

Femme, Feminine, Female: An Analysis of Contemporary Queer Filipino Women Representation in Online Media

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ABSTRACT

The Philippine media have shaped public opinion and reinforced stereotypes about sexual minority groups. This study examines the representation of queer Filipino women in contemporary online streaming media, aiming to answer the questions: How are Filipino queer women portrayed in online media? What themes and tropes characterize these portrayals and what messages about the queer Filipino experience are conveyed? The study analyzes three online limited series, each consisting of four to six episodes with runtimes of 20 to 30 minutes, streamed from 2020 to 2022 on iWantTFC and YouTube. Employing textual analysis within a feminist and queer theoretical framework, the research reveals distinct findings. Queer Filipino women in online media are depicted in a more positive light compared to traditional media representations. They are portrayed as young, confident, successful, financially and sexually independent individuals, who are comfortable with their sexuality and bodies, while living in accepting and tolerant environments. However, these portrayals primarily represent one facet of the queer experience: femme, middle class, cisgender, and mostly either lesbian or bisexual, with other queer women refusing to label themselves. The shows also portray queer female relationships through heteronormative lenses, perpetuating gendered power dynamics. Despite progress, queer women are at times objectified and stereotypes persist. The study thus indicates the need for nuanced, authentic representations that highlight the diverse gender identities and expressions of queer Filipino women, fostering a better understanding of their lived experiences and challenging existing stereotypes.

Keywords: *Online media, queer representation, queer women, Filipina, LGBTQIA+*

Introduction

If there is one word that best describes how Philippine society views members of the LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Plus) community, it is ambivalence. While the Philippine society considers itself tolerant of the LGBTQIA+ community compared to other Asian countries, it still has repeatedly resisted passing laws to protect sexual minorities, legalize same-sex marriage or civil unions (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2023; Labor & San Pascual, 2023), making them vulnerable to discrimination, abuse, exploitation and violence. This tolerance of the LGBTQIA+ community is not “true social integration” within Philippine society and can be “conditional” and “limited” to particular professional and social roles (Cheng, et al., 2016).

The conservatism and traditionalism prevalent in the Philippines can be attributed to the dominance of Catholicism even though historical records confirm the existence of gay people in elevated positions in pre-colonial times (UNDP, USAID, 2014).

The Philippines’ conservative view could also be attributed to the pervasive and deeply entrenched gender and heterosexual norms, which act as forms of social control that kept the social classes in check and preserved social order and structure (Kimmel, 2000). These norms impose rigid restrictions, reflecting complex power dynamics and domination over lower classes and minority groups. Gender roles were instrumental in facilitating the transition to a capitalist economy, where clear lines of inheritance and roles were deemed essential for efficient property transfer (Kimmel, 2000).

Conservatism, traditionalism, and gender and heterosexual norms under a capitalist economy are reinforced by social institutions – family, peer, school, government and the media (Kimmel, 2000) – that contribute to barriers to sexual minority rights. Of these institutions, the media, undoubtedly, plays an essential role in shaping public opinion and policy-making. Over time, the media has become vital, evolving with the advent of technology and the internet, serving multiple functions to consumers: forming “parasocial relationships” with media personalities, providing an escape from reality, reducing anxiety, increasing pleasure or setting political agendas (Horton & Wohl, 1956, Pearlman, 1959, Stephenson, McCombs & Shaw, 1972, as cited in Rubin, 2008).

The introduction of new media has further changed social attitudes and behavior. Television, for instance, provides coherent visualization and messaging for ritualistic mass consumption through dramas, commercials, news and other programs, resulting in a consequential “cultivation of shared conceptions of reality” (Gerbner, et al., 2002, p.44). This cultivation involves the repetition of imagery and messaging, “defining” the world and “legitimizing” social order.

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Philippine media, regulated by the government and subject to advertiser requirements on content production and airing, definitely contributes to reinforcing the current social order.

However, the emergence of cable television and, subsequently, online streaming platforms (which rely on subscription) has provided producers with a means to circumvent advertisers and regulatory boards. This has led to the creation of more daring, varied, thought-provoking, and controversial content. The ubiquity of the internet, smartphones, streaming platforms, and social media has made media consumption more intimate and active. Consumers are now able to connect with or critique content creators, as well as create and transform content themselves, as in the creation of fan fiction (Shirky, 2012).

This has implications for the creation of queer content, where the Philippines lags behind its Western counterparts. American television has, for example, made more strides in queer representation than Philippine television. From NBC's "Friends" to ABC's "Ellen" to Showtime's "The L-Word", American shows have contributed to the visibility of queer men and women. Even US President Joe Biden, in expressing his support for same sex marriage, acknowledged that the American gay comedy "Will and Grace" had done more to educate Americans about gay men than previous efforts, highlighting the power and role of mass media in normalizing queer people and their experiences (Bond and Compton, 2015). This is supported by studies that found American viewers are interested in and invested in young, gay characters on television (Armstrong as quoted by Bond and Compton 2015). Another study found that participants were more likely to develop positive attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ when they viewed positive videos (Levina et al., 2000 as quoted by Bond and Compton, 2015), and a similar study showed that viewers' attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ changed when they repeatedly watched clips of a gay couple from HBO's "Six Feet Under" (Schiappa, et al., 2005 as quoted by Bond and Compton, 2015). Over the years, as more mainstream television and streaming platforms integrated queer characters, they also contributed to the normalization of queerness and the queer experience.

In contrast, Philippine mass media portrays LGBTQIA+ characters and experiences in a more traditional light. Much of the cinematic or television content produced, from 1954 onwards – from late actor Dolphy's "Jack and Jill" all the way to the present – has shown stereotypical depictions of LGBTQIA+: that of the *bakla* (effeminate gay) or the *tomboy* (butch lesbian), both traditionally pejorative or derogatory. While the LGBTQIA+ community and advocates have lobbied for more protection and recognition for LGBTQIA+ rights (Labor & San Pascual, 2022; De Guzman, 2023), recent controversies have shown that there is still much to do. For example, the controversial cake-eating incident

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involving celebrity and Showtime host Vice Ganda and partner Ion Perez earned the ire of Filipino viewers, prompting the MTRCB (Movie and Television Review and Classification Board) to take action (Mallorca, 2023). Similarly, the recent and controversial religious performance of Filipino drag queen Pura Luka Vega resulted in a lawsuit against the artist (Boiser, 2023; Macairan, 2023; de Santos, 2023). While both issues are multi-faceted, it should be noted that both controversies involved members of the LGBTQIA+. Likewise, when local beauty queen Michelle Dee and actor Klea Pineda came out as gay, there were negative, homophobic reactions (Tsao, 2023; Sampayan, 2023; Mallorca, 2023). In the instances described above, it is apparent that Philippine society is not as accepting as it claims to be.

Moreover, local films and television shows produced with LGBTQIA+ characters indicate a much higher percentage of gay male characters, with only 10 to 11% of them representing queer women. Save for GMA's *The Rich Man's Daughter* (2015), there has not been any other mainstream television show starring queer women as lead characters, relegating them to supporting roles, as seen in ABS-CBN's drama *Dirty Linen* (2023). Currently, there has been a paucity of queer content in cinemas as well, with local production companies opting for more mainstream content to compete with dominant Hollywood-produced films in general (IMDbPro, 2024). This trend has prompted smaller production companies to turn to online streaming platforms as alternatives for queer narratives, where *BL* (boys' love) series have thrived and gained popularity. As gay-centric series continue to flourish online, fewer media depicting queer women are being produced.

