

# Moderation Practices as Emotional Labor in Sustaining Online Communities: The Case of AAPI Identity Work on Reddit

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## ABSTRACT

We examine how and why Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) moderators on Reddit shape the norms of their online communities through the analytic lens of emotional labor. We conduct interviews with 21 moderators who facilitate identity work discourse in AAPI subreddits and present a thematic analysis of their moderation practices. We report on their challenges to sustaining moderation, which include burning out from volunteer work, navigating hierarchical structures, and balancing unfulfilled expectations. We then describe strategies that moderators employ to manage emotional labor, which involve distancing away from drama, building solidarity from shared struggles, and integrating an ecology of tools for self-organized moderation. We provide recommendations for improving moderation in online communities centered around identity work and discuss implications of emotional labor in the design of Reddit and similar platforms.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Computer supported cooperative work**;

## KEYWORDS

Online Communities; Identity Work; Moderation; Emotional Labor; Reddit; Harassment; Bot; Microaggressions, AAPI; Race.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

While identity is often an individuated concept [18, 23], for many people, identity is a social construct—that is, it is generated through perceived membership in a social group [91]. In this view, who we are can be defined across a range of collective factors, such as social class, race, and ethnicity.

The ways in which we come to define our collective, social identities, however, can be complex [87]. Here, we focus our attention on the identity work—a collaborative process through which people negotiate their identities—engaged in by Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). AAPIs live a rich and storied history through which their intersectional identities have developed over time [50, 72] and are interconnected across a range of demographic categories, diverse backgrounds, and multi-generational perspectives [57].

However, the composition of conflicting identities within the larger AAPI community is diverse and potentially problematic. For example, there have been well-documented tensions between people from different countries that comprise the AAPI identity, such as China and Japan [56]. Further complicating identity work is where AAPIs fall at the receiving ends of stereotypes that often manifest in inaccurate public perceptions, such as the model minority stereotype [51]—the cultural expectation that AAPIs are exemplary achievers and attain a higher degree of education and socioeconomic status in contrast to other minority groups [51]—and they are often “othered” as perpetual foreigners [65]. This leads to us questioning how AAPIs engage in collective identity work in service of managing inter-group tensions and outer-group stereotypes.

Today, AAPIs have access to a range of online communities through which they can engage in collective identity work. In this paper, we explore the online identity work being

engaged in by AAPIs whereby they are working to redefine their public identity, challenge existing stereotypes, and negotiate their diverse and often conflicting identities. Online communities provide the socio-technical infrastructure for people to engage in identity work, yet given the complexity of AAPI identity construction, understanding how these online spaces sustain these activities beyond Western contexts remains understudied.

To explore how online identity work spaces are sustained, we examine the role and daily practices of moderators on Reddit—a category of users who, unlike traditional users, engage in the work of mediating the interactions and activities of other members of their online communities [47, 48]. More specifically, we explore how they work toward sustaining the online community spaces (subreddits) through which collective identity is formed. Importantly, the practices they engage in are often in service of promoting pro-social behavior and limiting anti-social behavior. Their primary role is to develop productive social norms and mediate the interactions of users as a means of sustaining their online communities [47, 48]. This leads to examining the role moderators play in developing sustainable online communities through which identity work can be accomplished. To guide our study, we focus on the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** *How do moderators shape the identity work of online communities?*
- **RQ2:** *How does emotional labor sustain an online community in AAPI contexts?*

Against this backdrop, we apply a lens that combines emotional labor [34, 35], identity work [18, 84], and public sphere deliberation [28, 29] to examine the visible and invisible practices of AAPI moderators on Reddit in service of sustaining their online communities.

## 2 RELATED WORK

### Identity Work as a Collective Process in the Online Public Sphere

Identity is constructed in relation to rules and norms in a social setting [26]. Identity is also a multi-faceted construct in that people can have several identities [8]. For example, people often identify with a certain race or ethnic group, or they may identify with other affiliations, such as their workplace or 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.

As a means of making sense of or changing one's identity, people engage in identity work [84]. This process can be collaborative as people work together to make sense of identity for themselves or reconstruct collective identity in an effort to change public perceptions. Studies of identity work have explored the uses of social media by a number

of groups, including those undergoing gender transitions [30], first-time fathers [1], underprivileged college students [64], transnational migrants [54], and disability rights activists [53]. Beyond scholarship focusing on individual identity work, Schwalbe examined subcultural identity work as a group process, suggesting how identity work can be understood as part of a process of cultural struggle [79].

Identity work is a process that can emerge in the public sphere, which as defined by Habermas is a domain of our social life through which public opinion is formed [28, 29]. 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 critique of Habermas' ideal concept of the public sphere is that it is based on rationality rather than emotionality. According to Melucci [62], emotion is an important element of collective action as “there is no cognition without feeling and no meaning without emotion.” In a modern networked society, digital publics are mobilized and connected or disconnected through affective statements that blend fact with opinion and emotion, demonstrating the importance of affect in creating feelings of community to sustain involvement and connections [68].

