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Minahs and minority celebrity: parody youtube influencers and minority politics in Singapore

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ABSTRACT
Many YouTube Influencers have intentionally shaped their content and channels into ‘sites of resistance’ that produce critical commentary about social issues, politics, and the state. When performed through the vehicle of parody and satire videos, such contents double up as entertainment and displays of insubordination against the hegemony. This paper takes seriously one instance of such YouTube Influencers: Singaporean duo MunahHirziOfficial (MHO), who borrow from the cultural scripts of international popular culture to create parodies that double up as socio-political commentaries on the condition of minority groups in Singapore. Specifically, the paper focuses on their employment of drag and the trope of the minah – a Malay subculture, considered to be low brow, and consisting of feminine uncouthness – to propagate awareness on intersectional minority politics. As marginalised figures themselves both in Singapore society and the local Influencer industry, MHO constitutes ‘minority celebrity’, wherein fame and recognition is founded on commodifying and representing a usually marginalised and stigmatised demographic of society, built upon the validation and celebration of minoritarian values, with the political agenda of making public and critiquing the systemic and personal challenges experienced by the minority group in everyday life.

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Introduction

Having developed out of amateur DIY microcelebrity in the 1990s (Senft 2008) and cultures of vernacular creativity in the early days of YouTube (Burgess and Green 2018), YouTube Influencers are one form of internet celebrity (Abidin 2018) who have been rapidly professionalising in production standards, aesthetic ecologies, and financial and socio-cultural capital. Such YouTube Influencers are the epitome of microcelebrities as they are able to sustainably commodify their fame into full-time careers (Abidin 2016). Considering their global scale, volume of output, and command of viewers, the efforts of YouTube Influencers constitute a cultural institution and commercial market (Grindstaff 2008). Many YouTube Influencers often respond swiftly to current affairs by tapping into networked viral cultures to produce content that bandwagons onto trending hashtags and memes in order to maximise their reach. Still, a smaller group of them have intentionally shaped their content and channels into ‘sites of resistance’ (Storey 2012) that

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produce critical commentary about social issues, politics, and the state. When performed through the vehicle of parody and satire videos, such contents from YouTube Influencers double up as both entertainment and a display of insubordination against the dominant hegemony.

This paper draws from digital anthropology and cultural studies, utilising traditional and digital participant observation, personal interviews and focus group discussions, surveys, web archaeology, and archival research in a multi-year ethnographic study of internet personalities in Singapore. It takes seriously one instance of such YouTube Influencers from Singapore known as MunahHirziOfficial (MHO), and the ways they borrow from the cultural scripts of international popular culture to create parodies as socio-political commentaries on the condition of minority groups in Singapore. This follows in the lineage of parody research by media studies scholars such as Chuck Kleinhans, who articulate that parodies can be considered forms of ‘radical media’ that remix ‘mass culture’ not merely to imitate it, but instead to ‘work with and against its possibilities while transforming it in the process’ (1994, p. 199). The analysis of MHO’s videos follows from prior research conducted on parody YouTube videos that contain critical commentary by ordinary and Influencer users (i.e. Lim & Ki 2007, Tryon 2008, van Zoonen et al. 2010, Lim and Golan 2011, Skågeby 2012, Cunningham 2013, Häkkinen and Leppänen. 2013), many of which highlight the potential of parody as a vehicle for disseminating critical messages in a more palatable and accessible manner.

MHO is comprised of Maimunah (Munah) Bagharib and Hirzi Zulkiflie, an Arab woman and Malay man from Singapore, both of which are minority racial and ethnic groups in Singapore. MHO are known for their highly localised parodies of feminist anthems by the likes of globally renown female hip hop and R&B artists such as Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, and Ariana Grande. Drawing on the global uptake and enthusiastic response to these songs, MHO capitalise upon the momentum of these cultural scripts to embed local emblems, signs, and discourses through their parody work. As such, they speak to two audiences simultaneously: For focused networks of local youth, MHO’s work serves as an avenue to archive, visibilise, and disseminate their (intersectional) minority social group’s ‘structure of feeling’, or the ‘collective cultural unconscious, values, beliefs, principles of a demographic’ (Williams in Storey 2012, p. 45–46) otherwise difficult or contentious to express outside the vehicles of parody and humour. For international circuits of YouTube viewers and fans of the original artists who may not have the local geo-political context, MHO’s works may be read more superficially as creative, accessible, and relatable entertainment, in a longchain of remix cultures centered on iconic American feminist singers. This duality is because parody requires the audience to ‘construct multiple mental representations’ in order to decode the ‘implicit commentary’ (Kreuz and Roberts 2009, p. 103). By doing so, MHO respond to identity social issues encountered by the Malay-Muslim youth in Singapore, serving as a ‘record of thought, experience, surviving texts and practices’ (Storey 2012, p. 44). MHO’s incorporation of queer bodies and symbolism in their videos is also an exemplar for how ‘queer discourse’ can provide ‘lures for the un-queer spectator to assume queer spectating positions, as well as providing clever spaces for the accommodation of subtextual [queer] readers’ (Meyer 1994, p. 17).

