Privacy and Disclosure on Facebook: Youth and Adults’ Information

Disclosure and Perceptions of Privacy Risks

Delivered to the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada

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Research Team:
Emily Christofides
Amy Muise
Serge Desmarais
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Executive Summary

This report outlines a study of information disclosure and privacy on Facebook among high school aged youth and working adults. This study is the first to explore these issues in a sample of respondents selected from outside of a University student population. In addition, the report provides information about specific individual factors that predict the extent of disclosure and use of the privacy settings on Facebook. We offer recommendations for increasing awareness and educating the public about protecting privacy on Facebook.

Key Findings

• Despite popular perceptions that it is young people who disclose a considerable amount of information online, our study suggests that youth and adults are similar in their disclosure behaviours on Facebook. However, adults are more likely than youth to report using the privacy settings on Facebook.

• While the majority of respondents from both our youth and adult samples reported knowing how to use Facebook’s privacy settings, a significantly smaller proportion of individuals from both groups reported actually using these settings.

• In both samples, respondents who reported having higher need for popularity and less awareness of the consequences of information sharing were more likely to disclose information about themselves on Facebook.

• Awareness of the consequences of personal disclosure was the strongest predictor of using the privacy settings on Facebook. This pattern was similar for both youth and adults.
• Respondents in the youth sample who reported having a bad experience on Facebook were more likely to control their information through use of the privacy settings.

**Recommendations for Education**

• Efforts should be made to provide adults with better knowledge about some of the features of Facebook so they can provide more guidance to their children about Facebook privacy settings. Doing so would also enable adults with the tools to monitor their children’s use of Facebook.

• Strategies should focus on increasing awareness about the consequences of disclosing information, as this was a strong predictor of both information disclosure and control among youth and adults.

• Education campaigns for youth should include strategies for dealing with negative situations on Facebook (i.e., cyberbullying, harassment), both in terms of prevention and management.

• All Facebook users should be educated about how to use and regularly monitor their privacy settings. This education campaign should, include cautionary statements regarding the selection of “friends” and how a person’s Facebook profile appears to other Facebook users.

**Recommendations for Policy**

• Work with online social network sites, such as Facebook, to develop privacy settings and terms of use that are accessible to the youngest potential users.
• Establish mechanisms by which Facebook users have more control over the information that other users post about them.

• Develop education and awareness campaigns that encourage users to read the privacy settings and that encourage parents to educate their children about online privacy.

• Advocate for school programs that educate youth about online privacy and the consequences of disclosure.

Introduction

This research project, funded by the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, examined the psychology of privacy on Facebook. In this project, we extended our past research conducted with university students to two new demographic groups, namely high school students and working-age adults. Given the current lack of research on Facebook usage by members of these two groups, both in Canada and elsewhere, we believe that this study would provide some useful information to scholars and other individuals interested in patterns of Facebook use. Our study was also guided by the desire to better understand individuals’ perceptions of the risks of information sharing on social network sites and the extent of information disclosure by high school students and working age adults. While we approached our study with the expectation that individuals from both samples will share many similarities with the way university students approach and experience privacy on Facebook, we also believe that high school students and working adults experience different life circumstances that may affect their use of Facebook. Specifically, their information sharing behaviour and the risks that they might
experience as a result of breaches to their privacy will be different depending on their stage in life.

**Current Context**

The study of privacy has been described as a field that has been neglected by social and behavioural scientists (Altman, 1975). While there has recently been increased interest in the topic, research into privacy from a psychological perspective is still an underdeveloped area (Christofides & Desmarais, under review). There remain many unanswered questions about the topic, and new questions are added as advances in technology and changes to the structure of communities alter what is possible in terms of the privacy people are able to enjoy.

**Changes in our Society**

The increased globalization of our world has changed our experience of community. In contemporary society, people more often live alone, relocate or commute to work (Statistics Canada, 2001); these community factors and the effects of a society that values individual strength and independence can lead to increased feelings of loneliness and isolation (Schneider, 1998). In Altman’s (1975) view of privacy, people are able to create a balance that gives them their preferred level of exposure to other people. If they feel isolated because of the decreased number of community connections, then they can compensate in another way. One key example is through the use of technology.
Technology

Technology, and computers more specifically, enables people to connect to others in a way that was not possible in the past. Computers and the Internet have become an avenue for people to connect with friends and strangers across the world (Christofides & Desmarais). While connecting with people, it is also possible to keep these conversations private because people are using their personal computers or cell phones to connect with others. Children now often communicate online in the privacy of their own rooms rather than on a family computer that parents also use, and many children have their own cell phones and use these rather than the home phone. This technology gives children increased privacy from their parents, and parents increased privacy from their children, though these multiple connections may provide them with less privacy from other parties. Generally, technology has increased the opportunities for connection with other people, though it has also changed the control that we have over our information. Both Westin (1967) and Altman (1975), two of the pioneers of privacy research, emphasize the importance of control in privacy. Contemporary technology has affected our ability to control our own privacy by reducing our ability to choose what information is known about us and what information we share with other people (Kling, 1996).

Facebook

Social network sites are one type of technology that is having an important impact on privacy. These websites enable people to connect with a vast range of other people. On Facebook, users create their own profile page, and then link to the profiles of other people. Their links to other people, the comments they post, their photos and interests are all available for others to see. Facebook, by its very nature, provides easy access to
friends’ and partners’ information, including changes to their profile, additions of new “friends,” and messages posted on their virtual “wall” (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009). Facebook is very popular with young people, and it is estimated that 76% of generation ‘Y’, also known as Millennials, use Facebook (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007). However, its popularity is also growing with adults. Facebook estimates that adults are their largest growing demographic. Despite the popularity of Facebook, little is known about how youth and adults use the site. In fact, most of the research that exists, including our own, focuses on Facebook use in University students.

