

Self-disclosure in young people: A study of social undergraduate students in a Ghanaian university

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Abstract

The internet seems to have changed the way young people interact and have changed the way people view privacy and self-disclosure on social networks. This study surveyed a total of 146 young people from various backgrounds and sought to throw some light on online privacy culture of Ghanaian young people and the types of information shared. The study found that young people are generally heavy users of social networking sites and they have large groups of friends online. This indicated shallow relationships. This finding was consistent with another finding that though they shared personal information online, they were careful not to share intimate personal information. It also found that young people are quite competent in managing their privacy though they seemed to be neutral when it came to posting explicit materials online.

Keywords self-disclosure; privacy; social media; internet

Introduction

Widespread usage of the internet is relatively new to Ghana. Mobile connectivity has grown from its introduction to the country in the late 1990s to a situation where mobile phone penetration stands at 126.06 % with a mobile internet penetration of 76.6% as at the year 2017 (National Communications Authority, 2017a, 2017b). Such rapid rises in the usage of the world wide web has brought some emergent behaviour.

Closely associated with the rise in connectivity has been a reduction in privacy(Kruck, Gottovi, Moghadami, Broom, & Forcht, 2002). Despite these risks, self-disclosure seems to be on the increase with people disclosing explicit and intimate details of their lives through social network sites and instant messaging applications. There however seems to be an emerging trend where young people in Ghana are known to have shared explicit images and information about themselves either directly to the public or to trusted associates which are subsequently leaked into the public space (Asare, 2017; Peace FM, 2015; Sodzi-Tettey, 2015). There have also been situations where various security breaches including improperly deleted files, lost drives have led to embarrassing disclosures of explicit information. These situations seem to have shaped the views of several Ghanaians about the privacy culture among young people.

Educators in Ghana generally have a negative perception of the cyberspace and one of the main reasons cited is that they believe students will be distracted by the attractions within the space. Of even more concern is that they believe that the internet and mobile devices expose users to immoral

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behaviour and one of the major concerns is pornography and hence the emphasis of discussions often focus on the negative uses of the internet (Johnson, 2015; Peace FM, 2017). They believe that students could download from the internet or engage in sexting or even take explicit photographs of themselves and share with their friends. There is however a technoethical view that technology and for that matter the internet is amoral (Graham, 2013) and the issue is however about human who express certain behaviours and cultures (Cohen, 2006).

Though there is some understanding of online social network culture of students in Western societies, this has been described as narrow (Almakrami, 2015) as some of this knowledge do not directly apply to other societies like Ghana. Additionally, there is little research about how these platforms are or might be used in different societies and hence there is the need to investigate this phenomenon in other societies like Ghana.

The research aims at contributing to the understanding of privacy and self-disclosure amongst young people in Ghana. It is aimed at providing an informed view to educators and education policy framers about the online privacy culture to help inform policies on the use of ICT devices. It also aimed at informing ethical, social and civic studies curricula which focuses on educating young people to be responsible technology users. It will help equip teachers with better knowledge to enable them to guide their students about online privacy. Specifically, the work sought to:

1. Understand online privacy culture of Ghanaian young people
2. Understand what types of information is shared by young people online
3. Examine the level of self-disclosure

Literature Review

The nature of Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure has been defined as communication that offers information about oneself (Chou, Teng, & Lo, 2009) it has been described as revealing one's private and sensitive information that would not normally be freely disclosed (Almakrami, 2015). Various authors have also described several dimensions of self-disclosure. On one hand, self-disclosure has been described based on the types on the information disclosed. Others have described it based on the scope of the information being disclosed. Based on the type of information disclosed it could be identity related information providing insight into the identity of the person involved in the disclosure, it could also be sensitive information and general habits or behaviour patterns that the subject may have (Chou et al., 2009). Other authors have described self-disclosure in terms of scope; breadth and depth. Where breadth deals with the range of issues that is covered and depth referring the level of detail that is disclosed (Sheldon, 2013). Self-disclosure has also been described as explicit or implicit form. On one hand, people can post explicit and unambiguous statement or multimedia content. Alternatively, it could be in a subtle or implicit form like wearing symbols to indicate religion or showing a wedding photograph that indicates marital status. The latter could occur unintentionally. Disclosure of such sensitive information could be made to an individual. It can occur during communication between two people, within groups where intimate details are shared or between an individual and an organisation (Joinson & Paine, 2007).

