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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Popular queerness on Vietnamese prime-time television: gender ambiguity, compliance and compromises

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ABSTRACT

The past two decades have seen a boom of queer media in many Asian countries, and Vietnam is not outside of this wave. This article examines the queer representations of three entertainers featured in three recent popular Vietnamese reality shows: Gil Lê in *Sisters Who Make Waves*, BB Trần in *Brothers Defeat Thousands of Obstacles*, and Pháp Kiều in *Brothers Say Hi!*. These entertainers serve as fascinating case studies for exploring what this paper proposes as non-confrontational 'popular queerness' and strategies of resistance through gender ambiguity and fluidity manifested by their playful self-representations, interactions with fellow contestants, and musical stage performances. Employing the conceptual framework of 'cisnormativity' and 'heteronormativity' (cis-heteronormativity) which explains persistent marginalization of LGBTQ+ people, the paper critically discusses the three entertainers' queer discursive, bodily, and stylistic self-presentations. It argues that the reality shows provide an enabling space for queer visibility and have the potential to facilitate discussions of queer identities, even though they remain partly constrained by cis-heteronormative norms.

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Popular queerness; gender ambiguity; LGBTQ+; reality television; Vietnam

Introduction

Entertainment is a cultural battlefield in which gender roles and gender expressions are continuously (re-)constructed and (re-)negotiated (Laforgia & Howard, 2017). In this era of globalization, creative industries in cosmopolitan capitalist societies have increasingly recognized and capitalized on the commercial benefits of popular gender representations which tap into queer desires (DeAngelis, 2017; Ye, 2023; Zhao, 2021). Contemporary Asia, where same-sex marriage has yet to be legally recognized in most states (except Taiwan and recently, Thailand and Nepal) and heteronormativity continues to dominate, has witnessed a boom of queer representations, with the popularity of androgynous K-pop idols, Japanese Boys' Love and Girls' Love cultures, homoerotic Chinese TV dramas, and queer cinema in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand

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(Zhao & Wang, 2023). The communist Southeast Asian country of Vietnam, with a sizable population of over 100 million, is not outside this wave of queer media.

This study explores the queer representations of three entertainers featured in three recent Vietnamese reality/variety shows that have attracted immense public attention, with millions of views in various media platforms. The first is *Ch đ p đ p gió r ̣sóng* (translated as *Sisters Who Make Waves*) (In 2024, the second season of the show changed its name to *Ch đ p đ p gió* - hereafter *CDDG*). The second, the first's male equivalent, is *Anh trai v ̣t ngàn ch ng gai* (hereafter *ATCG*) (literally *Brothers Defeat Thousands of Obstacles*). This show also goes by the English name *Call Me by Fire*. Both *CDDG* and *ATCG* derive from Chinese franchised reality shows. The third is a Vietnamese-made programme, *Anh trai say Hi* (translated as *Brothers say Hi!*, hereafter *Say Hi*), which resembles the format of *ATCG* but promotes different genres of music and targets younger audiences. The three shows have been broadcast during prime time on mainstream television channels (VTV3 and HTV2) while concurrently streaming online. Full episodes, clips of backstage activities, and 'focus cam' clips of each contestant are made available online in various media platforms (especially YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok), making the shows accessible to a wide range of audiences of different ages and backgrounds. Since their premier (*CDDG* in 2023, *ATCG* and *Say Hi* in 2024), these programmes quickly stood out in the saturated variety show market and set off a nationwide craze, especially *ATCG* and *Say Hi* which have, until December 2024, organized two and four concerts, respectively, following the completion of the first season. These concerts have attracted record-breaking audiences. Each *Say Hi* live concert reportedly drew a massive audience of 30,000 people, while 25,000 attended an *ATCG* live concert (Kenh14 vn 2024). More concerts are expected because of the unprecedented fervent fandom.

Against such background, we critically discuss the queer representations of three showbiz entertainers, including Gil Lê (in *CDDG*'s season 2), BB Trần (in *ATCG*'s season 1) and Pháp Kiều (in *Say Hi*'s season 1) through their self-presentations, interactions with fellow contestants, and musical performances. The three artists' queer and gender-confusing appearances have triggered speculations and discussions about their sexuality. While Gil Lê has constructed a queer image of either a 'tomboy' girl or a trans man (despite never officially coming out as either), BB Trần has publicly confirmed their membership of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning and Others (LGBTQ+) community and has a long-time boyfriend, and Pháp Kiều has identified themselves as an LGBTQ+ rapper (neither of them articulated further their gender identity). The appearances of these artists in the three shows known for strong gendered themes that foster gendered belonging to either (presumably cisgender) female artists or male artists send a confusing but thought-provoking message. One may argue that the shows push an inclusive agenda by enlisting them and offering them room to express their queerness, although they are not the only recent Vietnamese programmes featuring queer-inspired performances or queer artists. These three shows are selected as exemplary cases because of their simultaneous airtime and popularity, enabling a comparative analysis of how queerness is represented and received within the same cultural moment. The concurrence of these shows created a momentum that has the potential to foster collective, non-confrontational resistance within the Vietnamese mediascape and sustain the public discourse of queerness.