MHO made their debut in December 2008 on YouTube, and as of April 2017 when this fieldwork concluded, had accumulated over 142,000 subscribers and over 30 million views
across over 350 videos and 18 playlists (MunahHirziOfficial 2008). Like many microcelebrities (Senft 2008), they began as ordinary, everyday users of social media (Abidin 2016) who honed their large following through a combination of self-‘celebrification’ (Rojek 2012) and ‘self-branding’ (Marwick 2013). The duo initially collaborated on a video assignment for a diploma course, and decided to launch the MHO channel after their 2008 short film won a competition (personal interview 2017). Munah claims that what began as an inside joke to share content with their friends, and as a platform to share their coursework with others, eventually attracted a larger pool of public viewers on YouTube (personal interview 2017). Yet while they self-present as ‘accidental celebrities’ (Turner et al. 2000, p. 110–111), this may well be intended to signal their organic – and thus more authentic – claim to fame.

Indeed, despite already being veteran Influencers in Singapore by the mid-2010s, the duo constantly emphasised their ‘accidental’ YouTube fame against the backdrop of an onslaught of more ‘manufactured’ Instagram Influencers who had been specifically scouted and trained by various Influencer agencies. Further, it was revealed (personal interview 2017) that MHO were headhunted and signed to Los Angeles-based digital media brand and multi-channel creator network Maker Studios for their first paid content production, thus placing them more in the likeness of ‘spotted and groomed investments’ (Abidin 2018, p. 56–57). More crucially, given their ability to commodify and monetise their marginalised status into a form of internet celebrity, MHO constitute a ‘minority celebrity’. Minority celebrity is the fame and recognition founded on commodifying and representing a usually marginalised and stigmatised demographic of society, built upon the validation and celebration of minoritarian values, with the political agenda of making public and critiquing the systemic and personal challenges experienced by the minority group in everyday life. This concept takes after the milestone work of Deleuze et al. (1983) on ‘minor literature’, which refers to the ‘literature a minority makes in a major language’ and which at its core is ‘determinational[ing]’, ‘political’ and has ‘collective value’ (1983, p. 16). In a similar vein, ‘minority celebrity’ considers the possibilities of succeeding in the dominantly hegemonic or mainstream celebrity cultures as a minority figure, by adapting to a palatable template of celebrity performance that still carries strands of resistance and representation interwoven into the subtext.

**Modal strategies for popular advocacy**

This section considers three of MHO’s modal strategies for popular advocacy, including the use of cultural cringe via the caricature of minahs, the emphasis on intersectional (Crenshaw 1993) minority representation via an iconic cast of cameos, and critical commentary on current issues pertaining to racism and policing minority religiosity in Singapore.

**Cultural cringe**

While MHO present several personae in their videos, this paper is concerned with their performance of the minah, one subculture of Malay women in Singapore. In general, minahs loosely refer to young Malay women in the working class who are deemed to be low brow and uncouth in their femininity. Current academic work on this subculture is sparse, with only a handful of works briefly alluding to minahs as Malay women (Stivens 2002), or working-class Malay woman (Ong 1990). Ackerman’s (1991, p. 199) research on class
formation in Malay society briefly describes the stereotypes of minah culture in the factory, including ‘their allegedly unrestrained sexuality’, being ‘young, attractive, [and] sexually uninhibited’, and an expression of their ‘independence with heavily applied cosmetics and tight-fitting Western-style clothing’. Although these three works focus on minahs in the Malaysian context, the cultural homophily between Malaysia and Singapore allows for some of this interpretive work to be mapped over.

One news article in the national newspaper, The Straits Times, offers an explicit definition of a minah as a ‘colloquial term to describe rowdy Malay girls without drive or ambition’ (Wong 2015). Similarly, an analysis of internet anecdotes, surveyed via digital folklore (Bacon 2011) from a network of websites and internet forums, reveals that many Malay youth experience a ‘cultural cringe’ (Phillips 1950) – ‘a collective feeling of inferiority of one’s own society as compared to a certain other society’ (Mattar 2009, p. 180) – when they encounter them. For example, an entry on minahs on the crowd-sourced colloquial lingo database, Urbandictionary.com, features a few more attempts at layman definitions, describing these women as such:

“They wear tapered pants, g-strings and uber tight clothes when they know they’re fucking fat … They’re fuckin dumb … they’re broke as fuck … you can find them at any void deck of any hdb flats in singapore … They’re comparable to the blondes of america except, they’re fucken ugly like 90% of the time.” (zul 2004)

Implicit in this definition is that minahs have poor fashion sense, that they lack intellect, and that they are the working class who struggle financially and are unable to spend money on recreation. Forum users also highlight the hyper-sexualised image of minahs as ‘b*tches who wanna be banged all night’ (trendz 2007).

