

FACEBOOK FOLKLORE: SUBTLE ASIAN TRAITS DURING THE AGE OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has sparked significantly increased incidents of xenophobia, racism, and discrimination against people of East Asian appearance and descent. Initial investigations done in Wuhan, China, where the virus first appeared, suggested that bats were responsible for the initial outbreak. This led to a slew of anti-Asian memes across social media that portrayed Chinese people as bat eaters and Asian food as being “dirty.” In response, this research paper investigates how the online Asian diaspora community has used social media to engage in mutual care, discourse, and cultural expression amid increasing scrutiny and aggression around Asians and Asian cuisine. Specifically, it identifies and analyzes food memes and posts created and shared to the Facebook group, Subtle Asian Traits (SAT). This research aims to not only analyze the posts themselves as a form of folklore, but also investigate what role they play in the construction of group identity and cultural dialogue within SAT during Covid.

SUBTLE ASIAN TRAITS AND FOLKLORE

Social media, particularly Facebook groups, have long been a platform for sharing folklore. One particular Facebook group, Subtle Asian Traits (SAT), is focused on sharing content that relates to being and/or growing up in the Asian diaspora. Given its affordances as an Internet space, Facebook has provided the group the ability to form a community transcending international borders and boundaries, and thereby linking the diaspora. With around 2 million members worldwide, it is one of the world’s largest Asian online communities (Subtle Asian Traits 2018).

By sharing a stable racial and cultural identity, SAT diaspora group identity begins to solidify among group members. SAT was first created by a group of Asian-Australians as a joke to share their experiences of growing up as second-generation Asian-Australians but has since grown to give members all over the globe a platform to share the unique intersectional experiences of being Asian while living in Western, English-speaking countries. It has become a repository of “a universal (East) Asian experience” and a space that normalizes and validates Asian diaspora struggles (Abidin and Zeng 2020).

According to folklorist Alan Dundes, folk refers to “any group of people who share at least one common factor” (Dundes 1977). According to this definition, the group members of Subtle Asian Traits, when considering their shared pan-Asian cultural experiences, can be constituted as a folk group. Group members are mostly second- or third-generation Asians living outside of Asia, who sometimes struggle to find a balance between their Asian and Western cultural identities. Although there is a representation of many different Asian ethnicities, posts are usually focused on East Asian experiences because a majority of members are of East Asian descent.

When considering Subtle Asian Traits members as a folk group, posts shared to the SAT page are then considered folklore. According to Lynne McNeil, folklore exists as a form of cultural expression without the anchor of institutional culture (McNeil 2013). Social media groups like Subtle Asian Traits are a participatory form of web use where vernacular and institutional agencies hybridize into complex new communication processes (Howard 2008). The noninstitutional, or the vernacular of the everyday, are posted onto an institutional platform—Facebook. Although the posts on Facebook must follow the technological affordances and

general format of Facebook posts, the materials of the posts themselves fall outside of institutional reign. Posts are vernacular, human-generated, and non-institutional; they are folk-produced. SAT posts express shared cultural knowledge and beliefs. Within the group, stories and experiences are passed along from member to member. Memes joke about times when someone has struggled with assimilation, marginalization, or othering. As more members share, like, and comment on posts that they find relatable, group identity is constantly being affirmed and reaffirmed. If you didn't grow up sharing these culturally specific quirks, it would be hard to identify or even understand the folklore shared by group members. The delicate complexity needed in order to understand SAT humor expresses the subtle meanings behind every post. Hence, the "subtle" of Subtle Asian Traits.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Although the Subtle Asian Traits page is mostly dedicated to sharing jokes, memes, and other forms of humor, ever since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in posts discussing incidents of racism and xenophobia (Subtle Asian Traits 2018). The coronavirus, which first appeared in Wuhan, China, caused a global pandemic with high rates of infection and death. As a result, there has been a significant increase in the number of incidents involving xenophobia, racism, and discrimination against people of Asian— especially East Asian—appearance and descent in the west (Giuffrida and Willsher 2020). Fear and paranoia increased substantially. Initial investigations suggested that bats were responsible for the initial outbreak of the virus (Croucher et al 2020). This led to a slew of anti-Asian memes across social media that portrayed Chinese people as bat eaters and Asian food as being "dirty" (Fernando 2020).

