

**LEISURE AND HOMOSEXUAL REPRESENTATION IN THE THAI SERIES  
“BAD BUDDY”****Received on:** March 15, 2024**Passed on:** August 18, 2024License: *João Lucas de Almeida Campos<sup>1</sup>*

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**ABSTRACT:** The interest and constitutive element of the analysis proposed in this article involves the narrative, consumption, behaviors and motivations of LGBTQIA+ series, such as the Thai fictional work Bad Buddy. In order to investigate the narrative constructions around the homosexual characters who are the protagonists of the series, a film and discourse analysis was carried out, considering the weaving of relations between homosexual representations and media visibility in the plot. The analysis revealed some traits that sometimes demystify stereotypes about gay men and value

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diversity, and sometimes give visibility to heteronormative standards. In any case, the film content of the series analyzed in this study shows that audiovisuals, as a leisure and entertainment experience aimed at mass audiences, can offer insights and raise awareness of visibility practices for the LGBTQIA+ community, especially with regard to homosexual representation.

**KEYWORDS:** Audiovisual. Homosexual relationships. Boys Love.

### **LAZER E REPRESENTATIVIDADE HOMOAFETIVA NO SERIADO TAILANDÊS “*BAD BUDDY*”**

**RESUMO:** O interesse e elemento constitutivo da análise proposta neste artigo envolve a narrativa, consumo, comportamentos e motivações de séries LGBTQIA+, como a obra de ficção tailandesa *Bad Buddy*. No intuito de investigar as construções narrativas em torno dos personagens homoafetivos protagonistas da série, realizou-se uma análise filmica e de discurso, considerando a tessitura das relações sobre representações e visibilidade midiática homoafetiva no enredo da trama. Na análise, foram constatados alguns traços que ora desmistificam estereótipos sobre homens gays e valorizam a diversidade, ora dão visibilidade a padrões heteronormativos. De toda maneira, o conteúdo filmico da série analisada neste estudo evidencia que o audiovisual, enquanto uma experiência de lazer e entretenimento voltada ao público massivo, pode oferecer insights e sensibilizar práticas de visibilidade para a comunidade LGBTQIA+, em especial no que concerne à representatividade homoafetiva.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Audiovisual. Relações homoafetivas. *Boys Love*.

## **Introduction**

The cultural consumption of series is increasingly common in the daily lives of people who enjoy audiovisual media, consolidating itself as a relevant possibility for leisure and entertainment in today's society. Similar to other types of audiovisual productions, series provide the experience of leisure through image enjoyment. At the same time, they disseminate meanings and values that can reproduce and dictate behaviors consistent with heteronormative social norms that prevail in many contexts around the world. However, different audiovisual media products can also instigate reflections about the content and different elements that permeate the film narrative (Gomes, 2023).

Following this line of interpretation, audiovisual works are “a more complex possibility of reading contemporary life through which we learn from what we are, but also from what we are not, in the search for the other’s perspective, for the richness of differences” (Alberto, 2017, p.8). From this perspective, the cultural consumption of audiovisual media as a form of leisure and entertainment is not an alienating experience per se (Gomes, 2016). In this way, different audiovisual works can sharpen feelings, contribute to and incite performative acts and analyses for the assimilation of values and the construction of identities and otherness (Bortoletto, 2019).

This is the case of the Thai fiction audiovisual work *Bad Buddy The Series*. A serial production developed by the television station GMMTV, distributed worldwide by the streaming<sup>5</sup> platform YouTube, with its 12 episodes made available in full for free online, with subtitles in different languages.<sup>6</sup> The series presents LGBTQIA+ themes (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transsexuals, Queers, Intersex and Asexuals, etc.), and has as its media trademark the narrative genre known as Boys Love (BL). This genre<sup>7</sup> became popular in Thailand from 2014 onwards through serial audiovisual productions for TV, in which same-sex romantic comedies stand out.

According to Silva and Teixeira (2021, p.8): "BL dramas serve as an essential tool for [LGBTQIA+] representation within and outside the Asian continent." In the case of Thailand, which is a Southeast Asian country, the high consumption of the product has become one of the main centers of production and adaptation of the Boys

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<sup>5</sup> Streaming is a form of distributing data, usually multimedia, through packets, over the Internet.

<sup>7</sup> This genre originated in Japan in the mid-2000s, through manga magazines that portrayed stories involving relationships between two men in a romantic way, with its largest audience being heterosexual women (Baudinette, 2019).

Love manga genre for audiovisual, exporting its works to many countries (Zhang; Dedman, 2021).

The success of the Boys Love genre is due, among other aspects, to the fact that audiovisual productions starring gay characters are not marked by tragic endings, as is common in Western films with LGBTQIA+ themes, as seen, for example, in the films “Brokeback Mountain (2005)” and “Dogs in the Woods (2021)”, both nominated for the Oscar award. For Guerrero-Pico, Establés and Ventura (2018), the representation of gay characters in the narratives of both films is affected by the cinematic cliché named Bury Your Gays, a term that consists of the death of LGBTQIA+ characters throughout different audiovisual productions.