**Privacy and Facebook**

While there are many unknowns about the way people use Facebook and how they approach privacy, there is a small body of research to draw on that provides some insights about these issues. The main themes of this research are described below.

**Behaviour on Facebook**

One thing that is known is that students disclose a vast amount of information online. A recent study by Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009) about information disclosure on Facebook shows that the majority of students disclose information such as their relationship status, email address, and birthday, to an average of 297 “friends” and countless other networked connections through the site. Acquisti and Gross (2005) found that the majority of users provide real names, complete birthdays, and clear photo images of themselves in their profiles. Other avenues for information sharing include notes and status updates. Users can post information about their whereabouts and activities, as well
as their personal thoughts and feelings. People can also post videos and pictures of both themselves and their friends, whether or not those friends are Facebook users.

Christofides and colleagues (2009) found that participants perceived that they disclosed more information about themselves on Facebook than in general, but participants also reported that information control and privacy were important to them. It is suggested that Facebook users are very concerned with their privacy, but have a different concept of privacy and control than previously understood. When asked about the importance of being able to control who sees their information on Facebook, 76% of respondents indicated that it was at least somewhat important to do so. In our research, general tendency to disclose and need for popularity were the only significant predictors of information disclosure on Facebook, while higher self-esteem predicted higher likelihood of controlling information, as did lower levels of trust (Christofides et al., 2009). Interestingly, the likelihood of controlling information was not related to the likelihood of disclosing on Facebook. Based on traditional privacy literature, it would be expected that those who desire more control over their information would engage in less disclosure. Yet, we did not find this relationship for information control and disclosure on Facebook.

As Acquisti and Gross (2006) discovered, privacy values seem to have little impact overall on disclosure behaviour. Even after gaining greater awareness of the potential implications of their online disclosures, few people changed their online behaviour – only a limited number changed their privacy settings. According to Govani and Pashley (2007), 84% of participants in their study of Facebook users reported that they are aware that they can change their privacy settings, but of those people, only 48%
made use of the privacy settings. One factor in this may be the phenomenon identified by Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007). They found that profile elements seem to correlate with the number of friends a person has on Facebook; the more information people include in their profile, the more friend links they are likely to have. This provides further evidence that popularity has an important role in explaining the discrepancy between the importance of privacy and the lack of privacy-protecting behaviour on Facebook.

One of the attractions of Facebook is that it enables people to connect with others in a way that other more anonymous websites do not. Anonymity is often associated with the Internet, according to Bargh and McKenna (2004), but there are varying levels of anonymity. Social network sites have been described as nonymous, because while people have some level of privacy, the information they post is linked to their real identity (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). In the case of nonymous environments, if people want to be private they would have to be more reserved, and choose to hold certain information back. Reserve may be a difficult strategy to use in environments such as social network sites, where participating involves sharing information with others (Christofides & Desmarais). Sharing information is a way of recreating your offline identity online, or of exploring your identity. In their research about identity construction in nonymous environments, Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) found that in environments like Facebook, where people are linked with their offline identities, they show others about themselves by sharing information like pictures and interests. This is different from other environments where people may need to tell others about themselves. From this perspective, identity is not just an individual characteristic, but is also a social product. This social product is created not only by what you share, but also
by what others share and say about you. This very fact promotes self-disclosure as normal and necessary.

**Consequences**

While online disclosures can have positive results, negative consequences are also a possible outcome of online networking and information sharing. Some research indicates that young people perceive psychological risks associated with feeling uncomfortable or regretful about their disclosure, and social risks such as experiencing conflict with parents (Youn, 2005). Media reports have shown that students’ Facebook sites have been used in assessing their employment candidacy, and that students have been suspended or criminally charged based on information posted on Facebook (for a review, see Peluchette and Karl, 2008). We have also found that online disclosures can have a negative impact on romantic relationships (Muise et al., 2009). Facebook information has also been used in legal investigations in Canada and other countries (Dhawan, 2009). However, there is not a lot of information about the actual consequences of online disclosure. Most of what is available are anecdotal reports in popular media.

Also unknown is the extent to which this information about the negative consequences of disclosure influences peoples’ behaviour. While a better understanding of the risks of using Facebook may be a deterrent for some, it may not be a factor in others’ use of the social networking site, as Acquisti and Gross (2006) and Govani and Pashley (2007) have found. One problem is that researchers simply don’t know what people’s perceptions are of the risks of using Facebook. Further research is needed to understand the relationship between perception of risks associated with disclosing on Facebook, and actual disclosure behaviour.
Potential Explanations

Why is it then, that people report caring about privacy and yet disclosing so much? While studies have shown that Facebook users still value their privacy, this paradoxical finding remains a controversial point. Rauhofer (2008) has argued that people do not value their privacy as they are willing to give away their information in exchange for very small rewards. In our previous research, Facebook users reported disclosing more on Facebook than they do in general (Christofides et al., 2009). One explanation for this is that importance of popularity makes it difficult to limit what one discloses online.

