

Google+: A Playground for Online Predators?

Note: Given the highlight sensitive nature of the information in the attached document, Consumer Watchdog has chosen to redact all names and identifying information of the subjects, as well as disabling some hyperlinks to Google+ user profile pages highlighted to protect user's privacy. An un-redacted version of this document has been provided to Google, certain government agencies and media organizations.

Background

Google+ is a social networking service owned by Google Inc.

According to a May 2013 [Business Insider](#) story, Google+ is now the second-largest social networking site in the world, having surpassed Twitter in 2013 and now logging approximately 359 million active users.

Google+ describes itself as a “social layer” that integrates its other online properties. In this sense it bills itself as unlike conventional social networks such as Facebook that are accessed through a single website.

One of the key features of Google+ is the “Circles” feature – a way for Google+ users to group people together according to the relationship users have with those people (e.g. family, work, colleagues, interest groups, etc.)

As explained on the Google+ [“Learn More”](#) page:

*“Circles are an easy way to organize the **people you know** like in real life. They make it easy for you to share with just the right people, whether you’re sending an inside joke to friends or sharing that unbelievable photo with everyone. We give you a few circles to start out with, and you can create new circles for even more flexibility.”*

Another key feature of Google+ is the “Communities” feature – Google’s version of a group or forum, built to bring other Google+ users together around particular topics.

As explained on the Google+ [“Learn More”](#) page, “Communities” are designed to allow users to:

“Talk about the stuff you’re into with people who love it too”

A third key feature of Google+ is the “Suggestions” feature – a list of suggestions from Google+ for people you might know or might want to add to your Circle. As explained here, Suggestions could be generated by:

- *Your mutual connections with people on Google products such as Gmail.*
- *Interaction you've had with others on Google products*
- *The connected accounts you've linked on your Google Account.*
- *The people who are in your extended circles*
- *Friends on external sites, when those friends have connected their accounts on their Google+ profiles.*

Additionally, it appears that Google+ also makes suggestions of people one might want to add to his or her Circle based on the content they search for and profile pages they visit as will be documented further below.

While Google+ bills itself as one of the most innovative social networks on the web today, the reality is much different. As will be demonstrated on the pages that follow, in order to grow Google+'s user base as quickly as possible, it appears that Google has put growth far ahead of the safety and security of its users.

The truth is that what Google+ touts as innovations ("Circles", "Communities", and "Suggestions") are actually huge privacy vulnerabilities that may put users (particularly minors and children) at serious risk for unwanted content, pornography, and even communications from suspected sexual predators and pedophiles.

From March to September 2013, an investigation was undertaken to detail the significant privacy issues Google+ users may encounter when using the service. The evidence that follows will demonstrate that Google+ allows its users to routinely and blatantly violate its [User Content & Conduct Policy](#) specifically relating to:

6. Child Safety

Do not distribute content that exploits children, such as child sexual abuse imagery (including cartoon child sexual abuse imagery) or content that presents children in a sexual manner.

9. Sexually Explicit Material

Do not distribute content that contains nudity, graphic sex acts, or sexually explicit material. Do not drive traffic to commercial pornography sites.

Your Profile Picture cannot include mature or offensive content. For example, do not use a photo that is a close-up of a person's buttocks or cleavage.

What is immediately apparent in the information that follows is that Google has created a social network that captures as much upside as possible while pushing all of the consequences related to a shocking lack of privacy, security and safety off on its users. In essence, Google has put a premium on numbers and growth at the expense of the safety of its users. It captures all of the gain while Google+ users take all of the risks.

Specifically, the evidence that follows will demonstrate that:

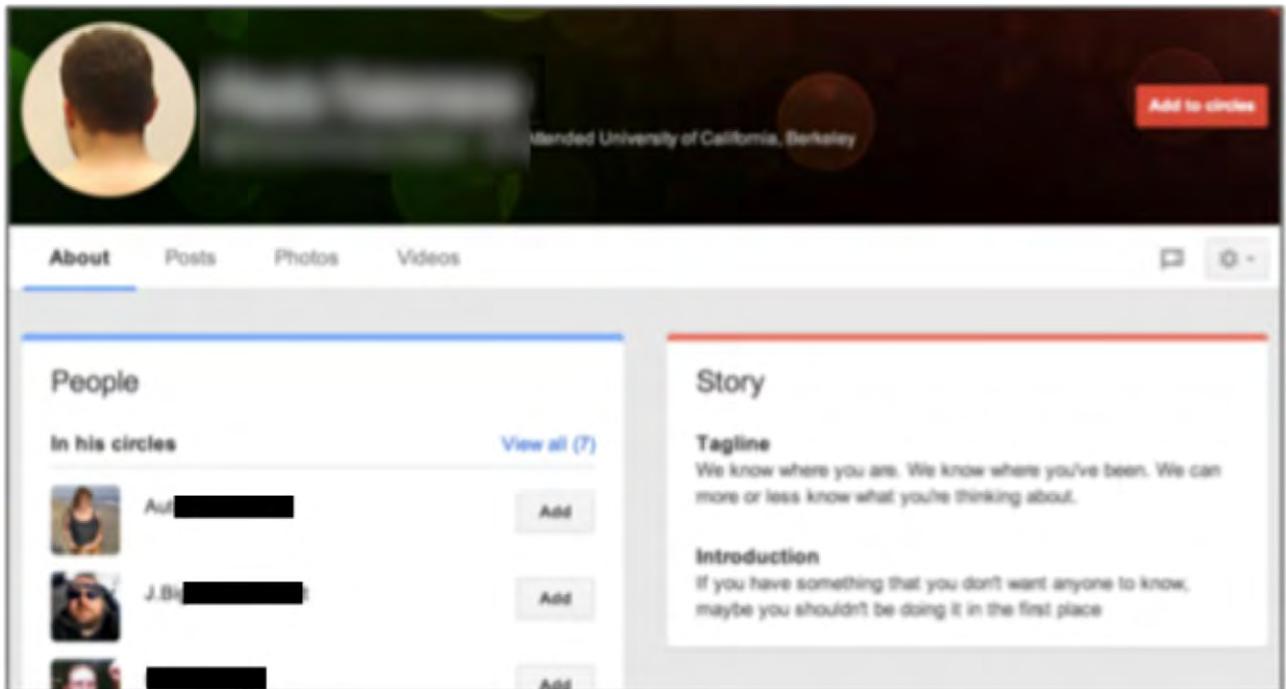
- 1) In order to grow the Google+ social network as quickly as possible, it appears that Google has turned a blind eye to a huge privacy vulnerability that allows users to add other users, including minors, to their Circles without their permission. This has occurred despite numerous complaints and demands from users that Google fix the privacy vulnerabilities with the Circles feature, something it appears Google has steadfastly refused to do.
- 2) This vulnerability further “imprisons” users by making it impossible for them to disassociate themselves (or delete themselves) from the Circles of Google+ users with whom they have no desire to be associated or affiliated with. In other words, once someone adds you to *his/her* Circle, there is no escape.
- 3) Google+ users routinely post pornographic material including material intended to drive traffic to commercial pornography sites, in clear violation of Google’s own User Content and Conduct Policy.
- 4) Google+ allows users to push unwanted pornographic images to other users (including teens and children) without their permission.
- 5) Google+ will often make Suggestions that users add teens and even children to their Circles, even when those users’ profiles, postings, community membership and Google+ search history include pornography, membership in sex-related communities, other age inappropriate content, and even pedophile related content. In this sense, the Google+ Suggestions feature actually serves as a recruitment tool to pedophiles and sexual predators – suggesting that such predators add additional children to their Circles.
- 6) Google+ users include several registered sex offenders or others who have been arrested for child pornography.
- 7) Google+ offers several Communities in which minors (or even adults posing as minors) advertise the trading of sexually explicit images and photographs of each other in apparent violation of its User Content & Conduct Policy.
- 8) Hundreds of suspected pedophiles and sexual predator rackets who traffic in highly sexual and exploitive images of their child victims appear to be both using Google+ and posting these images to the social network. Many of these images border on outright child pornography.
- 9) Google+ is also being used by suspected pedophiles to troll for underage users in order to engage them in sexually suggestive/sexually explicit online conversations, texts, and even videos.

