



WHEN IS YIK YAK YAPPING UNFUNNY?

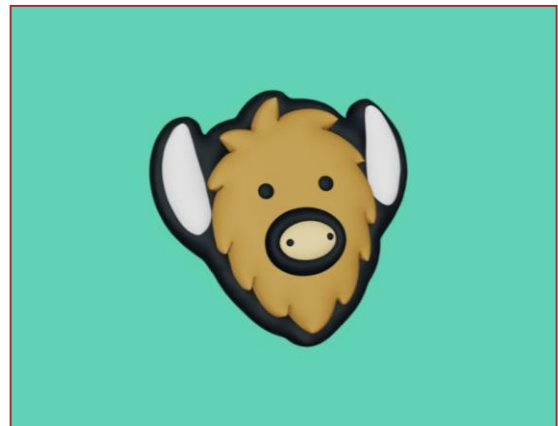
THE ETHICS OF ANONYMOUS ONLINE CHAT PLATFORMS

Madison Wells, Kat Williams, & Scott R. Stroud, Ph.D.

CASE STUDY

Anti-bullying awareness and support have been very prevalent in recent years to promote kindness amongst others and mental health initiatives - especially among students. Despite this emphasis on amiability and sympathy, a popular social media application called Yik Yak has made it easy for people to bully and harass others online publicly.

Yik Yak is a free, easily accessible phone application that promotes itself as a way to help college students “find their herd” by anonymously connecting with everyone at their university (Yik



Yak, 2024). In addition to providing users with an anonymous, location-specific, and public chat with their fellow college students to discuss various topics and happenings related to their school, students can also join chat groups that align with their interests. Yik Yak allows its users to post, also known as “Yak”, and view discussion threads within a five-mile radius to keep the chats location-specific. In these chats, people communicate about recent university news, post funny jokes, ask others for recommendations on things such as local restaurants, advocate for various issues, talk about their day, and more. With the app’s emphasis on open, anonymous discussion spaces, advertising students to “go nuts” when communicating ideas, users are subject to the benefits of anonymous speech highlighted above, as well as the downfalls associated with such activity like online bullying and harassment - which got the app into trouble in 2017.

Yik Yak originally launched in 2013 and looked almost identical to what it is now; however, the app was shut down in 2017 due to rampant bullying, racism, and harmful threats that mentally and physically endangered some of the app's users (Carrasco, 2022). Yik Yak relaunched in

August of 2021 with new “stay safe resources” that outline various guidelines regarding ridesharing, diversity and inclusion, violence, protection of minors, and bullying – emphasizing the app’s new dedication towards promoting the mental health and wellness of their users (Yik Yak, 2024). Despite implementing these new regulations, many are questioning if Yik Yak is actually enforcing them. While the app may have new guidelines that supposedly promote online safety and kindness, many college students have reported seeing a great deal of continued hostility on the platform as abuse and hateful rhetoric are still spread in university chat groups across the country (Valenti, 2022). Yik Yak discussion threads continue to be filled with racism, sexual harassment, homophobia, culturally insensitive remarks, and bullying in general, and there are virtually no repercussions (Shellenberger, 2022).

The anonymity provided by Yik Yak to publicly post in discussion threads without one’s identity attached has allowed people more confidence and freedom to craft harmful messages. More than half of cyberbullying is done anonymously, and 68% of people believe that requiring social media users to attach their real identity to their accounts will help decrease online harassment (Vogels, 2022). Looking at this research, it seems like a smart way to decrease the bullying on Yik Yak would be to remove the anonymity factor; however, Yik Yak hasn’t taken this action as they believe that there are benefits to communicating anonymously.

Despite the arguments that the service Yik Yak provides is harmful to its users, the app’s creators claim that Yik Yak has a positive impact on college students by providing them with a space to openly and confidently share messages - promoting communication and community engagement. While the anonymity aspect can lead to cyberbullying, it also increases the amount of unharmed, positive engagement many have with the app. Because people don’t have to worry about their identity being attached to the messages they post on Yik Yak, the anxiety many face with posting on social media or engaging with peers is gone. On Yik Yak, the quiet kid can be just as funny and recognized as the class clown, and this can be incredibly blissful (Wang, 2023). Not only does Yik Yak give a confident voice to those who otherwise would’ve stayed silent, but it can also increase community awareness. With the location-specific feature of the app, people can be very attuned to what is going on around them - good or bad (Hutchinson, 2021). For most, college is a new and scary experience, and Yik Yak can help ease the minds of college students with its ability to alert users of local events that they could go to and mingle at, as well as its ability to spread information on dangerous incidents that could warn users and keep them safe.

Yik Yak can provide its users definite advantages in navigating college, confidently voicing opinions, and engaging with the community; however, are these benefits enough to justify the negative consequences many have faced as a result of the app’s bullying-prone environment? The bullying and harassment that continues to fill Yik Yak’s discussion threads has made many hesitant to fully support the app - leaving users unsure if Yik Yak is really worth it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the ethical concerns with Yik Yak promoting their service while knowing that their relaxed guidelines allow for online bullying and harassment?
2. What are some ethical principles that the creators of Yik Yak can follow to avoid putting people at risk of being emotionally harmed from cyberbullying?
3. Should the creators of social media applications be responsible for minimizing the consequences their app can have if that means putting the app's popularity at risk?
4. Are applications like Yik Yak helping or hurting their users? What is ethically problematic about a service offering helpful and entertaining benefits that can have unhealthy consequences?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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