

## Gender Performativity of Lesbian Couple in Bingo Love Graphic Novel

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### Abstract

*This study focuses on gender identity problems experienced by the main female characters in the graphic novel *Bingo Love*: Hazel Johnson and Mari McCray. Both are best friends who later become a couple. The study aims to scrutiny the performativity of the main female characters in the *Bingo Love* novel through lesbian talk, physical appearance, and sexual activity under Butler's gender performativity. Results show that the changes that the two characters undergone can be identified in terms of physical appearance, casual and romantic conversation, and physical and sexual interaction. In addition, the study also concludes that gender identity in the characters, shown through appearance and interaction with others, can change according to the current cultural space and time in which they belong to.*

*Keywords: Gender Performativity, Queer, Lesbian, Gender Identity, Graphic Novel*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

LGBT and homosexuality issues are considered by some cultures to be negative and taboo. Seif (2017) in his research also shows some survey data related to public opinion in the United States regarding homosexuality where there are still many people who consider homosexuality as a taboo and a threat. This conservative community's behavior is caused by the dominant religious beliefs there which states that only heterosexuality is normal. This is because most people have cultural values that uphold heteronormativity. For instance, a person with a male body must act in a masculine manner and have a sexual orientation towards women as the opposite sex. Heterosexuality is a natural obligation of every human being. Thus, what is different from the natural obligation is deviated and not in accordance with the norm. Sexual activity that is not within the "normal" social framework will make the subject feel discriminated against, even considered as a "sin" in religion. This assumption leads to unpleasant treatments which includes the phenomenon of homophobia, discrimination, and deprivation of citizens' rights for LGBT people. Heterosexual will be condemned if having sex outside of marriage and 'deviant' sexual activity (Prajayanti *et al.*, 2015). While homosexuals, as if they do not have sexual rights because automatically sexual activity for them exists outside of marriage and is certainly distorted. Discrimination and guilt that are instilled in homosexuals cause them to cover up their sexual orientation, with the result that further mental stress is more severe. This makes them eventually choose to live a lie, sometimes to get married and have children, but are forced to live a "double" life, openly as a heterosexual, and secretly as a homosexual (Prajayanti *et al.*, 2015). Homosexuality is found in many societies in world. Even so, it is still considered a disgrace and threat, even though it does not harm others.

The struggle in finding identity is packaged by the author into an interesting story in the graphic novel *Bingo Love*. *Bingo Love* is a graphic novel written by Tee Franklin, Jenn St-Onge, and Joy San (2018). This graphic novel presents a series of complicated love life stories, which cannot be separated from real life problems, as well as revealing the inconsistencies of self-identity to the characters in the *Bingo Love* graphic novel. The original edition of this novel previously won the Queer Press Grant in 2017 via Kickstarter. The phenomenon that appears in the graphic novel *Bingo Love* is the same-sex romance represented by the characters, Hazel Johnson and Mari McCray. In this story, Mari McCray has a same-sex sexual orientation that she only discovered when she met Hazel who was originally a heterosexual. The fluidness in Hazel and Mari's identity made the story more interesting. On the other hand, Hazel had a normal heterosexual life with a man who was an air force pilot. However, the conflict began when Hazel was reunited with Mari who made her love life change. In this story, Hazel is portrayed as a woman who has unfixed identity. The love story she lived was even more complicated when she was in a relationship with a man, but her true feelings were for a girlfriend she liked when she was thirteen, Mari. As a woman, Hazel still tries to be a normal woman by having relationships with a man and having a family. The

friendship that exists between Hazel and Mari and her household conflicts further supports her attitude to adore fellow women. These factors are the supporting factors for Hazel in determining her identity.

Lesbians usually have the opposite appearance and behavior even though they are both women. A woman who look masculine and act like a male is known as 'butch'. Conversely, lesbians who are feminine-looking, similar to women in common and dependent on her partners are called 'femme' (Levitt and Hiestand, 2005). The relationship between butch and femme lesbians can be said to be similar to the traditional relationship of male and female partners who share protection and compassionate toward each other. The fluidness of self-identity in Hazel is an interesting thing to analyze by using queer theory. Queer theory is a theory that discusses the person's identity. Identity is not a permanent thing. It can be determined by interpreting the performance through lesbian conversation, appearance and physical, and sexual activity. In Queer's theory, sexuality is a series of actions, not natural things that are obtained by every human being (Butler, 1990). Hazel as a woman has a lesbian desire that shows sexuality is not natural, but it can change. In other words, queer concentrates on mixing up traditional assumptions regarding supposedly inevitable combinations of attributes of the self. For instance, someone with a feminine gender like Mari McCray can combine her identity as a masculine who is interested in other feminine gender, who are sexually as women.

