The Influence of Snapchat on Interpersonal Relationship Development and Human Communication

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Abstract

This study focuses on Snapchat, a cellphone picture-sending app and its influences on interpersonal relational development and the current understanding of the communication process. Using qualitative interview technique, 75 people were interviewed. These interview responses led to the identification and discussion of seven themes in the realm of interpersonal relationship and human communication. These themes range from moving a relationship from the experimenting to intensifying stage, reinitiating family relationships, relationship maintenance, and avoiding partners. The findings of this study also highlight the significance of a non-response, the level of risk involved in

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Snapchat messaging, and methods of identity management via Snapchat. Finally, this is a unique study in its approach, which is an effort to look at virtual human communication trends that are contributing to the development and reshaping of interpersonal relationship development models. Also, this investigation provides a new lens of opportunity through which scholars can look at McLuhan's long-debated claim that the medium is the message.

Communication is a never-ceasing process of sending and receiving messages across various mediums (Seiler & Beall, 2005). Thus medium remains extremely relevant not only as a source for sending and receiving information; it also determines the shape and kind of message. This argument leads us to McLuhan's (1967) claim, "the medium is the message." Although McLuhan made this claim in the 1960s when people did not have satellite TVs and digital media, the claim began making more sense to mass media and communication scholars during the shift to this information age where new means of communication such as Snapchat are reshaping the way younger generations communicate in their everyday lives.

McLuhan, through his claim, emphasizes that medium itself, not the message, should be the focus of a study to understand change in a society. For example, people tend to go for the obvious (news) and ignore the structural realities (medium) that bring change in the society. Thus the claim, "the medium is the message," refers to the understanding of change in audience attitudes that results from the introduction of new mediums such as Snapchat,

Facebook, Twitter, etc. Keeping in perspective the importance of a medium in communication processes, this investigation is a step forward in connecting the dots between relationship development and new means of communication, commonly referred to as social media.

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (p. 61). In his bestselling book, *Being Digital,* Negroponte (1996) argues that at the intersection of human communication, digital graphics, and multimedia sources, a radically new culture is emerging. Thus, for the purpose of this study, social media should be defined as internet-based human communication that allows the exchange of User-Generated Content (UGC) on a particular medium such as Snapchat.

To provide a roadmap, this investigation provides a review of the literature on communication processes and relationship development, and how these two ideological paradigms are connected.

Review of Literature

Communication is a never-ceasing process of sending and receiving messages across various mediums (Seiler & Beall, 2005). Barnlund (2009) noted that "among a few universals that apply to man is this: That all men—no matter of what time or place, of what talent or temperament, of what race or rank—are continually engaged in making sense of the world about them" (p. 6). Theories such as Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce & Cronen, 1980) and Social Constructionism (Berger & Luck-

mann, 1966) claim it is through communication that people make sense of their world.

For decades, communication scholars have sought methods to best describe the communication process and its players (Barnlund, 1970; Katz, 1957; Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Schramm, 1954). Just as the number of working definitions of communication continues to grow, the communication community of scholarship continually expands its understanding of the communication process. Communication scholars have on relationship building through communication (Baxter & Montgomery, 1992; Conville, 1991; Johnson, et al., 2004; Knapp, 1978; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009; Rawlins, 1996). Much research has also been directed toward how online communities and social media, such as Facebook, affect interpersonal relationships through communication (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Zwier, Araujo, Boukes, & Willemsen, 2011; Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Bradner, Kellogg, & Erickson, 1999). Other communication channels, such as texting, have been evaluated per marketig viability (Omkareshwar, 2012) and media richness (Kwak, 2012; Weisskirch, 2012). There is even a large body of research regarding the implications of picture-sending cellphone apps on sexual behavior (i.e. sexting) (Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Parker, Blackburn, Perry, & Hawks, 2013). However, the literature is replete regarding the use of cellphone picture apps and how they are used to move relationships through stages of development and influence one's understanding of the communication process. This study considers how Snapchat, a cellphone picture-sending app, affects interpersonal relationship development and offers insight into the influence of Snapchat on the field's

current understanding of the communication process.

How Relationships Develop

Knapp's (1978) Stages of Relational Development offer a clear depiction of the typical relationship progression. Though not every relationship completes all stages, and competing theories of relationship development claim a more cyclical approach, there is much merit to the concept of people moving through multiple relationship stages. Moreover, communication and psychology scholars have wrestled with gaining a more robust conceptualization of the life of a relationship (Baxter & Montgomery, 1992; Conville, 1991; Johnson, et al., 2004; Knapp, 1978; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009; Rawlins, 1996).

