Private Responses for Public Sharing: Understanding Self-Presentation and Relational Maintenance via Stories in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

With nearly two billion users, social media Stories—an ephemeral format of sharing—are increasingly popular and projected to overtake sharing via public feeds. Sharing via Stories differs from Feeds sharing by removing the visible feedback (e.g. "likes" and "comments") which has come to characterize social media. Given the salience of responses visibility to self-presentation and relational maintenance in social media literature, we conducted semi-structured interviews (N = 22) to explore how people understand these processes when using Stories. We find that users have lower expectations for responses with Stories and experience lower pressure for self-presentation. This fosters more frequent sharing and a sense of daily connectedness, which strong ties can find valuable. Finally, the act of viewing takes on new significance of signaling attention when made known to the sharer. Our findings point to the importance of effort and attention in understanding responses on social media.

Author Keywords

Social media; Stories; relational maintenance; self-presentation; social media responses

CSS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Social media**

INTRODUCTION

Responses to social media sharing constitute an essential element of the social media experience, with implications for both how people curate their sharing on social media and how people support their relationships on these platforms. Bazarova and Choi [1], for example, find that when people share publicly on Facebook, they are often seeking social validation or relational development, and providing feedback is one way audience can support these goals. Social media self-presentation often tends toward the socially-desirable [2]. This is at least in part because people have to consider the possible visible responses to sharing and even strategize

to receive these responses [3]. Relational maintenance on social media also partly depends on responses as a way to signal relational investment and support [4]. As instrumental as responses are to social media processes and scholarship, much of this literature has built on the assumption that responses to social media posts are visible to those posts' audiences [5, 6]. Such visibility means the responses themselves become part of the shared content. Indeed, public responses on social media can influence how people respond to posts [6], evaluate the sharer [7], and shift the sharer's self-perception [8]. Similarly, public responses can serve as a form of public association and endorsement of relationships [9].

What happens, then, when new ways of sharing diverge from this paradigm? The format of social media Stories—an ephemeral form of sharing on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Snapchat—has grown immensely in popularity in recent years. With close to two billion users [10, 11], Stories sharing was "on a path to surpass feeds as the primary way people share things with their friends sometime [in 2019]" according to Facebook chief product officer [12]. Sharing via Stories differs from other social media posts in both ephemerality, and, as discussed in this paper, the absence of visible feedback (e.g. "likes" and "comments") that have come to characterize social media communication. In addition, scholarship has focused on modes of sharing where knowing who and how many people look at a post often involves guesswork [13, 14]. For most social media posts, sharers do not know whether others have seen it, unless the viewer "like," "comment," or otherwise make their attention visible. With social media Stories, a list of contacts who have viewed the Stories is provided for the poster, but not visible to anyone else. The viewers list for Stories makes the very act of viewing visible.

This paper explores the consequences of these features. For self-presentation, the lack of visible responses potentially de-emphasizes the necessity and social status associated with high level of responses and, along with it, the need to "perform" an image via social media postings. However, since the Stories posting could still potentially be seen by the entire network anyway and can be updated multiple times per day, the self-presentational pressure may still persist and become even more relentless. The provision of a viewer list could further enhance the surveillance and performative

aspects of sharing. The implications of Stories for relational maintenance are similarly unclear. When people know exactly who is looking at their content, how might that influence the functions of responses? Moreover, who responds to Stories may also differ from who responds to public posts, given that more private channels can be more intimate and reserved for stronger ties [1].

In this paper, we asks how people perceive and practice self-presentation (RQ1) and relational maintenance (RQ2) on Stories, given the private feedback mechanism. For self-presentation, we find that the private responses lower expectations for receiving responses, downplay pressure for polished self-presentation, and preclude any negative feedback from affecting the sharer's image. For relational maintenance, we find that the act of viewing becomes more meaningful when made visible via the viewer list and that the private feedback can open up more chances for extended conversations.

This analysis of responses to Stories enables us to distinguish the importance of responses that are public from that of responses per se. This contributes to dissecting the emerging, yet increasingly important, model of sharing via Stories by showing how self-presentation and relational maintenance function through responses to Stories. We also contribute to understanding of the mechanisms through which responses affect self-presentation and relational maintenance more broadly. We argue that responses signal both acknowledgement of the effort made by the sharer and the audiences' effort to display attention on social media platforms. We thus affirm the role of responses as signals of attention and investment identified in prior literature, while extending it to a new context.

RELATED WORK

Social media Stories at the time of Writing
The Stories format was first introduced on Snapchat in October, 2013 [15]. In August 2016, Instagram, owned by Facebook, became the next major platform to adopt its own version of Stories [16]. Facebook and WhatsApp, both owned by Facebook, followed in adding this feature. All of the participants in our research study used Instagram Stories, Snapchat Stories or both, except for one person who used Facebook Stories and Instagram Stories. The following descriptions focus on Stories as operated by Instagram and Snapchat at the time of the research.

