TINDER FOR TEENS: AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF YOUTH INTIMATE CULTURES AND SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ON SNAPCHAT

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Research Aims

Snapchat has long been a pivotal space for youth digital intimate and sexual cultures, as well as gendered and sexual risks and harms (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017). Despite being one of the most widely used social media platforms among youth in England (Ofcom, 2023) and America (Anderson et al., 2023), there has been little in-depth research that connects Snapchat's unique features and affordances with an analysis of young users' practices and experiences on the platform. Responding to this gap, our paper explores our mixed-methods research findings on British young people's diverse social, sexual, and intimate experiences on Snapchat. We explore how Snapchat's unique features, such as disappearing images ("Snaps"), algorithmic friend recommendations ("Quick Adds"), and user engagement metric ("Snapscores"), form new conditions and environments for young people's experiences of courtship, sexting, and sexual and gender-based violence.

Approach

While it is important to protect young people from emerging digital risks, scholars are increasingly emphasising youth digital sexual rights, and the positive potential that

digital technologies can play in young people's sexual and bodily self-expression online (Albury, 2017; Albury et al., 2017; Livingstone & Third, 2017; Setty, 2019). Rather than taking a singular risk-focused approach to young people's uses of Snapchat, we aim to explore their broader sexual cultures on the platform. We develop an "affordance" (boyd, 2011) and "platform sensitive approach" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 17) to explore youth's Snapchat engagement. We consider not only the actions afforded by Snapchat's features, but also the diverse expectations that users hold of these features (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). In addition, we contextualise youth user experiences with Snapchat's guidelines and safeguards for youth, which we argue fail to understand or address youth users' experiences.

Method

We draw upon our quantitative and qualitative research conducted in UK schools following the COVID-19 lockdowns. Quantitatively, we administered an online survey to 551 teens (aged 13-18) of all genders—with questions on mental health and time online, digital literacy, and experiences of Tech-Facilitated Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (TFSGBV) during lockdowns. Qualitatively, we conducted 17 focus groups with 65 teens and 29 individual follow-up interviews with this sample in five comprehensive secondary schools across England. Focus groups used arts-based methodologies, asking participants to write or draw their perspectives on social media platforms using templates we provided. Select focus group participants partook in follow-up individual interviews, where we elicited more detailed accounts of topics discussed.

Findings

Our findings showed that young people are commonly using Snapchat in their social, romantic, and sexual lives. We found that 71.9% of survey respondents were on Snapchat, and 45.1% increased their time on Snapchat during lockdown. Snapchat afforded an opportunity to meet and connect—or "associate" (Treem & Leonardi, 2012)—with new friends or romantic/sexual partners, particularly during lockdown. For example, one teen described how Snapchat became a Tinder for teenagers, where they would add unknown users in their digital peer network through Snapchat's algorithmic friend recommendation feature ("Quick Adds") and would regularly exchange images, videos, and messages ("Snapping") with those users, with the goal to eventually meet them in offline spaces. Snapchat was also perceived as *the* app for sexting (i.e., the sending and receiving of sexually explicit images), due to its perceived ephemerality, privacy, and transparency.

These positive opportunities for youth digital sexual exploration, however, were enmeshed with gendered risks and harms. Young people's use of Snapchat as a tool for meeting "new friends" created opportunities for adult men to perpetrate TFSGBV. Young people often reported receiving unsolicited sexual images from Snapchat users they believed were peers but were actually adult men, also known as catfishing. In our survey findings, the majority of unsolicited sexual images came from adults that they had met online. Snapchat's lack of age-verification and image-based profiles, among other features, afford "pseudonymity" (Evans et al., 2017) to adult users—thus protecting groomers and child predators, instead of young people. We discuss how

these findings directly contrast with Snapchat's rollout of "stronger friending protections" (Snapchat, 2023a) for 13–17-year-old users, which were designed to reduce friend recommendations, connections, and communication between young people and strangers.

In line with our previous research (Ringrose et al., 2021), the majority of unwanted requests for nude images from peers in the same age range were also on Snapchat. For example, one teen described how conversations with boys she'd met on Snapchat would most often lead to exchanges of nude images, which at times involved the boys pressuring her to send nudes when she did not want to. In addition, peer-to-peer Image-Based Sexual Abuse (i.e., the non-consensual distribution of nudes) (McGlynn et al., 2017) was described as an expected outcome of sending a nude "Snap"—evidencing Snapchat's persistence (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017) and spreadability (boyd, 2014). Beyond the limits of Snapchat's perceived ephemerality (via the "disappearing Snap"), we discuss how Snapchat's "Quick Add" feature affords loose connections with unknown and semi-known youth users (often boys), who potentially feel more confident in perpetrating Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse (Ringrose et al., 2021) because of a reduced risk of in-person repercussions (e.g., at school). Again, these experiences are in direct contrast to Snapchat's prohibition of "pornographic content" in its community guidelines (Snapchat, 2023b), as well as its reliance on mutual friends as a safeguard against harm (Snapchat, 2023a).

Finally, young people experienced slut-shaming and stalking and tied these experiences to the "visibility" (boyd, 2014) afforded by Snapchat. Young people described monitoring other users' "Snapscores"—a number on each user's profile measuring their level of engagement on the platform. Girls were slut-shamed for having a high "Snapscore" as it was correlated with "Snapping" more sexual and romantic partners, which was associated with sexual immorality. We discuss how this trend is an example of an "imagined affordance" (Nagy & Neff, 2015) that is reflective of how the users imagine the technology operates within a context of societal sexual double standards. In addition, young people described the active surveillance of their romantic partners' "Snapscores", as a method to document whether they were active on the platform or not, which is indicative of a potentially problematic affordance if used in the context of an abusive relationship.

Conclusion

Snapchat continues to be a highly popular site for young people to meet new friends, and potential dating and sexual partners, and to exchange sexually explicit images. Our research contributes, therefore, to understandings of how Snapchat's youth users experience the app in relation to gender and sexual exploration and identity. In addition, our paper provides an in-depth analysis of how Snapchat's features, affordances and (lack of) user protection creates a specific environment for sexual and gender-based violence. Given Snapchat's inadequate platform-level responses to these issues, we conclude with recommendations for interventions dedicated to increasing platform-specific digital literacy (particularly for parents, policymakers, and educators), and preventing and responding to youth experiences of online gendered risks and harm—while upholding their digital and sexual rights.

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