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Problematising the use of Snapchat in Higher Education Teaching and Learning

Paul Fenn and Paul J Reilly,

University of Sheffield

Abstract

There has been relatively little research exploring how Snapchat can be used within Higher Education teaching to date. In this viewpoint, we draw on extant empirical data to explore the strengths and weaknesses of using the Instant Messaging (IM) app to support student learning and teaching within universities. We conclude by considering whether it is appropriate to fully integrate apps like Snapchat into Higher Education in light of the revelations of data misuse by these platforms. The growth of 'surveillance realism', whereby citizens feel increasingly powerless at their personal data being repurposed by these companies for financial gain, arguably supersedes any supposed pedagogical benefits for student learners.

Keywords

Snapchat, Social Media, Higher Education; Teaching; Learning; Surveillance Realism

Paul Fenn and Paul J Reilly,
University of Sheffield

Introduction

Since its launch in 2011, Snapchat has emerged as the social media platform most synonymous with Generation Z. First launched in 2011, the Instant Messaging App has seen exponential growth in its user base over the past decade. Recent research indicates that it has an estimated 229 million active users (Statista, 2020) with over 2.8 billion snaps created each day (Carson, 2017). It has proven particularly popular amongst young people, with 63 percent of its users in the United States (US) aged between 18-29 years old (Perrin & Anderson, 2019) and 77 percent of US college students using the app each day (Lee, 2016). This popularity primarily revolves around the ephemeral nature of content shared via the app, with users able to share photos and videos that are automatically deleted within a few seconds of being opened by the recipient (Colao, 2012; Kircaburun et al., 2018; Utz et al., 2015). However, like other online platforms, the most commonly cited reason for using Snapchat is to communicate with family and friends (Carson, 2017; Katz & Crocker, 2015; Piwek & Joinson, 2016). Pertinent to this paper, scholars such as Dobies & Nelson (2016: 17) have found some evidence already to suggest that students believe Snapchat is "easier than texting". This raises the possibility that the app might have potential as a tool to facilitate dialogue between students and teachers, both inside and outside the classroom.

Snapchat as tool for mobile learning

Mobile learning approaches have become increasingly important in contemporary Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Smartphones not only help students gain knowledge, but also develop collaborations and hold conversations with a view to achieving desirable learning outcomes (Al-Emran et al., 2016). There is also a widely held perception amongst students that the successful navigation of mobile learning environments was a prerequisite for improved academic performance (Chen & DeNoyelles, 2013). Mobile learning can be facilitated through a new genre of mobile apps and location-based services, which can encourage collaboration between students and teachers, knowledge creation, and information-searching (Chee et al., 2017; Cheon et al., 2012). Examples of Apps that have been used to aid Mobile Learning include Skype, Twitter, WhatsApp (Gikas & Grant, 2013; Rambe & Bere, 2013).

The ubiquity of internet-enabled smart phones and the high proportion of students using Snapchat would suggest the latter has great potential as a pedagogical tool. The limited research data thus far suggests students are broadly receptive to it being used as a mobile learning environment within HEIs. The app has been characterised as a 'private' space' where students could ask questions they might not ordinarily ask in class or via more 'public' social media platforms like Twitter (Dobies & Nelson, 2016; Ernstberger & Venable, 2016; Walter, 2017). Chemistry students have reported higher levels of engagement with the subject due to their ability to view images and videos shared by their instructors on the app (Hurst, 2018). There has also been evidence to suggest that this delivery of materials outside the classroom can help students apply theoretical frameworks to real-world examples. Lee (2016) found that 90 percent of his students used his Snaps during the course of their studies, with many claiming this helped them achieve higher grades. Similarly, Freyn (2017) received positive feedback from students for creating a bespoke class account on the IM app; Snaps were shared via the account each day, with students required to post responses in order to gain extra module credits. What is clear from these studies is that Snapchat may be best suited towards supporting the learning of students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and other subjects which rely heavily on the use of visual demonstrations in the classroom. However, it should also be noted that these results may be skewed by approaches such as Freyn's, which incentivised the use of the IM app through the use of module credits. Further research is also needed to explore whether positive perceptions of Snapchat in these studies translated into improved educational outcomes that could be directly attributed to the use of Snapchat.

Paul Fenn and Paul J Reilly,
University of Sheffield

Context Collapse and Privacy Concerns

The use of Snapchat as a mobile learning environment raises concerns over the privacy of both students and instructors. There is already extensive research showing how social media users often struggle to navigate 'context collapse' on social media, whereby multiple and overlapping audiences are viewing their content (see Marwick & Boyd, 2011 for example). Students do not wish to mix their personal and professional lives online. They frequently express concerns about the reputational harm that they might experience should messages originally intended for reserved audiences be leaked or made available online (Ernstberger & Venable, 2016). The same also applies to their instructors, who have often been reluctant to fully integrate online platforms into their teaching for fear of their privacy being breached and being exposed to reputational harm (Carrigan, 2019; Procter et al., 2010; Reilly, 2013). Digital feminist scholars in particular have been the subject of misogynistic abuse and harassment for their public commentaries on platforms such as Twitter (Ringrose, 2018). With there already being evidence of Snapchat being used for cyberbullying (Vaterlaus et al., 2016), it is easy to see why both staff and students would be reluctant to fully engage with the app in the HE (Higher Education) context.

