Social Penetration of Egyptian Youth on Social Networking Sites between Conscious and Unconscious

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Abstract

It is known that Facebook and Instagram users can set their privacy settings to determine their levels of disclosure. That means that the users are the ones who decide the penetration level for themselves on those social networking sites (SNS).

This study seeks to test whether those SNS can penetrate their users unconsciously and with their agreement at the same time or not. Through a qualitative study of highly engaged Facebook and Instagram users, this paper defines a new concept of SNS penetration, and claim that it happens forcefully and in an unconscious way.

Focus groups will be conducted to answer the major research questions and a thematic analysis will be conducted on the focus groups to determine the topics discussed by the participants. The data will be analyzed within the frameworks of Social Penetration theory and Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory.

Four main challenges will be tested as the study samples which are 10 Year Challenge, Kiki Challenge, The Ice Bucket Challenge and the Face App Age.

Keywords: SNS; Penetration; Privacy; 10 Year challenge; Kiki challenge; The ice bucket challenge; Face app age

Introduction

A controversial topic concerning the SNS use is the relationship between privacy management and online information disclosure and consequently the consciously or unconsciously social penetration.

According to Statista Report, in 2018, 50.8% of the Egyptian citizens were penetrated by the Internet with a 2.8% increase compared to the year prior which puts Egypt's rate "closer to the global Internet penetration rate which is estimated at 49.2%" [1].

It seems that SNS expansion created a tension between users' preferences for entertainment and their privacy actions and disclosure practices, and that consequently raises the question of the social penetration on those sites.

People throughout the world are SNS users and definitely millions have probably noticed that there is a new trend across Facebook and Instagram for people every once in a while, which the latest of them was the Face App Age Challenge 2019.

Through an analysis of 9 focus groups, each included from 4 to 6 members, the researchers try to find out the equation between the factors affecting the SNS users and their agreement for keeping their privacy. In other words, how do the users balance the tension between their privacy management and the desire to engage in the trends of Facebook and Instagram.

Research Problem

However, people are using SNS 24/7 thinking their information is safe, but actually it is not the case. So that is why the research problem lies in the social penetration which happens unconsciously and forcefully at the time when the users believe that they privately disclosed their information very well, ironically.

Research Importance

- Lack of studies has existed regarding the social penetration that occurred by SNS for many years.
- Understanding the motives behind the users doing such challenges.
- Understanding users' awareness - consciousness level towards the penetration when following "challenge" trends.

• Understanding the privacy management resistance towards the users motives to join such trends on SNS.

Research Objectives

• To determine the extent of penetration of SNS users.
• To determine the factors that make the users join any of SNS trends.
• To explore the users understanding to the privacy terms when taking the decision of entering the SNS trends.
• Making people aware and media literate when using SNS in the future and when taking the decision of entering any of the "challenge" trends.

Literature Review

Self-disclosure

A number of researchers have tested the Self-Disclosure of the Social Penetration Theory in their studies in order to understand another angle for the impact of SNS.

Abramova et al. [2] study aimed at collecting 50 studies that was conducted on self-disclosure on SNS creating a review of literature to be added to the mass communication library and maybe psychology too. All researchers believed that "disclosure of personal information is an integral part of any social networking community". Most of them resulted that individuals go after their benefits in order to disclose any additional information about them especially when they are starting a new relationship or upholding an existing one. There are various factors for the self-disclosure which are the need of relationship, mutuality, pleasure, satisfaction and self-presentation. Also, it is noted that self-disclosure is linked in a way or another to the privacy concerns of the users.

Additionally, Ma, et al. [3] study highlighted the link between the self-disclosure and intimacy level noting that previous studies proved that people disclose less about more intimate topics. A questionnaire was conducted to explore the differences between being fully identified and anonymous on the virtual world and the link between this and the individual self-disclosing their information to the people around them especially when they want to be intimates. Findings proved that there is a positive correlation between being anonymous and the increase in self-disclosure and consequently that means a negative correlation between being fully identified and self-disclosure. Nothing that being fully identified puts some regulations and social ties. However, the study found too that individuals feel more safe and comfortable when disclosing to the social ties than to the people around in both conditions the anonymity and fully identified.

