

S-T-I-G-M-A through the Eyes of PLHIV: Deconstructing HIV and AIDS Depiction in *Batang Poz*

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ABSTRACT

Various international serial dramas depict how people living with HIV (PLHIV) struggled in the early years of the disease through the perspective of entertainment media. Despite this, depictions of their stories in the Philippines are not given priority due to our deeply rooted conservatism. *Batang Poz* (Children with HIV), a local miniseries about teenagers suffering from stigma, has become publicly available online in response to the increasing number of Filipino youths with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). However, media depictions of this chronic health condition remain understudied in the country. This study sheds light on the mediated view of HIV and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) by analyzing the subjective experiences and situated logic of PLHIV. Moreover, this paper explores the possibility of combining Stuart Hall's Reception Theory with Roland Barthes's Semiotics to surface ideological discourse using the concept of deconstruction while allowing the audience to exercise agency. Thirteen PLHIV were interviewed, and their self-reflexive narratives were analyzed to unravel the hegemonic meanings constructed by the advocacy show. These dominant ideologies that perpetuate stigma include: [s]exual activities among men having sex with men as the sole driver of HIV; [t]esting for HIV as castration of dignity, [i]mmortalization of oppressive LGBTQI hierarchy; [g]lorification of tolerance rather than acceptance, inclusivity, and awareness; [m]agnification of shallow issues; and [a]dvocacy overpowered by capitalism. To summarize, *Batang Poz* did not present the milestones in HIV treatment but rather oversimplified public health issues and trivialized PLHIV rights.

Keywords: *HIV/AIDS, reception theory, semiotics, deconstruction, dominant ideologies.*

INTRODUCTION

The literature reveals that human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) are more stigmatized than many other diseases, including mental and physical illnesses. Adia et al. (2018) defined stigma as feeling less or ashamed when one experiences discrimination, feels vulnerable to prejudice, or rationalizes negative social experiences. They also found that people living with HIV (PLHIV) who identify as gay, bisexual, or transgender women (TGW) suffer disproportionate stigmatization due to the perception that HIV and AIDS are a gay disease that punishes homosexuals for having multiple sexual partners, mainly since an increasing number of men who have sex with men (MSM) are being diagnosed with the disease. Between 1984 and 2016, new HIV cases acquired through male-to-female sexual transmissions were less significant than those acquired through MSM, which are believed to have been the primary cause of the epidemic in the country from 2007 to 2018 (Tuppall et al., 2019). According to the Department of Health's Epidemiology Bureau (2022), approximately 70% of new HIV diagnoses in February 2023 involved MSM, 17% concerned men who had sex with both men and women, and approximately 3% involved TGW. The national HIV surveillance systems originally classified TGW as MSM until gender identity was taken into account in 2018 (Gangcuangco & Eustaquio,

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2023). During the 1990s, the term MSM was introduced to describe a behavior among people who engage in male-to-male sexual activity, regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation (Boskey, 2024).

Many international films and television shows focus on raising awareness about HIV and AIDS; however, most of them primarily depict the early years of the epidemic in the 1980s. During that time, there was limited knowledge about the rapidly spreading pandemic, and antiretroviral treatments had not yet been developed (Kelleher, 2021). According to Sallabank et al. (2022), the intensification of stigma by mainstream media is underexplored in the field of health science, while Scarcelli et al. (2021) suggest that delving into the portrayal of health in cinema can provide valuable insights into the formation of collective identities within distinct historical, political, and geographical contexts.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The Philippines has diagnosed over 100,000 PLHIV since 1984, with 48 new cases reported daily in 2023 (Ganguanco & Eustaquio, 2023; Jaymalin, 2023). According to Ganguanco (2019), the rate of HIV acquisition in the country increased by 174% between 2010 and 2017, making it the fastest-growing HIV epidemic in the Western Pacific region. As a result, several television programs have begun to incorporate HIV narratives into their plots.

Batang Poz (Children with HIV) is an online local miniseries adapted from the best-selling young adult novel by Palanca Awardee Segundo Matias, Jr. It has received widespread acclaim, winning the Best Original Program at the Asian Academy Awards in 2019 and the Jury Prize for Advocacy at the 7th Urduja Heritage Film Awards in 2021.

The show focuses on the circle of four teenage MSM: Enzo, Luis, Gab, and Chuchay. Enzo resents his family for receiving less attention than his brother. His alter account was used to express himself, and he collaborated with a couple on sex videos. Luis comes from an affluent traditional Chinese family that forces him to marry a family friend's daughter. He explored online dating and engaged in unprotected sexual encounters where he contracted HIV. He was kicked out of their home after informing his parents about his HIV status. Gab is a mayor's son and is partnered with a governor's daughter. When he got diagnosed, he confronted his best friend Kenneth because he was the only gay with whom he had sexual relations. Chuchay is a homeless gay breadwinner who brings laughter to the group. Chuchay was raped by the pedophile husband of their employer, from whom the child contracted HIV. This molestation continued through transactional sex.

This research attempts to address the question, "How does the awarded online serial drama *Batang Poz* establish and negotiate sociocultural ideologies on its mediated view of HIV and AIDS in consideration of PLHIV's social realities and reception of the show?"

The Viewers' Gaze

Stuart Hall's Reception Theory posits that meaning is generated through the interaction between media texts and their audiences, rather than being inherent to either one (Briandana & Azmawati, 2020). Originally, Reception Theory was referred to as Encoding-Decoding Theory, which was derived from pre-existing models of mass communication. Through visual and auditory codes, the encoding process creates a mediated perspective on social issues through the lens of the source (Dixon, 2019; Xie, 2022). Alternatively, decoding refers to the audience's interpretation and understanding of the message. There is no guarantee, however, that readers can decode the producers' intended meaning because visual signs have connotative rather than denotative effects (Dixon, 2019).

