
PRIVACY AND SAFETY ONLINE: STUDENTS PERSPECTIVE

Sanja Adjaip-Velichkovski

International Balkan University, Skopje, N. Macedonia, s.adzaip@ibu.edu.mk

Abstract: As the exponential growth of digital tools makes it easier for us to work, shop, interact, and connect online, those same technologies are easily turned into instruments for disinformation, unauthorized monitoring, misuse of personal data, and mistreatment of vulnerable populations and minors. Because of that, the public should be thoroughly aware of their privacy policies on the platforms they use, as well as how information and opinions are now created, transmitted, and shared, to be able to defend themselves.

This paper will address the issue of different levels of concern for privacy and safety online among the students at International Balkan University in Skopje, and the reasons behind it. We use the research results conducted during April 2024 through an online questionnaire with the students at International Balkan University in Skopje, North Macedonia, and explore the questions of students' views on privacy and safety while using online platforms. We argue that it is of utmost importance to educate and inform the public about online platforms' policies, especially of their privacy and safety-related policies, as well as to ensure the public understanding of the rights and obligations of the users once they accept the 'terms and the conditions' of an online platform.

Keywords: privacy, safety, online platforms

1. INTRODUCTION

With the growth and development of new technologies and the internet, the need for privacy regulations started rising. As we can witness, technology is becoming a double-edged sword, even though, it made our lives easier and is helping in the everyday lives of many people, it is also raising new concerns. The information about all individuals using these technologies is accessed, collected, stored, shared, bought and sold, manipulated, and even misused and all of this can be done by many individuals, governments, different types of organizations, private agencies, and what is even more dangerous, most of these things are done without the knowledge of people whose data is used (Buchanan, Paine, Joinson and Reips, 2006). Because of all these reasons, it's essential to be media literate, especially in the field of privacy and security. Privacy literacy is defined by Langenderfer & Miyazaki (2009, p: 383) as "the understanding that consumers have of the information landscape with which they interact and their responsibilities within that landscape". Furthermore, Givens (2015, p: 53) gave another definition that states that it is "one's level of understanding and awareness of how information is tracked and used in online environments and how that information can retain or lose its private nature.

For this research, a variation of the questionnaire created by UNESCO (2017), consisting of 24 questions designed as multiple choice survey questions was used. The questions for this research were simple aligned, well-defined, and easily understood by the interviewees. The target group for this research were students from International Balkan University in Skopje, North Macedonia. The total number of answers on this survey is 145, which formed a sample to represent the International Balkan University. This paper presents the results for the first part of the bigger research and is supposed to answer to which extent students from International Balkan University in Skopje are concerned about their privacy and safety online. The other research questions that were covered with this survey have to do with the importance of privacy and safety of others on online platforms, the usage of private data from online platforms by governments and different types of companies, and the importance of knowledge and skills about privacy and safety online.

2. PRIVACY AND SAFETY ONLINE

The word "privacy" is very complex and very hard to define. Therefore, there is no single, agreeable definition of privacy. Most of the time, people connect privacy as a kind of right, which may lead to thinking about legal and moral rights. Thus, when thinking about privacy as a concern that people like to have control of seems to be the right path. Roger Clark (2014) defines privacy as "the interest that individuals have in sustaining 'personal space', free from interference by other people and organizations". Breaking into a deeper level, Clarke (2014) extends the definition of privacy into several dimensions:

- *Privacy of person:* also referred to as 'bodily privacy' is concerned about the integrity of the individual's body. This describes the physical involvements of a person and includes issues about blood transfusion without consent and compulsory sterilization.

- *Privacy of personal behavior*: This includes concerns that are usually referred to as ‘media privacy’. It relates to all aspects of behavior, specified for sensitive interests such as sexual preferences and habits, political activities, and religious practices.
- *Privacy of personal communications*: Usually, individuals tend to communicate with others by using different media channels without the act of being monitored by other persons or organizations.
- *Privacy of personal data*: This refers to ‘data privacy’ and ‘information privacy’ and means that individuals claim that data about themselves should not be available to third parties (other individuals or organizations) without their permission, even in cases where data is possessed by other parties, the individual must be able to have control over the data and its use.

