

Social Media Influencers: Creators, Celebrity, Content, Audiences, Brands

“Snapchat’s Social Media Influencers”

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Snapchat’s fleeting content presents many research difficulties. Though nothing captured on Snapchat is ever truly deleted, there is no central way to archive content, survey broad patterns of usage, or measure audience statistics.¹ In this respect, a conversation about Snapchat’s live aesthetic and branded content from social media influencers is especially apt for television scholars. It presents themes that parallel the beginnings of television research. This makes the platform both challenging and fascinating to examine. I preface my response by welcoming others to contribute to this discussion, and acknowledge that the vastness and diversity of Snapchat makes every user experience unique.

Snapchat’s lack of data and transparency challenges researchers and threatens brands that employ Snapchat influencers. Without public data collection or visible likes, only Snapchat users can see how many “views” their snap receives. Brands rely on influencers’ screenshots to see how big of a reach a branded post attained. Still, media companies have taken over Snapchat, from legacy companies (*Wall Street Journal* and NBC) to Internet-based media companies (Buzzfeed and Tastemade) – all have adapted and created content for the platform. While individual social media “influencers” still thrive, I argue that the rapid dominance of media companies enable these brands as the ultimate influencers in this case study. The changing layout of the app emphasizes brands and companies, not users. While Snapchat’s aesthetics and features were partially shaped by

¹ There is an active YouTube subgenre of archived or fan-compiled Snapchats from social media influencers. But, when solely analyzing the structure of Snapchat, it should be classified as a platform dedicated to temporality.

individual social media influencers, currently, the top influencers continue to be brands and the influencers they employ.

Snapchat grew from a direct photo sharing service to a storytelling platform. As of 2016, it hosts many types of content with 24-hour expiration dates, from “Stories” (user-curated and edited photos/videos), to a live story section with submitted content from around the world, and a top carousel of branded content. As Snapchat developed, users tended to use photography and video to tell narrative stories. Corporate language pushes, “Snapchat is about storytelling – our stories, and yours.” Influencers and celebrities like DJ Khaled, a musician whose name became synonymous with his Snapchat persona, post daily video stories documenting their life – an autobiographical reality show – with each 10-second snap as shot within a larger story. These stories serve as a daily check-in with people you follow, with a time-based threat. You *must* keep up with DJ Khaled’s snap story – or else it disappears.

Khaled’s Snapchat story aesthetics blend self-promotion and branded content. His famously branded posts include his self-made Ciroc apple vodka slogan “Celebrate success right, the only way,” his use of geofilters with advertising logos and slogans, and shout outs to Apple Music (both self-promotional and advertising collaborators or musicians on his label). Khaled pens inspirational catch phrases like “Major key alert” or “Bless up” that are called back to him in public, turned into hashtags or memes, and circulated beyond his Snapchat story. Media companies pay Khaled to appear in commercials that emulate his Snapchat aesthetic. A 2016 Silk soymilk commercial features 10-second snaps of DJ Khaled drinking Silk. The commercial is layered with a video that looks like the Snapchat app screen – vertical with a countdown timer, Khaled’s username, and emojis. DJ Khaled

presumably held his phone to “shoot” the commercial, using the front facing camera to record himself. The rapid cuts of the ad spot bring Khaled’s Snapchat aesthetic to traditional TV commercials, revealing the full circle of Khaled’s influence.

When DJ Khaled travels in his Ciroc/Major Key bus, or invites his followers to a special video shoot, his Snapchat videos of his fans directly reflect the audience Snapchat constructs and aims to capture: pre-teens and teenagers with phones, and 18-34 year olds – their phones shining back at Khaled, recording him in return. The app brands itself and its content partners to Becomers (aged 12-34). Snapchat’s advertising information webpage cites a 2015 Nielsen statistic that, “On any given day, Snapchat reaches 41% of all 18 to 34 year-olds in the United States.” While television industry paratexts spread the narrative of a frightened industry, scared as the valuable 18 to 34-year-old demographic quits live TV, Snapchat claims their app is the new TV. Throughout its corporate rhetoric, Snapchat brags they have found where that valuable demographic has landed, and chooses partners accordingly –television companies that experienced the viewership hit (Food Network, MTV, ESPN, Comedy Central, CNN, and more). The partnership among Snapchat, social media influencers like Khaled, and powerful media companies continues to monetize and prioritize a youthful audience, influencing content and aesthetic accordingly.