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All What We Send Is Selfie: Images in the Age of Immediate Reproduction

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4. All What We Send Is Selfie: Images in the Age of Immediate Reproduction

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Abstract: Like the use of social network sites, mobile visual apps function as repositories of images. There, conversations are also affectively driven and have been adopted by a mass of users.

Focusing on Parisian teenagers' uses of Snapchat, a mobile application conceived for ephemeral image exchanges, this paper aims to offer a qualitative analytical appreciation, an insight on teenagers' selfie¹-taking ephemeral practices, and the mechanisms they have to control the privacy and the sharing of their images. Today, at least among the teenaged population I studied, it seems there is a marked shift in the practices of sharing and saving self produced images. Due to the fact that most of these mobile amateur pictures remain digital, there seems to be a change of attitude where youth see mobile images less as a physical good, a commodity, or an object for personal data archiving, and more as fleeting ephemerality. Is this the end of vernacular everyday life photographs understood as a material jukebox of souvenir? Through these transient private image exchanges, is not a more a visual-storytelling recreational exchange being established?

Keywords: Teenagers, Snapchat, Selfie, Identity, Ephemeral, Immediacy, Images, In/visibility

¹ Senft, T. (January 9, 2015). Senft's first selfie conceptualization was posted in The Selfie Research Network Facebook page, www.facebook.com. Also see the special *International Journal Of Communication* Selfie issue, edited by Senft, T. & Baym, N. and more specifically Senft, T. & Baym, N. (2015). Introduction, What Does the Selfie Say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon. *International Journal Of Communication*, 9, 19. Retrieved from <http://ijoc.org>



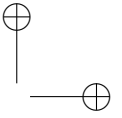


Theoretical frame and methodology

This Snapchat study is based on two guided focus group sessions done in Paris between May and June 2014. One session consisted of a group of five 16-17-year-old French, female teenage friends, and the other session of a five 16-year-old French, male, teenage friends. These Parisian groups of adolescents are teens that have also been raised in a McDonalds and Angry Birds world, and we can say that their environments surround them with a fast food and *discardable* ephemeral logic. Moreover, they regularly share their music playlists, pass their tech devices from hand-to-hand, and believe in a peer-to-peer way of sharing. I could even venture to say that they are shameless multi-taskers, master multi-screeners, and tend to love being in immersive situations. In this context, and springing from the flexible concept of social capital that Bourdieu and Wacquant defined as: ‘the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119), I will conceptualize how the Snapchat dynamic provokes strong attachment between individuals, transforms these personal photos and videos into social currency with affective value. The origin of this dynamic, I would like to suggest, lies partially in its existence as a series of endless symbolic interactions.

In order to study Snapchat practices, the focus group methodology seemed to provide the best way to understand and discuss the participant’s practices within their own group of exchange. Unlike these same teens’ Facebook or Instagram editing modalities, which can be for bridging social capital, all the participants I interviewed admitted using Snapchat predominantly or only with an existing social network of friends as their main audience, therefore either to maintain or to bond their already existing ties, and to continue in a semi private dynamic. Therefore, I would like here to make an appeal to Sveningsson Elm’s ‘Taxonomy of public/private relations’. According to her, the public and the private are in a constant continuum, and are more of a “perception and not of a fact” (Sveningsson Elm, 2009, p. 85). She delineates at least four categories (Ibid. p. 75). Based on her categorization I have outlined the following table.

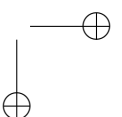




Public	Private
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– open– available for everyone– no membership or registration requirement (web pages, open forums)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– hidden– unavailable to most– access is restricted by user who specifies who can access the content (close friends)
Semi-Public	Semi-Private
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– available for most people– in principle accessible to everyone– requires membership or registration first (most SNS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– available only to some– requires membership or registration (intranet)

Clearly, by being in a group of discussion, together with their closest friends present, all the teens felt more at ease. By verbalizing their practices, these young users exchanged opinions and reflected upon their ideas and their visions about their own images and consequently about their own identities. However, I would like to register that the helpful process of focus groups presented two main difficulties or limitations. First, was the exclusion of the researcher from all the in-jokes and implicitness that both groups had, their jokes, their insider language, and of which the researcher, (as an outsider), had no-knowledge or access. Secondly, I found myself in the paradoxical position. I was analyzing participants' visual uses without actually seeing the images, and relying instead on my interviewees' reflections, or non-reflections, on their practices, and my own understanding of those practices in relation to our socio-cultural moment. Despite these limitations, some preliminary insights emerged.

