

SBI9's *What?* Music video as a subversive cultural anthem

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ABSTRACT

With the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping the whole world in 2020, the Philippine government was forced to put the entire country in quarantine. Also, with nearly everyone staying home, streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, and social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, saw a great rise in activity. Visual and performing artists who could no longer hold physical exhibits and concerts had to turn to these platforms in order to upload and share their creations. As artists can now directly interact with their patrons and visitors, a process of co-creation began to emerge. In this process, artists can either create new content based on their patrons' feedback or allow their content's meaning to evolve based on their interactions with their commenters. The result is either new art, or a new layer of meaning that could bring about a deeper level of awareness. This phenomenon can be seen in works like comic artist Tarantadong Kalbo's *Tumindig*, wherein consumers of the art created new meanings, and even new images, in order to illustrate a cultural shift. In the case of Philippine pop music, boy band SBI9's *What?* music video has seen a similar development. The lyrics' original meaning, which was inspired by the group's difficult experiences while trying to break into the local music scene, began to have an alternate layer of meaning, a more low-key subversive one, when commenters started weighing in. Following SBI9's *What?*'s various collaborators, as well as the comments and international recognition that followed, this essay describes the transformation of meaning that the song and its music video undergoes through co-creation in social media and streaming platforms.

Keywords: *social media, Philippine music, popular music, culture, identity politics*

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage economies, health services, and everyone's mental health, most people have been forced to stay at home due to the government mandated quarantine. It is now a world where social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and streaming services such as Twitch and YouTube have become not only their window to the outside world, but also have become avenues for self-expression (Nabity-Grovera, Cheung, & Thatcher, 2020). In the Philippines, despite the cancellations of various concerts and gallery exhibits, artists have used these platforms to not only express themselves through their creations and performances, but also to connect with their patrons and fans. In the process of the artists' direct interactions with visitors and fans, a space for shared meaning making have begun to emerge.

One such example of this phenomenon is SB19's music production, as seen in their March 2021 single *What?*. SB19 is a Philippine pop music group that was trained by South Korean entertainment firm ShowBT and debuted as a P-pop group in 2018 (Tenedero, 2019). The group is composed of John Paulo "Sejun" Nase, Stellvester "Stell" Ajero, Josh Cullen Santos, Justin de Dios, and Felip Jhon "Ken" Suson. Though their first single did not receive much attention, they soared up the Billboard Social 50 charts with their dance hit *Go Up!* (Losa, 2020), a song that told the story of their struggles as trainees and concert fillers. When the pandemic hit the Philippines in early 2020, various music acts, including SB19, had announced the cancellation of their scheduled concerts and performances (Policarpio, 2020). During this time, the group had done most of their projects and video recordings in the safety of their homes (Iglesias, 2020), even releasing a cheerful sounding single, *Ikako (Ikaw at Ako)*, that spoke of positivity amidst the pandemic.

It wasn't until March 9, 2021 did the group release another major music video (MV), *What?* (Gallardo, 2021), which showed a visible transformation in both the music and the group's image. Sejun, who changed his stage name to Pablo¹ in 2021, talked about how they want to have a more aggressive sound, as he explained the meaning behind the song's lyrics:

We are aware that a lot of people still doubt us, still look down on us, denouncing everything that we do and everything that we are trying to achieve. We love what we do, and the reason why we do it always with love and respect. Each of us carries our own flag, and we wave our flags

¹ "This paper will be using the group members' stage/first names for both readability and familiarity."

that way we deem right, raising it as best as we can. As a group and as individuals, we are aware that we cannot be the best at everything, and there are always those who are better, but it shouldn't stop us from reaching our goals, working on our improvement, and fulfilling our dreams. (Gallardo, 2021, para. 4-5)

Pablo admitted in an interview with Bandwagon (Basbas, 2021) that they wanted to take a more hands-on approach to the making of their music and the productions surrounding it because all of their songs prior to *What?* were all composed by Koreans. The result of them taking over their own music can be seen in the credits section of their *What?* MV (SB19 Official, 2021a), in which Justin's name appears first as the creative director. While the lyrics of the song itself can be taken to mean what Pablo intended, Justin's visuals tell an alternate story, one that takes on a more subversive, albeit low-key, meaning when avid followers of the group leave comments that unearth other interpretations based on the country's political atmosphere.

