

TO: Social Networking Team
FROM: Paul Miers
SUBJECT: Social Networking Focus Group Report
DATE: March 22, 2010

Here is my report on a focus group I ran with five college age males regarding their concerns about hackers and predators on social networks. Most participants reported they were not concerned about privacy or hackers and saw social networking primarily as a way to connect with women.

Focus Group Rationale

Social networks are increasingly subject to attacks by hackers and predators. Hackers are now targeting users by sending messages to their social networking sites impersonating their friends, and predators who frequent these sites have been charged with kidnapping, raping, and even murdering young women. Our team wished to determine how these threats affect Gen-Y's use of social networks and whether males and females view these threats differently. Information from these session will allow Proximity clients to promote the safety of their social networking sites when targeting Gen-Y users.

Setting and Participants

The hour long session was held in my apartment on Friday, March 12, 2010. The male participants were:

- Larry, 21, a Towson Univ. senior business major;
- Curly, 22, a Towson Univ. senior undeclared major;
- Moe, 20, a self-employed mechanic;
- Beavis, 19, a Towson Univ. sophomore computer science major (currently on academic probation)
- Butthead, 19, a friend of Beavis.

Session Topics

We covered the following three topics during the session:

Concerns about privacy

Only one of the participants, Larry, expressed any concern about privacy. He indicated that since he expected to graduate this spring he was afraid that "potential employers might be able to access stuff on my Facebook account I don't want them to see." Moe, who has trouble remembering his MySpace password, thought Larry's concerns were "paranoid."

Hacker attacks and online predators

None of the participants had encountered predators while online. Butthead, however, did note that he sometimes wished female predators would contact him. Both Curly and Moe admit to having downloaded viruses from MySpace, and Moe reports that he was sick for nearly a week after one episode. Beavis said that he tries to lure hackers to his site and then "hack their accounts." He believes he can parley skills gained from this activity into a position with the C.I.A.

Use of social networking sites as a dating portal

As expected, this topic prompted extensive responses which consumed most of the session. Larry, who is also engaged, was reluctant to talk. The other four participants, however, traded many stories about women they had met online. Beavis seemed to speak for the four when he exclaimed: "why else would I waste my time social networking?" I remain skeptical about the trustworthiness of the many reported online encounters, partly because by the end of the session I doubted that any woman would pay attention to these four guys.

Findings

The two most notable findings for this session are that the male participants

- believe they are invulnerable to hackers even though they freely share illegal files;
- view social networking primarily as a means to meet women.

Although the males in this session may not avoid social networks because of fears they will encounter hackers and predators, their obliviousness to the risk of downloading viruses could significantly limit their ability to access sites.

In addition, concerted use of social networks by males to connect with women could make women even more reluctant to interact with anyone on a social networking site outside a close circle of known friends. We should consider conducting follow-up interviews to determine if our clients need to take special measures to address concerns that women may have about social networking.