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# Social Media, Ethics and the Privacy Paradox

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## Abstract

Today's information/digital age offers widespread use of social media. The use of social media is ubiquitous and cuts across all age groups, social classes and cultures. However, the increased use of these media is accompanied by privacy issues and ethical concerns. These privacy issues can have far-reaching professional, personal and security implications. Ultimate privacy in the social media domain is very difficult because these media are designed for sharing information. Participating in social media requires persons to ignore some personal, privacy constraints resulting in some vulnerability. The weak individual privacy safeguards in this space have resulted in unethical and undesirable behaviors resulting in privacy and security breaches, especially for the most vulnerable group of users. An exploratory study was conducted to examine social media usage and the implications for personal privacy. We investigated how some of the requirements for participating in social media and how unethical use of social media can impact users' privacy. Results indicate that if users of these networks pay attention to privacy settings and the type of information shared and adhere to universal, fundamental, moral values such as mutual respect and kindness, many privacy and unethical issues can be avoided.

**Keywords:** privacy, ethics, social media

## 1. Introduction

The use of social media is growing at a rapid pace and the twenty-first century could be described as the “boom” period for social networking. According to reports provided by Smart Insights, as at February 2019 there were over 3.484 billion social media users. The Smart Insight report indicates that the number of social media users is growing by 9% annually and this trend is estimated to continue. Presently the number of social media users represents 45% of the global population [1]. The heaviest users of social media are “digital natives”; the group of persons who were born or who have grown up in the digital era and are intimate with the various technologies and systems, and the “Millennial Generation”; those who became adults at the turn of the twenty-first century. These groups of users utilize social media platforms for just about anything ranging from marketing, news acquisition, teaching, health care, civic engagement, and politicking to social engagement.

The unethical use of social media has resulted in the breach of individual privacy and impacts both physical and information security. Reports in 2019 [1],

reveal that persons between the ages 8 and 11 years spend an average 13.5 hours weekly online and 18% of this age group are actively engaged on social media. Those between ages 12 and 15 spend on average 20.5 hours online and 69% of this group are active social media users. While children and teenagers represent the largest Internet user groups, for the most part they do not know how to protect their personal information on the Web and are the most vulnerable to cyber-crimes related to breaches of information privacy [2, 3].

In today's IT-configured society data is one of, if not the most, valuable asset for most businesses/organizations. Organizations and governments collect information via several means including invisible data gathering, marketing platforms and search engines such as Google [4]. Information can be attained from several sources, which can be fused using technology to develop complete profiles of individuals. The information on social media is very accessible and can be of great value to individuals and organizations for reasons such as marketing, etc.; hence, data is retained by most companies for future use.

## **2. Privacy**

Privacy or the right to enjoy freedom from unauthorized intrusion is the negative right of all human beings. Privacy is defined as the right to be left alone, to be free from secret surveillance, or unwanted disclosure of personal data or information by government, corporation, or individual (dictionary.com). In this chapter we will define privacy loosely, as the right to control access to personal information. Supporters of privacy posit that it is a necessity for human dignity and individuality and a key element in the quest for happiness. According to Baase [5] in the book titled "A Gift of Fire: Social, Legal and Ethical Issues for Computing and the Internet," privacy is the ability to control information about one's self as well as the freedom from surveillance from being followed, tracked, watched, and being eavesdropped on. In this regard, ignoring privacy rights often leads to encroachment on natural rights.

Privacy, or even the thought that one has this right, leads to peace of mind and can provide an environment of solitude. This solitude can allow people to breathe freely in a space that is free from interference and intrusion. According to Richards and Solove [6], Legal scholar William Prosser argued that privacy cases can be classified into four related "torts," namely:

1. Intrusion—this can be viewed as encroachment (physical or otherwise) on one's liberties/solitude in a highly offensive way.
2. Privacy facts—making public, private information about someone that is of no "legitimate concern" to anyone.
3. False light—making public false and "highly offensive" information about others.
4. Appropriation—stealing someone's identity (name, likeness) to gain advantage without the permission of the individual.

