

The Rise and Fall of Yik Yak: a forgotten social media app

Abstract

In 2013, a new social media app popped up across college campuses nationwide. The app, Yik Yak, functioned as an anonymous chat room for those within a 5-mile radius of a user's phone location. Every user was anonymous and could post whatever they wanted to without fear of moderation or public shame. Users would submit a post, and it could be liked, disliked, and/or commented on by other user's. Yik Yak revealed a lot about college communities and what they felt under everyone's well-to-do surface: crude humor, declarations of love or lust, airing out frustrations or concerns that they did not want to publicize themselves. Moreover, the app also revealed a lot of sexism and racism among student bodies as well as giving a perfect platform to cyberbully someone in "public" without fear of being identified. Yik Yak unintentionally revealed the limits of social media for meaningful community building but also the collective desire to play anonymous.

Keywords

Social Media, Human-Computer Interaction, Performance and Technology

1. Introduction

In 2013, social media had not been solidified. The popular apps of today did exist back then, but their companies had not yet grown into the behemoths they are currently. A decade ago, there was still room for new social media to emerge. In the 2010s, the app, Yik Yak, functioned as an anonymous chat room for those within a 5-mile radius of a user's phone location. Every user was anonymous and could post most anything. According to its [co-creator Brooks Buffington](#), Yik Yak's intended purpose was to give everyone a voice on campus and connect people without having to have a prior relationship/mutual connection with someone. Unfortunately, it worked. However, Yik Yak produced social connections that Tyler Droll and Brooks Buffington could anticipate.

I chose this technological experience because I find fascinating ideas within this failed app that have not been pursued in some years. Unintentionally, Yik Yak revealed a lot about college communities and what students feel under their well-to-do surface and manicured

image. What abounded on Yik Yak was crude humor, declarations of love/lust, airing out frustrations or concerns that they did not want to publicize themselves for fear of institutional or social ostracizing. On the other hand, the app also revealed a lot of sexism and racism among student bodies with zero moderation. It also became an “ideal” platform to cyberbully someone in public without fear of being identified. Yik Yak provides lessons of the limits of social media for meaningful community building but also the collective desire to play anonymously in the digital age.

2. Background

Immediately after graduating Furman University in 2013, the fraternity brothers Tyler Droll and Brooks Buffington created Yik Yak. The year before, Tyler had learned to code iPhone apps at Furman and with Brooks’s help, created an app called Dicho and Dicho. That predecessor to Yik Yak was a social polling app, where you could poll other users on random questions like, ‘Who’s going out?’ or ‘Who’s going to the sports games?’ But they did not want to stop there; in fact, they wanted to take over social discourse on college campuses. [In a 2014 interview](#), Brooks states that they saw “that the campus voice was kind of held in the hands of a select few. The quote, unquote popular kids.” In their own words, they wanted everyone to have a voice on campus and orient campus discourse around humor and conversation rather than promotion of self-image.

Evidently, Tyler and Brooks were not the only people who desired anonymous socializing on college campuses. Yik Yak spread like wildfire on every college campus, and according to [Forbes](#), raised \$73 million as a startup on their way to an eventual \$400 million valuation. 12 months after it launched, Yik Yak ranked as a top ten most downloaded social media app in the United States ([source](#)). During my time in college, everyone either had the app or discussed the effects of the app on any and every campus. Additionally, the app became popular in middle schools and high schools around the nation for a time ([NYTimes](#)).

However, in 2017, Yik Yak shut down. The founders had tried to sell it before shutting down. Eventually, they did sell the rights to Yik Yak to Square (now, Block Inc.), an online payment company, for around a total of \$1 million ([Bloomberg](#)). How did this come to pass? In 2015, increasing amounts of cyberbullying, harassment, and hate speech of all kinds plagued the app ([NYTimes](#)). Because of the anonymity and the company’s privacy policy that required a subpoena, warrant, court order, or an emergency request with “a compelling claim of imminent harm”, anyone could spew verbal abuse and go unpunished and unknown ([NYTimes](#)). The increase of hate speech led to the company to do away with anonymous posts and force users to adopt handles and upload a photo (a la Twitter, now called X). This move pushed out the cyberbullies

who relished local anonymity and who already pushed out everyone else with their hate speech.

