The Privacy Paradox: The Role of Cognitive Absorption in the Social Networking Activity

Completed Research Paper

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Abstract

Prior research shows that Social Network Sites (SNS) users who are concerned about personal privacy tend to disclose less information. However, in real-world settings, SNS users often fail to consider such concerns in their actual behavior, such as self-disclosure. This phenomenon is known as the “privacy paradox” where individuals express high concerns about privacy but act in a contradictory way. Several theoretical approaches seek to explain this paradox. This paper extends this research by considering the holistic SNS experience. Drawing on published accounts in the press and prior work on cognitive absorption and privacy concerns, this paper proposes a theoretical framework that helps explain the privacy paradox. Specifically, it emphasizes the moderating effect of cognitive absorption on the relationship between privacy concerns and self-disclosure. Building on the privacy calculus theory, it also emphasizes the effect of cognitive absorption in magnifying perceived benefits and undermining perceived risks leading to increased self-disclosure.

Keywords: privacy concerns, privacy paradox, privacy calculus, cognitive absorption, self-disclosure, social network sites
Introduction

Communicating via Social Network Sites (SNS) has become ubiquitous in our daily lives. According to the most recent statistics by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 71% of American adults use Facebook; in addition, 52% of them use two or more SNS, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Pinterest. This represents a 10% increase from the 2013 statistics (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Although Facebook is still the most popular SNS, Facebook adoption has not increased but the use of the other platforms has marginally increased (Duggan et al., 2015), suggesting that SNS use is still proliferating. SNS provide a number of benefits to users including communicating and socializing, reading news, building communities, making friends, and sharing information with others. Exploiting and enjoying these utilities has significantly influenced individuals' communication patterns (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; He, Zha, & Li, 2013). However, enjoyment of these benefits does not come without cost. For instance, information shared on SNS is easily searchable and shareable (boyd, 2008). Information shared on SNS is also harnessed by practitioners for different purposes such as targeted advertisement, surveillance, and monetizing (Craig & Ludloff, 2011; Hurwitz, Nugent, Halper, & Kaufman, 2013; Varadarajan & Soundarapandian, 2013). Advancements in analyzing and utilizing SNS users' information, however, can backfire and lead to privacy issues.

Research on privacy has intrigued scholars from different fields, particularly Information Systems (IS), Marketing, and Communication researchers (Barnes, 2006; Bélanger & Crossler, 2011; Sheehan & Hoy, 1999; Smith, Dinev, & Xu, 2011; Taddicken, 2014). The literature has shown several antecedents and outcomes of privacy concerns. For instance, personality traits, privacy awareness, Internet experience, self-efficacy, social norms, culture, and demographic factors, to name a few, have been shown as significant factors influencing users' privacy concerns (Li, 2011; Smith et al., 2011). On the other hand, perceived costs, trusting beliefs, intention to use, and other behavioral reactions are outcomes of the privacy concerns construct (Li, 2011; Smith et al., 2011; Taddicken, 2014). The focus of this paper is exclusively on privacy concerns and self-disclosure, an important behavioral outcome that has essential practical implications. In particular, SNS providers rely heavily on users' continuous usage of SNS services and, more importantly, the amount of information these users disclose (Ko, 2013) to gain competitive advantage. Yet, without sufficient information shared by users, such as personal information, locations, likes, reviews, etc., SNS providers would not be able to support marketers and interested parties running their business depending on SNS big data (Craig & Ludloff, 2011; Sheehan & Hoy, 1999; Manyika et al., 2011).

The privacy literature has established strong support for the negative relationship between privacy concerns and self-disclosure (Altman, 1975; Petronio, 2002; Sheehan & Hoy, 1999). This relationship raises an expectation that users will tend to disclose less information or even discontinue usage of IS like SNS because of their concerns about personal information or even their concerns about the privacy of others (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2014). But in natural settings, user behavior can be different. Bélanger and Crossler (2011) suggest that a full understanding of this relationship is still ambiguous. There is a privacy paradox where individuals express high concerns about privacy but react in a contradictory way by disclosing an extensive amount of personal information (Bélanger & Crossler, 2011; Dinev, 2014; Pavlou, 2011; Smith et al., 2011). In other words, individuals appear to act irrationally in relation to their stated preferences. Research into the privacy paradox is building (e.g., Baek, 2014; Kehr, Kowatsch, Wentzel, & Fleisch, 2015; Taddicken, 2014; Utz & Kramer, 2009). It is a phenomenon that is clearly prevalent in the SNS context (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Barnes, 2006; Utz & Kramer, 2009). Against this backdrop, a number of researchers investigated situational factors and others adopted alternative theoretical approaches, such as bounded rationality and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), in an attempt to understand this seemingly irrational behavior (Dinev, 2014).

Despite the building interest in privacy, it appears that the current research into the privacy paradox lacks attention to the holistic experience with Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) that shapes individuals' behaviors, beliefs, and outcomes. For example, the intrinsic motivation, non-instrumental, or holistic factors, such as cognitive absorption, could help explain the privacy paradox in the context of SNS or even other ICT platforms, such as location-based services, online banking services, and e-commerce websites. Cognitive absorption refers to “a state of deep involvement with software” that results from temporal dissociation, focused immersion, heightened enjoyment, control, and curiosity (Agarwal &
Karahannal, 2000, p. 666, p. 673). The literature on cognitive absorption, which is largely derived from the flow theory, has shown that intrinsic motivation, absorption, and enjoyment strongly explain intention to use SNS and other IS (Agarwal & Karahannal, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Rouis, 2012; Turel & Serenko, 2012). Cognitive absorption is “important to the study of technology use behavior because it serves as a key antecedent to salient beliefs about an information technology” (Agarwal & Karahannal, 2000, p. 666). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) states that “because the flow activity has clear and noncontradictory rules, people who perform in it can temporarily forget their identity and its problems” (p. 48). Accordingly, it is plausible to claim that individuals who become so engrossed and interested in using SNS enter into a flow state or, more broadly, become cognitively absorbed. This cognitive state in turn makes them temporarily overlook or ignore privacy matters at the time of usage for the sake of intrinsic rewards and motivations toward using SNS. It is this psyche state that sets the foundation for this theoretical paper in elucidating the privacy paradox.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a theoretical framework for explaining the privacy paradox through cognitive absorption. It is conceptual research (Meredith, 1993) grounding its argumentation in two streams of literature (viz., privacy and cognitive absorption); but the resulting theoretical framework is illustrated by actual vignettes from the press. The theoretical framework provides explanations for the representative behavioral patterns illustrated in the vignettes. These patterns embody the propositions in the framework. This research conforms to the approximation and problematization concepts that are considered vital steps in theorizing (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Weick, 1995). For instance, Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) encourage researchers “to produce more novel research questions and theories by actively questioning and critically scrutinizing established knowledge in academia and in society at large” (p. 267).