10) Google+ users have been complaining about pedophile communities and sexual predators on the social networking site since it's launch. But other than small networks of volunteers who have limited success shutting down such Communities and banning users by reporting specific instances of violations to Google's User Content and Conduct Policy, Google appears to have done little to address the issue.

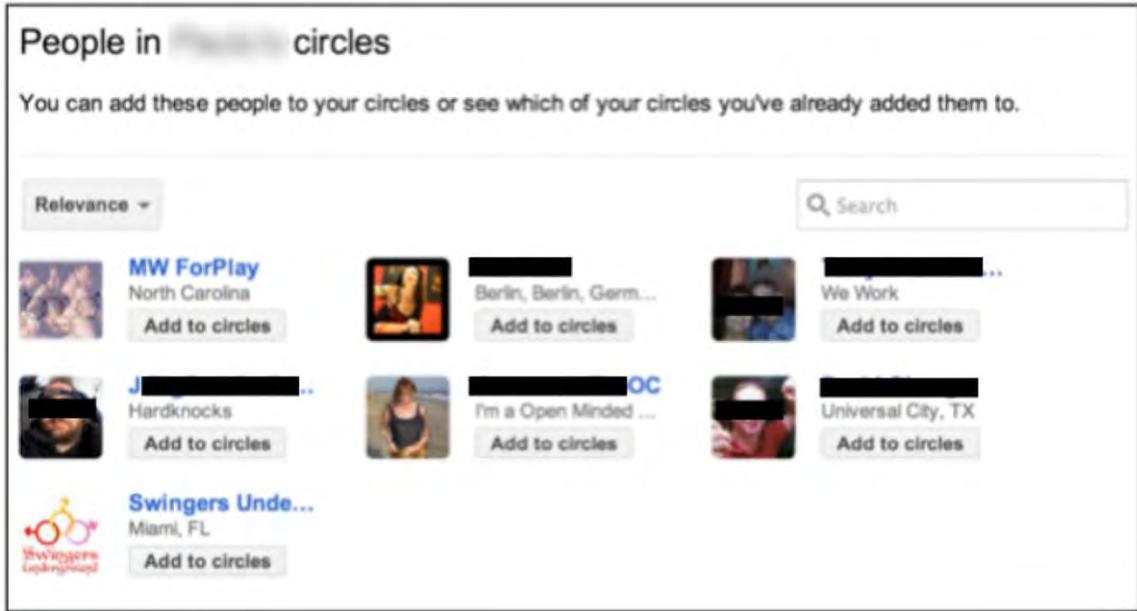
For the investigation that follows, two Google+ user profiles were created using aliases: Alias1, a male "hedonist" whose interests include "swinging lifestyles", and Alias2, a male whose profile and interests were intentionally left blank.

Google+ allows users to add other Google+ users (including teens and children) to their Circles without their permission.

- ✦ In order to grow the Google+ social network as quickly as possible, it appears that Google has turned a blind eye to a huge privacy vulnerability that allows users to add other users, including minors, to their Circles without their permission. This has occurred despite numerous complaints and demands from users that Google fix the privacy vulnerabilities with the Circles feature, something that Google has steadfastly refused to do.
- Google+ account and profile created to demonstrate Alias1’s interests in alternative sexual lifestyles. Alias1 subscribed to the “Swinging Lifestyles” community on Google+



- Alias1 clicks on the Google+ “Find People” tab to browse Google’s Suggestions for people he should add to his circle, most (but not all) of whom are involved in the “swinging” lifestyle. Alias1 adds 7 of Google+’s Suggestions, all of whom are obviously swingers based on a review of their profiles.



- Alias1 then adds four more people to his Circle: [redacted], an evangelical Presbyterian; [redacted], with the *DateSafeProject* – a teen dating sexual assault program; [redacted], with the *Center on Violence Against Women and Children*; and a 15-year-old high school student from Richardson, TX. (Note: The four were added temporarily in order to take screenshots and then immediately removed from Alias1’s “circle”).



- The “People in ‘Alias1’s’ circles” page above is publicly accessible and viewable by any user who clicks on the link from Alias1’s home page.

Google+ makes it impossible for its users to remove themselves from the Circles of other Google+ users with whom they do not want to be associated.

- In the example above, if our 15-year-old high school student wanted to delete himself from those included in Alias1's *publicly available* Circle, Google+ offers no functionality to allow him to do so.
 - Unlike Facebook or other social networks, Google+ does not require affirmative permission from other users in order to add them to your Google+ circle.
 - In other words, unlike Facebook where a user is required to send a "friend request" that must be accepted before adding a Facebook user to your list of friends, Google+ allows you to add *any* Google+ user you want without that user's permission.
 - Once someone is added to a user's Circle that information is *publicly available* to every other Google+ user.
 - Additionally, there appears to be no way for them to get out of that Circle unless the account holder who added them chooses to remove them him/herself.
- Google explains [here](#):

"People in your circles (but not the name of the circle) will appear to others on your Google Profile, unless you choose not to display that information... Name and photos of people in your circles as well as people who have added you to their circles will show on the side of your profile."

- Even blocking a user who has added you to their Circle does not delete you from their circle. As Google explains [here](#):

"When you block someone: You won't see their content in your stream (even though you'll remain in their circles)"

- Using the above example, not requiring Google+ users to ask for and receive permission before adding other users to their Circles or allowing them to remove themselves from the Circles of others with whom they have no desire to be associated is significant and highly troubling for the following reasons:
 - It's highly unlikely that any of the four non-swingers added to Alias1's Circle in the example above have any desire to be associated with him or the swinger lifestyle, but have no option of removing themselves from his Circle.
 - Not allowing the four non-swingers to remove themselves from Alias1's Circle could very well leave the impression with any friends, family, colleagues or employers who visit *the non-swinger's* pages that *they* may also share the same interests in swinging. That's because by default every Google+ user's profile page *also* shows which other Google+ users have *them* in their Circles unless users go

through a complicated process of editing their privacy settings to uncheck the “Show people who have added you to circles” box.

- Additionally, the implicit assumption among the swingers in Alias1’s Circle will likely be that the non-swingers he added to his Circle share the same interests. Will the non-swingers added to Alias1’s circle receive unwanted communications from swingers? Chat invitations? Will they be added to other swingers’ Circles?
- The dangers and concerns are not just hypothetical. Several threads on Google+ [include discussions](#) going back as far as two years from users desperate to get out of other users’ Circles and demanding a solution from the company... Google still has not addressed the concerns:



Google+ allows users to post pornographic material including material intended to drive traffic to commercial pornography sites.