When user posts new social media Stories, the content of their updates is not automatically displayed on a feed—unlike the front-facing views on Instagram and Facebook. Instead, a highlighted circle signifies that a user has a new Stories update, and the viewer can click on the highlighted circle to see that update (see Figure 1). The content of the update can be a picture, a video, or text. When viewed, the update always takes up the entire screen (see Figure 2). Story updates display one at a time. One person can upload multiple Stories posts at any given time, which means each

post will be displayed chronologically one after another. The Stories updates disappear after 24 hours, unless saved elsewhere, such as the Highlights section on Instagram. With small exceptions, such as a poll on Instagram Stories, there is no way to make a public response to a Stories post. Viewers can click on a dialog box and type a message or click on a provided emoji, which becomes a private chat to the receiver. Finally, a list of how many and who have viewed a Stories posting is provided for sharers and constantly updated to reflect new views. Snapchat pauses after each person's Story, allowing the viewer to exit out before proceeding to the next person. On Instagram, users must click on a specific Story to view it, but the stream of Stories then moves automatically from one person's story to the next. On Instagram, the user is thus offered less control over who to view.

Self-Presentation and Responses on Social Media
Self-presentation is "the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people" [17]. Goffman, in particular, [18] articulates a dramaturgical perspective on this process. Specifically, Goffman argues that self-presentation is a performance in which people present different aspects of themselves to different interaction partners at different times [18]. Self-presentation on social media often occurs through a public profile, which enables users to "maintain unique
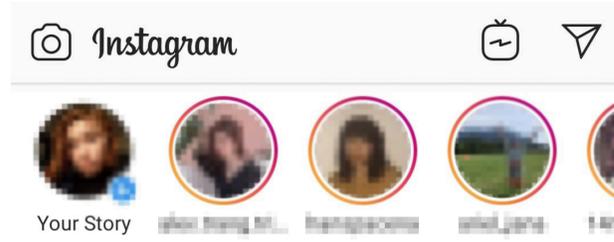

Figure 1. Highlighted circles signal that an Instagram user has a new Stories posting. Viewers click on the display picture to see the post (similar to Snapchat)

Figure 2. Stories display on Snapchat takes on entire screen (similar to Instagram)

collections of personal attributes created by the user, their network, and/or the platform" [19]. Social media users also tend to accumulate a network of known ties of disparate contexts (e.g. work colleagues, school mates, or family members) on these platforms [20]. As such, self-presentation on social media typically involves sharing content to a large network of ties from different social circles, a phenomenon termed context collapse [21, 22]. Social media self-presentation has been compared to an exhibition [23] and to shouting in a public square [2], demonstrating key characteristics of social media sharing: publicness, persistence, and scrutiny and commentary from an unknown or ambiguous audience (with exceptions such as the Stories format discussed here, posts in Facebook Groups, or LinkedIn profiles).

Such conditions help explain the ubiquity of the one-click responses on social media, such as the "like" button on Facebook or the "favorite" button on Twitter. Since responses play such a salient role for audience members, social media users in turn have to consider these responses in determining their self-presentation. From the sharer perspective, these clicks can signal agreement or support of their self-presentation [24]. More than half of the Facebook users surveyed by Scissors, Burke and Wengrovitz [24] indicated that getting enough likes for their posts was at least somewhat important. People may even delete posts that do not receive sufficient public feedback [3]. From the audience perspective, public responses to a post provide an additional metric, which may influence perception of the post itself [5, 6]. For instance, adolescents were more likely to "like" a photo with many likes, compared to those same photos but shown with fewer likes [5]. Additionally, fMRI brain scans of these participants showed greater activity in "neural regions implicated in reward processing, social cognition, imitation, and attention" when viewing photos with many "likes" among adolescents [5]. In addition, third-party viewers relied more on comments from friends—rather than self-generated claims by the sharers—in evaluating how extroverted a sharer on Facebook was [6]. When people share publicly to Facebook, receiving public feedback increases how much they internalize the postings to their self-views, compared to when they receive the same feedback—but privately [8]. In other words, the evaluation of self-presentation on social media involves both the original content shared and the visible responses to such sharing. Consequently, this potential of receiving public feedback, and how audience members perceive such feedback, is key to social media self-presentation.

Self-presentation via Stories removes this pressure of public feedback from sharing. Furthermore, Stories postings are ephemeral, lasting only 24 hours. Ephemeral social media posts offer an appealing alternative to the currently dominant feeds sharing [25, 26], whose self-presentational settings have grown increasingly inhibitive [2, 27]. However, research on self-presentation on Stories suggests that people still face self-presentational pressure due to the public nature of Stories. Specifically, people aim to post more noteworthy experiences and content that would be broadly interesting to everyone and consciously refrain from selfies [28]. These findings illustrated noted differences in self-presentation strategies between Snapchat Stories and Snapchat private messages, which seem to feature prominently selfies and everyday moments [29, 30]. With a private message, the scope of the audience is defined and known. In contrast, when posting via Stories, people confront an audience of their entire network. Given this more public sharing and the salience of audience to people's sharing decision [31], Stories users may still have to exercise caution in their self-presentation and post for the "lowest-common-denominator" [2, 23]. In summary, although people have to present themselves to a public audience in Stories, they do not need to be concerned about audience's feedback being visible and viewable by third parties. Given these contesting forces of responses and audience pressure to Stories self-presentation, we ask the following research question:

Research Question 1: How do Stories' private response mechanisms affect perceptions and practices of self-presentation?

