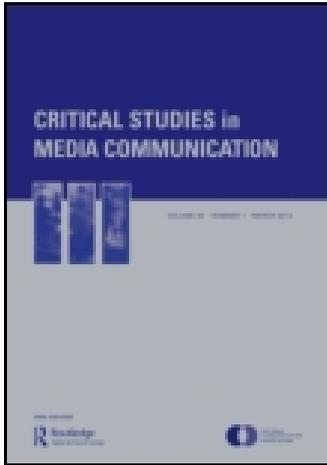


This article was downloaded by: [Boston University]

On: 13 October 2014, At: 08:45

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Critical Studies in Media Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcsm20>

### The Critique of YouTube-based Vernacular Discourse: A Case Study of YouTube's Asian Community

Lei Guo & Lorin Lee

Published online: 16 Jan 2013.

To cite this article: Lei Guo & Lorin Lee (2013) The Critique of YouTube-based Vernacular Discourse: A Case Study of YouTube's Asian Community, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 30:5, 391-406, DOI: [10.1080/15295036.2012.755048](https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2012.755048)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2012.755048>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

# The Critique of YouTube-based Vernacular Discourse: A Case Study of YouTube's Asian Community

Lei Guo & Lorin Lee

*Asian/Asian Americans, a minority group traditionally and systematically ignored by the American mainstream media, have become extremely vocal on YouTube. This study analyzes the YouTube-based vernacular discourses created by two of the most well-known and influential Asian American YouTube celebrities: Ryan Higa and Kevin Wu. For analysis, we provide a synthesized model, "hybrid vernacular discourse," to explore the YouTube-based vernacular discourses from three aspects: content, agency, and subjectivity. The study found that Higa's and Wu's vernacular discourses did demonstrate some revolutionary potential, but the potential was largely limited.*

*Keywords: vernacular discourse; rhetoric criticism; Asian/Asian American; YouTube; hybridity*

Asian/Asian Americans<sup>1</sup> are often represented by the American mainstream media as a group of people who succeed silently without protesting anything (Kawai, 2005). The emergence of YouTube, one among many factors, has played a role in changing the public perception of this population. For example, in early 2011, UCLA student Alexandra Wallace gained national notoriety for her YouTube video rant against Asians entitled "Asians in the library." The video generated more than one million views and a tremendous amount of news coverage (e.g., Lovett, 2011). This incident made Wallace infamous overnight and brought attention to a number of Asian/Asian-American YouTubers who produced hundreds of video responses.

Asian/Asian Americans' fame on YouTube, however, reaches far beyond this isolated incident. Many Asian/Asian Americans have risen to popularity on YouTube through self-produced videos documenting their lives and opinions. Among them,

---

Lei Guo is a PhD student in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. Lorin Lee received her MA from the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Correspondence to: Lei Guo, School of Journalism, the University of Texas at Austin, 300 W. Dean Keeton, Austin, TX, 78712-1073. Email: [guolei1985@gmail.com](mailto:guolei1985@gmail.com)

Ryan Higa (“Nigahiga”) and Kevin Wu (“KevJumba”) are the most well known. Their YouTube channels are, respectively, the second and 14th most subscribed channels across all categories and of all time as of June 2012 (VidStatsX, *n.d.*). Indeed, Asian/Asian Americans—a group systematically ignored by the mainstream media—are extremely vocal on YouTube.

While some critics have celebrated that “the revolution can be YouTubed,” this rhetorical study analyzes YouTube-based vernacular discourse with a critical lens. As Ono and Sloop (1995) warned, scholars must not take vernacular discourse as positive simply because of its vernacular nature. Ideological presuppositions may be reproduced unconsciously if we uncritically embrace the myth of the social media revolution.

In this article, we hope to achieve two goals. The first is to build a synthesized model of analysis for our study—and hopefully future studies—to critique YouTube-based vernacular discourse. Building upon previous scholarship, our synthesized concept of “hybrid vernacular discourse” encourages researchers to analyze vernacular discourse from three aspects: content, agency, and subjectivity.

Using this model, the second goal is to examine critically the YouTube-based vernacular discourses created by the two aforementioned YouTube celebrities—Ryan Higa and Kevin Wu. We argue that these two YouTubers challenged the mainstream hegemonic discourses against Asian/Asian Americans and other marginalized groups and constructed their subjectivities by articulating variegated discourses beyond race and ethnicity. On the other hand, constrained by YouTube’s institutional agency, the two YouTubers followed the site’s entertainment principle and produced several videos for the sake of amusement rather than for any democratic purposes.

We will provide a brief overview of YouTube’s Asian community, outline our synthesized concept, and employ this synthesized concept in our analysis.

### **An Overview of YouTube’s Asian Community**

Asian/Asian Americans are extremely active on YouTube. The visual medium creates a platform for comedians like Higa and Wu to share their witty humor, for videographers like Freddy Wong and Wong Fu Productions to show off their creativity, and for how-to gurus like Michelle Phan to showcase their knowledge about fashion. YouTube has also provided a stage for the burgeoning Asian/Asian-American dance and indie music scenes. It allows dance crews, such as Jabbawoockeez and Poreotics, and indie music artists, such as David Choi and Kina Grannis, not only to promote their talents, but also to create an intimate connection with fans. These young YouTube stars are recognized for their efforts online, as evidenced by their millions of channel views and subscribers (VidStatsX, *n.d.*), offline at packed venues through signed endorsements and contracts with major corporations and labels (Considine, 2011; Tsukuyama, 2012), and through media coverage on major news channels like CNN (2009).