Technology, the digital age, the Internet and social media have redefined privacy however as surveillance is no longer limited to a certain pre-defined space and location. An understanding of the problems and dangers of privacy in the digital space is therefore the first step to privacy control. While there can be clear distinctions

between informational privacy and physical privacy, as pointed out earlier, intrusion can be both physical and otherwise.

This chapter will focus on informational privacy which is the ability to control access to personal information. We examine privacy issues in the social media context focusing primarily on personal information and the ability to control external influences. We suggest that breach of informational privacy can impact: solitude (the right to be left alone), intimacy (the right not to be monitored), and anonymity (the right to have no public personal identity and by extension physical privacy impacted). The right to control access to facts or personal information in our view is a natural, inalienable right and everyone should have control over who see their personal information and how it is disseminated.

In May 2019 the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) clearly outlined that it is unlawful to process personal data without the consent of the individual (subject). It is a legal requirement under the GDPR that privacy notices be given to individuals that outline how their personal data will be processed and the conditions that must be met that make the consent valid. These are:

1. “Freely given—an individual must be given a genuine choice when providing consent and it should generally be unbundled from other terms and conditions (e.g., access to a service should not be conditional upon consent being given).”
2. “Specific and informed—this means that data subjects should be provided with information as to the identity of the controller(s), the specific purposes, types of processing, as well as being informed of their right to withdraw consent at any time.”
3. “Explicit and unambiguous—the data subject must clearly express their consent (e.g., by actively ticking a box which confirms they are giving consent—pre-ticked boxes are insufficient).”
4. “Under 13s—children under the age of 13 cannot provide consent and it is therefore necessary to obtain consent from their parents.”

Arguments can be made that privacy is a cultural, universal necessity for harmonious relationships among human beings and creates the boundaries for engagement and disengagement. Privacy can also be viewed as instrumental good because it is a requirement for the development of certain kinds of human relationships, intimacy and trust [7]. However, achieving privacy is much more difficult in light of constant surveillance and the inability to determine the levels of interaction with various publics [7]. Some critics argue that privacy provides protection against anti-social behaviors such as trickery, disinformation and fraud, and is thought to be a universal right [5]. However, privacy can also be viewed as relative as privacy rules may differ based on several factors such as “climate, religion, technological advancement and political arrangements” [8, 9]. The need for privacy is an objective reality though it can be viewed as “culturally rational” where the need for personal privacy is viewed as relative based on culture. One example is the push by the government, businesses and Singaporeans to make Singapore a smart nation. According to GovTech 2018 reports there is a push by the government in Singapore to harness the data “new gold” to develop systems that can make life easier for its people. The [10] report points out that Singapore is using sensors robots Smart Water Assessment Network (SWAN) to monitor water quality in its reservoirs, seeking to build smart health system and to build a smart transportation system to name a few. In this example privacy can be describe as “culturally rational” and

the rules in general could differ based on technological advancement and political arrangements.

In today's networked society it is naïve and ill-conceived to think that privacy is over-rated and there is no need to be concerned about privacy if you have done nothing wrong [5]. The effects of information flow can be complex and may not be simply about protection for people who have something to hide. Inaccurate information flow can have adverse long-term implications for individuals and companies. Consider a scenario where someone's computer or tablet is stolen. The perpetrator uses identification information stored on the device to access their social media page which could lead to access to their contacts, friends and friends of their "friends" then participate in illegal activities and engage in anti-social activities such as hacking, spreading viruses, fraud and identity theft. The victim is now in danger of being accused of criminal intentions, or worse. These kinds of situations are possible because of technology and networked systems. Users of social media need to be aware of the risks that are associated with participation.