The paper is organized as follows. In the next few sections we will review the literature on SNS, SNS and privacy, self-disclosure, the privacy calculus, the privacy paradox, and cognitive absorption. Following this review, we will share the three vignettes that demonstrate behavioral patterns described by current research (and from which we derive three propositions). We then show how cognitive absorption can extend our existing theoretical framing to help incorporate the propositions derived from the vignettes. In particular, the proposed theoretical framework emphasizes the moderating effect of cognitive absorption on the relationship between privacy concerns and self-disclosure. It also incorporates constructs from the privacy calculus while emphasizing the effect of cognitive absorption in magnifying perceived benefits and undermining perceived risks leading to increased self-disclosure. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

**Social Network Sites**

A number of acronyms like Social Networking Websites (SNW), Social Network Sites (SNS), Social Networking Sites (SNS), Social Networking Services (SNS), Online Social Networks (OSN), and Social Networks (SN) have been used in the literature. Nevertheless, these acronyms refer to the same phenomenon: online sites in which human communication takes place. Although they are sometimes used interchangeably, some acronyms are broader or narrower than others (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Therefore, researchers may prefer using a particular acronym depending on the research context. This paper adopts boyd and Ellison's (2007) definition as it aptly describes the nature of most popular SNS, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. SNS can be defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211).

SNS can be traced to the mid-to-late 1990s when theglobe.com and SixDegrees.com were first recognized (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Several SNS appeared in the dot-com bubble, but a few of them survived after the Internet boom. Some early SNS provided similar features like those provided by today's SNS, such as friend request, comment, private message, post, personalized photo, content sharing, etc. Examples of earlier SNS include: BlackPlanet.com, AsianAvenue.com, MiGente.com, Cyworld (www.skcomms.co.kr), LiveJournal.com, Ryze.com, Tribe.net, LinkedIn.com, Friendster.com, to name a few (boyd & Ellison, 2007). LinkedIn was launched in 2003 and Facebook was launched in 2004. Since then, these sites have shaped our understanding of the SNS world. In general, these sites provide online services, mostly for
free, through which online users are able to interact, socialize, and share different kinds of structured and unstructured data publicly or privately through personalized profiles.

**Social Network Sites and Privacy Concerns**

The fact that SNS generate a gigantic amount of data led researchers and practitioners to take steps toward making use of these data. On the one hand, social science scholars harness SNS data to conduct different kinds of research to understand human behavior. For instance, Stutzman, Gross, and Acquisti (2012) analyzed a longitudinal panel of 5,076 Carnegie Mellon University Facebook users to study privacy and disclosure behaviors between 2005 and 2011. On the other hand, practitioners find SNS data as a wealth of opportunities. For example, they analyze SNS users’ data via social media mining tools which in turn assist them in making sound decisions related to targeted advertisements and business improvements (Varadarajan & Soundararapandian, 2013). In addition, the plethora of unstructured data on SNS can be transferred to structured data which ultimately can be used as an additional source of income, such as monetizing big data sets containing SNS users’ personal information and products-related information (Hurwitz et al., 2013; Schmarzo, 2013). Employers make use of SNS data to recruit people (Breznitz, Murphree, & Goodman, 2011). Governments monitor and harness SNS data to trace malicious conversations and to identify terrorists (Hurwitz et al., 2013).

Whereas the above examples clearly illustrate the benefits of data generated by SNS users, the privacy issue can impede the progress of utilizing SNS users’ information (Manyika et al., 2011). First, practitioners are apprehensive about invading users’ privacy when adopting social media mining tools (Gundecha & Liu, 2012). Second, lawsuits against well-recognized websites, such as Facebook Beacon, Google Buzz, and AOL ValueClick, for violating online privacy and the recent implementation of online privacy laws indicate the criticality of online privacy (Hong & Thong, 2013). Third, there is evidence that individuals’ concerns about online privacy is increasing. According to the 2013 Pew Internet and American Life Project, 50% of Internet users reported that they are concerned about their personal information that is available online, an increase by 33% since 2009 (Rainie, Kiesler, Kang, & Madden, 2013). Therefore, scholars from different fields have continued studying privacy concern, its determinants, and its outcomes.

In the privacy literature, concern about privacy is central to empirical studies and has been identified as a major contributor to explain users’ willingness to disclose personal information (Malhotra, Kim, & Agarwal, 2004; Smith et al., 2011; Stewart & Segars, 2002). The construct of privacy concerns has been defined in different ways due to its multidimensional nature. In other words, “because of the near impossibility of measuring privacy itself...almost all empirical privacy research in the social sciences relies on measurement of a privacy-related proxy of some sort” (Smith et al., 2011, p. 997). To provide the research community with a distinct treatment of the term general privacy, Smith et al. (2011) classify general privacy based on two main categories: value-based and cognate-based. In their review paper, general privacy includes both physical and information privacy. The value-based category revolves around defining general privacy as a right or as a commodity, whereas the cognate-based category deals with general privacy as a state or as control. Nevertheless, general privacy, in most empirical studies, reflects the users’ concerns about the loss of information privacy (Smith, Milberg, & Burke, 1996). This definition is based on the control aspect within the cognate-based category (Smith et al., 2011). For example, Culnan and Bies (2003) maintain that privacy is “the ability of individuals to control the terms under which their personal information is acquired and used” (p. 326). Smith et al. (1996) maintain that information privacy concerns relate to collection of users’ information, the improper use of personal information, unauthorized secondary use without the user’s consent, and sharing personal information with other parties. Bélanger and Crossler (2011) define information privacy according to the users’ interest in having control over information about themselves. These different conceptualizations of privacy concerns resulted in a first-order factor (Buchanan, Paine, Joinson, & Reips, 2007; Smith et al., 1996), a multidimensional first-order factor (Chen & Rea, 2004), or a second-order factor (Malhotra et al., 2004; Stewart & Segars, 2002).