In this article, we utilize the concept ‘cisnormativity’ – the prevailing expectation that all individuals ‘naturally’ identify with the sex they were assigned at birth (coined by Bauer et al., 2009) and the related concept of ‘heteronormativity’ – the assumption that everyone is heterosexual unless stated otherwise (Warner, 1991) to discuss queer representations. We argue that *CDDG*, *ATCG* and *Say Hi* offer Gil Lê, BB Trần and Pháp Kiều an enabling and relatively safe space to display queerness, thereby enhancing the visibility of queer people and potentially facilitating social discussions of queer identities. At the same time, the spaces provided, however experimental and transgressive, still abide by cisnormativity and heteronormativity (hereafter cis-heteronormativity) and represent what we term ‘popular queerness’, to echo ‘popular feminism’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). This popular queerness, circulated in mass media, helps accentuate expressive rights, individual choices, and empowerment among the LGBTQ+ community without necessarily challenging structural inequalities manifested in cis-heteronormativity. In other words, popular queerness tends to be non-confrontational and constitutes soft resistance. Gil Lê, BB Trần and Pháp Kiều, in choosing to enlist the shows and be categorized as either ‘anh’ (brother) or ‘chị’ (sister), seem to have made compromises about their sexuality and arguably conformed to cisnormativity. While it may be their wish to remain gender ambiguous, considering the cis-heteronormative Vietnamese culture, the playful tones of the shows suggest elements of awkwardness and an overall inability to address gender issues seriously. That the shows are highly performative¹ entertainment spaces leaves the core of the challenges facing queer people largely unaddressed. Contributing to the under-researched literature on media representations of the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ community, our study highlights how entertainers’ representations may act as agents of change, despite their political limitations. It will illuminate how Gil Lê, BB Trần, and Pháp Kiều engage in strategies of resistance, where they neither confirmed nor rejected the ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ label, but performed their queer identity through creative discursive, bodily, and stylistic measures. Since the three entertainers have never asked the public to address them by a specific pronoun, out of respect to them, we use the pronouns ‘they/them’ to refer to them throughout this article. In subsequent sections, we present the literature review and theoretical frameworks and then the methodology before proceeding to our findings and discussions.

Literature review and theoretical underpinnings

Alexander Doty (1993, p. xv) defines ‘queerness’ as ‘a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight’. Recent literature has discussed ‘queer’ as ‘not only minority identities but also disruptive positions, sentiments, styles, and practices that productively reorient normative imaginations, regulations, and sociopolitical identities’ (Zhao & Wang, 2023, p. 154). The potential of popular gender representations to resonate with queer desires may be amplified in the present era as the simultaneous commercial advantages of accommodating both heterosexual and non-heterosexual audiences have been recognized (DeAngelis, 2017; Ye, 2023; Zhao, 2021). As a result, audiences nowadays witness ‘a significant investment in exploiting ambiguities and continuities between “cute” and “sexy”, and between “soft” and “hard” bodies’ (DeAngelis, 2017, p. 196).

Scholars such as Tan (2009) and Rushbrook (2002) have pointed out how even in some culturally conservative capitalist societies, the commodification of difference and the exotic other have become common, manifesting in such practices as guided tours to ethnic enclaves and 'rebellious' queer spaces. In Singapore, where same-sex practices only got decriminalized in late 2022, the tolerance of difference, including tolerance towards gayness, has been observed as an attempt to cosmopolitanize the country/city, to make it more appealing to the creative class (Tan, 2009). Meanwhile, in South Korea, another heteronormative society, queer-themed media have found fervent audiences among female viewers, even though the reality of sexual minorities remains harsh (Kwon, 2016). In contemporary Vietnamese urban society, where cis-heteronormativity persists – manifested in a binary ideal that celebrates macho breadwinning 'true men' and family-devoted women – more flexible and ambivalent visions of gender identities and practices have been found in younger urban residents (Gammon, 2021, 2023). They negotiate an appreciation for the continuity of traditional gender ideals, the celebration of certain alternative gendered expressions such as soft masculinities characterized by feminine looks and aesthetic self-care in men, and a growing tolerance of sexual differences (ibid.). In a country where the majority of people view marriage as one of a cis man and a cis woman by default, it might be surprising that variations of queer expressions are ubiquitous on mainstream television and social media. LGBTQ+ celebrities such as Hương Giang, Luna Đào, Vũ Cát Tường, An Nguy have enjoyed large fandoms.

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Following the 1986 *Đ i M i* (Reform) policy, marked by Vietnam's transition from a command economy to a 'socialist-oriented market economy', its corresponding integration into global networks (Werner & Bélanger, 2002) and more flexible gender relations (Nguyen, 2007; Martin, 2013), the local LGBTQ+ movement has made remarkable progress since the 2010s (Bui et al., 2024; Gammon, 2024). Compared to many other Asian countries, Vietnam has even been regarded as more tolerant towards LGBTQ+ issues (Gammon, 2021; Ives, 2018). Although same-sex marriage has not been legally recognized, it is neither banned nor condemned by state officials, and same-sex weddings have taken place and appeared in the news (Gammon, 2024; Horton, 2019). In 2014, the government legalized sex-affirmation operations. In 2022, the Ministry of Health sent an official letter to healthcare services asking them not to treat homosexuality, bisexuality and transsexuality as medical conditions requiring treatment (Thư Viện Pháp Luật, n.d.). This gesture was a progressive milestone, challenging a deep-rooted stigma against non-normative sexual tendencies, which had historically been framed in popular discourse as a social problem and contagious disease in need of eradication (R. Q. A. Tran, 2014; Trần, 2016). Meanwhile, many young Vietnamese people today consume Japanese and Chinese 'boys love' fiction (Trịnh & Nguyễn, 2020). Urban middle-class millennials have enjoyed the benefits of the LGBTQ+ movement: they have some freedom in their private lives, such as having same-sex relationships and disclosing such relationships to peers (although they are less likely to discuss this matter with families) (Trần, 2016). These benefits, however, are often not enjoyed by queer people in rural areas due to limited local understandings of LGBTQ+ issues (Ha, 2020) and the unequal distribution of resources and funding for LGBTQ+ activism in favour of big cities (D. Tran, 2025).

