# Relational Equality in M/M and Heterosexual Romance: A Reader Response Analysis

**[Degree Project in English Studies, ENA311]**

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## Abstract

This study conducts a literary analysis focused on female readership motivations for engaging with gay, specifically male/male (M/M), contemporary fiction. Through a thematic analysis of reader reviews of *Heated Rivalry* and *Twisted Lov*e by Rachel Reid and Ana Huang, the study examines how readers interpret and evaluate gendered power dynamics and relational equality in contemporary M/M romance in comparison to contemporary heterosexual romance. Combined with a literary analysis of novels, the study explores how emotional vulnerability, intimacy, and masculinity are interpreted by readers. The findings indicate that readers regularly perceive fictional M/M relationships as more egalitarian than heterosexual relationships due to the portrayal of mutual vulnerability, power distribution, and emotional development. However, the study also shows that these understandings are not necessarily based on the absence of hierarchy or imbalance, but on how readers interpret these dynamics within the relationship.

**Keywords:** M/M romance, reader-response theory, relational equality, masculinity, gender dynamics, Goodreads, romance fiction, reader interpretation

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## Introduction

Over the last decade, depictions of male–male romantic relationships in literature have increased significantly. Western M/M (male/male) romance is often considered to have emerged from slash fiction, fan-written stories with imagined pairings between two existing characters, and to draw influence from Japanese Boys' Love (BL). Despite its recent growth in Western publishing, M/M romance has established itself as a significant genre widely read worldwide, primarily by women. This growing demand has led to increased production of books, films, and television series depicting romantic and emotional relationships between men. In 2025, the television adaptation of Rachel Reid's *Heated Rivalry* brought new attention to Western M/M romance and increased the genre's visibility among broader audiences. The novel *Heated Rivalry* by Rachel Reid, which served as the basis for the television series, is one of many works created for and widely consumed by a substantial female audience. This engagement with M/M literature, especially slash fiction and BL, has attracted significant scholarly attention. A substantial number of studies have therefore sought to investigate why women consume gay romance literature that appears distanced from their own experiences. Scholars often ask whether M/M literature primarily functions as an object of desire or fantasy, or whether it carries a deeper meaning for readers.

However, despite the existence of numerous studies on the audience of gay romance literature, the Western genre that is M/M romance remains both commercial and culturally marginalized, which has led to its limited presence within academic investigation. While there is a substantial amount of research on women's consumption of slash fiction and BL literature (Zsila and Demetrovics 1; Bruner 1), contemporary Western M/M romance has received comparatively limited attention. This reveals a gap in the existing research and suggests the need for further investigation into how readers engage with and evaluate the genre. Previous research has frequently associated the appeal of M/M romance with perceptions of relational equality and a reduced reliance on conventional gender hierarchies. At the same time, scholars on slash fiction and Boy's Love have shown that gendered power structures and imbalance may still exist within these narratives. This tension raises questions about how relational equality is understood and evaluated in M/M romance. My study therefore examines whether responses to contemporary Western M/M romance resemble motivations previously identified in slash fiction and BL

research, particularly in relation to perceptions of relational balance compared to heterosexual romance. Through a thematic analysis of Goodreads reviews of Rachel Reid's *Heated Rivalry*, and in comparison, with a selective number of responses to the contemporary heterosexual romance novel *Twisted Love* by Ana Huang, I will explore how gender, intimacy, masculinity, and power dynamics are discussed, and how these elements shape perceptions of balance within the relationship. By analyzing these descriptions, I will consider whether contemporary commercial M/M romance reproduces relational dynamics similar to those identified in earlier BL and slash studies, how these dynamics may help explain the genre's appeal to a predominantly female audience, and whether perceptions of equality are shaped by the absence of hierarchy itself or by how readers interpret portrayals of power, intimacy and vulnerability.

Finally, my study draws on feminist literary theory and investigates how power and gender are constructed in romantic relationships and how these constructions may help shape reader interpretations of relational equality.

I therefore aim to answer the following questions:

- How do readers describe gender and power dynamics in contemporary M/M romance?
- How does this compare to reader responses to heterosexual romance?
- How do these reader interpretations relate to previous scholarship on female readership motivations in slash fiction and Boys' Love?

# Background

## Origins of Male–Male Romantic Narratives

### Slash fiction & Boys Love

As mentioned in the introduction, the commercial M/M romance genre is often considered to have developed under the influence of Western slash fiction. This genre emerged during the 1970s and was largely created and consumed by female audiences (Zsila and Demetrovics 12). Slash fiction first gained attention in fan communities surrounding the television series *Star Trek*, where female fans began producing stories that depicted romantic relationships between the characters Captain Kirk and Spock in fanzines during the 1970s (Pagliassotti 3). Additionally,

the term *slash fiction* comes from the slash mark used to indicate a romantic pairing between characters, such as Kirk/Spock. Over time, the production and engagement with slash fiction developed into a wider fan culture centered on homoerotic and romantic narratives involving original male characters from popular media.

Janidean Bruner, who has written extensive scholarship on slash, describes it as groups of fans who write and engage with homoerotic reinterpretations of characters not originally portrayed as gay (14, 16). Within these communities, fans reinterpret existing fictional universes by creating alternative narratives in which relationships between characters differ from those presented in the original works. These narratives are typically shared through online platforms such as Archive of Our Own and Wattpad, where fans publish and share their stories within the community. Fan fiction can be broadly defined as stories written by fans that use already established characters and settings from existing works to create new narratives (Bruner 7). A well-known example of this phenomenon can be found in the Harry Potter fandom. Although the original series is not a romance, fans often imagine alternative relationships between characters (Bruner 1). One of the most popular examples is the imagined romantic relationship between Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, which has generated tens of thousands of slash stories on Archive of Our Own, illustrating the strong engagement within slash fiction communities.

