

The Allure of Privacy or the Desire for Self-Expression? Identifying Users' Gratifications for Ephemeral, Photograph-Based Communication

T. Franklin Waddell, PhD

Abstract

Temporary messaging programs continue to rise in popularity, due in large part to the perceived privacy that they afford. However, recent controversies have revealed that messages shared on ephemeral messaging services are persistent and potentially retrievable, thus undermining the privacy they are assumed to provide. Given this paradox, why are temporary messaging services so popular? Does the allure of privacy still motivate the use of temporary messaging programs? Or, if privacy is no longer afforded by ephemeral messaging, what other psychological gratifications do these applications fulfill that might account for their continued use? Informed by the Modality-Agency-Interactivity-Navigability (MAIN) model and the uses and gratifications tradition, the current study conducted qualitative interviews to identify the gratifications that individuals derive from the popular ephemeral messaging application, *Snapchat*. Study results show that the visual affordances of ephemeral messaging have legitimized photographic communication, providing self-expression and relational gratifications that are unfulfilled by text-based applications. By comparison, users report low levels of trust in the privacy affordances of ephemeral messaging, projecting negative effects of temporary messaging on other users rather than the self. Theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed.

Introduction

A NEW CLASS OF mobile applications has emerged: programs designed specifically to preserve anonymity. The most commercially popular of these applications is *Snapchat*, a mobile messaging application where photographs, text, and video are ephemeral (e.g., disappearing within 10 seconds) rather than permanent. The success of *Snapchat* appears to foreshadow a new wave of applications focused on temporary messaging, with industry leader *Facebook* developing its own ephemeral message service.¹

On its face, it appears that the success of such programs can be attributed to the increased privacy that temporary messaging provides. However, popular discourse² and academic research^{3,4} have highlighted that these applications are not always a safe haven for privacy and security. Concerns have arisen regarding the sharing of sexually explicit “snaps” that are unobtrusively saved and then shared online without permission.^{5,6} Others have found that ephemeral messaging can elicit more jealousy among romantic partners compared to other popular social networking sites.⁷ The research question thus arises: what motivates the use of temporary message platforms despite the fact that they evoke privacy and relational concerns?

One relevant theoretical framework that can be used to examine the motivations underlying the use of ephemeral message applications is the Modality-Agency-Interactivity-Navigability (MAIN) model. The MAIN model theorizes that to understand the gratifications fulfilled by a technology, it is necessary to identify the affordances (e.g., “action possibilities”)⁸ that constitute the medium in question. Different types of affordances are theorized to fulfill distinct gratifications for users. For example, the MAIN model^{9,10} predicts that interactivity affordances that provide the ability to manage information security foster the gratification of privacy control, whereas modality affordances such as sharing photograph or video with friends fulfill gratifications related to self-expression and relationship maintenance. More importantly, an affordance-based approach allows generalizations about the motivations for technology use to be made to both current and future technologies that also contain the same collection of features. Therefore, the MAIN model was chosen to study the gratifications and associated affordances of ephemeral messaging applications that motivate their use.

In sum, the current study asks the following research questions: what are the gratifications that promote the use of ephemeral messaging applications? Are temporary messaging services popular because they afford privacy, or do other

gratifications promote their use that have yet to be identified in past work? To answer these questions, the current study uses in-depth, qualitative interviews with a sample of 22 young adults, with results revealing that self-expression and relationship maintenance, rather than privacy, are primary gratifications that users derive from ephemeral messaging services. The following sections detail the methodology and findings of the study, followed by a discussion of theoretical and practical implications.

Method

Open-ended interviews were conducted with 22 young adults who were current users of the ephemeral mobile application, *Snapchat*. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22. The majority of participants were female ($N=19$) and white ($N=14$). Participants were recruited from undergraduate courses at a large northeastern university and compensated with extra credit for their involvement in the study, which was approved by the institutional review board where the research was conducted. This sample was selected because young adults are the primary user population for ephemeral messaging services.^{1,2}

Data collection

The customary starting point for research on the gratifications of new media is qualitative interviews.¹¹ Following this tradition, 22 interviews were conducted over a 3-week period until thematic saturation was reached. All participants completed an informed consent form and a brief demographic survey before the start of the interview.

