TikTok's Influence on Discourse

Regarding Microaggressions Against Asians

Megan Kim

Department of Mathematics, Science, and Technology Department, Teachers College

Professor Ioana Literat

TikTok's Influence on Discourse Regarding Microaggressions Against Asians

The rising rates of Anti-Asian hate crimes calls for the consideration of the racist behaviors that have been overlooked but contribute to the increasing discrimination against this community. These behaviors are referred to as microaggressions–an everyday behavior that insults and invalidates marginalized communities and are often trivialized. The following research will focus on content that addresses microaggressions against Asians and Asian Americans. For the purposes of this paper the term "Asian/American", coined by Laura Huun Yi Kang (2002), will be used to describe the commonly conflated perception of Asians and Asian Americans despite their differences ethnically and nationally. This paper analyzes a small set of data that aims to understand how TikTok influences conversations and the ways in which users engage with material that directly addresses microaggressions that Asian/Americans face. It will provide more insight on ways that TikTok is providing a space that constructively educates and addresses the issues of microaggressions, but also provides opportunities to reinforce racist assumptions both within the Asian/American community and from outsiders.

Literature Review

TikTok and Discourse on Race

Discourse about racism is no longer limited to offline interactions and limited by who we are surrounded by. The sample data was extracted from TikTok due to its increasing popularity and use with approximately 150 million Americans using the platform as of March 2023 (TikTok, 2023). Though the platform is most commonly known for entertainment, it also provides the opportunity for users to discuss race and identity. Not only is there a high interest amongst young people (61.1%) to discuss social and political issues with their peers (CIRCLE, 2018), but there is also evidence that cross cutting, conversations across partisan lines, on social

media is easier to engage with than offline (Literat & Kliger-Vilenchik, 2021). TikTok encourages these interactions between people with differing views about politics, as well as race and ethnicity.

The expanded network increases interactions with other parties, but it's also important to consider how the affordances are reshaping or reinforcing racist dynamics (Matamoros-Fernández, 2018). On social media platforms, youth with 'non-dominant identities' experience more pressure to conform to the dominant culture, but depending on how it is used, it can also be leveraged for "individual and collective identity formation and solidarity among non-dominant groups" (Literat & Brough, 2019, p. 141). On TikTok, the hashtag feature plays a central role in cultivating collective identity and structuring dialogue. Asian/Americans have used the hashtagging system for #StopAAPIHate "building communities, in which scattered individuals gather, engage with each other, and develop their affective stories and connections' (Lee & Lee, 2023). This research will use this same premise to search for communities that have formed to address Asian/American microaggressions.

A majority of the analysis concentrates on the comment section to understand how the threaded commenting system influences the nature of conversations. The threaded commenting system encourages replies and divergent topics that spin off of the main content presented, contrasting from structured designs that encourage commenters to respond to a single prompt (Literat & Kliger-Vilenchik, 2021). This allows multiple conversations to evolve, and the most 'interesting' conversation–defined by likes–to be highlighted at the top of the comment section. Various studies have researched the content from the trend of #StopAsianHate (Jacques et al. 2023; Lee & Lee, 2023), but there is a lack of research that dives into the discourse that unfolds when discussing the everyday microaggressions that the community faces. This paper addresses

this gap by contextualizing the analysis in the affordances of TikTok and racial and identity discourse.

Microaggressions Against Asian/Americans

The everyday microaggression against Asian/Americans is a reminder of the group's status in society (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are more harmful than non-race based insults due to its continuous reinforcement of underlying subjugation and discrimination against marginalized groups (Wang et al., 2011). For Asian/Americans, like other marginalized groups, the stereotypes that underpin the microaggressions directed toward their community is systemically rooted. It can be traced back in U.S. history when, for example, the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 was passed to restrict immigration of Asians at the height of the 'yellow peril' or the exoticization of Asian American women when East Asian brides were deemed 'better prostitutes than wives' (Lee & Lee 2003; Doolan, 2019). Modern U.S. popular media, unfortunately, has amplified the stereotypes of Asian/Americans as perpetual foreigners and women from this community as exotic, sex objects (Bahr, 2021; Kaur, 2021).