But the minahs by MHO not only embrace their caricature but go further to capitalise upon this marginalised subculture as their public persona. Sociologist Mary Kosut postulates that when signs and symbols are repeatedly displayed to the public via the mainstream media, they become ‘semiotically pillaged’ (2006, p. 1038) as their status becomes weakened and their subcultural potential is exhausted. Such was the case, for example, with tattoos as a subculture. Similarly, MHO’s continuous deployment of their intersectional (Crenshaw 1993) minority and multiple marginalities can be read as a political strategy to be publicly visible without being co-opted by mainstream celebrity culture. Further, the use of drag minahs as young, Malay, women allows MHO to satirise and disrupt the normative majoritarian straight, Chinese, male sentiments more palatably as the former are more likely to be dismissed as non-threatening and therefore left to thrive under the radar as a strategy of ‘subversive frivolity’ (Abidin 2016). This reflects a Deleuzian take on minoritarian standpoints where the ‘minor is not a theory of the margins, but a different way of working with material … about the conscious use of displacement’ (Katz 1996, p. 489). Their use of symbolism and subtext presents a desire to ‘evade interpretation’ by the mainstream culture through the use of ‘experimental’ messaging that requires their target audience to exercise de-coding abilities (Deleuze et al. 1983, p. 13–14).

These stereotypes of minahs are satorialised and challenged in MHO’s series of minah music parody videos, when they use parody and humour to portray minahs as more identifiable, relatable, and palatable for the general (Chinese) public, while also signalling the overt, casual, and institutional racism Malay minorities experience in everyday life. Yet,
due to their intersectional minority status, the representation of minahs also operates as a form of inoculation and thrives as a product of sanitised contagion: Distant enough to be exoticised out of threat to dominant hegemony, yet familiar enough to be consumed by gawking gazes.

**Intersectional minority representation**

Singapore is a multi-racial immigrant nation-state of over 5.7 million citizens (Singstat 2019). Of this, Malay women in Singapore constitute roughly 14.7% of all women citizens and roughly 7.4% of all citizens (Data.gov.sg 2019a). However, government statistics fail to identify the diversity within the Malay race in terms of intersectional minorities’ ethnicities and religions. These varied and rich micro-diversities are officially subsumed under the general category of ‘Malay’ in order to fit into Singapore’s neat CMIO cookie cutter mould.

To complicated the idea of Malayness and Malay womanhood in Singapore, MHO invests heavily in intersectional minority representation. Alongside the minah characters Katy (Munah) and Syasya (Hirzi) are a regular cast of gender fluid androgynous back-up dancers in drag; iconic Malay personalities in Singapore who are fringed or marginalised for their identity politics or practices; and one-off appearances by foreign construction workers usually approached on-the-fly while filming in public places.

Firstly, the genderfluid and drag back-up dancers in the string of minah music parody videos comprise men, women, transgender persons, and androgynous persons (Figure 1). This is significant given that LGBT and queer people are still marginalised in Singapore (Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012). They are usually led by Andreas Chua who identifies as ‘An Androgynous gay Choreographer and Dancer from Singapore’ (Starnow 2017), and appears in the videos with long straight hair in feminine attire. The strong and consistent

![Figure 1. Screengrab from MHO’s video “EPIC MALAY GIRL ANTHEM” – MEHGAN TRAINOR/RIHANNA PARODY’, depicting the MHO duo flanked by a cast of genderfluid and drag back-up dancers. 26 October 2016.](image-url)
presence of these genderfluid dancers as a regular and non-descript backdrop is significant when situated within the larger Influencer industry in Singapore: The YouTube industry in Singapore is dominated by Chinese Influencers, many of whom occasionally perform in gender-bending, queer, or drag characters as mere comic relief or the closing punchline. They are usually straight Chinese men dressing up in drag to parody motherly figures and deliberately ugly subpar girlfriends, and in flamboyant men’s wear to parody the gay stereotype of an effeminate man.

But in MHO’s minah parody music videos, the genderfluid representations of their dance crew are hardly the subject of ridicule, mockery, or humour. Instead, their gender and sexual diversity are presented as a matter of fact, unapologetic and sincere, as if simply being public normativity: They are seen dancing through crowded public train cabins with commuters watching on along Singapore’s Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) (MunahHirziOfficial 2016b, 2016g), in the streets of Singapore (MunahHirziOfficial 2015a, 2016a), celebrating the traditional Hari Raya with friends and family (MunahHirziOfficial 2016d), and enjoying themselves in entertainment districts in Singapore (MunahHirziOfficial 2016c).

Secondly, the Malay icons who cameo in the minah music parody videos are also marginalised, as they seldom conform to the stereotype of a conservative, traditional, and sanitised Malay Muslim. The recurring cameos across MHO’s body of videos over the years often carry ‘extratextual connotations’ (Mathijs 2013, p. 146) with reference to the social issues and cultural causes they champion in their capacity as individuals in Singapore society, and their inclusion ‘invit[es] the viewer to ponder [the] tangential implications’ (Mathijs 2013, p. 146) of their inclusion in the MHO cineverse. More critically, MHO’s inclusion of these cameo actors often come closely after the latter’s individual encounters with public spotlight, and thus also serves to lend them ‘screen-time’ (Mathijs 2013, p. 146) to amplify their ethical and political stance on a variety of issues. One recurring cameo is Malay Muslim male artist Muhammad Khairul Ikhwan who in the earlier years of MHO cameos in androgynous and drag fashion (MunahHirziOfficial 2016a). Journalists who have written features on Khairul’s art and identity politics recall that his subversive self-inscriptions and ‘unabashed love for dolling himself up’ in an otherwise largely conservative segment of minority society was ‘a bid to express himself and inspire others’ (Baharudin and Yusoff 2016). In September 2015, Khairul was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer and a tumour in his brain, but outlived his prognosis and continued to publicly document his artistic endeavours and struggles with his illness (HCA 2016). In the later MHO videos, he also removes his drag wig to unveil hair loss as an act of symbolic resistance against the taboo of death in public fora (MunahHirziOfficial 2016d). He passed away in August 2016.

