

**Internet Use and Privacy Attitudes Survey**  
**The Minnesota Daily**  
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**I. INTRODUCTION**

**A. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this survey is to investigate student opinions and experiences with Internet use and subsequent attitudes about Internet privacy. Topics explored include frequency and content of Internet use, attitudes about personal data privacy and Internet safety, beliefs about one's identity on the Internet, and the relationship between Internet use and social behaviors. This survey used original questions designed and tested by the Survey Research Department at *The Minnesota Daily*.

Given recent media reports about the rising use of social networking sites by employers, colleges/ universities, and other web-users to find out more about students and young people, this survey is particularly timely. Often, these reports suggest that most young people are unaware of the potential dangers associated with revealing personal information on the Internet and that these young people fail to consider how public their presumably "private" Internet activities may actually be. *The Minnesota Daily* is interested in whether the suggestions have empirical support.

**B. General Questions of Interest**

- *Internet Use* -- How frequently do students at the University of Minnesota use the Internet, and what kinds of web content do they access?
- *Social Networking Websites and Associated Privacy Issues* -- How widespread is student use of social networking websites? Do members of social networking websites report different internet and social behaviors than non-members? Do members of social networking websites have more liberal attitudes about internet data privacy?
- *Internet Identity* -- To what degree do students believe their Internet activities are private or public?
- *Internet Safety* -- Do students feel "safe" online, both in their financial transactions and their interpersonal communications? How comfortable do students feel giving out personally identifiable information online?
- *Data Privacy* -- What are students' attitudes about data privacy, both on the Internet and in social situations?

- *The Internet and Participation* -- Are students using the Internet to participate in political, social, and academic life? Are students using the Internet to become involved in public issues that interest them?

### C. Special Notice About Data Release Procedures

The data from this survey are being used in a series of news stories about Internet use and data privacy published by *The Minnesota Daily*. Due to heightened public and media interest in this study and the findings, survey results will be selectively released each day to correspond with data presented in the print and online versions of the *Daily*. A new pdf write-up will add new sections of relevant data each day a new story is published. Previous publications of the data will not be altered. We will not use unpublished data to run statistical analyses on published data. A history of previously published pdf write-ups will be available on the Survey Research website to ensure transparency of the data release process.

Questions about this procedure can be directed to Dana Adams, Director of Survey Research at *The Minnesota Daily*, or Anna Leisa Sauser, President and Co-Publisher of *The Minnesota Daily*.

### D. Methodology

*The Minnesota Daily* received the names, contact information, and other publicly available data on currently enrolled students from the Office of Institutional Research and Reporting (OIRR). This list was current as of October 2006.

A sampling frame of 2,000 was chosen at random by using a SQL command from the complete list of 42,036. This is the total number of students enrolled for Fall Semester 2006. 378 students responded to the survey for a response rate of 18.9%. The margin of error associated with this sample is plus or minus 4.54% with a 95% confidence level. **This margin of error is reported as 4.5% for simplicity.** With a relatively low margin of error, the results of this survey can be generalized to the broader student population at the University of Minnesota.

The survey and consent process form was sent via e-mail link on Wednesday, November 15<sup>th</sup>. The survey closed on Wednesday, November 22<sup>nd</sup>. A reminder email to complete the survey was sent on Monday, November 20<sup>th</sup>. As in previous surveys, the reminder served to initiate a new round of responses and had the effect of raising the response rate slightly. Incentives to complete the survey also served to increase the response rate. Three Target® gift certificates valued at \$100 each were offered in a random drawing for participants who completed the survey.

### E. Methods of Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using licensed Microsoft Excel software packages. Rarely, totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

## II. FINDINGS

### A. Statistics of General Interest

**Degree Status** – As indicated in the table above, undergraduates were slightly over-represented in the sample, while non-degree-seeking students were under-represented. Representation for graduate and professional students in the sample was reflective of enrollment rates.

| <b>Degree Status</b>           | Survey Participation Total | University Enrollment Total |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Undergraduate Student          | 65%                        | 57%                         |
| Graduate/ Professional Student | 32%                        | 35%                         |
| Non-Degree Seeking Student     | 2%                         | 8%                          |
| Other                          | 1%                         | N/A                         |

