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Suspicious minds: user perceptions of privacy on Facebook in Myanmar

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Suspicious minds: user perceptions of privacy on Facebook in Myanmar

Abstract

This paper studies the user perceptions of and behaviours pertaining to social privacy on Facebook in Myanmar, drawing on findings of qualitative research from 98 respondents, and an online survey in which 403 responses were received. It explores two elements of the users' behaviour pertaining to social privacy– the means by and the extent to which personal information was shared on the social media platform, and the audiences with whom the information is shared are then examined. The research finds that a number of respondents refrained from publishing their names and photographs on the platform, while individuals with whom they had no offline contact were added to their social network. It finds that the rationales for such decisions had underpinnings pertaining to factors including gender, ethnicity and religion, and were reflective of the socio-political environment in Myanmar at the time of the research.

1. Context, motivation and prior work

1.1 ICTs in Myanmar

Ninety-one international telecommunications companies competed for two licenses in 2013 to operate in Myanmar alongside its incumbent operator MPT. This move to liberalize the telecommunications was accompanied by a dramatic drop in the price of a mobile SIM. A SIM that cost USD 200 in 2012 and USD 1500 prior to 2011, was readily available for USD 1.5 at the time the international operators began operations (Min, Fife, & Bohlin, 2014; Hurulle, Zainudeen, & Galpaya, 2017). Mobile ownership grew from 39 percent amongst 15-65 year olds in 2015, to 61 percent in 2016 (Zainudeen, Galpaya, Hurulle, & Suthaharan, 2017). Facebook is immensely popular amongst Internet users in the country, with 14 million subscriptions being recorded in 2018 (Facebook, 2018). Instances where rural Facebook users had conflated the use of the platform with the use of the Internet have been recorded (Cihon & Galpaya, 2017).

1.2 Myanmar's darker side

Myanmar has a history of a lack of cohesion amongst the many ethnic and religious groups that live in the country. "After 1962, the military junta created a new logic that only Burman Buddhists could be loyal citizens", Ibrahim (2018) writes. This ideology is thought to be followed by groups such as the 969 movement, who have implied that a massacre of Muslims was a show of strength (Fuller, 2013). The Rohingyas, a Muslim ethnic group living largely in the Rakhine State, "visibly alien in the color of their skin, in their language and most of all in their religion, have been at the brunt of this discriminatory thinking" Ibrahim writes. The term Bengali is also used to refer to the group to infer that the community is from Bangladesh, and has been used to insinuate that they should return to their country of origin. Lesser-known conflicts for

independence and self-determination have been underway in the Kachin, Kayah, Karen and Shan States for decades. Facebook received significant criticism in early 2018 over its operations in the country, with the United Nations investigator stating that it was used as a vehicle to incite violence and spread hatred against ethnic minorities (The Guardian, 2018).

1.3 Privacy in context

Nissenbaum (2004) views privacy as a means of contextual integrity, and maintains that it is only applicable when who types of norms are held—appropriateness and distribution. The norms of appropriateness define what information is appropriate or fitting to reveal in a relevant context; the norms of distribution refer to the transfer of data from one party to another. Facebook's inactions in Myanmar was not the only source of criticism for Facebook in the early part of 2018— the organization was heavily reprimanded for the collection and distribution of personally identifiable data from up to 87 million Facebook users, leading to much backlash on the company's privacy policies. Facebook's privacy policies had received its share of criticism prior to this occurrence, however. One year after its launch, Jones & Soltren (2005) identified three principle factors- that users revealed too much on Facebook, that the company did not take adequate steps to protect user privacy, and that third parties actively sought out end-user information using Facebook- that undermined privacy on the platform. This paper focuses its attention on that on user behaviours, akin to what Raynes-Goldie (2010) called social privacy as opposed to institutional privacy. A nationally representative survey carried out in 2016 suggested that a mere 18 percent of mobile owners stated that they themselves could create log-in details, while 19 percent reported being able to adjust the settings of an application without help from others (Zainudeen, Galpaya, Hurulle, & Suthaharan, 2017). The dearth of some basic skills that formed an essential component on online privacy on Facebook (and other social media networks) could thus be inferred. It is noteworthy that all academics may not all share the same level of apprehension about the sharing of such data; Palen & Dourish (2003), for instance, noted that active participation in the networked world requires “disclosure of information simply to be a part of it”.

