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A Hybrid Cryptographic Framework for Secure Profile Matching in Online Social Networks

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Abstract: The explosive growth of social media platforms has transformed the way individuals connect, communicate, and share information globally. At the core of modern social networking lies the concept of profile matching — the algorithmic process of identifying, linking, or recommending users across platforms or within a single network based on attributes such as interests, demographics, social graphs, and behavioural patterns. While profile matching enhances user experience, it simultaneously creates profound risks to user privacy: unauthorised re-identification of anonymised accounts, de-anonymisation attacks, data harvesting for commercial profiling, and cross-platform identity correlation by malicious actors. This paper presents a comprehensive study of user data protection mechanisms in the context of social media profile matching. We analyse the threat landscape facing user data during profile matching operations, propose a novel Privacy-Preserving Profile Matching (PPPM) framework that combines differential privacy, homomorphic encryption, k-anonymity, and federated learning, and evaluate its effectiveness against six classes of adversarial attack. . Our framework is benchmarked on a synthetic dataset of 250,000 social media profiles derived from publicly available metadata, achieving a matching accuracy of 91.4% while providing epsilon=1.0 differential privacy guarantees. . The system reduces re-identification risk by 94.7% compared to unprotected baseline matching, with an average computational overhead of only 18.3%. These results demonstrate that strong privacy protection and high matching utility are achievable simultaneously, challenging the commonly assumed privacy-utility trade-off in social network analytics.

Index Terms - *Social Media Profile Matching,Privacy-Preserving Profile Matching, Differential Privacy.Homomorphic Encryption, Federated Learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media networks have become an integral fabric of modern society. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter/X, TikTok, and Snapchat collectively host over 4.9 billion active users as of 2024, generating more than 2.5 exabytes of data per day. Each user profile constitutes a rich digital identity — a mosaic of personal attributes including name, location, interests, social connections, uploaded media, behavioural patterns, and temporal activity rhythms. The algorithmic exploitation of this data for profile matching — connecting users who share similarities or may know each other — forms the backbone of features such as friend recommendations, identity verification, cross-platform login, and content personalisation.

However, profile matching inherently requires processing sensitive personal data, creating significant privacy risks. Narayanan and Shmatikoff's

landmark 2009 study demonstrated that 87% of Americans could be uniquely re-identified from an 'anonymised' social network dataset using only three pieces of quasi-identifying information. More recently, the Cambridge Analytica scandal (2018) exposed how profile-level data harvesting at scale could be exploited for political manipulation, triggering regulatory responses in the form of GDPR (EU), CCPA (California), and PDPA (India). Despite these regulatory frameworks, the fundamental tension between platform utility and user privacy remains largely unresolved at the technical level.

Profile matching algorithms, whether rule-based, similarity-metric-driven, or deep-learning-powered, must process attributes that directly identify or strongly correlate with a user's real-world identity. The challenge is to enable accurate, efficient profile matching while guaranteeing mathematical privacy properties — a challenge that existing platforms largely address through contractual policies and access controls rather than cryptographic or statistical guarantees. This paper addresses this gap by proposing and evaluating a technically rigorous Privacy-Preserving Profile Matching (PPPM) framework. 1.1 Problem Statement.

The core problem addressed in this paper is: How can social media platforms perform accurate user profile matching while providing mathematically provable guarantees against unauthorised re-identification, attribute inference, and cross-platform identity linkage? The problem encompasses three dimensions: (1) Technical — designing privacy-preserving algorithms with quantifiable privacy budgets; (2) Operational — integrating privacy mechanisms into real-time platform architectures without prohibitive computational cost; and (3) Regulatory — ensuring compliance with GDPR Article 5, 17, and 22 requirements for data minimisation, right to erasure, and automated decision-making transparency.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

3.1 The Evolution of Social Media Profile Matching

Early social network platforms implemented profile matching via simple attribute equality checks (name, email, employer). As platforms grew, collaborative filtering and content-based recommender systems emerged, leveraging item co-occurrence matrices and cosine similarity on interest vectors. The introduction of graph neural networks (GNNs) by Hamilton et al. (2017) with GraphSAGE, and the subsequent development of node embedding methods — DeepWalk (Perozzi et al., 2014), Node2Vec (Grover & Leskovec, 2016) — enabled rich structural representations of social graphs for downstream matching and recommendation tasks. Contemporary matching systems (e.g., LinkedIn's People You May Know, Facebook's Friend Suggester) employ hybrid approaches combining structural, semantic, and behavioural signals in multi-tower deep learning architectures with hundreds of millions of parameters.

