Playing Strangers, Providing Care: An Ethnographic Study of Yik Yak at Swarthmore College

by

Emma Kates-Shaw

Advised by Christopher Fraga

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Swarthmore College

2016
Acknowledgements

I would like to give my sincerest thanks to the friends and family who have actively and passively made this paper possible, and to my advisor and department for supporting, advising, editing, correcting, and guiding this project into being.
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In September of 2015, I am sitting at a table with five friends I was close with freshman year, but who now exist as their own separate friend group. They lived together sophomore year, and they often spend time together as a group without me. This is not to say there is animosity here, just that at this meal I find myself bearing witness to a social group of which I am not fully a part.

We start to talk about Yik Yak. What was the joke on the feed this morning that everyone was talking about? It must have gotten voted off. Luckily, someone saved a screenshot of the original joke, before it got downvoted and disappeared. We pass around the phone, gasp, laugh, go back to looking at our own phones and pointing out the yaks we think are funny, horrible, interesting. This is not an uncommon interaction, I realize, for this group of people. They seem to have a script of sorts; it is a practice with its own set of actions, with compulsory words and motions and rules. I am outside of it, but I can participate because the app is on my phone, too; I use it to waste time, too; I, too, have seen the things they are talking about.

But in this moment, Yik Yak changes for me. Yes, it is a “place” for wasting time, an app people scroll through while sitting on the toilet, staying up too late, distracting themselves from their work. But it is also very much a part of people’s real lives at Swarthmore and elsewhere. It occupies a tangible space in our social sphere, whether we actively participate in that space or not. The research presented in this paper takes this as a given, assumes that Yik Yak is not a useless, time-wasting app that college kids use to be cruel to each other, but that it is crucial to understand as a real and important part of
social interaction on college campuses and beyond. This is the first push toward my thesis research: I want to understand what that social interaction looks like, how it affects and becomes part of “real life.”

The same group of people later tells me a story which becomes critical to another aspect of my research - the ways in which individuals interact with and understand the format of the app itself. The five of them are sitting in one of their rooms on a Friday night. No parties are going on, they’re making their own fun. The nature of the hangout turns to being on Yik Yak, and together, the group decides to “take over” the feed. Because five net downvotes eliminates a post, they agree to eliminate all posts that come up on the feed by each downvoting from their own devices. Then, they start to post things of their own that are nonsensical, random, but unified in their randomness. And each of these posts gets five upvotes from the others in the room, so it sticks around on the feed.

This anecdote gives fascinating insight into the ways in which people play with, manipulate, and in some cases abuse the format of the app, specifically its’ anonymity feature and location-based feed. In these ways, individuals actively participate in creating community dialogue, in this case literally creating the entirety of the community of Yik Yak’s dialog for a set period of time. I was shocked to find that this turned out to be a common practice in certain friend groups, sometimes being employed in more malicious ways. But its impact on the feed - something which many people on campus see and react to as part of their real lived social experience - is a testament to the dimensions that exist within individuals’ engagements with Yik Yak, and to the importance of studying those engagements seriously.
Thus, this paper will center on Yik Yak, a social media anonymous posting app for phones, and its use at Swarthmore College. My aim in this first chapter is to provide background information about the app and the ways in which it is used, as well as information about Swarthmore College and the culture and norms which make it unique. Additionally, I will briefly discuss the theories and frameworks on which my research is based, as well as the existing scholarship dealing with Yik Yak, and the importance of research on the app that goes beyond a focus of cyberbullying and harassment, and moves toward an understanding of the social space Yik Yak creates and the ways in which it is mediated. These concepts will be expanded upon in the second chapter.

1.1 Introduction to Yik Yak: Format and Rules

Yik Yak is an app formatted as a feed limited to about 100 posts, which, depending on how “active” an individual feed is, are visible on the feed for anywhere from a few hours to 100 days (Parkinson 2014). All posts are anonymous, although over the period of time that my research was conducted, Yik Yak introduced a “handle” feature, which allows users to create a name that gets attached to anything they post. This feature, however, can be turned off at any time or for any specific post for which a user wishes to remain completely anonymous.

Posts on an individual’s feed are determined based on location: users can only view posts within a 1.5-mile radius of their current location (Parkinson 2014). Yik Yak introduced a feature early in 2015 that allows users to set a home “herd,” that is, a specific location-based feed that can be accessed from anywhere. This allows, for
instance, a college campus feed to stay active during breaks when people are no longer physically at the school.

The app is popular mainly among college students, likely because it has already been banned in many middle and high schools for abuse of its anonymity feature in the form of cyberbullying and harassment (Papenfuss 2015, Patchin 2014). The app has a loosely enforced “over 18” policy, which only appears on the rules as a suggestion: “Yakkers should not join a herd until they are mature enough, so no one under 18 should be on Yik Yak”. However, in a conscious effort to reduce high schoolers’ use of the app, Yik Yak collaborated with data provider Maponics to geofence all high schools in the US, making it impossible to use the app when a user’s location is too close to a high school (Parkinson 2014).

The creators of Yik Yak, Tyler Droll and Brooks Buffington, acknowledge that the very nature of the app allows for “misuse from a small group of users,” but they also point out that “As more users sign up and start using the app, each community begins to self-regulate itself in a positive way” (as quoted in Parkinson 2014). This self-regulation happens in a few different forms. Firstly users can “vote” on a yak, which affects its popularity, and when a Yak receives too many downvotes, specifically net -5, it gets taken off of the feed. Contrastingly, a yak with a large number of net upvotes will be visible at the top of a feed being sorted by most popular yaks (users can choose to sort their feed by either “New” or “Hot,” seeing either the most recent yaks or yaks with the most upvotes at the top of their feed). In this way, yakkers in a given location set the tone for their herd, and “decide” what stays, what leaves, and what achieves a certain level of “fame,” i.e., rises to the top of a feed being sorted by “Hot” (as opposed to “New”).
Additionally, posts may be “flagged” by users for the following reasons: offensive content, targeting of an individual, spam, handle, or “other”. When a user flags a yak, they can opt to no longer see posts from that yak’s author. The process of flagging reports the post to “moderators,” who can then decide to take more serious action. However, as one of my informants noted, this process is mediated “from a distance and by individuals who are not a part of the community” on which the offensive content was originally posted. Upon further investigation, it is incredibly difficult to tell who exactly these moderators are, whether they are hired by Yik Yak or based in certain locations. Thus, it is possible that yaks which are “offensive” in a specific setting, i.e. Swarthmore College, may not be dealt with in the ways individuals in the community feel are appropriate.

Another regulatory measure that the app employs is a warning that comes up before a post containing specific words can be posted. While no record of all of the triggers for this warning exists, words associated with violence, hate speech, or personal identifying information are likely to set it off. A message pops up when the user tries to post, and asks if they are sure the content is appropriate. A user can choose to go forward and post the content, or may be convinced by the message that their words could be harmful, and decide not to post.

