Analyzing the Depictions of Queer Struggles in Selected Asian BL Series

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Abstract: Media texts depicting same-sex relationships among men long existed in ancient China in 206 BCE-220 BCE. The term BL or Boys Love was first coined in the 90s in Japan through mangas or Japanese comics and movies; it has since been steadily gaining fans from across the globe. During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which forced people around the globe to stay at home, the BL genre saw increased viewership from 5% to 34% on various streaming platforms. Most of these shows depict various struggles experienced by queer characters. SOTUS (2016), Gameboys (2020), and Dark Blue and Moonlight (2017) are three well-known BL series from Thailand, the Philippines, and Taiwan. This study aims to identify the struggles depicted in these series, compare and contrast the struggles, and characterize the queer characters struggling. The television programs were analyzed using the queer theory, coding framework, and textual analysis. The findings show that most of the struggles depicted centered around acceptance of the self, acceptance by others, and managing one's feelings. The characters from these BL series also share the same characteristics, such as how they respond to problems and their struggles.

Key Words: Boys love, queer struggles, media portrayal, Filipino BLs, Taiwanese BLs, Thai BLs

1. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

As the years pass by, the idea of being queer is slowly being accepted. Thus, shows and films that depict relationships between queer people emerged as a genre in contemporary media. Most of these shows are produced in Thailand and star cisgender male actors. Early depictions of queer people can be found in ancient China where it is generally accepted. Being queer started to be viewed negatively because of Western influences during the Qing dynasty (Kang, 2009). The term "BL" or Boy's love was first introduced in Japan during the 90s through mangas and novels (Olsen, 2020). The BL genre gained a following in Taiwan, Thailand, and China. It first came to Thailand in the form of novels. Due to the constant demand for BL content, Love Sick: The Series was one of the first few Thai BL shows produced in 2014. The BL genre started gaining popularity in 2014-2015 (Boonorana, 2020, as cited in Koaysomboom, 2020).

2020 marked the highest increase in viewership of BL series across different streaming platforms, with viewership increasing from 5% to 34% during the pandemic. The vice president of LINETV, one of the leading streaming platforms for BL series states that BL during this time may not be a sub-genre anymore; it is gradually going mainstream (Koaysomboom, 2020).

This study aims to identify and analyze the queer struggles present in the selected Asian BL series.

1.2. Theoretical Framework: Queer Theory

The 1990 theory developed by Butler states that human relationships are not derived from the body's biological separation (sex) but are derived from a person's portrayal of gender (sexuality). One of the ideas which queer theory rejects is heteronormativity, or the assertion that heterosexuality is the default sexuality in society. Most of the struggles depicted in the selected series are founded on Asian society's heteronormative standards. Asian societies generally emphasize producing a biological heir or family lineage (Raymo, et.al, 2015). This theory is applicable due to its relevance in the major themes depicted in the selected BL series.

1.3. Statement of the Research Problem

This research aims to compare the depiction of struggles experienced by the queer community in three BL series from Thailand, the Philippines, and Taiwan, namely SOTUS: The Series (2016), Gameboys (2020), and Dark Blue & Moonlight (2017). It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the struggles experienced by the main characters portrayed in the selected BL

series?

2. How are the struggles depicted in the selected BL series from different Asian countries similar and different from each other?

3. How are queer men depicted dealing with these struggles in the selected BL series?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative approach and incorporated the use of a memoing sheet and textual analysis. It is a descriptive research whose goal is to provide an accurate account of an individual's characteristics, situation, or group. Descriptive research can offer a deeper understanding of a situation as it naturally occurs (Dullock, 1993). This study aims to identify and analyze the struggles experienced by the queer characters; hence the chosen approach is the most appropriate.

2.2. Data Gathering Procedures

This study's data was gathered from the three selected BL series to be analyzed, namely SOTUS: The Series, Gameboys, and Dark Blue & Moonlight. The series were chosen according to their popularity and explicit depictions of struggling as queer men. These were also chosen because of the similar nature of the issues present in the series.