While slash fiction developed within Western fan communities, a similar form of male/male romantic storytelling emerged in Japan. This genre is known as Boys' Love, which I will refer to as BL. Although BL and slash overlap in multiple ways, scholars such as Wong and Zhou argue that a common characteristic of BL stories that distinguish them from Western slash fiction is their depiction of relationship dynamics. BL stories often use a seme/uke structure, in which one protagonist, the uke, is portrayed as more feminine, while the other, the seme, is portrayed as more dominant. The uke is often described as physically delicate, emotionally vulnerable, and aesthetically beautiful, whereas the seme tends to embody more conventionally masculine traits. The relationship structure can, from this perspective, resemble the gender dynamics found in conventional heterosexual narratives (Wong and Zhou 51), leading some scholars to question whether M/M narratives always depart from traditional gender hierarchies, despite often being discussed as more egalitarian alternatives to heterosexual romance. At the same time, this

dynamic is less typical in many Western slash stories, where relationships between male characters are often portrayed with less-defined gender roles (Bruner 6–7).

Because both slash fiction and BL are largely created and read by women, scholars have also sought to explain why these relationship dynamics appeal to female readers.

## Female Readership and Motivations in Slash Fiction and BL

It has been argued in previous studies that the appeal of slash fiction is more about the way it challenges hierarchical gender roles than about the fetishization of homosexuality or homoerotic content, even though it does occur (Emmi De Vries 103). Scholars have also suggested that readers and writers enjoy relationship dynamics that move beyond conventional gender hierarchies centered around male authority and female vulnerability and instead emphasize equality: “There is a notion of camaraderie and equal ability within (fictional) m/m relationships. In slash, the protagonists usually share an adventure and maintain a non-hierarchical partnership” (De Vries 109). This perspective is supported by Bruner, who argues that writing about two men avoids the inherent inequality in which dominance and submission are structured around gender roles (18). Similarly, scholars such as Vicky Keft-Kennedy argue that slash fiction blends feminine and masculine traits in its characters, thereby challenging the idea that one character must be tied to the subordinate role (56). In addition, readers of slash fiction may seek experiences where they can identify with characters they find relatable. This is supported by De Vries, who states, “Male/male erotic fiction is attractive to women because it provides them with the opportunity to imagine, and thus vicariously experience, relationships based on mutual trust and egalitarian values.” (109).

Another common explanation for the appeal of slash fiction concerns the relative absence of female protagonists. Scholars such as De Vries have argued that removing female characters can allow female writers and readers to avoid sexist stereotypes and restrictive gender roles that often shape the portrayal of women in literature (11). This leads me to suggest that M/M narratives may allow women to identify with both protagonists rather than being restricted to a single female perspective.

Similar motivations have been found in Japanese BL, where female characters are similarly absent from the narratives. Zsila and Demetrovics further describe BL as a "critical response to a patriarchal society, and an escapist genre rooted in dissatisfaction with traditional gender roles and related social expectations" (7). These explanations propose the idea that readers are drawn to M/M narratives because they offer alternative relationship dynamics and a form of escape from traditional gender expectations.

## Gender and Power in Heterosexual Romance Narratives

In *Reading the Romance,* Janice A Radway analyzes how romance narratives portray gendered power structures and how readers interpret these conventions. Her research suggests that although these narratives often support clear gender hierarchies, Radway's readers still desire to experience relationships with more equal dynamics. When asked to describe their favorite female protagonists, Radway's participants listed traits such as "intelligent," "spunky," "independent," and "unique" (125). They also enjoy stories where the heroines are portrayed as different from more conventional heroines in other romance novels, for example, as highly intelligent, with unusual occupations, or with characteristics usually associated with men (Radway 123). This pattern resembles what BL scholars have found about male protagonists being portrayed with feminine traits to support reader identification (Zsila and Demetrovics 1).

However, Radway further explains that the romances valued by her participants are not intended to challenge gender stereotypes. Even if the heroines' traits appear to initially challenge stereotypes, most of these stories eventually resolve within a patriarchal norm (123). In this sense, we find a tension between readers' stated preferences and the narratives they actually consume. While readers value unconventional and independent heroines, these characters often remain embedded within patriarchal gender hierarchies. Furthermore, Radway's analysis offers different explanations for readers' motivations for reading contemporary romances. One of these explanations concerns emotional compensation. Romance reading provides women with the emotional recognition and care that many women do not receive in their real lives. Through reading and identifying with the heroine, they may experience a narrative in which the female character receives attention, care, and recognition from the male protagonist (Radway 113). To the question "why do you read?", one of Radway's participants responded: "To be entertained; escapism, armchair traveling" (110). Escapism thus appears to be a recurring motivation among

romance readers, both in heterosexual and M/M narratives. As reported by Radway, Daisy Maryles similarly notes that "romances were read for relaxation and to enable [women] to better cope with the routine aspects of life" (Maryles qtd. in Radway 89). A comparable pattern can be identified in studies of slash fiction, where Bruner suggests that women engage with these narratives to "fulfill their own lives with relationships, writing against oppression in their own lives, using the fantasy as an escape" (18).

Based on this, I propose that romance reading is not only for entertainment but also a form of emotional and psychological relief. By engaging with these stories, readers may temporarily "transport out of the living room" (Radway 87), distance themselves from their everyday obligations, and instead explore alternative emotional experiences and relationship dynamics. One of Radway's participants concludes by stating, "I guess I feel there is enough 'reality' in the world and reading is a means of escape for me" (88).

