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## Vogue's Wintour defends controversial Kamala Harris cover



This combination of pictures shows two handout photo courtesy of Vogue, of US Vice President-elect Kamala Harris in a Michael Kors Collection suit on the February 2021 cover of Vogue magazine (left) and against colors inspired by those of her Howard university sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris (right) as she wears a Donald Deal jacket and Converse sneakers on the February 2021 cover of Vogue magazine. — AFP

A Vogue cover photo of a casual Vice President-elect Kamala Harris has sparked controversy, with critics saying it diminishes the politician's achievements, forcing editor Anna Wintour to defend the image Tuesday. Criticism of the cover has spread on social media since it was released on Sunday, with users insisting that what they see as a poorly composed portrait of Harris wearing sneakers is disrespectful to the first Black woman to be elected vice president. The photo-in which Harris also wears a blazer and jeans was taken by American photographer Tyler Mitchell, who in 2018 became the first Black photographer to shoot a Vogue cover with his portraits of music icon Beyonce.

It was this image that Wintour chose to grace the cover of the hard copy of the February issue, rather than a more formal portrait of Harris in a light blue Michael Kors pantsuit, which was also taken by Mitchell. Writing in the Washington Post, fashion critic Robin Givhan said the print cover was "overly familiar" and did not

give Harris "due respect." Social media users also slammed the photo's lighting and questioned whether the magazine had lightened Harris's skin. "Obviously we have heard and understood the reaction to the print cover and I just want to reiterate that it was absolutely not our intention to, in any way, diminish the importance of the Vice President-elect's incredible victory," Wintour said in a statement to New York Times reporter Kara Swisher. Swisher, host of the podcast "Sway," also broadcast a rare interview with Wintour Tuesday that was carried out before the controversy.

#### 'Positive change'

In the interview, the artistic director of Vogue's publisher, Conde Nast, describes the cover as "just so joyful and optimistic." "I cannot imagine that there's anyone that really is going to find this cover anything but that, and positive, and an image of a woman in control of her life who is going to bring us with the president-elect the leadership that we so

need," Wintour said. Harris, 56, has not publicly reacted but sources close to her have told US media that she was surprised by the choice of the more relaxed photo.

The controversy is the latest to engulf Wintour, who found herself under pressure during the massive Black Lives Matter protests that swept the US last summer. She apologized for not making enough room for Black stylists and photographers in the magazine. Wintour added that she also took "full responsibility" for "publishing images or stories that have been hurtful or intolerant." Rumors that she would resign circulated, but the British-born 71-year-old-described by Forbes magazine in 2017 as the "most powerful woman" in media-has remained at the helm of Vogue. "We've heard the complaints and the issues that have been raised by everybody who works at Conde Nast and we're working towards, I think, a lot of very positive change," she told Swisher. — AFP

## Marvel superheroes return... in quirky black-and-white sitcom

When the Marvel superhero movies reached their box office-shattering climax in 2019, nobody could have predicted the saga's next installment would be a kitsch, black-and-white TV sitcom called "WandaVision." But a lot has changed since Iron Man and friends saved the world in that summer's all-time record-grossing blockbuster "Avengers: Endgame" (and mopped up some loose plot points in "Spider-Man: Far From Home" shortly thereafter.) The wildly popular franchise of 23 interconnected movies has ground to a halt along with the rest of the world as Covid-19 shuttered movie theaters, delaying "Black Widow" and other big-screen superhero sequels.

Meanwhile parent company Disney has splashed out billions bringing its biggest franchises and characters to the Disney+ TV platform, as it locks horns with Netflix, HBO Max and others in the spendthrift "streaming wars." So here to finally push onward the over-arching plot of Marvel's "cinematic universe" is "WandaVision," an oddball and fiercely original series out Friday on Disney+. It stars witch Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen), and other-worldly android Vision (Paul Bettany), two B-list superheroes who struck up an unlikely but fan-favorite romance across several recent Marvel films. "WandaVision" finds them-without explanation-living happily married in the idyllic 1950s town of Westview, which is seemingly lifted straight from an episode of "Bewitched" or "I Love Lucy" (com-



In this file photo (From left) US actress Elizabeth Olsen, English-US actor Paul Bettany and US actress Teyonah Parris speak on stage for the Marvel panel in Hall H of the Convention Center during Comic Con in San Diego, California.

three well-received episodes, which are remarkable mainly for humorous set-pieces in which the pair narrowly avoid revealing their secret to nosy neighbors.

