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Examining Applicant Reactions to the Use of Social Networking Websites in Pre-Employment Screening

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Abstract

Purpose – Social networking websites such as Facebook allow employers to gain information about applicants which job seekers may not otherwise share during the hiring process. This multi-study investigation examined how job seekers react to this screening practice.

Design/methodology – Study 1 ($N=175$) employed a realistic selection scenario examining applicant reactions to prospective employers reviewing their social networking website. Study 2 ($N=208$) employed a simulated selection scenario where participants rated their experience with a proposed selection process.

Findings – In Study 1, social networking website screening caused applicants to feel their privacy had been invaded which ultimately resulted in lower organizational attraction. Applicants low in agreeableness had the most adverse reactions to social networking website screening. In Study 2, screening again caused applicants to feel their privacy had been invaded, resulting in lower organizational attraction and increased intentions to litigate. The organization's positive/negative hiring decision did not moderate the relationship between screening and justice.

Implications – The results suggest organizations should consider the costs and

benefits of social media screening which could reduce the attractiveness of the organization. Additionally, applicants may need to change their conceptualization of social networking websites, viewing them through the eyes of a prospective employer.

Originality/value – This investigation proposed and tested an explanatory model of the effects of screening practices on organizational outcomes demonstrating how electronic monitoring, privacy, and applicant reactions can be integrated to better understand responses to technological innovations in the workplace.

Keywords: electronic monitoring; procedural justice; organizational attraction; social networking; privacy

The use of social networking websites has proliferated in recent years. As of 2013, Facebook had an estimated 1.06 billion active users, making it the most widely used social networking website (Tam, 2013). While Facebook is the largest social networking site, many similar sites exist for a variety of purposes, such as establishing work-related contacts (e.g., LinkedIn.com), finding individuals who have similar interests in music (e.g., MySpace.com), or connecting with

individuals in one's community and keeping friends informed about interests and activities (e.g., Twitter.com, Google+). Most users of social networking websites display a wealth of information about themselves via their online profiles and webpage posts. Typically, users are able to amass "friends" who can communicate with each other through the site. Members can also search other users' profiles to find common interests, favorite movies, musical tastes, classes, books, photos, and other information.

Some social networking websites, such as LinkedIn, are principally designed to be viewed by colleagues and prospective employers. These websites contain information about past employment history, job relevant education, and/or other information pertinent to job contacts. Meanwhile, other social networking websites, such as Facebook, are not usually designed with work colleagues and prospective employers in mind. The latter type of website is comprised primarily of content aimed towards friends and acquaintances, with information pertaining to one's social life, current activities, or interests.

The wealth of information available on social networking sites offers researchers an abundance of phenomena to study (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). However, published research on this topic within the organizational sciences is scarce (e.g., Kluemper, Rosen, & Mossholder, 2012; Stoughton, Thompson, & Meade, in press). Meanwhile, the popular press has published a litany of articles on social networking sites, including several articles focused on using social networking sites to screen potential job applicants (e.g., Levinson, 2009; McNichol, 2010; Wiehl, 2008; Wortham, 2009). Some organizations seeking to hire summer interns or graduating college seniors use social networking

websites to conduct background checks (Finder, 2006; Goldberg, 2010). Employers may look for provocative photos, references to drinking or drug use, and disparaging remarks about previous employers and colleagues to help "weed out" candidates (e.g., Stoughton et al., in press; Wortham, 2009). As of 2006, 27% of the employers contacted for a National Association of Colleges and Employers survey said they check the backgrounds of job applicants using Google and social networking sites. This practice appears to have grown increasingly commonplace in recent years, as indicated by a 2009 study, conducted by Harris Interactive, which revealed that 45% of the companies contacted use Google and social networking websites to screen employees (CareerBuilder.com, 2009). As of 2011, estimates of the prevalence of this practice had risen to as high as 65% (Levinson, 2011).

While popular press accounts of organizations accessing social networking websites for employee screening abound (e.g., Goldberg, 2010; Levinson, 2011; McNichol, 2010), we were able to locate few scientific studies examining this practice (e.g., Kluemper, Rosen, & Mossholder, 2012; Stoughton, Thompson, & Meade, in press). Accordingly, we develop a framework describing the effects of screening practices on invasions of privacy, which is most germane to applicant reactions to the use of social networking websites in selection. This framework integrates the electronic performance monitoring literature with that of privacy and organizational outcomes. In addition, the investigation answers the call of practitioners and researchers alike (e.g., Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011; Vandenberg, 2011) to examine issues concerning the use of social networking websites to screen job applicants.

A Framework for the Effects of Screening in Selection

While the small existing body of research on social networking provides insights into topics such as privacy concerns and identity-sharing behavior (e.g., Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Stutzman, 2006), past studies have not addressed how job applicants perceive the use of social networking websites for employment screening purposes. Based on research drawn from the electronic performance monitoring literature, we posit that this practice will affect perceptions of privacy as depicted by the framework proposed in Figure 1. In this model, not only does screening affect privacy, but moderators such as individual differences (e.g., level of Internet knowledge or conscientiousness), characteristics of the job (e.g., professional vs. hourly, level of competition for the position, or segment of industry), and properties of the screening (e.g., type of social networking website, prior knowledge of screening, or consistency of the screening) affect this phenomenon as well.

The evidence for putting privacy at the heart of Figure 1 is compelling, as the collection of personal information for screening purposes has been deemed to be one of the more invasive procedures an organization can employ (Stone-Romero, Stone, & Hyatt, 2003). Claims in the popular press commonly maintain that employers' use of social networking websites constitutes a violation of applicants' privacy (Finder, 2006; Goldberg, 2010; Levinson, 2009, 2011). Most popular press accounts report that individuals are surprised that organizations are investigating a realm that they believed to be private (Duffy, 2006; Levinson, 2009).

According to Altman's (1975) and Westin's (1967) theories of privacy, individuals and groups have a desire for boundaries between themselves and the

environment in which they operate. Maintaining these boundaries is paramount to the privacy of the individual and is considered essential in the formation and maintenance of one's self-identity and individuality (Margulis, 2003). Alge (2001) theorizes that personal identity (i.e., self-definitions of qualities unique to the individual) is affected by perceptions of privacy and that personal identity can be parsed into two separate components: an individual's private assessment of oneself, and how one wishes to be represented publicly. It is a lack of control over how one's public self is conveyed that constitutes an invasion of privacy.

Alge (2001) theorizes that this lack of control over one's public persona can result in negative estimations of the self due to devaluation in the opinion of others. In the case of social network screening, applicants risk being devalued by hiring organizations because of their lack of control over their public persona. Obviously this would be disadvantageous to the job applicant, potentially resulting in self-devaluation. Thus, applicants are motivated to maintain the boundary between their personal and professional lives and are likely to experience privacy invasion when prospective employers breach this boundary between work and non-work-related aspects of the self.

Hypothesis 1: Applicants whose social networking websites have been screened will report higher levels of privacy invasion than those whose social networking websites have not been screened.

The preceding discussion implies that negative outcomes result from privacy invasions. Indeed, empirical research has supported this contention (e.g., Stone-Romero et al., 2003). While some of these

consequences (e.g., negative estimation of one's social identity) are noted above, there are a myriad of other outcomes of interest for this framework. For instance, psychological empowerment and organizational citizenship behavior, which have been linked to employee information privacy (e.g., Alge, Ballinger, Tangirala, & Oakley, 2006) represent other avenues for research. Additionally, invasions of privacy have been found as antecedents to procedural justice concerns and accordingly justice perceptions warrant investigation as privacy outcomes in Figure 1 (Alge, 2001). Testing the complete model is beyond the scope of this investigation, however the framework proposed in Figure 1 can be used to guide future research examining the effects of social network screening in the workplace as is done in Study 1 and 2 which follow.

