
The Social and Psychological Impact of Online Social Networking APS National Psychology Week Survey 2010

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) sought to investigate the patterns of online social networking and the social and psychological impact of online social networking in an adult population through its annual community survey as part of National Psychology Week. An online survey was developed and targeted both users and non-users of online social networking sites. Completion of the survey involved responding to questions using likert-type scales, including a measure of sociability and shyness, and providing open-ended responses. The survey was distributed to the Australian public through advertisements on social networking sites and in local newspapers and through the use of a 'snowballing' approach using email distribution. Recruitment of participants was not stratified; hence the sample may not be representative of the general population.

Key Findings of Survey:

1. While much of the media attention on online social networking has focused on young people's use of sites such as Facebook and MSN, the current survey found that online social networking was being used by people across the age range with 81 per cent of adults aged 31 to 50 years and 56 per cent of adults over 50 reporting that they use these sites.
2. Concerns about excessive use of online social networking were investigated. A large proportion of participants reported accessing these sites several times a day (51%) and feeling a need to log on at times throughout the day. Participants also believed that they wasted time on these sites. Nevertheless, when time spent on these sites was considered, 70 per cent of participants reported spending less than two hours a day on these sites.
3. Reports about cyber bullying and risks to children have led to increased fears about the impact of online social networking, particularly on children and young adults. The survey asked people about any 'bad experiences' they have had as a result of using social networking sites. A considerable number of survey respondents (28%) indicated that they have had a negative experience. An analysis of open-ended statements to describe this experience found that bullying, unwanted contact and the posting of inappropriate or distressing information to be the most cited events.
4. Social networking sites have led to a different way of communicating with others, both with those previously known to the person as well as newly formed friendships. Concerns about reduced face-to-face interactions and the loss of social skills have emerged. The current survey found that for a large number of people social networking sites increased their contact with friends and family (53%) and increased their participation in social activities (26%). Increased social participation provides benefits to people's self-esteem and mental health suggesting that taking part in online social networking is likely to lead to positive outcomes for some people.
5. Past studies have suggested that online social networking may be particularly helpful for those who are shy and less sociable as it provides an easier way for them to form connections with others. Survey participants completed a shyness and sociability scale and largely fell in the normal range of shyness and sociability with few people falling at the extreme ends. Further, as sociability increased so did time spent using social networking sites, indicating that patterns of social behaviour that occur in real life are replicated online.
6. Respondents were asked about romantic relationships formed online. The findings show that those in the 31 to 50 year age group (25%) were most likely to have had a date with someone they met online and 21 per cent of this group reported having formed an intimate relationship with someone they met on a social networking site. In contrast, younger people and those in the over 50 age group were less likely to develop romantic relationships with people they met online.

Background

The use of online social networking sites to communicate with family and friends and to meet people has had a significant effect on the ways in which people interact. For some people, who are avid users of social networking sites, friendships are sustained without any face-to-face interaction. This has occurred in the past through having pen pals where people developed life-long friendships with people they had never met. Online social networking has increased people's capacity for making and sustaining such friendships as well as having more regular communication with family and other friends. Research is just beginning to understand the challenges, benefits and negative consequences of this different way in which people interact with each other.

Much media attention has focused on the 'dangers' of online social networking, particularly for young people. This has led to fears about online social networking and calls for increased regulation and accountability of providers of these sites. Early studies suggested that internet communication had a negative impact on the individual by reducing face-to-face interactions and increasing level of loneliness (e.g., Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998; Nie, 2002). More recent studies have revealed a more complex set of outcomes (Beer, 2008). Studies have indicated that internet communications may supplement traditional social behaviour rather than increase or decrease it. This is consistent with a social network theory which implies that the more a person socialises in a traditional sense, the more they will socialise online. Increasingly, studies are indicating that social networking has a positive impact on social connectedness and wellbeing (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). For example, a study by the Office of Communications (Ofcom, 2008) found that those using networking sites use them to meet new people, seek out old friends, keep in touch with current friends, seek attention and/or keep up with their peers. Further, it has been suggested that online social networking may have benefits for those who find face-to-face contact difficult such as those who are shy or introverted (Wolfradt & Doll, 2001). Nevertheless, cyber bullying and inappropriate use of personal information have been identified as problems (Cross et al., 2009). However, research in this area largely focuses on children and adolescents.

Survey participant demographics

A total of 1,834 Australians responded to the survey. Fourteen per cent of survey respondents were male ($n = 256$) and 73 per cent were female ($n = 1,344$). Thirteen per cent of respondents did not disclose their gender. As shown in Table 1 there was a good spread across the age ranges with the highest percentage in the 18 to 30 age group.

