

# Contesting Race in YouTube's *K-Town*: "It's white people in Asian disguises"

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This paper utilizes ethnographic content analysis to analyze the discourses surrounding the negotiation of Korean American identity in a YouTube series, *K-Town*, a reality web series with an Asian American cast set in Los Angeles, California. We find that ethnic stereotypes about Korean Americans (KAs), as well as Koreatown, Los Angeles (KT) as a foreign space, are actively constructed and contested by users on YouTube. We argue that YouTube user-generated comments illuminate DuBois' concept of *stance* and *disalignment* whereby users invoke their ethnic or racial identities as either Korean American (KA) or more broadly Asian American (AA), to validate their own social location and to make claims regarding the authenticity of the

webisode in portraying KAs and KT. YouTube users also deployed Butler's concept of "abject identity" to critique the portrayal of unacceptable KA identities while simultaneously affirming acceptable ethnic identities. We conclude that YouTubers not only contributed to the discourse of what it means to be KA or AA, but also brought to the forefront who ought to determine what is an "authentic" portrayal. This is significant considering mainstream media's perpetuation of racial stereotypes in mostly White-centered narratives.

*Keywords:* Korean Americans, Asian Americans, ethnicity, stereotypes, abject identity, YouTube

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**I**n its infancy, the internet was hailed as a clean slate, free from the troubling differences of race and gender that structure social life (Beckles, 1997; Plant, 1998). Scholars shortly discovered that the internet is influenced by the same factors that shape gender and race "offline" (Daniels, 2009; Hughey, 2012; Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000). Indeed, online spaces do affirm racial identities and foster supportive racial communities (Byrne, 2008; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2011), but they are also used to fuel racist practices and discourses (Guo & Harlow, 2014; Hughey & Daniels, 2013).

The emergence of Web 2.0, defined by user-generated content that requires active participation and collaboration (e.g. ability to comment on online content) as opposed to simple provider-generated content, contributes to a discursive understanding of race and identity boundaries. The dichotomy between earlier consumptive online practices and more recent participatory web cultures is heavily debated, pointing to the false dichotomy between online production and consumption (Cohen, 2003; Ritzer, 2009). That is, consumers have always been active producers and these two practices have never been clearly differentiated (Hall, 1980; Toffler, 1980). Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) refer to the convergence of production and consumption as *prosumption*. While prosumption is not wholly unique to social media nor this particular historical moment, what is unique is that prosumption has dramatically increased and intensified with the exponential growth of participatory web cultures as consumers have more opportunities online in which to participate and collaborate (Chia, 2012).

YouTube, a video-sharing website that allows users to comment on each other's posts and videos, is one of the most visited sites for prosumption. On their website, YouTube boasts that they have over 1 billion users, reach more 18-49 year-olds than any U.S. cable network, and have a presence in more than 88 countries (<https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/press/>). The internet, and sites like YouTube, makes it possible for social media sites to reach global audiences. For example, Psy, a Korean musician, gained worldwide fame in 2012 when his "Gangnam Style" video went viral on YouTube. It was the first video to reach one billion views and at the time of writing is the most viewed video on YouTube (Gruger, 2012). Although Psy grew up in Seoul, he attended the Berklee College of Music in Boston. This transnational superstar is a creation of the nexus of the interactive platform and global popularity of YouTube.

As of May 2018, YouTube is the second most popular website (second to Google) and the top website for user-generated content (<http://www.alexa.com/topsites>); this is true on a national and global scale. Since its 2006 purchase by Google, YouTube has included more professionally generated content (i.e. music videos and web series). Considering YouTube's massive global popularity and user-base, it is a rich site to

understand participatory web cultures particularly in terms of marginalized groups. While there is growing research on YouTube and online racial identity, few studies have examined YouTube as a space of prosumption in terms of race and ethnicity (where users can simultaneously consume race and ethnicity and produce racial and ethnic communities, identities and boundaries) and none to our knowledge examine the racial and ethnic discourse of user-generated comments in response to a reality web series. How then does online user-generated content shape the understanding of race and ethnicity? Is this different from how race and ethnicity are understood and discussed offline? What are these new understandings of race and ethnicity?

This study employs these general guiding questions to fill the gap in the research by examining how ethnic stereotypes about Korean Americans (henceforth, KAs), as well as Koreatown, Los Angeles (henceforth, KT) as a foreign space, are actively constructed and contested by YouTube users (henceforth, YouTubers). We argue that YouTube user-generated comments illuminate DuBois' (2007) concept of stance and disalignment to validate their social location and to make claims regarding the authenticity of the webisode in terms of the portrayal of KAs and KT. YouTubers also enact abject identity (Butler, 1993) to critique the portrayal of unacceptable KA identities while simultaneously affirming acceptable ethnic identities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Negotiating Online Identities

Asian Americans (henceforth, AAs) spend twice as much time a month (12 hours and 23 seconds) watching videos on the internet than the general U.S. population and are more likely to use YouTube (64% v. 55%) (Nielson, 2013). Since AAs are more connected to the internet and more likely to access video sharing websites like YouTube, it is important to understand how AAs use the internet to negotiate embodied ethnic identities. We utilize two theoretical concepts to shed light on how AAs negotiate ethnic identities online, specifically DuBois (2007) theory of stance and Butler's (1993) theory of abject identity.