Gender performativity in lesbian couples have been researched before. In her study, Prajayanti (2015) discusses the representation of ideal women in the Victorian era, the description of lesbianism, and the ideology in the novel by showing lesbian identity. This research showed that there are several regulations that describe the ideal woman in the Victorian era. According to her, the picture of lesbianism could be seen from being passive to active in society where the main female characters gained freedom through their relationship. Furthermore, there is an agenda to give a voice toward lesbianism through this novel. Another study by Day (2017) aims to find out how the performance of gender and sexuality is featured in the Black queer web series on YouTube. This research focuses on the viewpoint of the viewers, their responses and comments to the series shows. Pertiwi's study (2017) shows that there is transformation of identity via daily performance of the female character.

The process of negotiating used by the female character to match the heteronormative values in the society. These negotiations are similar to those carried out by the main female characters in *Bingo Love* despite the conflict that arise from the society. One of the characters can act as masculine or known as 'butch', but this identity is not permanent given that her body as a whole is a woman who is also limited by her physical abilities. In addition, the study by Banerjee (2018) focuses on the representation of a woman with super-human abilities. This female character is often described as a tough, fierce, and fearless woman. Her physical appearance is depicted following 'the male gaze' by wearing tight costumes that show her curves. Both of these studies both use graphic novels, but differ in analyzing the research issues. Based on the explanation above, *Bingo Love* graphic novel written by Tee Franklin, Jenn St-Onge, and Joy San in this study can be examined using Judith Butler's theory. Queer theory is used to determine the identity of the person in the object of this study. This theory generally speaks of the absence of a permanent inner identity. A person's identity can be influenced by social and cultural factors. It is also an act that is repeated.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

This research uses descriptive qualitative to describe the gender identity portrayed by the main female characters through their performativity in the novel titled *Bingo Love* by Tee Franklin, Jenn St-Onge, and Joy San. In addition, the use of qualitative methods is inseparable from the researcher's aim to obtain more in-depth information related to the research theme. This study uses Judith Butler's gender performativity to analyze text quotes related to gender identity. For this research, the primary data source is in the form of text excerpts taken from the graphic novel *Bingo Love* by Tee Franklin, Jenn St-Onge, and Joy San. This research discusses gender performativity of the female characters in the graphic novel *Bingo Love*. Thus, the researcher is concerned about several non-narrative aspects such as speech bubbles, facial expressions, gestures, postures of the characters, and background of the graphic novel. Those non-narrative aspects can assist the researcher in determining the conversations that lead to the gender identity and the intimacy of the relationship between the two characters, physical appearance, and their sexual activities and behaviors.

### 3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hazel and Mari were seen showing their subversive act by parodying relationships like heterosexual couples. In a lesbian relationship, butch is a woman who impersonates and dresses like a man in general with predominantly masculine characteristics. While femme is a woman who impersonates and dresses like a woman with her feminine characteristics (Levitt and Hiestand, 2005). In this novel, Mari is portrayed as a woman who has dominant masculine traits seen from some previous data whereas Hazel is shown to have feminine traits. In lesbian relationship, both Mari and Hazel still recognize the importance of masculine and feminine roles as an imitation of heterosexual couple relationships. It is indicated by the 'butch' and 'femme' dichotomy in this graphic novel. In identifying gender identity, a lesbian, both butch and femme, will see the physical appearance of the woman who will be her partner. For instance, Hazel was first attracted to Mari while at Bingo Hall. At that time, Mari was dressed to emphasize her femininity. She also muttered about Mari's physical appearance which made her attracted. She described that "Mari was tall, beautiful, and smelled like cocoa." (8) These are some of the things that appeal to a butch in attracting femme women.

