

What Can Gender Economics Learn From the Pinoy BL Genre of the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic created significant disruptions in the usual economic and social routines, which required a lot of pre-pandemic affairs to be recalibrated, revisited, changed, and updated to fit the necessities of the “new normal.” In the case of digital media, a surge of content arose largely due to its popularity, touching the themes of the pandemic centering on homosexual love and its relations to household affairs, family and personal relationships, and the professions. Dubbed as the “boys’ love” (BL) genre, it portrays many of the facets of gender roles that are widely discussed in gender studies and research, while working under the lines of exposition in relation to the effects of the pandemic. We discuss some of the themes of the Filipino (or Pinoy) BL genre that have implications to gender economics in particular, and gender studies in general. Given the presented facets and dynamics of gender in this genre, we indicate some possible future work, research, and other areas for discourse and enrichment under the themes of LGBT.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, “new normal,” gender economics, BL genre, digital media

INTRODUCTION: FROM TRADITIONAL TO DIGITAL

As the Philippines endures the continued effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, real-time developments and iterations of everyday affairs have been implemented by various sectors of the economy. More particularly, the demand for digital services has increased exponentially: from e-commerce, remote and online education, social and public services, politics and suffrage, culture and history, and even the entertainment industry (Abueg, 2020a; Abueg et al., 2021). While health protocols prohibit the congregation of people to avoid further local transmissions, these did not prevent moviegoers, producers, talents, and the industry in general from developing alternatives to conventional movie and theater forms of entertainment. This paved the way for the normalization¹ and mainstreaming of digital media, which was intensified due to the constraints brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the decade prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there had already been improvements in the modes of delivery of entertainment material, utilizing the continuously enhanced state of technology. There were efforts to digitize old material—called the restoration process—which covers movies, images, and other material produced prior to the years before computers were introduced.² Bolstered by the pandemic situation, however, there has been an increase in participation from the audience in developing content and material for movies, television, and other forms of entertainment—thanks to social media and improved internet connectivity. Another factor is the continuous improvement in gadget functions aiding digitization: camera phones, software for audio and video

¹ By “normalization,” we mean that watching entertainment content and media through digital means (e.g., online subscriptions, online renting, paid downloads) are becoming the accepted modes relative to the pre-pandemic and more socially accustomed means (e.g., watching movies on the silver screen, going to theaters).

² As early as the 1950s, there were crude forms of computers, which have since become smaller and smaller in size, and increasingly efficient in terms of memory storage and functions. The film and entertainment industry had started to use technology-related inputs and outfits for media production as early as the 1980s. In the Philippines, such use began arguably around the 1990s. Much of the restored material (e.g., movies) are produced using film and reels—the conventional post-movie production output needed by movie houses.

editing, and also the computers themselves that continue to evolve in functionality. These “enablers” have provided opportunities for digital content creation and also an avenue of increased participation between the entertainment industry and the general audience.

One of the fast-expanding genres of entertainment during this pandemic is the “boys’ love” themed material, often referred to as the BL genre. The BL genre, usually a series of episodes that tell the story of two men falling in love regardless of whether they are formerly heterosexual or already gay. The phrase “boys’ love” comes from a Japanese movie of the same title in 2006, said to be the first Asian movie that touches on the LGBT theme of male gay relationships. Although the original intent of the genre was to focus on women in same-sex relationships, it evolved later on to male gay relationships, which now makes up a significant portion of this mainstream media content (Olsen, 2017). The BL genre presents gay relationships and gestures that, although intimate, do not generally suggest erotic angles—this is typical of a romantic comedy (or “romcom”) narrative. Bengan (2020) calls the BL as “*haraya ng lambing*” (“an imagination of tenderness”). Note that these qualifiers on the genre are not restrictive. Fermin (2013), for instance, notes that similarities in fan reproduction and reception by Philippine and Japanese audiences of BL may be attributed to identification and sympathy to LGBT-related issues and, to some extent “the idealization of male homoerotic relationships as a more intense kind of ‘ultimate love’” (Fermin, 2013).

In the Philippines, the BL genre became increasingly popular during the pandemic, at a time when the entertainment industry was “testing the waters” given the degree of social acceptance of LGBT-themed material in television, movies, and other platforms. The increased popularity of the BL genre in the Philippines was influenced by material coming from Thailand, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, China, and other Southeast and East Asian countries and territories. Bengan (2020) argued that such phenomenal success of the BL genre in the Philippines has been influenced by the popularity of the genre in Thailand, which emerged around 2014. Despite the wide acceptance of the BL genre in other countries, there was a degree of initial skepticism if such material would be welcomed by Philippine audiences. With the promising reception of foreign BL material by local

viewers, however, the Philippine BL genre soon appeared on digital platforms—and later produced hits in their own right.

This paper aims to contribute to the discussion of gay gender relations in the literature of gender economics, as well as to provide insights into the particular gender dynamics of gay relations in the Philippines as portrayed in the Pinoy (colloquial for Filipino) BL genre, all within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the attempt was to survey as much of the available BL series, only online materials were accessed to provide a glimpse of the general picture of the homosexual setting given the restrictions due to the pandemic. In this attempt, we identify recurring themes in these materials, which may have connections to existing issues, discussion points, and texts common to gender studies and gender economics.

FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In doing the survey, I selected recently concluded Philippine BL series viewable on YouTube during the pandemic months of 2020. I analyzed some of the common elements of the plot, the narratives, the character dynamics, and other elements, using the “broad strokes of content analysis” (Abueg, 2007). By saying “broad,” I note common thematic presentations in the surveyed BL genre which are also being touched on by topics in the literature of gender economics. I provide these themes in the succeeding sections of the paper, and the discussion hopes to provide future direction in the growing literature of gender, particularly those in the intersection of economics and LGBT issues.

Apart from the broad strokes of content analysis using the reviewed digital media of the Pinoy BL, elements of autoethnography were also used in the analysis. As defined by Adams et al. (2017), it is the method in qualitative research “that uses personal experience to describe and interpret cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices” (p. 1). In addition, they argued that “[a]utoethnographers believe that personal experience is infused with political/cultural norms and expectations, and they engage in rigorous self-reflection—typically referred to as ‘reflexivity’—in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life.” This facet of autoethnography is one complementing feature in this research, given that the author has

personally identified with the issues being presented in the digital materials. In fact, this method of research is one of the emerging developments in the literature of gender studies (Mészáros, 2014; Johnson, 2020), which may enhance the current methods and analysis done in gender economics.

In addition, I discuss these issues of elements of the selected BL materials using concepts, issues, and methods, guided by the topics covered in gender economics literature (Eswaran, 2014). Table 1 below summarizes the various BL series surveyed.

Table 1
Survey of Various Pinoy BL Series on YouTube, 2020

Series title	Airing dates	Number of episodes	Producer and indicated developments
<i>Ben x Jim</i>	October 15 to November 26	7	Produced by Regal Entertainment Inc.
<i>Boys' Lockdown The Series</i>	October 15 to November 29	6	Produced by Ticket2Me and Bit by Bit Company
<i>Gameboys</i>	May 22 to September 13	13	Produced by The IdeaFirst Company; with spinoffs <i>Pearl Next Door</i> , <i>Alt Gameboys</i> , and a second season; also an upcoming movie in July 2021
<i>Gaya Sa Pelikula</i>	September 25 to November 20	8	Produced by Globe Studios
<i>Hello Stranger</i>	June 24 to August 19	8	Produced by ABS-CBN Films and Black Sheep; with a movie spinoff in February 2021
<i>In Between: Sa Pagitan ng Kumusta at Paalam</i>	July 11 to October 10	14	Produced by USPHTV company; with an upcoming second season
<i>Meet Me Outside</i>	December 21 to January 1 (2021)	6	Produced by Blue City Holdings Co. Ltd. (Blued gay dating app)
<i>Oh My Mando</i>	November 5 to December 10	6	Produced by iWantTFC, with full first episode; previews and highlights of episodes 2 to 6 (full videos on iWantTFC)
<i>Quaranthings The Series</i>	September 4 to October 30	8	Produced by Ride or Die

Aside from those listed in Table 1, I also include *The Boy Foretold by the Stars* and *Hello Stranger The Movie* in the discussions (considered as BL but in movie formats). Given the continuous production of materials even at the time of writing, I limit my discussion to the select Philippine BL genre mentioned above. The materials listed in Table 1 (except for *Meet Me Outside*) registered an estimate of between 800,000 to 1.5 million views per episode by end-November 2020. Indications of popularity were also seen in social media platforms. On Twitter, BL is usually found trending every Thursday–Friday, as the new installments of the series are premiered on these days. Viewership continues even after the completion of the series or material, and by April 2021, views on some episodes have been recorded to be at least two million.

One common theme in the select Pinoy BL genre is how gay relationships bloomed in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, with all the struggles that accompany it. More particularly, the emphasis on digital infrastructure and online communication that supports these relationships is also an important feature in some of the plots. An example is the series *Meet Me Outside*, since the producer is also promoting its gay dating app platform. Even in other Pinoy BL series, online communication is depicted as vital and crucial to the plot twists (e.g., in *Gameboys* and *Hello Stranger*). Coincidentally, this is one exploration in current research and practice (De et al., 2020). A particular case for the Philippines was also raised in Abueg (2020a), which argues the need for increased connectivity-aided practices during the pandemic and which may continue in the years to come.

In reviewing the Pinoy BL genre material, we employed the framework of gender economics and used this perspective to analyze common themes and plot threads across the reviewed materials (as mentioned above). Using the perspective of gender economics, we look at how themes and elements of the Pinoy BL genre may contribute in enriching the discussion of gender in relation to labor markets and mobility, professions and employment, optimality of choices, collective behavior and decision making, and other aspects of economic thinking and behavior. We also look at the possible relationship of gender economics literature in these recurring elements in the materials surveyed. In sum, we look at the

interaction of gender and economic decisions being portrayed in the Pinoy BL genre, and looking at the elements that may improve and enhance gender economics.

