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## **AFFORDANCES, STEREOTYPES, AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE: VINE RACIAL COMEDY AS A SOCIOPOLITICAL DISCOURSE GENRE**

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### **Introduction**

Linguistic research on technologically-mediated communication recognizes the myriad ways in which technology can lead to new forms of language and discourse. Early research focused on the structural features of language perceived as unique to computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as the use of emoticons (Dresner & Herring 2010). Recent research takes a discourse-analytic approach that highlights how “social practices [such as language] that are present in new media technologies are socioculturally situated and embedded in existing social practices” (Akkaya 2014: 286). When CMC is contextualized as emerging from offline language practices, a broader range of analytical tools becomes available for a nuanced understanding of how discourse takes shape online.

Media and communication studies research has analyzed how the technological affordances (Hutchby 2001) of online platforms permit and restrict particular types of interaction and content production. On Twitter, for example, users can interact directly using @mentions (Bruns & Moe 2014), but the 140-character limit influences how tweets are structured. Because each social media platform has a unique combination of affordances, research that analyzes discourse on individual platforms is needed (cf. Thurlow & Mroczek 2011), and affordances shared across platforms make comparative research possible.

### **Methodology**

This interdisciplinary research analyzes discourse on the video-based social media platform Vine. Although Vine has had a meteoric rise in popularity in the U.S. since its launch in January 2013 (Friend 2014), its relative newness leaves it less researched than older platforms such as YouTube. Combining theory and methodology from linguistics, communication and media studies, and Black Studies, I examine how Vine-specific affordances for video production have led to the creation of a distinct type of online video that draws on particular offline discourses.

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My analysis is based on two years of online ethnography: watching Vine videos (“vines”), recording Vine-specific cultural and interactional practices (e.g., popular topics, viewers’ comments), and situating them within broader online culture and offline social practices (cf. Kozinets 2010). I became familiar with the Vine platform, including the “channel” feature that categorizes vines based on content. Of Vine’s nineteen permanent channels, “comedy” is the most popular — containing the most-followed Viners and most frequently watched vines — and includes a variety of topics and comedy styles. I limited the scope of my analysis to a single comedy Viner, King Bach, a 28-year-old African-American male comedian who is the most followed Viner overall (16 million followers in August 2016).

Through exhaustive sampling of King Bach’s vines posted between July 2013 and October 2015, I found that race was one of the most common topics in his comedy. I created a data set of 30 vines with racial humor, and with the “social, ideological, and political-economic [connection]” (Briggs & Bauman 1992: 147) of race between them, I analyzed them as a discourse genre: *Vine racial comedy (VRC)*. In Bakhtinian terms, Vine racial comedy is a “relatively stable” type of discourse that is “determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication” in which it occurs (1986: 60). The genre framework enabled an analysis of linguistic and non-linguistic features as well as Vine’s technological affordances as relevant to the content, and it connected King Bach’s videos to other online and offline discourse.

## Findings

One of the dominant features of King Bach’s VRC is characters constructed by auditory and visual semiotic features that portray cultural, racial, and linguistic stereotypes. Characters use shibboleths from ethnoracial and regional linguistic varieties (e.g., *gon’* in African American Vernacular English; see Green 2002); they may be accompanied by music with strong ideological associations (e.g., rap); and stereotypically racialized dress (e.g., white “prep” attire) is frequent. The inclusion of stereotypes in VRC is influenced largely by Vine’s affordance of a six-second time limit: Viners must portray their ideas quickly and effectively, which stereotypes can do since their social meanings are easily recognizable. King Bach’s inclusion of music, costumes, multiple actors, and other features are creative utilizations of Vine’s other affordances to work around the length constraint.

King Bach’s VRC also shares features with a broader popular subgenre of Vine comedy, #relatable, which portrays experiences from Viners’ everyday lives that are relatable to their viewers (e.g. embarrassing parents). King Bach’s “relatable” content is often racial issues African-Americans face in the U.S. every day, such as wealth disparity (“Broke on Black Friday”) and linguistic and racial profiling (“What THEY Hear When WE Talk”). He uses stereotypes to critique the types of people who believe them, the social phenomena that created them, or to subvert social expectations (cf. Hall, Evans, & Nixon 2013), and by doing so King Bach incorporates generic features of African American stand-up comedy, which has traditionally challenged the sociopolitical status quo through critical engagement with cultural stereotypes (Carpio 2008). VRC has been adopted as a genre by other Viners of color who have collaborated with King Bach, utilizing Vine’s affordances to address racial stereotypes about their own ethnoracial groups.

## Conclusion

Using social media to address racial issues and “talk back” to mainstream representation has become common practice in recent years (cf. Bonilla & Rosa 2015), and humor has been used for social critique in both online and offline discourse (cf. Calhoun 2016). Being video-based rather than text-based and having different affordances from its video-based counterpart YouTube, Vine and the humor produced on it are distinct from other social media. Vine and its affordances have created a space in which King Bach can use comedy to direct his millions of followers to sociopolitical issues they might otherwise ignore. The success of this endeavor is seen in the high number of views, likes, and shares on individual vines and in his sustained position as the most-followed Viner. In a society that advocates racial colorblindness (Wise 2010), King Bach’s Vine racial comedy is significant as both an innovative online discourse genre and a new form of sociopolitical critique on race.

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