Security Issues of Electronic and Mobile Banking

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Abstract: With the very dynamic development of digital banking and trust services, security system designers have a huge number of new users as well as new problem areas to address. The article tries to draw attention to the most burning elements of modern digital banking security systems, taking into account not only technical areas, but also the level of awareness and habits of their users. The approach described in the article indicates connections between various elements of security systems, which go beyond the infrastructure of a single bank. In the content of the article the authors analyze the dangers associated with the use of digital and mobile banking systems by people with different levels of IT-related threats awareness based on their qualitative research (one hour in-depth interviews) on a group of 60 clients of banking services in Poland. The article tackles some issues associated with the compliance of banks with the PSD2 directive and exemplary ways of implementing the SCA recommendations (including a special emphasis on the risks of using SMS codes), the use of biometrics in user authorization, popularity and automation of phishing attacks, as well as forceful coercion. Several issues associated with electronic and mobile banking security are elaborated based on their current status in Poland.

1 INTRODUCTION

Banking systems are susceptible to attacks in a lot of different ways, mostly due to the large number of access channels they provide and obvious financial benefits to a successful attacker. To address various security issues in that area, one should look comprehensively and employ a fragment-by-fragment systematic approach to securing one's services, because the attack is most likely to occur at the weakest link in the chain. Arguably, that link is typically the end-user, however procedural and technical means are applied to minimise the risk on that end. Interestingly, these means are advertised as security-enhancing conditioned only on the customer's eagerness to utilise them adequately, and, even further, it is considered his fault when such measures are found not to have been effective. What we will show in this paper is that for contemporary solutions there is a much wider range of possibilities for an attacker to bypass them, than simply because of the customer's lack of eagerness or attentiveness.

Banking changes over time, certain functionalities go into oblivion, while new ones appear and gain considerable attention – such as contactless payments or non-cash payments. A number of new threats arise around each of these functionalities, the mitigation of which should be carried out with both technical means, but also education and legislature. A side conclusion of our paper is that only when these three levels are equally balanced, can the ultimate goal of providing secure online banking be achieved.

1.1 Motivation and Contribution

These days electronic and mobile banking is ubiquitous, almost everybody uses it somehow via mobile apps or web services. At the same time, there are a lot of advertised and implemented security means, such as SMS codes, mobile tokens, etc. The general public is left to live in a conviction that their electronic security "is taken care of". Providers of financial services safeguard our transactions and accounts, we hear about new regulations aimed at improving security and facilitating our virtual lives, such as GDPR (European Parliament, 2016) or PSD2 (European Parliament, 2015), banking services are easily operable and instantly available, etc. While in general such a way of thinking is perfectly justified, in fact in some cases it might be an illusion of security.

If we look closer, it turns out that security issues might be shifted to third parties. For instance, if we

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use SMS codes for authorization of transactions we rely on a telecoms operator, using banking mobile app we put on trust in the app and its default settings and, of course, our phones. Moreover, if we consider also dangerous or risky user behaviors, we can become a subject of phishing or impersonation attacks, which origin might be far more distant from e-banking itself, that one would wish to believe.

Our contribution starts with putting some light on the big picture of e-banking security, present an overview of the whole security landscape and its actors, and point out essential issues and threats associated with them. More broadly, the aim of this paper is to draw the reader's attention to the fact that *e-banking security must be an end-to-end solution*, while typically it focuses on strengthening some points, while the vulnerability remains in some out-of-sight instances.

2 SECURITY ISSUES

We started our investigation of digital and mobile banking cybersecurity with our desk research and user interrogation. These works resulted in identifying several aspects of e-banking, that should be taken into consideration by its users and, possibly, providers to assess the security of the service from the perspective of usability. We have interviewed 60 people in Poland (age span 16-72, different professions and familiarity level with e-banking solutions) using a qualitative study – in-deep survey (one hour per person) and discussed security issues with several Polish banks representatives (Wojciech Wodo and Damian Stygar, 2020). Based on the analysis of gathered data, we address several issues associated with the security of contemporary digital and mobile banking.

