

Snapchat Abandonment among Self-Identified Millennial Women: A Proposed Research Project

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Abstract. Despite its quick rise to popularity after its launch in 2011, Snapchat’s user base has been declining in recent years. This is of particular interest given that the number of U.S. social media users overall continues to climb. Though users continue to adopt social media platforms, many studies examine social media usage alongside harmful and negative side effects, like increased anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem. Though some users may be experiencing these negative side effects and others, few studies have focused on why users leave social media platforms, like Snapchat. This study intends to focus on that abandonment among a large population of Snapchat users: Millennial women. This submission reviews relevant literature surrounding social media and outlines a proposed research plan to fill the gaps identified.

Keywords: Snapchat, Social Media, Abandonment

1 Introduction

In today’s digital environment, users have many social media platforms to choose from, and they make decisions about which systems to use and which to abandon. Snapchat, a platform known best for its disappearing photos, videos, and direct messages, quickly grew in popularity, climbing to 100 million monthly active users in just four years [1]. Snapchat caught the attention of younger audiences, and in 2018, work from Pew Research Center [2] found that young adults are heavy users of Snapchat, with 68% of those 18 to 29 saying they use the platform. Women also used the platform more than men — with 31% of women saying they used Snapchat, compared with 23% of men [2].

Despite the quick popularity of the application, the platform’s user base began shrinking in 2018 [3]. This is unusual, as social media usage overall, and popular

platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, continue to grow [4]. Snapchat is the only major social media, besides WhatsApp, to see a decrease in users from 2018 to 2019 [4]. The broad purpose of this proposed research is to better understand why people abandon platforms, which may provide insight into unintended negative effects that motivate social media users to quit.

Snapchat is still one of the newer social media platforms and has not been researched as much as other, older applications [5]. The loss of Snapchat users, while other platforms continue to grow, makes this topic worthy of study. The temporal nature of Snapchat, which removes the pressures associated with other social media platforms because creating perfectly curated social content is often not the goal, has proved an important addition to the social media landscape [6].

A better understanding of Snapchat, and why people adopt and abandon the platform, is needed. Other research into abandonment shows that people may leave platforms because they experience harassment [7] or have other concerns around mental health issues like anxiety or depression [8]. This work is interested in whether these factors also play a role in users' decisions to abandon Snapchat. It could shed light on what motivates users to quit a social media platform and could offer insights into what users expect and want from these spaces. The findings could have implications for several key stakeholders, including users, social media platform designers, and policymakers. A discussion of related work, along with a proposed research plan, follow.

2 Previous Research

2.1 What is Social Media?

Social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” [8]. Social media usage has grown since its popularization into the mainstream in the 2000s. As of 2019, Pew Research Center [4] estimates that at least 72% of adults use at least one social media platform, and more than three-quarters of those people use social media at least once per day. These numbers have grown continuously since Pew began collecting this data in 2005 [4].

Users spend significant amounts of time engaging in activities on social media platforms. In 2018, the global average for time spent on social media daily peaked at nearly two and a half hours [9]. With regular usage, this could amount to years of one's life spent on social media, which strengthens the need for understanding how platforms impact users and how users engage with such technology.

Contemporarily, social media takes many forms, from the conceptually prototypical Facebook, to virtual bookmarking boards on Pinterest, to location-sharing social maps on Foursquare, and even gaming chat networks like Discord and Cellufun [10-12]. Each platform varies by user experience, services offered, and target population, but they all allow users to exchange ideas and content in shared spaces. Social media platforms also serve many purposes. Several scholars have identified uses for social media platforms, with research in 2011 focusing on five main uses: education, social mediaing, strategic

communication, politics, and legal/ ethical issues, with some categories being utilized more than others [13].

2.2 Impacts of Social Media

Several scholars have explored social media's impact on its users, and these impacts range from positive, negative, to relatively neutral. These previously studied effects of social media may contribute to a user's abandonment of Snapchat. For example, social media has been praised by some scholars for its ability to decrease depression in some users [14]. This work connects social media and its ability to mediate communication with friends and family to increased social capital and perceived social support [14]. Another study also suggests a positive relationship between Facebook use and life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement, and political participation among college students [15].

However, social media has also been heavily criticized for its negative impacts. For example, studies have linked increased depression with increased social media use [8]. Additionally, studies offer that the use of these platforms may be associated with a decline in life satisfaction [16], subjective well-being, and self-esteem, though these studies focus primarily on Facebook [17]. Researchers at the University of Glasgow [18] found that increased emotional investment in and nighttime usage of social media linked to heightened levels of anxiety and depression, and lowered quality of sleep and self-esteem. Low self-esteem has also been linked to general body dissatisfaction related to specific actions, like posting a selfie online [19].

Though the impacts of social media on users have been widely researched, many are limited in their sample (i.e. using university student convenience samples) and their generalizability. Additionally, much of this work has focused on Facebook. More importantly for this work, there is not a significant body of research focusing on people's decision-making around abandonment of social media platforms specifically, though this topic has been covered in the media regularly.

2.3 Decisions to Use or Abandon Social Media

As stated, the idea of abandoning or quitting social media has been covered extensively in the media. In 2018, The Guardian [20] wrote a profile on British Generation Z (1997-present) teens exasperated with the complications of curating and maintaining an online presence and its effects on their mental health [21]. A 2019 BuzzFeed [22] article about Millennials and Generation Z echoed this sentiment. The subjects expressed increased procrastination, social anxiety, insecurity, and more as pushes toward quitting [22]. Pew Research Center [23] also found that users have concerns about their privacy and the handling of their personal data, especially when it comes to Facebook usage.

