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Article

Humor That Harms? Examining Racist Audio-Visual Memetic Media on TikTok During Covid-19

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Abstract
During times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, digital platforms are under public scrutiny to guarantee users' online safety and wellbeing. Following inconsistencies in how platforms moderate online content and behavior, governments around the world are putting pressure on them to curb the spread of illegal and lawful harmful content and behavior (e.g., UK's Draft Online Safety Bill). These efforts, though, mainly focus on overt abuse and false information, which misses more mundane social media practices such as racial stereotyping that are equally popular and can be inadvertently harmful. Building on Stoever's (2016) work on the "sonic color line," this article problematizes sound, specifically, as a key element in racializing memetic practices on the popular short-video platform TikTok. We examine how humorous audio-visual memes about Covid-19 on TikTok contribute to social inequality by normalizing racial stereotyping, as facilitated through TikTok's "Use This Sound" feature. We found that users' appropriations of sounds and visuals on TikTok, in combination with the platform's lack of clear and transparent moderation processes for humorous content, reinforce and (re)produce systems of advantage based on race. Our article contributes to remediating the consistent downplaying of humor that negatively stereotypes historically marginalized communities. It also advances work on race and racism on social media by foregrounding the sonification of race as means for racism's evolving persistence, which represents a threat to social cohesion.

Keywords
Blackface; humor; memes; online harms; racism; social media; "sonic color line"; stereotypes; TikTok; yellowface

Issue
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1. Introduction

Humor, the act of making "a mockery of seriousness" (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005, p. 4), is central to social life. It is a critical tool people use as a relief mechanism to deal with everyday life and to speak truth to power, but it can also be used to silence and discriminate (Davies & Ilott, 2018). Online, humor is a core element of internet culture that is rewarded by digital platforms' attention economy (Shifman, 2014), and people mobilize it both to organize against and to reinscribe systems of oppression (Brown, 2019). Social media platforms have historically taken an optimistic approach to humor (Phillips, 2019), and it is not until recently that some platforms are addressing humor that harms, beyond the harms thus far recognized within platforms' existing community guidelines (e.g., defamatory or violence-inciting speech). For example, in 2020, Facebook (now known as Meta) included Blackface parodies and other common racist stereotypes in its "hate speech" policies (Meta, n.d.). These changes are partly due because society's norms around what is acceptable in public discourse are evolving (Bell, 2021) and are often the result of the continuous work of activist groups that push platforms to improve their content moderation processes. In addition, media and governments are increasingly putting pressure on tech companies to

minimize the harms carried out through their platforms, including addressing "legal but harmful" content such as self-harm content, misinformation, and abuse in a consistent and transparent way (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2021).

But identifying and dealing with harmful forms of communication that are coded as humor in social media is a big challenge; all made worse by the fact that content moderation on social media becomes an almost impossible task without paying attention to historically entrenched power relations (Bartolo, 2021; Siapera & Viejo-Otero, 2021) and context (Gillespie, 2018). That is, platforms' policies tend to treat all identities as equal without distinguishing between groups that have been historically marginalized from groups that have not. This means, for example, that in some platforms "white face" parodies are treated equally as Blackface parodies (Siebert, 2016). But this approach dismisses the history of violence and racism linked to Blackface (Lott, 1992), which cannot be found in "white face" performances. Additionally, while human reviewers can provide context when evaluating problematic or borderline content in geographically diverse locales, automated content moderation tools are especially inadequate to understand humor's ambivalence and differentiate humor that speaks truth to power, from humor that crosses the line into harm (Dias Oliva et al., 2020).

Although much attention has been given to the spread of misinformation and coordinated inauthentic behavior on social media, perhaps a more challenging problem is how to deal with racism disguised as humor, as well as speech and conduct from users who are not necessarily trying to spread hateful ideologies but are simply participating online in ways that can potentially harm others (Roberts, 2016). This includes people's everyday engagements in humorous expressions such as young people on TikTok engaging in viral parody challenges, especially via the platform's "Use This Sound" feature, which allows users to appropriate and remix the audio from other videos. Drawing on the work of scholars that have theorized racial stereotyping online (Nakamura, 2002, 2008), and more specifically how racism emerges on social media as a result of user practices and digital platforms' norms, design, and governance processes (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Siapera, 2019), this article examines how user engagements with racist aural memetic media on TikTok via the "Use This Sound" feature, in combination with visual elements, perpetuates racist systems. Specifically, by drawing on Stoever's (2016) work on the "sonic color line," we add to work on racism on social media by foregrounding the role of sound as "a critical modality through which subjects (re)produce, apprehend, and resist imposed racial identities and structures of racist violence" (p. 4). We understand racism as a historical "process that is routinely created and reinforced through everyday practices" (Essed, 1991, p. 2).