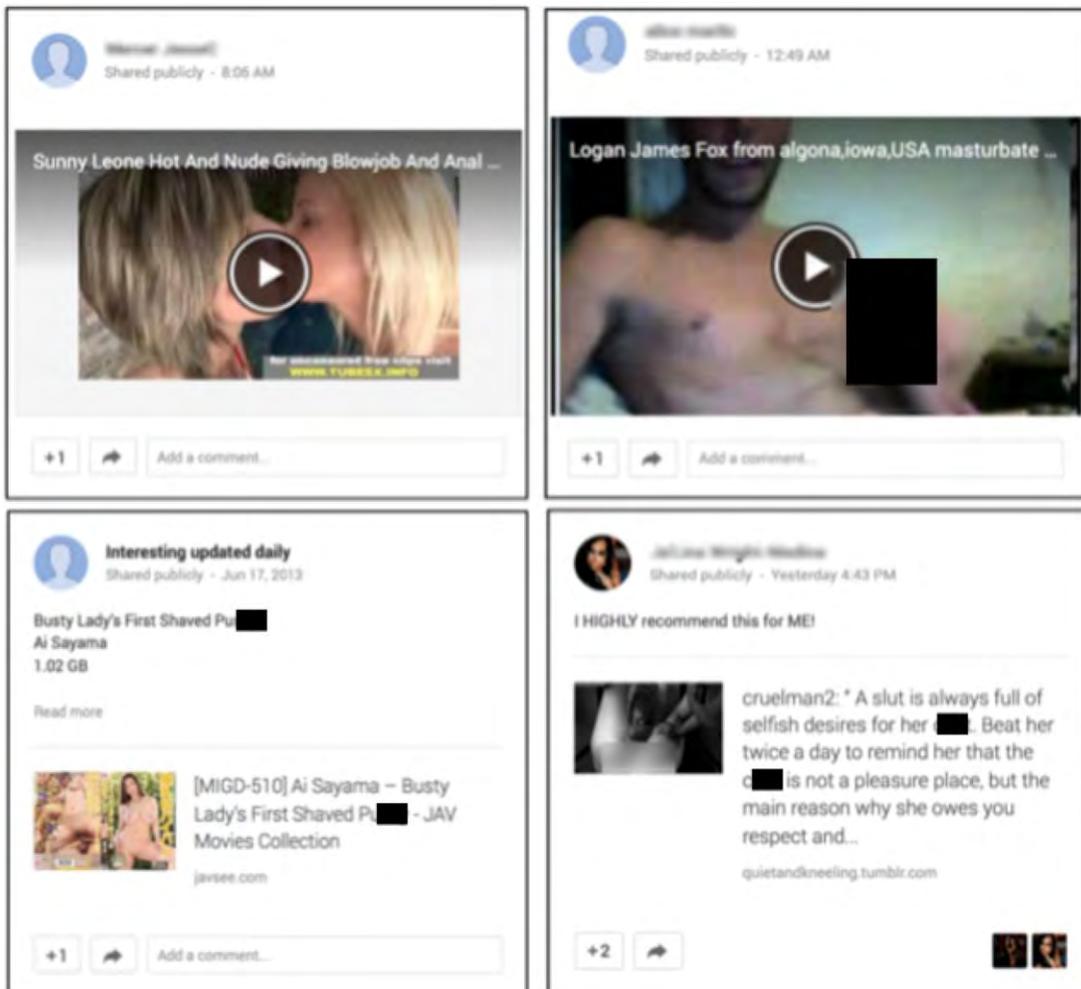
- As mentioned above, the Google+ [User Content and Conduct Policy](#) explicitly prohibits the posting of “sexually explicit material”:

9. Sexually Explicit Material

Do not distribute content that contains nudity, graphic sex acts, or sexually explicit material. Do not drive traffic to commercial pornography sites.

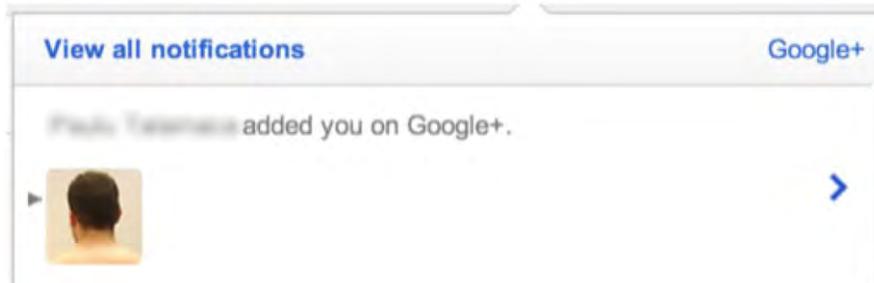
Your Profile Picture cannot include mature or offensive content. For example, do not use a photo that is a close-up of a person’s buttocks or cleavage.

- Despite Google’s prohibition on posting such material, finding pornographic imagery and content on Google+ (including images and movies) is exceedingly easy. It is also clear that many of the posted pornographic images are driving traffic to commercial pornography sites:

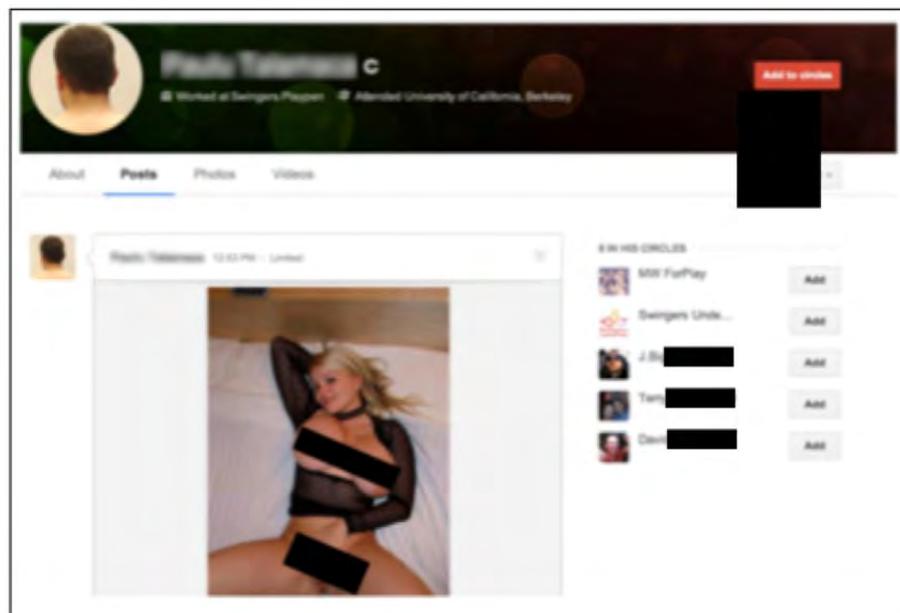


Google+ allows users to push unwanted pornographic images to other users -- including teens and children.

- Whenever a Google+ user adds another user to his/her Circle, that user receives a notification similar to the notification below.

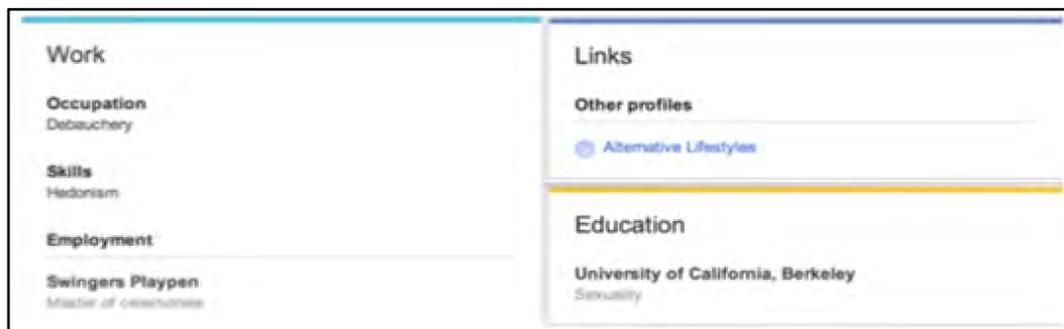


- For many Google+ users, their first instinct when receiving a notification will be to click on the name to learn more about the person and why the user added him/her to his Circle.
- In the Alias1 example above, if our 15-year-old high school student clicked on the notification that he had been added to Alias1's Circle, he would have been taken to Alias1's home page and seen the following pornographic image (**Note:**For the purposes of this test, the pornographic image has been censored and the photo has since been deleted by the user, not by Google. Additionally, the 15-year-old and the other non-swingers from Alias1's circle were both added and removed from his Circle before the pornographic image was posted).

