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The Challenge of Anonymous and Ephemeral Social Media: Reflective Research Methodologies & Student-User Composing Practices

Sara Elyse West
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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The Challenge of Anonymous and Ephemeral Social Media:
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by

Sara West
Lincoln Memorial University
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2011
East Tennessee State University
Master of Arts in Literature and Language, 2013

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University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

_____
Adam Pope, Ph.D.
Dissertation Director

_____   _____
David Jolliffe, Ph.D.   Patrick Slattery, Ph.D.
Committee Member   Committee Member

Abstract

This project seeks to provide a framework for navigating anonymous and ephemeral research spaces to theorize student-user composing practices on these social media platforms. This project reflects on and builds from the difficulties that arose during a previous project for which I collected data from a space that was both ephemeral and anonymous. That experience led me to the questions of use and research methods that I consider in this project, wherein I rely on critical reflective research practices to provide an effective methodology for examining the type of data in question. In this work, I consider how past and current conversations in composition studies, technical and professional communication, and popular media have shaped perceptions of anonymous and ephemeral spaces. Then, using the specific examples of Snapchat, Yik Yak, and Whisper, I discuss an IRB-approved, mixed methods study designed for this project. Through a large-scale survey and a small batch of qualitative interviews, I examine the ways that students are using these applications and the extent to which the characteristics of anonymity and ephemerality influence how they navigate these spaces. Finally, I offer implications of this project for instructions of composition and technical and professional communication, content creators and communication designers, and online researchers.

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Dedication

To my parents, Gary and DiAnne.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

At the 2016 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, a panel entitled "Just Going to Leave This Here: Empirical Study of Social Media" reported on the status of four ongoing empirical studies by four different researchers. Because I was chairing another panel at the time, I asked a colleague to sit in on this panel and take notes for me. When we met up again, she was excited to tell me about the panel's question and answer portion, in which someone had asked one of the presenters about research methods for platforms in which the posts are not archived. This audience member mentioned Snapchat, a messaging application known for its "self-destructing" messages that delete in 1-10 seconds. Because none of these researchers were navigating a research space such as this, they were unable to answer, but noted that this question was worth further exploration. My colleague was excited to tell me because my research seeks to explore these difficult research sites.

When I heard about this panel, I had already conceived of my dissertation project, and I had already spent some time in a research space in which posts were not archived. In my case, this research space was Yik Yak, an anonymous, location-based social networking application that was, at the time, extremely popular on college campuses across the United States. For a little over a month, I had collected posts from the University of Arkansas's Yik Yak feed to come to some conclusions about how students communicated on and interacted through this medium. Although I was ultimately satisfied with the article I wrote from this research, I experienced first-hand the difficulties that arose when researching in a space that was both ephemeral, with only the 100 most recent posts available at any given time, and anonymous, with no identifying user-features available to other users.

In this dissertation project, I seek to follow critical reflective methodologies, advocated for by Patricia Sullivan and James Porter (1997), and to bring in ideas from both composition and technical and professional writing to explore the ways that students navigate anonymous and ephemeral social media platforms. To do this, I build from my previous research (see West, 2016) by using user input to bridge some of the gaps that regularly occur when viewing a space from the position of "researcher." Sullivan and Porter's work in *Opening Spaces* has encouraged me to be more mindful of my position of researcher, the responsibilities I hold to those I research, and the methods I use. In my earlier project, I followed the traditional research structures that I felt like I *had* to follow—find a research space, collect data, analyze and code data, report findings, draw implications. This method yielded valuable findings, but as my interest grew in learning more about student-user composing practices, it became clear that the data needed to be informed by the users.

The current project studies how student-users communicate and compose in anonymous and/or ephemeral social media spaces, as well as suggests a research methodology to study these spaces. In this study, I first conducted an online survey of the University of Arkansas's composition and technical writing classes. These classes serve many students in different years and majors, and, because my research holds implications for both compositionists and technical and professional communicators, these students represent the types of students that may end up in those classes. This survey was 27 questions long and took about five minutes to complete; it asked students which anonymous and ephemeral platforms they used, and then took students through sections about three specific applications, chosen for their anonymous and ephemeral characteristics (discussed in the next section).

After the survey, from a list of students who offered to provide follow-up interviews, I interviewed four students to gain a more nuanced picture of how students are navigating these spaces. These 30-minute interviews were structured in three parts: the first focused on participants' general use of anonymous and ephemeral social platforms; the second was structured as a discourse-based discussion of posts from these platforms; and the third asked participants to discuss rhetorical concepts such as audience, purpose, and context in conjunction with these social platforms.

Before beginning the detailed discussion of my project and findings, however, I want to provide a larger context by defining what I mean by anonymous and ephemeral applications, and then I will discuss the brief, but complex, histories of applications that I use in this research. I will conclude this introduction by situating myself as researcher, setting the critically reflective tone for the rest of this document, and by providing an overview of the upcoming chapters.

Defining Anonymous and Ephemeral Applications

Anonymous and ephemeral applications seem to be a new turn in social media platforms. In order to better explain what I mean by this, let me take a moment to define the major parts of that sentence. Put broadly, a *platform* is a system that allows groups of people to interact in some way. The reasons for these interactions are many: to buy or sell products or services, to collect data, to socialize, to build communities, etc. (Srnicek, 2017). But the meanings of the word platform are even more diverse, as Gillespie (2010) notes, ranging from computational and architectural to figurative and political.

Social media, too, has broad and varied definitions, and some of those definitions preclude anonymous and ephemeral applications. An often-cited definition comes from danah boyd and Nicole Ellison (2008): "We define social network sites as web-based services that

allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). This definition works well to define many platforms, particularly popular ones like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. But it is difficult to fit anonymous and ephemeral applications within this definition, as identities are hidden and connections are difficult to determine. Thus, for the purposes of this project, I choose to use a broader definition of social media platforms, one that can encompass anonymous and ephemeral applications as well: Liza Potts's (2014) definition of social media systems as "the actual systems that allow people to form, join, and participate in networks" (p. 6). Potts's definition does not preclude any system based on its core characteristics: if users are present and participating, a system meets her definition.

I define *application* as the delivery service of the platform, the actual software that allows users to access the platform. Applications may be accessed through the web, or bought and/or downloaded on mobile devices.

For the purposes of this project, I label platforms *anonymous* by using Graeme Horsman's (2016) idea of approved anonymity. Approved anonymity describes applications that do not provide any user identification to other users, though the service providers themselves do hold some identifying data. This type of anonymity is most prevalent in social media and messaging applications like those I study: The technology companies that develop and distribute these applications have access to some identifying information, but researchers like myself and the participants of my research project do not.

Ephemerality refers to information that is not publicly archived and are thus is not accessible to users after a short period of time. These short-lived posts may be housed on the

application's servers, but users of the platform cannot refer to past posts, replies, or interactions without having deliberating archiving the material themselves, through a means such as screen capturing. Without direct access to the system's servers, researchers, like myself, are equally unable to access past data, which often makes for tricky research sites.

While profile-based platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are still giants in the social media (with Instagram being wholly owned by Facebook), other platforms that eschew basic characteristics of these platforms, like identity and permanence, have become increasingly popular. My project emphasizes the *characteristics* of anonymity and ephemerality, rather than focusing on a specific platform—especially necessary as these platforms rise and fall quickly, even within the span of this project (see discussion of Yik Yak below). To focus my users on these characteristics, however, I used three major platforms as representatives of particular platforms characteristics: Snapchat (ephemeral), Yik Yak (ephemeral and anonymous), and Whisper (anonymous).

Snapchat

Launched in 2011, Snapchat emerged in many ways as a response to the *once online, always online* idea that was associated with platforms like Facebook. The creators, Stanford undergraduates at the time, had grown frustrated with the current status of photo messaging: no matter what they sent and to whom they sent it, their photos could be accessed indefinitely. A new application through which photos would delete themselves upon being received and opened was their answer to this issue.

Figure 1. Example of received message on Snapchat.

The application's primarily young user base flourished in the years after its launch. According to Snapchat's internal data, in 2017 the application had over 180 million daily active users and most these users were 13-34 years old, a prime advertising demographic ("Snapchat Ads," n.d.). With this popularity, however, came some criticism, namely in labeling Snapchat a "sexting" app built for exchanging suggestive photos (see Bilton, 2012; Fogel, 2014).

Though photo-messaging is still a core component of the application, Snapchat has incorporated other features: users can now exchange text messages which also disappear and, most notably, they can share pictures and videos on a public-facing feature called "Stories." This feature allows users to post photos and videos that can be accessed by either a preselected audience of followers/friends or anyone who accesses the account. From this feature has grown local and campus stories, which are Snapchat-curated stories that encourage users in the same geographic location to contribute (e.g., a metropolitan area or college campus), and event stories, which are Snapchat-curated stories contributed to by users who are all witnessing the same event (e.g., The Academy Awards or the solar eclipse).

In March 2017, Snapchat went public with their company, Snap Inc. They opened with an initial offering that valued the company at $24 billion (Roof, 2017). While the company has since had its share of ups and downs, the application maintains a consistent user base among college students especially.

Yik Yak

Yik Yak launched in the fall of 2013 and spread quickly among students on college campus and residents of major urban areas. The application allowed users to form, join, and participate in networks based on their physical location, within a 1.5-10 mile radius.

In these local feeds, users could communicate with each other by creating posts, by

commenting on others' posts, and by voting on posts. Through the voting system, posts that

received many "upvotes" (i.e., positive ratings) could often be found on a separate "hot" list,

while posts that received many "downvotes" (i.e., negative ratings) were dropped from the

community feed. Only the most recent 100 posts (those which had not received a certain number

of downvotes) were shown on a local feed, and posts were not otherwise archived.

In early 2015, just over a year of its launch, Yik Yak had an estimated 3.6 monthly active

users representing over 1,500 college campuses (Smith, 2015). As the application's popularity

grew, the mass media reported on the application's controversies, namely occurrences of racist,

sexist, homophobic, and hostile posts (see Koenig, 2014;

Mahler, 2015; Ross, 2015; Schmidt, 2015). The generally

agreed upon consensus was that the application's anonymity

lent itself to this behavior, giving users an outlet for these

thoughts, presumably without repercussions.

Despite this controversy, however, Yik Yak remained

a popular application until the company made several

questionable decisions, including their decision to create

mandatory user handles (or user names) on the application.

Though originally presented to users as optional, the

application made handles mandatory in August 2016. This

change was met with a great deal of backlash from users, and

though it was reverted just three months later, the application

Figure 2. Example of Yik Yak post list when user handles were optional. The green box shows a user handle.

could never recover. Its user base had diminished so much that it finally shut down in April

2017. Since it closed, however, many other applications have sought to capitalize on its former success, including Sarahah and Jodel.

Yik Yak serves as a big part of my research project: as I mentioned, my interest in this application is really what began the whole process. The application truly rose and fell during the span of this project, which brought a new dimension to the research. Yik Yak's decline is interesting for several reasons: it provides a case study of what happens when applications change their fundamental characteristics; it shows the influence of critical mass media on new social media startups; and, especially interesting for this project, it provided me a chance to ask users about the controversial handle-policy that the application had implemented.

Whisper

Whisper, though less popular than Snapchat and Yik Yak, is one of the longest-running anonymous applications. Through the application, users can post anonymous messages, called "Whispers," displayed as text over a related image, either chosen from the users' camera roll or from the application's stock photo database. Users can like or "heart" other users' posts, reply directly in comments that appear below the original post, and send and receive anonymous chat messages from other users. Whisper users are assigned random handles, unrelated to their personal identity, which can be changed at any time. Users can only be contacted via their posts.

Shortly after Whisper's initial release in 2012, the application was valued at $100 million (Malik, 2013). By the end of 2014, it was a valued at more than $200 million (Buhr, 2017). At the end of 2015, Whisper hit 20 million active users in 187 countries (O'Brien, 2015).

The application has certainly succeeded in outlasting many of its anonymous competitors, but recent reports have pointed to its decline. In 2017, Whisper suffered some setbacks: it laid off 14 of its 71 employees to cut costs and lost several high-profile board members (Dave, 2017). Also in 2017, the company began working to establish advertising deals with a variety of sponsors. As the application's co-founders work to take back control, Whisper's future is still in flux. However, the application still boasts over 30 million active users, notably young adults.

Figure 3. Example of a post on Whisper.

Situating the Researcher

Before beginning the discussion of my project, I want to take the time to situate myself as a researcher. One of my goals for this project is to be a critically reflective researcher throughout (Sullivan and Porter, 1997); though I am researching spaces where user-identification and context are often unavailable, I want to make visible my own context and identity as a scholar.

Though I have been a user of most of the platforms I discuss in this project, I came to these spaces as a researcher first. My interest in Yik Yak came from a dinner discussion with a fellow graduate student, professor, and visiting professor from another university. The graduate student mentioned hearing some of her students discussing the application, and upon

downloading it, she grew interested in the ways that students commodified college courses, often using the space to discuss their feelings of ownership since they "paid" for these courses. These types of discussions fit with my peer's own research into the rhetorical moves of for-profit institutions, so even as we discussed this new application, we discussed it from the privileged space of researchers.

I downloaded the Yik Yak application after this discussion. I approached this space as a research space, even before I became a user of this space. I observed users on the application long before I posted my own content, and I kept up with media coverage as Yik Yak grew. This is important to acknowledge because I position myself in this project, and in the previous project from which this project grew, as a user. But I have always been a researcher-user, and thus the ideas that I bring to these spaces are automatically focused on that research. The ways in which I see student-users navigating the platform are filtered through the interest I have in the platform as a research space.

It is for this reason that critical research practices work so well for this project. In my previous project, I categorized Yik Yak posts based on student-users' rhetorical moves on the platform. I did so not as a user of that space, but as a researcher, but it has taken me some reflection to be able to understand that. In the current project, I wanted to have a better idea of why and how student-users are navigating these spaces, and to find that out, I needed to go directly to these users. While the discussions and implications for my research are still filtered through my privileged position as researcher, the data comes directly from student-users. I know I cannot erase my privileged positioning, but I can enrich the project by asking users to participate.

Situating the Project

As a social media user and researcher, a college instructor, and a frequent early-adopter of social media platforms, I began this project because I was very interested in this widespread adoption of anonymous and ephemeral applications. My goal was to find out why and how students are interested in these applications, and how they communicate and compose in these spaces.

As I have mentioned above, as anonymous and ephemeral applications have increased, so has criticism of these applications in both the popular press and academic settings. Most mass media pieces about these applications label them as sites that encourage cyber-bullying, shaming, sexting, and bigoted posts, or as sites with extreme privacy concerns[1]. Whisper and Snapchat, both launched in 2012, still face this criticism, and colleges were attempting to ban Yik Yak altogether up until its closure (Kingkade, 2016; Zamudio-Suaréz, 2016).

But because these applications are gaining popularity, with new applications emerging as quickly as others die out, I believe that it is important to see how student-users are using these applications daily. Technical communication scholars Elise Verzosa Hurley and Amy Kimme Hea (2014) argue that instructors should "rearticulate social media against fear- and illegitimacy-based narratives," but should likewise be aware that students are so influenced by these prevalent cultural narratives that it might be hard to get students to "think of social media as real texts worthy of their composing talents and time" (p. 55-56). Because I am a composition and technical writing instructor, I am particularly interested in composing habits in these spaces. My

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[1]For Yik Yak, see Koenig, 2014; Mahler, 2015; Ross, 2015. For Snapchat, see Bilton, 2012; Fogel, 2014. For Whisper, see Gianatasio, 2014; Lewis & Rushe, 2014; Saletta, 2014.

project addresses some of the criticisms of these platforms, and I hope that my study will lead to a more nuanced understanding of these platforms.

Chapter Breakdown

Just as this chapter has served to introduce the major concepts of my project, the following chapters will each cover a different part of my project.

My second chapter is my literature review. In it, I review literature in the fields of composition studies and technical and professional communication, and I will also discuss literature from other fields that focuses on anonymous and ephemeral characteristics. I begin this chapter by situating my research project in existing conversations about informal composing spaces like social media. I then provide a brief historical overview of conversations about anonymous and ephemeral online spaces in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Moving closer to present-day, I discuss the ways in which compositionists have studied and discussed social media and new media in the field. I also look at the way that social media has been discussed in the field of technical and professional communication. Finally, I conclude the chapter by looking at existing research on anonymous and ephemeral social media platforms, including Snapchat, Yik Yak, and Whisper. My literature review serves to establish my research in the fields of composition studies and technical and professional communication and will give background on existing discussions about this topic.

My third chapter introduces my research methodology for this project. The structure of this chapter is slightly different than a standard discussion of methodology: I will begin with a discussion of my previous research project, which I have already have talked about briefly in this introduction. In the vein of Sullivan and Porter (1997), this chapter will detail my critical reflection on my previous research and how that reflection helped me to reevaluate and revise

my research methods. This chapter, too, contains a bit of literature review, as I review previous methods in social media research and discuss why those existing methods are insufficient or ill-suited in an anonymous and/or ephemeral space. Then I elaborate on the methods of my current project. I explain the design and implementation of my online survey, as well as the design and structure of my interviews. The emphasis here is on my revision of research methods based on critical reflection and further study in my field.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss the results of my research. I begin with the results of the survey project, which provide broad knowledge of which platforms the students are using and their primary uses of these platforms. From this survey, I develop more concrete interview questions and discussion topics, so I move from this broad understanding to more specific ideas from interactions with users. After discussing these survey results, the second half of the chapter talks about my interviews with four student-users. In particular, this section of the chapter shows how participants frame anonymity and ephemerality, determine audience and context, and view community formation and maintenance on these types of applications.

My final chapter outlines the implications from my research and concludes my project. I provide implications for instructors of composition and technical and professional communication, content creators and communication designers, and online researchers. For instructors, I show how the results of my project can influence how they integrate and social media in their classrooms. For content creators and communication designers, I demonstrate the ways in which platforms privilege certain characteristics and how those platform-imposed characteristics influence content and the design of these spaces. Finally, for online researchers, I discuss how my methodology can be applied in future work. I conclude the project by providing some calls for future research in this and related research spaces.

Anonymous and ephemeral applications do not seem to be waning in popularity, even amongst the criticism and the decline of some of the notable applications of this type. But even if these applications ceased to exist, there is a lot to learn from this project about how students navigate and compose on many platforms and through multiple modes. As social media continues to play a role in personal, academic, and professional realms, this project, I hope, demonstrates the importance of critical, user-involved research in this space.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In chapter two, I will discuss how past and current research in the fields of composition studies and technical and professional communication (TPC) inform my research project. These fields have been active in social media research in the past decade, and both disciplines provide complementary ways of framing my research. Composition studies' emphasis on student composition in digital spaces—particularly in the subfield of computers and writing— encourages me to look more deeply into student composing practices in my own research space, while technical communication's emphasis on users motivates my own decision to go directly to the users for the answers to my research questions.

Both compositionists and technical and professional communicators find value in paying attention to the ways that users compose in online spaces. The ways that users compose and communicate in informal spaces can undoubtedly influence the ways we view both composition and communication. As anonymous and ephemeral spaces become more popular, the absence of identifiable and sustainable data impedes data collection for researchers. But, to better understand these spaces, both for content and for use, we need to understand how users are navigating these spaces themselves. Before diving into the study of these spaces, however, I first want to discuss the literature from composition, TPC, and other fields that discuss anonymity, ephemerality, and the spaces that privilege these characteristics.

Though, at the time I am writing this text, there has been a more recent surge of digital spaces built around anonymous users and ephemeral content, these characteristics are not unfamiliar. By tracing the fields' early interest in MOOs, instant messaging, and online discussion boards, I show how scholars in composition and TPC have discussed anonymity and

ephemerality in the past. Many news outlets focus on the negative aspects of anonymity, but early researchers found that allowing students to remain anonymous sometimes helped to foster more critical discussion. On the other hand, some early researchers noted that online discussion spaces solved the problem of ephemerality in the face-to-face situations. They appreciated the ability to revisit and archive content and to allow students to do the same. Now, as more applications offer digital spaces that are not publicly archived, we are seeing a return to ephemerality.

After discussing some historical precedents, I move to exploring recent discussions of social media in composition studies and technical communication. Both fields call upon researchers to bring their specialties to continued examination of social media spaces. The composition studies subfield of computers and writing continues to explore how new media affects student literacy and the classroom environment. Technical and professional communicators explore social media systems and deconstruct them as the product of user networks and interactions. My project draws on goals from both of these fields, but it also explores social media platforms that have yet to be thoroughly discussed by scholars in those fields. For this reason, I turn to a brief discussion of existing literature about these applications in other fields.

Composition and technical and professional communication offer corresponding ways to explore the tricky anonymous and ephemeral spaces that make up my research spaces. In addition, these fields offer historical precedent for discussing these spaces and the characteristics of anonymity and ephemerality. The dearth of literature from these fields about these applications, however, shows that my project is needed, and that it fits into the larger narrative about anonymity, ephemerality, and social media spaces.

Informal Composing Spaces and the "Self-Sponsored" Writer

In recent years, both compositionists and technical communicators have issued calls for research in digital spaces, informal spaces, and social media communication (and the spaces where these all meet). One of the most often cited, Kathleen Yancey's (2009) "Writing in the 21st Century," urges composition and communication scholars to research new forms of digital compositions as well as to instruct students in these forms of communication. She notes that students are not only composing and learning to compose within the classroom; they are often learning writing skills in less academic contexts through what she calls "social co-apprenticeship" (p. 5). So much of web-writing and social media writing falls under Deborah Brandt's idea of "self-sponsored" writing spaces that Yancey argues for researchers to acknowledge and, within those spaces, to "[a]rticulate the new models of composing developing right in front of our eyes" (p. 7). As popular press has shown, anonymous and ephemeral spaces are most certainly developing right in front of our eyes; platforms have risen and fallen in the span of this project, and perhaps even this chapter.

While the composition field is often characterized as being mostly classroom-oriented, the field readily explores both academic and non-academic spaces for writing. In Courtney Werner's (2015) study of new media scholarship in the field from 2000-2010, she finds that the overwhelming majority of articles fall into the category she called "composing in contemporary society." These articles focus not on classroom composition but on "the field's relevancy to a larger, non-academic community in the 21st century" (p. 64). Of course, this research often has implications for the classroom, but the field's acknowledgment of non-academic spaces of composition shows an understanding that students develop writing skills both inside and outside the classroom.

As a field, composition acknowledges that students compose outside of the classroom a great deal, and increasingly in online spaces. Digital literacy is practiced just as frequently—in some cases, more frequently—outside the classroom than in the classroom (Hawisher, Selfe, Moraski, & Pearson, 2004). And digital literacy continues to be an essential consideration in the composition and TPC fields, especially as so much of our composition and communication happens in digital spaces. So further research into these informal spaces of online composition will no doubt influence the way we view our classrooms and our fields. Heeding Yancey's call and following in my field's trend in new media scholarship, I want to consider these new models of composition—in my case, anonymous and ephemeral social media spaces—as sites of critical inquiry.

Origins: MOOs, MUDs, and Online Discussion Boards

Anonymous and ephemeral applications may have gained popularity recently, but within the composition and technical communication fields, these features can be traced back to early applications of MOOs, MUDs, and online discussion boards. The early reception and conversations about these online discussion tools lauded their ability to provide a more equal space for both students and instructors/tutors, even if this was not necessarily the case (Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 1996; Jordan-Henley & Maid, 1995; Schneider & Germann, 1999). Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber (1996) explore composition studies' preoccupation with online spaces by discussing the field's idea that these spaces might "somehow liberate students and teachers (as well as other computer users) to speak freely, outside age, ethnicity, gender, and race constraints, as well as other status and physical appearance markers that can keep individuals voices from being heard" (p. 269). Though

Johnson-Eilola and Selber question this assumption of liberation and equality, they still

acknowledge it as the prevailing narrative at the time.

Likewise, new social media platforms that do not rely on profiles or archives often appear

to be more egalitarian to members. Indeed, Yik Yak's founders' original idea for the platform

focused on these egalitarian concepts: "For us, being anonymous means that everyone is on an

equal playing field. That means that everyone's content is treated the same way, no matter who

you are" (Hines, 2015). It is important to see how the fields of composition and TPC have

discussed early forms of computer-mediated communication so that we can further explore the

connections these forms have to now-popular social media applications. In this section, I will

begin by discussing the field's early history with online communication technologies like MOOs,

MUDs, and discussion boards. Then I will explore in more specific detail how these technologies

connect to the features of anonymity and ephemerality.

A Brief Historical Overview

In the mid-1990s, MOOs, MUDs, and online discussion boards were often used to enrich

or form the basis for online composition classrooms. These tools were understandably useful for

distance education, but instructors began to see other advantages of using computer-mediated

technologies. For example, as Jennifer Jordan-Henley and Barry Maid (1995) show, both

asynchronous and synchronous online communication can be useful for establishing tutoring

programs. Marilyn Cooper and Cynthia Selfe (1990) note that instructors might choose online

conferencing to offset the traditional perceptions of teacher authority in conference situations.

Technical and professional communicators and instructors also saw the value of these spaces for

collaboration and communication in the workplace, as well as the classroom (Schneider and

Germann, 1999; Nagelhout 1999). Scholars and instructors, too, met and collaborated in online

spaces apart from their class contexts: In the field of composition studies, "Tuesday Night Café of the Netoric Project" and "Hypertext Hotel" were popular MOOs among computers and writing scholars (Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, & Selfe, 1996).

Along with the egalitarian ideal associated with these online spaces came the hope of critical dialogue and community engagement. Heidi McKee (2002, 2004) advocates for student involvement with the Intercollegiate E-Democracy Project, in which students can discuss a variety of issues with other students from different institutions and backgrounds. Students in her studies noted that the online setting allowed them more freedom to discuss different topics. Leslie Harris and Cynthia Wambeam (1996) note that online classes seem more likely to establish discourse communities and that students are more likely to rely on each other for feedback rather than defaulting to the instructor.

Work with online discussion spaces, however, has also shown that the field's early ideas about these near-utopian online spaces were overly simplistic. Albert Rouzie (2001) notes this contradictory history with MOOs/MUDs in particular:

> Early scholarship painted synchronous discourse as egalitarian and dialogic, while later scholarship has questioned these assumptions. Researchers who had at first seen synchronous discourse as free play came to see it as increasingly constrained by established hierarchies, and possible as destruction to effective class community. (p. 253)

While some online spaces still afford strong community dynamics (Pavia, 2013; Dich, 2016; Kelley, 2016), traditional hierarchies and classroom constraints caused instructors to question the presumed egalitarian nature of these online spaces (Fielding, 2016; Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 1996; Rouzie, 2001). As I will continue to discuss, the field's early ideas about anonymity and ephemerality followed a similar trajectory.

Online Spaces and Anonymity

As mentioned, early research with MOOs, MUDs, and online discussion focused on the positive attributes, following the subfield computers and composition's generally optimistic leanings (Moran, 2003). And although anonymity is often regarded with some reservations in our current profile-driven social media landscape, scholars who began researching MOOs, MUDs, and online discussion boards often noted the freedom that anonymity allowed participants. In these spaces, anonymity is afforded by use of screen names or the fact that participants may never actually see each other in public (Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Harris & Wambeam, 1996; Jordan-Henley & Maid, 1995).

Cooper and Selfe (1990), prominent names in the field even today, were among the first to explore the egalitarian nature that anonymous online spaces could provide. In their article about online conferencing, they note that this form of communication allowed anonymity, or at least perceived anonymity, that could put students and instructors on the same level:

> To further diminish their authoritarian status, teachers can also use pseudonyms in computer conferences; when these contributions to the conversation are relatively unmarked, they will be treated like those of any other participant. In addition, the lack of face-to-face cues in on-line conferences, while it eliminates much useful paralinguistic information, also means that some information about gender, age, and social status disappears unless individuals choose to reveal themselves by bringing specific experiences or cues into their written responses. *This relative anonymity not only contributes to the egalitarian nature of the conferences but also shifts the level of competition from that of personality to that of ideas.* (p. 853, italics mine)

Cooper and Selfe claim that the relatively anonymous nature of online discussion—in this case, online conferencing—can alleviate some of the traditional personality-driven power structures that are often established in the face-to-face classroom and can foster more critical discourse.

Similarly, in the realm of online tutoring, Jordan-Henley and Maid (1995) saw an advantage in conducting tutorials without the affordance of face-to-face communication. In their

research, they found that some students were more open to discussing their work with someone who they perceived to be a "nonjudgmental stranger" (p. 212). Like Cooper and Selfe, then, Jordan-Henley and Maid saw an exchange that focused more on ideas than personalities, appearance, or perceived hierarchies.

Early work that stressed this egalitarian nature often painted online discussions as a way to encourage more critical debate (DeWitt, 1997; Harris & Wambeam, 1996; McKee, 2002, 2004). McKee (2002, 2004) found that the discussion boards of the Intercollegiate E-Democracy Project provided students a place to engage in critical conversations about race and sexuality. Despite their tendency for "othering" people who were deemed to be unlike themselves, McKee ultimately believed that the discussions were fruitful and offered students a variety of perspectives. She reasoned that students may not have offered these perspectives if they felt uncomfortable in a face-to-face situation, or if the face-to-face discussion was dominated by a small number of participants.

Not all research focused on the benefits of anonymous or semi-anonymous interaction. As the composition studies field became more critical of online spaces, so too did the field become critical of the anonymity these spaces afforded, especially in classroom situations. A lack of face-to-face contact often led to decreased communal accountability, and/or the perception that because the class and the work took place online, it was not "real" (Fleckenstein, 2005). This disconnect from reality may also stem from many students' perceptions that the use of online spaces and technologies is superfluous (Fielding, 2016). Regardless of the reason, compositionists began to find that the community bond is often disrupted by students' inability or unwillingness to engage fully in online spaces.

Outside of the classroom, however, the relative anonymity afforded by online spaces still leads to increased community building and interaction. Some studies show that the communities built online can be long-lasting and can serve as literacy sponsors for members (Dich, 2016; Kelley, 2016; Pavia, 2013). These communities tend to occur organically, often forming around shared experiences, cultures, hobbies, and/or interests. But community maintenance often relies on shared posting norms, language cues, and idiosyncrasies, which, in many cases, calls into question the egalitarian ideal of online spaces. As participants in online spaces begin to leverage posting norms, new members and old members can be clearly distinguished, and this, along with the use of screen names, makes the online hierarchy even more clear. In truth, communities online often function similarly to physical communities by leveraging shared norms and gatekeeping functions (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 1996).

