RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Networking Sites and Privacy: An Audience Analysis on the Awareness and Utilization of Privacy Settings

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ABSTRACT

Our society has witnessed the rapid growth of social networking sites and their influence in our everyday life. There are people who consider social media as a medium for their self-expression. An individual can easily access and he or she can share his/her thoughts with others. Posts, status, updates, comments, instant messages, video uploads, tweets, and text have become a regular part in their lives. The problem comes when people share their photos, videos, personal information and private thoughts. This research paper is a study on audience analysis on the awareness and utilization of privacy settings. Survey findings indicated that the majority of social media users have understanding of privacy settings and they make use of their privacy settings. Individuals may understand the dangers of posting personal content on social networking sites, but still they add their personal information on social media.

Key words: Social Network, Security, Privacy settings

INTRODUCTION

Our society is witnessing a rapid growth of social networking sites (SNS) as well as their integration into our daily life. The popularity of these sites is increasing day by day. Social networking sites are web based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system; create a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and spread their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and structure of these connections may vary from site to site.

The literal meaning of privacy, as defined in the New Oxford English dictionary is the 'absence or avoidance of publicity or display; the state or condition from being withdrawn from the society of others, or from public interest; seclusion'. The aim of the study is to find whether people are aware about the privacy settings and whether they utilize it properly.

Many people utilize social networks like Facebook, twitter, linked in, Google plus, My Space etc. These networks allow users to publish details about themselves and their lives and also connect to their friends and colleagues. Social networking sites collect a range of data about their users, not only for privacy issues but also to sell this data to advertisers.

While joining a social networking site, the user is asked to fill forms with a series of questions. The profile is generated using the answers to these questions, which typically include descriptors such as age,

location, interests, and an about me section. Most sites also encourage users to upload a profile photo. The visibility of a profile varies from site to site and depends on the user discretion. Some search engines like friendstertribe.net, make them visible to any one whether the viewer has an account or not. Linked In controls what a viewer may see based on whether he or she has a paid account. Sites like My Space allow users to choose whether they want their profile to be public or friends only. Facebook takes a different approach. Users who are part of the same network can view each other's profile. Structural variations around visibility and access are one of the primary ways that social networking sites differentiate themselves from one other.

There are people who consider social media as a medium for their self expression. An individual can easily access them and he/she can share his/her thoughts with others. Most social networking sites allow users to leave personal messages to their friend's profile. Social networking sites often have a private messaging feature similar to webmail. Private messages and comments are popular in social networking sites. These sites also allow users to share video and images.

In uses and gratification theory, Blumler and Katz suggest that audience play an active role in choosing and using the media. Audience take an active part in the communication process and are goal oriented in their consumption. The theorist says that a media user obtain the media source that best fulfils the needs of the user. This research paper focuses on the theory to analyse whether people aware about the privacy settings provided by the social networking sites.

Literature review

Sonia Livingstone, in 'New media and society', published in 2008 explains the use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. According to her, the explosion in social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and Friendster is widely regarded as an exciting opportunity, especially for youth. Yet the public response tends to be one of puzzled dismay regarding a generation that, supposedly, has many friends but little sense of privacy and a narcissistic fascination with self-display (Dinh, 2012). This article explores teenager's practices of social networking in order to uncover the subtle connections between online opportunity and risk.

"While younger teenagers relish the opportunities to recreate continuously a highly-decorated, stylistically-elaborate identity, older teenagers favor a plain aesthetic that foregrounds their links to others, thus expressing a notion of identity lived through authentic relationships"(livingstone,2008). The article further contrasts teenager's graded conception of `friends' with the binary classification of social networking sites, this being one of several means by which online privacy is shaped and undermined by the affordances of these sites.