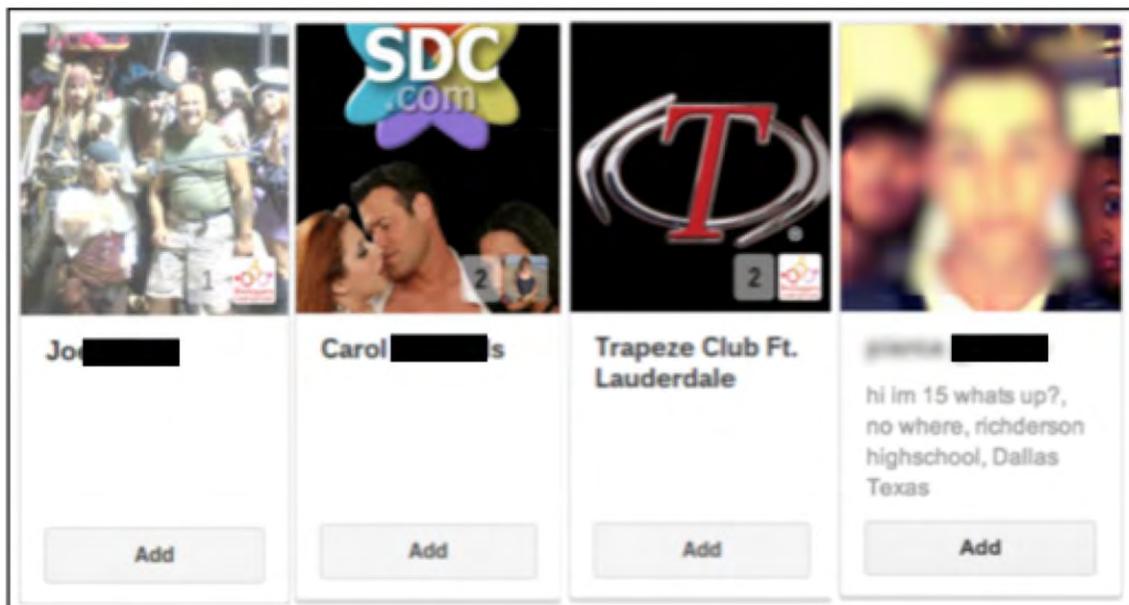


Google+ suggests that adult users add teens and children to their circles even when those adult users' profiles, postings, community membership and Google+ search history include pornography, membership in sex-related communities, or other age-inappropriate/sex-related content.

- Google+ includes a "People" tab to the top left of every user's profile page. Clicking on the tab takes users to a "Suggestions. People You May Know on Google+" page which offers suggestions of people users may want to add to their Circles.
- The profile of Alias1 included references to "swinging", "alternative lifestyles", "debauchery", and "hedonism".

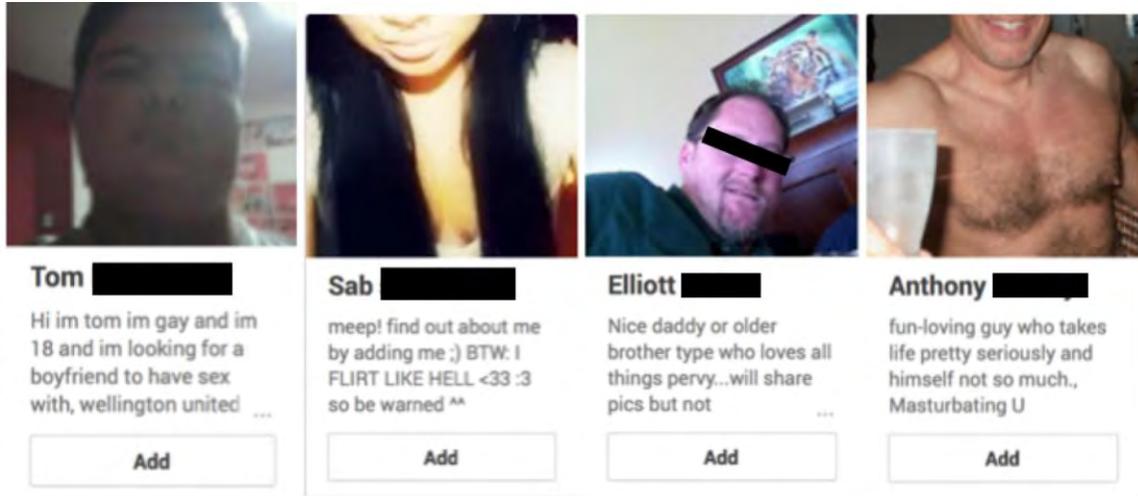


- Despite this, Google+ suggested that Alias1 add a 15-year-old high school student from Dallas, TX to his Circle:



- In a follow-up test, Alias2 searched Google+ exclusively for content related to teen pornography using a variety of keywords ("teens", "sex", "teen sex", "teen girls", "teen boys", "horny teens", etc.), sex-related Google+ communities, and other

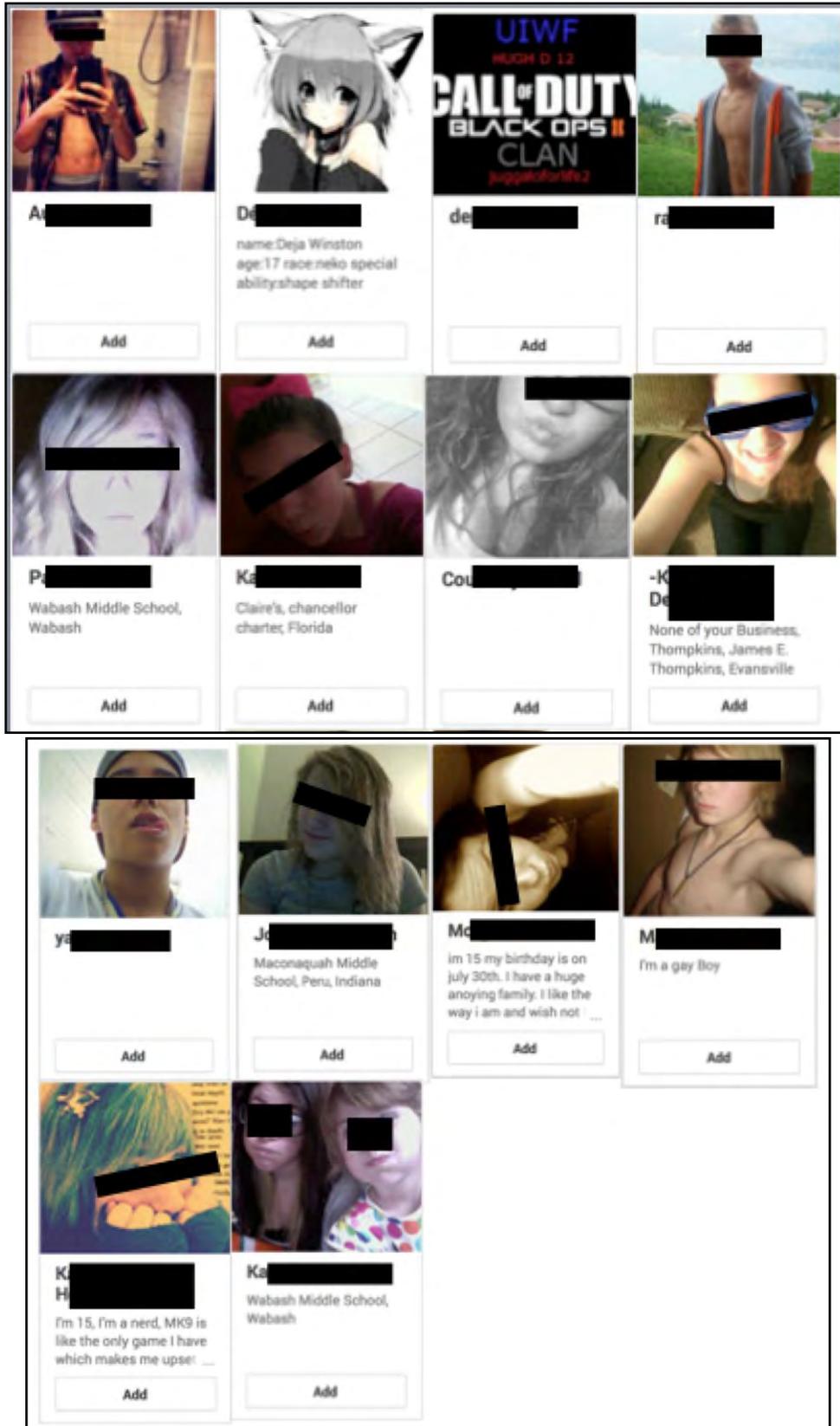
Google+ users who were interested in such topics. Google+ suggested 108 users that Alias2 should add to his Circle, many of whom were also interested in teen sex-related topics.



