Facebook and Psychology: Use and Misuse of Social Networks

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Abstract: - The rise in the past five years of social networking websites, including MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, has had a major impact on the way that today's young adults communicate. These sites, designed to increase ease of information sharing online and help keep persons connected in ways previously impossible, have become an almost indispensible piece of most college students' lives. But the ease of use of such sites can cause major concerns as well, as one's private life can become very non-private, very permanently. This is problematic in a field such as psychology, where professionals must undergo extensive training at both the undergraduate and graduate level and are often interacting with clients that may have a poor understanding of personal boundaries. The current study was designed to assess the level of personal disclosure of both neutral and possibly negative information by a population of undergraduates majoring in psychology. Data on use of Facebook was gathered on close to 600 students, showing large amounts of personal disclosure of potentially sensitive information, such as religious and political views, as well as a significant amount of questionable and unprofessional content. Given the relative ease with which this information could be viewed by future clients, employers, and supervisors, education on how to increase privacy online and what type of content should and should not be placed on social networking sites should be given to all persons early in their college career.

Key-Words: - Facebook, social networking, privacy, psychology majors

1 Introduction

Social networking venues have taken root in this generation and have revolutionized the way that personal interactions take shape. These websites allow people to easily post photographs, videos, and other information online to share with others, usually at little or no cost. Popular examples include MySpace, Twitter, and Bebo. One of the most used social networking sites is Facebook, which boasts a following of more than 300 million registered users [1]. The extreme ease with which anyone can obtain an online profile begs the question as to what type of materials are being laid out for the world to see. It is important for students, in particular students who will likely be working in a health care field, to understand that their actions online have the very real possibility of causing problems in their everyday lives.

Past research has been conducted on the types of people who frequent social networking sites [2] and found that the majority of users are college students who live at home. Other work [3] found that the types of materials on a personal profile and the level of activity by the user could be factors that indicate a high level of narcissism. Narcissistic tendencies may increase the level of personal disclosure and unprofessional content. Another group of researchers [4] examined how the number of friends a user has accumulated on their social networking site affects whether an outside visitor to their public profile perceives them negatively or positively. They found a negative relationship between number of "friends" on Facebook and positive views of that individual.

Prior research examining the types of content that is being shared by medical students and residents [5, 6] and students at a small Midwestern university [7] found high levels of unprofessional content and personal information being disclosed. The current study examined how undergraduate psychology majors utilize Facebook by gathering data on their level of publicly accessible information and the rate of unprofessional content. As popular as Facebook is, and as easy as it is to access personal profiles, specifically on the same network, it would be easy for a potential employer or admissions administrator to gain access to information that could be seen as unprofessional and inappropriate. Therefore, it is important for students to maintain their privacy and only allow certain types of information that they feel to be of no threat to their reputation to be accessible to the public. This is a new and relatively unstudied phenomenon, as in no other time during

history has it been so easy to share information with so many people in such a remarkably sophisticated way.

2 Problem Formulation

Given the paucity of information on the content sharing habits of college students in general, and those in psychology specifically, this study was designed to examine the level of privacy that individuals on Facebook attain through options that allow for customizable privacy. Unlike other social networks, Facebook requires that the individuals register using both first and last names. People in the same network, such as a particular city or university, are allowed to view items on other network member's profiles that are not private. Therefore, individuals who do not set their profile as private open their profile to be viewed by any member of their network, whether they know the person or not.

The names of all undergraduate psychology majors at the University of Central Oklahoma (n = 566) were collected from a public database available through enrollment services. Using personally created Facebook accounts, study authors (M.K. and D.W.) then systematically searched each participant for a profile using their first and last names. It was determined if the participant did or did not have a Facebook account, and whether it was set as public or private. For public profiles, the following variables were observed and noted as either present or absent: birthday, hometown, relationship status, political views, religious views, sexual orientation, personal photograph, field of study, home address, email address, instant messenger (IM) address, number of friends, number of photo albums, and the number of social groups. Afterwards, each public profile was examined for the presence of unprofessional content, that which could be seen as possibly offensive. To do this, the recent activity on each person's "wall" (the front page of a profile that shows recent status updates, comments, and other activity) was checked for presence of profanity, sexism, and racism. Finally, each photo was scanned for evidence of overt sexuality, alcohol use, drug use, sexism, or racism.

