

The Allure and Risk of Anonymous Social Networks

There is something about anonymity that gives people a sense of freedom; The ability to speak freely without being judged by people we see everyday. Given the number of new networks that support anonymous participation, there is clearly a need for it. In the long run, are these networks helpful or harmful? A bit of both.

Helpful:

- allows people to reach out for help for problems they don't feel comfortable sharing
- get the feeling of being part of a community
- ease and privacy of using a network without logging in or creating an account

Harmful:

- Allows a cruelty you would never see in person
- naive users are easy targets for predators
- False sense of security because the network or application team *can* get your location, email and/or personal information

Here's what you need to know about the 6 most popular anonymous apps:

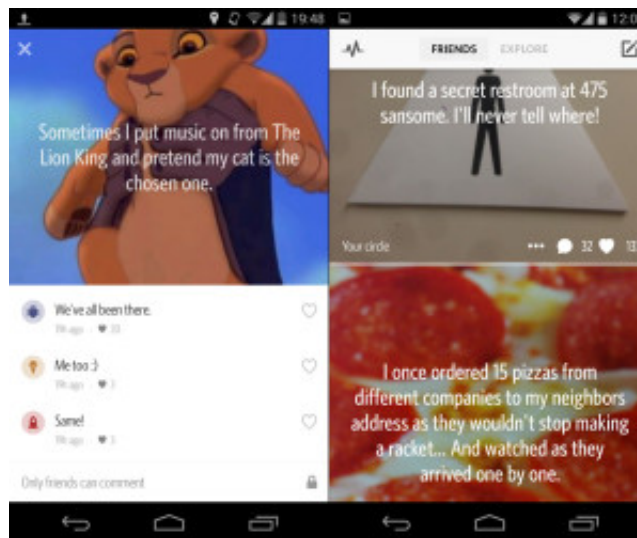
The Confessionals

Ever have a secret you are dying to get off your chest but have no one you can tell? Want to announce something but don't want to brag to friends? Enter [Whisper](#) and [Secret](#). Two apps that allow you to express how you are feeling in a few short sentences without anyone knowing it is you. If your post is 'upvoted' then it filters to the main screen for more viewing.

Whisper allows you to post your thoughts using either your own photo as background or one of their stock photos. Once posted, other people can anonymously comment on it. Sometimes a question is asked (example: What do you hate about dating?) and then people post Whispers to answer that question.



Secret is similar to *Whisper* in that it also allows you to post text on images to the public. Their main focus however is that you post 'anonymously' to a group of known contacts. It was set up like a game where you'd want to guess who was posting.



Allure:

- So far these networks have shown to be helpful for those suffering in silence on personal issues. When users reach out about their fears, others have been providing support.

Risk:

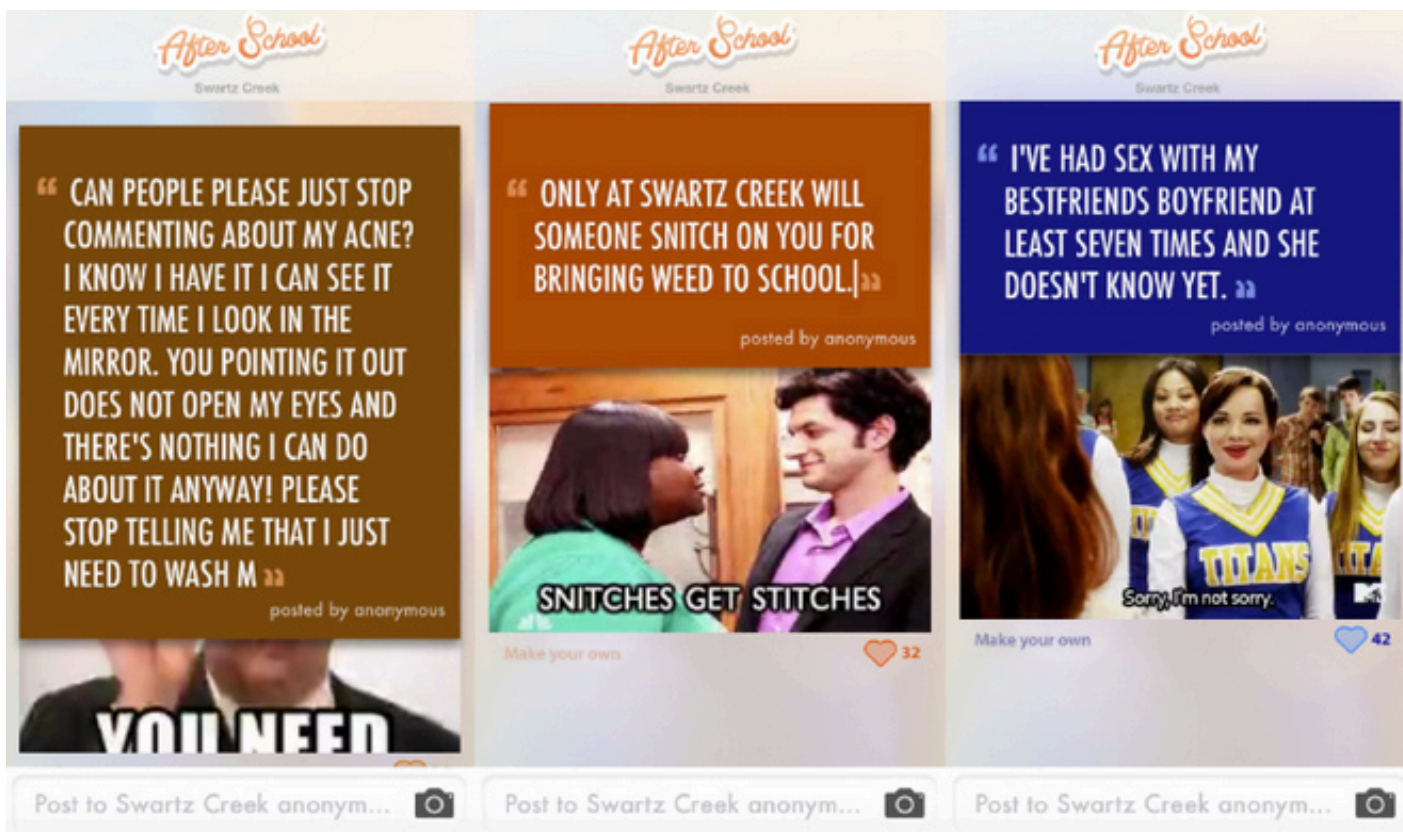
- In *Whisper*, you can engage users in a personal message thread which could lead to

