

Smart Social Networking

Fifteen Tips for Teens



Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. and Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D.

October 2014

Don't let your social media use negatively affect your life. Follow these simple strategies and avoid problems later!

1. **Don't post or send anything you would be embarrassed for certain others to see.** Think about what your family, friends, future employers, or college admission decision-makers might think if they see it. How would you feel if that statement or picture was forever tied to your name and your identity? Does it really represent who you are? Remember, your keyboard may have a "delete" button, but once online it is often impossible to remove.
2. **Do start early in building a positive online reputation.** Don't wait until you are getting ready for college or applying for a job to start developing a dynamite digital dossier. From the very first post you make on a new social media platform, think about how others will perceive and interpret what you share. Also, actively involve yourself in many positive activities. Excel academically. Volunteer. Play a sport. Lead a social group. Give a speech. Do community service. Write positive, thought-provoking and creative blog posts or editorials for online news outlets. Get yourself featured in newsworthy projects. All of these things will look good on a resume, and they will reflect positively on you if someone stumbles upon them in an online search. Figure out the best ways to create and maintain an online identity that strongly demonstrates integrity and maturity.
3. **Don't compromise your identity.** Identity thieves are constantly looking for new ways to obtain your personal information, usually for the purpose of benefiting financially at your expense. Never post your address, date of birth, phone number, or other personal contact information anywhere on social media. Even with restrictions, access can be gained through fraudulent means such as by phishing, hacking, or malware.
4. **Do be considerate of others when posting and interacting.** If you message someone and they do not respond, or if someone messages you and asks that you not post about them, take the hint and move on. Also don't post pictures of others without their permission. And if someone asks you to remove a picture, post, or to untag them, do so immediately. It's what you would want if you asked someone the same thing.
5. **Don't vent or complain,** especially about specific people or organizations, in public spaces online. People will negatively judge you based on your attitude, even if your complaint has merit. Employers, schools, and others have access to social media, and they are looking. Is that spiteful comment about your boss or co-worker really worth losing your job over? Or sharing with those who may have an awesome opportunity to give you in the future? Be careful, too, about complaining in seemingly private environments or sending direct messages to others you think you can trust. You just never know who might eventually see your posts.





6. **Do be careful about oversharing.**

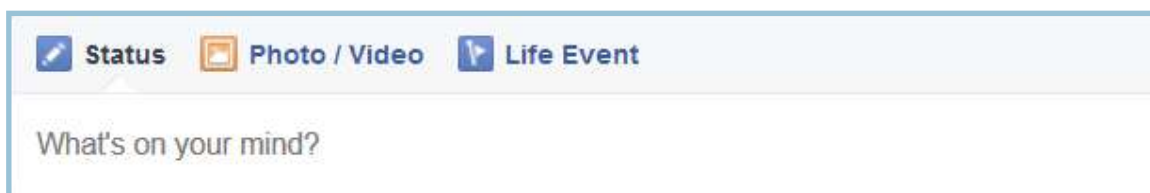
If you are always posting about your meals, trips to the bathroom, social life, and the latest viral YouTube video, others are going to think that: 1) you have way too much time on your hands, 2) you have no focus or goals, or 3) you are unproductive and cannot possibly contribute meaningfully to anything. Remember that people don't care as much as you want them to care about all of the various random things going on in your life. It's not all about you!

7. **Don't hang out with the wrong crowd *online*.** Resist accepting every friend and follower request that comes your way. Having a lot of followers isn't the status symbol some people make it out to be, and can just increase your risk of victimization. Giving strangers access to your personal information opens you up to all sorts of potential problems. It's also true, though, that those who are most likely to take advantage of you won't be complete strangers, but will be those you've let into your life just a little bit (like allowing them to friend or follow you) - and who use information they can now access against you. Be selective with who you allow to enter into your world! Go through your friends and followers lists regularly and take the time to delete those you do not fully trust, those that you have superficial and largely meaningless friendships with, and those you probably aren't going to ever talk to again.

