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Giving Away the Data of Others: an Exploration of an Ownership Ambiguity Framework

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When registering to use apps or websites, consumers regularly pass on the personal data of others online (Litt & Hargittai, 2014; Sarigol, Garcia, & Schweitzer, 2014). So why do people pass on vast amounts of information about others to unknown recipients, disrespecting deeply ingrained norms of respect for others privacy, information and possessions (Goodwin, 1991; Kelvin, 1973; Rudmin, 1991)? The paper begins by establishing the ownership framework and explores the elements of ambiguity at 3 steps by drawing on qualitative data from a range of sources.

Data from several sources were used in conjunction with literature on perceptions of ownership and personal data, namely, consumer attitudes to giving away the data of others as well as comments and online chatrooms such as the Facebook community webpages. Secondly, 113 subjects were asked to write down their thoughts on a scenario. Thirdly, the researchers engaged in introspection of their own behavior regarding the phenomenon.

The first step entails the realization of data transfer. For people to react to any transfer of ownership they need to be aware of it. Transfer ambiguity can result from; *Hidden decision*, i.e. the actual decision to give away is 'hidden' within the decision to use the app, and not made explicit. *Ignorance* concerns consumers' inability or unwillingness to actually read and engage with what is being requested (Dommeyer & Gross, 2003; Jensen, Potts, & Jensen, 2005). *(Motivated) Inattention* is a failure to pay attention inadvertently or being motivated.

Object ambiguity refers to the possibility that consumers may have difficulty grasping what the entity of (others') data is and what value it has. Several factors contribute to this. *Elusive nature of data* is the idea that data in our phones are complex and largely invisible, we may find it difficult to understand them as an entity that can be owned (Kamleitner & Mitchell, 2017). *Bundled sales* is the fact that apps do not request permission for specific, meaningful and easily identifiable points of data, such as a specific picture or phone number, but for a whole class of data such as all files or contacts. *Lack of value* results from consumers struggling to understand value of data for many reasons (Kamleitner & Mitchell, 2017).

The second step of passing on ownership assumes awareness of transfer and tackles the question as to who may hold a claim to the thing being transferred. Here, consumers realize that they are giving away something, but fail to realize that others may (also) hold a claim to it¹. Several factors contribute to this. *Being asked* means consumers may fail to question their entitlements because they automatically react to signals of ownership brought about by the situation. *Container effect* concerns the question of where the data are stored or located. *Creator effect* signals control and thus potential ownership is the question of who has created the data (Fuchs, Prandelli, & Schreier, 2010; Levene, Starmans, & Friedman, 2015). *Conveyed ownership* is the idea that most of the data about others have been obtained directly from the other with their permission or at least with their acquiescence. *Public good* is where data has been shared a lot and is common knowledge to many, means they treat it like a

public good (cf. Feeny, Berkes, McCay, & Acheson, 1990; Hardin, 1968).

In the third step consumers understand others' data have value and recognize that others have rights to it, but they fail to respect the rights of others. Several factors contribute to this. *Diffusion of responsibility* relates to the fact that personal data rights and responsibilities are rarely explicitly discussed and thus it is very difficult to draw clear boundary lines that show where each party's responsibilities begin and end. *Nothing to hide* is an underlying assumption held by some that sharing data only harms those who have something to hide. *Little harm* comes from consumers not knowing for certain whether there is any harm in the action. *Blind trust* in the app provider seemed to play a role in making the need to respect the rights of others less clear. *Reciprocity norms* means consumers may use signals from others to infer what they are and are not allowed to do (Lin & McFerran, 2016; Ratner & Hamilton, 2015). *Privacy is dead* means whatever one does no longer makes a difference because the dice of privacy have fallen. *You are me* suggests that the passing on of intimate information to others is also a matter of the relationship between the person the information is about and the consumers the information is about (Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997).

First, we have shown that the framework provides a useful starting point for the identification of specific reasons causing the (inadvertent) disclosure of others' data which is saturated with ambiguities. Second, the phenomenological decomposition of the phenomenon of the transfer of others data has brought to light that there are still substantial gaps in ownership research. Third, the framework is one of very few frameworks in marketing that explicitly recognizes the social nature of ownership and adds to a steadily growing stream of research across disciplines (Aryee, Seidu, Sacramento, & Martinaityte, 2015; Ashby & Burgoyne, 2009). Fourth are the practical implications of our findings with regards to public policy because interventions geared at reasons and ambiguities arising at step 3 will only be effective if there is not also a problem at step 1 and 2. For example, for step 1, where the consumer is unaware there is anything being transferred, companies could alert consumers to the transfer of other's data and app providers could make this more salient by using personalisation, e.g., 'the emails of your best friends' to overcome the incomprehensibility of 'all your contacts'.

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¹ Note that our exploratory interviews can only deliver insights on this step because participants had been made aware that the data transferred concern other people.

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