

Discoverer Article: How to Make Sure Facebook Doesn't Ruin Your Life

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How to Make Sure Facebook Doesn't Ruin Your Life

By Ilisa Cohen

• *There are more than 1 billion people friending, posting, sharing--and making horrible mistakes--on Facebook. Don't be one them!*

Imagine yourself a few years from now. (Can you see yourself? Wow, you're tall!) You're a in high school and you're planning for college. Applications? Done. SAT? Aced. Recommendation letters? Glowing. Personal essay? Brought tears to Mom's eyes.

So when that e-mail from your dream college pops up, you just know it will be good news. You open it with a big smile on your face. Accepted? No. DENIED!

Wait - *what?*

You'll never know for sure whether those photos you posted on Facebook (you know, the ones that got you grounded and that your dad said would ruin your life) are the reason you were rejected. But you'll always be haunted by the possibility. The fact is, an increasing number of colleges are looking up applicants on social media sites like Facebook and YouTube. After all, in a toss-up between two qualified applicants, whom would you choose: A) the person with albums of party pics - many with a clearly visible keg - or B) the person who's been tending to the organic vegetable patch in the community garden and using social media to share the progress?

You're...Not Hired?

The same goes for future employers. "Your social media profile can be more revealing than your résumé," says Renee Fricks, vice president of human resources at Imperial Capital, an investment bank in Los Angeles, California. And not just in the obvious ways. "Posting status updates with poor grammar can be even more detrimental than inappropriate pictures, since your writing and communication skills likely reflect more on your ability than what you do after hours," warns Fricks.

The Unknown

So here you are, part of the first generation of human beings to come of age at a time when it's normal to document and comment on your every move - and everyone else's. Pioneers must be bold! No one's asking you to take down your profile or stop posting on Facebook - we haven't lost our minds! But you're in uncharted waters here, so use our guide to help you stay safe.

The Problem

"I lost out on a job because of comments I made on Facebook."

Kim,* a high school student in New York City, heard about a baby-sitting job through a co-worker of her dad's. After a few weeks of radio silence, her father found out why she hadn't been hired: Kim's potential employer had looked at her Facebook page and saw her cover photo, which was a picture of a character from an offensive HBO comedy. Kim and her friends had commented on the photo with quotes from the show - which, truth be told, were pretty rude. The mom didn't get that they were joking. "It's easy to feel like Facebook is a safe place to share inside jokes," says Kristelle Lavallee, from the Center on Media and Child Health at Children's Hospital Boston. But saying something to your besties is very different from putting it on the Internet. Even if you're only quoting a television show, as Kim was, your post could easily be misinterpreted by people who don't know you personally. And let's face it, there's a good chance an employer, parent, or teacher may not interpret your words in the same way your peers would.

The Bottom Line

Before you post a comment, say it out loud. Would it be embarrassing if someone overheard you? Would they think less of you? If so, let it go.

Also, Kim had her privacy set to "friends only." It turns out that setting didn't include cover photos or the comments that went with them.

The Problem

"I posted a photo on Facebook that led to a robbery of my home."

In May 2012, a 17-year-old Australian girl posted a photo on her Facebook page of a large amount of cash she was helping to count at her grandmother's home in Sydney. About seven hours later, two masked men with a club and a knife entered her parents' house 75 miles away looking for the money. Though the thieves were in the wrong place, they went ahead and robbed the house anyway.

Fine, you might not be foolish enough to post a pic of all your cash, but there are things you might not consider dangerous that could actually be an invitation for trouble. "When you write a post saying you're going to be away on vacation for a week, you're telling people your home will be vacant and almost asking for someone to burglarize your house," says Judge Tom Jacobs, author of *Teen Cyberbullying Investigated*. "You might think that if you set strict privacy settings, your posts are private. But everything can be found once you post it," he says.

If you say you're checking in at the mall, a party, or a movie, a potential predator has directions to find you. You might think none of your friends are "predators" and that nobody you know is going to do anything to hurt you. But who do you think the masked men were in this case? It's reasonable to think they were the girl's Facebook friends, or friends of one of them.

The Bottom Line

There are bad guys on Facebook too. If someone could use the information to hurt you, don't post it. Revealing the name of your school, your address, your vacation destination, or where you'll be can be dangerous.

The Problem

"I got my friend in trouble by tagging him in a Facebook photo."

Dylan,* a high school junior, had just scored his driver's license, so he took his friends out for a celebratory ride. To commemorate the occasion, he took a photo of his very first passengers, posted it on Facebook, and tagged everyone. Who wouldn't? Little did he know, one of his friends was forbidden to ride with any new drivers unless an adult was in the car. Even though his settings were on "friends only," his friend's mom happened to see the photo and the passenger ended up grounded.

