Reactistan: Do the Subaltern Speak on YouTube?

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The advent of digital user-created media platforms such as YouTube has made possible the spread of a wide range of information including novel forms and variants of what might have previously been characterized as anthropological content. The present paper examined YouTube videos on a specific channel featuring purported "tribal people" from Pakistan reacting to cultural items and stimuli that are common to Western (and domestic urban) audiences. We found significantly greater indications of agency in the videos than indicators of subalternity. While the videos focused primarily on presenting the views and opinions of the participants and allowing their voices to be heard, they also held a continuing focus on the subjects' isolation or lack of exposure to mainstream. While agency and subalternity indices did not differ by gender, male participants outnumbered females and enjoyed greater screen time in the videos while audiences sometimes responded differently to male and female participants. The paper concludes with a discussion of whether such representation and presence in online media constitute a meaningful step towards enabling the subaltern to "speak."

Keywords: subalternity, culture, YouTube, social media, agency, representation

This new subaltern, caught between global capitalism/development and tradition/culturalism, is now completely co-opted as her body is rendered data and she is sought after as intellectual property. —Didur & Heffernan, 2003, p. 5

Modern digital, networked and social platforms provide users with a vast array of visual content allowing users to watch so-called "prank videos," dance clips or "flat-Earth" videos that coexist on the platform alongside serious scientific content (Kavoori, 2015; Meldrum et al., 2017; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013; Mohammed, 2019). Among the genres that have emerged into the YouTube social media marketplace are so-called "reaction videos" featuring a subject's reaction to another video (sometimes even another YouTube video), a song, or some other stimulus. The present paper

investigates "reaction videos" featuring purported "tribal people" on the Reactistan channel featured on the video sharing site YouTube and discusses their implications for agency and othering of these people with particular reference to Spivak's (1988) question of whether the subaltern can speak.

The Reactistan Channel

On their Facebook page, the producers of the Reactistan Channel describe themselves as "Pakistan's very own reaction and review channel" (Reactistan, 2018) and their page indicates managers in both Pakistan and the United States. However, Reactistan's primary presence is on the YouTube platform where, at the time of writing, the channel boasted 339,000 subscribers with videos such as *Tribal People Try Coffee for the First Time* and *Tribal People Try American Breakfast for the First Time* garnering upwards of a million views each within a few months of posting. Reactistan's videos focus primarily on food from cultures exotic to the participants being recorded but have also engaged the subjects with other cultural items such as cosmetic treatments and, while clearly part of the reaction genre, the channel's content may also fit into the genre category that Kavoori (2015, p. 7) labelled "The Experiment" which stages experiments "using a range of contexts science, entertainment, sports, performativity and the odd":

> Mobilized in a dazzling array of ways, the experiment has become a staple of YouTube, a digital way of experiencing the combination of elements, substances, objects arranged in visually compelling way—where a key element is the sheer fun of experimentation-and its consumption from afar and one one's terms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The video posting and sharing platform, YouTube, the second most visited website in the world ("The Top 500," 2017), allows users to create and upload videos for others to view, providing free access and democratizing the processes of communicating with mass audiences (Carpentier et al., 2013; Fuchs, 2011). The site features a vast array of content typologies including unboxing videos (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018) prank videos (Burris & Leitch, 2018), treatises on why the Earth is flat (Mohammed, 2019), travel vlogs, various tutorials (Lindgren, 2012; Purcario, 2018) and life hacks among many other popular mainstays of the platform. So-called "reaction" videos have also come to some prominence

on the platform, featuring responses of individuals or groups to some stimuli such as a song that the subject has not previously heard, video content seen for the first time or the food from a region or country foreign to them (Griffin, 2018; McDaniel, 2020).

Since the platform enjoys global reach, its content often bridges different geographies and cultures, raising questions of representation, hegemonic power, and the ethics of appropriation. Oh and Oh (2017, p. 698) for example argued that in the popular YouTube food and travel channel *Eat Your Kimchi* hosted by two white expatriates in South Korea, the producers sought to "demarcate the White self as superior to the Korean other" while essentializing Korea/ns as different or exotic and "mocking hybrid interactions with the West."

Subalternity and agency

Basic conceptions and terminologies of the subaltern trace back to Gramsci's work on hegemony with particular attention to populations excluded from social discourse and who can only be "subjects" of hegemonic discourse, having no power to influence the political or cultural currents of the mainstream (Galastri, 2018; Gramsci, 1929/1971). The term "subaltern" denotes lower social status or lower standing in a hierarchy (such as military ranks). Academic discourse surrounding this notion has extended the meaning of the term somewhat to include not just being of a lower rank or status but rather being excluded from the systems of status and power or having no voice in those systems (Legg, 2016; Spivak, 2014). Some renderings of the concept, suggested Varadharajan (2016, p. 751) may even be taken to consider this "wretchedness" as "normal, permanent, and inevitable."