The Bad Buddy series is classified as a drama and recognized globally under the term Lakorn, a designation given to Thai television dramas. The direction was handled by Noppharnach Chaiwimole and the main characters were played by Korapat Kirdpan (Pran) and Pawat Chittswangde (Pat). The plot is developed around these two characters immersed in conflicts and fights between their families and friends, whose relationship evolves into friendship and romance. The constructed narrative reveals a range of perspectives on this same-sex romance and also the communication strategies employed to provide LGBTQIA+ visibility and representation through this audiovisual product.

Considering that the series features homosexual protagonists and highlights the consumption of this audiovisual product for leisure, it promotes discourses of meaning in social practices from the perspective of media communication and gender, the question is: How are the Bad Buddy characters portrayed in the series? What strategies are used to make the protagonists' sexual orientation visible? How does the Bad Buddy

series address the experiences and challenges they face? Does the series contribute to overcoming heteronormative norms, or does it maintain them to be accepted by the public?

This article aims to analyze the representation of homosexuals in the Thai series *Bad Buddy*, focusing on aspects related to sexuality, behaviors, possible stereotypes and the demarcation of homosexual characters in the plot. The research thus seeks to investigate the narrative constructions surrounding the two protagonists (Pat and Pran) to deepen the understanding of the visibility of gay characters in the enjoyment of audiovisual leisure. This study is expected to contribute to existing debates on the visibility and representation of gay people, exploring how audiovisual media can offer meaningful insights into dynamics of visibility beyond the heteronormative model.

From this introduction, the investigation is divided into four more sections. Firstly, it is appropriate to characterize and contextualize the series and some themes that are addressed in the episodes. The second and third topics discuss the representation and visibility of the same-sex relationship highlighted in the *Bad Buddy* series, in addition to presenting reflections articulated with leisure based on the categories that make up film and discourse analysis.

### ***Bad Buddy: Television Series, Gay Representation, and Reflections on Leisure***

As Ginsburg (2001) explains, representation is often made of the represented reality and goes far beyond this, as it is in the image that it simultaneously impacts the being, as it is replaced by something that does not exist. This notion will guide some aspects considered in this article, along with perceptions and questions that form meanings and belong to a cultural, economic and social context or space, based on the

Bad Buddy series. The film was directed by Noppharnach Chaiwimole, and the main characters were played by Korapat Kirdpan (Pran) and Pawat Chittsawangde (Pat).

The Bad Buddy series is classified as a television drama, produced in Thailand and created by the television production company GMM TV<sup>8</sup>, a media conglomerate responsible for series and other variety programs for television. The plot is developed around the protagonists of the Boys Love (BL) genre series - love between boys, in Portuguese - Pran and Pat, two young men from Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. They belong to wealthy families who are enemies, and this rivalry passes on to both of them as an inheritance. The enmity is heightened by the fact that they live in neighboring houses and study at the same university. Even though they sometimes get closer, as happens at a student music festival, they always end up competing and fighting.

The disagreements deepen when the two young men enter the same university and become part of groups of young men linked to Engineering (Pat) and Architecture (Pran). Courses that, historically, cultivate rivalry within the institution. Similar to what happens between Pran and Pat's families, the provocations and confrontations between the two groups are constant. Tired of fighting and competition, the protagonists of Bad Buddy get closer and seek strategies to avoid serious confrontations between their college friends.

As the plot unfolds, although Pran and Pat do their best to deny and resist the attraction they feel for each other, the bonds built between them develop into a romance. Therefore, the narrative is focused on the representation of male homoerotic relationships and communication strategies for the visibility and representation of the “G” acronym LGBTQIA+. This assumption encompasses gender and sexuality studies,

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<sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://www.gmm-tv.com/home/> Accessed on: November 3 2023

as well as raising in-depth questions involving social representations linked to people who do not identify with heteronormativity, contributing to expanding their practices and meanings, and to the acceptance of certain ways of being and existing in the world.

In this context, according to the logic of Jodelet's thought (2002), social representations must be studied by articulating not only affective, mental and social elements, but "integrating, alongside the cognition of language and communication, the social relations that affect the representations and the material, social and ideal reality on which they will intervene" (p.41).

In *Bad Buddy* it is possible to identify such representations. They are transformed throughout the fictional production, considering, in particular, the discourses and image of homosexual characters. Such changes emerge in the narrative that operates in reference to an element of transformation of the real or the imaginary, felt by "distinctions in the form of socially elaborated and shared knowledge, as a practical objective, and which contributes to the construction of a reality common to a social group" (Jodelet, 2002, p.138).

In the context of Boys Love, a genre popularized in Asia through Japanese comics called "manga", stories considered clichés structure *Bad Buddy*. They mostly present a predictable script with situations that, in general, please the consumer public. Baudinette (2019) points out that the genre, by narrating homoerotic stories that involve two men in a romantic way, captivates an audience of heterosexual women, expanding the audience beyond the LGBTQIA+ community.

The social conditions, affections and relational perceptions about the characters in the series demonstrate that, in Lane's terms (1993), representation implies establishing an exchange between intersubjectivities and collectivities. This is

constructed “in the combination of knowledge that does not occur solely through cognitive processes, but which contains unconscious emotional and affective aspects, in the production and reproduction of social representations” (Lane, 1993, p.61).

