

# All hail, the baklang kanal!: Subversive frivolity in two Filipino influencers

Samuel Cabbuag and Christian Jil Benitez

## Abstract

In November 2020, in a now-deleted tweet, twelve queer Filipino influencers on Twitter were branded as “baklang kanal,” for their noted expressions of dissent against the Rodrigo Duterte regime. Soon after, an online debate ensued: among these twelve influencers, who are the most rightful to be considered as baklang kanal? While the term as commonly used now in Twitter is understood to refer to “gay individuals who are unapologetically outspoken about their views” (Vilog, 2020a), this paper intuits baklang kanal as a means to symbolically negotiate with the audience, toward construction of a seeming authenticity that is crucial for the establishment, maintenance, and expansion of their influencer status—what can be nominated as subversive frivolity, or the “generative power...arising from (populist) discursive framing as marginal, inconsequential, and unproductive” (Abidin, 2016, p. 2). We explore such harnessing of baklang kanal as generative power through a case study of two social media influencers, namely Pipay (@pipaykipay) and Sassa Gurl (@Itssassagurl), exemplary not only for their large followings, but as well as their inclusion in the inaugural Bardsy’s, a parodic people’s choice award facilitated over Twitter, for the Cannes’al (i.e., “kanal”) category.

Keywords: *Baklang kanal*, Filipino social media influencers, Filipino Twittersphere, subversive frivolity, micro-celebrities

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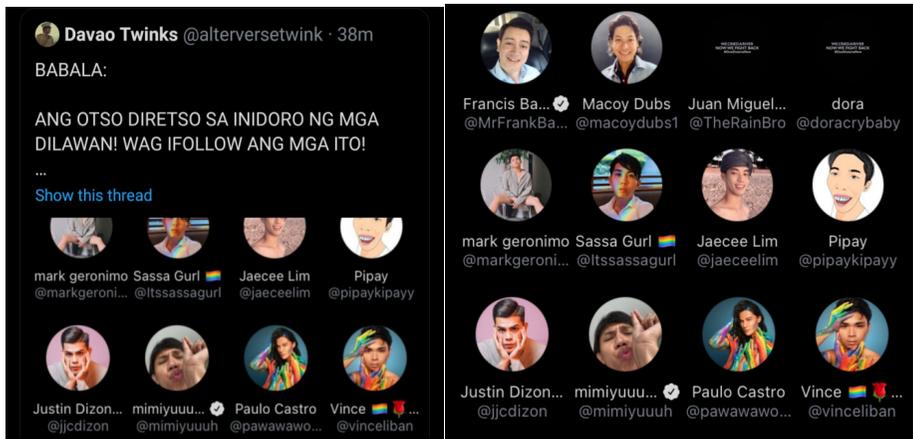
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## “Mga baklang kanal!”

On November 2020, as Typhoon Ulysses ravaged parts of Luzon in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, Twitter user Davao Twinks (@alterversetwink) listed down twelve influencers whom they advised to unfollow, branding them as “dilawan” (see Florentino, 2020, Figure 1), a derogatory term that literally means “yellowed” and is commonly used by the followers of the Duterte administration to refer not only to the supporters of the Liberal Party (whose signature color is yellow), but as well as to the critics of the Duterte administration in general (Cepeda, 2018; Gotinga, 2018). In their now deleted tweets, Davao Twinks criticized these twelve influencers for their supposedly divisive rallying against the national government for its remarkable passivity in the midst of calamities all over Luzon. According to Davao Twinks, these influencers had nothing else to do but to merely defame the beloved president (“puro paninira sa mahal na pangulo”), going as far as calling for his ousting as to let Vice-President Leni Robredo (from the Liberal Party, no less) take the lead instead (see Magsalin, 2020). In the same tweet, Davao Twinks called these influencers as “mga baklang kanal” (lit. “gays from the ditch”), who should be submerged: “#BangonDuterte sige pero ilubog natin itong mga baklang kanal!” (Rise, President Duterte, but let’s submerge these gays from the ditch!).<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1.** Images from a tweet of @LeonaFlorentino (Florentino, 2020) on November 15, 2020, showing Davao Twinks’ deleted tweets regarding Baklang Kanals. Downloaded by the authors.

The attribution of the label “baklang kanal” to these twelve influencers, however, was not an isolated case. According to the influencer Francis Baraan IV (@MrFrankBaraan) (2020b), one of the twelve influencers included in the aforementioned list, “DDS have been calling vocal members of the LGBTQ+ Community Baklang Kanal as a pejorative, [because] they think gays are

immoral, hypersensitive, entitled, trashy, loud, & promiscuous” (para. 1). And yet, in this particular encounter, Baraan also critically overturns the discourse: from being such “pejorative” (para. 1), he reclaims *baklang kanal* as “a term for empowered, brave, social justice warriors” (para. 2). In an earlier tweet, Baraan (2020a) also redefines the term through avowing to being such social justice warrior: “If being *Baklang Kanal* means vigorously & doggedly fighting for a more socially progressive, egalitarian, liberal, and democratic Philippines, then, count me in” (para. 2).

However, despite what appears to be an attempt towards unity, contentions quickly rose on Twitter over such reclamation. For instance, user K Manuel (@thekmanuel) (2020) subtweeted—that is, indirectly alluded in a tweet—that “We need more legitimate representation” (para. 1), pertaining to the then trending redefinition of *baklang kanal* instigated by Baraan. This oblique comment was then retweeted by another user Martin (@talkingtummy) (2020), whose agreement came in the form of an attached revision of Davao Twinks’s list, in which seven of the originally listed twelve influencers were replaced with implied “more legitimate representation[s].”<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, filmmaker Rod Singh’s (@iamrodafrog) (2020b) critique of the trending term was more generous in its frankness:

[I’m just] triggered...with how we praise the *baklang kanals* now but we tend to forget the real *baklang* outside our echo chambers [that are] most likely *mabubunot* [will be picked on] [here on] [T]witter for political correctness and problematic posts. *Baklang kanal* is not a brand and personality. (para. 1)

Although another user attempted to counter Singh’s comment by saying that “this ‘*baklang kanal*’ trending has different context” (Yee, 2020, para. 1), Singh (2020c) remained unmoved, insisting on the Philippine socio-historical roots of the term *baklang kanal* that is, after all, most urgent to keep in mind: “Hindi ako misinformed sa tweets ko. I know what I’m saying at hindi siya out of context” (para. 1) [I’m not misinformed in my tweets. I know what I’m saying and it’s not out of context] .

While Singh’s reminder is, of course, most significant, the context in which the term *baklang kanal* circulates in this particular instance must also be underscored: as Singh (2020c) points out herself, Twitter—and by extension, social media in general—as an “echo chamber” varies greatly from the world that is “real” and “outside”; therefore, it only makes sense that the seemingly same term, in practice, is understood and utilized differently across these discursive fields. After all, even “gender’ [itself] had been opened up to be dissimulating or transitive, in the first place”

(Jacobo et al., 2019), and as such, even attempts to “reclaim” terms such as *baklang kanal*—similar to *queer* and *dyke*—can only be “a process without a clearly marked end” (Brontsema, 2004, p. 14). In this sense, while the call to “gatekeep baklang kanal” (#KALECOMEBACKSTAGE, 2020, para. 1) or to insist its “real-world” definition can be deemed well-intended in its supposed fidelity for the “pagirl [effeminate] culture” (Singh, 2020d, para. 2) that has been often under-, if not misrepresented in media (see Vilog, 2020a),<sup>3</sup> it is also crucial that baklang kanal as predominantly perceived in this specific encounter must be read to be possibly deviating from the said “real world” culture, and toward another that is primarily shaped by the particular context that is the Twittersphere.