Frequently, scholars have applied this categorization to the post-colonial poor and powerless that emerged in developing nations after independence from mostly European colonizers (Fanon, 1961, 2004; Friere, 1970; Guha, 1988; Spivak, 1988). However, the concept is not limited to the colonial context, drawing attention, as well, to groups within any particular society who are excluded from even the most basic of power structures and resources or what Spivak (2014, p. 10) has called "an absence of any access to the possibility of the abstract structures of the state." Thomas (2018, p. 871) has described the "widely diffused notion" of the subaltern as "a figure of undifferentiated destitution, consigned to a zone beyond expressive capacity or purposive political agency."

For Makki (2011, p. 30) an important part of the work of those writing about subalternity (such as the Subaltern Studies Collective of Indian scholars) includes the aim "to recover the distinctive forms of consciousness and self-representation of subaltern communities within autonomous domains." This concern with consciousness, self-representation, and voice has often been described in terms of something like "agency." Often used without definition, the term "agency" can refer to various manifestations of self-determination including the ability to speak and determine how one is represented (Georgiou, 2018) and the ability to negotiate socially constructed meanings (Dutta, 2008). While important, the ability to speak is not in itself a sufficient remedy to the subaltern condition. For Guha (1999) members of the subaltern population, in trying to act or express themselves, face the difficulty of having been excluded from the formal record or archive of the state and so lack a formal history to ground their social negotiations. The subaltern, therefore, face the necessity of re-creating their histories to negotiate their social positions and, in doing so, challenge "the concept of subalternity itself" as they become "autonomous and agents of their own lives" (Cooper 1996, p. 9).

Engagement with or study of subaltern populations present problems for the investigator as the inherent relations of power between the observer raise questions about analyses or interventions. Archer et al (2019, p. 724) characterized the challenge that Spivak poses for investigating the subaltern thusly:

> (A)cademic attempts to 'give voice' to the Other are doomed to 'fail' because they inevitably—albeit often unwittingly—reproduce relations of inequality, by homogenizing the Other and leaving unequal power relations unaltered.

This perspective does not hamper these investigations, however, since there exists a long tradition of academic inquiry into subaltern groups before and after Spivak's insights, including applications of the concept to communications and its social roles. For example, Dutta's (2006) and Singhal's (2004) critiques of the treatment of subaltern populations in communications and development programs feature prominently in Makwambeni and Salawu's (2018) evaluation of the *Tsha Tsha* television drama on HIV/AIDS in South Africa which concluded that the producers of that program engaged in "elaborate efforts to provide voice to subaltern audiences" (p. 10). Patil (2014) has argued that many subaltern communities in rural India have been left voiceless as the developments in mass, digital

and social media found in the mainstream have passed them by and their exclusion is perpetuated as major commercial conglomerates have come to dominate the nation's communicative spaces. Patil (2014, p. 22) found that rural radio efforts such as *Sangam* Radio and Radio *Bundelkhand* provided "avenues for rural marginalized women" while offering "realistic emancipatory potential."

Continued investigation has led to the development of taxonomies and nomenclatures for evaluating the extent to which the voices and the agencies of subaltern populations may be reflected in the investigations of such groups or in social projects and activities that affect them. Relevant here, for example, is the work of Jayawardne (2013, p. 691) who coded academic writing on marginalized groups in Sri Lanka and India and sought to evaluate such work based on dimensions including what subject areas authors emphasized about the groups, attention to the group's history and heritage, attention to the present-day marginalized position of the groups in the host society, agency of the groups and the cultural identity and continuity of the groups.

When subaltern populations engage with the mainstream hegemonies of established media (and more recently, social media) the engagements raise questions of how such groups are presented in media portrayals and the extent to which they are afforded agency in their presentations. Here the work of cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall provides an important lens for investigation, suggesting, as it does, that perceptions of mediated content are functions of both audience expectations and producer decisions about what things to show and how to show them (Hall, 1989; Hall, 1997). For Hall (1997), media presentations are not unbiased portrayals but rather "re-presentations" of socially conditioned ideas. Such re-presentation of images or media messages creates meanings that are based on the expectations of the mainstream and those with the hegemonic power to determine such meanings. These concepts draw our attention here to the re-presentation of a subaltern group, the very perception of them as subaltern, and the expectations and prejudices with which audiences may view their content.

The Subaltern and Social Media

As networked digital technologies diffused, early perspectives diverged between utopian and dystopian visions of the emerging digital spheres as either intrinsically democratizing or harbingers of oppression and control (Friedland, 1996; Hacker, 1996;

Rheingold, 1993). Kellner (1995, p. 42), for example, pointed to the "potential for democratizing, humanizing, and transforming existing inequities in the domain of class, race, and gender" as well as their potential to become "powerful instruments of domination." This divergence continued into later analyses, evident in perspectives such as those of Dutta (2018) who discussed the capacity for subaltern articulations of everyday suffering to passively counter imperialist development narratives and hegemonic sites of violence, which contrast with Travers (2003) who maintained that online spaces will automatically reproduce offline social inequalities unless disrupted by activists in online counter-publics and Gajjala (2014) who argued that subalternity is perpetuated in online spaces for those without the capital or finances necessary for access and engagement.