For Hall (2016), representation connects meaning and language to culture, which is conceived as a set of shared values or meanings. Therefore, these signs depend on linguistic conventions and codes shared and intertwined with a chain of subjects and identities. The author explains that at the heart of the process of signification in culture, two closely related systems of representation emerge. “First, there is the 'system' by which every order of objects, subjects, and events is correlated to a set of concepts or mental representations that we carry” (Hall, 2016, p. 34). In this case, the meaning depends on the forms and associations constituted both internally and externally to our mind.

The second system depends on the construction of “a set of correspondences between the conceptual map and a set of signs, arranged and organized in different languages, which indicate those concepts” (Hall, 2016, p.38). According to Hall (2016), a “regime of representation” of relations is established that is situated in the production of meaning in the process of social practices between things, concepts and signs.

Based on these foundations, we make some considerations about the audiovisual production and consumption logic surrounding Bad Buddy. Added to this is the fact that GMM is one of the largest television entertainment companies in Thailand, known for producing and broadcasting dramas and series that address situations that affect the lives of gay couples. Therefore, the company values interactions between fans and the broadcaster's television products.

Prasannam (2019) explains that GMMTV uses fans' nostalgia to create memory-based activities. The marketing surrounding the fan meeting is led by the company, which also offers a promotional website to drive interactions between fans and the industry. In this recursive process, fan-led practices are re-mediated by the company and consumed by the fans themselves.

Thailand, located in Southeast Asia, has a culture of significant media visibility regarding the LGBTQIA+ community, as demonstrated by government data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand (2023)<sup>9</sup>. This representation operates and is associated with the word, the idea and the thing that holds it, such as imaginaries, ideologies, myths, mythology and memory (Makowiecky, 2003). Both in legal terms - since homosexuality was decriminalized in the country in 1956, becoming one of the first countries in Asia to respect this condition - and because the Kingdom of Thailand is known for its transgender culture, in which non-binary gender identity has been recognized and accepted for centuries.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, Thailand is known for promoting LGBTQIA+ festivities, such as the Songkran Festival<sup>11</sup>, which includes special events for the community, and the Silom Drag Festival, held in Bangkok and attracting participants from all over the world. Thus, the visibility of LGBTQIA+ people is realized in different leisure activities, such as festive events and audiovisual works, such as the television series of the Boys Love genre. According to Torres (2023, p.51), media products such as series can be considered as a "source of soft power" by businesspeople, producers, directors and actors. According to the Thai government, the boys love industry is worth more than 1 billion baht (approximately R\$148 million) [...]" The author also highlights that

<sup>9</sup> Available at: <https://www.mfa.go.th/> Accessed at: November 3 2023

<sup>10</sup> Non-binary gender in Thailand is known as "Kathoey" or "Ladyboy".

<sup>11</sup> Festival celebrating the Thai New Year.

the main export markets for this product are countries such as China, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia and even others located in Latin America.

Although Thailand is a country open to LGBTQIA+ leisure and tourism, the population faces some problems. As Armartpon, Chuenjit and Sithamma (2021) point out, Thai society is still conservative and not fully open to differences. There is still stigmatization and discrimination against people who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community, as many have difficulty finding employment. Another issue highlighted by the authors is in relation to laws that enable same-sex marriage, something recently approved by the Thai Parliament on 06/18/2024. The law approved by the Senate will take 120 days from this date to come into effect. However, Thailand is the first Southeast Asian country to approve same-sex marriage (CNN Brasil, online, 2024). Despite this progress for the LGBTQIA+ community, some challenges remain, such as the ban on transgender people changing their names on documents, which hinders their entry into the workplace, among others.

In this sense, to understand the social and cultural fabric that involves the affections and meanings of a community's relationships based on audiovisual productions, it requires a critical and attentive stance towards the elements that often reinforce prejudices, stereotypes and fetishes about the behavior of gay men (Silva; Teixeira, 2021). In relation to Thailand, few productions cast openly gay men: “due to the lack of openness and discrimination in these countries, few actors are or openly declare themselves to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community” (Silva; Teixeira, 2021). This condition, which involves imaginaries and stereotypes about masculinity and heteronormative relationships, underpins the construction of many productions, programs, products and their narratives structured on the screen. Homosexual feelings

and relationships are constructed based on the acceptance of the consumer public and the way it is portrayed (Silva; Teixeira, 2021).

As mentioned, the plot of Bad Buddy is built around the romance between Pran and Pat, which is portrayed in a light and fun way, without hiding the desire between those involved. The popularity of this series was driven mainly by the engagement obtained on social media, especially on Twitter, reaching Trending Topics, including in Brazil. The first episode aired on 10/29/2021 and the final episode aired on 01/21/2022. Bad Buddy achieved such international acclaim that, in 2023, two more special episodes were produced to develop the relationship between Pran and Pat.