"The (Marvel) movies are hilarious and that's definitely a huge part of their secret sauce," said Shakman, who drew influence from his background on other TV comedies including "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia." "The number one rule that we learned on 'Sunny' is if it makes us laugh, it will make other people laugh." Beyond the gags, starved Marvel obsessives are itching to find out what has happened to their favorite

Galaxy, 'Thor: Ragnarok'... they're constantly playing around with genre and tone and doing things that other people thought were pretty bonkers," he said. "That worked out great in the end. And 'WandaVision' definitely is a big swing... it's very different." — AFP

#### 'UNCLE ROGER' COMEDIAN SPARKS CHINA CENSORSHIP ROW WITH DELETED VIDEO

A UK-based comedian has sparked a censorship row after he apologized to Chinese fans and removed a video featuring a fellow YouTube star who had been critical of Beijing. Malaysian-born stand-up Nigel Ng has become a viral sensation in recent months with his character "Uncle Roger", an alter-ego based on a disapproving middle-aged man who critiques bad attempts at making Asian cuisine. His video of a horrified Uncle Roger watching a BBC presenter butcher fried rice has racked up more than 20 million views on his YouTube channel. The video was also widely ripped and shared inside China. But Ng now finds himself at the centre of a storm over digital content creators bowing to Chinese censorship-even on platforms that cannot be accessed inside the authoritarian mainland.

The comedian's presence in China is relatively small: his account on the Twitter-like Weibo platform has just 125,000 followers compared to the three million subscribers on YouTube, a website that is blocked by China's censors. On Tuesday Ng posted a message on Weibo announcing he had deleted a video which featured Mike Chen, a popular American food blogger and YouTuber.

"During the cooperation between me and the YouTuber, I wasn't aware of his political thoughts and the incorrect remarks he had made on China," Ng wrote, adding the video featuring Chen had created "negative social impact". During the video-copies of which were still available online-Ng and Chen review another food presenter's attempts to make dumplings. There is no discussion of politics. But Chen is frequently critical of Beijing on own social media platforms, writing posts about human rights abuses in Hong Kong and against China's Uighur Muslim minority. He also highlights Beijing's pursuit of the Falun Gong, a religious sect that has been banned by mainland authorities. Ng did not respond to requests for comment.

But Chen decried the decision to delete the video and said it illustrated China's growing sway over artists beyond its borders. "I do think that what happened here is the result of the Chinese Communist Party's censorship, even if it wasn't direct censorship," he said.—AFP



Malaysian-born stand-up Nigel Ng



In this file photo Best Director nominee and Best Original Screenplay nominee for "Vice" Adam McKay and wife Shira Piven arrive for the 91st Annual Academy Awards at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California.



In this file photo US actor Leonardo DiCaprio arrives at a social restaurant that aims to help the homeless in Edinburgh, Scotland ahead of his appearance this evening at the Scottish Business Awards. — AFP photos

## Netflix announces 70 star-packed 2021 films

Already the master of 2020's pandemic-era movie landscape, Netflix on Tuesday offered a preview of upcoming 2021 releases, a list with no fewer than 70 star-studded feature films. The sneak peek is unusual for the streaming giant, which historically has dropped news of only one film at a time—a testament to its clout as it easily surpasses the release volume of every Hollywood studio. From drama, comedy and science fiction to horror and even Westerns, the slate will take in every major film genre before the year is out, with some releases poised as potential competition for major awards. Among the most-anticipated titles is "Don't Look Up," from filmmaker Adam McKay of "The Big Short" and "Vice" fame and starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

"The Harder They Fall," a Western co-

produced by Jay-Z and with a primarily Black cast including Regina King and Idris Elba, also promises to be one to look out for. But the list included premier dates for only 10 of the titles—from early January to mid-March. The announcement—via a brochure on the streamer's website—was accompanied by a short video presented by "Wonder Woman" star Gal Gadot, "Jumanji" lead Dwayne Johnson and "Deadpool" actor Ryan Reynolds. The video also features Regina King, Adrien Brody, Meryl Streep, Sandra Bullock, Octavia Spencer, Jeremy Irons—even Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence—showcasing the several Oscar winners Netflix has snagged for their 2021 season.

