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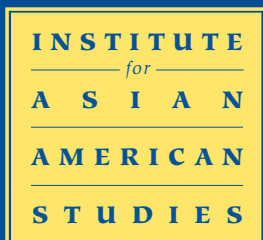
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A N O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R

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Sense of Belonging Among  
Asian American College Students**

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An Occasional Paper

INSTITUTE FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

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Dr. Gin's scholarly interests include racialized hostility on social media, the Asian American college student experience, and assessment in higher education. He has published articles in *Journal of College Student Development*, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Education*, *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, and is a contributing author in multiple books including: *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Higher Education: Research and Perspectives on Identity, Leadership, and Success*, and *Technology and Engagement: Making Technology Work for First Generational College Students*.

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*The views contained in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily of the Institute for Asian American Studies.*







# Racialized Aggressions and Sense of Belonging Among Asian American College Students

Kevin J. Gin

## Abstract

This naturalistic, qualitative inquiry explored how Asian American college students' encounters with racialized aggressions on social media impacted their sense of belonging at a predominately White institution (PWI). Participants indicated that encounters with racism on social media, especially on the anonymous mobile app Yik Yak, engendered racial distrust, and alienation from their institution. These findings suggest the virtual components of campus culture play a critical role in determining how Asian American college students feel they are welcomed, valued, and included at a PWI.

## Introduction

Racialized hate on social media has become increasingly common on college campuses, and the Pew Research Center (2017) has reported that "...harassment is now a feature of life online..." (p. 3). Racism has emerged on a number of social media platforms across universities, and include the use of racial slurs (Kerr, 2018), racially charged diatribes (Schackner, 2019), and students appearing in blackface (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). Racialized incidents on social media have

drawn the attention of scholars (Cabellon & Junco, 2015; Gin, Martínez-Alemán, Rowan-Kenyon, & Hottell, 2017) because online communications are now understood to influence and shape today's campus culture (Martínez-Alemán & Wartman, 2009). Minikel-Lacocque (2012) has suggested the term "racialized aggression" be used to represent these previously described "overt and intentional" acts of racism (p. 455), and this framework has been confirmed by Gin and associates (2017) as appropriate to capture online acts of racial hostility.



Given this rise in online hostility, scholars have emphasized the need to more thoroughly comprehend how racialized aggressions on social media shape college student experiences (Gin et al., 2017). Although early studies have suggested consequences such as lowered self-esteem (Tynes, Umaña-Taylor, Rose, Lin, & Anderson, 2012), and increased levels of online stress (Tynes, Rose, & Markoe, 2013) manifest for students of color who encounter racialized aggressions on social media, little is known how online racism impacts sense of belonging for racially minoritized student populations.

Sense of belonging has been identified as an important aspect of the higher education experience because students who satisfy a feeling of belonging tend to exhibit higher-order needs such as the creation of knowledge and self-authorship (Strayhorn, 2012). A positive sense of belonging has also been correlated with students reporting an optimistic perception of the campus environment (Strayhorn), but scholars have indicated that non-White populations such as Asian Americans tend to report low levels of belonging in higher education (Maramba & Museus, 2012).

Asian Americans are often the target of racialized aggressions on social media, and research that examines the impact of this racialized community's encounter with online hostility are scant. An initial investigation by Museus and Troung (2013) confirmed that online environments (e.g. message boards) harbor extensive and regular racism toward Asian American college

students. High profile incidents of racism on social media have also been documented and include a racially themed party titled "Asia Prime" advertised on Facebook at Duke University (Kingsdale, 2013), a viral YouTube video of former UCLA student Alexandra Wallace denigrating Asian students in the library (Lovett, 2011), and hostile remarks expressed toward Asian students on Twitter at Ohio State University and Michigan State University (Redden, 2012). Despite the prevalence of these incidents, researchers have yet to address how racism on social media impacts the ways Asian American college students feel like they belong to a campus community.

This current study addresses the previously identified gap in the literature by investigating how encounters with racialized aggressions on social media shape the ways Asian American students perceive how they are supported, connected, accepted, valued, and respected and how they matter (Strayhorn, 2012) at a predominantly White institution (PWI). The ubiquitous nature of social media in higher education, the frequency of racialized hate dispensed on social media on college campuses, the need to advance research regarding Asian American college students, and the lack of knowledge regarding the ways sense of belonging is affected by online environments guided the research question of this current study, which was "How do encounters with racialized aggressions impact Asian American students' sense of belonging?"



## Background Literature

### Asian American College Students

Asian Americans are one of the fastest expanding populations in the United States, and currently number over 22 million individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The U.S. Census uses the term “Asian American” as a broad racialized term that encompasses a number of ethnic populations from Asia, including individuals from South Asia and Southeast Asia. Pacific Islanders are not typically included within this racialized designation, although there are cultural similarities between Asian Americans and populations in the Pacific Islands (Fong & Mokuau, 1994). Asian Americans are a rapidly expanding student population within colleges and universities (National Center on Education Statistics, 2011), yet this population is often rendered the forgotten minority (Lo, 2003) and are not regularly emphasized in the discourse of race within higher education (Museus, 2008; 2009).