This way, it can be intuited that as much as the “real” baklang kanal is necessary to be considered in the rampant discoursing of LGBTQ+ representations in the Philippine digital sphere, the flow of the term *baklang kanal* in the said space itself must also be critically explored, especially since any medium inevitably reconfigures the purported message of a term circulated through and within it (McLuhan, 1964). Here, it is then worth noting that in the Philippine digital sphere, Twitter is particularly known for its specific group of users that are commonly branded as “woke,” that is, those who are most socially aware, and vocal in their expressions of dissent to the government (Filoteo, 2018; Presto, 2019); indeed, it is widely regarded that even “within 280 characters, a Twitter user can start a trend, tell a story, and spark a movement” (Pedida & Gozum, 2020, para. 1), especially since these woke populations are able to move across various online platforms and thus can potentially assemble a network of remarkable scale.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, it then becomes apparent why *baklang kanal*, in Baraan’s (2020a; 2020b) avowed attempt to “reclaim” it, suggests of a rhetoric primarily founded on being a “social justice warrior”: precisely because this redefining is produced from the Philippine Twittersphere, a particular field with a signature culture of “wokeness,” as perpetuated by users such as Baraan himself. Similarly, it is then by this culture of wokeness that Singh’s desire to emphasize instead the supposed “real world” definition of *baklang kanal* can be interpreted as a parallel instance of being woke, with its most pronounced concern for what lies “outside [the] echo chambers” (Singh, 2020b, para. 1), even though such wokeness is demonstrated in a turn that appears to counter the then-trending woke sentiment vocalized by Baraan. In other words, despite their seeming differences, these two attempts at articulating the *baklang kanal* are most similar in their very occurrence in the Philippine Twittersphere and thus their being implicated in its predominant culture of wokeness.

With this recognition of the critical role that the digital sphere plays in forming possible understandings of baklang kanal, this study then attempts

to characterize it as a specific performance of the already performative *kabaklaan* (see Garcia, 2008; see also Butler, 1988; 1990) as it is presently circulated in the Philippine digital sphere. Keeping in mind the existent extensive scholarship on performances of the related notions of gayness, queerness, and trans-ness<sup>5</sup> in the digital sphere (see for instance Abidin, 2019; Austria, 2004; Austria, 2007; Cavalcante, 2019; Duguay, 2016; O’Riordan & Phillips, 2007), this study aims to particularly contribute through attending to the online performance of the Filipino kabaklaan that is specifically reconfigured by a simultaneous rehearsal of being *kanal*, amid other renditions of the former that “carry various experiences” (Evangelista, 2019, para. 4). Through such emphasis on the latter, the study then aspires, albeit in a most preliminary manner, to “put pressure on [presumed] ‘universality’” of “globally legible signifiers such as ‘gay,’ ‘queer,’ and ‘trans’” (Jacobó et al., 2019, p. 5), and even “bakla” itself, in both the Philippine national context and its digital sphere.

### **“Loud, unbothered and *kalat*”**

While commonly imagined “long...before Twitter owned it” (Vilog, 2020a, para. 5) as those who are “bargas, walang poise, walang ka-pino-pino sa katawan” (Push Team, 2019, para. 4) [coarse, without poise, without any fineness in one’s body], or “walang patumanggang magsalita, walang pakialam sa mga tao kung may hurtful words [na] masabi” (PEP, 2019, 0:35-0:43) [candid in speech, not minding others even if there would be hurtful words said], the baklang kanal is figured most recently as “gay individuals who are unapologetically outspoken about their views—emphasis on the unapologetic,” and can thus be easily described as “loud, unbothered and *kalat*<sup>6</sup> [i.e., ‘messy’]” (Vilog, 2020a, para. 3). This latter description, it must be noted, is given by a think piece published around the time the contentions of being baklang kanal erupted over Twitter; as such, this attempt at a preliminary, although more timely definition of the term is recognized to be primarily related to, if not an offshoot from the perception of the baklang kanal of “people who camp out at Twitter dot com” (Vilog, 2020a, para. 3). And so, it then becomes understandable why in the same attempt at defining the term, the aforementioned qualities of being “loud, unbothered and *kalat*” (para. 3) is importantly expounded to be mere consequences of the baklang kanal being implicitly principled, “know[ing] [their] beliefs and... stick[ing] to them 100 percent” (Vilog, 2020a, para. 3). In another definition of the term, disseminated months after the controversy it has instigated over Twitter, this characteristic conviction of the baklang kanal is ultimately subsumed in the “woke” rhetoric, having described them as someone who is “not afraid to speak out their minds for the causes they believed in, like

HIV awareness”—in other words, a social justice warrior indeed, an “online personality,” as in a “social media influencer” (LoveYourself iComm, 2021, para. 7).

While it is an imperative certainly to “not forget that ‘baklang kanal’ has deeper roots” (Villog, 2020a, para. 4) in the Philippine context, such as with “stereotypes of it [being] further reinforced by media using gay characters for comic relief” (para. 5), it is also crucial to consider the more recent figurations of the baklang kanal, especially as their being iconically “loud, unbothered and kalat” if only for the particular present endeavor to understand the term as it is circulated in the Philippine digital sphere. This is because these aforementioned characterizations critically, and consciously, situates the baklang kanal in the world of social media, a discursive space where authenticity is most aspired, especially by micro-celebrities such as social media influencers (Marwick, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Hall, 2015; Senft, 2008). Particularly in the digital sphere, audiences primarily expect these personas to be more authentic than their celebrity counterparts, since the former are not bound by the traditional “star-making system” (Marwick, 2013, p. 119), thus making them more seemingly accessible and ordinary, and most expected as well to exude authenticity in majority, if not all of their contents (see Abidin, 2018, p. 11-12). Performed as such, authenticity then becomes reminiscent of Goffman’s (1959) description of presentation of oneself in everyday life, dividing it into the “back stage” and the “front stage” (see also Murthy, 2018); this way, authenticity can also be deemed as active in terms of practice: it is a virtue that is, above all, “negotiated symbolically” (Marwick, 2013, p. 121) through deliberate performances such as casually interacting with one’s followers (see Abidin, 2015), or in the case of the baklang kanal, being loud, unbothered, and messy, in front of their followers.<sup>7</sup>

That authenticity is actively practiced matters to what Abidin (2016) argues as subversive frivolity, or “the under-visibility and under-estimated generative power of an object or practice arising from its (populist) discursive framing as marginal, inconsequential, and unproductive” (p. 2). In other words, it is the power that helps micro-celebrities to establish, maintain, and expand their following through practices that are considered most banal, as in the case of posting contents “without crafting a behind-the-scenes or back-end persona” (Abidin & Cover, 2019, p. 220)—a gesture that is all the more powerful because seemingly trivial in its deployment. While Abidin (2016) particularly observes this phenomenon in her studies on Instagram selfies of Singaporean influencers, various contents of family influencers on platforms such as Twitter and YouTube (Abidin, 2017), and queer YouTuber influencers (Abidin & Cover, 2019), in this study, we remark on its similar

manifestation on the social media contents of baklang kanal influencers, specifically across Twitter and TikTok, in which they perform their most iconic characteristics as previously enumerated. As such, the baklang kanal is intuited to be an aestheticization as well of authenticity, which ultimately contributes to the cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu, 1984) of these influencers, allowing them to build up their generative powers online.

While the performance of being baklang kanal relates to the agency and labor of these influencers in curating their content and overall digital persona, it is also noteworthy that their being described and identified as “baklang kanal” is simultaneously ascribed and affirmed to them by the affective publics that expresses utmost sentiments and support to them (Papacharissi, 2015); in other words, the being baklang kanal of these influencers is also produced by the same public that consumes their very content. This way, it can be inferred that while the identity of being baklang kanal is a consequence of their performance of subversive frivolity, it also dovetails to Weber’s (1978) notion of charisma, that is, an ascribed characteristic that gives power to a charismatic leader. In the case of baklang kanal influencers, not only do they rehearse this identity online, they are also perceived and affirmed to be charismatic enough to lead—or more appropriately, to influence—as such “baklang kanal” by the community that follows and supports them. Twitter and social media at large can then be valued as a platform that affords (see Nagy & Neff, 2015) a relationship between these influencers and their followers, allowing the maintenance of the former’s generative with the latter’s verification, and thus further solidifying their very relational status as micro-celebrities and fans.

