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**THE YAK IS BACK: CREATING COMMUNITY ON THE DIGITAL BATHROOM
STALL WALL**

by

GEORGIA F. BATES

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR SEO YOUNG PARK
PROFESSOR ELIZABETH AFFUSO**

APRIL 30TH 2023

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INTRODUCTION

“If I had a nickel for every Thursday night I’ve spent in a random courtyard...” a girl’s voice piped up from the stall next to me, “I would have so many nickels.” Her friends’ laughter echoed through the bathroom, their conversation fading to the background as I speedily washed my hands, eager to get back to that night’s field site. Having pushed my way through a crowd to get in, the relative ease of returning was disappointing—especially when I realized that the revelry in the bocce ball court where I had been staked out had given away to just a few groups of people lingering around the tables and the margins of the yard.

“They’re going to Pomona, because Yik Yak says to go to Pomona and Yik Yak is their Bible,” A friend of a friend, who had kindly lent her Bluetooth speaker to the host of the party, chimed into my thoughts from the sidelines. Already a year into my fieldwork observing users of the app, this wasn’t the first time I had watched a space rapidly fill and drain itself of college students following the flows of the popular app. Witnessing the bustle just fifteen minutes before, it was hard to believe that the courtyard was nearing abandonment. Aside from a lone can adorning the ground, the only evidence of that night’s revelry would be that which was safely indexed online—undoubtedly on various stories and private messages, but primarily on Yik Yak, where that night on the bocce ball court would both start and end.

On the margins of the yard, Quinn,¹ a 20-year old English major, leaned over an empty lawn chair. Her face, glittery and flushed, was illuminated by the white light of her phone. Her friend Matt, a 19-year old undeclared student, stands close by, craning his neck to follow along with her rapid scrolling. Overhearing my friend’s comment about Yik Yak, she perked up, telling us that she had just posted about the party being over. “I told them it was fun though,” she showed me her post, indicated by a small wand on the screen.

“bocce party is dead. was popping tho.” (2 Yakarma/4mins)

“This one says there’s something at the Greek Theatre,” she said, gesturing toward the most recent post on her timeline. It’s a statement, but it’s also a question—one that Matt answered after a moment by shaking his head.

“I’m not walking down there. Has anyone said anything about Mudd?” It’s not uncommon to hear conversations like the one between Quinn and Matt while out on campus. One or more people in a designated group will take it upon themselves to scroll through the app in a hopeful bid for new information, which, once acquired, will be used to steer their friends in the right direction. That being said, Yik Yak is not a map—at least, not in the traditional sense. The app has been likened to an anonymous Twitter due to its short-form, chronological forums. Yik Yak adds its unique flair on microblogging by anchoring itself to specific communities through a geolocative feature that limits the timeline to a five-mile radius. The premise alone is enough to cause controversy. Much has been said about the dangers of anonymous platforms, especially one that has eschewed the dark corners of the internet and gone viral among young students. An Op-Ed for the Huffington Post once likened Yik Yak’s timeline to “bathroom stalls without toilets” (Mach 2014). Though the author intended this description as a smear, a public bathroom wall is the best way to describe Yik Yak to an outsider and highlights its intrigue. Much like a graffitied bathroom stall, posts are short, localized, and lack the finesse of most other public projects. It’s full of verbal litter, the leftovers of users’ private moments of expression and the digital equivalent of the cans you find in a courtyard and wonder what happened to get them there. Despite this, what critics and supporters could ultimately agree on was that Yik Yak is not inconsequential, even if its quotidian content is.

“I have around 7,000 Yakarma” Quinn would later explain to me. “It’s a little embarrassing. I spend way too much time on here. I love it, but I hate it” Yakarma, a score representing the aggregate of a user’s upvotes and downvotes, is a quantification of a user’s investment in the app. Not all of Quinn’s 7,000+ accrued upvotes came from posts like her informal party review. Scrolling through her Yik Yak history, she revealed a colorful array of Yaks:

“i like this guy in my soc class but i don’t know what to say” (6 Yakarma/4w)²

“what restaurants are still open right now? please i’m so hungry” (2 Yakarma/1w)

“hate when i’m trying to write a paper and accidentally watch 3 seasons of a show” (134 Yakarma/12w)

“come to the hive today, we’re making t-shirts and there’s snacks!” (14 Yakarma/15w)

“i hope somebody told the girl in the blue sweater in dennison that she looked bomb today” (10 Yakarma/3d)

This array of content, all posted by one user, points to the diverse and divergent ways that Yik Yak was experienced and deployed by students at the Claremont Colleges between Fall 2021 and Spring 2023. This thesis, the culmination of 20 months of participant observation and 22 in-depth interviews, investigates the various motivations for and methods used by Claremont Consortium Yakkers to create connections on campus. Putting my interlocutors in conversation with scholarship on contemporary social media, I look at how digital affordances are incorporated into users’ interpretations, ideas, and aspirations about their community and impact their engagement with the non-digital world.

The next section outlines the conceptual framework, focusing on locating Yik Yak as a platform in the current social media moment and in the specific social context of my field: the five Claremont Colleges. I then bridge this context with a reading of my fieldwork alongside relevant scholarship, investigating the way that theories of the imagined audience and affective

labor on digital platforms are enacted in an anonymous, hyperlocal network. Finally, section three deploys this analysis in order to evaluate the extent to which Yik Yak was involved in building community among students.

SECTION ONE – FINDING A NICHE IN A MEDIATED SOCIAL WORLD

A Short History of Yik Yak

Joining Yik Yak is as easy as downloading the app and allowing it access to one's location,³ which connects users to a local timeline of posts (called "Yaks"). The timeline is chronologically organized, meaning that the most recent Yaks appear at the top of the screen, and Yakkers have the option to scroll down indefinitely to view previous ones. Yaks are extremely short (limited by the app to 250 characters) and display the posting time as it relates to the time it is being viewed (i.e., "2h" to indicate that a post was made 2 hours ago). Yaks also display a number known as "Yakarma" which indicates the net amount of up- and downvotes that a post has received. If a post reaches -5 Yakarma, it is removed from the timeline and the original poster is notified that their Yak was "downvoted by the herd." Posts with the most Yakarma relative to the rest of the timeline can make their way to the "Hot" page, a curated feed made up of only the most upvoted contributions. Each Yaker has a total Yakarma score (only visible to themselves) which reflects that aggregate Yakarma of all the posts they've made. Users have the option to interact with the Yaks they encounter by up- or downvoting the posts, and they also have the option to leave a comment in a thread attached to the original Yak. Although it is otherwise anonymous, Yakkers have identifying emoji icons within a comment thread to avoid confusion, and the original poster receives an icon with "OP." Yaks can be reported by clicking an additional icon which takes the user to a short, explanatory survey. As this section will go into detail, controversy around its main features and competition in the college networking app

market led to a dynamic and overall insecure front-face to the app. During the course of my fieldwork, Yik Yak constantly restructured its interfaces, rewrote its policies, and provided new features⁴ such that the current form of the app has changed greatly. This thesis focuses on the version of Yik Yak that existed from August 2021 to early 2023.

Happening Now

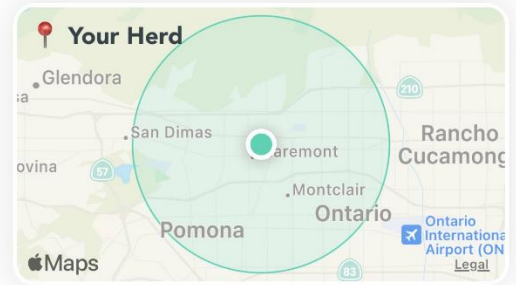


Figure 1: "Your Herd," map displayed to users indicating the bounds of the geolocative radius

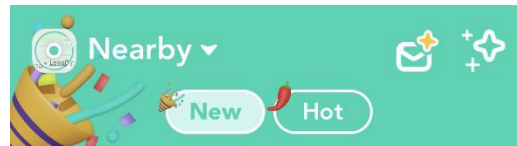


Figure 2: Homepage menu

Are people actually going to the
 [redacted] party? Upvote if yes

5h ago | <1mi



Figure 3: Yak from the bocce court party

Yik Yak's history is tumultuous and ripe for analysis given its popularity and controversies, situated in a time when the first generations of digital natives are still negotiating the terms and ethics of engaging online. The app is the brainchild of Furman University frat brothers Brooks Buffington and Tyler Droll, who told *The New York Times* that they "came up with the idea after realizing that there were only a handful of popular Twitter accounts [at Furman], almost all belonging to prominent students" (Mahler 2015). On Yik Yak, posts aren't attributed to individual users, appearing indiscriminately to everyone within the pre-set real-world locative radius. Buffington and Droll pitched Yik Yak to potential users and investors as a more democratic social media network, "where users didn't need a large number of followers or friends to have their posts read widely" (Mahler 2015). Many were quick to point out the irony of an app "for the disenfranchised" being rolled out at the nation's most prominent frat houses,

but this seemingly paradoxical model appeared to work as Yik Yak approached nearly 100,000 downloads per day within a year of launching (Hess 2015; Mahler 2015). By December 2014, the app was valued at approximately \$400 million, cementing its status as a hit with both college students and venture capitalists (Mahler 2015).

