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Digital Risks and Youth: A Study of Privacy Policy Avoidance on Social Media Platforms Among Degree College Students

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Abstract: The rapid growth of social media has significantly transformed communication patterns, especially among youth, but it has also introduced serious digital risks related to privacy and data security. The present study examines privacy policy avoidance behaviour among degree college students and its implications for digital risks. The study is based on primary data collected from 200 students across four districts of Western Uttar Pradesh, namely Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, and Bijnor. Using a structured questionnaire and Likert-scale analysis, the study evaluates students' awareness, attitudes, and practices related to privacy policies on social media platforms. The findings reveal that although a majority of students are aware of the existence of privacy policies, only a small proportion read them completely, indicating low levels of actual understanding. A significant tendency to avoid reading privacy policies was observed, largely due to their length and technical complexity. Statistical analysis, including percentage, Chi-square, and mean score analysis, supports the hypotheses of the study. The results further highlight that students are willing to adopt better privacy practices if policies are simplified and digital literacy is enhanced. The study concludes that improving privacy literacy and simplifying policy structures are essential to reduce digital risks and promote responsible social media usage among youth.

Keywords: Privacy Policy, Digital Risks, Social Media, Youth, Privacy Literacy.

Introduction - The internet is a vast ocean of information, and social media has emerged as a multidimensional medium for the exchange of information, engaging people across the world for diverse purposes. In the contemporary era, particularly with the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, the risks associated with social media have begun to outweigh its benefits. Digital risks today are not limited to a single factor; rather, they include multiple dimensions such as the digital divide, digital illiteracy, irresponsible usage, and exposure to incomplete or misleading information.

Beyond these widely recognized concerns, a more serious and emerging digital threat is being actively invited and often consciously ignored by users of all age groups, especially the youth. This threat arises from the tendency to ignore, partially read, or completely overlook the privacy policies of social media platforms. Such behaviour unintentionally grants these platforms extensive access to users' personal lives, leading to violations of privacy and increasing vulnerability to serious threats such as fraud, cyberattacks, and data theft.

The present research paper critically examines the potential digital risks arising from privacy policy ignorance among degree college students in selected districts of Western Uttar Pradesh, namely Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, and Bijnor. It analyses the underlying causes, explores the consequences, and suggests possible preventive measures to enhance digital awareness and promote responsible use of social media.

Review of literature

Social media has witnessed extremely rapid expansion in recent years. In this context, not only digital literacy but also privacy literacy has emerged as a highly significant and urgent issue. Recognizing its growing importance, researchers have examined the concept of privacy literacy through various academic works analysing how individuals understand, interpret, and manage their personal information in digital and social media environments. Wagner's large-scale analysis of privacy policy readability showed that users rarely read privacy policies because they are overly complex: "most users do not read privacy policies, but almost all users tick the box to agree with them" (Wagner, 2022, p. 7)[1] This underscores a fundamental barrier to informed consent in online environments: if privacy terms are unreadable, users cannot meaningfully understand what they agree to.

Several studies have specifically linked privacy literacy levels to actual privacy behaviour. Research on Online Privacy Literacy (OPL) indicates that greater privacy literacy correlates with improved protective behaviour: "users with higher privacy literacy prefer privacy protection behaviours" (Lyu, Guo, & Chen, 2023, p. 5)[2] This suggests that ignorance of privacy content is not merely a matter of oversight but a determinant of privacy management outcomes.

Youth-focused research also reveals that teens experience privacy concerns that can negatively affect how they interact with social media. Kim, Cho, Wolfe, Nair, and Hiniker (2024) found that teens with unclear privacy norms often develop "dysfunctional fear… that diminishes their quality of life or paralyzes them from taking necessary precautions" (p. 3). Such emotional factors contribute to avoidance or resignation rather than informed engagement with privacy settings.

Beyond the issue of literacy alone, psychological perspectives on risky online behaviour draw attention to the role of ignorance in shaping users' actions on social media. Munusamy (2024) identifies ignorance as a key psychological factor behind the spread of false or misleading information, noting that many users share content without verifying its authenticity. As the author observes, "users do not check the content on social media sites" (p. 8)[4]Although this study primarily addresses misinformation, the same underlying mechanism of ignorance can be extended to privacy-related behaviour. When users fail to critically examine privacy policies or understand how their data are collected and used, they unknowingly expose themselves to privacy breaches and related digital risks.

