# Simplifying the Complex: How do Consumers Understand Data Recipients in Complex Digital Ecosystems?

**Nour Shaaban**
University of Passau
**Johanna Zimmermann**
University of Cologne
**Jan Schumann**
University of Passau
**Thomas Widjaja**
Universtity of Passau

Paper from the 54th Annual EMAC Conference, Madrid, Spain, May 25-30, 2025

# Simplifying the Complex: How do Consumers Understand Data Recipients in Complex Digital Ecosystems?

**Abstract**

Digital platforms share consumer data extensively across vast networks of data recipients. While transparency features like privacy policies aim to inform consumers about data-sharing practices, research shows that many consumers struggle to process the abundance of information provided. Based on selective attention theory, this study explores how consumers actually think about and understand data recipients within complex environments. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 U.S. consumers, we identify four distinct mental representations consumers form to cognitively grasp data recipient networks, along with the key drivers underlying these representations. Our findings offer meaningful insights for marketers and policymakers to help them develop policies that align consumers' simplification approaches with data privacy practices in complex digital ecosystems.