

# SMUT MANHWA AS A SAFE SPACE: WOMEN'S AGENCY IN CONSTRUCTING IMAGES OF DESIRE AND GENDER INDONESIA



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## Abstract

This study examines how women in Indonesia construct smut manhwa as a safe space, and how this practice illustrates their agency in shaping sexual desire and gender relations within patriarchal structures. Using a phenomenological approach with four informants and three rounds of thematic coding, this study analyses data from online interviews. The findings reveal that women's agency operates ambivalently, simultaneously establishing hidden normative boundaries and negotiating alternatives to patriarchal norms. Women utilize digital resources to access restricted desires, continuously sorting and interpreting content reflectively. A comparison with China highlights how different forms of structural control (social stigma vs. state censorship) shape distinct forms of women's agency. This research contributes to the understanding of women not as passive consumers, but as reflective actors who continuously negotiate the meanings of desire, gender relations, and bodily autonomy within structural constraints.

**Keywords:** Manhwa Smut, Safe Spaces, Women's Agency, Structuration Theory, Digital Sexual Literacy

## INTRODUCTION

The development of digital media over the past decade has transformed how individuals access, interpret, and negotiate their experiences of sexuality, intimate relationships, and gender identity. These changes have not only expanded media consumption but also opened up spaces for individuals to reflect on themselves in relation to sexual subjects within the digital realm. Within the framework of gender sociology, these changes are significant because women, who society previously positioned as passive subjects in the discourse on sexuality, now have broad access to both consume

and produce meaning within their sexual experiences. Nevertheless, the persistent influence of patriarchal structures within society continues to constrain women's sexuality through social norms, moral standards, and stigmas that limit the open expression of desire. In this context, digital media serves not merely as a space for consumption but also as a space where identity, desire, and power relations are shaped and negotiated (Naseem, Younas, and Mustafa 2020)

One current trend in digital media is the emergence of "smut manhwa," a genre of Korean digital comics featuring romance, fantasy, and erotic content. The popularity of smut manhwa among women indicates a shift in consumption patterns, where women are no longer merely objects of representation but have become active readers capable of interpreting the media they consume through their own lived experiences. In studies of East Asian popular culture, the consumption of manga and manhwa often intersects with the concept of the "female gaze", that is, women reading with awareness, questioning, and challenging perspectives dominated by masculinity. (Hemmann 2020). Furthermore, studies on feminist erotica also reveal that women often seek sexual imagery that is safe, non-violent, and based on consent as a form of heteropatriarchal sexual imagination. (Down 2019). Thus, women's engagement with erotic manhwa should not merely function as a social practice encompassing self-reflection, meaning-making, and the search for safe spaces within a patriarchal cultural framework.

The urgency of this study is relevant in the socio-cultural context of Indonesia, where patriarchal norms remain deeply entrenched and limit women's freedom of action. Research on social construction in Indonesia shows that gender stereotypes, which position women as less rational and better suited to the domestic sphere, remain deeply ingrained in society, including among the younger generation. (Safitri and Ridwan 2024) A similar situation applies in the context of sexuality, where women's sexual desires and experiences are still contested by stigma and considered taboo. Therefore, examining women's consumption of smut manhwa is important because this practice reflects a negotiation in the modern era between digital sexuality, women's agency, and patriarchal cultural structures, particularly within Indonesia's socio-cultural context, which treats women's sexuality as a subject deemed taboo and socially controlled.

Previous research on erotic media and its consumption by women still has several limitations. The majority of existing studies continue to focus on representation, genre, the industry, and fandom within popular culture, particularly on boy's love (BL) fans and other forms of digital erotic media, without delving deeply into the personal experiences

of female readers (Hemmann 2020). Meanwhile, studies examining women's consumption of erotic media remain influenced by Western perspectives and often employ a masculine lens in understanding sexuality (McKee et al. 2025). In the Indonesian context, research specifically addressing how women interpret the consumption of smut manhwa as a safe space and a form of negotiation regarding patriarchal norms remains extremely limited. The novelty of this study lies in applying Giddens' structuration theory to examine women's consumption of smut manhwa as a form of agency and negotiation within a patriarchal digital culture, particularly in the Indonesian context.