With the many layers of technology required (including electricity, computers, modems and network connections), basic questions of access soon overshadowed both utopian and dystopian prognostications with increasing attention to the so-called "Digital Divide" between connected and excluded communities (Wresch, 1996). While access to the technologies remains a barrier for many communities (Hardaker et al., 2017), the evolution of diverse options including mobile phones (Akor, 2017; Warf, 2013) has greatly increased the potential for engagement even among previously excluded communities. Evidence suggests that the subaltern, including groups such as the indigenous *Adivasi* (Dutta, 2016) and the *Dalit* caste (Thakur, 2020) in India and displaced migrants and refugees in Europe (Georgiou, 2018), have been increasingly using social media including Facebook and Twitter to counter "hegemonic portrayals" prone to "dominant misrepresentations" of their communities (Dutta, 2016, p. 214).

In some cases, access to social media has created the chance to engage in what has been called a "subaltern public sphere" which can serve as a base for "counter-hegemonic activities against the dominant public sphere" (Lee et al., 2018, p. 1951) and foster "subaltern counter publics" (Sampedro & Martínez Avidad, 2018, p. 24). Akor (2017), for example, described protests in Nigeria in 2012 where marginalized youth groups used Facebook, Twitter and mobile messaging to mobilize against the government's removal of fuel subsidies and to make their voices heard. Similarly, *Niqabi* (face-veiled) Muslim women in Christian countries have used Telegram to express their frustrations and organize political action (Ainz-Galende & Rodríguez-Puertas, 2020). Such examples of

activists successfully fostering online counter-hegemonic discourses and consequently producing social change indicate the potential for active, counter-hegemonic subaltern communications in the digital sphere. They also beg examination of the potential for non-activist subaltern communities to reframe hegemonic discourse.

However, despite the potentials for counter-hegemonic discourses, some warn that the relationship between social media and the subaltern is not necessarily wholly positive. Gajjala (2014) has been among those who have questioned this engagement, asking (p. 29) "when is the subaltern brought online and for what purpose?" Since the subaltern subject of social media discourse "does not have the tools or the agency to actively and freely participate in a social order" argued Gajjala (2014, p. 161), they are likely to be subject to exploitation by outside forces and those in control of the messaging.

Tribal People

The "Tribal People" series on the Reactistan YouTube channel, from its very title, suggests that the subjects of the videos are at once exotic and subaltern. Since they are from remote villages presumably in the tribal areas of Pakistan, these participants are expected to be unfamiliar with mainstream cultural practices either in the larger community of their own country or in the global context. These differences may render the subjects as the exotic other or what Spivak (1988, p. 79) has termed the "irretrievably heterogeneous."

Pakistan's Tribal Region or what is also known as The Federally Administered Tribal Area (or the Tribal Belt) consists of an area of over 10,000 square miles along parts of the Pakistan/Afghanistan border. The region has been a site of contention over ownership and control for many decades and has been known for widespread violence and strife. The region has been called "Pakistan's most dangerous place" (Hussain, 2012, p. 16) and has a reputation for being hostile to outsiders. Noting its "lack of education and widespread unemployment," Aslam (2008, p. 669) has described the region as being "outside the political reach of various governments in the country" since Pakistan's independence in 1947, adding that:

> The tribes do not like any interference by the governments who have in turn failed
> to improve the basic amenities and standard of living in the area. Electricity is yet

to reach the entire tribal region, which is a major hindrance to exploiting its limited agricultural potential.

Gul and Chaudhry (2015, p. 793) noted that in these Tribal Regions, people live in a "deprived state" lacking even basic necessities and faring much worse than even regular rural populations due to their remote locations in mountainous terrain where "life is characterized by hardship and great insecurity especially for poor labor" who face "unemployment, underemployment, low wages, low prices and failure to find the market for their produce."

The group investigated here found themselves on the global social media stage due to the efforts of the channel's founders. The founders have described themselves as originally being from the Pakistani tribal regions and speaking some of the local languages but their families have since moved to metropolitan areas and even to the United States (Reactistan, 2021, July 17). They also admit to themselves being unfamiliar with some of the items to which the on-screen subjects have reacted.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present investigation evaluated the contents of YouTube videos featuring reactions of people from the tribal regions of Pakistan. Among our primary concerns was describing the basic contents of the videos with particular attention to extent to which these videos included indicators from the literature of the participants being subaltern (such as presentations of exoticism, voiceless-ness and exclusion from the mainstream) compared to indicators of their agency (including their opinions, self-determination and expressions of their histories and identities). We therefore posed the first research question (RQ1) in two parts as:

RQ1a: What are the characteristics of subaltern and agency indicators in tribal people reaction videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel?