Situational and interpersonal factors may provide some explanation for this mismatch. Interpersonal factors are the pieces that we might expect to affect privacy – elements of the situation and of the relationships between people. That is, if a friend asks a very personal question, we might feel inclined to answer because we care about them, and because sharing information brings us closer to them (Christofides & Desmarais, under review). We might do this even if we generally feel that privacy is important. Situational factors, such as the norms or expectations in a particular environment, can also affect behaviour. In the case of Facebook, there are many cues telling people that this is a safe environment in which to share, and that sharing is the thing to do. Users are bombarded with information that others have shared, and when they sign up, they are asked to fill in details that they may not even question because they view Facebook as an environment filled with friends and acquaintances. In this way, the situation encourages people to share, despite their views about privacy.
The role of impression management, or managing the way other people see you, is also an important factor. If, for example, a teenager posts on Facebook that she is going to Europe for March break, she may be trying to present herself in a particular way. While she appears to be sharing a piece of personal information, the purpose of this disclosure may be to present herself as more cultured than the average student. It is possible, then, that this young woman may not actually view this information sharing as disclosure, because the purpose of the information is devised to manage impressions more so than to relate a personal detail about her activities. Hence, it may often be the case that people may utilize Facebook to cultivate a certain impression of themselves despite privacy concerns (Christofides & Desmarais, under review). Other researchers have found evidence to support this idea (Tom Tong, Van Der Heide, & Langwell, 2008). According to boyd (2007), Facebook also plays a role in exploring various possible identities. As Livingstone (2008) points out, Facebook enables youth to share aspects of their personalities and their emotions in the way they create and modify their personal web page. For young people, factors such as the need for popularity and the importance of identity construction may take precedence over privacy concerns. This is especially true in an environment like Facebook, where the amount you disclose and how much others contribute to your page may be the key ways to assess your popularity. It seems that on Facebook, perhaps more than other environments, popularity is closely linked with your level of information disclosure.

It may also be the case that youth have a different concept of privacy than that of individuals who are more mature. If this is true, then young people may only view certain information as private and that the context of the disclosure may be the important cue in
determining whether the information is an intimate or personal act of sharing, or whether it is simply an act of information reciprocity. For example, when someone shares his religious views on Facebook, he may not actually be disclosing what some might consider private or even intimate information. Instead, since that young person’s peers are all sharing this type of information openly, he may share it as well because that is what is expected in this environment. Hence, if the young person does not consider this information to be private, then he may not see it as an intimate disclosure. Livingstone (2008) finds that youth are more concerned with being able to control their information than they are worried about what specific information they share online. From their perspective then, the information that they share on Facebook may not be private, and may simply be shared as a way of participating in their social environment. Interestingly, it has also been shown that people who disclose more online are seen as more trustworthy to their conversation partners (Henderson & Gilding, 2004), indicating that there may be other positive effects to disclosing information.

**Project Goals**

The importance of understanding our privacy needs and goals is increasing as technology erodes the control that we have over our individual information. At the same time, the changes to the traditional sense of community as well as to online communities may also have important impacts on our need for connection with other people, and thus our willingness to expand our privacy boundaries (Christofides & Desmarais, under review). Adolescents are particularly receptive to the potential benefits of their disclosures on Facebook, and the same may be true for young adults, as a large number of Facebook friends can be seen as a source of social advantage (Ellison, Steinfeld, &
Lampe, 2007). Relationship maintenance may also help young adults adjust to a new environment, such as when students start off at university in a new city. In addition, the need to belong has been shown to correlate positively with the willingness to join a social network site. Disclosing information is also an important part of building relationships as is seen in the reciprocal relationship between trust and self-disclosure in online communication (Christofides & Desmarais, under review).

While this study cannot explore all of the issues that have been discussed in our literature review, we have outlined the following goals as the bases of the study we conducted with the grant provided by the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada:

- To advance our understanding of the information youth and adults share on social network sites such as Facebook.
- To understand the factors that motivate youth and adults to disclose information, as well as those that motivate them to use the privacy settings on Facebook.
- To better understand youth and adults’ perceptions of the risks involved in sharing information on Facebook.
- To learn about youth and adults’ knowledge of the privacy settings on Facebook.

**Methodology**

The data collection was done in the fall of 2009 at the Ontario Science Centre (OSC) in Toronto, during the popular BodyWorlds exhibit, which attracted a broad range of visitors of all ages to the OSC. As such, we were able to do all of our recruiting at that location, and were able to survey adults and youth, where youth were surveyed with the permission of their parents. We set up our survey on a series of computers in the Weston Family Innovation Centre, an activity area that is geared to teens and is near the entrance.
and at the exit to the BodyWorlds exhibit. Participants were recruited to participate in a number of ways. First, Amy Muise and Emily Christofides regularly announced the study at the “Hot Spot”, which is a hub that joins various exhibits within the OSC, as well as the entrance to the BodyWorlds exhibit. These presentations challenged visitors’ knowledge about privacy on Facebook by presenting a quiz and a brief information session and encouraging listeners to participate in the study. Second, one of the research assistants engaged potential participants by showing them an interactive demonstration about privacy and information sharing on Facebook. Third, the research assistants informed OSC visitors about the study and invited them to participate.

Once visitors agreed to participate they were taken to one of the computers and the study was described to them before they completed the online consent form and survey. With youth, an additional step was the completion of a consent form by their parents. Youth and adults completed a similar survey, with some minor modifications to account for their differences in life circumstances and reading comprehension. The survey took approximately fifteen minutes to complete and had a series of questions about disclosure behaviour on Facebook, awareness of the consequences of disclosure, use of the privacy settings, self-esteem, trust, need for popularity, as well as demographic information. Participants were given a small token of appreciation for their participation, as well as an information brochure about the potential consequences of information sharing on Facebook, information about the findings from our previous research about the links between need for popularity and information disclosure, and the contact information for the researchers.
Results

Participant Details

After removing unusable data (some surveys were incomplete because participants started them and then realized that they had to enter the BodyWorlds exhibit at a specific time), the final sample consists of 568 participants.

