

Navigating the Potential Pitfalls of Online Visibility

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“What am I going to do with these gold lamé booty shorts?”

When this booty-related status message popped up under a student’s name in my Gmail* chat window, I felt unintentionally voyeuristic. Gmail is a program that likes to automate processes. Anyone you email frequently (e.g., your advisor, that student who asks a lot of questions, a client who uses email to schedule sessions) will automatically be added to your address book and can miraculously appear in your chat window. This is what occurred with the student who experienced the “booty short” quandary; I never invited her onto my chat list, but there she appeared.

The amount of information you can learn about someone via “status messages” in a chat program, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, or other social networking sites is voluminous and begs the question of what to do when you learn something you might not want to know. Or, perhaps even more problematic, who else might be learning information about *you*.

As graduate students, we walk the line between the technophile undergraduates and the often savvy but occasionally technophobic faculty. With technological familiarity comes potential complacency; information on the Internet is *not* usually private. Research suggests that although people report concerns about privacy, the content of information posted belies such concerns (Peluchette & Karl, 2008). Therefore, below are some tips and hints for navigating social networking sites and chatting opportunities available online.

Keep your profile private and set appropriate filters.

Facebook has a plethora of filters to control who can see what information about you, although many users are unaware of some of these privacy features (Cain, 2008). Some faculty members now conduct internet searches of graduate school applicants prior to sending out interview invitations — and have chosen *not* to invite certain applicants because of what they found. There are reports of employers using Facebook as a hiring tool, as well as stories of student suspensions and arrests due to information posted on social networking sites (Brady, 2006). Students, colleagues, mentors, and clients *will* Google you, and it is up to you to monitor what information the internet has to offer.

Think twice about “friending” faculty members or students.

Do you really want your advisor to read about your procrastination pizza binge? Do you want your professors to see those photos of you in Las Vegas? It can be tempting to want to acknowledge your friendship with successful academics in a public way by giving others access to your profile (“friending”), but if you are someone who is updating your status every few hours, just remember who might be reading it. Similarly, there may be unexpected repercussions from seeing messages that faculty post about their own lives. For example, I know of several graduate students who were perturbed after

learning of a faculty member's opinions expressed via status messages. The line between personal and professional can seem incredibly murky, particularly when status messages are viewed through a non-university chatting account but are available for student observation. Therefore, also avoid friending undergraduates who are your students. One faculty member in my program who uses Facebook regularly only "friends" undergraduates after they graduate. This allows her to keep up with former students and write honest status messages to her friends and family.

Avoid the temptation to look up others.

Every clinical student I know has been tempted to Google or search Facebook for someone they know in a professional setting. But, it is important to avoid the temptation to look up others, especially those who aren't your peers, such as a student, mentor or even a clinical client. This practice is unseemly and in some cases may be unethical. And remember, once you learn something, you cannot unlearn it.

Monitor who is "tagging" you in their photos.

My clinical friend "Mark" has a non-school friend who posted several pictures of a crazy weekend on Facebook and tagged Mark in them. Although Mark's profile is private, his friend's profile is not, so when Mark's therapy client Googled him, she saw enough that she began referring to Mark as her drunk therapist. These types of pictures are incredibly common in social networking sites: A study of Facebook usage in medical students and residents found that 70 percent of these users posted pictures with alcohol (Thompson et al., 2008). After hearing Mark's story, I now conduct what I call the Grandma Test: I respectfully de-tag myself from any photo I would feel uncomfortable with my grandmother seeing, and I have set a filter so only friends can see pictures tagged of me.

Think about your status messages and who might be viewing them.

Gmail allows you to turn off the automatic additions to the chatting program, preventing random students or clients suddenly appearing in your chat window. Similarly, be mindful of the lurkers like myself who are frequently logged in but "invisible," which means we can see who is online and any status messages, but no one can see us. Sneaky, eh? Activating the "my stamp of approval only" feature would also mean that people like me would be unable to surreptitiously monitor you.

Conclusion

Although social networking sites are lovely mechanisms for keeping in touch with current and old friends, such cyber-visibility can cause unintentional problems for relationships with students, faculty and clients. Obviously, the best precaution is to avoid instant messaging or social networking altogether. But, if you wish to continue engaging in online revelry, consider adopting some of the strategies outlined above.

As for myself, I must admit I was curious as to what happened to those gold lamé shorts. Perhaps someday I will find out, but until then I will hold my curiosity — and my own Facebook profile, chatting tendencies, and status messages — in check. ?

*A popular free mail program operated by Google that includes many functions, including an instant

message/chatting program that can be open whenever the e-mail webpage is open.