Self-disclosure is not necessarily an undesirable act, it has been described as intrinsically rewarding (Lin, Tov, & Qiu, 2014). For example, when disclosure occurs between two people in a romantic relationship, it can serve to enhance understanding, and to build trust and an overall sense of intimacy. Hence people with low relational intimacy with their friends within networks

tend to lurk without self-disclosure. In other words, there is a positive relation between intimacy and self-disclosure. This brings to the fore the issue of trust within online groups.

Online culture and social network culture

According to Henley (2013), current online privacy culture and disclosure is not as different from what used to exist prior to the advent of the World Wide Web aside the introduction of the electronic spaces which possess certain affordances. Technology amplifies various behaviours; for instance the New York Times Customer Insight Group (2011) suggest that in the information age, we share more content from more sources, with more people, more quickly and more often. There are also various characteristics of the internet that encourages self disclosure. These include its ability to provide anonymity (Bargh & McKenna, 2004) and physical distance between parties that are communicating. The internet also provides asynchronous communication and a lack of visual cues which are always present in face to face communication. Unfortunately, information shared on the internet is persistent and it always leaves traces of information shared.

Social networks vary in the sizes of community they provide. They can provide small, homogeneous networks that are characteristic of traditional work groups and village communities. Such groups sharing similar characteristics are good for conserving existing traditions norms and resources (Lea, Yu, Maguluru, & Nichols, 2006). They further explain that larger social networks on the other hand exhibit more heterogeneity in social characteristics of the network members and more complexity in the structure of these networks. These types of groups can potentially lead to large scale disclosures and privacy breaches.

Some online social network sites focus on encouraging sociability through profile-based user accounts (Keenan & Shiri, 2009). Here, users share public and private messages, photos, songs, videos and other standard forms of expression with other users.

While sites like Myspace and Bebo focused on high visibility by encouraging publicly viewable profiles, others including Facebook distinguished itself as privately viewable. Sociability as it is on Facebook is aimed at presenting your “real world” identity and networks through a safe, privately accessible web environment (Keenan & Shiri, 2009; Madden et al., 2013). This is achieved by encouraging the use of legal names, having a restricted profile access among others. High visibility has been thought to have its downsides. For example, corporate bodies are known to use social websites profile to conduct background checks on their applicants as an addition to their use of search engines. Consequently, poorly managed privacy settings or personal discretion and excessive self-disclosure could be hazardous.

Trust and Risks

The revelation of intimate details of a person’s life could expose a subject to many abuses. Risks refers to the possibility of an occurrence that may cause an undesirable outcome resulting from the exploitation of a vulnerability (Stewart, Tittel, & Chapple, 2005) whilst “trust is a psychological state comprising of the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations form the intentions or behaviours of another” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Online self-disclosure is inherently risky and has trust at its core and trust exposes people to risks.

A major objective of self-disclosing information is to build trust which in turn results in further disclosure. Chou et al (2009) indicates that trust results in constructive dialogue and reciprocal self-disclosure whereas mistrust elicits defensive behaviours and evasive communications. This concept of reciprocity is explained by the equity theory which argues that people have a tendency

to maintain equity exchange of information (Lee, Im, & Taylor, 2008). There is however indications that some online users disclose a lot of personal information about themselves voluntarily on their personal web space without commensurate reciprocity (Lee et al., 2008). In face to face interactions, one is sure of the audience and the person(s) to whom the disclosure is being made. This might not be the case in online networks and spaces especially large groups and in such cases managing boundaries on social networks is difficult. This is because user's network typically includes close friends, average friends, and mere acquaintances and postings are usually not directed to a particular group of people, making the information available to a mixed audience. The publicness, non-directness, and mixture of social circles in online social networks creates a complex social environment (Lin et al., 2014) with its attendant risks.

Online culture among young people

About 70% of young people between the ages of 8 and 18 go online daily (Lwin, Miyazaki, Stanaland, & Lee, 2012) and their potential exposure to various risks has come to the fore. This has been recognised with the creation of government agencies like CEOP Command in the UK and the passing of laws like the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 in the US.

