



Building acquaintance brands via Snapchat for the college student market

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KEYWORDS

Snapchat;
Acquaintance brands;
College student market;
Social media apps;
Branding

Abstract College students are inseparable from their smartphones, and heavily engaged in Snapchat. This social media app allows low-consequence expression: messages disappear within 10 seconds to 24 hours of their receipt, depending on the content. Because college students seem strongly attracted to Snapchat, the implications for brand managers interested in reaching this target market deserve exploration. Four focus groups of self-described heavy users show that this media app allows college students to enter the virtual Snapchatverse and find a sweet spot of acquaintances. The sweet spot is associated with feelings of relatability, inclusion, and effortlessness and has the potential to produce empowering experiences. The verbal protocols of college students suggest that Snapchat is an ideal social media for developing acquaintance brands: brands that aim to make themselves part of an inclusive, feel-good experience or highly relatable acquaintances.

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1. Snapchat and college students

Snapchat, the mobile app characterized by disappearing posts, is attracting attention from major brands such as CNN, Sony, and BMW. This is likely due to the audience delivered by the mobile app: Snapchat currently reaches 32.9% of all Millennials as compared to 23.8% for Twitter, and the median

age of Snapchat users is 18 as compared to 40 for Facebook (Silberman, 2015). Furthermore, Snapchat attracts about 100 million users per month—60% of whom are 18 to 34 years old—and produces over 2 billion video views per day (Snapchat, 2015). It has overtaken Twitter to become the third most widely used social media site among 18–34 year olds (Tornoe, 2015), and is the single most popular social media among teens (Miller, 2014). Despite the impressive statistics, Snapchat's strategic implications for brand managers remain unclear. An industry observer asks (Maunder-Allan, 2013, p. 52):

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Do we really understand young people's relationship with social media and the desires of this so-called 'social-media generation'? We know lots about their behaviour online, but, as we all know, this is not the same as what they think and feel about it. Are marketers engaging with young people in this social space as best they could?

This question strikes at the heart of the issue: How do college students think and feel about Snapchat, and why are they attracted to the medium? A focus on college students is deserved: this segment of 21 million Americans earns about \$1,200 per month and represents approximately \$412 billion in spending power (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), an amount comparable to the GDP of Austria (\$437 billion). The recommendations they receive from others in their social environment, particularly from others in their social networks, exert the most influence on their brand choices (Emarketer, 2015). Investors seem to sense the value. In 2015, Snapchat raised \$537 million in funding, adding up to a total of \$1.1 billion since its inception; Snapchat is currently worth about \$16 billion (MacMillan, 2015).

This article reports findings from four focus groups of college students, conducted over a 4-month period to examine why this demographic uses Snapchat. Our central purpose was threefold: (1) to draw analytical insights for future empirical validation, (2) to identify possibilities for branding that can speak to the practical realities of managers responsible for targeting college students, and (3) to relate how Snapchat can be utilized to reach this segment. We learn that the ephemeral properties of Snapchat—whereby most posted messages disappear within 10 seconds—have struck a deep chord among college students and their social and emotional needs. Frequent Snapchat usage is producing a distinct set of benefits for college students and creating new opportunities for brands. Managers interested in making their brands appear more inclusive, effortless, and relatable are likely to benefit from spending media dollars on Snapchat.

2. Why should brands care about Snapchat?

It is reasonable to question the worth of Snapchat to brand managers because new social media sites and mobile apps are frequently launched, yet not all retain their popularity. In addition to the fact that 77% of college students currently use Snapchat (Silberman, 2015), other factors attest to its relevance for branding among younger demographic

segments. Snapchat's early success is attributable to its ephemeral properties and the 'alluring young female' visual appeal used by founders Evan Spiegel and Bobby Murphy during the inception of this mobile app (Gillette, 2013). In using Snapchat, senders know that messages and snaps will disappear within seconds, and they will be able to tell if the receiver has saved their snap. This is appealing to college students, who perceive the unspoken message: "You can act without being seen by surveilling parents, adults, school administrators, and college admissions staff who consider your social media presence to judge in ways that can hurt you" (e.g., Boyd, 2014). A combination of the desire to titillate and participate in a peep show and the desire for unrestrained, consequence-free expression is behind Snapchat's current 100+ million users (e.g., Manjoo, 2013; Miller, 2014).

However, there is more to Snapchat that signals its long-term relevance to brand managers. First, Snapchat possesses mobile-app DNA; it was developed by people who understand mobile technology, for Millennials inseparable from their mobile devices (Kirkham, 2015). This is a distinctive, hard-to-replicate competency. Consider the deep-pocketed and otherwise technically-savvy Facebook, which stumbled with its own mobile app and has largely failed to respond. Despite the introduction of its 'poke' feature, aiming to mimic Snapchat, it has failed to gain comparable traction.