Mobile images are socially legitimated as part of everyday life and undoubtedly an established global cultural phenomenon. Additionally, as the adoptions of free visual mobile apps increases, in a circular way these self produced mobile images advertise themselves through word of mouth and through the sharing practice itself from person to person. After "the visibility of the networked image" (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008, p. 18), is it now the time for the *invisibility* of the networked image? Finding a fleeting existence from device to device, does Snapchat represent the ease of an evanescent and proximal need for more private and intimate amusement in personal image sharings?





Snapchat everyday life

Depending on who and how old you are, you'll probably diverge or converge in what *snapshot* and *Snapchat* mean and/or represent. Following Chalfen's school, according to Sarvas

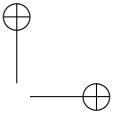
The term snapshot photography comes from the way the photos are captured (easily, instantaneously, and simply, by a single click) and the intentions the photographer has for the photo: no artistic nor commercial intentions, rather photos taken with simple cameras by non-experts for personal use. Snapshot photography is used often to distinguish between professional photography, and especially, amateur photography, where the intentions are more creative and artistic, and the technical skills of the photographer are emphasized. (Sarvas, 2006, p. 16)

In few years' time, the ease of production has increased the many possibilities and diversities in mobile image creation. Even the making and sharing of 'embarrassing' and mobile snapshots, which are considered funny, stupid, or those that are erotic, has become ubiquitous; and what counts as embarrassing for some can count as amusing for others and vice versa (Haddon & Vincent, 2009). However, since the domestication of webcams, the mediatisation of people's private sphere has been a frequent topic of debate.

According to both focus group members, Snapchat is today's teenagers' visual killer app². As of 2014 and according to popular opinion, it is one of the most used photo sharing apps among French teenagers, but unfortunately no quantitative data, statistics, and figures is yet available specifically to measure the French adoption. Originally conceived as a free photo-messaging application, Snapchat is a photo app for playful and ephemeral uses of mobile photos. It was created in September 2011 by Evan Spiegel and Bobby Murphy and belongs to the category of electronic games that the American Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rates under 'T' (Teen-13 and above). (Carlisle, 2009, p. 867). They have launched a kids' version called Snapkidz, but this version lacks its main asset, which is the possibility

² A killer app is an app that is so necessary or desirable that it proves the core value of some larger technology, such as mobile devices can be. By extension I use this concept to visual apps.

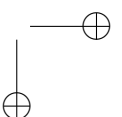
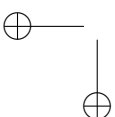




of sending photos. Therefore, two main ethical drawbacks come attached to these types of apps. First, that no real verification of age is feasible, and second, that to my knowledge no precise legislation exists on how to regulate a world-wide phenomena in what this app entails; in other words it signifies the non-standardization of laws, ethics and morality.

One of the most distinctive particularities of Snapchat, distinguishing it from other photo sharing apps, is that image producers can set a limited viewing time for the recipient of the image. This can range from between one to ten seconds after which the image ‘disappears’. This determines how long recipients can view the image; because afterwards, they ‘disappear’ and are no longer available via the Snapchat user interface. However, it is not actually securely removed from the device (Roesner, Gill & Kohno, 2014). Previously taken images archived in the user’s mobile device cannot be sent later in time through Snapchat, and images that have been exchanged through Snapchat are not archived in the device either. Technically, one can save Snapchat photos using screenshots. When one takes a screenshot, the initial sender receives a notification that her image has been screenshot by the receiver. It is also possible that users use cameras to photograph the snap. Therefore, while the characteristics of the app can certainly be circumvented, the sites’ logic is that one sends what one is seeing, experiencing and feeling *at that very moment*. Again, this ‘here and now’ (*hic en nunc*) paradigm changes or reverses the anti-indexical postmodern agreement and sets the context of the mobile snapchatted photo as an ephemeral short-term sharing proof of reality, also evidencing how ephemeral reality itself is. Snapchat images are not only performative markers, but also receptive ones. As Media lecturer and communications scholar Lisa Gye remarked “... the use of devices like cameralphones will have important repercussions for how we understand who we are and how we remember the past” (Gye, 2007), and/or in other words the uses and practices of photography are far more important than its aesthetics (Gunthert, 2014).

The females within the group estimated that in order to keep a trace they only screenshot 10% of the images received. One teenager said: ‘Sometimes we can end-up editing a funny montage, a power-point for someone’s birthday’ (laughs). It could happen that the funniest selfies are saved for later purposes and end up circulating in completely unrelated situations and contexts. But, possessing the picture is not the goal for participants, rather their





purpose is to have fun, to laugh and be connected immediately in a short term sharing. All female participants said they mostly always self-censored to not screenshot if it was a boy's snap.