Table 1. Age range of survey participants

Age range	<i>n</i>	%
Young Adults (18 to 30 years)	736	40%
Adults (31 to 50 years)	629	34%
Adults (51 to 80 years)	245	14%
Unknown	224	12%
Total	1834	100%

Thirty-four per cent of participants identified themselves as single and 43 per cent were married or had a life partner. The greatest number of respondents were employed full-time (41%), followed by part-time/casual workers (18%) and full-time students (17%). The remaining participants were home makers (5%), part-time students not working elsewhere (3%), not currently employed (3%) and retired (2%). With regards to the location of participants, the majority of participants were located in major cities around Australia (74%) a further 17 per cent were from inner regional areas, seven per cent from outer regional Australia and a small proportion from remote and very remote areas (2%). This is generally indicative of the population distribution according to remoteness as reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Findings

1. Use of social networking sites across the age range

There is no doubt that young people are often more eager about embracing new technologies than adults and become highly skilled very quickly. They are also more vulnerable and less inhibited in their communication than adults and therefore may become exposed to risks. The use of social networking sites has been the focus of a large number of research studies. In the current study we looked at use of social networking sites across the age range. Eighty-six per cent of survey participants reported that they currently use online social networking sites. A breakdown of users and non-users by age group is presented in Figure 1. The findings indicate that almost all of the young adults who completed this survey (97%) were accessing online social networking sites. However, a large number of adults aged 31 to 50 years (81%) and 64 per cent of adults over 50 also reported using these sites. In identifying those social networking sites that participants used the most, an overwhelming majority of respondents reported using Facebook (95%). Smaller numbers of participants were using sites like Twitter (2%), RSVP (1%), and Windows Live Spaces (1%). There was little variation on the sites used across the age groups with Facebook being the primary online social networking site across all ages. There was a decrease in the number of online friends with increasing age with those aged below 30 reporting an average 263 friends, those aged 31 to 50 reporting an average 206 friends and those over 50 having 92 friends (the average overall was reported as 205 friends).

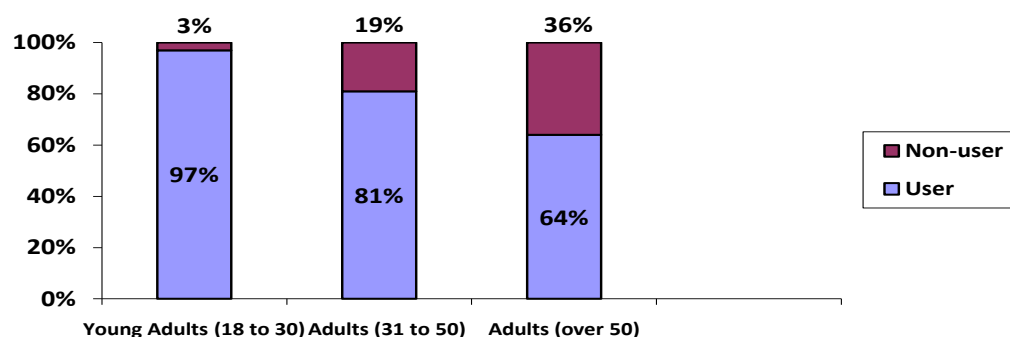


Figure 1. Users and non-users of social networking sites by age group

A total of 252 participants reported they did not currently use online social networking sites and the majority of those were over 50 years of age (36%). Of the non-users, 29 per cent reported previously using online social networking sites. The main reasons for withdrawal from online social networking were a loss of interest (43%), having better things to do with their time (38%), and preferring to speak with people directly (33%). Only a small number reported that they stopped using online social networking because of a 'bad experience' (9%). Participants not accessing social networking sites remained concerned about the negative impact of online social networking, with almost half (49%) of previous users indicating that they had been concerned about access to their personal information.

2. Investigation of concerns about excessive online social networking use

The frequency of access to online social networking sites was high. A large portion of respondents (77%) indicated that they were logging onto social networking sites daily: 51 per cent reported logging on several times a day and 26 per cent about once a day. Across the age groups, young adults were accessing social networking sites most often with 59 per cent of young adults reporting logging on to

these sites more than once a day when compared with 36 per cent for adults aged 31 to 50 and 23 per cent for adults over 50.