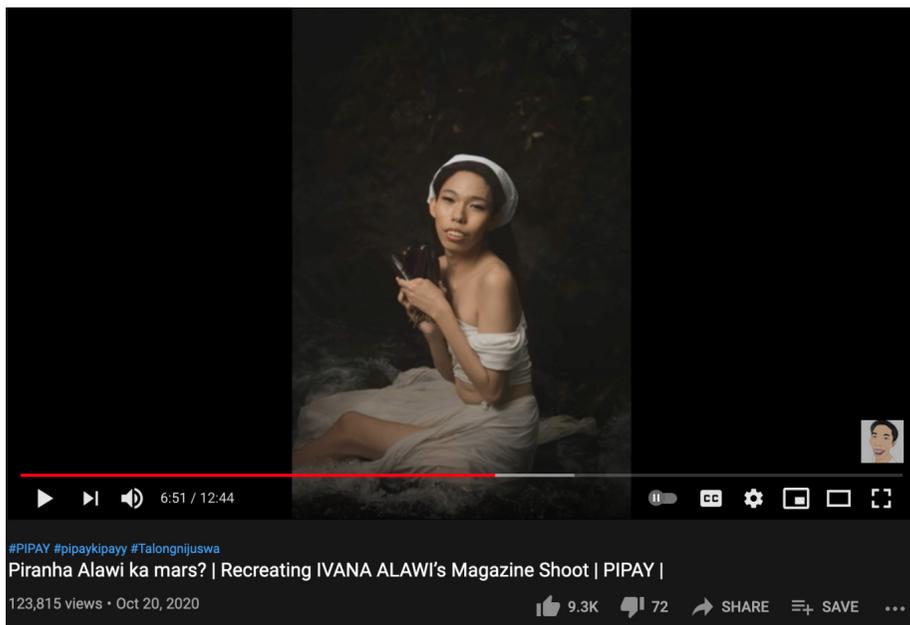
Such being ascribed identity of the baklang kanal is already made apparent in the aforementioned debate that the term has instigated on Filipino Twittersphere, regarding its supposed reclamation (Baraan, 2020a; 2020b) and the subsequent clamor for its “more legitimate representation” (Manuel, 2020, para. 1): that there are competing understandings of the purportedly same identity only attests to its being constantly negotiated by the involved affective publics. And so, to characterize the constructions of authenticity that are deemed acceptable as “baklang kanal” by the Philippine digital sphere, this essay turns to two specific social media influencers ascribed with such identity: Pipay (@pipaykipayy) and Sassa Gurl (@Itssassagurl), who are notable as micro-celebrities not only for their large followings,<sup>8</sup> but as well as their particular inclusion to the Cannes’al Award (i.e., “kanal” award), in the inaugural Bardy Awards, a parodic people’s choice award facilitated over Twitter. Cited as the award to be given “sa taong tingin niyo ay nagpakita ng peak kakanalan at di nahiyang ipakita kung gaano siya kabalahura...aka ang pinakakanal for you this 2020 sa Twitter” (satan, 2020a) [to the person

who you think has shown peak crassness and was not embarrassed to show their brazenness...a.k.a. the most *kanal* for you this 2020, on Twitter], Pipay and Sassa Gurl were particularly nominated to the Cannes'al category for their contents that originated in the platform TikTok and went viral on Twitter and Facebook: Pipay performing as a stereotypical mother-and-daughter tandem; and Sassa Gurl as a group of no-holds barred female high school students. Through an analysis of their respective performances, we attempt to preliminarily describe the deliberate performances therein of being *baklang kanal*, more than its typical qualification as loudness, unbotheredness, and messiness, as to articulate the generative power of this seemingly authentic and inconsequential identity.

### **Pipay Kipay and the contrived “Malupang pusod”**

Although already known for their short TikTok skits that throw “subtle political shades” (dela Cruz, 2020; “Pipay Kipay and the humor...” 2020), Pipay’s status as an influencer can be argued to have reached another level on October 21, 2020. A little more than a week after the unveiling of actress-influencer Ivana Alawi’s photo shoot for *Preview Magazine*, which “[took] inspiration from the ‘bold’ films of the 80’s” and featured her as the star for the fictional film “Labada ni Ligaya” [Ligaya’s Laundry] (ABS-CBN News, 2020a; Pascual, 2020), Pipay released their own set of photos recreating the said fashion shoot: dubbing themselves as “Piranha Alawi” (see Figure 2) as a way of poking fun at their signature dentals,<sup>9</sup> the shoot presents Pipay at a creek, in sheer beige and white dresses reminiscent of Alawi’s, while holding several eggplants that has come to be associated with him after their viral parody song *Talong ni Juswa* [Joshua’s Eggplant] (Pipay, 2020f). After earning over 80,000 likes and 10,000 retweets on Twitter, Pipay’s recreation of Alawi’s photos attracted even the attention of ABS-CBN News (2020b), one of the mainstream news outlet in the country, in whose short feature of Pipay identifies them—and therefore canonizes them as well—as a “social media star.”<sup>10</sup>

However, Pipay’s inclusion in the Bardy Awards for the Cannes'al Category is cited to be due to their “Mareng Cynthialyn performance in ‘Lupa sa Pusod’” (satan, 2020a), referring to Pipay’s (2020e) TikTok video titled *Malupang Pusod*, in which they play both the roles of mother and daughter, namely Matet and Gina (see Figure 3). In the said video skit, as Gina is seen dancing, presumably making a TikTok video of their own—and hence, a moment of meta-TikTok, one can say—Matet barges into the room, asking her daughter about a missing ladle.<sup>11</sup> Upon seeing her daughter wearing a cropped top, Matet begins to chastise Gina about it, which the latter interrupts, saying that it should not matter since she, as a



**Figure 2.** Pipay's (2020k) *Piranha Alawi* photo shoot vlog.

female individual, can dress however she wants. After the rather lengthy monologue of the daughter—an overtly didactic moment for the audience, as to effectually debunk the common fallacious causation between cases of sexual harassment and clothing—the mother subverts the seriousness that seems to have overtaken the atmosphere: Matet clarifies to Gina that she does not have a problem with her daughter wearing a cropped top; what bothers Matet instead is the fact that her daughter's exposed navel is filthy, described as the titular “malupang pusod,” or an earth-filled navel. Matet tells her daughter, “E paano kung iba ang nakakita niyan? E di tinayuan na ‘yan ng subdivision!” (00:48) [What if someone else would’ve seen it? They might have already built a subdivision there!].



**Figure 3.** Gina (left) dances for a TikTok video, as Matet (right) barges in. Screenshots from Pipay's (2020e) “Malupang Pusod.”

Pipay's performance in "Malupang Pusod" can thus be easily appreciated as a comedic content that aspires to convey a woke reminder in general—that is, a sharp commentary regarding the rampant sexual violence committed on women, which in the dominant toxic culture in the country are often blamed back to the women themselves, for instance under the guise of mindless deeming of certain clothes as "inappropriate" for them to wear, especially in public spaces (see Virtudes, 2020; "Why Jennifer Laude's killing...," 2020). However, what is more crucial in the said performance is its utmost timeliness: here, it is important to take note that just days prior Pipay published this TikTok video, on September 7, 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte had given an absolute pardon to Joseph Scott Pemberton, the United States Marine convicted for the murder of the Filipino trans woman Jennifer Laude, granting him an early release (Santos, 2020); at the time, the decision of the President—amid the present COVID-19 pandemic, nevertheless—prompted an online outcry for justice, under the trending hashtag #JusticeForJenniferLaude (Virtudes, 2020b). Keeping this context in mind, as well as Pipay's self-proclamation that majority of ideas for their contents are derived from current events (*Pipay Kipay and the humor...*, 2020), the didactic moment then in their Tiktok video can be further valued for its critical urgency, as its historical situatedness renders the performance to be most sensible and appropriate, and not a merely random content generated by such an influencer. This way, true to baklang kanal fashion, Pipay embodies a certain loudness and unbotheredness, one that also particularly strives to be, among others, "a voice... for the country and its people" ("Pipay Kipay and the humor..." 2020, para. 17).