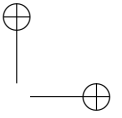
In other words, if it is a boy's selfie, they would not screenshot because he would know she wants to save his photo, and perhaps assume she has a special interest in him. Quoting one of their comments, they said

I do not dare... cause the other person knows that I screenshot... if it is a funny snap, or something bizarre of someone, for example screen shooting a photo of someone falling is OK, but if not I block. If it is a boy no, if it is among us it's OK.

The assumption is that for heterosexual teens, gender and sexuality turns up as an additional variable to take into account in how Snapchat exchanges are understood and practiced (Casado & Lasén, 2012). In terms of teenager teasing and seduction, there is a shame/dare dynamic where the screenshot notification becomes the proof and exposure of desire. Surprisingly, most participants were not aware that retrieving snaps was possible. In their imaginary, it seems as if they perceive the mesh not as a cellular technological network but more as mobile device-based peer-to-peer network. Out of the nine persons, only one of the boys knew of the existence of SnapCrack, one among some other free apps that enables screenshots without being unveiled, as it is in Snapchat. Interviewees in both groups said that in order to impede the receiver from taking screenshots, they play with the viewing time lapse. The shorter the image can be seen, the more difficult it is to screenshot it. In general terms, teenagers love to tease. Here, immediate photo messages are used as playful teasing.

The 'theory of playful identities' (De Lange, 2010, p. 23) accounts for the shaping of identities by mobile media technologies where play is the better medium to describe this mediation. Therefore, the next question that one can pose is why do they play this image teasing game? There are many possible answers, but evidently they play to see if they can screenshot and circumvent the ephemerality of this short term sharing dynamic. They play to be the paparazzi of their own lives, or even better, of their own images. They play games of tease, games of trust, friends' games. Codified games of rationed out seduction. But these practices do not really give the sense that participants are



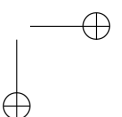


trying to shoot someone else's life: Snapchat pushes and transforms users' drive further: not in wanting to be able to photograph someone quickly and unnoticed, but in succeeding in the shooting of someone else's momentary and disappearing image: *the fleeting selfie*.

Funny fleeting selfies

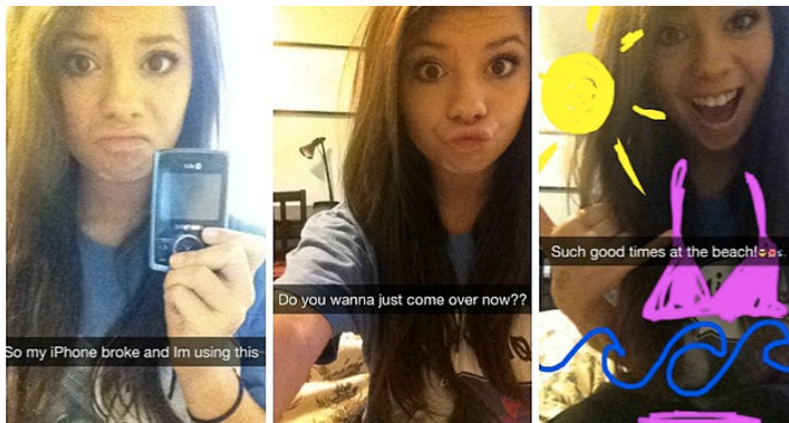
In the 2014 Snapchat version, images can be sent either to one or to several persons and can also be posted in a feature called Stories, that allows you to add a 'snap' to a public feed for 24 hours before it vanishes. Stories simulate the Facebook wall and can be seen by all the user's contacts for the lapse of one day, but only ten seconds per view. All the focus group participants commented to the effect that they constantly check what has happened within the Stories to see what their friends are posting when they feel bored. As for frequency of use, all members of the focus group said they use the app on a daily basis, several times a day, not even really knowing how many. I got answers such as 'as soon as I feel bored', 'all the time', 'whenever I have wifi', 'it is a reflex'. In the app, the number of photos sent and received confirms your 'score', thus subliminally creating a habit of wanting to come back again to play more and win. This score-keeping and gamification of ephemerality keeps people coming back and also adds a certain quantification of the ephemeral.