The final, most informal way in which regulation takes place is in the form of comments on yaks. An individual who finds a yak offensive may choose to express what it is they take issue with, and dialogue often forms around controversial topics. While all users are anonymous, commenters on a yak are given an icon to identify them on that yak’s comment feed, so that dialogue between recognizable individuals is possible. Original authors of yaks, should they choose to comment on their own yak, are
identifiable by an icon with the letters “OP” (for “original poster”) and can therefore respond directly to comments on their own yak.

Other features, which are not critical to my research, are nonetheless part of the dialogue informants use when discussing the app. These include “yakarma,” which refers to a number representing one’s “activity” on the app, i.e. posting yaks or comments that get multiple upvotes or comments, and voting on other yaks. This number is only visible to the individual user, so users cannot see the “yakarma” of anyone except themselves. There is a “peek” feature, which allows you to find and save locations whose feeds you can look at but not post on, unless you yourself are in that area. There are also “Global Herds,” which are essentially forums on which anyone in the world can post, and the feeds of global herds are usually themed around a specific event, question, or topic.

It is important to note that, due to the location-based nature of the app, Yik Yak’s content and trends likely look very different in different places. Additionally, local, national and global events tend to take over feeds for periods of time. My work will focus on Swarthmore College, a progressive and liberal environment, and my specific claims and results may not necessarily apply to Yik Yak’s use or trends in other areas. However, it is my hope that the more general findings and research, regarding social space and Yik Yak user-ship will be more broadly applicable and relevant.

1.2 Swarthmore College

Swarthmore College is a small liberal arts school located approximately 10 miles outside of central Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The school’s current enrollment is 1,534 students, and although that number has been climbing slightly year by year, it
nevertheless means that many faces on campus are familiar, and there is an assumption that one “knows everyone” at the College, or at least is only removed from strangers by one or two common connections.

The college is known for its rigorous academic environment, liberal political climate, and social-justice oriented student body. On the college website, under student life, along with varsity sports teams and the number of students who live on campus, there is a statistic for percentage of students who volunteer (60%), emphasizing the student body’s serious social justice focus.

As an admissions officer states in an information session I attended in November of 2015, Swarthmore students are “driven, curious, and excited to engage with others in academic and social settings alike.” The college website reiterates this: “The diversity of perspectives represented by Swarthmore students, faculty, and staff - including different viewpoints, identities, and histories - contributes to the community’s strong sense of open dialogue and engagement with ideas and issues.” There is an emphasis here on dialogue and engagement with others, two things that are also present in Swarthmore’s Yik Yak community and vital to my research.

1.3 Generational Differences in Subjects

The subjects with whom my research is concerned range in age from 18-22, and grew up during a critical moment in online interactions. Facebook, which became widely popular between 2006 and 2008, when it expanded beyond college campus users and became accessible to anyone over 13 (Zeevi 2013), was not a part of the middle school experiences of the older of my subjects, but was present for my informants aged 18 and
19. Thus, my younger informants began mediating their communication online at an earlier developmental period than did older informants. While only five years separate my informants, it is important to note that they occupy different “generations” technologically.

1.4 Existing Yik Yak Research and Cyberbullying

Much of the writing on Yik Yak exists in the form of online news articles citing reactionary measures from institutions at which it has become a social ill. Specifically, most of the articles published attacking the app for cyberbullying potential discuss its use by teens and in high schools and middle schools, and for threats of violence or hate speech (Duncan 2014; Horsman 2015; Lapowski 2014). An exception to this rule is a study conducted at the University of Florida by Health researchers Erik Black, Kelsey Mezzina, and Lindsay Thompson during the same period of time that my research took place, which examined the content of entire feeds at “peek”-able college campuses (Black et. al 2016). This study was the first of its kind to look at and analyze entire feeds from college campuses. However, this was a purely empirical study, concerned primarily with the statistical breakdown of feeds in terms of content. Still missing from this body of scholarship is an ethnographic approach that deals with individuals’ experiences and testimonies about the role the app plays in day-to-day life. It is my hope that my research can begin to expand on this field of study, and provide insight into the complexity of the social space that Yik Yak occupies and contributes to.
Chapter 2: Anonymity and Space: Framing

2.1 Ethics of Anonymity

In the fall of 2015, as I was beginning work for this thesis, Katherine Cross, a PhD student and sociologist at CUNY Graduate Center, came to Swarthmore to present a talk called “Ethics for Cyborgs”. She discussed the online world, specifically the world of gaming communities, as if it were a nation, and its users citizens. This framing was critical for me as I began to formulate a direction from which I wished to approach my research. Cross’s work deals with online communities in which, much like on Yik Yak, anonymity is a crucial part of membership. Being anonymous on these platforms, Cross says, is complicated. Anonymity allows individuals to say things - sometimes horrendous, harmful things - to others that they may not say face to face, but it also allows people whose identities are marginalized in “real life” to be safe from recognition (Cross 2014). The vilification of anonymity as the main source of violence online (Levmore 2010; Nussbaum 2010), she says, limits our understanding of its complexity. Gaming communities in which anonymity has caused harassment, threats, and violence, she says, are also communities in which that anonymity is vital to maintain. User-citizens in these communities, Cross posits, are likely to prefer engaging in self-regulatory measures over eliminating anonymity (Cross 2014).

Cross’s work deals with online gaming communities, and her aim to de-vilify anonymity is wrapped up in the importance of “fantasy” in these games. Anonymity, she argues, “is part and parcel of what can make video gaming so enchanting… the conceit of play facilitates the construction of new identities that might prove difficult or impossible
in the physical world” (Cross 2014). While “play” here denotes actual game-play, I recognized in her argument an assertion of the importance of online spaces that exist for their own sake, forums and platforms like Yik Yak where people do not presume seriousness and are, in many ways, “playing.” I felt incredibly moved by Cross’s commitment to taking those spaces seriously, to investigating their complexities and nuances rather than focusing solely on the violence and hatred contained in them.

As I began to work on my thesis with Cross’s framework in mind, I was met with doubt from individuals in my own life who expressed a distrust and distaste for the potential for these spaces to hold meaning beyond adolescent flippancy and violent, harmful “play.” This doubt was reinforced by the overwhelmingly negative writings about Yik Yak that I began my research with (Duncan 2014; Horsman 2015; Lapowski 2014). Rather than deterring me from my aim, I came to recognize this as an example of the duty young social scientists have to prove that our spaces, our socialites, our ways of being in the world, are valid and real.

2.2 “Phone Space”

This being said, there is no doubt that online interactions are, in many ways, pacifying and disengaging. For one thing, phones present us with new, transitory “spaces” in which we find ourselves spending measurable amounts of time. Individuals’ awareness of their personal phone usage as it relates to presence is in no way concrete. Consider your own phone usage: using your phone in a physical space takes you “out” of the space and into the realm of the phone, although you remain at least partially aware of your physical surroundings (if the physical space in which you found yourself suddenly
became engulfed in flames, or a friend called out your name, you would be able to leave the phone space and re-enter fully into the physical space).

