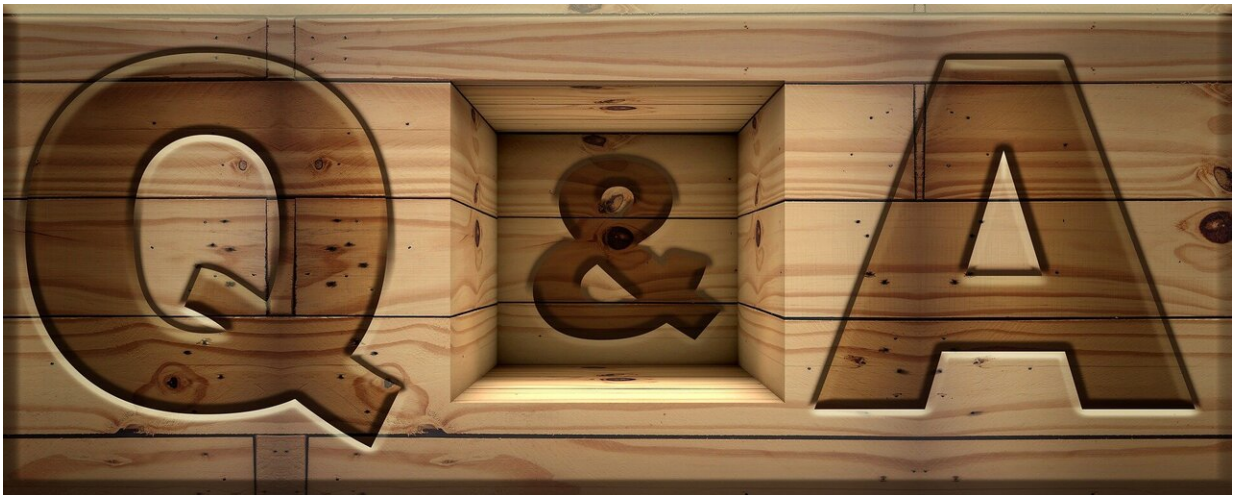


New Yolo anonymous Q&A app attracts millions of teenage users, has parents wary

June 18 2019, by Madeline Purdue, Usa Today



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As schools head into summer break, a new app allowing users to ask one another questions anonymously is captivating millions of teenagers.

Yolo is an anonymous question-and-answer app that connects to Snapchat as a way for friends to send comments and questions to each other. The person using Yolo can reply to the comment or answer the question on the Snapchat story along with a picture.

The messages are shown as sent by "Someone," and currently there isn't

a way to identify who senders are unless they choose to reveal themselves privately to the recipient.

Concerns over bullying on this platform have been raised due to the anonymous feature.

Gina Denham has a daughter who turns 12 next month and will not allow her to download Yolo due to the "negativity" she has seen on her 18-year-old niece's Snapchat revolving around Yolo.

"They showed me several (messages) that had the anonymous comments and I did not see one single positive remark. They were all horrible—there was extreme name calling. Several were referencing other kids who aren't even on Snapchat," said Denham. "I don't understand why they want to put themselves out there, setting themselves up for negativity like that."

Anonymous Apps

Problems can arise whenever anonymous messaging apps gain popularity due to mean-spirited or inappropriate comments, as seen on anonymous apps such as YikYak or Sarahah, which were popular a few years ago. Sarahah eventually was kicked off the iOS and Google Play app stores due to intense bullying by users.

Gregoire Henroin, co-founder of Yolo, did not anticipate the app becoming an overnight success. It has spent five weeks straight on the Top 10 apps list on the iOS App Store, and was in the No. 1 spot for two weeks during that time period. The app has been downloaded over 5 million times since being released on May 2.

Henroin is aware of the history of anonymous apps and wants to make sure his platform doesn't follow suit.

"Most anonymity apps failed because they were populated with bad content like (bullying) and the retention was low," Henroin said. "So our approach is, 'How do we create a healthy community where content is always good and people can use it for a long time?'"

He specifically wanted this app to pair with Snapchat because it was "the obvious track" to attract teenage users. He said the app "hit a nerve" as something users wanted.

Anonymous communication apps tend to be popular among teenagers and lead to bullying because they are starting to develop their own social status and learn [social norms](#), said Yalda Uhls, author of *Media Moms and Digital Dads*, and founder of the Center for Scholars and Storytellers.

"Your social cognitive system turns on as you hit puberty. You're starting to think, 'Oh my god, what do my friends think of me?' And these anonymous question apps really feed into that," said Uhls. "They're figuring out the social world. They don't understand what's mean and what's nice, and actions are separated from consequences (on social media)."

Bullying and Harassment

Yolo's profile on the iOS app store says the anonymous comments are meant to gain "positive feedback" from followers and warns users they will lose their anonymous status and will be identified if they send harassing messages. It is unclear how well the app is delivering on this promise.

Users have reported issues with the app's response to harassment and inappropriate comments. While other social media platforms have had issues controlling abusive content and fake accounts, Yolo promises

during the sign-up process that the app will not allow inappropriate behavior, yet users are having a difficult time identifying their harassers.

One review of Yolo on the iOS app store said they had reached out to the app's customer service department to identifying a harasser so they could block them but never got a response.

"(T)his was almost two weeks ago and the identity of the person has still not been revealed like the app "claims" it does," said the review.

A similar review said that instead of revealing the name of the person when they reported the comment, it just disappeared from their app.

"We know we have some complaints, but we are working to eliminate all the bad content," Henroin said.

Other users are raising alarms about how the app filters messages. Reviewers complain that Yolo filters the messages based on the presence of what it has deemed inappropriate words instead of how it is used in context to the message. In this case, the message is not delivered to the recipient and the sender does not know it has been filtered, raising questions in the reviews about how to better censor harmful messages.

Henroin said that filtering messages is a way to ensure only positive content is on Yolo.

"We invested a lot into security. This is our No. 1 concern, to keep the app as clean as possible. We need to invest even more in that."

What parents should watch for

Even with security measures, Uhls says parents should think twice before allowing their children to use these anonymous-type apps, but if they do,

to openly monitor and guide them through what is appropriate in an open and inquisitive way to get through to them.

"If a child is on (one of these apps), it is all the more important for their parents to be aware and to help them navigate it," said Uhls. "It's really important for parents to talk to them about it, to say, 'Have you heard about this app? Are you using it? Have you asked it a question? What kind of answers did you get?'"

Denham makes sure to have conversations with her daughter as she navigates new technology while keeping a watchful eye over what she is doing on the social media she is allowed to have.

"They will have access to all those things eventually, so why not use this time as 'training', so to speak—teach them how to navigate the internet world and deal with scenarios," Denham said. "Just saying 'no' now only adds to them being more vulnerable later."

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Citation: New Yolo anonymous Q&A app attracts millions of teenage users, has parents wary (2019, June 18) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-06-yolo-anonymous-qa-app-millions.html>

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