



Building acquaintance brands via Snapchat for the college student market



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Abstract College students are inseparable from their smartphones, and heavily engaged in Snapchat. This social media app allows low-consequence expression: messages disappear within 10 seconds to 24 hours of their receipt, depending on the content. Because college students seem strongly attracted to Snapchat, the implications for brand managers interested in reaching this target market deserve exploration. Four focus groups of self-described heavy users show that this media app allows college students to enter the virtual Snapchatverse and find a sweet spot of acquaintances. The sweet spot is associated with feelings of relatability, inclusion, and effortlessness and has the potential to produce empowering experiences. The verbal protocols of college students suggest that Snapchat is an ideal social media for developing acquaintance brands: brands that aim to make themselves part of an inclusive, feel-good experience or highly relatable acquaintances.

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1. Snapchat and college students

Snapchat, the mobile app characterized by disappearing posts, is attracting attention from major brands such as CNN, Sony, and BMW. This is likely due to the audience delivered by the mobile app: Snapchat currently reaches 32.9% of all Millennials as compared to 23.8% for Twitter, and the median

age of Snapchat users is 18 as compared to 40 for Facebook (Silberman, 2015). Furthermore, Snapchat attracts about 100 million users per month—60% of whom are 18 to 34 years old—and produces over 2 billion video views per day (Snapchat, 2015). It has overtaken Twitter to become the third most widely used social media site among 18–34 year olds (Tornoe, 2015), and is the single most popular social media among teens (Miller, 2014). Despite the impressive statistics, Snapchat's strategic implications for brand managers remain unclear. An industry observer asks (Maunder-Allan, 2013, p. 52):

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Do we really understand young people's relationship with social media and the desires of this so-called 'social-media generation'? We know lots about their behaviour online, but, as we all know, this is not the same as what they think and feel about it. Are marketers engaging with young people in this social space as best they could?

This question strikes at the heart of the issue: How do college students think and feel about Snapchat, and why are they attracted to the medium? A focus on college students is deserved: this segment of 21 million Americans earns about \$1,200 per month and represents approximately \$412 billion in spending power (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), an amount comparable to the GDP of Austria (\$437 billion). The recommendations they receive from others in their social environment, particularly from others in their social networks, exert the most influence on their brand choices (Emarketer, 2015). Investors seem to sense the value. In 2015, Snapchat raised \$537 million in funding, adding up to a total of \$1.1 billion since its inception; Snapchat is currently worth about \$16 billion (MacMillan, 2015).

This article reports findings from four focus groups of college students, conducted over a 4-month period to examine why this demographic uses Snapchat. Our central purpose was threefold: (1) to draw analytical insights for future empirical validation, (2) to identify possibilities for branding that can speak to the practical realities of managers responsible for targeting college students, and (3) to relate how Snapchat can be utilized to reach this segment. We learn that the ephemeral properties of Snapchat—whereby most posted messages disappear within 10 seconds—have struck a deep chord among college students and their social and emotional needs. Frequent Snapchat usage is producing a distinct set of benefits for college students and creating new opportunities for brands. Managers interested in making their brands appear more inclusive, effortless, and relatable are likely to benefit from spending media dollars on Snapchat.

2. Why should brands care about Snapchat?

It is reasonable to question the worth of Snapchat to brand managers because new social media sites and mobile apps are frequently launched, yet not all retain their popularity. In addition to the fact that 77% of college students currently use Snapchat (Silberman, 2015), other factors attest to its relevance for branding among younger demographic

segments. Snapchat's early success is attributable to its ephemeral properties and the 'alluring young female' visual appeal used by founders Evan Spiegel and Bobby Murphy during the inception of this mobile app (Gillette, 2013). In using Snapchat, senders know that messages and snaps will disappear within seconds, and they will be able to tell if the receiver has saved their snap. This is appealing to college students, who perceive the unspoken message: "You can act without being seen by surveilling parents, adults, school administrators, and college admissions staff who consider your social media presence to judge in ways that can hurt you" (e.g., Boyd, 2014). A combination of the desire to titillate and participate in a peep show and the desire for unrestrained, consequence-free expression is behind Snapchat's current 100+ million users (e.g., Manjoo, 2013; Miller, 2014).

However, there is more to Snapchat that signals its long-term relevance to brand managers. First, Snapchat possesses mobile-app DNA; it was developed by people who understand mobile technology, for Millennials inseparable from their mobile devices (Kirkham, 2015). This is a distinctive, hard-to-replicate competency. Consider the deep-pocketed and otherwise technically-savvy Facebook, which stumbled with its own mobile app and has largely failed to respond. Despite the introduction of its 'poke' feature, aiming to mimic Snapchat, it has failed to gain comparable traction.

Second, Snapchat's record of innovation is impressive. After its initial success attracting users who wanted to snap each other with photographs, Snapchat launched features that allow users to link photos together to create a narrative (Snapchat, 2015). In November 2014 the mobile app launched Snapcash, an easy way of conducting peer-to-peer payments. In January 2015 it launched the Discover feature, which allows users access to full-length articles and videos from sponsors (Tornoe, 2015). The network of media channels now available on Snapchat offers content posted on Comedy Central, CNN, and ESPN. Snapchat has its own media division for creating and sharing news content (Tornoe, 2015), and has started selling advertising to leading branders such as Samsung, Universal Pictures, Yahoo, and ESPN on its Discover service (MacMillan, 2015). It introduced Snapcodes in May 2015, making it easy to add friends to the network, and 'tap to view' in July 2015, making it easy to view videos without holding down the screen (Snapchat, 2015).

Third, Snapchat isn't afraid to change. Consider Brand Story, Snapchat's advertising format that launched in October 2014. Brand Story channeled 10–20 second ad spots featuring an advertiser's

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