

# SNAPCHAT

INTERACTIVE RESOURCE GUIDE



SAFER  
SCHOOLS  
TOGETHER



International Center for  
Digital Threat Assessment



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**Disclaimer:** Given the rapidly evolving nature of technology and social media applications, this information (especially social media platform related) is current as of the date of publication.

This is an interactive document. Click the underlined links to read more or navigate to the correlating section of the document.

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## INTRODUCTION

This Interactive Resource Guide and accompanying Micro Module will provide School Safety/Threat Assessment (SS/TA) teams with a functional understanding of the [Snapchat](#) platform and its utility in online data collection.

To make this training most effective, we encourage SS/TA teams to download the Snapchat application and follow along. In line with the recommendations provided in our [Digital Threat Assessment®](#) training, we suggest that your SS/TA team create a Snapchat account for investigative and threat assessment work. We recommend against using your personal accounts when searching, as there is a possibility that the searching methods demonstrated may notify the Subject(s) of Concern (SOC).

## HOW TO USE SNAPCHAT

Snapchat is one of the most popular social media platforms our youth use to communicate and share their digital lives. With over 414 million daily active users worldwide and over 4.75 billion Snaps created every day,<sup>1</sup> Snapchat is the de facto medium of communication for students in grades 6-12. Although the terms of service state users must be 13 years of age or older, there is no age verification process.

Snapchat turns text communication into a visual experience, enabling users to send disappearing photos which leave “no” evidence behind. Users can send photo and video messages which can be set to disappear after a certain amount of time. Users can set a viewing time of as little as 1 second (even less with Snapchat+) up to 24 hours, after which, once viewed, the image or video is deleted from the recipient’s device and from Snapchat’s servers, as the company *claims*.<sup>2</sup>

Snapchat allows users to take still photos, record short videos, add text, and create drawings to send to a personalized, and typically private, list of friends. However, nothing stops the recipient from taking a screenshot or using a different device to take a picture or the image or screen recording of the video.

**Remember:** if you take a screenshot using the recipient device, Snapchat will notify the sender that you have taken a copy.

Snapchat can be accessed on both [mobile](#) and [desktop](#) applications.

This video provides insight into how to use Snapchat.



*Video by YouTube user Simple Alpaca.*

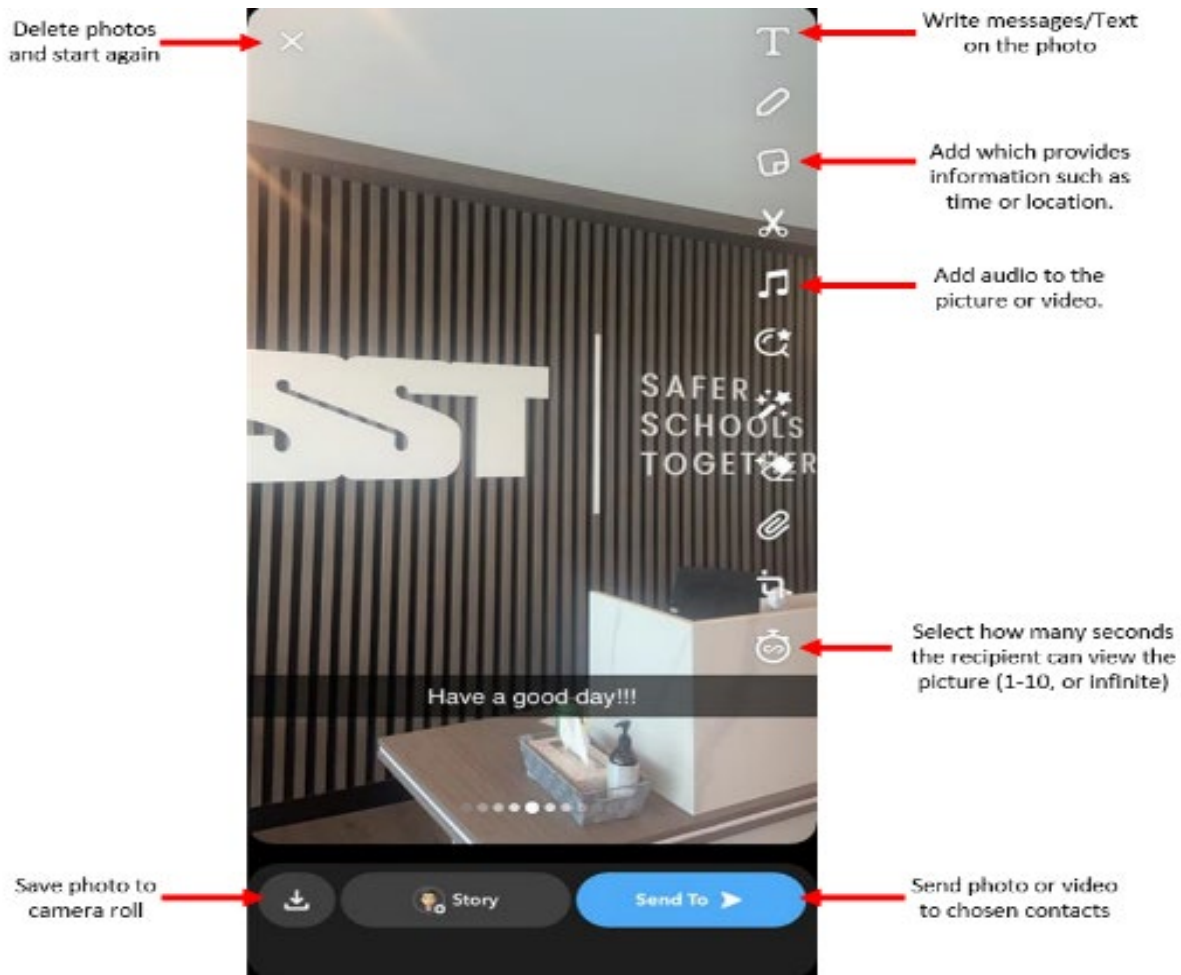
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<sup>1</sup> [Snapchat Demographic Stats: How Many People Use Snapchat in 2024?](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Snapchat Support](#)

## SNAPCHAT LINGO

### Snaps



A user takes a photo/video using their digital device/smartphone in real-time. The user can select an amount of time for the receiver to view the photo/video. A user can elect to have the photo/video they have just taken saved into their photo gallery, their [‘My Eyes Only’](#) folder, or simply sent via Snapchat without being saved on their device. YouTube user *How-To Authority* provides a helpful [video](#) that discusses what My Eyes Only is, and how a user can set this up. Below is an example of what a Snap looks like, and the different features/options you have once you take a photo or video. Once the receiver of the snap exits the photo/video, they will no longer be able to access it.

