

Digital Diaspora: Investigating Identity in ‘subtle asian traits’

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Abstract

The meteoric rise of *subtle asian traits* (SAT), a Facebook group centered around sharing memes and experiences unique to Asian individuals who balance their cultural influences with that of the Westernized society around them, has surely impacted how racial and ethnic identity is represented and engaged with. Its presence as a digital space nuances this phenomenon even further. How is a collective Asian diasporic identity understood and represented on SAT? To that end, how does this collective identity that SAT proposes inform or relate to members’ personal racial or ethnic identities? This research draws from seven semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with individuals who are members of *subtle asian traits* among other offshoot groups. A range of opinions were expressed about the community that is cultivated on SAT, of which inclusive and exclusionary aspects were cited as shaping a certain group racial identity. Participants’ personal relevance to this group identity similarly covered a range of attitudes towards SAT. The digital nature of the space is also examined in its influence and facilitation of the identity work that occurs. Overall, this analysis uncovers how SAT as a space drives racial and ethnic identity to the forefront of members’ minds and compels them to assert these identities unapologetically in contemporary and digital formats.

Keywords: racial & ethnic identity, subtle asian traits, digital spaces, collective identity

Digital Diaspora: Investigating Identity in ‘subtle asian traits’

It seemed to be out of nowhere that the now massive Facebook group *subtle asian traits* (SAT) erupted on social media. Beginning as a small group to share memes between nine Asian Australian students, the Facebook group was nothing but viral. In a matter of months from its creation in September 2018, the group amassed over 1 million members, and currently stands at almost 1.8 million members. SAT’s core purpose centers around the sharing of experiences that illustrate the hyphenated identities of Asians living in Westernized societies. Ranging from the mundane such as a supposed adoration for cultural cuisine (like bubble milk tea) to more serious topics such as experiences of racism (overt or otherwise), SAT regards itself as a space where Asians in Western societies can see themselves and their experiences represented in pop culture, where such individuals do not have to explain the subtle dynamics of their liminal identity (Kwai, 2018). Even after almost two years since its founding, SAT still retains a healthy member/audience base that is continuously craving and producing more content that focuses on the blended cultural experience.

In its ability to spark conversations about cultural identity on such a scale, SAT’s meteoric rise as a site of pop culture has been regarded as a modern-day diasporic phenomenon (Mao, 2018). Its virality was so unprecedented that at least 40 different offshoot groups resembling SAT’s format and moniker (*subtle asian* _____ or *subtle* _____ *traits*) were created in the months following September 2018 (Wu & Yuan, 2018). In SAT, members engage and articulate their hybridized identities of growing up and living as racialized individuals, yet experiencing the cultural influences of Western society; these individuals balance their racial and ethnic heritage (often the expectations of parents) with the expectation of integration into Western society. Prior to SAT, such public and online engagement of this tension in racial and

ethnic identity was not seen, especially to such a large scale. True to its name, *subtle asian traits* envisions itself as an outlet that validates the 'subtleties' of these very unique Asian identities.

As it has become a major influence in the domain of hyphenated Asian North American identity, SAT has undoubtedly exerted influence on racial and ethnic identity construction processes for its members. Additionally, identity construction work occurs within the group on a collective level to create a coherent and unified community that spans the entire world. Drawing upon data from seven interviews with members of SAT, I investigate two correlated phenomena: (1) how a collective Asian (diasporic) identity is understood or constructed on SAT, and (2) how this collective racial identity informs or relates to the individual racial and/or ethnic identities of SAT's members. From my analysis, I reveal the multiple tensions and conflicting logics that exist 'subtly' in the group, where the community in SAT appears inclusive to some, yet exclusionary to others. However, participants are nonetheless impacted by their experience with SAT, strengthening their own racial and/or ethnic identities in a plethora of pathways. Ultimately, this study offers a new insight into the intersections of identity work, race and ethnicity and digital forces, particularly in how racial and ethnic identity is valued, represented, and potentially transformed through and within digital domains.

Literature Review

Given its conception just over a year ago, *subtle asian traits* (and its adjacent Facebook groups) has not been earnestly examined as a site for social research. Despite this lack of literature focusing specifically on SAT, several scholars in the fields of race and digital media can provide theoretical foundations on which the current research can build. I consult both foundational works and emerging research in these various fields of study in order to build a comprehensive framework in approaching this project. The positions and theories presented in

this section, while not explicitly about SAT, can be applied to the digital space, and help illuminate how identities – individual or collective – may be formed.

Racial & Diasporic Identity Formation

When discussing racial identity in Western societies, one cannot ignore the contributions of Omi & Winant’s (2015) foundational racial formation theory, particularly within the United States. In their assessment of race and the discourse surrounding it (as it exists in the United States), Omi & Winant propose that “*racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed,*” through specific sociohistorical processes (2015, p. 109, emphasis in original). These processes encompass the unstable and highly political nature of how race is defined – from who is constructing such definitions to when and where said definitions are being recognized. The central argument in Omi & Winant’s discussion is how race is socially constructed in ways that support hegemonic racial hierarchies and interactions; thus, not only is race intensely political in its formation, but also in its praxis. In the history of Eurocentric societies, race has been governed or defined by a variety of institutions such as science, religion, and politics. Omi & Winant chart how race has been defined throughout these epochs, with definitions oscillating between varying degrees of essentialist and constructionist conceptualizations (e.g. eugenics and scientific racism in the Enlightenment compared to political categorizations of race into ‘multiracial’ or ‘Chinese’ instead of ‘Asian’). These definitions, as dynamic and ever-changing as they might be, are crucial to informing how racialization – the projection of racial meanings onto previously ‘un-racialized’ bodies, behaviours, or other social artifacts/institutions – occurs and is directly tied to enacted racism. For example, monosodium glutamate (MSG) being linked with Chinese food, despite just being a food additive, shows how racialization occurs in a

subconscious and banal manner, and can lead to a seeming racial hierarchy, even within the milieu of cuisines (Mosby, 2009).

Omi & Winant's discussion of racial formation also addresses how race is defined along varying levels of (inter)personal understandings and structural/institutional meanings, as well as the dialectic relationship between them. Omi & Winant propose the concept of 'racial projects,' expressions of race that offer "*interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings*" within a broader structural context (2015, p. 125, emphasis in original). These racial projects help connect the discursive meanings of race to its manifestations in individual and socio-structural experiences, which in turn influence discourse around race in an effort to establish widespread (possibly hegemonic) understandings in society. With this consideration, racial formation can be seen as an iterative synthesis of interacting racial projects on a societal level, where numerous different representations of race on varying levels (individual vs. structural) inform one another in a dialectical relationship.

Omi & Winant, in their theorization of racial formation, ultimately point to the power dynamic embedded in processes of defining or 'making race' (p. 106). The act of setting clear bounded meanings on what race is, looks like, or is performed is fraught with political implications, as the creation of such racial meanings will inevitably exclude another group of individuals, or perhaps create a chain of circumstances that ultimately affect one's social positioning. To understand racial identity formation is to understand how race itself as a concept is formed (which has already proved to be quite a difficult task); above all else, Omi & Winant's theory reaffirms that such processes of defining race/identity are never separated from each other, as personal and collective racial identities are temporally, spatially, and contextually ever-evolving.