More recently, Hong and Thong (2013) have put effort in providing and validating a comprehensive conceptualization of the privacy concerns construct. Grounded on Multidimensional Developmental Theory (MDT), their study resulted in an 18-item instrument with two second-order factors and six first-
order factors. Hong and Thong (2013) identified and validated three unique dimensions of privacy concerns: interaction management, information management, and awareness. Interaction management as a second-order factor includes three first-order factors: collection, secondary usage, and control. Information management as the other second-order factor includes two first-order factors: errors and improper access. Awareness was conceptualized as one of the first-order factors. Table 1 presents the definition for each sub-dimension of privacy concerns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Internet Privacy Concerns Dimensions (based on Hong &amp; Thong, 2013, p. 278-279)1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction Management</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The degree to which a person is concerned about the amount of individual-specific data possessed by websites”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary Usage</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The degree to which a person is concerned that personal information is collected by websites for one purpose but is used for another, secondary purpose without authorization from the individual”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The degree to which a person is concerned that he/she does not have adequate control over his/her personal information held by websites”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Information Management</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Errors</td>
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<td>“The degree to which a person is concerned that protections against deliberate and accidental errors in personal data collected by websites are inadequate”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improper Access</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The degree to which a person is concerned that personal information held by websites is readily available to people not properly authorized to view or work with the data”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Awareness</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The degree to which a person is concerned about his/her awareness of information privacy practices by websites”</td>
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Hong and Thong (2013) adopted the concept of Internet privacy concerns (IPC) and stated that IPC is “a special case of the more general information privacy concerns” (p. 276). Nonetheless, their conceptualization parallels those of others discussed above, but it differs in that it is inclusive regarding Internet privacy but exclusive regarding general perceptions of privacy, such as physical privacy. Thus, in the context of SNS, privacy concerns refer to the degree to which an SNS user is concerned about SNS providers’ practices pertaining to the treatment of personal information in terms of collection, secondary usage, control, errors, and improper use, in addition to the concern about being aware of such practices. Because the focus of this paper is on the paradoxical relationship between privacy concerns and self-disclosure, the following sections are limited to this phenomenon.2

**Self-Disclosure, the Privacy Calculus, and the Privacy Paradox**

In the context of SNS, self-disclosure refers to “the breadth and depth of the revelations a user makes” (Krasnova, Spiekermann, Koroleva, & Hildebrand, 2010, p. 111). In other words, self-disclosure is a behavioral reaction reflecting voluntarily disclosure of personal information to others on SNS (Clay, Lowry, Roberts, & Ellis, 2010). Accordingly, self-disclosure may take various forms like demographic information, photos, location information, and one’s preferences and attitudes in the form of posts, comments, reviews, and likes. As discussed earlier, information disclosed by SNS users is a valuable organizational resource as it enables organizations to create a strategic advantage through the utilization of data analytic tools (Craig & Ludloff, 2011; Hurwitz et al., 2013; Manyika et al., 2011; Schmarzo, 2013). In different IS domains including SNS, several empirical studies have shown that users tend to disclose less information, falsify information, or even discontinue usage because of their concerns about privacy (Baruh & Cemalcilar, 2014; Dinev & Hart, 2006; Jiang, Heng, & Choi, 2013; Keith, Thompson, Hale, 1 Hong and Thong (2013) adapted these definitions from Malhotra et al. (2004) and Smith et al. (1996).
2 For details about other outcomes and the determinants of privacy concerns see Bélanger and Crossler (2011), Li (2011), Li (2012), and Smith et al. (2011).
Empirical studies examining the relationship between privacy concerns and self-disclosure, in most cases, adopt the principle of cost and benefit analysis. It has been shown that individuals make decisions pertaining to information disclosure based on the subjectively predicted benefits and costs of the consequences. A well-recognized theory in this stream is the so-called privacy calculus (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999; Culnan, & Bies, 2003; Dinev & Hart, 2006). In this context, privacy is treated as a commodity with a subjective value attached to it (Smith et al., 2011). The privacy calculus proposes that self-disclosure is a product of three constructs namely: perceived risk which is sometimes measured by privacy concerns, perceived benefit which is measured by cognitive attractions to Internet content, and trust (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999; Dinev & Hart, 2006). The extant literature on privacy calculus indicates that privacy risks negatively impact self-disclosure (Malhotra et al., 2004; Xu, Teo, & Tan, 2005; Xu, Michael, & Chen, 2013). In contrast, privacy benefits positively impact self-disclosure (Phelps, Nowak, & Ferrell 2000; Xu et al., 2013; Xu, Teo, Tan, & Agarwal, 2010). In addition, trust in a service provider, like SNS or online retailers, is deemed to be highly relevant to the disclosure behavior and may determine or even overrule the risk belief (Dinev & Hart, 2006; Gefen, Rao, & Tractinsky, 2003). Therefore, by considering these three concepts, users can consciously manage their privacy-related decisions when confronted with self-disclosure incidents. However, humans’ ability to follow this rational thinking is rarely the case.