In this context, it is considered that the construction of situations and characters through audiovisual media creates certain "truths" about the identity of subjects, their sexuality and gender identity, as stated by Fernandes and Siqueira (2010). Furthermore, this imaginary "is appropriated in a dynamic that includes negotiation of meanings, expansion of repertoires or acceptance of certain ways of being as valid". (Fernandes; Siqueira, 2010, p.102).

In the entertainment market, cultural interests and processes are mobilized and permeate the representation of situations and characters (Makowiecky, 2003). In this experience of enjoyment in which love is recognized as one of the foundations of culture, as defended by Sigmund Freud, the importance of experiencing leisure and discussing "taboo" topics that are approached, on screen, as distinctions, is affirmed. According to Passos, Marini and Guedes Patrocínio (2021, p.3), this "leads us to think about issues of oppression, freedom and resistance in a given society".

Furthermore, the influence of media and audiovisual productions in film and television, and today on streaming platforms, indicate the reach and visibility of

society's concerns regarding behaviors, attitudes, tastes, and perspectives on LGBTQIA+ issues. The construction of the narrative in Bad Buddy is noteworthy, as some groups belonging to this community are often forgotten or receive little attention in mass-consumption audiovisual productions.

Gomes (2023) highlights that electronic entertainment has been changing the behavior of consumers and viewers in society, so it is important to have diverse content that portrays the population in its plurality, as is the case with gay people. Themes such as sexuality, taboos, repression regarding gender issues and intimacy intersect in fictional narratives. In the Bad Buddy series, this argument covers identity, sex, fantasies and desires, as well as opinions, values and behaviors, among other practices typical of gay relationships.

## **Methodology**

The qualitative research begins with a literary review on the main concepts and foundations used in this study. This review was conducted by consulting books, articles published in journals, dissertations and theses related to the themes of leisure, representation, series, boys love and the LGBTQIA+ community (Gil, 2019).

Furthermore, the research includes film analysis of the selected series. This analysis technique, as stated by Cunha (2021, p. 29), relies on the careful look of each researcher, “[...] as a subject capable of assimilating elements that, at first glance to a lay person, are not considered fundamental for the construction of critical thoughts about films”.

To achieve the purpose of this study, which consists of analyzing the protagonists of the serial production and understanding how they were portrayed, we

seek support from Aumont and Marie (2013), authors who develop two types of instruments for film analysis that prove useful in understanding the series' diegesis<sup>12</sup>. Initially, citational instruments stand out. These “(...) partly perform the same function as the previous ones (creating an intermediate state between the projected film and its detailed analytical analysis), but remain closer to the "letter" of the film" (Aumont; Marie, 2013, p.46).

In other words, it is necessary to describe in detail the content of the audiovisual material, simultaneously interpreting and analyzing, but sticking to a close connection with what is represented in the scenes. Thus, to compose the citational instrument, excerpts from the series will be selected, which, as the authors assess, offer “(...) an object of a more manageable size, which lends itself better to analytical commentary (...)” (Aumont, Marie, 2013, p. 73).

Another fundamental instrument already mentioned in the introduction of this study is the documentary instrument. In it, the objective is not “(...) to describe or cite the film itself, but to add information to its theme from sources outside it” (Aumont; Marie, 2013, p.46).

Combined with film analysis, discourse analysis was used to support the deepening of the discursive intentions included in the plot and documentary data. The use of advertisements in the series, for example, requires an analysis basis that provides theoretical support for such an element. At this point, critical discourse analysis will be used according to the parameters established by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), considering the fact that each image production is always motivated and conventional.

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<sup>12</sup> According to authors Vanoye and Goliot-Létê, diegesis means, in audiovisual: “The term diegesis, close to, but not synonymous with, history (since it has a broader scope), designates history and its circuits, history and the fictional universe that it presupposes (or "post-supposes"), in any case, that is associated with it (...)” (Vanoye, Goliot-Létê, 1994, p.40)

Every image is based on prior knowledge, so that the relationship between spectator and image occurs through social determinations. In this way, the authors argue that images transform individuals and are allied to social contours.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) propose three perspectives that were applied in this study. First, with the ideational perspective, any semiotic model is expected to be able to represent aspects of the world as they are experienced by individuals. From an interpersonal perspective, the semiotic model must be able to establish relationships between the producer, the signal and the receiver of the signal, thus representing a specific social relationship between the producer and the reader, or between the reader and the represented object. Finally, from a textual (compositional) perspective, the semiotic model forms texts through the complexity of signs that connect internally and externally to the context for which they were generated. This includes the organization and distribution of elements in an image. Such perspectives will be exemplified in the publicity during the documentary examination of *Bad Buddy*.

The relevance of detailing the analytical process undertaken is based here, since, as Vanoye and Goliot-Létê (1994) argue, decomposing a film means using its constituent elements, separating each part that cannot be perceived in isolation, as it is taken as a whole. After all, the production of any image or audiovisual material is never done free of charge, as they are produced for specific collective or individual uses, as stated by Aumont (1993).

The systematization that occurred in the analysis required watching the series to identify scenes relevant to the study and, then, they were separated for the analysis of the diegetic space. To this end, the following categories of analysis were defined: discovery of the characters' sexuality, family issues and identification of traits that the

series maintains in relation to the heteronormative hegemonic logic for constructing the relationship of the protagonist couple. Finally, we sought to identify possible ruptures in the heteronormative model in *Bad Buddy*.