Duality of Meaning

In analyzing the structure of the lyrics, sounds, and visuals of *What?* MV, we can turn to the framework that John Sawyer used when he deconstructed Handel's *Aggripina* (1999, p. 532):

1. duality of meaning in an utterance or a situation;
2. contradiction, dilemma or incongruity between the two meanings, with one meaning undermined, corrected or superseded by the second, often more veiled, meaning;
3. duality of comprehension whereby one party understands only the ostensible meaning while a second party is aware of both the ostensible and veiled meanings.

Sawyer posits that an audience that has a sharper grasp of meaning making may unveil a third layer of comprehension.

When Pablo talked about raising their flag, as a group and as individuals, he is establishing his identity as a song writer and as a performer. Being SB19's leader, this cascades through the group. Though his thoughts when he wrote the song were about their emergence as artists despite all odds, we can also look at the environmental and cultural aspects that helped shape this composition. These can be gleaned from the visuals and the sound itself.

When it comes to the visuals of the MV, one can check the history of Justin as a creative director. SB19's previous MV that had Justin as its creative director, *Hanggang sa Huli* (SB19 Official, 2020), was an animated

feature that was launched amidst COVID-19 quarantine. Justin's tendency to insert political statements were first seen in this MV, which is supposed to be a tragic song about unrequited love. Yet he managed to add a shoutout to "Love Wins" when the animators depicted Ken spraying a rainbow-colored painting that spelled "LOVE" on the wall after he defends a lesbian from bullies. Rainbows have become symbols for the LGBTQ movement (Morgan, 2017), making the *Hanggang sa Huli* MV the first project where Justin showed that he isn't afraid to delve into political themes. With *What?*, Justin's creative direction has outdone his work on *Hanggang sa Huli*. It is rife with relics and references that have been pivotal throughout Philippine history. Accompanied by the song's unusual melody and several changes in tempo, these can be the keys in unveiling another layer of comprehension.

Identity Politics and Music

Felipe de Leon Jr., an art studies professor at the University of the Philippines Diliman, once said that not being aware of culture confounds our grasp of identity (de Guzman P., 2020). He posits that our art works speak so much about cultural practices, as evident in the way some tribes, like the Kalinga, would have songs about a child's life (*owiwi*) and songs about his future development (*dagdagay*), or as in the case of the Bontocs, songs about death (*didiyaw*). It is even through music that the Spanish friars were able to convert Filipinos to Roman Catholicism.

National Artist for Music Ramon P. Santos once wrote an article at the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) website that spoke about Filipino music as a way to construct a national identity (2003). In the article, he describes how Filipino musical arts have evolved from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century to express national identity. It was in this period that he believes that the seeds have been planted for more exploration and expansion of music as an expression of cultural heritage, even though much of our current music trends have already been influenced by many other cultures.

Though *What?* is not, by its writer's definition, a protest song, it has all the elements that Lawrence Berger (2000) described a protest song would have: it can educate, motivate, and awaken consciousness during a period when social change is much needed. That *What?* MV was released during the COVID-19 pandemic is timely, as the lyrics shown in their lyric video (SBI9, 2021b), particularly the main rap parts, explicitly state that many people with intelligence operate through broken lenses. This suggests that the song is all about questioning the habitual lenses that listeners might have formed over the years. Some of the visitors on their official YouTube channel have left various interpretations in the comments section, but opinion writers

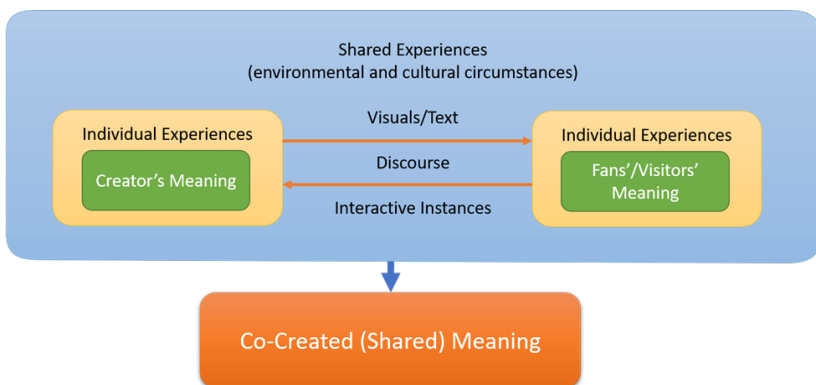
like Max San Diego of Udou.ph were able to summarize some of the more political comments into a conclusion: “It’s true that SBI9 talks about the challenges they had to face to get where they were for the most part of the song *What?* but they have my utmost respect for injecting a few drops of political juice into a song that would’ve done equally well without it”(San Diego, 2021, para. 14).

