



Border Crossings in the Japanese Anime *YURI!!! on ICE*

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Abstract

YURI!!! on ICE (broadcast in Japan between October 5 and December 22, 2016), a Japanese anime featuring male figure skaters from across the world in the International Skating Union Grand Prix Final, has become very popular globally. It even attracted the world's top figure skaters, such as Evgenia Medvedeva, Johnny Weir, and Stéphane Lambiel, who not only recommended the anime on their Twitter accounts but also were involved in various promotional events. The anime's huge success lies in the production team's intentional effort in crossing the boundaries of nationality, sexuality, and virtual reality. In this article, I analyse the ways in which the anime creates something in-between and hardly to be categorised—something that is neither real nor virtual, neither Japanese nor foreign, and neither BL nor gay. The anime serves as a tribute to both real-world competitive figure skating and an ideal Utopia in which all competitors and lovers, whether gay or straight, are treated equally with respect. It also demonstrates a brave and bold attempt to challenge established cultural and social norms by means of hybridisation and boundary crossing/blurring.

Keywords: boys love (BL), Japanese anime, globalisation, Cool Japan, hybridity

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Border Crossings in the Japanese Anime *Yuri!! on ICE*

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Aired on 5 October 2016 in Japan (IMDb, n.d.), *YURI!!! on ICE* is a Japanese anime featuring male figure skaters from around the world competing for the International Skating Union (ISU) Grand Prix of Figure Skating Championship. The main story line is about Japanese skater Yuri Katsuki's revival from a low career towards the Grand Prix Final, assisted by the coaching and affectionate friendship of Russian five-time World Champion Victor Nikiforov. An exceptional case in the Japanese industry of anime, comics, games, and novel (ACGN), the anime is an original production rather than an adaptation of any existing works. It achieved great popularity in Japan during its broadcasting period, as its official Twitter site has attracted around 465,000 followers worldwide since its launch in 2016 (@yurionice_PR on twitter, n.d.).

These fans come from both ACGN and non-ACGN audiences, including quite a few professional figure skaters such as Evgenia Medvedeva, a gold medallist in the ladies' singles at the 2017 World Figure Skating Championships and holder of 'new scoring world records on 13 occasions' (International Skating Union, 2021; Olympic Channel, 2021). Medvedeva, who is both a skating champion and self-professed otaku, 'has expressed her appreciation for the show—especially its more erotic scenes—on her Twitter feed' (Stimson, 2016). As reported by *Honey's Anime* (2016), Medvedeva promoted *YURI!!! on ICE* via her own Twitter account with extreme enthusiasm and even cosplayed Yuri Katsuki, one of the anime's most popular protagonists.

Since the last episode (ep. 12) released on 21 December 2016, there has been no sign of a second-season production of TV anime series (Troup, 2020). Yet fans may still have a semblance of hope from the scene of the ending song featuring the two main characters Victor and Yuri Kat-

suki performing pair skating and a snapshot of their life in St. Petersburg, in addition to the message ‘See You Next Level’ at the very end (Mirar, 2016b). After a year’s wait, the anime’s production company MAPPA Co., LTD. (<http://www.mappa.co.jp/>) announced at an event in 2017 a project of producing the anime film entitled *ICE ADOLESCENCE* (@yurionice_PR, 2018), scheduled for premier in 2020 (Troup, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, the production was delayed with no specific date of release (YURI!!! on ICE the Movie: ICE ADOLESCENCE, n.d.). Later a short teaser PV anime was uploaded to YouTube on 26 November 2020, which ‘was exclusively released at last year [2019]’s theatrical screening of Yuri!!! on ICE [sic] TV series’ (avex pictures, 2020), showing the 17-year-old Victor appearing to skate for Winter Olympics (Troup, 2020; Llewellyn, 2020). The video’s popularity with 2,579,038 views and 290,000 likes (avex pictures, 2020) demonstrate both the anime fans’ support of the forthcoming anime film and the likelihood of the film’s ‘[giving] new life to the fandom’ (Troup, 2020).

