

Dear students, what you post can wreck your life

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THE CONVERSATION

Dear Student,

Harvard recently [rescinded admission offers](#) for some incoming freshmen who participated in a private Facebook group sharing offensive memes. The incident has sparked a lot of discussion: Was Harvard's [decision](#) justified? What about the [First Amendment](#)? Do young people know the [dangers of social media](#)?

I'm a business school lecturer, career services counselor and former recruiter, and I've seen how social media becomes part of a person's brand—a brand that can help you or hurt you.

[College admissions staff](#), [future employers](#) and even [potential dates](#) are more and more likely to check your profile and make decisions or judgments about you.

Here's what you should know so you don't end up like those Harvard prospects.



The rescinded Harvard admissions have sparked debate over First Amendment rights to free speech. (Shutterstock)

1. Social media posts disappear, right?

Let's be clear about one thing: You've been building your online reputation since your first Snapchat. Think the posts disappear? Think private pages are private? Think again.

You might feel like your life and opinions are no one's business, but you can't always control [who sees what you post](#). Every photo, video, tweet, like and comment could be [screenshotted](#) by your friends (or frenemies). You might make a mistake with your privacy settings or post to [the wrong account](#). And a determined online sleuth can sometimes find ways around privacy settings, viewing photos and posts you might think are well hidden.

2. Do employers and colleges actually look at this stuff?

Your profile will very likely be scrutinized by college admissions officers and employers. According to CareerBuilder's 2017 [social media recruitment survey](#), social media screening is through the roof:

- 600 percent increase since 2006 in employers using social media to screen
- 70 percent of employers use social networking sites to research job candidates
- 34 percent of employers found online content that caused them to reprimand or fire an employee

This trend is common with admissions as well. Kaplan Test Prep's 2017 [survey of over 350 college admissions officers](#) found that 35 percent checked applicants' social media profiles. Many who do said social media has influenced their admission decisions.

3. What are recruiters watching out for?

So what are the potential hazards to avoid? These are some of the types of posts that left a bad impression on me when I used to recruit:

- References to illegal drugs, sexual posts
- Incriminating or embarrassing photos or videos
- Profanity, defamatory or racist comments
- Politically charged attacks
- Spelling and grammar issues
- Complaining or bad-mouthing – What's to say you wouldn't do the same to a new school, company, boss, or peer?

4. What can I do to build a positive online reputation?

Remember, social media is not all bad; in many cases it helps recruiters get a good feel for your personality and potential fit. The CareerBuilder survey found [44 percent of employers](#) who screened candidates via social networks found positive information that caused them to hire a candidate.

From my experience, the following information can support and confirm a candidate's resume:

- Your education and experiences match the recruiter's requirements
- Your profile picture and summary is professional
- Your personality and interests align with the values of the company or university
- Your involvement in community or social organizations shows character
- Positive, supportive comments, responses, or testimonials

5. How do I clean things up?

Research. Both the college of your dreams and your future employer could Google you, so you should do the same thing. Also check all of your social media profiles – even the ones you haven't used for a while – and get rid of anything that could send the wrong message. Remember, things can't be unseen.

Bottom line: Would you want a future boss, admissions officer, or blind date to read or see it? If not, don't post it. If you already have, delete it.

Sincerely,

Your Career Counselor

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