



Privacy in Social Media

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Abstract. This paper researched two issues; targeted advertising and politics in social media. In its findings, it was apparent that many social media platforms actively collected user data and used big data to store and analyze it so as to profile the users. From these profiles, targeted adverts were served to the users on their social media feeds. The data collection process was however found to be unethical and full of privacy intrusions. Concerning politics, it was found out that social media had been used as a political tool. There were findings that most users were annoyed with political posts being shown on their feeds. The culprits were found to be the algorithms behind social media feeds and suggestions and the users themselves. The paper gave recommendations said to be temporary solutions for the issues surrounding target advertising and politics in social media.

Keywords: Social media issues · Platform · Target advertising · Big data
Social media · Social media platform · Social media issue · Targeted advertising
Social medium user · Collected user data · Political view

1 Introduction

Eyebrows have been raised concerning the power that different social media platforms hold. The currently used social media platforms have been built using sophisticated systems and are powered by big data and complex algorithms. These platforms know almost everything about each of their users, from their actual locations to their likes and shopping habits (Shankar 2011). Mainly, this knowledge has been applied in marketing whereby they have set up advertising platforms for sellers. Using their rich knowledge of users from big data, these platforms are able to analyze each user's likes and interests (Shankar 2011). From this analysis, they then advertise to the user's products that they would be likely to buy (Shankar 2011). Social media marketing has easily crept up the list of the most commonly used digital marketing techniques and today it battles for the first place with Google advertising.

Apart from advertising, there are fears that social media is getting tangled in politics. There are fears that they are also being used to slowly brainwash users by politicians. Social media platforms are becoming politicized by users and the algorithms. Users currently have to tolerate politically oriented posts flooded all over their newsfeed either shared by, commented on or posted by their friends. The sophisticated social media algorithms have also been set in such a way that they will continually fill on a user's timeline political posts based on what they read, like or comment on. However, the

algorithms are not perfect and thus have been a cause of frustration for many users. There are also questions as to whether social media have been used to stumble governments. After all, there have been some uprisings witnessed that were fueled by social media. It has also been observed that some governments have had to result to ban these platforms in tumultuous times.

1.1 Research Questions

- (a) How are social media platforms doing target advertising with collected user data?
- (b) Is social media being used for political reasons?

2 Literature Review

There have been a few previous works done on the same topic. Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafar have done a paper on the role that social media played in some events of the Arab Spring (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). The three discuss social media as a low-cost tool that is both powerful and speedy and could be used to recruit, raise funds and distribute inciting information to the masses. The three say that these are the right ingredients to start a protest in restrictive governments such as the non-democracies of Arab nations (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). They say that in 2009, Twitter was used by protestors in Iran to fuel a revolution. Protestors are said to have ganged up on Twitter to organize coordinated protests (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). The researchers, however, try to distance the social media platforms from the protests and say that there were several other factors at play. They bring to light the political environment at the time of the said social media powered revolutions. They point out that the revolutions in Iran took place with only 8,000 of 70 million citizens registered on Twitter (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). At the same time, in other Arab countries where more people were on social media, no protests happened (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). Therefore, in as much as social media was to be blamed, it was rather a tool used, just the same way the protestors would have gone to the streets and picketed. They seem to convince readers to move away from assuming that social media has anything to do with collective actions done by citizens with political, social or economic consequences. Another relevant piece of work is a paper by Broyles and Slater about social media advertising (Broyles and Slater 2014). In the paper, it is found out that big data has been heavily employed in advertising. It is what social media platforms use to power their advertising tools. They explain that with big data, the platforms are able to collect user data, consumption patterns and purchase behaviors (Broyles and Slater 2014). This information is derived from what users post, comment, like or even privately chat about with others. The two give examples of how big data is being used today in monitoring what people say about different brands on Twitter (Broyles and Slater 2014). They also explain that it is used to keep details of how the said consumers interact with various devices. They try to bring out a picture that a lot is done in the background, with the power of big data, to ensure that the right advert gets to the right consumer (Broyles and Slater 2014). The two finish off by explaining some ethical issues surrounding the whole targeted advertising ambitions of social media platforms. They

give an example of a user that posts about a medical condition being targeted with different pharmaceutical adverts (Broyles and Slater 2014). They also highlight the question of the validity of big data. User tastes, likes and preferences change often and big data is not able to keep up. In the end, it ends up generating the wrong adverts to users whose likes have changed (Broyles and Slater 2014). They also slightly bring to light the privacy issues being brought up concerning the issue of intrusion into users' private lives in order to target them with adverts (Broyles and Slater 2014).