Knapp envisioned the relationship development process as a form of ladder, where each step signified a new stage. Participants progress up the ladder through the stages of initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding. Oppositely, if and when a relationship digresses, it follows a consistent path through differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating (Knapp, 1978). Knapp acknowledges that a person is not bound to follow this progression of steps from start to finish, but realizes that people can move back and forth within these steps.

Conville (1991) noted that rather than relationships moving in a staircase motif, they instead live in a cycle of security, disintegration, alienation, and resynthesis. In a kind of relationship rotation, partners move around and around within these four stages of relationship. Duck (1982), instead, considered relationships and their stages to be more sporadic. He developed the Phases

of Dissolution to describe how relationship viscosity works in intrapsychic, dyadic, social, and grave-dressing phases. In whatever manner the lives of interpersonal relationships are viewed, Courtright, Miller, Rogers, and Bagarozzi (1990) states that communication is often key in making positive relationship stage transitions. In order to maintain a strong and vibrant relationship where both partners find happiness and fulfillment, communication must be present. Each of these relationship development models are significant, but this paper will focus on Knapp's Stages of Relational Development due to its fluid progression from step to step.

Knapp's Stages of Relational Development.

According to Knapp, the typical interpersonal relationship moves through five stages of coming together and may progress to the five stages of coming apart (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). The five stages of coming together are: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding. The five stages of coming apart are: differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating.

Coming Together. Initiating is the first stage of Knapp's (1978) Stages of Relational Development and is signaled by a first interaction with another person where both verbal and nonverbal messages are sent and received. If the pair desires to get to know one another better, the process moves to the second stage of experimenting. Experimenting includes asking questions of one another through small talk covering a breadth of surface-level topics (Altman & Taylor, 1973). If a spark of interest remains upon identifying (Lucas, 2012; Beebe & Beebe, 2006) with the other person, the relationship will often move to

Knapp's third stage – intensifying.

During the intensifying stage, relationship partners express their feelings toward one another through both verbal and nonverbal expressions (Adler & Proctor, 2011; Tolhuizen, 1989). Partners in the intensifying stage typically utilize one of five major methods to express their love: giving gifts, serving the other, affirming, touching, and quality time (Chapman, 1992). This is an exciting time as a relationship blossoms, typically leading to the integrating stage wherein partners begin to set into a relationship groove, become more comfortable with each other, and mesh into one social unit. Moreover, partners in the integrating stage begin shedding parts of themselves in order to take on a shared identity (Adler & Proctor, 2011). A couple can remain in the integrating stage for years, never making a solid commitment to one another. However, if and when a commitment is made, the relationship reaches the pinnacle of Knapp's (1978) Stages of Relational Development – bonding. At the bonding stage, partners make a public statement of their commitment to each other. This statement can be verbal or nonverbal and range from cohabitation to marriage. In some relationship cases there is a ritual, while in others a simple shared address.

Coming Apart. While many relationships remain in the bonding stages for life, some begin to deteriorate through what Knapp (1978) calls the stages of coming apart. The first stage of coming apart is differentiating. This stage is characterized by covert separations, such as referring to shared items as mine rather than ours and discussions about personal goals over shared goals. According to Baxter (1988), differentiation is in part due to a

dialectical tension causing persons to want both connection and autonomy simultaneously.

If relationship partners do not notice and/or adjust their differentiating behaviors, they slip down one stage to circumscribing. Circumscribing is marked by a lack of interest in one another, leading to lowered quality and quantity of time together (Adler & Proctor, 2011). The relationship does not end at this point, but partners remain together in a melancholy state of interest. Prolonged circumscribing leads to a stage of stagnation, where the relationship moves neither forward or backward – it simply hangs on. Stagnation is marked by a lack of enthusiasm, where partners go through the motions with one another without much positive emoting.

Once partners begin to take stock in their relationship at this point, they may feel unhappy, see no hope for recovery, or view their relationship as a dead-end street. In such cases, it is common for partners to begin avoiding one another. This avoiding may be very covert or manifest, but the affect remains daunting on the health of a relationship and typically leads to the final stage of termination (Adler & Proctor, 2011). Relationship termination comes in many forms, but can be an extension of avoiding. However, in some cases, such as a divorce, there is a clear, written agreement to terminate the relationship.