Stemming from the online and offline maintenance of social capital, and linked to a group affiliation/belonging feeling, there is a collective license to acknowledge users activity, creating an even stronger attachment between its consumers. Snapchat photos and videos become 'symbolic capital' and 'social currency via social media' (Fuchs, 2015), and where immediate answers are expected, and thus elicited. This acknowledgment dynamic helps mold the users' identity in the 'always on' community sense (Baron, 2008). Though, the participants did not perceive the score as motivation or incentivization to return or use the app: 'it just changes who your three favorites are' (Alex). In fact Snapchat users do not see who the other user's friends are as only their three best friends are displayed. Those three best users represent the ones with which they exchange the most. But since in Snapchat users are under pseudonym, it is difficult to find people. The only way is to check whom those three top rank users are and ask to 'friend' them. Once again, the score is the

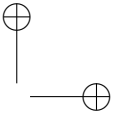


latent unspoken expectation that this pattern of joy and amusement should be repeated. In fact Snapchat users could be sending their images through MMS, but due to speed and price, short term sharing exchanges such as Snapchat stand as much more convenient: they are free of cost and do not engage any memory space in the device. I also want to underline that these short-lived iconic sharing practices underscore that the significance given to the aesthetic of a photo is no longer the core of its material essence or existence, but rather, its immediacy coupled with its mobile private and intimate shareability (Fletcher & Cambre, 2009).

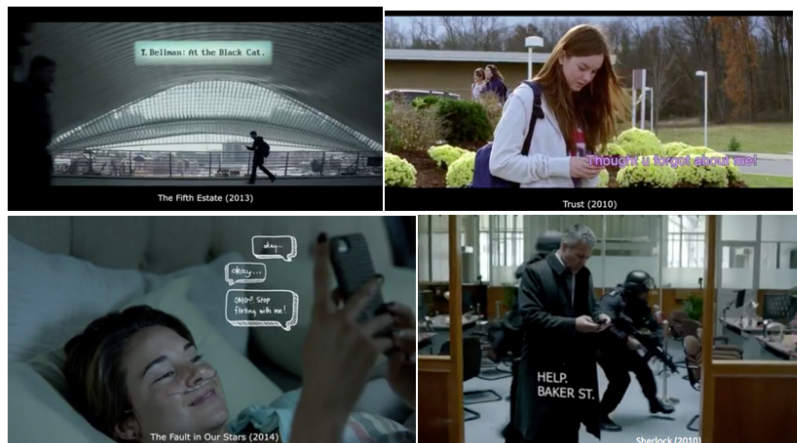
The interviewed teenagers said they usually, if not always, take selfies and add text and drawings on them when they send and receive. In order to write on the image the sender has to tap on it and then she will be able to add a text. Each photo can have only one short sentence, the length of a line. Many times it is the sender's face, their selfie, that appears in the photo as if talking. Nathan *Jurgenson*, researcher at Snapchat calls it 'your own voice-as-image' (Jurgenson, 2014). I agree with him, by understanding them as momentary linguistic signs, we can see how they function as illustrative formats that become one single combination of selfies and texts as these three Snaps below portray.



Screenshot taken from Le Journal du Geek, 27 Octobre 2013



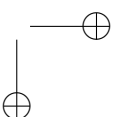
To compare how other media modalities are dealing with image and text altogether as one piece, in the video *A Brief Look at Texting and the Internet in Film* (2014) Tony Zhou analyzes how mobile texts and the internet are depicted in movies, and how film forms are always evolving (Zhou, 2014). Zhou reveals that even if this change had already occurred in countries such as South Korea and China (2001), in the last years a new formal convention on how to portray SMSs on the big screen has taken the spotlight. As the following screenshots taken from the video indicate: filmmakers use beyond screen text message to illustrate a text message in a film. As different and diverse the aesthetics can be, the overall effect is that the SMSs can be read on the image as one single piece of information, contextualizing both as a single unit at the same time.



These four screenshots were taken from Zhou, T. (15 August 2014), *A Brief Look at Texting and the Internet in Film*, Every Frame a Painting.

Therefore, calling on the concepts of intermediality and transmediality is of help.

Intermediality occurs when there is an interrelation of various – distinctly recognized – arts and media within one object but the interaction is such that they transform each other and a new form of art, or mediation, emerges. (Verstraete, 2010).





Transmediality concerns the translation of one medium into another, as when a novel is turned into a film; or a film into a game. Equally, an author may simultaneously bring out a book along with a movie and a website and require the reader to view them together and in addition to each other. (Ibid.)

As a transmedial and intermedial analogy, in the Snapchat-photos the texting is similar to these cinematographic ways of portraying SMSs. There is no before or after the image text bubble as it appears in a standard MMS on smartphone screens and the text line can float in any place of the image. The Snapchat message works then as one only cluster: both text and image strike together and thus are stronger (for not to say impossible) to break down into separate informational pieces. In this way, the answer/reaction is also done in one single entity. In a mediascape where the use of emoticons and stickers also seems to be on the rise (Allard, Creton & Odin, 2014), the mounting trend seems to be speaking together *with/through* images and not (only) *about* them. In *The panorama between mobile visual platforms is a sentimental bond* (David, 2013), I analyzed other apps, like the Japanese app Pick that also enable writing on photos and made an analogy between mobiles as a hybrid memo pad. The difference between Pick and Snapchat is that Snapchat is more in the line of a cinematic and flowing image as could be comprehended in the aforementioned video *A Brief Look at Texting and the Internet in Film*, one that passes, and is erased by other soon-to-come images.