1.4 Socio-demographic antecedents to online privacy behaviour

Altman (1977), views privacy as a being a culturally specific process in terms of mechanisms used to regulate social interaction, while seemingly paradoxically stating that it is also culturally universal process involving dynamic, dialectic, and optimization features at another level of analysis. Marshall, Cardon, Norris, Goreva, & D'Souza (2008) suggests that Indian students were more likely than their American counterparts to maintain a circle of friends online that they had never met before—these students were thought to exhibit more individualistic behaviour. Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis (2018), focusing on other demographic antecedents identified that a student was deemed significantly more likely to have a private profile if the student was female, had friends with private profiles, he/she was more active on Facebook, and preferred popular music. Kirkpatrick (2010) stated that “the older you are, the more likely you are to find Facebook's exposure of personal information intrusive and excessive”. Age was a popular theme in studies on online privacy behaviour. Often, even if age was not explicitly considered a variable in the analysis, the sample constituted largely of

teenagers or university students. Marwick & boyd (2014), for example, spoke of how a number of teenage respondents engaged in creative tactics to regulate who could access the information they shared online, not by using the technical features of social media such as limiting the audience visibility of posts, but by focusing on encoding the content itself in order to limit the audience.

This paper will use Nissenbaum's definition of privacy as a means of contextual integrity, while also drawing on the work of Altman (1977) that views privacy as a culturally specific process. It finds that much of the existing literature is reflective of the behaviour of social media users in the United States or other western countries. Marshall, Cardon, Norris, Goreva, & D'Souza (2008) indicates that attitudes towards privacy on social networking sites are significantly different in India– this paper hopes to add to the literature that examines the subject from the lens of a specific Asian country to identify both the attitudes and behaviour, and the rationale for both.

2. Methodology

2.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research methods were employed for the purpose of this research to investigate the topic. Ninety-eight respondents were interviewed, with 16 focus group discussions (FGDs), and six in-depth interviews (IDIs) being conducted. Internet users who had been using the Internet for a year or more were recruited in order to get accounts of sufficient depth. In order to get a variety of views, and in an attempt to keep allow the respondents to converse freely on the topic, the respondents' gender, age, socio-economic category, ethnicity, religion, political views and sexual orientation were used as target areas in the screening process. It is noteworthy that although target areas were identified, the conversation was not limited to subject matter on the topic.

The research was carried out in Yangon Region, Mandalay region, and the Kachin State. FGDs focusing on issues on religion were conducted in Mandalay. Four FGDs, focusing on ethnicity and local politics, took place in Myitkyina in the Kachin State, which is located in the North Eastern part of Myanmar. The remaining ten took place in Yangon, the country's largest city and commercial center. Kantar Public Myanmar and the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO) conducted the fieldwork (including the recruitment of respondents and moderation). The fieldwork took place in August and September 2017, with the participation of LIRNEasia researchers at all the protocols. Informed consent was of participation was obtained from all respondents, with parental consent also being received for respondents under the age of 18.

Table 1: Sampling table for FGDs

Target area	Notes on target group	Gender	Age	SEC	Location
Ethnicity	Kachin Ethnicity	6M	35-44	A/B	Kachin
Ethnicity	Non-Kachin Ethnicity	6F	25-34	C/D/E	Kachin
Ethnicity	Rakhine Ethnicity	6M	21-42	B/C/D	Yangon
Ethnicity	Shan ethnicity	3M & 3F	19-27	B/C/D	Yangon
Gender	Women	6F	35-44	C/D/E	Yangon
Gender/Ethnicity	Women (Kachin Ethnicity)	6F	15-24	C/D/E	Kachin
Gender/Religion	Women (Muslim)	3F	22-34	C/D	Yangon
Gender/Sexuality	LGBTI	Unspecified	15-24	A/B	Yangon
Gender/Sexuality	LGBTI	Unspecified	15-24	C/D/E	Yangon
Politics	Politically active	3M & 3F	25-34	A/B	Yangon
Politics	Politically active and pro-KIA	5M	35-46	Mixed	Kachin
Religion	Buddhist	6M	15-24	A/B	Yangon
Religion	Buddhist	6F	25-34	C/D/E	Mandalay
Religion	Muslim	6M	19-42	Mixed	Yangon
Religion	Non-Buddhist	6M	35-44	C/D/E	Mandalay

