(UN)DISICPLINED PERFORMATIVITY:
ANONYMITY, IDENTITY, AND GOVERNMENTALITY OVER YIK YAK

by

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Abstract

Anonymous social media platforms, like Yik Yak, have been at the center of public controversies surrounding the proliferation of trolling, bullying, and gendered and racialized violence. This has led to a renewed scholarly attention to forms of anonymity and pseudonymity deployed in cyber-spaces that allow users to post content without attachment to their identity. This project has employed the use of qualitative and ethnographic methods to develop a case-study to explore two layers of empirical analysis: (1) as an empirical extension of post-structuralist theory, this project demonstrates how social actors engage in (un)disciplined performativity that allow users to share user-generated content as identity performance separated from their overall reputation and (2) explore how (un)disciplined users are regulated through various forms of vernacular and institutional governmentalities. In combining these two layers, I seek to understand how anonymity is performed, how anonymous regimes stabilize, re-stabilize, and through controversy, destabilize, and theorize how this constellation of performative acts and regulatory features are embedded within a larger political economy of Yik Yak. Performative anonymity exists within a sprawling set of collectives defined by unwritten and (un)disciplined norms, values, and creative content which are all captured in a wider surveillant assemblage. The results of this case-study reveal that though anonymity and pseudonymity inevitably feature a proliferation of trolling and e-bile, it also hosts users who may engage in forms of entertainment, caretaking, and/or a flight from social stigmatization. This project positions itself to oppose the imposition of a “real name” web advocated by Facebook and Google, and to maintain more efficiently moderated anonymous spaces for those who need to escape exposure to the constant gaze of friends, family, and strangers.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

It is widely understood by social media users that surveillance saturates their day-to-day lives and routine activities (Lyon 2017); every step they take is geo-tagged, every status they post is stored and aggregated, and their social feeds are constantly thumbed through by an invisible audience of friends, family, and strangers. The Western social world has been ushered into a sprawling metricized existence where we are made to translate and present our self-identity to others over a variety of social media platforms. Such an identity is heavily curated with the express intention of leaving impressions on an unknowable audience that spans numerous social and cultural contexts (Marwick and boyd 2012). Surveillance on such platforms are diverse, and often deployed in morally ambivalent patterns. In other words, social media surveillance cannot be simplified as entirely problematic or empowering. However, such surveillance practices tend to vanish from sight as they fuse with the banal and mundane features of everyday life (Murakami Wood 2014). This is not to say that surveillance disappears completely from view as social actors are incredibly reflexive in how they present themselves over social media but it does become taken-for-granted. It is not surprising that alongside of this vanished ubiquity of watching and being watched that anonymous social media, like Yik Yak, Whisper, Secret, AntiChat, and Swiflie, would emerge as popular social media platforms for sharing, discussing, and debating user generated content. In this project, I will develop a case study of the anonymous social media platform Yik Yak, used by Queen’s University students, to explore the topics of anonymity, surveillance, identity, and governmentality.
Social media have reconfigured how the social is enacted by social actors in day-to-day activities in the various publics they maneuver through (Couldry and Dijck 2015). In a sense, it has added an extra communicative layer to our corporeal lives. This layer has significant consequences for the development and regulation of social identities and a user’s overall sense of self. This project is an attempt to understand the various ways anonymous social media have reconfigured the social through performative, digital acts mediated through a community of anonymous users. At the same time as users are practicing anonymity over Yik Yak, their digital traces and content are collected, stored, and aggregated through a set of opaque corporate practices vigilantly trying to turn a profit. Research into the ways social media platforms reconfigure the social life of human actors is important, not only because such practices have meaningful consequences, but also because it is a locus of surveillance capitalism that profits off user data (Zuboff 2015).

Anonymity is often defined as the masking of identifiable information on a wide spectrum between categories of identifiability and unidentifiability (Johnson & Miller 1998; Clarke 1999; Marx 1999; Pfitzmann and Hansen 2010; Hogan 2012; Nagel and Frith 2015). This spectrum of identifiability is mediated through social media platforms, digital applications, and specialized knowledge that must be deployed for a user to mask their presence. This works by severing the ability for a third party to link various forms of meta- and content data to a legal identity. As Gary T. Marx (1999) asserts, “Ironically, anonymity is fundamentally social” (100). In other words, engagement in anonymity is a social activity that is tied up with interactive practices of identity. Scott and Olikowski (2014) have shifted the theoretical analysis of anonymity away from merely being a technical object that allows a human user to mask their identifiability, into a diverse range of socio-material entanglements that are performatively
instantiated in practice. The practice of anonymity is comprised of an entanglement between social and cultural practices and technical arrangements of social media platforms, codes, and algorithms. Such social and technical practices are inseparable; their agency is entangled. In this project, I understand anonymity as performative, that all digital human action is a stylized, repetition of emergent acts that are in a constant negotiation with power. Such performative action is bound up in a matrix of power that includes sets of normative actions that surround gender, class, sexuality, and race (Butler 1990).

Anonymity is also (un)disciplined: the inability to link a performative digital act to an identifiable person allows for such acts to become unaccountable to a user’s reputation and untethers that users from being held responsible for their posts. As Mark Andrejevic (2006) notes, the lateral or peer-to-peer surveillance that exists between users over social media platforms assert a normalizing, disciplinary power over users engaged in visible acts of performative identity. Lateral surveillance operates by exposing users to a wide range of expectations from family and friends that disciplines those users to act normalized ways over their social media platform. This phenomenon is much more acute in social media such as Facebook and Instagram where digital performative acts are linked to identifiable human actors. Performative anonymity dissolves user accountability (“Reconfiguring Anonymity” 2017) which carries the potential to release users from the intensified exertion of disciplinary power. With a dampened presence of disciplinary power there is a proliferation of deviant behavior in the form of trolling, bullying, and various forms of harassment. However, (un)disciplinary performativity also allows for other practices, including: entertainment, caretaking, and a flight from social stigmatization. In practice, these categories often blur together in a mess of text and images appearing and disappearing over Yik Yak’s visual interface. However, understanding the
diversity of content posted through (un)disciplined performative acts has allowed me to approach the various public controversies around the “real name” web, anonymity, pseudonymity, and trolling.

Scholars from the Reconfiguring Anonymity (RA) project coordinated by Michi Knect at the Universitat Bremen have developed a framework for understanding the sociology of anonymity. The RA project, borrowing from Collier and Lakoff’s (2005) “regimes of living”, understand anonymity as a regime. They define this as the “situated configurations of social, technical, normative, and political elements” that make up the deployment of anonymity over various platforms. The RA project asserts, “that contemporary transformations of anonymity take shape at the intersection of (1) technologies/infrastructures, (2) legal, political and moral regulation, and (3) social practices”. These regimes of anonymity are subject to a great deal of institutional and vernacular\(^1\) forms of regulation that are organized under a relatively novel mode of governmentality. Kitchin and Dodge (2011) call this “automated management” where an assemblage of human and nonhuman actors (including operators, algorithms, and users) come together to exert control and discipline over Yik Yak’s feeds. Despite users being (un)disciplined, this does not entail a free-for-all of anonymous performative acts. Rather, users are embedded within a different mode of governmentality that operates with limited user exposure to lateral surveillance.

The regime of anonymity that I am concerned with in this project emerges from the anonymous social media platform Yik Yak. I have chosen a single platform as the object of this study to map-out an accurate case study that may provide insight into how users perform,

\(^1\) Vernacular is a term that is often used in the discipline of folklore to discuss the production and practice of informal cultural knowledge that is produced on the level of everyday life interactions (Howard 2008:494). It is knowledge that is not produced by an institution or by experts. It is folk practices and knowledge.
maintain, and regulate identity anonymously in highly surveilled digital spaces. This case study consists of an ethnographically-inspired participant observation and twelve semi-structured intensive interviews to explore user perceptions and practices over Yik Yak’s feeds at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Before elaborating on the overarching argument of this project, I will provide an overview of Yik Yak’s historical emergence, economic structures, and marketing practices.

Yik Yak is an anonymous and “hyper-local” \(^2\) location-based social network that features a central feed shaped by up-votes and down-votes. Users can either post with a handle (username) or anonymously to the feed. They are also able to comment on posts and engage in discussion. There is a private chat feature, as well as, user biographies (which are rarely used to reveal their actual identities). This platform is useful as a case study of the sociality of anonymity as it had begun as a fully anonymous social network that slowly introduced updates that dismantled anonymity as a feature and enforced pseudonymity through mandatory user handles.

Yik Yak was developed by Brooks Buffington, Tyler Droll, and Douglas Warstler\(^3\), three university fraternity brothers from Furman University in South Carolina. According to The Daily Dot, Yik Yak was their second attempt at developing a venture capitalist social media platform, their first attempt, called Dicho, was a failure (Knibbs 2014). Yik Yak took off with an ambitious speed, populating communities on University campuses across North America. The rapid...

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\(^2\) Hyper-local is the word used by Yik Yak to describe its emphasis on location-based communication. It became a journalistic buzzword for writers covering the development and expansion of Yik Yak. I use it here to illustrate Yik Yaks branding and public relations. It is not a word that I use in a scholarly sense.

\(^3\) Douglas Warstler was allegedly cheated out of a third of Yik Yak’s success by Buffington and Droll. Warstler is not mentioned in many articles written about Yik Yak—however, on November 18th, 2014, Business Insider covered a story concerning an ongoing lawsuit against the two “official” founders of Yik Yak (Shontell 2014). Although Buffington and Droll offered to buy Warstler’s third of the company—he refused and was intentionally left out of the development of the Yik Yak company. Buffington and Droll called the legal accusations to be “devoid of merit.” The legal battle was settled April 22nd, 2016, but the details of this settlement are unknown (Shontell 2016).
expansion of Yik Yak’s platform was timely, according to the *Slate*, Yik Yak developed during a popular hype around anonymous applications, including Whisper and Secret (Newman 2014). *TechCrunch* reported that within a year of its launch, Yik Yak secured around 75 million dollars in investments from interested companies (Shieber 2014). Significant investments and its enthusiastic reception among students became fuel that carried Yik Yak up to the top ten applications on the Apple App Store and Google Play store.

With its financial expansion, Yak began to expand its base of employees, hiring engineers, software designers, and marketers. According to *ReCode*, the company was able to attract Micheal Morrissey, a former executive at Google, to be its Vice-President Engineering (Wagner 2015). *TechCrunch* also observed that Yik Yak, touting it’s “hyper-local” atmosphere, began a strategic “guerrilla” marketing campaign comprised of hiring student representatives across the now 1300 university campuses where Yak’s presence was significant (Shieber 2014). The Queen’s University campus had allegedly three representatives that would set up booths and give out free swag such as Yik Yak themed socks and posters that featured the branded signature yak and the applications water-colored blue and teal background.

However, Yik Yak’s expansion into an increasingly popular social media application did not occur without controversy. There had been resounding public debate concerning the use of anonymous social media platforms after reports of trolling, bullying, and harassment began populating the press across North America. Opinion articles began to question whether anonymous social media like Yik Yak should even exist (Swant 2016), as well as, calls to ban Yik Yak from college campuses (Mach 2014). It was not only bullying and trolling that tarnished Yik Yak’s reputation, journalists were reporting on extreme examples of criminal activity, including: a host of bomb threats (Glum 2014), gun threats (CBC 2015), and threats of racist
inspired lynching (Dewey 2015). Many of these instances led to arrests as policing agencies used location-based (meta)data to identify users who had committed (or threatened to commit) violent crimes. CBC highlighted one instance where a threat triggered a lockdown at All Saints Catholic High School in Ottawa which resulted in growing concern from parents and educators over young students using this application (CBC 2015).

In December 2014, TechCrunch reported that Yik Yak had responded to the mounting controversy by instigating a series of geo-fences that blocked access to the app in high schools across North America (Perez 2014). Using a third-party application called Maponics, Yik Yak could use previously gathered GPS data on the locations of high schools and private schools across North America to set hundreds of thousands of geo-fences. If a student were to try to access the application within a geofence, a message would appear, reading, “It looks like you’re trying to use Yik Yak on a middle school or high school grounds. Yik Yak is intended for people college-aged and above. The app is disabled in this area” (ibid). Buffington explained to the press, “Most [startups] are concerned about grow, grow, grow, grow. We want to grow and we want to be huge, but we also want to make sure that we’re creating sustainable, good communities, too. That’s number one on our list. We didn’t create Yik Yak so that people could target other individuals” (ibid). Despite the geo-fences, controversy continued to develop around these issues and Yik Yak was never able to reign in control over deviant behavior within its hundreds of thousands of feeds.

Yik Yak’s decline was almost as swift as its development. In October 2015, Yik Yak began to drop from the app store charts (Perez 2015). In an article for TechCrunch Sarah Perez wrote, “It’s unheard of for a popular social app like Yik Yak to go from riding the top of the app store to dropping off like this without some sort of intervention” (ibid). Furthermore, the
controversy around bullying and harassment eventually pushed Google to remove Yik Yak from its top charts. *Business Insider* observed that Yik Yak was no longer endorsed by the Google Play Store as the company sought distance from the fermenting controversy (Price 2015). Though users could still search and download Yik Yak, they could no longer see it in the Google Play Store “top” charts.

On April 6th, 2016, *TechCrunch* reported, “According to download stats, traffic charts, surveys and a source that says college app’s monthly user count has been declining” (Constine 2016a). Entering its third year of existence, Yik Yak’s economic value began to stagnate. Yik Yak denied the obvious, their public relations staff asserting, “growth and usage is very strong” (ibid). The company responded to stagnation with a series of updates: introducing the ability to post photos, optional user handles, and a private chat feature. Each successive update seemed to have one thing in common: a move from user anonymity to user visibility. The addition of optional handles began a controversy within the application; a corporate identity crisis that lead to confusion surrounding Yik Yak’s identity as an anonymous application.

August 16th, 2016 was the day that Yik Yak’s identity crisis would boil over, leading many of its “hyper-local” feeds to dissolve as users abandoned the platform. Yik Yak operators introduced a new update that changed the character of Yik Yak entirely. This new update made user handles mandatory and took away the ability for users to practice anonymity. Two weeks later I began my fieldwork as a novice digital ethnographer, when I opened the app on my first day of exploratory research, I had the opportunity to witness Yik Yak’s most destructive controversy. As Law and Singleton (2013) observes, field research is full of “ethnographic surprises” (488), which can change the directions of research radically. The central feed which had boasted a seemingly endless feed of anonymous content had only a handful of posts before
the feed abruptly ended. It seemed like Yik Yak had become nothing but a metricized carcass, however, it opened an opportunity to explore user experiences of the platform after anonymity was taken away from them.

One user observed in a post, “Yik Yak’s update is a classic example of Icarus flying too close to the sun”. Yik Yak had made an abrupt change to its corporate identity which disrupted business-as-usual over the applications many “hyper-local” feeds. Another user wrote, “What the actual eff, is there any point to using this app anymore?” This identity crisis was not popular to the Yik Yak user base; users began to leave the application en masse. As some respondents reminisced, the application’s “glory days” were over. The application that facilitated hundreds of thousands of anonymous communications from University and College campuses across North America was now reduced to a handful of posts a day.

In an interview with TechCrunch during the launch of the update, Buffington said, “We’ve never been about anonymity” (Constine 2016b). This interview marked an interesting shift from the company’s initial branding around anonymous interactions. However, this should not have come as a surprise, as much earlier, in May 2015, in an interview with Buffington and Warstler on TechCrunch’s “Disrupt NY 2015”, Buffington told the talk show host,

We approach it a little differently than a number of anonymous apps out there. The first thing is, we’re location or community first and then anonymity second. So it’s all about fostering this place where you can come and connect with community… If you were to ask a college kid, you know, what makes Yik Yak special? Knee jerk reaction, then, may say, ‘oh, it’s the anonymity’. But I think, in reality, what they really like about it is the fact that they are connected to their communities (TechCrunch 2015).
From this interview, it appears the August 16\textsuperscript{th} update had been planned for a while, however, the platform operators had misjudged desires of its user base. The move away from anonymity, and toward pseudonymity, had radically shifted the identity of the application. As \textit{BI Intelligence} (2016) reported, Yik Yak’s pivot in identity made the application no longer appealing for users seeking out anonymous communication. The impact was devastating, and even though Yik Yak had re-introduced anonymity a few months later, it was never able to recover its foundation. In December 2016, \textit{Ars Technica} reported that Yik Yak had laid off thirty of its fifty full time employees and was nearing the end of its generous investment funds (Farivar 2016). On April 28\textsuperscript{th}, 2017, \textit{TechCrunch} notified its readers that Yik Yak would be selling its assets to Square for a total of one million dollars\textsuperscript{4} (Kolodny 2017). And finally, a few days later, Yik Yak notified its users through a universal post over all Yik Yak’s feeds that the platform would be shutting down.

Following a public controversy can be an indispensable methodological tool for a sociological investigation. When social life is (relatively) stable, much of its constituency remains hidden in the background as silent intermediaries (Latour 2005). This is what social theorists refer to as the “Black Box”, the opaque constituents that continuously structure and stabilize the social (Latour 1999; Pasquale 2015a). It is precisely within a controversy that these invisible mediators become visible to those with the methodological tools to investigate and map out its social constellations (Latour 2004). John Law (2009) observes, “The most interesting places lie on the boundaries between order and disorder, or where orders rub up against one another” (144). As I will explore later in the \textit{Methods and Methodological Framework} section, Yik Yak’s controversies cleared away the opacity of its overall constitution and allowed for a

\textsuperscript{4} According to \textit{TechCrunch}, at its peak, Yik Yak’s market value had been roughly 400 million dollars (Kolodny 2016).
sociological investigation into how users deploy anonymous and pseudonymous practices within a larger project of identity construction and platform governance.

The RA project has noted that the social science literature concerning anonymity is largely incomplete and has not addressed the complexity of anonymity in any systematic sense (“Reconfiguring Anonymity” 2017). This indicates gaps in the sociological literature of surveillance and communication studies that I seek to address in this project. Through my case study of Queen’s University’s Yik Yak feeds I will attempt to address the following questions:

1. How do the socio-material entanglements between human and technical actors constitute performative acts of identity over anonymous social media platforms?

2. What are the relational effects that emerge from anonymous social actors over the Yik Yak social media platform?

3. How do institutional and vernacular forms of governance coordinate to regulate content posting and interactions in Yak’s various feeds?

4. And, how does the update from an anonymous to pseudonymous social media platform affect such processes of platform governance?

These questions have led to my overarching thesis statement: Performative anonymity over Yik Yak feeds at Queen’s University, through the socio-material entanglements of Yik Yak’s platform and the diverse human users, have allowed for a novel form of (un)disciplined performativity that untethers social actors from forms of curated identity to engage in forms of entertainment, trolling and e-bile, caretaking, and flight from social stigmatization that are not attached to a user’s perceived reputation. Furthermore, anonymous social media feeds are subject to a mode of governmentality that is different from conventional social media. This mode of
governmentality is deployed through regulatory strategies that occur at the intersect of institutional and vernacular interests. When users are forced to perform under user handles, disciplinary power becomes intensified through lateral surveillance practices due to the creation of a reputation system and forms of identifiability. Thus (un)disciplined performativity becomes dismantled, alienating users from the platform. In short, my larger goal is to understand how anonymity is performed, how anonymous regimes stabilize, re-stabilize, and through controversy destabilize, and how this constellation of regulatory features fits within a larger political economy of Yik Yak.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

A case study of Yik Yak finds itself located within several important bodies of sociological literature, most particularly, surveillance studies and communication studies. This literature review will explore the topics of social media, performative identity, surveillance, and anonymity. An overview of the relevant sociological literature of social media mainly surrounds the topics of performance based theories of identity and surveillance practices. Researchers have approached the analysis of identity performance through either a dramaturgical framework (Goffman 1959) or a post-structuralist framework (Butler 1990) to understand how social actors negotiate the presentation of self in cyber-space. These practices of identity are wrapped up in various levels of surveillance practices, social control, and immaterial labor that comprise a larger political economy of social media. The literature on anonymous social media is by comparison incomplete. There have been a few studies conducted on the social media platform 4chan that provide a sufficient foundation connecting both anonymity and ephemerality to various types of identity performance. I have merged this literature with a broader range of studies on digital anonymity in general.

2.1 Social Media

Social media applications are ubiquitous in our day-to-day practices and are embedded in almost every dimension of social life. Largely, social actors residing in the Western world have access to mobile devices that tether them to vast socio-technical networks of family, friends, and strangers sharing various forms of user-generated content. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as, “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and
technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user
generated content” (61). In most social media platforms, users can construct profile pages, have
communicative access to other users, and can view those connections (boyd and Ellison 2008).
Dijck (2012) illustrates that social media can be broken down into three material processes:
*platforms*, *protocols*, and *interfaces*. Platforms constitute as the hardware, software, and operator
services that structure and organize a social media application. Yik Yak is itself a platform that is
accessible over a mobile device, is structured by software, and is operated and serviced by a
bureaucracy of information technology (IT) and business interests. Protocols are defined as,
“formal descriptions of digital message formats complemented by rules for regulating those
messages in or between computing systems” (Dijck 2012:4). These are the codes and algorithms
that steer user traffic, as well as, process and regulate content posted by users. These protocols
are designed by platform operators to conduct tasks that serve the interest of the platform
(Kitchin and Dodge 2011). Finally, social media are made accessible through interfaces. These
can be broken down into *internal* and *visible* interfaces. The visible interface is the branded
visual aspect of a platform; it is what the user can access through images and hyperlinks on a
digital screen. The internal interface is only accessible to the platform operators and consist of
administrational features for platform governance and maintenance.

Social media are not only technical artifacts, but socio-material practices that include
‘social’ of ’social media’ platforms is of course lived out by *social actors*, who are trying to
achieve their individual and collective goals, more or less in coordination with each other” (4). In
this way, there is a collision of agency between social and technical agents that shape the overall
platform (Kitchin and Dodge 2011). In the case of Yik Yak, users can open the application and
share content and communicate with strangers from a shared geographic location. Thus, users of Yik Yak at Queen’s University are situated within a locatable social and cultural context. Furthermore, how users use an application is never predictable, users may supersede operator intentions behind the protocols to use the platform in unexpected ways (Kitchin and Dodge 2011). Thus, neither user or technical agency is fully determined by technical design.

Fundamentally, social media has rewritten sociality and our methods of communicating and expressing ourselves to each other. Dijck and Poell (2013) draw attention to social media logics which refer to “the processes, principles, and practices through which these platforms process information, news, and communication, and more generally, how they channel social traffic” (5). Social media logics can be broken down into four components: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. Programmability is centered on the agency of protocols and algorithms and is responsible for steering user traffic, creative content, and communicative interactions. Code is both product and process: it comes into being through a collaborative effort of engineers, computer scientists, and marketers, but it also, once deployed, acts in the world (Kitchin and Dodge 2011). This is a phenomenon that Neyland and Möllers (2016) have called “algorithmic association” or the “assemblage of people, things, resources and other entities held together by practice and process” (46). The material and technical components of a social media platform have the potential to steer user traffic and shape user-generated content.

The association between algorithms and human actors work to create systems of popularity. Dijck and Poell (2013) write, “Each platform has its distinct mechanisms for boosting popularity of people, things, or ideas, which is measured mostly in quantified terms” (7). In anonymous social media platforms, forms of popularity emerge out of features designed to rate
user-generated content. In the case of Yik Yak, this would include the upvote/downvote feature and the “Hot Post” section that showcase the most popular posts in the overall network. The content that are upvoted become incorporated into the platforms sets of unwritten norms and rules, whereas, posts that are not valued by the overall collective, or posts that deviate from its social norms, are downvoted and potentially removed from the visual interface.

Social media platforms are the gateways into connectivity, or the material and metaphorical connections shared between social actors over a social media platform. Such a phenomenon is material in the sense that connectivity is achieved through the wired and networked connections between two or more computers and their human users (Dijck 2012). In this sense, connectivity is the constant streaming of data; it can be tracked and quantified, and thus, monetized. Dijck also illustrates that connectivity can be framed metaphorically, representing the social need to connect with others. As social media sites allow users to log in and connect to others, these websites facilitate such connections and simultaneously transform resources into data that can be monetized for profit (Dijck 2013). Andrejevic (2007) calls this the “digital enclosure”, or, “the creation of an interactive realm wherein every action and transaction generates information about itself” (2). Connectivity is also driven by forms of surveillance that seek to generate monetary value out of the many connections of users through the collection and monetization of user meta- and content data.