Study 1

There are three goals of Study 1. First, this experiment will test the explanatory model in which perceptions of privacy function as antecedents to procedural justice and selection system perceptions (see Figure 2). Additionally, we test whether employers' use of social networking sites for screening purposes affects applicants' perceptions of organizational attractiveness in a realistic hiring scenario. Finally, we investigate the moderating influence of personality on applicant reactions to social networking website screening. The term "social networking website" in this manuscript moving forward refers specifically to sites such as Facebook, which are not designed for professional purposes (Goldberg, 2010).

Procedural Justice

Procedural justice is defined as the fairness of the process that results in decision outcomes (Colquitt, 2001). In effect, negative perceptions of procedural justice represent the condemnation of a

particular organizational process. According to Leventhal (1980), fairness of the process is determined by an organization's adherence to procedures that are consistent with the moral and ethical values of individuals. Building on Leventhal's (1980) work, Gilliland (1993) put forth a model of procedural justice "rules" which includes ten dimensions that affect the degree to which applicants perceive a selection procedure to be fair, including job relatedness and propriety of questions.

As indicated previously, applicants likely view their social networking websites as a non-work-related arena of their lives (Duffy, 2006; Levinson, 2009; Schiffman, 2007). Because applicants tend to favor procedures that are job related (Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; Rynes, 1993), they are unlikely to consider the assessment of their social networking website to be just. For this reason, we expect social networking website screening to be associated with lower perceptions of procedural justice. We believe that perceptions of invasions of privacy will play an explanatory role in this relationship, as proposed in Figure 2. Indeed, empirical research has demonstrated a moderate to strong negative relationship between privacy invasion and procedural justice (Alge, 2001; Eddy, Stone, & Stone-Romero, 1999; Racioc & Williams, 1993). In support of this contention, Alge (2001) has shown that invasion of privacy perceptions mediate the effect of electronically monitoring employees' job activities on procedural justice. As the use of social networking website screening constitutes a form of electronic monitoring, privacy perceptions should also mediate the effects of this practice on procedural justice views. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

Hypothesis 2: The effect of social networking website screening on procedural justice

perceptions will be partially mediated by perceptions of privacy invasion.

Organizational Attractiveness

Organizational attraction has been conceptualized as both multidimensional and as a general concept (Highhouse, Lievens, & Sinar, 2003). It can be considered an indirect measure of applicants' attitudes toward an organization as an employer (Highhouse et al., 2003; Turban & Keon, 1993). Highhouse and colleagues (2003) divide organizational attraction into three facets: general attractiveness, intentions to pursue employment with an organization, and perceptions of an organization's prestige. The current study's use of the term *organizational attractiveness* refers to the first of these facets, general attractiveness, which encompasses initial attitudes about a company as a prospective place of employment.

Procedural justice during selection is expected to shape perceptions of organizational attractiveness due to assumptions applicants make about the organization on the basis of the selection process. Gilliland (1993) maintains that selection procedures often provide the first information that an individual receives concerning how an organization treats its employees. Signaling theory suggests that this information is important because applicants facing ambiguity and/or incomplete information use any information available as a signal about job and organizational attributes (Allen, Mahto, & Otondo, 2007; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991). Therefore, poor treatment by the organization during the selection process may be interpreted as an indication of how the organization treats employees and how the individual may be treated in the future (Gilliland, 1993).

Previous literature supports the contention that procedural justice has implications for applicant reactions and related outcomes. Stone-Romero and colleagues (2003) found that when individuals feel they have been treated unfairly, they are less likely to accept a job offer and, if already employed by the organization, they are more likely to quit their jobs. In addition, a negative relationship between fairness and intentions to recommend an organization to others has been found, which could eventually influence the effectiveness of a company's selection procedures by impacting the size of future applicant pools (Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004; Murphy, 1986; Ryan, Greguras, & Ployhart, 1997).

While we believe that screening social networking websites will ultimately decrease organizational attraction, we expect this effect to be explained by violations of privacy perceptions as mediated by perceptions of procedural justice:

Hypothesis 3: The effect of privacy invasion on organizational attraction will be fully mediated by procedural justice perceptions.

Effects of Individual Differences

There have been numerous calls for the investigation of the effect of individual differences on reactions to electronic performance monitoring (e.g., Alder & Ambrose, 2005; Kolb & Aiello, 1996; Stanton, 2000); however, there still exists a dearth of research examining the subject (Alder, Schminke, Noel, & Kuenzi, 2007). Chen and Ross (2007) recently proposed that personality variables may moderate reactions to electronic monitoring, with agreeableness in particular as likely to play a role. Traits associated with agreeableness include: "being courteous, flexible, trusting, good-natured, cooperative, forgiving, soft-hearted, and tolerant" (Barrick & Mount,

1991, p. 4). Traits associated with agreeableness such as dispositional trust have been hypothesized to affect reactions to monitoring (Tabak & Smith, 2005), and extensive research illustrates that individual differences can predict employee attitudes (e.g., Chen & Ross, 2007). Even still, agreeableness has gone relatively unexamined in the research, with very few studies (e.g., Zweig & Webster, 2003) examining its effects on reactions to monitoring.

The desire to control access to private aspects of life is assumed to be universal (Alge, 2001); in the case of social networking site screening, the boundary between personal and work life has been objectively breached. Invasion of privacy perceptions should accurately reflect that objective reality when social networking websites are screened and should not be affected by agreeableness. Agreeableness, however, should affect reactions to the breach when it occurs. Indeed, agreeableness has been found to correlate with perceptions of procedural justice (Shi, Lin, Wang, & Wang, 2009) and agreeable applicants tend to rate selection systems as more fair (Truxillo, Bauer, Campion, & Paronto, 2006). This finding is not surprising as agreeableness is defined in part as being forgiving, soft-hearted, and tolerant (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Thus, we expect that when faced with a violation of privacy, as is the case with applicants whose social networking sites have been screened, highly agreeable persons should react less negatively than persons low in agreeableness. The following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4: The effect of social networking website screening practices on procedural justice perceptions will be moderated by applicant agreeableness.

Method

Participants. Participants ($N=175$) were individuals who applied for a temporary, paid, research assistant position while enrolled at a large Southeastern U.S. university. With regard to gender, 63% of applicants were female. The mean age of the sample was 19.32 years ($SD = 3.59$). With respect to ethnicity, 76% of the sample was Caucasian, 10% was African-American, 5% was Asian-American, 2% was Hispanic, and approximately 7% reported another ethnicity.