### **Film and Discursive Analysis of *Bad Buddy***

As a starting point for the proposed analysis (Aumont, Marie, 2013), one aspect that stands out is the *Bad Buddy* advertising poster itself. It is a predecessor element of the audiovisual work and also of dissemination, carrying elements specific to the diegetic universe. In this way, the analysis of such a product can be seen as a document that provides valuable elements for the audiovisual plot.

In figure 1, it is possible to see the two main characters aligned in the middle of the image. Pat, on the left, wraps his arms around Pran, highlighting the affection that unites them, which is reminiscent of the Boys Love genre. However, the character on the right of the figure, Pran, with his hand over Pat's mouth, makes a universal indication of silence.

**Figure 1:** Promotional poster for the Thai series Bad Buddy



Source: GMMTV page on Facebook (Online, 2023)

Using visual communication resources to construct this study, we carried out a reading with the help of critical discourse analysis, as well as the ideational perspective of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) to analyze images, it is clear that the light colors in figure 1 refer to wood and the domestic environment. In the background you can also see the orange color of the sunset - in this case, the interpersonal meaning of "acts of color" may suggest an intention of relaxation. Thus, the ideational metafunction of figure 1 fulfills the purpose of promoting an audiovisual work that proposes to deal with a homosexual dilemma in a non-violent way.

From an interpersonal perspective, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), gestures, facial expressions and different types of looks influence image analysis and reinforce the meanings that are produced. In the case of the poster, the oblique angle,

showing the main characters in profile, denotes less involvement with the reader/viewer, while allowing them to "enter" the plot. The frontal angle would offer more proximity between characters and reader/viewer, instead of providing some kind of power involved in the poster.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), following the textual perspective, those elements that are placed to the left of the image can be understood as "the data", that is, elements about which the public already has knowledge. The elements placed to the right of the image represent "the new", that is, the elements that are being presented to the potential reader/viewer. In the image in question (figure 1), the gestures of the main characters can be attributed to this. As mentioned earlier, Pat affectionately embraces Pran while Pran uses the silence signal. The public is already aware that there will be a homosexual relationship in the narrative. However, the new element being presented in this poster is the gesture that signifies the imperative to remain silent or keep a secret, that is, the conflict that marks the plot.

Thus, the Bad Buddy advertising poster presents enough visual elements to arouse curiosity and encourage viewers to identify with the series' characters. According to Gaut (1999), the act of identification is aspectual, after all, identifying with a character depends on which aspect of the narrative presented the spectator assumes the role of imagining himself in the situation. For LGBTQIA+ populations, cases of family conflict are common, as highlighted by Moura et al. (2023): "(...) parents' discovery of sexual orientation reverberates in the imposition of limits and restrictions or even in expulsion from home due to sexuality, increasing the risks of violence in other social contexts" (Moura et al., 2023, p.450).

As seen, the serial narrative begins by demarcating the conflict between two neighboring families, whose rivalry spans generations, passing from parents to children. The protagonists, Pat and Pran, represent this struggle. Pat, an engineering student, has a robust and athletic figure, has an affinity for sports, is a member of the college football team, is extroverted, impulsive and has a relaxed approach to life. On the other hand, Pran, an Architecture student, enjoys arts and music, has a more serene, intellectual personality, and a slender body. They both attend the same university and transfer their family rivalry to the academic environment.

Regarding the choice of characters, it is clear that the Thai actors who play Pran and Pat satisfy media beauty standards that are also accepted by heterosexual audiences. Martins; Santos and Teixeira (2016, p. 378) state that "masculinized" gay men are those who have all the attributes of a heterosexual man, for example, in terms of speech, walk, and dress. "Men who, if you look at them casually, easily pass for straight." Thus, the actors may have been selected so that the work could be accepted by audiences that do not belong to the LGBTQIA+ community.

## **Sexuality in Narrative**

In the narrative arc, we can see typical moments of an audiovisual melodrama production, such as the fact that Pat and Pran "coincidentally" end up living in the same college dormitory building, on the same floor, and across from each other. This closeness allows them to get to know each other better, away from their parents. As the relationship strengthens, a friendship is formed and, simultaneously, passion manifests itself. This moment in the narrative will be one of development, related to the discovery

of sexuality. With this aim, the frames show, in the foreground, the protagonists' looks and physical contact, leading each spectator to a process that Gaut (1999) calls affective identification: imagining/feeling what the characters feel. The audiovisual resources employed tend to promote this type of identification in the sequence of development in the series' narrative arc.

At first, the relationship is hidden from family and friends for fear of prejudice and rejection. A gay person may face difficulties in the process of discovering their sexuality due to a lack of references, since society is governed by norms that correspond to a heteronormative hegemony. The family thus becomes a major issue within this dilemma.

Heteronormativity aims to regulate and standardize ways of being and experiencing bodily desires and sexuality. According to what is socially established for people, from a biological and deterministic perspective, there are two – and only two – possibilities for people's placement in terms of human sexual anatomy, that is, female/female or male/male (Petry; Meyer, 2011, p.195).

