

University of Debrecen

**Drawing Diversity:
Representations of Queerness and Sexual Identity Development in Webtoons**

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Introduction

With the coming of the technological age, writers, artists, and storytellers' horizons have expanded. What started with oral traditions, folktales, and theatre in ancient times have evolved into the printed books' culture, then into cinema and comic books. But for a while, it was expensive to produce these media as it took a lot of effort, manpower, and material resources to sell or rent them to the general public. But nowadays, even a few people or just one can create stories pretty cost-effectively and simply, and they can spread them online, making the process and the product all digital. This can apply to books, films, video games, and the subject of this paper: comics. In the first chapter of the present paper, the phenomenon of webtoons will be described in more detail, their definition, and partially their history. Suffice it to say for now, that they are not a very traditional method of storytelling as they blend the style of comics with contemporary technologies. Because of their relatively recent emergence, they have not yet been studied extensively in academic circles. This is part of the justification for the writing of this paper so that perhaps a conversation can start about webtoons; one that deals with them as seriously as books or films.

Furthermore, although webtoons are relatively new, and their creators are fairly young, this does not mean they cannot deal with deeper issues, have compelling plotlines, or have diverse characters. This diversity can manifest itself, for example, in the variety of represented sexual identities, which is the other focus point of the paper, besides webtoons. LGBTQ+ issues are still highly contested and there is a need for discussion about them, as it will be revealed later, harmful stereotypes exist about queer individuals, whether they be real or fictional.

Thus, this paper analyzes several queer characters from seven different series, examining appearances, behavior, sexual identity development, coming out, and spiritual experiences. It also shall take into account stereotypes, transgressions, subversions, how realistic some processes are, or how positive the messages are. This paper seeks to answer the questions: How are gay men/lesbians represented? How do they look and how do they behave? How do they conform to societal expectations? What about bisexuals? How do the issues of the development of sexual identity and coming out work in webtoons? Are they realistic? Through answering all of this, I shall argue that while some webtoons may simplify the process of identity development and the issue of coming out, they are otherwise inclusively representing sexual identities. The

first chapter deals with the theoretical background briefly and the second and third ones are about the representations of gay and lesbian characters, how they look and behave, and whether they conform to stereotypes, or transgress certain social norms. In the fourth and final chapter, I shall take a look at sexual identity development, and at the few coming-out scenes that exist.

The series that I am working with are: *Adventures of God*, *BiLove*, *Idiots Don't Catch Colds*, *Nevermore*, *Not So Shoujo Love Story*, *Pink Sugar*, and *The Doctors Are Out*. All the primary sources that are present in this paper are or have been serialized at some point, and because of this, not every story is completed; thus, new details about the characters may emerge and plot twists can be added by the authors later on. At the time of writing only *The Doctors Are Out* has been completed, and it has become a Daily Pass series as well (more on this in the first chapter). *Pink Sugar* has not been updated since August 2nd, *Not So Shoujo Love Story* and *Nevermore* are on hiatus momentarily. *BiLove* is being updated pretty irregularly, and it is unknown when the story of *Idiots Don't Catch Colds* will conclude. Being a slice-of-life series, *Adventures of God* does not have a plot, it consists of mostly independent episodes, but the relevant characters in this paper will probably not change much. These circumstances make it difficult to talk about the series as a whole, but I believe certain conclusions can still be derived based on the available episodes. Due to this, relevant information might change after the submission of the paper, but it will be indicated in the presentation in the spring. Still, if there are discrepancies, it is because most of the series are not finished yet.

The other certain limitation is the fact, that the different series do not always put a label on the characters, what is sure is that they are not heterosexual. It is not everywhere that the exact sexual identity and orientation are said out loud, or not by the character that is queer (e.g. in the case of Rei, when she says that she has a girlfriend, and it is her father who claims that his daughter is gay). In some cases, however, it can be suspected that a character is definitely homosexual, for example, Lenore.

Keeping these in mind, however, I believe the paper succeeds in arguing for the diversity of the characters in webtoons. Naturally, there are more series out there than the ones discussed here, so the results may be even more nuanced than what is presented here, though I contend that this paper is suitable for a discourse starter on the topic. I am also not opposed to the idea of

expanding the scope of this research into a format that allows for more comprehensive analyses but for now, this is what has been allowed by circumstances.

Chapter One: Theoretical Background

To reiterate, this paper examines sexual identity and queerness as they are present in webtoons. In the past decades there has been much study done on sexual identity minorities and queer theory has also emerged as a field of study. Webtoons, however, are a much newer phenomenon and they may be an unfamiliar concept to many, which is why I would like to start with the definition of this term in the first subchapter, what they are, and a short description of the platform where the series are from. The consequent subchapter deals with sexual identity, how it is best to understand, its components, and what might influence it.

1.1 Webtoons

The problem with defining webtoons is distinguishing between digital comics and webcomics, as they are similar, but not quite the same. Of course, they have their roots in traditional printed comics, but it was “the transformation of the medial environment that made possible the development of the new segment” (Dunai 334).¹ Thanks to this, sharing one’s work with the world became more available for anyone and a lot cheaper, as there is no need for printing, for example (Dunai 335). The term ‘webtoon’ comes from the combination of the words ‘web’ and ‘cartoon’ and it was first used in South Korea and can be considered a manwha² format (Dunai 335).

Kleefeld differentiates digital comics from webcomics/webtoons based on the creator’s intent (2) and the software used to read said webcomics (3). On the one hand, authors usually create their works with the mindset that their comic will be distributed online, with the possibility of a printed version coming second in line. On the other hand, as Kleefeld puts it, “[w]ebcomics, by contrast, can be viewed natively in any web browsing software, with the specific rendering being handled by an open-source coding language like HTML” (4). Other factors that differentiate webcomics from digital comics are the occasional use of animations, like short cycle animations, or sometimes even sounds and music (5). Alternatively, a digital comic can be thought of as a more general concept under which webcomics belong. However, an even better distinction is that while digital comics refer to those works that have more traditional

¹ Original: “(...) a mediális környezet megváltozása tette lehetővé az új szegmentum kialakulását” (Dunai 334), my translation.