TikTok is a popular short-video platform that is unique in understanding the entanglement between visuals, sound, race, and technology because of its characteristic design that prioritizes sound as the build-in technical feature for memetic engagement (Kaye et al., 2021). TikTok has 800 million monthly active users worldwide and is rapidly developing into a primary vector for harmful practices (e.g., Weimann & Masri, 2020). Despite its immense importance, academic work on this social media platform, owned by Chinese company ByteDance, is still emerging (Abidin, in press; Kaye et al., 2022). We selected Covid-19 as a case study to examine racist audio-visual memetic media on TikTok because the pandemic has been "racialized" (Mallapragada, 2021) and multiple and continued lockdowns around the world moved people's social interactions fully online. During Covid-19, "yellow peril" narratives of Asians as "infectious" emerged on social and mainstream media and "played a crucial role in the cultural production of Asians as a racial contagion" (Mallapragada, 2021, p. 279). "Yellow peril" is a trope that dehumanizes people from Asian countries as a threat to Western countries and their way of life and evokes imagery of "Asians as savages, merciless, immoral, subhuman, and a threat to…whites in general" (Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 38). TikTok experienced a surge in users during the pandemic who latched onto the platform for jocular intimacy and connection (Molla, 2021). We examined whether and how "yellow peril" narratives and other racist stereotyping of people of Asian descent in particular, and other racialized communities in general, emerged on this popular platform during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Humor That Harms

Critical humor scholars have warned about the negative effects of humor that dehumanizes historically marginalized groups and individuals (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005; Pérez, 2017). Crucially, too, theoretical frameworks arising from the knowledge generated by historically marginalized groups (e.g., Black feminist thought, critical race theory, feminist theory) have also addressed humor's potential to silence and discriminate (Ahmed, 2017; Collins, 2008; hooks, 2004). Humor and comedy often depend on finding the edges of convention and norms and, like other kinds of qualities of cultural products, the funniness itself is subjective. However, humor holds the potential not only to offend tastes but to cause actual harm (Ford et al., 2014; Thomae & Viki, 2013), yet this understanding is not universally accepted (Bell, 2021). When jokes tap into, for example, the "angry Black woman" negative stereotype (Ashley, 2014), they are commonly assessed using the common standard of "offensiveness," where the focus is on "a subjective reaction to an experience that can vary greatly among persons'' (Bell, 2021, p. 166). Bell argues, though, that when history and power relations are factored into the assessment of humor, one can recognize the harm in jokes because they represent "a tangible, objectively verifiable setback to a person's interests" (Bell, 2021, p. 166). Harm

is objectively verifiable "with access to the relevant situational information," such as considering racist and sexist humor as part of systemically unequal societies where some groups have historically been and continue to be disadvantaged (Bell, 2021, pp. 166–172).

An example of humor that harms are parodies linked to histories of violence and discrimination. Parody is a specific type of humor that is "forced to reference that which it mocks" (Davies & Ilott, 2018, p. 12). Within cultural industries, the practice of parodying disadvantaged groups by people occupying more privileged social positions has a long history as a form of entertainment. Nineteenth century's Blackface minstrelsy, a theatrical tradition in which white actors painted their faces black and dressed in costumes to act as Black caricatures (Lott, 1992), is a well-known example. Similarly, Yellowface has a long history in intercultural theater practices in Europe and North America wherein non-Asian (specifically, white) actors portrayed Asian characters in highly negative stereotypical ways (Lee, 2019). Yellowface sees non-Asian people embody "Asianness" by mimicking stereotyped phenotypical features and sounds, which flattens specific characteristics of different Asian ethnicities and perpetuates the harmful notion that all Asians are the same (Ono & Pham, 2009). These stereotypes, as Ewen and Ewen (2011, pp. 423–424) note, serve the "requirements of media formulas that sought to avoid the burdens of complex character developments in favor of trouble-free indicators of good and evil." In the process, these stereotypes are "routinely separated from their moorings in history, becoming floating signifiers that can easily be applied to serve any given objective" (pp. 423–424).

Harmful parodies such as Blackface and Yellowface still have currency today albeit they are increasingly subjected to public scrutiny and condemnation (Bakare, 2020). Through the lens of critical humor studies, the positions of power that the people involved in these parodies occupy in the world provide an additional tool to assess when humor harms (Davis & Ilott, 2018; Pérez, 2017). For example, taking a hypothetical case of a white male YouTuber performing the "angry Black woman" stereotype, he engages in this form of humor from a position of race and gender privilege. Yet a Black woman appropriating the same parody could be considered a media tactic to counter misogyny and racist hate (Sundén & Paasonen, 2020) and hence is unlikely to be harmful. Entertainment industries, especially in the United States, are starting to face the urgent problem of racial stereotyping in popular culture. But on social media, racist humor flows overwhelmingly unregulated (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Roberts, 2016).

