

Raikantopinoy: Glocalization of the Boys' Love Genre in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

During the community quarantine in the Philippines, numerous trends arose online and one of those was the Thai Boys' Love (BL) series. Its popularity grew exponentially a few months after the start of the lockdown, leading to independent studios producing the first Pinoy BL series or what I term the First Wave Pinoy BL. This paper aims to investigate how the Pinoy BL genre differentiated itself when it glocalized Thai BL. Through conducting content analysis of the first five Pinoy BL series, namely *Hello, Stranger* (2020), *Gameboys* (2020), *Gaya Sa Pelikula* (2020), *Quarantings* (2020), and *In Between* (2020), it was found that Pinoy BL removed and rejected some crucial tropes of Thai BL such as putting a villain edit on women, trivializing the act of coming out, and featuring the seme-uke dynamic. It is argued that these differences were attributed to queer creators and actors being primarily involved in the production, the rise initiated by non-major production studios, and an absence of productions' linkage to the book industry. This is an initial, yet crucial, research project as Pinoy BL is still a relatively new phenomenon worthy of future studies.

Keywords: Boys' Love (BL), glocalization, Philippine popular culture, queer sexuality, Thai popular culture

INTRODUCTION: THE DAWN OF PINOY BOYS' LOVE

During the community quarantine in the Philippines, numerous trends arose online and one of those was the Thai Boys' Love (BL) series. This was brought about by the increased demand for digital content during the quarantine (Morales 2021). The Thai series *2gether* (2020) became the most popular entry point for Filipino viewers into Thai Boys' Love as it aired during the start of the pandemic. Its popularity grew exponentially to the point that it prompted the production of what I term the First Wave of Pinoy BL series, such as *Gameboys* (2020), *Hello, Stranger* (2020), *In Between* (2020), *Quarantings* (2020), and *Gaya sa Pelikula* (2020). These series were produced by either independent studios or relatively new players in the industry, namely, TheldeaFirst Company, Black Sheep Productions, Ride or Die Initiative, ANIMA (formerly known as Globe Studios), and USPHTV. This is understandable as BL is a new genre in Philippine media that major industry players would initially be reluctant to produce or support. Added to that, with the huge impact of the pandemic on the entertainment industry in the country, producing a series that is arguably uncharted terrain would be too risky for them. Only after the relative success of the First Wave did mainstream production studios join the BL scene, such as Regal Entertainment with the release of *Ben x Jim* in late 2020.

Moreover, a rich pool of literature about Pinoy BL has yet to be developed because it is a relatively new phenomenon in the country. From a strategic standpoint, it is imperative to investigate the first *Pinoy* BL series because it is rather rare in the Philippine experience for a media phenomenon to be initiated from the industry's periphery and to penetrate the popular media market.

Originating from Japan, BL is already a significant aspect of Asian and even global popular culture. With its reach and entry to other countries' popular culture through globalization, it is noticeable that it transforms along the process of appropriation (Fermin 2013), localization (Prasannam 2019, 66), or "queer transfiguration" (Welker 2022, 3). This is apparent in Pinoy BL series' most proximate predecessor – Thai BL. This is not to say that BL has not reached the Philippines before the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Japanese BL genre had female fans in the country during the early 2010s when it was appropriated into local *yaoi* writings that incorporated issues on homosexuality and are sympathetic to LGBT concerns (Fermin 2013). However, it only resided in pockets and did not translate into series or films.

If Japanese BL is introduced to the Thai mediascape unaltered, it would be censored, as Thai media is still considered conservative for non-heteronormative expressions (Baudinette 2019, 115). In the early days of consumption of Japanese *yaoi* in urban Bangkok, Thai authorities considered BL as "obscene media" (Prasannam 2019, 66). Prior to the release of what was considered as the first full Thai BL series, which is *Love Sick the Series* in 2014 (Baudinette 2019; Prasannam 2019), years of conditioning in Thai mainstream media was made to ease in BL narratives. Some of these were the movie *Love of*

Siam (2007) that prompted more demand for gay representation in the media, the reality show *Academy Fantasia* (2004) that provided *yaoi* couples to the Thai entertainment industry, and collaborations of the industry-leading Thai media conglomerate GMM Grammy with Exact Company and Scenario Company (merged into The One Enterprise Company Limited in 2014) in producing gay couple content on television (Prasannam 2019, 67-69).

The glocalization of BL into Thai mainstream media, in its full-blown form, manifested itself in the insertion into the Thai drama format *lakhon*, with *Love Sick the Series* as the pioneer. *Love Sick* was a remarkable adaptation of a locally written *yaoi* fiction (Prasannam 2019, 69). Utilizing a medium for heteronormative relationships, infusion of BL elements did not come off as too foreign or threatening. When *Lovesick* achieved commercial success, it prompted more Thai BLs to be produced and eventually, BL became commercially viable for major private corporations. GMM Grammy was notable in institutionalizing the cycle of developing web novels into television series (Pham 2021, 111) by partnering with the book industry and grooming female *yaoi* writers (Prasannam 2019, 73). The same scale of production is yet to be witnessed for Pinoy BL. However, the difference in the Philippine experience is that the rise of Pinoy BL was heavily influenced by Thai BL instead of Japanese BL. With this, it is intuitive to take a closer look at Pinoy BL more in relation to Thai BL, but still with consideration of Japanese BL elements.