In the same context and according to Chasombat [4] study, there are few connections between SNS impact on interpersonal communication and offline relationship as the individual who enters the SNS are exposed to different virtual interactions and from here there are either positive or negative impacts on interpersonal communication in the real world. That is why the study conducted in-depth interviews in order to understand the how Thai users' interpersonal skills, behaviors, feelings and habits have been influenced by SNS especially Facebook. The research referred to the social penetration theory which the results was explained within its framework. Findings proved that individuals on the SNS prefer to self-disclose and share information as much as they want because they have higher controls than interpersonal communication and this consequently negatively effects the interpersonal communication in the real world as the feedback reaction will appear at the same moment and that is what the individuals do not prefer each time.

From the intimacy to the jealousy and surveillance, Farrugia [5] study examined the Facebook being a tool for surveillance and its impact on the couples. It also aimed at knowing the difference between the various stages of relationship and their use of Facebook for surveillance and its influence on jealous moods. Results revealed that SNS started changing the relationships between couples as everyone asses the other putting in their consideration their SNS pages. It was also found that the higher the SNS usage, the higher the jealousy level and consequently the higher the surveillance level. That means that SNS affects the self-disclosure level as the more the individual wants to reach the intimacy, the more they self-disclose and shares information.

Also, the issue of privacy and its relationship with self-disclosure was addressed in Ampong et al. [6] study. Findings showed that privacy concerns have a significant negative effect on Self-Disclosure. Regarding the factors, the individuals disclose their private information when they found a reward or benefit from disclosing such information such as "enjoyment personalization and the strengthening of social ties". Taking into consideration that individuals are sometimes anxious and worried about disclosing sensitive information on SNS. However, it has also been "speculated that a SNS users are more of "lurkers" or "listeners" rather than creators".

Moreover, the self-disclosure was addressed in Tang and Wang [7] study as it aimed at knowing the topics the Taiwanese bloggers disclose on their blogs and the real world in an attempt to understand the differences between the self-disclosure in the real and virtual world. Results highlighted at the beginning that the bloggers who were observed and questioned realized well the "risks of extensive disclosure on their blogs" and they only disclosed topics related to their attitude, body, money, work, feelings, personal, interests, experiences rather than personal private information. However, the bloggers understand the risks, but they were forced to disclose certain information to maintain the needs of their readers, otherwise they would have lost them.

On the other hand, Perbawaningsih [8] study findings showed that the social penetration procedure on SNS is not different from interpersonal communication as it was found in the previous studies, even if the online communication is between strangers. The researcher referred in the aspect of cultural differences to the traditional interpersonal communication which starts gradually from the beginning till the deepest level "intimate level". He proved that people start to peel cover one after another throughout the period they

are spending together in both the real world and the virtual one. He also referred that in both ways, the individual will go systematically and will not jump or pass any stage. The researcher did not deny that the user on the SNS may communicate openly and accelerate the process of developing the relationship. Additionally, it is proven that on SNS that individuals are able to hide their privacy which may lead to "psychological discomfort" as users may become "suspicious of the truth of information, including the identity and purpose of the actual relationship".

Theoretical Framework

This study has been informed by two theories of media and communication namely: Social penetration theory (SPT) and Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM).

Social penetration theory (SPT)

This theory is studied by Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in 1973. In the textbook Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application, authors West and Turner [9] stated that the idea of the theory came to the theorists in order to understand the "relational closeness between two people". The closeness or the intimacy as called in the theory is not the physical intimacy, but the emotional and rational. Social Penetration points to the methods and steps of relationship that reaches to the intimacy where people move from shallow to intimate communication. Altman and Taylor explain it as if you would peel an onion, layer by layer. The theory assumptions state that:

- Relationships progress from nonintimate to intimate.
- Relational development is generally systematic and predictable.
- Relational development includes depenetration and dissolution.
- Self-disclosure is at the core of relationship development.

Social Disclosure leads to Social Penetration, Voluntary Sharing and Transparency.