Based on structuration theory, Giddens emphasizes that social structures not only constrain but also enable individual action through reciprocal relationships, a duality he calls the structure-agency dialectic. As agents, individuals possess the capacity to reflexively monitor their actions to assess and adjust their behavior in daily life, as well as to maintain a sense of ontological security (Dayrobi, Usqo, and Lubis 2024). This approach is relevant for analyzing the phenomenon of consuming smut manhwa, as it allows for an analysis that views women not as subjects compliant with patriarchal norms, but as agents who negotiate, interpret, and reshape structures through the practice of consuming digital media. Against this backdrop, this study aims to understand how women interpret smut manhwa as a safe space amidst the stigma surrounding sexuality in patriarchal society, and how the practice of reading can play a role in shaping images of desire and gender relations considered ideal. Theoretically, this research is expected to contribute to the development of gender sociology and digital media studies, particularly by advancing understanding of the relationship between women's agency, the consumption of erotic media, and social structures in contemporary society (Giddens n.d.).

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative approach using phenomenological methods to understand women's personal experiences in consuming smut manhwa as a social practice related to sexuality and gender relations. The researcher chose this approach because it allows the researcher to explore the informants' meanings, perceptions, and experiences in depth within their daily lives, particularly how they interpret the act of reading smut manhwa as a safe space amidst sexual norms shaped by the patriarchal system. Thus, this

approach does not focus on general conclusions but on a deep understanding of the dynamics of individual experiences.

The data for this study originated from in-depth interviews with four female informants who actively read smut manhwa via digital media. The informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the criteria of women with extensive experience reading smut manhwa who could reflect on those experiences narratively. All four informants were college students with diverse yet complementary characteristics. The first informant (D, 20 years old) is a reader who interprets smut manhwa as a medium for self-reflection to understand preferences in relationships and to distinguish between fantasy and the standards of real relationships. The second informant (C, 20) views smut manhwa as a space for sexual imagination that cannot be expressed in public, while also serving as a means to raise awareness of the importance of consent in relationships. The third informant (P, 19) consumes smut manhwa as a source of self-understanding regarding sexuality and gender relations, including an awareness of the taboo surrounding female sexuality in the Indonesian context. The fourth informant (A, 20 years old) is an active reader of various manhwa genres, including the Boy's Love (BL/Yaoi) genre; given this background, personal experiences have shaped how they select and interpret the content they read. The limited number of informants aligns with the principles of phenomenology, which prioritize depth of exploration over statistical representation; thus, the four informants were deemed sufficient to achieve thematic saturation.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth online interviews using a semi-structured format, chosen for its flexibility and sensitivity to the research topic, allowing informants to share their experiences openly and honestly. The entire data collection process adhered to research ethics principles, including informed consent, data confidentiality, and the protection of anonymity. The data were then analyzed using thematic coding in three stages: open coding to inductively identify units of meaning from the interview transcripts, axial coding to group codes into broader categories, and selective coding to formulate themes that comprehensively capture the core of the informants' experiences. This process enabled the researcher to link empirical data to Giddens's structuration theory, yielding a deep interpretation of the phenomenon under study.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Results**

This section will outline the key findings from in-depth interviews with four female informants who read smut manhwa. The data was analysed through a three-stage thematic coding process, resulting in five main themes that depict the experiences of women who read smut manhwa as a private space, a medium for self-reflection, and a form of negotiation with patriarchal norms that have long restricted their expression of sexuality.

**Table 1. Coding Table.**

No	Theme (Selective Coding)	Main Category (Axial Coding)	Selected Open Code (Example from Informant)	Phenomenological Meaning (The Essential Structure of Experience)
1	Adult Manhwa as a safe space for women	A sense of security and comfort	INF-01: "Reading it feels safer, because no one knows and no one is judging me. I can just enjoy it without worrying about what people might say." INF-02: "Because my imagination runs too wild, I sometimes keep those thoughts to myself, and reading smutty manhwa is like letting those images out without having to share them publicly." INF-03: "When reading manhwa like that, you read it in your heart, so you feel safer and aren't afraid of being judged by others." INF-04: "Reading things like this tends to be considered taboo and a violation of norms for ordinary people (normies). So discussing this kind of thing will only invite people's hatred	All informants described reading smut manhwa as a private practice that provided comfort because there was no risk of direct social judgment. They felt they could express and access their desires without fear of being judged or discriminated against by those around them. Reading was done in secret or "in their hearts" as a strategy to protect themselves from the stigma and social control that still strongly surround women's sexuality.