And yet, contrary to Baraan's (2020a) aforementioned avowal of being baklang kanal as clearly being a social justice warrior, Pipay's deliberate political participation as an influencer eludes the tendency to take itself too seriously, if not self-righteously: as demonstrated in Pipay's *Malupang Pusod* skit, the inclination toward seriousness that could have been easily affected by the didactic moment is ultimately subverted too by the most self-deprecating punchline regarding being unhygienic, that is, the implied skipping of shower which causes such "earth-filled navel." More than its comedic effect, it is critical to note how such remark on filthiness exemplifies the banality on Pipay's contents that is important for their self-representation as a particular influencer, that is, as Pipay herself: contrary to the usual association of curation to a certain orderliness, if not neatness (see for instance Abidin, 2016), it is this filthiness that affords Pipay their being an influencer that is also specifically considered as a baklang kanal—loud, unbothered, and messy, with the latter exhibited in the most physical sense. And with these qualities performed with stark candor, through the

avatar of stereotypical Filipino mother-and-daughter Matet and Gina, the result can only be generative: the rather mundane detail such as the navel left unwashed cultivates “a sense of community and trust [that] is fostered as ‘social capital’” (Abidin, 2018, p. 33), which has allowed Pipay over time to emerge as the influencer—the “social media star” indeed—that they have become.

At the same time, it is also important to underscore that these qualities observable in Pipay’s performances are also a seeming authenticity that is most contrived: even “everydayness,” to simply put it, is curated (Abidin, 2018). One can easily infer the curatorial at work in Pipay’s self-presentation by the mere existence of other TikTok skits that also feature Matet and Gina, as well as their neighbor counterparts, mother-and-daughter Cynthialyn and Tintin (for instance, see Pipay, 2020i, 2020o, and 2020p): through these similar skits, despite the lack of any discernible linear continuity—that is, a distinct narrative—among them, a sense of a familiar world is still produced, just by the mere reappearance of the said characters. The deliberateness in these recurring appearances becomes more obvious when juxtaposed to Pipay’s TikTok skits prior to September 6, 2020: in these videos, although the characters of Matet and Gina were also featured, they did not exist yet as mother and daughter, appearing instead in various relations, such as two friends (see Pipay, 2020a, 2020b), or as a sari-sari store vendor and a customer, respectively (see Pipay, 2020c, 2020d). This way, the consistency of Matet and Gina as mother-and-daughter in Pipay’s TikTok skits since the aforementioned date only attests to the formulization of their characters, especially after the *Malupang Pusod* skit went viral on September 10, 2020.<sup>12</sup>

This element of deliberateness is crucial for it affords Pipay—and by extension, influencers at large—to produce contents in TikTok that are particularly inclined toward being viral or spreadable.<sup>13</sup> As the platform is primarily for “short-form mobile videos” (“Our Mission,” n.d.), while might be simply dismissed as more limiting than YouTube where creators can upload videos that can be hours long, TikTok encourages influencers in fact to compress their content into something that is more digestible, and if proved to be remarkably entertaining, can be pushed easily enough for virality across various platforms (see Jenkins, Green, & Ford, 2013). In other words, it is this very seeming limitation of TikTok that influencers can also deliberately harness, as to produce contents that are ultimately memeable—that is, spreadable and replicable cultural units (see Laurent, 1999), commonly implied in the present digital sphere as primarily funny<sup>14</sup>—which, in turn, would enable them to generate themselves as “meme celebrities,” personalities whose “extended and sustained” fame can be smoothly translated “into a stable, sustained, and usually diversified commercial

business” (Abidin, 2018, p. 50). And in Pipay’s case, such generative power can be seen in their eventual use and reuse of their characters Matet and Gina, as well as Cynthialyn and Tintin, in various TikTok skits that while maintaining of the iconic baklang kanal characteristics in earlier iterations, are now notably sponsored (see Pipay, 2020n, 2020p, 2020q, and 2020r). With Pipay now clearly monetizing their platform, one can then intuit that it is also through Pipay’s accumulated capital, economic and otherwise, that their recreation of Ivana Alawi’s fashion shoot became possible in the first place.<sup>15</sup>

The perceived deliberateness in Pipay’s contents allows then for a rereading of the punchline in their *Malupang Pusod* skit: while indeed exemplifying of the banality that is most significant for Pipay’s self-representation, the filthy navel must also be a detail that is contrived toward the persona they intend to project online. Here, it is instructive to note how the said detail simultaneously operates as a “political shade,” as the particular description of the filthy navel as “malupa,” is critically warned to attract those who might want to gentrify such piece of land: Matet cautions Gina, “E paano kung iba ang nakakita niyan? E di tinayuan na ‘yan ng subdivision!” (Pipay, 2020e, 00:48) ([What if someone else would’ve seen it? They might have already built there a subdivision!], alluding to the rampant conversion of lands, often agricultural, into subdivisions and malls.<sup>16</sup> This way, the supposed merely comedic image of the filthy navel turns out to be just as part of another political commentary in the skit: even the seemingly mundane is, in fact, contrived to render the typical rhetoric of “empowered, brave, social justice warriors” (Baraan, 2020a, para. 1). At the same time, it is also through this particular manner of deploying the dominant woke rhetoric that Pipay can be ultimately differentiated as a baklang kanal: if the brand of activism that dominates the internet sphere today has been criticized for its tendency to navel-gaze (see Whelan, 2020), in *Malupang Pusod*, Pipay unwittingly evokes the same idiom as to poke fun at it. As such, Pipay’s skit ultimately becomes a moment of reflexivity while participating in the same online political sphere that, as Singh (2020b) has critically reminded us, generally remains to be an “echo chamber.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Sassa Gurl and the Brazen “Chicana mima universe”**

In the middle of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the reality show *Pinoy Big Brother* (PBB) opened on October 19, 2020 the auditions for its latest iteration: titled as *Pinoy Big Brother Connect*, it allowed Filipinos all over the world to audition to become the newest housemates through the online platform Kumu App (Push Team, 2020). As the auditions began, many TikTok users uploaded skits that imagine scenarios inside the PBB house,

often featuring its signature Confession Room as their virtual background, letting these users act out instances in which they either nominate their fellow housemates for elimination or confess to Big Brother, or Kuya as he is locally called, their seemingly random, and yet still deliberately funny thoughts.

Among the uploaded skits was Sassa Gurl's (2020o), which features the characters Chicana, Princess, Angel, and Camille from her viral TikTok series. Dubbed as *PBB Gangster Edition*, Sassa Gurl's PBB scenario finds these characters nominating each other, frankly citing reasons such as the others' mere ugliness, bad breath, body odor, being a social climber, or stealing of the weekly budget (see Figure 4). The characters' notably brazen descriptions of each other, however, are only expected from them, for as Sassa Gurl (2020s) herself explains, these characters are deliberately "masyadong kanal"—too brazen—precisely because they are "jejemon [that is a] gangster,"<sup>18</sup> as in the rest of the "Chicana mima cinematic universe" that earned Sassa Gurl the nomination for the Cannes'al Category in the Bardy Awards (satan, 2020a). In the said TikTok "cinematic universe," the four characters are figured as public school students (see Sassa Gurl, 2020s) who would often get into *bardagulan* or "air[ing of] frustrations, grievances, or good old-fashioned fury" ("The nominees for the first-ever 'Bardagulan,' 2020, para. 1), typically leading to challenging each other for a "square" or fist fight. For instance, in Sassa Gurl's (2020a) video that first introduced the characters of this TikTok universe, the "gangster" Chicana visits (*dumayo*) the classroom of another section, confronting another student, Princess, for the false rumors she has been purportedly spreading. The video then culminates with Chicana taunting Princess—"Square tayo dito, ano?!" (00:40) [Come, let's fight!]<sup>19</sup>—only for them to both back down as a teacher is said to arrive in the classroom.



**Figure 4.** Chicana and her "friends" inside *Pinoy Big Brother* according to the order of their appearance in Sassa Gurl's (2020o) TikTok video. From left to right: Camille, Princess, Chicana, and Angel.