Second, Snapchat's record of innovation is impressive. After its initial success attracting users who wanted to snap each other with photographs, Snapchat launched features that allow users to link photos together to create a narrative (Snapchat, 2015). In November 2014 the mobile app launched Snapcash, an easy way of conducting peer-to-peer payments. In January 2015 it launched the Discover feature, which allows users access to full-length articles and videos from sponsors (Tornoe, 2015). The network of media channels now available on Snapchat offers content posted on Comedy Central, CNN, and ESPN. Snapchat has its own media division for creating and sharing news content (Tornoe, 2015), and has started selling advertising to leading branders such as Samsung, Universal Pictures, Yahoo, and ESPN on its Discover service (MacMillan, 2015). It introduced Snapcodes in May 2015, making it easy to add friends to the network, and 'tap to view' in July 2015, making it easy to view videos without holding down the screen (Snapchat, 2015).

Third, Snapchat isn't afraid to change. Consider Brand Story, Snapchat's advertising format that launched in October 2014. Brand Story channeled 10–20 second ad spots featuring an advertiser's

photo or video, which then expired within 24 hours. Snapchat discontinued the feature in May 2015. This rapid introduction-to-withdrawal cycle was described by some industry observers as growing pains (Wagner, 2015), but more likely it signals a rare ability on the part of Snapchat to manage feature creep.¹ Despite cautions raised by industry observers (e.g., Kleinberg, 2014), advertisers have migrated to Snapchat's Discovery feature or instead sponsor Our Story events as Macy's did for its Thanksgiving Day Parade (see Wagner, 2015). On Snapchat's CNN channel, BMW is the major advertiser. On its Daily Mail channel, T-Mobile, Macy's, and Oxygen buy space regularly. Successful brands including Sony, Sperry, Victoria's Secret, Universal Studios, and GoPro are also reaching their customers via Snapchat's Discover feature (see O'Brien, 2015).

Recent moves show that Snapchat is not at all hesitant to reshape the entire aesthetic of mobile video. Instead of relying on the heretofore-standard wide-screen format for advertisements, which are viewed by people while holding their mobile devices sideways, Snapchat is asking advertisers to develop content that can be viewed as the mobile device is held upright (i.e., in its natural position). This move signals the message: "We have the right technology. We are delivering the audience. You, the advertiser, should change." Brand managers may want to pay attention: Snapchat intends to manage how ads are viewed by Snapchatters over the long term (see Sloan, 2015).

3. How we learned about the Snapchat and acquaintance brands: The study

Four successive focus groups were conducted on a college campus with participants who described themselves as heavy users (i.e., several times a day) of Snapchat. Two focus groups were conducted in early spring 2015, in two sections of a college course titled Marketing Research. This course is offered to marketing majors in a business program. The focus groups were part of the semester-long exercise to learn marketing research by doing. Each focus group consisted of eight participants and lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. Both groups were audiotaped and replies were transcribed by a co-author. Class members who did not participate in the focus group were required to take notes and draw inferences for a subsequent discussion of drawing

inferences from qualitative data. Each focus group was asked to respond to two questions. Secondary, additional questions seeking clarification and explanation were also asked. The two primary questions were:

- Why do you use Snapchat now? What explains the fact that you are a self-described heavy user of Snapchat?
- What do you think brands should know about you and your Snapchat usage that may help them connect with you?

To gain the perspective of non-marketing majors and hear the voices of a cross-section of students, two additional focus groups were conducted in late spring 2015. Participants were self-described heavy users of Snapchat and were selected from across the campus by a co-author active in student organizations. The same questions were asked, with the discussions audiotaped and transcribed by a co-author.

A total of 32 students (17 males, 15 females) participated in the four focus groups. All were traditional-age, full-time undergraduate students who owned smartphones and used Snapchat several times a day. The focus group transcripts and notes made in the class served as the sources of data and were content analyzed separately by two co-authors. Inferences with supporting quotes were compared and contrasted. The following discussion reflects the synthesis of this data analysis.

4. The nature of the Snapchatverse

The *Snapchatverse* refers to the virtual universe created by the interaction between users' socio-emotional needs and the distinctive, ephemeral properties of Snapchat. If participants collectively spoke in one voice about what Snapchat means to them, they would say the following:

Snapchat is the medium for the new normal in communication (few words; short, visual memes). It is also a new normal in how I define my relationships with others (inclusion vs. relationships; acquaintances vs. friends/intimates; now vs. later; immediate value vs. lasting value). Frequent Snapchat usage takes me to a sweet spot where I seek and find liberation from speaking, articulating, backpedaling, defending, and posing; where I seek and find liberation and immunity from the negative responses of others; where I seek and find liberation from the reciprocity and commitment that traditional

¹ Feature creep is a problem that ails info-tech firms, which often crowd their services with just-in-case-someone-wants-it features that can produce sub-optimal user experiences.

relationships require. I am not on Snapchat to announce my awesomeness (as I do on Facebook or Instagram); to share pithy, witty sentiments or adulation for celebrities (as I do on Twitter); to find kindred spirits united by common interests in assembling, knitting, scrapbooking, baking, or barn building (as I do on Pinterest); or to develop a professional network (as I do on LinkedIn). In my sweet spot, I connect with acquaintances in an inclusive, relatable, pleasant, and sometimes empowering environment.

