

Privacy from a Consumer's Perspective: Shared Meanings and Goals

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Abstract

Drawing on image-elicited depth interviews, we explore the nature of privacy from the consumers' perspective. Our findings reveal that consumer privacy is a concept consisting of three dimensions – freedom from invasion, freedom from surveillance and freedom from others. Underpinning these dimensions of privacy are six privacy goals: safety, sovereignty, freedom, solitude, identity management and ownership. This paper contributes to existing literature by offering a more comprehensive account of the dimensions of privacy that are of concern to consumers and highlight the value of privacy in assisting consumers with the attainment of their goals. In doing so, we provide a basis through which consumer privacy concerns can be better understood and managed; and as a result, gain improved outcomes for all.

Keywords: Consumer privacy, consumer goals

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Introduction

Media reports and public opinion polls have documented increasing incidents of privacy violations and escalating levels of privacy concerns amongst consumers (ABC News, 2010; Dearne, 2010, Office of the Privacy Commissioner [Australia], 2007; Tay, 2010). In spite of increasing public and academic interest in privacy, a review of literature revealed a lack of both a clear conceptual definition of privacy and an understanding the personal goals underpinning consumers' desires for privacy. We believe that gaining an understanding the meaning(s) of privacy and its importance to consumers is an essential precursor to managing consumers' privacy concerns. As such, this study seeks to explore nature of privacy from the consumers' perspective.

Our findings revealed that consumer privacy is a concept consisting of three dimensions – freedom from invasion, freedom from surveillance and freedom from others – to which facilitate the attainment of several personal goals. These personal goals have been broadly labelled privacy goals. Six privacy goals were uncovered: safety, sovereignty, freedom, solitude, identity management and ownership. By clarifying the 'what(s)' and 'why(s)' of privacy from the perspective of the consumer, this paper contributes towards a better understanding of consumer privacy concerns and offers a basis through which consumer privacy concerns can be managed and gain improved outcomes for all.

Literature Review

Privacy is a multi-dimensional concept. In the marketing literature, privacy is operationalised along two dimensions: information privacy (i.e., the ability to control the collection, dissemination and use of personal information) and interaction privacy (i.e., the ability to control the type and volume of marketing solicitations encountered) (Goodwin, 1991; Jones, 1991; Patterson, O'Malley and Evans, 1997; Smith, Milberg and Burke, 1996). In the legal literature, privacy has been conceptualized as the right to be let alone (Warren and Brandeis, 1890), and operationalised by four dimensions: intrusion, disclosure, false light and appropriation (Prosser, 1960). In the psychological literature, privacy has been defined as the right of individuals 'to determine for themselves when, how and to what extent information about them is communicated to others' (Westin, 1967, p.7), 'the selective control of access to the self' (Altman, 1975, p.24) and the control of transactions (i.e., interactions, communication) between person(s) and other(s) (Margulis, 1977; 2003). Others within both the legal and psychological domains, have defined privacy as being immune from the judgement of others (Introna and Pouloudi, 1999; Johnson, 1989) as well as a concept that signifies, among other things, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, control over one's body, solitude in one's home, seclusion, freedom from surveillance, protection of one's reputation, secrecy, personhood, security, human dignity, identity and anonymity (Solove, 2002; Viseu, Clement and Aspinall, 2004). As can be seen in the preceding discussion, privacy is indeed an elusive concept (Solove, 2000).

The current marketing-based conceptualization of consumer privacy does not to fully reflect consumers' apprehensions concerning the technologically advanced uses of personal information (Harper and Singleton, 2001); which may engender a host of other privacy-related issues, such as 'identity expression' or 'spiritual sustenance' (Deighton, 2005;

Richins, 2005). It also fails to indicate the dimension(s) of privacy being investigated; or make assumptions about how privacy is perceived by consumers and rely on consumers' responses to fixed scales. Last, it does not account for the reasons underpinning consumers' desires for privacy. For example, legal and psychological conceptualizations of privacy, such as being immune to the judgement of others, the protection of one's reputation, freedom of thought, freedom of expression and human dignity represent the reasons underlying privacy concerns, rather than the dimensions of privacy concerns per se. Indeed, Pham and Higgins (2005), Richins (2005) and Thompson (2000) highlight the role consumers' goals play in explaining consumer behaviour. In summary, the objectives of this paper are two-fold. We aim to explore the dimensions of privacy that exist in a consumer context and uncover the goals underlying consumer privacy concerns.

