
Portrayal of Love and Social Issues of LGBTQIA+ in Pinoy Boys' Love (BL) Series

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Abstract: Drama as a performing art has changed dramatically over the years in terms of production quality, story, and platform it is performed. Recently, it has diversified from tackling societal issues such as same-sex relationships. The study analyzed how to love and social issues are portrayed in selected Pinoy Boys' Love (BL) series by conducting a content analysis. The findings revealed Pinoy BL series had proven its capacity to depict love in non-romantic situations inclusively and concluded that expressing love entails more than an emotion. It also comprises expressing it through language, in which words can make individuals feel loved because of the encouragement and affirmation they get. It has also been seen that love also comprises movements in which people who cannot openly express their love for another person through words may still do so by doing kind and pleasant gestures and deeds for them. Love may also develop through time; it has been demonstrated in the BL series that spending time together can help individuals reconnect with their lovers, friends, and families and rekindle desire in people who have lost the spark in their relationship.

The potential of the BL series to show the hardships that LGBT people had historically and continue to face in society was also noted, including personal-social and political-social concerns that affect them, proving that the BL series is intended to depict LGBTQIA+ themes seriously and realistically.

Keywords: *Drama Series, BL Series, LGBTQIA+, Love, Social Issues.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, the media has adapted to a more accepted style of portraying boys' Love or BL stories, allowing gays to be whom they are, acting as they like, and with drama that even heterosexuals can relate to. It does not dismiss gender issues; instead, it sees them as who they are. Since the popularity of some of Thailand's most well-known and highest-rated dramas has reached our shores, the number of BL fans in the Philippines has risen dramatically.

BL is a distinct genre developed in Japan and is properly known as *yaoi*. Many BL books have been successfully adapted into TV series by Taiwanese and especially Thai studios in recent years, including the iconic SOTUS, Dark Blue Kiss, Theory of Love, Accidental Love (a.k.a. Love by Chance), TharnType, and 2gether (Carreon, 2020).

The extraordinary popularity of BL in Japan and Thailand has recently inspired Filipino creators, who wish to duplicate the success for the Philippine audience. People would never have guessed that a love tale between two boys could be shown on the big screen just a few years ago. It used to be a subject reserved for indie or experimental films, but as BL's popularity has grown in the region, these stories have sprouted. However, some members of the LGBTQ+ community, on the other hand, criticize some foreign and Pinoy BL series because of inaccurate portrayals of their community. They claim that some BL series focuses too much on romantic fantasy, obscuring more serious LGBTQ+ issues and challenges.

The study conducted a content analysis to identify how love and social issues are portrayed in selected Pinoy Boys' Love series. The study sought to disprove the notion that the genre tends to just portray romantic cliches and unrealistic LGBTQIA tropes.

Research Gaps

Today, Pinoy BL episodes can be seen on YouTube and other streaming sites, and both Filipino and international fans are gushing about them. These have been far more realistic and relevant to our current circumstances. There is a limited study on this topic, and to address this gap, given its rising popularity, this paper aims to study BL phenomena to discuss and expound it further and to disprove such claims that the genre merely concentrates on romantic plotlines. It is interesting to look into how the Filipino-produced BL series portrayed love in different relationships, given that the genre is assumed to always focus on the traditional romantic cliches in foreign BL Series. This study also examined how societal issues are depicted in the BL series that purports to be just about love portrayal. In order to better understand how their stories are put together and to contribute to the paucity of literature and studies on subjects like the representation of love in various relationships and the struggles LGBTQIA+ people face in society; it is crucial to conduct a thorough content analysis of the Pinoy BL series.

Research Problem

Specifically, the study answered the following research questions:

1. How is love portrayed in the Pinoy BL series in terms of:
 - a. language;
 - b. movements; and
 - c. time?
1. What are the issues depicted in the Pinoy BL series in terms of:
 - a. personal-social issues; and
 - b. social-political issues?