The new normal is characterized by the fewest words, least contrived expressions, and unrehearsed photographs. In our study, a Snapchatter likened this to a ‘vacation of conversation’:

“Snapchat is the vacation of conversation. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, there’s no pressure to respond or commit to anything, and it’s just a nice moment for yourself. Texting is like your 9-to-5 [job]: you need to get things done, it is never a good idea not to respond, and you need to stay semi-professional at all times.”

Other respondents agreed:

“Texting people is a long-term conversation. Snapchat is—well, it is just a picture.”

“[Snapchat] does make communicating quicker, ‘cause even if I do put some writing in it, it is the smallest amount possible.”

Longer messages are regarded as self-absorbed and tedious, as articulated by participants:

“If you send one that is 10 seconds long—at least, for me—you are trying to get some kind of response. While a 2 second one is like: ‘I am going to do something stupid and do not care if they acknowledge it.’”

“When you see someone you’re friends with on the app have a Story that is, like, 200 or 300 seconds long. . . . I’m stuck thinking: ‘This person must think everyone loves them and that they don’t need to have a conversation,’ because they are just forcing you to acknowledge them.”

“It can get to be a little too much. It’s interesting and fun the first few times, but by the 6th snap or the 50-second mark in a Story, enough is enough.”

The fewest words/visuals coupled with unrestrained participation is not reflective of a conscious strategy.

Rather, it is reflective of a desire to expend the least possible amount of effort to maintain a connection with others:

“The pictures and videos mean I don’t have to try so hard to figure out what to say or how to say it.”

“My pic or video should be all you need.”

“I might not be able to put something into words sometimes, but I can take a photo of it.”

“I feel like there is more emotion behind the photo, because you can see the other person’s face.”

Suggesting that this pattern of communication may spill over beyond the Snapchatverse to shape interpersonal interaction, a respondent stated:

“It might not be the sole way of communicating, but it is a key part of how I communicate with everyone now.”

Frequent Snapchat usage appears to transport users to a sweet spot in the virtual Snapchatverse. The operating metaphor for expressing oneself, gaining information, and making sense of the world is *acquaintances*; the driving motivation is the pursuit of *effortlessness*. Consider the following excerpt of a conversation between a co-author and a student heavily engaged in Snapchat, which occurred during the classroom discussion on data analysis. The co-author was responding to the student’s explanation of the process of gaining information and evaluating brands on Snapchat.

