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# An Exploration of College Students' Online Privacy Protection Awareness and Behavior in the Social Media Era

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**Abstract:** Taking online privacy protection of college students in the social media era as an entry point, the study explored the current situation of college students' use of social media platforms, their awareness and behavior of online privacy protection, as well as the influencing factors through questionnaire surveys and data analysis. The study found that most college students do not pay enough attention to online privacy protection, and there is a high risk of privacy leakage. Factors affecting college students' awareness and behavior of online privacy protection include social media platform characteristics, personal factors, and social and cultural environments. In response to these problems, countermeasure suggestions such as strengthening the platform privacy protection function, enhancing college students' privacy protection education, and improving self-protection awareness are put forward, with a view to providing reference for building a safe and harmonious online social environment.

**Keywords:** Social media; College students; Online privacy protection

## 1. Introduction

In the information age, social media have become an important part of college students' daily life, and while they provide convenient communication and information access, they also bring the risk of online privacy leakage. This study explores the current situation of college students' awareness and behavior of online privacy protection in the social media era, observing in detail their activity level on various social media platforms, their information sharing habits, and their understanding and application of privacy settings. Through the comprehensive analysis of college students' online privacy protection awareness and behavior, this paper further explores how the privacy protection mechanism of social media platforms, users' knowledge of privacy protection, psychological characteristics, and social and cultural environments interact with each other to influence college students' privacy protection behavior. The purpose of this study is to put forward more detailed and specific countermeasure suggestions, aiming to enhance college students' awareness of online privacy protection, promote their self-protection ability in cyberspace, and provide a scientific basis and action guide for building a safer and more harmonious online social environment.

## 2. Current status of online privacy protection

### 2.1 Overview of social media use

In today's era when information is like a tidal wave, social media is no longer just a communication tool, but has become a way of life in the daily life of college students. According to the data of China Internet Development Statistical Report, we can clearly see that the popularity of social media among college students reaches an astonishing 98.5%. What's more noteworthy is that 76.3% of college students spend more than 2 hours a day on social media, a figure that fully reflects their extremely high dependence on social media. Among the many social media platforms, WeChat has become an indispensable presence in the lives of college students with its powerful social function and convenient payment function, with a high usage rate of 95.2%. It is closely followed by Jieyin, a short-video-based platform that attracts 72.4% of college students with its colorful content and high interactivity, and has become an important channel for them to spend time and discover their interests. Weibo, with its rapid information dissemination and extensive social network, has also reached a usage rate of 63.8%, where college students pay attention to current affairs, express their opinions and participate in discussions. These figures not only reflect the wide popularity of social media among college students, but also reveal how active they are on these platforms and how enthusiastic their social interactions are.

In this context, social media is not only an important platform for college students to obtain information, exchange ideas and establish interpersonal relationships, but also a space for them to show themselves, pursue trends and release pressure. It can be said that social media has deeply influenced the college students' lifestyle, learning habits and even the formation of values, and has become an indispensable part of their growth path. Therefore, how to correctly guide college students to use social media reasonably, play its positive role, and avoid over-

indulgence has become an important issue in education and society nowadays.

## **2.2 Analysis of the Current Situation of Online Privacy Protection Awareness and Behavior**

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the current situation of online privacy protection among college students, we conducted a questionnaire survey on 1,000 college students in our university, and the following is a detailed analysis of the survey results: In terms of privacy permission settings, only 45.6% of college students actively set privacy permissions on social media to restrict non-friends from viewing their movements. This indicates that more than half of the college students do not pay enough attention to the protection of their personal information on social media. In terms of personal information sharing behavior, 68.2% of the college students said that they had shared photos or videos of their personal life on social media, and 52.7% of the college students had disclosed their contact information, such as cell phone numbers or email addresses, on social media, which undoubtedly increases the risk of personal information leakage. In terms of privacy leakage experience, 79.1% of college students admitted that they had experienced privacy leakage or harassment on social media, which is a worryingly high percentage; in terms of knowledge of privacy policy, only 21.3% of college students said they had a detailed understanding of the privacy policy of social media, which means that most of the college students lacked a clear understanding of their own rights and responsibilities when using social media; In terms of coping with privacy issues, 37.8% of college students said they did not know how to take effective measures to protect themselves when they encountered privacy issues, which reflects that college students' knowledge and skills in online privacy protection are seriously inadequate.