			or disgust, potentially leading to discrimination and resulting in social alienation."	
2	Erotic manhwa helps women understand themselves and their desires	Self-awareness and relationship preferences	INF-01: "Yes, I've come to understand better what makes me feel comfortable in a relationship. Sometimes, from those stories, I realize that the key to a relationship lies in communication and mutual understanding." INF-02: "I've started to feel a longing for a partner who is sensitive and a relationship built on mutual consent from both sides, including in matters of sexuality." INF-03: "Nothing really, sis" (no significant changes)	Three out of four informants experienced a shift in their self-awareness and desires after reading erotic manhwa. They began to understand what makes them feel comfortable in a relationship—such as communication, their partner's sensitivity, and consent. One informant (INF-03) reported no significant changes, although they continued to consume this content. The narratives in the manhwa served as a medium for self-reflection regarding their emotional and sexual needs in an ideal relationship.
3	The Influence of Erotic Manhwa on Perceptions of Gender Relations	Gender relations in narrative	INF-01: "Well, those stories usually depict the perfect couple. From that, I sometimes learn to distinguish between fantasy and what actually needs to be present in a real relationship... it still requires communication, clear boundaries, and equality." INF-02: "I read quite a lot of manhwa where the women are quite dominant and don't just rely on the men... even in sexual relationships, women	The majority of informants reported that erotic manhwa opened up new perspectives on gender relations and gender roles that differ from real life. They observed depictions of women who are dominant, independent of men, and—in some genres (BL)—not portrayed as sexual objects at all. This allows them to imagine relationships that are more equal and based on communication and consent, in contrast to the patriarchal norms they experience in their

			<p>can take the lead.”                  INF-04: “I feel that women aren’t objectified, especially in BL manhwa, since both main characters are obviously men,” and “men don’t always have to be the ones to start or initiate things in a relationship.”</p>	<p>daily lives. They also learn to distinguish between the fantasies in the stories and realistic relationship standards.</p>
4	<p>Women’s Negotiation of Patriarchal Norms</p>	<p>Awareness of norms and strategies of subtle resistance</p>	<p>INF-01: “Yeah, of course it’s controversial everyone knows that because our society doesn’t normalize reading adult material. But I just treat it as normal; I keep it to myself.”                  INF-02: “If we look at it in terms of social norms, smut manhwa or content with sexual themes does indeed violate our social norms. However, from a biological perspective, having such fantasies and reading such material is perfectly normal.”                  INF-03: “Sex is still considered taboo in Indonesia, especially when discussed by women... because they’re afraid of being called weird or perverted... so I’ve never told anyone I’ve read smut stories, so I just don’t care.” INF-04: “Of course. Basically, norms must be followed in society, but I believe</p>	<p>All informants are aware that reading smut manhwa goes against prevailing patriarchal social norms, particularly restrictions on the expression of female sexuality in Indonesia. This awareness does not stop them from reading; rather, it drives them to develop subtle strategies of resistance: keeping their consumption private, sharing only with like-minded individuals, and adopting an “indifferent” attitude toward societal judgment. Some informants rationalize their practices with biological (natural libido) or legal (age of consent) arguments, while others take a firmer stance that reading is their personal right.</p>

			everyone has the right to express themselves... If people say I'm breaking the norms, I'll accept it, because I don't care what they say."	
5	Women's agency in selecting and interpreting erotic manhwa	Reasons for choosing reading material and reader selectivity	<p>INF-01: "Usually, I look at whether the plot is good or not, whether it's messy or not, and whether the character designs are good or not, so the overall vibe comes through; it's not just about the sex scenes."</p> <p>INF-02: "When I make a decision, I usually consider the visuals or art style, then the plot, and then the relationships between the characters in the story." INF-03: "I rarely read smut stories, but I usually read them if they show up on my For You Page on TikTok, and usually it's just because the art is good... there's some sex education in it, so I learn..." INF-04: "I do like smut stories, but not non-consensual/rape scenes, nor PWP; I prefer slowburn... I tend to avoid anything involving rape, non-consensual content, PWP, gore, bullying, and violence. Because those can trigger trauma... I tend to</p>	<p>All informants demonstrated active and selective agency in choosing smut manhwa. Their considerations were not solely based on explicit sexual content, but also on narrative, visual, character, and relational dynamics. They rejected content containing sexual violence, non-consensual acts, or content without a plot. These preferences were shaped by their personal experiences, including trauma, and demonstrated their ability to filter content based on personal emotional and ethical boundaries. One informant (INF-04) explicitly linked their reading preferences to experiences of domestic violence and a conscious effort to change their traumatic mindset. This agency demonstrates that readers are not passive but active in critiquing and selecting the narratives they consume.</p>

			prefer female protagonists or bottom/uke characters who are somewhat childlike, paired with a mature, protective male lead who also has a cold demeanor."	
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**Smut Manhwa as a Safe Space for Women**