Your privacy settings should be set to "friends only," but when your photos and status updates become accessible to hundreds of your so-called friends, you never know what they might do with that information. "A friend can download your photo and pass it along to a third party," says Lavalley. "And then your privacy settings don't matter much." There is almost no limit to how far that photo can go once you put it on your page. And, as this junior discovered, even something seemingly harmless can have consequences - not just for you but for your friends as well.

The Bottom Line

Before you post, get a thumbs-up from everyone else in the picture - and ask your friends to do likewise. Of course don't post anything you wouldn't want your parent, grandparent, teacher, or principal (not to mention a police officer) to see.

[*Names have been changed for privacy.]

5 Ways to Be Facebook Smart

- **Respect your privacy.** Don't post your phone number or address.
- **Don't be a bystander.** If you or a friend gets mean messages or comments, tell an adult immediately. You can also report inappropriate content through Facebook. Just go to the help center on the site and click "report abuse." The process is totally anonymous.
- **Use your online power for good.** You know all those friends you have? You can mobilize them to get involved in causes you care about. Use your social network to cheer up a friend who's having a hard time, or to spread the word about a local animal shelter in need of volunteers.
- **Be friends with your parents.** You might cringe at the thought, but look at it as a chance to do some damage control. When your dad comments "LOL" on a post about the death of someone's pet, you're there to tell him that it doesn't mean "Lots of Love."
- **Learn about the world.** By "Liking" news sources such as The New York Times and your local paper, you can use Facebook to stay on top of what's going on in the world.

* * *

- 93% of American teens who use social media have a Facebook profile.
- 55% of teenagers have decided not to post something online because they were concerned that it might reflect badly on them in the future.

Summary

Social media has helped change the way we communicate. Our article explores some things that can go wrong with Facebook, how to maintain a positive online image, and ways in which social networks are being used to do good.

Teaching Goals

This article and lesson plan will help students:

- develop their critical-thinking skills
- consider the consequences of their actions
- improve their self-presentation skills
- learn to better protect themselves online
- discover opportunities to use Facebook to do good

Critical-Thinking/Discussion Questions

If you use Facebook, what types of things do you use it for?

Answers will vary but may include: playing games; sharing photos of friends; making plans; having conversations; posting what I've been doing; linking to interesting or funny things online.

How do you wish to be perceived on Facebook? Does your Facebook usage support how you want others to think of you?

Answers will vary.

Are you aware of Facebook's various privacy settings? Do you use them? Why or why not?

Answers will vary.

Should Facebook be thought of as a semiprivate place for you and your friends to hang out online? Or is it a public arena where you have to be mindful of what you say and how you say it? Explain your answer.

Answers will vary.

Have you ever encountered any situations similar to the scenarios from the article? Has a photo or post yielded bad consequences? How did you deal with it? Did it prompt you to use Facebook differently afterward?

Answers will vary.

How do you want to affect others on Facebook? Give some examples of posts that help you achieve this goal.

Answers will vary.

Will you change your Facebook behavior or use any of the suggestions as a result of reading the article? If yes, which one/s? If not, why not?

Answers will vary.

Quiz

Directions: After reading "A Facebook Survival Guide," answer the questions below.

1. What is the purpose of this article?
 - a. to tell teens not to use Facebook
 - b. to suggest teens "friend" their teachers on Facebook
 - c. to report crimes committed on Facebook
 - d. to help teens use Facebook more wisely
2. Why did Kim lose out on a job?
 - a. She criticized her employer on Facebook.
 - b. She used Facebook to look up her competition.
 - c. She made offensive comments on Facebook.
 - d. She didn't have a Facebook account.
3. According to the article, what is one step you can take to use Facebook safely?
 - a. Post your location, so people know where to find you.
 - b. Post lots of pictures of your friends.
 - c. Ask your friends' permission before you post photos of them.
 - d. Keep your privacy settings at Facebook's default settings.
4. What percentage of teenagers surveyed have decided not to post something on Facebook because they were concerned it might reflect badly on them?
 - a. 100 percent
 - b. 55 percent
 - c. 39 percent
 - d. 2 percent
5. What is one site the article suggests "liking" on Facebook?
 - a. your teacher's page
 - b. The New York Times
 - c. a famous sports team
 - d. none of the above
6. According to the article, what should you do if you get mean messages or comments?
 - a. Tell an adult immediately.
 - b. Try to find the bully's IP address.
 - c. Respond with similar comments.
 - d. none of the above
7. According to the article, why should you "friend" your parents on Facebook?

- a. to share postings with a larger group
- b. because it will make them feel special
- c. so you can help them use social media wisely
- d. none of the above

8. Why do you think so many teens use Facebook unwisely?

9. The sidebar above lists five ways to be Facebook-smart. Which one do you find most compelling? Why?

Answers

1. d, 2. c, 3. c, 4. b, 5. b, 6. a, 7. c, 8. Answers will vary. 9. Answers will vary.

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