Despite such progress, the local cis-heteronormative culture, which perpetuates the ideal of the heterosexual family and reproduction, continues to marginalize the LGBTQ+ group and makes it hard for queer people to openly embrace their sexual identity (Gammon, 2024; Gammon & Phan, 2024; Horton, 2019). Under the influence of Confucian-inflected teachings of complementary gender roles, individuals have been subject to the regulation of hegemonic gender ideals. Men (understood as everyone assigned as male at birth) are traditionally expected to continue the patrilineal line and act as their family's breadwinners (Soucy, 1999; Rydstrøm & Drummond, 2004; Nguyen & Simkin, 2017). Women (everyone assigned as females at birth) are, by contrast, expected to serve as the primary caregiver and 'keeper of morality' (Drummond, 2004; Nguyen & Harris, 2009) in the family. In this culture, everyone is expected to marry a member of the opposite sex and have children, or else risk being seen as abnormal and disapproved of by their families and living community (Soucy, 1999; Horton & Rydstrom, 2011). Persistent cis-heteronormativity has reinforced a culture of silence and ambiguity in which queer practices tend to be hinted at and implicitly understood rather than explicitly discussed (Gammon, 2024). Societal expectations exert pressure on members of the LGBTQ+ community to keep a low profile and confine non-heterosexual practices to the private realm (Hoang & Nguyen, 2024; Nguyen, 2019). The annual Pride parade events, which had remained small-scale, have met with mixed reactions, with opponents describing the event as attention-seeking and repulsive (Hoang & Nguyen, 2024). While discussions of LGBTQ+ matters have become more common, most queer people tend to be misrecognized or remain invisible in everyday life (Horton, 2019). When queer people do come out, they tend to do so to a few people. Gay men, in particular, often seek to display a 'healthy' lifestyle to prove themselves 'normal' and be socially accepted (Trần, 2016).

Methodology

We present a critical discussion of the queer discursive, bodily, and stylistic self-presentations and musical performances of Gil Lê (in *CDDG*), BB Trần (in *ATCG*), and Pháp Kiều (in *Say Hi*) as well as their interactions with fellow contestants in the three shows. We chose these three entertainers as case studies because their self-presentations all showed gender ambiguity and fluidity, which distinguish themselves from other contestants who might exhibit some extent of stylistic queerness (such as Thanh Duy of *ATCG* or Quang Trung of *Say Hi*) but refrain from any disclosure of queer identity or those who belong to the LGBTQ+ community but project a static gender identity such as Lynk Lee, a trans woman who took part in the first *CDDG* season.

All authors watched the three shows on YouTube and focused on how Gil Lê, BB Trần and Pháp Kiều presented themselves, interacted with fellow contestants offstage and performed onstage. We followed discussions of the programmes on social media and local press to better understand audience reception as background context. We noted the salient examples (dialogues and performances) which involve moments of awkwardness and gender tensions, unanimously selected the key ones for analysis, and translated them into English. Our study sought to achieve 'investigator triangulation' (Denzin, 1978), incorporating perspectives from three scholars whose backgrounds share both similarities and differences: we are all early-career female Vietnamese PhD holders; the first author, based in the UK, works at the intersection of media studies and gender studies, while

the second, also based in the UK, mainly researches international education and migration, and the third, based in the US, studies K-12 education and teacher education. After selecting the key examples, we each examined them closely, took notes, and compared our observations. Although there are complementary contents such as mini-series showcasing backstage activities of the show participants (for instance, mini-series *Why Call Me by Fire*, *Highlight of ATCG*, *Reaction ATCG*, or *Behind the scene of CDDG*) and interviews with the entertainers, this paper focuses solely on the main episodes of the three shows as data for analysis.

Findings: queer representations in the brothers and sisters shows

In this section, we describe how Gil Lê, BB Trần and Pháp Kiều presented themselves, interacted with fellow contestants, and performed on stage. We start with a brief introduction of each show before discussing the entertainers.

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The original Chinese show *Sisters Who Make Waves*, which *CDDG* was based on, has become very popular in China since it premiered in 2020 because it challenges the social stereotypical bias towards middle-aged women, often associated with ageing and overweight (Ho, 2007) and thus a decline in attractiveness (Huang, 2021). Social pressure is even harsher for women working in the show business and influencer industry where looks and youth are critical (Foster, 2022). This sentiment is similarly reflected in *CDDG*, the Vietnamese version, in both seasons. Following the success of Season 1 in 2023, *CDDG 2024* features 30 Vietnamese women aged 29 to 60, defined in the show as mature or middle-aged women, most of whom have a showmanship background. They compete against each other in different groups and alliances at each round by showcasing skills in singing, dancing, writing music, and performing arts, as well as leadership and teamwork offstage. The programme centres on celebrating individuality and fostering sisterhood, and the ranking depends on collective points given by the studio audience.

Gil Lê (born 1991) debuted as a singer in 2011 and has since accumulated a large social media following, including two million followers on Facebook (the most popular social media platform in Vietnam) as of January 2025. In *CCDG*, Gil Lê drew attention immediately because of their androgynous image that gives the impression of a butch lesbian or a trans man. Gil Lê has a slim body and stylish short pixie hair and often appears in monochrome menswear (usually a shirt or men's blazer) or unisex baggy clothing. While Gil Lê has never come out as a lesbian nor trans man, they are known for their queer public image but romantic links to several cis female entertainers. Gil Lê was addressed by fellow contestants and staff members as 'anh' (brother). In episode 1, when addressing the sisters and Gil Lê on stage, the host said, 'dear beautiful sisters and Gil Lê', showing an attempt to respect Gil Lê's queer identity. When Gil Lê first entered the show's studio in this first episode, the other female contestants exhibited overwhelming enthusiasm and amazement. The sisters pretended to fight over Gil Lê, with banter that went, 'brother Gil Lê is mine!', 'Gil Lê is ours!'. In episode 10, a male host entered the sisters' dormitory and greeted Gil Lê with 'Hello my brother'.

