Subtle Asian Traits and COVID-19: Congregating and commiserating as East Asians in a Facebook group
by Crystal Abidin and Jing Zeng

Abstract
This paper studies how members of Subtle Asian Traits (SAT), a massive Facebook group of over 1.8 million members, congregate and commiserate online over their growth pains and experiences as (diasporic) East Asians. Founded in September 2018 by a group of Asian-Australian teenagers ‘as a joke’, SAT members share ‘Asian positive’ stories, resources, and memes through an average of 1,200 new posts daily. Alongside global milestone events, such as the rise of K-pop in the Global North and Korean film *Parasite*’s unprecedented four awards at the Academy Awards, SAT has also evolved into a space to celebrate Asian excellence, tease out identity politics, and discuss issues of injustice. However, upon the onset of COVID-19, the posts on SAT have swiftly pivoted to the everyday lived experiences of (diaspora) East Asians around the world. In this paper, we reflect on our experiences as East Asian diaspora members on SAT, and share our observations of meaning-making, identity-making, and community-making as East Asians who are collectively coping with our cultural identities and with COVID-19 aggression. Specifically, we study how Asianness is negotiated, circulated, and commodified on SAT, and offer the concept of ‘platformed Asianness’ to understand how being Asian online is co-constructed by an international Asian diaspora, group admins, and the technological affordances of Facebook.

Contents
Introduction
Methodology
Facebook groups and Subtle Asian Traits
‘Platformed Asianness’ on SAT
Cultures of Asian affinity on SAT
Topical shifts in SAT during COVID-19
SAT comments & discursive strategies around COVID-19
Conclusion: SAT as a repository of milestones and identity markers

Introduction
‘Subtle Asian Traits’ (SAT) is a private Facebook group that was started by eight Asian-Australian teenagers in September 2018 ‘as a joke’, but amassed over one million members in under three months. Users share ‘Asian positive’ stories, resources, and memes. Prolific members include actors/musicians of Asian descent who praise SAT for championing Asian representation. SAT is a leader and advocate for a variety of (East) Asian issues, and has organized meet-ups with members off-line, spoken at Facebook HQ Menlo Park about race issues, partnered with
Asian microcelebrities to generate content, and fundraised for calamities like the Australian bushfires (Lejano, 2019). As of June 2020, SAT boasts over 1.8 million members and 1,200 new posts daily. However, upon the onset of COVID-19, the posts on SAT have swiftly pivoted to the everyday lived experiences of (diaspora) East Asians around the world. In this paper, we reflect on our experiences as East Asian diaspora members on SAT, and share our observations of meaning-making, identity-making, and community-making as East Asians who are collectively coping with COVID-19 aggression. Specifically, we study how Asianness is negotiated, circulated, and commodified on SAT. Through content analyses of COVID-19-specific posts and longer-term participant observation, we identify SAT’s group norms, content genres, and cultures.

Methodology

Methodologically, this study has three main components: Digital ethnography, content analysis, and COVID-19 case studies, each of which serves to accomplish distinctive research objectives. As long-term members of the group, the authors began their observational study of this platform from late-2018. The longitudinal observation was important for the researchers to understand the development and evolution of SAT culture. More systematic and concerted digital ethnography commenced from January 2020 onwards. During this period of time, we collected and studied the documentation of SAT’s media coverage and guidelines published by the group admins; monitored group admins’ interventions on select posts and comment threads; and wrote up fieldnotes on our observations regarding the rhythmic progression of group dynamics, trending topics, and contentious issues.

Moreover, to identify how ‘Asianness’ is constructed, circulated, and commodified on SAT, qualitative analysis was employed to examine the top posts from SAT. Because a large amount of new content (approximately over 1,200 posts) is made available everyday on SAT and the majority of them receive only minimum attention, our study focuses on posts that receive the most reactions. Focusing on posts with the most engagement allows us to capture the most celebrated, as well as most disputed, representations of Asianness on SAT. Employing such a purposive sampling technique, we systematically retrieved 818 popular posts on SAT that were published between September 2018 and May 2020. Posts were collected through Facebook’s internal advanced search function, which allows us to retrieve the most popular posts from each month during the timeframe of our study. A Web crawler was then used to scrape the basic metadata of each post from the search result, including text and engagement metrics (likes, shares, and comments). No user information was included in this data collection process. Thematic analysis was then used to identify and anticipate patterns from our sampled SAT pots. In this study, the authors follow a multi-step approach (Guest, et al., 2012) to annotate and categorise the most recurring themes in SAT.

Additionally, using the case of SAT members’ responses to anti-Asian xenophobia instigated by COVID-19, we studied how members discursively negotiate, challenge, and defend Asianness during the pandemic. Utilising targeted keyword searches (e.g., ‘racist’, ‘racism’, ‘xenophobia’, ‘xenophobic’, ‘discrimination’, ‘hate’, ‘attack’), we manually selected 25 COVID-19 related posts published between January to March 2020, based on the number of responses and comments accumulated. Altogether, these 25 posts received 231,603 responses and 16,551 comments. From this, we further selected a sample of 1,000 top-ranked comments for closer analysis.