In doing the analysis, we complement the perspective of gender economics with the literature of gender studies, as well as those of communication and media theory (since we are looking at digital media), and also elements of queer theory (given the focus and theme of the reviewed materials). The combination of these three areas will contribute to the enrichment of the Philippine literature on gender economics.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The Hype of the “Boys’ Love” Genre During the Pandemic

The BL genre, although said to be attributed to the Japanese movie by that name in 2006, may even be traced to a much earlier idea of the “*yaoi*” in Japan (Bengan, 2020; Olsen, 2017; Fermin, 2013). It may also be noted that Western countries likewise offered their own brand of BL early on (although such material does not fall within today’s description of the BL genre), which was generally inclined toward more erotic themes. In the Philippines, adapting such themes in mainstream entertainment material was viewed as taboo, owing to the predominantly Christian Catholic orientation in the country. Beginning in the late 1990s, early forms of movies with LGBT themes emerged as “indie films”—more particularly, a subset of indie films called “gay indie” (Baytan, 2017; cited in Bengan, 2020). These indie films include elements similar to the Western erotic themes, as well as those found in some of the recent BL genre.

The emergence of LGBT themes in movies and series provided a different brand of mainstream entertainment media through the BL genre. The current BL genre generally does not suggest sexual undertones, but rather plays along the lines of romantic comedy (“romcom”) movies, attempting to normalize the view on gay relationships by portraying these just like those of heterosexual couples. LGBT advocates argue that the introduction of the BL genre, especially in the Philippines, is one step towards acceptance of gay relationships, just as the usual “straight” or heterosexual relationships are (Garcia, 2020; Agbayani, 2018; Santos, 2020).

An example is the observation by Bengan (2020) mentioned earlier that, in the case of the Thai BL genre, the target audience classification is “general viewing.” The reason is that this genre is different from the former movies depicting relations with sexual undertones. The Asian BL genre recognizes and reflects the cultural sensitivities in the places where these movies or series are produced, as compared to the Western BL genre that contains liberal discussions of queerness, homosexual relationships, and non-binary gender-based social relations.

To a certain extent, being predominantly romcom movies by nature, BL genre films and series also touch on some of the social elements portrayed in stories on romantic heterosexual relationships: family and friends, work and the professions, social norms and biases, and other institutions. Moreover, the boom of the BL genre in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic has added some angles of how relationships in general—and male gay relations in particular—cope with the struggles and socioeconomic constraints of the pandemic. It is also important to note that, while the implemented community quarantine restricted physical movements, it forced a lot of activities to be carried out via digital platforms. For instance, “netizens” or digital natives had more time to devote to navigating the world wide web for their various functions. Notably, despite the perpetual problems of slow internet connectivity and electricity supply issues, the Philippines still emerged as the country with the greatest amount of time spent on social media in the world, with an average of 3 hours and 50 minutes per day (Buccholz, 2020).

Apart from social media, some movie producers of the BL genre also use their own online platforms for showcasing their content. There has also been the introduction of subscription payments to some platforms offering entertainment content. In the case of the BL genre, its popularity in the Philippines is fueled by netizens immersed in social media, e.g., via YouTube for the episodes, with promotions and advertisements via Twitter and Facebook. For example, viewers who would want to have early viewership must access the producer’s sponsored platforms with a fee charged for each view (e.g., *Boys Lockdown The Series*). There are also activities for fanatics such as meet-and-greet, epilogue, and thank you concert-like formats, which also have online tickets for purchase (e.g.,

Hello Stranger). There are even Pinoy BL materials that can only be exclusively viewed on specific digital platforms. For example, the BL series *Oh My Mando* is exclusive to subscribers of iWantTFC (who produced the series), but teaser videos are available on YouTube for promotional purposes. Similar marketing strategies may also be employed in other Asian BL platforms (e.g., Thai BL) and on Netflix (Bengan, 2018).

As we will see in the next sections, the BL genre during the pandemic in the Philippines has become a conduit for so many gender-related issues that have various implications to social research, as well as in economics. Note that, while there are limited studies in the country devoted to LGBT and their connection with mainstream economics and other related areas, it is imperative to outline some of these issues, as they are not dealt with in isolation.³ Some of the LGBT issues tackled in the BL genre—more particularly in the material produced in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic—have overlaps with issues, concerns, and gender-related conflicts surrounding heterosexual relationships and norms.

One notable development during the pandemic is that the Pinoy BL genre has evolved from digital platform series to movies, fueled by increased and continued popularity. However, the pandemic has also shifted movies from the silver screen to cyberspace. The movie *The Boy Foretold By the Stars* is regarded as the first BL-themed movie that was allowed by the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board to be allowed for public viewing. This movie was part of the 2020 Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF),⁴ and won the “Second Best Picture Award,” “Best Original Theme Song,” and the “Gender Sensitivity Award.” In February 2021, *Hello Strangers The Movie* was also launched in time for Valentines’ Day celebrations, and via a digital platform as well.

³ One of the perceived reasons that gender studies tackling LGBT topics are sparse in the Philippines is primarily due to the lack of data. While the literature on gender studies and LGBT topics in gender economics in the United States has been remarkable, Badgett et al. (2021) have noted that there is much research to do and there is more room for further work in what they call “LGBTQ economics.”

