Construction and validation of the in-store privacy preference scale

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ABSTRACT

Consumer privacy issues continue to influence marketing practice. While protection from undue use of personal information draws significant attention, concerns related to undesired visibility of consumer activity in the shopping space has received very little. In fact any empirical measure of this is lacking, despite a growing body of literature in the realm of shopping related consumer embarrassment and practices used by consumers to privatize shopping behavior. To close this gap, this paper develops a self-report scale to measure in-store privacy preference (ISPP), a situational variable that addresses consumer desires to avoid shopping related self-disclosure. The paper reports on data collected from over 1000 adult consumers to develop and validate a four-item measure of ISPP. The measure is shown to predict several potential outcomes related to embarrassing or uncomfortable shopping experiences. Applications for the scale's use and implications for managers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The notion that consumption practices have symbolic meaning is well recognized. One aspect that has received less attention is when consumers attempt to conceal or hide shopping activity that may have undesirable symbolic representations, like buying condoms or products that imply an embarrassing problem. Hiding the product among a larger assortment and shopping in a less crowded store are some strategies consumers might use. These behaviors suggest that consumers have privacy preferences that are contextualized by the shopping task and the interpersonal nature of shopping environments. Yet, little has been undertaken to understand these privacy concerns in the retail environment. This is important because privacy is linked to maintaining one's public identity and self-presentation, which can influence a myriad of shopping related outcomes. In-store privacy preference and its implications on consumer behavior and marketing practice are the focus of this paper.

While measures of consumer privacy exist in the literature, they focus primarily on concern for data privacy (e.g., Malhotra et al., 2004). There are currently no scales in the literature that capture consumers' privacy preference. However, numerous studies suggest that shopping experiences can be daunting because they spur unwanted real or imagined normative scrutiny (Dahl et al., 2001; Parrot and Smith 1991; Picca and Joos, 2009), during which times privacy may be desirable. Several of these studies suggest that consumers prefer and are motivated to control these

shopping experience in a manner that helps them preserve their self-esteem, avoid negative judgments from others, and achieve a degree of anonymity (e.g., Blair and Roese, 2013; Brackett 2004; Dahl et al., 2001; George and Murcott, 1992; Goodwin, 1991; McGrath and Otnes, 1995). Thus the notion of a preference for shopping privacy seems well recognized. However, empirical research on this topic is hindered due to lack of measurement scale of the concept. This paper addresses this gap by creating a concise and easy to administer scale.

2. Concept development

2.1. Definitions and Theories of privacy

To define *in-store privacy preference* (ISPP), it is useful to rely on existing frameworks of privacy. Fried (1970, p. 23) considered privacy to include control over information about oneself as well as "a justified, acknowledged power to control aspects of one's environment." Posner (1981) offered a similar view, considering privacy to mean freedom from unwanted intrusion and disclosure. These definitions exemplify the importance of keeping aspects of one's self reserved and/or intentionally controlled by the individual.

Two main theoretical platforms help refine these definitions and explain privacy as ways in which people protect themselves. First, Westin's (1967) theory of privacy proposes that people determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them should be communicated to others. In Westin's

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view, privacy concerns the voluntary and temporary withdrawal of a person from general society using either physical or psychological means. He posits that we have a need for privacy that helps us adjust emotionally to our daily lives and interactions with other people (Margulis, 2003). Second, Altman's (1976, p. 24) theory of privacy is centered on social interaction, where privacy is "the selective control of access to the self." One element of control is avoiding unwanted persons or contact during an interaction. For example, Altman (1976) emphasizes control over intrusions that occur when others enter one's "space." In a consumer context, this intrusion occurs if the consumer is unable to control the physical presence of unwanted participants during a commercial interaction or consumption behavior. Specifying this dimension emphasizes that the presence of another person can reduce consumer privacy, independent of that person's knowledge about the transaction (Goodwin, 1991).

2.2. Literature review: Shopping privacy and preserving self-identity

Public consumption behavior, product display and product ownership are important facets of self-presentation (e.g., Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Belk, 1988). Numerous studies highlight the positive aspects of shopping for and showcasing products as a way for people to project a desired image of themselves in the public sphere (e.g., Tian et al., 2001; Wang and Wallendorf, 2006). But not all public consumer behaviors portray positive messages. The interpersonal nature of some shopping experiences make people uncomfortable because they are value-expressive, projecting information about one's self and one's personal values via their purchase that they believe will be judged negatively by others (McGrath and Otnes, 1995). For example, some people who wear hearing aids believe that they will be stigmatized as old, feeble and incompetent (Iacobucci et al., 2003). One study noted that individuals dealing with incontinence feel shameful, and fear signaling to others their private health problems (Kershaw and Schmall, 1992). Shopping for condoms or other sex-related products also spur fears of being judged as promiscuous or engaging in unsuitable behavior (Dahl et al., 2001; Brackett, 2004; Picca and Joos, 2009).

