

The Highest Form of Like: Snapchat, College Students and Hyperpersonal Communication

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THE HIGHEST FORM OF LIKE:
SNAPCHAT, COLLEGE STUDENTS AND HYPERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

By

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ABSTRACT
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Marquette University, 2018

The purpose of this study explores how college students engaged with others on Snapchat and how that differed from other Social Networking Sites (SNS). Social Information Process (SIP) Theory was applied as a framework for understanding the effects of time-limited (disappearing) messages and extended conversations that can lead to “hyperpersonal” communication, a form of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) that surpasses the level of affection and emotion of Face to Face (FtF) interaction. In a series of focus groups, college students explained how they used Snapchat and other SNS and the effects it had on interpersonal communication. The participants described emotional interactions with others on Snapchat which they characterized as more authentic and in-the-moment than other SNS and that reflected hyperpersonal communication.

Keywords: Snapchat, Social Information Processing Theory, Hyperpersonal Model of Communication

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Chapter I.

Introduction

In the author's professional experience as Director of Social Media at Marquette University, he has seen a generational divide between college student users of Social Networking Sites (SNS) and older people who do not understand the SNS usage by college students. Snapchat, founded in 2011, is a relative newcomer among SNS, and in a short time it has become extremely popular among current college students, while usage drops off sharply among older demographics (Smith & Anderson, 2018). During the last five years, the author has used Snapchat in a professional capacity to interact with college students who frequently use the app for everyday communication. At the same time, the author regularly interacts with alumni, parents of students and colleagues who express confusion about the appeal of this app for Gen Z.

As Quan-Hass (2007) noted, college students are often the first wave of adoptors of new communication technologies, which an older demographic might struggle to understand. As one student in this study put it: "My parents would see me doing it and be like, 'What are you doing?' And I was like, 'It's a new thing.' And they were like, 'I don't get it; I'll just avoid you.'" However, Snapchat does not need to be a mystery or be avoided if we study it as a form of emerging Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) that can be understood with communication theory. Therefore, this study attempts to share how college students use Snapchat on a regular basis, applying Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory as a framework for understanding, and examining the interplay and effect it has on communication.

Snap Inc., the parent company of Snapchat, lists its mission on the homepage of its website as “reinventing the camera” in order to provide the “greatest opportunity to improve the way people live and communicate” (Snap Inc., n.d.). Snap Inc. asserts that its product contributes to human progress “by empowering people to express themselves, live in the moment, learn about the world, and have fun together” (Snap Inc., n.d.). In fact, Snapchat emphasizes the “sharing the moment” feature of its app, noting that “your best friends” are always “at your fingertips” with “just a tap” (What is Snapchat?, n.d.). These descriptions demonstrates that Snapchat has lofty ideals worthy of further study which could help understand its intended and actual effect on communication. Given the scope of Snapchat’s popularity, it is important to understand its impact and to see how it plays out among its demographic of users.

Furthermore, Snapchat has unique features that differentiate it from other social networks that make it worthy of closer study. Snapchat messages disappear by default and do not exist on a permanent timeline like Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Snapchat also uniquely creates “streaks” – daily messages exchanged between two users for at least three consecutive days. The fire emoji next to a contact indicates a “snapstreak,” or simply “streak,” which is the number of consecutive days of snapping back and forth to another person on Snapchat (Snapchat Support, n.d.). For example, an 18 next to the fire emoji in Snapchat means a user and a partner have both have snapped back and forth with this friend for 18 days. These features by their nature reward frequent bursts of interpersonal communication over a long period of time. Taken together, these are all features that differentiate Snapchat’s mode of communication from other SNS, thus warranting its own focused research.

As such, this study seeks to understand how the factors of ephemeral disappearing messaging and frequent exchanges between individuals on Snapchat impacts relationships of its Gen Z users. Because Snapchat is an emerging form of CMC, the lens of Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory (Walther, 1992) will be used as a framework for research. This theory predicts that the limited social context cues of CMC and frequent exchanges over time creates a Hyperpersonal Model of Communication. As Walther (1996, p. 17) pointed out, hyperpersonal communication is “CMC that is more socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel FtF interactions” because it “surpassed the level of affection and emotion of parallel FtF interaction.” This study views Snapchat’s frequent exchanges and disappearing content as evidence of SIP’s prediction that CMC can result in hyperpersonal communication.

Rationale

This study seeks to better understand Snapchat use among Gen Z college students and how that differs from other social platforms. Scholarly research on Snapchat has focused on features of the app experience such as the ephemeral sharing nature (Bayer et al., 2016), how it can be used for sexting (Poltash, 2012) or even how it elicits jealousy (Utz, Muscanell, & Khalid, 2015). This study, however, seeks to understand Snapchat in the broader communication framework of CMC. Specifically, this study will examine the nature and role of Snapchat use in facilitating social interactions and its function as a social lubricant potentially facilitating hyperpersonal communication.

To fill the research gap, this study uses focus groups to understand how college students use the app to interact with peers through time and frequency to accumulate interactions and develop relationships, and the impressions they form. Focus groups were

used to explore themes because the group dynamic allows participants to express their views and consider them in relation to others, which often results in self-discovery of their own behavior and actions through reflection in other participants (Keyton, 2015). Furthermore, the focus groups setting can be less threatening to research participants to allow for participants to open up and discuss perceptions, ideas, opinions and thoughts (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This study can contribute to our understanding of digital communication in the context of what causes Gen Z to spend so much active time using Snapchat. Findings of this study also sheds light on the importance of the emotional and motivational factors at play with users of Snapchat. Furthermore, the result of this study offers insights on how to better understand how the younger generation selectively uses different SNS.

Preview of Thesis

This study explores the ways in which Social Information Process Theory helps understand and explain the ways college students who are members of Gen Z use Snapchat to relate to their peers. This chapters outlines the context of Snapchat within SNS and provided the rationale for conducting such research to contribute to our overall understanding of communication practices among the next generation. Chapter Two shares the themes of literature examining SNS, CMC and how SIP theory's characteristics have been applied in the past to existing media types of CMC, and the gaps in the research that can be continued to be explored. The theoretical framework of Walther's SIP Theory is presented to analyze communication through Snapchat. Using this literature review and theoretical framework, Chapter Two concludes by presenting the research question and hypothesis that guides this study.

Chapter Three provides a descriptive method of the focus groups conducted to collect data and the interpretive methods used to analyze the data. This includes an overview of the focus group participant demographics that took part in two 90-minute focus groups of college students on their usage of Snapchat. In discussing the procedures used in the study, the focus group interview questions and the interview protocol used in the research are explained as well as the research guidelines that direct the data analysis.

Chapter Four shares the findings of this study. The analysis uncovers five main themes that emerge from applying SIP theory interpretation to the data: a) The unique characteristics of Snapchat's diverse media sharing and friend-adding options, b) the differences between Snapchat and other SNS, c) The importance of time and frequency, d) The mitigating factors of Snapchat that limits social context cues, and e) Evidence for hyperpersonal communication taking place on Snapchat. These themes will be explored in greater depth in each sub section with quotes from focus group participants.

Chapter Five discusses implications of the findings related to CMC and SIP Theory. Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research are also discussed.

Chapter II:

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

Overview of Snapchat

Snapchat is a time-limited instant messaging service (Piwek & Joinson, 2016) that allows users to send text, photos, videos, or a cartoon likeness of oneself – all of which are collectively known as “snaps” – to one or several friends through a mobile app that can be found on iPhone and Android-enabled devices. As part of the CMC landscape, Snapchat allows users to connect with each other through means of a social network site, which Boyd and Ellison (2007) define as:

a web-based service that allows individuals to (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Over the past seven years, Snapchat has grown rapidly to reach numbers comparable to other SNS. Snapchat’s active users were estimated to have grown to 100 million in early 2015, according to Wall Street Journal evaluation (Wohlsen, 2015), and that number grew to 180 million by March 2018 (What is Snapchat?, n.d.). In December 2013 more than 400 million snaps were received on Snapchat every day (Shontell, 2013). To put that number in context, Facebook and Instagram shared the same number of photos combined in the same period (Piwek & Joinson, 2016).

Snapchat defines itself simply as “a camera,” but not in the traditional “flashbulb and lens cap” sense (What is Snapchat? n.d.). In a promotional video in spring 2018,

Snapchat shows an older grey-haired man try to take a group photo from a distance of people sitting still on a couch – but he encounters technical difficulties. A voiceover states, “No, not that kind of camera.” Then the next scenes shows a younger user taking a photo of the group – or “selfie” – on her phone where everyone looks much happier and closer together. (*A New Kind of Camera*, 2018). A description to learn more about the video states that Snapchat is “a new kind of camera that’s connected to your friends and the world” that “people use it every day to talk, play, learn — and take some pictures, too” (*What is Snapchat?* n.d.). The implication from Snapchat’s branding seems to imply that Snapchat is for use among a younger demographic that is more tech savvy and brings groups closer together to have more fun.

Sharing on the Snapchat app works in the following way: The sender creates a single message or sequence of messages consisting of text, photo and/or a video and sends these messages to either one or more individuals on their friend list in the Snapchat app. Snapchat is exclusively a smartphone app available on Apple iOS and Google Android and it is not accessible with a web browser, unlike other SNS like Twitter or Facebook Messenger. These messages can be decorated with hand-drawn doodles, “Bitmoji” or cartoon avatars of the Snapchat user, “geofilters” which display the location or timely events in the vicinity of the sender, or “face filters” which create humorous animations and effects. The sender chooses how long the receiver can view the message before it disappears, which can be set to expire between 1 second or an unlimited time before the receiver taps the message to make it disappear from the receiver’s smartphone. The receiver can also choose to replay a message once, after which it will again disappear from the receiver’s device. In addition, a sender can also choose to post their messages to

a “story,” which includes a list of all friends. These messages posted to the story exist for 24 hours before they disappear from Snapchat as well. Senders can also save their outgoing messages to their “memories,” which are only accessible in the future to the sender. If a receiver takes a screenshot of a message received, the sender is notified that a screenshot was taken. Text or video messaging chat is also possible between individuals or groups, a functionality which enables users to see a Bitmoji avatar indicating whether their friend is active in Snapchat and able to reply in real time.

A unique feature of Snapchat is that these snaps are ephemeral and dissolve after a few seconds or last up to 24 hours, but do not live on a more permanent timeline in contrast to SNS. Thus, in contrast to Facebook and other social media where posts are persistent and visible to a broader audience, the Snapchat app offers opportunities for “in the moment” and more private one-on-one and interpersonal communication, which has been linked to more intimate, personal forms of sharing (Utz et al., 2015). Snapchat’s more private nature of sharing stands apart from other SNS that have been famous for causing privacy controversies. Facebook, for example, has faced privacy concerns from its users throughout its history, including a class-action lawsuit regarding its privacy settings that claims that settings resulted in public dissemination of personal information that was originally private (Vijayan, 2010). The way that Snapchat contrasts sharply in this regard raises the question of what impact Snapchat’s more private, ephemeral sharing has on interpersonal relationships compared to other SNS communication.