Semiotic Origin of Reception Studies

The diverse social identities and actual social experiences of audiences influence the way meaning is received by audiences (Elinwa, 2020). Morley (1980, cited in Schroder, 2018) defined semiotic process as the system by which readers interpret information based on their experiences and situated logic. Furthermore, reception analysis emphasizes how audiences create meaning that contradicts the hegemonic position of media producers (Briandana et al., 2021). Hence, this reader-oriented approach proposes that mediated communication is more than transmitting information between sender and receiver; it focuses on the audience's interpretations (Schroder, 2018).

Meaning-Making through Signs

Semiotics is the study of signs, which can be used to convey a wide range of meanings. Roland Barthes's Semiotic Theory focuses on visual signs rather than verbal and non-verbal signs that appear straightforward but deftly convey ideologies in accordance with deceptive societal norms (Griffin, 2012). Likewise, Umberto Eco argued that semiotics can depict art that tells lies; thus, it can also be utilized to convey the truth (Griffin, 2012). Barthes first described semiotics as a study of myths or the phenomenon by which the culture becomes natural (Putri et al., 2022). A myth is a belief that exists today without a solid foundation and is a discourse that appears in or is concealed within popular culture icons (Chandler, 2022). Over time, myths have been classified into two categories: dominant myths and countermyths. A dominant myth is used to legitimize the social structure that supports the ruling population, whereas a countermyth presents a different perspective on reality that benefits the discriminated against (Reid, 2012, cited in Gibraltar et al., 2023).

Theoretical Convergence

Textual analysis is challenged by excessive interpretation of cultural symbols, which John Fiske termed semiotic democracy (Chang, 2023). Barthes's (1992) *The Death of the Author* suggests that the reader interprets the text rather than the writer, which scholars attribute to the reader's birth. This also complements Michel Foucault's conception of authorship, which suggests that the author is no longer the indefinite source of signification. However, Dixon (2019) claims that readers may misread a media text if they are not fully equipped to comprehend the content's intended message because of complicated story structures and unfamiliarity with the topic or vocabulary.

This study was inspired by the realization that communication is challenged by the decontextualization of discursive meanings (Jensen & Jankowski, 1991, cited in Adjoteye et al., 2021). Hall's canonical paper demonstrates that reception studies have semiotic roots, and to advance understanding of television discourse, scholars must explore the encoding-decoding model, now known as reception theory (Hall, 1973; Schroder, 2018). Morley (1980, cited in Schroder, 2018) defined the semiotic process as the action in which readers interpret transmitted information based on their own experiences and situated logic. Meanwhile, Nauli and Halomoan (2021) argued that connotative interpretation in semiotics can only be understood by people from the same culture, while Livingstone (2002) posited that the relationship between local cognition and ideological system is an issue that requires theoretical confluence to reconcile multiple viewpoints. Thus, the framework employed in this research was derived from reception theory and semiotics inspired by Marxist perspectives on exposing the dominant ideologies that shape our culture. As the researcher

suggests, “receptive semiology” involves co-constructing discursive meanings that recognize the collective perspectives and cultural practices of particular communities through the analysis of mediated and perceived messages relevant to them.

METHODOLOGY

This descriptive qualitative study seeks to prevent misinterpretation of ideologies by anchoring the deconstruction process in the self-reflexive reception of PLHIV rather than the researcher alone, who is not HIV-positive. Griffin (2012) defines deconstruction as the process by which researchers uncover or debunk ideological signs in media texts that reinforce dominant values.

Participant Recruitment

The recruitment process for 13 PLHIV was carried out by posting a call for participants on Twitter (now known as X). A key responsibility of the researcher was to coordinate the recruitment process to ensure that the study followed the National Ethical Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants created by the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (2022).

Potential informants were informed of the security risks associated with using technology, the psychological issues that may arise, the procedures taken to mitigate those risks, and the interview process and talking points, which helped them decide whether to participate in the study.

The study included MSM and TGW who have been diagnosed with HIV for at least one year and are of legal age, Filipino citizens, and have watched all six episodes of *Batang Poz* during the last two months prior to data collection.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The questionnaire was validated by a communication specialist, three HIV and AIDS advocates, a gender advocate, and a mental health advocate to ensure its clarity and integrity. The first part of the questionnaire included demographic information about the participants, while the second part dealt with their perceptions of *Batang Poz*.

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with the participants via Zoom Teleconference, with the option of turning off their cameras for anonymity. Participants were informed that they do not have to answer any questions they feel uncomfortable with. They were also encouraged to let the researcher know at any time during the interview if they wish to keep any part of the conversation confidential.

Data Analysis

This study adapted the three-stage design process developed by Makwambeni and Salawu (2018) and utilized Adjotey et al.'s (2021) coding scheme to categorize emerging themes, deviations from related literature, the participants' perspectives, their thoughts and reflections, and the role of film elements.

Ethical Considerations

The University Research Ethics Center of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines granted clearance for this study (UREC-2023-1309). In preparation for data collection, the researcher participated in the Specialized Training on Ethics for Public and Private Higher Education Institutions conducted by the Philippine Social Science Council from April to May 2023.

Informed consent was discussed with the participants before and during the interview so they knew the study's purpose and objectives and how and where the data would be used. Participants were given enough time to clarify things and express discomfort during the interview. They were also informed that they may decline or withdraw from their participation without consequences. Further, I allowed participants to decide whether to use pseudonyms in the paper, but they chose to be represented by code names. They were worried that using pseudonyms might inadvertently match the name of someone vulnerable to discrimination.