Several research works have focused on the use of personal information by commercial organisations for the purpose of marketing among others uses (Lwin et al., 2012). There are however wide variety of risks that internet users could be exposed to. These range from identity theft and fraud, online scam, bullying, embarrassment, ridicule, prejudice and discrimination. Other risks that people are exposed to include loss of social exchange, autonomy, human dignity and power (McFarland, 2012). There are other risks related to reputational damage that self-disclosure can expose people to. Paris Brown had to step down as Britain's first youth police and crime commissioner because of what she posted on twitter at the age of 14 (Press Association, 2013).

Henley (2013) suggests that a majority of younger people do not consider reputational issues, future employability, identity theft, legal problems when are being provocative. He argues that more should be done to educating young people in school to take the future impact of their online profile and reputation more seriously. This he attributed to mistakes rather than indifference to privacy. Madden et al (2013) however suggest that a majority of teen social media users do not express a high level of concern about third-party access to their data. Teens in exploring their different concepts of self, present these identities to others in a process of identity formation (Henley, 2013).

Madden et al (2013) further suggests that a majority of teens are competent in managing their privacy settings on social media, regularly delete online posts and masks content that might affect their reputation going as far as removing friends. The argument however advanced by Henley (2013) is that teens' perception of privacy is different from their parents. Therefore, to understand privacy culture among young people, it is important to understand the perception of privacy and its impact and the motivations that lead to these perceptions affect the inclination to disclose personal information online.

An overwhelming majority of young people (over 90%) connect with people they know well like friends from their school or other schools and their extended family(Madden et al., 2013). This is followed by close family members like siblings and parents. They are least connected (about 30%) to people who they seemingly lack strong social connections with. These are like teachers, coaches or other people they have not met including celebrities.

Motivations for Disclosing Information Online

It appears the primary motivation driving sharing of information is to shape relationships. Several authors have suggested information seeking, entertainment, and socializing as the primary motivating factors driving online usage behaviour and disclosure (Lwin et al., 2012). Lee et al (2008) suggest that self-presentation, relationship management, keeping up with trends, storing information, sharing information, entertainment and showing off are the main motivating factors for self-disclosure on blogs. Lin et al (2014) suggests that Facebook communication is driven by two main factors; first the need to maintain and improve social relationships and secondly for the purpose of self-presentation using various impression management strategies to create socially desirable self-images.

In another study of the motivation to share information online, six types of people were identified. There are Altruists, Careerists, Hipsters, Boomerangs, Connectors and Selectives (New York Times Customer Insight Group, 2011). Altruist shared information which in their view are helpful to their circle whilst Careerist use social networks to create professional networks. Hipster on the other hand are young people with a high affinity for cutting edge technology while boomerangs share information for validation and reaction. Connectors use social networking to access beneficial deals and promotions and selectives are thoughtful people who are careful about the information they share.

Based on the preferred type of online medium careerist, hipsters and boomerang appear to be work actively to reduce dyadic boundaries and Altruist and selectives however seem to take these boundaries seriously preferring emails. Connectors on the other hand seem indifferent going for both social networking platforms like Facebook and email alike.

Over 90% of teens post their real names and photographs of themselves whilst more than two-thirds post their school name, date of birth, interest, where they live, email address and relationship status on social network sites (Madden et al., 2013). A fifth posted their mobile phone number and videos of themselves and this was the lowest level of disclosure. This indicates that an overwhelming majority of teens disclose a lot of information about themselves. The same study also indicated that the level of self-disclosure is on the rise and suggested that disclosure of mobile phone numbers which had the smallest percentage disclosure of 20% had risen 10-fold in 7 years.

Group size has influence on self-disclosure. It has been found that the smaller the group size, the greater willingness to disclose intimate information and the bigger the group size, the shallower the quality of the group and consequently lower disclosure (Solano & Dunnam, 1985).

Methodology

The research took the form of a survey to help understand issues surrounding online self disclosure amongst young people in a university environment. The sample comprised of 146 University students. The respondents were heterogeneous comprising males and females belonging to different ages and different academic programs. They had different levels of education and used different social media platforms. Sixty percent (60%) of respondents were between the ages 21-25 and about 80% of respondents were male. Respondents were all literate with eighty-five percent (85%) having a minimum qualification of post-secondary, diploma and bachelors degree whilst fifteen percent (15%) had post graduate qualifications.