Individuals are no longer just consumers of online information. They now play a significant role in creating content for others to consume. SNS's and the internet as a whole are public spaces, used to connect people. (P J Bateman, 2010).Information posted to SNS's may also be used for other purposes; this is not always made clear to users by the SNS. FB founder Mark Zukerberg said, when commenting on this issue "People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people. That social norm is just something that has evolved over time" (Tan X, 2011). When users of a SNS use the site they are agreeing to the terms and conditions of that site. Therefore if a fraud activity of some sort occurs it can be argued that the fault is on the user due to the information being made public voluntarily, and the result of poor user awareness, having potentially not read or understood the privacy statement. Younger users are more likely to share their personal information and are less likely to take the time to read privacy statements, suggesting that adult or older users are more concerned with privacy issues than younger users (Hooper T, 2010).

The Internet has become a global medium for the gathering of personal information, generating data about users to assist in targeted marketing (Hooper T, 2010).Personal details such as name, age, gender, likes, geographic location and favourite; music, movies, and books are sold to third parties. With this information marketers are able to target users with personalised advertising (Hugl U, 2010).Data brokers also compile consumer information from both public and private sources and sell it to different organisations for a range of purposes including data mining, profiling and pre-recruiting information as well as for economic espionage.

SNS's unfortunate motivation for profit has been seen to overshadow their concerns for user privacy (Hugl U, 2010).

SNS's are taking advantage of dated governing laws to allow them to dictate user privacy policies, therefore exploiting users private and personal information without consent. "The globally recognized and accepted privacy fair practices essential for an effective online privacy policy are; Notice, Choice, Access, Security, and Enforcement" (McGrath, 2012). SNS users should not be dependent on SNS's to dictate how much privacy users will have. This is something that must be established in law. When the law offers so little protection, it allows for the deliberate misuse of data without the need for consent. This situation is not helped by the global nature of the internet, with privacy protection varying in different jurisdictions (McGrath, 2012).

Using SNS's and posting personal information both publically and privately can lead to a multitude of risks including; identity theft, sexual exploitation, online stalking, and cyber harassment. Users may also be subjected to public scrutiny, possibly creating permanent records that may negatively affect the user in the future. The average user voluntarily provides information about their home address, pet's name, where he/she went to school, mother's maiden name and other family details. This is the typical information used for security or lost password questions for online services (Grabner-Krauter, 2009). You would expect that poor social network practices would only lead to outcomes that will negatively impact SNS's (Dinh, 2012). In recent years; Bebo admitted that a bug in its systems enabled users to view other users private information (Grabner-Krauter, 2009), Twitter agreed to a settlement with the US Federal Trade Commission over charges that it put users privacy at risk by failing to protect their personal information and FB users found their personal details exposed and searchable on Google, Bing and Yahoo. Yet users keep using SNS's even after reports of privacy violations have been released (Sangani, 2010).

Users who participte in social networking sites inorder to gratify socializing needs typically desire to meet new people, sustain offline relationships and create a sense of community (Ellisonet,2007). Research by Augustine J Gallion found that 96 percentage of users used social networking sites to keep in touch with old friends, 91.1 percentage maintain existing relationships and 56.4 percentage to find new friends.

Objectives

1. To find out whether people are aware about the privacy settings in social media.
2. To find out whether people utilize privacy settings offered by the social networking sites.
3. To find out are social networking sites provide enough privacy for the users.

Methodology

The study uses Quantitative methodology for analysis and interpretation. Quantitative data is any data that is in numerical form such as statistics, percentages etc. This survey was conducted among 50 people. The source of primary data collection was quantitative method, using questionnaires. Secondary data is collected from published books, journals, articles, websites etc.

Universe of the study: Social Media Users

Population of the study: Social Media Users in India

Sample of the study: The youngsters are more interested in using social media networks, so youngsters are considered for the study.

Sampling: The most relevant results will be available from the youngsters, whom use mobile phones, laptops, tablets, etc., so youngsters are considered for providing the data.

Analysis and findings

According to the data, youngsters are using internet the most. They use internet for entertainment and for communicating with friends and family. These younger generations are significantly more likely than their old generation to seek entertainment through online videos, online games, and virtual worlds and they are also more likely to download music, movies, pictures etc. Middle aged group (31-40) are using internet more for online shopping and online banking, compared with the youngsters. E-mail communication is equally important for everyone.

