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By Anatoliy Gruzd and Philip Mai

**A Canada-wide survey on privacy perceptions and expectations  
of Canadian social media users**

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# Table of Contents

About This Report.....	3
Social Media Lab .....	3
About the Authors .....	3
Foreword .....	4
Highlights .....	4
1. Social Media Users' Privacy Settings .....	5
2. Privacy Settings Now vs Three Years Ago.....	6
3. Checking or Changing Privacy Settings.....	7
4. The Use of Anonymous vs Private Accounts.....	8
5. Comfort with Social Media Data Access by Third Parties .....	8
Appendix A. Method.....	10
Appendix B. Survey Questions.....	11
Appendix B. Survey Questions (cont.).....	12
Funding .....	13
Acknowledgments .....	13

## About This Report

This report was produced by the [Social Media Lab](#) at Ted Rogers School of Management, Ryerson University. It is released as part of the [Social Media Data Stewardship Project](#) funded by the Canada Research Chairs Program.

The report is based on a census-balanced online survey of 1500 online Canadian adults (18+). The survey was conducted between April 9–17, 2020. See [Appendix A](#) for more information about data collection and [Appendix B](#) for a list of survey questions used in the report.

In this report, we use the term '*respondents*' to describe all participants who took part in our survey (n=1500), and the term '*social media users*' to refer to participants who reported having at least one social media account (n=1409).

## Social Media Lab

The Social Media Lab is an interdisciplinary research laboratory at Ted Rogers School of Management at Ryerson University. The lab studies how social media is changing the ways in which people and organizations communicate, share information, conduct business and form

communities, and how these changes impact society. The broad aims of the lab's research initiatives are to provide decision makers with additional knowledge and insights into the behaviors and relationships of online network members and understand how these interpersonal connections influence our choices and actions.

## About the Authors

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## Foreword

As the second wave of coronavirus continues to surge in Canada, more people are turning to social media to stay connected. This increased reliance on social media has raised renewed privacy-related questions and concerns about digital trace data users leave behind and how such data is being used and by whom.

In this context, the Ryerson University Social Media Lab is pleased to release “Social Media Privacy in Canada 2020,” a new report that examines practices behind and attitudes towards social media data use by third parties. This report builds on and is a companion to [“The State of Social Media in Canada 2020,”](#) a report on social media adoption and use in Canada (Gruzd & Mai, 2020a).

## Highlights

1. The majority of users on messaging apps (74%), Snapchat (69%), Facebook (67%), and Instagram (57%), have accounts that are set as private — see [p.5](#).
2. In contrast, on LinkedIn and Reddit, there are more users who set their accounts as public (50% and 47% respectively) than those who set their accounts as private — see [p.5](#).
3. Pinterest and YouTube have the highest percentage (14%) of users who are unsure about their account’s privacy setting — see [p.5](#).
4. In comparison to our 2017 data, the percentage of Facebook and Snapchat users who set their accounts to private has dropped by 9% and 8% respectively. To understand why — see [p.6](#).
5. 22% of social media users in our survey (n=1409) have never checked or changed the privacy settings of their accounts, putting them at a higher risk of becoming a victim of data breach or identity theft — see [p.7](#).
6. The percentage of users who have never checked or changed the privacy settings of their social media accounts jumps to 33% among older adults (aged 55+, n=515). This result suggests that older adults might benefit most from targeted information literacy programs — see [p.7](#).
7. The majority of social media users (n=1409) have non-anonymous accounts on 9 out of 10 of the most popular social media platforms in Canada (except Reddit) — see [p.8](#).
8. Reddit has the largest percentage (27%) of accounts that are public but anonymous — see [p.8](#).
9. The majority (56%) of respondents (n=1500) were uncomfortable with marketers and political parties (52%) accessing information about them or posted by them publicly on social media — see [p.9](#).

## 1. Social Media Users' Privacy Settings

Participants' responses varied across platforms when asked whether their social media accounts are primarily private or public. Canadians largely have **private** accounts on the following platforms: messaging apps (74% private), Snapchat (69% private), Facebook (67% private), and Instagram (57% private).

TikTok/Douyin, Pinterest, and Twitter were about evenly split between those with **private** vs **public** accounts (difference under 5%).

