Doing Privacy: Exploring the Nature of Consumer Privacy and Privacy Management Strategies

Jo En Yap, RMIT University, Australia
Michael B. Beverland, University of Bath, UK
Liliana L. Bove, University of Melbourne, Australia

Using image-elicited depth interviews, we explore how consumers define privacy and how they achieve it. We find that the meaning informants ascribe to privacy (sovereignty over one’s personal domain) is a reflection of dominant socio-cultural influences. We also identify four categories of strategies used to “do” privacy: withdraw, defend, attack and/or reconcile.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Privacy invasion is to the information economy what pollution is to the industrial economy – a social cost borne not by those who benefit from pollution, but by the rest of society.”

(Deighton 2005, 144).

In the context of marketing, the privacy debate is dominated by discussions about consumers’ ability to control the collection, dissemination and use of their personal information (i.e., information privacy); and to a lesser degree, consumers’ ability to control the type and volume of marketing solicitations into their daily lives (i.e., interaction privacy) (Goodwin, 1991; Jones, 1991; Smith, Milberg and Burke 1996). We believe these approaches, although valuable, are limited for a number of reasons. First, other relevant aspects of privacy found outside the domain of marketing have generally been overlooked. Second, the concepts of information and interaction privacy were conceived in the era of direct and database marketing; and focus primarily on top-down, one-way exchanges from organizations to current and/or prospective customers. Third, instead of reflecting what consumers perceive privacy to be, current meaning(s) of consumer privacy are primarily framed by practitioners, researchers and the media. As such, findings may not fully account for and differentiate between the myriad of technologically advanced privacy related issues experienced by consumers as they navigate through the social-interactive environment of the 21st century (Harper 2000; Nguyen and Li 2010; Solove 2002). We believe that a bottom-up approach that produces insights into the ways in which consumers view privacy, and its various forms, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the concept as it applies in contemporary consumer society. Therefore, the first objective of this study is to explore the nature of consumer privacy.

Furthermore, consumers have largely been portrayed as ignorant and passive players in the marketplace that submissively accept privacy violations and are unable to protect their privacy (Acquisti and Grossklags 2004; Milne 2003; Milne, Rohm, and Bahl 2004; Nehf 2007; Norberg, Horne, and Horne 2007; Sayre and Horne 2000; Spiekermann, Grossklags, and Berendt 2001). This portrayal is in contradiction with current findings of consumers actively exerting their influence and participating in the marketplace; as co-creators of value (Vargo and Lusch 2004) and engaged participants (van Doorn, et al. 2010; Verheof, Reimartz, and Kraft 2010). Therefore, the second objective of this study is to explore the ways in which consumers actively defend or “do” privacy.

To address our research objectives, we conducted image-elicited depth interviews on a theoretical sample of 23 informants; 13 women and 10 men aged between 19 and 60 years of age. Each informant was given a sketchbook and asked to collect and/or draw images that presented their thoughts, feelings and experiences about privacy. They were then asked to explain the significance of each image. Then, informants were given a folder that consisted of around 100 privacy-related images. Informants were asked to select images which resonated with their thoughts and stimulated their emotions; and comment on their selected images. The interviews ranged from one hour to two and a half hours in length, were audio taped and later transcribed. Interviews were analyzed in line with open, axial and selective coding.

Our findings highlight the socio-culturally embedded nature of consumer privacy; where the meaning informants ascribe to privacy—a state of sovereignty over one’s personal domain—is shaped by the tension between the greater degree of personalization in all aspects of life and its paradoxical effect, feelings of impersonalization. It was found that three socio-cultural forces largely drive the personalization of life. These forces have been labelled: participation; greater good appeals; and shifting public-private boundaries.

Participation reflects the recognition that disclosure of personally identifiable information is fast becoming a prerequisite to gain access to the market, engage in social networks and live as a member of society. Greater good appeals to security, fairness and community welfare focus on the personal benefits derived from the greater good. Last, shifting public-private boundaries reflect the social trend of living one’s life on display, the casualization of relations between people and the insistence of businesses wanting to form relationships with consumers.

As previously alluded, the personalization of life paradoxically engenders feelings of impersonalization. This polar opposite condition of impersonalization is reflected in fuzzy boundaries and the denial of the authentic self. For example, the multiple roles informants play in the course of their daily lives are increasingly difficult to keep separate and the relationship marketing practices of some firms exceed what would normally be considered as the commercial boundary. As such informants acknowledge a need to be more mindful of creating a carefully staged public persona, and thus feel that their sense of authentic self is denied.

This dialectic tension arising from an increased emphasis on the personalization of aspects of life and a greater sense of impersonalization experienced by informants drives consumers desires for privacy and results in consumers actively “doing” privacy through the use of several cognitive and behavioural strategies. These strategies are categorized as: withdraw, defend, attack and reconcile. Withdraw represents avoidance tactics that informants engage in to facilitate the goal of removing one’s self from situations that may violate their privacy. Defend represents protective tactics that are largely concerned with proactively enacting and strengthening the barriers of informants’ respective personal domains, thus ‘minimizing damage’. Attack, represents offensive tactics that informants employ when confronted with a privacy related situation. These tactics are more direct and aggressive in nature. Last, reconcile can take the form where informants either convince themselves that privacy will prevail, or actively negotiate the conditions of disclosure with the requesting party.

In summary, by elucidating the ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of privacy from the consumers’ perspective, we offer a more comprehensive understanding of this concept as it applies in contemporary consumer society. Our findings highlight that consumers are active participants in the marketplace and engage in a number of strategies to achieve or maintain sovereignty over their personal domain. In doing so, we contribute to growing literature on consumer creativity (Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Epp and Price 2008, 2009; Price 2008; van Doorn et al. 2010; Verheof et al. 2010).
REFERENCES