Participants' informed consent was verbally agreed upon via Zoom Teleconference, which was managed by the researcher located at home and documented using special codes in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and the Philippine HIV and AIDS Policy Act of 2018. Recordings and transcripts are stored on a dedicated, password-protected hard drive, which will be permanently deleted one year after this article's publication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Jafar et al. (2022) assert that meanings must be constructed socially and historically. Barthes posited that audiences decode media texts through denotative and connotative readings, while Hall identified three positions from which audiences can interpret meanings: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional.

1. *Denotative Dominant*

Denotative readings produce literal and obvious descriptions or natural meanings for objects (Ishar & Irawan, 2023; Nauli & Halomoan, 2021). Briandana and Azmawati (2020) explained that in a dominant position, the media and the audience accept the same assumptions and cultural biases. This study reveals that the denotative readings of the participants reflect the dominant positions of the show.

a. HIV-Related Trauma is Fueled by Ignorance, Destitution, and Violence

A confrontational scene in *Batang Poz* occurs when Enzo bleeds while fighting with his father. Enzo's mother attempted to assist him but eventually hesitated due to the blood. A PLHIV with a detectable viral load can transmit HIV only when their blood, semen, rectal or vaginal fluids, or breast milk come in direct contact with another individual's bloodstream (HIVinfo.NIH.gov, 2024). In recalling the scene, P12 expressed frustration for those who do not realize that HIV is not airborne and cannot be acquired through social interaction, enthusing that "*You cannot get HIV even by using our restroom.*"

All participants claim that it is not HIV that robs them of dignity but the abuse and lack of acceptance they are subjected to in their families. Consequently, their kitchen utensils were separated due to disgust, they were beaten up and verbally abused following their HIV disclosure, and they were mistrusted by their family, which negatively affected their mental health and well-being. Thus, participants emphasized the importance of providing emotional support and understanding from family members to encourage PLHIV to seek treatment and for those who are sexually active to get tested. This finding is supported by previous studies of Massetti et al. (2018) and Hawcroft et al. (2019), which argue that interpersonal violence contributes to poor adherence to medications, whereas Llenas-Garcia (2022) asserts that domestic violence does not only include physical aggression and sexual assault, but also psychological warfare and controlling actions.

Meanwhile, P1 was appalled by harassment that corrupted children's innocence, which was demonstrated through Chuchay, who was sexually abused and prostituted by their sole molester. He clearly hinted at this when he said, *"Children's innocence can be exploited, especially when they have necessities their families can't provide. Chuchay doesn't practice polygamy, they got HIV from sexual assault."* Participants believed that homeless children and adolescents with emotional baggage were more likely to be taken advantage of, which was clearly demonstrated in the show. According to a report published by the CAMELEON Association (n.d.), approximately 7,000,000 Filipino children are sexually abused each year, and rape remains the most prevalent form of sexual abuse, followed by fondling and incest. From the interviews, the show also illustrated that low socioeconomic status increases people's risk of contracting HIV because of their physical, social, and informational circumstances. Mitchell et al. (2021) argued that economically disadvantaged and marginalized populations are more likely to be stigmatized, while Gutiérrez and Trossero (2021) posited that underprivileged and less educated individuals are less likely to use condoms.

Four of the participants relate to Chuchay's experience. P10 almost gave up his life as a child due to traumatizing experiences. He said, *"When I was young, I got raped while looking for care. During college, my status was revealed and I got bullied."* P9, who contracted HIV through rape, believes blaming victims is unjust, explaining, *"We did not choose this. My rapists drugged me, I was helpless."* Robledo Maciel (2022) found that men who acquire HIV through rape frequently experience victim-blaming behaviors that are underreported. This leads to the perpetuation of harmful male rape myths and a reluctance to seek psychological assistance. These findings imply that PLHIV may experience lifelong trauma due to past sexual abuse and victim-blaming, which negatively impacts their quality of life.

b. Social Support Restores Self-Esteem and Self-Care

Many of the participants feel that their families have turned their backs on them after learning about their status, causing them to suffer mental breakdowns as they adjust to their diagnosis and treatment. P3 attributes support from other people, explaining that *"Getting little to no support from my own family was excruciating."* P7 believes that *"a support group that cheers you up"* increases one's hope. When P9 began receiving treatment, his circle of friends served as an *"infinite source of empowerment"* that pushed him to return to school and cope with life despite his distorted mental condition. Moreover, he realized that deliberately not seeking treatment is similar to choosing a *"consensual death."* This finding shows that families' neglect is one of the key factors contributing to PLHIV's anxieties, which is why they try to maintain close relationships with trusted friends to avoid complete social and emotional isolation. Remien et al. (2021) argued that mental health problems have a significant impact on low participation and retention in the treatment of PLHIV. Many participants also noted that their friends are grateful for discussions about the consequences of risky sexual behaviors, which has encouraged them to advocate for HIV-related issues. They believe that discourses such as this have been beneficial, especially because many youths are seeking comfort in casual sexual encounters. Collins (2006) determined that those who are not HIV-positive and have psychiatric conditions can undermine negotiating protected sex.