Stories' Responses and Relational Maintenance

Public versus Private Responses & Relational Maintenance
Relational maintenance are actions taken "(1) to keep a relationship in existence, (2) to keep a relationship in a specified state or existence, (3) to keep a relationship in satisfactory condition, and (4) to keep a relationship in repair." [32] Feedback on social media is a mechanism of relational maintenance [4, 33-35], even at the lightweight level of one-click "likes," "favorites," or "hearts." Given that feeds on most social media sites are algorithmically filtered so that users may not see everything post shared by their network, responses help audience members signal that they have seen and paid attention to a post [36, 37]. Sharers similarly use responses to estimate the audience size of their posts, even if these responses may not provide the most reliable cues [13].

The quality of responses received and satisfaction with those responses are strongly related to overall satisfaction with the sharing experience [38]. People expect, and find it important, to receive responses from strong ties, such as close friends or romantic partners [24, 39]. Receiving more responses than expected by the sharers also helps the sharers feel more connected to their networks [39]. The prominence and usefulness of responses as a relational maintenance tool hence emerges clearly from research conducted in public responses contexts. One possible reason is that, in these contexts, the visibility of others' responses constitutes a public endorsement of relationship and enhances the relationship [4, 40]. That is, by leaving a response visible to the sharer, as well as other viewers of the post, one is willing to make known and visible one's association with the sharer of the post [9].

However, for people who want to communicate about more intimate or sensitive topics to seek support, social media platforms may be too prohibitive due to self-presentational norms [41-44]. Alternatively, when people make a public disclosure on social media, the default option is, in turn, a public response to their updates. Such publicness can make the support received appear less authentic [42]. As illustrated by Bazarova [44] via experimental methods, people see intimate disclosures made publicly as less appropriate than those made privately.

With social media Stories, two important functions of social media responses as typically studied are absent, or unnecessary: (1) the signaling of attention, negated by the viewers list and (2) the public performance of relationship, negated by the private mechanism of responses. Nonetheless, the responses sent to social media Stories postings may be more supportive of relationship maintenance, given that they are composed messages, instead of a one-click reaction, sent via one-on-one private channels. In a longitudinal investigation of Facebook use and well-being, frequency of composed communication with strong ties, including private messaging and comments, predicted increases in well-being [34]. Notably, none of the other forms of communication, including all communication with weak ties or one-click responses between strong ties, predicted increases in well-being [34]. Private channels are also where people are more likely to disclose more intimate information on social media [1].

Viewing Receipts as a Form of Communication
Moreover, making visible the act of viewing can also have implications for viewing behaviors and interpretations of such behaviors. Previous research on this form of viewing receipts—such as LinkedIn viewing notifications or read receipts Facebook Messenger—reveals that viewers may intentionally maneuver around these features. For example, on LinkedIn, a social media platform for professional networking, Hoyle et al. found evidence of people choosing not to view others' profiles due to LinkedIn rendering this act visible under certain privacy settings [45]. Interestingly, a minority of participants (16%) also indicated intentionally viewing content to express professional or personal interests in the profiles [45]. A majority of participants (70.7%) viewed the profiles of people who had viewed their profiles. These findings suggest that when platforms make viewing behaviors visible, users can use them as a networking strategy. In another study on messaging read receipts, 68.4% of participants reported avoiding seeing a message on Facebook Messenger; among these respondents, a majority cited not wanting the seen receipts to show up as the reason [46]. Indeed, not receiving response while seeing a seen receipts can invoke in senders negative emotions, especially for those with higher need to belong and fear of ostracism [47].

Just as the novel features of the Stories format may affect how people perceive and practice self-presentation, they seem likely to affect relational maintenance. We ask:

Research Question 2: How do Stories' private response mechanisms affect people's perceptions and practices of relational maintenance?

METHODS
The main aim of our study is to achieve an in-depth understanding of relatively novel phenomena around Stories. As such, we adopted semi-structured interviews as our method. The strengths of semi-structured interviews include a rich and contextualized understanding of the lived experiences of our participants. We conducted semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 60 minutes, with 22 participants between June and August 2018. We employed convenience sampling and recruited the majority of our participants by emailing the interns at the Microsoft office in Cambridge, MA, United States—in addition to from personal networks and posting flyers in nearby areas. We targeted the interns, because they were more likely than full time employees to be of the demographics to use Stories. Indeed, most of our participants were college students, who are frequent [48]—and intense [49]—users of Instagram and Snapchat, popular Stories platforms. As such, this sample could be particularly meaningful for achieving an in-depth understanding of Stories.

We described the study as an interview study about use of social media Stories and recruited for adults who use social media Stories. Before scheduling the interview, we asked participants which platforms they posted Stories to and how often to verify their eligibility. Participants received a $20 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation. We stopped recruiting after reaching saturation: we started to notice the same themes around participants' Stories perceptions and practices for the last few interviews. At the end of the interviews, we asked participants to provide their age, gender, and occupation (see Table 1). We referred to our participants in the paper with pseudonyms that they offered or created by us (if not offered by participants). We received IRB approval for the interview questions, recruiting strategies, and the handling of personally identifiable information.

Four of the interviews took place via Skype, and we conducted the remainder in person. Interviews began with a brief inquiry into the social media sites that participants use and then turned to focus on Stories. We asked how they decided what to post, what kinds of responses they received, how they interpreted those responses, and how they responded to others' Stories. We recorded the audio of all interviews.