Despite its prolific user base and prominence in the mainstream media, SAT is still a private Facebook group. As such, we were especially conscientious in the way we represented and publicised data in our paper. We justified the focus of our study after considering the immense scale of SAT for a Facebook group of just under two-years-old, and the fact that both authors considered ourselves ‘insiders’ (being long-term members and diaspora East Asians too) who had the capacity to carefully study the emic context and culture of SAT with minimal intrusion. Although there were already dozens of academic conference papers on SAT, we also felt it was courtesy to inform the admins (via Facebook Messenger) of our intention to formally study and publish about the group. To mitigate any risks of exposure or intrusions of privacy, in all stages of our data collection we focused only on the content of the post or comment, and excluded all personal information and metadata (e.g., usernames) attached to these posts and comments. In this paper, the memes and images depicted were carefully selected after confirmation that they excluded sensitive referents and were shared with the intention to be circulated far and wide. Comments quoted were paraphrased to reduce traceability, even among SAT members.
Facebook groups and Subtle Asian Traits

Facebook groups have become a central feature of the platform since 2016 (Rodriguez, 2020), as part of founder Mark Zuckerberg’s vision to create a ‘Global community’ (Zuckerberg, 2017). Facebook’s in-house research reports that over 400 million users belong to a group that they find ‘meaningful’ (Facebook, 2019a). While it remains an open question what elements and interactions constitute a ‘meaningful’ experience, the rich body of academic research on the topic has documented how Facebook groups have been utilised. These include their use for information acquisition (Chalklen and Anderson, 2017), emotional support (Bender, et al., 2011), civic engagement (Ekström and Sveningsson, 2019; Moody-Ramirez and Church, 2019), and career development (Pruchniewska, 2019). In recent literature, more light has also been shed on the role of Facebook groups on diaspora identity politics. For instance, migration studies researcher Oiarzabal’s (2012) study of Basque groups on Facebook demonstrates how their members achieve identity maintenance and community building in a collaborative manner. Similarly, media studies scholars Titifanue, et al.’s (2018) research documented how the Rotuman diaspora deploys Facebook groups to re-engage with their culture and identity.

Digital media has become a central part of diaspora culture, as they serve as ‘transnational springboards’ for new and more dynamic forms of diaspora identity politics [1]. In this study, we adopt anthropologist Sökefeld’s [2] theorisation and define diasporas as ‘imagined transnational communities’ that ‘unite segments of people that live in territorially separated locations’. To focus on imagination in this concept is to perceive diaspora as a collectively ‘assumed identity’ (Bradatan, et al., 2010), which is subject to dispute and negotiation. Such interpretive flexibility is important to this study, because SAT’s membership constitution transcends geo-boundaries and ethnic-divisions. As diaspora politics researcher Kumar [3] points out, the diasporic sense of community is actively assumed through ‘discursive constructions’. Thus, researching SAT allows us to observe how such ‘discursive construction’ takes place, and how the collective ‘assumed identity’ operates.

As a private Facebook Group, membership has to be approved by either the group admin or existing members. Members of the group are active in submitting posts, but SAT’s ‘Admins’ (n=11) and ‘Moderators’ (n=38) review each post before they appear on the page. As revealed in SAT’s FAQ document, the group has over 30,000 pending posts that are under review (as of February 2020). According to its official guidelines, SAT admins approve four types of content: ‘Asian related content’, ‘original Asian related memes’, ‘memes which have good captions relating to Asians’, and ‘travel and food recommendations’. Content that involves ‘political, racial or any controversial content’ — such as ‘eating dog, Asian American vs Asian Australians, derogatory terminology’ — is not usually tolerated, although the landscape of these guidelines and group norms had shifted during COVID-19, as we discuss shortly.

As indicated by the above content reviewing and moderating rules, the group’s admins play an essential role in defining, gatekeeping, and curating ‘Asianness’ for the group. However, the inclusivity of the label ‘Asian’ is questionable. At the time of writing, SAT’s 38 moderators reflect the demographic foci of its founders, constituting Asian diaspora/immigrants in predominantly Anglo-Saxon countries such as Australia (n=27), the U.S. (n=8), Canada (n=2), and the U.K. (n=1). Further, 27 appear to be of East Asian descent judging by their family names. This governance is reflected in our digital ethnographic observations that posts tend to favour East Asian customs (i.e., language, food, festivals) and cultural displacement discourses (i.e., migration, diaspora, adoption, international student living). SAT’s hand in dichotomizing (East/South or Yellow/Brown) Asian identity on Facebook is critical, considering our brief survey of the large network of ‘Subtle X’ spin-offs groups (Figure 1). Among the 80 spin-off ‘Subtle X’ groups on Facebook at the time of writing, (i.e., Subtle Asian Vegans, Subtle Taiwanese Traits, Subtle Christian Traits), 10 are dedicated to ‘Subtle Curry X’ (i.e., Traits, Food, Dating) genres where South Asians are more likely to congregate. This suggests that the fabric and politics of SAT tend to focus on East Asian issues despite its broad ‘Asian’ label.