2. Connotative Oppositional

The connotative reading conveys cultural, emotional, symbolic, or ideological meanings (Nauli & Halomoan, 2021; Dixon, 2019). Meanwhile, an oppositional position is one in which the

audience disagrees with the message's intended meaning due to the reader's experiences and worldview (Dixon, 2019). According to Nelson (2011, as cited in Bagasol and Embate, 2019), counter-narratives are enabled in three levels, which include (a) refusal, wherein PLHIV denies an inappropriate narrative; (b) repudiation, wherein PLHIV use their experiences to counter dominant narratives; and (c) contestation, wherein PLHIV come up with advocacies to resist false narratives. As observed, PLHIV's connotative readings contain oppositional positions about *Batang Poz*.

a. Depiction of Diagnosis as a Shameful Process is Fatal

In the show, a doctor revealed Gab's status to his parents without his consent, which led him to discuss his secret affair with Kenneth. His aunt also called for prayers on social media, revealing that he had contracted HIV. To avoid disappointing the girlfriend with whom he had transmitted HIV, his father advised him to fabricate stories about how he acquired HIV. Meanwhile, a sense of uneasiness was evident to Chuchay when the child was interviewed about sensitive information in front of their mother, who was unaware of their work.

According to P1, an accredited social worker, these portrayals are *"not empowering."* She stressed the importance of personal HIV information, citing that *"Healthcare workers are trained in handling minors in discussing their HIV status to prevent suicidal tendencies and to help them prepare for disclosing their condition to their parents."* P4 also disagrees with this interrogation concerning Chuchay's sexual life in front of several healthcare staff, stating that *"Doctors talk to their patients in private to provide a safe environment, particularly for minors not adequately educated on HIV and AIDS."* According to P11, who is an active advocate, *"Patients should not feel compelled to reveal their status."* He recommended that parents and legal guardians receive counseling to assist them in *"managing relationships with their relatives who test positive."* HIV disclosure is voluntary and should only be done when the individual feels completely safe and at ease; it also necessitates accepting environments to encourage open and informed discussions (Melgarejo & Delariarte, 2024). Meanwhile, HIV testing may be required when filing for legal separation or annulment, as it can serve as evidence of infidelity or the transmission of sexually transmitted infections by a spouse. HIV testing is also deemed necessary in cases of rape, other sexual offenses, and for organ or blood donation.

Despite the show's intention to emphasize the difficulties encountered during diagnosis, there is a grave danger in portraying them without providing the appropriate process that can alleviate the discomfort associated with HIV testing. It is evident from this finding that shameful portrayals of HIV diagnosis only contribute to distrust towards healthcare providers and HIV-related health services. Hutchinson and Dhairyawan (2018) indicated that shame is unwelcome to HIV advocacy because it discourages people from getting tested, disclosing relevant sexual history during testing, and retaining treatment after diagnosis. This finding also illuminates that educating the public about HIV-related laws is warranted. The Philippine HIV and AIDS Policy Act of 2018, referred to as Republic Act 11166, allows individuals aged 15 and younger who are either pregnant or involved in high-risk activities to access voluntary HIV testing and counseling without needing permission from their parents or guardians, with support from a licensed health or social worker. It also penalizes illegal HIV information disclosure. Meanwhile, the Universal Health Care Law, also known as Republic Act 11223, automatically includes all citizens in the national health insurance program, which provides them with affordable, preventive care, primary care,

treatment, and rehabilitation services.

b. Failure to Depict Systemic Issues Does Not Improve The Discourse

According to P6, he has friends who have been deported abroad for HIV, but they are unaware of the reason for their deportation at the time. This is congruent with Scarcelli et al.'s study (2021), which argues that individuals with certain illnesses are frequently labeled as unfit for fulfilling specific duties, leading to stereotyping and rejection, a situation that even intensifies with aging. According to Koirala et al.'s (2017) study, Gulf Cooperation Council member countries require annual HIV screening for migrant laborers to renew their work permits and deport them if they test positive without access to healthcare overseas. Human Rights Watch (2018) says that PLHIV discrimination in the workplace includes hiring rejection, illegal firing, and forced resignation due to diagnosis. However, the Human Rights Watch also reports that many PLHIV refrain from taking legal action against discrimination, harassment, bullying, and non-consensual disclosures of health status for fear that further public disclosure will prevent them from securing employment. In addition, previous studies (see Mumin et al., 2018; Maulsby et al., 2020; Ware et al., 2020) reveal that reduced employment capacity, job loss, and unemployment due to HIV progression and its stigma result in suicidal ideation, increased psychological distress, and a higher likelihood of hospitalization or death. In May 2024, the Supreme Court of the Philippines reaffirmed that employers cannot terminate employees who test positive for HIV. This came after a case involving a Filipino overseas worker who was unfairly dismissed due to their HIV status. Section 49(a) of RA11166 specifically prohibits employers from firing employees solely because of their actual, perceived, or suspected HIV status.

Even though it was subtly indicated in the first episode that the Department of Health is running out of drugs, the primary health concerns that affect the quality of services offered to PLHIV are not illustrated. According to P2, there are highly urbanized cities that do not have HIV hubs. P1 also pointed out that the provinces lack warehouses, leading to a lower medication supply. As evidenced by Koirala et al.'s (2017) investigation of barriers to HIV care, PLHIV in rural areas is likely to present late for HIV screening and treatment due to transportation challenges and a shortage of healthcare workers and facilities. Meanwhile, the United Nations Development Program (2011) reported that our decentralized governance system, the continuing stigma in the country, and the low coverage of HIV services in local governments indicate that we do not place a high priority on curbing HIV and AIDS. Additionally, physicians prefer to practice in urban areas rather than in isolated and disadvantaged communities. This shows that the interplay between governance, poverty, and healthcare cannot be ignored. Three participants stated that they know people who did not receive early diagnosis and treatment due to their belief that healthcare services, even in the provinces, are expensive, leaving those without insurance at a greater risk. Further, self-administered HIV test kits cost more than the daily minimum wage in the country, in addition to the fact that many people are unaware of the existence of self-test kits. Meanwhile, P9 expressed concern about the sustainability of PLHIV care in prisons since people deprived of liberty are likely to adhere to their treatment less closely.