In fact, copious real-world incidents, especially in the SNS context, impugn the rational thinking in privacy-related decisions (Alasaal, 2014; Bernstein, 2009; Finder, 2006). In addition, a number of studies found that SNS users express concerns about information privacy but they do not consider these concerns in their behavioral reactions including self-disclosure (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Acquisti & Grossklags, 2005; Barnes, 2006; boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Tufekci, 2008; Utz & Kramer, 2009). This phenomenon has been referred to as the privacy paradox where individuals seem to act irrationally toward their stated privacy concerns (Smith et al., 2011). Bélanger and Crossler (2011) and Dinev (2014) recommend future privacy researchers to make attempts toward unfolding this phenomenon. Accordingly, recent research has examined and suggested several theoretical approaches that assume less rational thinking and investigated situational and affective factors to explain this paradox (Baek, 2014; Kehr et al., 2015; Keith et al, 2013; Tsai, Egelman, Cranor, & Acquisti, 2011; Taddicken, 2014; Wilson & Valacich, 2012).

For instance, a number of studies examined the contextual nature of self-disclosure where privacy concerns might influence some forms of self-disclosure, such as sensitive and publicly published information, but not other forms, such as less sensitive and privately published information (e.g., Taddicken, 2014). Baek (2014) found that the privacy paradox would be reduced, or it totally disappears by making the privacy construct salient among participants. In Baek’s experiment, users who were confronted with a privacy-related message were more likely than those in the control group to be engaged in thinking about their online privacy, protection, and disclosure behaviors. These results suggest that the cognitive activation of the privacy concerns construct would cause more protective and less disclosure behaviors. In contrast and in a more realistic experimental design, Keith et al. (2013) found that privacy concerns still impact intentions to disclose negatively, and intentions to disclose are positively associated with actual disclosure. Keith et al. (2013), however, found that enjoyment is a significant positive contributor to actual disclosure. Additionally, a recent study shed more light on the momentary affective states in that individuals underestimate the negative consequences of self-disclosure when confronted with a user interface that induces positive affect (Kehr et al., 2015). Accordingly, Kehr et al. (2015), Stutzman et al. (2012), Cichy, Salge, and Kohli (2014), and others have encouraged future research to explore cognitive states and the holistic understanding of the multidimensional motives that can explain the privacy paradox phenomenon.

**Cognitive Absorption**

In the context of IS in general and SNS in particular, affective reactions such as emotion, enjoyment, habit, need for gratification, and high engagement have been shown as significant determinants of individuals’ behaviors, beliefs, and outcomes. They strongly contribute to the continuous use of SNS and other IS. For instance, Turel and Serenko (2012) show that users who enjoy using SNS become highly...
engaged in and enthusiastic about SNS. Ko (2013) found that the habit of self-disclosure is a major positive factor influencing bloggers’ self-disclosure behavior whereas other factors, such as audience feedback and social benefits, are not. This may suggest that bloggers have intrinsic motivations in the blogging activity itself and that is what drives them to blog continuously. Perceived enjoyment is an intrinsic motivator defined as “the extent to which the activity of using the computer is perceived to be enjoyable in its own right” (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1992, p. 1113). The extant literature on cognitive absorption has shown similar results to the ones mentioned above: a temporally disassociated immersion into the joy, power, and curiosity of SNS. The basic assumption in these studies is that cognitive absorption leads to increased intentional and actual use of IS (Agarwal & Karahannal, 2000; Venkatesh, 1999). However, unlike emotion, habit, positive effect, and engagement, the construct of cognitive absorption not only accounts for the holistic experience with technology but also represents a combination of individual, situational, and affective factors (Agarwal & Karahannal, 2000).

The construct of cognitive absorption was developed based on three inter-related research streams: the trait of absorption, the theory of flow, and cognitive engagement (Agarwal & Karahannal, 2000). First, Tellegen and Atkinson (1974) were the first to conceptualize the trait of absorption defined as an individual disposition or trait that results in sequences of total attention where the object of attention fully consumes an individual’s attentional resources. Second, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) developed the state of flow which suggests that people enjoying themselves during an activity become totally involved in it where nothing else seems to matter. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990), what makes people enjoy the moment of different life activities, “a state of optimal experience,” is this flow state that derives from intrinsic motivation or the autotelic personality. An individual who is able to enjoy an activity regardless of external rewards is an autotelic person (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The flow state is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct which includes a feeling of control, intense concentration, a loss of self-consciousness, and a transformation of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Third, cognitive engagement refers to the state of playfulness in the context of human-computer interaction (Webster & Ho, 1997). Cognitive engagement is identical to the flow state but without the notion of control (Agarwal & Karahannal, 2000). The three distinct dimensions of cognitive engagement include intrinsic interest, curiosity, and attention focus (Webster & Hackley, 1997).

Grounded on these three concepts, Agarwal and Karahannal (2000) conceptualized the construct of cognitive absorption and empirically supported its direct and indirect influence on behavioral intentions to use the Web. Accordingly, several scholars interested in studying human-computer interaction have continued examining cognitive absorption in different contexts, such as SNS, education, and online learning (Leong, 2011; Lin, 2009; Rouis, 2011). As such, many of these studies have focused on finding ways that increase enjoyment as a means to drive positive system use. However, it is arguable that cognitive absorption may also exert negative consequences, such as underestimation of privacy and inappropriate self-disclosure, as it seems to constrain individuals’ rational thinking. Whereas the privacy literature has not explored the impact of cognitive absorption on self-disclosure behaviors, prior research on enjoyment and habitual use provide supporting evidence.