This study focuses on Snapchat use by college students who are members of Gen Z, which Pew Research defines as anyone born beginning in 1997 (Dimock, 2018). This population was selected because Snapchat is primarily used by this generation, who

currently make up middle school, high school and college students. In fact, there is a “pronounced difference” in how this generation uses Snapchat compared to the Millennial generation that immediately precedes it (Smith & Anderson, 2018). According to Pew Research (Smith & Anderson, 2018), Americans ages 18 to 24 are substantially more likely to use Snapchat compared with those in their mid- to late-20s, with 78% of 18- to 24-year-olds using Snapchat, but only 54% among those ages 25 to 29. For this reason, Snapchat is much more likely to be a part of online communication of college students than of current post-graduates.

Context of CMC and SNS

To understand Snapchat, it helps to first understand the context of CMC and FtF communication. In the early days of the Internet and computers, it was assumed that CMC was by its nature impersonal or ineffective for interpersonal emotional communication because the medium provided “scant social information” (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991, p. 119). Early users of computers and the Internet were constrained by the limits of their text-based technology, which was contrasted with the rich meaning of body language, voice and facial cues of FtF communication. In summarizing studies from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Rice and Love (1987) pointed out how researchers of the time described CMC as “less friendly, emotional or personal,” “perceived as impersonal” and offering less “socioemotional content exchanged.” In sum, computer communication was thought to be best used for impersonal task-oriented business communication, in contrast to the personal bonding of FtF communication.

However, Rice and Love (1987) also observed in their research that even these text-based constraints could produce “electronic emotion.” They reviewed CompuServe’s nationwide bulletin boards and determined online postings “can facilitate a moderate exchange of socioemotional content.” People were starting to become more personal in their relationships on the early web. In *The Psychology of the Internet*, Wallace (1999) called this “the socioemotional thaw” and wrote that humans had a “drive to get more socioemotional mileage out of the keyboard” to seem more personal. “We adaptable humans are still learning how to thaw the chilly Internet, using whatever tools we can find. Few of us really want to be thought cold, and for good reason...” Wallace wrote (1999, p. 18).

People were inventing an online language with “emoticons” like :p (tongue sticking out) and ;) (winking) to mimic facial expressions and linguistic “softeners” like IMHO (in my humble opinion) and FWIW (for what it’s worth) to mimic vocal pitch. Wallace wrote that these “primitive and blunt” tools were nonetheless helping transform CMC from an “icy landscape” of impersonal communication to allow for “warmer, more socioemotional” expressions (Wallace, 1999). In the subsequent views, CMC was not inherently personal or impersonal. It depended on context such as the purpose of the communication (for idea brainstorming or simply discussing a favorite hobby?) and length of communication (a one-time online interaction or groups that get to know each other over time?). Fulk, Schmitz and Schwarz (1992) argued that the theories that called CMC inherently impersonal are “a dead horse no longer to be beaten.” Research reflected that it was up to the participants of CMC to decide how personal they wanted to communicate using the electronic mediums.

Just as users of CMC can choose how personal to be on those mediums, there is also evidence that people will use different types of CMC to fulfill different wants or needs in communication. Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) asserts that users seek out various media for fulfilling different benefits (Katz et al., 1974). An assumption of this theory is that people have specific goals when they choose one medium over another, and they actively make decisions to optimize their needs and the desires they want to gratify, including desires for information, entertainment, socializing and escapism (Rubin, 1986). This theory helps explain why, for example, the same person might use Instagram and Snapchat for two different purposes. As CMC grew, the diversity of needs it provided increased.

When it comes to SNS usage, age also plays a particularly central role. In the general population, smartphone ownership is highest among young adults with 85% of 18-29-year-olds reporting owning a smartphone (Smith, 2015), while Perrin (2015) reported that 90% of young adults use social media. Further, digital natives who have used this technology virtually their entire lifetime are apt to process information and interact with each other in new ways (Prensky, 2001). This provides a rationale for focusing in on the unique behaviors of the next generation as they quickly adopt the latest technology, which in this current era includes college students using Snapchat.

Privacy has been another issue that arises alongside the topics of CMC and SNS communication, and Snapchat is no exception. Within the bound of CMC, users have had to balance the sometimes competing desires for privacy with their willingness to be open and communicate with others in the SNS environment. Communication Privacy Management (Petronio, 2002) helps provide the basic framework with a boundary

metaphor to distinguish between public relationships and private information that is shared. On Facebook, for example, users have the ability to share both private and public information and then control access to that information to others through privacy settings. The decision whether to disclose private information can be determined by several criteria including, (a) culture, (b) motivation, (c) individual differences, (d) situations, and (e) gender (Petronio, 2002). One study (Pike, Bateman, & Butler, 2009) that examined privacy and self-disclosure on SNS through the lens of this communication privacy management theory found that the more a user believes that other individuals have unrestricted access to his or her information, the less likely they are to self-disclose information through that SNS. These rules may be applied in different CMC contexts, such as Facebook users adjusting their privacy settings or Snapchat users sending snaps to only certain friends on their list. D'Urso and Feldner (2010) assert that college students may decide what private information they wish to reveal based on their needs for similar information they wish to be disclosed from other students in order to “fit in” in this environment.

SIP Theory and Hyperpersonal Communication

Joseph Walther (1992) developed SIP Theory to explain how CMC could rival traditional Face-to-Face (FtF) communication in terms of emotional relationships. His SIP theory asserted that even though the dominant CMC of the time (online forums and email) lacked the nonverbal cues of FtF communication, humans would learn to adapt to develop emotional bonds with others using the tools of language and even develop new cues like emoticons. The overarching assumption of SIP, according to Walther, is that CMC is inherently different from FtF, and thus needs another theory to address how we

process these relationships. A primary assumption of SIP, according to Walther, is that CMC is richer and more adaptable than previous scholars assumed. SIP took aim at some of the research, methodology and findings of scholars who assumed that CMC was one-dimensional or promoted impersonal or insulting communication, and that “other theories of media selection make similar assumptions about the actual or perceived ‘richness’ of CMC compared to other forms of communication” (Walther et al. 1994, p. 462). This primary assumption rested on the notion of CMC being an altogether different type of communication that required a new theoretical framework.

Walther built SIP based on traditions of scholars who asserted that CMC did not necessarily hinder relationships, and in doing so sought to refute theories that assumed that CMC was not at the same emotional level as FtF because it lacked the nonverbals of FtF communication. An assumption of SIP is that the accumulation of CMC messages can develop bonds and close relationships over time, and “the interpersonal effects that are expected to accrue quickly over time in FtF interaction can indeed occur in CMC, but require extended time interactions” (Walther et al., 1994, p. 477). This occurs even if these CMC messages do not have the same interpersonal richness and weight as FtF communication. The assumption is that while a single FtF communication may be deeper than an online exchange, it takes more effort to initiate and maintain FtF discussions. CMC, by contrast, allows for easier initiation and continuation over time, so essentially what CMC loses in multi-channel communication, it makes up for in the amount of communication. SIP theory argues that emotional bonds may take longer to form online because interactions are less rich than FtF, but the rate and duration of online messages

could make up for that and produce hyperpersonal communication, or relationships that exceed FtF in terms of its emotional connection.

It is often said that people will say things online that would never be said in FtF context. That in essence is what is meant by hyperpersonal communication. SIP theory describes a process that may progress from impersonal, to personal and potentially to what Walther called hyperpersonal. Hyperpersonal communication is defined as “CMC that is more socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel FtF interaction,” which could “surpass FtF in some interpersonal effects” due to its emotional content (Walther, 1996, p. 17). For examples of this type of communication, Walther (1996) cited “exceedingly intimate interactions” like “hyperbolic messages” and “excessive affectionate responses” in Usenet groups and bulletin board chat spaces. Walther turned the idea that a lack of nonverbals is inherently a limitation on its head, and instead asserted that the absence of visual cues could produce tighter relationships because people online could fall in love with someone’s mind, rather than someone’s physical body (Walther & Burgoon, 1992). CMC, according to Walther (1996), affords the opportunity for users to “communicate as desired” which he called a human impulse that “can be more easily enacted via technology” (Walther, 1996, p. 33). In SIP Theory, communicators meet their needs in CMC by adapting their messages to get deeper into a relationship.

In the SIP Theory, Walter (1996) summarizes several conditions in which CMC can evolve into hyperpersonal communication. CMC becomes hyperpersonal, according to Walther (1996), when users are self-aware, physically separated, communicating in a channel that has limited social cues that allow them to selectively self-present

themselves, and who construct representations of their communication partners without the interference and intrusion of environmental reality. This allows for the potential for extended interactions and a higher rate of message exchanges than FtF. Walther, Anderson & Park (1994) assert that a critical difference between FtF and CMC is a question of rate of message exchanges. Users adapt their communication behaviors in CMC that allows for this type of communication to be “potentially just as potent over time” (Walther, Anderson & Park, 1994, p. 465).

In addition, due to the “deindividuated” mode of communication (which implies that users have no physical exposure to one another), CMC users can “overattribute” the few cues that they have. Overattribution is defined as building “stereotypical impressions of their partners without qualifying the strength of impressions in light of the meager information... on which they are built” (Walther, 1996, p. 18). This exaggeration leads to “overreliance on minimal cues” that form impressions of others in CMC (Walther, 1996, p. 18). This exaggerating leads users to “maximize our interpersonal effects” (Walther, 1996, p. 33). These conditions do not mean that all CMC will be hyperpersonal – it can also be impersonal or personal – but the right conditions can create hyperpersonal communication if the people involved in the relationship pursue this type of communication.

Scholars have applied CMC-based SIP Theory to research online relationships and its application in an era different from when the theory was first created. Applying SIP theory to communication research, there are two main concepts that inform the studies: 1) The importance of extended time and frequency to accumulate interactions

and develop relationships, 2) and the human adaptability to form strong impressions due to (not despite) a limited-cue online environment.

The importance of time and frequency.

Walther (1992) has asserted in SIP theory that when given enough time, CMC can be as emotional or more emotional than FtF communication, which he called hyperpersonal communication. Over the years, he has applied this idea of extended time producing deeper CMC-based connection to a variety of relationships, even the most fraught situations. For example, one study (Walther, Hoter, Ganayem, & Shonfeld, 2015) applying SIP theory found that Israeli Jews and Arab Muslims who communicated online reduced their prejudices against each other. When revealing these findings, the authors took note that their findings reflected a full academic year, rather than short-term exposure to each other in other studies. Walther contrasts his longer studies with “mixed results from previous studies on inter-group contact via CMC among Israeli Jews and Arabs” that “may reflect the inconsistent appropriation in those studies of the temporal and focal qualities that CMC-specific theories such as SIP articulate” (Walther, 2015, p. 7). This research seems to back up the “when in doubt, give it more time” tenant of SIP theory.

Related to the extended timeline of CMC versus FtF, SIP theory also asserts that messages need to be sent more frequently to accumulate the same level of cues as in-person communication. Using this idea, a study by Walther, Bunz, & Bazarova (2005) set out to create best practice rules for virtual work groups that met only online, not in person. The first two rules centered around time and frequency: Get started right away, and communicate frequently to create more digital messaging, and allow for relationships

to develop. At the end of the study, following these two rules did result in higher group performance from both self-rated and outside evaluations of the group. The results are consistent with SIP theory that predicts hyperpersonal communication with extended time and frequency.

