

Facebook and its Use Among Jamia Students: A Study

What Does Privacy on Facebook Mean to Jamia Students?

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***Abstract:** The study looks at issues pertaining to privacy on Facebook among the students of Jamia. The findings are based on seven focus group discussions conducted at various departments of Jamia Millia Islamia. The study reveals that there is gross ignorance among most students on how personal user information is collected, used and shared by Facebook. Ignorance of it leaves them susceptible to cyber crimes like identity theft, data theft, cyber bullying, and hacking. In addition, it leaves them open to having their online activity monitored and analyzed by private companies in order to hit them with targeted advertisements.*

Introduction

Over the past few years, much has been talked about user privacy on Facebook. Facebook has changed its privacy policy time and again. And last winter, Facebook CEO and founder, Mark Zuckerberg, declared the death of privacy. One of the leading arguments behind this claim has been that we live in a new era, beyond the ‘age of privacy.’ The new social norm for the next generation is to share freely and without regard for such antiquated concerns as – privacy.

Objective

Our main focus of the study was to understand how Facebook users in Jamia manage their personal information. Our objective is to understand how students understand the term ‘privacy’ and how they manage the risk of ‘Infringement of Privacy’ on Facebook; whether students know how their personal information is protected and used by Facebook.

Research Methodology

For the study, the main sources of information were seven focus group discussions for qualitative data collection. And for quantitative data, participants were asked to fill out questionnaires. The focus group discussions were conducted in Jamia Millia Islamia’s seven Centers/Departments; namely, Department of History, Department of Political Science, Faculty

of Engineering, Department of Urdu Mass Media, Faculty of Education, Centre for Culture, Media and Governance, and Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations. The total number of students interviewed for the study were 32, between the ages of 18 and 27 years. Each group comprised of no more than seven participants.

Research Findings

Besides collecting information pertaining to our objective, participants were also asked a few questions related to their Facebook usage habits and purpose.

Internet Accessibility

We found, 66% of the respondents had internet access at home. Out of the 34% students who did not have internet access at home, 33% accessed it through their mobile phones and 67% through cyber cafés, and thus all participants were Facebook users.

Motivation to Join Facebook

In our research, one of the main questions we asked was: “What motivated you to join Facebook?” The question was open-ended, so we got several different replies. A majority of the respondents (83%) said they were influenced or pressured by their friends to join. It was the popular thing to do. Few students (9%) joined for educational purposes and 4% for professional purposes. A few (2%) joined Facebook to reconnect with old friends. Interestingly, an equal number of participants (2%) joined for media entertainment purposes. (Fig 1.)

Frequency of Usage

For most of the students, Facebook has become part of their daily/weekly routine. Our study finds that few students (6%) are addicted to Facebook; so much so that they are on Facebook throughout the day, from morning to late at night. Internet service on mobile phones has tremendously facilitated “Facebooking” (defined as the act of using Facebook), and now students can check and update their status even while they are in class.

More than half of the students (67%) are daily Facebook users, while 19% are weekly users, followed by 8% who are monthly users.

Change in Purpose

Our next question was, now that they have been using Facebook for some time, has their purpose to use Facebook changed in any way from the one they had before they joined Facebook?

A majority of the students (68%) said they still use Facebook to interact with friends; however, a significant number of them (23%) said they also use Facebook to make new friends. There were only a few respondents (7%) who said they use Facebook to be in touch with their family. Interestingly, few of them (2%) said they use Facebook to follow their favorite celebrities.

Self-representation

The virtual and physical world contains the same basic forms of self-representation; the only difference is, the virtual world is much more self-controlled and self-constructed. The way people represent themselves in the virtual and physical worlds has similarities and differences. In the physical world people are able to be identified by their clothes, physical features, mannerisms, and their use of language. Similarly, in the cyber-world, people are identified by the language they use, and how they choose to visually represent themselves.

Of all the ways to represent oneself on Facebook, we found that majority of the respondents (46%) represent themselves by uploading pictures, picture tagging (19%), status update (17%), followed by uploading videos (12%), and there were 6% respondents who said they do not represent themselves by either updating their status, posting pictures, or videos. Instead, they limit themselves to chatting with their friends and to checking their friends’ Facebook activity. And it is in this way they feel connected.

There are instances at universities (not in Jamia) where inappropriate use of Facebook has led to university authorities taking disciplinary action against offending students. So we (researchers) wanted to know from the respondents whether they believed any of their actions could lead to infringement of privacy of others, and should such offenders be taken to task by the university administration.