3 Research Method

The chosen research method was a qualitative analysis of data. The data that used was composed of opinions from different respondents. Therefore, the best type of analysis for the data collected would be qualitative. The research was totally depended on secondary sources. It used, analyzed and discussed the findings obtained by previous researches. Two secondary data sources were used. They were from the highest ranked research institute in the world. The first research carried out in 2016 had 4579 respondents (Duggan and Smith 2017). The respondents were asked to fill a web survey or alternatively to download a questionnaire, fill and send back via mail. From the second research carried out in 2012, 1729 respondents were asked questions concerning target advertising. The entire research was conducted through online surveys and phone interviews. The respondents were both Americans and Hispanics and therefore the questions were asked in either English or Spanish. The data obtained from the two secondary sources was analyzed using Microsoft Excel to give graphical representations of the data obtained wherever possible.

4 Results

The first secondary data source considered was from Pew Research institute and it concerned the issues of social media involvement in politics. In the research, the participants had been asked to give their feedback concerning the political feeds they got from their social media accounts. 37% said that they felt worn out, 22% were enjoying and 41% said that they neither felt angered nor joyed by the political feeds (Duggan and Smith 2017). When asked about how they felt when they came across opposing political views, 59% of the respondents said that they felt annoyed while 35% said that they just found them informative. The said that that they were neither infuriated nor interested by such discussions.

As for the impacts of the confrontations between people of opposing political views, 64% said that they felt a larger rift between themselves and the opponents (Duggan and Smith 2017). 36% felt that the encounters left them on more common grounds with the supporters of the opposing political views (Duggan and Smith 2017). When asked about their reactions to political posts of opposing views as theirs, 83% of the participants said that they ignore them while the rest said that they leave a comment (Duggan and Smith 2017). 31% of the respondents said that they changed their settings in order to see fewer political posts from volatile political enthusiasts while 27% unfriended such people

instantly (Duggan and Smith 2017). When asked about the most used platforms for pushing political content to users, the respondents said that Facebook and Twitter shared the top position.

The second data source was another research, still by Pew Research institute, concerning the issue of targeted advertising. When asked whether they approved or disapproved of being subjected to targeted advertising, 68% of the respondents disapproved (Purcell et al. 2017) (Fig. 1).

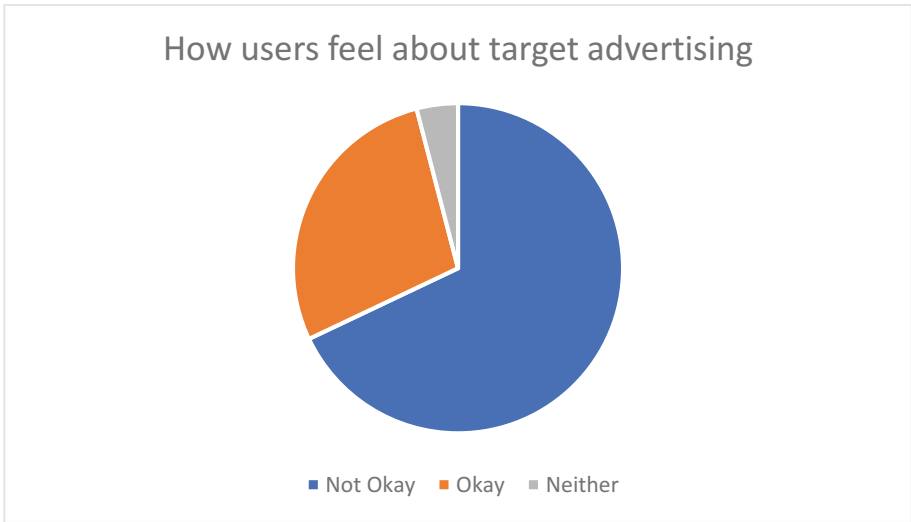


Fig. 1. User’s reaction to target advertising (Purcell et al. 2017)