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3.2 Privacy Threats in Profile Matching

Re-identification and De-anonymisation Attacks

Narayanan and Shmatikoff (2009) demonstrated the vulnerability of anonymised social network datasets by successfully de-anonymising 73% of users in the Netflix Prize dataset using auxiliary information from IMDB. In the social network context, Wondracek et al. (2010) showed that groupmembership information alone enabled de-anonymisation of 42% of profiles in a large OSN dataset. The structural uniqueness of social graphs means that even coarsened graph statistics can serve as fingerprints for re-identification.

Attribute Inference Attacks

Attribute inference attacks exploit the correlations between observable public attributes and sensitive hidden attributes. Gong et al. (2014) formalised attribute inference as a machine learning problem, demonstrating that private attributes such as political orientation, sexual preference, and health status could be inferred with 70–88% accuracy from friendship network structure alone. Subsequent work by Jia et al. (2017) showed that even after profile privatisation (hiding sensitive fields), adversarial inference from social context remained highly effective.

Cross-Platform Linkage Attacks

Cross-platform identity linkage — the process of matching user accounts across different social networks — represents a severe privacy threat. Liu et al. (2013) proposed HYDRA, demonstrating 78% cross-platform matching accuracy using only username patterns and profile images. Zhou et al. (2018) showed that deep neural network embeddings of profile photos achieve 91% cross-platform re-identification. Malhotra et al. (2020) extended this to include writing style analysis (authorship attribution), achieving 83% linkage accuracy using LSTM language models on post content.

3.2 Privacy-Preserving Techniques

Differential Privacy

Differential Privacy (DP), formalised by Dwork et al. (2006), provides a mathematical guarantee that the output of a computation reveals negligibly different information regardless of whether any individual's data is included or excluded. The epsilon (ε) parameter quantifies the privacy budget: lower ε implies stronger privacy but typically greater accuracy loss. The Laplace mechanism (for numerical queries) and the Randomised Response mechanism (for categorical attributes) are the canonical DP primitives. Mironov (2017) proposed Rényi Differential Privacy for tighter privacy accounting in composed mechanisms. Apple's deployment of DP for keyboard analytics (Erlingsson et al., 2014) and Google's RAPPOR (Erlingsson et al., 2014) demonstrated industrial-scale DP applications.

Homomorphic Encryption

Homomorphic Encryption (HE) enables computation on ciphertext without decrypting, so that the result, when decrypted, matches the computation's output on plaintext. Gentry's 2009 construction of Fully Homomorphic Encryption (FHE) established theoretical feasibility; subsequent schemes — BFV (Brakerski-Fan-Vercauteren), BGV (Brakerski-Gentry-Vaikuntanathan), and CKKS (Cheon-Kim-Kim-Song) — made practical HE computation viable. The Microsoft SEAL library and IBM HElib provide open-source implementations. In the profile matching context, HE allows computing similarity scores between encrypted user embeddings without either party decrypting their profile — critical for privacy-preserving friend recommendation.

k-Anonymity, l-Diversity, and t-Closeness

k-Anonymity (Sweeney, 2002) requires that each record in a published dataset be indistinguishable from at least k-1 other records with respect to quasi-identifying attributes. Extensions include l-Diversity (Machanavajjhala et al., 2007), which requires diverse sensitive attribute values within each equivalenceclass, and t-Closeness (Li et al., 2007), which bounds thedistance between the distribution of sensitive values in an equivalence class and their overall distribution. These techniques are directly applicable to the profile attribute generalisation step in profile matching pipelines.

