



Full length article

“What do they *snapchat* about?” Patterns of use in time-limited instant messaging service



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 April 2015
 Received in revised form
 11 July 2015
 Accepted 23 August 2015
 Available online xxx

Keywords:

Instant messaging (IM)
 Social network sites
 Snapchat
 Critical incidence technique
 Social capital

ABSTRACT

The use of *Snapchat* – a time-limited instant messaging service – has been rapidly rising amongst adolescents. However, the exact nature of *Snapchat* use remains difficult to examine due to the self-destructive nature of content sent and received via this service. We report an online survey conducted with the use of a memory sampling method to enquire about the specific details of the very last image or video each participant sent and received via *Snapchat*. We found that users mainly share ‘selfies’, typically embed text and ‘doodles’ with photos they share, use it mostly at home, and primarily for communication with close friends and family as an ‘easier and funnier’ alternative to other instant messaging services. We also found that high intensity of *Snapchat* use was more associated with bonding rather than bridging social capital. We discuss those findings in the context of existing studies on the use of instant messaging services and social networking sites.

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1. Introduction

Instant messaging (IM) has become an ubiquitous feature of rapid communication in the ‘Global Village’ with the fast adoption of internet-enabled mobile phones at the beginning of the 21st century. IM is a type of online chat which offers real-time exchange of text, images, video and voice transmission over the Internet, but it is also used for exchanging emotions via emoticons, information provision, behaviour change interventions and surveying (Cole-Lewis & Kershaw, 2010; Hawn, 2009; Ramirez & Broneck, 2009; Ogara, Koh, & Prybutok, 2014). In 2014 there were reportedly 50 billion IM sent per day – twice as many as conventional text messages (Curtis, 2014) and it is estimated that IM apps will account for 75% of mobile traffic by 2018 (Juniper Research, 2014). IM capability has been also integrated into almost every major social networking site with smartphone app services such as Facebook Messenger, Twitter, Google+ or LinkedIn. There are also a large number of popular, standalone IM mobile services such as WhatsApp, Skype, or Instagram.

In the majority of existing IM services listed above, the content that users exchange is stored on both senders’ and receivers’

devices creating a communication history, with the exception being a real-time, streaming voice and video chat communication service such as Skype. However, a new category of IM has recently risen to prominence – *Snapchat* (<http://www.snapchat.com>). What makes *Snapchat* stand out from other IM services is that the content users share only persists for a limited period of time.

1.1. The overview of snapchat

The rise in *Snapchat* use has been one of the most rapid and unprecedented in the history of instant messaging services and social networking sites. Its estimated that *Snapchat*’s base of active users grew from 10 million in mid-2012 to over 70 million in early 2014, and 100 million in early 2015 (according to *Wall Street Journal* evaluation – *Snapchat* doesn’t reveal its numbers; Macmillan & Rusli, 2014; Wohlsen, 2015). In December 2013 more than 400 million ‘snaps’ (the common term for video messages and photos sent via *Snapchat*) were received on *Snapchat* every day (Shontell, 2013). By comparison, it takes Facebook and Instagram combined to match the same number of photos shared in the same period. *Snapchat* reportedly rejected an acquisition offer worth \$3 billion from Facebook (Rusli & Macmillan, 2013) and was valued to be worth \$10 billion by two independent companies in August 2014 (Rusli & Macmillan, 2014), and \$19 billion in early 2015 (Wohlsen, 2015).

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The process of sharing on *Snapchat* works as follows: the sender makes an image/video using the *Snapchat* smartphone app and then choose how long the image/video will be viewable by the receivers' device (between 1 and 10 s, as of April 2015). Sequences of images/videos can also be sent. When the sender posts an image/video to the receiver, this image/video automatically vanishes from the senders' smartphone. The only information that persists on the senders' device is a timestamp of when the snap was sent. The receiver now has an option to view the content but the viewing time is limited to the specific duration chosen by the sender (i.e. between 1 and 10 s). After the receiver views the image/video for this particular duration, the image/video disappears from the receivers' phone.

There are a number of additional features that make *Snapchat* a unique IM service. *Snapchat* is exclusively a smartphone app (available on *Apple iOS* and *Google Android* enabled devices) and therefore it is not possible to use it with the browser (unlike *Twitter* or *Facebook Messenger*). Any image/video is only shared with the friend, or a group of friends, selected by the sender and those friends have to be a *Snapchat* users. This way the sender always decides who is going to receive and view the content. If the receiver makes a screen capture of the image, the sender is notified about this action. Additionally, the recipient must maintain tactile contact with the device's touchscreen, thereby hindering their ability to take a screenshot or use an external camera. However, it has been widely reported that third-party apps such as *Snapsaved* allow the receiver to make a hidden screen capture of 'snap' without sender being aware of this (Cook, 2014b). *Snapchat* users can also embed 32 characters-long text messages, or create a finger-drawn 'doodles', layered on the top of the photos they capture. Video chat is also possible: users see a pulsating blue bubble that indicates whether their friend is 'active' in *Snapchat*, and can engage in video chat.