This lack of visibility within research is in spite of evidence that indicates Asian American college students are subjected to regular encounters of racialized hate, and frequently report negative campus experiences (Museus & Truong, 2009; Sue et al., 2009; Teranishi et al., 2002). While scholarship about racism on college campuses tend to strictly emphasize Black and Latino/a student experiences (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Ramirez, 2014; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011), racial climate studies have been critiqued because they tend to neglect the unique racialization

that Asian American students face on college campuses (Chang, 1999). The inability to specifically focus on the lived experiences of Asian American students has further concealed the oppression faced by this racialized population in higher education today (Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2002). It is because of these sentiments that researchers have been encouraged to focus on Asian American perspectives within research agendas and emerging scholarship (Museus, 2009).

### Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging refers to the ways a student perceives how they are included within a campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This phenomenon has largely been understood to encompass emotional, and psychosocial outcomes that include feelings of connectedness, inclusion, being valued, and reciprocity of respect within a community (Goodenow, 1993; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Individuals who feel like they do not belong often express that they do not see themselves as a central part of a campus community, and that they are alienated to the margins of an institutional culture (Schlossberg, 1989).

Although there exist a widespread number of definitions within the literature, Strayhorn (2012) has provided the most thorough recognition of how belonging encompasses the broad range of emotional and cognitive outcomes that are pertinent to higher education. Strayhorn defined sense of belonging as “...perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of



connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)” (p. 3).

Educators have been invested in advancing positive sense of belonging because it has been shown that students who feel like they belong are more likely to persist in college (Johnson et al., 2007), exhibit elevated happiness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and report affirmative psychological wellbeing (Hagerty, Lynch-Bauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992).

A number of factors have been correlated with increasing a student’s belonging within the physical campus setting. Constructive factors that strengthen belonging include social involvement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005), cross cultural communication (Maramba & Museus, 2012), and favorable interactions with faculty (Freeman, Anderson, & Jensen, 2007). Consequential factors that decrease a student’s belonging include encounters with racial hostility, racial prejudice, and racial bias (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007), but these indicators have not yet been examined within the context of social media.

## Social Media

Social media such as Facebook (social networking), Snapchat (ephemeral messaging), Instagram (photo sharing), and Tinder (mobile dating) are pervasive on today’s college campuses (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lehnart, & Madden 2015). Students have near constant access to these online

platforms through phones, tablet devices, and laptop computers (Junco, 2014). The nature of social media’s presence is so ubiquitous within today’s institutions that these mobile technologies are now understood to be the gatekeepers of campus life (Dalton & Crosby, 2013).

Students rarely differentiate online experiences from face-to-face encounters because social media is seen as an extension of the regular communications that are central to an institution’s culture (Junco, 2005). These online interactions manifest themselves in various forms, including media sharing, individual/group messaging, browsing, or posting/tweeting on Facebook and Twitter (Head, 2016; Karapanos, Teixeira, & Gouveia, 2016; Lenhart, 2015). College students also exhibit a spectrum of engagement and time spent dedicated to each of these social media activities. For instance, Strayhorn (2012a) has noted that students of color use social media more than their White peers, women are more active online than men, and students who reside on campus are more frequent users of social media than their off-campus counterparts.

Connections to the virtual components of campus through social media have facilitated a number of constructive outcomes for college students including increased engagement via civic participation (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), greater exposure to co-curricular activities (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012), frequent connections to peers (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), facilitation of student integration (Daugherty, Broghammer, DeCosmo,



Giberson & Birnbaum, 2015), and increased student satisfaction (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). Social media unquestionably play a role in facilitating affirmative student experiences in the digital age of the 21st century college campus (Cabellon & Junco, 2015).

Conversely, social media have permitted users to dispense offensive communications through online sites and virtual apps (Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013). The Pew Research Center (2017) has reported that roughly 40% of American adults have been the target of online threats or harassment, and that those hostilities were frequently dispensed by anonymous perpetrators. The rise of anonymous social media has become especially troublesome because anonymity has been found to be associated with extensive inflaming behaviors (Joinson, 2001). These offensive communications include the promotion of racialized and gendered hostility, graphic usage of profanity, and the endorsement of violence toward others (Black, Mezzina, & Thompson, 2016).

The encounter of online harassment is also suggested to produce a range of concerning psychological stresses, including fearing for one's personal safety, avoidance of visiting the online locations where the hostile incidents occurred, and exhibiting high levels of anxiety (Pew Research Center, 2017). While limited research has been advanced regarding the encounter of racialized aggressions on social media by college students, initial studies have indicated that experiences of online racism engender racial battle fatigue, cultural distrust, and negative perceptions of campus climate

(Gin et al., 2017; Museus & Truong, 2013; Tynes & Markoe, 2010). The nature of these outcomes is concerning for college educators, and scholars have affirmed the need for continued investigation into how racially hostile interactions on social media shape today's student experiences (Rowan-Kenyon & Martinez-Aleman, 2016).

## Methods

A naturalistic, qualitative inquiry that was both phenomenological and ethnographic in nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) was employed to address the research question of this study. Pseudonyms were utilized for both the research site and all participants. A qualitative inquiry was appropriate for this study given that online encounters of racialized aggressions have not been thoroughly examined, sense of belonging is a complex variable that is not easily measured, and the voices of Asian Americans are not regularly uncovered in higher education.

