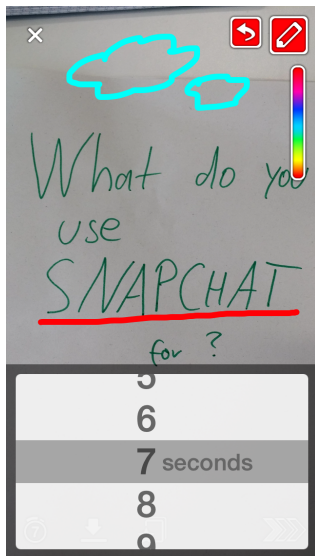


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# Snapchat: How to Understand a Teen Phenomenon



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**Figure 1:** Creating a new *snap* message with *Snapchat*.

## Abstract

We report from a case study, where we set out to understand the motivation of use behind Snapchat. Snapchat has primarily been adopted by teenagers. One of its perks is the short-livedness of its messages, which makes it particularly hard to study it. We approached this challenge by creating two teenage personas, and used them to interact with strangers. We found that this approach can yield deep, though subjective, insights into how teenagers adopt new communication systems, and what motivates their use.

## Author Keywords

Messaging; Snapchat; Teenagers; Ethnography

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation]: Misc.

## Introduction

Teenagers are digital natives, particularly in developed economies. According to Skierkowski and Wood [6], text messaging is one of the primary forms of communication among peers from this age group. Examples, such as Instagram or Snapchat, show that teenagers are many times the first to adopt novel communication services. For designers of such systems, it is important to understand teenagers' needs and usage patterns in order to design technology that is relevant to them.

Some areas we consider important, however, are hard to study. Teenagers value their privacy [3]. Moreover, certain important topics—such as cyberbullying, social pressure [5], and *being alone but together*[8]—are hard to investigate, because they require a basis of trust and the ability to reflect about them, both of which are difficult to achieve when working with teenagers [2].

In our recent work, devoted to study motivation and usage patterns behind *Snapchat*<sup>1</sup>, we addressed these challenges by immersing ourselves into the culture. We created personas of two 18-year old teenagers and started to engage in discussions with existing users, including many teenagers.

In this position paper, we report our insights from the study, and the challenges we believe would need to be addressed and discussed by the community. In particular, we show that our first-hand insights yielded deep and rich, but also potentially biased findings.

### Immersing into the World of Snapchat

*Snapchat* is a novel messaging service that introduced ephemerality into messaging. Its primary feature is to take pictures, add text and drawings, and send them to friends (see Fig. 1). Once the picture is opened for the first time, it can only be viewed for a few seconds before it disappears permanently from Snapchat’s servers and the user’s device. According to TechCrunch<sup>2</sup>, with 400M/day, more pictures were shared at the end of 2013 via Snapchat than through Facebook or Instagram.

**Why do teens use Snapchat?** In the line of our work, we wanted to understand the motivation behind using Snapchat.

Initial popular concerns were that people “would use it for sexting”<sup>3</sup>. However, in a survey with 5,475 participants, only 13.1% of the respondents said that they use it for this purpose [7].

**Traditional methods fail** However, it turned out that classical methodologies fail. Snapchat has no logs, no traces. By design, it does not allow to retrieve and analyse call logs, as e.g. done by Holtgraves and Paul [4] in the case of text messages. Hence, any survey method would have to heavily rely on the ability to remember relevant aspects. Further, as highlighted by Fitton *et al.* [3] “teenagers often isolate themselves” and “motivating teens to participate in research can prove problematic”. Finally, we presumed that the fun and excitement of the experience itself is part of the motivation—but we were afraid to not be able to accurately capture this in any method that requires self-reflection, such as an interview.

**Immersion** Thus, we decided to immerse ourselves into the world of Snapchat. We created two personas of 18-year old teenagers and published our account name on websites dedicated to exchange Snapchat usernames. We collected and analysed over 450 pictures that were sent to our personas. While we could not collect exact demographic responses, we estimated demographic information from the images. The age of our respondents ranged from roughly 16 to 40, with a strong bias towards younger ages (16-24).

