Abstract
Anonymous social media platforms comprise sprawling publics where users, untethered from their legal identity, interact with other anonymous users to share and read user-generated content. The emergence of mobile applications that promise anonymity as a primary feature has led to novel social configurations that have so far been understudied. This article is an empirical and theoretical attempt to understand the ways in which anonymous social media have altered the social through performative, digital acts mediated through a community of anonymous users. I do this through two main propositions: first, that practices of anonymity mediated through a social media platform comprise discrete performative acts of identity due to a process of dissociability, and second, that those dissociated performative acts become undisciplined. To address these propositions, I have drawn from 12 semi-structured interviews of undergraduate and graduate students at Queen’s University who were avid users of Yik Yak to explore the sociology of anonymity, surveillance, and identity. The findings are discussed in relation to theories of performativity and discipline that have been commonly deployed in media and surveillance studies.

Keywords
anonymity, social media, surveillance, performativity, discipline

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 geotagged, every status they post is stored and aggregated, and their social feeds are constantly thumbed through by an unknowable audience of friends, family, and strangers. The contemporary 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 identities are 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 practices on such platforms are diverse, and often deployed in morally ambivalent patterns. They are deployed by platform operators to collect disparate flows of data for purposes of monetization and platform operationality. However, they are also deployed by platform users as they thumb through the profiles and user-generated content of friends, family, and strangers. These lateral levels of surveillance are mundane, but also powerful. Users are exposed to the wide range of peer expectations in the form of sociocultural norms and habits that may impact a user’s reputation. It is not surprising that alongside of this ubiquity of watching and being watched that anonymous social media, like the widely acclaimed platforms Yik Yak, Whisper, and Secret, as well as the less popular platforms AntiChat and Swiftie, would emerge as widely trafficked applications for sharing, discussing, and debating user-generated content.

Anonymous social media platforms comprise sprawling publics where users, untethered from their legal identity, interact with other anonymous users and share and read content. In some cases, social actors seek to share content that would not be associated with their overall identity. The emergence of anonymous social media has altered the social in novel ways. Yet anonymous social media have received very little sociological attention, even while countless users are committed to the construction and maintenance of their various nameless publics. This article is an attempt to understand the ways anonymous social media have altered the social through performative, digital acts mediated through a community of anonymous users. Specifically, I am seeking to understand how the social acts of users and the digital affordances of platforms facilitate a novel kind of user agency. I

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do this by addressing two main research questions: first, how might we understand enactments of anonymity as comprising discrete and disparate performative acts of identity? And second, how do anonymous performative acts of self-identity instantiate in a socio-cultural context that evades the disciplinary power of surveillance and visibility? I address these questions through two main propositions: first, that practices of anonymity mediated through a social media platform comprise discrete performative acts of identity due to a process of dissociability, and second, that those dissociated performative acts become undisciplined. To explore these propositions, I will draw from 12 semi-structured interviews of students at Queen’s University who were avid users of Yik Yak to explore the sociology of anonymity, surveillance, and identity. My analysis will use Judith Butler’s (1990, 2009) theories of performativity and Michel Foucault’s (1995, 2015) theories of disciplinary power to account for these novel forms of social production. Through this theoretical extension, I have developed a concept that I call undisciplined performativity to describe the diverse thematic categories that emerge from digital, anonymous publics.

The Yik Yak Enterprise

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, maintain, and regulate anonymous publics. Yik Yak was an anonymous and “hyper-local” location-based social network that featured a central feed shaped by upvotes and downvotes. Users could either post with a handle (username) or anonymously to the feed. They were also able to comment on posts and engage in discussion. This platform was useful as a case study of the social production 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. Furthermore, users were not entirely anonymous. On a peer-to-peer level, users could post content to the feeds without any linkability between posted content and legal identity. However, the Yik Yak platform could collect meta- and content data that rendered a user identifiable to the platform’s operators. Yik Yak’s use of geolocation data allowed for precise locability of its users. This function served as a practical necessity to situate the anonymous public within a space, but nonetheless, expose anonymous users to corporate-level and state surveillance.

Yik Yak was developed by Brooks Buffington, Tyler Droll, and Douglas Warstler, three university fraternity brothers from Furman University in South Carolina. It took off with an ambitious speed, populating communities on university campuses across North America. The rapid 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 US$75 million 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 10 applications on the Apple App Store and Google Play store.

