

Chapter 1

Embodying Difference on YouTube: Asian American Identity Work in “Shit Asian Dads Say”

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the content and responses of a popular video, “Shit Asian Dads Say,” produced by YouTube production company JustKiddingFilms. In analyzing video content in conjunction with themes emerging from comments left in response to the video, the chapter discusses the ways in which comedic/satirical, citizen-produced content on YouTube helps to shape, construct, and reflect the boundaries of group membership. As the video hinges on second-generation performances of immigrant parenthood, its content provides a prime site to investigate how age, gender and race are performed and become contested or reified in digital space. An analysis of the YouTube videos grounded in the responses, commentary and discussion that accompany the videos in the user comments, ultimately empowers viewers' interpretations of digital creative expression.

INTRODUCTION

While Asian American participation in film and television has been growing it remains relatively sparse, particularly given the demographic composition of the Hollywood entertainment industry. A 2015 Writers Guild of America brief reported that minorities are underrepresented as television writers by a factor of nearly 3 to 1, with whites making up over 85% of television writers and writers/producers in Hollywood (Writers Guild of America, 2015, pp. 2-3). The numbers of minorities on screen are similar: while minority leads in film have increased, minority actors make up just under 17% of the faces seen in movies despite making up 37% of the US general population; among lead roles in broadcast scripted television, minorities are underrepresented by a factor of nearly 6 to 1 (Hunt & Ramón, 2015, pp. 9, 13). Asian Americans, in particular, remain largely underrepresented: Asian Americans constituted only 4.4%

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of the speaking roles across 100 of the top grossing films of 2013 (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2013, p. 1). The ratio was similar for broadcast TV shows in 2014-2015, with just 36 Asian-Pacific Islander characters out of a total of 813 (GLAAD, 2014, p. 5).

In addition to these numbers, diversity reports have consistently shown that minority writers are more likely to be found on television dramas rather than sitcoms (Writers Guild of America, 2015, pp. 4-5); this is partly due to the multiracial ensemble casting of major network dramas including *Lost* (ABC), *Heroes* (NBC), *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC), *Scandal* (ABC), and the like. Asian American representation on broadcast network comedies has been more limited, with few leading roles. In fact, 2015's *Fresh off the Boat* (ABC), centered on an Asian American family, is the first network primetime show to feature an Asian American family in 20 years – the first being Margaret Cho's short-lived venture, *All-American Girl* (PBS Newshour, 2015). Overall, commercially successful Asian Americans on mainstream screens have remained relatively invisible in comparison to their white counterparts.

To those habitually ignored or misrepresented in mainstream narratives, independently produced content can provide a voice and an outlet (Guo & Lee, 2013; Rhagavan, 2009). On the Internet sites like YouTube, Vimeo and blogging platforms afford minority producers/consumers the space to create and share narratives that resist stereotypes commonly found in the more generalized, mainstream content of network television and studio films. The medium of online video thus provides a rich site of analysis in regard to minority youth, how they articulate their sense of belonging and difference, and what narratives they find relevant to address, as they create content.

This chapter analyzes the content and responses of a popular video, "Shit Asian Dads Say," produced by YouTube production company JustKiddingFilms. In analyzing video content in conjunction with themes emerging from comments left in response to the video, the chapter discusses the ways in which comedic/satirical, citizen-produced content on YouTube helps to shape, construct, and reflect the boundaries of group membership. As the video hinges on second-generation performances of immigrant parenthood, its content provides a prime site of analysis to investigate how age, gender and race are performed and become contested or reified in digital space.

BACKGROUND

Using the Internet to produce and promote independent videos, racial and ethnic minorities have found a medium with which to portray themselves to audiences. A body of literature is growing regarding the role of Internet sites such as YouTube, Vimeo, Twitter and Facebook in minority self-representation. Kent Ono and Vincent Pham's (2009) work, for example, provides insight into Asian American blogs on the Internet that facilitate discussions on a variety of issues concerning Asian American experiences; these sites provide forums for consumers to interact with mainstream information in a critical context to discuss racial tensions, gender politics, and issues of ethnicity (Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 148).

Technology use trends show that Asian Americans understand race, culture and their bodies online more than ever. A Nielsen Media report on "The New Digital American Family" (2011) shows that Asian Americans view 1,000 more web pages than any other ethnic group, and watch YouTube more than any other demographic (Anderson & Subramanyam, 2011, p. 5). In fact, English-speaking Asian Americans led the way in Internet use and home broadband access in 2011, outpacing all other racial/ethnic demographics (Rainie, 2011). Viewership with television sets has declined amongst Asian Americans, but streaming online video is double the national average (Anderson & Subramanyam, 2011, p. 5). It is also

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