	(Muslim, Christian, Hindu)				
Religion	Non-Buddhist (Muslim, Christian, Hindu)	6F	25-34	A/B	Yangon

Of the six in depth interviews, three were with respondents who had previously participated in the FGDs– IDIs were conducted in an attempt to extract information that the moderators felt they would be uneasy to share in an open discussion. The three remaining IDIs were with individuals who were deemed as local celebrities with large social media followings.

Each FGD took between one and two hours, while IDIs concluded in 45 minutes or less. The discussions took place in the local language, Burmese. The discussions were recorded, and the discussion was translated and transcribed to English. Inductive coding methods were used to analyze the transcripts, given the exploratory nature of the research.

2.2 Quantitative research

The findings of the qualitative research are also supplemented with the results of an online survey carried out in October and November 2017. The sample of Internet users was sourced from respondents to Kantar TNS Myanmar’s 2015 and 2016 waves of its ‘Connected Life’ study. The phone numbers of 1,000 respondents, who had indicated that they were active online, were randomly selected from the samples of Connected Life 2015 and 2016. An introductory SMS was sent to the selected group, after which the team made a call to explain the nature of the study and the objectives of the work. A mobile friendly survey was designed, and the survey was truncated into two sections and sent on consecutive days to avoid survey fatigue. Each section took around 12 minutes to complete. 403 responses were received.

A series of logic checks were built into the online questionnaire and controlled via software logic, indicating that online survey respondents could not proceed to the next question if contradictory answers were given. SPSS software was used to analyse the findings of the online survey.

2.3 Limitations of the research

The findings are based on qualitative research in which purposive sampling was carried out, with the authors specifying the characteristics of the respondents that were used in the screening process. Though efforts were taken to include those of different socio-economic categories, ethnicities, religions, political views, genders, sexual orientations and age groups, the findings are not generalizable– the recruitment of a different group with the same characteristics could yield different findings. Furthermore, respondents were sourced only from those based in three geographic areas– Yangon, Mandalay and Kachin. Three FGDs, focusing on the prevailing ethno-religious tensions were due to take place in the Rakhine State. However, the conflict in the Rakhine State escalated the day before the research team was due to arrive there, and alternative measures had to be taken. Hence, Muslims and those of Rakhine ethnicity who were living in Yangon, but with relatives in the Rakhine State were interviewed in their place.

The results of the quantitative research too cannot be deemed to be nationally representative though the sample was drawn randomly from a nationally representative source. Non-response bias is likely to have occurred, suggesting that the responses of those who responded to the survey could have varied from those who did not respond.

3. Findings

The respondents of the quantitative online survey suggested that they were most weary of personal information being gathered by their family and friends, over thrice as much as they were of their Government. Given that significantly less concern was being expressed regarding the data collection by apps, platforms and third party marketing companies, this paper focuses on the specific measures taken by the respondents who were Facebook users in Myanmar to maintain their social privacy, and attempts to identify the underlying rationales for these decisions. Two main strategies were identified– the first revolves the information put up on the social media platform, in line with the appropriateness norm identified by Nissenbaum (2004). The second, in line with the distribution norm, focuses on the audiences to which the information uploaded was made available.