² South Korean comic type that is based on the Japanese comic type called manga.

formatting (e.g. print comics that have a digital edition as well and are read like pages of a physical book), webcomics conform to the different medium; that is, the Internet's and the platform's unique characteristics (Dunai 344-5).

On the platform Webtoon, this difference is notable, as the creators format the panels one below the other so that they are optimal for reading on a mobile phone. They also make use of the already-mentioned cycle animations, like in the case of the later-discussed *Nevermore*, which in its title panel and at the end credits features a little beating heart. This paper does not discuss *Purple Hyacinth*, but this webtoon has a soundtrack for almost every episode.

The works that are considered today are all from the same platform that was mentioned above. It is one of the biggest and most accessible platforms, which is why the comics are chosen from here, and it is also the reason why I would like to talk about it in a bit more detail. Webtoon has its origins in South Korea, it launched there in 2004, and then in 2014 in the United States as well. All of its comics are free to read, however, the platform supports its creators through ad revenue but also the Fast Pass and Daily Pass systems.³ Webtoons and webcomics thrive in South Korea, not just because they originate from there, but also because the country is highly supportive of its creative industries, so it provides them with ample funding (Yecies and Shim 2).

One can read the works of Webtoon either on a web browser, on their website, or through their application that is free to download for both Android and IOS. Multiple similarities are observable between the website and the app, such as the banner, recommendations (both Originals and Canvas⁴), currently trending series, and fresh uploads. Similarly to most online platforms, one can connect to the creators and other readers by giving a like or writing a comment under an episode, subscribing to the series, or rating it. Hence, by providing opportunities for every creator to share their work and for readers to express their opinions, Webtoon has grown to be one of the most significant platforms out there that shares webcomics.

³ Fast Pass is a way for readers to support the ongoing series and also to read some episodes ahead before the given episode becomes free to read for everyone. Daily Pass works on a similar principle, but in this case, the series is already finished, and the reader has usually 1-7 free episodes to read a day, but can read more if they pay or watch an advertisement, but the amount of advertisements is also limited on a day.

⁴ A series can be either Originals or Canvas. In the first case, Webtoon serves almost as a publisher, contracting the creators to work for them full-time – of course in exchange for sufficient funding, although the popularity of the series can affect how long the given series would run as well as extra income. However, on Canvas, creators do not have these advantages, they produce their series in their free time, and they are mostly supported by the readers through Super Likes or Patreon, but if the series is popular enough, it can be “greenlit” and moved to Originals.

1.2 Sexual identity

Especially since the second half of the twentieth century, an increasing amount of research has been conducted on sexual identity. More and more people are starting to talk about their experiences as queer individuals and in general, more attention is on the LGBTQ+ community. Thanks to all of these, the understanding of sexual identity has evolved continuously and tremendously.

First of all, it is not a binary (Dillon et al 652), as it used to be believed, but it is more comparable to a spectrum. This has its advantages because people can describe their experiences better (e.g. a bisexual who is not 50-50% attracted to male and female individuals), but it also makes labeling difficult. That is not to say that there have never been attempts, one of which is the ever-growing LGBTQ+ acronym⁵, or the use of the umbrella term “queer,” which refers to anyone not identifying as heterosexual.

Second of all, sexual identity is composed of multiple factors; Michael G. Shively and John P. Cecco identify the following: sex and gender identity (41), social sex-role (42), and sexual orientation (45). Biological sex is usually clear-cut and does not need much explaining, but there might be complications if the person is intersex. Gender identity corresponds with biological sex a lot of the time, but not always, as is evidenced by the existence of genderqueer⁶ individuals. Social sex-roles can vary culturally, but generally, they are “characteristics that are culturally associated with men or with women” (42-3) and they are “perceived as stereotypically masculine or feminine” (43). Finally, sexual orientation refers to the preferred sex that one would choose to have intercourse with.

It must be also noted that while there are a lot of sexual identities that one can identify with or relate to, heterosexuals are still the majority, which might be because heterosexuality is enforced by social factors (Dillon et al 653). Some of these factors include but are not limited to aspects such as microsocial influences or religion (655-656).⁷ Because of this prescribed heterosexuality, sexual minorities are understood in abstract terms (660) and they are often Othered.

⁵ It also includes gender identities and lesser-known orientations, but it is hard to keep track of, as new identities are always being added to it.

⁶ Includes, among many others, transgender, genderfluid and agender identities, but it is also being expanded constantly.

⁷ For example, when one’s family members says utterances along the lines of “when you get a husband/wife” or “when you have children of your own.”

The concept of stereotypes is widely discussed, but most definitions are more or less the same. For example, Jeffrey W. Sherman describes stereotypes as “mental representations that form the basis of one's knowledge about social groups” (1126) but also draws upon the work of Lippman, who understood stereotypes more as oversimplified categorizations about groups of people (1127). Similarly, Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan interpret stereotypes as a “cognitive method or procedure, used by our mind in order to simplify the complex barrage of information it experiences” (166), or in other words, “a method of understanding” (166). They go on to add that it can exist on multiple levels, such as that of the individual and the collective.

Lastly, the terms subversion and transgression are recurring, and they are not interchangeable. The definitions used here are based on the ones found in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, according to which, subversion is the overturning of a system, which here becomes the contradiction of the heteronormative system. Transgression is a violation of rules or laws that in this context is being adopted mostly as the breaking and violation of societal rules surrounding sexuality. However, not fully, because I do use the official definition as well, e.g. when it comes to Lenore in *Nevermore*, as she often goes against authority, whether it be the law or the Deans of the Academy.

