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Social media has ‘chilling effect’ on offline behaviour, study says

Facebook is affecting behaviour offline, with people acting as if they are under constant surveillance from online friends and family.

Researchers have found that Facebook users are self-censoring their day-to-day activities, in what is known as a ‘chilling effect’, to avoid disapproval from online friends.

In-depth interviews with a group of 19-22 year-olds revealed that respondents would hide cigarettes if pictures were being taken at parties.

Others admitted they would avoid standing next to certain people for fear of a picture being taken that would damage their relationship with their partner.

Participants said they avoided taking pictures altogether in certain circumstances, such as sunbathing on a beach, for fear that the images would attract unwanted attention online.*

The research was carried out by the University of Edinburgh Business School and the universities of Bath and Birmingham.

Dr Ben Marder, Lecturer in Marketing at University of Edinburgh Business School, said there was a blurring of our online and offline lives as mobile cameras made people possible subjects of surveillance at all times.

“At a time when any our offline lives can be instantly captured on a smart phone and posted online, people are becoming less free to act as they would like, as their boss, partners and families could always be watching.

“What started as a tool to bring warmth to our relationships, has starting to have a chilling effect on our behaviour. Big Brother might not be watching, but our Facebook friends are. And it’s reducing our freedom.”

Dr David Houghton of the University of Birmingham Business School said: “The increased accessibility of our personal persona to different types of people online make our offline lives a trickier juggling act than ever before.

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“A once seemingly innocuous photograph or video clip can now be the subject of more persevering anxiety, and our research shows this extends to bridge the gap between our online and offline lives.”

The researchers’ [full findings](#) are published in the journal, *Computers in Human Behavior*.

For further information please contact:

Derek Main; PR & Communications Manager, University of Edinburgh Business School;

Email: derek.main@ed.ac.uk; Phone: +44(0)131 651531; 07702312523

Notes to editors

***Case study examples. Names have been changed to protect respondents’ identities.**

Student Emma, 20 said:

“At parties every time a picture was taken I put the spliff behind my back so people on Facebook don’t think I’m a constant druggie [...] If the photo was not going to end up on Facebook I wouldn’t care as much [...] because not everyone would see it because it’s a lot more public, you know, with Facebook”

21 year old Shelly said:

“I remember during freshers’ week I had a boyfriend, and he was really jealous and he saw some pictures of like me on someone’s shoulders or something with a different boy and just like went mental at me, so I had to like consciously think every time there was a camera out like: oh, am I standing too close to this boy?”

More case studies available on request