Visual and physical appearance is one way to determine one's gender identity. A femme lesbian will pay attention to her appearance and look after herself to look feminine when meeting with her partner, as well as butch lesbians whose appearance looks like men. Even so, a woman must have prominent feminine traits that can be seen from her appearance. It is similar to butch lesbians where their masculinity will emerge when they interact with their lesbian partners. Therefore, sexual identity is not seen as something natural but as something that is constructed socially and continuously (Butler 1990). It can be said that this phase is an initial stage for a butch woman in identifying the identity of femme women and vice versa. In visual appearance, both are also presented with different styles in this novel. Mari is portrayed wearing clothes similar to the men, but she also still has feminine traits in herself when dressed properly as women in the novel. Whereas Hazel always wears feminine clothes such as dresses, skirts, or blouse. However, in figure 4.9, they also portrayed as if they were exchanging roles as Hazel was still wearing her white shirt and khaki jogger pants while Mari only wore her black lingerie. Even so, Mari still shows her gender role as a butch that gives pleasure to her partner in intimate activity. Mari's portrayal is similar to Hum's (2009) statement regarding the term stone butch or female-to-male-transgender.

A stone butch is a masculine woman who shows more desire to satisfy her partner in sexual activity. She takes a role as a masculine man, but can even switch to become a feminine woman. This opinion is also the same as Butler (1990, 136) which states that Mari's practices of the gender act are to produce realness by reproducing the actions of men and women alike. She is not just imitating male masculinity and female femininity, but she also shows that both masculinity and femininity are imitation practices. Moreover, she is able to produce naturalized effects from a series of practices because naturally, she is biologically a woman who has feminine traits but also has masculine characteristics through the imitating process. These masculine traits are also performed by Hazel in several scenes of the story. She is also shown to have initiated several actions that indicate masculine traits such as when she came to Mari's house by climbing a tree (29). She wanted to assure Mari's condition after being punished for her actions because it was deemed as a perversion toward the heteronormative norm. Both were punished for not seeing each other after being caught kissing in front of Mari's house. It can be said that Hazel's actions can be considered as an action that is closely related to men. However, this also can be understood because Mari has made Hazel interested in doing anything for herself as Levitt and Hiestand (2005) stated that butch women, in this case, Mari have the power to make Hazel give herself to her.

However, physical appearance cannot be a final decision in determining gender identity. Gender identity can be understood through a series of actions that aim to support her physical appearance. In other words, a person can be said to be a butch if her appearance resembles a man with a short haircut. Not only that, but she also needs to practice the actions that indicate that she is a butch. She may admit that she is a lesbian but if that realization cannot be followed by a series of butch's actions, then it cannot be understood as performativity. Furthermore, a series of actions need to be implemented continuously to create a naturalized effect from the gender that she imitates. The researcher found that gender identity of a person can be found through conversations in the form of texts that refer to the realization that she

is a lesbian. Someone who has admitted that she is a lesbian will confess her identity to herself. Any self-realization as a lesbian show that someone is experiencing a change in sexual identity. It is also experienced by Hazel as seen in figure 4.1 when she said that she was 'different' when she met Mari at her thirteenth (5). On several occasions she showed her happiness when she was with Mari even though at that time it was not expressed directly or as if she talked to herself within her mind as seen in figure 4.6. Here is the evidence of Hazel's expression that shows her self-realization as a lesbian: *"Mari was tall, beautiful, and she smelled like cocoa butter. She was a honey glazed goddess. I stared at her in class and just daydreamed about us being friends and hanging out"* (8).

The initial attraction then continues to develop into the desire to have. This was even stronger when Mari kissed Hazel on the cheek after school. The kiss increasingly made her lose interest in the opposite sex. Hazel admired Mari even though she realized that Mari was also a woman with all the same characteristics Hazel had. She always had dreams when she was side by side with Mari. This feeling is then increasingly developed when they are adults where they both desire to get married and engage in sexual activities together. In other words, Hazel realized that there was an interest in the same sex that was directed towards Mari at that time. This interest emerged suddenly when they met at Bingo Hall when they were thirteen years old. It further increases when triggered by a kiss from the person she wants. Awareness that something is 'different' with her and try to acknowledge it is a form of coming out. The coming out process was carried out in stages by Hazel and Mari. If Hazel first felt an interest in Mari when she met at Bingo Hall, Mari actually experienced it first with a girl named Leesa.