Abandonment has also been examined in the scholarship as it related to other platforms. Interview research found that abandoners of instant messaging expressed feeling distracted and annoyed by features that they once adopted the services in order to use [24]. Similarly, the effects of quitting Facebook have also been analyzed. Work from 2016 found that ceasing Facebook usage increased well-being in two dimensions: it improves overall life satisfaction, and emotions become more positive, but this work

did not examine user motivations for leaving the platform in the first place [25]. We plan to broaden the scope of this research area by exploring abandonment on the Snapchat platform specifically. Snapchat is an excellent case study because of the declining user base and because it is an understudied platform in abandonment research.

2.4 Snapchat and Its Impact

Snapchat is a popular app-based social media platform known for the temporary and seemingly “disappearing” sharing of content [26]. Though it began as a messaging platform where users could send photographs, videos, and text-based messages that would disappear after a set amount of time, the list of features available has since expanded. Now, the platform offers a range of features: visual filters, which can be provided by the company or designed by advertisers [26]; “stories,” which allow set content to be shared with friends, regionally, or topically for a 24-hour time period; and a social map feature, which allows users to share their location with friends, although the application also permits a “ghost mode” where the user will not appear on anyone’s map but their own [27].

The temporary nature of Snapchat content is what makes the platform unique from others like Facebook and Twitter. Studies suggest that this feature offers users higher allowances for self-expression [28]. However, Snapchat content can still be captured in permanent and pseudo-permanent ways, such as screenshots, activity scores, “best friend” badges, and in the memories of recipients [29].

Some of these saving and sharing mechanisms associated with Snapchat may be especially pertinent to women. With the exception of the permanence of screenshots, studies have found that these other remnants of shared content can cause conflict ranging from jealousy in relationships [30], blackmail, slut-shaming, and oppression of women’s sexualities [29]. Due to the inability to confirm what content has been shared when there is no tangible record kept (in the form of visible “shares” on the platform, for example), people may lie about what content was saved and shared, hold screenshots of non-consensual images, and more. Women often express experiencing double standards and social consequences for their use of Snapchat because they are taken more seriously than their counterparts even when sharing the same content [29].

Snapchat has been linked to sexuality since its inception, with the media deeming it “the app built for sexting” despite any marketing as such by the platform [29]. This has prompted studies of the content shared, with some work focusing on the types of sexual images most commonly shared. Yockey and colleagues [31] found that as many as 22% of sexual images on Snapchat could be deemed non-consensual, a factor they express as concerning for understanding of norms on the platform. With the occurrence of “The Snapping” in 2014, wherein 100,000 breached photos were released to the public, the incidence of non-consensual sexual content can be increasingly worrying [32].

There have been studies examining the motivations of use for Snapchat. Among college students, researchers found that sending “carefree” content like food and selfies increased utilization of the platform [33]. However, other researchers additionally identified that Snapchat was used for functional and practical endeavors such as problem-solving and overall entertainment [34]. Though the uses for Snapchat have

clearly been studied in some capacity, there is a gap in an understanding of users' decision-making related to abandonment of the application after adoption.

Though Snapchat has been studied in a variety of ways since its introduction in the market, much of the research on user abandonment of digital systems is based on Facebook and other platforms (like messaging applications and social games). Since Snapchat's user base is shrinking, this is an interesting time to examine the abandonment of such a popular platform. Understanding why people leave popular platforms like Snapchat will provide valuable insights to various stakeholders. Additionally, these findings will contribute to the designing and building of better social platforms and more engaged, collaborative, and safe online environments.

3 Proposed Research

The research question guiding our proposed research is: What factors influence self-identifying Millennial women to abandon Snapchat? First, some terminology must be defined. For the purposes of this work, a Millennial is an individual born between the years 1981 and 1996 [21]. Millennials are known for their quick adoption of information communication technologies [36]. Millennial women make up a large portion of Snapchat's largest group, women between the ages of 18-29 [37]. Gender exists on a spectrum and not everyone fits into the man/woman binary [38], which is why the scope includes those who personally identify as women. Besides the fact that 70% of Snapchat users are women, as previously discussed, women often have different experiences from others on social media [37]. Abandonment, for the purposes of this study, can include total deletion of the application from a user's device, but also those who may still have the app installed, but have not used it in the last six months. We intend to make this definition clear to participants in the survey.

Our research will be conducted as a survey hosted on a digital survey platform. We plan to recruit 150 participants through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and participants will be paid \$1 upon completion of a ten-minute survey. The survey will consist of both open and closed questions. The open-ended questions allow us to capture rich data. Our questions are guided by Pew Research, scales found in our literature review, and by the gap we want to fill. We plan to include questions such as:

- How did you feel when you opened the Snapchat platform?
- How do you believe the platform affected your offline relationships?
- What type of support, if any, has this social media platform offered you?
- What type of experiences have you had on the Snapchat platform?

The responses to these questions will be hand-coded by multiple coders in order to conduct a content analysis. We will use statistical analysis on the quantitative portion of our dataset. We also intend to conduct cohort analyses to understand how different motivations may play a role within different demographic groups. This may include race, age, educational level, or other factors.

4 Conclusion

Though there are still millions of users, Snapchat's user base has been declining since 2018 [3]. This work will examine why Millennial self-identifying women choose to abandon the popular platform and will contribute to the existing literature about the abandonment of other social platforms. It also has implications for other key stakeholders. Findings from this research could be helpful to social media platform designers who are concerned about declining user populations, educators and parents who are interested in the experiences of young women on platforms like Snapchat, and Millennial women themselves, who may find themselves considering the use or abandonment of a platform like Snapchat. This work also has the potential to address important social issues, like mental health, sexuality, harassment, and privacy.

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