For instance, LaRose, Kim, and Peng (2010) discuss and show that users who develop a habitual and compulsive use of SNS become less attentive to and aware of potential negative consequences. In addition, Turel and Serenko (2012) found that while users’ enjoyment with SNS positively influences the level of engagement, that enjoyment can lead to a strong habit which in turn forms a strong pathological and maladaptive psychological dependency (i.e. technology addiction). Turel and Serenko (2012) also show that bad habits, the pursuit of fulfilling short-term goals regardless of the long-term ones, emerge because of extensive use of SNS, perceived enjoyment, and increased time spent on SNS. Kehr et al. (2015) found that a user interface that elicits positive effect leads users to underestimate the risks of information disclosure. Moreover, Li et al. (2011) found that the more entertaining a website is the less privacy risk beliefs and the more privacy protection beliefs consumers have. Put differently, consumers who find a website as entertaining and pleasing tend to trust that particular website in terms of privacy protection and find it safe to disclose personal information. Findings by Kehr et al. (2015) and Li et al. (2011) might also suggest that perceived enjoyment can co-vary or even rule out effects of trusting beliefs on system use and self-disclosure.
Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) state that “what to pay attention to, how intensely and for how long, are choices that will determine the content of consciousness” (p. 92). Because SNS as an online environment fills social voids in people’s lives and brings about ongoing thrills (Turel & Serenko, 2012), being cognitively absorbed and losing consciousness at the moment of using SNS is a plausible phenomenon (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Lin, 2009; Rouis, 2011; Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). Thus, it can be argued that users who are highly engaged and absorbed in SNS environments would be more willing to self-disclose, share personal information with others, post photos, and respond to personal information requests. However, it is important to note that this self-disclosure behavior does not entirely adhere to this rationality because of the loss of self-consciousness and the absorption state that dominates users’ cognition at the moment of usage. Accordingly, the state of cognitive absorption may entail acts that result in short-term rewards, such as intrinsic rewards, but contradict long-term goals, such as protecting personal privacy.

This phenomenon can contribute to explaining the privacy paradox. In particular, it is argued that being absorbed in SNS not only increases the level of self-disclosure but also results in less attentiveness, consciousness, and awareness of privacy issues. In sum, the argument that cognitive absorption can explain the privacy paradox is based on two theoretical underpinnings. First, cognitive absorption plays a key role in determining SNS use and self-disclosure. Second, cognitive absorption restrains individuals from thinking prudently about privacy-related decisions.

This paper contributes to privacy research by elaborating the significance of the holistic experience through which users become so absorbed and engrossed in SNS — which in turn leads them to overlook privacy matters at the moment of usage. The extant literature on cognitive absorption has shown that intrinsic motivation, absorption, and enjoyment strongly explain intention to use SNS and other IS (Agarwal & Karahannal, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Rouis, 2012; Turel & Serenko, 2012). While the state of cognitive absorption seems very relevant to the privacy paradox, it is currently unexplored in the privacy literature.

Vignettes

Before we discuss how the state of cognitive absorption can theoretically contribute to explaining the privacy paradox, we present three vignettes. The vignettes represent true stories and incidents published in the press (Alasaal, 2014; Bernstein, 2009; Finder, 2006). For purposes of length, the vignettes are summarized and critically annotated in a way to highlight the role of cognitive absorption. For each vignette, we also provide commentaries based on previous empirical research that support our propositions and assert the influential effect of cognitive absorption in the SNS context.

The three vignettes revolve around three main phenomena. First, how cognitive absorption restrains SNS users from thinking prudently when confronted with privacy-related decisions. Second, how cognitive absorption magnifies perceived benefits and undermines perceived risks. Third, how the effect of cognitive absorption deactivates when confronted with privacy-related decisions that entail highly sensitive information. Grounded on these phenomena, we derive three propositions that embody the pattern of behavior demonstrated by the vignettes. The propositions will be illustrated in the theoretical framework in more detail.

**Vignette 1: Cognitively Absorbed and Nothing Else Seems to Matter**

Since their wedding night, Mary and John have been enjoying their married life. John decided to surprise Mary on her twenty-seventh birthday and presented her with a new laptop. Mary felt a thrill of excitement as she always wanted to have a laptop. Since that day, Mary began to discover the world of social media. She signed up for Facebook and Twitter and found joy in these networks while creating many new friendships. Within a few weeks, John realized that Mary’s life had totally changed as she did not leave her laptop day and night. She even did not look after their adorable daughter like she used to do. John started to feel unhappy with Mary being indifferent and apathetic to their family affairs, and he was so irritated seeing her so engrossed in the social media world. John decided to peek at Mary’s social media activities, and one day he found a chance to look at her Facebook and Twitter accounts. Suddenly, John was thunderstruck when he discovered that Mary’s friends on Facebook and Twitter knew about every single...
secret in their married life. John tried to resolve this issue with Mary and expressed his concerns about her compulsive use of social media and her inappropriate revelation of family matters. Nevertheless, a few weeks later, John discovered that Mary shared very private information about the family with her Facebook friends and was very peeved with the fact that she had not changed. John’s standpoint was that social media is never more important than family life and such secretive information must never go outside the family boundary. Unhappily, John decided to divorce Mary for this reason (based on Alasaal, 2014).

**Proposition 1:** Cognitive absorption with SNS can lead to numerous negative consequences including inappropriate disclosure and the deactivation of concerns about the issue of privacy.

Research has shown that excessive SNS use is associated with several negative consequences, such as feeling of jealousy, emotional and physical cheating, breakup, and divorce (Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013). A more recent study also found that Facebook users tend to directly share negative life events more than positive events (Bevan et al., 2015). In particular, the study showed that Facebook users express their negative romantic information freely through detailed wall posts while sharing positive events indirectly through photos, for example. Bevan et al. (2015), however, found a weak relationship between privacy and how information is shared. This finding suggests that affective and situational factors, such as a family dispute, could thwart users from thinking about their privacy when sharing sensitive information on SNS. Facebook has been attributed for marriage failures since 2009 when the statistics showed that Facebook is cited in “1 out of every 5 divorces in the US” (Goldwert, 2012). Moreover, 81% of top divorce attorneys stated that there is an increase in using SNS evidence in divorce cases (Protalinski, 2011). However, Facebook and other SNS cannot be simply blamed for ruining relationships. According to the authors of *Facebook and Your Marriage,* it is in fact Facebook users themselves who break down their own relationships and not Facebook, *per se* (Jason & Kelli, 2010). Jason and Kellie (2012) attribute these issues to several reasons and that individuals’ preoccupation with SNS and their inappropriate disclosure behaviors rank at the top reasons for ruining marriage relationships.

