Translating Boys Love

Turkish Scanlation Groups as Networked Counterpublics

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2. Abstract

This thesis explores the role of Turkish scanlation groups, particularly those engaged in localising Boys' Love (BL) media. BL media, originating from Japan and challenging traditional gender norms, has become a significant global influence in LGBTQ discourse. In Turkey, scanlation groups serve as platforms for queer youth, providing access to queer representation in a restrictive socio-political landscape. This study investigates how these groups function as networked publics, facilitating the empowerment of young queer individuals amidst authoritarian practices and societal constraints.

Using a methodological approach grounded in virtual ethnography, the study examines the organisational and social dynamics of these groups. Ethnographic findings reveal that these communities, primarily operating on Discord servers, offer more than mere entertainment. They facilitate the exploration of diverse identities, foster transgressive perspectives, and provide social support, enabling marginalised individuals to navigate and challenge fixed, normative identity structures. The study underscores the latent political potential of scanlation groups, highlighting their function as counterpublics where marginalised voices can circulate and proliferate. It argues that by combining the transcendental capabilities of network technologies with the inherent transgressive potential of BL media, these networked publics provide fertile ground for liberatory social transformation.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of networked publics and their political capacities, diversifies internet and digital media research by focusing on a niche peripheral example, and calls for recognizing and leveraging these niche communities to create safer and more empowering spaces for marginalised youth, both online and offline.

Keywords: Networked (counter)publics, Scanlation, Boys' Love (BL), Queer youth, Virtual ethnography, Online activism

3.   Introduction

In recent years, the digital landscape has evolved into a dynamic space where identities are negotiated, ideas are exchanged, and communities are formed at an unprecedented rate. Amidst this accelerating activity, a unique participatory phenomenon has emerged. Groups engaging in scanlation — the process of scanning, translating, and distributing comic media material online — have surfaced as dynamic networked publics, facilitating the global dissemination of comic media (Evans, 2019; Deppey, 2005; O'Hagan, 2008; Porras and Cassany, 2017). Concurrently, Turkiye's youth, constrained by censorship and limited purchasing power, has also increasingly turned to online localization of manga, which has led to a proliferation of scanlation groups and works on the Turkish internet (Okyavuz, 2017; Parlak, 2015).

The main focus of this thesis, therefore, is these scanlation groups in Turkiye, particularly those engaged in localising Boys' Love (BL) media. Originating from Japan, the BL genre frequently challenges conventional gender and sexual norms; and as it transcends geographical boundaries, it wields a significant influence in shaping global LGBTIQ+ discourse (Madeley, 2010; Wood, 2006). This study's findings reveal that in Turkey, where societal restrictions and censorship shape the socio-political landscape, scanlation groups centred on BL media serve as vital platforms for queer youth, offering access to representation and fostering a sense of belonging within a challenging environment.

In light of this, the central research question driving this thesis can be outlined as: "To what extent do Turkish scanlation groups operate as networked publics in facilitating the empowerment of young queer existence amidst authoritarian practices?" Expanding on this main inquiry, the study explores the intricate dynamics of Turkish scanlation groups, investigating how they establish and sustain themselves as networked publics. The concept of networked publics, increasingly prominent in academic discourse, offers insight into the transformation of public spheres by digital technologies (boyd, 2008;

Papacharissi, 2010; Varnelis, 2008). These publics, characterised by decentralisation and user-generated content, provide marginalised communities, including queer youth, with spaces to assert agency and challenge dominant narratives. Within this framework, scanlation groups are examined as networked (counter)publics carving out alternative spaces where marginalised voices can thrive and resist oppressive structures. For this examination, a methodological approach grounded in virtual ethnography is employed (Hine, 2020).

By conducting a thematic analysis of the findings obtained through participant observation and auto-ethnography, this study aims to investigate the extent that scanlation groups function as networked (counter)publics. In doing so, the study seeks not only to illuminate the transformative capacity of Turkish scanlation groups but also to emphasise the broader implications of seemingly non-political networked publics consisting of such marginalised individuals as queer youth. By spotlighting the peripheral case of Turkish scanlation groups, which have not been explored within this specific context before, this thesis endeavours to enrich scholarly discourse surrounding networked publics and their political capacities. Offering a non-Western-centric perspective, it further underscores the significance of encompassing diverse geographical and cultural contexts in understanding global trends of community formation and engagement in digital spaces.

4.   Theoretical foundations

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework necessary to address the research question proposed within this thesis. With this intention, first, the concept of networked publics will be explored, highlighting how these spaces and communities, reshaped by networked technologies, provide marginalised groups with arenas to challenge dominant narratives. The next section will examine Boys' Love (BL) media, a genre transcending national boundaries and influencing LGBTIQ+ discourse by challenging conventional gender and sexual norms. Finally, the phenomenon of scanlation will be discussed,

focusing on how Turkish scanlation groups act as networked publics, offering queer youth access to representation and community in a socio-political landscape marked by censorship. This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these interconnected concepts, setting the stage for the analysis of their real-world applications.

4.1 Networked publics

4.1.1 History of the term

The term "networked publics" began to gain traction in academic discourse in the late 2000s, as scholars explored the interdisciplinary field of network technologies and their impact on online interaction and socialisation (Ojala & Ripatti-Torniainen, 2023). Markus Ojala and Leena Ripatti-Torniainen (2023) trace the origins of the specific terminology to the edited collection *Networked Publics* (Varnelis, 2008), co-authored by researchers at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center for Communication and Journalism. This collection explored the transformative impacts of digital network technologies on social interactions, cultural practices, and lived experiences, highlighting the evolving nature of spatiality and cultural production within digital networks (Varnelis, 2008). The concept was further shaped through the focused ethnographic research, from scholars like danah boyd, whose work on the use of social network sites (SNSs) among American teens significantly contributed to the discourse regarding the social impact of networked technologies (Ojala & Ripatti-Torniainen, 2023). Ojala and Ripatti-Torniainen's (2023) quantitative review underscores the significance of these primary sources in defining and moulding the concept of networked publics. They report that 83 percent of reviewed publications on the topic reference boyd, while Mizuko Ito's introduction chapter in *Networked Publics* anthology also shows up as a widely consulted source for a conceptual definition (Ojala & Ripatti-Torniainen, 2023, p.4)

4.1.2 What is a networked public?

As might be expected, the notion of the networked public, is built on and heavily feeds from the more general conception of and the academic discussions regarding the public

sphere on a broader basis. In his book *Publics and Counterpublics* Michael Warner (2005) explores how publics operate and interact utilising the lens of public-sphere theory and queer theory to and conclude that publics are imagined entities with significant influence, yet their definition and boundaries are subject to ongoing negotiation and contestation. Ito's (2008) definition of a networked public aligns with the fluid and all-encompassing definitions of public in general with a specific focus on networked technologies. According to Ito (2008, p.2) networked publics can be defined as 'a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments accompanying the growing engagement with digitally networked media.' boyd (2011) builds on this definition, emphasising that networked publics are both spaces and communities of people, restructured by networked technologies. Exploring how networked media both shapes and is shaped by networked publics, boyd emphasises that these publics are intricately correlative with the properties and possibilities of digital communication technologies, stating:

> Networked publics are not just publics networked together, but they are publics that have been transformed by networked media, its properties, and its potential. The properties of bits regulate the structure of networked publics, which, in turn, introduces new possible practices and shapes the interactions that take place. (boyd, 2011, p.42)

Thus, as Warner (2005) notes, publics, in the general sense, have a significant impact in shaping our social world, so do the networked publics. Just like its non-networked counterparts, networked publics facilitate cultural or civic gatherings, bringing individuals together from different social circles through fostering interconnectedness and community membership perception. The technological affordances of networked technologies mean however, that the networked publics are able to extend this impact by 'permitting individuals to engage in such exchanges across time and geography, as well as around interest or sentiment' (McInroy et al., 2021 p.631). It can be said, therefore, that networked publics differ from the traditional understandings

of the public through technology introducing unique affordances and dynamics to the notion.

One of the crucial dynamics inherent in networked publics is the decentralised nature of engagement and production. Content creation within these publics does not originate from a central authority but is rather collaborative, facilitated by modern information technologies that enable user-generated content and higher interactivity. (McInroy et al., 2021, p.631). In fact, Ito emphasises that the term "networked publics" can be used to delineate this new and distinct mode of media engagement, offering an alternative to terms such as "audience" or "consumer" (Ito, 2008, p.2). The term networked publics, thus imply that through the affordances of networked technologies, publics are empowered to act as 'reactors, (re)makers, and (re)distributors,' fostering a 'shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange' (Ito, 2008, p.3).

This aspect of networked publics is directly relevant to the notion of "convergence culture," a concept pioneered by Henry Jenkins. Convergence culture entails the circulation of media content across various platforms, driven by both corporate decisions and consumer demands (Jenkins, 2006). In convergence culture, media engagement entails active participation and collective intelligence, where individuals collectively contribute to interpreting media content (Jenkins, 2006). As Ito (2008) points out, advancements in information and communication technologies, such as the reduced costs of processing power and digital storage, along with the accessibility of content production tools and network technologies, contribute to the proliferation of convergence culture, while also laying the groundwork for the formation and nurturing of networked publics. However, it is important to avoid overly deterministic approaches that exclusively emphasise the influence of technology, when considering the complex and mutually influential relationship between convergence culture and networked publics. Indeed authors Kazys Varnelis and Anne Friedberg (2008, p.27) state that the 'transition toward network culture is not merely technological, it is deeply tied into societal changes.' Similarly, Manuel Castells (2009), in his work authored in late 1990s, *The Rise of the Network Society*,

examines the transition of society towards increasingly networked structures in production, power dynamics, and overall human experience. This observation is later echoed in *The Wealth of Networks* by Yonchai Benkler (2007), underscoring the significance of decentralised and cooperative actions facilitated by distributed, non-market mechanisms free from proprietary control for the emergence of what he terms the "networked information economy" that supplants traditional industrial information models.

In that way, current literature on networked publics characterise them as being both a symptom of and a catalyst for the evolution of networked technologies, reflecting and shaping modern technological advancements. As Ito (2008) explains, networked publics are both *spaces* whose shaped features, boundaries, and capabilities are contingent upon their network infrastructures; and *communities* where individuals socialise, connect, and engage with content across various converged technologies, continually challenging and redefining boundaries imposed upon them. This fluid, ever-evolving definition of networked publics resonates with the conventional concept of publics and the public sphere, which similarly eludes precise definition and is subject to ongoing debate regarding its boundaries (Papacharissi, 2013).

