

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND PRIVACY ISSUES CONCERNING YOUTHS

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Abstract: *With social networking sites allowing the young users the opportunity to mingle with a huge network of known as well as unknown friends. It has become like an addiction for the young adults to create online profiles and certainly they are hooked to mobile phones, laptops and PCs. Accessing the internet through the mobile phones has made it even easier for the young generations to get logged-in into Facebook, Orkut or Twitter most of the time and post updates about their daily activities. Participating in the social networking sites and having an increased number of friends on the list is supposed to be a trend that cannot be ignored in any way. Nonetheless, the so called 'friend list' also includes some unknown friends and sharing of thoughts or personal stuffs to them might not be a good idea. Social networking sites offer privacy measures and encourage sharing of personal information. Hence, this paper would focus on how and in what ways the revelation of private information by the users are safe and further does it affect the privacy of the young users in any way. Moreover, the paper would also analyze the privacy settings made by the popular social sites and its effectiveness with case studies.*

Key words: *social networking sites, youth, privacy, security, new media, hacking.*

Introduction

Over the past few years, the popularity of social networking sites (SNS) has increased immensely. In the internet age, these social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, LinkedIn, MySpace, etc not only offer the scope of connecting also offers the scope of getting updates at any possible hour of the day. What is more interesting is that only a little knowledge about how these sites work is enough to start. The least that a user has to do is to create a profile and get started. There are both positive and negative sides of social networking sites. The basic objective of using the social networking sites is online communication and interaction. For using the social networking sites, the users need to make an online profile through which they can share information and messages with their friends. If there are friends in these sites then

there are huge numbers of strangers too. Hence, the information shared is also visible to these unknown persons. However, there are other concerns apart from privacy issue, subjects like identity theft and online harassment are common and the young users are most vulnerable to such crimes.

Mostly the sites encourage the users to start the account or to create the profile using real names and information as they offer various privacy measures where the personal information is not disclosed. But this is only the initial stage. It is up to the users that how they handle their account and share information with others. It has been observed that the users especially the young ones do not hesitate in adding and giving personal details to a large number of unknown people. Young users especially in their late teens are the ones particularly at risk as they are not as mature as an adult even like the ones in mid-twenties. Whereas they are quite capable of using computers and proficiently form and maintain accounts in SNS. Their capability and proficiency sometimes become their undoing as they are unable to manage the safety and precautionary issues adroitly leading to problems like hacking, identity theft, etc.

Literature Review

Social networking sites and associated privacy concerns is one of the most debated topic nowadays as participation in such sites has increased dramatically. A number of journals and articles come up with this issue that how the increase in the usage of social networking sites is leading to various online crimes. A blog in a website DashBurst clearly mentions that “with the rise of social media, privacy concerns have taken a backseat in recent years (Trenchard, 2013).” It talks about the potential dangers that a young user may likely face while using the social networking site. Thus it becomes very important for one to read the privacy policies and measures offered by these sites in order to have a safe online networking. Further, the blog also states the privacy policy changes brought out by the popular sites like Facebook and Twitter and how it has affected the users. One of the main reasons cited by experts and research studies for such tremendous popularity of the social networking sites is the emergence of sites that offer the scope of connectivity in this virtual world almost at any time of the day. People get in touch with near and dear ones with the services like Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, LinkedIn, MySpace, etc (Dutton, 2004). In social networking sites, sharing of private information and giving updates of day to day happening is a latest trend. These sites heavily caters to the young brigade especially the age group between 15 to 25 years. Sometimes it has been observed that youngsters use these sites for sharing news or any information rather than sharing it personally. Even if they meet in the morning in college, information is shared mostly through the social media sites. It shows the growing dependency on such sites (Kabay, 2010). It is strange enough to note that communication process is hugely getting affected through the advancement of the internet. With the controversial changes made by the popular social networking site Facebook in 2009, it had become quite impossible to maintain a safe invisible account (Trenchard, 2013). By analysing the personal information revelation behaviour of the users, it has been mainly found out that this factor mainly revolves around hobbies and interests although it also has other directions. Like for instance, semi-public information may include schooling or employment details, whereas personal information may include drinking or drug habits or sexual orientation, etc (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). The apparent openness of users of the social networking sites calls for unnecessary attention from strangers quite possibly leading to online victimization. It is very easy to join a social networking site. But without proper knowledge of the security measures, one can be a easy trap for the third parties like the hackers (Gross & Acquisti, 2005).

Privacy window offered by Social Networking Sites

By taking the example of Facebook, the point of privacy issues can be made clearer. This particular site encourages users to start an account by providing authentic details. Moreover, the default settings of the site allow friends, friends of friends and almost all users (including the unknown ones) present in the site to have access to the basic information provided by a particular user. The alteration of the privacy settings offered by the site has to be done on individual basis like whom to add as a friend or with whom the information has to be disclosed. Usually, when young users make online profiles, they do not bother about the privacy and post as much as personal and sensitive information as possible. So, here the question comes, is the young brigade of social media users aware of such privacy settings and if yes then how much of it is being implemented by them? Further, do they realize the gravity of such privacy issues that might create trouble for them? Identity theft, pestering, online victimization, etc. are some of the common consequences coming up as a result of posting personal information without checking the privacy settings. It has kind of become a common tendency among the youngsters of posting as many pictures as possible to gain attention from peer groups. Updating relationship status or posting selfie (kind of self portrait taken with mobile camera or digital camera) is considered a trend. Is maintaining trend getting more priority than safety and privacy?