Jiang, Bazarova & Hancock (2010) researched the effects of self-disclosure on intimacy between FtF and CMC, even if the information provided was the exact same in both channels. Researchers created groups of partners who had to come up with tips for college freshmen either in person for 10 minutes or over AOL's text-based instant messenger for up to 30 minutes, in keeping with the SIP model's need for CMC needing more time to develop relationships than FtF communication. In both groups, one of the partners (a confederate) disclosed highly personal information (such as talking about weight gain or divorce), and afterward the participants were surveyed to measure their feelings of intimacy following these candid conversations. As a result, those who received high self-disclosure communication via AOL instant messenger reported higher levels of intimacy toward their partner compared with the partners who received the same messages FtF. The results again support SIP's theory that predicts the hyperpersonal model. So why might this be? That leads us to the next section of SIP's theory about making attributions with limited social context cues.

Forming strong impressions with limited social context cues.

According to SIP theory, people will adapt to the medium of CMC to send and receive nuance in messages, whether it's using ALL CAPS TO SIMULATE SHOUTING, adding emoticons to indicate mood or interpreting the contents of the actual language used. According to SIP theory, lack of cues is not a liability; it is actually quite

the opposite. The limited number of cues forces people to overattribute what they know about someone, and as a result form stronger impressions about someone based on a small number of salient characteristics than they would if they had multiple competing cues in FtF communication. Casey Johnston, a writer for the website The Outline, illustrated the overattribution effect in CMC with the exaggerated-for-effect headline, “If you just message ‘hi’ and nothing else I assume I’m getting fired” (Johnston, 2018). She writes that:

... when my boss [messages] me “hi!”, and only “hi!”, my blood pressure shoots through the roof as I wait for her to say something else and she doesn’t, at which point I enter a catatonic state.

Before she learned the true intent of the message, she tried to interpret what a simple “hi” message meant given the lack of cues, which led her to make a series of overattributions that makes her believe it’s a “trap.” At the end of the article, Johnston reveals that her boss only wanted her to fix a misspelling (Johnston, 2018). This simple exchange over CMC shows how the little information users have access to can create huge implications in interpretations.

This type of hyperpersonal communication has been shown to have effects in a variety of CMC situations. Toma (2010) tested out this model with online dating to see if people trusted someone more if they only knew what someone wrote about themselves, or if they saw a photograph of this person along with text. According to Toma’s findings, participants rated others on the dating website more trustworthy if all they had to rely on was a written description. Adding a photograph, by contrast, caused perceived trustworthiness to go down, because it introduced a dose of complex reality and

moderated the strong feelings that came from only a small number of cues. This finding is consistent with the SIP's hyperpersonal model of communication which says that the small number of cues online produces stronger feelings.

The overattribution concept of the theory can be used to predict how people will react when presented with limited cues. In a study by Spottswood, Walther, Holmstrom, & Ellison (2013), it was predicted in accordance with SIP theory that readers of an online exchange would assume that anonymous messages came from a female if the messages sounded highly person-centered (HPC) – which means they were supportive. In contrast, the same participants assumed messages came from males if they were low person-centered messages (LPC). Study participants assumed gender based on message tone, even if they did not know the person's name or any other information that would help identify gender. This behavior is consistent with SIP's prediction that our brains fill in the blanks online when we have limited cues, using the only information that is available in online communication.

The research of Jiang et al. (2010) focused on the effects of limited CMC cues when a person receives a highly personal message from someone they do not know via Instant Messenger text. For example, in one interaction a research confederate talked about how their life was “a big mess” and they were sick when their parents were getting divorced (p. 68). This type of communication reflects the tenets of the hyperpersonal model of communication with its deep emotional content. Afterward, the research participants were asked to come up with explanations as to why someone would share such personal information with them. For those who encountered this high level of self-disclosure, they were more likely to attribute the cause to their relationship, rather than

other factors as personality or the medium itself. In the absence of additional cues in this study, people online “made more intensified interpersonal attributions when encountering high self-disclosure relative to their FtF counterparts,” which is consistent with the SIP theory that posits people adapt with “inflated attributions” (p. 69) when they have limited cues with which to make judgments.

Other researchers have examined if SIP theory predictions hold true across different cultures. Farrer and Gavin (2009) surveyed users of the online dating site Match.com in Japan to investigate how couples reacted when FtF cues were limited. They found that, consistent with SIP theory, participants made assumptions about others based on the politeness of their language, length of messages and speediness of replies. In this forum, hyperpersonal communication took place with the limited message context cues that were available. Despite traditional Japanese preference for FtF high nonverbal context, online daters were able to take advantage of cues that “differ from but are not inferior to the contextual cues of face-to-face communication” (Farrer & Gavin, 2009, p. 5). These findings bolstered the predictive power of SIP, according to Farrer and Gavin, because the theory that people online will make use of the cues available to them held true despite Japanese communication culture’s traditional FtF emphasis.

Gaps in Available Research

It is important to note that Walther built his SIP theory in the 1990s and much has changed in CMC since then. When the idea was introduced in 1992, CMC meant interacting with others via email and message board forums online, which connected people through the World Wide Web. Over the years, however, the definition and scope of CMC has expanded to include social media like Facebook, blogging on Wordpress and

Blogger, first person perspective on Twitter, peer-to-peer video sharing on YouTube, business communication on websites, marketplace interactions like Craigslist and much more (Mathison, 2009).

Because of this explosion of online content and community sharing, there was a lot of scholarly interest in the early 2000s in “participatory media, online community newspapers, and citizen journalism” (Mathison, 2009, p. 311). The concept of CMC went from a small segment of the population online interacting in limited forums, to the broad scope of society using technology to communicate every day in a variety of ways, from texting a loved one to sending an Instagram boomerang. CMC is everywhere today, with a subsequent impact on relationships. Tidwell and Walther (2002) noted that the rise of SNS allowed users to communicate and make use of the editing capabilities, identity cues, and asynchronous temporal qualities of CMC to engage in self-selecting identity construction behaviors despite the lack of non-verbal cues.

While the SIP theory was designed more than two decades ago to explain relationships that emerge out of emails and online forums, the CMC landscape looks very different today. Walther (2008) noted that technology was rapidly changing, and he felt “forced to ask” how SIP applies to most modern applications at all. He questioned if presence of visual media on social networks makes SIP theory irrelevant. Today, there is more visual media than ever before available via SNS. In the last few years, several social networks have introduced the ability to “go live” with video and interact with others in real time through web cams and increasing through apps. Twitter’s Periscope app, Facebook live, Instagram live and Snapchat’s short video have all created the ability to provide real-time or near real-time interaction between people online.

The elements of immediate interpersonal interaction as well as the rich nonverbal cues that go along with video are the two elements that seem to stand at odds with Walther's original theory – namely that CMC lacks visual cues and, as a result, it takes users longer time to get to know each other online. Does live video and the use of video chatting through apps like Snapchat change everything? Does it mean that SIP theory can no longer account for modern applications, as Walther questioned in 2008? More research needs to be done in the era of highly visual SNS to determine the application of SIP Theory in today's online communication.

Despite the changes in SNS, however, there is reason to believe that SIP Theory is still relevant in today's CMC landscape. Research by Wang, Moon, Kwon, Evans, & Stefanone (2009) suggests that even with the additional imagery now available in CMC, the hyperpersonal model of communication applies when people selectively send and receive photos with limited cues. For example, Wang et al. (2009) found that both men and women were willing to initiate Facebook friendships with fictional attractive profiles of the opposite gender when only limited social context was known. The researchers concluded that visual cues in isolation from other knowledge and context convey “social immediacy and forming initial impressions online” and that “selective self-representation combined with selective reception can foster a heightened sense of affinity even during one-time profile exposure” (Wang et al. 2010, p. 8). Visual cues, it seems, can also produce hyperpersonal communication through overattribution. In another survey of Facebook users (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009), researchers noted that undergraduate users of Facebook disclose more about themselves in an online environment than they do in general in FtF communication. This suggests that Snapchat

and other modern visual SNS can promote hyperpersonalization when compared to FtF communication.

Research Questions

What we mean by CMC is changing. While it was primarily text and emoticons when SIP theory was developed in 1992, CMC when applied to Snapchat now incorporates texting, photographs, video, live-streaming video, emoji, bitmoji, and disappearing messages all in one app experience. However, no matter how much CMC evolves, it will still be mediated and controlled to an extent that is not the same as FtF. While live synchronous video provides more cues than a digital forum of a few decades ago, it does not quite reach the level of all the nonverbal cues of FtF. Apps like Snapchat introduce new formats to CMC.

Therefore, this study applies SIP Theory to Snapchat conversations in CMC. One possibility is the increased rate of messaging through mobile smart phones (instead of desktop computers) along with the additional media sharing options could lead to an even greater level of hyperpersonal emotional exchange. Walther (1992) said that the medium and the rate of CMC could result in hyperpersonal communication that in some ways exceed the emotional exchange of FtF. This research aims to examine Snapchat through the lens of SIP Theory and its predictions of hyperpersonal communication. To that end, the following research questions will help guide this study:

RQ₁ – What basic types of information do college students share via Snapchat?

RQ₂ – How does sharing on Snapchat differ from sharing on other SNS?

RQ₃ – In what ways are social context and visual cues limited on
Snapchat?

RQ₄ – How does time and frequency impact relationships on Snapchat?

RQ₅ – Is hyperpersonal communication demonstrated on Snapchat?

Chapter III:

Methodology

To understand the ways in which college students use Snapchat and how it differs from other forms of SNS, it is critical to go to the source and hear directly from college students in their own words. This section describes the individual participants and outline the procedures used in this study. In discussing the procedures used in the study, the focus group interview questions and the interview protocol used in the research are explained as well as the method that guides the data analysis.

Participants and Context

The author conducted two focus groups with current undergraduate and graduate students of a four-year university. The focus groups consisted of all college students because this is one of the main demographics that use Snapchat (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Participants for this study were selected through the researcher's personal social media, the university's email communication as well as with flyers in the student union. Ultimately, 10 students volunteered to participate in two 90-minute focus groups of five students each. The sampling sought out students who were active Snapchat users through a purposive sampling rather than a random sampling to select cases that will provide rich data (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001). As a result, themes and participant responses repeated independently between groups, which suggests the sessions reached saturation, e.g. the point at which no new themes are observed in the data (Laenen, 2015).

The demographic composites of the participants include 7 females and 3 males, with an average age of 20.7. The participants represented students with majors in

Advertising, Public Relations, Spanish for the Professions, Athletic Training, Marketing, Nursing, Speech – Language Pathology and Journalism. Students in the focus groups also had minors in Marketing, Advertising, English, Arabic, Corporate Communication, Graphic Design, Political Science and Digital media. Race and ethnicity of the participants included Asian-American, African-American, Caucasian, and Hispanic/Latino. All of the participants were of either junior, senior or graduate student standing. Though the study was also open to freshmen and sophomores, none applied for the focus groups. This is possibly due to the fact that the study was conducted in the summer, when most students who are on campus are upperclassmen with summer housing.

Procedures

This section begins with a description of the focus group procedures followed by the methods used to analyze the data to describe the specific procedures used to collect and analyze the data.

Focus group research is used as a “a way of collecting qualitative data, which — essentially — involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions), ‘focused’ around a particular topic or set of issues” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 177). The author served as the lead facilitator of the focus group, along with another researcher as an additional co-facilitator. The interviews consisted of two focus groups in the summer of 2017, following focus group protocols suggested by Krueger and Casey (2000). The focus groups involved in this study meets the suggested protocols that they should include enough participants to yield diversity in information and opinions, yet should not include too many participants because large groups can

create an environment where participants do not feel comfortable sharing their true thoughts, opinions, beliefs and experiences (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009).