### Stories

A user can add the photo/video to their “Story.” Depending on the user’s privacy settings, the photos/videos added to a story can be viewed by all Snapchat users or just those on their friends’ list for up to 24 hours. Users can browse all Snap Stories by vanity name, and if you are looking to find the public stories of a known user, head [here](#). Not all Snap Stories are public though, and users can also

create personalized Stories where you can custom select what specific Snapchat friends can view your story. The photo/video on a user's story can be viewed an infinite number of times during those 24 hours, but *all* Stories expire after 24 hours.

## Spotlight

Spotlight is a new dedicated tab where users can see short-form videos, much like Instagram Reels or TikTok videos. Users have up to 60 seconds to create Spotlight Snaps for the public to see.

## Bitmoji

Owned by Snap Inc., users are encouraged to create an avatar, known as a [Bitmoji](#). A Bitmoji is a personalized emoji-like character designed to reflect the user's likeness. Users can personalize their avatar by changing hair texture, facial expressions, and body proportions. To further personalize their avatar, users can choose specific outfits that better portray personal style.

## Discover Page

Snapchat's Discover page allows users to access a variety of Stories from publishers and other subscriptions tailored to their interests. To navigate to the Discover page, users simply swipe left while on the camera screen.

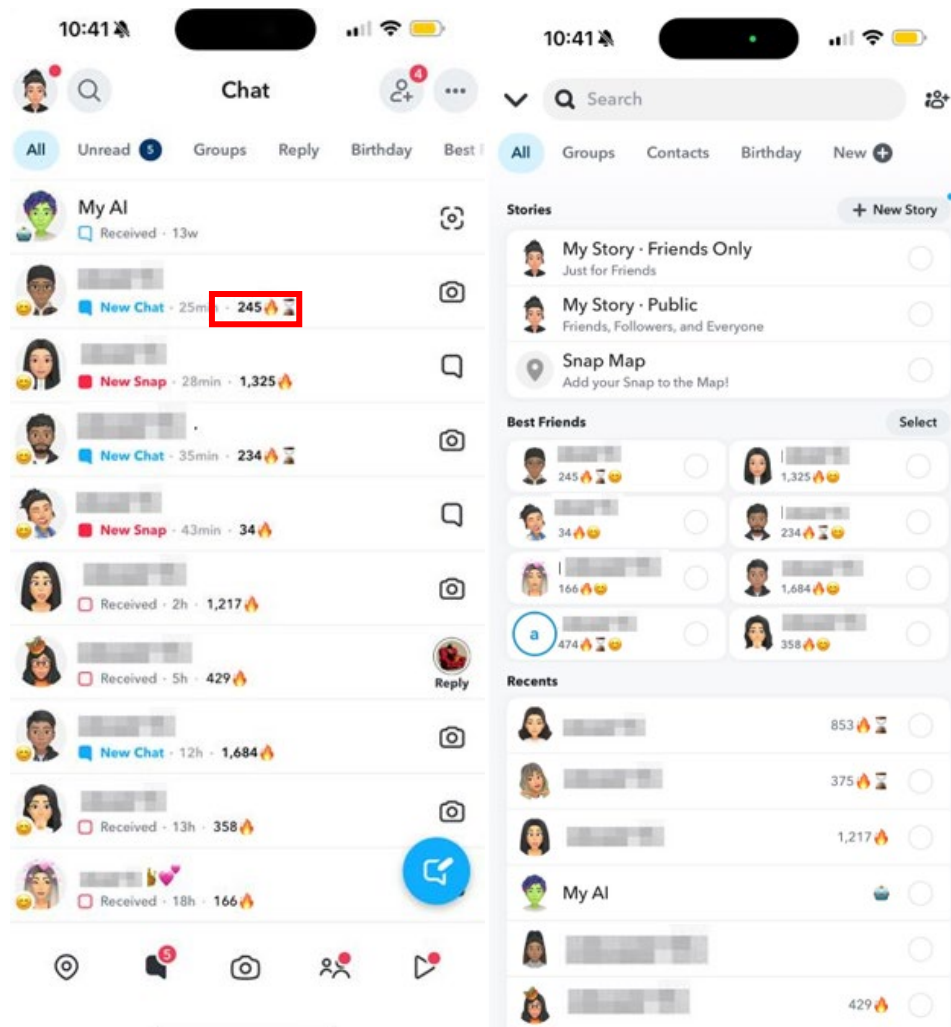
## Chat

Users can type a message, create a voice message, voice call, or video call within the Snapchat app to their friends. Once both parties have viewed the message, the message will vanish. The chat settings can also be manually changed within each conversation to be set to disappear after 24 hours instead. Additionally, users can save their chats from disappearing. Photos/videos from the camera roll or gallery of the user's device can be uploaded and sent within the chat. Group chats often exist between multiple friends. Often, we see negative group chat behaviors occur frequently on Snapchat, due to the ability for the messages to "disappear."

## Streaks

Seen within the chat log screen, a user's 'Snapchat Streak' is the number of consecutive days that the account owner and a friend have sent at least, but no less than, one snap per day to each other. If they do not Snap each other within 24 hours, they lose their streak with their friend.

This is a huge deal for our youth – we have seen students avoid field trips or travelling to places where they cannot access their phones in order to keep up these streaks. Connected with snap streaks is when an emoji of an hourglass next to a streak may appear, which means the users will lose their streak soon and if they do not snap each other, indicating the time period is closing in on 24 hours since they last snapped. Below is an example of what streaks look like on both pages of Snapchat. The red box outlines what a streak looks like, where the default option is that a fire emoji will represent a streak.



The ability to identify who a SOC has the highest streak with is extremely helpful for TA/SS teams in determining who else they can interview to get better insight into the behavioral baseline and hypothesized risk enhancers of the SOC.

## My AI

As the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) increases, we have seen a surge in the development of new AI services, specifically within social media. Most recently, Snapchat rolled out its own AI bot, called My AI. The new AI bot is powered by OpenAI's ChatGPT technology but has additional safety enhancements and controls that are unique to Snapchat.<sup>3</sup> What differentiates Snapchat's AI from services like ChatGPT or Midjourney is a user can customize the bot's name as well as the way it looks, reducing the perception of interacting with an AI system.

