**Privacy Issues In Social Networking Sites: A User’s Perspective.**

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**ABSTRACT--** With the growing popularity of online social networks, more and more personal information is being displayed in these websites. Although the use of Social Networking web sites and applications is increasingly on the rise, a large number is not aware of the possible risks associated with the use of these sites. Understanding these risks and challenges is crucial for avoiding potential loss of private and personal information. Though there are some researches done that addressed these issues, fewer were conducted with the context of developed countries. This paper examines the issues of privacy and trust in social networking sites from users’ viewpoint, and within the **context** of ***Islamabad and Rawal-Pindi, in Pakistan.***

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Social Networking Sites have existed for over a decade, but become very popular in the recent few years. Some of the popular sites today include Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and Bebo.

Social networking sites as web-based services that allow individuals to: (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other user s with which they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. Social Networking Sites allow users to connect, share information and other contents, chat, play games, and even add comments [1].

Different social networking sites follow different policies in providing interaction among members. Some put some restrictions, while others allow open interaction between all site members. At any case, users should be properly informed about those protocols, so they could take certain precautions to avoid any potential loss of private information.

Most of researches done in the area did not focus on the user’s viewpoints with regards information security. When developing a body of knowledge for information security, the human and socio-cultural aspects such as user’s perceptions should be adequately addressed.

This paper presents security and privacy issues in social networking sites from users’ viewpoint in two cities, Islamabad and Rawal Pindi, Pakistan.

The paper is organized into six sections. Following this introduction, the paper presents related literature, and then the research methodology employed in this study. The research results are then given, followed by the conclusion.

1. **SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND POTENTIAL INFORMATION SECURITY ISSUES**

In terms of Information Security, Trust may be defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” [2].

Many argue that privacy in social networking sites must be considered, especially when users’ private and personal information may be sold to third parties without their prior knowledge. Yet others argue that privacy in social networking sites is not a major concern, for users usually tend to provide such personal information to promote themselves.

Different categories of data are usually stored by most social networking sites like name, e-mail, address, and user status, educational background, etc. A minimal Facebook profile for instance, will only tell a user’s name, date of joining, school, status and email address. Any information posted beyond these basic fields is posted by the will of the end use. Although the required amount of information for a Facebook account is minimal, the total amount of information a user can post is quite large. User-configurable settings on Facebook can be divided into eight basic categories: profile, friends, photos, groups, events, messages, account settings, and privacy settings [3].

Because the information available on these social networking sites is personally identifiable, there is a risk that the information given by the users could be abused by stalkers. Besides, information stored or shared on these sites could be stored or mined for future reference, by different people. Different organizations, governmental or private could potentially use this information for judgment of characters [4].

1. **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The aim of this research is to explore users’ perception of security, privacy, and trust toward social networking sites in Islamabad and the Rawal-Pindi. The research addresses the following research questions:

“What are users’ perception of security, privacy, and trust toward social networking sites within Islamabad and Rawal Pindi?”

A pilot study is employed to conduct the research. The study involves a number of students because the majority of social networking sites’ membership is people in their twenties. All participants have been selected because of their experiences/membership status with social networking sites. Data were collected from a randomly selected number of respondents using the stratified random sampling technique. The study used questionnaires as an instrument for further discussions.

***Questionnaire***: the questionnaires were randomly distributed to the respondents. The questionnaires were randomly distributed to 30 male members with the response rate at 97%. (77%) of the respondents were students, and the rest were employees. (54%) of them were of between 20-23 years, and (42%) were between 24-30 years.

1. **RESULTS**

A number of categories emerged from the data analysis. These are: use of social networking sites, integrity of information within social networking sites, privacy within social networking sites, and users’ information security awareness. These categories are discussed below. Most of the questions – and the scheme of results- were derived from a similar research [5].

1. ***Use of Social Networking Sites***

The results reveal that the majority of respondents (73%) like to use social networking sites because they allow them immediate access to up-to-date information concerning a large number of friends, relatives, and other possible acquaintances. A reasonable number of respondents (20%) use social networking sites because they provide them with entertainment and fun. A small percentage (8%) indicated that use it to share their opinions and give comments.

1. ***Integrity of Information within Social Networking Sites***

The results discuss users’ behavior in relation to the use of social networking sites. Almost (92%) of the respondents stated that they posted real information in their profile, including name, age, location, date of birth, address and phone number.(73%) of respondents stated that they posted comments and views that reflect their true opinion regarding various matters. (27%) of the respondents stated that they have intentionally given some wrong (fake) information for various reasons. (35%) of the respondents admitted to have more than one registered account, so they could use different identities, in case they don’t wish to reveal their true identity. (80%) were willing to share their/display photos in social networking web sites. (12%) of users were displaying their addresses, and (19%) displaying their phone numbers.

1. ***Privacy within Social Networking Sites***

The findings of this study suggest that the majority of respondents did not expect high level of privacy in social networking sites, yet a reasonable number of them were willing to show their private information. (58%) of the users said that they lock the information provided on their accounts so that only people whom they know could see it. Almost (70%) said that they sometimes accept the friend requests without knowing for sure who they might be. (30%) of users stated that they expect a high level of privacy from their social networking site, while around (54%) was expecting a medium level. (30%) of the respondents indicated that information shared in social networking sites is meant to be public, not confidential, and should be seen by other members within the site. However, a reasonable number of respondents (39%) were willing to show their private information like phone Number and home address on their accounts.

1. ***Users’ Information Security Awareness***

Although many respondents (92%) claimed to have an appropriate level of information security awareness, many of the users (95%) could not identify basic information systems security threats such as “phishing”, or “Identity theft”.

However, (77%) of users said that they think it’s risky to allow everyone to see their information, which is a positive point. (86%) of the users declared to be aware of the options and privacy settings that they could change. A low percentage of respondents (12%) admitted to sharing their passwords with friends or relatives, the reason having trust in a personal relationship.

Most of the respondents (65%) with Facebook accounts were not aware that their networking site can sell their information to a third party, and (54%) of the users admitted not having read the privacy policy of the social networking site they use.

1. **CONCLUSIONS**

The research question seeks to investigate users’ security, privacy, and trust perception toward social networking sites, within the context of the country. The study reveals that the majority of users are not properly informed of the basic security risks involved with using social networking sites, although a majority said that there are possible risks when allowing open access to their information. Many of the examined users admitted to sharing their passwords, or accounts with others. While others could not identify basic information security risks such as Phishing, and Identity Theft.

The findings also suggest that the majority of users within the examined environments trust the contents of social networking sites, although many of them admitted to having several accounts with multiple identities, and accounts with incorrect/misleading information. However, the majority of the examined users admitted to posting real information in their profile regarding their age, location, interests, and views. The data collected also suggest that while privacy is not a concern of the majority of users, the privacy of some information, especially personal (e.g. address and phone number) is a concern.

The results also suggests that a large number of users are aware of the privacy options there social networking sites provides them with, and a reasonable number are not concerned much about the privacy as an issue, for they believe the information they provide is meant to be public.

1. **REFERENCES**

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