Snapchat and Memory Through Self-Surveillance

Growing up, I particularly remember snapchat’s rise to fame in my formative middle school years around ages 10-13. Launched in 2011, the app itself began in a very simple model that essentially worked as a text messenger. Unlike any other form of social media at the time, you could only send pictures. Most excitingly, the pictures were ephemeral, meaning what you sent would not save, and could not be viewed again. The structure of the app allowed so that users didn’t need to hold the same stress as what might have been done for other photo-centered forms of social media such as instagram. Creator Evan Spiegel comments that “Snapchat isn’t about capturing the traditional Kodak moment. It’s about communicating with the full range of human emotion — not just what appears to be pretty or perfect.” However, since snapchats debut in 2011, they have added an abundance of features that go against the original structure of the social media platform. In the coming years there’s been additions such as Snapchat “Stories”, “Chats”, filters, “snapmaps”, and most importantly “Memories”. I propose that the use of savable Snapchat memories and shareable features such as snapchat stories promotes surveillance in the form of self-curation, leading to a tailored collection that ultimately ends up negating the original base principle that snapchat was created for by inserting “Performative Authenticity” (Stern et. al, 1941). In addition, the use of choice in accessing memories created a space for memory commodification.

Negating the original purpose of the app, Snapchat memories now allowed the option for users to save their snaps as one would do in a typical camera roll. With memories, also came additional features such as the “Year Ago Today” function. With this feature, when snapchat users look through memories, they are greeted with a banner at the top that shows them past memories on the same day from past years. Creating these flashback type features created a new means of memory mediating for snapchat. Now, pictures that were originally spontaneously curated to be sent to a close friend, could shift into pictures that you curate yourself, for yourself. With more public social media platforms, people tend to curate specific pictures to be portrayed in whatever way they desire. However, how does this shift with apps like snapchat when at times the desired memory audience is yourself?

As most, I remember 2020 being a tough year. I was a junior in Highschool at the time, and most of my life before the pandemic revolved around things that were crucial to happen in-person. I was notoriously a theatre kid, and when not at rehearsals or school I was usually found working my job at a local retail store in FortWorth. Apart from social suicide, with the pandemic came more serious issues in my life. My grandmother was moved into a nursing home due to her worsening dementia and alzhimers. My childhood friend passed away in a car crash while she was in college, and I removed myself from a very harmful, toxic, long term relationship. However, when I check my “A Look Back at 2020” Recap on Snapchat, I am presented with a whole new narrative. Within these memories, are all the positive things that happened within the year. Things such as visiting senior sunrise with my friends, competition days before school had gotten canceled, and hiking outside with family. Within this recap, there was almost no indication that Covid had ever occurred in the first place, or any sort of acknowledgement of the major life events that happened to me. The “Look Back at 2020” didn’t represent my year in the slightest, nor did it seem accurate as a representation of the pandemic as a whole. When looking back at the specific snapchat memories from that era there were a few debbie downers, but nothing that I felt truly represented my individual memory throughout the pandemic. Erll Claims that “Media are not simply neutral carriers of information about the past. What they appear to encode- versions of past events and persons, cultural values and norms, concepts of collective identity- they are in fact creating”(114). So why is it that my Year recaps never seem to truly represent my year? Even if the algorithm selects pictures at random, since they're my personal memories belonging to me, it should still feel individualized (Erll, 15). Because of features that re-centralize memories, and the adaption of memories to a saveable space, it promotes self surveillance throughout the user's experience. Erll suggests that we save media such as pictures for ourselves to view in the future (124). Since I wasn’t documenting more somber events, there’s no way that said events could be moved into a recap representing my entire year. Just as suggested by Erll, this form of mediated memory is not neutral. Because of my lack of documentation, it seemed to encode year-long past events as something that never happened in the first place.

With this switch between an ephemeral layout to a more public one, I also found myself caring about and curating more of what I chose to save. Erll Claims “ We must understand media and mediation as a kind of switchboard at work in between the individual and the collective dimension of remembering. Personal memories can only gain social relevance through media representation and distribution” (113). Like most middle school students can probably agree with, I craved social relevance. I was now finding myself curating the images I saved with intent for “these media to elicit processes of remembering in the future” (Erll, 125). I was also now shifting my intent to be for the public eye, as opposed to personal remembrance. For me, it shifted to a desire for my media to be publicly admired and interacted with. The format allowed for people to “slide up” on your post and send you a message, now making the posts interactive seeing that it is Inherently a social process. Therefore the change in platform resulted in a form of surveillance through self-curation. There are practices such as “Friendly Social surveillance” (Hjorth, 61) where users check on their friends as the app was intended to be used. But, because of this feel of social surveillance, I curated my pictures through the avoidance of natural and spontaneous pictures. I would sometimes change my plans for the day based on what pictures I would want to save, an act of “Performative Authenticity” (Shtern et. al. 13). For example, during my sophomore year of highschool, I remember opening the “year ago today” feature and seeing that for the last 2 years I had done the same type of makeup. Because of this, I decided to do my makeup in the same way because I thought it would be interesting to have three years of pictures to see the evolution. Not only did it shift how I digitally portrayed myself through the app, I shifted my physical, real life portrayal for the sole purpose of altering my digital memories, creating a bridge between worlds of physical and digital.

When accessing your snapchat, you have to enter a specific tab to enter your memories, meaning that if you don’t wish to access them, you by any means don’t have to. The “memories” not being the main purpose of the app creates an environment for Memory to be stored in a digital cooling spot, similar to that of the family table mentioned in Epp and Price’s “The Storied Life of Singularized Objects: Forces of Agency and Network Transformation”. The mediated memories can be something that users stuff away in a digital box, and access if ever wanted/needed. However, “digital media offer[s] more than an opportunity for occasional reminiscence” (Hales 189). Because of aspects like the “Look back on 2020” features, it begins to become a commodification of memory. Although you can choose weather or not to open it, you cannot choose what is shown to you. Additionally, also because it is bringing up reminiscence of your past, it can feel de-individualized. Just as Dyer states in “truthfully I have no memory of the picture being taken, I am conscious that this is meaningless because of course, the photograph is memory” (Dyer, 14).

**Honor Code**

“I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.” - Lauren Wise

Word Count:

**Sources**

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