### **3. Social media**

The concept of social networking pre-dates the Internet and mass communication as people are said to be social creatures who when working in groups can achieve results in a value greater than the sum of its parts [11]. The explosive growth in the use of social media over the past decade has made it one of the most popular Internet services in the world, providing new avenues to "see and be seen" [12, 13]. The use of social media has changed the communication landscape resulting in changes in ethical norms and behavior. The unprecedented level of growth in usage has resulted in the reduction in the use of other media and changes in areas including civic and political engagement, privacy and safety [14]. Alexa, a company that keeps track of traffic on the Web, indicates that as of August, 2019 YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are among the top four (4) most visited sites with only Google, being the most popular search engine, surpassing these social media sites.

Social media sites can be described as online services that allow users to create profiles which are "public, semi-public" or both. Users may create individual profiles and/or become a part of a group of people with whom they may be acquainted offline [15]. They also provide avenues to create virtual friendships. Through these virtual friendships, people may access details about their contacts ranging from personal background information and interests to location. Social networking sites provide various tools to facilitate communication. These include chat rooms, blogs, private messages, public comments, ways of uploading content external to the site and sharing videos and photographs. Social media is therefore drastically changing the way people communicate and form relationships.

Today social media has proven to be one of the most, if not the most effective medium for the dissemination of information to various audiences. The power of this medium is phenomenal and ranges from its ability to overturn governments (e.g., Moldova), to mobilize protests, assist with getting support for humanitarian aid, organize political campaigns, organize groups to delay the passing of legislation (as in the case with the copyright bill in Canada) to making social media billionaires and millionaires [16, 17]. The enabling nature and the structure of the media that social networking offers provide a wide range of opportunities that were nonexistent before technology. Facebook and YouTube marketers and trainers provide two examples. Today people can interact with and learn from people millions of miles away. The global reach of this medium has removed all former pre-defined boundaries including geographical, social and any other that existed previously.



Technological advancements such as Web 2.0 and Web 4.0 which provide the framework for collaboration, have given new meaning to life from various perspectives: political, institutional and social.

#### **4. Privacy and social media**

Social media and the information/digital era have “redefined” privacy. In today’s Information Technology—configured societies, where there is continuous monitoring, privacy has taken on a new meaning. Technologies such as closed-circuit cameras (CCTV) are prevalent in public spaces or in some private spaces including our work and home [7, 18]. Personal computers and devices such as our smart phones enabled with Global Positioning System (GPS), Geo locations and Geo maps connected to these devices make privacy as we know it, a thing of the past. Recent reports indicate that some of the largest companies such as Amazon, Microsoft and Facebook as well as various government agencies are collecting information without consent and storing it in databases for future use. It is almost impossible to say privacy exists in this digital world (@nowthisnews).

The open nature of the social networking sites and the avenues they provide for sharing information in a “public or semi-public” space create privacy concerns by their very construct. Information that is inappropriate for some audiences are many times inadvertently made visible to groups other than those intended and can sometimes result in future negative outcomes. One such example is a well-known case recorded in an article entitled “The Web Means the End of Forgetting” that involved a young woman who was denied her college license because of backlash from photographs posted on social media in her private engagement.

Technology has reduced the gap between professional and personal spaces and often results in information exposure to the wrong audience [19]. The reduction in the separation of professional and personal spaces can affect image management especially in a professional setting resulting in the erosion of traditional professional image and impression management. Determining the secondary use of personal information and those who have access to this information should be the prerogative of the individual or group to whom the information belongs. However, engaging in social media activities has removed this control.

Privacy on social networking sites (SNSs) is heavily dependent on the users of these networks because sharing information is the primary way of participating in social communities. Privacy in SNSs is “multifaceted.” Users of these platforms are responsible for protecting their information from third-party data collection and managing their personal profiles. However, participants are usually more willing to give personal and more private information in SNSs than anywhere else on the Internet. This can be attributed to the feeling of community, comfort and family that these media provide for the most part. Privacy controls are not the priority of social networking site designers and only a small number of the young adolescent users change the default privacy settings of their accounts [20, 21]. This opens the door for breaches especially among the most vulnerable user groups, namely young children, teenagers and the elderly. The nature of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter and other social media platforms cause users to re-evaluate and often change their personal privacy standards in order to participate in these social networked communities [13].