All informants in this study consume smut manhwa as a form of private practice that provides a sense of security. This sense of security arises because reading is done privately, out of sight of others, and does not require them to discuss their desires in public. Based on the informants' experiences, consuming smut manhwa is easier than directly expressing an interest in sexually explicit topics. This tendency is evident in INF-01's statement: "Reading it feels safer because no one knows and no one judges me. I can enjoy it without worrying about what others might say." This pattern aligns with INF-03's statement: "When reading manhwa like that, you read it in your heart, so it feels safer and you're not afraid of being judged by others." Meanwhile, INF-02 emphasizes the function of consumption as a form of release for imagination that cannot be expressed in public spaces: "Because imagination that's too wild sometimes stays bottled up inside, and by reading smut manhwa, it's like releasing those images without having to bring them out into public spaces." INF-04 also noted that discussing such reading material risks social rejection because it is considered taboo by "normies (ordinary people).

From these four informants, it is evident that there is a consistent pattern: privacy is a key requirement to ensure that consuming smut manhwa remains a comfortable experience. Reading is done privately, kept to oneself, or shared only with those who share the same understanding. Nevertheless, their methods for maintaining their private space differ: INF-01 and INF-03 tend to focus on social distance, while INF-04 emphasises the risk of social isolation. Despite this, the findings on this theme suggest that smut manhwa is perceived as a safe space because it provides distance from social scrutiny and opens opportunities for desire without the gaze of others.

**Erotic Manhwa Helps Women Understand Themselves and Their Desires**

Three of the four informants explained that reading erotic manhwa helped them explore their needs, comfort levels, and perspectives on relationships. This influence

didn't always manifest as major changes, but was also evident in the way the informants highlighted certain elements as crucial in relationships, such as communication, sensitivity, and consent. INF-01 stated: "Yes, I've become more aware of what makes me feel comfortable in a relationship; sometimes from the story, I realize, 'Oh, so the key to a relationship is actually in communication and understanding each other.'" This is also consistent with the statement from INF-02, who expressed that reading smut manhwa evokes "a feeling of longing for a partner who is full of sensitivity and a relationship filled with mutual consent from both parties, including in sexual matters." Both quotes demonstrate that the reading experience does not merely stop at the plot, but extends to the recognition of important elements in relationships for the informants. However, this experience reveals limitations in the range of variation. INF-03 remarked: "Not really, sis." This finding indicates that not all informants experienced significant changes in self-understanding and desire after reading. This difference is important to highlight that the reflective function of smut manhwa plays a major role for some informants, but does not constitute a collective experience. Broadly speaking, this pattern of findings suggests that most informants use the narratives of smut manhwa to understand their personal comfort and imagine the kind of relationships they desire.

### **The Influence of Smut Manhwa on Perceptions of Gender Relations**

The majority of informants stated that smut manhwa provided them with a view of gender relations that differed from their everyday experiences. These differences are evident in the more dominant portrayal of women, communicative relationships, and the potential for relationships that are not always initiated or controlled by men. INF-02 stated: "I read quite a lot of manhwa where the women are quite dominant and not just dependent on men...even in sexual relationships, women can be dominant." Meanwhile, INF-04 stated, "I feel that women aren't objectified, especially in BL manhwa, since both main characters are obviously men," and added that "men don't always have to be the ones to start or initiate a relationship." These quotes indicate that the informants discovered relationship dynamics that don't always follow the typical patterns found in real-life relationships.

Meanwhile, the informants do not accept these representations at face value; INF-01 said that from these stories, she learned "to distinguish between fantasy and what should exist in a real relationship... it still requires communication, clear boundaries, and equality." These results reveal a dual pattern: on the one hand, smut manhwa opens new

perspectives on gender relations, yet on the other hand, the informant remains able to distinguish between fantasy elements in the stories and those acceptable in the real world. Thus, this theme suggests that consumption of smut manhwa correlates with the informant's deepening understanding of women's positions, men's roles, and the forms of relationships the informant finds comfortable.

### **Women's Negotiation of Patriarchal Norms**

All informants are aware that consuming adult manhwa goes against prevailing social norms. This awareness emerged repeatedly in their statements, particularly regarding perceptions of female sexuality, which remains taboo to discuss or express openly. INF-01 stated, "Yeah, of course it's against the norms, everyone knows that because our environment doesn't normalise reading adult content. "But I just take it in stride; I keep it to myself." INF-03 also expressed the same sentiment: "Sex remains taboo in Indonesia, especially when discussed by women... because people are afraid of being called weird or perverted... so I've never told anyone I read smut stories, so I just ignore it." These two quotes demonstrate that awareness of social norms enables informants to devise specific strategies to continue consuming such content, such as hiding their reading habits or limiting who knows about them.

