From Snapshot to Snapchat
Panopticon or Synopticon?

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Abstract
The article asks the research question whether the ephemeral affordance of Snapchat can be characterized as a product of the panopticon or of the synopticon. To seek to answer this question a threefold approach is employed. The first is historical and it investigates the relationship between the snapshot tied to leisure ("the Kodak moment") and Snapchat. The second is empirical, and it uses pre-existing statistics about Snapchat and a questionnaire survey carried out for this article. Finally, the article sees the Snapchat phenomenon in the light of pertinent schools of cultural theory

and in the context of new social media, e.g. research about selfies, and it considers the concepts of the panopticon and the more recent concept of the synopticon.

Keywords #Snapchat, #panopticon, #synopticon, # selfies, #the snapshot

Snapchat is an instant photo messaging and chat application that has the special affordance and mechanism that the photos or videos one user sends to others are deleted from their devices after one or ten seconds, and also from Snapchat's servers, though the company keeps a log of the last 200 Snaps, as the photo or video messages are called. The content is not archived. On the company's website, this is explained together with a caution:

> Delete is our default. That means that most messages sent through our Services will be automatically deleted once they have been viewed or have expired. But – and this is important – you should understand that users who see your messages can always save them, either by taking a screenshot or by using some other image-capture technology (whether that be software or even something as old-fashioned as a camera to take a photo of your device's screen). If we're able to detect that a recipient took a screenshot of a message you sent, we'll try to notify you. But the same common sense that applies to the Internet at large applies to Snapchat as well: Don't send messages that you wouldn't want someone to save or share. (Snapchat, 2014)

The communication model is one to one or one to relatively few, but the number of Snaps sent every day is impressively large. In November 2013, users of Snapchat uploaded around 400 million photo and video messages daily (Lance Whitney, 2013), and in May 2014 this number had risen to 700 million photos and videos per day (Hamburger, 2014), in August 2014 the number of monthly active users was 100 million (Abbruzzese, 2014). The users can draw or type a message on top of the photos and a chat function is included.

In addition, plain texting is an affordance, so that a picture message can be combined with this. Snapchat is clearly a success. The application's multimodal message service that is characterized by impermanence seems to have answered a need in contemporary interpersonal, mediated communication.

The article will seek to explain the success of Snapchat, and in line with this, it asks the research question whether the ephemeral affordance of Snapchat can be characterized as a product of the panopticon or of the synopticon. The article's conclusions are based on cultural theories, which are combined with empirical surveys, as the article uses pre-existing statistics about Snapchat plus a questionnaire survey carried out for this article. This is supplemented with recent social media research. First, the historical precursor and namesake of Snapchat, the snapshot will be considered.

The Kodak Moment: the Snapshot

Two photographic technologies and their uses precede Snapchat. The first was marketed with the slogan: "You Press the Button – We Do the Rest" (Chalfen, 1987, p. 13). Eastman Kodak's Box Camera was introduced in 1888. Its capability was that any amateur photographer could take a snapshot anytime anywhere. This small inexpensive consumer camera used roll film and it was light and portable and could be used without a tripod. Its success is documented by e.g. the 1983-84 Wolfman Report, which stated that American amateur photographers took around 11,75 billion photos in 1983 (Chalfen, 1987, p. 13). However, in 2012 Kodak filed for bankruptcy protection. New digital cameras and later ubiquitous cameras in mobile phones had overtaken the market for optical film and cameras. The other predecessor was the Polaroid instant camera. In contrast to Kodak and other similar cameras, the exposed films of which had to be sent to a laboratory to be developed and printed, the Polaroid camera could develop and print its own film – instantly. The Polaroid camera had in other words the capability of making private photos that did not pass through the hands of others. As we shall see later in the article, Polaroid had the affordance of being non-panoptical.