Focus groups were chosen as an exploratory method because it allowed college students to interact with each other and help explore their social interactions with other Snapchat users. A unique benefit of a focus group is the group dynamic that allows participants to express their views and consider them in relation to others in the group, which often results in self-discovery of their behavior and actions through reflection in others (Keyton, 2015). The setting of focus groups can be less threatening to many research participants, which allows for participants to open up and discuss perceptions, ideas, opinions and thoughts (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The focus group methodology can create a sense of belonging to the group which can then increase the participants' sense of cohesiveness (Peters, 1993) and help them to feel safe to share information (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996), which is a phenomenon observed by the author in the focus groups for this study.

In addition, because of the lack of research on Snapchat, there is a limited amount of language, key themes and information from which to pull to ask students about their use of the app. As a primary step in research, focus groups helped establish and create a shared vocabulary for the uses and motivations of why Snapchat is used by college students. For example, asking the group about their use of "streaks" with others helped explore the significance of this phenomenon, and if it was worthy of further inquiry. Good research means learning and following where the data takes you, which may be unexpected places.

Scripts consisted of 11 questions relating to the type of media college students typically used on Snapchat (e.g. photos, video and/or text), how the students' compare or contrast them to other SNS, the ability for students to "be themselves" with their authentic moods on Snapchat or Facebook, and the motivation for using Snapchat. After each scripted question, follow-up questions and probing questions were asked to explore emergent themes that were brought up by students in the focus group. The scripts and suggested follow-up questions can be found in the appendix.

Data Analysis

After conducting and recording the focus groups, the interviews were transcribed. The interview transcriptions focused broadly on primarily the narrative themes from the students. As a result, the transcribed interviews do not include non-verbal elements such as pronunciation, emphasis and pauses reflected in each response. The focus of the transcription is based on the content solely instead of the linguistic structure of the responses. The transcribed interviews represented approximately 77 pages of typed, double-spaced data.

This study relies on a constant comparative method of analysis that is used to interpret the transcribed interview texts for key concepts, themes, phrases and words. Each unit of meaning identified in the interview texts then becomes interpreted with knowledge of the researcher's focus of inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), which in this case was the contexts of SIP Theory. In analyzing the text of the focus group interviews, key themes emerged around repeated phrases, words and beliefs from the participants. These themes were then distilled into the following categories: a) The content and type of media used to send to others on SNS and Snapchat, b) The frequency of sharing on SNS

and Snapchat, c) The timeliness and speed of sharing on SNS and Snapchat, d) The lack of social context cues on Snapchat, and e) The sense of authenticity or inauthenticity and emotional connection with other people, which was evidence of hyperpersonal communication. The interviews were then highlighted and color coded to map to these key themes.

Analysis of the data started with the assumptions of SIP Theory, which predicts that CMC can become hyperpersonal due to the factors of time and frequency of exchanges and overattribution due to the limited cues of the medium. To that end, major points, questions, anecdotes and responses were highlighted that emerged from the focus group data. The 77 pages of findings were condensed into categories that reflected time and frequency of message exchanges, the ways that Snapchat limits communication cues, resulting in overattribution, and the evidence of hyperpersonal emotional exchanges between Snapchat users such as crying, laughing or screaming in Snapchat messages.

Chapter IV:

Results

This section reports the results that answer the five research questions with supporting quotes from focus group participants around key findings. Overall, five themes emerged: a) The unique characteristics of Snapchat's diverse media sharing and friend-adding options, b) the differences between Snapchat and other SNS such as Facebook and Instagram, c) The importance of time and frequency, d) The mitigating factors of Snapchat that limits social context cues, and e) Evidence for hyperpersonal communication taking place on Snapchat. These themes will be explored in greater depth in each sub section with quotes from focus group participants in the following section.

This section will not focus on the types of conditions that help produce hyperpersonal communication that are prevalent and common in other SNS, such as the factor of asynchronous communication. While certain factors may be a necessary condition for hyperpersonal communication, they are not sufficient. For example, Facebook and Snapchat have asynchronous communication channels, but Snapchat is the only current SNS that allows for messages to disappear after one second. Thus, only the salient differences in Snapchat that separates it from other SNS will be a focus for the scope of this study. This core difference in the way Snapchat diverges from other SNS will be explored to examine its unique impact. This section will focus on the factors that are specific to Snapchat in contrast to other SNS that help produce hyperpersonal communication.

Note: Where names were used to reduce confusion, all names of focus group participants in the following descriptions have been changed. In other instances, “female participant” and “male participant” are used to identify speakers. In addition, the focus groups did include comments from single participants that could be outliers. Whenever possible, comments and answers that had multiple participants saying similar sentiments or agreeing are included to reinforce the strength of these themes.

RQ1 – What Basic Types of Information Do College Students Share via Snapchat?

In an attempt to answer the first RQ concerning the types of information that students share on Snapchat, focus group participants reported sharing different types of content and media for different purposes. Participants noted the versatility of sharing in different ways depending on the situation or their own mood or personality.

Using snapcodes to add friends.

The diverse types of media used on Snapchat started with the methods for adding friends, which includes typing in someone’s username, adding with a phone number, adding with a stored contact saved on the phone, or scanning a user’s unique code, which is known as a “snapcode.” Each of these types of media played different roles in interpreting the meaning of each other’s relationships.

Focus group participants noted that adding someone through a snapcode seemed more “casual” than asking for someone’s number, which could imply a romantic interest. “There’s like a certain stigma with asking someone for their number – saying like, ‘I don’t really like you like that, I just want your number,’” one female participant said.

“But with Snapchat it’s like, ‘Oh, we’re just friends. I’m just gonna add you through snapcode, like it’s totally fine.’”

Participants noted that the snapcode also made the technical act of adding friends faster and easier. “I think actual typing in someone’s Snapchat name is really obsolete,” one female participant said. “When I first made my Snapchat I thought I set it up as something and I actually spelled it wrong so I was giving out a random person’s name. So people were adding somebody else and I was like, ‘Why don’t I have any friends? But then I figured it out.’”

Another female focus group participant agreed, noting that the unique spelling of Snapchat usernames makes it challenging to add people by typing. “When everyone first got Snapchat too, they put the most ridiculous names and mine was like [username] with like 8 n’s,” she said. “And so when people would add me they would type and I’d be like, ‘One more n.’ It was just dumb. So when the code thing came out, I was like, ‘This is so nice I don’t even need to know what your name is on Snapchat.’”

Short videos and blurry photos.

One female participant noted that while she can send long videos through any medium such as a text message, sending shorter snippets of video through Snapchat was “easier” because it would disappear. “Sending minute-long videos or something – I don’t want those on my phone to like keep forever,” she said. “I’d rather send a 10-second video on Snapchat.”

Some participants noted that they could share photos when talking on video made them “self-conscious.” Participants said they could share a photo with text and provide similar information to a video but without the need to talk. “When Snapchat first came

out and it was like just photos and videos and I was too scared to send a video,” one female participant said. “So I would always just do photos with the one little line of text.” Participants also noted that photos do not necessarily have to convey much visual information; rather sometimes the act of sending a “blurry” photo was the message in itself. “The blurry Snapchat pictures are really funny, just like people smeared a little,” said one male participant. “It makes it look like I’m in the middle of something.”

Bitmoji moods.

The participants also said that the cartoon Bitmoji character would allow them to share moods and feelings without even need to take a photo of themselves. “There’s one where there’s one person laying down on the bed and a person just sitting on them,” one male participant said. “That one’s my favorite I don’t know why. It just adds humor, I guess.”

Quick texting.

The texting function was reported for frequent use for responding to other people’s videos and photos. This was reported that it happens especially in a group chat environment where a lot of people are responding at once. “Let’s say you’re in a meeting or something and then you’re like, ‘Wow 53 notifications in one of these group messages,’” said one female participant. Participants shared that someone sending a snap in a group text warrants a quick response so as not to fall behind the curve, and texting was the most convenient option for a fast reply to keep up with the pace of the conversation. “It’s a little quicker reaction I think,” said one male participant. “(It’s like), ‘Here’s what someone showed everyone, I gotta contribute right away. Don’t have time to take a picture, just gotta send a little lol or whatever.’”

RQ₂ – How Does Sharing on Snapchat Differ From Sharing on Other SNS?

Focus group participants felt strongly that Snapchat stood apart from other SNS in terms of its type of users, functions, privacy, moods and effects. The following section details how participants view Snapchat compared with how they view other SNS, mostly Facebook and Instagram.

Core ephemeral functionality.

Even after Facebook and Instagram started adding the same types of functionality to those SNS, focus group participants shared that they preferred Snapchat's original functions and would be "loyal" to that SNS. Ephemeral messaging was seen as part of Snapchat's core identity and functionality, but a distraction on other SNS. They also noted low adoption rates for the Snapchat-type functionality that started showing up on Facebook and Instagram, specifically that few people were using the disappearing "stories" outside of Snapchat.

"Now when I look to see who's posting on the Facebook stories, there's like two people out of my 1,500 friends on Facebook that actually does it," one female participant said. "Like nobody does it." Participants also noted that Instagram's stories, which disappear after 24 hours, seemed less ephemeral and more prominent than Snapchat. This was seen as a negative compared to Snapchat's messages which disappear once they are viewed or clicked.

"I don't know how to get the stories on Instagram go away and I want them to," one female participant said. "I don't want to watch them, I just want the little bar to go away. On Snapchat, I can just click through really quick and they all disappear." Two other participants agreed. "Now, even if you still scroll through Instagram, the little bar

pops out of nowhere and it's like, 'Oh, don't forget to watch these stories,'" a male participant said, and a female participant finished the thought: "That happened the past two days, and like, 'I didn't watch you for a reason.'" These comments demonstrated that even as other SNS adopted Snapchat functions as part of their repertoire, Snapchat still stands apart because it has made features like ephemeral stories part of its core identity and essential tools for users.

Volume of sharing.

Focus group participants agreed that the frictionless ease and volume of sharing on Snapchat is higher than other SNS because the threshold for sharing is lower, since there are no visible popularity tally such as "likes" on a post on Snapchat.

"On Instagram you have to think of the perfect caption and edit it so it's nice," one female participant said. "There is more effort for Instagram. You want to post for likes. Snapchat is the more the unedited, casual moments in real time. Instagram is more delayed because of the process that goes into posting a photo."

Selfies.

The rise of Snapchat as a popular app coincided with the rise of the "front-facing camera" on later versions of the iPhone such as iPhone 4 and iPhone 4S, focus group participants reported. This meant that the camera was on the front of the camera, making it easier to frame a photo pointed at the person's own face, also known as the selfie. The focus group participants expressed reluctance to post too many "selfies" of themselves on other SNS, but this was more accepted on Snapchat because the photos disappeared. As one female participant explained:

The front camera was the main component for it. The concept of a selfie was blowing up and Snapchat took leverage on that and decided that they would own the selfie. It gave people an app to send selfies all the time. It made sense. I wouldn't send a selfie in a text message all the time and this app makes it so much easier and it disappears. I can have a really gross face and no one will really see it (after it disappears).