The number of exchanges these teenagers can have per day – my interviewees said that they may be as high as 50 – demonstrates that these units entail dialogues that depict prolonged iconographic conversations as in a longer story that is habitually enveloped in, and interrupted by, the everyday life context. They emulate the continuous all day texting that many teenagers have become used to engaging in. Rubinstein foresaw it as the emergence of a new type of speech in which photographic images acquire a new life along with the written language and spoken voice (Rubinstein, 2005, p. 114). He said

This move of the photographic image away from the activity of photography is similar to the move of the mobile email away from the rules of grammar and spelling. The photo-text message does not conform to the norms of the spoken or written language nor does it follow the norms of photography. (Ibid. p. 120)

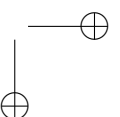




In this quick writing, a short sentence or word is embedded in the photo and not clinging separately above or beneath as usual photo captions are. Moreover, the real-time photography of these selfies indicates that the medium changes once again the conception of photography; even if still indexical these images become somehow more a fun fleeting linguistic sign. And, if as one of my interviews said: ‘all what we send is selfie’, then, it is possible that ten years after Rubinstein’s aforementioned opinion his prediction finally manifests factually.

But what exactly does it mean to say ‘all what we send is selfie?’ In today’s cultures, selfie, the umbrella word can imply almost anything. Selfies as evidence, as pedagogy, as affect, as ethics; homeless selfies, selfies at serious places, funny selfies, tweenies, petfies, bed selfies, foot selfies, bathroom selfies, food selfies, healthy selfies, the Obama selfie, celebrity selfies, duck-face selfie, usies, drone selfies, and the list of categories for this genre are endless. As this very article title reads: ‘all what we send is selfie’, Snapchat photos are used as a medium that allows for agency in the transforming of representations of reality. They also reveal how reality is difficult to seize, and provide a ground where identity issues are confronted, experienced, teased, and performed. Since Snapchat photos can be drawn and written on and captioned, images can be transformed. Hence, they also serve as proof that the medium transforms reality and transmits it in its own and curious ways. Self-mockery usually is a healthy release, not only for oneself, but also because by making yourself appear silly you show others that you have a humorous attitude towards yourself. The app is derisive towards photography and provides a place to play with images. Its social value lies in its symbolic interactions.

Moreover, the advantages and disadvantages of the cultural uses of such types of applications are frequently discussed via mass media outlets. For instance, as it is only possible to use Snapchat on mobiles, this element presupposes a more intimate and even embodied relationship. Does the fact that they are not publically openly exposed undermine a more sentimental or sexual hidden shame to these practices? Is it that when people see the image it is but for a short period? Innumerable online articles with evocative titles exemplify, point out, and connect the boom of the selfie, i.e. its mediatic success with the increase of digital ego-trips and narcissism. ‘Sharing the (self) Love: The Rise of the Selfie and Digital Narcissism’ (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014) is but an example. Some have queried that it is not really a way of pushing



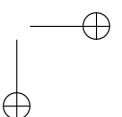


people to have fun and amusement, but rather that it refers more to the scoring logic, and have portrayed it as ‘the worst idea in tech: let’s gamify sexting’ (Notopoulos, 2012).

Others, such as the exhibitions presented at the National #Selfie Portrait Gallery – an installation of 19 emerging artists from the EU and the US, London, Oct. 2013 – or Xavier Cha’s conceptual performance. Cha wanders the exhibition and compulsively takes selfies/dick pics, which were collected and updated live through the artist’s Twitter, Vine and Instagram accounts and put onto the website disembodied tumblr account. These types of performances endorse that there are new creative ways in which selfies can be used for reaching and engaging audiences. Others such as Dasha Battelle (@dabttl) and @lukaszirngibl are demonstrating their drawing skills in Snapchat. While falling beyond the scope of this paper, the psychological, moral or ethical debates of these usages are significant and must be addressed. Even if many people are reluctant to use this app, those teenagers using it, and frequently sending selfies, confirm that it is entertaining.