Participants who witnessed or experienced despair at the time of diagnosis criticized the absence of mental health issues in the show. Despite HIV being manageable, P6 accentuated its *"emotional and psychological impact."* He stressed that there was no demonstration of how counseling works in the show and that HIV medications are available to everyone free of charge. P11 recalled his friends who were fun to be with but had not

accepted their status for many years. He also remembered a colleague who died by suicide after his partner abandoned him after disclosing his status. P10 was full of dreams growing up until he was diagnosed at 18. Because of prejudice, he became cautious of his actions, stating, *"You have nothing to worry about as a child, but having HIV is a different story because it robs you of your freedom to express yourself"*.

Board et al. (2021) assert that contaminated needles for substance abuse increase the risk of HIV contagion. Surprisingly, none of the participants have noted that *Batang Poz* does not adequately represent the vulnerability of people who inject drugs (PWID) and people who use drugs (PWUD). Gangcuangco and Eustaquio (2023) uncovered that PWID accounts for approximately 1% of newly confirmed cases in recent years, and its last biobehavioral surveillance data was collected in 2015, one year before former President Rodrigo Duterte took office. The fear of legal repercussions from Duterte's bloody campaign against drugs during his term may be attributed to the underreporting of PWID positive with HIV, especially since the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002 (Republic Act 9165) states that unwarranted possession of drug paraphernalia constitutes *prima facie* evidence of self-administration. According to De Jesus et al. (2013), RA9165 prevents harm reduction initiatives, including the Needle and Syringe Program (NSP), which provides sterile needles and syringes to PWID so that bloodborne viruses such as HIV and Hepatitis B and C are prevented from spreading.

Furthermore, the participants hoped that the media, with its resources and creative skills, would compensate for what educational and religious institutions cannot discuss due to their conservative stances. P1 criticized the education system, asserting that *"Many youth contract HIV because schools do not provide a comprehensive discussion of sexually transmitted infections in reproductive health lessons."* The University of the Philippines Population Institute (2022) reports that the percentage of Filipino youths aware of HIV and AIDS has reached its lowest point since 1994, when 95 percent of young Filipinos between the ages of 15 and 24 heard about the medical condition, compared to 76 percent in 2021. This is concerning, particularly since RA11166 includes HIV education in Section 14, which addresses the right to health and access to information.

Jacques Derrida's approach to deconstruction does not only dissect a media text to see what is in it but also what is missing from it (Wharton, 2014). By limiting the characters to minors, *Batang Poz* did not depict many socioeconomic and sociopolitical struggles experienced by adult PLHIV.

c. Sexualizing HIV and AIDS Perpetuates Moral Condemnation

In P9's view, the show depicts HIV as a consequence of promiscuity, so he emphasized that *"HIV can only spread if you are not responsible for your sexual behavior."* He also emphasized that there are faithful partners who contract HIV from their cheating spouses or partners. He also mentioned that not all alter accounts use X (formerly Twitter) or other social networking sites for casual sex, as indirectly suggested in the show, as some seek treatment and advocacy. These findings reflect that presenting HIV-related fallacies without dispelling them does not constitute advocacy.

Meanwhile, P11, who has experience in filmmaking, believes that *"over censorship is unnecessary"* in portraying sexual scenes. Although he advised the reduction of obscenity to keep the content appropriate for minors and clarified that *"Sex doesn't represent who we are."* P5 explained that there are symbolic ways to depict sex to provide impact and context,

while P12 pondered, *"Do we want to feel the characters' sexual urge or their desire for belongingness?"*

Interestingly, P5 encourages parents and religious groups to watch the show to gain a deeper understanding of this complex issue and be able to *"enlighten and guide the youth, rather than controlling them."* It appears, however, that this is wishful thinking since the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has denounced legislation and education campaigns that promote safer sexual practices, especially the use of condoms and other contraceptives, associating them with immorality and the spread of HIV.

Accordingly, overt sex scenes depicting MSM as sexual objects only add to abhorrence and denunciation, mostly from people with religious convictions. Warner (1981) argued that while sexual exploration is an integral part of sexual adjustment, it should not be weaponized against homosexuals.

d. Appeal to Fear Can be Fallacious

Prysthon (2016) emphasized the role of visual and oral codes in reflecting connotative and illocutive meanings, whereas Tolentino (2007, cited in Ancheta, 2016) noted that symbols codify meaning. The prominent symbol in *Batang Poz* is the image of a virus that resembles a monster. This appears before a character is diagnosed with HIV. Participants feel that this is misguided by saying these:

P3: It's like the virus is lurking around, and HIV is a death sentence.

P9: It makes HIV look symptomatic. The only way to know your status is to get tested.

As indicated by these statements, there needs to be more proactive engagement. O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009) found that while horrifying representations promote awareness of social crises, they also cultivate a sense of defenselessness. Additionally, Simpson (2017) suggested that using menacing appeals to motivate people may be psychologically or ethically questionable when the appeals are not based on evidence or rationality.