**Findings** The findings provide evidence that the ephemerality adds excitement and removes a need for perfection. It also makes it hard to maintain conversation threads and

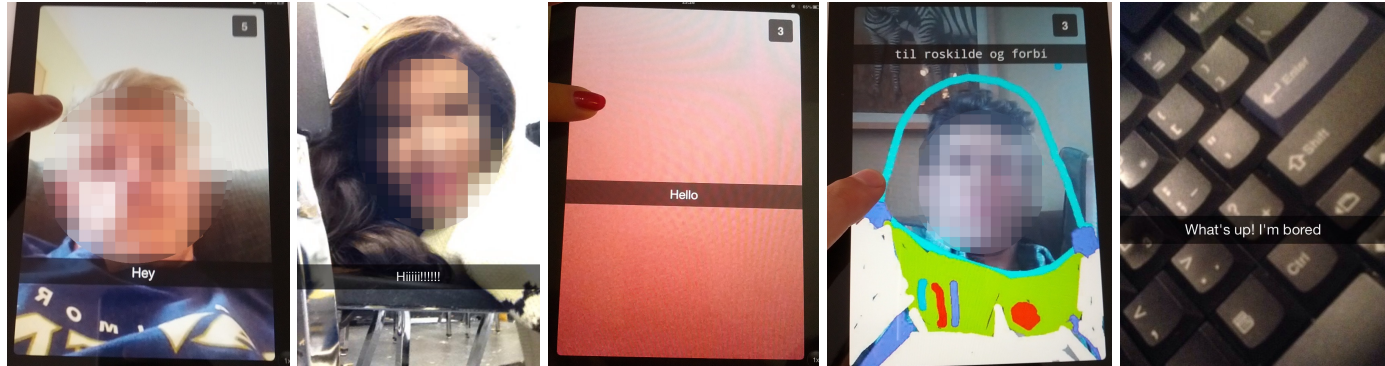
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<sup>1</sup><http://snapchat.com>

<sup>2</sup><http://techcrunch.com/2013/11/19/snapchat-reportedly-sees-more-daily-photos-than-facebook>

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.forbes.com/sites/jjcolao/2012/11/27/snapchat-the-biggest-no-revenue-mobile-app-since-instagram>



**Figure 2:** Example of the *snaps* (messages) that we received.

very-well supports “alone together” [8] communication without commitment. By allowing to send messages to multiple people without disclosing this fact, Snapchat makes group messages hard to spot, which enables group messages to feel personal. Rather than sexting, Snapchat seems to be a tool to battle boredom, as it allows its users to casually reach out to strangers with less of the risk and the commitment of persistent messengers. It is not subject to the same social pressure as messengers, as *e.g.*, described in [1] or [5]. We have our doubts whether interviews would have yielded the same insights, as they would have required the interviewees to be able to deeply reflect on those topics.

**Limitations** However, our approach has clear limitations. It introduces bias from first-hand usage. We cannot rule out that the experiences we made while using Snapchat bias our conclusions. Nevertheless, we were able to share those experiences that teenagers make when using Snapchat, which gave us a very strong insights into their motivation. We believe that when considering the potential bias, our findings

provide an important –often missing– angle to understand a phenomenon, such as Snapchat.

## Conclusions

Immersing into the culture of the subjects of one’s research is not a novel idea (see, *e.g.*, [2]). However, the specific features of Snapchat, in particular the fact that people seek out strangers to communicate, and the non-committing form of communication that it allows, have enabled us to immerse into a novel culture that teenagers are developing around ephemeral messaging. We were able to forgo all the problems around the lack of interest from the side of the study group [2, 3] and to obtain deep, though biased, insights into a part of the digital lives of teenagers.

However, the approach leaves a lot of open challenges:

- **Ethics:** what ethical considerations have to be made when deceiving participants with personas in order to learn more about them?

- **Bias:** how to avoid and correct the bias that the researcher gets through the strong impressions collected by first-hand experience?
- **Hawthorne effect:** how to recognize and counter the possibility that the observation itself biases the observed situation, and hence the conclusions drawn from them?
- **Scalability:** how to ensure scalability and the generalization of the insights when drawn from just a handful of personas? how many personas would be needed to draw meaningful insights that generalize?

## Bio

**Martin Pielot** is working with Telefonica Research (Barcelona, Spain). He is a associate researcher focussing on the fields of Human-Computer Interaction and Mobile & Ubiquitous Computing. Part of his work is around studying how people use novel communication channels, such as WhatsApp or Snapchat, and ideate, prototype, and test novel concepts around the topic, with the goal of making these services to be less stressing & interrupting, and more enjoyable & connecting.

**Nuria Oliver** is currently the Scientific Director and founder of the User, Data and Media Intelligence research team in Telefonica Research (Barcelona, Spain). Her research interests include mobile computing, multimedia data analysis, smart environments, context awareness, recommender systems, statistical machine learning and data mining, artificial intelligence, health monitoring, social network analysis, computational social sciences, and human computer interaction. She is currently working on the previous disciplines to build human-centric intelligent systems.

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