

The uses of Snapchat among students at the University of Sharjah

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Abstract : Snapchat has significantly influenced self-advertising and self-expression among individuals, particularly young people. The app's ability to provide greater control over privacy and audience management has contributed to its popularity. This exploratory study examines the impact of Snapchat on a sample of postgraduate students at the University of Sharjah, drawing on the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and conducting in-depth interviews with ten students. The main argument is that Snapchat serves a dual role by reflecting users' real lives and providing a platform for artistic and personal expression while facilitating a blend of public and private interactions. Additionally, while Snapchat's ephemeral nature enhances privacy and comfort, the potential for screenshots poses vulnerabilities. This ephemeral nature also facilitates a new pattern of civic use of Snapchat. Regarding gender differences in self-expression, Snapchat reflects existing societal norms and is a platform for negotiating and contesting new norms.

Keywords: Snapchat; UAE youth; ephemeral; privacy; self-expression.

1. Introduction

Social networking websites constitute web-based services that enable people to develop their profiles and connect with other users worldwide (Brandtzaeg, & Heim, 2011). Technological advancements have transformed the whole scenario of social media apps, leaving users with various options. Moreover, these applications have created significant competition among people to appear the best. Snapchat, launched in 2011, is a social media application that allows its users to stay connected with each other by sharing snaps and messages around the globe.

While Snapchat accommodates text messaging, its main attraction lies in its visual features, prominently showcased through its camera-driven interface. Serving as a versatile social platform, Snapchat offers various interactive features: users can exchange snapshots, engage in multimedia conversations, join group chats, share content on their stories, and view others' stories—identified as the app's most common usage (Piwek & Joinson, 2016).

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These snaps can be pictures or short videos with varied options for adding text, drawings, and illustrations. Snapchat has several privacy features that make it safe for people. The picture or video shared with friends disappears in just a few seconds. Also, the viewers can take a screenshot of the snap, but the sender is immediately informed (Vaterlaus et al., 2016).

Snapchat has played a significant role in self-advertising and self-expression among individuals. People of all ages have used Snapchat; however, younger populations are the main targets of Snapchat. For instance, students have used it to promote themselves by sharing their daily activities and routines; it has also helped them promote their hobbies and interests (Alsharif et al. n.d.). The original goal of Snapchat was to allow users to send a photo that would automatically delete itself after twenty-four hours. Thus, the recipient could only view the picture for a few seconds, as set by the sender. Once the recipient viewed the picture, they couldn't replay it without modifying the app. Although the app's user base has expanded, it remains primarily popular among young people. Privacy and audience management emerge as key factors in why young social media users have flocked to an app that allows them greater control over who sees which parts of their life narration (Cardell et al., 2018).

This study analyzes the benefits and implications of using Snapchat among a sample of postgraduate students at the University of Sharjah. Theoretically, the study draws on Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), and methodologically, it is based on in-depth interviews with ten students. Specifically, the study poses the following research questions:

1. How does the ephemeral nature of Snapchat impact users' perception of their privacy on Snapchat?
2. How does this ephemeral nature impact users' conversations on Snapchat?
3. Are there gender differences among users on Snapchat compared to other platforms?

We start with a concise literature review and a brief discussion of the chosen theory, UGT. We then outline the methodology followed by the findings, which are thematically divided to align with the research questions mentioned above

2. Literature review

Bayer et al. (2016) state that ephemeral social media has to gain popularity, and people share varied content for a limited period over these applications. Based on their study, they deduced that Snapchat interactions are more enjoyable and trigger positive moods compared to other social media applications. However, these interactions provide relatively less social support than other social media platforms. They believe that Snapchat has been more into sharing spontaneous content, such as videos or pictures, with close relationships; moreover, it helps limit self-presentation concerns by sharing mundane experiences daily.

Velten & Arif (2016) examined the interpersonal relationships affected by using Snapchat by looking into the factors influencing interpersonal relational development and communication. They argued that Snapchat usage directly affects people's interpersonal relationships by examining seven themes. Snapchat messaging involves high-level risk along

with identity management issues. Scherr & Wang (2021) applied user and gratification theory to examine the gratification niches of social media applications, particularly TikTok. They figured out that these social media applications enable social reward, trendiness, novelty, self-presentation, and escapist addiction. However, age is linked to trendiness in favorable terms while negatively related to escapist behavior.