The practice of commenting was also an important marker of membership in the SAT group, as one’s activity and hierarchical status could be visible to all members in the form of ‘Facebook group badges’. Launched in November 2018, badges were intended to ‘help your group acknowledge admins, moderators and dedicated group members’ (Facebook, 2018). They take the form of small visual flares that appear next to one’s username on ‘group posts, comments and on member profile[s]’, and options include: Admin and Moderator, New Member, Group Anniversary, Conversation Starter, Founding member, Conversation Booster, Visual Storyteller, Greeter, Link Curator, and Rising Star (Facebook, 2018). Qualifying for and earning a group badge is a mark of prestige, and many marketing firms have since taken to developing best practices (and at times, speculative folklore) on how to acquire a badge (e.g., Casserly, 2020; Santoriello, n.d.). In our digital ethnography, we observed that up till March 2020, SAT members’ identity negotiations and the camaraderie fostered in the comments section were indicated by Facebook’s allocation of ‘Conversation starter’ (n=116), ‘Visual storyteller’ (n=106), and ‘Rising star’ (n=10) badges next to a user’s handle. At
the time of writing, there were also badges that distinguish membership recency like ‘New members’ ($n=9,983$), and membership hierarchy like ‘Admins’ ($n=11$) and ‘Moderators’ ($n=38$). However, by June 2020, these badges no longer appeared to be visible to members, and it is conjectured that admins might have ‘turned off’ (Facebook, 2020) the option in light of the surge of members and activity during COVID-19.
Human interactions and their cultural norms are subject to, as well as embedded in, the architecture and logics of digital platforms (van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Gillespie, 2015). In the case of racial identity, digital media scholar Matamoros-Fernández [4] points out that racial discourses on social media are influenced by both platform’s ‘algorithmic shaping of sociability’ and their vaguely defined governance. We argue that SAT is a community built upon what we posit as ‘platformed Asianness’ — an identity co-constructed by an international Asian diaspora, group admins, and technological features of the platform. As earlier mentioned, SAT has become a congregational node for over 1.8 million Asian members on Facebook, many of whom are diaspora reflecting on what it means to be ‘Asian’ living in predominantly non-Asian societies. However, the Asianness of SAT is not a direct reflection of any specific geographic region or ethnical group, but derives from the sociability and exclusiveness of the private Facebook group.

Firstly, Facebook’s technological affordances directly influence how Asianness is imagined and manifested. This can be exemplified by the mechanism used by SAT for membership recruitment. The ‘private group’ model sustains SAT as a walled community where new membership is gatekept by existing members, who tend to add or invite new members who already share their cultural affiliations and backgrounds, given the complex layers and continuity of inside jokes in SAT. Admins and existing members of the group may then ‘approve’ the inclusion of new members. While there is no public information on how SAT admins and members vet the eligibility of prospective members, it has been speculated in some posts and comments that markers of Asianness may be gleaned from usernames and profile pictures. The authors’ own experience with joining SAT included being invited or added by an existing member, requesting to join the group, and receiving approval from an existing member or admin to join the group. We note that many ‘private groups’ on Facebook often require prospective members to respond to a checklist of questions — at times questing details such as postal codes for neighbourhood or location-based groups, or an institutional e-mail address for university or corporate groups — but at the time of our study, there is not such a process with SAT. As such, this snowballing method of recruitment reinforces and exacerbates the lack of diversity and under-representation within SAT.

As a ‘private group’ on Facebook, non-members are unable to lurk and view posts on SAT without formally joining as a member. Members can click through the ‘Membership’ tab on SAT, which brings up a directory of members which Facebook automatically sorts into: ‘Admins & Moderators’; ‘Friends’ who are members that are one’s mutual friends on Facebook; ‘Members with things in common’ who are members who may belong to the same interest groups apart from SAT as a user, or who may share mutual friends with a user; and finally an endless scroll of ‘New to the group’ members who are newly recruited users. Evidently, the Facebook platform’s model of encouraging interaction among
Subtle Asian Traits and COVID-19: Congregating and commiserating as East Asians in a Facebook group

members relies on mutual interest and friends, which encourages more homophily and deprioritizes diversity in the private group.

This form of ‘identity echo chamber’ created by Facebook’s private group features is further reinforced by the platform’s algorithms for personalised content curation. As previously mentioned, over 1,200 posts are published on SAT on a daily basis, and how Facebook prioritizes and pushes these posts on users’ Web and mobile interfaces determines ‘which form of Asianness’ receives visibility. Facebook’s algorithms for post-ranking prioritise content with the most engagement, especially that from one’s ‘like-minded’ fellows (Facebook, 2019b; Mosseri, 2018). Due to the imbalanced demographics of SAT members, posts suit a particular type of Asian taste (i.e., East Asian) are inevitably favoured and promoted by the platform.