2.1 Security Levels

Let us define two levels of security for the mobile and electronic banking applications: *basic* and *extended*. The basic level will apply to logging in to the user's account with passive permissions to view it. We will assign an extended level to active user operations, e.g. money transfers or trusted accounts setup, and also to changes to the key settings such as the configuration of authentication channels or incurring liabilities. Naturally, one might argue that this first level of security is achieved by unlocking the phone/tablet, and the second by actual logging into the banking app, however, it must be stressed that the phone *is not* and *cannot be* a secure device (see next section), so this train of thought must be discouraged.

Some banking applications are available on the market that provides functionalities (e.g. account status display or last transaction performed) without user authentication[1]. From the information security and privacy perspective, we discourage such solutions. Providing them is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it meets user's expectations of usability (monitoring account balance may not seem any kind of threat to somebody, while they might see it useful on a day-to-day basis), while on the other it creates a "foot in the door" sensation, that it is certainly possible to extend this functionality (of access without authentication) to other banking operations. Consequently, such a bifurcated view dwarfs the mere idea of a secure banking application.

2.2 Protection of Mobile Devices

The first line of protection is the device itself through which we use banking services, hence we should ensure that only an authorized person can use it. In the case of a mobile device, access protection based on a password or a long PIN (at least 6-8 characters) may be the minimum fulfillment of this criterion. The solution based on biometrics (it additionally ensures the lack of frequent exposure of the password or PIN in public places) may additionally improve the ergonomics of the solution and make it impossible to break the password since biometric features are harder to obtain (and apply to the device) by the adversary.

To prevent the adversary from using discovered bugs in the software, the device's operating system and its key software must be updated regularly. If we use additional software on a mobile device, make sure that it is only from the official application stores made available by the system producers (Google Play, Apple App Store, Windows Phone Store).

From the perspective of the banking app, a good idea is to check whether the device is not devoid of standard security (whether it was *rooted* or *jailbreak*). It is possible to check by standard users[2] [3] and by application developers[4]. Should this be the case, the banking app should refuse to run or transfer the entire responsibility to the user using the relevant information with a confirmation request.

The security of the network through which we use banking services is also a fundamental element of the

[1] https://www.cashless.pl/257-6-aplikacji-bankowych-ktore-pokazuja-saldo-przed-zalogowaniem

[2] https://www.techwalla.com/articles/how-to-check-if-an-iphone-has-been-jailbroken

[3] https://www.androidcentral.com/is-my-phone-rooted

[4] https://github.com/Stericson/RootTools

overall security. It should be ensured that sensitive financial operations are carried out in trusted networks, or at least well protected, although one should be particularly careful when using WiFi, because of the latest *Krack* attack against algorithm WPA-2 (Vanhoef and Piessens, 2017).

We take a psychological approach to determine the level of security. If the "low level" corresponds to what is currently used as the standard, the user would likely switch to a better solution, i.e. two-factor security or biometrics (intermediate). On the other hand, it is easier to downgrade the level of security by "one", giving up biometrics, but in the end, we get a higher level of security than the one we started with.

When using a user password, we recommend masking it and requesting only selected characters instead of entering the whole password, thus ensuring protection against interception of the entire password during a single session and thwarting attempts at analysis of the way of writing (keystroking attacks). It does not apply if one would like to use a password manager, thus those two solutions are excluding each other.

2.3 Anti-phishing

Users lack awareness of how hacking attacks are conducted and do not realize that they are not targeted but automated, based on phishing and installation of malware on victims' devices. Large-scale phishing attacks (automatic attacks) affect payment and settlement agents as well as the banks themselves through which the adversary extorts all data from the user, including logins, passwords, confirmations, and codes. These attacks are carried out most often in the form of impersonating legitimate banking websites. Countermeasures provide in-depth control of addresses of the origin of emails or links and verification of SSL certificates.

In response to this challenge, practical educational campaigns with a psychological element should be developed. Such actions can be carried out through a tool for simulated social-technical attacks based on phishing along with an educational aspect. The basis of this solution should be to determine the level of awareness and competence of employees and users of digital banking in the area of social-technical attacks. Based on our results of research, effective ways of informing about conducted attacks and potential threats should be developed, combined with effective education of users.

