



Defining the *halata*: The social construction of the “obvious gay” in the Filipino Facebook group *Samahan ng mga Halata*

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Abstract

Othering within the queer dating scene has become prevalent in recent years (Labor, et al., 2023), encapsulated by the phrase “pass sa halata,” which indicates one’s rejection of someone who is “obviously” gay. Yet the very definition of *halata* [obviously gay], and by extension *kabaklaan* [gayness], within the Philippine context is ever-changing. Through a symbolic interactionist lens, this study elucidates how the concept of the *halata* is being conceived and (re)defined in the Facebook group *Samahan ng mga Halata* [Association of the Obvious Gays], an online community which features gender-based content. From a textual analysis of 257 photos and videos posted from January to June 2024, the study’s results outline the *halata*’s core characteristics. The findings also indicate that while the age-old gay stereotypes of flamboyant behavior and preference for traditional masculinity persist, these become enmeshed with new and emerging definitions of queerness in the digital age, including tech-facilitated promiscuity and political awareness, thereby producing a novel image of gayness that is suspended between past and present notions of *kabaklaan* and is thus characterized by contradictory behavior.

Keywords: halata, bakla, LGBTQIA, Facebook groups, symbolic interactionism, SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

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Introduction

On February 27, Tiktok user charlesterprncp (Prinsipe, 2024) posted a video of himself responding to a comment that said he was attempting to deepen his voice so that he appears more manly despite him being actually “one of the gays.” Confused by the accusation, charlesterprncp clarified in his response that the voice he uses in his content is his actual voice:

What the fu-- bakit ganon ayaw niyong maniwala na boses ko 'to? Ah, ano gusto niyong sabihin ko? Yas queen skinny legend Versace boots the house down slay queen hungry mama and oop daddy work Charli xcx snatch my wig! Ganoon ba dapat, like? Ganito talaga boses ko! Wait, sorry, ganito boses ko talaga, like di ko pinipilit, like... 'yon talaga yung boses ko, promise (Prinsipe, 2024).

[What the fu—why don't you want to believe that this is my voice? What do you want me to say? Yas queen skinny legend Versace boots the house down slay queen hungry mama and oop daddy work Charli xcx snatch my wig! Is that what I should say, like? This is really my voice! Wait, sorry, this is really my voice, like I don't force it, like... this is really my voice, promise]

In this statement, he references a staple phrase often said by queer people on Twitter, and was even tweeted by American pop singer Charli XCX (Charli, 2021), asking if knowledge of such was the supposed standard for a person to be publicly known as gay or *halata* [obvious gay]. The video has since garnered 200,000 views on TikTok, bringing to the fore discussions about what it means to be gay in modern Filipino society.

This incident is but one of the many instances where the phrase “*pass sa halata*” [pass on someone obviously gay] is mentioned. This line is usually stated in dating or hookup apps for men who have sex with men (MSM) where one user turns down another due to the latter's being too outrightly effeminate—a reflection of the othering that happens within the queer dating community where preference for hegemonic and traditional displays of masculinity remain prevalent (Labor, et al., 2023).

Though gender representation in the Philippines is progressing positively, with events like yearly pride month celebrations, pride parades, and the emergence of numerous LGBTQIA+ formations that aim to champion gender-based rights, the Filipino conception of queerness, particularly the concept of the *bakla* [gay] (and by extension the *halata*), remains largely affected by patriarchal conventions well-entrenched in society. It is against this contradictory backdrop of increasing queer visibility on one hand, and persisting conservative ideology on the other, that the *bakla* is continuously reformed, reshaped, and renegotiated. Even more complex is how such a process unfolds in digital spaces like social networking sites.

One such example of this is *Samahan ng mga halata* [Association of the obvious gays], a public Facebook group formed on April 18, 2022. As of this writing, the group has amassed almost 250,000 members. The group was able to gain and grow its following because of its focus on gender-based content, much of which pokes fun at the stereotypical ways the *halata* behaves and is treated in everyday life. As in many Facebook pages, the members of the group use the platform to share and exchange information and form a community of understanding with one another based on their common experiences and collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006; Mansour, 2020). Providing reactions and commenting are other forms of interaction that enable the group to thrive and stay active, with some posts garnering as high as 50,000 reactions.

The unique quality of the Facebook group as a community where gender, particularly the *halata*, is frequently discussed, stereotyped, caricatured, and conceived of falls squarely in line with symbolic interactionism's premise where meaning is created using language, and is then used as a guidepost in social interaction (Carter & Fuller, 2015). *Samahan ng mga Halata* and the way its members discuss and depict the *halata* warrants inquiry as it provides a glimpse into how gender is continually redefined and reconstructed in online spaces, particularly in the Philippine setting where the populace is frenzied with social media use and still very far in terms of achieving equal rights for all genders (Dela Peña, 2023; Lalu, 2024).

