This draft feels pretty rough. I just started writing without putting much thought into how long I wanted the piece to be, and my direction changed course a few times – I don’t really have a title for it right now. I feel like I would like to expand on some of the ideas in a more organized fashion. A bunch of my sources are at the bottom but I haven’t properly cited yet.

As a college student, social media admittedly plays quite a large role in my life. Like many of my peers, I have accounts on several different platforms and use them for a variety of different reasons, such as personal and entertainment, educational, and professional purposes. I also quite often hear statistics about the billions of dollars in the industry, and the billions of people that use social media on a daily basis. There are thousands of platforms available in the modern age, but not all platforms are good platforms. I don’t download every app I come across, and I don’t regularly use every app I download. So what makes for a successful platform that is able to obtain a sizeable base of daily active users? The answer is nearly impossible to predict. We learn from the successes and failures of others.

When researching some of the social media giants around right now, it is impossible to overlook Snap Inc.’s photo messaging app Snapchat. The original idea for the app was created by CEO Evan Spiegel for a class project at Stanford University, in which it was marketed as a temporary, self-deleting picture sharing platform called “Picaboo”. Spiegel recruited CTO Bobby Murphy to help him develop the app, and it was launched from Spiegel’s father’s house with the new name “Snapchat” in September 2011. Within months, the app’s user base was growing exponentially and was gaining the attention of many of the big names in the tech industry. In 2012, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook founder and CEO, offered $3 billion to buy Snapchat and was rejected by Spiegel. The decision was a surprise to many and was ultimately seen as a very daring move.

Throughout its five-and-a-half-year history, the company has dealt with some of the harshest criticism and financial projections, and yet it has grown and maintained a monthly global active user base exceeding 235 million. In 2016 it was recognized as one of the most valuable startups with a valuation per employee at around $50 million. Now in early 2017, the company is looking to go public with an IPO, and is searching for $3 billion on a $25 billion valuation.

The app has seen its fair share of “copycats”, and it is no question that Facebook itself has attempted on several accounts to mimic the success that Snapchat has found with their platform. As recounted by Spiegel for Forbes magazine in 2014, Zuckerberg flew out to L.A. to meet him and Murphy prior to the attempted acquisition and outlined his plan to release Facebook Poke, an app with practically all of the same features and functionality as Snapchat. Spiegel described the purpose of the conversation as pure intimidation, and the company prepared itself for battle. Luckily for Snapchat, Facebook Poke turned out to be a flop, as it plummeted from the IOS app store’s top 25 shortly after its debut. It wasn’t until after the app’s failure that Zuckerberg returned to Spiegel with his offer.

This sequence of events truly highlights the difficulty behind the predictability of social media while providing insight as to what it truly is that makes successful platforms so valuable. Facebook, the largest and most successful social media company in the world, successfully developed a near perfect replica of a known popular app but was unable to gain any traction with the product. They then offered to pay $3 billion to acquire the app that they had essentially already created themselves. This shows that the acquisition really had nothing to do with Snapchat’s platform at all, but the commercial value of millions of global active, and addicted, users.

In 2013, Snapchat launched one of it’s most successful features with the addition of “Stories”. The feature allows users to take a snap add it to their “story”, which would then be viewable to their Snapchat friends for 24 hours. The feature quickly took over as the most frequently used function of the application, and naturally was met with imitator functions from competitors, such as Facebook owned Instagram, with its addition of “Stories” in 2016.

If you’re one that keeps up with tech and startup news, you might have heard of Beme and some of the buzz it created. Beme was a video messaging app created by Casey Neistat and Matt Hackett which was launched in 2015. Beme’s platform follows the same basic framework introduced by Snapchat. Users could take videos, which were sent to their friends who were able to open and watch them, and when they have finished the video is automatically deleted. What makes Beme unique, and what their platform rode on, was their focus on keeping interactions and experiences genuine while still being able to share them with your friends.

Unlike Snapchat and other similar apps, Beme did not have a record button. The app instead used the proximity sensor to start and stop recording. The user was expected to hold their phone to their chest, which would trigger the sensor and make the screen go black. When the video is done being recorded, it is instantly uploaded and shared. The purpose of this system was so that every video taken with the app is genuine. The user could not edit the videos, and because the screen display goes dark while recording, the user has no choice but to watch what they are filming with their own eyes, rather than through their phone screen. When users are watching other’s videos in the app, the only way of responding is by taking a “selfie” of themselves, called a reaction, which gets sent to the user and can be viewed once.

The app gained a lot of buzz during the time of the initial launch in 2015, and after one week the app had over 1.1 million videos shared. However, the app had a lot of extra help getting its feet off the ground.

Even if you didn’t know Beme, you may have heard of its founder Casey Neistat. Neistat is a filmmaker, vlogger, popular YouTube personality, and star of his own HBO series “The Neistat Brothers”. He currently has over 6.4 million YouTube subscribers (although at the time of Beme’s initial launch the number was just short of 1 million). His channel and popular vlog made for a great a platform to advertise for Beme during its production, attracting millions of eyes to the product before it had even been released. This was a luxury, as well as an incredible opportunity for the company because it guaranteed that the app would have no problem establishing an initial user base.

Beme soared for a bit, as the anticipation for the app’s release finally came to an end in July 2015. However, Beme’s stretch at the top did not last very long with user interest fading as time went on. There were many complaints with the app’s poor UI and incredibly complicated UX. As a result, Beme was rereleased in May of the same year with some major fixes which included an explainer video for how to use the app. The new version did not do much better, but the app was bailed out when CNN acquired it for $25 million in November of 2016. The purchase was made mostly with the development team in mind, hoping that they could help bridge the gap to the younger generation by gauging interest in their own platform.

I find the acquisition purpose ironic because I don’t think Beme did very well in that regard. It’s hard to judge Beme’s actual accomplishments due to Neistat’s fame before the launch of the product. Its initial success seemed to be very artificial because it could be argued that the app was generating attention more due to the popularity of Neistat than the popularity of Beme itself as a likeable form of social media. Personally I find it hard to believe that Beme would have gotten any funding at all had it been created by an average Joe because it lacks certain elements that popular social media platforms such as Snapchat rely on.

Because Beme’s pitch is all about the preservation of authenticity, it becomes a hands-off form of communication. Beme plays off the notion that people are always on their phones, specifically other forms of social media, and therefore are missing real life experiences. This is a great marketing strategy if you are targeting those that aren’t as active or dislike other forms of social media where editing and tailoring your content is necessary. However, I think that the popularity of apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, shows that sculpting an online persona is a big part of what people like about social media, especially among young people. Beme severely limited itself for future growth by having such a minimalist UX that cut out so many of the features that the younger generation enjoyed.

Bridging the gap between generations with social media has proven to be a hard task to accomplish. It’s estimated that the median age of Snapchat users is 18, while Facebook’s is closer to 40. I use Snapchat every single day, but I often come across comments on sources such as Y Combinator’s Hacker News from older individuals that just don’t understand why it has had the success that it has. I believe that for young people there exists a large deviation from what older individuals expect and enjoy out of an app’s purpose and UX.

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