While often seen as a battleground for subscribers and views counts, YouTube has also become a platform for collaborations, a phenomenon wholeheartedly embraced

by the Asian/Asian-American YouTube community. Online collaborations take many forms, such as cameos (e.g., HappySlip, 2012) and duets (e.g., kinnagrannis, 2011). These collaborations also extend offline. For example, Wong Fu Productions produced a grassroots movement called International Secret Agents (ISA) aimed to “empower and unite the Asian-American community” through an annual performance showcasing “hidden” Asian-American talent (ISA, n.d.). Notably, many performers at ISA are YouTube celebrities, including Higa and Wu, who are now a permanent part of the tour.

For this rhetorical study, we selected videos by Higa and Wu, two of the most popular and influential Asian/Asian-American YouTube celebrities. Ryan Higa, a Japanese American from Hawaii, is currently studying film at the University of Nevada (Higa, 2010). Higa’s YouTube channel is the second most subscribed across all categories and of all time as of June 2012. His channel, hosting a total of 120 videos, has more than five million subscribers and has been viewed more than 180 million times (Higa, n.d.). Aside from monetizing his videos through ads, Higa also sells video-related merchandise on his Web site. As a representative for Asian Americans, Higa served as a White House Virtual Youth Town Hall panelist, discussing issues regarding the Asian-American community (White House Initiative, 2011).

Kevin Wu, a Chinese American from Texas, attended the University of California–Davis as a film major but is currently on leave (kevjumba, 2012b). He has produced 91 videos since 2006, and as of June 2012, Wu’s YouTube channel is the 14th most subscribed across all categories and of all time with more than 61 million channel views and more than two million subscribers (Wu, n.d.). The popularity of Wu’s videos eventually brought him some mainstream exposure. For example, in 2010, Wu and his father competed as a team on the well-known American reality TV game show, *The Amazing Race*. Wu has also received sponsorship from corporations such as JCPenney and T-Mobile.

We consider both Higa and Wu’s discourses on YouTube as vernacular discourses. The next section discusses our approach in analyzing their YouTube-based vernacular discourses.

## Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

### *Vernacular Discourse*

A critical turn in rhetorical studies encouraged more rhetoricians to study vernacular discourse, a field traditionally marginalized in the public sphere and in the field of rhetorical criticism. Wander’s (1984) conceptualization of “Third Persona,” Morris’s (2002) “Fourth Persona,” and Cloud’s (1999) “Null Persona” all addressed the importance of examining discourses that are systematically silenced, consciously or unconsciously. Notably, it was Ono and Sloop (1995) who first suggested that rhetoricians look at vernacular discourses that “resonate within and from historically oppressed communities” that “have been systematically ignored” (p. 20). All of these concepts of persona and vernacular discourse suggest ways to critique the

dissemination of hegemonic power in a society through the analysis of traditionally marginalized discourses.

Specifically, Ono and Sloop's (1995) approach encouraged researchers to examine two characteristics of vernacular discourse: "cultural syncretism" and "pastiche." The former suggests that, in protesting the mainstream discourse, the vernacular discourse simultaneously constructs its own community's rhetoric. The latter, "pastiche," refers to the process in which "members of vernacular communities often use fragments or 'scraps' from hegemonic discourse to construct subjectivities" (p. 24). In sum, Ono and Sloop's (1995) method urged researchers to focus on how vernacular discourse interacts with mainstream discourse via its content.

Ono and Sloop's (1995) approach—proposed nearly two decades ago—was primarily used to analyze print-media-based vernacular discourse. However, with the emergence of the Internet, the content and context of vernacular discourse experienced dramatic changes. In recent years, a variety of Internet-based platforms provided unprecedented opportunities for traditionally marginalized communities to express their voices. Warnick (2007) thus noted that conventional approaches used in rhetorical studies should be adjusted for the Internet environment. In response, Howard (2008a, 2008b) proposed that researchers should examine the *agencies* of online vernacular discourse, in addition to the *content*. Based on his analysis of blogs, Howard (2008a) noted that while participatory Web sites offered new spaces for the expression of vernacular discourse, the technologies that created these platforms were typically produced, maintained, and funded by institutions. In other words, Web-based discourse is made by "a conglomeration of agencies being simultaneously enacted by both noninstitutional and institutional agents" (Howard, 2008b, p. 492). As such, Howard's (2008a, 2008b) approach to analyzing online vernacular discourse emphasized the importance of examining the negotiations between the vernacular and the mainstream via agencies.

Notably, both Howard (2008a, 2008b) and Ono and Sloop (1995) employed the concept of "hybridity" in their theorizations of vernacular discourse. They both treated vernacular discourse as hybrid, rather than essential or authentic, and greatly emphasized the interaction between the vernacular and the mainstream via its content and agency, respectively. Our synthesized approach in studying YouTube-based vernacular discourse, too, emphasizes the importance of hybridity. Furthermore, we look to include a third layer of analysis—subjectivity. However, before explicating our model, we will outline our approach to "hybridity," bearing in mind its various interpretations in academia.

### *Vernacular Discourse and Hybridity*

For rhetors as well as for scholars, vernacular discourse should not be treated as "pure" or "authentic" (e.g., Ono & Sloop, 1995). Celebrating the authenticity and distinctiveness of vernacular discourse would only essentialize vernacular communities and consolidate the hegemonic power structure that defines the difference between the vernacular and the mainstream, thus reinforcing the marginalization of the vernacular.

Conversely, scholars have also warned against an irresponsible anti-essentialist approach. If the essentialization of vernacular discourse results in an echo of the existing hegemonic system, the opposite argument, which negates any social classification, seems to “leave subaltern groups without a secure footing from which to launch counter-cultural insurgence” (Leonard, 2005, p. 150)—take, for example, the criticism of race. One could argue that emphasizing blackness or Asianness would essentialize the respective minority community. However, on the other hand, abandoning any racial category would lead to a colorblind ideology, serving the purpose of neoliberalism hegemonies (e.g., Lacy & Ono, 2011). To sum up, if a fixed line that defines the boundary runs the risk of essentialism, blindly erasing that line could lead to a political vacuum.