Brazen encounters like this are the staple in Sassa Gurl's "Chicana mima universe": whenever the characters appear, especially the titular Chicana and her rival Princess, there always seems to be a reason for them to say things that are rather too candid, often leading to their outright picking of fights<sup>19</sup>—be it inside the classroom (Sassa Gurl, 2020i; 2020k), in the school grounds (see Sassa Gurl, 2020b), in a computer shop (Sassa Gurl, 2020c; 2020d; 2020e), on the street (Sassa Gurl, 2020j), in a wake (Sassa Gurl, 2020f), in a drinking session (Sassa Gurl, 2020g), and even, as already mentioned, inside the PBB House itself (Sassa Gurl, 2020l; 2020m; 2020n; 2020o; 2020p). Bearing in mind the notable regularity of aggressiveness across these skits, it makes sense then that similar to Pipay's Matet-and-Gina skits, despite not having any clear overarching narrative that could definitively thread the videos together, they still form a seemingly coherent "universe," one that is ultimately grounded on such remarkable tactlessness of their recurring characters. In other words, it can be posited that more than the mere reappearances of the four high schoolers in Sassa Gurl's TikTok videos, it is the consistent loudness, unbotheredness, and messiness of these characters—indeed, their very being *baklang kanal*—that curate these videos into a semblance of wholeness.

In turn, this coherent universe built upon the aforementioned characteristics affords Sassa Gurl the generative power that she presently enjoys. As such, Sassa Gurl's being a *baklang kanal* influencer, as performed through the avatars of Chicana and her friends, can be intuited as in fact exhibiting of their *exceptional quality*, that is, their "technical capital" that pertains to the "realm of highly specialized skills" possessed (Abidin, 2019, p. 29; see also Yardi, 2010). Here, it is critical to note that while Sassa Gurl's showcasing of such iconic *baklang kanal* qualities may seem merely quotidian, given that "the attention economy of the internet is more democratic, and embracing of various skill sets, both elite and mundane" (Abidin, 2018, p. 29), these qualities can also be heralded as exceptional a skill set; after all, as previously mentioned, these characteristics—as well as being *baklang kanal* itself—are not only simply perceived but also attributed by the very affective publics that support their idol (Papacharissi, 2015). And in Sassa Gurl's case, such ascription of exceptionalism to their technical capital in performing the *baklang kanal* is ultimately attested by the celebration of their "Chicana mima universe," concretized by the virality that this TikTok universe has achieved,<sup>20</sup> as well as the overall positive appraisal it has gained in the Philippine digital sphere.

The latter includes, of course, Sassa Gurl's nomination in the Bardy Awards, under the Cannes'al category. However, more important than this perhaps is Sassa Gurl's nomination for and eventual bagging of the Best

Picture in the Bardy Awards, dubbed as given to the most “iconic...video reactions/editing (or any video related content) [in the] *bardagulan*” (satan, 2020b, para. 1) for the year 2020. Particularly cited for this category is Sassa Gurl’s (2020k) video titled *mga squammy girl nanagpaparinigang sa room* [squammy girls<sup>21</sup> who throw passive-aggressive remarks in the classroom], posted on September 4, 2020 (see Figure 5). Here, two girls are seen insulting each other while pretending to be not talking to and about each other, saying outright brazen things about the other’s face (“Ayoko sa mga mukhang bisugo,” (00:00-00:01), [don’t like those who look like a jobfish]); credibility (“Kapal ng kilay, kapal din ng mukha, ‘di magbayad ng utang,” (00:06), [her eyebrows are as thick as their face for not pay off her debts]); character (“Ang init, ah—girl, baka matunaw ka, plastic ka pa naman,” (00:20-00:22), [it’s so hot, girl, you might melt because you’re so plastic, i.e., not real]); body odor (“Sana all, maasim,” (00:22), [don’t you wish everyone smells just as sour]), bad breath (“Baligtad siguro ang bituka niya kaya amoy utot ang hininga niya,” (00:09-00:12), [her intestines must be upside-down, that’s why her breath smells like a fart]); and even dandruff (“Sosyal ng ulo, may diamonds in the sky,” (00:28-00:29), [her hair’s so extravagant it has diamonds from the sky]). The bardagulan then ends with Princess and Chicana faking a smile at each other, and the former telling the latter off with a sarcastic “God bless na lang sa’yo” (00:31-00:35), [May God bless you]—a clapback or sassy retort implied to culminate the tension with either a diffusion of their heated exchange or an escalation of it into an outright physical fight, although left unrealized in the skit.



**Figure 5.** Two “squammy girls” throwing passive aggressive remarks to each other in Sassa Gurl’s (2020k) TikTok video. Screenshots by the authors.

From this technically award-winning TikTok video, Sassa Gurl's eventual *PBB Gangster Edition* skit, posted twenty days after the *Squammy girls* video, can then be perceived as a repetition of the latter, although in a different context.<sup>22</sup> It is crucial to underscore here that on Sassa Gurl's part, such repetition can only be deliberate, as they must have only known that this humor affords them their generative power online: as Sassa Gurl themselves (2020aa) explains in their PBB follow-up audition video, "comedy ang aking talent, dahil sabi nila, kapag wala ka daw ganda, dapat may sense of humor ka" (00:00-00:05), [being comedic is my talent, because as they say, if you don't have beauty, you should at least have a sense of humor]. They further describe this talent as a weapon ("armas," "sandata") as to especially persist against and through "discrimination," demonstrating its combative potential through performing theoretical instances in which they supposedly deflect misogynistic remarks with most brazen, yet still supposedly comedic rebuttals.<sup>23</sup> Framed this way, it can then be deduced that Sassa Gurl's humor is ultimately founded on the same woke rhetoric abound in the Filipino digital sphere: as inferred from Sassa Gurl's appraisal of their own bardagulan humor, the characteristic loudness, unbotheredness, and messiness of their humor are therefore not simply inconsequential or unproductive, but subversive too in the final analysis, in its critical engagement with the present society at large.

At the same time, as already implied thus far, Sassa Gurl's brand of humor is subversively frivolous too in Abidin's (2016) generative sense: it is through their harnessing of this signature baklang kanal persona that affords Sassa Gurl to establish, maintain, and expand their present stature as an influencer in the Philippine digital sphere. And more than Sassa Gurl's nominations and win in the Bardy Awards, an apparent manifestation of the generative power they have accumulated is the eventual online rallying for their inclusion as an official housemate in the roster of PBB Connect, under the mock hashtag #IpasokSaBPIsiMima (Let Mima into BPI)<sup>24</sup> (see Sassa Gurl, 2020y; see also Nanno Na Kha, 2020).

After inducting twelve housemates into the PBB House on the live launch of the program on December 6, 2020, a "major twist" was then announced: "for the first time in 'PBB' history, the outside world has the power to decide who among the 117 aspiring housemates in Kumu [a social media platform] will enter Big Brother's house as additional housemates" (ABS-CBN, 2020c, para. 4). Among these aspiring housemates was Sassa Gurl, who was already a crowd favorite then, given their relative fame online. These aspiring housemates were then to hold livestream sessions through Kumu from December 6 to 27, 2020, to determine in several stages which of them will earn the most number of diamonds—that is, virtual gifts

that need to be purchased (see “Kumu currency,” n.d.)—from the public, and who will then be named as the additional official housemates (ABS-CBN, 2020c). Sassa Gurl, however, was eliminated in the selection process by December 13, 2020, since they were not able to earn suffice diamonds to make it to the cut for that particular stage. Overall, she landed 56th out of the 117 aspiring housemates, garnering over 2.06 million diamonds in the process (Sassa Gurl, 2020x).