The complexity of defining networked publics is compounded by the diverse contexts within which they operate and varied content they comprise. Indeed, the manifestation of networked culture in specific contexts is heavily influenced by factors such as 'media type, industry makeup, infrastructures, geopolitics, and cultures of consumption and production' (Russell et al., 2008). Amongst these diverse publics, anime and manga communities, along with networked fan groups, present their own unique characteristics. For fan groups, akin to other networked publics, the capabilities of the network offer 'an extraordinary possibility … to participate in the process of building and cultivating a culture that reaches far beyond local boundaries' (Lessig, 2004, p.9). However, while collective fan production serves as 'the lifeblood of commercial media', it also poses a challenge to traditional economic models, resulting in fan communities and

their content often navigating 'an uneasy relationship' with media industries (Russell et al., 2008, p.55). As detailed in the following sections, anime/manga fandoms stand out due to commercial producers' acceptance and utilisation of amateur cultural production, notably seen in the thriving *doujinshi* scene, where self-published content flourishes in a relatively permissive environment since the 1970s (Russell et al., 2008, p.59). This phenomenon partly stems from the initial marginalisation of anime and manga in English-speaking regions, prompting the emergence of noncommercial fansubbing as a way to access localised content, a history further explored in subsequent sections.

4.1.3 Identity and the network

As definitions and boundaries of the public sphere shift with the influence of network technologies, a parallel fluidity might be expected to emerge in the conceptualizations identity. This expectation arises due to the inherent connection of the self and the public, given that publics function not only as venues for social, civic, and cultural production but also as 'arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities' (Fraser, 1993, p.120). In fact,Papacharissi (2012) explains that, in late modern societies, the concept of self is depicted often as a fluid abstraction, constantly shaped and redefined through interactions with various social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. Goffman (in Papacharissi, 2012, p.304) characterises this process as an intricate 'information game,' where individuals engage in 'a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery.' According to Papacharissi (2012), with the proliferation of networked technologies, the information game extends to digital spaces where individuals navigate and negotiate their identities across converged platforms and multiple audiences.

While Manuel Castells (1996) asserts that as networks expand, a tension arises between the broader network and the individual; Kazylys Varnelis (2008) challenges this notion, disputing Castells' assumption that this tension would result in the replacement of class struggle with individualism. Instead, Varnelis argues that the concept of struggle and

resistance now extends to networked guerrillas, previously termed "black holes of marginality" by Castells, which operate outside the dominant network but are similarly organised within their own network structures. Still, Varnelis (2008, p.160) also emphasises that assuming networked publics automatically lead to greater civic understanding and solidarity may be unwarranted, by highlighting that the outcome of networked publics ultimately depends on the decisions made by their inhabitants:

> The question we face at the dawn of network culture is whether we, the inhabitants of our networked publics, can reach across our microclustered worlds to coalesce into a force capable of understanding the condition we are in and produce positive change, preserving what is good about network culture and changing what is bad — or whether we are doomed only to dissipate into the network.

Expanding upon this notion, boyd (2008) suggests that navigating the various capabilities of networks, such as identity construction and socialisation, holds significant importance for marginalised demographics, such as teens. Indeed boyd (2008, p.299) mentions the pivotal role of public spaces in teenagers' aspirations for agency, stating: 'While teens seek the unpredictable potential of publics, this is precisely what worries adults who prefer more controlled settings.' boyd (2008) suggest that contemporary society often perceives access to public spaces as primarily reserved for adults, prompting teens to establish their own spaces by forming counterpublics within broader societal structures. Relying on networked technologies, teens replicate and amplify offline processes of identity formation and socialisation, while also creating their own spheres where they can assert agency, challenging the dominance of adult-oriented traditional public spheres. For marginalised communities like teens, networks serve as 'both an enabler and a metaphor for value creation at the edges' (Ito, 2008, p.10)

4.1.4 Counter networks and retracted networks

Nancy Fraser (1993) critically examines the traditional public sphere, noting its tendency to favour privileged groups in shaping hegemonic discourse and majority opinion. She emphasises the imperative felt by the marginalised communities to establish counterpublics, creating spaces for collective dialogue and incubating activist objectives to increase influence over broader publics. This notion finds its resonance in networked counterpublics. By employing the technical affordances of online network platforms, marginalised communities create networked counterpublics 'wherein internet-based platforms are employed by marginalised communities to serve as opportunities for respite and as venues for organising counter-discourses against dominant groups'(McInroy et al., 2021, p.631). These counterpublics span various online platforms, with each community utilising platform-specific affordances to advance its objectives. In a similar vein, Abidin (2021) introduces another alternative form of publics with the concept of refracted publics which are online communities that utilise tactics to navigate and manipulate social media networks, orchestrating seemingly organic results while avoiding mainstream attention. According to Abidin (2021), emerging from the media landscape of the 2010s, these groups adapt to the overwhelming amount of content, intense competition for attention, and pervasive mistrust of information by utilising strategies like self-amplification, hashtag manipulation, SEO tactics, and clickbait. Refracted publics enable cultures and communities to remain undiscovered, appear as something else entirely, or gain attention in unexpected ways (Abidin, 2021).

Fundamentally, these concepts underscore how networked technologies empower marginalised groups to establish alternative public spheres, free from hegemonic influences. By providing outlets for diverse and disempowered voices to gather and thrive, these alternative publics have the potential to disrupt mainstream narratives, demonstrating the transformative capacity of online platforms in cultivating inclusive and participatory spaces (Varnelis, 2008).

4.2 Boys Love manga and erotic manga readership

4.2.1 Manga and its brief history

The earliest roots of Japanese manga can be traced back to caricatures drawn on the ceiling beams of the Horyu-ji temple around 700 CE (McCarthy, 2014). For a more systematic and deliberate origin, however, one may refer to the painted narrative scrolls (*e-makimono*), notably exemplified by the four *Chôǰuǧiga* (*the Animal Scrolls*) created by the abbot Toba Sôǰô during the 12th century, which are satirical works that depict aristocrats, priests, and warriors in various animal forms (McCarthy, 2014; Bouissou, 2010). Although scholars (Bouissou, 2010; McCarthy, 2014; Ito, 2005) often caution against directly linking present-day manga to e-makimono, considering the persistence of the e-makimono art form until the Edo period and its succession by similar media blending text and images, it is important to note that the longstanding tradition of graphic narration in Japanese culture was ushered by these developments. This tradition, in turn, contributed to manga's flourishing and societal acceptance, despite the absence of a linear relationship.

That said, the inception of the modern day manga itself can be attributed to two key cultural influences: the 'urban culture of the Edo period,' whereby cultural media prospered to entertain emerging merchant class; and the Western impact, following Japan's opening of borders in 1853 (Bouissou, 2010, p.21). This convergence culminated in 1900 with the launch of the Jiji Shinpô newspaper's weekly supplement titled "Jiji Manga," marking the first use of the term "manga" in a publication title (Bouissou, 2010, p.22). Thus, pre-war Japan fused imported comic art with its native graphic storytelling, establishing the groundwork for modern manga which initially served as a platform for both political dialogue and entertainment.

Despite visual media's use as propaganda during the pre-war and war periods, however, post-war manga faced strict censorship under American occupation, leading to a rise in ephemeral children-oriented narratives (McCarthy, 2014). Shōnen and shōjo manga,

catering to young boys and girls respectively, emerged as significant genres in manga consumption. The birth of modern manga was pioneered by Tezuka Osamu, whose shōnen manga *Shin Takarajima* (*The New Treasure Island*) offered the graphic techniques and narrative complexity that defined the modern manga art (Boussiou, 2010, p.26). Following the official end of the American occupation in 1952, Japan's economy saw improvement and an increase in disposable incomes led to a growing demand for reading material contributing to the creation and consumption of manga (McCarthy, 2014). Today, Japan's comics market boasts over a dozen weekly publications covering various genres, offering multiple manga serials in each issue (McCarthy, 2014).

4.2.2 Boys' Love media and its history

As mentioned earlier, this research proposal primarily concentrates on the scanlation of queer media, with the term "queer media" referring specifically to the Boys' Love (BL) (sub-)genre. In the realm of manga, Boys' Love (BL) stands as a multifaceted genre, encompassing diverse narratives of male-male romances. BL manga, with its diverse manifestations, which will be explored in detail later, is commonly viewed as a subgenre of shōjo, directly tied to the Japanese term for "young girl," representing a genre primarily targeted at young female readers (Camper, 2006 p. 24). In the early 1970s, shôjo manga, which was traditionally dominated by male creators, underwent a transformation led by the *Hana 24-nen gumi (The Year 24 Group)*, a group of young female artists in their early twenties, who introduced a novel aesthetic to the genre, presenting a feminine perspective on themes of love and sexuality. (Welker, 2015, p.43) In a society marked by masculine ideals, these artists have employed and introduced unique narrative devices that would help 'dissipate the anxiety of their readers and permit them to identify with the characters' (Boussiou, 2010, p.27). These included singular narrative devices such as transvestite heroines like Oscar in Ikeda Riyoko's *Berusaru no bara*; as well as the emergence of the shōnen-ai genre featuring romantic tales centred around pretty, effeminate young boys (bishōnen), as seen in works like *Juichigatsu no gimunajiumu (A High School in November)*,

Figure 1

Cover of a the reprint of *Berusaru no bara*, featuring Marie Antoinette (foreground) and Lady Oscar François de Jarjayes (background).

From *A Brief History of Manga* (2014)

Tōma no Shinzōi, and *Kaze to ki no uta (The Songs of Trees and Winds)* (Boussiou, 2010, p.27).In 1975, around the same time as this 'golden age of shōjo manga,' the first Comiket (Comic Market) — an internationally renowned dōjinshi fair showcasing and celebrating amateur manga work — took place in Tokyo. (Welker, 2015, p.43) During the initial years of the Comiket numerous circles focused on shōjo manga participated in the event (Welker, 2015, p.53-54). Motivated by the growing popularity of shōnen'ai manga, evident at events like Comiket, Sagawa Toshihiko convinced the publishing group that produced erotic magazines, where he was employed, to launch *JUNE*, the first commercial magazine tailored for girls, showcasing romantic narratives involving attractive young men. Later, reflecting on the magazine's content, Sagawa asserted 'what the Fabulous Forty-Niners produced was not "porn" but rather something between literature and pornography' — both essential to its appeal (Welker, 2015, p.59). According to Welker (2015, p.63) such magazines 'along with the commercially published dōjinshi anthologies and — even more importantly — the phenomenal popularity and proliferation of amateur BL media at the Comic Market and in other fora in the 1980s, helped pave the way for the commercial boom in the 1990s and the current prosperity of the BL market.'Rooting from a significant historical

narrative and evolving over time, the BL genre seems to grow fast and dynamic within Japan. According to Nagaike (2003, p.77) BL genre 'which includes a large number of comic books, novels, and … magazines dealing with male same-sex relationships, occupies a large sector of the Japanese book market, with many manga artists consistently attaining the bestseller list.' However, scholars also highlight BL's broader impact beyond its commercial success. As noted by Welker (2022, p.4), BL transcends national and cultural boundaries, challenging conventional gender and sexual norms, and constituting a cross-media phenomenon that is deeply intertwined with LGBTIQ+ issues, extending to political dimensions.

Figure 2

Cover of the first issue of *June* (October 1978 issue), then called *Comic Jun*

From *Boys Love Manga and Beyond* (2015)

The concept of BL media currently encompasses a variety of terminologies, each carrying distinct nuances that signify the theme, texts, and sub-genres of male-male romance, often crafted by female artists for primarily female audiences (Aoyama, 2012, p.64). For consistency, these media will be collectively referred to as BL media in this study. The term "media" is deliberately employed here, acknowledging the fact that although, in this context, BL pertains mainly to manga and comic media; BL texts often represent a cross-media phenomenon. In some limited instances, scanlation communities also engage in localising prose fiction BL texts, fansubbing, and scanlating manga.