Research has shown that privacy literacy and individuals' ability to protect their personal information online are influenced by socio-demographic characteristics and actual privacy knowledge. For example, a mixed-methods study of digital media users in the Middle East and North Africa found that participants' levels of online privacy literacy were related not only to their privacy protection behaviour but also varied according to demographic factors such as gender, with male participants showing greater concern and sometimes stronger privacy literacy outcomes (Bajnaid&Aljasir, 2025)[5] This highlights that privacy literacy is shaped by social and demographic contexts, and that different groups may have unequal privacy skills and awareness, which in turn affects how effectively they protect their data online.

Objectives:

1. To assess the level of awareness of privacy policies of social media platforms among degree college students.
2. To examine the nature and extent of privacy policy avoidance behaviour.
3. To analyse students' perceptions of digital risks.
4. To evaluate privacy-related attitudes and behaviour adopted by students for the protection of their personal information on social media platforms.

Hypothesis

H_1 : Degree college students exhibit a low level of awareness and understanding of privacy policies on social media platforms.

H_2 : There is a significant tendency among degree college students to avoid reading privacy policies while using social media platforms.

H_3 : Degree college students tend to avoid reading social media privacy policies because they are lengthy and written in complex technical language.

Research Methodology: The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine privacy policy avoidance and associated digital risks among degree college students. A total sample of 200 students was selected from various degree colleges located in the four districts of Western Uttar Pradesh, namely Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, and Bijnor. From each district, 50 students were selected based on their willingness to participate and their regular use of at least one social media platform. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale to assess students' awareness, attitudes, and practices related to privacy policies and digital risks. The data were analysed using appropriate statistical techniques such as percentage analysis, mean scores, and correlation analysis to identify trends and examine relationships among the variables studied.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

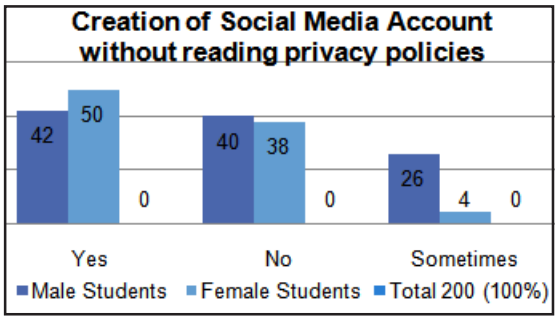
1. Socio-economic profile of the respondents: The profile of the respondents shows that students from different age groups participated in the study. The largest group of respondents (37%) was 23 years and above, followed by those in the 17–18 years (24%) and 19–20 years (23%) age groups, while 16% belonged to the 21–22 years category. This indicates that the study represents a broad range of young learners in higher education. In terms of gender, the sample was fairly balanced, with 54% male and 46% female students. With regard to the course of study, most respondents were pursuing postgraduate programmes (42%), followed by undergraduate courses (37%), whereas a small proportion were enrolled in diploma (1%) and certificate courses (2%), and 18% were in other programmes. The area-wise distribution shows that 42% of the students were from urban areas, 35% from rural areas, and 23% from semi-urban areas, reflecting a mix of backgrounds. When asked about daily time spent on social media, nearly half of the students (48%) reported spending 1–2 hours per day, while 21% spent less than one hour, 12% spent 3–4 hours, and 19% spent more than four hours daily. This clearly suggests that social media forms an important part of students' everyday lives, making the issue of privacy awareness and digital risks highly relevant for this group.

2. Social Media Usage Pattern: Social media usage patterns analysis reveals that a large majority of the

respondents are frequent users of social media platforms. About 70 percent of the students reported using social media multiple times a day, whereas only 12 percent stated that they use social media just once a day. With regard to privacy policy reading behaviour, 46 percent of the students admitted that they created their accounts without reading the privacy policy, while 39 percent reported that they read the privacy policy before creating an account. Another 15 percent stated that they sometimes read the privacy policy before signing up. Furthermore, a striking 79 percent of the students acknowledged that they allow social media platforms access to their photos, location, and contacts, often without carefully considering the implications. Nearly 45 percent of the respondents accepted that they have never changed their privacy settings, indicating a lack of active privacy management. In terms of platform preference, Instagram (40 percent) emerged as the most widely used social media platform among the students, followed closely by WhatsApp (37 percent). These findings clearly suggest high dependence on social media among students, coupled with limited attention to privacy practices, which may increase their exposure to potential digital risks.

