

Teens' approach to social media risk is different from adults'

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

For every parent who ever wondered what the heck their teens were thinking when they posted risky information or pictures on social media, a team of Penn State researchers suggests that they were not really thinking at all, or at least were not thinking like most adults do.

In a study, the researchers report that the way [teens](#) learn how to manage

privacy risk online is much different than how adults approach [privacy management](#). While most adults think first and then ask questions, teens tend to take the risk and then seek help, said Haiyan Jia, post-doctoral scholar in [information sciences](#) and technology.

"Adults often find this very difficult to understand and paradoxical because they are so used to considering possible risks of disclosing information online first and then taking the necessary precautions, based on those concerns," said Jia. "What our model suggests is that teens don't think this way—they disclose and then evaluate the consequences. The process is more experiential in nature for teens."

This disclose-first-and-then-make-corrections model may lend insight into what researchers refer to as the privacy paradox, according to Pamela Wisniewski, a post-doctoral scholar in information sciences and technology, who worked with Jia.

Wisniewski said that the privacy paradox suggests that there is a disconnect between the [privacy concerns](#) of teens and what information they disclose.

"For adults, the basic model is that different factors contribute to an individual's concern for his or her information privacy and based on that privacy concern the user takes certain actions, for example, disclosing less information," said Wisniewski. "This is a very rational, adult-focused model, however, that doesn't seem applicable to teens."

When teens begin to struggle with [privacy](#) concerns, they often try to find possible protective actions to mitigate risk, according to the researchers. Those remedies include seeking advice from adults, removing online information, or going offline completely.

Teens are often more exposed to online risks because they are using

[social media](#) as a platform for self-expression and as a way to gain acceptance from their peers. This desire for expression and acceptance can lead teens to disclose too much information. They may disclose vital contact information, or exchange photographs with strangers, for example.

"Adults don't know how big of a deal this is for teens," said Jia. "Before I worked on these papers, I was drawn to the issue because I heard about so many tragedies of teens who were exploring their identities online and that led them to very risky situations, often with terrible consequences."

A parent's first impulse may be to forbid Internet or social media access, but completely avoiding risks may cause other problems, according to the researchers, who present their findings today (March 17) at the Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing conference.

"First, I can't imagine a teen growing up and avoiding the Internet and online communications in this age," said Jia. "But there's also a danger that without taking on the minimum risks, teens will not have access to all the positive benefits the Internet can provide, nor will they learn how to manage risk and how to safely navigate this online world."

Jia said swimming lessons may be the best model for parents who want to encourage their teens to use the Internet and social media safely.

"It's a lot like learning to swim," Jia said. "You make sure they enter the water slowly and make sure they know how to swim before you let them swim on their own and in the deeper parts."

The researchers used data from the Pew Research Center's 2012 Teens and Privacy Management Survey. The survey gathered [information](#) on social media behaviors from 588 teens in the United States, most of

whom were active users of sites such as Facebook.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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