Beyond larger discussions of race, other scholars have written specifically about Asian experiences in Westernized contexts. Though much research has focused on the United States, the degree of integration/assimilation of Asians in Western societies has had particular impacts on their racial experiences and identities (Lee & Kye, 2016; Pyke & Dang, 2003; Schacter, 2014). Despite assumptions around Asian (North) Americans achieving full integration in American society, and subsequently assumed social parity with whites, Lee & Kye's (2016) study suggests that racial disparities may seemingly be masked through the model minority stereotype. Their research finds that though assimilation is occurring, the presence of glass ceilings and lack of upward mobility still limits the socioeconomic success of Asian Americans, suggesting that assimilation does not in fact dampen racial divides, but may in fact perpetuate them in restricting the levels of attainability or success afforded to Asian Americans (Lee & Kye, 2016, p. 256). Schacter (2014) looks specifically at South Asians in the United States, interrogating the conditions through which these individuals may identify with the panethnic label of Asian American, especially given the sociocultural impacts of 9/11 that still have ripples today. The data from her study suggests that while integration of Indian immigrants may position them to be more likely to identify with a panethnic label, the specific discrimination that this community faces (possibly because of the aftermath of 9/11 and a visual association to Muslim individuals) actually deters such identification. Schacter concludes that this correlation derives from racialization processes that understand South Asians as distinct from broader label of Asian American (p. 1508). Both Lee & Kye's and Schacter's research point toward a current state of Asian American race relations in which racialization and assimilation occur simultaneously to create unique racialized experiences. The definitions around what 'Asian-ness' is inform how

such racialization takes place, which can consequently impact how certain racialized individuals choose to identify with these labels.

In tandem with this discussion around labels and identification, Espiritu (2019) makes several integral contributions when discussing panethnicity as a label and identity. Most shifts towards panethnic organization grew out of the 1960s Civil Rights Movements, where racial lumping (categorizing different ethnicities under one label) on the part of states to control the allocation of resources was co-opted to create solidarity among the racial group and to resist systemic oppression. "Panethnicity is thus largely a product of racial categorization," and is inherently imbued with political ramifications, and (as Omi & Winant discuss) is attached to any form of racial definition (Espiritu, 2019, p. 263). Espiritu also explores how and which individuals may personally relate to panethnic labels, suggesting that the same forces which allowed for panethnicity to become a collective spirit could also translate to individual panethnic identification. For example, the racialization process of racialized people who grow up in the US may predispose them to more willingly identify with a panethnic label compared to how their parents may identify (i.e. the way they are racialized shapes their self-identity). Espiritu also mentions Ty & Goellnicht's (2004) support for the term 'Asian North American' as another example of panethnicity. Ty & Goellnicht propose such a term to address the limiting nature of 'Asian American', a term which has seemed to historically exclude certain ethnic groups like Filipinos and South Asians, and excludes consideration of Asians in Canada whose experiences resemble those of Asian Americans. In the development of this panethnic label, individuals and racial groups alike must devote "serious effort at reimagining what forces and influences shape and constitute the subjects who identify themselves as belonging under the broad reach of 'Asian North American'" (Ty & Goellnicht, 2004, p. 2). In my study, I adopt the term 'Asian North

American' in an attempt to simultaneously recognize the heterogeneity of what 'Asian North American' entails, as well as the connected experiences of Asians living in North American. Between Espiritu's discussion of panethnicity as a whole, and Ty & Goellnicht's suggested term, panethnicity proves to be a pluralistic and contested label that represents a discursive realm of inclusion versus exclusion, and even the ability to create alliances both domestic and transnationally; such phenomena surely inform how collective identity is formed and negotiated among racialized individuals in digital spaces.

Definitions of race do not only occur from outside ethnic communities, as Pyke & Dang (2003) illustrate in their study of second-generation Korean-American youth. Through examining their participants' usage of terms like "FOB" ('fresh off the boat,' implying lack of assimilation) or "whitewashed" (lack of cultural acknowledgement), Pyke & Dang uncover how bicultural identity is dependent on "intraethnic othering...the specific othering processes that occur among coethnics in subordinated groups" (2003, p. 152). To call someone 'whitewashed' assumes the understanding of immutable differences between Asian and white – that Asian will perpetually be seen as the foreigner to whites and can never be 'fully' American; whereas, to call someone 'FOB' assumes the expectation of assimilation and engagement with white social artifacts and culture. In both scenarios, bicultural individuals walk the line of their hybrid identities, a line that is quite arbitrary if not undefined. The use of these terms reflects a racial project in the lens that Omi & Winant purport, where individuals expend serious ideological work to resist racial assumptions around identity, but consequently perpetuate another form of othering in policing what it means to be an Asian in Western society. A social geography develops, whereby markers and practices of 'FOBs' or 'whitewashed' are seen as sites that people interact with or avoid (Pyke & Dang, 2003, p. 163).

Several other scholars have contributed vast theoretical knowledge in exploring how the above discussions of race may relate to the diaspora of racialized people. The phenomenon of diaspora is another sociohistorical process (in line with Omi & Winant's theorization) that reveals the relations of racialized individuals with their cultural homelands, histories, and heritage (Ang, 2005; Bishop & Phillips, 2004). As Bishop & Phillips state, "the traumas that birthed Asian diasporic communities play an integral role in identity formation for these communities;" rather than emphasizing the individual experiences of diaspora, the authors remind their audience of the structural (and often violent) elements that bring diasporas into existence in the first place (2004, p. 165). Examples of such violent traumas can be seen in Ang's (2005) exploration into Asian historical experiences in Australia as the nation shifts into a globalized community. Ang describes how Australian policies have historically socialized white Australians to feel threatened by changing ethnic landscapes, where Asians in Australia are "still deeply associated with the foreign, the strange, with alien otherness, and with invasion" (2005, p. 122). While these political actions were not taken against Asians specifically, their impacts on Asians who live outside of their cultural homeland shape how diaspora is experienced by these individuals, in turn shaping what they define as a diasporic identity.

Just as the histories of diasporas are vital to this discussion, Lee (2004) asserts that the future of diaspora and those entangled within it afford the same importance. Beyond tracing connections to a historical community in relation to current circumstances, Lee opts to also investigate how diasporic trajectories affect negotiations around identity. Diasporic identities/individuals can be thought of as hyphenated, hybridized between two cultures: one of their heritage, and another of their current geography. Without clear constructions of such identities, diasporic individuals exist in a state of entropy, a state of unsettlement in identity, that

seeks an equilibrium between the cultural forces. Lee suggests that diasporas need not be concerned with privileging the host country or homeland, but rather accept such feelings of displacement to allow for heterogeneity and diversity of diasporic futures (p. 75). Evidently, the impacts of Asian diaspora, whether in its past, present or future, warrant thoughtful consideration of structural and interpersonal forces that affect how individuals construct and conceptualize hyphenated racial identities. As “the constantly changing experience of being in diaspora [is] crucial to the transitional consciousness that diasporas inhabit,” the technological advances that surround diasporas may prove to be an avenue through which such futures that Lee discusses may materialize (p. 74).

Digital Communities, Collective Identities

Digital media offers a new and emerging outlet for collections of individuals to converge around similar interests and/or demographics. However, the proliferation of these new technologies also requires contextualization, especially in regards to discourse on identity formation (racial or otherwise). Marshall McLuhan's (1964) in his pivotal work, *Understanding Media*, famously remarks that “the medium is the message... it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (p. 9). Considering McLuhan's contributions, it is important to understand that while digital media and spaces afford a high degree of connectivity and communicative power for its users, media itself is not neutral; rather, as McLuhan's famed quote unveils, media moderates how communication occurs within and outside of (online) communities. For contemporary forms of media, the role of media shaping communications can manifest as mechanisms that express approval, disapproval or other emotions (e.g. Facebook's 'like/react' button), or as something more elusive, such as norms on where specific content belong.

Along with the increasing prevalence of digital spaces, memes have also evolved to become a powerful and defining form of communication in online enclaves. Originally coined in 1976 by Richard Dawkins as “small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation,” memes have now evolved to be digital artifacts with common characteristics in content, form, and/or stance, an awareness of each other, and are circulated, imitated, and/or transformed by many people (Shifman, 2014, p. 2, 41). Though memes may appear to be simple expressions of humour for a new Internet-savvy generation and public, their presence, ubiquity, and dominance as a mode of online communication signal a memetic capacity for reflecting and influencing social and cultural processes (Eschler & Menking, 2018; Gal et al., 2016; Shifman, 2014). In particular, the symbolic power of memes, from their production to their engagement and distribution in digital spaces, performs integral social identity work. Memes can only exist as representations of identities insofar as a certain set of knowledge or experience is required to properly engage in memetic work. Coupled with the necessity that memes be produced and shared en masse within digital spaces, identity construction therefore becomes a collectivized “performative” activity that asserts norms around specific groups of individuals (Eschler & Menking, 2018; Gal et al., 2016). Internet memes are far from being as naïve and apolitical as they may seem, but in fact offer insight into tense social processes like identity construction; the ubiquity of memes in digital space deeply impacts audiences who consume and produce these socio-technological artifacts, and shape how they conceptualize identities that they may or may not relate to.

