

**THE ANONYMOUS COMMUNITY:
INVESTIGATING THE USE OF YIK YAK AMONGST UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ST ANDREWS**

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“Oh my goodness! Our exam results are now online!”

“Really? How do you know this?” I asked my friend.

“Someone wrote it on Yik Yak.”

Yik Yak? I had never heard of this terminology before my arrival to study at the University of St Andrews, nor did I know it existed until my flatmate explained the concept to me. It sounded like an interesting idea and, as one does for most university related social events, I immediately wanted to be involved. I turned on my phone and instantly downloaded the little green icon with the cartoon yak in the centre and, after investigating how to use it for about five minutes, I was hooked. I found it bizarre that so many students in the surrounding area used this device yet I had never encountered it before. This really made me think. It occurred to me on that particular afternoon: why are all of these people so fascinated with using Yik Yak? I couldn't even answer this question myself, despite now being a user. What is the attraction in communicating with other people without knowing who they truly are?

This was now fixated in the back of my mind and I felt compelled to consider more. In the end, I decided to discuss this form of social media as the topic for my Ethnographic Encounters project, in the hope that I could answer these questions by the end of the experience. My aim for this project is to attempt to understand three different factors: the first being the primary reason for using Yik Yak; the second being whether or not Yik Yak can be considered a true community, and, finally, why it is considered better to speak anonymously with people.

What is Yik Yak?

Before the analysis on the topic in hand can occur, it is important to question or identify what exactly Yik Yak is as a concept. Yik Yak, in its simplest form, is a social media website

and phone application that allows users to write posts anonymously within a certain mile radius. Yik Yak has become extremely popular amongst university students, especially across the US and Britain as, according to Urban Dictionary, Yik Yak is described as “a mobile app college kids use to anonymously talk shit and post witty things to people nearby,” (website). Anthropologists Samuel Wilson and Leighton Peterson refer to all platforms of social media as “what is not: face-to-face communication,” (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 452). Social media has certainly become a craze over the last few years, but Yik Yak seems to be the only one at the minute where there is no need to create a personal profile or to attach your name to what you choose to write.

Users are able to write a post of their choice, consisting of two hundred characters or fewer, for it to then appear on a Yik Yak feed subject to that particular town or area, which brings “virtual reality into geographical, social spaces,” (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 453). All of the posts, which are simply referred to as just Yaks, are showcased in a long chronological list from the last twenty-four hours, for the other users to read and comment on at their leisure. If a user reads a certain yak that they like, perhaps they find it amusing or they can simply relate to the post, they can do what is known as ‘up voting’. It is a similar concept to liking a post on Facebook or retweeting a tweet on Twitter, in the sense that a user can click on the up arrow and give the author of that post one vote. However, if a user reads something on the site that they find distressing or simply do not agree with, they also have the option of ‘down voting’ it. One of the many rules with Yik Yak is that if a post receives a certain amount of down votes to take the number down to minus five, the Yak will be removed from the site altogether. This is due to the fact that, because people have the power to post literally anything they desire anonymously, they can very easily offend someone and the creators of the site do not tolerate this.

My Methodology

It was important for me to choose and apply an effective methodology procedure for my project. In most anthropological fieldwork scenarios, the researcher normally practises Bronislaw Malinowski’s technique of participant observation to extract the information needed. In my case, I found this to be quite a problem. With Yik Yak being an anonymous

online service, it was therefore difficult for me to observe someone typing a post on their phone or laptop and calling that observation research. I knew I would have to retrieve my information and create my methodology some other way. In the beginning, being a basic Yik Yak user myself, I wrote on the site anonymously asking if anyone would be interested in being interviewed by me about their views on Yik Yak (with an added bribe of a free coffee if they agreed to participate). I received a few replies to the Yak with people saying they would love to be a part of this experience and share their opinions. All of the informants that I gathered and that are mentioned in this project are students studying at the University of St Andrews between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, with all of whom interact on Yik Yak on a regular basis. The next problem, however, was that I didn't know how to meet with these people without giving away information about myself or themselves on the Yak. In the end, I realised this was pretty near impossible and commented on the post my student email so they could now communicate with me through an email service. It was a risk putting that on a site but I trusted the people of St Andrews to simply ignore the email address unless they were wanting to be interviewed by me. Even so, what exactly is it that I would have risked? Even if someone were to work out who I was from the email, what would they then do with that information? It is almost frowned upon to broadcast any personal information on this anonymous site; perhaps this is to do with a security issue or maybe this is just the Yik Yak protocol?

After this process of actually securing some students to talk to, I used a few techniques for gathering information about the use of Yik Yak. First, I was able to observe and oversee many posts being published on a daily basis, giving me a sense of the daily actions of the average St Andrews Yik Yak user, however I am unsure if this form of research can be considered as participant observation. Next, I decided to meet with some of the users face to face outside the boundaries of the Yik Yak app itself. When discussing the concept of the site with my informants, I found that communicating over Yik Yak itself to be quite a challenge. People found it easier to talk to me when they weren't having to type out their thoughts or having to fit their opinion into under two hundred characters. I chose to call the meetings with the students a conversation or a discussion, rather than labelling it as an interview, as they were able to confide in me more and feel comfortable with the situation.

As well as constructing these interviews, I was able to combine all of this knowledge with the ideas I gathered from different articles and books concerning the topic. However, with the internet being such a new field of study within anthropology, there were a limited number of articles and books that were relevant to this project topic. Although, there was one such term that was mentioned on numerous occasions from the texts I read and that was 'Digital Anthropology'. This is referring to anthropologists researching on the rise of online technology in the past twenty years or so, in this case being social networking sites. It has certainly become very interesting for anthropologists to study, as the internet can be accessed from all over the world and it is not necessary to travel to do any form of fieldwork. It is said that social networking sites "have been the fastest in terms of their ability to become a global infrastructure," (Horst and Miller 2012: 146).