An initial assumption of this research is that Pinoy BL differentiated itself from the general conventions of Boys' Love during its glocalization of the genre, more so from Thai BL. To appraise this, I performed content analysis of five series in the First Wave of Pinoy BL, which are *Hello, Stranger* (2020), *Gameboys* (2020), *Gaya Sa Pelikula* (2020), *Quarantings* (2020), and *In Between* (2020). These were chosen from the numerous series produced during this period as these received relatively high reception based on their views on YouTube and online presence. Also, they were produced by a mix of early and independent players scoped within the First Wave. The researcher watched every episode of each series to tally the themes. After extracting the themes from the series, they were juxtaposed with the characteristics and tropes of Thai BL and Japanese BL referenced from the literature.

As the research is only concerned with how the First Wave of Pinoy BL glocalized the BL genre, it cannot provide answers to the impacts of such glocalization to the general discussion of queer representation in media and how these series differentiate from gay- or LGBT-media in the Philippines. These should be pursued in future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW: PUTTING THE “LOVE” IN BOYS’ LOVE

Even though the BL genre became popular in the Philippines during the pandemic, it did not originate

from Thailand or materialize just a few years ago. In fact, the genre became popular during the 1970s in Japan in the form of *shojo* manga (girls comics) that served as a way for women to explore sexuality when such exploration was rather hindered due to the prevailing patriarchy in the country (Welker 2015, 46; Fermin 2013). Typically, BL showcases “beautiful boys” or *bishōnen*, but appreciation for them has been a longstanding practice in Japan, especially during the Edo period (1603-1868) (McLelland and Welker 2019, 6). Pieces of literature would list different tropes of BL, but this study would utilize Baudinette and Fermin’s works. Baudinette referenced four tropes: (1) heterosexual women, known as *fujoshi*, serve as the primary audience of BL, (2) BL is homosocial, with few female characters that are painted as villains or are only in minor supporting roles, (3) the majority of the characters conform to the stylistics of the *bishōnen* or “beautiful men,” and (4) the relationship dynamics are defined by the *seme-uke* rule (Baudinette 2019, 120-121). On the other hand, Fermin (2013) enumerated four tropes: (1) “coupling” as focus, (2) highly androgynous aesthetics of characters, (3) feeling of detachment from reality, focusing on the coupling, and (4) vilification of already rare female characters. Even if these tropes are generalized patterns in BL, this does not imply that the genre was amiss of evolution.

In the introduction of their book *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, McLelland and Welker (2015) claim that appreciation for *bishōnen* (“beautiful boy”) has been practiced in Japan for centuries and BL is just a manifestation of it. It was because of the entry of Western sexology in Japan during the late Meiji period (1868 to 1912), which pathologized homosexuality, that this practice withered away and became censored. Only in the 1970s did this have a comeback through the efforts of a group of female writers, the so-called *Fabulous Forty-Niners*, when they started writing manga that highlight romantic – and eventually sexual – relationships between beautiful adolescent boys. In the early 1970s, this version of manga was first published in commercial magazines and eventually grew to a market of both commercial and non-commercial production and distribution channels, even amounting to a yearly domestic value of almost USD 25 million. Since then, various labels, such as *shōnen’ai*, *yaoi* and *bōizu rabu* (boys’ love), have emerged and are often conflated as a single entity, despite their historical and stylistic differences.

James Welker (2015) provides a brief history of *shōnen’ai*, *yaoi*, and BL. He mentions that throughout the history of the above-mentioned iterations, there was a fluctuating mix of elements from high- and lowbrow cultures from Japan, Europe, USA, and elsewhere. *Shōnen’ai* started as a type of manga along the margins of *shōjo* manga or manga that cater to female audiences. It is characterized by a *seme-uke* rule that roughly reproduces male-female binary into male-male relationships. However, in contemporary discourse, it is associated with pedophilia (McLelland and Welker 2015, 5) that aids some *seme-uke* storyline dynamics. *Yaoi*, on the other hand, was born during the rising popularity of *shōnen’ai* and is characterized by fan engagement. Fans would write their own stories, or *dōjinshi*, with more homoerotic elements and shift away from employing foreign settings and characters. It is

composed of amateur *dōjinshi*, which parodies existing *shōnen* manga or anime and original *dōjinshi* (Fujimoto 2015, 77). Lastly, BL is characterized by commercialization of *yaoi* where producers of original *dōjinshi* works were enlisted by new commercial magazines. It completely departed from utilizing foreign characters and was usually set in Japan with Japanese characters (Welker 2015, 46). With the highly commercialized feature of BL, it spread globally, which caused the proliferation and glocalization of the genre, especially in Southeast and East Asian countries. Here, it showed that BL is not a homogeneous genre as it is perceived today, with iterations borne out of specific historicities and social conditions.

