

New research looks at fallout from posting embarrassing moments on social media

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While social media sites may offer positive opportunities to engage with friends, share information and expand our social networks, these online platforms may also become a place where past mistakes, missteps, or embarrassing moments become fodder for discussion in the public domain.

Sung Kim, professor of operations and information management at the Wisconsin School of Business at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, along with Ben Choi of the UNSW Australia Business School, Zhenhui Jiang of the National University of Singapore, and Bo Xiao of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, looked at the consequences of online invasions of privacy and their effects on relationships. The researchers examined two key variables around embarrassing social media posts—whether or not the [target](#) of the post was tagged (exposing the content to both the poster's network and the target's friends) and the level of shared friends in their networks.

They found that posts with tagging resulted in a higher level of perceived privacy invasion than posting only. And when the poster and the target have few shared friends, tagging expands the audience in a way that further heightens the sense of privacy invasion. When the poster and target have a high number of shared friends, though, it can change the nature of the interaction, making it seem less invasive and more along the lines of friendly teasing.

"People who are using social media should be aware of how their posts

can affect relationships, particularly with the use of tagging," Kim says. "It helps to be mindful not only of the content of your posts, but the potential size and reach of their audience."

Kim adds, "Our findings suggest when you tag people in an embarrassing post, it may be seen as friendly teasing or shared enjoyment when you have a large number of friends in common. But it looks very different when you do that with an audience that doesn't know the both of you and can leave the target of the post feeling hurt or humiliated."

The study also looked at how a target might respond to a perceived privacy invasion. Not surprisingly, in those cases where there was a strong feeling of privacy invasion, targets withdrew from discussing the embarrassing exposure. However, targets were reluctant to completely avoid future contact with the person who posted the content, either by "unfriending" the person or reporting the action to Facebook. That may be due to the concern that such actions would trigger direct confrontations.

As a result, Kim suggests that online [social networking sites](#) consider enhancing technical features to allow users to gradually de-escalate their relationships in those instances where a [privacy invasion](#) takes place. One option would be providing a broader range of selective sharing features, similar to what is available in Google+, where users are able to conceal certain social networking activities from specific users. That would allow for a more tactful and gradual means of limiting online interactions with someone who a social media user felt had violated their privacy.

"As [privacy issues](#) tied to online exposures become more common in [social media](#), people should take care to think about what they are posting and how they are posting it in order to make sure they are not sharing an embarrassing moment in a way that can be seen as hurtful to a

friend," Kim says.

More information: Ben C. F. Choi et al. Embarrassing Exposures in Online Social Networks: An Integrated Perspective of Privacy Invasion and Relationship Bonding, *Information Systems Research* (2015). [DOI: 10.1287/isre.2015.0602](https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.2015.0602)

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