**Stance.** Racial and ethnic identities are negotiated through social interactions (Kibria, 2000). Participatory web cultures are a significant site for identity construction as they facilitate the understanding and negotiation of social identities. This is especially true when considering marginalized populations, such as racial and ethnic minorities (Hermes, 2006; Nakamura, 2002; Tynes, Reynolds, & Greenfield, 2004). People are racially categorized by visual cues (e.g. physical appearance) *and* the content of their texts in online interactions. Kang (2003) points to how the “language, grammar and diction” of textual interactions suggest an individual’s race (p. 43). Jacobs-Hueys (2006) found that online discussions of hair became markers of racial identity and authenticity for Black women, while Ignacio (2003) highlighted how the use of *Taglish* (a mixture of Tagalog and English) in a Filipino newsgroup express ways in which Filipinos resist assimilation and negotiate their varying degrees of Filipino-ness. Similarly, Byrne (2008) found that participants used the inclusive term “we” to establish themselves as part of a racial community to legitimize their contributions to the conversation, particularly when their comments are critical of the racial group. Finally, Burkhalter (1999) examined online discussion boards and found that although there were no visual cues available then, racial identities were constructed and challenged through “cultural frames.” That is, users put forth particular positions and perspectives that racially identified them while simultaneously establishing particular social positions. However, these racial identity assertions can be interpreted differently at times by other discussion board participants. Speaking to this, some participants challenged the author’s racial identity by disputing the perspectives put forth by the author.

Applying a similar theoretical framework to cultural frames, scholars have utilized “stance” as a discursive analytical tool to understand the construction and negotiation of online identities. Stance is a “public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means (language, gesture, and other symbolic forms), through which social actors simultaneously evaluate objects, position subjects (themselves and others) and align with the other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field” (Dubois, 2007, p. 163). Users that enact stance put forth a particular perspective that the audience can then align or disalign

with. Acts of stance construct both the object and the identity of the stance taker. For example, Chun and Walters (2011) examined the video and user comments of a YouTube video of Arabic-English bilingual comic Wonho Chung. In the video, Chung evokes Asian stereotypes as the crux of his comedic performance. The authors found that users constructed and shared Arab subjectivity through effective use of stance and alignment. This occurred simultaneously with users also reaffirming essentialist ideas of what it is to be Arab and racist notions of Orientalism. A common theme across these studies is that social media offers an important social location to negotiate racial-ethnic identities as it allows audiences expanded opportunities to not only consume cultural products, but also to participate and collaborate in building a discursive understanding of racial-ethnic identities online. As we argue in this paper, the construction and contestation of race in social media rests heavily on cultural markers of ethnic identities that are contextual and narrative. Online users employ stance to legitimize their opinions regarding the authenticity of *K-Town* in representing online ethnic identities and geographic space.

**Abject Identity.** Butler (1993) argues that gendered beings are created through social interaction, specifically through a continual process of both invocation and repudiation of gender categories. That is, people invoke a gendered norm that is assumed to be a normative truth while simultaneously rejecting a “constitutive outside” (p. 3). This rejected outside contains all of the rejected notions of the gender category and it is within this constitutive outside that “abject identities” reside. Therefore, gendered beings must continually reject abject identities and continually affirm their gendered identities as normal. The continual rejection of abject identities creates a “threatening spectre” (p. 3) that must be continually rejected to maintain a culturally normative gendered identity.

We extend the Butlerian model of gendered interaction to the construction of ethnic identities in which the “threatening spectre” of an abject identity is utilized to construct normative ethnic identities. For example, Espiritu (2001) finds that Filipina chastity is revered compared to the sexual permissiveness of White women in the Filipino community. In doing so, the virtues of Filipina and White women are diametrically opposed, with Filipinas favorably positioned. In parallel, Jimenez and

Horowitz (2013) reveal in their study of high schoolers that being Asian is associated with intelligence and diligence when it came to academics compared to their White counterparts. However, speaking to the fluidity of race and ethnicity, “Asians who break the stereotype by taking a more easy-going approach to life can be recoded as White..., while one student notes, ‘if you’re really studious and white, you’re called Asian at heart’” (p. 859). The commonality in both studies of AA youth is that White assimilation is constructed as undesirable and, we argue the abject identity, while being Asian is desirable. Thus, the Butlerian theoretical model of gendered abject identities is applicable to the construction of ethnic identities and as we illustrate in this paper, are utilized online to construct and police normative ethnic identities.

We argue YouTubers employ both stance and abject identity to negotiate online representations of AAs and KAs. We broaden the application of Butler’s concept of abject identity (1993) to include ethnic identity. Users enact ethnic abject identity to critique the portrayal of unacceptable KA identities while simultaneously affirming acceptable ethnic identities. YouTubers also employ stance (DuBois, 2007) to legitimize their opinions regarding the authenticity of *K-Town* in representing online ethnic identities and geographic space.

