

Online Privacy Awareness using Social Media: A Case Study of Malaysian Youth

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ABSTRACT

The wave of social media has changed the preference of how youth are using technology for communication. Recent study shows that youth are the main users of social media. To certain extent, youth are sharing too many information including their private and personal information. However, lack of knowledge about online privacy is opening the doors for youth to become the victims of privacy attack. This exploratory study aims to explore the level of knowledge related to privacy among Malaysian youth when using social media. The results of this study showed that Malaysian youth's awareness on privacy issues is still at infancy level. This paper concludes by noting the theoretical and practical contributions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The wave of social media has changed the preference of how youth are using technology for communication. Recently according to PEW 2012 Internet report, social media applications are becoming the main communication tools for youth to communicate. Roughly there are about 900 billion of Facebook users worldwide. Out of that, 86% of them aged between 18-29 years old (i.e., youth) [1]. According to Gross and Acquisti [2], when using social media youth discusses range of topics ranging from family matters, friendships, work related matters, special interest topics to even politics. To some extent, they are willing to reveal their personal information which is sensitive and personal.

According to Acquisti and Gross [3] when using Facebook, youth are willing to share sensitive information such as political views, sexual orientations and many others. The disclosure of private information among youth has been reported as a phenomenon that occurred worldwide. Although social media operators provide some extend of privacy control; users (especially youngsters) are still reported to be the victims of privacy breach. Perhaps one of the main reasons that contribute to this is because there is lack of knowledge regarding privacy mechanisms in social media sites [4].

Thus motivated by that, this study is designed to explore the level of knowledge related to privacy among Malaysian youth when using social media (i.e., Facebook). Examining the level of knowledge related to online privacy among youth is important as it can help them in protecting their own privacy from being breached. Furthermore, being able to educate youth to become self-restraint is important as it can help youth from getting into greater threat in the future.

This study is anchored by two main research questions: 1) how Malaysian youth share their private information when using social media? and 2) what is the common knowledge among Malaysian youth on privacy when using social media? The rest of this paper is organised into the following sections. The first (this) section discusses about the motivation of this study. This is followed by a discussion about online privacy. The third section describes the research methodology adopted in this study. The fourth section discusses about the research findings and the last section offers some concluding remarks and discusses the research implications and limitations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Online Privacy

With the rapid advancement of ICT, it is becoming difficult to control individual's privacy (i.e., information and activity) within a networked of online society [5]. According to Strahilevitz [4] when using online social application people tend to share their private information and activities with close friends, relatives and sometimes strangers.

When using social media, heaps amount of information are circulated due to intensive interactions between users. As a result, one's personal information might be access by organizations, strangers or recruiters. Controlling the circulation of information is very difficult due to the nature of social media, which encourage sharing of information. According to Ho and Maiga [6], privacy breach when using social media is contributed by the following factors: user's lack of awareness on privacy control, technology in-flexibility to control privacy and lack of users control over what others reveal about them.

Online privacy is breached when private information is disseminated without following the rules or boundary of information disclosure that is agreed upon [4]. For instance, if private information is shared by a user to a group of close friends in a social network, it is still considered as private; but the moment the information are disseminated to outside of that social network or someone which he/she did not expected, it is called a privacy breach [4].

Hawkey [5] highlighted that it is becoming more difficult for users to manage privacy when using technology. With the restricted features of a technology, it is hard for users to fine tune the options of privacy in such a way that information can be selectively revealed depending upon the recipient and information type. This phenomenon is currently seen in online social networks.

2.2. Facebook and privacy implications

A study on Facebook users found that users are unaware of the privacy features and quite a number did not changed their default privacy preferences set by operators. By publishing such personal information online users are facing with many cyber and physical risks. Many users think that publishing personal information has many benefits that they can survive the consequences, they may be influenced by the interface design explanation or pear pressure in their privacy protection attitude [2].

Another study explored the relationship between Facebook privacy issues, settings, benefits and risks. The study showed that satisfied Facebook users outweigh the privacy threats. One of the strategies to protect privacy is to decrease the visibility of profile and restrict friends access which is considered as weak mechanism. Since users post the invisible part with their personal information, their privacy is at risk. The study also highlighted that young adults need to be more educated with the risks issues of privacy in such way that they should change their online behaviors [7].

Risk associated with social media varies from Identity theft, blackmailing, discrimination, to embarrassment [2]. These thefts can happen in any form as every individual is some way or the other connected to another person in this world in not more than six separation degrees. In this tightly connected network, people without knowing are revealing their information to strangers [2]. Not being able to control who can have access to one's information can allows people with negative intentions to personify themselves as some else, create friendships and steal private information [8]. It should be understood from all these factors that social media is not actively involving in retrieving and selling personal information, but they are unknowingly passing it along for others [9].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology. Focus group technique is used as the main research technique to collect data. According to Ping and Tan [10] focus group is a helpful technique that can be used to delve into a specific area especially when the topic is at exploration or discovery level. Face to face interview is used as the data collection approach from respondents. For this study, 20 undergraduate and postgraduate students in one of Malaysia higher education institute is selected as respondents. All of them aged 18-30 years old. All the respondents are selected using a convenience sampling technique

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Provide a statement that what is expected, as stated in the "Introduction" chapter can ultimately result in "Results and Discussion" chapter, so there is compatibility. Moreover, it can also be added the prospect of the development of research results and application prospects of further studies into the next (based on result and discussion).