Most people have never experienced a hacking attack and therefore have no idea what emotions are associated with it. Lack of awareness of cybersecurity is due, among other things, to a lack of understanding of the consequences of an attack and the emotions that are associated with it. Simulation of a social-technical attack in controlled conditions is to be a kind of shock connected with emotional stress, which will allow to effectively assimilate the transmitted information, understand what the attack is and what emotions a victim of social-technical attack experiences. The concept of emotionally based messages is presented in Figure 1. The figure represents three levels of emotion that can be caused in users, according to the degree of education one wants to achieve. The headings and content of the messages displayed to the user after wrong behavior (e.g. click on the phishing link) should be aligned to kind and strength of emotions we would like to invoke. The authenticity of those feelings and the whole experience during the process is crucial for educational objectives and remembering abilities.

Notably, some sensitive data used by banks to authenticate their clients are (to some extent freely) available via legitimate channels and media and as such do not require sophisticated phishing attacks. Perhaps the greatest example of all is the mother's maiden name widely used as an "established secret" between the bank and the customer. While guessing a random victim's mother's maiden name may indeed seem impossible, it needs to be stressed that banking attacks can be directed against a particular person – in which case such guesswork is greatly simplified. Establishing a back-up password based on details of the client's life seems to have originated many years ago when a certain operating system granted access to the computer by such method in case the password is lost or forgotten. While this *might* be a valid solution to a stationary computer, it is certainly *not* applicable to a banking account with non-personal access capability.

Of course, there is still the problem of responsive, substitute websites that can act as an intermediary between the user and the correct service (MiTM attack), and intercept communication and dynamically generate content. To mitigate this type of threat one needs to take care of protection against the *malware* software and especially control the permissions of various applications and plugins on mobile device or web browser. Given the level of threat and possible negative outcomes of a successful attack, but also the financial and organizational power of banks, we strongly suggest certificate pinning methodology (Oltrogge et al., 2015), not only for browser-based online banking but especially for mobile application development.

In the telephone channel, we recommend the use of a defined reverse password, for which the user may

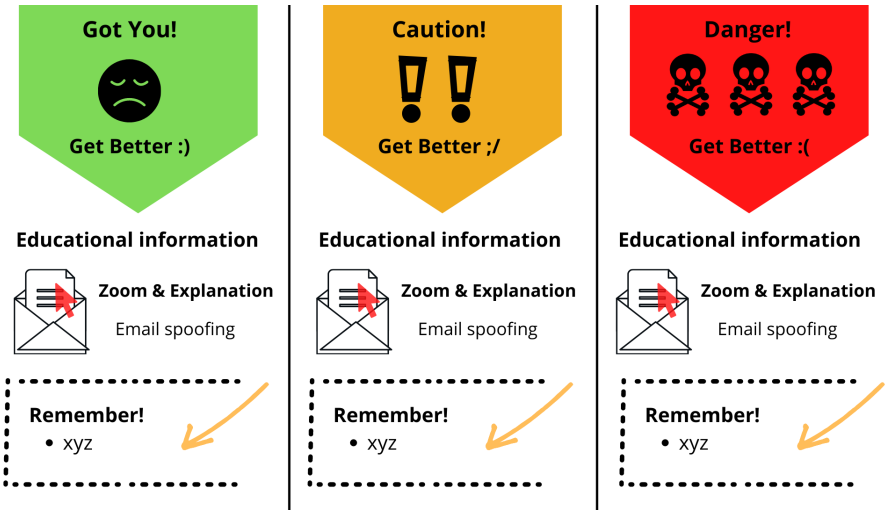

Figure 1: Concept of Emotional based Messages.

ask a bank consultant. This is a particularly effective solution because it is the user who verifies the caller's consultant, if the password has been kept confidential, the probability that this socio-technical attack will be successful is minimal. On the other hand, the often-used approach by the consultants saying "my name is ... and you can verify my identity by calling ..." should be declared as never used by the bank, as it introduces a false sense of security while requires little additional effort for the attacker to setup.