While not exclusive to college campuses, Yik Yak enjoys the most popularity among college students—as well as the most controversy. Stories emerging from a number of U.S. universities in its early years told of instances of academic dishonesty, hate speech, sexual harassment, and threats of violence connected to the app which quickly made Yik Yak a topic of mainstream debate (Thomason 2015; Schmidt 2015; Koenig 2014; Fabris 2015; Burroughs et. al 2015). In October 2015, a coalition of 72 feminist and civil rights groups across the country backed a letter to the U.S. Department of Education testifying that the app was being used as a “megaphone for hate mongering” (Burroughs et. al 2015). “Yik Yak cannot continue to turn a blind eye to the egregious incidents of sexual and racial harassment and threats on college campuses happening on its platform while simultaneously touting the app for its ability to create ‘community,’” it read, underscoring the tension endemic to Yik Yak’s existence. Drawing from these instances of hateful and even illegal content related to the app, mainstream coverage of the app’s “community” on college campuses contends it with the associations of anonymity.

Critics argued that anonymity on Yik Yak was ultimately a pass on individual accountability which allowed ignorant, disrespectful, and hateful content to thrive, placing it in direct conflict with ideas of community. The most prominent piece on Yik Yak, written for *The New York Times* in 2015, casts an immediately critical eye on the app for allowing users to communicate anonymously: “according to the Times, the hyperlocal aspect of Yik Yak has made it popular on high school and college campuses, while the anonymous part has made it

fashionable among cowardly jerks.” (Hess 2015; Mahler 2015). The article paints a picture of an online network wrought with crude and disrespectful content, centering on incidents in which anonymity had complicated administrators’ ability to address harassment which had occurred on the app. Fears that a silent majority of hate and harassment-enablers were being emboldened by anonymity on Yik Yak were expressed at many colleges and universities, including at Kenyon College, where anonymous harassment on Yik Yak was connected to the theft of materials from the campus women’s center (Mach 2014; Lindsay 2014). Such physical manifestations of online discourse put anonymity and Yik Yak under a media microscope where the principal concern became the culpability of digital technology in impacting the integrity of existing communities.

However, the idea that anonymity doomed Yik Yak to crash and burn was not universally accepted. Yik Yak’s proponents argued that the affordance of anonymity encouraged identity exploration across a spectrum of personal expression. Psychologist and social media researcher Reynol Junco (2015) wrote that mediated anonymity offers a level of safety which encourages creative risk-taking, identity exploration, and bystander intervention. Junco and others have questioned the rationality behind maligning social technologies like Yik Yak based on what they conceive to be isolated and sensational cases (Junco 2015; Hess 2015). Researchers at the MIT Media Lab who compared anonymous content on Yik Yak to non-anonymous content on Twitter found that Yaks were less than one percent more likely than tweets to contain vulgar language—and the ones that do are much more likely to receive negative feedback (Saveski et. al 2016). Evaluations on the effect of Yik Yak’s anonymity are overall not in agreement on to what effect it produces, nor do they holistically address the various content on the app.

Among all this debate, Yik Yak Inc. was rapidly losing investors and declining in active users, leaving the developers to scramble for ways to save the app. Midway through 2016,

Buffington and Droll undertook what they hoped would be a critical pivot away from controversy: de-anonymizing Yik Yak. They redesigned the app, requiring Yakkers to create user-specific handles and even set up a profile—bringing the interface closer to platforms like microblogging giant Twitter (Carson 2016). “Since day one, we were very focused on hyperlocal, and anonymity was just a mechanism we used to make the onboard easy,” co-founder Droll told Business Insider, promoting the company’s attempt decouple itself from the affordance that made it popular in the first place—a maneuver which fruitlessly resulted in Yik Yak shutting down in April 2017 (Carson 2016; Yik Yak Inc. 2017). The farewell post made on the company blog doubles down on this line: “the idea of local connection was always our number one goal” (Yik Yak Inc. 2017).

This was presumably the end of the line for Yik Yak—until summer 2021, when it suddenly reemerged with a reintroduction which stood in stark contrast to the backtracking that occurred in 2016-17. In the definitive comeback statement accompanying New Yik Yak’s launch, the app’s developers double down on the essentiality of anonymity to the Yik Yak experience. The post explicitly brands Yik Yak as a much-needed reprieve from labels and judgment which can stifle personal development: a “radically private network” which allows users “to be vulnerable, to be curious, and to learn more about the people around [them]” (Yik Yak Inc. 2021). Within a single decade, history seemed to be repeating itself as the same story unfolded: once again, Yik Yak enjoyed hundreds of thousands of downloads, a prominent place in certain campuses across America, and a litany of associated controversies. This new epoch of Yik Yak would be no more internally stable than the first, suffering constant new updates and redirects from developers and user communities alike. Importantly, however, this time around

Yik Yak did not find itself alone. In a short period of time, it was joined by similar platforms offering an anonymous, hyperlocal experience geared at college communities (Silerberg 2022).

We can understand the contentious, contradictory narrative of Yik Yak in both mainstream media outlets, user experiences, and from the company's own letterhead alongside broader examinations of space and interaction in the digital age. These mainstream characterizations of the app, as well as the reality of communication on the platform, can be situated within theories of internet culture as well as an examination of the physical spaces it overlaps with. What occurs during the day-to-day, routinized use of Yik Yak by students at the Claremont Colleges is much less sensational than what might appear in national headlines, but is nevertheless ripe for analysis regarding how cultures of social media, particularly anonymous and/or hyperlocal media, take shape. As a hyperlocal network, the consideration of anonymity on Yik Yak is necessarily one that implicates the relationship between digital technology, space, and identity performance. These lenses form the foundation for understanding the emergence and evolution of Yik Yak as a response to particular trends in both digital culture and the organization of physical space—particularly with respect to what anonymity and hyperlocality as digital affordances speak to contemporary digital persuasions.

Hybrid Spaces, Hybrid Places, Hybrid Worlds

The most defining feature of Yik Yak, and what many media and scholarly takes on the app have failed to holistically discuss, is not just anonymity. While the overall nature of their usage is debated, appraisals of Yik Yak all recognize the salient ability for the affordances of digitally networked publics to affect spaces in person. The hyperlocal aspect of the app is inseparable from users' anonymity—the two affordances must be understood together in order to examine its social niche. Apart from the app's basic infrastructure (i.e. all of the content a user

encounters on Yik Yak is generated by other users within five miles of them. The idea of hybrid space, present in the entanglement of the internet and the physical world, conceptualizes this phenomenon in order to speak to emerging modes of mobility and notions of place (de Souza e Silva 2006). Physical spaces are increasingly shaped by the internet users who inhabit them at the same time that local context contours the creation of content online. The architecture of Yik Yak and other digital publics is by nature co-constituted by developers and users who create particular norms of communication and interaction through the interpretation of affordances drawing from the massive web of publics they frequent. As certain social platforms expand in popularity and prevalence, the web of publics they overlap with will inevitably experience changes as social behavior shifts in response to the affordances of social technology. For Yik Yak, as greater amounts of users on specific college campuses began contributing on the app, more existing publics began to collide with each other and create specific realities for users based on the information shared and received by users and non-users alike. This phenomenon is consistent with theories of our world as being increasingly hybrid in nature.