It is important to note that these hierarchies, though disrupting the egalitarian ideal, are not inherently negative (Kelley, 2016). Perhaps, when not influenced by classroom restrictions, users better understand and operate under community hierarchies and posting norms. As McKee (2002) notes, misunderstandings and miscommunication can frequently arise in online spaces, and the online community at large often figures out ways to mediate. She argues that instructors should work with students to read online posts critically, considering the cultural factors that may inform others' posts and replies. By enforcing strict ways of posting and replying, she says, instructors are not adequately preparing students for real communication they may encounter on the web. My research looks at how students navigate spaces that are not controlled or directed by classroom concerns.

Online Spaces and Ephemerality

While anonymity has been thoroughly discussed in early research on online spaces, ephemerality has not received the same treatment. Much of what early researchers have discussed is that online spaces, to a certain extent, eliminate ephemerality by allowing written archives. As Heidi McKee (2002) notes, one of the benefits of online communication over face-to-face communication is "the archival nature of the medium" (p. 431). Because many online discussions are archived—especially in the case of online discussion boards—conversations can be easily revisited. This archival characteristic stands in contrast to face-to-face discussions, which are, by their very nature, ephemeral. As McKee (2002) goes on to mention, students who participated in online discussion posts could revisit and analyze their own posts, as well as the posts of their classmates. By the same token, researchers of online spaces have a ready supply of data for observation and analysis.

Of course, online spaces do not always circumvent ephemerality, either by design or by nature. More recently, Katelyn Burton (2015) questions the perception that the things that are posted and created online exist in perpetuity. She considers this idea to be a myth for three reasons: online texts can become incompatible with new programs and software and thus obsolete; online texts can be deleted or censored by the system; and online texts can be become obscure or "lost" in the wealth of information found online. Thus, while it may be true that online material can be retrieved for long after it is posted, the odds of retrieval decrease the longer the text remains online. She advocates for a pedagogy that considers the ephemerality of online texts, rather than assuming their permanence.

The ephemerality of online spaces, then, has not yet been studied with much scrutiny in the fields of composition studies and technical and professional communication. But as more

composition and communication occurs online, and as online spaces become more ephemeral by design, researchers will likely need to dedicate more attention to this aspect.

New Media, Social Media, and Composition Studies

As mentioned above, scholars in the subfield of computers and writing have conducted much of the research into online spaces within the field of composition studies. This subfield's continued interest in news tools and technologies has also led them to do a great deal of research in social media studies. Computers and writing, according to Charles Moran (2003), is a subfield that operates under an optimistic view of technology and technology's place in the classroom. He cites this optimism as a hallmark of the field, but he mentions that computers and writing does not "always and uncritically accept these [positive] assumptions" (p. 344). In his review of work in the field, he notes that this optimism in the field's early years may seem naïve, but it paved the way for more critical modes of inquiry. This transition from naivety to critical inquiry can be seen in the field's early discussions of online spaces.

Early research in computers and writing looked critically at the technologies students used and how (or if) new technologies could be used to assist students in their composing processes (Duffelmeyer, 2000; Hawisher, LeBlac, Moran, & Selfe, 1996; Hawisher & Selfe, 1991; Selfe, 1999). As Moran notes, the field's early research had moments of envisioning a utopian technological environment—students' writing concerns better mediated through technology, the field's professional status made more apparent through technology, and teachers' status improved through technology. Moran argues that this persistent hope continues to drive scholars in the field toward more critical inquiries.

One of the field's most influential scholars, Cynthia Selfe (1999), was among the first to encourage both students and instructors to develop critical technological literacy. She notes that

composition instructors are not only "teaching students…how to communicate as informed thinkers and citizens in an increasingly technological world," but also that instructors need to get to "the point of thinking about what we are doing and understand at least some important implications of our actions" as they ask students to use technology for the classroom (p. 414). For Selfe, there are real dangers in ignoring technologies as they became more widespread. Though her emphasis in this case was the access divide that technology would undoubtedly cause in literacy and literacy education, her words still apply as compositionists teach students to consider new media technologies, like social media, in a more critical way.

Responding to Selfe's call for compositionists to further consider how technology affects literacy, Stuart Selber (2004) introduced the idea of the "ideal multiliterate student." Such a student would need to be exposed to three categories of technological literacy: functional (technology users), critical (technology inquirers), and rhetorical (technology producers). The idea here is that students could only become competent users of technology if they also developed the skills to both question and participate with technology.

When instructors and researchers know more about these platforms and about students' composing practices within these spaces, they can move closer to Selfe's and Selber's ideas of literacy in their own teaching practices. In this project, I seek to highlight students' technological literacy regarding anonymous and ephemeral platforms. Up to this point, as I have mentioned, media outlets have represented many of these platforms negatively. And while there is reason for this backlash, this reception mirrors early discussions of now-popular social media platforms. Some of the fears about these platforms may be mediated through more critical inquiry.

Early research on social media mirrored some of the same anxieties brought up by Cynthia Selfe about technology in the classroom—how social media, as a new technology, might

affect student reading and writing practices (Maranto & Barton, 2010; Vie, 2008; Williams, 2008). Researchers discussed the importance of instructors becoming more fluent with these technologies so that they can encourage students to view them more critically. Maranto and Barton (2010) echoed Selfe's earlier warning—for compositionists to understand the implications of their actions—by asking instructors to question their own interferences in these spaces: "To what extent should writing instructors observe, invade, police, or colonize these social spaces originally designed by and intended for students?" (p. 38).

Though in an earlier piece, Stephanie Vie (2008) provides some answer to Maranto and Barton's concerns about invading spaces meant for students. She extends a call for compositionists to look at social media in much the same ways that early compositionists viewed computers and online writing: "What I propose is that compositionists begin looking at online social networking sites through an academic lens to examine the complexities these sites showcase and what ramifications they may hold for our pedagogies and our field" (p. 21). In other words, compositionists need not view themselves as colonizers but as researchers. Indeed, I hope to answer this call in my research: to view anonymous and ephemeral spaces through a critical and pedagogical lens, just as many researchers have done with Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Buck, 2015; Martorana, 2015; Maranto & Barton, 2010; Muhlhauser & Campbell, 2012; Shepard, 2015).

It has been almost a decade since Vie's call for compositionists to critically examine social networking sites. Despite wide-scale changes in uses of social media, scholars in the field are still weighing the perceived value of social media. There is no question that experience with new media technologies is valued in the field—the *MLA Job Information List* continues to feature listings that emphasize technological literacy for job candidates (Lauer, 2014). Entire

issues of popular journals in the field have been dedicated to social media and Web 2.0 technologies, including *Computers and Composition* and *Kairos*.

Though the field's interest in social media is high, there is still some question as to the usefulness of social media in the writing classroom. For example, Elisabeth Buck (2015) claims that the rhetorical skills that students demonstrate when writing for social media can be turned into teachable information in the classroom. While Ryan Shepard (2015) does not disagree that social media can be a valuable tool for teaching rhetorical awareness, his findings show that very few of the 474 students he surveyed identified social media posts as a type of composition. His study still demonstrates, however, that students are very conscious of the rhetorical choices they make in these spaces. He reasons that the most important thing that instructors can do is to make students aware of the connections between writing in a social media post, creating a profile, and making comments, and the composing they do in other settings. To do this well, instructors need to continue to engage critically with both the platforms and the student-users to learn more about how and why students compose in these spaces.

Students' abilities (or desires) to transfer rhetorical skills from social media composition to "academic" composition is not the field's only interest. To say that there is a clear line of distinction between "traditional" forms of writing and, for example, social media writing, serves to marginalize the compositions that students create most frequently. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, much of the composition field's scholarship focuses on composing in society, not necessarily composing in the classroom (Werner, 2016). Compositions do not necessarily have to have value in an academic context to be valuable. Wuebben (2016) calls attention to the ways in which compositions cross academic, personal, and professional networks. After a student inquired about the value of likes and "hearts" for an assignment,

Wuebben notes that because of "the increasingly multimodal and participatory nature of media production and composition, *all* of our writing and sign-making gestures matter" (p. 66-67). As students continue to engage in participatory culture, the lines of once distinct academic and "nonacademic" composition realms will become increasingly blurred.

Because of the less distinct boundaries between formal and informal composing spaces, it is increasingly important to participate in critical inquiries of both. As social media becomes more popular—for personal, professional, and academic use—our need for further research grows. Because of the relative newness of social media platforms and because of the difficulties of researching anonymous and ephemeral spaces (discussed further in the methods section), there is a dearth of research on these spaces. I hope to begin filling that gap with my own research. Keeping with composition studies' consideration of formal and informal composing spaces, I hope not only to learn more about how students compose on these platforms, but also to learn how they view their composition and its connections with in-class and out-of-class communication.

Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) and Social Media Studies

Technical and professional communication's history with online communication is equally important for understanding the scope of my project. Though I study students' use of anonymous and ephemeral applications, I draw implications for both TPC instructors and practitioners, especially in content creation and communication design. I situate my research within many of their current conversations about social media.

As much of the past research shows, technical communication has a vested interest in social media systems and users. Many researchers feel that social media research in TPC provides a unique positioning that some other fields lack—one that privileges users rather than

systems. Amy Kimme Hea (2014), in the opening to *Technical Communication Quarterly*'s special edition on social media, writes:

> Social media definitions often privilege the technological platform of Web 2.0 technologies while subordinating the users of those platforms. For technical communication scholars, this tension between technologies is integral to the ways in which we might come to "know about"—or I would say, research, teach, and use—social media. (p. 1)

Kimme Hea emphasizes technical communication's desire to define social media not just as "the technological platform of Web 2.0 technologies" but as a collection of the platform's users. Technical communication, in her approximation, thrives in studying the tension between technologies and users.

Because of the field's emphasis on user-centered and participatory design (Salvo, 2001; Spinuzzi, 2003, 2005), technical and professional communicators are particularly concerned with how users interact, both with other users and with digital systems. Both kinds of interactions are especially pertinent in my research as I focus on the users of the anonymous and ephemeral platforms. As Spinuzzi (2003) notes, the technical communicator is not meant to be a heroic figure that employs user-centered design to deliver victimized users from "unjust tyranny." Many users are already navigating complex systems themselves, and technical and professional communicators can learn from ways that users are already adapting to changing technologies.

Thus, while historically composition studies' interest in informal composing spaces lends itself to my research with students, I turn to technical communication to frame my research because of the field's interest in the technologies and the way users navigate, adapt to, and change these technologies. As mentioned, I look to Liza Potts' (2014) definition of social media systems in this project. She defines social media systems as "the actual systems that allow people to form, join, and participate in networks" (p. 6). Potts's definition follows the prevailing trend

of research in technical communication: the "system" can only be defined by emphasizing the users that participate in it.

Because of the range of topics in social media that technical and professional communicators have studied, the field has developed and adapted several strategies for research, observation, and participation. To frame my research, I consider the history of TPC's research in these social media systems and among their users. While some of these subjects may not be specifically applicable to my project, this research and the research methods inform how I chose to engage with my own work, a topic discussed in more detail in my methods section.

As is common in TPC, much research has focused on how these media are integrated into workplaces (Ferro & Zachry, 2014; Jennings, Blount, & Weatherly, 2014; Pigg, 2014; Stolley, 2009). Especially in Stolley's (2009) early case, a major concern of integrating social media was ensuring that the benefit outweighed the novelty. In more recent examinations, social media use in the workplace has become almost ubiquitous. As Pigg (2014) notes, users can traverse different platforms to invent ideas, compose documents, promote documents, and engage with community. These multiple platforms may serve as auxiliary actions to existing workflows. Thus it is important for technical and professional communicators to understand how users navigate their existing workflows and social media platforms to develop ways of integrating these systems.

A popular trend in social media research highlights how users navigate platforms during disaster situations (Bowdon, 2014; Potts, 2014). During times such as these, the need for fast and accurate information is heightened and the emergency situation motivates users to use platforms in different ways. Potts (2014) looks at how a large web of users can validate emergency information, weeding out the misinformation and changing this validated information into

community knowledge. In a similar vein, Bowdon (2014) notes that some prominent global outlets do not provide the type of information that users would seek during a disaster. Instead, they often focus on promotion of their own causes or programming. Despite this perceived lack of clear information, Potts (2014) shows that users can often work together to disseminate meaningful information to the right locations and to other users. The importance of this cycle from validation of information to dissemination of knowledge relates to Spinuzzi's (2003) dismantling of the "technical communicator as hero" trope: users adapt to the constraints of the systems, and to the needs of other users in the system, in ways that can be observed and used by technical and professional communicators to better the system itself.

Along these same lines, others in technical communication focus on how we might teach our students to engage critically with these technologies (Bowdon, 2014; Daer & Potts, 2014; Melton & Hicks, 2011; Sacks & Graves, 2012; Verzosa Hurley & Kimme Hea, 2014). As with composition studies, technical and professional communicators have noted the need for teaching students how to navigate these platforms. Daer and Potts (2014) also note this importance for TPC instructors as well. To adequately teach students to use social media and develop social networks, instructors, too, need to develop and maintain their own social media presence. To understand how to use and teach social media, then, technical communicators need to be both active researchers and users of these spaces.

Existing Research in Anonymous and/or Ephemeral Platforms

Research on modern anonymous and ephemeral platforms is not widespread in technical communication or composition studies. As I have noted, some early research looked at factors of anonymity on multi-user domains (MUDs) and multi-user domains-object oriented (MOOs). Anonymity and ephemerality on modern mobile and social media/messaging applications,

however, has been sparsely discussed in either composition studies or technical and professional communication. Luckily, these characteristics have been explored in some related other fields.

One of the first large-scale research studies on ephemerality and anonymity in online spaces, at least to my knowledge and the knowledge of the study's authors, was conducted using 4chan's /b/ imageboard (Bernstein, Monroy-Hernández, Harry, André, Panovich, & Vargas, 2011). While an imageboard such as 4chan is outside the realm of my current research project, it is a precursor to some of the social media and messaging applications that are popular today. Though not the first to research 4chan, Bernstein et al. do claim to be the first to study its characteristic of ephemerality *in situ* and to discuss users' alternate ways of establishing credibility when identities are not assigned. The researchers show how users have developed ways to control ephemerality—by bumping (pushing the post up in the feed) or saging (burying the post in the feed)—and how they have developed linguistic and technological ways to distinguish new users from more experienced users. Of interest to researchers are the ways that users navigate these platforms in spite of the characteristics of ephemerality and anonymity. Bernstein et al.'s study shows that the community did not suffer because of these characteristics—in fact, it may be because of these characteristics that the community's unique culture continues today (for better or for worse).

When applications profess to be social in nature, the knee jerk reaction of many is that anonymity and ephemerality may impede meaningful interaction. To an extent, research has backed up this premise: in an empirical study of content posted to the social media application Whisper, Wang et al. (2014) sought to find out if users in this anonymous space formed social ties like those in more traditional social networks. They found that, for the most part, Whisper

users did not form strong ties with other users. While users may sometimes share replies under the same thread, they rarely interacted across separate posts.

While Wang et al.'s (2014) research did reinforce some negative perceptions of anonymous networks, the researchers also found some interesting attributes of these networks: users who interacted more frequently were in the same geographic area (this made possible by Whisper's "nearby" feature). These users were more likely to see posts by other users the same area, and thus were more likely to interact. This idea is particularly interesting when thinking about localized feeds like Yik Yak and Snapchat community stories.

Researchers thus far have considered the characteristics of anonymity and ephemerality, as well as their relationship to interaction in communities and platforms. In my own project, I hope to follow this trend, though I will interact more often with the users themselves. Research like this about anonymous and ephemeral social media platforms is quite sparse.

Up to this point, most existing research on anonymous and/or ephemeral social media platforms focuses on public perceptions of these applications' controversial content. In existing work about Yik Yak—an application that was both anonymous and ephemeral—the focus has been on the content the applications' anonymous users generate: in particular, content that threatens violence, bullies others, or expresses bigoted opinions (see, for example, Koenig, 2014, Mahler, 2015; Ross, 2015; Schmidt, 2015). With negative content as a primary public concern, it should come as no surprise that the only existing empirical research study on Yik Yak also focuses on the content generated through the application rather than the interactions it fosters. In this study, Black, Mezzina, and Thompson (2016) collected posts from several college campuses and, using content analysis, categorized these posts into different content categories. They

concluded, however, that Yik Yak posed no great threat to young adults because the instances of negative content were relatively few, contrary to public opinion.

Contributing to discussions about interaction and community, Pitcher's (2016) study of students' discussions of sexuality on Whisper found that the anonymous nature of the application provides "a safe enough space for people to describe past and future desired [sexual] activities" (p. 722). In addition, he argues that this anonymity also allows students to make private matters public while cutting down on fear of judgment. Public spaces in which users could express their desires and find like-minded others, Pitcher notes, were "unimaginable before the advent of social media technologies" (p. 722).

Some studies follow the trend of considering the application's controversial uses rather than its capacity to influence interaction, communication, or composing practices. Similarly, past research on Snapchat has also focused on this controversy. Both Poltash (2013) and Young (2014), scholars in the legal field, discuss Snapchat's disappearing photo and video messaging and the possible legal ramifications of sending messages through this application. Poltash follows the precedent set by early media reports, focusing on Snapchat's early reputation as a sexting application (Bilton, 2012).

Snapchat's ephemeral characteristic—the "self-destructing" feature—does, of course, lend itself to critical discussions, but studying this characteristic only in so far as to discuss the possible negative uses dismisses the complexity of the application. Ekman (2015) argues that Snapchat's videos "appear merely ephemeral but are of considerable complexity and emergency" (p. 99). Ekman considers Snapchat's possible impact on the study of cinematics, stressing context-awareness in networked societies. Ekman notes that Snapchat is primarily "about affirming in a flash your existential co-orientation or becoming with those closer or very close to

you: snap visual media intimacy with those you wish to be here now" (p. 100). The focus here is not on the form that the "snap visual media intimacy" might take, but the idea of co-orientation that users create when sending and receiving the messages.

Many scholars in human computer interaction and communication have further explored the intimacy of this application and its usefulness in relationship maintenance. Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, and Falk (2015) draw a parallel between Snapchat conversations and traditional face-to-face conversations. Because Snaps last no more than 10 seconds, students in their study reported that they were more actively attentive to Snaps than posts on other social media platforms. The researchers find that Snapchat is associated more with a positive mood and with reaffirming close times. Vaterlaus, Barnett, Roche, and Young (2016) find that while Snapchat does breed jealousy and encourage sexting, students report that it more often aids in relationship maintenance and encourages a feeling of closeness. Similarly, Piwek and Joinson (2016) find that Snapchat serves to enhance strong emotional ties rather than create or maintain weaker ties, as tends to be the case with Facebook.

Existing research about anonymous and ephemeral applications covers quite a bit of ground—ranging, as seen here, from legal studies and cinematics, to human-computer interaction and communication. This range of literature shows that these applications are indeed important to study and can tell researchers much about the systems and the users that choose to use them.

Conclusion

In my project, I seek to explore more about how student-users navigate these platforms and how they value the characteristics of anonymity and/or ephemerality. Past research about these platforms provides a great deal of background knowledge. The current focus on empirical data collection and content analysis from the platforms shows a lack of research with the users

themselves—in my case, students. Research from technical and professional communication provides me with several studies involving users, while composition studies often reaches out to the students themselves. Thus, pulling from the core concepts of TPC and composition studies, I hope to focus not only on the platforms, not only on the content produced, but on the users of these spaces.

Technical and professional communication and composition studies have a history of studying how people compose in non-academic spaces (Werner, 2015), and my research continues in that vein. New digital technologies have always been of interest and have been met with both optimism (Moran, 2003) and words of warning (Selfe, 1999). But the fields have never shied away from exploring these technologies further. From MOOs and MUDs to Facebook and Twitter, researchers have always felt the pull to know more about how these applications work, how users navigate them, and how they might be used in the classroom or the workplace.

As social media applications that incorporate characteristics of anonymity and/or ephemerality continue to emerge, researchers have many reasons for seeking a deeper understanding of these characteristics and the applications born from them. Historically, ideas about these characteristics have been complex, ranging from the idea that anonymity could provide a more egalitarian classroom (Cooper & Selfe, 1990) and could encourage critical discussion of more sensitive topics (McKee 2002, 2004) to more recent concerns that anonymity breeds hate speech (Koenig, 2014; Mahler, 2015; Ross, 2015; Schmidt, 2015). And while ephemerality has yet to be studied in as much depth, researchers acknowledge advantages and disadvantages to having "permanent" records of our work (Burton, 2015).

Though researchers will likely never be able to come to a single conclusion about anonymity and ephemerality, I want to continue both composition studies' and TPC's calls to

explore both digital spaces (Yancey, 2009) and social media spaces (Maranto & Barton, 2010),

and to include users in that research (Salvo, 2001; Spinnuzi, 2005). This project is part of my

ongoing contribution to this work.

Chapter 3

Methods

As Sullivan and Porter (1997) note, writing and researching practices "all require a reflectiveness and critical awareness to be done well" (p. 21). For this reason, the structure of this chapter is a bit nontraditional: I spend a large portion of this chapter discussing my past project, before introducing the methods for the current project. I believe this structure is necessary because of the critical-reflective approach I employ. Without the experience of my previous project, the methods for this current project could have never been developed.

As I worked on this earlier project, I encountered several challenges while studying an anonymous and ephemeral platform. The questions that came from my previous project have influenced how I developed research methods for my current project. I use Sullivan and Porter's (1997) discussion of critical reflective methodologies in *Opening Spaces* as a way of framing how my current project builds from my previous research.

In my previous project, I did not, at first, realize the challenges that studying an anonymous and ephemeral platform would bring; I did not foresee that methods from previous research in composition studies and technical and professional communication (TPC) would not map onto these spaces easily. In order to answer my research question for that project—how are students communicating and interacting on Yik Yak?—, I approached as a researcher who Sullivan and Porter would call a "traditionalist," using a "select-and-then-apply-a-method" approach (p. 65). I sought to ground my methods as best I could in the methods of my chosen fields, composition studies and TPC. My methods still yielded valuable results, but those results focused on *what* students were composing instead of *why*. In my new research project, I address

this question of *why*, along with other questions that follow. My new research method does not discount my past research, but instead builds on what I have learned.

After discussing my past research experience in more detail, I go on to review my research methods for the current project. For my current project, I used a sequential mixed methods approach to determine how student-users communicate and compose on/in anonymous and/or ephemeral media platforms. First, I conducted an online survey of the University of Arkansas's composition and technical writing classes, to gain more general information about the platforms student-users participate in and the frequency and type of participation. Next, I interviewed four students who offered participate in the next step of the research process. These interviews were structured in such a way as to gain a more nuanced picture of how students navigate these spaces and respond to other users.

Theoretical Perspectives: Critical-Reflective Methodologies

As I have mentioned, I lean heavily on the work of Patricia Sullivan and James E. Porter (1997) and their discussion of critical-reflective research methodologies to shape my own theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Sullivan and Porter argue that often researchers view methods as something they "acquire" and then continue to use as almost a one-size-fits-all approach. In response to this attitude toward research, Sullivan and Porter call for researchers to realize the situatedness of their methods, to realize that methodology "is itself an act of rhetoric, both with our participants in research studies and with our colleagues in a given research field" (p. 13). Method is not just a step in the journey but is inherently tied to current discussions in the field, the questions we ask, and the answers we receive.

In developing their own critical-reflective practice, Sullivan and Porter discuss some of the existing theoretical perspectives that have helped shape their own ideas, namely feminism

and postmodernity. Drawing on these perceptions, Sullivan and Porter detail what they consider a "critical research practice" that involves critically considering research methods, aims, and discussions. Their goal is to encourage researchers to reflect critically on their own research and research practices—a methodology that promotes postmodern critique. In this methodology, researchers' own situatedness, as well as the situatedness of their participants, departments/workplaces, fields, etc., will always inform the research.

For my new research project, I ally myself with the critical practices that Sullivan and Porter advocate by critically considering some of the decisions I made during my previous project. As my research space is largely unexplored, critical reflection is more necessary than ever, especially since I hope to provide some guidance for others who seek to gather information in this space. In some ways, my method of research—and its successes and failures—is the crux of this project. While I will draw conclusions and implications based on what my research has found, I hope that researchers will be able to be critical of my method so that they, too, can build new and different ways of exploring difficult research spaces.

Background: Reflecting on Previous Research

When I began my previous research project, I started with one central question, as I mentioned: how are students at my university communicating with others through Yik Yak? Popular media reports about Yik Yak focused on negative content (see Mahler, 2015; Ross, 2015); the only other scholarly article that I had seen that uses a corpus of Yik Yak posts—from the field of HCI—also focused on whether or not Yik Yak was being used negatively (Black, Messina, & Thompson, 2016). When I used Yik Yak, however, I was more interested in how people communicated in this space, how they interacted and encouraged community and the

transmission of communal knowledge. I wanted to see if there were certain posting norms that students were leveraging while interacting with each other.

As this previous project forms the basis for my current project, I use this section to examine my research and data collection processes, as well as to discuss how peer reviewers for that project influenced my articulation of my methodology.

Researching Past Methods for Social Media Studies

Sullivan and Porter encourage researchers to look at their methodology in a more critical, reflective way, but note that many scholars do not want to spend time articulating their methodological choices. Early in my previous research project, I found myself falling into similar temptation. Because I had been an active Yik Yak user, I thought I knew what I would find, and I did not, at first, thoroughly consider my methodological choices.

As I worked on my previous project, I reviewed social media research in the fields of composition studies and technical and professional communication. I often encountered uses of actor-network theory (ANT), which uses maps to trace the relationships between human and non-human actors in a space (Potts, 2014; Potts & Jones, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013). Used often in TPC, the hallmark of this theory is its suggestion that "all participants, whether human or not human, have equal agency to affect any given situation" (Potts, 2014). This theoretical lens gives researchers not only a way to study how people function in a network, but also how technologies, platforms, events, and devices affect the network.

In her study of social media use in disaster responses, Liza Potts (2014) encourages researchers to use ANT because they

> can look across the networks of technologies and people to identify and understand communication exchange. This approach provides a new method for architecting social web tools and systems in order to support the work of participants. Tracing how actors form networks to exchange content is an important part of this framework. (p. 26)

Her goal is to study the way information is gathered and exchanged within the network of the social web during disaster situations, with the idea that experience architects—her term for user experience specialists, technical communicators, and information designers—will be able to find ways of making the social web more usable during these times of crisis. If the social web becomes more usable in these heightened disaster situations, she believes they will become more serviceable for daily use as well. To study the social web in this way, she encourages researchers to become active participants in the networks they are studying. This participation will better prepare researchers to create ANT maps, which will make more apparent the many connections of the social web. These maps can allow researchers to visualize the many connections of people and systems and how these people and systems work within a larger network to accomplish goals: in Potts' case, to validate information.

ANT mapping methods are useful in tracing relationships in a network; however, in anonymous spaces, the relationships between participants and events cannot often be determined. In addition, when data is ephemeral, producing ANT maps and identifying connections can be difficult. I saw early on that actor-network theory, though useful in many circumstances, was unsuited to the space I sought to research. The nonhierarchical structure, absence of identifying data, and short-lived post visibility rendered many connections invisible from thread to thread.

At this point in my previous research, I began searching through more recent work with social media datasets using grounded theory, content analysis and rhetorical analysis.

With grounded theory, researchers begin with a general area of study, gather a dataset, and watch for trends relevant in that space. William Wolff (2015) advocates for this theory because, he claims, the theories emerge from the data instead of from the researcher, and this diminishes some researcher bias. I believed, in my work especially, that research is inherently

influenced by the researcher—their past experiences, their desires, and their interests. While Wolff does not disregard this notion, he does believe that grounded theory will provide a less biased research foundation. Viewing grounded theory with this lens biased me against it, at first, because I felt that it was impossible to remove the researcher from the process. I was still looking for a theory or method that I could simply apply to my work. I viewed grounded theory as at odds with my situated positioning as researcher and user, so I originally disregarded it.

Many other sources that I encountered used some sort of content analysis (McNely, 2015; Wolff, 2015) or rhetorical analysis (Torrey, 2014), and I felt these methods combined might be better suited to my research space. Through my research, I found that it is not uncommon for researchers of social media to acknowledge their position as a fan-researcher or a user-research. Liza Potts (2015), referring to her fandom research as a "reflexive (auto)ethnography," notes that this position can be an advantage: "To know the interworkings of a particular community, culture, and group is to have a much better understanding of why certain moves are made and why activity takes place in particular spaces" ("Sussing Out, Reflexive (Auto)Ethnography," para. 2). Potts notes that because she was not a major actor in the situations she observed, she could not label her work simply autoethnography. But as a frequent user of this space and member of the community, she knew her previous participation helped shape her knowledge of traditional norms and conventions. Thus, while methods like content analysis and rhetorical analysis tend to focus on the research subject and/or the data, I felt that I could combine these methods with a reflexive (auto)ethnographic approach to mediate some of the loss of researcher situatedness. I decided that I needed to collect data, in the form of Yik Yak posts, and then I would attempt to analyze this data using these methods.

Challenges During Data Collection

As noted, the research process for my previous project was more difficult than I had anticipated. With Yik Yak, there is no publicly available way to mine data in bulk. Because of this, I chose to capture data through screen captures of a local Yik Yak feed. The one other study I found of Yik Yak, that of Black, Mezzina, and Thompson (2016), used this screen capture method as well, which led me to believe that it was the only data collection means available to scholars at that time.

This screen capture method caused some problems because I could not accurately judge interactions between users. I only knew how many replies and likes were received at the time I captured the post—I could not accurately say which posts received the most likes and replies by the time they finally left the local feed (by either being downvoted to deletion or by no longer being one of the most recent 100 posts). While some of the posts in my data might have been posted hours before, some may have only been posted seconds before. If I collected only posts as they neared the bottom of the feed, however, I may have missed posts that were downvoted by the community, which would have likely provided valuable context. As a user myself, I could, with a certain degree of accuracy, report which types of posts encouraged the most interaction. But still, I was frustrated that I could not capture a full communicative exchange—I wanted the *what* and the *why*, but *why* was not visible to me.