Table 1-Creation of Social Media Account without reading privacy policies-

Responses	Yes	No	Sometimes
Male Students	42	40	26
Female Students	50	38	04
Total 200 (100%)	92 (46%)	78 (39%)	30 (15%)



A Chi-square test of independence was applied to examine the association between gender and creation of social media accounts without reading privacy policies. The results revealed that the association is statistically significant (x^2 = 15.70, df = 2, $p < 0.01$). The pattern of responses shows that female students were more likely to report creating accounts without reading privacy policies, whereas male students were relatively more represented in the 'sometimes' category. This suggests that gender plays an important role in shaping students' approach toward privacy policy reading at the time of account creation. The findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive privacy awareness initiatives to encourage more responsible social media use among students.

3. Awareness about privacy policies: The analysis of students' awareness and reading behaviour regarding privacy policies indicates a noticeable gap between knowledge and actual practice. A large majority of the respondents (83 percent) reported that they were aware that social media platforms have their own privacy policies, while 17 percent stated that they were not aware of this fact. However, when it comes to reading these policies, only a small proportion (12 percent) claimed that they read privacy policies completely. In contrast, 30 percent of the students reported that they read only the headings, and 38 percent admitted that they read only a very small portion of the content. Notably, 20 percent of the respondents stated that they do not read privacy policies at all. This pattern clearly reveals that although most students are aware of the existence of privacy policies, the majority either skim through them or completely ignore them, highlighting a significant level of privacy policy avoidance and low privacy literacy among students.

Table 2- District-wise Distribution of Students by Level of Understanding of Privacy Policies (N = 200)

District	Read Completely (High)	Partly/Not Read (Low)	Total
Meerut	9	41	50
Muzaffarnagar	5	45	50
Shamli	6	44	50
Bijnor	4	46	50
Total	**24 (12%)**	**176 (88%)**	**200**

A Chi-square test of independence was applied to examine whether the level of understanding of privacy policies differs across the four districts of Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, and Bijnor. The results revealed that the association between district and level of understanding of privacy policies is not statistically significant (x^2 = 2.65, df = 3, $p > 0.05$). This indicates that students from different districts do not differ significantly in their privacy policy reading behaviour. It is evident that in all four districts, an overwhelming majority of students fall in the low understanding category, with only 12 percent reporting that they read privacy policies completely, while 88 percent either read them partially or do not read them at all. Therefore, the findings clearly support the hypothesis that degree college students exhibit a low level of awareness and understanding of privacy policies on social media platforms, and this pattern is consistently observed across all selected districts.

4. Reasons to avoid reading privacy policies: The data related to attitude towards privacy policies and digital literacy reveals a strong positive inclination toward improving privacy-related behaviour. A majority of respondents (63 percent) strongly agreed that reading privacy policies is important, indicating general awareness of their significance, although this may not always translate into actual practice. An even higher proportion (67 percent) strongly agreed that privacy policies should be simplified. Similarly, a substantial number of students (58 percent) strongly agreed that they would read privacy policies if they

were shorter and easier to understand, further reinforcing the need for user-friendly policy design. Digital literacy programs were widely supported, with a majority of respondents expressing agreement that such initiatives can help improve privacy awareness and responsible usage. Notably, a positive behavioural shift is also observed, as 58.5 percent of students strongly agreed that they would check their privacy settings after the survey, indicating increased awareness and intention to adopt safer online practices. Overall, the findings suggest that while privacy policy avoidance exists, students are receptive to improvements in policy design and digital education, which can significantly enhance their privacy behaviour.

Table 3 (see in last page)

The mean scores for all statements are above 4.0, indicating overall agreement among students. The highest mean score (4.30) for the statement that policies should be simplified shows that students strongly perceive complexity as a key barrier. Similarly, high mean values for other statements suggest that students recognize the importance of privacy policies and are willing to adopt better practices if policies are made simpler and supported by digital literacy initiatives. Overall, the results indicate a positive attitude toward privacy awareness but highlight the need for simplification and educational interventions.

Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1 states that degree college students exhibit a low level of awareness and understanding of privacy policies on social media platforms. The hypothesis is found to be true on the basis of percentage analysis and Chi-square test results. The data reveal that only 12 percent of students read privacy policies completely, while a large majority of 88 percent either read them partially or do not read them at all. This clearly indicates a low level of actual understanding despite general awareness. Furthermore, the Chi-square test result ($x^2 = 2.65$, $p > 0.05$) shows that this pattern is consistent across all districts. Hence, the hypothesis is supported by the findings of the study.