Fujimoto Yukari (2015), in her work *The Evolution of BL as "Playing with Gender,"* discusses how the evolution of the genre from *shōnen'ai* to *yaoi* and BL should be understood with consideration of the gender situation of its time, the authors' age, and the target audiences. Significant pieces of literature would interpret the development of *shōnen'ai* seen through a psychoanalytic lens which misconstrued it as women's safe simulation of sex or mere projection of female fantasies. However, BL was created as resistance to gender repression at the time, desire for equality in relationships, and search for the ultimate couple. When *yaoi* and BL emerged from *shōnen'ai*, there was a shift in perspective from the audience – from relating due to gender oppression to relating due to mere interest (Fujimoto 2015, 84). Moreover, the practice of coupling has been important in *yaoi* fictions, as *seme* and *uke* have mixtures of masculine and feminine characteristics (Fujimoto 2015, 85). Hence, the distinction between the two is just a product of the coupling process by the fans. In this period, the audience came to enjoy masculinity and femininity without feeling oppressed. Fujimoto (2015) explained it succinctly by noting a shift from "amusement of sex" (referring to *shōnen'ai*) to "amusement of gender" (referring to *yaoi*) as both *seme* and *uke* characters possess gender ambiguity (84). Furthermore, various *yaoi* terms emerged to depict many possible relationship patterns such as *sasoi uke* (a person that is physically *uke* but mentally *seme*), *jō uke* (proud *uke* queen), *hetare seme* (a loser *seme*), and more (Fujimoto 2015, 85). Here, from what seemed to be a myopic view of BL, Fujimoto's work shows that BL became as widespread as it is right now because it evolved into a genre where readers and creators could varyingly explore and interpret gender in what she calls "a thoroughly gender-blended world" (Fujimoto 2015, 85).

Thailand is an interesting case of BL genre penetration. In general, anything that departs from heteronormative norms is explicitly censored in the Thai media (Jackson 2011, 2), even if the country is viewed as accepting to non-heterosexuals, especially of transgenders, who in Thailand are called *kathoey*. The image of same-sex romance between men took a long time before it became slowly integrated into the Thai popular culture. It started with the consumption of BL manga by middle-class heterosexual Thai women (Baudinette 2019, 116) who enjoy intimacy between male characters in *shōnen* manga (Prasannam 2019, 65). Thailand has a genre of television drama called *lakhon* that features heterosexual romance among wealthy individuals (Farmer 2015, 80), and same-sex desires

are viewed as “sexual abnormalities” (Jackson 2002, 221). A shock in the *lakhon* tradition happened when the series *Lovesick* (2014) used heterosexual subplots to introduce queer narratives. Having identifiable *phra-ek* (male protagonists) and *nang-ek* (female protagonists), this *lakhon* differentiated itself from the homosocial norm of Japanese BL (Baudinette 2019, 119-123). Most notably, it had no explicitly identifiable *seme* and *uke*, which was further emphasized by the lack of references to sexual intercourse between the lead characters. It was done to “make BL elements legible to a Thai consumer who is unaware of the generic norms of BL” (123). It was so well-received that it even had its second season in 2015 and moved to the mainstream TV channel GTH. Since then, the Thai media landscape has changed and *lakhon* has transformed into series called *wai* (short for ‘series yaoi’) as the appropriated form of BL in the Thai mediascape. However, in the series following *Lovesick*, the conventions of Japanese BL, especially the *seme-uke* trope, became more apparent and acceptable within the Thai mediascape. With this, *Lovesick* served to provide BL literacy among Thai consumers (116-130).

Arguably, the Thai media landscape underwent a process called “glocalization.” This is essentially a blending of the global and local (Khondker 2005, 184). The term may be related to hybridity or syncretism but the crucial element of glocalization is possessing a local element involved in a fusion (Khondker 2005, 191). Here, there is a customization of the global to suit local cultures. Thai BL did not immediately embrace the conventions of Japanese BL, especially the *seme-uke* rule, in its early iterations. Only in succeeding years did it incorporate these conventions. The local element involved in Thai BL is the *lakhon* which served its host and the local *yaoi* novels that had been adapted into series. Tropes and elements of Japanese BL, especially *seme-uke*, became more apparent in Thai BL series such as *SOTUS* (2016), *Together With Me* (2017), *Love By Chance* (2018), *TharnType* (2019), and even in recent ones that were introduced to the Filipino audience, like *Dark Blue Kiss* (2019), *Theory of Love* (2019), and *2gether The Series* (2020).

Typically, Thai BL series feature university students who are either rivals-turned-lovers or friends with longstanding love for each other. Previously, Thai BL series would portray high school students but shifting to university students would make it easier and less controversial to incorporate mature issues, especially sexual activities (Pham 2021, 113). The *seme-uke* rule is very much existent, especially with having a “husband-wife” dynamic amongst the characters. During the years 2016-2017, there was a shift in the portrayal of masculinity in Thai BL – from hard to soft masculinity. The shift focused on showing the characters as kind and caring and less reliant on active violence and intense sexuality to assert their masculinity (Pham 2021, 116-117). However, beneath this is the persistence of the *seme-uke* dynamic. Also, vilification of female characters in Thai BL remains a common practice (Pham 2021, 120).