While there are tremendous benefits that can be derived from the effective use of social media there are some unavoidable risks that are involved in its use. Much attention should therefore be given to what is shared in these forums. Social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are said to be the most effective

media to communicate to Generation Y's (Gen Y's), as teens and young adults are the largest user groups on these platforms [22]. However, according to Bolton et al. [22] Gen Y's use of social media, if left unabated and unmonitored will have long-term implications for privacy and engagement in civic activities as this continuous use is resulting in changes in behavior and social norms as well as increased levels of cyber-crime.

Today social networks are becoming the platform of choice for hackers and other perpetrators of antisocial behavior. These media offer large volumes of data/information ranging from an individual's date of birth, place of residence, place of work/business, to information about family and other personal activities. In many cases users unintentionally disclose information that can be both dangerous and inappropriate. Information regarding activities on social media can have far reaching negative implications for one's future. A few examples of situations which can, and have been affected are employment, visa acquisition, and college acceptance. Indiscriminate participation has also resulted in situations such identity theft and bank fraud just to list a few. Protecting privacy in today's networked society can be a great challenge. The digital revolution has indeed distorted our views of privacy, however, there should be clear distinctions between what should be seen by the general public and what should be limited to a selected group. One school of thought is that the only way to have privacy today is not to share information in these networked communities. However, achieving privacy and control over information flows and disclosure in networked communities is an ongoing process in an environment where contexts change quickly and are sometimes blurred. This requires intentional construction of systems that are designed to mitigate privacy issues [13].

## **5. Ethics and social media**

Ethics can be loosely defined as "the right thing to do" or it can be described as the moral philosophy of an individual or group and usually reflects what the individual or group views as good or bad. It is how they classify particular situations by categorizing them as right or wrong. Ethics can also be used to refer to any classification or philosophy of moral values or principles that guides the actions of an individual or group [23]. Ethical values are intended to be guiding principles that if followed, could yield harmonious results and relationships. They seek to give answers to questions such as "How should I be living? How do I achieve the things that are deemed important such as knowledge and happiness or the acquisition of attractive things?" If one chooses happiness, the next question that needs to be answered is "Whose happiness should it be; my own happiness or the happiness of others?" In the domain of social media, some of the ethical questions that must be contemplated and ultimately answered are [24]:

- Can this post be regarded as oversharing?
- Has the information in this post been distorted in anyway?
- What impact will this post have on others?

As previously mentioned, users within the ages 8–15 represent one of the largest social media user groups. These young persons within the 8–15 age range are still learning how to interact with the people around them and are deciding on the moral values that they will embrace. These moral values will help to dictate how they will

interact with the world around them. The ethical values that guide our interactions are usually formulated from some moral principle taught to us by someone or a group of individuals including parents, guardians, religious groups, and teachers just to name a few. Many of the Gen Y's/"Digital Babies" are "newbies" yet are required to determine for themselves the level of responsibility they will display when using the varying social media platforms. This includes considering the impact a post will have on their lives and/or the lives of other persons. They must also understand that when they join a social media network, they are joining a community in which certain behavior must be exhibited. Such responsibility requires a much greater level of maturity than can be expected from them at that age.

It is not uncommon for individuals to post even the smallest details of their lives from the moment they wake up to when they go to bed. They will openly share their location, what they eat at every meal or details about activities typically considered private and personal. They will also share likes and dislikes, thoughts and emotional states and for the most part this has become an accepted norm. Often times however, these shares do not only contain information about the person sharing but information about others as well. Many times, these details are shared on several social media platforms as individuals attempt to ensure that all persons within their social circle are kept updated on their activities. With this openness of sharing risks and challenges arise that are often not considered but can have serious impacts. The speed and scale with which social media creates information and makes it available—almost instantaneously—on a global scale, added to the fact that once something is posted there is really no way of truly removing it, should prompt individuals to think of the possible impact a post can have. Unfortunately, more often than not, posts are made without any thought of the far-reaching impact they can have on the lives of the person posting or others that may be implicated by the post.

