



Selective Agency and Platformized Privacy: Explaining Youth Participation in Datafied Social Media

Agencia selectiva y privacidad en entornos platformizados: Explicando la participación juvenil en redes sociales dataficadas

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ABSTRACT

This study reassesses the explanatory scope of Privacy Calculus Theory (PCT) within platformized social media environments shaped by datafication, algorithmic governance, and participation-driven visibility regimes. While prior research has documented inconsistencies between privacy concern and disclosure behaviour, limited empirical work has examined how awareness, disclosure orientation, and behavioural responses interact under such conditions. Drawing on survey data from 386 Instagram and TikTok users in a high social-media-penetration context, the study investigates how experiential awareness of platform data practices, disclosure orientation, privacy-protective behaviour, and high-connectivity participation intersect in digitally mediated interaction. Findings reveal a differentiated configuration of privacy negotiation: experiential awareness significantly predicts localized protective actions but does not constrain disclosure willingness or expansive connectivity practices. Disclosure orientation emerges as the strongest predictor of visibility-enhancing participation. Conceptualized as selective agency, this pattern refines PCT by demonstrating how behavioural responses to privacy concerns are mediated by infrastructural participation logics that normalize connectivity and relational visibility. The study contributes by specifying the behavioural boundary conditions of privacy calculus in contemporary datafied communication environments.

RESUMEN

Este estudio reevalúa el alcance explicativo de la Teoría del Cálculo de la Privacidad (PCT) en entornos de redes sociales platformizadas caracterizados por la dataficación, la gobernanza algorítmica y regímenes de visibilidad impulsados por la participación. Aunque investigaciones previas han evidenciado inconsistencias entre la preocupación por la privacidad y los comportamientos de divulgación, existe una limitada evidencia empírica sobre cómo la conciencia, la orientación hacia la divulgación y las respuestas conductuales interactúan en estos contextos. A partir de datos de encuesta de 386 usuarios de Instagram y TikTok en un contexto de alta penetración de redes sociales, el estudio examina cómo la conciencia experiencial de las prácticas de uso de datos de las plataformas, la orientación hacia la divulgación, las conductas de protección de la privacidad y la participación de alta conectividad se articulan en la interacción digitalmente mediada. Los resultados revelan una configuración diferenciada de la negociación de la privacidad: la conciencia experiencial predice acciones protectoras localizadas, pero no limita la disposición a divulgar ni las prácticas de conectividad expansiva. La orientación hacia la divulgación emerge como el predictor más fuerte de la participación orientada a la visibilidad. Conceptualizado como agencia selectiva, este patrón refina la PCT al demostrar que las respuestas conductuales están mediadas por lógicas infraestructurales de participación. El estudio contribuye al especificar las condiciones límite del cálculo de la privacidad en entornos contemporáneos de comunicación dataficada.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Platformization, Digital Privacy, Selective Agency, Algorithmic Governance, Youth Social Media, Networked Visibility.
Platformización, privacidad digital, agencia selectiva, gobernanza algorítmica, redes sociales juveniles, visibilidad en red.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, social media platforms have evolved from interactional tools into infrastructural environments that organize social participation, identity performance, and public visibility. Within these datafied ecosystems, communicative practices are increasingly shaped by algorithmic governance, platform infrastructures, and engagement-driven visibility regimes (Arsel, 2026; Hastuti et al., 2025). Consequently, privacy—traditionally understood as an individual capacity to control the disclosure and use of personal information (Paine et al., 2007)—now unfolds within sociotechnical systems in which personal data are persistently inferred, aggregated, and circulated beyond meaningful user oversight. As profiling, personalization, and cross-platform integration intensify (Barth et al., 2019), driven by AI-powered algorithmic systems, the locus of informational control shifts from individual decision-making toward infrastructural design conditions (Kang et al., 2025).

Such complexity necessitates methodological approaches that integrate perspectives from communication research, digital sociology, and information systems to capture the interplay between individual cognition and platform structures. The increasing centrality of social media platforms as infrastructures of communication makes digital privacy not only a technological concern but a core issue in contemporary media and communication research. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are not neutral tools but environments that actively shape how users communicate, interact, and maintain social presence. In these contexts, participation is closely tied to visibility, responsiveness, and relational engagement, generating structural tensions between privacy protection and communicative inclusion. Understanding how users navigate these tensions is therefore essential for explaining digitally mediated sociality.

A substantial body of research has relied on Privacy Calculus Theory (PCT) to explain online disclosure behaviour. Rooted in rational choice traditions, PCT assumes that individuals weigh perceived risks against anticipated social and functional benefits when deciding whether to share personal information (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999). While this framework has generated valuable empirical insights, its explanatory assumptions are increasingly challenged in platformized communication environments characterized by opaque data flows, default publicity settings, and frictionless mechanisms of network expansion. Under such conditions, disclosure operates less as a discrete cognitive trade-off and more as an embedded dimension of participation within visibility-driven interaction regimes.