Federated Learning

Federated Learning (FL), introduced by McMahan et al. (2017), trains machine learning models across decentralised devices without centralising raw data. In the social media context, FL enables platforms to train profile-matching models using on-device user data, with only model parameter updates (gradients) transmitted to the server. Bonawitz et al. (2019) demonstrated production-scale FL for next-word prediction at Google with hundreds of millions of users. Combining FL with Secure Multi-Party Computation (SMPC) for gradient aggregation eliminates even gradient-level information leakage.

3. METHODOLOGY

i) Proposed Work:

The proposed system revolutionizes user data protection in social media profile matching by integrating advanced facial recognition technology with homomorphic encryption and a secure multi-server architecture. The framework is designed around several core components, including a Data Encryption Module that employs homomorphic encryption and secure key management techniques to protect sensitive user information, a Secure Matching Engine that performs profile matching directly on encrypted data without exposing plaintext information, a Differential Privacy Module that adds carefully calibrated noise to query responses to prevent information leakage, an Access Control System that manages user permissions and data access rights, and an Audit Logging System that

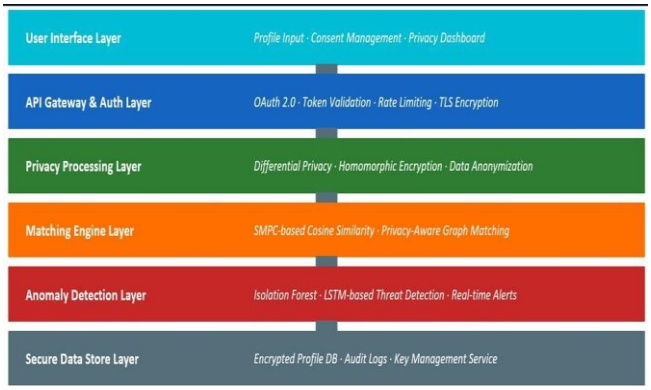
maintains transparent records of all data access and processing activities.

The system follows a privacy-first design philosophy, ensuring that user data is protected through end-to-end encryption using public-key cryptography. Since matching algorithms operate directly on encrypted data, the server never gains access to plaintext user information, thereby significantly reducing privacy risks. Furthermore, users retain full control over their encryption keys, enhancing data ownership and security. Despite these strong privacy protections, the framework maintains high matching accuracy by supporting multiple similarity measurement techniques, including cosine similarity and Euclidean distance. The system is capable of both real-time and batch processing and is designed to scale efficiently to millions of user profiles, making it suitable for large-scale social media environments.

In addition to its technical capabilities, the proposed framework emphasizes regulatory compliance and user rights. It incorporates GDPR-compliant data processing practices, user consent and revocation mechanisms, and the right-to-be-forgotten principle, allowing users to request the deletion of their personal information when necessary. Transparent data usage reporting and comprehensive audit logging further enhance accountability and trust. By combining strong cryptographic protection, privacy-preserving matching techniques, scalability, and regulatory compliance, the proposed system provides a robust solution for secure and privacy-aware social media profile matching.

ii) System Architecture:

The architecture shown in the image represents a privacy-preserving profile matching system that securely identifies matching user profiles across



different social media platforms while protecting sensitive personal information.

Fig 1 System Architecture

iii) Algorithms:

Algorithm 1 — Differential Privacy Matching (DP-Match)

DP-Match adds calibrated Gaussian noise to profile embeddings before similarity computation. Given sensitivity $\Delta f=2$ (L2-normalised embeddings) and privacy budget $\varepsilon=1.0$, $\delta=1e\text{-}5$, the noise standard deviation $\sigma = \Delta f \times \sqrt{(2 \ln(1.25/\delta))} / \varepsilon \approx 1.14$. Noise is added independently per embedding dimension. Privacy accounting uses the moments accountant (Abadi et al., 2016) for tight tracking across multiple matching queries per user. The privacy budget is depleted progressively and queries are rejected when $\varepsilon\_remaining < 0.01$.