The cumulative experiences of microaggressions represent a 'lifelong burden of stress" (Sue, 2010) as these incidents are trivialized or even dismissed, causing an adverse effect on the Asian/American community. Microaggressions have been trivialized by critics, going as far as referring to them as 'macrononsense' that 'hardly necessitate(s) the handwringing reactions' (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Asian/Americans are also hindered by the model minority stereotype that frames them as 'honorary whites' (Zhan, 2010). This perception makes it difficult to articulate experiences of racism when others don't recognize them as people of color (Lee & Lee, 2023). Despite these denials, various studies found negative effects on Asian/Americans when targeted by microaggressions. Particularly when faced with the model minority stereotype

and perpetual foreigner microaggressions, Asian/Americans self-reported higher rates of poorer health (Nicholson & Mei, 2020). Sue et al.'s (2019) review of other studies note that some of these adverse health effects include increased stress (APA, 2016), lower emotional well-being (Ong et al., 2013), and impeded learning (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007). Many also perceive these microaggressions as an indicator and contributor of rising anti-Asian hate crimes (Jacques et al., 2023). Not only do these microaggressions persist, but they continue to harm members of the community that are targeted.

Researchers have identified microinterventions that can effectively dismantle the microaggressions. Sue et al. (2019) identified four techniques: make the invisible visible, disarm the microaggression, educate the perpetrator, and seek external support. It's unclear, however, how this interventional framework transfers to discourse on TikTok. Thus, this research paper aims to answer the following question: how is TikTok shaping the discourse that unfolds when confronted with the topic of microaggressions against Asian/Americans?

Methods

In response to this research question, the following qualitative research methodology was employed based on the social media research approach conducted by Literat et al. (2022). For the data collection, I searched in TikTok's main search bar 'Asian' and 'microaggressions', and my feed proceeded to populate with multiple videos on this topic. I saved the first ten videos and documented its link. In consideration of the algorithm, which changes the videos that are recommended under 'Top' videos, I proceeded to refresh the feed two more times after the first search, and followed the same procedure. This tactic was used to account for any possible bias from the TikTok recommendation system. To narrow down my data sample and to ensure that I analyzed the most viewed videos, I selected the ten out of thirty videos that had the most number

of views. All the videos collectively had 659,500 views. The criteria for the content of the video was simple, the videos had to discuss microaggressions against Asian/Americans, but there were no restrictions on the racial, national, or ethnic background of the creator.

The data was collected on April 7, 2023. After finalizing the ten videos, I analyzed the content of the video. My analysis began with noting the general subject matter of each video, and then a more in depth analysis of the details of each video. The details included types of microaggressions that were discussed, the usage of audio, specific quotes and subtitle use, the nature of the delivery of the message, and the storytelling mechanics.

For the second part of the analysis, I analyzed the top comments for each of the videos and their subsequent threads. In total, the ten videos accumulated 11,529 number of comments, but only 1,137 comments were analyzed. I reviewed at least 100 comments for each of the videos. However, I analyzed additional comments for videos that contained comments with more than a hundred likes even after the initial 100 comments. These comments included the replies attached to the original comments. I used this methodology to capture how the conversation unfolded for each of the most 'popular' comments, 'popularity' determined by likes. In the first pass, I noted the nature of the nature of the comment and conversations. In the second pass, after reviewing my original notes, I began to identify common patterns and themes of how individuals were communicating with each other (Table 1).

Findings

TikTok's platform, with its commenting system, encourages viewers to engage with new perspectives and continue shaping new conversations based on the original video's commentary on micoaggressions against Asian/Americans. A brief analysis of the original content identifies the various techniques used to initiate dialogue and bring awareness to the topic. The main focus

of the study–the comment section analysis–categorizes three recurring patterns of conversational

