BACKGROUND

One of the principle goals of social media is to bring humans closer together. Through direct messaging, status updates, and multi-media content sharing, technologies that have surged in the Web 2.0 have evolved to meet this objective. It’s easier now than ever before to connect, yet social media is alienating. Users cultivate a “digital-self” to showcase the best and most attractive version of their selves.

Tech companies have launched new features and products to increase the immediacy and intimacy of their platforms. Snapchat gained immense traction for its novel approach to messaging with ephemeral digital photos, which made the communication medium feel more immediate and trustworthy. Building on this success, they launched text-based chat (with the same ephemerality), video messages, video chat, filters, and stories. A story on Instagram is a collection of multi-media posts shared by a user to all of their friends for a 24 hour period. Each post has its own timer, but can be watched multiple times. The idea of a “story” has been ported to nearly every other popular social media platform in the years following due to the immense success the feature brought Snapchat. The thought behind the story is to allow users to share elements of their day to a large audience effortlessly. Users can then watch snippets of their friends’ days, and live vicariously through their camera lens.

To ensure that stories and messages were “truthful,” Snapchat (unlike Instagram) required all content be recorded through the app, a policy that guaranteed anything viewed in the interface happened at the recorded timestamp. Snapchat seemed more intimate than competitors because its content wasn’t pre-recorded or fabricated. It felt more immediate because a photo posted to a story 30 minutes ago happened 30 minutes ago. The user’s agency of choice is diminished, unlike on a photo sharing service like Instagram (though in early versions photos also had to be taken inside of the app) where there’s no verification on a post’s timestamp or geotag. There, users carefully select experiences to share that appear the most interesting, look the most aesthetic, and have the greatest potential to make their followers jealous. Multiple photos from a single experience or trip can be disjointed, disproportionally representing their life. The resulting feedback loop where users are constantly comparing their lives to false representations of those they follow is a primary contributor to the social distress that has triggered backlash against social media in recent years.

Instagram, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, and other digital products were quick to fold stories into their respective interfaces. As users acknowledged the superficiality of their feeds, a trend was started to hold multiple accounts that serve distinct purposes. The notion of a “finsta” was
popularized for users who wanted to share content unfit for the larger audience of their original account. Finstas, much alike stories, attempted to bridge the gap between face-to-face experiences and digital interfaces.

Social media users have expressed the desire for new methods of sharing through their behavior and overwhelming acknowledgment that existing platforms provoke toxic tendencies. At the same time, usage patterns suggest that users have an affinity for interfaces which allow them to be superficial and groom their online identity.

**PROPOSAL**

My proposal is to develop a mobile application that aims to counter these toxic trends in traditional social media. Given a system where users surrender control of the cadence and content of the photos they share, a more immediate and intimate platform could be created. The proposed app would send users a notification at a random point during their day which would trigger a 10 minute timer. If users are interested in sharing that day, they must take a photo through the app and upload it to their feed before the timer expires. This project would be launched primarily as a social experiment to test whether people are receptive to a drastic change in how they view social media, and technology as a means to share and communicate with others.

I believe that relinquishing control over when it's possible to share will democratize users’ photo streams, and ideally serve as an authentic complement to the behaviors observed on rival platforms.

**GOALS**

1. A minimum viable product on the App-Store and Google Play by the end of the semester that supports the user experience of:
   - Sharing photos only at randomly generated times.
   - A feed for each user showing all photos they've shared.

2. Analytics to track user behavior and generate insights on the potential success of a platform built around these principles of randomness, authenticity, and immediacy.

3. Feedback surveys to
IMPLEMENTATION

To build a minimum viable product I plan on using the cross-platform and open-source mobile app framework React Native developed by Facebook. I’ll host a NodeTS server and a MongoDB database on Heroku, and store images in either an Amazon Web Services S3 filesystem, or within the Heroku instance. I have extensive experience working within React Native, but have been interested in developing a full-stack application for quite some time. Typically in my projects I’ve relied on Firebase to handle the back-end infrastructure—used as a blackbox.

DELIVERABLES

1. Finalized system design.
2. Wireframe designs for the front-end interface.
3. Finalized Sketch artboards for each screen.
4. Functional back-end system with test suites written. Functionality meaning:
   - scheduled notifications
   - photo upload & download
5. Functional front-end client with test suites written.
6. Integrated front-end and back-end with end to end tests written. This will serve as an MVP to gather user feedback against.