Tina Quach

CMS.609

Nick Montfort

4/19/2017

<div align="center">Social Transactions</div>

"Can I venmo you?"

"Sure, they cost 11.15 divided by two."

"Sweet, are you @Tina-Quach-1?"

"Yep!"

This is a recent conversation I had with a friend--I had bought a 2-pack of toothbrushes for us to split, and she was paying me back. With many college students, you are likely to hear similar conversations about using Venmo to pay or request money from someone. It has become such a commonplace occurrence that "venmo" has become part of the vernacular (much like "google") as a verb to describe using the service to pay another user.

Many social contexts have presented a need for a convenient way for one person to pay another person without going through their bank accounts and without counting cash for exact change. Thus, Venmo is not the only convenient method of making digital payments--users can choose from Google Wallet, Snapcash, Facebook Pay, Apple Wallet and more. Here, I've chosen to focus on Venmo in comparison to Facebook Pay and Snapcash because of their social aspects.

Venmo stands out because it acknowledges and highlights the social aspects of the peer-to-peer transactions it facilitates. Given that you already have an account and have signed in, you are immediately taken to a news feed much like Twitter's or Facebook's. The news feed consists of short posts that always denote the two people involved in the transaction, whether or not the action taken was "charged" or "paid", how long ago the transaction occurred, and a mandatory message (usually the reason for the transaction) (see fig. 1). In the global view shown in figure 1, all public transactions from Venmo users in general are shown and updated in real time. In the second tab, a similar news feed is shown, except at least one person involved in the transaction is a "friend" of yours. In the third tab, you can view a similar feed--except that it shows all of your own transactions along with the amount either sent or received (see fig.
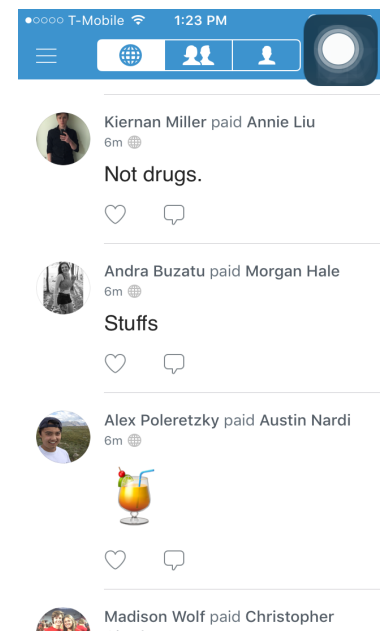

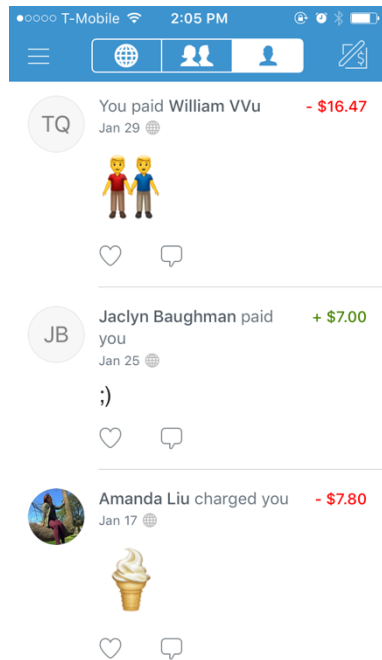Figure 1. Screenshot of Venmo's general public newsfeed on my account.

Figure 2. Screenshot of Venmo's third tab—all transactions involving me.

Figure 3. Screenshot of the Venmo's default, friends news feed implying that the four users depicted went to Little Donkey restaurant together.

2). Beyond the news feed feature, each Venmo user has a profile that once again has a list of transactions, but restricted to ones involving only the particular user.