Likewise, Phua et al. (2017) state that social media applications, including Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram, have significantly connected people worldwide. Although different people derive a varied level of bridging and bonding through social media applications, Snapchat users have the highest bonding social capital compared to Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. This is due to the "private nature" of Snapchat, where users can share pictures and videos with the people of their choice. Also, the shared material has been deleted right after the due time limit, thus making it safer to use. So, Snapchat relationships are considerably based on close friends and family members, strengthening one's relationship.

Kamble et al. (2021) explore the use of Snapchat among Generation Z to understand their motivations and interaction patterns with peers and romantic partners. The research utilized focus groups and in-depth interviews, and participants preferred Snapchat over other platforms due to the perceived security and authenticity it offers for communication. They also valued the ephemeral features of Snapchat, which align with their needs for privacy and security, making it a favored platform for connecting with friends and significant others. The analysis underscores the platform's alignment with the uses and gratifications theory, highlighting that the transient nature of Snapchat content meets specific user needs for managing social interactions without the permanence of other social media. This ephemeral quality also challenges conventional views on cultural memory, emphasizing a unique cultural shift towards the value of forgetting.

Dunn & Langlais (2020) provide another study that draws on quantitative and qualitative methodologies. They analyze data from undergraduates who responded to an online survey, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The findings indicate that specific Snapchat activities, such as interacting with peers, keeping tabs on former partners, and utilizing the Snap Map feature, were linked to heightened jealousy within romantic relationships. The evidence suggests that Snapchat may have negative implications.

Moreover, Piwek and Joinson (2016) employed an online survey to collect specific data on images or videos exchanged by users through Snapchat. The findings revealed that users predominantly exchange selfies and primarily use the service at home for communication with close friends and family, presenting it as an alternative to traditional instant messaging platforms. Additionally, intensive Snapchat usage was found to be more connected to fostering strong personal ties rather than expanding new ones.

Page (2019) introduces a multimodal framework designed to analyze the positioning of individuals and groups in selfies and other forms of representations within Snapchat's

Featured Stories, which serve as collective narratives of various public events. Findings indicate that the construction of group identities is significant in both selfies and quasi-selfies on Snapchat, and this discourse not only fosters social connections but is also ideologically loaded, often employing synthetic collectivization.

Also, Mittmann et al. (2022) surveyed hundreds of Austrian early adolescents to gather insights regarding their online friendships. Their thematic analysis revealed that early adolescents integrate online environments seamlessly into their communication habits, making little distinction between online and offline interactions. However, they still prefer face-to-face settings for deeper, more intimate exchanges to meet their communication needs. The study further suggests that online communication platforms do more than facilitate conversations; they also serve as vital spaces for establishing and nurturing friendships.

Villaespesa and Wowkowych (2020) analyzed how visitors at the Brooklyn Museum use Instagram and Snapchat stories, employing semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation techniques. Their findings shed light on the ephemeral nature of media shared on these platforms and the underlying motivations for such posts. Echoing the impulses of traditional photography, individuals often share content on social media driven by the desire to capture aesthetically pleasing artwork, document emotions, share experiences, or construct self-identity. However, unlike more permanent forms of digital sharing, the ephemeral quality of these stories encourages users to minimize editing and curation, highlighting the spontaneity and authenticity valued in these fleeting digital interactions.

Alsalem (2019) delved into the comparative usage and motivations behind using Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter among college students in Kuwait, using the Uses and Gratifications theory as a theoretical backdrop. The study involved a survey where students reported on their social media usage time, content satisfaction, specific intensity of use for each platform, and seven identified motives for use. The analysis revealed that while Instagram is the most frequently visited platform, Snapchat sees more intense use. The findings suggest that Snapchat is primarily used for passing time, self-expression, self-presentation, and entertainment. In contrast, Twitter users are motivated by self-presentation, entertainment, and social interaction. Instagram users, meanwhile, engage with the platform for passing time, social interaction, self-presentation, and entertainment. This study highlights distinct user preferences and motivations across these platforms, underscoring their diverse roles in digital social ecosystems.