It is well established that in the context of online political activities, certain communicative acts invite the formation of an ad hoc public sphere—an online space where any individual is free to exchange political information and ideas with others [82]. For example, users of social media services such as Facebook and Twitter can engage in political deliberation through private groups [5, 7, 82, 83]. Identity work in the context of AAPI community, then, constitutes a form of political deliberation, and today, users have taken to online community platforms, including Reddit, to engage in identity work as a deliberative, political process [15].

### Moderation Practices as Emotional Labor

Given the rich socio-historical context through which AAPIs engage in identity work, we are motivated to understand factors that sustain online community spaces like Reddit in the face of potential adversity and conflict. To explore this phenomenon, we draw on the conceptual framing of emotional labor. Hochschild defines emotional labor as “*the silent work of evoking and suppressing feeling—in ourselves and in others*” [35]. Hochschild focused on the ways that workers in organizations regulate their emotions while interacting with a range of stakeholders, such as customers and superiors.

Recent scholarship has found that participation in modern sociotechnical systems involves various forms of emotional labor. For instance, dominant patriarchal structures in peer production systems like Wikipedia make it challenging for women editors to participate when they are constantly targeted by trolls or receiving unwanted sexual advances

[63]; psychological constraints embedded in crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter disadvantage introverted personality types [13]; and demands to improve reputation ratings in ridesharing services like Uber and Lyft result in added work for drivers to please their passengers [73]. The proactive socialization of online volunteers remains essential for retaining their engagement [31]. In building on this scholarship, we study how moderators of online communities engage in emotional labor in the context of identity work, and how such practices might serve as a way to sustain their communities.

Reddit relies on volunteer moderators to keep its platform active. Similar to users of other large-scale online communities, redditors that continue to visit the platform are increasingly exposed to sponsored advertisements that keep the company profitable [93]. In Hochschild's words, "*a commercial logic will penetrate deeper and deeper into what we used to think of as a private, psychological, sacred part of a person's self and soul*" [35], the platform has been criticized for providing a fertile ground for breeding toxic online behavior that promotes misogyny and racism [59]. In its visible efforts to ban hate speech, Reddit closed down a number of prominent subreddits that violated its anti-harassment policy in 2015 [11].

Hochschild argues that during times of uncertainty, emotional laborers are most likely to sense an organization's "feeling rule" as socially shared norms that guide how people should try to feel [33]. Hochschild uses the example of flight attendants and the outward positive performance they must uphold in front of airplane passengers [35]. Based on the advertisements of airline companies that promise enjoyment to their clients, flight attendants are expected to greet passengers with a smile when they board a plane to prompt the way that "passengers ought to feel" [35]. Hochschild draws on Goffman's work of the presentation of self [26] to explain the dramaturgical demands of frontstage (visible to the audience) and backstage (invisible to the audience) behavior in the context of service sector jobs.

Emotional labor can be a highly visible, frontstage practice. In the case of Reddit, as feeling rules reflect patterns of social membership, moderators are taxed with the emotional labor involved in generating and enforcing shared norms with respect to how redditors should interact with each other. For example, most subreddits have a visible set of rules typically referenced in the sidebar of the subreddit, and moderators often engage with their communities in service of enforcing those rules. Thus, we see that the rules that become institutionalized within Reddit are actually institutionalized feeling rules.

### Moderation on Reddit

Moderators play integral roles as volunteer stewards in shaping and enforcing the rules and norms of their community [20, 60]. Any redditor can become a moderator by either creating their own subreddit or being invited by an existing moderator to moderate a subreddit. The latter may involve a vetting process which includes applying for a moderator position within the community and having one's post history reviewed by the moderation team.

Moderators have a range of controls for configuring the settings of their subreddits. They may edit stylesheets to change the subreddit's aesthetic, edit the rules page viewable by redditors, view traffic statistics of their subreddits over time, and manage items that are reported for review. Moderators are listed on the sidebar of their respective subreddit communities. Redditors may reach out to moderators through ModMail, a personal messaging tool that forwards inquiries to all moderators of a subreddit.

HCI and CSCW scholarship exploring moderation practices have looked at the quality control of user-generated content in health discussion boards like WebMD.com [38, 39], tools for both deterring antisocial behavior and promoting content literary practices on the video streaming site Twitch [22, 80], and blocklist subscriptions for preventing online harassment on Twitter [21, 44]. More specific to Reddit, studies have also been conducted with Reddit moderators, exploring how they took part in collective action against the platform in the 2015 Reddit Blackout [61], how they negotiated their contributions as civic participation [60], how they foster discussion on topics of debate [58], and how they view their role in welcoming newcomers to rapidly growing subreddits [45]. Additional studies on Reddit have examined how its social voting design contributes to users overlooking high-quality content [24], how users create throwaway accounts to protect their anonymity in sharing controversial opinions [49], and how it has become a place for users to self-disclose stigmatized issues [2, 14, 71, 92]. Less is known about the day-to-day emotional costs involved with moderating behavior and the resulting practices, or labor, that contribute to the longevity or stagnation of an online community. To address this gap in scholarship, we investigate how moderators engage in the emotional labor that sets the stage for pro-social behavior.

### 3 METHODS

This research is part of a broad, multi-sited investigation of the use of ICTs within and among populations engaging in identity work. This particular sub-study draws from a set of 21 semi-structured interviews with Reddit moderators from a diverse range of AAPI subreddits.

