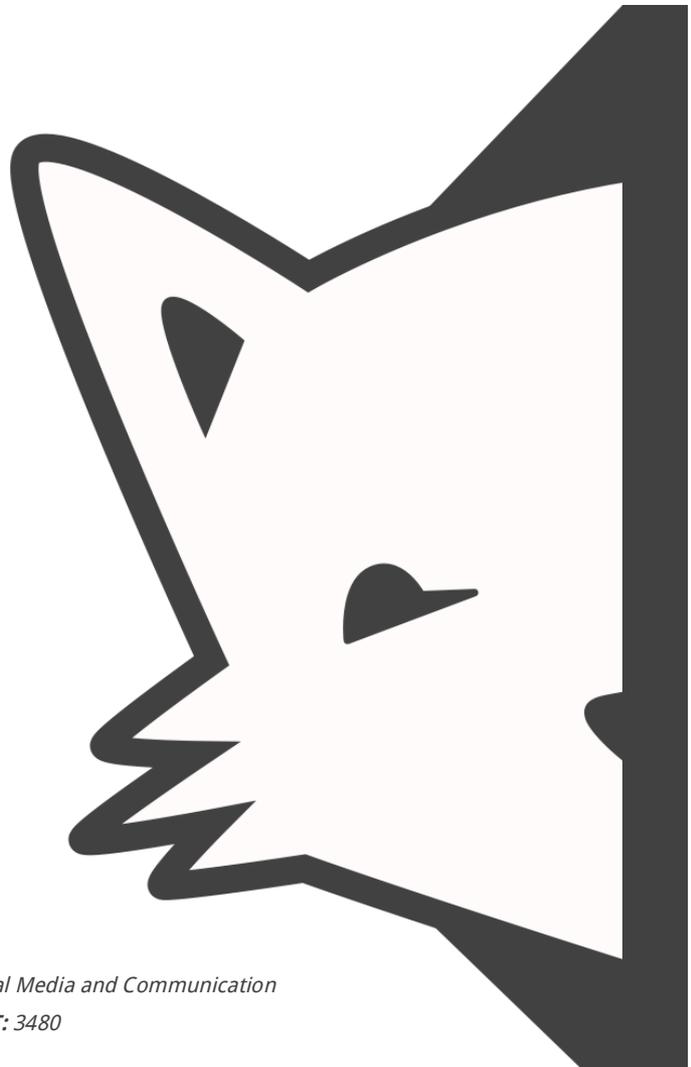


SECRET

SUBMISSION OF WRITTEN WORK



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INTRODUCTION

Anonymity is a recurring topic for public discussion in the world of social media transparency and 21st century privacy. People are sharing their personal lives through popular social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. As opposed to this transparent form of sharing, anonymous social media applications like Secret provide the service of "Sharing with friends, anonymously". Goffman states that every social interaction is an act and being on a social site such as Secret must be seen as online interaction. I therefore find it interesting to investigate how and why people are presenting themselves anonymously on Secret.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The social scene has changed with the expansion of the digital age. In the Oxford handbook of Internet studies Professor Nicole Ellison and Danah Boyd says that the emergence of social network sites has caused a new way for understanding social interaction (Ellison and Boyd, 2013). The way you present yourself to others has changed, because the interaction does not happen in real life. Bridget Hogan argues, that the main thing that has changed is the distinction of actor and artifact (Hogan 2010). The actor acts in a given situation – it is present. But on social network sites the actor can use artifacts (pictures and text) that continuously stay on the site and tell the watcher about the actor and his previous events. This way you can present and stage yourself as wanted. This storing of information has caused an anti wave of people who wants to share information and communicate with others on online platforms, without showing themselves and have the content deleted immediately after the post. Bernstein et. al have analyzed the SNS 4chan which is such a site. They see their research as translating anonymous SNS practices into terms of the familiar scholars. Their research is quantitative collected datasets of the activity on the 4chan over a two weeks period. They state that this kind of anonymous interaction can benefit

social interaction. They disagree with the general idea that being anonymous gives a lack in integrity. While being anonymous people are more willingly to share information and thoughts, because the data cannot be traced and is not stored. They found that 90% of all users of 4chan chose to be anonymous. 4chan is credited with being a source of many online memes. This makes it an excellent venue for studying innovation diffusion. This kind of interaction is positive because you dare to say what is on your mind and others can respond. This generates new interesting ideas. Other SNS sites have started to use this deletion of information e.g. Snapchat.

