

When it comes to privacy, gender matters

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A study aimed at assessing perspectives about privacy in a public place - particularly when surveillance is not related to security - suggests women are more concerned than men, both as watcher and the watched.

The University of Washington study also tends to cast doubt on the notion held by some that people no longer have any expectation of privacy once they leave their homes. Nearly a quarter of the men and women considered even minimal video capture to be a privacy violation.

Although the majority of both genders had no privacy problem with on-campus video capture, significantly more women than men were uncomfortable with it. And a majority of the women -- but not the men -- were uneasy about having their images viewed at off-campus locations.

The findings stem from responses of nearly 900 people, including 780 individuals who were surveyed or interviewed after being told they could be viewed using a high-definition television camera mounted atop a campus building.

The camera, with a view of pedestrians near a fountain and public plaza, presented a live display on a plasma screen in an office in the building. A roughly equal number of men and women participated in the study.

Findings are to be published next month in the Journal of Human Computer Interaction. UW Information School professor Batya Friedman and Psychology associate professor Peter Kahn, co-directors

of the UW's Value Sensitive Design Research Lab, are lead authors.

A majority of men and women, among both the watchers and the watched, said they had no problem with a live video of the scene being displayed in someone's office inside the building, the study found.

By contrast, a majority of women said it was "not all right" if the camera displayed the video on screens in an apartment off campus, an apartment in Tokyo or in millions of homes around the world. Such sentiment might be explained, Friedman said, by a greater sense of trust in the university as a benevolent community.

A majority of men and women interviewed said they would be uncomfortable with having their images recorded, as opposed to being used in a real-time display. The study also shows almost twice as many women as men voicing concern about even real-time display of their images.

What researchers found surprising, Kahn said, was that the percentage of concerned women did not vary -- as it did among men - depending on whether they were watching or being watched.

"Our interpretation is that, compared to men, women feel more vulnerable, especially in terms of physical safety and psychological well-being (such as being stalked) and that women bring these concerns into a greater variety of roles in life," the authors wrote.

More broadly, Friedman said the findings suggest that people do not subscribe to a position famously articulated by Sun Microsystems president Scott McNealy, who in 1999 was quoted as saying, "You have zero privacy anyway ... Get over it."

"Over half (55%) of the participants we surveyed expressed some

concern for having their image in a public place collected and displayed elsewhere," Kahn said. The researchers found a similar pattern when they conducted a follow-up study last year at the University of Stockholm with professor Kristina Höök at the Swedish Institute of Computer Science.

Source: University of Washington

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