It is important to note that though Knapp's model portrays these relationship stages in the form of a ladder, where one step leads to the next, partners can move from one step to another out of order (Battaglia, Richard, Datteri, & Lord, 1998). For example, a dating couple (integrating) may be considering marriage (bonding) when the girl's old boyfriend moves back to town. She does not

want to confront her current steady boyfriend about her feelings for her old boyfriend, but she is torn regarding who she likes most. She begins spending time with the old boyfriend, but is too embarrassed to discuss the matter with her steady boyfriend, so she simply avoids him (avoidance). It is her hope that after a long period of her absence, her steady boyfriend will get the hint and move on (termination). Meanwhile, she has picked up in the intensifying stage with her old boyfriend.

Relationship Maintenance

Furthermore, relationships require maintenance in order to yield long-term success, and this maintenance comes largely through effective communication (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Edenfield, Adams, & Briihl, 2012; Gordon, Oveis, Impett, Kogan, & Keitner, 2012; Halford & Bodenmann, 2013; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). Relationships require work and are thus maintained through various means including, among others, self-disclosure (Downs, 1988; Tan, Overall, & Taylor, 2012) and commitment (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994).

Social Media and Relationship Development

Recent research has discussed how social media outlets, such as Facebook, are used to initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships (Mansson & Myers, 2011; Fox, et al., 2013; Dainton, 2013). Mediated communication, defined as communication transmitted over a mechanistic medium, such as Facebook, cellphone, or radio (Seiler & Beall, 2005), is proven to increase the numer of interpersonal relationships and the quality thereof (Parks & Floyd, 1996; UCLA Report, 2000). Boase and Wellman

(2006) discovered that the use of social media in fact bolstered interpersonal face-to-face relationships. Moreover, a series of Pew studies revealed that when relationships blossom through mediated forms, they are more likely to succeed face-to-face as well (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; Wellman, Smith, Wells, & Kennedy, 2008;).

By and large, young people are seeking and maintaining relationships via online social networks more than in face-to-face settings (Pierce, 2009). Hu, Wood, Smith, and Westbrook (2004) noted that online mediated communication led to a heightened sense of interpersonal intimacy. Media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Daft & Lengel, 1986) refers to a medium's ability to convey the fullness of a message (i.e. face-to-face representing the height of media richness). The further one moves from face-to-face interaction, the lower the media richness, or fullness (Surinder & Cooper, 2003). It is interesting to note here that mediated communication has repeatedly been found to enhance interpersonal relationships while representing a lowered level of media richness. Overall, Dainton and Aylor (2002) noted that mediated communication simply enhances interpersonal relationships, and Hian, Chuan, Trevor, and Detenber (2004) and Pratt, Wiseman, Cody, and Wendt (1999) noted that interpersonal relationships sometimes progress more rapidly through mediated formats than within face-to-face interactions.

Mediated Risk, Identity Management, and Permanence in Self-Disclosure

Mediated communication allows more apprehensive communicators a safe place to communicate interpersonal attraction (Scharlott & Christ, 2001), while offering a

venue through which relationship partners can stay in touch long-distance (Boase et al., 2006). Self-disclosure plays a significant role in the process of relationship development and is adaptive to each relationship stage and context (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Luft, 1969). For example, through the experimenting stage, uncertainty about a partner is reduced through asking questions and revealing more and more personal information in a reciprocal manner (Berger, 1987 ; see also Hofstede, 2003). Risk is a major part of self-disclosure and includes consequences such as rejection, giving a less than desirable impression, and even hurting another (Greene, Derlega, & Matthews, 2006; Rosenfeld, 2000). Moreover, heightened self-disclosure can leave one concerned how the shared information might be used in the future (Rosenfeld, 1979; Erbert & Floyd, 2004)

Just as self-disclosure brings risks, it also provides an outlet for identity management (Wintrob, 1987). For example, during the intensifying stage of relationship development, partners attempt to appear more physically attractive to one another (Johnson et al., 2004). It is in the presenting-self where interpersonal communication partners maintain their identity during these phases of relationship development (Goffman, 1959; 1971). Partners work to maintain a particular identity that is perceived to be either cute, helpful, outgoing, etc. in the eyes of their observer, though these may not be completely accurate judgments of one's physical attributes or character.