The notion of space as “a concept produced and embedded by social practices” creates room to understand how digital affordances contribute to the constitution of space (de Souza e Silva 2006). With regard to ethnographic research, Przybylski defines the hybrid field: one in which interaction and communication flows between the digital and physical, contesting the distinction of “physical” and “virtual” worlds (Przybylski 2020). The hybrid field requires a conceptual shift in ethnographic practice which recognizes the increasing embeddedness of digital technologies (including the internet) in everyday life. Nowhere is this need more apparent than in the study of Location-Based Social Networks (LBSNs). Founded in the mobilization of the internet in the form of portable technology like smartphones, LBSNs construct explicitly

hybrid spaces through which users reconstruct and redefine space. LBSNs exemplify a particular form of digital-physical connection in which this relationship is central to the architecture of the platform and therefore the subjectivity of its users. While early commentary on LBSNs notes that they “failed to win many adherents and remain in a perpetually about-to-happen future” (Varnelis and Friedberg 2008), geolocative technology has since become significantly more widespread and embedded in SNSs like Facebook and Instagram. Likewise, LBSNs like Foursquare became at one point intensely frequented platforms within specific locales. On Foursquare, users are actively engaged in a project of self-creation through the selective contribution of personal information on the platform (Schwartz and Halegoua 2015). “The spatial self is shaped by the character of a physical place and the ways users associate themselves with physical place. The character of a place is a social construct that is continuously created and adjusted by the plethora of visitors to that location and the connotation of that place” (Schwartz and Halegoua 2015). The spatial self on hyperlocal, but not anonymous networks like Foursquare emerges as a particular form of Papacharissi’s (2010) networked self, part of a fragmented but indexable presentation of individual identity.

On Yik Yak, where an indexable identity is obscured as a feature, the principles of the spatial self within a networked public need to be reconsidered. Frith and Saker shed light on the practices of hyper-local, anonymous sociability facilitated by a digital environment, arguing that Yik Yak primarily functions to communicate and comprehend place. Content on Yik Yak collectively forms a “barometer of place,” affective of how users engage with and understand the locale of access (Frith and Saker 2017). This points to the feed on Yik Yak as a site where discourses arising from the social context of physical space play out in a digitally mediated manner. In the hyperlocal framework of Yik Yak, users digitally reconstruct space, creating a

digital notion of place through social content that is intrinsically linked to it through the app's geolocate emphasis. It must be noted, however, that these reconstructions always come with translations and new meanings. On Yik Yak, the physical presentation of the self can be obscured, edited, or inverted under the condition of anonymity and hyperlocal communication is contoured by the constraints of Yik Yak itself and the greater library of digital publics its users frequent. The selves that make themselves known on Yik Yak highlight the structuring forces and norms of broader digital culture as potentially curating the manifestation of place on the app rather than being an indiscriminate account of physical experience. Such representations are always a translation of such experiences funneled through strategies of digital communication. Yik Yak users are constantly negotiating with the multiple contexts in which they exist, chief amongst them the physical environment which comes with competing contexts of its own. They present themselves in relation to the space bounded by the app, leading to particular subjectivities and representations of offline place that are essentially and intrinsically hybrid in their digital translation.

Offering access to an expanded world of contacts, activities, and self-expression, social media has been changing the traditional landscape of the college experience for nearly two decades. The role of student affairs professionals as "gatekeepers of the student experience" is being contested as these technologies offer alternate modes of community connection and organization (Dalton and Crosby 2013, 2). Recognition of hybridity on Yik Yak provides a point of comparison from existing commentary seeking to make an argument for toxicity or benignness, providing a more nuanced character of this instance of digitally mediated anonymity. This approach to Yik Yak is essential to any attempt to speculate about the app's impact in a world that is already hybrid. Anonymity and hyperlocality on Yik Yak's short-form message boards

have made it a unique site of cultural production capable of shaping publics more broadly—what exactly takes shape, and why, however, is manifold and varied over place and time.

What's Happening?

The effects of Yik Yak's combination of geolocative bounding and unindexable anonymity can only be understood through an analysis that centers the context in which day-to-day use is situated. Relunched Yik Yak's initial success at the Claremont Colleges owed powerfully to its niche in the social app market, re-emerging at a particular time and place where it was extremely desirable to students seeking instant connections without a pre-existing network. Scholars of social media have discussed at length how this era of digital connectivity is characterized by hypervisibility and constant connection (Turkle 2011). It is less discussed how these conditions depend critically on the interplay between platform affordances and the temporal social conditions of the hybrid world. The Claremont students I spoke to expressed a significant insecurity in their ability to understand what was going on immediately and instantaneously, a subjectivity that owes itself to both the larger culture of what Sherry Turkle has called "Always On" social media (Turkle 2011) as well as the specific social positionality of 5C students. "Always On" refers to a culture of social networking in which our access to others has created the sense that we never truly have to be alone (Turkle 2011). However, despite the wide availability of mobile technology and social networking, feelings of loneliness and isolation persist—a condition which Turkle attributes to the manner in which people online "come to see others as objects to be accessed—and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing" (Turkle 2011, 154). It's important to understand how Yik Yak experienced ebbs and flows in popularity throughout the nearly two year long run of my data collection, with a notable downward trend in the second year. Yik Yak made its second debut in late August 2021, notable

broadly for its relation to the start of the academic year in colleges and universities across the U.S., but particularly in the case of the Claremont Colleges, the first on-campus term since March 2020. Across over 20 interviews with Claremont Colleges students during the fall and winter of 2022-2023, not one of my interlocutors failed to mention the impact of the pandemic on their college experience, a subjectivity that highly correlated with their various uses of Yik Yak while on campus. Jenna, a Pitzer College senior, told me that she felt like her entire college experience was stunted by Covid. Although less than a year and a half of her four years in Claremont were completed virtually from her family home in Washington, she emphasized that the effect of having to socially restart upon her return as having longer-lasting consequences. Though she had joined a number of clubs her freshman year, she watched participation wane as students left to isolate across the country and the globe. “When we all came back last year, I felt like a freshman all over again. That, plus the fact that the college just wasn’t doing the same level of programming because of the pandemic—I felt even more insecure than I did as a freshman.” This feeling of insecurity is significant in understanding the drive behind hyperlocal, anonymous networking, which is explicitly geared toward the ability for users to make instant connections without commitment or fear of exposure (Mahler 2015; Yik Yak Inc. 2021). What Jenna had heard about Yik Yak as a freshman in high school, when her older sister—away at college on the east coast—frequently posted screenshots from Yik Yak on her Instagram. “She randomly messaged me one day and was like ‘hey, they made Yik Yak again,’ so I downloaded it almost immediately.” Jenna admitted that she probably would have checked out the app no matter the circumstance, but she “never would have used it as much as I did if not for Covid.” For Jenna and many other Claremont students, Yik Yak was the perfect place to go in the absence of substantial community on campus. Yik Yak’s hyperlocal, anonymous timeline

potently met the needs of a consortium of students who were looking to navigate space and find a sense of place in the absence of existing networks. By bounding physical space in an anonymous environment, the app was able to offer access to the local community while also relieving social anxieties.

Caroline, a Scripps College senior, echoed Jenna's sentiments about the intrinsic tie between Yik Yak's early popularity and social life post-pandemic, explaining how Yik Yak took the place of much larger, more ubiquitous platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Both used by billions worldwide, these behemoth networks seem at first to be the logical places for connection and community building to be mediated.

“[Talking about Instagram and Snapchat] Like, nobody is updating their stories constantly, and you're also kind of limited by the amount of people you already have added. So it starts to depend on who you already have and where you have them... there really is a sense that a lot of the connections you make online—at least when it comes to school—are about increasing a network so you never really feel alone and you always know what's going on” (Sarah, Scripps College).

However, key in the rise of Yik Yak was its connection to the post-pandemic social scene, one that eschewed concerns about networked connections. “Yik Yak was so effortless,” Caroline emphasized. “Ideally, with Yik Yak, you could go to a new place and have nothing and still know what's going on.” User ideals are especially important when considering the social niche of Yik Yak because they highlight how platform affordances are received and interpreted by users. According to Claremont Yakkers, the delayed sense of disconnection engendered by posts on an indexable timeline, and the lack of universal access offered by stories on apps like Instagram and Snapchat, created the niche within which Yik Yak attempted to thrive.