The *bakla* in a state of flux

Gender studies anthropologist Martin Manalansan (2015, p.1) posits that as far as the Philippines is concerned, the *bakla* is not accepted, but "tolerated at best." *Bakla*, as a term, is a contraction of *babae* [woman]

and *lalaki* [man], and refers to a homosexual or to homosexuality as a whole (*kabaklaan*) [gayness] (Manalansan, 2015). *Bakla* is also related to other words used to characterize queerness among Filipino men such as *binabae* [like a woman], or *pusong-babae* [having the heart of a woman]. All of these terms are often used in a pejorative fashion, as they connote unmanliness or weakness (Manalansan, 2015; Tan, 1995).

Under the umbrella term of *bakla*, Michael Tan (1995) enumerates three different subgroups: call boys, *parloristas* [parlor workers], and gays. It is the latter two that are of interest here, primarily since their demonstration of homosexual behavior is not a result of economic insecurity like the call boys. Moreover, they fit aptly into the *halata*/not-*halata* dichotomy evident in the contemporary dating scene. The *parlorista* is often how gayness is perceived in the Filipino mainstream, with the mere mention of the word *bakla* enough to conjure images of flamboyant, cross-dressing, effeminate men working in beauty salons. J. Neil Garcia (2009) describes this stereotypical depiction of gayness thus:

Gays speak funnily, swish their hips, and wave their broken wrists as though by doing so they are already movie stars. They claim to know one another with the help of their noses, which are especially keen in ferreting out “fishy uteruses” (*malalansang matris*) from up to five miles away. They need this skill because they say one just cannot trust appearances these days: some macho men are actually nelly little girls once the lights go out. They also have their “haunts,” or places in which they gather—in loud and flaming clusters inside malls, on campuses, and in the beauty parlors which are their privileged locales because they invariably work there. Randy and misguided boys go to these parlors a lot, for free haircuts, ready cash, and something unspeakable (p. 1).

The second group, the gays, is distinct from the *parlorista* in terms of socioeconomic affordances, as this faction is primarily from the middle class. Unlike the *parloristas*, gays do not make it a point to show their femininity or flamboyance, preferring instead to lead double lives (Tan, 1995). In the workplace and the home, they may act more discreetly, choosing only to express their gender in places where

they feel it is welcome such as in gay establishments in the metro. The middle-class, often privileged social status of the gays also allows its members to become more enamored with the idea of being a global gay, mimicking the lifestyle and brand of gay people in the West (Benedicto, 2008). A case can be made here again about not preferring the *halata*, as the image of the gay person in the west is lightyears away from the *parlorista*, often including a muscular physique and acting in a straight manner (Benedicto, 2008).

Regardless of which particular subgroup a *bakla* belongs to, however, the prevalence of discrimination and homophobia in the Philippines largely constrains the freedom of expression of many in the LGBTQIA+ community. For the *bakla*, this is manifest in the need to come out of the closet or to disclose their gender to their families and friends, a process that is largely influenced by culture (Domingo & Escobido, 2024; Marquez et al., 2024). There is great variation in how Filipino families respond to coming out, but Manalansan's (2015) argument of the *bakla* being tolerated and not fully accepted finds relevance in the case of individuals who are not totally accepted or who are accepted under the condition that they do not act too effeminate – again a reflection of the preference for more discreet and straight-acting gays (Ocampo, 2014).

Apart from the anxiety brought about by disclosing their gender preferences, gay men also feel the need to counterbalance their being gay with more “positive” traits such as being academically competent or providing for their families (Ocampo, 2014; Presto, 2023). For gays who were raised with strong religious beliefs, as is the norm in a largely Catholic country, there is also the additional burden of reconciling their beliefs with their identities and lifestyle (Cornelio & Dagle, 2022). Indeed, to be a *bakla* in the Philippine setting, one must struggle to come to terms with their gender identity under multiple, oft-discriminatory constraints, from the level of the personal to the societal.