With reports coming up about the social networking sites being affected by privacy issues, some of the popular sites are constantly updating their privacy format. Locking down the account with the help of the privacy settings does not necessarily mean that the profile is safe. When one is signing up for the first time in Facebook (means opening up an account), some of the basic bits of information asked by the site are age, hometown, sex, religious views, etc. It might seem that providing these harmless facts is safe (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). But one question that arises at this juncture is why we are providing these facts to friends who are known to us and they know all these facts about us anyway. It is believed that social networking sites are meant for making new friends, getting in contact with long lost friends as well as making the networks grow for professional purpose as well. Actually it would not be wrong to state that as with the rise of the usage of social media the youngsters are really not much bothered about the privacy concerns. Social media had become like the platform through which the young generation is trying to make them accessible to the world outside. But is the privacy promises made by the social networking sites enough for keeping one's profile safe and personal? Well on the basis of the huge database of the users accessing the sites it can be said that even all these apprehensions are not keeping the young users away from the social networking sites. Interestingly the young users are least bothered about safety measures being provided by these sites.

Popular site Facebook has been under scanner several times because of the changes brought in the privacy settings by the site from time to time. Since its inception in the year 2004, access of Facebook was mainly limited to universities or rather to those associated with some educational institutions and profiles could be seen only by those who are at the same universities. It was because of these restrictions or settings that the users were all willing to give personal details as the user's base was restricted. Further it was in the year 2006 that the 'News Feed' feature was introduced by the site where the recent updates or activities of friends could be seen. Anything that a friend posts or updates instantly becomes visible to the 'friends' by default. By the year 2009, the information given by a user became 'more and more' public by default. It is not only about information or updates given but it is also about the access to one's profiles like seeing the list of friends as well as photos which one might wish to keep private. With these changes in the privacy settings, one's profile and all the private details, pictures became public by default and that too without the awareness of the users. In 2011, some more setting changes by facebook allowed users, who are not even in the friend's list, to visit full profile and check personal information. However, in 2008 Facebook created the option of deleting personal information and before that users were only left with the option of deactivating the account. Users are also having the option of 'Blocking' with which, they can permanently block people they don't wish to keep in touch in Facebook. There is the 'Help' option too that give the

users to clarify their concerns (Kabay, 2010). Another popular blogging site 'Twitter' allows its users to share information with 'followers'. Those who are following a particular person or celebrity can see their private information as well as posts. Twitter gives the option of 'retweet' to its users. Like for instance, a post made by a user can be re-tweeted by any of the followers, and in this manner the post can become public without even the user's knowledge.

In spite of the privacy settings and measures offered by the sites, it can still be dangerous to share personal information. For example, people like to share information of each and every moment on the social networking sites. It is even seen that people give information like 'taking a break', 'going for a holiday', etc. It is quite possible that it might lead to break-ins and robbery in their absence (Azimi & Ghomi, 2011). With internet becoming more and more accessible with mobile phones backing-up the service, the social networking sites are used every minute of the day. But, are the young users aware enough to pay attention to the privacy policies and tools offered by the sites? Online victimization is very common in this cyber age and the victims mostly comprise teenagers and adolescents. Identity theft and sexual harassments are common crimes reported by the users of social networking sites. Hence, it becomes extremely necessary that the young users follow the right steps carefully for making the experience of social networking a pleasant one.

Information Sharing and Revelation in Social Networking Sites

The basic purpose of using the social networking sites is interaction but with different sites the privacy settings of information revelation do change (Azimi & Ghomi, 2011). Making a profile by giving real identities is encouraged by sites like Facebook, Twitter, etc. Access to personal information depends on the settings offered by the sites. There is no harm in giving limited personal facts as far as it is made secured with the proper settings. But, how much heed does the young generation pay to this issue is a point worth exploring. It has been observed among the young social media users, that there is a tendency of sharing as much information as possible to as many as people as possible. It seems even more interesting to note that majority of the users does not change the default privacy settings. But, for security measures, it is always suggested to restrain public access to such private information as it is not known when and where there is risk. It is very easy to lure the users to hacking traps. It is also quite possible to click on some interesting links navigating to different pages. Hacking of accounts is commonly found to have taken place in Facebook.com with victims making a new profile and requesting friends to 'un-friend' their previous account that had been hacked. Even reports come up with celebrity accounts being hacked on Twitter. Undoubtedly, online social networking is comparatively vast and unfastened unlike the real life social networking and hence participating in online networking requires precautions and awareness.

Some of the major problems faced by the users especially young people are identity theft, hacking and comment controversies.