Although in this article we focus on how humor targeted at historically marginalized communities, especially through aural memetic media on TikTok, can be harmful and deserves attention, we also acknowledge that humor is a key tool for speaking back to power and counter racist hate, and as such, needs to be protected by social media platforms. For example, social media platforms facilitate the propagation of feminist and anti-racist jokes and help historically marginalized communities to connect with a larger network through laughter (e.g., Brock, 2020; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015). The importance of social media platforms for community building means it is important to protect jokes that aim at patriarchal and racist structures, even if these interventions play with tactics like shaming, linguistic appropriation of sexist and racist slurs, and humiliation that might offend (rather than harm) privileged audiences (e.g., Sundén & Paasonen, 2020).

3. TikTok and the "Sonic Color Line"

Since the early beginnings of the Internet, visual media has had a central role in racial stereotyping practices online (Nakamura, 2008; see also Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014). The links between sound and race on social media, though, have been less studied. We build on Stoever's (2016, p. 5) work on the role of sound in enabling "racism's evolving persistence" to examine how users' appropriations of sounds and visuals on TikTok, in combination with the platforms' lack of intervention in minimizing the visibility and spread of aural racist memes, reinscribe racist systems.

Stoever (2016, p. 7) shows how sound functions to produce "racialized identity formations." Drawing on Du Bois' (1903) concept of the "color line," which explains the differential power relations between white people and racialized Others in the United States, Stoever (2016, p. 11) proposes the "sonic color line" to define "a socially constructed boundary that racially codes sonic phenomena such as vocal timbre, accents, and musical tones." She explains how people, especially white Americans, perceive certain voices and sounds as being "funny and weird and sexual" (p. 8). She notes: "Through multiple simultaneous processes of dominant representation…particular sounds are identified, exaggerated, and 'matched' to racialized bodies" (Stoever, 2016, p. 11). Through these processes, she adds, "racial ideologies are (re)produced through the representational structures of discourse, aural imagery, and performance" (p. 11). While whiteness represents itself as "inaudible," immigrants and people of color are sonically stereotyped as "loud," "unruly," "improper," and "noisy" (p. 12). Stoever's work is interesting not only because she foregrounds sound in her analysis of racial formation, but also because she stresses that people's listening practices "are shaped by the totality of their experiences, historical context, and physicality, as well as intersecting subject positions and particular interactions of power'' (p. 15).

On TikTok, sound is what triggers users' creative engagements and harmful parodies such as Blackface and Yellowface become more complex than non-Black people painting their faces with black paint, and non-Asian people mimicking "hallmarks" of Yellowface

like "squinted eyes and buckteeth" (Meyer, 2016, para. 5). For example, the appropriation of Black sounds and voices on TikTok has been defined as "Digital Blackvoice" (Connor, 2020), and popular audio meme templates (Abidin & Kaye, 2021; Kaye et al., 2021) on the platform use these sounds. In fact, digital Blackvoice is part of what has been called as "digital Blackface" (Green, 2006; Jackson, 2019) or "digitalizing minstrelsy" (Roberts, 2016): the practice of appropriating Black bodies, sounds, and culture by non-Black people online for humorous and playful purposes. White teenagers on TikTok, in their lip syncs videos, commonly use audio from people of color that include, for example, the N-word (e.g., in a hip-hop song from an African-American artist). Through these mimicries, these teenagers engage with the racist slur without saying the word themselves. Other permutations of aural digital Blackface on TikTok are the use of audios featuring African-American vernacular English by non-African-American users "for the clout," or as a way to increase social followers, such as the use of the viral audios "This is for Rachel" (2019) and "Girl, don't do it" (2020). The humorous use of these audios by privileged English speakers trades on intersectional identity markers such as Blackness, class, and gender, and become examples of "mock language" (Hill, 2008), "aural stereotyping" (Stoever, 2016, p. 20), or "linguistic profiling" (Baugh, 2003), which we will unpack in the discussion of our findings. For Jackson (2019, p. 98), "certain dialects, vocal ranges, and vernacular are deemed noisy, improper, or hyperemotional by association with blackness," and they become productive online memes to express a cool, relaxed and humorous identity online.