## 6. Why do people share?

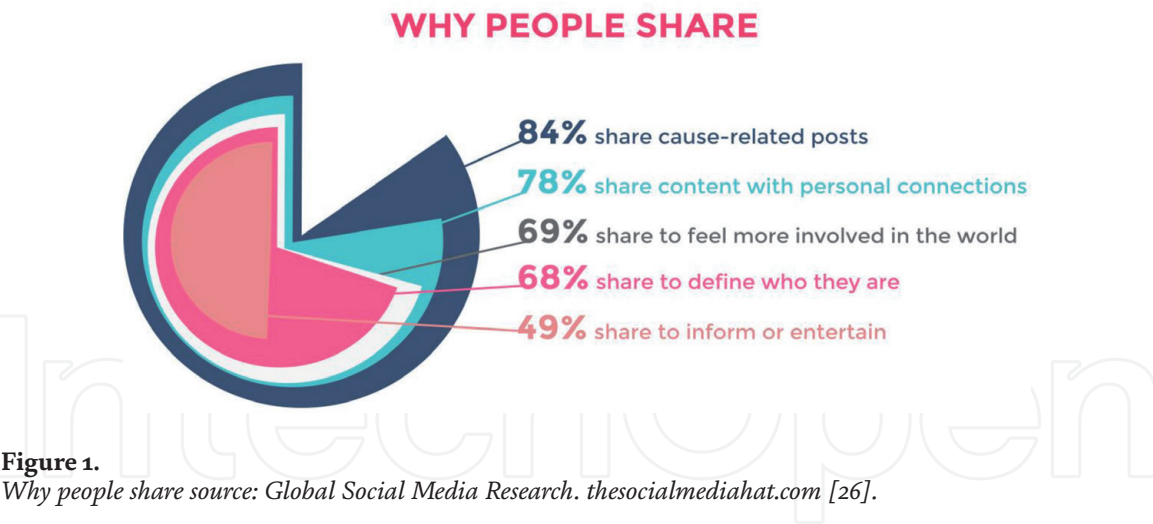
According to Berger and Milkman [25] there are five (5) main reasons why users are compelled to share content online, whether it is every detail or what they deem as highlights of their lives. These are:

- cause related
- personal connection to content
- to feel more involved in the world
- to define who they are
- to inform and entertain

People generally share because they believe that what they are sharing is important. It is hoped that the shared content will be deemed important to others which will ultimately result in more shares, likes and followers.

**Figure 1** below sums up the findings of Berger and Milkman [25] which shows that the main reason people feel the need to share content on the varying social media platform is that the content relates to what is deemed as worthy cause. 84% of respondents highlighted this as the primary motivation for sharing. Seventy-eight percent said that they share because they feel a personal connection to the content while 69 and 68%, respectively said the content either made them feel more





involved with the world or helped them to define who they were. Forty-nine percent share because of the entertainment or information value of the content. A more in depth look at each reason for sharing follows.

**7. Content related to a cause**

Social media has provided a platform for people to share their thoughts and express concerns with others for what they regard as a worthy cause. Cause related posts are dependent on the interest of the individual. Some persons might share posts related to causes and issues happening in society. In one example, the parents of a baby with an aggressive form of leukemia, who having been told that their child had only 3 months to live unless a suitable donor for a blood stem cell transplant could be found, made an appeal on social media. The appeal was quickly shared and a suitable donor was soon found. While that was for a good cause, many view social media merely as platforms for freedom of speech because anyone can post any content one creates. People think the expression of their thoughts on social media regarding any topic is permissible. The problem with this is that the content may not be accepted by law or it could violate the rights of someone thus giving rise to ethical questions.