In addition to its huge popularity and commercial success, the anime has won numerous awards. According to the report of Anime News Network (Loveridge, 2017), it even won first place in online voting for the 2017 Tokyo Anime Awards’ Anime of the Year, with 41,439 votes. It was also a winner of the 2017 Crunchyroll Anime Awards: Best Couple for Yuri & Victor; Best Opening for ‘History Maker’; Best Ending; Anime of the Year; Best Boy for Yuri Katsuki; Best Anime; and Most Heartwarming Scene for the kiss from Ep.7. In the Tokyo Anime Award 2018 it won Fan Prize in the Television Category as shown in IMDb (2021). Clearly it is a huge achiever in the industry, as Ian Wolf comments, ‘*Yuri!!! On ICE* [sic] is on course to make a clean sweep and win all seven of the categories it was nominated in’ (Wolf, 2017a). Most importantly, the anime was the sole winner of Crunchyroll’s first-ever ‘Anime of the Year Award’ (Fryer, 2017), despite complaints from a proportion of Crunchyroll users about some *YURI!!! on ICE* fans’ controversial voting behaviour (Wolf, 2017b).

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1 Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology

Until the date of submitting this paper (April 21, 2021), there have been around ten English publications on *YURI!!! on ICE*. A majority of them focused on fandom (McInroy and Craig, 2018; Zhang, 2018; Morimoto, 2019; Santos, 2019) and queerness (Laws, 2017; Mehta, 2021). Taking a slightly different approach, Karl Ian U. Cheng Chua invokes scholarly attention to the engagement of South-East Asian fans as a counterargument against the globalist perspective based on Koichi Iwabuchi's transnational theory of 'culturally odorless' (Cheng Chua, 2018, p.29, p.34). Another set of studies examine the cross-cultural elements (esp. gender and sexuality) of the anime, such as Tien-yi Chao's study of imagined Russian identity in the anime (2019).

Given its global popularity, *YURI!!! on ICE* should be viewed as a milestone in Japanese anime history and thus worthy of scholarly attention. Inspired by the above studies, this paper aims to extend Iwabuchi's observation of Japan's transnational soft power based upon culturally odorless products (2004, 2015) to the case study of *YURI!!! on ICE*. I contend that the anime is important in its innovative, 'border-crossing' nature that distinguishes it from other conventional or mainstream Japanese anime. The anime is likely to become a successful model of the effective 'pop-culture diplomacy and the Cool Japan policy', which, according to Iwabuchi's interpretation, involves 'selling more Japanese cultural products and enhancing certain national images' (2015, p.425).

In addition, the analysis in the main body seeks to explore and illustrate the phenomenon of cultural hybridity by looking at the anime's characterisation, settings, and plot. Based upon the notions of cultural hybridity and Cool Japan, this paper will discuss the ways in which *YURI!!! on ICE* crosses three borders of facts vs fiction, nationality, and sexuality. The fundamental research methodology applied for this study was textual and intertextual analysis of various materials ranging from scenes and contents of the anime, news reports, commentary articles, and interviews, to social media (facebook/Reddit/Tumblr/Twitter posts and comments), with a focus on English-language comments and fan-

dom. As I will demonstrate in later pages, such a wide choice of data helps in developing a case study of *YURI!!! on ICE* to decode the intricate border-crossing elements created by the anime and its production team, with a focus on their hybrid nature.

Following this introduction, the findings of this study will be discussed in three sections. In the section ‘Border crossing 1’, I will address the anime’s success in connecting the imaginative world of figure skating with real-life figure skaters in Japan and abroad. Under ‘Border crossing 2’, I will focus on transcultural communication and cultural hybridisation facilitated by *YURI!!! on ICE*’s characterisation, plot, and settings. Under ‘Border crossing 3’, I will elaborate on the blurring gender/sex boundaries presented by the anime, especially those among homosociality, homosexuality, and boys love (BL)/bromances. In so doing, the study aims to contribute to the latest scholarship on Japanese anime and cultural studies by stimulating further exchange and communication on the anime’s impact in terms of globalisation and glocalisation.

2 Border crossing 1: imaginary world vs. real world

Non-anime fans tend to have two common misconceptions about anime: anime is only for otaku or fans, and anime is unrealistic and based on wild imagination and alternative universes, similar to all products in otaku culture (e.g. manga, games, light novels). Yet, as I will demonstrate in this section, *YURI!!! on ICE* challenges these two misconceptions by crossing and blurring the boundary in three aspects: characterisation, glocalization, and connection between the imaginary world in the anime and the real world of figure skating.