However, what is most peculiar in Sassa Gurl’s PBB audition journey is their unabashed criticism of the program’s very system while also currently participating in it. For instance, on December 11, 2020, as Sassa Gurl (2020w) promoted on TikTok their then journey as an aspiring PBB housemate, it is notable how they criticized in jest the traditional star system at work in the said program: she remarks on the reliance of PBB—and by extension, the ABS-CBN network—to the formula of love teams, that is, “two usually young actors who are promoted as a romantic couple” (Belleza, 2017, para. 4). Responding to a tweet made by the official PBB account (2020) asking whether the public has already a love team in mind among the housemates, in their signature *baklang kanal* persona, Sassa Gurl (2020w) says, “Diyos ko, Kuya, ilang season na ng PBB, paulit-ulit na lang ‘yung mga love team...” (00:25-00:30) [My God, Kuya, how many seasons of PBB has it already been, and it’s still the love team...].<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Sassa Gurl (2020w) points out the seeming bias in the housemate selection process, frequently leaning toward those who fit the stereotype of current Filipino actors: “Puro guwapo at magaganda nga talaga ‘yung nakuha [ng housemate]—nakakaloka—at mga conyo<sup>26</sup> pa. Diyos ko, pagpasok ko talaga doon, obligado talaga akong maging funny” (00:35-00:45) [They’re all really handsome and pretty, those who were selected [as housemates]—it’s crazy—and they’re also English-speakers. My God, if I ever get in, I will really be obliged to be funny].

Another example of Sassa Gurl’s criticism of PBB as a system can be found in their tweet on December 7, 2020: here, a supposed recording of their livestream from Kumu is attached, in which they “accidentally” blurted out that they are not really a fan of the platform (see Sassa Gurl, 2020u). This tweet precedes another, saying “Feel ko talaga matatagal [sic] ako sa audition process na to” (para. 1) [I really feel that I will be eliminated from this audition process], with an attached screencap of a system message from Kumu, warning them regarding a certain “inappropriate content during the Livestream” (Sassa Gurl, 2020t, para. 1). And although no direct connection between the two tweets was ever made, online tabloids were quick to make an issue out of them, with headlines such as “Not even in the PBB House yet, did an Aspiring Housemate get disqualified?” (Mataro, 2020; see also LionhearTV, 2020). With these framings, the translation of Sassa

Gurl's "Chicana mima universe," with its known-for iconic baklang kanal characteristics, to their online persona as a whole has been completed: the most brazen Chicana, Princess, and the rest of the gang have been projected onto Sassa Gurl's online identity. In other words, the former are now not simply characters that Sassa Gurl assumes in their TikTok skits, but the latter's very seeming digital authenticity already—indeed, their baklang kanal self—as extensively curated through their engagements in the larger digital sphere.

Sassa Gurl's eventual incapability to get into the PBB House becomes telling then of the limits of the generative power that they possess: despite being able to attain the status as an influencer given their being baklang kanal, the decision of the ABS-CBN network as a whole to exclude her from one of the pre-selected housemates reveals that perhaps, their characteristic loudness, unbotheredness, and messiness are still deemed to be unacceptable in the more mainstream platform such as the said television and new media network. Furthermore, it also reveals how despite having over million views in their TikTok skits, especially those that had helped her gain traction and virality, Sassa Gurl was incapable of translating these into actual votes for their audition. And yet, at the same time, it is also important to consider how such seemingly failure to break into the traditional star system maybe the very subversiveness that Sassa Gurl's frivolity performs: after all, as Sassa Gurl (2020w) was supposedly promoting their aspiration to become an official PBB housemate on a TikTok posted on December 11, 2020, they remind everyone, "Siyempre dahil pandemya ngayon, hindi ko inu-urge 'yung audiences ko natulad ko ring nasa laylayan ng lipunan na magbigay sa akin ng diamonds sa Kumu. Kaya tinatawag ko ang atensiyon ng PhilHealth.... Bigyan niyo naman ako ng diamonds.... Onti lang 'yan sa mga nakuha niyo—charot!" (01:12-01:32) [Since we're in a pandemic, I'm not urging my audience who are like me, at the fringes of the society, to give me diamonds in Kumu. So I'm calling the attention of PhilHealth.... Give me diamonds.... That's just a few of what you've taken—charot!]. With this "political shade" that clearly pertains to the missing Php 15 billion funds in the PhilHealth (see Jalea & Peralta, 2020), it then becomes more apparent that indeed, for Sassa Gurl, while they thrive within the Philippine digital sphere, there still always remain other things to critically consider "outside [these] echo chambers" (Singh, 2020b, para. 1).<sup>27</sup>

### **"Hail, hail, baklang kanal!"**

Amid the continuous negotiations that surround the term, this paper has attempted to articulate an understanding of baklang kanal as it has recently circulated in the Philippine digital sphere. This has been executed through

turning to two Filipino influencers who have been ascribed with the status of being *baklang kanal*, namely Pipay and Sassa Gurl, notable for their extensive followings and similar inclusion in the Cannes’al category of the inaugural Bardy Awards of Filipino Twittersphere. Through looking at their respective contents on TikTok, as well as YouTube and Twitter, their performances of the deemed iconic characteristics related to the said digital identity—that is, loudness, unbotheredness, and messiness—were underscored, as to further explicate on the general perception of them as *baklang kanal*. Moreover, in these readings, related notions of contrivedness and brazenness were also explored, as to emphasize how these aforementioned influencers have been successful in their deliberate rehearsals of a subversive frivolity that affords them the opportunity to establish, maintain, and expand their very stature as influencers, as well as to critique at the same time the systems in which they themselves are implicated and participating.

Given the perceptible procedure in the construction of a digital identity that can be eventually considered as *baklang kanal*, the latter can then be ultimately construed as a kind of honorific in the present Philippine digital sphere: indeed, as it has been rebutted against Singh (2020b), *baklang kanal* as a phrase has a particular, if not outrightly different context online (Yee, 2020), and it is one that primarily hinges on how the digital sphere operates, with its predominant currencies of authenticity, woke rhetoric, and humor. As such, the violent irony therefore is this: as Singh (2020a) puts it, in the Philippine online world, it is possible for people to say, “Hail hail *baklang kanal* pero ang baba ng tingin niyo sa mga *baklang bumubooking*<sup>28</sup> ng mga straight sagilid-gilid” (para. 1) [Hail *baklang kanal*, but to also look down on the *bakla* who takes out random straight guys on a date]. And in the case of Pipay and Sassa Gurl, they appear to be given the honorific of *baklang kanal* influencers precisely because their performances provide what is deemed to be constitutive of such identity as it is predominantly understood online—and not because they necessarily represent such *bakla* as it is embodied in “reality.” In other words, it is the medium—the digital sphere itself—with its own culture that affirms, if not assigns these influencers’ being *baklang kanal*—a mechanism that is analogous to how gender is constituted in the “real” world in the first place (Butler, 1998), although perhaps made more palpable in this particular digital context.

As a final turn of this study, to accentuate once more the ascriptive quality of the *baklang kanal* as an identity, it is instructive to return again to the aforementioned Bardy Awards. It is most telling that in the end, neither Pipay nor Sassa Gurl was able to bring home the win for the Cannes’al category; instead, it was given to Filipino celebrity Maris Racal (satan, 2020c), cited for her TikTok performance (Racal, 2020b) imitating another viral video by

a certain Joy (@rjoy1919) from 2016, often remembered for her crassness, as she sassily told off her haters that they were “just a rat jumping around the corner” (see Davis, n.d.; see also *thatsideofutube 2*, 2017). A product of the ABS-CBN PBB franchise herself, Racial became a prominent actress and singer-songwriter since 2014, starring in various films and television shows, as well as releasing several singles. And yet, despite her status as a traditional celebrity, Racial (2020a) also insists on a tweet that she is indeed a *baklang kanal* herself, having “been exposed to the kanal culture since [she] was in [her] late teens to now” and even recognizing it as “a huge part of [her] growth” (para. 1). Furthermore, this self-identification as a *baklang kanal* is also perceived to be canonized, as Racial is “now...recognized by the *kween*s” (para. 1) themselves, that is, those who are considered to be the leading *baklang kanal* influencers in Twitter, such as @Punongbayan\_, @scorsaguin, and @charli\_sctex—among those that were esteemed to be “more legitimate representation[s]” of *baklang kanal* online (Manuel, 2020, para 1.).<sup>29</sup> This way, it can be said that Racial has been indeed affirmed as an “honorary *baklang kanal*” (Lariosa, 2020, para. 2) in the Philippine digital sphere, notwithstanding her being already a traditional celebrity before becoming such a supposedly *baklang kanal* influencer.