The privacy concerns are becoming even bigger with what digital tracks we leave. We leave data trails and digital footprints behind us, generating information about our lives and activities as we go. Since this issue is growing, the concern for the privacy of people online has increased as well (Rahnama & Pentland, 2022).

This articulates a major theme of contemporary online privacy – while there might be individuals who fight the battle to keep their data private, in reality, many elements of online privacy cannot be controlled. At its most fundamental, this is because there is simply so much data that is created whenever an individual undertakes any task online.

Anthropologists and legal scholars have known for years that privacy can’t be controlled by individuals, partly because we share information within networks. In other words, people talk about each other, both on and offline. There’s no easy way to put limits on that (Marwick, 2023).

The functionality required to fulfill any digital task generates data, there are innumerable companies and organizations collecting information, and there are other individuals and groups who want to access private data for their ends. And recognizing that open secret are inherent to the internet drives home the reality that the level of control that individuals have over their online personal information is necessarily limited. Despite laws and regulations (for example, the General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR, in Europe or privacy-protecting browser extensions) that make broad societal regulatory gains, it often remains up to the individual to approach the virtual sphere with eyes wide open and fingers crossed (Glover, 2023).

Furthermore, the language of buying, selling, and trading data exposes the commodification of personal information, whereby information about us has become a saleable item as part of the digital economy. This makes us want to demand greater transparency and accountability over how companies and organizations collect our data.

In the end, it is all about continuing the debate over the proper tension between the benefits of the digital world and the rights of individuals. Although we are heading in the right direction, the complexity of online privacy encourages us to consider a multifaceted approach to this challenge, one that combines the best efforts of technology, regulation, and individual awareness and empowerment.

3. METHODOLOGY

The focus of this research is to examine the level of awareness and understanding of privacy and security online. To explore this issue, both theoretical and empirical perspectives are included. A quantitative research method was used, to be more precise, the strategy of inquiry is survey research. Based on a literature review of relevant existing studies within this field a questionnaire is designed for collecting data from students from International Balkan University, Skopje.

The main objective of this research is to answer the following research question: To what extent are students at International Balkan University in Skopje concerned about their privacy and safety online?

Concerning the existing studies in this field, it is expected that this study will primarily broaden the discussion about privacy and safety online, especially in North Macedonia. Considering that North Macedonia lacks information on the current situation about, the students' concerns with privacy and safety online, this study can provide fertile ground for many individuals interested in that field. Since there is not enough research done in North Macedonia (especially in English language) about this topic, it can extend the literature for academicians and students concerned with such material.

For this research, a variation of the questionnaire created by UNESCO (2017), consisting of 24 questions designed as multiple-choice survey questions was used. The questions for this research were simple and aligned, well-defined, and easily understood by the interviewees. The target group for this research were students from International Balkan University in Skopje, North Macedonia.

The research results were conducted during April 2024 through an online questionnaire with the students at International Balkan University in Skopje, North Macedonia. The questionnaire is designed in a way that link can be opened and questions answered on various devices such as computers, tablets, or smartphones, which made it easy for respondents to participate. With the use of this method, participation in the study was voluntary, and anonymity

was guaranteed since no question can personally identify any individual. Since the survey was delivered randomly, without the interviewer's presence, there were no problems with bias in how questions were asked.

4. CONCERNS ABOUT PRIVACY AND SAFETY ONLINE: STUDENTS PERSPECTIVE

For this research, a survey was delivered randomly to the students through web, which allowed the participants to complete the study on their own time. The target group, as mentioned above are students from International Balkan University in Skopje, North Macedonia.

Participants of this survey were asked to answer questions regarding their gender and age, and the results are presented below. The total number of answers on this survey is 145, which formed a sample to represent the International Balkan University.

As we can see from Table 1, 103 participants from the survey are female, 41 participants are male, and 1 participant is nonbinary. The age range goes from 18-27 years.