As a local resident of the community and an online user of Yik Yak, I could fill in many of the gaps that my research left, and filling in these gaps made it even more apparent how very situated my research was. To really understand what students were posting about, or how they were communicating, it became important to read the entire corpus together. Posts might be trying to accomplish different things depending on what kinds of conversations were going on

around these posts. An outside reader, as would often be used to verify coding types, would have very likely not put the posts into the same categories as I did unless they were able to 1) see all the posts together and 2) know, or at least remember from context, the current events taking place at the time the posts were made.

Even with these issues, I felt that I had enough information to fairly discuss my data collection. I developed a typing system to categorize Yik Yak posts (see West, 2016). I still believe that looking at the user-created genres through this lens is a helpful way of discussing Yik Yak, especially because this system does not focus solely on content (the focus of many negative criticisms of the application).

Responding to Reviewer Comments

I submitted an article based on my previous research project to a special social media edition of *Communication Design Quarterly*. The reviewer comments I received on this first draft encouraged me to better articulate my methods. Though I had earlier read Sullivan and Porter's (1997) *Opening Spaces*, my advisor suggested that I revisit the text as I revised my work. And, as evidenced by the beginning of this chapter, I did.

Reviewer comments I received asked me to explain my methodology in more detail. As I mentioned, I had engaged in the "select-and-then-apply" method that Sullivan and Porter warn against. I had searched for a method that would be appropriate for the type of data I sought to collect. I had explanations for my decisions, but many of these decisions were made because of constraints of the systems. Some of the comments that my reviewers left were valid in more familiar spaces but did not apply to this anonymous and ephemeral space (e.g., they asked if I had received IRB approval, which was not necessary for this space). This space is still unfamiliar and the research practices there are still being developed.

As I more critically engaged with my research process, I found that my research methods closely resembled a grounded approach, even though I had dismissed it earlier in my process. I had already brought in content analysis and rhetorical analysis, as well as Potts' notion of reflexive (auto)ethnography, and I added in a better articulation of these ideas and grounded theory's ideas. Through this process, I came to understand that though my research revealed much about Yik Yak and the community of users I studied, what I found was not exactly what I had gone into the project hoping to find. My research confirmed that the way the community functioned—the transmission and maintenance of information—closely resembled Henry Jenkins's idea of knowledge community, which was the basis for this article. But I left that research project with more questions about the intentions and motivations of the student-users. So many people in a variety of fields, including TPC and composition studies, do great research with Twitter, whose open API allows for easy data collection. But what happens to the research process when the data disappears? What happens when we do not know who is posting? Is it possible to learn more about how students are communicating in these spaces, beyond just analyzing the content they produce?

With the rise of anonymous and ephemeral applications, these questions are some that we need to more seriously consider. Even though Yik Yak is no longer an active platform, the rise of replacement applications leads me to believe that some of its characteristics will continue to show up in new and different social media platforms. Yik Yak, of course, was not the first application to make use of these characteristics, and it will certainly not be the last. Snapchat has grown immensely in just a few years; Whisper has been in existence since 2012; and imageboards like 4chan still gain users even with anonymity and ephemerality as core

components. My interest lies not with these platforms, but with the ways students view these platform's privileged characteristics of anonymity and ephemerality.

Current Research Methods

My current research project follows from my previous research project. The scope, however, is expanded to include Yik Yak and other anonymous and/or ephemeral applications, specifically Snapchat and Whisper. In my current project, I seek to address the following research questions:

Q1. How are students primarily using popular anonymous and ephemeral applications?

Q2. Why are students using these applications?

Q3. What are students' perceptions of the characteristics of anonymity and ephemerality in online communication?

Q4. How can researchers navigate these applications?

To find the answers to my questions, I decided that I needed to go directly to the student-users themselves. While I could interpret some data as a user myself, I had to recognize that I approach the research space from a different rhetorical and hierarchical situation (that of researcher). To develop a more complex understanding of use and communication, I gather both quantitative and qualitative data from participants in the form of a mixed-methods study. First, I use a survey to gather quantitative data about the types of applications students are using and their primary reasons for using (or ceasing to use) these applications. Then I choose four participants for short discourse-based interviews.

In this section, I explain my reasoning for using a mixed methods design, as well as describe and explain my survey and interview design.

Mixed Methods Research Design

To answer my research questions, I employ a sequential mixed methods strategy, born from close, critical reflection on my previous project.

Defining Mixed Methods Research. Mixed methods research (MMR) design is still a recent methodology that combines both quantitative research and qualitative research to produce multiple means of data collection (Creswell, 2008). The multimethod approach in the social sciences seems to have originated in the work of psychologists Donald Campbell and D.W. Fiske (1959). The mixture of qualitative and quantitative sources was discussed in more technical detail in Todd Jick's (1979) "Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: Triangulation in Action." Jick argues that though many in the social sciences advocate for using multiple methods, there was, at the time, limited discussion on how to combine methods effectively and interpret that data.

Mixed methods research and analysis has become better developed over time, largely through the work of Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie, who created the first handbook for MMR in 2003. In the most recent version of that handbook, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) define the methodology of mixed methods research as "the broad inquiry logic that guides the selection of specific methods and that is informed by the conceptual positions common to mixed methods practitioners (e.g., the rejection of 'either-or' choices at all levels of the research process)" (p. 5). The rejection of the "either-or" approach allows for one of the major guiding principles of MMR, methodological eclecticism—defined by Tashakkori and Teddlie as the ability of MMR practitioners to "select and then synergistically integrate the most appropriate techniques from a myriad of QUAL, QUAN and mixed strategies to thoroughly investigate a phenomenon of interest" (p. 5).

For the most part, qualitative studies still dominate the research landscapes of composition studies and TPC, though TPC notes a turn toward "big data" research that has made mixed methods and quantitative approaches more prominent (McNely, Spinuzzi, & Teston, 2015). Similarly, research in composition—especially in computers and writing—has begun to take note of a lack of quantitative research studies. In Jennifer Bowie and Heather McGovern's (2013) study of the field's scholarship from 2003-2008, they argue, "Given the prevalence of and respect for quantitative research in other fields, investigating potential for and current use of quantitative research in computers and writing seems wise" (p. 245). In my research, I hope that bringing together both qualitative research with quantitative methods will help increase the overall validity of my research in a variety of fields.

Mixed Methods in Current Project. My approach is a sequential mixed methods approach, in which I first employ a survey and then seek to expand on the results of that survey through detailed interviews with four participants. My survey forms the basis of more general data to support my preliminary ideas about the prevalence of anonymous and ephemeral platforms, and in addition it gives me a better idea of how and why these platforms are being used (see Ferro & Zachry, 2014, and their survey on professional social media use). The survey results shape my interviews, and these interviews give me the opportunity to communicate directly with student-users and ask more questions about the ways and contexts of their compositions. Without the added benefit of the interviews, I would have only my own interpretation of the survey's results. While this is an often-used method of interpretation, I seek to work in tandem with participants to gain a deeper understanding.

I acknowledge that my choice to combine methods does, at least to some extent, stand in opposition to Sullivan and Porter's postmodern feminist approach. Feminist researchers have

most often championed qualitative methodologies because quantitative methods, the dominant research model in many fields, are often associated with masculinist bias (Brannen, 1992). As Julia Brannen (1992) points out, however, some feminists believe that there should be no method set aside as purely feminist. Instead, the researcher should seek to ensure that the results of the research are interpreted in such a way that acknowledges and demonstrates a variety of perspectives. Sullivan and Porter (1997) see much value in feminist methodologies, but note that feminist researchers are often not "continuously critical of their methods" (p. 63). In that vein, I seek to be critical both of my methods and those that have come before my own, and I see that both qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry can be beneficial for answering my research questions.

Note on Participants. In following with TPC's emphasis on user-centered and participatory design (Salvo, 2001; Spinuzzi, 2003, 2005), I see value in going directly to student-users to find answers to my research questions. All participants come from University of Arkansas's composition and technical writing classes. These classes serve many students in different years and majors, and, because my research holds implications for both compositionists and technical and professional communicators, these students' ideas toward anonymous and ephemeral platforms are most likely to align with the ideas of students frequently found in these types of courses.

I recognize that by choosing to reach out to student-users, I am first viewing participants in this role, rather than as unique personalities (Sullivan & Porter, 1998, p. 31). Thus, while I hope to draw larger implications for students, instructors, and researchers, I wish to first acknowledge that there is no "representative" student-user, and many situational, social, economic, institutional, and ideological factors are at play among participants.

Survey Design

In my survey approach, I sent an electronic survey to the instructors of composition and technical writing classes at the University of Arkansas (Basic Writing, Reading Strategies, Composition 1 and 2, including online and honors, Technical Composition 2, Advanced Composition, Essay Writing, and Technical and Report Writing). The purpose of this survey is to acquire some contextual data about students' use of anonymous and ephemeral platforms.

At the University of Arkansas, not all students are required to take composition or technical writing classes; thus, composition and technical writing students are already a specialized population. Students can forego taking first-year composition at the University by either scoring a 29 or higher on the ACT English section or by scoring at 680 or higher on the verbal portion of the SAT, by testing out of the University's credit by examination program or by testing out through a national testing program like the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), the Advanced Placement Program (AP), or the International Baccalaureate Program (IB) ("Undergraduate Catalogue," 2015-2016). In addition, students with dual-credit or transfer credits that take the place of these courses would not be enrolled. These types of exemptions are not uncommon in most similarly sized institutions. Furthermore, students in Advanced Composition, Essay Writing, or Technical and Report Writing self-select into these courses based on a list of requirements from their major, so students in these classes would also be aligned with specialized populations.

The Survey Instrument. The electronic survey, hosted by Google Forms, had four main sections: Demographic Information, Yik Yak, Snapchat, and Whisper (see Appendix B). The survey opened with a welcome screen that briefly described the survey and outlined the instructions for the survey process (Sue & Ritter, 2012). In total, the survey included 27

multiple-choice questions on a multiple-page layout. Research suggests that there is no great difference between survey fatigue in surveys with one lengthy page versus surveys with multiple pages (Sue & Ritter, 2012), and because I wanted some answers to skip certain sections, the multiple-page layout was the best for this instrument. Survey answer choices were listed with radio buttons when only one option needed to be specified, or check boxes when respondents could select more than one item. To retain consistency, each check box question contained additional help text that specified "check all that apply." Except for questions that asked for Yes or No answers, each question included an "other" option. To reduce the time the survey took, and because I would be following up with interviews, I chose not to include space for participants to justify their "other" answer, except in demographic questions and the first question about the applications they used (discussed below).

To get an idea of the range of student-users I surveyed, I included questions for demographic information. If I were to do this survey again, I would include these demographic questions at the end of the survey, as has been suggested by other researchers. Unfortunately, I was not aware of this turn in research when I designed and implemented this survey.

After the section on demographic information, I included a question that asked participants which anonymous/ephemeral social media applications they used/had used. As a response, participants could choose from 15 applications that were either anonymous, ephemeral, or both. To determine which platforms should be included, I recorded the number of posts on 10 applications for a one-week period to see which applications were active among the campus community. I decided not to include Swiflie since I was able to see that it was not in use locally, but I did include Privet and Candid to see whether the campus community was using these applications. In addition, I included Kik, Facebook Secret Messenger, Yodel-Group Stories,

which are anonymous and/or ephemeral messaging services I could not monitor to see whether they were in use. I also included four applications/sites that were at the time defunct but, while they were active, had large followings—Secret, Juicy Campus, College ACB, and Formspring.me/Spring.me.

In this section, participants also had the option of selecting "Other" and filling in an application of their choice. Participants may define anonymous and ephemeral social media applications in a way that is different than the scope of my research, but allowing them to fill in their own answer here can be useful in a couple of notable ways: 1) it allowed for applications that I may not have found in my research and 2) if participants added responses that did not fit my initial definition of these applications, I could explore why their definitions differed from my own. Participants could also choose an option that they had not used any anonymous or ephemeral platform; this response concluded and submitted the survey.

After this question came platform-specific questions about Yik Yak, Snapchat, and Whisper. These platforms were chosen because they were the most active in our local community and because they can be explored as representatives of their type. As discussed in the first chapter, Yik Yak is both anonymous and ephemeral, Snapchat is ephemeral but not anonymous (in most cases), and Whisper is anonymous but not ephemeral. In each of the platform-specific sections, the survey questions followed a similar format. These sections began with a question about whether the participant used or had used this platform; if answered in the affirmative, participants would then be prompted to answer specific questions about the application. If participants answered "no," they would be directed to the next section.

Each platform-specific section began with basic questions about the participants' frequency of use and reasons they used or stopped using the platform. Each section addressed

specific features about the application—for Yik Yak, questions were included about online harassment and Yik Yak's decision to make handles mandatory (and then optional again); for Snapchat, questions explored participants' use of Snapchat Stories and the use of Snapchat for sexually explicit messages; for Whisper, questions were included about Whisper's visual component and anonymous chat feature. With these questions, I hoped to learn which features of the applications were most useful and favorable to participants.

Each section concluded by asking participants how often they posted material on the specific platform that they would not share on a non-anonymous/non-ephemeral application such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This question was intended to help me see if participants used these applications differently, or if they simply used these platforms in the way that they used other social media outlets.

The survey in its entirety took most participants about 5 minutes to complete, but, as I mentioned, participants could skip through sections about platforms with which they did not have experience (for example, if they had never used the Whisper application, they would not have to answer questions about it). Participation in the survey was voluntary and participants could refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Participants were also permitted to skip any question they did not wish to answer. Individual responses were recorded anonymously.

At the end of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to navigate to a separate form wherein they could consent to be contacted for the interview portion of the project. This form allowed them to leave their email address without this address being linked to their survey answers, ensuring the anonymity of the responses.

Online Survey. The survey was created using Google Forms. This creation and distribution means was primarily chosen because of cost (Google Forms is free), convenience, and key features (Creswell, 2008).

As I had already decided that I would be the only person to see the data because of the sensitive nature of some questions, Google Forms' data analysis capabilities provided me with a more convenient way to handle my dataset without coding this data manually. One major advantage of online surveys is the ability to automate these data collection tasks; however, one of the disadvantages is that too many digital surveys may cause servers to overload (Gurak & Silker, 2007). Google Forms also provides an easy way to handle a large volume of data and to transfer this information to a Google Spreadsheet. There is a limit of responses that can be stored in a spreadsheet because of the maximum number of cells available (200,000), but my 27 (+1 column for timestamp) question survey still allowed for 7,142 responses, well under the number I could receive (Evan, n.d.). Google Forms handled the quantity of data I expected without overload.

In addition, because student email accounts are hosted by Gmail, Google's email service, all students at the University of Arkansas have a Google account. Thus, though there were some accessibility issues to consider (see next section), I had reason to believe that all student participants would have access to a Google account to complete the survey. This was an important consideration as I decided to require a log-in to ensure only one response from each participant. As access control is often a major consideration of online surveys, I felt it was important to limit the access to the target population (Sue & Ritter, 2012). A major concern of early online surveys, however, was the lack of anonymity (Gurak & Silker, 1997), but Google Forms does not link this email address with the responses, only logs it to prevent multiple

response attempts. I also considered most that students would be familiar with the Google and Google Forms interfaces, which would make participants feel more comfortable in completing a survey in this way.

Google Forms was also chosen because of the flexibility in survey creation. Forms is easy to use and allows the creator to format the survey in such a way that redirects participants based on their answers to certain questions. Because I could allow participants to skip sections that did not pertain to them, this feature was particularly useful for reducing response burden.

Survey Instrument Considerations and Limitations. Sullivan and Porter (1997) note that the research method often evolves as constraints—both from the method and the environment—influence the situation. They argue that computers and composition studies, in particular, contributes to the field by "challeng[ing] the sanctities of method" and encouraging researchers to "use the heuristic quality of method to aid them in dealing with shifts over time" (p. 66). Though they primarily focus on the ways in which qualitative methods shift throughout the research process, I saw a need for this heuristic quality in the quantitative portion of my project as well. In my survey design process, I came across many limitations that had to be considered as I worked through the design of my instrument, especially in the design of the questionnaire itself and the method of distribution.

Survey Length. My first survey draft was significantly longer than the final version, largely because I had not yet developed a sort of heuristic for what I hoped to learn from this survey project. When this first draft yielded a result that comprised 34 questions and took around 25 minutes to complete in full, I worried that this questionnaire would overly burden the respondents. Respondent burden, or the time respondents have to spend in order to complete a survey (or interview), usually results in a much lower response rate (Sharp & Frankel, 1983).

Since I was not incentivizing participation, a survey that was the length of my original draft would have likely yielded an insufficient response rate.

At this point, I knew that I had to reconsider my research questions and determine exactly what questions I hoped to answer with the responses from my survey. My intention was for the survey to begin to answer Q1-Q3—how students were using these platforms, and to what extent their uses of these platforms were influenced by the characteristics of anonymity and ephemerality. My survey did not need to conclusively answer these research questions; one advantage of using a mixed methods approach was that questions raised in this survey portion could be addressed in the interview portion. Nor did the survey need to include a focus on what students were posting; existing scholarly research on these platforms has already considered content (Black, Mezzina, & Thompson, 2016; Pitcher, 2016; Piwek & Joinson, 2016; Wang et al., 2014).

Because I had decided to focus fewer questions on content, I was able to cut out many questions that asked about specific types of posts on these social media platforms. Of my original 34 questions, 11 of them asked about the kinds of content that participants contributed. Since I already had a question that asked participants to identify what features made them most likely to use a platform, I determined that most questions about content were unnecessary, especially questions that asked participants to comment on the last piece of content they had posted. This information did not seem to yield the data I was looking for, as knowing this did not bring me closer to knowing how or why participants were using these platforms. I kept content-related questions that had explicit relation to the features of anonymity and/or ephemerality; for this reason, I kept the questions that asked participants to determine whether they would share the

content they shared on these sites on more traditional sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

After removing questions that did not contribute to answering my research question in a meaningful way, the result was a survey with 5 demographic questions and 22 subject-specific questions. This new survey took most participants under 5 minutes to complete.

Survey Questions and Self-Reporting. In my survey, I ask students to self-report. Self-reporting likely led some students to choose different answers than they would normally because they might have been afraid of the implications of their answers (for example, if they admitted that they used Yik Yak to bully someone, or sent explicit messages on Snapchat). To temper this tendency, the survey was anonymous and email addresses left for interview contact were not connected with survey answers. As a researcher, I should be more aware that some discrepancies may occur with more sensitive questions.

The survey questions may, too, could have caused some limitations for the study. Because there are no existing surveys of this type, dealing with these platforms, I designed my own survey instrument. Here I must acknowledge my situatedness as the researcher and my own biases, as Sullivan and Porter encourage. I created the survey based on my positions as both an active user and an active researcher of these platforms. Thus the questions I ask and the answers I have created are inherently based on how I have experienced and how I assume student-users experience these platforms. I have used each of the most popular platforms—Yik Yak, Snapchat, and Whisper—for many years, so survey questions and answers come mostly from my observations and my own use of these spaces.

Accessibility. As I have discussed, Google Forms' features met my needs for this project. Still, especially in an institution that serves a diverse population of students, I had to consider how accessibility issues might impact my response rate.

Because of the nature of my survey project and the platforms I study, my target audience was most likely already students who own a smart device, since Yik Yak, Snapchat, and Whisper are all mobile-native applications. Thus, while I did not want to ignore the fact that some students would not have smartphones, I could reasonably assume that if they did not, they were likely not users of the applications I sought to study.

Forms can be accessed on any device that can connect to the Internet, and since the length of the survey had been reduced, I felt that students could complete the survey using an Internet-enabled mobile device if necessary. In October 2015, the Pew Research Center estimated that 86% of U.S. adults ages 18-29 own a smartphone (Anderson, 2015). Also, because of the shortened length of the survey and because the survey was proctored in class, instructors were asked to invite students to share their devices with classmates who did not bring a device to class on that day.

Because my response rate was so high, I do not believe that accessibility was a large issue. In fact, the response rate for students in online courses (17.6%) was significantly less than those in face-to-face classes (91.7%). This difference in response rate indicates that direct contact with the survey (time spent in class) was a larger factor in participation than technological accessibility in participant response rate.

Survey Distribution. When design concerns were taken care of, I turned my attention to how the survey would be distributed to the students to encourage a high response rate. I was met

at this point with some institutional infrastructural constraints (Devoss, Cushman, & Grabill, 2005).

Because infrastructures are often the most visible upon breakdown, it was difficult to see how these issues would arise before I was faced with them (DeVoss, Cushman, & Grabill, 2005). As a teaching assistant, I soon found that certain conventions limited my scope of influence within the department. Emailing the survey to students directly would be impossible, as I did not have access to the email addresses for students enrolled in the courses I wanted to target. And while I did have access to the instructors' email addresses, I had no way of emailing them *en masse* and, as a teaching assistant, did not have much weight associated with my name and email address. I worried that instructors may overlook or disregard my email, rather than forwarding it to their students. And because my original idea was to email the survey to students for them to complete at their leisure, I also worried that even if the survey was distributed to the students, students would disregard or overlook it as well.

Though my department's existing infrastructure did not provide me with access to the participants, it did provide me with access to advisors who could assist. To get help with my concerns, I spoke with my department's Writing Program Administrator to see if he would be able to assist in distributing my survey. He suggested that I establish specific days for my survey to be distributed during class time, that I create instructions for instructors to "proctor" the survey, and that I send it to him so that he could distribute it through the department's listserv. His idea was that students would be more likely to fill out the survey if they did so in the classroom with their instructor present. The instructor would be a more trusted figure: they would better understand that the survey was a valid part of a larger research project and would be more likely to answer honestly on more sensitive questions.

IRB Approval Process. Because of technical issues with the university's email server, my initial IRB review for the project took longer than expected. My attached files were being somehow caught in the university email filters, and this resulted in my initial protocol revisions not reaching the IRB coordinator. Only after I contacted the coordinator to check on the progress of my approval process did I realize that the files were never received. In turn, this delayed my protocol's approval process by placing it further back in the queue. Though my initial protocol was submitted on August 29, 2016, I did not receive approval until October 5, 2016.

Because I determined that emailing the survey through our department's listserv was the best way of distributing the survey to my target population, I had to seek modification approval for this means of contact. At the point I sought this approval, our IRB coordinator was out of the office, and I did not receive this approval until November 23, 2016, with only two weeks left in the semester. Generally, composition and technical writing instructors hold conferences during one of these two weeks, prior to finals week, so I worried that my survey would garner few responses if I sought to distribute it during this busy time of year. I decided, then, to delay my survey distribution until the Spring 2017 semester.

Survey Implementation

The survey was distributed in the fourth week of the Spring 2017 semester (February 6-9). After the delay in IRB approval, I believed that distributing the survey at the beginning of the next semester would yield a higher response rate. By the fourth week of the semester, the deadline for enrolling in classes had passed, and students had the time to become accustomed to the current social media network of campus life.

The Writing Program Administrator sent out my survey via the Program in Rhetoric and Composition's listserv, which reaches 98 instructors of composition and technical

communication. Instructors were under no obligation to participate and were merely asked to help support my research project. This email contained step-by-step instructions for the instructors to proctor the survey during their class sessions. Instructors for online classes were given the option of making the survey link available for a 24-hour period on their Blackboard course homepage. Instructors were also prompted to fill out a form that asked them to record the number of students who attended class on that day, so I could get an accurate response rate.

625 students were given the survey, either in class (for face-to-face courses) or via that Blackboard course management system (for online classes). Because instructors chose to participate and because students were already sorted into the course sections, these students make up a fairly random sampling of those enrolled in composition and technical writing courses. It is possible, however, that not all types of students are represented, depending on which instructions and which students chose to participate. In total, 558 students from 43 class sections and 25 different instructors participated in the survey, making the response rate 89.2%. As Janice Lauer and J. William Asher (1988) note, an optimal response rate for this type of research is between 80-90% (p. 67). The total number of students enrolled in composition and technical communication courses that semester was 2,820, which indicates a 3.72 margin of error at a 95% confidence rate.

Survey Response Demographics. Most participants (65%, n=362) were enrolled in Composition 2 courses, which, as a required general education course, is historically the composition course with the most student enrollment in the spring semester. Because most of the courses I surveyed were 1000-level, or freshman-level, courses, it is no surprise that most participants (78.1%, n=436) classified themselves as freshmen.

A slight majority of participants identified as female (53.6%, n=299); 45.7% (n=255) identified as male, 3 participants identified their gender as Other (one identified "Alien" and two wrote "There's only two genders"), 1 participant preferred not to disclose, and no participants identified as trans*.

In response to a question that said "I am…" and listed race and heritage options, most participants identified as White (73.6%, n=411). 29 (5.1%) identified their race as African American; 29 (5.1%) identified their race as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin; and 23 (4.1%) identified their race as Asian. 5 (less than .01%) identified their race as Middle Eastern or North African, and 3 (less than .01%) defined their race as American Indian or Alaskan Native. 108 (19.4%) participants chose two or more races to identify. 1 participant wrote in "American," and two participants chose not to identify their race.

The demographics of the students who were surveyed fit closely with the publicly available student demographics of the university (Office of International Research and Assessment, 2017). For the Spring 2017 semester, the university reports that 52.2% of students were female, and 47.8% were male. In breakdown of race, 74.7% of students were classified as "Caucasian only," 7.7% as "Hispanic or any race,"[2] 4.8% as "African American only," and 2.4% "Asian only." Middle Eastern or North African is not listed as an option for the official University reports, but "American Indian Only" was listed as 1.1%.

Strikingly, only 3.1% of the university's students are classified as "Two or More Races," and that percentage was much higher in my survey. This may be due to the wording of the question—"I am…"—which may have encouraged students to pick races that were farther back in their heritage. In addition, because I allowed students to pick more than one response, rather

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[2] This is the official category name given by the Office of Institutional Research.

than having them pick between a race and a catch-all category of "Two or More Races," students may have felt more encouraged to identify each race that they felt fit them.

Interview Design

To follow up on the results of my survey process, I conducted interviews with four participants who had left their contact information in the interview contact form attached to the survey. In designing my interview process, I began by composing traditional question-and-answer questions. As John Creswell (2008) notes, this type of interview design is well-suited for the collection of background information on participants. I followed these questions by incorporating a discourse-based interview method (Odell, Goswami, and Herrington, 1983; discussed below), a method designed specifically for nonacademic writing. Though usually employed for workplace writing, these types of interviews are useful for inquiring about the discourse conventions that frequently occur in social media spaces. Susan Katz (2002) notes that this type of interview process is especially useful at the end of a study, after ethnographic efforts to familiarize the researcher with the writing done in these spaces.

I combine this interview method with reflexive autoethnography (Potts, 2014). As Potts notes, reflexive autoethnography is a way of articulating the experiences of non-active participants. Though I am a user of many of the social media platforms I study, I am not part of my own target population, and thus will likely have different ideas and experiences. However, as Potts explains, her status as a user of the fan-space she studied served "as a way to understand the structure in which the research takes place" ("Sussing Out, Reflexive (Auto)Ethnography," para. 2). Even though she was not a direct actor in the action that served as the focus of her study, her experience in the research space allowed her to identify and leverage norms and conventions and thus to draw informed conclusions about the users she studied. From my prior

research on Yik Yak, my access to campus-local social media spaces, and my position as user, I felt capable of leveraging my knowledge of these spaces in designing interview methods for student-users.

Discourse Based Interviews. Using my prior knowledge of these platforms, I could design an interview method that closely resembled discourse-based interviews. Discourse-based interviews are a method of qualitative interviewing developed by Lee Odell, Dixie Goswami, and Anne Herrington (1983). Designed specifically for researching nonacademic writing, these types of interviews are based on Michael Polanyi's assertion that knowledge is personal and tacit. Preparation for discourse-based interviews generally begins with an analysis of a body of text, usually documents created by the writer being interviewed. After this analysis, the researcher identifies certain discourse conventions that are found in a number of the texts (Katz, 2002).

In traditional discourse-based interviews, interview participants are shown documents that they have authored. Participants are then asked about specific elements of that text. In "The Discourse-Based Interview: A Procedure for Exploring the Tacit Knowledge of Writers in Nonacademic Settings," Odell, Goswami, and Herrington (1983) identify certain elements of participants' business correspondence and offered them alternate options for these elements. The process is presented as follows:

> To elicit information concerning the writer's tacit knowledge about the rhetorical context for the letter, an interviewer asked, in effect, two basic questions: "Here you do X. In other pieces of writing, you do Y or Z. In passage, would you be willing to do Y or Z rather than X? What basis do you have for preferring one alternative to the other?" (p. 223)

In some cases, questions are structured to give alternatives for answers so that writers do not feel the need to be defensive of their choices (Katz, 2002). Because of the nature of my research,

however, I did not feel that it was ethically sound to ask students to give me access to their anonymous/ephemeral social media posts. I relied instead on written and visual information that was publicly available on the social media platforms I studied. Using these posts, I designed discourse-based questions that would encourage student-users to talk about their initial observations, experiences with similar types of posts, and even, if they chose, compositions of their own posts.

Discourse-based interviews are intended to overcome some of the limitations of approaches like compose-aloud protocols: Odell, Goswami, and Herrington (1983) note that writers are often able to access and employ tacit knowledge because of its repeated use. They note that writers are not always comfortable with the process of composing aloud, choosing often to dictate just the words they are composing without detailed explanation. In some cases from their study, these compose-aloud procedures did not provide explanations for some of the differences the researchers themselves found in similar documents (e.g., the way the reader was addressed, the structure of the document and use of introductory information, the level of specific detail versus abstractions, the phrasing of requests, the conclusion and signature). They posit that this may be the case because the tacit knowledge the writer employed while composing the document was so embedded that these decisions were not actively considered during the act of composition.