Acknowledging the diversity in the definition of this particular media is crucial despite the terminological decision made, however, as it underscores the genre's

multiplicity and historical evolution. For reference, Camper (2006, p.24) outlines the terminology as follows:

> The "gay" love comics are just one genre among shojo, or girls' comics. Such comics have lots of names and genres. Shonen-ai or shounen-ai means "boy love." This genre emphasises relationships and romance over sex. Bishonen or bishounen means "beautiful boy." Yaoi is the sexier stuff, an acronym for "yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi," or "no climax, no point, no meaning" — a pretty good definition of pornography generally. … Generally, yaoi is smuttier than shonen-ai, but the Japanese names have shifted in meaning over time, as have their connotations in the West…

Indeed nowadays, the genre of BL manga encompasses a diverse array of narratives — as evidenced by the diverse terminology — ranging from emotionally charged romances to sexually explicit content, deeply rooted in notions of desire and love.

4.2.3   Erotic manga readership: Notions of gender and identity

An investigation into the concept of bishōnen (literally "beautiful youth/boy" in Japanese) within BL media illuminates how these BL characters enable readers to 'perceive the infinite potential of masculine expression unbound by notions of heterosexuality and heteronormativity,' offering a nuanced perspective on alternative gender identities (Santos, 2020, p.282). Originating in the shōjo manga of the 1970s alongside the emergence of BL narratives, these characters with their 'slender physique and expressive gaze,' have been quintessential to the early development of BL media; and with their androgyny and gender fluidity, they not only challenge conventional perceptions of masculinity but also disrupt the gender binary within the genre's artistic expression (Santos, 2020, p.282). Transcending heteronormative boundaries, they provide readers with a liberating space to explore diverse expressions of masculinity. Scholars (Nagaike, 2003; Santos, 2020; Welker, 2006) address that this departure from the norm is not merely aesthetic, instead it carries profound implications for gender identity and sexuality fo

r communities that form around BL media.

According to scholar James Welker (2006, p.866) 'the beautiful boy [bishōnen] can be read as a symbol of liberation.' Welker (2006) argues that during the 1970s and 1980s, identification with the beautiful boy offered readers an avenue to explore diverse sexual and gender possibilities. The emergence of this narrative and visual innovation was prompted partly due to the lack of depth offered to female characters in shōjo manga (Welker, 2006). Indeed in her ethnographic work involving interviews with Canadian manga readers, June Madeley (2010) reveals that even within today's manga audience, female readers perceive female characters as stereotypical and less prominent, favouring "pretty boys" commonly found in shōjo and yaoi manga. Despite manga's portrayal of gender fluidity, participants note familiar stereotypes among female characters, highlighting a disparity in representation compared to their male counterparts (Madeley, 2010). Bishōnen, thus, has enabled and continues to enable female audiences, in particular, to establish identification with characters portrayed in manga, 'compensating for the lack of logos and sexuality in the conventional portraits of girls' within shōjo narratives (Matsui, 1993, p.178).

Figure 3

Serge and Gilbert from *Kaze to ki no uta.*

Through this identification with the male body, as Nagaike (2003, p.86) states, 'the concept of a constructed female sexuality defined in relation to such terms as "guilt" and "shame" is sublimated.' Thus, according to Nagaike (2003), sexuality and femininity performed within male bodies allow the female audience of BL to feel a sense of detachment from the characters' sexual guilt while still participating in the sexual

excitement, both symbolised by the biological penis, which the female reader does not possess. According to Nagaike (2003, p.99) this also 'provides the discursive space for women to participate actively in such issues of female sexuality and identity as bisexuality, homosociality, and other modes that contest a hierarchized, heterosexual paradigm.' Similarly, Andrea Wood (2006, p.400) states that the androgyny embedded in the narrative opens space for characters that not only speaks to female desires and fantasies 'but also other queer, transgender, and transsexual ones.'

This inclusivity can be negated from the fact that, at first glance, the *seme* (means "attack," refers to the top in the relationship) and *uke* (means "receive," refers to the bottom in the relationship) dichotomy may suggest heteronormative active/passive sex roles. However, as many scholars (Aoyama, 2012; Nagaike, 2003; Saito, 2011; Santos, 2020; Wood, 2006) assert, the sexuality of *uke* is often characterised rather affirmingly in BL narratives, and both partners' erotic fulfilment and gratification are emphasised; diverging from the one-sided portrayals typical of heterosexual pornography. Indeed, emerging from the 'serious and melodramatic' shōjo stories of the early 1970s, where sex symbolised 'the ultimate act of self-sacrifice for the heroine,' BL narratives with bishōnen characters have reconceptualized love and sexuality; shifting it 'from the surrender of the female body for the sake of love, to the mutual exploration of love, sexuality, and erotic desire between two protagonists' (Saito, 2011, p.173-174). This is alluring for female readers in particular, as it helps them reconsider femininity outside conventional norms. As Welker claims the androgynous nature of bishōnen offer female reader 'to live [their femininity] no longer as disenfranchisement and subordination, but rather as phallic divestiture, as a way of saying 'no' to power' (Silverman in Welker, 2006, p.855).

Building on this, it can be said that BL gives its female creators and audiences an outlet to exercise bodily and sexual agency while capitalising on the conceptions of female desire. Tomoko Aoyama (2012) claims that this liberatory aspect is precisely what defines shōjo. According to Aoyama (2012, p.65), this freedom from 'conventional gender restrictions and cultural hierarchy can also be connected to a certain kind of

egalitarianism' that can be found in the notions of an 'imagined community.' The notion of community is what makes the readership and the production of BL media are 'far more complicated than … [being] erotica for women' (Camper, 2006, p.26). As Camper (2006, p.26) effectively summarises, '… female yaoi writers are changing the face of erotica addressing a female audience with portrayals of a more fluid sexuality, more female-attractive males and sexual scenarios, and elements of nurturing and caring — all within a context of hot sex.'

The communities that form around BL media thus can be said to have social and political impact that may escape an onlooker on the first glance. Asserting that, 'critical thinking does not need to be expressed in a polemical or serious mode and language,' Aoyama emphasises despite its whimsical and unserious content BL artists and readers transform societal inequalities and existing threats into sources of pleasure and gratification (Aoyama, 2012, p.66). Indeed, Kumiko Saito (2011, p.175), in her examination of cultural activities within BL media fandom, parallels Fiske's application of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to BL fan culture, illustrating how BL communities, similar to other fan groups, prioritise items of cultural significance over economic value, thereby reshaping societal norms.

However, as BL flourishes within a predominantly female-authored and consumed space, it often faces intense scrutiny and criticism. Since its inception, shōjo culture has been centred on reading and writing, activities that generate pleasure and identity formation (Aoyama, 2012, p.63). However, these pursuits are frequently dismissed as immature or self-obsessed, reflecting historical criticisms of girls' culture (Aoyama, 2012, p.64). Beyond this concerning infantilization and trivialization of girls' culture, the assumption that BL communities exclusively comprise heterosexual cis-women may also lack complete accuracy. While acknowledging the substantial female readership in BL, sociology scholar Kuzuko Suzuki (2015, p.115) underscores that 'demographic analyses of BL media are underdeveloped and thus much needed in yaoi/BL studies.' The nuanced nature of BL's readership and production defies easy categorization, further compounded

by the scarcity of quantitative reports detailing the gender and sexual identities of BL readers. Going over the few existing reports, Anna Madill (2020, p.2) states, although in local communities more women seem to be aware of BL media, 'readers and creators of "male–male romance" in the anglophone West are a relatively "queer" demographic.' Wood (2006) also critiques the prevailing view of BL, which predominantly associates its readership with heterosexual women, arguing that this normative perspective overlooks BL's complexity. Wood (2006, p.396-397) contends that BL is not merely queer due to its portrayal of homoerotic narratives; rather, she suggests that BL's queerness arises from the fact that it generates 'a global counterpublic that is both subversive and fundamentally queer in nature' through networks that facilitate 'discourse and textual circulation among fans in different countries.'

4.3   Scanlation groups as networked publics

Before a comprehensive exploration of Turkish scanlation groups engaged in localising queer media, it is essential to delve deeper into the intricacies of scanlation groups from a more broader context. The portmanteau word of scanlation (a combination of English words "scan" and "translation") denotes the fan-made scanning, translation, and editing of manga and similar comic material from one language into another. (O'Hagan, 2009, p.100) The process can be described in mainly three steps: raw-provision, which involves scanning and providing the original comic; cleaning, which involves removing all text; and finally translating which involves replacing the original texts with translated counterparts (Evans, 2019, p.2).

Scanlation, as noted by Evans (2016, p.324), occupies a prominent space within the practice fan translation and exerts influence over the comic industry prompting official manga translations worldwide. It is an amateur volunteer practice and is almost always done without express permission from the copyright holder. According to Evans (2019, p,2) the main contributing reason for fans to engage in participatory and volunteer translation like such is the unavailability of certain manga in the desired language. Thus,

scanlation provides a means for fans to provide access to comics, unlicensed and undistributed in a certain language. This perspective explains why many scanlators do not perceive their activity as competitive against official distributors. (Lee, 2009, p.1016) According to Lee (2009, p.1015-1016), this intention of promoting accessibility and recognition, rather than making profit, is a crucial aspect of scanlation practice, as it reflects the fans' enthusiasm for sharing cultural products with their communities. In response, the industry's stance on illegal scanlation remains mixed; with some seeing its impact as a net positive, while others threaten the websites that regularly distribute scanlated media (Evans, 2019, p.3).

The cultural phenomena of scanlation finds its origins in the globalisation of manga readership, stemming from the dissemination of Japanese anime and manga beyond Japan through grassroots fan trading; as despite their popularisation 'the social aspects established during the initial period of reception remain strong' (Sell, 2011, p.94). The particular inception of scanlation practices within fan communities, however, is challenging to precisely pinpoint. In *Scanlation Nation*, Deppey (2005) suggests that its origins might be attributed to the internet's advancement and the corresponding ability to transmit high-quality images through email in the early 1990s. Similarly, Natalia Trykowska (2009, p.7) suggests that the availability of home scanners may have accelerated the scanlation practice. These assertions collectively position scanlation as a phenomenon deeply entwined with the evolution of media technologies.

As previously noted, given its predominantly online nature, scanlation groups have evolved to operate on various online community platforms, with Discord emerging as the most prevalent choice. In their research regarding the organisation of scanlation groups Porras and Cassany (2017) assert that scanlation group are acutely aware of the 'technical characteristics of online platforms (real time or not real time; public or private status; persistence of the message in the system; size and layout of the message)' and they organise according to these affordances, 'maximizing participation and efficiency.' Authors suggest that despite doing voluntary work the scanlators do 'highly structured'

work that 'goes so far as to mimic the language and some procedures of official cultural industries.' The meaning constructed and the cultural side products created through scanlation are not results of 'individual inventiveness,' rather they are communal products of scanlators who have their own cultural logic communicated and consolidated through these network platforms (Porras and Cassany, 2017).

