

Heteronormativity in BL Webtoons *Love is an Illusion, Room to Room, and Path to You*

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ABSTRACT

This study exploring three BL Webtoons is for taking a closer look on how the characteristics of heterosexuality can be found in BL Webtoons. To achieve that purpose, the theories used cover the set formula of male and female illustrations and gender roles. The first analysis is about the physical appearance by going into details of the physical build, facial features, and biology of the masculine and feminine males. The second one is the actions to see the feminine and masculine characters' different ways of acting and thinking. The result of the analysis reveals how feminine males in these three BL Webtoons are depicted the same way as females are. The fact that gender identity and gender roles that describe heterosexuality are present, shows that these three BL Webtoons are narrated in the framework of heterosexuality. So, heteronormativity, the view that heterosexuality is the default, succeeds in infiltrating BL Webtoons.

Keywords: BL Webtoon, heteronormativity, gender roles, homosexuality

INTRODUCTION

Webtoons, digital comics in the form of long, vertical strips with 50-60 panels that updates weekly, have been gaining popularity for the past few years due to their convenient way of reading that allows readers to just scroll down instead of sliding to left or right (Park, 2019). It has various subgenres, and one of them is BL that will be the focus on this discussion. BL Webtoon, or Boys' Love Webtoon, is a subgenre that follows the journey of romance between males. While it is true that BL Webtoons cannot be found in Webtoon's official website or application, people still can access them through Lezhin Comics or Tapas. Despite not being displayed for the public like the other subgenres of Webtoon, BL Webtoons still gain massive popularity. As seen in the table below, the number of BL Webtoon titles keeps increasing in the Top 100 for each year, showing how more and more people are interested in this subgenre.

The Growth of Numbers and Ranks of BL Webtoons in Top 100 in Lezhin

Year	Total Titles in the Rank	BL Titles in the Rank	BL Title's Top Rank
2015	7	-	-
2016	100	35	7, 8
2017	100	33	1, 2, 3
2018	100	33	1, 3, 4
2019	100	44	8 titles in top 10

Source: Lezhin Entertainment. (2020). Lezhin Comics (Version #3.2.5) [Mobile app]. Google Play Store. <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.lezhin.comics>. Has been reprocessed by the author.

BL Webtoon actually has some sub-subgenres, and the two sub-subgenres that will be discussed in this discussion are male pregnancy and Omegaverse or Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics. Male pregnancy, which is more known as mpreg, is a subgenre in which men can conceive. In that world, feminine males will have some physical features that are usually reserved for females, which will allow them to bear children. Then, the other subgenre is Omegaverse in which there is a secondary gender that creates hierarchy with Alpha as the highest, Beta as the middle, and Omega as the lowest inside the universe. The Alpha will act in a masculine way, and the Omega will act in a feminine way, and male Omega can conceive children (Popova, 2018).

This discussion will talk about in what way BL Webtoon, that supposedly is about homosexual relationship, share the same qualities or aspects with heterosexual relationships. Then, to answer this question, the analysis will explore the way that authors differentiate the illustrations of the masculine and feminine men's appearance, their gender roles, and their behaviors to find out that the three BL Webtoons are indeed similar to what actually happens inside heterosexual relationships.

In order to analyze whether the elements inside heterosexual relationship is indeed presented in BL Webtoons, there are some theories and concepts used in this analysis. The first one is the set formula that is used to see how the physical features of female and male characteristics are illustrated. From Figure 1 and 2 below, it can be seen how all of the characteristics for drawing male and female characters are consistent. For body proportion, boys or men have taller and wider shoulders. Overall, they look bigger compared to the girls or women. Then, there is also consistency in the features of male and female characters. For females, the eyes are bigger than the males. They also have thicker eyelashes compared to the opposite sex. Meanwhile, male characters have thicker eyebrows and wider or bigger mouths compared to females. This reference of a man and woman's looks can be used to compare the pattern of physical features from the illustrations below to the three works discussed.