These dynamics are particularly evident among young social media users, whose everyday interaction is deeply intertwined with visually oriented and algorithmically curated platforms. Although youth frequently demonstrate awareness of digital privacy risks, such awareness does not consistently translate into systematic behavioural restraint. Instead, privacy negotiation often takes the form of situational adjustment and selective visibility management within relationally mediated participation contexts (Aker et al., 2025; Malandrino et al., 2013; Neves et al., 2024). This suggests that peer expectations, communicative norms, and platform affordances play a central role in shaping how privacy concerns are translated into practice.

Critical platform scholarship further highlights how infrastructural asymmetries structure these behavioural responses. Interface design, algorithmic recommendation systems, and engagement metrics embed disclosure within routine communicative practices while redistributing responsibility for privacy management toward users (De Boer et al., 2021). Consequently, awareness of privacy implications does not necessarily lead to withdrawal from participation but may coexist with sustained connectivity-oriented engagement. Privacy agency therefore appears relationally mediated and unevenly enacted across behavioural domains (Marwick & boyd, 2014).

This issue is particularly significant in high-connectivity environments where social and communicative practices are deeply embedded in platform architectures. As digital participation becomes integral to everyday life, privacy negotiation extends beyond individual decision-making to broader questions of media practice and social interaction.

Addressing these developments, the present study examines privacy negotiation among youth social media users in a high social-media-penetration context. Drawing on survey data from Instagram and TikTok users, the analysis investigates how experiential awareness of platform data practices, disclosure orientation, privacy-protective behaviour, and expansive connectivity practices intersect within a unified analytical framework.

Recent research further indicates that traditional privacy models struggle to account for behaviour in

datafied environments, where user actions are embedded within structurally mediated communication systems (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

To interpret these dynamics, the study advances the concept of selective agency, capturing how users combine localized protective adjustment with sustained visibility-oriented participation. By conceptualizing privacy negotiation as a communicative practice embedded in asymmetrical sociotechnical environments, the study contributes to debates on digitally mediated sociality, platform governance, and the structural mediation of agency.

Despite extensive applications of Privacy Calculus Theory, limited research has systematically examined how privacy awareness translates into differentiated behavioural outcomes under platformized participation conditions. Existing studies often treat disclosure, protection, and participation as unified responses rather than analytically distinct domains shaped by sociotechnical environments. Addressing this gap, the objective of this study is to examine how privacy awareness, disclosure orientation, and behavioural practices interact within platformized social media environments, and to assess the extent to which privacy calculus explains these relationships under contemporary participation conditions.

This study contributes by introducing the concept of selective agency and empirically examining the behavioural boundary conditions of privacy calculus in contemporary platformized environments.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature and develops the theoretical framework. This is followed by the methodology, the presentation of findings, and their discussion in relation to existing scholarship. The article concludes with key insights, implications, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Contemporary communication scholarship increasingly recognizes that social media platforms have transformed the structural conditions under which privacy is negotiated. Rather than functioning solely as tools for interpersonal interaction, platforms operate as infrastructural environments that organize participation, visibility, and value extraction at scale. Recent research emphasizes that algorithmic curation and engagement optimization fundamentally reshape how users experience communication and manage privacy (Ahmmed et al., 2025; Ou et al., 2026). Within these datafied ecosystems, privacy is no longer confined to individual control over information but is increasingly embedded in sociotechnical systems where data are continuously inferred, aggregated, and circulated.

As profiling and predictive personalization intensify, privacy negotiation shifts from discrete disclosure decisions toward ongoing participation in platform-mediated environments. Awareness of data practices is often shaped by users' experiential familiarity with platform affordances (Barth et al., 2019). Platforms generate value not only from explicitly shared content but also from behavioural traces and inferred data, reinforcing economic models based on data extraction and user profiling (Poell et al., 2021). Consequently, privacy becomes less an isolated cognitive choice and more a relational process embedded in communicative interaction (Jozani et al., 2020).

Within this evolving communication landscape, Privacy Calculus Theory (PCT) has remained a dominant framework for explaining online disclosure behaviour. Rooted in rational choice traditions, PCT posits that individuals evaluate perceived informational risks against anticipated social or functional benefits when deciding whether to share personal data (Dinev & Hart, 2006). Empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated that the perceived rewards of participation—such as relational connectivity, identity performance, and access to digital services—often outweigh abstract privacy concerns. Comparative studies further indicate that risk–benefit orientations vary across generational cohorts and sociocultural contexts, producing differentiated patterns of social media engagement rather than uniform trajectories of privacy restraint (Nuzulita & Subriadi, 2020).

