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Nearly Half of U.S. Adults Believe They Have Little to No Control Over Personal Info Companies Gather from Them while Online

Just Four in 10 Feel They Have a Good Understanding of How to Protect their Online Privacy

New York, NY – Nearly half (45%) of U.S. adults feel that they have little (33%) or no (12%) control over the personal information companies gather while they are browsing the web or using online services such as photo sharing, travel, or gaming, according to a new online survey of over 1,000 adults conducted by Ipsos on behalf of Microsoft. Only one-in-five (21%) say that they have at least a significant amount of control over such personal information, while a third (34%) feel that they have moderate control.

Similarly, many adults (24%) believe that they have little (19%) to no (5%) control over information that they intentionally share online through activities like online retail transactions, email, or social media. However, more adults feel that that they do have at least a significant amount of control over the information that they intentionally share than information that companies gather from them while they are browsing online (39% vs. 21%).

This lack of confidence may stem from respondents' lack of understanding of how to protect their online privacy. Less than half (40%) say that totally (11%) or mostly (29%) understand how to protect their online privacy. Forty percent report that they moderately understand, and an additional one-in-five (20%) said that they only minimally understand (17%), or are totally confused (3%) when it comes to personal online protection.

Most Common Steps Taken to Help Protect Online Privacy

Nearly nine in ten (85%) have taken steps to protect their online privacy, most commonly by deleting cookies (65%), opting out of targeted advertising (44%), uninstalling an app (41%), or confirming or changing their browser setting to request that websites don't track them (39%). Fewer have stopped using an online service entirely (21%) or changed to a different website or online service (20%). However, 15% report that they have not taken any of these actions to protect themselves.

One-Third of Consumers Consider Privacy Issues When Choosing Which Online Services to Use

A third of respondents (32%) say that they always consider a company's privacy reputation, track record or policies when choosing which websites to visit or online services to use, and an additional 54% sometimes do so. However, one in eight (13%) never take these things into account when choosing which websites and online services to use.

When asked under what circumstances companies should be able to track individuals browsing the web or using online services, 60% say this should be allowed only after an individual specifically gives the company permission to do so. An additional 8% feel this should be allowed only if the individual gets something in return, and 5% feel companies have the right to do this

whenever an individual goes online. More than one-quarter (28%) report that they thought companies should never be allowed to track individuals' online activities.

Just 20% of adults say that they want to receive personalized advertising based on their web browsing or online service use, while the large majority (80%) report that they did not wish to receive such ads.

A Third of Respondents Trust Friends and Family Most when it Comes to Advice Regarding Online Privacy

If they have questions, over eight-in-ten (85%) turn to outside sources for guidance about how to protect their online privacy, most commonly a website's privacy statement (39%) or friends and family (39%). Three in ten (29%) look to company privacy policies, and 21% go to independent privacy or consumer organizations for answers. About one-in-ten seek online privacy advice from news sites (12%) or government agencies (10%).

When it comes to trusting these outside sources, a third (33%) say that they trust friends and family the most, while 25% feel that independent privacy or consumer organizations are most trustworthy. Two-in-ten (22%) place their trust in website privacy statement and company privacy policies (20%). Fewer report that government agencies (15%) and news sites (10%) are the sources they trust most.

These are some of the findings of an Ipsos poll conducted November 15-18, 2012. For the survey, a national sample of 1,015 adults aged 18 and older from Ipsos' U.S. online panel were interviewed online. Weighting was then employed to balance demographics and ensure that the sample's composition reflects that of the U.S. adult population according to Census data and to provide results intended to approximate the sample universe. A survey with an unweighted probability sample of 1,015 and a 100% response rate would have an estimated margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points 19 times out of 20 of what the results would have been had the entire population of adults in the United States been polled. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to other sources of error, including, but not limited to coverage error, and measurement error.

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