Character analysis and close reading are used for the analytical chapters. I shall consider the characters' appearance and behavior, which include major choices, smaller actions, and demeanors. These do not exclude uttered sentences or thoughts written in the speech bubbles. Next to the Figure number, the episode number will be shown, unless indicated in the text. This number refers to the episode's sequential number, for example, if a series starts with a prologue and then “Episode 1,” then the prologue is assigned as episode 1, and “Episode 1” is considered episode 2. With all of these definitions and information in mind, let us take a look at the representation of queer characters in selected webtoons.

Chapter Two: Features of Appearance

Self-expression through clothing, hairstyles, accessories, and appearance, in general, is very significant for every (sub-)culture, as it can signal where one belongs, their values or beliefs. It is easily graspable as it is visible, and so, many stereotypes exist about how a certain group or community ought to look like. Firstly, how conforming to stereotypes these characters are is going to be investigated, then, secondly, whether they infringe on any kind of social expectations, and if so, a possible explanation shall be offered.

2.1 Stereotypical appearance

Most specific stereotypes that exist about gay and lesbian people can be brought under the same roof of gender roles and gender expressions being inverted. For example, the stereotype of the masculine lesbian (Blashill and Powlishta 789) is present in *Pink Sugar*, a series by Alex Barr. But as it was said, not all stereotypes are connected to gender inversion, as there exist the so-called lipstick lesbians (Hilton-Morrow and Battles 81), who are much more feminine than their masculine counterparts; such a character exists in Kate Flynn's and Kit Trace's webtoon titled *Nevermore*.

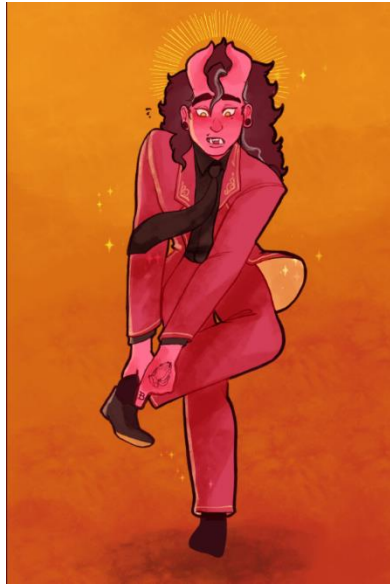


Figure 1



Figure 2

In Figures 1 and 2 we see Blake, one of the protagonists of the former series getting dressed (Figure 1) and also standing on her balcony, smoking a cigar (Figure 2); these are glimpses from the second and first episodes of the series, respectively, the first time the reader meets her. Her choice of clothing needs to be noted first, which is a dark pink suit. While its color is considered feminine, suits, generally, are undoubtedly considered masculine attire, rarely worn by women (but slowly becoming more common). This is similar to unshaven arms in the sense that while efforts are being exerted to make them socially accepted, in many circles it is considered unladylike to be hairy. However, in light of all of this, Blake is still a woman who embraces more masculine characteristics in her appearance.



Figure 3 – Episode 1

Nevermore's Annabel Lee (Figure 3) looks starkly different from Blake, as she represents the other stereotype, the lipstick lesbian. This is the very first look we get of her and she appears mostly the same throughout the series, but even when she has a different apparel, the style remains notably similar. She usually wears feminine clothing, not unlike in the above Figure, where one can see her in her school uniform, which consists of a frilly skirt, a bow, and an elegant shirt and jacket. In general, she has a feminine face and she takes great care in styling her hair into these curls (as can be seen in episode 27). Compared to Blake, she is much more traditionally feminine.



Figure 4 – Riley's arrival in Hell.

Similarly to masculine lesbians, a stereotype about gay men is that generally they portray themselves as more feminine than their heterosexual peers. In *Adventures of God*, all gay men go to Hell, because God wants to set Satan, otherwise known as Lucy, up with someone, who also happens to be homosexual. This strategy proves to be successful, as Lucy gets together with a man named Riley, who first appears in episode 3. Although we do not see his entire appearance, it is visible that he wears a simple grayish shirt that is not outright feminine. His hair is also cut in a pretty masculine way, however, it is dyed, which is a thing widely associated with women. It can be said with certainty that he is not as feminine as he could be, but he is not entirely masculine in his appearance either.



Figure 5 – Episode 764, Lucy, in what is probably his most common outfit.

Lucy is shown more often in the series than Riley is, and as a result, one can observe his clothing more frequently. Similarly to Blake, he wears masculine attire with a feminine color; in his case, it is a purple suit, instead of a dark pink one. Many characters' apparent traits contain a mix of both feminine and masculine elements, it is not as black and white as it would be if the stereotypes were right all the time; these blended characteristics are in fiction, as well as reality.

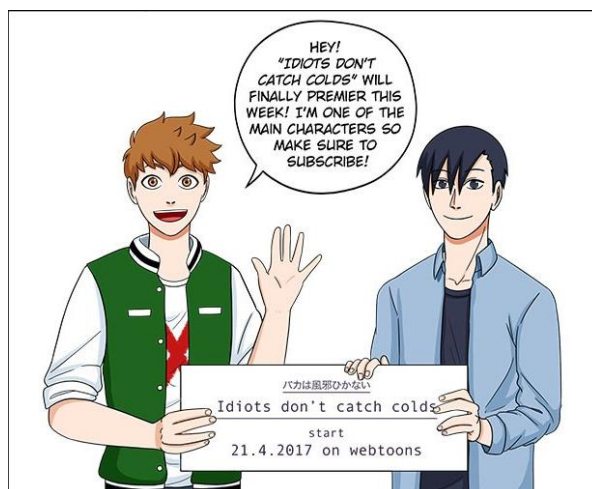


Figure 6 – Episode 1

The main character in *Idiots Don't Catch Colds* is a boy named Souta, whose sexual orientation is not known, however, he is not heterosexual. He first appears in “Promo” (on the left, in the green in Figure 6) (only non-canon episodes are colored) where he looks the way it is most socially appropriate for a boy his age. He continues to do so throughout most of the series, although he mainly wears his school uniform. Gender non-conforming appearance does not exist in his case, and because of this, it can be assumed that he is content and comfortable in the way he expresses himself – which is most important.