Jenkins et al. (2013) also discuss how modern circulation and distribution of media follows a “participatory model of culture” that implicates individuals as both consuming and actively shaping or reimagining the content presented to them (p. 2). Similar to Eschler &

Menking, Jenkins et al. consider that members have evolved to become active participants in sharing and defining the media landscape around them. Not only is the content that they engage with directly impacted but how media institutions and platforms operate are also indirectly shaped by participants' actions (e.g. voicing disapproval, increased use of certain functions, etc.). The scholars also interrogate a concept called 'spreadability', or the technical and social aspects, attributes, and structures that make it easier to circulate content. This idea is tied to how Jenkins et al. speak about the rapid nature of digital platforms, where such spaces can accelerate the reach and scope of content compared to traditional media channels. It is through spreadability that Jenkins et al. asserts how content (and the cultural ideas associated with these artifacts) can jump and travel to/between other mediums, platforms, markets, or domains. Thus, digital media – and the content that spreads in such spaces – provides opportunities for people to adopt cultural ideas and reconsider how other social relations and systems may operate.

The success of online communities cannot rely solely on memes and content alone, however. Members within these spaces must be continuously engaged and actively cultivate such spaces for such arenas of collective identity to thrive. Ren et al.'s (2012) research demonstrates how member attachment in online communities, specifically in regards to group/identity-based attachment, is correlated to greater longevity of and activity in online communities. Due to the decentralized nature of digital spaces where online communities form and congregate, in that there is a lack of physical obligation to 'show up', many communities often struggle to keep members present or engaged (this is another example of McLuhan's sentiments, where the medium directly affects degrees of communication and/or online activity). In their experiments, Ren et al. found that identity-based attachment – connection to group character or purpose – leads to greater attachment with community at large, and also aids in the participation and

retention of members. These findings suggest that identity formation and online communities perhaps operate in a parallel fashion, where the creation of collective identities inherently creates a community, which in turn modifies and changes further identity formation. Digital media, as both artifact and space, are heavily consequential to the present exploration of identity, especially given its pervasiveness in the 21st century.

Race in Digital Domains

Ever since the onset of these new technologies, discourses around race have been influenced by the discourse around digital media. Scholars position digital media as “altering our understandings of what race is as well as nurturing new types of inequality along racial lines,” where a new age of digital production shifts how race and racism take form (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013, p. 2). This sentiment echoes and integrates the themes of the literature presented above, where digital spaces are not only influencing and shaping new definitions of race, but at the same time, certain digital artifacts and instruments (platforms or actual pieces of media); thus, emerging technologies clearly shape social understandings of race, but are also part of hegemonic systems. This is particularly poignant for young people of colour, who are quickly adopting these technologies as a potential avenue for discovering and negotiating their racial and ethnic identities (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013, p. 6). Although it is worthwhile to examine how the digital is affecting race, Chun (2013) proposes that race can be viewed as technology itself. This perspective provides an avenue for not only deconstructing essentialist narratives about race, but also offers insight into how the concept of race connects visible markers to the specific cultural meanings; here, race becomes a conceptual mechanism that connects socially constructed cultural ideas to certain bodies and how they are treated. By situating race as technology, Chun argues that it may prove useful to look beyond what race is to what race does,

granting race a kind of agency over how identities and experiences may be shaped. With this line of thinking, Chun provides an opportunity to look at how race may act as technology within Internet spaces, and how digital features and spaces may be implicated in how race is performed and enacted in the everyday

The intersection of Asian identity and digital space, while experiencing a recent spotlight, has been occurring for quite some time. Ignacio (2004), for instance, researched an online newsgroup based on Filipino identity during the mid-to-late 1990s. Even during the early years of the Internet, new technologies functioned as transnational spaces that allow for the convergence of many definitions and understandings of nation(hood), diaspora, and race. Through her digital ethnography, Ignacio found that the deconstruction of ascribed definitions of what it means to be Filipino, and the subsequent reconstruction of the identity beyond physical boundaries of nations were particular themes of intrigue (2004, p. 5). This newsgroup forum repositioned Filipino culture from the margins to center in a sea of public discourse for emerging digital natives, providing racially specific outlets for individuals to negotiate and consequently construct their own racial and diasporic identities. In considering more contemporary digital media, though mainstream media and pop culture lacked sufficient representation for Asians (particularly in Western societies), digital and viral media such as YouTube provided new avenues of “cultural production” for Asian Americans (Balance, 2012, p. 141). As various Asian content creators achieved viral success on platforms such as YouTube, they were cemented into a new celebrity status, which Balance (2012) perceives as a form of affective labour for young Asian audiences who could see themselves represented in a form of media. This interpretation draws from an understanding that viral media depends not only on attract online attention and participation, but also on the ability to craft and “touch upon a shared set of affective investments

and affiliations” (Balance, p. 145). Between Balance and Ignacio’s research, these scholars respectively demonstrate how online spaces can provide better understanding to those enveloped in diaspora and racial tensions, offer clarity to varying histories of oppression, and open opportunities to experience a sense of racial connectedness and community, all of which are crucial to individual and collective identity formation.

Race and digital media are at a new and exciting juncture, where each seem to be as dynamic as ever. Just as Omi & Winant propose, attempts to define race, even (and especially) for oneself, proves to be a difficult task that is fraught with a plethora of social and political tensions. Modern digital media, which are changing and updating what seems to be every month, complicate these construction processes even further. Taking into account the theoretical positions of the scholars mentioned, this research provides a contemporary analysis into the multifaceted process of collectively constructing understandings of ‘Asianness’ through digital spaces. Furthermore, these collective understandings bear implications for how one’s personal racial or ethnic identity may be developed, nuanced or asserted, processes which are also explored. As a result, I chart into a new frontier in racial digital discourse and hopefully provide novel insight into how modern digital media users employ contemporary technologies and communication within a larger racial landscape and diaspora.

Methods

This research draws upon seven semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with individuals who are members of *subtle asian traits* (SAT) among other offshoot groups. Two of these interviews were done in person in Vancouver, BC, while the rest were conducted over online video chat. These participants ranged in age from 19 to 39 years old, though majority of them were in their early to mid-20s. These individuals all grew up or resided in North America,

with one being an international student studying in the US. Racial and ethnic identity was varied among participants, though several of them did identify with an East Asian identity (e.g. Vietnamese, Chinese) – others identified as Sikh/Punjabi or Filipino. Participants were also adept digital natives, using about three or four separate social media channels on average, and being a member of about six *subtle asian*-type Facebook groups. In the research sample, three participants identified as male and four participants identified as female, with no participants identifying as non-binary or other gender identities. All participants were college-educated or currently attending college/university, and currently living in metropolises around North America.

Due to the nature of this research, I used purposive sampling methods to recruit participants who were members or had experience with SAT or its offshoot groups. Non-Asian identifying individuals were excluded from the sample, regardless of membership in or experience with SAT or offshoot groups, as the research primarily engages with Asian racial and ethnic identity. Recruitment happened through two principal means. I first posted a short survey (collecting basic contact and demographic information) in three different *subtle asian* groups, including SAT. I also used snowball sampling, sending a recruitment letter to those in my personal network who had friends or peers that fit the inclusion criteria of this study.