In the collected data the number of regular users of internet is 44 and 6 out of the total samples are not regular users of internet. The percentage of regular users of internet is 88 and 12 per cent are not regular users of internet. But these 12 per cent are also aware about internet and its importance. These twelve percent of those not using the web said it's simply not relevant to their life and the internet was too expensive. The eighty eight percent people suggest that they can maintain a good relationship with others, and they got information, entertainment through the internet. According to the world wide survey there were 361 million internet users in 2000. But there are more than five times as many internet users as there were in 2000 (Global internet user survey, 2012).

The popularity of social networking sites has rapidly increased over the past few years. From the survey, it is clear that 90% people are actively participating in social networking sites. Only 10% people are not following social networking sites. The majority says social networking sites provide much kind of benefits and services to its users like helping them to connect with the new people, share opinion with likeminded people, and stay in touch with old friends and colleagues. The rest 10% says about the privacy concerns and they don't want to share their personal details with others. Some people think that it conserves precious leisure time.
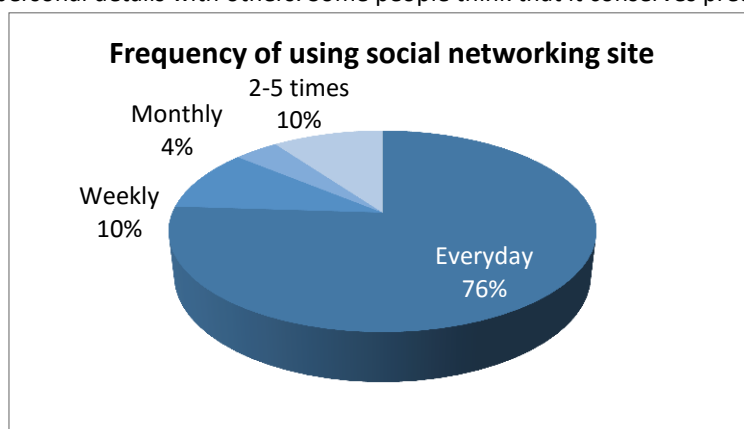
As per data analysis of usage pattern, the frequency of using social networking sites, daily users are more in number. 38 people consider it as a part of their daily time table. The numbers of respondents accessing networking sites weekly are about 5 and they prefer weekends or free time.About 2 respondents only use social networking monthly. Among the samples, 5 members use social networking sites 2 to 5 times a week. They repeatedly use sites in some days in a week and avoid rest of the days. 76% users are actively using social networking sites.

Social networking activities win to get people's attention. About 23 students use social networking sites 2 to 5 hours a week. 15 respondents use networking for less than one hour. 9 are engaged in networking for 5 to 10 hours per week. Only three respondents use networking sites for more than ten hours. From the data it's clear that, most of the users limit their usage time to 2 to 5 hours. Social media allows people to give expression to their life in a new way, to stay connected to others. All these factors tempt people to spent time for social networking activities.

The collected data shows that,for 14 respondents,Entertainment is the attracting element in social networking sites, 20 respondents choose connecting to everyone, 3 respondents vote for information, another 13consider that all the three factors can attract the audience. Social media has become the dominant in internet platform because of its advantages. Various social networking sites give importance to the customer satisfaction. So they grew up fast. Social networking sites not only provide a way to keep in contact with friends but also provide professional job opportunities through online networking.

According to the survey, 41 people motivate their friends to become a part of social networking site at the same time 9 people do not encourage others to become a part of social media. Today almost everyone would definitely have a profile in social media like face book, twitter, Google +, LinkedIn etc. 82% consider social media as an important part in their life so they encourage others to become a part of this. Rest 18% is also a part of this, but they won't give self promotion for this. There are a lot of advantages for using social networking websites that's why it has a large number of followers.

The data collected shows that, for 34 respondents Facebook provide more personal satisfaction, 10 respondents choose twitter, 3 respondents vote for Google +, another 1 vote for LinkedIn, 'other social media' are the attracting element for other 2 respondents. Facebook is the most popular social networking site of all time (Global internet user survey, 2012). The popularity of face book has increased drastically. Within years Facebook has reached 1+ billion users milestone. Social media helps us in many ways and also harming us in many ways. New applications and extra privacy features are developing and implemented continually in every social media.

