

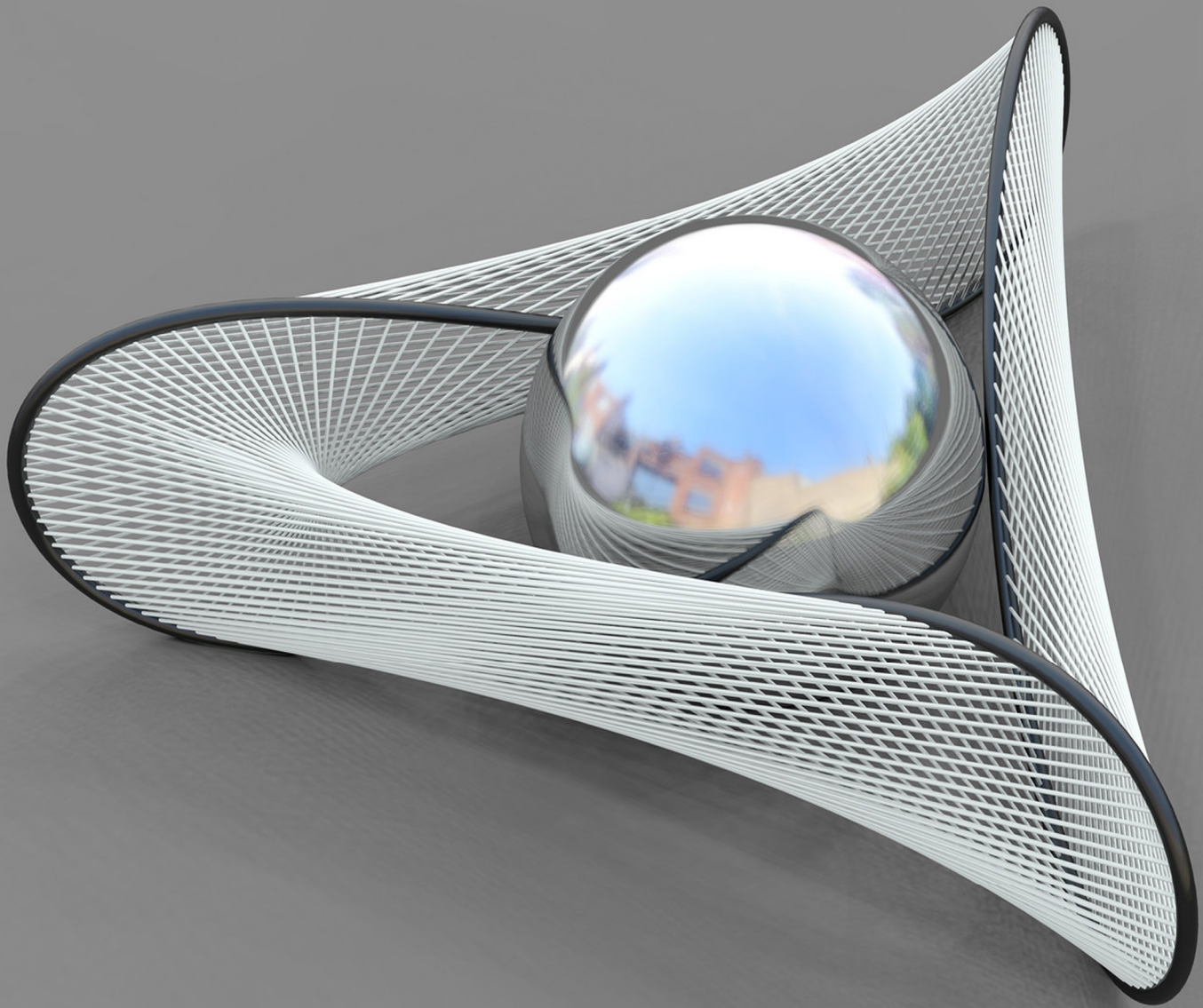
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YouTubing Difference: Performing Identity in Video Communities

Samara M. Anarbaeva

Department of Journalism and Public Relations
California State University, Chico, USA

Abstract

This study examines women's performance of gender, ethnicity, and race in a "How-to & DIY" YouTube networks. Through textual and visual analysis, I examine a specific community of ordinary women who participate in the "How-to & DIY" category on YouTube. I look at four women's YouTube channels, profiles, videos, and comments from their subscribers in order to reveal a deeper sense of what meaning users derive through creating videos on YouTube. I ask the following question: How do women in the YouTube Beauty community perform their identity and difference in their videos? After analyzing the videos and the dialogues, two themes have emerged: a sense of belonging and connectedness, and identity performance at the interface. Underrepresented women go to YouTube to relate to others who are like them, which gives them a sense of belonging and connects them to millions of others who are craving the same connection. Through video blogs, these women perform their gender, race, and identity.