⁴ The 2020 MMFF was the first edition of the film festival to be rolled out via digital platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the Pinoy BL genre develops and increases in audience reach, one noteworthy discussion in the conceptualization and creation of the films and series is the actors and actresses who play key roles in the genre, a welcome development that has enhanced the popularity of BL across parts of the world—particularly in Southeast and East Asia. Notably, the initial BL genre material in the Philippines had heterosexual actors cast in gay roles. This is one of the initial and main contentions of some viewers of Pinoy BL (Agbayani, 2018), since it is believed that queer actors and actresses are more effective and convincing in portraying such characters. One of the highlights of what is regarded as the first BL movie in Philippine mainstream cinema (*The Boy Foretold By the Stars*) is that one of the lead gay roles is portrayed by Adrian Lindayag, who himself identifies as gay. While this is a welcome step for the LGBT community, Lindayag admitted to having thoughts of quitting show business due to the negative reactions towards his sexual orientation (Santos, 2020). While there remains a degree of non-acceptance and skepticism on gay-themed media, LGBT actors and actresses remain hopeful that the continued support for the BL genre will push for the ultimate acceptance of queerness and gay relations in Philippine society (Agbayani, 2018) and also provide a “queer reawakening” (Garcia, 2020). As mentioned earlier, it may be possible that there remains some degree of idealization of male homoerotic relationships in the portrayal in the BL genre (Fermin, 2013).

In such issues of portrayal in the Pinoy BL genre, two things are apparent. On the one hand, there is this notion of ownership of the subculture portrayed in this genre. It may be argued that ownership means the completeness of expression of sexual orientation and gender identity. Through this BL genre, LGBT advocates, supporters, and members have another window or avenue of expression. On the other hand, the quest for social acceptance of queerness and gay relations through the LGBT role-portrayal of LGBT-members themselves is an echo of McLuhan’s (1964) famous phrase: “the medium is the message.” Even in any other media, the objective is always that the audience can relate to the characters portrayed. Such audience relatability is one metric of success of the media or material, in this case, the Pinoy BL genre.

This issue of gay unions brings us to the next point of discussion in the Pinoy BL genre. It is also noteworthy to highlight that, in the Pinoy BL productions surveyed in this paper, there was no clear message on advocating same-sex unions. While most of the works showed support for gay relationships, the question of whether these relationships were consummated as legally (or even religiously) recognized unions remains an open question. A usual argument for the degree of acceptance or recognition of gay relationships is the presence of the centuries-old Catholic institution (the quincentennial of which the Philippines is commemorating in 2021). This degree to which Filipinos are welcoming of gay relationships is possibly influenced by the presence of the Catholic Church, and other social factors pointed out by dela Cruz (2015). In addition, the attitude of Filipinos on gayness and gay relations might have colonial and post-colonial roots that are ingrained in the Filipino's social consciousness (de Leon & Jintalan, 2018). An example of the varying and complex degrees of acceptance of gay unions was portrayed in the 2013 soap opera *My Husband's Lover* (also mentioned in Bengan, 2020), in which the suppression by the main character (played by Tom Rodriguez) of his attraction to his schoolmate-turned-lover (Dennis Trillo) led to the former marrying a woman (Carla Abellana) due to family pressures, particularly coming from his father (Roi Vinzon). Issues of gay relations were likewise showcased in other early movies, such as *Rainbow Sunset* (2018) and *In My Life* (2009). Note that these movies and the soap opera mentioned are not classified as BL, although they touch on themes similar to those in the surveyed Pinoy BL productions.

Related to the issues of gay relations is the global battle for legalization of same-sex unions, where the Philippines remains one of the countries that does not have an enabling law on such union. This is despite the fact that LGBT groups have collectively campaigned for a law recognizing and protecting gay unions. A final ruling by the Supreme Court in 2020 dismissed the petition for reconsideration for a law on same-sex unions (which was earlier penned in a 2019 ruling) due to unconstitutionality arguments and the provisions of the 1988 Family Code (Guerra, 2020). This is apart from the mentioned influence of the Catholic Church, which strictly upholds its tenets on heterosexual unions. Interestingly, this doctrine

of the Catholic Church was challenged in a statement by Pope Francis himself apparently in support of same-sex unions, although it was later clarified that such statement is for civil recognition and not as a change in Catholic teaching. Note that the acceptance of gay unions has a significant connection to the acceptance of the LGBT community members, about whom Pope Francis also issued a statement in 2013. Coincidentally, this is one remarkable major theme in the movie *The Boy Foretold By the Stars*, which covers fate and destiny as well as the Catholic Christian stand on the issues of gayness and homosexuality.

However, the push for same-sex unions is a welcome development in gender economics. Noting that Becker (1957) had initially argued for the economic benefits of unions (assumed to be referring to heterosexual unions), the investigation on whether there are also economic benefits in the case of gay unions has only begun to bear fruit over the last decades of research. Evidence of improvements in health and happiness that are comparable among gay and heterosexual unions have been documented by Wienke and Hill (2009). These evidences and the range of economic benefits, as well the realization of the “marital surplus” from a gay union, need socioeconomic support and an enabling legal environment (Delhommer & Hamermesh, 2021).

Labor and Employment Decisions, the Household, and Gender Roles

One of the crucial themes of studies in gender and labor or employment is the discussion on gender roles. As early as childhood, determination of gender roles begins in the household along with influences of social institutions, norms, economic standing, to name a few. In the Pinoy BL genre, much of the parts of the films or series depicting childhood memories or narratives explore the struggles of the main characters in identifying what they want to be when they grow up. As ideal as children’s thoughts tend to be, their dreams and aspirations are heavily influenced by biases especially when the main characters begin to realize their sexual orientations and gender identities. The struggle is exacerbated if the main character experiences denial at first, perhaps due to family, peer, or social pressure.

