THE ⬧⬧⬧ HINDU

INTERNET

Is your Facebook profile protected from fetish pages?

Harshini Vakkalanka

APRIL 30, 2018 18:18 IST
UPDATED: MAY 01, 2018 18:23 IST

Facebook fetish pages could be breaking the law on many fronts: they may peddle images of unsuspecting women, are often a hoax, and could be the front of online

prostitution rackets

A few months ago, while exploring Facebook, I came across a post that showed a young girl, about 20, in skimpy clothing. The caption below the post, written in Telugu, was a 'request' to viewers to share the post if they thought it was 'hot'. I then discovered that the post belonged to a Facebook page called 'Telugu Girls', populated with pictures of women who seemingly belonged to the community. The comments section had plenty of inappropriate comments, with men even sharing their own numbers.

So I created an alternate Facebook profile (which was quite easy to do) to contact the page admin of a similar page. After initiating a chat, the admin offered phone numbers of people he claimed were call girls, the caveat being that a small amount be transferred to him via Paytm.

I reported such pages to Facebook (two in particular, saying that there were many more). This resulted in sexually explicit content being taken down, though the pages themselves were not deemed to be objectionable. I then complained again, this time as a journalist doing a story , asking for Facebook's stance.

While some other pages even openly advertised themselves as providers of escort services, most of these appeared more like con jobs than actual conduits for online prostitution. "At the time of the original report and review, we had initially removed content from the page, but not the page in its entirety. On further investigation, we have taken down the page," said a Facebook email to us.

Tips on safeguarding your photographs online:

- Use all the privacy settings available on social media accounts. For example, Facebook has the 'profile picture guard' and 'profile picture design' features. The guard takes away some of the obvious ways of copying a photo.

- Add only known friends and avoid strangers on friends lists.

- Use copyright infringement tools like DMCA webmaster tools. This helps in deleting photos from the Google search engine.

- Put an official copyright notice on or adjacent to each of your images on public forums.

It went on to say: "There is no place for this kind of content on Facebook, and we work hard to keep it off our platform. We have removed the page, and have taken steps to help stop similar pages reforming, and help prevent this abhorrent activity. There are photo privacy controls we offer to people in India, and we also remove all instances of non-consensual intimate content when we become aware of it, and use image-matching technology to prevent re-sharing of the image on our platforms." Facebook refused to put a name to the communication, saying it was from the company 'spokesperson'. They also shared a link that addressed redesigned menus for privacy and data settings, as well as safeguards for profile pictures.

- Disable the 'right-click' on your web page so that novices cannot easily copy and save your images.

Deeper digging revealed that such fetish pages on Facebook are, in fact, abundant. Many are categorised under several Indian linguistic communities, though it is unclear how many may actually be involved in activities like prostitution.

"It's illegal to advertise prostitution online; at the same time, social media offers an easy platform for escort services," says Bengaluru-based cyber expert Mirza Faizan. "It is easy to create groups or pages with just a few clicks. These pages are managed by agents who then spam other groups and draw attention through catchy names with words like 'Telugu' or 'Malayalam.'"

Such cases are often hard to spot because they use ambiguous images that are not obviously pornographic, making it challenging for social media platform regulators to block pages on obvious grounds. Some of these sites also often misuse images of young women and girls, posted on an online platform.

"Many of their images are often not well protected online and it's quite easy to download them," adds Faizan. When such cases are reported to the cyber crime branch or to the police, police officers often work with cyber experts such as himself to delete the photos by getting in touch with the technical teams of the respective sites.

"There is no one central agency that deals with these cases. We don't usually take up any cases unless they are directed to us by our senior officers (depending on the gravity of the situation) and we don't take up any cases unless an FIR is filed. What we have observed is that many such pages that claim to offer escort services are fake profiles," says a senior police officer who did not wish to be named.

"However, not many people who have had their photos stolen are willing to file an FIR because they don't want the publicity. The media tends to bring in their names. They want it removed and they want it done quietly. What we have observed is that Facebook is aware of everything that happens on their network, including chats. If someone reports a stolen photo, they simply take down the photo and not the page. They have their own standards on such issues," says our source.

"What you are doing on social networks is simply advertising yourself, but it comes at the cost of your security. Anything can happen. If you check your data on Facebook, you'll be surprised to see how much they know about you, including your location. It's only judicious use of social media that will come to your rescue."

According to Delhi's Cyber Cell, complaints related to social media must be filed with a copy/screenshot of alleged contents/profile; screenshot copy of URL of alleged contents; contents should be in both hard and soft forms and soft copy should be given in CD-R only.

They claim complaints can be filed online at http://205.147.111.155:84; in the nearest police station, or at the district cyber cell.

A senior inspector of police at Guwahati (whose number was listed on the portal as Superintendent of Police, Cyber Crime Investigation Cell, Central Bureau of Investigation — he has since been transferred) added he didn't know why the cyber cell has made provisions for online complaints as an FIR is required to be filed in case of any such complaint at the nearest police station.

"The number of fetish-related pages is growing on social media and there has been a growing number of cases of misuse of photographs, but once they seek legal advice, they don't take legal action," says Pavan Duggal, a cyber law expert and advocate.

"The problem is that Indian law has a conservative approach with respect to this subject. Whether it's prostitution-related, fetish-related, generally erotic or pornographic, the Indian law does not make a distinction. The Indian Information Technology Act 2000, uses wide, umbrella terms such as 'lascivious' with respect to the publishing of electronic content," adds Duggal.

According to Section 67 of Chapter XI of the IT Act: "Whoever publishes or transmits or causes to be published in the electronic form, any material which is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or if its effect is such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it, shall be punished on first conviction with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years and with fine which may extend to one lakh rupees." There are also separate punishments for child prostitution.

"Though a few interim orders have been passed by the Court in such cases, there is no documented information in the public domain of any such case where a judgement or decree has been passed," Duggal adds. Of course, Faizan reiterated, some of these sites may just be con-jobs for petty thefts.

While Duggal believes that addressing the root of the problem — the objectification of women — is a long-drawn process, both he and Faizan agree that it must begin at the school level. "It must begin by trying to change mindsets . All the stakeholders, from families to and workplaces must contribute and continue working in this direction."

Number Speak

A total of 8,045 cases were registered under the IT Act during the year 2015, in comparison to 7,201 cases during the previous year (2014), showing an increase of 11.7% in 2015. (Source: NCRB)

Printable version | Oct 3, 2018 12:45:42 PM | https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/internet/is-your-facebook-profile-protected-from-fetish-pages/article23730346.ece