

Oegugin Influencers and pop nationalism through government campaigns: Regulating foreign-nationals in the South Korean YouTube ecology

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Abstract

In South Korea, it has become a growing trend for foreign Influencers to promote Korean cultures, especially through genres like *mukbang* (lives-streamed binge-eating), beauty vlogs (e.g. “A day in the life of”), reaction (e.g., K-pop and K-drama “reacts”). This is observed in popular cross-platform hashtag streams like “oegugin” [#외국인; “foreign-nationals”], and “oegugin-baneung” [#외국인반응; “foreigner reactions”]. While institutions frequently deploy Influencers as ambassadors, the popularity of *oegugin* Influencers—particularly those of White descent—is prominently observed in South Korea alongside the global popularity of K-culture. In response, this paper details the emergent interventions toward the development and regulation of the *oegugin* Influencer ecology, by reviewing the strategic choices of *oegugin* Influencers when they work with government ministries and companies, especially around nation branding campaigns and contents. Specifically, we consider how the discourse of nation branding and nationalism is being shaped, promoted, and advocated by *oegugin* Influencers in the form of popular culture, despite Korea's existing racial system, which can be contentious for its entanglements with online hate and xenophobia. Further, we focus on what we call “pop nationalism” as evidenced in the *oegugin* Influencers' nationalist

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contents, and discuss how racial boundaries are regulated in the (re)production and consumption of such contents.

KEYWORDS

governance, Influencer, nationalism, *oegugin*, race, South Korea, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

working together with the government... I did that a few times, and I don't really like it because they want to have too much grip on the content, it's literally promotional materials for them [...] when I go somewhere [...] there's good things to say, but sometimes also the lesser good things to say, and I don't want to—how do you say that—“filter” myself, just for the sake of earning money. Ironically, that also doesn't really help me with getting views, because Koreans feel uncomfortable with too much honesty [...] So yeah, I prefer not to work too often with the Korean government.

– anonymous *oegugin* YouTube Influencer from our interview

In South Korea (hereafter Korea), a popular genre on YouTube is “*oegugin*” content. This prominently features predominantly White-presenting, non-Korean Influencers who often adopt nationalist tones to endorse the excellence of Korean culture. While this is most prominent on YouTube, the genre is also prevalent across platforms like TikTok and Instagram, with contents often tagged into hashtag streams like #외국인, [#*oegugin*, “foreign-nationals”] and #외국인반응 [#*oegugin-baneung*, “foreigner reactions”]. Many of these YouTube channels and contents are often affiliated with and sponsored by Korean government institutions and private companies, including multichannel networks (MCN) companies. Influencers have been considered key actors in social media marketing, for instance, serving as brand ambassadors (Smith et al., 2018). But when they start to endorse national cultures and ethos, it is important to consider the roles and impact of these foreign-national Influencers on the host country.

While foreign-national or expat Influencers are common around the world, we focus specifically on *oegugin* Influencers in Korea as we situate the phenomenon alongside the historical institute of racial systems in the country and global popularity of K-cultures in the *hallyu*—Korean wave. In this paper, we explore the genre, map out the parameters, identify the key actors, interrogate some implicit cultural and racial norms, and interrogate issues of governance in the “*oegugin* YouTube Influencer ecology”—the landscape of YouTube comprising (predominantly White-presenting) foreign-nationals in Korea, who adopt usually celebratory discursive templates to promote Korean culture, constituted by a visual genre that emphasizes the exoticism of otherwise everyday Korean experiences, that inadvertently become instruments of popular nationalism. How do *oegugin* YouTube-Influencers in Korea trigger and contribute to discourse on the need for Influencer governance, in relation to social systems like race and ethnicity, and in relation to contexts like globalization? What further systems of governance and regulation should be considered for the betterment of the Influencer industry in Korea at large?

We consider how the discourse of nation branding and nationalism is being shaped, promoted, and advocated by *oegugin* Influencers within Korea's ethnocentric race system.

A strong sense of racial and ethnic homogeneity in Korean society has formulated a unique ethnocentric race system (Shin, 2006), which often yields xenophobic hate against foreigners (S. Park et al., 2021). We first unpack this peculiarity within the contexts of the YouTube ecology and social media cultures in Korea, then draw on our empirical research to explain the opportunities and struggles of *oegugin* YouTubers. These are in turn contingent upon the need, themes, and practices of Korea's nation branding campaigns, in favor of certain images of Korea and *oegugins*. By doing so, we show how racial boundaries are regulated in the emergence and development of new cultural formats and genres of the Influencer culture and industry.

EMERGING POP NATIONALISM AND ETHNIC NATIONALISM IN KOREAN SOCIAL MEDIA CULTURES

This section provides two contextual concepts that set up the extended examinations of the landscape of the *oegugin* Influencer ecology in Korea: pop nationalism and ethnic nationalism. By doing so, we map out how the Influencer ecology is now a newly marketized and weaponized place for nationalism and a brimming marketplace for social media cultures.

In the era of global capitalism, nationalism has been integrated within consumer culture and repacked as “nation branding” by public and private sectors, often in partnership (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011, 2016). As a “compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms” (Kaneva, 2011, p. 118), nation branding has been widely practiced in the contemporary media landscape. In various media forms—for example, news, films, media figures, and social media contents—symbolic images of nation-states are constructed and reproduced as consumable brands both by governments and industries (Kaneva, 2011; Pamment & Cassinger, 2018). For instance, by using Influencers, the Chinese government spreads a nationalist story of successfully handling the COVID-19 pandemic on social media (Schneider, 2021). The Australian film industry often works with the government and promotes tourism, circulating Australia's brands around indigenous nostalgia (Carah & Louw, 2016).