**Gender**-- Only slightly more women than men responded to the survey, but this finding reflects the gender ratio of the broader University community. University-wide, women comprise 52% of the student population, while men comprise 46%. According to the Office of Institutional Research and Reporting, data is not available for between 1-2% of the student population, a result captured in this sample as well.

| <b>Gender</b> | Survey Participation Total | University Enrollment Total |
|---------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Male          | 45%                        | 46%                         |
| Female        | 54%                        | 52%                         |
| Other         | 1%                         | 2%                          |

**Race/ Ethnicity** – Participants in the survey are representative of the broader University student population by way of their racial and ethnic identification. It is not possible to make inference about the proportion of students who selected “other” as an option for race and ethnicity. The Office of Institutional Research and Reporting does not have an “other” category in demographics reporting, but provides categories for “International” and “Not Available.” These two categories were not provided in our survey and are omitted in comparison totals.

| <b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>  | Survey Participation Total | University Enrollment Total |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| African-American        | 2%                         | 5%                          |
| Asian/ Pacific Islander | 10%                        | 9%                          |
| Caucasian               | 81%                        | 83%                         |
| Hispanic/ Latino        | 2%                         | 2%                          |
| Native American         | 1%                         | ≤1%                         |
| Other                   | 5%                         | N/A                         |

**Age** – Because of the categories provided for respondent age are different in our survey and the Office of Institutional Research and Reporting data, we only provide the proportion of ages reporting in our study.

| Age         | Survey Participation Total |
|-------------|----------------------------|
| 18-20       | 38%                        |
| 21-23       | 28%                        |
| 24-26       | 16%                        |
| 27 or older | 19%                        |

## **B. Bias**

Students whose e-mail addresses were disabled (for any variety of reasons) would not have received the invitation to participate in the survey. Students who frequent users of the Internet may have been more likely to participate in a web-based survey as compared to less frequent users. Also, individuals interested in technology issues or data privacy issues may have been more interested in participating. Students concerned with Internet fraud may have been less likely to respond to our email with an embedded web-link. Students interested in Internet privacy issues or who have had personal experience with those problems may have been more likely or less likely to participate.

Because Internet use is increasingly common in American society and most individuals have had some experience with Internet use and data privacy, we do not consider potential response bias to be a significant problem. Though we only asked questions concerning *legal* internet activities, some participants may have considered questions about their Internet use to be sensitive information. Per the consent agreement, participants were free to not answer any question that they considered too personal.

Clearly, many interesting, relevant, and timely questions can be asked about student Internet use. The length of the Internet Use and Privacy Attitudes survey required the Survey Research Department to weigh carefully which questions to include in the poll. Certainly, other questions relevant to Internet use could have been included. Constraints of space, time, and primary interest required the inclusion of certain items at the expense of others. It is our hope that future research will seek to replicate and build upon the findings reported here.

## **C. Main Findings**

**Internet Use -- How frequently do students at the University of Minnesota use the Internet, and what kinds of web content do they access?**

### **Frequency**

Average Daily Use -- when asked how much time students spend online during a typical day, 2-3 hours was average for the largest percentage of students (28%). 77% report

spending less than four hours online during a typical day. 5% of students say they spend 8 hours or more on the Internet during a typical day.

When asked where they most often use a computer, 76% of participants say they use computers at home, while 15% most often use school computers (such as labs, university internet kiosks, or classroom computers). 8% of students report using computers primarily at their work or place of employment.

Participants who relied on community locations for most of their computer use (such as coffee shops) reported spending the least amount of time online during a typical day. Participants who reported using work computers for most of their computer use also tended to report spending the most amount of time online (6 hours or more).

Students reported owning a variety of technological devices. According to participants, 77% own a laptop computer, 48% own a desktop computer, 33% have cell phones with web-access capabilities, and 8% own hand-held PDA devices. 34% of participants reported own both a laptop computer and a desktop computer.

## Content

Participants were asked several questions about the content of their Internet use.

