'Me For You': Lessons About Everyday Video Messaging From Skype Qik

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Abstract

In this position paper we outline the opportunities and challenges of pure asynchronous video messaging as an everyday utility. We recruited 53 users to try Skype Qik 'in the wild' for two weeks from its launch in October 2014. We found users orienting to an organizational principle that we term 'Me For You', a self-conscious yet creative orientation that allowed users to transform features of their everyday affairs into show-about-ables that can be subject to and warrant the interrogative gaze of a Qik recipient. We found that such acts implied a reciprocity that was valuable in some special contexts, while at other times proving dissonant with assumptions about mundane communicative practices between particular parties. To warrant another's gaze requires artfulness, but in some relationships one might not want to demand that artfulness in return. We argue that richness is not a matter of mode but of perceived control, within which the morality of gaze represents an ongoing challenge for designing everyday telepresence.

Author Keywords

Video-mediated communication; telepresence; asynchronous; messaging; Skype; Qik; moral gaze

ACM Classification Keywords

H.4.3 [Communications Applications]: Computer conferencing, teleconferencing, and videoconferencing
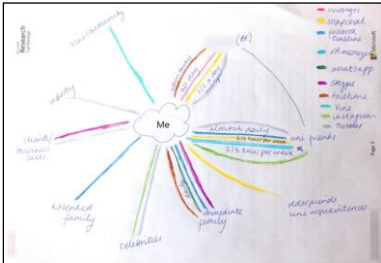
Figure 1. A typical communication technology ecosystem map. The user is in the center and individuals or groups of other users are connected to the user via colored lines representing different apps.

Figure 2. Number of people in most Skype Qik threads.

Introduction

Microsoft launched Skype Qik in October 2014. In the launch version, Qik users can exchange video messages of up to 42 seconds which can be replayed individually or as a sequenced thread. The earliest messages auto-delete after 14 days. No editing is possible beyond message deletion, nor other communicative modes (e.g. no text, emoticons, images, audio-only, tags, evaluations, or favorites). Sending video messages dates back to MMS and asynchronous features of video calling services. Modern messaging apps allow video as one among many modes of contribution (WhatsApp, Snapchat). Other video apps afford creative broadcasting (e.g. Vine, Instagram). Qik exemplifies a new video niche (e.g. Pop, Glide, and Tiiny), and provides an interesting field experiment into the challenges and opportunities of pure asynchronous video messaging as an everyday utility.

Method

Immediately prior to the launch of Skype Qik we recruited a convenience sample of 53 users from the UK (22), Australia (17), and Macau (14). Participants ranged in age from 17 to 44 (70% between 19 and 25), split 55% female 45% male. Participation involved a kick-off, 7 day check-in, and 14 day debrief. Participants were interviewed, their messages recorded, and some provided real-time feedback. There were no set times or tasks and no requirement to use Qik exclusively. While we do not claim to have recruited a truly representative sample, the variety of participants and data collection regime provide naturalistic data for investigating the vernacular descriptions and practices of using Qik 'in the wild'.
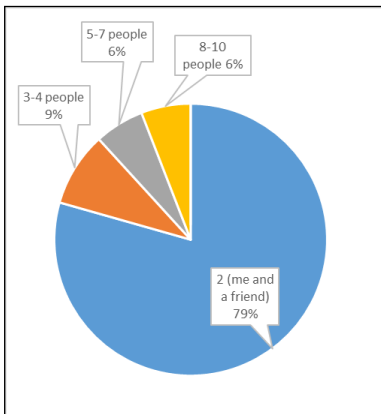
The vernacular of everyday app use

Technologized interaction refers to the vernacular categories and practices by which users treat technology as relevant to their interactions[3]. Users treat affordances as resources for shared meaning, framing but not determining behavior. We asked participants to draw their communication technology ecosystems (Figure 1), to understand where the Qik model might fit. These maps showed delicately ordered links between relationships, time, and platforms.

Descriptions of messaging, sharing, and calling had distinct characters. Messaging descriptions highlighted 'nowness': To touch, to whisper, to dwell-apart-together[2], to make arrangements quickly and without burden e.g. (e.g. WhatsApp, WeChat, and Facebook Messenger). Sharing descriptions highlighted 'look-at-this-ness': To broadcast, to fish, to create for attention but not to demand of others (e.g. Facebook, Weibo, Snapchat, Instagram, and Vine). Calling descriptions highlighted 'personal newsyness': To commit, to schedule, to be present, to improvise ongoing focus on one another (e.g. Skype and Facetime). Video was described as having a special place in these three categories. Messaging video involved occasional special video moments to be dropped in amongst ongoing chat. Sharing video involved specially created or curated video moments to be broadcast and get attention. Calling video involved a special need for ongoing video, proposing that the relationship is special and video can be used to manage that specialness.