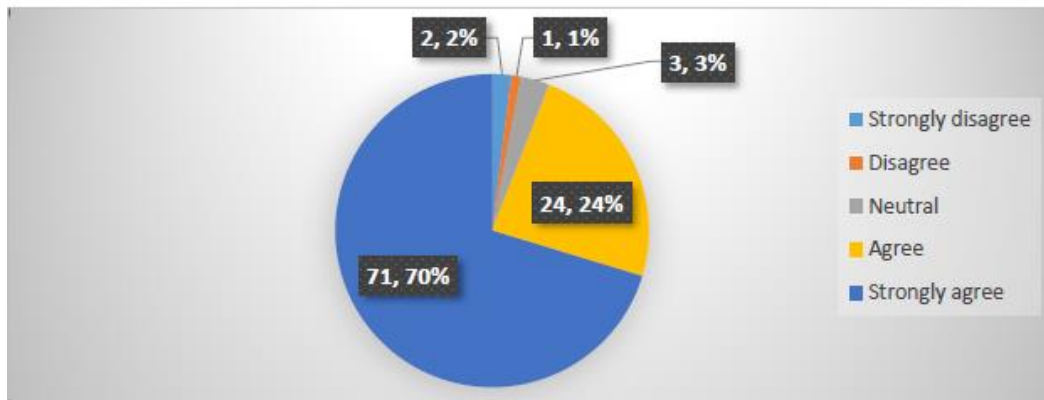
Table 1. Total number of participants

Total number of participants	Female	Male	Nonbinary
145	103	41	1

Source: Results from own work

Easier access to the devices through which people connect and approach to internet and the transformation of countries into modern and technologically developed ones, all around the Globe has given people the opportunity to use the internet more regularly and with more comfort. In addition, with these developments, new opportunities for safety and privacy threats are created (Stansberry et al., 2019). Many people all around the globe are not even aware of the privacy and safety threats that are always present on these platforms. The results show that a very large amount of participants are highly concerned about their privacy and privacy is very important to most of them.

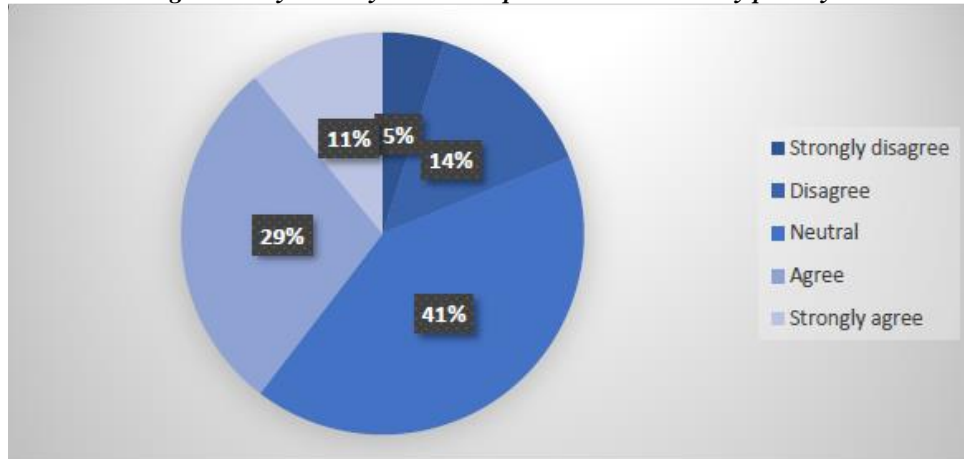
Figure 1. My privacy is important to me.



Source: Results from own work

To understand the extent to which students are concerned for their privacy online it is very important to see do they value more privacy or security on online platforms. Based on the results received from the survey, we can see that 41.6% are neutral or are either not sure whether privacy or security is more valuable to them or view them as being equally salient, while 28.7% agree and 10.9% strongly agree that their security is more important than their privacy on online platforms.

