ConnectSafely

TIPS FOR SAFE AND CIVIL USE OF ANONYMOUS APPS

A growing number of apps allow people to post anonymously. There are some very positive aspects to anonymous apps, including the ability to reach out for help and post with less worry about being criticized or embarrassed. But of course there are some risks. Here are some tips for reducing risk and optimizing the experience.

Know how to report. Some apps have reporting features that can alert the company's customer service staff if someone is being abusive or otherwise violating the company's Terms of Service. Learn to use these features where they exist.

Get help if you're scared. If someone threatens you in a way that gives you reason to fear for your safety, reach out immediately for help. Contact law enforcement if you are concerned about your safety. Kids should consider contacting parents or school authorities.

Know what the app knows. It's not uncommon for mobile social media apps to collect information about you and your friends. Pay attention to disclosures and think before you allow an app to contact friends on social media services or people in your phone's contact list on your behalf. Also be aware of the app's geolocation features, including sharing your location with others.

Know that anonymity's not guaranteed. Even though these apps might be able to hide your identity from other users, you're not necessarily completely anonymous. Both hackers and law enforcement (with proper authorization) have tools to find users through Internet protocol (IP) addresses, cell phone identifiers and other clues.

Post with the knowledge that it could be forever. Your posts may appear to go away, but chances are they'll remain online for a long, long time. And even if you delete them, there's always a chance that someone could have copied and reposted it. Always remember that what you post and how you act reflects on you now and possibly well into the future.

Be accountable. Users are morally and legally responsible for how they behave even in anonymous apps. In addition to the possibility of prosecution, you can be banned from using the app by the operator if you violate its Terms of Service, and there can also be repercussions from other authorities. The Terms of Service sometimes aren't easy to find (often they're on the services' websites), but they can help you know what is and isn't allowed.

Disagree respectfully. Anonymous apps often give people an opportunity to engage in spirited debate around just about any topic, including politics, religion, sexuality — even your favorite smartphone or computer. These debates can be great, but they should also be respectful.

Don't out others. Spreading rumors or revealing secrets about others in text, photos or videos is a form of bullying. Just because you know something about someone, doesn't give you the right to share it without permission. Ask permission before sharing a photo with anyone else in it, and honor any request from someone to delete posts about them or pictures of them. Even anonymous cruelty can come back to haunt you, so it's better to spread kindness.

Remember people have feelings. Anonymity plus the lack of visual cues, like facial expressions and body language, can make anonymous spaces feel less personal because it's harder to know another person's emotional state. What seems like a joke or mild teasing to the person posting could feel really harsh to the person tagged or targeted. Sometimes people make themselves vulnerable by posting questions like "How do I look?" or "Do you think I'm ugly?" Sadly, some people exploit such questions, as well as confessions, by being mean.

Be kind and reach out. Anonymity also makes it easier to be kind and to support others. Be supportive if you see hurtful comments about others and know that you can anonymously ask for support if you're the one hurt. Helping others can make you feel better and improves the community by reinforcing positive participation.