As portrayed in some of the Pinoy BL productions, the pursuit of childhood ideals is not as simple as going up the ladder of education, and later participating in the labor market. In the case of the Pinoy BL genre, there is significant pressure from the household preventing the character from pursuing his ideals: being himself given his sexual orientation and gender identity while pursuing the career he aspires to. In the BL series *Ben x Jim*, one of the main characters, Jim, was actually ready to give up his love to follow the dictums of his father. Jim believed that such submission was his way to do “damage control”—a common issue in LGBT relationships when people involved in a gay romantic relationship professed it publicly but without support from family, friends and peers, or the society at large.

A similar case is also presented in *Boys Lockdown The Series*. The difference lies in the way the lead characters, Key (Ali King) and Chen (Alec Kevin), navigate the pandemic lockdown and later develop a relationship. The characters do not even apply labels on gender identity, and the world of their lockdown does not even question that two boys fall in love but rather encourages such a romantic development. While the characters are not professionals (i.e., unemployed), much like the protagonists of *Gameboys* and *Gaya Sa Pelikula*, one of the boys (Chen) has a popular UpTik (their version of TikTok) account which allows for the series’ own admission of love through social media, which is similar to the characters of *Ben x Jim*. However, the case of admission of love in *Ben x Jim* had an opposite result: there was commotion among the lead characters which later led to tensions involving the supporting characters.

Related to the above example is the presentation made in *Gameboys* where it touches on the issue of emigration from Metro Manila to the province due to the pandemic. As Cai (Elijah Canlas) wanted to stay in Manila to be with his love interest, Gavreel (Kokoy de Santos), there was a struggle and, later, a compromise between Cai and his mother. To some extent, a major theme of LGBT relationships is that of “compromise” if the choice is between their love relationship versus family relations, career or profession, or social relations in general. Note that, due to this plot twist of emigration, the revelation of feelings and profession of love became

imminent. In the language of economics, resorting to compromise will produce “suboptimal results” (i.e., not “Pareto optimal”), while the pursuit of happiness and acceptance with the presence of compromises (with the absence of constraints), which is not utility-maximizing.

This suboptimality does not only happen to a single person pursuing the relationship, but to both parties involved regardless of circumstances. In the BL series *In Between: Sa Pagitan ng Kumusta at Paalam*, Tau (Miguel Villasis) creates a situation of rejection to force his love interest, Otep (Genesis Redido), to go with his mother and migrate with her to the United States. Tau deliberately says things that would push Otep away—a scene that is all too common in real-life male gay relationships. As the involved parties would go for a “Romeo-and-Juliet-against-all-odds” relationship, the situation is usually a choice between the family and the relationship. In the BL genre, this could be considered a staple in the plot, mirroring a common item in the menu of struggles of LGBT couples.

There is also an apparent tradeoff between gender revelation and choice of professions arising from conflicts in gender roles. For example, a depiction of a “misfit” profession pursuit is shown in *Ben x Jim*, where Ben (Teejay Marquez) is on his eighth year in college struggling to finish his Engineering undergraduate program. However, Ben would rather pursue his passion for baking and online selling. This is not approved of by his mother—a sentiment that is also partially insinuated by his love interest, Jim (Jerome Ponce), who jokingly calls him “wifey.”⁵ In *Gaya sa Pelikula*, Karl (Paolo Pangilinan) is pursuing architecture to build the dream house of his parents, but later wants to shift to Film in his fifth year. This is a decision that earns significant disapproval from his parents, especially his father. These portrayals show that, while decisions must be made in preparation for one’s future professions, in this case, it is possible that such pursuit of a career is only to please others (e.g., family, friends, and peers) and does not depend solely on the choice of the person, which is again a sub-optimal decision. As the

⁵ “Wifey” (sometimes spelled as “wify”) is a term of endearment coming from the word “wife,” and is usually paired with the term “hubby” meaning “husband.”

lead character, Vlad (Ian Pangilinan), in *Gaya sa Pelikula* would tell Karl in one of their personal discussions about their lives, the implied feeling would be “as if living the life of others for them.”

Economic Consequences of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Revelation

While most of the BL series portray a happy ending, real-world situations offer different experiences. Given that producers and even the actors and actresses would want viewership success, subscription, and following, we must check our own experiences and biases with what is offered in the BL genre. For example, the inevitable difficulty for the lead characters like Karl in *Gaya sa Pelikula*, Rocky in *Quarantings The Series*, and even Luke in *The Boy Foretold By the Stars* in finally determining their respective sexual orientations and gender identities remains on top of the list of struggles of gay people in the Philippines. In addition, co-equal with the issue of self-determination is the revelation of gender identity to parents, friends, and peers. While the more liberal societies of the Western world have offered much assurance in terms of “outing,” the Asian (and particularly the Philippine) BL genre may not be that assuring in this aspect, given what is portrayed in the material versus what the audience or the viewers have actually experienced. Even within the larger context of the Asian BL genre, cultural differences are reflected in the materials’ elements, plots, and storylines (Bengan, 2020; Fermin, 2013).