As demonstrated by Kath Albury (Albury, 2013), teenagers do differentiate between sexting and joke-sexting. Most of the Snapchatter participants in my focus group judged that there was more teasing going on than other things. They acknowledged being aware of, and responsive to, the feelings of others when sending just humorous content/selfies. For example, during one of the male focus groups, one of them received a snap. I asked if I could quickly see the image. He showed it to me. It was of a girl’s legs wearing a grey jogging pants and a very high-heeled pair of shoes. On the left part of the photo only one word was written in red. In French it read: ‘Avis?’ which translated would be something like ‘Opinion?’. Is this a joke-sext or a tease? The nuance is tiny. The boy smiles.

It is too early to gauge the multiple possible ranges of uses that Snapchat or any other transient visual sharing app can inspire. In any case, my findings thus far align with the results of a broader American survey. Conducted by Roesner, Gill and Kohno, the research suggests that Snapchat’s success is not due to its security properties, but rather because users find its logic gives them enjoyment (Roesner, Gill & Kohno, 2014). I discovered that for these groups, Facebook represented something more permanent, as an imprint that will last for too long; Instagram was used for beautiful photos, for playing the artists;





and Snapchat represents the *leisure*, the sharing, but most of all immediacy and amusement (Ibid.).

According to my interviewees, since it is transitory, average users do not have time to process it neither to rework it by applying filters and dressing it up in some way. They do not seem to know the aforementioned Snapchat artists, or even that doing transient art is possible. For them it is as-if it were a more authentic and raw representation of the self and the moment. The only alteration that can be made on the images through the app is scribble on them and/or write a very short line on it. For example, some of the comments my research subjects had about the feelings this ephemeral entertainment arose were: ‘it is the place where one shows oneself with no fear, with no make-up and in pyjamas’ (Maïmouna, 23rd May 2014). Another one said: Snapchat is the decadence, everything and no matter what, it is not serious. In general terms, in Snapchat you can always laugh (Midred).

In a Goffmanian (1959) sense most of these teenagers’ ephemeral staged but also *non-staged selfies* conform *the real me*. ‘I like the principle’ (Midred). Even if presentation seems to be at the center of these experiences, participants are teasing through a sort of anti-performance logic to get attention. In a moment where wearable devices are gaining popularity, and where the self seems to be in the in the spotlight, Snapchat and its selfies could also be a stepping stone that denotes both a more spontaneous reporting with self-mediation and self-fashioning, as well as a sign that perhaps we are entering a moment of quantified-self, a life-logging wave (De Lange, 2010, p. 58).

Entrenched in the zeitgeist and impositions of an attention economy, Snapchat users can also make and quickly send 10-second videos. ‘You have to go to the essential, and if you only have 7 seconds to watch a snap, you’d better look at it attentively’ (boyd, 2014). Just some days before I held my first focus group, in May 2014, a new Snapchat update had been launched, including a real-time chat option. Participants’ responses to questions about this version included: ‘chatting or sending only text messages (SMS) within the app is quite difficult and thus we still prefer to send very short one-line texts written on the photo itself’. So, if one wants to comment on a Snapchat, it can either be through sending another Snap back, through regular SMS, through another app, or by using another means of communication. How did teenagers circumvent the textual length constraint this particular app has? One tells me: ‘what we do is continue to respond through Snapchat but just with a black photo





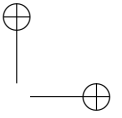
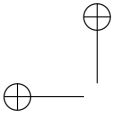
behind..., I just take a picture of the table or of my jeans to be able to write on it'. This comment exemplifies how users can outwit platform affordances and tool-led media use to find their own ways to circumvent and appropriate the platform's logic to their needs. Moreover, when the receiver sees the snap the sender reads 'opened', an *immediate answer* protocol/paradigm applies and an instant answer is increasingly expected. This is also due to the fact that "the mobile phone also helps to create an imagined sense of nearness with other people (called co-presence)." (De Lange, 2010, p. 138).

These fleeting moments are *not meant* to be stored; they are a way to train ingenious instant image message use. They are ways to practice how to surprise, how to be funny, how to tease, how to seduce. And while immediacy is often read as authenticity, these instant image messages are understood as more intimate and genuine than the constructed and seamlessly self-curated Facebook and Instagram portraits. As a token, this playful self-mediation action/reaction dynamic is what these teenagers like. Immediate ephemeral experiences that could be more related to a *short-lived orality*, which projects its users into a low-cost near future, as metaphors that belong to an intimate and performative realm. All at the same time, these constant and ubiquitous fleeting selfies demonstrate that the present is ephemeral and priceless. Joining Facebook and even Instagram, some teenager parents closely track what their daughters and sons do. Contrarily, my interviewees' parents, at least for the moment, are not joining Snapchat. Coline said that, for example, if she sends her mother a Snap, her mother responds through normal SMS. 'My mom has not understood what all this is about, she is not in the instant.' Other girls said that they would not have their parents as contacts. Coline then added – 'in any case, usually parents do not understand the things of the instant.' In contrast to their parents, the Instant Image Message (IIM) has become their way of communication, even one of their ways of being.