West and Turner described the beginning of a relationship as something with self-disclosure. According to them, "Our self-disclosure may be spontaneous." Taking that leap of faith to talk to someone new is the first step, and then it gradually gets closer as the process towards intimacy.

Self-disclosure can be calculated and planned and can be unplanned. In some of the relationships, individuals know exactly what they want to say to each other, but at other times self-disclosure may be impulsive describing such stage as "stranger-on-the-train phenomenon" as sometimes people reveal some information to strangers they do not even know in public.

Altman and Taylor conducted an onionskin structure portraying the individual as the onion with its various layers showing through it the various aspects of individual's personality.

West and Turner presented the different stages of Social Penetration which are:

- Revealing bits of ourselves to others
- Emergence of an individual's personality
- Spontaneous communication; use of personal idioms
- Efficient communication; establishment of a personal system of communication

In the textbook A First Look at Communication Theory, authors Griffin, Ledbetter and Sparks [10] highlighted the rewards as an outcome for any self-disclosure. The theorists noted that the individuals "decide to open up with another person using the perceived benefit-minus-cost outcome". In other words, the more the rewards and benefits the individual will receive, the more the individuals will reveal about themselves.

Carpenter and Greene [11] presented another angle from the Social Penetration Theory where Altman and Taylor resulted that it follows a specific outline which is the "greater the ratio of rewards to costs, the more rapid the penetration process". This reward/cost ratio proposes that relationships rises and reaches its peak faster when there are positive self-disclosure involvements and rise slowly or maybe not at all if too many supposed costs occur.

Communication privacy management theory (CPM)

This theory is studied by Sandra Petronio in 2002. In the textbook Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application, authors West and Turner [9] stated the ways the individuals determine their boundaries in disclosing personal private information. The theorists noted that private-disclosure makes the individuals receive many rewards as it increases their social control, authorize viewpoints and perceptions, and become more close "intimate" with the individuals they are disclosing with. "The balance of privacy and disclosure has meaning because it is vital to the way we manage our relationships". Petronio assumed that:

- Humans are choice makers.
- Humans are rule makers and rule followers.
- Humans' choices and rules are based on a consideration of others as well as the self.

Also, there are several main principles of CPM which are individuals who thinks they own and have the right to regulate their private information, individuals who regulate their private information by using the personal privacy rules. Also, disclosure of information to others can be comforting but it also gives others co-ownership of the information that was disclosed. Those co-owners for such information do not efficiently debate and track jointly held privacy rules, boundary turmoil which is the likely result to be found at the end.

Noting that, in the CPM, disclosure or private disclosure are the terms used instead of self-disclosure which is used in the Social Penetration Theory. This is because she believes that communicating private information means private disclosures

and that disclosures happen within the framework of communication not the self.

There are five Privacy Rule Development Principles which are: Culture, Gender, Motives, Contextual and Risk−benefit criteria.

In the textbook A First Look at Communication Theory, authors Griffin, Ledbetter and Sparks [10] noted that the individual who is considered the discloser must understand their personal privacy borderlines. Also, the theorists stated the information which is disclosed rarely returns back to be solely personal as it became "collective boundary" referring to the rule which says "not all boundary ownership is 50-50".

Griffin, Ledbetter and Sparks explained that there are various types of people, one of them is the "reluctant confidant" who wants the closure and do not agree by any means about the disclosure of his personal information as he considers it an "unwelcome burden". Petronio stated that this type of individual is responsible and have "often feels only a vague sense of responsibility to disclosed information, resulting in less of an obligation to follow the privacy guidelines of the discloser".

The theorist explained that the rules are "filters" and that is why there are levels for the boundaries starting from the individual whose boundaries are totally closed and thick, others whose boundaries can be "stretched tight allowing little information to pass through", and others whose boundaries can be totally open and loose permitting all and any information to simply pass through.

Chennamaneni and Taneja [11] represented Petronio's idea where she referred to the overlapping between the disclosure and the privacy boundaries as the more you disclose, the more privacy is at risk.