Overall Findings		
Main Theme	**Practice**	**Implications**
Support/Reinforcement	Celebration of culture	Reversing the shame and self-consciousness associated with culture and shifting towards embrace
	Advice through: -humor -anger -confidence	Providing tools to empower individuals
	Personal anecdote of same micro	Providing space to share personal story/experience
	Relatability	Helping others feel seen and validated by their experience
Identity Politics	Attacking and undermining through identity	In-group and out-group hostility
	Identity for contextualizing	Compelled to contextualize comment and stance
	Cross-ethnicity/race identification	Solidarity from other non-Asian/non-white groups; reveals shared experiences
Microaggression Disarmament & Education	Further deconstruction to debunking and nuance	Expansion on understanding of a group of individuals and/or others related to the comment
	Educating out group members	Often answering or engaging with members that critique, trivialize, or dismiss microaggression
	Introduction of new types of microaggressions within group and from out-group	Opening to discuss other microaggressions

Table 1: Overview of findings and implications of practices

behavior: support for targeted communities, attempts to disarm or educate the perpetrators, and

the role of identity politics in dialogue. The three categories also identify various practices that

were employed when engaging with others on TikTok, indicating potential opportunities and

drawbacks of engaging with conversations about racial microaggressions on the platform. Each

of the practices can be linked with implications (Table 1) that will be discussed further within the following sections.

TikTok's Role in Making the Invisible Visible

TikTok provides a significant affordance of publicizing user-generated content that brings visibility to topics like 'invisible' microaggressions towards Asian/Americans. The articulation of the problem in a multimedia format opens the door to further conversation about the topic. In this case, making the meta-communication explicit empowers individuals and communities targeted by the microaggression (Friere, 1970). All ten of the videos contained content that explicitly challenged stereotypes, forcing viewers to confront the microaggressions.

The analysis of how the content was presented revealed four different practices on how individuals chose to explicitly address microaggressions on TikTok (See Figure 1) and its influence on the comment section. The most popular form was playing music in the background as captions pop up listing off the microaggression(s) while the creator fills the frame. This format removed the explicit commentary from the creator and provided opportunities for commenters to interpret and expand upon the content (See Figure 2). The second most frequently used practice was using a TikTok feature, stitch. Stitches allow users to use a third party video clipping, up to 5 seconds, in their own video. Users would use the stitch to contribute to the construction of viewer affect (Hautea et al., 2021), highlighting a racist scene, before narrating their personal experience related to the clip. The stitches drew commenters that were familiar with the original videos, coalescing different communities from the social media platform. The third most common practice of self-reflection, utilized by two videos, reflected on their childhood experiences growing up as a minority in a majority white community. The comment sections for these two videos were also noticeably reflective. Lastly, one of the videos used roleplay to make

a commentary on what a microaggression would look like if an Asian/American made a microaggression toward a White person. The humorous tactic encouraged similar responses (See Figure 3). An analysis of the original content provided some insight on the ways in which viewers were encouraged to confront this topic. Future research should explore the relationship between the original content posted and its influence on the conversations that unfold.

