

#StopAsianHate: Facebook and Instagram aid in advocacy and the development of Asian identity

Abstract:

Social networking sites have evolved the way individuals can perform their identities and participate in online advocacy. This conference paper uses the #StopAsianHate movement, which was created after the rise in discriminatory actions against Asian individuals after the Covid-19 outbreak, to analyse how the affordances on Facebook and Instagram have facilitated the spread of community messages worldwide. Specifically, how these platforms are able to create a third space for individuals to participate in discussions that they otherwise unable to. The process looks at how Asian individuals can perform and strengthen elements of their identity by participating in the movement through affective publics.

Keywords: Covid-19, Facebook, Instagram, Identity, Community

Conference Paper:

Individuals that identify as Asian have had to endure an increased amount of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia after the spread of the Coronavirus disease. The Coronavirus disease, otherwise known as Covid-19, is a case of "viral pneumonia" that was first discovered in the People's Republic of China (World Health Organisation, 2020). Due to the outbreak beginning in an Asian country, individuals worldwide were quick to begin criticising members of the Asian community. In response to the rise in violent and discriminatory actions, numerous individuals have taken to Facebook and Instagram to combat the increased prejudice towards Asian individuals. Through the process of using the affordances provided by these social media platforms, it has also allowed Asian individuals to perform their identity that they may not have been able to in other areas of their lives. Therefore, people of Asian ancestral identity have been able to use Facebook and Instagram to advocate and promote the anti-Asian hate movement and further develop their identities in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Social networking sites have allowed a third space to form for Asian descendants to perform their identity. According to Oldenburg and Brissett (1982), a third place is a forum that enables individuals to experience what they cannot in their home and workplace. The third place creates a new area for individuals to be involved in social experiences and relationships that they would not be able to otherwise. Possibly their workplace and or home, now becoming a place of predictability. Therefore, to avoid upsetting the balance there, the individual cannot meet their needs for more diverse discussions; they feel as though a part of their identity is missing. Therefore, social networking sites allow for individuals to connect with others that share an experience or concern about feeling different from those around them – creating a community.

The idea of what a community is has evolved alongside technological developments. Traditionally, the idea of what a community consisted of was one that was solely based around geographical boundaries. However, through the development of new technologies emerged a new ideology surrounding the 'parts' that make a community. Bradshaw (2008) provides a working definition of what a community is in this era of time. He explains that community is no longer about the geographical ties between individuals, but the social relations that occur between individuals. Hence, the development of new technologies, such as social networking sites, have opened up the opportunity of a third space for individuals.

Facebook and Instagram are examples of social networking sites that have become the third space for many Asian individuals. Third place characteristics are that it is available and accessible every day for the individual to form relationships with other members that they otherwise could not have (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). Facebook and Instagram are both available for users at any time and provide a means for relationships to develop that otherwise could not without it. Both social media platforms reduce the geographical barriers that may restrict individuals from meeting and discuss their similarities. Therefore, allowing individuals' collaboration to occur around the world, rather than being geographically bound to discussing with those physically around them. They may be unable to do if the individual feels that they do not share the similar trait they want to discuss.

Asians and mixed-race individuals' identity can be complex due to the increased fluidity of choosing between racial boundaries. According to Blake (2019), those with multiple ethnic and racial ancestry have to manage multiple identities. With that, multiple elements come with those identities. These racial identities are "contextually fluid," meaning that the way an individual identifies to a race depends on several factors (Jiménez, 2004, as cited in Blake, 2019, p. 139). These factors can include their appearance as well as how an individual identifies. For example, an individual whose ethnicity is Asian and appears to have physical Asian characteristics may identify as being more westernised due to the environment that they have grown up in.

Furthermore, Goffman (1959) argues that individuals are comparable with performers who alter their identities based on who they are 'performing'; our identities are formed and evolve through the interactions we have with others. Identities have multiple elements that can contribute to making a single 'performed' identity. According to Owens et al. (2010, p. 479), some of the elements that make up an individual's identity are their "category-based identity," "group membership-based identity," and "role-based identity." This means that those of Asian descent are considered to have a fluid and/or fragmented identity.

Category-based identity and group membership-based identity are formed on how individuals perceive themselves to those around them, including similarities and differences (Owens et al., 2010). An example would be that due to the individual's physical characteristics, they may be categorised as Asian because they share similar traits to other people that have been identified as Asian. Group membership-based identity is the identity that has been reinforced through interactions with people that share the same category-based identity (Owens et al., 2010). Therefore, Facebook and Instagram have reduced the barrier for individuals to build their group membership-based identity. They provided a third space for Asian individuals to reinforce their cultural heritage. For example, on Facebook, a group founded by Asian-Australian university students known as "Subtle Asian Traits" has over 1.7 million members across the globe (Abidin & Zeng, 2020, p. 1). This group aimed to

create a space where members of the Asian community could come together to share relatable experiences that other individuals in their home or workplace may not have understood. Subtle Asian Traits created a space that allowed Asians to perform a fragment of their identity that they may have repressed around others.