Similarly, "digital Yellowface" has been discussed in terms of Hollywood using CGI to make white actors have more Asian features (Kates, 2017) and an "anime-inspired" Snapchat filter from 2016 (Meyer, 2016). In these cases, and in broader practices of "cybertyping" of Asians online, "the Orient is brought into the discourse, but only as a token or type" (Nakamura, 2002, p. 39). As we show in our finding sections, digital Yellowface on TikTok emerges when non-Asian people use Asian accents in English, voices, and sounds as a form of reducing people of Asian descent as mere stereotypes. It also emerges when TikTokers use the 'Use this Sound' feature to appropriate "Asian sounds" as irrational or overly emotional and mobilize them to overtly discriminate, or just "for the clout." Digital Yellowface on TikTok, though, often takes place in combination with visuals that also reproduce racial stereotyping. Indeed, the "fun" nature of TikTok aural memes largely emerges from the overlap of voice and body, from the multimodal nature of these memes.

TikTok features like "Use This Sound" make it easy to appropriate sounds and not attribute them (Kaye et al., 2021). Similarly, the features "Duet" and "Video-reply'' to comments, facilitate unreflective memetic engagements that can be harmful. It is precisely these in-built features that make digital Blackface and digital Yellowface so easily legitimized and shared further on the platform. In terms of policies, TikTok does not provide a detailed explanation of when humor can harm. The platform prohibits "threats or degrading statements intended to mock…an individual" under its harassment and bullying policy (TikTok, n.d.). "Satirical content" is mentioned without definition as a category of content that TikTok "may" apply exceptions to in the introductory statement to its community guidelines. "Parody" is mentioned as a possible exception to TikTok's policies around intellectual property violations and an exception to its policy against impersonation provided that the user makes clear that the account is a parody account. TikTok's design and the platform's lack of recognition in its policies that certain forms of humor can harm creates the conditions for harmful parodies such as digital Blackface and Yellowface, to spread unchecked.

4. Case Study and Methods

4.1. Case Study: The Racialization of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated anti-Asian sentiment worldwide (Gover et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2021). As the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 was reported to originate from a "wet market" in Wuhan, China (Wang et al., 2020), the pandemic triggered specifically a raised level of Sinophobia, which is a fear or dislike of Chinese people and their culture that traces back to the rise of European imperialism in the eighteenth century (Zhang, 2008). Since the racial label "Asian" encompasses a variety of different national groups, not only Chinese people experienced abuse, but anyone who was perceived as "Asian" was a target (Tan et al., 2021). In fact, people of Asian descent in settler states report common assumptions of "sameness" and "foreignness" in their informal social interactions with non-Asians (Kibria, 2000), and the pandemic was no exception. In the context of Covid-19, anti-Asian sentiment centered on blaming people of Asian descent—regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, or personal history—as the cause of the pandemic (Gover et al., 2020). While some of the racist aural memetic media we examined on TikTok specifically used "China" as a proxy to dehumanize Chinese people, most of the mimicking of physical features, accents, and gibberish speech we encountered on TikTok videos contributed to the flattening of specific Asian ethnicities into the umbrella concept of "Asian."

This anti-Asian sentiment worldwide, which led to real-world violence (e.g., Gover et al., 2020), needs to be foregrounded when evaluating the impacts of the covert and allegedly humorous practices on TikTok during the Covid-19 pandemic. We argue that racist aural memetic media on TikTok during Covid-19 contributed to larger dehumanizing discourses that were having real and nefarious consequences. As Gelber and McNamara (2016, pp. 500–501) warn, "subtle" and "routine" forms

of abuse have "cumulative" harmful effects for individuals belonging to groups experiencing historical and continued structural oppression. Attaching an illness to a historically marginalized group, therefore, has immediate and longer-term negative social effects in multicultural and multiracial societies (Keil & Ali, 2006).

4.2. Data Collection and Analysis

We employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate racist aural memetic media on TikTok. We built a bespoke data scraping tool in Python to collect TikTok videos (N = 6,544) and associated metadata. TikTok is well-known for its recommender system (the "for you" page) that personalizes each user's video feed based on their engagement and interaction with the videos the user is exposed to. For this study, it was necessary to avoid this personalization, which required us to develop a scraper that used the browser-based version of TikTok and which never was logged in to the platform. This means that the video feed used for data collection was primarily shaped by our web browser's language settings and the location that could be inferred from the IP address of the computer where the scraper was running. To collect TikTok videos that employed the hashtag #coronavirus, we pointed the scraper at https://www.tiktok.com/tag/coronavirus and collected data between January to June 2020. Note that millions of videos with the coronavirus hashtag were posted during this period and that our dataset is far from complete. The sample can however be considered a random selection of videos using this hashtag that were likely to be played to TikTok users based in Australia. To make this larger dataset manageable and more focused, we created a smaller dataset that contained videos with co-occurring hashtags relevant to this study. We selected hashtags referring to the umbrella concept of "Asian" (#asian), as well as tags denoting humorous engagements (e.g., #funny and #comedy, and the popular memes that emerged during Covid-19 on TikTok such as #itscoronatime). We also included videos tagged with keywords related to China (#china) and keywords that could potentially be used as proxies to denote Chinese people (e.g., #chinacoronavirus, #wuhan). Last, we also included videos tagged with #Australia to potentially collect examples of racist stereotyping in this country, which has a long history of anti-Asian racism (Hage, 2014). This reduced the dataset to 1,286 unique videos once duplicates were removed (97 videos contained two or more of these co-occurring hashtags).