Radway's findings, put together, show that even within heterosexual romance narratives, readers desire relationships built on emotional intimacy, recognition, and a degree of equality. However, these desires are often expressed toward narratives that ultimately reinforce patriarchal gender hierarchies. The tension between egalitarian ideals and unequal relationship dynamics mirrors similar patterns identified in both slash fiction and BL, where relationships can both challenge and recreate gender norms. These perspectives show the importance of examining how readers interpret relationship dynamics in different romance narratives. Since the present study is concerned with how readers construct meaning from relationship dynamics, reader-response theory provides an appropriate framework for the analysis.

## Theory

This research draws on reader-response theory, which shifts attention from the text itself to the role of the reader in creating meaning. Stanley Fish argues that meaning emerges through reader interpretation and that readers approach texts from different perspectives that ultimately influence how textual elements are understood (338). Meaning is therefore seen as something shaped through the interaction between text and reader, and not as something determined by the text itself. Similarly, Wolfgang Iser argues that readers participate in creating meaning by filling

gaps left by the text and connecting textual elements (Iser 84). This perspective is relevant to the present study, which examines how Goodreads reviewers interpret and evaluate equality and power dynamics in contemporary romance fiction.

The study also draws on feminist literary theory to examine how romantic relationships are structured and interpreted across different romance genres. While queer theory could also be relevant to a study of homosexual relationships, it is not used as the primary framework in this thesis. Queer theory often examines how texts construct and challenge norms surrounding sexuality, heteronormativity, and identity. Although questions of sexuality and representation are present in this essay, the primary focus of this study is how readers identified as female interpret power dynamics, masculinity, and relational equality in contemporary romance. For this reason, feminist literary theory serves as the main analytical framework. Further, the analysis is guided by three theoretical concepts: relational equality, gendered power structures, and reader interpretation.

In this study, relational equality refers to how romantic relationships are perceived as either emotionally mutual or imbalanced. This includes emotional reciprocity, intimacy, and the sense of balance between characters. In stories where male/male pairings are central, and male/female pairings are absent, scholars argue that the conventional connection between masculinity and dominance, and femininity and submission, is disrupted, because these narratives usually avoid the built-in inequality that frames traditional heterosexual relationships (Bruner 24). This alternative relationship structure in M/M romance is further supported by Zhou et al. who highlight that many readers of Boys' Love (BL) state that their motivations for reading stem from the perceived equality in relationship dynamics compared to heterosexual ones (Zhou et al. 4).

Related to the concept of equality is the structure of gendered power within the relationship. In this study, it refers to how power, authority, dominance, and vulnerability are distributed according to traditional gender expectations. These patriarchal structures often associate masculinity with control, emotional restraint, and authority, while femininity is associated with emotional openness, innocence, and submission. According to Janice A Radway, traditional

heterosexual romance is often structured around these gendered power dynamics, in which the dominant role is automatically applied to the male character, and the submissive role to the female character (123-30). Within this context, romance narratives often reinforce unequal relationship frameworks.

Finally, the concept of reader interpretation is used to examine how readers perceive relational equality and gendered power structures within romance narratives. For example, Radway's findings suggest that although readers express desire for mutuality and balance, they continue to engage with and identify with heterosexual romance narratives that rely on patriarchal gender expectations and unequal power dynamics. Similarly, readers of slash and BL often perceive M/M relationships as more egalitarian than heterosexual ones. However, Zhou et al. argue that BL narratives are not necessarily free from hierarchy, as the seme/uke dynamic may reproduce gendered power structures by associating femininity with the uke role, and masculinity with the seme role (4). This indicates that readers may interpret M/M relationships as more egalitarian not because they are necessarily free from hierarchy, but because readers interpret these dynamics differently when both characters are male.

These theoretical perspectives will guide this analysis of reader responses to *Heated Rivalry* and *Twisted Love*, and especially how readers describe the portrayal of power distribution, emotional vulnerability, and relationship dynamics, and how these interpretations affect the perception of equality or imbalance. I will give particular attention to whether readers find M/M relationships more egalitarian than heterosexual romance, even when conventional gender structures are present.

## Method

My study uses qualitative analysis of reader reviews to examine how readers interpret and evaluate gendered power structures and relational equality in contemporary M/M romance. The study further compares these responses in M/M romance to a work of contemporary heterosexual romance.

The works I have selected for analysis are the contemporary M/M romance *Heated Rivalry* (HR) by Rachel Reid and contemporary heterosexual romance *Twisted Love* (TL) by Ana Huang,

though this comparison is used selectively to highlight differences in reader interpretation where relevant. HR has achieved significant global popularity, garnering over 61,000 reviews on Goodreads. Similarly, the romance novel TL has generated over 137,000 reviews. Both novels have received significant attention from a predominantly female audience. Further, even though these books differ in terms of relationship type and narrative content, as Heated Rivalry is written within the genre of sports romance, and Twisted Love is created within the genre of contemporary romance, they are comparable in the context of my study. This is because both are contemporary romances that center on the development of an intimate relationship and are read worldwide by predominantly female audiences. Rather than comparing plot or genre conventions, the study examines how readers interpret the intimacy and gendered power dynamics in these two romance novels. In this sense, the two texts provide a useful contrast, as they represent different relational structures, male/male, and female/male, while still belonging to the same broader category of popular romance.