3. Negotiated Reading

The audience with a negotiated position acknowledges some dominant messages in general terms but modifies and resists specific messages as necessary (Dixon, 2019; Procter, 1994). Some scholars call negotiated reading a compromise or reconciling position.

a. Life After Diagnosis

The U=U campaign (Undetectable=Untransmittable) started in 2016 after it was scientifically proven that PLHIV, who achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load by religiously taking antiretroviral therapy, could not sexually transmit the virus through penetrative sex (Carry, 2024).

The participants reiterated that U-U is a *"symbol of hope,"* which is why they were surprised that it was not discussed in the show. P1 commented that *"PLHIV who maintain an undetectable status can have children without fear of transmitting the virus to them,"* while P11 said, *"The notion that PLHIV can no longer be loved or be sexually active will be broken."* It was with such enthusiasm that P8 exclaimed, *"We are no longer confined to the darkness*

of our diagnosis – we can still achieve our goals.” It was made possible through antiretroviral therapy (ART), a treatment regimen that reduces PLHIV's viral load until it becomes undetectable. Scarcelli et al. (2021) unequivocally support the notion that the U=U campaign has immense potential in reducing HIV stigma and has emerged as a game changer for disease prevention.

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is a medication taken by individuals who are not HIV-positive and are sexually active to reduce their risk of contracting HIV from sex or drug injection. The healthcare provider may also prescribe HIV post-exposure prophylaxis (HIV PEP) within three days after a possible HIV exposure to prevent transmission of the virus. However, this medicine should not be taken regularly and should only be used in emergencies and high-risk situations (HIV.gov, 2024). Meanwhile, doxycycline or DoxyPEP is an antibiotic that helps prevent sexually transmitted infections, such as chlamydia and syphilis, after a condomless sexual encounter (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). In January 2025, United States President Donald Trump ordered the freeze of programs funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which affected non-governmental organizations involved in HIV and AIDS awareness, prevention, and treatment. A Supreme Court decision overturned this action in March 2025 and ordered the unfreezing of foreign assistance funds. In the Philippines, several sexual health advocacy groups have reported that their services for HIV and AIDS, including information campaigns and free self-testing kits and PrEP, are significantly affected by the US government's freeze order. Some organizations have even halted their operations entirely. These groups urge the Philippine government to enhance its HIV and AIDS mitigation efforts (Ferrerias, 2025).

While some participants commended the show for portraying PLHIV as physically healthy, others criticized it for omitting to highlight major clinical breakthroughs that may reduce the stigma associated with HIV. This was given the benefit of the doubt by P9, who explained, *"Maybe it's because some people believe that these medical advancements will lead to promiscuity, increasing the risk of HIV."* In an older study by Lakdawalla et al. (2006), it was found that improved HIV treatments increase the sexual activity of PLHIV, contributing to the growth of HIV cases in the United States. But according to Ramchandani and Golden (2019), the increase in HIV may be attributed to the increase in population levels, the availability of digital platforms for casual sex, and the decline in condom usage. These findings imply that laying down the information to the public is necessary while making them understand that they must utilize the knowledge and act responsibly.

b. Diverse and Inclusive Representation

Several key groups of young people, including MSM, transgender individuals, people who inject drugs, sex workers, and trafficked women and girls, are particularly vulnerable to HIV and AIDS due to their high-risk behaviors or living conditions (Bekker & Hosek, 2015; Gangcuangco & Eustaquio, 2023).

Although Hazel contracted HIV from Gab, her story was not given the attention it deserved in the show. P1, P5, and P13 are transwomen who have encountered women forced to perform sex work due to poverty. Therefore, they are dissatisfied with the lack of representation of women in the series. As P1 stated, *"It does not educate people about women's struggles and rights"*. As Mahatir (1997) demonstrated a long time ago, women are more susceptible to HIV during penile penetration due to the increased exposure of their mucous membranes.

The cast and director of *Batang Poz* were interviewed on a special episode, revealing that interviews inspired the show with actual PLHIV stories. P4 believes interviewing PLHIV can only provide limited information, which is insufficient to create a story about them. Meanwhile, P13 believes that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) actors should portray LGBTQI characters to bring authenticity and allow them to take up space.

Meanwhile, Hart (2002) posited that films portraying gays as spreaders of HIV and AIDS reinforce the idea among non-gay viewers that they are safe from HIV and AIDS regardless of their risky sexual behaviors. These findings stress the importance of avoiding stereotyping in HIV and AIDS advocacy programs. It is the media industry's responsibility to ensure that their advocacy efforts are inclusive, encompassing all HIV-vulnerable populations, such as people with disabilities, migrant workers, individuals in enclosed spaces, commercial sex workers, and women who can acquire HIV prior to conception and transmit the virus to their children. Even straight men should be included to prevent limited and skewed HIV and AIDS representation. Moreover, the researcher observed the lack of representation of intersex individuals, not only in *Batang Poz* but also in many HIV-related films, documentaries, and drama series.

c. Hopeful Endings

The participants also felt the weight of their struggle at the conclusion of the series when graphics resembling virus-like images followed the protagonists' car with ominous music. According to P9, the ending resembles death or suicide, while P5's interpretation is that "*HIV has no happy ending.*" For P6, moving forward after a death can be difficult, especially for those who are left behind. Other participants voiced out that *Batang Poz* should have ended positively, although they understand that cliffhangers leave audiences with a lasting impression and curiosity about the issue. With these sentiments from PLHIV, sad endings appear to trigger negative feelings about themselves. A similar finding was found in Hart (2014), demonstrating that media constructs a reality among viewers that MSM's death in repressive HIV and AIDS tropes suggests that transgression means a terrible fate.