Within this context, media industries create a niche market by integrating national brands in pop cultures. Influencers collate national brands, imaginary nation identities, and their own interests, and reproduce nationalism through the creative use of memes and social media posts (for instance, see Lewis, 2018 for far-right Influencers; see Schneider, 2021 for a Chinese case; see White, 2017 for an example in tourism). Social media users also participate in the amplification of nationalism for entertainment by consuming, sharing, and spreading such pop culture artifacts on national brands produced by the Influencers (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Schneider, 2021). This junction of nation branding and pop culture is frequently observed in the rising Korean pop culture. Several scholars in Korean Studies—and Japanese Studies as well—have developed the concept of “pop nationalism” as a part of nation branding to describe this coalescence. It refers to a cultural phenomenon in which people identify themselves with the nation's soft power through the consumption of pop culture, such as K-pop and Japanese anime (Joo, 2011; Martin, 2020; Sakamoto, 2008). In the case of Korean society, K-pop's global popularity is highly celebrated, through which a national brand is reconstructed and propagated (Joo, 2011). When Korea's national brand is commodified as such, particularly through cultural artifacts of so-called K-culture, the selling of nationalism is usually operationalized through a form of racial governance, mirroring Korea's postcolonial histories and racial-ethnic system.

Korea's colonial history and the resultant racial-ethnic system are encapsulated in its unique ethnocentric nationalism, which has been a key driver in the construction and

mobilization of Korean society since the 19th century. Against Japanese imperialism, Korean independence activists developed Korean ethnic nationalism, to advocate for the Korean Peninsula's independence from Japan (Shin, 2006). Korean ethnic nationalism emphasizes the same bloodline of *hanminjok* [한민족, meaning “Han ethnicity” but simultaneously read as “one ethnicity” in Korean], uniquely different from Chinese and Japanese (Schmid, 2002; Shin, 2006). The conflation of race, ethnicity, and nation in Korean ethnic nationalism builds a particular imagination of “Koreanness”—the identity organized around the imaginary “sameness” in terms of physical appearance (race, ethnicity), language, accent, and cultural norms (Shin, 2006).

Notably, the White American hegemony is a crucial element in building Korean ethnic nationalism in relation to Korea's postcolonial history with the United States (Shin, 2006; Yoo, 1997). According to Korean historians, Korean identity has been built upon ongoing inner-conflicts between the postcolonial desire for Whiteness and their position as colonized Asians under Japanese colonialism (Ha, 2012; Yoo, 1997). By closely identifying with White Americans—the “saviors” who liberated Korea from “cruel” Japanese imperialism and “protected” it from communism (Rhee, 2020, p. 91)—Korean identity could be resurrected as the ethnicity with agency and independence. Historian Sunyung Yoo (1997) terms this unique Korean identity-building as “yellow colony identity” [황색식민지 정체성, *hwangsaek sikminji jungchesung*]. It is the ongoing process of reciting and reproducing Korea's racial-ethnic system that places the Korean ethnicity below Anglo-Saxon Whiteness, but above the People of Color “Others” by adopting the White lens (Ha, 2012; Shin, 2006; Yoo, 1997).

Within this context, the Korean media industry has pivoted on “racial capitalism” (Robinson, 2020), privileging both White American hegemony and Korean ethnocentric discourses, and simultaneously racializing non-Koreans as “the Other” for capitalist exploitation. As a system that “driv[es] social or economic value from the racial identity of another person” (Leong, 2013, p. 2153), racial capitalism in media reinforces existing racial inequalities by normalizing the dominant [usually White] but racializing, excluding, stereotyping, and commodifying the marginalized [People of Color] (Gray, 1995, 2013). If racial capitalism in the United States has been practiced against Blacks to a great extent due to the history of chattel slavery (Leong, 2013; Ralph & Singhal, 2019; Robinson, 2020), racial capitalism in Korean media has developed within the homogeneous racial-ethnic system in a manner of racializing non-Koreans—both Whites and People of Color—as *oegugins*, but deriving different social and economic values from their racial and ethnic labels.

Albeit predominantly homogeneous, the Korean media have often employed *oegugins* to highlight the country's diverse and cosmopolitan images—for example, Korean American members in idol bands, multicultural families from Southeast Asia in reality shows, and the celebritydom and star-making of White-mixed Koreans (Ahn, 2018). In particular, a “visually attractive White trope who loves Korea” has been popularly created in TV shows as it is believed to guarantee high ratings of the shows by speaking to postcolonial desire for Whiteness internalized within Koreans—the desire for White beauty and White validation (Ahn, 2015). In contrast, People of Color are usually exploited in the manufacturing and agricultural industries mostly for their physical labor (H. Yoon, 2021). As their “darkness” is not a desirable quality in the Korean racial-ethnic system, People of Color appear in media snippets for some diversity and multiculturalism (Ahn, 2018; S. Park et al., 2021). Pop nationalism exponentially increases upon the basis of such workings of racial capitalism in the media, creating a niche for competitive foreign-nationals or “*oegugin*” content in the media market. This is evident in the launch of popular TV shows featuring (White) *oegugins* such as *Welcome, First Time in Korea* (MBC Every1, 2017—present), *Non-summit* (JTBC, 2014–2017), and *South Korean Foreigners* (MBC Every1, 2018—present) (Ahn, 2018; S. H. Lee & Han, 2019).