Conceptual Framework

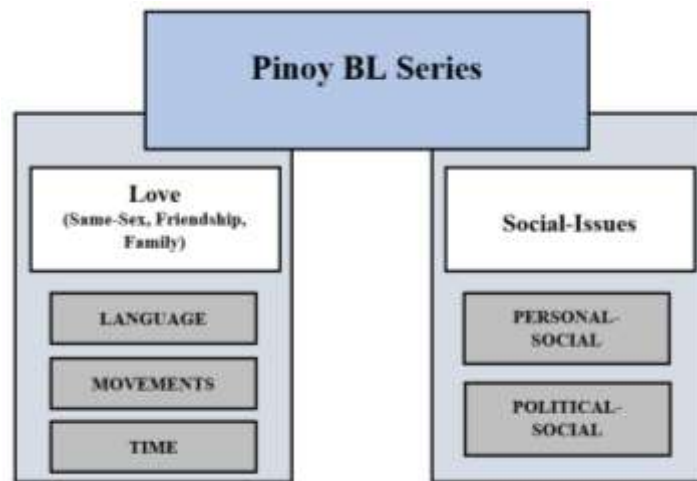


Figure 1. Research Paradigm

The researchers are guided by the concepts of expressions of love by The Oregon Counselling's (2020) online article which derived from Chapman's book *The Five Love Languages* (1992); and Elizabeth Thoman's (1986) classification of social issues to analyze the portrayals.

According to Chapman (1992), there are five love languages: Words of Affirmation, which was considered by the researchers as expression of love through language; acts of service, receiving gifts, and physical touch, which were considered as movements; and quality time which was considered by the researchers as love expression through the use of time. These love languages are present in romantic relationships, and even seen within families, and friendships. On the other hand, Thoman (1986) asserts that personal-social issues are primarily person-centered, that is, they consist of extraordinary circumstances that affect individuals or individual units of society - usually, crises in relationships or health while social-political issues include those more global concerns which can, indeed, affect individuals, but which individuals - by themselves - cannot begin to handle: the arms race, the impact of the world debt, discrimination, racism-and sexism, the effects of colonialism in developing nations, homelessness, and so on.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researchers utilized content analysis to identify love representations and social issue depictions in the chosen BL series. According to Columbia University Mailman School (2022), content analysis is used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data (i.e., text, film, series).

Sources of Data

The researchers selected six (6) BL series based on the following criteria: (a) popularity of the series; (b) availability of the series; and (c) theme of the Pinoy BL series such as love, family, coming out, awareness, different social issues, etc. The following are series used in the study: *Oh Mando*, *Mga Batang PoZ*, *BenxJim*, *Sakristan*, *Hello Stranger*, and *Gaya sa Pelikula*.

Data Analysis Procedure

To researchers have conducted a thorough review and inter coding to the selected drama series. To analyze the portrayal of love through language in the BL series, the researchers observed and identified the words, dialogue, or phrases voiced by the characters in the BL series that express affection and love (e.g., words of affirmation). To analyze the portrayal of love through movements in the BL series, the researchers observed and identified the actions, gestures, activities, and behaviors exerted by the characters in the BL series that are considered to be an act of love (e.g., acts of service, receiving gifts, and physical touch). To analyze the portrayal of love through time in the BL series, the researchers observed and identified how the characters in the series spend time with or give their undivided attention to the people they love (e.g., quality time). Depicted social issues in the BL series were also observed and identified, including personal-social and political-social issues. To identify the personal-social issues depicted in the BL series, the researchers observed and analyzed if the primarily person-centered issues affect the characters in the BL series (e.g., crises in relationships and health, anxiety, emotional issues, etc.). To identify the political-social issues depicted in the BL series, the researchers observed and analyzed the societal concerns that severely affect the majority of the characters in the BL series/ LGBTQIA community (e.g., discrimination, homophobia, domestic violence, harassment, etc.).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Portrayal of Love

In this study, the portrayal of love was perceived in the use of language, movements, and time by the characters in the BL Series. It was perceived that expressing love entailed more than just a feeling of affection; it also entailed saying and doing something for someone and giving one's undivided attention.

Language as Love. It has been perceived how acceptance and appreciation were given to those who demand the most respect in society, such as LGBTQIA+ persons. The researchers have inferred from the six series, that words have great power, especially when addressing those who are suffering or experiencing issues, such as those pertaining to their families or health and it supports Chapman's (2015) notion that words of affirmation entail verbal communication that is encouraging, affirmative, active, and appreciative. Majors (2021) explains that positive affirmations ensure more than simply a good feeling for those who receive them. As perceived in the series, words may also be used to vocally show gratitude and respect for another person as well as to encourage them. It can be used to convey love in a variety of ways. Words have the power to improve someone's disposition and can help them feel as though their emotions are valid because of the encouragement and validation they receive. This has been demonstrated in examples of friends being incredibly supportive and kind to one another as well as parents cherishing and caring for their children. And words of affirmation are not just for romantic relationships. Feeling appreciated and valued are human needs in any personal relationship, not just romantic ones.