Yik Yak was one of a handful of anonymous social media applications that had become successful and widespread in the past decade. With the growing ubiquity of social media platforms that demanded from users a full articulation of social identity and thus pervasive visibility, such as Facebook and Instagram, the ability to communicate in a community of anonymous strangers was becoming increasingly marketable. The current popularity of anonymous social media platforms began with the development of Whisper in 2012. Whisper facilitated the anonymous communications of its userbase through the use of text-based content overlaid on pre-selected photos. Following Whisper, Yik Yak was launched in 2013 offering a similar platform that was more inspired by Reddit’s forum board and content voting features. Yik Yak allowed for the sharing of images despite the potential for offensive content. In 2014, Secret was released and allowed circles of friends and family to send anonymous messages to each other. As these platforms began to wane in popularity, two smaller platforms, Swiflie and Anti-Chat, attempted to take their place, however, they never saw the rapid development in popularity that the other three applications had fostered. Currently, in 2019, Whisper is the only application of the group that survived both in terms of its popularity and financial security. According to Carpenter (2017), with CNN Business, the history of anonymous social media platforms is rife with promising beginnings and tragic ends as platforms shut down due to the proliferation of cyberbullying and trolling that lead to damaging press coverage and nervous investors and advertisers. Beyond that, as Ungerleider (2017) reported in Fast Company, it is difficult, though not impossible, to monetize anonymous social media platforms, so while they may begin with generous capital investments, many of these applications have not yielded compelling profits.

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 questioned 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. The public
pressure generated from these controversies eventually led Yik Yak to deploy an update on 16 August 2016 that removed the feature of anonymity and introduced mandatory user handles. Although this update may have carried the potential to stifle some of the problematic content proliferating over its feeds, it did not bide well with its user base. 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 application’s many “hyper-local” feeds. Another user wrote, “What the actual eff, is there any point to using this app anymore?” The platform’s identity crisis was not popular to the Yak user base and 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. Shortly after, the platform sold off its assets and closed.

Methods and Methodology

There is immense value in theorizing anonymity as a situated phenomenon located in complex socio-material conditions that are tied to a single platform, the spaces it comprises, and its diverse user base. My research into Yik Yak was heavily informed by Donna Haraway’s (1988) notion of situated knowledge, or the idea that the production of knowledge is situated within the subject position of a researcher, the socio-cultural and historical contexts of a research field, and can only ever provide a partial account. Thus, it is of methodological importance that this research emerges out of the Yak feeds located around Queen’s University campus, in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. The importance of focusing on a single platform has been advocated by Van Dijck (2013) and Bachmann, Knecht, and Wittel (2017) with recognition that practices of anonymity exist “as constellations of partial unknowability, invisibility, and untrackability…that emerge in complex intersections, entailing and combining amongst others, social practices, technologies and infrastructures, ethics and politics” (p. 243). Notably, such constellations of practices comprise complex entanglements between socio-cultural practices of human actors and the technical arrangements of social media platforms, codes, and algorithms (Scott & Olikowski, 2014).

The performative quality of enactments of anonymity occurs through a process of dissociability where social actors articulate their identity in ways that are dissociated from their overall sense of self (Ponesse, 2014). It is this dissociation between user-generated content and a social actor’s overall sense of self that makes anonymous communications so novel. As Ponesse (2014) observes, “Because anonymity is a way of segregating an otherwise integrated self—of packaging the selves piecemeal for the world—anonymity involves a loss of visible integrity, and as such creates ambiguous identities” (p. 316). It is this sense of dissociability that frames my approach to sociological theory. My research on

Literature Review

A Sociology of Anonymity

Anonymity is often defined as the masking of identifiable information on a wide spectrum between categories of identifiability and unidentifiability (Marx, 1999; Pfitzmann & Hansen, 2010). This spectrum of identifiability is mediated through social media platforms, digital applications, and specialized knowledge that must be enacted for a user to mask their online presence. Anonymity is fundamentally tied to unlinkability, which is fostered when a user employs technical tools to untether their communicative acts from their legal identity (Pfitzmann & Hansen, 2010). As Ponesse (2013) illustrates, anonymity “is a phenomenon of genuine, but partial, identity concealment” (p. 329). Although normative conceptions of anonymity seem to posit such practices as a form of deceit, Ponesse asserts that enactments of anonymity are morally ambivalent and that the concealment of identity does not necessarily mean that a social actor is conducting themselves maliciously. As I will explore later, there are a multitude of reasons that social actors might be motivated by when seeking to conceal their legal identities.

Anonymity is more than just a set of techniques to conceal identity, it is also a socio-material site of relational social production. As Marx (1999) observes, “Ironically, anonymity is fundamentally social” (p. 100), as anonymous communications require an audience of at least one other social actor. Enactments of anonymity are performative and thus necessarily relational (Scott & Olikowski, 2014). It is relational in the sense that human social actors interact with each other in a communicative platform, but it is also relational in the sense that social action is inherently tied to the material infrastructure of a social media platform. Bachmann et al. (2017) provide a useful conceptualization of anonymity; they write that practices of anonymity exist “as constellations of partial unknowability, invisibility, and untrackability…[that] emerge in complex intersections, entailing and combining amongst others, social practices, technologies and infrastructures, ethics and politics” (p. 243). Notably, such constellations of practices comprise complex entanglements between socio-cultural practices of human actors and the technical arrangements of social media platforms, codes, and algorithms (Scott & Olikowski, 2014).

