

## *Snapchat's Broken Promises: A Gender Analysis of the Social Media Platform*

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### RÉSUMÉ

Cette analyse de genre de la plateforme Snapchat explore les affordances de l'application en fonction de l'engagement initial que les créateurs ont promis à leurs utilisateur-ric-e-s. Les déclarations étant qu'ils ne se conformeraient pas aux normes de beauté vues sur d'autres plateformes, que la liberté d'expression serait encouragée sans embarras à ce sujet, et enfin, qu'il n'y aurait pas d'historique des publications sur cette application pour hanter les utilisateur-ric-e-s par la suite. Aussi convaincantes que ces promesses puissent paraître, dix ans après le lancement de Snapchat, certaines incohérences apparaissent en raison des différentes possibilités qui encouragent la performativité et la séparation des genres, comme les filtres de beauté. En outre, certaines fonctionnalités de la plateforme permettent aux utilisateur-ric-e-s de violer plus facilement la politique de confidentialité, ce qui a un impact genré négatif. Des alternatives de conception sont proposées à la fin de l'analyse, prouvant que des changements importants doivent être apportés afin de transformer cette application en une plateforme sûre et inclusive pour tou-te-s.

*Mots-clés* : Snapchat, réseaux sociaux, genre, affordance, design

### ABSTRACT

*This gender analysis of the social media platform Snapchat explores the affordances of the application according to the initial commitment the creators promised to their users. The statements being that they would not conform to the norms of beauty seen on other platforms, that freedom of expression is encouraged as there would be no embarrassment from it, and finally, that there will be no social media history on this app to haunt users afterwards. As compelling as these promises sound, ten years after the Snapchat launch, there are some inconsistencies that emerge due to the different affordances that encourage gender performativity and separation such as beauty filters. Moreover, some features of the platform make it easier for users to break the privacy policy which negatively affects gender practices on the application. Some design alternatives are given at the end of the analysis proving that there are important changes to be made for this app to be safe and inclusive for every gender.*

*Keywords* : Snapchat, social media, gender, affordance, design

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Snapchat is a popular social media application used mostly by teenagers and young adults to quickly exchange pictures or messages with friends. This platform offers a unique affordance that erases the photos and conversations after viewing if not saved. This application has been heavily criticized on many accounts such as gender-related issues since its release to the public in 2011, yet it is still widely utilized. According to an article written by Brian O'Connell (2020), Snapchat was originally created by three Stanford students, all men, who thought about the idea of quickly disappearing "snaps" in order to remove the awkwardness of posting a long-lasting picture on social media. In their first blog entry to share their new technology with the world, three statements were made about Snapchat that can now be contradicted through a gender analysis of the app. The first one being that it does not conform to the unrealistic notions of beauty and perfection that can be found in other social media platforms, the second affirmation encourages the freedom of expression from the user without being embarrassed, and the third one states that there will be no social media history to haunt the consumers (O'Connell, 2020). However, through its design, and its superfluous privacy policy, Snapchat contradicts these three initial promises while creating gender and racial discrimination.

### **The Impact of Filters**

Firstly, the creators originally specify that one of their goals is to offer a platform in which there are no unrealistic beauty standards, yet the early introduction of intricate filters in their design indicates otherwise (O'Connell, 2020). Snapchat comes with many filters that users can choose from to take a picture with, yet many morph the face and even whitewash it. Indeed, many of these filters remove blemishes and other imperfections such as bags under the eyes. The filters often present instances of gender constructivism. This is especially geared towards the female gender while makeup is added to the face while the nose is made smaller, the eyes bigger, and the lips more luscious creating the picture-perfect face according to society's traditional beauty norms. These filters create