Social media are not an exception here. Images of Whiteness in Korea are rampant on social media, including in online advertisements and on YouTube channels. A few prominent celebrities in Korea are White *oegugins* who first rose to fame as *oegugin* Influencers, establishing a new YouTube genre and a new form of pop nationalism where Korean cultures are endorsed through the voice of non-Koreans. The YouTube channel Korean Englishman is one of the prominent figures in this *oegugin* genre. White British men Josh and Ollie achieved great success for their famous “*oegugin Korean mukbang*” [외국인 한국 먹방, foreigners' binge-eating Korean food] with their British friends. As their series of videos generate popularity, recording 4.8 million subscribers as of May 2022, this became one of the most popular content formats in the *oegugin* YouTube genre, inspiring other *oegugin* aspirants YouTubers to follow suit. While the *oegugin* Influencer ecology expands as such, carving out a niche of pop nationalism, non-White foreign-nationals remain relatively invisible, which reinforces racial capitalism as a technique of the governance.

Against this backdrop, our research examines how the broader ecology of the *oegugin* Influencers is shaped and governed as a site of pop nationalism, working under Korea's unique racial-ethnic system. By discussing opportunities and pitfalls the *oegugin* Influencers navigate in the production of pop nationalism, we discuss how racial boundaries are regulated in the emerging culture and industry that closely work with nation branding.

METHODOLOGY

To understand racial dynamics and nationalism in the *oegugin* Influencer ecology in Korea, we adopted multi-methodologies and collected different sets of data. We first examined the overview of the Influencer industry and culture in Korea by archiving news articles about *oegugin* images in pop media cultures, the Influencer industry and the Korean government's social media content featuring *oegugins*, and the government reports about the social media regulations and policies. We mapped out how the so-called “*oegugin* Influencer industry” has developed as one of the key areas of the Korean Influencer industry, what issues have emerged in relation to increasing *oegugin* Influencers in Korea, what regulations have been developed or not been discussed yet, and how the industry and the government have responded to such issues and regulations in their use of *oegugin* images on social media.

Then we conducted a critical observation of controversies and issues around *oegugin* YouTubers, with an ethnographic spirit aiming to understand the relational and the contextual aspects of culture based on a longitudinal observation within the field (see Pink et al., 2018). We selected key controversies and issues in which *oegugin* YouTubers were embroiled in 2020–2021, and wrote up fieldnotes from our content analysis of relevant social media contents. We critically engaged with the interactions between their channel contents and the responses they received (e.g., likes, views, and comments). We situated the controversies and issues within particular socioeconomic and cultural contexts of Korean society and Korean Influencer industry to understand how tensions, interests, and needs of various actors intersect in the industry.

Lastly, we conducted personal interviews with 18 *oegugin* YouTubers from various racial and national backgrounds (see Tables 1 and 2).

TABLE 1 Interviewees by race

White	Black	Asians	Biracial
9	2	6	1

TABLE 2 Interviewees by region

Euro-Anglo region: US, Western Europe, Australia	Asia region: East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia	Africa region
9	4	3

In the interviews, we asked three broad questions about what types of content about Korea they produce on YouTube, how they situate themselves in the Korean Influencer culture and in Korean society in general as *oegugins*, and what drives them to continue or discontinue their YouTube careers in Korea. The informants' answers helped us understand not only their experiences and pitfalls of being *oegugin* YouTubers in Korea, but also the landscape of the *oegugin* Influencer business that they were part of, including the behind scenes of how *oegugin* Influencers would be utilized for nation branding campaigns and what kind of arrangements would be made in the business. All interviews were conducted in English, lasted around 40 min, and recorded for transcription and analysis. Interviewees gave informed consent as stipulated by University ethics guidelines. Additionally, our analysis is also informed by one of the biggest MCN channels in Korea, Sandbox, and a prominent Influencer talent agency that operates in ten country markets including Korea, Gushcloud.

Our analysis was focused on three points: what messages are highlighted in the *oegugin* YouTube content; who plays a role in the shaping and working of the *oegugin* YouTube ecology; and what socio-cultural implications are embedded in the consumption and reproduction of the *oegugin* YouTube content. After we sorted our data corpus by patterns and themes, we situated it within the context of racial capitalism, pop nationalism, and the Korean racial-ethnic system, to discuss how the *oegugin* Influencer ecology is governed and operates and what socio-cultural issues are yielded from such governance.

OEGUGIN INFLUENCERS ON SOUTH KOREAN YOUTUBE

This section begins with our mapping of the *oegugin* YouTube Influencer industry in Korea, identifying the parameters of the landscape and key actors in the scene. We then continue to consider three of these key actors in turn—the government, the industry, the audience—to explore the status quo of formal and informal regulation in the industry.

The ecology: Key actors in *oegugin* YouTube Influencer industry

Oegugin YouTube content became noticeable in the Korean social media scene around the mid-2010s, alongside the increasing global visibility of Korean media cultures at large. A few foreign-nationals in Korea launched their YouTube channels and became “unofficial” cultural ambassadors through their consistent sharing of cultural information on Korea and their country of origin. YouTubers like Josh and Ollie from Korean Englishman (launched in August 2013), and Dave from World of Dave (launched in September 2013) are among the pioneers in this *oegugin* genre. Over the years, this genre grew popular with the inflow of foreign-nationals in the country and on YouTube—either through their own YouTube channels or channels run by MCN companies. This was in response to the growing demands for Korean cultures from K-pop fans abroad, as evidenced in the burgeoning content of vlogging in Korea under the hashtag streams like #Korea, #Seoultravel, and so on.