Meaning Transformation Through Co-Creation

Social media has allowed meanings to transform in such a way that it feels like we are learning a new language, even adding new words to universal dictionaries (Chopra, 2013). The pandemic also saw an increase in streamers and content creators (Needleman, 2020), many of whom develop content with their audience’s feedback in consideration. This can be seen as a process of co-creation. In 2013, a paper presented at the National Communication Research Conference discussed the co-creation process between video game developers and the gamers who play their games, in which shared meaning-making considers four areas: discourse, text/narratives, visual representations, and interactive instances (Lapa, 2013). It seems that the co-creation process is also applicable to any content that is uploaded on social media, especially content that gets created and edited due to feedback.

One other example of this is how an artwork by Tarantadong Kalbo named *Tumindig*, which depicts a hand that has just woken up from worshipping an authoritarian government, became viral (Moral, 2021). The said work was eventually transformed by other artists, each iteration being a new version of *Tumindig*, to announce their stance against an oppressive regime. The same phenomenon can also be observed from a song, and especially a song that has been enhanced by a music video.

Figure 1.
Meaning Co-Creation between Content Developers and Visitors



This diagram considers the following:

- Text – the original lyrics as written by Pablo
- Visuals – the music video that emerged as interpreted by Justin
- Interactive Instances – the back-and-forth communication between SB19’s official channel and its visitors
- Discourse – the themes that emerge from the interactive instances

When Pablo wrote *What?*, he was initially thinking about all the hardships that the group went through, along with the unsavory comments that they would usually get in their channel when they were still starting out. One could say that the initial content was developed with the negative reception they received in mind. With Justin applying visuals to the lyrics, the music video became open to interpretation. Fans started leaving comments on their channel regarding the history of the map, as well as the history of the costumes worn by the band (SB19 Official, 2021). *What?*’s central theme is: “*Iwagayway mo ang watawat.*” Pablo explains it in the group’s interview with GMA Digital Specials (GMA News, 2021): Whatever it is that the listener is experiencing, he can raise his banner proudly. He also talked about how he likes that people have been delving deeper into the meaning, even to the point of creating new ones. Not everyone experienced what SB19 experienced as a boy band that had difficulty breaking into the industry, but there are common grounds between artists and fans: shared country, culture, political history, and most importantly, shared circumstances of being caught in a pandemic with enough time on hand to participate in active discourse.

Transformation to Cultural Anthem

In order to grasp the breadth of *What?* MV’s cultural narrative, this author looked into various reaction YouTube content, mostly from other musicians, filmmakers, as well as content from the crew involved with the production themselves. These were found both through YouTube’s algorithm, which usually serves videos to a user based on his or her viewing habits, and through snowball sampling.

Reaction videos are the most common results from searches about SB19. The *New York Times*’ Sam Anderson (2011) described reaction videos as “footage of people reacting to things” (para. 4). In the case of SB19, many reaction videos came from fans, but there were many other reactors, most of whom are from international channels, who stated that they’ve only heard of SB19 after some fans urged them to react. One of them is metal fan and owner of the Guitars and Bacon YouTube channel, who introduced his video (2021) by saying that his subscribers suggested that he react to the *What?*

MV. Guitars and Bacon's genre is poles apart from SB19's original image, which was that of a Filipino boy group trained by a South Korean company, a fact that gave their first few songs a distinctly bright and cheerful K-pop vibe. He still willingly watched the MV and admitted that the group suddenly sounded "rock band-ish," as he had never heard any of their songs do an intro with two electric guitars harmonizing. He was also one of the first Filipino reactors on YouTube to notice the tribal beats and melodies hidden underneath present-day electric accompaniments. This leads to an impression that SB19 were not only singing about their identities as artists, but they were specifically singing and dancing about being Filipino artists.