For focus group participants, Facebook was seen as being used for an older age group than their own, in contrast to their peers on Snapchat. "I thought it was an old person thing even though I know it's supposed to be like college students," said a male participant. "I thought it was an old person thing that they did for business and they say employers can check it out." In contrast to the "older" populations of Facebook, Snapchat was seen as the college students' peers and friends. "I think the people on your Snapchat are your peers," one female participant said. "That's why it's not as hard to be myself because your peers are very similar to you and do the same things you do."

Privacy.

Privacy was seen as a concern on other SNS because it is more open and public than Snapchat and has an older, potentially more conservative audience. One female participant called Facebook "more of a networking site." "You want to stay more professional on your Facebook because there is more adults on Facebook that might see you. I am less myself in that sense. It is more of the surface of who I am," she said. "I only ever share stuff on Instagram that's like the good ones, the PG ones," another female participant agreed. Focus group participants showed concern in particular for what relatives or future employers might see on Facebook, which caused them to self-censor

and post less on that SNS. One female participant said she was “super paranoid” and “so afraid” that others might see “something bad.” She recalls an instance at a friend’s New Year’s Eve party where she and her friends were drinking Welch’s sparkling grape juice, and a friend “posted something of me chugging it.” “I was freaking out,” she said. “I was like, ‘Take that down! Someone’s not gonna hire me!’” The same person shared that privacy is still a concern on Facebook:

I still do that. I have to watch what I do on Facebook because, I don’t know, employers are there, families are there, aunts and uncles, the distant ones are there. They just kind of assume that your whole life is on Facebook even though it’s such a small part of your life. I remember I think it was freshman year of college, people said if you want a job, you gotta clean up your Facebook! And it’s just become a habit. If you’re tagged in a really inappropriate picture, just untag yourself. Make your tagged pictures private, that’s what I did, because I don’t want anyone to see that. So it’s like a habit now.

Another female participant said that she had to remind herself that she could now post photos on Facebook of herself going to a festival where beer was sold, where previously she would have self-censored herself on that SNS.

I just turned 21 on Saturday, and as of Sunday, that’s when I started liking all of the festivals that were happening. There’s one beer one tomorrow or Friday or something. And it’s like, oh I can like this now because everyone can see that I liked it now, and they didn’t see that I liked it before. Because I feel like my grandpa is gonna see and be like, what are you doing going to this event? That’s how I feel, someone’s gonna see this and say, she’s an alcoholic.

Focus group participants emphasized that these privacy concerns outweigh sharing concerns on Facebook and other SNS, but they have a more open mentality on Snapchat. “But that’s just like Facebook though,” one female participant said. “It’s different on everything else.” A male participant agreed, calling Facebook a “judgmental zone.”

Authenticity vs. perfection.

There was also a sense among focus group participants that Facebook and Instagram requires a “happy face” or inauthentic front that is not present on Snapchat. Other SNS are more of a carefully curated presence of positive accomplishments and happy photos for friends, family and distant relatives to see. One male participant shared how he posted an article he had written for a local website “so that aunts and uncles and, like, old English teachers could see it.” One female participant shared an anecdote about how she sometimes felt “phony” posting only certain pictures to Facebook:

A lot of the times I’m posting pictures and albums and stuff like that, and it’s like I choose specifically which ones go in there. So it’s like, Oh it’s a happy picture of me with friends. And things that make me look positive and stuff. You know? And I guess in that sense there’s a little phoniness to it. You want to have a good Facebook, because people Facebook stalk all the time, I feel like that’s the main use of Facebook now. It’s like that or tagging friends in memes and putting mass amounts of pictures.

A male participant agreed, saying that Facebook and Instagram are about “nostalgia” – an archive of documenting milestones like graduation and birthdays – while Snapchat captures the “casual” here-and-now moments only for the here-and-now. He

characterized Snapchat as more about sharing the moment while Instagram and Facebook are more about documenting as a scrapbook:

Snapchat is more in the moment. We have this idea of “Instagram worthy” which is similar to Facebook like scrapbooky and something that you want to look back at. Facebook and Instagram are more for special occasions. Snapchat is more in the moment, look at this crazy thing that’s happening in the world, etc. I think it is more of a daily use whereas Instagram and Facebook is more the beacon of how you want to be perceived.

In contrast to the “special occasions” and “happy face” of Instagram and Facebook, focus group participants shared that they frequently shared a wide range their authentic moods from angry and venting to happy. One female participant shared how she would share herself crying on Snapchat:

Sometimes I’d be watching a show and I’d be so emotionally invested, and I would go back, like pause it, go back, record it and “aughhg.” Sometimes I’d be like, “I’m crying,” and a lot of random letters after that. Or like sometimes they’d hear me screaming in the background. I don’t know, I just get really invested in my shows. So like, I guess sometimes my emotions get the best of me, and I feel like I have to show this to someone who has already seen it and they would totally relate.

Another female participant agreed:

I agree with that though. I’ve screamed on Snapchat before because of anger. Because I’m telling my friends, “This is what just happened to me, and it’s ridiculous. I would like scream at the video. I’ve cried on Snapchat. There would

be Snapchat stories of me where I'm just laughing, like why are you doing that? Like, I can't post that on Instagram or Facebook, they'll think I'm psychotic. I definitely post it on Snapchat because it's just my friend group and it's not like anyone's gonna respond to me and say, like, "Oh yeah, Ha." No one's gonna be like, 'Are you okay?' Because it's just Snapchat.... I think it is a release. It feels kind of good to let a hundred people know.

Not surprisingly, given the privacy concerns and self-censorship that focus group participants reported taking place on SNS outside of Snapchat, they also reported that they felt more that they were themselves and authentic on Snapchat. "I don't feel like anybody's judging me if I post something on Snapchat as opposed to like other social media outlets," one female participant said. "Even if I post something on my story, it's not like they're gonna judge me like, 'Oh yeah she did this and she did that.' It's never really like anything bad. And I don't have to put up a front because the people I have on Snapchat are the people I chose to have on Snapchat." When asked if they agree with the statement, "I am myself on Snapchat," focus group participants enthusiastically agreed:

I agree, 100% [with the statement "I am myself on Snapchat."] If you are comparing to other apps like Instagram, you want to make yourself look pretty on that but, out of all the apps I am most authentic on Snapchat just because it is showing what I do every day. If I was at an event wearing a formal dress and looking nice that is more something that I would post on Instagram where more people would see it whereas Snapchat is more of the day to day.

A male participant said that the difference between Snapchat and other SNS is the need for perfection and the acceptance of the imperfect. "Snapchat's brand sense is that they

want the imperfect, perfect,” a male participant said. “Instagram wants the perfect picture worthy person but Snapchat wants that imperfect conglomerate of a mess which adds up to something else.”

Small circle of friends.

The concept of choosing a small group of close friends on Snapchat was another theme that came up that differentiated it from other SNS. “It’s kind of just a mass of friends on Facebook,” one male participant said. A female participant shared how Facebook felt like a popularity contest. “I got (a Facebook account) right before high school or in eighth grade and setting statuses was big thing and seeing how many likes you get was huge in the earlier years,” she said. “I remember it being a big thing to add friends and people wanted to have as many friends on Facebook as possible.” Another male participant said that Snapchat, in contrast, is “closed off” and public to “a hundred people at the most,” which was seen as a much smaller number than the amount of connections on other SNS. A female participant said she has many more friends and followers on Instagram and Facebook than Snapchat, because ““I am not going to be friends with someone on Snapchat who is totally removed from my daily life. I don’t want them to see what kinds of personal things I am up to.” Another female participant agreed:

I don’t really understand people that try to get mass followers on Snapchat. It doesn’t make any sense because you’re just posting on your story, for who? I think I saw something on one of those BuzzFeed articles like, “How to Get More Snapchat Followers.” That would be like, how to get more friends? Like, I only add my friends.

In summary, focus group participants drew a designation between the more intimate group of friends on Snapchat contrasted with the more open extended network of other SNS.

RQ₃ – In What Ways are Social Context and Visual Cues Limited on Snapchat?

A core assumption of the SIP Theory is that CMC has limited social context cues; that it is less rich than FtF communication. According to SIP Theory, this lack of social context cues makes people overattribute and provide more weight to the social context cues they have available. On the surface, this assumption might seem like it's no longer relevant because CMC provides a much richer multimedia experience compared to the largely text-based language of the 1990s when SIP Theory was developed.

However, the focus group participants shared several examples of how Snapchat limits the amount of social context information you can receive at one time through the unique features of the app, which in some ways differs from other SNS. For example, the ephemeral messages quickly disappear, which participants said allow for sharing just short snippets and small slices of life at a time. One male participant described Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat as “three independent children.” He said he wants them to “play nicely with each other” but they should do their own separate things. He said that unlike the other platforms, Snapchat should be for “in the moment” sharing, which limits the scope of the information that is shared. Another male participant noted that the presence of a “screen” will always provide a “barrier” that allows others to “misconstrue things,” or in the language of SIP Theory “overattribute” certain cues. This section will share the

focus group's results of how Snapchat's unique features limits social context cues, leading them to overattribute.

Comparative lack of features.

Focus group participants disclosed that Snapchat is more "simple" compared to the relative "complexity" of Instagram and Facebook. "It's lighter and an easy way to communicate without starting a full-blown text conversation," a female participant said. A male participant noted that Facebook has stories, Messenger and news feeds, which can add up to a lot of cues for the user to take in. Instagram stories also added stories on the top and bottom of the feed. In contrast, Snapchat has essentially one button to push to take videos or photos, or view images. "It's attractive because it's easy, just one button," this male participant said. The user taps and swipes to interact with Snapchat, which limits the amount of cues and information the user can take in at once.

Absence of quantitative status symbols.

Focus group participants were quick to point out that the lack of "likes," comments that are visible to others and the lack of a tally of friends on Snapchat played a big role in limiting the types of feedback they get on a post or their feelings of overall popularity. One female participant put it succinctly: "(On) Snapchat, you can be more yourself because people can't see how many likes you're getting." A male participant agreed and added that "it is more engaging than other platforms and I think part of that is the no numbers aspect of it. There is no popularity component because the people that you have on it should already have your back."

When asked how many friends the focus group participants had on Snapchat, no one knew the number. "I don't know because there is no way to tell," a male participant

said. The quantitative measure of validation through number of friends is not an aspect to Snapchat. This lack of this visual popularity cue – which is highly prominent on all other SNS – allows the Snapchat users to relax and focus on other aspects of the interpersonal relationships.

Short bursts of content.

Another of the ways that Snapchat limits the amount of social context cues is through allowing users to share short snippets of text, photos and short videos of the type that they would not normally share on other SNS due to the fact that Snapchat made sharing feel easier and more convenient. One female participant stated simply that Snapchat was the “best and easiest way to communicate with my network” due to the convenience factor, due to that the photo being “not as permanent as sending a photo in a text” and all her friends being readily accessible on the app.

Participants shared that sending quick snippets on Snapchat was preferable to sending something longer or more polished or permanent on another medium. One female participant noted that this convenience factor was the first thing she noticed about Snapchat when she started using it. “I wouldn’t send a selfie in a text message all the time but this app makes it so much easier and it disappears,” she said. Due to this convenience factor of Snapchat, the type of content that normally gets shared shifted to new types of content.