Regarding the Social Penetration Theory and the difference between it and Communication Privacy Management Theory, Petronio [12] referred that from Altman theory's argument about the privacy; she considered the idea of her theory. She stated that Altman offered a respected way "to picture privacy" and from such image she thought about studying the factors that affects the privacy in the form of private information. She decided to study the privacy instead of studying the self.

Methodology

This study is analytical rather than a descriptive one. The goal of this study is to investigate how users could be penetrated unconsciously by the SNS. The study depends on the Survey method to answer the questions of this study.

Data collections and tools

Focus Group Interviews will be used as a tool to collect the data from the respondents through face-to-face interviews.

Study Sample

Facebook/Instagram Trends

10 year challenge

Users are expected to post two of their images – usually side by side. One at present and the other from 10 years ago, then post it to their Facebook/Instagram account.

Kiki challenge

Users are expected to get out of their moving cars while a song is being played and dance beside it while it is moving, then post their video on their Facebook/Instagram account.

The ice bucket challenge

Users are expected to pour an ice bucket over themselves and post their video on their Facebook/Instagram account.

Face app age challenge

It is an application that can be downloaded on the users' mobiles. The picture that is created by such app became a trend on SNS. The app enabled the users to see themselves when they become old and post that picture on their Facebook/Instagram account.

Research questions

This study will address the following research questions to study the social penetration of the users on SNS.

- Do the users understand how SNS track them?
- How often have user personally been a victim of what is called an invasion of privacy?
- Do users decide what information to disclose and what to keep private?
- Do the users understand the consequences of joining any of the SNS trends?
- What are the factors that make the users join any SNS trend?
- Can SNS penetrate its users' information unconsciously?

Results

The focus groups data suggests that the majority of participants were aware of their privacy. Rare participants were unable to understand how their privacy could be violated, however, they knew it after experiencing as one of the participants in the focus groups stated that after joining one of the trends imitating her friends, she later read information in different websites explaining that joining such challenges enabled the creators to collect certain data about you with your approval and taking a step back by removing the picture will not help, so she learnt by experimenting.

The focus groups highlighted that all the users who join any trend understand that SNS track them and they do not care and they are totally conscious about the penetration.

Also, it was common between the focus groups participants that privacy management may enhance SNS users' awareness about privacy control; however, such awareness has slight and tiny effect on users' self-disclosure. It is not one of the major

factors and motives that make them take the decision of joining or ignoring the challenges and trends. Putting into consideration that those users who manage their privacy sets their own borderlines in what to show and to whom they show to and that defines the users primary purpose of disclosure in joining any of the SNS trend (**Figure 1**).
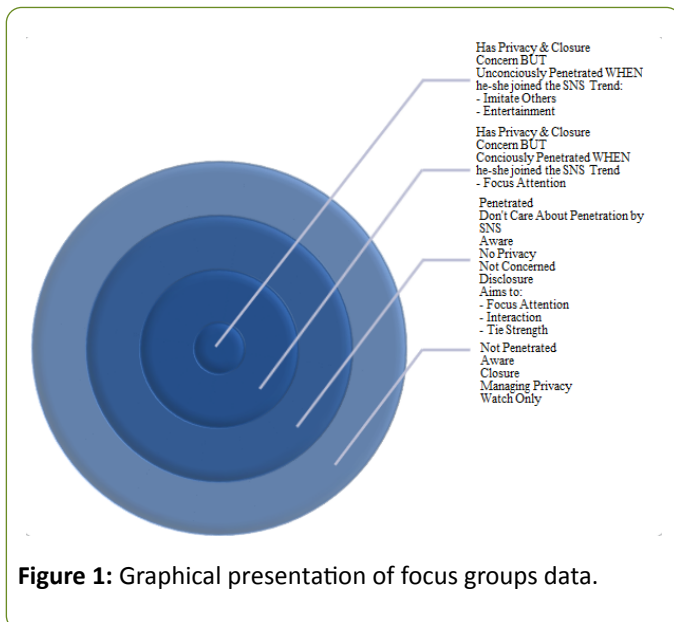

Figure 1: Graphical presentation of focus groups data.

