

Managing Your Online Profile

How People Monitor Their Internet Identity and Search for Others Online

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Summary of Findings

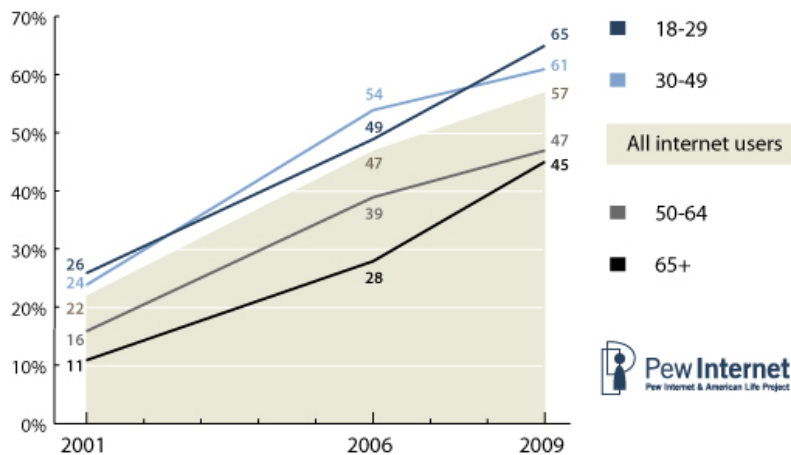
Reputation management has now become a defining feature of online life for many internet users, especially the young. While some internet users are careful to project themselves online in a way that suits specific audiences, other internet users embrace an open approach to sharing information about themselves and do not take steps to restrict what they share. Search engines and social media sites play a central role in building one's reputation online, and many users are learning and refining their approach as they go -- changing privacy settings on profiles, customizing who can see certain updates and deleting unwanted information about them that appears online.

Over time, several major trends have indicated growth in activities related to online reputation management.

- Online reputation-monitoring via search engines has increased -- 57% of adult internet users now use search engines to find information about themselves online, up from 47% in 2006.
- Activities tied to maintaining an online identity have grown as people post information on profiles and other virtual spaces -- 46% of online adults have created their own profile on a social networking site, up from just 20% in 2006.
- Monitoring the digital footprints of others has also become much more common -- 46% of internet users search online to find information about people from their past, up from 36% in 2006. Likewise, 38% have sought information about their friends, up from 26% in 2006.

Searching for ourselves

The % of internet users who have ever used an online search engine to look up their own name or see what information about them is on the internet, by age group.



Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, August 18-September 14, 2009. Margin of error is plus or minus 2 percentage points for results based on all adults [n=2,253]. For smaller subgroups, the margin of error may be larger. Please see the Methodology section for details.

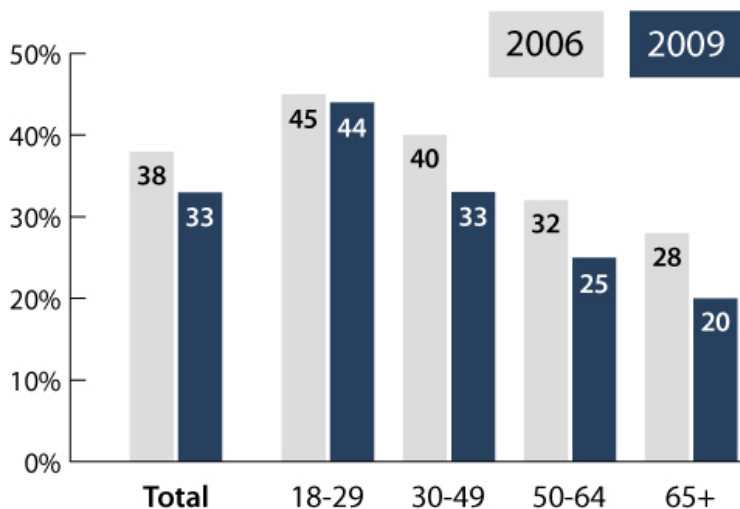
Young adults are the most active online reputation managers in several dimensions. When compared with older users, they more often customize what they share and whom they share it with.

Those ages 18-29 are more likely than older adults to say:

- They take steps to limit the amount of personal information available about them online -- 44% of young adult internet users say this, compared with 33% of internet users between ages 30-49, 25% of those ages 50-64 and 20% of those age 65 and older.
- They change privacy settings -- 71% of social networking users ages 18-29 have changed the privacy settings on their profile to limit what they share with others online. By comparison, just 55% of SNS users ages 50-64 have changed the default settings.
- They delete unwanted comments -- 47% social networking users ages 18-29 have deleted comments that others have made on their profile, compared with just 29% of those ages 30-49 and 26% of those ages 50-64.
- They remove their name from photos -- 41% of social networking users ages 18-29 say they have removed their name from photos that were tagged to identify them, compared with just 24% of SNS users ages 30-49 and only 18% of those ages 50-64.