However, the explanatory reach of privacy calculus becomes more limited in platformized communication environments characterized by opaque data governance and algorithmic mediation. In such contexts, user behaviour reflects adaptive responses shaped by platform structures rather than purely rational trade-offs (Uwayezu et al., 2026). Disclosure increasingly operates as an embedded dimension of routine communicative participation rather than a discrete cognitive decision.

Moreover, behavioural responses to privacy concerns often appear inconsistent, shaped not only by

rational evaluations but also by habitual media use, affective investment in social interaction, and situational participation pressures (Barth & de Jong, 2017). These dynamics suggest that awareness alone may not function as a reliable behavioural constraint when disclosure is normalized through interface design, interaction metrics, and algorithmically mediated expectations of communicative responsiveness.

Research on youth social media engagement further complicates individualistic models of privacy decision-making. Adolescents and young adults frequently demonstrate awareness of digital risks, yet such awareness does not consistently translate into systematic behavioural withdrawal. Instead, privacy negotiation tends to occur within relationally mediated participation contexts where visibility, peer affirmation, and networked interaction play central roles in identity construction and everyday communication (Aker et al., 2025; Malandrino et al., 2013). This suggests that privacy-related behaviour is shaped not only by risk awareness but also by social expectations, communicative norms, and platform affordances.

Comparative generational research likewise suggests that younger users frequently interpret privacy risks through participation-oriented lenses, prioritizing connectivity and communicative utility even when potential informational costs are recognized (Nuzulita & Subriadi, 2020). Protective behaviour therefore tends to be selective rather than comprehensive. Users commonly engage in localized adjustments—such as modifying privacy settings, curating audience visibility, or practicing contextual self-presentation—while remaining embedded in connectivity-oriented interaction environments (Neves et al., 2024). These differentiated strategies indicate that privacy agency operates unevenly across behavioural domains, reflecting ongoing attempts to reconcile experiential risk awareness with the participation incentives characteristic of digitally mediated social environments.

Critical platform scholarship highlights how these behavioural dynamics are structured by asymmetrical power relations embedded in digital infrastructures. Social media platforms actively configure the conditions under which participation and visibility occur through interface design choices, algorithmic recommendation systems, and engagement-optimizing metrics. In visually oriented environments such as Instagram and TikTok, network growth and relational affirmation are often reinforced through mechanisms that reward frequent disclosure and sustained interaction (Cotter, 2019). Default publicity settings, frictionless connection features, and periodic interface reconfigurations further normalize participation in expanded networks, subtly shifting responsibility for privacy management toward users while preserving platform control over data flows.

These infrastructural incentives complicate assumptions that awareness of privacy risks have necessarily led to behavioural restraint. Even when users possess experiential understanding of platform data practices, participation pressures and algorithmically mediated visibility expectations may attenuate the behavioural consequences of this awareness. Privacy negotiation thus unfolds within participation regimes characterized by uneven distributions of agency, where users engage in adaptive adjustments while remaining integrated in connectivity-driven communicative practices. From this perspective, platform power operates not only through surveillance or data extraction but also through the normalization of interaction patterns that sustain engagement and relational exposure.

Taken together, existing research highlights important limitations in individualistic models of privacy behaviour. While prior studies have documented discrepancies between privacy concern and disclosure practices, fewer have systematically examined how awareness, participation orientation, and behavioural adjustment interact under platformized conditions. This gap is particularly significant in environments where communication is structured by algorithmic visibility and participation incentives.

To analytically capture these dynamics, this study distinguishes between three interrelated dimensions of privacy negotiation: awareness, disclosure orientation, and behavioural responses. Rather than assuming linear relationships among these dimensions, their interaction is conceptualized as contextually mediated and shaped by platform affordances and participation incentives.

Recent empirical research further demonstrates that privacy behaviour varies across user profiles and platform contexts, reflecting diverse strategies of engagement and adaptation within algorithmically structured environments (Kang et al., 2025). These findings reinforce the need to conceptualize privacy not as a uniform behavioural outcome but as a differentiated and context-dependent process.

To address this analytical gap, the present study advances the concept of selective agency, conceptualizing privacy behaviour as a patterned configuration of localized protective adjustment combined with sustained participation-driven visibility practices. This framework shifts analytical attention from isolated decision

moments toward the relational and infrastructural contexts that shape behavioural possibilities in datafied communication environments. The following section develops this theoretical perspective as an integrative lens for examining differentiated patterns of privacy negotiation.

Building on these insights, the following section develops the theoretical framework guiding the study.

Privacy Calculus Theory (PCT) has traditionally explained online self-disclosure as the outcome of rational evaluations in which individuals weigh perceived risks against anticipated benefits (Culnan & Armstrong, 1999). However, its assumptions are increasingly challenged in platformized communication environments characterized by datafication, algorithmic governance, and visibility-driven participation. In such contexts, disclosure becomes an embedded component of routine communicative practice rather than a discrete cognitive decision.