Apart from the facilitation of volunteer work, however, these networks offer channels where the members can get to know each other, chat, share fan art, talk about common interests and engage in other social activities. Cathy Sell (2011, p.94) highlights this social aspect of the scanlation groups claiming: 'As inferred by the terms "group" and "club," manga and anime consumption is often viewed as a social activity.' This participatory engagement encourages these digital communities to establish spaces for communication and cultivate a shared culture characterised by common semiotic practices and understandings (Porras and Cassany, 2017) which then contributes to the emergence of these communities as networked publics.

Warner (2005, p.66) posits that publics are formed through interactions with texts and their dissemination. In this context, manga, particularly BL manga, serves as a catalyst for public formation, as these media texts foster community engagement and interaction. As Wood (2006, p.405) describes:

> Those who read boy-love manga do not remain passive receivers of the texts. Instead, these comics often act as a gateway to a "concatenation of texts." Fans begin to create their own doujinshi (fan manga), write their own fiction stories, participate in related areas like slash fandom, establish their own Web sites, begin their own translation and scanlation projects, attend anime and manga conventions, chat in online forums, and so on. The discourse of this rather varied and increasingly Web-based counterpublic relies on shared circuits of textual circulation that often transcend even the rather obvious constraints of language barrier.

Indeed, according to Porras and Cassany (2007) participatory culture, as outlined by Henry Jenkins, serves as a framework for understanding the dynamic collaboration and participation pertinent to scanlation groups that blurs the traditional boundaries between cultural consumption and production. Highlighting the close relationship between participatory culture and technological progress, Porras and Cassany (2007) also note that proliferation of network technologies has greatly expanded the reach and influence of participatory cultures. Indeed, for BL manga communities such as scanlation groups, network technologies play a pivotal role. That is because, despite the global growth of the commercial manga industry and the distribution of BL manga in physical form, the internet remains indispensable for sharing and elaborating upon BL media (Wood, 2006, p.406). These digital networks afford BL communities, including scanlation groups, the desired anonymity and isolation, enabling them to traverse diverse media landscapes, including erotic content, and construct online identities that transcend societal norms related to age, gender, race, class, or sexuality (Wood, 2006). Wood (2006) emphasises that these online platforms facilitate international engagement in discourse and textual circulation, thus positioning these groups once again as global networked counterpublics.

Contextualising Turkish scanlation communities within this global landscape and understanding the socio-political circumstances of their emergence in Turkey is likewise crucial for this forthcoming analysis. Since the first manga was published in Turkiye in September 1999, bookstores across the country had been distributing forms of this comic media, with both English and Turkish translations, targeting mainly a younger age group (Okyayuz, 2017). Around the same time, however, dissimilar to this Turkish case of convergence of the manga and the book industry, the growing influence of the internet was encouraging a different form of distribution for these comics on a global scale (Brienza, 2010). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, across the world, scanlation groups were becoming widespread ("Inside Scanlation"). In more recent years, the rapid digitalization of social life, the strict censorship practices, as well as the growing lack of purchasing power of the youth in Turkiye have immensely accelerated the rather legally

dubious online localization of the manga form. This has resulted in a proliferation of scanlation groups and works across the Turkish internet.
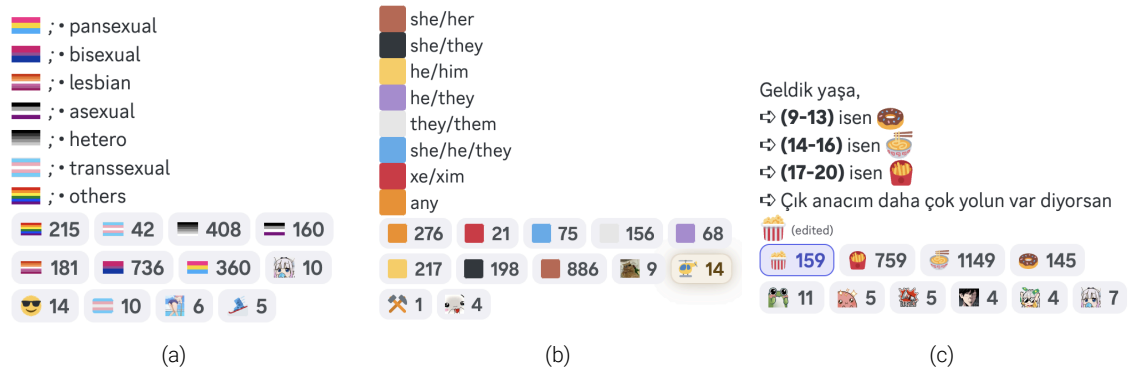

Figure 4

Role-getting practice in one of the scanlation servers observed, showcasing the members' (a) sexual orientation, (b) preferred pronouns, (c) age groups.

In Turkiye, as well as in most of its global instances, scanlation groups usually organise in online community platforms, with Discord seeming to be the most commonly used. Exploring the discourse and role assignment practices within the Discord servers of these groups suggests an observation that these Turkish scanlation groups may consist predominantly of queer youth. An example from the Discord server of one of the scanlation groups studied in this research is provided above. Figure 4a, Figure 4b and Figure 4c respectively show what roles the community members selected for themselves regarding their sexual orientations, preferred pronouns and age groups: revealing insightful information regarding group's demographics. These figures show that within this specific group the members are predominantly between the ages of 14 and 16, with almost 80% of members who participated in the sexual orientation role-claiming practice identifying with an LGBTIQ+ orientation. While a more comprehensive exploration of demographics across various scanlation groups is necessary for a clear conclusion the demographic insights shown here may serve as a valuable initial reference point. These

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insights may suggest a hypothesis that scanlation activities and digital networks predominantly involve queer youth in Turkiye.

The capacity of the internet to 'free everyone, but especially queer youth, from the shackles of geography' is widely recognized (Barnhurst, 2007). This capacity proves particularly significant for queer youth in geographies where access to queer representation is lacking or inexistent. That is precisely why the case of networked scanlation groups proves to be a socially and culturally relevant topic in the context of modern Turkiye. In the Freedom of Expression section of its 2023 progress report European Commission (2023) summarises the approach of incumbent governments and the overall state of acceptance toward queer expression as:

> The lack of protection for the fundamental rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) persons continued to raise serious concerns. The lack of legal protection against hate speech and hate crimes based on sexual orientation or gender identity was further exacerbated by negative stereotyping in the media and discriminatory rhetoric from high-level officials, including the highest political level. Anti-LGBTIQ rallies were organised … and were allowed by the authorities. LGBTIQ associations were regularly targeted by pro-government media … Discrimination, intimidation and violence against the LGBTIQ community and especially transgender persons increased, in part due to the lack of effective criminal sanctions. … LGBTIQ activities, marches and pride parades were banned in several provinces and police intervened to disperse participants.

This lack of inclusivity and diversity is not an issue that is solely prevalent for the LGBTIQ+ issues. Indeed, Susma, a platform that works to investigate censorship and auto-censorship in Turkiye, records at least 209 censorship cases, mentioning that these instances only include those that are publicly visible (2024, p.10). According to the platform the media and expression censorship in Turkiye is in a worsening state and

especially hurts social groups such as women, LGBTIQ+, ethnic minorities such as Kurds and refugees (2024, p.9). While media dissemination and communication on networks have previously been 'a place where those who had escaped censorship found refuge in,' governmental regulatory bodies and policy changes as well as the internal policies of private players have exacerbated the ethos of censorship in these digital spheres as well (p. 29). Thus, Susma platform records 23 censorship cases where content dissemination is obstructed through classic censorship methods such as fines and blocking of access, as well as others such as algorithmic changes and internal policy amendments. (p. 29-30) Still platform's report outline that: 'Despite all the interventions, digital spaces still maintain their feature of being an escape from censorship, considering the opportunities they provide (p. 30)'

In previous research, I have found that political authority and legitimacy are intricately tied to the use of discourse (Sakarya, 2021). For queer youth in Turkiye, the absence of inclusive queer content on a pervasive and enduring scale may lead to individual isolation and the erosion of the foundation necessary for the formation of collective cultural and social memory. According to Judith Butler (1997, p.168), such ongoing censorship and lack of inclusive socialisation result in a "foreclosure," cultivating citizens who automatically enforce censorship and are unable to think critically beyond totalitarian norms. The scanlation groups in Turkiye, operating through networks and facilitating social and cultural access to queer experiences, may challenge this foreclosure and provide queer Turkish youth with the opportunity to envision 'worlds that might one day become thinkable, sayable, legible' (Butler, 1997, p.41). Understanding the role of Turkish scanlation groups as networked counterpublics and assessing their impact on the socialisation and identity formation of their predominantly queer youth members is crucial not only for comprehending this specific case but also for grasping the transformative potential of networked publics more broadly.

5.   Methodology

Having outlined the theoretical background, this section now details the methodological framework used to gather observations necessary for objectively and fairly addressing the research question proposed in this thesis. With virtual ethnography as the main methodology, the chapter delves into the intricacies of conducting ethnographic research within digital networked field sites, offering insight into the distinct challenges and opportunities posed by this approach. Building on these insights, it then provides a detailed walkthrough of the methodological steps and decisions taken, accompanied by a dedicated section addressing ethical considerations. Overall, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive and transparent overview of the observational process which informs the analytical conclusions shaping the thesis and thus seeks to foster critical engagement and reflective analysis in interpreting the findings.

5.1   Virtual ethnography: an overview

The analysis of scanlation groups requires a methodological approach that can account for their intricate social, creative, and emotional dynamics. For this purpose, ethnography emerged as the most suitable method, as it offers 'rich, holistic insights into people's views and actions' by enabling researchers to immerse themselves in 'the way each group of people sees the world, through detailed observation' (Reeves et al., 2008, p.512). Given the predominantly online nature of scanlation groups and the study's focus on examining their characteristics within the context of networked publics, online ethnography was chosen as the methodological approach. This approach 'extends traditional ethnographic methods' to encompass 'technologically mediated interactions in online networks and communities' (Reeves et al., 2008, p.512).

While the multifaceted nature of digital media poses challenges for scientific inquiry, as Gabriella Coleman (2010, p.488) notes, these very characteristics 'also can make them compelling objects of ethnographic inquiry.' However, perhaps due to these

challenges, anthropologists have been slow to engage with digital media historically, with a notable increase in scholarly attention since the 1990s (Coleman, 2010). Coleman (2010) outlines the trajectory of scholarship on digital media, highlighting debates between technologically determinist perspectives and more sceptical views regarding the transformative potential of technology. Despite these ongoing debates, however, new technologies continue to influence and be influenced by social and cultural dynamics. Coleman thus underscores that 'it would be a mistake to overlook how digital media have cultivated new modes of communication and selfhood; reorganised social perceptions and forms of self-awareness; and established collective interests, institutions, and life projects.' (Coleman, 2010, p.490) She asserts that particularly for marginalised groups, digital technologies have provided spaces for community-building and self-expression within the ambiguous realm of the digital (Coleman, 2010).