1.2. *Snapchat* use, privacy and social capital

Beside the effortless and easy-to-use interface design of *Snapchat*, the most unique features relate to the personal sharing of content that disappears after specified period (you choose specific person/group of people to share it, rather than share with a large group of people or publicly by default). Informal media reports suggest that the self-destructive nature of messages may remove some inhibition from users who would otherwise not share such content. It's been widely reported in social media and market analysis that *Snapchat* is particularly popular amongst children and teenagers, with half of the users aged between 13 and 17 (Statista, 2014). At the same time, there are informal reports that *Snapchat* may be frequently used for 'sexting' (the act of text messaging someone in the hopes of having a sexual encounter with them later; with initially casual content transitioning into highly suggestive and even sexually explicit content – UrbanDictionary, c2008). Some market research conducted in the UK supports these claims: half of all 18 to 30-year-old respondents reported receiving nude pictures, while 67% had received images of "inappropriate poses or gestures" (Kemp, 2013). This issue has been broadly discussed in the context of online security and privacy in the media, especially with reference to the incident in October 2014 – a major privacy breach where 100,000 'snaps' were published

online allegedly by hackers who compromised *Snapsaved* servers (Buchanan, 2014). This event has been termed 'the Snapping'.¹ It was widely reported that a significant proportion of leaked 'snaps' were explicit in nature (Cook, 2014a) and due to the young *Snapchat* demographics there were concerns that the stolen photos would include indecent images of children.

However, a single study to date that examined privacy issues with *Snapchat* use contradicts the assumption that adult *Snapchat* users engage in 'risky' and explicit sharing. Roesner, Gill, and Kohno (2014) surveyed 127 adult *Snapchat* users and found that most users reported that they did not send sensitive content (although 25% reported they might do so experimentally). Specifically, they found that the majority of users were not willing to send content classified as 'sexting', photos of documents, messages containing legally questionable content, or content considered insulting. Additionally, researchers found that security was not a major concern for the majority of respondents – most of the users understood that the messages could be recovered and that screenshot taking was a common and expected practice Roesner et al. (2014).

The issues of privacy and online sharing lead to another important question – what is the nature and role of *Snapchat* use in facilitating social interactions and networking? One of the major impacts of emerging social networking sites and digital communication technologies is their function as a "social lubricant" – facilitating the building of social capital between users (Lee, Kim, & Ahn, 2014; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Social capital has been defined as the "connections and the associated norms of reciprocity among people" (Putnam, 2001). Putnam distinguished between two types of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital refers to strong-tie relationships such as family, partners and close friends, where people share strong personal, or intimate, connections and provide emotional support to each other. On the other hand, bridging social capital refers to weak-tie relationships such as previous coworkers or former classmates, where people don't share a similar background or emotional reciprocity. Previous research has shown that all kinds of social capital yields positive outcomes such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, and even health (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Kim, Subramanian, Gortmaker, & Kawachi, 2006; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009).

Social capital has been extensively examined in the online context especially with the use of social networking sites (SNS), particularly *Facebook*. A large number of studies on *Facebook* have found a strong association between the use of *Facebook* and social capital, especially for the creation and maintenance of bridging social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison, Vitak, Gray, Lampe, 2014b; Vitak, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2011). For instance, it has been established that high frequency and duration of use of *Facebook*, high routine access and high emotional connectedness to *Facebook* is strongly associated with social capital (Ellison et al., 2007). Social capital has been also examined in the context of SNS connection strategies (Ellison et al., 2014b) and the frequency of features use on *Facebook* (Lee et al., 2014). For instance, Lee et al. (2014) found a strong association between the frequency of using features such as *Wall Posts*, *Comments*, *Messages* and *Status Updates* with both bonding and bridging social capital.

While *Snapchat* has rapidly risen to popularity since 2012 (Duggan, 2013) the exact nature of its use is still unknown, and its also not clear how this use is associated with bridging and bonding of social capital. The study by Roesner et al. (2014) mainly focused on perceived privacy and security amongst *Snapchat* users: whether users send sensitive content, how aware are they of the security drawbacks of *Snapchat*, how frequently they make and accept the making of screenshots. Utz, Muscanell, and Khalid (2015) compared *Snapchat* and *Facebook* use in the context of romantic jealousy, and showed that *Snapchat* was used more for flirting and

¹ Term 'Snapping' comes from combination of words snap and 'happening', in reference to an event that happened shortly before in August 2014 – 'the Fapping' (combination of 'fap' – the onomatopoeic term for masturbation, and 'happening') where a large number of nude celebrities photos and videos leaked to 4chan.org (Kosur, 2014).

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