I place myself along side with Bernstein because I think this is a way to generate new ideas. But people posting on Secret do not have the ability to talk private and the content does not delete their post, follows or loves. Therefore I feel the need to ask the question, why does the user find it interesting to be on Secret.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Why do people have a desire to share personal content, anonymously through Secret?

Preliminary questions

- What is Secret and how does Secret work?
- How do people interact on Secret in the light of Goffman and Meyrowitz?
- Why do people use Secret as a social media?

METHOD

The method is written from a theoretical perspective primarily built around the theorist and researchers theory and research. Furthermore the method is written based on secondary research, data and information from Secret.

PRESENTATION OF SECRET

- What is Secret and how does Secret work?

The mobile application Secret (launched February 2014) belongs to the social media-subcategory defined as Anonymous Social Media (Anonymous social media. N.D.). Here, the main social functionality is to share and interact with content and information anonymously, through their web-based platforms or their mobile device application.

Users sign up with their email address but will not receive a username or be able to create a profile. At first users can read randomly chose secrets from all over the world, but they are not able to comment or share these secrets themselves. In order to share a secret or interact with others, the user is required to invite his or her friends (from e.g. Facebook or Twitter). This invite is sent out through Secret as an anonymous email invitation to whichever friends the user chooses. Secret does not reveal the identity of the user sending the invitation and should a friend choose to join, the user will not know which of his friends accepted the invitation. In order to read or post a secret you need three people from your network to join. Users are able to 'love', comment and follow each other's content. A users content, and interaction such as 'loving' others secret, will be shared with the user's friends (Byttow, 2014).

INTERACTION

- How do people interact on Secret in light of Goffman?

According to Goffman (1967) everyone is concerned to some extent with how others perceive them in a verbal or nonverbal communication. Goffman (1967) talks about 'face' in situations where an individual offers a positive self-image to others that he/she has the need to maintain. The person then takes on a certain 'line' (Goffman 1967); the acts in which he expresses the situation and evaluates the other participants and himself. Goffman (1967) explains, "face is an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes". And that in "any type of social interaction people

have the desire to control the impressions other people form of them". The need to enhance and alter one's self in order to be perceived a certain way is not just limited to face-to-face interaction but is indeed relevant when dealing with social interaction on social media networks where the performance is disembodied and then electronically re-embodied by the users choice of virtual signs (username, picture, bio etc.) to represent themselves. On Secret the direct communication between users is limited compared to Facebook, Instagram etc. though users are able to comment or love each other posts thus forming a way of interaction.

FRONT STAGE OR BACK STAGE?

Social interaction should be viewed as a theatrical performance complete with a front stage - where the performance is held, where the audience watch the spotlighted actor and the actor watch back - and a back stage where the actor in private plans his performance and is able to step "out of character". Goffman (1956) uses theatrical terms, when studying and explaining social interaction. He sees people as performing actors trying to achieve recognition and confirmation of their self-representations in every social situation they encounter. Just like in a theatre, he uses the terms front and back stage. When being front stage, the actor knows he is being watched and he will constantly try to act/perform accordingly to the role he sees fit for the situation.

When posting a secret on Secret, you might argue that the person enters the front stage. People on Secret will read the post and maybe comment on it. This is a social interaction. The user might carefully chose which secret to unveil, which words to use and what image to portray his secret on, to tell something about his character in a way he thinks reflect his personality. But because he is anonymous this conclusion is not obvious - because he is not really performing for anybody. I argue that a paradox is created between the front and back stage. Some argue that it is impossible to be back stage when engaging in online platforms, because everything you do is intentional

and something you choose to write or 'be' (Sternheimer, 2012). But Secret is a bit different than transparent social media (e.g. Facebook or Twitter), because your tangible identity (name, username, age, physical appearance etc.) remains anonymous. Goffman describes the front stage as the stage where you know you are being watched and then act accordingly to the situation. Is an audience watching you in the same manner when you are anonymous?