Given the challenging situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic realities are a pressing issue felt by society at large (Abueg, 2020b). Thus, decisions on recalibrating pre-pandemic lifestyles is one major theme in the Philippine BL genre. More particularly, an important implication on gender economics would be the effect on economic status regarding decisions on expressing gender identity and sexual orientation.⁶ This issue is

⁶ An example of this case is documented by Badgett et al. (2017) in Indonesia. The study documents that LGBT members would not openly identify themselves in the workplace to evade discrimination at the least, and at most discrimination in the form of non-hiring or job mismatch, resulting in reduced productivity and labor output. The causation may also be the other way around, i.e., that discrimination against LGBT members in the workplace may affect economic status (e.g., in McGarrity, 2014).

exemplified in *Quarantings The Series*, where the lead character Rocky (Royce Cabrera) argues that Judah's (Kyo Quijano) stand on freely expressing his identity is a sort of privilege, given Rocky's stature as breadwinner of their poor family. In addition, social pressures of "coming out" and freely identifying one's gender identity and sexual orientation would prevent someone to do so, given the possible undesired consequences coming from social biases and stigma. As noted earlier in *Ben x Jim* where Jim decides to freely admit his love for Ben through social media, this action creates ripples of negative reactions from both families and friends. This is also the plot twist between Dominic (Adrian Lindayag) and Luke (Keann Johnson) in their unexpected friendship in the movie *The Boy Foretold By the Stars*. Again, while economic literature always suggests that, in ideal situations, Pareto optimal decisions are the best decisions, real-world constraints give agents to reveal sub-optimal choices: a well-known result in microeconomics as the "theory of second best" (Coram, 1996).

In these identified elements of the Pinoy BL genre, there are resemblances to real-world events that parallel with issues tackled in gender economics. These issues in gender roles and gender-related professions are attuned to the notion of heteronormativity, which is relatively predominant in Philippine society. This degree of heteronormativity—as opposed to normalization of gay expressions and relations—has also translated to themes portrayed in the Pinoy BL genre. This is small (relative to the larger scale goal of social acceptance), but serves as a significant step in trying to educate the audience on how the Philippine society can achieve full acceptance of gay norms and relations. As embodied by Jim in the BL series *Ben x Jim*, his effort to educate Ben on his heteronormative tendencies aligns with the prescriptions in Drucker (2009). The BL genre is replete with such issues. Thus, we also consider below some other non-economic plot elements that contribute to the inquiry and the growing research in gender economics.

Uncertainties, Anxieties, and Domestic Violence

The COVID-19 pandemic has serious implications on physical mobility, socialization, and economic activities, often heightening anxiety and uneasiness that results in mental health concerns. This is recognized

even on a global scale by the World Health Organization (2021). For example, a surge in the number of calls to their hotline was reported by the National Center for Mental Health (Esguerra, 2020).

As mentioned, elements of recalibration of decisions with regard to work, residence, and family endeavors are evident in much of the surveyed Philippine BL genre. It may be natural for humans to consider a change in lifestyle as a form of adaptation and later resiliency to the pandemic—a Darwinian nature of adaptation. Such decisions, however, are also influenced by the available support to express one's gender identity and sexual orientation. It may be noted that, as portrayed in the various BL genre materials, the pandemic setting causes additional stress to the main characters and creates challenges with respect to their social and physical surroundings.

One depiction of anxieties is in the area of gay dating, arising from the risk of fraudulent personalities posing as good persons in dating apps. This is a highlight of *Meet Me Outside*, where a hotel receptionist, Dale (Genesis Redido), turns out to be an admirer of an influencer, James (Kaloy Tingcunco). The relationship begins as a one-way blind date, and later resolves with discussions on dating, use of dating apps, and other issues between the lead characters, until the latter's departure from the hotel residence after the December holiday season.

It is also commendable that the BL genre during the pandemic featured angles of violence especially during the pandemic. These angles of violence presented in the films point to the possibility of these being actually experienced by the LGBT community and to make the audience aware of the issue. In *Ben x Jim*, for example, Ben continues to be harassed by his ex-boyfriend, Leo (Johannes Rissler), who turns out to be a psychopath. While Jim continues to protect Ben, complications of the harassment affect their current relationship. This plot reminds us that LGBT relationships are not exempt from the violence and abuses that vulnerable women and children typically face. This is not new to the BL genre. As early as 2008, the indie film *Ang Lihim ni Antonio* depicted this angle of domestic violence, which led to a gay ending.

With the current pandemic protocols, it is a global concern that the restricted mobility of people may be a factor in the increase in cases of

domestic violence (affecting women and children), which remains largely unreported (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). This may be supported by the last three editions of the National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) reports in the Philippines, which had indicated a decline in the number of cases of violence during the pre-pandemic years (Mendoza, 2019), but with such decline feared to be due to underreporting or non-reporting of cases. In the cited 2017 NDHS report (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018), it was mentioned that

Spousal violence experienced by ever-married women by their current or most recent husband/partner, whether physical, sexual, or emotional, has declined slightly from 29% in 2008 and 26% in 2013 to 24% in 2017. Women's experience of physical violence has decreased slightly over time, from 20% in 2008 and 2013 to 17% in 2017. Similarly, women's experience of physical violence in the 12 months preceding the survey has declined slightly, from 7% in 2008 to 5% in 2017. Women's experience of sexual violence declined from 8% in 2008 to 5% in 2017.

