

The Representation Myth: Unveiling Oppressive Gay Images in Sparks Camp with Queer Paradigm

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Abstract. Now more than ever, representations of marginalized identities in various film productions have met relative success and positive reception from the masses. With multiple gay icons at the forefront of new media, the contemporary Filipino film industry capitalizes on the images of a visible minority riding on themes of diversity, inclusivity, and empowerment, which is why it is possible for shows like *Sparks Camp* to be produced for public consumption at present. Upon the announcement of the show's casting, there has been an uproar online regarding the lack of diversity in the show, labeling the cast as essentially and exclusively Bonifacio Global City (BGC)/Poblacion gays. While contestations on diversity may be easily debunked on grounds of the actual demographic and cultural variation between the campers, as was explained by the show's host Mela Habijan, a critical analysis based on intersectionality, consumptive pedagogy, and queer theory reveals that the problem is less about diversity than the implicit ideological bedrock through which the show was built on. *Sparks Camp* is symptomatic of the propensity of gay representation in contemporary Filipino media to marginalize rather than liberate a readily vulnerable community. Conclusively, media representation of marginalized identities must go beyond normative representation and image-building and instead focus on "queer representation."

Keywords. *media representation, gay image, queer theory, consumptive pedagogy*

Gay visibility in the Philippine media has gone a very long way. Now, more than ever, representations of marginalized identities in various film productions have met relative success and positive reception from the masses, particularly from the younger generation (Moody-Ramirez et al., 2023). With multiple gay icons at the forefront of new media, the contemporary Filipino film industry capitalizes on the images of a visible sexual minority propelled by themes of diversity, inclusivity, and empowerment, which is why shows like *Sparks Camp (Season 1)* can be produced for public consumption at present. *Sparks Camp*, which was directed by Theodore Boborol and written by Patrick Valencia, advertised itself as the Philippines' first-ever "queer" dating show that aired last May 24, 2023, on multiple social media platforms, with a teaser that garnered three million views (Manhit, 2023).

Upon the announcement of *Sparks Camp*'s casting, there has been an uproar online regarding the lack of diversity in the show, with social media users labeling the cast (or "campers" as the show calls it) as essentially and exclusively Bonifacio Global City (BGC) gays or Poblacion gays—a particular population of the gay community that has a solid affinity for the gay culture of the imperial capital, Manila. While contestations on diversity may be easily debunked on grounds of the actual demographic and cultural variations between the campers, as was explained by the show's host Mela Habijan (a transwoman herself), a critical analysis based on intersectionality, consumptive pedagogy, and queer theory reveals that the problem is less about diversity than the implicit ideological bedrock through which the show appears to be built on. *Sparks Camp* is symptomatic of the propensity of gay representation in contemporary Filipino media to marginalize rather than liberate a readily vulnerable community.

Indeed, the campers may be argued to be differentiated from one another to a certain degree. Still, the show's limited representation finds better articulation in terms of the sociocultural and economic capital that originates from the campers' middle-class statuses, allowing them to be

represented in the first place. Most, if not all, of the cast are prominent social media users or content creators with a significant number of followers. The campers are also either in tertiary level education (e.g., Justin and Alex are college students), post-graduate education (e.g., Nat and Dan are pursuing medicine), or have already finished with a stable job or career (e.g., Aaron is a famous influencer. Nick has his own business and Karl is an accountant). Finally, as was mentioned, the campers collectively embody an urban identity and lifestyle that defines the material and social culture available and accessible to them. These characteristics are all indicators of a particular socioeconomic status that the show can so easily exploit, with intentionality or the lack thereof, in its representation of the "gay image," especially when accounting for the Gramscian discussion of popular culture and cultural production.

The middle-class status of the cast serves as a source of spectacle that is apparent in *Sparks Camp*'s format—a gay dating show. Gay romance has a substantial viewership value that predisposes a particular population (i.e., the LGBTQIA+ community) to consumption but which may not be limited to them (Zsila, 2017). With popular culture, the show is packaged under the pretense of representation and entertainment that consumers may unsurprisingly receive positively and celebrate. The show channels the middle-class status of the cast to propagate the middle-class experience of homosexuality and the privileges it comes with, such as romance, camping as a human activity, and social connections. However, the experience of the middle-class life gained from consuming popular culture is devoid of the predicaments of the consumers (Tolentino, 2007). Relatively, the monotonous class membership of the *Sparks Camp*'s cast imposes a narrative of homosexuality that assumes a set of social and economic capacities that may not be true to the experiences and struggles of gay audiences if the show indeed aims for representation. To bank almost wholesale on a middle-class narrative of gay romance, for example, mainstreams a gay experience that may be so detached from the realities of the audiences in terms of their hardships as gender-nonconforming and low-class individuals. The consumptive pedagogy, that is, learning through consumption (Eichler, 2012), in media capitalism further complicates the representation of gay identity in *Sparks Camp* when looking at the self-presentation of its cast. All cast members except one (i.e., Bong) are, behaviorally and physically, straight-passing. "Passing" is an individual's capacity to be regarded as belonging to an identity category or group, such as sexual orientation, that is typically different from their own (Renfrow, 2004). Straight passing, therefore, is to achieve the "presumption of heterosexuality" for gender-nonconforming individuals, including gay men (Gianoulis, 2015). To this effect, the mainstreaming of gay male images that strictly resonate with masculinity and heteronormativity may be rendered problematic due to the media market's role as a legitimate source of information in the construction of marginalized identities.