The concept of hybridity can help to solve this dilemma. However, it should be pointed out that hybridity, originally a biological concept, has been employed in various academic fields, such as linguistics, race theory, and media studies; and its usage as a social practice and an analytical model is varied, problematic, and sometimes even offensive. For example, in the 19th century, hybridity was associated with eugenicist and scientific-racist thought (Young, 1995). More recently, while some scholars have noted the revolutionary power of hybridity, others have pointed out that hybridity as an analytic framework is dangerous and even serves to perpetuate uneven power relations (Kapchan & Strong, 1999). Our use of hybridity highlights its positive aspects by drawing upon Homi Bhabha’s (1994) theorization. Instead of reinforcing or negating the boundaries, Bhabha (1994) discussed:

the importance of the hybrid moment of political change. Here the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One* (unitary working class) *nor the Other* (the politics of gender) but something else besides, which contests the terms of territories of both. (p. 41)

That is to say, the significance of the hybrid, or the in-between space, lies in its ongoing rearticulation and renegotiation of social boundaries, which seeks to make any authoritarian categorization problematic. Indeed, the concept of hybridity in Bhabha’s (1994) work serves to *blur*, rather than shatter, the fixed boundaries that categorize, for instance, the vernacular versus the mainstream, and other classifications, such as race, gender, and nationality. It is this theorization of hybridity from which we draw inspiration for our own analytical model.

### *A Synthetic Concept*

Building upon Howard’s (2008a, 2008b) and Ono and Sloop’s (1995) works, as well as Bhabha’s (1994) theorization of hybridity, we propose a synthesized framework of “hybrid vernacular discourse” to approach YouTube-based vernacular discourse. We analyze vernacular discourse from three aspects: content, agency, and subjectivity.

We consider “hybridity” a *feature* of vernacular discourse in terms of its content and agency. Thus, as researchers, it is our goal to discern carefully how and to what extent a vernacular discourse is hybridized in terms of these two aspects. On the

other hand, we contend that rhetors should employ hybridity as a *political strategy* to construct their subjectivities. As such, our task as researchers is to examine whether the analyzed rhetors used this strategy and in what ways.

*Hybrid Content.* Following Ono and Sloop's (2005) approach, we first treat the content of YouTube-based vernacular discourse as hybrid. Specifically, vernacular discourse is hybrid in the sense that the line between vernacular and mainstream content is always fluid. The concept of "cultural syncretism" suggests that the creation of vernacular rhetoric and the contestation of mainstream discourse happen simultaneously. The concept of "pastiche" indicates that the construction of vernacular discourse inevitably borrows the language of the mainstream. Using these two concepts, we examine how YouTube-based vernacular discourse interacts with mainstream discourses. By doing so, we seek to extend Ono and Sloop's theoretical approach, an approach originally theorized within print media, to the digital sphere.

*Hybrid Agency.* Second, like Howard (2008a, 2008b), we treat the agencies of YouTube-based vernacular discourse as hybrid. "Agency," here, refers to the capacity of an agent (a person or an entity) to act in the world of YouTube. The agencies that help generate YouTube-based vernacular discourse are hybrid in that personal and institutional agencies are intertwined on this video-sharing site. On the one hand, YouTube's slogan, "Broadcast Yourself," claims a type of personal agency, and indeed individuals do have the agency to post their own videos on YouTube and articulate their vernacular voices. On the other hand, YouTube—the platform on which these vernacular videos are shared—is institutional. Founded in 2005 as a venture-funded startup, YouTube was sold to the corporate giant Google just one year later. Moreover, YouTube videographers' personal agency becomes further "polluted" when they opt in to YouTube's Partner Program, a program that pays participants, uploading original content, dividends of the advertisement revenues generated from their videos, among other perks and benefits (YouTube, n.d.-a). Notably, both YouTubers analyzed in this article are participants of this program. In order to remain a partner, participants must follow certain criteria,<sup>2</sup> and as a result, they must negotiate their own personal agency with YouTube's institutional agency. After all, for both partners and non-partners, in order to exert some influence in the YouTube sphere, one must first follow YouTube's rules of survival.

One important rule of survival is to make videos entertaining. Hess (2009, 2010) observed that the production of YouTube videos relies on infotainment logic, typically accomplished through techniques, such as parody, spoof, and irony. Considering YouTube's overly playful atmosphere, Hess (2009) warned that YouTube might become "a location for fun, not for political dialogues" (Hess, 2009, p. 427). While it is true that serious political discussions would potentially be marginalized and buried on YouTube where entertainment-oriented clips dominate, it does not exclude the possibility for users to express vernacular voices in a playful manner.

As such, our mode of analysis suggests exploring how users' personal agencies and YouTube's institutional agency collectively shape or constrain vernacular discourses

on the site, and in particular, how YouTube videographers cope with the site's priority to provide entertainment.

*Hybrid Subjectivity.* As discussed earlier, our mode of analysis also urges researchers to explore whether or not rhetors employ hybridity as a political strategy to construct their subjectivities. According to Bhabha (1994), hybridity as a political strategy suggests a subjectivity that troubles the boundaries of social classifications and exerts its positive influence by dancing along the borders. Leonard (2005) described this as "subjectiveless subjectivity." Neither grounded nor ungrounded, this "subjectiveless subjectivity" is displaced at the moment of its arrival, and is relocated at the moment of displacement. The focus of "subjectiveless subjectivity" lies in the constant process of deconstructing and reconstructing.