In addition to the strategy of keeping their consumption of smut manhwa private, some informants also provided reasons that reinforce their stance on the habit. IN-02 stated that although the habit appears, "from a biological perspective, having imagination and reading such material is normal." On the other hand, INF-04 stated, "If I face accusations that I'm violating norms, I'll accept it, because I don't care what they say." The pattern among the informants indicates that they do not reject the existence of norms, but they also do not stop their consumption because of those norms. The findings on this theme reveal that the informants consume smut manhwa while maintaining a distance, using justifications, and adopting certain attitudes toward social judgment.

### **Women's Agency in Selecting and Interpreting Smut Manhwa**

All informants indicated that they do not consume smut manhwa indiscriminately. They evaluate the works they read based on factors such as visuals, plot, character dynamics, and the types of content they avoid. Simply put, their consumption is not based solely on the sexual content of the scenes, but also on the quality of the story and their comfort with its content. INF-01 said, "Usually, I look at whether the plot is good or not,

whether it's messy or not, and whether the visuals of the characters are good or not, so the overall feel is there, it's not just about the sex scenes." INF-02 made the same point: "My considerations usually include the visuals or art style, the plot, and the relationships between characters in the story."

Meanwhile, INF-03 stated that they often favour the visuals. Still, they also find educational elements in smut manhwa: "I rarely read smut stories, but usually I read them if they show up on my FYP on TikTok and it's usually just because the art is good... there's sex education in it, so I learn..." These three quotes demonstrate that the informants' preferences shape their evaluation of the content of their reading material.

However, the most detailed data comes from INF-04, who stated, "I do like smut stories, but not non-consensual/rape or PWP; I prefer slowburn... I tend to avoid anything involving rape, non-consensual, PWP, gore, bullying, and violence. "Because those can trigger trauma..." The informant's statement is crucial, as it indicates that reading choices are not merely a matter of personal taste but also depend on the informant's emotional state. INF-04 also described more specific preferences regarding character types and preferred relationship dynamics. On this topic, patterns among informants show that readers select, reject, filter, and interpret smut manhwa based on personal considerations, rather than simply consuming whatever is available.

## **Discussion**

This discussion centres on the question of how women perceive smut manhwa as a safe space and how such consumption transforms into a form of agency and imagination regarding desire and gender relations. The focus of this discussion is on interpreting the sociological meaning of smut manhwa consumption through Anthony Giddens's theory, particularly the concepts of the duality of structure, reflexive monitoring of action, and ontological security.

### **Smut Manhwa as a Safe Space: Digital Privacy and Structural Duality**

This finding is relevant because it shows that the safe spaces created by the informants are not merely about personal comfort, but rather a form of self-adjustment to social norms that restrict women's sexual expression. In the Indonesian context, women often stand as subjects who must maintain modesty, suppress their desires, and avoid open discussions of sexuality. These conditions make the consumption of smut manhwa a private space, where informants do not have to face social judgment while accessing

erotic imagination. Studies on the objectification of women in social media show that social media is not a neutral space; it can serve as a tool for emancipation but also reinforce patriarchal dominance and the objectification of women (Khairah and Tambunan 2019)

From a Giddensian perspective, safe spaces operate through the duality of structure. Patriarchal structures act as a barrier by rendering women's sexuality taboo, yet digital structures create new resources: privacy, anonymity, and personal access (Giddens n.d.) Thus, women do not need to exit the restrictive structures fully. They can still read in secret, keep their consumption private, and avoid social exposure. However, this covert behaviour is not a form of passivity; rather, through this secrecy, women create a space to access their desires without needing to reveal them. Here, the duality of structure operates such that social norms persist through hidden consumption, yet simultaneously, a shift occurs through the sustained practice of reading. Structuration theory emphasises that structure is both a medium and a product of social action: individuals act within structures, yet their actions can both maintain and alter existing structures (Dayrobi et al. 2024)

Empirical data is evident in INF-01's statement that reading provides a sense of safety because "no one knows and no one judges." INF-04 also emphasises that discussing such topics triggers feelings of disgust, hatred, and social isolation. These quotes indicate that the primary threat does not stem from the sexual content itself, but rather from the social consequences if women face exposure for consuming such content. Thus, the safe space in this study is not merely a digital space, but also a social space shaped through self-exposure strategies. This phenomenon is also found in the Chinese context, particularly regarding the consumption of BL (danmei) and slash fanfiction. Madill and Zhao demonstrate that female-oriented male-male erotica constitutes a subculture created by women, including within the Greater China context (Madill and Zhao 2021). However, unlike the context in Indonesia, where control tends to stem from social stigma, religion, family, and public morality, China has an additional layer of control: state censorship regarding sexual content and BL. Zhang herself notes that BL/danmei and slash in China face stricter censorship compared to heterosexual pornography, meaning female fans must negotiate not only with family norms but also with state regulations (Zhang 2022).