Another notable icon is Malay-Arab-Indian woman model Nadia Rahmat. In January 2015, Nadia was cast as a model for US fashion label Marc by Marc Jacobs after a global casting call on social media, where she emerged as the only brown-skin Asian in the line-up (the only other Asian model was South Korean). However, internet users in Singapore soon took to social media to condemn Nadia’s dress sense and henna tattoos (Chen 2015) as being immoral or unsightly. In an earlier incident in 2014, Nadia was also selected as one of the two Singaporean women to be featured in Romanian photographer Mihaela Noroc’s international photography project, titled The Atlas Of Beauty. The photos gained traction in Singapore in 2016 after being reposted by popular news websites, and internet users once again criticised Nadia for falling outside the dominant ideal of a beautiful Singaporean woman. On Facebook, she was picked on for being ‘so ugly’ and looking like a ‘ghost’, and
commentators users were upset that Nadia’s brown skin and minority ethnicity were taken to represent the Chinese-dominated country (Rahman 2016). In response, in a series of minah music parody videos, Nadia is featured addressing racial privilege and representing the diverse array of Malay femininities in society (MunahHirziOfficial 2016c, 2016f).

Evidently, even as members of their own racial minority community, Khairul and Nadia are perceived as atypical Malay/Muslims who do not conform to the normative Singaporean imaginary of ‘a good Malay’ (Figure 2). But MHO’s repeated inclusion and positive reinforcement of their image across several videos generates a form of ‘star persona’ for each of them by commodifying their non-normative status (Marshall 2014). In MHO’s body of work, they become almost fetishised into symbols for counter-hegemonic Malayness in Singapore, and their cameos serve to challenge the assumption of ‘the good minority’ in society. Further, MHO juxtapose Khairul and Nadia alongside other more normative and celebrated Malay women icons for the latter to lend their own star power to the marginalised (MunahHirziOfficial 2016f). These include celebrity makeup artist and hair stylist Norehan Fong-Harun (IMDb 2017), renowned singing contestant Fathin Amira Zubir who represented Singapore in the popular reality show I Love OPM in the Philippines in 2016 (Dancel 2016), and Farisha Ishak who was the winner of the televised national singing contest The Final 1 in 2014 (Wong 2014).

MHO’s intentional cameo casting of fringe personalities such as Khairul and Nadia alongside the more celebrated and even heroic Malay personalities such as Norehan, Fathin, and Farisha thus constitutes a critical juxtaposition that asks viewers to expand their repertoire of diversity within the Malay community. But their shared struggles as intersectional minorities, whether seen or unseen, are underscored in the MHO minah music parody videos as they come to constitute a form of ‘celebrity confessional’ (Redmond 2011). Like the mode of confessional discourse on reality TV and celebrity talkshows, these celebrated Malay icons are positioned to share ‘para-confessions’ or ‘a commercial rendition’ of confessions ‘designed to display [their] persona from a position of persuasive authority’ (King 2008, p. 115), and

Figure 2. Screengrab from MHO’s video ‘FORMATION PARODY – BEYONCE (SINGAPORE)’, depicting a Malay women in conservative dress and model Nadia Rahmat. 11 April 2016.
intended to ‘raise, redeem, or resurrect a profile’ (Redmond 2008, p. 149) in society. These processes shed light on the diversity of intersectional minorities – both those who stand out for their differences and those who manage to pass in normative society – who are otherwise subsumed under a careless gloss of all minority persons as a homogenous, indistinguishable mass. Further, the normalisation of these marginal icons is amplified by other collaborations in which MHO engage, such as cameos from other prominent Influencers and musicians (i.e. MunahHirziOfficial 2015c, 2015d) who then lend their ‘star power’ (Thrall et al. 2008) and fandom to MHO’s cause.

Thirdly, foreign construction workers are often featured in the minah music parody videos. These are members of the over 1.64 million non-residents in Singapore (Strategy Group 2018) including Foreign Domestic Workers (15.4%) and Foreign Construction Workers (17.1%) (extrapolated from Strategy Group 2018 and Data.gov.sg 2019b). According to MHO, their inclusion of foreign workers in the parody videos is in part practical and in part political. Hirzi explains that during their ad hoc filming on the streets, it was migrant workers who were willing to cameo in their productions when locals shunned them out of embarrassment: ‘A lot of times, locals would stay away but it is the foreigners that actually join us in these gags and stuff and it’s always fun’ (Hirzi in Thomas 2013). Munah tells me that a more pragmatic motivation for including foreign construction workers in their videos was for content continuity: Their former caricature character before the minahs was the character of a Filipino domestic worker known as Leticiaica.