Unlike a majority of Japanese anime, the characters in *YURI!!! on ICE* are based on actual celebrity figure skaters. As the anime’s author Mitsurō Kubo points out in an interview (Dunham, 2016), ‘Real skaters also have an amazing sensuality, so we’d really like to depict a fresh, pure sensuality that will not lose to bishōjo anime.’ Additionally, she is knowledgeable of ISU events and international figure skaters. Her

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purpose for creating the anime is ‘to cheer for the entire skating world. I want to channel those feelings into *Yuri!!! on ICE* [sic] and make sure that it reaches as many people as possible’ (Dunham, 2016). Indeed, a quick look at the images and snapshots of the main characters (especially those in the figure skating world) reminds the audience of their real-world counterparts —Evgeni Viktorovich Plushenko, Stéphane Lambiel, Johnny Weir, Yulia Vyacheslavovna Lipnitskaya (prototype for Yuri Plisetsky in *YURI!!! on ICE*), and Daisuke Takahashi, to name just a few. Some other real-life figure skaters and sports announcers even appear as special guest characters in *YURI!!! on ICE*, such as Taihei Katō, the real-life announcer who played the role of the fictional announcer Hisashi Morooka in the anime (Inyxception Enterprises, n.d.). In episode 12, skaters Lambiel and Nobunari Oda also featured as commentators in episode 12 (Mirar, 2016a). Fans also pointed out in discussion threads that a snapshot in the same episode shows a Yuzuru Hanyū look-alike appearing on the cover of the *Ice Jewels* magazine (a Japanese magazine on figure skating, established in 2015) held by JJ, the fictional Canadian figure skater in the anime (LetTheHandsTouch2k18, 2016).

Interestingly, many of the real-life skaters showed excitement and enthusiasm about being the ‘prototype’ for the anime’s characters. This is particularly obvious in the case of Weir and Lambiel, who frequently tweeted and retweeted about *YURI!!! on ICE*. According to an interview with Johnny Weir, one of the journalists told Weir that it was Sayo Yamamoto, the director of the anime, who ‘credited you for capturing their interest in figure skating with your performance of Poker Face, and you’ve clearly been an inspiration to the story itself’ (Exorcising Emily, 2016). Even Victor’s costume (including the flower crown he wears) in his junior competition was modelled on Weir’s skating costume and accessories for the 2006 and 2010 Olympics respectively (Exorcising Emily, 2016). Here Weir’s response not only proves the parallels between his skating performance and the anime’s settings, but also expresses a clear sense of joy and honour about such a border crossing exchange:

There are so many parallels that I’ve noticed while watching

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the show. I changed coaches and competed in Cup of China and Cup of Russia when *I was 23 and trying to reinvigorate my career like Yuri-kun. My junior world championship victory was in Sofia, Bulgaria like Viktor.* I even was one of the first skaters who traveled with my own special tissue box starring my favorite cartoon, Cheburashka. Of course, the homage to my Swan costume from Torino and my rose crown in Vancouver from one of my dearest fans, were very special moments in my life and I'm so happy to see them show up now in a show I love.

I am very honored that the production team has taken some inspiration not just from me, but from the skating world. There are so many details that pop up that wouldn't mean anything to a casual skating fan, but to us as skaters who actually lived it, you can see so much respect for our world and what we do through the animes and story lines.

(Emily, 2016; my emphasis)

If character design based on and endorsed by real-life celebrities is common in Japanese ACGN, then the production team crossed the borderline between virtuality and reality by introducing the anime into official ISU competitions and events. Early in the ISU World Team Trophy in Tokyo from April 20 to 23 in 2017, 'this year's event is featuring a *Yuri!!! On ICE* [sic] collaboration with sales of goods kits showcasing a visual with the anime's skaters having a bit too much fun' (Green, 2017). As shown in the anime's PR Tweet, the poster features main characters of the anime gathering and competing for the trophy (@yurionice_PR, 2017). Later the anime's production team launched the same collaboration again for the 2019 ISU World Team Trophy; the official announcement on the anime's website shows a new poster featuring the anime's main characters, along with photos of Makkachin (Victor's pet poodle) acting as a mascot at the ice rink (YURI!!! on ICE Project, 2019). These promotional campaigns can be seen as a strong case of soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye in his most cited book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*:

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A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them.

(Nye, 2004, p. 5)

Many follow-up tweets of the ISU-*YURI!!! on ICE* collaboration present skaters of various nationalities posing joyfully in front of the above-mentioned special poster, celebrating the 2017 World Team Trophy in both the real-world and along with the anime characters in their own parallel universe of the event. This indicates a win-win situation: the anime was introduced to figure skaters (most of whom were not anime fans), while the anime fans who were not familiar with figure skating were attracted to the sport and relevant events. By doing so, both MAPPA the anime company and the Japan Skating Federation demonstrated immense soft power of ‘Cool Japan’ (Watson, 2016; Hashimoto, 2018) to the world.