All the interviews were transcribed with an IRB and GDPR-compliant transcription service. After verifying the accuracy of the transcription, we then exported the transcripts to Atlas.TI, where one of the authors conducted iterative coding

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Platform
Sara	21	M	Student/intern	S
M3gh@nn	28	W	Student	I
Ashley	25	M	Chemist	I
Bart	29	M	Research assistant, PhD student	I
Diane	32	W	Researcher/intern	I
Mike	26	M	Graduate student	I
Iris	28	W	Librarian	I, S
Naraic	36	M	Animal Technician	S
Sammus	32	W	Rapper, Producer, PhD Student	I
Bryant	21	M	Computer engineer	S
Elizabeth	20	W	Student/intern	S
Amy	19	W	Student/intern	I, S
David	20	M	Student/Intern	S
Jamie Bond	21	W	Student/intern	S
Sapphire	19	W	Student	S
Dmitri	20	M	Student/intern	S
Lan	19	W	Student/intern	S
Milo	20	M	Student/intern	I, S
Junie	22	W	Student/intern	I, F
Elsa	20	W	Student/intern	S
Devin	20	M	Student/intern	S
Holly	20	W	Student/intern	S

Table 1. Participant information
M = Man; W = Woman
I = Instagram; S = Snapchat; F = Facebook

as delineated by Charmaz's grounded theory practice [50]. The coder developed the initial codebook based on research questions, as well as themes noted from interviews. The coder coded the first few interviews based on this codebook. The authors then discussed the codes and identified important emerging themes. From these discussions, the coder refined the codebook by collapsing codes that were similar to one another and devised new codes for important phenomena. The coder then used the revised codebook to re-code the first four interviews as well as to code the remainder of the interviews. The authors had regular meetings to discuss key themes of the findings. In constructing our findings, we also pay attention to negative cases to see where one particular phenomenon may or may not apply. Quotes in the Findings section have been lightly edited for readability.

Methodological Limitations
Many of our interviewees skewed younger and were more technologically savvy. We also recruited via convenience sampling, which further limited generalizability of findings. We make no claim that the specific interpretations and practices we highlight here are the only ones, nor that they are universal. The aims of our study are to surface phenomena around Stories use, not generalizable finding for the entire population. Future studies can consider exploring or verifying the generalizability of these themes by interviewing different populations and with complementary methods such as surveys and experiments.

FINDINGS

RQ1: Private Feedback and Self-Presentation
Our first research question asked how participants presented themselves on Stories, given the private feedback. In our interviews, we took care not to mention the lack of public responses until one of our last interview questions to avoid biasing participants' answers. Yet, we found it was nonetheless influential throughout the interviews. The relationship between private feedback and low self-presentational pressure was twofold. First, there was a mutually held perception between sharer and viewer that Stories postings largely did not need feedback, which freed people from having to consider the feedback when posting. Second, any feedback was private and known only to the sharer, and this precluded the feedback from negatively influencing perception of their posting. We discuss each of these below.

Low Expectations for Feedback and Low Self-Presentational Pressure for Sharing
Consistent with McRoberts et al. [28], our participants described their Stories posting as lower pressure and much more relaxed than posts on other platforms such as Instagram and Facebook feeds. In explaining the low pressure, the lack of public feedback and low expectations for responses are among the primary reasons.

In deciding what to post to Stories or how often to post, our participants generally opted to show interesting content or snippets from their lives. At the same time, they held that content to a lower standard than a post to the regular feed. Several of our participants also described posting to Stories more when there were interesting events in their life, such as the activities of their summer or from their travels. When asked about their thoughts on Stories not having "likes" and comments, most of our participants enjoyed that there was no mechanism for visible feedback with Stories. They associated the absence of feedback with a lower bar for what can be shared. This lack of expectation freed them from having to account for feedback in deliberating what to share to Stories. The lack of expectation also deviated from feeds sharing, where expectation for feedback was instrumental for the sharing process [35]. One participant, M3gh@nn, pointed out:

I feel like it's great that [Stories] doesn't have Like…. I feel like the part of the no pressure or the low pressureness of Stories is that it's more about sharing just to share…There's no thought in your mind about how many likes is this going to get? It's not even an option.

Enjoying the freedom from public responses with Stories does not preclude receiving pleasure from public responses in other formats. For most of our respondents, the "likes" and "comments" that were unfavorable when associated with Stories were appreciated and important for feed posts. For

example, Sapphire, who did not even look at her list of audience for Snapchat Stories, stated "*what's the point*" when asked what it would mean to her if Instagram were to entirely do away with likes or comments. Our respondents explained the value of these metrics in terms of effort. Not only did they put effort into making those posts, they understood responses to them as validations of that effort. When participants posted to the regular Instagram or Facebook feeds, they expected responses and were accordingly mindful of crafting a post worthy of such responses. When asked what it would mean to him were Stories to start including likes and comments, Dmitri highlighted the circular relationships between having the ability to respond, expectations for responses, and pressure on higher quality post on social media:

I feel like [not having likes and comments for Snapchat Stories] is kind of better because when you add the like and comments feature, then there's also a little pressure to start liking and commenting, which means that you have to spend more time per Story. I think the appeal of Stories is it's very quick and you get a good idea of what people are up to with very little involvement on your behalf ....generally Stories are designed so that they are of the quality where they normally don't require a response.