Odell, Goswami, and Herrington (1983) note that some of these omissions could be overcome in discourse-based interviews, and may even be combined with compose-aloud protocols or other research strategies. Like Sullivan and Porter (1997), Odell, Goswami, and Herrington note that a single research methodology can rarely tell us all we need to know. Researchers in the field should be able and willing to employ a variety of research tactics. In her

explanation of ethnographic research, Susan Katz (2002) notes, "I found that some of the most insightful responses and informative data that I collected came from this source [discourse-based interviews]. The participants in my study actually seemed to enjoy explaining their documents to me in this way" (p. 33).

Indeed, I sought to design questions that would encourage student-users to converse with me. I hoped that these conversations would then give way to different topics, so that no one interview would yield the same information. A list of sample interview questions is in Appendix C. Because interviews were meant to be more dialogic, new or different questions and concerns often came up during our conversations (Katz, 2002; Selfe & Hawisher, 2012).

Interview Considerations and Limitations. Interviews were the best way to communicate one-on-one with my research population because I did not have the ability to observe participants in a more natural field setting, but this, as Creswell notes (2008), is still a limitation of this method. My presence as a researcher might have biased responses. In my study, however, the "natural field setting" could be anywhere. Capturing students composing on these platforms in a natural way is nearly impossible because even in another location, I would still be acting as researcher. In addition, the setting of the platform itself does not allow for easy data collection, or much information about the user's identities, motives, or context. These interviews, then, even with the caveat of asking participants to consider their use of these platforms outside of a more natural setting, were the best way I had of observing and asking questions about participants' practices.

In addition, at any time researchers rely on interview data, there is a question of the validity of the data. Odell, Goswami, and Herrington (1983) note that interview data is not always regarded as the most conclusive form of evidence. However, they respond to these

criticisms by noting, "We are using interviews to identify the kinds of world knowledge and expectations that informants bring to writing tasks and to discover the perceptions informants have about the conceptual demands that functional, interactive writing tasks make on them" (p. 228). Since my survey provides general context, I structured my interviews to explore these kinds of "world knowledge and expectations" about anonymous and ephemeral platforms that my participants hold.

Interview Participants

For my project, I had four interview participants who self-selected via the online survey. In total, eight students consented to be contacted by leaving their contact information at the end of the online survey. Only four of these students responded to emails to set up an interview time. Participants donated their time and did not receive reimbursement from the researcher or the department.

The four participants have been assigned pseudonyms, but their basic demographic information, including their preferred gender pronoun and major, have been used. The participants are as follows:

- Isaac, a Freshman engineering student who has had first-hand experience with Yik Yak and Snapchat. He also enjoys another anonymous application, TalkLife, with which I was not familiar, and the online anonymous chat system, Omegle.

- Christopher, a Senior communications student who had previously been a Yik Yak user. An avid Internet user, he also uses Imgur and Reddit and participates in these forums without disclosing his real identity.

- Katrina, a Senior mechanical engineering student who had transferred to the university in the year prior. She is a Snapchat user but had previously had negative experiences with an anonymous chat application.

- Trevor, a Sophomore business major who does not consider himself to be a big social media user. He uses Snapchat sparingly but had not had experience with anonymous applications.

Interview Process

Interviews were approximately 30 minutes, held in a conference room used by the Department of English. Interview questions were divided into three major sections.

The first set of questions was focused generally on the participants' use of anonymous and ephemeral applications, their personal feelings about these types of applications, and the benefits and drawbacks they saw in using these applications. This section provided opportunities for participants to decide how much information about their use of these platforms they wanted to share: while some participants discussed their specific online habits, others spoke in more general terms.

The middle section of the interview followed discourse-based practices and asked participants to comment on posts from three different applications: Yik Yak (2 posts), Snapchat (2 posts), and Whisper (3 posts). Not all posts were shown to each participant; posts were chosen based on the participants' familiarity and the time remaining in the interview. If the participant had never used one of the applications, they were given a brief explanation of the platform and then asked to comment based on the context they could gather from a static screenshot. Participants began with the platforms that they were most familiar; if time was running short by this time, images from platforms they were unfamiliar with were excluded from the interview.

All but one of these screenshots (a direct message on Snapchat) were obtained from campus or campus-adjacent locations: Yik Yak's campus feed, Snapchat's campus story, and Whisper's "nearby" feed. Participants were asked to talk through their thoughts about the post, including how they would respond if they saw the post, how their own posts may be similar, and whether this post met their expectations for what should be posted on the application.

The final section of the interview focused more specifically on my research agenda and on the preliminary results of the survey. Questions pertained to rhetorical inquiries such as audience and purpose, how anonymous and ephemeral applications differ from other social networking sites, how anonymous and ephemeral applications contribute to or detract from campus culture, and how/if administrators or instructors could/should use these platforms.

Conclusion

By using a mixed methodology that combines both surveying and interviewing, I explore anonymous and ephemeral platforms in a different way than my previous research. My current methodology combines both composition studies' proclivity for exploring sites of informal writing and technical and professional communication's emphasis on participatory and user-centered research design.

In my previous research project, I discovered how complex these systems could be, and how developing a corpus of data could not tell me all the things I wanted to know. Sullivan and Porter's (1997) work encouraged me to view my methodology not just as a process that eventually yields an end goal. Developing a sound methodology is a research process in itself.

As my previous and current projects show, one methodology may need to be supplemented by another before researchers can critically engage with a complex research site. And we should acknowledge the complexities not only in the site but in our roles as researchers

and in the roles of our research subjects as participants. There is no perfect methodology; after all, if there were, we would all use the same process. Methodology is a process, and this project makes use of critical reflective practices to improve that process.

Chapter 4

Data and Analysis

This chapter discusses the results of my mixed methods project comprising an online survey and a small collection of student interviews. As discussed previously, the purpose of this project was to determine how and why students are using anonymous and ephemeral applications, as well as to gauge their perceptions of anonymity and ephemerality on these applications. From my own experience as researcher in these tricky spaces, I hope that my results reveal some useful methods for learning more about similar digital spaces. The number of social media applications that employ characteristics of anonymity and/or ephemerality continues to rise. Thus, a more complex understanding of students' composing practices in these spaces can be beneficial to instructors and researchers, especially those who seek to know more about informal writing in digital spaces.

In this chapter, I first explore the results of the survey to provide a larger context for this project and the participants. The survey reveals much about the applications students are using and which characteristics of these applications are most appealing. As the survey was broken down into four sections, I will discuss the results of each section, and I will provide some analysis of trends that occurred.

After this discussion of survey responses, I turn to student interviews to illuminate more about both composing practices and perceptions of anonymity and ephemerality. These interviews provided more opportunities to ask questions and to listen to students' concerns and observations. Interviews also gave me the ability to show students posts from these platforms and gauge their responses. In this section, I will focus on trends that occurred in student interviews, particularly in their perceptions of anonymity and ephemerality, their considerations

of purpose and audience, and their thoughts about community formation and maintenance in these spaces.

In this project, I provide data that present a more nuanced picture of how students use these and view these platforms. The survey and interviews asked students to characterize their use of these platforms and to report what aspects of the applications they value. While there are always concerns about self-reporting, we should not discount what we *can* learn from this self-reported data.

<div align="center">**Survey Results**</div>

To find out more about how students thought about these characteristics and the types of applications born from them, I created an online survey which was distributed to composition and technical writing courses at the University of Arkansas. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, instructors of these courses were asked to proctor the survey during class (for f2f courses) or post the link for a 24-hour period on their course management site (for online courses). Neither these instructors nor their students were under any obligation to participate in the survey. This survey was provided to 625 students and yielded 558 responses, an 89.2% response rate.

Survey results are presented to provide information about the research space and as context for the project. Survey demographics are presented in the previous chapter. In this section, I will first discuss the platforms students report using; then I will report on the results of each of the platform-centric portions of the survey: Yik Yak, Snapchat, and Whisper.

Platforms Used

Before designing the survey, I downloaded several applications with anonymous and/or ephemeral components, some of which use geolocation to form location-based communities. I

monitored the number and regularity of posts on these applications for a two-week period. From

my observations, I concluded that the three applications used most in this local community were

Yik Yak, Snapchat, and Whisper. As can be seen in Figure 4, survey results partially supported

this conclusion. Survey participants did not report using Whisper in great numbers, though the

local Whisper consistently had new posts. This discrepancy could be explained by the fact that

the local community includes some area high schools, which may account for much of the user

base. Figure 4 displays participants' ranking of these applications.
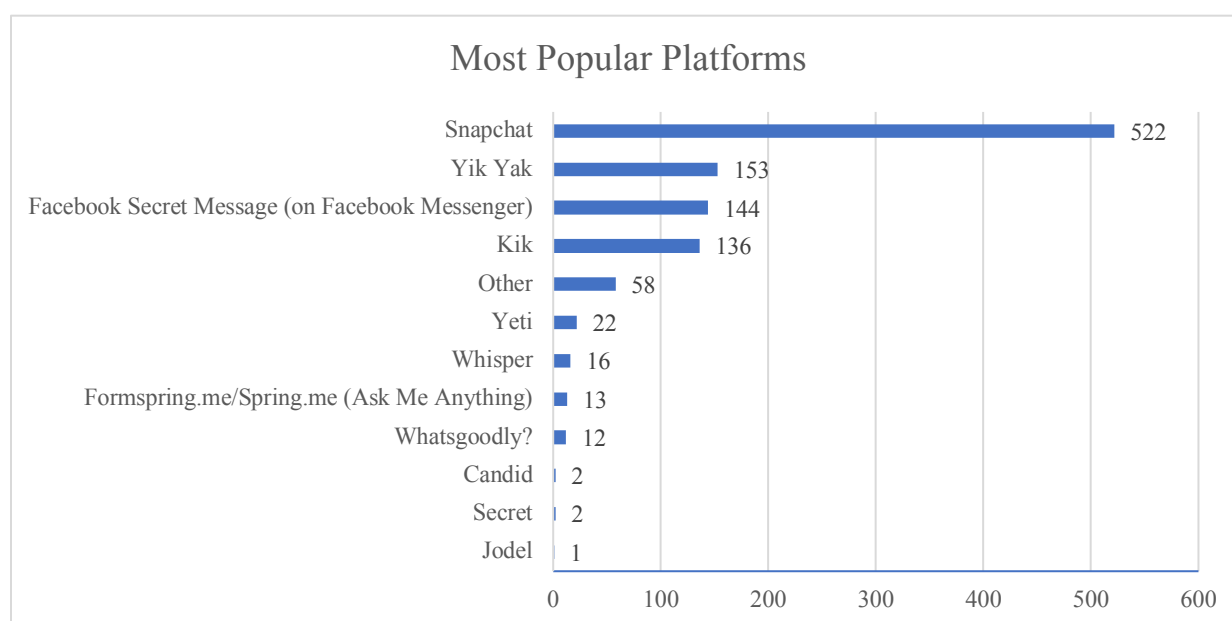
Figure 4. Most popular platforms with anonymous/ephemeral components, as per survey results.
Yodel--Group Stories, Shush, Privet, and Juicy Campus were included as options, but received
no responses.

It is important to note that students were permitted to choose more than one application,

and they were asked to indicate which applications they either currently used or had used in the

past. In later sections of the survey, users were asked again if they had ever used a certain

application. In the case of Yik Yak, however, this number was higher than indicated on the initial

platform question. This survey was distributed as Yik Yak was on its initial decline, and later

survey results indicate that many users had stopped using the application. Thus, this discrepancy

can most likely be explained by a misunderstanding on the initial question: users may have thought this question asked which platforms they currently use.

Snapchat and Yik Yak were mentioned most often, though Snapchat was mentioned over three times as much as Yik Yak. But these results also brought to light the popularity of some peer-to-peer messaging services that I had no way of monitoring, such as Facebook Secret Messenger and Kik.

Additionally, the next most often mentioned "platform" was simply "Other," indicating that there may be some up-and-coming applications used by students that were simply not on my radar. Students had the option of writing in responses here. While some mentioned applications I had not yet heard of—Afterschool, for example—most mentioned applications such Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr. While these are not necessarily platforms that meet my definitions of anonymous and/or ephemeral, it is possible that students considered these applications to be anonymous, since a chosen username does not have to be associated with a user's actual identity. It is also possible, though less likely I believe, that students did not realize the question was asking about specifically anonymous and/or ephemeral applications.

The results shown here seem to demonstrate two conclusions, which were backed up in later parts of the survey: Students most often use platforms that involve direct messaging of friends and family (Snapchat, Facebook Messenger, Kik) and/or platforms that involve location-based communication to form communities (Yik Yak, Yeti, Whisper).

Nonusers? A Survey Design Fluke. Because I knew that not all students would use anonymous and ephemeral applications, I also provided an option to select a box which read "I have NEVER used anonymous or ephemeral social media (directs to end of survey)."

Of the 558 survey participants, 96 students (around 1.7%) selected this option. However, a closer look at survey results revealed that this number may not necessarily be correct. Of those 96 students, 80 of them indicated that they had used certain platforms on the preceding question. Some participants either misunderstood the question or purposely wanted to be directed to the end of the survey. Thus, the actual number of students surveyed who had never used an anonymous and/or ephemeral application is much lower: 16 of 558 students (.02%).

In the future, this issue could be corrected in the survey design process. My intention in putting this option on the same page as the platform question was that students would be able to see a list of applications that fit into this designation of anonymous and/or ephemeral. However, because it was so easy to select more than one response, it is possible that participants did not realize what they were doing. In future projects or similar studies, the platforms question should have an option to indicate that the participant has never used one of these platforms. Another section should then be provided, asking the "have you ever used an anonymous or ephemeral social media platform?" with yes/no options. The "no" option could then direct to the end of the quiz. While this would not prevent accidental selections, it would provide a clearer separation.

Snapchat

Snapchat allows users to send "self-destructing" messages to each other, usually in the form of photos or short video clips. In addition, users can post photos or video clips to their Story, which is a collection of content that can be updated throughout the day and lasts only for a 24-hour period.

When designing the survey, I assumed that Snapchat would be the most popular application among participants. And indeed, 93.5% (522) of respondents to the initial platform question mentioned that they do use or have used Snapchat. Because of the survey design fluke

mentioned earlier, in which some participants either accidentally or purposefully selected the option to be sent to the end of the survey, and because students were permitted to skip survey questions, 462 students (83% of the total participants) entered the Snapchat section of the survey. 7 of these students indicated in the section's opening question that they did not use Snapchat and were directed to the next section. Therefore 455 students (82%) were given the option to answer more in depth questions about their use of Snapchat.

Common Uses of Snapchat. In my survey, I sought to determine why these students chose to use Snapchat. While some of the application's features have changed (to be discussed in the next subsection), Snapchat's key features—the ability to post and view stories, the capability to send and receive direct photo messages, and the ephemerality of content—have remained. My survey results reflect the popularity of some of these key features. Figure 5 provides an illustration to the most commonly selected uses for Snapchat.
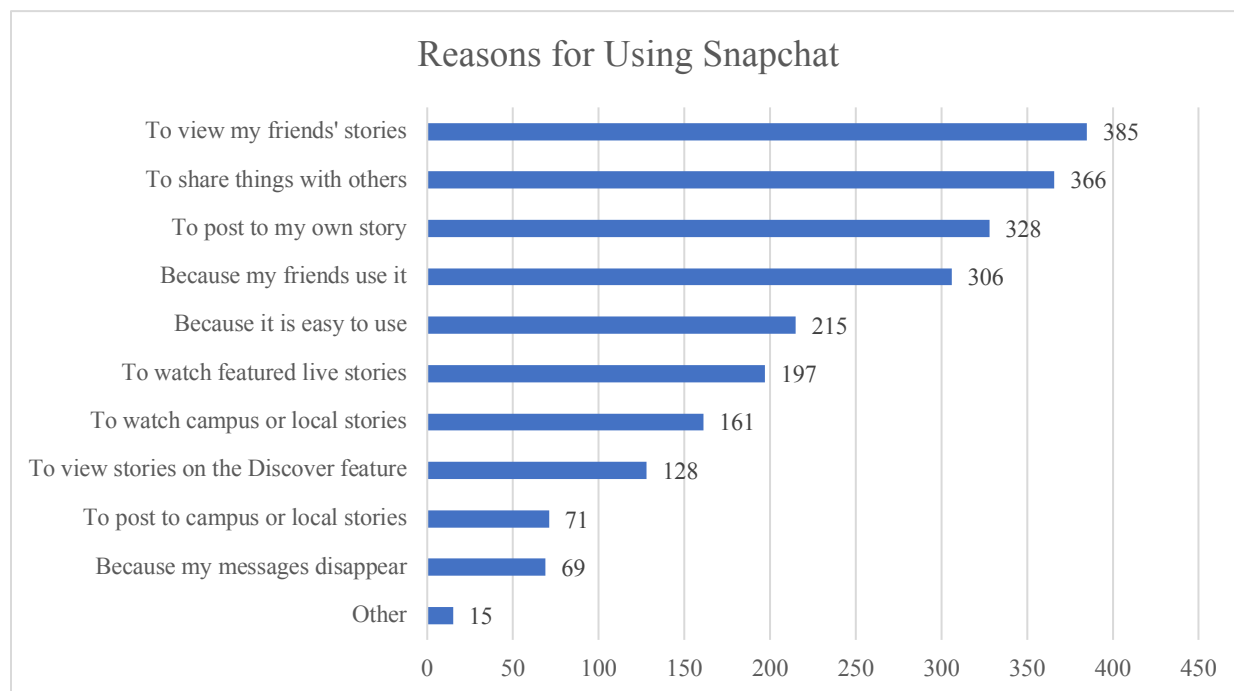

Figure 5. Reasons for Using Snapchat, as per survey results. 450 total responses; 98.6% response rate.

Posting and Viewing Stories. Students' reasons for using Snapchat are in some ways to be expected: Snapchat's most proprietary features are noted more frequently. Snapchat's stories—both individual and local/event stories—are mentioned in high numbers, with viewing friends' stories and posting to my own story in the top 3.[3] Stories are also Snapchat's best avenue for monetization, as this feature has already shown by incorporating advertisements between users' individual Stories and during local/event stories (Vincent, 2016).

Over the years, the application has also continued to change and adapt to the demands of both its advertisers and its users. For this reason, even in the time since my survey was distributed, some of Snapchat's features have changed. For example, at the time of the survey, some campus stories were being replaced by similar "Our Stories" which incorporated posts from a certain area or event ("View an Our Story," n.d.). Since the survey, campus stories have been reinstated. It is also important to note that any campus, local, or event story is created by Snapchat and submitted posts are curated by the Snapchat team before publication. The fact that the platform controls this content may factor into the ways that users interact with these stories.

At the time of the survey, I was particularly interested in students' use of the campus/local story, which at that time seemed to be frequently viewed and updated. Because Stories is such a popular feature, I sought to determine how the addition of campus/local stories influenced users' experience. I asked survey participants to characterize their viewing of these stories. Figure 6 shows results of this inquiry.

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[3] It should come as no surprise, then, that other applications have tried to incorporate similar features. Instagram began rolling out their stories feature in late 2016 ("Introducing Instagram Stories," 2016) and Facebook Mobile launched a similar Stories feature in late March 2017 ("More Ways to Share," 2017). In early summer 2017, Microsoft also introduced a Stories feature for Skype ("Introducing the next generation," 2017).
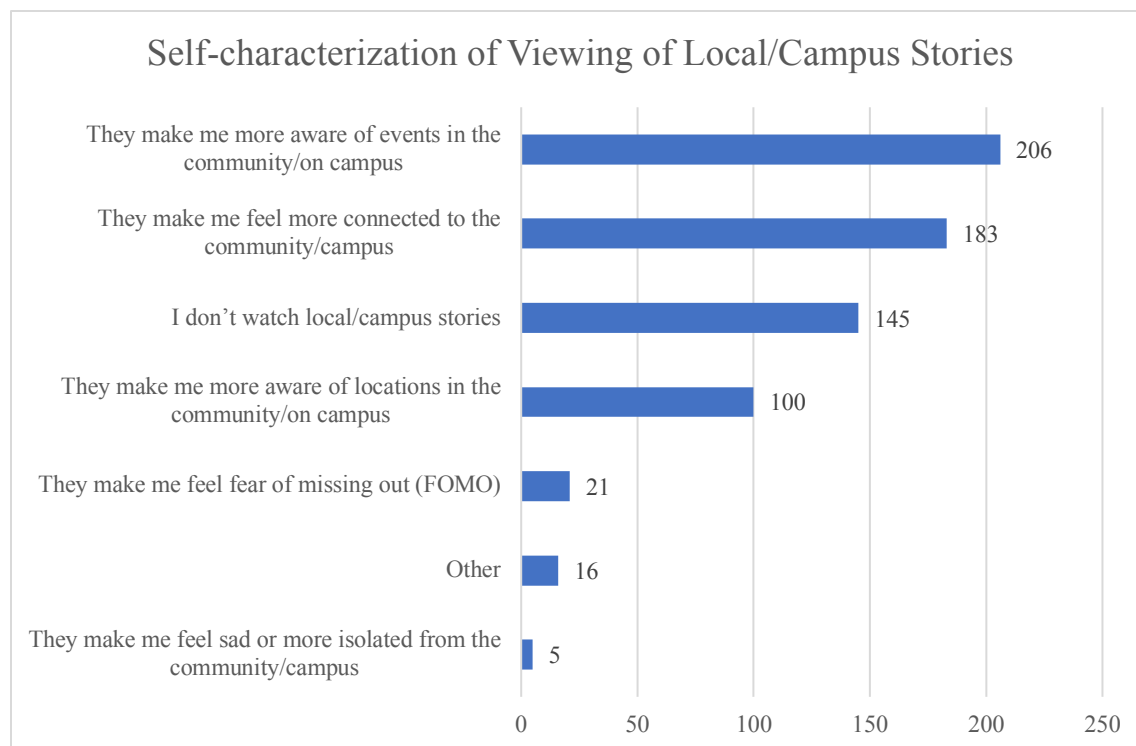
Figure 6. Users' characterization of their use of local/campus stories, as per survey results. 445 total responses; 97.8% response rate.

Among the most-selected factors, participants point out that viewing local/campus stories make them more aware of campus/community events, and these stories make them feel connected to the campus/community. These shared community spaces within the application seem to offer more positive influences than negative, with options such as feeling the fear of missing out (often called "FOMO") or feeling sad or isolated ranked at the bottom of the list. However, 145 respondents (21%) said they did not view these stories at all.

It is interesting to note, though, that students are more interested in sharing content with others (ranked 2nd in Figure 5) than contributing or posting to local/campus stories (ranked near the bottom). It is possible that the reason for this is Snapchat's own curation system: content shared directly, either though messaging or by being posted on individual stories, does not have to go through a curation process to be seen. Posts submitted to local/campus stories may not be

published, depending on the narrative vision of the curation staff. This could also be a contributing factor to why many students do not view these stories at all.

Participants indicate that the application is valuable because it allows for maintenance of already established communities. It is possible that those users who feel somehow outside the community (either physically or because curation does not allow for their content to be posted) do not feel that Stories are as influential. Perhaps in response to this, and to continue to provide the positive aspects of local/campus stories, Snapchat has recently added a Custom Stories feature. With this feature, users can create their own group or geofenced stories and allow friends or others in the area to contribute ("About Custom Stories," n.d.). Custom stories will likely provide a more popular avenue for smaller groups and communities of users, providing the community feel that Local/Campus Stories used to bring to many users.

Sending and Receiving Content. As my results show, the exchange of content—either by sending/receiving or viewing—is a major consideration in participants' use of Snapchat. The application privileges this type of communication, showing users their "Snapstreaks," the number of days they have exchanged snaps with another individual, and assigning each user a score based on the number of snaps they have sent and received. As Figure 5 shows, sharing and viewing content are among the top reasons for use, while another major contributing factor for many participants was that their friends use the application.

When characterizing participants' use of this application, it is important to see with whom participants share their content. I asked users to select others to whom they sent snaps; the results are shown in Figure 7.
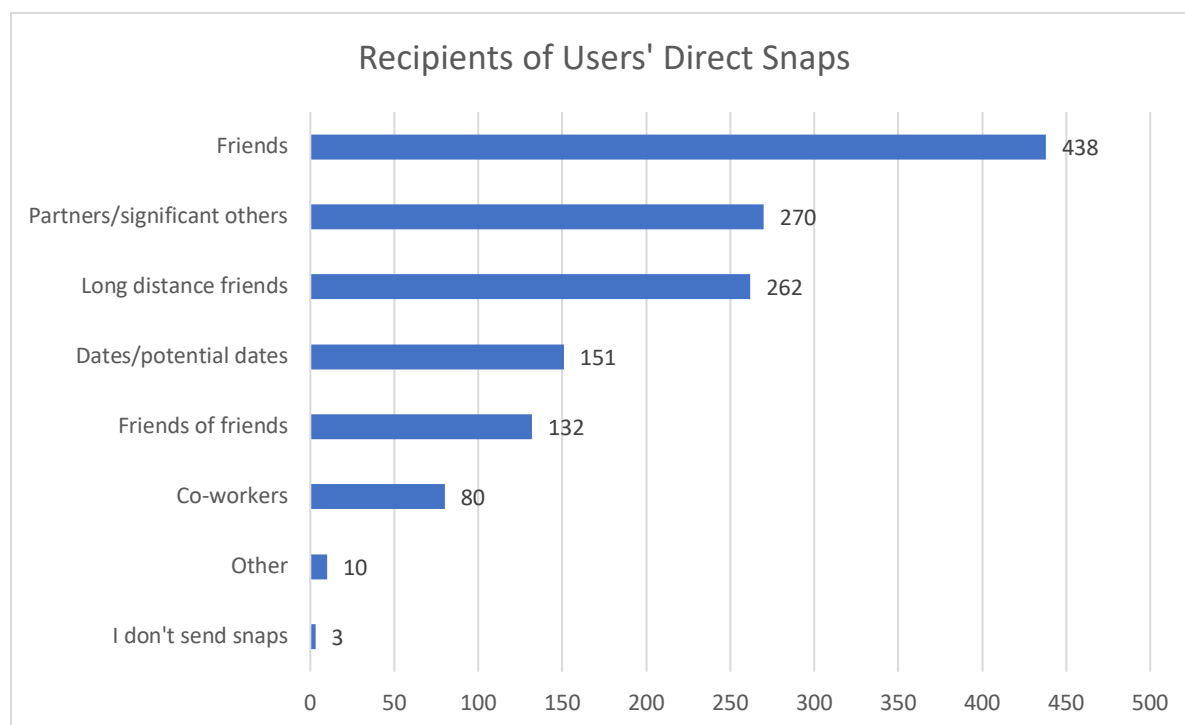
Figure 7. Recipients of Users' Snaps, as per survey results. 452 responses; 99.3% response rate.

The overwhelming number of respondents to this question (97%) selected "Friends." This response supports the high number of respondents who noted that one of the contributing factors of their use was that their friends also used the application. Other notable selections were Partners/Significant Others and Long-Distance Friends.

There is a drop-off of selections for Dates/Potential Dates, Friends of friends, and Co-workers. This distinction is important because it again speaks to users' desire for keeping up with close relationships through the application (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2015). The application seems less influential in creating new relationships than in maintaining established relationships.

Ephemerality of Content. Perhaps the most surprising result from this survey was the influence (or non-influence) of the application's ephemerality. In Figure 5, "Because my messages disappear" was second only to "other" at the bottom of the list of factors. Because my

interest in this platform centers on its ephemerality, I was surprised that a mere 69 users noted it as a factor in their use.

Part of my surprise comes from the initial controversy that surrounded Snapchat's popularity. There is an idea, maintained even today, that because the messages disappear after being opened by the recipient, users will be tempted to send material that they would not regularly displayed. While most of the controversy surrounds "tween" and teen use of Snapchat, I was interested to see if the application was being used in this way among the college students I surveyed. As with any survey that relies on self-reporting, it is possible that students did not feel comfortable answering this more sensitive question truthfully. Hopefully the survey's anonymous nature and the ability to skip the question altogether (only 11 participants in the Snapchat section chose to do this) allowed participants to answer freely. Figure 8 shows the results.
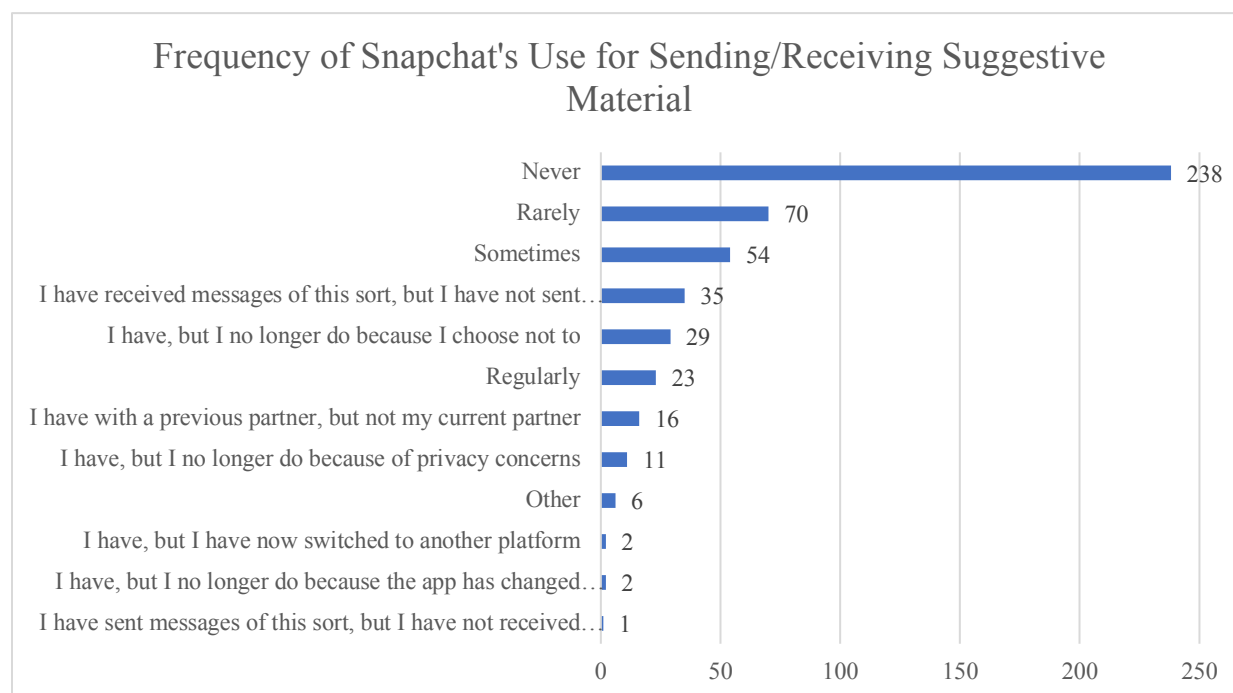

Figure 8. Frequency of Snapchat's use for sending/receiving suggestive material, as per survey results. 444 responses; 97.6% response rate.

