

## **HG2052 Language and Technology**

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### Analysis of Yik Yak as a medium of communication

#### **1. Introduction to Yik Yak**

Yik Yak is a now-defunct location-based social media application founded in 2013 by college students Tyler Droll and Brooks Buffington (Safronova, 2017). According to its website, Yik Yak was “a messaging app that allow[ed] users to create and view posts – called Yaks – within a 5 mile radius” (Yik Yak, 2015). A main feature was that users were allowed anonymity when posting and commenting. The application was rather short-lived, as the creators announced the closure of the application in April 2017 (Buffington & Droll, 2017).

However, despite its short lifespan, it gained a fair amount of traction and popularity. This was particularly so among college students, evident from its availability on over 2000 college campuses internationally (Heath, 2016). Yik Yak was one of the most-downloaded apps in its heyday, and even hit \$400 million in estimated market value (Graham, 2017). As of 2015, almost 2.5% of iPhone users were regular users of Yik Yak (Olson, 2015).

#### **1.1 Features of Yik Yak**

Firstly, the feature that differentiated Yik Yak from other platforms of social media is the allowance of anonymity when posting and commenting. As such, Yik Yak did not require users to register for an account, and therefore did not collect user information such as names or email addresses, except for geolocation and app usage (Webwise, n.d.).

Upon entering the application, users were presented with a live feed of posts, or Yaks in Yik Yak terminology, as seen in Figure 1. Yaks could be sorted by recency under the ‘New’ tab, or by popularity, under the ‘Hot’ tab. Being a location-based application, only Yaks posted by users within the stipulated radius would appear.

Yaks were limited to 200 characters, and users had the choice to sign off with a temporary handle, since there were no accounts or usernames attached to Yaks or comments (Webwise, n.d.).

Users had the ability to control which Yaks would appear on the ‘Hot’ feed, by upvoting or downvoting them, essentially ascribing ratings to the Yak. Yaks that received an overall rating of negative five were permanently deleted (Petrov, 2015).

Every user would also have points assigned to them called Yakarma, as seen in the upper left corner of Figure 1. Yakarma was a way to measure a user’s success on the application, and was influenced by the number of upvotes they received on their Yaks or comments (Wojdylo, 2014).

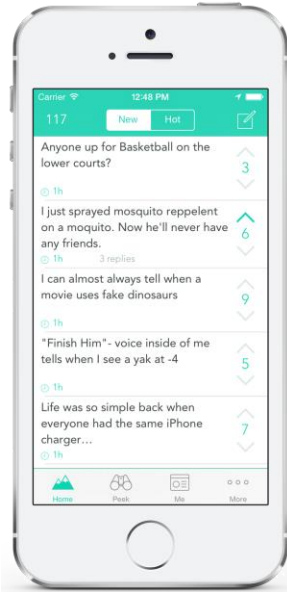


Figure 1: Live feed on Yik Yak<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Properties of Yik Yak and its effect on language use

The properties of Yik Yak such as anonymity, limited character count, location-based restrictions and the presence of a point system inevitably affected the way language was used on the application.

### 2.1 Inflammatory language

In social psychology, deindividuation is the situation where an individual behaves differently when in a group and does not see themselves as individuals (Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952). Anonymity has largely been noted as an important factor in deindividuation, which has been found to have a relationship with aggression (Silke, 2003). According to Suler (2004), anonymity is a key factor to what is called the online disinhibition effect, which is when people “say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn’t ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly” (p. 321). In a study by Santana (2014), it was found that anonymous commenters had a higher frequency of posting uncivil comments, compared to non-anonymous commenters. This relationship between anonymity and aggression can also be seen in the language use on Yik Yak, and is what Suler (2004) called toxic disinhibition.