Furthermore, the media mainstreaming of a particular expression of gay identity (e.g., discreet gay) makes those who satisfy such an expression more palatable than others (Eichler, 2012). Since gender is performative, that is, it maintains the fantasy of a norm (Butler, 1990), *Sparks Camp* is thus potentially marginalizing. The casting of a group of straight-passing gay men for a national media show may generate the risk of perpetuating hegemonic masculinity — one that subordinates other forms of masculinities, including femininities. Through the pedagogical representation of gay identity based on heteromascularity, homosexual effeminacy may be excluded, peripheralized, and exoticized because it cannot sustain the fantasy of male cisgenderism.

With the above argument, the presence of Bong (the hyperfeminine gay camper) and Mela (the fully transitioned transwoman host) in the show is interesting because it almost acts as a smoke screen for the show's vexing narrative of gay heteromascularity. The interference of two feminine identities creates the illusion of genuine representation. Ironically, such an attempt embodies counterproductive effects. This was historically the case in the media presence of gays in Philippine cinema. While homosexual characters have always received filmic portrayals since the 1950s, they are prone to "borderline representation" because they build queerness through specific images detached from variety and authenticity (Nanglihan & Santiago, 2019). Within the *Sparks Camp*, the juxtaposition of powerfully feminine and intensely masculine gender-nonconforming bodies reinforces a normative gender binary. It dichotomizes gayness or the idea of gender non-conformism as an either-or phenomenon that is the product of an argued ontological difference between two presumed categories (i.e., man and woman, male and female, masculine and feminine) and which forcibly befalls individuals, therefore blurring the gender spectrum. According to Warner (2004), the construction of this difference creates modalities of intelligibility through which bodies are constituted as either being intelligible (i.e., satisfying the norm) or unintelligible—with the latter category becoming a locus of

social exclusion, marginalization, and deviance. Ergo, those who cannot perform normative femininity and masculinity, as represented in media, are produced as alien bodies and are pressed against a precarious position. *Where do we position androgyny, fluidity, and non-binary in the prominent binary represented by Sparks Camp? Why are these forms of queerness so visibly absent?*

It must be noted nonetheless that the observations listed above are not peculiar to *Sparks Camp*; they have become the endemic features of the most contemporary representations of gay identity in Filipino media. The pandemic saw a surge in the production and consumption of gay media representation through Boys Love (BL) films in the Philippines (Cruz, 2021). However, similar to *Sparks Camp*, three of the most successful Pinoy BL series, including *Hello Stranger*, *Gameboys*, and *Gaya sa Pelikula*, exhibit prevailing middle-class sensibilities and capacities and the tendency to masculinize the gay image. Beyond the content of these films, there is also the issue of “straightwashing” which adds another dimension of skepticism to forms of entertainment media that capitalize on the narratives of the marginalized.

In a postmodern intellectual era, the queer paradigm maintains that resisting homophobia requires more than just representation, especially when such representations produce “essentialized identities” (Riggs et al., 2017), that is, gays—or any gender identity for that matter—as the embodiment of a particularistic set of norms (e.g., masculine, middle class, urbanized). Instead, it postulates the very idea of opposition to any normalizing force. It accentuates the opposition to the basic notion of any truth purported to result from inclusive representation.

Media representation of marginalized identities must therefore transcend normative representation and image-building and instead focus on queer representation, for the former espouses the danger of enforcing the same social, political, and cultural assumptions that dominate the power relations inherent in cisgender conformity. By presenting an ideologically-charged image of gay, lesbian, and other gender-nonconforming identities, whether consciously or not, one may inadvertently preserve the heteronormative construction of identity. In the case of *Sparks Camp*, while the show is indeed strengthening gay representation in media, such representation strongly hinges on the middle-class and straight-passing privileges of the cast, which, in effect, casts a shadow on other expressions of homosexuality that cannot be subsumed in the category of gayness that the show has created. Needless to say, in an ever-changing media landscape at a time where new forms of oppression are under the guise of multiple facades (i.e., inclusivity, diversity, equality, etc.) to become less perceptible, the emancipatory potential of gay imagery and representation is built on oppositionality—on resistance, not mere visibility

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