If vulnerable women and children are unable to report these incidents due to the mobility restrictions imposed during the pandemic, then it is also likely to be happening among members of the LGBT community. While domestic violence against women is usually attributed to the sexism issue, Benatar (2012) highlights that another form of sexism is largely undiscussed, which is called the "second sexism."⁷ This form of sexism manifests in the struggles and violence against gay males, which are also related to the heteronormative biases mentioned earlier.

In *Boys Lockdown The Series*, the plot illustrates how support is essential to address anxieties and mental health problems. Through the support character of Chen's sister, Ate Libby (Teetin Villanueva), the characters and even the audience are given a means to articulate their fears and misgivings about the lockdown and the pandemic response

⁷ Benatar (2012) qualifies that the word "second" is in reference to the fact that sexism was first directed at women. Moreover, the notion of "second sexism" does not only affect homosexual males, but also heterosexual males.

of the government. Ate Libby is also one of the important women acting as BL allies—if not the most important among the series used in this study—as she represents social and economic leadership in the Chavez household. This is also exemplified in the roles of Flo (Kat Galang) as Ben's best friend in *Ben x Jim*, by Lola Lolly (Gina Pareño) in *Quarantings The Series*, and by Ate Judit (Adrienne Vergara) supporting Karl in *Gaya sa Pelikula*. As discussed in the next section, it is a natural consequence that gay men find allies in women, as depicted in the Pinoy BL genre.

The uncertainties of the pandemic are also presented as contributing to an intensified seeking of affirmation and affection among the lead characters in the select BL genre in this study. For example, in the last episode of *Boys Lockdown The Series*, the lead actors' coincidental 24-hour lockdown provided the opportunity for their realization and profession of their feelings for each other. This is also depicted in the final episodes of *Gameboys*, *Meet Me Outside*, *Quarantings The Series*, and *Ben x Jim*, with the twist of physical separation between the lead characters as a consequence of the pandemic. In this, we see that circumstances influence the concept of economic time preference between the pandemic present and the uncertain future (Hilario & Sy Su, 2020).

Women as BL Allies

Despite the situations in the BL genre that show pandemic-related situations of male gay relationships, an important silver lining is the alliance of gay men with female peers, friends, and family members. This is one staple element across the BL genre during the pandemic, whether it would be the mother, the sister, the best friend, or childhood friend. Not only are elements of economic well-being important in expressing sexual orientation and gender identity, but so are the social, psychological, and emotional support for the usually embattled male gay relationships from immediate and extended family members and from peers. Fermin (2013) noted that, while initially women may have been vilified or viewed as obstacles to the lead character's growing relations, later versions of BL genre material have portrayed women characters as supportive of the male leads' gay relationships. However, it must be noted that some of the BL material are still working in this storyline, as depicted in *Oh*

My Mando. In this Pinoy BL series, Mando (Kokoy de Santos) is initially attracted to Krisha (Barbie Imperial). This later creates an internal conflict as Mando gets to know Barry (Alexander Diaz)—with this conflict being intensified due to the sibling relationship of Barry and Krisha, plus the concerns of Mando’s friends about his relationship with Barry over that with Krisha.

It is important to note that women’s support for male gay relationships takes various forms, as presented in the BL genre. Moreover, this is not only evident in the Philippine BL genre, but also in its Asian and Western counterparts. However, it must be emphasized that what makes women’s support in male gay relationships remarkable is the integral nature of this type of support in these relationships, given the predominantly conservative Philippine society. This is obviously depicted in each female supporting character in the surveyed Philippine BL genre material presented in Table 1. The connection between a male lead character and a female supporting character in a BL series may be supported by the arguments in the previous section. Notably, there are also cases of reciprocation, where lesbian relationships are supported by male peers, as in *Boys Lockdown The Series* and *Gameboys*. In the latter case, this led to a spinoff BL series for the supporting character, Pearl (Adrianna So), casting her as the lead in *Pearl Next Door*.

Another extensively studied phenomena in gender literature is the inherent differences between mobility in employment or in an organization after controlling for economic, social, and other factors. This concept is often referred to as the “glass ceiling phenomenon,” which is one of the focal elements of the literature of gender studies and in gender economics. Usually viewed as an obstacle to women’s career mobility, this phenomenon of glass ceilings also extends to members of the LGBT community in what Becker (1957) calls the “taste for discrimination.”⁸

⁸ Examples of Becker’s (1957) concept of “taste for discrimination” as applied to homosexual laborers is illustrated in a study by Badgett (1995), where homosexual males earn less than their heterosexual male counterparts, controlling for backgrounds (cited in Eswaran, 2014).

Even in countries like the United States with their liberal take on gender identity and sexual orientation expression, there persists discrimination against members of the LGBT community during job search and hiring processes. For example, a paper by Tilcsik (2011) has shown that openly gay applicants applying for jobs have only 7.2% chance of a callback relative to the 11.5% chance given their heterosexual counterparts, which reflects a 40% difference. This phenomenon is even more marked in the case of lesbians, and is often referred to as the “double-glazed glass ceiling” (Miles, 2008). Black et al. (2003) showed that, based on US data, while gay men are paid lower than heterosexual male counterparts, lesbians are paid even lower due to “double-discrimination” (Eswaran, 2014).