Methodology

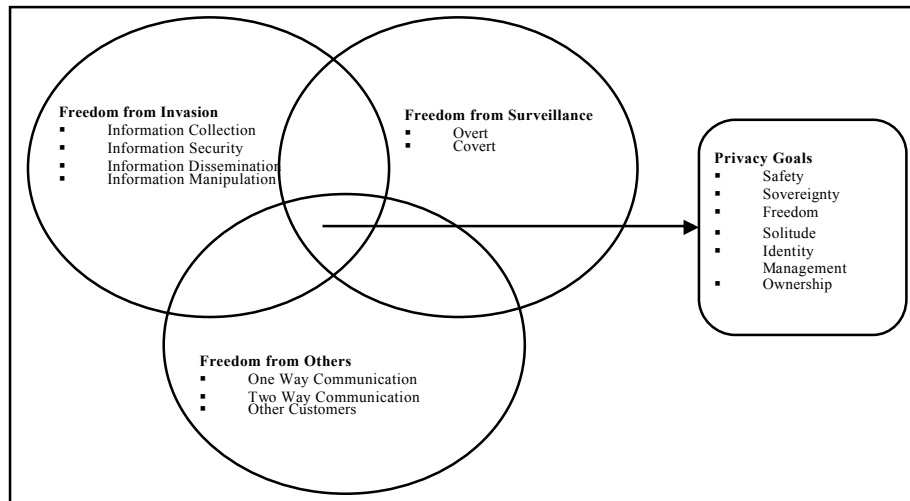
As the research objectives are exploratory in nature, we employed a qualitative approach. More specifically, depth interviews using the photo-elicitation technique were conducted on a theoretical sample of 23 informants; 13 women and 10 men, aged between 19 and 60 years of age. Visual images served as a tool through which the multiple meanings of privacy were uncovered and assisted interview participants in articulating their ideas, feelings and experiences (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Harper, 2002; Zaltman, 1997, 2003). Informants were first given a brief description of the research topic. They were then presented with a formal statement outlining the instructions and details of the research project, and a sketchbook. Here, informants were advised to spend time thinking about the concept of 'privacy from a consumers' perspective', collect between 12 to 15 visual images and/or objects that represented their thoughts, feelings and experiences as they related to the research topic and attach the selected visual images, along with any comments in the sketchbook provided. Each participant was given a minimum of one week to collect the visual images and to contact the researcher to schedule a time and location for the interview.

The interviews began with a discussion of informants' visual images and associated comments. Then, informants were given a folder that consisted of around 100 privacy-related images and asked to select those that resonated with them. Informants were asked to comment on these selected images. Finally, depending on time availability and if informants were not fatigued, they were asked to create a collage that summarized their main thoughts of privacy using photocopies of their own visual images and/or those supplied. They were then asked to comment on this summary image. This activity was only presented to six informants. The interviews ranged from one hour to two and a half hours in length, were audio taped and later transcribed. Interview data were then analyzed in line with open, axial and selective coding guidelines provided by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

Findings and Discussion

Analysis revealed that consumer privacy is a concept consisting of three dimensions: freedom from invasion, freedom from surveillance and freedom from others. These dimensions of privacy are underpinned by six privacy goals: safety, sovereignty, freedom, solitude, identity and ownership. A summary of our findings is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Dimensions of Consumer Privacy and Privacy Goals



The first dimension of privacy is freedom from invasion; a state in which aspects of the self are unknown to others. Here, informants articulated their desire to control who knows what about them. This is clearly illustrated in Kathy's (WFmid0-30s) comment about 'the onion effect' (see Passage 1). By placing herself in the middle of 'the onion', Kathy 'holds' all the aspects pertaining to herself; to which she divulges to others according to her discretion. Analysis identified four conceptually distinct aspects of freedom from invasion – information collection, information security, information dissemination, and information manipulation.

Passage 1: Kathy (WFmid-30s)

Kathy (WFmid-30s): I thought um, this picture was just um, me in the middle, and I, I was thinking about um, you know, from, from me going outwards, you know, for the people that I'm comfortable with and um, so on and so forth, I would be willing to share different things with people that are closer to me than um, people that are, are less close, I guess. Um, yeah, so I had me in the middle, and that I would be willing to share you know, just about anything with my husband. So I have very, very few privacy things between me and my husband. Um, and then my family and friends, you know, I would share a lot with them but um, not necessarily everything. And then so on and so forth, you know.