## Site and Participant Selection

The site of this study was East Oak University, a religiously affiliated, residential PWI in the northeast United States. The total student population was approximately 9,000 individuals. The undergraduate student population was comprised of 53% women, and 43% men. Seventy percent of undergraduate students on campus identified as White, and 30% of students identified as a racialized minority. Ten percent of the total undergraduate student population identified as Asian American according to data sourced from the university's Office of Institutional



Research when this study occurred in 2016. This campus was identified as an appropriate site of study because institutions with demographic profiles that are similar to East Oak have been documented as locations where racialized aggressions are likely to manifest (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

The prevalence of racial tension at East Oak further justified the institution as a relevant site for this study to occur. As had occurred on other campuses nationwide at the time of this study, the anonymous social media app, Yik Yak, stirred controversy at East Oak. Yik Yak (which is now defunct) was a mobile social media app that allowed individuals within close proximity to one another to post anonymous messages (called “Yaks”) for others to view and comment on as part of an interactive online forum. These forums could be sorted by specific college campuses, so users could identify the geographic location and school of where Yaks originated from, but lacked the ability to identify the persons who authored the Yaks (Koenig, 2014).

Numerous incidents invoking racial slurs and hatred directed at Asian, Black, and other non-White identities were prevalent on East Oak’s Yik Yak feed before and during the time of this study. In particular, a running thread about the “[East Oak] Asian” would regularly appear on Yik Yak, and gained popularity on the East Oak campus for mocking Asian American students. In response to this thread and the proliferation of racial hatred on Yik Yak, East Oak’s anti-racism undergraduate student organization

condemned the emergence of these and other offensive communications on the anonymous social media site.

Twenty-nine (29) participants comprised the sample of this study and were identified using purposive maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015). This sample size was sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Participation for this study was solicited to Asian American undergraduates at East Oak through emails sent to the campus multicultural office, the office of student activities, the office of residence life, and the academic list serves. In return for participation, participants were compensated at the completion of the study with a \$30 gift card to a local dining establishment or to the campus bookstore.

The final participant sample was constructed to reflect the characteristics of the Asian American population at East Oak. These demographic qualities included gender, age, home state, ethnicity, major, and class year. A table of participant selected pseudonyms and select demographic information is presented in Table 1.

## Study Design

Multiple phases of data collection were employed for this study (Creswell, 2013). Each participant engaged in an individual, 60-minute semi-structured interview (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) with the researcher in early spring 2016. The interview protocol was designed with multiple objectives in mind, including: A) classify the racial climate on social media at East Oak, B) document



**Table 1. Participant-selected pseudonyms and self-identified demographics**

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Home State	Ethnicity	Major	Class Year
Alex	M	21	MA	Chinese	Communications	4th
Ariel	F	18	MA	Chinese/Vietnamese	Nursing	2nd
Ashley	F	20	NJ	Chinese/Taiwanese	Finance	3rd
Carly	F	21	CA	Chinese	Communications	4th
Chandler	M	18	AZ	Filipino	Economics	1st
Chloe	F	20	NY	Korean	Psychology	3rd
Eunice	F	22	NJ	Korean	Int'l Studies	4th
Fitz	M	19	MA	Chinese	Biochemistry	1st
Gilly	F	21	NJ	Korean	Sociology	4th
Haley	F	22	MA	Korean	Political Science	4th
Holly	F	21	LA	Korean	Psychology	4th
Ja	M	21	MA	Chinese	Communications	3rd
Joey	M	21	NJ	Korean	Economics	3rd
John	M	18	MA	Korean	Biochemistry	1st
Kara	F	18	TX	Korean	Sociology	1st
Kasey	F	22	CA	Taiwanese	Nursing	4th
Keith	M	18	NY	Indian	Biology	1st
Kelsey	F	21	CA	Chinese	Psychology	3rd
Kylie	F	19	MA	Korean	Communications	1st
L.L.	M	19	NJ	Indian	Finance	3rd
Mary	F	20	WA	Korean	English	2nd
Melvin	M	21	NY	Filipino/Chinese	Finance	4th
Mia	F	21	PA	Korean	English	4th
P.P.	F	21	MA	Korean/Japanese	Communication	4th
Pat	F	20	MA	Chinese	History	3rd
Scout	F	19	MA	Korean	Biology	2nd
T.S.	F	19	NJ	Korean	Political Science	2nd
Vicky	F	18	OR	Vietnamese	Undecided	1st
Yoo	M	21	MA	Korean	Education	4th



the racialized aggressions participants encounter in their use of social media, and C) uncover if/how these online racialized encounters impacted participants' sense of belonging.

Immediately after the interview, the researcher took part in a 30-minute observation of each participant using their social media to document the "real-life settings" (Lau & Williams, 2010, p. 319) where racialized aggressions occurred online. Participants were then asked to engage as they normally would on their social media for the next thirty days, and email the researcher screen captures of racialized aggressions they encountered online. These digital artifacts were used to further explain and support the study's findings (Azzam & Evergreen, 2013). If participants did not encounter aggressions or did not use social media during this thirty-day period, they noted this lack of activity to the researcher via email communication.