In using hybridity as a strategy to construct vernacular subjectivities, such as those of Asian/Asian Americans, rhetors should, first, deconstruct the boundaries that assert various social classifications. As Chuh (2003) indicated, it is important to imagine the other differently in a new space where the discursive constructedness is always foregrounded. In practice, rhetors can employ political solidarity and mobility as contingent resources (Flores & Moon, 2002). In other words, Asian/Asian-American rhetors should engage in border crossing, articulating variegated discourses that are composed of many overlapping forces beyond race and ethnicity (Chuh, 2003; Lowe, 1991). In addition, rhetors should also seek to blur the categorizations from within. For example, when it comes to Asian-American discourse, scholars such as Chuh (2003) and Lowe (1991) have criticized the distinctions between Asians in America and Asians in Asia, and between American-born Asians and Asian immigrants, as maintained by the mainstream discourse. This is because the essential categorizations would reinforce a Euro-centric viewpoint that there is an authentic "Asianness," which is distant and fundamentally different from "Americanness." As such, a hybridity strategy suggests rhetors should articulate discourses by travelling along the borders of both intergroup (e.g., Asians vs. non-Asians, race vs. other social categories) and intragroup (e.g., Asians in Asia vs. Asian Americans).

Indeed, hybrid subjectivity is also about reconstructing. Rather than blindly discarding any racial categorization, Spivak's (1988) "strategic essentialism" suggests that it is possible to organize vernacular discourse under a particular ethnic identity such as "Asian American," "Chinese," or "African American." The subjectivity is fluid in nature, but "essential" only as a strategy for the purpose of challenging hegemonic discourses against members of this group. In other words, rhetors could use a certain social category as a starting point to articulate their discourses, but they should always be challenging the categorization.

In sum, our synthesized concept of "hybrid vernacular discourse" encourages researchers to treat YouTube-based vernacular discourse as hybrid in terms of content and agency, and examine their hybridization processes. We also suggest hybridity to be a preferred political strategy, and as researchers, we should explore whether or not rhetors employ this strategy in constructing their subjectivities.

*Asian/Asian Americans and Media*

An overview of the discourses about Asian/Asian Americans in both traditional and digital media can present the cultural context in which the current study is conducted.

In general, as Ono and Pham (2009) argued, the “historically embedded” racism against Asian/Asian Americans has guided the mainstream media’s representation of this population (p. 13). Specifically, contemporary mainstream media’s discourse about Asian/Asian Americans is composed of, but not limited to, three stereotypes: Model Minority, Robot Asian, and Perpetual Foreigner. The Model Minority describes this group as hardworking, family oriented, law-abiding, and well educated (Kawai, 2005). The emphasis of the seemingly positive image of Asian/Asian Americans succeeding in American society through their own, unaided efforts strengthens the colorblind ideology and denies the existence of institutional racism (e.g., Lee, 1999). The Robot Asian stereotype portrays Asians as nerdy, lacking in creativity, and/or without any social life, which explains why people of color cannot climb to the top of their professions, despite being a Model Minority (Wang, 2010). Another salient stereotype is the Perpetual Foreigner, which characterizes Asian Americans as exotic, non-American, foreign, inassimilable, and “FOB” (fresh off the boat) (Espiritu, 2004). As a result of this stereotype, Asian Americans’ in-group status as American is denied, and thus less accepted than other racial-ethnic groups (Zhang, 2010).

In recent years, an increasing number of Asian/Asian Americans have begun to use digital media as an alternative means of production and distribution. Scholars (e.g., Lopez, 2011; Nakamura, 2008; Ng, 2012) have used case studies to demonstrate Asian/Asian Americans’ use of various digital communication tools and strategies to cover issues related to their own communities, promote their own artists’ work, and challenge racism and stereotypes prevalent in the mainstream media. Importantly, Nakamura (2008) warned that online users might reproduce stereotypes and invoke “reverse racism” (e.g., Asians have higher IQs). She also noted that online petitions against racism were popular because they satisfied people’s desire to consume race visually.

As for YouTube, Ng (2012) described it as “one of the most influential platforms of the new media landscape” (p. 266), attributing its impact to its “DIY form.” He argued that this new production aesthetic and distribution system present empowered representations of Asian/Asian Americans that depart from traditional stereotypes. Ono and Pham (2009), on the other hand, expressed a hesitant optimism for such forms of new media. While they agreed that new media has given Asian/Asian Americans access to construct self-representations that would otherwise be difficult to convey in traditional media, they also argued that new media present only a potential, not a guarantee, for individual or collective activism. While there are studies that have looked at YouTube’s role as a medium for Asian/Asian Americans’ media representations and activism, very few of them have conducted systematic discourse analyses on the content of YouTube videos—a gap this study hopes to fill.

## Method

Higa's and Wu's YouTube videos consisted mainly of vlogs (i.e., video logs) that discussed their daily lives, and some self-directed and -performed sketches. Specifically, we selected each YouTuber's top five viewed videos as of June 2012 for close rhetorical analysis. We also included videos that explicitly addressed issues about Asian/Asian Americans, stereotypes, and race/racism by searching for the keywords "Asian(s)," "stereotype(s)"/"stereotypical," or "race"/"racism."

Employing the synthesized concept of "hybrid vernacular discourse," our analysis attempts to examine how Higa and Wu rhetorically constructed an Asian/Asian-American community by addressing the following questions. How did they challenge dominant ideologies while simultaneously affirming their own rhetoric ("cultural syncretism")? How did they borrow the language from the mainstream in order to challenge it ("pastiche")? How did different agencies—personal and institutional—help to shape or constrain their discourses? How did they construct their subjectivities, and to what extent did they employ the strategy of hybridity?