While the topics and themes vary from daily lifestyle vlogging to *mukbang* to K-beauty, many *oegugin* YouTube videos are popular among both global and domestic audiences, selling viewers on a new brand of Korea—“Korean cool” (Hong, 2014). “Korean cool” is established as cultural discourses and practices, in which certain images conveyed through the globally popular streams of Korean culture (e.g., K-pop, K-drama, and K-cinema) are coded into a new cultural norm of “being cool” (Hong, 2014). The polished images of K-pop stars and contents have contributed to the rise of “Korean cool,” which is now the brand identity of Korea (Epstein, 2014; Hong, 2014) and is sold as commodities for consumption (K. Yoon, 2017). *Oegugins*' YouTube vlogs constituted a significant portion of this practice by signaling Korean cool in their contents. On visual social media, “digital Korean cool” is usually operationalized through the display of prospective tourist spots like fancy cafes, backdrops of K-pop videos, and locations where K-dramas were filmed around Korea; these are targeted at non-Korean audiences to stimulate feelings of vicarious satisfaction, to meet the growing fantasy for K-pop, K-drama, and Korean experiences. Such sentiments of envy are often sighted in the comments sections of *oegugin* vlogs, such as this in Pakistani YouTuber Majid Mushtaq's video titled “Visiting BTS PopUp Store” in Seoul:

I wish I could also visit Korea 😊😊 and meet BTS once in my life. Majid mushtaq you are so lucky ♥️👍♥️👍♥️👍 (Majid Mushtaq, 2020)

In our interview, Majid Mushtaq says that his contents on K-pop and traveling in Korea were intended to provide helpful information and positive impressions about Korea to his Pakistani audiences, who are keen to know about Korea, K-pop, and K-dramas—he targets this local audience by intention, explaining that many Pakistani citizens are forbidden by the government to travel abroad due to security reasons. As such, *oegugin* YouTubers' Korean contents that target non-Korean audiences are particularly useful and entertaining as a new window to learn about Korean culture, which is all the more so valuable in the wake of the pandemic where travel and global mobility is highly restricted. As people of various nationalities who are interested in Korean culture gather at *oegugin* YouTube channels and contents in this manner, the *oegugin* genre functions as a conduit of intercultural knowledge, with *oegugins* themselves acting as both “nodes” at which interested parties cluster and “mediators” of the values and norms propagated through digital Korean content.

Yet, despite its rapid expansion, the *oegugin* Influencer ecology is one of the most unregulated areas in the broader Influencer scene in Korea. The main focus of the regulatory governance in the Korean Influencer industry and culture has been mostly on the commercial aspect rather than on socio-cultural issues. The Korean government has established and revised a series of acts and guidelines to regulate the commercialized Influencer industry, monitor its economic transparency, and to ensure consumers-as-users' rights (cf. J. Lee & Abidin, 2021). While decade-long efforts to make the Influencer and social media industry transparent has only recently come to some fruition, other socio-cultural aspects of the Influencer industry are still in development, or at times even yet to be discussed, leaving errant audience feedback (e.g., troll armies, hate campaigns) to keep Influencers in check (J. Lee & Abidin, 2021).

In our study of the government archives, we found that in response to rampant violence and hate in the Influencer scene, the Korean media regulation agency known as the Korea Communications Commission had published “A Guideline to protect internet users and ensure co-existence of content creators and online platforms” in February 2021. Yet, the Guideline states only basic principles for stakeholders in the industry to abide by: for example, that it is the industry's responsibility to protect Influencers from discrimination and to ensure their rights in production and circulation of content, and monetization; and that it is the Influencers' responsibility to provide high-quality content and not to infringe on others'

intellectual property rights (KCC, 2021). Further, as the Guideline is not mandatory, issues of online harassment against social minorities, including *oegugins*, are still outside the scope of this emergent instrument of governance.

A few big MCN channels in Korea, such as Sandbox and DIA TV, and local platforms like Afreeca TV have their own policies to protect their talents from online violence (H. Kim, 2016). According to our interviews with staff members at Sandbox, the company endeavors to ensure their talents' well-being on social media. They keep their talents updated with the government's policies and guidelines, and provide them with "care packages," inclusive of free legal services against online harassment, psychiatric consultations, and monitoring online comments on behalf of the Influencers. While useful to some extent, informants from our long-term digital ethnography on Korean Influencer culture reveal the sentiment that these protective measures are only offered by a handful of the big MCN companies or for mega-Influencers who are contracted with the companies. Influencers who work independently or work under small-sized MCN companies are rarely as well protected, but instead exposed to unruly online behaviors and circumstances (Yoo et al., 2018).

The most notable example would be the nationwide "canceling" of Ghanaian TV personality Sam Okyere. He is one of the few *oegugin* media figures with dark features, and who rose to fame for his fluent Korean, easygoing and fun personality, and frequent appearances on several TV shows. Despite his relatively well-established career in the media industry since 2014, he encountered public backlash in 2020 after uploading an Instagram post to criticize a photograph featuring a group of Korean teenagers who wore blackface as racist and offensive (S. Park et al., 2021). In the massive racist onslaught against him in his YouTube and Instagram comment sections, Okyere was criticized for "crossing the lines," and even for "correcting his masters [Koreans] after we [Koreans] saved him from a poor uncivilized country." Although his agency announced in August 2020 that they would seek legal redress against online trolls (J. Kim, 2020), he has not yet returned to the TV show circuit that he used to frequent, and even continues to receive racist harassment online. Without any legal measures and policies to ensure cultural diversity and protect Influencers on social media, it is almost impossible to prevent another Okyere case from happening. Instead, the well-being of *oegugin* Influencers' is still precariously reliant on the expectation of the goodwill of multiple stakeholders like the industry, users, and the Influencer themselves.