Gil Lê's pronoun as 'anh' was naturally used by contestants, be it direct or indirect communication. In episode 11, when their team was practising dancing moves, a sister reminded him: 'Brother, remember to not stand still while we're dancing'. Towards the end of this episode when the contestants had to form new teams for the next stage challenge, a leader shared how happy she felt when Gil Lê agreed to join her. She said, 'I was surprised because he was too talented and resourceful to be in my team' and 'I'm proud to be trusted by the sisters and brother' (*các anh ch*). The way she singled out Gil Lê as a brother exemplified her awareness and respect for their identity. In their solo performance of the song 'Take it slow' (episode 2), Gil Lê acted as a man expressing love for a woman despite the barriers which prevented him from acting on his love. Gil Lê addressed themselves by the first-person singular pronoun 'anh' typically used by males. As they sang, Gil Lê gradually got rid of the chains that bound their body. They rapped:

I [*Anh*] used to not live true to myself out of pain
 Feeling so hopeless hearing those rubbish lies
 Transforming myself is how I respond
 To all that malicious gossip and ridicules
 I turn the page

When Gil Lê finished their performance, the sisters cheered and exclaimed, 'So handsome!' (*đ p trai quá*). When the host asked them, 'what do you expect most when you enlist the show?', Gil Lê said:

I always appreciate and feel grateful for everything that life and my parents have brought me.
 I appreciate everything I have, but I'll be the conductor for my own life. Whatever shape or color, I'm a flower. That flower will bloom in its own way. I'll be tough and gentle in my own style.

In response, sister Phương Thanh (an experienced singer in showbiz in her 50s) said: 'On behalf of all the sisters here, I have to say: Gil Lê being here is so wrong. [Phương Thanh paused, while everyone seemed tense] Wrongfully handsome'. Gil Lê acted embarrassed, beamed, made a heart sign with their hands, and remarked: 'Your [flirting] move is so cool, sister'. Phương Thanh said, 'One must be straightforward when pursuing a guy. Gil's so handsome!' (all the sisters laughed).

In episode 4, Gil Lê also played along with the sisters' flirting attempts. For instance, they called Phương Thanh 'babe' and claimed their 'love loyalty', saying, 'Regardless of your decision [to join my team or not], my affection for you stays the same, babe'. Other sisters immediately continued to develop the storyline of the pretended love tale by warning Phương Thanh, 'Don't trust, Gil has a wife', hinting at Gil Lê's real-life romance with a female influencer. Gil Lê's presence thus created a different dynamic among the sisters that is different from the prominent theme of sisterhood in this *sisters* show, which also sets this second season apart from the first.

The way Gil Lê embraced their queerness as an artistic identity (as they termed, 'style' or 'colour'), which distances Gil Lê from discussions of real-life gender identity, is a soft, safer way for them to express their queerness. In episode 11, when reflecting on how they practised a choreography for the group's performance, Gil Lê talked about the conundrum of how to personalize the moves so as not to lose their 'flair' (their androgyny):

I looked at the sisters' moves, which were all incredibly sexy and captivating, and thought to myself: 'Here comes my big challenge'. Later on, I had to capture the mood and essence of that choreography while adding my own flair. It was about blending in with the group but still maintaining the unique 'me' on stage.

At show time, Gil Lê and the team delivered a performance where they played the role of a bartender and the other sisters played the sexy girls, all dancing on the beach. This performance was another out of the total five Gil Lê had delivered where they appeared as male: as a heartbroken man (episode 1), a school boy and fireman (episode 4), an anime warrior (episode 8), a bartender (episode 11) and a Persian prince (episode 12). This masculine style was consistent onstage and offstage. At any given moment during practice or at the sisters' dormitory, Gil Lê would be seen in baggy menswear and never female clothing (Figure 1). They did not wear revealing outfits to project sexiness like the other sisters. For Gil Lê, clothing is both a stylistic decision and an intentional display of queerness.

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Brothers Defeat Thousands of Obstacles 2024 (or *ATCG*) is the first season of *CDDG*'s male equivalent to air on Vietnamese television. 33 talented men aged 30 to 54 went through various challenges to team up and compete against each other to find the last 17 men standing at the final round. Similar to *CDDG*, the brothers performed in alliances, rehearsing and showcasing skills in singing, dancing, and rapping. Contestants were faced with multiple physical, mental and emotional barriers, especially after each got eliminated for having the lowest votes. The show combines dramatic storytelling, humour and heartfelt moments to shed light on the personal lives of these famous men.

BB Trần, born in 1990 and currently has 1.9 million followers on Facebook, was the first to be introduced as a brother in episode 1 and remained until the finale due to their popularity among the studio audience, who voted for them. BB Trần has worked as an actor in show-business for 15 years. Their showbiz career is linked to cross-acting as they have produced and/or acted in multiple parody clips or web dramas as a woman with intricate makeup and in elaborate women's clothing. Since BB Trần is openly a member of the LGBTQ+ community, they have been identified by audiences more as female. In *ATCG*, BB Trần often appeared with flowy waist-length hair, a tall, slim build that adorned a silver multi-layered long chain necklace to cover their revealing chest. Although BB has a chiselled tanned face with a strong jawline (often registered by people as masculine-looking), they frequently wore cute, funny-looking headbands (e.g. a bear-shaped headband in episode 7, a tiara-like headband in episode 13, and a headband resembling a Chinese Manchu-style headdress in episode 14). Right after their self-introduction, BB Trần confided, 'People think BB Trần is not man enough to be a brother in *ATCG*, which motivates me to try and transform my image' (episode 1). BB Trần's inner motivation to add diversity to their artistic identity resonates with the show's recurring message of renewing oneself and stepping out of one's comfort zone in order to 'defy social prejudices and transcend personal boundaries to advance further' (according to the host in episode 2).