At one point in time, the text box on Yik Yak changed from asking “What’s on your mind?” to “What’s happening?”, a modification theorized to be part of Yik Yak Inc.’s push to shift content from confessional to communal in the thick of media controversy (Shepherd and Cwynar 2018). When I met the CEO of Fizz, a Yik Yak copycat that was making waves on the Claremont campus through an aggressive, man-on-the-ground marketing campaign, I heard the same story. “It’s about people from the same place knowing what’s going on, how people are feeling, *connecting*” he said. He and his posse of frat-bros-turned-tech-bros weren’t very interested in talking about critical theories of social media or even about Yik Yak, their elephant-in-the-room competitor. Their driving mission was to connect with as many potential users as possible. “Where do you guys go to throw down around here?” They were interested in everything from where students hung out on Friday nights to which dining hall was popular on a Monday, a strategy that the Claremont students I spoke to after the fact cynically tied to an emerging conspiracy theory that the creators were engaging in a calculated astroturfing campaign to establish themselves. Their app launched for 5C students on a Wednesday afternoon in Fall 2022, and by the time I spoke with them on Thursday evening, they boasted of having a community of over 2000 users—unfathomable for a campus of a little over 8500. The timeline was already inundated with locally specific polls, memes, and event information—all with upwards of 500 upvotes. Considering that the average Yik Yak post on the app’s “Hot” page typically received around 100, to Claremont students like Rakesh, a Pitzer College senior,

“it [was] like Yik Yak on steroids. They took everything that users kind of built into Yik Yak ourselves and made it part of the app, and not only that, but they were able to make it so that right away, you had this insane engagement and you immediately felt like you were part of this active community. It was kind of a sensory overload.”

Whether genuine or not, such a campaign is rooted in the theory that the key to success in the hyperlocal networking market is to offer a hybrid experience that is as instantaneous and saturated with information as possible, establishing themselves as the latest and greatest in the local networking niche.

Being Radically Private (In Public)

While early scholarship on internet communities illustrated a space ripe for democratic agency and associated social change, the rapid expansion of internet users and the introduction of new digital technologies meant that the nature of space on the internet was far more elusive than these analyses suggested (Turkle 2011; Auerbach 2015). Shortly after the turn of the millennium, relative anonymity and decentralization of identity on the internet gave way with the arrival of Web 2.0, an era ushered in by the arrival of social networking sites (SNS) and advanced search engines (Helmond 2010). Platforms like Myspace (2003) and Facebook (2004) trailblazed this era, providing users with a highly detailed and demanding profile (van Dijck 2013). “Identity 2.0” describes the way that the prevalence of socio-technological spaces where identifying information is required means that the non-ephemeral nature of online expression has confronted users with the compromising potential of their digital footprints (Helmond 2010). Informed by the logics of workplace professionalism and an employability agenda, this has made posting online an increasingly curated practice, running contrary to ideals of the internet as a space for candid conversation. This is the context in which many Yik Yak users’ distaste of Fizz is situated. Rakesh pointed out that Fizz formalized many of the informal parts of Yik Yak, turning user culture into platform features. While this may have bolstered the platform in the eyes of some students, making the platform seem more responsive and official, it also missed a key part of what made Yik Yak so enticing to users: the feeling of authenticity and privacy that came with

the app's particular culture of anonymity. In my conversations with Yik Yak users, there was a common understanding that social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram promote inauthentic—or at least highly manicured—presentations of identity, where users feel pressured to conform to stricter social norms and expectations. Many users explained that anonymity on Yik Yak allows for more truthful expression without the need for filters, resulting in more honest opinions compared to other, non-anonymous social media. This was often linked to the idea that social media in general is often fake, with users portraying themselves as perfect while hiding their real struggles. In contrast, anonymous social media allows users to eschew certain identity-structuring contexts and post more candidly. Furthermore, anonymity allowed students to relax—in the words of Pomona College senior Sam: “you can chill out for a second and just be plain stupid. No need to think about what you're posting, who is going to see it, whatever.”

Moreover, the significance of anonymity to Claremont Yakkers was tied to their participation in the hyperlocal community. The context in which digitally anonymous interactions take place—in this instance, Yik Yak's college-dominated radius—is essential in understanding why it is important to users. Commenting on the so-called “nymwars” spurred as platforms like Google Plus began to enforce real names policies, danah boyd has asserted that these requirements are akin to an “authoritarian assertion of power” which hold individuals accountable for online expression divorced from particular context and forced into a generalized one (boyd 2011). Boyd firmly rejected the existence of a universal context from which individuals can be evaluated, noting that adjusting to different and often divergent contexts is often a necessity for marginalized people. “Context collapse,” occurs as the Web 2.0 internet integrates multiple audiences into a singular one, creating tension between the expectation for users to have a single, authenticated identity and the instinct to diversify self-presentation

(Marwick and boyd 2011). Discussing identity development in mediated environments with regard to context collapse, Keegan has argued that mediated pseudonymity has become essential to authentic engagement online (Keegan 2011). Identity 2.0 and the related notion of context collapse, co-constructed by SNSs which increasingly require real names and search engines which aggregate information online, are the foundation for a contemporary association of anonymity with privacy and authenticity. Their overlap is particularly located in the digital era, where the norms of transparency on SNS combined with increasingly sophisticated information indexing, creating new considerations of what it meant to be public. Contemporary cultures of anonymity exist in direct reaction to Identity 2.0, emphasizing its interlocutors' keen awareness of the coalescence of mainstream norms of digital identification and the potential of surveillance (Auerbach 2015; Correa et al. 2016). Anonymous digital spaces represent a particular method of eschewing the pitfalls of context collapse which necessitates the masking—but not elimination of—identity.

Anonymous communication is not just a means of performing without boundaries. A network not explicitly attaching posts to users' names does not mean those users become blank, homogenous slates with no context to draw from outside of a site that very well has many points of connection to other publics. Recognizing hybridity on Yik Yak necessitates a respect for the way its affordances can never be fully untethered, making its anonymous users constantly aware of their relation to and participation in the local community. As I discuss later, this combination is deeply impactful in shaping the ethics of the user-driven culture on the platform. Therefore, while some users exhibited disruptive or aggressive behaviors like trolling or making hateful comments, they and others also engaged in practices of care, comedy, confession-making, and other activities that cannot be detached from their ability to do so anonymously.

SECTION II – CURATING THE ONLINE COMMUNITY

Through participation on Yik Yak, users were involved in a project of creating a digital experience of a place that is contoured by the ability to write said world into being through an unindexable, anonymous lens. Communications research on the app from 2017 identified the most popular post genres as being humor, information-seeking, and information spreading—often intertwined with each other (Clark-Gordon et al. 2017). While quantitative work of the same interest has not been conducted on New Yik Yak, this analysis observably held true on Claremont Yik Yak.

“why do pitzer kids act like they’ve never met a republican? go talk to your dad!” (47 Yakarma/10h)⁴

“Party at Revelle Thursday night, be there or me and the girls are going to hex you!” (13 Yakarma/3h)

“if a non-Pomona student hypothetically wanted to get coffee at cafe 47... would the employees stop them? Asking for a friend”(10 Yakarma/3d)

The frequent intermix of humor and information was fundamental to user culture on Yik Yak, combining with the bright colors and plethora of emoticons to create what was, on the surface, a very jovial and whimsical atmosphere. Go deeper than the hottest posts, and the affordances of anonymity and the hyperlocal environment routinely elicited more intimate, vulnerable, and contentious types of sharing.

“I have such horrible imposter syndrome. Why am I even here...” (0 Yakarma/1hr)

“anyone who wanna get ahead with classes? Come and we binge work on hw” (2 Yakarma/1h, 6 comments)

At the Claremont Colleges, this created a culture defined by the way users represented the contexts they must navigate and mediate. The Claremont Yik Yak timeline was dominated by a mix of information seeking, humor, and confessions which drew from student users’ locally

grounded experiences. The pressures of academic and social life on the Claremont campus as experienced by students and represented anonymously on the app provide a window into why particular discourses and norms of interactions emerge on the platform. This section builds on an understanding of the co-evolving junction of social network users and platforms as well as the particular hyperlocal anonymity of Yik Yak, intending to demonstrate how a concept I term “hyperlocal imagination” takes shape and is deployed by Claremont users in order to build a sense of community and intimacy.

The Imagined Audience

To acknowledge the concept of hybridity on Yik Yak, one must appreciate that its features cannot be entirely separated, causing anonymous users to be consistently conscious of their involvement and connection to the surrounding community. The idea of “audience,” which makes up part of the situational context which informs one’s identity, is complicated into the “imagined audience” in mediated environments. As a fact of digital communication, internet users cannot traditionally evaluate the audience to whom they are speaking (Marwick and boyd 2010). Considering this inability to accurately account for everyone who may see their online activity, social media users attempt to curate an audience for whom they can more uniformly perform. An individual’s relationship to their imagined audience directly shapes their behavior: Twitter users have been theorized as keenly aware of how their use of the platform could potentially be assessed, speaking to their audience in a way that supported an ideal assessment (Marwick and boyd 2010). Boyd found that in the absence of empirical information about audience, social media users take cues from the environment in order to imagine the community (boyd 2007). “While anyone can potentially read or view a digital artifact, we need a more specific conception of audience than ‘anyone’ to choose the language, cultural referents, style,

and so on that comprise online identity presentation” (Marwick and Boyd 2010, 115). On Yik Yak, the affordance of shared location was interpreted by users as an affordance of shared place which entailed certain commonalities.