In this opening section, we have mapped out the key actors of the *oegugin* YouTube industry in South Korea—the *oegugin* themselves who are at once nodes and mediators of Korean cultures through visual social media; their domestic Korean and overseas followers who maintain the appetite for such contents; the bad faith actors who troll and harass *oegugin* influencers through casual and coordinated attacks; the MCNs who broker talents and implement various guidelines to "soft" regulate the industry; and the government and its various ministries that are just beginning to institute some form of governance. We now proceed to detailing the operations and tensions of how *oegugin*-government partnerships work.

The government: Power imbalances and tensions in government campaigns

Oegugin YouTube contents that celebrate Korean cultures are an effective and popular window for national publicity. Many government bodies utilize *oegugin* Influencers for their persuasive power, to promote tourism and enhance cultural knowledge about Korea. The Korean government's strategic approach to *oegugin* Influencers is epitomized in its newly launched project, "K-influencer Academy," sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and

Tourism, and run by its subsidiary Korean Culture and Information Service. The annual project was first launched in May 2020 and aims to cultivate cohorts of *oegugin* Influencers, formally branded as “K-influencers,” who can specialize in promoting Korean culture to overseas audiences. Contents are usually disseminated through the Ministry's official YouTube channels (i.e., Koreanet, Korea in the World, K-influencer Academy, and Modern Korea). Program participation is voluntary, as the K-influencers are not paid for their work and do not pay for their participation in lectures and mentorship opportunities offered (K-influencer Academy Office, 2021). In 2021, the K-influencer cohort featured 1224 people from 76 countries (Koreanet, 2021).

The Academy is designed to benefit both the Korean government and the K-influencers abroad. By participating in the K-influencer academy, the K-influencers hone their media skills from the programs and procure a wider range of audiences when their YouTube channels are introduced via the Koreanet YouTube channel. By encouraging K-influencers from different countries to talk about Korean cultures—but mostly on popular topics like K-pop, K-beauty, K-food—in their own languages, the Korean government outsources its nation branding campaign for free and in a localized manner. Similar smaller scale initiatives have been planned and launched by many local governments, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, tapping on the allure of *oegugin* YouTube influencers and their overseas audiences to revitalize local economies (J. Park, 2022). Yet, the government bodies' various nation branding campaigns featuring *oegugin* Influencers bear issues like racial capitalism and self-orientalism via pop nationalism. According to one of our *oegugin* interviewees, the government tries to “balance the racial and ethnic representation” in the campaigns, especially in the projects like K-influencers, by diversifying the pool of *oegugins* in its partnership with them. Nevertheless, during our observation, we notice that the local governments and small government bodies heavily and habitually rely on the “visually attractive White trope who loves Korea” by frequently working with *oegugin* YouTubers with White features who focus on the “Korean cool” aspects. While this convention may be effective at captivating global audiences' attention, it eventually reinforces the exoticization and orientalizing of Korean cultures through White perspectives, with other aspects of Korean culture being absent in nation branding.

Despite the government-wide demands for *oegugin* Influencers across the country, our interview data reveal that they often feel unrewarded and do not have the right to claim copyright on their own contents. Many of our informants detail that their engagement in the local government projects is at times compensated in the form of small honoraria through gift cards and local souvenirs, or in the form of the all-expenses-paid travel packages that facilitate their filming. The *oegugin* Influencers also report that sometimes their contents do not gain many views due to “take down” notices or algorithmic suppression by YouTube. This is both surprising and frustrating for the seasoned Influencers who are well versed with optimizing their visibility on YouTube, as their campaign videos have been known to be published by the government channels without any consultation or final confirmation. The *oegugin* Influencers express that the authorial stance adopted by the government campaign staff seem to deny the former's industry-specific expertise.

There are also more long-standing repercussions arising from these faux pas. Some *oegugin* Influencers in our study lament that their channels have been automatically considered “spam” or deranked by the YouTube algorithms due to the government campaign videos, which directly jeopardizes their income on the platform. For instance, informant Agata from Lithuania runs the YouTube channel Gyu & Agata to showcase various tourist spots in Korea and her life in Korea, and introduce Lithuanian cultures; reflecting on her experience of participating in Korean government projects, she tells us:

If someone uploads exactly the same video of exactly the same title, the same description, it causes copyright issues for both [parties] from the channels—your own channel and the government's channel [...] YouTube algorithm is not going to show us the videos in a search [...] it will be considered spam because it's not [the only copy of the] original content [...] So the algorithm considers us as spam [...] Then my next videos aren't likely to be recommended because nobody [was] interested in my previous video.

Agata also reports that it is difficult to manage the expectations of the government campaigns while upholding her vernacular knowledge of Influencer work on YouTube. She has also received some pushback from the campaign managers who insist that they “actually [have] the right to use the content” in whatever manner they wish, as they had sponsored the travel activities that formed the basis of the videos.

Another *oegugin* YouTuber who wants to remain anonymous also similarly criticizes the carelessness of nation branding campaigns that partner YouTube contents with TV programmes:

They [governments and companies] can just suddenly copyright your video without discussing, or they can cut out parts of other videos and then use it in their TV program without asking. We [can] either get sued or our channel gets blocked, or your video gets blocked from YouTube. Then the punishment is so harsh, but they are very big organizations. They have a lot of money, and they do whatever sometimes, without fearing any consequences, and a few times I got really pissed. I really care about the relationship, especially with having a relationship with a TV program, but if they just suddenly copy my video and put it on their channel without asking, I feel offended. This is not how we do things.