Design. While we were interested in two independent variables: screening presence and screening consistency, these two independent variables could not be fully crossed as it was not possible to manipulate consistency for persons who are not told they are being screened via their social networking websites. Thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (a) no screening, (b) consistent screening, and (c) inconsistent screening.¹

Procedure. Applicants were recruited from a larger pool ($N = 976$) of psychology students who had volunteered to participate in a pilot study that laid the groundwork for the current experiment. Participants in the pilot study were informed that a university-affiliated firm had asked the Industrial-Organizational psychology program at their university to help select research assistants for a temporary assignment. This (fictitious) position was described as one that pays the selected individuals \$75 to spend one hour with an online web portal rating their opinions about a series of web pages being designed by the hiring organization. As part of this initiative,

¹ Results of manipulation check items with respect to consistency of screening (a moderator) revealed no differences between the inconsistent screening condition and their consistent screening counterparts, see Table 1; moreover, consistency did not satisfy the conditions for model building and was accordingly dropped from further analysis

the psychology department was said to have developed an online application and assessment survey (i.e., selection battery) and research study, which participants were asked to complete. The selection battery gathered names, email addresses, and information about each individual's GPA, personality, and Internet experience/knowledge. Embedded in the Internet knowledge questionnaire was an item asking "Which of the following social networking websites do you use on a regular basis? Check all that apply." Response options included Facebook. This item was later used to determine eligibility for the current study, which was limited to active social networking website users. To guard against unwanted attention, this item was presented along with an Internet knowledge scale.

Prospective participants were asked if they would like to be considered for the temporary position. Because most of them were completing the pilot study for course credit, care was taken to explain that everyone who filled out the selection battery would receive credit for participating in the experiment, regardless of whether they wished to be considered for the job. A total of 506 (52%) of the pilot study participants expressed interest in applying for the job. All others were excluded from this study, thus all of the 506 individuals retained for this experiment believed they were applying for the aforementioned position.

After completing the selection battery, the 506 prospective participants were, unbeknownst to them, randomly assigned to one of the three study conditions via a JavaScript routine embedded in the online study materials. All prospective participants were then directed to a common closing statement indicating that (a) the applicants' responses to the selection battery would be used to determine who gets selected for the job, and (b) the research

team would contact applicants with an update in 2-3 weeks to let them know if they were finalists for the position.

Of the 506 individuals who expressed interest in the fictitious position, 502 individuals indicated that they use Facebook on a regular basis and were therefore retained for this experiment. After 2 weeks had passed, all participants were contacted and informed that the university team had completed its portion of the assessment and handed a list of finalists over to the organization, which would make the final selection decision. The *no screening* control group received no further information pertaining to the screening practices of the hiring organization. The *screening* groups were told that the hiring organization had just finished evaluating their social networking websites in order to assess professionalism.

After providing the information described above, the email message sent to participants offered a link to an applicant reactions survey, which measured the variables of interest in this study: invasion of privacy, (social) procedural justice of the selection process, and organizational attractiveness. Participants were asked to give the organization feedback on their selection system in exchange for entry into a raffle for \$100. Participants were assured that the hiring organization would not be told who did and did not complete the feedback survey, and that the results would only be presented in aggregate form, after the hiring decision was made and the job was completed.

Overall, 35% of the 502 eligible individuals completed the applicant reactions survey described above, producing a final sample size of 175. This response rate is consistent with what is commonly found in organizational research (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). Table 2 details the response rate and sample size within each of the two

study groups. A 2 x 2 chi-square test of independence revealed no significant differences in response rates by group, $\chi^2(1, N = 502) = 2.71, p > 0.05$.

At the close of the semester in which data collection was terminated, all participants were debriefed as to the true nature of the experiment. Upon learning that the position was fictitious, all participants were informed that they had been entered into a raffle for the sum of the pay of the fictitious position. Those who completed the applicant reactions survey were entered into an additional raffle, as promised. The raffle winners were selected based on the results of a random number generator and the prizes mailed within two weeks of the debriefing.

Measures.

Agreeableness (10 items, $\alpha = 0.80$). Agreeableness was assessed via items from Goldberg's (1999) International Personality Item Pool. An example item is, "I sympathize with others' feelings." Responses were provided on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type scale.

Invasion of privacy (5 items, $\alpha = 0.78$). Invasion of privacy was measured using items adapted from previous privacy research (Alge, 2001; Tolchinsky et al., 1981). Though the intent of the original items was maintained, modifications were required to fit the context of the present study. For example, "I feel comfortable with personal information being given out this way," was changed to, "I felt comfortable with the personal information the hiring organization collected." Responses were provided on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale.

Procedural justice (social) (18 items, $\alpha = 0.95$). Procedural justice (social) was measured using items adapted from Bauer and colleague's (2001) higher-order "social" factor of the SPJS. The subscales comprising the social higher-order factor

included: consistency, honesty (openness), interpersonal treatment/interpersonal effectiveness, two-way communication, and propriety of questions. Many of these items referred to a selection test and were modified for the current context as recommended by Bauer and collaborators (2001). Two items from the original honesty subscale were not administered; they were deemed irrelevant because applicants were not afforded the opportunity to ask questions about the selection system during this study. Items were presented with a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*to a small extent*) to 5 (*to a large extent*). An example item is, "There was enough communication during the selection process."

Organizational attractiveness (5 items, $\alpha = 0.95$). Organizational attractiveness was measured using items developed by Highhouse et al. (2003). An example item is, "For me, this company would be a good place to work." Each item was presented with a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Manipulation checks (4 items). Manipulation check items were administered to assess the degree to which participants perceived that their social networking websites were screened (two items) and the degree to which they perceived screening to occur consistently across applicants (two items). These items are shown in Table 1 and were presented with a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Results

Background Analyses. Prior to data collection, a power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). The results suggested that for analyses utilizing an F statistic with three conditions, a minimum sample size of $N=159$ was needed to produce sufficient

statistical power at a value of 0.80 for $\alpha = .05$ to detect a medium effect size of 0.25 (see Cohen, 1988). Thus, the final sample size of $N=175$ can be considered adequate to detect a medium or large effect.

Table 3 provides means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. Prior to testing the research hypotheses, the data were checked for violations of normality assumptions. All scales were within acceptable ranges for skewness and kurtosis.

Next, experimental manipulations were checked. First, the data were examined to determine the extent to which participants believed their social networking websites had been accessed by the organization, as the conditions were not fully crossed. Table 1 shows the two questionnaire items relevant to the screening manipulation, along with the mean responses per item, per condition. One-way ANOVAs on both of the screening manipulation check items were significant with Tukey post hoc tests revealing that the mean rating for the no screening control group was significantly lower than the rating for both the consistent and inconsistent screening conditions. Participants in the consistent and inconsistent screening conditions did not produce significantly different mean ratings, as mentioned previously these groups were collapsed and consistency was not included in further analysis.

Hypothesis Tests. Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations by group for the three primary outcome variables of interest. Hypothesis 1 which predicted that applicants whose social networking websites were screened would report higher levels of privacy invasion than those whose social networking websites were not screened was examined first in order to satisfy conditions for model building. An independent samples *t*-test comparing the no screening vs. the screening group with respect to the invasion

of privacy ratings was significant, $t(173) = -3.56, p < .01$. In support of Hypothesis 1, the mean score for the no screening condition ($M = 1.87, SD = 0.73$) was significantly lower than the mean score for the screening group ($M = 2.30, SD = 0.74, d = 0.59$), see Table 1.