2.4 Forceful Coercion

Let's consider a scenario in which the user is forced to login into the banking system or withdraw cash from an ATM under duress (under the direct influence of the adversary). In this case, it would be reasonable to introduce a protective mechanism that secures the life and health of the user in the first place.

In such a scenario it is possible to use the mechanism of a *sandbox*, i.e. letting the adversary into a mock-up system that looks like it is real, but it is not, and the operations in it are only virtual. In the case of a banking application or access via a web service, this would mean access to the user's virtual account, where the account balance would be fictitious so much so the execution of any apparent operations. The decision of redirection to such a virtual account is made by the user by one of the authentication factors, e.g. it may be a second identification number or a second password. The adversary cannot, without additional knowledge, recognize whether the user has logged in to the correct account or the sandbox, they are indistinguishable to the external observer. On the other hand, the fact of logging into the sandbox system itself tells the bank that something unusual is happening and it is possible to block operations in the real system until the moment of explanation.

2.5 Biometric Solutions

Apple along with the launch of the model of the iPhone X has released a new solution to secure access to the device using face biometrics – *Face-ID* (Apple, 2018). The solution on devices equipped with this possibility using the *match-on-device* model, which enables strong biometric verification of the legitimate user of the mobile device based on the hardware security of the device itself.

This verification method unlocks the device. The manufacturer also allows the use of this functionality to verify the user in the application, in our opinion, it is a sufficiently secure mechanism to allow the user to grant access to the basic level of security. It is worth emphasizing the fact that breaking this protection is significantly more difficult than in the case of the previous solution based on fingerprints. So far, this has been done by a Vietnamese security company – *Bkav*[5].

Earlier similar solution using fingerprint biometrics – *Touch-ID* would be acceptable for similar use, with the provision that only some manufacturers of mobile devices ensure the implementation of the solution at an acceptable level – e.g. Apple. Samsung or Huawei's solutions are susceptible to attacks using fabricated fingerprints by printing using conductive ink on appropriate paper (Cao and Jain, 2016). Nevertheless, constructing the security of an app based on the assumption that the user would use this particular

[5]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8FLl0vqt8I

device and otherwise will be forced to a lower degree of security seems not only unfair but can also violate free-market competition legislation.

For the voice channel, the only biometrics feature remains the voice itself, and a biometric verification mechanism for the caller's voice in a continuous model – *continuous verification* should be employed. Notably, the authentication procedure in this scenario doesn't have to be (and should not be) limited to only the authorization phase of the call - voice samples are available throughout the entire session and may be used to prevent situations like coercion described above.

In terms of two-factor authentication, one has to mention about *FIDO (Fast ID Online)*, which is a set of technology-agnostic security specifications for strong authentication. FIDO is developed by the *FIDO Alliance*, a non-profit organization that seeks to standardize authentication at the client and protocol layers.

FIDO supports the UAF[6] and the U2F[7] protocols. With UAF, the client device creates a new key pair during registration with an online service and retains the private key; the public key is registered with the online service. During authentication, the client device proves possession of the private key to the service by signing a challenge, which involves a user-friendly action such as providing a fingerprint, entering a PIN, taking a selfie, or speaking into a microphone.

In particular, U2F's key advantage is that the signature includes the URL of the website and so is resistant to phishing. It is also important to note that U2F does not meet the criteria of PSD2 SCA as it does not dynamically bind responses to transactions. However, FIDO2 can be SCA compliant.

As we presented in Table 1 popularity of two-factor authentication is still not present sufficiently in all branches of services.

2.6 SMS Codes Insecurity

Swapping SIM cards is an essential problem associated with electronic and mobile banking because the vast majority of banks and other financial institution promotes this security mechanism as a secure way of confirming transactions. It is very frequent that SMS confirmation codes remain the only available security mechanism offered by institutions (apart from ID/password authentication). Many banks have forced users to abandon the more secure one-time passwords list[8]hardware tokens or RSA keys in favor of confirmation codes sent by SMS. Such procedure is alarming and we consider such policy extremely dangerous because it hinges the security upon a single point of failure – client's smartphone, which might be easily compromised[9].

