What Is Creepy?
Towards Understanding that eerie feeling when it seems the Internet “knows” you

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Motivation FOR STUDY

• Collision of Marketing & Privacy

• Digital footprint and opportunity for behavioral marketing – Personalized Communication
  • Right Message, Right Person, Right Time

• Big data at the expense of consumer privacy
SMART, USEFUL, SCARY, CREEPY?*

How Target Figured Out A Teen Girl Was Pregnant Before Her Father Did

Every time you go shopping, you share intimate details about your consumption patterns with retailers. And many of those retailers are studying those details to figure out what you like, what you need, and which coupons are most likely to make you happy. Target, for example, has figured out how to data-mine its way into your womb, to figure out whether you have a baby on the way long before you need to start buying diapers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What Is “Creepy”?  
What Key Factors Make a Personalized Communication or Ad “Creepy”?  

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

THEY SAY

- Marketers
- Data Brokers
- Data Aggregators
- Online Advertisers

I SAY

- Internet Users
- Consumers
METHODOLOGY

• Qualitative
• Grounded theory method
• 22 semi-structured interviews, 4 age cohorts
• Male and Female
key theories

- Privacy
  - Nonintrusion (Bratman 2002, Kramer 1989)

- Marketing
  - Social Contract Theory (Friend 2004, Dunfee, Smith and Ross, 1999)

- Communication
  - Communication Privacy Management (Petronio 2008)
Key Findings

Key Finding #1: Creepy Is Widespread

Key Finding #2: Creepy and Privacy Intrusive are related, BUT Different

Key Finding #3: “THEY” are in Control

Key Finding #4: Lack of Control led to safeguarding information even when nothing to hide

Key Finding #5: Experience Of Creepy Does Not Diminish Internet Usage
Key insights

• Creepy is socially constructed
  ~ Social Norms ~ Social imaginaries

• Anthropomorphism: attributes human-like characteristics to non-human agents
Creepy is about emotional reaction

**Good:**

Dear Mr. Johnson -

As a valued customer of 11 years, we thought you might be interested in this offer.

**Creepy:**

Dear William H. Johnson (“Bill”) -

As a valued customer since your first purchase from our company on **Wednesday, March 12, 2003**, we thought you and your wife **Evelyn** (whom you married in **1987**) would be interested in this offer.
Creepy doesn’t necessarily mean privacy intrusion
What is creepy?

An emotional reaction to an experience, interaction or unsolicited communication where personal information has been unknowingly collected and used invoking feelings of apprehension and unsettlement.
Creepy QUADRANT

SOMEWHA T CREEPY (SC)
Some Control – Me
Low Transparency & Trust – Them

NOT CREEPY (NC)
High Control – Me
High Transparency & Trust – Them

VERY CREEPY (VC)
Low Control – Me
Low Transparency & Trust – Them

LESS CREEPY (LC)
Low Control – Me
High Transparency & Trust – Them

CONTEXT
So what!
Implications to practice

• Awareness of consumer concerns expectations
• Marketers, Advertisers understand interplay of transparency, trust and control
• Companies change behaviors
• Avoid harm
• Protect brand, reputation
• Avoid government sanctions
• Trust/Distrust
• Know creepy to avoid creepy
Creepy continues…

- Google Gmail Ads
- Facebook psychological experiment on 700k users
- Creepy and Not-so-Creepy Bots
- Websites Deliver Ads Depending on the type of computer you use
- Marketing Firms Track Health Problems
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