Thirdly, and closely related to the mediated self-disclosure dimensions of risk and identity management is that of message permanence (Adler & Proctor, II, 2011; Kikoski, 1993). During face-to-face interactions, verbal

and nonverbal messages are sent and received with no system of tangible record-keeping. Communicators gather and remember certain elements of the conversation, but none of the conversation is transcribed for preservation purposes – it is as if the words simply vanish once heard. Mediated communication, however, brings with it a sort of message permanence, where what is sent electronically is recorded for the unforeseeable future (Fielding, 2006). When sending a text message, for example, one must be willing for that message to live on past the time of origination and for it to be recalled with precision and possibly used against him or her. This discussion of message permanence is important in consideration of how Snapchat mediated communication disappears upon receipt.

Mediated Relationship Maintenance

Research is continually pointing to the significance of mediated communication in relationship development (Scharlott & Christ, 2001) and maintenance (Dainton, 2013; Johnson et al., 2008). Papp, Danielewicz, and Cayemberg (2012) discovered that simple disagreements between dating couples regarding their Facebook relationship status led to relationship dissatisfaction in some cases. Houser, Fleuriet, & Estrada (2012) discovered that though women utilize social media outlets to maintain relationships more than men, both men and women make use of a wide spectrum of social media to enhance relationship maintenance. Additional studies have revealed a positive correlation between romantic relationship satisfaction and post-relationship online social media friendship maintenance (Bullock, Hackathorn, Clark, & Mattingly, 2011) and the importance of identification in online relationship

maintenance (Craig & Wright, 2012). Such reports point to the significant role of mediated social outlets in maintaining relationships.

Snapchat

Evan Spiegel and Bobby Murphy developed Snapchat to work much like a text message. As undergraduates at Stanford University at the time of development, Spiegel and Murphy conceived the groundwork of Snapchat for a class assignment. A sender could take a picture of him or herself using the Snapchat cellphone app and send the picture to one or more friends, family, etc. In return, the receiver could snap a picture and return the gesture. The concept of sending self-photos, later known as selfies, to friends via the cellphone appealed to the app's creators, but they took a slightly different approach. Photos sent via Snapchat were deleted within ten seconds of receipt (Gillette, 2013), which encouraged users to share data/images they would not have otherwise shared (Turner, 2013).

Snapchat came at a time when people worldwide were experiencing high levels of anxiety regarding their online data. According to Michael Fertik with Reputation.com, the ability to record and store content online has led many, from those applying for college and employment to the spouse flirting with online eroticism, to seek methods of data-deletion in hopes of managing their identity (Singer, 2012). This desire to secure online self-data (Boyles, Smith, & Madden, 2012) has led to numerous lawsuits and discussions around the world (Gillette, 2013; Majovski, 2013). It is pertinent to mention here that Snapchat is available in 15 different languages including Ara-

bic, Korean, Chinese, and Spanish (Snapchat Inc., 2013). This ability of Snapchat to carry on online visual discourse that disappears within ten seconds of its reception startled the world with a new challenge regarding moral and ethical issues. In the meantime, Snapchat claims the ability to erase your selfie within ten seconds a breath of fresh air for those concerned about the longevity and potential publicity of their photos (Gillette, 2013).

Subsequently, Snapchat has become a prominent source for sexting (Poltash, 2013). Generation after generation seek new ways to increase voyeurism, while decreasing its implications (Barss, 2010). Snapchat seemed like the solution to this ever-present dilemma of data collection until reports began to announce that images could actually be saved by the receiver, the receiver's phone, or even the Snapchat servers (Valinsky, 2013; Large, 2013; Hill, 2013; Rosen & Rosen, 2013). Even with concerns regarding a sexting app reputation and the realization by clients that images may not really be deleted within ten seconds, Snapchat continues to flourish. Snapchat developers explain that "the allure of fleeting messages remind us about the beauty of friendship – we don't need a reason to stay in touch" (Snapchat Inc., 2013, p. 1).

Predominant Communication Models

Three predominant communication models are discussed below.

Linear Communication Model. When discussing a social media communication app such as Snapchat, it is helpful to consider the predominant communication models and their intersection with the app to understand the applicability of these models in this era of digital commu-

nication. One of the earliest understandings of communication was that of a linear process. Considering the typical telephone conversation, Shannon and Weaver (1949) developed the linear model of communication based on a kind of one-way flow of information. Within this model, a communicator would send messages to another through a channel while the other listened. Most likely due to the fact that the linear model was based on a telephone-like communication conceptualization, it did not take into account face-to-face nonverbal feedback.