Four 60-minute focus groups were held at the conclusion of the 2016 Spring semester. Each participant was invited to take part in only one of the four focus groups. Each focus group was comprised of six to eight participants and acted to enhance the meaning of previously collected data, confirm initial findings, and/or to weed out false findings initially identified by the researcher. Focus groups were also designed to triangulate findings across the various phases of the study, including verifying digital artifacts to warrant trustworthiness of data (Krueger & Casey, 2008). All participants who took part in this study attended one of the four focus

groups.

Data were transcribed and then coded using HyperResearch software. The raw data was first analyzed using an inductive method of emergent and open coding (Saldana, 2009) that permitted the development of root and stem codes. Categories were developed from the clustering of these codes based on internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Guba, 1978). These categories were further grouped together for the foundation of themes (Bernard, 2013), which were interpreted to address the research question of this study (Saldana, 2009).

Multiple sources of evidence ensured construct validity (Yin, 2014), and iterative thematic construction ensured internal validity (George & Bennett, 2004). Two critical friends (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008) analyzed the findings and raised probing critiques of the researcher's construction of themes. Critical friends were also used for cross checking of codes and to ensure inter-coder reliability. Field notes were maintained throughout the study to ensure consistency with the inquiry's original purpose and to confirm findings (Patton, 2015).

## Findings

Four themes emerged from the data. These themes included: A) the commonality of racialized aggressions on social media, B) the emergence of racialized distrust between Asian American and White students, C) the alienation of Asian American Students from East Oak University, and D) the need for institutional accountability. These themes



suggested that the presence and encounter of racialized aggressions on social media were detrimental in promoting a positive sense of belonging for Asian Americans at East Oak. The findings also suggested that White students claimed anonymous social media as a space where they could dictate campus culture by engaging in racist discourse that was meant to alienate Asian Americans and non-Whites from the institution.

### The Commonality of Racialized Aggressions on Social Media

Participants noted that they were not apt to encounter racialized antagonism on user-identifiable social media such as Facebook, Instagram, or mobile dating apps, but these platforms were not absent of racialized hostility. John stated that while it was rare to encounter racialized aggressions on Facebook, he did encounter and captured a meme mocking Asians (Figure 1) on that social media platform.

John described this aggression by saying, “There was a picture of this guy holding like seven [eggs] on his one hand and then the caption says, ‘You rack discipline,’ which is kind of like mocking at the Asian accent of confusing the R and the L sound and then just kind of mocking us at language...” He expressed his frustration with encountering this meme by saying “You never see memes making fun of White people” but stated that “...it’s OK to laugh at Asians, so I guess we get made fun of.”

In another example, Kelsey encountered the aggression illustrated in Figure 2 on the



Figure 1. Racialized aggression on Facebook

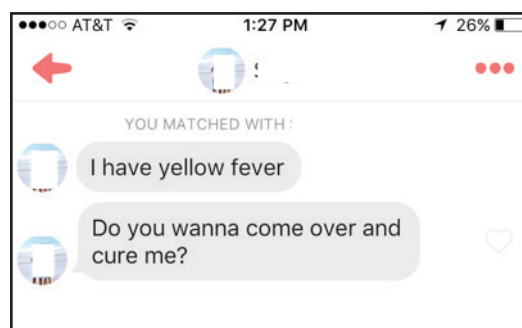


Figure 2. Racialized aggression on Tinder

mobile dating app Tinder, which she cited as an online location where Asian women were both objectified and racialized as sexual fetishes at East Oak. Asian men in this study reported a different scope of experiences than women on dating apps at East Oak. Alex illustrated the difference between Asian men and Asian women on mobile dating apps by recalling communications on Tinder such as being told Asian men have “...small dicks...” or being labeled as an undesirable sexual partner for non-Asian women. Almost all study participants in focus groups indicated they were not surprised by the presence and nature of these offensive comments on dating apps at East Oak.



Notwithstanding these examples, participants throughout the study agreed that racialized aggressions were not commonly encountered on social media where user identities could be positively verified (e.g. via names, and photos). Participants hypothesized this was due to fear by perpetrators of being labeled a racist for dispensing such communications. Participants also noted that the curated nature of identifiable social media such as Facebook and dating apps also contributed to the lack of racialized hostility on those platforms (i.e. users' online networks for identifiable social media typically consisted of self-selected family, friends, and peers who participants knew would not engage in inflaming behaviors, or in the case of Tinder, were networks of potential partners attempting to secure a date by impressing one another).

More often, participants cited regularly occurring expressions of anti-Asian hate proliferating on Yik Yak. The anonymous social media platform was regularly cited as the principal offender of online racialized hate at East Oak, in part, due to the ability for users of the platform to remain completely anonymous while engaging in racially offensive exchanges.