Platform ecosystems reshape the behavioural conditions under which privacy evaluations occur, as algorithmic systems actively curate content, structure interaction, and influence user decision-making processes (Ou et al., 2026). While these characteristics are not uniformly identical across all platforms, they represent dominant tendencies within contemporary social media environments, particularly those driven by algorithmic recommendation systems and engagement-based visibility metrics. Opaque data architectures, default publicity settings, frictionless network expansion features, and engagement-optimizing interface designs embed disclosure within normalized patterns of digitally mediated social participation. Visibility becomes a communicative resource through which users negotiate relational belonging, symbolic recognition, and algorithmic relevance. Consequently, privacy negotiation unfolds within asymmetrical sociotechnical environments that simultaneously enable communicative expression while constraining the practical scope of informational autonomy.

Critical scholarship suggests that privacy-related awareness does not consistently translate into coherent behavioural restraint in such environments. Users frequently demonstrate familiarity with platform data practices while continuing to engage in disclosure-oriented participation shaped by relational expectations, affective investment in social interaction, and infrastructural incentives (Barth & de Jong, 2017). Rather than producing systematic withdrawal, awareness may support adaptive recalibration through localized protective actions that remain compatible with sustained platform engagement (Cicchirillo, 2020). These patterns indicate that privacy calculus operates within structurally conditioned participation regimes where behavioural outcomes are mediated by the communicative logics of connectivity and visibility.

To account for these dynamics, this study advances the concept of selective agency as a platform-centred refinement of privacy calculus. Selective agency conceptualizes privacy negotiation as a patterned configuration of domain-specific behavioural responses through which users reconcile informational risk awareness with participation imperatives embedded in algorithmically structured social environments. At the perceptual level, experiential awareness may encourage bounded protective adjustments enabled by platform affordances. At the relational level, disclosure practices remain influenced by norms of social presence and networked interaction. At the infrastructural level, algorithmic recommendation systems and interface architectures shape the behavioural possibilities through which privacy agency can be enacted.

From this perspective, agency is neither absent nor fully autonomous but situationally enacted within participation regimes that normalize disclosure as a condition of communicative relevance. Privacy-aware users may therefore combine protective adjustment with continued engagement in visibility-enhancing connectivity practices. Conceptualizing privacy behaviour through selective agency shifts analytical attention from isolated decision moments toward the sociotechnical contexts that structure how awareness, participation orientation, and behavioural adaptation interact.

Building on this theoretical synthesis, the study examines whether privacy awareness translates into coherent behavioural restraint or differentiated patterns of participation. The following hypotheses assess these dynamics under platformized conditions shaped by algorithmic governance and visibility incentives.

3. Hypotheses Development

3.1. Awareness and Protective Action

Within classical PCT, heightened awareness of privacy risks is expected to encourage engagement in protective behaviour as individuals attempt to minimize potential informational harm (Dinev & Hart, 2006; Kehr et al., 2015). However, platformized participation environments complicate this assumption

by differentiating between formal policy literacy and experiential awareness of platform data practices embedded in everyday interaction. Although users may rarely engage systematically with privacy policy texts (Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020), they are frequently exposed to privacy implications through algorithmic content circulation, data persistence, and the redistribution of personal information across networked publics (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

From a selective agency perspective, awareness is therefore expected to translate into adaptive and bounded behavioural recalibration rather than comprehensive withdrawal from participation. Protective responses are most likely when platform affordances enable low-effort situational interventions, such as adjusting privacy settings, managing audience segmentation, or curating content visibility. These localized actions allow users to negotiate informational exposure while maintaining relational engagement (Dienlin & Metzger, 2016). Experiential awareness of platform data-use practices is thus expected to exert stronger behavioural influence than abstract familiarity with policy frameworks, which may remain cognitively distant from routine communicative practice.

Accordingly, the study proposes:

H1a: Experiential platform data-use awareness is positively associated with engagement in privacy-protective actions.

H1b: Policy awareness is positively associated with engagement in privacy-protective actions, although this relationship will be comparatively weaker.

3.2. Awareness and Disclosure Willingness

Traditional interpretations of PCT assume that heightened awareness of privacy risks reduces willingness to disclose personal information. Yet in datafied communication environments, disclosure is increasingly embedded in normalized regimes of participation shaped by algorithmic amplification, relational expectations, and engagement-oriented interface design. Under such conditions, the behavioural implications of awareness may be mediated by infrastructural incentives that privilege visibility and social presence (Cotter, 2019).

From a selective agency perspective, awareness is therefore not expected to uniformly suppress disclosure orientation. Instead, it may coexist with continued participation in communicative practices where visibility functions as a resource for relational affirmation and networked belonging. Given users' limited engagement with formal privacy policies (Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020), policy awareness is likewise unlikely to exert a strong independent influence on disclosure willingness.

