

Privacy & Security Perception and Behaviour of Exchange and International Students in the U.S.

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Abstract

This ongoing interview study explores how exchange and international students in the U.S. perceive and make privacy and security decisions while studying abroad. Through semi-structured interviews and scenario-based questions, we examine how students respond to everyday situations involving uncertainty, social pressure, time pressure, financial constraints, and limited alternatives. The study focuses on when students accept privacy or security risks, how their behavior may differ from their home country, and how the temporary nature of studying abroad shapes their decision-making. Currently 17 interviews have been conducted and transcribed, with further interviews and qualitative analysis ongoing.

1 Introduction

International and exchange students in the U.S. enter a temporary and often unfamiliar environment in which everyday systems, institutional structures, social norms, and privacy expectations may differ from those in their home countries. During this transition, they rely heavily on digital technologies for communication, navigation, coursework, banking, housing, and transportation. At the same time, they often make privacy and security decisions under time, financial, and social pressure, and uncertainty, while being separated from their usual support networks.

Prior work has shown that moving to the U.S. can create complex security, privacy, and data-sharing trade-offs, especially when newcomers must quickly adapt to unfamiliar digital, governmental, and commercial systems [7]. However,

exchange and international students represent a distinct group with completely different circumstances than other people. Their stay is often temporary, and their legal and institutional status depends on universities and government systems. Many decisions are shaped by the need to settle in quickly. Recent work also shows that international students may be vulnerable to scams involving housing, finances, government impersonation, and immigration-related fears, especially when urgency and lack of support influence their decisions [9].

These challenges are intensified by the institutional context of studying in the U.S. International students are subject to visa-related monitoring and reporting structures, such as SEVIS [2]. Previous work has also shown that universities can become part of broader systems for monitoring and regulating international students, contributing to a sense of visibility and vulnerability [1]. Similarly, migrants are also being surveilled through various means of technology [6]. Especially the recent U.S. policy changes expanded the monitoring for F, M, and J student and exchange visitor visa applicants, including review of applicants online presence [4,5]. As a result, privacy and security decisions are not only everyday practical concerns, but are also connected to students legal status, mobility, and ability to participate in academic life.

Students privacy expectations are also shaped by culture and prior experience. Prior research shows that privacy concerns can vary across national and educational contexts [8]. International students may therefore compare U.S. systems with expectations formed in their home countries when deciding whether to trust an app, submit documents, use university systems, or share information with institutions. The lack of familiar support can also affect how students handle privacy and security decisions. When students experience stress, uncertainty, or social isolation, it may become harder to evaluate risky situations or ask trusted people for help [3]. As a result, they may rely on unfamiliar institutions, platforms, or peers, even when they are unsure about the privacy and security consequences.

This study investigates how international and exchange students perceive and make privacy and security decisions while

studying in the U.S. Rather than focusing only on general attitudes, it examines everyday situations in which students may feel pressured to trade privacy or security for access, convenience, money, housing, academic success, or social participation. The study is centered around the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do exchange and international students perceive and make privacy and security decisions?
- **RQ2:** How and when do their decisions deviate from their home country?

2 Methodology

We conduct semi-structured interviews with exchange and international students in the U.S. to explore how they perceive and make privacy and security decisions while studying abroad. Before the interview, participants fill out a consent form and complete a short survey collecting demographic information and a few questions on their privacy and security knowledge and behavior.

The survey collects information such as student type, age, gender, home country, home and host university, degree level, field of study, length of stay, previous abroad experience, and current living situation. Eligible participants must be at least 18 years old and either currently enrolled as international students at a U.S. university or have participated in an academic exchange program in the U.S. lasting at least three months. Participants are recruited through personal contacts and snowball sampling.

The interview is divided into three parts. First, participants are asked about their experiences with technology, privacy, and security in the U.S., including perceived differences from their home country and whether pressure or the temporary nature of their stay affects their decisions. Second, they are presented with three hypothetical scenarios, each involving a privacy or security trade-off and two possible choices. These scenarios are used to examine how participants reason about risk, uncertainty, pressure, and limited alternatives in everyday situations. Finally, participants reflect on the scenarios and their broader experiences as international or exchange students.

The study is currently ongoing. At this stage, 17 interviews have been conducted. Data analysis and transcription are still ongoing, and additional interviews are planned with more students from different universities. The interviews are transcribed locally using WhisperAI, anonymized, and evaluated using MAXQDA.

3 Initial Findings

Based on an initial review of the transcripts, we expect that students' privacy and security decisions are strongly shaped

by situational pressure. Participants often seem willing to accept risks when they face time pressure, financial constraints, social pressure, or limited alternatives. In these situations, convenience and immediate needs may become more important than privacy or security concerns.

We also expect the temporary nature of studying abroad to influence students' behavior. Some exchange students appear more willing to take risks because they want to make the most of their limited time in the U.S. or avoid missing important opportunities. At the same time, many students rely heavily on digital services, university systems, and online platforms, even when they do not fully understand how their data is handled or where to get help.