RQ1b: What are the relative proportions of subaltern and agency indicators in tribal people reaction videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel?

Since audience response is the key currency of social media such as YouTube, we further sought to investigate how audience reception of these videos varied with indicators of subalternity or agency. To measure the possibility of such variation we used audience

views, likes and dislikes as indicators of audience sentiment and posed research question 2 (RQ2) as:

RQ2: How do audience responses vary with subaltern and agency indicators in tribal people reaction videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel?

The literature on subaltern studies is heavily focused, in part, on the gendered nature of the subaltern condition, particularly in cases where female populations are especially excluded, subjugated, or exploited (Davidson & Roach Pierson, 2001; Didur & Heffernan, 2003; Spivak, 1988; Woodward, 1993). We therefore posed research question 3 (RQ3) in three parts as:

RQ3a: Are there differences in the gender composition of tribal people reaction videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel?

RQ3b: Are there gender differences in subaltern and agency indicators in tribal people reaction videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel?

RQ3c: What part does gender play in audience reactions to videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel?

METHODS

Our primary investigation involved a content analysis of the Reactistan channel's "Tribal People" reaction videos on YouTube which numbered 88 videos at the time of coding. We supplemented this robust and well-established quantitative approach with some additional direct textual and thematic analysis.

Content analysis

Content analysis is a well-established approach to the investigation of media discourses and has been used to study a wide range of issues in a variety of communication channels (Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 2004). The present study coded the videos of interest on several objective and evaluative criteria. We recorded objective empirical properties such as the number of views, duration, date of publication and numbers of likes and number of dislikes. Since the issues of subalternity and agency were central to the present investigation, we also coded for specific content themes that the existing literature has associated with the subaltern condition and also coded for

themes that might indicate agency, with the understanding that a single clip could contain indicators of both.

Coding dimensions. Among the objective properties we coded for each item analyzed were the title, duration and numbers of views, likes and dislikes along with other details. We divided each video into segments corresponding to the producers' cuts to various individuals being featured. We then recorded objective criteria such as their durations and coded them on evaluative criteria guided by the literature on subalternity.

We developed a coding system from ideas in the existing literature on subaltern groups and their representations. These included concepts of subalternity expounded in Spivak (1988) and used widely elsewhere (Archer, et al., 2019; Didur & Heffernan, 2003; Dutta, 2006) as well as adaptation of relevant items from Jayawardne's (2013) typologies.

The videos investigated here were all presented as medium close-up frontal shots of the participant at a desk or table with occasional comments or clarifications from offscreen interviewers (the words of subjects and interviewers were presented as audio in their original language and simultaneous on-screen English text translations). The coding scheme developed for analysis of this content included the following items that sought to identify and record elements of a subaltern condition:

1. Indicator of subject's isolation or lack of exposure to mainstream
2. Indicator of subject's low social or economic status
3. Indicator of subject's inability to control their social environment
4. Indicator of subject's exoticness or otherness
5. Subject being told about external culture
6. Subject's opinions or wishes ignored—receives guidance

The competing notion of agency focuses on the ability to control one's environment, situation, or presentation. We sought to identify indicators of agency in the material under investigation by recording incidence of the following themes:

1. Indicator of subject's experience with and exposure to mainstream
2. Indicator of subject's positive social or economic status (e.g. being well-educated or well-travelled)
3. Indicator of subject's ability to control their social environment
4. Indicator of subject's similarity to or familiarity with mainstream

5.   Subject acts as informant about their own culture, history or identity

6.   Subject's wishes or opinions expressed or respected—gives guidance

Sampling. At the time of data collection, the Reactistan Channel had produced 87 reaction videos, each of which comprised many brief clips of subject responses to various stimuli considered to be novel to these people. In an initial round of sampling we captured data from all 15 of their earliest videos and in a second round we captured data from subsequent videos using a random skip (of 0 or 1) until we reached 50 total videos. For each video we started alternatingly from the start (excluding opening bumpers) or the approximate middle of the video and coded twenty segments of content, defining each segment as a piece of video in which a particular subject speaks. In all cases the segments included only one subject on camera. This sampling strategy yielded a total of 1000 items on which we conducted statistical analysis.

Inter Coder Reliability. We established inter-coder reliability from a comparison of test coding of a ten percent subsample of results performed by the two authors independently of each other using the very conservative Cohen's *Kappa*. This calculation considers k scores of 0.01–0.20 to indicate slight agreement, 0.21–0.40 to indicate fair agreement, 0.41–0.60 to indicate moderate agreement, 0.61–0.80 to indicate substantial agreement and above .80 to indicate almost perfect agreement (McHugh, 2012). Results indicated substantial to complete agreement on all the categories with all k coefficients calculated yielding significant values ($p<.05$).