Every time you write a secret, you somehow stage a question or statement: "My boyfriend told me he doesn't find me attractive because I'm not model thin. I haven't been able to eat without breaking into tears. I'm thinking about losing 20lbs of fat and then losing 180lbs of asshole boyfriend."

Does this show an unintentional act? It is written for a purpose and the words chosen perhaps with the intent to insinuate sympathy in a humoristic fashion. This statement is very personal and something you would not expect to see in a Goffmanian front stage performance (Goffman 1956). Somehow, posting a secret is a front stage act from a back stage mind.

Secret as a platform could be defined as a front stage where the presentation of the performance, in this case telling a secret, is delivered by written words. However the message is sent from behind the computer (the back stage), the text is a secret, which makes the content intimate and maybe embarrassing for you - this could indicate back stage behavior.

Trying to explain this you can bring the theorist Meyrowitz (Meyrowitz 1985) into play. He further developed Goffman's theory to address this new situation of digital interaction. Meyrowitz explains this new situation as a middle region, it is as a merger of Goffman's front and back stages. In this middle region the audience will witness how the actor navigates between the front and back stage. Explaining it by using a middle region might seem easy. It is highly possible that it is different from one person to another with what intention they post. But based on the mentioned paradox, the middle region could be a common ground for people performing on both front- and back stage.

LOSING FACE

Another aspect to consider while analyzing how people interact on Secret is facework, specifically Goffmans term 'loosing face'. He argues that a vital part of a coherent and meaningful social interaction is all actors agreeing upon "a definition of the situation". All must maintain their face and help others maintain theirs too. This is somewhat done by ignoring behavior that fall outside the agreed upon social rule set. I have establish that people posting on Secret is in a place in the middle region. Therefore they are somewhat aware of other actors. Though users are anonymous they use their secrets to portray and perform an identity - the choice of words, background picture or lack thereof, the use of humor etc. - and in doing so the actors are aware of an audience.

Secret might have established an online platform where you can let out frustrations and prepare for non-online front stage. You can tell the audience how you feel without really telling them or worry about people physically looking directly at you. You are still acting middle region and you mind how people respond to the secret you post. By sharing anonymously and not having the secrets linked to a tangible online identity Secret makes it possible for the users to maintain and avoid direct threats to their face. And if their new online identity "fails", e.g. by not receiving enough 'loves' on a secret, it is relatively easy for the user to cut the link to that particular secret and thereby maintaining their face.

Still some users are very involved with the comments they get and how well their secret is perceived:

"I politely offered my roommate pizza rolls and he accepted. Bitch you're suppose to politely decline. Now I'm down half my pizza rolls. Bitch."

This post resulted in a lot of negative comments: "Don't offer what you aren't willing to give. Twat." Reply from author: "This was just a joke anyways. I clearly offered. I was just bored XD". The author, though anonymous, still used facework (through e.g. humor and a laughing emoticon) to counteract an incident that could lead to losing face. When looking at the secrets posted on Secret people who send out post are often very involved with the

comments they get. They discuss the secret with the other participants and care about how it gets perceived.

Goffman (1967) mentions the avoidance process in which people simply avoid encounters where threats to the face are likely to occur.

In conclusion you can argue, that users of Secret are aware of their 'face', and therefore it is fair to assume that they are not posting from back stage. At the same time, it is a good place for sharing thoughts, because being anonymous limits the risk of losing face.

WHY DO PEOPLE USE SECRET AS A SOCIAL MEDIA?

In 1999 former director of the MIT Media Lab's Social Media Group Judith S. Donath examined how an identity is established and the effects of identity deception in the worldwide Internet discussion system Usenet. According to Donath (1999) anonymity is controversial in the online world. For some it is a way to maintain personal freedom in an era of surveillance and a way to speak up without reputations in other matters shadowing their opinions. For others it is pure anarchy; a cover for criminal acts or even terrorism. Therefore anonymity can have very negative connotations for some. Donath (1999) states that anonymity is not a direct barrier for communicating, but it can be a barrier for forming a community. One of the motivations of being part of a community, she says, is the existence of distinct and persistent personas with reputations and personal histories (Donath, 1999). Keep the personal freedom in mind, in the literary review I saw that Bernstein et. al tries to give the new SNS of anonymously and deletion, terms that can be understood in the existing scholars of social network theory. They do not understand it to be untrustworthy; they see it as another way to interact. These kinds of SNS give the users an opportunity to talk in the present (they use pictures to show it is present) (Bernstein et. al). This way it is like talking in real life, where the conversation is not stored. By using a SNS such as 4chan you are able to communicate with a much larger scale of others.

