

Dynamics of Appropriation, Resistance, and Representation in the Black TikTok Strike

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Abstract: Recently, African American content creators, specifically dancers, have reported facing marginalisation on online content creation platforms. They alleged that their original content has repeatedly been receiving significantly fewer views compared to those who merely copied their content. The creators who copied have largely been Caucasian, giving rise to accusations of racism not only towards the content creation community but also towards the algorithm of these platforms. As a result, African American creators carried out a virtual strike whereby they refused to choreograph dance moves for new music track releases. The strike brought forward a discourse of disproportionate visibility and popularity under ‘digital colonisation’, shedding light on how appropriation takes place in the content creation field.

This paper shall focus exclusively on how the marginalisation of Black content creators as contended by them has taken place as well as their resultant resistance as it occurred within the TikTok community.

CONTENT CREATION AND INFLUENCERS

From the early years of modem-connected Internet access to high data speeds in pocket-sized devices, social media online has evolved from a virtual common room for connecting with people on a rudimentary level to a platform for news, marketing, and campaigns as well as pushing discourse, opinions, and propaganda, amongst many other activities. The largest chunk of this space is now occupied by and involves content creation. Because of its widespread reach, content creation as a field covers all of the above purposes alongside others through its various forms such as video creation, blogging, etc. Content creators, therefore, have become driving forces for bringing the attention of the online world to a particular idea or subject.

Many times, the social events and subjects of discussions highlighted by content creators gather more steam online, as compared to traditional

marketing strategies. Thus, creators now prominently serve as part of the advertising campaigns for various sectors. Because of this, the individual voice of the creators with the highest reach is given more importance and they are able to engage with contemporary issues with a more assertive and comfortable presence. This gives rise to a domination of select discourses (as highlighted by these wide-reaching creators) in online forums, which will be discussed at a later point in this paper.

One of the recent developments in content creation is seen in creators pushing forward others' original work alongside one's own. An example relevant to the topic of this paper is of songs that top popularity charts. Their ratings are influenced not only by the quality of the artist's work but also with the contribution of content creators, especially dancers. These content creators select songs to choreograph, thereby driving others to do the same and thus promoting a particular song to the top spot. This practice and outcome relates closely to a term often used for popular content creators - influencers.

Much like product placement in any conventional media, when creators promote a certain product or service through their content, they ‘influence’ their audience to engage with said item or service. Companies, artists, and even other content creators thus approach a particular creator who has a substantial following or has been seen to gain an audience with remarkable efficiency. The creator is paid for their work, with their reach dictating their compensation. Thus, this is a new-age profession that many online users have taken up, especially the youth. More exposure equals more tie-ups, leading to more followers and earning more revenue. Content creators are also able to venture into other fields through this work. For instance, Addison Rae, who will be mentioned again going further in this paper, rose to

prominence on TikTok with her dance videos and bagged movie deals off her fame and popularity.

REPRESENTATION, RACISM, AND APPROPRIATION

A significant outcome of the open platform of social media-- and an important point of discussion in this essay-- is representation. Users were able to empower themselves through online representation, prominent examples including the African American population whose dialect, African American Vernacular English(AAVE), gained wider recognition on social media. Additionally, the African American population has striven for the recognition of AAVE as having a unique legitimate identity. The caveat of appropriation and misappropriation, however, has led to AAVE being used as a 'mock language' in online circles. This is a recurring feature of social media platforms, the act of appropriation which seeks to sideline, mock, or invisibilise marginalised voices. These acts were achieved not only by active participation of privileged users but also by the inherent nature of the algorithms running these platforms.

Twitter, for instance, had its automatic image cropping feature set particularly for White faces, wherein if a coloured person were to be in the same picture, the automatic feature would centre the White person's face, thus many times leaving out the coloured face. Tiktok itself has been known to show fairer and more posh videos on its popular feed, sidelining more popular or similar videos by other creators who do not seem to match a particular 'aesthetic'.

This paper does not focus on how Artificial Intelligence systems learn bias from their code (developed by humans) but rather on an active enforcement of bias that serves to further unstage marginalised voices. It will discuss how privileged voices act to further themselves over others, how the already marginalised are further invisibilised, how a resistance once voiced and picked up by others gains a foothold, the changes it brings, and the yet unacknowledged side of the resistance itself. In doing so, the paper sources its information particularly from online reports as these are able to provide links to said instances and have the advantage of being referred to easily by other users in the online sphere.