Soffer (2016) explores Snapchat's unique qualities, emphasizing its ephemeral nature as a digital parallel to the fleetingness of spoken words. The app's design to automatically delete messages post-viewing mirrors a characteristic of primary oral cultures, where knowledge isn't stored but passed orally and transiently. This feature sets Snapchat apart, contradicting the prevailing new media norms that focus on data accumulation and permanence. The very name "Snapchat" encapsulates its dual essence: "snap" indicates the visual aspect of capturing moments through photography and "chat" suggests the dynamic, transient nature of

oral conversations. This blend of visual and oral cultures within Snapchat reflects a fusion of permanence and ephemerality, capturing moments while emphasizing their temporary nature within digital communications.

Cardell et al. (2018) discuss the significance of self-representation on Instagram and Snapchat within the context of cultural values around autobiographical storytelling. These platforms are seen as modern arenas for narrating personal life stories, where the technological features of the platforms blend with various modes of self-representation. In Snapchat, ephemerality is not just a feature but a value, lending authenticity to the content.

Finally, Weinstein (2018) utilized a mixed-methods approach to investigate the impact of daily social media interactions on apps like Snapchat. The study revealed that while social media can enhance feelings of closeness, it can also lead to feelings of alienation. Self-expression on these platforms often brings affirmation, yet it simultaneously raises concerns about judgment from peers.

Based on the above review, this study examines Snapchat's role in motivating its use among students at the University of Sharjah. As the review shows, despite its widespread use and unique disappearing content, there remains a scant focus on its implications in scholarly research in and about the Arab region, particularly the UAE, where there is the highest percentage of Snapchat users (<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-united-arab-emirates>).

3. Theoretical framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provides a framework for analyzing how individuals engage with media, emphasizing that media consumption is neither passive nor arbitrary but a highly active and purposeful process. According to UGT, the audience plays a proactive role in selecting media that they believe will fulfill their specific needs, distinguishing media as a tool for goal-oriented usage. This selection process is not done in isolation but in a competitive environment where various media forms vie for the consumer's attention, each offering different potential gratifications (West & Turner, 2017).

UGT asserts that individuals have a significant degree of self-awareness about their media use, including understanding their motivations and articulating these reasons. This self-awareness is critical, allowing researchers to gather insights directly from users about their media consumption patterns. Moreover, according to UGT, the effectiveness and value of media content are ultimately assessed by the users themselves, based on personal satisfaction and the degree to which the content meets their expectations and needs. This places the audience at the center, not just as consumers but as active participants who make strategic choices about their media interactions based on clearly defined personal goals.

Several recent studies have demonstrated the use of UGT in exploring social media, user engagement motivations, and its impact on social capital. For instance, Ahmad et al. (2021)

studied how Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat users acquire bridging and bonding social capital from these platforms, drawing on the UGT with Social Capital Theory to comprehend the motivations behind social media use and its impact on social capital. The study identified two types of social capital on social media: Bridging Social Capital, involving weak, distant relationships that offer new information and opportunities, and Bonding Social Capital, involving solid and close relationships that provide emotional support and trust. The researchers found that Bonding Social Capital tends to be highest on Snapchat due to its private nature, where users interact with close friends and family.

Furthermore, in their 2021 study, Scherr and Wang delve into the use of TikTok in China, drawing on the UGT to categorize the gratifications of using this social media platform. These gratifications include self-presentation, where users share content to seek attention; trendiness, as TikTok serves as an escape from reality; and novelty, as it provides fresh and engaging content. Also, Phua et al. (2017) applied the UGT and social capital theory to examine users of four social networking sites: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Their study introduced the concept of temporal niches, demonstrating that gratifications can vary throughout the day.

Finally, Heravi et al. (2018) examined the reasons behind using online social networks and the connection between these reasons, privacy worries, and privacy-related actions. They questioned the widespread belief that privacy concerns significantly impede self-disclosure, indicating a difference between privacy attitudes and behaviors. Finally, Gao and Feng (2016) delved into the diverse gratifications of Chinese social media users across various platforms, drawing on the UGT. The study pinpointed specific gratifications, including information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, and impression management, as pivotal drivers of user engagement on microblogs.

