

Snapchat finds its niche with disappearing messages

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The Snapchat logo is seen at the front entrance to the messaging company's new headquarters in California, pictured November 14, 2013

For 13-year-old Coral Fairchild, Snapchat trumps old-style text messaging as the way to socialize with friends in the mobile Internet age.

The northern California girl adds mustaches to faces in pictures or

speech bubbles using touch-screen features that allow people to draw on Snapchat images being sent.

"You can take a regular selfie and customize it into a princess or a unicorn or whatever you want," she explained. "It's just a more fun way to communicate."

But if the message turns out to be too embarrassing, no problem. It will disappear in seconds.

The Southern California-based service has gained notoriety for the app that lets people send smartphone photos or video snippets timed to self-destruct 10 seconds or less after being opened.

Snapchat has rocketed to popularity since the initial app was released in September of 2011. Its growth initially sparked fears that, in a world of selfies, it would provide a false sense of security for teenagers thinking of sexting risque photos.

That concern appears unfounded, according to Matthew Johnson, director of education at Canadian not-for-profit digital literacy organization MediaSmarts.

"There is no evidence that Snapchat is being used any more recklessly than any other message service," Johnson said.

"Young people expect their friends and peers to do the right thing and rely on social pressure when it goes wrong," he continued, citing research done by MediaSmarts.

"In general, their instincts are very good, and they have in many ways a better handle on the social and emotional aspects of these technologies than we tend to think."

Conversations based on ephemeral images also reduce the potential for misunderstanding by providing expressions and other visual cues absent in email or basic text messages, according to Johnson.



Evan Spiegel of Snapchat attends TechCrunch Disrupt SF 2013 at San Francisco Design Center on September 9, in San Francisco

"Many adults can relate to reading an email and not knowing whether the person who sent it was being angry or sarcastic," he said.

"Move that to text messaging where there is a limit to the number of characters you can use and the back-and-forth is faster, and there is always the possibility of something exploding because someone misunderstands something."

Along with providing pictures, typically selfies showing expressions, the

mere fact someone is using Snapchat usually sends a signal that they are being playful and not serious, according to Johnson.

"Snapchat is essentially one big Smiley," he said, referring to a well-known happy-face emoticon.

The startup made news when the Wall Street Journal reported it rejected a \$3 billion offer from Facebook, presumably because its founders believed it would be worth more than that.

And other reports said Snapchat delivers some 400 million photos or videos daily from users, although the number is believed to count each time a recipient opens a file, possibly counting some messages more than once.

Snapchat skews young due to the fact it is aimed at people who prefer messaging from mobile gadgets.

Snapchat chief Evan Spiegel was recently quoted by the Wall Street Journal as saying that 70 percent of Snapchat users are women.

The company's in-house sociology researcher, Nathan Jurgenson, sees the service as a natural place for pictures that won't return to haunt people.

"It's easy to underestimate the significance of injecting more ephemerality into social media," Jurgenson said in a blog post.



Snapchat allows users to compose picture and text messages which 'self-destruct' some 10 seconds after the recipient opens them

"Part of the Snapchat appeal is that it serves as a social cue that something shouldn't be saved, not that it can't," he said.

"Young people say they will use it for something silly or a little embarrassing that they still want to share just with friends."

Jurgenson said the fact that the messages are timed to destruct means people will give them more attention: "When you look fast, you look hard."

Snapchat recently added a "Stories" feature that strings together a series of "snaps" to create a narrative that is available for repeated viewing by recipients for 24 hours.

But even with though the messages disappear, it is quite easy to copy Snapchat messages or pictures before they vanish, and research shows that [young people](#) are aware of that, according to Johnson.

Johnson expected the merging of pictures and text to become the new standard in messaging, while Coral Fairchild portrayed Snapchat as the "great next step" in mobile communications.

"I don't Snapchat anyone I don't know; that would be weird," Coral Fairchild said, noting she would make an exception for Harry Styles of mega-popular boy band One Direction.

"He wouldn't get my ugly faces, unless we were best friends."

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