We also removed videos in a language other than English (LOTE), videos that had been made private by the user who originally posted it, and videos that were made unavailable since the time of data collection. Removing these videos (LOTE n = 305; made private n = 90; unavailable n = 252), left us with 639 videos that were relevant to code for containing racist tropes. We then performed a thematic analysis of the videos collected. Throughout this analysis, we were particularly attentive to identifying videos containing harmful parodies such as Blackface and Yellowface, as well as other racial stereotyping such as "yellow peril" memes. This process allowed us to isolate 93 videos (14% of the videos coded) that displayed racist stereotyping. After coding these videos, we identified TikTok trends that were emblematic of racist stereotyping during Covid-19 on the platform, which we were able to include in the in-depth case study analysis.

In the findings section below we have chosen to describe significant patterns observed within the collected data and we use examples of individual videos with their engagement metrics to exemplify the trends. However, we do not provide hyperlinks matching the examples chosen to explain these general trends. This decision was made to protect the privacy of the TikTok users who participated in racist aural memes, most of which we believe are unaware of the harms of their practices. While we, as the researchers, do not condone the racist practices discussed in this article, it would be unethical to name these everyday users without their consent. For our analysis of the data, as white academics without lived experience with racism on social media, we draw on critical literature that has examined instances of racist stereotyping that are similar to what we observed on TikTok (e.g., Ono & Pham, 2009). Our analysis is also informed by the testimonies and analyses of racialized minorities collected on news articles, in which they define what they consider racist on TikTok, such as digital Blackface (e.g., Parham, 2020).

5. Anti-Asian Memes on TikTok During Covid

Within our sample of TikTok videos posted during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, we observed different instances of humorous racist stereotyping, which we group into two main salient practices: "yellow peril" memes and harmful parodies that displayed Yellowface and Blackface. In describing the findings below, we have, to the best of our abilities, identified the specific practice of racism present in the video. For example, a video singling out "China" within the joke is identified as Sinophobic. However, it must be noted that our chosen method limits us to mere observers of the videos, and as such, in some instances where people were mimicking stereotypical physical and sonic features associated with "Asianness" according to white frames, we could not truly know which specific group was the target of the parody.

5.1. "Yellow Peril" Memes

We identified tropes of "yellow peril" through memetic trends about people or objects being, by extension of their connection to China or Asian countries, contaminated with coronavirus. Three main memetic trends were salient in our sample: (a) skits showing people of Asian descent and targeting them as being the cause of coronavirus spreading; (b) skits where the video subject

reacts in horror or disgust when they receive packages or goods from China, where again the implied meaning was that by proxy to China, the objects were contaminated with coronavirus; and (c) skits that attribute the outbreak of coronavirus to Chinese people eating bats. We argue that these memetic trends illustrate the convergence of historical racist scapegoating of Chinese people and people of Asian descent in rich countries like America and Australia and contemporary social media cultures and practices.

The first trend we observed in the data involves skits about hearing or seeing a Chinese or Asian person sneeze, cough, or merely be present, to which TikTok users react as people of Asian descent must have or are spreading coronavirus. We found generic humorous video skits such as one where a person is dancing while the on-screen text reads: "When youre [sic] at your favorite chinese [sic] food place and you hear a cough from the kitchen" and the camera zooms in on this person's concerned face (19 k likes). In addition, we found hyper-local Australian skits such as one where a man uses a green screen effect to set the scene that he's on a train in Sydney passing through the suburb of Strathfield, which has a large Chinese population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). He then whispers "fuck" as he acts out people on the train starting to cough—suggesting that people of the suburb of Strathfield have coronavirus (16.3 k likes).

We also observed the reappropriation of the "Run" trend (Know Your Meme, 2021), which originated in 2015 in the now-defunct short-video platform Vine. On TikTok, over 2.5 million videos have used the song *Run* by AWOLNATION to create videos that set a scene under this suspenseful music (e.g., sneaking up behind someone) until the line "run" come up, in which case, the subjects of the video run. In our collected data, users reappropriated this trend to produce racist memetic transformations in respect to setting up scenes wherein people are seen running away from people of Asian descent due to a perceived association with coronavirus. In particular, we saw a variation of the same meme template which uses a portion of a YouTube video about how people of different nations sneeze. Through this TikTok aural meme ("Run," 2020), after the person from China sneezes, the audio starts and the clip cuts to chaotic scenes of people scrambling to run away either in a public area (47 k likes) or a crowded school corridor (52 k likes).