It is worth noting however, that 42 per cent of respondents reported that they tend to spend less than one hour on these sites each day and 70 per cent spending less than 2 hours a day. These figures are comparable to findings in studies of adolescents in the UK and USA (McGrath & Van Vugt, 2009) and suggest that patterns of online social networking use may not be significantly different for young people and adults. As with the frequency of logging on, there was a decrease in time spent on these sites with age. The older participants reported spending less than an hour online per day while the younger adults were more likely to report spending less than two hours.

3. Negative experiences from online social networking

There has been significant interest and concern about the risks of online social networking because of access to personal information and the anonymity that the system allows. A number of public cases of bullying and identity theft have put this issue in the public arena. In the survey participants were asked whether they have ever had a bad social networking experience. A considerable number of respondents (28%) reported having had a negative online experience with adults aged below 30 the most likely to report this (60%). These participants were asked to provide further information about the negative experience. For most respondents the experience reflected unwanted contact or people posting inappropriate or upsetting information online. Some respondents specified having online bullying and provided examples such as abusive messages and harassment from someone of the opposite sex.

Although research into young people reports varying rates of bullying across ages and based on definitions of bullying, the results for adults presented here are not much different from findings for younger people. However, it should be noted that in the current survey we asked participants to identify a bad experience rather than bullying per se. If the survey had asked specifically about bullying this may have led to different results. An interesting outcome of the survey was that when participants provided information about bad experiences many also indicated how they managed the experience such as blocking the person from contacting them, indicating that the experience had led them to consider ways to avoid such occurrences in future.

4. Social connectedness

Participants were asked their reasons for accessing social networking sites. Table 2 presents the responses with regard to the purpose(s) for using online social networking sites. Most respondents identified a range of reasons, with those most endorsed being about connecting with friends and family.

Table 2. Responses to the question: ‘For what purpose(s) do you use social networking sites?’

	<i>n</i>	%
Keeping in touch with friends	1387	88%
Finding out what other people are doing	948	60%
Keeping in touch with family	908	58%
Tracking down and contacting new friends	804	51%
General chatting with others	788	50%
Posting photos of myself or others	782	50%
Sharing information online with others	742	47%
Telling others what I've been doing	701	44%
Inviting people to an event	625	40%
Making arrangements to meet someone	487	31%
Playing networking games	393	25%
Making new friends	289	18%
Other	86	5%

NB. Participants were able to provide more than one response for this question.

'Other' reasons for using social networking sites included 'checking up on kids', 'getting invites to events' and a common theme was the use of networking sites for business, promotion and professional networking.

The survey results were positive when looking at the impact of online social networking on social relationships. A large proportion of respondents (53%) felt that online social networking allowed them to be in contact with people more regularly, and for 79 per cent of survey participants it helped them to keep in touch with people who live far away. Twenty-six per cent of respondents stated that they attend more social events when compared to before they were using social networking sites, suggesting that the use of online social networking sites increases both online and face-to-face social interactions. Open-ended responses from participants supported the convenience of online social networking as a communication tool for sharing information, making meeting or event arrangements, and staying in touch with people that they may not otherwise contact (e.g., by phone or face-to-face) .

It is interesting to note that more than half of respondents aged 18 to 30 felt they would lose contact with many of their friends if they stopped using online social networking (52%). This was less of a concern for the over 50 age group, with only 26 per cent of this group concerned about losing friendships. With regards to contact with family, over a quarter of respondents believed that they would lose contact with some family members if they ceased using social networking sites.

Respondents were asked about their preference for online communication when compared to face-to-face interactions. The majority of respondents reported that they preferred to communicate with people in person rather than using online social networking sites (54%, with 25% neutral on this matter) suggesting that people are not necessarily moving away from face-to-face interactions but perhaps used online social networking to enhance their in person communications. Curiously, the same number of respondents reported feeling more confident socialising online than in person (54%, with 15% neutral) while a small number of participants (8%) indicated that they felt they were treated better online than in face-to-face relationships.

5. Shyness and sociability

A scale of sociability and shyness was used to investigate whether these characteristics impacted on the use of online social networking sites given research indicating that the online format promotes social interactions for those who find socialising difficult. The scale was a self-report measure of sociability and shyness. Scores on this scale demonstrated that participants were largely categorised as having a moderate level of shyness and sociability with small numbers of people falling into the low and high categories. These findings indicate that people using online social networking are more likely to be those that rate themselves as having moderate levels of shyness and sociability, suggesting individuals who are likely to be competent socially, have already well-developed friendship networks prior to joining online networks, and develop new friends easily.

An investigation of the relationship between levels of sociability and time spent on social networking sites showed that as sociability increased, time spent using social networking sites increased. This provides further support to the notion that patterns of face-to-face communication are replicated in the online environment. This is consistent with what sociologists describe as a social network theory. This theory is based on the view that it is the relationships between people that will impact on patterns of social networking regardless of the mode of communication.