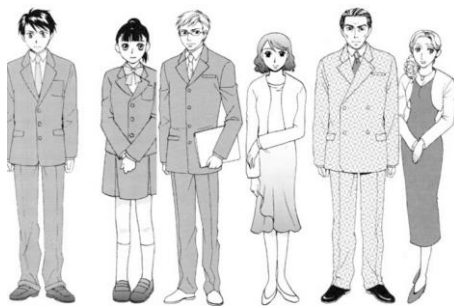


Figure 1. The full body figures of men and women

Source: Hime, K. (2006). *How to draw manga computones vol 4: Portraying couples.* (Vol 4). Graphic-sha. Has been reprocessed by the author.



Figure 2. Close-ups of the facial features

Source: Hime, K. (2006). *How to draw manga computones vol 4: Portraying couples.* (Vol 4). Graphic-sha. Has been reprocessed by the author.

The next concept used is gender roles, which is what and how the society expects people to act, speak, dress, groom, and conduct themselves based on their assigned sex (*What Are Gender Roles and Stereotypes?*, n.d.). Based on a book called *Gender & Equality* (2011), it mentions how society actually determines gender roles (Wienclaw, 2011). It is the way that children grow in society that have higher expectations and demands for boys that makes there is some gap between boys and girls. Then, this separation between boys and girls will also follow these children as they grow up. For example, by the time they are adults, people will have the stereotype on how it is more normal for women to cry rather than men. On the other hand, men will be expected to think of how to handle situations when they are facing something that is not pleasant to them. Meanwhile, women will have less action and instead they will reflect or take some moment to think of a way out which leads them to be more avoiding when conflict arises. This theory is to analyze how the character who acts as the masculine one always has high status and works somewhere while the other man who acts as the feminine one is closer to doing what women usually do.

There are also some differences in how men and women think and act. This might be influenced by the stereotypes of different traits that people have. Stereotypical masculine attributes include independence, aggression, strength, and competitiveness while stereotypical feminine attributes include nurturing, caring, passivity, and subordination (Thompson BSN, RN et al., 2011). With these characteristics, people may behave differently when they face problems or even with how they approach everything in their daily lives. I will apply this theory to analyze how the characters show different attitudes towards their problems and how they utilize the masculine or feminine trait according to their roles.

The other concept which actually becomes the base of this thesis is heteronormativity that considers the natural way of being a human is by getting attracted only to the opposite sex. This means that society considers heterosexuality as the norm. The belief in heteronormativity has embedded itself into the society in every corner of the world, making every element in heterosexual relationship set as the default. The normalization of heterosexuality does not only refer to their sexuality, but it also includes all the traditional stereotypes that people have in mind regarding a heterosexual relationship. This includes the simple thing like how males' and females' preferences are actually separated since their early lives. While boys are associated with the color blue and are encouraged to play with things that involve action, girls are associated with pink and are expected to play with more delicate activities such as playing with dolls. This still exists in today's society. There is a strong gap of how girls and boys are different, even for the little things like the color of their blanket or bib. Later on, this separation of gender identity develops to the separation of gender roles as the children grow up. By the time they are adults, they will follow the traditional gender roles that have been seen as the normal thing that man and woman are supposed to do. Once again, gender roles will decide on what things that man and woman are required to do. Then, the presence of gender identity and gender roles themselves are proof that there is a divider between the two genders, and this means that gender identity and gender roles are part of heteronormativity.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

1. The Physical and Biological Traits of the Feminine vs Masculine Males

In the three works used here, there are big differences between the feminine and masculine males in their appearance. Based on a book called *How to Draw Manga Characters Vol 4: Portraying Couples*, it can be seen how women always have bigger or rounder eyes, longer eyelashes, and smaller lips while men are taller, have wider shoulders, and thicker eyebrows (Hime, 2006). These set of formula can actually be found on the three BL Webtoons here as the feminine males are illustrated just as how a woman is depicted, and the masculine males are illustrated just like how a man is usually depicted in heterosexual relationships. Additionally,