The sociological and cultural significance of the snapshot has many aspects. One of the most important is that it can record and archive daily lives, and special occasions and celebrations. A snap-

shot is for private consumption. An average of 126 photos was taken in each American household in 1981 (Chalfen, 1987, p. 14). In Richard Chalfen's *Snapshot Versions of Life,* the iconography of snapshots has been surveyed. It is notable that based on the results of this survey Chalfen structures his book on the lived history of individuals where the content of a person's or a family group's snapshots documents and preserves their life history and its phases: "Beginnings", "From Infancy to Toddlerhood", "Childhood and Adolescence", "Early Adulthood", "Married Life", "Parenthood", "The Later Years", and "Images of Life's End" (Chalfen, 1987, pp. 74-93). Snapshots belong to rites of passage: baptisms, first days at school, confirmations, weddings, sport, college graduations, and seasonal celebrations, sometimes funerals. Tourist photography is also tied to snapshots. A camera became an icon of a tourist, and tourist travels were prime markets. Eastman verbalized this function of his camera: "Travellers and Tourists use it to obtain a picturesque diary of their travels" (Chalfen, 1987, p. 101).These private occasions are similar to the corresponding public occasions, which have been termed media events by Dayan and Katz: Contest, conquest and coronation (Dayan & Katz, 1992, pp. 30-33). The exhibition of snapshots is private, however. They may be stored in a cardboard box, in a family album, which may become a family heirloom, or snapshots may be framed and hung on walls, and they may be printed on Christmas cards and sent to friends and relatives.

One of the chief functions of snapshots is memory (Milgram, 1976, p. 7). Eastman's view of travel snapshots as a diary is just one instance of this function as preserved visual memory, and on a larger scale, a family album is a personal pictorial history. This pictorial historiography is often supplemented with anchorage captions that may state when and where the photo was taken, and it may identify the persons in the photo by name. This may be for the benefit of an audience that is a generation apart from the production of the photo. Chalfen repeatedly stresses the memory functions of snapshots (Chalfen, 1987, p. 137). The selection of photographs structures the memory of personal lives, and snapshots construe history and reality. This construction of personal history is characterized by exclusion. Only few, if at all any snapshots depict the workplace and colleagues. It is a history of life as leisure.

We now consider what characteristics snapshots may share with Snapchat. The question arises whether Snapchat can be considered a photographic technology or social media. The fact that Snaps are digital whereas snapshots were analogue may point to an answer, which will follow later in the article. The digital nature of Snap images allows them to be embedded in social media and in the kind of communication model of social media. Temporality is an aspect of both snapshots and Snaps, but with a decisive difference. The brief lifespan of a Snap and its ephemeral nature contrast with the function of snapshots as aide de memoire. Where snapshots in a family album may be accessible for generations, Snaps are accessible for a maximum of ten seconds. As such, snapshots may be characterized as inscription media, characterized by inscription on a surface and by storage, and Snaps as transmission media (Kahn, 2013, pp. 19-20), as Snapchat is a conversational media, characterized by sending and receiving messages that ideally cannot be stored.

The ephemeral nature of Snaps makes it methodologically impossible to archive and document their contents. As the Snaps cannot be examined, a solution is to ask the users, and the article employs a survey based on a questionnaire, performed by its co-authors at the University of Aalborg, Denmark in late 2014 as well as pre-existing, external statistics.