Anti-Asian messages on Yik Yak were explicit in nature, and conveyed overt detestation toward the Asian American community at East Oak. One participant, Gilly, described her experience on Yik Yak as a "...semester-long period of hating on Asians" on campus, and she captured the online aggression professing "I hate Asians" in Figure 3 as an example of the racism that

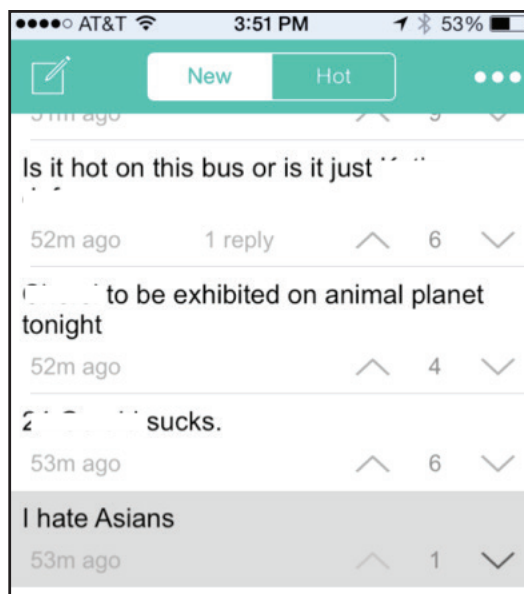


Figure 3. Racialized aggression proclaiming hate for Asians

Asian Americans encountered online.

Participants also stated in both individual interviews and in focus groups that racialized aggressions on Yik Yak tended to pathologize and ridicule the cultural characteristics of Asian Americans at East Oak, such as their cultural foods, and fashion. In addition to these offenses, participants noted that perpetrators on Yik Yak continually targeted and demeaned native Asian languages as "odd," "annoying," and "funny sounding," such as the example in Figure 4 that was also captured by Gilly.

The aggression in Figure 4 was corroborated in focus groups by several study participants as both "unsurprising" and "...typical for what you see..." on Yik Yak at East Oak.

Yoo stated that he regularly encountered aggressions on Yik Yak that he thought



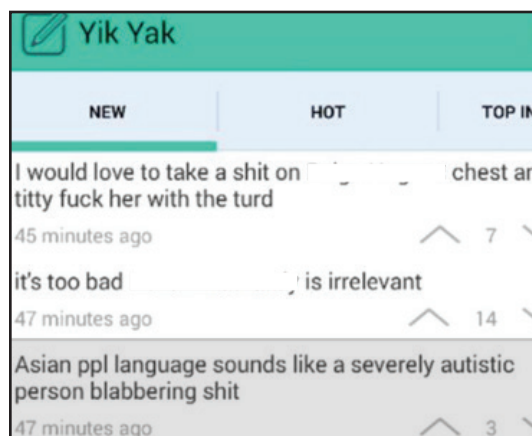


Figure 4. Racialized aggression demeaning Asian language

unfairly singled out Asian Americans in the campus library for their “loud voices.” He described his reaction to these online proclamations by stating,

You’ll see things [on Yik Yak] like... ‘Why are Asians so loud in the library?’ but it’s not just us. Everyone talks in [the library]. Have you ever been in [the library] during midterms? Everyone is there. Like, White kids can be the most obnoxious and loud ones.

Eunice captured the aggression in Figure 5 and also elaborated, “I don’t get why [people on Yik Yak] only talk about [Asian Americans] as the loud ones. It’s like they purposely pick on us for some reason.” Participants in focus groups supported the observations by Yoo and Eunice that Asian Americans were intentionally besieged on anonymous social media, and that racialized aggressions on Yik Yak were unrelenting in their ridicule of this community. Participants in focus groups verified that

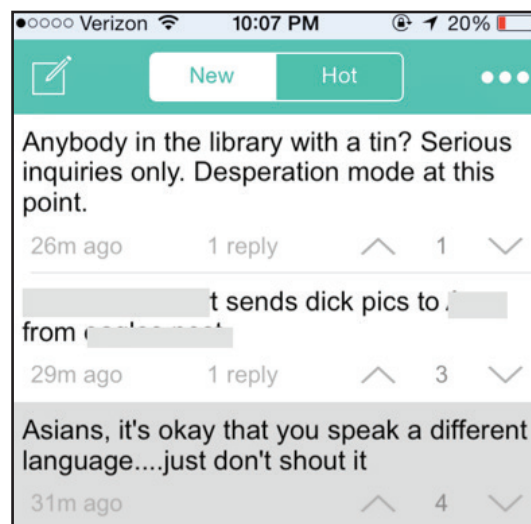


Figure 5. Racialized aggression demeaning Asian language

aggressions such as Figure 5 were regularly occurring on East Oak’s Yik Yak feed.

In addition to anti-Asian hostilities, participants also noted that anti-Black aggressions were rampant on anonymous social media. Although these aggressions were directed at another racially minoritized community at East Oak, the quantity and regularity by which anti-Black sentiments emerged on Yik Yak were disturbing to study participants. In one reflection, Mia observed that, “The more Black students you see protesting on campus, the more racial slurs on Yik Yak.” In another example, L.L. described his experience of attending a dance performance that featured his Black peers at the East Oak auditorium. L.L. recounted how he came across an aggression on Yik Yak during the performance that read, “Someone should get these apes off the stage.” In response to encountering racialized aggressions on social media, participants stated



that these hostilities collectively implied that non-White individuals, including Asian Americans, were not welcomed nor valued as part of the East Oak community.

### **The Emergence of Racialized Distrust Between Asian American and White Students**

The inability to identify the identities of perpetrators who dispensed racialized hate on Yik Yak caused participants to become distrustful of the East Oak community. This sentiment was especially directed at White peers. When asked to elaborate who they believed was responsible for dispensing racialized hate on anonymous social media, most students cited the White student population at East Oak. Although user identities could not be confirmed on Yik Yak, participants suspected their White peers were the perpetrators of these racialized aggressions because of the racially segregated nature (i.e. White and non-White) of the East Oak culture in the dining halls, residence halls, classrooms, and co-curricular activities.

