

Snapchat at school – ‘Now you see it...’: Networked affect – cyber bullying, harassment and sexting

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Snapchat is one of the most popular social media applications among Australian young people. Its global impact has grown rapidly in recent years. Reported is a mixed methods case study located in New South Wales schools. An online survey was conducted with education practitioners to enquire into their experiences of Snapchat in their school settings. The researchers used survey responses and comments from follow up interviews to consider how networked affect is enacted through Snapchat. Networked affect can be seen as a visceral movement of emotion through the intra-action of social media and human bodies. Both corporeal affect and Snapchat have received increased attention by researchers over the last five years although little has been written to link the two. We highlight the importance of reading the affective social impact of Snapchat use among young people and the potential of looking beyond its abuses to the affordances of the application.

Keywords: Snapchat, affect theory, cyber bullying, harassment, sexting, social media, schools

Introduction

Snapchat is a disappearing media application (app) that has taken youth social networks by storm: marketed to the 13 to 34 age bracket, there are over 100 million daily users (Ingram, 2015). Although it is well established in youth networked publics (boyd, 2010), there is little international research on its use (Vaterlaus, Barnett, Roche & Young, 2016) and even less on its use as a conduit for ‘sexting’, cyber-harassment and cyber-bullying (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012). In this paper we investigate how Snapchat aligns with networked affect (Handyside & Ringrose, 2016; Paasonen, Hillis & Petit, 2015) in New South Wales (NSW) school settings. Networked affect is a relational flow between bodies and objects. More than emotionality, it emerges through material–discursive entanglements wherein bodies, photos, cameras, and expressed selves are intertwined (Warfield, 2016). In these entanglements, technological objects (software and hardware) are influential and exert agency on other objects and on humans as “agential matter” (Bolt, 2012, p. 3).

Snapchat facilitates relationships in teen peer networks by providing a medium for images to be disseminated. ‘Selfies’, typically embedded with text, ‘doodles’ and other photos are used to communicate with friends and family as an “easier and funnier” alternative to other instant messaging services” (Piwek & Joinson, 2016, p. 358). Snapchat’s unique point of difference has been in its ephemerality. There are new features included on a regular basis to sustain the interest of young users. Comical ‘selfies’ can be sent of carnivalesque distortions, creating shared spaces for fun and frivolity between sender and recipients. Filters enable users to cloak themselves in masks and feathers, or transform themselves into comedic animals. In a world of fast responses, sending images (‘snaps’) is easy, quick and fun. Although Snapchat use in cyber networks can provide opportunities for creativity, we can also witness the underside of teen relationships. We provide research data to illustrate networks of affect circulating in educational settings through and around the use of Snapchat.

Background and context

We are a multi-disciplinary team of researchers at the University of New England (UNE) in the Schools of Education, Health and Law, who have conducted research into the use of disappearing media among young people since 2014. Our research commenced with an investigation into the use of Snapchat among students in higher education. Recognising that the ephemerality was an interesting feature of the technology, we commenced a project in 2014 to investigate parents’ experiences of Snapchat (Charteris, Gregory & Masters, 2016). This project involves both educators and high school students. The data for this paper is drawn from research into the experiences of school practitioners with Snapchat in their school settings.

Literature review

Snapchat offers rich social opportunities for creative image sharing. It is “a temporal fastness and ephemerality” where image “exchanges can be used as various forms of relationship currency” (Handyside & Ringrose, 2016, p. 1). The application has been linked with flirting and finding new love interests (Utz, Muscanell & Cameran, 2015). It is viewed as a “lightweight channel for sharing spontaneous experiences with trusted ties” (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck & Falk, 2016, p. 956). The majority of adults surveyed by Roesner, Gill and Kohno (2014) considered that security was not a major concern. They recognised that, rather than a violation of the sender's trust, capturing screenshots was common and expected. Most of their respondents understand that messages can be recovered. It is uncertain whether this is the case among young people and there can be serious repercussions when an image ‘goes viral’ (Charteris & Gregory, 2016).

Looking closely into the use of disappearing media among young people, we can learn about both power relations and the underside of teen peer culture. Scholarship associated with the affective turn has increased over the last decade. Affect theory, with its origins in the work of Deleuze and Spinoza (Deleuze & Deleuze, 1978), can be seen as more than internalised emotion. It is the influence of emotion as an embodied experience that flows between humans and which can pass through the non-human as objects are seen to be agentic in their own right (Bolt, 2012). Scholars have used affect to explore the relations between embodied experiences of humans and the technologies that are incorporated into their lives. “Materials, surfaces, scapes, sounds, and images leave traces on the human sensorium that are decidedly extralinguistic, and can only be accounted for through recourse to the more intuitive concepts and looser worldviews afforded by affect theory” (Baulch, 2016, p. 288). Scholarship on networked affect weaves together affect, emotions, and feeling with new and emerging media (Paasonen, Hillis & Petit, 2015). We consider networked affect through an analysis of practitioner comments about the use of Snapchat in their school contexts.