Thus, the study proposes:

H2: Experiential platform data-use awareness significantly reduces disclosure willingness.

H3: Policy awareness significantly predicts disclosure willingness.

3.3. Disclosure Orientation and High-Connectivity Practices

High-connectivity practices—such as accepting connection requests from unfamiliar users—reflect participation orientations toward network expansion, relational visibility, and sustained interactional presence. In engagement-driven ecosystems such as Instagram and TikTok, algorithmic recommendation systems and visibility metrics structurally incentivize connectivity and content circulation (Klug & Strang, 2019; Kokolakis, 2017). Within these environments, disclosure willingness may function less as an isolated privacy disposition and more as an indicator of broader participatory orientation toward symbolic recognition and social embeddedness.

From a selective agency perspective, expansive connectivity practices are therefore expected to be shaped primarily by participation logics rather than informational awareness alone. Users with higher disclosure willingness are likely to pursue strategies that enhance relational reach and perceived social capital.

Accordingly:

H4: Disclosure willingness is positively associated with engagement in high-connectivity practices.

3.4. Structural Limits of Awareness

If selective agency captures the differentiated operation of privacy negotiation under platformized conditions, awareness should translate into bounded protective adjustment while exerting limited influence

on expansive connectivity practices. Algorithmic recommendation systems, frictionless networking features, and engagement-driven interface design embed connectivity expansion within routine communicative performance (Kokolakis, 2017). Consequently, awareness may not function as a uniform behavioural constraint but rather as a contextually mediated factor filtered through participation incentives (Jozani et al., 2020).

This perspective suggests that users may recognize informational risks while simultaneously engaging in visibility-enhancing practices that sustain relational presence in networked publics.

Therefore:

H5: Experiential platform data-use awareness significantly constrains engagement in high-connectivity.

3.5. Theoretical Contribution of Hypothesis Testing

Collectively, these hypotheses assess whether privacy negotiation reflects a coherent risk–benefit calculus or a differentiated configuration of selective agency shaped by platformized participation regimes. Evidence supporting localized protective adjustment alongside sustained disclosure and connectivity would indicate that privacy calculus operates within infrastructural conditions that recalibrate the behavioural consequences of awareness. In this sense, hypothesis testing contributes to refining the theoretical scope of privacy calculus by specifying its structural boundary conditions in contemporary datafied communication environments.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Context

This study employs a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to examine how privacy awareness, disclosure orientation, and privacy-protective behaviour intersect within platformized social media participation among youth users. Survey-based approaches are widely used in digital media research to capture patterns of user behaviour and perceptions across large populations, enabling systematic analysis of relationships between cognitive and behavioural variables (Choi, 2023). This design is particularly suitable for identifying patterned associations across multiple behavioural domains, allowing for empirical evaluation of how privacy-related cognition translates into differentiated responses under platformized conditions. The design operationalizes key dimensions of selective agency in order to assess whether privacy-related cognition translates into differentiated behavioural responses across domains of digital interaction.

The use of a quantitative survey design is methodologically appropriate for examining multidimensional constructs such as awareness, disclosure orientation, and behavioural practices within a unified analytical framework. It enables the identification of statistically observable relationships across variables while maintaining consistency with prior empirical research on digital privacy behaviour (Meier & Krämer, 2022).

The empirical focus on Instagram and TikTok reflects their prominence as visually oriented and algorithmically curated platforms where network expansion, symbolic visibility, and relational interaction are structurally incentivized. These platforms exemplify contemporary network media environments in which communication is shaped by algorithmic curation and engagement metrics, making them analytically relevant for studying privacy behaviour in platformized contexts (Klinger & Svensson, 2015).

The study was conducted in a high social-media-penetration digital context characterized by extensive smartphone use and intensive platform engagement. Such environments offer theoretically meaningful settings for analysing how participation norms and infrastructural conditions shape privacy practices. Youth users constitute an appropriate analytical population because they are often early adopters of emerging platform affordances while simultaneously navigating evolving expectations of relational connectivity and informational exposure.

4.2. Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey administered to active Instagram and TikTok users aged 18–29. A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was adopted to access digitally engaged participants embedded in intensive social media participation environments. Although this approach limits statistical generalizability, it provides appropriate access to behavioural patterns characteristic of highly connected and digitally engaged user populations.

The final dataset comprised 386 valid responses following the exclusion of incomplete submissions and

cases failing embedded attention checks. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Ethical procedures concerning informed consent, confidentiality, and responsible data handling were strictly observed. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Sharjah prior to data collection.

4.3. Measurement and Operationalization

The survey instrument measured core dimensions of privacy negotiation consistent with the selective agency framework. Experiential platform data-use awareness captured users’ perceived understanding of how platforms collect, process, and circulate personal data in everyday interaction contexts. Policy awareness assessed familiarity with formal privacy governance mechanisms, including platform policies and data-management provisions. Disclosure orientation measured willingness to share personal information and engage in visibility-enhancing practices. Privacy-protective behaviour captured actions such as adjusting privacy settings, curating content visibility, or managing audience access. High-connectivity practices were operationalized through indicators of expansive network behaviour, including acceptance of connection requests from unfamiliar users.