The implication of the White community was affirmed in focus groups and reiterated in almost all individual interviews. For instance, Scout stated,

...since you don't know who is saying [racialized aggressions on Yik Yak], you kind of assume every person you interact with is a potential person who said this thing. It kind of makes me generalize people... It's especially if you're White.

Kylie affirmed this implication of White peers by stating she thought "White people are

those that post the most [racialized aggressions]." Joey added to this sentiment when he hypothesized, "...most [offenders on Yik Yak] would be like, the typical White guy."

This suspicion of their White peers triggered perceptions that Asian Americans were not welcomed at the institution. Ultimately, the encounter of racialized hate on social media implied to Asian Americans that they were perennial outsiders, and did not belong at East Oak.

### **The Alienation of Asian American Students from East Oak University**

Expressions and proliferations of racialized hate on Yik Yak suggested that Asian Americans were not a valued component of the campus community. Participants stated that encountering racialized hate on Yik Yak was an alienating experience. They also interpreted these messages as assertions that Asian Americans and other non-White communities were unwelcomed on campus, and further stated that the encounter of racialized aggressions were detrimental to their sense of belonging. For instance, Kelsey stated,

[Seeing racialized aggressions on Yik Yak] makes me distance myself from the community. Like, in class the other day, my professor asked if we would put a [East Oak] bumper sticker on our car. I was thinking like, 'No, I would not.' Because if I can see [racism being expressed on social media], then the perception of [East Oak] includes being racist and being majority White. That's not something I want.



For one participant, the encounter of racialized aggressions on social media, but especially on Yik Yak, was an impetus in facilitating her departure from East Oak. In reflecting on how racialized aggressions on social media impacted her student experience, Vicky stated,

I feel like [racialized aggressions on social media] strengthens my feeling of not wanting to be here. [What I read on Yik Yak] tends to disagree or have opposite views on how I see things. I'm actually leaving [East Oak] at the end of this semester because of it all. I've made that decision. It's time... Everything on Yik Yak. Like, it's so obvious you can't be comfortable [at East Oak] unless you're White.

Multiple participants explained in individual interviews and reaffirmed in the focus groups that the presence and encounter of racialized aggressions on both identifiable and anonymous social media conveyed to them that they did not belong as part of the campus community. As Alex explained, "I never will have the chance to be included by the majority of [East Oak's] community... [racism on all types of social media] only validates that feeling." Keith reaffirmed this perception when he stated, "If anything, [racialized aggressions on social media] makes [my sense of belonging] worse! It shows me racism is real here and maybe I don't [want to] or shouldn't be here."

The sentiment that racialized aggressions facilitated feelings of not being valued nor welcomed on campus were consistent themes that were nearly unanimous across the participants in this study. Participants

consistently noted that the encounter of racialized aggressions on social media had a detrimental impact on their campus experience. In response to these feelings, the majority of participants responded to the hostile online climate by seeking out connections with peers in ethnically similar subgroups at East Oak who served as culturally familiar support systems in the context of a racially hostile online climate.

Participants cited their immersion within ethnic subgroups was helpful in mediating the estrangement they experienced from encountering racialized aggressions on social media. Mia elaborated on the importance of Asian American communities at East Oak in her reflections regarding how she responded to encountering racialized aggressions on social media by stating "...subconsciously, [online racialized aggressions] pushes me more towards the Asian community. I know people won't be racist there, that's my mindset." Other students described their connections with cultural student organizations as a way to feel more connected with one another at a PWI that was saturated with online aggressions. Chloe noted,

When you see more of your [Korean] people from [campus ethnic club] representing [East Oak] and things like that, it really encourages you. It kind of makes you feel a little bit more a sense of belonging versus like all White people everywhere. It gives you hope that maybe we are seen as part of [East Oak]... unlike on Yik Yak.



Surrounding themselves with peers who were similar in racial or ethnic identity played a valuable role in helping participants feel like they were accepted and welcomed within a smaller subculture at East Oak despite sentiments on social media that Asian Americans were estranged from the larger institutional culture.

### **The Need for Institutional Accountability**

In response to the proliferation of racialized hostility on social media at East Oak, students called upon campus administrators to remediate online racial tensions and better promote belonging among Asian Americans through multiple actions. These recommendations included: A) explicitly recognize racial tensions on campus between White and non-White student communities, B) address those racial tensions through educational interventions both in person and online, and C) promote racial equity by diversifying the faculty, staff, and student demographics on campus.

Participants were resolute that campus leaders needed to validate the hostile experiences experienced by Asian Americans on social media by recognizing racial tension as an endemic issue within the institutional culture. Joey suggested,

If you don't talk about [racism that happens online], people who are [perpetrating hostile acts] are just going to keep on doing it. It'll stay the same and nothing happens. I think if [East Oak administrators] have open discussions and open forums and talk about

problems, maybe we'll get started to understand all the issues.