Limiting personal information

% of internet users in each age group who take steps to limit the amount of information available online about them



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Compared with older users, young adults are not only the most attentive to customizing their privacy settings and limiting what they share via their profiles, but they are also generally less trusting of the sites that host their content. When asked how much of the time they think they can trust social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn, 28% of SNS users ages 18-29 say "never." By comparison, a smaller segment of older users express such cautious views; 19% of SNS users ages 30-49 and 14% of those ages 50-64 say they never trust these sites.

The increased prevalence of self-monitoring and observation of others creates a dynamic environment where people promote themselves or shroud themselves depending on their intended audience and circumstances. There are good reasons to be more vigilant. Online reputation matters; 44% of online adults have searched for information about someone whose services or advice they seek in a professional capacity. People are now more likely to work for an employer that has policies about how they present themselves online, and co-workers and business competitors now keep closer tabs on one another. Those who are dating are more likely to research their potential mates online. And even neighbors have become more curious about finding information about one another online. Yet, even those who are careful about their own disclosures have to stay on top of the identifying material that others may have posted about them on social networking profiles, photo- and video-sharing sites, Twitter and blogs.

- 27% of employed internet users now work for an employer that has policies about how they present themselves online -- such as what they can post on blogs and websites or what information they can share about themselves. That compares with 22% in 2006.
- 31% of employed internet users have searched online for information about co-workers, professional colleagues or business competitors, up from 23% in 2006.
- 16% of all internet users have looked online for more information about someone they were dating or in a relationship with, up from 9% in 2006. Among those who use online dating sites, 34% go online to check up on their dates.

Social networking users are especially attuned to the intricacies of online reputation management. Two-thirds now say that they have changed the privacy settings for their profile to restrict what they share with others online. Most have also chosen to prune certain friends from their networks when they become too large or contacts fall out of favor, and many actively "revise" the information that others post about them.

- 65% of adult social networking users have changed the privacy settings on their profile to limit what they share with others online.
- 56% have "unfriended" contacts in their network -- deleting people from their friends list -- and 52% have kept some people from seeing certain updates.
- 36% have deleted comments that others have made on their profile, and 30% have removed their name from photos that were tagged to identify them.

Many are finding that sharing a certain amount of information online has clear benefits.

- Internet users are now twice as likely to be found by friends from the past -- 40% of internet users say they have been contacted by someone from their past who found them online, up from 20% who reported the same in 2006.
- Half of online adults (48%) agree that getting to know new people now is easier and more meaningful because you can learn things online about the people you meet.

Others are required to share information about themselves online as part of their profession.

- 12% of employed adults say they need to market themselves online as part of their job. While 15% of employed men say they have a job that requires them to self-promote online, just 7% of employed women say this.

And whether they are actively trying to get recognized or fly under the radar, most internet users report some level of "privacy through obscurity" -- there is information about them online, but it takes some digging to find.

- When self-searchers query their name using a search engine, the majority (63%) say they find at least some relevant material connected to their name. But 35% of self-searchers say their queries do not yield any relevant results.
- Just 31% of self-searchers say that most of the results on the critical first page are actually about them, while 62% say the first page of results is mostly about someone else with a name very similar or identical to theirs.

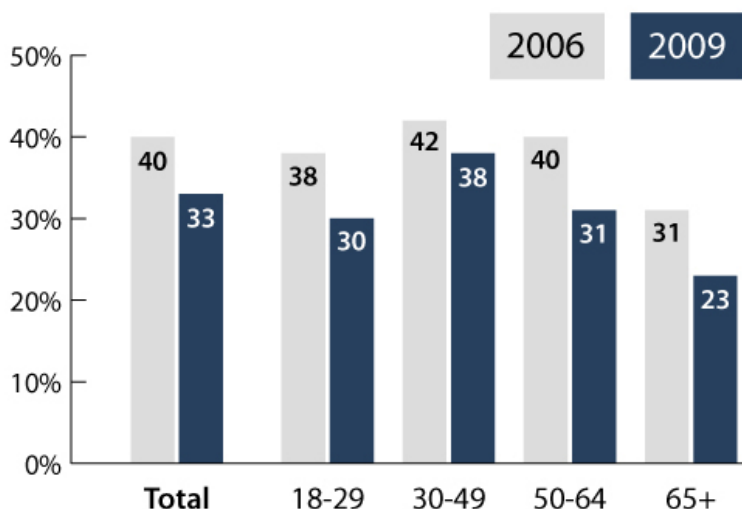
Stories of reputational mishaps abound and persist online -- particularly among celebrities, politicians and other prominent figures. Yet, relatively few among the internet masses have had bad experiences as the result of undesirable information being circulated about them online.

- 4% of online adults say they have personally had bad experiences because embarrassing or inaccurate information was posted about them online, a number that is unchanged since 2006.
- 8% have requested that someone remove information about them that was posted online, including things like photos or videos. The vast majority (82%) say they are usually successful at getting that content taken down.

Over time, internet users have actually become less concerned about the amount of information available about them online -- just 33% of internet users say they worry about how much information is available about them online, down from 40% in December 2006.

Concerns over personal information

% of internet users in each age group who say they worry about how much information is available online about them, over time



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However, most of this decrease is attributable to those who have never used a search engine to check up on their digital footprints. Those who do monitor their search results are more likely than non-searchers to express concern (37% vs. 27%).

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