“Upvote this is you’re a 5c kid, downvote if you’re not. I feel like 5c kids dominate this app for me” (75 Yakarma/10h)

“aint no kids here” (-1 Yakarma/7h)

“Yik yak is literally designed for colleges and high schools so makes sense” (0 Yakarma/7h)

Although the 5-mile radius accessible to students at the 5Cs defines a domain well beyond their campus, users constructed a narrower approximation of context based on the available material. Media discourse and scholarship on Yik Yak overwhelmingly and nearly uniformly focuses on the use of Yik Yak among college-aged students and in college settings. Despite Buffington and Droll’s purported aspirations for Yik Yak to become synonymous with local connection broadly, activity on the app remained largely driven by and therefore geared toward students from specific local colleges.

“It’s interesting that we tend to assume that everybody on Yik Yak is from the 5Cs. And often that’s true, but it’s not entirely true... I’m assuming it’s the 5Cs. But I you know, I do know and it’s in the back of my head that like, there’s other people as well, I guess, like, you never know,”

one student told me, emphasizing the synonymy of the collegiate community and the Yik Yak community in many student Yakkers’ conceptions. While she recognized that *technically* Yik Yak was open to anyone using the app within her radius, she pointed to the dominance of college-related content on Yik Yak as an affirmation of her imagined audience. Using this concept as a means of interpreting content on the app, Yik Yak’s hyperlocality provided the foundation for a hybrid form of audience imagination to occur, one that significantly shaped the nature of content on the app.

The Hyperlocal Imagination

The imagined audience promotes an understanding of how Yik Yak’s geolocate feature is interpreted as a signifier of hyperlocal audience. I use the term “hyperlocal imagination” as an extension of this concept which recognizes the experience of the imagined audience in an explicitly hybrid setting, one where users can reference their environment in a more traditional manner than is typically afforded in online spaces. This is demonstrated through posts that both reference the offline world in the physical radius and signal toward the communities that already exist there.

“The 5C’s has so many acronyms that I don’t know the meaning to and I’m too afraid to ask” (42 Yakarma/7h)

“Comment them and we’ll help” (3 Yakarma/5h)

“no shame comment them” (1 Yakarma/4h)

“Pitzer NYC girls stop smoking cigarettes in public places challenge” (17 Yakarma/3h)

“to the Pomona boy with the skateboard who had theater class in seaver during my Spanish class: I’m in love with you” (9 Yakarma/7h)

“if he had black curly hair, he has a gf”

“I know this man... I’ll sell you his snapchat for \$125” (4 Yakarma/6h)

“he doesn’t go to Pomona” (5 Yakarma/6h)

“another tip: you can see him in alice won’t die this weekend” (6 Yakarma/6h)

“Campus vibes – Pomona: stereotypical campus, boring; Scripps: magical garden; Pitzer: sustainable plants while sprinklers water the sidewalk; CMC: Reagan era tax cuts; HMC: NYC housing projects” (46 Yakarma/2h)

These examples from Yik Yak help paint a picture of user experience on Yik Yak as distinctly communal, employing a shared logic based in physical and temporal context that makes up the “what” and “why” of making posts. This communal spirit is the product of the hyperlocal imagination, seeing how the geolocation feature intimately links on-app experience to off-app experience, effectively providing an alternate mode of communication with the people around

oneself offline. Oftentimes, Yik Yak threads mirrored the casual conversations students might have in real life--as in the instance of the skateboarder love confession—with the tethered affordances of anonymity and hyperlocality creating space for such confessions to be made and discussed by previously unconnected individuals. Information systems research has suggested that anonymous communication is always influenced by relationships with others. In other words, even when communicating anonymously, individuals are still affected by social dynamics and interactions with the people around them: “enactments of anonymous communication are always a relational effort” (Scott and Orlikowski 2014). The idea of “effort” being put into anonymous emphasizes the fact that even in an anonymous environment, users are learning and adjusting their communicative strategies in order to fit in with the larger group. On Yik Yak, this effort entailed constant references to the physical and temporal context of the offline radius.

“the sense of community I feel with other students here for thanksgiving is so wholesome” (31 Yakarma/21h)

“purr”

“😊”

“lonely east coasterssssss” (1 Yakarma/18h)

In this instance, OP used Yik Yak in order to speak to other students who had not travelled home for the holidays, recognizing of Yik Yak as a place where location and time are bounded and audience can be appropriately sensed through the users’ offline context. On Claremont Yik Yak, the sense of community that users sought from the app was necessarily paired with its direct relation to offline place: the campus setting where the foundations for community already existed.

Curating Affect

Yik Yak's geolocative feature means that Yakkers were keenly aware of how their posts produced affect and effect in the local community. This is represented by the way users explained their own posts as well as their engagement with the upvote/downvote, reporting, and commenting features. Attentive to the way that their posts contributed to the atmosphere on the app and in the offline community, Yakkers used the app intentionally in order to engender feelings of connection, community, comfort, and closeness in other users.

Media platforms and social networks have long been conceptualized as spaces which generate and spread emotion as a way of creating connections (Dean 2010). This emotion, or "affect" (Dean 2010), results from the reflexive nature of communication and was produced on Yik Yak through an ongoing cycle of upvoting and downvoting, commenting, and making posts. Each small action contributes what Dean calls a "tiny affective nugget" which agglomerate into an affective experience of a platform. Though affect is an essential part of how online communities form, Dean (2010) emphasizes the fact that "affective attachments in media are not in themselves sufficient to produce actual communities—bloggers are blogging but the blogosphere doesn't exist... Affective networks produce feelings of community, or what we might call "community without community" (Dean 2010, 22). Analyses of anonymous spaces such as 4chan attest to how digital message boards can create a sense of shared experience—"something that extends beyond the brief period that individual posts are present"—even without the permanence of individual profiles (McDonald 2015, 972). Affect produced in an anonymous environment speaks to the potential of these spaces to host and shape community.

The idea of “community” on Yik Yak was taken up by users as a response to their hyperlocal context. Yik Yak’s platform infrastructure gives users a particularly significant amount of power in curating the content they see, though no individual user can make this determination. Although it automatically filtered potentially hateful content based on a number of flags, content was primarily policed by users, who could remove posts through mass-downvoting and reporting. Anon Collective (2021) proposes an additional way that Yik Yak users collectively moderated, arguing that the character of quotidian interactions constituted “vernacular regulatory strategies” (Anon Collective 2021, 266). “Vernacular” refers to the creation and implementation of casual cultural knowledge that is developed through daily social interactions (Howard 2008). By populating the timeline with specific types of posts, Yakkers hoped to influence the proliferation of similar content. Invested in curating an accurate reflection of their community and emboldened by anonymity, Yik Yak users maintained this moderation ethic in their approach to posting and commenting. Vernacular practices are a key part of the affective labor performed on Yik Yak. The strong influence that the collective of users have over content creates a feeling of responsibility toward shaping the affective qualities of the platform.

Most Claremont users were quite active in participating in vernacular efforts to regulate the feeds, owing to their stakes in the offline community. They did so in various ways: through the up-vote/down-vote system, through discussion and debate, and in extreme circumstances, through reporting users to the platform operators. Anon Collective (2021, 265) calls these practices the “labor of shaping the platform’s identity,” however, this does not go far enough in acknowledging the critical role that hyperlocality plays in the way that users in Claremont engage with Yik Yak. Users have no reason to be attached to Yik Yak as a community other than the fact that it is directly related to their geographic locality. The perception of the platform as a

digital reflection of campus was key in creating the conditions for affective labor which directly draws from experiences in person. Keshi, a Scripps College sophomore, and Penelope, a Harvey Mudd sophomore, admitted that though curiosity about the campus community had initially drawn them to Yik Yak, their participation at the time of our interview was mainly about producing and receiving affect.

“I wasn’t getting on Yik Yak and immediately being like, I’m going to pour my heart out to these people. It started as more, like, wanting to read funny posts and observations about college, and then I got into questions and confessions. And now sometimes I’ll just post and be like “I had a bad day” and that gets a bit of a response too” (Keshi, Scripps College).