Scholars have explored digital communities using different terminologies for their methods such as "cyber-ethnography" (Ward, 1999), "netnography" (Kozinets, 2010), and "virtual ethnography" (Hine, 2000), each with unique nuances and implications. This thesis adopts Hine's conceptualization of virtual ethnography as a primary methodological framework. Hine's approach, characterised by its interpretive and flexible understanding of the Internet and related phenomena, provides a comprehensive yet methodologically accessible framework for examining scanlation groups. To better comprehend the relevance of sociologist Christine Hine's framework of virtual ethnography to this study, it is essential to outline her insights which are based on the recognition of two primary approaches to understanding the internet. According to Hine (200, p.9) technologies such as the internet can be interpreted as both culture and cultural artefact.

According to Hine (2000, p.27), researchers adopting a 'discursive and practice-oriented approach' to studying online communities, through 'real-time engagement with the field site and multiple ways of interacting with informants,' provide a perspective on the internet as a culture, enabling the examination of online phenomena as 'functional in the social sense.' The internet serves various social functions, primarily in

community creation and identity formation (Hine, 2000). Firstly, according to Hine, (2000, p.19) the internet redefines traditional notions of community by transcending physical boundaries, fostering a sense of belonging irrespective of geographical constraints. Additionally, the internet plays a crucial role in identity formation and negotiation through performance and play, 'leading to rich social formations and fragmented identities' (Hine, 2000, p.19). That being said, however, Hine (2000, p.20) also stresses the need for critical analysis of the social processes and formations that develop online, cautioning against 'assuming that communities will automatically form or that identities will intrinsically be fluid.'

To thoroughly grasp the case, however, a multifaceted approach that also encompasses viewing the internet as a cultural artefact is beneficial. Hine (2000, p.32) emphasises the significance of examining how technology, including the internet, is appropriated and interpreted, which in turn, renders it with meaning:

> The Internet can ... be seen as thoroughly socially shaped both in the history of its development and in the moments of its use. ... This social shaping produces the object we know as the Internet, although the object that each of us knows is likely to be subtly and sometimes radically different.

In summary, ethnographic studies of the internet and technologies emphasise their deeply social nature. Consequently, the internet can be viewed as inherently social; since, as Hine (2000, p.38) says 'the capabilities of the technology arises, in situated contexts' through social practices. Drawing from the dual perspectives of the internet as both culture and cultural artefact, Hine (2000) shapes her methodology for virtual ethnography, outlining specific considerations and principles. The following sections will detail how this thesis methodology is crafted with a keen focus on these dual aspects.

5.2   Database selection and data sampling

In the initial phase of my methodology, I established the databases (or ethnographic fields) by selecting specific scanlation groups for observation. This selection process was

guided by two primary factors: my pre-existing connections with certain communities and their prominence within the scanlation sphere. To assess their prominence, I considered the order of their websites in Google Search results and the size of their Discord communities. Firstly, I examined the order of their respective websites, where scanlated works are presented, in Google Search results, as this would indicate their visibility and reach within the online landscape; secondly, I evaluated the community size on Discord, seeing it as a reflection of the group's scale and relevance.

For the Google Search assessment, I used keywords related to Turkish scanlation and selected the top ten ranked websites. Then, I checked their content and Discord servers for applicability. When assessing the community size of these ten groups, I observed a parallel between the website order and the community size, with the higher-ranking website corresponding to the largest Discord community. Thus, the highest-ranked group for both categories, referred to as *Group A* in this study, with 1,237 active members, was selected for its visibility and reach. The second group, referred to as *Group B* in this study, although fifth in search results, was chosen due to my existing connection with them.

With such considerations I have opted to observe two communities, the names of which I have chosen to withhold for privacy reasons in this thesis. Limiting the number of communities observed allowed me to prioritise depth and thoroughness in my engagement and observations. I was relatively new to *Group A* having joined as a participant at the outset of my research intentions approximately six months ago, in October 2024; while my involvement with *Group B* began in February 2021, initially out of curiosity and later for academic interest. Throughout my involvement with the groups, my engagement varied in frequency and intensity, ranging from active participation as a scanlator to a more passive member.

Upon selecting the communities, I deliberated on the methods for my observations, opting for two distinct practices: participant observation and

auto-ethnography. These practices both posed certain challenges. First among them was the level of engagement and immersion in the community necessary for my study. In virtual ethnography, the researcher's engagement may occur asynchronously with participant events, necessitating careful consideration of temporal dynamics to preserve the ethnographic significance of interactions. Researchers have the flexibility to engage with events that have already occurred for participants, allowing for a temporal shift in interactions. However, as Hine (2000, p.23) asserts, the ethnographic significance of these interactions diminishes when examined retrospectively: 'The utterances of participants might be preserved, but the experience of participating is not.'

Hine (2000, p.63) underscores 'intensive engagement with mediated interaction' as a principle of virtual ethnography; and particularly she cautions against what she terms "lurking," referring to passive observation or archival studies of communities. She (Hine, 2000, p.23) suggests that active engagement in virtual communities, 'allow[s] for a deeper understanding of meaning creation.' Following this principle, my fieldwork involved active engagement in community activities and rituals, such as games, scanlation tasks, and regular interaction in chat channels, aiming for sustained engagement to 'reduce the puzzlement' about community dynamics and navigate the temporal dislocation inherent in virtual fieldwork (Geertz, 1993, p.16).

Virtual ethnography introduces spatial dislocation as well, since engagement with virtual communities spans various spaces and media, therefore, making immersion in one specific virtual community intermittent and dispersed (Hive, 2000). Although identity construction is always performative and contingent on broader cultural shifts to a degree, virtual spaces particularly offer individuals an arena for identity exploration unrestricted by physical boundaries, partly due to this dispersed immersion. Hine (2000, p.119) notes that in these virtual communities, the opportunity to play with identity is welcomed, and there is no assumption that 'people will be offline whom they say they are online.'

This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the researcher. On one hand, it implies that a 'search for truly authentic knowledge about people or phenomena is doomed to be ultimately irresolvable.' (Hine, 2000, p.49) Some scholars for example, like Sherry Turkle (1995), opt to report on online observations only when they are complemented by face-to-face interactions to ensure the integrity of the ethnographic subject from the effects of online identity play. On the other hand, Hine (2000) emphasises that not all ethnographic inquiries require similar considerations of authenticity and identity. She contends that the ethnographer's focus should be on understanding how informants assess authenticity rather than imposing external expectations of authenticity from them; which entails accepting that "the informant" is a partial performance rather than a whole identity' (Hine, 2000, p.49).

Hine's perspective on authenticity and identity holds particular relevance for studies like this thesis, where identity performance is central to the analysis, reducing the need for a "real-life bias" and potentially even favouring its absence. Furthermore, given that scanlation groups primarily operate and socialise online, and that offline interactions are absent, observation of community interactions could occur solely in virtual spaces. Still in the hereby study, to evaluate specific observations regarding identity aspects of participants — such as age, gender, and sexuality, etc. — self-reported identity elements in role-selection channels of community servers were occasionally utilised as valuable assets for triangulation and cross-checking.

In addition to these, there were also several challenges to consider regarding the practice of auto-ethnography. As Lamerichs (2018, p.50) mentions, when it comes to participatory communities such as fandoms and scanlation groups 'adopting an insider's approach has been positively valued.' While participant observation involves engaging with a community from an external perspective, auto-ethnography centres on internal reflection and personal experiences. Here, one concern to address is the risk of introducing bias through excessive involvement and immersion in the community.

While Lamerichs (2018, p.53) acknowledges the concerns of certain scholars regarding media ethnographers being 'too overwhelmed by their research topic,' she asserts that every qualitative method involves a balance between 'intimacy and distance.' Therefore, she suggests that such concerns of biassed observation can be addressed through self-reflexivity. Openly acknowledging one's insider status encourages reflective analysis, establishes one's role in the research context and their trustworthiness (Lamerichs, 2018, p.53). Moreover, being an insider offers advantages such as avoiding common socialisation and participation errors, being approachable, and preventing participants from feeling uncomfortable or distrustful (Lamerichs, 2018, p.52). Given my previous involvement in scanlation groups, including my knowledge of BL content and acquaintance with some group members, I approached this research with a keen awareness of my insider status. I exercised caution, employing self-reflection and recognizing the constraints inherent in conducting personal ethnography. In addition, I maintained a critical perspective regarding the BL content underpinning these communities, while also remaining equally critical toward generalised opinions or assumptions about their functioning and organisation.

In sampling and documenting the data, I adopted an opportunistic or purposive approach, capturing information both in textual and visual formats through methods such as copy-pasting into archives and taking screenshots, alongside jotting down notes with interpretations. Given the relatively small size of the observed communities and the qualitative nature of the insights gained, I opted not to employ data mining tools or seek broader statistical overviews. Instead, I adhered to Hine's (2000, p.71) suggestion that ethnography unfolds as an exploratory process, 'where each new form of data leads to another,' remaining receptive to emerging leads and diverse forms of data without predetermined plans.

5.3   Approach to fieldwork and analysis

In an ethnographic study, analysis of data is often 'undertaken in an inductive thematic manner.' (Reeves et al., 2008, p.13) Therefore, I have scrutinised the collected data to discern and classify emerging themes and significant issues. In this process, I ensured triangulation of ethnographic findings with other data sources, including observations on the temporal and spatial features of the platform, as well as discursive and media analyses related to the BL content.

I have remained vigilant about practising reflexivity throughout my analyses as well. As mentioned before, reflexive awareness is important given the researcher's close connection to the participants and groups under observation. However, reflexivity is vital, also due to the fact that, as Hine (2000) points out, virtual ethnography is inherently partial. This means that achieving complete descriptions is not possible, and accounts are 'based on ideas of strategic relevance rather than faithful representations of objective realities' (Hine, 2000, p.65).

As mentioned before, in its essence the internet, similar to other technologies, carries a certain 'interpretive flexibility' (Hine, 2000, p.151). Even when a technology appears to have reached its closure for a specific community at a particular moment in time, Hine (2000) argues that this closure persists only if users are able to comprehend and utilise the technology in the appropriate way. This underscores the idea that the analyses presented in this thesis, similar to those that are made for other technologies, offer only a partial understanding of their case. Like any text, my observations about the scanlation groups and network publics are only derivative and cannot claim to represent an absolute truth.

During the course of this research, I immersed myself in the experience of being a young, queer Turkish individual online, recognizing that my own background informed my perspectives and interpretations. Consequently, I aimed for flexibility in analysing the results and considered alternative interpretations. My goal in presenting these findings

was to offer clarity without restricting the interpretive flexibility inherent in the cases and in the method of virtual ethnography.

5.4   Ethical concerns

The concept of reflexivity connects with the broader theme of ethical research practices. To ensure adherence to ethical guidelines and uphold participant privacy and data confidentiality, I dedicated a section to detailing my efforts in this regard. As Lamerich notes, 'online research is very delicate in terms of presence because the researcher is not always present as a researcher or leaves traces as one.' In navigating these challenges, I relied on established rules and guidelines, such as the Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 by the Association of Internet Researchers (2020) and Utrecht University (2022) guidelines on human-subject research.

