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# Exploring AAPI Identity Online: Political Ideology as a Factor Affecting Identity Work on Reddit

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**Abstract**

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) are often perceived as a monolithic group, despite their distinct composition of ethnic cultures, political ideologies, and socioeconomic backgrounds. AAPIs increasingly engage in online forums to disclose their experiences and opinions, and in doing so, take part in lengthy discussions that shape the views of their community. We retrieved over 72,000 Reddit comments posted between January to July 2016 for a mixed-methods study of AAPI identity work, analyzing discursive patterns of user-deleted and banned comments. We found that while conservative AAPIs tend to comment anonymously more frequently, progressive AAPIs are less likely to ban comments that did not fit the behavior and norms of their community. AAPI redditors engage differently between conservative and progressive online communities through a process of what we conceptualize as *identity work as deliberation*.

**Author Keywords**

Online identity; impression management; social network sites; deliberation; Reddit; AAPI.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.3. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI).

## Introduction

Born out of the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, the term *Asian American* was coined as a negation of the pejorative term *Oriental* to unite diverse Asian nationalities under one coalition [19]. The federal government commonly appends the term *Pacific Islander* after *Asian American (AAPI)*, expanding the scope of the AAPI umbrella to include populations originating from Far East Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Pacific Islands. Today, AAPIs are the fastest growing immigrant group in the United States, yet despite their staggering growth, are still one of the most understudied racial groups in the nation [29]. Unique to other historically marginalized groups, AAPIs contend with battling the *model minority* stereotype [17]. While AAPIs are often praised as math geniuses and spelling bee champions, they are also simultaneously *othered*—that is, excluded or differentiated from mainstream groups, e.g. as terrorists, objectified as having sexual fetishes, and exploited as cheap laborers by the dominant culture [17]. Hence, AAPIs are routinely judged by the model minority myth and the negative role it plays in their identity construction [17,22].

Recent scholarship in CSCW and CHI has started exploring identity work—the process through which people make sense of or re-construct their identities [27]—by a number of groups on social media, including those undergoing gender transitions [12], and underprivileged college students [20], to name a few. AAPI youth lead all other racial groups in technology use and proficiency [23], but to our knowledge, few studies illustrate how AAPIs use technology for identity work [15,24], and this research aims to address that gap. Moreover, we introduce *identity work as*

*deliberation*—a conceptual framing that draws on Habermas’ public sphere [9–11] to position identity work as a political, discursive public process.

## Literature Review: Online Identity Work

According to Goffman [7], identity is constructed in relation to rules and norms in a social setting. We often draw on these rules and norms as a means through which we manage other people’s impressions of us. These rules and norms can vary depending on the setting [18]. For example, the ways in which people act in the privacy of their own homes can differ from how they act in a public park.

Identity is a multi-faceted construct in that people can have several identities [3]. For example, people often identify with a certain race or ethnic group, or they may identify with other affiliations, such as where they work or go to school. When viewed as a social construction, identity is a moving target, and members of a particular group may not agree with public perceptions of themselves. For example, AAPIs are often viewed as a model minority [17], though members of this group do not always understand, agree, nor adhere to the public norms that are associated with them. To make sense of or change one’s identity, people often engage in *identity work* [27]. This process can be collaborative, as people work together to make sense of identity for themselves, or as a way to reconstruct collective identity in an effort to change public perceptions.

In this study, we are interested in how people come together online to engage in collective identity work. Members of the AAPI community who engage in identity work online may be doing so to redefine their

**RQ1.** How are AAPIs constructing and expressing their identity in online communities?

**RQ2.** What factors affect participation in online identity work?

public facing identity. However, this process can be complex with respect to AAPI, as their identities have formed, over time, in a highly politicized and ever evolving socio-historical context. For example, AAPIs are collectively perceived as high-income and well-educated, but in reality, AAPIs are scattered across the spectrum on socioeconomic attainment and civic participation [17,29].

To disentangle monolithic perceptions of collectivity, we analyze emergent identity work amongst AAPIs on the social networking site, Reddit—one of the largest and most frequented online community platforms. Any user (redditor) can create a community (subreddit) on nearly any topic, where they can share content in the form of text, links, and images. Content can be either upvoted or downvoted by any redditor. Participation in identity work occurs in the form of comments on each subreddit thread. Each community is moderated independently by volunteer users. Previous research on Reddit looked at how redditors make throwaway, or temporary, accounts to protect their anonymity in disclosing sensitive issues and opinions [1,16]. Given AAPI’s longstanding history of invisibility, silence, and exclusion [22], this paper expands the ongoing work on impression management and AAPI identity construction. Because we agree that AAPI identity work is not monolithic, we are interested in understanding differences, if any, among identity work in comparable online communities.