Interviews ranged between 20 and 30 minutes in length. Although the interviews were open-ended and iterative based the response of each participant, an interview guide was also created to probe the specific gratifications associated with the different affordances provided by *Snapchat*. Specifically, the interview began with general questions about participants' mobile phone habits (to build rapport and disguise the purpose of the study), then moved to the context of *Snapchat* with broad inquiries such as "why do you use *Snapchat*?" and "why do you think *Snapchat* is popular?" Follow-up questions were used to probe these responses and identify the specific affordance of *Snapchat* that contributed to the gratification identified by the respondent. The focus of the interview guide and the iterative process through which follow-up questions were chosen were both informed by the assumptions of the MAIN model.⁹

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. Participants were assigned nonidentifying pseudonyms so that the confidentiality of their responses was maintained. Thematic analysis was used to identify emergent commonalities between responses.¹²⁻¹⁴ Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis technique used to inductively identify recurring themes that are expressed across the responses of participants.¹²⁻¹⁴ Once a theme is identified, representative anecdotes are used from participants to provide a thick description of the theme in question. In the context of the current study, responses were categorized according to the

class of affordance described by the participant. Once coded within an affordance grouping, commonalities among the reported gratifications were analyzed to determine themes that were expressed by the majority of participants.

Results

Two themes were identified using thematic analysis: (1) the use of recordability affordances to maintain privacy and (2) the use of modality affordances for self-expression and community building.

Privacy affordances and recordability

The recordability affordance of *Snapchat* allows users to configure their photographs, videos, and text messages to disappear after a predetermined time period. For many respondents, this action possibility provided the gratification of maintaining privacy while connecting with friends. For example, one respondent (14) explained, "you send ugly faces and things like that, and you're not worried about it getting posted on Facebook...after that 10 second burst you're never going to see that photo again, so I think that definitely plays a role in why people snap." Respondent 2 similarly noted that, "I would say its privacy because you can make the ugliest face you want to and unless someone screen shots it, you know no one will see it, so you can be super intimate with a friend just like you're right next to them." The temporary nature of *Snapchat* messages was thus perceived by respondents as affording the ability to share photographs without the accompanying concern that the photograph might be viewed by someone other than the original receiver, while also providing the illusion of nonmediation.

Despite the common perception that *Snapchat* messages were temporary, many respondents expressed skepticism that their messages actually "disappeared." Specifically, many participants did not perceive *Snapchat* to afford complete privacy because they believed a record of their *Snapchat* conversations could possibly be retrieved. For some, these concerns regarding anonymity appeared to be derived from their attitudes toward communication technology in general. Respondent 7 noted that, "I always feel like with technology it is somewhere and it could come back" while respondent 4 stated, "I know how everyone says don't post something to the Internet because it can come back to haunt you...I would hope they would disappear because I have some unflattering pictures, but I guess it's uncertain because you never know where they're going to go."

The belief that *Snapchat* messages were retrievable appeared to inhibit the type of photographs that respondents were willing to share, although they did speculate that this concern did not deter all users. As participant 4 described, "I don't think the messages disappear, I think they all go back to somewhere, but I still think people are more inclined to take an ugly picture of themselves or something stupid because they think it will be gone." Similarly, respondent 10 explained, "I wouldn't take a photo I wouldn't want someone to see, but there definitely are people who do send pictures...you know, the wrong kind of pictures." Users thus believed that the precautions they used while communicating with others via *Snapchat* were not uniform across all others who used the program.

Modality affordances and self-expression

Aside from the affordance of recordability, a second feature of *Snapchat* as a technology is the modality through which messages are exchanged. Specifically, *Snapchat* provides users with the ability to communicate with others through the use of photographs and short video clips that range up to 10 seconds in duration. For many participants, providing the option to interact via a visual modality was perceived to afford a greater capacity for self-expression than text-based communication services.

Exemplifying this theme, respondent two stated, “me personally, I do like to read people’s expressions, so when you have a snap conversation with someone and you can see their expression with what they said, it enhances the conversation, whereas with a text message it might take you twenty minutes to type what you have to say.” Participant 9 also compared the expressive potential of *Snapchat* with texting, describing that “when I snapchat, I have a funny face or some kind of strange expression that gives away more of my emotions or feelings than just typing a sentence or two in a text message.” Furthermore, participants reported that the use of photographs provided a greater opportunity to share their experiences than a text-based message. As respondent 19 explained, “I think sometimes it’s easier to convey or show where you are compared to text, if you send a picture everyone can almost be just right where you are, compared to a text message where you can’t say exactly what you want to say.” Respondents thus perceived *Snapchat* to afford the opportunity for enhanced self-expression, both through the ability to display their emotions and to more vividly share their experiences.