If this is how the BL genre penetrated and adapted itself into the Thai popular media landscape, how did it glocalize into the Philippine media landscape?

THE “FIRST WAVE” OF PINOY BOYS’ LOVE

This section discusses selected series included in the so-called “First Wave of Pinoy BL.” Aside from the brief synopsis of each series, BL elements and tropes are assessed in contrast to the content of these Pinoy BL series.

Hello, Stranger (2020)

Hello, Stranger features two university students, Xavier and Mico, who have their different personalities brought together by a class requirement. Xavier is a popular varsity player who is underperforming in his academics. On the other hand, Mico is an uptight achiever who is part of the *Padawans* who regularly hold quiz nights. Situated in a COVID-19 pandemic storyline, the whole series mostly runs in video call scenes.

The series premises Xavier and Mico as enemies, hating each other’s guts. In their journey of self-discovery, they are stuck in their love triangles, with Xavier having Crystal as his girlfriend and Kookai, a member of the *Padawans*, having a romantic interest in Mico. However, even if the other love interests of Xavier and Mico are women, they are not portrayed as actively hindering the budding romance between the main leads. As Xavier and Mico continue working on their project, they find themselves getting closer and spend more time together (see Figure 1). Even after the revelations, they remain supportive of and stay friends with Xavier and Mico. This is highlighted in Crystal’s scene in Episode 7, *Hello, Truth*, where she supports Xavier’s decision on who he will choose between her and Mico.

The story is not mainly centered on the romance between Xavier and Mico. The *Padawans* are portrayed with their own struggles and storylines, such as Kookai and Seph’s budding romance and Junjun’s personal struggles. Even if they have their own subplots, they are still meshed, story-wise, as *Padawans*, especially when they are all supportive of Xavier and Mico’s romantic journey.

In dealing with the queerness of Xavier and Mico, the series is gentle in its approach. As both characters are seemingly straight at the start, their self-discovery is delicately portrayed as shown in how they both come out on their own terms and at their own pace. Mico comes out to the *Padawans* without being pressured to do so, while Xavier implicitly comes out to Crystal when she “just knows” he likes

another man and let go of him. Also, both Xavier and Mico show softness and tenderness in their characters, especially with the dynamics of their interactions. With this, there are no observable *seme* and *uke*.



Figure 1. Mico (left) and Xavier (right) making a promise to each other over a video call. Source: Preen.ph

Gameboys (2020)

Gameboys starts with Cairo, an online game streamer, getting defeated by a certain user Angel2000, who is revealed as Gavreel later in the episode. Wanting to redeem himself, Cairo asks Gavreel for a rematch, but the latter only agrees in exchange of courting the former (see Figure 2). At the end of the series, going through numerous obstacles in their budding romance, with Cairo's family moving to Bukidnon as the ultimate one, they get to spend time together in person and finally take ownership of their romance. Utilizing the start of the COVID-19 pandemic as the setting of the story, the series heavily relies on video call scenes as a means for the characters to interact. Also, it places narrative hurdles for the romantic journey of Cairo and Gavreel such as Cairo doubting the viability of an online relationship, Cairo getting jealous of Gavreel's ex-girlfriend and best friend Pearl, Gavreel getting jealous of Cairo's childhood friend Wesley, and Cairo getting jealous of Gavreel's ex-boyfriend Terrence.

Most of the romantic pairings in the story revolve around Cairo, Gavreel, Terrence, and Wesley. The series is rather homosocial, with only Pearl, Cairo's mom, and Risa, Cairo's ex-girlfriend, as the female characters. Nonetheless, they have relevance to the plot and have their own narrative journey. Pearl serves as Cairo and Gavreel's cheerleader and ultimate support, even having a moment calling out

Terrence's problematic behavior. She is the main driver of the story. Cairo's mom, after her husband's passing due to COVID-19, has an emotional guard which diminishes after a heartfelt scene with Cairo regarding his sexuality. Risa, although initially painted negatively as someone who outed Cairo, is humanized through her apology to Cairo and her explanation of how she felt with finding out that her then-ex-boyfriend was gay.



Figure 2. Cairo (left) and Gavreel (right) negotiating their game rematch. Source: Aminoapps.com

Looking at how Cairo's and Gavreel's sexualities are portrayed, it is rather difficult to identify an obvious *seme* and *uke*, as both are assertive and receptive to each other's advances. It can be seen as a rather 'normalizing' approach, refusing to follow a heteronormative dynamic. Even if Cairo is initially outed by his ex-girlfriend, he is provided with his own journey in coming to terms with his sexuality and finally coming out to his family. Most importantly, there is ownership of Cairo's and Gavreel's sexuality with their overt declaration of their queerness.