6. Forming romantic relationships online

A number of social networking sites focus on connecting people who are interested in forming romantic relationships. Use of websites such as RSVP was reported to be small (9.5%), with the highest rate of participation in these sites being adults over 50 years. In addition to identifying any accessing of sites that aim to promote romantic relationships, respondents were asked whether they have had a date with someone they met online. In contrast to results that show that older adults are more likely to use RSVP,

it was those in the 31 to 50 year age group (25%) that were most likely to report having dated someone they met online (21% of participants overall), and 21 per cent of this group reported having formed an ongoing intimate relationship with someone that they met online. Those younger than 30 and those older than 50 were less likely to date someone they met online (17% and 13% respectively) or to use social networking sites to form and ongoing intimate relationship (15% and 13% respectively). These results are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

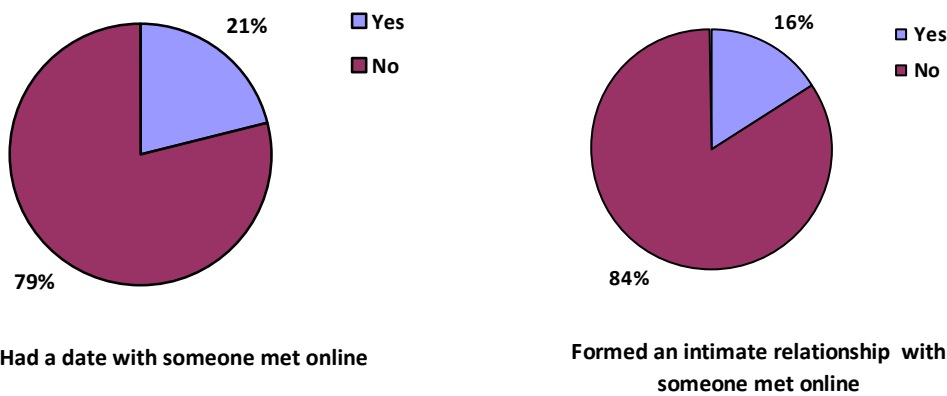


Figure 2. Romantic relationships formed online (all respondents)

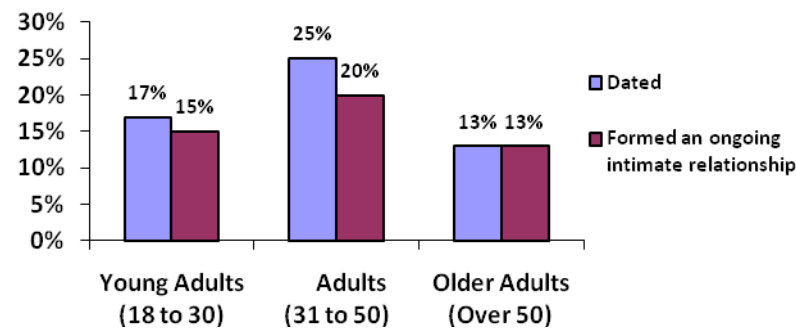


Figure 3. Age differences in romantic relationships formed online

Of interest with regard to relationships was that 16 per cent of respondents stated that they have used a social networking site to tell someone something that they felt was too difficult to say to them face-to-face, with the largest proportion of these respondents being in the younger age group (77%). When asked to describe the situation, the most common examples were ‘breaking up with someone’, ‘asking someone on a date’ and ‘telling a friend they had hurt me’. In addition, participants also described the online format as allowing them to convey difficult information such as discussing a debt. These examples are consistent with the affirmative response to the item ‘I feel more confident socialising online than face-to-face’.

Tips for positive online social networking

Optimise the benefits. If you move to different geographic area or have less time to meet with friends in person, consider communicating with them online to maintain your friendship.

Inform yourself about security options. Talk to your friends or family about how to use the sites and read up on the options you have to make your personal information secure.

Use your profile in a positive way. Communicate with people who have similar interests, organise social events and share information that you are comfortable with having on the internet.

Be in control of your online interactions. If you are experiencing negative interactions with someone online, stop communicating with them and consider blocking them from access to your profile.

Protect yourself. If you feel that you are being bullied by someone, think about how you can prevent the person from having access to your profile and talk to someone about what is happening.

Be respectful of others. Think carefully prior to posting other people's personal information, including posting pictures or making comments about them on your site.

Don't be a bully. It's easy to make comments about others that can be hurtful or offensive. Think carefully about what you post.