Other participants advocated for the institution to have a more prominent role in preparing students to be culturally competent citizens of society by promoting educational programs and interventions about inclusivity. For example, Yoo, stated,

I understand that [racism on social media] is a very big issue, and that can't be solved tomorrow, but if we're going to graduate from [East Oak], then we need to know how to respect others who are different and... I don't think we have that sort of opportunity to do that here at [East Oak]. I think [cultural education] is definitely needed.

The recommendation to hire greater numbers of Asian American faculty and staff was a suggestion proposed by almost all participants in the study in response to remediating an increasingly hostile online environment. Mary captured this sentiment when she shared the following recommendation of how to she would like to see East Oak respond to the proliferation of racialized aggressions on social media,

Actually, the first thing that came to mind [about recommendations for practice] is having leadership roles that are not White males. I think it helps if you have representatives on the campus that understand [Asian American experiences of racism]. I've only encountered one Asian professor, [name of professor], who was my Asian-American lit professor. He's awesome. He's the only Asian professor I know, and the only professor who's really understood me



and [my experiences with feeling like I don't belong].

It was clear that increased representation of Asian American faculty and staff was what students thought would help address the racially hostile social media environment at East Oak because the presence of culturally and ethnically familiar faculty/staff would enable students to feel less isolated on campus when they encountered online racialized hate. While participants stated that they realized the increase in non-White faculty and staff would not structurally eliminate racialized aggressions on social media, they proclaimed that achieving a critical mass of educators who shared a similar racialized identity with students in this study was crucial for incrementally advancing belonging for Asian Americans at East Oak.

## Discussion

Previous scholars (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007) have affirmed that a racially hostile campus climate in face-to-face settings is a detriment to facilitating a positive sense of belonging for racially minoritized students, but those studies did not consider the presence or impact of social media upon belonging. This current study extends that literature by suggesting the encounter of racialized aggressions on social media leads to alienation from a PWI, which compromises Asian American students' feelings that they are valued and welcomed at an institution.

Asian Americans in this study stated

that the encounter of racialized aggressions on social media amplified the dissonance between participants and their sense of belonging to East Oak. Although not all racialized aggressions documented in this study occurred on anonymous social media, an overwhelming majority of them were circulated on Yik Yak.

The existence of an inflammatory virtual environment on Yik Yak can be attributed to the online disinhibition effect (Joinson, 2007; Suler, 2004), which has been suggested to facilitate the manifestation of racialized aggressions. Online disinhibition has been found to be especially prevalent under conditions that privilege anonymity (Eschmann, 2019; McKenna & Seidman 2005; Tanis & Postmes, 2007). Anonymity and the "safe" barriers of the Internet enable online disinhibition, which liberate individuals from the burden of retribution for actions that are not typically viewed as socially acceptable. The behavioral inhibitions that usually structure cordial interactions within face-to-face and user-identifiable communications on social media were ostensibly absent in anonymous online spaces at East Oak. Social media where user identities could be verified (e.g. Facebook and Tinder) were not completely devoid of racialized hostility, but these online spaces were noticeably less virulent than the climate characterized on Yik Yak.

The allure of online anonymity and communicating in spaces through anonymous identities have been connected with the social and psychological developmental processes of late adolescence/college age individuals. Researchers have suggested



the cloak of online anonymity reduces the pressures associated with self-presentation that are amplified in early adulthood (Ellison, Blackwell, Lampe, & Trieu, 2016). As a result, anonymity has been suggested to bestow young adults with the uninhibited freedoms to explore their relationships with unfamiliar identities, relationships, and worldviews in ways that are less constrained than in face-to-face interactions (Keipi & Oksanen, 2014). The relationship between this developmental process for young adults and the phenomenon of online disinhibition compels educators on college campuses to explore how their programs, services, and strategies can challenge students to intimately explore young adulthood identities and unfamiliar worldviews without purposing online spaces into racially hostile environments. When exploration of individual identity is advanced at the expense of a subjugated community, such as Asian Americans, detrimental outcomes are likely to emerge for the targets of aggressions.

Asian Americans in this study regularly encountered racialized aggressions on social media, which dictated the cultural terms (e.g. don't speak your language) that were acceptable at East Oak. The endemic nature of racism on social media acted to delineate, enforce, and assert White dominance at the PWI. Such dominance ultimately served the function of regulating (Foucault, 1977) Asian Americans and other non-White identities as racially othered groups within the larger East Oak culture. These experiences led to feelings of being relegated as perennial outsiders to the institution.

This study challenges the physical scope with which sense of belonging may be impacted by suggesting that the racialized climate of social media also negatively contributes to the ways Asian Americans perceive they are welcomed, respected, valued, and matter. Revisiting Strayhorn's (2012) definition of belonging is suggested in light of this study's findings.

Strayhorn (2012) defined sense of belonging in a way that bridged multiple aspects of the college student experience, but his definition did not explicitly consider social media's role in shaping campus culture. As stated by Martínez-Alemán and Wartman (2009), today's college students perceive campus culture as existing both in person and online, and the findings from this study support that claim. It is recommended that the definition of sense of belonging be revised so that it recognizes the online components of the student experience.