We see the theme of contagion extended upon in the second trend which involves skits about receiving packages or realizing you have goods from China and reacting in fear or disgust due to a sense of coronavirus contamination. For example, we found multiple Sinophobic videos where the first scene is of someone excitedly opening their front door to see a package had arrived, only to become concerned once they see that the package is from China. We then see different video endings to make the joke: Videos that show people putting on rubber gloves to disinfect the package or goods (18 k likes), videos where the person furiously washes their hands (10 k likes), one where the person gets a kitchen utensil to carry the package to their sink and sets the package on fire (34 k likes), and one where the person throws the package off a balcony (12 k likes).

The third trend that we identified evoking tropes of "yellow peril" centered on condemnation of Chinese people's eating habits and, particularly, the alleged habit of eating bats, a long-running racist trope consisting of using food "as vectors of aggression in racializing the ethnic other" (Yiu, 2018, p. 3). Bats, and particularly the notion of eating bats, has become a proxy to China and by extension people of Asian descent due to early reports or the origin of coronavirus in Wuhan's wet market (Wang et al., 2020). While the origin of Covid-19 is still under investigation at the time of writing, bats have been associated with the coronavirus outbreak (WHO, 2020). In the collected data we saw videos where users linked bat eating to coronavirus, for example, a video of a woman with an Australian accent filming a bat flying over the afternoon sky, as her voice is heard saying, as to condemn the practice and suggest a link to coronavirus: "A message to Australians…don't fucking eat them" (40 k likes).

While most of the above-described memetic media are examples of people unreflectively reproducing the "yellow peril" racist trope, we also observed standalone videos that were outright racist. Within our sample we observed skits that reproduced the racist name of coronavirus "Kung Flu"—a racial slur made highly public through its use by former President of the United States Donald J. Trump, which also became a meme online used to perpetuate historical media stereotypes of Asians (DeCook & Yoon, 2021). For example, we found a video of a person asking Apple's voice-assistant Siri: "What are [sic] you think [sic] about?" Siri replies: "What dumbass called it the coronavirus…and not Kung Flu?" (73 k likes). In another one, a young man sets up the joke with on-screen text that reads: "Different name for coronavirus." The video then cuts to a different scene of him dancing with the various names: "coronavirus," "covid19," "Kung flu," and "boomer remover" (425 k likes).

5.2. Harmful Audio-Visual Parodies

The use of Yellowface was salient in our data. We found videos in which white subjects were acting as Asian characters for the audience by exaggerating racial features that have been designated "Oriental," such as "'slanted' eyes, overbite, and mustard-yellow skin color" (Lee, 1999/2011, p. 2). For example, in one video a white man creates a three-part comedy skit using the audio "Big Bank" by American rapper YG, featuring American rapper and songwriter Cardi B (18.6 k likes). The first scene shows the man representing coronavirus as being dormant for decades by relaxing on a couch in a raincoat (whereby the raincoat is the signifier of coronavirus in this skit) and the on-screen text reads: "coronavirus: Chillin…for almost 60 years." In the second scene, this

white man is seen bowing with his hands in a prayer position—a form of Yellowface that intends to signify to the viewer that he is embodying "Asianness"—and then he pretends to eat a "bat" in form of a black sock, while the on-screen text reads: "Chinese people eating bats in 2020." The third and last scene cuts to a clip of him jumping out from behind a door in the raincoat again as the lyrics of the song go "uh oh! Back again" to represent that coronavirus stopped being dormant because of "Chinese" people eating bats. In this case, the Yellowface parody intersects with the "yellow peril" racist trope discussed above.