### **Asian Americans and Media Portrayal**

White audiences in the U.S. have been able to rely on the mainstream media to reflect a wide range of viewpoints and to be portrayed in diverse situations, most often as the victors throughout history (Cropp, Frisby, & Mills, 2003; Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003). On the flip side, media often perpetuate racial stereotypes and reproduce dominant narratives that marginalize communities of color (Gray, 1995; Hamamoto, 1994). AA experiences are frequently ignored, and the rare representations draw on banal stereotypes (Ono & Pham, 2009; Wang, 2010). The yellow peril served as one of the earliest stereotypes which cast East Asians as economic, social, or military threats to the Western world (Hamamoto, 1994; Kawai, 2005). The yellow peril stereotype represented AAs as perpetual foreigners and unassimilable menaces to White society, serving useful in passing racist immigration and labor laws (i.e. Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882), as well as forcing Japanese Americans into internment camps during

World War II. By the 1960s, the portrayal of AAs took a speciously flattering turn as the hard-working model minority at the expense of discrediting claims of racial injustice made by African Americans and their supporters at the height of the Civil Rights movement (Osajima, 1988; Wu, 2002). Meanwhile, “controlling images” depict Asian women as sexually available, whether it is the variant of the feminine, accommodating “Lotus Blossom” or the threatening “Dragon Lady” that is unafraid to use sex as a means to an end; Asian men, on the other hand, are often portrayed as physically unattractive or sexually deviant (Han, 2006; Ono & Pham, 2009).

**Broadcast Television.** ABC (American Broadcasting Company) was the first network to air a series about an Asian American family on broadcast television. The highly anticipated sitcom, *All-American Girl* (1994), drew on Margaret Cho’s stand-up comedy about growing up KA with traditional Korean parents. This one-series sitcom was met with disappointment by the AA community for orientaling the KA experience. The network failed to hire KA writers, producers, or directors, and Margaret Cho, the lead actor, had no creative control in portraying the fictional Kim family (Jung, 2014). Twenty years later, *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-) is only the second series about an Asian American family to air on broadcast television, again on ABC. Similarly, the network hired a Persian writer, which sparked one of many creative battles between the network and Eddie Huang, a Taiwanese American whose memoir is the basis for the sitcom (Huang, 2015). Later that same year, ABC aired *Dr. Ken* (2015-2017), a sitcom starring, written, co-produced and based on the experiences of Ken Jeong, a KA. Here, too, racial tensions emerged as other producers of the show wanted Dr. Ken’s wife to be played by a White woman, which incidentally did not occur (Ryzik, 2016). It is worth noting that 2015 was the first time in U.S. television history for two sitcoms featuring AA families to air simultaneously. At the time of writing, there were no series that we know of that featured a mostly AA cast, although Hulu’s *The Mindy Project* (2012-2017) produced by Mindy Kaling and Netflix’s *Master of None* (2015-) produced by Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang, were both critically-acclaimed programs that consequently star South Asian American producers.

To be fair, a handful of KA actors have successfully secured leading roles, including Daniel Dae Kim in *Lost* (2004-2010) and *Hawaii-Five-0* (2010-), Sandra Oh

in *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-2014) and *American Crime* (2017), John Cho in *Selfie* (2014), Yunjin Kim in *Lost* (2004-2010) and *Mistresses* (2013-2016), and Daniel Henney in *Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders* (2016-2017) and in *Criminal Minds* (2015-).

Nonetheless, these examples illustrate how rare it is for AA actors to be featured on broadcast television and the difficulty writers face in creating AA roles that do not reduce them to trite stereotypes when they are represented in mainstream media.

**Reality Television and YouTube.** AAs have gained more ground in reality television (e.g. Christine Ha – *Master Chef Season 3* winner; Jabbawockeez – Winners of *America's Best Dance Crew* Season 1; Quest Crew – Winners of *America's Best Dance Crew* Seasons 3 and 8; Yul Kwon – *Survivor: Cook Islands* winner, etc.) and on YouTube (e.g. Wong Fu Productions, Sam Tsui, and Michelle Phan). Social media, like YouTube, provides a space for voices marginalized in mainstream media (Raghavan, 2009). However, research suggests that YouTube is more likely to reinforce stereotypes rather than contest hegemonic media portrayals of minorities (Kim, 2012).

In a content analysis of the top videos on YouTube in 2011, Guo and Harlow (2014) discovered that regardless of whether or not the YouTube content is professionally or user-generated, 63% of the top videos on the site evoked racial stereotypes. Videos that included racial stereotypes about Asians reinforced stereotypes 91% of the time. This study additionally measured audience reaction to the videos by counting the number of views, comments, and likes/dislikes, but did not examine the content of the comments nor explore whether or not the users were contesting the stereotypical depictions in the videos through user-generated comments. Other studies have examined the content of online user-generated comments with participatory web cultures and found that while racism persists online in traditional formats, participatory web cultures do offer a new and unique arena to shape discourses about race (Hughey & Daniels, 2013; Moody-Ramirez, Tait, Smith, Fears, & Randle, 2016; Nakamura, 2002). Thus, this study is an important addition to the growing body of research on how audiences contest and talk back to narrow depictions of race and ethnicity.



## Background of *K-Town* Reality Series

*K-Town* is a reality web series featuring eight AAs in Los Angeles, California's Koreatown. In 2010, news of the reality series and a Craigslist casting call instantly nabbed media attention, including stories in the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Post* and even a bit on *Chelsea Lately* and *Saturday Night Live* (Yang, 2012). The reality series was additionally highlighted in *OK! Magazine*, mentioned on TMZ.com, and discussed on the popular blog, [angryasianman.com](http://angryasianman.com).