8. **Don't hang out with the wrong crowd *offline*.** Maybe you're smart enough not to post that pic of you holding that red solo cup (filled with lemonade). But your friend does—and tags you—along with the comment: “Gettin’ blitzed!!!” You also might not want others to record your legendary dance moves at last week-end’s party, but cameras and phones are everywhere. If you are associating with people who don’t really care about you or your reputation, they may seize the opportunity to record and post the video for others to see (and laugh at). Worst of all, it could go viral, and next thing you know you are being interviewed by Daniel Tosh about a humiliating video of you that has gone global and been viewed by millions. Trust us – you do not want that kind of attention.

9. **Do properly set up the privacy settings** and preferences within the social media apps, sites, and software you use. Use the features within each environment to delete problematic comments, wall posts, pictures, videos, notes, and tags. Don't feel obligated to respond to messages and friend/follower requests that are annoying or unwanted. Disallow certain people from communicating with you or reading certain pieces of content you share, and allow access only to those you trust. Turn off location-sharing, and the ability to check-in to places. If you need to let your friends know where you are, just text them using your phone rather than sharing it with your entire social network.

10. **Don't post or respond to anything online when you are emotionally charged up.** Step away from your device. Close out of the site or app. Take a few hours, or even a day or two, and allow your brain some downtime to think through the best action or response. Responding quickly, based on emotion, almost never helps make a problem go away, and often makes it much worse. Pause before you post!



11. **Do secure your profile.** Use complex passwords that consist of alphanumeric and special characters. Avoid using recovery questions which have easy-to-guess or common answers such as a pet's name. Never reveal your passwords to friends or family, or leave them written down somewhere. Avoid accessing your online profile from devices which are unsecure (like at a library computer), or do not have virus and malware protection.



12. **Don't tell the world where you are at all times.**

You probably wouldn't hand a stranger your daily agenda, and you shouldn't post it all over social media. Burglars use social media to target victims by reading posts that clue them in as to where you are (and when you're not at home). Checking in while on vacation or posting an update such as "At the beach for the day" or "Be back in town on Tuesday" may be a fun way of letting your friends know what you are up to, but it also lets those with bad intentions know when your home is empty and vulnerable.

13. **Do regularly search for yourself online,** just to see what is out there. Start with Google, but also use site-specific search engines on social networking sites, as well as sites that index personal information about Internet users. Some examples are: peekyou.com, zabasearch.com, pipl.com, yoname.com, and spokeo.com. If you do find personal information about yourself, investigate how you can have it deleted. Many sites provide some type of "opt-out" form which allows you to request its removal.

14. **Don't get political.** It's best to shy away from political and religious declarations which might seem abrasive and may offend others. Even though these opinions might be legitimate (and you are certainly entitled to them), you need to realize that others are looking at what you post and will judge you accordingly. Plus, social media isn't the best place to discuss these complicated issues. Save the preaching for personal conversations! Also remember that sarcasm is often lost in online communications. A funny comment might can be easily misinterpreted or taken out of context, resulting in unintended hurt feelings or inaccurate perceptions.

15. **Do separate business from pleasure.** The reality is that we all would probably rather not have our employers (and many others) know every little detail about our personal lives. For this reason, consider online social networking with work acquaintances via sites like LinkedIn or Google+ as opposed to mixing your professional contacts with more personal ones on Facebook and Instagram.



Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. is a professor at Florida Atlantic University and **Justin W. Patchin**, Ph.D. is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Together, they travel across the United States and abroad teaching teens how to use technology safely and responsibly. They have written six books, including "Words Wound: Delete Cyberbullying and Make Kindness Go Viral" which helps empower teens to be the solution to online cruelty. They also offer comprehensive workshops for parents, teachers, counselors, mental health professionals, law enforcement, and others concerned with addressing and preventing online aggression. The Cyberbullying Research Center is dedicated to providing up-to-date information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents.

For more information, visit <http://www.cyberbullying.us>.

© 2014 Cyberbullying Research Center - Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin.
Permission for duplication provided for non-profit educational purposes.