Yik Yak on Campus: Navigating Identity and Violence through Hyperlocal Anonymity

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In spring 2021, I attended a special forum at Hamilton College in which students, faculty members, and college administrators gathered online to discuss the use of the Jodel app on Hamilton's campus. Jodel is a platform that allows users to post short messages anonymously and to upvote, downvote, and comment on the messages posted by others. The platform also relies on geolocation, only allowing users from within a radius of a few miles to see and respond to each other's posts. It is one of several such hyperlocal anonymous apps, including Yik Yak, that are popular on US college campuses. These apps have been criticized in both popular and scholarly discourse for acting as sites for blatant expressions of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other toxic attitudes,[1] and for enabling cyberbullying.[2] In that forum conversation, Hamilton College administrators expressed concern about the app's ability to spread such harmful discourse, with one representative of the dean of students' office going so far as to suggest that the college should try to find a way to ban the app.

For many of these students, the Jodel app gave them a space where they could vent frustrations, call out problems, or create moments of connection and solidarity without the pressure of public recognition.

Students, however, were strongly opposed, even though many of them had first-hand experience of the app's potential for toxicity. Beyond mere arguments in favor of free speech for its own sake, the most interesting and spirited defenses of Jodel were raised by students who had experienced various forms of

marginalization on the basis of their identities while at Hamilton (due to their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or class background). For many of these students, the Jodel app gave them a space where they could vent frustrations, call out problems, or create moments of connection and solidarity without the pressure of public recognition. As visible minorities at a small, rural, wealthy, and predominantly white institution, they found the anonymity of the app to be a welcomed relief from their regular experiences of interpellation as "diverse" students.[3] One student, a queer woman of color, described Jodel as "a space to breathe."

This led me to ask: Why and how do college students choose to seek online anonymity? How do hyperlocal anonymous apps, such as Jodel and Yik Yak, fit into the broader social media landscapes and university contexts that students navigate on a daily basis? What are the benefits and drawbacks of online anonymity for underrepresented students in particular?

I decided to pursue these questions further after taking a faculty position at Bucknell University in 2021, where Yik Yak is the anonymous hyperlocal platform favored by the student body.[4] Like Jodel, Yik Yak is a hyperlocal social media platform that allows users to post short messages anonymously and to upvote, downvote, and comment on the messages posted by others.

In this essay, I will highlight a few key takeaways from students' experiences on Bucknell Yik Yak, focusing on two areas that were both frequently discussed on Yik Yak and also brought up repeatedly by students in interviews: the prevalence of sexual violence on campus and the relative racial homogeneity of Bucknell's student body. The relative anonymity of Yik Yak allows students to share information and discuss their experiences around these sensitive topics in ways that they might not otherwise have done. These anonymous interactions are not always satisfactory, and can sometimes end up reinforcing students' feelings of marginalization or alienation from the wider campus. On the whole, though, the majority of our interviewees found Yik Yak to have at least some value as a source of information about campus goings-on and the opinions of their peers. I suggest that Yik Yak and similar platforms also offer a valuable window into the ways in which pernicious social hierarchies are encoded into everyday life on college campuses.

Yik Yak and Bucknell

As a social media platform, Yik Yak has an unusual history. It was originally introduced in 2013 and, after a wave of initial popularity, faced sustained public criticism for enabling cyberbullying along with racism, sexism, and other toxic discourses. The platform eventually became defunct in 2017 due to serious decline in user engagement. However, instead of remaining in the crowded graveyard of short-lived social media platforms, Yik Yak was resurrected in 2021 with seed funding from an unnamed investor. In early 2023, Yik Yak was acquired by Sidechat, another anonymous hyperlocal platform marketed primarily to college students. The owners of both Yik Yak and Sidechat have attempted to remain anonymous and have been reluctant to respond to press inquiries.

The profit model of Yik Yak is also opaque. Unlike other social media platforms, it does not serve ads

(targeted or otherwise) to its users. However, the app does collect granular data on its users' locations, and this data is vulnerable to access by people who are not Yik Yak employees. This location-tracking is a concern not only because it could potentially enable doxxing, stalking, or other forms of harassment, but because it raises the larger question of why Yik Yak is collecting this data on its users in the first place.[5]

The resurrected Yik Yak app quickly became popular at Bucknell University in the fall of 2021. Located in rural central Pennsylvania, it is a private school serving primarily undergraduate students, with an enrollment of just under 4,000. According to US News and World Report, the yearly cost of attendance is $80,970, and only 45 percent of first-year students received any form of need-based financial aid in the fall of 2021. According to Bucknell's demographic statistics, more than 70 percent of the student body is white. Greek life is a major part of the social scene at Bucknell; according to Bucknell's Office of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs, more than 50 percent of students choose to join a fraternity or sorority once they become eligible to do so in their sophomore year. Fraternities and sororities host a large number of social events on campus, and many of their parties are open to nonmembers. Many of our interviewees used the phrase "party school" to describe Bucknell due to the significant influence of Greek life on campus.