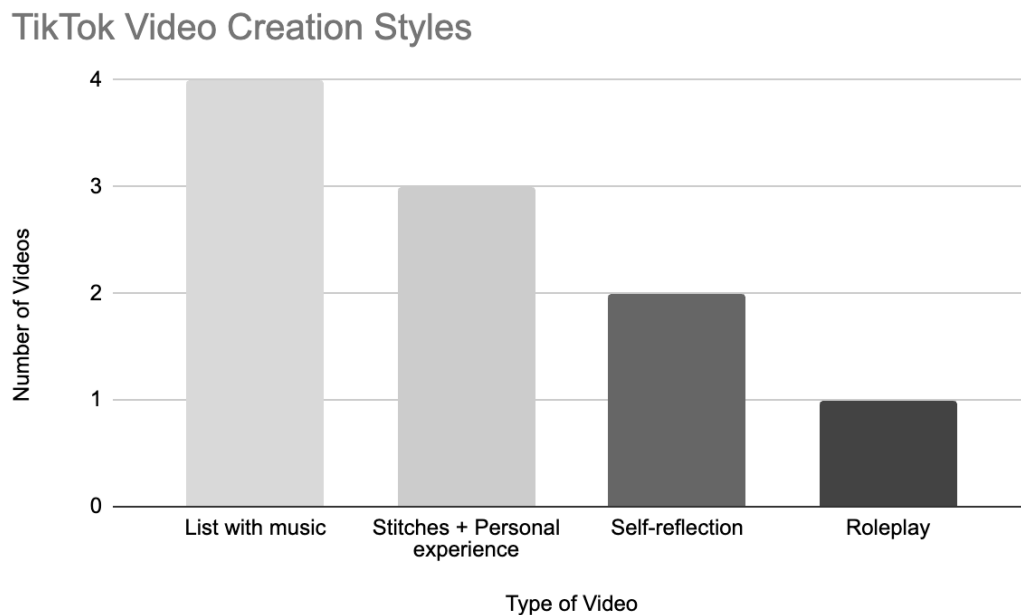*Figure 1: Content Creation Styles for TikTok Videos Addressing Microaggressions against Asian/Americans*
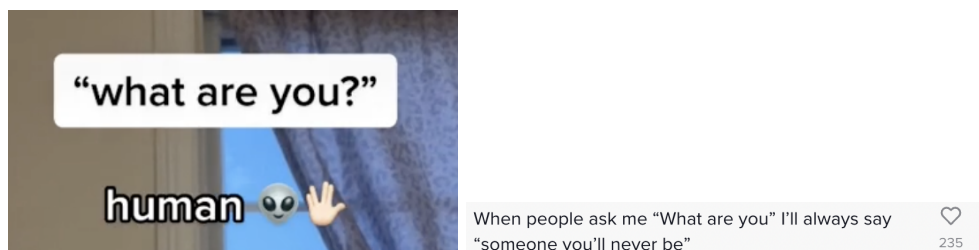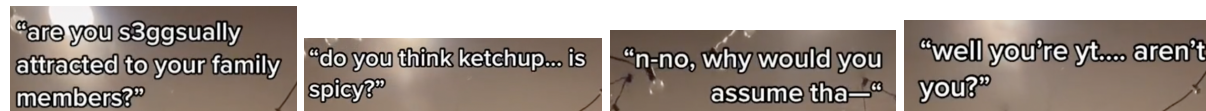

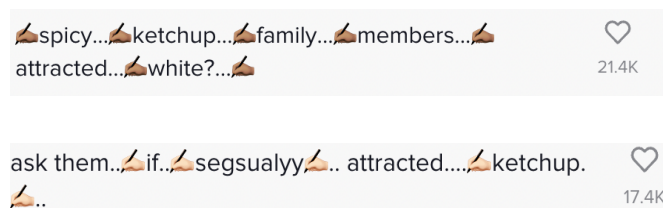*Figure 2: Repurposing subtitles from original video to give advice*

Screenshot from original creator   Comment section in response

Figure 3: Humorous content reflective in comment section

Subtitles from original TikTok video

Responses in comment section to TikTok Video

Seek reinforcement or support

The content analysis immediately highlighted the expression of support, and with a deeper analysis, three common practices were identified: shared personal experiences and relatability, celebration and empowerment of the individual and community, and advice on how to respond to microaggressions. The function of support should not be underestimated, since it is identified as one of the four ways to counter microaggressions (Sue et al., 2019). The platform encourages more expansive forms of communication ranging from "comedic, documentary, explanatory, communal, and interactive" (Schellewald, 2021). The findings demonstrate the ways in which the concept of validation is expanded upon and expressed.

Commenters leveraged the platform to asynchronously validate the experiences of targeted individuals and share personal experiences. The ability to asynchronously access the content and conversations, increased the opportunity to engage with a safe space to share their experiences with microaggressions. This affordance also allowed users to continuously build upon the validation and the threaded replies encouraged others to engage individually to validate specific individuals (see Figure 4). Unlike offline, TikTok not only allows individuals to form a

community over shared experiences, but it increases the opportunity for validation over an extended period of time.