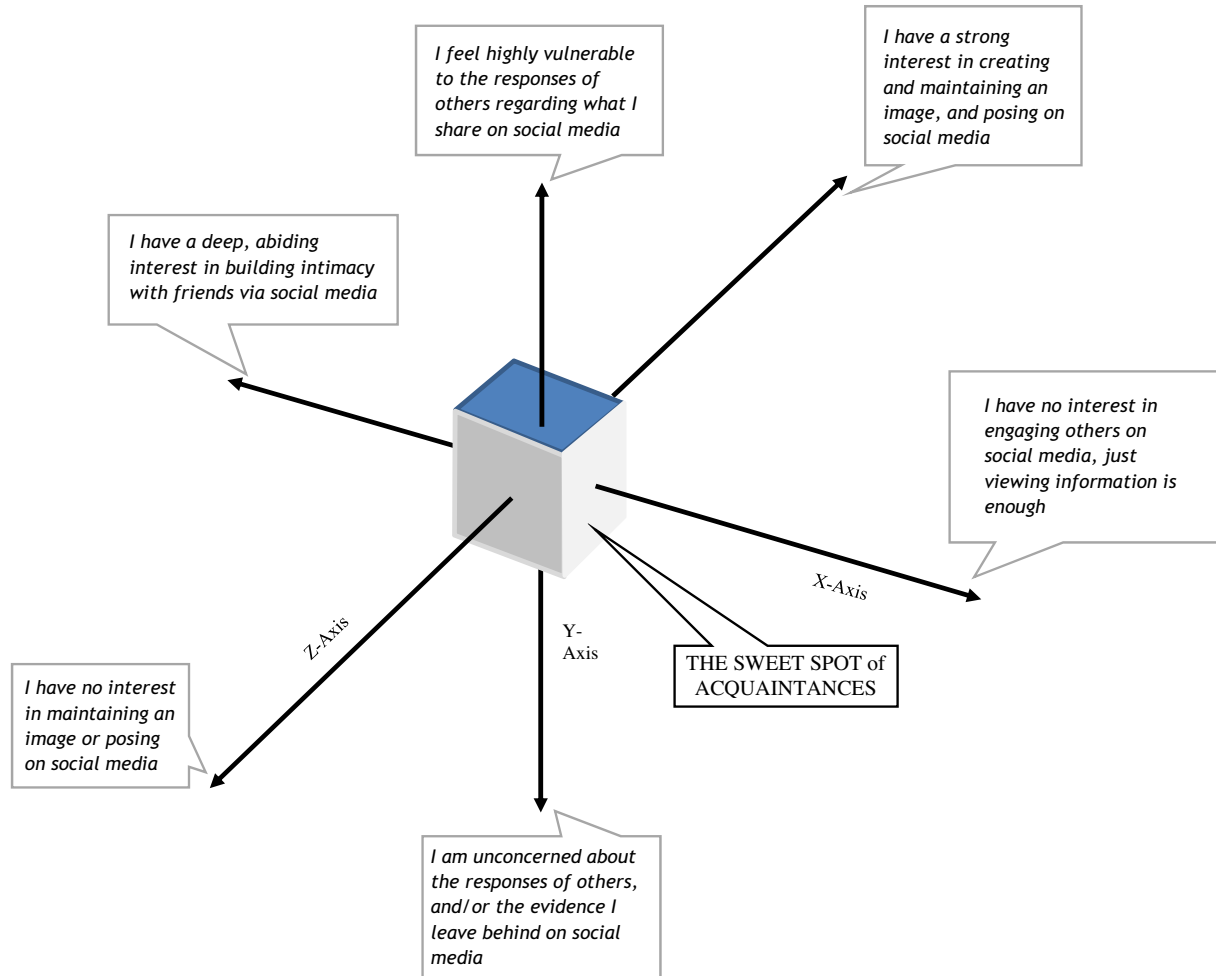
Co-author: When you say, “I see how it goes,” I hear you say this: “If something attractive falls into my lap, and if it offers many obvious benefits, then I will think about it. Otherwise, I am not interested in searching for information that can help me, or in making an effort to identify alternatives, or in committing to something that requires extra effort.” Am I getting this right? Is this what you are saying?

Student: Like. . . Yes.²

While other social media may be about friends, the Snapchatverse is an ecosystem of acquaintances with the attraction of effortlessness. Friends are not precluded on Snapchat, they are just not the people from whom the bulk of the benefit is derived. Information about brands may be available on most

² This exchange is paraphrased.

Figure 1. The sweet spot of acquaintances in the Snapchatverse



THE SWEET SPOT of ACQUAINTANCES
 (Emerges at the center of *three intersecting continuums*)

Y-AXIS POSITION: *I don't want any consequences for expressing myself on social media.*

X-AXIS POSITION: *I want to connect mostly with acquaintances.*

Z-AXIS POSITION: *I do not want to expend the effort it takes to pose on social media.*

social media apps, but the attraction to ads on Snapchat relates to the effortless ways in which this information is available.

5. Graphic representation of the sweet spot

Figure 1 is an illustration of the sweet spot: a three-dimensional space that emerges at the center of three intersecting continuums. Each continuum refers to a particular facet of the ways in which college students are pursuing “I don’t want to commit,” “I don’t want to pose,” and “I don’t

want consequences.” The challenge for brands is defined within the confines of this space: employing Snapchat to connect with users who are disinterested in committing and posing, and who crave an effortless and consequence-free experience.

The Y-axis portrays the varying tolerance for the consequences of social media presence. Some are unconcerned about the digital footprints they are leaving behind as a result of their social media usage (see bottom end of Y-axis, Figure 1). Others, however, are very concerned about socioemotional vulnerability; they fear their digital footprints will come back to haunt them and subsequently require backpedaling, explaining, and defending (top end of

Y-axis). Our study participants articulated these sentiments:

“Not having to worry about what I say being used against me, I can relax.”

“I feel more secure on Snapchat because. . .my snaps cannot be used against me.”

“We hear it all the time growing up, that jobs are gonna look at our social media history, and that terrifies us.”

The sweet spot, at the center of this continuum, is populated with acquaintances who do not judge, critique, evaluate, direct, or say anything that requires explaining and defending. Acquaintances are disinterested in anything beyond the immediate message, which quickly enough disappears. Acquaintances offer positive feedback only, something Snapchatters clearly crave:

“One person might appreciate something I like that I know my other friends would normally ridicule, so I get to send snaps about that thing to that one person.”

“I always expect a response. Why else would I snap someone something? Like, if I didn’t want a response I would add it to my Story.”