Next, the relationships shown in Figure 2 were collectively examined via a path analysis, which encompasses Hypotheses 2-4. As noted above, the consistent and inconsistent screening groups did not hold significantly different views of privacy invasion, as expected. Therefore, the two screening groups were collapsed into a dummy coded variable with a “0” for the no screening control group and a “1” for the other two conditions. We first ran a baseline constrained path model (using Mplus 5; Muthén & Muthén, 2007), which posited full mediation for justice perceptions and a moderated relationship between presence of screening and justice perceptions as in Figure 2. The initial model did not fit the data well based on commonly accepted fit criteria (i.e., Hu & Bentler, 1999): $\chi^2(6, N = 175) = 13.960, p = 0.03, TLI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.05$. Thus it appears that the hypothesized mediation relationship is partial rather than full in nature or the proposed moderation does not exist. In order to test Hypothesis 3 (i.e., whether the effect of privacy invasions on organizational attractiveness is fully mediated by justice perceptions), a second model was estimated which was identical to the baseline model except the direct path from invasion of privacy to organizational attractiveness was allowed. The resultant model demonstrated very good fit, $\chi^2(5, N = 175) = 5.60, p = 0.34, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.03, SRMR = 0.03$. The likelihood ratio test was significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 8.46, \Delta df = 1, p < .01$) indicating significantly improved model fit after freeing the aforementioned path. Figure 3 shows the unique, significant

variance explained by each link of the model and provides estimates of effect size. Therefore, Hypotheses 3 was partially supported in that justice perceptions mediate the relationship between invasions of privacy and organizational attraction as expected, but this mediation was partial rather than full as hypothesized. By extension Hypothesis 2 (partial mediation of screening on procedural justice) and Hypothesis 4 (the interactive effect of agreeableness) both demonstrate significant effects (see Figures 3 and 4).

Finally, in order to rule out alternative models, a third model was estimated that reversed the order of invasion of privacy and procedural justice (social). The resultant model demonstrated mediocre fit, $\chi^2(5, N = 175) = 10.44, p = 0.06$, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.03. The likelihood ratio test was not significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.52, \Delta df = 1, p > .05$) indicating reversing the order of effects did not significantly improve model fit.

Study 1 Discussion

The results empirically demonstrate that pre-employment social networking website screening increases applicants' perceptions of invasion of privacy, decreases their perceptions of organizational justice, and ultimately lowers organizational attraction. Moreover, we found that perceptions of invasion of privacy partially mediated the relationship between screening and justice perceptions as hypothesized. On the other hand, justice perceptions only partially mediated the relationship between perceptions of invasion of privacy and organizational attraction, which we expected to be fully mediated. It appears that violations of privacy led to a negative view of the organization for reasons above and beyond those pertaining to perceptions of injustice.

Additionally, agreeableness moderated the effect of social networking

website screening on procedural justice perceptions as expected. Justice perceptions represent applicants' reactions to a particular organizational process; in this context, they represent applicants' condemnation of the selection procedure. As expected, agreeableness had no relationship with justice perceptions for applicants whose social networking websites were not screened. Conversely, there was a clear positive relationship between agreeableness and justice perceptions for applicants whose social networking websites were viewed by the organization (Figure 4). Highly agreeable respondents tended to have very similar views of justice regardless of condition. However, as expected, applicants low in agreeableness had very adverse reactions (i.e., justice perceptions) when they were told that their social networking websites had been screened.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to replicate the findings of Study 1 in a non-student sample, which may be more reactive to privacy invasions from social media screening (Lorenzen-Huber, Boutain, Camp, Shankar, & Connelly, 2010). We also sought to more fully test our Figure 1 model by including another moderator (i.e., hiring decision) and examining applicant intentions to sue an organization that uses social network website screening (see Figure 5). In light of the tenuous legal status of screening via social networking websites applicant intentions to litigate when an organization uses social network screening is particularly relevant (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). Moreover, this environment is quickly changing as U.S. states begin to pass laws governing social networking website screening practices (Stern, 2012; Valdes & McFarland, 2012). Given the documented relationship between justice perceptions and legal challenges (e.g., Goldman, 2001), disgruntled applicants who feel their privacy

has been invaded may be prone to legal complaints. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 5: The effect of privacy invasion on intentions to litigate will be fully mediated by procedural justice perceptions.

It is prudent to keep in mind that none of the applicants in Study 1 had been turned down for the job at the point at which they completed the applicant reactions survey assessing perceived invasion of privacy, procedural justice, and organizational attractiveness. They all believed they were still “in the running” for the position. As such, the results from Study 1 likely underestimate negative reactions that may be expected among applicants who have been rejected for a job based on their social networking websites. Previous work has found that procedural justice is more positively related to reactions in the presence of unfair/unfavorable outcomes (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). Moreover, selection methods are generally rated more positively when applicants are accepted versus rejected for a position (Gamliel & Peer, 2009). Thus, we expect the negative effects of social networking website screening on applicant reactions to be stronger among rejected applicants, whose sense of self is more directly impacted and explicitly devalued by the organization, regardless of whether others are exposed to this type of screening. As such, the organization’s hiring decision is expected to affect the relationship between social media screening practices and applicant perceptions of procedural justice (social):

Hypothesis 6: The effect of social media screening practices on procedural justice will be moderated by organizational hiring decision.

Consistent with privacy framework for applicant reactions to social media screening in selection (Figure 1) we predict that social network screening affects applicants’ perceptions of organizational attractiveness through perceptions of privacy and procedural justice (H1-H3, see Figure 5).

Method

Participants. Participants ($N = 208$) were U.S. based adults utilizing Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowdsourcing website. MTurk connects requesters (e.g., researchers) with workers willing to complete *Human Intelligent Tasks* (HITs), tasks that cannot be completed by a computer. Participants were paid U.S. \$1.00 for their participation in the HIT outlined in the subsequent section. The level of compensation was chosen in an attempt to be close to the median pay rate for HITs requiring similar time and resource commitment at the time of data collection; for a more detailed explanation of using MTurk in psychological research see Barger, Behrend, Sharek, and Sinar (2011) and Behrend, Sharek, Meade, and Wiebe (2011). The mean age of the sample was 35.79 years ($SD = 12.55$). With respect to ethnicity, 86% of the sample was Caucasian, 4% was African-American, 5% was Asian-American, 2% was Hispanic, and approximately 3% reported another ethnicity. Over half of the sample, 62%, was working 30 or more hours a week at the time of data collection, while 33% were seeking full-time employment.

Design. The study used a 2 x 2 fully-crossed design where screening presence and hiring decision were directly manipulated.²

² Study 2 also collected data on screening consistency, background analysis revealed a lack of efficacy in the manipulation, therefore this data was dropped from further analysis.

Procedure. Participants were asked their opinions on a proposed hiring process. Specifically, they were instructed to imagine a university-affiliated firm had asked the Industrial-Organizational psychology program at a large Southeastern U.S. university to help develop its hiring program. While participants were not actually applying for the job, we asked that they imagine they were applying for a job in their field. They were then given a short statement describing the hiring organization adapted from previous literature (Bauer et al., 2001), “[The hiring firm] is offering a yearly salary 10% higher than other companies in your industry as well as generous stock options. [The hiring firm] is located in a town you like. In talking with people hired in the last 5 years, you have discovered that employees have received an average of three promotions in that time. The company also has been rated as a leader in the industry in terms of proactive environmental policies and was rated as one of the top 100 places to work by US News & World Report.” At this point participants completed an online selection battery that gathered information about each individual’s personality, Internet experience/knowledge, and employment status.

After completing the selection battery, the respondents were, unbeknownst to them, randomly assigned to one of the four study conditions via a JavaScript routine embedded in the online study materials. All participants were then directed to a common statement indicating that (a) two weeks had passed since they completed the “selection battery,” and (b) the hiring firm was contacting them via email with the results of the hiring process.

