Will Your Posts Come Back to HAUNT YOU?

Don't let search engines turn up embarrassing stuff about you! Here's how to be as awesome online as you are IRL.

By MARGARITA BERTSOS

Good rule: Think before that next snap!

You're probably not thinking about college admissions, getting a job, or even your friend's parents when you post to social media. But at some point, someone *will* search for your name—and what shows up can lift or sink your reputation. Take one kid who learned firsthand about "**social permanence**"—meaning once you put something online, its impact can last for a *very* long time. "A senior in my school was offered a college athletic scholarship. That same fall, he posted pictures of himself at parties drinking shots," says a high school counselor. The college **recruiters** found out and started to second-guess their offer.

For the student, the next few weeks were a nail-biter. "They asked him to clean up his social media, write a letter to the school reflecting on what it means to be a leader on a team and in life, and warned him that if he made any more false moves, they'd **revoke** his scholarship," says the counselor. "Ultimately, he did go to the university but learned a valuable lesson: Poor decision making—offline and online—can keep you from your lifetime goals."

While no one's suggesting you delete your Insta or Snapchat, you want to be sure there's nothing searchable or screenshot-worthy that could hurt you later. Use these tips to make your best **impression**.

ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES (BOY); TANHHA2001/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (SNAP GHOSTS)

TIP 1:
T.H.I.N.K. before you post.

Asking yourself a few simple questions can go a long way to making sure you're putting a good **digital footprint** forward. "The important thing is to know you're making a choice every time you **engage** with social media," says Janell Burley Hofmann, author of *iRules: What Every Tech-Healthy Family Needs to Know About Selfies, Sexting, Gaming, and Growing Up*. So before you post anything, quickly remember the T.H.I.N.K. rule and ask yourself:

- Is it **T**rue? Or am I lying or stretching the truth?
- Is it **H**urtful? Is it mean or hostile?
- Is it **I**nspiring? Is this going to be a good influence on others?
- Is it **N**egative? Is it harsh or abrasive?
- Is it **K**ind? Is it considerate and compassionate?

Bottom line: Reflect on who you want to be in real life and what character **traits** you're most proud of, Hofmann says. Then T.H.I.N.K. before you post and make sure that none of your choices **sabotage** that image.

TIP 2:
Do a self-check.

Google your name and see what turns up. And run a search for yourself on pipl.com, a people search engine that lets you find information about yourself that even you have forgotten about. Some is probably harmless—like that picture of you grooving on the gym floor at your grade school dance-a-thon—but you may uncover truly cringey posts on social media accounts that you no longer even use. Think of your posts this way: Even if not easily searchable, would you be OK with someone taking a screenshot and showing your grandma?

POP QUIZ:
Test your social media smarts

☐ True   ☐ False
A "like" just means you've seen something, not that you approve of it.

False. When you "like" something, it can be interpreted as your show of support, Hofmann says. Whether it's a mean meme, an insensitive joke, or an over-the-top video, you're letting the world know that it has your thumbs-up. Don't give anything you don't actually like your public stamp of approval online.

☐ True   ☐ False
Group chats are a safe place to say or share whatever you want.

False. Last spring, Harvard University administrators revoked admissions offers to at least 10 students accepted into the class of 2021 after discovering that they were using a Facebook group chat to exchange sexually explicit memes and offensive messages.

☐ True   ☐ False
Silence is an option.

True. It's OK not to comment, to leave a conversation in a group chat, or to unfollow someone, Hofmann says. Sometimes the best way to express yourself is to not be involved.

Don't burn down your reputation with one false move!

Google

TIP 3:
Clean things up.

The delete button is your friend. Erase anything—tweets, photos, Facebook likes, YouTube videos—that isn't in line with how you want to present yourself to the world. The obvious don'ts: pictures containing alcohol or drugs; offensive language or racist remarks; inappropriate clothing (or lack of clothing). As for that embarrassing video or photo your friend posted and tagged you in, ask them to take it down.

TIP 4:
Focus on the positive.

Your goal on social media should always be to present your best self. Think about the parts of your life that you'd be proud to show the world. Did you read an interesting article that changed your **perspective**? Link to it. Did you make it onto a sports team? Snap a photo of yourself in your jersey and post it. And don't forget to be generous. Did your classmate volunteer at the Special Olympics or get nominated for class president? Post a photo and give her some props.

TIP 5:
Don't be afraid to be real.

While you do want to make yourself look good, the goal isn't to become totally fake. "You don't need to be perfect online, in the same way you don't need to be perfect offline," Hofmann

65%
of job recruiters were left with a positive impression of applicants who posted to social media about volunteering.

SOURCE: Jobvite survey

says. No one's life is as flawless as social media might make it seem, and your friends will probably adore you for—and totally relate to—the occasional facepalm you're willing to share. (You left the house with two different shoes? #oops!) That said. . .

TIP 6:
Protect your privacy.

Social-network privacy policies are always changing. So a privacy setting that's in place one month might be gone a few months later—and you may not even realize it. Your friend who's always set her posts to "friends only"—the ones you might have commented on thinking the larger world wouldn't see what you said—can one day make them public. And even if your own account is private, remember nothing's *ever* truly private online.

Social Media Fails—By (Yikes!) Adults
Teens aren't the only ones who make mistakes.

MISTAKE: Displaying silly, gross, or just plain ridiculous behavior
A couple of restaurant workers were fired and their names made the news after they filmed themselves doing disgusting things with food—like sticking food up their noses and putting it on a sandwich—and then posting the video on YouTube.

MISTAKE: Putting people down
Yale University placed one of its residential deans on leave after finding she'd written Yelp reviews that referred to people as "morons" and "white trash."

MISTAKE: Bragging about drinking or doing drugs
A 23-year-old math teacher was put on leave from her job over racy content and photos, including posts about drinking and smoking marijuana, on her personal Twitter account.