## Method

### Identifying Subreddits

We searched for subreddits where AAPIs engaged in identity work using Reddit’s internal search page. Thus, we excluded subreddits that mainly posted news

articles with little to no comments around the post from consideration, as redditors in those subreddits may find lurking behavior [21], or nonpublic participation, normative within the community. Table 1 lists the most popular AAPI subreddits by subscriber count. We restricted filtering criteria to subreddits with over a thousand subscribers to analyze active communities with an established following. We chose topical subreddits based on relevance to issues pertaining to AAPI identity as self-described in their respective subreddit descriptions. International Asian groups (r/Korea, r/Japan, r/China) are excluded from this study due to issues of language translation and general detachment from American issues and perspectives.

We targeted two subreddits salient to AAPI identity: r/asianamerican and r/aznidentity. We chose these two as the focus of the analysis because they covered the broadest spectrum of AAPI topics in comparison to other subreddits that focused conversations on specific topics. Moreover, the political ideology of the two subreddits can be classified as generally progressive or generally conservative based on close readings of their comments. For example, r/asianamerican is largely a progressive group, where members commonly advocate for equal opportunity and prosocial causes, whereas members of r/aznidentity are largely conservative, identifying as “Trump supporters.”

### Data Collection

We obtained over 72,000 Reddit comments posted from January to July 2016 in both r/asianamerican and r/aznidentity from a public Reddit comment dataset [14], inclusive of ~1.7 billion JSON objects complete with the comment, score, author, subreddit, position in comment tree and other fields that are available

Count	Subreddits
11,868	r/asianamerican
11,547	r/asianparentstories
7,531	r/asianmasculinity
6,185	r/abcedes
5,183	r/asiantwox
3,550	r/gaysian
2,180	r/aznidentity
2,001	r/hapas
1,151	r/asianamericanissues

Table 1. Subscriber count of popular AAPI subreddits. Updated 18 September 2016.

through Reddit's API [25]. We retrieved targeted information via SQL commands on Google BigQuery [5], Google's fully managed, petabyte scale, low cost analytics data warehouse [6]. We used R for all statistical and visual data analysis.

In our dataset, *r/asianamerican* has 43,831 comments from 2,737 redditors. The *r/aznidentity* subreddit has 29,985 comments from 1,016 redditors. We identified 291 redditors who participated in both subreddits with the same username. For *r/asianamerican*, the top 20% most active commenters comprise 547 redditors who posted 31,149 of the 43,831 comments, or 71%. For *r/aznidentity*, the top 20% most active commenters comprise of 203 authors who posted 21,760 of the 29,985 comments, or 73%. In *r/asianamerica*, 232 redditors have posted only once. In *r/aznidentity*, 840 redditors have posted only once.

We stratified our sample into two groups among each subreddit: core redditors and peripheral redditors. Prior work on social media show that core contributors shape and influence the overall identity of the community [2,8]. We identified core redditors as those who contribute the top 20% of comments in their subreddit, basing this criteria on work looking at core and periphery structures [2,8]. We consider the remainder of the sample peripheral redditors. A random sample of 500 comments from core redditors of both subreddits, calculated from a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, provides a valid sample size for analysis. We used data visualization techniques on R (importing 'ggplot2' and 'wordcloud' packages) to plot high level comparisons of the two subreddits, and then, where appropriate, used a Pearson's Chi-squared test to test for significant differences.

### *Content Analysis*

We employed a grounded theory approach to label variables and their relationships within our corpus. The first author coded the initial round of comments via an open coding process that established tentative labels for emerging themes from the data. The second round of analysis proceeded into an axial coding process for identifying relationships among the open codes. A total of 16 reoccurring codes emerged describing AAPI identity work, which include: *cultural identity* (e.g., family, food, race, religion), *political identity* (e.g., activism, assault, immigration, politics), *social identity* (e.g., education, entertainment, language, relationships), and *self identity* (e.g., health, jobs, masculinity, sexuality). We created categories for these codes related to AAPI identity work and participation, which led to the themes presented in our findings.

### *Identifying Throwaways*

To identify throwaway accounts, we followed the method outlined in previous work [1,16]. That is, we programmatically checked account names in the metadata associated with comments to see if they contain the word "throwaway" or similar versions, such as 'thrw', 'throw', 'throway'. Certainly, this does not yield all throwaway accounts, but rather focuses on accounts that self-identify as a throwaway account, which is a fairly typical Reddit norm.

## **Preliminary Results**

### *Categories of Identity Work*

We describe four major categories of AAPI identity work we see emerge from our codes: cultural identity, political identity, social identity, and self identity. We provide exemplars of the type of comments being generated in *r/asianamerican* and *r/aznidentity*:

- *Cultural identity* refers to belongingness of a group. Redditors discussed their culture in relation to their race (cultural stereotypes, injustices), family (hierarchical, patriarchal, collectivist norms), food (reviews of Asian cuisine, recipes, and restaurants), and religion (systems of faith and worship).
- *Political identity* is influenced by interests and perspectives of a group. Redditors shared their thoughts on activism (organizing, mobilizing, and resistance-building around social justice issues), assault (publicized attacks, rapes, and other criminal activity), immigration (migration patterns, globalization, colonialization), and politics (governance, party affiliation, war).
- *Social identity* is an individual's sense of self, based on their group membership. Redditors discussed education (college admissions, grades, standardized exams), entertainment (sports, hobbies, media representation), language (oral and written languages, translations), and relationships (attraction, dating advice, interracial arrangements).
- *Self identity* is the recognition of one's potential and qualities as an individual. Redditors shared anecdotal experiences about their health (mental capacities or physical abilities), jobs (career advice, networking tips), and masculinity (gender norms, critiques of qualities traditionally associated with men).