Of the 208 participants, 181 (87%) indicated that they use Facebook on a regular basis; unlike Study 1, all participants were retained for this experiment as the scenario was purely hypothetical. The *no*

screening control group received no information regarding screening practices. The *screening* group was told that the hiring organization had just finished evaluating their social networking websites in order to assess professionalism. These individuals were informed that the employer was able to evaluate “each and every” finalist’s social networking website after logging onto these sites with the help of current employees with friend-links or because the hiring firm initiated friend-links with the participant.

After providing the information described above, the participants continued the study completing an applicant reactions survey, which measured the variables of interest: invasion of privacy, procedural justice (social) of the selection process, organizational attractiveness, and intentions to litigate.

Measures.

Invasion of privacy (5 items, $\alpha = 0.92$), procedural justice (social; 18 items, $\alpha = 0.94$), and organizational attractiveness (5 items, $\alpha = 0.94$) were measured using the same items as Study 1.

Intentions to litigate (4 items, $\alpha = 0.93$). Intentions to litigate was measured using items developed for this study based on previous literature (e.g., Bauer et al., 2001). An example item is, “An organization that uses a hiring system like this would likely be sued by applicants.” Each item was presented with a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Results

Table 4 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables. For a comparison between Study 1 and Study 2 variables see Table 5. Prior to testing the research hypotheses, the data were checked for violations of normality assumptions. All scales were within acceptable ranges for skewness and kurtosis.

In order to establish the conditions for model testing, Hypothesis 1 was examined. Table 6 provides means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals by study condition. Hypothesis 1 predicted that applicants whose social networking websites were screened would report higher levels of privacy invasion than those whose social networking websites were not screened. An independent samples *t*-test comparing the two screening conditions to the two no screening conditions with respect to the invasion of privacy ratings was significant, $t(206) = -2.39, p = .02$. In support of Hypothesis 1, the mean score for the no screening conditions ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.16$) was significantly lower than the mean score for the screening conditions ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.20, d = 0.33$), see Table 6.

Next, the relationships shown in Figure 5 were collectively examined via a path analysis, which encompasses Hypotheses 2-3 and 5-6. The two screening groups were collapsed into a dummy coded variable with a "0" for the no screening control groups and a "1" for the other two conditions. We first ran a baseline model as in Figure 5. The initial model did not fit the data well based on commonly accepted fit criteria (i.e., Hu & Bentler, 1999): $\chi^2(17, N = 208) = 56.80, p = 0.00, TLI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.11, SRMR = 0.06$. Thus it appears that one or both of the hypothesized mediation relationships are partial rather than full in nature. In order to test Hypothesis 3 (i.e., whether the effect of privacy invasions on organizational attractiveness is fully mediated by justice perceptions), we estimated a model identical to the baseline model except the direct path between privacy invasions and organizational attractiveness was allowed to be estimated. This model also did not fit the data, $\chi^2(16, N = 208) = 56.79, p = 0.00, TLI = 0.83, RMSEA = 0.11, SRMR = 0.06$, and a likelihood ratio test did not indicate

significantly better fit than the baseline model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1.08, \Delta df = 1, p > .05$). Thus it appears that allowing partial mediation did not significantly improve model fit, which supports Hypothesis 3 (full mediation).

A third model was estimated which was identical to the baseline model except the direct path from invasion of privacy to intentions to litigate was allowed. The resultant model demonstrated very good fit, $\chi^2(16, N = 208) = 20.34, p = 0.21, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.05$. The likelihood ratio test was significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 59.97, \Delta df = 1, p < .001$) indicating significantly improved model fit after freeing the aforementioned path. Figure 6 shows the unique, significant variance explained by each link of the model and provides estimates of effect size. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was partially supported it that justice perceptions mediate the relationship between invasions of privacy and intentions to litigate as expected, but this mediation was partial rather than full as hypothesized.

Finally, in order to test Hypothesis 6 and rule out alternative models, a fourth model was estimated which was identical to the previous model except the path from screening to justice perceptions was estimated, removing hiring decision from the model (moderation). The resultant model demonstrated poor fit, $\chi^2(21, N = 208) = 284.12, p = 0.00, TLI = 0.45, RMSEA = 0.25, SRMR = 0.14$. The likelihood ratio test was significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 263.78, \Delta df = 5, p > .001$) indicating the previous model fit the data significantly better than the current model.

Study 2 Discussion

The results again demonstrate that pre-employment social networking website screening increases applicants' perceptions of invasion of privacy. Ultimately, applicant's perceptions of organizational justice lowered organizational attraction and increased intentions to sue the organization.

Additionally, in Study 2 we manipulated the hiring decision experienced by applicants, proposing that the effect of social media screening practices on procedural justice would be moderated by organizational hiring decision. Results indicated that this was not the case; the hiring decision of the organization had no effect on applicant perceptions of procedural justice. This is a notable finding as it indicates that social media screening practices affect privacy outcomes (e.g., organizational attractiveness, intentions to litigate, etc.) irrespective of whether or not the applicant is offered a job.

While the moderating effect of hiring decision on applicant perceptions of procedural justice (social) was not found to be significant, it should be mentioned that the model results indicated that the proposed moderation aided model fit, which is consistent with the extant literature. Therefore, the lack of significant findings could be related to the power problems of moderated multiple regression (MMR) analyses (cf. Aguinis & Stone-Romero, 1997; Aguinis, 1995).

General Discussion

This investigation provides an initial examination of the effects of social networking website screening on job applicants perceptions. Based on anecdotal accounts in the popular press (e.g., Goldberg, 2010; Levinson, 2011; McNichol, 2010), this practice is quite common. This examination applies theory from electronic performance monitoring and privacy literature to the selection context by proposing a model of job applicant reactions to employers' use of social networking sites for screening purposes (see Figure 1), in addition to investigating the conditions under which these relationships may be altered (e.g., individual differences, hiring decision, different screening methods).

Study Limitations and Future Research

While this research offers a notable first step in examining applicants' reactions to social networking website employment screening, it has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, while applicants in Study 1 were students who received course credit for completing the pilot study pre-screen, they were under no obligation to further pursue the position and, in fact, nearly half chose not to seek out the job opening. Given that additional effort was required without compensation to complete the selection system feedback survey, these participants can be considered representative of the larger workforce of part-time employees, contingent workers, and job applicants in similar situations. In other words, these participants were not students asked to simply imagine a hypothetical scenario and how they may react.

The nature of the job and selection procedure examined in Study 1 may serve as boundary conditions. The job was a short-term, temporary assignment, where applicants possessed limited information about the hiring organization. This is arguably similar to situations encountered by individuals who seek employment through temporary work agencies, and it should be noted that such individuals comprise a nontrivial segment of the labor force. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005) over 15 million workers are employed in some non-traditional capacity (e.g., contractors, on-call workers, contingent workers) in the United States. Similarly, individuals contacted about employment by a headhunter may not know the name or attributes of their future employer during the early stages of the selection process. Thus, although this study included unique features, we expect it will readily generalize to similar settings (e.g., temporary employment, employment through headhunters) and to non-similar settings as well. The theories of violations to

the sense of self that occur with the non-consensual breach of private and public barriers are robust. To this extent, we imagine our findings would generalize to any employment situation, demonstrated further by the significant findings of Study 2.

The hypothetical nature of Study 2 however should also be mentioned as a boundary condition as it likely served to attenuate the effect of screening on both invasions of privacy and procedural justice (social). Therefore, what remains unknown is the magnitude of the effects witnessed when applicants are seeking long-term employment with an organization with which they are quite familiar. When the stakes are higher (e.g., when applying for a more important position, in a non-simulated setting), the effects may be even stronger.