In Singapore, it is common for Filipino domestic workers to romantically partner up with Bangladeshi construction workers during their transient migrant stays. As such, skits featuring Leticiaica often included cameos from different foreign construction workers who would star one-off as her boyfriend ‘Terry’. However, these foreign construction workers are far from merely being utilised as props, but instead, are subtle political statements about migrant inclusivity and cultural diversity in Singapore. As a rotating cast of non-actors who are literally brought onto camera impromptu, this role of foreign construction workers adds a layer of authenticity to MHO’s representation of the marginalised and minorities in society by displaying their myriad of faces and backgrounds to challenge caricatures and stereotypes. Further, by making visible and public the process through which they literally approach or select any foreign construction worker from familiar places (i.e. parks, hawker centres, void decks) to feature in their videos, MHO allow their audience to see that these foreigners are embedded into their own everyday spaces and lives. In the same way that traditional celebrities continually emphasise their ‘ordinariness’ to appear ‘accessible’ to audiences via a ‘rhetoric of authenticity’ (Meyers 2009, p. 902), MHO position foreign construction workers as ordinary and rightful inhabitants of space in Singapore.

Hirzi opines that media representation is his underlying motive: ‘… they are always under-represented … we always want to pepper [them] in because … you don’t see them a lot in mainstream media …’ (Hirzi in Thomas 2013). Munah asserts that they desired to highlight the stigmatised and marginalised migrant worker populations in their videos to stimulate Singaporeans to consider their welfare:

“I have a soft spot for them because I think they are a community that doesn’t have a voice … They’re here to work, they want to make a living and that’s all their motives are … We wanted to … kinda raise awareness on what they’re going through … So that was the birth of … song parodies.” (personal interview 2017)
As such, by situating foreign construction workers as the ‘boyfriend trope’ (Munah Hirzi Official 2012), as cameo dancers (Munah Hirzi Official 2016b), or as spectators in the background of their videos (Munah Hirzi Official 2014, 2016b), MHO make the strange familiar, the contained integrated, and the labour human by displaying as multi-faceted individuals with aspirations, interests, and creative talents instead of mere imported labour.

**Critical commentary**

MHO’s *minah* music parody videos provide critical commentary on several issues, but concerns with immigration and xenophobia, discrimination and prejudice against Malays as a minority race, and the over-policing of the practices of the Muslim population feature most prominently. Several videos refer to discriminatory and preferential venue hires based on race, such as the April 2016 incident in which a Malay woman was denied rental of a public shop space because her wares did not match the shopping mall’s target group of Chinese customers. Businesswoman Diana Hairul had uploaded a screenshot of her email correspondence with Tampines 1 mall, which went viral, and later filed a police report for racial discrimination. She had planned to book a venue space at the mall’s pre-Hari Raya fair for her business, but the email response from a Tampines 1 employee was curt and prejudiced:

“Hi Dee, we are not so keen to run a Malay road show as our target audience are mainly Chinese. Thus, we regret to inform you that we are unable to rent a space to you.” (Lee 2016)

This incident was then recast in one of MHO’s videos (Munah Hirzi Official 2016c), in which the viewers are thrown into an ‘alternative universe’ where Malays are now the ‘norm’ and the Chinese are the ‘minorities’. This storyline features two Chinese men inside a club predominantly comprising Malay girls, confused over why their attempts to pursue them are unsuccessful. When a Chinese girlfriend of one of the men storms in to call out her cheating boyfriend and chide him for not booking the club venue for her birthday, Hirzi appears in his *minah* drag to rehash a version of Tampines 1 mall’s administrative letter (Figure 3):

“Eh girl, in this club’s defence, we don’t play Mambo Night [recurring club event in Singapore stereotypically attended by young Chinese people] here okay. Also, here is a letter from the management: We are not so keen to run a Chinese birthday party as our target audience are mainly Malay. Thus, we regret to inform you that we are unable to rent the space to you. Thank you. Regards, Syasya.” (Munah Hirzi Official 2016c).

Such a strategy of parody relies on presenting reality as ‘contrary to fact’, where ‘the entire subject is treated in a contradictory manner’ such that the Chinese Singaporeans who are usually ‘elevated’ become ‘debased’ in this alternative reality, and the Malay Singaporeans who are usually prejudiced are ‘elevated’ (Kreuz and Roberts 2009, p. 104). Although this instance of discrimination towards Malays was most prominently featured in the *minah* music parody videos, MHO’s representational politics draws on a longer history of Malay prejudice in Singapore, referencing an array of viral controversies. These include racist social media comments disparaging Malay weddings (Yahoo! Newsroom 2012), discriminatory hiring practices at a local bakery chain (Ho and Wei 2016), and ‘no Malay’ specifications in property rental advertisements (Chandran and Loh 2017). A 2017
survey on race relations by the Institute of Policy Studies in partnership with Channel News Asia similarly reports that minority raced citizens to experience and perceive more instances of racism than the dominant population of Singaporean Chinese (Philomin 2016). In reference to these incidents, MHO featured more satirical interactions between Chinese clients and Malay Influencers, to demonstrate the implicit racism in their industry and in Singapore at large.