Much of this ambiguity has to do with the relationship of oneself to one’s phone, or, in a more abstract sense, the knowledge of self as social subject present on social media platforms. In her examination of the ways in which this subject is present in social media, Zeena Feldman notes, “while destabilising conventional binaries of belonging, the mediated Subject remains marked by the demands of presence and absence, of rejection and inclusion, of nearness and distance” (Feldman 2011, pg.111). To “belong” online, we must be present there and make our presence known. But in doing so, our presence in “the real world” complicates and morphs. There is a struggle here to define presence, absence, and the spaces in between.

Marc Augé is similarly concerned with these aspects of presence versus absence. In Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, Augé discusses in depth the concept of the “non-place” as transitory space, as neither near nor far, as space in which we do not feel we are fully present, but rather “passing through”. It is certainly not too far of a stretch to relate Augé’s theory of physical non-places to the use of phones in physical spaces. Augé delineates non-places is as follows: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (Augé 1995, pg. 77-78).

Phones, and the time spent on them in social “places,” masquerade as concerned with relations, history, and identity, but in lived reality this is not the case. Time spent on a phone, even in contact with another person, is often time spent alone. And so, as Augé
later notes, “the complex skein of cable and wireless networks [mobilizes] extraterrestrial space for the purposes of communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself” (Augé 1995). Phone space is therefore non-place, but also deeply personal space. And in the case of social media, phone space, non-place, and the individual embodied in these realms becomes public space. It is through this framework that I approach the aspects of my research that deal with embodiment on the platform of Yik Yak, specifically individuals’ understandings of who it is that is present on Yik Yak, who is listening, and who is being heard.

While people, especially those with whom my research is concerned (college students) may be considered not “present” in a physical space when they are on their phones, and would likely qualify time spent on apps as “doing nothing,” it must also be understood that the interactions which occur on apps are indeed real, and occupy their own time and place in individuals’ social spheres.

Critical to this endeavor is a deeper understanding of the sections in Marc Augé’s Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity that deal with the paradoxical near and elsewhere as it relates to the practice of anthropological research. Augé’s near and elsewhere deal with the physical and cultural senses of the words: near meaning culturally non-foreign (read: Euro-centric, Western-centric, and although Augé does not mention it specifically, white, male and heterosexual-centric), elsewhere meaning the opposite of all of these things, combined with an exoticized fantasy of the symbolic implications of these differences. Augé questions whether the anthropologies of near and elsewhere are in fact entirely separate endeavors—he outlines the ways in which
an anthropology of the near is often understood as less sophisticated or conceptually complex than anthropology of the elsewhere.

There is a duality here, Augé notes, in that the weakness of an anthropology of the near seems to stem both from “a possible weakness in the capacity of European societies for symbolization,” and/or “the limited ability of Europeanist ethnologists to analyze it” (Augé 1995, pg.11). The question here is one that involves not only the culture or place being studied, but also the identity of the ethnographer him/herself. The task of engaging with an anthropology of the near is thus challenging by virtue of both the ethnographer’s potential inability to examine his/her own culture and the potential for the culture to, in a way, resist being studied by not offering up anything for scrutiny other than that which we, as members of the physically/culturally “near” community, already know. Although Augé is not speaking specifically here about online communities, his concept of distance applies quite well to the complexity of studying online interactions like those which occur on Yik Yak, and illuminates some of the murkiness of how these interactions are to be viewed as a researcher both physically and socially close to the community in which the research is taking place. For it is proximity that unites Yik Yak users, but in many ways both users and the app itself are distant and strange, unrecognizable as any one individual or member of a community. In this way, the app deals largely with the concept of the stranger, and the ethnographer enters the field on the same level as everyone else, unrecognizable as a member of the community engaging in self-reflexive study.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Strangers and Cities

Interactions on Yik Yak are anonymous. Thus, I began my review of literature for this thesis with the history of an anthropological understanding of the stranger, and the ways in which strangers socialize with one another, outside of the realm of the Internet. The development of the discipline of anthropology is itself closely related to strangeness. Foundational anthropological texts point to the “other” as the ideal subject of research because of his or her strangeness (Malinowski 1922; Geertz 1973; Rabinow 1977; Nader 1986), and also recognize the effect of the “strange” anthropologist on the communities that he/she is studying (Rabinow 1977; Nader 1986). However, “stranger” can also refer to an outsider who is not wholly outside of a specific culture, but is more locally foreign, i.e. from another town, state, or community (Simmel 1908; Park 1928).

Strangers, as defined above, were social outliers in early societies, in which people lived closely with one another both physically and socially. In these communities, the stranger was a product of migration (Simmel 1908). But with technological advancements and shifting economic structure, culturally diasporic groups of people began moving to cities, and suddenly “strangers” were everywhere (Augé 1995; Bauman 1988-9; Park 1928). Thus, anthropology of cities emerged as a critical turning point in anthropology, where suddenly the foreign became local. Urban anthropology emerged as a discipline of its’ own, led mainly by the Chicago School (Lutters and Ackerman 1996), and engaging with diasporic “others, ” or strangers, in city spaces.
3.2 Anthropology of the Internet

So we begin with small, rural communities where strangers are exclusively “foreign,” and move to cities where strangers are overwhelmingly local, and finally we move into the age of the internet, where strangers are far and near and accessible in all senses of the words (Wilson et. al 2002). As the Internet became more intermeshed with individuals’ habits, social lives, and practices of interacting with one another, anthropologists developed new ways of studying and discussing online behavior (Boyd et. al 2007). Namely, the emergence of social media sites, whose goal was to literally mediate sociality through online platforms, proved ideal for anthropological and sociological research, as the methodological practices already in place in these disciplines “[enabled] the investigation of cross-cultural, multileveled, and multisited phenomena; emerging constructions of individual and collective identity; and the culturally embedded nature of emerging communicative and social practices” (Boyd et. al 2007). Definitive studies outlined the discipline through ethnographic fieldwork in communities such as Second Life and W.E.L.L. (Boellstorff 2006; Rhinegold 2000), and provided ethnographers with blueprints for how to navigate research in the online “field.” Studies of civility (Santana 2013), ethics (Cross 2014), and morality (Leiter 2010) have enriched the discipline, and brought to light some of the critical social issues at odds with the growth of anonymous free speech. As anonymous online platforms and the issues they bring with them have become more common, ethical examinations of the legal responsibilities of the hosts of these platforms have emerged as well (Citron 2014; Leiter 2010; Levmore 2010; Nussbaum 2010).
3.3 **Online Help Forums/Anonymous Care**

My research on Yik Yak deals with strangers and the internet, but more specifically it deals with strangers helping each other on the internet. Thus, a review of sociological and anthropological understandings of anonymous help forums is critical. Foundational to these forums were the “Dear Abby” and “Ask Ann Landers” newspaper columns, started respectively by twin sisters Pauline and Esther Friedman. These columns allowed individuals to write in anonymously with problems and questions, which were then answered by “Abby” and “Ann” (Pottker and Speziale 1987). Other iterations of columns like this appeared and continue to appear in newspapers and other publications, oftentimes focusing advice dialogue on something specific, like sex and relationships (Gudelunas 2008) or mental health (Dibner 1974). While newspaper columns are answered by individuals with pen-names (“Dear Abby” and “Ask Ann” have passed through many hands over the years, but the sign-offs at the end of columns remain the same), and do not guarantee help to all that write in, radio talk shows of similar nature, such as Loveline, allow callers to engage with specific individuals and “get help” on the spot (Ferris 2004). These forums all represent forms of pseudo-therapy, in which an individual’s anonymity is critical to their own search for care. Yik Yak, I will argue, occupies its own place in this lineage.
Chapter 4: Methodology

Central to my research are a few questions: How do serious social interactions on Yik Yak affect people’s understanding of “real-life” social space? How does Yik Yak operate as a platform for interactions, and what aspects of Yik Yak facilitate specific kinds of interactions (i.e.: serious positive interactions)? In order to answer these questions, the research needed to take into account both the online interactions on the app, which are anonymous, and the experiences of people who use the app. Thus, my research took two separate paths: online data collection, and in-person interviews of app users.