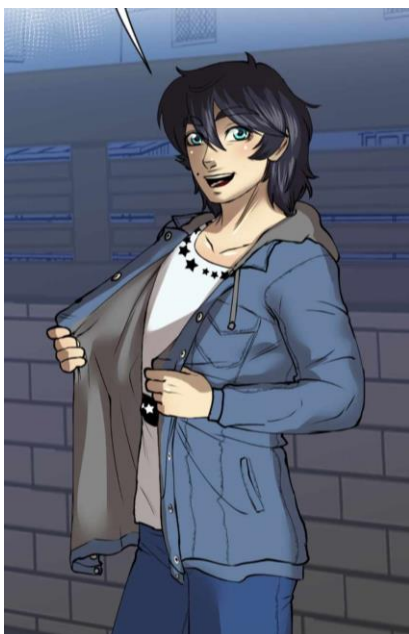


Figure 7 – Enzo in episode 67.



Figure 8 – Mat in episode 119.

Souta's situation, where orientations are not known for sure, is not as uncommon as one might think. Due to this, finding confirmed bisexual characters can be a challenge, but not impossible. Two examples would be Enzo from *BiLove* (Figure 7) and Mat from *The Doctors Are Out* (Figure 8). Besides sharing the same sexual orientation they have few things in common, like some stylistic choices. Based on the overlaps of three online articles on bisexual fashion (Out In Jersey, Aurore, and Haney), it can be concluded that they follow these stereotypes in a limited manner. None of them wear a lot of accessories or tuck in their shirt; while in this picture Enzo's shoes are not visible, it is clear that Mat does not wear sneakers; both of their hair is somewhat longer than the “bisexual bob” (Out In Jersey); finally, they both layer their clothes. It must be noted also, that these characters change outfits quite often, so these Figures serve more of a representative purpose.

In the case of the eight characters discussed so far, the overwhelming majority did not follow the stereotypes rigorously. To reinstate Sherman's words, stereotypes are mental representations and/or oversimplified categorizations of groups of people (1126-7), and due to this, are oftentimes false, or simply do not apply to every single member of a given community or group. Because the characters tend to not conform entirely to either the traditional gender expressions or to the stereotypes, it can be safely said that they subvert them. Here, not yet as an act of definite rebellion, as it shall be seen in the next segment, but because that is just who they are, unapologetically.

2.2 Apparent transgressions



Figure 9



Figure 10 – Lenore after escaping from her previous life (episode 67).

Dressing masculine as a woman violates the way society thinks about them, it can be considered a transgression. While Blake may not do it specifically to infringe on social rules, the same can not necessarily be said about Lenore, also from *Nevermore*. The majority of the series takes

place in the afterlife, where people have to graduate from a school named Nevermore Academy, to get a chance at reincarnation. Students get personalized uniforms, Lenore's can be seen in Figure 9, taken from the first episode. She prefers a more masculine look in the afterlife, but in her life, she also staged her death and assumed the fake identity of a man. Being born in the 19th century, as a woman and queer (although nobody knew about that besides her or Annabel), she did not have a lot of agency, which is why she rejected a woman's life and embraced that of a man; not because she is transgender. She is unable to live as a woman because of social constraints and being deemed a madwoman because of grief and physical injury: she does not have the desire to become a man, she wants the power and the privileges that come with being a man.



Figure 11

Not So Shoujo Love Story's Rei is not as complicated as Lenore. Her stylistic choices are partially due to preference, partially to differentiate herself from all those she deems 'normies.' She appears in the first episode, and it can be immediately noticed that her hair is very short, her ears are pierced multiple times (which goes against the school dress code) and she only wears a skirt because it is the uniform, but outside of it, she never does. Right from the start she comes off as brute and disagreeable because of the unpleasant expression on her face. She is not

pretending to be someone she is not, being unapologetically herself, and the way she does it some might think distasteful.

Konstantinos Eleftheriadis highlights that “stylistic transgressions attempt to demonstrate the constructed character of gender and sexual identities” (133), meaning that gender and sexuality are built on artificial socially constructed ideas, including the roles people should fill and how they should express themselves. One does not need to be queer to commit them, but generally, this has been linked to their subculture, as they are the ones whom these constructs affect the most. While Lenore and Rei commit these transgressions for highly different reasons, the result is the same: their styles are a form of nonconforming and differentiating.

Clothing often influences first impressions which play a huge part in how a certain group or person is judged or related to by others. It must be kept in mind that while style may reflect something about another’s personality, it does not define them entirely. Emphasizing how structured some notions regarding gender roles and expressions are, webtoons also stress that not accepting someone solely based on the way they look is not giving them a chance to show who they are – something the next chapter will go more into in regards to some characters.

Chapter Three: Aspects of Behavior

Naturally, representation is not limited only to what is seen on the outside but also to the behavior of individuals – in this case, fictional characters. In the same way, as in the previous chapter, the stereotypes are considered first, and then the transgressions. Some behavioral stereotypes are related to gender roles still, while others are more concerned with lifestyles and morals. The transgressions, however, are committed sometimes because the character feels that they need to take certain actions for the betterment of their life quality, or would not even be considered transgressions in a different time and society.

3.1 Stereotypical behavior

Some stereotypes expect queer people to dress according to the gender on the other side of the binary. Likewise, according to some stereotypes homosexual relationships are supposed to be based on the traditional heterosexual structure, where one party takes on a more feminine, while the other one a more masculine role (Felmlee 227). Naturally, relationships can function without this type of role division, but it may still occur.