## Findings

### *The Revolution Potential of the Vernacular*

The two YouTubers' vernacular discourses are revolutionary in two ways. First, they helped create a new look for the Asian/Asian-American community on YouTube. Second, to some extent, they established a hybrid vernacular subjectivity by crossing the borders between race and other social categories rhetorically.

*Challenge and Reconstruction.* Higa and Wu used rhetorical strategies including identification, remixing, and humor as vehicles for content that was potentially critical of mainstream hegemonic discourse. Meanwhile, these rhetorical techniques helped establish their own vernacular rhetoric ("cultural syncretism") and thus helped build a personal, creative, and energetic Asian/Asian-American community on YouTube.

Wu's video "Asians just aren't cool enough?" (kevjumba, 2009) is a good example. In this video, Wu used identification—or "one of us" rhetoric—to address issues about Asian/Asian Americans. Identification refers to the means by which an author may establish a shared sense of values, attitudes, and interests with his or her audience (Burke, 1950). The more likely an author can talk in the audience's language through "speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying [his or her] ways with [the audience's]" (p. 55), the more effectively s/he can persuade the audience. Using the strategy of identification, Wu constructed his YouTube persona as an ordinary Asian American with whom his Asian audience could easily identify. Like many other vlogs, the "stage" and "actors" were ordinary and familiar. Set in his slightly messy bedroom and dressed in casual clothing, Wu treated his audience as his friends, and lightheartedly conversed about his thoughts and feelings. The content of the video, however, addressed heavier issues. Wu criticized the mainstream media's distorted representations of Asians by drawing upon his personal experiences. Rather

than specifically discussing the issue, Wu framed the reason, or the motive of this critique, as his anger toward a Hollywood movie that cast his childhood cartoon hero, an Asian martial artist, with a Caucasian actor:

Like most young Asian kids, I grew up loving . . . *Dragon Ball* . . . There weren't any other Asian superheroes growing up, so Goku was like our only idol, our hero. But Hollywood decides that they're gonna make a movie from our childhood fantasy, and star this guy [Caucasian actor, Justin Chatwin] as our hero, Goku. Goku is white? . . . This is ridiculous.

Wu sought to resonate with his Asian audience by reminding them of their shared childhood memories. He frequently used the pronouns “we,” “our,” and “us” to break the boundaries between himself and his audience and construct himself as someone “like most young Asian kids.” Wu later remarked, “Maybe I’m just hurt because my idol growing up is now being turned into this guy [Chatwin].” By identifying with his audience, he voiced the outrage that his viewers ought to have—one that should protest against the media misrepresentation of Asians for the sake of their shared Asian hero.

Another frequently used technique was remixing, a type of “pastiche.” Wu remixed many fragments of mainstream discourse to serve his own argument, particularly in the form of images in this video. He included a headshot of William Hung, a former *American Idol* contestant whose popularity stemmed from his embodiment of a caricatured image of Asian immigrant stereotypes, such as speaking with an English accent and having a nerdy demeanor. Another picture featured the well-known American pop idol Miley Cyrus posing for a picture by pulling back the corner of her eyes to create a “slanty eye” look, a gesture viewed as her mocking Asians. By remixing these images into the video, Wu insisted that Asians, at least in the eyes of the mainstream media, just “aren’t cool enough.” Wu contended, “We’ve never been cool. We’re still not cool. And unless we do something about it, we never will be.” Thus Wu again warned his Asian audience that the mass media’s distortion of Asian images is something that they as Asians are not and should not be happy with.

Moreover, as will be discussed in detail, these Asian/Asian-American YouTubers were extremely talented in using humor to express their views. In his commentary regarding the choice to cast Chatwin as Goku, Wu’s frustrations were amplified through his humorous comparisons. He went as far as to claim that casting his father (an Asian) as Bob Saget’s (“a white guy”) role in the American television series *Full House* would be more fitting than the film director’s decision to cast Chatwin as Goku. To add to the humor, the picture used of Wu’s father closely resembled Saget. These humorous comments helped Wu to make the point that his Asian audience should “do something” in order to defend their own images in the public realm.

As the analysis above suggests, Wu strategically used the “one of us” rhetoric, remixing, and humor to challenge the mainstream discourse against Asian/Asian Americans. Constructing a persona as an ordinary Asian American and talking in a personal and humorous manner, Wu turned this video into a conversation in which

he shared his personal feelings with friends. This created a unique YouTube-style vernacular rhetoric, which is very different from that of conventional speeches in which rhetors attempt to “educate” or “preach” to their audience. Moreover, these Asian YouTubers’ performances by default served to create a new look for the Asian/Asian-American community. In challenging the preconceptions of the community prevalent in the mainstream media—quiet, robot-like, and obedient—these Asian YouTubers appeared to be expressive, rebellious, and funny in a creative way. Seen in this light, these videos do present some revolutionary potential in how they simultaneously create vernacular discourses while contesting mainstream discourses.