“Yik Yak is the perfect place to post compliments. It’s where people are most likely to see it and where it’s the least creepy... Honestly, it doesn’t matter if the person I’m complimenting sees the Yak. It’s weird, because the posts get a decent amount of upvotes, like maybe—sometimes up to 20 or so, and I think that’s because people just like the positivity, even if it’s not about them, they like to know that random complimenting is happening. It reminds people that someone probably has nice though about them too. I feel that way at least, which is why I do it” (Penelope, Harvey Mudd College).

The precursor to both of these efforts was a curiosity and desire to participate in a community rooted in the offline radius, a motivating factor that was maintained through Keshi, Penelope, and other users’ various uses of the platform. These instances demonstrate how the conditions for affective labor form through the interaction of user ideals and platform affordances.

Especially with respect to the hyperlocal as a significant determinant of the themes and norms of discourse, these quotidian accounts of Yik Yak provide a potent lens from which to understand a very specific way of being anonymous online, one that is mobilized toward relieving the pressures of indexed communication. Considering Yik Yak Inc.’s assertion that the app provides “risk-free, lens-free spaces to be vulnerable, to be curious, and to learn more about the people around us” (Yik Yak Inc. 2021), we can come to view Yik Yak as a collective but not

uniformly executed project of creating an affective environment by students with various motivations.

Aspirational Anonymous Democracy

Another significant use of Yik Yak was the treatment of the platform as a public common for debate and an opportunity to shape collective opinion. Though Claremont Yakkers universally admitted that they disliked a non-zero portion of the content on Yik Yak, this did not mean they reported or downvoted all of it. Yakkers wanted to engage in debate and were invested in the process because they were contributing to a democratic approximation of the campus atmosphere. “I like that these discussions happen on Yik Yak because they don’t happen in classes” one student remarked, “It feels democratic to me. It doesn’t matter how much of a platform you have because everybody has the same platform.” Despite acknowledging the vitriol, bullying, and general annoying content that they were exposed to in varying daily doses, Claremont Yakkers valued anonymity because they felt it made the platform more honest and helped them engage with the campus in a more socially aware manner.

“There are over 7,000 people here, and we’re all in various little bubbles depending on what school you go to, your major, who your friends are. On Yik Yak, I get a variety of perspectives, which I really appreciate even if I disagree, because I know that opinion is out there. There are a lot of things I wouldn’t even know about except that people talked about them on Yik Yak. And that’s not just events, it’s people’s ideas and opinions. It’s just as important” (Zoha, Claremont McKenna College)

The notion of Yik Yak as a democratic or meritocratic space was important to users because it generated a sense of truth. Disagreeable or even offensive content was expected, and even accepted by students who came to value the app for its representation of a more diverse spectrum of opinions than they encountered within their own circles, allowing them to hone their debate skills and participate in shaping the opinions of the student body at large.

“I get political on Yik Yak,” a Scripps College sophomore told me.

“There’s stuff that I just can’t let go, because it’s like, it’s not some random person on the internet, you know? This is someone I could be in classes with. And I don’t feel responsible to change their mind so much as I feel like, like I need to show other people that there are people who don’t feel that way and won’t let certain stuff fly on campus.”

Anonymity can be performed toward certain aspirations, particularly concerning associations of anonymity with freedom and democracy. These examples demonstrate affect produced on the platform in two ways: first, through the labor of users engaging in producing affective content, and second, through reflection on that labor as geared toward personal value of democracy and meritocracy.

SECTION THREE – EFFECT IN THE OFFLINE RADIUS

Though plenty of users spoke about finding community through Yik Yak and being more social because of it, Yik Yak’s ability to create lasting personal connections between Claremont users was ultimately limited. Returning to Sherry Turkle’s (2011) concern that networking media provides only the illusion of greater connectedness, it’s important to investigate the way that the previously discussed Yik Yak—the hyperlocal imagination, the community-driven affect, and the democratic ethic—did and did not translate to change in the offline radius.

Ephemeral Connections

For some Claremont Yakkers, anonymity made it more socially acceptable and accessible to attend events posted on the platform than anywhere else. Despite the likelihood that OP would be unknown to those using the app for offline social engagement, many users still felt more comfortable attending events found on Yik Yak than those shared by people added on networked social sites such as Instagram. “If it’s on Yik Yak, then I assume it’s for everyone,” Grace, a Pomona College junior told me, expressing a common logic among some Claremont Yakkers.

“anyone who wanna get ahead with classes? Come and we binge work on hw” (2 Yakarma/1h)

“might be down later way” (1 Yakarma/1h)

“where”

“down!”

“in Shanahan building Mudd”

“In room ****, pull up anytime”

“come through to Pomona track 2:15!! Free beer and good music” (3 Yakarma/2h)

“is this beer league?” (1 Yakarma/2h)

OP: “[thumbs up emoji and wink emoji]”⁵

Posts of this character also demonstrate the existing level of social trust among users of the app, who frequently felt comfortable enough to meet up with other users despite their inability to explicitly account for their audience. The comfort engendered by the hyperlocal context of communication online translated into comfort felt engaging in offline experiences, following posts on Yik Yak into the physical world.

One such instance, dubbed “the Yik Yak Party” by my interlocutors who attended, demonstrated how the informality and ephemerality of communication on the app translated into the offline experiences it facilitated. A little after 10PM on a Friday night, we found ourselves wandering around an off-campus apartment complex. Following only a brief back-and-forth between the party host and my friend, we had little clue where we were going or who would be there, our only assurance being that OP purported to be from the Claremont Colleges. When we arrived, already about a dozen students were gathered around the kitchen table, and more would join us throughout the night. When I causally asked where everyone had come from, all of the partygoers (save for one student’s visiting boyfriend) were reportedly 5C students, hailing from every school in the consortium except Harvey Mudd College. Out of 11 students hanging out in the main room, only 4 were there because they knew the host—his roommate and select friends

from his classes. The remaining 7 of us had all followed the same path across Yik Yak and campus boundaries in order to come together that night. Despite being strangers, we found easy conversation regarding classes, dorm life, and college during the Covid-19 pandemic (“You guys are from Scripps? Your campus is so beautiful,” “I’m actually taking a Scripps class right now—Italian.”; “Pomona classes aren’t any harder than the other schools,” “I dropped my only Pomona class after a week because the professor wouldn’t let us use the bathroom”; “Did you guys do online school here?”, “Nah, not worth it.”). These points of connection (and the party demographics as a whole) reflect the hyperlocal imagination that exists on and helps build connections through the app: the host’s post on Claremont Yik Yak was aimed toward and attracted fellow students. Students were brought together on the precondition that they already share an established campus community, easing the friction that may exist when meeting someone for the first time. When reflecting on the night later on, my friends and I agreed that it had been surprisingly easy to get comfortable with everyone: “It definitely wasn’t as awkward as I was expecting. People were just cool with us right away,” one commented. Amid our conversation, one comment articulated both the attractiveness of inclusion on Yik Yak and a then-unconsidered complication: “Well, it’s Yik Yak, so like, I assume if you’re posting your party on there you can’t be mad about who shows up.” This comment would later gain significance, especially as Yik Yak began to create complications in social scenes that required privacy and exclusivity. Ultimately, though the Yik Yak Party amounted to a memorable night, the event did not lead to lasting relationships for myself or my friends. While the idea of community motivated many Yakkers’ willingness to follow the anonymous instructions of their presumed peers, the desire to pursue social interaction on the app did not necessarily translate into a desire to create deep connections with those they encountered. Reflecting the way that

online interactions were generally motivated by a desire to participate and feel belonging in the community at large, the idea of connection as pursued through offline events was not about individual relationships. Rather, participation in Yik Yak's offline social scene exemplified a desire to experience the affect of a communal experience similar to the way users did online.