Cultivation theory posits that television plays a role in "shaping viewers' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and values" (Gerbner & Ross, as cited in Shrum, 2017). Therefore, it is important to assess if existing depictions of queer Filipino women are positive and representative of their experiences. Through the lens of feminist and queer theory, which challenge preconceived notions and conceptions of gender and sexual identity, the researcher sought to answer the following questions: How are Filipino queer women portrayed in online media? What themes and tropes characterize these portrayals? and What messages about the queer Filipino experience are conveyed?

As can be seen in the discussions above, it cannot be denied that narratives hold power, and queer narratives depicting the LGBTQIA+ community in a positive light can go a long way not only in changing perceptions about the LGBTQIA+ community, but also in paving the way for policies that protect the rights of the community.

Methodology

This research employed textual analysis within the theoretical frameworks of feminist and queer theory to investigate the representation of queer Filipino women in contemporary online streaming media. The analysis is grounded in feminist theory to examine the portrayal of women characters in the selected series, focusing on their roles, characterization and experiences. Works by feminists Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze, Judith Butler's concept of performativity (Salin, 2002), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's feminist and critical theory (Tibile, 2012), Simone de Beauvoir's ideas on feminist theory as applied to cinema (Blum-Reid, 1997), and Kimberle Krenshaw's concept of intersectionality, as well as feminist and queer theorists such as Adrienne Rich, and her work on "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), Michel Foucault and his book on "The History of Sexuality" (1978) and Gayle Rubin's "On the Politics of Sexuality" (2006), have informed the analysis of the chosen series for this study. Additionally, works by Ruti (2016) and her use of feminist film theory in her analysis of *Pretty Woman*, which revisits the movie and delves into its feminist undercurrents, along with other studies on media using feminist and queer theory, such as De Leon & Jintalan (2018), Nunez (2017), and Bravo (2022) were reviewed.

Guided by these perspectives, the analysis focused on how the selected shows depicted stereotypes, objectification and traditional gender norms, as well as whether they reinforced, challenged or subverted these constructs. Moreover, using feminist theory also meant examining how the shows depicted the agency and empowerment of women, assessing whether they are active or passive agents in their own stories. In addition, feminist theory also allowed the researcher to consider how intersectionality is depicted in the shows, considering how the shows tackled gender in relation to class, race and other important social structures, and the representation of feminist issues, such as workplace equality and gender-based violence. Moreover, feminist theory enabled examination of media ownership and production, and their impact on the production of queer female narratives. In addition, queer theory, as part of feminist theory, served as an important theoretical framework for analyzing the selected web series in terms of depiction of diversity of queer identities, the existence of heteronormativity in the narrative, portrayal of queer female characters in positive or negative lights, the presence of stereotypes and tropes, and the authenticity and diversity of experiences portrayed by queer female characters.

The pragmatic approach adopted in this paper considered practical factors such as time constraints and resource limitations. This ensured efficiency and

practicality in the selection and analysis of the queer female web series, while still being able to derive meaningful results despite these constraints.

Three online limited television web series were chosen and used in this study. They were chosen based not only on availability, which ensured a wider viewership, but also on whether the queer female characters played leading roles in their respective narratives, allowing for a more substantial analysis of their depiction. Thus, all series analyzed featured queer women prominently both as lead and supporting characters. Additionally, all three series were locally written, produced, and directed by Filipinos and Philippine production companies and starred Filipino actors. These series were the only ones readily accessible and downloadable at the time of the study, implying that other viewers could also access them easily through platforms such as iWantTFC and YouTube, which offer free, ad-supported subscriptions (with ad-free viewing available through premium subscriptions). The online limited web series chosen were *Fluid* (iWantTFC, run time, 28-30 minutes, four episodes), *Sleep with Me* (iWantTFC, run time, 28-30 minutes, six episodes), and *Pearl Next Door* (youtube.com, run time 30 minutes, eight episodes). Where possible, the videos were downloaded for analysis. All these shows also had similar run times and a reasonably short number of episodes, enabling the researcher to watch, transcribe, and analyze each episode of each series for queer representation of Filipino women.

A total of 18 episodes, each with an average duration of 28-30 minutes per episode, were analyzed from three online web series. The episodes were viewed multiple times, with a minimum of three viewings per episode, to enable the identification of significant segments relevant to the study. During the initial viewing, notes were taken for familiarization with the different storylines, queer characters, themes, tropes, representations, and portrayals. Subsequent viewings aimed to further explore and document these elements. Additionally, specific scenes or sequences were reviewed as needed to ensure accurate analysis.

Due to time constraints, episodes and scenes were chosen for analysis based on their portrayal of the queer female characters, considering aspects such as agency, empowerment, stereotypes, media ownership, production influence, narrative depiction of sexuality and queer identities, heteronormativity, gender and power dynamics, authenticity of the queer female experience, and intersectionality (i.e. class, race). These aspects were evaluated through character interactions, dialogue and language use, representation of relationships, critical or pivotal moments (such as coming out scenes, confrontations of stereotypes or instances of empowerment), narrative arcs, as well as elements like costumes, set designs, locations, and in some instances, performances, which contributed to the representation and portrayal of queer female characters.

Thematic analysis was used throughout the viewing process to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns or themes across all three series. Anchored on the feminist and queer theoretical frameworks, this method provided a deeper understanding and description of the data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, initial codes were generated, explored, and refined to develop a coding scheme for analyzing different elements of the series, aligning with the theoretical frameworks discussed.

Furthermore, the scholarly works of researchers with similar studies in the areas of media and gender were consulted to ensure credibility, reliability, and validity of the data. Where possible, these researchers were personally consulted as the research was being conceptualized, during the data gathering process, initial result generation, preliminary analysis, and discussion formulation. Specifically, the studies of Alimen (2009) and Campillan (2023) were reviewed and consulted, serving as guides in the research process of the current study. The authors of the research were consulted, and they provided helpful feedback and critique on the paper after reviewing the initial results, codes, and themes, which helped with the direction and refinement of the paper. These, along with reflexivity, were done to increase rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, including constraints on data collection and the potential introduction of biases through the selection of series based on theoretical frameworks and criteria. These may limit the generalizability of the findings to all representations of female queerness in contemporary media, and variations may exist in series that were not chosen for this study.

Results and Discussion

This research sought to answer three questions as follows: How are Filipino queer women portrayed in online media? What themes and tropes characterize these portrayals? and What messages about the queer Filipino experience are conveyed? Based on these research questions, it could be seen that the representation and portrayal of queer Filipino women are feminine, femme, and cisgender; that they identify as lesbian, bisexual, or do not label themselves at all; that they are young, employed, urban and middle class; and thus are financially independent. Moreover, tropes discovered about Filipino queer women include the use of heteronormative norms in relationships, a dominant-submissive gender and power dynamic, the objectification of women, and the perpetuation of stereotypes against bisexual women and lesbians. Finally, the themes gleaned from the series studied include safe spaces and found families, the fluid concepts of identity and identification, choice and agency, and positive representation.