People feel bolder behind a screen than in person, people still foolishly believe that “what happens on Facebook, stays on Facebook,” people type and press ‘Send’ faster than common sense can kick in, and people feed off the rush they’re feeling rather than rationally thinking about what they’re doing. This is a recipe for disaster, and it happens at quantum speed on Facebook. (Jason & Kelli, 2012)

**Vignette 2: Unaware of Where It Could Take You**

Andrew enjoys surfing Facebook during his free time. Andrew is a senior manager of the RTO (a pseudonym), a marketing firm. He likes reading and commenting on other people’s posts, updating his status every other day, and hitting “Like” whenever he finds posts and photos that attract his attention. Andrew also likes a number of Facebook pages but he is a heavy participant of “Furball NYC,” “Kathy Griffin,” “Juicy Couture,” and the musical “Wicked” Facebook pages. George, the president of the RTO, is a friend of Andrew on Facebook. George also enjoys using Facebook but he is not that big fan of Facebook like Andrew. One day, while George was surfing Facebook, he discovered that Andrew is gay after noticing his energetic activities in the aforementioned Facebook pages. Andrew, however, is a straight male in the eyes of his colleagues and would have preferred not to reveal his sexual orientation in public, especially to his work fellows. It did not actually bother George at all that Andrew appeared to be gay and stated that “I’d feel the same way if it was a straight friend joining a leather-and-lace group” (Bernstein, 2009). Nonetheless, Andrew would not be happy knowing that the president of the company knows that he is gay (based on Bernstein, 2009).

**Proposition 2:** Cognitive absorption with SNS can not only lead to heightened enjoyment (magnification of perceived benefits) but also to unintentional revelation of personal information (underestimation of perceived risks).

Disposition to sharing personal information, *per se,* is not a new phenomenon but the new media, coupled with advanced digital devices, instigate individuals to share more: “For those active on Facebook, it is likely that their social media friends know more than their immediate families about their daily activities,
connections, and thoughts. Diaries that were once private or shared only with close friends are now posted as blogs for anyone to read” (Belk, 2013, p. 484). This habit has been attributed to the fact that individuals are self-motivated toward sharing their thoughts and beliefs as it helps them in affirming or modifying their sense of the self (Belk, 2013). Tamir and Mitchell (2012) conducted an experimental study in which they used MRI scans on 212 subjects and showed that disclosing information about the self does activate the brain’s reward system. According to their findings, sharing information with others is in fact intrinsically rewarding (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). Prior research has also shown that online activities such as Facebooking and Tweeting stimulate the reward system (as cited in Rose, 2012). However, possessing control over what to share about the self is very difficult especially in the era of social media (Belk, 2013).

When we’re looking at the screen we’re not face-to-face with someone who can immediately respond to us, so it’s easier to let it all out—it’s almost like we’re invisible. The irony is that rather than just one person, there’s potentially thousands or hundreds of thousands of people receiving what we put out there, said Belk. (Hiebert, 2013).

A recent study has provided empirical evidence that Facebook Likes can predict numerous psycho-demographic facts (Kosinski, Stillwell, & Graepel, 2013). The study could discriminate between homosexual and heterosexual men with 88% accuracy based on Facebook Likes provided by 58,466 users (Kosinski et al., 2013). Also, Facebook pages, such as “Kathy Griffin” and “Juicy Couture” were found to be strong indicators of homosexual interests (Kosinski et al., 2013). The findings of this study are striking as they assert that Facebook knows too much about its users, and it can actually predict some personality traits about its users who are themselves not aware of. Facebook Likes are not only powerful as they can predict personality and demographic facts with high accuracy but also are a portrayal of ingrained personality traits as they come from the subconscious and spontaneous disclosing behavior. However, Facebook privacy logic does not reserve users’ liking behaviors and aims to shed light on certain Likes by sharing them with others in the network. For instance, when a user hits the like button for a page or joins a group that represents homosexual interests, Facebook would share this incident with everyone in the user’s network (Fowler, 2012).

Companies like Google and Facebook decide what ads to show people by using scraps of information they gather as users go about their regular browsing and clicking routines ... But there is also a loss of privacy when data is collected about people without their permission. Gleaning potentially sensitive information about someone that isn’t explicitly shared, such as sexual orientation or drug use, could be abused by companies as well as governments and potential employers. (Kelly, 2013)

Vignette 3: An Intermission from the Cognitive Absorption State

Henry is a senior mechanical engineering student at State University. Henry maintains a high GPA while enjoying socializing, partying, and having fun during his free time. Henry is also a big fan of Facebook, a network through which he shares his school life from his honor-student achievements to things that might bring him into disrepute, such as drinking, pot smoking, and sexual escapades. To him, it is a real joy seeing others like-ing his status updates and commenting on his photos. Yet Henry was unaware that his frivolous Facebook use could bounce back against his future career. In his last year, he started applying for jobs and submitted several applications. It was almost time for commencement and he had not yet been invited to any job interviews. Henry’s frustrations began to grow as he noticed many of his colleagues had already succeeded at getting jobs, even though some of them lagged well behind his excellent and academic achievements. He decided to talk with Dr. Griffin, the school career counselor, in order to express his concerns. During the meeting, Dr. Griffin was surprised that Henry had never been called for any job interview, especially considering the fact that he had such a promising academic profile. Dr. Griffin asked Henry whether he had a Facebook or MySpace account and asked him about the kind of material he shares on these networks. Henry was frank enough and told her about his activities and even offered Dr. Griffin a chance to browse his Facebook account. At this point, Dr. Griffin realized the reason why he had not been invited to any job interviews. She politely told him that he had used Facebook in an extremely immature and unprofessional way, particularly given the outrageous posts and photos he shared on Facebook. “I never really considered that employers would do something like that,” Henry said. “I thought they would just look at your résumé and grades” (Finder, 2006, p. 1). Dr. Griffin asked him to
remove any material that would make him look immature and unprofessional. After a couple weeks, Henry began to receive invitations to job interviews, and had been offered a number of promising jobs (based on Finder, 2006).

Proposition 3: Disclosure of sensitive information can lead to a deviation from cognitive absorption which in turn leads to more prudent disclosure behaviors.

