

The Disclosure of Personal Information by UK University Students on Facebook and MySpace

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Abstract

Facebook and MySpace are two of the most popular social network sites in the United Kingdom. They both are in the top ten most viewed sites by UK Internet users, and between them hold information in the form of over 119 million profiles.

This paper tests the hypothesis of whether UK university students who have registered both MySpace and Facebook profiles, disclose more information on their Facebook profile, and why.

Surveys were carried out on the opinion of information disclosure, and profiles were compared between the two websites to find trends in which types of information were freely expressed on profiles.

The paper concludes that in the majority of cases, the hypothesis is correct, particularly shown by a reluctance to post full name, current address, mobile telephone number and landline telephone number on MySpace profiles. However, it should be noted that in the case of other attributes such as political and religious views, the paper finds that UK university students are comfortable in expressing these, despite their listing as 'sensitive personal data' under the Data Protection Act of 1998.

1. Introduction and Background

MySpace is the 6th most visited site by UK Internet users according to Alexa [1]. UK visitors account for 6.5% of MySpace users. It reached a membership of 100 million on August 9th 2006 [2], and typically receives about 230,000 new members a day. It was founded in July 2003 by Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe. It was owned partially by Intermix Media, who were bought in July 2005 by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. The UK version of the site was launched in January 2006.

Facebook is the 10th most visited site by UK Internet users according to Alexa. UK visitors account for 9.8% of Facebook users. It was founded in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, and now has over 19 million active users, and 47,000 networks based around regions, work places, universities and high schools. [3] On September

26th 2006, Facebook changed its membership policy [4], to allow more users to join up. Previously, you could only join with a valid email address ending with either: edu, com, org, gov or mil. The expansion allowed anyone with a valid email address to join, but still requires proof of affiliation to access university or workplace networks. At the point of expansion, Facebook reported a membership of 9.5 million, doubling its membership from September 2006 to April 2007.

According to the Data Protection Act of 1998:

"Personal data means data which relate to a living individual who can be identified –

(a) from those data, or

(b) from those data and other information which is in the possession of, or is likely to come into the possession of, the data controller,

and includes any expression of opinion about the individual and any indication of the intentions of the data controller or any other person in respect of the individual."

Further to this, the DPA states:

"In this Act 'sensitive personal data' means personal data consisting of information as to-

(a) the racial or ethnic origin of the data subject

(b) his political opinions

(c) his religious beliefs or other belief of a similar nature

(d) whether he is a member of a trade union (within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992),

(e) his physical or mental health or condition

(f) his sexual life

(g) the commission or alleged commission by him of any offence, or

(h) any proceedings for any offence committed or alleged to have been committed by him, the disposal of such proceedings, or the sentence of any court in such proceedings.

Broadly speaking, the DPA 1998 covers any information that relates to living individuals, which is held on a computer. Information such as a name, address, date of birth, opinions about the individual, or other information from which the individual can be identified.

This paper is to find out if the amount of personal information disclosed by users of both Facebook and MySpace, differs between sites, and why. The hypothesis tested is that UK university students disclose personal information on their Facebook than MySpace. The paper will also explore the reasons why this may be.

2. Methods of Research

This research paper employs two main methodologies. Firstly, the collection of data by means of survey. The data collected was the opinions of users of both Facebook and MySpace, focusing around which types of personal information these users were happy to post on each of these two social networks, and how secure they felt the information they disclosed was. The online survey was first piloted with a small sample group, before it was made available for a wider response. The final survey had 11 responses.

As a research method, this provided easily comparable results of a list of personal information, highlighting trends of which types of information, users were most happy to disclose, and how this differed between the two social networks.

The types of personal information that were surveyed were: relationship status, political view, religious view, email, mobile telephone number, landline (home) telephone number, current address, and current employment details.

Respondents were also surveyed as to their thoughts of how safe it was to disclose personal information on Facebook and MySpace. They were asked if it was safer on MySpace, Facebook, equally safe on both, or not safe on either.

Drawing the survey back towards the research purpose, respondents were asked if they disclosed more personal information on their Facebook profile or their MySpace profile, or the same information on both.