**Table 1: Summary of AAPI subreddits studied.**

Subscriber Count	Subreddit Name	Creation Date	Moderator Count
18,847	r/asianamerican	Jan 2010	*11
11,719	r/abcdesis	Sep 2013	*6
11,382	r/aznidentity	Nov 2015	*13
10,614	r/asiantwox	Jan 2012	*8
9,305	r/hapas	Sep 2014	33
6,029	r/gaysian	Jan 2012	*4
4,047	r/asianbeautyadvice	May 2017	*7
2,875	r/asiandrama	Jun 2011	6
1,781	r/asianfeminism	Aug 2015	*4
1,463	r/asianamericanissues	Feb 2009	1
1,311	r/asianbros	Nov 2014	*3
550	r/desitwox	Jan 2012	*5
63	r/asianamericanathletes	Sep 2017	1

\* u/AutoModerator (bot) is listed as a subreddit moderator. Updated 18 April 2018.

### Participant Recruitment

Between February and April 2018, we recruited 21 participants who were listed as moderators on public AAPI subreddits. Using Reddit’s internal search engine, we used keywords such as “Asian,” “Asian American,” “Pacific Islander,” and “AAPI” to identify subreddits where AAPIs engaged in identity work through which we could recruit moderators. Topical subreddits were chosen based on relevance to issues pertaining to Asian American identity as self-described in their respective subreddit descriptions. We employed maximum variation sampling as a purposeful sampling strategy [70] for observing how a phenomenon is understood among different groups of people across a variety of contexts. Thus, our eligibility criteria included anyone who served as a current or previous moderator for an AAPI-focused subreddit.

Moderators were recruited from 13 different AAPI subreddits, 11 of which had a minimum 1,000 subscribers during the time of data collection. Listed by subscriber count in Table 1, the subreddits varied in the kind of identity work being engaged in a public subreddit setting. Private subreddits were excluded from the study due to their discretionary nature and strict membership requirements. The first author directly messaged every single redditor listed as a moderator in the sidebar of targeted subreddits. A total of 118 Reddit direct message solicitations were sent to moderators of our final list of 18 AAPI subreddits (in addition to the subreddits reflected in Table 1, the first author reached out to moderators from r/asianparentstories, r/asianmasculinity, r/easternsunrising, r/asianpeoplegifs, r/asianeats).

The human moderator count for the targeted subreddits varied greatly (average = 7.15, standard deviation = 8.44; bots were removed from calculation), with the largest moderation team count of 33 belonging to r/hapas, and the smallest moderator count of 1 on both r/asianamericanissues and r/asianamericanathletes. A moderator listed on a specific

subreddit does not necessarily imply that the moderator is still active on the subreddit.

### Interview Protocol

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews via voice and video calling applications like Skype, Google Hangout, and Discord. One participant (P10) requested that the interview was done purely through textual exchanges to preserve his anonymity. Moderators were required to be at least 18 years old to participate in the study. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to more than 2 hours. Recordings were transcribed within 24 hours of conversing with each participant. Our Institutional Review Board approved the study.

The interview guide comprised of eight sections: (1) collecting demographic information of the moderator, (2) diving into their motivations behind using Reddit, (3) understanding their sense of identity within their community, (4) exploring factors that influence their deliberation on Reddit, (5) uncovering their moderation practices, (6) unpacking their understanding of anonymity, (7) inquiring about the ways they seek social support, and (8) their perceptions on the Reddit platform at large.

### Data Analysis

The first author analyzed interview transcripts iteratively by using coding [77] and memoing [25] techniques. He inductively developed a codebook that maintained an inventory of codes with their descriptions [86]. A total of 18 reoccurring codes emerged related to the challenges moderators faced in managing their subreddits, working with their moderation teams, and developing strategies for moderating AAPI communities. The codes were reduced under axial coding into the 6 themes presented in this paper. We reached a point of saturation after our interview with our fifteenth participant, as no new themes emerged, and the remaining six participants confirmed the identified themes.

### Participant Demographics

As illustrated in Table 2, a total of 12 participants identified as cis male (57%) and 9 identified as cis female (43%). The majority of moderators were aged in their twenties (62%). All but one moderator (P3) identified with having Asian or Mixed (with Asian) heritage (95%). Moderators were highly educated, as 19 participants attained at least a bachelor’s degree (90%), and 8 participants completed an advanced academic degree (38%). We also collected self-reported data on the average amount of time moderators spent on Reddit during the participant recruitment period: 7 participants spent 0-1 hours on Reddit per day, 1 spent 1-2 hours on Reddit per day, 8 spent 2-3 hours on Reddit per day, 2 spent 3-4 hours on Reddit per day, 2 spent 4-5 hours on Reddit per day, and 1 spent over 5 hours on Reddit per day.

