

HG2052 Language, Technology and the Internet

Assignment 1

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Analysis of Snapchat as a medium of communication

1 Introduction

In this report, I will be analysing my chosen medium of communication, Snapchat. Much of research done on Snapchat has been on its main “snaps” feature, with little said about its ephemeral text chat. Hence, this report aims to focus on describing and analysing Snapchat’s text chat feature. In the following sections, I will first introduce the medium together with relevant literature. I will then analyse its properties with reference to Herring’s (2007) faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse and Crystal’s (2006) seven features. I will then discuss the medium’s effects on communication.

1.1 Snapchat

Snapchat is a form of computer-mediated communication whereby users are able to communicate in the form of photos and videos, known as “snaps”. The distinctive feature of Snapchat lies in its intentionally ephemeral design, whereby the snaps would disappear permanently “in the matter of seconds” after the recipient sees them (Colao, 2012).

Since its launch in 2011, Snapchat has grown steadily in its userbase globally. From the fourth quarter of the year 2019 to the corresponding quarter of 2020, the daily active users of Snapchat had increased from 218 million users to 265 million users worldwide (Tankovska, 2021). In a Business of Apps article, the number of daily active users of Snapchat is predicted to continue increasing to 356 million by the year 2023 (Iqbal, 2020).

Snapchat today has additional features on its platform which introduced new mediums of communication within the platform. In 2013, Snapchat added their “Stories” feature whereby users could upload rewatchable snaps that would be public for all their friends for 24 hours (Etherington, 2013). In 2014, Snapchat added a disappearing text chat feature, which came along with a video-call function (Dillet, 2014). In 2015, Snapchat added their “Discover” feature, an extension to Stories, whereby users could watch Stories from brands and content

creators which are compiled and organised into various topics (Crook, 2015). The Discover feature now also includes featured Stories from the community (Snapchat, n.d.). However, the analysis in this report will focus on Snapchat’s ephemeral text chat feature.

1.2 Snapchat’s ephemeral text chat

At first glance, Snapchat’s ephemeral text chat interface looks just like any other text-messaging platforms. Below are screenshots I have taken of the chat interface.

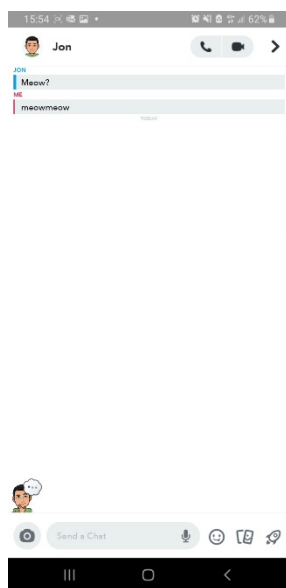


Figure 1 Snapchat text chat interface

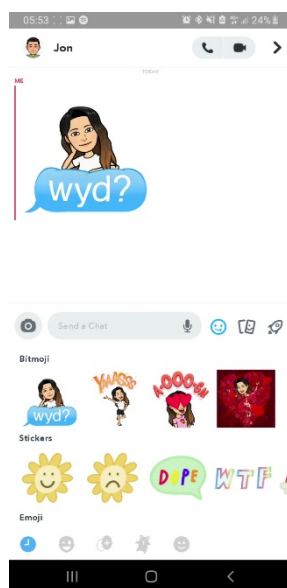


Figure 2 Snapchat ‘bitmoji’ stickers

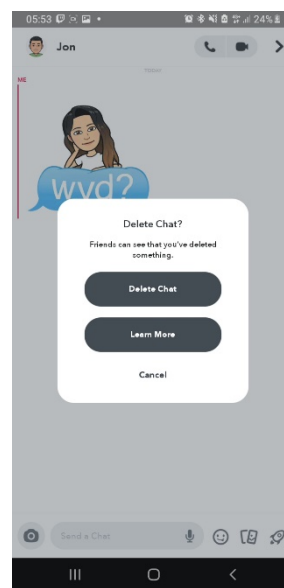


Figure 3 Snapchat delete chat function

In reference to Figure 1, Snapchat’s text chat interface shows the addressee’s name at the top left corner, with the voice call and video call options at the top right. The messages of the conversation are shown top-down chronologically with the latest message at the bottom. A little icon with a speech bubble is shown at the bottom left of the chat to indicate that the other party is currently typing a message. At the bottom of the interface is a bar with the options to send (from left to right): new photos and/or videos, text messages, voice messages, stickers and/or emojis (see Figure 2), photos and/or videos from one’s device and games from Snapchat’s Discover. All messages sent in Snapchat’s text chat are automatically deleted after one leaves the chat. In Figure 1, notice that the two text messages are highlighted and bolded for one. These messages are “saved”. The message which is both highlighted and bolded signifies that it was saved by the user. The message which is only highlighted signifies that it was saved by the user’s addressee. This means that the person who saved it can see the messages again even after leaving the chat. Snapchat also has the function to

delete a message sent before the recipient sees it or even after the recipient saves the message. However, the recipient will be notified of any deleted messages, as shown in Figure 3. These features and functions, as well as the above screenshots, would be referenced again with elaboration in the subsequent sections.