I have collected responses exclusively from Goodreads, with reviews ranging from a minimum of 200 words. Because the analysis is not a full comparative analysis but centers on the responses from M/M romance, 35 reviews were collected from HR, and 20 from TL. Because the study focuses on female readership, reviewers were selected based on profile names, profile pictures, and other information suggesting a female identity as presented on Goodreads. However, since Goodreads profiles are self-representations and online identities cannot be independently verified, these identifications should be understood as indications rather than confirmed demographic information.

Further, my selection criteria focused on including a range of reviews, ensuring a balance between 1-star and 5-star ratings, and only including reviews with a minimum of 200 words. Aside from these criteria, the reviews were selected without strict filtering. The themes used in the analysis were identified through repeated reading of the material. First, I conducted a coding process to identify recurring key phrases in the reviews, including expressions of vulnerability, relational dominance, explicitness, and credibility. Secondly, I grouped these into broader codes, for example, emotional vulnerability, power imbalance, sexual explicitness, and authenticity, which were subsequently used to identify three broader themes in the data. For example, in HR reviews, phrases such as “vulnerable and honest” and “slow burn” were coded as vulnerability

and emotional development, which contributed to the themes of Emotional Vulnerability and Relational Intimacy. In TL reviews, phrases such as “sense of possession” were coded as dominant masculinity, which contributed to the theme of Masculinity and Power Dynamics.

In addition to the thematic analysis of reader responses, the study also includes a literary analysis of *Heated Rivalry* and *Twisted Love*. Through close reading of selected passages, with particular attention given to internal monologue, characterization, and dialogue, I examine how relational power, intimacy, vulnerability, and masculinity are narrated in the texts, and how these elements are later interpreted by readers.

The analysis faced several limitations. First, the exclusive use of Goodreads data creates platform limitations that may not be representative of romance readership. Secondly, although I made efforts to find a balanced range in reviews and applied selection criteria, the process is not fully systematic, as my final selection of reviews does not follow a fully replicable procedure. Lastly, I use a relatively small sample size of 55 reviews, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. However, focusing on a more in-depth analysis of a smaller sample size allows for a more detailed understanding of reader interpretation. Additionally, this study has a limitation related to the author’s interpretation. As the coding process involves my own interpretation of readers' wording, the analysis is inherently subjective, and an alternative understanding and categorization of the data is possible. Lastly, the reviews are publicly available to Goodreads members, but the authors of the reviews will be anonymized for the sake of protecting user privacy.

## Analysis

The analysis of Goodreads reviews reveals patterns of how readers understand and discuss the romantic relationships portrayed in selected novels. Instead of focusing on a single aspect of the narratives, readers tend to engage with them on multiple levels, particularly in relation to themes such as emotional development, sexual representation, and masculinity. These responses, analyzed collectively, form three recurring themes that will structure the following analysis.

The first theme, *Emotional Vulnerability, Relational Intimacy and Credibility,* focuses on how readers describe the emotional connection between characters and the gradual development of

their relationship, and the perceived credibility of the relationships in HR and TL. Building on this, the second theme, *Masculinity* and *Power Dynamics*, explores how readers interpret the distribution of power between the characters and the various forms of masculinity within the narratives. Finally, the third theme, *Representation, Authenticity* and *Cultural Meaning,* considers reader engagement with issues of gender representation, broader cultural significance, the depiction of gay relationships, and questions concerning realism. Together, these three themes reflect how readers evaluate and interpret the romance narratives. For the analysis, they provide a framework for comparing reader responses to contemporary M/M romance and heterosexual romance.

In the following analysis, the reviews will be referenced as (HR1) for *Heated Rivalry* review 1 and (TL1) for *Twisted Love* review 1.

## Emotional Vulnerability, Relational Intimacy & Credibility

This theme focuses on how readers understand the emotional depth and the gradual development of intimacy between the characters, and whether these elements shape readers' perception of relational equality. In HR, the relationship between two professional hockey players, Ilya Rosanov and Shane Hollander, develops over approximately nine years, evolving from a primarily physical connection into an emotionally intimate, and vulnerable relationship.

In the reviews, HR readers frequently describe the characters' emotional and relational development as a "slow burn", where emotional intimacy develops slowly and gradually over time. Readers also demonstrate recurring appreciation for this form of development. One reader on Goodreads states: "The slow burn and how they grew together as individuals was beautiful" (HR9), while another adds, "When things finally shifted, I couldn't stop myself from weeping with joy" (HR6). Additionally, reviewer HR13 writes, "It slowly takes us through the phases of their relationship and when they finally give in and accept their feelings, it was glorious." Reader HR9, who highlights that they "grew together as individuals," shows that readers perceive this development as mutual and not driven by one character, which may contribute to the interpretation of relational equality. Review HR12 further adds, "Even though they were rivals, they had a beautiful, shared respect for each other throughout the years."

While readers frequently refer to the "slow burn" of the relationship, their responses also highlight emotional honesty between the characters: "It literally makes my heart ache to think of how vulnerable and honest these characters get to be with each other" (HR1). Similarly, HR14 adds "They confided in each other." Further, HR reviews repeatedly highlight the emotional connection between the characters, stating, "We get to really know them and connect with them" (HR13), and "I can understand very vividly how it would feel to be Ilya or Shane" (HR26).

Readers also engage with how sexual explicitness shapes the credibility of intimacy. In reviews of HR, some readers understand the physical relationship's long duration and the frequent sexual encounters as replacing emotional depth, describing the relationship as "almost nothing other than sex" (HR25), whereas others argue that "their relationship was developing emotionally because of what was happening physically" (HR23). These contrasting opinions reflect how readers evaluate sexual explicitness through its connection to emotional development and imply that when intimacy is perceived as mutual and emotionally grounded, it contributes to relational depth and equality. In contrast, when it is read as repetitive or superficial, the relationship is understood as more imbalanced.