With My AI, users can leverage a variety of AI capabilities. To access My AI, users need to access the Chat screen. From the Chat screen, users will then be able to select My AI and ask the AI bot a variety of questions. Some examples of how My AI can be used include asking for advice, requesting help to plan a

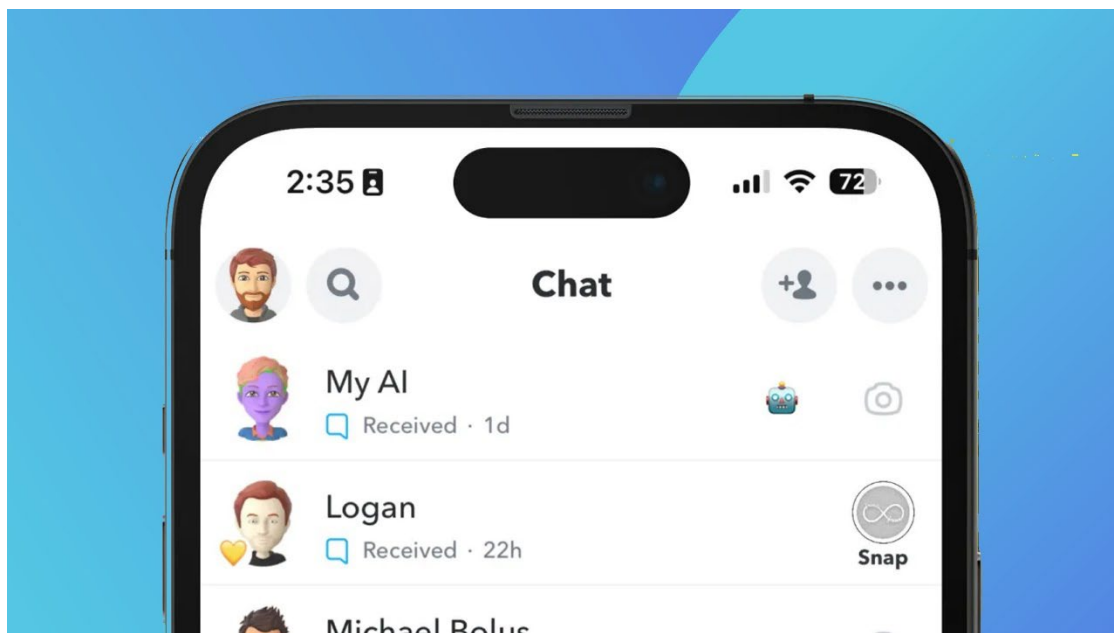
<sup>3</sup> [What is My AI on Snapchat and how do I use it?](#)

trip or find directions, or even asking for simple suggestions such as ‘What should I make for dinner?’<sup>3</sup> If a user has shared their location with Snapchat, My AI will be able to provide specific information including nearby location recommendations.<sup>3</sup>

Users currently have the option to send feedback to Snapchat by pressing and holding any responses from the AI bot. This allows users to share more on what they would like to see more or less of while Snapchat continues to “train” the My AI bot.<sup>3</sup>

Unless you sign up and pay for Snapchat+, there is no verified way, nor has SST found a way to permanently remove My AI from a user's Snapchat account.<sup>4</sup> We encourage parents/guardians to talk to their children about the risks associated with having conversations with AI, and how AI should not replace a trusted adult, parent, or adviser if they are experiencing a difficult situation.

My AI was created to foster creativity and connections with friends, receive real-world recommendations, and learn more about their interests and favorite things. Some features of My AI even include being able to personalize your AI and the option to bring it into conversations with friends on Snapchat.



*Photo from Creative Bloq.*

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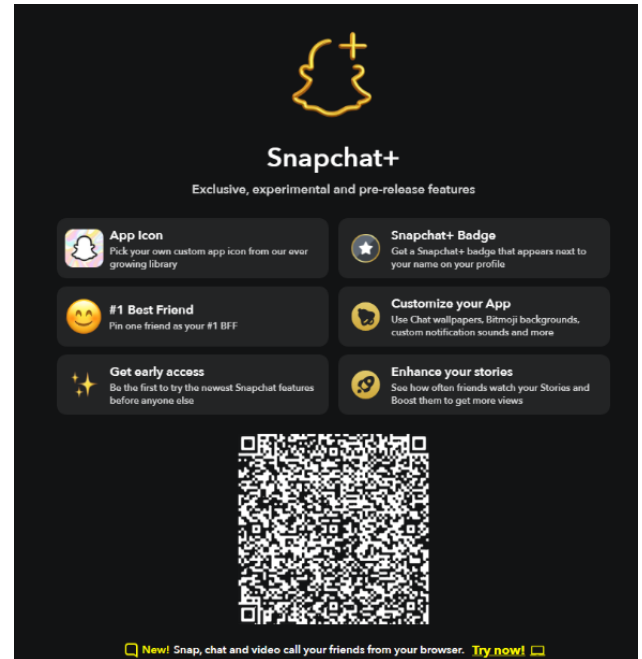
<sup>4</sup> [How do I Unpin my Snapchat AI?](#)

## Snapchat+

In 2022, Snapchat released a subscription-based feature called Snapchat+. This monthly subscription is accessed within the Snapchat app and offers a collection of exclusive features.

Snapchat+ has 11 million paying subscribers.<sup>5</sup> According to Snapchat, the “subscription will allow [them] to deliver new Snapchat features to some of the most passionate members of [their] community and allow [them] to provide prioritized support.”<sup>6</sup>

There are several unique features of Snapchat+, which include priority story replies, and allowing a Snapchat+ user's posts to become more visible on the platform. Snapchat+ users can also assign a specific emoji for friends to show they have viewed their Snaps, add custom backgrounds for their Bitmojis, and change the look of the Snapchat icon on the home screen of their device. In addition, Snapchat+ users can set time lengths to send a photo to as short as .10, .25 and .50 of a second.



## Snapchat for Web

In 2022, Snapchat released Snapchat for Web which allows users to access the Snapchat application from their PC or laptop via <https://web.snapchat.com>. This new feature includes most of the same features as the mobile version including posting, direct messaging, group chats, video sharing, and voice calling. Snapchat users who already have accounts can login to the web version with the same credentials they use on their mobile devices or can sign up for a new account on the web. Once either mobile or desktop applications are synced, users can continue their conversations with other Snapchat users.