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enactments of anonymity over Yik Yak provides empirical details of the consequences of dissociation as a primary modality of communication over a social media platform.

More recent empirical scholarship on anonymity moves beyond seeing anonymity as a spectrum or continuum of identity concealment to understand such relational practices as situated in the material architecture of social media platforms (Bernstein et al., 2011; Knuttila, 2011; Nagel, 2017; Scott & Olikowski, 2014). 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. 4chan was launched in 2003 and has become the quintessential anonymous social media platform. However, it is notable that much of 4chan belongs to a niche population of Internet subcultures and has not become a mainstream platform accessible to users outside of its subcultural boundaries. 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). Notably, as Bernstein et al. (2011) observed, 4chan’s platform allowed anonymous users to share user-generated content in such a way that it used textual and linguistic cues to construct an informal status and norm system that tacitly organized how users interacted with each other. Thus, the seemingly chaotic forum boards were partially ordered by both the platform’s material structure and the socio-cultural norms that emerged throughout the platform’s history. Although Yik Yak’s platform shares a similar constitution of anonymous culture, there are notable and consequential differences. Most notable is that 4chan had become popular in a niche minority of Internet culture largely constituted by trolls, hackers, and lovers of obscure Internet memes. Yik Yak, on the other hand, had become a popular mainstream platform used on college and university campuses across North America. Its geolocational feature afforded users local cultural norms that were shaped by the platform’s upvote/downvote feature which governed the popularity of user-generated content.

Anonymity, ephemerality, and contingency play enormous roles in shaping the socio-cultural practices on both 4chan and Yik Yak. As a fundamental platform feature, anonymity facilitates unlinkability between a user and their content allowing users to post content that is not linked to any identifying features. On both 4chan and Yik Yak is a feature that Knuttila (2011) has called “the ephemeral culture of anonymity” (p. 8). Ephemerality in this context means that content is only visible and accessible on the visual interface for a short period of time. As newer messages appear, older messages are removed from view. In both the 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 combination of anonymity and ephemerality results in a state of contingency that leaves users unable to predict the constitution of their audience or how they might react to their content (Knuttila, 2011). So even if 4chan and Yik Yak have somewhat durable cultures that are collectively produced through the use of posting and voting on content, it is a contingent culture that is subject to constant change and chaotic repurposing.

Social Media and Digital Affordances

Social media applications are ubiquitous in our day-to-day practices and are embedded in almost every facet 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 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” (p. 61). Social media are not only technical artifacts, but constituted of socio-material practices that include human interests, desires, and socio-cultural contexts. Couldry and Van Dijck (2015) write, “The ‘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” (p. 4). At the same time, technical elements such as codes and algorithms operate with a measure of agency that intersects and blurs with the intentional action of human actors (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011). Thus, social media platforms become complex publics that comprise heterogeneous human and non-human elements (Van Dijck, 2012).

Social media is closely associated with identity practices and the Goffmanian presentation of self in digital environments (Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2012; Cover, 2012; Hogan, 2010; Robinson, 2007; Van House, 2011). Furthermore, performative acts of identity are shared practices that emerge through performative acts with each other through the mediation of a social media platform. Recent scholarship relies on Butler’s (1990; 2009) theories of performativity, where digital social action constitutes a set of performative acts constantly in negotiation with fluid, dynamic, and multiple sets of selves (Cover, 2012; Perryman, 2006; Van House, 2011). Cover (2012) 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” (p. 179). Digital performative acts over Yik Yak are deployed by way of user-generated content which can take the form of text-based or image-based messages. When a message is posted to the central feed, other
users can upvote it, downvote it, and engage in meaningful discussions, debates, and arguments. Through these anonymous performative acts, a user can engage in discreet acts of the presentation of self that cannot be retroactively aggregated as the messages are both anonymous and ephemeral.

The ubiquity of our metricized existence over social media platforms has resulted in a social condition that Couldry and Hepp (2016) call “deep mediatization” or the ability for digital new media to become a fundamental force in the mediation of social reality. By reference to depth, the authors mean to highlight mediatization as a primary factor in the development of the social self. In practice, social actors are made to articulate the self through the use of social media platforms, which results in a translation of social acts into data. Van Dijck and Poell (2013) refer to this as a process of datafication where all social acts are rendered as readable and quantifiable data. Datafication is significant at the vernacular and institutional levels. Users can read each other’s user-generated content across a multitude of social media platforms. And institutions can monitor and collect the fruits of datafication, such as meta-data, content data, geolocational data, and other sorts of “data exhaust” that are produced through a user’s connection with others. Furthermore, the sustained presence of users within the digital context is shaped by an opaque modality of power that Galloway (2004) calls “protocol,” or the scripted and standardized rules that underlie the use of codes that make up the material architecture of social media platforms and thus shape user traffic in ways that are often made invisible to users. Protocols manage platforms, and though they are indiscriminate toward content, their logics are determined by institutional interests. These protocols are also responsible for steering social traffic through websites which shape and engineer how the social will play out, even at the vernacular level (Van Dijck, 2012). In relation to Yik Yak, control is maintained through platform design as opaque software is deployed to shape the boundaries of user agency and steer how users might engage with the social media platform.