From a certain angle, the ascription of the *baklang kanal* identity to Racial can be seen as a demonstration of how the discourse of *kabaklaan* has been certainly “opened up” (Jacobó et al., 2019) even in the Philippine digital sphere, as to accommodate “various experiences” of the *bakla*, such as those of the related figure that is the “*babaeng bakla*,” with their own “combin[ation of] gender, sexuality, mannerisms, clothing, taste, romance, and love, among others” (Evangelista, 2019, para. 4). And while such being *babaeng bakla* has been generally understood to primarily have “something to do with language” (Garcia, 2008, p. 107) particularly with “some of the intricacies of *swardspeak*” (p. 107) or the languages of the *bakla* at large, it is also crucial to take into consideration in Racial’s case the medium in which she rehearses such languages, that ultimately allows her to be identified as a *baklang kanal*: given the utmost aspirations in the digital sphere for authenticity, and the Filipino affective publics’ frequent association of this authenticity to one’s being *kanal*, Racial’s becoming an honorary *baklang kanal* can be intuited then as a specific consequence of her overall performance of subversive frivolity, as similarly observed in Pipay’s and Sassa Gurl’s contents, than, say, her “legitimate representation” of the sector that such a term purportedly embodies. As such, while Racial’s inclusion can indeed attest that “the narratives of the *bakla* could not be reduced to any specific aspect of identity or any one label under SOGIESC or LGBTQIA” (Evangelista, 2019, para. 3), it also reveals the precarity in the

fluidity of Philippine digital sphere: the subversive potential of an identity that is often deemed as marginal, inconsequential, and unproductive can be claimed even by someone of the stature of a traditional celebrity at their peak—in the center, already influential, and has most likely accumulated much capital beforehand.

Never mind then the “real baklang kanals outside our echo chambers” (Singh, 2020b, para. 1): in Philippine Twittersphere, and perhaps in the larger digital sphere in which it participates, baklang kanal has become—indeed, *is*—“a brand and personality” (Singh, 2020b, para. 1).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> It is crucial to note that the act of submerging, if not drowning, has been commonly associated to suppression of queer subjectivities, as to let emerge instead a heternormative self. This gesture is frequently imagined to take place in a metal drum, as clearly described in J. Neil Garcia's (1996) "The Conversion" (p. 146-148). A more recent example of this can also be heard in Gloc-9 and Ebe Dancel's "Sirena," in which the queer subject is described to experience violent repetitions of the same gesture, supposedly leading to a kind of endurance: "Dram na may tubig ang sinisisid / Sa patagalan ng paghinga sa 'kin kayo ay bibilib'" (To a drum of water I would dive / When it comes to holding one's breath, I am to be admired) (see Universal Records Philippines 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The original list include the following: Sassa Gurl (@ltssassagurl), Pipay (@pipaykipayy), mimiyyuuuh (@mimiyyuuuh), Macoy Dubs (@macoydubs1), Juan Miguel Severo (@TheRainBro), Francis Baraan IV (@MrFrankBaraan), dora (@doracryaby), mark geronimo (@markgeronimo), Jaecee Lim (@jaeseelim), Justin Dizon (@jcdizon), Paolo Castro (@pawawawofficial), and Vince Liban (@vinceliban). Of these twelve, only the first five remain in Martin's (2020) revision, with the rest replaced by the following: Hannah Dulcette (@charli\_sctex), Jai Cabajar (@jaicabajar), Davao Conyo (@philipmandez), Lordt (@ribsrep), MIMAROPA MAE QUINTO (@Punongbayan\_), Netizen Patroller (@scorsaguin), and Laguna Tripper (@laguna\_tripper). The names listed here are based on the displayed names for each Twitter handle as of writing, January 24, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> In the same tweet, Singh (2020d) cites two internet personalities who she deems to be qualified as "baklang kanal": Erika Embang, a YouTube vlogger from Negros Occidental; and the Bakla ng Taon (BNT), a group of YouTube vloggers from Manila. It is interesting to note here that these exemplary baklang kanal are not as much visible on Twitter as they are on YouTube and Facebook.

<sup>4</sup> This potential for a grand scale network can be imagined through the instance of the "Milk Tea Alliance," primarily composed of online users across Asia, from countries Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and, most recently, Myanmar, who stand as vanguards for democracy in the region; see Barron (2020), McLaughlin (2020), and The Economist (2021).

<sup>5</sup> It is crucial to underscore here the insistence against completely equating kabaklaan to "gayness," "queerness," and/or "trans-ness," considering the specificity of the Philippine socio-historical conditions that have contributed in forming the notion of bakla itself (see Jacobo et al., 2019; Garcia, 1998; and Catalan, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Kalat literally translates to "mess," and in turn, has been used to denote one's being messy. In the present Philippine digital sphere, this quality is commonly understood in at least two senses: first, an expressiveness that dares to disclose one's sexual activities, including the desire to engage in such (see mamisaranghae~, 2020); and second, a blatant aggressiveness that is performed when one partakes in an online argument. In the case of the definition provided by Vilog (2020a), it is apparent that kalat pertains more to the latter understanding, especially with her description of the baklang kanal as most assertive of their principles.

<sup>7</sup> The expected performance of micro-celebrities' authenticity through relationality with their followers can be observed in the #SafeNowPH campaign of LoveYourself, an HIV advocacy group. In the said campaign, baklang kanal as online personalities become "the face of the newest HIV awareness campaign... [in the] hope that many netizens can relate to the HIV advocacy" (LoveYourself iComm, 2021; our emphasis).

<sup>8</sup> As of writing this essay, January 16, 2021, Pipay has over 1,000,000 followers on her verified TikTok account, 159,000 followers on Facebook, 115,100 followers on Twitter, and 56,600 subscribers on YouTube. On the other hand, Sassa Gurl also has over 1,000,000 followers on TikTok, 152,800 thousand followers on Facebook, 146,700 thousand followers on Twitter, and 33,400 thousand subscribers on YouTube. When contrasted to the exemplary "baklang kanal" cited by Singh (2020c), it is interesting to note that Pipay's and SassaGurl's followers in Twitter and YouTube are inversely proportional to those of Erika Embang and BNT in the same platforms. See note 3.

<sup>9</sup> One of the consistent contents in Pipay's TikTok is their response to comments in the platform tagging them to other contents that feature, often in jest, protruding dentals (see for instance Pipay, 2020j, 2020l, and 2020m).

<sup>10</sup> It is crucial to note that on one hand, such labelling can be interpreted as less telling of Pipay's status as an influencer than the insistence of ABS-CBN on its traditional star system, as one of the country's major television and media networks. As Abidin (2018) notes, traditional celebrities—stars, as we commonly call them—differ from internet micro-celebrities in several ways (p. 11-12), which

also differ from influencers in the particular tendency of the latter to “strategizing their content into a commercial endeavor” (p. 13). With this in mind, one can read ABS-CBN’s appraisal of Pipay as a “social media star” as its way perhaps of forcefully aligning them into its system, by means of its traditional sequestering of Pipay away from the mundane non-star others.

On the other hand, one can also intuit a vernacular vocabulary at work: that perhaps, in the Filipino context, the aforementioned taxonomy of celebrities does not necessarily apply, given the specificity of the Philippine socio-historical conditions that have shaped the local star system and online ecologies, among others. For instance, consider the following headline which conflates three kinds of celebrities in Abidin’s (2018) classifications: “In 2020, *online personalities* and *celebrities* redefine being an ‘*influencer*’” (Diño, 2020; our emphasis). Hence, in this study, we also deploy the term *influencer* in its colloquial sense in the current Filipino context: fluid enough to be a “micro-celebrity” or even a “star.”