By and large, participants report that they do not use Snapchat for sending/receiving suggestive material. On this question, as with most others, participants could pick more than one response. Some participants thus chose both rarely and sometimes, for example. Taking this into account, the number of participants who responded in some form of assent (rarely, sometimes, and regularly) was 144 (32.4%). This is compared with 238 respondents (53.6%) who said they did not use the application for this type of content; however, 3 of these respondents also responded "rarely," while 6 also responded that they had received messages of this sort, but had not sent any. In addition to this, 50 individuals answered that they had used the application in this way, but for various reasons (some selected more than one reason for this), no longer did so.

Though most participants selected that they did not use the application for this purpose, there are still some students who did report using the application to send or receive this sort of content. Whether this content is shared more often on Snapchat than other services, however, cannot be determined from the results of this survey.

I thought that surely ephemerality must in some way contribute to the types of content shared through this application. To more specifically gauge the influence of ephemerality, I asked participants to compare the content they shared on Snapchat to more traditional profile-driven applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It is important to note that even these more traditional applications are used in different ways by different users; as noted earlier, many students even considered some of these platforms to be anonymous, likely because of the way they used the application. However, I felt the comparison to these applications was most effective particularly because the content on these applications, unless deleted by the user or the system moderators, is not ephemeral. I asked participants if how often they would send content

on Snapchat that they would *not* share on more traditional platforms. For this question, students

were only permitted to select one response. The results of this inquiry are shown in Figure 9.
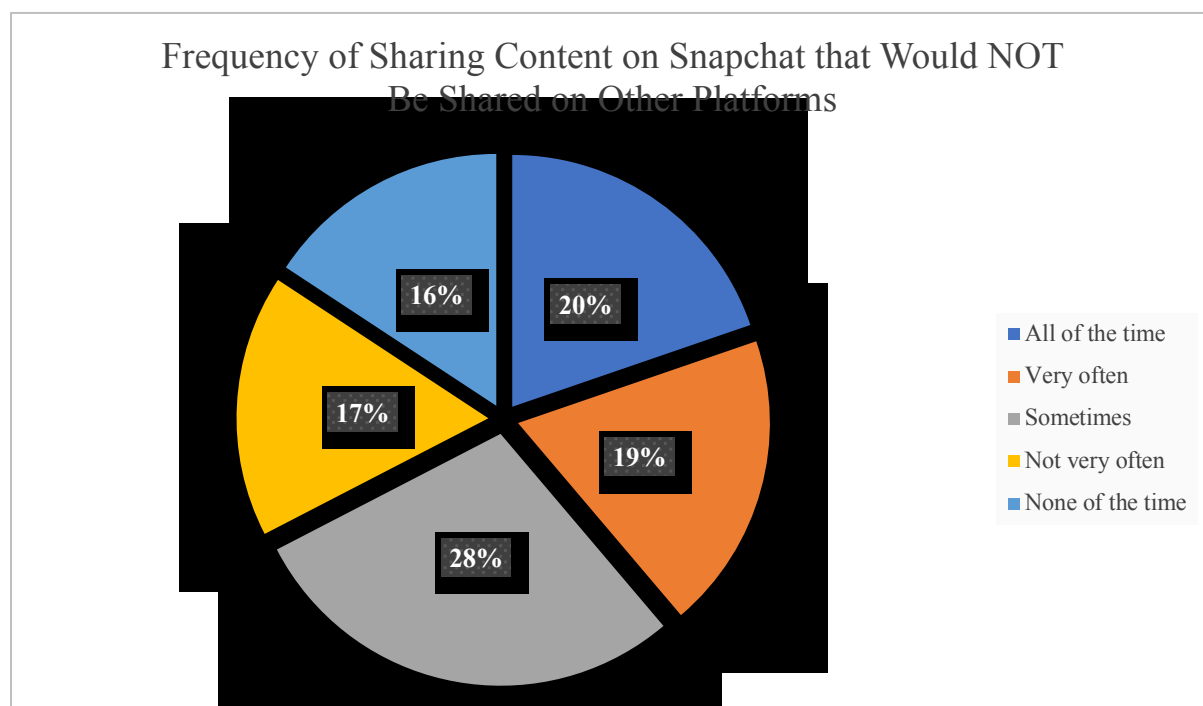
Figure 9. Frequency that participants would send content on Snapchat that they would not share on other platforms. 451 responses; 99.1% response rate.

Results here show that there is not a clear consensus among participants as to how

frequently they would share content on Snapchat that they would not post on other platforms.

The slight majority chose "Sometimes," and the fewest number of participants chose "None of

the time." Whether participants considered ephemerality specifically in their responses, this

question asked participants to compare the content they knew would be deleted to the content

they assumed would last in perpetuity.

Thus, while participants themselves did not identify ephemerality as a major contributing

factor of their use, Snapchat is so specifically tied to this feature that it was surely a factor.

Students may often consider ephemerality as tied to the sending and receiving of suggestive

material, but it influences more than just that. It very likely affects the content that is shared—

suggestive or not—as well as the frequency of use, by allowing material to disappear rather than to use up storage space of a mobile device.

Frequency of Use. A highly-regarded metric of social media success is the number of times that users visit the application throughout the day. According to Snap Inc.'s final quarter report from 2016, users opened the application around 18 times a day, and users under 25 tended to visit the application even more (Novet, 2017). My survey confirms this frequency of use (see figure 10), though I was not as interested in exact numbers.
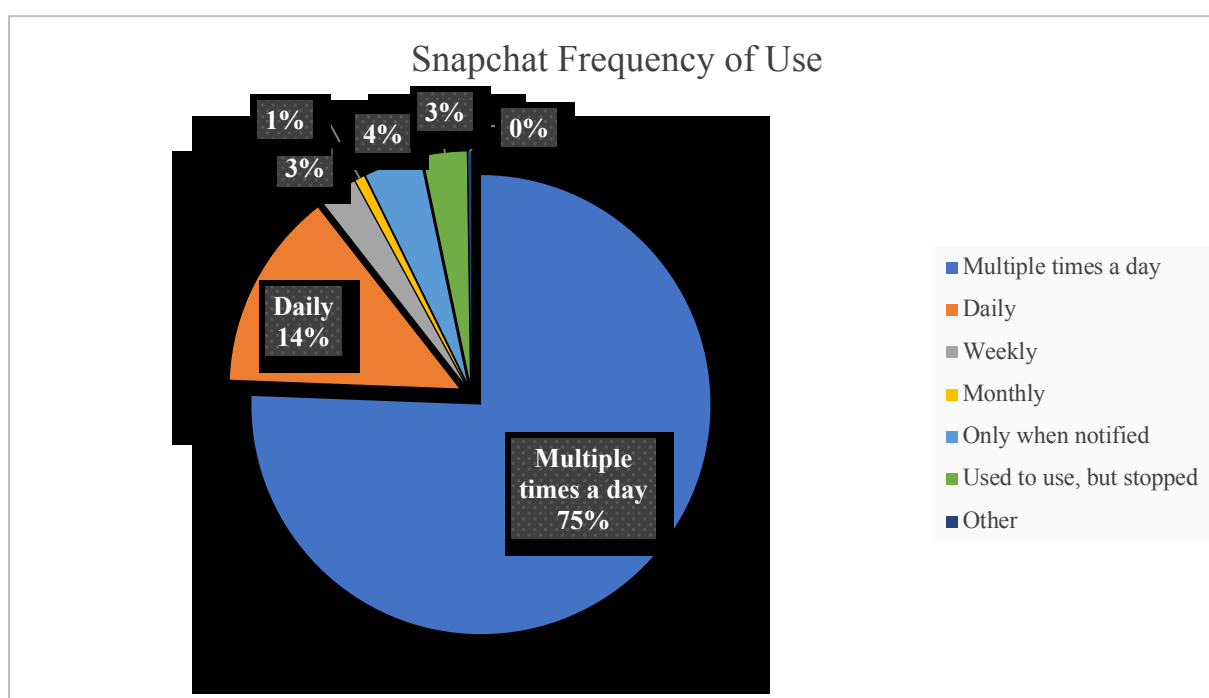
Figure 10. Frequency of Snapchat Use, as per survey results. 455 responses; 100% response rate.

344 participants (75%) reported using the application multiple times a day. The next highest response was daily, which 63 respondents (14%) selected. In addition, responses to this question seem to indicate that Snapchat was still very much active within this student population, with only 14 respondents (3%) selecting that they used to use the application, but have since discontinued use.

As seen in Figure 5, survey respondents indicated their highest rated reasons for using Snapchat were viewing friends' stories, sharing things with others, and posting to their own stories. The application's changeability, coupled with the ability to continually receive updates from friends, seems to be the most notable feature in keeping users engaged and in providing incentive for continually checking the application.

Yik Yak

At the time my survey was conducted, Yik Yak was in a very peculiar place in its existence. The application began as a completely anonymous space with feeds that were geofenced to certain locations, particularly college campuses. Users had no identifying features, not avatars, usernames, or anything of the like. The application continued in this way until March 2016 when the service introduced static handles. Users first had the option of either using a handle or remaining anonymous; however, in August 2016, the application made handles mandatory for all users (Newton, 2016). In response to complaints and a sharp decline in users, Yik Yak decided to make handles optional again in November 2016. The damage was already done, however, and the application shut down in April 2017.

At the time my survey was distributed, then, Yik Yak was already in decline. Handles were optional again, but many users had already abandoned the application. My observations of the local Yik Yak feed confirmed that students were not using the application as much as they had been when I had done my first research project in this space. For this reason, many of my survey questions were designed as a space of inquiry into why students once used the application and why they may have stopped using it.

As I mentioned earlier, the number of students who completed the Yik Yak portion of the survey was slightly higher than those who reported using Yik Yak on the initial platform

question. Users may have misread the first question and thought this question asked which platforms they currently use. The opening question for Yik Yak asked participants if they had ever used Yik Yak, likely prompting more participants who had previously used the application to answer in the affirmative. 186 participants (33.3% of the total participants) selected that they had used the application and were then asked to answer further questions about the application.

Common Uses of Yik Yak. My observations have shown that the local Yik Yak feed had once been used frequently by students and other members of the community. I assume, then, that users once found value in Yik Yak, so I sought to determine the reasons that participants initially had for using the application. My previous study showed that many posts on the application seemed to serve some purpose in the community (West, 2016). I wondered how participants would characterize their reasons for using the application. Figure 11 shows these responses.
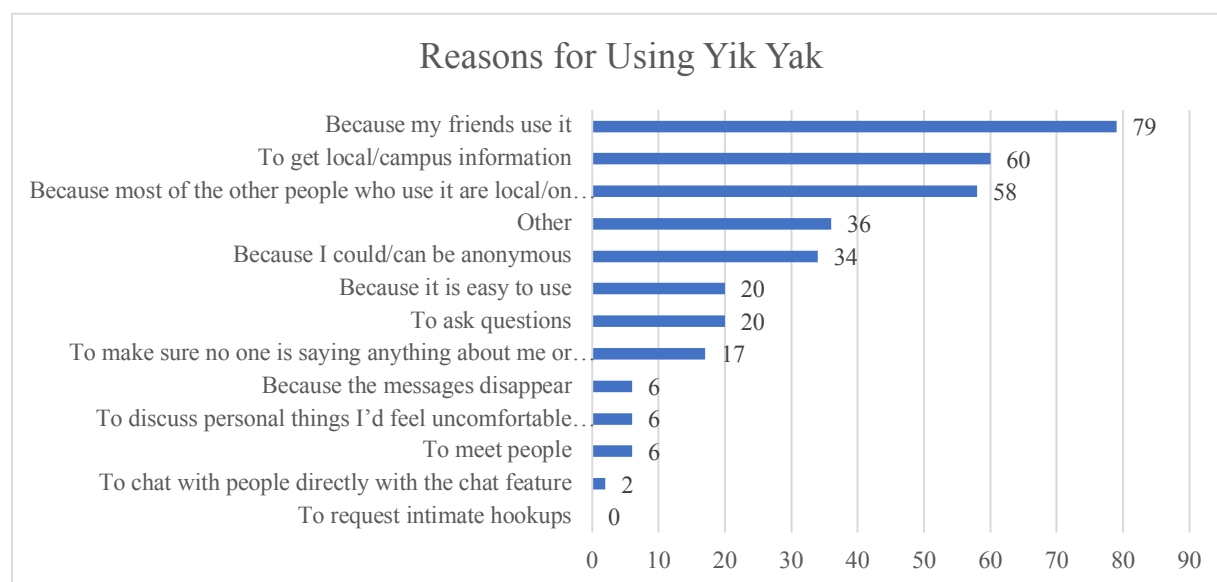

Figure 11. Participants' reasons for using Yik Yak, as per survey results. 184 responses; 98.9% response rate.

As seen here, participants' top reason is because their friends use the application. Because Yik Yak, for much of its existence, was anonymous and did not provide any feature for "friending" or "following" others, I find it interesting that friends still play such a strong role in

the adoption of this application. This can perhaps be attributed to the other most mentioned reasons: "to get local/campus information" and "because most of the people who use it are local/on campus." Because Yik Yak was geofenced to a certain area, local friends could see the same information. Conversations begun or seen on the local feed, then, could continue or be commented upon in the physical space.

Much like Snapchat, reasons for using Yik Yak center on relationships and community, even though the application provided no way of discerning these relationships. Even the direct chat feature does not seem to be used frequently by these participants. Thus, the application seems to be popular because of the connection with the local community rather than specific individuals from the community ("to meet people" and "to request intimate hookups" were also ranked low on the list). More personal options—such as "to make sure no one is saying anything about me or organizations I belong to" and "to discuss personal things I'd feel uncomfortable sharing in other places"—were also not mentioned frequently. The community-centrism of the application seemed to be the major contributing factor in its use.

Leaving Yik Yak. If the community feel was the major contributing factor for using the application, then I would imagine that users have left the application because of some disruption in this community. As I had expected, most survey participants reported that though they had used Yik Yak previously, they did not currently use Yik Yak. Figure 12 shows the frequency of use for Yik Yak; most participants indicate they no longer log on to the application.
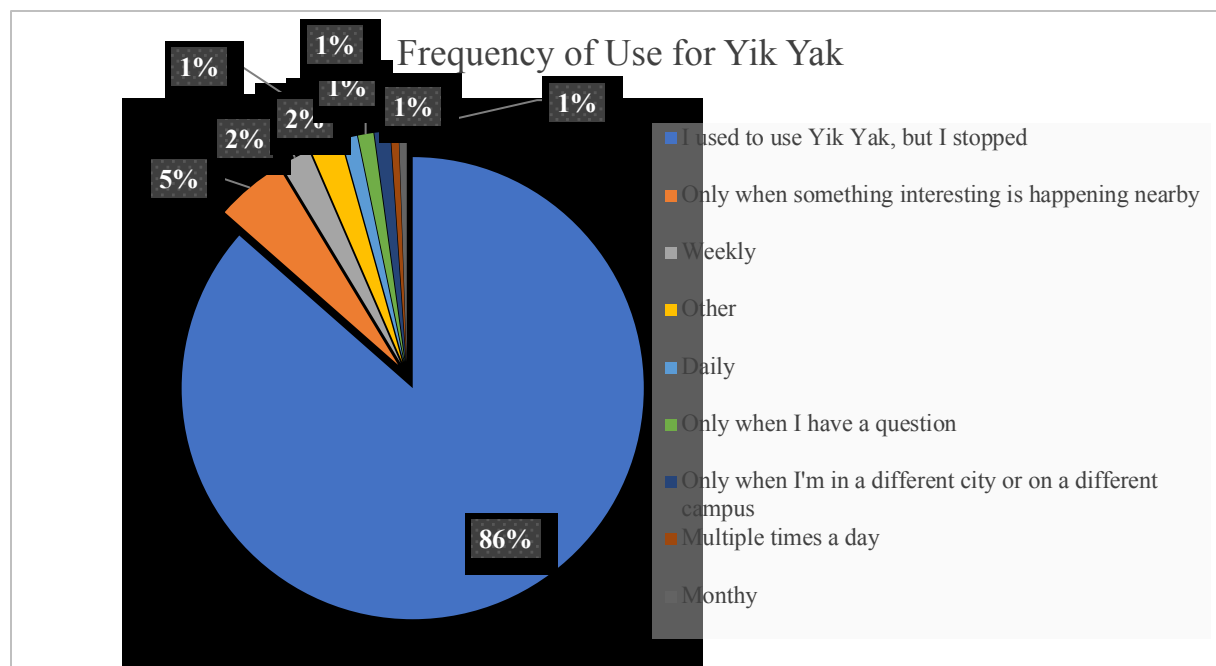
Figure 12. Frequency of participants' use of Yik Yak, as per survey results. 185 responses; 99.4% response rate.

The figure above shows that the clear majority of participants (160 respondents, 86%) noted that they no longer use the application at all. The next most selected item, "Only when something interesting is happening nearby," again seems to be a callback to the community feel of the application. Some users still felt led to consult the local Yik Yak community when something in the physical community seemed interesting. Still, this figure demonstrates that the local Yik Yak community had, for the most part, disbanded at the time of the survey.

Because I anticipated this type of response, I asked participants why they had stopped using the application. Figure 13 provides an illustration of their responses.

Reasons for Discontinuing Use of Yik Yak

Reason	Count
I am not interested anymore	142
It is no longer active on campus/locally	30
My friends stopped using it	27
I don't have time	26
Other	13
It has changed too much	8
I stopped using it in the time period that profiles were required	6
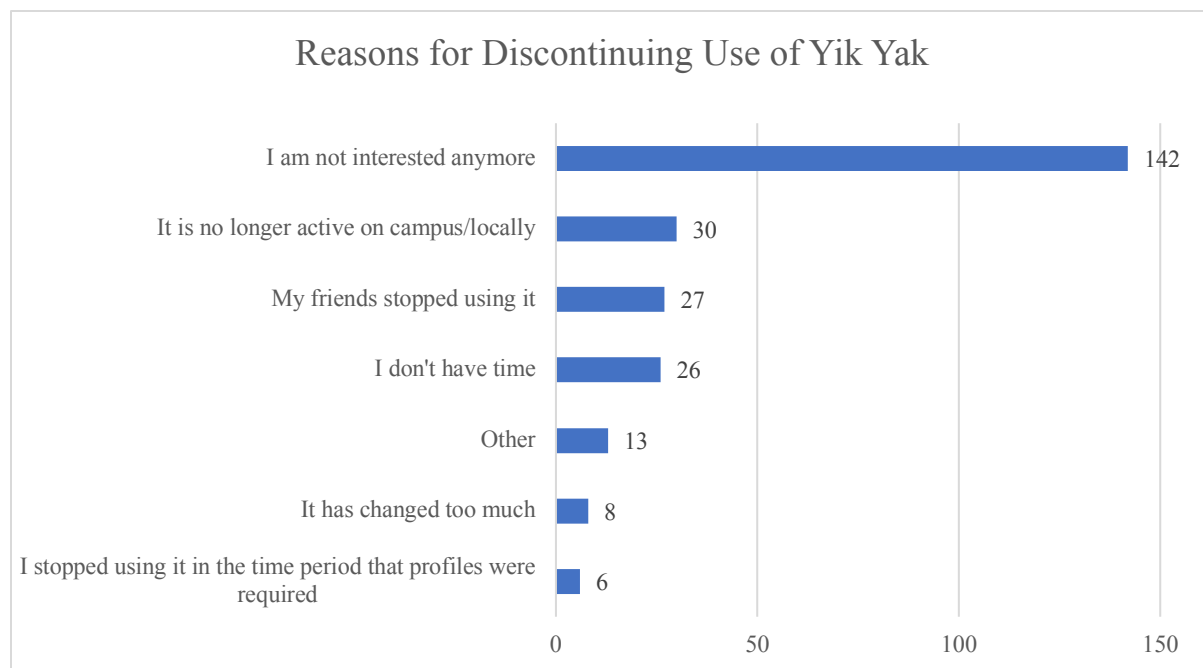
Figure 13. Reasons for discontinuing use of Yik Yak, as per survey results. 182 responses; 97.8% response rate.

Surprisingly, while the reasons for using Yik Yak seemed to focus on the influence of others, either friends or the community, the top reason for discontinuing use was personal in nature. I assumed that the decision to leave the application would most likely be fueled by Yik Yak's back-and-forth with handles/profile. However, participants did not support this idea. They attributed their leaving to a lack of interest, in general. It is also possible that "I am not interested anymore" was chosen because it provided an easier answer to this question, as it does not ask *why* the interest no longer remains. In the short time span of the survey, participants may not have had time to interrogate the deeper reasons for leaving the application. If they had, perhaps more participants would have decided that the lack of activity on campus/locally (the second most selected option) was more of a contributing factor.

Influence of Handles. The information in Figure 10 demonstrates that, at least for these participants, Yik Yak's decision to implement handles was not a major factor in their decision to

stop using Yik Yak. To interrogate this idea a bit more, I asked participants to compare their use

of Yik Yak with handles to their use without. Figures 14 and 15 compare these responses.

Figure 14. Use of Yik Yak with required profiles/handles, as per survey results. 182 responses; 97.8% response rate.

Figure 15. Use of Yik Yak when profiles/handles became optional again, as per survey results. 182 responses; 97.8% response rate.

Figure 14 displays participants' use of Yik Yak with required handles, while Figure 15

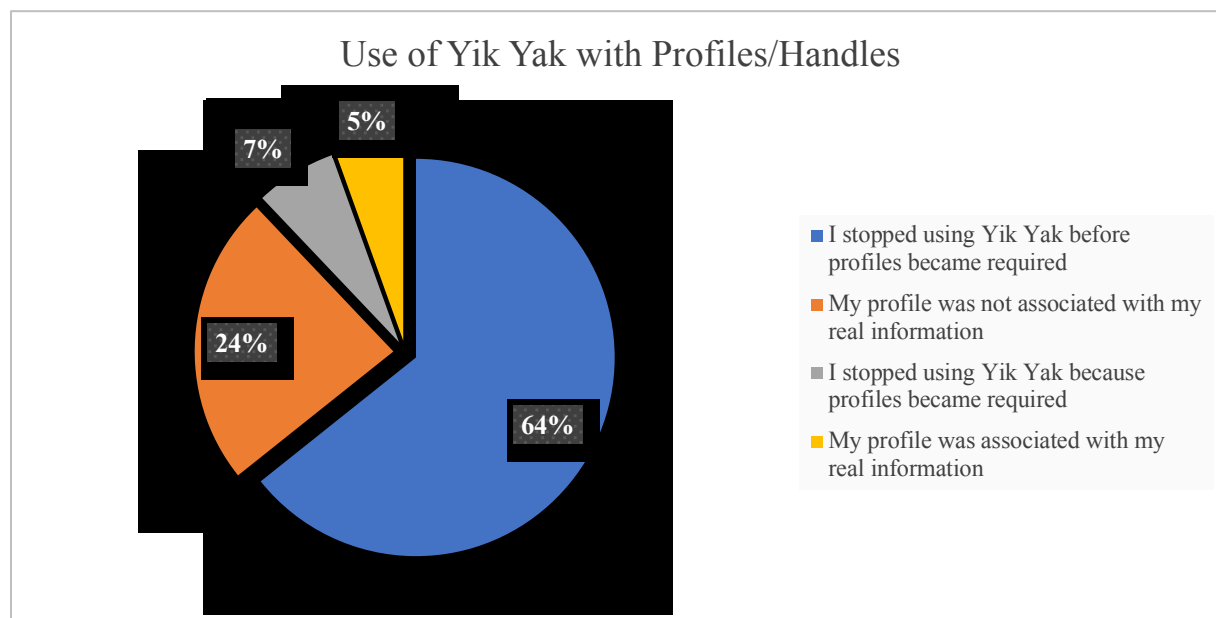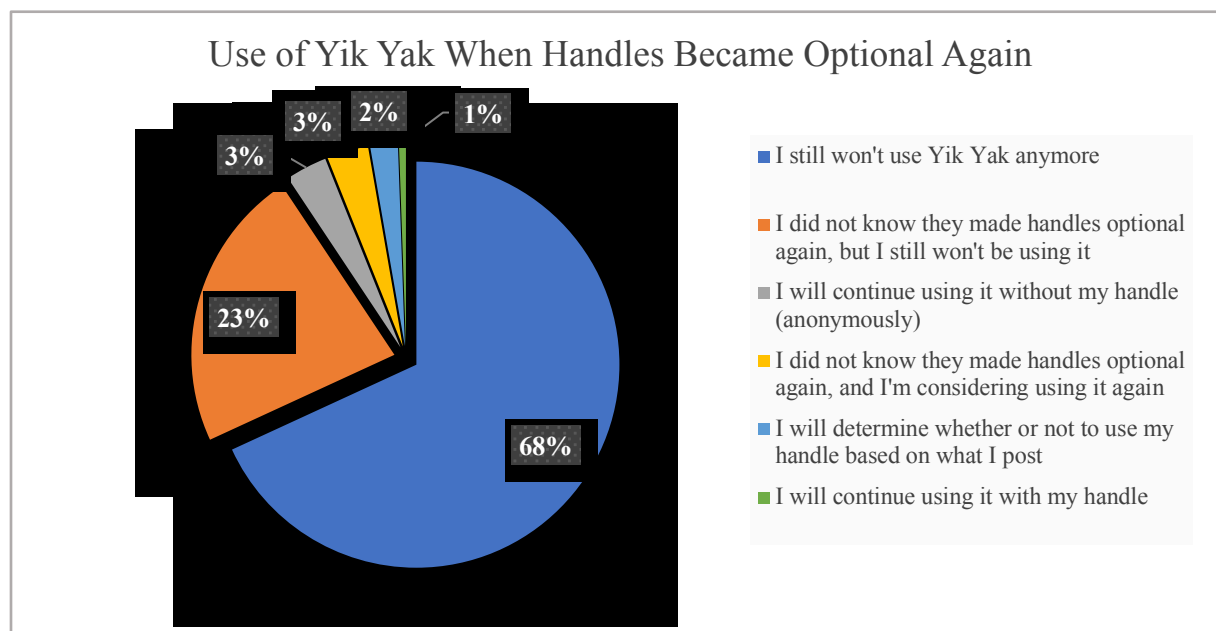shows participants' use after handles had become optional again. The results of this inquiry once

again demonstrate that participants' use was not heavily influenced by the handles' implementation. While handles were required, participants who still used Yik Yak largely chose not to associate their handle with their personal information, thus maintaining anonymity on the application. However, most participants reported that they had already discontinued using the application even before handles were required. This information begs the question of what happened to cause much of these participants to lose interest in the application.

Figure 15 continues to reinforce the idea that handles did not influence participants' use of the platform. When asked how they would use the application when handles became optional again, participants reported that they still would not be using the application. Some reported that they did not know that Yik Yak had reverted to optional handles, but this information did not change their decision to discontinue using the application.

Later in the survey, I asked participants if they would post content to Yik Yak that they would not post other spaces, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I separated this question to inquire as to whether the use of a handle influenced this decision. Results of this inquiry (shown later in Figures 17 and 18) also showed that the use of handles had no major effect on the type of content participants shared.

As it seems much of these participants left Yik Yak before handles became required (and then optional again), it is impossible to tell from this project the influence of handles themselves. It seems most likely that something happened within the community, the application, or the users that swayed users away from Yik Yak.

Influences of Anonymity and Ephemerality. Criticism of Yik Yak, as previously discussed, centers on its anonymity and ephemerality, with the idea that these characteristics encourage bullying and bigoted posts. If users began to leave the application before handles were

implemented, perhaps it was because of the hateful atmosphere that can sometimes develop on

Yik Yak's local feeds. I asked users if they had ever felt attacked on Yik Yak; their responses are

shown in Figure 16.
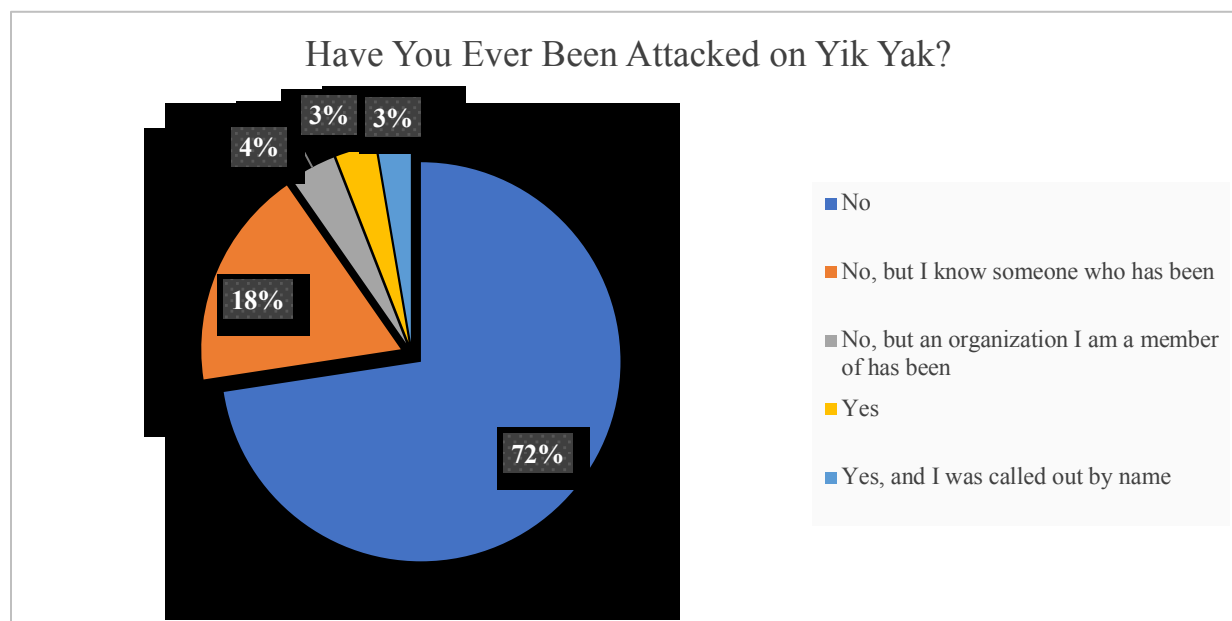
Figure 16. Responses as to whether participants have ever felt attacked on Yik Yak, as per
survey results. 186 responses; 100% response rate.