*Deconstructing Asianness.* Asian/Asian-American YouTubers sometimes constructed subjectivities by articulating a vernacular discourse that was beyond issues of being Asian, or even race. Higa’s video “The iPod human” (nigahiga, 2007) exemplifies this hybrid subjectivity. In this video, which parodied Apple’s line of iPod products, Higa advertised a new revolutionary iPod product, the “iPod Human.” This “iPod Human,” depicted by Higa and his friend, was multifunctional, just like other iPods. For example, it could “hold up to six and a half songs,” which could be annoyingly sung back by “The iPod Human” anywhere—at home, in the car, and even in bed. This parody insinuated that iPod products permeate into every aspect of our lives to the point that humans have become the product. Uploaded in 2007, this video is even more applicable to today’s consumer society. Similarly, in Wu’s video “That’s not gay!” (kevjumba, 2010b), he critiqued people’s overuse of the term “gay,” combating the misconceptions and biases against homosexual people and the notion of the effeminate Asian male, at least implicitly. Higa’s and Wu’s videos demonstrate that they, as Asian Americans, are not limited to speaking an Asian-specific vernacular discourse on YouTube. Instead, they rhetorically worked with other vernacular communities and criticized the hegemonic discourse regarding race, commercialism, and sexuality.

In addition, Wu’s inclusion of his father, Papa Jumba, in his videos works to deconstruct the essential difference among Asian/Asian Americans, as perceived by the mainstream media. In Papa Jumba’s guest appearances, it is apparent that he is a first-generation Asian immigrant, who speaks with an English accent and sometimes in Mandarin Chinese. However, in Wu’s two-part series, “My dad is Asian” (kevjumba, 2010a, 2012a), while Papa Jumba exhibited Asian-like behavior, such as doing Tai Chi, scenes of him enjoying hip hop music and his humorous and expressive performance served as a contrast to these images. In fact, Papa Jumba’s willingness to participate in these comedy sketches is another factor in blurring and deconstructing the fundamental differences between American-born Asians and Asians immigrants.

### *Echoing the Mainstream*

The analysis above paints a rosy picture of YouTube-based vernacular discourse. However, the darker sides of their videos are equally worthy of close examination. Constrained by YouTube’s rule of survival and driven by their intention to celebrate

the positive aspects of being Asian, Higa's and Wu's discourses sometimes echoed, rather than contested, mainstream racial constructs and ideologies.

*YouTube: LOL or Leave.* A very important goal of these Asian/Asian-American YouTubers is to win hits for their videos. To achieve this, they must comply with YouTube's production logic, the logic that prefers entertainment to serious discussions of social issues, or what we call "LOL [i.e., laugh out loud] or Leave." Studies have shown that the majority of the favorite and most viewed YouTube videos include entertainment-oriented content (e.g., Kim & Viall, 2010). In other words, YouTube videographers not only choose to be amusing, but they also have to be. Having attained the status of "YouTube celebrity" and YouTube Partner, these YouTubers' personal agencies become further compromised. In order to attract the attention of their audience, and thereby advertisers, the two YouTubers' videos often focused on comedy, which overshadowed their social agenda, and sometimes even perpetuated stereotypes and racism.

In some cases, the YouTubers might indeed wish to challenge the stereotypical portrayals of Asian/Asian Americans. However, by foregrounding the entertainment value of their videos, their criticisms became ambivalent. A perfect example is Wu's "I have to deal with stereotypes" (kevjumba, 2007), a video that aimed to "debunk" certain Asian stereotypes. Instead of critiquing through reason, Wu chose to use irony in the form of a skit. He first verbally refuted the applicability of the widespread stereotype to himself, only to be proved incorrect by his "personal" experiences. Take for example the "Asians are nerds" stereotype. Wu asserted:

*Wu:* Kevin's not nerdy... Look... I don't make all As, okay? I am a bad kid...

Today, I made B+!

*Wu's "mother":* Kevin, you make B+? You think you cool make B+? You dishonor our family!

*Wu:* Not now, mom.

In attempting to refute the stereotype that he, an Asian American, is a typical diligent straight-A nerd, Wu showed the audience his "bad" grade of a B+, only to be thwarted by his mother's unexpected interruption, that is, a reality check. Wu and his mother's brief altercation not only provided comedic relief, but also implied that he, behind the video, is actually a diligent and obedient Asian-American child. Regardless of what messages Wu intended to convey, what viewers enjoy, and thus remember most vividly, might be Wu's ironic representation of a Model Minority student.

In other videos, Higa and Wu might even purposefully take advantage of Asian/Asian-American stereotypes to create amusing videos. However, because of their identities as Asian/Asian American and their attempts to identify with their audience, these YouTubers are less likely to offend or alienate their Asian/Asian-American audiences than YouTubers of other races.

Higa's "How to be" series, an infomercial parody, similarly incited humor by reinforcing stereotypes. The beginning of each "How to be" video featured a stereotypically geeky-looking Asian youngster being bullied by another character.

After the bully's departure, an off-screen voice asked the geeky Asian, "Still getting beaten up in school? Still can't defend yourself?" After answering "yes," he was thrown a tutorial tape teaching him how to be "gangster," "Emo," and "Ninja" in order to defend himself. Despite mastering the step-by-step tutorial, the Asian youngster ultimately ended up being bullied again. While these videos clearly showcased Higa's creativity and knack for comedy, they also perpetuated the idea of the helpless social situation for Asians/Asian American, as depicted by the humorously nerdy Asian protagonist. Despite all efforts to become stronger or fit in, the Asian will forever be viewed as a weak outcast.

These YouTubers used mainstream stereotypes about their own community to produce entertaining videos that worked to identify with and retain their Asian audience and fans by employing the "one of us" rhetorical strategy. These racist and stereotypical presentations of Asian/Asian Americans would be seen by viewers as "joking around," and as indispensable comedy techniques. However, the reproduction of the stereotypical discourse by Asian Americans *themselves* might work even better to perpetuate the racial stereotypes among both Asians and non-Asians, which might in turn elicit a "Yeah, that is so true" response, a fear also expressed by Ono and Pham (2009).