Method and methodology

To execute this mixed methods case study, we invited 3,353 NSW primary and secondary schools to participate via email and received an 8% response rate. Although the response rate was low, those who responded were possibly those who had exposure to Snapchat use in schools. An online survey was used to preserve participants’ anonymity. A total of 276 participants (184 female, 92 male) agreed to participate of whom 28% were practitioners in school leadership positions. The other participants were classroom teachers (66%) and school counsellors (1.4%). The research received ethical approval from the UNE Research Ethics Committee.

In this paper we focus particularly on responses to the following survey question: *In your school, what have you seen children do with disappearing media (e.g. Snapchat)?* The survey comments were manually coded in relation to the reported nature of Snapchat use in the participants’ schools. Follow up semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 consenting school leaders and teachers. Supporting samples of survey and interview comments are used to elaborate on the emerging themes from the survey that are outlined in Table 1.

Findings

Survey results and open-ended comments

Overall, 51% of educators in this research indicated that social media influences their teaching with 42% reporting that their classroom has been influenced by Snapchat. The findings found that educators are taking action, with 90% of respondents discussing issues related to social media with their students. Responses to the survey question on the use of Snapchat by students in schools, witnessed by educators, are categorised in Table 1. Due to the generic nature of comments on bullying and harassment, there is likely to be a crossover into the area of sexting. Sexually explicit material can be used to harass and the networked effect of these activities cross gender matrices. Nevertheless, significant research in the field highlights that existing double standards around girls’ sexuality can lead to social media harassment that can be significantly damaging (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone, 2013). In the data, bullying and sexting intertwine and the nature of the harassment was unclear from the comments.

Table 1: Teachers' perception of student Snapchat use

Use of Snapchat	Percentage of Practitioner Respondents
No visible use of Snapchat in the school	26.8%
Playful use - sending images, videos, messaging	45.1%
Bullying/harassment	11.8%
Sending inappropriate images/text	12.4%
Sexting	1.8%
Self-harm	0.9%
Parental involvement/complaints	1.2%
Total	100%

The following comments map networked affect in schools and their wider communities. Although it is uncertain from these comments how subjects experience the distribution of their 'snaps', it is likely that their acquisition and digital curation evoke a range of embodied responses including amusement, shame and humiliation. Images of 'vulnerable' people (both students and teachers) can be recorded at school and used to evoke affect among peers through the circulation of unflattering material. Some comments by principals and teachers: "Students send photos of other children or make comments they wouldn't normally make simply because they believe there isn't a record"; "They take images and videos of vulnerable students. They covertly record teachers, particularly teachers for whom they have little respect"; and "They send inappropriate photos/videos of other students without their permission. It is used to tease, embarrass and bully others" demonstrate this.

Teachers reported that although students thought explicit images would disappear, they were saved and distributed. The following comment highlights the interplay between sexting and bullying, and the juxtaposition of love and trust with betrayal and harassment. It also reveals the complexity of the emotionality of self-harm when it is mediated and magnified through Snapchat as networked affect. "I am aware of some students sending sexualised comments and images (adolescents) believing they will disappear. I am also aware of images and comments being saved (screenshot) and misused later. I am also aware of photos of self-harm being distributed using disappearing media".

The next comment highlights a range of affective interrelations promulgated through Snapchat in school settings. Screenshots of 'snaps' can be used to bring bullying to the attention of teaching staff, yet these same images can also 'go viral'. Evidenced, Snapchat networks draw in a range of students, teaching staff and parents who respond and contribute to webs of affect: "They send mean texts and students have screenshot them before they disappeared. Students respond inappropriately and create bullying issues at school. Parents respond negatively towards other children. Young teachers responding to each other during work hours".

Despite its use as a vehicle for sexting, Snapchat can support 'light hearted' activity and produce generative interactions: "I understand anecdotally that some students have been involved with sexting and the like in the past, but for the most part it is used for amusing and light-hearted exchanges between students". As Snapchat is an application that is popular among young people, it is interesting to note that not all teachers are familiar with this form of social media. One teacher noted that they "had to ask what Snapchat was and why it was described as 'disappearing'". This lack of knowledge about the Snapchat application could be a problem if relational issues arise in schools and educators are not aware of its functionality and implications for misuse.