This increased sharing translated into higher volume of shorter bursts, focus group participants reported. As one female participant put it: “I don’t want to be that person that has the hour long story.” Another female participant reported that sending short messages like “a 10-second video” was something she did instead of sending “minute-long videos

or something I don't want on my phone to keep forever." In fact, focus group participants reported that sharing longer content was frowned upon or skipped. One female participant shared how she stopped watching videos if they were too long:

Like, my roommate is one of those people who has like a 500 second long thing. It was my freshman year roommate and I wanted to be supportive and watch her stories and stuff but then [Snapchat] stopped telling me how long [snaps] were [due to an interface redesign]. And then I kind of was just like, "Okay no sound, I'm just gonna skip through it," kind of a thing. And then sometimes, I would turn off the sound if someone's at a concert and just like 500-second snaps, like no.

Due to this perceived social expectation that shorter and quicker content is better on Snapchat, some cues are naturally limited.

Casual content.

The focus group participants often characterized their content as "funny," "dumb" or otherwise less serious and involved than other SNS. A male participant said he "never liked doing like the vlogging thing," referring to edited YouTube videos, but that he preferred to "take a snap and put text over it or something or draw something, that's my favorite way to use it." Similarly, one male participant said that he uses Snapchat for "stupid and funny things" that otherwise would not normally show up in other SNS platforms. "I love Snapchat for the dumb things," he said. Focus group participants contrasted the amount of time and effort that they put into a message sent on a SNS that lasts compared to the type of media shared on Snapchat. The Snapchat messages were more casual and relaxed in their limited context, compared to the more formal or polished communication of sharing on other SNS.

Streaks.

Focus group participants shared that they often sent quick photos to maintain streaks. One female participants said she sends photos of her toes as “streak” photos. As one male participant put it, “no one wants to see your face all the time.” Others reported that people send blurry pictures in order to send something quick. “I see a lot of blurry pictures from my friends and they are like, ‘Streak it’s gonna go away soon,’” one female participant said. A male participant concurred, saying that a blurry photo means “Hey streak bro, like come on, look at this or respond.” These photos do not share much social context or information, but they served a larger purpose of maintaining interpersonal contact over time. As one female participants said, these limited-cues photos let others “know that you’re alive.”

Focus group participants also equated being “in the moment” in Snapchat with being less conscious of all the other cues that you can present on a SNS like Facebook. One male participant gave the example of being able to “like” the page of Barnes and Noble as a signal to others that he likes books. Since Snapchat is free of those contexts, he said, he is more free to focus on the message of what is happening in his life at this moment. Another male participant gave a helpful analogy: “Facebook’s like, here’s an album of what I did in the summer. Snapchat is like, Here’s what I’m doing today, at the beach right now.”

RQ4 – How Does Time and Frequency Impact Relationships on Snapchat?

Starting with the moment people add each other on Snapchat, timing and the frequency of message exchange played an important role in moderating relationship cues. Participants noted that timing is important when it comes to adding someone through

saved contacts in your phone also had to be someone you already knew well. One male participant said there was a “statute of limitations” between getting someone’s number and adding them on Snapchat. “Like, I got this person’s number like three months ago, just because we worked together,” he said. “Should I just add them out of the blue, is that weird?” In terms of timing, participants shared that adding someone as a Snapchat friend by snapcode was the “least awkward” way of making friends because it is “in the moment.” This section will share the feedback of focus group participants that addresses the fourth research question, How does time play a factor in impacting relationships on Snapchat?

The focus groups participants highlighted how both the extended time of exchanging messages and frequency of messages played a role in their relationships on Snapchat. There were numerous reasons for the high-volume of exchanges over an extended period of time. A big factor was the disappearing nature of Snapchat, which allowed for timely “in the moment” sharing. The ephemeral nature of the images and video also meant that it does not take up space on people’s phones, which allowed for a higher volume of sharing. Finally, the nature of Snapchat’s streaks function encouraged ongoing sharing between individuals on Facebook to continue the daily interaction.

Streaks are a unique phenomenon that emerged as a driving force in encouraging sharing among the focus group participants. One female participant shared that people who have streaks longer than 365 days “care so much” that they will go to great lengths to continue the streaks. “When we were abroad some people literally gave their Snapchat to their friends so they could log on and keep up their streaks,” the one participant said.

Another female participant shared how going on a one-day retreat without phones created anxiety among those who had streaks. “Everybody was like ‘Oh my God, save the streak!’ before we got it back the next day,” the participant said. While one participant found going to great lengths to preserve streaks was “too extreme,” the participants agreed that continuing a streak can be a great motivator to continue extended conversations with others over time.

Deeper relationships.

Participants reported that starting a streak is a strategy to start an extended conversation with someone and a deeper relationship. After starting a streak, those you communicate with frequently show up on a “best friends list” that encourages even more communication. A male participant said that streaks provide a way to “track how much communication you’ve had with certain people recently.” This participant reported that he would “casually” send messages to someone in order to establish a streak. “If you don’t have a streak with someone yet and you really want to make one... you just pretend you are casually snapping,” he said. Over time, this can develop into a deeper relationship. “One time, I started talking to one of my friends more and he was on my best friends list and I was like, ‘How did this happen!’ Then I snapped him more for the sake that he was at the top of my list and then I talked to him more and we’re better friends now I guess,” this participant said. The focus group participants reported that streaks open up an avenue to continued frequent interaction.

Participants reported that, over an extended period of time, streaks could strengthen the bond of relationships with people they were already close with. One female participant, Hannah, reported that she made a pact with her best friend after they

reached a streak of 365 consecutive days of exchanging messages. They decided to continue a streak “for life” that they were not going to break “unless severe injury or death.” However, the streak was broken when Hannah studied abroad and didn’t have access to an Internet connection for more than a 24-hour period, which results in her not able to send a message to her best friend. Hannah’s friend then “got really freaked out” and sent a message to a mutual friend to make sure Hannah was fine. “She was like, ‘Hannah wouldn’t break the streak,’ so it was kind of a way for her to make sure I was alive.” Hannah reported that she felt a sadness from this loss of connection after this daily interaction ended with the streak. “I kind of missed it, at first when it happened I was really really upset,” Hannah said. “After that I was like ‘OK, this is OK,’ and then I kind of missed not hearing from her every day.” This demonstrates as the SIP Theory shows that extended interaction can be a powerful tool to build relationships in CMC, and the streak function provides an avenue for this type of ongoing interaction.

RQ5 – Is Hyperpersonal Communication Demonstrated on Snapchat?

As noted earlier in this paper, the presence of certain conditions in CMC can potentially produce hyperpersonal communication, according to SIP Theory. As the preceding themes highlighted, Snapchat does exhibit the effects of limited social cues and frequent and extended communication that can produce hyperpersonal communication.

Evidence of overattribution.

Starting with the way that users add friends on the app, Snapchat users already displayed tendencies to overattribute significance to small cues. For example, adding someone through snapcode while “face to face” was deemed “casual” by focus group participants. However, adding someone on Snapchat that you previously had in your

contacts was seen as taking an extra step of potentially having deeper feelings for this person.

“If you come back a couple days later and then add somebody you’re like, ‘Oh, so they’re still thinking about me, OK,’” said one female participant. A male participant agreed that it could be a subtle hint but important signal to this person. “Like, ‘I got this person’s number like three months ago because we worked together, should I just add them out of the blue, is that weird?’” he said.

An overattribution to the meaning of streaks was also evident. The use of streaks created a sense of bonding among focus group participants through the simple act of exchanging a daily message. Overattributing the central role of a streak may cause users to attach a deeper importance to the relationship. For example, for the student who maintained a 365-day streak with her friend “unless severe injury or death,” the streak became a symbol of their ongoing relationship. When one person ended the streak, the other friend “got freaked out” and assumed something more serious had happened to this person because she “wouldn’t break the streak.” In reality, the streak ended simply due to a lack of wifi. Another male participants used streaks as a cue for determining his relationship with “girls I’ve dated before or something,” and asked himself when they maintained a streak “why am I talking to this person much lately?” This limited cue – a fire emoji next to someone’s name – became an opportunity to overattribute deeper meanings to the relationship.

Snapchat also provides small hints of cues in its design such as emojis next to names that indicates a “best friend” status, or shows how receives have interacted with the message through viewing, replaying or screenshotting. This provides opportunity for

the senders to read into these messages and overattribute certain meanings. For example, Snapchat allows users to replay one message from one person every 24 hours. When someone replays a message, the sender gets notified with an emoji that the person replayed their snap. Focus group participants reported that having someone replay their snap makes them feel special since users do not want to “waste” their limited replay ability. “Getting that emoji next to their name saying somebody replayed their snaps that makes them seem more important,” said one female focus group participant. The way that Snapchat users read into the smallest symbols, actions and emojis in its design creates the overattribution effect that is necessary for hyperpersonal communication.

Authentic communication.

Another theme that came up with the focus groups is Snapchat is more authentic, personal and less judgmental than other SNS. This is also how Snapchat seeks to position the perception of its app. In a promotional video, Snapchat described itself as a camera “where how you feel matters more than how you look,” while showing people take snaps of brushing their teeth, hanging out with their dog or waiting for the bus (Snapchat: A New Kind of Camera, 2018). The implication seems to be, at least from this promotional video, that Snapchat is for the more mundane but personal moments that you want to share with friends. The focus group participants confirmed these feelings. On Snapchat, focus group participants reported that they felt like they could be more themselves, display more vulnerability and express emotions more freely. These emotions are all consistent with the hyperpersonal model of communication, which asserts that people can exchange intense emotional content via CMC. These conditions were all readily apparent with the focus group participants.

Consistent with Snapchat's goals, focus group participants expressed that they could be themselves on Snapchat in a way that they did not feel on other SNS. One female participant said that when she's sending "this really ugly picture" of herself, then "I feel like that's more personal." On Instagram and Facebook, she felt like "Oh my family is gonna see this." In contrast, "Snapchat is like, it's me. I am not gonna be covering anything up," she said. "If I'm gonna post something on Instagram or Facebook, it's gonna be family friendly, it's not gonna be a really ugly picture of myself." Another female participant noted that she felt more confident sharing photos that were imperfect on Snapchat. "I feel more confident taking an ugly picture of myself, like with double chins or something," she said. "I'm not gonna be like, 'Oh my God, they are gonna make fun of me.' Now it's like, 'Oh, it's on Snapchat, whatever.'"

Lack of social judgment.

A positive association with Snapchat among participants was that it was largely free of unwanted social judgments that they felt existed on other SNS. "There is less judgment on Snapchat," one female participant said. This was in part tied to the lack of cues that indicate popularity on other SNS. For example, the participant said that on Facebook people can tell how many friends you have, and on Instagram people can tell how many likes you receive on each photo. Neither of those signs of popularity – and therefore potential negative judgement – exist on Snapchat. The participant noted that the only publicly available number ranking on Snapchat is your "Snap score," which shows how much you use the app, not how many friends you have or how popular your posts are to an audience.

Participants noted that they do not even know how many total friends they have on Snapchat because “there’s no way to tell.” This, in turn, created a feeling of emotional closeness, rather than a popularity contest. The participants shared that this lack of judgement allowed them to feel more emotionally connected to others, and strong emotional connection is a characteristic of the hyperpersonal model of communication.