Does the iconography of Snaps resemble the iconography of snapshots as described above? The survey at Aalborg University had 146 respondents with an average age of 24.6 years. The respondents were asked what iconographic categories or subjects they preferred to *receive* in Snapchat. Among the categories, a category such as "Events" is comparable to the celebrations in family albums, whereas "Selfies", "What I'm doing right now", "Food and drink", "Funny or strange things" and "Other people" do not seem to be comparable to the photos in family albums. "Sexting" is obviously not similar to the content of a family album, but may perhaps be comparable to the specific use of Polaroid cameras (Chalfen, 1987, p. 45, pp. 87-88). However, apart from the small group of "Documents", all the Snapchat iconographic categories, like snapshots, belong to the sphere of leisure, and there is a notable prevalence for subjects that are tied to the moment. (Figure 1)
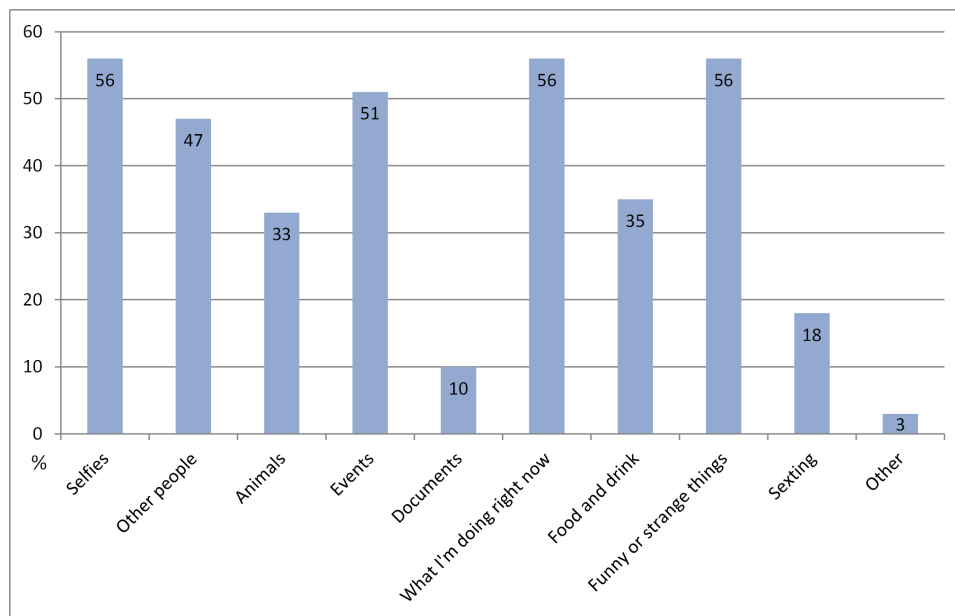
Figure 1: What kind of content do you prefer to receive in Snapchat?

Another survey asked about what types of content users *send* (Figure 2). This survey is also from 2014 with 127 adult respondents, who were Snapchat users (Roesner, Gill, & Kohno, 2014, p. 68).
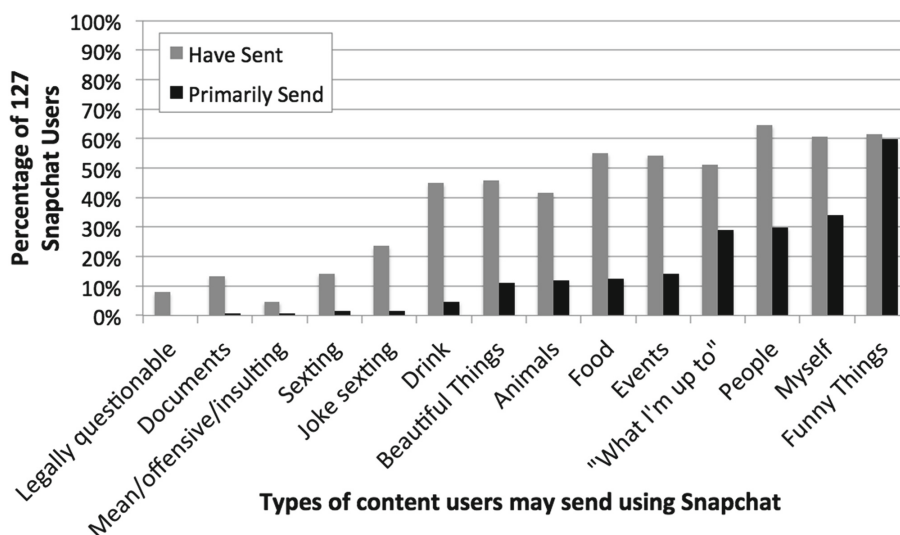
Figure 2

We see the same pattern that the Snaps are of the moment, and that the iconological function of memory of recording and archiving daily lives and celebrations is not a dominant trait with categories such as: Funny or quaint things and episodes, animals, and what I'm up to, or what I'm doing or eating and drinking right now. The ephemeral technological affordance of Snapchat may be said to be mirrored in the iconography of the Snaps.

The communication model of Snapchat can also be gathered from user statistics. The model is one to one, and one to few. Only 12 % of Snapchat messages are sent to multiple recipients (Albergotti, 2013).