### Self-Awareness, Desire, and Reflexive Monitoring of Action

This finding is relevant because it shows that researchers cannot reduce the consumption of erotic *wamanga* to mere entertainment. For the informants, erotic *manhwa* serves as a reflective space for recognizing comfort, personal boundaries, emotional needs, and desired relationship dynamics. In this context, the consumption of erotic media functions as a space for the construction of self-meaning. This finding aligns with studies on the consumption of *homoromantic* fiction, which show that readers' interest is not based solely on sexual orientation but also on narrative elements, emotional resonance, and character transformation (Faizah Umi Anisatul, Ningsih Idha Rahayu 2026). Giddens' concept of "reflexive monitoring of action" helps explain this process. Agency is not only evident when individuals openly resist but also when they repeatedly monitor, evaluate, and adjust their actions. The informants in this study did not simply accept *smut manhwa* at face value. They were able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, between narratively enjoyable relationships and emotionally healthy ones. When INF-01 stated that they came to understand "what makes a relationship comfortable," and INF-02 expressed a desire for a sensitive partner and a relationship based on consent, both demonstrated that desire is not a directionless impulse but an experience critically reflected upon.

This reflective practice also links to digital sexual literacy, the informal ability to understand the body, consent, boundaries, and relationships through digital experiences. In a study on adolescent erotic narratives on Wattpad, erotic stories serve not merely as entertainment but also as a space for informal sexual socialisation where readers and writers construct meanings regarding desire, consent, pleasure, and power (Anciones-Anguita and Pastor-Cerezo 2025). However, the study also notes that such spaces are ambiguous because they can facilitate the exploration of women's desires while simultaneously reproducing patterns of domination, ambiguous consent, and unequal sexual relationships. In the Chinese context, such reflective processes are evident in the consumption of *danmei* and *slash fanfiction*; Zhang demonstrates that women in China use *slash* to negotiate sexual desire, gender relations, and heteronormative norms, yet this practice occurs within spaces constrained by censorship and stigma (Zhang 2022). This constraint means that women's reflexivity in China is not merely about the question "What do I want?" but also "Where can I access it safely?" and "How can I continue to enjoy this content without facing social and legal risks?" Compared to Indonesia, reflexivity in

the Chinese context is more tied to strategies for reading and accessing digital platforms without state oversight.

### **Gender Relations, the Female Gaze, and the Production of Alternative Meanings**

This finding is relevant because it demonstrates that smut manhwa serves as a space that produces alternative meanings of gender relations. In a social context that still expects women to adopt a passive role and maintain the boundaries of propriety, smut manhwa offers the freedom to fantasise, where women can be dominant, or men are not always the ones in control within a relationship, as well as sexual or emotional relationships built on consent and communication. This finding is significant because popular media not only reflect reality but also provide a symbolic language for imagining relationships that differ from dominant norms. From a structuration framework, gender representations in smut manhwa serve as symbolic resources. Provide examples of patriarchal structures that dictate how men and women act. However, when women read stories that subvert these norms, such as those where women can be dominant or where relationships do not objectify women, they gather material to reinterpret these relational patterns. This reinterpretation is where agency emerges, functioning not as actions exposed in public spaces, but as shifts in how one reads, compares, and evaluates gender relations. Research on gender stereotypes in the webtoon *\*Remarried Empress\** shows that digital comics still perpetuate gender stereotypes; even when female characters appear as strong figures, they are still positioned as needing male protection (Aully 2022).