Additionally, the severity of the manipulation in Study 1 and Study 2 may limit the generalizability of the manuscript. The practice of “friending” applicants may appear to be overly draconian, but was done in an effort to be in-line with the anecdotes of the popular press (cf. Ducklin, 2009; S. Goldberg, 2010; Palank, 2006) and is therefore likely consistent with hiring procedures experienced by real world applicants.

Future research is needed to more fully investigate Figure 1 and determine the conditions under which these findings generalize. Looking at the various proposed moderators, investigating whether these findings generalize to other social media such as Twitter and LinkedIn which have different system characteristics, but are also commonly used to screen applicants is a valuable future direction. As LinkedIn is intended for use by job seekers, we expect that applicants would react differently than they do with non-work-related sites examined in this study. Other moderators such as making screening practices known

to job candidates in advance of the screening process (i.e., system characteristics) could be examined in future investigations. In addition, future research could examine the content of applicants’ social networking websites. By doing so, researchers can determine whether the effects of the screening practice examined in this study depend on factors such as the degree to which the applicant’s social media sites contain information generally regarded as inappropriate or unprofessional and whether the applicant has attempted to make his or her social media profile inaccessible to the general public. These questions become pertinent because the effect of screening has now been empirically linked to privacy invasion and its consequences, the second and third links in the model (see Figure 1). As mentioned previously, a multitude of outcomes exist when individuals feel their privacy has been invaded (e.g., devaluation of the self, decreased OCB, psychological disenfranchisement), future investigations could explore more outcomes than those investigated here (i.e., procedural justice, attractiveness, and intentions to litigate). Furthermore, organizations’ use of social media in recruitment likely affects the selection process as well. Future investigations could examine the effects of social media on applicant perceptions of the organization measured before and after exposure to social media presence and how this affects organizational attraction; this could be looked at in addition to a social media screening manipulation. Additionally, researchers could examine the effect of recruiting applicants from different social media websites, which have different user profiles, to determine if issues such as adverse impact may be present when using a recruitment strategy that employs social media.

Outside of the hiring context, research should also examine the

consequences that occur when organizations use social networking websites as a mechanism to check up on job incumbents. Such efforts may wish to examine whether this represents a violation of an implicit psychological contract and/or whether it affects outcomes such as organizational commitment, deviant and counter-productive work behaviors, organizational citizenship behavior, and turnover. While the framework presented in the present manuscript (Figure 1) is focused on the selection process, the underlying mechanisms of privacy invasion are predicated on reactions to a form of electronic monitoring and therefore the framework would apply in such instances as well.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this study demonstrates how research from disparate literatures such as electronic monitoring, notions of the self, privacy, and applicant reactions can be integrated to better understand responses to new technological innovations in the workplace. This integration is expected to lay fruitful groundwork for future research and theory devoted to understanding the consequences that occur when employers use social media to gain information about applicants and employees.

This research has important practical implications for organizations. The results indicate that organizations seeking to hire individuals should consider the costs and benefits of the clandestine use social networking websites to screen employees. Such practices could reduce the attractiveness of an organization during various phases of the selection process, especially if the applicant pool at large knows or suspects that the organization engages in such screening. Internet message boards and social media provide easily accessible forums for job seekers to share

their experiences and opinions with others. Thus, a soured applicant could affect others' perceptions of the organization as well (cf. Hausknecht et al., 2004). Job candidates may be discouraged from accepting offers of employment if they interpret poor treatment of applicants as a preview or indication of how they would be dealt with in the future (Gilliland, 1993). This may be particularly true of applicants low in agreeableness. As for those who do accept an offer of employment, research has indicated that applicants selected under unfair procedures are prone to unfavorable attitudes post-hire, causing Ployhart and Ryan (1998) to suggest that the negativity resulting from procedural justice violations during selection could carry forward onto the job, leading to low performance and turnover.

Furthermore, the results indicated that applicants that feel their privacy has been invaded may be more likely to sue the organization, which can be costly to an organization regardless of complaint validity. Indeed, legal claiming does not occur in isolation and the ripple effect of litigation can serve to tarnish an organization's reputation, customer loyalty, and shareholder value (Goldman, 2001). Consequently, organizations should weigh the consequences of applicant legal action when considering social network screening practices.

Finally, this investigation suggests that applicants view social networking websites as a space separate from their work environment. Practically speaking, if organizations continue to use the information found on these websites to make work-related decisions, applicants may need to change their conceptualization of social networking websites. Applicants may wish to reconsider using their Facebook pages as private forums for casual discussion with their friends and instead adopt a much more guarded tone. Additionally, there could soon

be demand for services geared at inspecting clients' social networking web pages and other presence on the Internet in an attempt to "scrub" such pages. This is especially true for applicants with more objectionable material found on their social networking websites as well as those applying for sensitive positions, such as jobs requiring security clearances.

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Table 1

Criterion Means, Standard Deviations, and 95% Confidence Intervals by Study 1 Group

Condition	No Screening (<i>N</i> = 55)				Screening (<i>N</i> = 120)			
	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>CI_L</i>	<i>CI_U</i>	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>CI_L</i>	<i>CI_U</i>
Screening Manipulation Check 1 ^a	3.40	(0.97)	3.14	3.66	4.18	(0.91)	4.02	4.35
Screening Manipulation Check 2 ^b	2.56	(0.78)	2.35	2.78	3.53	(1.08)	3.34	3.73
Consistency Manipulation Check 1 ^c	4.00	(0.77)	3.79	4.21	3.83	(0.81)	3.68	3.97
Consistency Manipulation Check 2 ^d	2.44	(0.76)	2.23	2.64	2.97	(0.98)	2.79	3.14
Invasion of Privacy	1.87	(0.73)	1.67	2.07	2.30	(0.74)	2.16	2.43
Procedural Justice (Social)	4.05	(0.53)	3.91	4.20	3.75	(0.64)	3.64	3.87
Organizational Attractiveness	3.80	(0.79)	3.58	4.01	3.60	(0.64)	3.49	3.72

^a Screening Manipulation Check 1 – “It is likely that the hiring organization accessed my Facebook profile before deciding who to hire.” ^b Screening Manipulation Check 2 – “I believe the hiring organization gathered personal information about me, without my permission, when deciding who to hire.” ^c Consistency Manipulation Check 1 – “The hiring organization used exactly the same procedure to evaluate all applicants in the same way.” ^d Consistency Manipulation Check 2 – “It seems like the hiring organization gathered more information about some applicants than others.”

Table 2

Responses Per Study 1 Screening Status

	No Screening	Screening	Total <i>N</i>
Eligible Participants	182	320	502
Respondents	55	120	175
Response Rate	30%	38%	35%

Note: Participants were randomly assigned to condition via a JavaScript application embedded in the online study materials. The consistent and inconsistent screening conditions were collapsed for model analysis and presented collapsed above.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among the Study 1 Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Invasion of Privacy	2.16	.76	(.78)			
2. Procedural Justice (Social)	3.85	.63	-.59**	(.95)		
3. Organizational Attractiveness	3.66	.69	-.41**	.42**	(.95)	
4. Agreeableness	4.23	.50	-.09	.10	-.03	(.80)

N = 175, ***p* < .01, Coefficient alphas on diagonal.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among the Study 2 Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Invasion of Privacy	3.42	1.19	(.92)			
2. Procedural Justice (Social)	3.38	0.73	-.66**	(.94)		
3. Organizational Attractiveness	3.55	1.02	-.48**	.68**	(.94)	
4. Litigation Intentions	3.13	1.12	.63**	-.58**	-.48**	(.93)

N = 208, ***p* < .01, Coefficient alphas on diagonal.