*"Asianness" Revisited.* Higa and Wu tried to construct hybrid vernacular subjectivities in some of their videos. They challenged racial essentialism, and rhetorically mobilized a political mobility and solidarity. However, in other cases, they unconsciously echoed hegemonic racial categorizations by celebrating a unique "Asianness." At the end of "Asians just aren't cool enough?" (kevjumba, 2009), Wu said, "and to all you Asians, I think we're very cool people . . . They're jealous of our SAT scores, our food . . . our technology, Karate techniques, and our cuteness."

Wu's closing remarks attempted to mobilize his Asian audience, and to build a collective Asian/Asian-American community on YouTube. By doing this, however, Wu distinguished "we" (i.e., him and his Asian audience) from "they" or "you" (i.e., his non-Asian audience), and made Asians and non-Asians appear as if from opposite camps. By constructing these two camps, he reinforced the racial categorization that "Asians" are a group of people different from, or even better than, non-Asians. Wu even pointed out some "positive aspects" of the Asian audience, satirically suggesting that non-Asian viewers "are jealous." In other words, the weapon he used to criticize stereotypes was not to deconstruct the stereotype per se, but rather to use "cool" stereotypes to refute "uncool" stereotypes. Wu wanted his audiences, both Asians and non-Asians, to perceive Asians as a group of "cool" people. However, in doing so, he left the stereotype (or the fixed conception of a certain group of people) unchallenged, contradicting himself in terms of his critiques about stereotypes. More dangerously, this rhetoric in turn essentialized an Asian community.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In this article, we use the synthesized concept of "hybrid vernacular discourse" to examine YouTube-based vernacular discourse from three angles: content, agency, and

subjectivity. We found that Higa's and Wu's vernacular discourses did demonstrate some revolutionary potential, but the potential was largely limited, a sentiment which echoes that of Ono and Pham (2009).

Specifically, Higa and Wu challenged the hegemonic views about Asian/Asian Americans while simultaneously establishing their own vernacular rhetoric and thus (re)building a new YouTubed Asian community. They also constructed hybrid subjectivities by travelling along the borders of different vernacular communities, and deconstructing the differences among Asian/Asian Americans. Ironically, they also echoed the mainstream discourse of racial ideologies and stereotypes. Constrained by YouTube's institutional agency, Higa and Wu prioritized entertainment in producing their YouTube videos. Consequently, their social agendas, if any, became overshadowed and ambivalent. Worse yet, they utilized Asian/Asian-American stereotypes and their ethnic identities for the sake of producing a comedic effect. Though unintentional, racial stereotypes and even racism were reinforced during this process. Equally dangerous is their celebration of a unique "Asianness," which fundamentally essentialized the Asian community and left hegemonic racial categorizations and stereotypes unchallenged. Indeed, Higa's and Wu's vernacular discourses are "fragmented, unconnected, even contradictory or momentarily oppositional" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 451).

In our study, one of the most important findings is that YouTube's institutional agency and its entertainment principle of "LOL or Leave" consistently constrained the vernacular discourse on the site. On YouTube, uploaders strive for view counts, and viewers come for an entertaining, rather than educational, experience. As a result, the critiques of racial ideology could be easily sacrificed for the sake of entertainment. To conclude, as for whether or not "the revolution can be YouTubed" for Asian/Asian Americans, this study suggests that the revolution still has a long way to go.

In addition, we hope our synthesized concept of "hybrid vernacular discourse," though still in its preliminary stage, provides a useful framework for future studies to examine vernacular discourse, especially YouTube-based vernacular discourse. In particular, following Howard (2008a, 2008b) and based on our findings, we contend that agency is an extremely important factor to consider when studying YouTube.

## Notes

- [1] Our study is situated in the context of the United States. We use the term "Asian/Asian American" because we conceptualize Asian/Asian American as a hybrid concept. We do not want to emphasize the distinction between Asians in America from Asians in Asia, or America-born Asians from Asian immigrants. This will be discussed further in the theory section.
- [2] The agreements stipulate that partners comply with the rules put forth by Google's AdSense program, in addition to YouTube's Terms of Service and Community Guidelines—the same rules that all YouTube users agree to follow upon registering an account. Moreover, partners should upload "original, quality content" and have at least one video available for monetization. More information about the Partner Program can be found at YouTube (n.d.a, n.d.b).