Given the implications of the glass ceiling and the “taste for discrimination” against the LGBT community—bad for gay men and worse even for lesbians—it is imperative to consider and provide support for LGBT members in the workplace. This is highlighted in the reviewed Pinoy BL series: women offer male lead characters emotional, moral, and social support. This is regardless of whether the woman herself is attracted to the opposite sex or the same sex. It may also be highlighted that gender diversity is promoted in the Pinoy BL, given this portrayal of support systems. Using *Boys Lockdown The Series* and the spinoff of *Gameboys* as examples, the women supporting roles also indicate same-sex attraction rather than heterosexual, with some women supporting characters also previously involved romantically with one of the lead characters.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines has offered another developing story in terms of the multi-faceted entertainment industry. The phenomenal success of the Pinoy BL genre—an influence of both Asian and Western equivalents—has increased the level of social acceptance of Philippine society of the notion of male same-sex relationships and social relations, as the BL genre now also shares a part of the mainstream entertainment menu. The BL genre has emerged as

one of the coping mechanisms of the LGBT community, and also a source of hope for the community and its advocates, especially during this time of the pandemic.

In this paper, we outline four basic arguments of the Philippine BL genre that may be of value to gender economics in particular, and to gender studies literature in general. First, as shown in the BL genre material, gender identity and sexual orientation expressions formed in the household affect the person's future decisions when it comes to the extent of participation in the labor market given societal definitions of work as either male- or female-appropriate, and the degree of acceptance of LGBT members in the workplace. The gender roles and determination issues portrayed by the lead characters in the BL genre reflect the struggles and conflicts that also have implications later in their professions. Regardless of the experiences of the lead characters, these elements provide a window to a more complex situation that gay men experience—even before and, more so, during the pandemic.

Second, there are economic consequences or considerations when gay men and lesbians openly identify themselves as members of the LGBT community. We see how this decision to come out initially depends on the degree of support coming from the household (the family) and the immediate emotional support circles (friends and peers). Following coming out, considerations about social acceptance and how these would affect labor and employment opportunities also matter.

Third, we see that not only vulnerable women and children experience domestic violence, but members of the LGBT community do as well. Arguably, the situation created by the pandemic further exacerbated the probable increase of cases of domestic violence that were unreported.

Finally, the alliances formed between male lead characters and female supporting characters across the BL genre provide some degree of assurance that, generally speaking, women are natural allies, advocates, and supporters in the plight of the LGBT community. Noting this connection between females and gay men depicted in the BL genre (which is also reflected in real-world experiences), the efforts to advocate for development and empowerment in formal organizations are issues not

only particular to women. As women employees and workers face discrimination in both public institutions and private organizations, so do gays and lesbians.⁹ Thus, we see advocacies of gay liberation as similar to causes for women empowerment for females. Boy Abunda in his TEDxADMU talk in 2016 posed the question: “Why can’t we have a gay president?” Thus, such issues of discrimination against women climbing the corporate ladder are also possibly experienced by members of the LGBT community.

Apart from the glass ceiling phenomenon, an equally important issue highlighted in the BL genre is the pressing issue of legalization of same-sex unions. While the content of the BL genre may not directly address this issue, the mere fact that it normalizes male gay relationships (via a romcom narrative) may have implications on attitudes about same-sex unions. In fact, coordination models in economics have highlighted the importance of legally-recognized unions (whether heterosexual or same-sex) in attaining maximal benefits. This was earlier proposed by Becker (1957) in a model of the household, but under a heterosexual union. Fortunately, there are developments in recent literature that suggest that such benefit may extend to same-sex unions (e.g., Wienke & Hill, 2009; Delhommer & Hamermesh, 2021).

Finally, as LGBT advocacy and support continue to increase and widen, so does the appreciation of the BL genre as media industry players continue to look into such developments (Requintina, 2020). Towards the end of 2020, some of the surveyed BL materials in Table 1 have indications of sequels and spinoffs. In addition, there are upcoming new BL series and movies that are appearing in mainstream entertainment—with the 2020 MMFF having showcased the first BL movie in its lineup. And despite the struggles, the BL genre in the Philippines provides another

⁹ Examples of Becker’s (1957) concept of “taste for discrimination” applied to homosexual laborers is illustrated in a study by Badgett (1995), where homosexual males earn less than their heterosexual male counterparts, controlling for backgrounds. Black et al. (2003) even showed, using US data, that while homosexual males are paid lower, homosexual women are paid even lower due to “double-discrimination” (cited in Eswaran, 2014).

avenue of hope for the LGBT advocacy and community in general, in its pursuit of equality, non-discrimination, and elimination of biases and violence. Indeed, the elements of the Pinoy BL discussed in the review contribute to the wealth of discussion, research, and discourse in gender economics particularly in the Philippine setting. As a rallying call for the LGBT community and society at large, we reiterate the words of advice of Flo to Ben in *Ben x Jim*:

Nothing in this world can ever set us free. Not love, not peace, not wealth: it's the truth. It's the only force as powerful as time itself.

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