This study also draws on UGT, focusing on specific gratifications such as privacy, given the ephemeral nature of Snapchat. It will also test whether there are gender differences in using Snapchat given this ephemeral nature, which should add more privacy to female users in a relatively conservative society like the UAE.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method to provide insight into Snapchat's influence on the behavior of University of Sharjah students. The qualitative data is obtained through in-depth interviews with a selected sample of students. This approach enables researchers to understand the participants' attitudes and perspectives regarding Snapchat's use as a tool for self-expression.

It is important to note that the small sample size aligns with the study's exploratory nature, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. Thus, this study aims to uncover new patterns and themes related to Snapchat usage, particularly in the context of cultural and gender nuances in the UAE.

The participants for the study were selected using a convenient sampling technique, where each student at the University of Sharjah who meets the following criteria had an equal chance of being included in the research: 1) They are enrolled in any postgraduate course at the University of Sharjah. 2) They actively use social media applications. 3) They are regular users of Snapchat.

The final sample included ten students: three male and seven female PG students, seven of whom are UAE citizens and three are Saudi citizens. The sample's age groups range between 24 and 30. The interviews were conducted between July and September 2024.

Each student was interviewed for up to one hour and asked about their general perception of social media applications and Snapchat. They were also asked how Snapchat has affected their lives and whether it led them to self-expression.

All interviews were transcribed using the MS Word transcription function and checked for accuracy. Given the small number of interviews, they were analyzed manually, coding each according to the pre-defined codes determined by the research questions. The interviews were analyzed thematically. During the analysis, a new code or theme emerged: the use of Snapchat in civic discussions, as described in detail below.

In terms of ethical considerations, the University of Sharjah approved the study prior to conducting the fieldwork. Students were provided with information about the study, and they gave their consent to participate in this research. All the data was kept confidential and was used only for this research.

5. Findings

5.1 General Uses of Snapchat

Snapchat has established itself as a multifaceted platform for personal expression and communication among students in the UAE. This section explores how students utilize Snapchat, integrating their exact words to provide an authentic glimpse into their experiences.

For instance, P1 views Snapchat as a tool for candid, unfiltered sharing, contrasting it sharply with other platforms: "I don't check a lot; I just shoot and upload all the time. But with Instagram and WhatsApp, I check everything to make sure that the photos and videos are of high quality and have essential content." This perspective highlights Snapchat's role in fostering spontaneous social interaction, separate from the curated personas often cultivated on other social media platforms. P1 adds, "I see myself as aware enough to separate my real life from what is on social media. Snapchat is just a means of communication and fun for me, but I do not allow it to change me or my personality."

P2 uses Snapchat as a digital diary, sharing daily activities and thoughts: "My content is simple. I share my diary and things like having a cup of coffee or a book I read." This use

underscores the platform's role in documenting personal life and sharing these moments with friends. "If I go to a new place, I take pictures of it and send them to friends, and sometimes I shoot a video while driving or sitting in a quiet place," P2 explains, indicating Snapchat's role in maintaining connections.

P3 emphasizes privacy and selective sharing: "I made my account private, and I do not accept requests for additions from people I do not know." This highlights a cautious approach to social media, focusing on intimate circles and personal content, contrasting with broader social networking practices. P8 contrasts Snapchat with other platforms, particularly in terms of content spontaneity: "Snapchat is the place where I can be spontaneous and not worry about the quality of pictures or videos."

Moreover, P4 details an active engagement with Snapchat's story feature: "Lately, I've been more active in sharing stories with my friends. I post pictures of everyday moments like enjoying a cup of coffee at a café or in my car." P4 also mentions the safe environment Snapchat provides, "I think Snapchat is safe in general, and I have been using it for years."

P5 sees Snapchat as an informal and fun space: "Snapchat is like a diary for me; I take pictures of everything and share them constantly." This sentiment is echoed in their approach to content sharing, "I don't like to share serious things on Snap, I feel that it is a place for light communication and entertainment, not a place for heavy topics."