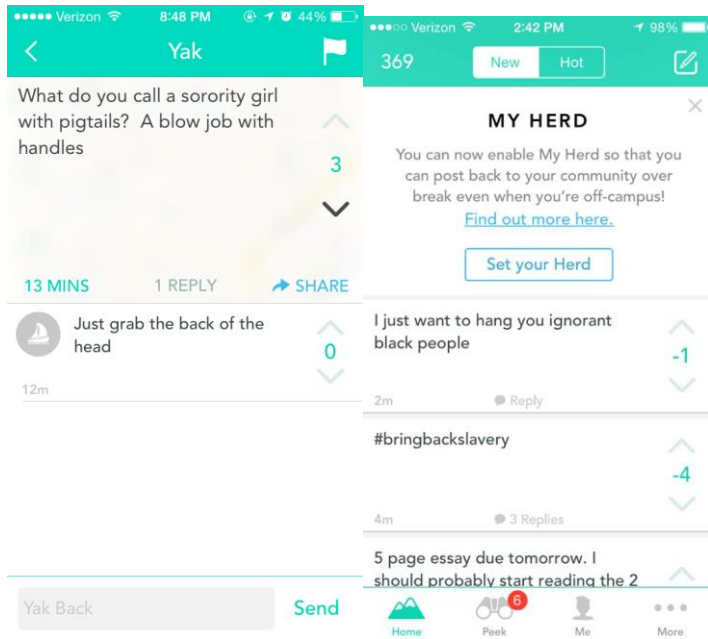
In addition, the asynchronous nature of Yik Yak would also lead to the aforementioned disinhibition online (Suler, 2004). Yaks and comments could be posted at any time without the need for an immediate response, and this lag in response time could lead to disinhibition (Suler, 2004).

With everyone on the platform under the guise of anonymity, there were many posts that were aggressive and hostile. According to Black, Mezzina and Thompson (2016), many of the posts on Yik Yak were “arguably inflammatory”, with frequent appearances of profanity. Sexist and racist posts were also seen on the platform, as seen in Figures 2 and 3.

In fact, a major reason contributing to the application’s ultimate downfall was the plethora of hate-speech, to the point where college administrators had to get involved (Safronova, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> Image from <https://web.archive.org/web/20160103002504/http://www.yikyakapp.com/features/>



Figures 2 and 3: Examples of sexist and racist Yaks by anonymous posters<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2. Personal thoughts and shared identity

The online disinhibition effect, as explained above, allowed users to be more open to being aggressive. However, besides toxic inhibition, Suler (2004) also noted that this effect could lead to benign inhibition as well. Benign inhibition could involve an “attempt to better understand and develop oneself, to resolve interpersonal and intrapsychic problems or explore new emotional and experiential dimensions to one’s identity” (Suler, 2004, p. 321).

The effects of anonymity is also key here, as users feel more detached from their real-world identity online, and what they post online cannot be linked to their actual lives (Suler, 2004). Asynchronicity of the medium also plays a part, as the time lapse after posting a personal or intimate message allows the user a window of escape, which can make them feel safer in their decision to post it (Suler, 2004).

These features therefore led to Yaks that reflected users’ personal thoughts. Despite the controversial and inflammatory posts seen on Yik Yak, there was also a fair share of Yaks seeking or offering support. According to a study by Bayne et al. (2019), peer support and mental health were among the most prevalent topics on the application, with “generally positive and supportive conversations about politics, sex and health” (p. 100) being another major category.

Yik Yak also used geolocation technology to restrict interaction to nearby users, and geo-fencing to block high school and middle school students from accessing the application (Shamma, 2016). This resulted in the application being used by people of similar ages who were active around the same vicinity. In the case of Yik Yak, this meant that college students studying in the same school districts were dominating the application.

<sup>2</sup> Figure 2: Image from <https://digitaltechatud2015.tumblr.com/post/130513635362/gender-and-yik-yak-at-ud>

Figure 3: Image from <https://www.wweek.com/news/2015/11/18/lewis-clark-college-students-outraged-by-racist-yik-yak-comments-plan-rally-in-salem/>

Being from the same community, many Yaks posted used location-specific language (Heston & Birnholtz, 2016). This involved using implicit language that made location-based references based on shared knowledge, or using explicit language such as specific places or classes on campus, that only people in the community would understand (Heston & Birnholtz, 2016). When posting on Yik Yak, users would “use and draw on location information in nuanced ways that allowed them to demonstrate insider status or invoke shared social identity, but they rarely used location to discuss actual locations or coordination” (Heston & Birnholtz, 2016, p. 8).