A related issue is how Snapchat collects, stores and shares data gathered from its users. The company is quite transparent about the amount of personal data they collect from users, who are required to provide their name, date of birth, email address and phone number in order to create an account. While their terms of service assure users that this information is gathered in order to provide users "with an amazing set of products and services that we relentlessly improve" (Snap, 2019), there remains doubts as to why they are collecting metadata on devices being used to access their services, their access to the cameras on smartphones and the locational data shared by users who have not disabled relevant tracking softwares.

Despite its two main selling points, namely its encryption and the ephemeral nature of content shared between users, there also remain concerns over the integrity of its data-handling policies. Former and current employees developed a tool called SnapLion in response to law enforcement requests allowing access to private user data, including photos and videos that were shared by users (Cox, 2019; O'Donnell, 2019). Leaked company emails described how Snap employees used such internal tools to access users' saved snaps and personal information including phone numbers and email addresses (Cox, 2019). Snap responded to these embarrassing revelations by introducing end-to-end encryption in January 2019, reassuring users that their conversations were safe, private and secure. However, Snap failed to disclose holes in this encryption such as pictures and videos being stored on the company's server for 30 days as before, which left them vulnerable to hackers. It was also revealed that end-to-end encryption only worked on Snaps, not text messages or group chats on their servers (Cox, 2019; Ric, 2019).

These issues are arguably a manifestation of the surveillance capitalism that underpins Snap and other social media corporations. The 'sharing' of these data with advertisers is integral to the business model of these platforms, with increasing evidence that they are also sharing it with intelligence agencies without the explicit permission or knowledge of users (Mayer-Schoberger & Cukier, 2014; van Dijck, 2014). In June 2013, revelations by whistleblower Edward Snowden exposed how the National Security Agency (NSA) had access to troves of metadata including internet search histories, email content, file transfers, photos and interactions on Facebook, Google, Apple, Skype, Yahoo and other Social Media platforms (Fuchs, 2017; Fuchs & Trottier, 2017; Hintz et al., 2018; van Dijck, 2014) The NSA even went as far as to outsource this data collection work to 2000 private companies, who are profiteering through 'spying' on citizens on their behalf (Hintz et al., 2018).

Paul Fenn and Paul J Reilly,
University of Sheffield

This raises an ethical dilemma for educators who might see educational value in the use of Snapchat to support their students' learning. Encouraging students and tutors to sign up to this App will expose them to this pervasive data collection and surveillance. Perceived privacy breaches are one of the main reasons why citizens are reluctant to use the same social media accounts for their personal and professional lives. Therefore, university teachers may be reluctant to further blur these boundaries by insisting students use these Apps in order to access teaching materials or engage with their classes.

Conclusion

In this viewpoint, we have problematised the use of Snapchat as a tool for Higher Education learning and teaching. There are clearly some advantages to using the App as a backchannel connecting tutors and students. The limited empirical data so far suggests it can enhance student engagement, albeit in many cases participation via Snapchat was mandatory or assessed. Students also appear enthusiastic about how the App can be used to support the teaching of STEM subjects, primarily due to their visual component translating well on the App. There has also been some evidence to suggest that students felt they had a 'voice' they lacked in large lectures and seminars where they might be reluctant to ask questions. Clearly further research is needed to explore whether this positive feedback translated into improved educational outcomes for those concerned, a factor which is conspicuously absent from many empirical studies in this area published to date. Further research is also needed to substantiate preliminary claims suggesting that the integration of the App into Higher Education teaching can empower learners. This is particularly pertinent given the push for universities to adopt blended or online-only teaching approaches in order to cope with the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We do wish to end on a note of caution though. The use of Snapchat in Higher Education Institutions remains limited, and it appears better suited towards marketing universities than supporting its teaching. This is primarily due to the App being linked to various privacy breaches and staff perceptions it might result in them experiencing reputational harm should personal and professional boundaries be blurred (Carrigan, 2019; Procter et al., 2010; Reilly, 2013). A related issue is how the App has been linked to increased incidents of cyberbullying within schools, suggesting that it might facilitate negative behaviours that undermine the ability of some students to achieve intended learning outcomes (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). It is therefore easy to see why many educators and their students would be reluctant to use Snapchat as a tool for mobile learning. Moreover, educators have a responsibility to critically reflect on the digital tools they integrate into their teaching, and encourage their students to do the same with their learning. They should be fully aware how data generated by their students will be used by Snap in light of the extensive evidence of surveillance capitalism in the public domain. Therefore, any proposed use of Snapchat in Higher Education teaching must not only show a link between use of the App and educational outcomes, but also ensure students are aware of how these platforms monetise interactions on their servers.

For correspondence please contact:

Email: pfenn1@sheffield.ac.uk   Twitter: @PaulFenn16

Email: p.j.reilly@sheffield.ac.uk Twitter: and @PaulJReilly

Paul Fenn and Paul J Reilly,
University of Sheffield

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Paul Fenn and Paul J Reilly,
University of Sheffield

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Paul Fenn and Paul J Reilly,
University of Sheffield

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Paul Fenn and Paul J Reilly,
University of Sheffield