This is not to say, however, that the *bakla* is totally devoid of space to express himself, for there is progress, albeit incremental, in queer visibility in the country. The yearly celebration of pride month, as well as the emergence of LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups such as Bahaghari and UP Babaylan are significant steps in shining a spotlight on the queer community (Labor & San Pascual, 2022). There are also efforts in several LGUs to issue ordinances barring discrimination, as well as initiatives to celebrate queer couples (Abad, 2022; Mangaluz, 2023). Filipinos

have also begun to show larger acceptance of the LGBTQ community according to various surveys (Abad, 2020; Social Weather Stations, 2023; Tubeza, 2013;). Positive as these are, however, challenges remain in championing gender rights, primarily exemplified by the inability of the SOGIE bill to be passed despite its being lobbied repeatedly in Congress for over two decades (Labor & San Pascual, 2023). Despite their increased visibility in the public eye, there clearly remains much to be done in fully integrating the LGBTQIA and the *bakla*'s interests into mainstream society.

The mediatization of the *bakla*

In media content, particularly in film, the *bakla* has been a staple character since it was popularized by Dolphy in the 1950s. Known as the “Philippine king of comedy,” Dolphy successfully portrayed the *bakla* in line with many of the stereotypes surrounding the Filipino gay, namely being effeminate, woman-hearted, and low-class (Inton, 2016). Interestingly, this decades-long portrayal of the *bakla* on the silver screen lines up squarely with Tan’s (1995) and Garcia’s (2009) description of the *parlorista*. So effective and so socially cemented is this gay archetype that its enactment continues to thrive in Philippine media, whether in cinema or in TV shows (Inton, 2016).

It was only after the turn of the century that another kind of *bakla* emerged in Filipino films: the Brokeback Mountain type (Payuyo, 2012). Derived from the award-winning hit film *Brokeback Mountain* which depicted a romantic relationship between two cowboys, the term is an apt moniker for characters that display a more conventionally masculine image of the *bakla*. Unlike the flamboyant, flaming *parloristas*, Brokeback Mountain gays are “young, handsome, and straight-looking men” (Payuyo, 2012, p. 306) whose love interests are those who share the same gender expression as them. These two dominant portrayals of the gay man in film are not only interesting, but seem parallel to the *halata/not-halata* divide in the contemporary dating scene among gay men. Orville Tatcho and Ariel Barrias (2016), however, contend that these two depictions of gays in film are not enough to fully encapsulate the complexities of being a Filipino *bakla*.

With that said, the emergence of social networking platforms in contemporary times seems to be an ongoing solution to this either-or problem in gay representation, as social media brought with it many individuals and groups that sought to democratize queer visibility by producing content that has allowed for a more nuanced and humanized

view of the LGTBQIA+ community (Dzurick, 2018; Pain, 2022). Stuti Das and Reya Farber (2020), for example, found that queer content in online spaces has been used to subvert and challenge heteronormative gender standards, dismantling the notion that one's gender is the central and sole aspect of a queer individual's life.

Locally, queer Filipinos have taken to social media platforms to produce content as well. Reaction videos to Miss Universe pageants, for example, have been characterized as the “unleashing” of *kabaklaan* among Pinoy fans on YouTube (Lorenzana, 2022). Here, emotion-driven performances provide entertainment that is able to transcend gender differences, yet is still subject to harsh reception, especially from homophobic viewers (Lorenzana, 2022). On X (formerly Twitter), queer spaces have even transcended to the level of pornography in the so-called “alter” community (Cao, 2024). Though primarily done to amass fame and validation, these spaces also afford microcelebrities who produce sexual content catharsis from the “patriarchal constructs they navigate in their everyday lives” (Cao, 2024, p. 259). LGTBQIA+ personalities have likewise found a home in more contemporary social media platforms such as TikTok, where their performances of relatable, often comedic characters, such as the *baklang kanal*, are able to find support and gain them a following (Cabbug & Benitez, 2022).

Whether in social life or in media, the definition of what it means to be *bakla*, and by extension what it means to be *halata*, is continually evolving. This lends substance to the idea of mediatization, where communication technologies and communicative behavior mutually impinge on one another (Livingstone, 2009; Solis, 2020). Hence, the *bakla* use the media to define themselves while media itself simultaneously defines the *bakla*.