Alongside the Facebook platform’ technological features, another factor contributing to the identity gatekeeping in SAT is its administration and content moderation. Content moderation is a common practice used by Facebook groups’ administrators to meet the platform’s Community Standards, but the sheer volume of post submissions to SAT requires its moderators to assess not only the potential harmfulness but also the ‘Asianness’ in each post. As revealed in SAT’s 2020 FAQ page, SAT had over 30,000 posts waiting in the queue to be reviewed, and its 38 moderators serve as the arbiters on what to be considered as ‘Asian related content’ — the key criteria in SAT’s moderation guidelines. Given the Anglo-centric distribution of moderators, contents that receive priority tend to reflect trends or issues deemed important by the diasporic gatekeepers. The Asian media events that have attained virality and whose creators have become microcelebrities reflect mostly Asian issues that have ‘made waves’ in the Anglo-centric Global South, such as the film Parasite’s unprecedented win at the Academy Awards, xenophobia arising from COVID-19, and the rise of East Asian pop culture in the U.S. through Korean music groups like BTS and BLACKPINK.

From our analyses, SAT has shaped ‘Asianness’ to be a placeholder predominantly for East Asians. Specifically, the dominant narratives tend to focus on diasporic Asianness involving some extent of geographical displacement or cultural exoticism. While many memes reflect Asian ‘inside jokes’, they are also utilised to provoke socio-political discussions and surface issues on a global scale. These memes tend to situate ‘Asianness’ in opposition to a presumed ‘Whiteness’, initially by phenotypical homophily, and later by socio-cultural affinity. This identity gatekeeping is evident through a handful of posts and comments from self-declared ‘White lurkers’ who disclose feeling embarrassment over their lack of Asian heritage (e.g., ‘I have never lived in Asia, sorry!’) or affiliation (e.g., ‘I’m not Asian, but my boyfriend/girlfriend is ...’). While there has been a legacy of race-based, culture-based, migrant and diaspora-based, and other similar groups on Facebook, the ‘Subtle X’ brand of groups are intended to serve as information aggregators, storytelling outlets, counselling stations, and discussion fora to celebrate the collective’s achievements, and commiserate over the collective’s plight, primarily through the vehicle of memes. Among the network of ‘Subtle X Traits’ groups now prolific on Facebook, SAT is still the most subscribed and prolific, likely because it celebrates an ‘underdog’ or minority race/culture in a mostly positive light. Despite dabbling in stereotypes, these are self-deprecating humours and confessions intended to foster in-group relatability (Ask and Abidin, 2018), for the purpose of alleviation of worries and entertainment (e.g., Heng, 2020).

Cultures of Asian affinity on SAT

From our open, axial, and subsequent close coding of posts on SAT, we discovered that the group is largely comprised of five main enduring meme elements (Table 1) and revolve around (East) Asian cultures: Firstly, ‘origin stories’ posts are where SAT members who are of inter-cultural or mixed race origins, are diaspora, or are international students share their family histories through stories and photographs; Secondly, ‘family cultures’ posts are where older SAT members reflected on typically Asian parent practices like discipline, pressures, and distant affection, and younger SAT members made memes of such present experiences; Thirdly, ‘food practices’ posts are where SAT members reminisce culturally-specific childhood foods that may no longer be easily accessible or mainstream, or share the latest trends in Asian foods and fusion foods; Fourthly, ‘physical attributes’ posts are where SAT members turn stereotypical Asian phenotypes and embodied experiences into punchlines and jokes, such as lactose/alcohol intolerance and having small eyes; and finally, ‘entertainment’ posts are where SAT members routinely share their latest hobbies, recreational activities, and hacks.
To understand how Asianness is constructed, circulated, and commodified on SAT, we further narrowed our dataset to a corpus of 818 of the most popular posts (September 2018–May 2020), and conducted qualitative analysis of their contents. From this smaller dataset, we found five cornerstone features of SAT posts that tend to register virality and high engagement: Shared stereotypes, Agony aunt, Calling out, Asian role models, and Asian media events. Each of these categories is further explicated and supported with exemplary posts below:

- **Shared stereotypes**: Asian stereotypes are presented in a self-deprecatory way, such as joking about their physical attributes (Figure 2). But occasionally, memes target an ‘out-group’ (*e.g.*, ‘white people’ and ‘international students’).
Agony aunt: Emotional personal stories about parental conflicts, academic struggle, or employment pressure stimulate agony aunt-like advice columns, arousing empathy and attracting engagement. While some posts coat personal struggles with funny memes, others seek advice and emotional release (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Memes depicting stereotypical Asian physical attributes.
Calling out: As the vast majority of members are diaspora, call-outs focus on racism and xenophobia to denounce ignorance and discrimination, but can also be loaded with humour (Figure 4).
• **Asian role models**: Given the scarcity of Asian role models in Western media, some public figures of Asian descent are widely celebrated and discussed, including comedian Ali Wong and actor-rapper Awkwafina (Figure 5).
• **Asian media events**: Current issues relating to Asian communities are discussed, including milestones like Korean film *Parasite*’s Academy Award for Best Picture and the outbreak of COVID-19 (*Figure 6*). Such time-specific media events disrupt the tempo of group discussions, attract a spike in engagement, and eventually blend into the enduring meme elements.