Banks and other financial institutions claim that SMS codes are secure[10], which is not exactly true, because the smartphone or mobile device might be manipulated remotely (by malware) or physically stolen, or compromised in a more sophisticated way – e.g. by SIM card swap. It seems not so easy, but in fact, it requires just a little desk research and social engineering. The first step is to gather personal data, needed for issuing the so-called *collector's identity card* – a forgery of an ID, with almost all respects the same as a legitimate ID. Possession of such "document" is still legal in many countries (it is possible to manufacture such documents even with all holograms[11]) – e.g. Poland, however right now Polish government proceeded new regulation against this activity (Polish Parliament, 2018a)), but still it would be possible to obtain abroad).

Using such an almost perfect counterfeit document an attacker may attempt to request a duplicate of SIM card from the telecoms operator. To the best of our knowledge and personal research, this is, unfortunately, possible because on such occasions there is a lack of proper verification of identity and the document itself. The majority of verification processes are made by visual means, by inexperienced personnel, and usually are based on a scan of the original ID stored in the operator's system. Furthermore, there is no proper procedure for checking the integrity of the data printed on the plastic document against official state registers (access to these systems is very restricted[12]) and document holder. Essentially, the clone of the SIM card can be issued based on very weak assumptions and procedures, while what it entails for the affected person is much more important. After a new SIM card is issued, the old one is disabled, leaving a very tight window of time to react. (Note, information is sent to the old SIM that it will soon be disabled.) After the old SIM card is disabled, the legitimate user loses network access, and consequently any straightforward means of accessing their

[6]www.fidoalliance.org/specs/fido-uaf-v1.2-rd-20171128

[7]www.fidoalliance.org/specs/fido-u2f-v1.2-ps-20170411

[8]https://www.zadluzenia.com/pekao-rezygnacja-z-kart-kodow-jednorazowych/

[9]https://cellspyapps.org/hack-someones-phone/

[10]https://inteligo.pl/pomoc/pytania-i-odpowiedzi/bezpieczenstwo/kody-sms/

[11]http://dokumencik.pl/sklep/

[12]www.gov.pl/web/cyfryzacja/udostepnianie-danych-z-rejestru-dowodow-osobistych1

Table 1: Two Factor Auth (2FA) Summary.

Entity [type / #]	Any 2FA [# / %]	SMS [# / %]	Hardware Token [# / %]	Software Token [# / %]
Banking Worldwide (n=160)	75 (46,9%)	49 (30,6%)	28 (17,5%)	26 (16,3%)
E-mail Providers (n=35)	24 (68,6%)	9 (25,7%)	7 (20%)	22 (62,9%)
Cloud Computing (n=32)	27 (84,4%)	8 (25%)	5 (15,6%)	26 (81,3%)
Major Polish Banks (n=15)	15 (100%)	15 (100%)	5 (33,3%)	9 (60%)

Source: https://twofactorauth.org and own research.

bank account. The phone cannot place calls so it is problematic to use voice channel immediately, and even logging via a website with a password does not solve the problem, because to change account configuration an SMS code is required. At the same time, the adversary would get any security codes sent to the victim's phone number, essentially gaining access to second-factor authentication.According to the *NIST Special Publication 800-63-3*[13] (National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), 2017) SMS codes as 2FA mechanism should be deprecated. NIST has enumerated possible threats, i.e. the potential attacker may receive SMS code if was able to convince telecoms operator to redirect the victim's mobile phone or the codes can be read by a malicious app.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Analyzing the aforementioned threats we came up with a list of recommendations for users and other stakeholders – i.e. banks and telecoms operators, which are essential to provide a higher level of security.