Further implementation of *YURI!!! on ICE* and its products occurred after the ISU-*YURI!!! on ICE* collaboration. The most significant example was Japanese skaters Miu Suzuki and Ryuichi Kihara using ‘Yuri on ICE’, the anime’s theme music representing the main character Yuri Katsuki, for their Pairs SP (short programme) performances at Skate Detroit in 2017 and 2017 NHK Trophy (Loveridge, 2017; @fencer-x, 2017). Later in the Pyeong Chang 2018 Winter Olympics, they ‘delighted anime fans by performing a figure skating routine set to music from the popular Yuri on ICE [sic] animated series’ (Gerken, 2018). The video footage of the pair’s performance has attracted 2,637,838 views, 170,000 likes, and 4,533 comments since its release on 20 August 2018, as many viewers expressed amazement about such a ground-breaking arrangement (Olympic, 2018). According to the news report, the footage ‘was widely shared on social media as users instantly recognised the accompanying music’ (Gerken, 2018). The two skaters of Team Japan and

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the *YURI!!! on ICE* production team succeeded in attracting the world's attention, even though it had been more than a year since the end of the anime in December 2016.

Despite the production team's active engagement with ISU and the figure skating circle, *YURI!!! on ICE*'s characters are not merely imitations or parodies of real-life figure skaters. Rather, the anime's characterisation is a mixture of iconic features attributed to both the real world and the anime world. As A. S. Lu (2009, p. 185) points out: "[S]ome of anime's international success may be due to the perceived racial ambiguity of its characters. Such ambiguous features may have been internalized into anime character design". Similar examples can also be seen in *YURI!!! on ICE*, as its characterisation is a mixture of various international celebrities. According to the production team, for instance, the characterisation of the hero Yuri Katsuki is based on former Japanese figure skaters Tatsuki Machida and Daisuke Takahashi, while many *YURI!!! on ICE* fans attribute Yuri to the extremely popular Japanese figure skater Yuzuru Hanyū because of his appearance and 'moe' demeanour (cute nature), as well as because 'Yūri's short program *Eros* matches Japanese figure skater Yuzuru Hanyū [sic] 2014 Sochi Olympic Short Program' (Hanashiro, 2016). The other two central characters, Yuri Plisetsky and Victor Nikiforov, are also based on real-life figure skaters. Mitsurō Kubo has openly admitted that Yuri Plisetsky's character design was based on the Russian former skater Julia Lipnitskaia; on the other hand, Victor shares significant similarities with the legend Russian skater Evgeni Plushenko, aka 'The King of Ice' (Ellingworth, 2014), even though the production team has never acknowledged these parallels until now (Chao, 2019, pp. 66–67). Despite the debates on the exact origin of *YURI!!! on ICE*'s characters, it is undeniable that their connection with real-world figure skaters helps attract potential audience members with both otaku and non-otaku backgrounds. The anime's popularity demonstrates successful and skillful maneuvers of virtual and realistic resources in creating characters of various nationalities and personality traits.

YURI!!! on ICE's successful strategy is not limited to incorporating

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elements in the real world into anime (based on a fantasized world of figure skating). Scholars such as Otto F. von Feigenblatt (2010) agree that the fusion of Japanese and Western cultural icons is pervasive in Japanese otaku products. In this case, one may find such a mosaic hybridization of cultural memes pervasive in *YURI!!! on ICE*; the characters are multinational, yet their foreignness is mixed with a trace of Japanese flavor, either from the mentality of real Japanese people or from the virtual elements of Japanese anime.

In *YURI!!! on ICE*, one of the representations of Japanese otaku culture is the dramatic or even slightly childish variation of the characters inserted (abruptly or timely) into the main plot. According to the conventions of Japanese anime, such an insertion or distortion typically functions as a kind of comic release, either to ease the tension of the main storyline or simply to entertain the audience.

Two examples are provided here. First, in episode 1 (2:33), a melancholic scene with Yuri Katsuki is immediately followed by his *chibi* figure popping up to introduce himself (@serifxt, 2017). According to Mami Suzuki's definition, *chibi* in Japanese means 'small' or 'short' (2016); '[i]t's usually applied to objects, animals, or people (i.e. a short person or a small child)' (2016). The sudden switch from the normal characterisation to the *chibi* figures may look abrupt and ridiculous to viewers of American animation. However, this is a very common visual device to Japanese anime fans, sometimes even becoming formulaic. Another use of this parody-like *chibi* figure is in episode 10, 15:36 (Yamamoto, 2017c), when Yuri Katsuki mentions that he did not talk to Victor at last year's banquet (which is completely inaccurate and all guests recall Yuri being too drunk that night to remember talking and even dancing with Victor). Notably, the next scene shows Victor in a comically exaggerated facial expression, with beer spitting from his mouth (Baker-Whitelaw, 2021). The above examples do not seem to abate the dramatic tension of the scenes, but rather add more charm to the characters. These visual representations in *YURI!!! on ICE* have two important meanings. First, they serve as a bridge between the 'two-dimensional' otaku world and the 'three-dimensional' world in our daily life, creating a 'third space'