Avoid going online more than you plan. If you think you are using online networking sites too often, think about restricting yourself to a certain amount of time per day or week.

Have a process for screening people who request to be your friend. Consider the following: How well do you know them? How did they come to seek to want to be your friend? Remember, you don't have to accept every friend request.

Be aware of the information that you post.

- Never share personal information like your mobile phone number or address. Close friends should already have this information.
- Remember that information you post online can stay there permanently, so think carefully about what you are posting.
- Don't post anything online that you would normally only disclose to a close friend. When communicating online you can be drawn into providing information that you did not intend to share.
- Some aspects of social networking sites are open to all members so only post information in those sections that you are comfortable sharing with strangers.

Meeting someone face-to-face. If you really want to meet up with someone that you have only communicated with online ensure you meet in a public space, tell someone where you are going and and if possible take a friend with you.

Appendix: Additional results of interest

a. Advantages and disadvantages of online social networking

Participants identified both advantages and disadvantages of online social networking. The main advantage reported was the promotion of links with friends and family. The convenience of being able to communicate with people more regularly than they otherwise might, with 53 per cent of participants endorsing this statement, and being able to communicate for longer periods of time was (24%) also reported to be a benefit. Statements from respondents indicated that they were aware of aspects of online social networking that make it a convenient way to interact with others. For example, further comments such as “I don’t have to reply straight away as I would on a phone” and “I interact with people that I would not contact in any other way” reflect characteristics of online social networking that are seen to be positive as they promote communication that may not have otherwise occurred.

In considering the disadvantages, respondents identified a number of negative aspects of online social networking including:

- the time-consuming nature of online social networking sites, with 57 per cent admitting that they waste a lot of time on these sites (70% when 18-30 year olds were analysed separately);
- concern about access to personal information by others, with 43 per cent worried that ‘non friends’ may see their personal information; and
- concern that information posted may be used against them (28%).

Comments by respondents again indicated that there was awareness that the online communication format may have a negative impact. This was reflected in statements made when respondents were asked for further information such as “communication is not as personal”, “context can be lost” and “communications can be misinterpreted”. A list of the main advantages and disadvantages of online social networking is presented in Table 3 and 4.

Table 3. A selection of responses to the question: ‘What are the main advantages in using online social networking compared with speaking to people face-to-face or on the telephone?’

	<i>n</i>	%
It helps me keep in touch with people who live far away	1247	79%
I can speak to them more regularly	832	53%
It helps me locate old friends	675	43%
I can speak to more people at the same time	585	37%
I can speak to more people on the internet than by phone	458	29%

NB. Participants were able to provide more than one response for this question.

Table 4. A selection of responses to the question: ‘What are the main disadvantages in using online social networking compared with speaking to people face-to-face or on the telephone?’

	<i>n</i>	%
I end up wasting a lot of time	897	57%
People you do not want to see your information may gain access to it	674	43%
Other people might use information against me	437	28%
I could become addicted to using online social networking	347	22%
I don’t catch up with friends as often as I used to	178	11%

NB. Participants were able to provide more than one response for this question.

In reporting on their patterns of online social networking use during the day, 57 per cent of respondents aged 18 to 30 indicated that there were periods throughout the day where they have a desire to be able to log onto their online profile (a total of 47 per cent across all age groups). Nevertheless only 22 per cent of participants were concerned about becoming addicted to online social networking use.

b. Posting personal information

When asked about posting personal information online, 49 per cent of respondents using social networking reported that they do, while 51 per cent reported that they do not post personal information and a significant 85 per cent of respondents reported that they post pictures of themselves online. Further, 13 per cent of participants revealed that they have posted information online and regretted it later. However, the majority of participants had considered ways of protecting their information, with 87 per cent stating that they restrict access to their personal information. The majority reported doing this by use of settings available to them on the site including using the privacy settings or blocking people. These findings suggest that although participants are posting personal information online, they believe they have tools to regulate and protect their online environment. This may indicate a false sense of security about personal information online which in reality may be accessed via hacking or virus infection. Further, a recent survey by found that many users are unaware or not concerned about privacy settings on social networking sites (Consumer Reports, 2010).

When asked about decisions made in accepting online friends, most respondents reported that they only accept people they know personally (64%), with only 2 per cent of respondents indicating that they accept anyone. These results are presented in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Participant reports of those they accept as online friends

Those who selected 'Other' specified a range of differing reasons including "only people I would talk to on the street" or "I mostly accept people I know personally, but sometimes accept others who I meet online with similar interests".

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