To use Snapchat for Web, users are required to give the application access to a webcam and/or microphone for users to post, video, and voice call. If the user does not grant access or does not have a webcam or microphone available, they will still be able to text chat on the application. As well, please know that you will not be able to access the Snap Map via the Snapchat Web version. But, users can post video Snaps to their My Story from the web.<sup>7</sup>

## Snap Map

When in the camera screen, swipe down to access the Snap Map. The Snap Map was originally introduced in 2017, and raised significant privacy concerns. The Snap Map allows users to view Snaps of sporting events, celebrations, breaking news, etc. in their communities and around the world. This

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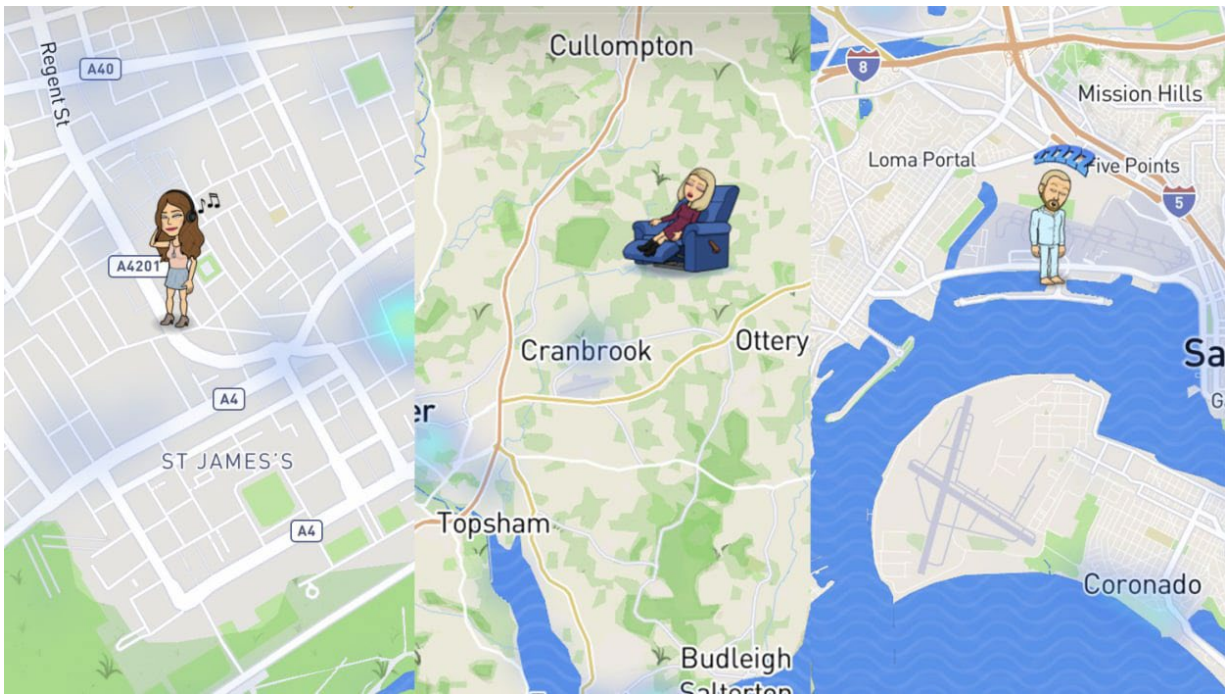
<sup>5</sup> [Snapchat+](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Introducing Snapchat+](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Post from the Web](#)

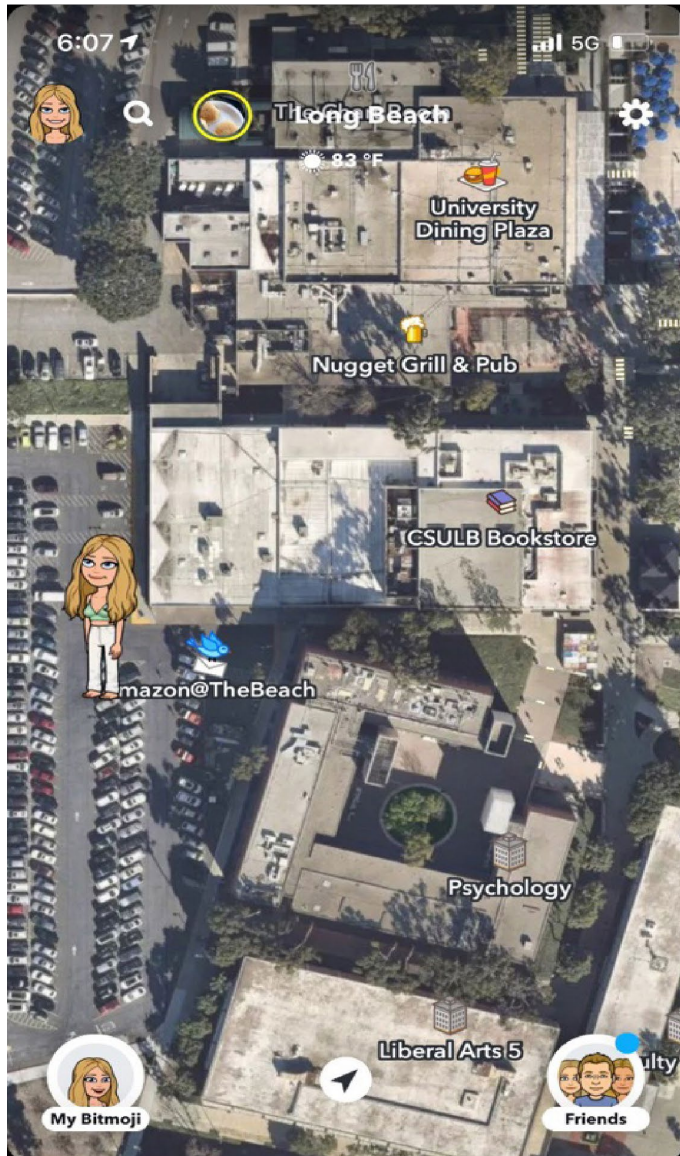
feature is only available within the application itself. In addition, a feature of the Snap Map called 'Places' allows users who post a public story to tag specific locations that then show up on the Snap Map (malls, public spaces, sports arenas, etc.).