**8. Content with a personal connection**

When social media users feel a personal connection to their content, they are more inclined to share the content within their social circles. This is true of information regarding family and personal activities. Content created by users also invokes a deep feeling of connection as it allows the users to tell their stories and it is natural to want the world or at least friends to know of the achievement. This natural need to share content is not new as humans have been doing this in some form or the other, starting with oral history to the media of the day; social media. Sharing the self-created content gives the user the opportunity of satisfying some fundamental needs of humans to be heard, to matter, to be understood and emancipated. The problem with this however is that in an effort to gratify the fundamental needs, borders are crossed because the content may not be sharable (can this content be shared within the share network?), it may not be share-worthy (who is the audience that would appreciate this content?) or it may be out of context (does the content fit the situation?).

## **9. Content that makes them feel more involved in the world**

One of the driving factors that pushes users to share content is the need to feel more in tune with the world around them. This desire is many times fueled by jealousy. Many social media users are jealous when their friends' content gets more attention than their own and so there is a lot of pressure to maintain one's persona in social circles, even when the information is unrealistic, as long as it gets as much attention as possible. Everything has to be perfect. In the case of a photo, for example, there is lighting, camera angle and background to consider. This need for perfection puts a tremendous amount of pressure on individuals to ensure that posted content is "liked" by friends. They often give very little thought to the amount of their friend's work that may have gone on behind the scenes to achieve that perfect social post.

Social media platforms have provided everyone with a forum to express views, but, as a whole, conversations are more polarized, tribal and hostile. With Facebook for instance, there has been a huge uptick in fake news, altered images, dangerous health claims and cures, and the proliferation of anti-science information. This is very distressing and disturbing because people are too willing to share and to believe without doing their due diligence and fact-checking first.

## **10. Content that defines who they are**

Establishing one's individuality in society can be challenging for some persons because not everyone wants to fit in. Some individuals will do all they can to stand out and be noticed. Social media provides the avenue for exposure and many individuals will seek to leverage the media to stand out of the crowd and not just be a fish in the school. Today many young people are currently being brought up in a culture that defines people by their presence on social media where in previous generations, persons were taught to define themselves by their career choices. These lessons would start from childhood by asking children what they wanted to be when they grew up and then rewarding them based on the answers they give [27]. In today's digital era, however, social media postings and the number of "likes" or "dislikes" they attract, signal what is appealing to others. Therefore, post that are similar to those that receive a large number of likes but which are largely unrealistic are usually made for self-gratification.

## **11. Content that informs and entertains**

The acquisition of knowledge and skills is a vital part of human survival and social media has made this process much easier. It is not uncommon to hear persons realizing that they need a particular knowledge set that they do not possess say "I need to learn to do this. I'll just YouTube it." Learning and adapting to change in as short as possible time is vital in today's society and social media coupled with the Internet put it all at the finger tips. Entertainment has the ability to bring people together and is a good way for people to bond. It provides a diversion from the demands of life and fills leisure time with amusement. Social media is an outlet for fun, pleasurable and enjoyable activities that are so vital to human survival [28]. It is now common place to see persons watching a video, viewing images and reading text that is amusing on any of the available social media platforms. Quite often these videos, images and texts can be both informative and entertaining, but there can be problems however as at times they can cross ethical lines that can lead to conflict.

## **12. Ethical challenges with social media use**

The use of modern-day technology has brought several benefits. Social media is no different and chief amongst its benefit is the ability to stay connected easily and quickly as well as build relationships with people with similar interests. As with all technology, there are several challenges that can make the use of social media off putting and unpleasant. Some of these challenges appear to be minor but they can have far reaching effects into the lives of the users of social media and it is therefore advised that care be taken to minimize the challenges associated with the use of social media [29].