Disjunctive Connections

Offline-radius interactions facilitated by Yik Yak were not always productive of these communal experiences. While I have detailed the critical role that the hyperlocal imagination on Yik Yak plays in driving student connection, consideration of intersectional experience reveals how different sub-communities utilize the same affordances in different ways and to different effects. Though only a fraction of the overall student population, LGBT students frequently made their mark on Yik Yak. “The internet is literally the only reason I knew anything about queer culture before college. Even now basically everything I know is something I saw on Tumblr, Instagram, Youtube—even TikTok,” a student explained. Using Yik Yak can be seen as a natural inclination of a new generation of queer people who have overwhelmingly turned to digital sites in the absence of real-life support. Networked publics are broadly conducive to queer connection as they allow dispersed LGBT individuals to interact across time and space (boyd 2010). On Claremont Yik Yak, posts about queer life made up a visible portion of the everyday timeline:

“5C gay tinder is so bad... I just want a boyfriend!” (15 Yakarma/5h)

“does anyone know if the girl with the shaved blonde hair at Scripps is single? Or even gay lol” (4 Yakarma/3h)

“SOOOOO many ‘straight’ men here are on the dl its insane...” (13 Yakarma/42m)

“i love that in college i can be friends with all the jocks but it’s so hard not to fall in love hahahahahah” (20 Yakarma/3h)

“I feel like everyone is gay on here and then in real life I know like 3 gay people” (8 Yakarma/5h)

“go to queggers!” (6 Yakarma/5h)

“literally just hang outside at scripps or pitzer for 30 seconds” (3 Yakarma/4h)

“quegger at dennison tn” (32 Yakarma/2h)

“what’s a quegger” (2 Yakarma/2h)

OP: “queer party”

Most revealing of the complicated relationship between LGBT individuals and anonymity on Yik Yak was discussion of “Queggers,” which were the subject of many posts throughout the semester. “Quegger” is a portmanteau of the words “queer” and “kegger” that is generally used among 5C students to denote a party open to members of the 5C LGBT community. While no formal definition exists to explain what is and isn’t considered a “Quegger,” students familiar with the term overwhelmingly characterized them based on the establishment of a safe space for queer students. Queggers and information about them were in high demand on Yik Yak, situated in the context of the app being a larger platform for LGBT students to connect.

“Can we have a quegger this weekend? Like one of the good ones at scripps...” (13 Yakarma/35m)

“Quegger tonight at Revelle!”

“what’s revelle?”

OP: “big house at scripps”

“are bi ppl invited?”

OP: “uh yes?”

“sorry, wasn’t sure if that counted”

“it definitely counts omg”

However, just as discussion of Queggers on Yik Yak introduced queer students to a community safe space they were otherwise unaware of, it also opened them up to non-queer students who

encountered the posts. “People think because it’s on Yik Yak it’s for everyone,” a student told me, blaming the app for a recent influx of cisgender, heterosexual men and women at the handful of Queeggers she had attended. While queer students who posted about Queeggers may not have intended to extend an invitation to the entire student body, the inability to inexplicitly curate an audience on Yik Yak effectively exposed the events to the larger community.

“At the last one I asked this 6-foot-tall, football player-looking guy if he was there for the Quegger and he was like ‘what is that?’—he had no idea it was for gay students... It’s not even malicious necessarily], it’s just ignorant. They see a post telling them where the party’s at and don’t stop to consider that ‘Quegger’ means something specific to a specific group of people... it’s on Yik Yak so they just assume it’s fair game.”

The next weekend, when I resolved to follow a Yik Yak post advertising a Quegger outside the Scripps College library, it had ended before I arrived. It was only 11PM, but the courtyard area was practically silent—the few remaining students were busy cleaning up scattered cans and cups which suggested a much larger crowd had previously been there. “The Quegger is over” one girl remarked. “It was all straight couples, and then CampSec⁵ came and shut it down [due to the commotion]... So, it basically ended twice.”

Yik Yak has the potential to subvert community, particularly subcommunity organizing, through the generalizations users make about their audience. Students recognized that anonymity on Yik Yak had its demonstrated upsides—particularly in a queer context where being open about one’s identity entails additional considerations—“but just because you can’t or don’t want to be public about something doesn’t mean it’s not important. It’s not that I hate Yik Yak or anything because I know it can be good... it’s just that they’ve created this space where straight people’s ignorance about our community is now affecting our ability to hold queer-positive parties.” In providing a platform where labels are alleged not to matter and exclusion is near

impossible, Yik Yak has the potential to undermine the equity it seeks to promote, especially for communities lacking mainstream visibility. This instance of the imagined audience travelling offline demonstrates how the hyperlocal imagination necessarily excludes perspectives that cannot simply be approximated by users who are unaware of subcultures on campus.

However, the app also presented opportunities for affinity groups to spread awareness and advocate for visibility within the greater student body. Using Yik Yak to explicitly discuss who was and wasn't the intended audience for online posts and offline events became commonplace for queer students.

“At the end of the day, it's not like telling people not to come on Yik Yak is going to stop everyone. But I like to think that it makes some people more aware of what's going on and how people feel and maybe it makes a little bit of change, which is why every time it comes up I get dragged back in to arguing about it. Deep down I definitely feel like I'm doing something effective.”

River, a Scripps College junior who provided the quote above, told me that they learned to be more explicit about the way they talked about queer events on Yik Yak, avoiding vagueness or coded language in favor of spelling out what the event was and who was invited. Discussing events in detail on Yik Yak beforehand, here, can be seen as a strategy to prevent having to make those difficult distinctions by using a platform where users have access to a large portion of the campus community oriented toward discussion social life.

Gendered and Intimate Imagination and Affect

Although plenty of Yik Yak users used the app to facilitate offline connections, there were various boundaries to this behavior which pulled from both the app's affordances and the broader contexts of its use on a college campus. How interactions were received by other Yakkers and to what effect is important for understanding the effects and limitations of affect

produced in a hyperlocal, anonymous network. Not all interactions on Yik Yak were implicated in an agenda to create offline connections or other effects. Users' personal restrictions often stemmed from the tension between hyperlocality and anonymity, pulling from their understanding of the offline radius and their positionality within it. Not all interactions on Yik Yak were implicated in an agenda to create offline connections or other effects. Gender is one such limitation that recurred throughout my ethnographic data, one that highlights how the hyperlocal imagination is intertwined with personal identity and social needs.

Whereas elsewhere on the internet, the profile is an obvious place for the performance and presentation of gender (van Dijck 2013), the lack of indexability and condition of anonymity on Yik Yak create new routes for the production of gender and gender relations on the app. The techno-utopian vision for Yik Yak espoused by its creators might imagine the anonymity engendered by the app's front-end conditions and user culture as creating a space of liberatory gender-neutrality, but this is anything but the case. Gender was constantly at play in the way users presented themselves, interacted with others, and navigated the hybrid environment. The gender of a user was sometimes explicitly invoked, such as in posts that proclaimed "as a girl..." or vice-versa. Otherwise, gender primarily came into play relationally: through the interaction of Yakkers. The generalized, abstract idea of a Claremont Yik Yak user was often not completely maintained as Yakkers replied to each other in the forum structure underneath specific posts.

"Can some girls come hype me up in the comments? I'm feeling really unconfident tonight and I want to have a good time" (7 Yakarma/3h)

"You look so hot tonight!!!!!" (2 Yakarma/3h).

OP: "thank you unicorn <3" (2 Yakarma/3h)

"the white male urge to mosh and be violent because you can't dance" (18 Yakarma/11h)

"so you're going to be sexist and racist? Okay." (-1 Yakarma/10h)

OP: “@carrot it was you, wasn’t it” (0 Yakarma/3h)

“I have weed and alc, does anyone want to get lit? Tryna forget myself for a while if I can” (6 Yakarma/4h)

“Can u drop a snap or some so I know ur not a rando cuz I am a female and do not want kidnapped. Also don’t want this to be a set up by police” (0 Yakarma/2h).

This back-and-forth interaction brought individuals to life in the short duration of their conversation, the careful reveal of information emerging as a meaningful strategy employed by users looking to produce feelings of connection, even if they begin and end on a single post. This strategy is present both in the encoding and decoding of posts by users, who both produce and interpret references to gender that speak to the hybrid context of the app. On Yik Yak, where the traditional presentation of gender as coded visually, auditorily, and behaviorally is obscured, discussion topics, word use, emojis, and stylistic choices became abstract signifiers of gender which users interpreted and responded to in ways that shaped the possibility of mobility. Skye, a Pitzer College freshman who posted primarily about video games, reflected on these limitations in a way that was revealing of how Yakkers perceived and reacted to their perceptions of gender on the app, drawing from their experiences in the physical environment and the broader digital world.

“Okay, well, I’ll post a lot about gaming. Not a lot—I don’t post on Yik Yak a lot—but I’ll mention a new game or something, like ‘oh, this game is so good’ because I want to know if other people at the colleges are playing it. And then people will comment like assuming I’m a dude because I play video games. I don’t correct them because I find gamer boys really annoying and I just know they’ll be like ‘oh what? A girl gamer’ and be all weird about it”

Of course, the primacy of hybridity means that all negotiations of Yik Yak necessarily take into consideration the experiences and context of the physical environment. Skye admitted to never meeting up with people on Yik Yak—even when she was propositioned—over concerns about how other people in her community might react to her gender not matching their assumptions.