Asian diaspora researchers Crystal Abidin and Jing Zeng have seen SAT become a platform where group members collectively try to deal with the pandemic and the consequences of what they term #COVIDRacism (Abidin and Zeng 2020). To extrapolate on that research, this paper investigates further how the online SAT community has used social media to engage in mutual care, vernacular discourse, and cultural expression amid increasing scrutiny and aggression around Asians and Asian cuisine. Specifically, it aims to identify and analyze food memes and posts created and shared to the Facebook group. This research aims to not only analyze the posts themselves as a form of folklore but also investigate what role they play in the construction of group identity and cultural dialogue within SAT during Covid.

ANALYSIS: SAT FOOD MEMES AND FOOD-RELATED POSTS

A bulk of Subtle Asian Traits posts are memes, and a majority of those memes reference Asian food in some sort of way. Although SAT members have diverse ethnic backgrounds, many members are brought together by using one of the most universal and accessible languages of all: food. Typical food memes reference an obsession with boba (a popular drink consisting of milk tea and tapioca pearls), eating Korean bbq, and/or a love of rice and sushi (Subtle Asian Traits 2008). Food memes are often posted to the group, and an influx of group members will like, comment, and/or share the post. These food items are some of the more popularized and even stereotypical food items linked to Asian cuisine in offline settings, that have trickled into online spaces as well. However, there have been many food memes that highlight the Asian foods that have not been ingrained into popular and mass culture, and which are also highlighted in this paper.

With food stigmas at an all-time high, having been amplified by the pandemic, why do SAT members continue to post food memes? The answer is a mixture of engagement in cathartic vernacular discourse, expression of cultural identity in a safe space, and the desire for mutual care to cope with Covid-related stresses. Researchers Abidin and Zeng describe how members of SAT have utilized social media to collectively cope with the rising prejudice against Asians through “Catharsis, Escalation, and Problem-solving” (Abidin and Zeng 2020). Food memes, in particular, allow members to have a safe haven surrounded by similarly affected people, to engage in discourse about racial prejudices against Asian food, as well as to freely post about their culture’s foods and foodways.

SCROLLING TO COPE: MUTUAL CARE

One of the most significant aspects of Subtle Asian Traits is its function as an online community hub. Because members share a general Asian identity, it is easy for group members to feel at ease in a time where prejudices and hate crimes are on the rise. Admin for Subtle Asian Traits does their best to maintain a “safe space” by constantly moderating and removing inappropriate posts (Subtle Asian Traits 2018). Many members feel that they can openly share their experiences of xenophobia, racism, or discrimination openly and receive support and mutual care from group members.

Originally, when the pandemic first began, Subtle Asian Traits was still being used mostly as a meme and joke page. For the most part, moderators wanted to keep the page humorous, light, and fun (Abidin and Zeng 2020). However, as incidents of targeted Asian hate crimes began to rise, members began to turn to the SAT page as a place for help, resources, support, and even venting. When user posted about experiences of people asking them, “Do you

eat bat?” or other incidents of microaggressions or outright harassment, members often jump into the comment section to try to offer their support. Many members send their love, support, and sympathies, but others are angered by and critical of the childish behavior of people who would engage in these kinds of racist activities. Nevertheless, the bulk of comments were geared toward mutual care. People wanted to know how they could provide help to someone who was facing racism because of Covid-19.

The SAT platform can clearly be used as a space for finding mutual care from community members who are similarly suffering from xenophobia. With Covid-19 painting Asians as bat-eaters, food memes and posts on the SAT page shifted into posts that celebrate how Asians— especially Asian parents and elders— use food as a language of love. The posts themselves are an act of caring towards the community. Reaffirming Asian food as something valuable and not “dirty” allows members to have a sense of comfort and belonging. In one food meme, an SAT member apologizes for telling their mom they wanted “white people lunch” and now acknowledges all the effort that went into making their Asian lunch every day (Figure 1). Of the numerous SAT posts concerning food during the Covid-19 pandemic, many have talked about food as a labor of love given freely from their families.