Black symbols, styles, language, etc. have been subject to increasing appropriation by White users

online. This goes as far as White social media personalities getting tanned (or edited through software) in order to actually pass off as a person of colour, complete with the speech pattern and other appearance markers. This is a new social problem affecting Black users, with the appropriating users not being racist in the 'traditional', overtly hateful sense yet leeching off their entire culture and getting rewarded over Black users. Black people have had to face policing of their natural features in order to integrate themselves into professional spheres while those appropriating their style get rewarded with welcoming acceptance.

Online, the same style exhibited by Black users do not gather as much views as appropriations of their style by White content creators. White creators have been known to copy off the content and go viral with it, with the Black originator of that style hardly getting any recognition for the content they created. It must be noted that social platforms like Instagram, Tiktok, etc. definitely operate with the understanding that once a style latches on the general psyche, it is taken up by many users - this is understood not as an act of appropriation/plagiarism but as a feature of these platforms. However, the issue lies in the fact that Black creators are disproportionately affected by White creators taking up their styles and getting rewarded off them while the former get nothing in return. Additionally, it is not a matter of taking the time to climb up through one's reach, as Black creators work just as hard (in the context of this paper, they arguably have been shown to create newer and more original content) to gather views and followers as White content creators.

THE RESPONSE

A fairly recent development sheds particular light on this pattern. Black content creators have gone on a 'strike', denouncing the 'theft' of their dance choreography on TikTok. Black creators refused to create new dance moves as their original content was repeatedly invisibilised after getting copied by White creators, who got disproportionately more hits and likes on their videos as compared to the original Black creators.

Black creators have highlighted how White creators make use of the content originally created by the former and reap benefits off the same. As pointed out

before, copying and sharing the same moves/tunes/styles is merely a feature of these platforms. However, in these cases of content usage, the original creators have not been acknowledged or recognised for their work. It is the White creator who, having gone viral with the work put in by Black creators, benefits more.

To reiterate, original dance choreography over new songs is carried out by Black creators for the most part. It is their work that grabs the most attention and is thus considered objectively more catchy as it brings the spotlight onto the work of the artist whose music they have chosen for their dance. However, this space brought to fruition by the labour of Black creators does not yield better statistics for them but for those who use their work without giving due credit.

An example that highlights the heavy implications of this practice that goes beyond mere credits can be seen in the work of Addison Rae, who was mentioned earlier in this paper. Rae has been reported to have made millions of dollars in revenue in a single year off her TikTok page. She was more recently invited to The Tonight Show hosted by Jimmy Fallon, a prestigious TV show watched all over the world, where she performed many dances that were choreographed originally by Black content creators on TikTok.

On the other hand, one of the creators whose work Rae used, and which subsequently became one of her top-performing videos on TikTok, failed to acquire similar recompense for her labour. This creator, a 14-year old Black TikToker named Jalaiah Harmon, did not receive recognition for her work. While in this particular instance, Jimmy Fallon and other celebrities promoted Jalaiah and other Black content creators after getting to know of their original work, the event illuminates the larger pattern of marginalisation in these circles. A White creator like Addison Rae gets recognised, bags movie deals, earns exponentially more in revenue. Black creators on the other hand are not rewarded or even acknowledged for their labour, and their revenue is substantially lower than White creators who continue to use their work without giving credit. In this, these instances reflect the phenomenon of cultural appropriation. An instance of cultural appropriation specific to the Black experience is that of Kim Kardashian, a White celebrity, who regularly appropriates characteristically Black physical features and has been observed to occupy Black spaces with these actions.

This instance with Addison Rae is found in several other places, such as the one with Jalaiah Harmon, a Black teenager whose 'Renegade' dance choreography was taken up by Charli D'Amelio without giving due credit. D'Amelio, a top TikTok star who was 16 at the time, received millions of likes on her video and had other celebrities tag her as the original creator of the dance. Jalaiah Harmon, on the other hand, did not receive any credit for her original creation and had to labour to get credited as the creator of the dance.