in-between. Second, they more or less reveal the characters' mentality to the audience—such disclosures actually contribute to their charisma rather than damage it.

3 Border crossing 2: multiple nationalities and globalization

The second border crossing is effectuated in *YURI!!! on ICE*'s cross-national characterisation and scenes featuring cross-cultural communication. Transnational cultural exchanges are also significant in the visual display of landscape and local cultures in the anime. Almost every episode of the anime involves cross-cultural and foreign elements, as the story involves a foreigner (Victor)'s life in a Japanese hot springs resort as well as international figure skating events located in various countries. While Victor and Yuri Plisetsky, the two foreign visitors to Japan, enjoy Japanese katsudon (i.e. fried pork fillet with egg onion sauce, served with steamed rice) and hot springs, Yuri Katsuki is also fascinated by foreign foods and attractions during his Grand Prix tournament around the world. More importantly, these 'exotic' Japanese and foreign items not purely come from the production team's imagination; rather, they represent real locations and items. For instance, *YURI!!! on ICE* fans have been working painstakingly to track down the original source of each landmark and item in the anime, including Yuri's hometown Hasetsu (which is based on Karatsu and Saga in Kyushu, Japan (Donko, 2016), Utopia Katsuki (the hot springs hotel run by Yuri's family), Barcelona Princess Hotel (accommodation for Grand Prix competitors), the hot pot restaurant in Beijing (appearing in episode 7, when Yuri competes for Grand Prix of China), Victor's flat in St. Petersburg, and even the lip balm applied by Victor to Yuri Katsuki's lips in episode 5 (which turns out to be similar to a CHANEL product).

The above phenomenon reminds one of studies on the issue of Japanese ACGN products' transnational features and impacts, from Iwabuchi's question about 'How "Japanese" is Pokémon?' (2004) to Fabienne Darling-Wolf's investigation into the questionable national identity of Miyazaki's *Heidi* (2016). Similarly, *YURI!!! on ICE* encompasses cultural hybridity in both characterisation and plot. As mentioned in the

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section ‘Border crossing 1’, the anime’s characters are mainly international figure skaters. These skaters, like their real-world counterparts, live a life full of globalization and cross-culturalism. Many of them train outside of their home countries and travel abroad frequently to compete in various events. For example, Yuri Katsuki used to reside in Detroit, USA during his four-year training period and returns to Japan after discontinuing the contract with his former coach. This may remind viewers of Yuzuru Hanyū, who has been coached by Brian Orser in Toronto, Canada since 2012, along with Spanish medalist Javier Fernández (Hersh, 2014). In addition, with the exception of very short footage of Lambiel speaking French, *YURI!!! on ICE* is dubbed in Japanese (or in English in the official English version for a global English-speaking audience) throughout the 12 episodes. However, it is likely that the skaters would actually speak (non-native) English to each other most of the time, especially when Victor is coaching Yuri Katsuki. A scene from episode 6 illustrates such inconsistency: at the end of the episode, Yuri announces his determination to win the Grand Prix Final gold medal, and acknowledges the love of his family and friends, which he has just recently recognized. At this time, Yuri’s family and friends who are watching on television are touched by his words; however, Victor, who seems bewildered and unable to understand the Japanese announcement made by Yuri on television, only grumbles to himself that he is going to burn Yuri’s ugly necktie.