Modality affordances and relationship maintenance

In addition to providing an outlet for self-expression, photographs also afforded respondents with the increased capacity to maintain connections with family members or friends who were geographically distant. Specifically, many participants explained that their primary use of *Snapchat* was to connect with displaced family members rather than communicate with their friends who lived locally in the same area. For example, respondent 7 explained, “I snapchat with friends from home more, so we can stay in touch and show them where I am, like my twin sister is a million miles away and she’s never been here, so it’s a way to show her where I’m at or show my friends from home what I’m doing.” Along similar lines, respondent 11 noted, “it makes you feel more connected to whoever you’re snapchatting with because you can see what they’re doing and where they are, I have friends who’ve never visited so sending them a snap gives them context to my life up here.” *Snapchat* even allowed participants to circumvent obstacles that would otherwise limit the frequency that they contacted distant friends. For example, participant 12 described, “I feel like especially with guys, you aren’t going to send a ‘hey, I miss you kind of text’, but you can say it with a snap, like ‘hey, this is what’s up’...everyone wants to stay in touch so *Snapchat* is more informal way to say hey...with a snap all your friends can see it and then whatever, check back later.”

However, not all participants perceived interactions on *Snapchat* as fulfilling their gratification for connection with others. One respondent (11) recalled that “my best friend from home snaps me every day, but it’s not personal, so I

wonder if they are just to me or if there to everybody, like it bothers me a little bit...because at first I thought she was just sending it to me, and that’s the only way we communicate but now I realize were not really communicating because she’s just pushing a button in her contact book.” In sum, while participants generally reported that the modality affordances of *Snapchat* provided them with an increased opportunity to maintain contact with friends and family, the gratification fulfilled by *Snapchat* appears to depend on whether the interaction is perceived as a true conversation rather than a form of mass communication.

Discussion

It is often assumed that the popularity of ephemeral messaging services is driven by the information privacy afforded by using temporary messages. The safeguards these applications provide are not infallible, however, with recent news providing numerous examples of ephemeral messages being retrieved and widely disseminated without users’ permission or awareness. Why do these temporary messaging programs remain popular despite their apparent lack of security? Do users still perceive these programs as affording a private interaction? What gratifications might motivate the use of these programs even when privacy is not fulfilled? The current study used qualitative interviews with users of *Snapchat* to examine the gratifications that ephemeral messaging services provide, with results revealing two main motivations: (1) the need for privacy and (2) the need for connection with others.

Beginning first with privacy, participants were relatively divided regarding the degree of anonymity that ephemerality provided, with trust in the affordance appearing to vary based on the technological savviness of the user. Some individuals reported that they were more willing to share “playful” photographs with friends when using ephemeral messages because it was assumed that the messages were temporary and nonretrievable. Not all participants perceived that ephemeral messaging afforded privacy, however, with those skeptical of technology in general also less likely to assume that temporary messages were permanently deleted. This pattern of results may reflect a difference between users high and low in “power usage,”¹⁵ an individual difference variable related to technological expertise, which past research has found increases privacy-related concerns among technology experts. Applied to the current study, our results show that the recordability affordances of ephemeral messaging only fulfill privacy gratifications among those low in power usage due to their low level of technological sophistication,¹⁶ which is consistent with the predictions of the MAIN model.

A second theme in the context of privacy was that while respondents assumed their friends used ephemeral messages to send risqué images and videos, they themselves denied using the program for sharing their own explicit photographs. The assumption that media are more likely to negatively affect other people rather than the self is consistent with the “third person effect”¹⁷ found in media effects research. Applied to the current study, participants’ responses appear to exhibit a similar perceptual bias where respondents assumed that ephemeral messaging is more likely to induce their friends to engage in questionable behavior, a finding that is especially notable given that the third person effect typically only occurs among socially distant others¹⁸ rather than among individuals from the same

referent group. These findings thus extend the third person effect to a novel domain by showing that users assume others are negatively affected by ephemeral messaging, even when the individuals in question are similar to the self.

Given that many users appear to be skeptical of anonymity provided by temporary messaging, what are the other gratifications that might be motivating its continued use? One answer based on our results is that the visual modality of *Snapchat* is a source of gratification. Participants reported that communicating with photographs provided nonverbal cues that afforded the opportunity for heightened self-expression as well as an increased ability to monitor the tone and emotions of others. Visual communication via photographs was even equated by some participants to the experience of communicating face-to-face, which further reveals the robustness of photographs as a source of gratifications. The illusion of nonmediation induced by photographs exchanged via ephemeral messaging is consistent with the “realism” and “being there” heuristics, both of which are hypothesized to be elicited by modality affordances according to the MAIN model.^{9,10}

Finally, participants also reported using the application to maintain community with distant friends and family. Results show that temporary photographs were used primarily to communicate with loved ones who were geographically distant or to provide a “visual context” to their life for friends who had never visited them before. Some respondents even described that ephemeral messaging had normalized communicating with their friends via photographs, an act that they would not consider appropriate when using text messaging or other modes of communication. In other words, ephemeral messaging appears to fulfill gratifications for relational maintenance that are left unsatisfied by other communication technologies, a finding that may explain the continued popularity of the medium despite concerns regarding the security and privacy of data. However, an important boundary condition of modality affordances for fulfilling relationship gratifications appears to be the extent to which the receiver is the sole recipient of the message, as multiple participants complained that the medium became impersonal when used by their friends as a tool for mass communication. Modality affordances thus offer the opportunity for maintaining connections with others, but only when the interaction is assumed to be personalized rather than widely shared with others.