All multi-item constructs were measured using five-point Likert-type scales ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. Item wording was adapted from established operationalizations in prior privacy and social media research to ensure conceptual continuity while reflecting contemporary platform affordances.

This multidimensional operationalization reflects contemporary methodological approaches that conceptualize privacy behaviour as an interaction of cognitive, relational, and behavioural processes rather than as a single decision outcome (Inverardi et al., 2023). It also aligns with the selective agency framework by capturing domain-specific behavioural responses across awareness, participation, and protective action.

4.4. Reliability and Validity

Construct validity was supported by grounding measurement scales in established scholarship on privacy calculus and digital privacy behaviour (Meier & Krämer, 2022). Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for all multi-item constructs. As presented in Table 1, experiential platform data-use awareness demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .78$), disclosure willingness exhibited high internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$), and privacy-protective actions showed satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = .74$). Policy awareness displayed moderate reliability ($\alpha = .67$), consistent with prior research indicating variability in users’ engagement with formal privacy governance mechanisms.

Table 1: Reliability of Multi-Item Study Indices (N = 386).		
Scale	k	Cronbach’s α
Policy awareness index	4	0.67
Policy complexity avoidance	1	—
Platform data-use awareness index	5	0.78
Disclosure willingness index	6	0.88
Privacy-protective actions index	6	0.74

Note. Cronbach’s α is reported for multi-item scales only. Single-item measures were not assessed for internal consistency.

Prior to full deployment, the instrument was pilot-tested with a subset of the target population to assess clarity, completion time, and response variability (Dillman et al., 2014), thereby enhancing measurement precision.

4.5. Analytical Strategy

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression modelling was employed to estimate relationships among theoretically specified constructs and to assess the behavioural boundary conditions of privacy calculus under platformized participation regimes. Separate models were estimated for privacy-protective behaviour, disclosure willingness, and high-connectivity practices. This approach enables examination of domain-specific behavioural outcomes rather than assuming a uniform response to privacy awareness.

This modelling strategy is particularly suited to testing the concept of selective agency, as it allows for

the identification of differentiated behavioural patterns across multiple domains of privacy negotiation. Such analytical strategies are consistent with contemporary empirical approaches that examine how privacy-related perceptions and behaviours are distributed across different domains rather than treated as unified constructs (Cristofaro et al., 2025).

The following section presents the empirical findings derived from this analytical approach.

5. Results

This section presents the empirical findings in a structured manner aligned with the research hypotheses. The analysis examines relationships among platform data-use awareness, disclosure orientation, privacy-protective behaviour, and high-connectivity practices among youth social media users. It focuses on whether privacy awareness translates into consistent behavioural restraint or into differentiated patterns of adaptive participation across platform interaction domains.

The modelling strategy distinguishes between protective and participation-oriented behavioural domains, enabling the identification of differentiated effects rather than assuming a uniform behavioural response to privacy awareness. This distinction is essential for evaluating whether privacy negotiation operates as a coherent risk–benefit calculus or as a contextually mediated configuration of selective agency.

5.1. Descriptive Overview

The sample comprised 386 young social media users engaged in intensive use of visually oriented platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok (see Table 2). Construct means indicated moderate to high levels of platform data-use awareness and privacy-protective behaviour, alongside moderate disclosure willingness. Acceptance of connection requests from unfamiliar users clustered around the scale midpoint, suggesting neither systematic avoidance nor consistent network expansion.

Overall, the descriptive pattern indicates the coexistence of awareness, protective adjustment, and participatory engagement within routine platform use.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=386).

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	99	25.6
	Female	287	74.4
Age (years)	15–20	92	23.8
	20–25	226	58.5
	25–30	37	9.7
	30–35	31	8.0
Education level	High school	188	48.7
	Diploma	49	12.7
	Bachelor's degree	131	34.0
	Master's degree	18	4.6
Nationality	Emirati	332	86.0
	Arab (non-Emirati)	35	9.1
	Other nationalities	19	4.9
Occupation	Student	294	76.2
	Employee	51	13.2
	Business owner	16	4.1
	Unemployed	25	6.5

5.2. Regression Analysis

To examine differentiated patterns of privacy negotiation under platformized participation conditions, three ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were estimated predicting engagement in (1) privacy-protective actions, (2) disclosure willingness, and (3) high-connectivity practices. This approach enables assessment of whether privacy awareness is associated with consistent behavioural restraint or with domain-specific adaptive responses.