The reality series was controversial prior to airing, from praise for showcasing an all-AA cast to criticism for its depiction of AAs in light of the absence of diverse programming. The entertainment website, *A.V. Club*, described the reality series as an embarrassment and satirically urged mainstream media to “not stop until all the colors of the human rainbow have been humiliated” (O’Neal, 2010). Director Eugene Choi stated that “the negative response came when there were no episodes produced, and not even cast members selected” (Wang, 2012).

Despite the controversy, a major cable TV network picked up the reality series in 2010, but was eventually pulled due to a “regime change” at the network, spawning creative tensions between the series producers and TV executives (Yang, 2012). In 2011, YouTube started funding original content (Original Channels Initiative) with \$100 million in start-up funds and picked up *K-Town* after a two-year hold.

*K-Town* premiered on July 11, 2012 on LOUD, a YouTube channel from studio Electus. It is directed by Eugene Choi, Eddie Kim, and Mike Le and produced by Tyrese Gibson’s production company, HG Productions. According to Mike Le, one of the primary goals in producing *K-Town* was to move beyond simplistic mainstream media depictions of AAs as “ninjas or dragon ladies or asexual IT guys” and actively work against the model minority stereotype (Yang, 2012). In fact, many popular culture commentaries have made the point that part of the appeal of *K-Town* is to watch the cast members behave in ways that contradict stereotypical expectations for AAs (Reft, 2013; Wang, 2012).

There are ten episodes for Season 1; each episode is approximately 10 minutes. The cast is composed of four women (Scarlet Chan, Jasmine Chang, Cammy Chung, and Violet Kim) and four men (Joe Cha, Steve Kim, Jowe Lee, and Young Lee).

## METHODS

This study is an ethnographic content analysis (ECA) of the first year of online user-generated comments of the first episode of the reality web series, *K-Town*. ECA is a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) relying on inductive reasoning and constant comparison to build theoretical explanations. ECA is a purposive, reflexive and interactive approach to analyzing online content that calls for “constant discovery and constant comparison” (Altheide, 1987, p. 68). It is a “reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis and interpretation” (Altheide, 1987, p. 68). Themes are expected to emerge throughout the analysis and thus there are no predetermined categories. The goal of ECA is to understand and discover meaning within the text as well as to verify theoretical relationships. The data collected is both numerical and textual.

ECA differs from quantitative content analysis (QCA) in several key ways. With QCA, the categories are predetermined; researchers move in a linear fashion between data collection, analysis and interpretation; the data collected is solely numerical and consists of the frequency and variety of content. The goal of QCA is to verify hypothesized relationships.

We employed ECA as a research methodology as we were interested in not only what YouTubers said and how often, but also in how YouTubers understood *K-Town* and the portrayals of AAs and KAs. Specifically, as AAs watch twice as many online videos per month and are more likely to use YouTube than the general U.S. population (Nielson, 2013), we were interested in how AAs and KAs interacted with each other and made sense of the first all AA online reality web series. Inclusive terms such as “Asian,” “Asian American,” “Korean,” and “Korean American” were used to establish YouTubers as belonging to and identifying as part of the Asian community (broadly defined) as well as *romanized* words in the Korean language that signified insider Korean status. A few examples of these Korean words included *bulgogi* (marinated beef) and *ahjussis* (middle-aged men). Stance then was operationalized as anytime a user claimed insider knowledge by either self-identifying as Korean or Asian as well as by claiming knowledge from residing, working, or frequenting KT.

Since YouTube is the media platform whereby viewers initially watch and interact with *K-Town*, the user-generated comments from this platform rather than fan blogs/vlogs or other media outlets were chosen for analysis. Season 1, Episode 1: "The Beginning" introduces the eight main characters and the geographic location of KT; a part of the premise is to introduce Scarlet to KT as she is not KA and unfamiliar with the neighborhood. A variety of locations are included, such as a foot massage spa, boxing gym, and several Korean bars and nightclubs. In addition, group tensions are exposed, including the previous romantic relationship between Jowe and Violet, as well as Young's marriage proposal to his long-time girlfriend. This episode was intentionally selected for two key reasons. First, the reality series was highly anticipated and controversial prior to airing. The first episode was chosen to highlight these initial reactions. Secondly, this episode had, at the time of writing, the most user-generated comments highlighting the interactions of users with the reality series. The first year of user-generated comments were included in the analysis and the data was analyzed by the two authors.

The preliminary analysis of the first year of user-generated comments was conducted independently by each of the two authors without predefined categories. Posts that were spam or unrelated to the reality web series were excluded (e.g. users amending typographical errors in earlier posts, shout-outs to bloggers who directed the user to the video, and discussions between users that resulted in name-calling). A total of 1,224 user-generated comments were included in the analysis.

The initial analysis by each investigator resulted in the emergence of general themes that were then continually refined as the authors compared their findings with each other and returned to the data for further analysis and interpretation. This circular and reflexive pattern of coding, analysis, and interpretation occurred numerous times until the authors agreed that no further themes or patterns emerged from the data. The most dominant theme from the data was that of authenticity. Specifically, authenticity in regards to the portrayal of KAs and the geographic location of KT in Los Angeles, California. As the authors continually returned to the data, additional subthemes emerged that cut across the overarching theme of

authenticity. The four subthemes are: race/ethnicity, gender, space, and class (defined in Table 1)<sup>1</sup>.