In light of this guidance, I have conducted my research and have written this thesis with an ongoing dialogue with the communities under observation. Transparency was a key principle throughout the project, achieved through two main practices. Firstly, upon entering a new community for research purposes, I disclosed my identity as a researcher by stating it in my welcome messages, typically posted in the introduction channels where new members provide brief personal information. Secondly, in the community where I had prior interaction and could not post in welcome channels — since these messages are usually posted upon joining the servers — I similarly declared my research intentions through a message posted in general chat channels. In addition to this, I directly messaged the main administrators of the two servers included in my research, outlining the research objectives, main arguments, and privacy measures taken. Both these private messages to the administrators and the public messages for the servers invited participants to voice any concerns they might have about the research.

I have taken utmost care to protect the privacy and confidentiality of vulnerable participants. Still, maintaining participant awareness proved challenging, particularly as some individuals had left the communities by the time of thesis writing. Hence, to ensure

that their privacy is preserved, I decided on the principle that direct quotations from participants may not be included in the research unless I had the explicit consent of the relevant participant. Based on private conversations with the administrators of both groups, at their request, I have also decided to keep the names of the scanlation groups anonymous. Throughout the thesis, I refer to these groups as *Group A* and *Group B* to ensure an additional layer of privacy for their members.

Through methodological precautions and reflexive awareness integrated into the research process, I aimed to provide a study that is informative, honest, inclusive, and humble in its assumptions. My ambition is for this methodological approach to enable a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the selected communities, highlighting the significance of virtual ethnography as an effective tool for studying online spaces and interactions.

6.   Ethnographic Analysis

To reiterate, this ethnographic analysis aims to address the central research question: "To what extent do Turkish scanlation groups operate as networked publics in facilitating the empowerment of young queer existence amidst authoritarian practices?" The analysis begins by examining the organisation of these communities within network structures and their use of technical affordances. Although this initial focus is less reliant on ethnographic observation, understanding the technological field site sets the stage for exploring the social and cultural practices, norms, and power dynamics in subsequent sections. Section 4.2 delves into these aspects through the author's personal membership and ethnographic observations to assess how these groups function as networked publics. This assessment is based on three key features: shared cultural foundations and heterogeneity, participatory practices, and identity formation. By evaluating these features, the analysis explores the degree to which scanlation groups embody the characteristics of networked publics. Building on this, the political potential of these groups as refuges and gathering spaces for queer youth is then examined in section 4.3. Ultimately, this analysis

aims to reveal how the organisational and social structures of scanlation groups serve as networked (counter)publics, offering marginalised youth spaces beyond authoritarian scrutiny to gather, find solidarity, and envision alternative futures. However, it is noted that this potential relies not solely on the technological affordances of the networks, but also on the individuals who shape and operate these public spaces.

6.1   Organization of the communities and the networked features

Before delving into the observation of social and cultural practices, norms, and power dynamics within these spaces, it is essential to examine their organisational dynamics from a structural perspective. As highlighted by Hine (2000), the formation and evolution of these groups are closely tied to the networks they operate within. Understanding how scanlation groups navigate their network features may thus provide insights into their reciprocal influence. Additionally, since, as boyd (2011) notes, publics encompass both physical spaces and the communities within them; investigating the network spaces where scanlation groups operate offers valuable insights into their characterization as publics.

As mentioned, this study examines two scanlation groups: *Group A* and *Group B*[1]. *Group A*, which I joined in around October 2024, holds a prominent position among BL scanlation communities in the Turkish internet sphere. *Group B*, which I was previously affiliated to, although ranking lower in the search results, maintains a similarly populous Discord server with 1052 active members at the time of writing. According to my observations, this discrepancy may stem from *Group A*'s unique ability to directly scanlate material from source languages like English, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean into Turkish, rather than relying on previously translated material. This means that not only *Group B* possesses a larger pool of scanlation volunteers, but also, more significantly, *Group A*

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[1] As mentioned above in the *4.4 Ethical concerns* section, names of these scanlation groups are kept anonymous as per the request of Group admins.

garners more website visits as it publishes material earlier than those groups who have to wait on English scanlations to start their process.
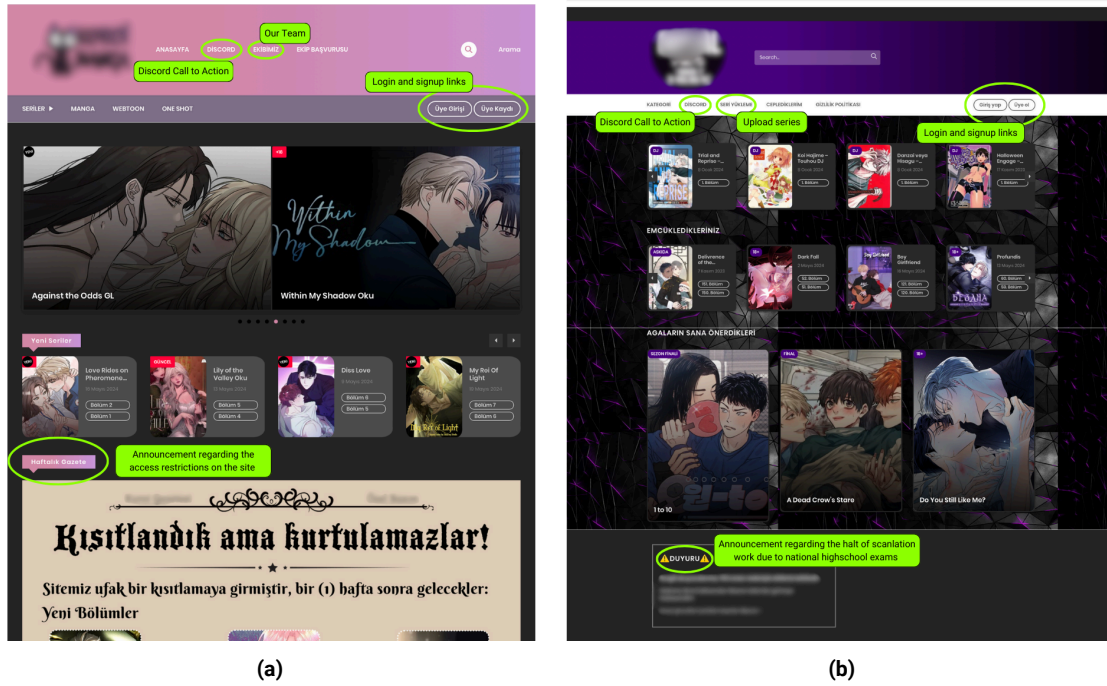

Figure 5
Annotated website homepage views from Group A (a) and Group B (b)

As mentioned, although both groups primarily operate as social groups existing on respective Discord servers, they also maintain dedicated websites where they publish their scanlated works. While Discord servers are the primary focus of ethnographic analysis, it is important to briefly overview these websites, as they often provide the initial point of contact for outsiders encountering these communities. Typically, individuals may come across these websites while searching for specific manga series or during a general browsing session on relevant topics. Upon visiting these websites, visitors are prompted to join the Discord community through a 'Discord' link prominently featured in the navigation menu. This link directs users to the server invitation page, facilitating their entry into the community.

Apart from the Discord call-to-action, both groups' websites share similar features. It is worth mentioning that these websites display advertisements and request user data, suggesting potential profit generation. *Group B*, in particular, also compensates its scanlators with a nominal fee which, again, indicates a possible revenue stream.

Despite these similarities, websites have a few noticeable distinctions. Notably, *Group B*'s website requires membership for series access, likely contributing to its lower search engine ranking. Additionally, *Group B*'s website allows visitors to upload content independently, albeit subject to administrative approval. In contrast, *Group A*'s website does not feature an open upload system but offers unrestricted access to scanlated works. The absence of an open upload system on *Group A*'s website prompts the inclusion of an introduction page for scanlators to showcase their profiles and social links. At the time of writing, within this introduction page in *Group A*'s website, there is also a notification for visitors regarding the access restrictions on the website, a censorship limitation possibly circumvented by *Group B*'s membership-based access policy.

As mentioned, these websites typically serve as the initial point of contact but lack the extensive socialisation capabilities afforded by platforms like Discord. Consequently, individuals seeking to join these communities often follow server invitation links. Upon arrival, they are greeted by the server's community rules, which must be acknowledged before accessing its contents. These rules, also found within dedicated channels, include standard Discord server guidelines, asking members not to spam, not to use multiple mentions,[2] not to promote other servers and similar usual rules. Notably, both servers also maintain a strict policy against pornographic or adult content, despite the prevalence of such material in scanlated works. Servers thus only permit such content on dedicated NSFW channels, which are accessible only after obtaining the requisite role from role-claiming channels. Additionally, users are asked to confirm their legal adult status before accessing these channels.

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[2] Such mentions as "@here" and "@everyone" which may cause mass notifications to be sent out to many members in the server.

In addition to these community rules, both servers leverage the administrative and governance capabilities afforded by the Discord platform. One notable feature in this regard is the use of bots. Bots are utilised persistently and innovatively across both servers. While both employ common bots for moderation, security, and anti-spam measures, they also utilise numerous Discord bots that facilitate socialisation and provide entertainment. These bots automatically send messages to members on various occasions such as first entry to server, level advancement, and even birthdays. Furthermore, they provide opportunities for playful interaction through user-run games like word chains or more complex role-playing games (RPGs), fostering connections among members. The automated and intangible nature of these bots streamlines socialisation in a manner that is particular to networked spaces and distinct from real-life interactions. Consequently, they enable social connections to develop efficiently and equitably, independent of direct human intervention.

Another important aspect enabled by the networked technology that underpins these publics, in this case, is the concept of roles and role claiming. Role structures are a very specific affordance of such social network platforms as Discord and they play a crucial role in cultivating and managing exclusive communities like these scanlation groups. Server roles on Discord dictate user actions including channel access and facilitate channel and member moderation. They establish a structured hierarchy of permissions, assigned either manually by administrators or through automated processes. Additionally, users can claim roles themselves using reaction roles, through reacting to a specific message monitored by a bot, with an emoji. These roles can denote various things such as interests, preferences, or permissions within the server community. Unlike standard functional roles, roles available in role claiming channels within *Group A* and *Group B*, also offer members the opportunity to designate attributes like age, gender, sexuality, pronouns, astrological signs, or personality types based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), among others. There are more specific roles for members to get, in order to participate in certain social activities within the server; such as claiming the role

for their course tracks in highschool[3] or the languages they are learning which would then let them have access to channels where members co-learn.

The co-learning channels are just one example of the various specialised channels found within both *Group A* and *Group B* servers. Utilising the channel structure provided by Discord, these servers offer channels dedicated to a wide range of activities, including general chat, gaming, learning, and sharing creative works, among others. Additionally, there are voice channels available for members to engage in voice chats, although these are not frequently utilised. To enhance the experience of members, channels are organised into categories in both groups, facilitating ease of navigation. Beyond the broader socialisation opportunities offered by Discord's networked technology through server-wide chats, members also have the option to engage in smaller group discussions or one-on-one conversations through direct message chats. These direct messages contribute to the development of interpersonal relationships among members and aid in facilitating workflow, particularly in the assignment of different series to distinct teams of scanlators who collaborate and communicate via Discord direct message chats.