- Note that the [full profile](#) on Elliott [redacted] Google+ page above reads:

*Nice daddy or older brother type who loves all things pervy... will share pics but not publicly—been deleted before! 38 now and looking to chat and share pics with any gay guys (or straight or bi) that are into it. **Any age is cool with me—who am I to tell you you're too young? Right?** Anyhow, I will share more photos as I go and will be on messenger as time allows! Hope to visit with you all soon!*

- Google+ also suggested adding at least fourteen underage Google+ users to Alias2's circle – 12% of the Google+ suggestions. Note on the following page that in many cases, the underage Google+ users specifically reference their ages and schools:



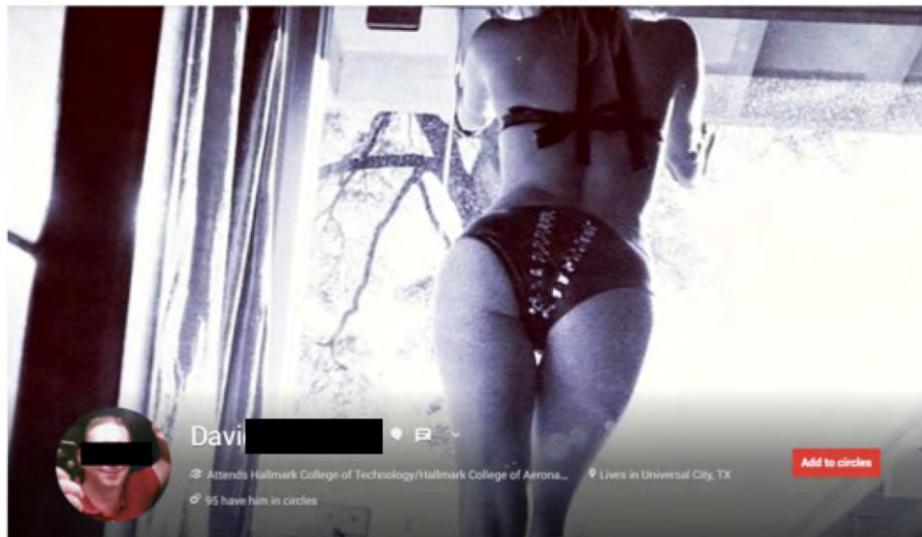
- In this circumstance, the privacy vulnerabilities related to Google+ Circles coupled with a Suggestion feature that “suggests” that Alias2 add children to his Circle is a

recipe for disaster. If Alias2 were so inclined, he could add any of the children above to his Circle as well as Elliott [REDACTED], the “pervy” Google+ user looking to share pics with “any age”. Because anyone Alias2 adds to his Circle receives a notification, [REDACTED] would be able to browse all of the photos and profiles of children in Alias2’s Circle and even add those children to his own circle without their approval.

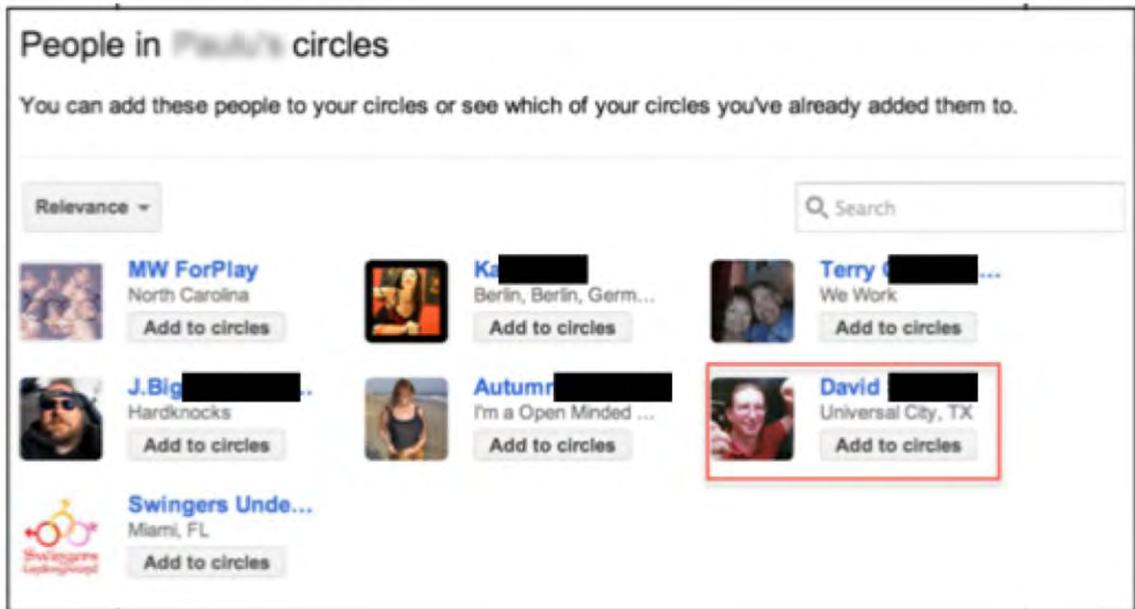
Google+ includes several users who are registered sex offenders or who have been arrested for child pornography.

- Utilizing sex offender registries, news stories, and other research tools, it was possible to identify several Google+ users who are either registered sex offenders or who have been arrested for child pornography. *Note: It is important to keep in mind that we do not presume to know whether all of the examples below have been convicted in a court of law and should thus be presumed innocent until conviction.* Examples include:

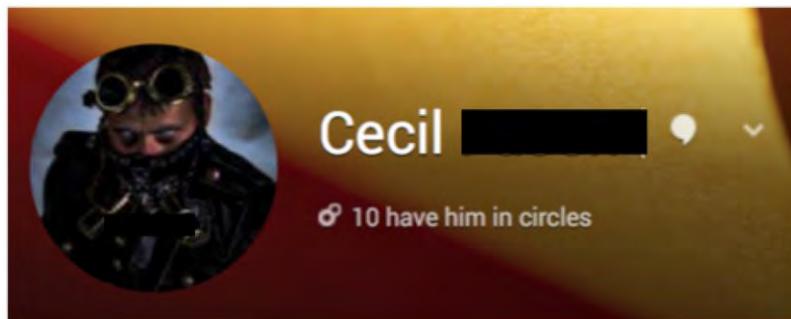
- [David \[REDACTED\]](#) – Arrested in June 2012 for possessing child pornography (Google+ profile [here](#))



Ironically, Google+ also suggested David [REDACTED] as someone Alias1 should add to his circle:



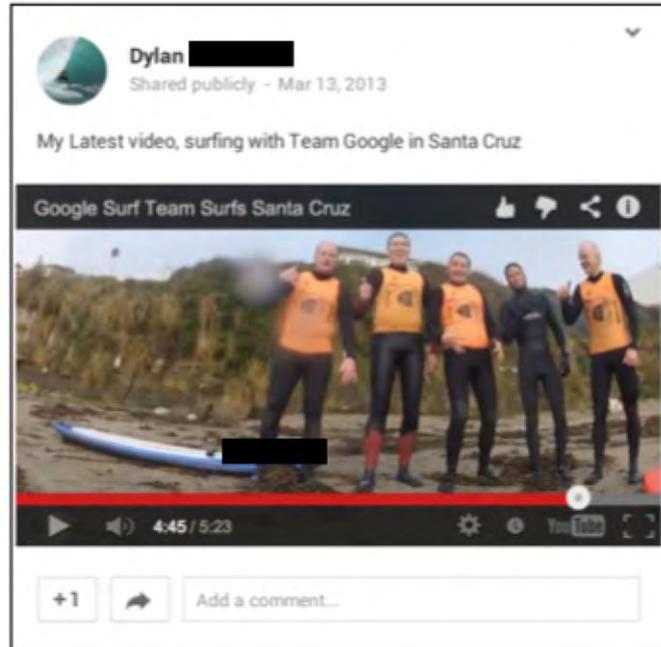
- [Cecil \[REDACTED\]](#) – Convicted in 2003 for indecent liberty with a minor. (Google+ profile [here](#))



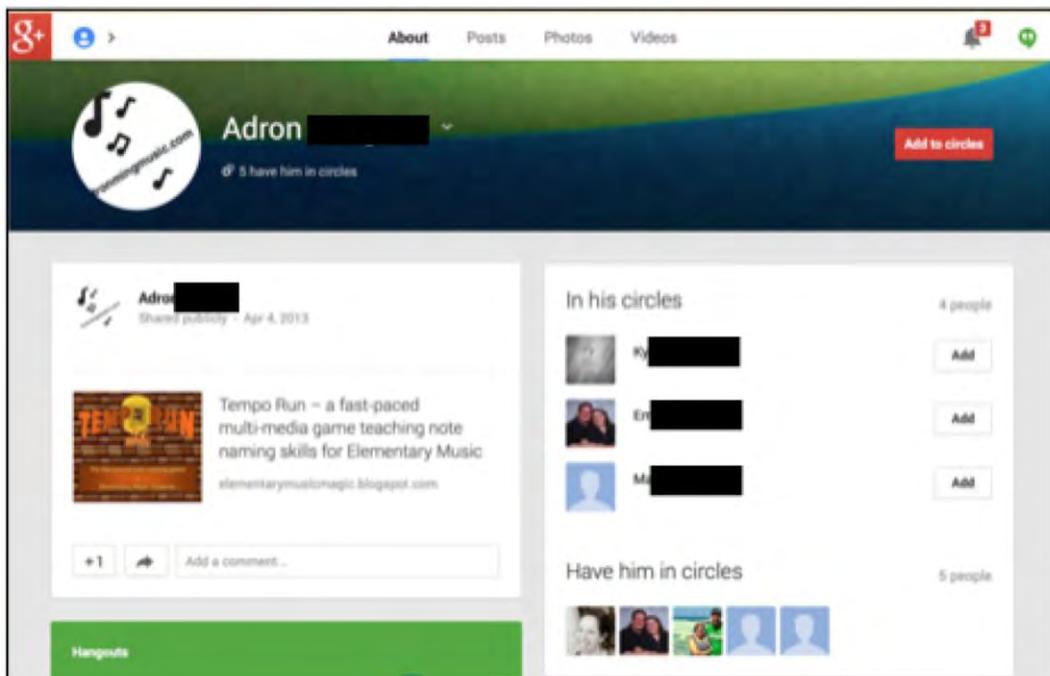
- [Dylan \[REDACTED\]](#) – Arrested on August 16, 2013 and accused of committing lewd acts with children, possessing child pornography, using a minor for sex acts, and sexually exploiting children. (Google+ profile [here](#))



Ironically, ██████ [posted](#) a video of himself with the Google surf team to his Google+ page only 5 months before his August 16th arrest:



- [Adron ██████](#) – Arrested on August 19th in Texas on suspicion of possessing child pornography (Google+ profile [here](#))

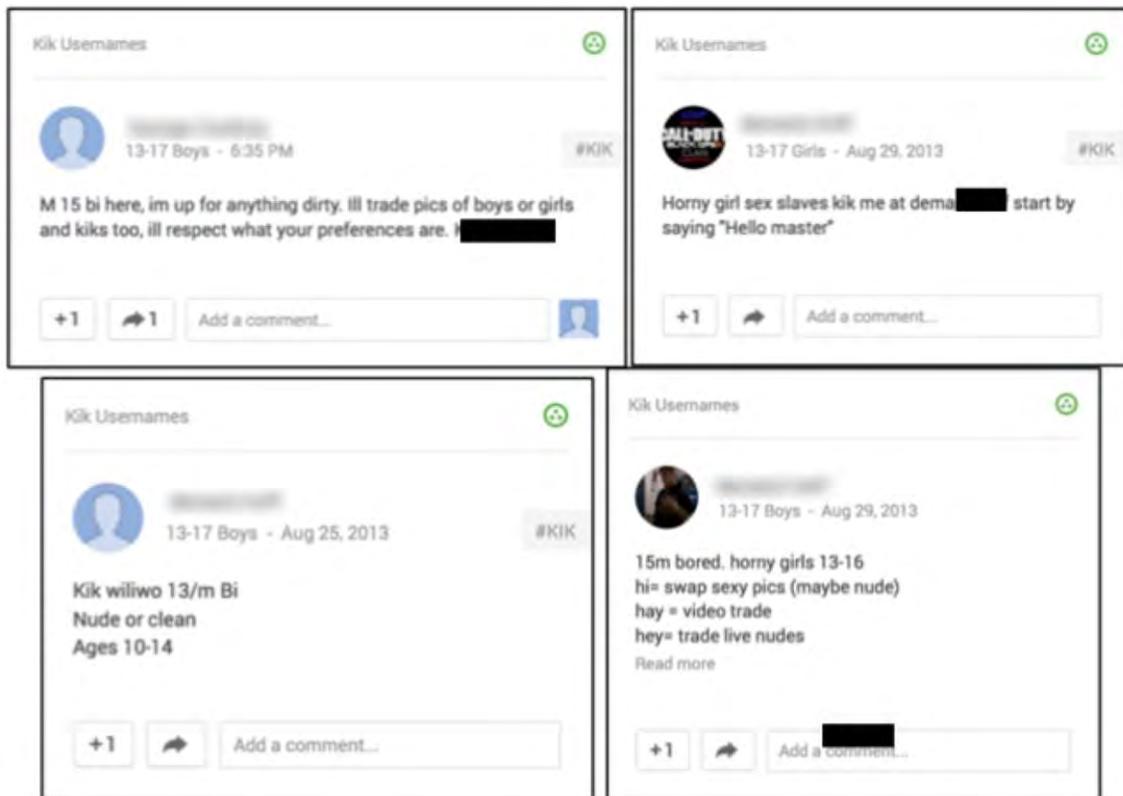


Google+ appears to be routinely used by minors to advertise the trading of sexually explicit images and photographs of each other in violation of Google’s User Content & Conduct Policy.