According to our study, 89% of the respondents think that they do not infringe on other people’s privacy by uploading and tagging other people’s pictures and videos, or posting their GPS location; while the rest (11%) think they do infringe on other people’s privacy in ways mentioned earlier.

Awareness of Facebook's Privacy Policy

On being asked whether participants had ever read Facebook's privacy policy, a majority of the students (85%) said they had never read Facebook's privacy policy, while a meager 6% said they had read it completely. But there were a few (9%) who said they had read it in brief, partially. (Fig 2).

Responsibility for Objectionable Content on Facebook

Due to lack of substantial internet related laws, Facebook is increasingly being held responsible for objectionable content posted on its website by its users.

When asked whether Facebook should be held responsible for objectionable content, our study finds that majority of the respondents (53%) think that Facebook should be held responsible for objectionable content, while 38% think Facebook should not be held responsible for user generated content. And 9% did not have an opinion. (Fig 3).

Awareness of Facebook's Advertisement Policy

We wanted to know if the students had read the advertisement policy on Facebook, and whether they were aware advertisers were made available of a user's personal information once a user clicked on any of the ads. We found that 84% students had not read it and only 13% students had, which was followed by 3% who had read it partially.

Focus Group Discussion Analysis

The study reveals that privacy may be considered conducive to and necessary for intimacy, since intimacy resides in selectively revealing private information to certain individuals but not to others. Trust may increase or decrease within an online social network. At the same time, a new form of intimacy becomes widespread: the sharing of personal information with a large number of friends and strangers alike.

For example, many students considered sharing their information important in order to connect with the outside world for making new contacts. At the same time few believed that in order to be private they can either customize the visibility of their information or not reveal any personal information on Facebook.

Advertisement

Few students knew about tailor made advertisements that Facebook employs as an advertising strategy. Few think that it is a nuisance. Majority of the students were not aware of the consequences of “liking” an advertisement on Facebook.

Facebook privacy policy explicitly states that they may disclose information to third parties, which is a clear infringement of user’s privacy. Therefore there is a ghost profile for every user of Facebook, with the private companies who advertise on Facebook. When we asked students about advertisement policy or the consequence of clicking on ads, very few knew what it was, as already mentioned earlier. We found only one student who knew about tailored made advertisements but did not mind Facebook sharing personal information with private companies in order to be provided with tailor-made ads. On the other hand, there were few who were not aware of the consequences of clicking on a Facebook ad but still never clicked on them because they considered these ads to be a nuisance.

Surveillance

On the question of surveillance, most respondents claimed to know that the government monitors content on Facebook. However, interestingly, two opposing views were expressed on the issue during discussions. One view expressed no objection to the idea of corporations having access to personal information and browsing habits, but objected to the idea of governments having the same information. The other view was that it was the duty of the government to monitor people’s internet use, but the government should not censor their content because that would mean a violation of their right to free expression.

Data Theft

Out of a sample size of 32, there were four victims of data theft and hacking. Two girls were victims of identity theft in which fake Facebook accounts were created in their name, using their pictures and personal information. Also, a male student discovered a fake account made with his picture on the account profile. He later found out that it was his friend who had created the fake account.

A student also narrated an incidence of misuse of password, which gave unauthorized access to his account.

In every instance, the perpetrator of identity theft was an acquaintance of the victim.

Third Party Applications and Games

We found out that majority of the students do not use third party games and applications on Facebook. And the reasons mentioned were either that they do not find games and applications interesting, or they feel that these games and applications slow down the speed of their computer, so they keep away from them. The ones who use third party games and applications on Facebook did not realize they allow Facebook to share their personal information when they click on the “Allow” button before they get to use them.

Conclusion

We found that there are some students who feel that Facebook is a private space, and withholding or sharing personal information is a personal choice. In terms of usage, many use it regularly and actively, while there are others who choose to be inactive in terms of updating content but use Facebook to stay in touch with friends by chatting and following their friend's Facebook activity .

We also found that the notion of privacy is different for everyone. Everyone decides differently on what is private and what is not by customizing their privacy settings.

Furthermore, students do not log onto Facebook to merely express themselves but also to form communities that organize and run group projects.

We also found that there is ignorance regarding consequences of privacy infringement because 75% of the students were not aware of web cookies which can steal their information even when they are off-line. Moreover, 85% students had not read the privacy policies and were also not aware of the impact of using Facebook third party games and applications.

At the end of our discussion with every group, we asked whether they would consider deleting their Facebook accounts now that they were aware of the many privacy infringement issues associated with it. The students unanimously said – No. Deleting their account would bring an end to their virtual world. A world they have come to depend on to fulfill their social needs.

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