

07.31.2024

Food wars

BY

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The theft dispute between Onezwa Mbola and Nara Smith reveals the consumerist undertones behind content for women in the online creative economy.

For the last two months, the internet has been stewing over allegations of theft triggered by a recipe for boba tea. On June 10, South African food content creator Onezwa Mbola released a TikTok preparing a guava-flavored version of the Taiwanese drink, using ingredients that she'd cultivated on her farm in the Eastern Cape. Two days later, Nara Smith, the food influencer and model famous for her theatrically pristine "from scratch" cooking videos, made a rooibos variation of the beverage for her 8.9 million followers. Like a number of her videos, Smith claimed she made the boba to satisfy an obsessive craving. However, Mbola wasn't buying the twee gimmick. In a TikTok that has since been deleted from her account, she accused Smith of stealing a number of her recipe ideas and tweaking enough details to obfuscate the alleged plagiarism. Responding to the mounting criticism in her comments, Smith denied being aware of Mbola's TikTok account, insisting that she'd simply "googled the recipe." Online detectives were quick to undercut her plea of innocence, sharing a screenshot of a comment where she called Mbola's content "inspiring." But given the appetite for bad blood on the internet, it is entirely possible that this screengrab was fabricated.

With the enormous scale of interest in Smith over the last year, it is no surprise the accusation prompted endless rounds of discourse on TikTok, X, and YouTube. The half-German, half-South African creator has become the poster child for the "tradwife" movement, a term that germinated within "red pill" communities dominated by young men on the American far right. Denouncing the political and economic gains of feminism, these men (and some women) called

for a return to traditional gender roles embodied by the romanticized image of the 1950s middle-class housewife, dutifully tending to her husband and children. Though Smith has distanced herself from the tradwife label, preferring to see herself as a “working mom juggling all kinds of hats and responsibilities,” her demure voice, histrionic femininity, and singular devotion to her family have been interpreted as concerning throwbacks to a time where a woman’s agency, identity, and selfhood were never ventured beyond the white-picket fence.

Besides the misgivings about Smith’s midcentury cosplay, the incident has highlighted the discrepancies that exist between TikTokers located in the Global North and those in the Global South. As a South African TikTok, Mbola cannot monetize her content under the TikTok Creator Fund, a scheme that provides remuneration only for creators based in the US, UK, Germany, Italy, France, and Spain. To qualify for the TikTok Creator Fund, an account must have 10,000 genuine followers, and 100,000 authentic views within 30 days of application. With more than 800,000 followers and millions of views on her latest videos—numbers that have likely been bolstered by the interest in the dispute—Mbola more than meets the requirements for the scheme.

Yet even with these impressive metrics, Mbola hasn’t made any money from her content. It’s an issue that has been raised by other TikTokers, like South African marketing strategist Lebo Lion and comedy creator Vee Jay HD, who have criticized the exclusion of African creators from the Creator Fund, adding that their contributions to music, dance, entertainment, and even rage-bait engagement have formed a vital part of the video-sharing platform. Admittedly, the rate of pay for the Creator Fund is rather low, ranging from \$0.02–\$0.04 per 1,000 views. Regardless, the exclusion of African countries from the scheme forces creators to seek brand deals and sponsorships from corporations, which, given the market size of the content creation on the continent, pale in comparison to sponsorships in wealthier countries in the Global North.

While few can contest the imbalance of earning power for African TikTokers, it is less clear whether Smith’s actions can be considered an example of content intellectual property (IP) theft. Much of that boils down to the established practices of creators on video-sharing platforms and the internet at large. From the earliest days of YouTube and the late great Vine, the forebears of TikTok and Instagram Reels, recreating video content—particularly the viral kind—is part of how creators build a name and portfolio for themselves in a highly saturated and competitive market. At present, creators stand to gain more views if they make use of a trending clip of music and audio, or replicate a dance or recipe making the algorithmic rounds. Neither Mbola nor Smith is the originator of boba tea, nor are they the first creators to film themselves making the drink. Even if Smith confessed to nicking recipe ideas from Mbola’s account, it still wouldn’t constitute a copyright or trademark law infringement under TikTok’s current IP guidelines, which do not protect “underlying ideas of facts.”

Perhaps if Smith was keeping tabs on Mbola's profile, an act of accreditation could've gone a long way in preventing the blowback. With Smith's ties to South Africa, the incident could've started a dialogue about the gap between smaller and bigger accounts in the regions that she comes from. Nonetheless, the incident has demonstrated the need to reexamine how theft is defined in the online creative economy. It has also revealed the extractive nature of how creators engage with the marketplace of ideas on the internet. If TikTok and other video-sharing apps were to implement a policy requiring creators to cite the source of their inspiration, it would potentially be applied to content that goes beyond video. Currently, it is rare to find video creators who namecheck the written source of their recipe ideas unless they form part of an ongoing series or belong to a well-known food blogger, chef, or home cook. The uncited use of their work in video content is seldom regarded as theft. For example, it is telling that Smith acknowledged Google as the source for the boba recipe, and not the creator who may have spent a considerable amount of effort devising, calibrating, and uploading the recipe to a website. It speaks to how creators have grown accustomed to seeing the internet as one big, free repository where other peoples' work can be taken without acknowledgment, invisibilizing and devaluing the labor of those behind the links that conveniently appear on their search engines.