**Table 2: Summary of participant demographics.**

ID	Sex	Age	Race	Ethnicity	Degree Earned	Subreddit Moderated
P1	M	20-29	Asian	Indian American	Bachelor	r/abcdesis
P2	M	20-29	Asian	Pakistani American	Bachelor	r/abcdesis
P3	M	18-19	White	Caucasian	High School	r/asiandrama
P4	M	20-29	Asian	Vietnamese American	Master	r/gaysian
P5	F	20-29	Asian	Taiwanese American	Bachelor	r/asianbeautyadvice
P6	F	30-39	Asian	Taiwanese American	Doctoral	r/asianamericanissues
P7	M	20-29	Asian	Chinese American	Bachelor	r/asianbros
P8	M	20-29	Asian	Chinese Canadian	Bachelor	r/aznidentity
P9	M	20-29	Asian	Chinese	Master	r/aznidentity
P10	M	30-39	Asian	Chinese	Bachelor	r/aznidentity
P11	F	20-29	Asian	Chinese American	Master	r/asianamerican
P12	M	20-29	Mixed	Chinese, Italian	Bachelor	r/asianamerican
P13	F	20-29	Asian	Hong Kong American	Bachelor	r/asianfeminism
P14	F	30-39	Asian	Thai American	Postgraduate	r/asiantwox
P15	M	30-39	Asian	Korean American	Master	r/asianamerican
P16	F	20-29	Asian	Indian American	Master	r/desitwox
P17	M	40-49	Mixed	Chinese, Caucasian	Bachelor	r/hapas
P18	F	20-29	Asian	Chinese American	Bachelor	r/asiantwox
P19	M	30-39	Asian	Korean Canadian	Master	r/asianamericanathletes
P20	F	18-19	Mixed	Japanese, Welsh	High School	r/hapas
P21	F	20-29	Asian	Bengali American	Bachelor	r/desitwox

## Reflexivity Statement

In examining how marginalized communities are studied, reflexively understanding the authors' race and ethnicity may bring certain affinities into perspective [78]. The first author identifies as AAPI and has previously engaged in advocacy work for the AAPI community. He has also been subscribed to AAPI subreddits for more than four years.

## 4 FINDINGS

We center our results on the emergent themes of emotional labor involved in the moderation practices of our participants. To answer RQ1, we report on challenges that arise in their meta moderation that shape the identity work of their online communities. To answer RQ2, we describe their moderation strategies for managing emotional labor and the underlying workarounds they employ to sustain their AAPI subreddits.

### Challenges of Meta Moderation

Here we describe challenges moderators face as manifested in emotional labor from meta moderation. Moderators engage in a range of meta practices—practices that exist outside of Reddit itself—as a means for fulfilling their duties as moderators, and in managing tensions within moderating teams. These challenges include: (1) burning out from volunteer work, (2) navigating hierarchical structures, and (3) balancing unfulfilled expectations.

*Burning out from volunteer work.* Six participants (P5, P7, P12, P13, P16, P18) disclosed feeling burned out, or exhausted, from their volunteer service as moderators at some point in their service. P12 notes how burnout caused by overwork or stress is a gendered issue for her moderation team.

*“Sadly, we do get a lot of burnout, mostly through our female moderators. As far as keeping everything alive, we just keep moving forward. Try and encourage them. But, you know, it’s tough.”* (P12)

While moderators talk about burnout in different ways, some continued to serve their volunteer roles for the benefit of others. P16, an Indian American female in her twenties who moderates for r/desitwox (a subreddit devoted for Desi girls of the South Asian diaspora to talk about life, culture, fashion, and community) underpins the gravitas of keeping her community accessible for people like her, despite the emotional toil she endures to keep her subreddit alive.

*“It’s been a tiring job doing this for free and dealing with a lot of the shit that we’ve dealt with, and so now I kind of just mostly focus on r/desitwox and my private sub and just keeping the community going and keeping that space open for other girls who may be like me.”* (P16)

The majority of participants who have experienced burnout in this study identified as female. These participants shared how they encountered harassment and misogynist comments directed either towards themselves or the redditors of the communities they moderate. Similar outcomes in volunteer roles have been found among female Wikipedia editors, which eventually influence the type of work the editors commit to serving in their volunteer roles [63].

*Navigating hierarchical structures.* AAPIs hail from high context societies, such as those in the East, which are hierarchical in nature and emphasize honor and respect-based practices that maintain positive impressions both within interpersonal networks and outwardly in public [32, 81, 96]. We continue to see hierarchical structures reinforced in the moderation practices of AAPI subreddits, where moderators may be provided different levels of access contingent on the roles they fulfill in each subreddit they moderate. P12 illustrates this point further among the moderation team of r/asianamerican.

*“Yes, there’s actually some hierarchy. The more tenured ones have full moderator powers that include banning. They have a lot more say in what we wanna do as a whole, from a meta standpoint. Then we have the newer mod permissions. It’s more a support role. Mostly they’re in charge of just looking out for threads.”* (P12)

Hierarchical structures vary across moderation teams, and some teams found the hierarchy challenging to subvert. P7 notes how uneven levels of moderation access prevent moderators from gaining complete control of a subreddit.

*“Reddit’s moderating structure makes it difficult to usurp power... The only way to usurp a moderator is by literally hacking their account.”* (P7)

The power dynamics stemming from hierarchical moderation structures influence how moderators interact with one another. P9 reveals how hierarchical clashes between moderators may contribute to the formation of new subreddits.

