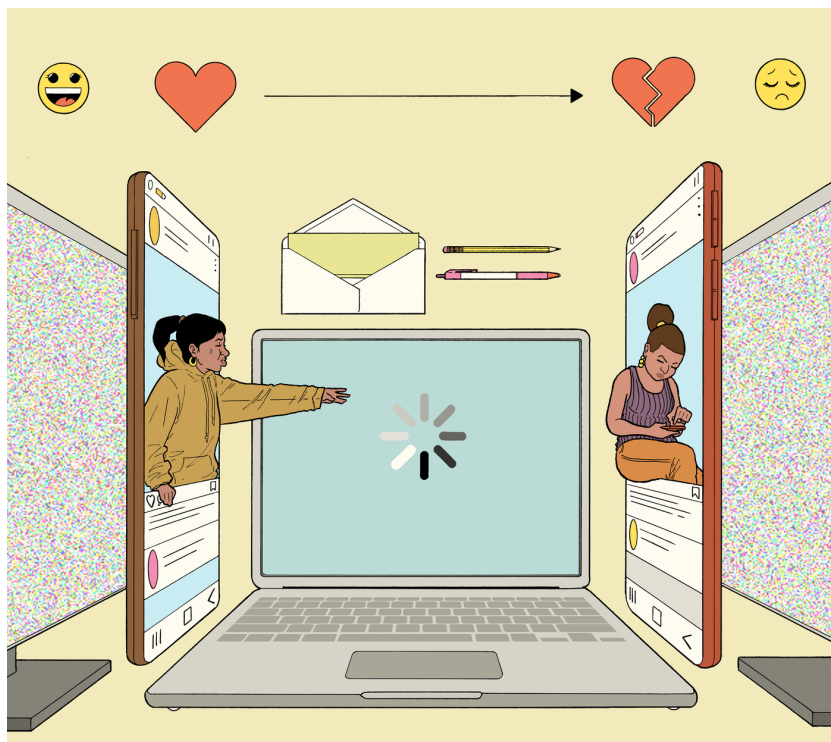


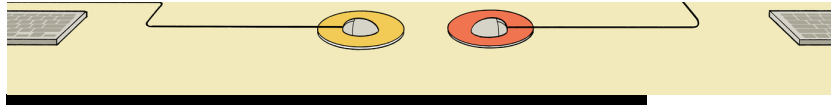
SOCIAL MEDIA | AUG. 22, 2024

Snapchat Is a Minefield for Teen Friendships

The hugely popular app ranks users based on how much they interact with each other. What could go wrong?

By Casey Lewis, who writes After School, a newsletter about Gen Z and Gen Alpha.





FRIENDS FOR NEVER

Stories exploring the ways our platonic relationships fall apart — and what we do with the pieces left over.

Illustration: Kyle Ellingson

“I got a call from my friend and she says, ‘Look what this girl wrote about you,’” says Saana, a 13-year-old from Brooklyn.

There’s a feature on Snapchat that allows you to pose a question to your followers, and someone had asked, “How do you feel about Saana?”

“This is my friend. She should say some nice things about me, right?” Saana says. Instead, this friend wrote that Saana is “really tall” and “super annoying.” (The friend, apparently, didn’t think Saana would see what she had written, since they weren’t yet connected on Snap.) “I started bawling my eyes out,” Saana told me. The two haven’t spoken since, and the experience made Saana wonder if she should be more selective about who she considers a friend. She also deleted Snapchat afterward, though she recently redownloaded it, because everyone’s on it.



It's hard to overstate just how much teens today rely on Snapchat to stay in touch with friends. According to a 2023 Pew study, about half of teens in the U.S. use Snapchat and Instagram daily with a larger share reporting that they use Snapchat "almost constantly" compared with Instagram. And while platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are used to consume content, Snapchat is primarily used to communicate, comparable to WhatsApp or iMessage. I spoke with one 12-year-old from the Bay Area five days after her parents finally relented and let her download the app. "I've made so many more friends just by having Snapchat," she tells me. Without it, she says, she would have no social life in seventh grade, which she starts in a few weeks.