4.1 Yaks

The first part of my research process was personal use of the app, during which I recorded interactions on the app, which came across as “serious” in the form of a written transcript. All together, with about 4 months of data collected, I selected 40 yaks to analyze generally as the first round of data, and analyzed the transcripts of these yaks and their comments. Collection of this round of data took the form of “screenshotting” the interaction on my cell phone, and later inputting the transcript of the yaks and comment threads into an Excel document.

It is important to note that this method of collection did not cover all of the bases of information it would have been possible to collect about interactions on the app. For instance, exact timestamps are missing when you access a yak after a given period of time. Some conversations on threads span days, some only minutes. Additionally, posts
with net 5 negative downvotes disappear from the feed, and so on occasion I would find comments that seemed to reference past posts that were no longer visible. I explored other possibilities of collecting yaks in order to remedy these issues but, as explained to me by Nabil Kashyap, an experienced digital archives specialist at McCabe Library at Swarthmore, Yik Yak has recently been highly on the defensive technologically. It is therefore almost impossible to access the feed remotely and continually download information as it changes, which would have been the only way to consistently document changes, aside from locking myself in a room all day, refreshing the app ad nauseum, and recording every change by hand.

While these limits in my research were frustrating, I came to understand that ultimately the methods I used represent with decent accuracy the daily dynamics of the Yak feed, and the ways in which individuals interact with the feed in real time. Similarly to field observation, in which you cannot be a part of, or even listen in on, all of the interactions occurring around you, this method of “observing” Yik Yak allowed me to capture moments, conversations in progress. It is likely that the interactions I captured extended beyond the screenshot-ed transcript anyways, and out into “real life,” into conversations among friends sitting at tables in Sharples dining hall. In a sense, I imagined that this method of data collection was like walking into a room where hundreds of conversations were happening, and stopping to record bits of ones that seemed relevant. Thus, this round of data collection, while in no way a complete picture of the interactions that occur on Yik Yak, allowed me to compile a set of data from which representative analysis of rhetoric and discourse could emerge.
As previously stated, the goal of my research was to achieve an understanding of serious social interactions on Yik Yak, specifically focusing on positive interactions, and their effects on social space at Swarthmore. However, my methods in collecting data had to remain as unbiased as possible in terms of assessing the “positive” nature of interactions. In order to achieve this, I divided the interactions I wished to study into the following six categories: reaching out for help and/or advice, asking for other people’s opinions on an issue, seeking information, confession/sharing without asking for advice, unsolicited kind words or sentiments, and compassionate forms of community self-regulation (i.e. playing the “peacemaker” in a mainly argumentative comment thread). The document in which transcripts of yaks were recorded includes date of the yak, classification according to the aforementioned categories of both the yak and the nature of responses, and transcript of the yak itself and the comment feed.

The main purpose of this aspect of research was to attempt to define and examine the specific discourse of serious interactions on Swarthmore College’s Yik Yak feed. It is important to note that “discourse” here is meant to denote not only specific use of language (i.e. references to past yaks, Swarthmore-specific terms), but also the broader ways in which users interact with one another, speak about their problems, or categorize the Swarthmore community. Much of this analysis was, in fact, based on language, but the clarification between linguistic analysis and broader, anthropologically rooted discourse analysis is a critical one.

As noted by Ron Scollon and Philip Levine, examining “online” discourse is a critical part of understanding human capacity for multimodal discourse, that is, online conversations and interactions are not, in fact, entirely separate from in-person ones
(Levine and Scollon 2004). They affect each other, bleed into each other, and often exist in the same spaces. More and more, it can be argued that online discourse and “in-person” discourse may in fact occur in the same “speech event,” to borrow a term from linguistics. For example, a group of friends sitting together at dinner and having a conversation may pull up Yik Yak and read yaks aloud to one another. This is all to say that collection and analysis of individual yaks cannot stand alone as data for discourse analysis, but was strengthened and enriched by an analysis of in-person interactions as well.

Another important thing to note is that this method of gathering data does not require the consent of those whose posts are being collected as Yik Yak is a public, and more importantly, anonymous platform which can be accessed by any registered user with a mobile phone or computer.

4.2 Interviews

a. Recruiting

My research also relied on personal accounts of app users. Thus, the second round of my research took the form of interviews with self-identified app users. It is perhaps important to note that the process of recruiting participants, and getting people to agree to be interviewed about Yik Yak, was a difficult one. I originally posted on the app itself, asking people to email me if they were interested in speaking about their experiences. The first comment on my post was “Fuck you, OP”. The second, “There’s your thesis”. This hostility may have stemmed from the clear “outsider”-ness of a self-referential post on Yik Yak, that is, a post about the community which asked it to identify itself, or asked
individuals to identify themselves. While I will not go into a detailed analysis of this particular interaction, I think it is important to include as a reference point for how people deal with breaking down the lines between anonymous interactions on the app and real-life interactions about the app (i.e., talking to me about their app use).

Regardless of the anonymous hostility I was initially met with, I went on to post on the Reserved Students Digest at Swarthmore College, an online “bulletin board”-style hub for posts about job offers, lost and found items, and announcements. This gave me a slightly higher interest rate, i.e., higher than nothing, but still there were individuals who initially reached out to me, and then ceased to respond once they learned what my research was about.

Thus, I moved on to snowball sampling through friends and acquaintances, and occasionally asking individuals who I found myself talking to about Yik Yak whether they would agree to be interviewed. This method gave me the highest success rate, and accounts for the highest number of individuals I ultimately recruited.

b. Data

Individual interviews, each about 20-25 minutes long, were conducted with six people: Mark, Rebecca, Abigail, Ethan, Irene, and Danielle (names have been changed to protect privacy). Only two of these interviews (Mark and Ethan) were solicited over the Reserved Students Digest. The other four (Rebecca, Abigail, Irene, and Danielle) were solicited organically via conversations I was a part of as a group, in which the individuals were also participating. All of the interviewees identify as Yik Yak users, but apart from that they each use the app differently, and represent different aspects of Swarthmore’s social landscape. Although I do not go into depth about gender in my analysis of my data,
I did interview more women than men, and it is perhaps interesting that all of the women were solicited via organic conversation, while the men responded to my online posts about being interviewed. Thus, my identity as a woman and the nature of the interviews may have influenced female informants to be more straightforward or willing to reveal information to me than male informants were.