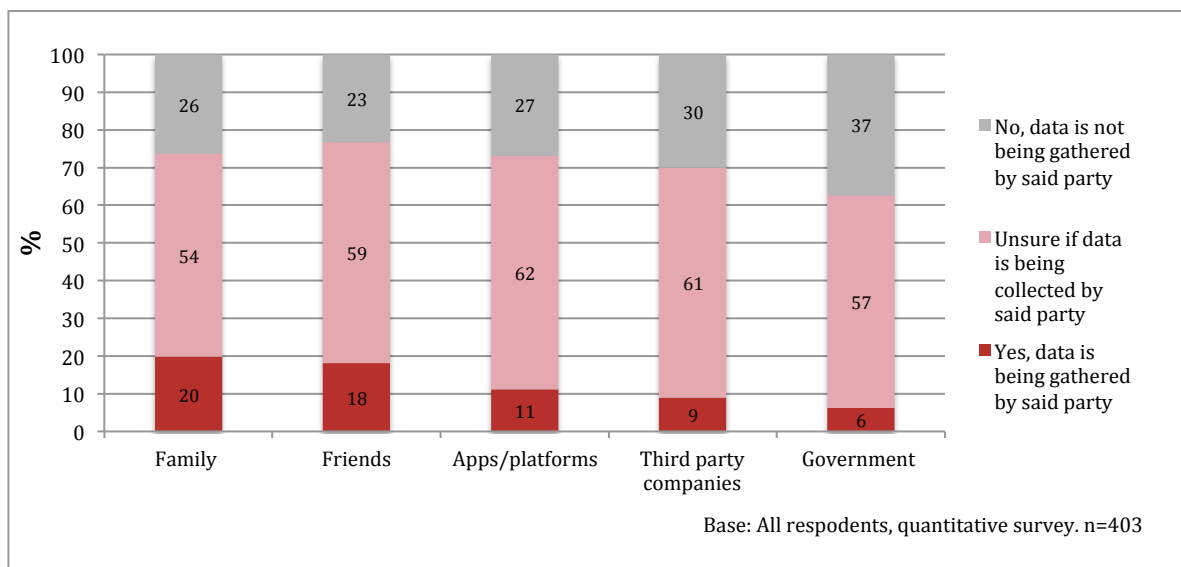


Figure 1: Perceptions of personal information being collected without consent

3.1 Uploading personally unidentifiable information online

A number of respondents spoke candidly about how they posted information that did not fully reflect their legal names. The types of names used by these respondents varied largely. Some tended to use nicknames or English instead of their legal or real names. It is noteworthy to note that nicknames and English names are both used in offline settings. It is not uncommon in Myanmar for those who attend international schools to be given an English name (War, 2016). Commonly seen amongst the respondents was a tendency to use “beautiful names”, such as ‘music lover’, which had little to do with how they were referred to offline on a regular basis, but may have relevance to a subject

close to the individual's heart. Such "beautiful names" are reminiscent of the similarly seemingly obscure email addresses used in the late 1990s. A number of others spoke about how they used names of popular celebrities and cartoon characters—the relevant photograph accompanied at times. A number of other respondents spoke about uploading pictures of scenery instead of photographs of their own.

Those who desired a higher degree of anonymity chose not to reveal both their own name and their photographs. The authors also encountered others who revealed one and not the other, though a distinct pattern for this choice was not identified beyond general concerns of their privacy and security.

Some respondents used such accounts as their primary account, while others used it as their secondary (or tertiary) account. The results of the online survey suggested that of the 381 respondents who were social media users, 41 percent claimed to be using more than one Facebook account. The sections below will examine the respondents' rationale for needing an account void of some or most of their personal information.

a. To maintain offline relations with spouse

Some female respondents, all of whom were married housewives of mid-low socio-economic categories, stated that they refrained from putting their real pictures, and/or their real names on Facebook. The decisions stemmed largely from their husbands' displeasure of their use of the platform. Refraining from divulging their names, and or photographs, were seen as a workaround to continue using the platform while appeasing their husbands.

"I don't use my real pictures and real name. My husband doesn't like it. He doesn't want me to use Facebook officially."

Female, 22, Housewife, SEC D, Yangon (R13.3)

"My husband doesn't like me to posting my pictures on Facebook. If I use it with my real female name, boys will hit on me."

Female, 34, Housewife, SEC C, Yangon (R13.1)

A poor betel nut seller whose husband worked in the government service, in an attempt to avoid unwanted attention from the opposite sex, went to use Facebook through her husband's account instead of her own. She went on to say that she adopted a male persona when having conversations with those on their friend list.