Demographics

285 young Facebook users (aged 9-18, mean age = 14) completed the survey, with a mix of boys and girls (112 boys, 171 girls; 5 participants did not report their gender). 283 adult Facebook users (118 men; 165 women; 2 participants did not specify their gender) who were not high school or university students (aged 19-71, mean age = 32) completed the adult survey. Please see Figure 1 for gender comparisons and Figures 2 and 3 for a complete listing of participants’ age.
Participants were primarily white/Caucasian (66.6% of youth, 68.2% of adults), with the second most common ethnicity being East Asian (7.3% of youth, 9.9% of adults), which includes Chinese, Japanese, and other nationalities. For a detailed breakdown of ethnicity please see Figures 4 and 5.
Socioeconomic Status

Adult participants were asked to report their income (in one of ten predefined income categories), their education and their occupation, which are the determinants of socioeconomic status (SES). Teenage participants were not asked about their parents’ income or education because younger participants may not have been aware of this information, and the older participants may have found the questions intrusive. Average household income was approximately $65,000. 26.7% of participants had family incomes
of $100,000 or over, and incomes were fairly evenly distributed between the other categories, with between 5 and 10% of participants falling in to each. Please see Figure 6 for a more detailed view of participant income distribution.

![Figure 6 - Household Income for Adult Participants](image)

Adult participants were also asked to report their highest degree earned, and the majority of participants had completed an undergraduate degree or had some university or college education (53%, see Figure 7). Participants were also asked about their occupation, and occupations ranged from business and finance (17.37% of participants)
to retail and service jobs (12.63%) to military and government jobs (2.11%).

![Figure 7 - Highest Education Achieved for Adult Participants](image1)

**School Year**

Participants in the youth survey were asked their year in school, and we found that this ranged from below grade 8 (17.4%) to grade 12 (15.3%) and other (4.2%), most likely indicating that those students were enrolled in high school beyond their grade 12 year. Please see Figure 8.

![Figure 8 - School Grade of Youth Participants](image2)
**Relationship Status**

Adult participants were asked what type of romantic relationship they were in because we felt that their relationship status may affect their degree of openness on Facebook. However, we did not find such an effect in our data. Most of our sample was either married (31.6%) or seriously dating one person (28.1%, please see Figure 9). 27.9% of the adult sample had children under the age of 18.

![Figure 9 - Relationship Status for Adult Participants](image)

**Facebook Behaviour**

**Facebook Use**

Both adult and youth participants were asked how long they had been using Facebook, and we found that adults had used the site significantly longer (a mean of 27.84 months, or just over 2 years) than youth (19.25 months, or just over a year and a half; $F(1,389) = 40.74, p < .001$). We also compared the amount of time that people spent on Facebook in a day, and found that youth spent significantly longer (a mean of 55.9 minutes, or nearly one hour) than adults (38.2 minutes, $F(1,389) = 4.21, p < .05$; please
see Figure 10). While youth spent more time on Facebook, they tend to do so in fewer sessions, as youth were less likely to report checking the site several times per day. 21.5% of youth reported checking the sites multiple times per day, whereas 30.5% of adults reported doing this. However, this difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 1.13, p = \text{n.s.}$). Please see Figure 11 for details.
Friends on Facebook

There were no significant differences in the number of friends that our sample of youth and adults has on Facebook. Adults have an average of 237 friends, whereas youth
have on average 220 friends (differences were not significant, $F(1,389) = .36, p = \text{n.s.}$).

We also asked about participants’ behaviour in relation to adding friends and friend requests on Facebook. While adults have slightly more Facebook friends, young people reported that it is significantly more important for them to have as many friends as possible (with a mean of 3.4 on a 7 point scale for youth and 2.29 for adults; $F(1) = 64.52, p < .001$). Youth were also significantly more likely to add someone as a friend that they don’t know personally ($F(1) = 9.25, p < .01$), say yes to a request from someone they don’t like ($F(1) = 8.57, p < .01$), and add someone that they wouldn’t choose to talk to in person ($F(1) = 36.27, p < .001$). Youth were slightly more likely to search their friends’ networks for people to add than adults, but this was not a significant difference ($F(1) = .257, p = \text{n.s.}$). Please see Figure 12.

![Figure 12 - Adding Friends on Facebook in Youth and Adults](image-url)

- Importance of having as many friends as possible
- Adding someone they wouldn't want to talk to in person
- Searching friends' networks for people to add
- Saying yes to a request from someone they don't like
- Adding someone they don't know personally

**Figure 12 - Adding Friends on Facebook in Youth and Adults**

- **Youth Participants**
- **Adults Participants**
Family on Facebook

Most of the youth (69.1%) had at least one of their parents as a friend on Facebook. Youth aged 14 and younger were slightly more likely than youth aged 15 to 18 to have parents as friends on Facebook (72.5% versus 65.1% respectively), but this was not a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2(1) = 1.81, p = \text{n.s.}$). Of those who did not, the main reason was that their parents were not using Facebook (17.2% of the total sample). Please see Figure 13.

As mentioned previously, 27.9% of adults in our sample have children under 18 and 36.3% of those people’s children use Facebook. 54% of adult participants with children are friends with their children on Facebook, and twice as many parents of children under 18 (36.7%) as those with children over 18 (17.8%) were friends with their children on Facebook. In addition, 50% of parents reported that they monitored their children on Facebook. Methods of monitoring include watching them use Facebook, checking for updates (as their Facebook friend), knowing their login and password and
going on their site to monitor their behaviour, and talking to them about anything they think is questionable.