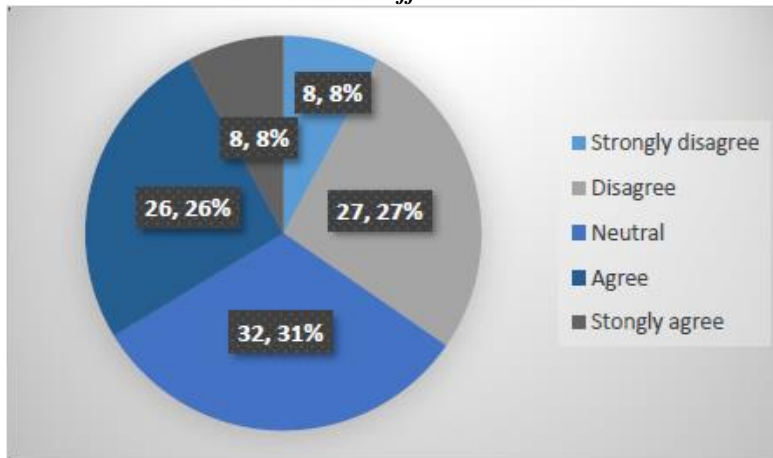
Figure 2. My security is more important to me than my privacy.



Source: Results from own work

The next statement that can help answer the research question related to the level of concern about privacy and safety online is “The personal/private information that I share about myself on the internet or through social networks cannot affect me.” When it comes to this statement, only 8.8% of the participants strongly agree and 26.26% agree that personal information that they share about themselves on the internet or through social networks can affect them. A large number of participants (32.3%) are neutral regarding this statement.

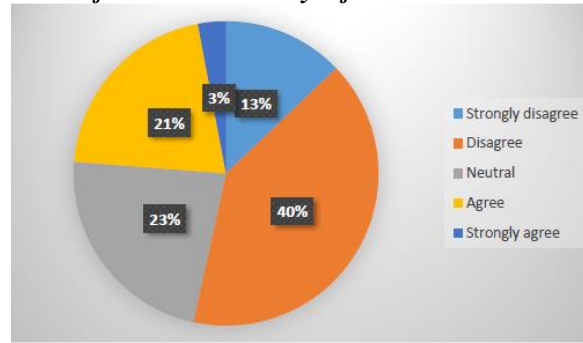
Figure 3. The personal/private information that I share about myself on the internet or through social networks cannot affect me.



Source: Results from own work

The Internet has become an inevitable part of the everyday life of many people around the globe, especially with the rise of social networking sites. People are using this kind of platform for many purposes, but some of them are to share their private information, such as private photos, private data like birth date or birthplace and personal address, and even a personal phone number. All of this data could be misused or even abused for many purposes if they arrive in the wrong hands. That’s why, to make sure that one’s privacy and security are not under threat, it is very important to know what amount and what kind of personal data should be posted online (Firth et al., 2019). Because of the importance of this information, participants of this research were asked do they publish private information about themselves on the internet or through social networks. From the answers obtained, we can see that only 3% of the participants strongly agree that they publish their data online, while 21% agree on this question. On the other hand, more than 50% of respondents do not publish their data on this platform.

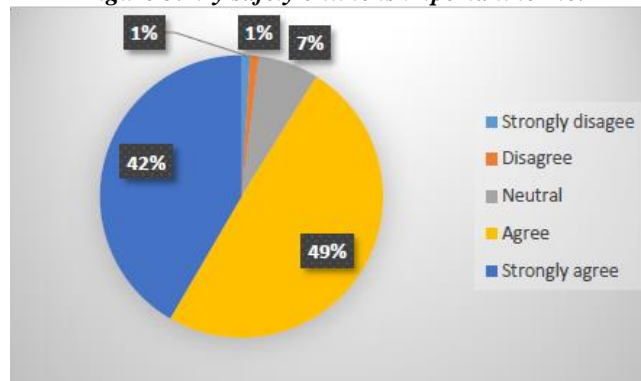
Figure 4. I publish private information about myself on the internet or through social networks.



Source: Results from own work

Furthermore, participants in this research were asked whether their safety online is important to them. As can be seen from Figure 5, a large amount of the students are concerned and their safety online is important to them. The thing that is of concern is that there is still a significant amount of respondents who are not interested in their safety online.

