**Title:**

**ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THE PRIVACY PARADOX: A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK**

**What is the research problem?**

People join Online Social Networking sites (OSN’s) for number of reasons like keeping in touch with family and friends, professional reasons. Studies show that users are not actually aware of the privacy issues and share more information about themselves and close ones, also that how it can be exploited. This paper looks into the privacy issues surrounding OSN’s and recommends a research framework.

**Overview/main points of the proposed approach/architecture**

* There has been an exponential growth in the use of Internet in day to day life. A constant stream of text, images, audio, and video can be accessed at any time through computers and mobile devices within range of an Internet connection.
* There is a growing trend in people to interact on through virtual social networking websites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and LinkedIn.
* While the popularity of online social networking continues to grow so too does the increasing threat to member privacy.
* Most of the members are not enable their privacy settings or be aware that someone is gaining access to their profile through an account they thought was a trusted friend. Many sites lack user-friendly settings and users are unable to determine if their pages are private or public.
* A poor understanding of privacy on the Internet in general means that not all users of a social networking site realize that it is public and thus lack the knowledge to protect themselves from unauthorized viewing.
* Social networking sites require certain pieces of information from the users, asking for e-mail addresses, birth dates, school affiliations. Some users experience the illusion of privacy, as if they are joining an exclusive group.
* Were as using this information provided by the user themselves, the advertisements on these sites are tailored to the user based on the data that he or she supplied during the registration phase.
* Unauthorized access and use of private information found on a members social network profile can lead to countless dangers including; identity theft, fraud, stalking, and loss of employment.
* As privacy concerns multiply, there is little evidence that social networks are losing members. This phenomenon is known as the privacy paradox.
* The objective of this paper is to present a research plan along with a rationale for exploring the privacy paradox mentioned above and to understand why people divulge private information in an online social network setting.
* First self-verification theory will be used to examine the motivating factors behind online social networking. Second, the theory of uncertainty avoidance will be used to analyze how online social networkers handle feelings of ambiguity in the context of controlling private information.
* Individuals are constantly seeking out social situations that will verify their own self-conceptions. By applying the self-verification framework to the online social network setting, analyzing the motivating factors behind ones use of online social networks can be further analyzed.
* Example, a Facebook member can choose the images and information displayed on their profile, it can be hypothesized that individuals feel they can control their own self-conceived role better in a virtual social network than they can while interacting in a more public setting offline.
* However, does the need for socializing with others through virtual social networks outweigh the desire to safeguard personal privacy, will be a good question.
* Uncertainty avoidance is defined as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations” and the desire for rules and regulations to avoid anxiety.
* According to the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, “The problem Facebook is solving is this one paradox i.e. People want access to all the information around them but they also want complete control over their own information”.
* A second hypothesis is that individuals who communicate through virtual social networks feel they have control over their own private information. But also that the majority of individuals who communicate through virtual social networks will confirm that they did not read the privacy policy before becoming a member.

**Research Methodology**

* Recommended way to gather information through use of a questionnaire which will ask for responses in four different areas:
  + Member demographics: consist of collecting data on gender, age, race, marital status, computer usage, internet usage, where the member accesses the internet, and how many virtual social networks in which they are members.
  + Communicating online vs. offline: Users comfort level of communicating private information online vs. offline will be addressed by listing a series of personal events such as “getting married”, “having a baby”, “obtaining a new job” and using a five-point scale to determine their comfort level.
  + Patterns in Personal Privacy Settings: examining patterns in personal account privacy settings such as respondents can be asked to select the specific groups of people they allow to access certain characteristics of their virtual social network profile
  + Privacy policy awareness: questions regarding their awareness of privacy policies on virtual social network websites.

**Expected Results**

* The expected result of this study is to produce findings that will assist in furthering the awareness of privacy safeguarding across various virtual social network communities. The findings of this particular research framework are expected to reveal the need for further education of virtual social networkers concerning privacy safeguarding online.