An open question was also included in this survey, for further comments, but most of the respondents did not feel the need to add. The survey also asked for consent to participate in a second research method, which was not compulsory.

The second piece of research was a comparison of user's Facebook and MySpace profiles. A sample of 20 users were selected, totaling in 40 profiles being compared. Ideally, the same attributes surveyed in the first piece of research would have been compared, but due to the types of information requested for disclosure by Facebook and MySpace, amendments had to be made to the list to make a more accurate comparison.

The attributes selected were: Full name (Some form of first and second name, that related to their true name), gender, sexual orientation, reason for participation (listed

as 'looking for' with Facebook, and 'here for' with MySpace), religion and school (currently attended).

3. Analysis of Results

The results were collected from both the questionnaire survey and the profile survey. These were compared and contrasted.

3.1. Analysis of Questionnaire Survey

Results collected from the questionnaire survey showed that 100% of respondents would post a relationship status on their Facebook profile, whereas 91% would do so on their MySpace. This was curious, as it was found that Facebook does not require a relationship status to be set, whereas it was commented by respondents to the survey that relationship status was a required field for a MySpace profile, yet only 91% of the survey respondents were happy to post this. It could perhaps be said that relationship status is something that UK university students are quite happy to express within an online social network.

Some sources also have begun to investigate MySpace's power as a dating site. Yarmosh gives reasons from MySpace's popularity and user-base, [5] and Tancer provides more analysis of the traffic during a 12 hour downtime of MySpace [6]. During this time dating sites had a little more than a 10% increase to their traffic.

Relationship status was the attribute respondents were most comfortable to express across both Facebook and MySpace, with current employment being the second highest. 91% would post their employment details on their Facebook, and 73% would do the same on their MySpace. This was curious as in recent times, employers have begun to use social networks to research job applicants [7][8] and some employers even create profiles on the networks to find new recruits.

This high number, particularly on Facebook, may be due to the use of company networks. Disney and Xerox are two companies that have networks on Facebook. They function in the same way as university networks, like the University of Hull network. There are also regional networks, such as Manchester and London. Membership to a network creates an identity, as was required by all Facebook members until September 2006, when Facebook opened their doors to everyone.

MySpace allows users to join professional networks by the type of employment, but it was found that this was not always adopted by the target group, who were clearly university centered.

82% of respondents would list their email address on their Facebook, 64% would do the same for their MySpace. Reasons for this could be as simple as the fact

Facebook displays email addresses as a small image, preventing the easy harvest of these by spammers. Spam is a problem for MySpace, whose users are plagued by phishing emails [9] where account details are harvested by duped users who believe the communication to be from MySpace.

Interestingly, 64% of respondents would post their political views on their Facebook, and 73% would on their MySpace. Surprisingly this was one result that contradicted the hypothesis, that users would post more information on their Facebook profile. 27% of the respondents were neutral here, possibly because of a passive approach to the subject. Religious views showed a higher percentage (73%) willing to list this information on their Facebook, with 82%, higher again, who would post this on their MySpace. 18% were neutral for this query. When compared to the classification of political and religious views by the Data Protection Act, this shows a complete difference in the opinion of how personal religious and political views are. The DPA 1998 classes both of these pieces of data as sensitive, alongside criminal records.