Gaya Sa Pelikula (2020)

A prequel to the Wattpad version of the series, *Gaya sa Pelikula*, features the story of Karl, a financially struggling architecture student who wants to shift to Film Studies, and Vlad, a next-door neighbor hiding from his family. When Karl is not paid by his employer, an opportunity arises as Vlad offers to pay his rent in exchange of him staying in Karl's unit. Added to that, they have to pretend to be lovers to Vlad's sister, Judit. Initially, they both struggle staying together under one roof because Karl is too uptight and Vlad is messy. Eventually, they start opening up, but it presents dilemmas for Karl as he is

still in the process of finding his sexual identity. At one of the peaks of the story, Karl is pressured into admitting his feelings for Vlad, leading him to reveal to Judit that their relationship was fake. Feeling rejected, Vlad flees only to come back after his sister encourages him to keep on loving despite the possibility of getting hurt. Their reunion results in them confessing their feelings. As they are finally being themselves in their bubble, the climax of the story occurs – the predicament of revealing their relationship to their loved ones. Pressured yet again, Karl denies his relationship with Vlad because he feels obliged to come out even though he is not ready yet. *Gaya sa Pelikula* takes a heartbreaking turn when Karl and Vlad have to separate. The series ends with Anna, Vlad's friend, encouraging Karl to live his truth in the outside world, where real life starts. The two leads end up seeing each other again in a university organization's orientation (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Karl (left) reuniting with Vlad (right) in a university organization's orientation. Source: Preen.ph

The series is rather romantically homosocial as it only features the love story between Karl and Vlad. However, the other characters still have their own narrative journeys: Judit explores the bounds of allyship, Anna struggles in enjoying her life as a single mother, Karl's parents realize how much they have burdened their son to live up to their expectations, and Tito Santi, Karl's uncle, reflects on being an older gay man. Although the focus of the series, the treatment of the romance between Karl and Vlad is not overpowering of other characters' storylines or of Karl's and Vlad's personal journeys.

As an interesting usage of female characters in the series, Judit and Anna are not romantically connected with any of the main leads. Instead, they serve as representations of allyship, where they present its ethics through their narrative arcs. Judit, a self-proclaimed ally in her interest to protect her

brother Vlad, breaks a taboo of allyship, which is pressuring someone to come out. This is dialectically challenged by Anna's character who is more understanding of Karl's lack of readiness to come out. Here, both female characters are not just crucial in the romantic and personal story arcs of Karl and Vlad, they also carry with them the ethics of allyship, which is a rather uncommon theme in BLs.

The series takes pride in its characters taking ownership of their queerness, from coming out and owning up to being gay. It presents the primacy of "coming out at one's pace and terms" through the depiction of Karl's hardships whenever he is pressured to come out. Also, with the utility of "soft masculinity" (Pham 2021, 117), identifying the *seme* and *uke* is impossible.

Quaranthings (2020)

Quaranthings is a story about Judah, a competitive college student, and Rocky, a hustling breadwinner, who are stuck in their shared apartment at the start of the community quarantine. They start out as housemates with no interactions before the lockdown and with preconceived notions about each other. As they spend their time together (see Figure 4), these notions change, and they are able to do selfless acts for each other. With the tension growing between the two, Judah pursues Rocky, which leaves the latter surprised. Eventually, they consummate their relationship, but numerous challenges arise. Some of these are Rocky's confusion about his sexuality and Judah's orgmate and fling, Glenn, coming into the picture. The final hurdle for their romance is Rocky's dilemma with coming out to his Christian family. The series seems to end with Rocky and Judah going separate ways, but a plot twist happens when Rocky finally comes out and is accepted by his family. This gives him the push to place all his bets on Judah. The series ends with them being together and spending the rest of the quarantine with Judah's grandmother.

This series is probably the most homosocial among the five titles in this research, with the characters mainly being gay men. *Quaranthings* is intimate in its storytelling, focusing on Judah and Rocky's romance, with some side characters supporting them. Contrary to the usual love triangle in BLs where women are included, the love triangle in the series is composed of Judah, Rocky, and Glenn, and there are no romantic subplots.

Although, initially, one can observe a *seme* and an *uke* between Judah and Rocky due to their physical characteristics, this is immediately overturned by the lead characters' shared moments of assertiveness and softness. Furthermore, the *seme-uke* dynamic blurs in Judah's actions, as he constantly corrects misconceptions of homosexuality and same-sex relationships. It is also important to note the refreshing aspect of Rocky's coming out arc, not least because of his working class background. Rocky asserts that they are too busy trying to survive to even think about their sexuality.

Therefore, Rocky's coming out only comes after the reassurance of his family, whom he serves as the breadwinner.



Figure 4. Judah (left) hugging Rocky (right) as a dare during their first drinking session. Source: Inquirer.net

In Between (2020)

In Between features the story of Tau and Otep and their journey of coming out as a couple and dealing with the ups and downs of their relationship. The series starts with their breakup which is followed by their reunification during a friend's birthday party. Both, after seeing each other after some years, talk about their past relationship and crucial events. It is revealed that the breakup is a selfless act by Tau to push Otep to move to the United States with his mom.

As things clear up, they get back together. A rather overly stretched climax of the series, Tau and Otep celebrate their anniversary in a resort with their gang *Boom Harot* (see Figure 5). Orion, Tau's friend, becomes a source of jealousy of Otep, and it is later revealed that he is an accomplice to Tau's surprise. The series ends with Tau and Otep declaring their love for each other in a pretend wedding.