1. Introduction

Internet researchers are increasingly studying online communities pertaining to race and identity. Race has been the most dominant and persistent group boundary in the United States (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). It has many different definitions; I use the definition by Cornell and Hartmann (2007), who define race as “a human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent” (p. 25). Thus, race is a group of people who are socially defined based on their physical characteristics. Human beings decide to determine which characteristics define a certain race. Ethnicity is another socially constructed term. Ethnic groups are those groups of people who “entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration” (Weber, 1968, p. 389).

According to Nakamura (2008), race is “ultimately deconstructed as a visually meaningful term” (p. 78). When we go online, we bring our offline experiences and learned values with us. Race matters in cyberspace because we have formed our knowledge and experiences with and about race offline (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000). We can make the argument that picking a certain race and gender for an avatar becomes the essential part of an online interaction. Racialization at the interface is determined by how gender, geography, caste, colonization, and globalization overlap (Gajjala & Rybas, 2008). Yet race is sometimes overlooked in virtual worlds, perhaps due to unequal access to the Internet (Nakamura, 2002). Hence, the Internet can be used as a type of digital representation by women and minorities to challenge previous frameworks and interfaces by making themselves seen (Nakamura, 2008). This makes it even more important to explore race and gender in virtual worlds. Talking to people of different races and ethnicities online can “lift residential segregation’s choke-hold on interracial social contact” (Kang, 2003, p. 44). In cyberspace, we communicate directly with actual people of other races, and these direct experiences are more “stereotypical than vicarious ones since there is less economic pressure for racial minorities to perform stereotypically for any audience” (Kang, 2003, p. 46). We often examples of this on popular social media sites like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube.

The interface offers a place for everyone to find their own social needs. Such diverse websites are bringing online more minorities who can find communities with which they can relate. According to Hill (2001), these racial and ethnic websites are crucial because they give people of different backgrounds, reasons to go online: “Ethnic content providers simply offer all the services that mainstream sites offer, but with a more particular focus” (p. 26). These online content sites enable users to see information that reflects their lives. These platforms that focus on ethnic minorities could decide the future of the Internet. “The Internet needs minorities as much as minorities need the Internet... minorities also need content that speaks to their needs and communities” (Hill, p. 28). As minorities are being better represented online, they are creating the content as well. However, just the existence of these websites, even in abundant quantities, is not a solution to the scarcity of ethnic minorities online. We must strive, for instance, to understand what it means to be an Asian woman or an African-American woman online today. We must ask ourselves, Why do women go online? What kind of meaning do they make? The race, identity, and gender of a community member can encourage other community members to communicate and interact, especially if they have not had prior experiences with people of various backgrounds. Communication among members of different ethnicities may help YouTube members to understand and learn more about race and gender identities online as well as offline.

2. YouTube as a Place for Women to Practice DIY

Women use social networking sites for various reasons: to educate themselves, to seek support/advice, to empower themselves and others, to participate in the cultural economy, to create and consume content, and to engage in social movements. The reflexive nature of social networking sites allows women to connect to one another and communicate on an everyday basis. Social networking is usually user-driven; participants engage in immediate discussions about various threads by posting blogs (Burgess & Green, 2009). Social networking sites attract participants with mutual social and professional interests. Online communities can make women feel safe and in control of their authentic representation when discussing issues the best way they know how (Molyneaux, O'Donnel, & Gibson, 2009; Tiernan, 2002). This feeling then encourages women to create and consume content on a daily basis.

The purpose of this so-called participatory culture becomes the women's thirst for self-expression and creativity display (Strangelove, 2010; van Dijck, 2009). Thus, there are minimal barriers for participation and involvement as well as strong support for sharing one's creations with others in the community. There is informal mentorship in participatory cultures like YouTube, where experienced participants help newer members adjust. The community creates an environment where people appreciate and care about what the other members say or create (Jenkins, 2010). One way young women feel safe and in control of their channels on YouTube is by posting about beauty products without feeling the pressure from a male-dominated society or being called superficial. Women from all over the world come together on YouTube to create global beauty and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) talk.

DIY cultures existed long before the technological revolution emerged; however, with YouTube's creation and subsequent popularity, the DIY nation is able to shift the practices from offline to online. The new media technologies make the DIY participatory culture more visible by putting the communities on the map. They allow people with similar activities to connect to each other more easily and collaborate on various projects. YouTube makes it possible for artists, "craftivists," and everyday people with a camera or a webcam to come together and create DIY communities. In turn, these communities can lead to a number of possibilities for members to learn more effectively (Jenkins, 2010). Participants in these communities engage in DIY practices on a regular basis and become cultural producers. When they post their work, they are able to get prompt feedback and/or help from other members. When members take the time to respond to others via textual comments, they become insiders to their social practice (Jenkins, 2010). Thus, a community of women who are thirsty for self-expression and meaning-making emerges.