Empirical findings from this study are evident when INF-02 states that she reads manhwa featuring dominant women who do not always depend on men. INF-04 also notes that BL manhwa does not objectify women because the characters are all male. The concept of the female gaze explains these statements, in which women are not merely objects of gaze but also subjects capable of seeing, feeling, evaluating, and enjoying the construction of relationships. In the context of BL manhwa or male-male erotica, the removal of the female body from the center of the relationship conversely provides female readers with space to enjoy eroticism without having to position themselves as sexual objects. This phenomenon aligns with research by Oeyta, Dewi, and Suryadi, who state that BL closely correlates with dissatisfaction regarding traditional gender roles and rigid social expectations (Dinatha, Dewi, and Suryadi 2022). This phenomenon is also evident in broader Asian studies; Roy explains that same-sex comics such as yaoi, shonen-ai, manhwa, and manhua have proliferated extensively across Asia, regions often perceived

as upholding traditional sexual values, yet have garnered a substantial female readership through digital platforms (Twaha 2024). In China itself, BL/danmei has become a space where men can serve as objects of female gaze and definition. Zhang explains that this raises concerns within China's mainstream discourse because it directly disrupts norms of marriage, reproduction, and heterosexual masculinity (Zhang 2022). Thus, in both Indonesia and China, women's consumption of erotic media challenges the assumption that women must be passive in desire; however, in China, this issue is more readily recognized as a moral-political problem because the state actively regulates such boundaries.

### **Negotiating Patriarchal Norms: Hidden and Ambivalent Agency**

These findings are relevant because they demonstrate that women's agency is not limited to overt resistance. Informants do not reject social norms head-on, yet they do not fully submit to them either. They read in private, limit who knows about their reading habits, and reinforce personal justifications that reading smut manhwa is a personal right, as long as it does not harm others. Thus, agency emerges subtly, hidden, and ambivalent. From Giddens' framework, ambivalence is a key aspect. When women keep their consumption of smut manhwa secret, it seems to uphold the social norm that women must hide their sexuality. However, this reading practice shows that the norm is not entirely effective in controlling their desires. In short, patriarchal norms persist in the social sphere through practices of secrecy, yet these practices reshape these boundaries within the private sphere through ongoing consumption. Studies examining women and children from terrorist families in Indonesia show that agency in highly stigmatised conditions often emerges through hidden forms, such as strategic silence and negotiation within unfriendly social environments (Ridwan 2026). Although the contexts differ, the concept of hidden agency helps us understand how women manage social risks without engaging in open resistance.

The quote from INF-01: "I'll just keep it to myself," demonstrates a safe strategy to maintain access without incurring social sanctions. Conversely, INF-04 states that even if others view her as violating norms, she will accept it because she does not care about others' reactions. These two positions signify a spectrum of agency, ranging from hidden strategies to a more assertive stance toward the risk of stigma. Studies on Boys Love fans in Indonesia indicate that BL exists within a dynamic of tension, where society still views homosexuality as taboo, yet the BL fanbase in Indonesia continues to grow among

enthusiasts (Avianti and Yunanto 2023). In the Chinese context, negotiations become increasingly complex because women face stigma not only from family and Confucian norms regarding female propriety but also from state censorship. Zhang demonstrates that BL/danmei fans must contend with content restrictions, access blockades, and censorship-evasion tactics, including using foreign platforms or VPNs to access content that is unavailable in their home countries (Zhang 2022). Unlike in Indonesia, where control stems from family, religion, and social stigma, in China itself, such control originates from the state's institutional structure. Consequently, the forms of agency among Chinese women are relatively technical and fragmented, manifesting as codes, switching platforms, disguising terminology, or seeking digital alternatives.

### **Reading Selectivity, Ontological Security, and Digital Sexual Literacy**

These findings are relevant because they demonstrate that readers of smut manhwa are not passive. Informants prefer works based on plot, visuals, characters, relational dynamics, and emotional boundaries. They also reject manhwa in genres such as non-con, gore, rape, bullying, and violence. Thus, the consumption of smut manhwa is not merely related to an interest in sexual scenes, but also to the ability to filter content and establish personal consumption ethics. Giddens' concept of ontological security helps explain why reading routines are important sociologically. Ontological security relates to a sense of stability, safety, and consistency in daily life. For the informants, smut manhwa provides a controllable space, such as choosing stories, stopping reading, skipping uncomfortable scenes, and avoiding genres that trigger trauma. In a social environment that does not provide open space for women to explore sexual desires, control over the reading experience fosters a sense of safety for them. Thus, a safe space does not arise from reading done in secret, but rather from the reader having control over their emotional experience.