**Disclosure Behaviour**

Survey participants disclosed a variety of information on their profiles, including personal information, pictures, and whatever is shared through applications. We used two methods for assessing levels of information disclosure on Facebook. We first asked directly about disclosure levels on Facebook and found that 35.4% of youth participants and 29% of adult participants reported being at least somewhat likely to disclose on Facebook. The difference in disclosure between youth and adults was significant ($F(1,389) = 8.75, p < .01$). We also asked questions about the specific information that was disclosed and created an index of disclosure using this information. Most common disclosures included birthday (82.6% of youth and 78.6% of adults) and joining a network (which by default shares all personal information with others in the network; 70.1% of youth and 84.9% of adults had joined at least one network). Please see Figure
Participants were also asked how likely they were to post various types of pictures (ranging from 1 = not at all likely to 7 = very likely). On the whole, youth and adults agreed on what pictures were more or less appropriate to post (note that a few questions were not asked of both groups because of relevance in the case of adults, or appropriateness of asking youth about sexual or illegal behaviours in this context). Both groups were on average likely (means of approximately 5 on the 7-point scale) to post a profile picture, pictures with friends, pictures from vacations or traveling, or dressed up for a formal event. Neither youth nor adults were likely to post pictures of themselves doing something illegal (mean of 2.14 for youth and 1.46 for adults). Youth were also unlikely to report posting pictures that they wouldn’t want their parents to see (mean of
Participants were also asked about how likely they were to use applications on Facebook. Applications are add-ons, often created by third party companies, that Facebook users can select as a way of sharing information. These include quizzes about yourself that are shared with others and games that can be played by multiple users. Adding an application gives the third party company who owns this application access to any information that the user has on Facebook. Youth were significantly more likely than adults to use applications ($\chi^2(1) = 11.76, p < .001$). For youth, 45.3% were at least somewhat likely to add an application, whereas in adults 30.8% were at least somewhat likely to do so.
Privacy Enhancing Behaviour

We used two methods for understanding privacy enhancing behaviour on Facebook. We first asked a series of questions about likelihood of controlling information on Facebook, for example, “How likely are you to change who can see your profile?” We found that on average, youth and adults were somewhat likely or likely to control their information on Facebook, but that adults were more likely to do so than youth (means were 4.40 for youth participants and 5.15 of adult participants and differences were significant, \( F(1,389) = 33.12, p < .001 \)). Participants were then asked about their knowledge of and their use of the privacy settings on Facebook. Most youth and adults knew how to change their privacy settings (87.3% of youth and 93.2% of adults), and most had actually done so (66.5% of youth and 82.9% of adults). Although significantly more adults than youth in our sample reported knowing how to change their general privacy settings (\( \chi^2(1) = 4.19, p < .05 \)) and reported actually having changed their privacy settings (\( \chi^2(1) = 14.30, p < .001 \)), these differences were small and knowledge of the privacy settings was generally high. However, for both youth and adults, significantly more participants reported knowing how to use their privacy settings than reported actually using them (\( \chi^2(1) = 34.03, p < .001 \); \( \chi^2(1) = 15.01, p < .001 \) respectively).

For all of the privacy settings that we asked about, both youth and adults were more likely to know than not know how to change the specific options. However, in some cases, participants were more likely to choose not to use a particular setting, despite knowing how to do this. For example, 64.5% of youth knew how to put someone on a limited profile, but only 28.7% had actually done so. On the whole, it seemed that use of privacy settings was not limited by knowledge of them (see Figure 16).
Figure 16 - Use and Knowledge of the Privacy Settings in Youth and Adults

- Yes, and I have done this
- Yes, but I have not done this
- No, I don't know how to do this
Awareness of Consequences

We also provided a series of statements about awareness of the consequences of sharing information online, including, “I think it is important to think about how the information I post on Facebook will be used in the future.” Participants were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with these statements and we found that overall both youth and adults either somewhat agreed, or neither agreed nor disagreed (differences were small but significant and the mean for youth was 4.69 and for adults was 4.51, \( F(1,389) = 4.66, p < .05 \)).

Bad Experience

In an open-ended question, youth participants were asked if they had ever had a bad experience on Facebook, and the nature of that bad experience. Of 210 responses, 26.7% reported having had a bad experience on Facebook. While the majority of participants had not had a bad experience on Facebook, some of the bad experiences that participants shared were especially vicious. For example, one participant reported that a boy at school had started a Facebook group asking friends to vote for whether or not they thought she should commit suicide. Luckily, her friends stood up for her and the boy eventually apologized. Another participant reported, “The worst thing I have ever seen on Facebook would be internet bullying… people saying terrible things about others using disgusting names.” As one participant said, “Sometimes things on the internet can hurt people more than real life.”

Other examples of these experiences include having people say upsetting things about them, harassing them, spreading rumours, posting photos they did not want shared,
or using the applications (for example the “honesty box”) to say something hurtful. For example, one participant reported that “Someone had posted a picture of me doing something that I didn’t want anyone to see.” Several others reported that a friend or stranger “hacked” their account and made changes or posted messages. Another participant explained that “There have been a lot of people who start stuff on Facebook because they can’t do it in person.”

Youth also reported that strangers had tried to befriend them on Facebook, which made them uncomfortable or frightened. For example, one participant said that a stranger sent her a note saying that she was pretty. As she said, “It was very scary for me so I think it was a bad experience.” Another described responding to one of these messages explaining that she would not add him because she didn’t know him, only to receive profanity in response. Participants used several different strategies to respond to these threats. In some cases they reported the behaviour to a parent, to Facebook, or to the police. In other cases they blocked the person, changed their password or limited their friends list.