Moreover, even with an understanding of external stimuli influences on communication within respective contexts, the linear model lacked appreciation for communicator backgrounds and only considered communication to be a one-way street. Foulger (2004) states communication typically involves both participants acting as both the destination and source, unlike what is displayed in the linear model. Shannon and Weaver's linear communication model laid the groundwork for future communication scholars and critics to further consider the elements surrounding a communication process.

Interactive Model of Communication. Working from the foundations of Shannon and Weaver, the interactive model of communication adds a bi-directional mode. Schramm (1954) recognized the absence of message-conveyance from the second person, or receiver, in Shannon and Weaver's linear model. Schramm envisioned a back and forth flow of information where communicators send messages to one another in a give and take method known as the interactive model. This model is similar to that of Shannon and Weaver, but allows for the second person to send a message back to the original sender. In

this model, communicators take turns sending and receiving messages from one another, which builds on Shannon and Weaver's conceptualization that one sender sends a one-way message to the receiver.

Another significant contribution, among others, Schramm made to the field's understanding of the communication process is that of the coding and decoding processes. Schramm noted that there is more than what meets the eye during a communication process – there is a cognitive process taking place below the surface. Prior to sending a message, a sender codes or crafts a message; when the receiver receives the message he or she decodes or interprets the message. Even with these significant contributions, Schramm's interactive model did not account for how the communication process is encompassed by feedback.

Transactional Communication Model. Barnlund (1970) later developed what is currently the most widely accepted model of communication. Barnlund's transactional communication model is taught in communication classes covering the field of communication studies (Foulger, 2004). The transactional model represents a culmination of past communication models while recognizing the role of feedback. Barnlund understood that communication does not take place in a vacuum where participants merely take turns sending messages through one-way channels.

Instead, Barnlund observed how both overt and covert, intentional and unintentional messages were sent simultaneously. Called feedback, this process of rapid simultaneous message sending is a kind or reaction to a communication partner's previous communication or a

host of other stimuli. Feedback plays a prominent and influential role in face-to-face communication, but is limited in channels of low media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

Snapchat Reflective of Transactional Communication Model

Given Snapchat's nature of sending and receiving messages in an asynchronous manner, it is most reflective of the Transactional Model of Communication. One person sends a message to a receiver, who then decodes the message and soon after, or at a later time, sends a message back to the original sender. It is important to note here that Snapchat does not represent a social networking outlet. According to Boyd and Ellison (2008), social networking mediums must connect members within the medium beyond initial contacts. Snapchat is a form of single-channel communication in a dyadic format. It is true that a person can Snapchat an image to multiple friends at one time, but others cannot view these images uninvited as they can more freely via Facebook, for example.

Rationale

Research surrounding relationship development has centered around the process of communication and relationship development in both face-to-face and mediated elements including Facebook and texting. From the literature, it is evident that relationship stage development and maintenance is affected through social media outlets. Houser, Fleuriet, and Estrada (2012) note that relationship partners use an array of mediated communication venues to build and maintain relationships. Fox, Warber, and Makstaller's (2013) work on Facebook is evidence of

how relationship status can be influenced through social media. Moreover, their research also revealed that Facebook partners are more likely to seek information about each other via social media images rather than text. Mediated communication intended at moving a relationship from one phase to the next plays a significant role in the self-disclosure communication process, brings risk, can help one manage identity, and typically carries message permanence.

However, the literature is replete regarding the use of a short-term social media app such as Snapchat and how it might influence the communication process and relationship development. Therefore, based on the literature, it is reasonable to assume that Snapchat both adapts the current understanding of the communication process and is a viable tool for effective relationship development, all through a mediated communication channel. In an effort to discover the effect of Snapchat on relationship development among people, the purpose of this study is to extend the current understanding of the link between social media and relationship development. Findings are relevant to private citizens, not-for-profit fundraising organizations, private industry, and the public and governmental sectors. This study addresses potential influence of Snapchat on the relationship development process and the communication process.

> **RQ1:** Is Snapchat used as a tool for relationship development and maintenance?
>
> **RQ2:** What is the influence of Snapchat on the communication process?

Methodology
Participants

This study utilized qualitative interviews as a data collection tool because interviewing is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues (Seidman, 2006). Institutional Review Board approval is on file at the researchers' university. The key focus of the interviews was an attempt to understand people's changing behavior of communication while using online tools such as Snapchat.