This finding relates to digital sexual literacy; for instance, INF-04 not only enjoys smut manhwa but also details the content she avoids because it could trigger trauma. INF-03 also noted that she gained specific sexual knowledge from smut manhwa. In the Wattpad analysis, erotic digital narratives serve as symbolic laboratories that shape sexual scripts. Yet, they also entail risks as some stories perpetuate dominance, ambiguous consent, and unequal relationships (Anciones-Anguita and Pastor-Cerezo 2025). Therefore, reader filtering is crucial, as it indicates that readers do not merely consume content but also assess whether it aligns with their moral and emotional principles. In the

Indonesian context, these findings relate to research on the Fujoshi community on Telegram. Wardani demonstrates that access to BL manhwa on Telegram provides fans with the freedom to pursue their hobbies and connect with like-minded individuals. Yet, it also presents issues regarding access to 18+ content and the negative impacts of excessive consumption (Wardani 2024). Thus, researchers must understand reader agency alongside the negative impacts of digital platforms. Not all forms of access can be understood as empowerment, as what matters most is the ability to read critically, filter content, and understand one's own limits.

In China, digital sexual literacy also develops under control mechanisms. Female readers of BL/danmei must not only filter content based on preferences and comfort but also understand and follow platform rules, figurative language, and state restrictions. Madill and Zhao demonstrate that BL has gained widespread recognition among young people in Greater China. Yet, it exists in a different environment from the Anglophone context due to pressure from strict regulations and sexual politics (Madill and Zhao 2021). This pressure makes women's digital literacy in China more complex, as it involves not only literacy about story content but also about risks.

### **Smut Manhwa as a Space for the Production of Meaning and Desire**

The findings of this study are also relevant because they demonstrate that the consumption of smut manhwa directly relates to the production of meaning and desire. Women do not merely read the bodies of characters in the stories, but also reinterpret their own bodily positions within social relations. In a culture that still regulates women through standards of propriety, beauty, and morality, smut manhwa serves as a space to imagine the body as a subject of desire, rather than merely being positioned as an object of surveillance. A study on body positivity on Instagram reveals that young women are not merely passive recipients of body standards but can reconstruct the meaning of the body through daily digital practices (Kiptiyah and Ridwan 2025). However, the digital space remains ambivalent (Octavianti et al. 2025), demonstrating that social media can serve as a space for liberation but also for the reproduction of stereotypes and objectification. This ambivalence makes it crucial to engage critically with manhwa. Smut manhwa is not inherently a space of liberation. Some of its narratives may reinforce male dominance, toxic relationships, or objectify women's bodies. However, this research indicates that readers can engage in critical reading; they accept elements that provide a sense of safety or reflection while rejecting those deemed unhealthy. Thus, agency does

not lie solely in the media itself but also in the relationship between readers, the media, and the social structures that shape how they read.

Related studies on ladies' comics in Japan also reinforce this argument. Jones demonstrates that erotic comics for women cannot be understood as a form of pornography that oppresses women, because female readers are also active in determining their responses, pleasure, and the meaning within the narratives they consume (Jones 2016). However, Jones also notes an ambivalence because some also contain sexual violence and domination. This observation aligns with the findings of this study, that smut manhwa serves as a space and also opens access regarding women's desires, yet must still be read critically because it remains within problematic power relations.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that the consumption of smut manhwa is not merely a form of digital media consumption, but a meaningful social practice within the context of gender and sexuality. Through interviews with four informants, this study found that women construct smut manhwa as a safe space, not because of a weakening patriarchal structure. Still, they can use private spaces to access desires they cannot openly express in social settings. Within the framework of Giddens's theory of structuration, this study demonstrates that women's agency operates ambivalently. Women are not entirely free from the norms that have restricted their sexuality, yet they are not entirely submissive either. They read privately, select and filter content reflectively, build an understanding of consent and healthy relationships, and negotiate the distance between themselves and social judgment. These practices demonstrate the simultaneous operation of the duality of structure, reflexive monitoring of action, and ontological security within everyday consumption practices.

A key point is that women's agency in this study does not emerge as open resistance but as a form of hidden, gradual negotiation. This study suggests that gender sociology must interpret consumption practices in digital media not as deviant behavior, but as a space for women to manage the meanings of the body, desire, and gender relations. When compared to the Chinese context, where state control through digital censorship adds a layer to strict Confucian norms, it becomes evident that the tension between restrictive structures and supportive resources always shapes Asian women's agency in the

consumption of digital erotic media. This study also has limitations regarding the number of informants and the comparative context between Indonesia and China, which remains literature-based. Future research could develop comparative field-based studies that incorporate diverse social backgrounds while analyzing the roles of digital platforms and women's consumption strategies. Overall, this study contributes to gender sociology by emphasising that women as readers of digital erotic media are reflective actors operating within structural boundaries, not merely passive consumers, but subjects who continuously negotiate the meanings of desire, the body, and social relations.

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