The final feature of social media logic is datafication, or the ability of social media platforms to render and translate all corporeal and worldly things into readable and quantifiable data (Dijck & Poell 2013). Meta-data, content data, geolocation data, and other sorts of “data
exhaust”⁵ produced through a user’s connectivity with others over the social media platforms have the potential to be stored in company servers. Dijck (2014), using Roger Clarke’s concept of *dataveillance*, observes, “the monitoring of citizens on the basis of their online data—[which] differs from surveillance on at least one important account: whereas surveillance presumes monitoring for a specific purpose, dataveillance entails the continuous tracking of (meta)data for unstated pre-set purposes” (205). Most of these processes remain opaque from the user perspective, typically the only access to a company’s data practices are through the *Terms of Service* and *Privacy Policy*. However, in most cases, these documents are overly vague or written in complicated legal jargon, both which carry the potential to confuse or mislead users and researchers.

As a final note on social media platforms, danah boyd (2007) asserts that social media constitute a form of “mediated public” or “environments where people can gather publicly through mediating technology” (2). In line with corporeal public spaces, mediated publics allow for human social actors to interact with each other through the presentation of self in relation to perceived societal norms. However, mediated publics are also defined by various features that emerge from technological mediation. These features are persistence, searchability, replicability and the invisible audience. In other words, interactions in a mediated public endure temporally, are easily searchable, can be copied outside of its original context, and are seen by an unknowable number of people. Anders Albrechtslund (2008) observed, “Together, these four properties make friendships ‘eternal’—or at least existing beyond the control of the involved persons”. These mediated publics consist of users who are engaging in various practices of the

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⁵ Data exhaust is a concept that emerges from technologist’s occupational discourse that points to the constant generation of data from user digital practices. Such disparate streams of data carry the potential to be transformed from “waste material” to profitable, monetized data (Zuboff 2015).
presentation of self through the sharing or exhibition of user-generated content, and at the same
time, consuming and shaping the content of others.

2.2 The digital presentation of self

Social media is closely connected with identity practices and the presentation of self in
digital environments (Robinson 2007; Hogan 2010; House 2011; Norgrove and Bean 2011;
Bakardjieva and Gaden 2012; Cover 2012; Schwartz and Halegoua 2015). Knuttila (2011)
observes, “In social media terms: Facebook wants to know how you are, Twitter wants to know
what you are, and Foursquare wants to know where you are. Social media relies on an
articulation of a lived social self” (5). David Lyon (2010) describes identity as the starting point
of surveillance, in terms of social media, identity is expressed as our names, personal stories and
biographies, the places we belong to, and the connections we are embedded within. Lyon writes,
“At its heart identity is a relational concept… identities always involve others, and never remain
the same. They are negotiated and evolve in ongoing ways through interaction with others” (12).
In other words, the articulation of identity is a shared practice that emerges through performative
acts with each other through the mediation of a social media platform.

Much of the literature on identity and social media emerge from symbolic interactionism
and take the shape of a dramaturgical approach. Typically, this is deployed through Goffman’s
“presentation of self” to account for social action over social media platforms (Robinson 2007;
Hogan 2010; Hogan 2012; Bakardjieva and Gaden 2012). Irving Goffman’s famous
dramaturgical understanding of the nature of social interaction served to popularize the concept
of performance. Goffman (1959) provides a good starting point: “A ‘performance’ may be
defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in
any way any of the other participants” (15). Social actors use techniques of “impression
management” to influence social situations, and furthermore, perform different renditions of self based on socio-cultural contexts or the “stage”. It is enticing to conflate sociological performance with a theatrical performance, however, this would mischaracterize Goffman’s usage. Though actors methodically approach social situations, “one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” (17). According to Buccitelli (2012), models of performance are highly relevant in digital contexts where the platform visual interface becomes the stage for performative acts and is mediated to other users.

Dramaturgy is particularly useful for understanding how users interact over social media platforms because of its focus on the presentation of “idealized” versions of self (Hogan 2010). Users can deploy available features of a platform to curate different renditions of self based on the social and cultural context that they are connected too. The multitude of a user’s presentations of self serve to inform a conception of a “master self” which is constantly renegotiated through social action (Robinson 2007). Furthermore, when users are curating a presentation of self over a digital social media platform, they often do so with an audience in mind (Marwick and boyd 2012). Marwick and boyd write, “This audience is often imagined and constructed by an individual in order to present themselves appropriately, based on technological affordances and immediate social context” (115). The authors note that such performances are subject to “context collapse”. This concept refers to the ways in which, due to a user not knowing who exactly will see their content, “flattens multiple audiences into one” (122). This results in “self-censoring” of user-generated content over social media platforms as there is no way to filter specific messages to specific audiences.
Hogan holds that the presentation of self through digital performance is more accurately understood as an “exhibition”, or “a site (typically online) where people submit reproducible artifacts (read: data). Those artifacts are held in storehouses (databases)… curators (algorithms designed by site maintainers) selectively bring artifacts out of storage for particular audiences” (381). Hogan shifts the metaphor from being a performance set on a dynamic stage, to an art gallery where people produce and consume content that is curated by users through the mediation of an institution. This shift is suppose to capture the move from corporeal performance as ephemeral, to digital performance as recorded and stored. However, both approaches do contain a conceptual issue: the dramaturgical and exhibitionist approaches both assume an authentic, “master self” that guides a user’s corporeal and digital performances. The issue with a “master self” is that it does not accurately capture the dynamic and multiple nature of identity performance. For an instance, House (2011) asserts, “Goffman’s subject is a stable, pre-existing self who makes conscious choices about what to reveal and how to present himself or herself depending on the audience and the subject’s relationship to them and their goals…” (426). This way of understanding the presentation of self is not sensitive to the ways a human social actor’s agency might be shaped by asymmetrical dynamics of power and consistent instability. Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity not only understands performative acts as not held to an “authentic” and stable sense of self, but is also bound by pre-existing power relations that keep social actors bound within their socio-cultural contexts.

Social action over social media platforms constitute a set of performative acts that are constantly negotiating and renegotiating fluid, dynamic, and multiple sets of selves (Perryman 2006; House 2011; Cover 2012). Cover writes, “Butler’s theory of performativity is based on the idea that identity and subjectivity is an ongoing process of becoming, rather than an ontological
state of being, whereby becoming is a sequence of acts, that retroactively constitute identity” (179). Such an account of human agency poses performativity as occurring within a socialized matrix of power that includes a constant negotiation with sets of normative practices surrounding gender, class, sexuality, and race (Butler 1990, 2009). Activities are engaged with through orchestrating a profile and biography, friending, liking, tagging, status updates, and interactions with other users. The performative self is not a free-floating entity of identity experimentation as such acts emerge out of an array of unwritten platform norms that are constituted through platform design and emergent social and cultural practices (House 2011).

Furthermore, in contemporary social media practices, such platforms are typically accessed through mobile devices connected to the Internet which tap into streams of geolocational data that inform the functionality of a social media application. Schwartz and Halegoua (2015) note the existence of the “spatial self”, they write, “a variety of instances (both online and offline) where individuals document, archive, and display aspects of their identity to others” (1644). For many social actors, the presentation of self is, among other digital practices, a spatial practice which incorporates metricized geocoded data into their presentation of self. This is an important concept in regards to the Yik Yak application as its platform relies on geolocational data to organize the central feed. As a result, students at Queen’s University posting content to Yik Yak will inevitably reproduce socio-cultural norms and practices that are unique to the campus. The “spatial self” is becoming more and more important as social media platforms continuously integrate spatial data into their visual interface. As mentioned earlier, social media platforms are fundamentally about the articulation of user identities. If this is the case, they are also about the surveillance of those identities from various layers of practice that
include state and corporate surveillance, but also the surveillance of friends, family, and strangers.

2.3 Surveillance Studies and Social Media

If social media is largely practiced through performative acts and the presentation of self, then another key function of a social media platform are practices of surveillance. Frank Pasquale (2015a) writes, in the *Blackbox Society*, “Knowledge is power. To scrutinize others while avoiding scrutiny oneself is one of the most important forms of power” (3). This sentiment of the power of surveillance is at the foundation of the surveillance of anonymous social actors. It also must be approached with caution, surveillance is not only constituted through “big brother” type organizations, but also through peer-to-peer means. The ubiquity of surveillance and its absorption into every-day practices means that the act of surveillance can be made mundane. In other words, social media users are constantly engaging in practices of watching each other over the various social media platforms they use on a day-to-day basis.

A great majority of social media platforms collect streams of meta- and content data to construct consumer profiles and strategically target advertisements (Albrechtslund 2008; Cohen 2008; Trottier 2011; Trottier 2012; Trottier and Lyon 2012; Fuchs and Trottier 2015). According to David Lyon (2007), surveillance can be defined as: “the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (14). However, Lyon’s definition of surveillance can only be taken so far, it is centered on the “focused” and “systematic” nature of surveillance. Social media surveillance is much more broad in practice, here I return to the concept of dataveillance, or as Dijck (2014) explained, the process of continuous monitoring of masses of users for various political and economic reasons. Such data is harvested *en masse*, and in many cases, it is put to work to generate profit. Thus,
surveillance, in the form of dataveillance, is often used for capitalistic purposes and designed in terms of power and control, as it is deployed to regulate behaviours in ways that are productive to profiteering (Fuchs and Trottier 2015). Social media surveillance is a centerpiece in the architecture of “surveillance capitalism” that has become a massive marketplace in contemporary business practices (Zuboff 2015).

The concept of surveillance in the literature is often taken as morally ambivalent in the sense that it can be used in ways that are empowering, creative, and inspiring, as well as ways that are repressive, regulatory, and alienating. Albrechtslund (2008) theorizes that the use of social media is premised on “participatory surveillance” that focuses on the “social and playful aspects of surveillance”. He criticizes prior academic discourses surrounding surveillance to be too focused on hierarchical schemas of power, citing theories inspired by ‘big brother’ and ‘panoptic’ metaphors. He admits that such models are strong, and useful, depending on the context, but a disproportionate focus on such hierarchical models ignores the social and playful nature of social media. He observes, “Online social networking can also be empowering for the user, as the monitoring and registration facilitates new ways of constructing identity, meeting friends and colleagues as well as socializing with strangers” (8). This is an important note: by focusing disproportionately on dystopian understandings of surveillance, researchers potentially ignore user centric motivations for engaging with social media.

The panopticon was a “utopian” prison devised by Jeremy Bentham that consists of a central guard tower surrounded by prison cells. From the tower—the guards can watch the prisoners. The consequence is that the prisoners will always feel like they are being watched whether the tower is occupied or not, thus disciplining their behaviour. Foucault (1995) incorporated the panopticon into his theory of disciplinary power, removing it from the confines of a prison and using it as a heuristic metaphor to describe manifestations of disciplinary power in society. This is panopticism. However, it has become an aged and overused trope in surveillance studies that may not accurately represent contemporary surveillance practices (Murakami Wood 2007).
Of course, a rigorous analysis must not focus primarily on one or the other, positive and negative elements must be taken on together. Participatory surveillance is a major factor in the collective use of social media. On Yik Yak, posts are meant to be playful and engaging. Such playfulness involves users sharing content back and forth and engaging in meaningful conversations. At the same time, user-generated content and connective interactions are all captured in a digital dragnet by the institutions that own the social media platforms. Another term that reflects this level of user involvement comes from Mark Andrejevic (2006), who discusses the interactive age, “Interactivity in this context is presented as an antidote to the depredations of mass society—a technologically enhanced cornerstone of democratic participation insofar as it represents the ability not just to see and hear, but to be seen and heard” (392-393). As users engage in the creative work of curating a sense of self within the digital enclosure of social media platforms, their identity becomes metricized into “promiscuous” flows of data that carry the potential to produce monetary value (Trottier and Lyon 2012).

Fuch’s (2012) notes that surveillance, under a capitalist system, is subjected to a competitive logic of accumulation that results in a host of social, political, and ecological issues (184). The logics of social media exists within an overall logic of accumulation; to financially support these media platforms and export them to users without a subscription fee, these platforms had to develop a way to make data profitable. A novel form of capitalism emerged from the advent of big data that seeks to exploit and sell large swaths of data collected from users through digital surveillance embedded in their platforms software. Zuboff (2015) calls this “surveillance capitalism”, she observes, “This new form of information capitalism aims to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control” (75). In terms of the constitution of social media platforms, Fuch’s (2013) observes, “These platforms are
advertising-based and accumulate profit by targeted advertising that requires massive surveillance and the commodification of user data and user behavior data for economic ends” (684). Such political economic systems are not neutral; they deploy strategic practices seeking to shape user’s productivity through largely opaque directives embedded in the platforms architecture (Dijck 2012). Social media practice has reconfigured the position of the consumer in regards to the process of commodity production while they go about producing user-generated content.

Nicole Cohen (2008) elaborates that social media applications have transformed the relationship between producer and consumer in contemporary cyber-space. The role of the consumer over a social media platform has become multifold: they are responsible for the production of content that they are simultaneously expected to consume, thus they become transformed into the prosumer⁷. User-generated content produced and consumed by the prosumer are translated into metricized data that is then monetized to swing a profit. As users of social media consume content, they produce data, which is fed back into the system and embedded into the algorithmic code structure to inform what sort of user-generated content should be revealed to users. This process is essential to the existence of large-scale social media platforms. Furthermore, prosumption can be understood as form of immaterial labor apart from the capitalist workforce (Lazzorato 1996). The concept of immaterial labor refers to the ways in which labor has been drawn into digital work to produce informational or cultural commodities. However, as Terranova (2013) notes, immaterial labor does not necessarily assume wage labor or employment, it is the creative, free labor of users invested in a social media platform. In this

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⁷ Cohen (2008) uses the term prosumer to understand the duel practices of production and consumption that occur within social media practice and are embedded into a wider political economic system of data surveillance and advertisement. This term initially came from the American writer Alvin Toffler in the 1970s.
sense, social media are not neutral intermediaries of online social communities, but active mediators in shaping such communities for capital gain that asymmetrically benefit platform operators. As we will explore later, users do not necessarily see their engagement with immaterial labor as exploitative. Instead, the production of immaterial labor becomes a “fair” exchange for the free use of a social media platforms services.

Institutionally driven dataveillance is just one level of surveillance endured by social media users, lateral, or peer-to-peer surveillance must also be considered within the study of social media practices (Andrejevic 2005; Andrejevic 2006; Reeves 2012). Andrejevic (2005) terms this lateral surveillance, “not the top-down monitoring of employees by employers, citizens by the state, but rather peer-to-peer surveillance of spouses, friends, and relatives” (481). Lateral surveillance emerges out of a democratization of technologies of surveillance. This is not just a focus on social media, but other tools and applications that are available to people in everyday life to track peers for a diverse variety of reasons. Lateral surveillance is also compounded with a generalized sense of risk, combined with neo-liberal ideologies of individualism: “the need to enlist monitoring strategies as a means of taking responsibility for one’s own security in a networked communication environment in which people are not always what they seem” (ibid 482). Peer-to-peer surveillance also produces its own power effects: it is a disciplinary power that uses vernacular methods of social regulation. I will return to this point in the theoretical framework section. Yik Yak’s position in the corpus of social media and surveillance studies is somewhat novel in the literature: Yik Yak allows users to be anonymous at the lateral level, however, the company still conducts dataveillance at the institutional level. This combination of strategies renders users of Yik Yak simultaneously anonymous and surveilled.
2.4 Digital anonymity and pseudonymity

Anonymity is the masking of identifiable information that can be linked back to a social actor. This can be conducted in both corporeally and digitally through various methods from disappearing into a crowd or obfuscating identifiers to using a virtual private network (VPN) or a digital application that masks linkability between a user and their content. In much of the literature, anonymity is taken as being located on a spectrum between identifiability and non-identifiability (Johnson and Miller 1998; Clarke 1999; Donath 1999; Marx 1999; Pfitzmann and Hansen 2010). Such a spectrum, in the digital context is usually associated with social actors using digital applications and/or technical skills to mask their presence and digital footprints. It is typically recognized that complete anonymity is largely impossible in the contemporary media landscape because of the progressively complex methods of surveillance embedded within digital infrastructures (Nissenbaum 1999).

Early definitions of anonymity in the social and computer sciences implied the masking of identifiable features of a user to prevent them from being identified on a digital network. Clarke (1999) writes, “An anonymous record or transaction is one whose data cannot be associated with a particular individual, either from the data itself, or by combining the transaction with other data”. In this sense, performances of identity are understood as metricized representations of self that carry the potential to be linked to a corporeal social actor’s legal name. Marx (1999) had identified various categories of identity that must be masked for an actor to be considered anonymous: legal name; locability; pseudonyms linked to legal name; pseudonyms not linked to legal name; pattern knowledge; social categorization; symbols of eligibility and negligibility. However, within cyberspace these categories shift, Nissenbaum (1999) observes, “In the computerized world, with the systems of information that we currently
have in place, namelessness by itself is no longer sufficient for protecting what is at stake in anonymity” (142). Discrete forms of (meta)data that are constantly produced through performative acts over the Internet and carry the potential to be aggregated to re-identify users.

In order for users to be anonymous they must engage in practices that nurture a state of unlinkability between a user and their content, and between the content themselves (Pfitzmann and Hansen 2010). The practices of anonymity described in the literature rely on users to manage their digital identity. Pfitzmann and Hansen (2010) write, “An identity is any subset of attribute values of an individual person which sufficiently identifies this individual within any set of persons. So usually there is no such thing as ‘the identity’, but several of them” (30). The authors continue to explain that identifiable digital traces constitute a “partial identity” as it is attached to a context or a role.

More recent scholarship on anonymity move beyond seeing anonymity as a spectrum or continuum and see it as sets of practices situated in an application or social media platform (Bernstein et al. 2011; Knuttila 2011; Scott and Olikowski 2014; Nagel and Frith 2015). Scholars have focused largely on 4chan to explore theories of anonymity over social media platforms. 4chan is a forum board where users are typically anonymous, content is ephemeral (in the sense that content routinely disappears as new content is posted), and users have developed sets of unwritten rules and norms in a culture unique to the platform. Much like Yik Yak, the practices of anonymity are not absolute, users are anonymous at the peer-to-peer level, but the website logs IP addresses and other identifying data (Knuttila 2011). However, what is important here is that 4chan’s platform allowed for anonymous users to share content and through textual and linguistic cues construct status systems and norms (Bernstein et al. 2011). 4chan is a useful platform to frame a Yik Yak case study, because 4chan shares many of the same features: first, it
is laterally anonymous; second, all content is ephemeral; and third, all interaction is conducted in contingency.

Anonymity, ephemerality, and contingency play an enormous role in shaping the socio-cultural practices on both 4chan and Yik Yak. First, users are drawn into such platforms through the appeal of anonymity. However, as mentioned above, such anonymity is only on the lateral or peer-to-peer level, in other words, such interactions occur in full visibility of the platform operators. Furthermore, anonymity is a material semiotic performative act. As Scott and Orlikowski (2014) observe, anonymity is constituted through socio-material practices. They write, “How anonymity is enacted depends on the particular ways it is materially instantiated in practice” (9). This includes the various social and cultural contexts of the human actors, as well as, the technical contexts of the social media platform in regards to its hardware, software, and operator practices. The ways in which social actors practice and perceive anonymity is invariably connected to the socio-material features of a particular platform.

Connected to anonymity is what Knuttila (2011) calls “the ephemeral culture of anonymity” (8). Ephemerality in this context means, in 4chan and Yik Yak, messages only stay on the visual interface for a short period of time. As newer messages appear, older messages are removed from view. In both platforms, mechanisms of popularity (such as an upvote/downvote feature) allow for users to compete for their content to stay in the feed longer. As Bernstein et al. (2011) observes, the constant state of ephemerality or the risk of content disappearing, creates “a powerful selection mechanic” that solidifies the types of content that the overall community wants to see, and thus establishes a set of socio-cultural norms. The connections between anonymity and ephemerality result in a state of contingency (ibid). Knuttila writes, “Contingency supplants randomness or the alternative outcome of an event or action, because it is always in a
state of becoming” (12). As users post content to the central feed they are unable to predict what kind of reaction an anonymous audience might respond with. So even if Yik Yak has a somewhat durable culture, it is a contingent one that is subject to constant change and chaotic repurposing. Due to this contingency, it might be said that the “context collapse” noted by Marwick and boyd (2012) intensifies due to the inability to predict a target audience. At the very same time, the unlinkability between content and user supplant a potential method of navigating the effects of context collapse as an anonymous user cannot be directly targeted for content that they post (Bergstein et al. 2011). This is at the foundation of my theorizing of (un)disciplined performativity that will be explored in the theoretical framework section.

In many social media platforms users are given the opportunity to have a pseudonym, or alternative identity. Such platforms include MySpace, Reddit, and Twitter, as well as, Yik Yak after the August 16th update to enforce mandatory handles. Roger Clarke (1999) noted, “A pseudonymous record or transaction is one that cannot, in the normal course of events, be associated with a particular individual”. A user will have the equivalent to a pen name that represents their performative acts over a social media platform. A pseudonym can result in the creation of a pseudo-identity that Clarke also refers to as a “nym”. This is equivalent to the term “handle” used by Yik Yak. As Pfitzmann and Hansen (2010) observe, “Ongoing use of the same pseudonym allows the holder to establish or consolidate a reputation” (25) Such reputations are often generated through the linkability between content that is posted by a pseudonymous social actor (Donath 1999). The pseudonym may or may not have likability to an identifiable human actor. The differences between anonymity and pseudonymity are incredibly important to understanding the social landscape of Yik Yak. The shift from an anonymous social media platform to a pseudonymous one changed the communicative landscape by intensifying identity
dynamics and a reputation system. The most important difference is that anonymity does not have a reputation system to hold a user accountable for their posts. This is different from pseudonymity, which does employ a reputation system that may contribute to shaping how a user will interact. The absence of a reputation system, compounded with ephemerality and contingency, may lead to an intensification of deviant behavior in cyberspace.

2.5 The trolls and e-bile of social media

Much of the literature that explores anonymous social media platforms also point to a serious problem that has been referred to as “flaming”, “trolling”, “cyberbullying”, and “e-bile” (Donath 1999; Jane 2012, 2014; Phillips 2015; Pasquale 2015). As explored earlier, there was a public debate over mainstream news outlets arguing whether or not “cyberbullying” and “trolling” could be linked to anonymous and pseudonymous social media platforms. This discussion was a major element in the decline of Yik Yak’s public image, presumably pushing them to move away from anonymity.

Coleman (2014) argues that early trolling, “referred to people who did not contribute positively to discussions, who argued for the sake of arguing, or who were simply disruptive jerks” (39). She goes on to pose the troll as the contemporary trickster trope who use cyberspace as a playground for the potential lulz8. However, such a definition, though accurate in some contexts, does not capture the damaging and venomous, and oftentimes gendered, dimensions of such activities. Jane (2012) uses a concept called “e-bile” to capture the more notorious

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8 The lulz (emerging from the acronym “lol” or “laugh out loud”) refers to a combination of light hearted and offensive jokes that are often done at the expense of others. As Coleman (2014) writes, “the lulz functions as an epistemic object, stabilizing a set of experiences by making them available for reflection” (31). She continues, “Lulz are unmistakably imbued with danger and mystery, and thus speak foremost to the pleasures of transgression” (31). Though the lulz is not inherently about trolling or e-bile, it is often used as an excuse for it.
dimensions of trolling. She defines e-bile as, “any text or speech act which relies on technology for communication and/or publication, and is perceived by a sender, receiver, or outside observer as involving hostility” (3). She continues,

E-bile episodes may be triggered by disagreements over divisive subjects such as politics, religion, or sexual preference, but participants rarely engage substantively with each other’s positions. Instead, the first and final move is almost always an ad hominem...

Once again, the point is rarely about winning an argument via the deployment of coherent reasoning, so much as a means by which discursive volume can be increased—e-bile is utilized, in other words, to out-shout everyone else (3-4).