P7 offers insights into more nuanced uses of Snapchat. P7, as an influencer, uses the platform extensively: "I am an influencer on Snapchat, so I use it daily intensively. I always record my diary, whether I'm at home or out." Similarly, P9, an abaya designer, uses Snapchat to share professional content and personal anecdotes, though not without challenges: "Unfortunately, I receive negative comments about some of my designs, with some girls criticizing the colors and lengths of the abayas." Finally, P10 encapsulates the overall sentiment towards Snapchat's unique appeal in social media: "Snapchat is unique among social networking apps because it is primarily used for photography."

On the other hand, P7 also experiences the darker side of social visibility: "I always get bullied about the way I talk or even about how I look, such as the shape of my nose or body, especially when I post a story from the gym."

In summary, these narratives underscore Snapchat's dual role as both a mirror and a canvas: it reflects users' real lives and provides a space for artistic and personal expression. The platform facilitates a blend of public and private interactions, allowing users to navigate between personal, professional, and playful engagements. Despite its casual and ephemeral nature, Snapchat is not immune to the complexities and pressures of social media dynamics, such as privacy concerns and online bullying. However, its continuous evolution and the specific ways it is cherished by users, highlighted by the students' testimonials, suggest its enduring relevance in the digital social landscape.

5.2 Privacy and the Ephemeral Nature of Snapchat

Snapchat's distinctive appeal lies in its ephemeral nature, which significantly shapes user interactions and perceptions of privacy. The following accounts from various users explore these aspects, revealing both the benefits and the concerns associated with the platform.

For instance, P1 appreciates the transient nature of content on Snapchat, noting, "You can share something, but no one saves it. If someone took a screenshot, you would know immediately." This feature provides a layer of security, though P1 acknowledges potential improvements: "I expect [Snapchat] to cancel the screen capture feature, to make people use it more." The casual, carefree use of the app is evident as P1 adds, "On Snapchat, I talk freely and be myself, photographing what I like and posting it without thinking too much."

P2 emphasizes a tightly controlled privacy setting: "I am keen on my privacy, and my account is private. I only add people that I know well, my close friends, and my small family." This selective sharing ensures a trusted circle, enhancing the sense of security. P2 also appreciates the technical safeguards,

"Snapchat is a platform that prioritizes privacy. I feel at ease knowing that the pictures I save, whether within the app or in a private folder, are fully protected. The app also offers features like password protection for the clipboard, ensuring that only I can access it. This gives me peace of mind...The 'seconds' feature helps a lot as the pictures disappear after a few seconds, and this gives more privacy, but sometimes I fear the screenshot or the possibility of someone taking a screenshot of the photo...I think the seconds feature may develop in the future. It may let the picture or video disappear immediately after the person sees it without being able to save it or store it in the conversation, which can make people feel safer when they send private photos."

P3 and P10 share concerns about the potential to misuse the seconds-feature. P3 recounts, "Sometimes, I share things I don't want anyone to keep, so this feature is very useful." However, the risk of screenshots remains a notable worry: "But it is also a double-edged sword because some people can misuse it, such as taking screenshots and saving the picture." P3 adds that,

The seconds-feature is important to me because it makes the content temporary. Sometimes, I share things I don't want anyone to keep, so this feature is very useful. But it is also a double-edged sword because some people can misuse it, such as taking screenshots and saving the picture. For example, once, I sent my picture without a veil to a friend who was not close to me to show her the color of my hair, but she saved the picture without my permission."

P10 echoes this sentiment, suggesting an enhancement to the platform: "Snapchat's seconds feature could be enhanced by adding a feature that prevents users from taking screenshots of private images." P10 adds,

"Sometimes, the 'seconds' feature of Snapchat photos provides more privacy to the image because it disappears after a few seconds, preventing the recipient from saving it. However, it's still possible for someone to take a screenshot of the photo and save it. To prevent this, I only add people I trust and know in real life to this application...for instance, I once shared a very special photo. I took a picture of my mother and some family members at home to share this friendly moment with my brother, who is studying abroad. However, I accidentally sent it to a university colleague instead of my brother. I felt very embarrassed because my relationship with this colleague was very superficial. I quickly deleted my colleague from Snapchat before she saw the image because the 'seconds' feature was not available then. To this day, I don't know if my colleague saw the picture or not...I believe Snapchat is very private and secure. However, rumors often spread about the app, such as the claim that it saves photos permanently, even if they haven't been shared with friends or through a private story."