From this perspective, the series approaches the discovery of sexual orientation with a connotation of tranquility and normality, including in its plot lines like that of the character Pat, when he states: “maybe I've liked men for a long time, I don't care about gender”. At this point, it can be understood that the social patterns in which the subject is inserted hinder, but do not prevent, the perception and assimilation of one's own sexuality.

The way the theme is portrayed helps in the identification process that Gaut (1999) calls empathic identification. This style of identification occurs when the viewer feels the same way about the situation that confronts the character. In this regard, real emotions are directed towards situations known as fictional (Gaut, 1999). People in a similar process of discovering their sexuality, whether in Pat and Pran's age group or

another, can empathize with the feelings and conflicts experienced by the characters. Mendes (2017) argues that if the viewer can see this on screen, it can generate a feeling of acceptance in which the person represented is not considered inferior to anyone, and is not the only one to go through this.

The increasingly frequent representation of same-sex relationships in the media plays a crucial role in normalizing this type of relationship in society. By displaying displays of affection between same-sex characters as naturally as in heterosexual productions, Figure 2 records the peak of the first performance by Bad Buddy's protagonists.

**Figure 2:** The first kiss



**Source:** frame from episode 5 of Bad Buddy The Series (2021)

The scene, which took place in chapter 5 of the series' first season, shows a dark environment, but with the city lights in the background, creating an ideal romantic atmosphere for the kiss. There is also the game of field and counter-field, which, as Cunha (2021) states, “(...) the counter-field being a decoupage element that supposes the alternation with a foreground called "field", that is, the field is the inverse of the counter-field”. This game focuses, in the foreground, on the faces of the characters Pat

and Pran, with the camera in low-angle view for Pat and normal view for Pran<sup>13</sup>, giving the impression that one is taller than the other. This is justified by the fact that Pat is giving the speech that will culminate in a kiss.

Beleli (2009, p.117) explains that "by incorporating relationships between people of the same sex, soap operas and series also produce a call for identification, encapsulating subjects in a model that refers to heterosexual relationships, guided by practices that seem predefined and, therefore, do not need to be problematized." Corroborating this thought, Farias (2010, p.112) states that the acceptance of gay people is increasing, "however, it is not homosexuality that is being accepted, it is tolerated as long as the model of affective-sexual relationship is the same ideal model in force of the heterosexual couple, 'well-behaved', monogamous, stable".

The series *Bad Buddy* challenges hegemonic standards by highlighting that same-sex relationships do not need to conform to heteronormative standards. A dialogue between Pat and Pran in episode 9 exemplifies this approach. Pat affectionately calls Pran "wifey", and is promptly corrected by Pran in an affectionate and lighthearted manner: "Does calling me wife make you feel superior to me? We don't need to adopt terms like husband and wife; we are boyfriend and girlfriend." For Butler (2002), the biological binary imposed by heteronormativity is limited to the standards of man and woman, naturalizing these roles in society and imposing them as a rule for gays to conform to this norm, although it has no real basis.

Torres (2023) helps us understand that the representations that are generally conveyed by the boys love genre reflect more of a stimulus to heteronormativity than a

<sup>13</sup> The "contra-plongée" is a cinematic technique that focuses on the object, person or scene from a point of view below eye level, looking upwards. This technique can be used to create a sense of grandeur in relation to what is below (be it the viewer or character/object in the scene). The "plongée" is characterized by being the opposite, referring to filming from above downwards.

questioning of it. An example of this is the use of the term “wife” by the one called seme (active/dominant) in relation to the uke (passive/submissive). Thus, even in relation to other boys love productions, the Bad Buddy series manages to go further by showing the character Pran's refusal to be called “wife” by Pat.

Another point of discussion concerns the fact that Pat, considered the most masculine character in the relationship due to his physical characteristics, studies engineering and is interested in sports, revealing his preferences in sexual dynamics. According to Jirattikorn (2023), the presence of uke and seme is notable in boys love series, something that for him reflects an emphasis on the heteronormative. In this context, seme and uke end up occupying places that imitate traditional heterosexual relationships, which seems to be irreversible regarding sexual preferences. However, by representing the uke, that is, the passive, as the most stereotypical in the construction of masculinity, there is a rupture in expectations, which generally associate female subjects with this role. Furthermore, during the narrative it becomes clear that they could change the imposed standards.

Almeida (2011) argues that this prejudice is strongly influenced by a culture of sexist mentality. In this way, the series helps to demystify the idea that a gay man with a certain physical appearance and behaviors considered "effeminate" or "masculine" does not necessarily occupy a predetermined place as passive or active, respectively. In other words, each individual's sexual preferences are not linked to the way a person behaves, dresses or talks, and are not static and can change throughout life.