The story is homosocial with the nature of the romance between Tau and Otep, and their friend, Nin, and Makisig as the foci. The female characters, Nics and Bianx, both part of *Boom Harot*, are accessories without substantial story arcs. However, they are portrayed positively as supportive friends to the *Boom Harot* gang. This is depicted through their reassurance of Nin's feelings towards Makisig.



Figure 5. Tau (left) showing to Otep (right) the surprise celebration he organized for their anniversary.

Source: world-of-bl.com

This series includes elements that are reminiscent of Japanese BL. Aside from hints of internalized homophobia and heterosexual undertones in Tau and Otep's relationship, Tau rejects his queerness when Nics and Bianx express their disbelief that he likes men. He says that the only man he likes is Otep. Also, it can be observed that Tau acts as the *seme* and Otep as the *uke*.

This is further observed in Otep's frequent jealousy and him always being taken care of by Tau. Nonetheless, just like the other series discussed, there is delicateness in tackling the issue of coming out. This is evidenced by the case of Tau and Otep when they reveal their relationship to *Boom Harot*, and Nin's declaration of love towards Makisig.

The themes generated from the content analysis are collated in the table below.

Theme	<i>Hello, Stranger</i>	<i>Gameboys</i>	<i>Gaya sa Pelikula</i>	<i>Quaran-things</i>	<i>In Between</i>
Homosocial	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Women as villains against main leads' romance	No	No	No	No	No
Overt/explicit coming out	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*

Overt/explicit declaration of main characters as 'gay' or not straight	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Observable <i>seme</i> and <i>uke</i>	No	No	No	No	Yes
Main leads are 'homosexual' at the start of the series	No	Yes**	Yes**	Yes**	No
Existence of love triangles involving the main leads	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Table 1. Themes of the Pinoy BL series.

* not applicable to main leads

** only one of the main leads

It is noticed that some tropes of Thai BL, and by extension, Japanese BL, are existent in Pinoy BL, such as homosociality and the existence of love triangles involving the main leads. The latter is somewhat understandable as love triangles generally exist in love stories. However, it must be noted that the homosociality of the majority of the five series studied here can be attributed to their small production size and limits due to restrictions during the pandemic. What can be interesting in the table is the departure of Pinoy BL from the conventions of Thai BL and Japanese BL, such as vilification of women, rejection of queer identity, and the *seme-uke* rule.

GLOCALIZED (?): BOYS' LOVE IN PINOY BL

At this point, it is imperative to question how glocalization is operationalized in the First Wave iterations of Pinoy BL. This section discusses the main themes of glocalization observed in the series and the factors attributed the themes' manifestation.

The Villainous Role of Female Characters

As a norm in the BL genre, women are used to hinder the romance of the two male leads. With the role of jealous girlfriends or persistently dense schoolgirls, they do everything to get one of the leads as their lover. They attribute a lack of attraction to homosexuality, which leads them to snoop more into the lives of their love interests. In some cases, this act is supported by their close friends who may or may not stick with them in the end. When they discover the homosexuality, their impulsive reaction is to spread the news. The usual response of people in the story is to discriminate against the outed person. One of the leads receives the repercussions of such an act, which serves as the dramatic challenge to the couple. Ultimately, they overcome the challenge and reach a happy ending. On the other hand, the villainous women either reconcile with the main leads, find another lover, or have an unfortunate ending due to their behavior. Nonetheless, women usually play the villain in BL series. In

hindsight, this practice seems harmless, but it insidiously sends a message that women are bottlenecks in queer relationships.

This trope appears to be absent in Pinoy BL genre. The characters of Pearl in *Gameboys*, and Kookai and Crystal in *Hello, Stranger* are not presented negatively, even if they are previous love interests of the male leads. Instead, they are supportive of the male characters. In *Hello Stranger*, Kookai confesses her feelings towards Mico but is rejected. She stops her pursuit and becomes supportive of his relationship with Xavier. For Crystal, when she senses that Xavier will choose Mico over her, she calmly retreats and retains her friendship with Xavier. It can be argued that the female characters are also more than just love interests of the main leads. A case in point is Pearl in *Gameboys*, as she serves as a mediator in conflicts. With Judit and Anna's roles in *Gaya sa Pelikula*, they serve as models of heterosexuals' important alliance with the LGBTQIA+ community.

Respecting the Sanctity of Coming Out

It is noticeable in Thai BL that coming out of the closet is a staple source of conflict among the main characters, such as in Pete and Kao's love story in *Dark Blue Kiss* (2019) and Korn and Nork's relationship in *Together With Me* (2017). Either one of them or both are in the closet. Sometimes, this alone is the basis for the conflict arc of the story. It is usual in Thai BL for the male characters to be outed against their will, for instance on social media and through the spread of rumors. The male characters are subjected to unsolicited stares or bullying. They suffer the repercussions on their own and those who out them always remain unpunished. The worst case is for them to receive bad karma (e.g., being exposed online or being abandoned by their friends) due to their wrongful actions and behavior. However, this is not related to their act of outing the main characters. It can be argued that coming out is not considered an overly sensitive issue in Thai BL.