Representation and portrayal of queer Filipino women

While there has been an increase in Filipina queer representation, particularly in online streaming platforms, that reflect a shift in media narratives, the web content analyzed for this research reveal, however, that the portrayals are similar or not diverse at all. The web series studied predominantly feature characters who are feminine, femme and cisgender, focusing primarily on lesbians, bisexuals or characters with undisclosed sexualities. Further, these depictions often highlight young, independent women who are employed, urban and belong to the middle class. While this visibility shows the progress that has been made in queer representation in general, it also shows a limited scope, as these narratives exclude the broader spectrum of gender expressions, socioeconomic backgrounds and diversity within the queer Filipina community. This study thus has revealed gaps in representation of queer women on the web series studied that may impact on audience perception and discourse.

Feminine, Femme, Cis

One common portrayal or representation that was depicted in all three queer web series is that all of the characters are feminine, femme, and cisgender. This can be seen in the clothing and appearance of the lead female queer characters in all three series. In *Pearl Next Door* (Intalan & Lana 2020-2021), the lead self-identified as bisexual character, Pearl Gatdula (played by Adrianna So), is long-haired, wears feminine clothes (blouses, skirts, dresses), make-up, and nail polish. Supporting characters and love interests, self-identified lesbian Karleen Gregorios (Iana Bernardez) and Alex Aguirre (Rachel Coates) are also feminine. Similarly, in the series *Fluid* (Katigbak et al., 2020), the previously heterosexual and lead character Mitch (Roxanne Barcelo), and her love interest, self-identified lesbian George (Ann Lorraine Colis) with whom she engages in her first non-heterosexual relationship, are both feminine in appearance. Both sport long hair, wear make-up and feminine clothes. A minor character, Portia (Zar Donato), is depicted as androgynous. Finally, in the series *Sleep with Me* (Katigbak et al., 2022), the lead character Harry (Janine Guttierrez) and her love interest Luna (Lovi Poe) are also depicted as feminine, with both of them also having long hair. Luna, however, wears the more non-traditional loose clothing, jeans, and leather or non-feminine shoes. Again, a minor character, Belle (Gelai Penales), is depicted as androgynous.

As can be seen from above, it is also worth noting that the representation of the queer Filipino woman is overwhelmingly femme and feminine, which excludes and thus rejects other forms of gender expression, implying that the more acceptable way of being a queer Filipino woman is to be feminine.

Les, Bi, Unknown

Another representation noticed in all three series is the prominence of the more known sexual identities: lesbian and bisexual. In *Fluid* and *Pearl Next Door*, George and Karleen both identify as lesbian (Episode 1 for both characters). Pearl identifies as bisexual (as shown in Episode 1 during the vlogging episode). Interestingly, Mitch in *Fluid* does not identify as either lesbian, bisexual, or any other identity. In *Sleep with Me*, neither Luna nor Harry identify as lesbian or bisexual either. It is possible, however, that since both Mitch and Luna have just come from a heterosexual relationship, they are not as ready as the other queer female characters to identify as either lesbian or bisexual, although it should also be noted that both series do not explore this aspect of Mitch and Luna's newly-discovered part of their identity: this transition from a heterosexual to a homosexual relationship. Nor do the series spend time to dramatize their coming out process to indicate its integration to their identity. What is interesting though is the postulation of the three series of the complexity of sexuality and sexual orientation (Rosario, et al., 2006).

Young, Employed, Urban and Middle Class

All the queer Filipina characters analyzed from the three series also share other similar characteristics. For one, all characters are young (in their twenties or thirties), educated, middle-class, employed, and independent. Additionally, all live in urban areas (the setting for all three series is the city, or in this case, Manila).

In *Pearl Next Door*, Pearl is a successful vlogger, with each episode showing her in a spacious bedroom, with a veranda, and other amenities. The set design for the bedroom, where she shoots most of her vlogs, are filled with paintings, plants, and furniture. Similarly, Karleen is also part of the middle-class, in that she has an online, work-from-home, administrative job (she is shown managing the wedding plans for her best friend in Episode 3); lives alone in an apartment; and has her own car, whereas Alex, a former classmate who has just come back from the United States, is also implied to be financially well-off.

There is also the absence of parents or other family members in the episodes, which indicates that these queer women are living alone and independently. In *Fluid*, Mitch is also part of the middle-class, shown through her bakeshop business (episode 2) and the large, two-story house with a garage in a gated subdivision with her family (Episode 1). George, her love interest, works in films (Episode 1). She lives comfortably in a spacious, fully furnished apartment, that includes other amenities (as a dark room, an office/workspace, state-of-the-art equipment, a mini-library and so on), and a vintage convertible car (Episode 2).

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In *Sleep with Me*, Harry and Luna are also both depicted as middle-class. Harry works as a DJ (revealed in Episode 1), Luna as textbook editor (Episode 2), with comfortable apartments (shown in Episode 1 for Harry and Episode 2 for Luna) and, a car (Luna in Episode 1).

It should be noted however, that of the three series, *Sleep with Me*, is the only one that attempts to show a more realistic view of queer Filipina lives. Where the other queer female characters in the other series are flawless and conventionally attractive, Harry is a queer character who suffers from a disability, a high school car accident left her disabled and confined to a wheelchair. Apart from her struggles as a differently-abled queer woman, as when she passes through a hallway littered with trash (Episode 1), encounters non-PWD (Persons with Disabilities)-friendly establishments (Episode 3) and workplaces (Episode 5), she also struggles financially and professionally as a DJ from a struggling radio station on the brink of closing down. In Episode 3, she is finally terminated from her job. Luna, on the other hand, while also middle class, is a college dropout facing job insecurity as well, compounded by the fact that she also suffers from a disability: a sleep disorder that renders her unable to finish her education, find a job to accommodate her disorder (Episode 2) or even maintain a relationship (Episode 1).

Interestingly, when viewed through the lens of intersectionality, in the case of Harry and Luna, the writer draws parallelisms between queerness and disability, with both queer characters experiencing the same or similar forms of discrimination for being women, being queer and for being disabled. In this, *Sleep with Me* rises above the other series because it tries to depict a more realistic, authentic depiction of queer women's lives in the Philippines.

As can be seen in the above, all queer female characters depicted hail from a similar class or background, thus showing only one aspect of the Filipina queer experience. A Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) Family Income and Expenditure Survey showed that though 40% (four out of 10 people) of the population are middle class and 1.4% are high income, a majority (58.4%) are still in the low-income bracket (Zoleta, 2022). This means that they have experiences and challenges that will be different from those in the middle or upper income class. As indicated in a 2018 Philippine Institute of Development Studies (PIDS) research, middle-income households are characterized by access to education, health, and other government and non-government services, urban living, affordable housing and transportation, job stability, higher educational attainment, fewer children and better opportunities (Zoleta, 2022; Albert et al., 2018), all of which may not be as available to the lower income classes. In fact, in a similar study, a large percentage of poor Filipinos live in Metro Manila

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in urban poor settlements or informal settler communities (Racelis & Aguirre, 2005 as cited in Ceperiano et al., 2016), a situation that is absent from all three series, which are all set in Manila. The slums of Manila, for example, are notably absent in each series. Another study also indicated the intersectionality between queerness and poverty, which impact on “agency, security, dignity and meaning of life” (Thoreson, 2011 as cited in Ceperiano et al., 2016), again, a reality that is absent in all three shows.