A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed and 146 were returned making a response rate of 97.3%. The questionnaire used for the research was developed by the researchers to focus on issues

raised by literature and to cover potential issues relating to online self disclosure. It also covered demographic and other characteristics of the young people that could help assess demographic variations. Peer review was done and the resulting feedback was used to improve content validity before it was disseminated. The questionnaire was also pilot-tested with 10 young people within the target population prior to administering the actual survey. This was to provide feedback on questions to help identify and correct questions that were ambiguous or which they had difficulty understanding. The questionnaire was then tweaked to improve it.

Results

Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents indicating they have a Facebook and other social media accounts.

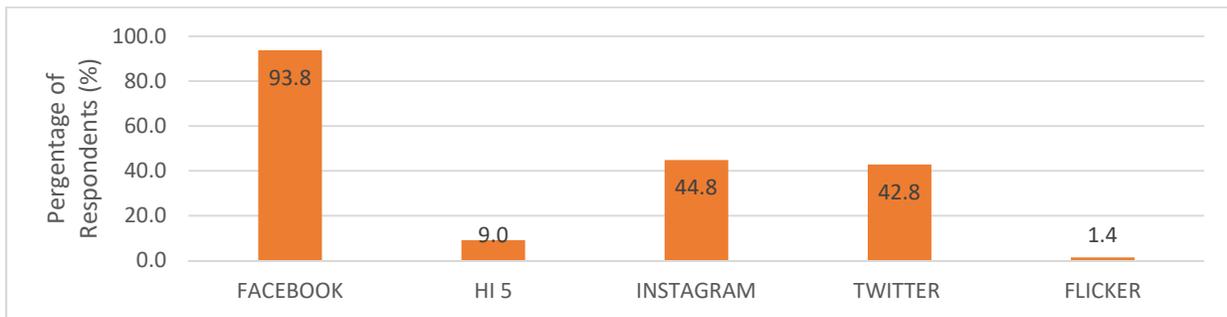


Figure 1 Percentage of respondents indicating they have a Facebook and other social media accounts

As shown in Figure 1, an overwhelming majority of respondents representing 93.8% have a Facebook account more than any other social media covered. Instagram was the next highly subscribed social networking site with a valid percent of 44.8%. On the other hand, flicker had the least subscription.

Figure 2 indicates the number of friends that respondents have for each social media service. This is to explore the potential depth of level of friendship.

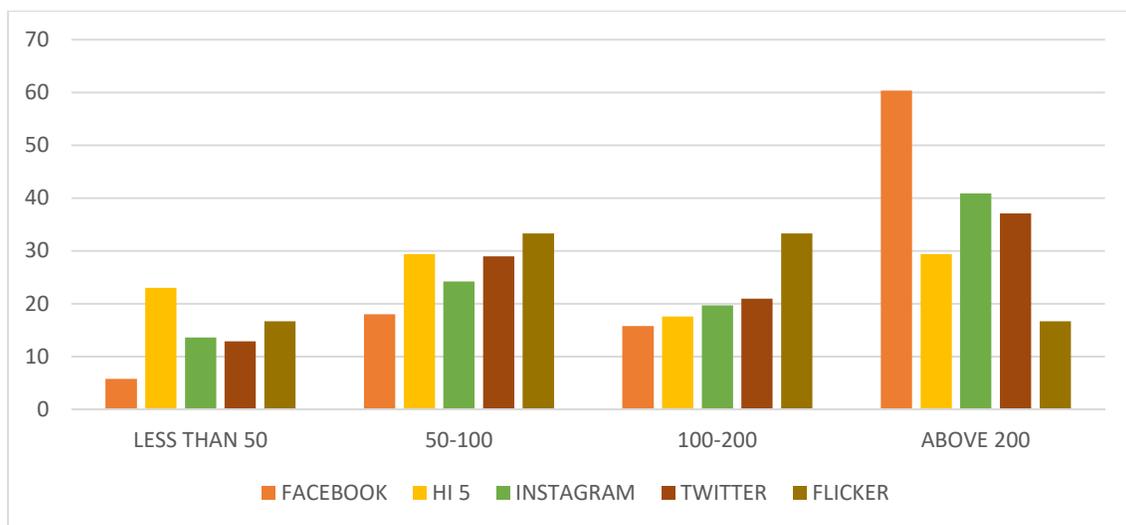


Figure 2: Number of friends respondents have on various social network sites

Figure 2 indicates that a majority of Facebook users (60.4%) have over 200 friends followed by Instagram and Twitter recording 40.9% and 37.1% respectively of their respondents having over 200 friends. Though a majority of users use Facebook which allows for a restrictive profile, the results also indicated that respondents generally have a relatively large number of friends/followers and it is expected that they will have a shallow level of friendship with their circle of social media friends.