A study by Kluemper, Rosen, and Mossholder (2012) found that Facebook profiles can predict academic success and job performance. Facebook profiles reflect personality traits such as extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellectual curiosity (Kluemper et al., 2012). Employers make use of these rich media before inviting candidates to interviews. For instance, a study conducted among 2,184 hiring managers and Human Resource professionals has shown that at least 2 out of 5 companies consult SNS to research job candidates (Career Builder, 2013). “Our profiles on Facebook, Pinterest, Google+, Twitter, et. al. reflect our likes, dislikes, personalities, and best photo angles, and are likely more useful to employers in seeing what we might be like to work with than a short interview” (Hill, 2012). Career consultants advise job seekers to conduct online search of themselves in order to have a depiction of what employers will find (Career Builder, 2013).

Many student Facebook users share various facets of their lifestyles. The sharing activity enables students to self-present and to extend themselves (Belk, 2013). In addition, students pursuing this activity find it intrinsically rewarding (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). The thrill of excitement found in sharing personal life events on SNS, however, leads students to undermine future negative consequences (Turel & Serenko, 2012). For instance, during college life, students sharing outrageous party and pot smoking photos might not conceive this type of material as sensitive and detrimental to their career lives because of the perceived high level of enjoyment. However, they eventually become aware and realize the fact that such material is highly sensitive during job search. At this stage, students return to their original rational thinking and consider removing unprofessional materials as they can impede their success at getting jobs. “When in the job market, be aware of what photos you’re being tagged in and what your friends are posting. Just because you’re being careful, doesn’t mean that they are” (Gaudin, 2013).

Reframing the Privacy Paradox and Cognitive Absorption

Figure 1 depicts the privacy paradox as reframed under the assumptions of cognitive absorption. The y-axis maps the prevailing logic behind privacy-related decision making. The behavioral reaction toward self-disclosure is shown on the x-axis. The highly prudent privacy calculus prevails at the bottom of the y-axis, depicted in a gradient white color. At this point, users adopt the cost-benefit analysis mode as a calculus of privacy. Their self-disclosure behavior leads to low-to-moderate disclosure. The highly expedient cognitive absorption prevails at the top of the y-axis, depicted in a gradient red (dark) color. At this point, users succumb to cognitive absorption and their self-disclosure behavior leads to moderate-to-high disclosure. The related self-disclosure behavior on the x-axis tends toward more appropriate disclosures at the left of the x-axis, depicted in a gradient white color, and tends toward more inappropriate disclosures at the right of the x-axis, depicted in a gradient red (dark) color. The patterns in the vignettes indicate that there is a temporal progression from early forms of appropriate, calculated disclosure behavior (lower left area) to later forms of inappropriate, expedient disclosure behavior (upper right area).

Consider Mary (Vignette 1), she would not be expected to pursue inappropriate self-disclosure in the early days when she started using Facebook. It could actually be that she was apprehensive about filling out every personal piece when she first registered on Facebook. Also, it would have taken her a few days to get acquainted with the Facebook medium. This stage is depicted by the first dotted line in the left side of Figure 1 where Mary’s cognitive absorption in Facebook was at its minimum leading to appropriate self-disclosure. A few weeks later, however, Mary seemed very involved in Facebook where she also found it intrinsically rewarding to connect with more people and to share with them information about her family. This is depicted by the middle dotted line where the level of disclosure deviates from appropriate to inappropriate. Similarly, Andrew’s (Vignette 2) self-disclosure behavior can also fit in the continuum between the middle dotted line and the one situated in the right side of Figure 1. Andrew was enjoying participating in homosexual Facebook pages, and he was also a compulsive user of the “Like” button. This
pursuit, which reflects Andrew’s perceived benefits of the networking activity, restrained him from thinking about potential risks, such as unintended revelations of his sexual orientation. Eventually, there is a possibility that SNS users become thoroughly absorbed in Facebook and tend to share different kinds of personal information with others, an activity which they find intrinsically rewarding. For instance, Mary’s absorption in Facebook led her to share her family secrets with her Facebook friends while overlooking the privacy of her family. Henry’s (Vignette 3) appropriate and inappropriate self-disclosure on Facebook was part of his daily activities in which he was intrinsically rewarded by seeing others reacting, through Likes and comments, to his posts. Although prudent thinking would not prevent sharing less sensitive information, it would absolutely inhibit revealing sensitive information on SNS as such information is easily shareable, searchable, and utilizable (boyd, 2008). Nonetheless, nothing else would seem to matter to those users who find the activity of Facebooking intrinsically rewarding and highly enjoyable. In other words, absorption in SNS restrains users form thinking prudently about privacy-related decisions at the moment of usage.

This phenomenon may not be an issue of rationality versus irrationality. Rather it may be an issue of different realms of rationality: prudent, reflective rationality versus injudicious, expedient rationality. These different realms of rationality inhabit the privacy calculus and cognitive absorption respectively. For example, in vignette 2 above, Andrew’s exuberant Facebook use might be regarded as making a rational decision based on magnified benefits and underestimated risks: rationality bounded by limited cognition (Acquisti & Grossklags, 2005).

Figure 1. Privacy-related Decision Making

It is important to note that a user’s disclosure behavior might deviate on this continuum from the peak absorption down to the prudent, reflective thinking depending on the situation. For instance, the external stimuli that instigated Henry (Vignette 3) to remove unprofessional posts from his Facebook account made him aware of the importance of considering his personal privacy when disclosing information on Facebook. In other contexts like online shopping, requests for highly sensitive information, such as Social Security Number, can immediately deviate a user from the cognitive absorption state to the privacy calculus point. On the other hand, a user might reach the cognitive absorption state at the early stages of an activity depending on the focused immersion, heightened enjoyment, control, and curiosity but not temporal dissociation as it entails continuous activity. For instance, compulsive acceptance of a particular website’s privacy statement reflects a state of cognitive absorption in a sense that, at a very early stage, acquiring the service is what a user pays the most attention to regardless of other consequences. In other words, obtaining the online service is, per se, intrinsically rewarding. However, the activity of reading that
privacy statement brings about an undesirable cognitive dissonance which opposes the pleasant cognitive absorption state. Individuals in the cognitive absorption or flow state tend to suppress the activation of any construct that has potential of cognitive dissonance (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), and therefore it is argued that this is the basic fundamental behind the existence of the privacy paradox.