In other words, whether on the feed or in Stories, audience responses serve to acknowledge the effort a sharer put into their posting. With Stories, where sharing is more in-the-moment and lower effort, viewers express less need to acknowledge the sharing with responses. In parallel, sharers, who view their Stories as low effort, have low expectations of receiving responses to them as a result.

Private Feedback Serving as Protection Mechanism
The private feedback also serves as a protection for the sharer. No matter how the post is received, most of the feedback is obscured from audience. Jamie Bond explained:

[Posting to Stories is] like putting something against a glass window and being like "Here. You can't do anything to it, but here. You don't have to deal with or worry about somebody saying something that you might not want. So if somebody is like "Well, this is stupid" then you could be like "Okay." No one else is going to see that they said that, though, so it doesn't matter.

In another instance of employing the protection of private responses, Milo relayed his strategy of posting a Story where he blocked all but a single person from seeing. Since the responses and the viewer list were private, Milo's intended viewer could not tell that they were the only one able to see Milo's Story, allowing Milo to effectively send a one-on-one message disguised as a one-to-many messages. He elaborated:

Well, if you like somebody and then you happen to take a really good picture of yourself, then you want them to see it, but you don't want to snap them because it will look pushy, you will post on your story and then you would block other people. So then, that person will actually see it without having to snap them.

This strategy for self-presentation in service of relationship building speaks to how deeply self-presentation ties into relationship processes.

RQ2: Private Feedback & Relational Maintenance
Our second research question asks how Stories sharing and responding foster relational maintenance. We emphasize how participants make sense of the viewers list and use the private message response mechanism. Our interviews show that the lightweight nature of Stories encouraged more quotidian sharing that helped people keep up with close ties' daily lives. Moreover, the viewers list—while not intended to be a response itself—took on the symbolic meaning of a response because a viewer's choice to watch a person's story was made visible. Relatedly, our interviews with participants revealed deliberation around whose Stories postings to watch, although several participants approached watching Stories out of habit or boredom, instead of interest in a specific poster. Finally, Stories' one-on-one response mechanism fostered catching up between ties because its privacy allowed a Story to serve as a conversation opener. We elaborate on each of these findings below.

Keeping Up with Daily Life via Stories
Watching other people's Stories and posting Stories provided a convenient way for our participants to keep up with their ties' daily lives, as well as share their own. Earlier, we discussed that sharing via Stories involves lower pressure and is thus more lightweight, partly thanks to the private responses. As a result, people can post to Stories more frequently—and about more quotidian events than they would on their feed. Consequently, especially for strong ties such as close friends or family members, audience members appreciate Stories for allowing them to see glimpses into the sharers' lives. When asked if there are things her parents would not learn otherwise if not for her Stories postings, Lan answered:

they get to see what I'm doing [much] more frequently. I call my parents once a week on FaceTime and I can only remember so much during that time [versus] little snippets every day [via posting Stories]. I think they get a better understanding of what I am going through here.

Not only did audiences of Stories see more glimpses of daily lives thanks to the frequent sharing, they also viewed Stories as showing more "real" and ordinary moments from others' lives, as opposed to the feed. Participants, like Iris, described the feed as "hyper-curated" or only showing the best moments from people's lives:

even when I'm looking at my [Instagram] feed, and it's usually really nice, well-crafted photos, and then the Insta stories would be them making funny faces or ridiculous poses and stuff, and it makes them seem more like real people rather than just like sort of flat characters

That the content shared on Stories was more representative of daily life also helped the sharers feel as if the viewers were connected to the lives they led, which may differ from the less frequent and more polished images that they shared elsewhere. Bart, a participant who lived in a rural area and far away from his friends, answered our questions about the value of responses to his Stories by saying:

because I live the life that I do, and I live in a more rural area, and I don't have a lot of friends that I can hang out with in person, it is really helpful to get positive feedback on the stuff that I post online, because I think that people are able to…learn about my life…. It is useful to know that people are keeping up with me….

Similarly, Elizabeth compared these daily glimpses against postings on other social media platforms:

It's more of a day-to-day, random moments, as opposed to staged…like you're more likely to spend 20 minutes editing a photo for Facebook or Instagram, but Snapchat, you post it, it's done.

Thus, the lower pressure of Stories sharing means that not only is sharing easy, the postings also often happen in the moment and reflect current events in one person's life. This can create a sense of ongoing togetherness, especially when people consistently view one another's stories over time. This stands in contrast to Instagram or Facebook updates that may be a highly polished portrayal of events which happened weeks ago or only major life announcements.

Deciding and Managing Whose Stories to View

The viewers list is another key element in relational maintenance processes via Stories. Compared to feed posting, the viewers list—which shows exactly how many and which users have seen a Stories update—is a novel feature of Stories. In addition, unlike with feed sharing, people may specifically click on Stories to start viewing them, making the act of viewing at least interpretable as more intentional.