Figure 3 shows a distribution of respondents' likelihood to use a social networking site in a typical day.

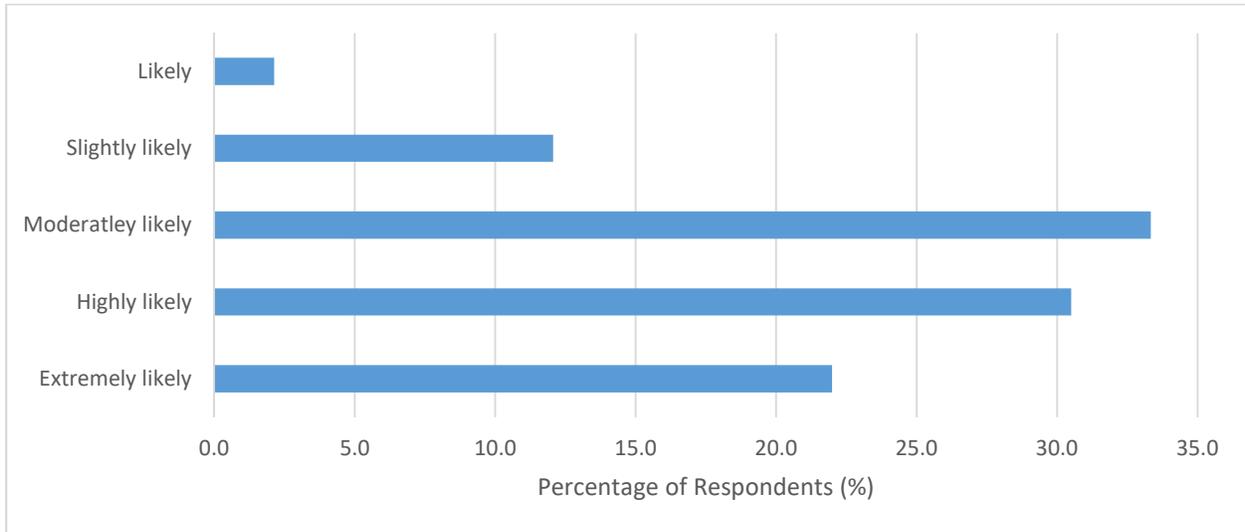


Figure 3: Respondents' level of usage of social networking sites

From Figure 3, an overwhelming majority of respondents are expected to use social media on a given day. They responded that they are “moderately likely”, “highly likely” or “extremely likely” to use social networking on a typical day. Of these about 30.5% of the respondents are highly likely to visit a social networking sites in a typical day as compared to only 2.1% who seldom visit a social networking site in a day indicating that respondents are generally heavy users of social media.

Figure 4 shows the type of information that respondents share on social networking platforms.

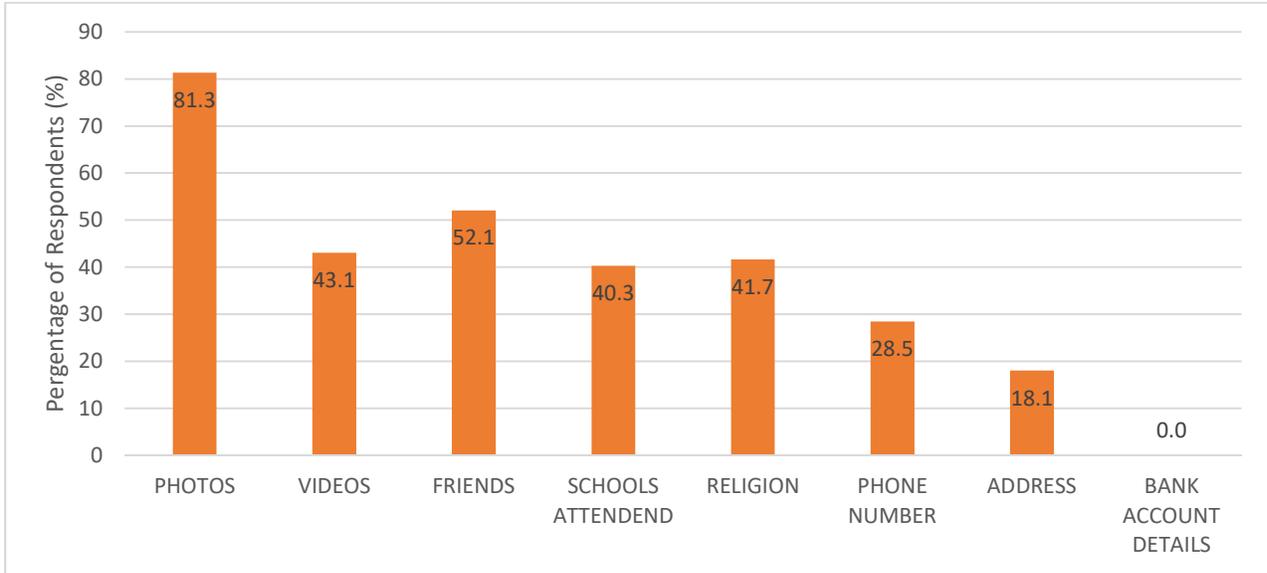


Figure 4: Kinds of information shared by respondents on social networking platforms

Respondents seem to share some personal information about themselves however it appears they do not share very private details. From Figure 4 above, information mostly shared by respondents on social media are photos which represents 81.3% of respondents, followed by information on friends and videos representing a valid percent of 52.1% and 43.1% respectively. Information which is not shared at all by respondents is bank account details.

The reasons why respondents share information on social networking sites is presented in Figure 5.

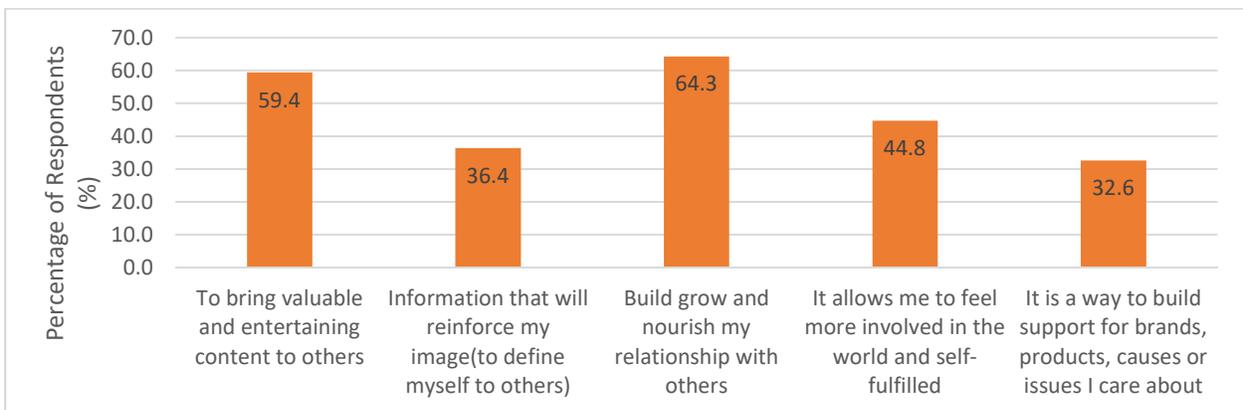


Figure 5: Reasons for sharing information on social networking sites

From Figure 5, sharing “information to build, grow and nourish relationship with others” was the main motivation for sharing information on social media platforms. This represented 64.3% of respondents. This is however followed closely by “information that will bring valuable and entertaining content to others” representing a valid percent of 59.4%. This is in line with literature

that young people share information for the primary reason of shaping their relationships. Sharing information for the purpose of promoting their image or pursuing causes and promoting products was one of the least motivating factors.

A distribution of the views of respondents on the sharing of personal and explicit information is explored in Figure 6.

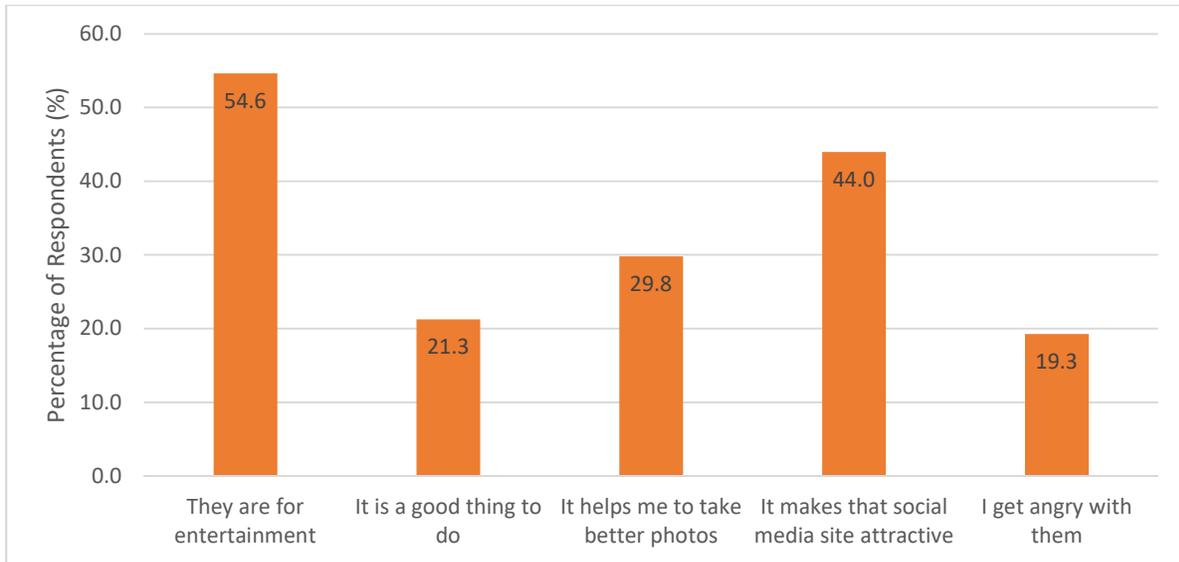


Figure 6: Perception of respondents on posting personal and explicit information social networking sites

Various responses from the Figure 6 shows that respondents are generally neutral to the sharing of explicit information. Whilst a minority of respondents 19.3% do get angry with explicit information, it implies that an overwhelming majority of 80.7% do not find it irritating. Similarly, whilst 21.3% seem to find it as a good thing, a majority of 78.7% do not see it as a good thing to do. Hence in as much as they do not find it acceptable for them to do they do not necessarily find it irksome. Again, 44.0% of the respondents feel explicit information makes to social networking attractive to use meaning 56.0% do not find it attractive.

It can however be said that about 21.3% of respondents think is it good and a similar number 19.3% seem to strongly dislike the practice. Though these groups are not a majority they seem to show a significant number of young people that have a strong view on the sharing of explicit information.

Respondents' approval or otherwise of their friends posting their personal information on social media is presented in Figure 7.

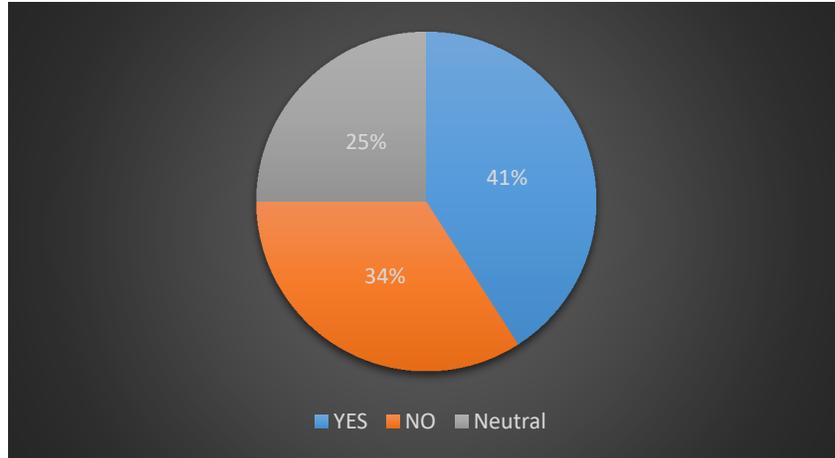


Figure 7: Approval of respondents when friends post their information on social networking sites

On the question of their view of other posting information on them, respondents were almost balanced on their view in line with (Madden 2013) that young people do not have an overriding concern about third party access to their information. Though 41% approve of others posting information on them 34% of respondents do not approve on such practices. A significant 25% are neutral on that practice.

A distribution of the how frequent respondents restrict access to their social media accounts is presented in Figure 8.

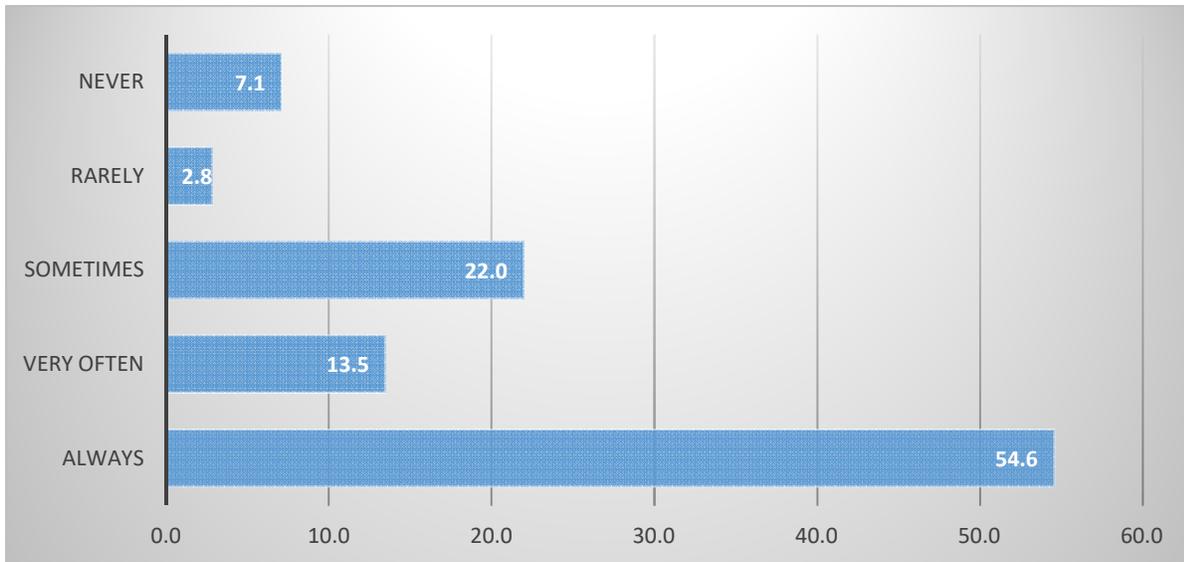


Figure 8: Frequency of respondents setting their social media accounts to private/limited access

Figure 8 shows clearly that respondents have a keen sense of privacy with an overwhelming majority regularly keeping their accounts private. This can be seen from the 13.5% and 54.6% who very often and always keep their social media account private/limited access respectively. In

contrast only 2.8% rarely keep their social networking accounts private. This is in line with (Madden 2013) who indicates that young people are competent in managing their privacy.

Conclusions

Young people surveyed in this work, are generally heavy users of social media platforms with most of them highly/extremely likely to use social media in a typical day. Their predominant reason is to build relationships and not pursue causes or promote themselves.

In using social media, they seem to be on large shallow groups and for that reason do not share very sensitive details about themselves such as their addresses, phone numbers or bank account details. The study also revealed that the young people seems to have a relatively high sense of privacy and one can conclude that information revealed to others are not ignorantly done.

In addition, when they come across personal and explicit information about people on social media, majority do not get angry or feel inclined to practise what they see. One can also conclude that even though some of the young people may be inclined to encourage sharing explicit information they do so with good awareness of privacy issues.

Another finding from the research indicates that 56.4% of the youth surveyed almost always keep their social media accounts private.

Young people surveyed in the study are aware of privacy and thus want to control information about them. Despite this some are comfortable with explicit information and others sharing information about them. One can agree that their perception of privacy is probably different from their parents though more could be done as recommended by (Haley 2013) to educate young people about future reputational damage relating to employability among others.

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