Individuals have since used Subtle Asian Traits on Facebook and the affordances provided on Instagram to fight against the rising racism against the Asian community. Mineo (2021) explains in her article that anti-Asian racism can be traced back to 1871 in the United States, so there has been a rise in discrimination and violent acts towards Asian-Americans, the racism and xenophobia against Asians has sadly always been a part of America's history. However, Hswen et al. (2021) have studied the relationship between Donald Trump calling Covid-19 the 'Chinese virus' with the rise in anti-Asian opinions of public members and found a strong correlation. Since the comments, the ever-growing cases of Covid-19, and the deaths that have resulted, multiple physical acts of violence have occurred against Asian-Americans. This increased aggression towards the Asian community has led to a movement known as "Stop AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) Hate," created by the Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council (A3PCON), Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), and the Asian-American Studies Department of San Francisco State University as a way to advocate for Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders (Stop AAPI Hate, n.d.). Stop AAPI Hate has since created a Facebook page and Instagram profile to share their resources and any information regarding the movement.

Though the Stop AAPI Hate movement was initially created due to the increased aggression towards Asian individuals in America, it has since spread worldwide. This is because Asian individuals living in countries outside of America, have also reported a rise in prejudice and discrimination since the Covid-19 pandemic began. Roberto et al. (2020) have found that within Australia at least a quarter of recent attacks against Asian-Australians has been due to Covid-19. They report that Asian-Australians have been physically attacked, verbally attacked and refused entry into certain businesses. Therefore, because of their category-based identity (physical appearance), Asian-Australians have faced a rise in discrimination and also seek out

third spaces like Subtle Asian Traits, to perform a part of their identity that has been repressed due to the discrimination that could unfold.

It is through the use of Facebook and Instagram that movements like Stop AAPI Hate has been able to spread globally. One of the contributing factors to this advocacy promotion is through Asian celebrities, influencers, and high-ranking individuals coming forward to share the stories, of their own hardships as well as shining a light on others, and information on their social media platforms. Facebook and Instagram affordances allow these individuals of Asian ancestral identity to construct the narratives of their identity on the platform. According to Barassi (2018), individuals can use these platforms to present and create a highly political fragment of their identity. This is done by curating what the individual posts on their profile, commenting and interacting with other users, and what they share. These interactions create a narrative of their 'political self' and the identification of a political community. This is also an example of role-identity, the internalised identity that has formed due to taking on a role within a relationship with at least one other person (McCall & Simmons, 1966, as cited in Owens, 2010, p. 479). An individual may also sustain multiple roles through their lifetime, sometimes simultaneously depending on the situation. However, like Goffman's argument, McCall and Simmons (1966, as cited in Owens, 2010, p. 481) also argue that an individual will decide which role-identity they will choose to perform depending on who they are performing to. In the context of this situation, one could argue that the act of promoting their content to their viewers allows them to perform their political identity, because the context they are actively performing in is one of a political nature. Therefore, through online advocacy, individuals' identities will alter as who and why they are 'performing' changes.

Facebook and Instagram have also facilitated the creation of affective publics. Affective publics are created through the interconnected sentiments made by individuals online (Papacharissi & Trevey, 2018). An affective public allows for the production of disruption in a political narrative that results through connective action. This means that the affective public's identity can also appear to be fragmented due to it being created through the collective narrative of multiple individuals involved in

the public. For example, the Stop AAPI Hate social media profile can be seen as having a single political identity. However, it is likely run by multiple individuals. Simultaneously, individuals that have commented on or liked any posts the organisation has shared have performed their political identity - showing their membership to the community.

The affordance that has had a beneficial impact towards creating global communities across the globe, on Facebook and Instagram, is hashtags. Hashtags are used on social media platforms to categorize and index posts created by individuals based on the topic (Xiong et al., 2019). According to Xiong et al. (2019), individuals have begun using hashtags as a way to spread and interact in what academics call 'hashtag activism.' This form of activism is an example of participatory culture, which Jenkins and Deuze (2008) explain as the cultivation of opportunities available for individuals to create a connection with one another through their interactions online. The use of hashtags allows individuals a segue into strengthening their group membership-based identity. This is because individuals who participate in hashtags, especially those around advocacy topics, have joined a group of people who also identify with that topic. In the case of the anti-Asian hate movement, one of the more prominent hashtags circulating the web is '#stopAsianhate.' Many Asian individuals around the globe have used the hashtag to share the stories of their experiences with experiencing racism. They distribute resources on the movement and continually show their support and membership within the global Asian community.

The creation of social media platforms has allowed for the facilitation of advocacy movements around the world. The affordances that they have provided not only created and strengthened global communities but has allowed for individuals, especially those of Asian descent, to strengthen and/or perform a fragment of their identity that they otherwise could not have in other areas of their lives. With the Covid-19 pandemic still ongoing, the racism and xenophobia that is faced by the Asian community continue. However, through the affordances that Facebook and Instagram have provided, it will be interesting to see just how much further the anti-Asian hate movement can contribute to creating new communities and strengthening current ones.

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