Thematic Analysis

To complement the quantitative results of the content analysis, the investigators conducted a qualitative thematic analysis to interpret how the audience responded to the women in the videos. This analysis explored how subaltern women were represented on the Reactistan YouTube channel by investigating audience reactions in the comments sections. The investigators first conducted a search within a sample of 700 total comments (100 comments from 7 videos) for any comments which referenced the women in the videos. This revealed 28 total comments which were used as the data set. The investigators then conducted a thematic analysis by reading each comment several times, systematically coding features of the comments, organizing these codes into distinct

themes, refining each theme, naming each theme, and reporting the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS

Though this topic provides the basis for a wide array of issues and investigations, this study focused its attention on the specific research questions described above. We address the results of data analysis regarding each of those questions below with the addition of insights derived from the thematic analysis of gender-related comments on a selection of videos.

Characteristics of content

Research question1a asked: "What are the characteristics of subaltern and agency indicators in tribal people reaction videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel?" The sampled content of 1000 clips totaled 89 minutes and 21 seconds with an average duration of approximately 5 seconds each. This sample was drawn from 50 of the channel's 88 videos at the time of data collection. The sampled videos alone accounted for over 40 million views.

From among the six indicators of agency and the six indicators of subalternity we measured in the coding process, the most common item was that of the subject's wishes or opinions being expressed or respected including the subject giving guidance. We observed this characteristic in 494 (49.4%) of the videos. This was perhaps consistent with the main thrust of the videos being recounting the subjects' reaction to various stimuli. By way of comparison, the corresponding subaltern indicator—that of the subject's opinions being ignored had the lowest frequency of all categories and accounted for only 15 instances (1.5%).

The second most common items in the sample were indicators of the subject's isolation or lack of exposure to the mainstream. Analysis indicated the presence of these subaltern indicators in 249 (24.9%) of the segments coded. The corresponding agency indicator was demonstration of the subjects' familiarity with the mainstream and that appeared in 148 (14.8%) of the clips in our sample.

Outside of the "opinions ignored" item above, the other least common category was items indicating the subjects' low social or economic status which accounted for only 16

(1.6%) of cases. The corresponding agency indicator which described subjects' social or economic status as being high or appropriate to their community featured in 34 (3.4%) of the cases.

Agency vs Subalternity

Research question 1b asked: "What are the relative proportions of subaltern and agency indicators in tribal people reaction videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel?" To address this question we summed the subaltern codes to create a measure of subaltern indicators (ranging from 0—6) and, similarly, summed agency codes for a measure of agency indicators (ranging from 0—6). On average, the index of subaltern indicators measured .45 (N=1000, SD=.71) while the index of agency indicators was higher at 1.08 (N=1000, SD=.84) and the observed difference was significant (t[999]=-15.42, $p < 0.01$, d=.82). As might be expected, these two measures were negatively correlated (r[998] = -.41, $p < .01$).

Audience Reactions

Research question 2 asked: How do audience responses vary with subaltern and agency indicators in tribal people reaction videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel? The primary numeric evidence of audience participation was the number of "views," "likes" and "dislikes" for each of the 50 videos sampled. Sampled videos averaged 813,213 views each (N= 50: SD = 849,959) with likes averaging 24,608 (N= 50: SD = 22,843) and dislikes averaging 519 (N= 50: SD = 575). The average ratio of likes to dislikes was 69 to 1 (N= 50: SD = 37.5). Subaltern indicators were much more strongly associated with higher view numbers (r[48] = .460, $p < .01$) than were agency indicators (r[48] = .282, $p < .05$) though both relationships were positive and significant, suggesting that while both kinds of content drew audiences, depictions of subalternity were somewhat more likely to do so.

The subaltern index positively and significantly correlated with both likes (r[48] = .425, $p < .01$) and dislikes (r[48] = .429, $p < .01$) in similar magnitude while the agency index correlated positively and significantly with likes (r[48] = .308, $p < .05$) but showed no significant correlation with dislikes. Thus viewers were about equally likely to respond positively or negatively to portrayals of subalternity and were more likely to respond positively to portrayals of agency than to dislike them. These findings prompted further

examination of the audience sentiments and an examination of viewer comments provided additional evidence of responses to subaltern and agency indicators in the videos.

Some viewers directly addressed indicators of subalternity such as being unfamiliar with mainstream foods. For example, one user responded to a subject saying "I've never eaten chocolate" with "I didn't expect that. That makes me sad…" (Reactistan, 2020, June 20). Others commented on suggestions about the subjects' social conditions. For example, a viewer responded to an indicator of subalternity with: "Hits me in the feels when that lady says they don't eat this good often" (Reactistan, 2020, May 2).