E-bile is theorized widely to include: “trolling, RIP trolling, cyberbullying, cyberviolence, cyberstalking, cyberhate, ‘happy slapping’, and certain types of hacking, as well as on-line speech acts evincing misogyny, homophobia, racism, religious prejudice, and cultural intolerance” (11). Acts of e-bile have become overwhelmingly common in the contemporary digital climate. This is certainly represented in thousands of journalistic articles and opinion pieces that highlight its problematic features. The consequences of toxic cyber-behavior are very real, it can result in silencing, intimidation, harassment, and other real-life dangers for victims. However, it must be noted that though there is certainly a connection between anonymous and pseudonymous social media platforms and e-bile, such platforms are not the cause of such a toxic atmosphere (Hogan 2012; Nagel 2015).

This distinction is incredibly important to current popular debate surrounding digital ethics and the “real name” web. Nagel and Frith (2015) observes that identifying anonymity as the cause of toxic cyber-behavior is an easy approach as it identifies an easy solution: “get rid of anonymity” (3). This is an argument that has been championed by social media giants like
Facebook and Google who have sought to enforce “real name” policies on their social media platforms. Nagel and Frith assert, “It is a reminder that ‘real name’ debates online cannot be divorced from the political economy of the Internet; no one has more to gain from the ‘real name’ Internet than does Facebook” (3). Hogan (2012) identifies the shift to the “real name” web as not an ethical but a political decision that benefits social media platforms. He observes, “The real-name web is not a technology; it is a practice and a system of values” (2). Hogan contends that both real-name and anonymous/pseudonymous social media platforms play their appropriate roles in appropriate contexts. Nagel and Frith (2015) points to anonymity’s connection to security, for those who need to express precarious aspects of their identities, anonymity can be an incredibly important social and political tool.

Whitney Phillips (2015), in her qualitative research on trolls, locates such behavior as emerging, not from anonymous social media platforms, but from the larger social and cultural contexts that social actors are socialized within. Phillips observes, regardless of how aberrant (and/or abhorrent) it may appear, trolling makes a great deal of sense within the context of contemporary American media. Trolls make expert use of the creative tools provided by the Internet. Their attitudes toward and use of social media is often in direct alignment with the interests of platform marketers, CEOs, and their corporate shareholders. They harness the contours of the historical and political landscape, and the corporate media system therein (123).

Phillips identifies three components that inform the cultural foundations of trolling: (1) the mediation of social media caters a distancing effect between social actors and a trolling event that inevitably fosters the potential for dehumanization; (2) the Internet has become a “filter bubble” where trolls consume only the information that they want and find amusing, while
ignoring information they find distasteful; and (3) the overall political climate has become increasingly polarized and hostile and normalizes the use of violence and vitriol in online encounters. Phillips continues, “In a lot of ways, trolls do everything right” (123), as their behavior has become normalized and accepted by a mainstream audience.

Furthermore, as Jane argues, e-bile is a gendered phenomenon that affects women and men in very different ways (that are asymmetrical in their intensity and severity). Women are often exposed to sexualisation, as well as, death and rape threats. While men are targeted with homophobic slurs, a “threat” of feminization, and accusations of “micropenile disorder” (ibid). In *Angry White Men*, Michael Kimmel (2013) locates white, hegemonic masculinity as a locus of anger in the contemporary era that is expressed largely in a virtual environment. He theorizes that such anger emerges from “aggrieved entitlement”. This can be defined as a phenomenon where a sense of grievance from the downward mobile group of male social actors is connected to a sense of perceived entitlement for social privilege that is being dismantled in contemporary social politics. Kimmel writes, “Ironically, that sense of being entitled is a marker not of depravation but of privilege… It invariably distorts one’s vision and leads to a misdirected anger—often at those just below you on the ladder, because clearly they deserve what they are getting far less than you do” (24). This gendered issue of e-bile was present in my data analysis: male respondents seemed much more willing to express that trolling and e-bile were not a serious issue on Yik Yak, however, female respondents expressed that e-bile was present and threatening.

Phillips observes, “The problem isn’t anonymity; in other words, it’s the norms under which particular groups are operating” (156). Banning anonymous and pseudonymous communication, in favor of a “real-name” web, will have little impact on e-bile as it does not
address its cultural roots. However, it will have an empowering effect for the dominant social media platforms, feeding them evermore data for their monetization machinery. Yet, such issues must still be addressed, because as Jane (2012) warns, there are many dangers in normalizing such “hostile and hateful modes of discourse” (12), as it “carries the potential to reduce the inclusivity and civility of both on- and off-line cultures” (12). This case study on Yik Yak will explore how the Yik Yak feed at Queen’s University utilizes an integration of institutional and vernacular strategies to regulate user-generated content. As Pasquale (2015b) writes, “No magical technology will suddenly civilize the web. That’s a task for professionals—who, one hopes, will someday be paid properly for the labor of building and maintaining community online” (4). Though the project of ejecting trolls and their e-bile from the Internet is a patch work of methods of regulation, it is still within the shared interest of both operator and user that a feed is made to be a clean and safe environment (Dijck 2013). As I will explore, however, the strategies of regulation deployed by Yik Yak were largely inefficient and eventually served to dismantle the entire social media platform.

This project will seek to address the gaps that are currently present in the literature around social media, identity, surveillance, and anonymity. It will achieve this goal by exploring the textures of the Yik Yak feed at Queen’s University in the ways it mediates an instantiation of performative anonymity and (un)disciplined performativity, how it harnesses the labor power of platform operators and prosumers in order to regulate flows of content, and how pseudonymity unraveled these dynamics through an intensification of identity practices and lateral surveillance. As I will illustrate throughout this case study, unmoderated anonymous social media platforms may intensify practices of trolling and the use of e-bile, however, it also provides a cyber-space
for users to practice novel forms of entertainment, caretaking, and flight from social stigmatization that are not linked back to a social actor’s perceived identity and reputation.
Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

The contemporary social landscape in the Western world is saturated with the presence of social media, so much so that it has become a taken-for-granted, common sense aspect of our everyday life. Media theorist, Dijck (2012), likens social media to household utilities, much like water or electricity, that human actors need to tap into to successfully maneuver through the social, cultural and technical contexts that surround their lives. It is this embeddedness in our day-to-day routines that brought me to center on a framework of material semiotics and poststructuralism to explore these tight webs of messy relations. I use these frameworks together with the concept of controversy to understand how the interrelations in Yik Yak feeds at Queen’s University produce power effects that served to hold the wider network together (and, inevitably, tear it apart). Using these frameworks, I ask: How do the socio-material entanglements between human and technical actors constitute performative acts of identity over anonymous social media platforms? What are the relational effects that emerge from anonymous social actors over the Yik Yak social media platform? How do institutional and vernacular forms of governance coordinate to regulate content posting and interactions in Yik Yak’s various feeds? And, how does the update from an anonymous to pseudonymous social media platform affect such processes of platform governance?

Material semiotics is an approach that, as John Law (2009) observes, “treats everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located” (141). It privileges both the material and discursive performative acts that constitute the realities of social actors. It also privileges both human and nonhuman actors as equally implicit in such performative acts. According to Law, contemporary material semiotics is constituted by a “diaspora” of theoretical sensibilities: performativity, multiplicity, fluidity, and
realities and goods. First, all things are performative, including: human actors, nonhuman actors, institutions, organizations, and markets. They are performative in the sense that they emergently produce realities. Second, such performative acts are characterized by multiplicity. As Mol (2002) observes, each performative act produces its own reality, which insinuates that there are as many realities as there are performative acts. These realities can coordinate together in a practical manner that works. Or, they can collide and produce controversy. In this way, the performative acts of Yik Yak operators interact with market practices and produce a reality that coordinates with Yik Yak users at Queen’s University. Such realities only coordinate for a time, and then once the collective interests of these realities no longer align, then they may collapse and reconfigure.

The interrelations between these multiple realities are incredibly complex and fluid. Law (2009) observes that multiple modes of reality and ordering flow into each other and constantly overlap. And as realities and goods collide, they either come to coordinate with each other, or cascade into controversy. Law writes, “Two realities are counterpoised, and those realities are heterogenous, combining and enacting the natural, the social, and the political” (154). The practice of material semiotics, and its diasporic sensibilities, are comprised of descriptive acts that emerge from empirical traces and evidence. I will use the material semiotic sensibilities to frame the analysis of my research. Most specifically, I will be relying on this framework to frame the vast complexity of social life and actor agency. Actors do not act alone; they act together shaping each others agencies and trajectories. Haraway (2016) refers to this as sympoiesis, the shared construction of social reality. This complexity also means, as John Law (2009) writes, “reality is not destiny” (155). In other words, reality could always be otherwise, a sentiment that opens the potential for politically motivated change.
Poststructuralism refers to the diverse sets of theories that emerged as a critical response to the philosophical school of structuralism in the later half of the twentieth century. It is as Butler (1990) observes, a break away from structuralism that rejects “the claims of totality and universality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions that implicitly operate to quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural significance” (40). It is a philosophical attempt to move beyond the understanding that the social is bound in structures of language and meaning. As Harcourt (2007) observes, “Poststructuralism concentrates on the moment when we impose meaning in a space that is no longer characterized by shared social agreement over the structure of meaning” (1). Meaning, in this sense, is understood to be contingent, situated, partial, and always subject to change (Haraway 1988). According to Law (2009) material semiotics and poststructuralism mesh together quite well. He describes material semiotics as an empirically focused poststructuralism. In regards to my usage of poststructuralism, I will be specifically focusing on Foucault’s (1995; 2015) theories of governmentality and disciplinary power and Butler’s (1990; 2009) theories of performativity.

Both material semiotics and poststructuralism are explicitly political and emancipatory projects that seek to challenge problematic and established sets of knowing and practicing. John Law (2004) writes, “Material semiotics, which explores and seeks as a liberatory project, to interfere with relations, simultaneously material and semiotic, that are enacted as partially connected patterns of practice, knowledge, subjectivity, objectivity, and domination, by diffracting these in order to make a difference” (159-160). In doing so, research is produced in a way that is partial and situated in the researcher’s subject position and does not pretend to exist without an agenda as a “view from nowhere” (Haraway 1988). In a similar vein, both Foucault’s and Butler’s poststructuralist work challenges the established understandings of knowledge and
power and what it means to belong to a group or category. In this way, my project will be framed politically in terms of addressing problematic aspects of surveillance, digital identity, and performative anonymity.

3.1 Governmentality, control, and discipline

All things are exposed to being governed; this includes human actors, nonhuman actors, and material and semiotic systems and institutions. Yik Yak is a social media platform that consists of a “collective of humans and nonhumans”\(^9\), in other words, arrangements of social actors that are shaped in particular ways to be disciplined and governed for the sake of a safe and clean feed of user-generated content and interaction, but also, for the sake of being productive towards larger profitable goals. To govern is not solely the territory of a government or state apparatus, there are “a plurality of forms of government” (Foucault 1991:91). In relation to social media platforms, the role of governing is distributed between platform operators, algorithms and protocols, and platform users. These regulatory strategies are entangled within a larger governmental assemblage that exists to regulate the flow of content and interaction over a platform’s visual interface. A useful concept to address the above research questions is Foucault’s notion of “governmentality” which he defines as:

the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form

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\(^9\) In a move to address the anthropocentric nature of the usage of “society” that erases the agencies and effects of nonhuman elements, Bruno Latour (1999) developed a theory of collectives that collapses the distinction between the social and the natural. He writes, “In the newly emerging paradigm, we have substituted the notion of collective—defined as an exchange of human and nonhuman properties inside a corporate body—for the tainted word ‘society’” (193). I use the concept of a collective to highlight the heterogenous elements of Yik Yak’s overall constitution: it’s many elements and many communities interacting through the mediation of a durable social media platform.
of power, which has as its target population, as its principle form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security (102).

Furthermore, governmentality is centrally concerned with the “conduct of conduct”, or in other words, how actors behave in social situations (Elden 2016). Stuart Elden (2007) asserts that governmentality can be understood as a constant and emergent process that is subject to change and modification, as opposed to a static “state of being” (568). As a result, there are several “modes of governmentality” that are situated in social, cultural, and political practices (Kitchin and Dodge 2011).

Finally, the various modes of governmentality that are attached to modernity in the Western world are concerned with biopolitics, or the shaping of populations. Michael Dillon (2007) observes, “in biopolitics the referent object of governance is life; specifically, in the beginning, ‘population’” (45). Populations, especially those based in anonymity, are characterized by contingency and the need to produce knowledge about uncertainty to manage potential risks. It is worth noting that the constitution of governmentality has shifted significantly since Foucault’s theorizing. Manuel Castells (2000) has declared a shift from an information society to a networked society that has led to a transformation of centralized forms of power to decentralized and distributed forms of power. The consequences of decentralized and distributed forms of power are that vernacular and institutional actors carry significant influence over the governance of a social media platform.

The mode of governmentality that this project is concerned with is aligned to Kitchin and Dodge’s (2011) concept of “automated management”. The authors write,
Put simply, automated management is the regulation of people and objects through processes that are *automated* (technologically enacted), *automatic* (the technology performs regulation without prompting or direction), and *autonomous* (regulation, discipline, and outcomes are enacted without human oversight) in nature… automated management thus works in a different way compared to other modes of governmentality, creating a situation wherein ‘code is law’ (85).

The regulatory strategies that constitute this mode of governmentality are deployed through algorithms and protocols that underlie a social media platforms visual interface. However, in the realm of social media, human users must also be enlisted to deploy strategies of regulation. The concept that “code is law” is articulated through a technological determinism. As I will explore in the results section, algorithm and protocol are never alone in the project of platform governance, they are necessarily entangled with human social actors. Automated management, when understood in relation to social media, enlist institutional and vernacular actors to deploy strategies of control and discipline with shared, but diverse, intentions to regulate Yik Yak’s feeds.

When I refer to strategies of control, I am drawing on Deleuze’s (1992) concept of “societies of control” which has been said to have replaced Foucault’s (1995) notion of the “disciplinary society” (Murakami Wood 2007; Norgrove and Bean 2011). In relation to Yik Yak, control is a form of power that is manifested through platform design as opaque software is deployed to shape the agency of social actors in ways that they are not aware of. In order to explain how this operates, Kitchin and Dodge (2011) use Agre’s (1994) concept of “grammar of action”, they explain, “A grammar of action is a highly formalized set of rules that ensures that a particular task is undertaken in a particular way, given certain criteria and inputs” (87). As Dijck
(2012) described, the visual interface of a social media platform is designed to channel communicative acts in premeditated ways that shape users in productive ways. However, Kitchin and Dodge’s (2011) model of automated management must be augmented in relation to social media platforms as it relies on a logic of technological determinism that conceptually undermines the agency of human actors. Algorithm and protocol cannot be deployed alone to shape user agency to regulate Yik Yak’s feeds. The platform must also rely on strategies that enlist social actors to participate in regulation by exerting various forms disciplinary power over other users.

Margo Huxley (2007) uses Deans (1994) concept, “governmental self formation” to understand how a mode of governmentality deploys regulatory strategies that seek to instill a reflexive self-discipline over social actors. She writes, “[Governmental self formation] relates to the ways in which assorted agencies, authorities, organizations and groups seek to shape and incite the self-formation of the comportments, habits, capacities and desires of particular categories of individuals towards particular ends” (188). Through a set of diverse regulatory and disciplinary practices, automated management can be deployed to instill forms of ethics and conduct in users that fosters “autonomous subjects” (ibid 189). However, even while institutional and vernacular strategies of regulation are deployed, such forms of governance are always enacted in ways that are partial and incomplete. The success of automated management (as well as other modes of governmentality) are contingent on the various intentions of diverse and unpredictable populations. Thus, the regulation of a social media platform becomes, “a government of the contingent, by the contingent, for the contingent” (Dillon 2007:46). The success of a mode of governmentality relies on its ability to deploy strategies of regulation to
mediate contingency, uncertainty, and risk. However, this is a difficult undertaking and in the case of Yik Yak was never completely effective.

Governmentality and automated management are compatible with material semiotics sensibilities. There are multiple and fluid heterogenous, performative acts that emerge from platform operators and algorithmic assemblages (in the form of algorithms and protocols that shape conduct by steering content over the visual interface), as well as, users who are engaged with sharing user-generated content to communicate with other users (content can be accepted, declined, or criticized by the commenters). Modes of governmentality also deploy strategies that seek contingent coordination between institutional and vernacular actors to regulate content (in the form of upvoting and downvoting and post reporting). Thus, it is the shared responsibility of both platform operators and users to regulate the overall Yak population (Dijck 2013), and these diverse strategies come together to form Yik Yak’s platform governmentality. Notably, this mode of governmentality downloads the responsibility of platform security to its users who become responsible for their own risk mitigation (Andrejevic 2005). This downloading of responsibility to “autonomous subjects” in order to automate platform governance is embedded within a larger logic of neoliberalism (Huxley 2007:189). This can be understood as a deployment of free labor, that work alongside of the creative labor of producing user-generated content, in the absence of employed content moderators.

The goal of instilling “governmental self formation” is to nurture a population of “autonomous subjects” who are responsible for their own discipline (Huxley 2007). In this way, disciplinary power becomes an important strategy for a mode of governmentality (Foucault 1991). Foucault (2015) observes that disciplinary power is the power to create habits. In his lectures on The Punitive Society, he writes, “Discipline produces the fabric of habits through
which the social membership of individuals is defined. It produces something like the norm; the norm is the instruments by which individuals are tied to the apparatus of production” (239). This is a form of power, which in Foucault’s terms (aligning with material semiotics) is an effect generated relationally between actors. Foucault observes, “we find power, not as something someone possesses, but as something that takes place, is effectuated, exercised” (228).

Furthermore, he writes, “Power is not monolithic… At every moment it is in play in little singular struggles, with local reversals, regional defeats and victories” (228). The norms that are instilled by the effects of disciplinary power discursively emerge from those who can shape what is normal and what is abnormal; this could be a platform operator, prolific users, school teachers, supervisors, and other key members of a collective. Disciplinary power operates through two main mechanisms: surveillance and individualization (Foucault 1995). First, social actors must be watched (or at least have the impression that they are being watched). And second, social actors must be distinguishable from each other so that they can feel a sense of accountability surrounding their actions.

In relation to the literature on social media discussed earlier, a user must have their legal identity distinguishable to others. In this way, lateral surveillance from friends, family, and strangers, that have a direct impact on a social actor’s perceived reputation, becomes the most effective form of disciplinary power (Andrejevic 2006). In relation to social media, the user must be aware that they are exposed and individuated by their peers in order to be disciplined. As a result, a user will augment their presentation of self based on their perceived audience (Marwick and boyd 2012). This has been noted by Mitrou et al. (2014) who observed that institutional and vernacular levels of surveillance over social media platforms constitute “participatory panopticism” which normalizes and disciplines users in a collective.
### 3.2 Performativity and Identity

As mentioned earlier, social media practices and the formation of identity can be understood through a performative lens (Perryman 2006; House 2011; Cover 2012). Such a lens borrows heavily from Judith Butler’s (1990; 2009) work on gender performativity to understand the textures of human agency and emergent acts of identity over social media platforms. This is to say that all human action is performative in the sense that it is a stylized, repetition of acts that are in a constant negotiation with power. Human agency allows us to have choice in our actions, but such choice is bound up in a matrix of power that includes sets of normative actions that surround gender, class, sexuality, and race. In the case of digital performativity, the performative space is not face-to-face, but mediated through an array of digital platforms and carry novel features apart from its corporeal equivalent. Another important feature of performativity is the inclusion of technical agency within nonhuman elements. Annemarie Mol (2002) characterizes this within her concept of “enactment”, writing, “performances are not only social, but material as well” (38). In this sense, algorithms, servers, and markets play an equivalent performative role as humans in the overall collective.

Performativity mediated through digital social media have novel characteristics and consequences, including: temporal extension, durability and audience mixing, serialization, and the poetics of mediation (Buccitelli 2012). First, performative acts are subject to “temporal extension” where the results of a performance, such as a conversation on a Yak thread, linger for an extended time. Though Yik Yak’s feeds are ephemeral in the sense that it is constantly updating, adding new content, and removing others, content can be extended either by a user screen capturing a post or through data being stored on Yik Yak’s servers. Second, performative acts are subject to “durability and audience mixing”, not only is a post durable in that it can
endure for an unknowable time, it’s audience is variable. Buccitelli writes, “Digital discourse is often characterized not by the non-presence of social identity but by a difficulty in controlling the identities of those to whom the performance is directed” (77). When a post is made on Yik Yak, countless and variable anonymous users may see and post on it. Third, performative acts are inevitably subject to “serialization” in that whatever performance is inputted through a social media platform, it is converted into zeros and ones. It is also monitored and recorded into Yik Yak’s servers. Finally, performative acts are subject to “the poetics of mediation”, the nature of the platform will mediate the ebbs and flows of performance to such a degree that an ethnographic consideration must be given to the situatedness of that performance in relation to the platform infrastructure. As a consequence, social actors will be shaped differently on Facebook than they would be on Yik Yak. Social actors express emergent renditions of their identity through digital performative acts, or the ways in which they are deployed to the aforementioned characteristics allow them to be taken up by various categories of surveillance.
3.3 Surveillance and exposure

Surveillance in the context of social media can be theorized as existing in two broad categories that carry significant meaning for both platform operators and users. The first is lateral surveillance. Social media platforms are constructed around lateral forms of surveillance in that people participate to watch each other and curate a presentation of self for others to watch. It is also, according to Andrejevic (2006), closely associated with disciplinary power. The exposure to the wide array of expectations from friends and family disciplines users to act in normalized ways. As I will explore in the discussion section, participants were keenly aware of this category of surveillance as the content they posted and the interactions they engaged with had a direct impact on their reputations. The second category of surveillance is hierarchal surveillance. This can be understood as surveillance conducted by state or corporate bodies for the purposes of policing, social control, and profit. As I will explore in the discussion section, participants were largely unconcerned with this form of surveillance as they did not feel that they were individually targeted by Yik Yak or policing agencies.

3.3.1 Lateral surveillance

Lateral surveillance follows a different set of logics than hierarchal surveillance in that it is participatory, creative, and mundane and is embedded in many day-to-day practices. Anders Albrechtslund (2008) wrote about a concept called “participatory surveillance” to look at the “social and playful aspects of surveillance” (6). The concept of participatory surveillance is quite useful for a study on Yik Yak because of user reliance on textual and image based content posting. On such platforms, posts are meant to be playful and engaging as users deploy humorous content and memes to communicate various beliefs and practices. Though
participatory surveillance is not characterized as nefarious or dystopic, such practices occur in a potentially more consequential ecosystem of watching. As mentioned before, lateral surveillance results in its own power dynamics that carry consequences for all participating actors. Andrejevic writes, “Lateral monitoring takes place with an eye to the monitoring gaze of authorities who set guidelines for subjects responsible for their own security—a responsibility that includes keeping an eye on those around them” (397). Lateral surveillance is tied up with practices of governance that occur at the intersect of institutional and vernacular interests. Yik Yak provides the code of conduct and the ever-watching algorithms, and the users, in various ways, enact those normalized ethics. There is a lot of social investment into lateral forms of surveillance over social media platforms, as users engage in a ubiquitous searching of friend’s photos, creative content, and textual posts (Trottier and Lyon 2012).

As mentioned earlier, practices of social media entail both the presentation of self and identity, as well as, various practices of surveillance. Though users may have grown relatively comfortable sharing intimate aspects of their lives (Trottier 2012), this does not mean that practices of social identity in cyberspace occur without issue or tension. Trottier observes, “Visibility and exposure on Facebook is normalized. Exposure is not limited to any specific instance, but rather a pervasive condition of social life on social media” (330). Kirstie Ball (2009) explored a similar issue through a framework she called “the political economy of interiority”, defined as, “a process where an aspect of an individual’s personal or private world becomes exposed to others, via a process of data representation, interpretation, sharing through intermediaries within a broader surveillant assemblage” (643). This is a laborious process of presenting a curated self to an imagined audience that spills over into other contexts. For an example, a Facebook status update that was crafted for peers might become visible on close
family feeds (Marwick and boyd 2012). Such a reflexive understanding of being exposed to others results in a lateral disciplinary power that serves to shape how users present their identity online. However, lateral surveillance occurs in the backdrop of the larger surveillance capitalist ecosystem, where all user-generated content, the fruits of lateral surveillance, are collected, aggregated, analyzed, and monetized.