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there is also a common element in heterosexual relationship that can be found on the male pregnancy or Omegaverse sub-subgenre which is the fact that the feminine male can conceive. In this sub-subgenre, the feminine male has some changes to the function of the inner organs, that is for the sake of allowing them to conceive children. So, there really are distinctions of the physicals between the feminine and masculine males, making everything similar to how society sees how men and women are very different in their appearance.

a. Physical Build and Facial Features of the Feminine and Masculine Males

In *Love is an Illusion, Room to Room, and Path to You*, the feminine and masculine males can be identified from their physical build even from the first glance. The three masculine males, Dojin, Dowan, and Jensen are drawn as tall and muscular with wide shoulders while Hyesung, Chamin, and Nathaniel, the feminine males, are depicted as slender and delicate. For instance, it can be seen from Figure 3 below the big difference in the body build of the feminine and masculine male from *Room to Room*.



Figure 3. Dowan and Chamin

Source: MangaOwl. (n.d.). *Room to Room*, ch. 43. <https://mangaowl.net/single/47582/room-to-room>

Furthermore, the difference between the feminine and masculine males' appearance is not only in their physical build, but also in their facial features. The feminine males all have softer features compared to the masculine ones, and one of the examples can be seen in Figure 4 and 5 below.



Figure 4. Nathaniel's close-up

Source: MangaOwl. (n.d.). *Path to You*, ch. 18. <https://mangaowl.net/single/58221/path-to-you>



Figure 5. Jensen's close-up

Source: MangaOwl. (n.d.). *Path to You*, ch. 18. <https://mangaowl.net/single/58221/path-to-you>

From the figures above, it can be seen how the feminine male looks so much like women when compared to the masculine one, there is a probability that one of the reasons why the author might want to create a huge gap is because the author wants to make the audience able to differentiate the characters easily. Because this is a romance between males, readers might get confused if the characters are too much alike. That is why, to avoid any confusion, the author creates two males with different physical builds in the relationship. However, this reason still cannot explain as to why the distinction between the two males really have to follow the portrayals of man and woman with the feminine males specifically taking over the characteristics of the woman. There is even one part in *Love is an Illusion* where Hyesung, the feminine male, expresses his jealousy towards Dojin's facial and body hair due to the fact that he does not have any body hair and the many times that Chamin, the feminine male lead in *Room to Room*, expresses his jealousy towards Dowan's bulky body build. The fact that biologically, body hair grows on men's bodies, but the feminine character shows the inability of him being a "real man" as in the ideal image of a man, shows that he feels like he does not meet the criteria of being a real man. The same goes to Chamin who seems to be unable to gain a bulky body even when he has tried his best to join Dowan going to the gym shows that in this work, he just fits to have a delicate body.

With this discussion, it is clear that there are indeed some stereotypes regarding how to draw or portray a feminine or masculine male characters in BL Webtoons. Authors always make the feminine male characters look very close to female's looks, whereas they use sharper features to create the masculine males. Then, they also tend to set the figures or body builds of the masculine males to be bigger and taller, like how society expects of a man and woman.

b. Child-bearing Ability

Getting pregnant is one of the common element inside a heterosexual relationship since society expect people to get married and then bear children. However, the presence of male pregnancy inside BL Webtoons indicates how unconsciously there is the thought that to have a family means that there needs to be a child inside it, which means that the heteronormative view has infiltrated the author's worldview. In *Love is an Illusion*, the feminine male is able to get pregnant and gives birth to a son using normal delivery. What happens during the pregnancy process is exactly the same as how a woman usually conceives and gives birth to a baby. Hyesung goes through morning sickness, cravings, and being in little pain when the baby kicks his stomach. However, one concerning thing is actually the fact that the author chooses to make Hyesung use a natural birth method instead of having surgery. This feels like portraying how they have to go through the same pain that women usually go through while giving birth. Also, the interesting thing is that it is always the feminine male inside the male pregnancy sub-genre that can conceive children, and never the masculine males. This shows that there is indeed a differentiation between the two males, making it more similar to heterosexual relationships.