Participants also noted that they could tailor the type of snap to the person receiving it, and the type of cue they wanted that person to attribute. While “ugly” photos were reserved for close friends, participants also reported spending more time developing higher-quality photos for potential romantic relationships. “With my friends I don’t care what I look like,” one female participant said. “But if I’m sending it to a guy that I like, it’s gonna be cute.” Another female participant said that her friends she was hanging out with could tell she was sending a photo to a potential romantic interest based purely on the amount of time she was spending on the photo. “It’s always funny when your friends can tell when you’re sending it to someone you like, they’re like, ‘Why are you putting so much effort into this? Who are you sending this to?’” she said. This type of behavior is consistent with the hyperpersonal model of communication’s overattribution of limited cues, in this case a photo that takes more time to create.

Individualized personal messages.

Another hyperpersonal aspect of Snapchat usage is sending messages directly to individual friends, in contrast to sending it to a wider audience of all your friends or followers like the default setting on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Snapchat users have the option of sending a message to one friend, multiple friends or all of their friends, with the latter option known as a “story.” This creates more personalized, individual

conversations than sending to a larger group of people. “I usually have a lot of different conversations with different people so each of those snaps are different,” one female participant said. “I usually just send [a snap] to my best friends list – I think that’s seven people,” another female participant said.

Focus group participants shared a preference for getting these individualized messages over messages that went to a larger group of friends. “You wouldn’t post something private on your story or send something to your story that you think is embarrassing that you only want your close group of friends to see,” one female participant said, noting that she uses private Snapchat messages more often than stories. A female participant noted that “you just present yourself differently” when you can select different people who get different messages tailored to them. “I can send this to [one person] and my friend Jeff at a specific time because they know me differently. Then I can send this picture to another two people because they know me differently. Whereas [on] Facebook is like you all have to know me [in one way],” the participant said. A male participant estimated that about 70% of his Snapchat messages go to individual friends, instead of all friends on the story. This participant shared that others may get upset if you send a message to an individual that also shows up for more people on your story. “Some people get upset with me when I send them a snap directly but also post it to my story, which sometimes I don’t like either,” he said. “Pick one or the other. Either I’m special or I’m not.” A male participant agreed that “the one on one aspect” creates “really authentic conversations.” “If you’re like really exhausted or something, you can’t hide that,” he said. “You just naturally take a picture of yourself and if you’re really exhausted or angry or something, it just comes through even if you’re not trying to

show it, really. So I think it's, aside from stories, I think your emotions are pretty authentic on Snapchat." Overall, this shows that the aspect of sending direct messages as a practice on Snapchat created the conditions of emotional connection, which is consistent with the hyperpersonal model of communication.

Starting conversations to deepen relationships.

Focus group participants shared how it was easier to enter into a conversation on Snapchat versus a more "formal" way of communicating like texting or other SNS. One male participant stated that "If somebody randomly texted me, I'm gonna feel a little bit alarmed, like what's wrong?" He said that it would seem unnatural to "text them and say what's up, what's going on" without a pretext. Another female participant concurred that a text out of the blue would feel like it's reserved for emergency situations, like someone going to the hospital. In contrast, Snapchat was a medium where they felt comfortable starting a conversation without the need for additional subtext. This situation then creates an avenue for additional deepening of the relationships between users.

Focus group participants noted that Snapchat's design helps facilitate more interpersonal interaction because there is no like, thumbs up, heart or other reaction buttons. Instead of simply clicking a button to show approval like on other SNS, if users reply on Snapchat they have to send back something that they take time to write, photograph or film, which takes more thought and personal touch. A male participant noted that a simple photo of food on Snapchat can be an opportunity to bridge into further conversation. "It's like, 'Oh man, where's that pizza from?' Then we'll have a conversation," he said. "If someone posted like a restaurant, 'Those wings look amazing, where are you?'"

A female participant shared that having others reply to her stories makes her happy. She called that “the highest form of like.” “One girl replies to [a snap I post] every single time and it makes me so happy and I don’t know why,” she said. This feeling is in keeping with the hyperpersonal model of communication of emotional content.

Ultimately, the overall net effect of extended and frequent bursts of communication was a feeling that moods were more authentic on Snapchat, which resulted in hyperpersonal communication characterized by exchanges of authentic, emotional content. The focus group participants affirmed this finding in response to direct questions:

Moderator: To what extent do you agree with the statement: I am able to convey my authentic moods and feelings on Snapchat?

Male 2: 100%

Female 3: 100%

Male 1: 100%

Female 2: 90- 100%

Female 1: 100%

Female 3: It has more of an effect, seeing someone’s face with their emotions.

Moderator: Why do you use Snapchat?

Male 1: It’s never not a good time. It’s never not something relevant. There’s never not a time when you can’t celebrate someone else or someone can’t celebrate you.

Chapter V:

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

As a Director of Social Media in a marketing and communication office, the author's career has revolved around explaining social media to people who often find it mysterious and perhaps even dangerous. Common reactions include social media is a "waste of time," "only for narcissists" or the catch-all "I just don't get it." One female participant in this study summed up a common sentiment when she shared this anecdote: "My parents would see me doing it and be like, 'What are you doing?' And I was like, 'It's a new thing.' And they were like, 'I don't get it; I'll just avoid you.'" The author's experience was similar in that older generations who were not well versed in Facebook, Twitter or Instagram found it something to be feared or avoided.

Snapchat is no exception to these sentiments from the uninitiated. It can seem, on the surface, to be a waste of time for selfie-taking narcissists or sexting teenagers. But there is no denying that Snapchat is extremely popular with millions of highly engaged young users. When Facebook offered Snapchat billions of dollars and brands started jumping on the bandwagon, it was validation that this SNS should not be ignored. In this study, the author sought to build an understanding of Snapchat through research. From the eagerness that students in the focus groups displayed with sharing their experiences and helping others understand how they use Snapchat, it appeared that older generations have not taken time to actively listen and understand Snapchat from the perspective of the younger users. This lack of understanding is a missed opportunity to relate to a younger

generation who use Snapchat to communicate in ways that are personal and fulfilling to them. Snapchat is no less meaningful to this upcoming generation as web forums, AOL Instant Messenger and e-mail were to previous generations whose communication practices were explored and explained through SIP Theory. This next generation deserves to be understood and taken seriously as well. To that end, the following are conclusions from the study findings.

Snapchat has redefined CMC.

The Snapchat generation is increasingly influential online, and communicators would be well-served to pay attention to the trends. As stated at the beginning of this study, what we mean by CMC has changed over time and continues to evolve. The rise of massive mainstream SNS like Facebook and Instagram have ushered in a new way of communicating. However, the next wave of SNS users in the form of college students and Gen Z have embraced a way of communicating that seems like a backlash to the Facebook era. Today's college students seem turned off by the way their parents, grandparents and aunts and uncles communicate on SNS, and so they are choosing a different path – a path that has been taken before by early Internet users.

The way that college students use Snapchat seems like it hearkens back to the days of message boards when SIP Theory was first introduced. This study shows that there can be vast differences in how people interact through CMC in the era of Facebook and just a few years later in the era of Snapchat. This research has shown that, in some ways, Snapchat has more in common with the early days of CMC than it does with SNS like Facebook and Instagram.

At the time of the development of SIP theory, CMC was a new method of communication. Walther (1992) developed SIP Theory in part to explain a type of interacting with others that never existed before, which is to say through computers. With Snapchat, communicating exclusively through phones with disappearing messages is another new type of communicating that differs from SNS like Twitter and Facebook. It makes sense to evaluate Snapchat as a new form of CMC, but it may also make sense to focus on the impact of mobile communication in the era of ubiquitous personal digital devices. Previous generations experienced SNS through a computer. The reason SIP Theory and hyperpersonal communication exists is because of the first C in CMC – the computer. But increasingly, the phone is replacing computers for digital communication, especially for this younger generation. The author's own children, ages 8 and 4, are far more adept at using a phone than using a computer.

This shift has changed the type and quality of information that gets shared on a regular basis through mobile devices. Snapchat was one of the first apps that identified and took advantage of this sea change. Rather than retrofitting a website onto a phone – as was the case with Facebook – Snapchat was built for mobile communication from the start. This has allowed it to focus to a far greater extent on impactful video and photos as well as selfies that convey moods, feelings and emotions. The immersive design of Snapchat also plays a factor in how the receiver obtains these messages. Rather than taking up a section of the screen, Snapchat fills the entire phone that brings people into each other's world. Instagram, another early mobile-first application, still adhered to web design standards in its early days by making its user interface a scrolling feed. Snapchat, by contrast, used the entire phone screen and transformed the user experience to mobile-

native tapping and swiping to navigate. Snapchat is not merely sharing information on a different medium. The term CMC may need to be expanded to include MMC, or Mobile Mediated Communication. With Snapchat, the mobile medium has become the message.

Snapchat is perceived as “more authentic.”

How does sharing on Snapchat different than other SNS? In a word, Snapchat is seen as real. There’s a meme on social media that at a birthday party, the photos at the beginning of the night are for Facebook to show the individual in a sober state to friends and family, the photos from the middle of the night are for Instagram to show an extended friend group how much the individuals is having a great time, and the photos from the end of the night are for “true” friends on Snapchat who understand “the struggle” at the tail end of a party. In each case, all three are examples of self-presentation. Because Snapchat is the only one that shows beyond the public persona, it is deemed by college students as being more authentic and true. The ephemeral nature of the images make Snapchat and ideal SNS for college students to feel like they can truly be themselves with a smaller group of true friends.

While Facebook, Instagram and Twitter encouraged sharing publicly and broadly, Snapchat is about sharing more intimate moments with select people. For example, the current president of the United States, who is a member of the baby boomer generation at age 72, uses Twitter as a primary medium of communication to share with a mass audience. The goal of Twitter for President Donald Trump is to reach as many people as possible to establish a narrative about his policy and his image to his more than 50 million followers, and the news outlets who follow and report on his tweets. The idea on Twitter, with President Trump and others, is to go viral and reach a broad swath of

people. In contrast, Snapchat is about communicating foibles, vulnerabilities and authenticity to a small hand-picked group of people. This behavior on Snapchat is a throwback to the early days of CMC, when participants communicated on niche message boards or groups and talked individually with small groups of friends on email. Snapchat, in a way, is a throwback to the early days of CMC and SIP Theory in its self-selected private sharing.

In a theory of self-presentation, Goffman (1959) differentiated between an idealized self, or a “social self,” in comparison to a “flawed” or “realistic” self that expresses genuine qualities (both positive and negative) and exhibit more behavioral variability. In terms of SNS, Snapchat seems to reflect the “realistic” self, while other SNS represents the social self. Students reported that outside of Snapchat they are expected to share the perfect photo in the perfect setting with the perfect pose and the perfect caption on other public-facing SNS, especially Instagram.

Kyle Stock (2018) described the Instagram public persona as “a parade of self-indulgence—a life over-edited and ultra-shared.” He describes someone on Instagram as follows:

Young, distracted and styled just-so, Anissa Kheloufi is part of a growing genus of Instagram junkies. As the 21-year-old flits around the Paris suburb of Saint Ouen, she’s incessantly snapping photos and videos. Usually they’re of her friend Cynthia Karsenty, who preens for the camera in swanky clothes ranging from high-waisted shorts and pin-striped jumpers to big, fuzzy slippers.

Generation Z performs this role of social self on Instagram because it is a learned behavior that has become a norm. “On Instagram you have to think of the perfect caption

and edit it so it's nice," one focus group participant said. "There is more effort for Instagram. You want to post for likes." Posting for the likes, popularity and approval of an extended network is the essence of the social self.