Table 1

*Definition of Four Subthemes*

Subtheme	Definition
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	mention of race and ethnicity; use of racial or racist language, users self-identifying their racial or ethnic identities
<i>Gender</i>	mention of masculinity, femininity, gendered bodies; use of gendered language
<i>Space</i>	the geographic location of Koreatown, Los Angeles, and other Korean spaces
<i>Class</i>	mention of socioeconomic status; use of cultural capital markers

In regard to numerical data, each investigator utilized the definitions in Table 1 to ensure intercoder reliability and independently coded the user-generated comments in terms of frequency and variety along the four subthemes. The numerical coding results were compared between the two authors and the few coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved. Of the 1,224 comments, 56.29% (689) were coded as race/ethnicity, 25.81% (316) related to gender, 12.58% (154) dealt with space, and 5.31% (65) focused on class (See Table 2). Nearly one-fourth of the 1,224 comments were negative toward the reality web series or the cast members.

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<sup>1</sup> Users must register with YouTube and provide basic information (e.g. age, gender and location) in order to comment. This information is easily accessed on the site, but there is no guarantee that this information is factual. Indeed, anonymity in terms of user names is the norm. Additionally, YouTube profiles and comments at the time of analysis were text only (no embedded imagery). The race or ethnic identity of the user was only noted when user self-identified or employed *romanized* words in the Korean language that signified insider Korean status. Finally, we did not modify user quotes in terms of spelling or grammar to maintain user voice.

Table 2  
*Subtheme by Frequency and Percentage*

Subtheme	Percentage (Frequency)
Race/Ethnicity	56.29% (689)
Gender	25.81% (316)
Space	12.58% (154)
Class	5.31% (65)
<b>Total</b>	100% (1,224)

As authors, we continually returned to the data to examine the narrative themes that emerged within each subtheme to discover and develop theoretical understanding of how users, in particular AAs and KAs, made sense of and interacted with each other and the reality web series. This reflexive investigation with the data and between the authors lead to the theoretical understanding of how and when users employed stance (DuBois, 2007) and abject identity (Butler, 1993) in relation to *K-Town*.

## FINDINGS

### “Real” Koreans

The overarching theme emerging from our data was related to the authenticity of how Los Angeles' KT was portrayed and whether the cast of *K-Town* was a valid representation of KAs. That is, questions of authenticity were embedded in the user-generated comments coded under race/ethnicity. The debate of representation was the subject of the majority of the comments coded as race/ethnicity and centered on the argument that the reality web series is an inaccurate representation of “real” KAs, and more broadly, AAs.

Youtubers used stance to align themselves as part of the racial or ethnic group while simultaneously disaligning themselves with the portrayal of KAs or AAs on *K-Town*. Taking stance, in terms of racial or ethnic identity and aligning

themselves as belonging to the Korean ethnic or Asian racial group, legitimated their opinions regarding the authenticity of *K-Town* in representing KAs or AAs.

There were 96 comments in which a Korean ethnic or Asian racial identity were stated, and in 69.8% (67 of 96) of those comments, the users identified themselves as Korean or KA. Thus, the majority of comments that invoked stance to legitimize their opinions regarding the representation of AAs and KAs on *K-Town* were Korean or KA themselves. Additionally, of the 96 comments, 86.65% (83) were negative in regards to *K-Town* being inauthentic or an inaccurate representation of KAs or AAs<sup>2</sup>:

patriots: “Im korean but this is quite stupid”

iSleep2: I’m sorry but I’m asian, and this is really making us look bad

alee55: im Korean, and im pretty embarrassed. like seriously, wtf is this..

The negative comments in which racial or ethnic identity was invoked were overwhelmingly characterized by deriding the show as horrible or embarrassing to Asians.

A small minority of YouTubers, 13.54% (13 of 96), employed stance to voice support for the reality series and defend the portrayal of KAs and AAs on *K-Town*. While these participants also utilized their own KA and AA identities as stance to align themselves with the KA and AA community, they differed in that they did not invalidate the representation of KAs and AAs on *K-Town* through disalignment. Instead, they argued that the reality series was enjoyable (4 of 13) or a refreshing break from the model minority stereotype (6 of 13). For example:

Tommyp619: I’m Asian and I approve this show. We are slowly breaking into the entertainment industry which is dominant by whites and blacks and away from the stereotypical image of kung fu/nerdy people. Comon, give them some credit.

MARK MAN: I’m Korean and I thought this was hilarious lol it’s just a show, idk how it would be a disgrace to Koreans. It’s entertainment.

Youtubers utilized stance by invoking their own ethnic or racial identities as KAs and AAs, and disalignment to critique the portrayal of KA and AA experiences on *K-Town*. Those user-generated comments that were positive or neutral toward the webisode and the representation of KAs and AAs also utilized stance, but aligned themselves with the webisode. Nonetheless, there were also Youtubers that did not identify themselves racially or ethnically that critiqued the portrayal of AAs and KAs. However, instead of utilizing stance and disalignment, non racially or ethnically self-identified users utilized Butler's concept of the abject identity to critique unacceptable portrayals of KAs and AAs.