During interviews, we asked students to (1) describe the typical Bucknell student and (2) reflect on whether they felt they personally fit this description. Students who saw themselves as typical Bucknell students used words and phrases such as "work hard, play hard," "preppy," "likes to party," "into Greek life," and "smart" to describe the typical Bucknell student. Students who did not see themselves as typical Bucknell students tended to emphasize the student body's overall affluence, whiteness, and privilege. As Jilly,[6] a first-generation white female student, put it, "a typical Bucknell student is Chad on his boat with his boat shoes, snapback, and his polo […] 'Oh, I'm going to work on Wall Street. My dad worked on Wall Street.'" The majority of students interviewed did not see themselves as typical Bucknell students for a variety of reasons, such as race, class status, first-generation student status, gender identity, and sexuality. Starflower, an Asian American female student from a working-class background, put it this way: "I just don't think I could ever become, by definition, 'Bucknellian.' That just feels weird. I just go to Bucknell."

Because Yik Yak's main feed displays posts by users within a small geographic radius…students at Bucknell often regard the app as a campus bulletin board primarily for student use and only occasionally used by others (e.g., college staff, faculty, and locals).

In this demographic and social milieu, the specific affordances of Yik Yak shape the role that it plays in campus social life. Because Yik Yak's main feed displays posts by users within a small geographic radius, and because everyone within that geographic radius sees the same feed of posts, students at Bucknell often regard the app as a campus bulletin board primarily for student use and only occasionally used by others (e.g., college staff, faculty, and locals). One of Yik Yak's distinctive features is that each user is

randomly assigned an emoji on a colored background; this emoji is visible to others when a user comments on someone else's posts. Frequent users of the app often come to be recognized and referred to by the emoji that appears with their comments, achieving a form of anonymous microcelebrity.[7]

Without proprietary access to Yik Yak's user data, it is not possible to know for sure what percentage of the Bucknell student body uses Yik Yak. When we asked our interviewees for their best estimates on this question, their guesses varied widely, from 20–25 percent to 80–90 percent. One interviewee reported that her most popular post had received more than 900 upvotes, from which we can infer that at least at one point, over 900 people within the app's 5-mile radius were using the platform. Yet, at least some students at Bucknell use Yik Yak as an important but fraught source of information that allows them to keep tabs on goings-on on campus, particularly regarding sexual violence.

Yik Yak as whisper network: Discussing sexual violence on campus

To put it bluntly, Bucknell University has troublingly high rates of sexual violence on campus. A study conducted in 2022–2023 by the Campus Sexual Assault Research Team found that 27 percent of women and 12 percent of men reported experiences of rape or attempted rape during their time as Bucknell students; the statistics for other forms of sexual and gender-based violence, such as sexual assault, harassment, and stalking, are similarly appalling. For the sake of comparison: According to a 2020 report by the Association of American Universities based on data from 21 US colleges and universities, the overall rate of nonconsensual sexual contact for college students was 13 percent. Furthermore, there is a strong link between sexual violence and Greek life at Bucknell; while women who were not involved in Greek life reported rape or attempted rape at a rate of 20.6 percent, the rate of prevalence jumped to 38.4 percent for women involved in Greek life.

Unsurprisingly, students often take to Yik Yak to comment on the intersections of sexual violence and Greek life. As seen in figures 1 and 2, specific fraternities are often mentioned by name.



Fig. 1. Screenshot. November 17, 2022.



Fig. 2. Screenshot. November 17, 2022.

As can be seen in the second screenshot, allegations of sexual violence on Yik Yak are often challenged. In this case, the commenter says that the original poster's accusation against the Chi Phi fraternity is "just untrue." Yik Yak users can also weigh in on any post or comment by downvoting it. Any post or comment that receives a net score of negative 5 (meaning it has received five more downvotes than upvotes) is automatically removed from the platform. As several of our interviewees reported, students sometimes use that feature to act in concert to remove posts that they dislike or disagree with. Danny, who was a very frequent user of the app, described the removal process as follows: "If there's one that sucks, I downvote it. I get all my friends to downvote it. I'm like, 'Pull out your phones right now. Downvote it.' Once it gets the negative five, it's gone. So, I'm always instantly on that." Another

interviewee told us that she had heard of frat members coordinating with each other to quickly remove any posts about their frat that cast them in a negative light, including posts related to sexual violence.