Snapchat versions of life

Having declined a Facebook acquisition of three-billion dollars in November 2013, Snapchat's monetization mechanisms are yet to be unveiled. Currently, the number of mobile photos and videos one can upload to mobile photo sharing platforms like Instagram and Snapchat is unlimited, there is no possibility of a professional account and its usage is free of charge. However,

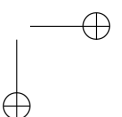
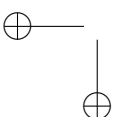




nothing ensures that licensed charged subscriptions will not be proposed in the future. By the end of 2014, many brands such as Audi, Taco Bell and McDonald's, have their Snapchat pages. They advertise through sending snaps, by offering a special discount or bonus to users that follow their ephemeral advertising instructions and/or games. Some American news media channels such as NPRNews, HuffPost WashingtonPost are also present. Counterpointing these advertising campaigns, perhaps an increase in the use of advertisements versus no-advertisement propositions can be the economic model for the survival of these photo/video applications (Kamradt, 2013).

Since November 2014, in a partnership with payments firm Square, 'Snapcash' will allow people to enter their debit card payment information securely and message their friends a dollar amount to be directly deposited into the recipient's bank account: a preview of what money exchange can be. The question of its economic model remains still unclear, but as I write more and more companies create their profile and enter strongly into this Snapchating logic. In fact, Snapchat users could be sharing their images through MMS, but both due to speed and price, ephemeral exchanges stand as much more convenient: they are free of cost and do not engage any memory space in the device. Snapchat images circulate in different levels and make part of a more visual interpersonal communication that mainly becomes its '*raison d'être*' (Wang, Tucker, Rihll, 2011). Referring to consumer culture Wagner expresses: "In consumer culture, the value of an object or a service is expressed through its use, which is culturally constructed and cannot be isolated from its social context." (Wagner, 2011).

One might also want to ask: What makes these visual apps so successful? Emma (participant) replied: 'because it's the new thing...?' It was not really new, but I could not retort that to her. In fact, more important than the newness, is to consider the phatic aspects of this modality. Phatic expressions can be verbal or non-verbal but most of all what characterizes them is their social function. Rather than informative, they serve to start a conversation, salute someone, just say goodbye or acknowledge the fact of listening. The term refers to: small talk conversation for its own sake. Phatic communication is the term coined by Malinowski, B. (1923) in "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages", and concerns those instances, which their function is to perform a social task, as opposed to conveying information. However, they fortify social ties and establish and maintain the chance of communication.





In Jakobson's adoption of the term "Phatic communication occurs when, for example, comments are made about the weather ('nice day'), inquiries about health ('how do you do?') or affirmation of some obvious state of the world ('we won!'). The phatic function endeavors to keep channels of communication open and to maintain the physical, psychological or social contact. Phatic exchanges confirm that communication is in fact taking place (e.g. eye contact, nods, idle chat) and reaffirm connectedness" (Vetere, Howard & Gibbs, 2005).

What happens with phatic images? How did we succeed in reaching a phatic and useful, selfie moment? Analyzing technology in society, researchers Victoria Wang, John V. Tucker, and Tracey E. Rihll defined the concept of *phatic technology* as a 'technology that serves to establish, develop and maintain human relationships' and 'where the essence of communication is relationship building not information exchanging' (Ibid.). Snapchat enables the circulation of phatic images. Moreover, as aforementioned, Snapchat is not only used for image exchange: it can entail ephemeral practices such as transient conversations, just amusement, but also advertisement and money exchange. Paradoxically, in larger cultural and economic trends, ephemeral selfies become more grounded daily. In a more personal exchange and in discussing all these visual app exchanges, a friend of mine responded me: "my intrigue, my desire, comes from my excitement". Clearly these visual exchanges can trigger cerebral tease and intrigue players almost like thrillers. However, it could also be the other way round: excitement can come from intrigue and desire.

Following Snapchat's initial uniqueness, on October 14th 2014, Skype (now owned by Microsoft) launched Qik, which, after many technical transformations, is now an app for disappearing video messages. Therefore, and in this visual mobile application consumption, it should be recalled that even if Snapchat was mentioned in *Time Magazine's* 2013 most remarkable persons, it is but one more app in the visual ecosystem. The addition and combination of all these visual applications and platforms aids and reinforces the passage of mobile imagery. It moves from device centered to app-based. It becomes a key part in the app economy³, contributing but to its adoption and mone-

³ The app economy refers to the array of economic activity surrounding mobile applications. Mobile apps created new fortunes for entrepreneurs and changed the way business is done.





tary capitalization. In all cases, it must be recalled that in 2014 Snapchat was declared as having been the fastest growing app.