The second dimension of privacy is freedom from surveillance; a state in which one is not subject to constant monitoring and observation. Here, informants articulated their concerns about being watched and kept under attentive view. This is clearly illustrated in Jessica's (WF50) remark about iris scanning technology (see Passage 2).

Passage 2: Jessica (WF50)

Jessica (WF50): See well that's scary. That they'll be able to get information out, all about you, just by your, you know, your eyes. Your fingerprints. There's like the Big Brother thing. You know, you don't want people watching you all the time. And that, you know, that big brother. They know exactly, if they wanted to, they can just follow you wherever you are. So you're not individual anymore. You're just, you know? *I: What do you mean?* Well if they can pinpoint wherever you are, I guess you are an individual but you don't have your privacy anymore. There's you know, there's nothing you can, can do where you can, you know, you don't have somebody knowing about it.

Jessica does not like being watched and like many of the informants, drew upon the metaphor of Big Brother and the Orwellian society, where you are watched and can be tracked wherever you are. Analysis identified two conceptually distinct aspects of freedom from invasion – overt surveillance and covert surveillance. Overt surveillance pertains to explicit and tangible monitoring activities, such as CCTV cameras and rewards/loyalty programs. Covert surveillance pertains to implicit and intangible monitoring activities, such as RFID tags and online tracking technologies.

The third dimension of privacy is freedom from others; a state in which one is left alone and not disturbed. This may take place on both a physical and/or mental level, as clearly illustrated in Sam's (WM43) comment below (see Passage 3). Here, Sam expresses his contempt for personalized marketing communications, stating that his 'personal space has been consumed over a frivolous or marketing opportunity'. Analysis identified three conceptually distinct aspects of freedom from others – one way communication (i.e., organizations' one-sided attempts to communicate with customers, such as junk mail, spam and SMS offers), two way communication (i.e., reciprocal interaction with organizational representatives, such as being approached by service providers on the streets and service vicinities, and telemarketing), and other consumers (i.e., activities of other customers, such as loitering by ATM machines, standing too close in queues, eavesdropping on conversations and being approached by others customers).

Passage 3: Sam (WM43)

Sam (WM43): Once again, technology and consumer privacy, um, links into now the proliferation of electronic mediums [...] Um, but it's interesting when you get his information coming across the phone um, the telephone, um, the text messages, the spam, it's all personalized nowadays. And it's customized to maybe your buying behaviour. So maybe someone here has actually got my receipt from Rebel Sport, and they've worked out [how much I spend, how much I earn, my spending and lifestyle particulars, where I live] [...] And now I'm getting phone calls from India. What the f---'s going on? [...] My personal space has been consumed over a frivolous or marketing opportunity that shouldn't actually don't without my explicit knowledge, of knowing yes, I actually want to know about these things.

Privacy helps the consumer to achieve a number of goals. (see Table 1 for Informant Exemplars). Privacy affords a sense of both financial and personal/physical safety. As can be seen in Jessie's (WFmid-30s) passage, she is uncomfortable with the idea of 'people knowing where she lives when they don't need to know' for personal security reasons. Similarly, Sarah (WF40) tells of her concerns about her financial world being violated and her identity stolen. Privacy also provides sovereignty; that is, doing as one pleases without being subject to external influence/control and another's authority. This is clearly reflected in Bob's (AM25) passage as he discusses the pervasiveness of rewards and loyalty cards. Bob strongly believes that he should be able to choose for himself what to purchase, what to do and what he likes.

Privacy also facilitates the goal of being free and true to the self, in terms of actions and expressions. As Gary (WM46) refers to image of actor Ewan McGregor standing in front of a luscious mountain landscape, he discusses how that privacy affords him the freedom 'to be himself', to do as he pleases in the 'privacy of his own little self contained world'. Privacy assists in the achievement of a state of solitude, where unwanted communication is avoided, peace and quiet prevail and there is a 'temporary escape' from the hustle and bustle of day-to-day life. This is clearly illustrated in Jessie's (WFmid-30s) passage. As she refers to an image of a man walking along a beach, Jessie talks about the importance of having 'a space away' from others.

Privacy also allows for the management of one's identity. This enables one to manage the way in which one is portrayed/presented and perceived by others, thereby allow one to avoid being subjected to judgments, assumptions and discrimination. This is clearly reflected in Ken's (AMmid-30s) passage as he provided examples of situations where knowledge of one's sexual orientation, religious beliefs, political affiliations or lifestyle choices could result in discrimination, damage to one's reputation and influence the way in which one is treated. Finally, privacy provides a sense of ownership where one has 'something that is mine and mine alone'. This is clearly illustrated in Jessie's (WMmid-30s). Taken aback by the amount of information available when she typed her name into the 'Google box', Jessie spoke of the importance of 'keeping your own info private so you've got something for yourself'.