Image 1. Poster of SOTUS   Image 2. Poster of Dark Blue and Moonlight   Image 3. Poster of Gameboys

Textual analysis was utilized to compare the depictions of struggles in the selected series. The researcher conducted three viewings to analyze scenes wherein there is a significant and explicit depiction of queer struggles.

The first viewing consisted of the researcher getting the gist or summary of the selected dramas. In the second viewing, the memoing sheet was used to note the important details, such as how the struggles were depicted and how the characters dealt with the struggles. The third and final viewing was a review in case some details were missed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Comparing the Struggles

The most similar characters with almost identical issues are Arthit from SOTUS and Cai from Gameboys. Both are depicted as full of doubts about themselves and fear of what others may think about them. They both hid their feelings at first because they did not want to let others see their vulnerability. Cai and Arthit were aggressive or unfriendly towards Gav and Kongpob, respectively. Nevertheless, towards the end, both warmed up to their respective significant others and started to show warmer and friendlier emotions. In terms of personal struggles, both Cai and Arthit mentioned that they had been confused about their sexuality. Cai mentioned this in a scene where he recalled that moment when Riza had publicly outed him as gay. Arthit, on the other hand, was not that verbal about his state of confusion and instead conveyed it through his actions. He avoided Kongpob whenever his feelings of confusion intensified, specifically concerning whether he was queer and had feelings for Kongpob. The only time Arthit had opened up about his inner battle between his feelings for Kongpob and thoughts of rejection from others was when he talked to his friend.

Image 4. Arthit being confused about his feelings towards Kongpob   Image 5. Gav (L) listening to Cai (R) about his experience being outed   Image 6. Jimmy being frustrated about his relationship with Yanfei

The three selected shows depict all three categories of struggles: personal, emotional, and social. However, some categories of struggles are not emphasized. The struggles depicted in SOTUS were primarily personal ones as they dealt with Arthit's confusion with his sexuality. The struggles shown in Gameboys are primarily emotional as Cai was dealing with his father's condition and the COVID-19 pandemic. Dark Blue and Moonlight's main struggles can be categorized into social struggles since Yanfei and Jimmy had to hide their relationship from Yanfei's mother.

One common struggle among the three series is the idea of coming out as queer and being accepted by society. Arthit in SOTUS was worried about how people would think of him when he came out as queer. Cai had trouble coming out to his family and was even outed by his friend, causing him to leave home due to the fear of getting rejected. In Yanfei's case in Dark Blue and Moonlight, he feared coming out and being rejected by his mother.

3.2. Protagonists' Responses

Image 7. Arthit getting advice on his feelings

Image 8. Cai (L) being irritated at Gav (R)

Arthit's typical responses to his struggles were aggression, hostility, or avoidance. As shown in certain scenes, when Kongpob confessed to Arthit about his feelings, he avoided Kongpob. In a scene where Arthit was jealous of a close friend with Kongpob, he acted aggressively towards Kongpob. Arthit talked to his friend with the hopes of getting advice on what he should do. Cai from Gameboys' responses to his problems were quite similar with Arthit's responses. When being teased by Gav, Cai usually responded with an irritated tone, like how Arthit does. Both characters also show significant developments throughout their whole series. When faced with a problem involving Gav, Cai always listened to others before Gav, causing him to jump to his own conclusions along with his insecurities. Like Arthit, Cai also opened up to someone about his struggles as being out as queer.

Image 9. Yanfei attacking the coach

Physical violence is not emphasized in Gameboys and SOTUS. However, when Yanfei witnesses someone using a derogatory word for queer people, he resorted to violence, physically attacking that person. In Episode 5, when Jimmy outed Yanfei to his mother, their immediate response was to be physical against one another. Arthit, Yanfei, and Jimmy all shared the same response when encountering problems with their significant others. They tended to be passive and hide their genuine opinions and feelings. In a scene from Episode 5, Yanfei pretended not to care about Jimmy being distant. However, when alone, he was visibly affected by it. Jimmy also had a similar response in Episode 9 when he and Yanfei met again but as ex-lovers. He pretended that he had moved on from Yanfei but suddenly cries when alone.