It is important to also locate my positionality as a researcher in this project. As I am a member of SAT and other offshoot groups myself, including all of those that I recruited from, I am aware of the subtleties (for lack of a better word) that surrounded each of the spaces. The peers with whom I asked to share my recruitment letter were also members of these groups. Moreover, me being a second-generation Asian person studying in university also brings a level of connection to my research participants, making them possibly more inclined to share their

experiences with me. My membership and experience with these groups also provides me with background knowledge that informed my interview questions, and was also helpful when references to certain artifacts or memes were made (either by the participant or myself). Beyond affording a level of privilege in accessing this knowledge, my membership and experience with SAT also implicates how I myself may be involved or affected by the phenomena that I investigate. I am not without my own biases on how SAT represents and impacts Asian diasporic identity for its members (a fact that is inevitable), but regardless, this study very much shows that the spectrum of attitudes towards what SAT has done for Asian diasporic/North American individuals and communities is quite varied, even among a small sample.

Interviews on average lasted around 60 minutes, and consisted of three distinctive types of questions. I first asked some demographic questions about age, racial and/or ethnic identity, home life and upbringing, and use of social media or online communities. I then proceeded to questions concerning race and racial experiences (positive, neutral, or negative) to understand how connected each participant was with their racial or ethnic identity, and how they individually perceive what it means to be Asian (North American). These questions also reveal some of the sentiments participants had prior to approaching or experiencing SAT or its offshoot groups. The last set of questions I asked participants focused on experiences and perspectives around SAT as a space through which race is expressed, affirmed, embraced, or challenged, allowing participants to reflect and share their opinions of SAT approximately a year to a year and a half after its inception and meteoric/viral expansion. All interviews were audio-recorded, with the interviews conducted online video-recorded as well. Afterwards, I transcribed all the interviews, and participants were provided with a copy of the transcript to review for accuracy and confidentiality. In reviewing the transcripts, I employed an inductive approach to generate

cohesive themes that connected separate participants' experiences and perspectives, finding a range of opinions about Asian identity in North America, as well as how it exists on SAT.

Discussion

Participants' varied responses illustrate how the definitional work occurring in SAT proves to be productive for some, while oppressive or exclusionary for others. Nonetheless, SAT's dominant presence in the digital domains that many Asian North American individuals frequent have made them more acutely cognizant of racial and ethnic dynamics at play in society at large. This discussion falls into three predominant themes: (1) *Inclusion, Exclusion & Collective Identity* – an analysis of participants' attitudes towards the community on SAT and its construction of a group identity; (2) *Personal Racial & Ethnic Identity* – looking at how participants personally compare and/or contrast their racial and ethnic identities to SAT's community; and (3) *A Digital Space* – examining the role of digital space on these phenomena. On a collective level, participants mention the multiplicity of factors that contribute to how racial and ethnic community on SAT is seen as inclusive or exclusionary. Out of these characteristics, participants identify a racialized group identity for SAT, whether it is something they relate to or something they feel disconnected from. When considering their personal racial and ethnic identities with respect to the racialized group identity that SAT purports to represent, participants saw a variety of similarities and differences, as well as opportunities to engage or develop their personal racial identities further. Regardless of whether participants feel SAT is a positive or negative force for broader understandings of Asian North Americans, the group identity that is constructed on SAT also seems to strengthen or solidify each participants' conceptualization of their racial and ethnic identities. Throughout both of these themes of collective and individual racial identity, the digital nature of SAT has ramifications for how culture and understanding is

shared and communicated between members, highlighting how technical features of these spaces can actively shape the identity work that occurs.

Inclusion, Exclusion, & Collective Identity

Participants ranged in level of connectedness with their racial and/or ethnic community prior to SAT’s conception. This connectedness provides an appropriate backdrop for how they understand SAT’s digital racial and ethnic community. Though they cite humorous content and network referrals as reasons for why they initially joined SAT among its offshoots, several participants also remarked about the desire to find connection to a racial community. Khoi, for example, describes how he “joined SAT to be a part of an online community of Asians, especially Asians who grew up in the Western world,” because of a deep “longing for something like that.” JT also expressed similar sentiments when I asked why he initially joined SAT:

Being 20,000 miles or whatever away from home and the only connection to family and friends from home is Facebook. Being away, it’s hard to communicate with them a lot of the times, and a lot of them don’t share the experiences I do as an international student. But when I was looking through SAT, there are all these Asians from across the world experiencing the same thing I did, that’s very comforting.

As an international student from Asia and studying in the US, JT sought out a connection that simultaneously acknowledges his Asian upbringing and American experiences. Both Khoi’s and JT’s reasoning for participating in SAT when it was first launched – one that is echoed by other participants too – suggests a larger collective yearning for Asian representation that encapsulates the experiences of living or being brought up in Western society, something that SAT seems to accomplish. However, having been about a year and a half since the Facebook group first gained notoriety, several participants now mention their critiques and waning engagement with SAT, citing certain exclusionary undertones present in the group’s discourse. In this section, I chart how some participants view SAT as an inclusive and welcoming space, whereas others now see

the group as deteriorating into a restrictive community that reproduces existing racial hierarchies, and how these perspectives may feed into the construction of a supposed group identity for SAT.

To some, SAT and its offshoot groups represent a new avenue through which Asian individuals from around the world can congregate in a unified and inclusive racial community. These spaces allow members to voice and express their experiences, frustrations, or desires for racial representation that they see as lacking, especially within North American or Eurocentric contexts. In reference to the offshoot group *subtle asian makeup*, Ally, a Vietnamese American woman, remarks:

I really appreciated that group, because growing up and even now, there's not a lot of Western beauty things geared towards Asian people. I would never be able to follow a makeup tutorial, because my eyes do not look like the YouTuber's eyes, or the hair, I could never have that kind of hair because my hair just isn't the same. And so, having that group and being able to see people that look like me doing really cool things with makeup or beauty...was very empowering for me.

In this quote, Ally suggests that a historical exclusion in North American beauty markets or products may have led to her affinity for *subtle asian makeup*; this may indicate how racial dynamics or even experiences of racism may aid in shaping SAT and communities like it as inclusive spaces that recognize Asian (North American)-centered narratives. Kevin speaks about the camaraderie that one could feel due to shared traumas from racism, whether they may be microaggressions or more blatant forms of verbal attacks, where he feels part of "an in-group since [he] had experienced different forms of racism...[because] you can identify with other people who had felt various forms of discrimination and you can get people to empathize with them." Therefore, SAT's allure of inclusivity is that it offers a forum for Asian identifying individuals to not only bond over specific cultural practices, but also to acknowledge and possibly resist anti-Asian racism that persists in society.

Another key feature that many participants mention as contributing to SAT's inclusive nature is the aspect of relatability. As a platform that uses memes as a dominant or primary form of communication, relatability of content proves to be a key reason why participants are drawn to SAT. "I find one the main ways that memes are appraised by is how relatable they are," Khoi tells me when I ask about memes shared on SAT, "aside from how funny they are." The relatability of memes is tied to the collective approval (and therefore success) for whatever that meme may come to represent; as such, if SAT is built upon representations of Asian (North American) practices, experiences, or attitudes that a majority of members can relate to, they may logically consider the group is an inclusive space as because it connects to such a wide audience. Amy, a Punjabi woman, reflects this importance of relatability in the offshoot groups as well:

I like *subtle curry traits* the best, it's a lot more relatable...*curry traits* is for the Indians, and they're still technically Asians, but I guess there's a subgroup because they're a little different from your 'typical' Asians.

Amy here considers the relatability of SAT versus the relatability of *subtle curry traits*, an offshoot of SAT that focuses on the lived experiences of South Asians in particular. The relatability of this offshoot group draws Amy closer towards it as she more closely identifies as Indo Canadian over Asian, underscoring the significance of having relatable content to hosting an inclusive digital space. From the relatability of content to the similarity in racial experiences, SAT's construction as an inclusive racial and ethnic community informs what a collective racial/ethnic identity may look like on the group, which I will explore later in this section.

