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Communicating Privacy: An Exploration of Social Media Privacy Policies and User Account Settings

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Communicating Privacy: An Exploration of Social Media Privacy Policies and User Account Settings

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Introduction

Privacy is a major concern for social media users, especially as people turn to social media as their primary mode of communication. Specifically, this concern comes from how social media sites handle user's personal information. Despite these privacy concerns from users, social media companies encourage public profiles. Their business model relies on user generated content that is shared as much as possible. This is achieved through default profile settings that make account information public (Heyman et al., 2014) and complicated privacy policies written in text-only format (Fox & Royne 2018). Prior research shows a lack of communication between social media sites and users. This project explores the privacy policies and user settings of four major social media sites: 1) Facebook, 2) Instagram, 3) Twitter, and 4) Snapchat.

Methods

A content analysis was conducted on the privacy policies of the four social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram. The length of time needed to read each policy, including time spent re-reading and trying to understand wording, was measured, along with observations of the policy accessibility. Additionally, the default privacy settings of a newly created account were examined, observing the level of difficulty and number of steps needed to manually change privacy settings to obtain a private account.

References
Fox, A. K., & Royne, M. B. (2018). *Private information in a social world: Assessing consumers' fear and understanding of social media privacy*. Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, 26(1-2), 72-89. doi:10.1080/10696679.2017.1389242

Heyman, R., De Wolf, R., Pierson, J. (2014). *Evaluating social media privacy settings for personal and advertising purposes*. info, Vol. 16 Issue: 4, pp.18-32, https://doi-org.ursus-proxy-1.ursus.maine.edu/10.1108/info-01-2014-0004

Objective

- Identify how accessible and understandable social media privacy policies are to the average user
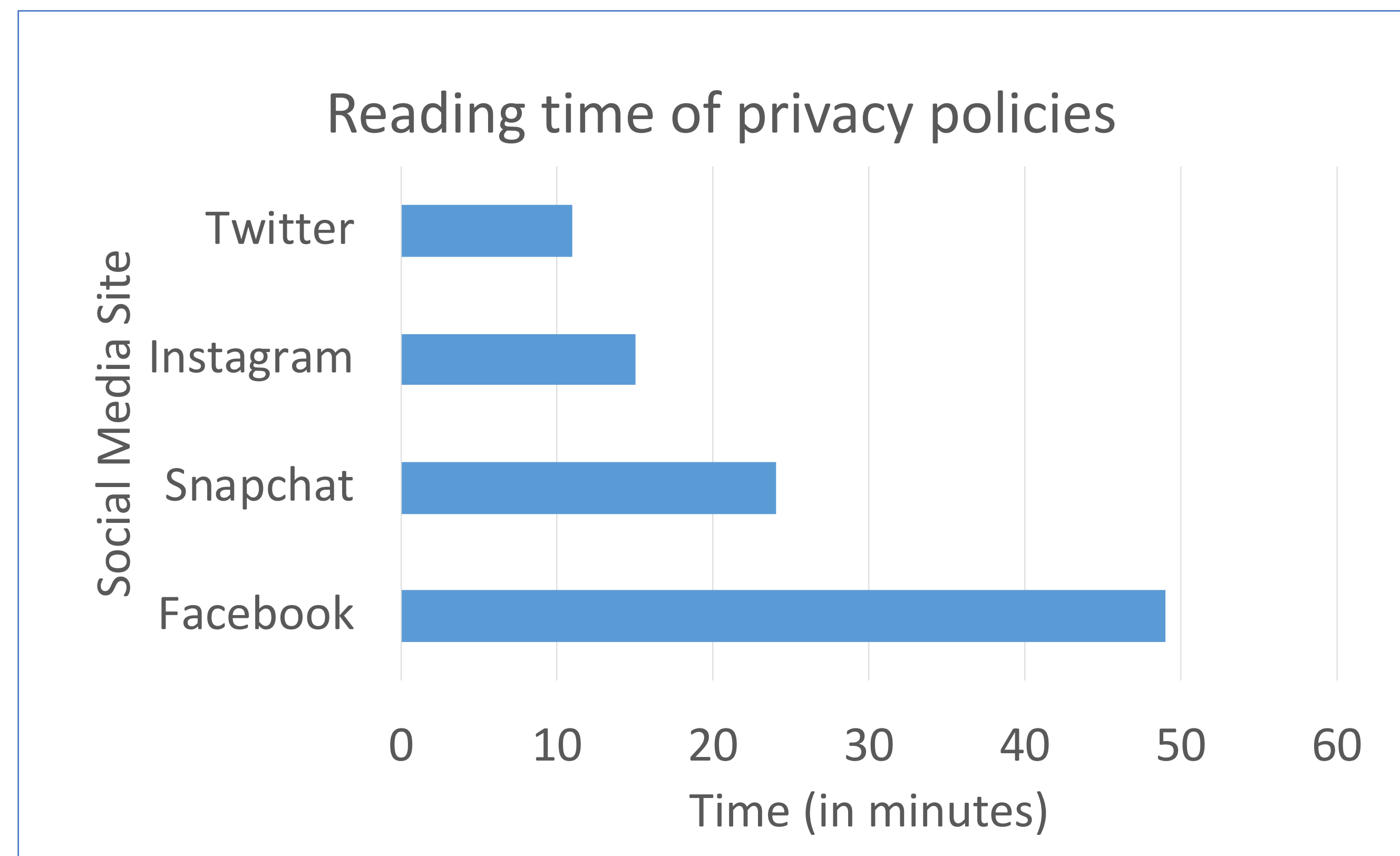- Determine the level of privacy afforded in profile default settings for a new social media account