Although language barriers and cultural shock are not issues addressed by *YURI!!! on ICE*, cross-cultural communication contributes to the depth of its plot. An example of this is the scene of exchanging rings in episode 10, in which Yuri Katsuki places the golden ring—which he claims is a lucky charm based on his success at the Grand Prix Final—on Victor’s right ring finger (Yamamoto, 2017c, 13:39–14:40). The ring exchange scene soon becomes one of the anime’s signature visual display of male/male romantic relationship, even though the anime’s author Kubo explained in an interview that the pair of rings is a common sort of “omamori,” protective charms’, worn by many skaters, rather than wedding rings: ‘More than implicating something like a wedding, *it’s similar to members of the same circle deciding to have a matching item*’

(toraonice, 2017a). Yet still, after the episode aired, a number of *YURI!!! on ICE* fans discovered that in Russia and Eastern Orthodox countries, people actually wear wedding rings on their right ring finger (toraonice, 2017b; weeb-collector, 2017). Such a discovery soon aroused enthusiastic discussions online about whether or not Victor would regard the ring as a wedding ring (see an example at u/Holo_of_Yoitsu, 2016). Although the production team has not yet released any formal statements about this, the scene demonstrates an idealistic approach to cross-cultural communication, namely empathy and understanding with an open mind. In other words, Victor may wonder why Yuri Katsuki places the ring on his ‘wedding ring’ finger, but he chooses to be open-minded and accept it as symbol of Yuri’s commitment to their relationship.

In addition to plot and characterisation, even the music used was international. This is obvious in the opening song ‘The History Maker’, which features English lyrics performed by Dean Fujioka, an actor-singer who was born in Japan, studying in USA, then residing in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Indonesia, before returning to Japan. The skating music used also represents an extensive array of music of various genres and languages (most are in English and Western style), in which one can hardly sense any ‘Japan-ness’. This not only is indicative of globalization in real-life figure skating, which is still dominated by Western countries, but also corresponds with Iwabuchi’s notion of ‘culturally odorless’ Japanese products (2002, p. 24). Judged by its popularity with fans around the world, *YURI!!! on ICE* was successful in creating a highly globalized setting that caters to the needs of a worldwide audience.

Despite the positive presentation of globalization, it is still necessary to be aware of the hidden yet pervasive traces of Japanese elements. The icon of ‘Japan-ness’ is the consistent reoccurrence of katsudon, a Japanese household meal usually eaten to celebrate ‘victory’, such as passing an exam or winning a game, for ‘the word “katsu” is pronounced the same as the Japanese verb for being victorious or to win’ (Yasuka, 2012). In the anime, katsudon first appears as Yuri Katsuki’s favorite food, while later it becomes part of Yuri’s identity (as he is nicknamed by Yuri Plisetsky as ‘Katsudon’) and charisma that deeply attracts Victor.

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The iconised image of katsudon reminds one of many cultural products (such as Pokémon) created and displayed as a campaign of Japan's soft power, namely the image of 'Cool Japan' (Iwabuchi 2002, 2004) and, in my view, Cute Japan. The marketing of 'Cool Japan' is not limited to ACGN (i.e. 2-dimensional world), but extended to the real 3-dimensional world. The most notable case in recent time is the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wearing a red Super Mario hat to represent Japan's national identity at the closing ceremony of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro (Watson 2016; Grau 2019). Although no data have been found to prove that the anime creator MAPPA is funded or requested by the Japanese government to implement 'Cool Japan' in its anime works, there are still signs of maneuvering Japan's positive image and values. For instance, the iconisation of Yuri-katsudon is part of the cultural export of 'Cool/Cute Japan', corresponding with the Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Council's 2015 proposal for attracting foreigners' interest in 'Japan's goodness' (Hashimoto, 2018, pp. 52-53).

Returning to the visual signs of border crossing transculturalism in *YURI!!! on ICE*, the most cogent example is the 'katsudon pirozhki', appearing in episode 9 of the anime. As Chao (2019, p. 74) points out, this hybrid food is consistent with the transcultural feature of the anime. Additionally, the characters, especially Victor, Yuri the Japanese, and Yuri the Russian, visit each other's home country to experience new cultures with an open mind, and then to create a new cross-cultural identity, which is likely common to many real-life figure skaters active in international events. From the audience's perspective, all of these constructs—friendships among skaters from different countries and a medley of exotic foreign foods and attractions—create a hub of cultural exchanges, allowing the characters and audience to cross the borders of nationality and unite in the 'Utopia' created by the anime.