Among our informant pool, *oegugin* YouTube Influencers who aspire to be accepted into K-influencer campaigns often convert the perceived boost to their reputation, and strive hard to be noticed by campaign managers. This sentiment is not always only financially-motivated, but can often be rooted in meaningful social causes. For instance, one of our informants is Walter Lee, who runs the YouTube channel KozzieTV, is a Korean-born man who was adopted to Australia as a child. Upon returning to Korea in his 20s to learn more about the culture, he ended up launching his channel to help Koreans—including migrants, diaspora, and international visitors—to adapt to life in Australia. His motivations to promote bilateral ties and cultural knowledge in both countries is enriched by his liminal status of being perceived as both a local and an *oegugin* by various audiences. He tells us that “the whole reason to do this channel was to work with the Korean and Australian governments,” to expand his desire to explore and promote both facets of his national and cultural identities. In this niche role, Walter has been invited to various bilateral events and campaigns, such as emceeing the Melbourne Korean Festival in 2019.

Yet, the accounts from Agata and our anonymous informant above reveal that the reality of the job tends to deny their expertise of how platform algorithmic preferences and content regulation actually work. When conflicts occur because of poor communication pathways or because the labor of *oegugin* Influencers are undervalued (Duffy, 2017), the recuperative and reparative work in which they have to undertake constitutes a loss of resources, time, and potential income. Yet, the informants in our study lament their preference for choosing to remain silent—and indeed even remaining anonymous, as in the account above—in order not to appear “difficult” to work with.

As more government bodies and agencies execute plans to collaborate with *oegugin* Influencers for nation branding, there appears to be an urgent need for the voices and

expertise of the latter to be heard, respected, and implemented. While we speak of “regulating” and “governing” the industry to keep errant Influencers in check, it is also pertinent to introduce a governance structure that protects the working and moral rights of Influencers, especially considering the power imbalance when their clients are also government ministries. In the absence of this, *oegugin* YouTube Influencers have themselves embarked on mutual peer policing, as we will consider in the next section.

The industry: Self-policing as social regulation

The *oegugin* YouTube ecology became a locus where foreign-nationals can navigate alternate career pathways and income streams. Despite the pitfalls of being improperly compensated in some official government campaigns (as detailed above), many of our informants reveal that fashioning themselves as *oegugin* Influencers provides opportunities to expand beyond the restricted list of economic activities stipulated by the conditions of their visa. This is the case as the status of their earnings through the often informally negotiated brand partnerships and platform pay-outs still remain as “gray income” (cf. Li, 2007) that often falls outside of government supervision.

To accumulate such opportunities, many *oegugin* Influencers must strive to expand their national presence, which is increasingly being offered by appearances on the mainstream TV circuit. As evidenced through the *oegugin* genre of TV shows we mentioned earlier, being an *oegugin* Influencer affords opportunities for foreign-nationals to become celebrities. Such success is most notable in the example of Josh from the YouTube channel Korean Englishman, whose YouTube fame facilitated his crossover to becoming a national TV personality.

This pathway is also reflected in our digital ethnography of and personal interview with Dutch YouTuber Bart from the channel iGoBart. His YouTube demonstrates a strong interest in Korean-Dutch cross-cultural exchanges especially pertaining to war veterans and history, as well as a focus on North Korean cultures and insights. As his video series on North Korea became viral, Korean broadcasting companies contacted him for short interviews, news, and even TV programs, which further helped him “put [him]self and the channel on the map for a short time” as he says in the interview. As such, many foreign-nationals adopt the already-established *oegugin* YouTube genre practices and produce pop nationalism in the hopes that they can generate income and pursue careers in the mainstream entertainment industry, by actively responding to the demands for Korean culture via market imperatives.

However, some *oegugin* YouTubers are critical about the *oegugin* YouTuber genre that has fostered around pop nationalism, including *gukbbong* [국뽕] sentiments. *Gukbbong* is an online portmanteau, from *gukga* [국가, “nation-state”] and *bbong* [뽕, slang for methamphetamine, usually meaning “addiction” or “addictive content”], referring to new patriotism or such media content (Y. Lee, 2021). *Gukbbong* culture originally started in online communities as a satire criticizing local journalists' nationalist convention of inquiring global celebrities about “boring” questions about Korea (e.g., “do you know Kimchi?” “do you know PSY?”) and acquiring validation about the country and culture (Choi, 2018; Y. Lee, 2021). The sarcasm in the *gukbbong* discourse has developed an online vernacular culture where people find nationalist pleasure from voluntarily consuming the *gukbbong* discourse and content, and identify themselves with the nation identity, while making fun of such patriotic culture in a self-deprecating manner (Y. Lee, 2021). In response to the growing popularity, the *oegugin* Influencer ecology became the center of the *gukbbong* vernacular as many *oegugin* YouTubers reproduce the sentiments in their contents of celebrating Korean food, K-pop, and K-beauty, tapping into burgeoning pop nationalism.

To demonstrate, we introduce one of our informants, British YouTuber Dan from the channel Dan & Joel; the duo use short documentary style to showcase the various aspects of Korean society that are not usually captured in the global image of Korean cool, such as the homeless elderly who live in the street. In our interview, Dan criticizes the increasing prevalence of *gukbbong* contents and practices in the *oegugin* YouTube scene:

Sometimes when you're trying to talk about a positive [aspect of Korea]... the way you contextualize that is by making a negative [statement] about the country that you're from. [...] Let's say *gamja jorim* [감자조림, Korean side dish of stewed potato]. If that is tasty, it doesn't mean that British mashed potato is not tasty [...] And you don't have to do this [make a comparison]. And I think that's personally where it feels like more [a] disingenuous kind of *gukbbong*, like "Oh wow Korea is amazing." But in order for Korea to be amazing, my country has to be "bad"—it's an unhelpful comparison sometimes.