In summary, the organisational dynamics of scanlation groups play a pivotal role in facilitating accessibility and socialisation within networked spaces. By leveraging the affordances of the networked technologies that they are built on, both *Group A* and *Group B* come up with organisational strategies that expedite the formation of publics, characterised by efficient communication, socialisation, and collaborative workflows.

6.2   Understanding scanlation groups as publics

As mentioned earlier, networked publics represent fluid entities encompassing both physical spaces and communities. To understand how scanlation groups A and B manifest as networked publics, it is also crucial to examine the human aspects that define publics. In this thesis, publics are defined as diverse social collectivities united by shared

[3] In the Turkish high school system, the concept of "course tracks" refers to specialised academic streams that students can choose to focus on. These tracks include science-oriented academic streams, humanities-oriented academic streams, and others.

interests (Ito, 2008; McInroy et al., 2021). Networked publics, like traditional publics, provide spaces for individuals to negotiate, construct, and perform their identities (boyd, 2008; Varnelis, 2008). Additionally, they offer democratic opportunities for individuals to participate in cultural value production and reproduction (Varnelis & Friedberg, 2008; Lessig, 2004). To evaluate whether scanlation groups in question align with this definition, I present my ethnographic findings across three key categories: shared cultural foundations and heterogeneity, participatory practices, and identity formation.

6.2.1   Shared cultural foundations and membership heterogeneity

In any participatory community or fandom, a shared passion for a specific media form is the foundation of member cohesion (Ito, 2008). This is also true for the scanlation groups observed. As mentioned, introduction to these communities often happen through messages accompanying scanlated BL media online. Readers may encounter messages at the bottom or the top of the scanlated comic material, consisting of introductions from the relevant scanlator group or their calls for volunteers. According to my observations, unless introduced by a friend or acquaintance, members' involvement with the groups often begins with this encounter. This implies that individuals joining these communities are inherently interested in BL content online and the collective engagement with BL media forms the basis of their participation within these spaces.

This collective engagement is further underscored by the inherent diversity within the group. Through the roles claimed by members and insights gathered from community interactions, it becomes apparent that the community encompasses individuals of various genders, sexualities, ethnic backgrounds (including Turkish, Kurdish, and Laz, among others), and age groups predominantly spanning from 14 to 20 years old. This diversity aligns with the definition of publics as 'heterogeneous social collectivities,' as stated by the Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Amongst this diversity BL media serves as the common ground bringing these individuals together; and

from this common ground further stems a distinct way of speech, behavioural norms, and shared values, shaping the community into a cohesive and functional networked public.

Through observations within both *Group A* and *Group B*, and conversations with members, I found ample opportunities to investigate the distinct characteristics of these communities. Despite a shared interest in BL media, each group has its own unique atmosphere, with noticeable variations in member behaviours, speech patterns, and interpersonal dynamics. This highlights their transformation beyond their initial role as platforms solely existing for BL media engagement and participation, into social entities with different characteristics. These differences may trace back to groups' origins. From the start, for example, *Group B* takes a more casual approach, evidenced by their group name featuring a sexual innuendo, and the informal tone in admin messages and rules. In contrast, *Group A* adopts a more formal stance. Although both communities enforce a no-cursing rule, *Group A* also adheres to it more strictly. Consequently, discourse in *Group B* is characterised by a relaxed vernacular, with innuendos and profanities, leading to emotionally charged and sometimes hard-to-follow conversations.

In both groups, there is a noticeable prevalence of youth vernacular, characterised by memespeak,[4] as well as idioms and metaphors derived from internet culture. This vernacular extends to expressions associated with queer culture in Turkiye, such as the use of "abla," meaning "sister," to refer to individuals regardless of gender or age, a practice commonly found within the queer community in Turkiye. However, more niche queer-specific terms, such as those originating from "lubunca" — a secret Turkish cant and slang used by sex workers and LGBT community in Turkiye — are less prevalent in their language. Here, the observation that this more niche local terminology, typically learned through offline interactions within the queer community, is notably absent in both groups, coupled with the widespread use of non-Turkish terminology, also hints at the possibility

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[4] Memespeak here, refers to the informal language and linguistic conventions used in internet memes and digital communication; including slang, wordplay, and cultural references unique to online communities and other and internet-specific terminology.

that these youth predominantly acquire their knowledge of queer culture from global online media and virtual communities, rather than offline interactions.

In addition to these, members of both groups frequently use terms of endearment and affectionate greetings, especially among those with closer bonds. Newcomers are welcomed warmly and encouraged to join chat discussions, but members show heightened enthusiasm when interacting with familiar individuals. Conversations among established friends often include inside references, ongoing topics, and shared humour. The nature of these interactions varies based on individual relationships, with some exchanges marked by warmth and affection, and others by playfulness and sarcasm. For example, consider a dialogue between *Member H* and *Member A* from *Group B*:

Member A: MY SISTER WELCOME HOW ARE YOUU (sic.)

Member H: I feel welcome my baby, I'm good you?

Member A: I feel much better now that I saw you.[5]

Dialogue 1 translated and paraphrased by the author.

The same member, *Member A*, extends a different greeting to another friend a few days later, adopting a wholly distinct manner of interaction:

Member A: Where are you, sis?

Member Z: I'm here, you bitch.

Member A: Okay, just leave now.

Member Z: Did you not miss me?

Member A: noo......

Member A: maybe a little

Member A: whore

Dialogue 2 translated and paraphrased by the author.

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[5] The literal translation of this would be much more poetic in the lines of 'When I saw you, I bloomed like a flower' which is a way of expressing the joy or happiness one feels upon seeing someone they care about.

My analysis of these communities reveal that the dynamics of the relationships fostered among members differs both in character and substance; and a multitude of diverse relations exists among different individuals, forming a complex net of interconnections. It thus becomes evident that the fabric of these publics is woven not only by their shared rituals and norms but also by this intricate web of interpersonal relationships that bond their members together. These more intimate bonds play a pivotal role in the establishment and cultivation of community cohesion, complementing the shared behaviours and norms that define its collective identity. These bonds and shared interests empower members to navigate the inherent heterogeneity, to reconcile their differences; engaging in occasional debates over contrasting opinions, and seeking intervention from administrators when necessary. Overall, members collaborate to construct a functional public characterised by a diverse membership unified by shared cultural foundations.

6.2.2 Participatory practices and engagement with BL media

Undoubtedly, a significant cultural foundation that unites the members is the practice of scanlation. Therefore, the participatory practices of scanlation warrants a thorough analysis, offering insights into online participatory communities and fandoms at large. More importantly, understanding of how scanlation groups operate holds significance in contextualising them as a form of public, offering arenas for social, cultural, and civic production, similar to traditional public spheres.

As previously mentioned, not all members of the Discord servers actively engage in scanlation practices; some join primarily for social interaction or to stay informed about upcoming scanlations. Those involved in scanlation typically form distinct teams, each tasked with a specific series. These teams typically comprise translators, redactors, and editors. Editors primarily focus on cleaning raw scans by removing original text from raw materials using photo editing tools, while translators work on raw or English-translated material to produce translations on a text document. These translated texts then undergo review and editing by redactors who send the finalised translations to editors. Finally,

editors incorporate the translated text into cleaned scans, again using photo editing tools, and prepare the scanlation media for upload to their respective websites.

Both scanlation groups effectively leverage networked features to streamline their workflow and communication. The execution and dissemination of their work heavily rely on various digital tools facilitated by network technologies. Team members utilise laptops, tablets, and smartphones, employing text processing and photo editing software to carry out their tasks. Additionally, they coordinate team communication through Discord group chats or other messaging platforms like WhatsApp.

Usually, the individual overseeing workflow and assuming a relatively higher position in the team is the editor. Each series usually has multiple translators working concurrently on different chapters, with translators often contributing to more than one series depending on their availability. Editors may also handle multiple series, although this is less common due to the increased responsibility and workload associated with the role. Consequently, scanlation groups tend to have fewer editors compared to translators, making it uncommon for a series to have more than one editor. In my observations, redactors are the least numerous team members. Redaction roles are often taken up by editors and translators; with individuals dedicated solely to redaction typically overseeing multiple series, as the redaction workload is comparatively lighter.

Both *Group A* and *Group B* do not mandate prior experience to join the team and extend support through guidelines and occasional workshops for those interested in scanlation. Notably, *Group A* — in contrast to *Group B* who welcomes members of all ages — imposes an age restriction for team membership. An administrator from *Group B* cites a past incident involving a team member's family objecting to the adult content of scanlated series as the rationale behind this distinction.

Both groups actively seek new volunteers to expand their workforce and audience. While these groups exhibit a dedication to catering to their communities by providing channels for members to propose new scanlation projects, senior members emphasise

that reaching as many readers as possible remains the top priority. To achieve this, both groups strategically allocate their workforce to either expand their scanlated series portfolio or accelerate the scanlation of series with larger audiences; understanding that offering a wide range of popular BL content or achieving rapid releases can increase website traffic and potentially boost advertising revenue. Assessing the profitability of these groups through ethnographic methods is challenging, especially since senior members are either uninformed about or reluctant to disclose exact profits. However, conversations with senior members of *Group B* reveal that while their website generates some profit from ad revenue, most of it is allocated to network expenses such as website hosting and Discord server maintenance. Moreover, it's noteworthy that *Group B*, unlike *Group A*, also compensates its members on a weekly basis, albeit with modest amounts that serve more as incentives for volunteers rather than substantial earnings.

It is, thus, reasonable to assume that the majority of individuals engaged in scanlation work do so voluntarily, driven by a genuine passion and interest. Often, individuals undertake all three roles and produce scanlations single-handedly, out of merely liking a series and desiring to broaden its audience. Moreover, members of scanlation groups frequently engage in discussions about series not only scanlated within their own groups but also those produced by others. The potential for a wider readership and the opportunity to engage in discussions about their favourite series thus serve as significant motivating factors for individuals to participate in scanlation practices.

While neither *Group A* nor *Group B* maintains conversation channels exclusively dedicated to discussions of BL media, most general conversation channels feature extensive discourse on various BL content, including manga, anime, movies, games, and literature. Although much of this discourse is characterised by light-hearted banter, members also engage in more critical examinations of BL media. For instance, in *Group A*, members delve into a discussion regarding the sexual content depicted in a particular BL manga series:

Member B: If you are not going to write [about] sex then what's the meaning of writing yaoi at all?

Member V: I think to read yaoi only for sex is sexualising [*sic. probably means fetishizing*] gay relationships which is very disturbing.

Member T: I agree.

Member V: There are one shots that feature only sex, read those if you'd like.

Member I: If it doesn't have sex in it, it isn't called yaoi, those who do not like to read sex can read shōnen [*sic. means shōnen-ai*].

…

Member B: I think seeing gay sex and immediately thinking of it as fetish is more disturbing. I do not fetishize the sex, but it is unrealistic if they just hold hands the whole series.