Table 5

Comparison of Descriptive Statistics Between Study 1 and Study 2

Variable	Study 1 (<i>N</i> = 175)		Study 2 (<i>N</i> = 208)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Invasion of Privacy	2.16	0.76	3.42	1.19
2. Procedural Justice (Social)	3.85	0.63	3.38	0.73
3. Organizational Attractiveness	3.66	0.69	3.55	1.02
4. Agreeableness	4.23	0.50	–	–
4. Litigation Intentions	–	–	3.13	1.12

Table 6

Criterion Means, Standard Deviations, and 95% Confidence Intervals by Study 2 Condition

Condition	No Screening, Not Hired (<i>N</i> = 41)				No Screening, Hired (<i>N</i> = 56)				Screened, Not Hired (<i>N</i> = 49)				Screened, Hired (<i>N</i> = 62)			
	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>CI_L</i>	<i>CI_U</i>	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>CI_L</i>	<i>CI_U</i>	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>CI_L</i>	<i>CI_U</i>	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	<i>CI_L</i>	<i>CI_U</i>
Invasion of Privacy	3.44	(1.20)	3.07	3.82	3.03	(1.11)	2.74	3.32	3.80	(1.13)	3.47	4.13	3.44	(1.23)	3.13	3.75
Procedural Justice (Social)	3.39	(0.71)	3.17	3.62	3.64	(0.64)	3.47	3.81	3.02	(0.74)	2.81	3.24	3.43	(0.70)	3.25	3.61
Organizational Attractiveness	3.72	(0.92)	3.43	4.01	3.88	(0.85)	3.64	4.10	2.96	(1.20)	2.61	3.30	3.61	(0.87)	3.38	3.83
Litigation Intentions	3.06	(1.18)	2.70	3.44	2.83	(1.02)	2.56	3.10	3.41	(1.22)	3.06	3.76	3.22	(1.03)	2.96	3.48

N = 208

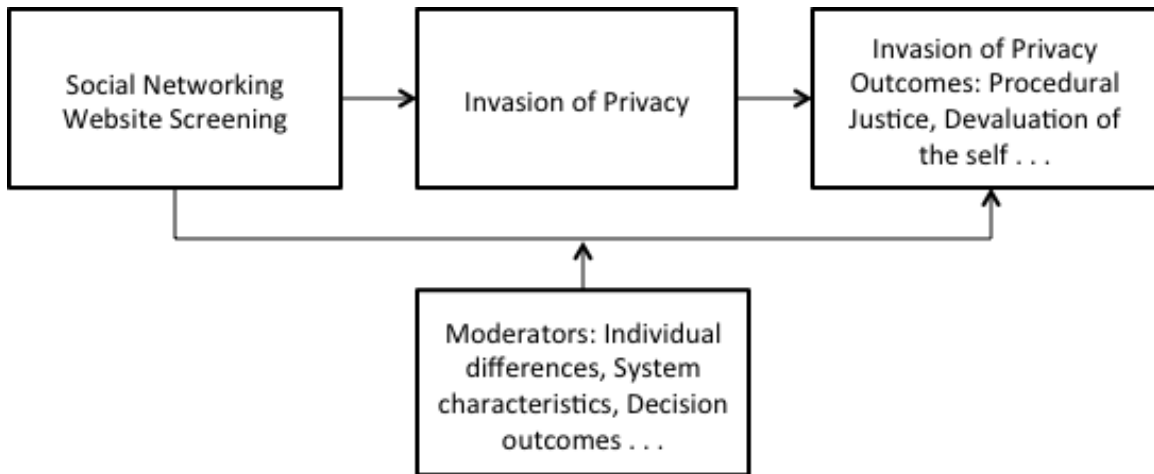


Figure 1. A framework for the effects of social media screening in selection. Testing the complete model is beyond the scope of this investigation, however this framework can be used to guide future research examining the effects of social network screening in the workplace.

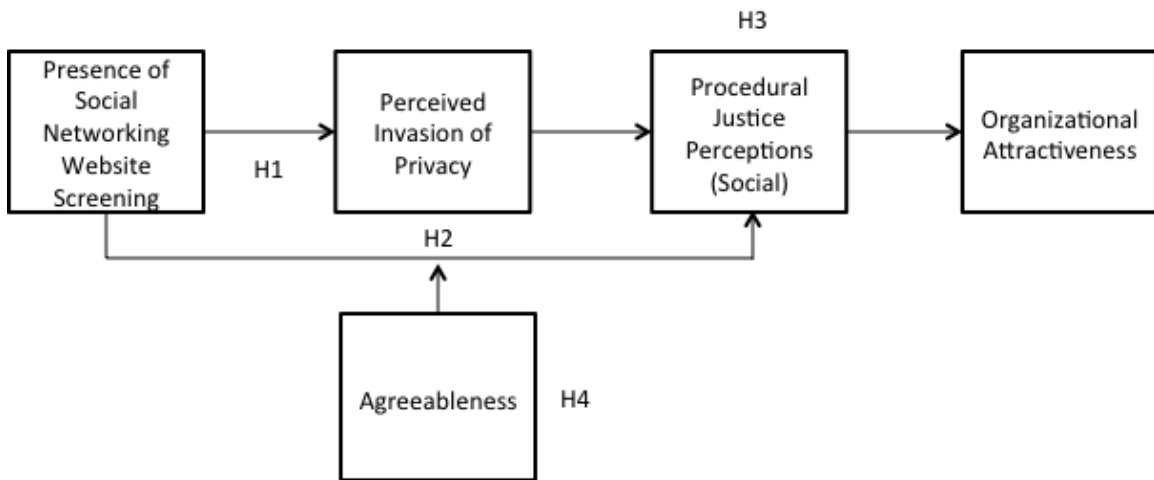
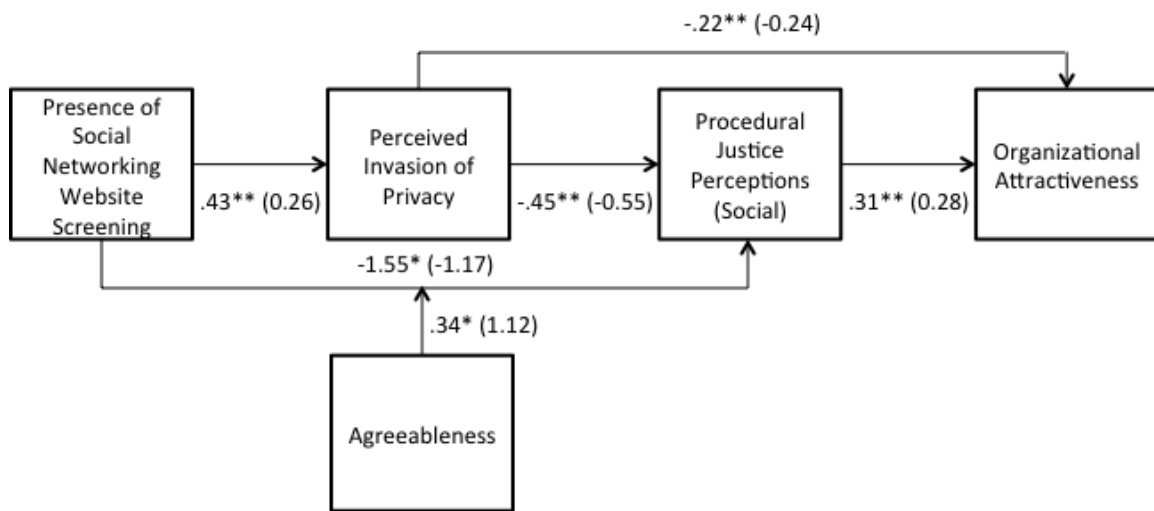


Figure 2. Proposed model of relationship between presence of social networking website screening and organizational attractiveness in Study 1.



