

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of The Study

Nowadays, what seems to be perceived as 'normal' in terms of relationship is between a man and a woman, similar to how people see men being masculine and women being feminine as what is 'natural' – these are how everyone should be, as ordained by the law of nature or similar forms of idea adhered to by most of the population. This perceived normativity permeates a lot of today's society and, consequently, becomes internalized in a lot of people's heads, elevating it to a form of concept that does not need to be questioned. This is what is defined as 'heteronormativity'. According to Oswald et al., 2005, as cited in Few-Demo et al., (2016), heteronormativity is an ideology which promotes heterosexuality as the ideal form of sexuality as well as family traditionalism. This causes people to believe that men liking women is the 'correct' form sexuality, and it entails traditional gender roles as well. Blackstone (2004) wrote that gender roles are the expectations placed upon people in accordance to their society's belief in regards to gender and sex. Since heteronormativity is hailed as the norm in many modern day societies, men are expected to be people who are the breadwinner; a dominant, strong person. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be people who are nurturing and caring as well as submissive to men's demands as they are the ones who steer the wheel in a relationship. With heteronormativity being seen as the norm of society, queer men are seen as deviants that need to be corrected. This is because, according to Van der

Toorn (2020), heteronormative folks perceive any difference in social conformity with prejudice as well as intolerance. This leads to the existence of sexual prejudice.

According to Herek (2000), sexual prejudice is the name given to preconceived notions or stereotypes about certain groups of people based on their sexuality. In the context of heteronormative people seeing queer men, they see them as deviants who threaten the status quo. There is no tolerance against queer men and there are certainly stereotypes to reinforce this prejudice. One of those is that queer men are seen as inherently effeminate due to the fact that most heterosexual men compare them to heterosexual women in which case both are similar in that they both like men (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009). This leads to the prejudice and, sometimes, even violence against queer men. Not only are they seen as a deviant already due to the fact that they are men who do not like women, but they also bear the burden of being stereotyped as effeminate. Certainly, a man who likes another man is, at the very least, an odd presence in a heteronormative society, and due to this non-conformity, they are treated with prejudice and discrimination no matter if they are actually effeminate or not. This prejudice extends to not only the treatment of queer men in general, but also their portrayal in the media. Queer men are often portrayed as joke characters with one effeminate queer man talking and behaving in an exaggerated manner that will make the audience laugh, simply objects that garner derisions (Hart, 2000). This is harmful as representation is imperative for especially marginalized groups of people, including young queer men who are struggling due to

their sexuality and inability to understand how to live with it. Sexual prejudice which stereotypes queer men as effeminate perpetuates itself in a constant feedback loop and its presence in media only accentuates the discrimination and ridicule queer men face. However, gender performance seems to imply that sexual prejudice is simply a subjective perspective stemming from heteronormativity.

Butler (1990) wrote that gender is a 'performance'. It means that gender is a form of concept that is only realized through acting it out; gender cannot exist by itself and its existence hinges on whether a person is capable of performing certain acts seen as representing a gender. These acts range from how people think, dress, behave, to what occupation or role someone does in their society. For example, in a traditional gender roles setting, one identifies as a man by demonstrating masculine traits such as being aggressive, dominant, and stern, as well as avoiding colors that are associated with femininity in their clothing (e.g. pink). Similar thing applies to those who identify as women. As explained earlier, however, gender is a social construct, and, as a consequence, the acts seen as representatives of a certain gender also relies on social convention at large. This is proven by the fact that there are numerous cultures all around the world and quite a number of them have different interpretations of what gender is and the things it entails compared to the today's well-known gender binary. Even 'traditional gender roles' itself is as dynamic as the culture it exists in. Indeed, while this thesis uses the western context of traditional gender roles where men display 'rough masculinity' and women show 'soft

femininity', the term itself may change its meaning altogether in a different context, such as the popular and widely accepted soft masculinity in South Korea (Ainslie, 2017), consequently changing what is acceptable and normal for South Korean men. The man/woman gender binary, too, is prevalent and seen as the norm in many places, but gender identities beyond these two still exist in some parts of the world. One prominent example of this is the five genders in the Bugis culture in Indonesia. According to Suliyati (2018), they are: a.) *Oroane*, the equivalent to cis and heterosexual man, b.) *Makkunrai*, the equivalent to cis and heterosexual woman, c.) *Calalai*, a female-born person who appears and behaves like a cis man, d.) *Calabai*, a male-born person who appears and behaves like a cis woman, and e.) *Bissu*, an identity that is seen as representing the state of being genderless; neither man nor woman. This set of gender identities defy the ordinary man/woman gender binary enforced in most parts of the world due to difference in culture. Bugis people see gender in a different light and *Bissu* is seen as a form of culmination from the previously mentioned four genders. Still true to the fact that gender is a performance, the *Calalai* and *Calabai* also perform their gender identities through acts that represent their identities as *Calalai* or *Calabai*, such as through behaviors and clothes. The *Bissu* also distinct themselves through clothes that do not represent man or woman. The existence of these different gender conceptions provides evidence to the fact that gender is a social construct; it is tied directly to the culture surrounding it and so does any expectations in regards to it. That sexual prejudice assumes the fleeting existence of humanity has to follow certain societal norms that are based on

'nature' or 'how things should be' are already contradictory and this explanation has demonstrated how sexual prejudice brings about harm in its demand for total adherence.