Dan goes on to recount a popular instance where *oegugin* YouTube influencers who were vlogging about Korean food would avoid mentioning spicy food from other countries, as it was perceived that this was a uniquely Korean phenomenon. He underscores his reflexivity around these self-presentation tensions with the exasperation: "and it's like, you don't want to say stuff that's not true, you know?"

As *gukbbong*-related content often entails the promotion of such binary views around "good Korea(ns)" and "bad Others," some *oegugin* YouTubers in our study criticized this "*oegugin* convention" of flattening the otherwise multifaceted dimensions of different cultures. Yet, because of the popularity and strong presence of pop nationalism in the *oegugin* YouTube scene, *oegugin* YouTubers are often pushed to self-mediate and negotiate a balance between their own interests and the endorsed nationalist discourse in portraying Korea.

The Dan & Joel channel seem to have found a creative strategy, by utilizing popular *oegugin* YouTuber templates like "*oegugin* Korean *mukbang*" to carry more socially significant messages. For instance, in some of their videos, they draw on the *mukbang* genre by sharing a meal with social minorities in Korea, such as a homeless person, an elderly cardboard collector, and a feminist tattooist. Similarly, Bart from iGoBart also intersperses his personal interest in Korean history with the popular *oegugin* genre of nature vlogging (where he details his bicycle tours in the Korean countryside) and romantic dating (where he talks about his personal life with his Korean wife).

In the face of institutional and client pressures to portray overtly positive and nationalistic images of Korea, some *oegugin* Influencers have carved out spaces to disseminate what they feel is more sincere content in line with their personal interests. They draw from a blend of YouTube genres, carefully curating a balance between satisfying audience demand for typical "K-influencer" nation branding contents with their own sincere vantage points about Korean society, to present hybrids that they hope would maintain both commercial and intellectual appeal. These self-reflexive negotiations are important compensatory strategies for *oegugin* Influencers to resist the phenomenon of *gukbbong*, while remaining legible in the competitive K-branding market. However, focusing on these "success" stories alone belies the fact that Influencers are ultimately at the mercy of their followers, whose interest and affection have the power to sustain their social relevance and commercial potential. It is at this juncture that we turn to the final key actor, to survey one of the major pitfalls of the *oegugin* YouTube Influencer ecology—online racism.

The audience: The selective pitfalls of online racism

As established earlier in the paper, the *oegugin* YouTube ecology has been shaped in line with Korean ethnic nationalism and pop nationalism in reflection of the different needs and interests of multiple actors. However, its grassroots governance operates most prominently via the feedback of followers on social media, and is often clouded in the discourse of online trolling and hate.

Volcic and Andrejevic (2011) posit that nation branding is a “technique of governance” that leads social actors to voluntarily participate in the nation branding process and practice and cultivate selfhood from the imaginary “brand community” of nation in the name of the homeland's economic development. On social media, such governmentality operates not just through economic principles but also through the language and grammar of pop culture, by alluring social actors to monitor each other's cultural practices to produce “social desirability” in the name of fun and entertainment (Albrechtslund, 2008). Since the attributes of “social desirability” are defined by ethnocentric racial capitalism and pop nationalism in the *oegugin* YouTube ecology, those who do not conform to such implicit values are regulated by other social actors through informal but popular discursive mechanisms such as online hate. When *oegugin* images are commodified only in a manner of signifying the cosmopolitan brand image of Korea, racial capitalism yields xenophobic and racial harassment the less desirable and nonconfirming *oegugin* YouTube Influencers who are People of Color.

The privilege of Whiteness is underscored by one of our Canadian informants, Camille Blais, who runs her eponymous YouTube channel while working in the PR industry in Korea. She explains:

I haven't experienced a ton of xenophobia personally. But that also comes with, like, the reality of being... the “model minority” is not the right word. But out of all foreign people, White people do have a special privilege, so that has to do a lot with I think the way that I am experiencing living in Seoul. And I acknowledge that, so I don't think that these things [experiences of racism and online hate] don't happen to other people. I think they absolutely do, and I support other creators who talk about it, because it needs to be shared. But I don't feel comfortable talking about certain elements of xenophobia, I haven't experienced them, because I don't think I can have a fully formed opinion on them.

White-mixed Korean American Becky, who works as a model in Korea, launched The Halfie Project on YouTube in 2019 to talk about the racialized lives of mixed-race Koreans (The Halfie Project, n.d.). The Halfie Project channel and Becky's mixed identity created a rupture in the *oegugin* YouTube ecology by criticizing the system that grants visibility, acceptance, and rewards only to White-mixed Koreans. In the interview, Becky shares why she started her journey and how she would like to position herself as a White-mixed Korean YouTuber.

When I think about Koreans, I think that is very easy to put the 혼혈 [*honhyul*, “mixed-race”] identity into a box. You know, “they look like this,” “they think like this,” “they're not that.” And I don't think that's true [...] So I was trying to [consider], how can we create this feeling of familiarity and understanding? It's just 다르게 사는 한국인 [*dareuge saneun hangugin*, “Koreans who live differently”], right? That's the kind of the way I wanted it to be shown, not like these foreigners who are “trying” to be Korean. They are just Koreans who are living in a different way.