The support, however, was not limited to seeking out community and receiving validation. Commenters also took the approach of celebrating the targeted culture and employing mechanisms like emojis to empower others (see Figure 5) . The third type of practice that emerged was the attempts to offer advice on how to respond to microaggressions. The advice provided was often a tactic that reversed the microaggression, forcing the perpetrator to confront their own biases and consider how their culture may have influenced their misperceptions of Asian/Americans. For example, a commenter shares how they're scared to eat their food at school because of their fear of being harassed by others, and another user replies, "TELL THEM AT LEAST MY FOOD HAS SEASONINGS". The burden is taken off of the recipient to explain their culture and food and asks the perpetrator to examine why they may hold certain beliefs. These various forms of support allow targeted individuals to engage with a variety of perspectives and discover the types of support that is most helpful for their needs.

Figure 4: Asynchronous Support

Figure 5: Employing Emojis for Empowerment

Vietnamese dumplings are 🔥. Lunchables could never 😂

2022-5-4   Reply

♡
483
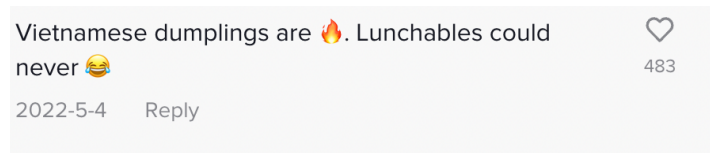
Microaggression Disarmament and Education

The second theme identified in the conversation analysis revealed that when various threads in the comment section were challenged by attempts to reinforce the original targeted microaggressions or new forms of microaggressions emerged, users responded with microinterventions aimed to disarm or educate. These two tactics, recommended by Sue et al. (2019), are used by individuals engaging in the comment sections, but rather than facing the perpetrator alone there is a community that is bolstering one another in the confrontation. The commenters used various tactics–ranging from deconstructing generalizations and providing nuances with personalized anecdotes, educating others about specific cultures and languages, confronting offensive remarks, and responding to questions (See Figure 6). Unfortunately, some of these confrontations still failed to educate perpetrators who doubled down on their belief system. Even though individuals used Sue et al. (2019)'s microintervention recommendations, these engagements didn't change the mind of others. It would be helpful to understand why this is the case, and if the comment sections are a viable place to be educating and disarming fellow commenters. It's possible that the infrastructure of TikTok raises more challenges since individuals are communicating with strangers and may not be able to engage as effectively, respectfully, or empathetically with one another. Regardless, the ability to directly reply to comments created new opportunities to engage with specific comments and discuss topics tangential to microaggressions discussed in the video content. The question is whether these engagements are productive in changing the minds of others.

Figure 6: Disarmament and Educational Tactics

Identity: Weaponization, Contextualization, and Solidarity

The third recurring pattern in the comment section revealed how identity politics played a role in contextualizing a point of view, attacking and undermining other perspectives, and connecting or differentiating oneself from the targeted audience. The variety of expressions demonstrate the opportunity social media presents for individuals to conceptualize their political identities and encounter divisive viewpoints (Zhong, 2022). Commenters repeatedly integrated references to their identity–ranging from ethnicity, language, geographical upbringing, and nationality–to contextualize their own experiences but also to question the validity of others. The cases where identity provided context, the comments would oftentimes expand viewer's understanding of a topic (Figure 7). However, identity was also weaponized to invalidate the views of others by questioning their background (Figure 8). The technique could manifest for the opposing purposes.

Multiple interactions in the sample data revealed patterns in which in-group conflict arose as users within the Asian diaspora differentiated themselves by nationality. In two of the videos, the content explicitly addressed the microaggression that celebrated the culture and appearances

of Koreans and Japanese and denigrated Chinese culture and looks. The comment sections began to make comparisons between the East Asian countries which fostered greater hostility towards others in the comments. Rather than focusing on the perpetrators, the conversations began to try to make assertions that presumed the dominance or independence of one or the other and questioned the patriotism of others. The possibility of global interactions compels users to consider a greater variety of contexts that are no longer limited by geography and how people's linguistic expressions incorporate identity (Zhong, 2022). It also raises the question of how interactions can be steered away from internal conflict and encourage support for one another within the Asian diaspora.