**Figure 3:** Intimate relationship



**Source:** frame from episode 11 of *Bad Buddy The Series* (2021).

In the scene depicted in Figure 3, which took place in episode 11, the mise-en-scène constructed within the context of a beach suggests that Pran and Pat's sexual surrender followed the cycle of the sea. Initially, there is a shot of the beach during high tide, followed by a low-angle shot of the couple lying in bed. The camera, positioned above, provides the perspective of an omniscient observer, able to penetrate the couple's intimacy and witness their games and conversations. Note that the character Pat is shirtless, reinforcing the athlete stereotype mentioned earlier, while Pran remains in a white shirt. After a brief dialogue in bed, suggesting to the viewer the imminence of the sexual act, an ellipse occurs<sup>14</sup>, marked by the sun passing between the trees and returning to the couple. A new plan reintroduces the beach, now at low tide, indicating the end of the cycle. The camera returns to the room with the same angle as before, but with the character Pat alone.

<sup>14</sup>The Ellipse, according to Gerbase (2014), is like a temporal “hole” in the plot of an audiovisual. The ellipse serves to move the viewer into the future and, according to the author, this future could be 5 minutes away, a day, a year, centuries away, and so on.

Firstly, it is worth noting that the sexual relationship between the protagonists is only hinted at in the scene depicted in figure 3, which can be interpreted as something that avoids the sexualization of the characters. This contrasts sharply with the approach of certain series, produced mainly in Western societies, which tend to hypersexualize gay characters.

The scene develops slowly, fluidly, and is characterized by a broad temporality. The slow-paced narrative, with no notable soundtrack and little dialogue, encourages reflection, allowing processes to unfold naturally. This approach, which incorporates a time closer to everyday life, contributes to the naturalness of the scene and facilitates the smooth integration of the sexual theme into the plot.

## **Family and Social Relationships**

Regarding the family sphere, Nascimento et al. (2020) analyze the reflection of prejudice experienced by LGBTQIA+ people: one that can begin at home and “tends to generate situations of tension and conflict that make the family environment a space marked by persecution, fear and prejudice, manifesting intrafamily violence in different ways” (Nascimento et al., 2020, p.7). The family issues in *Bad Buddy* are therefore relevant to the visibility of this type of psychological and physical violence. Moura *et al.* (2023) argue that youth is marked by transformations and instabilities in the spheres that make up the individual, which can cause conflicts, uncertainties, anxieties and concerns.

Much of the suffering related to the experiences of homosexuals begins at home, as there is still a lack of understanding and prejudice on the part of family members.

Bad Buddy approaches this discussion in a light and delicate way, showing the importance of parental support for members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

In episode 7 there is a dialogue between Pran and his parents during the meal (figure 4). At that moment, the father asks his wife, “what if our son brings a man home?”, to which the mother rebukes the father, saying: “So what? The boyfriend is his, not ours.” She continues to support her son by saying, “If you’re happy with this person, go ahead.”

The scene has a natural connotation, and continues with the parents asking Pran about his relationships and he, shyly, answers the questions with a smile. In this dialogue, we can see a play of field shots and reverse shots. However, when the mother affirms her support for her son's sexual orientation, the foreground focus on Pran's face denotes relief and satisfaction. Then, the mother warns: “Don’t do it with the kids next door,” reinforcing the families' enmity. Still in the foreground, Pran's expression changes, suggesting fear and insecurity in the face of this verdict.

**Figure 4:** Family dialogue



**Source:** frame from episode 7 of Bad Buddy The Series (2021)

According to Chan (2021, p. 84), boys love narratives are identified as a manifestation of "moderate heteropatriarchy", as they provide an opening for parental acceptance of same-sex relationships. However, this acceptance is conditional on the preservation of filial virtue. The author analyzes another Thai production, the series Love by Chance, and examines the influence that family members have on LGBTQIA+ individuals. According to their analyses, the themes addressed by boys love productions have created space for challenges and transformations in the heteronormative structure, although intrinsic patriarchal values persist in the narrative, which limit explicit manifestations of homoerotic romance.

Articulating Chan's (2021) considerations with the narrative content of Bad Buddy, despite his mother's acceptance of a possible gay romance, Pran's parents' stance imposes restrictions on the type of person their son can get involved with. By warning the child that acceptance is conditional on the relationship not being with neighbors, family values are imposed and restrict the individual's freedom. Furthermore, the character Pran's posture throughout the conversation is affable and docile, and could be interpreted as submissive. Therefore, parents' initial acceptance of a gay relationship is hampered both by patriarchal values and by the need for approval from the person their child chooses.

Outside the family, friends may be the first to offer support to gay individuals, as discussed by Campos and Gonçalves (2022). In the series Bad Buddy, the first to discover the protagonists' sexuality are their friends. Even though it was unusual, Pat and Pran were backstage at the school theater, behind the curtain, playing and hugging, when suddenly, the curtain falls. The intimacy between them is thus revealed to everyone present in the auditorium, including Pran and Pat's best friends who were in

the audience. In this scene, Pat and Pran's (figure 5) desperation and fear are evident as they have their relationship exposed to the entire school.

**Figure 5:** Characters' reactions to the unexpected exposure of their relationship



**Source:** frame from episode 8 of Bad Buddy The Series (2021)

The scene is marked by several punctuations (cuts), which provide objectivity and mark scales of emotion. The act, however, unfolds at length, from Pat's moment alone, reflective behind the stage (which begins at minute 6:08 of chapter 8) to the brief close-up of Pran's best friend (at minute 10:30). According to Oliveira, Novaes and Oliveira (2017, p.15), “taking into account the classical narrative as a paradigm very present in television fiction, the idea of a dramatic arc presupposes three basic elements: the dramatic trigger (or inciting incident), the climax and the resolution”.