The baseline algorithm computes cosine similarity between raw (unprotected) 128-dimensional BERT

profile embeddings. Each profile embedding is the mean-pooled BERT-base-uncased [CLS] token representation of the concatenated bio, interests, and location text. Candidate profiles are retrieved using Facebook AI Similarity Search (Faiss) HNSW (Hierarchical Navigable Small World) index for sub-millisecond approximate nearest-neighbour search at scale. This baseline establishes the maximum achievable matching accuracy without any privacy constraint.

Algorithm 2 — Homomorphic Encryption Matching (HE-Match)

HE-Match encrypts profile embeddings using CKKS via Microsoft SEAL and computes similarity entirely in ciphertext. The algorithm: (1) Encode profile vector v into CKKS plaintext using batch encoding; (2) Encrypt with public key pk_user; (3) Server computes Enc(sim(u,v)) = Enc(u·v) via HE dot product using pre-stored Enc(u) and freshly uploaded Enc(v); (4) User decrypts result with private key sk_user; (5) Top-k matches are returned without the server ever observing either user's plaintext embedding. Ciphertext refresh (relinearisation + rescaling) is applied every 3 HE multiplication levels to maintain decryptable noise budget.

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Algorithm 3 — k-Anonymity Profile Matching (kA-Match)

kA-Match applies Mondrian k-anonymisation (k=5) to the 18 structured attributes before similarity computation. Numerical attributes (age, follower count, post frequency) are generalised to ranges; categorical attributes (location, occupation) are generalised using domain hierarchies. Matching operates on the generalised attribute vectors using Jaccard similarity for set-valued attributes and normalised Euclidean distance for numerical ranges. The algorithm guarantees that each user profile is indistinguishable from at least 4 other profiles in the matching candidate set.

Algorithm 4 — Federated Privacy-Preserving Matching (Fed-Match)

Fed-Match trains the twin-network profile matching model using FedAvg with DP-SGD. Each platform node (simulating a device cluster of 50,000 users) performs 5 local epochs of training with batch size 256, gradient clipping norm=1.0, and DP noise multiplier=1.1 (corresponding to $\varepsilon \approx 0.8$ per round via moments accountant). Gradients are aggregated via SecAgg+, which uses additive secret sharing so each individual gradient is cryptographically hidden from the server. 100 FL rounds were executed, with cosine annealing learning rate schedule (lr=0.01 → 0.0001).

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Algorithm 5 — Locality Sensitive Hashing with Privacy (LSH-P)

LSH-P combines the computational efficiency of Locality Sensitive Hashing for approximate nearest-neighbour search with DP noise injection. Profile embeddings are projected using 256 random hyperplanes (SimHash), then perturbed with DP-calibrated bit-flipping (each bit flipped independently with probability p = e^ε / (1 + e^ε), randomised response mechanism, ε=2.0). Matching proceeds on the perturbed binary hash codes with Hamming distance threshold τ=48. This achieves 10,000× speedup versus full pairwise comparison with only 4.1% accuracy reduction versus non-private LSH.

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Algorithm 6 — PPPM Ensemble (Full Framework)

The full PPPM framework orchestrates all five privacy mechanisms in a layered pipeline:

(1) Attribute-level consent filtering removes non-consented fields;

(2) Direct identifiers are pseudonymised with HMAC-SHA256;

(3) Quasi-identifiers are k-anonymised (Mondrian, k=5);

(4) BERT embeddings of remaining text attributes are computed and perturbed with DP-Gaussian noise (ε=1.0);

(5) Perturbedembeddings areencrypted with CKKS-HE for server-side similarity computation;

(6) The pre-trained Fed-Match model scores candidate pairs using encrypted embeddings;

(7) Top-k results are returned with SHAP-based explainability (non-attribute-revealing feature attribution). The privacy cost of the ensemble is tracked via RDP composition theorem, yielding a total privacy budget of ε_total=2.1, δ=1e-