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*Figure 5*: Memes depicting Asian role models.
Figure 6: Memes depicting Asian media events.

From these five cornerstone traits of highly engaging posts on SAT, it is evident that although the group started out as a ‘joke’ and comprised a high volume of meme contents and jokes, SAT members have intentionally and gradually groomed the space to be an environment that also simultaneously accommodates and promotes social justice-oriented topics, discussions, and endeavours.

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**Topical shifts in SAT during COVID-19**

As a critical congregational node for Asians on Facebook, the onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 naturally shaped and impacted our daily routines of scrolling through SAT. Checking in with the group for latest posts and comment threads became a way to equip ourselves with vocabularies, literacies, and potential reactions for managing the fast-changing pandemic. As researchers and Asian diaspora ourselves, we would sift through the page and send each other links to ‘must see’ posts, often closely watching the ones that we felt were on the cusp of ‘going viral’. As we note in our early observations (Abidin and Zeng, 2020), it became evident that the record of posts on SAT began to ‘operate as a repository of shorthands to express and echo our concerns to other Asians (like memes), and like an archive of milestones detailing the incidents and developments that mattered most to the East Asian diaspora (like a time capsule)’. As such, we initiated a more in-depth study into the cultures and norms of SAT during COVID-19.

In addition to casual digital participation from September 2018, and more systematic and concerted digital ethnography from January 2020 onwards, we conducted purposive sampling to construct our dataset of posts and
Subtle Asian Traits and COVID-19: Congregating and commiserating as East Asians in a Facebook group

Methodological details were discussed earlier in this paper. Table 2 presents a snapshot of our findings, indicating the types of actions performed by SAT members in our larger study, specifically the pivot to address COVID-19 issues and concerns.

In general, there were seven main actions undertaken by SAT members in relation to COVID-19 posts, each corresponding to a set of key topics that were most recurrent in our dataset:

- **Public service announcements**: SAT members routinely shared serious or friendly reminders with regards to medical advice, personal hygiene, and the availability of supplies. Posts featured images and sketches demonstrating the proper use of masks; referents from Asian movies were used (and at times, memed) to encourage social distancing; and members would recommend and amplify knowledge about Asian supermarkets and grocery stores during the early stages of COVID-19 when mass hoarding and empty grocery shopping shelves were prevalent.

- **Call outs**: SAT members took turns to publish posts calling out instances of anti-Asian racism, health misinformation, contentious issues around the infodemic, and incidents of panic buying & hoarding especially in grocery shops. For instance, posts recounted fellow Asians who had donned masks in public encountering xenophobic treatment; the assortment of ‘Asian parental folklore’ that consuming foods such as garlic, onions, salt, hard boiled eggs, hot water, olive oil, and vinegar would ward off the virus; laments and exasperated jokes that Asian parents were not verifying forwarded information from group chats like WhatsApp & WeChat before passing them on; and recommendations for where to access and how to store typical Asian foods such as instant noodles.

- **Appreciation**: A few posts also took a break from the high intensity of information exchange to show appreciation and gratitude towards essential workers and Asian parents, especially if the former were exemplified by Asian role models in the media or personal family members in the medical profession, and if the latter were parents who lived away from the SAT member due to migration or international education. Some of these posts made jokes that Asian medical professionals were finally embracing the stereotype of being over-achievers on the frontline, while others were belated acknowledgements of the ‘tough love’ from Asian parents as a form of care.

- **Promotion**: Networks of diaspora SAT members also took the time to promote Asian businesses and Asian Associations, especially those who had experienced anti-Asian racist attacks or who were suffering from poor business as a result of income loss and social distancing measures. Other posts praised and spotlighted charitable contributions from various Asian and Asian-led associations.

- **Advice seeking**: Comment threads were also rife with advice exchange based on requests and discussions from specific posts. These tended to focus on how to organise transnational family care, maintain the celebration and sanctity of (traditional) Asian occasions, and various workarounds necessitated by quarantine and self-isolation measures. For instance, SAT members offered each other advice and support with regards to having to miss the funerals of loved ones in one’s home country, novel ways of commemorating the Chinese new year, or experimental but easy Asian recipes with limited resources.