Our interviewees were very aware that information on Yik Yak is partial at best; it may be completely untrue, exaggerated, or subject to manipulation. At the same time, many of our interviewees reported that Yik Yak can feel like a valuable source of insight into a campus social scene that is often difficult to navigate, particularly for students on the margins. One white working-class student, Lisa, used the term "perverse knowledge" to describe the information that she gained using the app:

> It's like this perverse knowledge, like you want to know what's happening, to keep yourself safe. Because a lot of people go to the frats every Friday. If they told me they were going to Chi Phi, I'd be like, "Are you sure?" I heard a girl telling me she wanted me to go to Fiji [Phi Gamma Delta]. And I was like, "Are you sure?" […] There is this desire to know. I'm a freshman who's not heavily involved in Greek life. How else would I know what's going on?

Miley, a queer white student who described her class background as "impoverished," was not a frequent user of Yik Yak, but she did tend to use the app to get a sense of what other students were thinking when issues of sexual violation came to the forefront of public attention:

> I definitely go on it whenever I know something is going on campus. There was a huge increase in posting on Yik Yak when the scandal of the one P-Safe [Public Safety] deputy deleting that video footage [taken by a male student in a women's bathroom]. All campus was outraged. All the women of campus were outraged. And then, just this semester, when that camera was found in the bathroom of Uptown [secretly recording male students at urinals].

She also valued the app as a source of information on Greek life that she felt she could use to keep herself and her friends safer:

> I do like Yik Yak in that sense, because it will keep me updated. Like, "Fiji just got shut down for this," or "Lambda did this and they're on suspension for the week" or something like that. Because, even if I don't go out a lot, I want to know where my friends are, and if they're okay.

Race, anonymity, and invalidation

When we asked students to describe Bucknell as if they were talking to somebody who's never been there, many of them commented that the school is "very white" or "not diverse." The school's lack of diversity is a common topic of conversation on Yik Yak as well, as seen in figures 3 and 4.



Fig. 3. Screenshot taken September 1, 2022.

Yak Details

The lack of ethnic diversity at Bucknell honestly sucks

13h ago | Around 5 miles away

26

2 Comments



To be fair you went to a school called Bucknell, what did you expect

13h ago | Around 5 miles away

1



chooses to come here *complains when here* you are the worst kind of person please stfu

13h ago | Around 5 miles away

0

Fig. 4. Screenshot taken September 17, 2022.

Both of these posts received a larger-than-usual amount of total upvotes (42 and 26 respectively), indicating approval or agreement by the app's users; most of the posts in our overall sample received 5 or fewer total upvotes. However, the dismissive comments on the post in figure 4 were very common on the platform. Students of color who posted about their experiences of marginalization on campus were often told by other users that they had made the choice to come to Bucknell and therefore shouldn't complain about the lack of diversity. In some cases, their experiences of feeling othered were challenged or minimized in other ways, as described here by Nick, a bisexual Indian American student:

> Nick: "Today I posted, 'Another day another opportunity for the caf [cafeteria] workers to say, I wish I had hair like yours to any curly-haired POC.' And people were really upset about it. I can read you some of the comments […] Someone was like, 'Pardon my ignorance. Why is this a bad thing to say?' And then someone, I'm assuming it was a person of color, said 'It feels like we are zoo animals and only seen as a POC rather than a human being," which is very accurate. They summed it up better than I could have. And then someone comments, 'Oh, I hope they see this and tell you how thankful they are to not have curly hair tomorrow. They'd never want to feel like a zoo animal.' Someone was like, 'I mean, if they are viewing you like an animal, they wouldn't want to be like you. People are different. Maybe everyone has their own insecurities. Tell them how it makes you feel without being condescending. They're 99 percent not doing this from a place of ignorance. Not malicious.' I never said it was malicious; it's just ignorance. People seem to be like, 'you're overplaying.' The general vibe I got from it was that I was not valid, that my opinion was not valid. Like, I'm making the caf workers seem like bad people. I don't think they are bad people, and I didn't say that. I'm just saying I am a little sick of every time I walk up, someone's saying something about my hair, because it makes me feel like I stick out."
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> Interviewer: "Yeah, that's totally understandable. Do you feel like maybe if you posted this on an account that was tied to your name that maybe people wouldn't respond like that?"
>
> Nick: "God, I would never post it. That makes me so nervous, especially at Bucknell, people at Bucknell would see it. I feel like white people would be like, 'Oh, this kid, he thinks this kind of way.' Or they'd be like, 'Oh, he's complaining again,' or something like that? I don't know. It just makes me uncomfortable. I feel like I wouldn't be able to do that."

While the anonymity of Yik Yak allowed Nick to feel comfortable enough to make his original post, the majority of comments that he received in response from other Yik Yak users made him feel invalidated. While this pattern of interaction can and does occur on many social media sites, the hyperlocal nature of Yik Yak compounded the sense of frustration felt by Nick and other students we interviewed. These students were not just in conversation with random strangers on the internet; they were interacting with people who shared their classrooms, dorms, parties, and other social spaces on campus. Thus, when their experiences of racial othering were belittled or dismissed by their peers, students who already felt marginalized on Bucknell's campus were likely to feel even further alienated.