Movements as Love. The researchers were also able to identify that acts and gestures are other ways that love can be shown as perceived from the movements of the characters in the BL series in which it supports Nguyen (2022) assertion that an act of service is the tangible

manifestation of a considerate gesture. It is one of the five love languages, which are distinct ways of expressing love. Individuals whose major love language is an act of service will appreciate the tangible, perceptible measures people are doing to improve or simplify their lives by making things a little bit simpler. According to Evans (2022), those who use physical touch as their preferred form of love language experience love and admiration more strongly when expressing it physically. The Pinoy BL series proved that people who are unable to openly express their love for another person through words can still do so by doing kind deeds for them, giving them gifts, or otherwise acting in a way that shows how much they cherish and care for that person. It was confirmed that, especially if an amount of effort is being made, actions can cause two people to grow close and can even lead to a higher level of relationship and it negates Wong's (2021) claim that the plotlines of the BL series tend to follow standard tropes in romance dramas since the series were able to depict sacrifices and challenges as well other than merely kilig and sweet scenes.

In *Mga Batang Poz*, it has been perceived that most of them are expressing their love to their loved ones, friends, and family through acts such as giving gifts to the people they love, being helpful to them, and even through physical affection.

In the series, Luis has seen that he is always watching over his grandfather, who is in a coma. He kept on monitoring if his grandfather was already awake, and during those times that his grandfather was awake, he is the one who feeds him in bed, and he does sponge baths for his grandfather.



Figure 1. Still Cut of Luis and his grandfather- *Mga Batang Poz*

In *Ben x Jim*, it has been perceived that most of the character's actions in the series portray love. It has been implied in the series that when Ben found out that Jim would return to their place, he repaired the tree house that he and Jim used to play at when they were kids. Even if they are now adults, Ben feels the urge to repair it so that it can serve as their hangout place to reminisce about all their childhood memories the moment Jim arrives.



Figure 2. Still Cut of Ben- *Ben x Jim*

In *Sakristan*, it has been found that the characters of Christian and Zach in the series are very much concerned with each other, and it can be perceived through their actions. It was seen that Zach was having chills when they were trapped in the office, and Christian touched his forehead, and he felt that he was feverish. Zach asked him to help him cool down his chills. Christian was panicking about what he could do, but he couldn't ask for help because they were trapped, so he just hugged Zach to make him feel better.



Figure 3. Still Cut of Christian and Zach- *Sakristan*

In *Gaya sa Pelikula*, the characters of Vlad and Karl, tend to express their love for each other through acts of service and physical touch. It has been seen how Karl went out of his way for Vlad on his birthday, and how Vlad went out of his way to take clips of his memories with Karl and make a compilation for them, which made Karl sentimental in the latter part of the series.



Figure 7. Still Cut of Karl and Vlad- *Gaya sa Pelikula*

In the first episodes, it has been implied that Karl cares for Vlad, even if they've just met in the recent past. Karl agreed with Vlad when he asked him to pretend as his lover in front of his sister because he didn't want to go home yet, and even if Karl didn't want Vlad to stay in his apartment, he offered it to Vlad because he didn't have somewhere to stay.

Time as Love. The researchers were able to see that quality time, which is also an expression of love, occurs when people set aside time for the people, they cherish in order to enjoy their company. The worth of each moment and the finiteness of time are constant themes in the communication of this love language. Due to the way it promotes a sense of attachment, the Pinoy BL series showed how spending quality time with someone or a group of people can also make them more bonded. Furthermore, it has been shown that spending quality time with friends involves more than just having fun all the time; it also involves being there for them when they need you and paying attention to their problems, and comforting them by saying

things that will make them feel better. The finest gift that families can offer to one another, according to Witmer (2020), is time spent together.

Portrayal of Social Issues

This study also looked at the common personal-social and political-social concerns (Thoman, 1986) that complicate and exist in the lives of LGBTQIA+ persons. It was discovered that BL series are capable of tackling the social challenges that queer people are severely confronting which supports Kaul's (2014) notion that the media can raise awareness and be a start to addressing local and global issues where it can educate about cultures, and give a broader political, religious, or social context and they can dispel long-held misconceptions as well as be a catalyst for social change. The Pinoy BL series has served as a source of awareness and education because it is believed that the social challenges it depicts are common to most LGBTQIA+ people and it validates Fujimoto's (2020) notion that realistic BL has reduced the gap between fiction and real life.

Personal-Social Issues. Personal issues have been explored in the selected series including jealousy among friends, infidelity, mental health crises, health issues, parental pressure, rejection, and even invalidation of one's emotions. These problems are quite prevalent in society, and LGBTQIA people are typically the ones who deal with it.