From our interviews, we find the decision to view Stories to range in its intentionality, from purely habitual to very deliberate. First, several participants acknowledged that they viewed Stories out of boredom and habit—instead of an inherent interest in the sharers—and assumed the same of their own Stories' viewers. For example, Bart observed that the same set of people always view his Stories first and suggested that some viewers of his Instagram Stories tend to be habitual viewers of Stories:

it's usually the same people…especially the first people to view my stuff, because I just assume that those people are just like addicted to Instagram and are just always looking at it, so it is not just about seeing the story.

This assumption of Stories viewing out of habits and automaticity was often applied to weak tie viewers. Elsa said: *"If it's someone who I'm not super close with, then I'll just assume that they just tapped through everyone's stories at once."* This reasoning for Stories viewing possibly stems from perceptions of Stories postings as often "boring" or "ordinary," making it less likely that a weak tie would be interested in such updates.

Although this mindset of habitual watching may apply for several of our participants or to certain type of ties in one's network, there were also many instances of intentional Stories viewing among our participants. For example, some participants responded that they make sure to watch updates from strong ties such as close friends, romantic partners, or family members. In contrast, people deliberately avoided watching Stories by contacts who they were in sensitive situations with, such as former romantic partners. Amy expressed why she would not view the Stories posting by her former partner: *"I don't want them to think that I still care what they're up to."* Furthermore, the difference between how participants interpret the intentionality of Stories viewing can lie with platform's features. Once you click on an Instagram Stories, you can be automatically directed to the next person's Stories, without any preview of who it may be. Meanwhile, after viewing one person's Snapchat Stories, you have an option to see whom you will view next before proceeding. Although this is a subtle difference, the extra click and pause before viewing with Snapchat can underscore intentionality behind the act of viewing. The (non)responsive quality of visible Story viewing can thus serve as a marker of relational dissolution as well as maintenance.

Stories Viewing Serving as Signal of Attention.

When we asked interviewees how they approach the viewers list and whether there were some people they wished would view their Stories, we found that the signal of viewing takes on varied significance among our participants. The significance also differed across disparate types of audience members. As discussed above, external reasons such as boredom or habit may sometimes motivate Stories viewing, which consequently renders viewing as an unreliable signal of interest. That said, certain participants found the signal of viewing to be important or enjoyable when it came from people such as their crushes, romantic partners, or family members. This is in keeping with earlier findings about visible forms of responses, such as Facebook "likes" [24]. The act of viewing with social media Stories, particularly with Snapchat Stories, serves as a signal of attention due to its intentional and self-selecting nature: at least at the start, people have to opt to click on a Story and have control over what they view, as opposed to the feed displaying posts to them [28]. In describing the significance placed on his romantic interest viewing his Stories, Naraic ascribed *"[an] interest in what I'm up to or an interest in me as an individual"* to the act of viewing. As a result, while likes, comments, and other sorts of responses may be essential for showing effort in other modes, in Stories, viewing itself demonstrates investing effort (albeit small) into a relationship. Milo further compared the experience of the viewer list to a "like" on social media:

I guess the satisfaction from seeing people who look at my Stories who don't typically [click 'like' on] my pictures... It's like: "Ha! Caught you! You are actually seeing my posts but you didn't 'like' it!"

In other words, the viewers list, while not explicitly built as a feedback mechanism, takes on the significance of a response mechanism in signaling one person's attention to another. The same act of viewing takes on the meaning of interest when rendered visible. The symbolic meaning of attention conveyed via the act of viewing Stories was particularly striking with one of our participants, Mike. He was not aware of the viewers list until our interview. Once he learned that others could see him viewing them, Mike expressed intentions to revise his viewing practice:

I told you earlier that usually when I use my story, I just go through everything and I swipe, swipe, swipe until I go the end of the last stop. But now...I might not go through all the lists because I mean, sometimes I don't really care about them that much. Maybe I should not look at them...if they'll see me on the list, maybe they'll think I care when I actually don't care.

Learning that others could tell when he viewed their Stories prompted Mike to assign meaning to his act of viewing: the same mindless viewing may signal "caring" when the sharer is aware. Similarly, Elizabeth recounted her realization as she first learned about the viewers list:

[Learning about the viewers list] made me consider, "What if my posted a story?"... and then it made me realize that that person that I've been trying to avoid has seen that I look at his stories, which was a painful realization.

Opening Extended Conversations with Responses to Stories

Our findings suggest that people may not respond privately to stories very often. When responses did occur, however, our findings suggested that they could serve as conversational openers that foster catching up. Since Story responses routed to a one-on-one chat space, the sharer and responder can have an extended conversation that would otherwise be unwieldy or too visible in the public comment space, as Devin explained:

I think people don't want to have public conversations that often or at least my friends. And if they reach out to me privately on Snapchat then we can have an actual conversation rather than like a comments thing that might bother other people.

Second, with the live and instant norm of posting to Stories, people understood that whatever was happening in a Stories update was going on at the moment, evoking conversations around that topic. In contrast, an Instagram post in a certain location may mean someone was there weeks ago, making it less certain that the location was still an appropriate topic of discussion. Ashley likened the experience to meeting someone you have not seen in a while:

Initially, it's [the response] obviously about the context and then go on to be, like, how have you been? It's been so long. I'm not saying it's a follow-up through all the way, but it's a short catchup and what are you doing in your life right now, basically if you see someone in a long time in person or it would be awkward to just say that's cool.