Figure 12

Oftentimes just because someone portrays themselves as more masculine or feminine, that does not mean that they behave in that way. The 13th episode in *Nevermore* illustrates it well, as here the students have to escape a maze-like house while monsters are hunting them. Annabel Lee is no damsel in distress nor is Lenore her knight in shining armor, as in this case, it is the other way around, the former saving the latter (Figure 12). This sends two messages simultaneously: one, that looks do not necessarily define behavior, and two, that feminine-looking people are also capable of handling themselves and even others. These subvert the old idea that feminine or woman-like people are weak and are just waiting for someone to save them – that is not the case, femininity does not include incapability.



Figure 13 – Episode 17



Figure 14 – Hanna in Episode 26

While this stereotype is subverted in *Nevermore*, it is more present in *Not So Shoujo Love Story*, although it is still not followed entirely. Rei does not only come off as aggressive, but she behaves that way as well, as she gets angry easily, and shouts and curses a lot – often the two go together (Figure 13). In contrast with this, Rei's love interest, Hanna, is much more ladylike in many senses. In the school that they attend, she is the most popular girl, as evidenced by a fan club formed by boys who admire her because of her great inner and outer qualities. Moreover,

she is one of the student council presidents, which confirms her academic excellence, good demeanor, and respectable reputation. However, she does not shy away from making sexual comments, which are traditionally not accepted from women, as they are not supposed to present themselves as sexual beings if they want to be desirable by certain men. But since Hanna does not want a man, she wants to be together with a girl, there is no need to adhere to social rules of heteronormativity.



Figure 15 – Episode 92

The already-mentioned Riley used to be a hairdresser before his death (and continues to do Lucy's hair in Hell too), which can be considered a feminine job by stereotypes. Conversely, not every stereotype that exists about queer people revolves around gender roles, especially in the media. Sheng Kuan Chung claims that "lesbian and gay characters are portrayed living in an unrealistic, erotic lifestyle that revolves around alcohol use, drugs, club scenes and casual sex" (101). It is not so often seen in webtoons as, for example, Riley and Lucy mostly spend their time in Hell, not doing anything outrageous. To demonstrate, in Figure 15 Lucy and Riley can be seen as they are reading children's letters to Santa misaddressed to Satan, while Riley is doing Lucy's hair. Riley giving new haircuts to Lucy is a frequent occurrence and the two of them

appear doing this specific activity a lot of the time – it would be hard for them to get any further from clubbing and sleeping around.



Figure 16

Staying in the vein of *Adventures of God*, there are multiple instances where Lucy gives advice and guides the Hellpers. These girls were able to summon Lucy multiple times and were willing to sell their souls for childish gains; the first time they wanted tickets for an event called “Fairy Princess on Ice,” but Lucy refused their souls (episode 27). These summonings happened multiple times during the series until Lucy became some form of a guardian for the girls. Another example of him being a decent human being is provided in Figure 16, from episode 515. All these show that just because he is gay (and Satan), he is not necessarily a bad person. He is a more complex character that goes beyond the simple duality of ‘good and bad.’ Nevertheless, usually, heterosexuals are indeed normalized and homosexuals villainized (Green 32), but here this opposition is subverted, testifying to the fact that queer people are only human too, that they are complex individuals, not solely ‘good or bad.’



Figure 17

Stereotypes against bisexuals can originate from biphobia, and they include myths such as “that they are looking for attention, just experimenting, immoral, greedy, unfaithful or unstable” (unfe.org n.p.). Mat embodies the opposite of all of these myths, he, as a character, debunks almost all of them, just by being who he is: he is secure in his sexuality, faithful to his partner, Nando, and does everything in his power to make sure that Nando feels comfortable in their relationship. The latter man battles insecurities and anxieties throughout the series, he constantly questions himself and his feelings, but Mat always makes sure that there are no misunderstandings, or if they still occur, they are communicated properly, the problems are talked through and eventually resolved. A great example of this is from episode 130, when as a result of a family crisis, Mat’s ex-girlfriend and mother of his child is forced to sleep at his place,

and Nando is not sure what to think of the situation. The two men reconcile as Mat understands Nando's issues and even apologizes for making his partner feel the way he did (Figure 17).

Therefore, many stereotypes exist about queer people regarding social roles, lifestyles, and moralities. Most of them are negative or at best neutral, but more importantly, generally untrue in webtoons. Subverting these misbeliefs, these creators and series accentuate their frequent falsity and provide diverse representation.

3.2 Behavioral transgression

Queer people can be considered "social outcasts" (Hilton-Morrow and Battles 57), meaning that they do not fit entirely into regular society. They are different, do not fit the mold, they are othered. Lenore's character has been discussed already regarding transgressions, so only a few more details and arguments shall be added. Compared with her, Blake not yet has been talked about in more detail, which will follow a bit later. It can be said in advance that both of them have been ostracized in one way or another, for one reason or another, and in that sense they are similar, but notable differences exist between the two.



Figure 18

First, Lenore's transgressions are more like crimes, namely arson and creating a whole new persona as whom she can pose. She breaks the law to gain control over her fate, which she feels is not in her hands; she does not even feel respected as a human being. But she also rebels in her death as well, resisting the authority of the Deans, the founders and directors of Nevermore Academy, she goes up against them at every possible opportunity, because she finds them suspicious and untrustworthy. On a certain level, it makes sense why she is doing what she does, but at other times it feels as if she was physically unable to follow conventions and rules. Joyrich defines queer as precisely the opposite of the regular, as the unusual (134) and Lenore fits this interpretation. To avoid confusion, it must be noted that her choices are predominantly deliberate and thought through. She does not always do things on a whim, as she is not as "mad"

as her family believes it. No decisions are taken lightly, as is visible in Figure 18, taken from the 50th episode, when she burns down her house and with that the symbolic bridges that connect her to her past self. Her grim facial expression, the colors, and the lighting all emphasize the severity of the situation and that she is serious about her actions and will take responsibility for the consequences. The darkness makes sure the reader also feels the weight of what is about to transpire, while the red clothes match the fire, and both represent her anger and resentment towards society and her family.