** $p < 0.01$

* $p < 0.05$

Effect size estimates in parentheses.

Figure 3. Model of relationship between presence of social networking website screening and organizational attractiveness in Study 1.

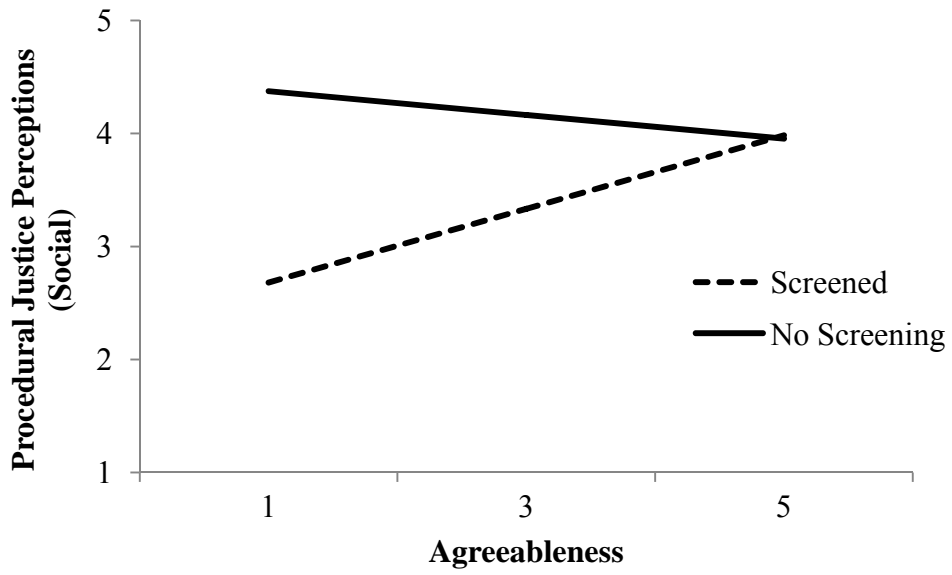


Figure 4. Interaction between presence of social networking website screening and agreeableness on perceptions of procedural justice in Study 1.

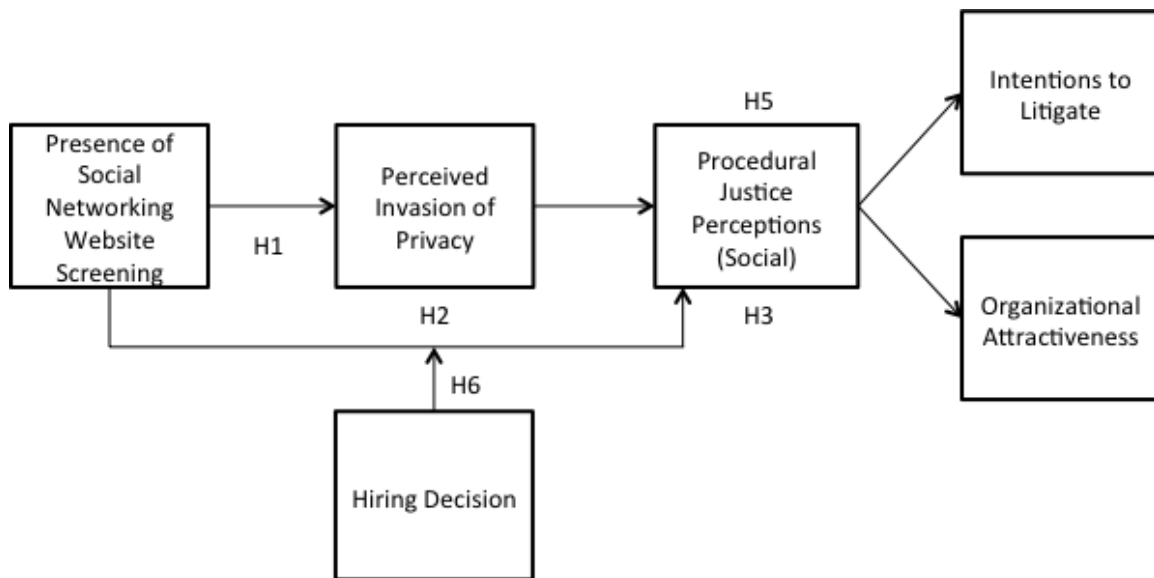
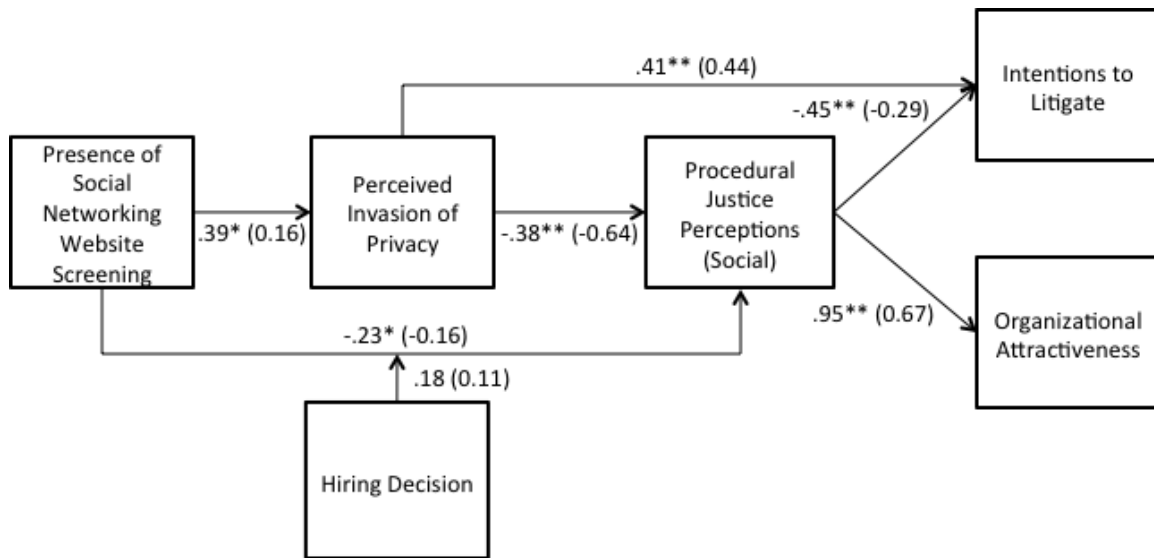


Figure 5. Proposed model of relationship between presence of social networking website screening and organizational attractiveness in Study 2.



** $p < 0.01$

* $p < 0.05$

Effect size estimates in parentheses.

Figure 6. Model of relationship between presence of social networking website screening and organizational attractiveness with partial mediation in Study 2.