Discomfort is sometimes attributed to a societal gender–product mismatch. For example, men are a fast growing segment for online beauty stores because they are often embarrassed and uncomfortable purchasing these products in person (Fottrell, 2013). These trends in male grooming are shaping the manner in which brands and retail stores accommodate men. For instance, retail stores including Target and Duane Read in the US have created dedicated *men's* sections to comfort the male shopper who might feel that purchasing certain personal care products signify an undesirable characteristic of femininity, metrosexuality or homosexuality (Skålén, 2010).

These examples demonstrate how self-presentation is achieved by concealing public displays of consumption and how attempts to achieve privacy can be dictated by real or imagined societal norms (Goffman, 1959; Goodwin, 1991). Indeed, a growing body of research suggests that consumers disguise purchases that cause embarrassment or pose risks to their desired public identity (Blair and Roese, 2013; Brackett, 2004; Dahl et al., 2001; Nichols et al., 2014; Picca and Joos, 2009). For example, men buying pornographic magazines at a convenience store request a bag more often than men purchasing other types of magazines (Lewittes and Simmons, 1975). Consumers needing incontinence products often purchase sanitary napkins instead of "adult diapers" in order to avoid perceived social scrutiny (Kershaw and Schmall, 1992). Consumers are also more likely to purchase additional unrelated items in an effort to disguise the true nature of their shopping trip when purchasing things dealing with fungal infections, sexual

health, or other sensitive personal hygiene problems (Nichols et al., 2014). A recent study by Blair and Roese (2013) proposed the *identity balance of the basket* whereby they argue that it is the full composition of the shopping basket that attenuates or exacerbates embarrassment and discomfort. They suggest that purchasing items that are related (e.g., anti-gas medicine and toilet paper) signal undesirable basket identity and create more embarrassment. Erotic books also sell faster online even though the prices is usually higher (Fottrell, 2013); a statistic attributed to the discomfort people experience when making the purchase in person.

Other concealment behaviors are noted by Brackett (2004), who reported that most men shop alone when buying condoms and that people actively behaved in ways that helped increase privacy and reduce attention from others, including monitoring others in the store, avoiding a clerk of the opposite sex, avoiding asking for help, surveying the aisle and waiting for others to leave, and avoiding eye contact with other people. Brackett's (2004) conclusions echo the importance of not only expected interactions with others that might occur, but also the influence of noninteractive social situations (i.e., people in the same aisle) on a shopper's fears of being watched or judged. A noninteractive social situation is one where "a social entity is physically present during consumption but is not involved nor attempts to engage the consumer in any way (Argo et al., 2005, p. 207)".

These studies support theorizing that in-store privacy is sought to avoid self-disclosure or unwanted intrusions from others (Altman, 1976). They also suggest that in-store privacy (as opposed to data privacy or online shopping privacy) is a real concern for many consumers that can have important outcomes in the retail space.

3. Methods

The scale was developed following procedures recommended by Churchill (1979), Spector (1992), Devellis (2012) and Gerbing and Anderson (1988). The research program was designed to generate self-report items to measure in-store privacy preference (ISPP), purify the scale, demonstrate its reliability and validity, and show its usefulness in predicting shopping related feelings and behaviors.

3.1. Construct exploration and definition

The first steps were conducted in order to define the construct and help generate items that represented its characteristics. Information was gathered from the literature review previously cited, as well as an analysis of qualitative data from forty consumers recruited from an online panel who were asked to name and describe a shopping situation where they desired privacy (45% male, 55% female, $M_{age} = 37$). The data were analyzed with a focus on common themes in purchase behaviors and products that initiated the behaviors. The qualitative data suggested that, overwhelmingly, privacy concerns were due to emotional discomfort or embarrassment related to the product or service and not the consumers' lack of knowledge or confidence about the purchase process. The products mentioned were overwhelmingly related to sexual behavior (e.g., condoms, lubrications, pregnancy tests), personal hygiene (e.g., fungal infections, acne creams) or gastrointestinal medicines (e.g., diarrhea, gas pills) and products related to bathroom issues (e.g., toilet plunger). A few participants described the discomfort they felt purchasing clothes or undergarments because they were overweight. Thus, the participant descriptions seemed to fall in line with the themes present in extant literature.

Based on the literature review and qualitative data, the definition of in-store privacy preference was established as the