Unlike stance and alignment, the abject identity is repudiated in *K-Town* user-generated comments that do not specifically identify their race or ethnic identity. The whitewashed Asian is a failed Asian to which real or authentic Asians are compared and constructed. Of the total user-generated comments coded as race/ethnicity, 13.64% (94 of 689) user-generated comments were concerning assimilated, Americanized, or whitewashed Asians as an inauthentic AA representation. For example:

Greek91: they act soo americanized

Vamgurl: i hate it when people stereotype asains. this isn't even a stereotype. it just shows a bunch of white washed koreans trying to be the next jersey shore. :/

The critique of the cast members of *K-Town* being whitewashed when not directed toward the show as a whole, were aimed specifically at female cast members. For example:

notaregularguy: Why do Asian girls try so hard in trying to act like white girls? Hello, my name is Kim Ling, real name Ling Ling. You take picture, let me do V sign!!!

KittyK47: They still sound like white girls.

Meanwhile, when discussions moved away from the cast members being either Asian or whitewashed, they were described as acting like white trash or Mexican (although these were by far the least number of comments). For example:

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<sup>2</sup> All usernames are pseudonyms.

Icy96: They talk like white trash.....

Epic22103: Korean's that act like mexican's

YouTubers also came to the defense of *K-Town's* portrayal of KAs and AAs. Of the comments coded within the theme of race/ethnicity, 6.09% (42 of 689) contested the negative comments regarding the reality series by arguing that *K-Town* dispels the model minority stereotype of the hard working, studious Asian, and offers in its place, a more diverse representation of AAs. Thus, these comments, although rare, did not utilize the *K-Town* cast members as an abject identity to argue against, but rather challenged the ubiquitous model minority stereotype. For example:

lovesmakeup: theyre not embarrassing the asian community....they're acting like normal young people. gosh.

cyrstalacids: I think what people need to realize is that the asian stereotype is someone who is a social hermit, studies all day and night, plays computer games, etc. So, to be shown in this light counteracts this idea of all Asians.

Even though *K-Town* is extreme and a bit staged, there are Asian like those in the cast that exist.

In conclusion, YouTubers constructed the authentic AA and KA identity by simultaneously rallying against the abject identity of the whitewashed Asian. Additionally, user-generated comments argued that the cast members of *K-Town* were not Asian, but rather a different race of lower economic standing. Finally, some YouTubers lauded the representation of AAs in *K-Town* as the webisode portrayed an alternative image to the model minority stereotype and diversified the representation of AAs in popular culture.

## Space

There were 154 (12.58%) user-generated comments coded as space and these comments comprised of statements or inquiries related to the geographical location of KT. Similar to the discourse by YouTubers in regards to the authenticity of the representation of AA and KA identity, YouTubers also utilized stance to claim insider knowledge or experience of KT. In our examination of the above-mentioned sub-themes of space, the authors compared 41 user-generated comments utilizing



stance to the remaining 113 user-comments that did not utilize stance or infer insider knowledge of the neighborhood. In doing so, divergent patterns emerged. In this section, we analyzed the top three themes that emerged in both groups (i.e. the user-generated comments utilizing stance and the remaining user-generated comments that did not utilize stance).

In our analysis of YouTubers that utilized stance, 36.58% (15 of 41) were coded as inaccurate portrayals of KT. Among these comments, the legitimacy of physical locations used in the webisode was questioned and sometimes an authentic KT experience was shared in place of what they deemed as an inaccurate portrayal of this geographical territory. The following examples are representative of statements that challenge LOUD's depiction of KT:

verylilfighter: smh wanna know the real k-town?

we study

we b boy

we eat bulgogi

not this ktown shit

hgir17621: LOL I like how a lot of the locations aren't in KTown, but next door to it...I used to live in KTown it's not bad, but it's a lot residential places.

These "insiders" applied stance to dispute the authenticity of the reality series by specifically suggesting that locations used in filming are outside the geographic borders of KT or that the activities being filmed are grossly distorted, often in a negative light. In these cases, YouTubers utilized stance through their insider knowledge as residents or regulars to discredit the portrayal of KT in the webisode as inauthentic while simultaneously adding validity to their comments regarding what an authentic KT experience looks like.

The second theme, KT as a positive or desirable location to live or frequent, was articulated in 26.83% (11 of 41) of user-generated comments that utilized stance. For example:

FukYu: i've been to 98% of the places they show and been to. so i'll be watching closely how accurate they are with their "show and tell" i LOVE Ktown...but please, KEEP IT REAL!

kwaitanabe: like I love KTOWN and all...it used to be our spot in college ahahahah but wow...im just surprised to see that its finally on the internet than on TV like originally planned.

In both comments, YouTubers expressed familiarity and fondness of KT. Moreover, FukYu urges to “KEEP IT REAL!”; hence, even fans of KT expected an authentic portrayal from the producers of the web series.

Lastly, the theme of KT’s urban landscape emerged in 7.31% (3 of 41) of user-generated comments enacting stance. The following examples shed light on how former residents characterized KT:

adamf: My experience living in K-Town was more about gang shootings, drugs, gangs and constant police presence...Lots of recent Latin American immigrants crammed into tiny apartments near my place

jerrybeach3340: besides that I used to live in ktown when most of it was further on western. I grew up with loads of Koreans who had become products of the urban environment surrounding them. This show Koreans in a more cosmopolitan light then the town i grew up seeing in the 80s

These YouTubers focus on the urban conditions of KT (e.g. inner-city, gangs, and immigrants), a direct contrast with the glamorous lifestyle of drinking and partying that is depicted in the first webisode.