Snapchat has been popular with young people since it launched back in 2011, and much of its staying power comes from its ability to embed itself into the social fabric of adolescent life. The app effectively gamifies friendship with features like streaks and trophies, boosting user engagement while making itself indispensable to maintaining relationships. Its complex web of social rules can also prove incredibly tricky to navigate.

“There’s a big focus on who’s on each other’s

stories. Like, *Did you put me on this story?*,” one 16-year-old, Angie, tells me. “I have different stories for different people and different friend groups. It becomes exclusive.” Chloe, a 14-year-old from Missouri, recently experienced the chaos Snap can cause in her own inner circle. She has two best friends — I’ll call them Sarah and Bella — and one day, Bella posted a photo of her and Chloe hanging out while Sarah was at softball practice. Sarah was busy, so they didn’t think they were doing anything wrong, but afterward she was upset. “Why did you guys do something without me?” she wanted to know. Eventually Sarah forgave them, but the friendship was hurt — partly because the two hung out without her but also because evidence of the hangout ended up on social media for others to see.

Snapchat also encourages constant communication between friends with a ranking feature for Snapchat+ subscribers called the Friend Solar System. A modern-day version of MySpace Top 8, it’s a running list of the top-eight names a user snaps with the most often. Unlike MySpace’s feature, though, Snap’s rank is automatic, not manual. Users can influence their friend rank by how much they’re in communication with someone. If you’re snapping your best friend more than anyone else, she’ll be your No. 1 — but if she’s snapping someone else more than you, you won’t be hers. Phoebe, 16,

says she's seen this feature cause contention among friends. If your best friend is No. 1 on your list, she explains, but you're not No. 1 on hers, it can "be a little bit hurtful," she says. "You realize that you're not the same as what they are to you."



And if merely having a ranking of your friends isn't enough, you can also "pin" them. The free version allows you to pin up to three friends on your profile, and if you pay for Snapchat+, you can pin a "#1 Best Friend." This ostensibly makes it more convenient to message one another but

also functions as an additional identifier of status. Riley, a 13-year-old from Westchester whose mom requested he go by a pseudonym, says that pinned friends are an even more exclusive list than the Friend Solar System. He's seen arguments break out when someone has pinned a friend and the pin has not been reciprocated.

Snapstreaks, a feature that tracks how many days users have sent Snaps back and forth to one another, can also cause rifts within friendships. A streak, which is visible to the people involved in the streak but not to others, is a sign of loyalty. "It's kind of, like, a flex if you have a really, really high streak with somebody," Riley says. "I feel like it signifies that we're really close — to have the willpower to snap that person every single day," Sahara, 14, tells me. But not everyone has that willpower, and losing a streak can result in hurt feelings. "I've had a streak for over a year with one of my friends — almost two," she says, and would be upset if she lost it. Older teens say the Snap's rank feature isn't that deep. "It's just a rank of who you snap the most, whether that's actually meaningful snaps or not, because most snaps are just pictures of the floor, which is like, just mind-numbing," says Angie. "You just sent pictures of the floor to thousands of people at once." The only person Angie maintains a streak with these days is her mom.



Some of the app's features can make it easy for kids to turn on each other. Riley recently had a falling out with a classmate that started in person but intensified online. On a school trip to Boston, there was another boy who wanted to room with Riley and his friends at the hotel, but they didn't want to room with him — they felt like he had bullied them in the past. When Riley told him they didn't want him in their room, the other kid got upset and sent the group progressively angry, mean texts on Snap. This was strategic, Riley says — messages on the app disappear after 24 hours. “If you take a screenshot, it will show up to the other person,” Riley says, “so what I normally do is take my mom or my sister's phone and just take a picture.”

I did speak with some teens, most of them older, who soured on Snapchat after having bad experiences on it. Leah, 16, got the app when she

was 12, after two of her friends signed her up. One day, she logged on to find she'd been sent more than 300 taunting messages from her classmates in what appeared to be a coordinated cyberbullying attack. "Snapchat is really good at making everyone involved think that they care about you," she says. "You send streaks to people or you snap them, then you have this idea in your head that you're friends now. It's like, *No, you're freaking not, man*. They're just on this app, and you are, too." These days she mostly communicates with friends on Discord, and she rarely looks at Snap. But she hasn't been able to quit entirely — after all, everyone else is still on it.