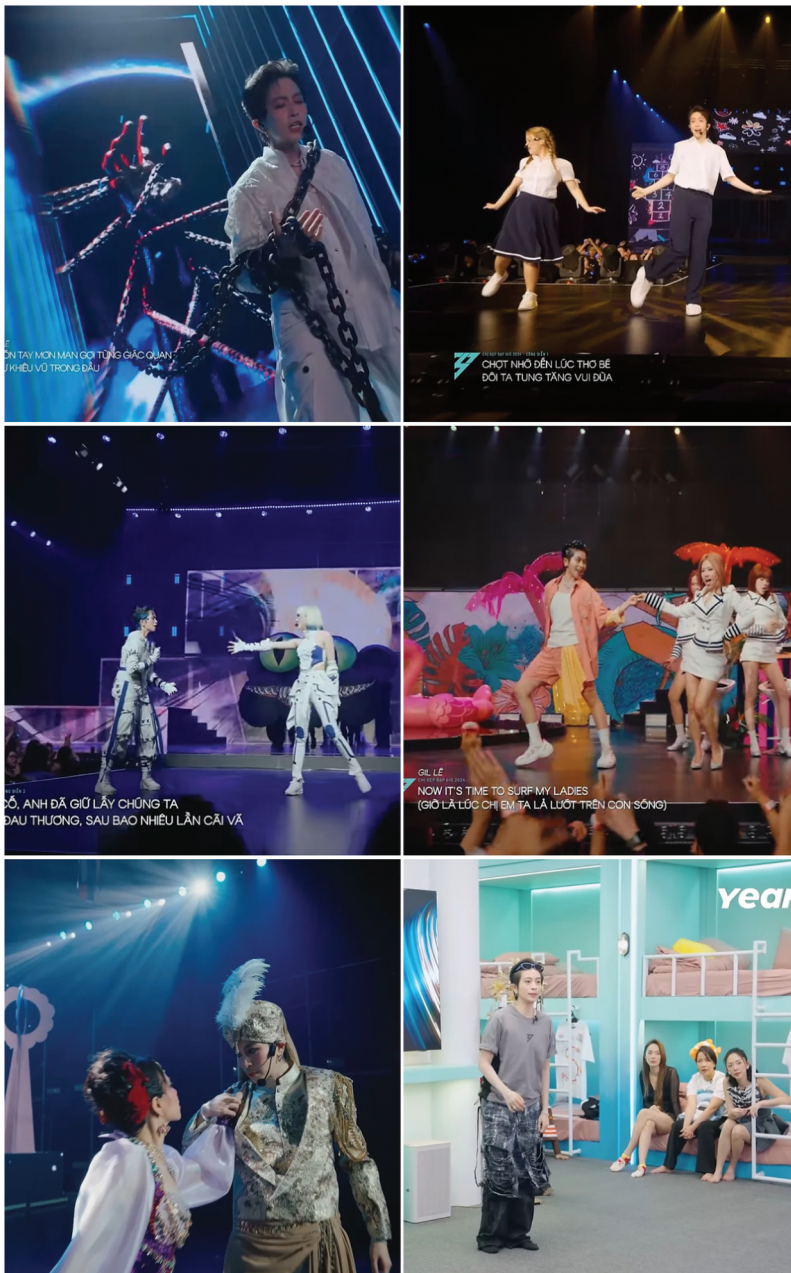


Figure 1. Gil Lê in male appearance on stage and off-stage. Photo: authors' screenshots of CDDG episodes on Yeah1's official YouTube channel.

In *ATCG*, BB Trần was shown to be popular among colleagues and contestants. In episode 2, before BB Trần's solo and group performances, a short clip of well-wishes from their friends and colleagues is shown. In the clip, some of BB Trần's mentees addressed them as 'má' (mom) – an endearing way to address the female leader of a group, who is protective of the group members. BB Trần earned this 'mom' title through their nurturing quality, socially

deemed as feminine, and this label became a running inside joke throughout the show. For example, in episode 13 when a brother jokingly said that BB Trần's title of the Crown Prince was only self-proclaimed rather than being appointed by anyone, Kay stood up for BB: 'Watch what you're saying, that's my mom!'. Kay's acting like a hot-headed boy when his mom got humiliated caused everyone to laugh and showed how BB Trần was very dear to him. Brother Hà Lê (a 40-year-old married straight man fitting traditional masculinity) saw BB Trần as a warm-hearted and cheerful younger brother. He commented, 'You [referring to BB Trần] can be different before you enter the programme, but when you're in here, your difference is cradled and protected by everyone' (episode 13). Hà Lê's statement implies the brothers' supportive and protective attitudes towards BB Trần's non-conforming gender, indicating the show as a safe space for them.

Multiple moments demonstrated BB Trần's queerness. In episode 5, BB and their team delivered a performance featuring a dramatic scene where several Japanese samurais appeared to hijack the bride from her wedding carriage and bring her back to her lover. As they completed, the host asked, 'What's the role each of you is to take?', BB replied, 'I'm Xuka', even though he was dressed as a Japanese samurai and the bride was played by a different dancer. Xuka (Shizuka) is an elementary school student, the only girl of the five iconic characters in the popular Japanese manga *Doraemon*. By role-playing Xuka, BB hinted at their identity as a girl. In episode 7, when the host asked the teams for a name they were taking for themselves, BB Trần, then wearing a headband shaped like bear ears, spoke on behalf of the team: 'Our alliance is after all one of the men of the 9x generations (those born in the 1990s)'. As they spoke, however, they appeared embarrassed and chuckled, as if questioning what they just said. This statement was immediately met with the brothers' laughter, which signalled their amusement at BB's identification as part of the men's alliance (hinting at the irony of the statement). As they also smiled in response to the others' laughter, BB added, 'It's time our alliance matured, so we take the name "Mature 9", to echo the 90s' (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Comical presentation of the brothers' amused reactions at BB Trần speaking on behalf of the 'men'. Photo: authors' screenshot of ATCG episode 7 on Yeah1's official YouTube channel.