Perhaps the most concerning content viewable from this map, is that it shows where your friends are...and exactly where they are...in real-time. Users can share their locations with everyone on their "friends" list so they can see exactly where their friends are and what they are specifically doing (driving, at an airport, sleeping, listening to music, etc.) in real-time on a virtual map.



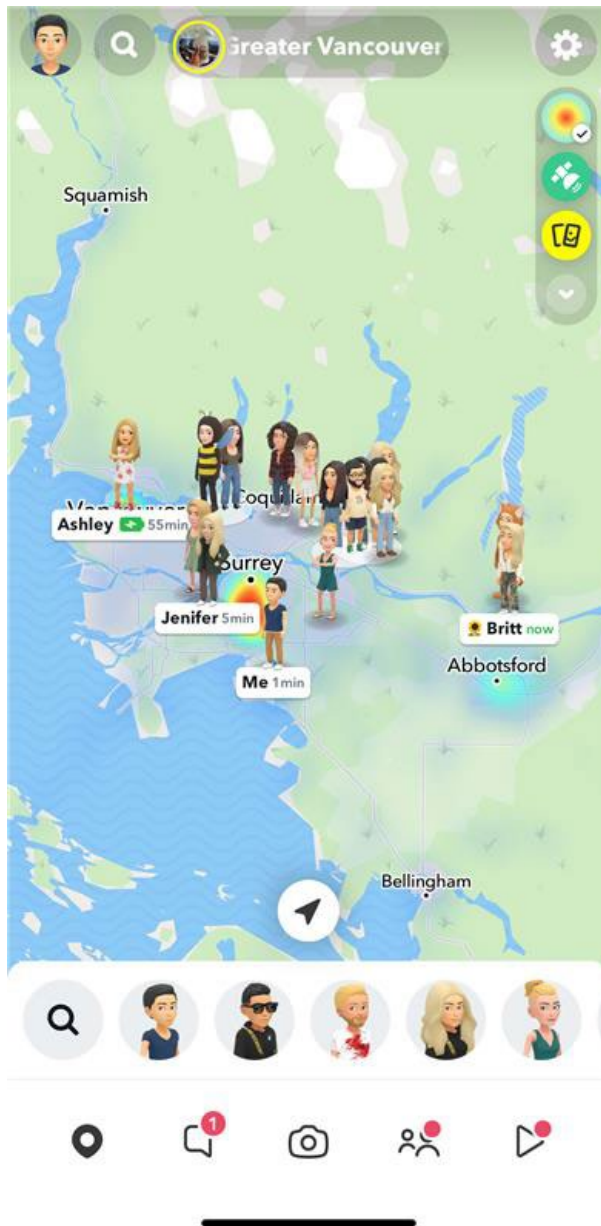
*Photo from Mashable.*

It is important to know how in depth the Snap Map goes.



For example, in this situation, we asked this individual where they were standing. They explained how they were standing next to their white car and could see their school Bookstore. And, on the Snap Map, in real time, it updated to show exactly that.

Below is an example of what the Snap Map looks like to a user from the mobile application while logged into their account.



The characters you see on the screen to the left are all friends of the Snapchat user whose account we are using to preview the Snap Map. All of these friends have the Snap Map enabled. They are represented by a Bitmoji<sup>8</sup> they designed for themselves.

Within the Snapchat Settings, users can turn off the ability for others to see their location by enabling something called Ghost Mode or only allowing their location to be viewed by certain friends (i.e., their best friend) and/or parents/caregivers or other trusted adults.

Ghost Mode is a full privacy mode that makes a user's presence on the Snap Map invisible to other users. This disallows other users from viewing their location, including users on their friend list.

The Snap Map is often used by SST Threat Analysts and law enforcement to find missing students by asking their peers to share their Snap Map with us.



<sup>8</sup> [Bitmoji](#)

When dealing with targets and/or threats of violence, it's crucial to know whether or not the SOC's location can be identified in their current location in their Snap Map. Snap Map should also be one of the first tools TA/SS teams turn to when working on missing student cases.

## Friend Screen Icon Guide

Below is an image that illustrates what the different icons mean on Snapchat.

**Sent Icons**

- You sent a Snap without audio
- You sent a Snap with audio
- You sent a Chat
- Depending on privacy settings, a gray pending icon may appear if someone has not accepted your friend request

**Opened Icons**

- A friend opened a Snap without audio
- A friend opened a Snap with audio
- A friend opened a Chat
- A friend viewed and received Cash

**Received Icons**

- You have an unopened Snap (or group of Snaps) without audio
- You have an unopened Snap (or group of Snaps) that includes audio
- You have an unread Chat

**Viewed Icons**

- Your Snap sent (without audio) has been viewed
- Your Snap sent (with audio) has been viewed
- Your Chat has been viewed
- A Snap or Chat is pending and may have expired

**Screenshot Icons**

- A screenshot has been taken of your Snap without audio
- A screenshot has been taken of your Snap with audio
- A screenshot has been taken of your Chat