the performance of unrealistic social media beauty standards towards their users (especially women) by encouraging blemish-free faces. Therefore, easily influenced audiences such as young girls get more concerned with their appearances which can create all sorts of self-confidence issues and even encourage them to change their bodies using unhealthy methods (creating eating disorders) or have surgery to look like the filters as concluded in a 2020 research by Janella Eshiet (Eshiet, 2020, p.56-57). Morphing the face is not the only capability of these filters, some actually lighten up the skin tone to create a sense of youthfulness and “glowiness,” but for black users, it actually renders their skin lighter taking their race and identity away from them. Usually, those filters offer the possibility of having colored eyes but brown is never in the choices which push the unrealistic beauty standards of the skinny, white, soft-faced girl with light-colored eyes. Moreover, one filter called “gender swap” offers the possibility of changing the face with one that looks like the opposite gender for “fun” while some transgender people have to fight for their life to be recognized as a specific gender. However, it does not end there, the traits given by the filters when applied to the face are stereotypes of the “perfect” man and woman facial features like a square jaw for the male filter or a soft skin for the female one. So much for wanting to promote an app with no unrealistic beauty standards, Snapchat conforms and even creates the norms of perfection through their design of gendered filters.

### **Poor Privacy Policy**

Secondly, the application encourages the users to express themselves freely without any repercussions that can haunt them later, yet horror stories of nude leaks as well as unwanted explicit pictures and gender-targeted ads violate this approach that can not be regulated by the privacy policy of the app. Even though it is highly discouraged in the privacy policy terms of Snapchat, young people still feel pressure to share pictures of their naked bodies on this app since there is a chance for them to disappear, yet a simple screenshot can ruin a life forever. It is also an easy platform to leak nudes quickly which does not help the situation. There have been many cases over the years pertaining

to underage explicit pictures taken on this app that had to be considered as child pornography criminal cases even if they are distributed and taken by minors according to an article in *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* (Lorang, McNiel, & Binder, 2016). Unfortunately, it seems to be more of a gendered issue as girls and LGBTQ+ peoples are more susceptible to this kind of cyberbullying as there is immense social pressure to send nudes to male counterparts, for example. In addition, the platform indicates in its privacy policy that none of the “snaps” are saved in the system, so it makes for harder investigations into the matter for criminal cases. A recent example in an article found on ABC news written by Joel Brown (2020) describes the story of a young female college student who was raped and filmed on Snapchat where the content was shared with fellow friends of the rapist. In the end, the video disappeared from the platform due to its design. This instance exposes the problems with this app which hides the evidence against her assault and ended with a lawsuit against the social media platform for its purposeful design for easy as well as secretive creation and distribution of non-consensual sexually explicit content. Moreover, unwanted explicit pictures are also non-consensual sexually explicit images that are shared against the receiver’s accord. In fact, Snapchat has a problem with what this CNN news article call porn bots which are fake accounts with seemingly real names that distribute pornographic content to users without their consent as a marketing strategy to bring people to their sites (Segall, 2014). The worst is that even if the account of the problematic user is flagged for misconduct, there is no follow-up from the company towards the victim to let them know if the account was deleted or if there was an investigation which is one of the points Ysabel Gerrard criticizes in her article about social media content moderation (Gerrard, 2020).

Furthermore, Snapchat uses user information and 3rd party information from other social media platforms to target specific ads towards gender essentialism which is a problem that arises in Rena Bivens and Oliver L. Haimson’s study of advertisements in social media apps (Bivens and Haimson, 2016). Users are put in these essentialist gender boxes in order to control their feed in their stories page in which content and ads are displayed. Finally, Snapchat’s fake vow of privacy and freedom of expression can be

reiterated truthfully through online sexual harassment and invasion of privacy leading to gendering practices.

In conclusion, Snapchat's original promises to their users of non-conforming with classic gender beauty standards, of promoting a safe outlet for freedom of expression, along with offering a torment-free social media platform are obliterated by its true design with unrealistic filters, sexual-harassment concerns, and targeted advertisements with no repercussions according to their privacy policy. This analysis dictates a current report of problems recorded in social media platforms and the lack of agency from the creators to prevent them. If Snapchat could be changed to mirror its original statements, it would have to change its filters to represent all genders and imperfections equally by still being fun to play around with like removing the morphing and whitewashing characteristics of some of them. Then, it would have to be offered only for adults since explicit content can be too easily shared and received by its users, and/or pictures should be saved by a data system to be investigated if needed. Also, ads should be suggested towards interests instead of targeted towards gender to keep the user involved.

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