This process then develops as the time they spend together from what was originally just a classmate becomes a best friend. This can happen because each is attracted to one another. We can see that Mari invited Hazel to hang out at the cafe by treating her a hot chocolate. At this stage, Mari demonstrates her control by making herself look desired by Hazel. A butch woman will try to do something to attract the attention of the femme women (Levitt and Hiestand, 2005). If the femme woman responds it, then the butch woman has managed to attract the attention of femme women. After the two have been close friends for quite a long time, then the initial expectation of having each other will also keep them to avoid rejection from either individual. Rejection is part of the risk of lesbian relationships that is also experienced by both Butch and Femme (Levitt and Hiestand, 2005). However, in the relationship between Hazel and Mari, Hazel also actually wants this moment and responds to Mari's invitation so that Mari does not need to bother about rejection. She then began to kiss Hazel's cheek that could be understood as a process to see the response from Hazel. It was from Hazel's response that Mari was then convinced that Hazel was the same as her. Their relationship was totally upgraded when they had their first kiss in front of the church. This moment can be understood as a concrete act of coming out itself.

In one scene, Hazel had also been jealous of Mari who played her role as butch. This is because Mari who works as an attorney requires that she deals with various people, while Hazel only deals with various activities at home. This condition increasingly made Hazel feel that her life was miserable (122). She felt her role required her to take care of her family, clean the house as she always did when she was with James, and so on. She then revealed this to Mari until finally, the two negotiated with each other to find solutions to the Hazel problem. Mari finally decides to open a fashion design school together with Hazel to prove that their goal together is to do everything together. The issue of gender is only a matter of performativity, an imitation process, and endless repetition as stated by Butler (1990). The physical appearance that is identified by the community as gender identity is used as a means for gender performance as per community normativity. Interestingly, they did not stop at the level of dressing as a marker of women's identity, Hazel and Mari showed contradictions in their physical appearance as a form of gender instability. In other words, Hazel and Mari's physical appearance only served as a sign that they were both biologically female. However, clothing is further used to signify the role they play in lesbian relationships.

For instance, Mari is a butch woman and she has to dress like a man. Not only that, she also emphasized the meaning behind the dress style with a series of masculine actions. She also works as an attorney, which incidentally is a professional public domain that many men are involved in. It also forms the character that she must behave as if she is a provider in the family who also protects her partner. Moreover, by combining her innate feminine and masculine traits, she shows that gender is fluid and as if the original did not exist because she was able to combine the two.

Butch women tend to appear independent regardless of their biology because they are considered to act like men. They can blend femininity and masculinity in themselves to challenge the existence of binary. Hum (2009) stated that butch lesbians capable of fusing gender values into their unique characteristics in the transgender community because they were provided with heteronormative knowledge and sexist oppression as well as present an incredible level of sensitivity and insight. In sexual performativity, Hazel and Mari revealed their sexual activities several times as a lesbian couple. It is performed by bathing together, pleasuring each other, kissing, hugging, and using tools such as sex toys. Hazel and Mari's sexual activity was first performed when they were thirteen years old in front of the church where Mari was upset at the time with her grandmother (19-20). On panel 1-3, Hazel enthusiastically embraced the kiss of Mari's lips because that was what she had been expecting for a long time. The researcher found that their first-time sexual interaction can be understood as a sign of assurance that both have the same sexual attraction. Even in a lesbian community, a person will not easily recognize whether that person is being attracted to her or not until there is physical contact as described by Levitt and Hiestand (2005).

Levitt and Hiestand (2005) explained that attraction is displayed by exchanging signs between a femme and butch. A femme is expected to be able to show her sexual desire through her femininity to be seductive. A butch is expected to show her desire toward a femme or act as if she is desired by the femme. In responding to that, a butch is more expected to initiate every movement such as inviting for a date or engaging in sexual activity. Furthermore, femme women could increase their sexual tension by exhibiting the power to accept or reject butch desires, while butch woman shows the merit of their desires. Overall, Hazel and Mari have shown that they can take on the role of men and women alternately. This is in line with Levitt and Hiestand (2005) that the actions carried out by them in displaying out their roles as butch or femme are negotiations between the two. Mari is portrayed as dominant butch but she also negotiated it with Hazel. She does not mind if Hazel initiates sexual activities such as being on top or vice versa. Levitt and Hiestand (2005) in an interview with a lesbian couple explained that butch women like Mari were attracted to the sexual characteristics of femme women like Hazel, but both butch and femme women showed that this femininity did not necessarily have to be related to passivity.

