

# Subtle CSCW Traits: Tensions Around Identity Formation and Online Activism in the Asian Diaspora

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has been uniquely challenging for the Asian diaspora. The virus has directly devastated Asian communities around the world, most notably across India. Its indirect effects have also been crushing: violent hate crimes against elders, the dissolution of once-thriving businesses, and the trauma of pandemic-enforced disconnect from transnational family networks have all weighed heavily on Asian people. Publicly grappling with these difficulties, through hashtags and GoFundMes across social media, has raised awareness of the issues that Asian people have dealt with long before COVID. But doing so amidst isolation has illuminated a need for space to build relationships, confront intra- and inter-community biases, and envision a more hopeful future. This workshop looks to create that space. By convening social computing researchers with ties to Asian diaspora identities, we aim to foster discussion of how social platforms enable identity formation and online activism unique to the Asian diasporic experience. We will consider what it means to be an Asian diaspora researcher, challenge CSCW's notion of what it means to be Asian, and explore how Asianness can work in alliance with other marginalized identities to ultimately concretize a research agenda for CSCW to more meaningfully engage with Asian diaspora experiences.

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## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing**; • **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**; **Social content sharing**; **Computer supported cooperative work**;

## KEYWORDS

Asian diaspora, online activism, identity formation

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Social computing has long been important for diaspora communities across the world, fostering transnational connections crucial to maintaining family networks. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of social platforms in diaspora experiences has become more vital than ever—and for Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) and people from the Asian diaspora in particular, issues of identity formation and online activism in social computing spaces have become relevant in personal and dizzying ways.

In this workshop, we look to explore the intersection of social computing and Asian diaspora experiences. By this we mean not only social computing research *located* in Asian diasporic communities, but also how CSCW can engage with the Asian diaspora experience as an identity, a social group, and a research orientation. Doing so requires confronting a fundamental challenge: the lack of clarity around who makes up the Asian diaspora, and what

commonalities may be shared across a group with a multitude of disparate histories, living now in disparate contexts. We use this discomfort as a traversal point to catalyze conversations within our community. More concretely. More concretely, drawing inspiration from Smith et al.'s CHI 2020 workshop on race [13], our goals are to:

- identify the conditions in our research environments that prevent us as a community from engaging with and centering Asian experiences,
- provide a safe space for all peoples affiliated with the Asian diaspora to share experiences through small group activities,
- inform a research agenda for future work, making space for CSCW for AAPI/Asian Diaspora experiences to be studied,
- grapple with the complexity of Asian identity and its inter-sections with gender, nationality, language, sexuality, citizenship, ability, and other forms of identity both in our HCI research work and as an HCI community, and
- build a coalition of researchers connected to and invested in shaping the Asian diaspora's sociotechnical future.

To anchor what is hopefully the first of many discussions, we consider the following:

## 1.1 Online Activism

The COVID-19 pandemic has made inequities between the Global North and Global South more visible and immediate to those living abroad, motivating exchanges of support across national borders and strengthening transnational communities. For example, in late April 2021, as South Asia faced its most serious threat of coronavirus thus far, and institutional mismanagement exacerbated existing resource constraints [8], people in need and members of the South Asian diaspora took to Twitter to coordinate hospital beds, oxygen supplies, and medicine for their loved ones. Within South Asia, individual social media accounts quickly transformed into coordination centers—providing resources, communicating with hospitals, and verifying information [3]. Within the United States, Indian-Americans mounted campaigns urging the Biden Administration to release Astra-Zeneca vaccines to countries in need [4]. These efforts highlight both the strengths and limitations of the nature of social computing; to be able to facilitate care from miles and even oceans away is powerful, but the distance also means that individuals can only do so much in supporting on the ground movement. We might additionally explore how this form of online activism can work alongside other social and political movements—Black Lives Matter, for example—and when it is better to decenter our own priorities for the sake of others'.

Indeed, the online world expands the reach and potential for political activism; however, there are conflicting narratives around goals, priorities, and agendas within diasporic Asian communities. In their article “The Asian American Activism You Won't See On Instagram,” Kim Tran describes two Asian Americas: the first group includes people who are more visible and have set representation as *the* issue for AAPI people today, while the second group instead focuses on the structural liberation of non-mainstream AAPI people (e.g., queer and trans people, sex workers, undocumented immigrants, women, and poor people) [14]. The tendency of the first group to focus on consumerist expressions of activism—e.g. T-shirt

campaigns and bubble tea fundraisers—over deeper engagements with legacies of colonialism has been critiqued as *boba liberalism* [7], and reflects longstanding concerns around how a monolithic understanding of what it means to be Asian, AAPI, and/or part of the Asian diaspora can deprioritize the needs of large swathes of people within the coalition. Abadin and Zeng raise this in their piece on Subtle Asian Traits (SAT), a popular Facebook group: “the limitations of SAT as a space for discursive activism given that the values and ethos of all 1.7 million of us cannot be singularly aligned” indicating that “the imagined utopia and harmony of a space like SAT is fragile and superficial and can be easily disturbed or destabilized when the tonality of topics ventures into more serious discussions” [1].

