

Vile rap video could spark ‘free for all’

Allowing offensive video attacking ‘brownface’ ad to remain online would worsen racism here at expense of minorities: Shanmugam

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If a recent controversial rap video calling out racism was allowed to remain online – as some have called for – then other videos with racially offensive speech will also have to be permitted, Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam said yesterday.

This would come at the expense of minorities here and worsen racism in Singapore, he said at a discussion on race organised by the National University of Singapore’s Department of Communications and New Media (CNM).

Explaining why the Government had ordered the video by YouTube artist Preeti Nair and her brother to be taken down, Mr Shanmugam said: “If we allow the line to be crossed... then it’s free for all, the Chinese can be equally offensive, and the minorities will be the losers in such a conversation.”

But noting that it was important to have frank discussions about race and for people to ex-



Mr K. Shanmugam speaking at a discussion on race organised by the National University of Singapore’s Department of Communications and New Media. TNP PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

press themselves, he said of the video: “The only thing that is being objected to is the tone.

“When you use offensive language, others will use offensive language and it takes a completely different dimension.”

Mr Shanmugam was speaking to about 100 university students, staff and members of the public at the CNM Leaders Summit, where participants get to engage key political and industry leaders on specific issues.

Racism was the main topic, in light of a controversial adver-

tisement to promote e-payments and which featured a Chinese actor in “brownface”, playing a man with visibly darker skin and a woman in a tudung.

In response, Ms Nair and her brother, Mr Subhas Nair, made a parody rap video containing four-letter words and vulgar gestures to call out the racism by Chinese Singaporeans.

The police later gave the siblings a conditional warning for the video. The Infocomm Media Development Authority also issued a stern reminder to those

involved in the ad on the importance of paying attention to racial and religious sensitivities.

Mr Shanmugam said the laws must apply equally to all, and if the rap video were permitted, this would mean that the Chinese can do likewise and make similar racially offensive videos about Malays and Indians.

“In any society, 95 per cent of the people would not go and do these things and attack another race. But if you allow the 5 per cent to do it, over time that will become 10, 15 per cent,” he said.

“Once it becomes normalised, it’s perfectly normal to talk about each other along these lines. Then to what extent do you think we will be able to have that kind of interactions we have today, where by and large the races co-exist and conduct relationships on a certain basis of respect and trust?” he asked the audience.

Mr Shanmugam cited a poll by government feedback unit Reach of more than 1,150 people, which found while awareness of the recent controversy was high, only about one in 10

actually watched the video.

The majority, or 76 per cent, supported the government stance of removing such videos from the Internet.

Asked by a participant if the decision to censure the video could have been left up to society, Mr Shanmugam said it had crossed the line of criminality.

“If society feels that such a video in the future should not be considered to be in breach, then the law will have to change.

“And you are the people who are going to determine what the laws ought to be, because the laws reflect the social values and mores of society,” he said, noting the laws will change if that is what the majority wants.

Mr Shanmugam said he feels there should be a conversation, preferably from the ground up, on race and religion.

“It’s a topic that is trending now and people are aware of it. We should discuss it – how do the minorities feel, how do the majorities feel. Have this openness in the conversation.”

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