BB Trần carried themself with a distinctive manner of speech and gestures. In most interviews or interactions with other contestants, they expressed themself with animated facial gestures, fluctuating intonation, sarcasm, humour, and wit, to make their statements funny, twisted or playful. In episode 7, the brothers were challenged into a cooking contest to win more points for their teams. A brother was complimented for saving his team with his dish, to which BB Trần commented: 'What's there to save? It's so strange they gave that dish so much praise. The judges must be clueless. That dish is so basic! Anyone could make it'. Within just a few seconds of the speech, they pretended to be jealous of the opponents by constantly giving side glances, sneering, mocking and making sarcastic remarks about the dish made. This style, reminiscent of sassy gossip girls, was intended to make everyone laugh, with no offence meant. BB's comment resulted in laughter and playful moments among the brothers.

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Brothers Say Hi! 2024 (or *Say Hi*) was promoted to be a 100% Vietnamese reality show, which features songs either composed by the producers or contestants specifically for the show. The contestants competed in group-based challenges to demonstrate their ability to sing, dance, write songs or direct their group's choreography and overall stage presence. Unlike *ATCG*, contestants in *Say Hi* belonged to a younger age group (between 20s and 30s) and sought to project a well-rounded image expected of idol boy bands, appealing to young audiences. The show's detailed depiction of the creative process, its display of humorous interactions between members, and intense competition are said to redefine Vietnam's music reality television.

Pháp Kiều (born 2001) currently has 340,000 followers on Facebook. Like BB Trần in *ATCG*, Pháp Kiều reached the finale of *Say Hi* thanks to audience votes. Since their debut in *Rap Vi t*, a reality show for rappers in 2023, Pháp Kiều has publicly confirmed their queer identity and is known as an LGBTQ+ rapper. Pháp Kiều's presentation of queerness was complex, characterized by constant gender-switching and gender-fluidity tactics on and offstage, as well as in their interactions with fellow contestants. Pháp Kiều showed their compliance with cis-heteronormativity by various strategies, starting with their claim for eligibility to be a *brother* in *Say Hi*. In their self-introduction in episode 1, they said 'Brother Pháp Kiều 2024, say hi'. When the show host later asked Pháp Kiều, 'Are you sure you're in the right show?', they responded, 'I think yes, because Kiều has Pháp in front of it [laughing]'. Pháp Kiều is a stage name, while their real name is Pháp. Pháp Kiều implied that their given name, Pháp, reflected their male gender at birth. This name preceded 'Kiều' (a typically female name)", which symbolized their rapper persona and queer identity.

Pháp Kiều's compliance with cis-heteronormativity was again reflected in their final solo performance of a self-composed rap song, in which there was a line 'People make a hand signal that I'm not fit for the vibe/I'll show you the stamp on my ID that says I'm male' (episode 13). In sync with the *brother* vibe of the show, Pháp Kiều also played male roles in several team performances. At the beginning of episode 3, when Pháp Kiều described their team as one of 'real and mature men', other contestants burst out laughing, and one of them playfully commented, 'Why weren't you confident saying that?', to which Pháp Kiều replied firmly 'No, I'm manly'. In episode 5, reflecting on their team's preparation for the second live stage performance, Pháp Kiều commented, 'Normally, in

my performances, I'm carried by dancers. For this song, I have to carry a female dancer, I have to act strong, I have to act as *brother Pháp* for once'. To complement Pháp Kiều's reflection, a team member praised their efforts, stating, 'I think now Kiều is officially a bro'.

Despite their compliance with cis-heteronormativity, Pháp Kiều repeatedly presented their queerness throughout the programme. On the handwritten profile published by the producer, they listed their nickname as 'Sister Kiều (for now only)' (Figure 3), suggesting their fluid gender identity. In episode 11, following a challenging physical activity, when the host asked how Pháp Kiều managed to beat the game, they responded, 'I don't understand why the other brothers let a beautiful girl like me jump on these painful mats without even pretending to lose and let me win'. In the show, many situations hint that Pháp Kiều was treated more like a 'girl' by fellow contestants. In episode 2, while Pháp Kiều's team was rehearsing for their stage performance, the team joked about Pháp Kiều flipping their shirt up as a surprise move since the audience would typically expect other entertainers to flaunt their well-toned six-packs instead of Pháp Kiều with their more 'girly' persona. In response to the light-hearted joke, Pháp Kiều laughed it off, 'this, I think Hải Đăng Doo or Wean Le [other team members] will be best suited for doing it. I think if they flip their shirts, the audience will love it and replay it many times, I'll do it too' (episode 2). There were times when Pháp Kiều was explicitly addressed to as a girl in the show by their fellows, such as 'the flirtatious princess' and 'a gem' (episode 6), 'babe Kiều' (*bé Ki u*, episode 9, episode 14), 'lady' (episode 10), or 'Ms. Kiều' (*bà Ki u*, episode 11). In response, Pháp Kiều also jokingly called other contestants 'my charming prince' (episode 6), 'my first love' (episode 9), or referred to themselves as 'a little sister' of the brothers (episode 10).