“If I am sending someone a snap, that means I am hoping for a conversation, and I want to think boys won’t ignore me.”

“If I send a snap to one or two people, I have the expectation that I should get a response.”

“A snap to one or two people becomes personal, so I expect a response.”

“If I trust you enough to send you a snap, that means I believe you know where I am coming from or will at least appreciate it.”

“I am never embarrassed about what I put on it or what people think of it.”

Photos, comments, and narratives are posted freely because there is little or no negative feedback. Users feel safe in the knowledge that posted material will disappear and can never be used against them:

“There is no judging, there is no blackmailing, and there is nothing but a chuckle and then a new snap to laugh at.”

“If you flip this around, I have never gotten someone’s snap and felt judgmental about it.”

“I’ve never felt like I had to justify or defend anything I like or anything I like to snap.”

“I feel like I can snap anything because no one can really prove anything. I snap something and in 10 seconds it is just gone.”

“It lets me be weird and I don’t have to explain why.”

“I have never felt judged on Snapchat.”

“There is no judgment; you can basically tell all about what you did and don’t have to worry about feeling judged. No one can put you down or belittle you. It’s actually nice.”

In this regard, Snapchat compares favorably over Twitter and Facebook:

“On Twitter and Facebook, if you rip on someone it stays there. So people feel like it’s okay to gang up on you.”

“I’ve never felt ganged up on [using Snapchat], unlike if I posted something to Facebook and people mocked me for it.”

“I feel like I think too much about what I want to say on other social media apps before I post anything.”

“I have never gotten bad remarks. . .like you would get on Twitter for something I put on Snapchat.”

“If I was gonna tell a bad joke and I posted it to Twitter, a snowball effect of down votes and negative reactions would happen.”

“Without the voting of a typical social media thing, you never feel [that] something you like is wrong or disliked.”

“Twitter is like a snowball effect. Once one negative comment gets posted, more negative comments just pile on top.”

“Other things like Reddit or Facebook, their voting systems force people to overly plan their posts or content because they don’t wanna get downvoted.”

“With Twitter and Facebook, there’s a good chance you will get in trouble for something you put up.”

The Z-axis portrays the varying levels of need felt for maintaining an image or an affected persona in the social media environment. An individual positioned at the lower left (i.e., bottom) of the Z-axis is disinterested in maintaining *any* image. At the upper-right end (i.e., top) of this continuum, the need for posing and demonstrating one's distinctiveness, superiority, skills, and/or professional credentials is very strong. The acquaintance-related sweet spot emerges toward the center of this dimension, where others do not matter so much; hence, the need for posing does not matter at all. If the resulting communication produces an authentic discourse among non-posers, it is not an intentional outcome. Rather, it is reflective of the sweet spot, where Snapchatters can shrug: "In this snap, I am being myself. To present anything else would require effort I do not want to expend." Our study participants relayed this notion:

"[What others post]. . .It comes across as true."

"They have to share a photo they've taken. You know it's real and you assume, for that person, it must have been a moment they connected with if they felt the need to capture it."

"[On Snapchat] You can never put on a persona."

"Everything just comes off how it is and you cannot hide it."

"You get to let different parts of yourself shine."

"I like to think I am an okay drawer. So, like, I doodle in class, and if I want to send it out as a snap, I can send it to the people who I know will be like "Ok, cool" and not try to nitpick what I enjoy doing."

The X-axis portrays a continuum reflecting the varying degrees of commitment toward keeping relationships alive in the Snapchatverse. At the lower-right end (i.e., bottom) of the continuum, college students have no desire to engage others. Here, the notion of long-term relationships is emotionally taxing: it spells reciprocity, obligations, choice making, and commitment. At the opposite, upper-left end (i.e., top), college students are seeking deep, intimate relationships. The center of this axis represents the heady world of acquaintances; college students can unapologetically seek positive responses only, without committing to a relationship, and keep all options open indefinitely:

"Snapchat is a conversation starter, so I don't have to commit to anything on it. With texting, that is usually leading to some form of commitment or plan."

"There is zero commitment. Even if you do try to have a conversation with someone it eventually goes away. Nothing is permanent."

"The only time I need acknowledgment for a thing I sent to 8 or 9 people is if it is [in the form of] a text message. And that is for a long-term commitment or for creating plans, and that's just so there's some permanency to it."

"You do not have to carry a conversation. There is barely any commitment to having to try and talk with someone. As soon as I want to stop responding, I stop. And no one gets offended like they would if we were texting. I no longer have to say "I gotta go" if I want to exit a conversation. I literally just stop and it is over."

6. Benefits of the sweet spot

If our focus group participants spoke in one voice about the benefits they derive from frequent Snapchat usage, and from the sweet spot they experience as a result, they would say the following:

I feel included. Others feel relatable, and sometimes even intimate with acquaintances. The effortlessness with which Snapchat produces its benefits is an empowering experience.