This can generate a lot of new inspiring thoughts. In fact this site has created a lot of the Internet phenomenon (memes). This kind of inspiration and information could be an explanation for why people use Secret. If it is not to stage oneself or to be confirmed in one's face, it can simply be for inspiration and getting new ideas, without having to be held accountable for the post. In this sense Donath also says that it is decreasing a community, but that have to depend on the community. The 4chan users do not seem to mind, in fact they see it as a release.

Today's surveillance society makes it hard to go anywhere online without being traced and getting your online activity stored into megadata, so called big data (Andrejevic 2014). Using sites such as Secrets could be some kind of statement, consciously or unconsciously, that people do not respond well to this kind of overall surveillance. As Donath also mentions the personal freedom is an innate sense you have. On a societal level, this could be a reason why people spend time on sites such as Secrets - as a counter back to the big data and surveillance society.

Secret is based on being on an anonymous community, where you can share your deepest secret that might be too private or too embarrassing to share in an open forum. When looking through the general tone and messages on Secret, a pattern of clean and positive secrets appears. Writing secrets anonymously could be seen as an obvious attraction for troubling, offensive or criminal content such as Donath mentions. But this is not the case, the content on Secret maintain clean and positive, setting a social norm for what content is allowed on the site. Kim Mai-Cutler (2014), technology journalist at Techcrunch, describes Secret as "The Facebook for what you are really thinking" and the fact that you do not know if one of your friends might be behind the newest post, may provide a higher level of curiosity than if it consisted of only posts from total strangers.

But you still want to question why the tone is 'clean'. Because it is a post and not an immediate message such as on 4chan - you could imagine that the site managers follows a set of rules and norms, a social structure if you might. This limits the degree of free expression because not all secrets are appropriate. But you would expect that most people using the site acts

accordingly to the structure anyhow, so people do not notice this cleanness while using the app.

Another reason could be that it simple just is intriguing and fun to use with friends.

While Secret is not a location-sharing application per se, it does provide the possibility of proximity awareness (Licoppe, 2013) through it's built in "Nearby"-feature. Shared secrets that receive 'loves' from third link friends (friends of friends' friends) will have their location on the time of the post identified by state or country. The "Nearby"-feature however provides more specific locative information by scanning your nearby environment, although it is never revealed how close a particular shared secret is (more than by the aforementioned state or country). Applying Licoppe (2013), here proximity is experienced as an ambiguous form of the onscreen encounter: the user reading the secret (receiver) is made aware of the location of the user writing the secret (sender) by means of location tracking technology. The ambiguity of the matter lies in the fact that this information is superficial (only revealing state or country), but as the radius of this so-called "Nearby"-scan remains unrevealed, Secret in fact prevails in creating a type of social tension between sender and receiver(s), because of the chance of a close onscreen encounter (Licoppe, 2013). The company slogan "Share with friends, anonymously" hereby receives another layer of meaning as the level of anonymity amongst friends is somewhat decreased by the use of the "Nearby" locative media feature. So the Goffmanian stage (Goffman, 1956) of Secret is preserved by semi-revealing locative facts to add to the tension of anonymous social interaction: is there a friend, or a friend's friend, who is in fact sharing an intimate statement in my nearby environment right now? This affects the onscreen encounters, and the subtle anticipation of a timid encounter (Licoppe, 2013) where the receiver, remaining an ordinary passerby in real life, works to recognize the proximity of the sender, is manipulated into both parties ensuring the blurred path between the digital world of secrets and the "real" world.

CONCLUSION

When people post a secret on Secret, they are working both front and back stage. They have the ability to share private information, get inspired by others or express interesting views while partly staging themselves, but without having to be held accountable or be judged. By using these kind of anonymous social medias the users are able to communicate with others in the present, without having the conversation traced or collected to metadata. At the same time not knowing whom you are interacting with creates excitement, whether it might be someone within your real life social circles or total strangers.

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