divulging identifying information

- In *Secret*, the smaller your contact list, the less anonymity you have

The Bathroom Walls

Similar to the confessionals, these apps allow you to anonymously post text over-layed on an image. The difference here is that it is targeted at schools. [Yik Yak](#) was designed for college campuses, so you can communicate with users in a 5 mile radius. In [After School](#), you select your school by drop down list and then the device verifies that you go there using other data on your phone (GPS, Facebook data).



These apps were designed to have classmates talk with each other. Unfortunately, in both cases, these apps are rampant with bullying. Think of the messages on a bathroom wall ("Billy is a dork" or "Lucy is a slut"). There are several schools in the US that have banned their use so the apps have had to accommodate for this by turning off functionality on actual school grounds but working within the vicinity of the school.

Allure:

- Kids can read and post gossip anonymously so they feel part of the clique

Risk:

- Lots of bullying

The Rule-Breaker

What's one of the first safety rules you learn? Never talk to strangers. [Omegle](#) is a chat app that sets up two anonymous users in a chat room. The tag line is actually "Talk to Strangers". I have seen a parody on this that said "Talk to pedophiles". Young kids seem to really gravitate to this one despite the age being set to 18 and over.



The screenshot shows the Omegle website interface. At the top left is the Omegle logo, and to its right is the text "Talk to strangers!". Below this is a chat window with the following text:

You're now chatting with a random stranger. Say hi!

Stranger: age?

You: I am a bicycle, ask me anything.

Stranger: age?

You: well, I was built 15 years ago

Stranger: nice, u an f bike or a m bike?

You: Why don't you ride me and find out for yourself?

Stranger: haha nice one :)

Stranger: im f 14 btw

You: Neither gender no age apply, all are welcome to ride the bicycle of joy

Stranger: ha u sound weird

Stranger: but cool :)

You: That is because I am a bicycle. Perhaps there is a misunderstanding. Let's begin again.

You: I am a bicycle, ask me anything

Stranger: are u horny?

You: I am a bicycle.

At the bottom left of the chat window, there is a button labeled "Stop" with "Esc" written below it.

Allure:

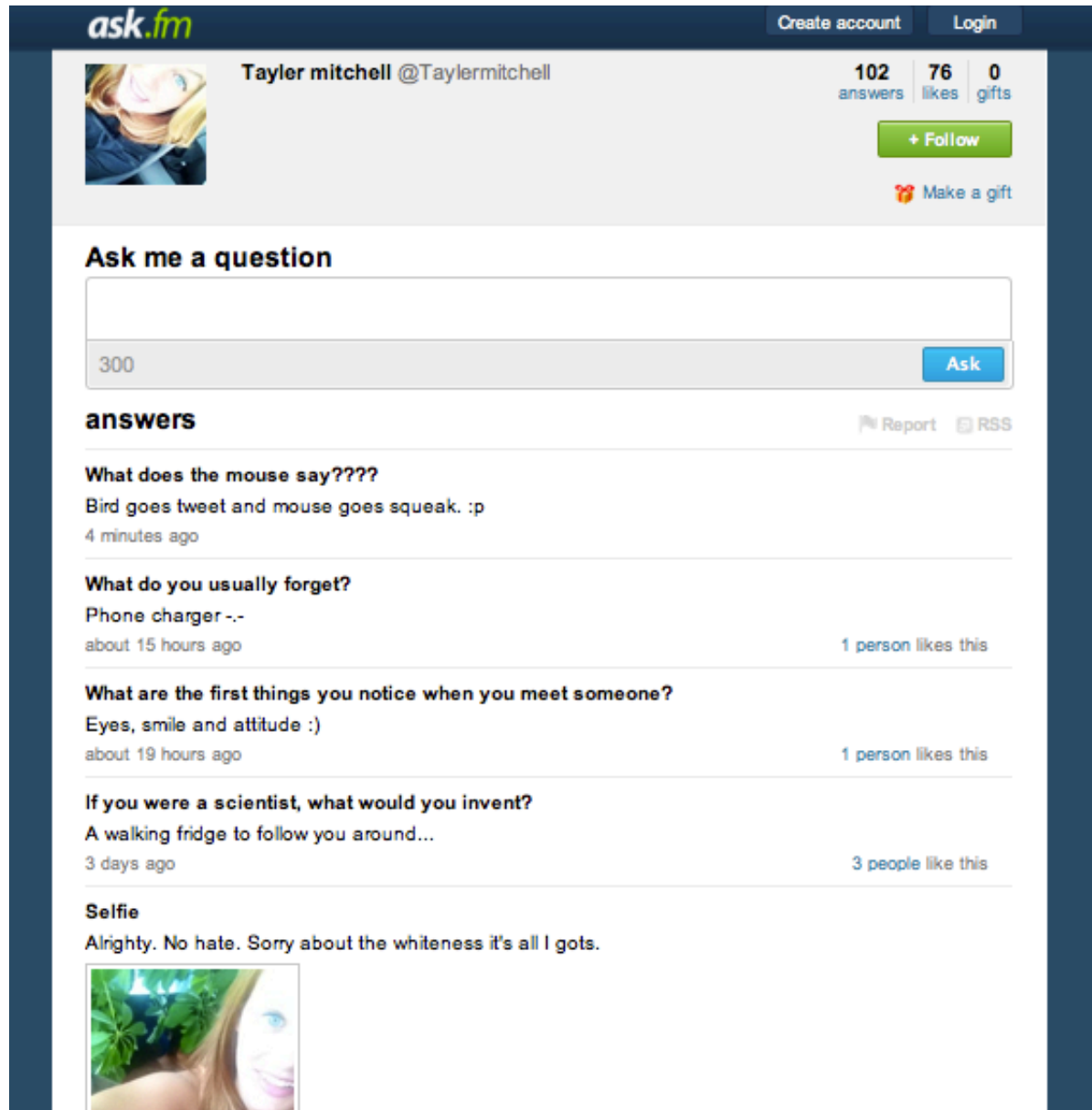
- People (kids especially) love to 'experiment' in conversations with strangers

Risk:

- Easy to give away too much personal information assuming the person on the other end can't find you
- You can become an easy target for a predator

The Interrogation

Last and (in my opinion) least, we have [Ask.fm](#). Targeted mostly at kids, users enter with a picture and a profile. Then other anonymous users and strangers post questions to their 'board' where the profiled person can answer publicly. Sometimes the questions are innocent ("Who are your best friends?") but often they get nasty fast. This site has the most connected ties to cyberbullying and teen suicides in the UK. In the cases I have seen in local schools, most questions are of a sexual nature.



The screenshot shows the ask.fm profile of Taylor Mitchell (@Taylermitchell). The profile header includes the ask.fm logo, the user's name and handle, and statistics: 102 answers, 76 likes, and 0 gifts. There are buttons for 'Create account', 'Login', '+ Follow', and 'Make a gift'. Below the header is a section titled 'Ask me a question' with a text input field and an 'Ask' button. The 'answers' section lists four questions with their respective answers and timestamps:

- What does the mouse say????**
Bird goes tweet and mouse goes squeak. :p
4 minutes ago
- What do you usually forget?**
Phone charger --
about 15 hours ago
1 person likes this
- What are the first things you notice when you meet someone?**
Eyes, smile and attitude :)
about 19 hours ago
1 person likes this
- If you were a scientist, what would you invent?**
A walking fridge to follow you around...
3 days ago
3 people like this

Below the answers is a section titled 'Selfie' with the text: 'Alrighty. No hate. Sorry about the whiteness it's all I gots.' and a small image of a person's face partially obscured by green leaves.

Allure:

- Users love the feeling of importance they get at the centre of attention

Risk:

- Lots of cyberbullying
- Inappropriate language and content for younger audience
- It is very easy to over-share information in a public way

As an adult, you can decide if you want to use these networks or not. So be cautious about over-sharing personal information.

If you are a parent, you should be wary of what your kids are using. Students in my area are heavy users of *Ask.fm* and *Omegle*. Users start as young as 9 or 10.

Make sure to ask your kids what apps they use, have them explain to you why they enjoy using them, and then help guide them to use these apps safely and constructively.