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“BLACK GIRL TRIES KOREAN MAKEUP”: RACE, GENDER, AND TRANSNATIONAL PLATFORM

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Introduction/Conceptual Frameworks

A video series titled *Black Girl Tries Korean Makeup* on YouTube asks viewers a provocative question: what happens if Black women YouTubers wear K-beauty (Korean beauty) style makeup that has been mostly practiced by Korean women? In 2016, Black woman YouTuber Ariana started the series *Black Girl Tries Korean Makeup* in which she follows Korean makeup tutorials. Since then, the series has accumulated more than one hundred videos from numerous Black YouTubers who express cultural interests in K-pop culture. This paper theorizes the implications of transnational encounters in beauty cultures and the role of YouTube in mediating them and capture the inter-racial and inter-cultural dynamics between Black-Koreans beyond the US national context.

K-beauty (Korean beauty) is a catchy trend on YouTube which encompasses aesthetics, cosmetic products, and beauty ideals from South Korea, characterized by pursuing glowing, dewy, and light skin tone featuring a variety of skincare products. K-beauty is now being adopted by non-Koreans in North America including Black women influencers on the borderless platform of YouTube, who created the *Black Girl Tries Korean Makeup* video series.

Beauty and skin tone have been always a battlefield for women of color. Eurocentric beauty standards have shaped Black women’s self-esteem, identity, and economic mobility. Black women who have an appearance that is closer to White hegemonic beauty ideals i.e., a lighter skin tone, straightened hair, could have an advantageous position in the marriage and job market (Craig, 2002). In this context, for Black YouTubers and other non-Korean viewers of the video series, the light skin preference clearly signifies anti-Blackness.

K-beauty aesthetics can be read as anti-Black since the products reflect the light skin preference in South Korea, characterized by a limited variety of makeup foundation shades but many whitening products. On the other hand, this aesthetics have been cultivated in Korea, where has a different racial dynamic. For Korean viewers, being the majority ethnic group in Korean society and the ethnocentric racial dynamic of “Korean

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versus foreigners” (Kim, 2016), could hinder locating Korean viewers themselves in the web of racial relations that have been historically developed in Western societies.

I analyze how these different racial constructions and power relations around White hegemonic beauty ideals have brought out a conflict between Black K-beauty YouTuber and Korean viewers, especially with the special focus on how YouTube as a platform has played a role in mediating K-beauty to diverse audiences. YouTube uses the term ‘platform’ to give the impression that YouTube is a neutral and egalitarian space (Gillespie, 2010). However, YouTubers are encouraged to comply with YouTube’s algorithmic decisions, by closely monitoring quantified likes, duration of the watching time of their video contents through audience analytics offered by YouTube, which is Bishop (2018) named as “self-optimization.” (p.73)

Method

To examine YouTube videos, comments, and the module in YouTube Creator Academy, I adopt a Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) as a method, which emphasizes how digital content creations are not constructed in a vacuum, but rather deeply rooted in various social relations (Brock, 2018).

I analyzed 43 *Black Girl Tries Korean Makeup* themed videos from two prominent Black K-beauty YouTubers, Ariana and Brooklyn. Their videos are a germane sample for the series, given their active participation; the total number of K-beauty-related videos made by them is about 40% (n= 21, n= 22, respectively) of the entire video series. In addition, I also collected 100 comments as a purposive sample of comments from the 43 videos, which can best illustrate the narratives and dynamics of the discourses constructed by the viewers.

Lastly, I also analyzed the module titled "Building a Global Chanel" in YouTube Creator Academy which is a set of courses that is offered by YouTube for content creators to direct “desirable” ways to operate channels, to examine how the attention economy and digital infrastructures have shaped the mediation of K-beauty.

Discussion/Conclusion

In the videos and comments, I found that there has been inter-racial and inter-cultural conflict between Black K-beauty YouTubers and Korean viewers. Black K-beauty YouTubers were very vocal about critiquing the anti-Black aspect within K-beauty such as a lack of color inclusivity as well as a lack of proper understandings of deeper skin tone while K-beauty brands claim to be international brands. In response, some Korean audiences have strongly argued that Korean beauty cannot be judged by “Western standards,” asserting that Korea is a mono-ethnic country where light skin preference does not necessarily translate into anti-Blackness. They also pointed out the cultural hegemony of the West regardless of the racial background of the YouTubers.

I assert that this conflict arguably has been shaped by YouTube’s digital infrastructure. As a snippet of how YouTube defines the direction of intercultural videos and channels, the module titled “Building a global channel” on YouTube Creator Academy was analyzed. It encourages YouTubers to make intercultural videos for greater engagement and profits, by treating local culture as a commodity that is unique enough from the

dominant culture, and by relying on the heavy visuality rather than nuanced contextualization of each culture.

The K-beauty video series by Black women YouTubers is one of the examples of international videos. The platform environment that prioritizes short entertainment and commodifies local culture, the K-beauty videos conceal the historical presence of White hegemonic ideals of beauty that have oppressed Black women, as well as the specific South Korean context in which light skin preference has been established, including ideals of traditional beauty and a mono-ethnic culture. Racial reconciliation needs recognition and acknowledgment of the harms that each racial group has had to others (Yamamoto, 2000). However, YouTube, which now connects global societies encourages YouTubers from different cultures and racial groups to unknowingly reproduce harm to each other.

By tackling the inter-cultural and inter-racial encounters on YouTube, this project will demonstrate how the attention economy on digital media platforms operates in relation to race and gender within a transnational, post-colonial framing beyond the US national context.

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