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By Lauren Ro

11:52 A.M.

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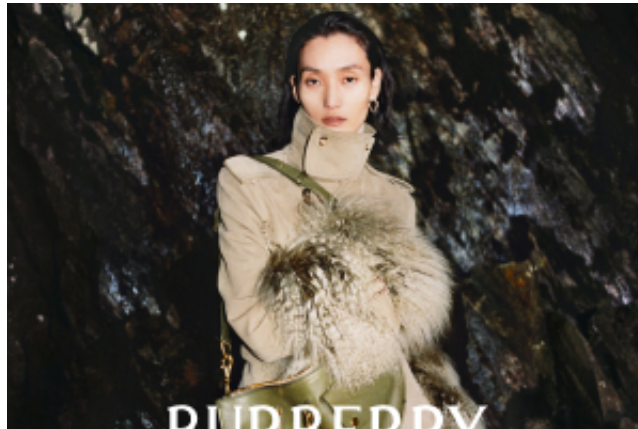
11:30 A.M.

Will There Be Another Presidential Debate?



10:52 A.M.

Cardi B's New Baby Is Here



10:41 A.M.

Atiya Walcott's Style Delivers 'a Dose of Joy'



10:15 A.M.

The FDA Is Investigating Toxic Metals in Tampons

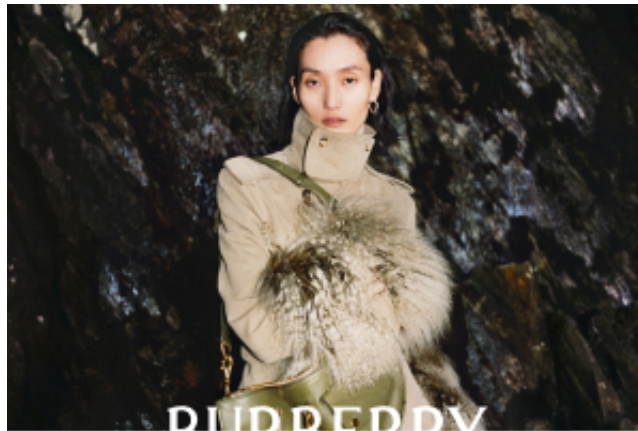


10:00 A.M.

Pro Golfer Rose Zhang Is More Than Just a Prodigy

9:53 A.M.

Where Are the ‘Girls That Do Drugs’?



9:40 A.M.

Your Daily Horoscope, by Madame Clairevoyant: September 13, 2024



9:25 A.M.

What's Going On With Lil Tay?



7:00 A.M.

The Parasites of Malibu 🗣️



FIRST PERSON | 7:00 A.M.

In the Fitting Room Post-Ozempic Figuring out what to wear — and what to come to terms with — after the transformation from taking weight-loss drugs.

By Samhita Mukhopadhyay



YESTERDAY AT 6:13 P.M.

The 55 Best Halloween Movies to Watch This October



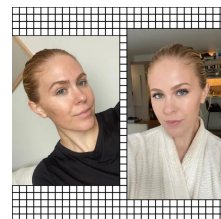
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Of Course Nara Smith Is Friends With Ballerina Farm



YESTERDAY AT 5:20 P.M.

18 Foundations Your Dry Skin Won't Hate



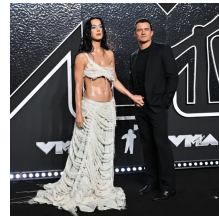
YESTERDAY AT 4:23 P.M.

All of the Allegations Against Diddy



YESTERDAY AT 4:13 P.M.

Katy Perry and Orlando Bloom Were Made for Each Other



YESTERDAY AT 2:54 P.M.

NYPD Commissioner Resigns Following Federal Searches: What We Know



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Danity Kane's Dawn Richard Accuses Diddy of Sexual Assault



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