Others found agency in the presentations, such as a viewer who commented on the wisdom of these folk who were cautious about having anything in excess. Another called the participants "wholesome" while other viewers found the subjects to be "polite" and "gracious" (Reactistan, 2020, April 18). Similarly, a viewer commented "These people are so open and honest with trying new things, I would love to see an episode of outsiders trying their foods, they would be so happy" (Reactistan, 2020, March 28).

Also evident in the comments were indicators of viewers becoming aware of their own lack of knowledge of the subjects' culture and environment. One viewer commented, for example: "It would be nice if they could show pics of the things they were comparing the taste to, so we can have an idea of what they're talking about" (Reactistan, 2020, July 4).

Gender

Research question 3a asked: "Are there gender differences in the gender composition of tribal people reaction videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel?" The sampled content indicated a preponderance of segments with males ($n = 617$) compared to females ($n = 383$). The observed frequencies of these two categories were significantly different if an equal distribution of gender were to be assumed (X^2 [1, $N = 1000$] = 54.76, $p < .01$) though that assumption as it pertains to women appearing on screen might be a weak one for reasons of culture in the origin community or even in the host metropolitan community. Similarly, a comparison of the duration of clips by gender also indicated that, in the sample, males enjoyed greater total ($n = 58$ minutes and 55 seconds) and average ($M = 5.73$ seconds) screen time than women's total ($n = 30$ minutes and 27 seconds) and

average (M = 4.77 seconds) screen time in the videos. This observed differences in average times was significant (t [998] = 4.61, p < .001, d = 0.31).

Research question 3b asked: "Are there gender differences in subaltern and agency indicators in tribal people reaction videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel?" To answer this question, we examined the levels of subaltern and agency indicators in clips featuring either gender. Taken on a per clip basis, the data suggested relatively equitable gender distribution of agency scores with clips featuring males averaging 1.09 (n = 617, SD =.85) and females averaging 1.07 (n = 383, SD = .83) and a similar distribution of subalternity scores with clips featuring males averaging .46 (n = 617, SD =.70) and females averaging .42 (n = 383, SD = .71). Neither of these observed differences in mean was statistically significant.

To evaluate the relative levels of agency and subalternity by gender, we calculated a simple "net agency" measure from the total score on the agency indicators minus the total score on the subaltern indicators for each case. This scale could yield results ranging from -6 to 6 with higher and positive numbers indicating stronger agency over subaltern indicators. Actual results yielded a minimum of -5 and a maximum of 6 (N = 1000, M = .63, SD = 1.3). The gender distribution of this measure also indicated that while females averaged slightly higher (n = 383, M = .65, SD = 1.3) than males (n = 617, M = .62, SD = 1.3), the observed differences were not statistically significant.

The gender gap widened somewhat when the duration of clips was included in the analysis with measures of agency and subalternity scores multiplied by the duration of each clip. This analysis of scores and duration combined yielded significantly higher averages for males (n = 617, M = 6.86, SD = 7.77) over females (n = 383, M = 5.77, SD = 7.71) in agency (t [815.37] = 2.16, p < .05, d = 0.14). When we combined the subaltern scores with durations the measure demonstrated slightly higher averages for males (n = 617, M = 2.75, SD = 5.84) over females (n = 383, M = 2.14, SD = 4.81) but the observed difference in means were not statistically significant. This suggests that with screen time considered, while the agency measure showed a slight tendency for males to be depicted with higher agency than females, subaltern descriptors were relatively evenly distributed between the genders.

Gender and Agency in User Comments

Research question 3c (RQ3c) asked: What part does gender play in audience reactions to videos on the Reactistan YouTube channel? We conducted a thematic analysis to explore audience responses to the women in Reactistan videos. Out of the 700 comments we analyzed, though only 28 mentioned women, we observed that gender relevant comments were roughly equally divided between celebrating and reducing the women's agency.

Agency Celebrated.

Women as Rebels

Of the twenty-eight comments, nine expressed a fascination with the women's diversion from politeness as they openly insulted a product or asserted their knowledge. These comments praised the women for not giving positive reviews, describing their responses as "honest" and "confident." Three of these comments noted a moment when Ameeta was asked if she had heard of donuts, to which she responded that she obviously had, since she is educated. The three comments praised Ameeta for her "sass" and her self-assurance. The comments posed the women as rebels to the politeness that the audience expects from them. In this sense, the Reactistan videos allowed for women to be represented as nuanced and opinionated beings, and the audience received them as such.

Women as Shadowed

Three comments expressed eagerness to learn more about the women's lives, highlighting questions left unexplored by the videos. For example, one comment asked how the ladies' green bracelets are held in place. The presence of comments inquiring about the lives of subaltern women indicated the potential for the reaction video platform to illuminate subjugated knowledges and lessen epistemic violence.