From Panopticon to Synopticon

Michel Foucault's idea of the panopticon as a general societal disciplinary mechanism is sometimes described as a further development of the purely architectural carceral idea of Jeremy Bentham (McHoul & Grace, 1993 / 1997, p. 67). However, already Bentham expanded his disciplinary prison plans to society in his letters in 1787 (Bentham, 1787 / 1995). After having described his circular prison building and how its principles could be used in hospitals, manufactories, madhouses, hospitals and schools, Bentham finally suggests the panopticon as saturating society as a whole (Bentham, 1787 / 1995, Letter XXI). In brief, the plan of Bentham's prison building is that the building is circular with the cells in the circumference and a watchtower in the centre. The guards can always watch the inmates through the iron grating (Bentham 1787 / 1995, Letter II). Therefore, the prisoner has a feeling of always being observed, and this has a correctional effect, according to Bentham, because of "the apparent omnipresence of the inspector (if divines will allow me the expression,) combined with the extreme facility of his real presence" (Bentham, 1787 / 1995, Letter VI).

Bentham's idea of the few watching the many is the panopticon principle, In *Discipline and Punish - The Birth of the Prison* Michel Foucault develops Bentham's theory into a comprehensive societal system of power and subjection to power with a surveillance principle (Foucault, 1991 / 1975, pp. 202-203). It is important to note that this surveillance mode is double. The subject is both watching himself and feeling being watched. For our purpose in this article, this double internal role may be said to be an instrument not only of the power relations of society, but also of identity formation. A related

duality also connected to power and discipline is described again by Foucault in *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality.* In this work, Foucault describes Western society as confessional, and how sexuality has been regarded as something sinful to be hidden away and repressed, and yet at the same time something to be confessed and verbalized in e.g. the Catholic confession or psychoanalysis. Sexuality is both hidden and spoken aloud, so the will to knowledge about it was combined with pleasure, and with power (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 45). In this context, the distribution of Snaps from personal and private life and the reception of them can be termed confessional.

The many watching the few, or the spectacle of the few was a historical, feudal display of power – "the demonstration of grandeur" (Habermas, 1962/2009, p. 10). According to Thomas Mathiesen, the many watching the few has its modern equivalent in the viewer society, or the synopticon. Mathiesen focusses on modern mass media and their history, and his point is that the modern mass media since the creation of the mass press between 1750 and 1830 (Mathiesen, 1997, p. 220, p. 215) and later film radio and television have resulted in a new viewer society that is different from the panopticon. Mathiesen recognizes that panoptical society coexists with Synoptical society, especially in the context of digital or computerized surveillance (p. 218), and he illustrates the double principle with a reference to the merger of panopticism and synopticism in George Orwell's *1984*'s: "through a screen in your living room you saw Big Brother, just as Big Brother saw you" (p. 223). An appropriate contemporary comparison is any Laptop's web camera placed just over its screen. Just as Mathiesen revisited Foucault in 1997, he himself was revisited in 2011 – " in the Age of Web 2.0" - by Aaron Doyle. (Doyle, 2011). Doyle's visit is more of the nature of an updating than a critique. He points out, though, that the mass audience has become fragmented and that Mathiesen has neglected the possibilities of resistance even within a panoptical system (Doyle, 2011, p. 284). Doyle further argues that the spectacle as demonstration of political power persists, and that: "There are still some spectacular exercises of sovereign power that inflict physical pain in punishment rituals." (p. 288), and he mentions the hanging of Saddam Hussein as an example. Since the publication of Doyle's article, this tendency of using the new or social media such as YouTube as platforms for spec-

tacles of "ritualized public corporal punishment" has grown with e.g. videos of cruel beheadings of hostages. There is no doubt that the internet and the new social media must be taken into consideration when analysing the concept and practice of the synopticon. Doyle's point that the mass audience has become fragmented must be carried further, and another communication model of some of the new media is decisive when defining the functions of them. We have here in the article the statistics about the users of Snapchat that only 12 % of Snapchat messages are sent to multiple recipients to take into consideration.