#### *Censorship and Suppression*

After organizing identity topics to inform our approach to answering RQ1, we ran a Pearson's Chi-squared test ( $X^2 = 42.797$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$ ) and found a statistically significant difference in how

progressive and conservative AAPI communities construct and express their identities online.

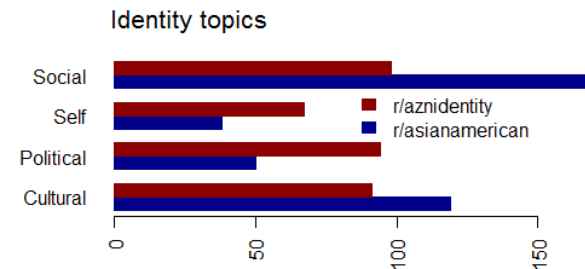


Figure 1. Category frequency by subreddit.

To answer RQ2, we deployed an analysis of throwaway accounts, which provided an opportunity for identity exploration, particularly for stigmatized discussions concerning topics like mental health and sexuality, as some of what these redditors are talking about online are taboo within the walls of many AAPI households. Using the same methods as [1,16], we find that 314 (0.7%) and 795 (2.7%) comments in r/asianamerica and r/aznidentity came from throwaway accounts, respectively. This suggests that conservative AAPIs tend to comment anonymously more frequently. We also examined the frequency with which moderators deleted comments (a kind of censorship) or redditors removed their comments (self-censored) [25]. In r/asianamerica, 6.9% of comments were deleted and 6.2% were removed, while for r/aznidentity, 8% of comments were deleted, but only 2.9% were removed.

#### **Discussion**

We sought to examine how AAPIs construct and express their identity in online communities and found significant differences between progressive and

### Limitations

We acknowledge that some of the differences between the content on the different subreddits may be due to norms of each of the communities, which could be independent of political leaning. While RQ1 is only partially addressed, a deeper analysis on overlapping redditors who participate in both r/asianamerican and r/aznidentity may disentangle binary interpretations from the data and provide richer insights into intersectional AAPI identities.

### Future Work

As this study only looked at two subreddits salient to AAPI identity work on Reddit, further work may expand on discourse within other subreddits listed in Table 1. Subsequent research may also investigate how other ethnic minorities come together on online platforms to collaboratively make sense of their identities and develop a sense of community with others that share an identity with them.

conservative AAPI identity work. Subreddits form community structures with expectations for norms around appropriate behavior and resulting consequences for not following perceived norms. Hence, we find that that identity work is regulated in relation to the political leanings of any given group. We see this play out in two different types of censorship operating in the two groups. In r/asianamerica—the largely progressive group—there was roughly the same amount of deletes and removals. For deletes, moderators tend to delete comments that were either vitriolic or nonconforming with the ideas or values in r/asianamerica. Also, users will remove their own comments if they receive strongly disapproving responses, e.g., feedback that calls out redditors as racists, misogynists, or bigots may cause them to remove their comments (self-censorship). On the other hand, in r/aznidentity—the largely conservative group—there seemed to be less tolerance: deletes happened more frequently. Also, redditors tended to be more resistant to negative feedback and were far less likely to remove their comments.

To explore online identity work, we draw on conceptualizations of the public sphere. Habermas describes the public sphere as a domain of our social life through which public opinion is formed [9–11]. Within the public sphere, people often engage in deliberation, which comprises of the activities through which people share information, form opinions, and participate in the political process.

A public sphere must adhere to three values for it to function properly: inclusion, civility and rationality. Inclusion means that anyone can participate. Civility means that everyone must treat others with respect.

Rationality means that people engage in reasoned argumentation and provide facts to support their claims. Deliberation has been applied to the study of online public spheres, such as social media, though findings are scattered in that some scholars have suggested that online public spheres are polarized (like-minded people interact with one another) [13,26,28], whereas in other cases online media have achieved Habermas' values [9–11].

Taken together, we introduce the concept of *identity work as deliberation*—a political process through which members of the public engage in collaborative identity work. In applying this conceptualization to our study, we find that there exist differences between conservative and progressive identity work among AAPIs, and that these groups work towards censoring alternative views in an effort to maintain their vision of collective identity. We suggest future work should understand if AAPIs engage in *identity work as deliberation* that adheres to the ideals of the public sphere, or how to best design online platforms to achieve this goal.

### Conclusion

Our study ties current work on censorship practices into AAPI contexts. We show that political orientation plays a significant role in determining how different groups suppresses non-conforming identities. We found that the types of identity work AAPI redditors engage in differs between conservative and progressive communities where they engage in what we call *identity work as deliberation*. We conceptualized Reddit as a public space where people come together to engage in collaborative identity work as a public sphere.

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