This round of data collection was focused on gathering information about individuals’ experiences with both positive and negative serious interactions on Yik Yak, as well as individuals’ overall experiences with the app. I wanted to know how people viewed these interactions in terms of contributing to the overall climate of Yik Yak, and also in terms of who might be engaging in them and why. I was also interested in seeing the ways in which Yik Yak played into their “real-world” social interactions, so in each interview I ended up asking about anecdotes at the end, sometimes bringing up the anecdote about my friends taking over the feed in order to prompt respondents.

Throughout the interviews, I also consistently brought up anonymity, and questioned individuals about their thoughts and feelings regarding Yik Yak being anonymous.

c. Interviewees

It is important to note that, due to the nature of my recruiting process and the size of Swarthmore, I knew all but one of my interviewees prior to interviewing them. Of the six individuals interviewed, one (Mark) was a first year student, one (Ethan) was a sophomore, two (Abigail and Rebecca) were juniors, and two (Irene and Danielle) were seniors.

Ethan, Irene and Danielle all identify as people of color, and Rebecca is an international student from Europe. Mark, Rebecca, and Abigail identify as white. Both
Mark and Abigail identified being closely connected with athletics on campus, and Rebecca notes that her boyfriend is on a sports team, so she interacts with his teammates often and considers herself on the fringe of their social sphere. Danielle is a member of a sorority and a performance group, Abigail is in an acapella group and involved with queer spaces on campus, Irene is involved with the school paper, and Rebecca helps to run a student organization.

Abigail and Danielle are both from the West coast, and identify this as important to their upbringings and identities. Rebecca identifies being international as important to her sense of self. Irene, Mark, and Ethan are from the east coast, but do not mention this as a crucial part of their identities. All of the participants live on campus, and identified a sense of belonging here, to varying degrees.

Mark, Ethan, and Abigail identify themselves as regular Yik Yak users. They post to it sometimes (Mark “a couple times every few weeks,” Ethan “once or twice a month,” and Abigail “once or twice a week”), use it at least once a day, and generally consider it part of their daily routine. They also all cite it as a source of information on the general “pulse” of campus. Rebecca, Irene, and Danielle use Yik Yak less often, from once every couple of days to once every other week, and almost never post on it. (Danielle does sometimes, but for her sorority, as opposed to out of personal desire to post.)

4.3 Additional Data: Online Transcripts

In my conversations with library personnel about my research, it was brought to my attention that the Friends Library was in possession of records of Swarthmore students’ online interactions from past years. I received, from Celia Caust-Ellenbogen in
the Friends Library, transcripts from a non-anonymous online forum at Swarthmore in 1991, in which students discuss race, racism, and oppression, and sign their names to their comments. While these were not analyzed as closely as my current records of interactions on Yik Yak, I did employ them as a means of placing my research historically at the College.
Chapter 5: Serious Yaks

Over the course of my seven months of research, I documented and screenshots over 60 yaks, as well as taking notes on the content of the yak feed. Per 100 posts, there were generally about 3-6 posts about “serious” content that fit my parameters, although this number was much higher on certain occasions. Finals at the end of the fall semester, midterms during spring semester, and the days surrounding Valentine’s Day/weekend all saw increases in specific kinds of serious content on the feed: more people reaching out for help, more people expressing depressed or suicidal thoughts, and more people putting out generally positive sentiments. Important political events - i.e. debates, primaries, and speeches - saw an increase in political conversations that sometimes broke out into arguments with heated comment threads. All in all, though, the content of the feed was mostly jokes and complaining: puns about the weather, lighthearted self-deprecation, and Swarthmore-specific inside jokes were among the most common content.

Fig. 1: Examples of typical yak feed
Of the yaks I screenshots, I ran discourse analysis on 40. The discourse analysis I ran looked for phrases that displayed compassion, specifically, combinations of the words and phrases “will be ok,” “I promise,” “here for you,” “get help,” and “love you.” My most salient finding was that in the text of the original 40 yaks (not comments), “suicide” or “self harm” came up 17 times, and compassionately coded responses were present in the comments of every one of those. The discourse around self-harm yaks was the most consistent of all of the discourse analyzed: every time self harm came up, it was met with overwhelmingly compassionate responses and not a single negative response.

![Example of seriously coded yak and responses](image)

Fig. 2: Example of seriously coded yak and responses

Additionally, two compassionately coded yaks (not comments) that mentioned suicide appeared on the same feed (which usually represents a few days) as the largest concentration of self-harm yaks (5 in one feed, spanning 2 days). The day on which those yaks appeared, I was also privy to conversations about the yak feed in two different social groups. In both groups, individuals mentioned feeling more worried about the people they
knew struggling with self-harm and suicide, and brought up the compassionate yaks, noting that they were relieved to see that others had noticed the increase in self-harm mentions as well, and that someone seemed to be “doing something about it.”

Another interesting finding had to do with yaks about weight and exercise. Coding for the terms “fat,” “obese,” and “weight” turned up 6 yaks, all from individuals complaining about their own weight or their inability to lose weight. The comments on these were significantly more varied than on the self-harm yaks. Out of 23 responses total to the 6 yaks, compassionately coded responses (this time with the term “beautiful” added into the coding) only occurred 14 times. The other 9 responses either affirmed the original poster’s concerns about their body (ex: in response to “Why am I so fucking fat”, someone posts, “You eat too much”) or suggested unhealthy ways of managing weight (“fasting” or “diet” are mentioned 6 times in the 23 responses.) This represents perhaps a dip into the uglier side of Yik Yak, and it is difficult to place exactly where it sits on the cyber-bullying scale. Part of what makes these particular interactions difficult to categorize is the self-deprecation exhibited by original posters. The original poster of the yak that reads “Why am I so fucking fat” responds to a commenter who says “You’re beautiful OP [kissing emoji],” with “Thanks, but I really want to lose weight”. This ambiguity is more closely examined through interviews.

Finally, the overall language use in all 40 of the yaks I examined was decidedly casual, which is not a surprise. Grammar errors, lack of capitalization, slang, and abbreviations marked the language used in even the most sensitive of yaks as informal and unconcerned with itself.
Chapter 6: Hearing and Being Heard

It became clear in my discussions with my informants that Yik Yak acts as a sounding board of sorts. As Danielle put it, “It’s like screaming into the void really, it’s like a giant scream into the void.” It is a forum that exists to be looked at and to post things on for others to observe, but looking at the feed is in fact an enacted form of hearing what is being said by community members, and posting is a silently enacted form of speaking (or screaming into the void, as it were). The informants that posted yaks “regularly” themselves - Mark, Abigail, and Ethan - all identified a vague “having something to share” as a reason to post yaks. For Mark and Ethan, this information took the form of funny things about campus life, current events, or funny personal things that happen to them which they think others will enjoy or relate to in some way. Mark also mentions letting people know about campus events - unexpected fun parties, specifically - as a reason to post.