On the other hand, the dominant themes that emerged from YouTubers that did not enact stance vastly differed from those that did utilize stance. First, the characterization of KT in racial or racialized terms emerged in 23.89% (27 of 113) of user-comments that did not utilize stance. What is more interesting is that they were rarely describing the territory as a KA community.

Ilikemanga: This is why I’d rather go to Little Tokyo.

heya6767: fuck koreatown los angeles and all the stupid gooks that think they’re something out there

cambendell: Mexicans run K-town, muchos gracias.

Within this theme, the range of responses were broad, from describing KT as a place for AAs to party or pointing out the large concentration of Latinos that reside in Los Angeles. These racialized descriptions tended to be negative and/or explicitly racist.

Next, inquiries about the geographic location of KT were the second dominant theme in user-comments that did not enact stance (21.23%, 24 of 113). These comments reflected a sense of understanding that KT was somewhere in the U.S., sometimes narrowing it down to Los Angeles, but the actual location was unknown (or invisible) to YouTubers that did not enact stance.

Finally, the inference of KT as a foreign space consisted of 6.19% (7 of 113) of user-generated comments that did not employ stance. In these cases, KT was referenced to countries outside of the U.S., rather than a Los Angeles neighborhood. For example:

GodLover: i knew Korea was amazing but wow underground clubs? does japan also have those?

TheFunnyGals12: This is a different side of korea i didn't think existed. Instead of acknowledging (or learning for the first time about) the racial-ethnic diversity of Los Angeles, these YouTubers automatically assume the webisode is filmed in a foreign country, more specifically an "Asian" country, although Korean diasporas could be found around the globe.

In sum, YouTubers utilized stance, by invoking their own insider knowledge and familiarity with the physical location of KT. Such user-generated comments emphasized the inaccurate portrayal of KT in terms of space, and in its place, described the location as a positive place to frequent or reside, or in terms of its urban features, which were not featured in the webisode. In contrast, YouTubers that did not utilize stance privileged themes that were the least acknowledged by those that utilized stance. These themes, such as the portrayal of KT as either foreign, unknown, or a racialized space, are parallel to the discourses of AAs as foreign, invisible, or raced individuals compared to Whites.

## DISCUSSION

### Stance and Disalignment

We found that YouTube's interactive platform reveals nuanced processes, through the utilization of stance and disalignment, of boundary making in negotiating

AA identities. KAs actively resisted the racialization process by emphasizing their ethnicity; that is, they saw themselves as a Korean ethnic group as opposed to an imposed Asian race (Kibria 2000). In addition, boundary making also took place to distinguish Asians from Whites (or Americans, generally). Kibria (2000) found that second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans drew on their ethnic identities to contest racializing processes particularly the homogenization of ethnicity into a generic Asian racial identity. This resistance to the racialization processes enabled them to distance themselves from a particular activity, practice or identity that was at the center of racialization, especially when it dealt with racial hostility. Similarly, *K-Town* YouTubers used stance and disalignment to distance themselves from a practice of racialization and what they felt to be an inauthentic representation of KAs and AAs.

In doing so, YouTubers not only contributed to the discourse of what it means to be KA or AA, but also brought to the forefront who ought to determine what is an “authentic” portrayal. This is significant considering mainstream media’s perpetuation of racial stereotypes in mostly White-informed narratives. The majority of YouTubers in our study that revealed a racial-ethnic identity were KAs and they were also more likely to denounce the portrayals in *K-Town* as inauthentic; in particular, it was the social construction and portrayal of “Koreans,” not “Asians” that was most contested. Compared to other Asian ethnic groups, KAs are less likely to identify as AA (Kim, 2008; Lien, Conway, & Wong, 2003). Notwithstanding, some YouTubers lauded the representation of AAs in *K-Town* for veering away from the model minority stereotype.

### **Abject Identities**

YouTube user-generated comments highlight how *K-Town* and its characters serve as an abject identity of an unacceptable KA ethnic identity while simultaneously affirming acceptable KA identities and behaviors. Our study reveals that the “authentic” AA or KA identity is often constructed against the “threatening spectre” of an abject identity, most commonly, the Americanized or “whitewashed” Asian (Espiritu, 2001; Oh, 2015; Pyke & Dang, 2003). This Americanized Asian is a

repudiated and failed ethnic identity against which authentic Asian identity is invoked. This rang especially true when describing AA women cast members.

When the discourses related to authenticity focused on individual actors, the implications were far from gender-neutral. Asian women were more heavily critiqued and criticized compared to their male counterparts. “Controlling images” of Asian women as sexually available is likely to play a role, but it does not address the absence of singling out male cast members for acting whitewashed (Collins, 1999). However, the patrolling of women’s racialized bodies in order to uphold community reputation is not a new phenomenon (Chou, 2012; Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). Filipina Americans were subject to social control that reinforced patriarchal norms around women’s behavior while simultaneously constructing Filipinas as morally superior to White women (Espiritu, 2001). Similarly, we found that critiques of female actors’ bodies and behaviors were evoked to invalidate the authenticity of the cast members’ ethnic identities; hence, the AA women cast were merely “acting white” rather than adhering to stereotypes of Asian women as sex objects.