**Replay Icons**

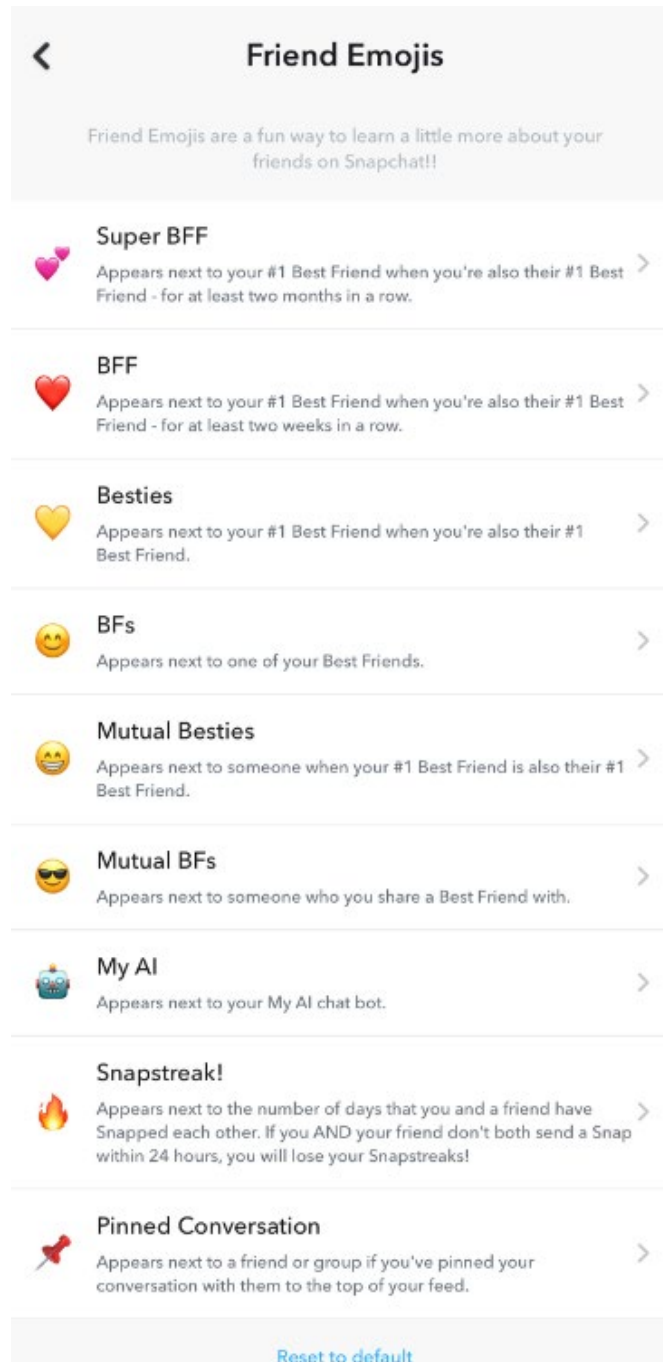
- Your Snap sent without audio has been replayed
- Your Snap sent with audio has been replayed

**Replay Feature:** You can replay a Snap once per day after it's been opened and disappeared.

Courtesy of Snapchat.

## Friend Emojis

These emojis help you keep track of your friends on Snapchat. These can change over time, based on the way you use Snapchat. Below is a screenshot of the default Snapchat Friend Emojis that have specific meanings; however, users are able to customize these emojis to their personal preference in the Settings of Snapchat.



## Family Center

In 2022, Snapchat released [Family Center](#), which allows parents to have greater control and a better understanding of their child’s Snapchat activities. The in-app tool allows parents to see who their children are interacting with on the platform, meaning any new friends added by their children can also be viewed in the Family Center.

Snapchat released a statement on Family Center<sup>9</sup> explaining how the “Family Center is designed to reflect the way that parents engage with their teens in the real world, where parents usually know who their teens are friends with and when they are hanging out – but don’t eavesdrop on their private conversations.”

The Snapchat Family Center statement also included information such as giving parents access to an easy, confidential reporting system that is directed to their Trust and Safety teams, as well as new resources for parents and teens to foster constructive and open conversations about online safety.