Under these posts about how Asian families express their love through nontraditional or nonverbal cues, comments are filled with emotional support and recognition: heart emojis and



Figure 1. Food meme of white kid lunch vs. your lunch, posted with an apology.

members' own experiences of food in connection with love and family. These messages of care and comfort provide counter-narratives to popularized ideas that Asian food gives people coronavirus, that Asian food is dirty, or that all Asians eat bats, dogs, and/or cats. Scrolling through these posts, and the comment sections that follow, give SAT members a refuge to speak about their own happy and loving experiences with food and builds a support system that affirms and uplifts their culture's foodways.

VERNACULAR DISCOURSE AND EXPRESSION

Members of Subtle Asian Traits are mostly diasporic Asians, who have been traditionally and systematically ignored by mainstream Western discourse. Asians are not only socially ostracized in real life, they are also minorities in cyberspaces. For Asians to be able to congregated in Subtle Asian Traits allows them to express vernacular discourse as a form of catharsis. Kent Ono and John Sloop characterize vernacular discourse as “speech that resonates within local communities...[It] is also culture: the music, art, criticism, dance, and architecture of local communities” (Howard 2008). The vernacular is when communication is marked as “an authority alternate to the institution (Howard 2008).

While mainstream, institutional media highlights incidents of xenophobia, racial slurs, harassment, and hate crimes, SAT works by highlighting individual feelings of anger, frustration, and fear. However, SAT admins will almost always shut down posts that start to get *too* political for the moderators. Indeed, any posts that mentioned eating bats or any other kind of racist remarks were blocked from the group, revealing the limitations of SAT as a space for discourse (Abidin and Zeng 2020).

However, a set of food memes arose from the group that subtly invites a specific kind of vernacular discourse. Specifically, the memes humorously depict a deeper frustration around racial tensions between Asians and other races. A year of Asian-targeted hate has forced group members to grieve, fear, and anger. These incidents have had Asians reevaluating all instances of racism and forcing them to speak up and raise awareness of the racial tensions that they face in society. Many memes point out that other races love, appropriate, or capitalize on Asian foods without acknowledging the history and culture behind the food (Figure 2 and Figure 3). In Figure 2, a child is seen scrunching her face and humorously looking overall confused and incredulous. Paired with the caption, “when you see those white kids who made fun of your packed lunch during middle school eating at a korean restaurant 8 years later,” it is meant to poke fun at the attitudinal shift in acceptance of Asian foods by other races. Other races, like the “white kids” being referred to in the post, have the power to change their opinions on Asian food whenever it suits them.



Figure 2. Meme of a young girl scrunching her face over a bowl of cereal.

Likewise, the post in Figure 3 is meant to jokingly invite criticisms about the British treatment of Indian food. The post pokes fun at Britain for naming Chicken Tikka Masala as one of its national dishes (Figure 3). Comments are filled with laughter, disgust, incredulity, and mockery about the “colonization” of Tikka Masala, a food that has its historical roots in India, and point at a larger dissatisfaction with the way other races treat Asian foods. During a time where Asian restaurants, including Chinese and Indian restaurants, are closing at significantly higher rates than non-Asian restaurants, the post and reactions to the post explore the funny but very real ways in which the Asian food industry is being, and will continue to be, impacted by Covid and Covid racism (Fernando and Mumphrey 2020 and Kim 2020).



Figure 3. Meme of Britain naming Chicken Tikka Masala as one of its national dishes along with a Khalid music video still and the lyrics, “So you’re still thinking of me”.

I argue that these food memes and food-related posts invite vernacular discourse because they raise criticisms about race relations that resonate within the SAT community, especially at a moment in history where racial tensions are at an all-time high. Many variations of the quote, “Love our people like u love our food,” have circulated the social media page since news of Asian hate and violence have increased throughout the pandemic. But there is still skepticism whether the “reverse-racism” of blaming white people is truly meaningful discourse. In *Subtle Asian Traits*, Asians have all the power to criticize and laugh at others, especially those groups who have a history of cultural appropriation, that they may not openly express on other platforms as freely. They are given the opportunity to engage in discourse and cultural dialogue amongst

themselves about what they do or do not find acceptable when it comes to other cultures eating, appreciating, or commodifying their food. Whether or not this discourse will prove to be beneficial or harmful remains to be seen.