Member V: Everything about BL is unrealistic.

Member I: I think it is not disgusting as long as it is not non-con [*means non-consensual sex*].

Member V: But almost all sex in BL is non-con. I've never seen one that isn't.

Member B: There are some. I only read those.

Dialogue 3 translated and paraphrased by the author.

Such instances of critical discourse regarding the context and broader implications of BL media are common within both groups, often extending to discussions on ethics and morality surrounding body and sexuality.

In addition to engaging with BL material critically, both groups maintain dedicated channels for artwork submitted by their members that encourage even further participation. Members contribute drawings of their favourite characters and occasionally create spin-off doujinshi, while talented individuals may even develop their own series, which is received warmly by fellow group members.

6.2.3 Navigating dual identities: identity performance and social support

As previously mentioned, publics serve not only as arenas for social, civic, and cultural production but also as platforms for the formation of social identities. Networked publics, by providing a platform for experimentation and representation, networked publics serve as both facilitators and symbols of empowerment for marginalised communities. Therefore, exploring how identities are performed and presented within scanlation groups offers valuable insights into their nature as publics.

Based on my observations, the scanlation group's social cohesion derives from shared cultural foundations and interpersonal bonds, both of which are nurtured by a communal trust that enables the socialisation in these groups to extend beyond the confines of online interaction to encompass aspects of individuals' offline lives and identities. This implies that members often disclose more personal information than solely their online personas. With few exceptions who prefer to remain anonymous, members commonly share details such as their actual names, genders/sexualities, ages and even the cities they live in the introduction channels. Many members engage in deeper and more exclusive socialisation through direct messaging on platforms like Discord or WhatsApp, where they share additional information and establish closer connections. Moreover, some individuals within these communities already know each other in real life and have introduced each other to scanlation communities.

One interesting observation emerges as many members express a sense of duality, describing themselves as "two-faced." In their offline lives, individuals mention that they often conceal aspects of their character, particularly those related to their sexual interests or curiosity. In contrast, within the groups, they find a sense of comfort and acceptance, as fellow members acknowledge "both sides" of their identity. Some members state that their online friends are "more real" than offline friends. Consequently, they engage in meaningful and intimate conversations, delving into various personal and profound topics within these groups. Their interactions extend beyond mere

entertainment and leisure, encompassing mutual learning and support. Members frequently confide in one another and seek advice, offering empathy across a spectrum of life experiences from casual inquiries about university exam preparation to more profound discussions about sexuality, loss, or mental health struggles.

Such discussions not only bring the real-life identities and experiences of members into online spaces but also help interpret, navigate, and reconcile them. By providing a space with less authoritative scrutiny, whether from parental or governmental figures, these networked publics offer predominantly young queer individuals the opportunity to explore and express their identities more fully than they might in their offline lives.

> *Member N:* I created an anime whatsapp group, guess what happened next... when my parents saw it was something related to LGBT, they kicked everyone out and blocked them ... I'm going to therapy just because of this.
>
> *Member K:* NO WAY.
>
> *Member K:* Ugh, I can't even tell my parents... Last year, they had this weird talk with me asking if I'm lesbian.
>
> *Member N:* Damn it, my family is extremely religious.
>
> *Member E:* If my dad found out I read yaoi, he'd throw my phone away.
>
> *Member R:* Mine are relatively liberal, but they would still be mad about this.
>
> *Member N:* They took my phone away already, my dad threw it against the wall, the screen shattered, and he said, "Now you have two phones," and I got my new phone today.

Dialogue 4 translated and paraphrased by the author.

As illustrated above, scanlation groups are an avenue for members to engage in alternative forms of socialisation facilitated by technology, potentially fostering social connections and a feeling of belonging within a unified social structure, a networked public. This sense of belonging and connectivity can hold a significant value for a young

individual, as it could empower them to occupy a space within a public, potentially more expansively and authentically than what is achievable offline. Therefore, it can be posited that these networked publics not only provide social support networks through interpersonal connections but also foster confidence and empowerment, enabling individuals to navigate the challenges they encounter offline more effectively.

6.3   Political discourse and counterpublic potential

The empowering and affirming social dynamic cultivated within these groups prompts another important question: do these scanlation groups embody the characteristics of a networked *counterpublic*? I'd argue that the answer to this question is nuanced and contingent upon an examination of the political potential and agency exhibited by these communities. Examining political activism and awareness within scanlation groups, thus, becomes crucial in situating them as counterpublics capable of challenging prevailing narratives, contesting hegemonic discourse, and advocating for the interests of marginalised individuals.

Political discourse frequently takes place within both *Group A* and *Group B* in various conversation channels, particularly around significant happenings such as the Pride Month and governmental election period. For instance, during last year's Pride Month, members of Group B engaged in fervent criticism of municipal decisions to revoke pride marches. On top of such conversations on LGBTIQ+ issues, discussions on broader political topics, including Turkiye's political history, ethnicities, and religions, are not uncommon. In both groups, these discussions happen among members who I observed to have diverse political identities with varying ethnic backgrounds and levels of religiosity. Both *Group A* and *Group B* engage in exchanging opinions on political events and statements made by politicians. For instance, a discussion in *Group A*, happened prior to my membership in the server, seems to have revolved around the topic of the headscarf, wherein members discussed notions of modesty associated with it. Notably, divergent

opinions on such topics have been navigated respectfully, without the need for administrative intervention.

While inclusivity and respect are generally prevalent within these communities, I observed deviations from this norm, especially in discussions about ethnicities. In *Group B*, for instance, recurring jokes occasionally border on derogatory remarks directed at Kurdish members, revealing the presence of an underlying prejudice. Despite some Kurds reciprocating these remarks in a lighthearted manner, instances of offence have arisen throughout my membership, prompting interventions from group administrators. These incidents, along with the lack of deeper, more operative discussions on political issues, imply a lack of overarching political consciousness within these spaces. A concerted effort to drive meaningful political agendas centred on intersectionality, social justice, equity, or inclusivity is notably absent. Furthermore, there is a lack of emphasis on advocating for substantive real-world changes, whether through legislative reforms or active civic engagement.

Although these observations may suggest that, at first glance, it may be challenging to categorise scanlation groups as counterpublics based on their current political nature; I find that it is also essential to consider their potential political significance before drawing a definitive conclusion. After all, one might be inclined to be less critical of the absence of organised online activism, especially given the young demographic of these scanlation groups. While these groups may currently lack structured and effective political engagement, they nonetheless play a crucial role as spaces dedicated to marginalised cultures. Particularly, they provide young queer individuals with exposure to queer representation and socialisation. By offering a diversion from hegemonic discussions on gender and sexuality, these groups enable marginalised youth to gather, find solidarity, and envision alternative futures for themselves.

This dual perspective, once again, emphasises the importance of avoiding technological determinism when examining networked publics like scanlation groups.

Turkish scanlation groups exemplify that neither their effectiveness as publics nor their potential as political counterpublics can be solely attributed to their networked features. While certain networked affordances undoubtedly facilitate their function as (counter)publics, it is equally arguable that the networked nature of these communities imposes certain constraints alongside opportunities. For instance, it can be argued that these environments may inadvertently insulate young queer individuals within protective bubbles that allow for escapism, potentially discouraging real-world action. However, it can also be argued that these network technologies enable individuals to form authentic connections that might have been inaccessible in offline settings, thereby creating crucial social support for marginalised individuals. It is crucial to strike a balance between acknowledging the influence of networked technologies while avoiding technological determinism. Ultimately, these scanlation groups highlight that the political potential of networked publics hinge on the decisions and actions of their participants.

7.   Conclusion

In this thesis, I have undertaken an exploration of scanlation groups in Turkiye, with a particular emphasis on their localization of Boys' Love (BL) media. My primary aim was to examine the role of these scanlation groups as technologically enabled publics and understand their significance in providing spaces for queer youth amidst societal constraints and censorship. According to my observations, the engagement with BL media within these groups serves as more than just entertainment; it offers a space for exploring love and sexuality while navigating questions pertaining to identity and the body. The findings of this study highlight that these groups offer far more than shallow socialisation or mere entertainment for their members; in fact they serve as dynamic arenas where marginalised queer youth in Turkiye can actively negotiate their identities, navigate the complexities of identity performances, exchange knowledge, form interpersonal connections, and seek and provide support for the challenges they face in their real lives.

Despite operating within private spaces and lacking transparent governance structures, scanlation groups demonstrate a remarkable ability to self-regulate and maintain cohesion, underscoring their complex and self-nurturing nature. While some may contend that these groups lack overt political engagement or awareness, a closer examination of their organisational and societal dynamics reveals a latent political potential that validates their existence as counterpublics. As Papacharissi (2013, p.77-78) suggests, 'the search for activities that are purely of a political nature runs counter to human impulse.' The intertwining of politics with everyday life is evident in the context of scanlation groups and their engagement with BL media. United by a shared interest in BL media and fostered by self-nurtured collectivity and cohesion, these groups embody networked publics where ideas that are frequently subjected to scrutiny by prevailing socio-political ideologies are granted the freedom to circulate and proliferate. As a result, young queer individuals are afforded the opportunity to encounter and explore alternative imaginaries within these publics.

This thesis has previously examined BL media's ability to offer readers a way to detach from traditional gender norms and the gendered body, consequently creating a discursive space where notions of body and sexuality can be navigated more freely. Addressing criticism of the ostensibly apolitical and escapist nature of BL media, Ria Otomo (2015, p.148) thus reminds that 'forgetting one's gendered body, or floating away from a fixed identity, is essentially a liberating concept and, for that reason, it is the core idea of queer theory.' Similarly, danah boyd (2008, p.44) discusses the liberating potential of the internet, noting that while one should avoid overly technoutopian views, it is widely acknowledged that the internet can 'free people from their corporeal limitations, their social restraints, and the political regimes that regulate them.'

Reflecting on these two observations regarding the internet and BL media, I contend that by combining the transcendental capabilities of network technologies with the inherent transgressive potential of BL media, network-enabled scanlation groups formed around BL media provide a uniquely fertile ground for liberatory social

transformation.Ethnographic observations reveal that, beyond mere escapism, these networked publics enable marginalised individuals to break away from fixed, normative identity structures. They provide a space to experiment with and embody different versions of the self, fostering transgressive perspectives. Such explorations of potentialities, I believe, quietly but steadily catalyse political action through collective imagination.

Moving forward, it is imperative to conduct further ethnographic research to fully grasp the intricacies and potentials of scanlation groups. Interviews with members would provide direct insight into their experiences and perspectives, while comparative studies with groups in different contexts and localities would provide insights on the impact of contextual factors on dynamics observed in this study. Expanding our understanding of scanlation groups and participatory communities holds the promise of harnessing their transformative potential to create safer and more empowering spaces for marginalised youth, both online and offline. By acknowledging and learning from these niche communities, we can enhance our ability to construct inclusive and empowering environments for marginalised youth and cultivate activism and engagement among politically disinterested populations. Ultimately, this study hopes to bring attention to the political potential of similar networked publics and stand as a call to action for researchers, activists, and policymakers to prioritise the needs and voices of marginalised communities in the digital age.

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