'THESE SNAPS ARE MADE FOR TALKING': VISUAL COMMUNICATION AND INSTANT EXPRESSION ON SNAPCHAT

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Personal photography in the Digital Age

Although there is significant research on personal photography and photo sharing practices on social media (Livingstone, 2005; Van Dijck, 2007, 2008; Tifentale, 2014; Gye, 2007), only a relatively small body of emerging research has focused on application Snapchat as a communication platform (Bayer et al., 2015; Roesner et al., 2014; Utz et al., 2015; Poltash, 2013; Katz & Crocker, 2015). This project provides an opportunity to advance the understanding of the practices and motivation behind Snapchat communication. By situating my findings within the existing conversation surrounding photography and social media cultures, this study fills a gap in literature by analysing how Snapchat both extends and intensifies digital photography's shift from memory to communication.

With the emergence of digital cameras and smartphones, the concept of a 'Kodak moment' has changed and evolved. The convergence of networked communication technologies with smart phone and digital camera capabilities, has allowed sharing images to become simple and instantaneous. Social networking sites (SNSs) are built on the production of user-generated content (UGC) and have become key platforms for sharing digital images. Palmer (2012) suggests that new picture sharing practices, (being immediate, every day and transient) have allowed the camera phone to become a "life recorder" (Palmer, 2012, p. 86).

Images once bound to the domestic sphere now have a potentially global reach due to networked communication technologies and SNSs. Digital photography can now be about 'collect[ing] materials for conversation' or for 'display[ing] social relationships' (Lee, 2009, p. 165). Images then, are often used on SNSs for accumulating social currency in the form of likes and comments (Rainie et al., 2012).

Snapchat promotes image sharing like other social media channels, whilst simultaneously branding itself as an alternative communication medium that does not track, store or sell user data. Ephemeral data applications can be seen as a response to

our cluttered world of Big Data (boyd, 2010), offering users more control over the distribution and archiving of their networked data.

Methods

I approached the study by building on key ideas within media studies literature relating to 'participatory culture' (Jenkins , 2006; Kennedy, 2013), and digital photo-sharing practices (Garde-Hansen, 2014; Van Dijck, 2008; Gye, 2007): memory, communication, identity. By applying previous frameworks for understanding digital photography to the specific contexts of Snapchat, this research project aimed to gain a better understanding of how the app represents a significant shift in image sharing and visual communication.

Qualitative research methods were employed to produce in depth data concerning the three key themes: Temporality, Sharing and Self. 12 participants were recruited to partake in semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The interviews were framed by the three key research themes and broken into several categories, with the intention of exploring how advancements in media technologies have allowed new practices of photo-sharing and communication to emerge.

Findings and Discussion

Qualitative data suggested that participants perceived Snapchat as a means for direct communication or a "messaging platform" (Bayer, 2015, p.23) rather than a platform for image or video distribution. In Snapchat interactions, a photo typically begins as the impetus but as the 'conversation' continues, greater value is placed on the text (the caption).

All participants reported that over 90% of their Snapchat content consisted of "selfies." Furthermore, one of the most striking findings to emerge was the notion that Snapchat selfie communication lessens the likelihood of a message being misread or misinterpreted due to lack of tone and body language.

Snapchat's temporal affordances have allowed new platform-specific sharing practices to emerge which centre on the exchange of humorous and typically mundane snippets of everyday life. My interview data suggests that users enjoy having control over who consumes their content, when they view it and for how many seconds. These findings indicate that Snapchat image sharing between close-ties differs from the highly considered, premeditated practices of self-presentation on broadcasting platforms (i.e. Facebook and Instagram) (Belk, 2013).

For participants, this ability to be in the moment (not focused on the past or on the future) was somewhat liberating. The affordances and uses of Snapchat shift the terms of Goffman's (1959) self- presentation from a front facing mode common to other SNSs, to a more 'behind the scenes' or 'backstage' look at particular events or occasions- the less glamorous, humorous moments that occur "in the moment."

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that a more real-time networked self, attuned to the exigencies of the present and the network, emerges in these contexts. These findings suggest that Snapchat is perceived as a more intimate platform for self-presentation than broadcasting platforms. The selectivity and ephemerality of the platform allows for more personal communication to occur, while its temporal nature allows "Snaps" to appear spontaneous and casual at the same time. In the digital age where remembering is the default, Snapchat reminds us of the importance of forgetting.

The study's findings suggest that Snapchat is a welcome alternative within the current social media landscape. Like real life interactions, Snaps are ephemeral and temporally bound "in the moment." Overall, this study's results strengthen the idea that Snapchat has both extended and intensified digital photography's shift from memory to communication. Snapchat photography communicates a moment rather than capturing a memory. The ephemerality of photos shared on Snapchat places a new emphasis on the present moment, allowing a more 'real-time' networked self to emerge.

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