Independent Queers

Since the queer female characters in the selected series being studied are all young, educated, middle-class and urban, this also has implications in terms of agency and autonomy – important aspects of feminist theory. Class, background and youth translate to independence, both financially and sexually, giving the queer female characters agency in their lives and the autonomy to make decisions for themselves. As such, the queer Filipina characters are more open and freer to question and challenge existing social and gender norms and expectations. Consequently, they are in a position to reject these, and explore other paths for themselves. This translates, not only for example, in the choice of jobs but also choice of partner and relationships.

In the case of *Pearl Next Door*, Pearl is a young, bisexual Filipina vlogger discussing issues on love, romance, partners and relationships (Episode 1, 2, and 3) sex, and orgasms (Episode 6) through her vlog entries. In her vlogs, the issue of her sexuality is matter-of-fact, especially when she declares her feelings for Karleen. In the series, YouTube and vlogging are used to shift the point of view, to break the fourth wall, and engage in meta discourse with the audience, with viewers able to comment on the series in real time, making the audience not only active consumers, but an active part of the series, able to engage and participate in the narrative and even talk back to the character of Pearl as if she were a real person. In this way, the choice of using vlogging as part of the narrative format also serves to humanize the characters and have the viewers invest in and thus relate to the characters. In this sense, the series succeeds in depicting queer women as normal people on the social media YouTube, a common platform that has the potential to normalize such depictions of queer female experiences. Similarly, queer characters Karleen and Alex, express their feelings for her via social media posts or directly to Pearl herself.

In *Fluid*, Mitch’s independence also allows her to tentatively explore a queer relationship with George, despite her initial apprehensions and the tacit disapproval of her family (Episode 2). Mitch’s independence stems from being a business owner, as the series shows that she owns a bakeshop. This implies that she has the means and the capital to establish her own business. Her financial

independence is shown in her ability to go on regular dates and meet her friends regularly for meals or for parties (Episode 1) and her ability to contribute to the family (her younger brother in Episode 1, casually asks for PhP 500 from her when their mother, played by Janice de Belen, refuses to give him money). This gives her a measure of independence and control over her life and her decisions, that may not be available to other Filipino women her age. Her independence also means that though her mother disapproves of her dating George, the fact that she can contribute to the family income, and thus has a say in family matters, means the mother (and the rest of the family) cannot simply force Mitch to stop seeing George or to reunite with her ex-boyfriend. Had Mitch been dependent on her family and had she had a low-income job, it is possible that she may not be able to make such decisions so easily.

In *Sleep With Me*, Luna's independence also makes it possible for her to break up with her boyfriend in Episode 1 and fall for Harry by the end of the same episode. Harry shows this similar independence, indicating her interest in Luna by the end of Episode 1, publicly announcing her attraction to Luna on air by Episode 2 and going on a date and embarking on an intimate relationship with Luna by Episode 3.

The discussions presented above are consistent with a study that was done by Ceperiano et al. (2016), in which middle and upper class queer women (lesbian, bisexual, etc.) would have different experiences from lower income ones. It should be noted that the queer women characters in all the shows either identify as bisexual or lesbian (or in some instances, do not label themselves at all) and none identify with the common local term, "tomboy". The absence of the word "tomboy" in all the series discussed imply, as Ceperiano et al. (2016) have pointed out, that the word is largely associated with the Filipino low-income masculine lesbian woman, a word infused with mixed meanings, simultaneously empowering for the lesbian, but also pejorative or derogatory when used by others (particularly heterosexuals). The word "tomboy" encompasses "gender, sexuality and class" as a single identity, the unitary experience of discrimination that the "tomboy" experiences in which her "non-normative gender expression also signifies their non-normative sexuality in the context of the urban poor" (Ceperiano et al., 2016). Ceperiano et al. (2016) also pointed out that identifying as "tomboy" would invite name-calling, gossip and public ridicule, with the tomboy only being able to buy acceptance if they were useful, as when they are able to contribute to the household income. As such, the lack of this word, representation and portrayal, ignores or erases their presence in Filipino society, where gendered roles, heterosexism and heteronormative norms are rigid, thus also ignoring the more dominant (lower) classes where this form of expression and identity is more prevalent.

In all three series, all the women actively pursue the object of their desire/attraction, as well as confidently express their sexuality and sexual independence. In fact, what is interesting is how their sexuality and sexual and gender identity are matter-of-fact, and natural.

As can be seen in the discussions above, the modern queer Filipino woman, as depicted in online contemporary media, is open, liberal, independent, confident, sexual, sensual, and queer – a departure from previous depictions of them. However, as can be seen from above, the depictions only show one facet of the queer Filipina experience and more should be done to reflect other realities and experiences in the Philippines.

Tropes on Queer Women

In the course of the textual analysis of the selected queer web series, the tropes that were identified as recurring were Heteronormative Queer Female Relationships, Dominant vs. Submissive Power Dynamics and Queer Women as Sex Objects. These tropes were identified based on established frameworks in queer and feminist theory, which critically examine how media representations can perpetuate or challenge societal norms.

Heteronormative Queer Female Relationships reflect the tendency to depict queer relationships into familiar, traditional dynamics that mirror heterosexual norms, where clear gender and conventional relationship roles are prioritized. Heteronormativity, as defined by in queer theory, is the “presumption and privileging of heterosexuality” (Pollitt, et al, 2021).

The trope of Dominant vs. Submissive Power Dynamics draws from feminist theory’s critique of power imbalances in relationships (Atwood, 2019), which, as this study reveals, is mirrored in queer content as well, reinforcing stereotypes about gender roles, with one in a position of control, the other depicted as passive.

Queer Women as Sex Objects also comes from feminist theory, which highlights how women are often sexualized or objectified by the camera lens for male entertainment, or for the male gaze due to the dominance of heterosexual men in the whole film or television production process (Mulvey, 1975). Queer women, as unattainable objects of desire, are sexualized or objectified even more, their bodies and identities commodified and reduced to objects for entertainment.

These prevalent tropes reveal the progress and limitations of current queer Filipina media representations online. Analyzing these tropes with the aid of queer and feminist theory revealed that narratives surrounding queer Filipino women need to allow for more diverse, genuine and complex portrayals of queer identities.

Heteronormative Queer Female Relationships

One common trope that has come up in these series is the portrayal of queer female romantic relationships through a heteronormative lens: often defining contemporary queer female romantic narratives by the pursuit of romantic love in a way that mirrors traditional heterosexual relationships. Thus, these portrayals frequently involve familiar, socially accepted storylines such as meeting “the one,” courtship and the performance of activities to win the person’s favor and the presence of a romantic rival. These heteronormative storylines thus overlook the broader spectrum of queer experiences, confining the queer Filipina narrative to the pursuit of romantic fulfillment that follows conventional standards.

Moreover, as these storylines often emphasize the need for queer relationships to conform to societal expectations, they also reinforce the idea that love and relationships are only legitimate if achieved through these normative paths, diminishing the diversity of queer Filipino relationships (for example, relationships without rigid labels, or partnerships that prioritize companionship over romance). While audiences may find these narratives familiar and relatable, they depict a limited understanding of queer love, failing to portray the more complex, fluid nature of queer relationships. By focusing stories on the pursuit of love based on heteronormative practices, they limit the rich diversity of experiences within the queer community, reinforcing traditional narratives in a space that has the potential to feature more wide-ranging and inclusive portrayals.