The *bakla* as a symbolic construct

It is within this continuous process of (re)definition that the *bakla* emerges as a symbolic construct, one whose conception and continued relevance can be analyzed from a symbolic interactionist point of view. As opposed to the tenets of essentialism which view humans as having certain innate characteristics, symbolic interactionists view gender as a product of social practice (Brickell, 2006). Though biological differences are indeed present from birth, and to a certain extent can be used to categorize people as male or female, these “hold no significance prior to social interactions.” (Brickell, 2006, p. 93). That is, biology is not what dictates gender, but culture. Extended to the concept of gayness,

this means the *bakla* is enmeshed in external social events, and is continuously affected by economic, religious, and cultural phenomena. As Plummer (2003) puts it,

[s]exuality, for humans, is not simply a free floating “desire” but is always grounded in wider material and cultural forces. There is no essential “sexuality” with a strictly biological base that is cut off from the social. From the social acts of rape to the social processes surrounding reproduction, sexuality for humans has no reality *sui generis*. Any concern with “it” must always harbor wider social issues, for human sexualities have to be socially produced (no human can ever just “do it”), socially organized, socially maintained and socially transformed. (p. 516)

This means that like the situation of the *bakla* that oscillates between acceptance and non-acceptance in Filipino society, the definition of what it means to be *bakla* is also constantly changing because of language use and social interaction. As gender is not fixed, it must be performed or done (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Salih, 2007), and it is only through this doing that the *bakla* is defined – who he is, what his actions are, whom he loves, and how he exists. In general, the way people navigate their everyday lives is largely based on gender performances. Lorber (2018), for example, argues that this is manifest in our conception of which genders are appropriate for familial roles (e.g., who should be taking care of the children), and who should be wearing certain items of clothing (e.g., blue connoting masculinity, accessories like earrings connoting femininity) (Lorber, 2018).

Beyond these simple affairs, activities and careers also become attached to certain genders, to the point that people think of entire professions and hobbies as more fitting for some genders over others. Griffin (2011) provides an example of this by retelling a story where a father and his son get into a car accident. The father dies but the boy is rushed to the hospital, only to be denied an operation by the surgeon because the boy is the surgeon’s son as well. This story usually evokes confusion among those who hear it, as they operate under the assumption that surgeons are male, thus demonstrating the gender bias inherent in the medical field (Griffin, 2011; Newman, et al., 2020).

It is through these default assumptions that stereotypes crystallize in social memory, which explains why the image of the *bakla* as flamboyant, feminine-at-heart, and transmitters of sexual illnesses (Acaba, 2018; Garcia, 2009; Manalansan, 2015) have spread like wildfire in the past. Yet symbolic interactionism also explains the turn towards acceptance of the queer community and the increasing visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community who are proud of their *kabaklaan*, thus shaking and renegotiating once more the socially cemented conceptions of the *bakla*. Social media, as an extension of public life, is likewise an active site of gender performance, and it is here that the subject of this study, the *halata*, continues to be relevant.

Methodology

This study's units of analysis are 257 photos and videos from the Facebook group *Samahan ng mga Halata* which were posted from January to June 2024. The author certifies no direct human involvement in this research project, as all the units of analysis and the Facebook group itself are public and are thus accessible to anyone. No post or image included in the units of analysis has a privacy setting which limits its audience to any particular group.

The author further declares that in no point in the research enterprise did he invite human participation of any kind, as the research goal was solely focused on the texts produced in the Facebook group. To further adhere to an ethical data gathering process, screengrabs of posts used by this article as figures have also been anonymized by blurring or cropping out the names of the accounts that originally posted them to ensure their privacy.

Even from an initial survey of the units of analysis, certain trends and patterns could already be gleaned about the defining characteristics of the *halata*, making the approach to this project inductive in nature. To organize the findings from these initial observations, a coding sheet was used, eventually birthing major themes that constitute the makings of the *halata*.

Photos and videos, which compose the bulk of the content in the group, were chosen as units of analysis as Facebook is a site that thrives on visual content such as memes. These units were scrutinized using textual analysis grounded in a symbolic interactionist framework. Textual analysis is apt for this study as it aims to unpack meanings embedded in a text, allowing for the concept of the *halata* to be surfaced

by the interpreting researcher. The importance of this process which investigates meanings is explained by Belsey (2013):

Meaning, then, subsists in the relations between people, inscribed in signifiers, sounds or images (including written shapes, and pictures, as here). It has its own materiality: meaning intervenes in the world, defining our understanding of values, requiring us to obey rules and, indeed, calling us to arms. But because it never appears in itself, as pure intelligibility, as idea, but is always inscribed in the signifier, in the sound or the image, meaning is never fixed, single or final (p. 167).