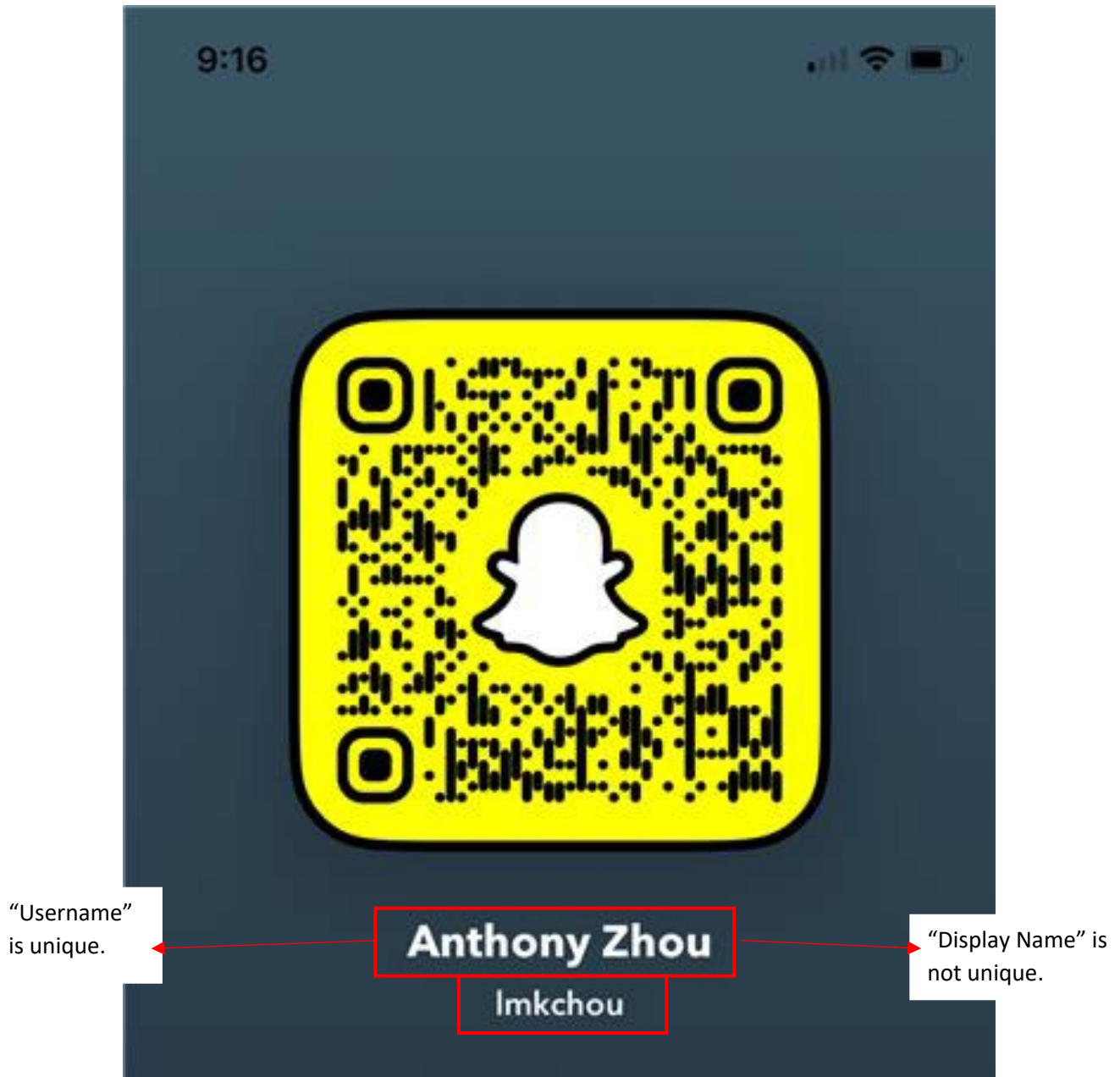
*Video Courtesy of YouTube.*

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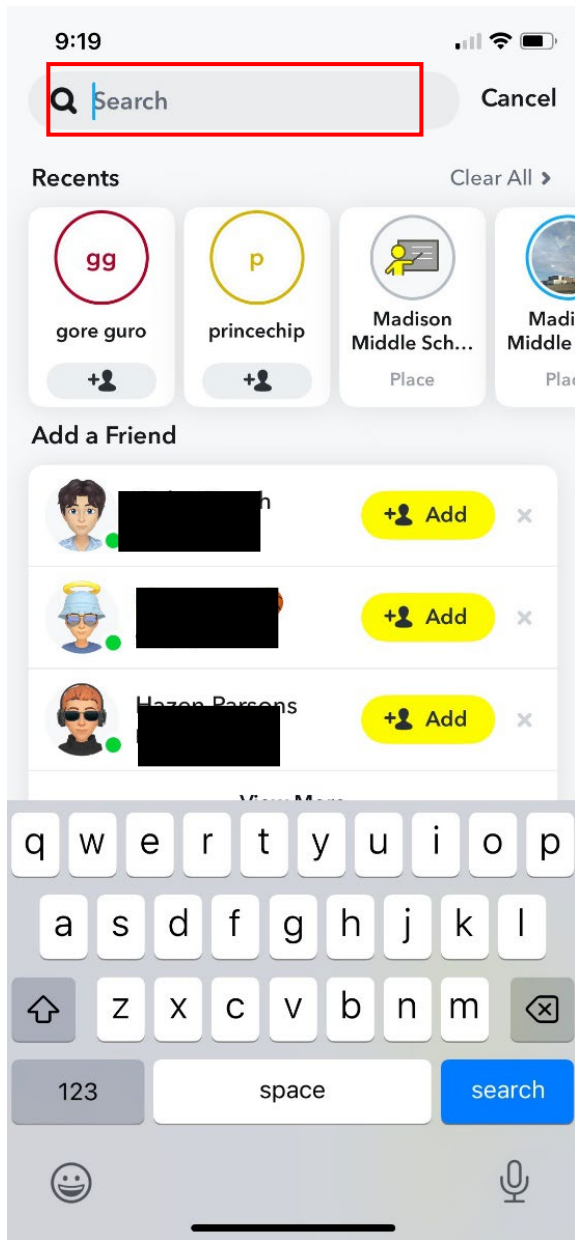
<sup>9</sup> [Family Center](#)

## SEARCHING WITHIN SNAPCHAT

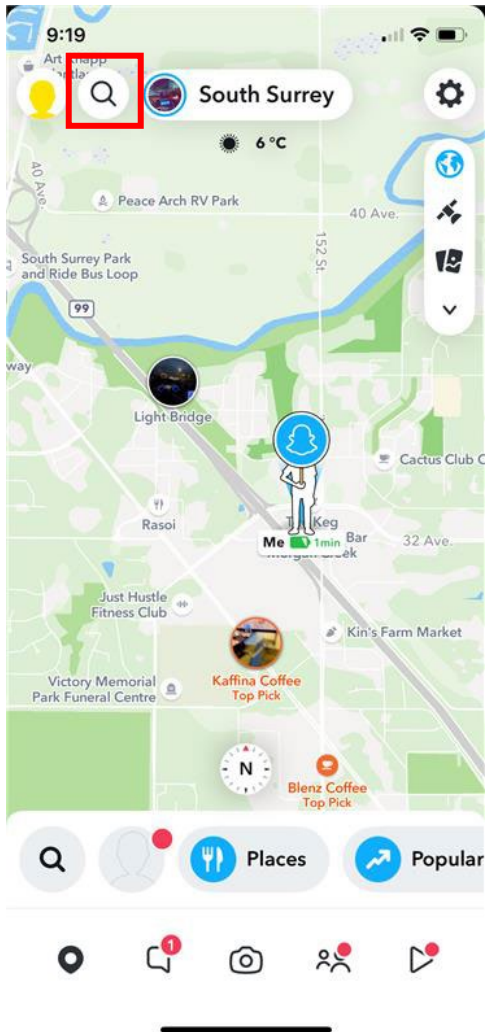
Searching within Snapchat can also be done by phone/tablet. To search for a specific user, you must know their unique username. Note that usernames and display names are not the same, both screenshots below are examples of what to look for when locating a username.



To use the search function, click on the search bar which can be found at the top of any of the screens within the app.



Once you open the search tool, you will be able to search by username (remember this is unique to each user). You can also use the same search function to search by location on the Snap Map within the app.



## UTILIZING SNAPCHAT FOR SCHOOL SAFETY / THREAT ASSESSMENT

Before creating an SS/TA account for searching, we must first review when an account should be used. Within a law enforcement environment, adequately trained internet investigators and researchers can create 'false persona' or covert accounts to conduct covert investigations. However, as SS/TA teams, we only want to create these accounts for searching. We should never pretend to be another student, request to follow them if their accounts are set to private or send any messages to anyone. The purpose of these accounts is to collect necessary and relevant data for your SS/TA concerns.

An SS/TA account ensures reduced risk of detection or compromise of an ongoing investigation. If we use personal social media accounts for searching, we run the risk of accidentally interacting with someone/a SOC or showing up in a SOC's suggested friend list. It is always best to separate personal social media accounts from our professional ones.

SS/TA teams must keep records of the details (e.g., username, password, etc.) associated with their accounts. Recorded details will be useful if any social media site restricts access to an account and asks the owner to prove they are the account holder by answering questions based on the information provided. If evidence is taken to court, the team can provide the information used for their SS/TA accounts.

Before you create an SS/TA account, you must know your agency's policies around things like friending and any levels of approval or documentation required.

Creating an SS/TA account may appear simple; however, there is an important process to follow. Here are some tips to consider when creating an account:

- Do not use a VPN; most IP ranges are flagged.
- Use a public network (e.g., Starbucks or a library). Please be aware that you will not be on a secure public network. Do not do anything else except create these accounts.
- Clear your cache data before you begin. Click [here](#) to learn how to clear your browser cache if you are using Google Chrome (if you are not, then refer to whatever browser you are using, and search how to clear your cache).