In *Globalization The Human Consequences* Zygmunt Bauman discusses and compares the two concepts of panopticon and synopticon in a chapter called "Is there life after Panopticon?" The answer given is that there is, but with a difference. Bauman claims that the database makes a superpanopticon possible, and the difference is that those under surveillance now are willing subjects (Bauman, 1998, p. 50). Based on Mathiesen, Bauman writes that the watched now have become the watchers in the synopticon, and they are seduced into watching. "The many watch the few. The few who are watched are the celebrities" and "In the Synopticon, the locals watch the globals", the globals being celebrities from e.g. entertainment, sport or politics. In contrast, "In the Panopticon, some selected locals watched other locals" (p. 53).

Senf (2008, 2013, 2015) has argued that the mode of reception of social media is not gazing as with film in a cinema, and not glancing as with television in the home, but rather the more tactile "grabbing". In the case of Snaps, one can point to the practice of taking screenshot on the phone by pressing two buttons simultaneously in order to save the image, and possibly re-distribute it. However, grabbing also takes place when commercial firms and state authorities harvest data (Senf & Baym, 2015, pp. 1598-1599), and in this way, the panopticon principle is at work. In the quote from Snapchat early in this article (Snapchat, 2014), users of Snapchat were warned not to post images that were not meant to be saved or shared. This warning may be well meant, but Snapchat cannot be regarded as a neutral corporation facilitating pure and direct peer-to-peer exchange of Snaps. The Snaps of the peers are logged by Snapchat and they are stored for a time in the company's database. In the seemingly symmetrical communication between peers, the commercial company,

its policy and the affordances it offers must be taken into account as a power relation (Hansen & Højbjerg, 2013, pp. 8-9).

The statistics about Snapchat users' communication model suggest a new definition of the synopticon, or an addition to Mathiesen's definition of the many watching the few. It is suggested now in this article that the synopticon is also the few watching the few, and the few being willingly watched by the few. Alternatively, to use Bauman's term about the Panopticon principle here transferred to the synopticon, the locals watching the locals. Concentrating solely on Snapchat, this is not so surprising with Snapchat's roots in the private snapshot. Other social media give a more nuanced picture as they combine communication models. On Twitter, for instance, a user may have very few followers, or in the case of celebrities millions, e.g. Katy Perry has more than 60 million followers (Twittercounter, 2015), and anybody, i.e., unregistered users, can read any tweet. The average number of friends per Facebook user is 130, not few and not many (Facebook Statistics, 2015). In all cases, we have a willing and voluntary panoptical surveillance mechanism, and the synopticon is more nuanced in its communication model than the many watching the few.

Identity Formation

Finally, in this article we consider the percentages from the questionnaires about the Snapchat iconographic categories "Selfies",
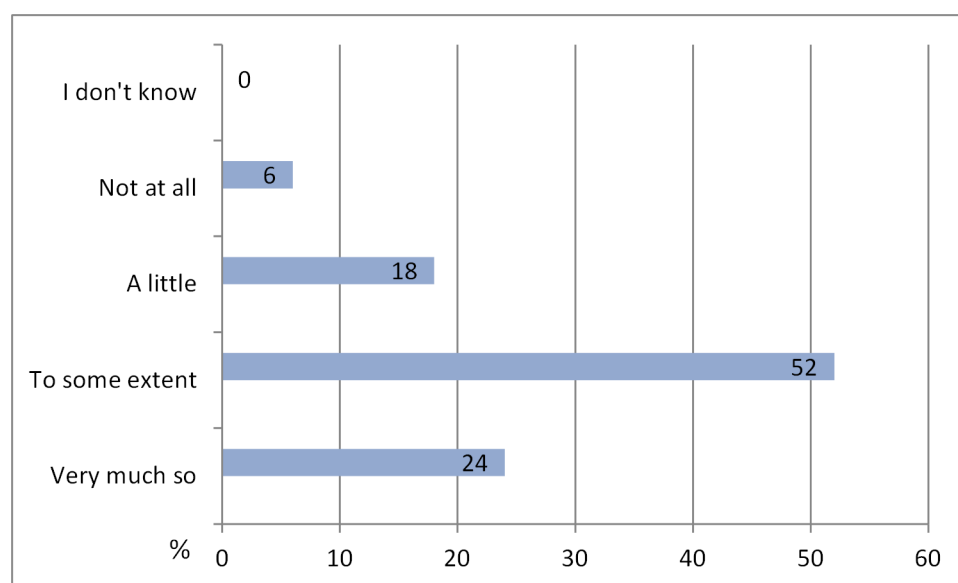

Figure 3: To what extent do you consider how you appear in the Snaps you send?