Heston and Birnholtz (2016) found that using location-based language in Yaks increased the likelihood of earning a high rating by 39.1%. Using first person plural personal pronouns also attracted high ratings, as it “invok[ed] a shared identity” (Heston & Birnholtz, 2016, p. 7). This shows that users on Yik Yak valued language that was “locally relevant” and that “invoke[d] a collective identity” (Heston & Birnholtz, 2016, p. 6).

### 3. General effects of Yik Yak on society

The anonymity accorded to users on the application gave rise to many threats of violence on school campuses. This included threats of school shootings, bombings, and sexual assault (Dewey, 2015), with an example shown in Figure 4. Many schools were threatened with school shootings on Yik Yak, including the “University of Missouri, ... Fresno State, Charleston Southern University, the University of North Carolina, Michigan State, Penn State, Florida Atlantic University, Widener University, and Towson University” (Nelson, 2015). Bomb threats were also made towards high schools in Massachusetts and California, before the Yik Yak team blocked the application from high schools completely (Safronova, 2017).

Due to these threats, police had to get involved and multiple students were arrested for making these violent threats (Nelson, 2015). Some schools were also on lockdown or evacuated due to the threats (Safronova, 2017). The many threatening posts on Yik Yak incited much fear and unrest on school campuses, to the point that some colleges banned the application on campus grounds (Hess, 2015).

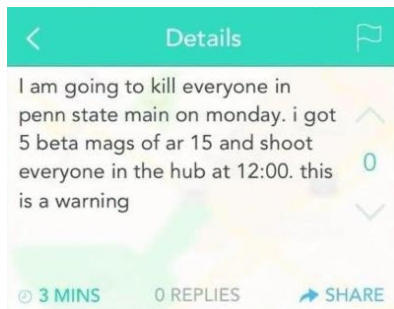


Figure 4: Shooting threat in Penn State<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, content on the application was not all violent. As mentioned in Section 2.2, students would use Yik Yak for peer support and to share their personal thoughts. There had been multiple instances where students would post Yaks suggesting suicide, and users would come together and show an outpouring of support (Shahani, 2015). A notable example was that of University of Michigan, where a user posted what seemed like a suicide note (Arbor, 2015). This prompted a group of students to gather on

<sup>3</sup>Image from [https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/crime\\_courts/article\\_a97194fe-5237-11e4-9c7e-0017a43b2370.html](https://www.collegian.psu.edu/news/crime_courts/article_a97194fe-5237-11e4-9c7e-0017a43b2370.html)

campus, holding signs with supportive messages like “Stay strong”, and opening up about their own struggles with mental illness (Arbor, 2015).

Therefore, in stark contrast to the violent threats on the application, Yik Yak was also a platform where users would open up about their struggles and support one another. However, the positivity on the application was not enough to overshadow the negative uses of Yik Yak, which ultimately led to the death of the application (Safronova, 2017).

#### 4. General effects of Yik Yak on language

Yik Yak has often been compared to Twitter, with TechCrunch (2015) describing it as a “hyperlocal anonymous Twitter”, and co-founder Tyler Droll touting it a “local, anonymous Twitter” (Miners, 2014).

Since Twitter’s inception and popularity came much before Yik Yak’s, it cannot be said that Yik Yak was the one to have an overall influence on language. However, during the lifespan of Yik Yak, Twitter was also already a popular social media site. This very likely meant that there were overlaps of users between both platforms.