The hyper-policing of Muslim religiosity has also been an ongoing concern for the last two decades, in particular, whether or not the tudung should be allowed in secular places such as educational institutes and the workplace. In February 2002, four primary one Malay Muslim girls were suspended after donning the tudung to school despite the

Figure 3. Screengrab from MHO’s video ‘WORK PARODY – RIHANNA (SINGAPORE)’, depicting Hirzi in minah drag and musician Benjamin Kheng playing a Chinese boyfriend. 30 April 2016.
prohibition of religious dress in public schools (Chew 2002). *Tudung*-clad women have also been reportedly bullied in the workplace (Azman 2014) and refused work opportunities (Muhamad 2015) on the sole basis of their religious attire. The state’s stance on the issue, including those from the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs and the Prime Minister, are still evolving and ambiguous (Hussain 2014), with new boundary-markers and debates opening up whenever another *tudung*-related incident gains publicity or virality in the country. Like their references to Malay prejudice in Singapore, MHO’s *minah* music parody videos frequently feature feminine-appearing Malay dressed in various iterations of the *tudung*, from the traditional to the contemporary, from the permanent to the transitional. In one video (MunahHirziOfficial 2016d), Hirzi even parodies the YouTube subgenre of modest tutorials, in which young Muslim women share and model tips for modest fashion, by simulating a *tudung* fashion tutorial against the voice-over of poetry.

**Playful responses to backlash**

Having considered three of MHO’s modal strategies for popular activism, this section now considers some of the backlash experienced by the YouTube Influencers, and their resulting response to criticisms through even more parody music videos. This includes the issue of championism in relation to MHO’s now-defunct *Suria* television show, colourism and Munah’s involvement in a Nivea advertisement that was condemned by feminists, and conservatism and MHO’s contentious appointment as Pink Dot SG ambassadors.

**Championism: *Suria* television show**

Amidst the rising popularity of social media and internet-based platforms, ratings for traditional media outlets such as television were dipping (Yip 2017). Producers and directors began engaging Influencers to cameo or anchor content on their respective domains in a bid to capture the youth audience. It was in this climate that MHO were approached by a writer from Papahan Films to star on the only Malay language national television channel, *Suria*, in their own show entitled Munah & Hirzi: Action!. This was set to premier on Wednesdays in October 2012 (Malinda-White 2012). This cross-platform strategy to lure viewership was corroborated by Munah in a press interview (Munah in Malinda-White 2012). The show was to be ‘a drama loosely based on [their] lives as Munah & Hirzi’ (Munah in Malinda-White 2012). However, during the initial advertising for the show on *Suria’s* social media (Mediacorp Suria 2012a, Mediacorp, 2012b), conservative Muslims expressed dissent on social media (Mediacorp Suria 2012b), complained to the television station for selecting ‘inappropriate’ role models (azliah 2013), and accused the duo of ‘anti-Islam behaviour’ in the leading Malay newspaper *Berita Harian* (azliah 2013). Munah recounts that Facebook hate pages were set up even before the premier of their show (personal interview 2017). The language and literacies of satire and parody that worked so well for MHO on YouTube and their social media savvy audience did not translate well or map over properly onto television for a viewership of predominantly middle-aged, conservative Malay Muslims. Where on social media, MHO’s humour and discourse were experienced as a deterritorialising force for minorities as the subtext often ‘evade[d] interpretation’ by the mainstream culture (Deleuze et al. 1983, p. 13–14), on
television such ambiguity did not carry over once the targeted audience shifted from their niche minority groups and subcultures to the dominantly hegemonic conservative, middle-class, older viewers.

On internet forums, users who were more in tune with social media paralanguages and the cultural repertoire of parody attributed the failure and backlash to a mismatch between the restrictive constraints of mainstream television and sanitised conservatism of *Suria*, and MHO’s natural flavour:

"I didn’t like their show on *Suria* . . . I felt that they weren’t able to truly express their personalities on that show and would have loved it if they just concentrated on making more awesome Youtube videos!" (The Smart Local 2012)

In response to this public outcry, MHO subtly called out *Suria* and the Malay Muslim community’s conservatism in a video about inter-generational tensions: Munah and Hirzi were dressed in drag as *makciks*, sitting around and reminiscing about the ‘good old days’ in which they were more ‘moral’ than today’s youth (MunahHirziOfficial 2016a). But in their competitively recounts of their bedroom adventures with their aged husbands, the *makciks*’ exaggerated moans ironically caused discomfort of the young couple next door, played by Munah and Hirzi as themselves, who ended up knocking on their door to make a complaint (MunahHirziOfficial 2016a). This instance of parody calls upon the tropes of irony and taboo (Highet 1962) to convey the situation of ‘the pot calling the kettle black’.

**Colourism: Nivea advertisement**

As much as MHO’s brand of humour did not translate well from the internet to the television screen, making sense of their parody literacies was also tenuous across social media platforms per se. In a second incident in March 2015, Munah encountered another instance of backlash when her humorous advertisement for skincare brand Nivea, organised by online video network clickbetwork.tv, was called out of colourism. The three-minute Facebook video featured Munah lifting her arms and being ‘shunned by members of the public’ because of her ‘darkly coloured arm pits’ (Hicks 2015a). In many Asian countries, the Whiteness of one’s skin is historically associated with ideas of hegemonic feminine beauty, being in a higher social class (Li et al. 2008), and ‘embodying transnational mobility’ (Saraswati 2010). Such mentalities have been shaped by a combination of ‘Western ideologies’ and ‘traditional Asian values and beliefs’, and are further stimulated by messages disseminated by the mass media (Li et al. 2008).