Figure 19 – Mary (left) and Beatrice (right) in episode 47

Subsequently, the majority of *Pink Sugar*'s plot also takes place in the afterlife, in Limbo, to be exact. Correspondingly, all of the characters who do not show up exclusively in a flashback are dead. Blake was alive during the 1960s, when homosexual relations, albeit not criminalized in the US, were still considered a mental illness. She used to be called Beatrice, and she attended a weekly book club that served as a temporary relief from her unfulfilling life. There, she met another woman, Mary, with whom they became close friends quite fast. The friendship ended up a romantic affair, but it was soon that they were found out. As a result, Beatrice got sent to an asylum to 'cure' her homosexuality. This marked the start of her penance for being queer which ended in her suicide. But the 1960s are also significant from the feminist movement's point of view, as this era gave birth to second-wave feminism, and according to Ferguson, lesbian relationships are feminist. She explains that since two women can be happy together and satisfy

each other emotionally and sexually, a challenge is posed to the patriarchy, where women can be entirely independent of men; they do not need them as before (164).

Though it is not easy everywhere to be some kind of queer, it used to be even harder in earlier centuries. They were considered even more outcasts than they are today – at least in Western society. Lenore and Blake, too, were homosexual in the wrong time and space, when that was unacceptable. This identity is what constituted some of their transgressions, or prompted subsequent ones.

Stereotypes have been existing and will continue to do so about every group of people, still, it must be kept in mind that they are not always true, and one must look at the individual first, and relate to them as a distinct person. Media and the stories one consumes count a lot towards upholding, often false, beliefs about other communities, and because of this artists and creators have a responsibility to write narratives where harmful categorizations are replaced with true diversity and show that fictional characters as well as real people can portray themselves anyhow they want, or behave differently than one would think so at first. The webtoons discussed in this chapter certainly attempt to bring variety into how queer characters are depicted all the while providing spaces where readers can feel represented.

Chapter Four: Facets of Life

When talking about sexual identity and queerness, observing its developmental process can provide one with valuable insight into how media and art deal with the topic. Correspondingly, the situation is similar to coming out. Both of these processes are crucial to identity development as a whole, as they define potential partners, as well as may influence other interpersonal relationships, and are shaped by environments. The first subchapter examines sexual identity development, while the second one deals with coming outs, examining how realistic they are, and what kind of messages the depicted situations send.

4.1 Sexual identity development

Sexual identity development is the name of the process through which individuals realize that they are, in fact, queer (Dillon et al 649-50). Many models describing this procession have been worked out, but for the sake of this paper, the one by Dillon, Worthington, and Moradi shall be used. They identified five steps of sexual identity development, which consist of: compulsory heterosexuality, active exploration, diffusion, deepening and commitment, and synthesis. These are, however, not to be thought of as linear, because individuals can skip some of these, come back to them later in life, or not at all (Dillon et al 658). A description of each of these stages follows in this section, after which their presence in *BiLove*, *Idiots Don't Catch Colds*, and *Not So Shoujo Love Story* is contemplated.

Firstly, compulsory heterosexuality and active exploration, I contend, are self-explanatory. It is crucial to note, however, that active exploration can be either cognitive or behavioral (Dillon et al 660), meaning that individuals can fantasize about having non-heterosexual relations, or try these activities in a real-life setting, with physical people. Secondly, diffusion can be understood as “the absence of commitment and of systematic exploration” and there exist two types of it: diffused diffusion and carefree diffusion (662). Individuals in the former status have been described to experience a lot of uncertainty and they worry significantly about a lack of commitment to their sexuality. In contrast with this, carefree diffusion is best understood as a lack of anxiety about not having commitments or not having explored much (662); as is suggested by the name, they care much less. Thirdly, the phase of deepening and commitment is characterized by individuals committing more to their sexual identity,

preferences, and needs, among others (663). Finally, in the synthesis status individuals are the most secure in their identity, they understand it in this stage the most and it reflects in their behavior as well (664). In the webtoons where sexual identity development can be observed (that is, where characters have not figured out their orientation before the events of the series), the compulsory heterosexuality phase is always present, but the others may be rarer.



Figure 20

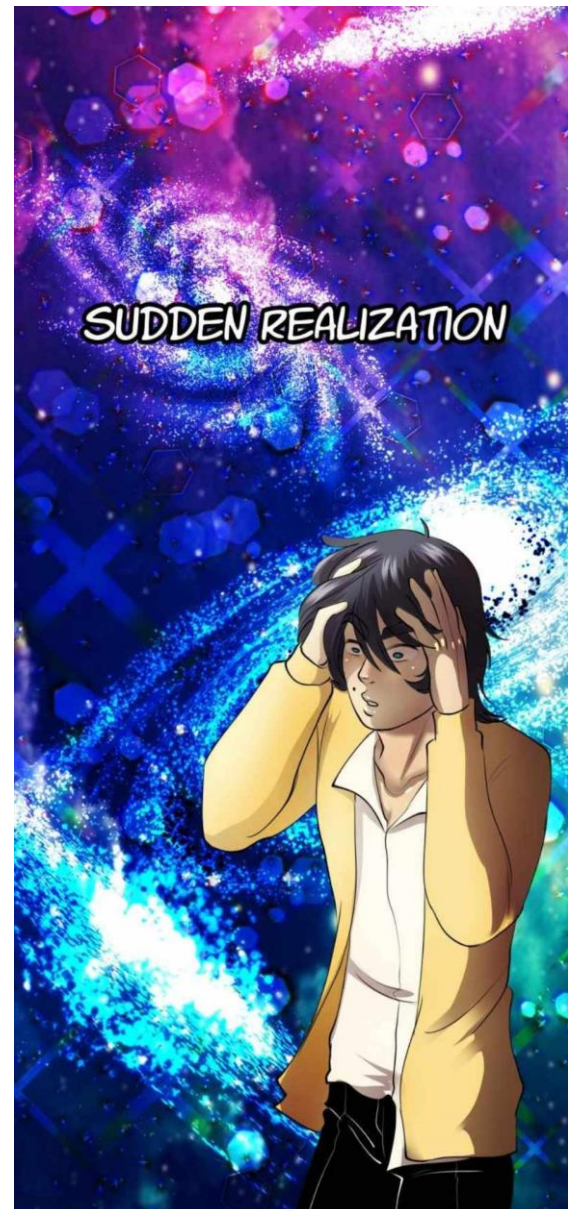


Figure 21

In *BiLove* is this process the most simplified, as Enzo jumps from compulsory heterosexuality instantly to synthesis. It happens without any transition, and because of this, it is unrealistic. Scholars emphasize that bisexual identity development includes a lot of confusion. This does not necessarily stop after the individual finds and applies the label or settles into their identity, as they may continue to experience ambivalence; their process “involves confusion, exploration and uncertainty” (Weinberg et al qtd. in Dillon et al 645), which we do not see later