In this narrative structure, the dramatic trigger occurs when the protagonists discuss a previous disagreement and realize that they are not ready to reveal their relationship to their friends. The climax unfolds when the curtain falls and suddenly all of the protagonists' friends and colleagues are faced with the fact that the two are united by a prank - after overhearing Pat say, through an intentional audio leak, that they were dating. A quick sequence of close-ups appears on the screen, focusing on the faces of

the people present, who appear to be shocked by the discovery, with the last one appearing disappointed because he is Pran's best friend and doesn't know anything.

This strategy of ending at the climax is intentional on the part of the director, to create curiosity in the viewer:

[...] the pleasure of narrative is linked to desire. Plots speak of desire and what falls upon it, but the movement of the narrative itself is driven by desire in the form of “epistemophilia,” a desire to know; we want to discover secrets, know the ending, find the truth (Culler, 2009, p. 126).

The faces of the colleagues alternate with the faces of Pat and Pran, who appear embarrassed and unresponsive. At this point, the plot intends to move the viewer, who puts himself in the place of embarrassment, vulnerability and insecurity in which the protagonists find themselves.

What follows in the narrative at this point is that Pat and Pran's friends are truly surprised to discover the characters' affection. This does not happen because it is a homosexual relationship, but because the protagonists have been rivals since childhood. There is also disappointment because they didn't trust themselves to reveal the secret and say that they are dating. After the issues are resolved, friends provide support and become allies to the couple.

The friendship network is shown to be an intermediary of the support and solidarity expected from the family, showing greater potential when composed of LGBT peers, who support each other to overcome the imposed inequities and difficulties experienced in their family relationships (Nascimento et al., 2020, p. 882).

The series ends in an ellipsis, in which the protagonists are already educated and professionally successful, and financially independent from their parents. Families continue to hate each other. Parents pretend not to know about their children's relationships, but this is not because of sexuality, but because of rivalry between families. Pat and Pran's relationship is shown to be strong and stable.

## Final Considerations

This analysis reinforces the importance of expanding the debates that enable both the forms of love and the different aspects that permeate the cultural consumption of media products such as the Bad Buddy series, which represents a community still invisible in our society.

The presence and representation of the LGBTQIA+ population in audiovisual productions, as a way to enjoy leisure, plays a significant role in building the process of inclusion and visibility of these individuals. The experience of watching serialized audiovisual programs aimed at entertainment can also heighten sensibilities, evoke emotions and reflections on themes that permeate societies and their contexts. By exploring these representations, the narrative has the power to foster affective perspectives on prejudice in same-sex relationships in society.

In Brazil, the consumption of boys love content and the significant growth of fan clubs, as indicated by the study by Torres (2023)<sup>15</sup>, reflect the interest and demand for narratives that address sexual diversity. However, even in the face of this growth, it is important to recognize the limitations that the series present. As discussed in this article, Bad Buddy still follows hegemonic heteronormative standards, reinforces clichés and values globally accepted beauty standards.

Despite this, this audiovisual work introduces relevant debates not only for the LGBTQIA+ community. By questioning established norms, the series' plot goes beyond the discovery of the protagonists' sexuality. It thus highlights other themes and establishes other representatives, who, in this or another context, will take the place of those who represent: even with the influence of the media and the organizational

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<sup>15</sup> Torres (2023) conducts an ethnographic study with boys love fandom groups in the study entitled “Affective, moral and political crossings in the consumption experience of Boys Love (BL) series in Brazil”.

conglomerate presented as if it were the only one capable of translating society's desires.

In the relationship built in *Bad Buddy*, the importance of demystifying some myths that are rooted in society about same-sex relationships was noted, such as: there is no stereotypical construction of a “woman” in the relationship, that is, being active or passive is not a question of masculinity. Furthermore, gay people do not need to fit their relationship into heteronormative standards. Even in the face of the stigma surrounding the differences that involve same-sex couples in the way they relate, in the series, difference does not mean something problematic, showing that the relationships are based on similarity. In this sense, the characters Pat and Pran involved in a romance with family conflicts and interference, common actions in human relationships, are capable of resolution, contributing to widening the breaking points of hegemonic powers.

Finally, it is essential to reflect on the media discourse surrounding audiovisual productions, the boys love genre and others, as well as narratives, in order to understand the advances in the political and social rights required for gay couples, as there are several obstacles that remain in the world in the face of same-sex relationships. The LGBTQIA+ community, in this case represented by the letter "G," with all the clichés commonly present in audiovisual works that address relationships between heterosexual couples, can enjoy plots like *Bad Buddy*, as can all those who seek to enjoy audiovisual media as a leisure experience.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that this article does not exhaust the topic and expands the dialogue with other studies that address LGBTQIA+ representation in the

media and the diversity of other individuals who are represented by this acronym, especially gays.

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