A useful way of conceptualizing how platforms act as silent mediators that steer user traffic over social media platforms is through the concept of “digital affordances” (Cirucci, 2015; Nagel, 2017). Using Gibson’s (1979) concept of affordances, Cirucci (2015) discusses how the structural affordances of a particular social media platform operate to shape how users performatively enact the self. For instance, Yik Yak provides users with the ability to upvote and downvote content on its feeds, such an affordance acts as a selection mechanic shaping how users prioritize or reject user-generated content.

The ability to engage in enactments of anonymity is in itself an affordance that is fostered through unlinking a user from identifiable information. Such an affordance allows for platform structures that “emphasize interests over identities” (Nagel, 2017, p. 318), even while a user is enacting the self.

Anonymous social media platforms are invariably different from most conventional platforms, which allow users to construct profile pages, have communicative access to other users, and view those connections (boyd and Ellison, 2008). Yik Yak had begun without profile pages, communicative access to other users, or the ability to view connections between users. Communication was channeled through a central feed (and subfeeds), where anonymous users posted ephemeral content and interacted with the content of others. As Nagel (2017) writes, “In asking people to identify themselves in particular ways, and by either affording or restricting pseudonymity [and anonymity], platforms express ideal forms of engagement” (p. 326). Through its affordances, anonymous social media constitute a public where multitudes of users interact with each other through the sharing of user-generated content (boyd, 2007). Such publics are mediated through an array of platform algorithms and interfaces that channel communicative acts in largely premeditated ways. Notably, digital affordances are not static; they change as platform operators release updates to the social media platform. For instance, in 2014, Yik Yak attempted to curtail abusive and vitriolic content by removing anonymity as a feature and replacing it with pseudonymous user handles. This change in structural affordances on the platform shifted the whole character of Yik Yak and forced users to change how they enacted their performative selves. As I will explore later, this led to a catastrophic collapse of Yik Yak’s userbase which ultimately ended with the platform operators shutting down their servers and selling off their assets.

**Surveillance and Discipline**

Anonymity is undisciplined: the inability to link a performative digital act to an identifiable person allows for such acts to become dissociated from a user’s overall identity and untethers that user from held accountable for the content they post. As Mark Andrejevic (2006) notes, the lateral or peer-to-peer surveillance that exists between users over social media platforms asserts a normalizing, disciplinary power over users, influencing them to act in subscription to a platform norm. This phenomenon is much more acute in social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, where digital performative acts are linked to identifiable human actors. The enactment of anonymity dissolves user accountability, which carries the potential to release users from the intensified exertion of lateral disciplinary power.

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 (Van House, 2011). In this way, a platform’s material structures and algorithms are just as important as a human’s intentional use of the platform’s tools in the deployment of the presentation of self (Van Dijck, 2012). 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 to present themselves appropriately, based on technological affordances and immediate social context” (p. 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 the constitution of their audience, media practice “flattens multiple audiences into one” (p. 122). This results in the laborious “self-censoring” of user-generated content over social media platforms as there is no way to filter specific messages to specific audiences. Dynamic practices of the presentation of self are directly connected to various practices of surveillance. David Lyon (2009) describes identity as the starting point of surveillance, and in relation to social media, identity is expressed as our names, personal stories and biographies, the places we belong to, and the connections we are embedded within. As I will explore shortly, these dynamics are transformed almost entirely in anonymous social media platforms.

The forms of surveillance useful for this article’s analysis are participatory and lateral surveillance. Albrechtslund (2008) observes that social media practices are premised on “participatory surveillance” that focuses on the social and playful aspects of social media conventions. 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” (p. 8). This is certainly the case with Yik Yak, as the generation of content is meant to be playful and engaging. Such playfulness involves users sharing content back and forth and engaging in meaningful communicative acts. However, Albrechtslund’s (2008) analysis is not sensitive to the various power dynamics that exist within playful and creative forms of surveillance. Andrejevic’s (2005) concept of “lateral surveillance” sheds some insight into these modalities of power. He defines this as, “not the top-down monitoring of employees by employers, citizens by the state, but rather peer-to-peer surveillance of spouses, friends, and relatives” (p. 481). The logics that underlie social media platforms typically rely on a constant stream of lateral surveillance as users browse the profiles and content of their friends, family, and strangers. Through lateral surveillance, social media users are exposed to a wide array of judgments and opinions from those around them that directly influence their presentations of self. These processes operate through moments of exposure, or what Ball (2009) defines as “the act of subjecting someone to an influencing experience . . . the state of being vulnerable or exposed” (p. 647). As I will explore, respondents in my research often displayed a great deal of apathy toward corporate forms of surveillance, but a great deal of concern directed toward lateral levels of surveillance.