Alongside gender performance, queer representation in the 21st century has been getting more prevalent as well. Staples (2019) wrote how songs and movies progressively adds queer people to the forefront center of their display and the GLAAD report of 2019-2020 corroborates this claim. As such, more and more representations of queer men which break out of the effeminate stereotype has been more common. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) is an example of the first kind of resistance to sexual prejudice as it is a movie which portrays traditionally masculine men – married to women, even – having a bittersweet homosexual affair in a highly homophobic time of the 90's in the United States, showing not only a representation that does not demean queer men, but also a realistic and hurtful one (Price, 2018). Another piece of media which befits the description of the second kind of resistance is *RuPaul's Drag Race* which won two Emmy's awards just last year in 2021 and, according to Brennan and Gudelunas (2017), the harbinger of the golden age of drag. Indeed, drag culture is associated with the queer community due to the fact that those who perform it are often queer people who wear exaggerated versions of gender opposite to theirs and behave as if they were the opposite gender as well, usually to subvert expectations that sex and gender are congruent (Litwiller, 2020). In the context of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the performers are mostly Assigned-Male-at-Birth

(AMAB) people who dress like women, commonly referred to as 'queens'. The fact that RuPaul's Drag Race has garnered popularity to the point that it won Emmy awards has proven that queer men's radical acceptance of gender performance, especially of being effeminate, as a form of resistance against sexual prejudice still has a long way to go and that it is a valid form of demonstrating queer men's gender performance fluidity. In an almost similar manner, the objects discussed in this research, those are *Heartthrob* and *Future Friends* music video, challenge the stereotype brought about by sexual prejudice in the media by showing the fluidity of queer men's gender performance, but on a rather larger spectrum than RuPaul's Drag Race's exclusively effeminate show.

Even so, it is still a long way for queer representation to leave a lasting effect on the world. Though queer representation in the media have been steadily increasing, the discrimination surrounding queer people has not entirely dissipated. In 2017 alone, the year when these two music video were published, the then-president Donald Trump banned transgender people from serving in the military (Lybrand, 2019). This discrimination is also seen throughout the daily social lives in the U.S. as proven by the 2017 National Crime Victimization Survey which shows that queer people are almost 4 times more likely to be victims of violent crimes (Flores et al., 2020). Two years after that, Trump also expressed his opposition to the Equal Opportunity Act, a bill which would guarantee protection and basic civil rights for the queer population of the United States (Fitzsimons, 2019). According to Moreau

(2020), in the U.S. alone there was an increase in LGBTQ+ hate groups in 2020, notably also the year where Donald Trump who infamously banned transgender people from enlisting in the military was still a president. Not only that, even in 2022 there are still many anti-queer rhetoric and legislation brought about by some parts of the U.S. government, most notably the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* which allows women to legally have abortions. While this decision does not directly threaten queer people, some fear that this event signals the overturning of the legality of same-sex marriage in the United States (Garver, 2022). This decision also threatens trans men if their uterus is still working as, if they somehow get pregnant, then they will be forced to bear the children (Bior, 2022). Indeed, there has been remarkable progress in queer acceptance in the United States, but sexual prejudice still exists in those of heteronormative mindset. That is why, in the words of Davis & Needham (2009) as cited in Dhaenens & Van Bauwel (2012), "all depictions of sexual minorities in the mass media require scrutiny and interrogation." Though this statement does sound like a hyperbole, it is not inaccurate to the notion of being critical to queer representation in the media and whether said representation helps in the fight against anti-queer ideas permeating the society. Following this logic, the two music video *Heartthrob* and *Future Friends* by Superfruit were chosen as the objects of this research.