Researchers have identified YouTube as an important and rich source of information about the new visual media for academic study and valuable for future research (Burgess & Green, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Molyneaux et al., 2009). It is important to continue to research this work because of the use of YouTube by everyday people as well as the mix of media personnel who use it as a resource (Burgess & Green, 2009). I chose to study the YouTube community of women because video-based communities remain understudied (Kendall, 2008). YouTube quickly became more than just an archive of videos. The platform has become a place for women to create meaning and broadcast themselves and their specialized information.

Studying YouTube videos is important for many reasons. Since its launch in 2005, hundreds of millions of users from all over the globe have visited the site, whether to watch videos or to upload videos of their own (Fahs, 2008). In those nearly nine years online video sharing has flourished immensely and become a phenomenon in new media (Molyneaux, et al., 2009). By November 2007,

YouTube had become the most popular website for entertainment in Britain. In 2008, YouTube was one of the top ten most-frequently visited sites in the world. The reason for this success may be due to the fact that YouTube aimed to remove the technical barriers to video sharing online (Burgess & Green, 2009). YouTube's demographic generally ranges from ages eighteen to thirty-four, which means as researchers, we can take a closer look into the future at a diverse range of ages. Millions of people visit YouTube and subscribe to various channels every day, and 80 percent of that traffic comes from outside the United States (YouTube, 2015). YouTube is the top video platform followed by Yahoo and VEVO (The Nielsen Company, 2012). These numbers are just some of the reasons for studying YouTube when opting to understand this phenomenon of video sharing.

YouTube is the second largest social networking site after Facebook and attracts over a billion users from around (YouTube, 2015) who consume and create hundreds of millions of videos. Its growth since 2005 around the globe is so tremendous that it is hard for researchers to ignore such a huge phenomenon. Most of the videos are user-created and are likely to be of nonprofessional quality or produced on a low budget. In 2013, about 100 hours of video were uploaded to YouTube every minute. These videos are spread out among the site's various categories. YouTube offers videos in many different categories including Music, Sports, Gaming, Movies, Beauty & Fashion, How-to & DIY, Tech, Science & Education, Cooking & Health, and so forth. Each category consists of the channels that focus on the subject of the given category. Any visitor (registered or non-registered) can view the content of any member's channel. To become a member, one must create an account, which then lets the individual upload videos. YouTube members create and maintain online identities by sharing their stories through their videos. Creating and sharing videos has helped YouTube users to create new connections and develop social ties that would have been impossible in the physical world (Lange, 2008). YouTube users are perfect examples of how current culture, everyday life, and consumerism are distinctly connected and interrelated.

Cyberspace holds hundreds of millions of videos that share women's stories. The stories that portray images of women are shared via "vlogs," which are video blogs (Molyneaux et al., 2009). In this way, YouTube creators launched a site that fosters a participatory culture (Burgess & Green, 2009) that allows people not only to sit back and take in information, but also to respond to and become an active part of the ongoing conversations (van Dijck, 2009).

Video blogs are created by using a laptop with a webcam, a camcorder, or a smartphone. The archive of videos includes funny cat videos, DIY recipes/crafting/beauty, and vlogs about users' lives, pets, style, and so forth. As YouTube encourages users to create the content on the site, anyone with web access and the tools to record video can create and post content, which is likely the reason most user-created videos are amateurish. Still, these amateur-quality videos, created by average citizens, attract millions of fans and viewers who judge them not for their technical quality but for their content.

YouTube started as a video-sharing platform but now it can also be labeled as a social networking site that lets users "friend" each other and post comments on each others' profiles (Lange, 2008). When the website launched, its statement read, "Your Digital Video Repository"; by 2009, the tagline had evolved to "Broadcast Yourself" (Burgess & Green, 2009). Today, millions of users take advantage of this revised statement by showcasing their talents and creating social ties. Every day women in the "How-to & DIY" category broadcast beauty and style vlogs on their channels. As mentioned in the beginning, it is important to keep in mind the changes that are made to the YouTube community every day. As Internet researchers, we must recognize and do our best to adapt to this dynamic and ever-changing nature of cyberspace.

At the intersection of technology and culture, we see identities of ordinary citizens being created and maintained in the eyes of the audiences. The way YouTube content is being generated today is a paradigm shift. As Jenkins (2006) argues, “Audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture” (p. 24). Women of color are putting themselves on the map of cyberspace by demanding their right to be beautiful in their own way, not the way the media tell them. Second-generation Asian and Latina women are inspiring other women in the world to be themselves, unlike the popular fashion magazines in the United States that portray mostly dominant Caucasian women from the mainstream media. On YouTube, a short woman of color goes to the “How-to & DIY” channel to feel inspired about being herself and not feel pressured by what dominant society and culture dictate.