Black content creators, having observed this pattern for a long time, went on to start a virtual strike. With the tag #BlackTikTokStrike, they declared their opposition to this invisibilising practice. The movement gained traction and was covered by many leading news portals. The impact of this movement could be seen in the case of Megan Thee Stallion, a rapper whose new releases were regularly used for choreographing by TikTok users. Stallion's new release after the beginning of this movement saw significantly fewer views and hits because Black creators refused to release dance moves on its track. The track is said to be catchy on its own but the lack of proper choreography around it has led to its dip in popularity. This development has now been presented as evidence for the contribution of Black creators towards the art form and the promotion of other artists. This labour benefits not only other creators and the artists but also the platforms on which content creators post their work. For instance, traffic increases on the app when a particular style goes viral as more people access it to view and add their own content on the same trend. However, the rise in traffic ends up getting credited to the ones whose privilege sidelines the original creators. In light of this movement, TikTok issued a statement that it was working towards addressing these issues. However, Black creators claim that this has not been implemented properly in practice yet.

THE LARGER ISSUE OF DIGITAL COLONISATION

Erick Louis, a black content creator from the USA, says that the appropriation and stealing of content without due credit is 'digital colonizing'. Cultural appropriation has been recognised as a regular practice predominantly in the Western world and digital colonisation is another form of the same phenomenon.

For instance, Khloe Kardashian and Kylie Jenner, popular White celebrities, were accused of stealing clothing designs made by Black artist Destiny Bleu and Plugged NYC (a Black-owned clothing brand). The original clothing designs were inspired from 1990s African American fashion; Kardashian and Jenner did not credit the creators nor did they offer any payment for copying their designs, thus carrying out cultural appropriation and intellectual theft at the same time. Maha Cherid describes how Kardashian and Jenner “not only financially benefited from the sales, but also prevented less known Black designers from earning profits on their creation”. Cherid concludes that cultural appropriation maintains “racial and ethnic hierarchies that effectively disempower communities that are already marginalised”.

Many creators use Black culture and styles to propel themselves into the spotlight. They take over activism centering on Black issues to gather support from Black creators (the recent Black Lives Matter protests, for example). For all intents and purposes, it benefits these creators to ‘act Black’. Taking the instance of Black-centred activism, the White creators are also seen to be well aware of the discrimination and marginalisation faced by the Black population in America. Thus, their responses to not being aware about the original choreographer (despite the original creators bringing it to their attention many times) come across as flimsy excuses for not taking the effort to properly credit them. Merely giving them their due for their labour (an action that does not stretch beyond the most basic practice of crediting) will serve to promote their work in a much more fruitful manner than what the current situation provides.

In ‘The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation’, James Young and Conrad Brunk identify appropriation as “an attack on the viability or identity of cultures or their members”. Popular White creators thus blatantly using the work of smaller creators’ without due credit results in the latter getting sidelined by comparison, whereas they could have gained much needed recognition for their talent and hard work. Young and Brunk’s statement that acts of appropriation “potentially leave members of a culture exposed to discrimination, poverty, and lack of opportunity” underline this phenomenon in the content creation community.

In studies conducted on the relations between race and social media, it was found that the African-American

population used social media to carry out an expression of the ‘Self’. Their self-expression involves presenting their culture, ideas, styles, etc. to others and celebrating common identities within their community. This self-expression differs from self-promotion, where the platform is used as a portfolio to showcase one’s work and connect in a professional sense with others. It was the African-American population that was engaged in using social media for self-expression while the White users took an approach directed more towards self-promotion. Thus, with this distinction and the examples cited above, it can be said that the self-expression of Black content creators is effectively used for the self-promotion of White creators.

In ‘So You Want to Talk about Race’, Ijeoma Oluo describes cultural appropriation as “the adoption or exploitation of another culture by a more dominant culture”. The same can be seen in digital spaces wherein the Black creators are invisibilised through biased algorithms and preference is given to White content creators who positively exploit the work of Black creators without any credit or recompense. The term ‘digital colonisation’ effectively covers the same phenomenon of cultural appropriation as it occurs in the virtual space. Whereas the Kardashians benefit from selling products inspired by Black culture (while actually copying Black-created products in a few cases), White content creators benefit from the content of Black creators, further marginalising them.