3.3.2 Hierarchal surveillance

Hierarchal surveillance can be understood as the various methods and logics behind how private and public institutions watch populations. As mentioned earlier, both Fuch’s (2012) and Zuboff (2015) illustrate that social media platforms are aligned to the logic of accumulation and surveillance capitalism. Such a system can be best characterized through Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson’s (2000) use of the concept “surveillant assemblage”. They observe, “This assemblage operates by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows. These flows are then reassembled into distinct ‘data doubles’ which can be scrutinized and targeted for intervention” (606). In this way, human social actors have their performative identities metricized in a variety of ways and collated into consumer profiles which carry the potential to dramatically impact the social and financial lives of those actors.

As mentioned earlier, users were profoundly apathetic about hierarchal or institutional surveillance. This apathy might be due to hierarchal surveillance not having an immediate, tangible impact on the lives of social actors. However, another important aspect might be in the opacity of such surveillance practices. David Murakami Wood (2014) has theorized this level of surveillance as a vanishing phenomenon, as information and communication technology become more and more complex, so does the surveillance practices embedded within those technologies.
Due to both the complexity and the embeddedness of surveillance practices in our communication devices, they tend to disappear into the background of collective life. This is apparent in respondent reports; some respondents were surprised that Yik Yak operators were surveilling their social media habits.

Both lateral and hierarchal surveillance practices intersect in ways that produce the governance and discipline of users across social media platforms under a political economy of interiority. The human actor is thus exposed to such practices from all directions and as a result are disciplined to varying degrees that are situated within particular platforms. Ball (2009) defines exposure as “the act of subjecting someone to an influencing experience… the state of being vulnerable or exposed” (647). In this sense, it does not matter if “the few” cannot watch “the many”—“the many” will not know if they are being watched or not and thus act in ways that subscribe to normative behaviour (Doyle 2011:289). And furthermore, such forms of surveillance are normalized and embedded into a larger culture of surveillance that shapes our understanding of surveillance practices. Lyon (2017) observes, “[Surveillance] is no longer merely something external that impinges on our lives. It is something that everyday citizens comply with—willingly and unwittingly, or not—negotiate, resist, engage with, and, in novel ways, even initiate and desire” (818). The Yik Yak platform engages in constant practices of hierarchal surveillance, however, due to user anonymity, it lacked forms of lateral surveillance. As a culmination of performative anonymity and the absence of lateral surveillance over Yik Yak’s social media platform—users become (un)disciplined.

3.4 (un)disciplined performativity

The primary theoretical contribution that emerged from an analysis of my empirical data was the existence of a novel form of performativity that occurs due to the “poetics of mediation”
(Buccitelli 2012) associated with anonymous social media platforms. I call this (un)disciplined performativity. As already explored, social media is primarily about the curation of self through performative acts of content sharing that expose the interiority and vulnerability of a human social actor to a wide array of friends, family, and strangers. In most social media platforms, such an identity is subject to heavy surveillance on the lateral level as exposure to friends and family lead to a disciplining of digital performative acts. This results in a curation of the digital presentation of self that shapes social actors to act in normative ways. Over anonymous social media, users are able to avoid lateral levels of surveillance, and as I will explore in the subsequent results and discussion, users are able to perform particular renditions of self that they would otherwise not perform.

This is not entirely surprising, as other social media platforms entail a great deal of identity labor. The ability to share content in an anonymous collective removes that laborious aspect of identity curation and opens interesting performative opportunities. I define (un)disciplinary performativity as: A configuration of self that performatively emerges from interactions over anonymous social media that entails a bracketed cultural expression of identity mediated through a social media platform which significantly dampens the effects of disciplinary power exerted through surveillance and individuation. When I say bracketing, I am referring to Mizuko Ito’s (2005) notion of partial bracketing of identity performance, she writes, “a stilling of the physical body, and a turning of one’s attention to the text on a screen” (336). In this way, a user is able to channel a specific performative presentation of their identity into Yik Yak’s feed that is not linkable to other performative acts. The brackets around “un” insinuate that disciplinary power is made to be weakened due to the absence of lateral surveillance and the inability for other users to individualize the (un)disciplinary social actor. As explored earlier,
there are particular conditions from which disciplinary power is produced (through surveillance and individuation), and those conditions are largely absent in anonymous social interactions.

Though users are not exposed to the normalizing effects of disciplinary power when they interact over Yik Yak, they are still in a negotiation with socialized norms. Butler’s (1990; 2009) theory of performativity is careful to posit that an actor cannot escape the matrix of power that they were socialized within. A social actor can never be fully outside their social and cultural context. The consequence here is that (un)disciplined performativity does not entail a free-for-all of performative acts. Users still adhere to socialized sets of norms, but are not held directly accountable for troublesome behaviour. For users of Yik Yak, this form of lateral disciplinary power might insinuate a move away from Foucault’s panopticism, where a central power watches over that many. Users, rather than being afraid of an abstract state, policing force, or corporate body, are much more concerned about the opinions of those around them and how that will shape their reputations. Furthermore, (un)disciplined actors are exposed to modes of governmentality, most particularly Yik Yka’s deployment of automated management which brings together strategies of control and discipline in order to regulate the flow of user-generated content.
Chapter 4  
Methods and Methodological Framework

This project is not an ethnography, however, the methods involved share ethnographic sensibilities. In this section, I will explore the ethnographic methodological principles that guide this research, as well as the qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. As Coleman (2010) asserts, “To grasp more fully the broader significance of digital media its study must involve various frames of analysis, attention to history, and its local contexts and lived experiences of digital media—a task well suited to the ethnographic enterprise” (488-499). This research began as an exploratory project with intentionally loose research questions, eventually over the course of the project, those research questions became much more rigid. In order to best represent the social media platform and its wide variety of users, I employed a qualitative multi-methods approach. This approach included three separate but interconnected phases: semi-structured intensive interviews with Yik Yak users; a digital literature review and document analysis of the company Yik Yak; and an digital ethnographic approach to content data posted on Yik Yak. It must be noted that I have consequential limitations to this work: having a restricted timeframe for fieldwork and analysis has impacted my ability to conduct an in-depth ethnography. As a consequence, much of the data drawn from participant observation over the Yik Yak platform will not be included in this project.

A social scientist can never fully divorce themselves from the field of research that they are exploring, thus I recognize that my position as a privileged, white, male researcher has inevitably shaped the results of this project. In this regards, some phenomenon will become present, while others will be rendered absent due to the partiality of my perceptions. Donna Haraway (1988) has advocated that all knowledge is situated knowledge that is both objective
and partial, the knowledge emerges through the subject position of the author. She observes, “The moral is simple: only partial perspectives promise objective vision… feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object” (583). In this way, “pure” objectivity is impossible to achieve as it insinuates a scientific actor stepping outside of their social location. An example of this relevant to Yik Yak, is my inability to fully understand the gendered aspects of Internet trolling in anonymous social arenas. As a male scholar, my experience of trolling is fundamentally different than those gendered otherwise. In order to account for this blindness in my research, I have relied on the accounts and experiences of female scholars. Finally, I am also an invested user of Yik Yak with a politically motivated understanding of anonymity, thus my research is positioned to advocate for anonymous and pseudonymous digital spaces in an age of intensifying surveillance practices.

4.1 Controversy as methodology

Controversy has been the fundamental gateway into understanding opaque user practices and perceptions deployed in the overall Yik Yak collective. The public controversy that began with the August 16th, 2016 update to implement mandatory handles served as a gateway into the blackboxed, heterogenous relations that comprise the Yik Yak feed at Queen’s University. Venturini (2009) notes, “controversies are situations where actors disagree” (4). And furthermore, “controversies begin when actors discover that they cannot ignore each other and controversies end when actors manage to work out a solid compromise to live together” (ibid 4). Public controversies are some of the most complex phenomenon in collective life, they show case fundamental conflicts, debates, and dynamic social friction. Yik Yak’s controversies revealed the platform’s constitution and allowed for an access point into studying the distribution of power between asymmetrically positioned social actors. Following the public controversies
that have plagued Yik Yak was a key strategy in developing and theorizing (un)disciplined performativity. Through following the controversies, I was able to question users on their experiences and perceptions of Yik Yak practices both while it was anonymous and pseudonymous. Thus, I could empirically trace the differences that separated anonymous and pseudonymous communicative acts.

4.2 The Extended-Case Method

I relied on an *a priori* deployment of material semiotics and poststructural theory to frame my research approach and assumptions. This strategy emerged from Burawoy’s (1998) “extended case method” which has been described as a qualitative and ethnographic approach that stresses the intersubjectivity that exists between the researcher and participant, the importance of social and cultural context to shaping social actors, and stresses the importance of using theory to illustrate institutional and vernacular phenomenon. The extended case method maintains some general methodological assumptions for exploring social and cultural phenomenon. First, “extending the observer to the participant”, or in other words, the observer is a part of the world they are observing and thus influence it. Second, “extending observations over space and time”, implying that situational knowledge produced through qualitative research must be translated into social processes that display power dynamics. Third, “extending out from process to force”, that connects local social process to larger external forces. In this way, we can connect local Yik Yak feeds to the wider political economy of the Yik Yak platform that spans across North America. Forth and finally, “extending theory”, arguably the most important dimension of the extended case method, the researcher begins with theory, and through fieldwork, refutes and builds on those theories. The Queen’s University Yik Yak case study will be used to extend Butler’s (1990; 2009) theories of performativity and Foucault’s (1995; 2015)
theories of governmentality and disciplinary power to account for qualitatively obtained empirical data.

4.3 Sampling

In order to explore the constitution of Yik Yak from the perspective of both operator and user, I have collected data from two different perspectives or viewpoints: qualitative interviews with users of Yik Yak at Queen’s University and a document analysis of journalistic and technical documents concerning Yik Yak found over the Internet. By collecting and contrasting data from these two viewpoints, I was able to understand some of the competing perspectives that are deployed in Yik Yak’s controversies. I have also conducted ethnographic participant-observation which primarily consisted of capturing user-generated content through screenshots on my mobile device. However, due to the abundance of data and time restrictions, I have omitted much of that data from the case study.

4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews of Yik Yak users from Queen’s University

In order to understand how users of Yik Yak at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, interact with the Yik Yak social media platform I explored user interactions, practices, and perceptions of anonymity and surveillance through semi-structured intensive interviews. This interview structure allowed me to explore how students at Queen’s University interact with social media, perceive the weight and impact of their interactions, and motivations for using anonymous platforms. I interviewed twelve respondents at Queen’s University that include both undergraduate and graduate students. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, including six self-identified women and six self-identified men.
In order to access this population, I employed a convenience sample of known Yik Yak users and then used a snowballing technique to solicit more respondents. My motivation for using this technique is that Yik Yak users are generally anonymous, making it a particularly difficult to access potential participants. The use of snowball technique is appropriate for studying such platforms as it is assumed that users of Yik Yak may know other users who may be willing to participate in the project (Berg and Lune 2012). I began by identifying and approaching users of Yik Yak through association with my own personal networks and then after the completion of the interview I asked for referral to other users of Yik Yak. I also deployed a series of online advertisements and posters over Queen’s University groups on Facebook and Reddit.

This sample was collected from users who attend Queen’s University, that is, students, faculty and staff, who are regular users of Yik Yak. These are the users that make up the constitution of the social media platform, they post text and images anonymously, and up vote and down vote the posts of others. The semi-structured intensive interviews explored several key themes that emerged out of the research questions: (1) intentions and perceptions of posts on Yik Yak newsfeed; (2) preferences for up-voting and down-voting; (3) motivations for using the platform; (4) interactions with other users outside of the platform; (5) issues they experience on Yik Yak; (6) knowledge of Privacy Policy and Terms of Use; and (7) knowledge of surveillance practices (see Appendix D: Interview Guide).

4.3.2 Digital document analysis of Yik Yak operators and marketers

To get a sense of the political economy of Yik Yak, I first sought interviews with Yik Yak employees. After seeking permission through official channels, I was met with absolute silence from the company’s public relations staff. I had reached out to employees and executives
through email and through LinkedIn. I also approached their marketing representative at Queen’s University, but her questions to the corporate office were also met with silence. With the lack of access to anyone who could properly represent Yik Yak in my research, I had to seek out alternative routes. In order to illustrate how the corporate and marketing side of the social media’s platform operated I conducted online research for journalistic sources, public documents, and user blogs. This sort of analysis is very limited in its ability to understand the political economic forces of Yik Yak, but as potential data, they have allowed me to construct a map of the terrain. These texts constitute a source of unobtrusive data: a form of data collection that is completely disconnected from the processes that produced them (Berg and Lune 2012). However, it must be noted that these sources are not an absolute record of Yik Yak’s operations, they can only illustrate intentions and possibilities. I relied on Yik Yak’s website\(^{10}\) in order to get a sense of its policies and guidelines, this included sampling the following documents: *Terms of Service, Privacy Policy, Guidelines for Law Enforcement*, and *Code of Conduct*. I also used Google’s search engine to sift through journalistic and opinion articles that explored Yik Yak’s market practices and public controversies (these can be found in the reference section).

### 4.4 Ethical considerations

This research posed minimum risk to the respondents as the research did not explicitly target vulnerable populations or high risk research topics. Though this project carried minimum risk, I still maintained some precautions to maximize the safety of participants in this research. It is important to note that this research had not explicitly targeted any vulnerable populations, however, some users I interviewed happened to be members of vulnerable groups that resulted in

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\(^{10}\) Shortly after Yik Yak sold its assets to Square, they shut down the website. Yik Yak’s rules and policies are no longer publicly available.
important data. All respondents have been rendered pseudonymous as the only demographic
detail included was the respondent’s gender. I’ve excluded any identifying data from the results
of this research in order to obscure reference to a respondent’s identity.

It has been explicitly stated that participation in this research is voluntary, and that
respondents retain ownership of all data collected and they had the right to withdraw from the
research project at any time without consequence up to the date of publication. I have
approached this project with a mind towards transparency, by this I mean, no information
pertaining to my research or intentions have been hidden from the interview respondents. All
participants have been asked to sign a consent form and have had the opportunity to give their
active consent.

Throughout the data collection process, I was involved in digital ethnographic participant
observation. This entailed me using Yik Yak both to post anonymous ‘yaks’ and to collect
samples of ‘yaks’. Due to the anonymity provided between users of Yik Yak, my participation
and observation in this social media platform was inevitably covert. Rutter and Smith (2005)
have identified an ethical issue associated with the presence or absence of the ethnographer in
terms of watching or lurking in social media platforms where they cannot be seen. However, this
is an inevitable ethical dilemma in my research due to the ephemerality of the feeds, any posts
declaring my research would quickly disappear. It is important to note that all user participation
is rendered automatically anonymous or pseudonymous which minimized any risk of
identification of participants throughout the fieldwork. If it was suspected that any post could
potentially identify a participant, it has been excluded from my research. Also, as explored
earlier, social media by its very construction are “mediated publics” that contain very little
privacy as it is (Boyd 2007). Lurking and consuming content is a part of the social media ecosystem and thus my presence was not out of the norm.

4.5 Data Analysis

After I completed my data collection and transcribed my interviews, I was left with an abundance of data to work with. I printed my interview transcriptions, journalistic documents, and technical and policy documents to prepare for a detailed content analysis. On top of this I had collected over 2500 screen shots of user content on Yik Yak that I have stored to a separate hard drive. This evoked many anxieties concerning how I might approach organizing this volume of data. Unfortunately, due to time constraints I was unable to systematically analyze all the data that I had collected. The content data from the ethnographic fieldwork will be used to provide descriptive depth to parts of this case study, but will otherwise be omitted. Besides this, I conducted a detailed content analysis on the interview transcriptions. Hsiech and Shannon (2005) define content analysis as, “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes and patterns” (1278). Due to the structure of my interview guide, my transcriptions were roughly organized thematically. Regardless of this, I approached this data through an abductive lens that included several phases of coding and theoretical memoing.

In order to systematize my approach to the interview data I set a “criteria of selection” (Berg and Lune 2012) to guide my analysis through a set of research questions. These questions emerged from a general objective to conduct exploratory research through a performative framework on Yik Yak’s anonymous collective to gain insight into how the community is produced, sustained, stabilized, and destroyed. The questions are as follow: (1) How do invested members of the anonymous collective understand the practices of anonymity and surveillance?
(2) How do actors understand Yik Yak as a community of anonymous and/or pseudonymous users? (3) And how do users conceive of institutional and vernacular forces of social regulation and discipline?

My coding process was layered into several steps. I began with reading the transcriptions a few times to become intimately familiar with the textures of the data. After this, I began a round of line-by-line open coding where I freely generated themes and patterns that emerged from the data. While doing this, I engaged in memo-writing to track the flow of my ideas and observations, allowing for theoretical development throughout the coding process (Charmaz 2014). After I finished my open coding process, I chose a set of primary codes that were relevant to my research questions and began a more detailed axial coding around key themes (See Appendix E: thematic code chart). Another important part of this process was sifting through manifest and latent content (Berg and Lune 2012). Manifest content, like particular user definitions of surveillance, emerged smoothly from the data. Latent content required an extra interpretive phase in order to sift through the realm of semiotic and symbolic meanings. From interpreting latent content, I developed theoretical observations about (un)disciplined performativity over anonymous social media.

The document analysis of journalistic and technical texts concerning Yik Yak was much more straightforward. The goal of analyzing these documents was not to produce themes or codes, but to sift through hints and journalistic descriptions to construct a map of Yik Yak’s history, business practices, and policies. In terms of journalistic texts, I printed off every article concerning Yik Yak that I could find via Google search and organized them by month and year. I carefully reviewed their content, memo-writing and taking notes along the way so that I could reconstruct the data afterwards. In terms of the Yik Yak technical documents, I printed them out
and organized them thematically according to their content. I engaged in the same process of reading, memo-writing and note taking that I did with the journalistic articles. The end result of this process provided me with enough evidence to make educated assumptions as to Yik Yak’s corporate market practices.

4.6 Research Limitations

This case study was developed as a requirement of a masters of arts in sociology from the Department of Sociology at Queen’s University and thus has several restrictions imposed on it. Time was the most consequential restriction because of the short time allotted for research, fieldwork, analysis, and writing. I was unable to do in-depth ethnographic fieldwork and analysis. Though I hold that my work is still ethnographic in nature because of its focus on cultural practices surrounding Yik Yak and because I had time to reflexively familiarize myself with the field. It must be considered that I was not able to systematically analyze the 2500 screenshots of user-generated content I had collected. Furthermore, because of the space allotted for the final thesis project, there are several themes and nuances that I had to set aside for future projects. It is helpful to understand it as a partial and situated report on the tenuous relationship between practices of anonymity and surveillance. Though I am not able to give a full cultural account, such a partial ethnography demonstrates that there are social, cultural, and political complexities surrounding the practices of anonymity that were absent from the literature. Due to the methodological nature of an ethnographic case study this research is not generalizable as it relies on the specific socio-material arrangements of Yik Yak at Queen’s University campus. However, it carries the ability to provide insight into the practices of anonymity and surveillance that could inform future research.
Chapter 5

Anonymity, Pseudonymity, and Identity

The next section will detail the results of my content analysis on the qualitative data collected concerning the topics of anonymity, pseudonymity, and identity. Respondents generally understood anonymity as a performative practice of identity masked from their overall reputation, as well as unlinkability between user-generated content. Anonymity on Yik Yak was typically considered a “social”, as opposed to a “technical” endeavor that was conducted for leisure more than privacy. Respondents often reflected on the potential of state or corporate surveillance over Yik Yak’s feeds. However, respondents were overwhelmingly concerned about lateral levels of surveillance and typically carried an atmosphere of apathy towards hierarchal surveillance. An interesting finding that emerged from data was that respondents largely felt that when they posted content over Yik Yak’s feeds, they could express an “authentic” or “true” self. Respondents typically felt that because anonymous communication lacked an intensified degree of identity curation that it could reflect an “unfiltered” sense of self. This “authenticity” is a part of what I have called (un)disciplinary performativity which was motivated by several key themes: entertainment, trolling and e-bile, caretaking, and flight from stigma. Finally, users noted that these socio-material effects largely dissolved when the Yik Yak operators rolled out their August 16th update. The introduction of mandatory user handles in an exclusively anonymous space deprived the overall collective of a key communicative feature, leading most of Yik Yak’s user base to abandon the platform.

5.1 Perceptions of Anonymity

5.1.1 Linkability to identity
Many respondents reported that the main feature of anonymity was its ability to enable a user to mask their identity while browsing a social media platform. This masking of identity could be achieved by unlinking user content and legal identity, as well as obscuring linkability between a user’s content. The ability to post without being linked to an overall perceived identity and reputation system is what attracted most of the respondents to Yik Yak’s platform. When asked about how they would describe anonymity, one male respondent said, “When I can’t be related to anything I say or do… I can’t be related to anything I say or do or have said or done in the past”. Another female respondent described, “If I had to come up with one definition, I guess I would define it as cloaking, cloaking your identity. For whatever purpose”. This ability to dislodge content from a user’s legal identity allowed for the generation of content without worry for a user’s overall reputation. Another male respondent reported,  

I think [anonymity] is when anything you say or anything you post online wouldn’t get traced back to who you are. And you can hide your identity and just like the post would just be there without anyone to trace back too. And you wouldn’t have responsibility to letting people know who you are. You don’t have to be accountable for anything that is posted.

Respondents were largely interested in the ability to post user-generated content without being accountable or responsible for any consequences that might follow the content. Another key feature of anonymity was the ability to post anonymously with other anonymous users. A male respondent reported, “The ability that no one knows who you are and you don’t know who other people are, at least on Yik Yak… that was great. Because you could literally just have conversations with people with no prior concepts and no prior opinions”. Many users were fascinated with this novel way of communicating without being tethered to their legal identity.
This communicative feature opened avenues of content sharing, discussions, and debates that lacked the curation of identity that defines interactions on other social media platforms.

5.1.2 Linkability between posts

Another key aspect of anonymity was the ability to obscure linkability between a user’s posts. Some users reflected on the experimental quality of being able to have a conversation with themselves while giving the appearance that there were multiple users in the discussion. One female respondent noted, “It’s kind of like, you never know if all the posts are coming from one person or they are all from someone different. Or like which ones are from the same person, or which ones aren’t. So I think that’s kind of a good feature”. This feature was slowly dismantled over Yik Yak’s lifetime; this began inclusion of randomized avatar pictures to indicate difference between users (while still maintaining anonymity) and than later optional and then mandatory user handles. A respondent’s attraction to anonymity at the level of linkability between posts had a pragmatic motivation as well. One male respondent reported, “There is the point where you could associate a certain opinion with a person that’s posted a similar opinion before. Just because it’s a small community”. The integrity of anonymity on Yik Yak depended on the ability for users to post content without aggregating a perceived identity or reputation. Even though pseudonymity still carried the potential to mask a user’s legal identity, most of the respondents felt uncomfortable with the ability for other users to deduce their character by aggregating posts. Linkability between posts and other identifiers were a hindrance to the larger collective. Another male respondent explained, “it’s an inability to connect any details to one another. Like I said before, part of the anonymity on Yik Yak wasn’t just that I didn’t know who was posting but that I didn’t know which posts were the same person. And I think that’s part of anonymity to, it’s images or characteristics being divorced from one another so that you can’t have them together”. 66
The feature of unlinkability was exclusively related to lateral levels of surveillance, other users were unable to link posts together to deduce a user’s character. However, Yik Yak maintained the ability to link user-generated content to a user’s legal identity in the platform’s internal interface.