Even if most HR reviews recurrently interpret Shane's and Ilya's relationship as egalitarian, not all readers interpret the relationship the same way. One review offers a contrasting opinion that Shane is positioned in a more "submissive" and "feminine role", while at the same time, Ilya is portrayed as "hyper masculine" (HR30). This supports the idea that conventional gender roles may still be present in the narrative and relates back to previous research by scholars such as Zhou et al. who argue that readers often perceive greater relationship balance in M/M romances than in heterosexual romances, even when some form of imbalance still exists (Zhou et al. 4). This perspective will be further discussed in the theme of *Masculinity & Power Dynamics.*

From a similar perspective, reader responses to *Twisted Love* (TL), frequently describe the relationship between Ava and Alex as less mutually developed and uneven. TL by Ana Huang is a contemporary romance that centers on a heterosexual relationship characterized by a dominant male protagonist and a cheerful, innocent female protagonist. The narration of the story focuses on emotional transformation and redemption, and similarly to the characters in HR, TL characters Ava and Alex have known each other for several years before the relationship

progressed into romance. While readers of HR may interpret slow emotional development as a sign of relational equality, readers of TL frequently criticize the fast progression of the relationship as lacking emotional development. For example, one reader states that “Their feelings for one another went from 0 to 100 very fast, one chapter he's acting all nonchalant and cold and then in the next he “desires” her and tells us how badly he wants her” (TL19).

Readers of TL frequently critique the lack of emotional depth and development, particularly in reviews that emphasize that the narrative relies on “telling rather than showing their relationship growth” (TL12). It is further reinforced by comments that question the credibility and speed of the relational development, with one reader asking why the characters, who have known each other for several years, “did not notice each other for 8 years” (TL19), contributing to the progression being read as unrealistic. Furthermore, the relational development is interpreted by readers as unbalanced and driven primarily by the male character rather than through mutual development, reinforcing the perception of inequality.

These reviews demonstrate that readers associate relational equality with mutual emotional development and shared relational intimacy, while relationships that lack these elements are perceived as more unequal and uneven. This interpretation aligns with De Vries’ argument that women are drawn to M/M narratives because they offer the opportunity to imagine and indirectly experience relationships based on equality (de Vries 109).

In HR, it is not until nearly halfway through the story that the characters have a real in-depth conversation, as their earlier encounters are primarily structured around secretive and sexual interactions. Over the duration of their nine-year relationship, these occasions are often sporadic, with periods of no contact lasting up to six months. Despite this, their feelings for each other continue to grow. It is therefore understandable why some readers perceive sexual encounters as substituting for more meaningful and intimate interactions and consequently interpret the relationship as superficial. However, the slow burn is developed deliberately. Shane and Ilya’s relationship gradually shifts from being strictly physical to one where emotional attachment has emerged, though they experience these feelings as confusing and difficult to express. As Reid writes, “He felt a horrifying swell of emotion that he couldn’t let Shane see” (200), illustrating Ilya’s struggle to process and conceal his developing feelings. In this sense, Reid invites readers

to follow the characters' progression, noticing their internal conflict and evolving intimacy before they are even able to fully recognize it themselves. This is reflected in Shane's uncertainty: "Shane wondered if Ilya felt it too. The heaviness of the aftermath of their encounters. The impossibility of everything" (204).

The use of alternating perspectives is particularly important in this regard. While each scene is presented through a single point of view, the text offers parallel moments of emotional intensity and concealment, inviting readers to recognize mutual feelings even when they are not directly expressed. In one section, during one of their encounters, Shane reflects: "He was now consumed by one thought: No one makes me feel like Ilya Rozanov does" (Reid 162). Noticing the fear on Shane's face, Ilya asks, "Is everything okay?" to which Shane responds, "What? Yeah. Of course." In a later section, we read, "Ilya's eyes lost their heat, and his brow furrowed, as if he'd just realized that Shane was really leaving. Then, just as quickly, he schooled his face to its default expression of cool indifference" (Reid 166). These instances of emotional concealment point to how both characters actively suppress and disguise their developing feelings, even as they experience them together. I therefore argue that readers who interpret the relationship as superficial and imbalanced focus more on the sexual aspects of the relationship than on its gradual emotional development. Through alternating perspectives, moments of emotional concealment, and gradual progression, Reid encourages readers to recognize a mutual emotional experience, which adds to the perception of balance and emotional equality, even when equality is not explicitly stated.

This is further supported by reader responses to TL, where reviewers critique how emotional intimacy and attachment appear suddenly rather than gradually over time. For instance, the male protagonist shifts from emotional detachment to strong attachment within a relatively brief period of time, reinforcing the perception of uneven relational development. When Alex and Ava reunite after a period of separation, Alex quickly shows signs of jealousy when Ava interacts with another man, despite their limited emotional connection. Similarly, only a few pages later, while Alex is preparing to go on a date, Ava reflects, "strange. That was the only word I could use to describe the niggling feeling in my stomach, the one that made my skin itch and my pulse beat double time" (67). This development continues as she notes that "He reached out to steady me, and my heart jumped" (67), and where Alex, only pages later, reflects, "I wasn't sure when

or how, but I'd started seeing Ava less as Josh's sister and more as a woman" (75). These examples indicate that TL presents emotional attachment abruptly, with attraction and jealousy emerging before emotional development has been established, helping explain why some readers question the relationship's credibility.