Table 1: Privacy Goals – Informant Exemplars

Privacy Goals (Definition)	Informant Exemplars
Safety (Financial and personal/physical safety)	<p><i>Jessie (WFmid-30s)</i>: I think retail, they don't need to know your personal information. If you're going out to buy something, I don't think you should automatically have to give out your information [...] I just don't like the idea of people knowing where I live when they don't need to know, yeah. <i>I: Why?</i> Well, for personal security, even. Like you just don't know – The more you give out your details, the more likely it is that someone, for, whatever reason might, I don't know, follow you or you know?</p> <p><i>Sarah (WF40)</i>: Um, and this was just basically about um, internet banking and how you're vulnerable um, through that now. That's a whole other area where privacy can be um, taken [...] When I think of lack of privacy, I think of my financial world being violated [...] That's how I think of privacy or lack of privacy. I don't know if everyone's the same but that's how I feel. I feel like if um, yeah, that's, that's my idea like when I think of lack of privacy I feel like yeah um, my cards been taken or my identity being stolen or that's my perception of lack of privacy.</p>
Sovereignty (Doing as one pleases without being subject to external influence/control and another's authority)	<p><i>Bob (AM26)</i>: Let me choose you know, let me choose myself what I want to purchase, what I want to do, what I like.</p>
Freedom (Being free and true to the self, in terms of actions and expressions)	<p><i>Gary (WM40)</i>: And the last one, was representing freedom. The freedom that privacy affords you. Put me on his face, it's just him, you know, the freedom that you get, the whole illusion. That you know, it's just you [emphasis on you] [...] Um, freedom to be me. Freedom to be myself. Without you know, if I wanna run around the house wearing a shower cap and nothing else, that's me, okay [...] So to me, freedom is being able to do what you want in the privacy of your own thing, I mean, the privacy of your own little self contained world, i.e. your house, your unit, your flat, etcetera.</p>
Solitude (Unwanted communication is avoided, peace and quiet prevail and there is a 'temporary escape')	<p><i>Jessie (WF mid-30s)</i>: So I started with the, a picture of someone walking along the beach with no one else around. So that's about seeking privacy for yourself. Going to a place where there's no one else [...] I feel that's an important thing. To have a space where you can go and keep yourself private from others. Just to have some peace and quiet [...] So I just feel for me, personally, it's nice to have that space away from other people, you know?</p>
Identity Management (Manage the way in which one is portrayed/presented and perceived by others)	<p><i>Ken (AMmid-30s)</i>: If you, they think, if they give that information out, that may lead to discrimination. So for example, just until a few years ago, um, gay people, they didn't want to show that they are into that because they think, okay, they will get discriminated. So they felt okay, that's a private, that's private information. That's about themselves. So better to keep it that way so then to avoid discrimination [...] And um, so the same with um, other things as well, like say for example, your religion. So some people may not really want to say you don't have a religion. Coz they may think okay, others may think of you as a bad person. Because you don't have a religion. Or other person not want to say your religion because they think it may lead to discrimination. Yeah.</p>
Ownership (Where one has 'something that is mine and mine alone')	<p><i>Jessie (Wfmid-30s)</i>: Um, I don't think it's just about um, yeah, keeping your own info private so you've got something for yourself. Like I said, coz a lot of information about your is freely available on the internet or whatever. So it's nice to just keep some things private. That make sense? [...] Not everyone needs to know every detail about your life [...] I know one guy won a few awards for his work and he's quite shy about it. Like didn't want to have it all up there. He was like you know, showing off or something like that and he said he didn't want, he didn't want that you know, made known to people. He wanted to keep that to himself.</p>

Conclusion

This paper contributes to existing literature in the following ways: First, we offer a more comprehensive account of the dimensions of privacy that are of concern to consumers and provide the basis for future research on this issue. Second, we provide an understanding of the value of privacy to consumers in assisting them to achieve their privacy goals. Finally, from a practical point of view, by clarifying the 'elusive' nature of privacy as it applies in the context of consumption, this study provides a shared, common language around which discussions between academics, privacy advocates, managers and policy makers can take place. In doing so, we provide a basis through which consumer privacy concerns can be managed and gain improved outcomes for all.

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