3.3. Media vs. Real Life

The most emphasized theme which was common among the three selected series is the idea of coming out. Coming out was seen in Gameboys when Cai was outed to his family. Similarly, in SOTUS, Arthit was having doubts about whether the people around him could accept his sexuality before coming out to his friends. In Dark Blue and Moonlight, Yanfei wouldn't come out to his mother because he knew that he would not be accepted. The protagonists' struggles related to coming out are consistent with the findings of Wei and Liu (2018) when they suggest that majority of the LGBT students in China were not comfortable coming out as queer.

Image 10. Yanfei not being accepted by his mother for being gay

Image 11. Cai being accepted by his mother for being gay

Cai's mother in Gameboys was supportive of her son's sexuality as opposed to Yanfei's mother in Dark Blue and Moonlight. Both women's ages are not explicitly stated in their respective series. Cai's mother can be assumed to be in her 40s-50s, while Yanfei's mother could possibly be in her senior years, around 60s-70s. Pew Research Center's 2007-2019 study findings support these depictions as their findings assert that acceptance of the LGBT community varies from generation to generation, with the older generation being less supportive and the younger generation being more accepting. The portrayal of Cai's mother being accepting of her son's sexuality is also supported by Pew Research Center's data, in which they find out that the Philippines had the highest acceptance rate of the LGBT community in Asia.

Image 12. Arthit grabbing Kongpob by the collar

Image 13. Arthit as the head hazer

The deviation from different masculine standards can be seen across the three selected series. Each of them has points which they emphasize based on the societies of their country of origin. Students from Thai universities put importance on the concept of authority and seniority through initiation rites or hazing sessions. Seniors who do the hazing, mostly male students, are expected to be masculine, aggressive, and cruel towards the juniors. Arthit from SOTUS, in some scenes, was depicted to be aggressive towards his juniors; however, he was also depicted as

someone who deviates from the aggressive and masculine image of senior hazers. Arthit was shown as someone who likes pink milk, a drink considered to be feminine in Thailand; hence when Kongpob pointed this out, he was embarrassed. In the latter part of the series, Arthit's soft side was more prominent. He became gentler and showed vulnerability in terms of expressing his true feelings.

Image 14. Cai being outed on social media by his friend

Image 15. Cai's brother (L) and Cai (R) talking about their father's situation

In Philippine society, a man is expected to be the breadwinner and provider of the needs of his own family. The ability of a man to provide for his family serves as the basis of how masculine he is seen in society. In terms of religion, the majority of the Philippines is Catholic. One of the core beliefs in Catholicism is that being queer is a sin. Because of this belief, queer people are often discriminated against; being straight became the usual and default sexuality. When Cai was outed to his family as gay, he was ashamed and left his home. Cairo, as a man, felt like he could not deliver to his parents' standards of him; hence he apologized to his mother for being gay.

Image 16. Yanfei and Jimmy talking about work

Image 17. Jimmy (L) and Yanfei (R) talking about their breakup

In the present times, Confucian ideas are still seen in modern Taiwan. Confucianism has always been patriarchal; in an ideal Confucian household, there is a husband, wife, and their children. The man or father is expected to lead the household while the wife and children obey him. Yanfei's mother in Dark Blue and Moonlight upholds this belief when she tells Jimmy and Yanfei to find wives. Jimmy from Dark Blue and Moonlight deviates from this Confucian thinking as the family Jimmy visualizes consists of two men and their adopted children when the subject of having children is brought up.

4. CONCLUSIONS

BLs, regardless of country of origin, in a broader sense, share almost the same struggles and characterization. Arthit from SOTUS and Cai from Gameboys share the most similarities with the way they act and respond to certain situations. Additionally, it was found that the major themes and

struggles depicted in the selected BL series are reflective of the current status quo of the LGBT community in Asia. Based on the findings and previous studies, most of them support each other's ideas, such as generational differences in views and heteronormativity in Asian society.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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