But there is another dimension to the Smith and Mbola saga that has yet to be unpacked by those who have taken up arms for their preferred creator. In a follow-up video to the deleted one, Mbola took direct aim at Smith, stating that she wasn't interested in participating in "likability politics" or being "palatable" to the internet. While no creator can fully claim to be above the audience-feedback engagement loop necessary for relevance online, Mbola's sentiments betray a frustration with the portrayal of traditionally feminized labor in the food content creation space. For all the industriousness of her videos, Smith makes life in the kitchen look deceptively effortless. She wears archival designer pieces that escape the indignity of a stain, rises above the humiliation of owning blunt knives, aging cutlery, or splintery cutting boards, and cooks with pots and pans without the customary scrapes and peels that come with frequent usage. There is never a splattering of grease on her stovetops or a stubborn lick of grime on sparkling countertops, which boast the latest in kitchen appliances. Regardless of what she makes, her face remains blankly calm, and free from sweat or unflattering facial expressions. Quite remarkably, even her hands avoid the force necessary to execute some of her more technically demanding recipes.

In other words, Smith puts on a performance of labor that is stripped of any real humanness; she creates a delicate production of kitchen life that could fit into a glamorous film or TV set. With occasional appearances from her well-groomed children and wealthy model husband, Lucky Blue Smith, the Mormon model who once graced the Tumblr pages of many millennials, her content is full of aestheticized pageantry that makes the propagandistic housewife infomercials of the 1950s look unpolished. In her defense, you could argue that Smith is merely responding to the increasingly unreasonable demands made of food creators. You only have to read through

the comments of any food video to notice that cooking without gloves, working on surfaces that haven't been scrubbed clinically, or tasting food with too few, too many, or too worn-out utensils is treated like a criminal offense worthy of an unfollow.

On the other hand, a number of the articles and video essays have chosen to focus on the role of “featurism,” “colorism,” and “white-supremacist beauty standards” in dictating Smith’s success. While these factors have certainly enhanced her appeal and visibility, they don’t fully explain why her star has continued to rise despite pushback against her tradwife persona and other accusations of theft—the latest being her work for a Marc Jacobs tote bag campaign. Perhaps the uncomfortable truth is that the consumerist undertones in Smith’s videos can be found in a great deal of content made for and by women. Whether it’s fashion, entertainment, lifestyle, beauty, skincare, pro-aging, or financial advice, Smith caters to what the American beauty critic Jessica DeFino termed the “sale gaze” in an essay for the *Sunday Times*. DeFino argues that if the male gaze captures the “psychological condition of living under patriarchy” for women, then the sale gaze speaks to the “psychological condition of living under capitalism.” Consequently, the videos of these women creators tend to convey class aspirations that are expressed through a distinct set of markers, like a multistep skincare routine, expensive collection of kitchenware, stylish outfits that are never worn twice, and a lifestyle that bears none of the financial stresses, adult obligations, and nine-to-five monotony of their followers.

In contrast, Mbola doesn’t present her content as light work. She doesn’t disabuse her audience of the toil of living off the land. Life on her farm may seem idyllic, but it is far from idle. You see her laboring over the livestock that she forages, and tending to the vegetables and fruits that she harvests, picks, peels, and cuts with the hands of someone who makes food to be eaten, not admired. Her audience isn’t spared of extensive planning and diligent care that goes into ensuring her meals are fit for consumption. And while her voice may have the soothing tones of a veteran radio personality, you don’t get the sense that her kitchen is free from the unpredictability and commotion of everyday life as a working mother.

In essence, Mbola presents a version of traditionally feminized labor that cannot be easily commodified. In a recent video essay, the food creator Donedo stated that “while there are certainly fans of the farm-to-table lifestyle that [Mbola] embodies, [Smith’s] lifestyle will be far more coveted [in America].” But Smith’s content isn’t just a product of geography or a desire for the American Dream. Smith exists as a vision of capitalist escapism that appeals to women who crave moments of luxurious distraction, or have become disillusioned with navigating a precarious job market that once seemed like theirs for the taking. Though Mbola has built an immense body of work that celebrates the beauty of her childhood surroundings and champions more sustainable food systems, it is a lifestyle that cannot be bought. Being in the kitchen may be a labor of love, but it still requires work.

About the Author

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