Related to the limited representations of KAs, coupled by persisting stereotypes, in mainstream media, feelings of shame are common among KAs, especially when women are portrayed as “sexually loose” (Danico, 2005). We found that the frequent mention of the term “shame” or “embarrass” offers insights about stigma management as a way to contest the racialization process (Goffman, 1963; Kibria, 1999). On one hand, it reflects the cultural influence of Confucian principles on AAs, in particular KAs. They are more likely to be raised by parents that emphasize the collective over individual, obedience over independence, and other hierarchical aspects of Confucianism (Kibria, 2000). On the other hand, shame is a common emotion expressed by second-generation KAs as a form of stigma management to deal with their racial status (Kibria, 1999).

**Conflating Race and Class.** The cast members of *K-Town* were intentionally selected to challenge the model minority stereotype of the hard working, economically secure, and passive Asian. In doing so, they were critiqued for embodying an alternative abject identity of some other race. The discourses related to the

inauthentic portrayals of both AAs and KKs frequently intersected with comments regarding class and race. Wilkins' (2004) study of White Puerto Rican "wannabes" reveals that class was utilized to both invalidate and validate wannabes' claims to racial crossing. In our study, the use of "Black" or "Mexican" signified a person of lower socioeconomic status compared to when cast members were described as "acting White." Moreover, it was evident that "acting White" meant middle-class White as opposed to acting "trashy" (i.e. lower-class Whites) or "ratchet" and "ghetto" (i.e. Black). Unfortunately, discussions of race and class from an intersectional perspective were absent from the discourse. While the producers' intention may have been to dispel the model minority stereotype, the discourse suggests that AAs are still largely regarded as a race that does not experience financial insecurities.

**Koreatown as Yellow Peril.** The visual and discursive imagination of Koreatown as a territory outside of the U.S. and more akin to countries like Japan or North Korea illustrate how stereotypes of AAs as perpetual foreigners or dangerous and menacing people shape the construction of Los Angeles' KT on the internet. While Los Angeles is well-known for being an ethnically diverse city, when neighborhoods are identified as Asian, Black, or Latino, they almost always carry a negative connotation of being a "bad" or "dangerous" neighborhood (e.g. ghetto, barrio, etc.) (Kim, 2008; Yu, Kim, Park, & Oh, 2009). In contrast, "good" neighborhoods tend to be predominantly White, but often without mention of its dominant racial marker. That is, place-based reality television programs almost always take place in expensive White neighborhoods, although a relatively small number of people have the financial means to live in exclusive communities regardless of their race and ethnicity. Moreover, although most reality television cast members in mainstream media are White, they are not assumed to be a European immigrant based solely on their physical appearance; this is in contrast to how AA are often perceived as perpetual foreigners in spite of being third and fourth generation Americans (Tuan, 1998). In our study, Koreatown was described as both foreign (i.e. in another country) and dangerous (i.e. where Blacks and Latinos live), highly reminiscent of the Yellow Peril stereotype that painted people of Asian descent using the same terms.

## CONCLUSION

While the dismal figures of media ownership by people of color reflect ongoing structural challenges of media control, media have always been sites for contesting constructed images. In the past, disgruntled viewers organized and participated in letter-writing campaigns directed to the executives of television networks, film companies, or magazines to express their discontent when confronted with racist or offensive content. Today, the internet offers a promising, interactive venue for marginalized groups to actively participate in public discourses about race and ethnicity in ways that were not imaginable in the recent past via commercial television, radio, or print. Social media, including YouTube, offers expanded possibilities through its presumptive format, which allows users to conveniently post comments.

Due to these new ways of viewing popular culture, AA are positioned advantageously to contest racist images and narratives. Compared to other racial-ethnic groups, they are both a “highly connected” group *and* a demographic that is growing at a faster rate than Whites, Blacks, and Native Americans. While the AA producers of *K-Town* set out to create the first reality series with an all-AA cast to specifically dispel the model minority stereotype, it was the viewers that made sense of what they saw (not the producers). YouTube’s interactive platform revealed the nuanced processes, through the utilization of stance and disalignment, of boundary making in negotiating AA identities and, consequently, the resistance to racialization by others. We found that YouTubers not only contributed to the discourse of what it means to be KA or AA, but also brought to the forefront who ought to determine what is an “authentic” portrayal. This is significant considering mainstream media’s perpetuation of racial stereotypes in mostly White-centered narratives.

Meanwhile, the internet has made it possible for the global popularity of *Hallyu* (“The Korean Wave”) as evidenced by the increasing consumption of Korean cultural products, ranging from melodramas to pop music, better known as k-pop. All digital media content, by default, has transnational significance. Likewise, about half of AAs make up the “creative class” in the U.S. (Florida, 2014). And as East Asia’s economic

standing in the global economy continues to expand, so will their role in keeping Hollywood profitable (Kokas, 2017). Hollywood will have no choice but to think twice about how Asians are depicted in popular culture and films if they want to profit from global audiences.

The American media industry can no longer capitalize on stale stereotypes as it unsuccessfully attempted to do in the case of *All-American Girl* (1994). Moreover, casting people of color into formulaic White plots is a hybrid of assimilation-meets-colorblind racism that is unlikely to bode well with AAs. New programs must be creative, innovative, and yes, multicultural until the full range of AA experiences is adequately represented in popular culture as it is for Whites. AAs need to see themselves, rather than thinking as one YouTuber (aka realAsian) stated, “oh, okay, I see what’s going on here. It’s white people in asian disguises.”

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### **Funding and Acknowledgements**

The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.