This is not the case in Pinoy BL, where the act of coming out is often the central theme. In *Hello, Stranger*, Mico comes out to the *Padawans* by himself when he feels brokenhearted. In *Gameboys*, Cairo comes out to his mother after reconciling with his brother. On the other hand, in *Quarantings*, even though Judah pressures Rocky to come out, he does it on his own terms. In *In Between*, Nin's coming out story is not obliged upon him by *Boom Harot* or his boyfriend Makisig. Even though the gang has a sense that Nin is gay, they do not pressure him. Lastly, in *Gaya sa Pelikula*, the series puts much premium into Karl's own journey of coming out and shows his struggles in admitting his queerness. Arguably, this sensitivity to coming out and owning one's queerness can be attributed to a relatively more politicized queer community in the country (Fermin 2013), evidenced by the Philippines having the oldest LGBTQ+ movement in Southeast Asia (Magsambol 2019).

Blurring the Seme-Uke Dynamic

'Husband' and 'wife' are common terms in Thai BL, whereby the former pursues the latter. Beyond the term, the dynamics within the relationships in the series are reminiscent of a heterosexual couple, which can be contributed to Thai BL's *lakhon* origin, prevailing Thai culture, and the nature of Japanese BL. The *seme* or the husband is protective, possessive, and caring. On the other hand, the *uke* or the wife is nagging, submissive, and shy. At face value, it is an entertaining or even ostensibly endearing dynamic. This is the case for Thai BL for so long, from the release of *Lovesick*, which privileges heteronormativity (Baudinette 2019, 124), to *Love by Chance*, which tries to normalize BL relationships (Pham 2021, 119), and to *SOTUS*, which departs from the use of violence and muscularity to the depiction of masculinity (Pham 2021, 117-118). Even if there is an evolution in the practice, the *seme-uke* trope is still apparent.

Interestingly, this dynamic is almost absent in Pinoy BL. Almost all series investigated do without this trope. In *Hello, Strangers*, even if the characteristics of Xavier and Mico show that there is a *seme* and an *uke*, with the former being muscular and athletic, and the latter being studious and introverted, these characteristics do not play into their dynamic. Instead, their lines and gestures have no distinct dominant or submissive character. As for *Gameboys*, the *seme* and *uke* rule is subtly observable. Gavreel is portrayed as a muscular queer person who courts Cairo, who is comparatively soft in terms of physical features. Also, the latter has moments of nagging, but it can be assumed as his wall of defense that recedes later in the series. In fact, as the series progresses, the *seme-uke* line blurs even more as both characters show assertion in their relationship. *Quaranthings* has an interesting pairing because following the conventions of BL, usually, the more masculine character is the one to pursue the other. However, in the series, Judah, an effeminate character, is the one pursuing Rocky, who is rather masculine. This unconventional dynamic, however, is only used in initiating the relationship, and the distinction eventually blurs. In *Gaya sa Pelikula*, the *seme-uke* trope is not observable at all. Both Vlad and Karl share softness in their character, which is not, in any way, used to paint a *seme-uke* dynamic. A different case is observed in *In Between* where Tau appears to be the *seme* and Otep the *uke*. In many instances, Otep becomes jealous and frustrated, while Tau comforts and reassures him. The *seme-uke* trope ultimately manifests as Tau rejects his queerness when confronted by his friends, saying that he does not like men except for Otep. Overall, the first wave of Pinoy BL generally rejects the *seme-uke* trope by either blurring the line between the roles or outrightly abandoning it.

Factors of Glocalization in First Wave Pinoy BL

The researcher attributes the extent of glocalization of the BL genre in the Philippines to the following factors: (1) production as mostly comprised of queer individuals, (2) production as initiated by non-

major production companies, and (3) absence of linkage between production and the book industry. It is argued that these are principally integral factors in setting the direction of Pinoy BL in the future.