The personal-social issues that the characters in the Pinoy BL series had faced and represented are as follows:

Parental Pressure, Rejection, and Favoritism. In *mga Batang Poz*, Enzo always asked his parents why he and his brother are not being treated equally, and it makes Enzo feel that he is being left behind, which led him to commit rebellious acts. On the other hand, Luis' character was the one who consistently received pressure from his family. His brother first admitted to their parents that he is gay, but he was shunned at home because their father is homophobic. Luis got pressured and he was so afraid to come-out as gay to his family. The moment he admitted to his parents that he was gay, his father rejected him and cursed him, saying that he was a shame to their family. It shows that one of the reasons most gays are having trouble coming-out as their true identity is the lack of support from their families and the pressure that they are carrying from society—the fear of being rejected and the fear of being judged. In *Ben X Jim*, it has been perceived that Ben is being pressured by his mom. His mom is being so controlling, to the point where he even forbids Ben to be in a relationship with Jim. Ben is really pressured and it seems that his mom cannot let him handle his own life, and make decisions for himself. This is one of the problems that the youth are experiencing from their households—most parents are being manipulative and are depriving their child to make self-decisions and it turns out to be a negative trait of some parents because their child didn't have the chance to experience the real world all by themselves, and they are prone to committing mistakes when they get old because they've been boxed for a long time. In *Gaya sa Pelikula*, it has been perceived that Karl is being pressured by his parents to become an architect, and even if it is something that he is not passionate about, he took the risk of studying architecture as his father asked him to. However, it seems to appear that he is having a hard time pursuing it, so he told his parents that he no longer wanted it and he would shift to filmmaking instead, but his father acted vehemently enough that he even laughed at him.

Emotional Invalidation. In *Hello Stranger*, it has been perceived that Mico invalidated Xavier's emotions when he couldn't focus on their discussion for the group project because he was not on good terms with his girlfriend. Mico seemed to be insensitive because he nagged Xavier and told him that he was concerned about his grade for the project that they were doing. Xavier was upset because it sounded like Mico was only thinking of himself and could have become more sensitive. Xavier told Mico that he shouldn't ever comment on someone's problem if he wasn't able to experience it first-hand. Kookai's feelings for Mico were also invalidated in the series. It was implied in the series that Kookai likes Mico—she confessed to Mico that she likes him and told him that she wants him to become her lover, but Mico told her that she only sees Kookai as a friend. Kookai was so upset, and she felt ashamed of what she did. She distanced herself from Mico after she confessed, but they reconciled in the latter part of the series because Mico confessed to his friends that he was gay.

Identity Crisis/ Coming-out Issue. In *Gaya sa Pelikula*, a gender identity crisis was seen in and the character who was suffering from it was Karl. There was a scene where Vlad and Karl were dancing together because Karl wanted to teach him how to dance at a prom. However, they got carried away while dancing and they almost kissed each other. Karl panicked and ran away from Karl, and it seems that Karl was so confused and he is seen to be so anxious because of what happened, especially that he is claiming that he is a straight guy. According to the University of Washington (2022), coming out may be both challenging and freeing for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons. Most people take time to figure out who they are. It's the phase where they are having a crisis about admitting their true identity—they are confused, and uncertain about whether or how to come out and this has been persistently perceived from the Pinoy BL series. Coming out can be a very difficult process as what has been seen from the gay/ bisexual characters of the BL series. For gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons, there may be a sense of being different or of not fitting into the roles expected of them by their family, friends, workplace or greater society. Coming out involves facing societal responses and attitudes toward LGBTQ people. They may feel ashamed, isolated, and afraid, as what has been felt by the lead gay characters of the series.

In *Sakristan*, after Christian received hurtful words from his friend, he began to get confused about his sexuality and if it was normal or not. He suddenly remembers all his memories with Zach and he is so bothered and stressed out because he can't understand what is going on to him. The University of Washington (2022) asserted that individuals do not move through the coming out process at the same speed. The process is very personal. It happens in different ways and occurs at different ages for different people. Some people are aware of their sexual identity at an early age just like the gay characters of Mando in *Oh, Mando!*, Ben in *BenxJim*, and Vlad in *Gaya sa Pelikula*. Others arrive at this awareness after many years just like Mico and Xavier in *Hello Stranger*, Christian in *Sakristan*, and Karl in *Gaya sa Pelikula*. Coming out is a continuing, sometimes lifelong, process. It shows that identity crisis is one of the common issues that the LGBTQIA+ community confronts—they are having a hard time coming out as who they are because of a lot of factors that are hindering them, such as religion and prejudices and it validates UPLB Perspective's (2020) notion that BL series shows the struggles of the queer community, and even the people who are in the process of knowing themselves.