- Google+ has several sexually explicit Communities specifically focused on minors and teens including “[Horny Teens](#)” (904 members), “[Horny Teen Chat](#)” (311 members), “[Horny Teen Talk](#)” (43 members), and many others.
- In many of these Communities sexually explicit content focused on teens is not only tolerated, but also encouraged. The [community guidelines](#) for the Horny Teens Community for instance reads as follows:

*About this community: Welcome to a community created for all the horny teens that need someone else. **Explicit content may be present and is recommended and welcome here**, please just enjoy yourselves and let me know if there is anything I can do to make your experience better. ;)”*

- These Communities include hundreds, perhaps thousands of posts from underage Google+ users looking to share and trade sexually explicit photos of themselves or engage in sexually explicit texting. In one of the examples below, requests for “nude” photos are targeted at children as young as 10 years old.

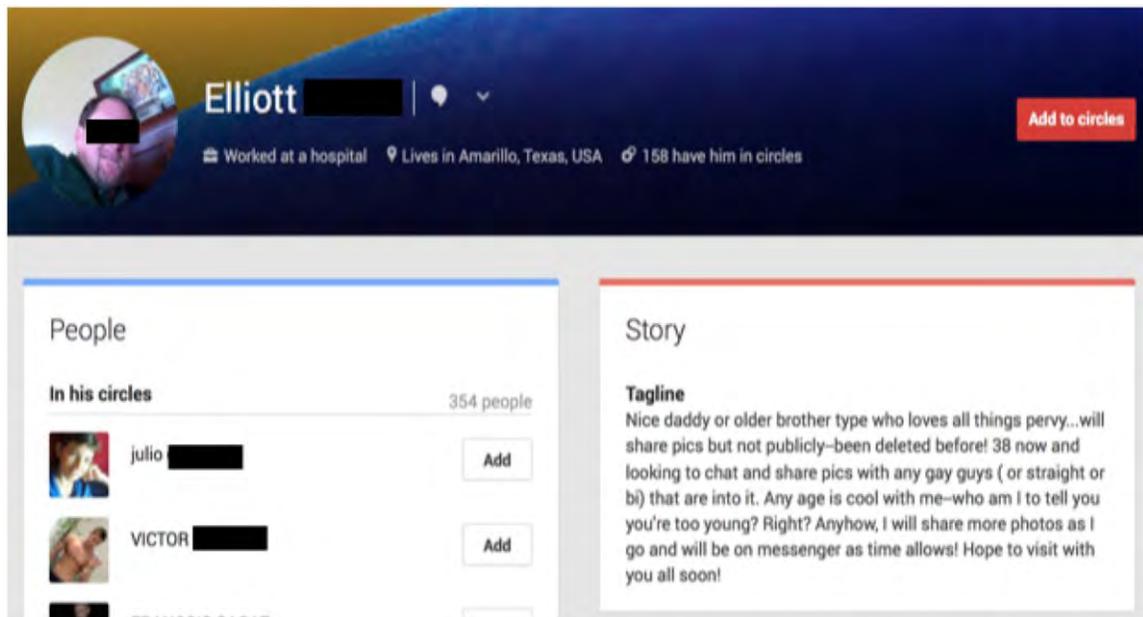


- It should be pointed out that in many cases it is impossible to determine whether

those posting requests for nude images of underage children are in fact other children and teens or adults because often no identifying information or ages are listed in their Google+ profiles.

Google+ appears to be a destination for hundreds of suspected pedophiles to share highly sexual and exploitive images of children, often bordering on outright child pornography.

- In what is unquestionably the most disturbing trend on Google+, hundreds of Google+ accounts trafficking in highly sexual images of children that often border on child pornography were identified. In many cases these Google+ users are operating out in the open as self-identified pedophiles.
- **Example 1:** Elliott [REDACTED] [profile](#) lists him as a 38-year-old Systems Operations Manager at a hospital in Amarillo, TX “*who loves all things pervy*” and is seeking to “*share pics... Any age is cool with me – who am I to tell you you’re too young? Right?*”



- [REDACTED] includes over 100 young boys in his [Circle](#). Many of the profile images are sexualized or even nude images of children -- in several examples boys who appear to be extremely young – under the age of 10 or even toddlers.

People in Elliott's circles

You can add these people to your circles or see which of your circles you've already added them to.

Relevance ▾



we [blacked out]

Add



kau [blacked out]

Add



1 [blacked out]

Add



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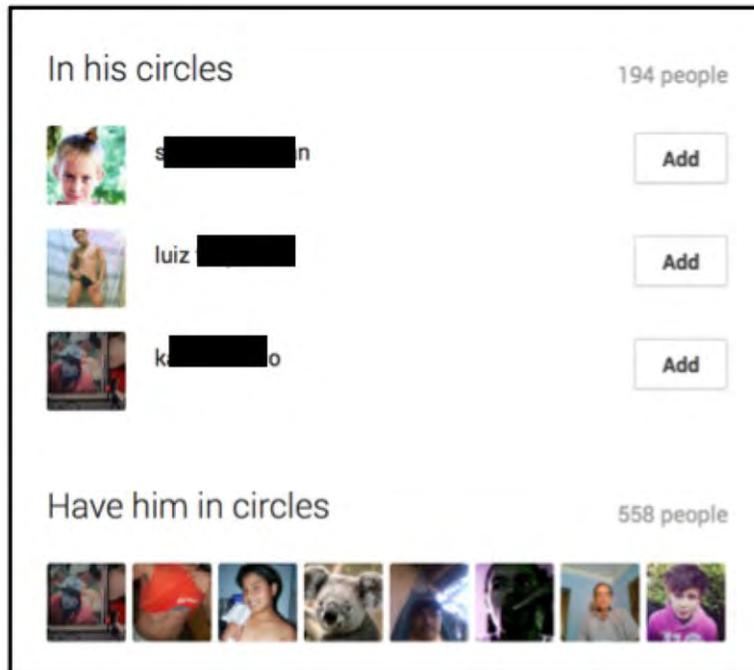
Add



jam [blacked out]
Kirkcudbright

Add

- **Example 2:** Thomas ██████████ [profile](#) whose profile image includes a photograph of a boy also includes over 50 boys in sexually suggestive/exploitive poses and various states of undress.



- ██████████ circle also includes a user whose profile image has been identified by the FBI as a universal symbol by which pedophiles identify each other.

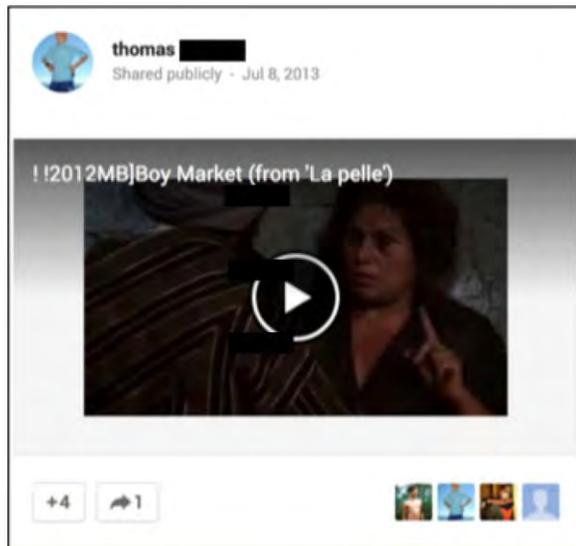


"The BoyLover logo' (BLogo) "is a small blue spiral-shaped triangle surrounded by a larger triangle, whereby the small triangle represents a small boy and the larger triangle represents an adult man. A variation of the BLogo is the Little Boy Lover logo (LBLogo), which also embodies a small spiral-shaped triangle within a larger triangle; however, the corners of the LBLogo are rounded to resemble a scribbling by a young child," said the document." Source: [WikiNews](#)

- In an August 30, 2013 Google+ entry targeted towards pedophiles ("**...pedof. etc de 12-17 años**"), ██████████ posts a photo album of images of 12-17 year old boys, many of whom are in sexually suggestive poses. The comments include postings from other Google+ account holders offering to share additional "**boy pictures and video**".