### Setup Step 1: Email Creation

- Set up an email account with [TutaMail](#).

### Setup Step 2: SS/TA Account Creation

- Create all your accounts at once and tie them in as one profile. This will create intentional cross-correlation.
- Keep notes on your SS/TA accounts. The use of a password manager is suggested. Once the account is created, do not leave it empty. Make it feel 'real' right away by adding a profile picture, etc.

## What to Call the Account?

- Do not impersonate someone else.
- Do not add students as friends.
- Keep the theme of your account school related. Have fun with this! For example, if your school is in Texas and called the “Knights”, you could call your username “@txknights”.

## Where to find Content to Post

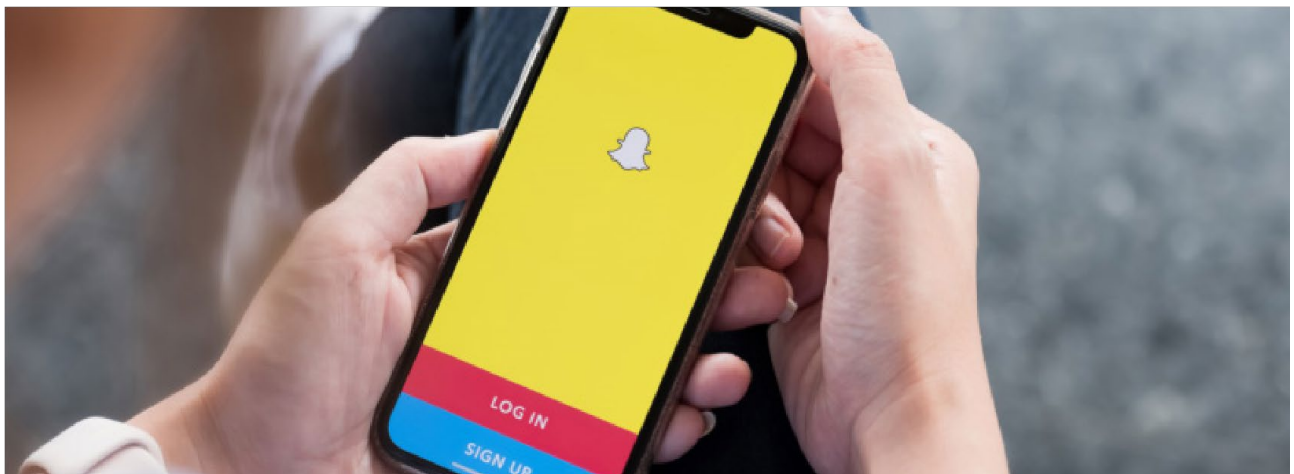
Do not use personal social media accounts to check student profiles. In a worst-case scenario, if the student is showing signs of suicidal ideation - what would happen if you searched that student from your personal account and they saw that you had accidentally viewed their public story? What if you accidentally added them as a friend? Could this potentially enhance their current overall level of risk?

It is encouraged that SS/TA teams get together as a group to create one social media account for each platform that is shared only within the SS/TA team.

There are some good resources for finding free, high-quality stock photos to use for these profiles, including:

- [Pexels](#)
- [Unsplash](#)
- [Bing](#) or [Google Images](#) of large crowds (sporting events or concerts)

It is also a good idea to join groups such as [Facebook Groups](#) or forums such as [Reddit](#) that are publicly accessible – usually based on celebrities, fan accounts, meme accounts, or sports team networks to find content and promote engagement on your profile.



## Documenting for School Safety/Threat Assessment Teams on Snapchat

Documenting for SS/TA teams on Snapchat is a bit different than documenting for other social media platforms as there are certain features on Snapchat that may interfere with the Threat Assessment process, particularly around screenshotting.

When screenshotting occurs in Snapchat, the user (whose photo you are screenshotting) will be notified that a screenshot has been taken. This is an important feature to know as being notified that a snap has been screenshotted may heighten the justification for the SOC.

Use a secondary device to take photos and/or videos of the device with which you are opening the snaps. It is best practice to have your phone in video mode (preferably perched on a tripod to keep the recording steady) in case the photo or video you are opening is only a few seconds long. If you are not recording a video for documentation, you may not be able to take a photo in time and may miss out on documenting critical information.

**CAUTION:** If intimate images are involved in the search, secure the device, do not re-share images, and consult with local law enforcement.

### When documenting for SS/TA, remember the following:

- When in doubt, document it (with the exception of intimate images).
- Always document as much of a profile and/or post, photo, comment, etc. as possible. Document all potentially worrisome online behavior as quickly as possible - before it disappears.
- Remember to include the date and time of documenting on each piece you document.

If you have any questions about documenting worrisome online behavior, contact Safer Schools Together at [info@saferschoolstogether.com](mailto:info@saferschoolstogether.com).



## RESOURCES FOR SNAPCHAT INVESTIGATIONS & LAW ENFORCEMENT GUIDE

United States law enforcement and government agencies should submit legal process (including preservation requests) to Snap Inc. (“Snap”) via [Snap’s Law Enforcement Service Site](#). From there, law enforcement and governmental agencies can create an account for the purpose of submitting requests and checking the status of submissions. To read more about the Snapchat Law Enforcement Guide, read the [Snap Inc. Law Enforcement Guide](#).

Law enforcement officials seeking the emergency disclosure of Snapchat account records should complete and submit Snap’s Law Enforcement Emergency Response Form via Snap’s Law Enforcement Service Site.

Non-U.S. law enforcement officials seeking the emergency disclosure of Snapchat account records should complete and submit [Snap’s Law Enforcement Emergency Response Form](#)

**Note:** The Law Enforcement Emergency Response Form is for use **only by sworn law enforcement officials** requiring emergency assistance regarding a **threat of imminent death or serious bodily injury**. All other inquiries from law enforcement must be directed to [lawenforcement@snapchat.com](mailto:lawenforcement@snapchat.com).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



[Safer Schools Together](#)

[Raising Digitally Responsible Youth](#)



International Center for  
Digital Threat Assessment

[International Center for Digital Threat Assessment®](#)

[Live Virtual Training](#)

[On-Demand Training](#)



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