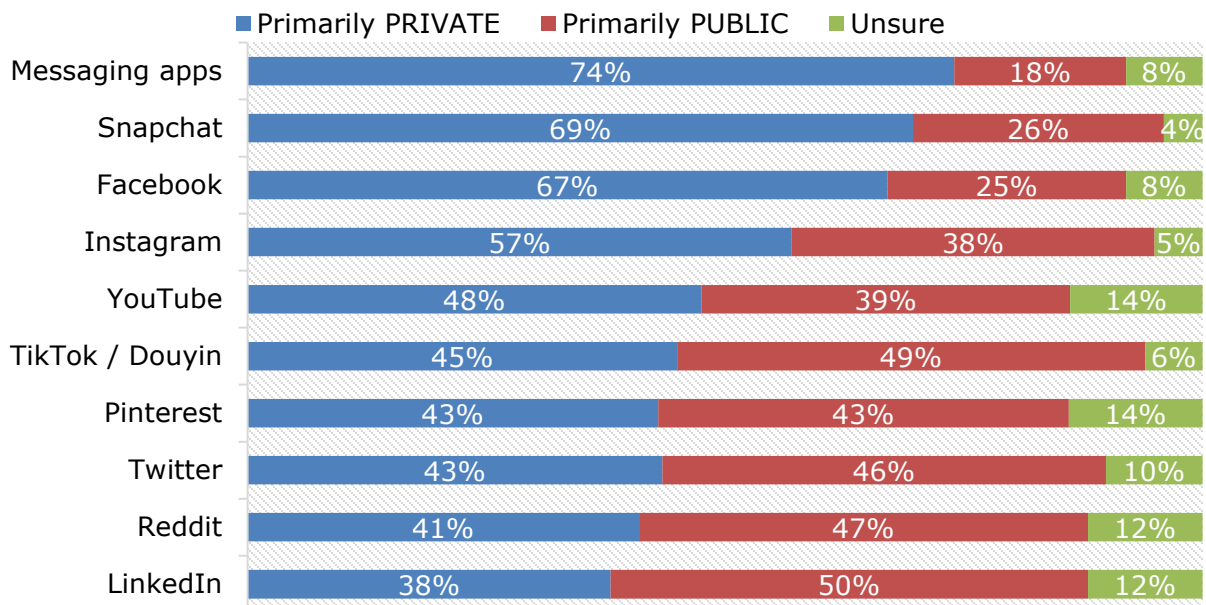
There were more users with **public** accounts on LinkedIn (50% public) and Reddit (47% public).

Interestingly, when comparing responses across different platforms, 4% to 14% of users on the platforms included in our survey were **unsure** of their privacy settings.

Snapchat (4% unsure) and Instagram (5% unsure) users were least **unsure** about their account's privacy setting, while Pinterest and YouTube users were most **unsure** (14% unsure). This suggests that Pinterest and YouTube have some work to do when it comes to informing their users about default and current privacy settings of their accounts and data.

### Privacy Setting Among Users of Each Platform (%)

(n=varied, platform specific; see Appendix B)



Source: Gruzd & Mai (2020b)

Note: All percentages are rounded to the nearest 1% and are based on the number of users on each platform.

## 2. Privacy Settings Now vs Three Years Ago

When comparing the 2020 results with data from 2017, the percentage of primarily **private** accounts has reduced by 9% on Facebook, by 8% on Snapchat, and by 4% on YouTube and LinkedIn. For the remaining platforms, the difference is marginal (3% or less).

This finding offers an interesting avenue for future study. One possibility is that the increased level of users' privacy concerns (widely reported after the Cambridge Analytica privacy scandal broke in 2018) might be wearing off, and that at least some social media users, particularly on Facebook and Snapchat, are now relaxed about their privacy settings in favour of maintaining more public profiles.

Another possible explanation is that Facebook and Snapchat might have lost users who used to have private

accounts at a higher rate than those with public accounts.

As this is a cross-sectional survey, any longitudinal comparisons ought to be treated with caution since we have not surveyed the exact same group of people over time.

### Percentage of Users with Primarily Private Accounts in 2017 vs 2020

(n=varied, platform specific; see Appendix B)

Platform	2020	2017	% change
Facebook	67%	76%	↓ -9%
Messaging apps	74%	-	
YouTube	48%	52%	↓ -4%
Instagram	57%	56%	↑ 1%
LinkedIn	38%	42%	↓ -4%
Twitter	43%	41%	↑ 2%
Pinterest	43%	42%	↑ 1%
Snapchat	69%	77%	↓ -8%
Reddit	41%	44%	↓ -3%
TikTok / Douyin	45%	-	

Sources: Gruzd & Mai (2020b), Gruzd et.al. (2018)

Notes:

Messaging apps and TikTok/Douyin were not included in the 2017 survey.

All percentages are rounded to the nearest 1% and are based on the number of users on each platform.