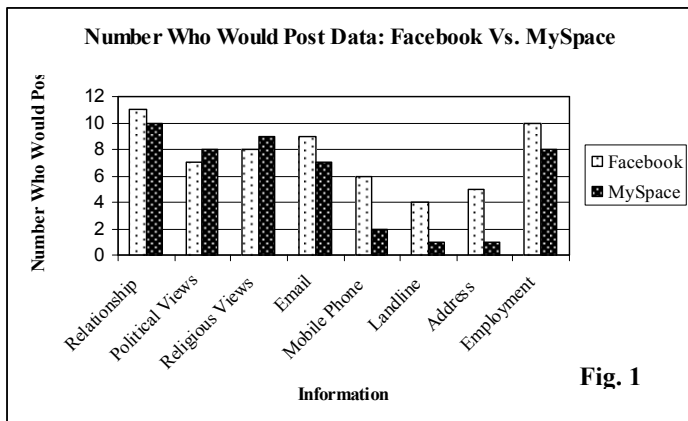


Fig. 1

Instead, the respondents to the survey showed that the most personal information questioned about were landline phone number and current address. 55% would display their mobile phone number on their Facebook, only 18% on MySpace, in comparison to 73% who would not post it there. 45% would post their current address on Facebook (36% would not), and 82% would not post current address on MySpace (9% would). Landline received the highest weighting of *would not post* responses. 45% would not post it on Facebook – the only piece of information where a majority would not post (36% would), and 91% would not post their landline on their MySpace. This significant difference can be seen illustrated in Figure 1. In all, the majority of respondents would not post their mobile phone number, landline or their current address on their MySpace, supporting the hypothesis. This was also found by another study (Koffman, 2006, p.5) [10] where the

majority of students questioned did not feel safe putting their telephone number or address on a social networking site, either Facebook or MySpace.

With the current worries about identity theft and online stalking, the survey asked which site respondents thought was more secure to post personal information on, Facebook, MySpace, equally safe on both, or not safe on either. None of the respondents classed MySpace as safest, 9.1% classed the two sites equally safe, 18.2% classed neither as safe, and a large majority of 72.7% responded that Facebook was safest. This tallies with the earlier results, that the majority of respondents would post all but their landline number on their Facebook. This safety may stem from how closed Facebook is to non-registered users, and the privacy settings available to users.

54.5% responded that they posted more information on Facebook. 27% posted more on MySpace, and 18.2% posted equal amounts. This response relied on self-perception, which led to the second survey.

3.2. Analysis of Profile Survey

Seven information fields were surveyed in the second survey of 20 users. These were fields that could be displayed on both Facebook and MySpace profiles, and followed an analysis of all profile attributes available to users to display on their profiles. The selected attributes were: full name, gender, sexual orientation, purpose for membership (looking for/here for), location (town on more specific), religion and school (university attended).

100% of the surveyed Facebook profiles displayed full names, in comparison to 20% of MySpace profiles. Facebook requires a forename and surname for profiles, whereas MySpace requires a forename and surname for search purposes only, without those details being published. Instead MySpace provides a display name field, which users can change regularly. To change your name in Facebook, it has to be approved by Facebook staff first.

Gender was displayed on 95% of Facebook profiles, 85% of MySpace profiles, which suggests this information is comfortably expressed by the majority, and is often backed up by a profile photograph. Sexual orientation was displayed on 75% of Facebook profiles surveyed, and 75% on MySpace. This and purpose for membership (looking for/here for) were the only attributes to receive the same proportion of users displaying these, where 55% displayed the attribute.

95% of Facebook profiles displayed a location as specific as a town, 80% of MySpace profiles did the same. Ideally, a comparison of current address would have been better, but MySpace does not prompt users to enter anything more specific than a city and postal code (which is not used on the profile).

70% of Facebook profiles surveyed listed a religion, or lack of religious belief, following the survey results. 50% of MySpace profiles did which contradicted the survey results, which should have seen around 80% of profiles showing a religious belief.

Finally, 100% of Facebook profiles displayed a current school (university), led by the strong school networking adopted by Facebook, and 70% of MySpace profiles also listed a current school, which was high considering the differing site emphasis.

4. Conclusion

The results of this research paper do not provide an entirely definitive answer to whether all university students in the United Kingdom, who use both Facebook and MySpace, disclose more information on their Facebook. This research has captured the opinions and trends of a small percentage of this group.

However, the data analyzed, confirms that the hypothesis that UK university students disclose more information on their Facebook than their MySpace is, for the majority, correct, but the types of information that the difference is seen is with a full name, mobile telephone number, landline telephone number and current address. The main reasons for this difference are the privacy features provided by Facebook, which provides a secure environment for more disclosure, as access can be more tightly controlled. MySpace is far more publicly accessible, and problems with security or stalking are highlighted in the media, causing concerns for its users.

5. References

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