Table 1.1. Student’s Self- Reported Internet Activity (ever)

| Internet Activity  | Percent “Yes” |
|--|---------------|
| Searched own name using Google                               | 87%           |
| Used Wikipedia to do research for a school assignment        | 71%           |
| Cited Wikipedia as a scholarly source in a school assignment | 28%           |

Table 1.2. Student’s Self-Reported Internet Activity (in previous 12 months)

| Internet Activity   | Percent “Yes” |
|---|---------------|
| Researched consumer products  | 81%           |
| Researched health and medical topics  | 76%           |
| Searched for information about current friend(s)                                  | 50%           |
| Searched for information about former friend(s)                                   | 37%           |
| Searched for information about former partner(s)                                  | 22%           |
| Searched for information about current partner(s)                                 | 20%           |
| Researched advice about personal relationships                                    | 20%           |
| Searched for information about a potential partner before a first meeting or date | 16%           |

Approximately one in five students has a blog.

34% of students say that responding to e-mail takes up too much of their time.

61% of students agreed with the statement: “there is more junk on the Internet than there is useful information.”

### **Social Networking Websites and Associated Issues**

31% of students say that, in general, they think their Internet activities are anonymous. Amount of Internet use, as measured by average daily use, was uncorrelated with this result. Older participants were less likely to believe their Internet activities are anonymous. There was no gender difference to this finding.

85% of students report having visited a social networking website (such as Facebook, MySpace, or other social networking websites). 73% of participants say they are members of a social networking website. 63% of students report having a membership at Facebook, and 32% reporting having a membership at MySpace. 27% of students who are members of social networking sites have memberships at both Facebook and MySpace. 14% of students say they are members of other social networking websites.

*Participants were asked a series of questions about whether they would consider some activities to be violations of an individual’s privacy and, if yes, how severe a violation they would consider the activity to be. Below, we report the findings about scenarios related to social networking websites.*

*Scenario: Employers using social networking sites to find out more about a potential employee before making a decision on whether to hire him or her:* Opinions were fairly equally split among the response categories. 27% consider this no violation of privacy; 26% said consider this a minor violation, 26% consider this a moderate violation; 20% consider this to be a major violation of privacy. Members of social networking sites were more likely than non-members to say this scenario was a moderate to major violation of privacy.

*Scenario: Colleges and universities using social networking sites to investigate violations of campus policies:* Again, opinions were fairly equally split among the response categories. 30% consider this to be no violation of privacy; 28% consider this a minor violation of privacy; 22% consider this a moderate violation, 20% consider this a major violation of privacy. Members of social networking sites were more likely than non-members to say this scenario was a moderate to major violation of privacy.

*Scenario: Police and law enforcement using social networking sites to monitor illegal activities:* 47% consider this to be no violation of privacy; 22% consider this a minor violation of privacy; 17% consider this a moderate violation, 14% consider this a major violation of privacy. Members of social networking sites were more likely than non-members to say this scenario was a minor, moderate, and major violation of privacy.

### **III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **A. Recommendations for Future Surveys on Similar Topics**

Clearly, many interesting, relevant, and timely questions can be asked about student Internet use. The length of the Internet Use and Privacy Attitudes survey required the Survey Research Department to weigh carefully which questions to include in the poll. Certainly, other questions relevant to Internet use could have been included. Constraints of space, time, and primary interest required the inclusion of certain items at the expense of others.

Future surveys on Internet use and privacy attitudes should be certain to guarantee participant anonymity. The use of a detailed informed consent process greatly helped the administration of this survey and (we believe) the ultimate quality of the data obtained.

Future surveys on data privacy scenarios could (and should) include a “ranking” question for participants to report which scenario(s) they perceive as most violative of individual privacy. We were only able to make a tentative comparisons based on highest response rate of perceiving the scenario as a major violation of privacy. Indeed, a “ranking” question would be more methodologically rigorous in this situation than the “rating” questions we used. Future surveys would also do well to ask a battery of emotional response questions in evaluating violations of privacy.

#### **B. Recommendations for Improvement**

We hope future surveys will make use of comparisons to national samples of young people. Especially with regards to young adults’ Internet use and attitudes about privacy, care should be taken to obtain the most representative samples possible in hopes of comparing the sample population to the target population.

Several other studies have conducted surveys about Internet use and attitudes about Internet and other technological privacy issues. Comparison to existing surveys on similar topics using student samples from other universities is a ripe avenue for future work. As public discourse surrounding Internet safety, social networking websites, and data privacy issues increases, future research will hopefully be encouraged to replicate or improve upon the findings presented here.