Not wanting to complicate the relationships she formed talking about video games, her participation in this particular subcommunity remained entirely on the app. That being said, she continued posting about video games anyway, enjoying the discussions and sense of relatability she got from users she knew were nearby.

For other users, the lack of desire for offline mobility meant that the inability to ascertain if someone's offline and online expression were the same was irrelevant.

“It feels kind of intimate, because you do feel like you know people, and they know you too. Like sometimes I'll make a post, like, I post a lot about my feelings and confessions and stuff. Like if I'm having a bad day I'll go to Yik Yak and post about it. And I'll get comments of people being like 'I'm sorry girl' or 'it'll be okay babe,' so there's like a female intimacy there.”

To Sunny, a Claremont McKenna College junior, it didn't matter if the Yakkers she interacted with existed offline in the way she imagined online. What ultimately determined how she received the affective labor of other users was her ability to hyperlocally imagine that people *like* the users she encountered existed in the offline radius. What she sought from Yik Yak were ephemeral moments support from female students, subjects that she passively observed in the offline radius and validated her experiences online. The fact that some interactions were limited and did not proceed into the offline radius did not mean that they weren't meaningful and productive for users who only participated online.

Gender additionally presents itself as a significant category of investigation concerning Yik Yak due to the large amount of sexual content on the app. For many users, Yik Yak was a locus for romantic and sexual exploration. As I discussed in Chapters One and Two, Yik Yak's attractiveness hinged on its ability to offer users a window into the physical world around them and provision of a platform within which they had a stake in producing social affect. For a

population of young, mostly single college students who tasked themselves with rediscovering their campuses after Covid, sex and romance were particular areas of insecurity within broader social concerns. Yik Yak offered a level of transience and obscurity to the romantic and sexual pursuits of several students that they would not have otherwise experienced due to the application's overall characteristics. Zoha, a 23 year-old politics major, described herself as “obsessed” with using Yik Yak. Though she had frequently attended parties and club events advertised by other users on the app, she noted that there were limits to her willingness to meet up with other Yakkers—particularly when it came to the use of the app for sex and romance.

“I know that people find hookups through Yik Yak sometimes, and I know of at least one or two people who have like, actually hooked up with people through Yik Yak—and, I have thought about that. My issue is, what if I don’t find the person attractive, and even like, you know, even if some people would be like, well, you know, you can like Snapchat them first or whatever. But then they have my name, they know what my face looks like, and then especially if I decide I don’t find them attractive then that’s *really* awkward. So I’ve never, like, I’ve never wanted to pursue that.”

Zoha’s story demonstrates the tension between the hyperlocal and anonymous aspects of Yik Yak that works to prevent rather than facilitate offline connection. Particularly as a woman, Zoha was uncomfortable with the possibility of having to reject someone she met up with.

Complicated by issues stemming from offline difference, anonymity on Yik Yak was limited in its ability to extend the space that Droll and Buffington imagined would be freeing and meritocratic for users. The close relationship to physical space served to exacerbate these disjunctions and limited the ability of specific users to access the sense of connection and mobilizing opportunities that other users did.

CONCLUSION

Drawing from the way Claremont Yik Yak thrived and failed, it would neither accurate to assert that humans exist in a world of social platforms nor that social platforms exist in a world

of humans. The way that people encounter, interpret, and deploy the various affordances of the internet is a constant tug of war between the diverse contexts from which we are motivated to engage in the first place. The potential for offline mobility and the ability to create enduring personal connections facilitated by Yik Yak was precipitated by limitations stemming from the broader contexts that Yakkers pulled from in order to determine their behavior. Like the nature of interaction on Yik Yak, connections were broadly ephemeral and impersonal—defined by a desire to participate in the general student community without an actual commitment to getting to know individual other students. Even for users who were able to leverage the hyperlocal aspect of the app in order to make connections offline had limited success in maintaining an extended personal relationship with the people they encountered. Broader structures of difference greatly influenced the interpretation of the app, especially as students considered the divergence between the ability to be anonymous online and the lack thereof offline. Expanded research on Yik Yak (or similar hyperlocal, anonymous networks) would be right to further investigate how global lines of difference such as gender, sexuality, race, and class structure the way that people use such technologies and what its implications are for studies of anonymity and digital mobility as a whole.

However, this does not mean that Yik Yak was unsuccessful in meeting the social needs of students or even in creating an idea of community for the period of time that it was widely used. While the community that emerged on Yik Yak was not one of authentic and long-lasting personal relationships, it served the needs of students who were seeking any sense of community at all. The capacity to imagine and engage with the community in their immediate surroundings on a hyperlocal level was a powerful and emotionally stimulating experience, even for those whose interactions were limited to the Yik Yak app. Offline connections are necessarily linked to

the sense of community that can exist through the internet, even on an app that draws heavily from its association with the physical world. The app's culture of anonymity fostered ideals of meritocratic and democratic engagement in an online space, facilitating communal participation in practices of affective labor. These community building strategies were deeply connected to notions that the app was a digital representation of the offline community, meaning that users viewed themselves as active participants in creating an affective experience of that community for their peers. This sense of community-building and participation outweighed the significance of individual interactions.

By the end of Spring 2023, the scene I described in the introduction was all but extinct. Claremont Yik Yak faced a drought of interest stemming from competition from more school-specific apps like Fizz and a general lack of student interest. “Once a month or so, I’ll remember it’s there and I’ll go back to see what people are up to,” Zoha told me in January 2023. In moments of curiosity, ranging from midday boredom to Friday night consultations, the app was occasionally still perused in hopes of connecting with other students and participating in the campus community. However, as Quinn and other students would tell me, Yik Yak was never the same as it was during its first year. Combined with pressure from competitors like Fizz, which lived up to the moniker of “Yik Yak on steroids,” Yik Yak lost its luster when the student community at large began to fully socially recover from the effects of the pandemic and its users grew tired of the format or simply had no use for the app amid their demanding schedules. Quinn, who once told me that she spent “literally hours” on Yik Yak some days, admitted in our final interview that she hadn’t checked the app in months.

“It’s not like I intentionally put it down one day and like, swore it off... I think at some point I just didn’t need it anymore—I had other stuff going on. I still use other social

media all the time, so it's not that I'm taking a technology break. I just don't... feel like I need it."

Considering the significant role that Yik Yak once played in facilitating the behaviors and emotional experiences of students like Quinn on college campuses, it is hard to conceive of the app as an abject failure. Yik Yak promised its users connections with the people around them—something it initially delivered in a generalized, affective sense of the term. However, connection proved an unscalable mission for an app built around the social lives of students existing in relative stasis (apart from the rare global catastrophe). Assuring Yakkers that the app came with “no strings (or labels) attached” (Yik Yak Inc. 2021), Yik Yak’s developers ironically failed to consider their own stake in the links it facilitated, unable to successfully monetize such ephemeral, anonymous, and often crude or banal interactions. An analysis that singularly focuses on a platform’s endurance, widespread influence, or market success is more attuned to predicting the flows of capital in the tech world than it is at ascertaining its social impact. The significance of Yik Yak, contrary to the metrics of capital achievement and the persuasions of Web 2.0, lies in its lack of permanence and inability to scale. The brevity of the app’s heyday in Claremont cannot be separated from what made it so impactful to my interlocutors: a locationally bounded and emotionally affective experience that was unsustainable in the long-term. Once again, the graffitied bathroom stall proves apt at conveying the essence of Yak Yak as well as the inevitability of its demise. On the wall lies the sum of a communal effort to explore every inch of space, a grotesque display of vulnerability that may be painted over at any moment, one where the minute processes of creation are private, sometimes intimate, and ultimately more significant than the resulting tapestry.

ENDNOTES

¹All names have been changed and some life details have been altered in order to protect the identities of those who contributed ethnographic data.

² Full Yaks are quoted, some comments have been omitted. Yakarma is displayed relative to time, given in minutes (m), hours (h), days (d), and weeks (w). Although Yik Yak indicated the approximate distance of OP from the user, this is not represented. Spelling and grammar errors have been left intact, occasional identifying information has been blocked out.

³As of April 2023, Yik Yak requires users to self-report their age and “join” the timeline of a specific school, although this is not officially verified.

⁴ Features added during fieldwork include direct messages, limited photo and video sharing, and the ability to add flair to posts in order to sort them by predetermined topics.

⁵Student slang for Campus Safety, deriving from their previous title of Campus Security

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