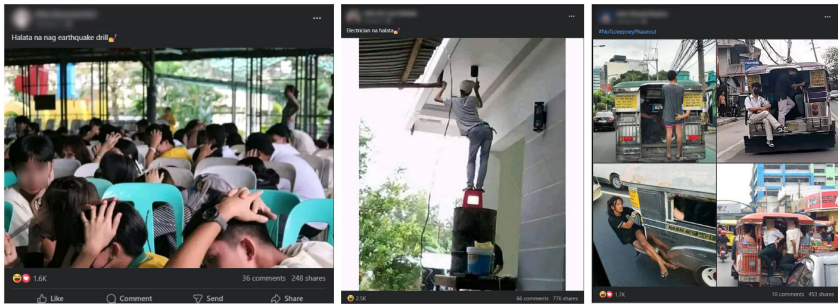
The compatibility of textual analysis with symbolic interactionism is also made apparent by the passage above, for as the *bakla* and its variation of the *halata* can be viewed through a symbolic interactionist lens as ever-changing, textual analysis becomes a tool with which this process can be dissected, in line with what this study aims to do.

The *halata*: the new, contradictory face of *kabaklaan*

In terms of who the *halata* is, an abundance of posts likens him to the all-too-familiar *parlorista* gay, an indication of this stereotype's grip on social memory. In many photos, the *halata* displays flamboyant or feminine behavior, performing gestures like the limp hand, sitting with crossed legs, donning women's apparel, and striking provocative and sexually suggestive poses. The *halata* seems to do this in whatever scenario he is depicted, including playing in an arcade, eating at home, riding at the back of a jeepney, fixing electrical wires, and even during an earthquake drill, as can be seen in Figure 1. Flamboyance and femininity emerge here as clear indicators of *halata*-ness, forming part of what Griffin (2011) calls default assumptions that someone can make based on preconceived gender biases.

Figure 1

Examples of Posts that Depict Flamboyant Behavior as a Core Characteristic of the *Halata*.



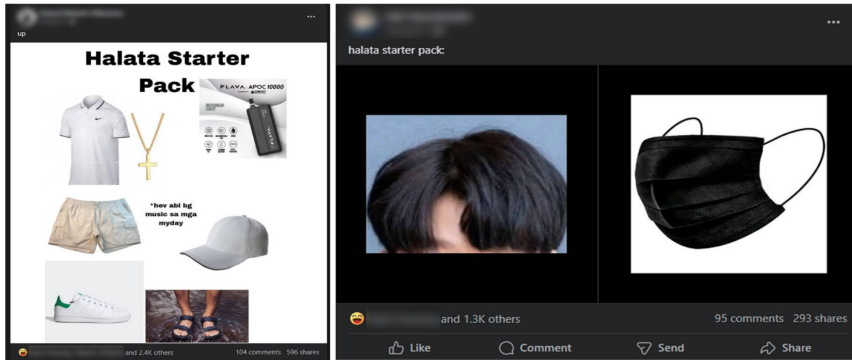
Note: Images from Bosconovitch, 2024; Rañada, 2024; Busano, 2024a.

In stark contrast to this, however, is a sharp deviation from the *parlorista* archetype as well. The changing terms of what it means to be *halata* is manifest in posts that actively counter images of femininity, with these pieces of content also amassing thousands of reactions, illustrating the degree to which members of the group agree with these claims. To be *halata*, according to these posts, means wearing polo shorts, caps, white shoes, face masks, rounded glasses, and sporting a parted hair-do, among others (see Figure 2).

The *halata* seems to be a combination of the flamboyant gay and the *Brokeback Mountain* gay archetypes originally outlined by Payuyo (2012). Whereas these two representations are usually separate in film, they are merged in social media, such that the label *halata* can be used liberally towards any man, no matter his gender expression. This melding seems also to partly confirm Tan's (1995) research, where some of his respondents posited that most straight men in the country were not above sleeping with other men. Heterosexuality, as far as these posts are concerned, is taken as a façade that is subject to change under certain circumstances. It would seem that amid the emerging preference for traditional masculine types in the dating scene, heteronormative displays of masculinity are abounding among gays, and in the process are also becoming markers of gayness. Thus, the *halata* in Samahan ng mga Halata is not just the loud, flaming gay, but also the closeted gay who tries his best to act straight or at least minimizes his effeminate personality (Eguchi, 2009).

Figure 2

Examples of Posts that Counter the *Halata-as-feminine*.



Note: Images from Villanueva, 2024; Sacramento, 2024.

So, while the vestige of the *parlorista* is there, it is no longer the sole conception of what it means to be gay – and an obvious one at that – in today’s time. The *halata* is not just the flamboyant, screaming individual but also the cool, composed, contemporarily styled, albeit closeted man.