5.1.3 Socially anonymous

Most respondents did not immediately reflect on the existence of hierarchal forms of surveillance in terms of data collection or police intervention. However, some users did reflect on the existence of these forms of surveillance and described a distinction between technical and social anonymity. When probed further on how anonymity could exist on Yik Yak while there was still a level of hierarchal surveillance, one male respondent replied, “I’m sure that there’s ways that people collect data in order to trace it to me as an individual. But socially it’s anonymous. Like it’s anonymous in that I’m not introducing myself to anyone and no one would know who I am in the real world if they were not actively putting in a lot of effort to know that information”. Though the respondent reflected on this knowledge, like the others, there was little concern about potential problematic aspects of hierarchal surveillance. Another male respondent reflected, “Well, I’d assume that there would be some sort of surveillance going on with the app. So, I don’t really define it as anonymous to the app. But I consider it anonymous to other users of the app”. Apathy towards hierarchal forms of surveillance seemed to occur for a pragmatic reason, because hierarchal surveillance could not impact a respondent’s overall perceived identity or reputation.

5.2 Performativity and identity on Yik Yak

5.2.1 Identity labor and social media
As explored above, performative acts of anonymity are an emergent negotiation with identity. Many respondents reported that they were aware of the burdensome task of curating their identity online through conventional social media platforms. Such a curation lead respondents to reflect on the existence of an “unauthentic” or “untruthful” expression of self and resolve these tensions by calling anonymous interactions an “authentic” or “true” expression of self. One female respondent reported, “Because social media as a whole is fake, Right? We all know people on Facebook and Instagram, who, you know, they have this front of being perfect. You know they have the perfect family. The perfect life. But really, they are just like falling apart. You know what I mean? But on Yik Yak it wasn’t like that”. Such identity curation led to an abundance of identity labor that was largely perceived as burdensome and tiresome. Another male respondent said, “It’s great. Because you can say exactly how you feel and you don’t have to worry about keeping up personality like Facebook, Twitter, or other social networks. You can literally say exactly how you feel and if people don’t like it… the posts go away, right?” The combination of anonymity and ephemerality create a context where a user not only has the inability to link content to an identifiable human actor, but also an inability to aggregate posts as all content would eventually disappear from the feed. Another female respondent described the emancipatory potential for sharing content that would not be linked back to the “whole” of her identity. She observed,

Because [posts] were not perceived in the context of the whole of me, they were perceived by themselves, right? So whenever I speak it’s always in the context of, ‘okay, so, you’re like this racially ambiguous looking, a woman of color, you’re a lesbian, you’re an activist, you’re very vocal all the time’. Also, they know this will contribute to how they see me. And if they think they know my type of person that changes their
perception. Where as anything I post, even if it is political, even if I am saying the same things. It was just that one time thing, they don’t know who I am. Or who is saying it.

There is a lot less room for them to pigeonhole me into a particular idea of who I am.

This lack of identity curation enabled a novel form of performative identity that did not engage with the same level of identity labor that is common in most conventional social media platforms. Respondents held that the inability to draw together disparate posts to perceive a “whole” sense of a user’s identity was an indispensable feature of Yik Yak.

5.2.2 Reflections on “true” or “authentic” identity

Respondents typically felt that anonymity on Yik Yak provided them a way to supersede the disciplinary power of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram in order to post content that reflected a “true”, “honest”, and “authentic” self. The reasoning behind this logic was related to the curation of self on other social media platforms, which users typically felt was not genuine because of the peer-to-peer expectations that shaped a users content curation. When posting content over Yik Yak, the lack of identity curation allowed users to share “authentic” flows of their identity, “unmediated”, into the anonymous cyberworld. One male respondent reflected, “That’s exactly what Yik Yak is, it’s a community oriented with no faces. It’s all about who you are inside, like, really inside. It’s who you are, what you think, what you believe in. It’s not like, what you want people to think about you”. In a similar vein, another male respondent reported, “It’s like the idea that when people are wearing masks they are a lot more honest. Or they act in a way that they wouldn’t if you could see their face, so I guess it’s the same thing when no one knows who you are—just more so”. These viewpoints indicate that users are reflexive when considering what anonymity might bring to their sense of self. A female respondent replied, “I feel like if people were to find out who is saying everything it wouldn’t be
as honest. People would just care about how [other] people see them, in general, and not expressing what they truly think”. Thus, anonymous social media provide a platform for users to feel more like their selves, and less like a performance of their selves. Another female respondent reported, “Yeah, no one knows who you are. No one is able to tell you that this person is this way because you don’t know who that person is. So, there is definitely more of a platform for them to be themselves. And say, uncensored things that they wouldn’t say otherwise”. The ability post content without curation, compounded with not being held accountable to that content, opened novel ways of communicating in (un)disciplined patterns.

5.2.3 (un)disciplined content posting

Respondents largely felt that because of the anonymous and ephemeral qualities of Yik Yak, they could share, discuss, and debate content that they would not typically want associated with their overall reputation. Such (un)disciplined content posting is not restricted to trolling and e-bile (though there was a great deal of that), but also included themes like entertainment, caretaking, and a flight from social stigmatization. As I will explore, (un)disciplined performativity enabled social actors to engage in novel forms of communication and identity practice that reflected an ambivalent ethics that could be both emancipatory and problematic. One female respondent reflected, “You know you are not going to be responsible, necessarily. Or you can’t be outed, so to say, if there is something personal you are letting out. But you know there could be responses and audiences there [for the content]”. There was a portion of (un)disciplined content that could fall under the category of e-bile and have dangerous consequences. Another female respondent reported, “Because I think the point of the app, or at least how it started, means that you could say anything about anything. And I’m sure a lot of people wouldn’t want to be connected to the sort of things that are yaked about at three o’clock
in the morning”. Though (un)disciplined performativity could be ambivalent, the resulting intensification of trolling and e-bile has severe consequences for those who are made victims.

For most of the respondents, the ability to engage in (un)disciplined content posting and discussions was at the center of why users were attracted to the Yik Yak collective. This was a form of social media engagement that could not be satisfied by most social media platforms. A male respondent reported,

Just things you don’t really have anyone to [speak to about], even your girlfriend, or whatever. You can’t say that to them. You can’t talk to them about that. But on Yik Yak you really can. It’s also just a good feedback for any thoughts you have that you don’t have to worry about being judged on those thoughts for having them. You know? That’s what I think the real heart of Yik Yak is.

Another male respondent mirrored these thoughts, “It was really brilliant, because people would speak their minds. There were people that would say things on Yik Yak that people would never in a million years say on the Internet without anonymity”. Some respondents felt that this was a positive experience that could be shaped by an individual’s personal ethics. Another male respondent said, “The whole aspect of anonymity was definitely intriguing and definitely drew me towards it because I realized that I could say or do anything without reprisal. So long as I post in my moral guidelines—I’m free”. However, other respondents recognized that (un)disciplined content sharing was not always a positive experience. Another male respondent reflected, “But it seems to me that some folks must feel like they can’t say this with there name behind it. If what they say has the cloak of anonymity behind it, either to agitate others for whatever reason or to express some deep seeded discriminatory character of themselves, that they couldn’t do otherwise”. In the following section, I will present empirical data that will
explore the various themes that motivated users to seek out a platform that would enable them to post (un)disciplined content.

5.3 Motivations to become (un)disciplined

5.3.1 Entertainment

One of the most prolific themes that motivated users to become (un)disciplined over Yik Yak was entertainment. One female respondent described their experience of Yik Yak as, “Pretty much people post weird stuff and its entertaining”. Entertainment as a leading factor in motivating people to use Yik Yak could also be demonstrated over the central feeds on the platform. Users would often post memes about school, inside jokes that developed over Queen’s Yak feed, and current politics or news. One of the memes central to Queen’s University was the use of Shrek\textsuperscript{11} memes to analogize disgruntled, stressed, hungover, and tired undergraduate students to a swamp ogre. Another respondent male respondent reflected, “The thing is there is a super fun side of Yik Yak like joking around through memes and stuff”. Entertainment over Yik Yak would also sync up with other social media applications that utilize platforms for meme sharing (such as Reddit, IMJUR, and 4chan) by way of recycling memes and jokes from other platforms over a yak feed. Another male respondent reflected,

\begin{quote}
I liked people who posted funny jokes and stuff like that. I’d always actually upvote stuff that I saw stolen from other feeds. So I’d browse other feeds and ran into people that stole stuff off of Reddit or other feeds. Because you always cause controversy in the comment
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Shrek is the main protagonist of a children comedy movie developed by DreamWorks Animation that depicts the adventures of a disgruntled, green ogre. Shrek’s character became a recurring meme over the Queen’s University Yak feed to depict tired, stressed out, hung over, and moody undergraduate students during mid-term and exam periods in a semester.
section. And I always thought it was really funny at the people who go out of their way to post a little recycle symbol in the comments.

Yik Yak, much like 4chan, was a platform that was utilized as a form of leisure culture, and most of the other themes were expressed through memes. However, entertainment over Yik Yak was not value neutral, there were a sizable share of sexist, homophobic, and racist memes that would filter through the central feed.

5.3.2 Trolling and e-bile

The combination of a lack of accountability, reputation system, and ephemeral posts set up social context that could intensify the posting of toxic vitriol, acts of trolling, and the constant generation of e-bile. Some respondents believed that anonymity enabled users to post “immature” content. One female respondent asserted, “I think because its anonymous people think they can say whatever and not be held responsible for the things that come out of their mouth or what they type into their phones so like its definitely like given people more freedom in what they share with the rest of the world”. Such freedom paved the way to a proliferation of e-bile that carried heavy consequences for some respondents. Another male respondent reported, “There is a whole lot of negativity on it. The reason that I deleted it was because of cyberbullying for lack of a better expression of it. People seemed to me, like two or three people on there especially, they would go on there and really post like sexist and racist things”. Respondents typically understood this behaviour as a direct result of the lack of accountability due to the unlinkability with their legal identity. Another female respondent said, “I guess people troll because they are feeling frustrated or because there is no social filter and people will just say whatever they want”. Others opposed trolling, another female respondent asserted, “I think they’re cowards. I think bullies period are cowards. It takes a special kind of coward for them to
do it online”. No respondent admitted directly to trolling, however, a few respondents had discussed a fascination with watching and encouraging arguments over various Yak threads.

Perceptions of trolling and e-bile were clearly gendered. An interesting finding was that the majority of male respondents, with a few exceptions, saw little to no problems associated with e-bile, trolling, and cyberbullying over the Yak feed. One male respondent reflected when asked about his perception of bullying over Yik Yak,

Like, nah. I don’t know, you can’t like bullying with anonymity. That’s kind of a benefit… [anonymity] cuts that down a lot, obviously. There’s this communist user and people always say, ‘go back to high school or something’. But that’s the most extent that’ve seen just because it’s such a large community, and it’s like really specific bullying. I don’t know. Nothing major at all.

Such answers concerning the state of e-bile over Yik Yak’s feeds were out of touch with the reality of the diversity of posting over Queen’s University Yak feed. There were daily instances of e-bile at various degrees of severity. As one female respondent reflected, “Yeah, that’s a social issue for sure. And it exists in our culture. So when you live in a racist culture scenario, you end up with people posting racist things that are also creepy or any number of bigoted things that someone could say. But I think the nice thing about that is that if that exists it can be called out”. Yik Yak’s many feeds were plagued with various forms of e-bile that were culturally and politically motivated. However, the Yak feeds were not exclusively a space for e-bile. In fact,
many of these spaces had a counter-narrative that was typically deployed to counteract trolls and toxic content.

5.3.3 Caretaking

There is a significant presence of users on Yik Yak who post helpful and positive content over the central feed, as well as those who engage with users who express that they are going through rough times. Several respondents reported that they actively took on a caretaker role while using Yik Yak. One female respondent reported, “I was always the therapist online… there was only a few of us who would comment on stuff, especially when it came to sexual things, or if someone was really down on themselves”. This same respondent told me that she would reach out to users who posted content expressing mental health issues and offer access to friendship and mental health services. The same respondent continued,

There was one time someone was talking about suicide. And at first, I didn’t know if they were joking or not, as gross as it is, people do joke about it. And, as the comments, I hadn’t commented yet, as the comments were coming in, it had become clear that this person was serious. So, I came on and said post your handle and I will talk to you. So they posted their handle and I chatted with them for over an hour.

A male respondent, who was a graduate student and a teaching assistant, told me, “When I do post, I kind of feel like, as a TA and as a graduate student, when I see an undergrad who is in trouble, I will post, ‘its okay, you know, here is where counselling is.’ I feel like an obligation, I don’t know, like a paternal sort of thing, to say here’s where you can get help”. Typically, respondents who spoke to me about taking a caretaking role felt a responsibility to intervene in conversations that implicitly demonstrated bullying or harassment, or users who expressed that they were in trouble for various reasons.
Furthermore, respondents typically expressed that because anonymity allowed for (un)disciplined content posting, users were enabled to reveal the truth of their problems. One male respondent said, “Lots of people had a tendency to post their feelings on Yik Yak because of the anonymity”. Another female respondent reported, “A lot of the times people will post about things they are struggling with, like depression or if they have been sexually assaulted. Stuff like that. It’s very hard for me to like read through those things and not being able to reach out and show them resources or anything like that”. At the same time, respondents were aware of the potential for soliciting advice or a person to speak to about issues. One male respondent told me, “I had an experience with a friend who was going through some stuff and I didn’t really know what to tell her so I posted about it. And, I got the advice, even though it wasn’t me, I pretended that it was me. But, you know, it was interesting the results I got from that because it was a pretty controversial thing that I posted, [but] people were really supportive”. The ability to post (un)disciplined content to Yak’s feeds to explore interpersonal and psychic issues was also very useful for users who experienced social stigmatization due to their membership in a vulnerable group.

5.3.4 Flight from social stigmatization

A number of respondents reported that they were able to use Yik Yak’s anonymity to communicate about or obscure aspects of their identity that were socially stigmatized by mainstream culture. Within the group of respondents, two identity categories were present: several LGBT* identified respondents and several people of color. It must be noted that due to the small sample size, this theme was not prominent in my data as it represented a small proportion of my sample. However, I felt it was an important factor to explore in lieu of the literature on e-bile and feminist cyber-politics. One male respondent reported, “I just feel like I
am a lot less inhibited in saying things, specifically things that are related to human sexuality. I feel a lot less inhibited saying on social media platform like Yik Yak”. This respondent expressed that he could communicate about his sexuality anonymously and even find romantic partners over the local Yak feed. Another female respondent reported,

I was able to make posts that people thought were funny and a lot of these people were probably in real life people who despise me and everything I stand for politically. Because I’m that leftist, queer, person of color, who is aggressive about it. But on there I can just make jokes and people would be like, ‘yo!’, and I would get up votes or down votes or whatever. I thought that was very enjoyable, very funny.

As mentioned earlier, anonymity provided the ability to untether from the exhausting identity labor of performing a stigmatized subject position. Users could share content they enjoyed without having to worry about defending the entirety of their perceived identity. However, Yik Yak was not exactly an escape from social stigmatization. Users experiencing social stigmatization were still exposed to various forms of e-bile. Another male respondent said,

They are the same assholes on Yik Yak as they are on Facebook, on Overheard, or wherever. But instead of just saying, ‘Oh black lives matter are just as bad as the KKK’, they will say the ‘n’ word. The only difference is the words they use. But the sentiment is the same. They don’t want people to have rights. They don’t see black people as fully human. But they won’t say it that way on Facebook, they’ll say it that way on Yik Yak.

These four themes are not entirely distinct from each other, various thematic qualities of (un)disciplined user-generated content overlap, blurring the lines between problematic and emancipatory content. Such content relies on the platform interface catering to anonymity and ephemerality to facilitate unlinkable performative acts. When Yik Yak deployed its August 16th
update that enforced mandatory user handles, the various factors involved in (un)disciplined performativity were largely dismantled.

5.4 Forced pseudonyms

Due to an increased presence of e-bile and several public instances of users being arrested for hate crimes and bomb threats, the increasing public pressure eventually motivated Yik Yak to move away from anonymity. I speculate that the move to mandatory user handles was a strategy to impose disciplinary power into the platform to mitigate the proliferation of e-bile. This move to mandatory user handles was met with resistance by an overwhelming portion of the user population. For many respondents, resistance to the August 16th updates was fueled by the introduction of identity labor into Yik Yak’s communicative structure. One male respondent explained his post-update content sharing, “Now I kind of have an identity that one feels like they are stuck in and once one feels they have an identity they can’t… I don’t know. I don’t know what else I would post now. Other than the communist things”. This user became known for his posts on radical Marxist theory and over time took on a celebrity status within the population of remaining users. Another male respondent reflected, “It’s almost like famous people amongst the app, you know? They have no fame though because they are still technically anonymous. It’s weird”. The handle update changed the communicative structure of Yik Yak, essentially removing the conditions of (un)disciplined performativity by increasing the presence of lateral surveillance and individuation.

Another issue that emerged for respondents due to the August 16th update was linkability between a user’s posts. Now that users had an identifiable user handle, other users could aggregate user-generated content posted to feeds under a pseudonym to construct identity profiles and reputations. One male respondent said,
It’s abysmal. It’s still anonymous. They just make you use a handle. But the thing is now—if I post something today and I post something tomorrow, people can go back and remember my post from yesterday and be like ‘oh this guy…’. It used to be that I could post something, and the next day, no one had any clue of how those two connect unless they are purposely making it like that.

Linkability between a user’s posts further eroded the ability to engage in various forms of (un)disciplined performativity. However, some respondents expressed that perhaps the update was needed, one male respondent stated, “You would have seen nastier comments. Sometimes, and now that’s a lot less common now because even if you are not using a real name, just the idea that there is a user name there I think its enough. Because if they want to post anything else the next day you know you are already the asshole about something you said yesterday”. This response may indicate that users were reflexive of the affects of the introduction of mandatory handles on disciplining user-generated content. However, the respondent continued, “But I think a lot of the more personal stuff also got filtered out. You know those kinds of posts. People posting about being lonely and trying to find partners”. The introduction of user handles might have mitigated some trolling and e-bile, but it also dismantled the other three factors identified in (un)disciplined performativity. Another male respondent reported, “Because now you have a legacy that follows you and I think that’s always kind of scary because once you’re saying things that could be controversial or it could be looked down upon”. The introduction of the mandatory handles fundamentally changed the features that drew users into Yik Yak’s platform in the first place.
5.5 Concluding remarks

This section provided samples of empirical data that sought to explore the textures of anonymity and pseudonymity, identity practices over social media platforms, and tangible evidence of reflexive (un)disciplined content sharing over Yik Yak’s anonymous feeds. The evidence provided may also reveal the disciplinary power embedded in lateral identity practices when pseudonyms are made mandatory in anonymous spaces. The purpose of this section of results was to demonstrate that users were drawn to use Yik Yak because of its ability to provide unlinkability between content and identity, and between a user’s content. Respondents reflected on the novel ways that they could communicate with each other in the absence of laborious identity curation. Furthermore, such (un)disciplined behavior was practiced within the scope of four main themes (entertainment, trolling and e-bile, caretaking, and flight from stigma). The next section of results will explore the various ways that surveillance techniques and regulatory practices converge at the intersection of institutional and vernacular interests to exercise a mode of governmentality. As will become apparent, the presence of (un)disciplined performativity does not nullify platform governance, it just recalibrates how such regulatory strategies are deployed.
Chapter 6
Social Regulation in (Un)disciplined Collectives

This section will explore the results of my content analysis on the qualitative interview transcriptions concerning the perceptions of hierarchal and lateral surveillance, as well as, institutional and vernacular forms of governance and regulation. As mentioned earlier, respondents largely demonstrated significant apathy towards hierarchal surveillance and a great deal of concern over lateral levels of surveillance. Furthermore, in terms of platform governmentality, though the platform is largely regulated by an entanglement of operator and user practices, respondent reports indicated that platform regulation should be deployed at the vernacular level. Respondents would only use features, like post reporting, that would prompt operator mediation in extreme circumstances (such as hate crime, mental health crisis, and threats of violence) which would often involve operator or police intervention. As the results suggest, the deployment of regulatory strategies over anonymous social media platforms are complex and multi-dimensional.

6.1 Perceptions of hierarchal surveillance

Most respondents took a “I’ve got nothing to hide” type attitude to hierarchal levels of surveillance over Yik Yak. The general understanding of the existence of hierarchal levels of surveillance was that it typically did not have any impact on a respondent’s immediate lives. Respondents tended towards not thinking about surveillance practices in political terms, rather, they would think about it in pragmatic terms in relation to their day-to-day experiences. Though some respondents did express concern about privacy issues and opaque surveillance practices, they felt resigned to submit to those practices to have access to the platform services. One male
respondent reported, “I don’t consider [surveillance] a breach of privacy at all. I think that’s just like pure data. Not anything that’s associated with me. Or with my account”. This was a common theme in the data, because surveillance on Yik Yak was carried out by computer software collecting user data, it did not constitute a breach in privacy. Other respondents were vaguely aware of journalistic reports that illustrated police intervention into instances of bomb threats or acts of violence over Yik Yak. Another male respondent told me,

> There is definitely a story that happened somewhere in the US, where there was like a bomb threat on Yik Yak. They shut down the school and everything and it turns out it was just a joke. And they caught the person obviously. So, there is definitely a way of knowing who posted things on Yik Yak, but they try to make it anonymous for the most part. But its good for just recreational usage. But like, if there’s actually people who use it with alternative motives and stuff, it can be a dangerous tool if its anonymous.

Hierarchal surveillance in this context is only a threat to those who are using the platform to break or deviate from the law. For all other purposes, from the view of many of the respondents, the platform remained effectively anonymous.

Another theme that emerged from my data indicated that hierarchal surveillance did not constitute a privacy issue because the user agreed (in some way) to the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy. One male respondent reflected, “I mean that’s how social media works. That’s how the Internet works and so I don’t know. The alternative that seems to exist is that services you’d have to pay for. And I don’t think that I’m willing to do that”. Generally, respondents felt that the surveillance of their online activities and the potential monetization of that data was a fair trade off for free use of the company’s services. A Female respondent reported, “I’m studying media so I kind of know that every single app that we are using does something with
our information, that’s why it’s free”. When asked if Yik Yak’s collection of their data constituted as a breach of their privacy, another male respondent said, “You know what? I would say yes. But than again, I haven’t actually read their Terms of Service. So if in their terms of service, it says, we will distribute our information to so in so. Or we will distribute your information to who ever we see fit. Than technically I agreed to that. So can I get mad? Up front they are telling me and I’m just to lazy to bother, right?”. Regardless of not reading the documents, respondents typically understood them as binding contracts that implied consent to surveillance practices.

6.2 Perceptions of lateral or vernacular surveillance

All respondents reported concern or discomfort with lateral forms of surveillance conducted over social media platforms. For most respondents, this concern about near-constant exposure to the watching of friends, family, and strangers was a main driver in their intentions to use Yik Yak (or anonymous social media in general). One male respondent reflected, “The fact that the government or the company is collecting [data] is not as important to me as the fact that I can remain anonymous from the rest of the community”. Most respondents logged into Yik Yak daily to communicate with others without tedious forms of identity labor. Another male respondent reported, “So you didn’t have to worry about anyone judging your next post. You are always free to post different stuff. New stuff. And you don’t have to worry about people reflecting on your old posts, right? So it was great”. An interesting finding was that users still felt that lateral surveillance was a major factor in pseudonymous communication. A part of this anxiety around handles was connected to the linkability between posts. One male respondent reported, “you don’t want people to like build a profile on you based on what you say and know who you are and like then it the whole concept comes crumbling down you know”. A female
respondent reflected on a similar note, “It’s like still anonymous but it’s like you can build a profile of that person from there whereas before it was like these [posts] were all separate things. You had your one post and no one could connect it to any of your older posts so no one knew who was saying anyone thing”. The introduction of lateral levels of surveillance into the Yik Yak platform was a major driver for user resistance after the August 16th update.

A driving force of this anxiety was largely due to Yik Yak becoming a social media platform based on identity labor, users found themselves practicing the very thing they sought to avoid. A female respondent observed, “And so, it’s anonymous in the sense that you don’t have to put identifying features, but it’s a lot less anonymous because it creates a picture of you. An idea of you. That is archived and present and cohesive where it wasn’t before”. Respondents were also anxious about their peers discovering their handle and linking their posts back to them. One male respondent reported, “One of the main reasons that people did use it was because it was anonymous and if you posted three times no one would be able to tell oh this person posted three times. So when they introduced the handle, I feel like a lot of people were more hesitant to use it because oh now somebody can identify me, either by my handle or whatever”. For much of Yik Yak’s history, the platform dynamics were constructed in such a way that users could consider themselves simultaneously anonymous and surveilled.