"I feel that using a male's account is safer... If a woman uses her own account, some guys want to talk and say things that are not appropriate. Even when I say I am married, they still say things like that."

Female, 28, Betel Nut Seller, SEC E, Myitkyina (R6.2)

b. To freely share their personal feelings without judgment

Figure 1 suggests that respondents were most convinced that their friends and family were gathering personal information about them through their online activity without their consent. One female respondent from Mandalay noted that she used a second Facebook account in order to vent her feelings without the knowledge of her friends and family.

“ I have one account to talk to my friends. I upload what I do, where I go, and what I eat and use messenger in that account with my name. My official account has my own profile picture.

*I have another account to post my feelings because I am afraid my friends will comment under those posts. Nobody knows about that account. I use this account with another name... I don't upload my photo either– I post pictures of scenery in that account. When I am stressed because of family matters or children, I upload things... “ (R9.5)
Female, 29, Trader, SEC D, Mandalay*

c. To engage in discourse on current affairs

Facebook's Newsfeed is popularly conceived to be means of obtaining news– the abundance of local language content may be a key reason behind the popularity of the platform. One respondent was a landlady, who used her young tenant's Facebook account on her phone, with his consent, to stay up to date on the news. The varied content on his Newsfeed, given the large number of Friends he had, led her to use his account instead of her own. This complements the findings of Zainudeen & Galpaya (2015) who identified respondents who thought of Facebook as their only information source for news. This research finds that respondents tended to read the posts on their Newsfeed passively, without actively engaging with the content.

A number of those who did want to engage in discourse, often pertaining to politics or the prevailing ethno-religious conflict, wanted to do so without their comments being traceable to them.

“We cannot say anything we want openly now given the current situation, even though it is free now... Online, however, we can talk to each other about anything we want to without needing to be afraid. I have two accounts... One account does not have a profile picture. I can see news and write anything I want freely. I read news and share news.”

Male, 35, Carpenter, SEC B, Myitkyina (R5.4)

“Without showing my identity, I can engage in preventing misconceptions or state my opinions on local and international news without getting my name hurt... I can take the news without letting my identity be revealed. So, I use nicknames or other funny names with profile pictures like cartoon characters.”

Female, 38, Owner of snack shop and part time volunteer for NGO, SEC D, Yangon (15.1)

“I didn't use my real photo because the people with different opinions in politics can target me and threaten me”

Female, 26, Social influencer, Yangon (ID15)

Given the centrality of ethnicity related issues in politics in Myanmar at the time of the fieldwork, the respondents' reluctance to engage in such discussion online was often tied to their own ethnicity. A man of Rakhine ethnicity, a primarily Buddhist ethnic minority living in the Rakhine State and often thought to be perpetrators of violence against of the Rohingya community, was one such individual. He spoke about changing his name to one that did not divulge his ethnicity, as he felt targeted on the social media

platform. The fear of receiving a “Haha” reaction on Facebook, which is seen as symbol of sarcastic laughter used to humiliate its recipient in Myanmar, pushed the respondent to do so.

Another respondent of Kachin ethnicity spoke of a negative experience she faced while commenting on current affairs with her own (Kachin) name. As a result of the incident, she maintained two accounts– one with her own (Kachin) name, and another with a Burmese name, commonly used amongst those of the ethnic majority in the country.

“I don’t use my real name or my photo when using social media. Many people hate Rakhine and I don’t want to use them. They [have given} us Haha sticker comments. When we meet one day there will be problems. I changed my name to avoid such situations.”

Male, 42, Fish salesman, SEC C, Rakhine ethnicity, Yangon (R12.6)

“One time, people in the comments section [of one of my posts] got into an argument. After that, I decided to use two accounts for different purposes. One is with my Kachin name [for] my relatives and friends from the same ethnicity. The other one is with my Burmese name and it is for activities where there could be negative impact if I used my Kachin name. [This is] for political or other controversial views. Since then, I [haven’t had] any problem.”