The gradual progression of intimacy and emotional development shapes how readers understand both equality and emotional credibility within the relationship. When reading HR, readers witness how honesty and mutual emotional connection gradually emerge. In contrast, TL relies more heavily on telling readers that attraction and emotional connection exist rather than gradually showing their development. Overall, readers' sense of balance in the relationship is shaped not only by the relationship itself, but also by how vulnerability and emotional development unfold throughout the story.

### Masculinity & Power Dynamics

This theme centers on how readers interpret portrayals of masculinity and power dynamics in the novels. In reviews of HR, readers frequently describe both masculinity and power dynamics as balanced and shared between the protagonists, emphasizing equality within the relationship. For example, one reader notes that "One of the reasons why so many women love M/M romances is that we appreciate the power balance in M/M romances" (HR20). Similarly, readers highlight how masculinity is portrayed alongside vulnerability, with one review describing the characters as "two complex characters that beautifully show how masculinity and vulnerability can coexist" (HR17).

However, as mentioned earlier, a smaller number of reviews present a contrasting perspective, suggesting that the relationship still reflects a power difference, as illustrated by one reader who claims, "Shane consistently comments on how hyper masculine Ilya is, while Shane is forced into a more 'submissive' and 'feminine role'" (HR3). Another reader similarly suggests that the narrative "plays into patriarchal stereotype wherein one character is the 'manly man' while the other aligns with femininity" (HR3). Still, most reviews on HR describe the relationship as balanced despite these criticisms.

In contrast, a reader notes that “M/F romances often tend to give us a powerful MMC, personally I hate that kind of dynamics” (HR20). This reflects a perception that male-female romances often rely on patriarchal gender roles, describing the male character as “powerful”, “dominant”, and “emotionally distant”. This perception is reflected in expressions from the novel, such as “I didn’t do sweet nothings or lovemaking” (Huang 13) and “She was mine, she just didn’t know it yet” (Huang 106). Unlike responses to HR, where readers more frequently comment on vulnerability and intimacy, most TL reviews focus on exaggerated portrayals of masculinity, possessiveness, and dominance. Responses such as “He’d burn the world for her” (TL7), reinforce the intensity of this possessive dynamic, while statements such as “Everyone wanted him, but he didn’t do feelings” (TL6), point to the lack of emotional accessibility.

In HR, readers emphasize mutual vulnerability and shared emotional growth between the characters, whereas the dominant and possessive masculinity in TL contributes to the perception of imbalance. For example, expressions such as “Every inch of you belong to me” (Huang 162) are viewed as indicative of control. Readers' understanding of masculinity is reflected in how they evaluate power relations and gender expectations within the relationships. When power is read as balanced and mutually distributed between characters, as in HR, the relationship is interpreted as equal, in line with Bruner's and Zhou et al.'s claims of perceived equality in M/M romance. In contrast, when power is structured around dominance and control, as in TL, it is applied to the male character, adding to the perception of inequality.

The interpretations also reflect gender expectations, as dominant masculinity is often associated with traditional heterosexual romance norms, while vulnerable masculinity challenges them. As Radway suggests, readers are often critical of the heteronormative portrayal of masculinity and instead prefer balance.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that some readers continue to perceive an imbalance in the relationship, despite the even distribution of power and shared vulnerability, indicating that heteronormative expectations still influence interpretation. My reading of HR revealed elements that may support this perception, particularly in the portrayal of Shane. For instance, in a conversation where Ilya describes Shane as “very pretty (...) like a doll”, and Shane responds, “You’re painted up too”, pointing to Ilya’s makeup, and Ilya answers, “Yes, but I’m

not pretty" (Reid 41). The language used to describe Shane is traditionally associated with femininity, which contrasts with Ilya's more conventionally masculine portrayal. Additionally, Shane's interior monologue frequently reveals anxiety, insecurity, and emotional conflict regarding both his feelings for Ilya and his own masculinity, while Ilya instead appears more avoidant and restrained. This is particularly reflected in Shane's comparisons between himself and Ilya, where he describes Ilya as "so... masculine" while describing himself as "baby-faced and short" and unable to "grow proper facial hair" (Reid 32). Many of the masculine traits associated with Ilya, such as physical dominance, height, confidence, and sexual experience, are also presented through Shane's perspective, which may further shape readers' perceptions of asymmetry between the characters.

However, this apparent asymmetry does not necessarily indicate inequality within the relationship. Instead, I argue that while Shane is described using language associated with feminine traits and portrayed as more emotionally open, these characteristics do not in themselves indicate submission or a lack of power. They function more as aspects of his individual personality than as signs of subordination. At the same time, Ilya's emotional distance should not be read as a result of conventional masculinity norms, but rather shaped by external cultural constraints. During an argument, Shane states: "It felt like we were...more." and Ilya responds, "We can't be more, Hollander." (…) "I would not be able to go home." (…) "I could not go home to Russia" (Reid 201). This highlights his fear of returning to his home country, where his sexuality may have profound consequences, and further indicates how his emotional restraints stem from fear rather than indifference toward Shane.

While some readers interpret Shane's sexual position as indicative of submission, this is explicitly framed in the novel as a matter of personal preference: "I kind of prefer to be a hole. Than the peg" (Reid 185). I therefore argue that what some readers perceive as imbalance is instead determined by the characters' individual traits and narrative context, and not by a clear emotional hierarchy within the relationship. While traces of feminization and asymmetry are present, many readers still perceive equality, because emotional vulnerability and relational development are shared between both characters.