In her book *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness*, Melissa Dahl (2018) shares an example herself of the effort it can take to post just a single photo on Instagram:

"On election day in 2016, in particular, I must have taken dozens of selfies before I settled on one to post to Instagram. 'Why does it look like you voted in a park?' one of my more observant friends asked me later in the day. I was embarrassed. It looked like I voted in a park because the lighting by the church where I actually voted was incredibly unflattering, so I stopped in a park for a better-lit selfie later that morning. Her comment made me cringe, because it was a reminder of all the ridiculous work it takes to be the effortless, authentic person I want to appear to be online" (p. 44).

Dahl also cites a *Washington Post* article about the day in the life of a 13-year-old who meticulously curates an Instagram feed:

"There are only 25 photos on her page because she deletes most of what she posts. The ones that don't get enough likes, don't have good enough lighting or don't show the coolest moments in her life must be deleted. 'I decide the pictures that look good,' says 13-year-old Katherine Pommerening. 'Ones with my friends, ones that are a really nice-looking picture'" (Contrera, 2016).

As these examples illustrate, impression management in the digital age takes a great deal of time and effort. Not only do members of Generation Z have to manage what people think of their FtF image, now they have multiple online platforms that require

careful image crafting, curation and upkeep. However, in the midst of this highly-edited digital existence, students reported that they could be themselves on Snapchat. They could take “the ugliest selfie,” as one student put it, and it would be fine. These moments would be for their real friends, and it would be private because of the ephemeral nature of Snapchat. These postings are intended to be a digital glimpse just for a moment into a “flawed” and “real” self. As one of the college students explained: “I feel more confident taking an ugly picture of myself, like with double chins or something,” she said. “I’m not gonna be like, ‘Oh my God, they are gonna make fun of me.’ Now it’s like, ‘Oh, it’s on Snapchat, whatever.’” In this way, Snapchat has created a niche sphere of digital sharing.

In an age when the ubiquity of digital media can create intense pressure to maintain a “perfect” online public image, Snapchat can serve as a sort of release valve to be less than perfect. No one can manage the perfect image all the time. Yet there is intense pressure to be perfect both online for this generation. In response, they flocked to a niche of a social network where imperfection and awkwardness is the norm, and even celebrated. “Instagram wants the perfect-picture worthy person,” one of the focus group participants said. “But Snapchat wants that imperfect conglomerate of a mess which adds up to something else.” So young people have a choice. They can be a version of themselves on Facebook or Instagram, or their “real” self on Snapchat.

Snapchat limits the number of cues.

A common refrain from well-meaning adults to the younger generation was to be careful what they post on social media because it could come back to haunt those who posted it. Younger users took this advice to heart, and started using an app that deleted all their postings by default. This feature that protects privacy also has the effect of creating

an environment with a limited number of cues. Simply visiting a site like Facebook.com on the computer or opening the Snapchat app shows how differently these SNS encourage users to interact on the platform. On Facebook.com, there are countless options: A user can share a status update, create a photo album, react to a friend's post with six different reaction buttons, search for a friend, click on shortcuts and menus on the left side, view advertising and sports scores on the right side, or countless other actions. In contrast, opening the Snapchat app introduces the users to an almost entirely blank screen with a camera, and viewing other people's snaps takes up the entire screen. This limits the experience of someone using Snapchat into certain parameters.

To be sure, an app that shares predominantly photos and video was not what Walther had in mind when he wrote about the limited cues of text-based communication online. However, Snapchat has introduced its own version of constraints and limitations to its app. It may be a different medium, but the effects are the same. In the end, the users of message boards and Snapchat are each served up a limited number of cues with which to interpret their world. Whether interpreting the meaning of an emoticon or a selfie that disappears after two seconds, the user has to come to conclusions about the person and the relationship of who sent the message.

Snapchat's frequent communication builds relationships.

For decades, the telephone was the latest technology that allowed people to stay in touch with quick phone calls. As the commercials suggested, this technology allowed people to virtually "reach out and touch someone." Years later, Facebook would develop an early feature called the "poke" to start a conversation with someone. Today, the technology that produces these same ends

is Snapchat's streak. The technology has evolved, but the end result is the same: Encourage short but frequent ways to foster conversations in order to sustain connection between people.

For Walther (1992), the ability in CMC to communicate frequently over time helped reinforce an environment that fostered relationships. At that time, that meant "logging on" to the World Wide Web to participate in discussions several times a week, daily or even multiple times a day. Today, that ability has greatly expanded with the ubiquity of mobile devices that prompt users with a notification every time there is an incoming message. Furthermore, Snapchat's unique streak characteristic adds to the time and frequency effects by encouraging regular and sustained contact. In this way, the effects that Walther wrote about in CMC are greatly amplified. Today's young people are hyperconnected, with the potential to develop their relationships through constant digital contact.

The hyperpersonal communication as defined by Walther (1992) may be impacted by having your connected device on at all times. The hyperpersonal communication of the early CMC era could be transformed today into hyperconnected hyperpersonal communication.

Snapchat's hyperpersonal communication.

The conditions for hyperpersonal communication appeared to be ripe in the 1990s and again today in the form of Snapchat. From the focus group results, themes emerged that reflected the factors of SIP Theory and its prediction that CMC – and in this case Snapchat – can produce hyperpersonal communication. Specifically, focus group participants highlighted the frequency and extended duration of their interactions, the

limited cues of interacting with others on a platform that supports ephemeral messaging, and the outcome that reflected the emotional content of hyperpersonal communication. In many ways, it seems like Snapchat was designed with SIP Theory in mind to specifically induce hyperpersonal communication in the way it deletes messages, encourages streaks, and dangles enticing ways to overattribute small cues like emojis in front of users.

Ultimately, hyperpersonal communication satisfies relationship needs. Schlenker (1985) proposed that “people are more satisfied in particular relationships and situations” when “their desired identity images are supported, validated or elicited” (p. 93). It is rewarding to self-disclose vulnerable personal feelings that get validated, and Snapchat provides that outlet. Snapchat allows people to interact in emotionally satisfying way that they cannot always indulge in other SNS. To that end, people seek out hyperpersonal communication on Snapchat because it is desirable for relationships.

The findings suggest that the SIP Theory is still relevant in terms of Snapchat decades after it was created to explain CMC. These findings also suggest that there is something unique that makes it in some ways more similar to older forms of CMC than other modern SNS. To sum up the thoughts of participants, Snapchat creates the circumstances where Gen Z can share their authentic moods and their authentic selves for small slices of life, from tears of anger, the joy of celebration or the mundane moments of a dull day in an ephemeral text, photo, video or Bitmoji. Over time, the sum of these frequent interactions add up to, in one participant’s phrase, “the highest form of like.” This “highest form of like” is a way of expressing hyperpersonal communication in today’s medium of SNS communication.

Limitations and Future Directions

The primary limitation of this study is the homogeneity of the small number of participants that all came from the same university with slightly more female participants than male. Further study could follow up to see if similar findings held true across a younger demographic of middle school and high school Snapchat users. In addition, like all SNS, Snapchat is an app that updates and redesigns its interface. A major update to Snapchat's interface in early 2018 changed some aspects of how users interact with each other and could have an impact on communication.

Another potential limitation to the findings is the impact of Instagram appropriating many of the features of Snapchat, including filters and ephemeral messaging. At the time of the focus groups, Instagram was in the early stages of implementing these features. In the time that's passed, such features being adopted elsewhere could potentially make Snapchat less unique and less relevant as a stand-alone study. At the same time, the dissemination of Snapchat's features could also mean that it is more relevant overall to CMC and requires a larger study across platforms. Another limitation is that only the author coded and interpreted the transcript. There was no outside validity check.

As the use of Snapchat rises and continues to be an important part of Gen Z relationships, there is a growing need for the academy to study the interpersonal impact of this SNS and also to understand its similarities and differences compared to the broad array of CMC. This study represents an attempt to achieve this understanding of how Gen Z uses Snapchat and how its unique characteristics can lead to hyperpersonal

communication. As with many research projects, it only scratches the surface and leads to more questions related to Snapchat changes and use among different demographics. This study adds clarity to an often misunderstood SNS while at the same time points to additional questions and features of the SNS that need to be explored.

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APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion on Snapchat. My name is Tim Cigelske. We are interested in your views to find out how you use Snapchat and how that compares and contrasts with other social media platforms. Our focus group will last no more than 90 minutes. You're welcome to leave if you feel uncomfortable at any time, and you are welcome to skip any questions that you don't feel comfortable answering.

Before we begin, let me suggest some things that will make our discussion more productive. Please speak up--only one person should talk at a time. We're recording this session because we want to ensure that we do not miss any of your comments. Keep in mind that we are interested in both negative and positive comments. There will not be any names attached to your comments in our later reports in order to assure your confidentiality. If anyone wishes to withdraw, please do so now.

My role in this discussion is to ask questions and listen. I will not be participating in the conversation, but I want you to feel free to talk with one another. I will be asking about 10 questions, and I will be guiding the discussion from question to question. In these discussions, there is a tendency for some individuals to speak out often and for others to not say much. Please know that it is important from us to hear from each of you, as you each have different experiences and opinions.

Before we get started, I would like you to carefully read through a form that describes your rights as a participant in this study.

(Distribute consent forms and give students time to read it.)

Do you have any questions?

Next, I'd like you to complete a demographics form, which will also be kept confidential. As noted in the consent form, it will be stored in my locked office.

(Distribute demographics forms and then collect consent and demographics forms.)

Thank you so much. Before starting the focus group, I'd like you to know that there are no right answers to these questions. I want to hear everyone's responses, and it's absolutely fine if you disagree.

Focus group questions

1. I'd like to start by asking what types of messages do you send on Snapchat? In other words, do you use photo, video, text, etc?
 - a. LOOK FOR: Photos, video, texting, bitmoji, stickers, calling, etc.
2. If you could pick ONE way to communicate in Snapchat, what would it be? (e.g. video only, photo only, bitmoji only, etc.)
 - a. Probe: Why is that? LOOK FOR: The benefits of the media they choose.
3. How is the design of Snapchat *similar to or different from* other social media that you use?
4. Think back to when you first started using Snapchat. What was your first reaction to it?
 - a. Ask follow-up questions—how has that changed to today, if at all? Did make you happy? Less lonely?
5. Think back to when you first started using Facebook, if you use Facebook. What was your first reaction to it?
6. To what extent do you agree with this statement: I am myself on Snapchat.
 - a. Ask follow-up questions—why? Do you feel like you can express yourself authentically on Snapchat?
7. To what extent do you agree with this statement: I am myself on Facebook.
 - a. Ask follow-up questions—why? Do you feel like you can express yourself authentically on Facebook?
8. To what extent do you agree with this statement: I am able to convey my authentic moods and feelings on Snapchat.
 - a. Probe for: Why or why not?
9. Do you watch Snapchat videos with the sound on?
 - a. Ask follow-up questions: When? Why?
10. Finally, WHY do you use Snapchat?
 - a. LOOK FOR: ○ The interface ○ Friends are there ○ Using natural language and communication ○ Features such as face filters ○ Uniqueness ○ Disappearing messages
11. Is there anything you would like to add?

Thank you so much for your help! If you have additional thoughts, feel free to follow up with me later.