Straits Interactive Cautions the Use of ChatGPT Clone Apps Due to Privacy Concerns and Potential Misuse

Discrepancies in Declared Data Safety Practices vs. Actual App Behavior

Singapore, 30 August, 2023— Straits Interactive, through its research arm, the Data Protection Excellence (DPEX) Centre, has released findings on the data practices of 100 mobile "Clone Apps" leveraging OpenAI's GPT APIs on the Google Play Store. The research uncovers significant discrepancies between declared data safety practices and the actual behaviour of these apps, which pose potential privacy risks to individual and corporate users alike.

Methodology and Objectives
With the rising popularity of ChatGPT features being replicated in mobile apps, the study aimed to evaluate the declared data safety information of ChatGPT-based apps and delve deep into the permissions they actually solicit, particularly regarding personally identifiable information (PII). The research undertook an exhaustive analysis of 100 apps selected from the Google Play Store with the search term 'ChatGPT', representing a combined total of 44 million downloads.

Data Safety Contradictions
The study found that 46% seemingly confidently asserted on the app download page (within the Data Safety Section) that they did not collect any PII . Contrarily, the App Permissions Section indicates that chat conversations, classified under PII, are vulnerable to harvesting.

68% of the apps claimed no third-party PII sharing, but their reliance on the application programming interface (API) from OpenAI—a third party—directly contradicts this claim. Alarmingly, 42% admitted that once the user PII is collected, "the data can't be deleted."

The disparities cast shadows over the privacy practices of these apps, especially considering that 58% of them have user ratings averaging 4.3, probably indicating their ease of use and/or effectiveness, etc. rather than taking data privacy risks into account. Importantly, five apps featured among the Top 30 free productivity apps, while four ranked within the Top 20 for gross revenue**.**

Excessive App Permissions Exceed Declarations
Among the 46 apps that said they do not collect any PII, a startling 29 actually requested at least one app permission that would enable them to collect PII.

The research pointed out a mismatch between the Data Safety declarations and the permissions these apps actively solicit. Notably, the apps requested:
- Access to Microphone: 41%
- Ability to Modify/Delete Photos/Media/Files: 36%
- Ability to Modify/Delete Storage Contents: 34%
- Access to Device ID & Call Information: 13%

Furthermore, a significant 72% of all the apps requested at least one PII-related permission. Worryingly, 35 apps could gather "Device and other IDs," potentially identifying all user account IDs. The capabilities of some apps to access search history or lists of installed apps accentuate the concerns of PII exposure and misuse. It is important to note that these figures refer exclusively to apps that disclosed their data collection practices via the data safety page, and were then cross checked against the permissions they requested. Ultimately, users are advised to always exercise caution when downloading and engaging with AI mobile chatbot applications.

"While apps replicating ChatGPT's features are proliferating, our findings serve as a crucial alert. Users often place faith in app declarations. However, the need for heightened vigilance is evident given the disparities we've identified," said Kevin Shepherdson, CEO of Straits Interactive. "Developers, on the other hand, ought to prioritize transparency, ensuring their Data Safety claims align coherently with the permissions they request and the inherent data flows of their apps."

According to Lyn Boxall, a legal privacy specialist at Lyn Boxall LLC and a member of the research team, "From a legal standpoint, the discrepancies between an app's declarations on data safety and its actual behaviours are not just alarming but potentially actionable. Users have the right to transparency and truthfulness when it comes to their PII. Misrepresenting data practices can lead to serious regulatory repercussions, especially under increasingly stringent data protection laws worldwide. App developers need to recognise that privacy is not just an ethical obligation but also a legal one. The stakes are high, both in terms of potential penalties and loss of user trust."

Building a Better understanding of Data Protection policies
These findings by the DPEX Centre show that developers still have a long way to go in terms of their accountability and transparency practices, as well as providing a clear data protection policy. To help facilitate a better understanding of incorporating privacy by design and design thinking in mobile app development, the DPEX Network has developed specially a course entitled Mobile Applications - Privacy by Design and Design Thinking beginning in November 2023 for interested parties.

More information about the DPEX Centre can be found at www.dpexnetwork.org

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About Straits Interactive
Straits Interactive delivers sustainable data governance solutions that help organisations create trust in today's data-driven world. As trusted advisors to SMEs, MNCs and data protection authorities in the region, we provide comprehensive competency, consulting and capability roadmaps in data protection and governance. We partner top universities in the region and international certification bodies to provide advanced diplomas, degrees and certification courses. Today, we offer our own line of software, digital content and more than 40 courses covering data protection, data governance and Generative AI.

Our hands-on advisory services, combined with our software-as-a-service solutions, help reduce risk and create value from data to help businesses achieve their digitalisation and innovation objectives. In 2023, ten years after it was founded, Straits Interactive was honoured as one of the top ten "Outstanding and Promising Startups" at the inaugural Action Community for Entrepreneurship (ACE) Startup Awards, an unprecedented national accolade celebrating exceptional start-ups in Singapore.

For media enquiries, please contact:
Straits Interactive
Angela Schooling
Marketing & Communications Director
Telephone: +65 98222625
Email: angela@straitsinteractive.com

Clearstory International
Roisin O'Donoghue
Senior Account Executive
Telephone: +353 87 7489420
Email: roisin@clearstoryinternational.com