The directors featured on the slate include notable names such as Jane Campion for "The Power of the Dog," Halle Berry and Lin-Manuel Miranda in both of their first spins behind the camera. Johnson, Gadot and Reynolds will appear in "Red Notice," an action film with a \$160 million budget, according to US media. Netflix did not respond to an AFP query about which-if any-of its 2021 films would also receive theatrical releases. The preview came as Warner Bros. dropped its own slate, revealing that it would release all 17 of its 2021 titles simultaneously in theaters and on HBO MAX. — AFP



This file photo shows Floor Jansen (right) and Marco Hietala of the band Nightwish performing at the City National Grove of Anaheim in Anaheim, California. — AFP

## Disillusioned bassist quits Finnish metal band Nightwish

The bass player of the Finnish symphonic metal band Nightwish announced Tuesday he was leaving the group, citing his mental health and disillusionment with the music industry. Nightwish, whose original members came from Kitee town close to the Finnish-Russian border, rose to international fame in the 2000s thanks to their epic compositions and the operatic vocals of classically trained singer Tarja Turunen. "I have some reinventing to do," Marko Hietala said in a statement on Twitter, adding: "It's dangerous for me and the people around me if I continue." The 54-year-old accused music executives of squeezing artists and "unfairly sharing the profits". Hietala joined the group in 2001 as bassist and second vocalist, while Turunen later fell out with co-founder and keyboardist Tuomas Holopainen and left the band in 2005.

Nonetheless the band's cult status

saw their 2007 album "Dark Passion Play" reach number one in six countries and make platinum in Germany. With international sales of over nine million, Nightwish are the most successful metal export from Finland, the country which a 2012 analysis claimed has the world's highest concentration of metal bands per capita. Other noteworthy headbangers from the Nordic nation include HIM, Apocalyptica and Lordi, whose monster hit "Hard Rock Hallelujah" bagged Finland its first Eurovision win in 2006. Two weeks ago Alexi Laiho, frontman of the Finnish group Children of Bodom, died aged 41 following "long-term health issues," according to his bandmates. The virtuoso player was named Best Metal Guitarist in 2009 by the readers of Guitar World magazine, public broadcaster YLE reported. — AFP



In this file photo (From left) President of Marvel Studios/Producer Kevin Feige, actors Chris Hemsworth, Chris Evans, Robert Downey Jr, Scarlett Johansson, Mark Ruffalo and Jeremy Renner attends the Marvel Studios' 'Avengers: Endgame' cast place their hand prints in cement at TCL Chinese Theatre IMAX Forecourt, in Hollywood, California. — AFP photos

plete with canned laughter track.)

They still have superpowers, but have traded battles with genocidal villains for a cozy world of school fundraisers, neighborhood watch meetings and anniversary dinners. If that sounds incredibly weird, it is. "When I first heard the pitch of the show, I was gobs-macked," admitted director Matt Shakman. "There are so many shows out there on streaming right now-to find something that feels so special, like it hasn't been done before, that's really rare," he told AFP. "And this definitely is one of those."

#### 'Secret sauce'

Of course, all is not what it seems. Mystery shrouds the arrival of Wanda and Vision in their bizarre new home, and some neighbors appear to know more than they initially let on. Trailers suggest that later episodes will hop through time and bring Marvel fans the more familiar popcorn action sequences they have been craving—and, indeed, scenes shot in color. Keeping plot under wraps, Marvel has shown press just

characters. Marvel has produced dozens of TV series before, but "WandaVision" is the first confirmed to fit-somehow-into the films' grand, shared storyline. An explosion of fan theories has tried to solve these riddles, not least how the show gets around Vision's death in 2018 film "Avengers: Infinity War." "There is so much anticipation for the show," said Shakman. "The 'why' of it all is part of the great mystery of the show," he explained.

#### 'Crazy risks'

"WandaVision" is just the first of a dozen Marvel series in the works for Disney+. Bosses hope the shows can emulate the small-screen crossover success of "Star Wars" smash hit "The Mandalorian," which has sent subscribers to the new platform in their droves. But while "Star Wars" films have traditionally stuck to a fairly rigid "space Western" formula, Marvel have never been afraid to experiment, said Shakman.

"They have been taking these crazy risks the whole time-'Guardians of the