**Personality Measures**

In addition to the demographic questions and the questions about disclosure and privacy-related behaviour on Facebook, we also included a number of standard questionnaires (also called scales or measures) about personality factors, including self-esteem, trust, and the need for popularity. These scales were used to determine whether they can help predict the extent of disclosure and the level of privacy setting use.

**Self-esteem.** We measured self-esteem using the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (as used by Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe, 2007), which is a well-tested scale in psychology.
The scale measures someone’s feelings about him or herself, and asks participants to state the extent to which they agree or disagree with a series of statements such as “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” This was deemed to be a reliable measure in both the youth (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$) and the adult samples (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$). Overall, youth felt less positively about themselves than did adults (differences were significant and means were 3.89 for youth and 4.18 for adults, $(F(1,389) = 14.21, p <.001)$. This is consistent with past research that indicates youth under 18 generally have lower levels of self-esteem than young and mid-life adults (Trzesniewski, Donnellan & Robins, 2003).

Trust. The trust scale (Couch & Jones, 1997) has also been extensively used in the psychology literature and includes a series of statements about trust in other people around them. For example, one item reads: “It is better to be safe than sorry when it comes to the people in one’s life.” The measure was found to reliable for both youth (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$) and adults (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92$). Youth were found to be less trusting than were adults (differences were significant and means were 3.31 for youth and 3.70 for adults, $F(1,389) =23.02, p <.001$). Past research has found that levels of trust increase linearly from childhood to young adulthood, and then remains relatively stable across adulthood (Stutter & Kocher, 2007).

Need for popularity. Participants were also asked about the importance of popularity (Santor, Messervey & Kusumakar, 2000) using a well-established scale that included questions such as, “I often do things just to get approval from people in my life.” The scale was found to be a reliable measure for both youth (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92$) and adults (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .93$). Contrary to popular beliefs about the importance of popularity in the lives of young people, differences between youth and adults were not
significant, and agreement with the questions was quite low (the mean for youth was 2.21 and for adults was 2.06, $F(1,389) = 2.3, p = .130$).

For the purposes of comparison, we have included a table of means for all of these measures, as well as awareness of the consequences of sharing information online, control (use of the privacy settings), and disclosure for youth and adults, which were discussed in previous sections (see Figure 17).

![Figure 17 - Mean Levels of Self-Esteem, Need For Popularity, Trust, Awareness of Consequences, Information Control and Disclosure](image)

### Explanations for Facebook Behaviour

**Predictors of Disclosure**

Our descriptive analyses about privacy knowledge indicate that the majority of both youth and adults in our sample have knowledge of how to use the privacy settings on Facebook. Of the participants who had knowledge of the Facebook privacy settings,
only a proportion of them choose to use them. This finding suggests that there are other factors involved in the decision to disclose and control your information on Facebook.

To explore this issue, we conducted some statistical analyses (hierarchical regression analyses) to determine the extent to which the factors we described in the previous section motivate youth and adults to disclose information on Facebook. These particular factors were selected on the basis of past research we conducted with samples of university students. Separate regression analyses were conducted for youth and adults in order to explore whether different factors are important in predicting disclosure in these two groups. The outcome variable for both analyses was the likelihood of disclosing personal information on Facebook. To account for the influence of certain demographic variables shown in past research to influence disclosure, age and gender were entered into the first block of the regression. In the second block, trust, self-esteem, need for popularity and awareness of consequences were entered, allowing us to account for the influence of these factors above and beyond the effects of age and gender.
Figure 18 – Predictors of Information Disclosure on Facebook for Youth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Strength and Direction of Prediction (β)</th>
<th>Significance (p-value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Block 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.216</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.079</td>
<td>.214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.181</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Popularity</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of Consequences</td>
<td>-.317</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For youth, age was a significant predictor, with older youth disclosing more information on Facebook. Of the personality factors entered in block 2, need for popularity and awareness of consequences were the significant predictors of information disclosure on Facebook. Youth who have a greater need for popularity and report less awareness of consequences were more likely to disclose information on Facebook.
Information disclosure among adults showed a similar pattern to that shown for the youth sample. Age and gender were entered into block 1, but neither significantly predicted information disclosure on Facebook. The same personality factors that significantly predicted disclosure in youth were also significant predictors of disclosure in adults. As was the case for youth, adults who have a greater need for popularity and less awareness of the consequences of sharing information online were more likely to disclose information on Facebook.

**Predictors of Information Control**

Another main goal of the current research was to explore the factors that predict youth and adult’s use of the privacy settings on Facebook. These analyses followed the
same pattern as the regression analyses conducted to predict information disclosure. Separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted for youth and adults. The outcome variable for these analyses was the 6-item measure of information control on Facebook. The effects of age and gender were accounted for in block 1, and the same personality factors were entered into block 2, namely trust, self-esteem, need for popularity and awareness of consequences.

*Figure 20 – Predictors of Information Control (Use of Privacy Settings) – Youth*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Strength and Direction of Predictor (β)</th>
<th>Significance (p-value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.261</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.169</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.252</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>-.228</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>.176</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Popularity</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>.886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of Consequences</td>
<td>.286</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For youth, age and gender were both significant predictors of information control. Older youth and females in this age group were more likely to use the privacy settings on Facebook. The personality factors entered into block 2 also significantly contributed to the model. Youth who have higher self-esteem, who are less trusting and who have a greater awareness of consequences, were more likely to control their information through
use of the privacy settings on Facebook. Awareness of consequences was the strongest predictor of information control for youth.