The two platforms did share similarities, such as limited character count, of which Yik Yak offered 200 while Twitter offered 140.<sup>4</sup> With the overlap of users, it was possible that language use on Twitter and Yik Yak shared some similarities. According to Hu, Talamadupala and Kambhampati (2013), while Twitter and SMS have 140 and 160 character limits respectively, most entries make use of less than half of the amount. Based on this precedent, it is likely that Yik Yak posts were generally made up of less than half the character limit.

In addition, in a study comparing Yik Yak to Twitter, Saveski, Chou and Roy (2016) found that posts on Yik Yak were only “slightly more likely to contain vulgarities” than on Twitter. There was also no significant difference in topics discussed on both platforms, however there were more obvious “patterns and vocabulary that [were] indicative of the college-centric user base” (Saveski, Chou and Roy, 2016). This is consistent with the findings in Section 2.2.

#### 5. Seven features introduced by David Crystal (2006, Ch 3–6)

Speech-like	Text-like
time bound	space bound
spontaneous	contrived
face-to-face	visually decontextualised
loosely structured	elaborately structured
socially interactive	factually communicative
immediately revisable	repeatedly revisable
prosodically rich	graphically rich

Figure 5: Features of speech and written text as introduced by Crystal, 2006

<sup>4</sup> Twitter increased its character count to 280 in November 2017, however that was after the closure of Yik Yak. Thus for the purposes of this paper, Twitter’s character limit will be taken as 140.

In this section, the medium of Yik Yak will be compared to speech-like and text-like features, as introduced by Crystal (2006). Figure 5 above shows the features, and those coloured in blue font represent the features applicable to Yik Yak.

Posts on Yik Yak were space-bound, as users just posted on the platform, without knowing who was going to read them. The posters usually had no direct audience in mind. Readers could read the posts hours after they were posted.

Yik Yak was also contrived, in that there was a time-lag between production of the Yaks and its reception by other users of the application (Crystal, 2006). With high internet speeds, however, this lag might not have been very significant. Yet, authors of posts were able to pause and think after writing, before pressing send. Readers could also re-read and analyse the posts, and responses could have only been posted after some time had lapsed.

With the application being on smartphones and having a huge emphasis on anonymity, users interacting with each other had absolutely no visual contact, thereby rendering Yik Yak visually decontextualised. Users had no other context to rely on, depending solely on the words on the screen to understand the message. While emojis could perhaps mimic facial expressions and cues, Yik Yak did not provide the option of emoji keyboards when using the application (Kersting, 2014). However, some users found a roundabout trick by manually copying and pasting emojis into the text box (Wojdylo, 2014).

Yik Yak also had the feature of being loosely-structured like speech. With the character limit in place, contracted forms of words were also used. Sentences were therefore also not very long. The use of obscenities was also prevalent, as noted in Section 2.1.

Being a social media platform, posts on Yik Yak were therefore socially interactive. Users would post their own thoughts and feelings, as mentioned in Section 2.2. However, as Yik Yak was writing-based, it also had the feature of being factually communicative. Posts could record facts or communicate ideas (Crystal, 2006). Therefore on this front, Yik Yak shared features of both speech and writing.

Before posting, users could draft and edit their writing before finally posting the Yak. Yik Yak was therefore repeatedly revisable. Users could also have been interrupted while authoring the posts, but this could not possibly be known by the readers (Crystal, 2006).

Finally, Yik Yak was graphically rich. In 2015, Yik Yak allowed users to post images, although pictures could not contain faces (Tepper, 2015). Posts could include capitalisation and punctuation, and while these features could perhaps convey some extent of prosody such as loudness, they still lacked in prosody as compared to speech.

## **6. Conclusion**

In summation, Yik Yak managed to have a rather significant impact on language and society despite its short lifespan. Its notable features of anonymity and location-restriction played a big part in the type of language that was used on the application, yet were also key reasons for its quick demise. Meanwhile, it also bore some similarities to other popular social media platforms such as Twitter, and in a way amplified the types of language used on Twitter onto its own platform as well. As a writing-based social media platform, Yik Yak shared many features of written text according to Crystal (2006). However, it still possessed a few speech-like properties.

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