The previous model was conducted by the study researchers in order to represent a probable theorization of the different types of SNS users and the level of penetration on SNS. Also the factors that cause the users of each level either be penetrated or not to be penetrated. The study conducted with Facebook and Instagram users determined how the need for joining the trends is related to behaviors of privacy management and self-disclosure and social penetration.

This study model was conducted after the researchers made sure that Egypt is one of the countries whose population (57%) is penetrated by SNS and that was confirmed according to the new 2019 Global Digital suite of reports from **we are Social** and **Hootsuite** [13,14].

SNS challenges and trends have gone viral across the world and definitely Egyptian users participated. First there was the **Ice** Bucket, then there was the **Kiki**, then the 10-year challenge and the latest entry to the growing list of challenges that became trends on SNS was the Face App Age challenge. The SNS endlessly generate new viral trends that lead people crazy. All such challenges have caught the attention of many.

And because it caught the attention of many, that meant there are different reactions for the SNS users towards those challenges. The researchers after conducting the focus groups categorized the SNS users in four circles in a dart. Each dart circle includes the users who have the same characteristics of the group and are affected by the same factors.

The first and the one in the outer core includes the users who are never penetrated as those are the users who keep watching silently without taking any action at all. Those users are fully aware about their privacy. They know how to manage

it well. They have full – closure towards any SNS penetration. They do not change their attitudes based on what people say. They understand well how the SNS works and never fells in the trap of joining any trend because they recognize the challenges target of gathering information about them. Those are the ones who the SNS keeps trying to grab them in any of their trends.

On the contrary, to those who are not penetrated, there are three dart circles which symbolize three levels of penetration for those who SNS can penetrate them through joining their viral challenges.

The one in the inner core is for those who has privacy and closure, but were unconsciously penetrated when they joined a challenge or two. Then comes the one after which represents those who has privacy and closure but were consciously penetrated when they joined the challenges. Lastly comes those users who are penetrated and do not care about being penetrated and are fully conscious and aware about this.

Detailing the three penetration levels in the dart, the second level of the dart from the outside circle, includes those who are open for penetration. Despite any warnings written anywhere and despite the various cautions that these challenges would break and crack their privacy, they do not care at all. They join the challenge fully aware and conscious. They are self – disclosure. Those are the users who have inherent curiosity to try the challenges. They want to have gain attention and prefer having fun by taking the challenge and sharing it on their Facebook and – or Instagram accounts. They enjoy having some laughs with their friends about the challenge. They are open for interaction and consequently can gain intimacy with someone who are similar and that can create tie strength. Those are the users can be considered challenge addicts. Those are the ones who the SNS do not employ effort to grab them as once a challenge starts being viral, they go crazy to give it a try. Joining such challenges arouse the reward system in their brain and motivate them, so they quickly enter it as this gratifies their needs.

The following circle in the dart includes the users who are penetrated consciously, but those are the ones who have privacy concerns and know its importance and even can manage it. They do not self-disclose however, they prefer being closure. Traditions sometimes are one of their concerns when thinking about joining any challenge. Those users do not join all the challenges, they pick certain ones. The one that gratifies their needs. The satisfaction that will be gratified when they join the challenge is the major motivation behind their engagement. Also, they are motivated by the attention they will receive from such engagement. They find the need to take part, so that their behavior is valued in the SNS community and they feel accepted later is the main reason for the decision of the joining. They take the decision after evaluating the situation well and calculate the amount of rewards to make sure that the win exceeds the loss of their privacy. They often sacrifice the critical thinking especially about their privacy concerns. Those users are the ones who the reward schemes influence the behavior and attitudes.

Conclusion

Reaching to the inner core of the dart, here come the users who are penetrated unconsciously as they imitate the behavior of someone close to them or someone they like, and unconsciously fell in the trap without noticing. Imitation, curiosity and entertainment, etc. are the major factors that motivate those users to join any of those challenges. They definitely prefer being closure. Those users do not know what is truly threatening their privacy and what is not. Some of them believes that computers are machines and do not think, but what they do not understand is that they can process the data which is entered and can analyze it by certain equations and algorithms.

The dart can simplify that SNS can influence and causes the diffusion of information about the user and it can happen in both ways consciously and unconsciously as explained previously.

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