Just as aspects of SAT play a significant role in marking the group as a welcoming racial community to all identities¹ and experiences, some participants also point out how these same aspects may be excluding individuals as well. Specifically, several participants remark about conceptualizations of what is 'visually' considered as 'Asian' or 'belonging to Asian community,' perspectives which create a narrow and exclusive racial and ethnic community. These ideas elucidate subtle frictions that exist within a pan-Asian label and expose how intraethnic marginalization may be occurring within SAT's racial and ethnic community. All participants mention how common thinking around terms like 'Asian' or 'Asian Canadian/American' often excludes or neglects to consider certain groups in its definition. Particularly, JT makes reference to skin colour as a marker for how someone could be considered Asian in North American society, and possibly in SAT as well:

I'm just going to say if you're light-skinned, you're good to go. If you're dark-skinned, too bad, you're not Asian... When people refer to Asians, they generally refer to light-skinned Asians.

Here, JT stresses the importance of the visual presentations of race to understanding what Asian means, a tension that already exists outside of SAT and seems to be reflected in the Facebook group as well. This indicates that while SAT can act as a haven for people to express their traumas with racism, the group's presence may also inadvertently contribute to racism against other individuals, excluding even those who belong or identify with the Asian community.

Many participants also express how SAT is constructed as mainly East Asian (i.e. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese), and how this largely excludes other Asian identities,

¹ Though SAT focuses on representing Asian experiences (an idea that appears to be quite contested by members), the Facebook group itself is open for anyone to join regardless of racial or ethnic identity. Thus, the group also includes several non-Asian identifying members too.

specifically Southeast and South Asian individuals. Amy’s comments above regarding relatability in SAT and *subtle curry traits* – though it may showcase inclusivity in SAT – concurrently exposes how there is an inherent limitation that separates South Asians from belonging to an Asian (North American) racial category. These sentiments may be linked to the dichotomy of skin colour mentioned with JT’s remarks, with the ‘whiteness’ of East Asian identities being understood as the staple for Asian representation. Samantha, a Filipino woman, continues this discussion about skin tone as an exclusionary factor in the community when I ask who may be excluded when we speak of Asians or Asian North Americans:

Being brown makes me not feel like I’m a part of that community. I think the term Asian and Asian american² is just one huge monolith which really only focuses on Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese are kind of joining that group. In general, most Southeast and South Asians aren’t really a part of that... I think that race is very much phenotypic... it’s how people racialize you when they first see you.

Beyond the internal hierarchies being drawn within a racial community, Samantha also makes note of the monolithic nature in the way that ‘Asian’ is understood in both SAT and in broader North American contexts. By virtue of phenotypically presenting as something other than the monolith that she mentions, Samantha is already visually excluded from such a community; regardless of how relatable the content on SAT may be, the fact that she does not often see herself represented in the media shown there fundamentally showcases how SAT may act as a exclusive community despite efforts to brand itself as inclusive and open.

² In my interview with her, Samantha specifically made a note to use a lowercase ‘a’ in reference to ‘Asian American’ due to her critical attitudes towards American assimilation and US colonialism in the Philippines. These phenomena, though not explored in this analysis, may also contribute to how Filipinos in broader North American society are racialized differently – a process that may be mirrored in SAT.

Some participants also express how SAT is complicit in furthering racial discourses that pertain to Asians and other racial groups. Britney extrapolates some of the exclusionary aspects of SAT that other participants have mentioned above:

Ervin: What do you think about the memes that are shared on SAT?

Britney: A lot of the time, they're problematic...I personally find some things offensive in the sense that it either downplays our own Asian diaspora identity or Asian identity, and other times it pushes down other races that I cannot condone. A lot of SAT posts don't bring up the fact that we perpetuate anti-Blackness, perpetuate the fact that 'Black people are inferior to us', and that white people are the standard we are trying to move towards.

The discourse that occurs on SAT is not removed from the racial dynamics of outside of digital worlds. Rather, Britney eloquently situates these discourses in a way that is reminiscent of Omi & Winant's concept of racial projects. She describes how the memes that are shared in SAT create a collective racial understanding of 'Asianness' that interacts with how 'Asian' is understood in 'offline' North American contexts, as well as interacting with racial projects that involve other racial groups. Britney specifically implicates how Asian representations in SAT feed into anti-Black racist discourse that is especially poignant in the US. For some participants, SAT's role in allowing reductive representations about racial groups discourages their involvement or engagement with the group and may explain why they view SAT as exclusionary.

Despite being open for anyone to join, and being primarily dominated by (East) Asian members and other members of colour, why does racism appear to be such a problematic feature of SAT? The geopolitical origins of the Facebook group may offer insight for this question. SAT was founded by nine Asian Australian students, and as Ang (2005) explains, Australia's historical racial policies have created a particular attitude towards racism in the country. As Khoi explains:

I've been frustrated to find that a disproportionate amount of Asians from Australia seem to be the least politically aware of the stereotypes and racism

Asians face, and I attribute that the culture of Australia having casual racism be very accepted and normalized.

Khoi interrogates how geographic differences in understandings of racism, from its severity to what may constitute it, contribute to SAT's attitude towards the issue. The dynamics of the racial landscape where SAT was founded has subtle impacts on how racism may be accepted or resisted in the group. Conflicting logics around racism that remain unnegotiated may potentially push certain members away, and ultimately paint a perspective that sees SAT as an insular and exclusive racial and/or ethnic community.

Between attitudes of inclusivity or exclusivity, participants mention certain defining characteristics which shape what SAT's racialized group identity looks like. A recurring theme that linked many of the participants responses was an emphasis on shared experiences. Whether it is a telling of enduring microaggressions or a recounting of growing up in a culturally liminal space, SAT's group identity seems to be centered on the shared experiences unique to Asian individuals from Western societies. But why these experiences in particular? Kevin explains:

No one had really talked about the shared experiences of growing up with an immigrant parent in such a way that was consumable, shareable, and that was refreshing. So that's why it was such a big thing.

Much of SAT's success can be credited to how its group identity was constructed around its relatable and seemingly common experiences that many Asian North American people identified with. Kevin continues with this line of thinking later in my interview with him, mentioning how powerful it was, "being in our in-group, because we're not used to that." Much like Ally's statements at the beginning of this section, Kevin alludes to how the historical exclusion of Asian narratives and voices in pop culture and public discourse in North America may have provided an opportunity for SAT to take hold as a popular space that welcomed these shared experiences as points of bonding and racial/ethnic camaraderie or unity.

For Britney, the shared experiences that inform SAT's racialized group identity primarily come from racial or cultural traumas that Asians in North America may face from Western society. In her experience, SAT's community identity coalesces around the struggles of being between worlds, of being seen as a 'perpetual foreigner.' She tells me:

Community-wise, it's based on shared experiences, rather than differences or nuances in the experience. I think [SAT's] main foundation of this built racial community is based on a lot of the negative parts of what we felt when we grew up. Whether it's through "Go back home to your country, speak English/the language of the land," that sort of thing. It doesn't really focus on the positive aspects of the Asian community.

Here, Britney shows that the shared experiences which inform what SAT's collective racial identity often contain trauma and racism. This pattern which she observes as shaping the group's identity may not be a universally held sentiment, but does echo the motivations participants had when they initially joined SAT; the group provides a space through which participants who have experienced racism or other negative circumstances as a result of their race or ethnicity can feel validated and seen by others who may have encountered similar situations.

Aside from the experiences that Britney highlights, the nostalgia associated with growing up with traditional Asian parents is another key feature of SAT's group identity. Several participants spoke about how represented they felt when they saw memes or jokes regarding experiences they went through as someone Asian in a Western society. Ally speaks about this affinity for seeing her Asian upbringing appear on SAT:

For the jokes to both be Asian, but it's definitely Western Asian³, Asians that have grown up being misunderstood by their peers or have grown up with similar parents that have similar personalities. It really identifies with what I've

³ Here, Ally refers to Asians in Western society, and not Asians in the Western parts of Asia.

experienced growing up and how I’ve viewed my family, my culture, my community.

