

Rap video by local YouTube star Preeti on 'brownface' ad crosses the line, not acceptable: Shanmugam

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SINGAPORE - A local comedian's rap video - made in response to a recent "brownface" advertisement - "crosses the line" and is not acceptable, said Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam.

"This rap video insults Chinese Singaporeans, uses four-letter words on Chinese Singaporeans, vulgar gestures, pointing of middle finger, to make minorities angry with Chinese Singaporeans," he said of the clip featuring YouTuber Preeti Nair and her brother, rapper Subhas Nair.

"When you use four-letter words, vulgar language, attack another race, put it out in public, we have to draw the line and say not acceptable," Mr Shanmugam told reporters on Tuesday (July 30).

Noting that he takes a "zero tolerance" approach to such matters, Mr Shanmugam said if "speech, songs like this are allowed, slowly but surely, it will get worse."

The minister said the Ministry of Communications and Information has also asked social media platform Facebook to take the video down, adding that he has asked the police to investigate the matter.

The 2 min 50 sec-long video was taken down from Facebook and other social media platforms on Tuesday afternoon. The Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) said it issued a notice to the publishers to take down the video, and they complied. "IMDA has assessed that the video by Preeti and Subhas constitutes prohibited content under the Internet Code of Practice, that is objectionable on grounds of public interest and national harmony," said an IMDA spokesman.

The video was uploaded on Monday (July 29), in response to a recent advertisement by e-payments website epaysg.com.

The ad featured Mediacorp actor and DJ Dennis Chew portraying characters such as a woman in a tudung and a man with visibly darker skin.

Broadcaster Mediacorp, through its celebrity management wing, later apologised for the controversial ad and the epaysg.com website has also removed it.

On Tuesday, Mr Shanmugam said it is "not a defence" to say that the rap video had been put up in response to the advertisement.

"If (it was) something you didn't like, then you ask for an apology. If you think it is criminal, you make a police report. You don't cross the line yourself."

He said people may ask why the Government is taking this so seriously - that one video is not going to lead to violence, and people will laugh this off.

This may be the case, but if this one rap video is allowed, then hundreds of others have to be allowed too, Mr Shanmugam said.

"What do you think will happen to our racial harmony? Social fabric? How will people look at each other?" he asked.

"And suppose you allow this video? Let's say a Chinese now does a video attacking Indians, Malays using four-letter words, vulgar gestures ... And let's say there are hundreds or thousands of such videos. How do you think the Indians and Malays will feel?"

"Would people feel safe? Will the minorities feel safe? There are good reasons why Singapore is different, why there is racial harmony here, why all races feel safe, why minorities feel safe. And we must maintain that, we will maintain that," he added.

Similarly, if vulgarities were used to describe another's religion, this will also not be allowed, Mr Shanmugam said.

"When you put out statements that wound racial, religious feelings, that's an offence in Singapore... We cannot allow these sorts of attacks," he added.

On the epaysg.com advertisement, Mr Shanmugam noted that 30 years ago, people would have said it was in "poor taste" and "passé".

"Today, I think it's worse than that. You need that cultural sensitivity. You have a Chinese brown out the face and pass off as Indian or Malay, there's going to be a lot of distaste," he noted.

"Similar things have happened in other countries and really, they should have taken a reference from that to see how people will react," he added.

He also said he had asked lawyers to look into the epaysg.com advertisement, and their view was that it is not an offence.

Institute of Policy Studies' senior research fellow Mathew Mathews said some people – including millennials and Ms Nair's fans – may be upset by the tough approach taken by the Government towards the rap video.

Going by the comments on the video before it was taken down, people do not seem to be offended and are aware that it is targeted at those who are racist, said Dr Mathews.

But as the video is online, it also goes out to a wide audience, he pointed out.

"For an audience which does not know all the context, may not be a fan, and doesn't understand all your good intentions, they could see it as being very insulting," he said.

The video also talks about the entire Chinese community, rather than just being a critical commentary of those who were responsible for the "brownface" advertisement, he added. "The video is a racist way of addressing racism, which I think is done in very poor taste," said Dr Mathews.

UNCALLED FOR

Other politicians have also weighed in on the incident, criticising both the "brownface" advertisement and rap video, while stressing the importance of racial harmony.

Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad said the advertisement was disrespectful and offended many due to its insensitivity, while the video was “uncalled for” and “totally offensive”.

Chairman of racial harmony advocacy group OnePeople.sg, Dr Janil Puthuchery, said: “As the performers suggest, two wrongs don’t make a right. They do not seem to have heeded their own advice.”

“We did not get this far in race relations, by trading one offence for another. We are better than either of these two examples. I find them both unacceptable,” said Dr Janil, also Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information.

Dr Janil also said the advertisement was “inappropriate, ill-judged and in poor taste”.

Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu said the incidents are a reminder that race relations in a society as diverse as Singapore’s can never be taken for granted.

“It is a constant work in progress, and we must always strive to do better. Mistakes will sometimes be made that cause misunderstanding and hurt among people. But as a society, let us resolve such issues in a spirit of mutual respect,” she noted.

Mr Zaqy also cited the Malay proverb - Bahasa menunjukkan bangsa - which highlights that the language used reflects one’s appreciation of its culture.

“We must always strive to embody this saying, to be respectful with one another, so as to safeguard our racial harmony and unity as one people,” he said.