Scott Hoying and Mitch Grassi first created Superfruit as simply a vlogging channel for two male queer friends before they eventually released songs of their

own. Some of their songs unabashedly show queer relationships, like *GUY.exe* that portrays a man yearning for a perfect man to date and *Deny U* which depicts two men after they break up from their previous romantic relationship. One other song titled *Worth It (Perfect)* shows a boy dancing around in a pink dress with a girl in a suit. These subversive clothing choice began with Mitch wearing said pink dress and Scott wearing the suit in their Instagram photo. This also applies to both *Future Friends* and *Heartthrob*. *Future Friends* is a music video which talks about the breaking of a romantic relationship between two queer men and how they may become possible future friends, while *Heartthrob* is a playful song with a 90's teen girls yearning for popular male celebrities at the time. In *Heartthrob* especially, Scott and Mitch act like they are teen girls in that era: having their nails painted with bright-colored nail polish, possessing furniture geared towards female consumers, going through a skincare routine which was seen as forbidden to be done by men at times, and of course desiring those famous men as a part of their queerness. In contrast, they act in a hyper masculine way in their music video *Heartthrob* since its theme is about wrestling. Even though the fighting scene was acted out by professional wrestlers wearing their costume, other scenes are still done by Scott and Mitch themselves. This presentation is of huge difference when compared to the *Heartthrob* music video, and as such calls into question the stereotype prescribed to queer men by sexual prejudice. Both songs are also of the pop genre, an incredibly popular genre to the point that it is often commercialized due to how songs in this genre are made to appeal to a broad audience with its focus on rhythm and melody as well as the

popular themes of this genre being about love, relationships, and feelings (James, 2021). Not only that, but as of the time of this writing, both music video have garnered at least 1.5 million views each on YouTube and Superfruit themselves have 2.1 million monthly listeners on Spotify, both of which are largely popular video and song streaming platforms (Zhang et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2021), making the songs and the artists incredibly popular and influential, thus a worthy site of scrutiny.

This line of reasoning, then, provides a ground upon which this study can be conducted. Heteronormativity, which permeates most societies today, entails traditional gender roles and it harms queer men in their day-to-day life. However, the notion of gender performativity posits that, just like everybody else, queer men are all subject to gender performance and their gender expression is affected not by their sexuality but their understanding of gender itself. Thus, queer men are able portray not only effeminacy, but also masculinity, demonstrating a fluidity of gender performance. This focus on queer men's fluid gender performance fills the gap which the previous studies did not consider. Continuing from the explanation of this study's background, this research will explain in-depth the various technical means by which this study is done (such as the theoretical framework, methods, review of related studies, scopes and limitations, etc.) before presenting the data extracted from the objects of research and its interpretation. Finally, this study will conclude its findings in one final argument.

1.2. Statement of The Problem

Due to the focus of this study being that of queer men's fluid gender performance, the questions being asked are of concern to this focus:

- How do the music video *Future Friends* and *Heartthrob* by Superfruit portray the fluidity of queer men's gender performance?

1.3. Objective of The Study

From the statement of the problems above, the objectives of the study are as follows:

- To analyze the gender performativity represented in the music video *Future Friends* and *Heartthrob* by Superfruit.

1.4. Significance of The Study

It is expected that, from this study, a new approach can be taken in inspecting sexual prejudice and stereotypes which often plague queer minorities by examining the whole picture to see complete facts. The writer also wishes that this study could be of use for those who take interest in studying sexual discrimination, in particular sexual prejudice, in music video. Especially so for undergraduate students of Universitas Airlangga who have undertaken cultural studies for their minor and wish to learn more about this issue.

1.5. Scope and Limitation

The writer will select a few particular, striking scenes from each music video and compare both of them. For *Future Friends*, scenes in which queerness and traditional masculinity intertwine will be chosen, as well as other scenes which display aggressive and gender-heteronormative behaviors for another point of comparison. The fight scenes will be included along with scenes where both Scott and Mitch are seen as the fight commentators. As for *Heartthrob*, the sleepover scenes will be included as they contain many key demonstrations of effeminate behaviors together with a few scenes from the beginning of the music video. The make-up and clothes choice will be analyzed together with the behaviors from the chosen scenes. The lyrics will also be taken to give context and substantiate the result of said analysis.

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

Gender performance: "... the idea that gender is something inscribed in daily practices, learned and performed based on cultural norms of femininity and masculinity." (Figueira, 2016).

Fluidity: "As a concept, fluidity is variously construed as changing, unstable, inconsistent, and ambiguous. " (Davis, 2009).

Queer: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically."

(Sedgwick, 1994). 'Queer men' itself usually refers to cis-man individuals who self-identify as gay, bisexual, or queer (Prescott et al., 2018; Levitt et al., 2017), but this cisgender identity does not limit their experience of gender as Levitt et al. (2017) has demonstrated that some of them experience gender fluidity when they perform drag, thus the term 'queer men' here will be used and it will hereby refer to “non-heterosexual individuals whose primary gender identity is cis-man but are not fully tethered to said identity.”

Sexual prejudice: “Negative attitudes toward an individual because of her or his sexual orientation.” (Herek, 2000).

Heteronormativity: “An ideology that promotes gender conventionality, heterosexuality, and family traditionalism as the correct way for people to be” (Oswald et al., 2005, as cited in Few-Demo et al., 2016)