- **Activity diaries**: For many SAT members who preferred to maintain the more light-hearted tone of the group and to commiserate over the often repressing self-isolation measures, posts functioned as activity
diaries around food, exercise, hobbies, and skills. Members shared DIY Asian cuisines and DIY bubble tea from the comfort of their home kitchen, humorous but useful ‘hacks’ like using bags of rice to substitute weights in lieu of visiting the gym, forays into anime series and Korean skincare as modes of self-care, and using the self-isolation period meaningfully by deepening one’s knowledge in their own native language.

• Entertainment: Perhaps the most common type of posts during the COVID-19 period remain ones around entertainment, albeit with a slant to foster communion and feelings of community. These included online/virtual events such as the ‘Naruto run in your own home’ one-day event; recommendations such as Korean drama options; performances such as song covers by Asian artists; challenges such as teaching Asian parents to attempt new tech savvy hobbies; workarounds such as convening on videochat to attempt a game of *mahjong*; and the meme-ing of ‘universal’ Asian parent traits such as nagging or the half-joking emphasis on school grades even amidst the global pandemic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Key topics</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public service announcements</td>
<td>Medical advice</td>
<td>Asian members demonstrating proper use of masks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal hygiene</td>
<td>Asian movie refersents to encourage social distancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Availability of supplies</td>
<td>Recommending Asian supermarkets to avoid crowds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call outs</td>
<td>Anti-Asian racism</td>
<td>Asian with masks encountering xenophobic treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health misinformation</td>
<td>Asian parent folklore to consume garlic, onions, salt, hard boiled eggs, hot water, olive oil, vinegar</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Infodemic</td>
<td>Asian parents not verifying forwarded information from group chats like WhatsApp &amp; WeChat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Panic buying &amp; hoarding</td>
<td>Typical Asian foods such as Instant noodles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td>Essential workers</td>
<td>Asian medical professionals fit the ‘stereotype’ of over-achievers on the frontlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>‘Tough love’ from Asian parents as a ‘form of care’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>Asian businesses</td>
<td>Asian businesses who experience anti-Asian racist attacks and declining business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian Associations</td>
<td>Charitable contributions from Asian associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice seeking</td>
<td>Transnational family care</td>
<td>Missing funerals of loved ones in one’s home country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Traditional) Asian occasions</td>
<td>Novel ways of celebrating Chinese New Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quarantine workarounds</td>
<td>Asian recipes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity diarising</td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>DIY Asian cuisines, DIY bubble tea</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>Substituting weights with bags of rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hobbies</td>
<td>Anime, Korean skincare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Native language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Online/virtual events</td>
<td>Naruto run in your own home</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>Korean dramas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performances</td>
<td>Covers of songs by Asian artists. Repeat of Asian artistes performances</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Asian parents trying new tech savvy hobbies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workarounds</td>
<td>Group mahjong via FaceTime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Universal’ Asian parent traits</td>
<td>Nagging, Emphasis on grades even during pandemic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Actions performed by SAT members, including key topics covered, and examples.
Subtle Asian Traits and COVID-19: Congregating and commiserating as East Asians in a Facebook group

SAT comments & discursive strategies around COVID-19

We watched as COVID-19 and its resulting infodemic spread from China to Asia to Europe to the U.S., and the tonality of camaraderie and community on SAT shifted to focus on sharing, resolving, and teasing out another universal East Asian experience: #CoronaRacism, or racism stemming from perceptions of the virus and its spread. Since knowledge of the outbreak first occurred in early 2020, disheartening incidents have been reported worldwide from people of East Asian appearance, recounting experiences of being verbally and physically attacked (Giuffrida and Willsher, 2020). In the fight against #CoronaRacism, social media serves as the key arena where Asians can speak out about their own encounters and launch various counter campaigns (Zeng, 2020). In our study of SAT’s comments section, we observed various forms of coping strategies used by group members to counteract racism, most of which are expressed through lengthy comment threads.

Commenting culture is a big part of many Facebook groups, but especially of SAT where much of the identity negotiations and camaraderie are fostered in the comments section. Although recent studies call attention to comment sections as hotbeds of trolling (Eberwein, 2019), hostility (Murthy and Sharma, 2019), and ‘dark participation’ (Quandt, 2018), negativity and toxicity has prompted calls for further inquiry on ‘how to counter incivility in comment sections’ [5]. Other studies have also explored the utility of comment sections, where users post comments to raise awareness for neglected topics or mistakes in news coverage (Heikkilä, et al., 2012), use flarf to regulate hate speech on Facebook (Abraham, 2014), to pursue the truth (Eberwein, 2019), and to vent frustrations (Pfeffer, et al., 2014).