- Introduction of a new mechanism for SMS codes delivering and checking. A personalizing rule can be set by mutual agreement between the bank and the client, that some (simple) rule will be applied to the number sequence sent via SMS, and only after such modification will it be used as confirmation code. The said rules can be very simple, such as "always add one to the last digit", or "switch 3rd and 4th digit": while possibilities are almost infinite, the operations will hardly be difficult to perform in memory. On the other hand, the adversary capturing "raw" code from an SMS stands extremely little chance to discover the actual authentication code from it.
- To protect personal data and monitoring their potential unauthorized usage, one could ask for reports about queries regarding one's PESEL, or creditworthiness: such service is provided by BIK[14].
- A change in the legislature is needed, one forcing strong verification mechanisms for a personal ID and its holder by telecoms operator and banks, and allowing access to official register. The lack of proof of access by the operator/bank to such a database, when the use of some ID document is evident and yields grave consequences (as in the example above), could lead to legal charges of negligence pressed against the operator/bank. Fortunately, new regulations on cybersecurity in Poland were adopted in 2018 (Polish Parliament, 2018b).
- Introduction of electronic ID or ID with electronic layer and infrastructure, where public API is available for verification of authenticity and integrity of the data of the document and binding between printed, electronic, and stored in state register content. Such documents have already been introduced in several countries – e.g. Germany (Federal Office for Information Security, 2017), Estonia[15] and in Poland (2019)[16]. Sadly, on many occasions, security experts not related to governmental structures have not had any influence on introduced changes, which brings up questions about public supervision of governmental proceedings.
- Another secure authorization mechanism must be available by service providers – other than SMS

[13] https://www.nist.gov/blogs/i-think-therefore-iam/questionsand-buzz-surrounding-draft-nist-special-publication-800-63-3

[14] www.bik.pl

[15] https://e-estonia.com/solutions/e-identity/id-card/

[16] https://www.gov.pl/web/cyfryzacja/e-dowod-dowod-z-warstwa-elektroniczna

codes, e.g. hardware tokens (not only mobile apps), RSA Keys, one-time pads (banks are withdrawing them right now, justifying this fact by introducing PSD2, which is irrelevant).

- We highly recommend a mobile/software or hardware token as the authorization method. The token must depend on the information of the activity it authorizes (e.g. four last digits of recipient account number for money transfers). Thanks to such an approach, we bind authorization code with data (and date) of the transaction, then it is impossible to confirm other transaction (replay attack) or swap transaction data on the fly by the adversary (man-in-the-middle). There already exist such devices in Europe that are PSD2-compliant (e.g., smart-TAN in Germany, chipTAN in Austria)(Günther and Borchert, 2013).

4 FUTURE WORKS AND CONCLUSIONS

As the main focus for future work in this area, we would like to investigate in more detail the usage of the second security factor (i.e. biometrics, tokens) in mobile banking security systems and apps. We believe that there must be an alternative secondary security mechanism to the SMS codes or mobile apps, due to their limitations.

Based on the outcomes of this paper and further investigation we will define a set of new evaluation criteria for a complete assessment of electronic and mobile banking security. Based on these criteria we will create an evaluation survey and appropriate scoring. We will use our criteria matrix to perform a more exhaustive evaluation of Polish and European Banks in the first place, we will quantify the answers and tune scoring for each criterion.

As we can see there are a lot of threats associated with electronic and mobile banking. Therefore bank security systems should be designed very carefully, taking into consideration a lot of different factors, not only internal to the banking infrastructure, but also outside systems (such as telecommunication operator's procedures). Security and privacy properties should be delivered by design, which means the banking system should be security driven. Biometrics might be also very useful in the way of reconciliation of security and ergonomy. Any notifications regarding critical issues should be pushed to the user through multiple channels - i.e. e-mail, SMS, and mobile app.

Implementation of legislation such as PSD2 in a way that not only ensures compliance with the regulations but also provides a real improvement in the level of safety and allows the choice of safety mechanisms higher than the minimum required by the legislation. The problem is, among others, the fact that most institutions implement 2FA implementation using SMS codes as OTP. The introduction of software tokens - applications for phones, the introduction of hardware tokens, or launching biometric channels such as second verification or authorization factors could significantly increase the level of security.

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