# "THE SILLY PICTURES DISAPPEAR": EPHEMERAL SOCIAL MEDIA AS BOUNDARY PLAY

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## Introduction
In contrast to the "total recall" and "save everything" ethos of digital pioneers (Bell & Gemmell, 2009), recent popularity of applications such as Snapchat that offer erasure of shared media by default suggests that ephemerality of digital content is important. However, little is known about what role ephemerality plays in the use of communication media (Kotfila, 2014; Roesner, Gill, & Kohno, 2014). This paper presents a study of college student use of Snapchat based on observations, informal conversations, and focus group interviews. We find that students use Snapchat alongside rather than instead of Facebook and Instagram and show that much of Snapchat use can be productively interpreted as relational boundary play precisely because of ephemerality of content (Nippert-Eng, 2005).

## Method
The analysis presented here is based on two data sources. The first are extensive notes from observations and informal discussions with undergraduate university students at two universities in Denmark conducted in 2013 and 2014, utilizing courses where the first author was not teaching and thus not in a position of power. Rather, the author used opportunities during guest lectures and interactions with students during exercises. The author took extensive field notes during and after these engagements, however, none of the students will be quoted verbatim given the informal nature of the interactions. The second data source relies on focus groups conducted as part of a study on student use of social media and conceptions of sharing in March and April of 2014. The four focus groups consisted of 18 college students aged between 24 and 34 (mean of 28,7), equally split between men and women. We ensured heterogeneity among participants in how actively they used social media and in their backgrounds ranging from technical lines of study to the humanities. As students are primary population currently using Snapchat and is the most studied social media user group, it makes sense to consider them first. The student experience of Danish and American college students is significantly different, thus we cannot claim that our findings negate or support insights into the use of social media derived from a myriad US college

student samples to date. Rather, our findings suggest particular ways in which mobile social media use can be interpreted.

**"This picture doesn't really exist"**
A Snapchat account allows users to set only a user-name and a display name. The interface involves a list of contacts and the ability to take pictures, augment them with drawings and captions, send and receive them. These 'snaps' erase themselves from both the sender and the receiver mobiles based on the timer preset by the sender (up to 10 seconds). If the receiver uses their mobile phone to take a screenshot of the image, the sender is notified. The list of contacts has no history of communication with these contacts within the app.

Most students we encountered used Facebook and the vast majority also used Snapchat. While some students used Facebook or Instagram in isolation, we did not encounter anyone who used Snapchat exclusively. The popularity of Snapchat illustrates that users appreciate the option of ephemeral digital social interaction. Snapchat was used alongside SMS, media messaging and Facebook posts thus clearly performing a different function. Most often use of Snapchat was described as silly, playful, "definitely not serious" engagement with friends enabled by ephemerality of content. Students knew this ephemerality was not foolproof and discussed available workarounds for saving pictures.

**The silly pictures disappear**
The built in defaults of preservation or ephemerality do not preclude content from being saved or deleted. Yet making content ephemeral where it is automatically saved or saved where it is automatically ephemeral has consequences. To our participants the default of ephemerality eased their accountability for the content they produced.

"*You don't give it as much thought because the content disappears. It is not something you will linger on, revisit time and time again. It's much more simple information about what are up to. There is something about the briefness of it that makes it fun*" (F2).

Students explicitly noted that little of Snapchat communication involved content they considered sensitive and the silly pictures were sent as snaps because they weren't considered worth saving. Rather than speaking to concerns of privacy, most pointed out that there is value to immediacy of sharing low quality images, funny only in the moment of exchange. The knowledge that an image will expire freed the sender from the responsibility of producing meaningful content.

**Snapchat as boundary play**
"*You share pictures, where you actually think you shouldn't see this.*" (F1) and this is possible because "*it [Snapchat] gives a sense of this picture doesn't really exist.*" (F2). The default of ephemerality that Snapchat offers enables boundary play (Nippert-Eng, 2005) – a kind of "feeling out" of relationships and their boundaries and edges – a test of confidences. The permanence of most digital media can make "small" and "playful" communication potentially dangerous if such communication is documented and encountered out of context. Snapchat allows explicit targeting of communication making

it "interpersonal", the ephemerality enabling a kind of relational play impossible in the formalization imposed on content through digital permanence.

Our participants also used ephemerality to limit the recipient's access to this same content outside the context of the specific communication. While conversation partners may remember the content of past snaps they had exchanged, they do not have the digital objects themselves to point to at a later date and out of context, potentially freeing users from the need to self-censor as research suggests many do in other media such as Facebook (Das & Kramer, 2013), or phone media messages (Ahern et al., 2007).

The notion of ephemerality is in direct conflict with the underlying perception of permanence of digital content and its endless multiplication. Snapchat users did not seem to care that this ephemerality could be easily circumvented because their behavior was based on the social contract with their relations. Receivers could capture these momentary expressions, but such captures became a violation of the normative expectations of the users.

## Conclusions

In contrast to ephemerality of direct experience documentation transcends the fault of memory by fixing data produced through social interaction in physical or digital form (Kotfila, 2014). This fixity can be advantageous, as individuals no longer have to rely on memory to transmit information. However, there is a loss of control of the information since once transmitted it can be re-transmitted again. This fixity also changes the meaning of mediated interaction as generating digital objects that can be read back and re-interpreted in the future and out of context. Snapchat's snaps are pictures that don't really exist precisely because experimentation needs space for forgetting, a kind of protection of the future self from the playful transgressions of the past. For Snapchat users, intentional data loss spells carelessness in a digital world where every action is saved and catalogued, requiring far too much forethought.

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