Read the letter Snap's head of diversity sent to staff about its offensive Juneteenth filter

Snap's vice president of diversity and inclusion apologized this weekend for the distribution of a Juneteeth filter that many people found offensive and offered new details about the how it was created. In an email distributed to the company, Oona King said the filter released Friday was a collaboration between black and white employees — and pushed back against criticism that the company had been culturally insensitive.

The filter — Snap calls them "lenses" — asked users to "smile and break the chains" of slavery. King, who is black, said that "in hindsight, we should have developed a more appropriate lens."

"Speaking on behalf of my team, clearly we failed to recognize the gravity of the 'smile' trigger," King wrote in a letter to the company. "That is a failure I fully own. We reviewed the Lens from the standpoint of Black creative content, made by and for Black people, so did not adequately consider how it would look when used by non-Black members of our community. What we also did not fully realize was a) that a 'smile' trigger would necessarily include the actual word "smile" on the content; and b) that people would perceive this as work created by White creatives, not Black creatives."

Despite the collaboration, the filter did not go through the usual review process, a Snap spokeswoman said. The company is investigating the matter.

Snap has long struggled with the perception that it lacks a diverse team. Unlike most of its peers, the company has refused to release a diversity report about its workforce, though it said this month it was planning to to share more information in the future. The company has previously released several filters it later had to apologize for, including a Bob Marley-themed filter in 2016 and an anime-themed filter later that year.

King's full letter is below (emphasis hers).

> *Dear Team,*
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> *As a leader responsible for driving Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Snap, I want to directly address what happened with the Juneteenth Lens yesterday.*
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> *Snap released a Lens to commemorate Juneteenth that many people felt was offensive because it prompted users to 'smile' to break the chains of slavery. Snap was also accused of failing to include Black perspectives in the creation of our Lens to mark Juneteenth – a date often celebrated by African-Americans to mark the end of slavery. After reviewing how the process unfolded, it's very clear that Black Snap team members were fully involved in every stage of developing and approving the Lens and that, in hindsight, we should have developed a more appropriate Lens.*
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> *I particularly want to apologize to our team members who have been accused both externally and internally of failing to be culturally sensitive; in some instances they have actually been called racist. This is completely unacceptable.*
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> *All of these accusations are particularly painful, first because we care so deeply about racial justice, and second because the accusations are completely untrue. For the record, and the avoidance of all doubt: the two Snap team members who on separate occasions specifically questioned if the "smile" trigger was appropriate for Juneteenth were two*

White team members. The Snap team members who suggested the smile trigger to begin with, and said it was acceptable to use, were Black Snap team members, and / or members of my team.

Speaking on behalf of my team, clearly we failed to recognize the gravity of the "smile" trigger. That is a failure I fully own. We reviewed the Lens from the standpoint of Black creative content, made by and for Black people, so did not adequately consider how it would look when used by non-Black members of our community. What we also did not fully realize was a) that a 'smile' trigger would necessarily include the actual ***word*** *"smile" on the content; and b) that people would perceive this as work created by* ***White*** *creatives, not Black creatives.*

We feel it is perfectly acceptable as Black people to celebrate the end of slavery – as we do with picnics, BBQs, street parties and other forms of celebration across America – and say "Smile! Happy Juneteenth; we're no longer enslaved! But we're not yet really free either!" However for a White person to tell a Black person: "Smile! You're no longer slaves" is offensive in the extreme. I'm hoping many people will understand how the same word can be appropriate in one context, but inappropriate in another, depending on who is using it. Regardless, we should not have used smiling as a trigger to break the chains of slavery in the Lens, and we understand why that was offensive.

The mischaracterization on social media – that White executives at a tech company failed, yet again, to include Black perspectives – is completely untrue. What is true is that regardless of our diverse backgrounds, we are all human, and humans make mistakes. We are building a culture where we confront and acknowledge our errors so that we can learn, improve and grow together. This mistake has taught us a valuable lesson, and I am sincerely sorry that it came at the expense of what we meant to be a respectful commemoration of

this important day.

Oona

https://www.theverge.com/2020/6/21/21298251/snap-juneteenth-filter-lens-oona-king-statement-snapchat