Rather than suggest that sense of belonging solely refer to the ways that individuals perceive a supportive environment "on campus," it is suggested the definition be expanded to include the ways students perceive a welcoming environment both on campus and on social media. Alternatively, scholars may wish to redefine "on campus" in a way that openly encompasses both the physical and online components of campus life instead of solely referring to the face-to-face setting (Martínez-Alemán, & Wartman, 2009). Despite Yik Yak no longer being an extant app, racialized experiences continue to emerge on college campuses via social media such as on GroupMe (Fink,



2019), Twitter (Schreiber, 2019), and Instagram (Wood, 2019) and further confirm this study's findings that racism is no longer confined to the brick and mortar setting.

This revision to the current understanding of sense of belonging is warranted due to participant testimonials that implied the encounter of online racialized aggressions were detrimental in facilitating feelings of being welcomed at East Oak. Expanding the definition of sense of belonging to encompass interactions on social media is also appropriate to consider due to previous scholars (Mastrodicasa & Metllus, 2013; Tynes & Markoe, 2010; Tynes et al., 2013) who have called for educators to more intentionally integrate the ways that online racialized hostility shapes today's student experiences.

Although participants stated the presence of a racially hostile social media environment was consequential to their belonging in relation to the overarching East Oak identity, Asian Americans also expressed a strong affinity to ethnic subgroups on campus. While connection with ethnic sub-communities has been previously documented to decrease the distress resulting from encounters with racialized hostility in the physical campus setting (Syed & Juan, 2011), only one previous study has established that identification with ethnic sub-communities is an appropriate intervention to intervene the stress that emerges from encountering racism online (Tynes et al., 2012).

The findings from this current study build upon Tynes and associates' (2012)

research by suggesting that identification with ethnically familiar communities may be a viable response to counteracting the dissension between a student and the institution as a result of encountering racialized aggressions on social media. Consistent with assertions made by previous scholars (Maramba & Velasquez, 2012; Museus & Maramba 2012) who stated that involvement with ethnic subgroups help facilitate positive experiences for Asian Americans at PWIs, participants noted that engagement with culturally familiar peers at East Oak were beneficial in fostering a sense of community and support against the backdrop of a racially hostile online climate. This current study adds to the preexisting literature by suggesting culturally familiar ethnic communities (e.g. cultural organizations, friendship groups) play a necessary role in arbitrating racialized aggressions that are widespread within the virtual components of campus life.

### **Implications for Practice and Research**

While the establishment of counterspaces (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009) are practices that regularly exist in the physical campus setting, little attention has been paid to how higher education fosters similar spaces on social media in response to a hostile racialized online climate. The initiation and promotion of online counterspaces is a suggested institutional response to address the encounter of racialized aggressions on social media by Asian



Americans.

The deployment of hashtags on Twitter and engagement on Facebook group pages have effectively been employed by students to actively call attention to and mobilize against racial injustices within society (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Leaders on college campuses may wish to model this practice by establishing similar virtual counterspaces at their institutions to promote anti-racism resources (e.g., readings, online dialogues, etc.) to engage in online. These social media interventions can complement pre-existing physical counterspaces on campus and empower institutions to combat racialized aggressions in a way that asserts the online environment is a “home space” that endorses the inclusion of an entire community (Gin et al., 2017, p. 31).

There is also a limited amount of research that has been conducted regarding the relationship between leadership/identity development and online racism. The few studies that have been conducted regarding online identity (Dalton & Crosby, 2013; Luppicini, 2012; Stern, 2015) have yet to explicitly account for the encounter of racialized aggressions on social media. Because of this gap in the literature, it is recommended that scholars revisit pre-established theories and reassess those models by considering how today’s racialized climate on social media complicates student development theory in the digital age.

Student affairs/higher education graduate programs must also assess their learning outcomes in a way that critically examines how students build proficiencies

for addressing racialized aggressions on social media. Today’s institutional cultures exist in hybrid virtual and physical spaces, but graduate programs tend to strictly emphasize competencies that only apply to the face-to-face campus setting (Junco, 2014). Given the emphasis of producing multiculturally competent administrators (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004), addressing racialized aggressions on social media within course curricula will ensure graduate students are equipped to navigate the complexities of today’s physical and online institutional landscapes.

The need for this preparation in future educational leaders is also in line with the recommendations of students in this study who called for institutional accountability to originate and be driven by campus administrators. Suggested areas of administrative training include the need to be versed in navigating difficult conversations regarding racism (both online and in person), promoting knowledge that advances inclusion in a learning environment, and exhibiting a dedication to fostering equity in hiring practices.

While the focus of this research was the intersection of racism on social media and sense of belonging for Asian Americans, the manifestation of race related stress from encountering online racialized aggressions also deserves attention as it relates to the experiences of other racialized groups. Future research should explore how encounters with racialized aggressions on social media contribute to other experiences of psychological and emotional harm



for students of color on college campuses. Given this study was the first to examine the interplay of racialized aggressions on social media and sense of belonging, further research may be conducted that examines how racism on social media impacts sense of belonging as it relates to other racially marginalized communities (e.g. Biracial, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, etc.) who have been subjugated on college campus.

## **Conclusion**

The intersection of racism and social media has been shown to negatively impact how Asian American students feel they belong on today's campuses, compelling further attention be paid to the phenomenon of online racialized aggressions. The advancement of practices, policies, and research that address racism in the virtual components of campus culture now become priorities that must be confronted and remediated for the promotion of inclusive learning environments within today's landscape of higher education.



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