In *Pearl Next Door*, Pearl openly expresses her intention to court (*ligaw*) Karleen. The aforementioned courtship is a traditional heteronormative practice usually done by Filipino men courting women, wherein a man wins a woman’s favor through gifts, dates, and other means, until the woman says “yes” or agrees to date or have a relationship with him. In this sense, the woman is an object that needs to be won by the man. When another queer female character, Alex, pursues Pearl, a love triangle is formed in which both characters fight over Pearl, with Alex announcing in episode 5, “Date us both...I am willing to earn you”, again, implying that Pearl is an object that needs to be “earned” or won. The courtship depicted in the series shows both Alex and Karleen trying to “win” Pearl over by showcasing their talents and/or skills (i.e. dancing and singing), physical prowess, physical desirability on social media and financial stability (the sending of gifts, flowers, etc) (Episode 5), all of which are calculated to demonstrate their desirability as partners.

Similarly, in *Fluid*, George also courts Mitch through dates and gifts. While doing so, she copies heteronormative gestures, as when she opens car doors for Mitch (Episode 2), holds out chairs for Mitch (Episode 2), fetches Mitch from

work and brings her home during their dates (Episode 2, Episode 3). In this sense, George, though feminine like Mitch, acts as the man, and by default Mitch is the woman, in their relationship. This can also be seen in how the relationship begins and progresses, in that George initiates their first interaction, George is the first to add Mitch on social media, the first to ask her out on a date, the first to initiate their physical relationship.

Interestingly, like *Pearl Next Door*, the back half of *Fluid* introduces the *love triangle* trope, with Mitch's ex-boyfriend Jacob (Joross Gamboa) trying to win Mitch back. As such, George and Jacob compete to win over Mitch, this time pitting the heterosexual man, Jacob, against the lesbian, George, to win the affection of Mitch. At one point of the series is a confrontation scene where each one sizes each other up to see their suitability and desirability for Mitch (Episode 3). Again, much like *Pearl Next Door*, the queer Filipina character is a passive object to be won in *Fluid*.

In *Sleep with Me*, Harry and Luna forego the traditional heteronormative practice of ligaw or courtship. Harry initiates the relationship by announcing her attraction to Luna on air (Episode 2), but Luna initiates the first date (Episode 2). Similarly, their physical relationship begins when Harry initiates the first kiss (Episode 3), but she never pushes Luna, giving the other character a chance to reject or accept her offer of intimacy.

Dominant vs. Submissive Power Dynamics

In connection to the above, since the queer female characters of *Fluid* and *Pearl Next Door* follow heteronormative practices, then the gender and power dynamics are also reflected in a traditional, heteronormative way. This traditional means of establishing a relationship, where the man is the active pursuer and the woman is the passive receptacle of affection, indicates an oblique or skewed view of gender power dynamics, in which the woman is an object that needs to be won by the man. This suggests an unequal and gendered relationship between the dominant (the man) and the submissive (the woman), the kind of heteronormative relationship seemingly replicated in the queer female relationships depicted in the series studied.

This is most apparent in *Fluid*, in which George is the more dominant partner in their relationship. As discussed in the previous section, she initiates the relationship, even the physical aspects of it, in the series, and during said intimate scenes, George is the dominant partner (the top), Mitch the submissive (bottom) one (Episode 2, Episode 3). Whilst they are in a queer relationship, they still follow a traditional, heteronormative and thus an unequal, gendered relationship. In this sense, it could be said that *Fluid* lacks a fundamental understanding of

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how queer female relationships work, especially non-traditional ones, where both queer women are feminine and cisgender.

To a lesser extent, “*Pearl Next Door*” depicts this also, though paradoxically, whilst Pearl has agency over choice of partner, she also has to submit to the demands of both Karleen and Alex, when they both demand that she give each of them time and an audience (Episode 5). In this way, she is subject to their whims, as when Karleen realizes she is also attracted to Pearl (Episode 3) or as when Alex requests that they talk everyday (Episode 2). It should be noted that as this series was filmed and released during the pandemic, intimate or physical scenes have been kept at a minimum.

Again, *Sleep with Me* departs from how queer female characters are depicted in the other two series, in that neither Harry nor Luna takes a dominant role in the development of the relationship. Harry is independent and tries to assert herself where needed all throughout the series (at home, at work, in her relationships). Queer physical intimacy, as depicted in their intimate scenes (Episode 3, Episode 4), are also shown as more realistic, as both try to navigate intimacy while dealing with Harry’s disability and Luna’s sleep disorder. Again, in this way, the series succeeds in depicting a more realistic queer female relationship, where there is equality, agency and an absence of heteronormative norms.

Again, as with the previous series, a third party, Belle (Gelai Penales), Harry’s ex-girlfriend, provides a foil to Luna’s character. Unlike the other shows though, Belle, a minor character, is not so much a threat but a plot device, one that pushes Luna to examine her own feelings of jealousy and love for Harry (Episode 4), the impetus with which she finally accepts she loves Harry and its implications for their burgeoning relationship.

Queer Women as Sex Objects

In connection to the above, because of this femininity which, as Ruti (2016) has pointed out is a “heteropatriarchal invention (sic)” (p. 34), intended for male satisfaction, and thus allows for the hypersexualization of women, the queer Filipina characters in the series analyzed are, at some points in the narrative, depicted in a hypersexualized way. This is apparent in *Pearl Next Door*’s Episode 6, when Pearl, Karleen, and Alex all go to a resort for a vacation. In this episode, all the characters are wearing skimpy bikinis and both Karleen and Alex, rivals for Pearl’s affection, can be seen evaluating each other’s physicality, and desirability, implying that a queer Filipino woman’s desirability is closely connected to their physical attractiveness. When Pearl emerges in a similar attire, they both look at Pearl in a suggestive way, transforming Pearl into an objectified character. While the viewer watches female queer desire openly expressed onscreen, the way this desire is depicted also seems designed for males. Pearl thus is a sexual object,

displayed for “erotic contemplation” (Mulvey, 1975). In this episode, the series ceases to be about queer female desire, but about male desire, apparent in the way the queer female characters are shot and shown. This could be connected to the fact that the directors are male, and that the series is not necessarily solely intended for queer Filipino viewers, but also for men, and for their titillation (it should be noted that the directors for all episodes of *Pearl Next Door* are male).

Moreover, this is also apparent in *Fluid*, as in Episode 2, when Mitch has her sexual encounters with George. In this episode, the queer women are in skimpy bikini outfits, and they are shot in an oversexualized, objectified way. Again, it should be noted that the director for *Fluid* is male.

It should be noted however, that while the queer female characters in the series *Sleep with Me* are feminine, the characters are not dressed in revealing clothing. The queer female characters in this series also interact all throughout the series without the oversexualized objectification of the previous two series. It should be noted further that as compared to the two previous series, the series creator, writer and director, Samantha Lee, is a lesbian, which may explain the absence of the so-called male gaze throughout the six episodes of the series.

As Mulvey (1975) has pointed out, “sexual imbalance” exists in the real world, that is divided between the “active/male” and the “passive/female”, largely determined by the “male gaze” that projects fantasies onto the female figure. In *Fluid* and *Pearl Next Door*, the presence of males in the production and direction of both series replicate Mulvey’s theory, in that women are supposed to be looked at and displayed, their appearances existing as code for a striking visual and erotic impact. For this reason, Mulvey (1975) theorizes that the presence of a woman is indispensable in a normal narrative film, functioning as erotic object of the narrative, and erotic object of the viewer. As can be seen in the above, the presence of two or more queer women makes for an even more compelling visual and erotic impact, doubling their impact both as erotic objects of the narrative and the viewer.