The researcher also found that their sexual behavior began when they were teenagers. Mari when she was a teenager at the end of the story told that before meeting Hazel, she also showed interest with the girl. McCabe et al. (2011) confirmed this where youths are likely to experiment with same-sex activity after trying heterosexual activity. In Mari and Hazel's case, the researcher found that both of them were attracted to the desire to have same-sex sexual behavior even though each of them then went into heterosexual relations, and decided to return to being lesbians at the end of their age. However, the researcher did not find out if Mari or Hazel had previously tried heterosexual relations before they met, but Mari had indeed been kissed by a boy but she did not like it and instead showed her interest toward a girl named Leesa. In the end, the authors did not clearly explain their gender identities. Thus, the gender identity of Hazel and Mari in this novel can only be understood through a series of performativity, a process of imitation that takes place continuously without end (Butler, 1990). For instance, Hazel is identified as a lesbian femme in this novel who looks like a woman but she also acts and performs like a butch. Therefore, the recognition of lesbian identities and sexual activity can be used to determine Hazel and Mari's gender identity in this novel. The physical appearance cannot significantly determine a person's final gender identity. It is because, within the scope of the lesbian community, a butch woman will have difficulty in identifying femme women. After all, the style of dress is equally accentuating feminine characteristics as women in general. Clothing or physical appearance only serves as a marker or initial identification that she is butch or femme.

However, this is not absolute, so both of them usually enter the stage where butch women show an interest or attraction that can be understood by femme women or women who are also interested in them. Both the butch or femme woman needs to make sure that someone who approaches her also shares the same interests with her. This stage can later lead to the recognition of identity in the smallest scope, called coming out. After a butch or femme woman believes that her partner has the same interests as her, this relationship will develop into the next stage. In this case, Hazel and Mari conducted same-sex marriage as a concrete form of coming out widely which involved many people including their families. They begin to show sexual activity as a form of commitment with their partners. Hazel and Mari had kissed when they were thirteen years old and became more intimate after they got married and went on their

honeymoon. Both of these sexual activities are also imitations of heterosexual couple relationships that require roles. In this story, both of them show that gender is not permanent. This is because in a lesbian relationship both are female and also have feminine traits that impact their sensitivity towards their partner. Mari understands how to treat Hazel and vice versa so that we can see when Hazel is busy taking care of her family, Mari tries to give her satisfaction and comfort. These treatments were very rare for Hazel when she was with her husband. It can be said that women with more femininity understand other women compared to men. That is also the reason why Hazel and Mari need and complement each other. They both also provide each other opportunities for their partners to be active and take the initiative in sexual activity. Thus, the study identifies that Mari's gender identity is dominantly butch and femme so that she belongs to the androgyny category. Whereas, Hazel has the dominant feminine traits and a bit of masculine, although she has a more femme role. The masculine behavior that she shows is just a spontaneous act that arises because of her concern for her partner and that is one of the feminine characteristics.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

Hazel and Mari in this graphic novel are portrayed as women who have different roles in undergoing their relationship so that there are differences in the way they dress. Hazel is always portrayed as wearing identical clothes with women with feminine characteristics in general, such as wearing a dress, gown, blouse, and skirt, although sometimes she also wears casual clothes like men. While Mari is the opposite, she is depicted wearing a blazer with long fabric pants, sleeveless tops that are covered with outer, and casual clothes such as tank tops and jogger-like pants when at home. She also appeared several times with clothes that accentuated the femininity as sexy sleepwear.

In addition, the two professions are also described differently, Hazel is always depicted working at home while Hazel works as an attorney outside the home. In conversation performativity, Hazel tends to follow what Mari does even though at the beginning of the story it seems that Hazel has the control. That is because Mari has the ability for Hazel to always be passive even though the two negotiate it. A form of recognition that they are a lesbian couple is when at their marriage as a form of commitment. Butch women like Mari show that they look attractive in front of femme women. That is what makes Hazel always admit that she has an interest in Mari.

Both of them also show sexual activity which is a process of imitation of heterosexual relationships where there needs to be a role that takes over their partners. In this case, Mari acts like a man who has control over Hazel. However, it is not uncommon for Hazel to show the same thing by taking over the role on top. This shows that in addition to imitating, they also negotiate all actions with their partners. Either Mari or Hazel always pays attention to their partner's comfort that being a butch woman does not always have to take over and play a dominant and aggressive role, and vice versa with femme women.

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