4. The Paradox of Batang Poz

In Louis Althusser's perspective, ideology emerges from the misrecognition of one's identity, shaped by various practices and beliefs. Meanwhile, Barthes theorized that ideologies, also known as myths, serve as connotations for media texts. Essentially, people are drawn to ideologies by being called or interpellated (Althusser, 1971, cited in Wharton, 2014).

It was through providing agency to PLHIV that contextual realities on HIV and AIDS discourse emerged, thereby arousing epistemic meanings that stimulated several ideologies. As a result, S-T-I-G-M-A was given a symbolic meaning in this study, demonstrating that *Batang Poz* falls short in educating viewers, as its portrayal of PLHIV has not changed significantly despite advances in medical science and progressive advocacy regarding HIV and AIDS in recent decades.

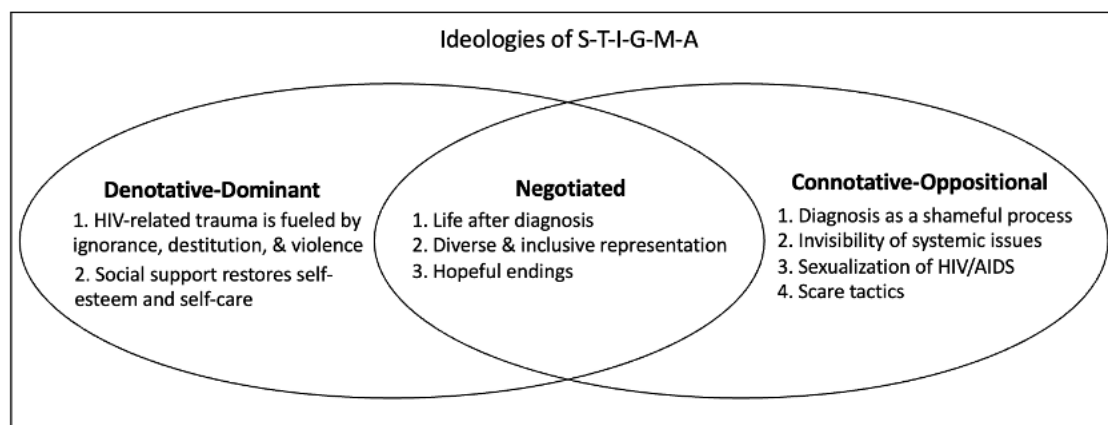


Figure 1: Ideologies in *Batang Poz*

a. [S]exual Activities Among MSM as the Sole Driver of HIV and AIDS

When sexual activities and MSM are portrayed as the sole source of HIV transmission, internalized homophobia and denialism of facts are perpetuated, which are the true social cancers tearing our nation apart. Several sex scenes are depicted in *Batang Poz*, implying that HIV and AIDS may only be acquired through sexual contact. These sex scenes were also presented in a vulgar, rather than creative, manner. Since the intended audience for this online show is adolescents, it is not appropriate for them to view this material without appropriate guidance. Furthermore, attaching perversion to the MSM and objectifying them stigmatizes an already marginalized sector by implying that queer people should be monitored rather than the oppressive behaviors toward them. While explicit sex scenes between Enzo and a couple diagnosed with HIV were shown, his immunity to HIV was not explained further, leading to confusion for viewers regarding unprotected penetrative sex with PLHIV. Meanwhile, focusing on only young MSM's lust for the flesh resurrects the criticized HIV and AIDS trope depicting it as a gay plague, this time repackaged as a demonization of the "alter world." While people view this online community in an ignominious light, a number of initiatives are formed through it, extending aid and practical information to fellow PLHIV (see Odlum et al., 2018; Malik et al., 2021; Gamayo et al., 2024).

b. [T]esting for HIV as Castration of Dignity

The first step in HIV prevention and treatment is HIV screening (Sison et al., 2022), which is why *Batang Poz* concludes each episode with a reminder saying, "Get tested." However, it portrays all HIV diagnoses negatively, implying that testing positive for HIV and AIDS requires hiding back in the closet. Either they will be ostracized by strangers or by their loved ones for getting positive, or they will suffer the potential consequences of refusing to get checked and treated. All they need to do is choose which trap to jump into. Biana and Joaquin (2020) narrated that fear tactics, based on Kantian philosophy, are morally inappropriate when they compromise people's moral and legal rights. This also discourages people from getting tested, thereby putting themselves and those with whom they have sex at risk. Bekker et al. (2023) found that newly exposed individuals are the most infectious because of their high viral load. Those who refuse treatment or are unaware of their status may spread HIV. Furthermore, counseling and support services after diagnosis are crucial for individuals to understand their

health and diagnosis, cope emotionally, know their rights, and manage their lifestyle, which were not shown in *Batang Poz*.

c. [I]mmortalization of Oppressive LGBTQI Hierarchy

The LGBTQI community's rights to equality are compromised when they are pitted against one another to gain social tolerance and recognition. It is subtle but evident in the restrictive portrayals of the main characters, with the impoverished gay serving as comic relief and the weakest link. While Chuchay steals and trades sex for money, the bisexual and queer characters attend school and are all economically stable, maintaining a less degraded reputation. Edwards (2020) argues that this type of portrayal may cause young viewers who are uncertain of their sexuality to model themselves after characters without realizing that they are not represented objectively and without stereotypes. Meanwhile, the neglect of lesbians and intersex, as well as transgender people, who are at higher risk than the general population, increases their marginalization. The patriarchal society orchestrates this immortalization of unjust othering as they hold power in defining and defying social norms. *Batang Poz* was not only a man's brainchild but was also written and directed by men.