Abigail cites slightly different reasons to post: as a woman, she feels Yik Yak gives her an opportunity to be “gross and funny” in a way she can’t be with her friends, or in “real life.” She also mentions that anonymity may allow others this opportunity, “I think [anonymity] allows people to say like really gross, funny things that maybe happened to them, that they’d be too embarrassed to tell other people.” Abigail cites embarrassment as a reason not to post the things people post on Yik Yak on other forums, but also notes that the nature of her yaks is generally not serious, and does not have much at stake except coming across as funny (getting upvoted).
Informants describe the reasons they look at the feed in slightly different ways. All of them mention humor, that they know looking at it is likely to give them a good laugh. Danielle and Abigail say specifically that they are only there for the fun. When I bring up serious yaks, Danielle replies, “I honestly, I just scroll past that because that’s not why I’m looking. I’m not there to help people, if I’m going to help people I’m gonna do it in a more personal way than Yik Yak.” Contrastingly, Mark takes the serious content on Yik Yak seriously. Specifically, if he sees something out of line in a negative way, he says he is apt to report it and downvote it. Ethan responds similarly with concern about serious yaks, but says he is only likely to engage “if the situation seems really bad.” Rebecca and Irene, who are more passive users (both say they open the app about once every couple of weeks), take note of the serious content, and of how people respond, but would not actively engage with something they felt was out of line.

But people other than my informants often do engage with content they feel is out of line. By downvoting and reporting content they feel this way about, a group of users can get a post deleted permanently from the feed. In this way, my informants note, users determine who and what actually gets heard. This, however, is a topic of controversy. Consider Mark and Rebecca’s accounts of the same phenomenon - political discussions on Yik Yak, and the arguments that arise as a result:

Mark: The thing that I think makes Yik Yak just like not good for political discussion is that Yaks are hidden after 5 net downvotes. So, you’ll have someone replying over and over again to something that you can’t see, and it turns out just to be like...well, I think that like first of all it becomes like annoying as like you can’t see what the person was trying to prove, and then secondly, like, it sort of encourages a, like, *hivemind of acceptable opinions*, if that makes sense.
E: Yeah. So the opinion that’s not accepted just disappears.
M: Yeah, it just disappears and it can be silenced by like, *a quiet majority*. (emphasis added)
Rebecca: From what it looks like there are a lot of people who kind of, it seems like there are groups that kind of rally around certain posts, but it does seem that sort of more progressive open-minded people tend to very quickly downvote things that seem aggressive or unnecessary on the interface. And so, even if there are conversations that break out, generally the votes that determine whether the posts stay or don’t stay go towards more of an open-minded place, I think. (emphasis added)

Both Mark and Rebecca described the process of self-regulation that the community participates in, but what was “progressive open-minded” self-regulation for one was a hivemind silencing unacceptable opinions to the other. Thus, there is a disagreement here over who gets to be “heard” on Yik Yak, and why. Both Mark and Rebecca recognized a politicized charge to this phenomenon. And yet, although Mark said that he feels this process does not allow everyone a chance to be “heard,” he was also only one of two informants who indicated actually participating in the process himself. Later in his interview, he stated, “personally I think it’s good to sort of have the community police itself.”

The “policing” of the feed is not mentioned explicitly by others, but they do recognize that voices are occasionally “missing” from feed, and that this causes conversations not to have the organic flow they would in real life. Thus, while some my informants see a it as a privilege to be “heard” on Yik Yak-- one afforded only to those whose posts fit in with the “acceptable” content of the feed--others see the feed as representative of the community as a whole. The ways in which what stays on the feed is regulated has its pitfalls, my informants recognized, but it also creates a specific space for people who “need” to be heard, i.e., the yaks on which my research primarily focuses.

All of my informants mentioned self-harm or suicidal referencing yaks. While Danielle, as stated earlier, scrolls right past them, she does note that “I kind of maybe just
want to make sure people are helping that person, kind of like oh I hope this person’s ok but I don’t wanna be the one to do it.” There is a responsibility here that all of my informants mention, to “make sure” that the person posting is ok. Although none of them mentions specifically being the one to actively intervene, they all believe it is the community’s responsibility to provide the poster with resources and support. Informants had different ideas, however, about what would cause someone to reach out in this way on Yik Yak:

Mark: Anonymity is sort of liberating, so maybe if you have an opinion or something that you’re too embarrassed to share, or if you’re embarrassed about sharing the fact that you’re like, truly stressed out or freaking out over something or can’t manage something, that’s not necessarily something you wanna go and share with like, anyone besides your closest friends, or even your closest friends in some cases.

Mark states that he sees Yik Yak serving as a substitute for even the closest of relationships. Similarly, Abigail and Rebecca have ideas of Yik Yak as a substitute for certain forms of “real-life” interactions:

Abigail: I think it’s one of the same reasons people go to therapy, it like gives you an ability to just really say what you’re thinking, in like, a free way that has no prior conceptualization, like someone doesn’t go on, you know, it wouldn’t be the same way you go to a friend, and be like this is what I’m thinking, I’m thinking about killing myself, you know that would, that would create this whole thing where, like, if you post it on an anonymous forum, like all you’re going to receive back is like, support in the way that you need it. Not in the like, teary eyed fearful way, that they’re gonna like, start watching you to make sure that you’re ok, more of just like, hey I’ve felt like that before too, you’re gonna be ok.

(emphasis added)

Rebecca: I think it can quickly access the people that you want to access in a way that is anonymous but is geographically located, so when you’re at Swat, you know you are gonna reach Swatties, as opposed to maybe posting on...anonymous internet sites or web forums, where yes, you’re gonna reach a lot of people right away, but you don’t know who you’re reaching, versus Swarthmore is very specifically Swarthmore geographic. And so, since a lot of people might be struggling with things that are very
pertinent to our campus or to the campus atmosphere, this is a place to reach out to people who understand that, and can maybe respond to it in the right way as well. (emphasis added)

For Abigail, Yik Yak replaces the role of close friend, confidant, and therapist. The collective community of Yik Yak responds to people posting serious content in such a way, Abigail notes, that someone posting about, for instance, suicide knows that “all [they’re] going to receive back is support in the way [they] need it”. Interacting in this way on Yik Yak avoids the need for real life interaction, and ensures that individuals will not have to “create this whole thing” i.e., deal with people they’ve confided in. Rebecca similarly posits that people reaching out on Yik Yak for help are doing so with the knowledge that they are “reaching Swatties,” and seeking help from people who will be able to “respond in the right way”. Anonymity here affords people temporary care that need not, and can not, extend beyond the realm of Yik Yak, but is also wrapped up in trust that a specific call for help will be met with the “right kind” of help. Danielle, however, did not articulate this disconnected help network as positively as Abigail and Rebecca did:

Danielle: they don’t have a sense of belonging at Swarthmore, or they just don’t feel like they’re being appreciated or understood, or just general loneliness, I really, I really don’t understand it because I have felt those things before and I think many people do, but I choose to deal with it in a more private way. So I don’t necessarily understand the motivations behind publicly declaring something like, “I’m so sad I want to kill myself,” yeah.