4 Border crossing 3: (homo-) sexuality

The third border crossing lies in the ways in which *YURI!!! on ICE* presents homosociality and homosexuality. The anime has attracted

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both heterosexual and homosexual audiences, as well as both fans and non-fans of boys love (BL), a subgenre in Japanese ACGN, featuring romantic and/or erotic relationships between men. Similar to the subculture of slash, BL fans enjoy the practice of ‘shipping,’ namely highlighting the romantic or erotic bond between two male characters in BL, non-BL, or queerbaiting texts and media, seeing the shipped characters as a couple. As Leandra Laws (2017, p. 6) observes, even though the anime is not categorised as BL, it can be regarded as a nuanced case of ‘The Evolution of Boys’ Love’ —it does contain BL elements (such as the soulmate-like relationship between Victor and Yuri Katsuki) while some major BL features are missing, such as the *seme/uke* dichotomy (8), in which *seme* usually takes the sex role of top while *uke* the bottom. Sameera Mehta also remarks on the anime’s hybridisation of gender and sexuality:

YOI ruptures both modes of reading homosexual romance; neither are the couple simply stand-ins for the transference of female sexuality, nor do they play out dynamics that defines common perception of homosexual relationships. This is where the interplay of the feminine-masculine dialectic serves to synthesise either/or readings and present a nuanced take on sexuality.

Sameera Mehta (2021, p. 69)

Under such a backdrop, I would like to extend the issue of hybridity by further complicating the anime’s ‘in-between’ nature. The portrayal of male/male relationship in *YURI!!! on ICE* can be interpreted in two ways: one is that the anime highlights the homosexual and homosocial elements of figure skating; the other is that it may deliberately incorporate elements of male friendship or bromance (even to the extent of queerbaiting, such as the scenes discussed later in this section) to attract BL fans (even though the anime is not labelled as BL) or to promote LGBTQ rights.

In the real world, figure skating, in particular male figure skaters, are often perceived as homosexual. According to Abigail Jones (2014), the effeminate nature and aesthetics of figure skating make it prone to ho-

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mophobia and fantasies of homosexuality: ‘The common assumption that male figure skaters are gay—and the latent and often blatant hostility behind it—is the sport’s deep and dirty secret. It colors the attitudes and actions of skaters, coaches, judges, officials and even the fans.’ However, as common in sports, homosexuality is still taboo in figure skating, with very few athletes coming out. One example is Brian Orser (Yuzuru Hanyū’s Canadian coach and former Canadian champion), whose homosexuality was disclosed involuntarily in 1998, which resulted in great controversy (Jones, 2014). More recently, Johnny Weir is arguably the most famous figure skater who announced his homosexuality, while other skaters have remained silent about their sexuality, leaving it subject to gossip, tabloid fodder, and speculation.

Compared with the homophobic world of real-life figure skating, the world in *YURI!!! on ICE* is overly gay-friendly, containing a significant proportion of bromance elements, even to the extent of BL. In recent years, there have been an increasing number of Japanese sports-themed ACG works with special reference to homosocial or bromantic/BL, such as *Kuroko’s Basketball*, *Free!!*, and *Haikyu!!* (the word means ‘volleyball’ in Japanese). This is based on a long moralistic tradition in Japanese ACG culture, in which teamwork and friendship are celebrated as keys to success (Brent Allison, 2017, pp. 21–22). Even though the above works have nothing to do with gay love, their emphasis of male/male friendship has inspired fans to create a large amount of BL fan works that fantasise and even eroticise same-sex friendships. *YURI!!! on ICE* follows the same bromantic pattern, while it moves further from the conventional settings of male sports manga/anime by adding BL elements to the plot and dialogue. As I will elaborate shortly, the anime emphasises the bond between Victor and Yuri Katsuki, as well as their quest for the true meaning of love in their lives.

Apart from the cute *chibi* figures referenced earlier, visual cues suggesting homoeroticism appear very often in the intervals of the main story as well; some of them even appear to be deliberately set as BL. The first homoerotic (BL) scene appears in episode 2 (5:22), in which Victor, who has just arrived in Japan, approaches Yuri Katsuki using a

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highly erotic gesture, with an equally erotic line: ‘Let’s build some trust in our relationship’ (Yamamoto, 2017a). The scene shows Victor holding Yuri’s chin, in an attempt to get to know Yuri better. This is a typical visual cue of seduction in BL, even though the plot does not suggest any sexual desire from either party. As the plot progresses, more intimate physical actions occur, such as touches and hugs between the two central characters as their relationship becomes more intimate. In episode 4 (4:33), for example, Victor touches Yuri’s lips, while stating rather erotically, ‘No one in the whole wide world knows your eros, Yuri’ (Yamamoto, 2017b). Here the foreign word of エロス (Eros) is mentioned in the anime. Defined by Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), Eros means both the Greek God of Love and ‘sexual love or desire’ (usually in small letters for this meaning). Against such a backdrop, it was not surprising to see a huge explosion of *YURI!!! on ICE* fan works (shipping Victor and Yuri Katsuki as a couple) being produced just after the anime’s release in October 2016.