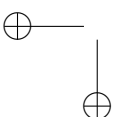
If the movement to web 2.0 enabled a new set of visual practices, especially in terms of blurring the lines between professional and amateur images, private and public, apps like Snapchat point to a set of different practices. These ephemeral exchanges represent appreciation, interest, love, friendship but most of all trust (Mauss, 1923-1924), even within the most private circles. In the words of H. Berking, ‘the gift makes feelings concrete’ (Taylor & Harper, 2003, p. 9). Here the intangible is somehow concretized and cyclically made tangible yet invisible in larger public spheres. With sent and received images, people have something to talk about, something that might further facilitate a more targeted conversational exchange and discussion of experiences. These actions, in turn, could allow other stories to surface, while at the same time contributing to the financialization of data flows, and commodification of participation in larger public spheres.

Conclusion

This article analyzed and appealed to comprehend how these instances of mobile visual *mediations of the self* contributed to the construction of the selfie as a social and visual utility, enhancing its later appropriation as a worthy and phatic image. I studied visual narratives that relate to the selfie moment, mainly understood as a fleeting image. To demonstrate how, as one of my interviewees said: “*all we send is selfie*”, topics of self-representation, affective evidences and empowerment were developed.

Using focus groups, I have concentrated this analysis on the study of self-created images, made through the photo app Snapchat that allows users to see the image for a short period of time before the image disappears. I asked: in what ways do teenage Snapchatters feel they might be circumventing a consumerist ecosystem predicated on image possession? It is arguable that Snapchat might be symptomatic of a desire to forego data archiving and instead just live and share self(ie)-fleeting moments. Of course, production of ephemeral sel-

The app economy encompasses the sale of apps, ad revenue or public relations generated by free apps, and the hardware devices on which apps are designed to run. In 2007, virtually no mobile apps existed. As of 2011, more than 25 billion apps have been downloaded. (Wikipedia).



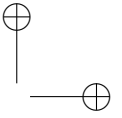


fies via Snapchat is not totally free nor eludes a commercial application. Conversely, the practice demonstrates why it is high time to consider issues like transiency, immediateness and friendship when studying current and future mobile image production, consumption, circulation, and conceptualization. Midred, one participant, made a comment that could help unravel one of my introductory questions: is it the end of the photo souvenir jukebox? She said: “we are not going to remember the snaps, because these images are not very important and therefore they are not made to be remembered.”

Most of my interviewees said that they had a Facebook and Instagram account, but that they used them much less. This means that they do use other image-permanent apps, and thus their Snapchat practice does not only represent an exclusive transient and discarding dynamic, but rather, a more nuanced representation of the self. In each one of the platforms they play with different engagements of intimacy and authenticity. Besides, the general declining desire for ownership among teens towards their mobile images seems also to be directly linked to other technological developments. Mainly, due to an increase in the penetration of the cloud-logic, and therefore of its use. Nowadays, the possibility of placing data in the clouds is cheaper, occurs more often and in some devices is even proposed by default. Backing up in the cloud becomes something common for these users. The data is backed up somewhere far away in the web, but does not engage the memory space of the device and correlates similarly to Snapchat’s dynamic. Concomitantly, we could say that it is as if these adolescents became physically less attached to the images they produce, and therefore these mobile images no longer represent for them something they want to keep forever and archive irreplaceably or carry carefully in their pockets. It may also mean that they take for granted that everything is going to be archived anyway, if not in the device, then in the cloud.

These teenagers exemplify an audience that is formed and deformed by what they see online. Their public visual selfie opacity can thus be either useful or limiting to the work of visual and mobile culture researchers. Moreover, it also definitely is a sign of the commodification of excitement, that of bypassing public overexposure. Despite the conscious aim to grasp the desired yet unreachable object, it is by joining the force of sharing within the network that produces satisfaction. Just as once Instant Messaging impacted mediated communication, immediate image sharing is undeniably changing, fostering and conditioning new forms of social relations, setting the commodification



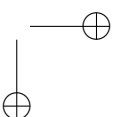


of users own images in the center (as we have for the moment seen through these teenagers' activity) as both objects and subjects of the system.

Amateur mobile images also rely on the lightness of immediacy, mockery, self-derision, but also on the cyclical pleasure of play, fun and confidence of ties, where these vernacular visual sharings are the sign and its images the symbols of how vulnerable and ephemeral trust can be. The fact that the sharing of these photos is short lived makes its production process answer more to impulses rather to reflection.

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