2. The Division of Gender Roles and Behaviors Between the Feminine and Masculine Males

Being in a relationship consisting of two males, BL Webtoons showcase scenes that might work just fine in straight romance stories. Things and conflicts that come inside the work will show how the characters think and do. What happens in BL Webtoons is that they have opposite ways of reacting. So, the contrast between the feminine and masculine males is not just from their physical appearance, but also their gender roles and behaviors. Feminine and masculine males will have their own roles for their task separation and they will also have different actions while facing some problems.

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As stated in the theoretical framework, gender roles are part of heteronormativity because it defines how women and men have their own responsibilities or tasks that are assigned to them inside a relationship. If a relationship has this separation of their gender roles, then regardless what their sexuality is, they still regard a relationship of a man and a woman's. So, it might be a different case only if both the males inside a homosexual relationship can switch their roles in doing their daily task every once in a while. However, the fact that everyone settles for one role means that gender roles exist within the relationship, and it applies the idea of heteronormativity.

a. The Gender Roles of the Feminine and Masculine Males

Daily task separation is something that is determined by the gender roles, and in the three works discussed here, they still use the traditional gender roles for men and women. Women are considered to be more suitable for being the keeper of the house and supporter for the husband who works hard to provide things for the family. These stereotypes of traditional gender roles actually are still applied in BL Webtoons too. In the three works used in this analysis, each one of the feminine males have at least one scene where they do the household chores, such as cooking, cleaning the house, or taking care of children. On the other hand, in two out of the three works, the masculine males work, either as a full time worker or part time worker. In *Love is an Illusion, Room to Room, and Path to You*, the feminine males do not work on hard tasks or jobs. Instead, when they spend some time together with the masculine males, they will serve the masculine males by cooking or simply taking care of them.

All the three BL Webtoons have separation of roles for the feminine and masculine male. In *Love is an Illusion*, Dojin as the masculine male is in charge of working. There is a short period where he takes care of the son while also working because Hyesung runs away, but once Hyesung comes back, he as the feminine male becomes in charge of taking care of their son. It shows how taking care of children, which is the traditional task for women, is assigned to the feminine male. In *Room to Room* and *Path to You* too, the feminine males serve the masculine male while they are together. It can be from how they prepare the meals or clean the mess in the house. The fact that it is always the feminine males that do these kinds of housing chores and not the masculine males, shows that there is a settlement of roles.

Another thing to be discussed is how although this is a relationship between two males, there are different ways to address them, and the terms that people use are the terms used for men and women. For instance, there is a scene in *Love is an Illusion*, where Hyesung visits Dojin's family's house, and over there, one of the servants calls Hyesung using "Madam" instead of "Sir." Another example will be when Dojin and Hyesung get married. The person who is in charge of leading Hyesung's and Dojin's wedding reception refers to Hyesung and Dojin as "bride and groom" instead of "grooms" or "husbands" which shows that normally weddings should consist of bride and groom instead of just one type of them. This is some kind of strong heteronormativity because even when this is the wedding of people of the same gender, people still think that marriage unites two kinds of people.

Additionally, everyone calls one of Dojin's parents who gave birth to all the children of the family as "Mom" even though he is a man. Hyesung himself is called "Mom" too. There is also one time when Dojin refers to Hyesung as "mommy" and Hyesung is not bothered, which means that it is indeed the right way to refer to him according to their society. In one specific scene where Hyesung's and Dojin's son, Byul, cries, Dojin refers to Hyesung as the baby's mother. This shows that the normal members of a family consist of father, mother, and children. Also, in *Path to You*, there is also some moment where the feminine male, Jensen, is in dilemma because he comes to realize that he can never become the real other figure for the masculine male's little brother. Nathaniel feels down once he realizes how an ideal family should have female and male parents. This shows how same-sex parents are still unacceptable.

b. The Difference in Behaviors of the Feminine and Masculine Males

In the three BL Webtoons, the feminine and masculine males of each work always have different characteristics which lead to how they behave differently and how they have different ways to solve their problems. Based on traditional gender roles, men are aggressive, dominant, and achieving while women are sensitive, passive, and emotional. All of these traits can be seen through the actions of the characters. In all of the three works, while feminine males tend to be passive and they avoid conflicts which belong to the women's traits, the masculine males tend to be more active and they will confront their problems.

