Digital Footprints: Managing Our Irrevocable Traces

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Social media have permeated cultures around the word, drastically changing the way we stay in touch and our mediums of expression. Just as man's one small step onto the moon left permanent footprints, our activity on social media also leaves irrevocable traces (Varando 719-775). As social media become the norm for self-expression, these "digital footprints" begin to have a greater impact on our professional lives.

Our digital footprints are primarily used by companies to better market to us. Each little search users make and each post they react to, all are recorded into vast databases. These databases are often used to help business psychologists better understand how to advertise to consumers. This information is not only used to know how to advertise, but also when users are in the right mood for a particular advertisement. Danny Azucar, Davide Marengo, and Michele Settanni, from the University of Turin's Department of Psychology, studied the accuracy of the Big 5 personality traits (five fundamental personalities traits used by psychologists to describe human behavior) as portrayed by digital footprints captured by social media. Azucar et al. claim that the information taken from users' digital footprints can allow researchers access to larger unbiased groups,

further the customization of online marketing, and be used to create more personalized computer-human interactions and better targeted health campaigns (157).

The information taken from our digital footprints provide businesses with great databases of knowledge and, therefore, power. Knowing how to control our personal information—our digital footprints— has never been as paramount as it is today, in the Information Age. In the 2018 publication of Distance Learning, Maureen McDermott claims "...people should receive education enabling them to create and strategically implant positive, active digital footprints on the Information

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(Kelly 32).

Superhighway" else, "People who lack this knowledge may generate digital footprints with negative implications, thus necessitating remediation" (54). I agree with McDermott. As people continue to pour more of their personal lives into social media, it becomes increasingly important for people to receive some form of education about how to control their digital footprints.

Many students believe that they do not need to worry about their digital footprints for various reasons—the biggest of which is that social media portray an accurate version of themselves and are, thus, not causing any harm to their reputations. Mar Camacho, Janaina Minelli, and Gabriel Grosseck conducted a study to gauge students' knowledge of, and level of comfort with, social media and the concept of a dig-

ital footprint (3180-3181). The results certainly suggested that students feel content with the virtual selves their social media display. They are also aware of their privacy settings and think they use them properly. While I accept that they feel comfortable with their settings, they are overlooking the fact that the average student surveyed has over two hundred friends. Can those students truthfully say that they know and trust each of those friends well enough to share all of the things that they post on social media? Considering that, in person, most people only discuss their true feelings with a handful of people, I find it hard to believe.

Frequently, students also doubt that employers check their social media; however, just consider the recent controversy over James Gunn who was fired from Walt Disney Studios for offensive tweets from about eight years ago. He is not the only one to have been fired for their tweets/posts. One can simply do a google search to find countless cases similar to his.

On a different note, Stephanie Kelly, Scott Chrirten, and Lisa Gueldenzoph conducted a two-year qualitative research project to measure the efficiency of students' online reputation management. What they found is that many students set their privacy settings to the extreme and lost many chances to promote their professional presence and establish a positive professional network. They concluded that, "To adapt the changing landscape of the job market, instructors must concentrate on presenting a balanced view of social networking, focusing equally on what information students should provide as well as that which they should not" (32).

I fully agree that it is crucial for students to be instructed on how to manage their digital lives efficiently because students who do not can suffer a variety of consequences. Instructors can take several approaches to help their students better manage their digital footprints. A great place to start is by explaining that the internet can be a friend or a foe, depending on how it is used. Then instructors can explain the importance of social media and digital footprints in the professional world. Examples will be key to helping the students know the difference between professional and unprofessional digital footprints. Who should teach these concepts to the students? This responsibility falls to those in charge of teaching the students about digital literacy, and other departments such as Career Services and the Writing Center can be of assistance when students have additional questions. With this, students will be better equipped to manage their digital footprints in a digital world.
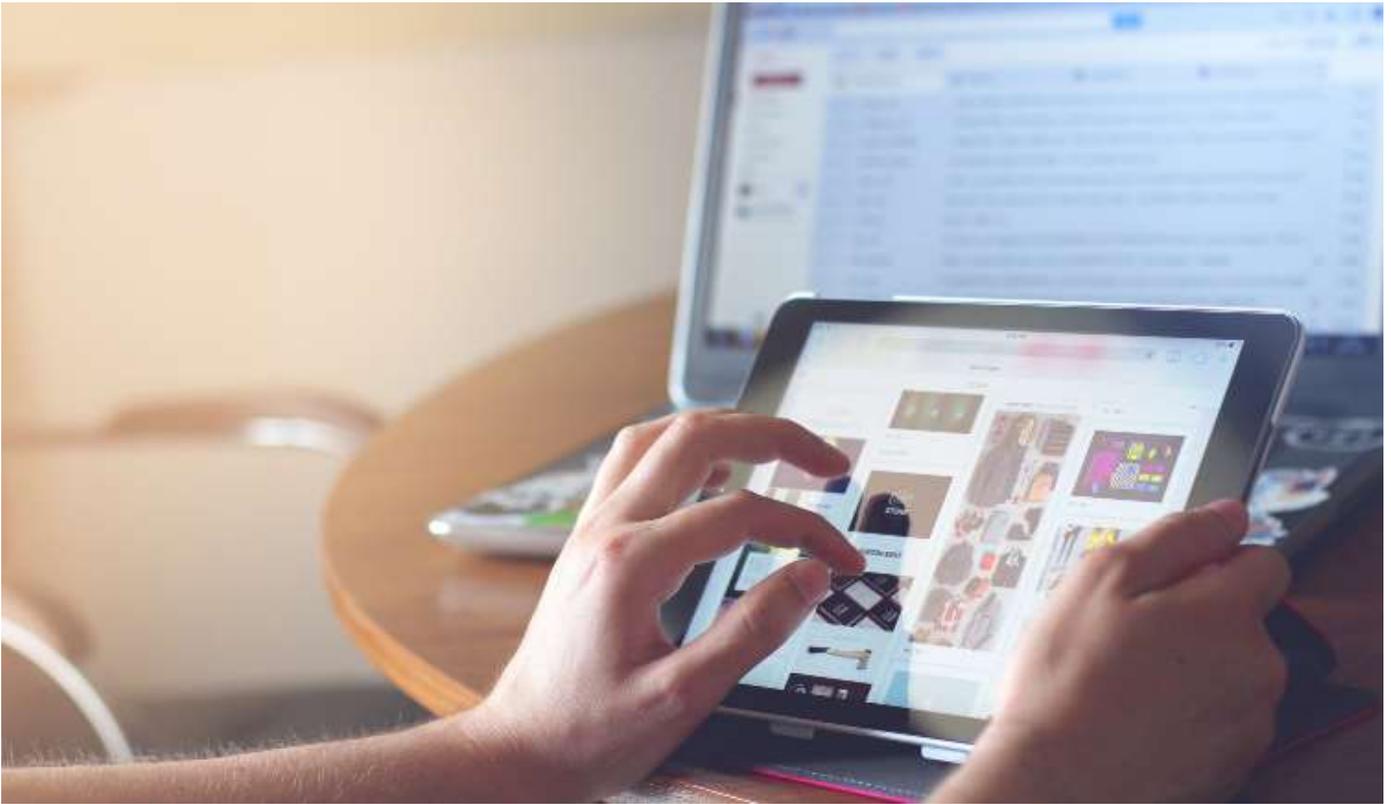
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