The practice of using identity was also applied by other non-white and non-Asian/American individuals to convey their solidarity and relatability to the microaggressions. The microaggression video that assumes Asian/Americans can't speak English fluently begins with a stitch of an elderly woman saying, 'You're very articulate, you did understand English'. In response, multiple users express how relatable this assumption is based on their background. Some of the comments were as follows: "Ugh people have down this to me too for being brown. I was born in Chicago too!!!" and "My fiancé is Hispanic. Totally get it.". These expressions of solidarity across races reveal further possibilities for individuals from different communities to connect with one another and discover common ground. In a system that often pits groups against one another to maintain a hierarchy, TikTok provides a space in which groups that experience varying levels of racism can gain more empathy for one another and potentially work together to counter them.

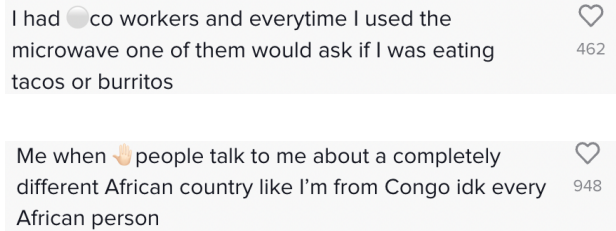*Figure 7- Identity used to create more nuance*

Bay Area is the best ... so diverse and aim to move to the bay !

2022-4-29   Reply

804

As an Asian American growing up in the bay, I can say it's been great for the most part

2022-4-30   Reply

55

Bay Area wasn't always like that in the 90's it was mostly Mexicans and black people now there's hella Asians especially Indians

2022-5-1   Reply

20

Figure 8- Weaponization of identity

Ur white

2022-4-30   Reply

21

How does she look white to you

2022-4-30   Reply

6

You assume shes white bc you saw a video where 80% of her face is covered??

2022-4-30   Reply

12

Figure 9- In-group conflict

No offense. Just curious. Are you loyal to America or China? I mean, if there's a war, will you take arms against China?

2022-4-30   Reply

1

I'm Australian

2022-4-30   Reply

90

Dude what kind of question is this?? This kind of thinking is what led to the japanese internment camps

2022-4-30   Reply

• • •

82

Figure 10- Out-group solidarity

I had ⚪co workers and everytime I used the
microwave one of them would ask if I was eating
tacos or burritos

♡
462

Me when 👆people talk to me about a completely
different African country like I'm from Congo idk every
African person

♡
948

Discussion

The findings from this sample data demonstrates a myriad of ways that commenters are employing tactics to support, educate, and form connections with one another. The affordances of TikTok increases the opportunities to engage with dialogue with a topic that is often dismissed or discussed within homogenous communities. While it increases visibility by reaching a more diverse audience, it also opens additional vulnerabilities that can increase racism. Commenters are already employing microintervention techniques that have been deemed effective by previous research, but further research is needed to understand why and when these techniques fail to disarm or educate perpetrators. Identifying the factors that hinder or facilitate educating racist behavior online will address a prevalent need in the online community. Lastly, the role of identity politics on social media is redefining individuals' belief systems regarding race. On one hand, it is creating more nuance as users from varied backgrounds share their personal experiences. On the other hand, it also seems to foster potentially more extreme views from out-group members as they double down on their belief systems when confronted and more internal hostility within the Asian-diaspora. The contributions of this paper demonstrates the nuances of discourse on race and identity on social media.

The findings from this study call to attention the ways in which TikTok's affordances are influencing the rich conversations around racial microaggressions against Asian/Americans, but further research needs to be applied. The findings are limited by a small sample size, and the content is primarily focused on East Asians. Future research should seek ways to include the

voices of the groups that are marginalized in the Asian/American community (e.g. South Asians, Southeast Asians). Additionally, discourse about the microaggressions specific to Asian/American men also should be included in future research. This analysis is limited to specific demographics within the Asian/American community, skimming the surface of a much larger conversation. Hopefully, future research will be able to analyze content that is more inclusive and explore greater attention to details on the connection between the TikTok video's use of audio, visuals, stitches, and tone influence the structure and nature of conversations.