### 3. Checking or Changing Privacy Settings

Another indicator that users might be concerned about their privacy is how often they check or change privacy settings of their social media accounts. To examine this practice, we asked: “How often do you check or change your privacy settings?” This question was posed in the context of respondents’ overall social media use and did not focus on a particular platform.

The majority (78%) of social media users in the survey (n=1409) reported checking or changing their privacy settings at some point in a year (either daily, weekly, monthly, or less than monthly), while 22% have not. The

most common answer was “less than monthly” (43%), indicating that it is not something Canadians do frequently.

When examining these numbers across age groups, we find that older social media users tend to check or change their privacy settings less frequently. For example, 33% of adults aged 55+ (n=515) reported never checking or changing their privacy settings. This result suggests that older adults might benefit most from information literacy programs designed to teach how to manage and secure their online accounts.

#### Percentage of Users who Change/Check Privacy Settings by Age Group

(n=varied, age group specific)

	Total		Age group				
	Social Media Users		18-24yr	25-34yr	35-44	45-54yr	55+
	n=1409		n=165	n=258	n=243	n=228	n=515
<b>Daily</b>	10%		15%	19%	14%	7%	4%
<b>Weekly</b>	9%		13%	10%	9%	10%	6%
<b>Monthly</b>	15%		21%	16%	14%	18%	13%
<b>Less than monthly</b>	43%		35%	44%	46%	46%	44%
<b>Never</b>	22%		16%	11%	17%	20%	33%

Source: Gruzd & Mai (2020b)

Note: All percentages are rounded to the nearest 1%. The sample size is based on the social media users only.

## 4. The Use of Anonymous Versus Private Accounts

In addition to using privacy settings, another mechanism to protect one’s privacy on social media is to use anonymous accounts.

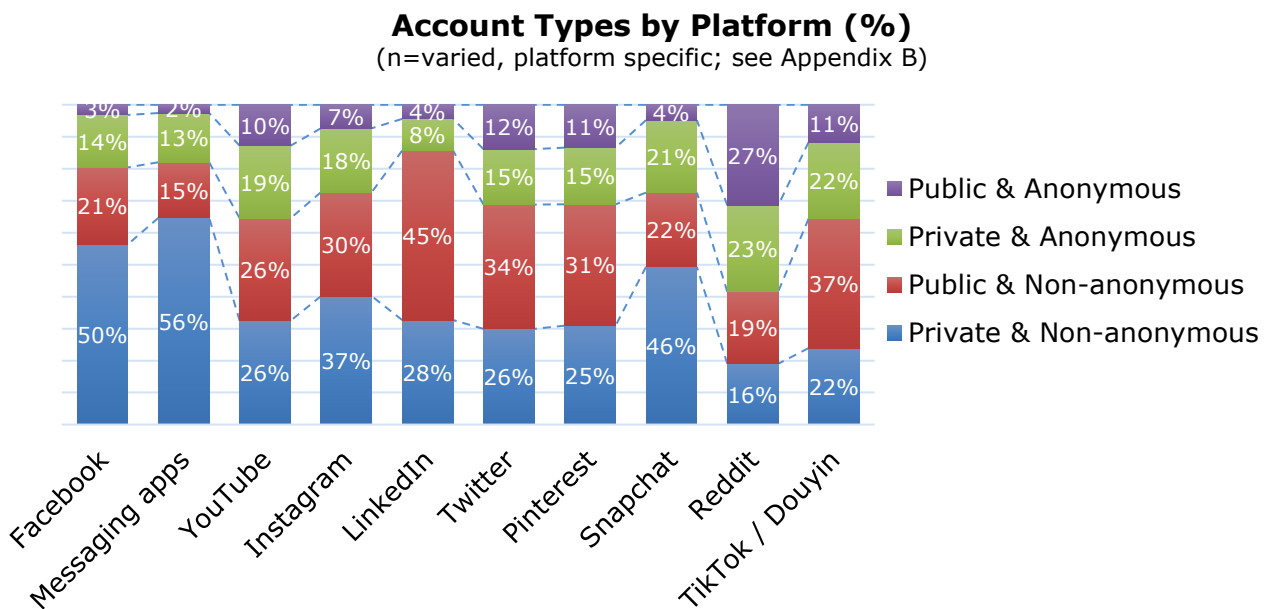
Generally, there are four possible combinations of account types with varying degrees of privacy and anonymity that social media users can choose from: 1) public and anonymous, 2) private and anonymous, 3) public and non-anonymous, and 4) private and non-anonymous. Accounts that are public and non-anonymous are the most open accounts, while those set to be private and anonymous are the most private vis-à-vis the public (but not necessarily vis-à-vis the operators/owners of the platform).