Ultimately, what the identified tropes reveal is that the imposition of heteronormative norms on same-sex relationships essentially render them invisible or unrealistic (Ceperiano et al., 2016), and those that enact standard gender roles are visible, and thus valid.

Queer Women Stereotypes

Another trope that can be seen is that of the “evil” or “bad” bisexual. Queer women in media have long been subject to harmful stereotypes, bisexual women even more so (Feinstein, et al., 2022). The most pervasive of these stereotypes about bisexual women, as can be seen in the series studied, is that they are untrustworthy partners, their relationship with women transitory until they find

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the right, male partner. These representations not only reinforce negative ideas about bisexuality but also ignore the reality of healthy, complex relationships, and thus authentic queer Filipina representation. This is more explicitly shown in *Pearl Next Door*, with Karleen, the lesbian character, as the mouthpiece that voices this out.

This can be seen first in episode 2, after Pearl declares her feelings for Karleen on her vlog:

Karleen: Are you even gay?

Pearl: I mean, I like men, too...

Karleen: *Hindi na ako nagda-date ng straight* (I don't date straight people anymore)...that's a big no for me.

Pearl: *May gusto ako sa 'yo*, obviously *hindi ako straight* (I like you, obviously I'm not straight).

Karleen: Or bi...*hindi na ako nagda-date ng straight or bi* (or bi...I no longer date bi people)...

Karleen reiterates this again in episode 3:

I just don't want to be someone's road to self-discovery again. *Ayoko ng maging experiment...ayoko ng maging phase at lalong ayokong maging huling tao na dinata nila bago nila marelize na na straight pala sila or bi* (I don't want to be an experiment...I don't want to be a phase and I definitely do not want to be the last person they date before they realize they are straight or bi).

-(Intalan & Lana, 2020-2021).

In *Fluid*, George acknowledges this, when Jacob comes back to win Mitch back, when George accuses Mitch of using her as a rebound (episode 4):

Mitch: *Iba yung kaso namin ni Jacob* (it's different with me and Jacob)!

George: Why? Because Jacob is a man? *Mas legit relationship nyo, ganon?* Compared *sa ano mang meron tayo*, because what we have isn't special (Your relationship is more legitimate, is that it? Compared to what we have)?

-(Katigbak, et al., 2020)

Lesbian characters also face homophobia and discrimination as well. It should be noted that though the characters are feminine, this does not exclude them from the homophobia of other characters.

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For example, George, a lesbian, faces homophobia in *Fluid* as when she meets Mitch's family in Episode 3 during the family dinner. In Episode 2, Mitch's family, composed of her mother (Janice de Belen), father (Al Tantay) and younger brother and sister, can be seen expressing curiosity and interest in George, when George first comes to pick Mitch up for a date. The mother is portrayed as disapproving through her facial expression. This is made more apparent in Episode 3, when, during the said dinner, Mitch's mother says the following to George:

Mother (Janice de Belen) to George:

Ang pretty pretty mo, wala kang boyfriend? (You're so pretty, why don't you have a boyfriend?)

Ang sexy mo, wala kang boyfriend? (You're so sexy, why don't you have a boyfriend?)

Ang successful, wala kang boyfriend?(You're so successful, why don't you have a boyfriend?) (Katigbak, et al., 2020)

Mitch's mother declares her disapproval again when she talks to Mitch about George, "Si Jacob, *pinagpalit mo sa tomboy?...Si George, mukha na mang mabait, mukha namang stable... mabibigyan ka ba ng anak?* (You replaced Jacob with a tomboy? George looks kind and stable...but can give you a child?)" (Katigbak, et al., 2020).

The above sample dialogues indicate that a woman's worth, whether heterosexual or not, is equated with having a male partner and having a child. Mitch's mother's statements indicate that a woman's physical looks and financial success will mean more if she has a boyfriend, and that no matter how appealing or financially stable they may be, their inability to provide a child and thus create a family renders them inadequate partners.

This is reiterated yet again when Mitch and Jacob argue in Episode 3, when Jacob minimizes Mitch by implying their relationship was a result of Mitch being impulsive, her unclear thinking and her wanting to be entertained after the break-up and George says "Ano sa tingin mo ako...That I am Mitch's bad decision (what do you think of me? That I am Mitch's bad decision)? (Katigbak, et al., 2020)" Later in the conversation, when George tells Jacob the reason he and Mitch failed as a couple was because of his inability to be monogamous, Jacob had emphasized that, compared to George, he at least has the biological ability to provide Mitch with children, and George does not.

When Mitch's mother meets Jacob, Mitch's ex-boyfriend, in the latter part of the same episode, the mother treats Jacob in a more positive manner, facial expression happy and tone excited in Episode 3, despite Jacob's previous

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treatment of Mitch. This is also shown in how the mother talks to Jacob in the episode, entertaining him as Mitch deals with guests during the opening of her bakeshop:

Pasensya ka na ha, busy pa si Mitch, kakaasikaso ng mga bisita. Kumain ka na ba? Anong gusto mo? Gusto mo ng soft drinks, juice, kape, cake? (“I’m so sorry, Mitch is still busy with her guests. Have you eaten? What do you want? Soda, juice, coffee, cake?”) (Katigbak, et al., 2020).

When, during the conversation, Jacob calls her *tita*, Mitch’s mother insists he call her mother instead:

Tita, ano ka ba, mama na lang, hindi ka naman naiiba sa pamilya namin. Kulang na nga lang ikasal kayo ni Mitch (“Tita? Call me mama, you’re part of this family. The only thing missing is your marriage to Mitch”) - (Katigbak, et al., 2020).

When Jacob admits to Mitch’s mother that he had intended to win her over again, Mitch’s mother approves of this and of Jacob, saying, “*Tama yung ginawa mo* (What you’re doing is right).” - (Katigbak, et al., 2020).

These examples indicate that despite what is seemingly shown as acceptance, lesbian characters are still second-tier or lower class citizens compared to the heterosexual male characters. Mitch’s mother’s treatment of the lesbian George, juxtaposed with how she treats Jacob indicate that lesbians are, at most tolerated, at least in online media narratives.

Thus, the above indicates that homophobia exists not only in society in general, but also within the LGBTQIA++ community (Labor et al., 2022). Moreover, there are clear delineations of what constitutes a queer identity in the Philippines: one must either be fully homosexual or fully heterosexual, with no in-between (the bisexual). Again, as with the discussions on heteronormative relationships, this depiction of the Filipino bisexual woman renders them invisible, as it rejects their previous relationships with men, and rejects their viability as potential partners for lesbians. In this sense, the discussions of the lesbian characters, as in Karleen’s case in *Pearl Next Door*, are potentially harmful, in that it perpetuates stereotypes against bisexual women and renders their acceptance, either as part of the LGBTQIA++ community or the society in general, much harder.