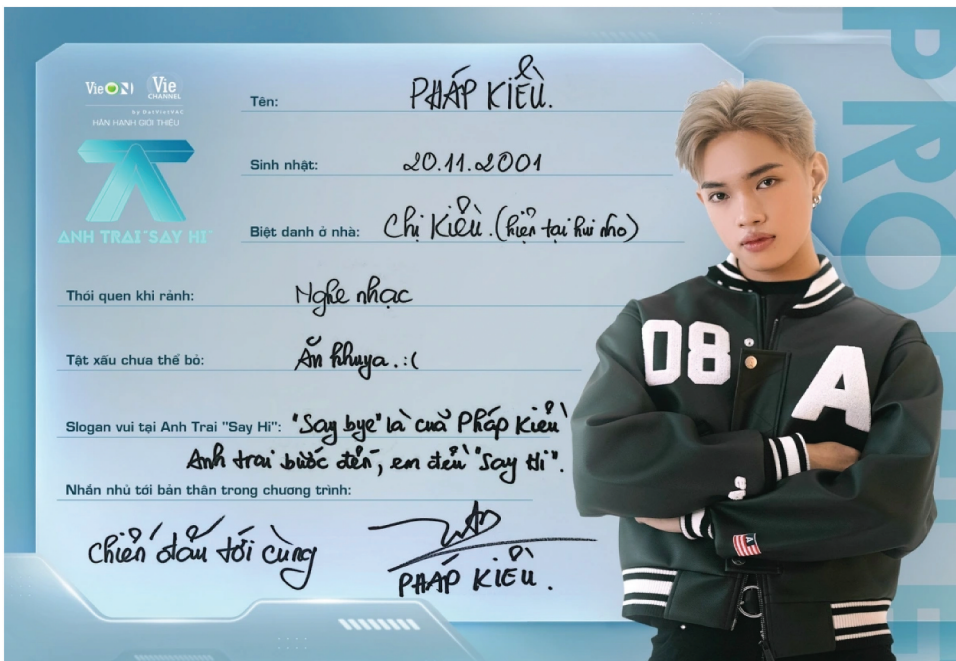


Figure 3. Pháp Kiều's hand-written profile in , in which they declared their nickname 'sister Kiều (for now only)'. Photo: VOV (2024).

One of the prominent strategies employed to present and embrace Pháp Kiều's queerness is their self-identification as a fangirl and the creation of a bromance with other singers. Pháp Kiều described themselves as 'a fangirl' of brother HIEUTHUHAI, whom they idolized. In multiple occasions, Pháp Kiều showed their excitement, likening the experience of being in the same variety show with HIEUTHUHAI to 'winning a lottery' (episode 10). They also reflected on their emotions after performing a duet with their idol, saying, 'I was so happy. I tried to control myself, or else I'd have jumped and jumped' (episode 13). At the same time, Pháp Kiều developed amusing bromantic interactions with rapper Negav. In episode 2, Pháp Kiều said, 'Pháp Kiều is very close to Negav, we talk a lot, and also do other things [laughing mischievously]'. Negav playfully responded, 'You're so into me . . . I know you love me lots. I love you, too'.

A prominent manifestation of Pháp Kiều's presented queerness is their use of figures such as lady snake (episode 2), fox (episode 10), or sexy bunny (episode 13) as embodiments of their femininity, which other contestants acknowledged as compelling depictions of Pháp Kiều's feminine essence. Snake and fox, in East Asian folklore, symbolize feminine qualities such as sensuality, charm, or even the power to captivate and transform (Budi et al., 2022; Lixia & Eng, 2012). Pháp Kiều also used the image of a rainbow to highlight their queer identity and artist persona. In episode 13, for the final solo stage performance, they showcased a self-composed rap song titled 'Colours', referring to the idea of a rainbow after the rain. In this performance, Pháp Kiều wore a pink wig, a tight pink-black costume, and moved and danced sinuously like a girl. One line in their rap lyrics went: 'I'm just one colour, but a rare one', 'I may not fit your eyes but I do for your ears', which reveals their understanding that their queerness might not be favoured by all audience groups, but they were unique and their musical talent would win people's hearts.

Discussion and concluding remarks

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The appearances and performances of Gil Lê, BB Trần, and Pháp Kiều demonstrate clear representations of queerness, gender ambiguity, and gender fluidity, which problematize the conventional binary-based approach towards sexuality and gender. Their queer expressions blur the boundaries between the personal and the professional, between authenticity and performativity, creating amusing, exciting moments. By enlisting the three artists, *CDDC*, *ATCG* and *Say Hi* have exhibited evident inclusive attempts. Not only have the shows placed Gil Lê, BB Trần and Pháp Kiều among a diverse group of contestants of different generations and gender images, who showed support for them, but they have also offered the three a relatively safe playground to creatively and flexibly express their queerness with the celebration of cheering audiences. By allowing such non-normative gender representations, the programmes have helped the LGBTQ+ community gain further visibility and potentially attract more allies from audiences.

On the other hand, the appearances of Gil Lê, BB Trần and Pháp Kiều in the three shows with strong binary gender themes manifest a compromise with cisnormativity and a desire for belonging within the programmes. The three gave the impression that they accept to be publicly identified by the sex assigned to them at birth. Gil Lê signalled this by stressing how they are 'grateful for everything that life and my parents have brought me', BB Trần claimed

themselves as part of the ‘alliance of mature men’ at one point, and Pháp Kiều acknowledged the male sex assigned at birth by mentioning their name and ID. The artists’ queer self-presentations and performances are therefore gender transgressions within limits. Such representations remain rather superficial and largely apolitical, because the artists acted on individual self-interests in the role of entertainers on stage rather than making attempts such as joining other LGBTQ+ public figures in LGBTQ+ activism. They have been careful not to get involved in explicit activism either on stage or offstage, which could expose them to backlash. It should be also noted that the stage is inherently a performative space, and long before public figures were given the option to ‘come out’ as queer, flamboyant and androgynous looks or even cross-dressing on stage had been common and generally accepted or cheered on by local audiences. Gil Lê, BB Trần and Pháp Kiều’s gender-confusing appearances and performances might even appear mundane due to the ubiquity of androgynous representations performed by both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ entertainers on local showbiz. Despite the visibility of such representations, norm-transgressing practices have continued to be seen as social transgressions in daily life.