The fact that the content shared on SAT speaks directly to the cultural upbringing in Western society that many members like Ally experienced is notable. Here, Ally engages Balance’s (2012) discussion of how viral media, much like that which appears on SAT, requires a connection to an audience’s ‘affective interests.’ It is this appeal to deeper racial experiences that allows posts and memes about shared experiences to shape what SAT’s group identity looks like. These memes that represent shared experiences are an example of the social identity work that can occur on a collective level (Eschler & Menking, 2018), distinguishing the community centered around SAT as unique from other racial or ethnic communities. The underlying tenet of these shared experiences is its diasporic nature – where Asian culture, practice, and tradition as it exists in North American context have been transformed into an aspect of this digital and collective racial identity.

This section highlights how collective racial and ethnic understandings are formed and created on SAT as a space, resulting in the development of a racialized group identity that underlies the activity that occurs on the platform. From the construction or defining of this racial community, participants express varying degrees of inclusion or exclusion that seems to mirror their level of inclusion in Asian American/Canadian communities outside of SAT. On one hand, many East Asian identifying participants remark about how SAT offers a new and inclusive space through which people can embrace their diasporic Asian identity. However, other participants also critique SAT’s exclusionary undertones that are predicated on racist and colorist frameworks. These ideas of inclusion and exclusion fit within Espiritu’s (2019) framework of panethnicity, citing how panethnic labels and organizations becomes sites of negotiation. Pre-existing racial dynamics that participants experience prior to when SAT was created is deeply

influential for how collective racial dynamics on the group are formed, whether they view the space as inclusive or exclusive. In some cases, SAT is an outlet through which the burden of racism is lifted, whereas for others, racist exclusion continues. A racialized group identity forms out of the factors which participants credit with making SAT an inclusive or exclusive racial and ethnic community, the so-called 'subtle traits' of being Asian. In the next section, I explore how participants' personal racial and ethnic identities relate or may be informed by SAT's collective racial identity.

Personal Racial & Ethnic Identity

Just as the participants I interviewed had a variety of opinions regarding SAT's racial and ethnic community, they also had varying levels of connection towards the collective racial identity that SAT's proposes. I begin this section by reviewing the spectrum of alignment between participants' personal racial and/or ethnic identities with that of SAT's group identity to understand the individual relations that participants have with the Facebook group. Afterwards, I explore how these attitudes inform an elevated recognition for one's racial and/or ethnic identity, regardless of how aligned they may be with the collective racial identity in SAT.

Amy explains how SAT's group identity allows her to connect with others by cementing how the group is inclusive of a variety of Asian identities:

I definitely think it's helping bring people together and identify themselves as Asian and knowing that there's this stuff that's funny, relates to us, and that it's cool to be Asian.

For Amy, the collective racial identity that is represented in SAT is highly relevant to her and reaffirms her identity as Asian. She remarks about how SAT highlights the positive aspects of Asian identity and could inspire others to embrace such a label with the knowledge that there is public acceptance and approval for this diversity. This suggests that SAT's group identity may

align with those who view the group as inclusive and productive for racial/Asian representation in Western media/pop culture. Notably, despite East Asian voices comprising a large share of content on SAT, Amy as a Sikh/Punjabi person still feels connected to the space and its group identity. Amy continues:

While 'Asian' would never be the first word I pick to describe myself, I feel like SAT, when I look at it, you see that you relate to a lot of things or find them funny. You are still grouped as an Asian person, and I think it helps bring back that identity.

Relatability is a key focus in Amy's reflection on SAT and how she feels belonging to that space. Even though she may not always see experiences that pertain to South Asians appearing on SAT, the other aspects of relatability, especially the shared cultural experiences, hold more importance for her ability to connect with SAT's group identity. In Amy's case, aligning herself with this identity allows her to discover and more fully engage with the Asian identity she loosely claims, bringing that layer of her race/ethnicity to the forefront; therefore, one's personal racial and ethnic identity may be nuanced or developed as a result of interacting with SAT's collective racial identity.

Some participants felt like they could relate partly to the collective identity found in SAT, with aspects of their own experiences or identity diverging from what is seen on the Facebook group. When I asked Khoi about how he relates to SAT's group identity, he tells me:

The main similarity would be the fact that simply I'm Asian in the Western world. Follow that by how I was raised by Asian parents who immigrated to the Western world well into adulthood. So, that would be the main similarities, and all the things that come with that, like the expectation and pressure to succeed academically and financially. Whereas other things, I don't relate to as much directly because I didn't experience it, because of my privilege of growing up in the bubble. But I know it exists, because my cousins who grew up in the States lived through that, my friends who grew up elsewhere lived through that. So, I know that, yes, there are a lot of Asians in the Western world who lived through these experiences that I didn't.

Khoi speaks about how he relates to some fundamental similarities and shared experiences that inform SAT’s group identity, but makes mention of his “privilege growing up in the bubble.” In this unique case, Khoi tells me of the ethnic makeup of his classmates in elementary and high school, and how they were predominantly Asian or Vietnamese children of immigrants much like he was. The lack of isolation, underrepresentation, and subtle racism whilst growing up mismatches the aspect of racial traumas that SAT’s communal identity encompasses. However, other parts of Khoi’s identity and experiences do align with that of SAT. Khoi’s response points to the importance of recognizing personal histories with race as having a major influence in shaping how individuals form their racial and ethnic identities. As much as collective racial formation is worth considering, the individual experiences of racialization and identity construction are also consequential to how applicable SAT’s group identity can be.

Though the above participants mention a level of connection to SAT and its group identity, several others contrasted such attitudes. Rather, these participants felt largely disconnected from SAT in the experiences that are shown, and by extension, the collective racial identity it purports. Kevin describes the shift in content he sees from when he first joined SAT to more recently:

Ervin: So how do you think these shallow experiences you mention compare with your own racialized identity?

Kevin: It’s just such a small part of it, it’s no longer...you could still do it, you could still talk about the same things you used to; it’s like a friend who isn’t here often anymore, and you don’t connect on the same level anymore.

Kevin recognizes that there is a part of his own identity that still aligns with the content and experiences that are shared on SAT. However, he now considers SAT’s representations of Asian identity as distant, a caricature of what he envisions as his own racial and ethnic identity. JT relays similar sentiments when asked about his relation to SAT’s group identity:

JT: I feel like the common identity that I really see is that we love K-pop, we love boba, we got expensive clothes, we only hang out with the same ethnicity. I feel like I don't fit into any of that.

Ervin: You don't relate to this common/group identity?

JT: There are some stuff that I can kind of feel like I see this in me, but most of the time, not really.

JT describes some of the cues that signal what SAT represents as Asian identity, mostly vapid and meaningless interests that do not seem to be necessarily tied to Asian culture. These shallow representations of what Asian identity and culture is discourage JT from more fully aligning himself with the identity that SAT furthers, as such identity work that SAT is doing is reductive and counter-productive to SAT's purpose as a space to uplift meaningful Asian representation in Western pop culture. Both Kevin and JT articulate how they largely feel disconnected from SAT as a space for genuinely engaging with their Asian identities, as the content and experiences that are circulated in the group often rely on shallow (yet universal) experiences to keep a recurring audience.

Participants evidently range in their level of agreement when considering their personal racial or ethnic identities against SAT's collective racial identity. However, SAT seems to interestingly embolden participants' personal racial or ethnic identities, irrespective of how connected they felt to SAT's group identity. For example, Ally expresses how her experience with SAT pushes her to more deeply embrace and engage with Asian culture and identity offline:

Ervin: Do you think that participating in SAT or its offshoot groups influences your "offline" experiences as a racialized individual?

Ally: I think it does, I definitely think if anything, it further pushes me to seek those similar communities offline...They just strengthened my ideas of what it means to be Asian American...what I viewed as practices that I thought of as Asian – like taking your shoes off or eating cake with chopsticks, things like that – that this was me doing this because I'm trying to be very Asian or Asian American. Seeing other people validate that through SAT makes me

want to continue doing those things and if not, always do those things,
because it's not just me, it's other people too...

As she feels like SAT's group identity around 'Asianness' is aligned with her own racial identity, Ally finds solace and community in being Asian American as other members of SAT validate her quirks and experiences. The subtle or mundane aspects of living as Asian in a Western society hold deep value for Ally and those like her, and cement her passion around her racial identity.