In cyberspace, gender roles and identities are breaking down. Many women construct and derive knowledge from their active participation in the cyber world, and then use that experience to express their voices offline as well. The Internet is quickly becoming “feminized,” as women’s voices are outnumbering men’s cultural domination over the interface (Strangelove, 2010). Women in the YouTube community are not only engaged in the consumption and performance of market-based notions of femininity, but they are also actively resisting dominant role models in favor of their own role models (e.g., top-viewed gurus). Women are collaborating with each other and speaking up to create significant cultural content. Past research has cited women’s main means of power as their bodies and sexuality; however, in a participatory online culture, the research needs revision (Strangelove, 2010). The new media empowers those who can create online content; thus, it becomes women’s new tool for means of power. The YouTube audience is not the typical audience who is used to interpreting stories from a male-dominated perspective. In the beauty community of women on YouTube, women produce and share their own stories, edit their own histories, and have the freedom to construct their own meanings. Hence, their ability to create their own stories makes them powerful, not weak.

Just like cultural norms offline, video practices on YouTube are gendered. Women produce more personal and interactive videos than men (Strangelove, 2010). Whether it is crafting, beauty talk, DIY tips, or comedy channels, women’s video practices can be highly social and have an aura of authenticity. They face resistance and objectivity from some male community members. For example, in the beauty community, the gurus monitor their video blogs closely by blocking spammers and “haters,” those users who write negative comments on the video blogs. In this way, women feel and give joy as producers of their own stories. “Private and public pleasure collide and result in community and contested identities” (Strangelove, 2010, p. 102). Identities are created and performed as these women vlog and interact with the audience on a regular basis.

To know what is going on online, we must first experience it and be online. So, after spending a few years on YouTube and watching videos on a daily basis, taking notes, and rating videos, I would like to explore the following research question: *How do women in the YouTube Beauty community perform their identity and difference in their videos?*

I focus on the following points:

- Who are these beauty gurus, and how have they changed as a result of producing their own videos?
- How are their profiles/channels constructed?
- How are they performing gender, race, and ethnicity in their YouTube videos?
- What do the comments created by viewers tell us?
- What are the patterns of beauty guru videos in terms of performing gender and race?

- What themes emerge when looking at the deeper meaning of the videos?

After looking at the deeper meaning of the videos created by women in YouTube, I answer these questions by carefully analyzing each profile (channel page), video, and comments individually.

3. Methods

In this paper, I analyzed four YouTube channels from the U.S. and U.K. I watched dozens of videos from each YouTube guru and used visual and textual analysis to analyze the text and videos from the gurus and the text from their fans. The nature of this paper is focused on identity construction in terms of the guru's race and gender. Therefore, I focus on the videos where the women talk freely about their identities in relation to their being the "Other" or being different.

When analyzing texts, I needed to become an interpreter of what these texts assumed and what meanings they generated. Understanding what certain comments mean implicitly and their assumptions becomes part of the process of textual analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Fursich, 2009). However, I also needed to use my judgment and evaluation skills, such as judging whether someone's comments are sincere, serious, or sarcastic. After spending four years on YouTube, I am able to differentiate spammers from regular members, haters from those who only give constructive criticism, and so forth.

When I worked on textual analysis, I monitored users' comments about the video. To get a fair sample, I picked a few comments from the beginning, the middle, and the end. The order of comments usually changed on a daily basis, due to constant comments, so I captured the comments on the day I analyzed the video. After collecting a sample of textual comments, I looked through them to find a common theme.

A basic model for analysis in visual anthropology consists of four stages: observe as a whole, take notes, structure analysis, and search for significance in the meaning (Collier, 2001). I followed these basic steps and took detailed notes when I watched the videos. In particular, in this study I observed videos on a regular basis and immersed myself in the YouTube community through watching the videos, reading comments, and rating (clicking on thumbs up or thumbs down). I kept a journal so I could reference the videos later and analyze the materials presented in the videos. It is important to observe how these processes are discussed in the social media and in related groups, observing those who relate to the social systems as users, participants, critics, or proponents, and/or analyzing a chosen community in multiple contexts online: creating a YouTube account, watching, rating, and commenting.