P5 and P8 discuss the implications of mistakenly sharing content. P5 mentions, "For example, it can become a problem if you accidentally send something to the wrong person." P8 values the platform for sharing more personal moments:

"If I have a funny situation or a spontaneous shot with friends, I share it on Snapchat because I know it disappears after a while... Snapchat gives me the freedom to share things that I am not comfortable sharing on other platforms...I feel that it gives a sense of privacy, but at the same time, one must be careful. Even if the pictures disappear quickly, there is always a possibility that someone will take a screenshot or save it in some way...In the future, [snapchat] should provide more privacy so that people trust it more and feel more comfortable sharing their private content."

P6 contrasts Snapchat with other social platforms, highlighting its unique notification feature:

"Snapchat is different because it notifies me if someone takes a screenshot, giving me a greater sense of privacy...You can rest assured that the recipient of a picture can only view it once or twice on Snapchat... still, if Snapchat were to prohibit screen capture, people would feel even more confident about sharing more private content and wouldn't worry about compromising their privacy."

P7 acknowledges Snapchat's general security but recalls a breach: "However, I cannot guarantee that it won't get hacked. It happened to me once, but thankfully, I restored my account within 12 hours." P9 voices concerns about data usage: "I have some concerns about Snapchat. I've heard that Snapchat may use pictures from accounts, especially in Arab countries." This unease is balanced with the platform's necessity for professional purposes.

These narratives highlight a common theme: while Snapchat's ephemeral nature generally enhances privacy and comfort, it is not without its vulnerabilities. Users appreciate the temporary visibility of content and the notification of screenshots, which are seen as

protective measures. However, the potential for screenshots and privacy breaches remains a concern. Enhancements like preventing screenshots or making content disappear immediately after viewing could further strengthen trust in the platform. Thus, Snapchat, by constantly evolving and addressing user concerns about privacy, can continue to offer a secure and enjoyable environment for sharing fleeting moments of daily life. The platform's ongoing commitment to improving user experience and security features will likely dictate its future adoption and user trust levels.

5.3 Gender differences among users

Snapchat's role in reflecting and challenging societal norms is evident in the varying ways users from different cultural and gender backgrounds engage with the platform. This section integrates user experiences to explore how cultural and gender differences influence Snapchat use.

For instance, P1 touches on the gender dynamics of social media usage: "Even girls today photograph their faces, post their private diaries, and publish them like young men do, and maybe more sometimes, and this has become very normal in our society today." However, P1 also notes the variability of this openness depending on family values, stating, "Some girls belong to very conservative families and can't share everything."

P2 illustrates the complexities of navigating family expectations and social freedom. They share a story where family connections unexpectedly overlapped with social media: "One time, I took a photo of a place I was planning to visit with my friend. This place is off-limits for my family." P2 adds,

Most of my friends use Snapchat more freely than I do. They share things more daringly than I do, such as posting their stories, personal photos, or videos while in public places or even at home. They also use the seconds feature to post very private things. I am always careful in these matters...There is a clear [gender] difference. Men often publish their diaries with their friends and talk about their cars, but women tend to post pictures of the food they cook or things related to clothes, gowns, and makeup...Most girls publish their diaries like boys today, but some girls remain bound by the stereotype imposed by society or their families, preventing them from posting private pictures on the platform.

Thus, the potential for unintended information sharing showcases the delicate balance users maintain between their online presence and offline realities.

P3 and P10 discuss gender-specific content preferences and the implications of these choices. P3 observes, "My [female] colleagues use it more conservatively than young men, and this is due to customs and traditions." P3 also highlight the harsh reality of online interactions: "Online abuse is widespread, and I see a lot of bullying."