Each of Venmo's news feeds form different contexts for reading its posts, despite similar content. Since the general public Venmo tab presents a higher proportion of strangers' transactions, the focus of the content is placed on the content or reason for the transaction (see fig. 1). On the other hand, transactions that involve your friends (seen in the default, second tab) allow you to get a sense of what your friends are involved in (see fig. 3). In figure 3, we see three people all paying the same person for Little Donkey at about the same time, albeit using different, but similar messages. From this, we can infer that at least these four people had a meal at Little Donkey restaurant together. Venmo can be an effective way to learn about social outings that people may not post about through other forms of social media, but that they leave traces of through their financial interactions.

On the other hand, using Facebook Pay and Snapcash keep transactions private to those in the chat. Although Snapcash and Facebook Pay each build on the user base of its respective social media app, they do not highlight the social nature of transferring money. Furthermore, the payment or request is integrated into other conversations, whereas Venmo keeps each transaction discrete. This integration places less emphasis on the transaction and more emphasis on the user's conversation or relationship with the other member(s) of the transaction.

Venmo also has several limitations and features in the way that requests and payments can be created. Firstly, there is a 2000-character limit, which is a little of 14 times more than Twitter's 140 characters. Secondly, the app encourages its users to use emojis in their payments and requests through autocorrect and autocomplete suggestions (see fig. 4). Here, venmo seems to prioritize visual or pictorial communication over textual, possibly riding the wave of virtual stickers, emojis, and GIFs that have become so prevalent in casual online

communication. There seems to be curated sets of emojis that highlight Venmo's playful and social aspects.
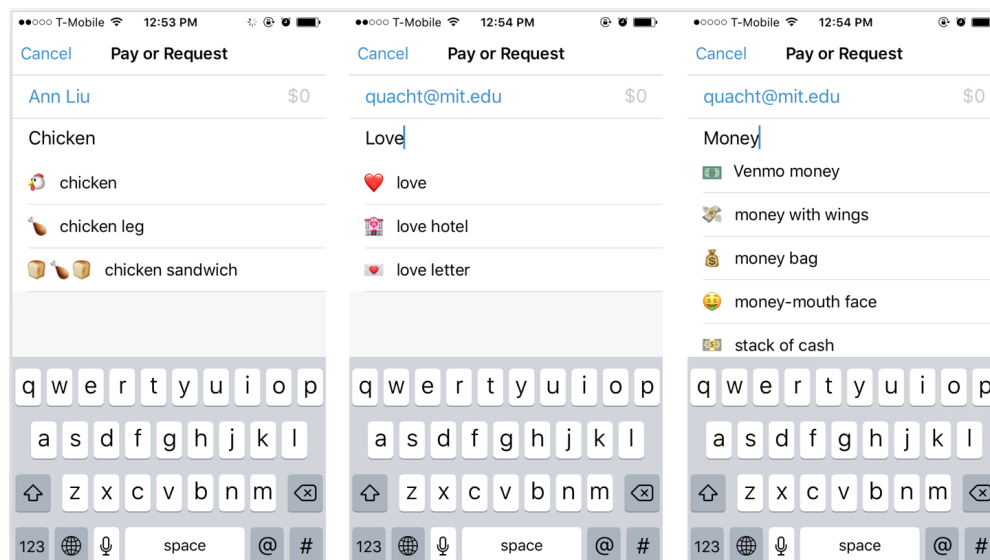

Figure 4. Screenshots of the Venmo app while the user adds a mandatory message. Typing in text, reveals related emojis that can be selected to replace the text you have typed.

Venmo's affordances for making transactions public and forming creative messages in these transactions encourage users to turn their Venmo transactions into a sort of performance. Often through inside jokes, sexual innuendos, and sarcasm, users give inaccurate impressions to those outside of the transaction who lack the context. In figure 5, a friend charges me for "dat ass" when she actually means a pair of underwear. At the same time, other users go beyond the intended use of the text being for the reason for the transaction but as a sort of message to go along with the transaction (see fig. 6). Although Venmo means to create some sort of record keeping to help users keep track of what they are paying and paid for, users have embraced the social and performative aspects of the app, expressing themselves creatively (with and without emojis) in their transactions.