Women as Entertainers

Only two comments mentioned the women as entertaining and interesting figures. In these comments, the commenter considered the woman the highlight of the video because of her personality. In an era where diverse forms of media are easily accessible and influential, indeed, subaltern women are re-presented as entertainment personalities who can capture an audience. Notably, these comments referenced women without

mention of any male colleagues, in juxtaposition to a following theme that noted women's inferior entertainment value compared to men.

Agency Reduced.

Women as Children

In seven comments, the women were described as "innocent", "child-like", and "simple" in their discovery of these foods which may be considered basic knowledge to the audience. They were noted for their ignorance, or for pointing out what was obvious to the commenter. Four comments did this affectionately, while the other three used humor to convey these ideas. For example, one comment praised "such honest, innocent and simple feedbacks" while another claimed the women were eating the burger incorrectly, not biting "enough to taste all the ingredients." Despite differing approaches, all seven comments extrapolated the women's ignorance with unfamiliar foods into their overall unfamiliarity with the world. The comments in this theme rejected the idea that these women were experts in their own lives, suggesting they require guidance.

Women as Counterparts

Four comments presented the women as less captivating or interesting than their male counterparts. For example, one comment noted that women tasted a small amount of the product while men tasted large amounts. In such comments, the women did actions of little interest, whereas the men offered more entertainment. Although the comments acknowledged that women were actively engaging with the product, they were not recognized as agents themselves, but used as vehicles to recognize the agency of their male counterparts.

Women as Beauty

In three comments, the women were not heard, but seen. They were recognized not for their actions or mannerisms, but for their physical appearance. These comments spoke of the women's smiles, beauty, and clothing. In one comment, Mooran was praised for her beauty in the first sentence, and in the second sentence, Peer was praised for the personality he displays in his reactions.

DISCUSSION

The findings above strongly suggest a voice for the subaltern in the sampled videos from the Reactistan YouTube channel in which their agency overshadows their subalternity. At the same time, the data suggest that the presentations may yet rely on the continuing portrayal of the subaltern nature of the participants and thereby perpetuate audience expectations of otherness and exoticness, reminiscent of Chibber's (2013, p. 289) observation: 'The more marginal, and the more mysterious, the better.'

Agency, subalternity and gender patterns

Overall, agency indicators significantly outweighed subalternity indicators in terms of both frequency and screen time with participants' expressions of their own opinions including their giving advice being the most common item. From this we can conclude that Reactistan presented the subjects with some sense of their own opinions and some value to their contributions. We have also found that both subaltern and agency indicators are associated with higher viewership and audience engagement, and that audiences are more disposed to "like" videos that demonstrate agency.

We thus contend here that, at least in some sense, the subaltern can and do speak on YouTube. While this contention adds to the debate on subalternity, it does not automatically purport to erase the valid and continuing concerns about subaltern populations more broadly, their exclusion and their lack of voice. The social media technologies and the technically privileged producers (themselves of tribal origin) have clearly provided this subaltern group with a voice, hailing back to early conceptions of the promise of the democratizing and inequity mitigating potentials of the digital networks (Kellner, 1995; Rheingold, 1993).

However, even while the subaltern subject speaks, several elements of their depictions suggest continuing representational biases—or what Hall (1989; 1997) would characterize as the stereotypical reproduction of expected tropes. Even in the choice of their description as "Tribal People" as their defining quality, for example, there is a strong tendency to compartmentalize and "other" these valued contributors and to re-present (Hall, 1989; 1997) them in keeping with audience preconceptions and expectations of how they should look, sound and act.

Much of the literature on the subaltern has included consideration of gender as a factor in the voice of disenfranchised communities. In the present study, the data indicated that while males and females in the sampled content were represented with similar incidences of subalternity and agency indicators, the dominant presence of males in terms of screen time created a gender disparity in which males were portrayed with higher levels of agency. This duration effect did not extend to the subaltern index where the male and female averages did not differ significantly.

The observed predominance of male participants in terms of both incidence and screen time may simply reflect gender norms of the cultures from which these videos originate as females may hesitate to participate in recorded or publicized presentations due to real or perceived social and cultural restrictions (Ali & Syed, 2017). The discrepancy in screen time may also partially be due to gender inequalities perpetuated by YouTube. Notably, a previously posted video where the women reacted to cosmetic make up applications was removed, exemplifying claims by Travers (2003) that topics specific to women fail to survive in online spaces, resulting in gender neutral video topics. While this relative male prominence on screen may be accurate, the numbers may conceal a certain amount of outspokenness from the female cast members. As noted in our thematic analysis, far from being subservient or compliant, many female cast members were openly critical and questioning, and sometimes even cynical and rebellious. In response to a question about whether potato chips or local papadums tasted better, for example, a female respondent sharply offered: "Potatoes will taste like potatoes. Papadum will taste like papadum" (Reactistan, 2020, July 4).