In effect, SAT is a perfect example of the tensions that we are hoping to capture in this workshop. Within the Facebook group, there are changing and contested ideas about what it means to be a member of the diaspora. It has led to several spin-off groups for people who feel isolated by the greater SAT, such as “subtle curry traits”, “subtle mixed traits”, “subtle Viet traits”, and “subtle queer asian traits”. Drawing all of this together, we look to go deeper into how online activism can and should operate for a population whose aggregation and disaggregation are constantly in tension with each other, in service of shifting political goals.

## 1.2 Identity formation and community development

Online spaces and communities can have a significant impact on how people form and reform their identities, especially for AAPI and Asian communities. For instance, Dosono and Semaan explored how AAPI Reddit users moderate their online communities and foster collective identity resilience [6]. Recently, the hashtags #StopAsianHate and #StopAAPIHate have gained traction, spurring organizations and movements dedicated to fighting systemic racism against Asian people. Specifically, the #StopAsianHate page on GoFundMe is filled with donation pages for stigmatized Asian businesses and Asian people who have been beaten, hospitalized or murdered. The rise of this hashtag has provided a beacon for many Asian people across the world familiar with the experience of racism, though there are complexities involved when the uniting force is steeped in violence and pain.

Further research has investigated the role that SAT has on identity formation, highlighting how an online community like SAT faces tension in balancing similarities and differences. Online communities for Asian diaspora like SAT provide a unique, shared space for cathartic sharing of experiences with prejudice and racism; escalation and signal-boosting to raise awareness of racist incidents; problem solving responses to instances of COVID-related mistreatment; and commentary/discussion of Asian diasporic experiences during the pandemic and more generally [2]. More broadly, these communities provide an opportunity for diaspora to co-construct a collective **transnational** identity—what Abadin and Zeng refer to as “platformed Asianness”, which is further shaped by group administrators and technological affordances [2]. Notably, transnational identity formation is deeply rooted in narratives of migrant domestic and care work [10]. The balikbayan box, a care package

sent back home by overseas Filipino workers, serves as one particular symbol of the intersection between care networks and global 'exports' of labor and constructs a transnational identity outside of state boundaries in the process [5]. While these spaces are ostensibly inclusive of all Asians and people from the Asian diaspora, instead they may tend towards homophily, center and overrepresent dominant perspectives and narratives, and replicate patterns of inter/intra-community conflict. Given the forming, shaping, and reshaping of identity through online communities is a well-studied topic in social computing, CSCW researchers are well-equipped to explore the nuances of aggregation and conflict specific to AAPI people and people from the Asian diaspora.

### 1.3 Overlaps with design

The rise in visibility of Asian culture has also meant that the aesthetic of Asianness is now on trend; however, this has largely been directed through a white, Eurocentric, and fetishistic lens. As evidence of this, a design group drew criticism for their redesign of Mahjong, a tile-based game that originated in China and has since become popular across Asia, substituting the traditional imagery with a "refreshing" new color palette and more Western cues (e.g., replacing bamboo symbols with "BAM") [15]. The root of the issue with this recent Mahjong example is not so much that a group of white women thought they could repackage an Asian staple and upsell it for white audiences, but rather that the appropriation of Asianness that has become more common in design and technology shallowly refuses to see Asians as people with deeper stories. People find it easy to see us as threats to Western dominance, backgrounds for white saviors, Asian cyborgs devoid of humanity, but never as people who face threats of imperialism, racism, and other forms of oppression.