Becky's critical stance against Korean ethnocentric nationalism is apparent in her YouTube content, which strategically highlights her nonconforming "foreignness" to appeal to the dominant discourse of pop nationalism and postcolonial desire with which many Korean audiences seek. This is not without risks—Becky's strategic posturing has evoked xenophobic online hate among Korean viewers, which she encountered after releasing two videos of *oegugin* single moms who are raising their mixed-Korean children in Korea. She says in the interview that her goal of the videos was to provide the space for a meaningful discussion on the Korean government's limited support and policies for mixed Koreans. However, by raising this oversight by the government, Becky and her *oegugin* persona was perceived to be "threatening," and troubled some Korean audiences who appeared to be uncritically consuming pop nationalism for entertainment and self-validation. Consequently, Becky and the *oegugin* single moms received online backlash in the form of racial hate and trolling, and their personal information and social media accounts were doxed:

We received so many hate comments. We had xenophobia, we had people telling them "if you hate Korea so much, leave!". We also have people who are saying like, "you guys are so...like, sluts or prostitutes. That's why you can't keep a man." It was very sexist. It was very racist. It was just really classist against single moms.

As the hate attacks grew significantly, Becky states in the interview that she felt sorry for failing to protect the *oegugin* single moms from racist online hate, and decided to remove the videos from public view. As of May 2022, she has taken down other videos that similarly showcase herself and other *oegugins* criticizing Korea's lack of support and understanding toward mixed-Koreans. She has also since slightly altered the channel's theme to the general discussion of race, rather than focusing on specific cases of mixed Koreans and their struggles in Korea.

Our East Asian *oegugin* informants are also reflexive about the nuances of colorism tangled with the privileges on offer to them. One example is Will Ly, an Asian American from Colorado of Hmong descent, who launched his eponymous channel when he moved to Seoul to work as an ESL teacher. When asked if he has experienced online hate or xenophobia in general as a YouTube Influencer, he tells us:

So, being Asian American, and being Asian, specifically, I very much fit into being Korean, you know? A lot of the times I get a pass as a Korean [...] because of that, I don't get as much xenophobia, I think, in comparison to, let's say...you know, someone who has darker skin tone [...]

Will explains that while some people "pull away" from him upon learning that he is a foreign-national, others perceive his East Asian-appearance as compensating for this. In addition, he also recounts how his American-accented English was often perceived as a "highly valued" quality, which he feels has accorded him "privilege" as he becomes accepted and even lauded by some locals.

When *oegugin* YouTubers, especially those with non-White and dark features, appears to be critical of Korean society, their "undesirability" of the Otherness becomes more intolerable and subject to hate speech and a collective action of "canceling." Hate is further facilitated by "platformed racism" on YouTube (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017), which is mediated, amplified, and even manufactured by the platform's own vernaculars, especially with its algorithms and designs. The undesirable Others, whose very presence challenges the globally-acknowledged soft power of Korea and who seem to challenge the Korean

racial-ethnic system, are regulated and ousted to the margins of the *oegugin* YouTube ecology in this manner.

The xenophobic and racist hate experienced by *oegugin* YouTube Influencers is a discursive mechanism that disciplines them into keeping within the accepted boundaries of the *oegugin* genre, specifically by complying with the established norms and practices of the genre around “Korean cool.” Those who do not do so are marked as traitors and attacked by online hate mobs. In the longer run, many of them also find themselves being subject to coordinated sabotage when haters repeatedly downvote and report their channels under false pretexts, resulting in the algorithmic suppression of their videos by YouTube, and even occasional account suspensions. These revelations might seem like a surprise considering the global popularity of “typical” *oegugin* YouTube templates such as *mukbang* and reaction videos. Yet, it is imperative to consider that such successes and handfuls of “compliant” *oegugin* YouTube Influencers are ultimately built on the backs of the continued institutional, systematic, platformed, and social racism encountered by the *oegugin* who challenge the status quo.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we mapped out how foreign-national or *oegugin* Influencers shape the YouTube ecology in the Korean social media industry. In tandem with the globally-acknowledged soft power of the K-pop phenomenon, *oegugin* YouTubers' contents on Korean culture functions as a locus for Korea's nation branding campaigns. Further, *oegugin* YouTube becomes a competitive marketplace where various actors, including governments, industries, social media users, and foreign-nationals in Korea, reproduce pop nationalism in various content genres and formats, such as *gukbbong*, to pursue their own interests, be this money, attention, careers, or new patriotism.

The emerging *oegugin* YouTuber industry provides some opportunities for foreign-nationals in Korea to obtain some visibility in the media, with the potential for this to be developed into mainstream media celebrity. Yet, this is mostly the case for those whose Otherness is visually attractive and appear to be *oegugin* enough, and whose their media personae are legible to Korean ethnic nationalism—in other words, the *oegugin* YouTube Influencer ecology is one that prioritizes and rewards White *oegugin* who confirm to the national branding, penalizes those (even White *oegugin*) who challenge the status quo, and makes invisible the People of Color *oegugin* altogether. It is this third group who are often left defenseless against racist bigotry and growing cultures of online hate in the country (S. Park et al., 2021).

This multi-year ethnographic study is, to our knowledge, the first attempt to map out how nationalism and racial capitalism are interwoven as instruments of Influencer governance in Korea. While this paper has mapped out the parameters of the *oegugin* YouTube Influencer ecology, we see that only the visually-compliant (i.e., White-presenting), politically-obedient (i.e., does not question racism in Korea), and commercially-viable (i.e., able to leverage on global interest in K-cultures) are able to succeed in the industry. In other words, while the *ecology* of the *oegugin* Influencer scene is complex and rich in diversity, the *economy* is dominated by only a select crop. Although there is emerging governance over the Korean Influencer industry by the government ministries, these are predominantly focused on the *economy* of advertorial disclosures and tax transparency (J. Lee & Abidin, 2021). The next frontier requires the socio-cultural fabric of the *ecology* to be attended to, perhaps confronting the unbearable weight of institutional racism that has remained implicit for a long time.

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