Table 3 reports standardized coefficients (β) to facilitate comparison of relative effect sizes across behavioural outcomes. The models evaluate how experiential platform data-use awareness, policy awareness,

and disclosure orientation are differentially associated with protective and participation-oriented practices in contemporary social media environments.

Predictor	Model 1: Protective Actions (β)	Model 2: Disclosure Willingness (β)	Model 3: High-Connectivity (β)
Platform data-use awareness	.374***	.257***	.042
Policy awareness	.235***	.029	.084
Policy complexity avoidance	.015	.105†	.007
Disclosure willingness	—	—	.353***
Privacy-protective actions	—	—	.120*
Controls	Included	Included	Included
R ²	.286	.106	.177

Note. Standardized coefficients (β) are reported. Controls include gender, age, education, and nationality. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

5.2.1. Awareness and Protective Action

Experiential awareness of platform data practices significantly predicted engagement in privacy-protective actions ($\beta = .374$, $p < .001$; Table 3). Policy awareness also showed a positive association ($\beta = .235$, $p < .001$), although with a smaller effect size, indicating that experiential understanding of platform data use is more behaviourally influential than abstract familiarity with policy provisions. In contrast, policy complexity avoidance and disclosure willingness were not significant predictors.

The model explained 28.6% of the variance in protective behaviour ($R^2 = .286$), representing comparatively stronger explanatory power than the other models. Overall, these findings indicate that privacy awareness is primarily translated into bounded protective adjustment rather than comprehensive withdrawal from platform participation. Users appear to adopt situational protective strategies that allow continued engagement while managing perceived informational risks.

5.2.2. Awareness and Disclosure Orientation

Experiential platform data-use awareness was positively associated with disclosure willingness ($\beta = .257$, $p < .001$; Table 3), indicating that increased familiarity with platform data practices does not necessarily reduce participatory disclosure. Policy awareness was not a significant predictor, while policy complexity avoidance showed only a marginal association.

The model explained 10.6% of the variance in disclosure willingness ($R^2 = .106$), reflecting comparatively modest explanatory power. Overall, these findings suggest that privacy awareness may coexist with participation orientations shaped by relational expectations and engagement incentives embedded in platform environments. Rather than acting as a behavioural constraint, awareness appears to be incorporated into communicative routines that sustain visibility, connectivity, and social presence.

5.2.3. Disclosure Orientation and High-Connectivity Practices

Disclosure willingness emerged as the strongest predictor of engagement in high-connectivity practices ($\beta = .353$, $p < .001$; Table 3). In contrast, platform data-use awareness and policy awareness were not significant predictors. Privacy-protective behaviour showed a small but significant positive association with high-connectivity practices ($\beta = .120$, $p = .033$), indicating that protective adjustment and expansive participation may coexist within users' behavioural repertoires.

The model explained 17.7% of the variance in high-connectivity behaviour ($R^2 = .177$), indicating moderate explanatory power. Overall, the results highlight the central role of participatory orientation in shaping network expansion within visibility-driven platform environments. High-connectivity practices appear more closely associated with relational incentives linked to visibility and social presence than with awareness of platform data risks.

5.2.4. Integrative Pattern

Across models, platform data-use awareness predicted engagement in localized protective actions but

did not significantly constrain disclosure willingness or high-connectivity practices. By contrast, disclosure orientation consistently predicted expansive network behaviour. This differentiated configuration indicates that privacy negotiation unfolds unevenly across behavioural domains rather than through a unified orientation toward risk avoidance.

More specifically, awareness was associated with bounded protective recalibration compatible with sustained participatory engagement. Users appear to adopt situational protective strategies—such as managing visibility settings or curating self-presentation—while continuing to pursue relational connectivity and interactional presence.

Taken together, the results suggest a pattern in which protective and participatory orientations operate as parallel rather than opposing modes of engagement. Privacy awareness therefore appears to support adaptive management of informational exposure without substantially altering participation trajectories in visibility-driven platform environments.

It is important to note that the reported findings reflect statistical associations rather than causal relationships. The results identify patterns of behavioural differentiation across domains of privacy negotiation, indicating the relative influence of awareness and disclosure orientation on specific practices. These findings do not evaluate the effectiveness of privacy strategies but instead provide empirical evidence of how behavioural responses are distributed under platformized participation conditions.

6. Discussion

This study set out to examine how privacy awareness, disclosure orientation, and behavioural practices interact within platformized social media environments. The findings indicate that privacy negotiation does not operate as a unified risk–benefit calculus but rather as a differentiated configuration shaped by participation regimes that normalize visibility, connectivity, and data exposure as conditions of mediated interaction. By contrast, disclosure orientation consistently predicts visibility-enhancing participation. These results suggest that Privacy Calculus Theory retains partial explanatory relevance but operates within infrastructural participation regimes that recalibrate how awareness is translated into behavioural outcomes.