Responses indicate that most participants had never felt attacked on the application;

however, a fair percentage of responses (28%) mentioned some sort of attack may have

happened, whether to them, another person, or a group of people. But because of the number of

participants who say they had never experienced this type of behavior, it is impossible to

attribute the mass exodus from the application to this behavior.

Because anonymity and ephemerality are central to my research, I wanted to know more

about how participants valued these characteristics. Surprisingly, the results of the survey

showed that these characteristics did not seem to have a big impact, much like Snapchat's

ephemerality. Figure 11, Reasons for Using Yik Yak, shows that though anonymity was ranked

5th as a contributing factor, ephemerality was ranked 9th. Neither of these platform-imposed

characteristics ranked higher than the characteristics related to geofencing.

      As I did for Snapchat, I asked participants to report how often they would share

something on Yik Yak that they would *not* share on their personal social networking sites.

Because Yik Yak was anonymous at one point and had required handles at another, I separated

this question into two—one that asked if participants would share content they would not share

on other sites when they were using a handle, and one that asked if they would share content they

would not post on other sites when they were anonymous. By separating this question, I hoped to

gauge anonymity's influence on users' content. Figures 17 and 18 show this comparison.
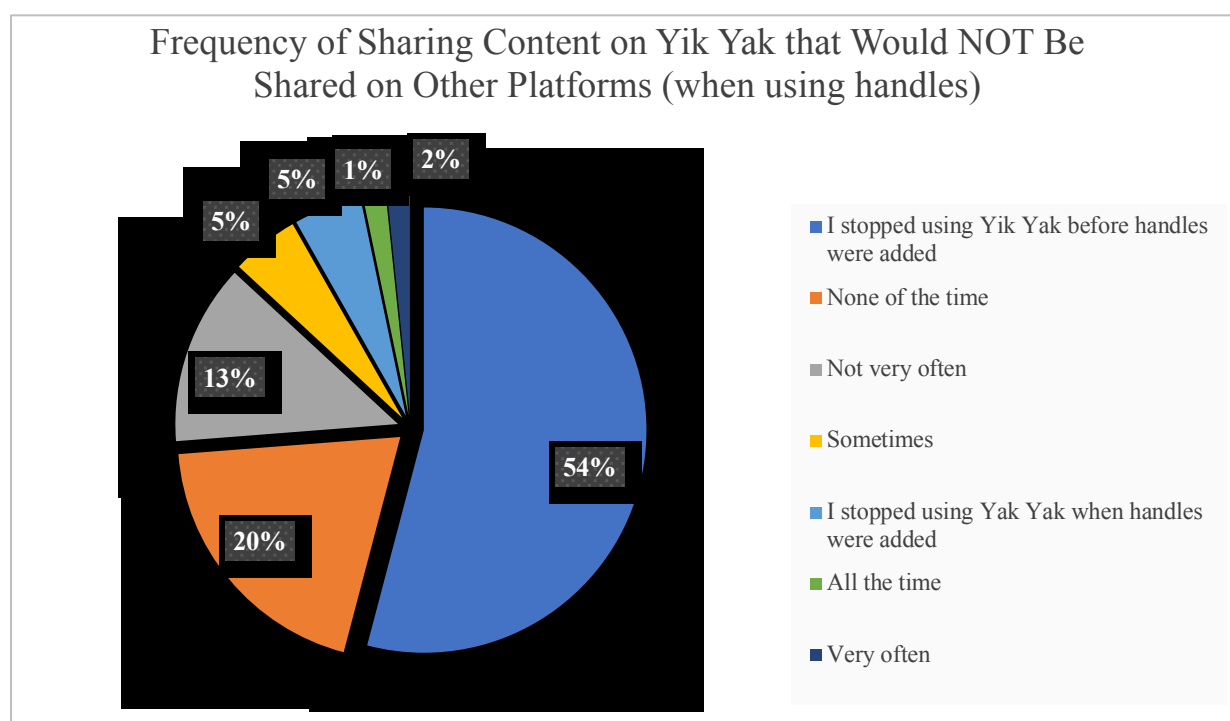
Figure 17. Frequency of sharing content on Yik Yak that would not be shared on other platforms
(when using handles), as per survey results. 183 responses; 98.4% response rate.
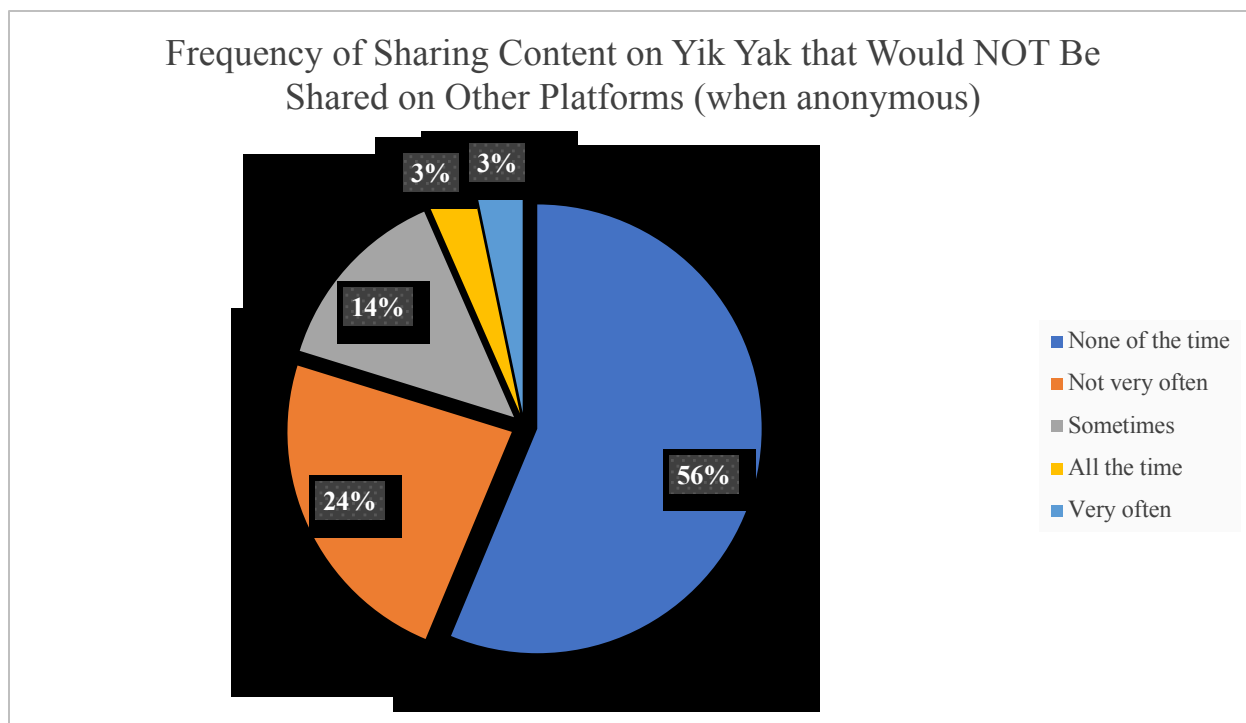
Figure 18. Frequency of sharing content on Yik Yak that would not be shared on other platforms (when anonymous), as per survey results. 183 responses; 98.4% response rate.

As these two charts show, again, there is not much influence by handles, as most

participants note in Figure 17 that they had stopped using Yik Yak before handles were

implemented. Figure 18 is particularly interesting, as it seems to show that participants do not

value anonymity as much as I had expected. Indeed, over half of the respondents reported that

they never posted content on Yik Yak that they would not post elsewhere. This result seems to

imply that participants would say the same things they would say on Yik Yak even on accounts

that are tied to their personal information. It is possible that participants worried they might be

outing themselves as trolls, or, again in the short time span of the survey, did not have time to

think about their answers fully. Later in the interviews, I investigated this result further, and

participants placed a stronger emphasis on the anonymity aspect. Still, throughout the survey,

participants seem to identify that the application's community-specific aspects were more

important in their use.

Whisper

Launched in 2012, Whisper continues to be one of the longest-lasting anonymous social media platforms, and in 2016, Whisper reported having approximately 30 million active monthly users (Ungerleider, 2017). Unlike Snapchat and Yik Yak, Whisper does not have an ephemeral aspect: posts submitted to Whisper feeds are archived. Whisper allows users to post anonymous content in the form of images (either from a database or from the user's own photo) with text super-imposed on top.

Though the Whisper feed in the local community in which this survey was distributed seemed to be quite active, I was surprised to learn that very few survey participants reported using the application. Whisper's largest audience demographic are users between 18-34, which would encompass most of the survey participants. After Yik Yak's closing, Whisper has gotten even more attention, as media and tech enthusiasts seek to determine why Whisper continues to outlast other anonymous applications (Ungerleider, 2017). The answer to this question is not within the realm of this project, but it is worth mentioning that though my survey does not reflect a large user base, Whisper continues to thrive while other similar applications close.

In the initial platform question, 16 participants reported that they had used Whisper. However, because of the survey fluke that I explained earlier, one of those users was directed to, or chose, to navigate to the end of the survey. Thus 15 participants entered the Whisper portion of the survey, only about 3% of total survey participants.

Common Users of Whisper. As in other parts of the survey, I asked participants in this section to identify their reasons for using or previously using Whisper. Often, the Whisper post

take the form of secret-sharing. This form seems to be a callback to the popular PostSecret[4]

series, in which participants create postcards detailing their secrets and send them to be

published anonymously on the creator's website. In my survey, I sought to determine if this was

the way that participants used this application. Figure 19 shows these results.
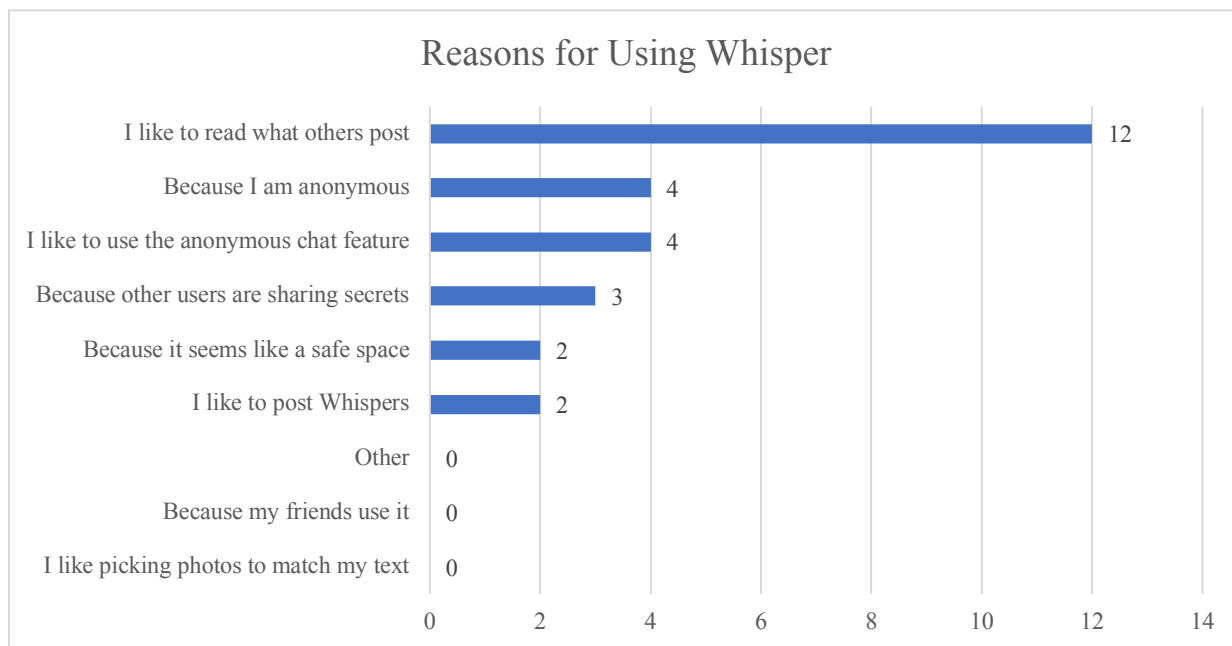
Figure 19. Reasons for using Whisper, as per survey results. 15 responses; 100% response rate.

       Throughout my research, I have noticed users' desire to participate in or maintain

communities and relationships through these social media applications. In the case of Whisper,

however, this does not seem to be the case. Results show that for most participants, the value of

Whisper is not as an outlet for their own thoughts but rather as a place to read what others say

(only two users say they even post content). Perhaps Whisper provides users with a space in

which they can see that their own feelings or thoughts are shared by others, even without having

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[4] PostSecret (located at postsecret.com) was created by Frank Warren in 2005. Warren introduced a PostSecret mobile app in 2011 but soon discontinued the application due to the obscene nature of some users' content. There has been some controversy between Warren and Whisper's creators because of the similarities between the two applications. For more information, see VanderMey, 2014.

to actively voice them. But it is also possible that Whisper posts are viewed solely for entertainment value. Regardless, the sort of participatory communication that was privileged in other spaces does not seem to be privileged here (though some users do report using the chat feature).

Anonymity, too, seems to be more of a factor in Whisper, though this may simply seem to be the case because of the small number of participants. Both anonymity and the anonymous chat feature ranked high in reasons for using the application. "Because it feels like a safe space" may also be influenced by the anonymous aspect.

Frequency of Use of Whisper. In this community, it seems that Whisper has suffered much the same fate as Yik Yak. Already a small number of participants report using the application, and when asked about the frequency they used it, many participants reported they no longer accessed Whisper. Figure 20 shows the frequency of use.
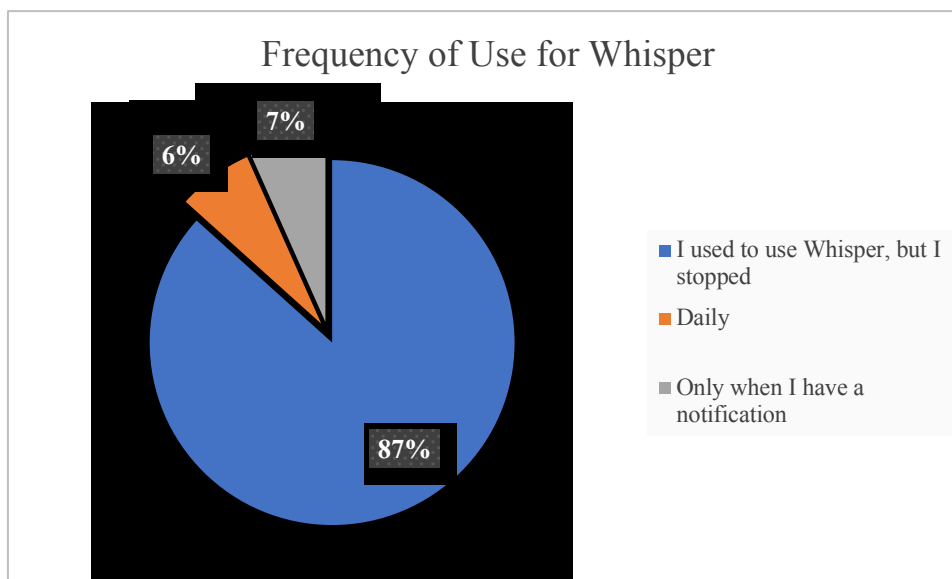
Figure 20. Frequency of use of Whisper, per survey results. The options weekly, monthly, and other received no responses. 15 responses; 100% response rate.

Only 2 participants reported still using Whisper at all, and one of those noted that they only checked the application when they had a notification. However, one user reported using

Whisper daily. The majority, though, report that though they once used Whisper, they no longer did so. This result is particularly interesting since Whisper continues to boast a growing user base. More research would need to be done to determine why this community of participants does not use the application more often.

Participants' reasons for leaving Whisper were much like Yik Yak, with most participants (11) noting that they were simply not interested anymore. Again, this option is likely used as a catchall answer, as it does not ask participants to explain their reasons for losing interest. Two participants said they no longer had the time, and one noted that their friends no longer used the application.

Influences of Anonymity. As shown in Figure 16, anonymity does seem to factor as a moderate consideration for participants' use of Whisper. To gauge the influence of anonymity, I again asked participants to consider how the content they posted on Whisper compared to their posts on other platforms. Figure 21 shows these results.
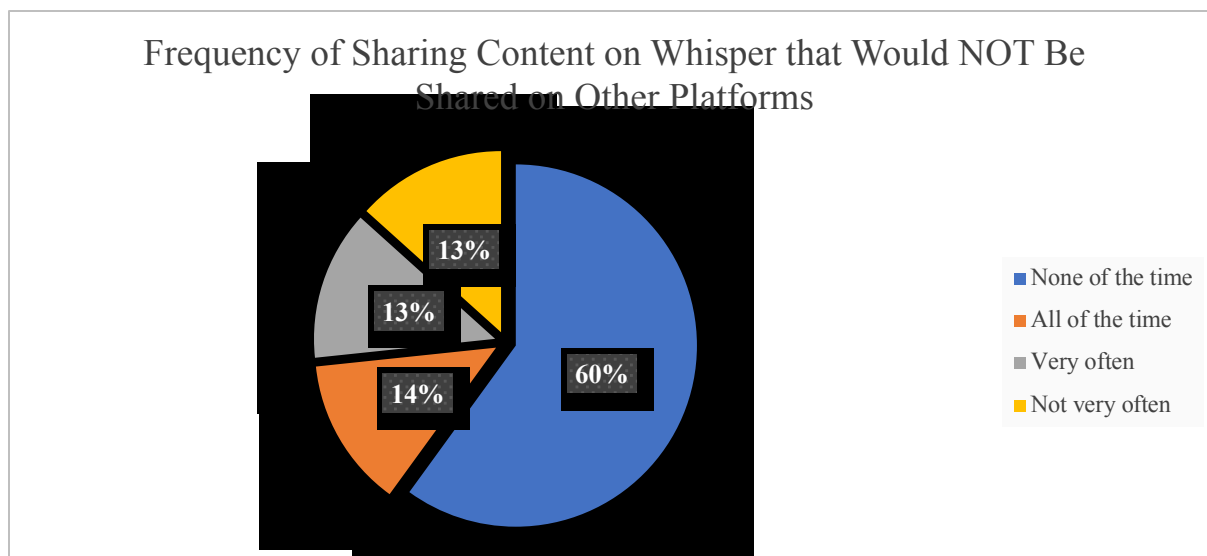
Figure 21. Frequency of sharing content on Whisper that would not be shared on another platform. 15 responses; 100% response rate.

Even with the higher factor of anonymity in the earlier question, most participants reported that they did not share content on Whisper that they would not share on other sites. This result is perplexing, much like the result for Yik Yak, especially because of the secret-sharing nature of Whisper. Perhaps a re-articulation of the question, one that does not pose the question in the negative, would provide clearer answers.

Participant Interviews

While the survey results help to provide context for the project, the participant interviews allow for an avenue of data collection that goes beyond numbers by providing an avenue for participants to articulate their own views on the platforms. The survey began to answer the first two of my research questions—How are students primarily using popular anonymous and ephemeral applications? and Why are students using these applications?—but, as discussed, still left me with questions about how students think about anonymity and ephemerality more generally, my third research question.

I turn to participant interviews to continue to interrogate students' use of anonymous and ephemeral applications. As noted in Chapter 3, these interviews were divided into three parts: the first section asked general questions about anonymity and ephemerality, the second section used a discourse-based structure to ask students to consider specific content from applications, and the third asked questions that connecting to rhetorical properties of using the applications, such as considerations of audience and purpose, and the function of these applications in campus culture.

Chapter 3 introduces participants, but I include this information again for ease of access. The four participants are as follows:

- Isaac, a Freshman engineering student who has had first-hand experience with Yik Yak and Snapchat. He also enjoys another anonymous application, TalkLife, with which I was not familiar, and the online anonymous chat system, Omegle.

- Christopher, a Senior communications student who had previously been a Yik Yak user. An avid Internet user, he also uses Imgur and Reddit and participates in these forums without disclosing his real identity.

- Katrina, a Senior mechanical engineering student who had transferred to the university in the year prior. She is a Snapchat user but had previously had negative experiences with an anonymous chat application and no longer uses applications of this type.

- Trevor, a Sophomore business major who does not consider himself to be a big social media user. He uses Snapchat sparingly but has not had experience with anonymous applications.

In this section, I identify major themes that emerged from my interviews and that serve to provide further insight to survey results. I discuss participants' perceptions of anonymity and ephemerality, and then their thoughts about the applications that emphasize these characteristics.

I go on to discuss some of the rhetorical elements of purpose and audience that these participants considered while posting and responding. I also sought to build on my survey results by inquiring about a major trend in my survey results: the function of these applications in campus/local community and in connecting to other users.

Perceptions of Anonymity and Ephemerality

Throughout my interviews, participants shared their ideas about anonymity and ephemerality, ranging from full acceptance to distrust of these characteristics. As I note throughout the section, there seems to be a divide between the two participants that use anonymous platforms regularly, Isaac and Christopher, and the two who do not, Katrina and Trevor. Though the participants often discuss the same general topics, they do so in very different ways, frequently bringing up both positive and negative aspects. This section discusses several trends that emerged in the interviews: the idea that anonymity allows users more freedom, the idea that anonymity can protect users' privacy, and the idea that ephemeral messaging mirrors face-to-face conversation.

Anonymity as Freedom. In each of my interviews, participants seemed to hold an idea that anonymity allowed users more freedom in online platforms. For some participants, this type of freedom represented freedom from the restrictions of static identity. For others, this type of freedom represented freedom from consequence.

For Isaac and Christopher, anonymity was an inherently positive aspect. Isaac was the most vocal about his perception of freedom in anonymous applications. When asked if the ability to be anonymous was advantageous for users, he replied that "it's pretty good 'cause they can just do as they please, and they're more free." Throughout his interview, he mentioned "free" in conjunction with anonymity five times. When asked to consider if anonymity was beneficial or

harmful for college students, Isaac responded that anonymous applications may be more

beneficial because they provide users' both an outlet for their feelings and a platform of less

restricted communication:

> For most people it's beneficial to be able to vent out feelings or frustrations that's really bothering you. Something that you might want advice on or might want more input on but you can't really just say it to whoever, like your friends or your family or anything. And you want to get more of a variety, you want to step out of your comfort zone of your circle of friends, you want to see what's outside of this and what others think. So it's nice in a way that you don't have to go up to random people and ask them. Because even then they're going to be defensive, so it's better to find people that are not defensive, people that are online, anonymous.

In Isaac's estimation, anonymity provides freedom for both parties in this hypothetical situation:

the user who wants to vent, and the people who might reply. For the initial user, anonymity

allows them the freedom to "vent" or ask for advice without feeling like they are being judged.

Anonymity also affords this user the ability to voice these concerns to others who feel free

enough to respond without needing to be defensive. Later, Isaac notes, "I feel like people are

more truthful, when they don't have to have their identity tied to who they are." Thus, Isaac

seems to note that anonymity allows users to both voice their concerns and opinions and to

respond truthfully to others.

Christopher had some concerns about anonymity overall, but he subscribed to the idea

that Internet communication in general, not just anonymous communication, often led users to

operate as if they would face no consequences for their words or actions. Despite his concerns,

however, he identified as an avid Internet user, and still decided not to share his identity in many

of the Internet forums on which he participates. During his interview, he noted that in his own

use of anonymous applications, he operated under and appreciated this freedom from

consequences idea. He identified his primary use of Yik Yak as a place "to shit-post." He said,

"I'd just get on and I'd say stuff, just to, I mean like I'd use it to complain a lot. I'd use it to

anonymously complain about something that was bothering me." Although he uses negative

language to identify the content he posts, Christopher's comments relate back to Isaac's mention

of freedom "to be able to vent out feelings or frustrations that's really bothering you."

Later, when asked to consider whether anonymous applications provide a true-to-life

representation of himself, Christopher commented:

> I feel like it's still…I feel like it's a truer, a truer aspect of me, even in all of the ugly
> parts. Like when I play games and I say…things and I get mad, and after I'm done with
> all that, I think to myself, I didn't used to be like that, what happened? I'm not sure why
> I'm getting so angry at this. I didn't used to. But, yeah, I feel like people on the internet is
> like a more, it's closer to who I am, what I truly am.

In this case, Christopher shares that his online persona is likely a truer representation of himself,

but he shares his frustration, as sometimes he does not like what he sees. The anonymous aspects

of the Internet in general, though, provide him with the freedom to express emotions—anger, in

this case—that he may not feel comfortable confronting in other contexts.

Katrina and Trevor, however, felt that this kind of freedom was negative and the

perception that users were free from consequences could cause these users to act irresponsibly.

Katrina, who primarily viewed anonymous applications as "inappropriate," noted that

anonymous users did not have to worry about the same consequences as users in more traditional

social media platforms:

> [I]f it's anonymous they get to hide behind that name, they don't have to face criticism or
> scrutiny. They can just do whatever they want without consequences, because if you were
> to do something like that on Facebook, they'd know your name, you could get messages,
> you could get banned, blocked, etc., etc. If it's anonymous, you can get away with it
> [sending inappropriate messages].

While Isaac, and perhaps even Christopher, may see the lack of criticism or scrutiny as a positive

aspect, Katrina sees it as a negative aspect because it gives users the confidence to "do whatever

they want without consequences." In her limited experience with an anonymous messaging

application, Katrina mentioned that despite her desire to use the application to make friends,

other users subverted her ability to do so. As she said, "I didn't want to use it as a dating site, but

people—it was too much perversion, there was too much nudity, and I didn't like that." Users, in

this case, have too much freedom, and that freedom makes them a liability to other users. The

freedom to post and share whatever they wanted limited Katrina's own ability to use the

application in the way she felt it should be used. She prefers applications like Facebook that have

specific terms for use, and where users can be reliably, at least in her view, reported for

inappropriate content. Later in her interview, as we discussed specific posts from anonymous

platforms, Katrina stated that she was beginning to see some positive attributes. However, at the

end of her interview, she noted, "it *can* be used for [positive things]. But in reality, it can shift

and it can be used for a lot of bad things. I just think of it like a Pandora box."

Trevor had less to say on this topic, but he too saw anonymous communication as

potentially negative to other users. When asked to consider the advantages of being anonymous,

he responded, "Well, you can say what you want and no one can hold you to it." I asked him to

describe why that was an advantage, to which he responded, "Well, I mean, I guess it's good for

the person saying it. But, I don't know how that's good for anyone else." Like Katrina, he

viewed anonymity as a freedom from consequence, and he saw that as a disadvantage to other

users. In stark contrast to Isaac and Christopher, who felt that anonymity allows people to be

even more themselves, Trevor worried that people who are anonymous are not who they say they

are. He expressed this fear by saying, "You don't really know who it is, what kind of like person

it is, and I guess they could be like a stalker or something."

Because Trevor is not a user of anonymous applications, he seems to divide anonymous

spaces into two types of users: users with agendas who will hide their true identity, and those

who will be deceived by these users. Though deception was not Katrina's primary concern, this dichotomizing of users was also something that Katrina showed in her responses. Meanwhile, Isaac and Christopher, both of whom function in anonymous spaces quite often, do not seem to separate users in this way. While both mention potential disadvantages of anonymity, they focus on describing how they feel as users of these spaces. They do not separate themselves from users of these spaces, as Trevor and Katrina do. Their insight into these spaces seem to point to a more varied understanding of users and uses in these spaces.

Anonymity as Protection. Extending their ideas of anonymity as freedom, the interview participants often shared that anonymity provides some degree of protection for users. Participants discussed these protections using different terms—some used the idea of privacy, claiming that anonymity provides users more privacy than traditional social media applications. Others saw anonymity as a way to protect users against criticism for taboo or controversial ideas.

Even Katrina and Trevor, who worried that users would manipulate their anonymity to prey on other users, saw some value in this protection aspect. In particular, Katrina noted early in her interview that she could see privacy as a benefit to anonymity, saying "with anonymous apps, you don't have to be open to the public. It's a matter of privacy." Though she appreciated the terms of use that traditional platforms like Facebook provides, she still noted that anonymity could allow for users to retain more privacy. Still at this early point in the interview, Katrina primarily identified the negative aspects as outweighing the positive aspects.

During the discourse-based interviews, I showed each participant a series of posts from Snapchat, Yik Yak, and Whisper. One Yik Yak post discussed the initial poster's struggles with depression, and showed replies from other users who offered advice and empathy for this situation. Upon seeing this post, Katrina was surprised, having not considered that anonymous

applications may contain this kind of content. When I asked her to talk through her reaction to the post, she said:

> Something that's personal, something that's hurting someone, something that's health related, should never probably be posted on a public social media site. I think by doing this anonymously, they're protecting their privacy and they're also getting help from other people. And I really like that.

Here, Katrina again compares anonymous-enabling applications to more traditional—"public"— social media sites. Whereas she had previously mentioned the "public" applications as safer for users, because users who violated the terms of the site could be reported or banned, she now points to the idea that some types of content "should never probably be posted on a public social media site." She notes that anonymity of these platforms allows some users to receive feedback from others without having to publicly acknowledge their personal issues.

Trevor had also voiced some hesitance toward anonymous applications, worrying that the anonymity would protect identity in such a way that would encourage users to operate with hidden agendas. Throughout the interview, he continued to point out that users may be using anonymity to hide some part of their identity. After viewing a political meme posted on Yik Yak, I asked why something like this may be posted to the anonymous application. Trevor responded that he had seen political memes being posted on a variety of platforms, but that this particular meme, showing a clear political preference, may be shared anonymously "because a lot of people may know them to be one way, but they may have different opinions in secret." Sharing the meme anonymously, then, might allow the user to engage in political discourse outside of their normal realm. In fact, according to Trevor, sharing the meme anonymously might allow the user to disclose a political preference opposing the one they share with their close relationships.