DISCUSSION

Compared to the feed posts that are the usual objects of social media scholarship concerning self-presentation and relational maintenance, Stories postings feature the same audience but differ in the private mechanism of responses. Such conditions provide the opportunity to see deeper dynamics of social media responses in these processes and to understand which are due to responses and which to platform design. Our interview study investigates how people understand social media Stories and how the private response mechanism shapes users' self-presentational and relational maintenance practices. Our findings indicated that people experienced reduced self-presentational pressure with Stories, which they associated with lower expectations around responses and the protection provided by private responses. For relational maintenance, the act of viewing Stories sometimes sent a signal of attention and interest that fostered relationships, even if minimally. This is evident by the attention many of our participants paid to the viewers list and to managing whose Stories to view. Finally, though private responses to Stories posts were infrequent, such responses could initiate extended, one-on-one conversations that helped people stay close.

Although we studied a relative novel platform, from our findings, we seek to highlight basic mechanisms that may extend to all form of responses on social media, heeding the call for grounding in technology scholars [51]. To this goal, for our Discussion, we draw attention to two salient aspects important to making sense of feedback on social media, beyond Stories: (1) the relationship between effort and expectations and (2) signaling of attention.

Social Media Responses and Expectations of Effort

Expectations of responses for feed sharing is an instrumental dimension of social media platforms [35]. However, in contrast to previous work, which consistently showed the importance of receiving ample public feedback for Feeds sharing [38, 39], we found that people have few expectations of receiving responses for Stories, partially attributed to the responses being private. This distinction between private versus public responses, however, supports a shared theme about responses, regardless of platform: they provide sharers and audience members a way to create, and fulfill, expectations of effort.

The distinction made by our participants seems to lie in the effort invested in each type of postings. Effort has always been a salient aspect of relational exchanges [52]. In building a messaging a system to nudge users to write increasingly longer messages, thus expending more effort, Kelly et al. [52] found that some participants appreciated this nudge and

saw the longer messages as potentially more meaningful. Our findings point to how this emphasis of effort also occurs in the realm of public postings in the exchange of posting and responding effort. When people share to the feeds—where public responses are possible and expected—they work to ensure that their posts are worthy of responses. Several of our participants elaborated that, for an Instagram post, they would have to plan out the photo and post after sufficient editing. In turn, as viewers, they recognize the effort exerted and the expectations placed in a feed post and respond accordingly—giving out clicks and comments. Stories postings, on the other hand, seem to discourage effort. The norm is to capture and post in the moment, often with the built-in camera in the application. Furthermore, Stories postings are ephemeral, disappearing after 24 hours. Consequently, sharers neither expect nor desire the responses that would be integral to feed sharing [35]. Stories viewers also share this perception and do not feel expectations to respond to the Stories they view. While social media research has always underscored the importance and expectations of response to sharing, our findings offer an explanation for this phenomena: a mutually held set of expectations between the effort it takes to create a post and the effort it takes to respond.

Future work should investigate these themes further as norms start to coalesce around these emerging forms of sharing. For example, as Stories postings start to replace feeds sharing, would people come to expect more engagement with these postings in terms of responses? In addition, Stories postings originated from Snapchat, which has always embraced a norm of quotidian and lightweight sharing [30]. As they become more popular on platforms associated with polished sharing, such as Facebook and Instagram, expectations for the quality of post may differ from the current norms of lower effort postings. Finally, without public responses, how are sharers determining what type of content their audience finds interesting and desirable in order to fine-tune their subsequent posts?

Social Media Responses Signal Attention
Previous research has theorized that the signaling of relational investment and attention is a particularly salient aspect of social media platforms [4, 53]. Although these platforms frequently feature explicit replies as a central feature of the sharing experience, people find implicit mechanisms of responses elsewhere. For instance, the viewing of profiles in LinkedIn [45] or the checking of messages in a system without any notification built by Kelly et al. [52] both provided communication partners with signals of interests. This is because the act of clicking presumably comes from an interest in the target in these cases. With feeds sharing, this signaling seems to occur via lightweight responses.

What we surface here is how this signaling of attention by the feedback giver—or the interpretation of attention by the feedback receiver—occurs via Stories' viewers list, a feature typically absent for feed posts. As such, the viewers list becomes a vessel for attention exchange. Indeed, the language our participants used to describe whose Stories they choose to view or what they think of people who view their Stories bore strong resemblance to how the "like" button has been discussed and studied [37]. That is, both the "like" button and the act of viewing someone's Stories could be described as a lightweight action to maintain contact and to gesture your continued interest in weak ties [37]. However, as reminiscent of the "like" button, the intentionality behind the act of Stories viewing is ambiguous: some participants view Stories habitually without much deliberation over whose Stories they are viewing, while others go to great lengths to avoid viewing Stories by certain contacts. Finally, for strong ties, the act of viewing Stories may feel compulsory, similar to the expectations for a "like" [24, 37].