*Figure 21 – Predictors of Information Control (Use of Privacy Settings) – Adults*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Strength and Direction of Predictor</th>
<th>Significance (p-value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.047</td>
<td>.429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.223</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.079</td>
<td>.186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.191</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>-.034</td>
<td>.617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>.118</td>
<td>.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Popularity</td>
<td>-.010</td>
<td>.876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of Consequences</td>
<td>.211</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For adults, gender was also a significant predictor of information control. Women were more likely to use the privacy settings than men. Of the personality factors entered in block 2, awareness of consequences was the only significant predictor. Adults who had a greater awareness of the consequences of sharing information online were more likely to control their information on Facebook.

**Summary of Findings**

We found a number of interesting findings that are relevant for both research and practice, and provide a brief summary and discussion in the next section before moving on to implications of the research. First, we were surprised at the range of ages of
Facebook users. While Facebook officially requires users to be at least 13 years of age to use the site, children as young as 9 (and in some cases younger) reported that they used Facebook. In order to participate in our survey, their parents had to give their permission. With children in this age range we found that even our survey was difficult for them to understand and often required occasional or even constant interpretation by a parent or researcher. This led us to wonder about their ability to understand the information on the website and the consequences of disclosing online. In addition, youth were less likely than adults to control their information on Facebook and were more likely to share information. Fortunately, we were pleased to note that younger participants in the youth sample were also more likely to have their parents as friends on Facebook, a step that may serve as a form of monitoring. We believe this is a positive step towards educating these young users, but this interpretation is based on the assumption that parents are also educated about the privacy pitfalls associated with the use of social networking sites. Our data suggest that this may not be the case, which can be interpreted as a source of concern.

Despite popular perceptions that youth disclose extensively online, we found that the differences between youth and adults were generally small or non-significant. On average, adults had used Facebook longer than had youth, which should be expected given their age. However, members of the younger sample spent significantly more time each day on Facebook and tended to do so in more concentrated periods of time, rather than the occasional and briefer pattern of adult use. While disclosure levels were different for youth and adults (higher for youth), approximately one third of each group reported being at least somewhat likely to share information on Facebook. They also generally
agreed on what types of pictures and information were more or less appropriate to share. Very few individuals of either group reported showing a photo of themselves doing something illegal, whereas most posted a profile picture. Similarly, most participants had posted their birthday, but very few had posted their home address.

Our data also show that adults were more likely to control their information than were youth, but this difference could not be fully accounted for by differences in knowledge about privacy settings. It seems that our participants, and especially the youth, were making an active choice not to use the privacy settings – a trend we perceive as somewhat troublesome. Women and girls were more likely to control their information than were men or boys. Perhaps this relates to experiences of females that do not match that of males, such as having a stranger contact them on Facebook, which several girls reported experiencing. For both youth and adults, the strongest predictor of information control on Facebook was a greater awareness of the consequences of sharing information. This is a reassuring finding because it indicates that education initiatives may be effective in increasing people’s protection of sensitive information. In addition, youth with higher self-esteem and lower levels of trust were more likely to control their information on Facebook. This finding was in keeping with the findings from our previous research with university students, where self-esteem and trust predicted likelihood of controlling information and need for popularity predicted likelihood of sharing.

In the present research, as in our past research, we found that higher need for popularity predicted greater information disclosure for both groups. We were somewhat surprised to find that the need for popularity was significantly important to both youth adults. A new finding from this research was that lesser awareness of the consequences
associated with information sharing predicted higher likelihood of sharing information and this was the case for both youth and adults. Given their age and experience, we expected that adults would be far more aware of the consequences of using Facebook than would be the case for youth, but this clearly was not the case. Instead, this difference, while significant, was extremely small – a finding that is quite surprising given that adults are already operating in an environment where their disclosures might affect their current job or career prospects. We believed that the potential consequences of Facebook disclosure might curtail some form of information sharing among adults but the data do not support this argument. However, it may be the case that some of the negative experiences reported in our study by some individuals in the youth sample, for example being bullied or approached by a stranger, made them more cautious and concerned about the potential consequences of information disclosure. Having experienced negative outcomes such as these may have made them more attuned to the consequences of sharing personal information extensively online.

**Implications and Recommendations**

**Education**

One of the key findings from our research is the importance of popularity in predicting disclosure on Facebook. This finding, combined with the increased role of the online world in our social environments, implies that it is no longer possible to advise people to simply keep their information private and avoid sharing any personal information online as a way to reduce potential violations of privacy. Doing so is no longer a realistic option. We propose what we consider to be a more realistic approach, which is to inform people of strategies for participating in their social world while
protecting themselves from potential negative consequences. However, while we perceive our proposed strategy as a good starting point, we also argue that it is equally important for users of Facebook or other online social networks to understand that the importance they place on popularity may have an escalating effect in terms of the extent to which they are willing to disclose online. For example, our past research (Christofides et al., 2009), and to some extent the results of this study, suggests that the quantity of information that members of one’s social network are willing to share, along with the frequent requests for online friendship, may lead people to share and connect in ways that might put them at risk for some of the negative consequences of online disclosure. Becoming more aware of the relationship between the need for popularity and the associated increase in information disclosure may help people to question their acceptance of Facebook friendships that would otherwise be considered acquaintanceships at best. Similarly, being more aware of the numerous triggers for sharing information, such as cues from Facebook, the news feed of information that others have shared, and responses to others’ disclosures may help people to consider more carefully what they are sharing and with whom they are sharing.