3.1 Formation of a Community: Sense of Belonging and Connectedness

The participatory culture of YouTube has enabled everyone who has a webcam/camera to be a producer of her own videos. No longer can voices be silenced. Jenkins (2008) attributes this emergence of a participatory community to a larger cultural economy. This space represents a meeting place for those from various grassroots communities – some have been producing media for a long time, and others are amateurs. When I watch a certain video and like it, I click on "thumbs-up"; if I have a suggestion or a question, I post it in the comment box. However, this is not to say that haters and spammers get the same treatment: If I am a hater, I may face consequences; my comments might get deleted and my account may get blocked. Strangelove (2010) refers to haters as those who post "rude and often racist, sexist, homophobic, or obscene messages" (p. 118). Just like any offline community has those who do not get along well with others, YouTube is no different – it is a community that has norms and rules.

Holly is the “cool” Asian-American young woman in the beauty community who inspires Asian women all over the world. Many of her Asian viewers desire to look like her. In her video “Tag, 5 facts about me,” she reflects back to her teen years, when she first tried makeup and could not find the right shade for her yellow skin tone at the store when her mother took her shopping:

Tag, 5 facts about me

In this video, Holly tells us five things about herself, because she was tagged to answer that question from the YouTube community... The first question is, “When did you start using makeup?” When she was fifteen, she got really self-conscious about her under-eye circles and could not find anything that matched her skin tone in drugstores. She talks about her first time going makeup shopping and how hard it was to find the right shade for her skin tone. Her mom took her to the mall’s makeup counter, but she still did not find anything that matched her skin tone, so she went to the MAC counter because they are known for working with different ethnicities... The second question is, “What is your makeup style?” She likes pretty and feminine makeup. She always wears eye and lip makeup... She wishes she could dress like Kim Kardashian, since she has a very classy style. She then tells us what colors she loves to wear. She loves gold jewelry. She does not like anything to take away from her face. When she enters the room, she wants people to notice her face and hair, not what she is wearing... Her favorite brand of makeup is MAC, and she worked there for a while, as well. “Makeup Forever” is another favorite brand of hers. The fourth question is, “Who inspired you to become a guru on YouTube?” She and Youtube have a love/hate relationship, but then she joined the blog and was pushed by YouTube to post more videos. As a makeup artist, she enjoys posting tutorials...

Some viewers relate to her based on her Asian-ness and bad experiences at the makeup counter:

bebeefcukk: I've had similar experience at the department stores. Some ladies at the makeup counters are just so rude and forceful when I'm trying to find good products. Anyways I really like your videos! Subscribed

wasat20: your soo preety . i wished i looked like yuu :(im asian too.

echoe963: Im so glad i found you on youtube! we kind of look similar so it helps a lot watching your vids(:

The idea of connecting on YouTube, which anthropologist Michael Wesch (2008) talks about in his presentation, is evident throughout the comments in all the videos. Wesch states that YouTube is a celebration of the new and unimaginable, where we find new ways to connect with each other. Through creating different video tutorials and vlogs, these gurus share their joy with others. Their viewers can relate to them by feeling somehow connected, as if these gurus were their sisters or good friends. Many women want to feel like they are not the only ones who look different and feel the need to be close to someone who looks like them, or who might be experiencing similar feelings. Many of Holly’s fans are those with a different skin tone who also have had a hard time finding the right shade of makeup at the store; they want to fit in with their looks, and they feel they can if they can create Holly’s makeup looks.

Race and the location of a makeup guru can be identified via their videos, personal channel pages, and occasional personal vlogs. I was surprised by how quickly and easily I was able to find these self-identifiers. Often in their videos, these gurus talk freely, without much editing, about their families, pets, their significant others, their geographic locations, their everyday lives, and their personal stories.

The next video is from Christine (YouTube user name Xteener), who currently (September, 2016) has over sixty-eight million views on her channel and over 450,000 subscribers. This video is titled, “2 Autumn Inspired Looks in 1.” She also posted a link to an online feature article written about her in the

newspaper of the University of Georgia, her alma mater. In the article, her makeup skills and YouTube stardom were discussed. I was curious, so I clicked on the link and read the article. I learned that she grew up not being allowed to use makeup and since then has grown to like it. I found out that she is a Vietnamese American. “I thought I would just start filming myself one day. It was a newfound hobby and creative outlet... I loved putting myself out there to help guide, teach and inspire” (Moua, 2010, p. 1). I gave the video a “thumbs-up” because I liked the video and the link to the article, because they made me feel closer to Xteener and her life – I had learned about her university, ethnicity, and more. Many viewers comment on her being the sweetest and most likable guru on YouTube:

xpensxipodsxx: i read the article :) its so true what they said; youre seriously one of the sweetest/most down-to-earth people on youtube.. I LOVE YOU :)

Some subscribers are relieved to finally get a clear answer about Christine’s ethnicity:

yangtanw: so i always wondered whether you're korean, chinese, or vietnamese. the article answered my question :)

Mainstream media usually do not spend much time talking about monolid eyes, so YouTube gurus like Xteener can teach, demonstrate, and inspire via tutorials and how-to tricks. When I performed a search for “makeup for monolids” on December 18, 2013 – 53,200 videos showed up. Thus, monolid women can be inspired by watching Christine’s videos, while feeling similar and connected. Xteener’s subscribers can relate to her because they have the same shape of eyes and type of hair:

xosweetea: im just really amazed at how well you do eye makeup on asian monolids. its a pain for me to do my makeup and not like how it comes out because i dont have a defined crease and the shadows may come up too high.