Female, 25, University student, SEC B, Kachin ethnicity, Yangon (R2.1)

The multiplicity of accounts, and engagement in discussion on Facebook did not necessarily need to have political or ethnic underpinnings. One respondent, who actively used 12 Facebook accounts simultaneously, did so to fight with others though the subject matter is not revealed. He also had an account in a girl’s name, though he identified as male, though the reasons for this decision were not revealed.

“I have 12 [Facebook} accounts– I use all 12 accounts all the time. Five of my accounts are real with my own pictures, but the others do not have my real pictures. One account is in a girl’s name. I use fake accounts to fight with other people on comments. I watch 18+ videos on some accounts...”

Male, 19, Student, SEC D, LGBT, Yangon (R17.1)

It should be noted that despite the large number of respondents who spoke about using multiple Facebook accounts, there were some who were against the notion of doing so. A few spoke about the need to use their own and put up their real names and pictures to take accountability for their comments. One suggested that he had nothing to hide.

“I use my name and photo so that people will know who I am. I take accountability on my comments.”

Male, 21, University student, SEC C, Yangon (R12.2)

“I don’t do anything bad so that I upload my real name.”

Male, 35, Owner of oil shed, SEC B, Myitkyina (R5.4)

It was not uncommon for the female respondents to upload real photographs of themselves, but only in a group setting. They could thus remain identifiable, but were of

the notion that being in a group setting would reduce the chances that the images would be manipulated (or “Photoshopped”, they put it).

“People say that posting your pictures is risky these days. So, I stopped uploading those. I upload family pictures on Facebook [instead]”
Female, 32, Trader, SEC C, Mandalay (R9.4)

“Because I am afraid other people will take my picture and abuse it. If there are two or three people in the picture, they cannot crop it [and manipulate it]... “
Female, 19, Unemployed, SEC E, Myitkyina (R7.3)

3.2. Granting others access to personal information

Acquisiti, Brandimarte, & Loewenstein (2015) note that the desire for interaction, socialization, disclosure, and fame are fundamental human motives like the need for privacy, and that electronic media in the current age provide unprecedented opportunities to act on them. The internal trade offs that the respondents in this study between these different elements were clear.

Most respondents from Myanmar had at least accepted Friend Requests from those who they did not have offline encounters with— some spoke of actively sending out friend requests to strangers as well. One university student from Myitkyina suggested that her ratio of known to unknown friends on the social network was a 1:10. Connecting with people on Facebook was seen as a means of making new friends and expanding networks, as much as it was seen as a means of keeping in touch with individuals they had already met offline. Some even showed how they had sustained interaction with those they added, despite their lack of familiarity outside the platform. This tendency to maintain contact with those they did not know in offline settings were seen amongst both men and women, and across age and socio-economic groups.

“I have about 100 friends that I know in my account. I have about 1000 friends that I don’t know [outside Facebook]. There are more outside friends that I don’t know...”
Female, 20, University student, SEC D, Myitkyina (R7.1)

“I send two friend requests every day— one girl and one boy. I send request to two people each day whether they accept it or not. In fact, I want to make friends by telling them about myself.”
Male, 35, Jade trader, SEC C, Mandalay (R10.4)

“I talk to people I don’t know [in offline settings] on Facebook if they’re okay, I actually keep on talking to them. Some people just want to be friends. They want to share [information] about themselves and tease [us]. Once, after I uploaded a picture on Facebook, someone teased me saying that I am getting fat. When I ask him whether he knows me, he said he does not know me but he sees pictures I post. [He had seen pictures posted] previously, and said that I have got fatter in this photograph.”
Female, 29, Trader, SEC E, Mandalay (R9.6)

On the other end of the spectrum however, we met a respondent who only accepted Friend Requests of those he had met in an offline setting, and went on to call the

individual who sent him a Friend Request to verify that it was they who sent the request. This level of due diligence was not a commonality among our respondents, with only one other respondent stating that they only accepted those who they knew in offline settings.

“I got to their Wall to see if I know them or not. I accept if I know them. If I don’t know them, I don’t accept.”

