

ETHICS OF SNAPCHAT & MINORS

a.4, b.7, c.14, d.22

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ABSTRACT

Snapchat is a fascinating and powerful technology, and with great power, comes great responsibility. This technology created by three Stanford students shook up the social media industry back in September 2011 when the app was initially released. Snapchat was the first of its kind, as no one else in the social media arena had developed a technology such as this. Snapchat was all about sending pictures that would disappear after being viewed. This left its users feeling safe: what harm could a picture do, especially if it is guaranteed to be delivered to only a selected few individuals, and it will be deleted within moments of being seen? The problem with this technology was that many underage children felt more comfortable knowing their pictures were deleted after been sent, and so they began to experiment, using the app to send inappropriate and even sexual pictures, thinking that no harm would come to them because these photos would be immediately deleted. However, there were specific rules put in place to deceive users, and in fact, Snapchat does not immediately delete all photos. Snapchat stores certain data that if a user knew he/she might be more hesitant or even reconsider what pictures they were sending. If sexual pictures of underage children get leaked on the Internet through Snapchat databases who takes responsibility? Throughout this paper I try to be unbiased and provide both arguments in favor of Snapchat, and arguments against them and provide both arguments in favor of Snapchat, and arguments against them. After listing both sides it is apparent that Snapchat is trying to hide specific information regarding their privacy from most of its users, and this could be a serious problem for their underaged users. For example, it is not clear to the average user that any messages not opened get stored on Snapchats database for up to thirty days, and deceptions like this could cause serious harm to minors if someone with malicious intent were to get their hands on this sensitive information. It is the user's responsibility to know what they are getting themselves into when using the Internet, but when the users are children, the responsibility shifts. It is now Snapchat, ethical responsibility to ensure that the children using their platform are well represented and safe, by know exactly what they are signing up for. It must be Snapchat's mission to protect the children of their platform in a similar way a parent would protect their child. If actions are not taken, the future of privacy will become more ambiguous and the leakage of sensitive information will become more abundant. It is a hard subject to talk about, but it is a necessary one.

I. INTRODUCTION

Snapchat is a popular social media application that was released to the public in September 2011 on Android and iOS devices. Snapchat allows users to send and receive pictures, videos, and messages privately to others that disappear within a few moments of being seen. Snapchat is a very popular application since it launched. Currently, the total number of currently active users as of September 17, 2018, is over 300 million, where majority of the users are over 18 [1]. The ethical issue arises when dealing with minors. In a survey presented on Statista.com in February 2016, it was determined that 23% of Snapchat users in the United States were aged between 13 and 17 years [2] However, since 2018, 69% of children ages 13 – 17 use Snapchat, and the numbers are increasing [3]. More minors are using Snapchat, but who is monitoring them? Is it Snapchat's responsibility to ensure the safety of its young users? Is the company doing its part by including privacy statements and terms of services on their website and making new users accept these terms? When inappropriate behavior takes place between minors, who should be held accountable?

This paper will explore the ethical responsibility of Snapchat with regards to its underaged users. This technology a couple years old, but people do not seem to fully understand it. Snapchat's core features will be investigated in an unbiased manner, presenting arguments both supporting and opposing Snapchat. Through the discussion of Snapchats technology and minors, this paper hopes to provide an ethical framework.

II. BACKGROUND & RELATED WORK

Snapchat, or Picaboo as it was known in the beginning, was the first of its kind [4]. No other technology offered instant private sharing where only the user, and recipient were able to see the photo. Its creators Evan Spiegle, Bobby Murphy, and Reggie Brown, students at Stanford University when, intoxicated in their rooms, they fantasized about a way to send "disappearing photos" to others [4]. The three students let their fraternity test out the application. After using Picaboo for a couple of weeks, the brothers agreed that the application was fun, but did not treat it seriously, after all it was only a friend's self-made app [4]. Evan Spiegle was taking a mechanical engineering class called "Design and Business Factors", the final for the class was to present a business plan and a prototype for an app [4]. Spiegle presented Picaboo to the class, expecting a sheer amount of excitement and clapping, Spiegle was left with comments such as, "Why would anyone use this app?" [4]. The Teaching Assistant pulled Spiegle aside and asked if he created a sexting app. Although it seemed liked majority did not see a purpose for the app, the three Stanford students continued working on it [4]. According to Statista.com, Snapchat is now the sixth most used social media application [5].

III. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR

Although there are ethical issues with Snapchat's technology, there are some positive aspects of the app and the way Snapchat handles their policies.

A. *Privacy*

To prevent underage users to misuse their platform, Snapchat's privacy policy and terms of service are provided on their website and on the application itself. There are links on their website and highlighted areas to click on for more information if the user so chooses to learn more about their terms and conditions of use. To register for Snapchat, new users must also disclose their ages. This prompt is found late in the process, however. The first few prompts when creating a new Snapchat account are geared towards the company gaining permission by the new user to access private information on their phones and contact databases. Snapchat claims this information must be collected to provide the best personalized snapchat experience [6]. Snapchat's founding policy is to delete photos immediately after they are opened [4]. This prevents private photos, videos, and or messages from being used against the user in some way. Snapchat's intention is to make users feel as if they could say whatever is on their mind without the concern of Snapchat keeping a permanent record of everything the user has said on the application [7]. Snapchat also ensures the privacy of its users by notifying the sender if the recipient happens to screenshot the image sent to them.

B. *Location Services*

After logging into Snapchat, the user can explore several features within the mobile application. Snapmap is a feature of Snapchat that allows users to post their whereabouts on a

world map. This could prove useful for friends and families looking for one another, or if the device was lost or stolen, this feature may be able to make the device easier to find.

C. Terms of Service Renewals

As technology advances, the company's terms of service must be updated along with it. When the terms and conditions of Snapchats' privacy policy is updated, the company let's all its users know on the Snapchat website. The company also provides a summary of the policies in case any users want a quick overview of the terms and conditions [8].

IV. ARGUMENTS AGAINST

A large portion of arguments against Snapchat's technology and how it deals with minors revolves around the company's privacy policy. Many people believe Snapchat is a on top of their privacy policy, but the concerns can be seen when observing them under a microscope.

A. Privacy

Snapchat's private policy and terms of service are provided as highlighted links instead of larger text boxes. The problem remains that no one ever reads these terms and privacy policies, and so no user, let alone a minor, would know what they are agreeing to. Being unaware of Snapchat's privacy policies, many users have been guilty of sending sexual pictures and or videos, and there is nothing in place to protect minors from this. The registration process urges new users to "tap allow when prompted" and highlights the button to make it even easier for users to start using the application right away. This feature encourages new users to avoid reading Snapchat's policies. In an age of instant gratification, users are mindlessly "tapping" and "agreeing" to terms that they have not read carefully. Once "agree" is tapped, Snapchat then has access to users' camera rolls, text messages, and contacts of the user. All this information is requested before the user creates an account. Technically the user can deny Snapchat from using this information, but then the user cannot access or register with Snapchat. After allowing this information to be collected new users must create their account information, which includes their age. As Brian O'Neill points out, "Inevitably children's innate curiosity, combined with peer pressure and the appeal of exciting content on major social networking service platforms has meant that large numbers of young people lie about their age to register on services that were not designed for them [9]." There is currently nothing in place to determine the truth or accuracy of the new user's age, making it very easy for users to lie about their ages. It is Snapchat's policy to delete photos immediately after they are opened. This was the goal of the application's founding member Reggie Brown [4]. This policy gives users of the application a false sense of security. People will feel more comfortable sending sexual photos because they believe the picture will be deleted, but that is not always the case. For example, if the recipient fails to open the photo, Snapchat will store any photo, video, or message on their servers for up to thirty days [8]. This leaves the user's private data vulnerable. Hackers and third-party companies who gain access in the event of a security breach, can upload and redistribute this private information onto other platforms. For example, during the "The Great Celebrity Naked Photo Leak of 2014", 4.6 million Snapchat accounts were hacked and had years of pictures sent through the application leaked on the internet [10]. Snapchat made a statement that put the blame on hackers instead of themselves. Mark James, an online security specialist had something else to say regarding the blame, "They give the perception it is safe, they need to make it safe. They need to crack down on people's ability to access their data [10]." Four years later, Snapchat has done nothing to prevent 3rd party

applications from breaching the security of their application. Instead they say this in their privacy policy “It’s important to keep in mind that other Snapchatters can always take a screenshot, or save things using a third-party app [11].” The only way to hear about 3rd party issue is by going on Snapchat’s website, but children are rarely going to visit the website.

