



Full length article

Unpacking the characteristics of Snapchat users: A preliminary investigation and an agenda for future research



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ABSTRACT

Snapchat is emerging as a popular image-based instant messaging service. Aiming to provide the first insight into the characteristics of Snapchat users, this study ($N = 235$) drew on the limited existing Snapchat research base, uses and gratifications theory, and other social media research to derive a range of research questions about Snapchat users vs. non-users. As hypothesised, Snapchat users were younger, placed significantly more importance on social connectedness than non-users, reported significantly greater reliance on graphics in communication, were more likely engage with technology regularly, had greater comfort with technological multitasking, and showed a stronger preference for online social interaction than non-users. However, in contrast to predictions, a desire for instantaneous interaction and reward was not significantly associated with Snapchat use. The findings are considered in terms of a proposed research agenda, including relevant theoretical paradigms (such as belongingness, technology acceptance, psycholinguistic, and semiotic theories) and applied outcomes (such as social capital and communication). Frameworks for future Snapchat research are provided.

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1. Introduction

Ephemeral in nature, Snapchat is an instant messaging application that allows users to send pictures (“snaps”) in the form of photos or videos to other Snapchat users on their mobile devices. These can be “friends” (these are users who have added each other as contacts) or “followers” (someone who follows another user but has not been added to that other user’s contact list). Snapchat use has been exponential since its inception in 2011. On average, 150 million people use Snapchat and 100 billion videos are viewed on Snapchat daily (Smith, 2017). Snapchat has become one of the top six most frequently use messaging apps (Statistica, 2017), with a recent study of social media users suggesting that the frequency of Snapchat use is comparable to that of Facebook messaging and conventional SMS (Piwek & Joinson, 2016). Given Snapchat’s popularity, the current research had three interrelated purposes. By providing the first examination of the characteristics of Snapchat users, this study reveals who is more likely to engage with this messaging application (and therefore who is more likely to experience outcomes associated with its use), embeds Snapchat within existing theoretical models, and informs an agenda for future Snapchat research.

1.1. About Snapchat

The photo messaging feature is the most commonly used aspect of Snapchat (Piwek & Joinson, 2016). In its simplest form, users can create content by taking a photo or video, adding an optional piece of text. Other additions include “stickers” (emojis), sender-drawn doodles, and geofilters (stylised labels for specific geographic locations that can only be accessed while in that location).

An important feature of Snapchat is that unlike traditional SMS-based photomessaging, Snapchat photos that are sent between contacts are automatically deleted from both the sender’s and receiver’s device within a matter of seconds. Thus, rather than being stored on either users’ phone, Snapchat snaps are a transient form of communication.¹ Snaps can be sent directly to individual contacts, or

¹ It should be noted that although the image (snap) is deleted from the Snapchat interface, recipients are able to take a screenshot of the snap, allowing it to be recorded with the other images in the device’s gallery. It is also possible to capture the snap using a separate device (e.g. a camera or other phone), to retrieve the data via other directories on the device, or through apps such as Snapsaved. Whether or images are expected to be recorded by the receiver seems to vary as a function of group norms (Roesner et al., 2014). For example, with longer timed snap availability (e.g. 10 s) the sender might assume that there is a strong possibility that the image will be saved, whereas a shorter snap (e.g. 2 s) is more difficult to screenshot as the user interface requires the receiver to maintain contact with the screen.

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added to a story using “my story” (or both). Similar to newsfeeds on other social media, stories act as a repository for recent uploads, allowing uploaded snaps to be viewed as a narrative. However, even stories are transient, with those snaps only lasting for 24 h (though during this time, the snaps can be viewed as many times as a follower desires).

The rapid uptake of Snapchat indicates that it may have the potential to act as a powerful communication tool, with significant psychosocial implications for the platform's users. If—like other new media—Snapchat has the capacity to affect social interactions, then it will be essential for researchers to unpack the nature of Snapchat use.

1.2. A (very) brief history of Snapchat research

Perhaps unsurprisingly, research has not kept pace with Snapchat's rapid emergence. Understandably, to date, the published findings on Snapchat are largely descriptive in nature. Nonetheless, by viewing existing Snapchat research in the context of other new media research, it is clear that the psychosocial correlates of Snapchat use are a key area that warrants investigation.

Undoubtedly, the graphical, image-based nature of Snapchat is central to its uniqueness. While platforms such as Instagram may also have a focus on the use of images, with the exception of a text messaging option, all interactions on Snapchat are —by definition— snap-based. Most recently, Waddell (2016) proposed that Snapchat has made photo-based interactions a legitimate and authentic form of communication. It has been suggested that Snapchat exchanges might be viewed as image-based conversations (Katz & Crocker, 2015), where the individuals in the exchange follow a set of pseudo linguistic rules in terms of syntax and turn-taking, and where a narrative forms over the course of the visual interaction. The fleeting nature of Snapchat exchanges means that users can experience a sense of urgency when viewing images (Billings, Qiao, Conlin, & Nie, 2017). Users are more attentive to the content of snaps, and they can be as engaged with the exchange as they might be with a face-to-face conversation (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016).

