather than inherited cultural similarity.

*B. Comparative Evaluation of Indonesian and Transnational BL Media*

A second key finding reveals that Indonesian BL media was consistently evaluated through comparison with transnational BL productions. BL fans applied standards derived from their prior viewing experiences, particularly in relation to narrative coherence, emotional pacing, and visual aesthetics. Indonesian BL content was not rejected solely due to its local origin, but because it did not always align with the transnational standards that audiences had internalized.

Participants frequently contrasted Indonesian BL with Thai or Japanese BL by highlighting differences in emotional delivery and storytelling structure. These comparisons indicate that cultural proximity was assessed relationally, rather than absolutely. Proximity was determined by how closely Indonesian BL matched the affective and narrative expectations shaped by transnational exposure.

In contrast, non-viewers of BL media did not engage in such comparative evaluations. Their interpretations were grounded in local cultural norms and moral considerations, and they tended to assess Indonesian BL in terms of social appropriateness rather than narrative or aesthetic familiarity. This suggests that transnational exposure functions as a key condition for the development of comparative media literacy.

*C. Divergent Constructions of Cultural Proximity Between Audience Groups*

The findings further demonstrate a clear divergence in how cultural proximity was constructed between BL fans and non-viewers. BL fans developed a form of transnational cultural proximity, where closeness was associated with familiarity gained through global media circulation. For these audiences, proximity was experiential and affective, built through repeated engagement with foreign media texts.

Non-viewers, however, constructed cultural proximity through alignment with dominant national values and moral frameworks. Cultural closeness was equated with social acceptability and conformity to local norms, leading to more

distant or resistant interpretations of BL content. This divergence highlights that cultural proximity is not a fixed attribute of media texts but an audience-dependent process shaped by media exposure histories.

TABLE I  
PATTERNS OF CULTURAL PROXIMITY CONSTRUCTION AMONG AUDIENCE GROUPS

<b>Audience Group</b>	<b>Media Exposure Background</b>	<b>Basis of Cultural Proximity</b>	<b>Evaluation Mode of Indonesian BL</b>
BL Fans	Regular consumption of transnational BL media	Narrative familiarity, emotional tone, production standards	Comparative and transnational
Non-BL Viewers	Limited or no exposure to BL media	Moral alignment, national cultural norms	Evaluated through acceptability

The findings of this study provide important insights into the changing nature of cultural proximity in the context of transnational media consumption. Classical cultural proximity theory, as proposed by Straubhaar [4], assumes that audiences tend to prefer media content that reflects their own cultural background, language, and social values. This assumption was developed in the context of broadcast-era media systems, where audience exposure to foreign content was relatively limited and national media industries played a dominant role in shaping cultural familiarity. However, the findings of this study suggest that such assumptions require reconsideration in the contemporary digital media environment.

Among Indonesian female audiences who regularly consume Boys’ Love (BL) media, cultural proximity was not constructed through national or local cultural similarity. Instead, proximity emerged through sustained transnational exposure to BL productions from Thailand and Japan. Repeated engagement with these media texts enabled audiences to internalize narrative conventions, emotional expressions, and aesthetic standards that became familiar and comfortable over time. This supports Iwabuchi’s argument that cultural proximity can be formed through affective familiarity rather than cultural sameness [5]. In this sense, proximity is not an inherent quality of media texts, but a relational process shaped by audience experience and media circulation.

The comparative practices observed among BL fans further highlight the role of transnational taste formation. Participants evaluated Indonesian BL media using standards derived from foreign BL industries, particularly in terms of storytelling coherence, emotional pacing, and production quality. This finding resonates with Jenkins et al.’s concept of spreadable media, which emphasizes the active role of audiences in circulating, comparing, and assigning value to media content across platforms and national boundaries [8]. Indonesian BL media, therefore, does not operate in isolation within a national media ecosystem, but competes within a

transnational field of cultural production shaped by global media flows.

In contrast, the reception patterns of non-viewers demonstrate that local cultural frameworks remain influential for audiences without prior transnational exposure. These participants constructed cultural proximity based on moral alignment and national cultural norms, leading to more distant or resistant readings of BL media. This divergence underscores the audience-dependent nature of cultural proximity and aligns with reception theory's emphasis on contextual decoding processes [12]. Cultural proximity, therefore, cannot be treated as a universal or homogeneous experience even within the same national context.

Taken together, these findings suggest that cultural proximity in contemporary media consumption is dynamic, fragmented, and shaped by differential access to transnational media. Rather than being anchored solely in national culture, proximity is increasingly constructed through taste formation, affective engagement, and comparative media literacy developed through digital platforms. This study extends cultural proximity theory by situating it within transnational and platform-based media environments, highlighting the need to consider audience exposure patterns and media repertoires when analyzing cultural resonance.

By foregrounding transnational taste as a key factor in audience reception, this research contributes to broader discussions in media and cultural studies regarding globalization, audience agency, and the reconfiguration of cultural boundaries in the digital age [9]. It suggests that local media producers and scholars should move beyond assumptions of automatic cultural closeness and instead recognize the complex, transnational conditions under which audiences construct meaning and preference.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how Indonesian female audiences construct cultural proximity toward Boys' Love (BL) media within the context of transnational media exposure. The research aimed to address the assumption that local media content inherently possesses greater cultural closeness for domestic audiences. Through a qualitative case study using Focus Group Discussions, this study explored how prior engagement with transnational BL media shapes audience reception of Indonesian BL content.

The findings demonstrate that cultural proximity among Indonesian BL fans is not primarily based on national or local cultural similarity, but rather on transnational taste formation developed through sustained exposure to BL productions from countries such as Thailand and Japan. These audiences constructed cultural closeness through familiarity with narrative conventions, emotional styles, and production standards associated with transnational BL media. In contrast, non-viewers of BL relied more strongly on local moral and cultural frameworks when interpreting Indonesian BL content, resulting in a different construction of cultural proximity rooted in national values and social norms.

These findings answer the research objective by confirming that cultural proximity in contemporary media

consumption is dynamic and audience-dependent. In the digital media environment, proximity can be formed through affective familiarity and comparative evaluation rather than shared national identity alone. This study therefore supports the proposed hypothesis that transnational exposure plays a more significant role than national cultural similarity in shaping cultural proximity among Indonesian female audiences of BL media.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of cultural proximity theory by extending it beyond its traditional national framework and situating it within transnational and digital media contexts. It highlights the importance of considering audience taste formation and media exposure patterns when analyzing cultural resonance. Practically, the findings suggest that local media producers should not assume automatic cultural closeness with domestic audiences, but instead consider transnational audience expectations and media standards shaped by global circulation.

Future studies may expand this research by involving more diverse audience groups, incorporating longitudinal approaches, or examining the role of digital platforms and algorithms in shaping transnational cultural proximity. Such studies would further enrich the understanding of audience reception in an increasingly globalized media landscape.

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