in the series either. Both Figures above are from episode 20, when Henry reminds Enzo that bisexuality exists, which puts the pieces together for him. After this, there is no more questioning, no more discussion about his identity, he accepts it at once. These pictures would be directly below each other in the episode, there is absolutely no transition between them. He entirely accepts this new part of his identity, which is also suggested by the background that depicts a galactical scenery, as if the universe's wisdom became his, and he reached his true self.

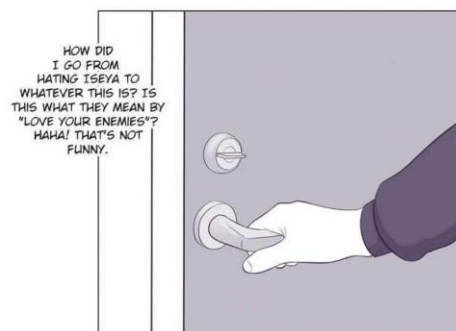


Figure 22 – Episode 77

Figure 23 – Episode 87

In contrast, Souta in *Idiots Don't Catch Colds* has a weird dream in episodes 73 and 74, which gives birth to his doubts about his heterosexuality mostly in episodes 75 to 77. His confusing feelings do not stop here as they continue to perplex him in episodes 86 to 88 with a daydream. These two events that happen in close consecutiveness with each other mark the

beginning of his uncertainties. At the time of the writing, he has not yet figured it out completely, which is probably the reason why the reader has not yet gotten a definitive answer to his orientation. In his case, active exploration in a cognitive manner can be observed, see the aforementioned daydream. Besides this, carefree diffusion is also present, where he is content with his feelings towards Nao (the love interest), but does not wish to label himself as of yet. He is still far from the deepening and commitment, and synthesis statuses, but this series, among most of the other ones discussed in this paper, is still ongoing. In the Figures provided his confusion is clear from the way he grabs his head in panic, or when he tries to reason with his feelings, contemplating what it means if he liked both a girl and a boy. Nevertheless, even at this current state it can be said that in *Idiots Don't Catch Colds* the sexual identity development is more detailed and realistic than in *BiLove*, for example.



Figure 24

The compulsory heterosexuality phase is probably the most prominent in *Not So Shoujo Love Story*, where Rei starts with constantly reading her shoujo⁸ mangas, not caring about anyone else, but herself, and her fantasy romance with Hansum, the most popular boy in the school. At the beginning of the story no other kind of love exists, only the one between her and him. Throughout the series, she does eventually realize that she is queer, but it takes her approximately a hundred episodes to fully accept it. Even then, she is insecure in it; at least until episode 121. The diffused diffusion state is also present here, as one can see her conflicted and troubled, like in episodes 63 and 45, but the reader never gets a very deep look into her mind and inner workings, mostly hints at them. In later episodes, the deepening and commitment status

⁸ The word shoujo describes both the target audience and the genre: they are mostly romantic stories made for teenage girls.

appears too, particularly when the world is transformed into one identical to the style of shoujo mangas, and to break out of it, Rei must fight to make Hanna recognize her so that the world can return to its original state. She succeeds in the end, and this moment is crucial in both her character development and her identity development: she accepts that she cannot live in a fantasy and that real life is more precious, as there she can be with the person that she likes for more valid reasons than imagination.

In this webtoon, there are several smaller moments when one can see Rei getting closer to figuring out her sexuality or just recognizing that there is a whole world outside of her comic books, and not everything is as black and white as she first thinks. One such moment is in episode 65 (Figure 27) when Hanna prevents her from getting injured after Rei falls down some stairs. The sentence “a girl can be a prince too” I do not believe exclusively refers to gender roles, but mostly to the fact that girls can serve as romantic partners for other girls too and that there is no need to categorize everything so strictly into neat little boxes, the way Rei started at the beginning of the series.

In Dillon et al’s work, five steps of sexual identity development are established, and as they argue, it is not unusual for an individual to jump over some of them. However, it is still uncommon that someone skips over most of them in just one moment, which is what happens in *BiLove*. In this regard, the other two series were more realistic, in that both Souta and Rei need some more time and opportunities to evolve in this sense. A semblance of realism is needed in every story, especially when it comes to showing that not everything is as easy as it might seem elsewhere. The realization that one is not heterosexual is a process involving a lot of confusion and distress, and even though some might take it better than others, stories are needed where the troubled can find solace.

4.2 Coming out

The act of coming out is one of the most major moment(s) for queer individuals. It is when they proclaim to themselves and others that they differ from ‘standard society’ in that they are not heterosexual. It occurs on multiple levels (Jaspal 1), such as that of the individual or their surroundings. Also, it is not a one-time event, but processual (Chirrey 28), meaning that one can be out to their friends, but not to their family members or co-workers. Wendy Hilton-Morrow

and Kathleen Battles also describe coming out as a multi-stage process that includes questioning, self-recognition, and finally, naming; however, these phases are often “confusing, anxiety-provoking, and as a point where people remain closeted” (166). Coming out is by no means easy, but it is not as difficult for some as for others.