Male, 25, Mason, SEC D, Yangon (R12.3)

It is important to note that despite that fact that most respondents had included into their network individuals they had no offline contact with there was a degree of selectiveness about which individuals they included in their network. In other words, many were not averse to adding strangers, provided they fit certain criteria. By looking at their profile pictures, and going through their walls, it was determined whether or not they fit the criteria they had in mind. The different factors that individuals took into consideration when determining whether to add the said individuals to their Facebook accounts are examined below.

a. Presence of Mutual Friends

Some respondents placed an implicit level of trust in the hands of their Facebook Friends who they knew in offline settings. It was assumed that their friends would only add those who they knew and trusted onto their networks. Thereby, some respondents chose to accept or decline the friend request of an individual based on whether they were connected to a friend or not.

“I look their wall and if I think they will be friendly to me, I accept them as friends. Mostly, I accept friends I know. Later, I get many friends who are friends of my friends. [If] they sent me friend requests and I accept them because they have mutual friends with me.” (R7.6)

Female, 21, Teacher, SEC C, Myitkyina

b. Ethnicity

Three respondents of Kachin ethnicity—a majority Christian group that resides in the Northern Kachin Hills—stated that ethnicity was a primary criterion they used for this purpose. Ethnicity being the main screening criterion contrasted starkly with the respondent of Burmese ethnicity listed in the previous section, who had a stronger sense of national identity. A faction of the Kachin community, as is the case with other ethnic minorities, has been fighting the Central Government for independence for decades. One respondent stated that they accepted Kachin people regardless of whether they knew them in offline settings or not, but did not extend the same behaviour for those of Burmese ethnicity.

“I accept only Kachin people. I don’t like other races.”

Female, 18, Tailoring Apprentice, SEC C, Kachin ethnicity, Myitkyina (R7.2)

“There are one or two Burmese people in my account— I only accept [Burmese] people who I know as friends. I accept Kachin people whether I know them in real life or not. If

they have mutual friends with me, I accept them.”

Female, 19, Housewife, SEC D, Kachin ethnicity, Myitkyina (R7.4)

“Usually, we wouldn't think twice to accept people from different ethnic groups. I accept them at once when they send me requests. [Now, however] If other ethnic groups send me request, I think a long time whether to accept them or not. I take a long time because of what is happening in our State...”

Male, 34, Carpenter, SEC A, Kachin ethnicity, Myitkyina (R5.3)

c. Religion

Some respondents encountered spoke of how they used religion as screening criteria to determine who they should include in their social networks. When probed on the reason for using these criteria, responses such as “I don't know...” and “It's something I do unconsciously” were obtained. One female respondent from Yangon, who earlier spoke about the merits of using nicknames and celebrity names on Facebook, recalled a time where she accepted a friend request from a stranger, seeing that he was a Buddhist. Later however, she concluded that her initial screening criteria may have been insufficient— she discontinued conversations with him once she realized he was from Monywa, as she was under the impression that those from the city in question were cunning.

“ I don't usually accept many people though... I [usually] don't accept people from other religions. I accept requests mainly from Buddhist people.”

Female, 35, Housewife, SEC D, Buddhist, Yangon Region (R15.4)

“I met a guy from Monywa. While I was reading news online, this guy came and said, “Hi” so I “Hi” back at him since I saw he's a Buddhist, too. By that time, he has already downloaded by picture. He called me Mama (sister) and asked if we could be friends. I was like of course, everyone can make friends. I like to keep the reply short and straightforward. He asked me where do I live, and I said I live in Yangon. But then, he asked more “Where exactly?” and I said, “Why do you ask?” so he said, “I just want to make friends with you.” I asked him, “Where are you from?” and he said “ I am from Monywa.” I told him I don't talk with guys from Monywa since they tend to be cunning.”

Female, 38, Owner of snack shop and part time volunteer for NGO, SEC D, Buddhist, Yangon (15.1)

d. Nationality

A tailor of Burmese ethnicity living in the Kachin State articulated that she tended to trust those of the same nationality— those from Myanmar. She also spoke about how she tended to not accept friend requests from individuals from countries such as Thailand and China unless they had English names that they could read and understand. When deciding to accept the requests of those outside the country, the primary screening criteria tended to be the ability to understand the content they posted— the language in which the name was written might have been perceived as an indicator of this.