The data obtained proves that Social media is highly popular among youth. 44 respondents' rated social media as highly popular among youth, 5 people marked it as popular and only one person consider social media has only average popularity among youth. Social media plays an important role in youth life. These sites can be used as news and information source. Through social media youth can stay connected with friends helps to build better relationships with everyone.
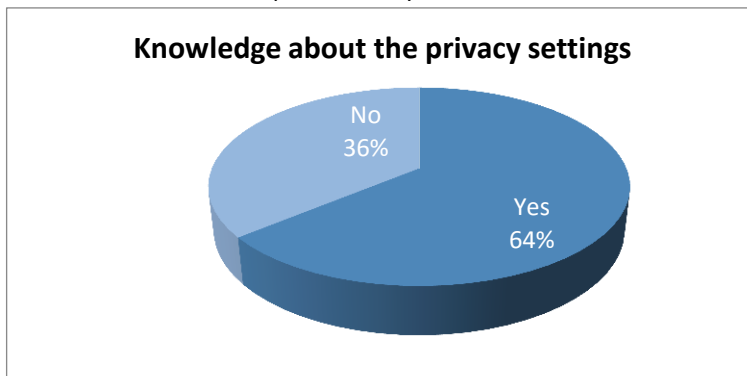

The above diagram shows that 64% respondents are aware about the privacy settings in social media at the same time 36% respondents are not aware about the privacy settings. Posts, status, updates, comments, instant messages, video uploads, tweets, and text have become a regular part in their lives. The problem comes when people share their photos, videos, personal information and private thoughts. People should be careful about the amount of information that they reveal to people we don't know. It is easy to create a fake profile online and people are not always who they say they are. Even items we delete can remain on the internet for years. So the users should be careful about the privacy settings in that particular social media.

People upload their photo on social networking sites, which provide an identity for the users. According to the sample 82% respondents were uploaded their photo which can be recognized by others. 16% doesn't upload their photo. Youngsters like to share photo with their friends. They take different kind of pictures and upload in the social media. But this is not a good tendency especially for ladies. Our profile can be attacked by other persons. They can easily misuse the photos. Everyone knows this fact then also they share their picture with others. Photos can easily gain the attention of others. Through their photo the profile owner attract others to their profile. This collected data also shows people like to share photo with others.
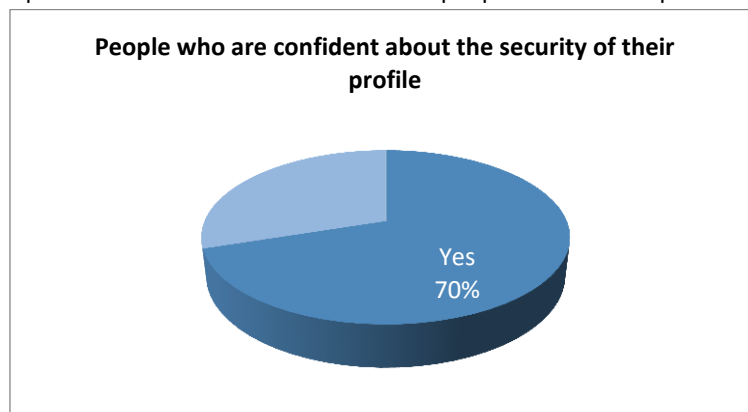
The collected data shows that 70% people are confident about the security of their profile. 30% people are not confident about the safety of their profile. Most social networking sites require users to agree to terms of use policy before they may use for their services. Social networking sites store data of their users or even share it with third parties. Identity thefts, sexual predators, are example for the privacy concern in social media. If we follow the privacy instructions, everyone can keep their profile safe. To minimize the risk of identity theft, carefully monitor the information which is publicly available on social media or make the profile private. Using different passwords for the social media sites, email accounts and any online commerce sites can also make it more difficult for identity thieves to acquire information about a person.