Familiarity with Snapchat and frequent usage lead to intensifying feelings of empowerment. At the most basic level, participants derive a sense of comfort from connecting with friends and acquaintances:

"When you get a snap from someone else, it feels nice because that means whatever moment they caught, they thought you would appreciate it."

"The snaps are something like: "Hey, this person knows me. We understand each other."

The sense of comfort is more meaningful because it emerges from an experience of effortlessness:

"I don't have to make sure the picture is good or perfect like on some other social media apps."

"There is no standard. There are limited filters. There is no way to edit anything. And that's all okay."

Effortless comfort can also produce feelings of intimacy as a relevant outcome of Snapchat usage:

“It feels intimate. [Snapchat] makes me feel comfortable with myself when compared to other social media apps.”

“It definitely is more intimate than other social media apps.”

Despite low emotional investment toward others, a feeling of inclusion is the most widely reported beneficial outcome of Snapchat usage. Virtually every participant in our focus groups mentioned this benefit:

“At least for me, it’s a way to include others in my moments.”

“It makes me feel included. So even if I am not with my friend, I can at least feel like I am.”

“Everyone can feel included on Snapchat. I never feel left out from my friends on the app, ‘cause even if they do not snap me personally each day I still can see their Story.”

“You don’t need to make plans, but you can still say: ‘Hey, I haven’t forgotten you.’”

“It may be a brief validation, but at least they haven’t forgotten me.”

“Most of the time you just. . . assume the person is treating you to a moment they felt was worth documenting, and they felt that you would appreciate or relate to that moment.”

“I’m looking to either send snaps that I think connect with the person I am sending it to—or, if I am putting it to my Story, that multiple people will connect with.”

More frequent Snapchat usage seems to highlight the differences between benefits received and effort expended; it produces a strong feeling of empowerment. As voiced by two study participants:

“You almost get a Superman complex because you do not have to deal with any image-saving or worry.”

“I’m not Superman, but I can still feel like Clark Kent.”

7. Acquaintance brands on Snapchat

An acquaintance brand in the Snapchatverse is defined as one that appears in the sweet spot

(see [Figure 1](#)). The felt benefits of engaging in the Snapchatverse in general, and the sweet spot in particular, are transferred to the brand. The boundaries blur between acquaintances, content, and ads. Snapchatters are spared the effort of brand-related information processing and decision making. The strength of acquaintance brands varies directly with the strength of benefits attributed to acquaintances in the sweet spot, coupled with the number of Snapchatters who identify the brand as a denizen of their sweet spot. College students are describing an acquaintance brand in the following terms:

This brand is included in my sweet spot; I relate better to it now that I see it in this space. It is validated by its association with my acquaintances; I am spared the effort of evaluation. This brand makes no claims or propositions, provides no reason for purchasing, and asks for no relationship or commitment. It hovers in space, just as do my acquaintances. I don’t feel forced to make a choice; I can keep all options open indefinitely. I associate this brand with inclusiveness and effortlessness; it makes me feel momentarily empowered. This brand will do just fine if my preferred brand is unavailable or stops being my preferred brand.

Snapchat is an appropriate social media app for brand managers who intend to target college students and would define their challenge as such: “Our brand is not as relatable to college students as we would like. We want them to view our brand as a highly relatable acquaintance brand that feels effortless, inclusive, and empowering. We want our brand to emerge as a viable option if the user is looking for and cannot or does not access their preferred brand.”

8. The context for branding on Snapchat

The branding power of Snapchat is better understood in the context of (1) acquaintances as filters of brand-related information, (2) the emotional nature of social media usage, and (3) attribution of social status to the brand.

8.1. Leveraging acquaintance-brand connection

In the Snapchatverse, college students are shrugging off brands that clamor for attention, brushing aside burdens of making an effort and posing for others, discounting fears of leaving digital evidence that can later come back to haunt, and attempting to

Table 1. Constructing multiple elements of brand-related emotions via social media apps

Social Media App	Key Appeal	Elements of the emotional connection in the brand-user relationship achievable
Snapchat	Comfortable, consequence-free Snapchatverse; Acquaintances (and brands) feel more relatable, effortless, and momentarily empowering.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatability • Effortlessness • Inclusion • Empowerment Notable brands: Sony, Samsung, Sperry
Facebook	Me-TV, empowering personal broadcast channel for exhibiting one's uniqueness and sharing one's life with others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narcissism The potential for building a brand-user connection as a result of Facebook usage remains unclear. Usage data available from the firm may help brands.
Twitter	Connection with celebrities, media personalities, and others who share a strong interest in brands, events, sports, etc. Connecting with brands as if they are not just people, but as if they are celebrities (i.e., entification of brands).	Brand is not just a person, brand is a celebrity (brand entification). Notable brand: Starbucks
Pinterest	Authentic, honest discourse among regular people who share their aesthetic; Curated virtual scrapbooks (photographs) reflecting their true talents, skills, and interests.	Feelings of an authentic connection with brands, transferred from feelings of an authentic, verifiable connection with genuinely interested others. Notable brand: Zappos