It has been the norm in BL that it is written by women for a female audience, observed from the historical development of *shōnen'ai* and *yaoi* in Japan, spearheaded by female writers (Fermin 2013; Welker 2015, 44). In Thailand, it is still the case, even though more male or queer individuals write and produce BLs in recent years, because female writers, who are the original *yaoi* fans, are the ones first approached by media companies like GMM Grammy (Prasannam 2019). Nonetheless, it is still women who mostly write the BLs that are later produced as series in media networks. This is not the case in the Philippines. There are no existing BL novels that serve as basis for Pinoy BLs, even with *Gaya sa Pelikula* that is a prequel to its Wattpad series version. With this, productions start with writing the scripts, which are written by queer writers. This is the case in *Hello, Stranger*, directed by Petersen Vargas, who identifies as gay; *Gameboys*, executively produced by Perci Intalan and Jun Lana, who are both gay; *Quarantings*, directed by Pancho Maniquis who is also gay; and *Gaya sa Pelikula* directed by JP Habac and written by Juan Miguel Severo, both gay men. Also, there are queer actors cast as main leads such as Paolo Pangilinan and Kyo Quijano, who are openly queer. A special case is *Gaya sa Pelikula*, which has the Metro Manila Pride organization as its consultant. Of course, it is not automatically the case that just because a BL is produced by queer creators that it is already representative of the experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community, but it holds weight on to how there is a departure from the conventions of BL – from the *seme-uke* trope to vilification of women, which are usual features of works of female *yaoi* or BL writers. Filipino LGBTQIA+ identities have been historically disenfranchised, misrepresented, and ridiculed in the Philippine media. There have been longstanding qualms for better representation (Smith 2021) and the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising popularity of *2gether the Series* in the country become opportune times for queer creators to take the lead and produce these BLs. Their rejection of the *seme-uke* trope, vilification of the women trope, and rejection of queerness is reflective of the relatively progressive LGBT politics in the country (Fermin 2013) which these queer creators aim to address. Notable examples are *Gaya sa Pelikula*'s commitment in 'reclaiming' and correcting the narratives about the LGBTQIA+ community in Philippine media (Antonio 2021) and its demonstration of how allyship can be properly practiced; and *Gameboys*' effort in making sure that portrayals of queer characters are empathetic and that the actors understand the topics and issues in the series (Smith 2021). This demonstrates that the first wave of Pinoy BL as created by a significant number of queer individuals provides the momentum in departing from the major tropes of BL, addressing the longstanding criticism of the genre regarding LGBT representation.

Another crucial aspect of the Philippine experience in the creation of the first wave of Pinoy BL is how these series are produced by early and independent production companies. Thai BLs are produced by big network companies such as GMMTV and now-defunct Nadao Bangkok, both subsidiaries of the major network company GMM Grammy. With this, Thai BL series are circulated in streaming platforms

such as Netflix, WeTV, iQIYi, and AISPLAY. This is not the case of Pinoy BL. The first wave has been produced by early and independent players in the industry, namely, TheldeaFirst Company, Black Sheep Productions, Ride or Die Initiative, ANIMA (formerly known as Globe Studios), and USPHTV. They are far smaller than the major players, such as Regal Entertainment, Viva Films, Star Cinema, and GMA Pictures. The latter two companies are part of the top networks in the country – ABS-CBN (closed due to the government's rejection of franchise renewal) and GMA. These smaller production studios have less to lose and much to gain, especially with the lowering costs of producing and marketing series brought about by increased digitalization and social media. Also, major players are so ingrained in utilizing formulas in producing films and series that BL is a new and risky terrain for them to pioneer because they are mainly profit-driven. In contrast, the early and independent players' incentive is mainly their survival in the industry (Lim 2019, 42). With this difference in economic incentives, there is more leeway for small players to produce BLs that may partially differ from foreign ones.

The last factor of glocalization is the absence of a production linkage to the book publishing industry. This is a striking feature of the Thailand experience where media companies adapt local *yaoi* novels by female Thai writers and later on tap publishing companies to groom writers of future BL series (Prasannam 2019, 73). Such industrial linkage is crucial because the major tropes observed in BL are conventional writing practices of female *yaoi* or BL writers. In turn, these tropes translate into the adaptation of such novels. Such linkage has yet to materialize in the Philippines. Instead, BL materials are directly conceptualized in the scriptwriting process of Pinoy BL production. This condition gives more leeway for the departure from major tropes to happen.

CONCLUSION: THE PROMISE OF PINOY BOYS' LOVE

This paper has argued that Pinoy BL differentiates itself from its predecessor, Thai BL, through glocalization. Also, it must be noted that glocalization always happens when a cultural product crosses geographic borders, like in the case of Thailand's glocalization of Japanese BL through its injection into *lakhon*. It is imperative to understand *Pinoy* BL's glocalization of the BL genre within the context of its first wave, i.e., BL series produced by early and independent industry players. With the content analysis of the select series in the earlier section, it can be observed that tropes in Thai BL are rejected in Pinoy BL. Firstly, the usual vilification of women in Thai BL, or BL in general, is abandoned; instead, women are portrayed positively, either as supportive friends or ex-partners, or as images of allyship. Secondly, the trope of non-ownership or even rejection of queerness is generally absent in Pinoy BL, evidenced by the coming out scenes of the characters in which they do so on their own terms, unlike in some cases in Thai BL where they are outed. Most importantly, the *seme-uke* trope is blurred in Pinoy BL, even to the point that identification is almost impossible. These are significant manifestations of Pinoy BL's glocalization of the genre and are attributed to more involvement of queer creators in the

production, early and independent industry players that have been pioneering this wave, and absence of productions' industrial linkage with the book industry.

With how the First Wave sets the tone of Pinoy BL in the Philippines, the genre can be promising in further addressing existing criticism of BL, for instance that it is not representative of the lived experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community. It already has started its course by showcasing characters that need not to be boxed within the *seme-uke* binary and by recognizing the sanctity of coming out. Also, it holds potential in pushing mainstream and major industry players in taking risks in opening their space for more queer narratives and queer creators.

As of December 2022, almost ninety Pinoy BL series have been produced, and major industry players have joined the scene. It is then important for future research to investigate the interplay of major and non-major industry players in the creation of narratives in Pinoy BL.

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