RQ 1: How Malaysian youth share their private information when using social media?

From the analysis most of the respondents (82%) published their actual - name, email address and contact information on their social media site. One of the reasons why respondent is willing to share their actual information is because:

“Having actual information displayed on the page is easy as it can help me identify my friends. Also with having real information it can help me to keep in touch with my long lost friends.”

On the other hand, 18% of the respondents used false information. Most of them created an e-mail account just for social media (i.e., Facebook) registration purposes. All the information is not correct. One of the respondents responded by saying:

“Making all of my information available publicly will open doors for identity theft. I put a note on my profile for those who wanted to add me as friend can send private message directly. My account is not available for public”

Furthermore, the findings also shows that 60% of the respondents entered their actual contact numbers and 80% revealed their actual hometown and city. One of the reasons why respondents share their actual contact number is because they used social media (i.e. Facebook) as their main communication tool. One of the respondents responded by saying:

“I used Facebook to do business and join professional groups. Leaving my actual number on my profile is like making my business cards available to others. Making my numbers publicly available has more disadvantage than advantage. Tele-marketers called me so many times. But I also received important calls who get my number from Facebook”

In addition, most of them used actual picture to represent themselves and 30% used non-related images as profile picture. Most of the respondents believe that using actual image is the least way to share their private information with others. By using an actual image it can help others to figure out their actual identity.

Finally, almost all respondents share their information about education. Most of them have no problem to share their education related information publicly. As for one of the respondents said:

“Sharing information about my school would not bring much harm. This information is important as it helps me grouped the friend list. Also it helps refresh my memory. Furthermore, nowadays most of the reunion activities are held through Facebook, so being able to let others know when and where you graduated can make you visible and easy to be detected”

RQ 2: What is the common knowledge among Malaysian youth on privacy when using social media?

From the analysis, it shows that about 44% of the respondents know about the privacy features in social media, 20% do not about it, and 46% do not care about privacy features. Most of the respondents who answered did not care believed that social media is just a tool for online social activity. For them most of the information shared is less of a value. Hence, it is not important for them to understand about the privacy features. One of the respondents said:

“I only used Facebook to find my old school mate. I don’t share private information. Most of them (refer to pictures and information) are old memories. In fact most of them in my friend list is actually those I really know. So I think it is not important to learn about the privacy features”.

Further analysis shows that 66% of the respondents hardly change their privacy settings on social media. Further analysis shows that their reasons for not making any changes to the privacy setting is because:1) it is complicated (30%); 2) do not know about the setting (12%) and 3) respondents are not bother about it (24%).

The data also shows that 32% of the respondents use the privacy features. Where they only allow friends to access their privacy information, 48% allow anybody to access their private information and 4% did not know about the features on how to control others from accessing their private information.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Based on the research findings, this study concludes that:

1. Malaysian youth are opening themselves to be picked up by identity theft. Too many personal information available publicly. This information is enough for an identity theft to personify themselves as somebody else (i.e. victim). With the available information it can allow identity theft to get in touch with others by camouflaging themselves and start taking over victim's identity;
2. To a certain extend, Malaysian youth are sharing too much information in the name of social activities and networking. They overlook the consequences of making too many private information available publicly;
3. While the personal information is easily provided publicly, utilization of privacy preferences are not up to the expectation. Very few people change the default privacy settings within the social media application (I.e., Facebook). By default most of the application is set to maximum visibility and access to others; and
4. Malaysian youth are not putting much attention to silent listeners. Most of them think that the conversation is harmless thus requires lack attention. Having silent listeners within one's social network is dangerous as they are waiting to catch hold of valuable information and utilize them in a negative way.

In order to increase Malaysian youth awareness of privacy issue, this study suggests:

1. Malaysia's educational institutes (i.e. school, university) or government agencies are urged to educate Malaysian youth (through workshop, talks, TV advertisement, etc.) about the danger of identity theft; and
2. To simplify the complexity of the privacy mechanism provided by social media operators. Based on the data analysis it shows that respondents are having hard time to understand the privacy features.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes by providing better understanding of Malaysian youth level of knowledge on privacy when using social media (i.e., Facebook). To the best of knowledge this is the first study that try to examine privacy issues from the context of Malaysian youth. Practically, this study also provides few practical suggestions on how to increase the awareness of online privacy among Malaysian youth.

This study is not lack of limitations. Among them: 1) the respondents only represent a small group of Malaysian youth. Hence the results should be interpreted with cautious; 2) this study only examine youth using Facebook. Perhaps in the future, examining this topic within other social media applications (i.e., twitter) might provide different views.

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