"What I'm doing right now", "Myself" and "What I'm up to". These percentages will be combined with other answers from a questionnaire about the motivation for sending Snaps and about the hoped-for reception of the Snaps, and with research focused on selfies. The question is about to what extent users consider how they themselves appear in the Snaps they send (Figure 3, previous page).

And the corresponding question is to what extent the sendrs of Snaps consider how the receivers think they appear (Figure 4).
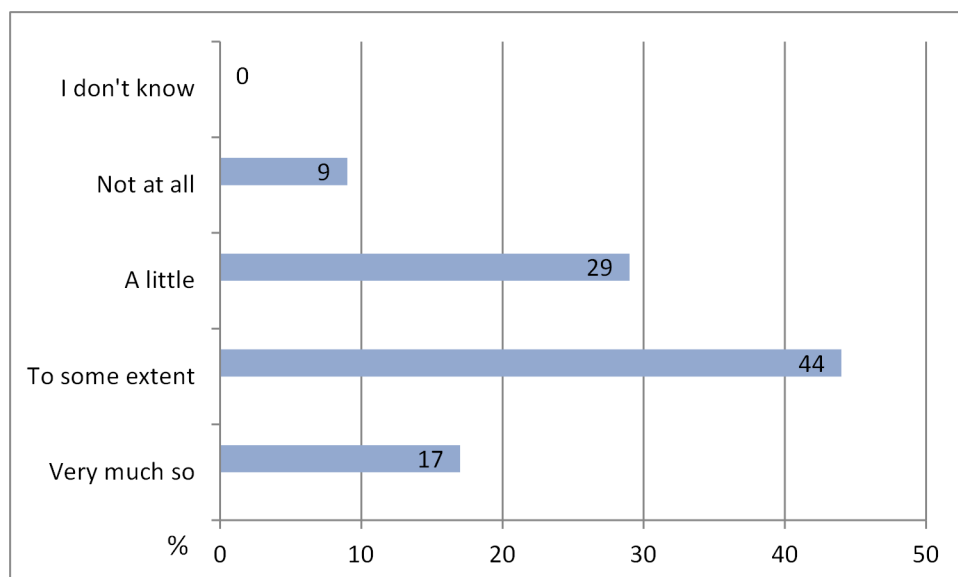
Figure 4: To what extent do you consider how the receivers of your Snaps think you appear in them?

In both the survey carried out for this article and in the pre-existing survey, the percentage of users who have sent Snaps with themselves as the subject is high. In the survey carried out for this article it is 56 %, and in the survey carried out by Roesner, Gill, & Kohno it is 62.5 %. In the article's survey, only 24 % (Figure 3) of the respondents do not consider or consider only a little how they themselves appear in the Snaps they send, and only 9 % do not consider how the receivers think they appear (Figure 4). Based on these figures it is clear that the Snapchat subjects of oneself and one's own and others' perception of oneself are predominant in the use of Snapchat. Katz & Crocker (2015, pp. 1864-1865) have reached the same con-

clusion in their survey of selfies and Snapchat use, where more than half of their respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement: "It is important to make sure I look good in my selfies", and Katz & Crocker conclude that the visual communication of this kind is not as spontaneous and without deliberation despite the affordances of the technology. The reputation of the sender is a concern. The admonition to use common sense by the Snapchat Corporation in the quote at the start of this article seems to be taken seriously. The iconography of selfies is similarly nuanced as listed by Senf & Baym (2015, p. 1590) with such diverse motifs as illness-related selfies, museum selfies, soldier selfies, sports selfies etc. Katz & Crocker (2015, p. 1862) discuss the definition of a selfie, and conclude that it is "images not only taken by the person posting the image but that also include part or all of the person taking the photo", though also a suggestion of including extensions of the self, such as images of food and "images of such things as pets, homes, vehicles, and craft products" could be taken into consideration. It must here be noted that this discussion is solely about selfies, and not about Snapchat, where our research indicates a wider iconography (See figure 1). As a contrast, Chalfen concludes about the snapshot: "The most common snapshot found in albums and photograph collections (studied for this report) focuses on the theme of relationships" (Chalfen, 1987, p. 77). In her work with the family photo album Mette Sandbye builds upon Chalfen's (and others') work, and she claims that the "albums are social and emotional communication" that "can tell us about affective bonds in families" (Sandbye, 2014, p. 5). Sandbye regards the photo album as relational, communicative, and performative objects.