While we believe these findings are novel and theoretically useful, they still should be contextualized according to the typical limitations of qualitative research. Our results are drawn from a small sample of young, white adults, which is a clear threat to external validity. Our sample was also heavily female, so further research is needed to replicate our findings with a more demographically diverse group and to also probe whether possible differences between male and female users exist. Nonetheless, the “thick description” offered by our findings takes the customary first step for uses and gratifications research¹¹ that can serve as a foundation for future quantitative research on the motivations of ephemeral messaging.

Conclusion

In sum, study results show that self-expression and relational maintenance are key gratifications that users derive

from the visual affordances of ephemeral messaging applications. By comparison, privacy gratifications are generally dismissed or assumed to be driven by antisocial motivations among other users rather than the self. More broadly, ephemeral messaging services such as *Snapchat* appears to be fulfilling a need for self-expression and relationship maintenance by normalizing time-limited communication through photograph exchange. The allure of connecting with others thus appears to be a key piece to solving the privacy paradox puzzle among users of ephemeral messaging services.

Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

References

1. Murgia M. Facebook tests disappearing messages, like Snapchat. The Telegraph 2015. www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/11993123/Facebook-tests-disappearing-messages-like-Snapchat.html (accessed July 7, 2016).
2. French S. Snapchat's new “scary” privacy policy has left users outraged. Market Watch 2015. www.marketwatch.com/story/snapchats-new-scary-privacy-policy-has-left-users-outraged-2015-10-29 (accessed July 7, 2016).
3. Bayer JB, Ellison NB, Schoenebeck SY, et al. Sharing the small moments: ephemeral social interaction on Snapchat. Information, Communication & Society 2015. www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1084349 (accessed July 7, 2016).
4. Piwek L, Joinson A. “What do they snapchat about?” Patterns of use in time-limited instant messaging services. Computers in Human Behavior 2016; 54:358–367.
5. Poltash NA. Snapchat and sexting: a snapshot of baring your bare essentials. Richmond Journal of Law and Technology 2012; XIX:1–24.
6. Young D. Now you see it, now you don't...or do you? Snapchat's deceptive promotion of vanishing messages violates federal trade commission regulations. The John Marshall Journal of Information Technology and Privacy Law 2014; 30:1–6.
7. Utz S, Muscanelli N, Khalid C. Snapchat elicits more jealousy than Facebook: a comparison of Snapchat and Facebook. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking 2015; 18:141–146.
8. Gibson JJ. The theory of affordances. In: Shaw R, Bransford J, eds. *Perceiving, acting, and knowing: towards an ecological psychology*. Hillsdale, NK: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 67–82.
9. Sundar SS. The MAIN model: a heuristic approach to understanding technology effects on credibility. In: Metzger MJ, Flanagan, AJ, eds. *Digital media, youth, and credibility*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 73–100.
10. Sundar SS, Limperos A. Uses and grats 2.0: new gratifications for new media. Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 2013; 57:504–525.
11. Rubin AM. The uses-and-gratifications perspective of media effects. In: Jennings B, Zillman D, eds. *Media effects: advances in theory and research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 525–548.
12. Boyatzis RE. (1998) *Transforming qualitative information: thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
13. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology 2006; 3:77–101.

14. Fereday J, Muir-Cochrana E. Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2006; 5:80–92.
15. Sundar SS, Marathe SS. Personalization vs. customization: the importance of agency, privacy, and power usage. *Human Communication Research* 2010; 36:298–322.
16. Sundar SS, Jia H, Waddell TF, et al. Toward a theory of interactive media effects (TIME): four models for explaining how interface features affect user psychology. In: Sundar SS, ed. *The handbook of the psychology of communication technology*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 47–86.
17. Davison WP. The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1973; 47:1–15.
18. Perloff RM. The third person effect. A critical review and synthesis. *Media Psychology* 1999; 1:353–378.

Address correspondence to:
Dr. T. Franklin Waddell
College of Journalism and Communications
University of Florida
3067 Weimer Hall
Gainesville, FL 32611

E-mail: frank.waddell@jou.ufl.edu