6.3 Perceptions of being simultaneously anonymous and surveilled

Respondents typically had their own definitions of what it meant to be anonymous when they engaged in the performative act of sharing content over Yik Yak’s feeds. Most respondents felt that hierarchal levels of surveillance did not affect their ability to be anonymous. One male respondent reported, “It’s more of a social thing. So with the average person on the app they will not know who you are. But don’t expect that people, if they want to or need to know who you
are, can’t find you”. Respondents had good reason to believe that as long as they did not break any laws or cross any lines then they would not have to worry about hierarchal surveillance. However, they were not ignorant to its larger existence, another male respondent said, “truly anonymous? Like nobody knows who I am? Not even the NSA? No. No, I don’t think so. You’re on the Internet. The internet, you always have ways to track it down. And I’m not smart enough to try to cover my tracks to a degree where no one could find me”. Respondents typically posed their anonymity as fundamentally social, a female respondent pointed out, “And it does sound weird. I feel that anonymity is more important towards your peers than to people who don’t particularly matter to you”. Respondents typically prioritized a particular type of anonymity that addressed the level of surveillance that they were most concerned about. As long as they were anonymous on a lateral level, then they were unconcerned with being surveilled by the hierarchal level.

6.4 Vernacular and institutional regulation

As mentioned previously, even anonymous social media platforms, while being (un)disciplined, are still maintained by a mode of governmentality deployed through a lexicon of regulatory strategies. Such regulatory strategies emerge both vernacularly and institutionally as operators and users try to shape Yik Yak’s feeds to achieve various goals. Most respondents were quite active in participating in vernacular efforts to regulate the feeds. They did so in various ways: through the upvote/downvote system, through discussion and debate, and in extreme circumstances, through reporting users to the platform operators. Upvoting and downvoting was a primary source of regulatory activity for respondents, one male respondent reported, “Because I saw this happen quite a bit, where someone is like ripping on an ex-spouse or an ex lover and they are like, ‘you’re being an asshole’ and they get downvoted. And it’s kind
of nice to see like that social feedback”. A female respondent noted that such regulatory features carried a democratic atmosphere, she described,

[Yik Yak is] a site where you could anonymously post opinions or jokes or just observations and people would determine as a collective whether or not that thing was valuable or valid. So, if you get more than five down votes and no upvotes your comment is automatically removed. So it’s very democratic in that way. But in a very harsh way. But it was cool just to see what would survive and what wouldn’t, because it was like a self-regulatory community.

Another female user reflected on the capabilities of the upvote/downvote feature, she said, “I think the upvotes and downvotes kind of makes sure that people aren’t trolling because obviously people can tell when someone’s kind of cruel and being annoying on social media. Like, we down vote it”. It must be noted that such a regulatory feature was oftentimes afforded an inflated sense of power to clean up the Yak feeds from e-bile and vitriol. From my ethnographic experience, forms of e-bile deployed over the feeds often persisted through methods of regulation. Upvoting and downvoting was also used by some respondents to extend the presence negative content on the feed to watch inflammatory debates for entertainment. One male respondent reported, “There wasn’t much that I would downvote. I was pretty neutral. I would either upvote stuff because I thought it was funny or interesting or want other people to see it or I would scroll past it. I never actively sought to get rid of a post unless bummed”.

Another female respondent demonstrated a similar practice, “But actually, I will usually change my downvote on those if a discussion develops. If other people start talking about it than I want to see this discussion continue. And I will just not upvote it. But I won’t continue to downvote it”. It is clear from these results that regulatory strategies are not unified towards a singular goal,
but are multiple in the sense that use of the upvote/downvote feature can be used to pursue a variety of goals.

Another vernacular strategy for regulating Yik Yak’s feeds were the use of debate, discussion, and argument to challenge undesirable user-generated content. One respondent felt that debating trolls was a fundamental reason why he used Yik Yak, he reported, “I’d kind of feel a responsibility to balance out the trolling”. This balancing would either be through providing a counternarrative to the use of e-bile or by posting positive content on the main feed to balance out the feeds collective ideology. Another female respondent also felt the need to intervene in instances of bullying or harassment, she said, “Well I just straight up told them to fuck off. Excuse my language, but I don’t take people’s crap at all. I’m a defender. When the handles came out and I started seeing people do that, I just stuck up for whoever it was that they were attacking”. Although I do not have data to support this, it seemed that trolls and bigots would employ similar strategies to amplify their presence on the feeds and shape the types of user-generated content that would make it to the “hot” section. Such strategies were present in the constant tug-of-war occurring in drawn-out debates and arguments that often-times occurred between far-left and far-right social actors.

Finally, respondents generally expressed that they would take caution around reporting posts, either a respondent refused to report any posts or they would only report a post under the most extreme circumstances. One male respondent told me, “It’s funny that I didn’t even [report] when those rape posts were up. I still didn’t report it. I just assumed that other people would I guess. I rarely report anything online anyways”. Another male respondent said when asked if he
would report negative content,

No. I would down vote it but I wouldn’t [report it]. Actually, if there was someone saying that I’m going to bomb the school, I would report that. But, beyond that like there is a borderline, if someone was on there saying they’re suicidal and someone was encouraging them, anything like that, I would obviously report. I think generally my opinion is that I just refute what is being said if I think its worthy of being reporting.

Respondents seemed to want to maintain control over the regulatory features in their local Yik Yak feeds, this either took the shape of voting on a post or engaging in debate. At the very same time, as one male respondent demonstrated, users seemed to believe that extreme posts would get reported by somebody online. He reported, “It prevents that sort of harassment because of the legacy thing because people who are harassing will get reported and doing it repeatedly, is a little safer”. Vernacular methods of regulating the feed do not occur apart from institutional methods of regulation.

Yik Yak had various ways of institutionally regulating the system which were informed by their Code of Conduct available on their website and over the platform’s settings menu. Institutional methods of regulation took the shape of algorithms designed to automatically flag problematic content, as well as features that would suspend or ban user accounts. Much of these regulatory features were automated by algorithms, minimizing human labor from employed content moderators. As a few respondents noted, the algorithms also targeted any mention of
other anonymous social media platforms, posts about competitors were automatically downvoted one vote per minute and made to disappear from the feed\textsuperscript{12}.

The most prominent institutional regulatory strategy visible to users were the use of an algorithm to flag problematic content. One male respondent told me, “I once tried to post a picture that wasn’t sexual but like Yik Yak detected it as being sexual and it kept getting instantly removed. And like my friend was like, after the update, he was upset so he tried to post a picture of Hitler. And caption it, ‘Yik Yak CEO’, and it was removed instantly. They have Hitler detection I guess”. Algorithmic regulation added an extra layer to slow or prevent the posting of e-bile, however, it was not a flawless strategy. Such algorithms would sometimes work in unanticipated ways, another male respondent reported, “If you use the word ‘gay’ or I think the word ‘lesbian’ on Yik Yak it will flag and say it looks like you potentially used a bad word. And I would be like, I think that’s a potentially offensive flag. I really wasn’t a fan that the algorithm would flag that”. Yik Yak’s dictionaries seemed to take an unnuanced, normative approach to semantics that did not consider contextual use of meaning for words that could simultaneously be taken as an insult or a category of identity.

Another method of regulatory action used by Yik Yak’s operators was to suspend or ban problematic accounts. One male respondent described, “I’ve been suspended. Yeah, I had my account suspended and I’ve had a profile picture removed. So, I’m not actually one hundred percent sure, so they suspended my account for a period of time. Forty eight hours. And they said

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Yik Yak’s automatic downvoting of user mentions of competition was noted by Josh Constine (2015) in a report for TechCrunch who conducted and video recorded an experiment to watch the downvotes occur. As it turns out, Yik Yak presumably attempted to blend this into the overall feeds by downvoting once per minute. In response to the article, Buffington and Droll explained that the feature was an anti-spam technology. I also experimented with this feature to verify its existence and watched several posts get downvoted and deleted.
\end{flushright}
I could appeal it, which I did and they unsuspended my account”. This respondent had posted an image containing depictions of violence against police officers that was associated with his far-left politics. Such institutional methods seemed to be incapable of sufficiently regulating e-bile and vitriol as the algorithm was not sophisticated to comb through acceptable and problematic content. Miranda Katz (2017) from Wired reported that Yik Yak had lacked a labor force of human content moderators to verify flagged content, Katz speculates that Yik Yak’s move to mandatory handles was a strategy to regulate its many feeds.

Speculation around Yik Yak’s August 16th update being a regulatory feature to counteract emergent trolling and e-bile was expressed by some respondents. One female respondent said, “From my understanding, because I googled this because I wanted to know what was going on, [the update] was apparently to stop the bullying”. This respondent later discussed that the move to mandatory handles did little to actually prevent the constant state of bullying and harassment over Yak’s feeds. A male respondent described this in more detail,

And back to the implementation of mandatory handles. I think that definitely dissuaded [trolls], and I think that’s what yik yak was going for. Because before the handles, people could post freely. Whatever they want, without identification of any kind. And it would probably get downvoted if it was negative. But after, handles became an option, handles being optional was a way for Yik Yak to improve the community. Because if you can build a reputation around someone’s online identity, and the moment the yak community realizes that this person just posted something, even if the negativity is not to extreme, the reputation surrounding that person is probably going to lead to that post being downvoted.
The deployment of a reputation system tied to a mandatory user pseudonyms seemed to be a strategy to discipline users in the overall collective. A system of reputation would introduce lateral surveillance to expose a perceived user identity to the scrutiny of other users, leading to an integration of both surveillance and individuation which would inevitably lead to the production of disciplinary power. As an unintended consequence of this move to regulate user-generated content, the feature served to alienate users from all factors associated with (un)disciplined performativity and led most users abandoning the platform altogether.

6.5 Concluding remarks

This section provided samples of empirical data to explore user perceptions and practices around lateral and hierarchal surveillance, the interactions between anonymity and surveillance, and the deployment of vernacular and institutional methods of regulation. Respondents expressed that there is a disproportionate focus on vernacular methods of regulation to shape user-generated content over Yak’s many feeds. This form of regulation would not explicitly target the deployment of e-bile, but shape the feed in multiple directions which would remove some content while highlighting others. As a result, the deployment of e-bile remained a significant problem over Yik Yak’s feeds. Respondents were cautious about relying on institutional forms of regulation, and would only deploy them in extreme circumstances. This section served to demonstrate that anonymous social media is mediated through a complex mode of governmentality that deploys various overlapping strategies of regulation. However, such a system largely relied on the participation of users to clean up the feeds of e-bile and vitriol resulting in inconsistent practices that would not sufficiently regulate the feed.
Chapter 7

Discussion

This section will explore the empirical findings analyzed in this case study in relation to both the literature review and the theoretical framework. Fundamentally this project sought to explore the textures of performative anonymity, (un)disciplined performativity, and governmentality over the Yik Yak feeds at Queen’s University. In doing so, using the extended case method, I was able to extend Judith Butler’s (1990; 2009) theories of performativity and Michel Foucault’s (1995; 2015) theories of disciplinary power and governmentality to account for relational affects that emerge from the socio-material entanglements between Queen’s University students and the Yik Yak platform. This section will explore the concept of (un)disciplined performativity, platform governmentality, the effects of imposing pseudonyms on an anonymous collective, and an elaboration into Ball’s (2009) political economy of interiority as it relates to the Yik Yak collective. From this analysis, I hope to achieve some insight into some of the problematics that I encountered throughout the tenure of this project. First, I will explore the normalizing effects of lateral surveillance over performative identities; second, I will explore the politics of trolling and e-bile; and third, I will explore the political economy of Yik Yak as a failed capitalist project. The Yik Yak collective is emblematic of several problematic features of social, cultural, and political dimensions of new media in contemporary Western society. And thus, serves as a good foundation to explore those problematic features.
7.1 (un)disciplined performativity over anonymous social media

(Un)disciplined performativity is a concept that might explain some of the performative characteristics that occur over anonymous social media platforms like Yik Yak. Fundamentally, it can be used to discuss issues of trolling and e-bile, while also considering other relevant themes involved in its practice (entertainment, caretaking, and a flight from social stigmatization). I do not mean to use this concept to diminish the damaging consequences of trolling and e-bile in both corporeal and digital contexts. However, in the current political economic atmosphere, neoliberal capitalist interests have tried to frame legal identity as transparent and characterized by integrity, and anonymity as characterized by deceit. I am referring here to the “real-name” web and the “nymwars”. The usage of (un)disciplined performativity is an attempt to account for the nuance and complexity associated with practices of anonymity and pseudonymity over social media platforms.

In order to frame the political significance of the approach I’ve developed; I will illustrate the consequences of enforced “real name” policies through two examples. In a blog post, titled ‘Real Names’ Policies Are an Abuse of Power, danah boyd (2011) illustrates the tensions that developed in the “nymwars” when Google began to enact their “real name” policies by way of deleting accounts that did not contain the legal names of its users. These policies quickly spiraled into a massive public controversy as users who made use of pseudonyms to protect their identities (including LGBTQ*, abuse survivors, activists, etc.) found their safe spaces online were being forcefully taken from them. boyd observes, “‘Real names’ policies aren’t empowering; they’re an authoritarian assertion of power over vulnerable people”. This is further compounded with Hogan’s (2012) assertion that “real name” policies are tethered to neoliberal capitalist ideologies. These ideologies are often deployed by Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO and
founder of Facebook, in ways that relate the use of anonymity or pseudonyms with a “lack of integrity”. And as Hogan asserts, “For Zuckerberg this is not simply an ideological principle but one that is supposed to guarantee Facebook’s monetary success” (3). The politics of governing user “nyms” are of critical importance for many users over the Internet who are trying to evade forms of surveillance for various reasons.

Another example of the problematics associated with an enforced “real name” web comes from Facebook’s enactment of its “real name” policies that were unable to recognize transgender or queer identities. For much of Facebook’s history, the system would often attempt to “correct” an user’s name or gender to conform with normative standards of “legal names”. According to Ennis (2015) from the Advocate, such policy enactments exposed and compromised the identities of transgender or queer identified individuals which had resulted in a disproportionate exposure to violence and social stigmatization. In both these cases, the public response over the “real name” controversies forced the social media platforms to back down from their policy assertions and allow pseudonyms. However, such controversies reveal an underlying political economy where the “real” identities of users take on economic value for platform operators. So, while the existence of pseudonymous and anonymous social media platforms can exhibit e-bile as a result of (un)disciplined performativity, it is not sensible to call for an end of anonymous social media as such a course of action would also carry problematic consequences for users who rely on anonymity and pseudonymity for political reasons or for safety. Furthermore, as Phillips (2015) illustrates, such acts of e-bile exist in platforms where users are tethered to their “real name” identities. Such an observation further solidifies the argument that the enforcement of the “real name” web would not actually solve the problem of proliferating e-bile. Hogan (2012) suggests, “that real names make a great deal of sense for many online contexts, but should not be
considered as a totalizing regime” (2). This was reflected in the results, as enforcing a reputation system did not severely impact the ability for users to deploy trolling tactics and e-bile, but did alienate the user base with destructive consequences for the platform. With this politics in mind, I would like to explore the textures of (un)disciplined performativity in regards to its existence over the Queen’s University Yik Yak feeds.

7.1.1 Performative Anonymity

Anonymity is not merely a tool that is used by social actors, it is a set of performative acts that are bound up with socio-material entanglements of humans and their various systems of belief, as well as the social media platform with its hardware and software. Performativity is largely about the ongoing and emergent material expression of a person’s identity that is in a constant negotiation with the various socialized norms that exist within a social actor’s various contexts. From the perspective of users, anonymity is performatively deployed to express particular renditions of identity that a user could not normally express. As Kennedy (2006) has noted, performativity of online identity follows the logics of Haraway’s situated knowledge, it emerges specifically from the anonymous platform and carries its own situated textures. This is similar to Ito’s (2005) concept of partial bracketing where a corporeal user will still their physical body and set their attention to a screen in order to perform a different identity.

For other forms of social media, identity performativity is rendered in complex and interrelated ways that oscillate between the construction of profiles and user-generated content and the responding performative acts of other users. As Cover (2012) writes, “That is, an array of activities that require a user to ‘work’ to perform a coherent, intelligible selfhood extending across all these online activities in addition to offline behaviours” (178). This is what I call “identity labor”, the hard work that goes into curating a sense of self over conventional social
media platforms under lateral forms of surveillance. All respondents expressed their concern for the forms of identity labor they were made to partake in when they used social media platforms that subscribe to “real name” conventions. Furthermore, respondents had largely made clear that such performances, over Facebook and Instagram, were disingenuous due to the identity curation (or performance) involved in the presentation of self over the respective platforms.

Due to the structure of Yik Yak’s platform interface, performative anonymity is practiced in a way that users are not able to link user-generated content to a legal identity. And before the update, users were unable to link an author’s various posts together. When Yik Yak’s visual interface was framed for anonymous communication, there were no profiles, no aggregated posts, and thus, no durable identities or reputation systems. This is due to the combination of anonymity and ephemerality of the Yik Yak platform, users obscure linkability with their “real name” reputation and all posts are set to disappear as new content emerges. This combination of features allowed for a novel form of expression. As explored in the results section, users felt that their posts constituted as a performative act of an “authentic” or “true” identity. The existence of an “authentic” self carries a measure of theoretical friction in relation to the concept of performativity. A key element within theories of performativity are that there is no “master” identity (often associated with symbolic interactionism) that informs a user’s presentation of self. All identity is understood as emergent and in the moment. In other words, as Cover (2012) observes, “Butler’s theory of performativity is based on the idea that identity and subjectivity is an ongoing process of becoming, rather than an ontological state of being, whereby becoming is a sequence of acts, that retroactively constitute identity” (179).

What the perceptions of “authenticity” and “truth” might represent is that anonymity allows users to express thoughts, slivers of identity performance, that they would otherwise not
want associated with their overall reputation. This could include the gritty and painful stuff that would be omitted from a curated version of their presentation of self over Facebook or Instagram. Marwick and boyd (2012) observe, “The concept of ‘authenticity is a popular one. We refer to the ‘real me’ and authentic experiences, artifacts, and people. However, there is no such thing as universal authenticity; rather, the authentic is localized, temporally situated social construct that varies widely based on community” (124). As the authors continue, authenticity is always constructed in dichotomic relation to something else. For respondents, this dichotomy was represented as the curation of identity within “real name” social media platforms and the “authentic” identity over anonymous social media platforms. In other words, from the perspective of the respondents, the identity labor that goes into curating a presentation of self over Facebook or Instagram is always layered with a level of “deceit”. But as the authors point out, because all acts of identity are performative, the dichotomy fails. Both the curated and the authentic are constructed and thus neither is universally authentic. Marwick and boyd assert, “The fact that we constantly vary self-presentation based on audience reveals authenticity as a construct” (124). However, the above data provide insights into a novel form of performativity that emerges specifically from the socio-material entanglements of anonymous social media platforms like Yik Yak. Respondents understood this as a form of “unmediated” performative acts. Their use of “mediation” does not insinuate that the Yik Yak platform does not shape their performativity, but that other users do not mediate their sense of self. And thus, respondents felt that anonymity allowed them to performatively deploy an “unfiltered” sense of self.

7.1.2 (un)disciplined performativity

Performative acts that are mediated through an anonymous social media platform take on the qualities of being (un)disciplined. As defined earlier, (un)disciplinary performativity is a
configuration of self that performatively emerges from interactions over anonymous social media that entails a bracketed cultural expression of identity mediated through a social media platform which significantly dampens the effects of disciplinary power exerted through surveillance and individuation. In other words, because a user is anonymous—preventing the linkability to a legal identity, as well as, preventing the linkability between user generated content—there is no way for other users to surveil the legal identity of that user and hold them accountable to their performative acts in any meaningful way. This is directly due to the inability for a user to be exposed to a reputation system that shapes how that user might act in accordance to sets of rules and norms. From a Foucauldian perspective, the absence of meaningful surveillance and individuation leads to a dissolving of the effects of disciplinary power, and as a result users are not exposed to the influence normative “habits” (Foucault 1995; 2015). However, as mentioned earlier, though users are untethered from exposure to disciplinary power, they are still engaging in performative acts. This means that they are still subject to operating within a matrix of power that shapes how they can act. A social actor can never be fully outside their social and cultural context. The consequence of this is that (un)disciplined performativity does not entail a free-for-all of performative acts. Users still adhere to socialized sets of norms, but are not held directly accountable for troublesome or transgressive behavior. (Un)disciplined performativity allows a user to enact bracketed forms of identity, related to entertainment, trolling and e-bile, caretaking, and flight from social stigmatization, that they otherwise may not be able to express. These expressions of (un)disciplined performativity occur through the posting of textual and image based user-generated content in a collective that will then assess such content based on the criteria of the mode of governmentality discussed in the theoretical framework.
I’ve reached these conclusions through examining the changes in user perceptions that occurred with Yik Yak’s shift from anonymous to pseudonymous communicative structure. As explored in the results section, respondents felt that they could perform an “authentic” or “true” self using anonymous social media specifically because there was no way for lateral levels of surveillance to make sense of a “real name” identity through observation of user-generated content. When Yik Yak deployed its August 16th update to enforce mandatory user handles, users found themselves in a terrain of identity labor that was new to the Yik Yak platform. Even though other users could not link a user’s handle to a legal identity, the interface was changed to provide linkability between posts and attached to a handle, and thus, a reputation system. The respondents expressed a great deal of concern over the introduction of a reputation system where user handles became the locus of perceived identities. Even though the platform remained ephemeral, users now had the ability to remember other user handles and the personalities that those handles represented. As respondents expressed, this might have alleviated some of the trolling and e-bile over Yik Yak’s feeds, but it also diminished the capacity to engage in other (un)disciplined activities. This represents a clear intensification of the exertion of disciplinary power through lateral levels of surveillance over the Yik Yak platform. To fully explore the consequences of these updates on the ability for users to engage in (un)disciplined performativity, I will need to explore how platform governmentality operates over anonymous social media.

7.2 Platform governmentality

It is in the shared interest of both user and operator that Yik Yak’s feeds are reasonably protected from the proliferation of e-bile type content that threatens both the user’s wellbeing and the company’s reputation. As mentioned above, (un)disciplined performativity does not
entail a free-for-all of performative acts, in fact, (un)disciplined users are exposed to an interrelated array of vernacular and institutional forms of regulation. This is to say that discipline is not entirely dissipated, it is merely not intensified. However, these methods of regulation are carried out differently as the platform cannot rely on systems of accountability and reputation. For this section, I will need to refer to Foucault’s (1991) definition of governmentality, the ways in which institutions, populations, and methods come together to exercise complex forms of power to shape a collective for political economic and security purposes. Platform governmentality refers to a mode of governmentality that is situated in a particular social media platform that shapes how regulatory strategies are deployed. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, I will be drawing form Kitchin and Dodge’s (2011) concept of “automated management” to frame the mode of governmentality that informs how Yik Yak is governed. The most important feature of Yik Yak’s mode of platform governmentality is that it is deployed largely at the vernacular level, but informed and shaped by automated algorithms and protocols. As explored in the results section, these forms of regulation are actively and reflexively practiced by platform users in a variety of ways that either encourage or discourage problematic content. In practice, vernacular and institutional regulatory strategies are constantly entangled as they are deployed, however, for analytic purposes I have untangled them into their respective categories. After I have explored their constitution I will bring them back together in an overall analysis.