A major challenge with the use of social media is oversharing because when persons share on social media, they tend to share as much as is possible which is often times too much [24]. When persons are out and about doing exciting things, it is natural to want to share this with the world as many users will post a few times a day when they head to lunch, visit a museum, go out to dinner or other places of interest [30]. While this all seems relatively harmless, by using location-based services which pinpoint users with surprising accuracy and in real time, users place themselves in danger of laying out a pattern of movement that can be easily traced. While this seems more like a security or privacy issue it stems from an ethical dilemma—“Am I sharing too much?” Oversharing can also lead to damage of user’s reputation especially if the intent is to leverage the platform for business [24]. Photos of drunken behavior, drug use, partying or other inappropriate content can change how you are viewed by others.

Another ethical challenge users of social media often encounter is that they have no way of authenticating content before sharing, which becomes problematic when the content paints people or establishments negatively. Often times content is shared with them by friends, family and colleagues. The unauthenticated content is then reshared without any thought but sometimes this content may have been maliciously altered so the user unknowingly participates in maligning others. Even if the content is not altered the fact that the content paints someone or something in a bad light should send off warning bells as to whether or not it is right to share the content which is the underlying principle of ethical behavior.

## **13. Conflicting views**

Some of the challenges experienced by social media posts are a result of a lack of understanding and sometimes a lack of respect for the varying ethical and moral standpoints of the people involved. We have established that it is typical for persons to post to social media sites without any thought as to how it can affect other persons, but many times these posts are a cause of conflict because of a difference of opinion that may exist and the effect the post may have. Each individual will have his or her own ethical values and if they differ then this can result in conflict [31]. When an executive of a British company made an Instagram post with some racial connotations before boarding a plane to South Africa it started a frenzy that resulted in the executive’s immediate dismissal. Although the executive said it was a joke and there was no prejudice intended, this difference in views as to the implications of the post, resulted in an out of work executive and a company scrambling to maintain its public image.

## **14. Impact on personal development**

In this age of sharing, many young persons spend a vast amount of time on social media checking the activities of their “friends” as well as posting on their own

activities so their “friends” are aware of what they are up to. Apart from interfering with their academic progress, time spent on these posts can have long term repercussions. An example is provided by a student of a prominent university who posted pictures of herself having a good time at parties while in school. She was denied employment because of some of her social media posts. While the ethical challenge here is the question of the employee’s right to privacy and whether the individual’s social media profile should affect their ability to fulfill their responsibilities as an employee, the impact on the individual’s long term personal growth is clear.

## 15. Conclusion

In today’s information age, one’s digital footprint can make or break someone; it can be the deciding factor on whether or not one achieves one’s life-long ambitions. Unethical behavior and interactions on social media can have far reaching implications both professionally and socially. Posting on the Internet means the “end of forgetting,” therefore, responsible use of this medium is critical. The unethical use of social media has implications for privacy and can result in security breaches both physically and virtually. The use of social media can also result in the loss of privacy as many users are required to provide information that they would not divulge otherwise. Social media use can reveal information that can result in privacy breaches if not managed properly by users. Therefore, educating users of the risks and dangers of the exposure of sensitive information in this space, and encouraging vigilance in the protection of individual privacy on these platforms is paramount. This could result in the reduction of unethical and irresponsible use of these media and facilitate a more secure social environment. The use of social media should be governed by moral and ethical principles that can be applied universally and result in harmonious relationships regardless of race, culture, religious persuasion and social status.

Analysis of the literature and the findings of this research suggest achieving acceptable levels of privacy is very difficult in a networked system and will require much effort on the part of individuals. The largest user groups of social media are unaware of the processes that are required to reduce the level of vulnerability of their personal data. Therefore, educating users of the risk of participating in social media is the social responsibility of these social network platforms. Adapting universally ethical behaviors can mitigate the rise in the number of privacy breaches in the social networking space. This recommendation coincides with philosopher Immanuel Kant’s assertion that, the Biblical principle which states “Do unto others as you have them do unto you” can be applied universally and should guide human interactions [5]. This principle, if adhered to by users of social media and owners of these platforms could raise the awareness of unsuspecting users, reduce unethical interactions and undesirable incidents that could negatively affect privacy, and by extension security in this domain.



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