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Anonymous social media – Understanding the content and context of Yik Yak

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ABSTRACT

Yik Yak, an anonymous social media application has garnered a pervasive following and secured millions in investment funding. The application has been a consistent topic of discussion on U.S. college campuses and in the media, often described in very negative terms. This study sought to gain an empirical understanding of the nature of communication on the application. Across three days, 4001 anonymous posts from 42 different US college campuses were collected and analyzed using emergent inductive content analysis. Overall, the content associated with each post varied widely, with a large percentage of posts (45.1%, n = 1802) focused upon campus life and announcements or proclamations. Also frequent were posts that included profanity or vulgarities (13.5%, n = 544), posts that asked apparently rhetorical questions (10.1%, n = 405) and posts related to dating, sex and sexuality (9.2%, n = 366). Many of the posts were arguably inflammatory, but few contained individualized personal information. A large proportion of posts reflected domains of perceived normative behaviors on college campuses, such as alcohol, drug use and sexuality. Importantly, posts analyzed were highly context specific, limiting the research team's ability to fully understand or appreciate the impact of a post. Finally, even in light of the highly contextual nature of the posts, based on our limited analysis, the authors of this manuscript conclude that Yik Yak, while a tool with the potential for abuse and misuse, does not represent a significant threat to young adults.

1. Introduction

In late 2013, an anonymous mobile application called Yik Yak launched and quickly became popular, especially on U.S. college campuses. Yik Yak allows for proximity-based, anonymous posting and is aimed at college-aged young adults. The application's users who are in the same geographic area (a 10 mile radius) are placed on the same message board. Each local message board provides the opportunity for users to post anonymous text-based messages, limited to 200 characters, and to provide up or down vote feedback and text-based comments to existing posts. (Lapowsky, 2014) In addition, Yik Yak allows its users to 'peek' or view, but not comment or add to postings, at select other campuses. Yik Yak provides a simple set of six rules for users that are easily accessible within its user interface: (Yik Yak, 2015).

1. You do not bully or specifically target other yakkers. 2. You DO NOT bully or specifically target other yakkers. 3. Zero-tolerance policy on posting people's private information. 4. Don't clutter people's feeds with useless or offensive yaks. If you see a useless or offensive yak, make sure to do your part by downvoting or reporting it. 5. If your yaks continue to be reported, you will be suspended. 6. Ride the Yak.

In order to enforce these rules, Yik Yak includes a reporting feature that allows users to 'flag' postings that violate rules. Given its popularity and rapid growth, Yik Yak has attracted considerable media attention. (Goldsmith, 2014; Tyrrell, 2014; Valencia, 2014) Additionally, the historical precedent associated with anonymous social media applications targeted at young adults has led to sufficient public perception and some anecdotal evidence which indicates that Yik Yak may be used as a vehicle for deliberate personal identification, or other means of personal defamation or humiliation. (Goldsmith, 2014; Horsman, 2015; Lapowsky, 2014; McCarthy, 2015; Tyrrell, 2014; Valencia, 2014; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015;

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Yik Yak, 2015) Yet, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there has been no systematic analysis of Yik Yak content to gain an empirical understanding of the manner in which students post to the application.

Using thematic analysis and an emergent coding process, this study sought to gain insight into the nature of content, or Yaks, posted on the Yik Yak application by individuals within the vicinity of college campuses.

2. Background

Social media is a mainstay for not just young adults but for the average American consumer. Whether they are updating statuses on Facebook, sharing photographs via twitter or Instagram, recording and sharing brief videos via vine, or seeking the ratings of an intended service on Angies List, social media is central to American lives. Most (73%) adults who use the internet also make use of a social network and specifically, up to 90% of internet using adults between the ages of 18–29 are social media users. (Pew Research Center, 2013a).

Online social networks, emergent first on college campuses, are tools of critical importance to young adults during an often tumultuous period of social adjustment. (Yang & Brown, 2013) However navigating and managing online social relationships is itself a complicated task for any social media user, particularly college students. According to Yang and Brown, college students are forced to balance prior relationships while building new relationships among potentially thousands of unknown individuals. Issues surrounding privacy have emerged as added layers of complexity in the social media milieu. (Yang & Brown, 2013) Research by Jeong and Coyle provides evidence that young adult social media users perceive differing threats to their privacy based upon the application they are using; therefore, users may choose to disclose or communicate in very different ways based upon these perceptions of privacy. (Jeong & Coyle, 2014) While many social media sites are household names, new and unique social media sites and mobile applications proliferate amongst specific demographics. The rise in new or alternative social media with differing privacy expectations is not unexpected; teen and young adult Facebook users have asserted that the excessive adult presence, bullying activities, and concerns over privacy on more "mainstream" social media sites such as Facebook have led them to search for networks with a more exclusive audience. (Baumer et al., 2013; Boyd & Marwick, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2013b).