P3 provides one specific example: "Once, my friend filmed only her hand on Snapchat, and people bullied her because she was obese. This happened in front of me when she was with me for dinner," adding that "Stereotypes affect some girls who break with customs by constantly posting their diaries to strangers in order to attract attention." Moreover, P10 asserts the gender differences among users:

There are differences in the type of content posted by different genders on Snapchat. I've noticed that girls tend to be more reserved about sharing their photos and personal thoughts, possibly due to cultural norms, while young men seem more open. Young men also post more daring content, including inappropriate videos, on their Snapchat stories. At the same time, girls may also share inappropriate content but do so through a private story that only selected people can view. This is just my observation. Yet, some girls misuse [snapchat]; for example, they can photograph some people outside (in public places) without asking permission from people, which is illegal... one of my friends filmed a person dancing in the street in front of his friend's car. She posted this video on the Snapchat story.

P4, P5, and P6 further detail the gendered experiences on Snapchat. P4 suggests that the ephemeral nature of Snapchat's content holds particular appeal for female users: "I share what I want to share, but I think this [seconds] feature is more useful for girls." P5 mentions, "Some girls are prohibited from sharing their diary or using Snapchat generally due to social restrictions," while P6 contrasts the freedom young men have in posting photos with the scrutiny that girls might face.

P7 and P8 both address the stereotypical content shared by different genders: men posting about cars or sports and women posting about beauty and fashion. P7 shares personal experiences with inappropriate comments due to their public figure status: "Because I'm famous, some men take advantage of this and send me inappropriate comments on the private or even comments on the photos and videos I post."

P9 provides a hopeful perspective on the changing norms: "Stereotypes had an effect in the past, but now, society has become more open. This means there is no longer a big difference between girls' and young men's use of applications." However, they acknowledge that some restrictions remain, especially for women in more conservative families.

Through these accounts, it is clear that while Snapchat offers a platform for self-expression and connection, it also reflects societal norms and expectations. Cultural and gender differences shape how individuals use the app, from the content they feel comfortable sharing to how they interact with others. These disparities highlight progress and ongoing societal challenges, as users navigate the interplay between personal identity and cultural expectations.

In summary, Snapchat serves as a mirror reflecting existing societal norms and a stage where new norms are negotiated and contested. The platform provides a unique space for users to express themselves, potentially reshaping cultural and gender norms over time.

Nonetheless, the influence of traditional values and the risk of online abuse remain significant factors that affect user experiences, particularly for women.

5.4 Civic uses of Snapchat

One intriguing observation is how participants leverage Snapchat's temporary nature. They use the app's ephemeral nature to initiate and engage in meaningful civic discussions on taboo or controversial topics. This unique use of Snapchat showcases how individuals find innovative ways to use social media as a platform for important conversations. Snapchat, known for its ephemeral nature, plays a complex role in its users' digital expression and civil behavior. This section then explores how cultural norms and the app's temporary nature influence user behavior, particularly focusing on civil uses and the challenges that arise in this context.

For instance, P1 mentioned that they wrote about issues such as polygamy, early marriage, and forced marriage, while P2 stated engaging with "topics like drug addiction that are very sensitive and need awareness". Otherwise, P2 also mentioned that given the sensitivity of such topics, preference is given to face-to-face conversations.

P3 provides insight into the conservative use of Snapchat among female colleagues due to cultural traditions: "My [female] colleagues use it more conservatively than young men, and this is due to customs and traditions, but despite this thing, they publish their pictures on the story of Snap, and this is something I cannot do." This statement reflects the careful negotiation between personal expression and cultural expectations. Additionally, P3 highlights the darker side of Snapchat's social interactions: "Online abuse is widespread, and I see a lot of bullying." This example underscores the challenges of maintaining civility in a digital space where anonymity and ephemerality can sometimes lead to negative behavior.

The issue of online bullying is further complicated by societal stereotypes, as P3 notes: "Stereotypes affect some girls who break with customs by constantly posting their diaries to strangers in order to attract attention." This observation points to the tension between the desire for personal expression and the scrutiny often accompanying it, particularly for women challenging traditional norms.