Surprisingly, Yik Yak is still used today. In 2021, the app resurfaced under new ownership that was unnamed. Eventually, in 2023, that unnamed company sold it to Sidechat, a competing anonymous posting platform ([TechCrunch](#)). In this current iteration, Yik Yak asks users for their school email in order to sign up, nullifying true anonymity. Moreover, in 2022, a researcher analyzing Yik Yak discovered a way to access every user's unique ID and precise location within 10-15 feet ([The Verge](#)). In spite of the blows to anonymity and bans from multiple schools, the app still exists and has an active user base. This new user base is unaware of the app's past but still deals with the bullying, bigotry, and misinformation the app has always inevitably bred.

3. Personal Experience

At Davidson College between 2014 and 2016, everyone on campus used Yik Yak, including me. We used the app as frequently as Facebook, Instagram, or any other giant social media app at the time. I used it alone, used it amongst friends, or read the scrolling forum while waiting around anywhere. I forget how exactly I was first introduced to it, but the most likely scenario was my friends showing me something hilarious or crazy that someone posted on there. I did not have a Twitter or Reddit at that time, but Yik Yak functioned as a fusion of the two. Except, these weren't just random strangers online to gawk at. The people on Yik Yak surrounded you, by definition. Our well-to-do, high-achieving peers were saying all these vitriolic, crude, and outlandish things under the mask of anonymity. The community outside our college also could use Yik Yak and share how they really felt about the school. Even a professor might be making an incendiary post. The posts on Yik Yak felt more impactful (positively or in a lot of cases, negatively) knowing anybody right in front of you could match the savory, unsavory, or spicy details of what you just read.

Yik Yak's design layout was not groundbreaking by any means. The UI consisted of mint green and white color scheme and four tabs on the bottom: Home, Peek, Me, More. The Home tab was the app's main feed that contained a stream of scrolling posts that could be commented on (a la Twitter) or could be upvoted or downvoted (a la Reddit). Moreover, a user could see New posts ordered chronologically or Hot posts that were the most upvoted that day. If a post got downvoted five times, it would be automatically removed from the app. This was their attempt at "content moderation." However, they did not anticipate screenshots or the frequency of posts/comments getting repeated. When an application chooses not to have profiles, banning someone becomes more of a chore, one in which Yik Yak had no interest.

The Peek tab allowed a user to see the feed of other locations you could enter but not post or vote in the other locations. I did not use this tab then because I was much more invested in my current 5 mile radius than any other location I wasn't involved in at the time. I also did not use the More tab; I do not remember what was in there. The Me tab showed posts that you made and their current vote status. I toggled between the Home tab and this tab a lot because on the few posts I did make, I vainly wanted to see what people thought of my little jokes. I wanted a precious, superficial sign of validation in an upvote and the resulting little hit of dopamine.

Yik Yak's design was simple but effective. The style of the app mattered much less than its content, supplied by a bunch of angsty and insecure college students who could masquerade as anonymous. In fact, interacting with Yik Yak increased these feelings of angst and insecurity across campus, creating a loop of posting begetting more angst begetting more posting.

Fortunately, I never became a "Yik Yak campus celebrity" but other students were not so lucky. There were more than one, but I remember one woman vividly who had to endure a lot of undeserved attention and bullying (TW: for misogyny in this next sentence). Let's call her: "Janis."

I never spoke to Janis, which is a feat on a liberal arts campus of 2000 students. On Yik Yak, she was labeled with a crude name commenting on her appearance. Anytime I entered the student union or cafeteria, I would be able to identify her. This was based on my friends and I discussing the Yik Yak findings of the day, someone looking at her and pointing her out to us. Over time, I recognized her independently. She always looked tense or sad but surrounded by her friends. I don't know what it's like to be under a microscope every day by unidentifiable people, all in your immediate vicinity. I don't wish to know.