Later in the interview, Trevor again pointed out that a user may be hiding part of their identity. While discussing a particularly sensitive Whisper post, one that alluded to LGBTQ+

adoption, Trevor mentioned that the user may have chosen an anonymous space because "they might have not told one of their relatives yet that they, or she, is a lesbian. Or maybe they hadn't told their boss yet. And they didn't want to come out in front of everyone on social media." Again, Trevor tended to believe that users of anonymous spaces have something to hide, but did acknowledge that these spaces protect that identity in some way.

Like Katrina, Trevor also separated the type of content shared on anonymous applications with those of more traditional platforms. When viewing another Whisper post which showed a user's struggle with whether they should ask out a professor, Trevor mentioned that the post would be "an appropriate thing to post on Instagram or something." Going further, he said, "I feel like it's like, common sense [not to post such a post to Instagram]. There's like a, kind of like, manners. It's just kind of something, there's a list of things you do and don't do on social networking sites." Though Trevor deemed them "manners," he seemed to be pointing to leveraged norms of social media spaces. Sites like Instagram carry with them expectations for content. Anonymous spaces, then, protect users even when they subvert these norms.

Both Isaac and Christopher saw the protection that these anonymous spaces provided as a necessary and positive aspect of the platforms. During our conversation, Isaac explained why he believed that users enjoyed anonymous spaces, saying, "So, [on other social media applications] a lot of people like to withhold sexuality, sexual orientation, and things that are kind of like— religion—things that are kind of controversial. That they don't want to be pointed out and discriminated against." Anonymous spaces allow users to avoid discrimination and speak about topics that may be deemed taboo in public spaces. Isaac mentioned this again when viewing the Yik Yak post about depression:

> So, I think it's kind of something that is out of public, like it's not really talked about
> much like around the surface of things, how people feel and like how to treat that. It's

something kind of taboo, speaking on directly, it's something that's like personally affecting them. So when they're talking about this, they're noticing how they're feeling and it's just not something they'd really want to bring up to certain people or even a public source of people.

His comments again point to the protection that anonymity allows: this user can share his/her experience without disclosing his/her identity. And, because depression is frequently viewed as taboo, this space allows the anonymous user to reach out for help without worrying about negative perceptions being associated with their identity. Also interesting is how Isaac, like Katrina, saw anonymous applications as outside the realm of the "public."

Christopher viewed this protection from a more personal perspective. Because he was a self-admitted "shit-poster" on Yik Yak, he enjoyed the protection that he received from this space, calling it his "stress release platform." But he also viewed these spaces as protection from actual physical/mental harm. In particular, he discussed doxing, a form of Internet harassment that, though he had not personally experienced, he had seen frequently:

I've see a lot of stories of people online who are careless about their usage of these [platforms] and people found them. The Internet actually has a term for that, it's called doxing, getting doxed. People get on the Internet, they look you up, they get your name, your address, your phone number, your social media accounts, and then they post them on the internet for all to see. It's, um, it's a harassment tactic and I try not to, I'm mindful of that. […] I know that if you're not careful, people can find you and if you say the wrong things then people will want to find you.

Of anonymous platforms, Christopher said, "[For] the most part I feel like if you're posting anonymously you can be more truthful. You can tell it how it is without being concerned about your opinion, or without being *as* concerned about your opinion getting back to you." His idea of something "getting back to you" was more extreme than the other participants. Because of the online spaces with which he was familiar, he took measures to protect this identity, and remaining anonymous, even in spaces that ask for usernames, was one of the ways he did this.

Anonymity allowed him to "complain" and "shit-post" with less of a concern about what might offend or anger others.

Ephemerality as Mirrored F2F Conversation. Participants had far less to say about ephemerality than they did anonymity. I imagine that may be because ephemerality has become so commonplace, with the huge popularity of Snapchat. But one thing that emerged when discussing ephemerality in general and Snapchat[5] was how ephemerality mirrored face-to-face conversation. Perhaps this similarity was why participants had less to say about ephemerality—as spoken conversations themselves are generally ephemeral, this characteristic may not be notable to participants. Isaac, Katrina, and Trevor contributed some ideas about ephemerality, but Christopher, likely because of his lack of experience with Snapchat, saw ephemerality as having much the same advantages and disadvantages as he discussed with anonymity.

When discussing Snapchat, Isaac clearly drew the connection between ephemerality and conversation in the physical space by noting, "So, the pictures disappear. It's kind of like life in a way that it's just a conversation, and the word goes by, then it's by." Here he is referring to Snapchat's messaging feature, a core feature of the application. As users send photos to each other, which are deleted after they have been seen, this action seems to mimic face-to-face conversations. Isaac also sees the actual composition of posts as reminiscent of face-to-face conversation. He says that platforms like Snapchat encourage users to post in the moment: "They might not be like something you thought about it very precisely, they are still your words in the way that it was at that moment." Something about the ephemeral characteristic, then, allows users to share without overthinking content. He also mentioned that, much like face-to-face

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[5] Though Yik Yak is both ephemeral and anonymous, participants discussed Yik Yak only in terms of its anonymity. Because of this, Snapchat served as the primary touchstone for discussions of ephemerality.

conversation, he often forgot things he said or things that others have sent via Snapchat because he could not revisit those posts.

On Snapchat, the use of photos/videos and text combined mimics the face-to-face aspect. As Katrina mentioned in her interview, "You can post videos and pictures so I feel like when you're actually looking at the person, it's like, your tone changes, it's different when you're talking face-to-face versus just typing something online." In this quote, she separated Snapchat from online communication entirely, actually labeling it "face-to-face." She considered Snapchat to be a very personal form of communication, more personal than platforms like Facebook. When I asked her to explain what she meant by "more personal," she responded:

> With Snapchat, it's the individual posting their life story. I mean like someone taking pictures of their car, the pool, animals. [With] Snapchat, you get to see like a person's life, with pictures, then it gets deleted. So I think it's just more personal.

She went on to mention that users can post more often on Snapchat because other users do not have to keep the messages and pictures on their own phone, nor does it clutter the application itself. Thus she saw Snapchat as more personal not just because of the content that is shown, but also the frequency that users can post. Whereas posting several photos in a row on Facebook or Instagram may be frowned upon, it is a common occurrence on Snapchat, as is a continual back-and-forth between users.

Trevor also identified Snapchat as more personal, but unlike Isaac and Katrina, he did not see the mirrored face-to-face conversation as a positive attribute. During the interview, I showed a rather mundane Snap that mentioned the weather. I asked him if he would respond to a Snap like this, and he said, "I probably wouldn't respond and if they kept sending them, I'd probably unfriend them." When I asked why, he said he thought of Snapchat as a platform to send "something interesting." When asked about his own use of Snapchat, he said:

> I'm not really one of those people who just wants to [post], like, hey, eating this or hey, reading this book, or hey, watching this right now. I'm not going to send that because I feel like it's a waste of time.

I asked what kind of things he would post, and he replied, "if I wrecked my car or something, that would be something [I would post]." Later in the interview, he drew a distinction between users who posted about their daily lives and those who posted when there was "something interesting." This distinction, at least in his experience, was based on gender. He explained:

> Well [my female friends] post like, getting my hair done, getting coffee, driving in my car listening to this song, uh, day by the pool. And it'll be like 5-6 snap stories in a day. Usually I'll just click through them. My [male] friends will be someone, I don't know, at a party getting knocked out. My male friends will post something like that. It'll be just like one video and you'll be like, what happened last night? Woah.

While Trevor had friends who used Snapchat in a way that mirrors face-to-face conversation or shows daily activities, he preferred those users, like his male friends, who post things that are outside the norm. He had different expectations of the platform than some other users, including both Isaac and Katrina.

Discussions of Purpose and Audience

Near the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked to consider questions relating to rhetorical elements such as purpose and audience. These questions tended to be unnecessary, as discussions about purpose and audience occurred throughout each interview. In this section, I discuss some trends that emerged: considerations when responding to posts and when determining audience.

Considerations When Responding to Posts. In the discourse-based portion of the interview, I asked participants to speak through their initial thoughts about each post, including whether they would reply to the post. Primarily through this conversation, I gained some insight

into the processes that participants went through to determine if the original poster wanted a response and if they should be the one to provide that response.

For the most part, when asked if they would respond to a post, participants first considered whether the initial post seemed to ask for in-depth response. When discussing the Yik Yak post about depression, Isaac said he would respond because the post was about "something that they might need help with, something that they actually want to hear advice on." Katrina also said she would respond, saying, "I'd probably feel sympathetic and I'd probably tell them— I'd probably help out any way I could."

When I showed Christopher the Whisper post about asking out a professor, he mentioned that he did not see the content as particularly controversial. He said he would not reply because "I actually don't feel like it is looking for a response. I feel like it's something that someone would just want to get off their chest." Katrina felt similarly, mentioning that she thought the user was looking to "voice what they're feeling and get attention." To the same post, Isaac debated on whether the user was looking for a response, noting that they seemed to use the post as "mostly an outlet" for their feelings, but that they might be looking for responses because "they were still thinking of asking him out for coffee, so it's still up for debate, it could go either way." Because the post said the user is "thinking of" asking the professor out, Isaac wondered if perhaps the user wanted a response that would sway their decision in one way or another. Still, Isaac saw the post as mostly a way for the user to share their feelings. Finally, Trevor read the post as clearly asking for response, saying that the original poster is looking for "advice about what to do." While these participants come to different conclusions, in this case, about what the original poster wants, they clearly show that they attempt to determine the (self-perceived) purpose of the post before deciding whether to respond. This is important since it shows that

users are attempting to analyze the situation as best they can by thinking about the nature of the platform and the language used in each post.

If participants did not believe a post desired a response, they would then determine whether they would acknowledge the post in another way, such as a "like" or "upvote." For example, none of the participants felt like it would be necessary to provide an in-depth response to the Yik Yak post that contained a political meme, because they did not feel like the original poster was using the post to incite debate, only to make a joke. Isaac decided he would only "look at it and pass by," because the post is "not really asking for opinion on it, it's just like, here it is, I think this is funny." However, a few of the participants said they would like either the post or the comment, depending on their own interest or political party. While the original post made a joke at the expensive of one political party, the comment was a disparaging remark about the other political party. Trevor said he would not like the post but would probably like the comment, while Katrina said it depended on "if I have a really funny comeback." Later in the discussion, however, she said, "I wouldn't respond to something like this but I definitely would like it, because I think it's just funny satire." Similarly, because Christopher found the meme entertaining, he said he would "give [the post] an upvote and a chuckle but I probably wouldn't reply to it" because "I thought it was funny but I don't really have anything to add."

Both Katrina's and Christopher's responses to the political meme point to another trend of participants determining if they would respond: whether the post entertained or interested them. Christopher noted that usually his decision to reply was, as with the Yik Yak meme, based on if he was entertained by the post:

> Sometimes if I think something is funny and someone had posted a joke and someone had posted a funny comment relating to that joke, like a pun or something like that, [then] I'll reply and say that was hilarious or something like that. Or I'll reply and have like a

pun of my own. Like, a lot of times there's running jokes on certain types of media platforms and I'd participate in those.

While he notes that he responds to congratulate other users, he also points out that he responds to assert his membership in the community. By responding to and participating in running jokes, he shows that he understands that community's discourse. This is especially important in anonymous platforms, where a user's identity, even within the community, cannot be verified. Participating in these shared jokes verifies that Christopher is an established member of the community.

Often, participants decided to respond to posts when felt they had something meaningful to add, and if they did not, they would not to respond. In response to a Whisper post about using ADD medicine, Christopher reported that he would likely respond because he had first-hand experience with taking a similar medication. When I asked Isaac if he would respond to the Whisper about asking a professor out, he said he likely would not because he did not "know how to really offer advice on that." After being shown a Snap of a rooster on campus, Katrina said she would respond if she could think of "something positive and funny. I would say something like, this is a morning wakeup call or this is some fresh chicken on campus!"

The decision to respond can also be based on how the participant decided to use the platform. For example, Trevor spoke less about the content of the post in his decision to respond. He said that for the most part, he would not respond to any of the posts, except on Snapchat. And even on Snapchat, he would respond sparingly, based on who sent him something: "Close friends I'd probably respond to. And people that I wouldn't normally Snap, that are not usually close friends, just to see why they'd sent it to me." As I discussed earlier, Trevor uses Snapchat to stay informed about his friends' exciting or out-of-norm activities. He has already determined that the application should be used this way, and he mentioned that he would delete other users who did

not post content in which he was interested. Thus, he does not need to use replying to posts as a way to affirm his interest; simply choosing to friend or follow another user, to him, should be enough.

Considerations When Determining Audience. Near the end of the interview session, I asked participants to walk me through their considerations of audience when composing on anonymous and/or ephemeral platforms. As a rhetorician and instructor, I sought to determine if students considered rhetorical ideas as they posted on or navigated these social media platforms. I was particularly interested in how they identified audience when the audience was not defined, as in anonymous applications, or when they could not rely on archived knowledge, as with ephemeral spaces. Most of their discussions centered on ideas of the users of these platforms themselves; however, some participants noted that the structure and purpose of the application could be a factor in determining the audience as well.

Isaac mentioned that he considered "the most common demographic" on the platform, that is "whoever you consider to be the target audience for the app." For the platforms we discussed, he mentioned that "it'd probably be college students." But for some applications, like TalkLife, an anonymous advice application that he used regularly, the audience had more to do with the purpose of the application. On TalkLife he did not consider demographics but that the application was made up of "a lot of people that need help or want to give others help." He did not identify an audience based on demographics, but instead believed that the clear purpose of the application will draw in users with similar ideas.

Christopher spoke specifically about his experience on Yik Yak when discussing his thoughts about audience:

> On Yik Yak, occasionally I'd try to get people to come to, like, Starbucks. Like, hey, show up, there's people here. Come talk to me. But, for the most part, for the most part, it

was mostly, like, it was mostly just put out to anyone who would listen. I did like the fact that I knew it would be people around here instead of just random dudes who could be anywhere in the world, so, I did, that's about who I thought about as my audience.

Though he mentions that his posts were "mostly just put out there to anyone who would listen," he then references the geolocation aspect of the application. Because of Christopher's knowledge of how the application functioned, he determined that his audience would be local. This local audience made him feel more comfortable in the application. He noted that he felt that he "could complain about local things that people from like say, New York or anything wouldn't quite understand because they didn't, they wouldn't have had any personal experience with it." His perceptions of audience, then, also helped him determine the overall context and what kinds of content he would share on the application.

Unlike Isaac and Christopher, Trevor seemed to think about audience as determined less by the nature of the application and more by his choice of who to follow and/or friend. Because he had not used any anonymous applications, he discussed audience in terms of Snapchat, and said that he considered that his audience will be his group of friends. As mentioned earlier, he believed that content shared on Snapchat should be "something interesting," and he expected his audience to have the same idea. When asked about his posting habits, he said he had posted quite a bit of content over Thanksgiving break, but that usually he did not post often. When I asked why, he replied, "A lot of stuff happened during Thanksgiving, and then it's kind of like, back to the daily routine." Trevor uses the application's friending abilities to curate an audience for himself, an audience that he believes uses the application in the same way he does.

Finally, Katrina had a quite different idea about audience in these spaces. Throughout her interview, she continually mentioned that despite her negative ideas about anonymous applications, the ability to use them was within users' right to freedom of speech. This dedication

to free speech extended to perceptions of audience as well. Because she highly privileged

freedom of speech, she had some conflicting ideas about audience:

> We all post what we want, it's free speech. So honestly you don't have to consider your
> audience unless it's like, I mean, it can be really hurtful. […] People who still disagree
> with having, like, gay marriage. That could still be, that's still subjected to criticism.
> Some things are still sensitive to people. So that's what you watch out for, that's what I
> watch out for. It's hard to say because free speech comes with its down sides. I wouldn't
> want to post anything that would offend anyone. Honestly, I would not. But it is what it
> is.

First, Katrina says she does not believe audience needs to be considered because each user has

the right to say whatever they want. But she struggles a bit with this notion because of her own

desire not to offend someone with the content she posts. So, to some extent, she must consider

her audience in order to determine what types of material she should and should not share. When

I asked her how she determined this, she replied, "The thing is, I have my friends, Snapchat,

Facebook, same friends. First off, they're your friends for a reason. Alright? If they're already

your friends, why should they be critical of what you post anyways?" Like Trevor, then, Katrina

curated the audience she wants in these spaces, and because she did not use anonymous

applications, she did not feel she was ever faced with a time wherein she did not already know

her audience.

Function in Community Formation/Maintenance

My survey results seemed to place an emphasis on community and collaboration rather

than the characteristics of anonymity and ephemerality. Because of this emphasis, I was

interested to see what interview participants had to say about how these applications encouraged

community formation and maintenance. Participants seemed to indicate that anonymity and

ephemerality may, in some ways, increase connectivity. This idea likely reflects some of the

perceptions that the participants had about anonymity and ephemerality in general, especially

those participants who felt that anonymous applications allowed users to be more open and honest and ephemeral applications allowed users to share their lives while in the moment.

When discussing community, Isaac spoke about TalkLife, the application he was using most at the time. He mentioned that he had made several friends on the application and was involved in a long-distance romantic relationship with a woman he met via the application. I asked him why the application helped him to form these relationships, to which he responded, "You're still coming there so you can feel a connection of people, like, coming together on one app or something for a certain cause […] But you can see that after talking to someone for a while, if you can talk to them for a while, you can sort of flesh out who they are as a person." Again, Isaac reaches back to the notion that anonymous applications allow a user to show their true selves. This ability helps relationships and communities form.

Christopher also believed that anonymity allows users to be more open and honest about their ideas, opinions, and lifestyles. But his ideas about community formation and maintenance lied less with this expression of "true selves" and more with the establishment of community norms. As mentioned earlier, Christopher said he tended to respond to posts when he was could participate in running jokes on the platform. Because the platforms he frequented have established norms, users can either communicate within those norms, identifying themselves as seasoned veterans of the platform, or communicate outside of the norms, likely identifying themselves as either trolls or new community members. Regardless, Christopher's brief mention of running jokes invoked this idea of community dialogue, which seems to emerge, in the case of anonymous applications, to aid in providing some sort of identity. Without an individual identity then, this shared dialogue provides a communal identity for members.

Speaking specifically about Yik Yak, Christopher noted that the geolocation feature aided in making him feel like he could connect with other users on the platform. Again, he invoked the idea of shared language/shared experience, saying that users in other locations "wouldn't quite understand" the posts in the campus's local feed "because they didn't, they wouldn't have had any personal experience with it." Because the Yik Yak feed operated in a limited radius, Christopher could identify not only his audience, but also content with which they would be familiar. When he complained about something that bothered him, he could assume that his sentiment would be shared by the local community of college students.

Without any experience with anonymous applications, Trevor, as I mentioned earlier, curated his friends and followers to suit his expectations of the application, in his case, Snapchat. It is entirely possible that the users he allowed in his circle of friends merely reflected the way he used the application, but within other circles they may have used the application differently. His ideas of community beyond his own curated friend group were limited. When I asked him about viewing the Snapchat Campus story, he said he thought it was "cool" because "I saw some people I know on there." Here, Trevor's formation of groups acts as an antithesis to what the other participants have discussed. He does not use the application to feel connected to any larger community of users. Trevor's friends are chosen based on certain characteristics, while Isaac's connections on TalkLife occur by chance and Christopher's online communities must form and learn norms together, rather than selecting members based on certain criteria. While Trevor's use of Snapchat is not wrong, it demonstrates how applications that allow users to friend/follow each other and applications that reach a larger audience differ.

Katrina mentioned that anonymous applications often put users in touch with "groups" of other users, rather than one-on-one conversation. As I have mentioned, Katrina's ideas about

these applications—particularly anonymous applications—seemed to change throughout her interview. While she was fast to condemn these types of applications as "inappropriate," her perceptions changed as she viewed posts (like the Yik Yak depression post) that were unlike those she had seen during her brief use of an anonymous application. She saw the ability to reach out to others, while protecting one's own identity, as a positive attribute for these applications. Near the end of the interview while we were discussing how different groups tend to form on traditional social media sites, she said, "That's what people use a lot of that anonymous apps for too, to just connect with people who are more and more like them. Who feel like they're not connected to these other groups."

While I would not, at first, think of using anonymous applications as way to find people who were "more and more like" the user, I see through analysis of the other participants that Katrina made a valid point. Anonymous applications, because they do not offer individual identities, perhaps make it easier for users to believe that the communities that emerge think and act like them. Christopher, too, made this point, in assuming that just because Yik Yak users were in the same geofenced area, they would share his experiences. Whether this is true is not the point, but the application afforded Christopher the ability to see, in the anonymous user base, a reflection of his individual experiences. The communal norms, the way that users interact and identify as in-group members, reinforce this idea as well, showing a communal whole rather than individual users. Again, this shared communal identity, even as it minimizes users' individual experiences, is not in itself a bad thing. These spaces, for many users, provide an alternative to the traditional social media platforms which emphasize the individual, urging users to portray themselves in an ideal manner.

Conclusion

My initial research project, in which I collected posts from the local Yik Yak feed, enabled me to get an idea about how this local, online community functioned. But as a researcher of this space, even though I was also a user, I could never be truly integrated—I could never know exactly what was going on, as I was viewing content as data rather than simply posts. Though I will never be able to offset my role as researcher, I was able to use the information from my previous research to reach out to student-users. Throughout this chapter, their perceptions have added a great deal of depth to my understanding of these spaces and, I hope, to the fields of technical and professional communication and composition studies.

The survey results show how participants use these applications, what features they privilege, and how they compare their use of these applications with more traditional applications. In these results, I saw a clear focus on community, a privileging of who uses the application and if the participant feels they belong to this group (either a friend group or local group). What was not clear in the survey alone is how anonymity and ephemerality influence students' perceptions. In fact, anonymity and ephemerality seemed to play a small role in students' use and adoption of these platforms. I wonder if participants were so familiar with these central features that participants did not see how the features influenced use beyond surface level.

Participant interviews helped me to begin answering that question, and with the survey results already in hand, I could formulate questions that would allow participants to share their ideas about anonymity and ephemerality. When given more time to think through and elaborate on their perceptions of these applications, participants had much to share about both these characteristics and the applications that emphasized them.

Together, both the survey and the interviews demonstrate the multifaceted landscape of anonymous and ephemeral applications. The survey establishes the context and provides a snapshot of student use at the time, while the interviews help illuminate some of the questions left behind from the survey. Ideas about these applications differ by group, by user, and by situation. But one thing is made clear: a monolithic reading of these spaces discounts the complexity of this rich composing space.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications

In this chapter, I discuss the conclusions and implications of my research about students'

use and perceptions of anonymous and/or ephemeral social media platforms. My research seeks

to continue in the vein of past research in social media studies, particularly in the fields of

composition studies and technical and professional communication (TPC). I focus on anonymous

and ephemeral social media applications because these applications continue to find an audience

among young users, particularly those on college campuses. Even before I began my research

into these spaces, I felt that a more nuanced view of how students navigate these spaces could

hold important implications to those in composition, communication, and social media studies.

Because I sought to follow a critical-reflective research process, I came to this project

with a very loose idea of the implications and conclusions the project would yield. I did,

however, assume that my project would provide implications for three broad groups: instructors

of composition and TPC, content creators and communication designers, and researchers of these

or similar online spaces.

Each of these groups has a vested interest in the participants of this study (college

students), and/or the subject of this study (anonymous and ephemeral applications). This project

yields broader implications than just for college students and these specific characteristics,

however. For instructions of composition and TPC, this project provides implications for

integrating and discussing social media in the classroom. For content creators and

communication designers, this project advocates for considering how platforming-defining

characteristics (like, in this case, anonymity and ephemerality) should be considered when

creating content, considering audiences, and (re)designing platforms. For online researchers, my

project provides a model for future studies in similar research space, but perhaps more than that, it advocates for using critically reflective research practices. Though I outline some of the major takeaways here, I hope that members of each group—and others—have already begun to see implications of this project in their own work.

Implications for Instructors of Composition and Technical and Professional Communication (TPC)

Because the users in this case are students, my research yields several implications for instructors of composition and TPC courses. In fact, all the implications from my research, including implications for content creation, communication design, and research, can also applied in the classroom. In this section, I discuss how my research might contribute to instructors' views of social media spaces and of how social media could be brought into the classroom in meaningful ways.

Articulating Social Media Spaces as Legitimate Composing Spaces

One of the primary goals for this project was to answer the many calls for instructors to view and teach social media spaces as legitimate composing spaces (Verzosa Hurley & Kimme Hea, 2014; Vie, 2008 & 2015; Yancey, 2009). As Vie (2015) notes, "students expect a technologically enhanced educational experience" in the classroom today (p. 34). Thus, even instructors who do not teach courses with an explicitly technological focus will be expected to understand and integrate some digital tools in the classroom. Social media platforms, because most are accessible from a variety of devices and are free to use, are often the digital tools that teachers first choose to bring into the classroom. This project thus attempts to "rearticulate social media against fear- and illegitimacy-based narratives," and to ask students to "think of social

media as real texts worthy of their composing talents and time" (Verzosa Hurley & Kimme Hea, 2014, p. 57).

In demonstrating social media's legitimacy, this project shows how student-users employ several rhetorical strategies in their adoption and navigation of these spaces. As Buck (2015) found in her study of students' Facebook use, students did not always identify these rhetorical strategies in a survey, but these discussions were prominent in interview responses. My project shows something similar: when students are given the time to think about and discuss their use critically, they will certainly do so. This alone has rich pedagogical applications. Buck advocates for talking to students about their social media use, allowing them to discuss not only the content they post but also their process in determining which platform to use at what time and for what purpose.

My project demonstrates the increasingly complex ways in which students navigate these platforms, especially as platforms privilege certain characteristics—in this case, anonymity and ephemerality. While many students adopt these platforms because of the popularity among their friends, family, or local community, they must learn the composing practices of the platform through their individual use. Often, as my study demonstrates, students do not recognize the influence of the platform on the content they compose: survey participants seemed to think that the platform-imposed characteristics factored in little to their use of these platforms, while interview participants talked at length about how these characteristics influenced their content and their perceptions. Interview participants were, of course, given more time and prompting to explore these characteristics. Thus, in a classroom environment, instructors should explicitly ask students to explore and reflect upon how they compose on these spaces, and what factors influence their compositions.

After using these platforms (or participating in the platform-communities) for an extended period, students begin to learn and leverage posting norms of that site (Pigg, 2014), though instructors may need to make this clear by pointing out examples. More active users of the platforms, such as Isaac and Christopher in my study, seem to have more nuanced views of the site. Active users can often discuss both the negative and positive characteristics of the applications, and how those characteristics influenced their individual use as well as the community. Less active users, like Katrina and Trevor, may have a more difficult time articulating their ideas about the platforms, merely because they have had less exposure to the posting norms of the platform.

This comparison is important to keep in mind when thinking about implementing social media into composition or TPC courses. In short, students who have used certain platforms with some consistency can better articulate their composing practices within that space. Too often, courses rely on a single social media assignment or social media unit (see Li, 2012; Melton & Hicks, 2011); however, this project shows that if instructors want students to be able to critically evaluate platforms themselves, as well as their uses of these platforms, students should have some exposure to the platform itself. Thus, social media use can be woven throughout the class itself, used to support research, networking, and communication.

Connecting Social Media Writing and Other Forms

Not every course needs to be a *social media* course, but that does not mean that social media cannot be used to teach other forms of writing. If the goal of the course or of a particular unit is to teach another form of writing, then instructors can make connections between unfamiliar forms by discussing more familiar forms like social media writing, if that comparison seems to fit the class experience. Shepard (2015) notes that the students in his Facebook survey

"are very aware of ideas such as audience awareness and awareness of rhetorical situation," and they may "be enacting skills related to invention and process writing" (p. 94). Bringing social media into the classroom may then provide avenues for discussing rhetorical situation and writing process in general.

My project shows that student-users do consider rhetorical elements such as purpose and audience when composing in social media spaces. These processes are internalized through frequent use of the platform, so instructors may have to spend some time asking students to discuss or write about their processes. Once the writing process is made visible, instructors can apply the ideas and vocabulary they hope to convey. For example, this project demonstrates the complex motions that student-users go through determine whether they will reply to another post. From this process, students can determine what rhetorical moves are most useful for eliciting a desired response on that social media platform. This practice, in turn, could be applied to several other forms, such as memos, proposals, and email correspondence, perhaps by combining it with a writing across contexts or teaching for transfer approach (see Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014).

Incorporating Discussions about Platform Ethics

Instructors may be reluctant to use a controversial application in class, and since so many anonymous and ephemeral applications draw negative criticism, they may not be the best applications for any sort of mandatory use[6]. Because of their rising popularity, however, students may well be composing on these platforms daily (Vie, 2015). Because of this, these types of applications can be useful in discussing ethics, particularly in TPC courses.

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[6] See Brock Carlson (2018), however, for a pedagogical application of Yik Yak.

The survey results indicated that student-users did not frequently use these applications for the popularly criticized uses (such as suggestive images on Snapchat and harassment on Yik Yak). Interview participants, however, had little problem discussing the negative associations of the applications, even when they could dispel some of these associations. That these criticisms exist, and have been shown to be true in many spaces, cannot be forgotten.

Students should be taught to consider the ethical implications of participating a space that allows or even encourages negative behaviors in its participants. Now that Yik Yak is no longer an active platform, students could also consider why this space was ultimately unsuccessful, even despite its early popularity. In addition, students could engage in discussions about the types of behaviors society deems "negative" and how these views influence platform development. Finally, depending on the nature of the course, students could research how platforms are built, from idea to creation, to consider how platform creators view their ethical obligations.

Implications for Content Creators and Communication Designers

My research looks at characteristics that platforms fundamentally prefer or privilege and the impact of those privileged characteristics on the way student-users communicate. Because of the focus on platforms, this research also has implications for content creators and communication designers. These two groups have a vested interest in determining both how platforms operate and how users navigate these platforms.