Fortunately, a new generation of designers are working to challenge how the West defines acceptable and pleasing design. Javier Syquia's design thesis, for instance, explores themes of decoloniality by highlighting maximalism in Filipino graphic design as a contrast to sanitized, Eurocentric ideals of minimalist design [11]. His design manifesto, titled *Perlas ng Silangan* (Pearl of the Orient), unpacks the formation of Filipino identity, and serves as a decolonial reclamation of Philippine history and legacy through contemporary expression. Additionally, scholars in CSCW are unpacking how design can both challenge and reinforce bias and discrimination. In the context of dating and hookups platforms, Hutson et al. demonstrate how design features like search, sort, and filtering tools can support racist and discriminatory behavior [9]. Further research has used design to help people cope with interpersonal racism [16, 17] and create counterspaces that foster belonging and persistence [12]. These examples highlight the value and potential for design to challenge norms specific to the Asian diaspora.

We do not expect that these three topics are fully representative of everything this workshop has to offer. Some additional starting themes for discussion include:

Perspectives on conducting formative research to understand the diversity and complexity of AAPI experiences with social computing. How do researchers grapple with data (dis)aggregation, participant self-identification, language barriers, conducting research ethically with this community?

In-progress or finished work exploring how AAPIs have used social computing as a lever for organization, awareness, and/or activism in a year marked by anti-Asian racist attacks. How might we draw from histories of civic engagement to inform the future of digital and in-person activism?

Critical and historical perspectives on AAPI identity. Given the relatively short history of AAPI as a discrete identity, what has been the role of social computing in the evolution of what we attach to the term?

Allyship and solidarity with other minoritized communities. What is the role of social computing in fighting or accelerating anti-Blackness in AAPI communities?

Drawing from fields outside of CSCW and HCI. We cannot ignore the scholarship in Asian American Studies, Critical Asian Studies, Diaspora Studies, and more. How can we draw from outside academic perspectives to bolster our theoretical understanding of Asian issues within CSCW?

## 2 WORKSHOP LOGISTICS

This will be a one-day workshop, split into two synchronous sessions to accommodate global time zones. Participants will be given the option to attend one or both sessions. Prior to our synchronous sessions, we will generate discussion topics, encourage participants to familiarize themselves with each other, and share favorite readings and resources through Padlet and Slack. In our synchronous sessions, we will meet through Zoom and document our conversations through Miro. Afterwards, we will leave the Slack active to encourage further discussion and provide a centralized online community.

We aim to have a maximum of 30 participants to balance facilitator ratios and opportunities to participate in rich discussions. We will advertise our workshop through social media channels (e.g., CSCW Meta, personal and institutional Twitter and Facebook accounts, and the #cscw2021 hashtag) and target academic, non-profit, and industry circles. We will select participants who will provide a diverse range of perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences with the intersection between social computing and AAPI/Asian diaspora studies.

Interested participants will fill out an online survey with short answer questions exploring their previous research experiences around AAPI/Asian diaspora issues, themes they find important to discuss, and their own goals for what they hope to get out of their workshop experience.

### 2.1 Activities

#### *Asynchronous pre-workshop activities*

Two weeks prior to the start of our workshop, we will invite participants to propose and engage with discussion topics. We will use Padlet and Slack for informal discussion, which we will use as a starting point for our synchronous time together.

#### *Synchronous activities*

As we have all had personal experience with Zoom fatigue, our virtual workshop will not follow the standard all-day commitment that in-person workshops allow for. Thus, we propose the following set of activities that allows for participants to engage in rich discussion, which are informed from our past experiences with

virtual workshops. Below is an example of our proposed schedule, leaving room for updates as learn more about participants' time zones:

- 9 - 10 am: Introductions, speed dating activity for group norms setting
- 10 - 11 am: Breakout group discussions + full group share out of key talking points 1
- 11 - 12 pm: Break, optional social time
- 12 - 1 pm: Breakout group discussions + full group share out of key talking points 2
- 1 - 2 pm: Group discussion and co-creation of agenda for future research
- 2 - 2:30 pm: Break
- 2:30-3 pm: Closing + moving forward

### 3 AUTHORS

We are a team of CSCW researchers who share an intimate awareness of the liminal space that we each occupy as an Asian diasporic person: the never-ending questioning of where and how we belong. We also share the experience of leaning on each other for community in the last year, grappling with questions like these and our own relationships with Asianness as social computing researchers. While many of us are currently affiliated with US institutions, our varied experiences with, our collective experiences with queerness, gender, being mixed-race, nationality, ability, doing research both from abroad and within communities gives us insight into various aspects of the Asian diaspora experience. With this workshop, we aim to create space within the CSCW community for these conversations—to be visible and to take up space with intention.

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Calvin Liang is a PhD Candidate in Human Centered Design and Engineering at the University of Washington. His work combines human-computer interaction and social computing to explore how design can support LGBTQIA2S+ people with their health.

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