Emergent applications such as Snapchat, Secret and Whisper are specifically aimed at this demographic and increasingly feature privacy or anonymity as paramount characteristics. (Young, 2014) Snapchat for example, focuses on privacy, allowing users to send photos or videos to another Snapchat user, dictating exactly how long a recipient can view this content (between 1 and 10 s). After this period of time, the message is unable to be viewed and deleted from Snapchat's servers; in other words, they self-destruct. (Poltash, 2013; Seh, 2014) (However, it is worth mentioning that Snapchat users may create screen captures of a message if quick enough.) Since its launch in 2011, Snapchat has been inextricably linked to sexting, the practice of sending sexually explicit messages or images over the internet or via text messaging. (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012) Secret, another emergent application, focuses on anonymity, allowing users to post messages, pictures and other content without the potential fear of retaliation. (Isaac, 2014).

Anonymous sharing online is not a new phenomenon. Perhaps the most pervasive and enduring example is 4chan.org, a message board that does not require registration, making all postings functionally anonymous. (Knuttila, 2011) Launched in 2003, this often incendiary message board has had and continues to have considerable influence on Internet culture, launching viral culture such as LOLcats and promoting off-line protests of the Church of Scientology. (Bernstein et al., 2011; Coleman, 2011; Rutkoff, 2007) In 2007, another anonymous website focusing only on college students was launched and quickly expanded to over 500 college campuses. Juicy Campus facilitated anonymous posting to pages associated with college and university campuses and allowed users to vote on content that was the 'juiciest.' (Barr & Lugus, 2011; Hostin, 2008) Although no systematic analysis of Juicy Campus' message board content exists, there is considerable evidence of postings that included threats, defamation and obscenity, which ultimately resulted in lawsuits, campuses blocking access to the site and the site's ultimate demise in February 2009. (Barr & Lugus, 2011) Inevitably new gossip-oriented sites emerged to replace Juicy Campus including CollegeACB, College only and College Wall of Shame, although these sites failed to attain a similar level of popularity.

Drawing from this cumulative anonymous posting, Yik Yak was founded in 2013, and since then has garnered a pervasive following and secured more than $60 million in investment funding. (Wikipedia, 2015) The application has also been a consistent topic of discussion on college campuses and in the media. (Wang, Wang, Wang, Nika, Zheng & Zhao,) The application has often been described in very negative terms, with frequent assumptions of inflammatory online behavior. (Goldsmith, 2014; Horsman, 2015; Lapowsky, 2014; McCarthy, 2015; Tyrrell, 2014; Valencia, 2014; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015; Yik Yak, 2015) Wang et al., assert that Yik Yak and other anonymous tools encourage inflammatory communication because of their inherent lack of accountability. (Wang et al.,) Yet, to date, the majority of the criticism associated with Yik Yak has been made based upon anecdote; an empirical understanding of the nature of communication on the application is warranted. Armed with a better understanding of how users are communicating with each other on an anonymous mobile platform will better inform future conversations about these emergent technologies.

3. Methods

On three successive days (May 9, 12 and 13, 2014) two of the authors (EB, KM) accessed and collected a convenience sample of publically-available data from the Yik Yak iOS application using screen captures. A total of 674 screen captures from all 'peekable' college and university campuses (N = 42) were accessed and archived. While participation on YikYak is location-based, limited, for example to the user's college campus, users can read or 'peek' posts passively on other college campuses or locations. For the purposes of this study, we accessed all 42 viewable ('peekable') campuses during the timeframe associated with the data collection. The majority of these institutions were large four-year public research institutions (n = 23, 54.7%). Non-Ivy League four-year private institutions were also well represented (n = 13, 30.1%), smaller four year public institutions (n = 4, 9.5%) and Ivy League institutions (n = 2, 4.8%) rounded out the population. The majority of peekable institutions (n = 27, 64.2%) were located in the Eastern and Southeastern U.S. On average, each screen capture (Fig. 1) contained 5.9 Yaks, resulting in a total of 4001 Yaks, with an average of 95.3 Yaks per campus. It is worth mentioning that since May of 2014, Yik Yak has changed its rules as to the number of peekable campuses, and as of October 2014, any and all message boards were made peekable regardless of location. (Wikipedia, 2015).

Prior to analysis, narrative from each of the 674 screen captures was transcribed from picture files to Microsoft Excel by a third party transcription service. The Yik Yak application limits the