## References

- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Burke, K. (1950). *A rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chuh, K. (2003). *Imagine otherwise: On Asian Americanist critique*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Cloud, D. (1999). The null persona: Race and the rhetoric of silence in the uprising of '34. *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 2(2), 177–209. doi:10.1353/rap.2010.0014
- CNN (2009, August 15). Wong Fu Productions [video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/showbiz/2009/08/15/rowlands.wong.fu.productions.cnn>
- Considine, A. (2011, July 29). For Asian-American stars, many web fans. *The New York Times*.
- Espiritu, Y. L. (2004). Ideological racism and cultural resistance: Constructing our own images. In M. L. Andersen & P. H. Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender: An anthology* (5th ed., pp. 175–184). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Flores, L. A., & Moon, D. G. (2002). Rethinking race, revealing dilemmas: Imagining a new racial subject in Race Traitor. *West Journal of Communication*, 62(2), 181–207. doi:10.1080/10570310209374732
- HappySlip (2012, May 11). Speechless [video file]. Retrieved from <http://youtu.be/WXfAtFjqCRQ>
- Hess, A. (2009). Resistance up in smoke: Analyzing the limitations of deliberation on YouTube. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26(5), 411–434. doi:10.1080/15295030903325347
- Hess, A. (2010). Democracy through the polarized lens of the camcorders: Argumentation and vernacular spectacle on YouTube in the 2008 election. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 47, 106–122.
- Higa, R. (2010). About. *da official website of Ryan Higa*. Retrieved from <http://www.higatv.com/about.php>
- Higa, R. (n.d.). Nigahiga's channel. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/user/nigahiga>
- Howard, R. G. (2008a). Electronic hybridity: The persistent processes of the vernacular web. *Journal of American Folklore*, 121(480), 192–218. doi:10.2307/20487596
- Howard, R. G. (2008b). The vernacular web of participatory media. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25(5), 490–513. doi:10.1080/15295030802468065
- ISA (n.d.). About. *ISA TV: International Secret Agents*. Retrieved from [http://isatv.com/?page\\_id=181](http://isatv.com/?page_id=181)
- Kapchan, D. A., & Strong, P. T. (1999). Theorizing the hybrid. *Journal of American Folklore*, 112(445), 239–253. doi:10.2307/541360
- Kawai, Y. (2005). Stereotyping Asian Americans: The dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril. *The Howard Journal of Communication*, 16, 109–130. doi:10.1080/10646170590948974
- kevjumba (2007, March 8). I have to deal with stereotypes [video file]. Retrieved from <http://youtu.be/nbZ9zJ22WfQ>
- kevjumba (2009, April 10). Asians just aren't cool enough? [video file] Retrieved from <http://youtu.be/SAbJgXUM4o4>
- kevjumba (2010a, August 31). My dad is Asian Ep. 1 [video file]. Retrieved from <http://youtu.be/yqSCOPvPJ7g>
- kevjumba. (2010b, September 14). That's not gay! [video file]. Retrieved from [http://youtu.be/\\_gdCjQw6Lb8](http://youtu.be/_gdCjQw6Lb8)
- kevjumba (2012a, March 2). My dad is Asian Ep. 2 [video file]. Retrieved from [http://youtu.be/Lw\\_vzLw4xyA](http://youtu.be/Lw_vzLw4xyA)
- kevjumba (2012b, May 7). COLLEGE [video file]. Retrieved from <http://youtu.be/MrXvK2BrT9A>
- Kim, E., & Viall, L. (2010). *When ordinary citizens produce media content: A comparative analysis of most popular and random YouTube videos*. Paper presented at the AEJMC annual conference, St. Louis, MO.
- kinnagrannis (2011, February 16). The way you are—David Choi and Kina Grannis [video file]. Retrieved from [http://youtu.be/tbPhf\\_KXNZI](http://youtu.be/tbPhf_KXNZI)
- Lacy, M. G., & Ono, K. A. (2011). Introduction. In M. G. Lacy & K. A. Ono (Eds.), *Critical rhetorics of race* (pp. 1–18). New York, NY: New York University Press.

- Lee, R. (1999). *Orientalism: Asian Americans in popular culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Leonard, P. (2005). *Nationality between poststructuralism and postcolonial theory: A new cosmopolitanism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lopez, L. K. (2011). Fan activists and the politics of race in *The Last Airbender*. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15(5), 431–445. doi:10.1177/1367877911422862
- Lovett, I. (2011, March 15). U.C.L.A. student's video rant against Asians fuels firestorm. *The New York Times*.
- Lowe, L. (1991). Heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity: Marking Asian American differences. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1(1), 24–44. doi:10.1353/dsp.1991.0014
- McKerrow, R. E. (1989). Critical rhetoric: Theory and praxis. *Communication Monographs*, 56, 91–111. doi:10.1080/03637758909390253
- Morris, C. E., III (2002). Pink herring and the fourth persona: J. Edgar Hoover's sex crime panic. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 88(2), 228–244. doi:10.1080/00335630209384372
- Nakamura, L. (2008). *Digitizing race: Visual cultures of the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ng, K. (2012). Asian American new media communication as cultural engagement: E-mail, vlog/blogs, mobile applications, social networks, and YouTube. In J. N. Martin & L. P. Macfadyen (Eds.), *New media and intercultural communication: Identity, community and politics* (pp. 255–276). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- nigahiga (2007, November 10). The ipod human [video file]. Retrieved from <http://youtu.be/Phbe8mEDMe4>
- Ono, K. A., & Pham, V. N. (2009). *Asian Americans and the media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ono, K. A., & Sloop, J. M. (1995). The critique of vernacular discourse. *Communication Monographs*, 62, 19–46. doi:10.1080/03637759509376346
- Spivak, G. (1988). *In other worlds: Essays in cultural politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Tsukuyama, H. (2012, April 20). In online video, minorities find an audience. *The Washington Post*.
- VidStatsX (n.d.). VidStatsX community collage: YouTube top ranked 1 to 100. Retrieved from <http://vidstatsx.com/collage/top-100>
- Wander, P. (1984). The third persona: An ideological turn in rhetorical theory. *Central States Speech Journal*, 35(4), 197–216. doi:10.1080/10510978409368190
- Wang, G. (2010). A shot at half-exposure: Asian Americans in reality TV shows. *Television and New Media*, 11(5), 404–427. doi:10.1177/1527476410363482
- Warnick, B. (2007). *Rhetoric online: Persuasion and politics on the World Wide Web*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- White House Initiative (2011). White House Virtual Youth Town Hall [video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/whitehouseaapi>
- Wu, K. (n.d.). Kevin's channel. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/user/kevjumba>
- Young, R. J. C. (1995). *Colonial desire: Hybridity in theory, culture, and race*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- YouTube (n.d.a). Partners Program. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/partners>
- YouTube (n.d.b). What are the criteria for partnership? Retrieved from <http://support.google.com/youtube/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=82839>
- Zhang, Q. (2010). Asian Americans beyond the Model Minority stereotype: The Nerdy and the Left Out. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 3(1), 20–37. doi:10.1080/17513050903428109