We also encountered various videos in which the sound was the key element used by TikTokers to embody "Asianness" and other racialized identities. Within the data, we found several instances of English speakers, most of them white, appropriating audios that parodied Spanish and Asian accents in English, and African-American vernacular English. For example, we found several videos that engaged with the viral aural meme "It's Corona Time" (2020). In this audio, a Spanish speaker—coded more specifically as a speaker from Mexico—is heard repeatedly saying "it's corona time" in English with a Spanish accent. Of note, Corona is a popular beer from Mexico. On its own, non-Spanish speakers engaging with this aural meme on TikTok could be considered what Hill calls "mock Spanish," which she defines as "a set of tactics that speakers of American English use to appropriate symbolic resources from Spanish" and which she theorizes as a form of covert racist discourse (Hill, 2008, p. 128). Examples of mock Spanish, according to Hill, are instances where non-Spanish speakers parody the Spanish accent in English or use Spanish words and sentences such as *hasta la vista* ("until we meet again") or *no problemo* ("no problem") to "create…a desirable colloquial persona that is informal and easy-going, with an all-important sense of humor and a hint" (Hill, 2008, p. 128). At the same time, Hill argues, mock Spanish "assigns Spanish and its speakers to a zone of foreignness and disorder, richly fleshed out with denigrating stereotypes" (Hill, 2008, p. 129), which is "invisible (or at least deniable) for Whites" (Hill, 2008, p. 155). For Hill, new forms of mock Spanish emerge from popular culture, and we argue that the "It's Corona Time" aural meme is an example of it. Mock Spanish is similar to Stoever's (2016) and Jackson's (2019) explanations of how white people learn that certain voices and accents, especially African-American vernacular English, sound "funny" and "cool," as we will describe in cases where white TikTokers used aural digital Blackface memes in videos about Covid-19.

What makes the "It's Corona Time" aural meme especially insidious during the coronavirus pandemic is that, as in other forms of mock Spanish, it "constructs a light, jocular, humorous stance" (Hill, 2008, p. 142), in this case, towards people of Asian descent. We found instances of the "It's Corona Time" aural meme being used in "yellow peril" audio-visual memes where people of Asian descent were being filmed without their knowledge in an airport, at the doctor's office, and at a university. The "joke" within all of these videos centers on the idea that being in proximity to Chinese and Asian people means that coronavirus is present. In these videos, mock Spanish (Hill, 2008) parodies and "yellow peril" intersected in the same memes. It would be a stretch to accuse the TikTok users that engaged with the "It's Corona Time" aural meme as intending racist denigration. However, the appropriation of non-English accents by English speakers to make a "joke" about Others—in this case people of Asian descent—taps into a "larger system of white racism and its discourses" (Hill, 2008, p. 157).

Another form of aural harmful parody that we observed is what we characterize as aural digital Yellowface. Aural digital Yellowface sees TikTok users utilizing the in-built creative tools and features of the platform to parody Asian accents in English and "Asian sounding words" within the context of coronavirus. For example, we found three videos by the same Asian creator whose content centers on over-exaggerating his "Asianness" by employing a stereotyped Asian talk (e.g., loud tonal dialogue that emphasizes broken English). Arguably, these videos are examples of "implicit yellowface" which "are subtle racist practices such as the use of denigrating humor to portray Asian characters" (Wong, 2020 p. 11; see also Ono & Pham, 2009). What is of note for this research is how other TikTok users—specifically non-Asian users—appropriated this Asian creator's voice by utilizing TikTok's "Use This Sound" feature. Following the digital traces of this Asian creator's audio, by clicking into this feature, we find a significant number of videos of people, often white teenagers and children, appropriating and lip-syncing to this sound in their video creations. Additionally, in some of these videos, we see the white subjects over-dramatizing their face to further embody the caricature that this "Asian sounding" expression represents. Aural digital Yellowface—combined with visual elements of Yellowface—could also be considered an example of "mock Asian," which Chun (2004, p. 263), building on Hill's (1998) work, describes as a "discourse that indexes a stereotypical Asian identity."

In our data, we also saw multiple videos engaging with "digital Blackvoice" (Connor, 2020) for humorous purposes. In one video, a white creator is shown lip-syncing to the popular aural meme of a Black woman's voice saying, "Can I live? Can I fucking live?" (2019). In this video, the white creator uses digital Blackvoice to make their "joke," which was set up using on-screen text that reads: "2020 is going to be my year. January 2020: WWIII, Coronavirus, and Kobe dies" (4 k likes). Similarly, in another video, we see a different white creator using the voice of American rapper Saweetie saying "something fun, something for the summertime," (2021) which is a popular internet reaction GIF. In this audio meme, the white creator refers to the 2019–2020 Australian bushfires by lip-syncing to this digital Blackvoice as the on-screen text reads: "The coronavirus debuting

in Australia while its [sic] been burning for 4 months" (5 k likes). Once again, we find that while the on-screen text appears to be communicating the crux of the joke, the digital Blackvoice is used in such a way that it, in fact, becomes the target of the joke—even if unintended by the creator.