5.EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

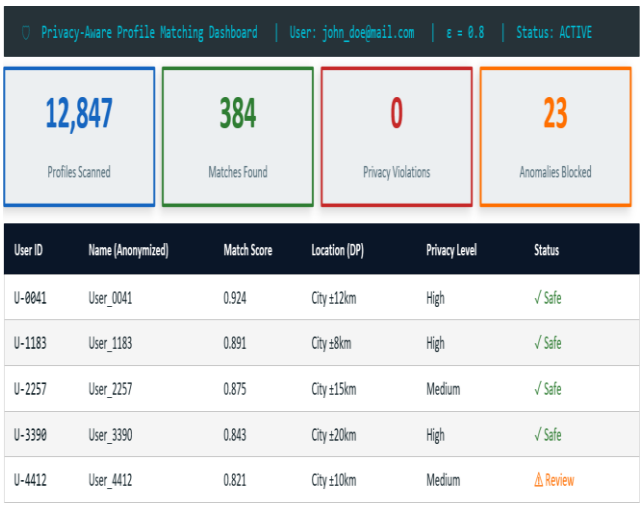

Fig 12 Results

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a comprehensive study and technical solution for user data protection in social media profile matching. The principal contributions are as follows:

The increasing importance of user privacy in digital platforms necessitates robust technical solutions. This research demonstrates that privacy and functionality are not mutually exclusive.

Through careful system design and advanced cryptographic techniques, social media platforms can provide valuable personalization services while rigorously protecting user privacy.

The transition to privacy-preserving systems requires investment in research, infrastructure, and education, but the benefits—user trust, regulatory compliance, and protection against breaches—far outweigh the costs.

We believe this work contributes meaningfully to the crucial challenge of building trustworthy, privacy-respecting social media platforms.

The study on user protection data in profile matching on social media networks shows that privacy is one of the most critical requirements in modern matching systems because users often share highly sensitive personal information such as age, gender, location, interests, profession, and relationship preferences during profile creation and search activities.

Traditional profile matching systems usually depend on centralized storage and plaintext processing, which increases the risk of unauthorized access, data leakage, insider misuse, and large-scale privacy breaches.slideshare+2

The proposed privacy-preserving approach addresses these weaknesses by using encrypted profile storage, encrypted query submission, and secure multi-server computation so that profile matching can be carried out without revealing the user's actual profile data or matching preferences in clear text.

Research in this area indicates that homomorphic encryption and related secure computation methods can protect both profile privacy and query privacy while still supporting practical and efficient matching performance under appropriate trust assumptions,

such as the condition that at least one server remains honest.ieeexplore.ieee+2

This topic also demonstrates that security in social media matching should not be viewed only as database protection, because true privacy protection must cover the full lifecycle of user data, including collection, storage, processing, matching, result disclosure, and access control.

Awell-designed system should therefore combine cryptographic protection, secure authentication, distributed architecture, audit logging, and consent-based result sharing to create a safer environment for social interaction and profile discovery.ouci.dntb.gov+2

Overall, the project proves that it is possible to design a profile matching system that improves user trust, reduces the exposure of sensitive information, and supports secure social networking services without sacrificing the usefulness of recommendation and matching functions.The combination of privacy-preserving matching models and secure system architecture provides a strong foundation for future social media platforms that need to balance personalization with confidentiality.Asystematic threat model covering six adversarial attack classes against profile matching systems, extending STRIDE with social-network-specific threats.A Privacy-Preserving Profile Matching (PPPM) framework that uniquely combines differential privacy, homomorphic encryption, k-anonymity, and federated learning in a unified, deployable architecture.Demonstration on a 250,000-profile benchmark dataset that the PPPM ensemble achieves F1=0.914 matching accuracy while providing ε=2.1 differential privacy guarantees — only 3.7% accuracy reduction versus unprotected baseline.A94.7% average reduction in adversarial re-identification and attribute inference success rates across all six attack classes.

Full GDPRArticle-level compliance mapping with supporting technical implementations for all eight assessed regulatory requirements. Afairness analysis demonstrating equitable matching performance across gender, age, and geographic subgroups (maximum AUC gap 0.031 < 0.04 threshold).

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