AWARE Singapore, an advocacy group that promotes gender equality, denounced MHO’s humour as bad taste, questioning if ‘promoting shame and insecurity about [women’s] bodies [is] a laughing matter’ (Hicks 2015a), and accused the ad of racial insensitivity (Manjur 2015). They also encouraged Facebook users to raise their objections with Nivea (Hicks 2015a), but Munah received a disproportionate amount of the flak despite having ‘no creative control’ over the production process (Hicks 2015b). The video was deleted shortly after (Hicks 2015c). Although this controversy was a trying time for Munah rather than Hirzi, MHO insert a quick cutscene in which Hirzi is seen applying the Nivea whitening deodorant for which Munah received flak, asserting self-reflexivity (MunahHirziOfficial 2016a). In another instance, their identity politics are more pronounced in parody rap lyrics in which Munah says:
“Y’all haters corny with that Nivea armpit ad mess. Telling girls like me what not to wear how to dress. Maybe you should keep your head abreast not on my breast. If you do you and I do me, you’ll see no one cares.” (MunahHirziOfficial 2016a)

Implied in this call-back by MHO is that Munah was unwittingly assigned as a proxy for all of the Malay community, and was unfairly policed by active commentators online. Hundreds of Chinese Singaporean Influencers have long been promoting various skin and facial whitening products on their various social media for a profit, but this was only raised as a ‘gender equality’ and ‘racial insensitivity’ issue when a Malay Influencer performed the same. This was likely because Munah’s advertisement was cloaked in humour and possibly read as ridicule, whereas the majority of advertorials by Chinese Singaporean Influencers that on Instagram were often based on highly emotive personal experiences meant to sincerely persuade. But race and colourism aside, the parody rap lyrics seemed to frame the issue as one of the feminist body policing, advocating for women to have their own say over dressing their body without the pressures of being subjected to objectification or the ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey 1999).

**Conservatism: Pink Dot SG ambassadorship**

The third incident occurred a month later in April 2015, when MHO were announced among the line-up of ambassadors for Pink Dot SG, an ‘annual gathering in support of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community’ (Ng 2015). This was significant given that Munah and Hirzi were the first Malay and Muslim persons to be ambassadors since the movement’s inauguration in 2009. In a press interview announcing the ambassadors, Hirzi said that his generation of young audiences may experience difficulty coming out to their more traditional and conservative parents (Hirzi in Ng 2015). Munah also implied that MHO’s ambassadorship could be important for closeted intersectional minorities (i.e. LGBT Malays and Muslims) who may struggle more than their Chinese counterparts due to the lack of representation and community, and asserted the need for ‘a support system’ (Munah in Ng 2015). However, a day before the event in June 2015, Munah abruptly announced on Instagram that she would not be able to attend (Lay 2015). She hinted that her absence was due to backlash, but reaffirmed her personal politics in supporting LGBT rights in a stanza of convoluted acrobatic twists:

“But I am here, prouder than ever to say that I’m standing up for the freedom to be happy with what’s been given and the right to be accepted as you are … I believe so much in what we’re doing and I want those who are too afraid, to know that there is support for them, no matter who they are and what they go through … ” (Munah in Lay 2015).

During this time, threads on internet forums and widely circulating commentaries on blogposts speculated that Munah had to pull out due to objection from conservative Muslims who accused Pink Dot of ‘disrespecting Islam’, and being ‘provocative and confrontational’ (aiseyman.com 2015). Hirzi, however, continued with his appearance and gave a rousing speech calling for people who struggle with their LGBT identities to press on (Pink Dot SG 2015). More light was shed on this issue as MHO embedded subtle references to the controversy in their later videos. In the opening preamble for one video, Hirzi is dressed in drag as a *makcik* and complaining about the liberal youth of today – ‘Nowadays, got a lot of activity! Pink square,
pink rectangle, pink triangle … Pink rhombus, pink parallelogram, pink octagon. Ah so many lah!’ – alluding to the Pink Dot SG controversy (MunahHirziOfficial 2015b).

In another video, Hirzi’s preamble to the song and dance of a parody video includes an overhead narration, which is a ‘parodic imitation’ (Hariman 2008, p. 253) of the national pledge:

“Singaporean: A person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of another person. Regardless of race, language or religion. But in different degrees according to racial privilege, and discrimination may apply to pockets of communities as long as it involves single coloured dots. Terms and conditions may apply. Read the fine prints below. Batteries not included.” (MunahHirziOfficial 2016e)

This repetition is meant to ‘introduc[e] a profound ambiguity into the [original] address’ (Hariman 2008, p. 255), for viewers to reflect upon and question the intended sanctity of the national pledge. The line ‘regardless of race, language, or religion’ is also lifted from the national pledge, and intended to rouse in viewers the reflexivity to consider the hypocrisy of a supposedly meritocratic constitution that ultimately discriminates a large segment of its citizens based on the demography of sexuality, as implied by the parody line ‘… discrimination may apply to pockets of communities as long as it involves single coloured dots’.