DustBunii: i like yur haircut (: i wanna get a bob too but im scared i'm going to look like one of those chinese housewives o;

When Michelle posted her first video, thousands of comments flooded her page with race and ethnicity questions. As a result, viewers got into a discussion with each other about her ethnicity:

KOFts: You're really pretty, what are you? Are you wearing colored contacts?

rae629: she's probably filipino, vietnamese, or thai

cokewhore37: she's not thai

ranela: her name is pham...vietnamese

rae629: oh ok...well i knew she was from southeast asia. lol

The compliment above followed by the question, “What are you?” is quite ambiguous. It becomes so easy to ask such questions online without losing face. KOFts asks Michelle about her ethnicity as if she were asking about an object. It becomes easier to hide your face and become a “lurker” who can ask and say anything you want without fear of scrutiny. Nobody notices the way the question is asked, and they carry on the conversation as if this were the proper way to ask. I wonder what that says about society in general. We obsess over a person’s race and ethnicity and difference when we see a person of color. We have certain views of race and ethnicity that we carry with us from childhood. Our worldviews are shaped and nurtured by the mainstream media every day. The way viewers discuss a guru’s race or ethnicity can seem racially generalized. One may call these types of interactions a type of racism that is hidden in messages that are meant to oppress the persons of color. Rae629 compares the three very separate ethnicities as if they were all the same. The three ethnicities that have separate languages and cultures seem the same because they are all Asian. Being White is still a privilege on

YouTube. If you are a White guru, you will usually not get the ethnicity question as much as a guru of color, although there is still the question of geography.

In a video titled, “Racism: Say No to Racism,” from July 2009, Bubz (Bubbi) discusses how she was faced with racism when she was only five years old:

Racism: Say No to Racism

... She starts out the video by saying that her latest video about “bigger and rounder eyes” created tensions between her commenters, who questioned her message of the tutorial. Her commenters voiced that she should not be ashamed of her Asian eyes. So she makes this video to clarify a few things about race and racism. She tells about her first experience with racism, when she was five years old and a little boy on the playground pointed at her, laughing and calling her “Chinese.” She did not know at the time that she was different, so this made her want to be Caucasian. Another experience with racism occurred when she was walking with her grandmother, and teens threw rocks at them and shouted racial slurs... One of the things she says is that when Asian people dye their hair and try to make their eyes appear larger, this does not mean they are trying to be White. She then wonders whether White people are questioned when they color their hair and make their eyes appear different... Bubbi deals with racist comments on YouTube by either ignoring or deleting them. She encourages others to take measures and not be ashamed of themselves by reaching out to others and staying strong through racism.

Thousands of people around the world responded to this emotional and very touching video about racism relating to Bubbi:

ILoveYouB2stRawr: this is so true.. people in my school always make fun of asians.. because they think that asians speak like " ching chong chang." and it really hurts because im an asian.. and we dont speak like that.. and yeah i talk back to them and yell at them.. but after watchign this.. i'll know how to hold it in.. thanks bubbi =)

In this comment below I learn about a multiracial person who is faced with racism no matter where this person goes:

ChawaiM: im half White n half asian, i lived in Western Australia Perth for 9yrs, all the White kids in my skool teased/fight me coz my eyes were slanted abit, then a gang of kids made death threats to my family, so we decided to leave Australia, now im in East Malaysia (Borneo). n still i get shit frm ppl coz they only see my White skin. ive been around racism all my life, gotten in to fights with people n comin out with blood everywhere, trust me it aint pretty, i jst wish more ppl were like you BUBZ.

This comment demonstrates incidents of racism in Argentina:

gracielpark: I'm Korean.. and when I immigrated to Argentina when I was four y.o, many of my classmates who were of European decent would pull their eyes and call me "chinita" (little chinese girl). i would get so angry... but there really was nothing i could do about it.. teachers did nothing...nothing..

Such comments show just how many silenced voices from all over the world come to YouTube to speak up about their experiences with racism and with being the “Other” from an early age; they say this video helps them to relate and learn how to deal with racist situations. Comments of encouragement and relatability pour from all over the world. Bubbi encourages her fans to speak against racism and to have tolerance. But if you are the only person of color in your school, who are you supposed to share your experiences with? Producing a video on YouTube means your experience may gain great visibility from being distributed and shared, usually via a third party, as an emailed link or by being posted on other

sites like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter. Thus, if one woman feels that this video relates to her friend or family, it will get distributed and go viral or a highly trafficked video that will be mentioned in the traditional media news.