Bearing the above discussion in mind, this difference between Snapchat and selfies on the one hand and snapshots, e.g. in family albums, on the other may be removed if iconography is fused with the mode of distribution, and relationships and performance move into the centre of both. The iconography of snapshots is relationships, and the communication mode of Snapchat is based on relationship as the use of Snapchat may be defined as a visual and verbal communication and conversation between peers. Katz & Crocker (2015, p. 1867) describes how what they call "Snapchat conversations" is a widespread communication mode where 29 % of their student respondents answered a Snap, "within 10 minutes,"

and the ping-pong exchange of Snaps took the form of visual conversation. The digital affordances of Snapchat as social media can be seen in this way as an expansion of the performative, relational character of the purely photographic medium of the snapshot.

Conclusion: The Ephemeral Iconography of the Self

To answer the research questions about what has caused the success of Snapchat, and whether the ephemeral affordance of Snapchat can be characterized as a product of the panopticon or of the synopticon, the article has faced the problem that the technological nature of the Snaps makes them unavailable for analysis. They disappear. Instead, paratexts tied to Snapchat have been produced, found and quantitatively analysed before they have been combined with insights from cultural theories and social media research. These paratexts in the form of answers to questionnaires both found elsewhere and specifically produced for the article have then become the empirical data to be examined. Initially, however, the predecessor for Snapchat, snapshots of leisure and of family life, have been described and compared to Snaps. An important conclusion to be made from this comparison is that snapshots have the function of memory and celebrate the value of relationships, whereas Snaps have the function of being ephemeral and celebrate the individual self. This conclusion leads on to another when it is combined with the article's investigation of the communication model of Snapchat. Based on statistical figures, not only of Snapchat but also of other social media, this model has to be the few watching the few, or the locals watching the locals, and here there is a notable historical connection to Snapchat's roots in the private snapshot, which has the same communication model. It is also a notable insight that the focus on relationships in the iconography of snapshots is comparable to the communication mode of Snapchat where visual conversation strengthens relationships and bonding despite the selfie-character of the many Snaps. It is a further conclusion in this article that the communication model of the few watching the few has made it necessary to reformulate and expand the theory about the synopticon as it was originally proposed by Mathiesen, and modified by Doyle. The synopticon is also the few watching the few, and not just the many watching the few. However, Snapchat is not private in the same sense as a family album full of snapshots is, and it is here that

the cultural theory about the panopticon comes into play. The disciplining, power-related mechanism of the panopticon is also relevant when analysing Snapchat. Snapchat can be characterized as a panoptical power mechanism through which the few are willingly watched by the few, and this surveillance is disciplining, as we have seen from the statistics that it is important for the senders of Snaps how they themselves appear. Already Bentham and later Foucault saw it as a quality of the panopticon that it was internalized. We can conclude from our questionnaires that this applies to Snapchat, too. The users of Snapchat are concerned just as much or more with how they appear to themselves, than how they appear to the receivers of the Snaps. A further motivation for the use of Snapchat was placed in its confessional nature with the will to confess about personal life and secretive private aspects of it, and then at the same time the duality of the lust tied to evading the power of the panoptical, or rather in the case of Snapchat the synoptical, disciplinary power. Now we can finally answer the research question that this literally short-lived and disappearing confession with its iconography of the self is the explanation of the success that the ephemeral affordance has given to Snapchat, but this societal function is also facilitated by the social, relational and conversational function of Snapchat.

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