The scenarios in the interviews suggest that students often make privacy and security trade-offs in concrete everyday situations. For example, some participants would share ID documents with a suspicious host to keep a travel booking, hide political social media content to improve internship chances, or accept phone monitoring in exchange for financial compensation. These early impressions suggest that privacy and security decisions abroad are often shaped less by general awareness and more by pressure, dependency, uncertainty, and the feeling of having no realistic alternative.

4 Expected Contributions

This study contributes to a better understanding of how exchange and international students make privacy and security decisions while studying abroad. By focusing on everyday situations and scenario-based decision-making, it highlights when and why students may deviate from their usual privacy and security practices.

It also shows how pressure, uncertainty, financial constraints, temporary stay, and institutional dependency can make students feel vulnerable or leave them with no realistic alternative but to accept privacy or security risks.

These insights can inform universities and support services on how to better support students through clearer guidance, better arrival support, and more accessible resources for making safer privacy and security decisions in unfamiliar environments.

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A Appendix

A.1 Survey Questions

1. Are you currently studying in the U.S. as an international or exchange student?
 - (a) International student
 - (b) Exchange student
2. Age
3. Gender
 - (a) Female
 - (b) Male
 - (c) Non-binary
 - (d) Do not want to disclose
 - (e) Self-description
4. Home country
5. Home university
6. Host university in the U.S.
7. What degree are you currently studying for?
 - (a) Bachelor’s degree
 - (b) Master’s degree
 - (c) Doctorate (PhD)
 - (d) Other qualification
8. Current degree program/major
9. Current year of study [total time spent studying at your university in your current degree]
10. How long have you been in the U.S.?
11. How long are you going to stay in the U.S.?
12. Have you studied or lived abroad before this stay?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) No
13. hat is your current living situation in the U.S.?
 - (a) University housing/dormitory
 - (b) Shared apartment or house
 - (c) Living alone
 - (d) Living with family/relatives
 - (e) Other
14. How would you rate your knowledge about digital privacy and security? (Scale: Low, Somewhat low, Moderate, Somewhat high, High)
15. When others have security or privacy issues with their computers or mobile devices, I am often asked for help (Scale: Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neutral, Somewhat agree, Agree)
16. When I have security or privacy issues with my computer or mobile device, I often ask others for help (Scale: Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neutral, Somewhat agree, Agree)
17. Would you say you are someone who is careful about privacy and security online? (Scale: Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neutral, Somewhat agree, Agree)
18. Your email address for a possible follow-up interview [optional]

A.2 Interview Guide

Introduction: Hello and thank you for being here today and participating in our interview study. I am XXX, your interviewer for today.

Overview: Today, we will ask you a few questions about your experiences with privacy and security while studying abroad.

We would like to gather your honest thoughts and opinions on this topic. Please be assured that we do not intend to test your knowledge or evaluate your opinion. We may ask you questions about topics you are not familiar with. That is perfectly acceptable. You can always indicate that you are unsure or do not know something. Please take your time when answering questions; they do not have to be answered perfectly.

The interview is split into three parts. First, questions about participants' experiences with technology and privacy during their stay in the U.S. Second, hypothetical scenarios involving privacy and security decisions with only two choices. Lastly, reflective questions about the scenarios and the international student experience.

Consent: When completing our survey, you have already signed a consent form. I would like to emphasize once again that all information you provide us with in this interview will be treated confidentially. You can withdraw from the interview at any time; just let us know. If you wish to withdraw from the interview, we can stop at any time without any disadvantages for you. The same applies if you find a question uncomfortable. We can of course skip it without any disadvantages for you.

Questions before we begin: Before we start recording and begin the interview, is there anything else you would like to ask us?

Recording: The recording is now running. Just to be sure, do you still want to participate in the interview and do you agree to the recording? (FOR ME: START RECORDING)

Just for documentation: The participant ID is [participant ID] and the LimeSurvey code is [LimeSurvey code]. Today is [date], and it is [time].