Due to the exposure of a user’s digital interactions by their friends, family, and strangers, users experience intensified disciplinary power. Foucault (2015) observes that disciplinary power is the power to create habits, 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” (p. 239). This is a form of power, which in Foucault’s terms 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” (p. 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 user, school teachers, supervisors, and other key members of a public. 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. As social media platforms are characterized by participatory and lateral levels of surveillance, users are constantly exposed to the normalizing gaze of their peers.

The dampening of disciplinary power in anonymous contexts is often associated with a proliferation of vitriolic behavior such as trolling, grieving, bullying, and various forms of digital harassment. This has been highlighted by several scholars (Bachmann et al., 2017; Donath, 1999; Knuttila, 2011; Hogan, 2012; Jane, 2012; Pasquale, 2015; Phillips, 2015). The belief that being nameless in a communicative environment will entail such vitriolic acts is often taken up by representatives of Facebook and Google to discredit anonymity as deceitful while claiming to provide a viable alternative (Hogan, 2012). Notably, Facebook and Google have carved out an economy of big data that profits off user visibility, thus positioning the “real name” web as a political economic ideology. However, as my research will demonstrate, enactments of identity do not comprise exclusively toxic behavior, but also facilitate other practices, including entertainment, caretaking, and a flight from social stigmatization. In practice, these categories blur together in a mess of text and images appearing and disappearing over a social media’s visual interface. Enactments of anonymity are morally ambivalent, though the existence of vitriolic behavior often serves to obscure the existence of other social practices.

### Defining Undisciplined Performativity

I propose the concept of undisciplined performativity to explore the ways in which users utilize anonymous social media platforms to perform renditions of their identity that they would not want associated with their overall reputation. I define this concept as (1) a configuration of the performative self that emerges from the structural affordances of
anonymous social media, (2) that allows a social actor to dissociate enactments of self from the content they post, (3) and as a consequence, the structural affordances of anonymity dampen the disciplinary effects of lateral surveillance and thus significantly lessen the impact of socio-cultural norms in shaping user behavior. It is important to maintain that despite the undisciplined nature of enactments of anonymity over a social media platform, users are still influenced by the cultural practices relationally developed between users and a platform’s structural affordances. Thus, there is still a normative influence on users performatively engaging with Yik Yak’s platform. Although users are not exposed to the normalizing effects of disciplinary power, 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 contexts. The consequence here is that undisciplined 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 behavior that troubles those norms. For users of Yik Yak, this form of lateral disciplinary power heralds a move away from Foucault’s panopticism, where a central power watches over the many. Users, rather than being fearful of an authority figure, are much more concerned about the opinions of those around them and how those opinions will shape their reputations. As I will explore, surveillance is only meaningful to users as far as it can expose a user’s performative self and perceived reputation to the watchful gaze of friends, family, and strangers thumbing through their curated digital content. Users seek out anonymous communication to present opaque and discreet rendition of their identity to other anonymous users without risking any impact to their overall reputation.

Undisciplined Content Posting
Respondents largely felt that because of Yik Yak’s anonymity and ephemerality, they could share, discuss, and debate content that they would not typically want associated with their overall reputation. Such undisciplined content generation was not restricted to trolling and e-bile (though there was a great deal of that), but also included other thematic categories, including entertainment, caretaking, and a flight from social stigmatization. As I will explore, undisciplined 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 if there is something personal you are letting out. But there could be responses and audiences there [for the content].” At the same time, such content could prove problematic when it was deployed for purposes of trolling and entail 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 yakked about at three o’clock in the morning.

For most of the respondents, the ability to engage in undisciplined content posting and discussions was at the center of why users were attracted to the Yik Yak platform. 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.

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 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 undisciplined content sharing was not always a positive experience. Another male respondent reflected, “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 sections, I will present empirical data that will explore the various thematic categories that served to motivate users to seek out a platform that would enable them to post undisciplined content. Such categories were teased out of the qualitative data for heuristic purposes and thus are always very interconnected with some user statements fitting in several categories at once.

Trolling, Bullying, and Harassment
The combination of a lack of accountability, reputation system, and a culture of ephemerality nurtured a context where digital vitriol and enactments of trolling could become intensified. 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 it's definitely like giving people more freedom in what they share with the rest of the world.

The freedom to post without user accountability caused a proliferation of digital vitriol that carried heavy consequences for some respondents. Another male respondent reported:

There is a whole lot of negativity on [Yik Yak]. The reason that I deleted it was because of cyberbullying for lack of a better expression of it. People seemed to me like they would go on there and really post like sexist and racist things.

Respondents typically understood this behavior as a direct result of the lack of accountability brought on by dissociation from a legal identity. Another female respondent said, “I guess people troll because they are feeling frustrated or because there’s no social filter and people will just say whatever they want.” No respondent admitted directly to trolling, however, a few respondents had discussed a fascination with watching and encouraging arguments over various Yak threads. There were daily instances of toxic vitriol at various degrees of severity. As one female respondent reflected:

Yeah, that’s a social issue for sure. And it exists in our culture. 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.

Although Yik Yak allowed for an intensification of digital vitriol and trolling, there were other users that invested time in developing a counter-narrative to oppose toxic content. And furthermore, there were users that took on an explicit role as a caretaker or therapist.

**Caretaking and User Therapy**

There was 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 difficult 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. A male respondent 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, ‘it’s 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. In this way, users utilized the platform’s structural affordances as a selection mechanic to counter enactments of trolling, bullying, and harassment. One female respondent said:

like, if people posted something emotional, they would get trolled quite a bit. So, I also felt a responsibility to balance out the trolling. And to balance out the well-meaning responses from people who clearly didn’t have much of a background in this.

Another male respondent observed, “But I think if someone comes on and says something overtly nasty, most people are like, that’s not right. And they will downvote it.” Users often relied on the platform’s voting system, reporting system, and practices of debate and discussion to respond to vitriolic or abusive users.

Furthermore, respondents typically expressed that because anonymity allowed for undisciplined content posting, users were enabled to speak honestly about 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 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 undisciplined content to Yak’s feeds to explore interpersonal and mental health issues was also very useful for users who experienced social stigmatization due to their membership in vulnerable groups. However, even while content posting was undisciplined, there were still some topics that were not hashed out over the central feed. One female respondent said:
if it was a situation where you needed to chat outside of the comment section, I would ask the OP (original poster) to post their handle or turn their handle on. And then I could chat with them that way, especially if it was something that was deeply personal, and they didn’t want to get into too much in a comment section.

**Entertainment and Boredom**

One of the central motivations for users to regularly engage with the Yik Yak platform was for entertainment purposes or to satisfy boredom at work or during class lectures. One female respondent described her experience of Yik Yak: “Pretty much people post weird stuff and its entertaining.”

Entertainment as a central theme to undisciplined content posting was a consistent practice over the central feeds on the platform. Users would often post memes about school, inside jokes that developed over Queen’s Yak feed, and parody current politics or news. One male respondent reflected:

And there was always stuff that pertained to the school, so the stuff that I found that always got the most upvotes was always stuff that pertained specifically to a joke about the school that usually only Queen’s students or people from Kingston would get.

An example of this situated humor at Queen’s University was the use of Shrek memes to analogize disgruntled, stressed, hungover, and tired undergraduate students to a swamp ogre. During my tenure of participant observation, Shrek memes were often deployed in ways that were relatable to other students. Another male respondent described, “The thing is there is a super fun side of Yik Yak like joking around through memes and stuff.” 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.

During Yik Yak’s height of popularity at Queen’s University, students in an undergraduate introduction class orchestrated a collective prank over Yak’s feeds. One male respondent explained:

Somebody posted, everyone cough. And there was a bunch of coughs going on. And at the end of the presentation someone posted, everyone stand up and applaud. So everyone stood up and started clapping. And the presentation person was like, oh thank you, thank you. And it was so hilarious.

Another instance of a collective joke was a fascination with a pizza delivery guy who became unwittingly famous over the local feeds as students ordered Friday and Saturday night pizzas. The most upvoted jokes were always situated in local contexts, as a male respondent explained:

And there was always stuff that pertained to school, so the stuff I found that always got the most upvotes was always stuff that pertained specifically to a joke about the school that usually only Queen’s Students or people from Kingston would get.

Several users expressed that they disdained users who would post about social justice or intervene in enactments of trolling, bullying, and harassment. One female respondent said:

Things got too serious. Or like, people would spaz out and you would get like one hundred notifications of people posting and just like ranting and being angry. And you’re like, I’m just going to delete my comment because I don’t want to be part of this.

For some users, entertainment at any cost became the primary factor of the platform’s overall culture.

Several respondents reported that one of their prime motivations for opening the application on their mobile device was boredom. A male respondent told me:

I will use Yik Yak if I’m not doing anything and want to kill some time. I will use it at night but I will also use it predominantly when I’m at work during the day, because my job is very boring.