Given the portrayal of queer Filipino women in the three online media discussed and the tropes shown, the messages that can be derived from these can be four-fold. First, the Filipino queer woman, by and large, lives a life that may be construed as ruled by heteronormative constraints. This can be seen in the

employment of the heterosexual concept of courtship (*ligaw*) and acceptance or rejection (*basted*), as in the case of *Pearl Next Door*. The queer female characters in all three online shows also appear to be defined by their previous and present queer or non-queer relationships, resulting in the quintessential love triangle trope mostly seen in the heterosexual romantic genre. Secondly, as heteronormative constraints define queer female relationships, these relationships are also defined heteronormative gender and power dynamics, such as the existence of a dominant or active partner and a submissive or passive partner, mirroring traditional gender roles. This can be seen in the series, *Fluid*, wherein George, by default, is the initiator of the relationship, taking on the more active, masculine, dominant role and Mitch, the object of her affection, taking on the feminine, submissive, passive role in the relationship. These traditional, heteronormative constraints indicate a more socially accepted, relatable portrayal for a more general audience that may find diverse representation of queer relationships not as relatable. Thirdly, queer Filipina representation online appears to exist for the male gaze, the queer cisgender Filipina body sexualized and objectified for the male viewers' entertainment (Mulvey, 1975), rather than existing to empower and celebrate queer female desire. Finally, these series also perpetuate stereotypes about queer Filipina women, particularly bisexual women, as untrustworthy, indecisive individuals who treat relationships with lesbians as transitory, until they find the right, male partner. As such, though there are positive aspects to the portrayals of queer Filipinas in the web series studied, there are still tropes, and thus stereotypes, that are perpetuated, which may be harmful to queer Filipino women.

Themes

In this study on the three web series, several themes emerged, mirroring both the challenges and affirmations of queer Filipina identity. The first one, "Safe Spaces and Found Families" indicates how, in the face of a still largely traditional, conservative society, queer Filipinas have found accepting, supportive communities to belong to outside of traditional family structures, establishing the importance of a safe space in which one can safely express one's identity. Furthermore, another theme, "Labels and Non-Labels: Filipina Queer Identity Defined/Undefined" indicates the emerging fluidity of identity within the queer Filipina context, through the acceptance or rejection of labels, reflecting the complex and evolving nature of queer self-identification. Next, the theme "Queer Choice and Agency" reveals how queer Filipina women assert autonomy and self-determination in the face of a conservative society, demonstrating the ability and drive to direct their own lives and relationships, thus moving beyond stereotypes of passivity or victimhood. Finally, the last theme, "Positive Representation"

indicates that though the series studied may depict stereotypes and tropes about queer Filipinas and their experience, these series also depict empowering and affirming narratives about queer women, celebrating rather than marginalizing their identities. These themes, taken together, allow for a richer and multifarious understanding of the queer Filipina experience as portrayed in online media.

Safe Spaces and Found Families

The three online series make a point of establishing *found families* or the concept of the family of choice, in which the queer characters find people who will accept them for who they are and thus create a queer safe space. This is apparent in *Pearl Next Door*, in which Pearl's circle of friends, including Karleen, Alex, Fonzy (Philip Hernandez), Cairo (Elijah Canlas), and Gavreel (Kokoy de Santos) are all queer characters. In *Sleep with Me*, Harry's support system includes her brother and Belle, while Luna strikes up a friendship with the convenience store clerk Wendy (Noor Hooshmand), who also happens to be queer. Finally, in *Fluid*, Mitch's found family includes JM (Joanna Marie Katanyag), Portia (Zar Donato), and Wings (Emmanuelle Vera).

What is interesting in both *Pearl Next Door* and *Sleep With Me* is the absence of biological families. In *Sleep With Me*, Harry and her brother only mention them in passing, and they are not seen at all, whereas Luna only chats with them (a sister) online. Similarly, there is a marked absence of family members in *Pearl Next Door* as well.

Labels and Non-Labels: Filipina Queer Identity Defined/Undefined

Characters in the series analyzed define and identify themselves differently in terms of orientation and attraction. In *Pearl Next Door*, lead character Pearl, for example, says in Episode 7:

Never ko naman sya in-overthink, hindi rin ako nagstruggle with an identity crisis. I feel like I've always been attracted to both men and women...But I feel like I always look for the same things as I look for in a man as in a woman, yung nakakatawa, yung masayang kausap, yung hindi napapagod sa energy ko, malumanay, so if a guy fits the criteria then I will be attracted to him, then if a girl fits the criteria, then I will be attracted to her, ganun lang (I never did overthink about [my sexuality], nor did I struggle with an identity crisis... I feel like I've always been attracted to both men and women...But I feel like I always look for the same things as I look for in a man as in a woman...someone who is funny, who is fun to talk to, who doesn't get tired of my energy, who is gentle...o if a guy fits the criteria then I will be attracted

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to him, then if a girl fits the criteria, then I will be attracted to her, that's it). - Pearl (Intalan, & Lana (2020-2021).

In both *Fluid* and *Sleep with Me* lead characters Mitch, Harry, and Luna, do not label themselves at all, although it is clear in both that Mitch and Luna have had heterosexual relationships previously. This indicates a more fluid definition of sexuality for these queer women, as well as a recognition of their capability to be attracted to men and women.

However, it is also important to note that this refusal to label their sexuality, which can be interpreted as a recognition of the fluidity of both sexuality and gender, could also be connected to the stigma for words such as *lesbian* or *tomboy*, which was pointed out by participants in a study conducted on queer women in the Philippines (Rodis, 2014; Ceperiano et al., 2016). Corollary to this, the rejection of labels, as well as the depiction of queer Filipino women as feminine could also be a way to deal with or avoid discrimination and homophobia in the larger society. In this sense, this is a “performance” to elicit a more favorable response from a disapproving society (Rodis, 2014), and as such, queer Filipino characters in the three shows are depicted as feminine in order to pass as heterosexual in a discriminating and discriminatory society so that they can be gainfully employed, avoid harassment and live comfortable lives. In fact, a 2018 study has pointed out that discrimination and bullying is one of the main problems young LGBTQ people face (Ceperiano, et al., 2016, Tang & Poudel, 2018, UNDP, ILO, 2018). This is apparent in how *Pearl Next Door* brings this up in the series, as in the discrimination against bisexual women. Pearl from *Pearl Next Door* (Intalan & Lana, 2020-2021) voices this out clearly, “...*Meron talagang taong hindi naniniwalang* bisexuality exists...(There are those who don't believe bisexuality exists). I've always been criticized as indecisive...” Love interest and supporting character, Karleen, a lesbian, voices her own prejudices about bisexual women, as well, as mentioned in the previous section, rejecting bisexual women, as she believes she would be used for their self-discovery or she would be considered a phase (Episode 3).

While queer women depicted struggle with accepting other queer women, they also have to contend with society itself. In *Fluid*, for example, after Mitch breaks up with her boyfriend Jacob and shows a romantic and sexual interest in George, her mother expresses disapproval. As discussed in the previous section, Mitch's mother, expresses her disapproval and hence homophobia at George's apparent lack of a male partner, despite her attractiveness and success, indicating that a woman with no male partner indicates a failure on the part of the woman to “perform” as a woman.

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Moreover, again, discussed in the previous section, when Mitch finally comes out to her family by introducing George at a family dinner (Episode 3), her mother expresses her disapproval of the relationship, informing Mitch that though George might be kind and stable, she would be unable to provide Mitch with children. In this interaction, Mitch's mother's reaction to her daughter's queer relationship echoes that of the larger society, in which a Filipino woman's worth, success and desirability are equated with her ability to get a man and produce children. Moreover, Mitch's mother's statement reflects the larger society's seemingly innocuous views about queer women.