The framing of traditional masculinity in TL is established from the outset, even before the story fully begins. This is already evident in the book's tagline, "He has a heart of ice... But for her he'd burn the world," which signals a relationship structured around emotional distance and possessiveness. Early character descriptions additionally reinforce this as Ava describes Alex as a "look at me wrong and I'll destroy you and everyone you care about kinda guy" (Huang 6), and he is additionally characterized as an "asshole," a "genius" (7), and "a statue in an Italian museum come to life" (8). In contrast, Ava is described by Alex as "innocent," "doe-eyed," and "sweet" (18), establishing a clear difference between dominant masculinity and feminine vulnerability. These early narrative elements establish a visible hierarchical dynamic before the relationship has even been fully developed. Compared to HR, where relationship dynamics emerge gradually and remain open for interpretation, TL presents a more fixed framework for masculinity and power from the very beginning. Readers therefore develop an understanding of the relational structure early in the novel. I therefore propose that readers who respond positively to this portrayal may be recognizing and valuing these unequal dynamics as a central part of the romance, rather than perceiving them as problematic.

Overall, I argue that readers' perceptions of relational equality are not shaped simply by the presence or absence of masculine or feminine traits, but by how power and vulnerability are structured and distributed between the characters. While M/M romance often includes moments of asymmetry and feminization, as in HR, readers do not necessarily interpret these elements as signs of inequality. In contrast, heterosexual novels, such as TL, often frame dominance and relational imbalance as central parts of the narrative, contributing to a more traditional and hierarchical understanding of romantic relationships. These differences may help explain why readers frequently perceive HR as more egalitarian despite the presence of some asymmetrical dynamics.

## Representation, Authenticity & Cultural Meaning

Along with emotional and relational dynamics, reader responses to HR also engage with questions of representation, authenticity, and cultural meaning. Questions of authenticity and representation are also relevant to perceptions of relational equality, as readers often connect realism and credibility to how they evaluate relationship dynamics. The increased spread of M/M representation in romance novels can be seen as a positive development for LGBTQ+

acceptance. However, there are continuing concerns about the fetishization of gay characters and an unrealistic portrayal of gay relationships. Readers of HR express conflicting opinions on this issue. For example, one reader states, “This book is a prime example of why I always am wary whenever I pick up an M/M romance written by a woman… it felt like nothing but fetishization from start to finish.” (HR3), additionally questioning the authenticity of an M/M narrative written by a female author. Another reader expresses a contrasting view, stating, “I don’t share the opinion that this book is catering especially to women fetishizing gay/bisexual men.” (HR20)

However, some reader responses support the idea that, regardless of whether the portrayal is read as fetishized or unrealistic, the narrative is still valued for providing representation for marginalized communities, as one reader notes, “This book and the TV show have brought so much representation and support.” (HR12), while another reader adds that it “really changes the game and narrative for gay hockey players.” (HR7). These responses indicate that increased visibility and representation are perceived positively, particularly in relation to the marginalization of LGBTQ+ individuals in professional sports and countries like Russia.

Reader responses to HR and particularly TL also critique unrealistic male characteristics associated with dominant masculinity tropes. The male character in TL is often described as having traits that, in real life, would be perceived as highly problematic. One reader describes this as a “macho, detached man personality” (TL15), while another refers to him as a “powerful self-made god” (TL20). Many reviews with higher star ratings respond positively to the possessive and morally ambiguous traits, whereas reviews with lower ratings respond more critically, describing it as “a man written by a woman who has probably never had any interaction with a man before” (TL2).

These responses demonstrate that readers not only evaluate relationship dynamics but also questions of authenticity and representation. In HR, the varied responses show that perceptions of authenticity are subjective: some readers find the portrayal representative and meaningful, while others question its credibility, both in terms of the narrative and author. In contrast, TL responses are more consistent, as readers frequently, regardless of whether they approve of it or not, describe the male character as unrealistic and shaped by common masculinity tropes. These responses reveal different expectations of authenticity in the two novels, while readers disagree

on whether HR feels authentic or constructed; TL is more frequently associated with exaggerated masculinity tropes.

Particularly in relation to female authorship of M/M narratives, readers question whether the author's underlying motivations stem from representation, objectification, or possibly, a form of identification with the characters, while distancing themselves from traditional and restrictive representations of female characters. This relates back to scholarship on BL and slash fiction, where identification and the absence of female characters are central to understanding reader motivations. By allowing readers to identify with characters without gender constraints and distance themselves from typical forms of female objectification, M/M narratives may offer an alternative space for engagement. A similar mechanism may also help explain some forms of female authorship of M/M romance, where it can function as a way to explore identification while distancing from conventional portrayals of female characters. In this sense, the absence of female characters and the focus on M/M relationships may contribute to readers perceiving these relationships as more equal. However, as reflected in some of the readers' responses to HR, traditional gender dynamics are not completely absent, as some readers continue to interpret certain traits and dynamics as forms of feminization. This indicates that while readers of M/M stories, such as HR, often perceive greater equality and balance, these narratives do not fully escape existing gender structures, nor the questioning of credibility or fetishization, which continue to shape how readers interpret relationships in M/M romance.

## Conclusion

Readers and previous scholars argue that motivations for reading M/M romances rather than conventional heterosexual romance are linked to the greater presence of equality and mutuality within fictional relationships. Female characters are often absent, while power, intimacy, and openness are more often shared between male protagonists, providing readers a vicarious experience of relational equality that they may not encounter in everyday life.

However, the findings of this study suggest that these motivations are based on interpretations rather than on objective relational equality. In other words, they are not based on the complete absence of asymmetry, feminization, or heteronormative structures in M/M narratives. Instead, these elements are structured differently and understood differently by readers. While M/M

romances such as HR contain moments of imbalance and feminized characters, these traits are not interpreted as signs of relational inequality. Instead, emotional vulnerability, intimacy, and power remain more mutually shared between the characters, reinforcing readers' perception of equality.