Many of the crew who were heavily involved in the production have also released their own video blogs (vlogs) in order to narrate the events that transpired during the making of the music and the MV. In his vlog, one of the MV postproduction editors (Villarojas, 2021) described the process of applying lighting, backgrounds over green screen, and was even very specific about what planet was supposed to be used for Justin's backdrop. He initially says in his vlog that it was Pluto, but later corrects himself in the comments, and stated that the planet was actually Neptune. This is correction is significant, as it suggests the importance of what that choice of planet symbolizes in many myths and cultures.

For further comparisons and references, this author did a search on Philippine indigenous dances, in particular the ones performed by traditional Igorots in the Jackie Annaguey Images channel (2020), and found a similarity with the dance moves that SB19 performed in *What?*. At around one minute into the video of the traditional Igorot dance, the performers, composed of three men, started raising their hands up high then hunching down, bouncing their bodies to the tribal beat of the drums and gongs. SB19 did similar movements during the chorus and most evidently during the MV's dance break. Though *What?*'s melody was heavily accompanied by the metal sound, the understated tribal beat and tempo, as with the dance moves, were also uncannily similar. The music producer Simon Servida (2021), who vlogged about his collaboration with Pablo, revealed that the latter wanted a sound that starts off at 112 beats per minute (*andante moderato*) that transitions to 96 bpm (*moderato*) and back again to tempo 1. If one were to hear the raw version of *What?* as played in Servida's vlog, one might be reminded of The Dawn's *Salamat* (1989) and *Iisang Bangka Tayo* (1992). Coincidentally, *Iisang Bangka Tayo* is a cultural anthem that speaks of brotherhood and nationhood amidst brewing turmoil, but was ingeniously disguised by the band as a song of friendship (OneMusicPH Team, 2016). This precedent opens the possibility that SB19's *What?* might also be a cultural anthem that has both a commercial meaning and an alternative subversive message.

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The following table illustrates the transformation of meaning that can be gleaned when combining the lyrics, which originally was written by Pablo as an expression of their individual and group identities, with the visuals and the sound.

Table 1. What? MV formation of alternative layer of meaning.

Lyrics	Visuals	Sounds	Alternate Layer of Meaning
<i>Nagsimula na pero wal na 'kong balak na tapusin. Di ibig sabihin / pag di tinapos, ako'y hihinto na rin. Alam ko naman na di ako'ng pinaka-ano, magaling. Got no biz with all of you, please. Destiny's I'll be better and—</i>	The camera first points to a road that is lined with torn papers. SB19 slowly emerge from the dark. They walk forward, but Pablo turns back, and makes a gesture with his hand that symbolizes cutting the head off.	Drums and trumpet. The beat is very similar to a march.	The song introduction speaks of emergence of consciousness and embracing our identity despite all the naysayers.
<i>Lahat ng aking basura, uh. Pupilutin, laging dala. Kahit saan pa ko mapunta. Lapat sa lupa aking mga paa.</i>	Ken is a ruler on a throne that sits atop a garbage dump.	This part showcases how low Ken's baritone voice can go. The melody and beat completely deviate from Pablo's intro.	We will use all the negativity being flung into our direction as stepping stones.
<i>Mahiwaga, bawat nakasarang bintang sa'kin dati lahat ngayo'y nagbubukas.</i>	Neptune meeting earth as seen in the window behind Justin.	Melody slows down, clap-like sound in the background	Neptune symbolizes evolution from inertia to expression of consciousness (Greene, 2000).

