

The “Privacy Paradox” in the UAE Insights and Future Research Directions

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Summary

Purpose and importance of study for the UAE

The emergence, rapid development and wide adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has exponentially increased the amount of personally identifiable information (PII) being collected by commercial and government entities. Although research demonstrates that information privacy is a major concern for citizens in the digital age, scholars have also drawn attention to the ‘privacy paradox’, a phenomenon that describes the contradiction between individuals’ privacy attitudes and their actual behaviour. The information privacy paradox has significant implications for e-commerce, online social networking and government privacy regulations. The presence of the privacy paradox encourages e-commerce and online social networking sites to collect vast amounts of personal information. At the same time, it serves as a call for action for legislators and policymakers to address the problem of excessive collection of information by the aforementioned entities. While the information privacy paradox phenomenon has received an abundance of attention among the academic community, research in this area is scarce in some cultural contexts, including within the UAE. The objective of this research, therefore, is to examine privacy attitudes and privacy behaviour in the UAE by assessing the efficacy of current data protection measures.

Methodology

In order to meet the objective of this study, it was necessary to conduct a survey of knowledge workers (i.e., individuals who deal with data). As access to this segment of the population is typically not convenient, university students are often used as surrogates. Subsequently, data were collected via a questionnaire survey of senior undergraduate students at a university in UAE.

Study Key Points and Findings

- When it comes to messaging, it was found that participants use technologies that breach their privacy (e.g., WhatsApp) as opposed to privacy-centric messaging apps (e.g., Telegram);

- When choosing email communication, respondents prefer Gmail (e.g., Google is a recognized privacy violator) to ProtonMail;
- Social media platforms that are considered to be privacy violators (e.g., Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram) are particularly popular among study participants;
- Regarding Internet browsing habits, survey respondents again expressed a tendency of using a known privacy violator (i.e. Google Chrome) as opposed to privacy-centric browsers (e.g. DuckDuckGo);
- Despite a clear tendency of using technologies that violate privacy, respondents' attitudes to privacy are contradictory. Generally, participants perceive themselves as private people and are conscious about keeping their sensitive information private;
- Further, an overwhelming majority of participants expressed their concern on how commercial organizations treat their personal information;
- The aforementioned findings demonstrate the obvious presence of the 'privacy paradox' in UAE. This serves as a call for action for legislators and policymakers to address the problem of excessive collection of information by the aforementioned entities.

Future Research

In this first instance, the presence of privacy paradox in the UAE was established. Further research will analyse the extensive data in greater depth using statistical techniques such as tests for correlation, tests for differences, and structured equation modelling / partial least squares. Next, a follow-up study will be conducted with qualitative focus group research to tease out some of the issues raised by the quantitative analysis. Based on the results, recommendations will be developed for UAE legislators and policymakers.