*“There’s four [main moderators] who split from r/asianmasculinity [to create r/aznidentity] because we disagree with the moderation tactics of the top mod. We slowly moved the conversation from sexual dynamics into racial politics.”* (P9)

Seven participants (P4, P5, P8, P9, P11, P13, P15) elaborated on their observations of AAPI subreddits and their history of fragmentation. According to the creation dates of AAPI subreddits in Table 1, r/asianamerican (a subreddit that aims to foster a sense of community among Asian Americans and their respective counterparts in the Asian diaspora) is one of the oldest subreddits created for AAPI identity work. P11, a Chinese American female in her twenties who moderates for r/asianamerican, provides a brief overview of allegiances and defections among AAPI subreddits.

*“On our side of the issue would be r/asianamerican, r/asianfeminism, r/asiantwox, r/asianparentstories. Then all the other Asian communities on Reddit are some variation of r/asianmasculinity and r/aznidentity—those were actually splinter communities of r/asianamerican because they felt that the moderation of r/asianamerican was too harsh. Those people moved out of the community and created their own.”* (P11)

As confirmed in our interviews, the r/asianamerican subreddit served as the central space for AAPIs to discuss a wide range of topics on Reddit, which later splintered off into smaller communities. Those who repeatedly shared philosophical disagreements on the direction of r/asianamerican were banned or censored from the subreddit, thus creating splintered spin-offs for alternative discussion.

*Balancing unfulfilled expectations.* Three participants (P1, P4, P8) have experienced challenges in keeping pace with the demands redditors expect out of their subreddit moderators. Redditors grapple with maintaining values of the public sphere: inclusion, civility, and rationality [28, 29]. 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. P1, an Indian American male in his twenties who moderates for r/abcedsis (a subreddit for members of the South Asian diaspora, colloquially referred to as American Born Confused Desis), feels caught in a dichotomy of doing both too much and too little moderation.

*“It’s always been a fine line to find balance. Sometimes we had users in the past they say we’re Nazi*

*mods, and then there’s sometimes where we get criticized for not doing enough.”* (P1)

Political differences among influential AAPI redditors also played a factor in the splintering of subreddits. P15, a Korean American male in his thirties who moderates for r/asianamerican, attributes political ideology as a factor for subreddits to splinter into smaller fringe groups. Previous research has shown that AAPI redditors engage differently between conservative and progressive online communities through a process conceptualized as identity work as deliberation [16].

*“There was a split within r/asianmasculinity where a bunch of people were kicked out. Those people went on to form r/aznidentity. It had to do with the amount of labor that was being invested and personal vendettas, also political differences.”* (P15)

In light of the evident splintering within AAPI subreddits, P8, a Chinese Canadian male in his twenties who moderates for r/aznidentity (a subreddit that prioritizes the discussion of issues, ideas, and policy that affects the lives of Asians who live in Western society), recognized how newer moderators work to change the culture left behind by older moderators.

*“Our older moderators were in favor of more fringe topics that might not really get much praise, whereas newer moderators are more in favor of more moderate topics that everybody likes to discuss.”* (P8)

Moderators are also aware of the increasing importance emotionality plays in online discourse, particularly when facilitating contentious deliberation. P8 became conscientious of how moderation is interconnected with the moods of people browsing the subreddit at that point in time.

*“[We are] balancing the type of extremist posts with moderate posts and positive and negative kind of post material. Because I realize as a large subreddit, the type of topics that we have on our front page can affect people’s moods.”* (P8)

Despite their shortcomings, moderators have come to accept the thankless nature of their roles. Outside of their moderation team, moderators hardly receive any gratitude for the emotional labor they invest in their community. P4, a Vietnamese American male in his twenties who moderates for r/gaysian (a subreddit for LGBTQ members of the AAPI community) compares redditors as children of a subreddit family, with moderators serving a largely unappreciated—yet important—parental role in the development of the subreddit.

*“You can’t please everybody and everybody wants something different, but they’re all children about it.”* (P4)

While moderators play a key role in maintaining and upholding values of the public sphere through meta moderation, we find that they do not feel fully appreciated by members of

their subreddits, which may negatively affect the recruitment and retention of moderation teams.

### Moderation Strategies to Manage the Stress of Emotional Labor

In this section, we describe the strategies moderators employ to manage the emotional stress manifest in moderation work. These strategies include: (1) distancing away from drama, (2) building solidarity from shared struggles, and (3) integrating an ecology of tools for self-organized moderation.

*Distancing away from drama.* Twelve participants (P3, P4, P5, P7, P9, P11, P13, P14 P15, P16, P20, P21) shared their experiences of observing drama unfold within their online communities. P18, a Chinese American female in her twenties who moderates for r/asiantwox (a subreddit dedicated to Asian women—the ‘TwoX’ refers to the XX chromosomes that determine the sex of an individual), describes how she has become desensitized to threatening messages over the tenure of her moderation.