<sup>11</sup> Missing kitchen utensils become a trope in Pipay’s TikTok videos (see for instance Pipay, 2020g, 2020h, 2020i, and 2020s). It is interesting to note here the irony at work in Pipay’s performance: while children are stereotyped as the ones who would ask their mothers about their missing things, as memorialized through the famous Filipino legend about the pineapple (see Jocano, 1959), the dynamics in Pipay’s TikTok skits are ultimately altered, with both the mother and the daughter unaware of the things’ whereabouts.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, since December 16, 2020, Pipay begins again this formulation of their characters in Mamang Ina, a character introduced to give their followers advice regarding various issues (see Pipay 2020t, 2021a, and 2021b).

<sup>13</sup> While Jenkins, Green, and Ford (2013) argue that virality has a negative connotation, hence their suggestion of the word spreadability to connote a more deliberative process of spreading content, it is arguably the same in the context of this study.

<sup>14</sup> Consider for instance the following top definitions for “meme” in Urban Dictionary: “the cure of depression” (sodium-chloride, 2018), as in “a way of life... [that] gives laughter and joy to the viewers” (Mr small potato, 2017), in the form of “funny or weird video or picture of trending things” (DashSkyYT, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> In Pipay’s (2020k) vlog that shows parts of the process in recreating Alawi’s fashion shoot, although it is not disclosed whether monetary compensation has been given to their collaborating photographers and editors, one cannot deny the capital that is still involved in such a procedure. Supposing that there is indeed no monetary compensation given, Pipay’s deliberate promotion of their collaborators, by way of naming them in their vlog, can be taken as a form of compensation as well, albeit a social one.

<sup>16</sup> With this widespread gentrification led by, among others, the family of Senator Cynthia Villar, also the chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture (see Magasino, 2020), the character Cynthia—whom Matet would often berate for her unprogressive views (see Pipay, 2020i and 2020o)—can then be interpreted as a clear jab at the senator. Further inference can be made through comparing Pipay’s wig as Cynthia to the senator’s signature bob.

<sup>17</sup> Contrast Pipay’s unwitting reflexivity in “Malupang Pusod” with the strange incident on November 19, 2020: in the aftermath of Typhoon Ulysses, the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) Secretary Martin Andanar reported that the President Duterte was supported by the public as evinced by the supposed trending hashtag #NasaPusoKoAngPangulo, “the President is in my heart,” when in fact, what actually trended was #NasaPusodKoAngPangulo, “the President is in my navel.” Such instances can be considered as an embodiment of mindless participation in social media sphere, the encounter is essentially “a lesson for all of us using the internet: Check before you post anything. Read before you retweet. Fact-check before you share. When in doubt, Google is free” (Villog, 2020b).

<sup>18</sup> The term *jejemon*, a portmanteau of *jeje*—a derivative of “hehe,” a Filipino onomatopoeia for laughter—and *mon*—as in “monster” from the Japanese animated series Pokémon—refers to the subculture of people, especially the youth, who created their own language, i.e., *Jejenese* (see Rapi and Capati, 2018). Furthermore, *jejemons* are also characterized by a particular fashion, such as oversized shirts, loose capri pants, and signature “jeje caps,” described as “caps that have a colorful design at the back and are not really worn appropriately, but only place[d] on top of the Jejemon’s head” (mallowsurprise, 2010). Although historically distinct from gangsters, given the frequent assembling of *jejemons* into “clans” (see Marcoleta, 2010), Sassa Gurl’s conflation of the two becomes colloquially understandable.

<sup>19</sup> Such candidness is contrary to the common perception of Filipino communication as characterized by “a high degree of ambiguity” (“mataas na antas ng pagkaalanganin”) (Maggay, 2002, p. 3). As such, according to Maggay (2002), the directness in disagreement can lead to “a heated exchange, a phenomenon that is also observed in personal situations such as deep conflict or misunderstanding”

("mainitang sagutan, isang penomenong makikita rin sa mga personal na sitwasyon na gaya ng masidhing hidwaan o di-pagkakaunawaan") (p. 24).

<sup>20</sup> As of writing this study, January 22, 2021, Sassa Gurl's (2020a) first TikTok skit on Chicana and Princess has reached over 2,500,000 views and over 324,900 hearts or likes; her TikTok skit set in a computer shop over 1,300,000 views and 185,600 hearts; while her reuploaded "PBB Gangster Edition" (Sassa Gurl, 2020o) over 221,600 views and 30,100 hearts, since its reposting after it was first muted by TikTok.

<sup>21</sup> While there is no concrete definition for the term *squammy*, it is mainly considered to be derived from the word *squatter*, the politically incorrect term for "informal settlers"; *squammy* then is generally understood to be indicative of behaviors of informal settlers. It must be underscored here the underlying class antagonism at work in this term. Hence, in SassaGurl's contents, the generative power of her performance of being "squammy" through being *baklang kanal* can be perceived as, indeed, subversive as a frivolity. For a memorable imagination of such "squammy girl," see an archive of a previously viral video in *Batangas Videos* (2016).

<sup>22</sup> The same can be said to Sassa Gurl's other TikTok skits that feature as well Chicana and the others in the PBB House; see Sassa Gurl (Sassa Gurl, 2020l; 2020m; 2020n; 2020o; 2020p).

<sup>23</sup> For instance, in one TikTok video, Camille was told by a man that she wears a pair of shorts that is too short and skimpy for her ("Uy, miss, ang ikli ng short[s] mo!"), to which she sassily replies "Ay, thank you, mana sa titi mo!" (Ah, yes, just like your penis) (Sassa Gurl, 2020aa). This particular narrative form—a *baklang kanal* that sassily deflects misogynist remarks thrown at her while walking outside—became the foundation in another of Sassa Gurl's series (see Sassa Gurl 2020q; 2020r). Titled "Art of Charot by Camille," the series features the titular character, known in the "Chicana mima universe" to stir drama among her friends, particularly Chicana and Princess (see Sassa Gurl, 2020h; 2020n). As such, Camille embodies then what Sassa Gurl says as combative potential of humor against everyday violence.

<sup>24</sup> In this hashtag, instead of #IpasokSaPBBsiMima (Let Mima into the PBB House), Sassa Gurl deliberately changed PBB into BPI, which stands for the Bank of Philippine Islands, then explaining their reply to their own tweet: "idepositniyo ko pls" (Please deposit me, i.e. put me into the automatic teller machine) (Sassa Gurl, 2020z).

<sup>25</sup> In a separate tweet that directly responds to the official PBB account, Sassa Gurl (2020v) responds, "walang maglo-love team pagnakapasok ako. bawal" (There can be no love team if I manage to get in. It's prohibited.)

<sup>26</sup> *Conyo* refers to "the way Filipino speaks in Taglish (Tagalog and English language)," as well as "a class of people" (Benavides, 2020), particularly of the upper-middle to upper class, given their access and notable comfort, if not preference, in using the English language. For a description of the *conyo* as a class through its signature consumptions, see Banzon (2015).

<sup>27</sup> On January 17, 2021, Sassa Gurl updates that as they have promised (2020x), they allotted her 20% commission from their livestreaming over Kumu as an aspiring housemate to charity; according to them, with the revenue, they were able to make "200 packs of spaghetti and 300... sandwich[es]," which were then given to "homeless people" (Sassa Gurl, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> The term *booking* refers to a date that most likely end up with sex (see Capacillo, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> See note 2.

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## About the Authors

**SAMUEL CABBUAG** is an assistant professor at the Department of Sociology, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines Diliman where he finished both his undergraduate and graduate degrees. His research interests include digital sociology, group dynamics, fandoms, popular culture, and media and cultural studies (corresponding author: sicabbuag@up.edu.ph).

**CHRISTIAN JIL BENITEZ** teaches at the Department of Filipino, Ateneo de Manila University, where he obtained his AB-MA in Filipino literature (2016/2018). A member of the Film Desk of the Young Critics Circle, he served as its chairperson for the filmic year 2019. His current critical engagements primarily revolve around Philippine time, and have been published in *Katipunan*, *Kritika Kultura*, *eTropic*, and *Philippine Studies*, among others (corresponding author: cbenitez@ateneo.edu).