CULTURAL EXPRESSION AND PERFORMING AUTHENTICITY

Food memes function to normalize the experiences of cooking and eating as an Asian person living in a Western country and create a sense of a unified Asian community. The memes are used as a form of cultural expression and to communicate group affiliation. During Covid-19, when many Asians are feeling fearful or unsafe being associated with East Asians, food memes that celebrate Asian food signal shared cultural identity and generate camaraderie, comfort, and community. SAT is filled with a convergence of funny memes and stories about missing stereotypical Asian foods that have become limited since the pandemic, like “Kbbq, AYCE hotpot, dim sum, Indomie/Maggi, and boba” (in the vernacular of SAT members) (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Meme of bulldozer labeled “drinking bubble tea with 0% sugar” pushing massive cargo ship labeled “eating late night supper, KBBQ, maggi mee, double mcspicy with ice milo.”

Similar to the African American cultural tradition of “signifyin(g)” as a means of performing racial identity online, the Asian diaspora within Subtle Asian Traits perform their identities through displays of competence and knowledge in their usage of memes and humor (Florini 2013). Understanding the joke provides a sense of cultural belonging and camaraderie.

When a meme jokes about the Asian dish stuffed bitter melon as being something to fear, based on the number of likes for the post, thousands are able to relate (Figure 5). Without cultural knowledge about what the dish is, the meme would be confusing and unintelligible. By posting a certain Asian food without explaining the cultural context, members are performing their authenticity through displays of insider cultural knowledge. When members show that they understand without needing an explanation, through likes, comments, and tags, members signal that they belong in the same racial group as well, expressing their cultural background.

As Anthony Bak Buccitelli observes in “Performance 2.0,” Facebook posts can be considered a performance that allows participants to engage in numerous forms of communicative interaction (Buccitelli 2014). There is some level of performance involved when navigating the SAT space, in a kind of performed authenticity. Because posts are heavily moderated to include only relevant topics surrounding Asian identity and culture (Subtle Asian Traits 2018), users who want to post memes or other jokes into the page must “perform” their Asian identity to receive admin approval for their posts. When a member of SAT posts about dim sum (an Asian brunch cuisine that has become extremely popularized among SAT members), they know that it is an act of “performing,” or showing that they belong in the group and that their post should be approved. Yet,



Figure 5. Meme: "I fear no man. But that thing...(showing an image of stuffed bittermelon)...it scares me."

members are still able to convey their cultural authenticity despite the act of putting on a performance. Evidence of authenticity comes from other members being able to relate to posts, consequently liking, commenting, and tagging others to share. When one SAT member posted about missing dim sum during the pandemic, over 19,000 other SAT members who liked the post showed that they were able to relate, with over 6,000 members leaving comments as well.

According to folklorist William Bascom, the four functions of folklore are to (1) entertain, (2) validate culture, (3) educate, and (4) maintain conformity (Bascom 1954). Subtle Asian Traits' food posts certainly aim to amuse, express cultural beliefs and identity, as well as educate and perpetuate certain images about what it means to be Asian. Food memes, by definition, are humorous, but the format of the SAT page also promotes digital and cultural solidarity through authentic cultural expression. The more it is spread and repeated, the more it becomes ingrained in SAT culture and believed to be truth. These posts serve to validate the cultural experiences that members have, as well as educate others who are less familiar. As more members see peripheral friends and acquaintances in the comments tagging each other, the affirmation that the content of a post contains valid aspects of culture begins to multiply, serving to maintain conformity to that cultural belief or idea. It is a process and performance of affirmation, validation, and cementing cultural beliefs, actions, and words.

CONCLUSIONS

Ergo, the identification and functional analysis of food memes/posts shared to the Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits clearly reveal how the community engages in mutual care, vernacular discourse, and cultural expression as a way of coping with or even combatting increased scrutiny and aggression around Asians and Asian cuisine. The ability to relate to others and freely share

stories and discourse that go against the grain reinforces group identity and sense of community. In an age of Covid, where xenophobia is at a high, it was inevitable that Asians would turn inwards to members of their own community to engage in cultural dialogue that provides access to resources and protection. Subtle Asian Traits is not a perfect space, and there are certain limitations to how it can function, but in general, it has been an invaluable resource for members of its community. With rates of Covid-19 infections and deaths falling, and the world gradually returning to a new “normal,” it will be interesting to see how Asians from all over the world continue to use Subtle Asian Traits for cultural dialogue and to see how SAT continues to evolve as a platform.

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