*“It is a ton of emotional labor, but I’ve forced myself to detach a lot. For example, we got like a super, super threatening message in the ModMail the other day, and I thought it was kind of funny, so I shared it with a friend. She was horrified. She was like, ‘I’m so sorry. Wow, I can’t believe you had to read that.’ I was like, ‘Oh... I thought it was kind of funny.’ I just have to emotionally divorce myself, otherwise, it’d be too much.”* (P18)

P11 also reveals how she separated herself from drama that unfolds in her subreddit by not intervening in drama.

*“Lots of drama happened in these subreddits, of which I wasn’t that related to, but it just convinced me that it was not a community that I wanted to invest more time in... I needed to step back.”* (P11)

While discussions on Reddit have the capacity to be interesting and meaningful, not all interactions on Reddit are productive. P12 has repeatedly observed the futility of arguing with anonymous people online, particularly redditors who are not open to listening to opposing perspectives or having their worldviews challenged.

*“I don’t really directly respond because I know, like at this point... some of those guys’ minds are already made up and they’re not gonna change them. I just kinda, like, downvote, roll my eyes, get a little annoyed, and then just move on.”* (P12)

Moderators are acutely aware of how their responses to incendiary dialogue can impact the emotional labor behind their moderation. P14, a Thai American female in her thirties who moderates for r/asiantwox, illustrates that avoiding

antagonistic redditors serve as an effective means of strategic distancing.

*“There some very aggressive antagonistic people and I don’t want to attack them, I don’t want them tracking me down because I’m not high profile, but I can be found and I don’t want that.”* (P14)

Experienced moderators tend to distance themselves from unnecessary drama that pervades their subreddits, as the visible work that comes from dealing with drama is not worth their emotional labor. Our empirical evidence draws parallels to Hochschild’s work on emotional labor, whereby the suppression of emotions are felt but not expressed [35].

*Building solidarity from shared struggles.* All 21 interview participants experienced microaggressions—indirect, subtle, or unintentional discriminatory exchanges against members of a marginalized group [88, 89]—on Reddit targeted either toward them or members of their community. P8 describes how microaggressions have a long-term effect on how AAPIs may view themselves and those similar to them.

*“Think about the huge and ever-growing list of lies against Asians: dog eaters, small penises, hated by women, no human rights, organ harvesting, Tibetan genocide, Mao’s genocide, Tiananmen Square massacre, uncreative copycats, etc. What is there to be proud of? These Asians get brainwashed into hating themselves.”* (P8)

Beyond comments that hint at casual slights, moderators also expressed their interactions with redditors who spew blatant racial biases, discriminatory remarks, and other forms of harassment. Instead of directly responding to the attacks targeted toward them, moderators vented their frustrations internally to their moderation teams as a means of seeking social support. P16 illustrates how this process of support seeking develops friendship among a team of moderators.

*“I kind of started meeting some other Asian women and we kind of started realizing that, ‘Hey, this harassment that we’re facing, we’re not the only ones.’ We reached out to each other, ‘Oh, you’re getting this, too? Oh, these are the same people.’ I’ve formed friendships.”* (P16)

In response to microaggressions and harassment, moderators form solidarity with others in the larger AAPI community by connecting and welcoming redditors to newly created subreddits that address a community need. P16 shares the motivations behind her creation of r/desitwox and how moderators who believed in her vision rallied around her and volunteered to grow her subreddit.

*“With r/desitwox, one of the mods was like, ‘Hey, I really want space for Desi girls, because r/abcdesis is very male-dominated.’ We were like, ‘Why don’t*

*we carve out a space for ourselves?’ By that time, I had already had experience with the other subs, so I was like, ‘Oh, I’ll help run some of the auto-moderator’ and that’s how it came about.” (P16)*

P17, a mixed-race male in his forties who moderates for r/hapas (a subreddit with a reputation for sparking controversial topics among those who identify with half-Asian ancestry), articulates the way he intervenes in guiding contentious and gendered microaggressions surrounding dating within the AAPI community.

*“I didn’t like banning the Asian males because I kind of had a sense of camaraderie for them. But then I also understood, I could kind of see how they were, it was a little bit of a crowd out and sometimes we had to just cut down the numbers somehow tactfully so that actual Hapas had more of a voice in their own sub.” (P17)*

Here we see P17 engage in emotional labor in negotiating the need for camaraderie with the need for representation, performing invisible work in banning Asian male redditors who were drowning out the voices of Hapa individuals through microaggressive comments.

Moderators like P9 are willing to put aside their personal differences to see AAPI subreddits more united than divided, underscoring the need for the community to stand in solidarity for issues larger than the feuds between AAPI subreddits.

*“We all want the same thing, no matter how much we hate each other, we should just squash the beef. I forgive.” (P9)*

As microaggressions have the potential to be internalized by those that encounter them on a daily basis [89], moderators play an important role in creating opportunities for solidarity by building online spaces that counter disparaging stereotypes surrounding their AAPI identity. These spaces allow AAPIs to reframe how they perceive themselves in the larger narrative of society and allow moderators to reclaim their sense of purpose from the emotional labor invested in their online communities.