The *halata* as lifestyle

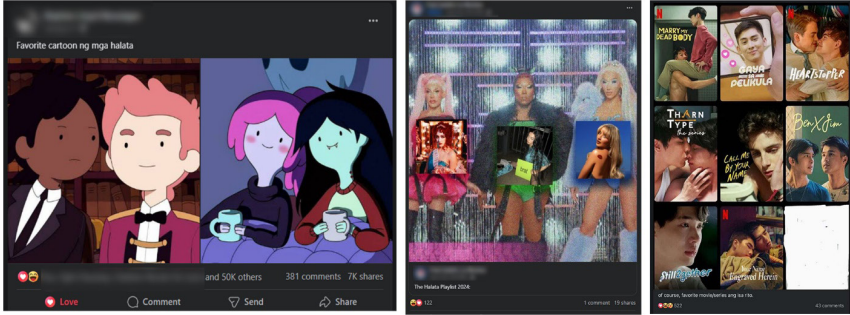
In its continuous creation of content, the collective intelligence of the group has rolled out a number of posts that do not just define the *halata* in terms of behavior or wardrobe, but actually outlines the way the *halata* lives his life. References are often made to forms of entertainment where gay characters are the stars, be they cartoons, movies, or TV shows, as evident in Figure 3. Such fascination with gay content demonstrates the intensity with which these shows have resonated with members of the LGBTQIA+, as well as fulfilled their longing for increased visibility (McInroy & Craig, 2017). The *halata* desires emancipation and romance, indulging in this fantasy through media content where he does not have to hide his identity (McInroy & Craig, 2017; Santos & Baudinette, 2024).

The *bakla-as-feminine* reemerges again in music taste, with mostly a fascination and idolization of women musicians. Posts depict the *halata* as obsessed with what one post calls “main pop gurlie,” referring to female artists like Ariana Grande, Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift, Mariah Carey, along with newer artists that have recently topped the pop charts such as Chappell Roan and Sabrina Carpenter (Brown, 2023; Carpenter,

2018). These women have endured as “gay icons,” whose music and personalities have attracted queer fandom and even helped them deal with the stress of coming out (Chan, 2023; Forenza, 2017; Guilbert, 2018).

Figure 3

Posts that Depict the *Bakla* as Fascinated with Queer Content in Media.



Note: Images from La Moréna, 2024; Marasigan, 2024; Busano, 2024c.

A fascinating aspect of this theme is that it points to who the target audience of the Facebook group is: millennials and Gen Z. This is evident in posts which hark back to the *halata's* childhood where he has played the “mother” in Chinese garter, looked at topless masculine men in magazines, and was fascinated with the female heroines in *Encantadia*, a Filipino fantasy series that aired in 2005. These pop culture references, along with the bulk of posts that pertain to more current trends such as the *halata's* present music tastes, situate the *halata* as a digital native whose childhood spans the turn of the century and who has grown up witnessing the shifting meanings of *kabaklaan*. As Facebook and other social media sites are primarily dominated by a relatively young demographic (Serbanescu, 2022), this indicates that much of the symbolic construction of the *bakla* that takes place within the Facebook group are a product of the youth.

The *halata* as sexual

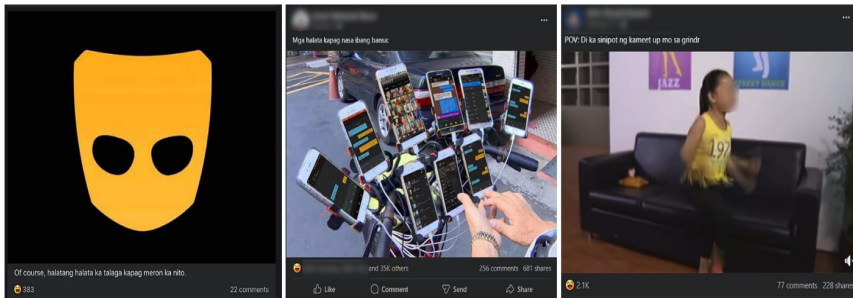
There is a consensus in the group that the *halata* is a sexual being, with a whole array of posts and memes poking fun at his sexual behavior. Running gags in the group often include shared experiences and unconventional encounters in the gay dating app Grindr. A location-based app that facilitates hook-ups between men, Grindr’s emergence significantly contributes to the mediatization of sexual interactions

within the Filipino gay community and the exploration of one's sexuality (Castañeda, 2015). Hence, it is unsurprising that the *halata* is conceived as experienced in meeting sexual partners through the app.