These findings affirm that the relational use of social media sharing and response requires negotiating and assigning symbolic meaning to the technological features offered by these platforms. Just as the one-click feedback (e.g. "likes," "hearts," or "favorites") and "comment" can take on a variety of meanings and functions with feeds sharing, people can find meaning in the viewers list beyond its face value. The act of viewing a Stories is often self-selecting [28], and the act of viewing is rendered visible to the sharer. Together, this makes it possible to read the viewing of Stories as a signal of interest, even when it may in fact result from automatic or bored viewing rather than genuine interest. That is, not only is the viewer seen as intentionally interested in a Stories post, they are seen as willing to let the other party know that they have seen it. One popular press writer has even extolled the Snapchat viewers list as the tool to tell whether your romantic interests are reciprocated [54]. Given this combination, the act of viewing a post in and of itself on Stories becomes a gesture of attention and an indicator of caring about the other person, whether intentional or otherwise.

The multitude of interpretations around the meaning of viewing someone's Stories also harkens back to Goffman's distinction between impression "given" versus "given off" [18]. Goffman distinguished between impression "given" (what someone intentionally wanted to convey) versus impression "given off" (what someone unintentionally conveyed). Goffman's theory thus provides a useful lens to contextualize findings around how people interpreted the viewing signal. Given people's idiosyncratic approaches to the viewers' list (how much attention someone pays to it, how often someone looks, etc.), the impression "given off" while viewing can vary widely. For example, if someone always views another person's Stories very soon after posting, they may "give off" the impression of being preoccupied with this person, but only if the other person fastidiously checks their viewers list soon and frequently after posting. These varied interpretations further attest to the existence of different media ideologies [55] surrounding and governing technology use and its consequences.

Design Implications for Publicness of Response

It is striking that our participants shared an almost universal enjoyment of the private responses to Stories sharing. Although many social media platforms default into public modes of sharing and aggregate each discrete response (i.e. a "like" or a comment) into numbers (i.e. 65 likes and 28 comments), certain sites are experimenting with hiding the number of likes from the audience, such as Instagram and Facebook [56]. In addition, other platforms with reduced levels of publicness (i.e. Facebook Groups) or persistence of content (Snapchat) are enjoying greater popularity [57]. These shifts suggest that both users and platform designers are looking for alternative solutions to the tyranny of publicness demanded of users typically. Considering Goffman's enduring theories on self-presentation [18], the ability to have more control over audience for self-presentation is more in line with how people typically prefer to present. While sharing via Stories is public, people can benefit from the assurance that each piece of response is seen by them only and that no one else is privy to how their self-presentation is being received by their separate social circles.

However, public responses could serve many purposes. Andalibi et al. [43] found beneficial network effects among people who choose to disclose their pregnancy loss online: seeing the positive responses to one person's disclosure of pregnancy loss encouraged others to make the same disclosure and allowed them to access social support. Whether responses are public or private, there are hence tradeoffs to the sharers and their audiences. Instagram, for instance, cited mental health concerns around the restless pressure of public feedback, especially on teenagers, as a motivation behind the platform's hiding "likes" [58]. Future designs of platforms should consider iterating on these choices and default options provided to users.

Design and Research Implications for Response's Effort

Although posting to Stories largely involves lower effort from both sharers and posters for each post, questions remain around how these dynamics play out. First of all, while most Stories do not receive a response, the responses that occur are often more effortful and can even facilitate extended, private exchanges. When we compare these responses to the frequency or effortfulness of other types of composed responses such as a comment to a public post or a private message prompted by a public post, it is unknown whether composed responses to Stories occur more or less frequently. In other words, Stories postings may potentially serve to encourage more one-on-one exchanges through their response mechanism of private messages. On the other hand, Instagram and Facebook now provide quick reaction to Stories, where you can click once on one of the default emojis to send a private reaction message. Although such designs may make responses easier—and perhaps more likely, platform designers should be mindful of intentionally instilling low-effort responses. This is because effort is an important consideration in relational maintenance, with greater effort potentially gesturing more investment in a relationship. Recent interventions in this topic have explored, for example, messaging system that requires progressively longer messages [52].

Moreover, as Stories posting and viewing become more frequent, people may start to invest greater accumulative effort into this genre of post as a whole. In other words, sharing and viewing 50 low-effort Stories postings over a month may require more time and energy than a single polished Instagram post. As a medium, Stories postings can be particularly useful in building a greater ambient awareness of one's network [59, 60], given its constancy and volume. Ambient awareness of network has been associated with beneficial implications for well-being. Future studies should investigate this effect of Stories on relational investment via quantitative methods (i.e. surveys, experiments, or longitudinal studies) to determine the interpersonal and psychological implications of Stories use.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the increasing popularity of Stories presents a paradigm shift for social media users, and the invisibility of feedback offers scholars the potential for new insights into how relationships and selves are created and maintained through online interactions. This paper highlights the thus far under-examined negotiation of expectations around effort and attention displays that may be integral to interpersonal exchanges on social media. Whether sent privately or publicly, our study reveals that social media responses serve to (1) acknowledge mutually-held expectations between sharers and audience about effort put into social media and (2) send signals of attention and interest. With Stories, the effort put into posting is often lower and associated with low expectations and low level of responses. Secondly, we find that participants search for and find cues of attention and interest with Stories' viewers list—functions scholars have attributed to one-click feedback with feeds posting [37]. Importantly, we highlight how these functions emerge independently of whether the responses were sent publicly or privately, clarifying and supporting social media literature on responses to public sharing. We encourage further research that considers these questions in different or broader populations, and that examines questions of the self-presentational and relational negotiation of effort in other digital media.

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