Interview findings

We now turn to examples of networked affect taken from interview data. The respondents were practitioners from two regional high schools in NSW. The comments were selected on the basis that they convey affective flows. Respondent 1 and 2's comments below illustrate a poignant affective paradox. The sender, in sending an affect producing image, is 'insulated' from the impact of their actions. They do not witness the recipient's embodied emotional reaction. The receiver, can be 'devastated' by the 'snaps' sent with significant implications for their wellbeing.

I think social media becomes an avenue for students to hide behind, to inflict pain on others... They don't understand the full consequences of what they are doing, the full impact, how devastating it can be. I think social media is an avenue for brutality that they see as fairly innocuous, fairly easy to access. There are no apparent consequences. They could sit in their bedroom at 10'clock at night and tell someone to commit suicide because they are so angry at them. If they said it face to face it would be a far more confrontational thing. Saying it via a quick Snapchat means that it comes and it goes and it disappears. They feel anonymous. They feel insulated by that technology and no one has come to me with a good story about it (Respondent 1, Secondary Principal).

There is depression and anxiety - depression because they're feeling so bad about themselves because these people have made such comments. And they're not willing to get out of bed because of that. They are scared to come to school because of what might happen... So, it can snowball when they're making those comments about each other online - and that's what leads to these anxiety disorders or the depression that, you know, unfortunately we do see an increasing incidence in our school (Respondent 2, High School Teacher).

Although it is unclear whether Respondent 2 is qualified to judge students' mental health, the comments highlight the relational fallout when networked affect 'snowballs' through a school community, isolating and ostracizing individuals.

Discussion

In a world where young people are immersed in a plethora of competing visual images, Snapchat, with its pressure to register attention, focuses the gaze. The publicity associated with 'snaps' when they are disseminated among networks of people can be seen as an affect economy. "In an affect economy, value is sought in the expansion or contraction of affective capacity" (Clough, 2007, p. 25). Through the transmission of 'snaps', there is a clear expansion of affective capacity among relational networks. Prompted through young people's Snapchat use, affect is intensified in the relational flows between peers, parents and educators. Correspondingly, Handyside and Ringrose (2016, p. 7) highlight that Snapchat creates "affective mediated web-like structures through which various emotions circulate and interact" and the "variable intensities and power relations shape what users/bodies can do (or not do)". Snapchat shapes social relations. As the data demonstrates, the sharing of damaging 'snaps' can have negative and far-reaching social repercussions for young people and school communities. In certain cases, this can extend to legal liability if technology is misused to "harass, intimidate, tease, threaten, abuse or otherwise terrorise" peers and teachers (Kift, Campbell & Butler 2010, p. 60).

Through Snapchat circulation, affective corporeal and cyber responses are evoked from peers, teachers and parents. Paasonen, Hillis and Petit (2015, p. 1) note that "the fluctuating and altering dynamics of affect give shape to online connections and disconnections, to the proximities and distances of love, desire, and wanting between and among bodies, to the sense of standing out from the mass". Publicity of self-harm, cyber-harassment and cyber-bullying can be magnified as images sweep through school communities. The school practitioners we surveyed and spoke with were entangled in the networks of affect associated with practices of bullying and sexual harassment. Few spoke of its merits. Many were pleased to have policies where the phones were prohibited in the school during the day, although some spoke about permitting phones and teaching appropriate cyber practices in the form of 'good digital citizenship'.

Future directions and Conclusions

Although Snapchat is a rapidly growing form of social media, as yet there is little research in school contexts. In particular, little has been written about students' experiences with Snapchat in Australian school contexts. Further, there is a challenge in separating harassment associated with sexting and cyber bullying activities. Additional research in this area could explore the moral panic around girls' sexuality (Authors, 2016) and cyber-harassment. There is also an opportunity for further research into the legal consequences, particularly in terms of bullying and harassment (Kift, Campbell & Butler 2010).

The majority of the educator participants in the research reported negative effects of its use in their school contexts. The application appears to have immense popularity among young people. Thus, there is potential to investigate how ephemeral media and the curating of images can be translated into an affordance in both schooling and initial teacher education programs. Affect theory involving the intra-activity of human and non-humans (Bolt, 2012) has become increasingly influential in education research. Embedded in and amplifying the relational flows in schools, Snapchat is instrumental in the entanglements associated with networked affect.

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