Despite no explicit disclosure of homosexuality, the anime’s later episodes suggest an obvious development of deep affection—at least as soul mates, if not homosexual love—between Victor and Yuri Katsuki. It reaches a climax with the symbolic display of the ring exchange in episode 10 (Yamamoto, 2017c). Interestingly, when Yuri Katsuki’s friend Pichit Chulanont incorrectly announces the ‘marriage’ between Yuri and Victor, the crowd in the restaurant simply give the ‘couple’ a round of applause to show their support. Compared with the secretive (and perhaps stigmatized) homosexuality in real-life figure skating, in *YURI!!! on ICE*, the whole world appears to be open-minded and even positive about homosexuality, which seems too good to be true. In fact, according to the author Mitsurō Kubo, the anime is a story of love instead of a love story ‘in the narrow sense of a “love affair,” or “carnal love’ (Bridges and Chapman, 2017). Accordingly, the world in the anime welcomes all kinds of love, regardless of sexuality—here Yuri Katsuki, Victor, Yuri Plisetsky, other skaters, along with their friends and family, all endeavor to achieve love and life.

Even though the production team has dismissed connections with same-

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sex romance and eroticism, in many ways *YURI!!! on ICE* still emphasises gay-friendliness, which can be seen in the ‘official shipping’ (namely a pair of male characters promoted, or at least presented, as a couple by the production team, either explicitly or inexplicitly) in the anime and its official merchandise.¹ From posters and magazines to toys, we see at least two major ships (mainly Victor and Yuri Katsuki, plus Yuri Plisetsky and the Kazakhstani skater Otabek Altin) posing together like close male friends or even couples. This has been repeated for many times, even after the last episode in December 2016. While other sports-themed Japanese ACGN works popular in BL/*Yaoi* fandom (such as *Kuroko’s Basketball* and *Free!!*) tend to minimize scenes with homosexuality or same-sex affection, *YURI!!! on ICE* consists of numerous scenes that are more explicit about male/male relationships without actually disclosing the characters’ sexuality. Despite occasional criticism of queerbaiting (perhaps as a marketing device to attract BL fans), the overall positive reception from the audience, award judges, and cultural critics, shows the anime’s proactive approach to homosexuality, while simultaneously avoiding being labelled as BL. It may well serve as an effective strategy to challenge the existing categories of Japanese ACGN, by crossing the borders between gay, BL, and straight.²

5. Conclusion

This article examined *YURI!!! on ICE* as an innovative and extraordinary case in the Japanese anime industry. The above findings and discussions, with a focus on English media, English-speaking communities, and English resources, affirmed the anime’s success in crossing and blurring the borders of virtual reality, nationality, and sexuality. Despite the limitation of scope and data, this study is hoped to contribute to the existing scholarship of Japanese anime and BL by exploring

1 See the following webpages for a few examples (the two widely acknowledged ‘official shippings’ are Victor and Yuri Katsuki, along with Otabek and Yuri Plisetsky) in the official *Yuri!! on ICE* spinoffs: https://twitter.com/solty_tsubuyaki/status/998761741524725760; https://twitter.com/MAPPA_Info/status/1058554624066576385; <https://twitter.com/tvusagi5/status/1016930130961129472>; the most obvious one is the following official artwork showing Victor and Yuri K as if they are at their own wedding: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/466192998918758707>

2 I thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

the anime's hybrid and cross-cultural nature, as well as its attempt to move beyond the existing categories and conventions. The core spirit of *YURI!!! on ICE*, or at least the aspiration of the production team, can be summarised by the title and the lyrics of its opening song, 'History Maker' (avex pictures, 2016), namely breaking through the established norms. This applies particularly to the anime's characters, who strive to unsettle the boundaries of nationality, culture, and gender/sex.

YURI!!! on ICE challenges and subverts existing patterns and boundaries. This echoes the remarks made by Mitsurō Kubo in an interview in September 2016: 'I would like to create a work in which you'll come to love all three characters, and enjoy the figure skating.... I threw all of my strength into this work as a staff member in these two years' (Comic Natale, 2016). Director Sayo Yamamoto followed up by stating, 'I approached figure skating as well as anime with my sincere feelings. So I am doing my best to create something that will satisfy fans of both sides' (Comic Natale, 2016). This facilitates an in-between zone of ambiguity and hybridity, allowing different and even opposing identities to mingle, mutate, and thrive. It is also hoped that future studies will examine further the anime's deployment of cross-cultural, cross-genre, and cross-gender elements, as well as the extent to which these features are perceived by audience in Japan and non-English-speaking regions.

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