Hypothesis 2 states that there is a significant tendency among degree college students to avoid reading privacy policies while using social media platforms. The data show that 46 percent of students do not read privacy policies, while only 39 percent read them and 15 percent read them occasionally. The findings indicate that a considerable proportion of students neglect privacy policies during social media use. Hence, the hypothesis is supported by the results of the study.

Hypothesis 3 states that degree college students tend to avoid reading social media privacy policies because they are lengthy and written in complex technical language. This hypothesis is found to be true on the basis of mean score analysis of Likert-scale responses. The statement "Policies should be simplified" received the highest mean score (4.30), indicating strong agreement among students. A majority of respondents also expressed that they would read privacy policies if they were shorter and easier to understand. This clearly shows that length and complexity act as major barriers to reading privacy policies. Hence, the hypothesis is supported by the findings of the study.

Findings of the Study:

1. A significant proportion of students spend considerable time on social media, with nearly half using it for 1–2 hours daily and a majority accessing platforms multiple times a day, highlighting high engagement levels.
2. A large number of students (46%) create social media accounts without reading privacy policies, while only 39% read them, indicating a prevalent tendency toward privacy policy avoidance.
3. The Chi-square test shows a significant association between gender and privacy policy reading behaviour, suggesting that gender influences how students approach privacy policies.
4. Although 83% of students are aware that social media platforms have privacy policies, only 12% read them completely, while the majority either skim through or ignore them, indicating low levels of actual understanding.
5. District-wise analysis reveals that low understanding of privacy policies is consistent across all four selected districts, with no significant difference found, suggesting that the issue is widespread and not location-specific.
6. A large proportion of students (79%) grant access to personal data such as photos, location, and contacts, often without fully understanding the implications, increasing their exposure to digital risks.
7. Nearly 45% of respondents have never changed their privacy settings, reflecting a lack of proactive privacy management among students.
8. Students strongly perceive length and complexity of privacy policies as major barriers, with the majority agreeing that policies are too long and difficult to understand.
9. Most respondents expressed that they would be more likely to read privacy policies if they were shorter and written in simpler language, indicating the importance of user-friendly design.
10. There is strong support for digital literacy programs, as students believe such initiatives can improve their understanding and responsible use of social media.
11. The findings also indicate a positive behavioural intention, with many students' expressing willingness to check and update their privacy settings after participating in the study.
12. Overall, the study highlights a clear gap between awareness and actual practice, where students know about privacy policies but do not actively engage with them, leading to increased digital risks.

Conclusion: The present study highlights the growing concern of digital risks among youth in the context of

increasing dependence on social media platforms. While social media offers numerous opportunities for communication and information exchange, the findings of this study clearly demonstrate that students' engagement with these platforms is often accompanied by inadequate attention to privacy practices. A significant gap exists between awareness and actual behaviour, as most students are aware of the existence of privacy policies but fail to read or fully understand them.

The study confirms that privacy policy avoidance is a widespread phenomenon among degree college students, largely influenced by the length, complexity, and technical nature of policy documents. This behaviour exposes students to potential risks such as data misuse, privacy breaches, and cyber fraud. The results further indicate that this issue is consistent across different districts, suggesting that it is not limited to a specific geographical context but is a broader concern affecting youth in general.

At the same time, the findings reveal a positive aspect, as students show a willingness to adopt better privacy practices if policies are made simpler and more accessible. The strong support for digital literacy initiatives and the expressed intention to review privacy settings indicate that awareness interventions can play a crucial role in improving online behaviour.

In conclusion, the study underscores the urgent need to enhance privacy literacy among youth and to simplify privacy policies to make them more user-friendly. Addressing these issues is essential for promoting responsible social media use and minimizing digital risks in an increasingly data-driven digital environment.

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Table 3- Attitudes towards Privacy Policies and Digital Literacy (N = 200)

S.	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
1	Reading privacy policies is important	8 (4%)	33 (16.5%)	0 (0%)	33 (16.5%)	126 (63%)	200
2	Policies should be simplified	8 (4%)	25 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	33 (16.5%)	134 (67%)	200
3	I would read if they were short and simple	17 (8.5%)	25 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	42 (21%)	116 (58%)	200
4	Digital literacy programs can help	17 (8.5%)	17 (8.5%)	0 (0%)	50 (25%)	116 (58%)	200
5	After this survey, I will check privacy settings	0 (0%)	33 (16.5%)	17 (8.5%)	33 (16.5%)	117 (58.5%)	200

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