In contrast, the relationship in TL is structured around established gender hierarchies, where masculinity is connected to dominance, possessiveness, and emotional distance. Additionally, power is framed around the male protagonist from the very beginning of the narrative, contributing to readers' perception of relational inequality. As a result, readers not only interpret relational interactions differently, but also respond to the construction of masculinity, intimacy, and power.

Finally, this study shows that readers' perceptions of equality in romance narratives are not simply shaped by the presence or lack of conventional gender traits or imbalance within the relationship, but by how readers interpret expressions of intimacy, vulnerability, and power within the relationship. M/M romance therefore often offers readers relationships that are not necessarily objectively equal, but that can be interpreted as more emotionally mutual, flexible, and less restricted by patriarchal gender structures than those common in heterosexual romance narratives.

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## Appendix – Review Material & Coding Process

**Heated Rivalry Reviews**

| Review | Rating | Key Phrase Example | Main Themes |
|---|---|---|---|
| HR1 | 5 | “vulnerable and honest” | Emotional Vulnerability |
| HR2 | 5 | “took a while for the feelings” | Emotional Development |
| HR3 | 1 | “plays into patriarchal stereotype” | Power Dynamics |
| HR4 | 5 | “Emotional intensity” | Intimacy |
| HR5 | 5 | “slow emotional progress” | Emotional Development |
| HR6 | 4 | “written by a woman” | Authenticity |
| HR7 | 5 | “changes the (…) narrative for gay hockey players” | Culture & Representation |
| HR8 | 4 | “romance is equally significant” | Intimacy |
| HR9 | 3 | “slow burn”, “excellent emotional conveyance” | Emotional Development & Credibility |
| HR10 | 4 | “queer identity in hyper-masculine spaces” | Culture & Representation |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| HR11 | 5 | “the love is immeasurable” | Intimacy |
| HR12 | 5 | “story is so important” | Representation |
| HR13 | 5 | “realistic solution” | Credibility |
| HR14 | 4 | “combustible chemistry” | Intimacy |
| HR15 | 3 | “personality evolve”, “Self-discovery” | Emotional Vulnerability |
| HR16 | 4 | “don’t admit feelings”,“idiots to lovers” | Intimacy & Emotional Development |
| HR17 | 4 | “masculinity and vulnerability can coexist” | Masculinity & Emotional Vulnerability |
| HR18 | 3 | “made Ilya feel vulnerable” | Emotional Vulnerability |
| HR19 | 2 | “Too much sex” | Emotional Development & Credibility |
| HR20 | 3 | “power balance in mm romances” | Power Dynamics |
| HR21 | 3 | “Russian homophobia accurate” | Culture & Authenticity |
| HR22 | 3 | “insane chemistry”, “much smut” | Intimacy & Credibility |
| HR23 | 4 | “developing emotionally because of physical” | Intimacy |
| HR24 | 1 | “excessive sex” | Credibility |
| HR25 | 2 | “He had to man up and own it” | Masculinity |
| HR26 | 3 | “okay to like if it’s two gay men?” | Authenticity |
| HR27 | 4 | “from degrading to passionate” | Power Dynamics |
| HR28 | 3 | “struggles and personalities” | Emotional Vulnerability |
| HR29 | 3 | “realistic ending” | Credibility |
| HR30 | 1 | “Feminization of bottom” | Masculinity & Power Dynamics |
| HR31 | 1 | “65-70% smut”, “lack of plot” | Credibility |
| HR32 | 1 | “women sexualizing gay men” | Authenticity |
| HR33 | 2 | “wanted more trauma exploration” | Credibility |
| HR34 | 1 | “woman writes terrible book about two men” | Authenticity |
| HR35 | 1 | “One long sex-scene” | Credibility |

**Twisted Love Reviews**

| **Review** | **Rating** | **Key Phrase Example** | **Main Themes** |
|---|---|---|---|
| TL1 | 3 | “he went from 0 to 100” | Credibility |
| TL2 | 1 | “Man written by woman” | Authenticity |
| TL3 | 4 | “god complex”, | Masculinity |
| TL4 | 3 | “He’s so cringe” | Masculinity |
| TL5 | 5 | “changes only for her” | Masculinity & Power Dynamics |
| TL6 | 5 | “she was MINE” | Masculinity & Power Dynamics |
| TL7 | 5 | “possessive streak? here for ALL of it” | Masculinity & Power Dynamics |
| TL8 | 5 | “control, obsession, revenge” | Power Dynamics |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| TL9 | 4 | “incredible groveling” | Intimacy & Credibility |
| TL10 | 4 | “princess treatment” | Power Dynamics |
| TL11 | 1 | “Ava dumb with no sense for danger” | Credibility |
| TL12 | 3 | “telling instead of showing” | Credibility |
| TL13 | 4 | “too jealous as to be murderous” | Masculinity & Power Dynamics |
| TL14 | 2 | “if you touch another man”, “gross” | Masculinity & Power Dynamics |
| TL15 | 2 | “macho detached man” | Masculinity & Power Dynamics |
| TL16 | 2 | “stereotype” | Masculinity & Credibility |
| TL17 | 1 | “asshole murdery ways” | Masculinity & Power Dynamics |
| TL18 | 1 | “romance made no sense” | Credibility |
| TL19 | 2 | “didn’t notice each other for 8 years” | Credibility |
| TL20 | 1 | “helpless woman in need of saving” | Power Dynamics |