Identity Theft

Social networking sites especially Facebook have its biggest bunch of users in between the age group of 15 to 25 years. Discussion with young users leads to the conclusion that most of them are 'unaware' and at the most 'do not bother' about the privacy settings offered by the social networking sites. Posting updates is the favourite pastime for the youngsters. Friends of a college going SNS user found a lot of posts from her, which were different and peculiar, later it was found that the young users account had been hacked and someone else was posting these updates on her name. Some users are forced to delete their profiles on

account of identity theft due to the embarrassment they face thereafter. Sometimes, fake profiles are being made and the actual user does not even know that a fake user is updating and posing things that are disgraceful. Cases of identity theft and hacking of the profile and all shared personal is quite commonly faced by the young users. Some are self-confessed SNS addicts and for them socializing means communicating and chatting online rather than socializing in person. Answers derived by asking some school going, college going and university students about their awareness and extent of using SNS lead to the fact that these users do not hesitate in sharing personal details and photographs. Further, they do not pay much heed to the privacy settings as they believe that they have only a close circuit of friends who can see their updates and they remain clueless about how unknown people can have access to their personal shares. Adding unknown strangers or friends of friends and joining communities are not uncommon though. Hence, checking the privacy status and becoming a bit more careful about adding friends might help to some extent.

Comments Controversies

In Facebook when a user gives any update status or posts any picture, it is quite common to receive 'likes' and getting comments on the same. In one such instance, a young Nongovernmental organization (NGO) worker posted pictures of one of the charity events organized by his NGO. There was nothing wrong in posting pictures and receiving comments. However, it was seen that people start chatting through comments and in the process many private things regarding the events become public. In this case too comments started pouring in apart from receiving 'Likes' in all the pictures. What lead to the trouble for this NGO worker was some comments that revealed some confidential matters about the organization he served. A series of comments became a chatting session leading to the problem. It was not intentional on his part but it obviously had a negative impact on his career as he was labeled irresponsible. So, thinking twice before writing anything on this open social forum is mandatory because the chain of comments can lead to any possible direction which may be harmful.

Hacking

Young users often spend most of the time chatting with friends in SNS. Adding unknown friends is not unusual in SNS like Facebook. In one case, a teenage Facebook user engaged in chatting with one of her unknown 'friends' didn't know what was in store for her. Her casual attitude towards unknown strangers leads her Facebook account to get hacked. The friend with whom she was chatting sent her a link claiming that she must click the link and see the amazing video. The young girl did so and the page that opens exactly look like a duplication of the login page of Facebook. The difference was that the replica page was hosted by another web address and not Facebook. The teenage user was asked to enter her login details in order to see what the new page contains. This was just a trick to collect the username and password of the user. The girl entered the details and this was enough to hack her page gaining complete access to her profile, information and posts. Just few minutes later when her friends asked her about the strange updates and posts she is giving, the girl realizes that she had been victimized and her profile had been hacked. The password gets changed immediately and the actual account holders are unable to log in again. In such cases, sharing of vulgar comments and posts continue from the hacked account and the original account holder does not even get the scope to inform his/her friends the actual story. The threat does not stop here as now the friends of the victim start receiving same requests of visiting a site and watch amazing videos or images. Thus, trusting someone so easily in the web world is not suggested. Changing of passwords frequently is advisable to keep the accounts safe.

Concluding Thoughts

It is interesting to observe what actually social networking means to the young generation. Mostly the young people aged between 15 to 25 years use the popular social networking sites regularly. For them networking socially means Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and the like. The online virtual world, where even small information about almost anything is available at every possible time of the day, the young technology savvy generation does not really seem to care about the online privacy threats. The world to them basically means the internet and the social networking sites where they can get connected to friends (existing as well as new ones). One of the reasons for adding unknown strangers to 'Friend List' of Facebook was for 'getting to know more people from different backgrounds and cultures is interesting, or social networking sites are meant for mingling with new people to broaden the horizon of friendship or simply increasing the number of friends in the friend list is what really matters'. The young users feel that giving 'status updates; posting selfie, stylish pictures' is cool and happening trend all the time. Modern mobile phones provide a good back-up in maintaining this trend 24x7. It clearly shows that as per the 'online happening trend' young users might not hesitate to share information more than just name and age. Social networking and online privacy seriously turn out to be a serious concern when sensitive information is being shared and with the changing definition of 'social networking' in this internet age.

The World Wide Web and the social networking sites are definitely opening up broader avenues of communication, at the same time; addiction to online social media is rising. Making friends with unknown people and increasing the numbers in 'friend list' in social networking sites might be considered as happening and trendy but can pose a tangible threat to one's privacy. Online world is abysmal and what is projected might not be real. Hence, when participating in the social networking sites the young users are required to be aware and vigilant. For young people to be aware and vigilant they have to be informed about the pro and cons which has to be done by the SNS managers who should clearly and legibly give information (not disclaimers) in the social networking sites about security concerns and privacy issues while avoiding legal jargon so that it is clearly understood especially by young people, so that the cyber world becomes a safer place to navigate by all netizens both young and old.

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