1.3 Tools of analysis

In the following sections, the properties of Snapchat's ephemeral text chat will be analysed using primarily Herring's (2007) faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse and Crystal's (2006) seven features, making comparisons to speech and text.

Herring's (2007) faceted classification scheme defines categories of computer-mediated discourse into medium (technological) factors and situation (social) factors. The medium factors include synchronicity, message transmission (1-way versus 2-way), persistence of transcript, size of message buffer, channels of communication, anonymous messaging, private messaging, filtering, quoting and message format. The situation factors include participation structure, participant characteristics, purpose, topic or theme, tone, activity, norms and code. Both lists of medium and situation factors are non-exhaustive.

Crystal's (2006) seven features allows for analysis of whether a medium of communication is more speech-like or text-like. They can be summarised in the table below:

Speech like	Text like
time-bound	space-bound
spontaneous	contrived
face-to-face	visually decontextualized
loosely structured	elaborately structured
socially interactive	factually communicative
immediately revisable	repeatedly revisable
prosodically rich	graphically rich

2 Properties of Snapchat's ephemeral text chat

The key property of Snapchat's text chat is of course its ephemerality. By default, messages are deleted once the user reads them and exits the interface. Users can indeed save and re-read messages, compromising on its ephemerality to some extent. However, these saved messages can still be easily deleted by the sender at any time. This means that messages are

still very much transient and time-bound (Crystal, 2006). This overall lack of persistence of transcript leads to lower levels of meta-linguistic awareness and hence results in users having less consideration and reflection on their communication (Herring, 2007).

This effect on communication can then be related to the spontaneity of Snapchat's text chat. Although the asynchronous and repeatedly revisable properties of Snapchat's text chat make for easy planning of messages, the reduced meta-linguistic awareness reduces the perceived need to do so. Hence, communication on the medium is largely spontaneous and loosely structured.

Next, in terms of participants structure and characteristics, Snapchat has been found to be used for one-to-one private conversations with one's close friends, partners and family members (Piwek and Joinson, 2016).

The options of sending photos and/or videos, as well as stickers and emojis, also allows for graphically rich communication on the platform. One is also able to send Bitmoji stickers, which adapts the sender's physical appearance into the character in the stickers (Figure 2), an attempt to simulate face-to-face conversations on an otherwise visually decontextualised platform.

3 Effects on communication

The above properties of Snapchat's ephemeral text chat reflect an attempt to incorporate the written discourse of chat to be speech-like, using technological affordances. This is supported by Oren (2016) who found that "Snapchat aims to apply through technological means the temporal time-bound paradigm that characterizes oral cultures". Its linguistic features are similar to that of many chat or text messaging platforms such as Whatsapp and Telegram. However, as the study by Piwek and Joinson (2016) shows, the properties of Snapchat have caused communication to be more intimate and private than other similar platforms. This supports earlier research which found users of Snapchat tending to build and maintain smaller social networks on the platform (Utz, Muscanell and Khalid, 2015).

3.1 Effect on society

Snapchat's more private and conversation-like mode of communication is found to serve as a form of bonding of social capital instead of bridging (Piwek and Joinson, 2016). This also means that the medium is found to be forging closer and deeper relationships instead of forming wider and more superficial social networks (Putnam, 2000). In that aspect, Snapchat is found to be associated with more positive mood and enjoyment than other platforms but not a good source of social support (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck and Falk, 2016).

Snapchat also introduced a platform for context sharing to society – to share the “here and now” of one's experience (Bayer et al., 2016). Bayer et al. (2016) also found that the contexts shared on Snapchat are different from other social media platforms as they are contexts that are generally seen to be more mundane everyday happenings.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, as a medium of communication, Snapchat offers a twist to conventional social media and text messaging platforms. Its deliberate incorporation of ephemerality to its otherwise ordinary social media and text messaging platform introduces a different, almost rebellious, effect on computer-mediated communication.

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