A SNAP OF INTIMACY: INVESTIGATING PHOTO SHARING PRACTICES ON SNAPCHAT AND INSTAGRAM

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In this paper we investigate photo sharing practices among young people on the social media platform Snapchat. What kind of photos are exchanged amongst 12-17 year olds through this app where pictures are elicited after 10 seconds? How is the content of the photos perceived by the young people themselves?

Empirical background

Snapchat is a photo sharing app where the content self-destruct after a short while. Sometimes the content is screenshot by the viewer (and possibly shared again). Ephemeral social media such as Snapchat thus interrupts linear temporality and, we argue, plays with both temporality and intimacy. Instagram, on the contrary, can be described as a media where the content shared is persistent. I.e. the app allows the users to organize, use, document and remember in a persistent manner (Bayer et. al., 2015).

In order to investigate young people's photo sharing practices on Snapchat and Instagram we employ an internet mediated mixed methods approach (Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2013; Larsen, 2014). The primary empirical material consists of an online survey focusing on photo-elicitation practices on the two platforms, secondary empirical material consists of qualitative interviews conducted prior to the survey. The primary focus is on typical content and most commonly shared pictures as well as the sharing of and experiences with photos that are seen as unpleasant or disruptive by the receiver. The survey is conducted in 2015 and 2016 amongst Danish youth.

Our findings suggest that Snapchat is a site for intimacy where pictures of double chins and ugliness are exchanged. Hence, Snapchat seems to be site of self-exposure.

These activities of photo-sharing and photo-communication bind the youth in closeness, dramas and friendships. In this respect Snapchat differs from, for instance, Instagram where the pictures shared tend to be more polished, neat and perfect. The intimacy shared and maintained on Snapchat does, however, also cover nudes, dickpics and tarnished pictures that discredit certain individuals; or by intimate sharings of nude pictures that are screenshot. In this respect, intimacy entails both the comfort of sharing and the dramas of disruptions.

Analytical foci

In this paper we take our empirical point of departure in the ephemeral social media app Snapchat. We investigate how Snapchat interacts with social relations in particular manners. Snapchat is an app used on mobile devices which allows the user to be 'on the go' and hence update self-destructing photos continuously. Such mobility allows users to share photos remotely and irrespective of time and place. On Snapchat they often employ a higher level of self-disclosure and have reduced self-presentational concerns compared to other social media platforms (Larsen & Kofoed, 2015; Bayer et. al., 2016). The self-destruction of photos and hence the ephemerality of the app is of particular interest since the altered temporality (compared to persistent social media) seems to be of importance in how intimacy is allowed. Our main research question is: How do Danish youth aged 12-17 regulate intimacy and maintain relationships through photo sharing practices on Snapchat? To answer this question, we make use of the concept of intimacy as this is theorized by Lauren Berlant (1998).

On this basis, we have two analytical foci in the paper:

1. Snapchat involves sharing a moment on the move and often non-glamorous selfies (Larsen & Kofoed, 2015; Christensen et. al., 2015; Katz & Crocker, 2015; Bayer et. al., 2016). How does such non-glamorous self-disclosures play out? How are they perceived? Are they utterly unimportant, as respondents often state themselves (Larsen & Kofoed, 2015; Lobinger & Brantner, 2015)? Or are they, on the contrary, key players in maintaining and challenging intimate relations because of their apparently unimportant and self-disclosing content such as visits to the toilet, double chins or hangovers (Larsen & Kofoed, 2015)?

2. A high level of self-presentational concerns are often expressed in relation to Instagram whereas Snapchat by the youth is seen as an emotional escape and an intimate "free space"; free of having to be evaluated, notified or "liked" thus paving the way for more distributed practices of self-presentations through photo sharing, as opposed to photo sharing on Facebook where users are subject to a more unified self-presentation (Wittkower, 2014). Users are generally aware that snaps might be screenshot and saved on the receiver's phone, which often creates an even closer bond of intimacy and trust between users. However, these issues also put users at risk of cyberbullying (Kofoed, 2014; Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012) and the feelings of feeling safe in the shared intimacy are experienced as intimidated. In the paper we discuss issues of trust and expectations of privacy in social media environments where content is shared for a limited period of time and promises to evaporate.

Discussion

The two analytical foci are based on an exploration of differences in photo sharing practices on Snapchat and Instagram. We discuss how different affordances are far from innocent and how photo sharing practices and the performances of intimacy are embedded in the particular affordances and the temporalities allowed by these.

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