7.2.1 Vernacular forms of regulation

When I refer to vernacular strategies of regulation, I mean the methods that users deploy to shape and regulate the user-generated content being posted to the various feeds over the platform’s interface. On Yik Yak, the main methods of vernacular regulation take the form of the use of the upvote/downvote feature, users debating, discussing, and arguing the content of posts,
and post reporting through the platform interface. These regulatory strategies take on the form of “governmental self formation”, as the platform shapes users to become “autonomous subjects” that are responsible for their own platform content moderation (Huxley 2007). The most important method of vernacular regulation was the upvote/downvote feature as it gave users a “democratic” choice in the types of content that appeared in the feed. As mentioned previously, posts with numerous upvotes are featured in the “hot” post section where users can see only the most popular posts. A post that is downvoted to a total number of -5 is removed from visibility. This feature gave respondents a feeling “self-regulation” in the overall governance of local Yak feeds. Furthermore, this feature solidified the situatedness of acceptable content as vernacular regulation was tied to a geographical location. Typically, respondents had noted that most of the e-bile posted would often get downvoted off the feed. However, this varied quite a lot depending on who might be online at any time and what sorts of motivations such users would carry. Several respondents noted that there was a gendered and racialized component to platform regulation where sexist and racist posts tended to linger on the feed. Such e-bile was oftentimes upvoted in order to keep the ensuing discussions and arguments on the feeds for others to spectate arguments and debates for entertainment. In this way, vernacular forms of governance were contingent upon the various social, cultural, and political leanings of users on the feed at any moment.

The second method of vernacular regulation on Yik Yak’s feeds was the use of text and image to engage in debates, discussions, and arguments. Sometimes these debates could become quite heated as users in politically or socially polarized positions posted comments that quickly turned into acts of flaming and insults. However, it was in these discussions that the overall collective of users made known what content was acceptable and what content was not. In terms
of the posting of e-bile, some respondents pointed to the importance of balancing out conversations on the feed through posting content that challenged problematic posts. At the same time, other users would post counter-vitriol content to chastise posters if they engaged in problematic behaviour over the feeds. However, the usefulness of providing a counter-narrative or chastising problematic users varied significantly. I speculate that this reason was tied to the (un)disciplined nature of such engagements. Without a tangible identity or reputation system, there could be no memory of problematic users which might encourage future acts of e-bile.

The final form of vernacular methods of regulation was post reporting. As mentioned earlier, this type of behavior was largely used with caution by respondents. Respondents mostly described it as a “last resort” type method for the most extreme types of e-bile (Such as death threats, bomb threats, suicide threats, and sexual harassment). I speculate that users expressed caution with this method as a way of maintaining vernacular influence over the local feeds as opposed to letting in a third-party operator intervene in local feed affairs. The efficiency of such a form of regulation was questioned as well, as it is unclear to respondents if human or algorithmic moderators review the content that they report. Judging from the small number of employees hired by Yik Yak, and the large amount of problematic content proliferating on feeds across North America, they likely did not have many human moderators to review most user reports. In order to deal with this problem of a relative inability to regulate its own feeds, Yik Yak had to look to other institutional methods to compensate for their lack of human labor.

7.2.2 Institutional forms of regulation

The institutions that facilitate and operate social media platforms have a broad reach of resources at their disposal to shape various aspects of a social media platform. When I refer to institutional strategies of regulation, I mean the methods that platform operators and their
designed software deploy to shape and regulate the content being posted to the various feeds of the platform. According to Julia Angwin (2017) from ProPublica, social media platforms are not responsible for censoring content in the US, she writes, “A 1996 federal law gave most tech companies, including Facebook, legal immunity for the content users post on their services”. This law has a very practical usage, it allowed web hosts to let users post content without having to “legally vet” each post before it was made public. Nonetheless, it is within a platform’s interest to moderate their feeds to attract users, investors, and revenue. Such forms of regulation are not monolithic; they rely on the participation of users to fully engage in vernacular strategies of regulation. At least, this is the case with Yik Yak as they did not have the labor power to take on moderation themselves. In terms of the logics that underscore Yik Yak’s institutional regulation, Yik Yak has a set of publicly available policies that describe how the company operates, what users must consent to, what constitutes as unauthorized activities, their codes of conduct, and their guidelines for law enforcement. Yik Yak also has a user-friendly draft that sums up their lengthily policy documents:

“You should NOT post content on Yik Yak that harms either the feed or your community.

For example:

1. DO NOT bully or specifically target others. This includes but is not limited to defaming, abusing, harassing, stalking, and threatening others.

2. DO NOT post other peoples phone numbers, street addresses, social media accounts, personally identifiable information, or content that is lewd, obscene, or offensive.

3. DO NOT post repetitive, spammy content.

If your yaks are repeatedly reported or flagged, you will be suspended”.

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As mentioned earlier, Yik Yak operators did not seem like they had access to hired or volunteer moderators to sift through reported content. As Angwin (2017) reported for ProPublica, large social media platforms like Facebook and Google, in the interest of moderating the content of their billions of users, hire third party “content reviewers” who sift through algorithmically sorted and user-reported content that allegedly breaches platforms policies. However, Yik Yak, being a much smaller start-up company, did not have the bulk of human labor to properly regulate all its feeds. They did hire several thousand part-time public engagement workers from university and college campuses across the United States and Canada, however, their job descriptions were to engage other students in “guerilla marketing” by setting up booths and giving out free branded swag (like posters and Yik Yak themed socks), not content moderation. Regardless, a human labor force of moderators does not always solve issues of platform vitriol. As Katz (2017) reported for Wired, the company Secret hired 90 full-time content moderators and were still having trouble properly regulating their feeds. It may be that in order to deploy an effective strategy of governmentality, operators and users must form contingent alliances in order to build systems of institutional and vernacular regulation.

Yik Yak relied heavily on algorithmic methods built into the software architecture of their platform to moderate the increasingly large amount of user-generated content. Dijck (2012) notes that due to the architecture of social media platforms, the internal interface, often made opaque to users, can shape and direct the flows of content in premeditated ways that moderate user-generated content and channel user interactions to conform with platform rules and protocols. This is what Neyland and Möllers (2017) called algorithmic association, the relational effects of human social actors interacting with algorithms to produce situated practices and processes. This is also a key feature of automated management, as algorithms are deployed with
limited human intervention to shape the regulatory features of a social media platform (Kitchin and Dodge 2011). Presumably, these algorithms were designed to comb through user-generated content to seek out problematic keywords and offensive images and then deploy punitive measures that would result in removing content or suspending users. The use of software to moderate user-generated content can only go so far, as such software is not well versed in situational or geographical context and semantics. One glaring point of contention that emerged from the data was one respondent’s disappointment that the algorithm could not judge the difference between LGBT* identifiers deployed as either insults or identities. The epistemologies and underlying philosophies that serve to inform how these algorithms sorted problematic content from acceptable content were never made available to the public. This is a typical in terms of corporately run social media platforms, Facebook, Google, and Twitter have similar opaque practices (Angwin 2017).

Another strategy of institutional regulation deployed by Yik Yak was the use of geo-fences to make Yik Yak services unavailable in certain pre-decided geographical locations. As Sarah Perez (2014) reported for TechCrunch, Yik Yak responded to mounting criticism concerning the proliferation of problematic content over its feeds by instigating a series of geo-fences that blocked access to the application in high schools across North America. The hope was that by blocking users under the age of 18 (the required age limit to use the application), there would be a reduction of problematic content that came from or targeted legal minors. Using a third-party application called Maponics, Yik Yak used previously gathered GPS data on the locations of high schools and private schools across the continent to set hundreds of thousands of geo-fences. However, this did not do much to prevent the proliferation of problematic content
over its feeds, though it did ban communities of minors who seemed to be at a higher risk of posting e-bile related content, as well as of being affected negatively by such content.

Finally, Yik Yak could facilitate legal intervention from policing or security agencies into the overall collective for the purposes of law enforcement. According to Yik Yak’s policies around police intervention into emergency issues, Yik Yak suggests that users report extreme content to emergency services directly. Yik Yak’s *Guidelines for Law Enforcement* document explains that police must send a request with a warrant or notification of an emergency to Yik Yak to authorize a release of non-public information. The document reads as follows:

“Yik Yak’s records include the following whenever a user interacts with the Yik Yak app:

- The date and time of the interaction with the app, beginning with the installation of the app;
- The IP address used to access the app;
- The GPS coordinates of the device used to access the app;
- The user-agent string associated with the device used to access the app; and
- The user’s handle.

Yik Yak will also require its users to provide a phone number when they first launch the app”.

Yik Yak also notes that it “retains different types of information for different time periods”, however, they do not specify the duration of those timelines. Yik Yak retains the rights to decide when to release non-public information. However, they have made it clear that they cooperate with legal authorities under legal circumstances. There has been an abundance of journalistic articles published reporting on death threats, bomb threats, and acts of hate crimes that have resulted in police intervention and arrests. Such a feature is incredibly important in digital spaces
that are characterized by constant e-bile, as it can hold users who post extremely violent content accountable to their actions. However, it also demonstrates the inability for Yik Yak’s operators to deploy its own strategies of regulation, Yik Yak delegates the responsibility to report extreme content to the user. In order for police intervention into illegal or dangerous content, a user must contact emergency services themselves. Institutional and vernacular regulatory strategies are not deployed by a mode of governmentality in a vacuum, they must form contingent and interconnected alliances in order to function effectively. And even then, alliances are subject to a great deal of friction.

7.2.3 Vernacular and institutional entanglements

As already mentioned, the deployment of a mode of platform governmentality is not monolithic. They are enacted in ways that are constantly incomplete and partial. In the end, there is still a significant presence of trolls, bullies, and bigots that provide a problematic issue that is difficult to resolve over any social media platform. Notably, at the same time, there is a significant presence of users with a variety of intentions that span from entertainment, therapy, and flight from social stigmatization. It is a diverse ecosystem of content emerging from the collision of several different communities at Queen’s University over a central feed. These diverse vernacular and institutional interests become entangled in practice, and this results in varying levels of governance that either seek to provoke e-bile for entertainment, to moderate and remove e-bile from the feeds, or to allow users to balance out e-bile by providing positive or counter user-generated content. It is notable that Yik Yak seems unable to handle the workload of moderating its many feeds by an institutionally-led model. This is unlike Google or Facebook who can afford to hire third-party companies to conduct their content moderation. Such a system relies on platform operators curating contingent alliances with a diverse set of human actors.
involved in vernacular social media practices. The contingency of these alliances can result in stabilization and acceptable user-generated content, or cultural friction as the various intentions of involved actors do not align. I refer to Anna Tsing’s (2005) concept of friction, or, “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (4). When Yik Yak operators download the responsibility of platform moderation to its diverse population of users, it results in a constant tug-of-war between users vying for control of the feeds content.

Yik Yak seems to have to rely on a user-led model of moderation where users must take on the responsibility of surveilling and policing their local feeds. This is in line with Andrejvich’s (2005; 2006) assertion that in an increasingly neo-liberal media ecosystem, users are responsible for dealing with their own risk and security. Andrejvich (2006) notes, “lateral monitoring takes place with an eye to the monitoring gaze of authorities who set the guidelines for subjects responsible for their own security—a responsibility that includes keeping an eye on those around them” (397). This phenomenon of lateral levels of moderation in highly branded and corporatized social media environments adds another layer to Terranova’s concept of free labor, where platform operators download responsibility of moderation to users with no compensation. Users take on the simultaneous responsibility of prosumption and moderation to which they are not afforded any rewards or incentives. And in doing so, vernacular regulatory strategies allow Yik Yak operators to save substantially on the financial burden of responsible platform moderation.

7.2.4 Mandatory Handles and disciplinary power

Prior to August 16th 2016, Yik Yak’s deployment of strategies of governmentality were largely inefficient to reign in control over the (un)disciplined user-generated content that its
anonymous features enabled. As speculated earlier, Yik Yak’s move to innovate towards mandatory user handles were very likely an attempt to deploy another method of regulation. By instituting pseudonymous identities, Yik Yak operators could construct an ad-hoc reputation system that introduced a measure of disciplinary power into the overall collective. The introduction of disciplinary power within the Yik Yak interface allowed for user accountability and responsibility in user-generated content. As mentioned earlier, lateral disciplinary power relies on the existence of a durable identity to attach a reputation to, so regardless of the platforms ephemerality, users would be able to remember the user handles of problematic trolls. From the user perspective, the dismantling of (un)disciplined performativity as a major platform feature alienated its user base by exposing them to lateral forms of surveillance. Most respondents were quite upset about the August 16th update as their intentions for using Yik Yak were to escape forms of identity labor and curation. Though these updates might have been intended to clean up the feed, they resulted in a platform identity crisis that rendered Yik Yak no different than already established pseudonymous applications like Reddit or IMGUR. Users were seeking to escape exposure to disciplinary power that characterized most conventional social media platforms. Such an innovation led to user exposure to a wider political economy of interiority.

7.3 The political economy of interiority

7.3.1 Exposing identities to others

As is made apparent in the results of this case study, surveillance was only meaningful at the vernacular level as far as it was connected to a user’s presentation of self and perceived reputation. Respondents were most concerned about exposure of their individuated identity at the
lateral level as it shaped how they could engage in identity labor through the curation or
exhibition of user-generated content that sought to present their varying senses of self.
Furthermore, in the process of curating a presentation of self, other users may take a curated
identity to be “authentic” or “true” which may result in economic, social, and/or cultural
consequences. It is useful to understand this phenomenon through Kristie Ball’s (2009) “political
economy of interiority”, defined as, “a process where an aspect of an individual’s personal or
private world becomes exposed to others, via a process of data representation, interpretation,
sharing through intermediaries within a broader surveillance assemblage” (643). Identities over
social media are exposed to various forms of surveillance and social control. Social control, from
this perspective, is disciplinary, as it makes use of surveillance and individuation to expose users
to the watching of friends, family, and strangers. Under such circumstances, users come to
regulate their own identities in relation to their imagined audiences.

As an anonymous social media platform, Yik Yak could facilitate a collective that evaded
lateral levels of surveillance. Due to this evasion of surveillance strategies, Yik Yak did not have
a full political economy of interiority. As is clear from Yik Yak’s various policy documents, Yik
Yak had the potential to conduct hierarchal surveillance to create data doubles of users for future
intervention. Yik Yak stored (meta)data, including: dates and times of platform interactions, IP
addresses, GPS coordinates, user-device identifiers, and user handles. The aggregation of all this
data carried the potential to build identifiable profiles of anonymous users. Respondents were
largely unconcerned with this level of surveillance and had recognized their use of the
application as a tacit acceptance to Yik Yak’s Terms of Service and Privacy Policy documents
(despite none of them ever reading the documents), thus legitimizing hierarchal surveillance.
Due to this apathy, hierarchal surveillance did not enact sufficient disciplinary power to mediate
the intensified presence of e-bile over Yik Yak’s feeds. This proved problematic for Yik Yak operators. When the operators enacted the August 16th update, they provided a platform architecture that could bring together a more complete surveillance assemblage that included the effects of both hierarchal and lateral surveillance. This robust political economy of interiority exposed the once anonymous users to intensified lateral surveillance through an ad-hoc reputation system, linkability between pseudonyms and content, linkability between a user’s posts, and platform surveillance of their browsing, interactions, and content. Arguably, this move failed to sufficiently address the issues of e-bile proliferating over Yik Yak’s feeds and served only to destabilize the Yik Yak collective by alienating its users.

7.3.2 The status of trolls and e-bile

Frank Pasquale (2015b), addressing the existence of highly contested digital spaces observes, “If we could easily escape commenting culture, we might accept its pathologies as one more cost of free speech. But we cannot, and its ubiquity demands a more active response. Trolls and commenters can harm their victims, crossing a line between speech and conduct” (2). And as both Emma Jane (2012) and Whitney Phillips (2015) elaborate, trolling and e-bile are often deployed in highly gendered and racialized ways that expose vulnerable populations to a disproportionate amount of Internet-based violence. These issues have always plagued social media platforms and do not seem to discriminate based on anonymity, pseudonymity, or the “real name” web. With this said, it cannot be ignored that anonymity and pseudonymity provide for conditions of intensified e-bile proliferating through unaccountable user-generated content. Pasquale (2015b) continues, “Complete anonymity can foster the out-of-control, zany atmosphere of boisterous message boards. But it also encourages disgusting, degrading, or illegal material” (2). However, as explored earlier, moving away from anonymous social media
platforms in general does little to address the issue, and may even cause more damage in dissolving safe spaces for those who use anonymity for reasons outside of trolling and e-bile. And as Hogan (2012) reminds his readers, the “real name” web that is curated by Facebook, Google, Instagram, and Twitter (among others) is also plagued by abusive content despite users being largely identifiable. There is no easy answer or solution to these issues.

As informed by the previous sections, the deployment of a mode of platform governmentality over social media platforms are a complex and multi-layered endeavor that emerge from the entanglements of institutional and vernacular regulatory strategies. For Yik Yak, this took the form of a user-led initiative where the platform operators downloaded the responsibility of mitigating risk and security to the users themselves. The Yik Yak operators provided the visual interface and protocols to build the scaffolding of regulatory features, but, for the most part, these features needed to be initially deployed by users. When these forms of governance failed, Yik Yak moved to get rid of anonymity all together. However, this move not only failed to sufficiently regulate the feeds, it also alienated and dissolved its user base. As it seems from the case study developed in this project, reliance on new measures of governmentality should have been experimented with before changing the applications identity as an anonymous social media platform.

The difficulties in addressing trolling and e-bile are rooted in its wider cultural foundations. Phillips (2015) writes, “Trolls may push [cultural] logics to their furthest and most grotesque extremes, but ultimately trolls’ actions are imbricated in the same cultural systems that constitute the norm—a point that casts as much aspersion on the systems themselves as it does on the trolls who harness and exploit them” (115). Phillip’s theorizing lines up with the Yik Yak feeds at Queen’s University in a lot of ways. First, due to the poetics of mediation in an
anonymous social media application, the ease to dehumanize a person is intensified due to a lack of a perceived identity. The distance between users have reached their furthest manifestation. Users, addressing the content of others, untethered from identity, can deploy e-bile in discussions, debates, and arguments without reflecting on the humanity of the original author.

Second, the political contours of trolling in an anonymous space are informed by contemporary institutional and vernacular politics. My fieldwork occurred during the Trump election when the polarization between the far-right and the far-left was becoming solidified in institutional discourse. The U.S. election was so contentious that debates were constantly ignited over Yik Yak’s feeds. In a recent report published by Marwick and Lewis (2017) for Data & Society, the authors detailed strategies employed by the far-right to amplify extremist views. They identified trolling as a fundamental strategy of media manipulation to amplify radical ideologies (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Much of the e-bile posted over Yik Yak during my participant observation were in line with extremist views such as those advocated by Men’s Rights Activists (MRA)\(^\text{13}\) and the “alt-right”\(^\text{14}\).

Phillips (2015) explains that the Internet as an open and free cyber-space carries with it trolling as an “unpleasant side effect”. The Internet’s openness allows for the thriving of trolling and the proliferation of e-bile due to a consistent lack of accountability and responsibility. This is most prolific in anonymous spaces like Yik Yak that are known to be radically free in terms of the ability to post \textit{any} content with minimal punitive risk. However, attempts to remove the

\(^{13}\) According to Marwick and Lewis (2017), Men’s Rights Activists (MRA) are a group of male activists seeking to reassert male dominance in contemporary society through advocating normative gender roles and the “traditional” family structure. In doing so, they fundamentally oppose feminists who they see as an enemy bent on dismantling male privilege.

\(^{14}\) According to Marwick and Lewis (2017), the “alt-right” was a term coined by the white supremacist ideologue Richard Spencer as a movement to split from conventional conservative politics. Usage of the “alt-right” has been deployed as a way to re-brand white supremacy and neo-Nazism to appeal to a “millennial” generation.
medium of such openness carry terrible consequences. As Phillips writes, “Attempt to smoke out the trolls... and you simultaneously smoke out the activists” (155). It must be noted that no social media platform is completely “open” as they are still subject to regulatory strategies or platform moderation. Even in forums like 4chan’s /b/ board and 8chan’s /pol/ board, there is still a significant presence of unwritten social norms that shape how users interact (Knuttila 2011). However, such forums have minimal content moderation and have become a space for some of the far-right’s most vocal racists and bigots (Marwick and Lewis 2017). To much openness on the Internet leads to hostile and toxic forum boards that intensify the degree of e-bile and offensive content. Phillips (2015) does suggest some potential solutions to such issues in the form of platform interventions. She observes, “These interventions can include amended Terms of Service agreements, efficient comment moderation protocols, and of course a liberal use of the banhammer (the act of banning specific posters from a given thread or from a site entirely based on username and/or IP address)” (156). In this way, tinkering with a social media platform’s mode of governmentality may be the most efficient way of mediating offensive and toxic user-generated content.

The case study I have developed thus far has demonstrated that within the realm of platform governmentality, respondent practices have tended towards an emphasis on “self-regulation” within respective geo-locational Yik Yak feeds. Respondents seemed to be cautious when it came to deploying any methods that would bring “outside” institutional influence. These results might indicate that to create a safer and cleaner Yik Yak feed, vernacular social actors should be enlisted as content moderators with special administrational powers within their feeds. This form of platform governance is not new, there have been many cyber-collectives that have relied on volunteer moderators to enforce a platforms policies and police user-generated content.
According to Angwin (2017), writing for *ProPublica*, in the 1990s America Online had convinced thousands of Internet users to volunteer as moderators for free access to their online services. And, many smaller forum and image boards have followed similar trends. An example of these strategies can be found on Reddit, a largely pseudonymous platform that consists of hundreds of thousands of topic and issue based subreddits (smaller forum boards within the platform). Each of these subreddits have their own moderators that assess and regulate user-generated content, subreddit rules, and Reddit *Terms of Service* and related policies.

As a part of Yik Yak was its focus on “hyper-local” anonymous communities, it might have been beneficial to hire local content moderators to moderate and administrate local Yik Yak feeds according to the *Terms of Service, Privacy Policy, Code of Conduct*, and local customs and conventions. Another potential avenue to sufficient regulatory strategies are the use of higher level software algorithms and machine learning technologies to moderate content universally, while gaining insight into contextual semantics. Katz (2017), observed in his article for *Wired* that Whisper, another anonymous social media platform, had deployed a complex system known as “The Arbiter” which searches and deletes content that breaches platform policies. However, Whisper also hired a “safety team” of over 130 people to address flagged content that The Arbiter might have missed. The only way to properly regulate online cyber-spaces is through careful calibration of labor power deployed to moderate local communities that pay attention to local, cultural, social, and political semantics and context. Safer anonymous social media platforms may be possible with the proper forms of content moderation, thus nullifying the need to enforce identity standards and deploy strategies located within the political economy of interiority. However, such calibrated regulatory strategies often lead to issues of unpaid labor,
volunteering for profit-based companies, and overworked and stressed out users due to mediating constant streams of awful content.

7.3.3 Controversy, free labour, and failure

Yik Yak, as explored earlier, was a start-up business that emerged from the work of university graduates, Brooks Buffington, Tyler Droll, and Douglas Warstler. They developed the application and marketed it to wealthy venture capitalists, “those people who put money into new firms” (Mosco 2005:26). Yik Yak’s economic structure is akin to other businesses in venture capitalism. As Mosco describes, “The visionary wins some venture capital funding, hires a public relations firm and goes after media attention” (26). In this case, the appeal to venture capitalists was immensely successful and Yik Yak’s founders secured up to 75 million in investments (Shieber 2014). However, with little returns on investments and no monetization in sight, Yik Yak had become emblematic of the failure of anonymous social media. One investor, Bill Gurley told Business Insider, “I think it’s going to be really hard to monetize. I think there’s potential that they are a false positive” (Shontell 2014). A few years later, Yik Yak has shut down after being center stage in several public controversies and unable to monetize its platform or its collected data.

Despite Yik Yak’s policies laying the legal scaffolding to collect, monetize, and trade user data, they were unable to put those policies into practice. This is not overly surprising, in an interview with TechCrunch’s “Disrupt NY 2015”, responding to a question inquiring about the company’s intentions to monetize, Buffington said, “These things linger in the back of our mind, but it’s not something we are looking to test at this point”. The success of surveillance capitalism runs on the successful enlistment of prosumers to engage in free, immaterial labor that gets translated into (meta)data to be sold or fed into a monetized advertisement system. In order for
value to be generated through data, that data must be put to work. Oftentimes, this means deploying targeted advertisements that are informed by inferences made off user-generated content and browsing habits (Cohen 2008). However, Yik Yak did not have a means to deploy targeted advertisements built into its interface. It can be speculated that Yik Yak’s failure to monetize may have been intensified by its inability to generate profit from the free labor of its user base.