Alternatively, the other Yik Yak posts I remember the most (that weren't vapid jokes, bullying, outright racism and/or misogyny) are the ones that critiqued the college administration. Our college president at the time I attended (2013-2017) was Carol Quillen, the first woman president at Davidson College and first non-alumni president of the college. Her very presence disrupted Davidson traditions and rightfully so. She led the effort for a new science building on Davidson's campus, a new makerspace built, introduced Africana Studies as an academic major, and expanded Davidson's athletic center. All these things improved student life and Davidson's campus tremendously. But these new buildings needed money, which meant the college's budget needed re-arranging.

Due to this, Carol Quillen's administration decided to end a unique Davidson tradition dating back to the 1920s. At Davidson, workers in The Lula Bell Houston

Laundry building (now The Lula Bell Houston Resource Center) would clean students' clothes for free. This antiquity obviously did not make financial sense. So in 2014, Carol Quillen announced the free laundry service would end that year and students would use free laundry machines throughout campus. This caused a collective uproar that manifested most loudly through Yik Yak. According to a local article at the time: "Within 45 minutes of the announcement, more than 100 messages had been posted to Yik Yak." ([WFAE](#))

When people are anonymous, they really do not hold back. Fortunately, I cannot recall many of the specific posts made on Yik Yak. However, everyone at Davidson that day witnessed a spectacle of furious people lashing out at Carol Quillen. They called her a lot of names, criticized Africana Studies as a major, but some anonymous users made valid points. Where was the student input in this decision? As people who supply the school with money every year, shouldn't students have some say in what gets built or taken away from campus? Even if the decision was a sound one, what was the process of prioritizing the budget like and why is the budget so opaque for our private school?

4. Impact and Implications

Amidst the vitriol, there were legitimately thought-provoking conversations happening on Yik Yak. More likely than not, I heard opinions from people online that I might never have heard otherwise in my real life social circles. As someone who sometimes communicates more comfortably in written form than immediate verbal responses, I see a genuine appeal in being able to have a conversation where your identity is not centered. Also, you can keep a conversation going where every person can be read and no one is shouted over/physically intimidated. This is especially relevant in critiquing institutions that have a lot of personal information about my identity. However, this is the double-edged sword of social media: I can say things that I keep hidden in public and bond with other people I wouldn't otherwise; but any malicious or stupid person can chime in and the algorithms tend to publicize their visceral opinions the most.

Overall, I will never use Yik Yak again, even in its current state. My online curiosity has shifted from getting a meager amount of upvotes on Yik Yak to sharing silly things with my friends. I am grateful that I no longer lean on the internet as a place for validation as I did when I was younger. However, I still have interest in exploring the performance of socializing anonymously online versus socializing in person and the corresponding effects. How can anonymity be used in a therapeutic way? Can that spark more honest and less forced conversation if anonymous text is provided as a medium at a gathering/event? Going forward, I would like to design a physical

experience where digital interaction suddenly transforms into physical interaction. Of course, I would moderate the interactions and have to ensure nothing reaches a point of harm. Perhaps a viewing audience can also act in moderating.

I do not advocate for more anonymous social media applications as those seem to foster cyberbullying and division inherently. However, the combination of anonymous input with physical performance could yield some very fascinating and/or very volatile results. We know too much about each other online yet we are mysteries to each other in person, hiding and filtering out of necessity. How can we join positively when the time calls for it this very second for a whole host of issues? From experiencing Yik Yak, I would like to avoid treating all kinds of speech the same and avoid creating tools for bigots. Moreover, I would like to embrace designing technologies that help people socialize in-person with each other more and engage in the environment directly in their radius. The digital space is secondary to the physical.