The posts in the group consistently characterize the *halata's* life as one of promiscuity and sexual adventure. The *halata* uses Grindr as a tool to find partners in foreign places, as an instant solution for his sexual desires, and as a coping mechanism for heartbreak, as evident in Figure 4. Members also point out shared experiences regarding their use of the app, such as receiving sensitive pictures, as well as frustrations over hookup plans falling through (see Figure 4). Owning and operating a Grindr account, at least as far as the group is concerned, seems to be the benchmark of being *halata*. While partly expected due to Grindr's focus on MSMs, this is also evidence that the continuous mediatization of gender and sexual encounters today has pervaded social life enough to influence the description of (obvious) homosexuality. Hence, to be *halata* means not just to engage in sexual behavior, but to do so using new media technologies (Solis, 2020).

Figure 4

Posts that Outline the Sexual Behavior of the *Halata*



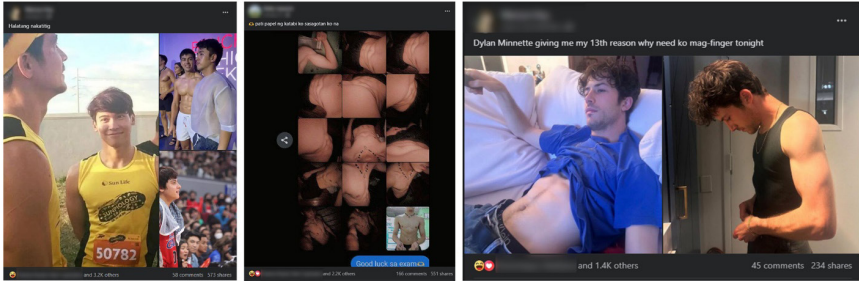
Note: Images from Blasco, 2024; Busano, 2024d; Busano, 2024b.

With this said, one aspect of the *bakla* that has persisted seems to be preference for masculine-looking and masculine-acting men (Eguchi, 2009; Tatcho & Barrias, 2016), some of examples of which can be seen in Figure 5. The group abounds with photos of muscled, good-looking men, including local and Hollywood actors. No unit of analysis points to flamboyant gays or transgender people as attractive. That this is the case even in a group whose focus is primarily on gender-based content echoes Labor et al.'s (2023) findings that there still exists

othering within the queer community. This is not to say, however, that homophobia and transphobia are dominant in the group, for there is also an effort to reclaim the *halata* as a symbol of resistance and to strip it of its derogatory nature as will be discussed in the next theme. But as far sexual preference is concerned, traditional and hegemonic images of masculinity remain preferable.

Figure 5

Posts that Depict Traditional Masculinity as Sexually Attractive.



Note: Images from Hoy, 2024a; Hoy, 2024d; Izanami, 2024.

The *halata* resists

For all the fun and “haha” reactions that the Facebook group seems to thrive on, there is no separating it from the larger social context of Filipino society where the full, unconditional acceptance of the queer community remains stunted. *Samahan ng mga Halata*, as a response, often memefies the collective struggle of its queer members. A substantial number of posts acknowledges that to be *halata* means to subject oneself to discrimination, with the frustration of being tagged as *halata* communicated jokingly in videos of people screaming, becoming offended, or overreacting. Though these are packaged as humorous, such content provides a view of the personal pain one feels when excluded from their own community, particularly on Grindr. The Facebook group in this sense may function as a space where a *halata* can cope and find a community that understands the struggle of being discriminated.

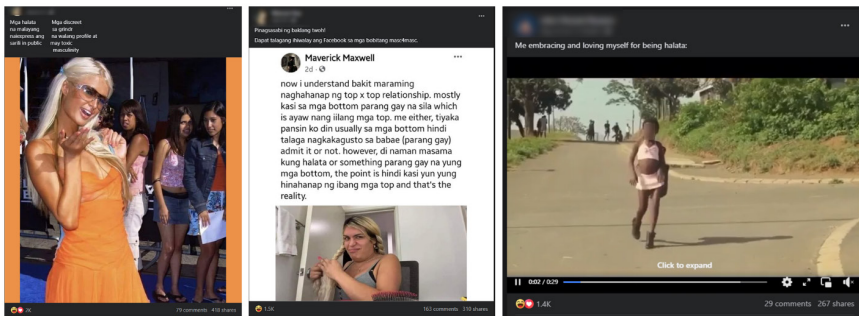
Humor stands out as the main coping strategy of the group, affirming previous research on queer coping strategies that identified joking as a tool for bonding (Craig et al., 2018). The disparaging and self-deprecating jokes in the group are effective because it is members of the queer community themselves—people with firsthand experience—that

make them. This also affirms previous research on the case of minority groups, including LGBTQIA+ communities in other nations, whose jokes are often more effective and acceptable because they come from their own in-group and not outsiders (Thai et al., 2019; Weitz & Koc, 2022).