The comments posed the women as rebels to the politeness that the audience expects from them. Spivak (1988, p. 91) has noted that (in the post-colonial environment and when it has served their purposes) "benevolent" males have sometimes praised female deviation from social norms and prescriptions (usually those that the colonizers sought to impose). The case could certainly be made that the commenters observed in our analysis are also praising what they perceive as deviation from prescribed gender norms (though without necessarily offering any critique of the patriarchal norms of the indigenous culture). Nonetheless, the channel indeed offered a space for the women to express their opinions freely, without having to cater to the expectations of "an intermediary

unconnected to their collective" (Ainz-Galende & Rodríguez-Puertas, 2020, p. 293), as the producers were themselves from Pakistani tribal regions. In this sense, the Reactistan videos allowed for women to represent themselves as nuanced and opinionated beings, and the audience received them as such. This is not to say this mode of representation eliminates the effects of widespread cultural gender inequality; as we have noted above, there are instances in which women were interpreted as foils against which viewers recognized the agency of their male counterparts. Yet, the equivalent presence of audience engagements inquiring about the women's gendered lives and praising the entertainment value of their personalities reveal avenues through which the women's subaltern voices were heard.

Articulation with the mainstream

We argue here that the discourse of the sampled material which includes portrayals of agency alongside descriptors of the subjects' subaltern state is a small step towards challenging the absence of such groups from the online environment and countering hegemonic and stereotyped representations that do exist. This argument is consistent with prior research demonstrating counter hegemonic practices (Ainz-Galende & Rodríguez-Puertas, 2020; Akor, 2017; Dutta, 2016; Georgiou, 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Sampedro & Martínez Avidad, 2018; Thakur, 2020).

Extensions of the Reactistan channel as well as other YouTube channels capitalized on the popularity of these participants and followed some of them back to their home environments which further emphasized their subalternity. The lack of a road leading to one participant's (sometimes called Uncle Mustafa) home which was an isolated tent on a craggy outcrop furthered such a narrative. Similar other offshoots including a channel developed for participant Peer Jan Rind focused on the remote, isolated and economically depressed nature of the home environment.

We must return here to Patil's (2014) concern about exclusion from the mainstream. Where technical and knowledge barriers may prevent access to social media technologies and self-expression from subaltern groups such as these tribal people may not otherwise be possible, their reaction videos, created by former tribals, provide at least some presence on these media and suggest some realization of Patil's (2014) notion of "realistic emancipatory potential." Both the initial videos and the offshoot videos and channels

suggest avenues towards reducing the extent to which such groups might be excluded from the digital ecosphere. More broadly, then, the present findings offer a challenge to notions of subalternity being "normal, permanent, and inevitable" (Varadharajan, 2016, p. 751).

Re-presentation

The present statistical analysis suggests a predominance of agency over subalternity in the discourse of the clips as well as a certain gender equity in these measures. Such findings must be taken in the context of what is actually presented on the screen. To apply Hall's (1989, 1997) concept of re-presentation, we must temper the conclusions drawn here with an awareness of the various ways in which the content may have included or excluded imagery or narratives in fulfilment of the pre-existing expectations of the audience. The present sampled videos were overwhelmingly popular with audiences as indicated by high numbers of views, a predominance of likes over dislikes and overwhelmingly positive audience comments. If these subaltern subjects become less exotic or othered it remains to be seen if their reactions would generate as much interest.

Here we may note Spivak's (1988, p. 76) focus on "epistemic violence" perpetrated upon subaltern groups in which the subaltern subject and their context are simultaneously observed and excluded as suits the privileged observer. In such a relationship between subject and observer the observer's history and context are assumed to be normative while the subaltern observed is assumed to be at once othered and alienated from the privilege of normalcy, their intricacies and cultural specificity of the subaltern lost in sublation (Spivak, 1988).

In the present analysis, however, we have noted at least some interest in dismantling or reconfiguring this structure as commenters expressed interest in knowing more about the lives of the subject. A similar or offshoot YouTube channel called "Tribal People Try" has, more recently, introduced expositions of local foods and customs that the featured personalities present to screen – in part due to viewer requests. In some ways, therefore, the re-presentational inequalities so ingrained and typical of observations of subaltern groups may find avenues to reciprocity and to the reduction of epistemic violence thought previously to be inherent in the encounter.

Potential for change

The subaltern counter-narrative or a predominance of agency indicators may arguably not satisfy all the requirements of the notion of agency, particularly as Spivak (1988) has suggested both a collective dimension and the potential for social change (engendered by such collective action) as distinctive features of agency. However, the subaltern counter-narrative presented in a popular medium may represent a small step in the development of agency. Relevant here (though from a different context) is Conway's (2018, p. 192) statement about initiating "a process through which subaltern agency can emerge and become representable in a politics of the popular." There are few better instances of the popular today than YouTube, and the present findings suggest that the representation of the subaltern group investigated here has increased their ability to be represented in the politics of the popular and therefore has contributed to subaltern agency.

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