In all of the three works, the feminine males somehow always avoid or run away after the masculine males confess their feelings. Regardless of their personal reasons, the fact that what they do when they feel that they might face changes after the confession is to leave without talking it out with the other party shows that avoidance is their instinct to a problem that comes to their lives. On the other hand, the masculine males always try to confront or fight for the challenges that come their way. When they face the rejections from the feminine males, they still try to reach out or contact them even when it is to no avail.

Another noticeable difference is their contribution to start their relationship. In all the three works, it is always the masculine males who confess their love to make the relationship work. Just like the practices in real life or many manga, the one who confesses is usually the male, and in this case, the masculine male. When BL Webtoon features male characters, there should be equal chance for either the masculine or feminine male to confess. Yet, the fact that the confession is marked as the masculine males' job shows how there is a strict restriction on their behavior just because they are categorized as feminine and masculine males.

CONCLUSION

Heteronormativity is indeed present in the three BL Webtoons due to the normalization of the view that there should be a male and female role in a romantic relationship. Since heteronormativity exists in the characterization and storylines of the three titles, this means that these BL Webtoons portray the heteronormative's framework. Heteronormativity covers not only the thought that the persons inside a relationship should be of a man and woman, but also the thought that the man inside a relationship is expected to behave and do certain things while the woman is expected to behave and do other things. In the discussion, it has been explained how things starting from the outer appearance, which shows that there are different gender identities, to how the characters' minds work, which shows the different gender roles, actually will determine their actions that work according to how everything is in a heterosexual relationship.

All in all, the discussion here is that there is the projection of value from heterosexual relationships inside homosexual ones in BL Webtoons. Even when this genre narrates about the relationships of two men, what happens in the story is that the feminine males have many similarities to women rather than the characteristics of men. The truth is that there is nothing wrong with them doing what women usually do. However, the feminine males have to do what women usually do and the masculine males do what men need to do. So, it means that the feminine males in BL Webtoons are actually considered as the women role in the relationships.

Another interesting thing is the reason why authors decide to go with BL Webtoons instead of the usual male-female pairing. It might be from the fact that BL Webtoons are written by females and directed for females (Madill & Zhao, 2020). This means that the authors do not know how homosexual relationship works, and there is the chance that BL Webtoons' authors use "male characters" to attract readers based on the fact that romanticization of males' relationship can become the source of capitalism (Madill & Zhao, 2018). As stated in the

introduction, BL Webtoons are put in a separate platform that requires the readers to purchase the chapters instead of reading them for free like the other Webtoon subgenres. Also, the fact that BL Webtoons are what mostly show up when people click the “Webtoon” genre on Japanese Comics free platforms shows that BL Webtoons are popular, so it can attract more readers to their story. However, with their limited knowledge, they portray the gay life using what they witness from their daily life. That is why even when the characters are identified as males, the actions of the feminine males that show their emotions or characteristics follow what women usually do.

Lastly, as stated in the theoretical framework, settlement of roles or the presence of gender roles is actually the indication of heteronormativity. The reason behind this presence of heteronormativity is most probably because the writers of gay romance are mostly straight women. 80% of male-male writers from Dreamspinner Press are female (Fogal, 2015). With this huge percentage, it is safe to assume that in general, most boys’ love authors are female. That is why they can only portray the homosexual relationship from what they imagine and not from how the relationship actually works in real life. Furthermore, the fact that the authors from the three BL Webtoons come from Asia, where patriarchy is strong, must have influenced the way they depict the relationship between two males. All of that can be seen from how the authors put traditional gender roles and create totally different characters for the feminine and masculine males. The author might be used to the heteronormativity inside the society, and that is why they portray women’s image inside the feminine male that supposedly are equal to the masculine male. In other words, if there is no heteronormativity inside BL Webtoons, then the male characters should have more equality in both their appearance and their gender roles.

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