Reading time of privacy policies

Figure 1. The duration of time spent reading each privacy policy largely depended on the length and readability of each document
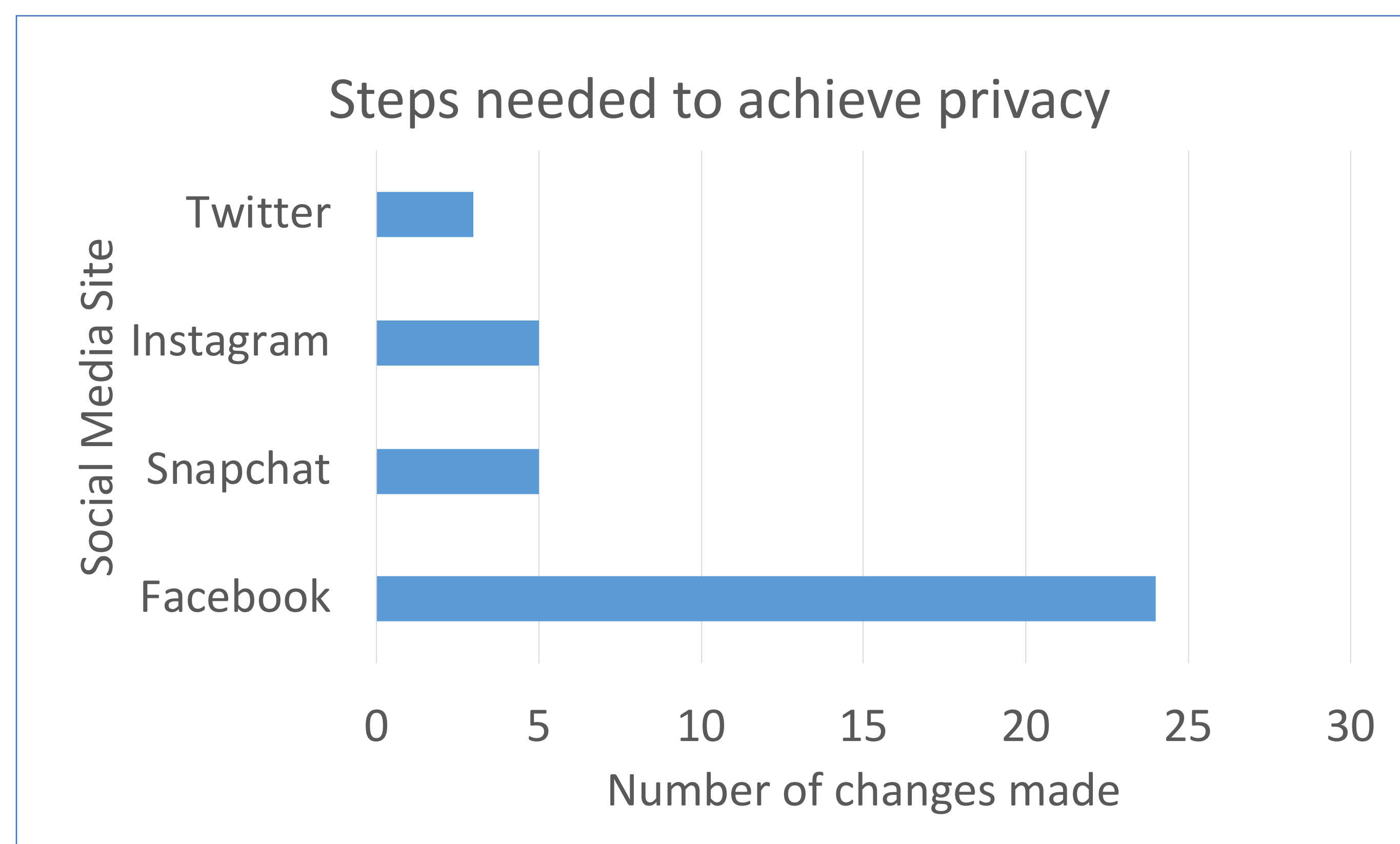
Steps needed to achieve privacy

Figure 2. Number of steps to achieve privacy were calculated after creating a new social media account

Results

Social media privacy policies vary in length, presentation, and word usage. All of the documents included complicated and vague language, especially when addressing how users' information is tracked and sold. Figure 1 shows the length of time spent reading each site's privacy policy. The sites with longer reading times had the most confusing language, which required additional time spent re-reading and analyzing the text. Persons are required to consent to these legally binding statements to create a profile. Across all sites, the majority of content-related settings are set to public by default. The number of steps needed to create a private profile are summarized in Figure 2. Although these steps create some privacy, the collection and sharing of user data by the platform and third-parties cannot be wholly prevented by users through these means.

Discussion

The findings indicate that social media sites mislead users through opaque legal documents and overly complicated profile settings that keep user accounts as public as possible. While these sites are promoted to users for their convenience, the social media companies collect and sell personal information without users' full awareness. The privacy policies are so long and strenuous that they discourage users from actually reading and understanding how their information is exploited. Social media companies benefit from the blind trust of users, extracting users' value for profit. While, technically, the user consents to this exploitation, the user often is not fully aware of the freedom they are surrendering. This research suggests the need for further investigation into the exploitation of user data and greater protection of user privacy and autonomy.