

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Be safe, Be Responsible

What is social networking?

There are many different types of social networking sites and they all work in slightly different ways. They help you keep in touch with friends, get to know people online and share information. On most sites, you will create a profile for yourself. A profile may just be a username and a contact address but might include a photo. It will often contain a personal description, your interests, the music you like or even videos you have made. It may have links to your friends' profiles.

Taking care of personal information

Social networking sites are popular because they make it easy to share information with others: Information posted on a site could be public and may be seen by many people. So be careful about what you reveal. Your privacy or personal safety may be at risk if you disclose too much. Your profile may be seen by thousands of strangers, and parts of a website may be 'public spaces' so what you say there is also public. This also makes it easy for others to copy your information and send it to people you don't know.

Are you using the right sort of site?

People network for all sorts of reasons and there are different sites to suit their needs. You need to make sure that the sites you use are the right ones for you.

Do you know how the site works?

Most sites let you control how public or private your profile or information about what you have been doing on the site is. These controls are often called 'privacy settings'. Choose a site that gives you as much choice as possible over who is able to find your profile and how much information they can see. Do not assume that privacy settings are automatically set at their most private level; this is not always the case. Always find out how these work before you start building your profile. Set the privacy level as strictly as you can and learn more about a site's privacy procedures and settings. It is best to assume that there is no such thing as absolute privacy on-line.

Would you want a stranger knowing this about you?

- Always be careful with the information you post. Personal information can easily be misused, for example, to gain access to your online bank account or steal your identity. Make sure your password is safe by avoiding ones which others might guess. Keep it secret and change it regularly.
- It's a good idea to have one email address, which you only use for social networking; that way, until you get to know someone, you don't have to tell them any of your other contact details.
- If you don't want people you meet online to work out your where you are, take care not to give out information which would reveal your location. Your personal safety offline can be affected by what you tell people online.

What will other users think?

It's not just a matter of personal safety. What seems insignificant to you and your friends could damage your reputation when seen by others. For example:

- Pictures taken at parties and posted online (nursing students, in particular, should beware of bringing the profession into disrepute by misuse of the uniform).
- Abusive comments, especially if they could be considered defamatory, sexist or racist. What might seem inconsequential, when said in the context of a conversation, could appear a lot more serious when it appears as text.

These have not only caused embarrassment, but also led to disciplinary action by the University. In some cases they have led to "fitness to practice" proceedings, against nursing and social work students, which have seriously damaged their career prospects!

Before you post something, ask yourself what impression your web presence would make, if you were a complete stranger. If applying for a job, would you want the people interviewing you to have seen everything on your profile?

Who else is online?

- You will need to make a judgement, whether you really trust someone enough to share your personal information. Make sure your friends know how to treat your information before you share it with them.
- Your friends will also have their own expectations of privacy and how they want you to treat their personal details. Just because they have told you something it does not necessarily mean they want it shared with others.

Summary

- Most people use and enjoy social networking sites safely. However, if something starts to spoil your enjoyment, such as unwanted attention or offensive comments, report this to the site administrator.
- Social networking sites are a useful way to meet people, but make sure you control access to yourself online, hide details you think are sensitive or simply don't post them at all. Above all, learn how the sites you are using work and how you can use them safely.