The current political economy of social media platforms exists on a foundation of exploitation that is often blackboxed and made intentionally opaque in the name of corporate interest. Olivia Solon (2017), writing for The Guardian, illustrates the precarious and stressful lives of underpaid and overworked Facebook moderators. These content moderators comb through algorithmically or user flagged content to decide whether content is problematic or not. These employees spend their work hours skimming through violent content that often depicts executions, child molestation, terrorist propaganda, and instances of violent hate crimes. This has led to employees exhibiting psychological issues compounded by the company not providing mental health coverage in employee benefits. The journalist notes that Facebook is notoriously secretive about their labor issues, training, and moderation criteria. And as mentioned earlier, there is a long history of content moderators being exploited as unpaid volunteers for larger telecommunications corporations that spans the history of the Internet. While recognizing that anonymous social media platforms like Yik Yak must engage in more efficient ways of moderating content in their feeds, companies must not continue this problematic trend of free or precarious labor.

As Tiziana Terranova (2013) has pointed out, the Internet has thrived off the excess of “free labor”, a concept she defines as, “a feature of the cultural economy at large and an
important, yet unacknowledged, source of value in advanced capitalist societies” (33). As mentioned earlier, much of this free labor can be understood through Lazzorato’s (1996) concept of “immaterial labor”, the cultural production of content commodities that occur in the overall creative economy (in this case, within social media platforms). Lazzorato elaborates that immaterial labour is “the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” (1). He breaks this concept down to two components: informational content and cultural content. Informational content refers to the shift from physical labour to labour organized by computer and digital technology. Cultural content refers to the production of creative and artistic artifacts that were never considered in the realm of labour. This concept is incredibly useful for understanding the role of social media in capitalism. Immaterial labour is often expressed as creativity and play, but becomes the unrecognized exploitation of users as platform operators utilize their creative potential for capital gain. Terranova (2013) makes a point of emphasizing that, “free labor, however, is not necessarily exploited labor” (47). This point has been emphasized by respondents who believed that their immaterial contributions to the platform constituted a fair trade for “free” access to platform services. However, on Yik Yak, users engage vernacularly in the labor of moderating content for Yik Yak and are not only accessed for their “free labor”, they also have no access to appropriate resources to properly conduct platform moderation. Meanwhile, Yik Yak operators exploit vernacular methods without taking on the financial burden of hiring professionals with access to appropriate health care to mediate the burden on an employee’s mental health. Yik Yak tacitly downloads unrecognized free labor on to its user base, whether those users consent to such practices or not.

Yik Yak, despite its many strategies to respond to the public controversies that developed around it, was unable to recover from the damages it incurred when it moved from anonymity to
This failure was likely due to two major aspects: public controversy and lack of monetization. Public controversies have immense consequences, as the friction between social actors and their diverse ideologies proliferates, controversies can cause a collective to destabilize and collapse if consensus becomes impossible. In the case of Yik Yak, operators were never able to satisfy the mounting criticism concerning the presence of trolling and e-bile in their feeds. When Yik Yak found themselves in the position to mandate user handles, they opened an even larger controversy that led the company to fold. Furthermore, Yik Yak was never able to monetize their platform. Though the reasons for this remain a trade secret, it is worth speculating that the data of anonymous social actors is not readily usable in the capitalist market. Instead, it must be deployed and put to work in a practical sense in order to generate value.

Free labor seems like a necessary economic problematic of social media. With that said, Terranova (2013) suggests two conditions for the “liberation of free labor” in cyber-space: (1) a portion of the profits earned through the monetization of a user’s free and immaterial labor should be contributed back to the “commons” and (2) social media platforms should be “deprivatized” and put into the realm of public control. Though some might think of this as a radical political position, it is an enticing conclusion. As social media platforms have become increasingly embedded in our day-to-day forms of communication and as they are propped up by the immaterial labor of its users in terms of the monetization of user-generated content and the vernacular and institutional forms of content moderation. As social media constitute an important medium of social and cultural capital, they should be brought under the public as an essential public service. It must be noted that in the current neo-liberal climate, such a shift in the political economy of social media is unlikely (if not impossible). However, in regards to anonymous social media platforms, so far, they have not been able to generate sufficient profits to be of
interest to the capitalist market. This opens an opportunity for open-source, publicly funded anonymous social media emerging from the grassroots and owned collectively. Alternative social media platforms, like Diaspora and Ello, have attempted to construct open source and decentralized platforms that did not rely on for-profit interests or surveillance to keep the platform operational. However, as they were in competition with the already established and popular Facebook, they largely failed to build a user base. This is not the case for anonymous social media platforms. In the absence of significant competition, there is a chance that an open-source, collectively owned, and anti-surveillance anonymous social media platform could carry the potential to become popular. With that said, there are no easy solutions to the problems that have been highlighted in this case study, and more research needs to be conducted to sift through strategies of reclaiming social media platforms in the interest of the commons. As well as, more scholarly attention given to the realm of platform governmentality in terms of ethnographic accounts of trolling, e-bile, and other problematic digital vitriol.
Chapter 8

Conclusion

This project was an ethnographic endeavor at creating a case-study of the Yik Yak platform at Queen’s University to explore perceptions and practices around anonymity and surveillance. I accomplished this through a combination of twelve semi-structured intensive interviews, a document analysis of journalistic and policy-related documents related to Yik Yak, and a digital participant observation of local Yak feeds. I explicitly used the public controversies emerging around Yik Yak as an access point to studying otherwise blackboxed dynamics of identity, discipline, and platform governmentality. In short, my larger goal was to understand how anonymity was performed, how anonymous regimes stabilized, re-stabilized, and through controversy destabilized, and how this constellation of regulatory features fit within a larger political economy of Yik Yak.

The findings of this research indicate that anonymity over social media platforms are a performative endeavor that is interconnected with an overall project of the presentation of self. Yik Yak’s platform catered to a form of identity construction that I called (un)disciplined performativity. This theorizing emerged through an extension of Foucault’s (1991; 1995; 2015) usage of disciplinary power and governmentality and Butler’s (1990; 2009) usage of performativity as informed by the empirical data and analysis within this case study. (Un)disciplined performativity operates by untethering a user from the labor involved in curating an identity over social media platforms while exposed to forms of lateral surveillance and disciplinary power. This allows users to perform renditions of their identity while not having to contemplate how such performative acts would reflect on their overall reputation. Such (un)disciplined acts typically took the shape of four different themes: entertainment, trolling and
e-bile, caretaking, and the flight from social stigmatization. This phenomenon became clear when asking respondents about their perceptions of lateral surveillance. Respondents typically carried significant concern about being watched constantly by friends, family, and strangers as they engage in “real name” social media like Facebook and Instagram. On Yik Yak, respondents felt comfortable posting content that they would not want associated with their overall reputation.

However, even while users were (un)disciplined, they were still subject to deployment of modes of governmentality that constituted situated institutional and vernacular regulatory strategies to govern the user-generated content in Yak’s feeds. This took the shape of Kitchin and Dodge’s (2011) concept of “automated management”. Regulatory strategies deployed by social actors exhibited intentions to prevent or proliferate problematic content over Yik Yak’s various feeds. Some actors sought to make the platform safer for all users by downvoting, debating, and reporting acts of trolling and e-bile. At the same time, other actors sought to keep trolling and e-bile present on the feeds to watch the arguments and controversy as a form of entertainment. In practice, institutional and vernacular social actors were entangled in the work of regulating the platforms feeds and thus were exposed to a small measure of discipline. However, such entanglements of institutional and vernacular interests were largely user-led at the vernacular level. In other words, in most cases users were responsible for initiating the platforms regulatory features. If the voting system failed to remove problematic content, users would have to report it to Yik Yak through the visual interface, or in extreme circumstances, call the emergency services. This mode of governmentality is propped up by a form of free labor in the sense that Yik Yak has downloaded the responsibility of platform moderation to its users, with little resources or benefits. As a result, Yik Yak had been able to save financial resources by not
employing professional content moderators. However, despite the varying intentions involved in Yik Yak’s platform governmentality, there were still a significant presence of trolls and problematic content that carried consequences for both the user and the platform.

In response to the growing public pressure to clean up its feed, Yik Yak operators deployed an update on August 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2016 that enforced mandatory user handles which effectively dismantled its feature of anonymity. Such a move dissipated the ability for users to engage in (un)disciplined performativity as it intensified disciplinary power through the introduction of a pseudonymous reputation system. Pseudonyms simultaneously introduced lateral surveillance and individuation that differentiated users in a way that held them accountable for their content. This opened a destructive controversy within the Yik Yak platform as users were alienated by Yik Yak’s mandatory user handles. This alienation was due to Yik Yak changing the fundamental communicative structure that gave the application appeal to such a wide user-base in the first place. Unable to monetize and quickly losing its user base, the Yik Yak operators pulled the plug on the application in May, 2017. For much of its four years in operation, Yik Yak was incredibly popular across North America and was used by students in virtually every university and college campus. Despite Yik Yak’s failure, its popularity does demonstrate that there is a social and cultural interest in anonymous social media that is now lost in the absence of a viable platform.

As made clear by danah boyd (2011), anonymous and pseudonymous platforms in cyber-space are an essential quality of the Internet for many social actors. boyd points out that many arguments deployed against anonymous and pseudonymous platforms equate the lack of a reputation system with disingenuous and deceitful user intentions. She asserts, “The assumption baked into this is that the observer is qualified to actually assess someone’s reputation. All too
often, and especially with marginalized people, the observer takes someone out of context and judges them inappropriately based on what they get online”. There is no “universal context” from which an observer can make an ethical decision to police another user’s identity. As boyd elaborates, this dynamic of reputation systems typically results in privileged social actors policing the performative acts of marginalized social actors. Furthermore, as outlined by my case study, in most conventional social media platforms, users are made to engage in the laborious curation of their identity which is shaped and disciplined by lateral forms of surveillance deployed from a user’s friends, family, and strangers. To be (un)disciplined, for some, is the only way that they can practice their “authentic” self. The loss of a social media platform like Yik Yak represents a profound loss in the ability to enact (un)disciplined selves in a world that is saturated with lateral surveillance and a pervasive political economy of interiority.

However, it is undeniable that anonymous social media entails the inevitable existence of trolling and the deployment of e-bile. As explored by scholars like Jane (2012), Coleman (2014), Phillips (2015), and Marwick and Lewis (2017), acts of trolling are an inevitable, if not ugly, background scenery of the Internet. Though it may be inevitable, it does not mean it should remain unaddressed. As pointed out by Phillips, instead of focusing on getting rid of mediums that intensify trolling practices, there should be a renewed focus on more efficient and ethical forms of platform moderation. As explored in this case study, respondents largely expressed an interest in vernacular led moderation of the Yik Yak’s feeds they felt they belonged to. However, integrating this form of moderation into the visual interface (much like Reddit’s moderation mechanics) would require care so not to proliferate issues associated with free and voluntary labor for profitable corporations. An integrated entanglement of algorithmic content flagging and
human verification would provide a system of platform governmentality that would account for contextual and semantic nuance.

Finally, as suggested by Terranova (2013), a liberation of free labor over social media should take the duel priority of returning a measure of profit back to the commons as a contribution to the value generated by the free labor. As well as, a “deprivatization” of key social media platforms to a publicly owned communications utility. In a time when social media platforms are seamlessly embedded in our means of communications and our social, cultural, and economic capital, such platforms should not be trusted to the private sector looking out for the sole interests of shareholders and profit margins. I recognize that this shift would be accompanied by a variety of problematic issues (surveillance by the state being one of them), however, it might be argued that the public domain, subject to democratic rule, might provide a more manageable way of making change and ethically managing the data of a user base.

This case-study has revealed some theoretical textures of anonymity, pseudonymity, and identity over anonymous social media platforms. However, there were some significant limitations in this project. First, due to the situated quality of the interviews and participant observation research, this research is not generalizable to a wider realm of anonymity. Second, due to constraints on time and resources, I was unable to do a full content analysis on the ethnographic data collected through screenshots of user interaction on the platform itself. With more time and resources to analyze this data, there would have been a richer ethnographic texture to theorizing (un)disciplined performativity in action. Finally, and most importantly, I was unable to get into contact with Yik Yak operators in order to get a sense of their data collection and storage practices, their political economic well-being, their content moderation practices, and the logics behind their platform algorithms. Though analysis of vernacular
practices are important, the overall case study is patchy and incomplete without being balanced with an analysis of institutional practices.

However, with that said, the case-study developed in this project does provide a theoretical lens for future research into anonymity over social media platforms. (Un)disciplined performativity provides a theoretical platform to understand the novel forms of performative acts that emerge when users feel as if they were not being watched. The most urgent research on anonymity and pseudonymity surrounds the proliferation of trolling, e-bile, and gendered and racialized Internet violence over conventional social media platforms. With the emergence of the “alt-right”, political media manipulation, and the amplification of extremist ideologies within normative social groups, it is urgent that social scientists, cyber-activists, IT professionals, and journalists learn to counteract such toxic behavior in frequented online spaces. Anonymity and pseudonymity are essential performative strategies in a society under the constant duress of hierarchal and lateral forms of surveillance. In a time when corporate entities are trying to make the web transparent for users (and opaque for themselves)—the ability to act under alternative or absent identities are an important strategy for survival and resistance. However, the presence of intensified trolling and e-bile only serve to silence those voices and alienate the already alienated.
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8.1 Journalistic


8.2 Academic


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Appendix A

General Research Ethics Board (GREB) Clearance

August 04, 2016

Mr. Kyle Curlew
Mater's Student
Department of Sociology
Queen's University
Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Ref #: GSCO-135-16; Romeo # 6918997
Title: "GSCO-135-16 The Myth of Anonymity: Surveillance, Social Control, and the Political Economy of Yik Yak"

Dear Mr. Curlew,

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GSCO-135-16 The Myth of Anonymity: Surveillance, Social Control, and the Political Economy of Yik Yak" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCP GS (2014)) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (Article 6.14) and Standard Operating Procedures (401.001), your project has been cleared for one year. You are reminded of your obligation to submit an annual renewal form prior to the annual renewal due date (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/trio/aqmon.html, click on "Events"; under "Create New Event", click on "General Research Ethics Board Annual Renewal/Closure Form for Cleared Studies"). Please note that when your research project is completed, you need to submit an Annual Renewal/Closure Form in Romeo/aq indicating the project is completed so that the file can be closed. This should be submitted at the time of completion; there is no need to wait until the annual renewal due date.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at http://www.queensu.ca/trio/aqmon.html, click on "Events"; under "Create New Event", click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form"). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researchers or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To submit an amendment form, access the application by at http://www.queensu.ca/trio/aqmon.html, click on "Events"; under "Create New Event", click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for the Amendment of Approved Studies". Once submitted, these changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Ms. Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Sincerely,

John Freeman, Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

C: Dr. David Murzanki Wood, Supervisor, Chair, Unit REB
  Ms. Michelle Underhill, Dept. Admin.
Appendix B

Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics

Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Kyle Curlew

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of Issue: 3 April, 2016
Appendix C

Letter of Information

Letter of Information


This research is being conducted by Kyle Curlew under the supervision of Dr. David Murakami-Wood, in the Department of Sociology at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario.

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen's policies.

What is this study about? The purpose of this research is to understand how human intensions can be shaped or influenced by computer software in social media applications. This study will explore user perceptions and practices of the pseudo-anonymous Yik Yak mobile phone application by studying the culture of Yik Yak. Through studying interviews with users, the researcher will attempt to understand the politics of social media and surveillance from the user perspective. There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated with this study.

Is my participation voluntary? Yes. Although it be would be greatly appreciated if you would answer all material as frankly as possible, you should not feel obliged to answer any material that you find objectionable or that makes you feel uncomfortable. You may also withdraw at any time up until the time of publication in May 2017 without any prejudice to you or services you might already be receiving. In order to withdraw from this project, you should email or call Kyle Curlew or his supervisor, at the contact information below. Your data will be removed and deleted from the project.

What will happen to my responses? We will keep your responses confidential. Only Kyle Curlew and Dr. David Murakami-Wood will have access to the initial produced data. All data containing personal
identifiable information will be stripped of identifiable data. Once the data has been fully anonymized it will be stored in the Queen’s University archive and available to the public. The voice recordings will be stored securely for a minimum of five years. The data will be published in my master’s thesis, and may also be published in professional journals, compiled in academic books, or presented at scientific conferences, but any such presentations will never breach individual confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.

**Will I be voice recorded?** This interview will be voice recorded to ensure that the researcher can accurately understand, analyze, and present the data. The audio recordings will be transcribed and stored in a safe server.

**Will I be compensated for my participation?** Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and will not be compensated monetarily.

**What will my participation in this research project involve?** Your participation will involve collaboration in an interview that will be between 45 and 60 minutes. This will involve a series of open-ended questions that are designed to understand your experiences with everyday uses of *Yik Yak*. Topics that will be covered in this interview are: (1) intentions and perceptions of posts on *Yik Yak* newsfeed; (2) preferences for up-voting and down-voting; motivations for using the platform; (3) interactions with other users outside of the platform; (4) issues experienced on *Yik Yak*; knowledge of *Privacy Policy* and *Terms of Use*; (5) and knowledge of surveillance practices.

**Is there any benefit to my participation?** Yes, you may benefit from knowing that you are contributing to advancing knowledge in Sociology. The results of this project will also seek to direct public policy and contribute to privacy advocacy groups.

**What if I have complaints or concerns?** Any questions about study participation may be directed to Kyle Curlew at 15kjc1@queensu.ca or 613-888-4492. You may also contact the project supervisor, Dr. David Murakami-Wood at dmw@queensu.ca and 613-533-6000, ext. 74490. Any ethical complaints or
concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081.

Again, thank you. Your interest in participating in this research study is greatly appreciated.
Appendix D

Interview Guide

INTRODUCTION:

Good afternoon ___________, thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my research.

This research will entail some loosely structured questions about your use and perceptions of Yik Yak and social media in general. It will take roughly forty five minutes to an hour to complete.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. At any time in the research process, you can choose not to consent to participation and I will return all data without consequence. It is also worth noting that your identity will remain confidential, only known to myself and my supervisor. I will assign pseudonyms to all participants. Do you have any questions? [Provide answers]. Do you consent to participation in this research?

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS:

[Throwaway]: Where are you from?

[Throwaway]: What brought you to Kingston?

[Throwaway]: What is your age?

[Throwaway]: What kind of mobile phone do you use?

[Throwaway]: Do you miss your home?

[Throwaway]: Do you use Yik Yak in your home town?

INTENTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF POSTS ON YIK YAK NEWSFEED:

[Essential]: How would you describe Yik Yak?

[Probing]: How often do you use Yik Yak?

[Probing]: What times of day do you typically use Yik Yak?
[Essential]: What kinds of Yaks do you typically post?

[Probing]: Do you often get up-votes?

[Essential]: What do you think of the use of anonymous posting in Yik Yak?

[Essential]: What are your thoughts on the most recent update to Yik Yak that removed the ability to be anonymous?

[Probing]: Did you use your real name for your user tag?

[Probing]: What do you think about the lack of a “hot” posts feature?

[Essential]: Have you ever been prompted by the platform for posting inappropriate posts such as pictures of people’s faces?

[Essential]: Have you posted your opinion of the new updates to the Yik Yak feed?

[Probing]: What’s your current Yakarma?

[Probing]: Have you read posts that left you creeped out or angry?

[Essential]: Did you connect your social media links to you Yik Yak?

[Essential]: Do you reply to posts?

[Extra]: Which do you do more, post content to Yik Yak or watch the posts of others?

[Essential]: What kind of photo did you use for the new profile feature?

PREFERENCES FOR UP-VOTING AND DOWN-VOTING:

[Essential]: What is the most typical post that you would down vote?

[Probing]: Would you down vote people who broke anonymity or identified others?

[Probing]: Can you describe how you typically feel when you are given an up vote?

[Essential]: Seeing a type of post that is often down voted—do you think you would be less likely to post that?

[Probing]: Can you describe how you typically feel when you are given a down vote?
[Probing]: Does that feeling escalate when you have several down votes on one post?

[Probing] Can you describe your most popular post and the nature of some of the responses?

INTERACTIONS WITH USERS OUTSIDE OF THE PLATFORM:

[Essential]: Do you bring up interactions on Yik Yak to your peers in person?

[Essential]: Do you know many other Yik Yak users?

[Probing]: Would you ever meet up with someone from Yik Yak?

[Essential]: How do you typically speak about Yik Yak when you are not using it?

[Essential]: Would you ever tell people that you use Yik Yak?

ISSUES EXPERIENCED ON YIK YAK:

[Essential]: Have you ever been prompted for disobeying Yik Yak code of conduct?

[Essential]: If Yik Yak sent you a warning for misuse, how would you react?

[Probing]: How do you react when you witness another user breaking Yik Yak rules in a post?

[Essential] Have you noticed any bugs on the Yik Yak platform?

[Essential]: Have you been the target of bullying from anonymous users?

[Probing]: Did you report the bullying to Yik Yak?

THOUGHTS ON PLATFORM INNOVATION:

[Throwaway]: In your opinion, does Yik Yak develop new features frequently?

[Essential]: What is your initial take on new features on Yik Yak? (New features: Web site, pseudonyms, sending favorite yaks, removal of anonymity, link ups to social media, removal of ‘hot’ yak feature)

[Essential]: Is anonymity a feature of the application that is important to you?

[Probing]: Did you follow the advertisement to see the innovation?
[Essential]: Have you considered using a different anonymous social media application? If so, which ones?

[Probing]: Have you used any other anonymous social media platforms like Whisper?

[Essential]: Would you prefer that users interacted with pseudonyms?

[Probing]: Have you left any reviews on the application?

[Probing]: Have you ever read any blog posts on the Yik Yak website?

[Essential]: If you disagreed with an innovation of the product, how would you tell the platform? Say through an app store review?

KNOWLEDGE OF SURVEILLANCE PRACTICES:

[Throwaway]: What kind of personal information did you provide Yik Yak when you created your account?

[Essential]: Have you read the ‘Terms of Use’ or ‘Privacy Policy’ for Yik Yak?

[Essential]: What does the term anonymous mean to you?

[Essential]: How anonymous are you on Yik Yak?

[Probing]: Do you think people are more inclined to tell the unfiltered truth when they are anonymous?

[Essential]: What kind of information do you think Yik Yak collects from your account?

[Essential]: Do you know what Yik Yak does with your information?

[Essential]: How would you define surveillance in terms of social media?

[Probing]: Have you ever read Yik Yak’s rules?

[Essential]: Do you consider Yik Yak’s use of your information a breach of your privacy?

[Essential]: Can you be both anonymous and surveilled at the same time while you browse Yik Yak?
KNOWLEDGE OF ECONOMIC STRUCTURE:

[Essential]: What do you know about how Yik Yak earns an income?

[Essential]: Do you think it is a fair trade to offer you a free service for commercial use of your data?

[Essential]: Do you think that Yik Yak should be held accountable to the responsible use of your personal information?

[Essential]: Is there anything concerning the use of your information that would cause you to leave Yik Yak?

CONCLUSION:

Thank you for your participation in my research—the information you have provided me will be very beneficial to my work. Is there anything that you would like to share with me that couldn’t fit under any of the questions I asked? As I am analyzing user posts, I was wondering if you would be comfortable sending me some screen shots of Yaks you have posted from your Yik Yak history? If yes, than please send it to the phone number or email address that is on your ethics form when you have the time. Thank you.
# Appendix E

## Thematic Coding Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytic Categories</th>
<th>Codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surveillance</td>
<td>Lateral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hierarchal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity</td>
<td>(un)disciplined Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trolling &amp; Bullying</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual Content</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playful</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Caretaking and Advice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oppression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performativity and Self</td>
<td>(un)disciplined performativity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity Maintenance and Celebrity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disciplinary Power and Precarity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Type of Interaction</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boredom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regulation and Social Control</td>
<td>Vernacular or Informal Control</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional or Formal Control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yik Yak Political Economy and Branding</td>
<td>Branding Image</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obfuscation</td>
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<td>Alternative Applications</td>
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The Myth of Anonymity Coding Chart
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Importance of Application Popularity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Privacy and user perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity definitions and perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveillance definitions and perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy definitions and perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use/Privacy Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous while surveilled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>