B. *Location Services*

Users of Snapchat can also post their location on a world map giving access to any friend that is curious. This is an interesting feature known as the Snapmap, but seems odd for a disappearing photo application to add. No reported crimes are linked to this feature, but the thought of one happening is not hard to imagine. Snapmap gives the exact location of a user to anyone on their friend’s list. Minors tend to add friends as well as acquaintances on social media. So is it that hard to believe someone on the user’s friend list could be monitoring their location, waiting for the perfect moment to rob their home address, that was given to them by Snapmap.

C. *Terms of Service Renewals*

In the events of Snapchat’s terms of service being updated, specifically the privacy policy, the company let’s all its users know on the Snapchat website. The issue with this is that most minors are not going to go on a mobile app’s personal website to read up on the updated privacy policy. The company also provides a summary of the policies in case any user wants a quick overview of the terms, the summary is vague and leaves out a lot of detail regarding what data is stored and for how long [8].

V. DISCUSSION

When looking at the intention of Snapchat’s founders and the decisions the company has made over the years there can be some discussion on whether the way Snapchat handles its core philosophy is ethical. Snapchat at its core is an app that allows users to send pictures for a certain amount of time to a recipient. After the recipient opens the image, it’s deleted. If the recipient screenshots the photo, the sender will be notified. In the case of a recipient not opening a message, the information contained is stored on a database for up to 30 days.

The way Snapchat handles its core philosophy follows the guidelines of conventional morality. Someone who lives with conventional morality says the standard for determining whether an action is right or wrong is based on the rules and or practices of one’s society [12]. The reason Snapchat follows conventional morality is because the standard created for social media companies over the years has been to be cautious when disclosing information about user data and privacy policies. It can be argued that conventional morality regarding these norms is unethical due to the violation of the principle of double effect. This principle says given the intention and goal of an action treat others with respect and make sure there are no known bad effects that are disproportionate with the good of the main effect [12]. Snapchat violates this with the knowledge of 3rd party screen recording apps and its lack of concern with fixing the issue.

If Snapchat were to follow a utilitarian approach the app might be more secure. Utilitarianism is acting in a that provides the greatest benefit for the largest number of people [12]. The reason Snapchat could potentially be more secure if this approach is followed is because the benefitting the number of people would refer to users. To ensure the greatest benefit for the users, Snapchat would have to revisit the security and privacy policies currently in place. With this mindset, Snapchat may delete all unnecessary data.

VI. CONCLUSION

Snapchat's privacy policy has both its positives and its negative that can be argued either way. The question of who is accountable when data about a minor gets out to the public is easily answered with regards to privacy, and how Snapchat handles theirs. It is at the end of the day, the company's problem if information is leaked, not the hacker nor the underaged child. In a society where Mark Zuckerberg is welcomed for encouraging his employees to "Move fast," because he claims that "unless you are breaking stuff, you are not moving fast enough," but when dealing with potential and very serious dangers regarding minors, is this the advice to take? How many minors should we break in the name of technological "progress" and advancement? If we think about why this application was ever put into practice to begin with, we must be honest with ourselves when thinking about the intentions driving college-aged young men. Why would they want to invent photos that disappear if the content of those photos weren't inappropriate to begin with?

I believe that Snapchat should get rid of any data stored on their end that is unnecessary to how to app functions. Memories should be locally stored, if a snapchat does not get opened it should be deleted within a day, because realistically someone is going to have a hard time remembering what was said a day prior. If these social media platforms continue to discretely store user data at the rate they do, the future of personal privacy may be at risk.

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