*Integrating an ecology of tools for self-organized moderation.* Bricolage is the act of choosing tools at hand in order to develop solutions that enable agency [94]. Twelve participants (P2, P3, P4, P7, P8, P9, P11, P13, P16, P18, P19, P21) engaged in bricolage whereby they assembled an ecology of technologies together as a means of building capacity for moderation work. The Reddit platform lacks a range of features that moderators need to perform their activities, and we find that moderators self-organize to develop agency for moderation work. A common strategy among moderators is to relegate private communication channels for steering the direction of the subreddit to platforms like GroupMe and

Discord, as Reddit’s private messaging platform has been described as less usable. P11 shares how she works with her moderation team to make decisions backstage in a private Slack channel invisible to their subreddit.

*“We have a team of five to seven people who are somewhat active. We all sit in a Slack channel. Usually, if people don’t know what to do about a comment, whether they should allow it or not, they’ll ask other mods. We kind of go on a consensus basis, although we sort of divide our team into full mods and support mods.” (P11)*

As illustrated by P11, moderation teams piece together subtasks (i.e., remove comments, ban users) in their coordinated practices that require human intervention. For tasks that can be automated, moderators may resort to using AutoModerator,<sup>1</sup> a customizable bot that monitors new and edited comments in subreddits and acts on them as needed. Bots can be configured to detect, flag, and remove content regarded as offensive, inappropriate, or rule-breaking; post regular community discussion threads; and alert moderators if certain types of content are posted.

*“I would say 50% to 70% of the work is done by u/automoderator. When there’s a post that auto mod took down, it’ll message us, and we can look at it and be like, ‘This is actually fine,’ or, ‘No. This does need to go.” (P11)*

Our participants also described ways in which they have customized their Reddit routines to improve their ability to moderate their subreddits more effectively. P2 explains how he uses a third party browser extension to annotate private notes about a redditor’s post history, which remains unseen by the redditor.

*“People don’t realize that as mods we have this toolbar where we can post notes about individual users. We can say, ‘Over here he was trolling, or over here, he was trying to bait someone.” (P2)*

P16 notes how the users of its subreddit took it upon themselves to improve their experience with using Reddit.

*“I wish Reddit itself would have those kinds of tools integrated into the platform, but they don’t. The toolbar, auto mod, all that stuff, it’s not actually Reddit created those kinds of things. It’s users who created it and made it better.” (P16)*

In implementing a bricolage of tools to facilitate their moderation practices, moderators engage in invisible work that does not get seen by the broader subreddit.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.reddit.com/wiki/automoderator>



## 5 DISCUSSION

In the following section, we discuss the costs of emotional labor within collectivist cultures and suggest how practices of moderation constitute a form of emotionally taxing volunteer work. We then provide implications for designing for emotional labor, what we coin as designing for sustained volunteerism, to improve how the work of moderation happens in Reddit and similar platforms.

### Costs of Emotional Labor

As illustrated in our findings, the work moderators engage in is personally emotional, and they encounter threats to their personal privacy and wellbeing. The longevity of online communities rests on the backs of the moderators who have a significant emotional investment in the online spaces in which they are embedded. This is especially important given the personal risks associated with engaging in this kind of work, which we explore next.

*Risking personal safety and wellness for the social good.* Recent research has looked at how paid commercial content moderators are contracted for employment by social media companies to flag and remove inappropriate content from the platform [76]. These platforms need human agents to sift through and evaluate vast quantities of user-generated content that have been reported by community members for review. Companies have historically exploited the volunteer labor of their workers in order to maximize profits, and this bottom line ethos has also been evident in Reddit’s well-documented history of corporate mismanagement [60, 61]. Platforms with smaller revenue streams lack the financial resources to compensate their content moderators and depend on volunteers to take on the burden of moderation without compensation. While platforms are experimenting with ways in which moderation tasks can be automated, current filtering mechanisms are coarse and still in need of refinement to detect inappropriate content and halt abusive behavior of bad actors [75]. The work of human moderators cannot scale and is not well-equipped to review content for extended periods of time. Inconsistent moderation limits the ability of community members to understand the bounds of acceptable behavior and does little to guide individual actions.

When moderators ban redditors or delete content from their subreddits, their actions may be subject to scrutiny by dissenting community members. Angry redditors may escalate their retribution in a way they perceive as justified harassment, abuse, or doxing that jeopardize the character or safety of the moderator [4]. Moreover, since moderators are subject to rote and monotonous tasks in their moderation workflow, they are constantly exposed to disturbing content that may have long-term effects on their mental health. The

lack of a standard definition of harassment across current social media platforms [69] pose additional hurdles to designing moderation tools that work across multiple platforms.

Despite such personal costs, moderators can empower themselves to be viewed as social entrepreneurs, such that in moderating identity work spheres, moderators are working to improve the social good of the platform. For instance, the relationship between Reddit moderators and Reddit administrators (paid company staff) can be improved, as most female participants felt that Reddit administrators can take a stronger stance against the issue of harassment on the platform. Thus, moderators—the minority of any subreddit—take it upon themselves to manage the emotional labor that sustains their community.

*Saving face in online collectivist spaces.* AAPIs hail from cultures that function in “high context,” that is, cultures that uphold a system of values that prioritize the identity of the group over the identity of the individual [32, 96]. High context societies, such as those in the East, are hierarchical in nature and emphasize honor and respect-based practices that maintain positive impressions (i.e., “saving face” [37, 81]) both within interpersonal networks and outwardly in public space [32]. For instance, traditional high context cultures view negative impressions of individuals as a direct reflection of their entire family [10, 42, 43, 90].