Some scholars like Baek (2014) have criticized prior privacy research that was based on survey instruments. Perhaps this research is not flawed in its design, but only missing an influential attribute (i.e. cognitive absorption) in its models. Conventional polls or surveys still show empirical evidence that privacy concerns negatively influence self-disclosure behaviors, but this influence is outside of the cognitive absorption state. Stated differently, survey studies ask people questions about privacy concerns and self-disclosure at the time where 1) the salience of the privacy construct is either at the middle or the bottom point of the y-axis in Figure 1, and 2) the chances of suppressing the privacy construct are very weak. According to that, individuals at the moment of responding to survey items would think prudently and hence a negative relationship between privacy concerns and willingness to self-disclose is expected, as many empirical studies show. To avoid these paradoxical results, in addition to measuring privacy concerns and self-disclosure, it is necessary to measure how deeply individuals are absorbed in the activity, whether it be Facebooking, Tweeting, Snap Chatting, online shopping, online banking, instant video, etc. While a negative relationship between privacy concerns and self-disclosure is still very likely, the construct of cognitive absorption arises as a moderator of this relationship.

Figure 2 illustrates how cognitive absorption elaborates the privacy calculus components (Dinev & Hart, 2006; Smith et al., 2011) based on the above propositions. Cognitive absorption weakens the negative relationship between privacy concerns and self-disclosure and exerts a strong positive effect on the self-disclosure construct (Proposition 1). In the cases where the cognitive absorption is very high, there is even a possibility that the negative relationship could turn to a positive relationship as privacy concerns interact with cognitive absorption. Recent work on uses and gratifications supports this assertion: situational, cognitive and affective factors, from which cognitive absorption is comprised, may best be modeled as moderators (Krcmar & Strizhakova, 2009).

Figure 2. The effect of cognitive absorption on privacy-related decision making

The literature shows that individuals during the state of cognitive absorption enjoy pleasure and gratification from interacting with a computer system like SNS. However, the pleasure and gratification in the experience lead an individual to overestimate the benefits and underestimate the potential risks in that experience (Kehr et al., 2015; Larose et al., 2010; Li et al., 2011; Turel & Serenko, 2012). Agarwal and Karahannal (2000) and many others have shown a strong support for the direct positive impact of cognitive absorption and its indirect impact, through perception of usefulness and ease-of-use, on intention to use IS and SNS. Based on this research stream and the above cited work from the privacy...
literature (e.g., Acquisti & Grossklags, 2005), cognitive absorption will have a positive influence on perceived benefits and negative influence on perceived risks (the main antecedent constructs from the privacy calculus theory, see Figure 2). This calculus in turn partially mediates the relationship between cognitive absorption and self-disclosure. Put together, cognitive absorption will magnify perceived benefits and undermine perceived risks leading to increased self-disclosure in both cases (Proposition 2).

The degree of information sensitivity is an influential factor that impacts self-disclosure behaviors. The more sensitive the information (such as the descriptions of immoderate personal behavior in vignette 3), the more likely privacy concerns will overpower cognitive absorption (i.e. Malhotra et al., 2004; Taddicken, 2014). Accordingly, disclosure of sensitive information contributes strongly to the activation of the privacy concerns construct which in turn can deactivate the user from the cognitive absorption state, resulting in a 3-way interaction. In this way, requests for or disclosure of sensitive information can weaken or even nullify the moderating effect of cognitive absorption and its direct effect on self-disclosure (Proposition 3).

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has used cognitive absorption theory to explain anomalies arising from existing work on privacy and IS. Users in experimental settings and survey studies express prudent rationales regarding appropriate levels of self-disclosure (Keith et al., 2013; Sheehan & Hoy, 1999). But in more natural settings, their behavior represents more expedient and inappropriate self-disclosure (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Barnes, 2006; Utz & Kramer, 2009). Our theoretical framework provides an explanation for these anomalies (known as the privacy paradox). In SNS usage, people may progress into a state of cognitive absorption where their behaviors are propelled in a flow that transcends more calculated decision-making. Our proposed framework extends the literature on the privacy calculus (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999; Culnan, & Bies, 2003; Dinev & Hart, 2006) by proposing a more elaborate factor model in which self-disclosure behaviors are influenced by cognitive absorption. In particular, we theorized that cognitive absorption plays a significant role in magnifying perceived benefits and undermining perceived risks which in turn leads to increased self-disclosure. We also extend the literature on cognitive absorption (Agarwal & Karahannal, 2000) by proposing an important new arena in which the phenomenon is having serious effects on the privacy of the large population of individuals using SNS.

Future studies adopting experimental designs are needed to further explore the proposed theoretical framework. For example, future studies can manipulate the state of cognitive absorption and show how its interaction with the stated privacy concerns causes individuals’ disclosure behaviors. According to the arguments in this paper, we would expect to find a significant difference between the treatment and control groups, in a simple experimental design, in which the treatment group would disclose more information regardless of their stated privacy concerns. Indeed, extensions of this simple experimental design by manipulating and examining the 3-way interaction of information sensitivity and cognitive absorption would reveal more insights about the privacy paradox.

According to empirical studies in the privacy literature, SNS users who are concerned about privacy tend to disclose less information about themselves. However, it has also been shown that such users do not actually consider these concerns in their behavioral reactions, suggesting a paradoxical situation. This paper provided a theoretical contribution to this area of research by proposing a set of propositions and an extended theoretical framework that emphasizes the critical role of intrinsic motivations represented by the state of cognitive absorption. In particular, drawing upon true stories from the press and prior work on cognitive absorption and privacy paradox, we argued that the state of cognitive absorption restrains SNS users from thinking prudently about privacy at the time of usage. These users might in reality have genuine privacy concerns about how their personal information is treated by SNS providers. However, their absorption in the social networking activity and their sense of achieving intrinsic rewards from this activity suppress the activation of prudent privacy-related thinking (privacy calculus) which in turn heighten inappropriate self-disclosure behaviors including imprudent ones.
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