The multifaceted nature of the term "platform" already asks content creators and communication designers to consider outside forces like advertisers, along with inside forces dictated by the platform owners (Gillespie, 2010; Srnicek, 2017). Social platforms must, first and foremost, encourage socialization; in this project, the influence of socialization is shown as

student-users privilege platform popularity over the specific platform's characteristics. The platform must then build in or plan for some way of satisfying the need for monetization. After providing avenues for socialization and monetization, however, a platform must have some characteristic or set of characteristics that sets it apart from other social platforms. The key to creating content or designing communication spaces within these platforms is being able to meet goals for socialization (and, for some, monetization) while acting within the platform-imposed characteristics.

Considering Platform-Imposed Characteristics on Content Creation

This project considers platform-imposed characteristics and how they shape or limit content, as well as how these characteristics influence users. Interview participants discussed how they adapt to composing spaces with the system-imposed limitations of anonymity and ephemerality. Participants showed that though these system-imposed limitations might not have figured greatly into their adoption of the platform, they influenced the way students used the platforms.

It is important for content creators, individuals or businesses/organizations, to understand that because platforms are designed with certain defining characteristics, these characteristics must be adhered to when creating any content for the platform. Before composing on a certain platform, content creators should understand its core characteristics—not only because the platform dictates it, but because that is what other users expect to see. Content creators must also understand how users navigate these platforms, which was a focus during this project, so that they can create content that keeps in mind both the platform and the users.

Figure 22 shows a simplified version of the content creation process. The content creator must first understand the way the platform works before then understanding the different genres

at play within that platform. Then the content creator can use the knowledge of the platform and a chosen genre to reach the audience.
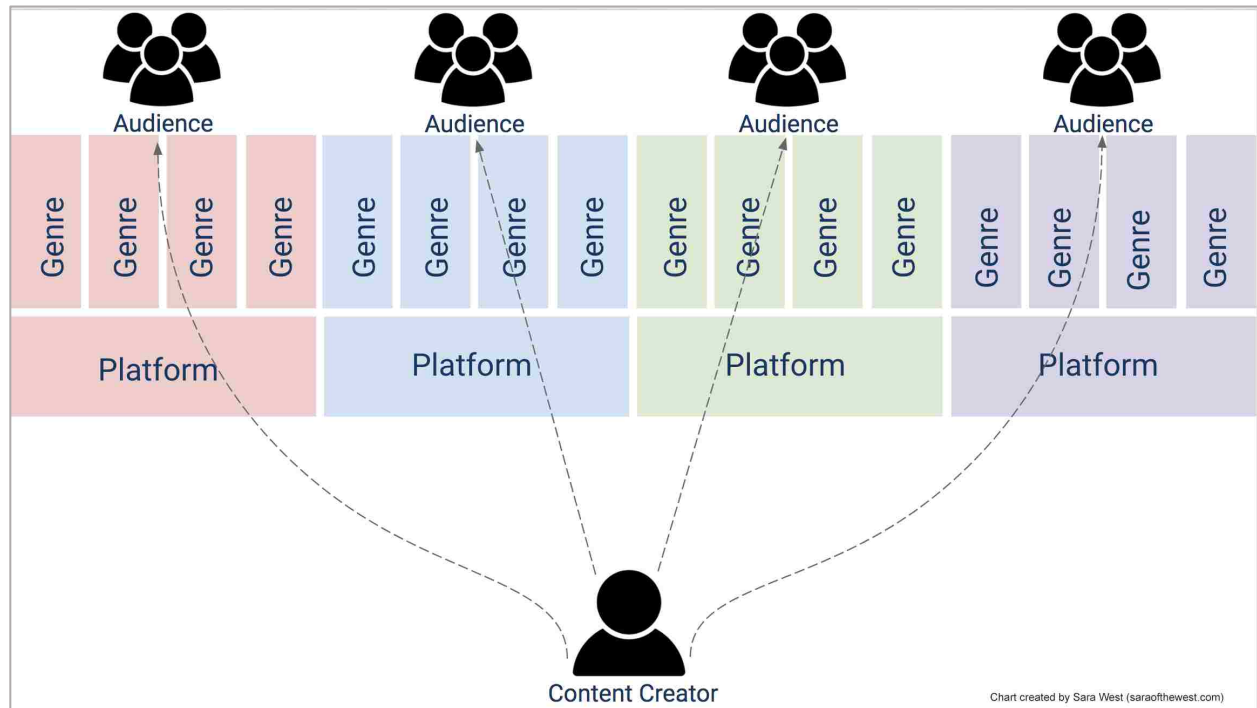
Figure 22. Illustration of the process from content creation to reaching audience.

Considering Platform-Imposed Characteristics on Communication Design

Potential (re)designers of communication spaces like social media platforms should also consider the ways that the platform characteristics will influence the content and users of that platform. In doing this, communication designers should also acknowledge how platforms privilege certain content or certain users (Gillespie, 2010). Designers should consider the impetus for the creation of a new communication space and should seek to understand how users will internalize platform-imposed characteristics.

This project took place during the decline of the once popular application, Yik Yak, which provides an example of the power of these platform-imposed characteristics. Shortly after the platform's decision to remove its core characteristic, anonymity, Yik Yak lost much of its user-base. Though my project implies that many users left the application even before this

change, the undermining of this characteristic solidified Yik Yak's decline and eventual shutdown. For communication designers, Yik Yak's fall demonstrates a case in which users left the platform when the fundamental characteristic dissolved, thus confirming the power of the platform's core characteristic for its survival.

The risk in (re)designing a communication space is often that the designer is seen as a heroic figure that employs user-centered design to deliver victimized users from "unjust tyranny" of bad design, a myth that Spinnuzi (2003) seeks to dispel. My research reinforces Spinnuzi's fundamental argument: that users are already navigating complex systems themselves. Thus, communication designers can learn from ways that users are already adapting to changing technologies and can implement that knowledge in their (re)design of platforms.

To (re)design a communication space, then, communication designers will need to consider the ways that users are already functioning in this or similar spaces. A fundamental concept in communication design is participatory design, or asking users to participate in the (re)design of a space (Getto, Potts, Salvo & Gosset, 2013; Salvo, 2001; Spinuzzi, 2005). To allow for this participatory design, communication designers should understand how users are navigating the platforms, such as through this study.

Implications for Online Researchers

One of the primary goals of my project was to find a way to successfully study student-users in anonymous and ephemeral social media spaces. As discussed, a previous project with Yik Yak showed me that data collection in these spaces was difficult. If I wanted to know how students-users navigated these spaces, I needed to go directly to the student-users. My project should provide online researchers with a model for how to conduct research in areas where content analysis alone seems insufficient. Even if online researchers do not seek to replicate my

study method, however, they may still find the critical reflective method helpful in other research projects.

Providing a Model for Future Research

This project acknowledges the ways new and changing applications circumvent many traditional research methods. As I mentioned while discussing my methods for this project, I did not at first realize how difficult data collection would be when I relied on methods like content analysis. With Yik Yak, it was possible to screen capture posts for analysis, but because posts were deleted when they were downvoted by the community, the screen captures alone could not show the full communicative exchange.

As I mentioned, going directly to the users in this situation is no new idea. But as researchers begin to look at these platforms more frequently, this method of research may need to be considered earlier in the process. In some cases, collecting data directly from the platform is not an option at all. It is also true that in some cases, a researcher could not access the users.

With the mixed methods of project, I could identify users with the survey before seeking interviews. I would recommend allowing survey participants the ability to opt out of each platform they do not use, so as not to dilute results with non-users. Providing users this ability allowed me to be more confident about the results of my survey.

By conducting a survey first, researchers can have a more nuanced view of the research space before conducting interviews. Interviews can then fill in the gaps that the survey will inevitably leave. In my case, I was surprised to see that only a few participants identified the platform's defining characteristics (anonymity and/or ephemerality) as their primary reason for using the platform. While it should not have been a surprise that users adopt platforms based on their ability to be "social" with friends on that platform, the survey simply could not answer all

my research questions. Luckily, I could use the survey to better inform the creation of my interview questions. Thus, interview participants filled in many of the gaps from the survey and provided some comments about their individual experiences with these types of applications.

To other researchers who are dealing with tricky research spaces, I would suggest a study such as this. A broad survey can help establish context and guide the creation of interview questions. Interviews can then expand on the survey results. The combination of methods works well to provide a complex picture of the research space, even when content from the platform is not readily available.

Advocating for Critically Reflective Research Practices

Critically reflective research practices are beneficial to all research projects, but social media research especially, as researchers must navigate being simultaneously researchers and users of the space. In addition, as Gruwell (2018) notes, reflective research provides social media researchers a way to discuss the roles that algorithms play in influencing social media content and users.

By following Sullivan and Porter's (1997) advice for critically reflective research practices, I looked back at my previous project to help form the foundation for this project. While the previous project was successful, it brought up several other questions about how and why students were using anonymous and ephemeral platforms. If I only used content analysis to answer these questions, I would not be adequately acknowledging my position as researcher. And, even logistically, it would be difficult to assume student-users' reasons for using the platform just based on the content they posted there.

With the critically reflective research foundation, I was about to rearticulate some of my goals from my previous project. Sullivan and Porter provide a framework for looking at previous

projects not just as springboards for new projects, but as part of the larger research process. Going back to previous research should not be viewed as merely a revision or, worse, a failure. Rather, looking critically at both current and previous research projects can make for a more critically reflective researcher.

Conclusion and Call for Further Research

As I conclude my current project, I am struck by how many questions that each new project yields. So much about anonymous and ephemeral applications is yet to be explored. The difficulty of collecting data on these applications may well be one of the reasons for this.

My method in this project can provide a model for future research, but it is certainly not the only method for researching these spaces. It is my hope that other researchers can use my method, but even more, it is my hope that other researchers can look at their research process critically and reflectively to establish new ways of studying these spaces. As more studies involving these spaces emerge, content creators and communication designers can begin to think about how to better create and design in these spaces.

In addition, as more instructors begin to integrate or at least discuss these platforms in their courses, I hope that more pedagogical research can point to the best ways to do so. I hope also that instructors can share how their students responded to assignments and discussions that integrated these platforms. My own previous research showed that students are sometimes tentative about social media as part of a course (West, 2017). While students may initially be hesitant, the key to more critical understanding about these platforms is using and discussing them critically.

Social media, in general, offers many opportunities; platforms are always changing or being built. Users, researchers, and instructors alike must deal with those changes, but much of

this is made invisible by our uncritical adoption of new platforms and new characteristics. More research is needed to understand how and why people use platforms, so that we can better instruct students, create content, and understand users.

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Appendix A: Research Compliance Protocol Letters

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

October 5, 2016

MEMORANDUM

TO:	Sara West
	Adam Pope
FROM:	Ro Windwalker
	IRB Coordinator
RE:	New Protocol Approval
IRB Protocol #:	16-08-057
Protocol Title:	*The Challenges of Anonymous and Ephemeral Social Media: Reflective Research Methodologies & Student-User Composing Practices*
Review Type:	☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB
Approved Project Period:	Start Date: 10/05/2016 Expiration Date: 10/04/2017

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (https://vpred.uark.edu/units/rscp/index.php). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 3,500 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

November 23, 2016

MEMORANDUM

TO:	Sara West Adam Pope
FROM:	Ro Windwalker IRB Coordinator
RE:	PROJECT MODIFICATION
IRB Protocol #:	16-08-057
Protocol Title:	*The Challenges of Anonymous and Ephemeral Social Media: Reflective Research Methodologies & Student-User Composing Practices*
Review Type:	☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB
Approved Project Period:	Start Date: 11/23/2016 Expiration Date: 10/04/2017

Your request to modify the referenced protocol has been approved by the IRB. **This protocol is currently approved for 3,500 total participants.** If you wish to make any further modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

Please note that this approval does not extend the Approved Project Period. Should you wish to extend your project beyond the current expiration date, you must submit a request for continuation using the UAF IRB form "Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects." The request should be sent to the IRB Coordinator, 109 MLKG Building.

For protocols requiring FULL IRB review, please submit your request at least one month prior to the current expiration date. (High-risk protocols may require even more time for approval.) For protocols requiring an EXPEDITED or EXEMPT review, submit your request at least two weeks prior to the current expiration date. Failure to obtain approval for a continuation *on or prior to* the currently approved expiration date will result in termination of the protocol and you will be required to submit a new protocol to the IRB before continuing the project. Data collected past the protocol expiration date may need to be eliminated from the dataset should you wish to publish. Only data collected under a currently approved protocol can be certified by the IRB for any purpose.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

109 MLKG • 1 University of Arkansas • Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201 • (479) 575-2208 • Fax (479) 575-6527 • Email
irb@uark.edu
The University of Arkansas is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution.

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Preliminary Questions

Class year:
- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Prefer not to disclose

I identify my gender as…
- Man
- Woman
- Trans*
- Other: [fill in]
- Prefer not to disclose

I am…[select all that apply]
- ☐ White
- ☐ Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Middle Eastern or North African
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ Some other race, ethnicity, or origin: [fill in]
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose

Major: [write in]

In which of these courses are you currently enrolled at the University of Arkansas? [Check all that apply]
- ☐ ENGL 1013: Composition 1
- ☐ ENGL 1013O: Composition 1 Online
- ☐ ENGL 1013H: Composition 1 Honors
- ☐ ENGL 1023: Composition 2
- ☐ ENGL 1023O: Composition 2 Online
- ☐ ENGL 1023H: Composition 2 Honors
- ☐ ENGL 1033: Technical Composition 2
- ☐ ENGL 2003: Advanced Composition
- ☐ ENGL 3053: Technical and Report Writing

Next Section: Platform Usage

Question 1: Which of the following social media platforms do you or have you used? [Check all that apply]

- ☐ Yik Yak
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Whisper
- ☐ Yeti
- ☐ Facebook Secret Message (on Facebook Messenger)
- ☐ Jodel
- ☐ Yodel—Group Stories
- ☐ Shush
- ☐ Secret
- ☐ Whatsgoodly?
- ☐ Candid
- ☐ Kik
- ☐ JuicyCampus
- ☐ Formspring.me/Spring.me (Ask Me Anything)
- ☐ Other anonymous or ephemeral application or website not listed here: [fill in]
- ☐ None of these [Directs to end of quiz]

Next Section: Yik Yak

Question 2: Have you ever used Yik Yak?

- Yes
- No [directs to next section]

Question 3: How regularly do you use Yik Yak?

- Multiple times a day
- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Only when something interesting is happening nearby
- Only when I have a question
- Only when I'm in a new city/on a different campus
- I used to use Yik Yak, but I stopped
- Other

Question 4: If you stopped using Yik Yak, why did you stop using it?

- ☐ I am not interested anymore
- ☐ I don't like that profiles are required
- ☐ It has changed too much
- ☐ My friends stopped using it
- ☐ It's not active on campus/locally anymore
- ☐ I don't have time
- ☐ Other

Question 5: For what reasons do/did you use Yik Yak? [check all that apply]
- ☐ To get local/campus information
- ☐ To ask questions
- ☐ To make sure no one is saying anything about me or organizations that I belong to
- ☐ To meet people
- ☐ To request intimate hookups
- ☐ To discuss personal things I'd feel uncomfortable sharing other places
- ☐ To discuss recreational drug use
- ☐ To chat with people directly with the chat feature
- ☐ Because it is easy to use
- ☐ Because I could be anonymous
- ☐ Because the messages disappear
- ☐ Because most of the other people who use it are local/on campus
- ☐ Because my friends use it
- ☐ Other

Question 6: Have you ever felt personally attacked on Yik Yak?
- Yes
- Yes, and I was called out by name
- No, but I know someone who has been
- No, but an organization I am a member of has been
- No

Question 7: Before Yik Yak's change to required profiles, how often did you share or ask something on Yik Yak that you would not share or ask on a non-anonymous social media platform (e.g, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)?
- All of the time
- Very often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- None of the time

Question 8: Now that Yik Yak requires profiles, how often do you share or ask something on Yik Yak that you would not share or ask on a non-anonymous social media platform (e.g, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)?
- All of the time
- Very often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- None of the time
- I stopped using Yik Yak before profiles were required
- I stopped using Yak Yak when profiles became required

Question 9: Which of the following best describes your use of Yik Yak after their decision to switch to required profiles?
- I still use it, and my profile is not associated with my real information.
- I still use it, and my profile is associated with my real information.
- I stopped using Yik Yak when profiles became required.

Next Section: Snapchat

Question 10: Have you ever used Snapchat?
- Yes
- No [directs to next section]

Question 11: How regularly do you use Snapchat?
- Multiple times a day
- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Only when I have a notification
- I used to use Snapchat, but I stopped
- Other

Question 12: If you stopped using Snapchat, why did you stop using it?
- ☐ I am not interested anymore
- ☐ My friends stopped using it
- ☐ It's not active on campus/locally anymore
- ☐ It has changed too much
- ☐ I don't have time
- ☐ Other

Question 13: For what reasons do/did you use Snapchat? [check all that apply]
- ☐ To share things with others
- ☐ To watch the live stories
- ☐ To watch our campus or local stories
- ☐ To post to our campus or local stories
- ☐ To view my friends' stories
- ☐ To post to my own story
- ☐ To view stories on the Discover feature (sometimes called the "news section")
- ☐ Because it is easy to use
- ☐ Because the messages disappear
- ☐ Because my friends use it
- ☐ Other

Question 14: If you use Snapchat to share material, who do you send snaps to?
- ☐ Close Friend(s)
- ☐ Partner/Significant Other
- ☐ Family Member(s)

- ☐ Distant Friend(s)
- ☐ Co-Worker(s)
- ☐ Date(s)/Potential Date(s)
- ☐ Friend(s) of a Friend
- ☐ I don't send snaps
- ☐ Other

Question 15: How would you characterize your viewing of local/campus stories?
- ☐ They make me feel more connected to the local community/campus.
- ☐ They make me more aware of events in the community/on campus.
- ☐ They make me more aware of locations in the community/on campus.
- ☐ They make me feel sad or more isolated from the local community/campus.
- ☐ They make me feel fear of missing out (FOMO).
- ☐ I don't watch local/campus stories.
- ☐ Other

Question 16: Have you ever used Snapchat to send or receive suggestive material (i.e., for sexting)?
- ☐ Yes, regularly
- ☐ Yes, sometimes
- ☐ Yes, but rarely
- ☐ No
- ☐ I have, but I no longer do because I choose not to
- ☐ I have with a previous partner, but not my current partner
- ☐ I have, but I no longer do because the app has changed and that no longer seems to be the purpose
- ☐ I have, but I no longer do because of privacy concerns
- ☐ I have, but I have now switched to another platform
- ☐ I have received messages of this sort, but I have not sent any
- ☐ I have sent messages of this sort, but I have not received any
- ☐ Other

Question 17: How often do/did you send something on Snapchat that you would not post on another social media platform (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)?
- • All of the time
- • Very often
- • Sometimes
- • Not very often
- • None of the time

Next Section: Whisper

Question 18: Have you ever used Whisper?
- • Yes
- • No [directs to next section]

Question 19: How regularly do you use Whisper?
- Multiple times a day
- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Only when I have a notification
- I used to use Whisper, but I stopped
- Other

Question 20: If you stopped using Whisper, why did you stop using it?
- ☐ I am not interested anymore
- ☐ My friends stopped using it
- ☐ It's not active on campus/locally anymore
- ☐ It has changed too much
- ☐ I don't have time
- ☐ Other

Question 21: For what reasons do/did you use Whisper? [check all that apply]
- ☐ I like to post whispers
- ☐ I like to read what others post
- ☐ I like to use the anonymous chat feature
- ☐ I like that picking photos to match my text
- ☐ Because it seems like a safe space
- ☐ Because other users are sharing secrets
- ☐ Because I am anonymous
- ☐ Because my friends use it
- ☐ Other

Question 22: How often do/did you send something on Whisper that you would not post on another social media platform (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)?
- All of the time
- Very often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- None of the time

Next Section: Interview Option

If you consent to be contacted for an interview about anonymous and ephemeral ("self-destructing") social media platforms, please leave your email below. If you are chosen to participate, you will receive more information via email, and then you can decide whether or not you are able to participate in the interview portion of this project.

If you are not interested, leave this section blank.
[long answer]

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview Portion, Submitted to IRB
IRB Disclaimer: Interview questions will largely be based on the outcome of the survey (which will be conducted first). Contained in this document are sample questions.

Opening Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview portion of this research project. In this interview, you will be asked about your use of anonymous and ephemeral applications, and you will be asked to respond to sample posts made to these applications. This interview should take no longer than 30 minutes. You will be both audio and video recorded, but, as my email said, these recordings will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. Interviews will be transcribed without identifiers and recordings will be destroyed after the research project is completed. Parts of your interview may be quoted in my research project, but you will be given a pseudonym.

Do you have any questions about the interview procedure before we get started?
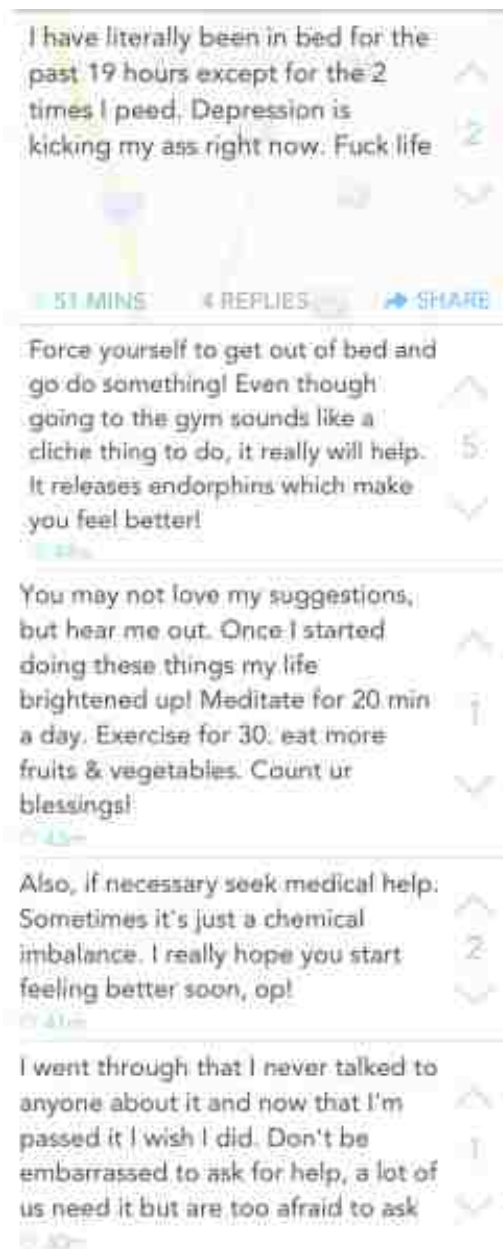
Do you feel comfortable with this process?

Are you ready to move on?

Preliminary Questions
- What anonymous and/or ephemeral social media platforms do you use?
- Why do you use these platforms?
- What are the advantages of being anonymous in online communication?
- What are the disadvantages of being anonymous in online communication?
- What are the advantages of ephemeral text/photos in online communication?
- What are the disadvantages of ephemeral text/photos in online communication?

Discourse-Based Interview Questions
In this section of the interview, I will show participants sample entries from Snapchat, Yik Yak, and Whisper, depending on which of these applications they use. Not all participants will be given the same sample posts.

I have literally been in bed for the past 19 hours except for the 2 times I peed. Depression is kicking my ass right now. Fuck life

2

51 MINS   4 REPLIES   ➔ SHARE

Force yourself to get out of bed and go do something! Even though going to the gym sounds like a cliche thing to do, it really will help. It releases endorphins which make you feel better!

5

You may not love my suggestions, but hear me out. Once I started doing these things my life brightened up! Meditate for 20 min a day. Exercise for 30, eat more fruits & vegetables. Count ur blessings!

1

Also, if necessary seek medical help. Sometimes it's just a chemical imbalance. I really hope you start feeling better soon, op!

2

I went through that I never talked to anyone about it and now that I'm passed it I wish I did. Don't be embarrassed to ask for help, a lot of us need it but are too afraid to ask

1

●●○○○ Verizon LTE   9:42 AM   ⌣ ✈ ◎ 77% ▭

< 　　　　　　　Yak　　　　　　　🚩

The face you make when you travel 150 years into the future and you discover that Donald Trump is the 45th President of the United States.

6

9h 1 Reply

💬 Reply

I have a feeling ol' Honest Abe would have voted for Trump over Hillary. And that's coming from a liberal.
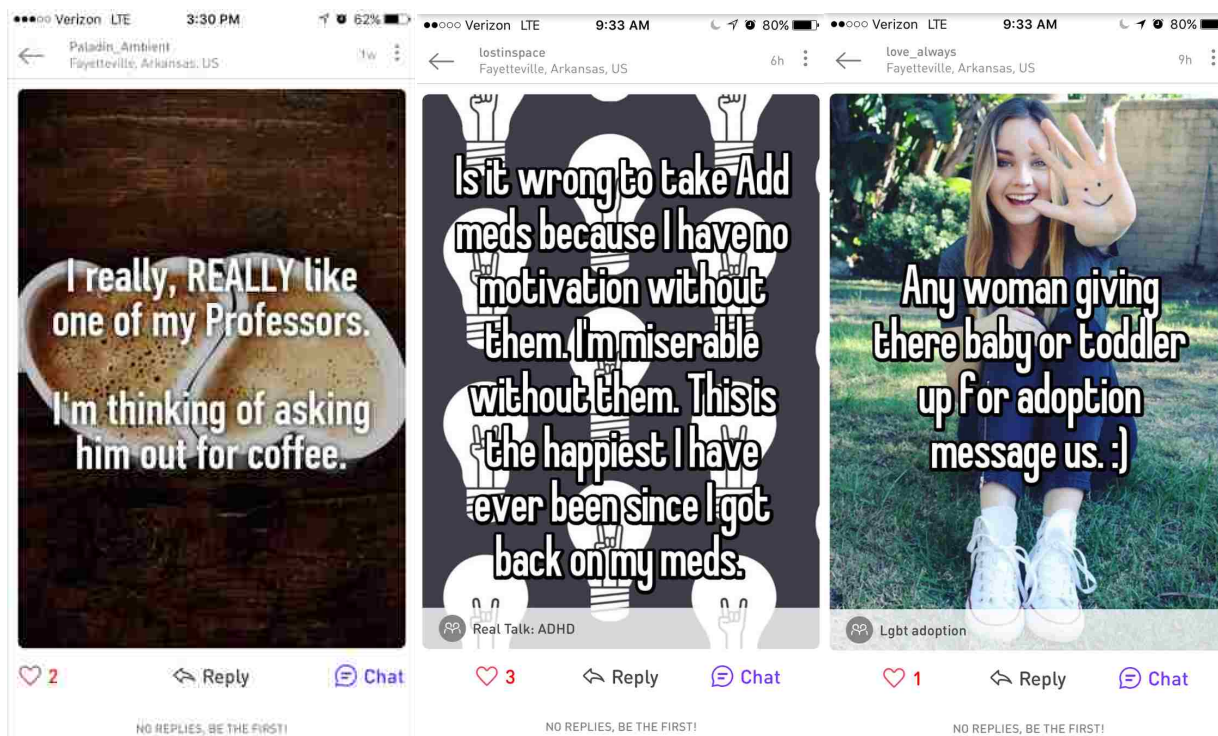
-1

9h

Yak back

- What is your first response to seeing this post on Yik Yak?
- Do you often see posts similar to this on Yik Yak?
- Would you post something similar to this on Yik Yak? Why or why not?
- Would you post something like this on another application? Which one? Why or why not?
- Would you respond to this person's post? If so, how? If not, why not?
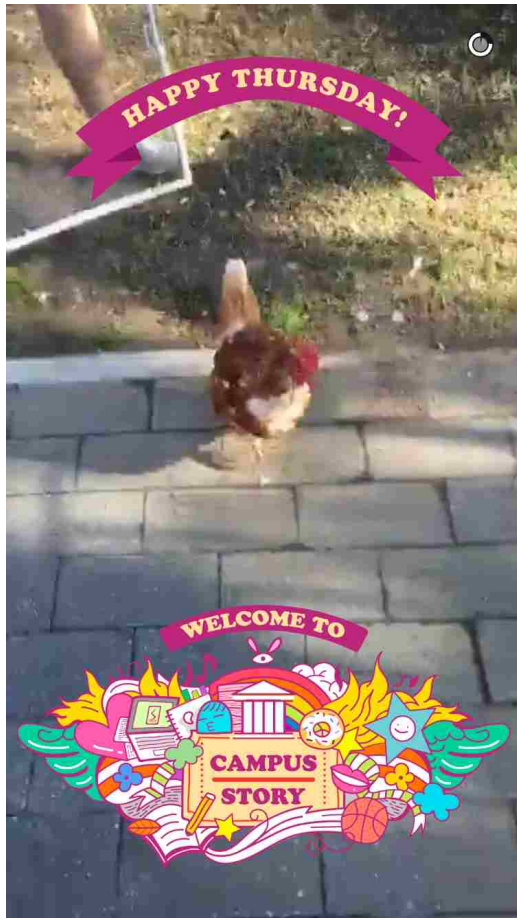
- What is your first response to seeing this post on Snapchat?
- Would you expect to often see posts like this on Snapchat?
- Would you post something similar to this on Snapchat? Why or why not?
- Would you post something like this on another application? Which one? Why or why not?
- Would you respond to this person's post? If so, how? If not, why not?

- What is your first response to seeing this post on Whisper?
- Do you often see posts similar to this on Whisper?
- Would you post something similar to this on Whisper? Why or why not?
- Would you post something like this on another application? Which one? Why or why not?
- Would you respond to this person's post? If so, how? If not, why not?

Connection to My Research Questions
- Do you feel that your use of anonymous and ephemeral sites is different than other social media sites? How so or why not?
- When you post on these anon/ephem sites/applications [will likely name the specific ones we discussed], who do you think of as your audience? Does that influence the way you post?
- Do you feel like the things you post on these sites is a fair representation of you as a person?
- Do you think these types of applications are beneficial or harmful for students?
- When you use [these sites/applications], do you feel more connected to other people on campus? Why or why not?
- Do you think college instructors or administrations could use these applications for anything?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share?