A group of 16 trained interviewers collected data from a convenience sample of 80 participants (five interviews per interviewer). There were no preset age parameters, but participants ranged from 18 to 60 years of age and created a cross-section of ages. All participants were residents of the Southwestern U.S., adults, used Snapchat, and were selected based on social connections to the interviewers. Participant were asked a series of five questions regarding their use of the Snapchat app:

1. What kinds of pictures do you take and send via Snapchat? (i.e. What do you photograph?)
2. Would knowing your Snapchat pictures could be "saved" change the kinds of pictures you send?
3. Would you say you have ever used Snapchat as a tool to manage your identity?
4. What do you think or feel when you send someone a Snapchat and he or she does not reply?
5. Who do you Snapchat – only close friends, new acquaintances, etc.? – And is Snapchat a way in which you advance relationships – how?

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were assured interview confidentiality and interview transcriptions were coded for record maintenance. Data analysis utilized what Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, and Coleman (2000) call the kaleidoscope model of constant comparative qualitative data analysis. According to Dye et al.'s, a researcher can effectively analyze qualitative data through a series of steps, beginning with a grand sum of data and moving from large to smaller groupings of thematic materials. In so doing, researchers begin to observe thematic groupings and how these themes reach across groupings.

For purposes of this study, Dye et al.'s kaleidoscope model of data analysis was adopted to accommodate multiple data analysts. Following Patton's (1990) model of grouping same questions, each interviewer searched for themes across their respective five participants, question by question. Each interviewer then grouped with two co-interviewers for discussion regarding answer/thematic clusters across multiple participants in what Richards et al. (2012) calls a process of "examination, pattern identification, and interpretation" (p. 207).

The groups discussed themes across interview question number one and if these themes were in fact themes across more than one interview. From this discussion on all five interview questions, the interviewers were able to begin to pull real themes from the interviews – a form of constant comparison within Dye et al.'s model. Once all 16 interviewers vetted interview transcripts and discussed themes with co-interviewers, the primary researcher led a large focus-group like discussion with the interviewers in an effort to begin data categorization,

analysis, and refinement (Dye et al., 2000). This discussion was conducted in an effort to discover how Snapchat affected relationship stage movement or maintenance, but also allowed for spontaneous discovery. As a form of post hoc data analysis fidelity, a third-party, objective researcher collected and analyzed the entirety of the data and offered helpful insight as well.

Results and Discussion
RQ1

The first research question addressed the influence of Snapchat on relationship development. While analyzing RQ 1, four themes were discovered. These themes range from moving a relationship from the experimenting to intensifying stage, reinitiating family relationships, relationship maintenance, and avoiding partners via non-responses.

Experimenting Stage to Intensifying Stage

Out of these four, the first theme deals with the use of Snapchat as a tool to move interpersonal relationships from the experimenting stage to the intensifying stage. This is done through flirtatious, fun, simple selfies sent from partner to partner. Instead of sending an awkward text stating, for example, "I am thinking of you," partners can send a simple image of themselves with no words. The interpretation of the visual message is left to the receiver, but the message is less likely to be rejected outright. Therefore, the sender is advancing the relationship through the sent image.

As one respondent said, "Since the subjects of our Snapchats are not extraordinarily personal, it has become

a much easier way to get to know someone." Another respondent was of the view that "[a]s far as getting to know this particular individual, I feel that it has been much easier than if our primary form of communication was textual or in-person." Another stated, "I think it can help further a relationship by specifically connecting with the other person through sharing photos that are funny or something only they would find interesting." This participant confirms Knapp's (1978) theory that through the development of interpersonal relationships, partners begin to become more intimate in their shared information having gained a more personal connection with the other.

Some of the participants observed that the sharing of images via this social media reassures the level of trust between participants of this communication tool. "I make acquaintances friends through Snapchat," stated one respondent, again affirming Snapchat's role in relationship development. Furthermore, Snapchat seems to aid users in developing separate types of relationship, friendships and romantic interests, in different ways, whereas one respondent noted, "my Snapchats are different to my friends than my boyfriend." As one of the participants observed, Snapchat helps her maintain long distance relationships through "trust" that, she believed, is communicated via sharing of images online.

Reinitiate Family/Friend Relationships

The second theme uncovered pertains to the use of Snapchat as a tool reinitiating inactive family/friends relationships. When one is less likely to call or write a family member, a cousin for example, who he or she has not seen in a long time, he or she seems to be more likely to commu-

nicate via images. According to the responses gathered from this study's participants, these images allow Snapchat users to reopen the lines of communication between family members in a way that is less threatening. After extended absences in real-life, sent images via Snapchat create a strong sense of presence without words jumbling the intention. In other words, images become conversation-starters in order to reinitiate family/friends relationships. As one of the participants said, "I wish my mom would get one [Snapchat app] so I could send her silly pictures of things happening…"

However, this desire to reconnect is not only specific to family members or close friends, in fact many participants expressed their aspiration to reconnect with old or long-forgotten buddies from their childhood era. For example, some participants suggested that they use Snapchat to reconnect to their old buddies "from high school." Furthermore, one respondent noted that she uses Snapchat to reinitiate her relationship with people from her past, stating, "I only Snapchat those [people] that I can trust."

Relationship Maintenance

The third theme dealt with ways in which Snapchat is used to maintain interpersonal relationships. Whether these relationships be family, friendships, or romantic in nature, Snapchat images provide an outlet for users to make clear efforts toward relationship maintenance. On days when a relationship is struggling or simply in an effort to maintain that cheery feeling of a relationship that is going extremely well, images sent via Snapchat seem to carry a form of reassurance, as one partici-

pant stated, I use Snapchat to "strengthen my existing one [relationships]."

   While others participate on Snapchat conversation aggressively to make sure they are maintaining their "exclusiveness" of friendship online simultaneously. As one respondent said,

> "…it helps foster my relationships with close friends I don't get to see often so that we can keep in touch with random daily life activities." Another respondent noted, "with friends I don't see all the time in person . . . it [Snapchat] allows me to feel more connected with them because we send stupid pictures back and forth, it feels like they are still a part of my life."

Avoiding Stage

   The fourth theme identified was that of Snapchat's role in the *avoiding stage* of relationships while they come apart. As relationships sometimes unravel, one or both partners tend to avoid the other. In general, this avoidance can be viewed in various ways (i.e. not answering a phone due to caller-id). When a Snapchat image is sent from partner to partner during this stage of a relationship's demise, the receiver can avoid the sender by simply not replying. This lack of reply, in itself, sends a clear message of avoidance, whether intended or not, leading one respondent to note, "I sometimes get upset if I see that they opened it [her Snapchat] and did not respond."

   Almost all the participants agreed that "lack of response" affects the nature of their relationships with Snapchat buddies, and such feeling are actually carried over to the offline world as well, stating, "it's worse when

people don't reply to texts." As one of the participants said,"[I]t bothers me. I know they received the pictures but they don't care enough to respond." The Snapchat community interprets such hurtful feelings in multiple ways: "It hurts, I know they may be busy…but I feel ignored or may be like they saw the way I looked and was disgusted or something," one respondent said.

Although these findings regarding the avoiding stage of relationships resonate with the theme of non-response under RQ2, it is imperative to make it clear that *avoiding* is related to the aspect of interpersonal communication, whereas the non-response theme, discussed under RQ2, pertains specifically to the communication model or process.

RQ 2

The second research question addressed the influence of Snapchat on the communication process. While analyzing RQ 2, four themes were uncovered. These themes range from the significance of a non-response, the level of risk involved in Snapchat messaging, and methods of identity management via Snapchat.

Non-Response

The first theme discovered pertains to communication partner perceptions when a message is not acknowledged with clear feedback. This kind of non-response, in itself, sends a very strong message to the sender, though sometimes this feedback is unintentional. If a romantic couple have been dating for about three weeks and she sends him a selfie and he fails to comment or reply within a few hours, she can interpret this non-response in various

ways. A non-response could mean, for example, the re-
ceiver is busy, his/her phone has died, or that he/she is no
longer interested in the relationship.

Participants' answers to questions about non-
responses ranged from "Offended," "Rejected," to
"Sadness." One respondent, while expressing sadness to a
non-response on Snapchat, said, "I think they hate me."
Another said, "No response feels like that I "scared them
off." One respondent added, "I am a little nervous, and I
keep refreshing the page to see if they opened the Snap-
chat." Some simply concluded that it "feels like the con-
versation ended."

As one respondent describes it this way: "Typically,
I am the one not responding to Snapchat because the mes-
sages are statement-natured. I have thought, though, that
maybe my lack of response is hurting someone on the
other end." Oppositely, one respondent stated, "I am not
sure what feeling I have. I definitely do not get mad or feel
rejected because I know they may be in class or work and
not able to Snapchat me back. I like to try and send them
[Snapchat] when they are in class hoping that they will
start laughing in the middle of the class. So I am not super
offended or hurt when they do not reply back to me."

Risk

The second theme deals with the level of perceived
risk in sending Snapchat images. The inherent nature of
disappearing messages/images encourages senders to take
risks (i.e. sending obscene self-images to receivers). Per-
taining to the larger body of relationship theory, this find-
ing is consistent with relationship-building approaches
when there is no harm involved. In the presence of less-

ened harm, people feel more at ease to take risks in an effort to build interpersonal relationships. Overall, participants echoed that pictures seemed less "risky" than texts, but specifically to people they can trust, stating, "Why would I want to send a photo of myself to some random stranger or someone that I do not know very well? Who knows what they would do with those photos."

Some participants were of the view that Snapchat's feature to let the shared images disappear encouraged them to take risks while sharing objectionable content on this social media. As one participant said, "If I knew that my Snapchat pictures could be saved, I would definitely change the pictures I sent." While others thought that since "Snapchat is not a proper form of communication," they feel okay engaging in risky behaviors by sending objectionable pictures of themselves. Further still, another respondent noted, "I would never Snapchat somebody who I do not know. That only opens myself up for very strange and weird encounters." Another stated, "When the randos [random people] Snapchat me, I generally block them. . . That's freakin' weird," stated another participant.

Identity Management

The third theme revealed echoes what is already known about identity management. As one strives to dictate receiver perceptions regarding his or her identity, Snapchat serves as yet one more medium to accomplish this task through visuals. For example, instead of verbally relaying that I am a rugged man because I drive a jacked-up Jeep, I simply Snapchat an image of myself standing in front of my Jeep. Realizing texts can be "misinterpreted," the complementary element of an image seems to lessen

the likelihood of miscommunication. As one respondent noted, "it [the Snapchat image] helps complete it [the message]."

Unlike in daily face-to-face interactions, Snapchat affords us the opportunity to more readily dictate what people see about us and therefore their perceptions. "It is an easy method of telling people who I am in a different way," a participant said. Another respondent added that he identifies himself "to others as someone who is funny and may be serious at times, depending on the conversation." "I guess I like being funny!! And I send funny Snapchats," stated one participant, noting how she uses Snapchat as a method to manipulate the receiver's perception of her sense of humor.

Discussion

In conclusion, this study identifies a paradigm shift in existing communication models by highlighting the important aspect of non-communication (non-response) as a new form of feedback that was not acknowledged in existing communication models. Therefore, these findings echo McLuhan's well-debated statement that "the medium is the message." There seems to be an expectation that Snapchats will not garner an immediate response. This study revealed a consistently emerging theme that Snapchat is a less formal form of communication, participants are mostly not offended when replies are not immediate or if never received. Therefore, in a way, non-response becomes a kind of response in the minds of these users, which should lead communication scholars to reconsider the position of non-response in traditional communication models.

Likewise, from this research, it is evident that

Snapchat is used as a tool to build and maintain interpersonal relationships. Whereas in a media-centric culture, relationship building and maintenance is moving to a more virtual method, there seems to be a niche for Snapchat in this relationship development process. For example, this study reveals the significant role Snapchat plays in engaging, building, reinitiating, and maintaining relationship across time and space. There seems to be a place for the role of Snapchat in relationship development models, such as Knapp's Stages of Relational Development.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

As with any study of this scale, there are a couple of limitations that should be identified. First, this study utilized the network of 16 interviewers who were trained in the art of qualitative data collection. This is a large interviewer pool, but they were closely supervised and brought together into groups to synthesize the themes. Secondly, this study is regional in its scope and therefore not generalizable to the larger population. However, this research has provided an avenue for communication scholars to expand our understanding through further studies in this neglected area of social media and communication.

This investigation is unique in its approach regarding the study of communication via images and social media. However, this study offers only a glimpse into this communication area, leaving much room for discovery as it relates to Snapchat's role in social media and visual communication. The important aspect of non-communicating (non-responses) as a new form of feedback has not been acknowledged in existing communication models. Therefore, it is important that this communication phenomenon

be studied across various social media platforms (i.e. Yik Yak). In addition, further research should follow this approach by studying how non-response on social media as becoming a new form of feedback as it relates to relationship development among online communities.

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