1. What is your general perception about privacy and data security in the U.S.?
2. How safe do you feel your personal data is in the U.S.?
3. Do you think your privacy is valued in the U.S.?
 - (a) Do you think your privacy and data security are valued more or less in your home country than in the US?
 - (b) Do you trust the organizations in the U.S.?
 - i. universities,
 - ii. companies,
 - iii. or government services
4. Do you have any fears/concerns regarding privacy and security in the U.S.?
5. Did something surprise you in terms of privacy and security in the U.S.?
6. Do you have any examples where you experienced a privacy or security issue while studying abroad in the U.S.?
7. Do you think your privacy or security behaviour has changed since coming to the U.S.?
 - (a) What are the biggest differences compared to your home country?
8. Are there risks you might accept in the U.S that you would not accept at home?
 - (a) Do you think you make different privacy or security decisions in the U.S., because you know you only stay temporarily?
9. What digital services (tools/apps/websites) do you use most often in your daily life here? Which of them feels essential?
 - (a) Were these digital services completely new to you?
 - (b) How dependent do you feel on these during your stay in the U.S.?
 - (c) Do you have any concerns about these services?
10. When you use these digital services, do you think about privacy or security risks?
 - (a) What do you do to protect your privacy or security when using digital services?
11. When deciding whether to trust an app or service, what do you usually look at?
12. Do you sometimes feel like you don't have enough information to make good privacy or security decisions?
13. Are there institutions in the U.S. that help international students with privacy or security concerns (for example, the university, IT services, or others)?
 - (a) Are these helpful?
 - (b) Are there similar institutions in your home country that you can use while being abroad?
14. Are there situations where convenience is more important to you than privacy or security?
 - (a) Can you give an example?
15. Have you ever made a privacy or security decision that you knew was not ideal because of pressure (for example, time pressure or social pressure)?

- (a) What kind of pressure was it?
- (b) What made you decide anyway?
- (c) Were there situations where you resisted the pressure?

16. Have you ever felt like you had no real choice when making a privacy or security decision?

- (a) Why did it feel that way?
- (b) What factors influenced that situation?

17. Do other people influence your privacy or security decisions, such as friends, family, social media, or education?

18. Do you sometimes feel overwhelmed by the decisions you need to make?

Here are some scenarios where you will have only two choices for each one. Tell me how you think about every scenario and how you make your decision:

Questions during the scenarios

- General questioning
 - What's the reason for your decision?
 - Which option feels riskier to you?
 - What makes this option better than the other?
 - What concerns would you have in this situation?
 - How confident do you feel about your decision?
- Finding factors
 - Is your choice impacted by the fact that you're here temporarily?
 - Would you make the same decision in your home country?
- If a friend were in this situation, what would you advise them to do?

Scenario 1: Booking a hotel for a trip

There is an important football game between your university and a rival university. Many students, including you and your friends, plan to travel to the city where the game will take place. You and nine friends book a house for the weekend through a well-known booking platform. The house is surprisingly affordable and located very close to the stadium, which is important because none of you has a car and there is no public transport. A few days before the trip, the host contacts you and asks for photos of the IDs from all guests staying in the house. This requirement was not mentioned when you made the booking and usually only the person who made the reservation would need to provide identification. The host says that if everyone does

not send their IDs, the reservation will be cancelled. You would receive a full refund, but at this point, it would be very difficult to find another affordable place to stay for the weekend.

Choice:

- Everyone sends photos of their IDs so that you can keep the reservation
- You refuse to send the IDs, and the host cancels the reservation. You receive all your money back, but finding another affordable place to stay for the trip would be very hard

Scenario 2: Internship Application

You are applying for a highly competitive internship in the U.S. at a well-known company in your field. Getting this internship could significantly improve your future career opportunities. The company asks applicants to provide links to their social media accounts as part of the application process. These accounts must be public so that the company can review them. Let's say one of your accounts contains many posts about political topics. Some of these posts express strong opinions that might be viewed negatively by certain reviewers. You could choose to provide all of your accounts as requested or decide to hide or delete this account. However, it could affect your application or lead to unknown consequences if the company later discovers that you did not disclose all of your social media accounts.

Choice:

- Provide all of your social media accounts, including the account with political content
- Do not disclose that account and only provide your other social media accounts

Scenario 3a: Research study participation

You are offered 500\$ to participate in a research study from the university that analyzes smartphone usage among international students. To take part in the study, you would need to install an app that collects detailed information about how you use your phone over 2 weeks, including app usage and activity patterns. They would be able to see everything you do, so they monitor your phone. The researchers say the data will be used for academic research only, but participating would require giving them continuous access to information about your phone. The money would help you cover expenses during your time abroad.

Choice:

- Participate in the study, get 500\$ and allow the researchers to collect data about your phone usage

- Decline the study to avoid sharing your phone activity data

Scenario 3b: Research study participation

What if we change the scenario a bit and make it so that they don't monitor your phone. Instead, they can only see your general activity and phone usage. For example, the researcher will only see how long you are on your phone, at what time, on what apps, and what kind of activities on the apps you are doing (they see you are chatting/posting/... but not what and with whom you are interacting). You again have the same choice and the same amount of money.

Questions after Scenarios:

1. Did any of these scenarios feel realistic to you? Have you experienced something similar during your time in the U.S.?
2. Were any of the choices particularly difficult?
3. What advice would you give to new international students regarding privacy and security when using digital services in the U.S.?
4. What could universities do to help international students make safer privacy or security decisions?
5. Is there anything about privacy or security during your time abroad that we haven't talked about but that you think is important?

End:

- Would you like to say anything else before we finish, or do you have any questions for us?
- I'm going to end the recording now (END RECORDING)
- Thank you again for your time and participation. You can always contact me with the email I used for the invitation if you have any more questions. Have a nice day!