“If I accept only people with Myanmar name, my doubts are clear because they are Myanmar people. I feel friendly to them because I am Myanmar too. [I also accept those] who have English names that I can read. If they upload pictures such as flowers or girls, I accept them. I usually don’t [accept] people who write their names in languages that I do not understand– like Chinese language or Thai languages. However, [if] it turns out that he is the Bengali. When I think that he/she is Bengali, I don’t accept him/her.”

Female, 26, Tailor, SEC C, Burmese ethnicity, Myitkyina (R6.6)

“I would check their profile when I receive a “Hi.” Some people, they don’t use their pictures as their profile, so I need to check on other pictures and other things, too. If I see someone I know in their friend list, then I would accept them. Even if that person is a non-Buddhist foreigner, I would still accept him/her, unless they are Kalar, because I know some of them just want to make friends and some might even understand Burmese.”

Female, 40, Housewife, SEC B, Burmese ethnicity, Yangon (R15.3)

The latter part of her statement, however, brings forth another important issue highlighting the underlying tensions on the Rakhine State. Given the popular notion that the Rohingya community is perceived to be from Bangladesh and not Myanmar, they are not accepted into their friend networks. A respondent of Burmese ethnicity however, spoke of how she filtered out requests from those were deemed “Kalar”. The word Kalar, a derogatory term used to refer to those associated with the Muslim race, is also frequently used—this term’s exact meaning has now been blurred with it being used to refer to Muslims, South Asians and Rohingyas (Latt, 2015). This may be a problem of intersectionality, as articulated in Crenshaw (1989) as the interconnected nature of categorizations such as race and gender, creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage.

e. Gender

A respondent who earlier spoke of only uploading group photographs of her family stated that she mainly accepted friend requests from females, as not to upset her spouse. *R9.4 I mostly accept [requests from] females, I don’t accept males that much. [I don’t accept requests from males] because my husband is jealous.*

Female, 32, Trader, SEC C, Mandalay

Homophily, the notion that contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people (McPherson, Smith-lovin, L, & Cook, 2001) is observed among our respondents. Many respondents spoke their desire to associate with similarities to themselves. While the lines under which the respondents’ decisions to include strangers into their social networks are clear, it is important to note that the factors identified above are often not used in isolation. As the segment on nationality will highlight, some respondents took into consideration multiple factors when making such decisions— a single respondent was found to have considered multiple factors including the nationality (and thus the language spoken), ethnicity, religion and the presence of mutual friends.

4. Conclusion

Ensuuing the thesis of Altman (2007) and Marshall, Cardon, Norris, Goreva, & D'Souza (2008) that privacy related behaviours may differ amongst varied cultures and countries, this paper explores online behaviours related to privacy in country specific context. The study focuses on Facebook, which is immensely popular in Myanmar, and was the most frequently mentioned use of the Internet in qualitative protocols. The results of a non-representative online survey suggested that Internet users were most certain that their friends and family were collecting their personal data without their consent— hence, the paper focuses on user behaviours undertaken to maintain social privacy. Drawing from the idea of privacy as contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2004), it examines the means by which personal information was uploaded onto Facebook, and the considerations taken when deciding which audiences could view the content was uploaded. A number of respondents, in various combinations, refrained from sharing their real names and real photographs on the social media platform. Three primary reasons were identified for these actions— to maintain peaceful relations with their partners, to share their personal feelings without being judged by friends and family, and to engage in political discourse. When exploring the means by which limits are drawn on data sharing on this social media platform, the study finds that many respondents tended to include individuals with whom they had no previous offline interaction in their social network. However, this was done within certain limits, with a large degree of homophily was observed in this selection. Respondents tended to freely add strangers onto their social network taking into consideration their nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, and the presence of mutual friends. All respondents did not use these uniformly, and some used a combination of these factors to determine who would be added to their Facebook accounts. The fact that many respondents post disingenuous information about themselves, but then go on to include strangers into their social networks by screening the personal data shared by the stranger, suggests a sub-optimal method of maintaining one's privacy.

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