References

American Psychological Association (APA). (2016). *Stress in America: The impact of discrimination*. Washington, DC: Author

Bahr, S. (2021, May 18). Stereotypes Are Rife Among Asian and Pacific Islander Film Roles, Study Finds. New York Times.

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/18/movies/asian-pacific-islanders-film.html

Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. (2018). *Election night 2018: Historically high youth turnout, support for Democrats*. https://bit.ly/2OYgIA1

Doolan, Y. W. (2019). Transpacific camptowns: Korean women, US army bases, and military prostitution in America. *Journal of American Ethnic History*, *38(4)*, 33–54.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Hautea S., Parks P., Takahashi B., & Zeng J. (2021). Showing they care (or don't): Affective publics and ambivalent climate activism on TikTok. *Social Media & Society*, *7(2)*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211012344

Jacques, E.T., Basch, C.H., Fera, J., & Jones, V. (2023). #StopAsianHate: A content analysis of TikTok videos focused on racial discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Dialogues in Health, 2,* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dialog.2022.100089.

Kang L. H. Y. (2002). *Compositional subjects*. Duke University Press.

Kaur, H. (2021, August 5). Female Asian and Pacific Islander characters are still objectified in films, a new report finds. CNN.

https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/05/entertainment/asians-pacific-islanders-film-representation-report-trnd/index.html

Lee, J. J., & Lee, J. (2023). #StopAsianHate on TikTok: Asian/American Women's

Space-Making for Spearheading Counter-Narratives and Forming an Ad Hoc Asian

Community. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157598

Literat, I., Boxman-Shabtai, L., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2022). Protesting the Protest Paradigm:

TikTok as a Space for Media Criticism. *The International Journal of Press/Politics,*

28(2), p. 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221117481

Literat, I. & Brough, M. (2019). From Ethical to Equitable Social Media Technologies:

Amplifying Underrepresented Youth Voices in Digital Technology Design. *Journal of*

Media Ethics, 34(1), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2019.1638259

Literat, I. & Kligler‑Vilenchik, N. (2021). How Popular Culture Prompts Youth Collective

Political Expression and Cross-Cutting Political Expression and Cross-Cutting Political

Talk on Social Media: A Cross-Platform Analysis. *Social Media + Society, 7(2).*

https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211008821.

Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2015, September). The coddling of the American mind. *The Atlantic*.

Retrieved from

https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mi

nd/399356/

Matamoros-Fernández, A. (2018). Inciting Anger through Facebook Reactions in Belgium: The

Use of Emoji and Related Vernacular Expressions in Racist Discourse. *First Monday,*

23(9), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v23i9.9405

Nicholson, H.L. & Mei, D. (2020) Racial Microaggressions and self-Rated Health among Asians

and Asian Americans. *Race and Social Problems, 12,* 209-218.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-020-09293-1.

Ong A.D., Burrow A.L., Fuller-Rowell T.E., Ja

N.M., & Sue D.W. (2013). Racial microaggressions and daily well-being among Asian

Americans. *Journal of Counsing Psychology, 60(2),* 188-99.

https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031736

Salvatore, J., & Shelton, J. N. (2007). Cognitive costs of exposure to racial prejudice.

Psychological Science, *18*, 810–815. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01984.x

Schellewald A. (2021). Communicative forms on TikTok: Perspectives from digital ethnography.

International Journal of Communication, *15(21),* 1437–1457.

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender & sexual orientation*.

Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Sue, D. W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., & Mendez, N. (2019). Disarming

racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, White allies, and

bystanders. *American Psychologist, 74(1),* 128–142. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000296

TikTok. (2023, March 21). Celebrating our thriving community of 150 million Americans.

TikTok. https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/150-m-us-users

Wang, J., Leu, J., & Shoda, Y. (2011). When the seemingly innocuous "stings": Racial

microaggressions and their emotional consequences. *Personality and Social Psychology

Bulletin*, *37*, 1666–1678. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167211416130

Zhong, J. (2022). The Pragmatics of Media and Identity Politics. BCP Business & Management,

20. https://doi.org/10.54691/bcpbm.v201i.1121