Britney, though she does not connect with SAT's representations of Asian identity as enthusiastically as someone like Ally, also expresses how SAT has been productive for her own conceptualization of race and ethnicity:

It allows us to talk about our nuances of Asian diaspora identity, as opposed to just being not that. Some of the posts that I read on *subtle asian discourse*, and the other more activism-focused groups, allows me to figure out my own nuances of Asian identity is, and how I can articulate that when talking to other people about racial issues, or even talking about my ethnic identity...I think through SAT and its offshoots, I've gotten closer to my different ethnicities, and to the cultures of those ethnicities. It becomes an everyday questioning, and it puts Asian American and the Asian American identity at the forefront of my mind everyday.

While Ally may see SAT's representation of Asian identity as mirroring or validating her own identity, Britney sees the group and its offshoots as a catalyst for continuous negotiation for how she seeks to racially or ethnically identify. She expresses as certain dislike for SAT as having become a toxic space, yet it is its presence among other offshoot groups that continually reminds her of the multifaceted nature of her racial and ethnic identities, and how they compare and contrast with each other. Though she may not embrace SAT for what it represents and the content that appears in the group, she personally reaffirms and interrogates her own racial and ethnic identities by constantly seeing SAT's posts appear in her Facebook timeline.

Samantha goes further, having a deep disdain for SAT and its narrow and reductive portrayal of Asian identity. However, even she strengthens her own racial and ethnic identity as a

result of engaging with SAT, namely through asserting her personal racial/ethnic identity in contrast to SAT's collective racial identity:

I think that the identity of SAT continues to allow and perpetuate racism against Asians from Asians and others. My identity is very much the opposite of that. My identity as Asian american or Filipino american is that I seek out interracial solidarity, I seek out radical change, I seek out the destruction of white supremacy. That's me as an Asian american, it's very much getting back to the roots of how 'Asian American' started in the civil rights movement in the US.

Here, Samantha uses SAT to define her own racial and ethnic identities as oppositional to the racist discourse she finds on the Facebook group. In this light, SAT acts as a sort of catalyst for developing social justice oriented racial and ethnic identity for Samantha; the current state at which SAT exists compels Samantha to assert her own nuanced racial and ethnic identity against SAT's identity. Thus, even for those who may strongly disagree with SAT and its representations of Asian identity, the space acts as an impetus for which individuals can more fully embrace or emphasize their own personal racial and ethnic identities.

The degree to which participants' personal racial and ethnic identities align with that of SAT's collective racial identity is highly variable. For some, SAT provides a model through which one can project their own racial identity in efforts to validate one's experiences. For others, SAT's group identity stands in stark contrast to how they personally choose to identify in terms of race and ethnicity. Nevertheless, a common thread running through participants' responses is how SAT fundamentally connects participants with their individual racial and/or ethnic identities, whether they agree or disagree with the group identity that SAT portrays. As Britney states, these groups make its members cognizant of how race personally affects them and their identity; it is not necessary for individuals to align themselves with SAT's collective racial identity in order for them to feel its impacts on personal racial and/or ethnic identity, revealing the Facebook group's capacity to shape racial dynamics even outside of digital domains.

A Digital Space

Given its existence as a digital space, the technical elements, capabilities, and structure of the medium cannot be ignored when considering how SAT may impact racial and ethnic identity. Emblematic of McLuhan's (1964) ideas on the medium shaping the message, participants mention the way in which SAT functions as well as other technical facets of the Facebook group impacted their experience and attitudes towards the space. For one, the digital nature of SAT affords the group a transnational capability that spans the globe (barring any nation-states that have banned or prohibited use of Facebook). Khoi makes reference to this aspect:

On the Internet, there is no distance, so it connects people from all over the world you would never ever meet in real life otherwise. Here at home, I rarely ever meet someone that shares my views, but through SAT, I've met 10x as many people that share my views. I know that I'm not as alone as I feel.

Khoi appreciates the global connectivity that modern social media provides for facilitating discussions or space around Asian identity. It is this digital connectivity that engages what Chun (2013) discusses about race as technology. Just as technology acts as a medium to enact a set of ideas, racialized Internet spaces allow for a materialization of Asian diasporic discourses that influence personal racial and ethnic identities. Race as discussed on the Internet, and specifically 'Asianness' in the case of SAT, can have major impacts on various diasporic communities and geographies, a phenomenon that I have already explored in how the experiences shared on SAT may work to create community among a global Asian diaspora or sow divisions; race is not simply an identity, but rather a technology that can unite or divide, or *mediate*.

Several participants also allude to how the admins and moderators of SAT, as well as the community itself, has a role in policing and moderating the content that appears and/or gains notoriety and reach. For example, when I ask if SAT is affecting racism against Asians or Asian Americans in any way, Samantha remarks:

I think it kind of encourages it – no actually, I think it definitely encourages it. Just because the mods [moderators] allow so much hatred in that group.

Samantha directly implicates the moderators and admins for their role in facilitate racist and exclusionary discourse on Facebook group, which she sees as having potential to manifest in more overt racism towards Asian individuals. As the admins and moderators must approve all posts before they are published, they play a heavy hand in dictating the direction of where discourse goes, as well as what the collective racial identity of SAT is represented as. Kevin also speaks to this point when he describes SAT as becoming “more manufactured”:

Ervin: Tell me more about this idea of ‘manufactured’?

Kevin: I don’t know, there’s heavy moderation, right? What you say really only is what goes through however many people look at them.

Like Samantha, Kevin notes how the content that appears on SAT (and by extension, all of its offshoot groups) are filtered through a team of moderators and administrators that manage the group and its daily operations/functioning. While it can be argued that such filtering of posts is necessary to bring coherence to what is shown in the group, especially in a group with over 1.5 million members, who these moderators and admins are deserve proper consideration; what is it that qualifies these individuals to make decisions on whether something is deemed a true ‘subtle Asian trait’ that can be published in the group? Moreover, the diverse positionalities of this moderator/admin team are also important to consider, as each of their personal histories with racial communities and dynamics are sure to influence their judgment on posts about racial identity.

Britney extends this idea of content moderation on SAT further, implicating the community itself as well as the moderators and admins:

Ervin: So, you would say that SAT stifles questioning?

Britney: Yeah, I would say that. SAT specifically stifles a lot of questioning.

Ervin: Do you think that is on the part of the admins/moderators or if its more of the community that's there?

Britney: I think it's both. The admins and moderators have a hand in it for sure, especially with them rejecting certain posts and allowing others to be put onto the SAT feed. They really do emphasize certain types of what is the right Asian and what is not. But also, with a lot of the community, because they do add non-Asians in there, especially white people – people continue to control and police people, and through that it stifles and it doesn't allow us to question what it means to be Asian diaspora.

Britney agrees with the statements that Samantha and Kevin both make, but also involves the community that gathers in SAT. As members who can actively comment and react to published posts, the community can also police what they see as 'Asian' or not. This indicates that community can play an active role in the iterative racialization process of different online artifacts that appear on SAT; their reactions ('likes', 'dislikes', 'laughs', etc.) and comments aid in the appraisal process of whether posts of a similar fashion can appropriately achieve virality in the future, matching what Eschler & Menking discuss as users "collaboratively curating what is seen" (2018, p. 9). Furthermore, Britney also mentions this aspect of stifled questioning and discussion in SAT. Despite her desire to engage in thoughtful discussion in this space, the collective dismissal of such desires by other SAT members subsequently construct the group as inconducive to earnest negotiation of one's Asian diasporic identity. Jenkins et al.'s (2013) concept of participatory culture is evident in this account, SAT's community/members appears to hold great influence in dictating its own discourses and identity.

When speaking of virality, another technical characteristic of the medium is the algorithmic process in how posts are shown to members. For most participants, they mention how posts are integrated into their Facebook News Feeds (main area where content is shown), meaning that every time they open Facebook, they are likely to see content posted on SAT. However, of the posts that are shown, Facebook's algorithm prioritizes content that elicits active

participation, i.e. higher ratios of reactions/likes, comments, and/or shares (Mosseri, 2018).