Respondents would generally use Yik Yak in the absence of other daily distractions. A female respondent reported:

Yik Yak is kind of just another social media for when you’re bored or you have nothing to do. I usually just use it for that . . . I detach it from meaning anything to me. It’s just like a blog type thing. I just read it and its funny. I rarely ever post.

In comparison to Facebook and Twitter that are routinely used for mundane practices like communication between friends, anonymous social media is largely used as a way of passing time.

**Flight from Social Stigmatization**

A few respondents reported that they could use Yik Yak’s anonymity to communicate about or obscure aspects of their identity that were socially stigmatized by mainstream sociocultural groups. Within the group of respondents, two identity categories were present: several LGBTQ identified respondents and several people of color. One male respondent reported, “I just feel like I am a lot less inhibited in saying things, specifically things that are related to sexuality. I feel a lot less inhibited saying [such things] on social media platforms 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 upvotes or downvotes or whatever. I thought that was very enjoyable, very funny.
Anonymity facilitated the ability to untether from the exhausting identity curation involved in performing a stigmatized subject position. Users could share content they enjoyed without having to worry about defending the entirety of their personal identity. However, Yik Yak was not an escape from social stigmatization. Users experiencing social stigmatization were still exposed to various forms of offensive digital vitriol. Another male respondent said:

They are the same assholes on Yik Yak as they are on Facebook, on Overheard, or where ever. But instead of just saying, “Oh black lives matter is 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.

Although Yik Yak’s anonymity facilitated a way in which to communicate about various identity categories that were exposed to social stigmatization, users were not able to escape from problematic content. However, anonymity allowed for users to discuss these issues without risk of such conversations being linked with their overall perceived identity and their reputation.

**Pseudonyms and Discipline**

Due to an increased presence of digital vitriol and several public instances of users being arrested for hate crimes or bomb threats at high school and university campuses, controversy erupted that plagued Yik Yak’s public reputation. The increased public pressure and bad press eventually motivated Yik Yak to move away from the structural affordance of anonymity. On 16 August 2016, Yik Yak introduced an update that moved the platform to mandatory user handles. This update was widely unpopular to Yik Yak users. For many respondents, resistance to the 16 August updates was fueled by the introduction of identity curation 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 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 among 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 undisciplined performativity by increasing the presence of lateral surveillance and individuation.

Another issue that emerged for respondents due to the mandatory handle update was, the new communicative structure fostered linkability between a user’s content posts. Now that users had an identifiable user handle, other users could aggregate user-generated content posted to feeds under a pseudonym which essentially created a tacit reputation system. 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 too 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 undisciplined performativity. The introduction of user handles might have mitigated some digital vitriol and trolling, but it also diminished the other three thematic categories identified in the concept of undisciplined 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 mandatory user handles fundamentally changed Yik Yak’s platform identity and communicative structure. This severely impacted users as it removed the key structural affordance that attracted them to use Yik Yak’s platform in the first place.

**Discussion**

Undisciplined performativity is a concept that might provide an apt frame to explain the performative and relational characteristics that occur over anonymous social media platforms like Yik Yak. Fundamentally, it can be used to move beyond a focus on digital vitriol, trolling, bullying, and harassment by revealing other meaningful thematic categories involved in undisciplined content posting. I do not mean to use this concept to diminish the damaging consequences of Internet vitriol in both corporeal and digital contexts. However, in the current political economic atmosphere, neoliberal capitalist interests have tried to frame legal identity and the “real name” web as transparent and characterized by integrity, and anonymity as characterized by deceit. Under this logic, anonymous users come under suspicion because they have something to hide. As Bachmann et al. (2017) assert, “Anonymity is under attack. In a process that started decades ago, an increasing multiplicity of forces is creating a slow, but steady rising perfect storm” (p. 241). This process has slowly emerged through broader transformations over the Internet into a space characterized by user visibility through structural affordances that are actively hostile to anonymity or pseudonymity. They continue, “These include communication infrastructures like IP-address based Internet, cellular networks and social media platforms” (p. 241). As surveillance capitalism is deployed to monetize aggregate forms of
metricized user identities (Zuboff, 2015), there is a real threat to the ability for users to express themselves outside of the disciplinary power present in constant and consistent visibility. The theorizing of undisciplined performativity is an attempt to sociologically account for the nuance and complexity associated with the social productivity characteristic of anonymous social media platforms.

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 and its material infrastructures. 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 renditions of identity dissociated from a user’s legal identity and overall reputation that they could not otherwise perform.

For other forms of social media that afford visibility, identity performance 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 behaviors” (p. 178). In the work of curating an intelligible selfhood, users are exposed to lateral levels of surveillance by friends, family, and strangers. This exposure leads to scrutiny over the various curations performatively deployed by a social actor and are aggregated into a reputation system. All respondents expressed their concern for the forms of identity curation 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 they considered performative acts over Facebook and Instagram as disingenuous due to the identity curation involved in the presentation of self over the respective platforms. Although I do not wish to insinuate that identity curation is disingenuous, these results do indicate that users reflexively understand their curation of self as largely artifice.