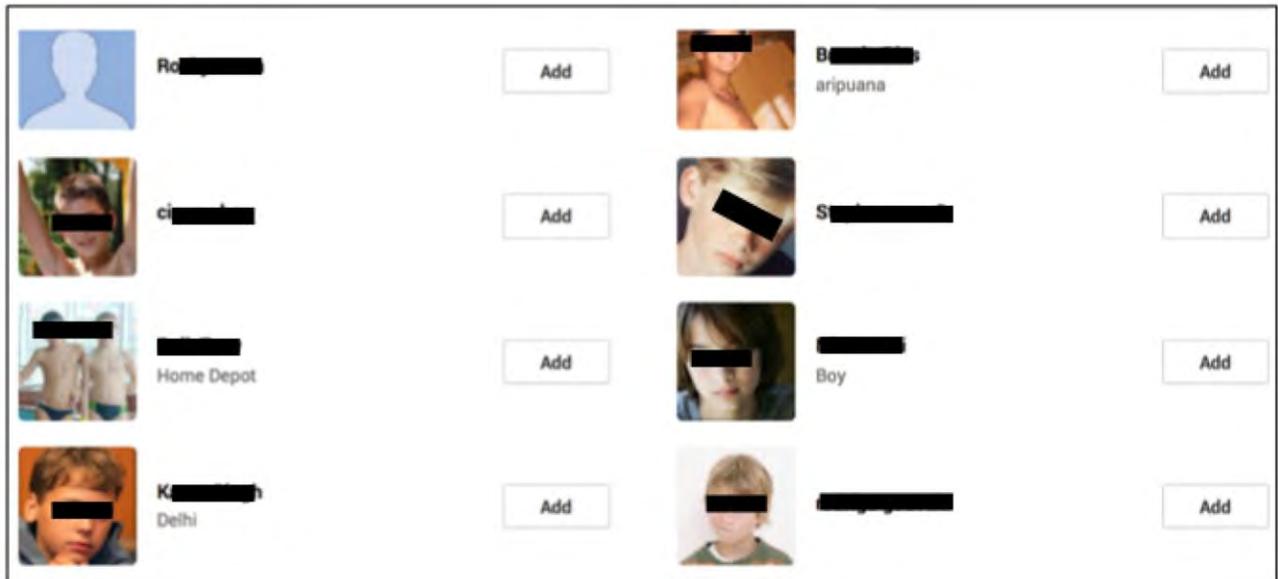
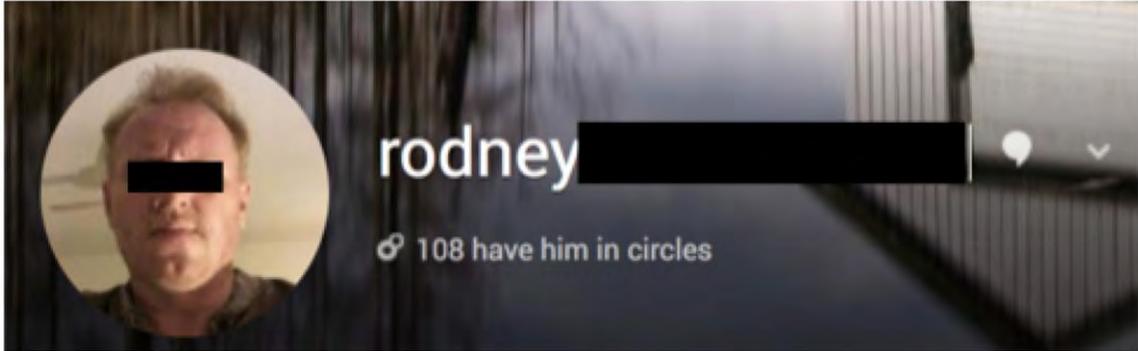


- In a July 8th, 2013 post, [redacted] includes a link to a film clip from the 1981 Italian war film “*La Pelle*”, which depicts men purchasing boys for sex at a “Boy Market”.



Google+ is being used by suspected pedophiles to engage in sexually suggestive/sexually explicit online conversations, texts, and even videos with minors.

- **Example:** Rodney [REDACTED] from Florida includes 154 users in his [Circle](#), almost all of who use photos of young boys as their profile photos.



- In a July 2013 Google+ entry, [REDACTED] engages in correspondence with a 16-year-old “looking for love” and shares his email and age... 30 years old:



Gays

Gays - Jul 2, 2013

Hi I'm [redacted] in 16 and looking for love I'm bi

+2



5 comments



rodney [redacted]

Jul 2, 2013

you can see my pic in my google acc please add me i live in florida usa

Read more

Add a comment...



rodney [redacted]

Jul 2, 2013

hi [redacted] iam bi to how r u wolfgang18881@gmail.com write mt please add me to



Gays Jul 2, 2013

How old r u



rodney [redacted]

Jul 2, 2013

iam 30 how r u



rodney wolf martin

Jul 2, 2013

hi add me [redacted] please



rodney [redacted]

Jul 2, 2013

you can see my pic in my google acc please add me i live in florida usa

Google+ users have been complaining about pedophile communities and sexual predators on the social networking site since it's launch. But other than users shutting down such Communities and banning users by reporting specific instances of violations to Google's User Content and Conduct Policy, Google has done little else to address the issue.

- While many Google+ Communities have sprung up to police the social networking site for pedophiles and sexual predators, these efforts are volunteer efforts by Google+ users themselves. Communities such as #reportchildporn, #stopsexualexploitation, #reportchildexploitation, and #pedophilia have had limited success banning Google+ accounts and Communities hosting child pornography.
- The problem is that these are volunteer efforts only. #reportchildporn for instance has only 45 members, a drop in the bucket when trying to police and shut down the hundreds and perhaps thousands of accounts and Communities of suspected pedophiles and sexual predators operating on Google+.
- Incredibly, many of these committed volunteers are being harassed themselves by the very same pedophiles and sexual predators they are trying to ban from Google+. Not surprisingly, these pedophiles often resort to exploiting the very same Circles vulnerability identified above by adding these volunteers to their pedophile Circles as described in this Google+ post to the [#reportchildexploitation](#) community:



john [redacted]
Shared publicly - Feb 7, 2013

Report Child Porn originally shared to Report Child Porn (Report to ... :

This guy has now two profile. He was the owner of several child porn communities, and pages. He has circled many of our google people who are online and do many shows to the public. He has them mixed in with his circles of sick people. He is now starting to come to private posts of these people. He has one profile where he shows his diseased penis in the profile pic.

<https://plus.google.com/u/0/b/105167530340100734207/110959585661091040248/posts>

Report and Block

He will be reported again to the #internetcrimesagainstchildren task force, and reported again to +Google +Google+ Help

The idea that these sick people are allowed to stay online and interact with society is a form of ignorance of the head groups. Intellectuals are suppose to protect the weak (children) and society, not give allowance to those who exploit children and harass others.

Report and Block He has came to our communities and joined, but we have banned him-reported him-and blocked him.

Just how many people does it take to get a sick pedophile offline?

Does it take a full media exposure?

#seesomethingsaysomething #reportchildexploitation #takeitdown

- In the post above, one can also get a sense of the frustration these Community volunteers have experienced trying to get Google to ban the accounts of pedophiles. Indeed, as the example on the next page demonstrates, even when the Google+ accounts of pedophiles are identified and reported, they are often still online months later:



- The above was posted on January 28, 2013. As of December 12, 2013 (almost 12 months later), [Heitor \[redacted\]](#) account is still active. [redacted] Circle includes over 467 young boys and girls, many in highly sexualized poses:

