~~Prize~~-Winning Research on Snapchat – The Meaning of Mobile Imagery

The following post is a summary of Alexander Hebels' winning entry for the 2014 Polis Social Media Prize.

Exploring the relationship among the presentation of self, trust, and images via the Snapchat picture messaging application

By Alexander Hebels

Images are everywhere. We send and view images everyday. We chuckle at how terribly accurate Internet gifs and memes apply to our lives, and get sad when people don't like our profile pictures on Facebook ('look at me at this cool music festival with my crew') or don't double-tap our Instagrams (yes, your filter was actually *too* hipster).

Our culture is increasingly visual. But there are reasons for this are about more than the technology. Yes, smartphones and apps give us the power to instantly capture and transmit candid moments. But it's about us as people. Images – from the Snapchat picture message to the Facebook profile pic – say something about who we are, or who we want people to think we

are. Thus, the aim of my research is to understand how individuals present themselves on online platforms. More specifically, I believe there are relevant connections between the way people present themselves online and how users then construct/deconstruct images that will tell us about the reality of our social media led lives.

I want to explore these connections via the Snapchat mobile application, a relatively new picture messaging application that allows users to capture and send *Snaps* that contain both image and text to other Snapchat subscribers. Snapchat's exclusive focus on images provides a new and unique experience in which to think about pictures and how/why people are so fixated on visual texts. After all, in November 2013 the WSJ reported that 400 million Snaps are sent each day. That is a lot of selfies. (See other interesting Snapchat stats here).

This is a field in which scholars recognize the implications of website design for understanding people and culture and how the construction of visual/multimodal (the combinations of visual, audio, and written material) texts differs from the way we read and understand written (more linear) texts. You don't necessarily look at a Facebook page the way you're reading this blog post.

We now have to be reader-viewers. To know how to read and make sense of written text is no longer enough. We now, more than ever before, have to be equipped to "read" and interpret images. My research will examine how that happens.

My research will also initiate a shift away from SNS (social networking sites) and toward mobile applications which are often seen as faster, more accessible forms of communicating that have become an emotionally important and integral aspect of daily life. People can't live without their smartphones and without their apps (imagine studying without 2048). Check this out for a cool representation of mobile/app statistics.

Developed only a few years ago, Snapchat has attempted to revolutionize the manner in which mobile phone users think about communication with images. The application of theories involving online identity presentation and visual texts/literacy represents a new area in which user identity can be explored in tandem with evolving technology and a proliferation of social media choices. According to Snapchat, the app "creates a place to be
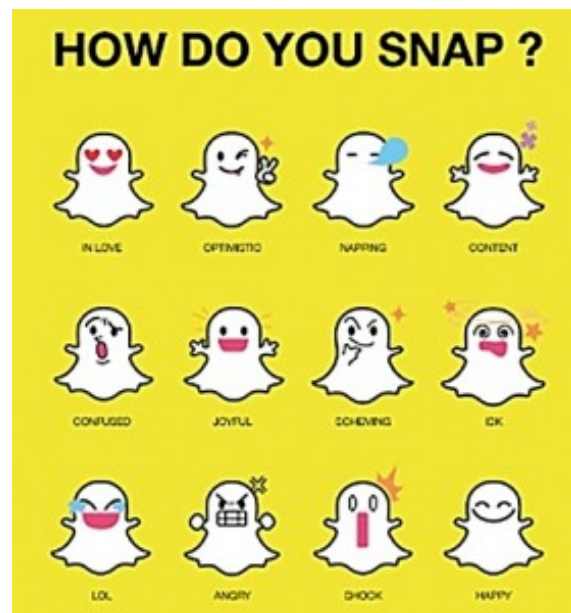
funny, honest or however else you might feel when you take and share a Snap with family and friends. It's sharing that lives in the moment, unless someone decides to save it" (Snapchat, 2014). Simply put, it is a place where you can be *you*.

The idea that Snapchat provides a current and evolving platform for users to express who they really are is something I hope to explore and evaluate in my research. But by pulling from semiotics and ideas on visual texts I hope to augment research on the self-presentation of identity with an awareness of how images are constructed and read, thereby extending research beyond the fact that SNS are used to say something about who we are: *how do images say this?; are we aware of the ways in which images construct meaning when we send/receive them?*

I want to problematize these ideas on a more commercial level as well. If users on Snapchat, for example, are acutely aware of how people tend to look at and understand images, or that images can often be misinterpreted, o that visual elements like angles and distance all construct and provide meaning, would the Facebook profile picture be more powerful? Could the LinkedIn headshot convey something even more about our professional selves?

These, and other questions, are key drivers behind my research. But first – *let me take a selfie*.

Alexander would love to hear your comments or questions about his research on a.hebels@lse.ac.uk.

Alexander Hebels 'selfie'