We also observed within the data layers of humorous content that crossover digital Blackface and Sinophobia. For example, during the start of the pandemic, there was a viral meme of Cardi B talking about the pandemic in terms of receiving packages from China and singing out: "Guess what bitch? Haha, coronavirus!" (Cardi B, 2020). This clip of Cardi B became the *Coronavirus Remix* aural meme (Know Your Meme, 2020), wherein people lip-sync and dramatically respond to Cardi B's voice or splice the original video of Cardi B to make their joke about coronavirus. An example is a video that starts with a clip of a baby bat licking a hand and then the video cuts to the remix aural meme of Cardi B (368 k likes). Similarly, we found instances of digital Blackface intersecting with Sinophobia through videos that used footage of actor Idris Elba coughing while eating spicy wings on the popular YouTube series *Hot Ones* (Hot Ones, 2019). These videos employed the footage of Elba to express an overly emotional reaction and used on-screen text such as "mosquitoes when they bite a chinese [sic] n***" (22.5 k likes) and "when your [sic] out eating in china [sic] and you see the server start coughing" (173 k likes). The use of digital blackface in anti-Asian racist memes is a novel practice we observed on TikTok whose cultural significance could be explored in further research.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have drawn on Stoever's (2016, p. 27) work to examine TikTok as a "technology of the sonic color line" that, like other technological developments, develops and circulates "new acoustic sonic protocols of racialized sounding and listening." By examining different audio-visual memetic media that spread on TikTok during the early days of Covid-19, we have demonstrated how racial and ethnic groups are subjected to racist stereotyping through visual and sonic means on this platform. TikTok, due to its "Use This Sound" feature, facilitates "aural stereotyping" (Stoever, 2016, p. 20) or "linguistic profiling" (Baugh, 2003) like any other social media. As a result, sound on TikTok is a crucial element in enabling the perpetuation of racism on the platform. Our study also builds on the work of scholars that argue that racism online emerges in unique ways that deserve attention (Nakamura, 2002, 2008), especially since racism on social media is co-produced by user engagement and platforms' infrastructure, business practices, and governance (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Siapera, 2019).

We also have shown the importance of studying the audio components of memetic culture on social media and presented TikTok as a unique platform to explore the "sonic color line" (Stoever, 2016). Sounds, like images and written text, can reproduce racist systems (Hill, 2008; Stoever, 2016). The racializing impacts of sounds on social media deserve further scholarly attention. Our study adds to the literature that has explored how the racialization of Covid-19 played out online (Abidin & Zeng, 2020; Li & Chen, 2021), and shows how users on TikTok often engage in aural digital Blackface (see also Connor, 2020) and, during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, also engaged in aural digital Yellowface. Aural memes (Kaye et al., 2021) on TikTok such as the viral "It's Corona Time" (2020) are contemporary examples of what Hill (2008) has documented as "mock Spanish," a covert racist discourse that works to sustain a racial hierarchy in which whiteness is on top. By including some examples from Australian users in our analysis, we have also shown how global trends are appropriated in local contexts and demonstrated the importance of situating racializing practices on social media in specific national contexts with specific histories of race and racism.

Humor that punches down on historically marginalized groups causes psychological harm to those who are joked about and has a negative impact on these groups including a silencing effect, the denial of equal social status, and even violence (Ford et al., 2014; Thomae & Viki, 2013). Humorous expression linked to histories of violence and discrimination is particularly damaging since it contributes to broader social harms by reinscribing structural injustice in unequal societies where overt forms of abuse are less tolerated socially and by the law (Bell, 2021). In addition, the positionality of those involved in humor—both that of the jokester and the target of the joke—is important to assess when humor harms (Davis & Ilott, 2018; Pérez, 2017). As the history of Blackface and Yellowface tell us, an important element of the racist nature of these parodies was that white actors were the ones impersonating "Blackness" and "Asianness" in ways that reduced racial minorities to mere stereotypes. On TikTok, media celebrities, artists, and performers are not the only ones engaging with these harmful parodies; everyday people also engage in novel permutations of Yellowface and Blackface. It is precisely this everydayness of racist stereotyping, which is facilitated through TikTok's technical features and its lack of governance of humor that harms, which allows racial ideologies to be (re)produced. It is also because listening is a "historical and material practice, one both lived and artistically imagined" (Stoever, 2016, p. 14), that sonic stereotyping on TikTok spreads unchecked among users that have never been subjects of racialization. By engaging in audio-visual memetic media that reduced people of Asian descent as mere caricatures or portrayed them as a danger to others, TikTok users—mostly white people—willingly and unwillingly contributed to broader media racist discourses that dehumanized Chinese and Asian people during the pandemic (Mallapragada, 2021; Tan et al., 2021). These dehumanizing practices on TikTok,

in combination with entrenched historical racist animosity against people of Asian descent in countries such as the United States and Australia, created a breeding ground for physical attacks that took place against this racial minority during Covid-19. We are not claiming a direct causal link between racist stereotyping on TikTok and real-world violence. Rather, we argue that the harmful nature of humorous expression on social media needs to be determined in relation to power, history, and factoring broader systemic inequality as a background condition.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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