Privacy settings on our account help to control who has access over our personal information. Among this sample, 15 respondents shows their personal details to their friends, 8 people choose friends of friends, 2 people make their profile public and 10 people keep all information safe. 9 respondents show data to their specific friends. 6 people don't put any information about themselves. Most of them are trying to keep their profile private and safe. That means majority of the respondents do not want to put themselves into a trouble.
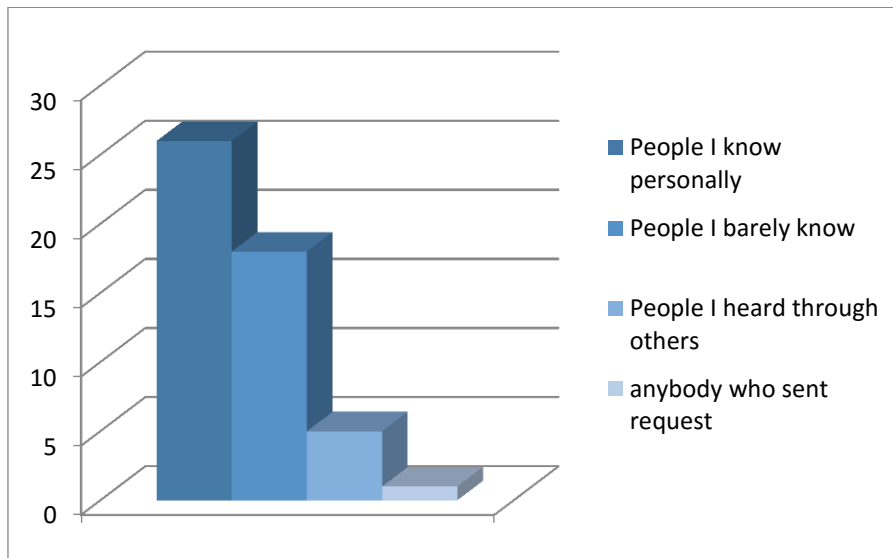
According to the survey,26 respondents were accepting people they know personally.18 will accept people they barely know and 5 were accept people they heard through others. 1 person is ready to accept anyone as his friend. 26 people were selecting a safe zone. If we accept a person, without knowing his background is not good for our profile. We couldn't share anything with that person. This data shows that 6 respondents are ready to accept anyone. People post detailed and specific information on social media (including phone numbers, addresses, schedules, social plans, etc.). Hacking is one of the major privacy concerns in social media. If we accept anyone as a friend they can easily found data from our profile.'The most common strategy for privacy protection is decreasing profile visibility through restricting access to friends. It is also a very weak mechanism.Restricting profile visibility to "friends only" simply means restricting it within the visible part of the iceberg. As long as users feed the invisible part of the iceberg with extensive personal data that they update voluntarily and continually, their privacy is at risk' (lachello& Hong, 2007). For avoiding this problem, most of the respondents add people they know personally.

This diagram shows that from how long a person is careful about his personal details. From the above data analysis, it is clear that 18 people were keeping all the data safe. 21 respondents adjust their profile after knowing more about the privacy settings. 2 were changing the settings after facing privacy issue on their profile and 9 respondents do not remember when they adjust their profile. If a person newly joining to a social networking site he has to adjust all the privacy functions. A person has to keep it safe and don't make the data public. Everyone has the right to keep their data secret.

Users must be aware of the terms and conditions offered by these social networking sites. It is the decision of the user, whether he/she will continue to use the social networking sites.

Conclusion

Survey findings indicate that majority of social media users have an understanding of privacy settings of social networking sites and also make use of them wisely. Users understand the dangers of posting personal content on social networking sites. But, still they add their personal information on social media. The study proved that the users are afraid of the intrusion of their privacy by a third person.

Major privacy issues with social networking sites are their privacy agreement. The privacy agreement states that the social network owns all of the content that users upload. This includes the danger of pictures, videos and messages being stored in these social networking sites database, even if the user decides to terminate his/her account.

The most vulnerable victims of private information sharing behavior are preteens and teenagers. There is age- restrictions on numerous websites, but these restrictions are not found that much effective.

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