Sexting, Facebook can put students in danger, FAU expert warns

By Scott Travis, Sun Sentinel

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The popularity of smartphones and social networking sites is keeping a growing number of people connected — to danger, deception and a loss of academic or career opportunities.

Many haven't set secure privacy settings on their profiles, and may not realize how easy it is for a Facebook friend to spread embarrassing content from a private profile. Add in impulsivity, multitasking and the ability to instantly post or text from a mobile device, and the results can be disastrous, said Sameer Hinduja, the co-director of Florida Atlantic University's Cyberbullying Research Center.

"I've seen personal and professional damage occur to individuals who posted or sent something online that will plague them for the rest of their lives," said Hinduja, an associate professor of criminology.

For example, an 18-year-old in Orlando texted a nude photo of his 17-year-old girlfriend — and ended up on Florida's sex offender list. A job applicant at a Miami Shores university ranted online about having to take a typing test, and lost the chance for the position. And a 13-year-old Hillsborough teen killed herself after sexting photos were spread around her school.

As a result, colleges and school districts say they're making Internet safety a priority in their training efforts. They're holding workshops, adding Internet safety to freshmen orientation exercises and counseling students as they apply for colleges or jobs.

In a session this week at Florida Atlantic University, Hinduja warned students to lock down their privacy settings and resist the urge to put profanity-laden rants and drunken keg stand pictures on their profiles.

Misrepresentations

At least 75 Facebook friends thought Boca Raton resident Carolina Droze had created a new Facebook account. But the invitation came from an impostor who stole her photo and asked her friends for money.

She and her husband, Ryan Droze, said in March that they considered themselves savvy Web users, having worked for websites and having promoted their wedding photography business on Facebook.
"It creeped me out. I thought social networking was so important," Ryan Droze said at the time. "But I've changed my mind."

Ashley Atchison was fooled when she got a friend request last year from someone purporting to be an alumnus of her Florida State University sorority. But the "friend" started making sexually explicit requests and threatened to get Atchison kicked out of the sorority if she didn't comply, she told The Today Show.

Police say the person on the other end was actually Mitchell Hill, 27, of Key West, who used Facebook to harass sorority members at FSU, Louisiana State University, the University of Florida, the University of Alabama and Auburn University.

**Sexting**

The practice of sexting — using a mobile device to send out explicit photos — has become mainstream, with more than half of college students acknowledging they've sent or received such an image, according to a recent University of Rhode Island study.

Hinduja conducted a study on sexting at middle and high schools and found that 13 percent of children aged 11 to 18 had received a naked or semi-naked of someone from their school. Nearly 8 percent admitting sending a photo.

Hope Witsell, 13, suffered from vicious bullying after a suggestive photo she texted to a boy got out at her middle school, according to the St. Petersburg Times. She hanged herself in 2009.

In a high school outside of Milwaukee, at least 31 male students reported they were seduced into sending naked photos of themselves after receiving a Facebook request from a pretty young girl. But it wasn't actually a girl. On the other end was an 18-year-old named Anthony R. Stancel, who threatened to expose the photos if they didn't have sex with him. He was sentenced last year to 15 years in prison.

Sexting has also led to child pornography convictions in Florida. The most famous happened four years ago when Phillip Alpert of Orlando, who had just turned 18, forwarded naked pictures of his 17-year-girlfriend to her family and friends after an argument. He is now a registered sex offender.

"He was unable to live with father, because his house was too close to a school," said his lawyer, David Lawrence. "He got kicked out school and couldn't get a job."

Minors have also been prosecuted as sex offenders for sexting, although the state passed a law this year that decriminalized sexting charges among minors for first-time offenses.

**Oversharing**

The stakes are getting higher as more employers and colleges start to check out applicants through their social media pages and Google searches. Nearly a quarter of admissions officials
check out an applicants' Facebook page, up from 10 percent in 2008, according to a new survey from Kaplan Test Prep.

A 2010 survey from Microsoft showed that nearly 70 percent of all companies used the Web to research job candidates.

In 2007, a woman used the social networking site MySpace to vent her frustrations about a job interview at Barry University in Miami Shores. She was applying for a job overseeing the school's online newsletter. She probably didn't expect one of her readers to be Michael Laderman, Barry's assistant vice president for communications.

"I saw that she had posted how ridiculous and insulting it was that she was asked to take a typing test," Laderman said. "Of course, she said it in much harsher words than I can repeat. And needless to say, there went any chance of me wanting to hire her."

People have lost jobs as well, including a Port St. Lucie teacher whose skimpy bikini photo got out, and a Georgia teacher who was photographed on vacation with a glass of beer. A Lake County teacher was suspended this year after he made derogatory comments about gay people on his Facebook page.

These decisions may not always seem fair, but they are a reality, Hinduja said. He said people should focus on creating websites and social media profiles that present a positive online presence.

"Colleges, grad schools. Employers. They get a boatload of applications," he said. "What's the quickest way to thin out the pile? Run your first and last name through Google."

**Tips for a safe online experience**

* Learn about and use the privacy and security settings on social networks. Consider restricting access to your page to a select group of people, for example, your friends from school, your club, your team, your community groups, or your family.

* Think twice before posting pictures you wouldn’t want your parents or future employers to see.

* Be cautious about how much personal information you provide on social networking sites. The more information you post, the easier it may be for a hacker, thief or stalker to commit a crime.

* Install a security suite (antivirus, antispyware, and firewall) that is set to update automatically.

* Use tools to manage the information you share with friends in different groups. If you’re trying to create a public persona as a blogger or expert, create an open profile or a “fan” page that encourages broad participation and limits personal information. Use your personal profile for trusted friends.

* Let a friend know if he or she posts information about you that makes you uncomfortable.
* If someone is harassing or threatening you, remove the person from your friends list, block the person, and report the incident to the site administrator.

* Make sure that your password is long, complex and combines, letters, numerals, and symbols. Ideally, you should use a different password for every online account you have.

* Be cautious about messages you receive on social networking sites that contain links. Even links that look they come from friends can sometimes contain malware or be part of a phishing attack.

* Be aware people you meet online may be nothing like they describe themselves, and may not even be the gender they claim.

Flirting with strangers online could have serious consequences. Because some people lie about who they really are, you never really know who you’re dealing with.

*Source: Florida Atlantic University*