Whereas Venmo creates a sort of social reward for using its app, Snapcash provides more of a playful stimulatory reward through animations and cultural references (see fig. 7).[1] In part (a) of figure 7, we see someone "making it rain" on the person who she is paying using Snapcash. Part (b) of figure 7 depicts the receiving end,
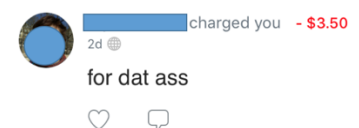

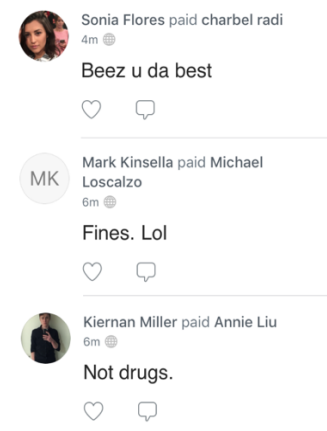Figure 5. Screenshot in which a friend charges me "for dat ass."

Figure 6. Sonia Florez directly addresses charbel as "Beez" and says that she's "da best," while Mark pays Michael for fines, "lol". Kiernan pays Annie for "Not drugs"—probably drugs.

---

[1] https://youtu.be/kBwjxBmMszQ

completing the visual of "making it rain" as the dollar bills come flying at the person being paid. This playful feature does not ask why the user sends money; it solely enables to the users to have fun in their transaction. In this case, the text is not meant to leave a record, but to communicate-- "YOU RECEIVED $7".
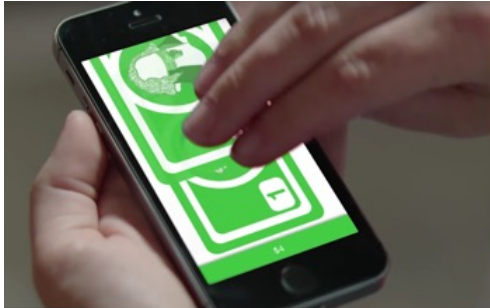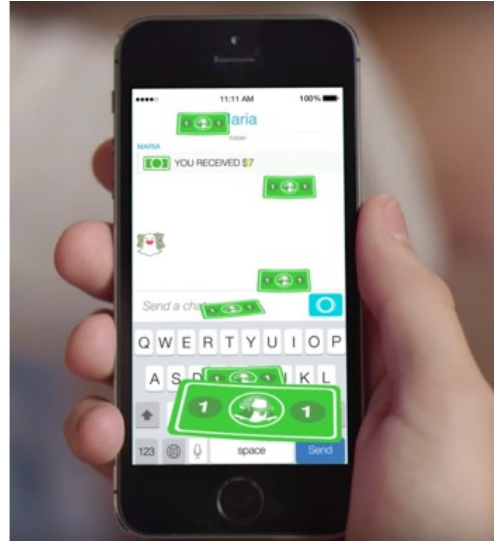

Figure 7. Screenshots from Snapchat's video, revealing the interface of Snapcash—the feature enabling Snapchat users to send and receive money over the app.

This deeper dive into the digital forms of Venmo requests and payments and how it compares to Snapcash and Facebook Pay demonstrates how affordances of payments apps can build contexts that affect user's readings of the app's digital texts. By limiting the scope of the transactions you see--with constraints like posts from all Venmo users, or only posts involving your friends, or only posts involving you—you can chance your reading of transactions. You might focus more on what kinds of transactions are being made (in the public context) rather than who is making the transactions (as you might in the friends context). Furthermore, these apps employ digital forms that appeal to cultural references and fads, furthering their function as social apps. Combining both visual aesthetics, imagery, and text, these apps effectively create entertaining, engaging experiences out of something as dry and business-like as paying someone or asking someone for money.