Therefore, the posts that actually reach members Facebook are often only those that achieve high engagement numbers, something that Ally makes note of:

You only see the top posts, the ones that get 10k likes or more. And those sorts of posts that everyone relates to is helping shape what the definition of Asian or Western Asian means.

Ally mentions a link between posts with high engagement and their supposed relatability to members, which seems to drive up engagement even further. As already discussed, the relatability of content is tied to how identity is collectively shaped on SAT; thus, if posts that garner the elevated active engagement that Facebook's algorithm favours, it is likely to have a higher capacity to reach more members and impact their ideas around Asian identity. Here, a possible risk arises where shallow and reductive narratives may attract much attention and ultimately be disseminated much faster and to more people, creating a feedback loop between impact and reach.

Aside from how Facebook as a medium can moderate and influence how content is published and disseminated, participants also spoke of possibilities that digital space could have as an educational tool in racial understandings. Samantha offers insight into why online spaces can be adapted as arenas to educate others about racial issues:

I think that online, in particular on Twitter...I get a lot more discussion and I think that has a lot more widespread impact on discussions of race and racism and oppression. But in person, people are really intimidated when it comes to discussions of race and racism, and they're not willing to interrogate their biases or privileges in order to understand racism a lot better. So, I think being online is a lot better learning opportunity because you can have the fake profile that doesn't look like you.

The nature of online spaces, especially in their allowance for a degree of anonymity, allow users to more freely speak about issues they may not so easily discuss in person, and Samantha sees

this an opportunity to educate and engage people about racial issues they may not have considered. Thus, digital spaces are providing a new frontier for shaping racial dynamics and understandings for not only racialized/Asian identifying individuals, but also for those outside of specific racial groups too.

In this section, I illustrate how the digital nature of online spaces such as SAT have a great impact on the way that racial discourse and identity is communicated and constructed. On one end, digital mediums provide greater capacity for connection on a transnational level, or as a way to communicate racial experiences and issues to a widespread audience. Digital spaces like SAT, however, are also embedded with content moderation mechanisms, whether that is on the part of Facebook as a platform, the admins and moderators as facilitators of the space, or the community itself, regulating its own identity work. It is crucial to consider these processes and features of digital spaces to more holistically understand how SAT constructs its racialized group identity, and how this representation of Asianness is shown to SAT's members. Online mediums may have potentially evolved diaspora into digital formats, but it is not without consequence; here, Chun's (2013) questions about what race can do as technology are especially poignant as we consider what diasporic futures can look like in an era of digital media.

Conclusion

It is clear that a multitude of forces and processes coalesce to perform identity formation and development, whether it occurs on a collective or individual level. For several members of SAT that I interviewed, they have to balance and negotiate their own personal racial and ethnic identities in light of the collective Asian identity that is founded and embedded in SAT. Some regard SAT's community as inclusive and welcoming to all Asian identities, providing an outlet and space for this particular racial group to see a form of representation in popular culture.

Others adopt a more critical view of SAT as an exclusive space that mirrors intraethnic divides within the broader racial groups and furthers racism and discrimination already seen outside of SAT. Between these contentions, a collective racial identity is constructed in SAT that is built upon the shared experiences of its members, the apparent 'subtleties' of second (or later)-generation Asian North Americans navigating both cultural influence and Western socialization. Participants consequently assess their own personal racial and ethnic identities against this collective 'Asian' identity, uncovering a wide range in levels of relevance, with some finding high correlation between personal and collective identities and others feeling more disconnected. Regardless of their level of connection to this collective identity, these participants become ever more cognizant of their own racial and/or ethnic identity through aligning oneself with SAT's collective identity, or through positioning one's identity as oppositional to that of SAT. Amidst these processes is an undercurrent of digital dynamics that are facilitating and influencing the (collective and personal) identity work taking place, where certain aspects of these spaces affect what is shown to members. The technological mechanics of the platform, from algorithms to content curation, have crucial effects on how racial and ethnic identity is communicated, and fundamentally enacted or performed in these new digital spaces. Overall, this analysis provides significant insights to how Asian North American individuals come to understand their unique racial and ethnic identities in light of emerging technologies that are becoming their dominant form of entertainment and communication. As more public discourses shift to democratized spaces like social media platforms, it is important to examine how technology and race interact to produce particular racial and ethnic identities, as well as unique (digital) racialization processes, on both collective and individual scales.

This research presents a launchpad to discuss how other social issues may be represented, discussed, or affected as a result of SAT and the proliferation of other Asian diasporic digital spaces. In the concluding parts of my interview with Khoi, he mentions the gendered dynamics of desirability around Asian men and Asian women – could these racist archetypes be resisted through SAT and its offshoots, or do they become reified through humour? Additionally, we may consider how class, ability, and accessibility may interact in this space. Given that such community is created through Internet-based media, membership and access to these spaces and the social benefits (i.e. cultural capital, sense of belonging, visibility, etc.) it can confer is dependent on one’s ability to have steady grasp on and constant use of technology. Therefore, who inhabits and interacts with these Facebook groups may be an area of inquiry that could be further elaborated upon. Both of these brief considerations allude to a need for more intersectional analysis into SAT to more fully understand how digital forces may be interacting with existing systems of marginalization.

The geographic contexts in which this study occurred are important to address. Asian diaspora is very much a global phenomenon that works both outside of a particular nation, and also within as well – to attempt addressing such a complex and multifaceted issue is not only extremely difficult, but also may result in the ignorance of particular racial and/or diasporic histories and traumas that Bishop & Phillips (2004) emphasize. My focus on Asian North American individuals and their experiences with SAT comes with a recognition that the racialization processes happening in these geographies surely influence how they may consider their racial and ethnic identities. As such, the varying ways through which Asians have experience marginalization in other Westernized countries – particularly United Kingdom and Australia where Asian populations are quite considerable – warrant investigation that can be

compared alongside this analysis to uncover how SAT's impacts on racial and ethnic identity may (or may not) differ geographically. Research on the experiences of members in SAT who reside in Asia itself may also work to this same effect, and implicate the internal and external natures of the Asian diaspora.

Another key point to mention in my analysis is the focus towards SAT rather than the other offshoot groups. As SAT remains the most prominent and populated space out of all the different *subtle asian* groups that were created in the tail-end of 2018, its immense influence and reach deserve proper academic inquiry. However, this is not to discount the racial and ethnic identity at play within these offshoot groups. When speaking with Amy, she mentions to me how she prefers *subtle curry traits* over SAT (though she appreciates both) for the former's direct relevance to her identity as Punjabi/Sikh. How do the communities in these offshoot groups position themselves in contrast or comparison to SAT? Rather, besides their niche interests, what aspects of these offshoot groups intrigue members, possibly away from the dominance that is SAT? All of these questions can direct further research into the presence of these contemporary racialized spaces, especially looking at how communities within racial and ethnic groups interact with each other through digital means.

Racial and ethnic identities are becoming ever-present among the psyches of young Asian North American individuals who balance the influences of their racial and ethnic heritage with the cultural influences of their surroundings. Technological advances have nuanced and allowed such interrogation to occur on a scale never so easily accessible and public. The impacts of SAT on how racial and ethnic identity develops on both collective and individual levels have and continue to unfold so long as group sustains its engagement. Whether or not some may feel that SAT creates an inclusive community, its presence and phenomenal impacts cannot be disregarded

in shaping how the contemporary digital racialized subject engages with the concept of racial and ethnic identity, for oneself and community. SAT may point to a certain diasporic future for individuals like myself – an Asian identifying person that is heavily molded by Westernized environments, institutions and social forces – but maybe not in ways that seem obvious. In finding similarity as well as difference, SAT proves that diasporic futures are truly heterogenous in the way that Lee (2004) describes, positioning individuals to acknowledge their varied racial, ethnic, and diasporic experiences in ways that connect to a common (digital) catalyst.

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