Building on this theoretical psycholinguistic view, the majority of participants (who were young adults) in Katz and Crocker's survey explicitly reported feeling like “I'm having a conversation when I exchange Snapchat photos” (p. 1867). Vaterlaus, Barnett, Roche, and Young (2016) used a qualitative approach to investigate Snapchat use in a similar age group, and found that a key theme emerging was that Snapchat was like “chatting through pictures” (p. 597). In another qualitative study, Snapchat users reported that Snapchat was like talking, similar to the “offline conversations in daily life” (Xu, Chang, Welker, Bazarova, & Cosley, 2016, p. 1665). Thus, the role of Snapchat as a form of image-based communication is supported by both theory and users' self-reports.

A corollary of the image-conversation nexus reported by Snapchat users (Katz & Crocker, 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2016), is the experience of enhanced social presence (that is, feelings of interpersonal immediacy and intimacy) derived from Snapchat exchanges (Pittman & Reich, 2016). In a sample of 253 undergraduate students, Pittman and Reich found that image-based social media use (in comparison to text-based social media use) such as Snapchat was associated with greater happiness, greater satisfaction with life, and less loneliness. Those authors concluded that it was the direct, intimate, and immediate nature of image-based exchange that boosts perceptions of social presence, and—as a consequence—human connection. Pittman and Reich (2016) also conducted a text analysis of participants' open ended responses using VOSviewer (a tool allowing related text in a corpus

to be visualised, see Van Eck & Waltman, 2010), revealing that image based media were related to using images to boost familiarity and social ties, whereas text based social media were primarily related to keeping up to date with news, albeit with a social component. Pittman and Reich framed their overall findings in terms of uses and gratifications theory (Rubin, 1986) which postulates that media users seek out media to satisfy particular needs. Specifically, Pittman and Reich suggested that image based communication facilitates immediacy and intimacy in social relationships, thus gratifying social needs.

In line with this, Snapchat users explicitly report that it is a user-friendly way to maintain social connections (Katz & Crocker, 2015). Social connections are a form of social capital. Social capital refers to social networks and the resources that are contained in those networks (Putnam, 1995), and can be further delineating as bonding (based on strong, emotionally close relationships) and bridging (based on weaker, informational and utility related relationships) subtypes (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). The role of social capital in social network exchanges is well-established, in both offline (Cockshaw, Shochet, & Obst, 2014) and online (e.g. Sinclair & Grieve, 2017) contexts. Katz and Crocker (2015) interviewed 18 individuals, and observed relevant public discussion forums. Their data indicated that snaps are often only sent to a select group of friends, represent experiences with specific shared meaning for group members, and are a means to reinforce social bonds within the group. In a focus group study, undergraduate participants consistently reported feelings of inclusion and intimacy from their Snapchat exchanges (Sashittal, DeMar, & Jassawalla, 2016). As such, it seems that Snapchat may offer a means to boost bonding social capital.

Additional evidence for the utility of Snapchat in maintaining social connections comes from Bayer et al. (2016), who reported that more interactions with close ties occur on Snapchat than on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook. In a follow-up qualitative study, participants in Bayer et al.'s research reported that snap images often comprised of content only meaningful within existing and strong social relationships. For example, because the images sent were only “thin slices” (p. 15) of behaviour, participants stated that knowing the sender well was necessary in order to be able to interpret the nature of the snap.

Snapchat users also report that Snapchat exchanges are fun. Sent snaps are primarily of humorous things (Roesner, Gill, & Kohno, 2014; Utz, Muscanell, & Khalid, 2015), and Snapchat exchanges are often considered enjoyable experiences (Bayer et al., 2016), and are spontaneous with playful and game-like components (Katz & Crocker, 2015). Although Katz and Crocker did not explicitly identify it as such, there also seems to be a learning and reward driven aspect, with Snapchat users reporting positive emotion when receiving a snap that plays upon the snap they have just sent. It seems that these rewards are likely to result in additional Snapchat related behaviours.

Utz et al. (2015) took a comparative approach to their Snapchat research, by juxtaposing motives for Snapchat use with those for Facebook use. The top three identified motives for both Snapchat and Facebook use were “distraction and procrastination”; “keeping in touch with friends and family”; and “seeing what people are up to” (p.143). Utz et al. also followed the reasoning that as Snapchat snaps are transient and therefore presumably more private, that the app would lend itself to sensitive, highly personal activities such as sexting and flirting. While a partner's use of Snapchat was associated with greater jealousy induction than his or her Facebook use, in contrast to expectations, the participants in Utz et al.'s study reported that sexual imagery was the least frequent type of snap sent.

In sum, initial Snapchat research has explored the social

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