There is also an effort in *Samahan ng mga Halata* to remove the negative connotations attached to the *halata* and subvert the existing preference for traditional masculinity. Posts of this type empower the *halata* by claiming that to be obviously gay is not to be ashamed of and should not be the basis for exclusionary treatment. Similar posts, often delivered using aggressive or sarcastic language, also characterize a preference for purely masculine-acting individuals as idiotic and toxic. One post, for instance, points out that gays who have this kind of opinion “prioritize going to the gym rather than studying,” while another suggests that they should not be allowed to use Facebook at all. Charged by a distinct Filipino brand of sass, the emergence of the *baklang kanal* is also apparent in the Facebook group, with posts whose sentiments are “loud, unbothered, and *kalat* (messy),” (Cabbuag & Benitez, 2022, p. 60).

Figure 6

Posts that Empower the *Halata* and Subvert Hegemonic Masculinity.



Note: Images from Hoy, 2024b; Hoy, 2024c; Busano, 2024e

Such sentiments were expressed prominently during June, widely celebrated as pride month, with posts championing and celebrating queerness and gayness. To be *halata* was no longer a source of shame. It did not matter if one was *halata* or not, for like everyone else, the *halata* deserved to be loved and feel comfortable in their own skin. Some posts even went as far as to wish homophobes a hard time during

the entirety of the month, or to joke about gays “bulldozing” traditional and religious norms and values in the country.

Samahan ng mga Halata thus transcends being a mere online community where the *halata* is depicted and made fun of; it is also a space to discuss and rally against larger social issues that beset the LGBTQIA+ community. A myriad other issues are also discussed including HIV awareness, divorce, gay marriage, pageants, and gay representation. Such conversations allow for subversive frivolity (Abidin, 2016) to fully unfold in the Facebook group, with the discussions spanning posts that provide hot takes, to those who formally explain and discuss the interests of the queer community on such matters. Collectively, the posts signal that the *halata* is self-aware of his predicament as a queer individual in society, and is inclined to resist and rage against these social inequalities in his desire for emancipation.

Conclusion: Who will the *halata* be?

This study’s results outline some of the *halata*’s defining characteristics, with the results indicating the persistence of the age-old stereotype of gay flamboyance and a preference for traditional masculinity. There is a caveat to the former, however, as being *halata* is also thought of as the closeted gay’s attempt to act in a straight manner. The defining marker of obvious gayness, it seems, is no longer hinged on gender expression, but on sexual activity using digital technologies. Lastly, and perhaps the most novel of the findings, is that the *halata* is aware that he does not exist in a political vacuum. He is thus empowered and equipped with the ability to critique the very social system that perpetuates gender inequality and represses the LGBTQIA+ community to whom he belongs.

The depiction of the *halata* is one that brims with contradictions. The *halata* can act flamboyantly, fan over feminine pop stars, and watch queer forms of entertainment, but can also put up a straight facade. The *halata* can be sexually adventurous and desire masculine-acting men, but can lambast the dating scene for treating him as someone less desirable compared to gays who can play the role of a straight man better. The *halata* knows how to make fun of himself, but has enough wit to use that same sense of humor to subvert the dominant power structures which continues to oppress him and the queer community at large. It is this multifaceted, sometimes conflicting behavior that renders the *halata* as a concept that is continually in flux and subject to

unrelenting contradiction and redefinition in online spaces. The *halata* is a symbolic construct in limbo, suspended between notions of what it meant to be *bakla* in the past versus what it means to be *bakla* in the present.

Predicting what or who the *halata* will be next is a futile exercise, for any assumption will inevitably be only a hypothesis. The premise of symbolic constructionism is that it will always be up to people to create social reality, including the notions, definitions, and stereotypes about being *bakla* and *halata*. It will be interesting, however, to see if the *halata* can fully shed the stereotype of flamboyance or femininity as its defining characteristic, given that social media ideally democratizes the process of (re)defining gender and allows more voices from the gay community to chime in (Dzurick, 2018). Also of interest to future researchers is the role that the *halata* may play in social issues, as Facebook groups such as *Samahan ng mga Halata* exhibit a tendency to be mobilized for political purposes because of their niche audience and the advocacy-related discussions circulating within, thereby imbuing them with a proto-political character (Combinido & Curato, 2021; Ong & Cabanes, 2018). Equal attention should also be focused on researching if the notions of *halata*-ness that are perpetuated in the Facebook group resonate with content in other social media platforms, or more importantly, gays on the ground. This is to confirm if the Filipino conception of gayness is actually shifting, or if it is happening only within the moderated bubbles of social media.

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