Other users engage in the promotion of the UAE, such as P6, who states,

Sometimes, I post pictures of our sheikhs, may God protect them, and sometimes, videos in which I talk about the UAE's achievements, especially in areas such as development and progress that you see around every corner. We must show the world our pride in what we do...I often receive criticism, especially when I post content about our rulers or the state. Some people like to comment, especially those from outside the UAE. You see them criticizing anything related to our country. Even if one responds to them, you still don't know exactly what they want...I often share information about new state laws that relate to filming in public places or insulting

people. It's important to be aware of these laws to avoid getting into trouble unknowingly... For example, some laws prohibit taking photographs of people in public without their permission or engaging in insulting behavior toward others on social media. These laws are especially important in our society, where we value people's privacy.

P8 also states that,

More than once, I engaged on Snapchat in conversations on societal issues such as blood donation or environmental preservation campaigns. Snapchat is an excellent way to promote these matters because it reaches people quickly, especially since everyone opens their Snapchat daily and sees the content constantly. For example, I shared information about a voluntary blood donation campaign, and some of my friends reacted and asked about the details, which made me feel that Snapchat is really a powerful means of awareness.

P10 discusses the gender dynamics of Snapchat usage, noting the different types of content shared by men and women: "There are differences in the type of content posted by different genders on Snapchat. I've noticed that girls tend to be more reserved about sharing their photos and personal thoughts, possibly due to cultural norms, while young men seem more open." This difference reflects societal expectations and influences how users navigate their online presence. P10 also addresses the misuse of the platform: "Yet, some girls misuse [snapchat]; for example, they can photograph some people outside (in public places) without asking permission from people, which is illegal..." This incident highlights the ethical considerations that come with the freedom afforded by Snapchat's features.

Thus, the temporary nature of Snapchat content, while offering a sense of security in terms of privacy, does not necessarily mitigate the potential for misuse or alleviate the societal pressures that shape user behavior. As users continue to explore the boundaries of what is acceptable to share, the platform serves as a battleground for negotiating personal freedom, privacy, and societal norms.

In summary, Snapchat's ephemeral platform design offers unique opportunities for casual, less permanent sharing, which can be liberating for users. However, this same feature can also contribute to uncivil behavior, such as bullying and privacy violations, which are compounded by cultural norms and gender expectations. Addressing these challenges requires platform-level interventions and broader societal changes that promote respect and privacy in digital interactions. As Snapchat evolves, it remains to be seen how these dynamics will play out and how users will adapt their behaviors in response to both technological and cultural shifts.

6. Conclusion

In exploring the various themes associated with Snapchat usage among students in the UAE, it is clear that Snapchat serves as a dynamic platform reflecting broader societal and

cultural dynamics. From general usage and privacy concerns to the impacts of cultural and gender norms, Snapchat users navigate a complex web of social interactions and personal expressions.

The platform's ephemeral nature largely contributes to its appeal, allowing users to share moments of their lives with a perceived safety net against long-term repercussions. However, this same feature also raises privacy concerns, as users fear the potential for screenshots and misuse, underscoring the need for more robust safeguards against such vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, the discourse on cultural and gender differences reveals how deeply entrenched societal norms influence the behavior of male and female users differently, shaping the content they feel comfortable sharing and how they engage with the platform.

Thus, Snapchat mirrors existing societal behaviors but still provides a space where norms can be contested and renegotiated. As users continue to push the boundaries of what is culturally acceptable, Snapchat stands as a testament to the evolving landscape of digital social interaction, highlighting the opportunities for greater personal expression and the persistent challenges of maintaining privacy and civility in the digital age.

Despite the above insights, it is important to note this study's limitations. First, the study is exploratory and was constrained to a small sample of postgraduate students at one UAE university; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the results offer a fresh perspective on the transient uses of social media apps like Snapchat, which could be further explored in a larger-scale study. Second, the study exclusively relied on qualitative interviews to gain deeper insights from the participants. However, future research could consider employing alternative research methods, such as surveys with a broader participant base encompassing various age groups. Finally, it is important to note that this study is exploratory in nature, although it still offers valuable insights and potential research directions for future studies to explore. The preliminary findings of this study provide a foundation for further investigations and may serve as a springboard for more in-depth exploration in the field.

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