Mental Crises and Health Issues. In Ben x Jim, depression has been portrayed. Ben's ex-boyfriend, Leo, can't move on from him, and there comes a time when Leo attempts to commit suicide, but Ben stops him. One of the reasons why Leo is so hard on himself is that he has been disowned by his mom because, instead of guiding and supporting him, she just lets Leo be drowned in his bad habits. In Mga Batang Poz, Chuchay, Enzo, Luis, and Gab were HIV positives. Luis has contracted the virus by engaging himself in sexual activities with different guys he has met. According to his doctor, it could have gotten him rid of the virus if he had become responsible enough, such as using protection. Enzo's friend RJ is also HIV positive. When he found out that he had contracted the virus, he got so upset and even attempted to commit suicide by overdosing on pills. Chuchay, on the other hand, contracted the virus because he used to engage himself in sexual activity with a man who has a wife and it left him traumatized because he used to engage himself in sexual activities with that man because he was getting paid. However, the moment Chuchay found out that he was positive, he was so anxious and it traumatized him.

Political-Social Issues. Political-social concerns including discrimination, homophobia, stigmatization, domestic violence, and sexual harassment have also been identified in the BL series. These political-social issues are challenging circumstances that many people in a society are going through at the same time. Social-political issues include those more global concerns which can, indeed, affect individuals, but which individuals - by themselves - cannot begin to handle (Thoman, 1986).

The political-social issues that the characters in the Pinoy BL series had faced and represented are as follows:

Discrimination/ Homophobia/ Prejudice. In Mga Batang Poz, HIV positives are being discriminated against for contracting the virus. The prejudice of people that HIV is contagious where they can get infected if they get skin to skin with a positive person, and that by just talking to them face to face can already infect them, are some of the factors that discriminate against the characters. These misconceptions are stigmatizing them, when in fact, HIV cannot be easily transferred from one person to another. Unlike cold and flu viruses, the virus cannot travel via the air (NHS Inform, 2023), and most especially, it is not a gay disease as some unaware people are claiming it is. Sakristan, there was a scene where Christian goes to his childhood friend who is also an acolyte, Wolf, to tell him that he is in love with Zach and that he is confused about his sexuality. Wolf acted vehemently and told Christian that he would go to hell. He even told Christian some discriminatory remarks like filthy sucker, faggot, homo, and baboy. It shows how some religious people tend to become inhumane because of their preconceived notions about LGBTQIA+ people. In Gaya sa Pelikula, there was a scene where Vlad remembers all the discriminatory remarks that his sister used to tell him when they were young, like, "talented sana pero bakla." (You are talented, but you are gay) and "Pabakla bakla ka kase kasa iniwan tayo ni dad e." (Our father left us because you are gay.) Vlad was so upset every time he remembered those words because it affected him so much, which caused him to be distant from his family.

Stigmatization of HIV Positives. There were multiple scenes where the HIV positive characters were discriminated against and have been attacked based on people's misconception

about HIV/AIDS. HIV positive characters in the BL series have been cast out, hated, and discriminated against because most people thought that the virus is contagious and can be transmitted easily such as talking to them nearby and even touching their belongings. Studies show that people with strong social support are less likely to feel stigmatized than those who are isolated” and this has been perceived in the Pinoy BL series where some of the HIV positive characters were motivated to take medications because there are people around them who are supporting them and inspiring them to keep fighting instead of stigmatising them (John Hopkins University, 2022). It has been portrayed in the Pinoy BL series where HIV positive characters were distressed and felt ashamed when they found out their real status with the virus.

Domestic Violence and Sexual Harassment. Ben in BenxJim experienced domestic violence from Leo when they were still together. There were also similarities with regard to the reasons for remaining with the abusive partner. Both heterosexual and homosexual victims commonly listed the following aspects as reasons to stay: love for the partner, financial and emotional dependency on the partner, (Merrill and Wolfe, 2000) and one of the reasons why the character in the BL series chose to stay with his violent partner is due to its emotional dependency on him since his partner does not have any support system other than him. Sexual harassment was perceived in the BL series as well. In Mga Batang Poz, Chuchay was forced by a married man to have sexual activities together, even though it was against Chuchay's will to do so. It shows that Domestic violence is not limited to heterosexual relationships and can affect individuals of all sexual orientations and genders.

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