As the chart below indicates, the most common account type on messaging

apps, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram is **private** and **non-anonymous**. This is likely because these platforms are often used to connect with close social contacts such as friends and family members.

On the other hand, LinkedIn, TikTok/Douyin, Twitter and Pinterest tend to host **public** and **non-anonymous** accounts. This is somewhat expected as these platforms are more performative in nature, geared towards maintaining a professional presence, news sharing or entertainment.

Distinct from other platforms in our survey, Reddit has the largest percentage of **anonymous** accounts including: 27% of accounts that are **public & anonymous**, and 23% that are **private & anonymous**.



Source: Gruzd & Mai (2020b)

Note: All percentages are rounded to the nearest 1% and are based on the number of users on each platform. The chart does not include users who are **unsure** about the privacy or anonymity settings of their account(s).



## 5. Comfort with Social Media Data Access by Third Parties

The final question in this report examined Canadians' comfort level with the access and use of publicly available social media data by third parties (other individuals or organizations). Specifically, we asked: "How comfortable would you be if one of the following entities accessed information about you or posted by you publicly on social media?". This question was shown to both users and non-users of social media platforms (n=1500) because even if a person does not have a social media account, information about them might still be shared on social media by others.

The majority of respondents were uncomfortable with marketers (56%), followed by political parties (52%), accessing information about them or posted by them publicly on social media.

In contrast, respondents were least uncomfortable (36%) with academic researchers accessing their publicly available social media data, followed by current (40%) and potential (42%) employers. While it is expected that academic research would hold a relatively high level of trust in society due to the ethics protocols and specialized training to work with user data put in place by academic institutions, a relatively low discomfort













level towards employers' accessing information from social media can be indicative of the fact that at least some participants might have felt that public profiles on platforms like LinkedIn help improve career prospects.

In terms of the remaining entities on this list, respondents were about evenly split. Some were more comfortable with this practice than others, potentially because of perceived personal or professional benefits of public self-disclosure on social media.

To note, the comfort level is also likely moderated by the overall level of trust towards third parties, which will be the subject of a follow-up study.

### Percentage of Respondents who are Uncomfortable with Third-Party's Social Media Data Access

(n=1500)

Third Party	Uncomfortable	
Marketer		56%
Political party		52%
Journalist		50%
Insurance company		49%
Financial institution		48%
Person you used to date		48%
Government		47%
Customs/border protection officer		46%
Legal professional		46%
Potential employer		42%
Your current employer		40%
Academic researcher		36%

Source: Gruzd & Mai (2020b)

Note: All percentages are rounded to the nearest 1%. "Uncomfortable" includes both "Somewhat uncomfortable" and "Extremely uncomfortable" responses.

## Appendix A. Method

### Data Collection and Cleaning

Data was collected using Dynata, a market research firm. The survey was open from April 9-17, 2020 and was hosted on Qualtrics, an online survey platform. We received a total of 1500 completed responses, excluding incomplete responses and those completed under 5 minutes. The survey was made available to online Canadian adults in English. The term “online Canadian adults” refers to Internet users aged 18 and older.

### Ethics

The data is anonymized and presented in aggregate in this report. Prior to data collection, Research Ethics Board approval was obtained from Ryerson University. Participants were shown a comprehensive consent form.

### Percentage Reporting

All percentages are rounded to the nearest 1%.

### Margin of Error

A margin of error is not reported since an online survey is not a random probability sample.

### Sampling

To increase the representativeness of the data and reflect the demographic mix of Canada, we used proportional quota sampling to recruit respondents.

The quotas were based on gender, age, and geographical region<sup>1</sup> to match the distributions in the 2019 Statistics Canada population estimates as shown in the table below.

### Census-Balanced Sampling by Gender, Age, and Region

CANADA	2019%
<b>GENDER</b>	
Female	50.65
Male	49.35
<b>AGE</b>	
18-24	11.14
25-34	17.21
35-44	16.46
45-54	16.13
55+	39.07
<b>REGION</b>	
Western (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan)	31.60
Atlantic (New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island)	6.63
Ontario	38.98
Quebec	22.79

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the study could not survey participants from Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon due to insufficient membership in the online panel.

