

Goodbye Billy

WHEN PLDT started the first of its "Hello, Billy" ads last year, the public reacted with amusement to its characters. The ad featured Billy, a Filipino living overseas, and his mother, who's always calling in and poking into her son's personal life and probing about a mysterious Gracia.

The "Hello, Billy" series, as with most ads, played on stereotypes, especially that of the nosey Pinay mother. Billy's mom wasn't just stereotypical, she was archetypal. After I wrote about Billy's mom in my column, I had friends—Italian, Jewish, Chinese—calling in to claim her as their own.

Ads can poke fun at society's stereotypes, making us think and say, "Yeah, that's silly." In some cases, ads may even stimulate the public to create their own plots and scripts, challenging stereotypes with other stereotypes.

Which is what happened with the PLDT ad. Early after the ads first appeared, there were already text messages going around, spoofing the ad itself. One particular variation had Billy's mom calling her son. "Gracia?" she asks the person answering the phone. The other party replies, "*Hindi po, si Graciano.*"

PINOY KASI

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OPINION



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party repins; *Timat po, si Graciano.*
 The gay community took that variation in stride; in fact, I suspect it was someone gay who started that text message going. Suddenly, a TV ad character became the object of intense *tsismis*: was he straight, gay, bisexual?

But even as people debated about Billy's sexual orientation, a gay character emerged in the ads. Courtesy of Billy's mother, now stereotyped as the *tsismosa Nanay*, the nation learned that Billy was indeed serious about this Gracia. Out from the shadows emerged a new character, Joey, apparently one of Billy's gay friends, depicted as someone completely dismayed by the news.

Again, there was speculation in the gay community: Was there some shared past between Billy and Joey? How many San Miguels did they drink together? Why was Joey hiding behind a luggage cart at the airport, looking so broken-hearted as he spied on Billy bringing home his Gracia?

Then PLDT did another episode showing a disturbed Billy asking Joey about ugly rumors concerning Gracia. Who could have spread such vicious rumors? The camera pans across Joey's face and we know, immediately, who the culprit is.

Gay groups were furious. The Library Foundation (TLF), an organization that has been quietly doing information, education and advocacy work with gay men, fired the first salvo, followed by Lagablab, a lesbian and gay advocacy coalition. One reader sent me a compilation of rather scathing anti-PLDT comments taken from chat rooms, including calls to boycott the entire Metro Pacific business conglomerate (which controls PLDT) and Ace/Saatchi, the ad agency.

Again, I have to emphasize that stereotyping itself is not necessarily bad. I loved the ad for Skyflakes showing two burly men, one with tattoos and the other there to comfort his special friend.

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with tattoos and the other there to comfort his special friend.

Likewise, in the PLDT ad, Billy's stereotyped mom got many Filipinos chuckling. In fact, the ones who probably laughed out the loudest were the ones among us who have such moms—moms who never stop hounding us about girlfriends (or boyfriends), and moms who write letters to scold nasty people who dare to criticize their sons. (If it were not for his venerable age, Sen. Blas Ople would have gotten the public's wrath descending on him for daring to criticize a Pinay mom.)

All that is different from the way gay men are stereotyped in the PLDT ad. The Skyflakes ad tells the public a jeepney driver can be gay too and gruffly gentle. The PLDT ad tells us the *bakla* is dangerous when jealous, ready to do anything to destroy perceived rivals.

Joey's stereotyping, Lagablab points out, exposes the gay community to "ridicule and abuse" because it reinforces existing prejudices: "Priests who have condemned homosexuals for immorality, parents who have taught their children that homosexuality is evil, comedians who believe that slapping homosexuals is funny, and, yes, advertisements that portray homosexuals negatively—they all have a role to play why some homosexuals lose their job, get unfair treatment from restaurants or hospitals, or even get killed. All because of their sexual orientation."

Lagablab makes an important point: the ads reinforce already adversely negative attitudes toward gay people in Philippine society. Television comedies are even worse, with *bakla* characters subjected to outrageous indignities. The other night, I caught one television episode showing a *bakla's* face being dunked in a pool of urine, accompanied by canned laughter. Is this just another harmless instance of Pinoy toilet humor? I don't think so. Repeated day in and day out, such images make it that much easier for a gang of thugs to beat up a *bakla* "just for fun."

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beat up a *dukita* just for fun.

What's disturbing, too—and Lagablab points this out—is that many of these anti-gay ads and TV scripts are actually done by gay men. I'm not surprised. We like to claim Filipinos are tolerant about homosexuals when in reality, the biases are so overwhelming and pervasive that they are internalized by gay men as well.

Ricky Villabona, a friend who works with the ad industry, told me he wasn't offended by that last "Hello Billy" ad. What he did find disturbing was the way a gay character was inserted into the whole series, even before the last episode. Joey is there not just as comic relief, but as a joke in itself. The message that comes through, for Ricky, is that being gay is one big bad joke in itself.

He's right. The image of the weak, desperate, scheming gay man, deserving only ridicule and spite, seeps into society's collective psyche, and that includes the minds of gay men as well, who then work on more anti-gay ads and scripts.

The PLDT ads had a good start but it's time to say "Goodbye, Billy."

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