On the subsequent pages three coming-out scenes are being focused on, namely Mat’s to Nando, Enzo’s to his father, and Souta’s, but his case is somewhat complicated. As the first two characters are confirmed bisexuals, it has to be mentioned that in general, many negative attitudes remain towards bisexuals: some of these are that they are, in reality, homosexuals in denial or transition or simply want to retain their heterosexual privilege (Israel and Mohr 121).



Figure 25 – Episode 39

Both Mat's and Enzo's coming outs go smoothly, but not for the same reasons. Mat already has his sexuality figured out, as he is older and more mature than most other characters talked about in this paper, which is why it can be argued that he has more experience with coming out; for example, who to say it to, when, where and how. Nando is probably not the first person he came out to, and Mat is secure enough in his identity that even a bad reaction would not break him down. He is entirely sure of what he is doing and says it very matter-of-factly, like the undeniable truth that it is.



Figure 26 – Episode 82

In contrast, Enzo is much younger with a newly discovered identity, about which there are no visible inner conflicts. He also only comes out to his father from his family, and he does not concern himself about his mother or sister. Self-doubt about his sexuality is also non-existent, however, he is more anxious about outside opinions, which is illustrated by the way he asks “Is... is that okay?” Although his father is not the first person to learn about his identity, it is natural that his opinion would matter more than that of a friend or neighbor, for example. Luckily for Enzo, the coming out goes well, and his father assures him that being bisexual is perfectly fine – as a loving and understanding parent should do.



Figure 27



Figure 28

Souta's coming out is complicated because it can hardly be called as such. His friend, Keisuke, asks Souta directly whether he has feelings towards Nao, which is confirmed. Whether this conversation can count as a coming out is debatable. Technically, Souta did not admit to being any kind of queer, but he did acknowledge to another person that he likes one of his same-sex friends romantically. I would still like to argue that it counts because the implications are there, and a different kind of reaction can still be expected in contrast with admitting feelings towards someone of the other sex. Likewise, as in Enzo's case, Keisuke's reaction is not negative, in fact, it is positive, as he urges Souta to make up with Nao as they had a conflict earlier.

While it is not at all impossible that coming outs go as smoothly as they do in these situations, it is not always the case, because in many instances coming outs elicit negative consequences. These unfavorable reactions can originate from various sources such as ethnic

background, religious affiliation, and many others (Rasmussen 146) and can manifest through rejection by family and friends, bullying, and additional risks (Goldman 69). Although this is the reality for many people, there is an understanding that coming out can “facilitate social support” and “expose the individual to more positive images of their sexuality” (Jaspal 2). Portraying positive examples in media is one way of supporting those who are coming out because it shows that somebody, somewhere accepts them.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research aimed to take a look at different aspects of the queer experience as they appear in webtoons. For this purpose, character analysis and close readings were used to observe the seven selected webtoons (*Adventures of God*, *BiLove*, *Idiots Don't Catch Colds*, *Nevermore*, *Not So Shoujo Love Story*, *Pink Sugar*, *The Doctors Are Out*). Besides the first chapter describing the theoretical background, three additional chapters dealt with representation, sexual identity development, and coming out.

As many stereotypes exist about queer individuals, it is not so easy to avoid all of them when creating homo- or bisexual characters; what one can do most effectively is subvert them, mix them up, and in that way put a fresh spin on them. One that persists is that queer people reflect characteristics that are opposite of their sex on the gender binary, in their self-expression, for example. Alex Barr (*Pink Sugar*) and Teo and Corey (*Adventures of God*), just to mention some, design characters that portray both feminine and masculine traits; not conforming to stereotypes for any kind of reason is a way to highlight how constructed these gendered ideologies are.

Similarly, the authors can design situations where it is shown that traditional gender roles do not apply to every situation (e.g. in *Nevermore* by Flynn and Trace), or portray that just because bisexuals are believed to be promiscuous, they can live and thrive in serious relationships too (*The Doctors Are Out* by Blau). Some characters commit behavioral transgressions, like Lenore or Rei, to shed light on the socially constructed nature of identities, or simply just to distinguish themselves from others. This differentiation is visible in the way Rei might appear apprehensive at first and not to be considered the same as her peers whom she calls 'normies'. Moreover, behavioral transgressions are oftentimes considered as such, transgressions, because of societal constraints and taboos, that cannot be overlooked by the dominant group (*Nevermore* and *Pink Sugar*).

Despite how crucial sexual identity development is, the struggles that come with it may be simplified in certain series (*BiLove*), but outlined better in other works (*Idiots Don't Catch Colds* and *Not So Shoujo Love Story*). Not every stage described by Dillon et al needs to be present, but skipping every one of them between compulsory heterosexuality and synthesis is highly improbable. *BiLove* presents this latter version, which is somewhat problematic, but

fortunately, series like *Idiots Don't Catch Colds* and *Not So Shoujo Love Story* offer a more nuanced representation. A process that includes so much internal conflict should not be overly banalized, to avoid potential negative reactions.

Lastly, Coming outs allow more leeway when it comes to problematic occurrences. Though it depends on a lot of factors, it is quite common that someone's coming out does not have negative repercussions. While some readers may not relate to a situation like that, it does suggest that a positive reaction is not impossible, like when Enzo in *BiLove* came out to his father. Instead of being shunned and not taken seriously, he was supported and reassured, that he is loved, no matter what.

In this paper, thus, I argued that while there are aspects to still be desired in the department of identity development, webtoons are embracing queerness. They reflect a growing sentiment shared by groups that stand with queer individuals and argue for their equal rights. Being a fairly new form of media, that does not necessarily mean that webtoons have nothing worthwhile to contribute to serious discussions and art as well. Reading the series, one might get the feeling that at times they are lacking in how a character realizes their queerness, or how easy coming out goes for them. Despite these shortcomings, webtoons feature diverse characters, following stereotypes in varying degrees, oftentimes having encouraging messages for the reader.

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