We learn about racism from an early age; we socially construct what each race means to us. To the little White boy, Bubbi is not part of the typical British mainstream – she is different and funny looking; she has a different set of eyes, not like other children. How does this boy know she is different from him? Why does he think it is funny or humiliating to be Chinese? Where does he learn such behavior? Bhabha (1994) says such a view of the racial “Other” is a point of identity and a problem for a discourse at the same time. The little White boy is identifying himself as superior and mainstream, and identifying Bubz as the Chinese “Other,” as someone who should be ridiculed and made fun of. Definitions of “Britishness” assume that a person who belongs in this culture is White (Hall, 1997). Therefore, Bubz’s appearance raises questions among many YouTube viewers about her ethnicity. Her profile says she is from the U.K., but it is not enough for the viewers; they have to know her origins, her “real” ethnicity, because she is different looking from the typical mainstream British people. Hall (1997) says we need such difference because we are only able to construct meaning through a dialogue with the “Other”; thus, meaning is established through dialogue. This difference signifies and carries a message (Hall, 1997); a message that will create an ongoing dialogue about race.

With White gurus, it is assumed that they are White (on the exterior), and their videos do not elicit many questions about their ethnicity. Nakamura (2002) says that the interface enforces all the Asian Americans as permanently “foreign” (p. 121). Americans grow up checking the race box when going to the doctor, applying for college, and even when applying for a job. Therefore, with non-White makeup gurus, even if they have no distinct “foreign” accent (e.g., Xteener and MichellePhan), viewers have the need to know more about their identity and background. This burning desire from hundreds, perhaps thousands, of viewers to find out another person’s ethnicity is daunting to me. That it even matters on YouTube in the modern world I find fascinating. I start to wonder why it matters if a guru is Thai, Chinese, or Vietnamese. Viewers want to know, and when they find out they stick to the media stereotypes about how an Asian person should look and act.

Poynterr is not excluded from such inquiries about her race and ethnicity. Though this full time nurse does not make videos as frequently as other gurus, she still has captured thousands of YouTube members’ attention. Her last video was published five years ago. Nakamura (2002) states that “sounds of foreign languages being spoken in television ads had their own ability to shock and attract attention” (p. 95), which explains all the questions and shock from the members when they find out Vanessa (Poynterr) is Chinese in her “Ethnicity/Nationality, Take 2” video from March 2010:

Ethnicity/Nationality Take 2

... She gets so many questions about her ethnicity/nationality. In fact, it is the number one question in her comments section, and the messages are: What is your ethnicity? She says she is fully Chinese, and that her mom and dad moved from Hong Kong. She is 100% Chinese, she repeats. Her nationality is British, because she was born and raised in the U.K. She repeats that she was born and raised there, and mentions her nationality again because her viewers confuse the two: nationality and ethnicity. Her accent is British, not Australian. Another question: Can she speak Cantonese? Yes, she says a little bit, just the basics. Next, Can she read or write in Chinese? No, she cannot, but she can understand fully when watching TV. She demonstrates her Cantonese skills... She thinks her viewers are really hung up on her ethnicity and says that she is not sure about the exact region of Hong Kong – all she knows is that her parents immigrated from Hong Kong. At the end of the video,

she plays a little clip of her family in the car to see how her family speaks in Cantonese, and she instructs us to listen to her younger sister to see whether we think she has a British accent when speaking Cantonese.

Vanessa's viewers cannot believe this "exotic" looking woman is Chinese; she does not look Chinese at all to the viewers who are used to seeing only stereotypical images of Chinese people in the media:

angelsparkle8: wow..i cant believe u are chinese. U look sooo exotic like meditteranean or middle eastern or something. U r gorgeous either way!

starXkidXcraze: lol i can believe youre chinese! and i love youre accent! it's really cute on an asian! i've got no videos of myself up, but i dislike ethnicity questions too. =['Cause my dad's from the US, but he's African American, German, Irish, and two different kinds of Native American and my mom's from Thailand but her grandfather's Chinese!

Other viewers express their frustration about various accents:

M3197: Im Australian and It suprisies me how much these people dont know anything about other countries and Australian accents are nothing alike British accents.

There is also a remark about Vanessa sounding British when she speaks Cantonese:

bmariano: Girl you and your sister do have a british accent in your chinese. And yeah there is an american accent for ABC's

Bmariano uses the term "ABC" to refer to "American-born Chinese."