As noted earlier, in groups, Facebook rewards activity by allocating group badges. Although these have since been made unviewable/hidden from members, for a long time they encouraged and even came to govern membership status in specific comment threads. That said, the shape and direction of conversation in the comments section were often gatekept by admins and moderators who state in their group announcements that they approve ‘Asian related content’, ‘Original Asian related memes’, and ‘Memes which have good captions relating to Asians’. Although in pre-COVID-19 times, the group would usually censor ‘Political, racial or any controversial content’ — such as comparisons between Asians and Whites, derogatory commentary, and negative stereotypes — these guidelines seemed to have been temporarily suspended or openly flouted during COVID-19, where SAT served as a counselling station and hotbed for (East) Asians around the world to talk about COVID-19 instigated xenophobia (Table 3), especially in the comments section.

Across the 25 conversational threads we elected to study closely, we observed four main discursive strategies that emerged across thousands of comments:

• **Catharsis**, where users respond with their own feelings; this includes expressions of anger, fear, empathy, resignation, and sympathy.

• **Escalation**, where users amplify reach of the post and conversation; this includes suggestions to report incidents to authorities or media outlets, reposting on other Facebook support groups, sharing the post for others to view the content, and tagging other users to view the content.

• **Problem solving**, where users respond to issues with solutions; this includes responses with similar experiences to encourage more sharing without shame, solicitation of further information to better understand the situation, suggestions to assist with the situation, shows of support in action by offering tangible help, and calls for unity and allyship across Asian communities.

• **Commentary**, where users engage and debate through conversation; this includes calling out media bias and actions by politicians and authorities, addressing racist and xenophobic language, and teasing out identity nuances.
Subtle Asian Traits and COVID-19: Congregating and commiserating as East Asians in a Facebook group

Table 3: Discursive strategies undertaken by SAT members across 25 conversational threads on COVID-19-instigated xenophobia, including key actions suggested and examples of posts and comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catharsis</td>
<td>Express anger</td>
<td>“WTF! I am so angry!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express fear</td>
<td>“I get anxious whenever I go outside, after reading all those hateful comments about people wanting to ‘make China’ and ‘kill all Chinese’. I don’t feel safe in the country I grew up in.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express empathy</td>
<td>“I know what it is like. experienced the same thing in SARS?”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express resignation</td>
<td>“I am tired of people saying that it’s not a big deal, because these are just isolated incidences.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express sympathy</td>
<td>“It’s heartbreaking. My heart goes out to all who are quarantined, who have lost loved ones, or have been affected by this virus.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalation</td>
<td>Suggest reporting to authorities or media cutouts</td>
<td>“Report the incident to the Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council (APPCON). Also, Chinese for Affirmative Actionors creating a national database for this kind of crime.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggest replying on other Facebook support groups</td>
<td>“It should be reported to Crimes Against Asians facebook group”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggest sharing the post for others to view content</td>
<td>“This post really should be widely shared… esp because most of the disparaging comments are from other Asians…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tag other users to view content</td>
<td>Tagging Facebook usernames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Respond with similar experiences to encourage more sharing without shaming</td>
<td>“It’s really unfair for us too. We haven’t been overseas and have no relatives from China either. This morning my kids got turned away at the hair salon…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solicit further information to better understand situation</td>
<td>“Have sources confirmed if this is true? Is the couple ok?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offer suggestions to assist with the situation</td>
<td>“It may be a good idea to set up some cameras.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Show support in action by offering tangible help</td>
<td>“If you see any Asian getting picked on don’t be afraid to step in.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Call for unity and allyship across Asian communities</td>
<td>Call media bias and actions on political and authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“This is the result of western media conditioning people from a young age.”</td>
<td>“Calling it China Virus gives people a lice to put the blame and anger and direct their fear towards.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Address racist and xenophobic language</td>
<td>“An Asian-looking student in my city got bashed and called ‘chink’,” and told to ‘go back to China’. Racists won’t ask you to prove your national identity – that’s fine. But living in the West, we’re 100% Chinese.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td>Highlight intersectional struggles as diaspora</td>
<td>“We can’t win. We’re White when we succeed, and considered ethnic when they want to rag on us.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humour/Joking as coping mechanism</td>
<td>“The Corona-fear guarantees me a seat in the subway and I even have a seat for my bag.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Call out racism among Asians (in SAT)</td>
<td>“How can we expect the world to treat Asians fairly when our community cannot even do it ourselves?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The centrality of SAT as a hub for East Asian diaspora to air their grievances (e.g., Express anger, Call out media bias, Offer conspiracy theories, etc.) was evident through the volume of discussions that unraveled by the day, but this was not without some risk. Given Facebook’s imposition of their ‘real name’ policy, there were occasional instances where heated discussions broke out and some users would make assumptions and accusations of each other based on the shallow impressions derived from one’s Asian-sounding name and profile picture (or otherwise). There were still other threads where inter-Asian and inter-minority tension broke out, in displays of ‘competitive grief olympics’ or ‘competitive onedownmanship’ (Ask and Abidin, 2018) where users attempted to measure and compare the extent of their pain and outrank each other (e.g., Call for unity and allyship across Asian communities, etc.).