Due to the structural affordances of Yik Yak’s platform interface, performative anonymity is practiced in a way that users untether user-generated content from a legal identity. And before the user handle update, users were unable to link or aggregate multiple posts under any single author. When Yik Yak’s visual interface was constructed for anonymous communication, there were no profiles, no aggregated posts, and thus, no durable identities or reputation systems. Over the “real name” web, users are embroiled in the burdensome task of identity curation in order to shape how other people understand their presentation of self. As respondents expressed, users tended to curate a “perfect” life over conventional social media platforms. The undisciplined performative acts conducted through anonymity allow for the expression of the gritty and painful experiences that a user would typically omit from their Facebook profile or Instagram feed. From the perspective of respondents, identity curation that goes into constructing a presentation of self over Facebook or Instagram is always layered with a level of deceit.

Performative acts that were mediated through Yik Yak’s platform took on the qualities of being undisciplined. Such enactments of identity were only socially salient if the platform afforded users a communicative environment that was completely free of lateral surveillance and individuation. While a user posted content to a central feed, their content would disappear into a constantly shifting flow of ephemeral and contingent text and images. From the perspective of other users, such content was explicitly dissociated from a user, while allowing the original poster to express an unfiltered byte of their self-identity. Due to the affordance of anonymity, users were able to engage in practices of undisciplined performativity to express themselves in a variety of ways without the impending influence of disciplinary power. Such platforms explicitly challenged normative methods of communication by removing the pervasive influences brought on by visibility and concern over reputation.

Furthermore, user behavior and social interactions were explicitly mediated by the structural affordances designed within the platform’s material infrastructure. The code and protocol hidden beneath the visual interface of the Yik Yak platform was designed to steer user traffic in predesigned ways that encouraged a particular rendition of the social. When Yik Yak’s platform operators made the decision to roll out a massive update to the platform’s structural affordances by replacing the feature of anonymity with pseudonymity, it produced an entirely new rendition of the social that was exposed to a small but consequential degree of lateral surveillance and individuation. Under this new structure of mediation, users by-and-large felt that their usage of the platform had meaningfully changed, and they were no longer able to post undisciplined content. Under their pseudonyms, they began to accumulate a durable and recognizable identity and thus a reputation system. Although these structural changes did not nullify practices of trolling, bullying, and harassment, they did make a great deal of users feel as if they were held accountable to their performative actions.

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, although 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 the boundaries of how they can act. Thus, users subscribe to societal norms that are tied to a wide diversity of gender and racialized identities that led to the production of friction and
conflict across the feeds. A social actor can never be fully outside their social and cultural contexts. The consequence of this is that undisciplined 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. Undisciplined performativity allows a user to enact bracketed forms of identity, related to entertainment and boredom; trolling, bullying, and harassment; caretaking and therapy; and flight from social stigmatization. These four thematic categories are not entirely distinct from each other, various thematic qualities of undisciplined user-generated content overlap, blurring the lines between problematic and emancipatory content. Most importantly, these performative acts of identity are most times intentionally obscured to not affect a user’s reputation.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I used the results of 12 semi-structured intensive interviews to explore the intersections between anonymity, surveillance, and identity over social media platforms. My main goal in this article was to demonstrate that performative acts of anonymity mediated through a social media platform consist of dissociated acts of self-identity that evade the disciplinary powers associated with lateral surveillance and individuation. Such practices of performative anonymity exist as undisciplined. To approach my analysis, I drew on Butler’s (1990, 2009) work on performativity and Foucault’s (1995, 2015) work on disciplinary power. The fundamental theoretical contribution from this article was the concept of undisciplined performativity to account for the complexities and nuances present in social interaction over anonymous social media platforms. This work also provides an empirical lens to demonstrate how anonymity is not inherently defined by deceptive and vitriolic acts on the behalf of users, but a wide and diverse range of social interaction that is enabled by the platform’s structural affordances. In a digital world that is rapidly becoming pervasively visible and transparent through an expanding surveillance society that values the “real name” web over anonymity or pseudonymity, it is increasingly important that we demonstrate the value of anonymous social media. It is far too easy to cast away the capacity for users to be anonymous due to the toxic climate constituted through acts of trolling and bullying. However, such acts exist within an ecosystem of practices that also include the abilities to entertain, caretake, and flee from social stigmatization. More empirical research needs to be conducted on the forms of governmentality that such platforms produce; such research must explore how anonymous social media platforms are able to mitigate digital vitriol, bullying, and harassment over platform feeds to make anonymity more palatable to contemporary communicative needs.

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**Note**

1. Data exhaust is a concept that emerges from a 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).

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