Danielle articulates “privacy” here as entirely separate from and, in fact, in direct opposition to anonymity. What is more private or safe for Abigail and Rebecca is decidedly less so for Danielle. She sees seeking help on Yik Yak as a “public” act, rather than an attempt to privately reach out, cloaked in anonymity.
A few key themes are present here: trust and confidence, both in the community of Yik Yak and in the fact that that community is made up of individuals who will respond compassionately; and belonging or the lack thereof, and the way in which this influences people’s perceived options for dealing with something like suicidal thoughts. Why go to Yik Yak instead of a friend? Perhaps it can be said that people see Yik Yak as a friend, or a collective of friends, as a being that as Abigail and Rebecca mention, will “respond in the right way.” It is almost as if there is a script to these responses, and people reaching out for help know what they are going to receive. It is not tied up in actually having to deal with one’s problems, as Abigail says, telling a friend who will then “start watching you to make sure that you’re ok.” Regardless of the feelings my informants had about why someone would reach out in this way, they imply that for these kinds of interactions, Yik Yak is decidedly safe.

Irene, however, has doubts about the validity of this “safe space,” and worries that it is deterring people from seeking out connections in real life:

Irene: I think [the “safe space” of Yik Yak] may devalue those real life spaces, because I think those real life spaces can be so helpful and so useful. And when you have this anonymous platform you think, this is, like I don’t have to leave my bed, I can just have this, from my phone, in my bed, but really you’re not helping yourself.

The value of real-life interactions is something I was surprised not to see more people mention. It was almost as if, in our discussions of Yik Yak, even as we talked about the “real world,” it did not seem close or possible as an alternative space in which to deal with one’s issues. The removal of identity was clearly critical to my informants’ understanding of serious interactions on Yik Yak.
Chapter 7: Playing the Stranger

Georg Simmel’s concept of the “stranger,” briefly discussed earlier, is foundational to my analysis of the ways in which people seek and give help on Yik Yak. Simmel’s stranger deals with the near and far, that is, he/she exists closely in proximity with a community of which he/she is not a part, and this fact gives him/her distance. This synthesis of the near and far, as we have seen, is not unique to Simmel but is vital to an understanding of the stranger’s place in society. For Simmel’s stranger, mobility is what affords this duality. “If mobility takes place within a closed group,” he says, “it embodies that synthesis of nearness and distance which constitutes the formal position of the stranger” (Simmel 1950, pg. 402). This duality is central to my analysis of membership and interaction in the online community of Yik Yak.

Strangers, Simmel says, are different from wanderers in that they do not come and go without leaving a sense of belonging behind, rather, they settle down in new places, retaining aspects of both nearness and farness in their unique position in society. The stranger that stays, Simmel says, is socially and economically valuable: he/she is the original tradesperson, as his/her mobility affords him/her access to goods, ideas, and technologies which locals do not have access to.

Additionally, “he often receives the most surprising openness -- confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person” (Simmel 1950, pg. 402). This openness is eerily comparable to the types of interactions that occur on Yik Yak as a result of its anonymity feature. The willingness to be open with on outsider is tied, Simmel notes, to
the stranger’s perceived objectivity as a non-native member of the community, which also affords him/her a type of freedom. However, “the freedom…which allows the stranger to experience and treat even his close relationships as though from a bird’s-eye view, contains many dangerous possibilities.”

For instance, Simmel says, in the case of conflict within a community, those “native” to the community being attacked are more likely to blame outsiders, i.e., strangers. The stranger has a certain freedom nonetheless, says Simmel: “he is not tied down in his action by habit, piety, and precedent” (Simmel 1950, pg. 403). Being afforded anonymity, or “strangerhood,” may in fact allow individuals to operate as Simmel’s stranger does even in communities in which they claim membership. Thus, this concept is directly applicable to my research about why and how people disclose, engage seriously with or help each other on an online platform like Yik Yak.

As we find ourselves meditating on Simmel’s stranger in the 21st century, we must necessarily turn to cyberspace and interactions mediated through screens. These advancements in technology and changes in the ways we interact with one another allow all of us to act as strangers, to be both near to and distant from those around us. Zeena Feldman’s 2012 article, “Simmel in Cyberspace,” argues exactly this, through the lens of Simmel’s stranger.

Feldman notes that while Simmel’s concepts of strangeness are not predicated on computer mediated communication (CMC), much of what he has to say about strangeness rests on the same paradoxes which technology afford, i.e. “inclusion and exclusion, movement and stasis, distance and proximity” (Feldman 2012, pg. 298). This
paradoxical framework is useful, Feldman says, because it “privileges complexity over the transparencies of binaries” (Feldman 2012, pg. 298).

The ways in which individuals “play” strangers on Yik Yak is indeed paradoxical and complex. Before Abigail’s interview began, while she was reading the informed consent form, she asked whether I would be watching her use the app, or looking at her personal feed and yaks. I told her no, and she let me know that if that had been the case, she would not have consented. She was willing to talk about her app use, but absolutely not willing to reveal her “identity” on Yik Yak. There was specific anxiety, in fact, around the prospect that I might see or know which yaks were hers. Ethan expressed similar anxiety, although his tone was more joking than fearful. “I wouldn’t let you see my yaks,” he said, “you’d think I was a stupid fucker.” This anxiety was not explicitly present with my other informants, but Danielle did discuss the process of yakking as putting on a mask: “it’s like wearing a mask, looking at a person and being like ‘you’re fat.’ You just, you can just say it. But you wouldn’t do that if your name was associated with that.”

Although she was unwilling to show me specific yaks of hers, Abigail provided me with an anecdote after being prompted by the story at the beginning of this paper, of my friends “taking over” the Yik Yak feed:

Abigail: my sophomore year, my girl squad, there’s nine of us, and we were all at dinner in Sharples, and we were like, we should take over Yik Yak, and like pretend that it’s Phi Psi (one of two fraternities on campus) attacking DU (Delta Upsilon, the other fraternity), and then DU responding to Phi Psi, because they were having parties the same night that weekend, and we wanted to create controversy and like pretend that it was the other group. And so we started yakking, pretending that we were Phi Psi brothers, writing shit about DU, and then we started pretending that we were DU, because like back then it didn’t say that you were “OP” (original poster)... so we were all writing and commenting and upvoting,
and then we stopped doing it and it was crazy because it kept continuing. And like, other people were becoming involved and I remember talking to [a Phi Psi brother] and him being like, “oh, those fuckers in DU writing all this shit about us,” and yeah then talking to people in DU and them being like “god they’re so stupid, all those Phi Psi brothers” and my friends and I were like (screams) “oh my god!,” and we didn’t tell anyone, it was really funny.