Online communities like Reddit function as identity work spheres—public spheres that provide a space for the enactment of collective identity work—because they allow AAPIs to create anonymous profiles that are detached from their identity in the real world. In navigating values from Eastern to Western societies [81], the process by which redditors move from a collective identity to an individual identity make for an interesting complication of identity work. While low context societies like the United States embrace values of individuality, openness, and free speech, AAPIs often retain their cultural values even after immigrating to Western countries [9], complicating their identity work across the continuum of collectivist to individualistic norms [40].

On Reddit, AAPI spaces reify collectivist norms from offline to online contexts. Collectivism and humility—two separate factors listed in Kim’s [46] Asian Values Scale—persist within the moderation practices of AAPI subreddits. For instance, AAPI moderators serve an integral role in continuously “saving face” [27, 37] or managing impressions of the subreddit. This, in turn, maintains the integrity of a collective identity to outside observers [41]. In speaking individually with AAPI Reddit moderators, we also perceived notions of humility absorbed and exuded through their volunteer roles. They often credited the work of their holistic moderation team instead of seeking singular recognition. Developers of online community platforms similar to Reddit should take

into account their users' adherence to cultural values when designing new mechanisms to facilitate moderation.

### Opportunities for Sustainable Volunteerism

The activities being engaged in by moderators are a form of volunteerism [36], which is a pro-social behavior whereby people engage in activities that promote the social good [6]. Previous research in HCI and CSCW has looked at how digital volunteers, particularly during crisis, will become an increasingly important feature of social life [12, 85]. However, in the context of crisis situations, digital volunteer work may not last too long given that after a crisis has ended, people return to their routine lives. In the context of Reddit, moderation (and thus volunteerism) can become habituated. In relation to the sharing economy, moderation can be viewed as a service in a growing economy of emotional labor. Here, we propose design criteria to support sustained volunteerism in connection with the emotional labor involved.

*Empowering moderators through visible social support.* Recent HCI and CSCW research has investigated the online experience and disclosure of vulnerable and stigmatized identities. Andalibi and colleagues have looked at the various types of sensitive self-disclosures made on the photo-sharing platform Instagram, finding that emotional, network, and esteem support were discussed in greater frequencies than informational and instrumental support [3]. Rho and colleagues analyzed anonymized Facebook disclosures of students enrolled in elite universities who identified with low socioeconomic status, discovering that the structural affordances of social network sites can provide restorative properties among its users that foster a sense of belonging and enable opportunities for action, reflection, and communication [74].

Social support brings positive benefits to those who seek it, as it decreases stress, helps develop coping skills, improves mental health, and increases the overall quality of life [19, 66, 95]. However, in cultures embedded with collectivist values, seeking support in public settings is frowned upon because it reflects poorly on the collective identity of the family and community [81]. As visible work is highly emotional and politically charged, providing social support to moderators in the form of community affirmations (e.g., making a sitewide announcement for Moderator Appreciation Day every July 1st) may raise awareness of their contributions and validate their experiences through added recognition from their subreddit.

*Developing moderation tools with emotional affect in mind.* Dourish describes how the immaterial, virtual world has implications on the material, lived experiences of people [17]. In threading the perspective and lived experiences of our participants, we notice their personal investment and emotional labor in online spaces are adversely impacted in

the material, “real world.” Future research along these lines anticipates how we may consider various features of socio-materiality—such as heft, time, and resilience—in relation to moderation.

As volunteers consume their spare time moderating online communities (the mode reported in our dataset was 2-3 hours spent per day on Reddit), they implement an assemblage of material strategies to streamline and automate their moderation tasks. However, automation lacks an emotional dimension, and exploring the development of automated tools through an emotional labor lens may provide designers with insights for ways to generate empathy with emotionally-enhanced tools. Moderation tools, like bots for instance, are embedded with the values of a group [55], and reinforce positive or toxic behavior. As Reddit bots are scripted to provide mechanical feedback on various output fields like comments or private messages, interjecting emotion in the form of linguistic mimicry [67] may aid in guiding dialogue that is more open to authentic, empathic responses, resulting in less emotional labor for moderators.

### Limitations

Our sample of participants who moderate for AAPI subreddits may not necessarily represent the experience of moderators on other online platforms that operate on a different set of identity management affordances and privacy norms. Similar to the nature of interview studies in qualitative research [52], the goal of this work is not to produce generalizability, but rather to study a specific phenomenon in a focused context.

## 6 CONCLUSION

People increasingly turn to online communities for shaping their identity work. While current research trends consider the role of algorithms in shaping how information is disseminated, human moderators also invest emotional labor to manage how information is shared within their communities, and further work along these lines should explore opportunities for sustainable digital volunteerism. As much of this work is unseen, little is known about the experiences of the people doing this work, and this qualitative study sheds light on the experiences of a subset of moderators engaged in largely invisible work. This paper illuminates the underreported experiences of AAPIs who are themselves engaging in identity work within their moderation practices.

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