And yet, Nick also felt a sense of solidarity with the commenter who stepped into the conversation to expand on Nick's original post by saying that the cafeteria workers' comments made students of color

feel like zoo animals. Imagining that student as a fellow person of color, Nick said their take on his original post was “very accurate” and that “they summed it up better than I could have.” Among the many comments that dismissed or trivialized his experience, Nick was heartened that at least one other person shared his perspective. This interaction demonstrates the emotionally complex nature of the conversations enabled by Yik Yak’s hyperlocal anonymity.

Conclusion

Several of our interviewees expressed the view that, despite Yik Yak’s limitations and flaws, it nevertheless served a useful purpose in campus life by giving them a window into what their peers were thinking about sensitive and important topics. Wyatt, a biracial and bisexual woman, said that Yik Yak wasn’t widely used among her friend group, which consisted mostly of other queer POC students, because the racist, sexist, and homophobic posts “make it feel like the app isn’t really for them.” But she nevertheless said that she would advise new Bucknell students to download the app because “it does give you a good idea about what people on campus are thinking. So maybe when you first get here, it might be good to look at it and see what you’re getting yourself into.”

One of the features that contributes to Yik Yak’s role as source of insight on “what you’re getting yourself into” is that everyone who uses Yik Yak within the same geographic location sees the same feed. In a social media landscape where most of the platforms that students use provide them with content algorithmically tailored to their specific interests, Yik Yak is unusual because it offers a relatively uniform set of posts and comments. Lisa compared Yik Yak to a lens through which to examine Bucknell’s campus culture:

> All Yik Yak is, is a magnifying glass. It’s like, if you put yogurt outside, you look at it. And you’re like, “Yeah, that yogurt is fine.” Then you eat and throw up. Looking at it with a magnifying glass, with your microscope, you see there’s bacteria. All yogurt has bacteria, and all colleges have problems, right? But you can’t see the kind of problems or the kind of bacteria until you use the microscope.

While providing students with a microscope through which to inspect their campus’s problems, Yik Yak can also provide us with a lens through which to re-examine the relationship between social media platforms and hierarchies of race, gender, wealth, and other forms of privilege. As the work of many scholars has demonstrated,[8] internet tools and platforms that are supposedly neutral in their design can actually encode and reinforce existing inequalities. It is not surprising that in this research, the students who had the most positive things to say about Yik Yak were the students who were also most likely to describe themselves as “typical Bucknell students,” whereas the students who felt like they didn’t fit in on campus due to their relative distance from whiteness, wealth, and heterosexual masculinity had a more fraught relationship with the platform. While these marginalized students were able to find some value in Yik Yak as a tool for keeping themselves safer on campus, their need to do so can be read as an indicator of how far we still have to go as a society.

Footnotes

1 Jennifer Martin and Martina Sharp-Grier, "Lest We Forget, the Personal Continues to Be Political: Yik Yak and Other Unsafe Spaces, Necessary Dialogue in a Time of Silence," in *Campus Action Against Sexual Assault: Needs, Policies, Procedures, and Training Programs: Needs, Policies, Procedures, and Training Programs*, ed. Michele Paludi (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 51–82.

2 Chengbi Liu and Daniel Siu, "Exploring the Spatiotemporal Pattern of Cyberbullying with Yik Yak," *The Professional Geographer* 69, no. 3 (2016): 412–23.

3 Bonnie Urciuoli, "Neoliberalizing Markedness: The Interpellation of 'Diverse' College Students," *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 3 (2016): 201–221.

4 The primary method of data collection was semi-structured ethnographic interviews with approximately 40 students at Bucknell, conducted by myself and two student research assistants, Nikash Kale and Zoha Nadeer. I also collected a convenience sample of approximately 5,000 posts on the Yik Yak platform and conducted a close reading of Yik Yak's terms of service and community guidelines, as well as news coverage of the platform. Furthermore, as a professor, I had the opportunity to have many conversations with students about their experiences with social media on campus.

5 The resurrection of the platform through anonymous seed funding and its acquisition by Sidechat indicate that at least some people are willing to take a gamble on Yik Yak's profitability, even as the company has consistently declined to answer questions on how that profitability is to be achieved.

6 All interviewee names are pseudonyms, chosen by the interviewees themselves.

7 Crystal Abidin and Megan Lindsay Brown, eds., *Microcelebrity around the Globe: Approaches to Cultures of Internet Fame* (Leeds, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018).

8 For example, Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Polity 2019), and Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, *Data Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020).