3 Problem Solution

3.1 Participants

Of the 566 undergraduate psychology majors, 50% (n = 283) had existing personally created profiles at the time of the data collection. Of those people who had an active Facebook account, 47.7% (n = 135) allowed their personal profiles to be viewed by anyone in their particular network and by any of their friends. The network that was relevant in this particular study was the "Central Oklahoma" network, which is available to anyone who had an @uco.edu email address. All of the information presented below was obtained from those 135 public profiles. Females were much more heavily represented in this sample (68.9%), consistent with the higher numbers of females majoring in psychology in the United States.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Reveal of Information

As seen in Table 1, those persons with public profiles tended to reveal high levels of personal information. Indeed, this reveal was very similar to other undergraduate samples [7, 8] and graduate samples [5].

Table 1: Descriptive information obtained from public Facebook profiles.

Revealed Info	Total (n=135)	Females (n=93)	Males (n=42)
Birthday	93.3%	95.0%	90.0%
Hometown	65.9%	68.0%	62.0%
Relationship status	82.2%	86.0%	74.0%
Political views	45.9%	44.0%	50.0%
Religious views	57.8%	58.0%	57.0%
Sexual orientation	68.1%	68.0%	69.0%
Personal photograph	95.6%	97.0%	93.0%
Field of study	49.6%	49.0%	50.0%
Home postal address	7.4%	2.0%	19.0%
Email address	38.5%	33.0%	50.0%
IM address	24.4%	23.0%	29.0%
Mean # friends	301.9	323.5	238.1
(Range)	(0-1715)	(0-1715)	(0-1644)
Mean # photo albums	6.7	8.5	2.9
(Range)	(0-70)	(0-33)	(0-70)
Mean # social groups	22.6	24.8	17.9
(Range)	(0-160)	(0-68)	(0-160)

3.2.2 Qualitative Analysis

For each of the students that had a publically accessible Facebook account (n = 135) a qualitative analysis was performed. Each profile was scrutinized for content that could be seen as unprofessional or inappropriate. This is

important because future employers, clients, and graduate school admissions boards all have the opportunity of viewing these public profiles, and recent surveys have found that many do so [9]. Any reference or visual representation of alcohol use or drug use was collected, along with evidence of overt sexuality, racism, sexism, and profanity. Of the 135 students who had public profiles, 46.6% had questionable content on their profile (see Table 2).

Table 2: The occurrence of questionable content on public Facebook profiles.

Questionable content	Total (n=135)	Females (n=93)	Males (n=42)
Alcohol use	35.6%	39.0%	29.0%
Drug use	3.0%	3.0%	2.0%
Overt sexuality	41.5%	43.0%	43.0%
Profanity	11.9%	14.0%	22.0%
Racism	3.0%	0.0%	13.0%
Sexism	4.4%	4.0%	6.0%

3.2.3 Gender Differences

In order to examine the possible gender differences in the level of privacy, a series of one-way ANOVAs were used. The only difference in the area of unprofessional content was presence of racist material ($F_{[1, 134]} = 10.31$, $p < .05$), as the only participants who were found to have racist content on their page were males (n = 4). Other significant differences found included the fact that males revealed their home address more often than females ($F_{[1, 134]} = 13.02$, $p < .05$) and that females had significantly more photo albums than males ($F_{[1, 134]} = 8.10$, $p < .05$).

4   Conclusion

With the surge of social networking sites it is easier than ever for students to reveal personal information to their friends and family. Unfortunately, it is just as easy for other individuals to search for people on their own network that have their profile set to public. Therefore, it is more essential than ever that people realize that their online information is not necessarily private. Precautions must be used to keep prying eyes at bay. These precautions include privacy settings that are available through options inside Facebook and most other sites and more selective "friending" – granting others access to your profile and, consequently, giving you access to theirs.

It is natural for people, particularly undergraduates who are not thinking about the future, to post things that, in their minds, are not inappropriate or unprofessional. They dissociate their online selves from their real-world selves. This is not the case however, because it is all too simple for someone to take content from online and bring it into real life context to use any way they see fit. Each and every student must be informed of the possible ramifications for their online unprofessionalism, very possibly in some type of introduction course to the university or the major of psychology.

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