These findings should be interpreted within the specific context of high-connectivity social media environments characterized by intensive platform engagement and visibility-driven interaction norms. In such contexts, participation is not merely optional but often constitutes a condition for maintaining relational presence and communicative relevance. Accordingly, the observed behavioural patterns reflect structurally conditioned participation regimes rather than universally generalizable privacy behaviours.

Privacy negotiation therefore appears less as a unified behavioural strategy and more as a domain-specific process shaped by platform affordances and participation expectations. Participation increasingly constitutes a prerequisite for maintaining relational presence and symbolic social belonging within digitally mediated environments (Hastuti et al., 2025). Consequently, evaluations of informational risk unfold within sociotechnical contexts that privilege engagement and networked interaction (Klug & Strang, 2019).

The concept of selective agency provides a useful framework for interpreting these dynamics. Rather than disengaging from platforms in response to privacy awareness, users adopt adaptive strategies that combine bounded protective adjustment with sustained participation in visibility-driven interaction environments. Actions such as modifying privacy settings or curating audience visibility enable individuals to manage perceived informational exposure while continuing to pursue relational connectivity. This interpretation resonates with prior research indicating that privacy behaviour often reflects situational adjustment rather than systematic withdrawal (Cicchirillo, 2020). Agency thus emerges as relationally mediated and unevenly enacted within participation regimes structured by algorithmic incentives.

The coexistence of protective behaviour and expansive connectivity further highlights broader transformations in digitally mediated sociality. Visibility functions as a communicative resource through which users sustain relational networks, perform identity, and secure symbolic recognition in algorithmically curated publics. Engagement with platform environments entails ongoing exposure to data extraction processes, yet such exposure is increasingly normalized as part of routine participation. Privacy awareness does not necessarily disrupt these dynamics but may instead be incorporated into adaptive repertoires that enable users to navigate participation incentives while maintaining perceived autonomy.

Importantly, the contribution of this study lies not in evaluating the effectiveness of privacy interventions but in explaining how privacy-related behaviour is configured across distinct domains of action. By demonstrating that protective behaviour and participatory engagement operate as parallel rather than opposing trajectories, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how agency is enacted under platform conditions.

This aligns with broader communication scholarship emphasizing that platform infrastructures shape not only content distribution but also the conditions under which users engage, interact, and make privacy-related decisions (Poell et al., 2021).

These findings highlight the structural imbalance between platform data extraction models and user privacy expectations, suggesting the need for stronger governance frameworks and platform accountability mechanisms (Poell et al., 2021). Approaches that rely solely on individual awareness or digital literacy are unlikely to be sufficient in environments shaped by infrastructural design features. Meaningful privacy protection therefore requires greater attention to platform architectures—including default visibility settings, frictionless networking mechanisms, and opaque algorithmic processes—that shape how users balance protection and engagement.

From a communication perspective, these findings reinforce the need to examine privacy as a structurally mediated dimension of digital interaction rather than solely an individual behavioural outcome. They further suggest that regulatory interventions should prioritize platform design transparency and algorithmic accountability rather than relying solely on user awareness initiatives.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and reliance on self-reported measures may introduce social desirability bias. Future research could employ longitudinal or experimental approaches to examine how evolving platform affordances influence selective agency over time. Comparative cross-cultural analyses would further contribute to understanding how participation regimes and sociotechnical conditions shape privacy practices across diverse digital contexts.

7. Conclusion

This study reassessed the explanatory scope of privacy calculus within platformized social media environments. The findings demonstrate that privacy awareness does not uniformly translate into behavioural restraint but instead supports localized protective actions alongside sustained participation in visibility-driven interaction practices. Youth privacy behaviour, therefore, cannot be fully explained through coherent cost–benefit reasoning alone. Instead, privacy negotiation emerges as a differentiated and contextually embedded process in which protective adjustment and participation are simultaneously sustained.

These findings contribute to ongoing interdisciplinary debates on datafication, digital governance, and platform-mediated communication, where privacy is increasingly understood as a structurally conditioned rather than purely individual phenomenon (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). They further resonate with recent research emphasizing the growing influence of algorithmic infrastructures on privacy behaviour in digitally mediated environments (Ahmmad et al., 2025).

Conceptually, the study advances platform communication research by demonstrating how infrastructural participation logics recalibrate the behavioural consequences of privacy awareness. By introducing the concept of selective agency, the analysis highlights how communicative autonomy is enacted within asymmetrical sociotechnical environments that privilege visibility, connectivity, and relational presence. Privacy behaviour thus reflects an ongoing negotiation between informational self-protection and the pursuit of mediated social belonging.

These insights suggest that strengthening digital privacy governance requires attention not only to user awareness initiatives but also to the structural design conditions that shape participation incentives within platform ecosystems. Future research should further examine how evolving platform architectures redistribute opportunities for privacy agency across diverse sociocultural contexts and digitally mediated communication environments.

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