This comment below tries to come to Vanessa's defense, but does not quite make it:

specialxkae: no wonder vanessa thinks the commenters are smart asses. She is what she is. Majority of chinese girls look alike, n she just turned out more exotic and pretty which means she stands out! haha who wants to look the same anyway

Stating that the majority of Chinese women look alike is another way of "Othering" the entire ethnicity. This person seems to understand Vanessa's frustration, but then contradicts her supportive comment by making a racist comment. In these next comments, we see the two commenters opposing everyone's opinions:

sonotquiet: i'm surprised that you get that question a lot... you look completely chinese.

tokyodoru: lol quite funny that people ask that qn you deffinatly look 100% asian

These two commenters disagree with everyone else. So, looking through the comments, I gather that Chinese is not exotic, as opposed to Middle Eastern, which is. That Chinese ethnicity is "Othered" implies an ethnicity with no beautiful women who might look "exotic." It is interesting that Vanessa has to explain her ethnicity and nationality, and has to prove that she does, in fact, speak Cantonese. The dialogue created between her and her viewers is about her ethnicity. Comments indicate that the viewers are using their racial stereotypes of what a Chinese person should look like: not exotic and not beautiful.

Nakamura (2002) states that "race is under construction" (p. 134) and, as long as there are ways to be raced and gendered by clicking on a box, the process of a raced identity still exists. She says that the way we talk about race in cyberspace can change and that there is hope as long as we free our minds of racism. Fortunately, we are living in a digital age where we see representations of various races and ethnicities. We can observe such communities and create discussions revolving around race, gender, and ethnicity. Creating a dialogue that deals with race, gender, and ethnicity can help immensely with the

construction of these issues online. Starting and continuing such conversations can lead to greater discussions and hopefully, broadening minds.

4. Conclusion

My research question asked “How do women in the YouTube Beauty community perform their identity and difference in their videos?” When looking at each guru, it was easy to find self-identifiers as I began the process of constructing her identity. Through earlier profiles or channel pages, I was usually able to learn about some of the demographic information, as well as information that gurus disclose voluntarily by providing a FAQ section (this section may not be included in current profiles). I found that ethnicity and race of women are important when they are not White. Community members demand to know both characteristics of the guru if they are not already provided in her profile. The discourse of race and ethnicity in gurus’ videos tells me that these issues are important to them. Online or offline, race and ethnicity have been embedded in people’s minds since childhood.

I found that gurus create a community on YouTube, and by doing so, they all feel connected to each other. Female gurus of color bring together other women like them, from around the globe, to discuss everyday issues, not just DIY topics. For example, Bubz often creates inspirational videos where she talks about her experiences with racial/ethnic harassment. She makes videos to respond to her viewers who feel bad about themselves. She inspires them to stand up and speak against racism; by opening up about her negative childhood memories, she encourages others to openly discuss their own experiences with racism. Vanessa creates a video in which she explains that her nationality is British, but her ethnicity is Chinese. She makes sure her subscribers understand the difference between the two.

Such videos are being created by gurus in attempts to explain to their loyal viewers where they, or their parents/ancestors, came from. Through watching videos, community members connect to others who can relate to them in terms of race and ethnicity. These ordinary gurus who post videos from their bedrooms are role models to women of all backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, and races, all over the globe. The discourse of race and ethnicity in their videos tells me that these issues are very important to them.

I have found that this community is full of women and men who just want to connect to “Others.” I have been asked why I chose to study makeup and women and I clarify that this study is about the meaning-making practices and identity performance in online communities. It happens to be a community of women talking about DIY fashion and makeup, but the implications rise beyond that. This study is about underrepresented and silenced women being able to represent themselves online. Thousands of women who are not aware of different races/ethnicities/geographic locations ask ignorant questions unintentionally or intentionally every day. The underrepresented gurus are often “Othered” by the community members, which, as Bhabha (1994) says, is a point of identity and a problem for a discourse at the same time.

YouTube is a great platform for people to start, and continue, the dialogue of race, ethnicity, gender, and difference. It opens up the discussions we wouldn’t otherwise openly have offline. When community members comment on the exoticism or difference of a guru, it creates a discourse that constructs race and ethnicity discussions. After these discussions are mulled out, we can then start identifying such practices as a positive entity: a direction toward learning about different races and ethnicities, and accepting the differences in all of us. I talk about Hall’s (1997) notion of representation when several gurus represent the same country but look different. The presence of various forms of discussions revolving around race, gender, and ethnicity creates a clear picture of what it is like to be a guru who is a Muslim or Vietnamese-American. There is so much research that we need to do and so

much more to understand even though we are about to enter 2017. These conversations are important to have and open up a sea of questions and opportunities for scholars, but most importantly, they start the dialogue we all want to see.

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