The outrage around the ‘#BlackTikTokStrike’ movement is tied to a history of appropriation that began a long time ago, before social media made it possible to make it visible to the entire world. Instances like the use of blackface, adoption of Black-driven and Black-focussed music for White artists, and Black choreography co-opted for White dancers, amongst others, showcase how Black labour has a history of being used for the benefit of White people.

BLACK WOMEN AND THE COMMUNITY

It is to be noted that Black women creators have choreographed the most popular dance moves and it is their work that gets appropriated the most by White creators. Creators like Mya Nicole Johnson, Camyra Franklin, and Keara Wilson, to name a few, have choreographed dance moves that went viral when performed by White creators. The songs to be

choreographed are themselves by Black women artists, like Megan Thee Stallion and Cardi B. However, there is no specific mention of the role played by Black women creators even in the reports that have properly covered this issue.

In spheres where there is a unified community coming together to resist and assert their presence, the role played by women when shown to be greater ends up getting subsumed in the larger movement and discourse. Just as White feminism blurred over the experiences of the Black women and the Black liberation movement sidelined them in its struggle, the Black woman creators-- while seen prominently in the Black TikTok Strike-- are not recognised as an entity unto themselves but are subsumed in the larger movement. Their value is thus superadded and branded as the value of the larger Black creator community.

This approach might appear as an erasure of the efforts and contribution of Black women content creators; it also reflects the stand taken by the 20th century Black women activists in America. Activists were disillusioned by the White feminist movement that sought to gain liberty for White women while still consolidating racist discrimination against the Black population. As a result, Black feminists moved away from such movements as they realised that these will be used “as a weapon to strengthen white oppression of black people”. Bell Hooks, in her book ‘Ain’t I a Woman’, observes that while the White feminists were advocating for the Equal Rights Amendment in 1933, Black women activists were struggling to prevent atrocities on Black men and women alike, “to improve the conditions of the masses of poverty-stricken black people”.

In the book, Bell Hooks remarks that non-inclusivity, hostility, and failure to address racism disenfranchised the Black women activists, even adding to and encouraging Black anti-feminist rhetoric. Hooks laments the attitude that developed within the Black community against feminism in general, that put the Black woman in a subordinate role in the civil rights movement and relegated her demand for gender equality to a lower status.

Viewed from this perspective, it appears that the current Black content creators have a similar yet markedly different approach. Black women creators have not sought to distinguish themselves as the ones most affected by the intellectual theft but have taken it

up as an issue of the entire Black community. Their approach has not been to create a separate identity as women creators of the community but instead to face it within the umbrella of a single community inclusive of everyone. Their role is visibly in the forefront of the struggle as the community puts forward a united stand. However, they do not claim that their struggle is solely for the Black women creators nor that male creators do not have it as worse as they do.

This distinction and acknowledgement is important as it differs from other movements like that of White feminism which perceived women's liberation exclusively through the lens of the White woman's experience. Additionally, unlike other aforementioned instances where the unique experiences of women belonging to the Black community were sidelined, Black women creators have kept the focus on the experience of the entire community without excluding their own selves in the process. This can be seen as a significant break away from the problematic issues of subordination within the movement, self-erasure, and demoting of women participation in general to focus on the ‘main issue’. Rather, Black women content creators have led the TikTok strike, maintained their own identity, and shed light on the injustice towards the entire Black community.

CONTINUING THE RESISTANCE

The Black community continues to oppose its appropriation, marginalisation, and invisibilisation. While the advent of the Internet has made it possible to help their voices be heard on a global platform, it has also brought along its own set of challenges. These challenges put forward by privileged White users have pushed Black creators to resist them in unique ways. Black creators now continue to speak out against lack of credit and theft of labour and have demanded for reforms that will empower them to earn recognition and money for their work. A potential hazard of representation also arises within this movement wherein Black women creators are not recognised as its most prominent players.

However, the Black women creators not centering the discourse solely around their experience is also a study of inclusivity, one that puts forward the larger good of the community. The movement continues to gain traction and has elicited positive responses from celebrities and the various content-creation platforms.

It has shown substantial development in discourse, effecting change in an incremental way. Following the history of practical, real-life strikes to gain rights and recognition, the virtual strike has shown the way for effective online resistance. Similarly, the #BlackTikTokStrike movement could possibly have further impacts in areas other than online content creation to effect necessary social changes.

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