How do you feel about target advertising	
Not okay	1175
Okay	484
Neither	70

28% of the respondents said that they were okay with targeted advertising while 4% neither had a positive or negative reaction to target advertising (Purcell et al. 2017). From the respondents that were okay, it was observed that most of these were young or came from households with low income (Purcell et al. 2017). Most of the respondents that disapproved target advertising were male, under the age of 65, with college degrees and came from high-income households (Purcell et al. 2017) (Fig. 2).

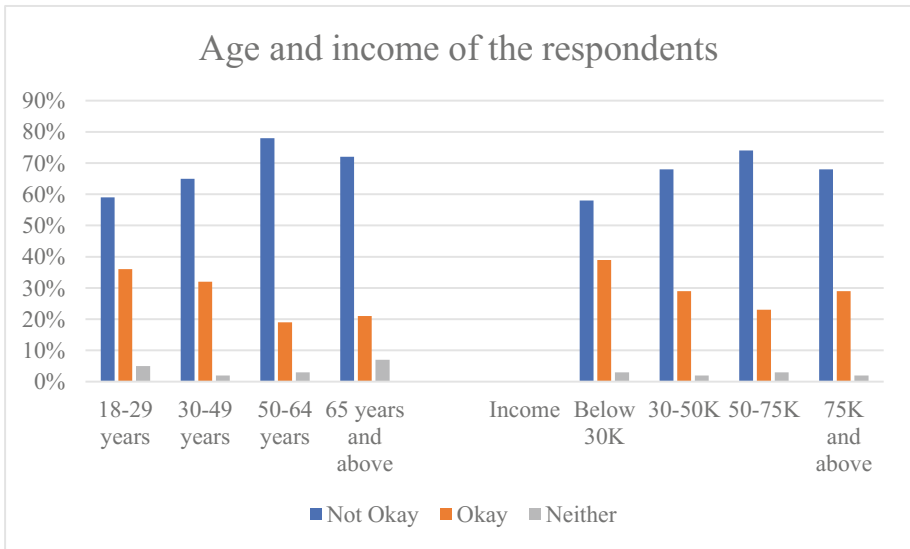


Fig. 2. The age and income brackets of the respondents (Purcell et al. 2017)

Age and income of respondents			
Age	Not okay	Okay	Neither
18–29 years	59%	36%	5%
30–49 years	65%	32%	2%
50–64 years	78%	19%	3%
65 years and above	72%	21%	7%
Income	Not okay	Okay	Neither
Below 30K	58%	39%	3%
30–50K	68%	29%	2%
50–75K	74%	23%	3%
75K and above	68%	29%	2%

5 Discussion

From the first research, it was observed that social media users were growing concerned with the number of politically-oriented posts on their timelines. Whilst some enjoyed using social media for political debates and engaging in political discussions, there was quite a number that was frustrated with such content. As was found out, 37% of the respondents said that they were growing tired of having to come across these posts. They claimed that social media was being used for polarization and to promote animosity between rival political groups. They, therefore, opted to steer clear of such posts and discussions but were growing tired of doing so. They found it exhausting to try and avoid

all the political posts that were being flooded on their timelines. Unfortunately, these posts were being fed to their timelines even when they made efforts to try and avoid them. On the other hand, 22% said that they enjoyed participating in heated political discussions on social media. They said that they found the informative and interesting. 41% said that they neither felt angered nor pleased with the political posts and discussions on social media.

When respondents were asked about the impacts of confrontations with people of different political opinions on social media, most respondents said that they were both frustrating and stressful. Mostly, they claimed that instead of there being meaningful discussions, there was an exchange of insults between the conflicting sides. It can already be seen that a majority of social media users are against political posts and discussions on social media. Most users also claim that these are non-helpful discussions on social media and they leave more damage than they do good. The next question that respondents were asked amplifies this. When asked about the end result of engaging in discussions with people of opposing political views, 64% said that they felt a larger rift than before.