## **3. Influencing Factors of College Students' Online Privacy Protection Awareness and Behavior**

### **3.1 Social Media Platform Characteristics**

Social media platform characteristics play a decisive role in college students' online privacy protection awareness and behavior. First, platforms differ in the complexity and transparency of their privacy settings, and some platforms have cumbersome settings that make it difficult for students to understand and operate, thus affecting their privacy protection behaviors. According to the survey, 57% of college students on platforms that use default privacy settings have not changed any of their privacy settings, compared to a decrease to 35% of college students on platforms that offer explicit privacy control options. The tendency of platforms to have default privacy settings is also an important factor, as students may unknowingly disclose personal information if platforms have more open default settings. An analysis of the privacy settings of 100 social media apps showed that only 32% of apps provided explicit privacy control options, while 57% of college students had not changed any privacy settings. The level of platform security and privacy protection technology is also directly related to the safety of student information.

### **3.2 Analysis of individual factors**

Individual factors include college students' age, gender, educational background, psychological characteristics, etc., which together play a role in their awareness and behavior of online privacy protection. A survey of 2,000 college students showed that the percentage of college students aged 18-20 who shared sensitive information on social media was as high as 74%, while this percentage dropped to 62% for students aged 21-23. This suggests that younger students may neglect the importance of privacy protection due to their inexperience and lack of awareness of online risks. Gender differences may also affect privacy protection behavior; for example, one study showed that 49% of female college students set privacy permissions on social media, compared to 41% of males, showing gender differences in privacy protection behavior. Educational background, on the other hand, affects college students' ability to acquire and apply privacy protection knowledge, while psychological characteristics such as self-disclosure tendency and risk perception also have an impact on privacy protection behavior. A psychological study found that college students with high self-disclosure tendencies were more likely to share personal information on social media without considering privacy risks.

### **3.3 Socio-cultural and environmental factors**

Socio-cultural and environmental factors also play an important role in college students' online privacy protection awareness and behavior. Cross-cultural studies have found that Chinese college students share personal information on social media 20% more frequently than their American counterparts, which may stem from the different views of privacy in the two societies. The degree of sophistication and enforcement of laws and regulations also affects college students' privacy protection behaviors, and if the laws and regulations are not sufficiently robust or are poorly enforced, they may reduce college students' confidence in online privacy protection. Family education style and peer-to-peer online behavioral habits also affect college students' privacy protection awareness and behavior through the socialization process. The family survey found that the percentage of children setting social media privacy permissions in families with positive parental attitudes toward online privacy protection was 58%, while in families with negative attitudes, the percentage was only 38%. The interaction of these factors together shapes the privacy protection behavior patterns of college students in the social media era.

#### 4. Countermeasure Suggestions to Enhance College Students' Awareness and Behavior of Online Privacy Protection

In order to significantly improve college students' awareness and action of privacy protection in the online environment, this study proposes a series of meticulous countermeasures: social media platforms must deeply optimize their privacy protection functions, simplify the operation process, enhance the transparency of the settings, and provide clear and easy-to-operate guidelines on privacy protection, so that users can customize their privacy permissions more conveniently and effectively guard their personal information; The education system should pay attention to the education of online privacy protection and incorporate it into compulsory courses, so that students can deeply understand the importance of online privacy and master the necessary protection skills through systematic teaching plans and practical activities; schools should regularly organize lectures and skills training on online privacy protection to further deepen students' knowledge and skills; college students should enhance their awareness of self-awareness of privacy protection, and form a safe online behavioral privacy protection, and form safe online behavior patterns, including posting personal information on social media cautiously, as well as reviewing and adjusting privacy settings regularly to reduce the risk of privacy leakage; the government needs to continue to improve the laws and regulations on online privacy protection, clearly defining the privacy rights and obligations of college students in cyberspace, and at the same time, strengthen the supervision and crack down on any infringement of college students' online privacy, so as to ensure that the online environment is clear and the rights and interests of students are adequately protected.

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