While there are many benefits to online connections, both adults and youth need to learn more about the dangers of online disclosure and ways of protecting their privacy. Although respondents in both of our samples knew how to use the general privacy settings available in Facebook, they had less knowledge of some of the more specific settings, such as limiting who can see their photos. Users should be encouraged to explore the various privacy settings and try them out so that they know how to block someone, delete them, put them on a limited profile, or otherwise restrict access if they
have reason to believe that their information might be misused. Should someone experience a negative situation on Facebook, it is important that they know how to respond to this situation by controlling access to their online site. Arming them with strategies for dealing with situations that make them uncomfortable will enable them to respond more quickly and potentially avoid further consequences. For example, if someone starts to experience teasing or bullying at school from a peer who is a Facebook friend, it may be wise for them to limit their online connections to this person. Blocking, reporting to Facebook, reporting to parents or teachers, or contacting police are all options for dealing with difficult, dangerous or illegal situations online.

Reporting a user is an anonymous process – a fact that may not be fully known by many Facebook users – and so there should be less fear of retaliation if one uses such a method. While reporting a user on Facebook seems to be a relatively straightforward process for some, others may feel intimidated by such a strong action, may fear the consequences, or simply may not understand what happens once they report another user. Websites such as Facebook must provide clear and comprehensive information about the way in which they enable users to protect their privacy. Some of this information is already available on the website, but it is not always easy to find, and people do not always read the privacy policies. Our findings suggest that adults’ awareness of the various ways to protect their privacy is somewhat lacking and, in many cases, is no better than that of respondents from the youth sample. On the basis of this result we strongly recommend that adults become more educated about their own disclosure behaviour on Facebook as well as the many means by which they can protect their privacy online.
Doing so is not only for their own protection but also to help them educate, protect, and appropriately monitor their children’s behaviour on Facebook.

We recommend that education campaigns should focus on making the consequences of disclosure more salient and more applicable to youth and adults as this was the biggest predictor of both information disclosure and information control. This process should facilitate teaching people to protect their privacy before experiencing negative consequences. While most people would seek to avoid negative consequences, in our research we found that having experienced negative consequences does also tend to change behaviour. As noted, in this era of online access, it would be totally unrealistic to advise all social networking users to avoid online disclosure. What we can recommend, however, is that strategies be developed to encourage all users of Facebook or other social networking sites to become more knowledgeable about the privacy and control settings available in these sites. Furthermore, we would strongly recommend that all users be informed of the specific consequences experienced by other users who have been less cautious than they perhaps should be when revealing personal information. Along these lines, it would also be useful to provide people with more information about what is considered harassment in the online context and what can be done about it. This information should be available on the Facebook website, but an education campaign belongs in schools where children should be educated about online safety, and where other forms of bullying are addressed.

Users of any social network website, and of Facebook in particular, should actively monitor their profile to keep their information and relationships up to date. This process involves deleting, blocking, or limiting people with whom they are no longer in
contact or who they no longer consider a “friend” – an outcome that is likely to occur with greater frequency in younger age groups. However, adults may also add a number of friends and then experience life changes, such as changing jobs, having children, or moving, and these changes in personal circumstances may alter a person’s social group. Users should also regularly check what photos are tagged of them and occasionally verify how their page is viewed by friends, friends of friends and strangers. Another part of this active monitoring is to check the privacy policy on Facebook. The office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada has held a role in encouraging Facebook to make their privacy settings and privacy policy more explicit and easier to understand. While this move is an excellent first step, the most pressing challenges at this point is to encourage users to read the privacy policy, to remain up to date about the privacy settings as they evolve, and to use the privacy controls that are available. Public education is needed to ensure that social networking site users are aware of the ways to control their information, of the factors that may lead them to disclose more than they intend to, and of the consequences of carelessly posting personal information and private disclosures online.

**Policy**

As new technology evolves, policies must evolve as well to keep up with these changes. One thing that we have learned – a finding that should perhaps not be very surprising – is that young children (we spoke with users as young as 9 years old) are either currently using Facebook or wanting to use Facebook. Some do so with their parents’ permission while others simply access the site by lying about their birth date. While Facebook does not condone this behaviour, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to ensure that all users are legitimately in the required age group. Hence, we
recommend that Facebook simplify all information regarding privacy strategies and policies so that all users, even the youngest ones, easily understand the privacy-related information. We believe that targeting the wording to the lowest common denominator (in terms of reading level) is likely the simplest way of resolving this issue.

One very clear instance in which policy is needed is in the access and use of posted photos. Currently, users can post pictures of themselves and others, and can put names to photos in a process called tagging. As noted in our results section, participants in our study talked about their concerns regarding others’ capacity to add photos of them without their consent, which they sometimes wished had not been released. Often, posting these photos without a person’s consent results in great discomfort or, worse, in teasing or harassment. While it would be difficult for Facebook to limit what pictures can be posted, or by whom, we recommend that some degree of control be allotted to individuals’ identity. We propose a simple mechanism whereby tags or photos can only be released once the person being tagged has accepted this action. In this way, users would have more control over what information shows up on their profile, and could lessen the ability of others to publish photos of them without their consent.

A final area where policy may be useful, one that we consider essential for the protection of social network users, is related to the education of people in the appropriate and safe use of the Internet. We mentioned some strategies for education in the previous section, but feel that it is important to address this matter as a policy issue. If education is left solely to the responsibility of parents and interested teachers without providing them with the appropriate level of knowledge about these issues, then those who are not personally familiar with online social networks will not be able to educate youth about
safe usage or protect themselves in their own usage. Currently, many schools block the use of social network sites. As such, the implicit messaging is that this is a topic best discussed outside the school context. However, if parents and other adults are not informed about these issues then children are likely to get their information from each other or from the Internet. We feel that it is important to educate teachers so that they can in turn educate children about the safe use of online resources.
References