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Lyrics	Visuals	Sounds	Alternate Layer of Meaning
<p><i>Di na bala para iangat ang bandera. Bara nasa puso niyo na ang tatama. Bang! Ama, salamat at Ikaw ang agimat. Bawat banat, iwagayway mo'ng watawat.</i></p>	<p>SB19 costumes have thin pieces of cloth hanging around their limbs to give emphasis to the flow of their movements. This is where their movements start to resemble those of Igorot traditional dances.</p>	<p>The song slows down to 96 beats per minute. Heavy bass and drums, this part is where the indigenous music influence can be heard the most.</p>	<p>The first chorus reveals that “What?” is actually a play on the word <i>watawat</i> (flag). The lines seem to send a message that there is no need to resort to violence when we want to raise our flags. By the grace of God, we will survive this.</p>
<p><i>Pare-parehas lang tayong may pagkakaiba. Di ba? Ika nila ibang mundo nakikita niya. Mabuting iba, 'di gaya nila. Pikit ang mata, ang tama, wala, ha? Bente-bente, paulit-ulit. Intelihente, subalit ngunit basag ang lente, pinunit-punit. Hinubog ng dalagang bakal, sirit. Tssss.</i></p>	<p>Elevator doors open to reveal Josh in business formal attire. As he raps his part, he slowly loosens up his clothes, takes out a chain, and enters an iron maiden.</p>	<p>This portion is much quieter than the rest of the song (excluding the dance break), and is characterized by the heavy bass.</p>	<p>Combined with the visuals, this part speaks about a dominant political narrative that binds us in chains and keeps us in an abusive contraption. This makes it difficult for even the most intelligent people to break off from because the narrative is viewed through broken lenses.</p>
<p><i>Maniwala, darating ang mga biyaya, higit pa sa lahat-lahat ng nawala. Daming sakuna, di ko ininda. Hindi titigil hanggang sa wakas. What?</i></p>	<p>Stell is shown happily singing on a mountain, an herb slowly growing out of a seed on his palm.</p>	<p>The beat in this part is livelier, and hopeful-sounding.</p>	<p>Believe, have hope, and never stop fighting the good fight. We'll eventually experience a better future.</p>
<p><i>Daming sakuna di ko ininda. Hindi titigil hanggang sa wakas. What?</i></p>	<p>Justin takes off his blindfold and looks at the galaxy by his window.</p>	<p>The melody prepares itself to launch into chorus.</p>	<p>We've gone through so much turmoil, this isn't the time to give up.</p>

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Lyrics	Visuals	Sounds	Alternate Layer of Meaning
<p>Dance break. No singing.</p>	<p>All five members of SB19 are shown wearing the military uniforms from the Philippine Insurrection period. They also show dance movements that are similar to Igorot traditional dance, except this portion exudes a more aggressive atmosphere. Masked backup dancers in white appear in the background.</p>	<p>The drums get more aggressive as the dance break progresses.</p>	<p>This part gives the vibe that SB19 are readying themselves for war.</p>
<p><i>Wag niyong sabihin sa'kin kung ano'ng aking dapat gawin. Di naman kayo natutong making. Saan man dalhin ng hangin, ang aking yagit suot pa rin. Di magpapanggap na ako pero hindi.</i></p> <p>Note: Chorus is now being sung by the backup dancers, with SB19 leading them.</p> <p>Pablo screams, "Pilipinas!" in the middle of the chorus.</p>	<p>Still wearing military uniforms from the Philippine Insurrection period, SB19 go against the flow of the backup dancers. Much similar to how one fights his way out of a stubborn crowd.</p> <p>SB19 reach the scaffolding. The crowd, now led by SB19, suddenly chant, with their fists raised repeatedly to signify fighting spirit.</p>	<p>This is the bridge, where the melody deviates from the original pattern, but slowly segues to the chorus.</p> <p>All accompaniments stop, and this is now just filled with chanting.</p>	<p>Oppose the pervading narrative despite pressure from all sides.</p>

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Lyrics	Visuals	Sounds	Alternate Layer of Meaning
End of Video: What?	Murillo-Velarde Map	Electric guitar fading right after the word “What?” was spoken.	This map plays a significant role in the territorial arbitration between the Philippines and China, when the latter tried to lay claim over Spratly Islands (Mojarro, 2020). It is also the most subversive part of the song as it seems to ask the question: “Are we not going to fight for our sovereignty?”

Conclusion

SB19 is the first Filipino group that was able to break into Billboard’s Next Big Sound chart (de Guzman L. , 2019). As such, they have become somewhat synonymous to the central theme of *What?*, meaning a banner to be raised with pride. As of midyear 2021, the *What?* MV now has close to 13 million views worldwide. With such an influential group making waves, their process of digital co-creation with consumers of their music can contribute to the awakening of cultural awareness that is sleeping deep within many Filipinos. If 1980s era music like The Dawn’s *Iisang Bangka Tayo*, and even visual arts like Tarantadong Kalbo’s *Tumindig* can ignite such awareness, then perhaps the same thing can be said of new Filipino pop music. Like the previously mentioned works of art, *What?* MV depicts not only a picture of personal struggle, but also a bigger message that portrays the state of our society and culture, especially during the pandemic. The music video also emphasizes that despite the trying times, we can always choose to fight and raise our flag. It is a very strong message that delivers a call to action, even if its original meaning had a more commercial appeal.

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