The inclusion of queer artists in these shows differentiates them from their original versions. While the Chinese *Sisters Who Make Waves* has sparked public discourse on sexism and ageism and framed the middle-aged female contestants’ participation in the show as a form of ‘rebirth’ (Liao, 2020), the Vietnamese adaptation *CDDG* and Gil Lê’s appearance may initiate an engaging discussion that goes beyond ‘popular feminism’ which points to women’s rights, choice, and empowerment achieved by media-produced visibility (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Keller & Jessica Ringrose, 2015). Gil Lê’s participation in *CDDG* extends beyond ‘the expression of female confidence, professionalism, courage, and empathy’ (Shi & Liu, 2023, p. 2) to encompass debates about how queerness can be perceived and accepted as ‘legitimately beautiful’. Similar arguments apply to the two *brothers* shows. In essence, the three Vietnamese variety shows have broadened their focus from addressing collective anxieties over age discrimination, showcasing artistic and musical talents, and promoting teamwork and solidarity among celebrities, to incorporating soft talks on gender identity and the presentation of non-binary gender in highly-gendered variety programmes. We then argue that such a phenomenon of queerness and gender fluidity and confusion can add nuances to our understanding of the ‘economies of visibility’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018) – a mechanism predominantly managed and controlled by corporate media that highlights certain forms of feminism, and arguably masculinity, visible while rendering others invisible.

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Local queer entertainers walk on the precarious thin line of social acceptability: they can afford to be experimental in the way they look and perform, but need to make sure not to project a ‘threatening’ image that would repulse conservative audiences. They may have relative freedom on stage and freedom in private lives but must manage their public image carefully. Sticking to ambiguity therefore remains a common strategy to circumvent backlash. This strategic ambiguity is not exclusive to Vietnamese showbiz; it has been detected in many other Asian markets of queer media including South Korea and China (Laforgia & Howard, 2017; Qiao & Hu, 2024).

While gender ambiguity can be read as a result of the oppressive culture of silence (Gammon, 2024), in a way it also represents attempts to challenge binary-based notions of sexuality and gender. Gil Lê, BB Trần and Pháp Kiều may not necessarily view themselves as victims of oppression and may be embracing the ambiguity and fluidity of their sexuality and gender. Their ambiguous self-presentations can be read as a strategy of resistance which fits the current changing society in its process of negotiating contradictory values: accommodating a desire to modernize and cosmopolitanize itself without turning its back on its Confucian-inflected tradition, which emphasizes gender differences. We argue that this ‘ambiguous queerness’ in the shows represents a third space (Bhabha, 1994) enabling the queer contestants to creatively express their non-confrontational queerness. They appeared to embrace the ambiguity and consider it a dimension of their artistic/celebrity identity to perform in the reality shows besides their self-identification as an individual. In a society where there remain limitations in LGBTQ+ awareness and education, the three entertainers’ performances of queer ambiguity seem to have not provoked aggressive reactions but have attracted audiences’ attention and curiosity. We suggest that these variety shows represent what we propose as ‘popular queerness’ which, echoing ‘popular feminism’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), highlights certain values such as expressive rights and individual choices and empowerment without necessarily challenging social structural inequalities directly.

In this study, we understand popular queerness as queer expressions that circulate in the public sphere via mainstream or popular media channels – such as popular television programmes, films, and social media – and reach mass audiences. These representations tend to be non-confrontational, seeking recognition and empathy rather than focusing on activism (e.g. demanding institutional rights such as same-sex marriage) and directly critiquing structural oppression. In the Vietnamese context, popular queerness constitutes a form of soft resistance—one that compromises with enduring social conservatism and a lack of understanding or empathy towards queer individuals. It encompasses queer ambiguity as an appealing manifestation of artistic performance and style, which is key to its popularity among mass audiences. The power of popular queerness is that it enables both queer visibility and queer ambiguity without necessarily demanding clear identification or overt political commitment to activism. This argument brings us closer to the concept of non-confrontational collective resistance. While confrontational collective action refers to forms of actions involving direct challenges by the use of force (Uysal et al., 2025), non-confrontational actions do not involve outgroup action or disruptions, nor do they present potential political or physical risks (Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021). Non-confrontational resistance instead entails the mobilization of affect to ‘unsettl[e] existing power relations’ (Marsh & Sliwa, 2021, p. 477) and could serve as a strategy of self-empowerment (Ortiz et al., 2023). In this case, we propose that popular queerness, despite its ambiguity and non-confrontational nature, represents a collective resistance that may contribute to the gradual transformation of public attitudes towards queerness.

Our study has shown how Vietnamese entertainers have engaged in strategies of resistance to subtly blur the boundaries of gender binaries. While the life circumstances of these entertainers – privileged by their income and popularity – do not reflect the everyday realities of ordinary queer individuals, they help enhance queer visibility and inspire the local LGBTQ+ community. Through their nuanced yet confident and creative expressions of queerness, they affirm their uniqueness and

challenge prevailing social norms surrounding gender roles and sexuality. This study lays a stepping stone for further studies regarding queer representations in Vietnamese popular culture, which remains under-researched. Future research may shed light on the social impacts of the three shows and similar programmes through audience-based approaches such as analyses of social media posts and comments, interviews and focus group discussions involving both cisgender heterosexual and LGBTQ+ audiences.

Note

1. 'Performative' as used in this article should not be understood within Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as Butler's theory focuses on gender performativity as unconscious and subconscious everyday gendered enactments. This article does not discuss everyday practices but focuses on literally 'performative' spaces – the stages and off-stage studio performances (filmed for reality televisions).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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