Yik Yak as a Support System

There are many occasions where a user of Yik Yak feels comfortable enough to write a post on a very personal problem. This can range from relationship troubles and sexual matters, or something as serious as suicidal thoughts. It could also be as simple as someone feeling a little lonely or having a particularly bad day. From my own personal experience of using the site, there is quite a high percentage of students who publish what is considered a personal post, with most of them being written in the evening time after the hours of around 8 or 9pm. My informant Sean commented on the ability to write something so deep and stated that "it allows me to speak my mind without repercussions in an open space." It is clear that the anonymous feature on this social media encourages users to speak freely about any personal matters without the fear of associating their identity with the problem at hand. It is interesting to consider if the site was not anonymous, would these users be as open amongst the community? When this is compared to other social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (which have personalized accounts so each user is identified) it certainly seems as though Yik Yak is a safer place to confide in. Another of my informants named Linsey brought up an interesting point when discussing this topic, and suggested that Yik Yak should perhaps provide a hotline number for those in need of it, especially if it is seen as a serious issue.

When the average user first logs on to the mobile app and begins scrolling through the posts of the day, it is very unlikely that they will not read one that discusses a personal or private matter. Many will think no more of it and scroll right past those kinds of posts, however there are other users who are more than happy to give some guidance to the writer in need of it. Another informant of mine named Kaja expressed to me that she uses Yik Yak a lot of the time but prefers to read other posts rather than actually writing her own. She told me that “there is always so much love in the comments (of a Yak) and that it is nice to read other people being very supportive.” This is encouraging for users who perhaps do not have a friend to talk to outside of Yik Yak, or that are embarrassed to share their problem in a public group. They can feel at ease by posting their problem on Yik Yak and know that the chances are that another user in the area can relate to that same problem or is going through the exact same experience, like a safe community for those who suffer from social anxiety. Informant Amelie said to me that it can feel comforting knowing that you can share your worries without being judged, and this is an ideal quality to possess within a community.

Discussions and Debates

As well as communicating personal matters on Yik Yak, many of the users also feel free to express their opinions on a particular subject, perhaps something to do with the town itself or something from the recent news headlines. This can be a good reason for someone to up vote a Yak as they may agree with the view of that particular writer. However, there are also expected to be occasions in which a user does not agree with someone else’s opinion and this can create a debate on the Yik Yak feed. My informant Heather told me during her interview that she liked to interact with debates and that “normally it is done in good taste, but unfortunately there are the select few who take advantage of the anonymous system.” In other words, during a seemingly harmless debate between a group of university students, there can often be one individual who can say a nasty comment or take his views on the matter too far. Sean also carried on to tell me that when this happened to him on one particular occasion, it made him feel uneasy. He commented by saying that “when the Paris attacks happened (November 2015) I personally felt panicked. Tragedies are only seen as tragedies when it is close to home and this annoyed some people. But people are allowed to

feel scared.” He went on to tell me that this hasn’t put him off ever using Yik Yak again, as it can be insightful to think on a situation in a different way. My other informant Kaja added the point by saying that whenever there is a nasty comment on Yik Yak, the users in the St Andrews area are very quick to down vote something that is seen as unfair or offensive. This definitely highlights just how users of this anonymous website actually unite like an online community to throw away any source of negativity and discuss academic matters in a light hearted way.

Yik Yak as a Source of Comedy

Throughout all of the interviews I conducted for this project, there was one aspect of using Yik Yak that stood out from the rest and was one of the main reasons why my informants liked the site in the first place. This was the fact that many of the posts in the St Andrews area were seen as funny jokes or had comedic elements to them. On many occasions the funny Yak will be in relation to something about the town or the university, or perhaps just the idea of being a student that could be applied to other places outside of St Andrews. Informant Amelie, who only reads Yaks rather than write them, stated “when a Yik Yak is really funny, I feel almost proud that I go to a university with such witty and clever people. I don’t laugh a lot so if someone makes me laugh with a good Yak, I even comment!” It seems as though the users, some who are feeling lonely like from the previous section, seek out Yik Yak in an attempt to cheer themselves up from the stresses of the typical student lifestyle. As a matter of fact, there can sometimes be friendly banter between different Yik Yak communities. For example, St Andrews often joke with the academics of Dundee University, a neighbouring university, and the Dundee university Yik Yak feed makes jokes about their close university, known as Abertay. My informant Linsey told me that her favourite aspect of the funnier Yaks was that they can be extremely relatable and are often better than classic generic jokes.

Concluding Thoughts

Before fully diving into the research of this project, my only thoughts about the social media known as Yik Yak was that it was an excellent device for procrastination when I should have

been studying. I now realise that this site has many more purposes than that. Yik Yak is somewhere to escape from the troubling worries of life. Yik Yak is a place that can put a smile on one's face. Yik Yak is an environment where intellects clash together to discuss interesting ideas concerning the world we live in. This social media brings people together from all walks of life and allows people to bond without even knowing who they are. However, there is one very important aspect that this project taught me that is unique to the workings of Yik Yak. The students who used the app in St Andrews created their own online community, which is subject to the area they are in. Yik Yak differs depending where you are situated in the world, creating a unique online community within a designated area. It is interesting to note that not all users of Yik Yak will have the same experience as those who use it within the St Andrews area. And, from all of the information I gathered from my informants, the town of St Andrews is a truly heart-warming and speculative place to utilise the app of Yik Yak.

Bibliography

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