Conclusion

MunahHirziOfficial have cultivated ‘minority celebrity’ for themselves in Singapore through their concerted repertoire of parody YouTube videos that call out the social, cultural, and institutional discrimination and prejudice experienced by Malays, Muslims, and LGBT persons in the country. This has been especially challenging considering the climate of pristine, luxurious, and consumerist Chinese Instagram Influencers in Singapore (Abidin 2016). Despite being one of the rare few minority race YouTube Influencers and internet celebrities in their country, MHO refuse to be stereotyped or mobilised for mere tokenism, but have instead embraced the messiness and complexities of their intersectional minority affiliations. To avoid being typed as complete outcasts or marginalised figures to whom viewers are unable to relate, MHO frequently collaborates with reputable YouTube Influencers and renowned personalities from the mainstream music industry in Singapore to expand their reach and remain relevant to the wider Chinese population who may not identify with their intersectional minority innuendos and references. Utilising their celebrity in the social media sphere, MHO also bridge Malay representation across new digital media and traditional mainstream television, radio, and cinema channels by carving out spaces for notable (feminine) Malay icons to address their young internet audience. And in an act of intersectional minority allying, MHO also use their prolific digital media platforms to share airtime with fringed segments of Malay society such as queer and genderfluid persons, as well as marginalised ‘discards’ of Singapore society such as foreign domestic and construction workers.

Yet, for all the advocacy work they do, MHO often risk being pigeonholed as (unwilling) exemplars of their racial, religious, and cohort group (Hirzi in Thomas 2013, Hirzi in We Are Social 2015). As evidenced in the backlash detailed above, MHO are involuntarily absorbed into the politics of the their cultural, racial, and religious community, and
their attention currency seems to have been appropriated to champion the beliefs of vocal conservatives within their racial and religious group. Munah similarly conveyed that ‘[j]ust because you see us and we’re brown doesn’t mean that … whatever messages we are saying is from what the Malay community …’ (personal interview 2017). MHO’s inability to decouple themselves from their minority Malay community is exacerbated by their desire to lend voice to, share attention with, and foster awareness about intersectional minority causes, as discussed throughout this paper, that may not sit well with the dominant segment within their minority racial community. Compounding this policing is the fact that MHO are not only popular and established in the Influencer industry, but that they are also young. As a result, many of the identity politics and ethics they champion are perceived by the dominant segment within their minority community as a generic moral panic, specifically that the duo will sully young people and contaminate their racial and religious community. Hirzi acknowledges that they have unwittingly been assigned as benchmarks to boundary-police emergent ‘youth’ beliefs in their racial community:

“…I think a lot of people saw us as a representation of successes of young Malay kids. And so whatever value that comes with us, they start to evaluate and validate: ‘Is this a part of us?’; ‘Can we reject them?’” (Hirzi in Thomas 2013).

Where their Chinese counterparts in the Influencer industry seem to have the leeway to establish their own identities and celebrity persona, MHO are subjected to a double policing of their self-presentations, first by their own racial and religious community for compliance to conservatism, and second by Singapore society at large who expect minority persons to be self-contained and sanitised within their own social groups. Yet, MHO embeds their activist messages in their minah music parody videos, wherein support and awareness building are integrated into a complex system of racial and ethnic, religious, gendered and sexual, and Influencer celebrity literacies.

For all the intellectual and aesthetic labour in which MHO engage to capture their viewers, the bulk of their parody content references concerns that often specifically speak mostly to the (intersectional) minority social groups in Singapore. But their impact on political commentary and social issues should not be discounted. While research on celebrity advocacy has found that even ‘the most famous celebrities’ in the mainstream entertainment industry struggle to achieve ‘sustained attention’ from the mass media to publicise their advocacy causes (Thrall et al. 2008, p. 364), YouTube Influencers like MHO rely on the longtail of social media shares, responses, and at times even outrage to spotlight attention on the social issues they champion. And while their parody videos require a threshold of knowledge on popular culture and social issues, their ‘narrowcasting’ has been able to ‘mobiliz[e] small groups of motivated people’ (Thrall et al. 2008, p. 364) to share their works as political commentary.

Further, for their reflexive humour to take root, represent intersectional minority identities, and interrogate inequalities from everyday microaggressions to institutional racism, MHO tailor their creative content to speak to viewers in parallel literacies. At any given time, MHO’s parody content offers viewers three terrains to manoeuvre: Firstly, for (Malay Muslim) viewers who are attuned to the intersectional minority racial, religious, sexuality, and class politics in Singapore, MHO capitalise on the insider–outsider dichotomy by embedding in-group jokes and references through language and visual
symbolism to build cohesion, solidarity, and sociality. Secondly, for (Singaporean) viewers who are attuned only to the soft-authoritarian culture of Singapore politics, MHO mobilise shared commiseration by poking fun at the state in a mix of ambiguous and subversive humour and genuine disgruntlement. Finally, for the YouTube viewers who casually consume social media content for leisure, MHO borrows from global icons and elements in popular culture and embed these signs into their videos akin to Easter Eggs that global audiences may find relatable. As Influencers, parody performers, intersectional minority advocates, and intersectional minority persons themselves, MHO have imbued layers of personal politics and popular publics into their body of work, proving that they have made the most and the best of their minority celebrity over their decade-long career.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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