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Original article

## Older Adolescents' Views Regarding Participation in Facebook Research

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### A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** Facebook continues to grow in popularity among adolescents as well as adolescent researchers. Guidance on conducting research using Facebook with appropriate attention to privacy and ethics is scarce. To inform such research efforts, the purpose of this study was to determine older adolescents' responses after learning that they were participants in a research study that involved identification of participants using Facebook.

**Methods:** Public Facebook profiles of older adolescents aged 18–19 years from a large state university were examined. Profile owners were then interviewed. During the interview, participants were informed that they were identified by examining publicly available Facebook profiles. Participants were asked to discuss their views on this research method.

**Results:** A total of 132 participants completed the interview (70% response rate); the average age was 18.4 years ( $SD = .5$ ); and our sample included 64 male participants (48.5%). Participant responses included endorsement (19.7%), fine (36.4%), neutral (28.8%), uneasy (9.1%), and concerned (6.1%). Among participants who were uneasy or concerned, the majority voiced confusion regarding their current profile security settings ( $p = .00$ ).

**Conclusions:** The majority of adolescent participants viewed the use of Facebook for research positively. These findings are consistent with the approach taken by many U.S. courts. Researchers may consider these findings when developing research protocols involving Facebook.

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### IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Our findings indicate that the majority of older adolescent participants viewed the use of Facebook in a research study positively. These findings are consistent with current legal approaches and can provide guidance to researchers when considering Facebook research protocols.

Social networking sites (SNSs) are extremely popular, particularly among adolescents and young adults [1]. It is estimated that up to 98% of U.S. college students maintain an SNS profile [2,3]. Currently, the most popular SNS is Facebook, which recently surpassed Google as the most frequently visited site on the Web [4,5]. Facebook allows profile owners to create an online profile including displayed personal information, to communicate with other profile owners on the SNS, and to build an online social network by “friending” profile owners. Profile owners

choose among available profile security settings to determine how much of their information to display online. Profile security settings can be “public” (e.g., allowing open access to the profile to any SNS user) or “private” (e.g., limiting some or all profile information access to online friends). “Private” profile security settings can limit access to the entire profile, or settings can be customized to limit access to certain profile viewers or to particular sections of the profile.

Increasingly, SNSs are being used for research to investigate adolescent and young adult behaviors and personality [6]. The nature of SNSs allows large amounts of identifiable information to be revealed and disseminated and, thus, collected as data [7]. Previous studies have examined adolescents' health behaviors displayed on SNSs both individually and distributed within online social networks [8–10]. As studies have evaluated publicly

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displayed information that is often personal, such as substance use or sexual content, concerns have been raised regarding protecting the privacy and confidentiality of research participants [3,8,10,11]. Further, SNSs are now being used for participant recruitment purposes as well as data collection purposes.

Researchers have sought guidance in pursuing this research in a manner consistent with ethical and legal principles. Ethical and legal concerns regarding collection of data from SNSs have been explored in a handful of articles and legal cases [12–15]. Courts have ruled that a person should have no reasonable expectation of privacy in writings that are posted on a social networking Web site and made available to the public [16]. Little is known about views of adolescents themselves who are Facebook research participants. This information could assist researchers in developing research protocols that limit concerns about privacy for adolescent research participants.

Many SNS users state that privacy issues regarding displayed profile content are important to them; yet, users still choose to display large amounts of personal information [17]. A previous study evaluated college students' views regarding privacy and information sharing and found that students perceived that they disclosed more information about themselves on Facebook than in offline life, but that information control and privacy were important to them [17]. In another study, users claimed to understand privacy issues, but still reportedly displayed large amounts of personal information. Participants explained that privacy risks were ascribed to other SNS users rather than to oneself [18]. Similarly, an Australian study found that Facebook users felt that the risk of a privacy violation to them personally was very low, or were not aware of privacy issues [19]. However, a study evaluating college students' reactions to updated security settings on Facebook found that the majority of respondents were upset over privacy policy changes because of a perceived loss of privacy control, even though there was no increase in the amount of information that was exposed [7]. Thus, although many SNS users report concerns about privacy issues, not all act on these concerns, and some SNS users may not completely understand currently available privacy settings.

As researchers who use SNSs, we have occasionally heard concerns raised by human subjects committees and other researchers regarding privacy issues in conducting research in this setting. Given these privacy concerns, questions about the appropriateness of researchers' use of Facebook to collect information or contact participants require attention. To date, no study has evaluated participants' views on these topics. As part of an ongoing study assessing college student alcohol use, the objective of this study was to determine older adolescents' responses after learning that they were participants in a research study that involved identification of participants using Facebook. Our goal was to illuminate findings for other researchers who may have experienced similar concerns in their own SNS research.

## Methods

This study was conducted between November 1, 2009 and July 1, 2011 and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Wisconsin.

### *Setting and subjects*

This study was conducted using the SNS Facebook (<http://www.Facebook.com>). Facebook was selected because it is the

most popular SNS among our target population of older adolescents [3,4]. We investigated publicly available Facebook profiles of freshmen undergraduate students within one large state university Facebook network. To be included in the study, profile owners were required to self-report their age as 18–19 years and provide evidence of Facebook profile activity in the past 30 days. We only analyzed profiles for which we could contact the profile owners to invite them to the interview by calling a phone number listed in the university directory or on the Facebook profile.

### *Data collection and recruitment*

We used the Facebook search engine to search for profiles within our selected university's network among the freshmen undergraduate class. This search yielded 416 profiles, all of which we assessed for eligibility. The majority of profiles were ineligible because their profile owners were incorrectly included in search results, as their age was not 18 or 19 years ( $N = 36$ ). Other excluded profiles had no contact information (phone number or e-mail) listed within the university directory or on their Facebook profile ( $N = 83$ ), or owing to privacy settings ( $N = 102$ ). Of privacy exclusions, 87 profiles were fully private and 15 profiles had set the Wall section to private. A total of 188 profiles were eligible for evaluation.

Three trained coders evaluated all profiles. As part of an ongoing college health study, the coders viewed all publicly accessible elements of the Facebook profile and recorded basic demographic information such as age and gender. For profiles that met inclusion criteria, profile owners were called on their phone. After verifying identity, the study was explained and profile owners were invited to participate in an interview about college student health. Respondents who completed the interview were provided a \$50 incentive.

### *Interviews*

Interviews were conducted one on one with a trained interviewer. After explaining the study and obtaining consent, participants completed several health measures for the ongoing study, including assessments of alcohol, substance use, and mental health. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked the following single question: "We identified potential participants for this study by looking at publicly available Facebook profiles of people in the university network. Do you have any thoughts about that?" Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### *Analysis*

Qualitative analysis was conducted in a two-step process. First, three investigators viewed a sample of transcripts to characterize the interview responses (A.G., L.K., M.M.). We used an iterative process in which transcripts were initially evaluated by each of these three investigators. Then, investigators met to review and reach consensus regarding types of interview responses and on other themes present in the data. At the conclusion of this discussion, it was determined that responses could be categorized into a 5-point Likert scale. Consensus was reached that the scale would include a rating of 1 that represented "strongly dislike" of the method, such as concern or anger on the part of the respondent. A score of 2 represented "somewhat dislike," an expression of uneasiness with the method. A score of

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