Here, Abigail and her friends not only take advantage of the ability to “take over” the feed by upvoting each other’s yaks, but additionally employ anonymity actively in order to take on the personas of other members of the campus community. This precisely represents the dangers some of my informants mention about anonymity: that, as Irene states, “you don’t know who’s saying what, and you can’t trust any identifying information on [Yik Yak].”

In the case of Abigail’s story, the lack of connection and identification on Yik Yak allows for play verging on dangerous: Abigail and her friends convinced the Swarthmore community of their false identities, simply by “playing the take-over game” (my own coinage of the phrase). The “playing” of the stranger, however, takes place not only with individuals but can be seen as Yik Yak’s overall purpose in the Swarthmore College community. If we conceive of Yik Yak as a personified “entity,” its role is exactly aligned with Simmel’s posturing of the stranger as an individual in whom people can confide as a direct result of their lack of connection. In the case of serious interactions mentioned in previous chapters, individuals place trust in the entity of Yik Yak and confide about sensitive personal matters. The stranger, enacted collectively by individual Yik Yak users, then serves its purpose: responding in a reliably comforting, assuring, and pacifying way. There is no messiness, no complicating of relationships, no need to even leave one’s bed, as Irene has pointed out.
Chapter 8: Diffusing Power

Zeena Feldman provides a useful definition of social media as digital platforms of interaction between technology, space and social relations (Feldman 2012). The emphasis on interaction here is critical, as it is what sets social media apart from more general Internet use. While interaction may take place elsewhere on the Internet, for instance in the comment section of an article or via a goods and services website like Craigslist, social media stands apart as a platform specifically geared toward interaction for its own sake. Feldman suggests that interactions on social media are enactments of community, that is, they represent the activity of “an aggregate of people who belong differently, and to different degrees” (Feldman 2012, pg. 308). The variation in the ways people “belong” on social media is immediately recognizable to any young person who uses platforms like Yik Yak or Facebook to engage with community—some people use the apps passively, as onlookers, and some are overactive.

Swarthmore’s Yik Yak feed is full of identifying information, an understanding of which indicates community membership. Generally, this takes the form of initials followed by class year, or in the case of professors, first initials followed by last names. It was not uncommon, in the periods of time I checked the Yak feed, for one individual to be named multiple times in a day or week, usually revolving around a specific joke. The trends associated with “targeting” of individuals were not explicitly present in interviews, but it stood out in my observations of the Yik Yak feed over the 7 months of conducting research. As a member of the Swarthmore community, this specific aspect of research is highly auto-ethnographic, and salient to me only because of my personal
connections to the community which I studied. Specifically, individuals who were called out by name multiple times on Yik Yak tended to be of higher social standing “in real life” at Swarthmore, or members of groups associated with higher social standing, i.e. sports teams and fraternities. Individuals who have been “Yik Yak famous” (Swarthmore colloquialism, indicating an individual’s consistent presence on the feed, often associated with a particular joke or tone of yaks about the individual) in the past have not always fit this description, which is critical to note. However, during the period in which my research was conducted, most “Yik Yak famous” individuals were not called out for negative reasons, or harassed. Rather, they were the subjects of jokes, their names associated with certain phrases or comments that were altogether harmless.

One of my informants, Mark, did have personal experience with this trend:

Mark: people on my sports team would like, yak about me, sort of like as a joke, and it would get upvoted, and that’s all like fun and good, but then people are saying like, “does anyone else think that like [his initials and class year] yaks about himself?” Or like, “oh [his initials and class year], like is he gay?”

Although Mark initially referred to this occurrence as “cyberbullying,” he brushed it off in the interview and in real life as a joke, nonetheless one that caused people to associate him with his “Yik Yak fame”:

Mark: I would like, bump into people at parties and they’d be like ‘oh, you’re [his initials and class year]’, and I would never know how to take that, because people had sort of had these preconceived assumptions about me before they even met me.

While this experience directly affected Marks interactions with people in the real world, he still saw Yik Yak as a positive thing, on the whole. This indicates a degree of social stability that many others who have become “Yik Yak famous” in the past have not enjoyed.
Thus, the trends I observed over seven months of research indicated that calling out individuals on Yik Yak was associated with the individual's ability to "stand" that kind of attention in some way. Thus, this activity represented an enacted diffusion of social power, through teasing and play directed at powerful individuals. Again, it is important to note that this was a trend observed over a relatively short period of time at Swarthmore, and is not necessarily representative of general trends on the app or even general trends at Swarthmore.
Chapter 9: Conclusion

So what does Yik Yak do to our relationships with one another? The app acts as both a personified stranger and a platform on which individuals seize the opportunity to play with strangeness themselves. It is a vessel into which people pour their confessions, their crushes, their confusions, frustrations, angers, and sadesses. As a collective entity, it takes these things and keeps the identity of their author in confidence, but shares the content with anyone close by who wishes to see. As onlookers, individuals process these pieces of information as part of the dialogue of the community as a whole, although we have seen that this is deceptively straightforward, in terms of what gets “heard,” i.e., what stays on the feed.

Yik Yak virtually entangles us with one another, it fosters interactions between individuals whose identities are invisible to one another, but who are nonetheless interacting: giving each other advice and providing support, but also arguing, calling each other out, being anonymously cruel. The individuals using the app at Swarthmore College are perceived as being members of the College community by members of the College community, although in reality it is incredibly simple to download the app and pretend to be a member of whichever community one is geographically close to. Thus, there is a level of trust employed when people reach out with serious and sensitive content. That trust is enforced, however, by the consistency with which certain kinds of content are responded to. The collective Swarthmore yak community specifically treats yaks about self-harm and suicide with care.
Yik Yak asks us to deal with farness and nearness as it relates to our social relationships with the people in our communities. It forces us to reconcile the strangeness of the people close to us, and allows us to freely explore our own inclinations to engage with the identity of “stranger”. The space it provides is not for anything in particular, which carries with it the potential for abuse, violence, and hate rhetoric to have its’ own platform. However, when those things did appear, my informants stuck by the policy of community self-regulation, even while acknowledging its pitfalls.

Finally, interesting patterns of diffusing power were present in the period of time this research was conducted, although they may not accurately represent general trends in community interaction.

Swarthmore College, the site of this research, is known for its liberal leanings, and has a history of dialogue about serious social issues. In transcripts from a 1991 online forum at the College, students discuss race, racism, and political correctness, signing their names to each comment. These transcripts indicate Swarthmore’s history as a site of fostered dialogue about serious issues. In this way, anonymity does not seem to have changed the ways “Swatties” engage with each other about certain issues. However, missing from these transcripts are the confessions, admissions of failure, and discussions of topics such as self-harm and suicide which overwhelmingly make up the “serious” content of Swarthmore’s Yik Yak feed.

Further research on Yik Yak and apps like it must investigate the ways in which it affects individual experience and real-life interactions, the ways in which it leaks into social life negatively and positively. There is no doubt as to whether Yik Yak has the potential to harm and create painful real-life crossover for individuals, but it also
represents the possibility for productive growth as a community, increased trust in each other, and fostering of networks of support for those who do not feel safe expressing particular thoughts or feelings in person.
Works Cited


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