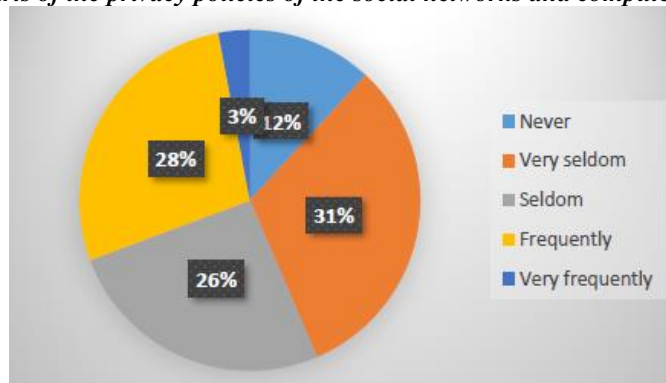
Figure 5. My safety online is important to me.



Source: Results from own work

To protect ourselves online it is very important to know what terms of conditions every website or social networking site, software, or any other platform or technology possesses before we start using it. Some platforms are asking to agree on sharing some personal data to be able to use this platform (Rafter, 2023). Those data later could be sold or shared with some third parties which can misuse or abuse the personal data of the people. In that regard, it is of huge importance to read parts of the privacy policies of the social networks and computer software that people use and this research is providing this question and participants of this research answered as shown in Figure 6.

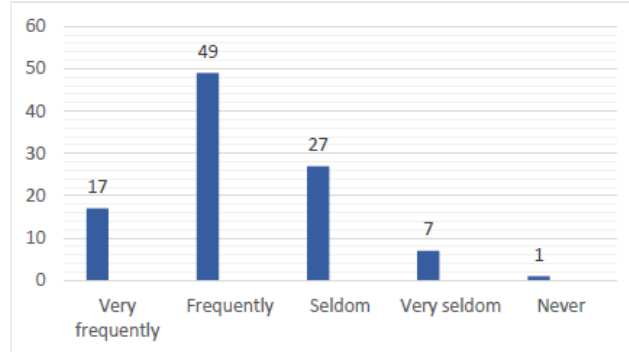
Figure 6. I read parts of the privacy policies of the social networks and computer software that I use.



Source: Results from own work

One of the ways how to protect ourselves on social network sites is to adjust privacy settings on those sites. The participants in this survey were asked whether they took this step to protect themselves. The answers (Figure 7) show that even though the majority of the participants do adjust privacy settings, there is still some amount of those who do not do so. One more concerning fact is that only 17% of the participants very frequently adjust their privacy settings.

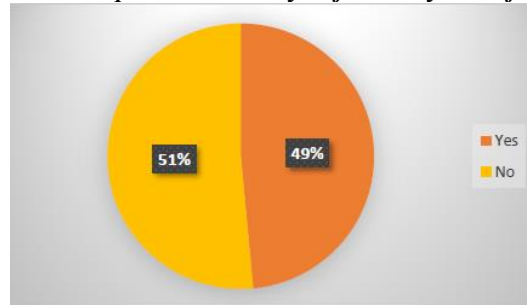
Figure 7. I adjust my privacy settings on the social network platforms that I use.



Source: Results from own work

To analyze whether the participants of this survey ever felt that their safety online was threatened, this question is asked. The concerning results show that almost half of the participants (49%) did feel that their safety online was threatened.

Figure 8. Have you ever had an experience where you felt that your safety online was threatened?



Source: Results from own work

5. CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration the point that new technologies, especially the internet, continue to influence people's everyday lives and activities worldwide, scholars also continue to research this topic from various points of view, and this particular study aims to add a step further in this direction. The answers from students brought to light some interesting conclusions.

The research question developed for this study, to which extent are students at International Balkan University in Skopje concerned about their privacy and safety online gave interesting results. The results showed that the majority of the students (71%) state that their privacy is important to them, and a large number of students state that their safety is important to them. Still, big number of students who participated in this research claim that the personal/private information that they share about themselves on the internet or through social networks cannot affect them. Furthermore, the results show that a very small number of students are reading and searching for information about how to stay safe online. From these results, we can conclude that students at International Balkan University in Skopje, even though are aware of their privacy and safety threats on online platforms, they are not so active in preserving it.

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