Perhaps the one series where other characters do not express their opinions about the queer female characters is in the series *Sleep with Me*. This is likely because most of the characters are queer (main and secondary characters), which seems like a conscious decision on the part of the writer/creator to populate the series with queer characters, creating an imagined, ideal space where queer characters are accepted. Similarly, while Luna is shown to have had a heterosexual relationship before Harry, there are no statements expressing disapproval or homophobia for her choices all throughout the series, either from the queer characters for having dated a man before Harry or from the heterosexuals, for dating a woman after (it should be noted though that outside Harry, Luna's interaction is limited to her sister, the boss at her workplace and Wendy). In the series, the focus is mostly on how Luna and Harry navigate and sustain their relationship, amidst professional and familial obligations. In this sense, *Sleep with Me* depicts a more ideal society, one in which sexuality, sexual orientation and gender are not the central issues, but that of relationships and stability.

Queer Choice and Agency

Queer Filipino women characters, as portrayed in the three series, have choice and agency. They are free to reject heteronormative norms and free to reject heterosexual partners. Similarly, they are free to choose other women as partners, with little to no lasting consequence or impact, save for the disapproval from family. These, however, are more in line with the characters' social status – as all of them are middle class queer female characters, their middle income status affords them the opportunities that queer people in the lower classes might not have.

In addition, though the portrayals depicted in the three online shows are positive, it cannot be denied that these portray only one aspect of the queer Filipino woman's life. As most of the characters are middle class, they thus have jobs, lifestyles and opportunities and experiences that are different from those of lower income queer women. Moreover, the financial independence their

middle-income status affords them means that they are able to reject societal expectations.

Positive Representation

Finally, all three series depict a more positive message about Filipino queer women: that the queer Filipino women can have the so-called happy endings. This is a departure for how Filipino queer women, and queer women in general, are depicted. Where before queer women are *fridged* or die at the end of a series or a film, or are *transformed* and become heterosexual, these shows depict queer Filipino women's journeys in a more positive light. In *Fluid* and *Sleep with Me*, the queer Filipina characters have their ending with their love interest, while *Pearl Next Door* leaves the door open for a possible happy ending for the main characters Pearl and Karleen. On the one hand, this is a win for queer Filipino women, as this is a more positive depiction of queer female lives in the new century. On the other hand though, this emphasis on the search for love and a happy ending, points to the idea of a lack of something essential, and that the only way to satisfy that lack is through love and desire, the search for and pursuit of love, as postulated by Jacques Lacan (Ruti, 2016).

Summary and Conclusions

The analysis and discussions have revealed changing depictions of queer Filipino women in local online media. The continued dominance of Hollywood cinema and television, coupled with a local television and film industry that only seeks to compete with western cinema and television and/or seeks to perpetuate tried and tested narratives, as well as censorship and regulation of content that will be aired and advertiser dictates, have encouraged content producers to look to the web and create queer Filipina narratives in an online setting that is independent of censorship and regulation.

This study has found that the three contemporary web series depict queer Filipino women in a relatively positive, promising light. The three web series depicted the modern queer Filipino woman as feminine, femme and cis. Moreover, most of these queer women identify as lesbian, bisexual or do not label themselves at all. They are also young, employed, urban and middle class. Thus, this means that they are financially and sexually independent, and more open-minded and liberal. However, all the series studied also still depict female queer relationships in a traditional light, following heteronormative norms such as courtship and taking on the traditional male (dominant) – female (submissive) roles in a relationship. There are also instances where queer Filipino women are objectified for the entertainment and titillation of the audience. Moreover,

these shows also perpetuate stereotypes about bisexual women and lesbians, minimizing their experiences and rendering them invisible.

Despite these, queer Filipino characters have been able to create safe spaces and find families of their choosing that will accept them. At the same time, queer Filipina characters in the online shows studied either label themselves as bisexual or lesbian or not label themselves at all, indicating a fluidity of identity. Finally, despite what was pointed out, the shows studied indicate queer Filipina characters that have choice and agency, who take control of their narratives and make decisions about their identity, sexuality, partners and relationships.

The findings of this qualitative analysis indicate that while local Philippine media have come a long way in terms of the way it depicts queer Filipino women, it is also depicting one side of the queer Filipina experience only. There should be room for explorations for different narratives that address the intersectionality of sex, gender, sexuality, class, identity and orientation. Moreover, this study has revealed the need for more representatives from the queer female community to represent and tell the stories of the queer community itself, rather than have men doing the same.

It should be noted however, that the constraints mentioned previously indicate that there are limitations to this study that can further be explored in future research going forward such as series and episode selection as well as episode viewing to determine significant portions for analysis that may have introduced biases. Further, the choice and focus on selected series and episodes may not have fully captured the diversity of contemporary queer female representation on Philippine media. Again, it is important to note that findings indicated here are context-bound to the series and episodes studied and that variations may exist in other shows that were excluded from this study.

Recommendations

It is understandable that the local film, television and online media industry are driven by market forces and audience demand, especially in the face of fierce competition with foreign film, television and online streaming media, resulting in a declining audience. As such, the local industry has tried to adapt by creating content that are rarely explored in the mainstream media, such as the queer Filipina experience, that still appeals to a wider audience, leading thus to depictions that are traditional, socially accepted, heteronormative, at times stereotypical ways of only one class or subsection of society. Thus, there is still room to explore how the queer Filipina experience is depicted. However, it is also possible that there are lesser known online content that may be portraying or representing queer female characters in a more diverse way. Further, it could

also be considered that who produces the content, as well as who owns the media organization that produces the content, may well have a defining impact on the queer experience that finally makes it onscreen. Analysis of audience reception of queer content, particularly from the LGBTQIA+ community, may also shed light on queer women and media representation. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that there are still further opportunities for research in the area of queer Filipina representation in media.

It is thus recommended that for future research, quantitative and qualitative research may be used to determine the scope of representation and portrayal of queer female characters in Philippine media. Elements of filmmaking and television production, such as direction, production, cinematography, costume and set design, music and composition may also be included so as to provide a thorough analysis of representation. It would also be beneficial to include a more in-depth study of how media ownership and production impacts on the creation of queer female narratives, as well as audience reception and interpretation, to further elaborate on the representation and acceptance of queer female characters, as well as contextualize local queer Filipina characters in relation to a global and transnational audience, since the shows mentioned here such as *Fluid* and *Sleep with Me* are also currently streaming on popular global streaming platform Netflix.

With a mandate that seeks to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women that is enshrined in the Philippine Constitution and that is covered by international agreements, it is imperative that the government review the ways in which sexual minorities are being depicted in the media. This entails honest introspection and exploration of the ways in which society has failed sexual minorities and failed to address their needs. Whilst media may not be the only solution to changing the way queer Filipinas are depicted, it could still go a long way in destigmatizing queerness, and build acceptance, and not just tolerance of sexual minorities. Institutions like the Film Development Council of the Philippines and Cinemalaya might explore ways in which they can encourage filmmakers and television producers to consider the diversity of the queer experience, as well as encourage budding queer filmmakers to tell their stories. Local government units might, in partnership with universities and colleges, explore the ways in which the power of the narrative can transform how citizens view sexual minorities, such as inviting filmmakers, and promoting film festivals, and scriptwriting workshops and so on, thereby encouraging a safe space for artists to create narratives to depict different experiences. Ambitious as it may seem, an avenue in which dialogues may be opened and budding storytellers and filmmakers may be inspired to tell their narratives might hold the promise of better stories.

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