escape into a sweet spot where banner ads do not follow them. What brands say matters less; what is said by the acquaintance-brand connection matters more. Acquaintances can serve to accentuate and reinforce the power of the brand message or serve to blunt its effectiveness. Mobile apps are portals to virtual worlds of acquaintances, and the acquaintance-brand connection fundamentally shapes their sensemaking.³

In the Snapchatverse, leveraging the acquaintance-brand relationship refers to the following. First, the Snapchatverse is not for unknown brands. GoPro, Sony, and Samsung are known; their connection with acquaintances can be strengthened via Snapchat. Introducing a brand on Snapchat emerges as a risky choice. Second, college students are not in the Snapchatverse to shop: they are enjoying effortless, feel-good connection with acquaintances. Because acquaintances do not ask for anything, leveraging acquaintances means not asking college students for anything. Snapchat is attractive because

it embodies effortless energy. Brands asking this audience to expend cognitive energy (e.g., “evaluate these facts and make a decision”), emotional energy (e.g., “use these criteria to prefer this brand”), or behavioral energy (e.g., “buy now”) may find this medium unattractive. Third, Snapchat is more suited for producing a sense of relatability and pleasant inclusiveness; it is not ideal for sharp-edged appeals. Even if sharp-edged, provocative appeals are used, the user-acquaintance relationship and the sweet spot blunt their effectiveness. For instance, in the communication and mobile app universe, Samsung electronics is an acquaintance brand; in the clothing and accessory market, Sperry shoes is an acquaintance brand. Samsung and Sperry are perfectly viable if Apple and Nike are out of reach or are no longer seen as friends. These brands may well intend to develop unique positions in the marketplace; in the Snapchatverse they are mostly associated with general feel-good relatability and inclusion. Brands with sharper-edged appeals (e.g., fashion brands, BMW, Starbucks) are active on Snapchat. However, despite what they intend, Snapchatters find them in their sweet spot and

³ For a fuller explication, see [Gardner and Davis \(2013\)](#).

mostly hear: “We are a feel-good, inclusive, effortless, relatable brand.”

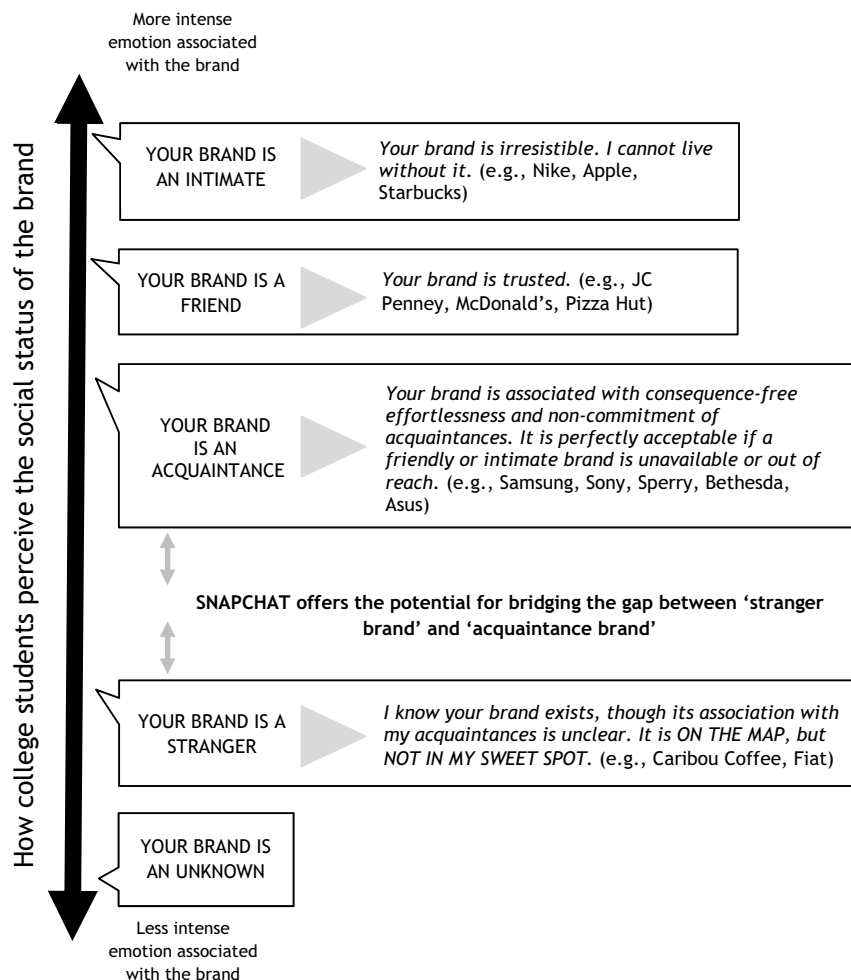
8.2. Leveraging social media-user connection