It is evident that most political arguments on social media turn out to be heated. Such kind of discussions end up giving opposing sides more reasons to hate each other. Most users also said that they try as much as possible to ignore political posts while only a few go ahead to read them and leave comments. This is because the political posts on social media are targeted at swaying the thoughts of anyone that reads them. It is something that social media users try to avoid. 37% of the respondents said that they try to change their social media settings in order to avoid seeing political posts. Social media platforms have provided different ways to do so. One can hide such posts or block people who post or share such articles. There is also an option of reporting a post so that the social media companies can take further actions on a particular user. Some respondents said that they will instantly block or unfollow anyone who posts or share aggressive political posts.

Throughout the whole research, it can be seen that a majority of social media users are actually against political content on social media. It is so unfortunate that social media platforms, on the other hand, are trying to push towards politics. If one watches just one video clip concerning politics, the social media platforms have complex algorithms to keep feeding such a person with more political feeds. It is desperate for users that do not want to continue getting such type of content because it annoys them. Even on YouTube, a click on the wrong political video clip triggers off a stream of political video suggestions. Users have already said that they are exploring ways to avoid interacting with such feed on their timelines.

From the second research, three-quarters of the respondents said that they were not okay with having their information collected for target advertising. In target advertising, social media platforms continue to monitor all the activities of a user on and outside social media. This data is collected and stored in large repositories supported by big data (Holtzhausen 2016). These repositories contain data about what each social media user posts, likes, comments on, his or her physical location and even what is in the private chat (Holtzhausen 2016). Some social media platforms such as Facebook go ahead and collect device information and read all the contacts that a user has on his phone.

With this information, these platforms employ complex algorithms to profile each user into a certain category to be sent adverts most suitable for him or her (Holtzhausen 2016). This is what users are trying to avoid, the loss of their privacy with a selfish aim by social media platforms of being targeted with adverts. There is a huge outcry concerning the ways social media platforms have intruded the personal lives of people in order to get more information about them for the purposes of marketing. In this research, most of the respondents that said they did not like being spied on for targeted adverts were below 65 years of age and earned high incomes. Some of the young and low-income earners said that they were okay with their data being collected for target advertising. It can be seen that, still in all the different age and income brackets, most of the respondents were against the collection of their data.

6 Conclusion

The findings and discussions from the two researches have succinctly answered the research questions. As concerns the way targeted adverts are made out of the collected user data, the issue of big data and complex algorithms has been brought to light. It has been found out that however much that targeted advertising is benefiting the social media companies, users are crying. So as to amass maximum revenues from social media advertising, many infringements to the privacy of users have been done. Users are feeling betrayed by these social media platforms. The few that are oblivious to the extent of the privacy issues said that they were okay with targeted advertising. Unknown to them is that data unrelated to social media is being siphoned off their devices.

The second question that was researched on it the issue of entanglement of social media platforms with politics. It has been proven that social media has been made a political tool. There are many culprits to blame. One of them is the newsfeed algorithm for each social media platform. They have increasingly been suggesting more politically-oriented feeds to users. Watching one of these suggestions has led to an aggressive flooding of one's feed with more political posts. The other culprits of political entanglement in social media are the users themselves. There are users that take social media as the field to wage battles against their political opponents. There are others who actively create infuriating posts designed to anger their political rivals. There are yet others that have used social media to fuel protests against governments. That is why governments such as in Turkey have sought to block off such media during politically heated moments such as the failed coup.

7 Recommendations

There are several recommendations that this paper sees as temporary solutions to the two issues that were researched on. Concerning target advertising, governments are encouraged to come up with legislations barring the intrusion of the privacy of their citizens. They should restrict the amount of data that social media platforms can collect from users. Preferably, these platforms should only collect data from posts, likes and comments that users make. Only governments can resolve this since the social media

platforms have shown reluctance to address the cries of their users. As concerns the issue of political entanglement in social media, it is upon the platforms to devise new ways for users to turn off any politically related posts. Some platforms have come up with ways to block content that is considered not safe for work. The same way that they have implemented this, they should be able to come up with a way to block all political posts when a user wants to. This will help users that do not want to come across such feeds on their timelines.

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