

China state TV raps Kohler, BMW for using facial recognition

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A shopper walks past a MaxMara clothing store at an upscale shopping mall in Beijing, Tuesday, March 16, 2021. Chinese state TV has criticized bathroom fixtures brand Kohler, automaker BMW and MaxMara fashion boutiques for using facial recognition to identify customers in a possible violation of privacy rules that took effect this year. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

Chinese state TV has criticized bathroom fixtures brand Kohler and automaker BMW for the use of facial recognition technology on visitors to their outlets in possible violation of privacy rules that took effect this year.

The accusation came in an annual China Central Television broadcast Monday to mark World Consumer Rights Day that often highlights complaints against foreign brands.

Facial recognition is used by China's government as part of a surveillance network to monitor the public through millions of video cameras. Some Chinese developers market the technology abroad, prompting complaints they might be helping oppressive governments.

Kohler Co., BMW AG and Italian fashion brand MaxMara are among companies that use facial recognition on visitors, CCTV said. It said they failed to obtain permission from individuals that is required under legal changes that took effect Jan. 1.

On Tuesday, Kohler said it would stop using the technology. The company said facial recognition was used only to record how many customers visited shops and information about them wasn't saved.

"We sincerely apologize to customers!" Kohler said on its social media account.

BMW said dealers cited by CCTV are Chinese-owned and not controlled by the German automaker.



Employees stand at the entrance to a MaxMara clothing store at an upscale shopping mall in Beijing, Tuesday, March 16, 2021. Chinese state TV has criticized bathroom fixtures brand Kohler, automaker BMW and MaxMara fashion boutiques for using facial recognition to identify customers in a possible violation of privacy rules that took effect this year. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)



An imaging camera similar to ones shown in a Chinese state television broadcast is seen at a MaxMara clothing store at an upscale shopping mall in Beijing, Tuesday, March 16, 2021. Chinese state TV has criticized bathroom fixtures brand Kohler, automaker BMW and MaxMara fashion boutiques for using facial recognition to identify customers in a possible violation of privacy rules that took effect this year. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

"To the extent permitted by the relevant laws and regulations, we've been constantly advising the authorized dealers and partners to strictly follow the legal requirements in their independent business operation," the company said in a statement.

Faces are "sensitive personal information" under the law, CCTV said. It said the growing use of facial recognition as a substitute for a password

by companies means a leak would "seriously threaten" privacy and security.

MaxMara uses the system to measure customer flow in stores and doesn't capture personal information, said a woman who answered the phone at the company's China headquarters in Beijing. She said data are erased every night.

"We will not collect anyone's facial information," said the woman, who would not give her name.

Some public places in China such as airports have signs that tell visitors they are being recorded.

In 2019, a law professor sued a zoo in the eastern city of Hangzhou for requiring visitors to record their faces. News reports said the zoo responded by giving visitors the option of leaving their fingerprints instead.

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