Will Your Posts Come Back to HAUNT YOU?

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 Instagram 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.

By MARGARITA BERTOS

YOUR FUTURE

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

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 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, . . .

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.