'Me For You'

We are calling the primary organizational orientation of Qik users 'Me For You', which is a self-conscious morality of creative and responsive obligation to being
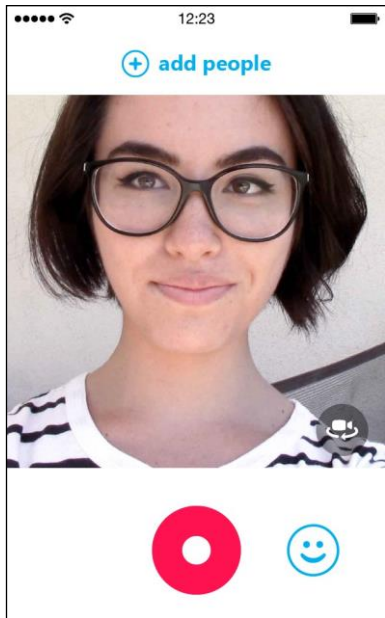
Figure 3. The Qik recording UI focuses attention on oneself.

Figure 4. The traditional Skype calling UI focuses attention on the live remote other.

gazed at over video. We first noticed this in the overwhelming use of Qik one-on-one rather in groups (Figure 2), indicating an orientation to video as intimate. Users reported that the recording UI default to the front-facing camera, combined with the lack of immediate feedback from the other, focused attention on recording oneself as to-be-viewed (Figure 3). Full duplex video calling focuses attention on live interaction with a large image of the other (Figure 4).

The authentic but crafted 'Me For You'
Positive feedback emphasized Qiks as gifts of relational value, crafted and received at each person's pace:

- "I can say everything and catch up more easily than typing it all or waiting to call."

- "I said she should be a rapper if she talks so much. So she made up a rap."

- "I watched the video of her singing that song in the car many times."

Positively valued 'Me For You' orientations included separated best friends singing for each other (Figure 5), making a tour of a university for a family member, and, of course, flirting. All of these activities derive value from there making and receiving a one-take video that is known to be a crafted performance of the self for the other. Since Qik videos are made in the production context of 'soft ephemerality' (persisting for up to two weeks), the videos treated as having the most value are not the kind of 'simply' casual, raw, spontaneous, or throw-away products of Snapchat's hard ephemerality of a few seconds. Such value, however, may be orthogonal to everyday utility.

Figure 5. A good gift of 'Me For You' is singing for a best friend who is overseas.

The tyranny of the ordinary 'Me For You'
'Me For You' confronts some users with what we might call the 'tyranny of the ordinary'. Recording a video asynchronously focuses attention on whether the mundane self and surroundings warrant viewing:

- "I don't want to see myself or for her to see me in my pajamas."

- "I don't like the sound of my voice so I hoped she wouldn't replay it over and over."

- "I'm like, why did she send that to me? What's she saying?"

The pure video messaging model presents thresholds of worth and obligation that must be overcome for both initiating messages and responding to messages. One participant pair was stymied in a single turn (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The tyranny of the ordinary - how should one respond to a voiceless video of a chocolate bar?

The turn consisted of a voiceless video of a chocolate bar. "I showed her my chocolate bar in the morning but I didn't really want to say anything in particular," said user A. User B in response "wanted to say 'I hope that isn't all you're having for breakfast' but I had nothing to show back." If a recipient cannot provide a reasonably fitted proportional response to a video then this may be a barrier to sustained use. Indeed, in this case the participants reporting turning to another service to continue their conversation. The onus of turn-by-turn production of text and emoticons in that service was reported to be much lower and thus better suited to this mundane interaction. To stress the mundane nature of the talk is not to judge the conversation as of little value. The value of the interaction was to dwell-apart-together, but turn-by-turn video would have been an overdetermined mode for this purpose.

Conclusions

'Me For You' is clearly not the only or defining orientation to video in all forms of telepresence, but it does point to two sets of challenges in designing for everyday telepresence. First, while video is a rich mode, our study shows that this should not be conflated with interactional richness. Richness is a matter of fine-grained control, allowing each turn to be constructed with 'just enough' resources rather than the risk of providing 'more than necessary'. Bridging vernacular assumptions about everyday utility and the specialness of video clearly requires moving beyond the assumption that richer modes offer better user experiences. Rather, users are looking for ways to control everyday production of message attention, creativity, delight, fit, flexibility, reportability, and uniqueness.

Second, participants' orientation to Qik video as 'Me For You' points to a need for a deeper understanding of users' orientations to mediated gaze. Gaze in video-mediated communication is traditionally researched in terms of how eye line and camera field of view relate to turn-taking and task effects[1]. However, we see in this technologized interaction that gaze is also a moral orientation of participants. The transformation of features of everyday life into show-about-ables instantiates an interrogative gaze, used as a resource for directing attention to the enactment of roles, relationships, and social activities. To warrant another's gaze requires artfulness, and in some relationships one might not want to demand that artfulness in return. Sometimes the moral order of friendship needs a lighter touch. The design of everyday telepresence must account for this moral orientation.

Acknowledgements

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