In addition to Snapchat, today’s top social media apps include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google+, Tumblr, Instagram, VK, Flickr, and Vine (EbizMBA, 2015)—a list that is likely to change in a year, and every other year thereafter. This emerging reality poses a new challenge for branders who—as scholars have advocated—aim to produce emotional, intimate connections between their brands and users (see Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Thompson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). The challenge is simply stated: Each social media offers unique technological features, appeals to unique psychosocial properties of users, fosters unique usage behaviors, and—more importantly—produces unique emotional experiences for users (see Table 1). If no single

social media app can produce the entire repertoire of emotions that a brand manager aims to foster in the brand-user relationship, our study points to the merits of (1) conceptualizing the emotional, intimate connection as a complex mosaic; (2) using multiple social media apps to produce distinct emotions, which when taken together produce the desired, complex, mosaic-like emotional connection; and (3) employing unique metrics to assess the effectiveness of social media engagement.

For instance, the Facebook universe is about peeping and posing, and offers a strong appeal to narcissism (Sashittal, Sriramchandramurthy, & Hodis, 2012). The Twitterverse is for entifying brands, fostering attributions of not just anthropomorphic properties but also a kind of celebrity status (Sashittal, Hodis, & Sriramchandramurthy, 2015). Pinterest facilitates finding kindred spirits and connecting authentically with others (Sashittal & Jassawalla, 2014). The Snapchatverse transports college students to a sweet spot of pleasant

Figure 2. Leveraging the brand-Snapchat connection



relatability, inclusion, and empowerment of no choice making and no commitment. Each social media implicates unique metrics for assessment: appeal to narcissism on Facebook, extent of brand entification on Twitter, finding kindred spirits on Pinterest, strength of professional networks and their benefits on LinkedIn, and relatability in terms of the brand's social status on Snapchat.

8.3. Leveraging the brand/Snapchat-using college student connection

Social media are more 'social' than 'media' to college students. As such, the effective use of Snapchat by brand managers typically begins with an assessment of the brand's social status as it varies along a continuum of intensity of felt emotions in the Snapchatverse (see Figure 2).

A known brand is perceived as a stranger, an acquaintance, a friend, or an intimate (Figure 2). College students' perceptions vary; what might be a stranger brand for one person can be an intimate brand for another. A survey is likely to reveal the precise distribution of their attributions. Snapchat seems unsuitable for reaching students for whom the brand is unknown and more appropriate for reaching students who regard the brand as a stranger (i.e., it exists on the map depicted in Figure 1, but features outside the sweet spot). As Figure 2 shows, Snapchat is best suited for bridging the stranger-acquaintance gap, thereby transforming perceptions from 'not particularly relatable' stranger-brand to 'I see it in my sweet spot' acquaintance brand. For instance, Snapchat is more likely to produce beneficial outcomes for stranger brands (e.g., Caribou Coffee, Fiat) than it is for those brands currently perceived as friends (e.g., McDonald's) or intimates (e.g., Starbucks, Nike).

Producing the perceptions of acquaintance brands—"this brand is (highly) relatable, associated with effortlessness and non-commitment; it will do just fine in case the friendly or intimate brand is unavailable"—is neither entirely useless nor anti-branding. If brand managers are less than impressed by the notion of an acquaintance brand as defined in these terms, there is some merit to viewing this status as a key milestone in the process of producing an intimate brand-user connection. In this regard, brand managers may benefit from the words of college students. They view friend brands as "I trust these brands. I will give them the benefit of the doubt and value my connection over the long term"; and intimate brands as "These brands are irresistible. I cannot imagine life without them." Regardless of their desirability, these outcomes seem to lie beyond the realm made possible in the Snapchatverse.

Snapchat engagement is more advised for brand managers that aim to use this medium as a stepping stone—and acquaintance brand as a key milestone—in the eventual emotional brand-user connection they want to foster.

9. Final word to brand managers

Proliferating social media call brand managers to calibrate and design messages that leverage the emotions produced by the media, the social status of their brand, and their brand-user connections. Snapchat can serve as a powerful tool for the right purpose and context: transforming stranger brands into acquaintances. Acquaintance brands may be viewed as milestones in the process of developing friendships, emotional connections, or intimacy; or as ends in and of themselves because they produce pleasant feelings of inclusion, relatability, momentary intimacy, and other emotions that verge on empowerment.

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