d. [G]lorification of Tolerance Over Acceptance, Inclusion, and Awareness

The paternal or familial relationships in *Batang Poz* are contingent on certain situations that favor non-positive characters. Chuchay's father felt disappointed when Chuchay got diagnosed, worrying about how the child could still provide for their family. Enzo, on the other hand, only got better treatment from his family when he revealed he was not positive with HIV. Parental tips on navigating and managing relationships, as well as discussing sexuality with their children, should be emphasized in PLHIV advocacy shows, which is why not depicting the discomfort of youth buying condoms remains an unaddressed issue. According to Human Rights Watch (2016), the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012 (RA20354) prohibits minors from purchasing condoms without parental consent. Therefore, young individuals must present identification cards in pharmacies and convenience stores. In terms of romantic relationships, the series only showed the concept of a serodifferent couple (one is PLHIV) and an HIV-concordant couple (both are PLHIV) without providing information on how to protect themselves and their relationships. While the advocacy show packages itself as an instrument in understanding PLHIV, the fact that it denies people knowledge of vital information makes the show nothing but lip service.

e. [M]agnification of Shallow Issues

Mirroring cursory HIV and AIDS-related issues eclipses severe mental health challenges, which kill what remains alive in PLHIV's humanity. Dixon (2019) revealed that ideological effects on audiences include simplifying ideas to the point where the media already de-intellectualize and depoliticize messages. Consequently, the audience is left with repetitive messages that deprive them of seeing society's severe infections. Additionally, there was a greater emphasis on the stigma triggered by others than the stigma that was self-imposed, which is more difficult, especially for the newly diagnosed. Baselga (2021) says that internalized stigma results from a person's acceptance of negative societal beliefs associated with a stigmatized condition, propagated by cultural devices such as offensive portrayals. Since the root cause of many struggles faced by PLHIV and those who advocate for them is concealed in the series, vital aspects of their lived experiences remain untold. It also failed to foreground the biomedical breakthroughs that will allow PLHIV to manage their disease, start a family, and

live a healthy life without fear of transmitting the virus to family members and loved ones. Ren and Lei (2020) reported that contrary to the negative depictions of PLHIV, they can have long and productive lives when given the appropriate treatment. Meanwhile, Osborne et al. (2020) demonstrated that antiretroviral medications are effective at attenuating HIV, increasing the life expectancy of PLHIV, and decreasing their vulnerability to opportunistic infections.

f. [A]dvocacy Overpowered by Commercialization

Advocacy born of commercialization incites spectacles out of PLHIV's disadvantaged conditions to gain marketability, thus obliterating the need for changing the narrative from "dying with HIV" to "living with HIV." This is a symptom of Filipinos' hegemonic struggle due to our excessive familiarity and preference for American values and practices guided by capitalist principles (Espiritu, 2011). Having said this, one might ask, "Did the show exploit the stories of PLHIV for profit?"

It is important to note that while there are few studies on HIV advocacy in the media, several studies point out that effective media representation provides a balanced view of the positives and negatives that PLHIV experience. In Soffer's (2021) view, biomedicine and the mass media jointly framed HIV and AIDS as mere biological and individual issues. Consequently, he proposes a change in HIV and AIDS rhetoric--to expose its complex issues of power and inequality. Meanwhile, according to Bollas (2022), empathic representations of PLHIV negate the us-versus-them binary, thereby illustrating that those who contribute to the ostracization of PLHIV become the "others."

CONCLUSION

According to Zerebecki et al. (2021), entertainment media could be detrimental by promoting echo chambers that reinforce existing negative attitudes towards sexual and ethnic minorities. Therefore, minorities should be represented in a manner that depicts friendly interaction with their community. However, *Batang Poz* subtly packages HIV and AIDS as persecution for queerness and compulsive sexual behaviors, which is at odds with the Philippine National AIDS Council's Human Rights Roadmap. Apart from sexualizing HIV and AIDS and objectifying its characters, the show suggests hierarchy among MSM characters by caricaturing and disenfranchising the most effeminate. Although the show attempted to present HIV and AIDS as a true equalizer by portraying that HIV can infect people from low and high socio-economic groups, the queer and gay characters served as sacrificial lambs who were devoured by moral condemnation.

According to a previous study by Javaid (2017), gay men are near the bottom of the gender stratum since they are viewed as deviants and abnormal for challenging gender expectations. Meanwhile, the lone female PLHIV in the story was portrayed as a secondary character, suggesting that women's struggles with HIV are considered less significant. Moreover, there was no mention of the milestones in HIV treatment that could reduce the stigma attached to PLHIV. Instead, the series focused on superficial issues already known to people and disengaged from PLHIV's more complex struggles. Meanwhile, the depressing and horrifying depictions of HIV testing do not encourage people to get tested. Finally, the show did not focus on depictions of PLHIV rights and public health but rather aligned its story with queer bating.

This study concludes that depictions of HIV in *Batang Poz* reflect remnants from a dark period when PLHIV were socially rejected, as the show depicted HIV and AIDS as fatal and insurmountable infections, rather than as manageable chronic conditions. The researcher, therefore, contends that even HIV and AIDS advocacy shows like *Batang Poz* struggle to understand and depict PLHIV objectively. It is imperative to note that advocacy shows should be inclusive and accessible to everyone throughout the year, and they should provide substantive information to the newly diagnosed and those populations vulnerable to HIV or dealing with PLHIV. This study addresses the research gap Scarcelli et al. (2021) identified, emphasizing the urgent need to explore fiction films comprehensively. They reiterated that films play a crucial role in understanding the intersections of discrimination, identity, and health, and they are vital for uncovering the sociopolitical factors that shape health identities.

BIODATA

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