## Appendix B. Survey Questions

For this report, we analyzed the following questions from our survey:

<p><b>Social media accounts</b></p> <p>Do you have an account on the following social media sites?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook</li> <li>• Messaging apps</li> <li>• YouTube</li> <li>• Instagram</li> <li>• LinkedIn</li> <li>• Twitter</li> <li>• Pinterest</li> <li>• Snapchat</li> <li>• Reddit</li> <li>• TikTok / Douyin</li> </ul> <p>[Yes; No; Unsure]</p>	<p><b>Anonymity status</b></p> <p>Is your primary account on the following sites anonymous (i.e., not identified by legal name or other information which may reveal your offline identity)?</p> <p>Note: If you have multiple accounts on a given site, please answer based on the account which you used most frequently.</p> <p>[Anonymous; NOT Anonymous; Unsure]</p>
<p><b>Age</b></p> <p>What is your age group?</p> <p>[18-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55+]</p>	<p><b>Third parties</b></p> <p>How comfortable would you be if one of the following entities accessed information about you or posted by you publicly on social media?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic researcher</li> <li>• Marketer</li> <li>• Financial institution</li> <li>• Insurance company</li> <li>• Potential employer</li> <li>• Your current employer</li> <li>• Journalist</li> <li>• Government</li> <li>• Legal professional</li> <li>• Customs and border protection officer</li> <li>• Political party</li> <li>• Person you used to date</li> </ul> <p><i>*The display order of these entities was randomized for each participant.</i></p> <p>[Extremely comfortable; Somewhat comfortable; Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable; Somewhat uncomfortable; Extremely uncomfortable]</p>
<p><b>Privacy setting</b></p> <p>What is the privacy setting of your social media account(s)?</p> <p>[Primarily PRIVATE; Primarily PUBLIC; Unsure]</p>	
<p><b>Privacy frequency</b></p> <p>Thinking about all of the social media sites you use, how often do you...?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check or change your privacy settings</li> </ul> <p>[Several times a day; Daily; Weekly; Monthly; Less than monthly; Never]</p>	

## Appendix B. Survey Questions (cont.)

### Social Media Adoption and Use Questions

While the survey asked Canadians about twenty different social media sites, only those that reached a 10% adoption rate in Canada were included in the report. These are: Facebook, Messaging Apps, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat, Reddit, and TikTok/ Douyin.

Messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp, FB Messenger, Viber, Telegram, Line, IMO) were combined into one category called “messaging apps” due to the similarities in their affordances and use cases.

	Q. Do you have an account on the following social media sites or messaging apps?						Q. How often do you visit the following social media sites / messaging apps?							
	Yes		No		Unsure		MAU <sup>2</sup> (Several times a day; Daily; Weekly; Monthly)		Daily (Several times a day; Daily)		Weekly		Less Often (Monthly; Less than monthly; Never)	
	n	% of 1.5k	n	% of 1.5k	n	% of 1.5k	n	% of 1.5k	n	% of Users	n	% of Users	n	% of Users
Facebook	1250	83%	240	16%	10	1%	1183	79%	968	77%	182	15%	100	8%
Messaging apps	980	65%	496	33%	24	2%	936	62%	680	69%	200	20%	100	10%
YouTube	955	64%	515	34%	30	2%	914	61%	613	64%	252	26%	90	9%
Instagram	762	51%	713	48%	25	2%	711	47%	523	69%	149	20%	90	12%
LinkedIn	663	44%	816	54%	21	1%	514	34%	181	27%	214	32%	268	40%
Twitter	630	42%	842	56%	28	2%	531	35%	316	50%	148	23%	166	26%
Pinterest	593	40%	879	59%	28	2%	482	32%	187	32%	202	34%	204	34%
Snapchat	404	27%	1067	71%	29	2%	358	24%	230	57%	92	23%	82	20%
Reddit	232	15%	1249	83%	19	1%	208	14%	125	54%	63	27%	44	19%
TikTok / Douyin	227	15%	1259	84%	14	1%	211	14%	143	63%	48	21%	36	16%

These percentages are based on the number of users in our survey for each platform.

<sup>2</sup> MAU = Monthly Active Users

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Canada Research  
Chairs

Chaires de recherche  
du Canada

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The Ted Rogers School of Management (TRSM) at Ryerson University is Canada's preeminent entrepreneurial-focused business school that is shaping the country's next generation of global innovators and leaders. TRSM is home to six schools of management, three innovative graduate degrees, and 15 innovative research centres, institutes, and labs. The Ted Rogers School of Management is accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and is home to 11,000+ students and 250 industry-connected faculty members.

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The report is an update to a similar report the Social Media Lab released in 2018 based on a survey that was conducted in 2017 (Gruzd et.al., 2018).

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