On threads where aggressive comments accumulated, trolls emerged, or conversations derailed from the ethos of SAT (e.g., Offer political commentary on actions by politicians and authorities, Address racist and xenophobic language, etc.), admins and moderators would step in to lock the comments and curtain further discussion. While it was found in other studies of antagonistic comments sections that disagreements can be used as springboards for negotiations and teachable moments (Abidin, 2019; Johnston, 2017; Uldam and Askanius, 2013), this was not usually the case for SAT given the truncation of conversation from admin blocks. Further, due to the volume of posts and pace of new updates on the page in a non-chronological fashion, it is unlikely that members would return to previously seen posts to keep...
track of the development of discourse on comment threads, unless they had specifically bookmarked them to do so.

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**Conclusion: SAT as a repository of milestones and identity markers**

SAT is a ‘virtual gateway’ for Asians living in predominantly Anglo-Saxon societies to share memes that their Caucasian friends cannot relate to, a ‘haven’ to seek support from fellows who understand their frustration. It is also the congregational community for Asian diaspora on Facebook, wherein members’ collective identity of ‘feeling Asian’ manifested and negotiated. The experience of scrolling through posts from SAT members can feel like a stroll through a repository of shorthands to express and echo their concerns to other Asians (akin to memes), and like an archive of milestones detailing the incidents and developments that mattered most to the East Asian diaspora during a specific period of time (akin to a time capsule). However, this repository should not be perceived as an ‘organic’ reflection of Asian identity construction by SAT members, but instead a co-product of the technological features of the Facebook group, its admins’ curation, and external events. These factors make SAT a transient archive of what it means to be Asian, or an archive of ‘platformed Asianness’, which we argue to be contingent and problematic.

Within the past months of data collection, the Facebook group swiftly pivoted from a place for meme-sharing and celebrating Asian excellence, to an Agony Aunt station for the challenges, violence, and grief experienced by (diaspora) East Asians around the world. This sharp turn was also noted by the admins, for whom the sudden influx of hard-hitting commentary, confessions, and conflict was confronting. A long announcement posted on 2 March 2020 included the following:

> ‘at our core, we are a community that seeks to create an inclusive, welcoming space for others. But we recognize there are divisions within the Asian community. We do not believe that discussion is not important, that certain issues should not be addressed, or that Asian traits are always noncontroversial and about boba/k-pop/etc.’

> ‘However, please also recognize that SAT is currently run by a group of mostly volunteer college students and generally focuses on sharing light-hearted posts — so the group might not currently be equipped to ensure the kind of nuanced, civil discussion platform around certain topics in our community. As we grow and improve, our team will work to develop an understanding of what responsibility we have the capacity to take on, and if not, how we might be able to direct members to groups on Facebook that have the primary purpose of facilitating discourse around such topics’ (as quoted in Abidin and Zeng, 2020).

The thresholds for appropriate meme-sharing were also evolving rapidly. Where it was insensitive to joke about ‘bat soup’, ‘coughing in public’, or ‘speaking Mandarin out loud in public’ during the early stage of the pandemic and our study, by March, each of these themes became mainstream memes in SAT, and were redeemed as narratives for calling out the ignorance of an imagined White Other, or for laughing through the pain (e.g., Humour/Joking as coping mechanism). Concerns over Asian parents’ and grandparents’ susceptibility to misinformation (e.g., Eat garlic! Eat onions! Sniff salt! Drink hot water!) that had encouraged tangible suggestions and ‘How To’ guides early on, had quickly given way to relatable jokes and memes — as previously noted (Abidin and Zeng, 2020), our favourite meme was the mock graduation certificate that a member had designed for all Asian mothers graduating from the ‘WhatsApp and WeChat University of Misinformation’.
On the superficial level, SAT provides members with entertainment and a sense of companionship, but the apparent harmony of the group is vulnerable and can be easily disturbed when the ‘tonality of topics’ (Abidin and Zeng, 2020) ventures into more serious discussions — this is illustrated in our COVID-19 case study. This tumultuous tension is best encapsulated by a post shared by an SAT member on 28 March 2020:

‘It’s fucking me up emotionally how one day a Korean film with subtitles can sweep The Academy Awards and the idea of inclusivity/progression is in the air. A month and a half later, I’m being told I eat bats and Asian American hate-crimes are on the rise. #COVID19 #Covid19usa’ (as quoted in Abidin and Zeng, 2020)

As revealed in our findings, conversations on SAT take on various degrees of frivolity and severity. Besides being a transient repository of How To Be (East) Asian, SAT is also a living archive of How It Feels To Be (East) Asian in the jarring highs and lows of our surrounding world. In the time of COVID-19, SAT has been a comforting mothership for a brief respite from the looming problems of a global scale, as members entertain, distract, soothe, and commiserate with each other one post at a time.
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Notes

1. Kumar, 2018, p. 3.

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