



Full length article

“Do you like cookies?” Adolescents' skeptical processing of retargeted Facebook-ads and the moderating role of privacy concern and a textual debriefing



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ABSTRACT

Adolescents are regularly exposed to commercial messages on social networking sites. There is scant knowledge of how they interact with marketing communications on these social platforms. This study examines how advertising on Facebook is associated with adolescents' ad skepticism, and how this influences their purchase intentions. Also, the moderating role of privacy concern and a textual debriefing about the nature of the advertising technique are investigated. In total, 363 adolescents aged 16–18 years participated in an experimental study. The results show that, in general, retargeted Facebook ads (compared to non-retargeting) lead to higher purchase intentions. However, when textual debriefing is provided or for adolescents with a high privacy concern, skeptical attitude toward retargeting increases, which in turn decreases purchase intentions. These research findings hold some important implications for actors from different fields of expertise, such as policy makers, practitioners and educators.

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1. Introduction

During the last decade, the advertising industry has witnessed a sharp increase in innovative online marketing techniques. Advertisers are searching for new ways to adapt their messages to the characteristics or behavior of consumers. In that regard, *retargeting* can be addressed as one of those recent innovative practices. Retargeting refers to exposing an online user to an advertisement including a particular kind of content that (s)he searched for online or saw on a previously visited website (Goldfarb, 2013). For example, if an internet user searched for or saw a pair of shoes on a website, this item or a similar one may appear in retargeted ads as (s)he continues to browse the web. Retargeting is a frequently occurring tactic in the data-rich environment of social networking sites (SNS), and certainly on Facebook, where advertisers have rapidly adopted this technique (Hamman & Plomion, 2013).

Notwithstanding its implementation in practice, scant research has been conducted to investigate the effects of retargeting on SNS, making this a particularly fruitful and relevant area (Knoll, 2015). Although it is important to explore the general tendency of how consumers interact with retargeting on SNS, gaining insights into this practice among adolescents may be of particular importance. Being avid SNS users, adolescents are regularly exposed to retargeting on these social platforms. Consequently, it is important for this group to understand how, when, and why advertisers try to influence them with this technique. However, during adolescence, cognitive abilities and with information processing skills are still developing, which means that their knowledge of advertising techniques and persuasion strategies is not entirely matured (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994; Friestad & Wright, 1994). The latter applies particularly for new advertising formats as adolescents may have limited knowledge about these novel persuasion techniques due to inexperience and unfamiliarity (Verhellen, Oates, Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2014). As a result, adolescents might be less able to critically reflect on advertising on a conscious level, making them a group of consumers at risk of unwanted persuasion effects.

The aim of this study is to investigate how adolescents process (i.e. advertising skepticism) retargeted ads on Facebook, compared

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to non-retargeted ads, and how this influences their behavioral response (i.e. purchase intention). Furthermore, it has been argued that marketplace comprehension and critical processing can be influenced by various personal and situational characteristics (Shimp, 2010). In the context of retargeted advertising, we will therefore investigate the impact of adolescents' privacy concern as a personal factor. As retargeting employs personal information of online consumers to customize advertising (i.e. their browsing history), it can be argued that one's level of online informational privacy concern can be an important factor in the elaboration and effectiveness of retargeting. The contextual factor that will be investigated is a textual debriefing about the nature of the advertising technique. As young consumers may sometimes encounter difficulties to recognize and understand advertising critically, it is said that they must be contextually aided or encouraged to do so (John, 1999). Therefore, a textual debriefing could be effective in triggering critical advertising knowledge.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

To test our hypotheses, we have developed a theoretical model (Fig. 1) representing a moderated mediation relationship, also called conditional process model (Hayes, 2013). In this section, the full model will be broken down into separate but interrelated hypotheses in order to obtain an interpretative overview of how the model is constituted.

2.1. Responses toward retargeting

As studies about retargeting are scarce, we will built upon insights from similar practices that have gone by several names, such as targeting, customization, tailoring, personalization and online behavioral advertising (Taylor, 2013). Although some slight differences, they all share the same basic principle with retargeting: target advertising to those consumers that are most likely to be interested based on personal information. We will, for the sake of clarity, group all these techniques under the term 'targeting'. Studies investigating this topic among adult consumers have yielded inconsistent results (Maslowska, van den Putte, & Smit, 2011; Yu & Cude, 2009). Two main perspectives can be distinguished in the literature. On the one hand, consumers might perceive the content of a targeted ad as more appealing, relevant and aligned with their personal interests (Tucker, 2014). The targeted ad is believed to deliver the right message to the right people at the right time, implicating that people perceive it as more relevant and consistent with their goals and interests (Cho & Cheon, 2004). Empirical support for this perspective was found in studies indicating that targeted advertising content leads to favorable responses, such as positive attitudes (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006; Maslowska et al., 2011), increased purchase intention (Goldfarb &

Tucker, 2011) and click-through rate (Yan et al., 2009). On the other hand, the advantage of receiving relevant ads comes at the expense of people possibly perceiving targeted advertising as both creepy and unpleasant as they may experience greater feelings of privacy invasion (Tucker, 2014). The latter can result in less positive attitudes and a decrease in purchase intention, and an increase in ad avoidance and rejection (Baek & Morimoto, 2012; McDonald & Cranor, 2010; Yu & Cude, 2009).

Given these mixed findings about targeting, it leaves us to wonder how young consumers will react to a specific advertising technique that customizes commercial content based on their online search behavior, as retargeting does. Adolescents exposed to a retargeted ad (compared to a non-retargeted ad) generally possess more information (e.g. price, availability, etc.) because they are exposed to an ad containing the very same product or service they have already looked for in an earlier search query. It can be expected that repeated exposure and more information lead to favorable effects on advertising outcomes (Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991; Pechmann & Stewart, 1988). Therefore, the current study predicts that adolescents will have a higher purchase intention for a product depicted in a retargeted ad, compared to a non-retargeted ad. In summary, we posit the following hypothesis:

- H1 Retargeted ads lead to higher levels of purchase intention compared to non-retargeted ads (i.e. direct relationship).

2.2. Advertising skepticism toward retargeting

During adolescence, young people may become skeptical about different kinds of social communications, including advertising (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This phenomenon can be explained by the reactance theory introduced by Brehm (1989). Most of the time, people want the freedom to think, feel, and act as they choose. When realizing that they are subject to an (external) commercial attempt that tries to persuade them, they will perceive it as a threat to their autonomy and freedom of choice, triggering what has been defined as *reactance* (Brehm, 1989). Subsequently, this reactance can generate resistance to persuasion by people by avoiding the persuasive message, or disagreeing in a more thoughtful manner, i.e. counterarguing and questioning the credibility of the source and the message (Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2011; Silvia, 2006). Based on the latter, White, Zahay, Thorbjørnsen, and Shavitt (2008) showed that targeted messages result in 'personalization reactance' – a psychological resistance in response to inappropriate personalization of messages. This implies that, given that advertisers track down the personal browsing history of (usually) unaware online consumers to enable retargeting, people may experience this as an invasion of their online privacy and therefore feel deceived. Because of this privacy intrusion and feelings of deception, people may be more likely to deal with this advertising practice by criticizing the tactic and process the ad with more skepticism (Boerman, van Reijmersdal & Neijens, 2014). Next to reactance, Knowles and Linn (2004) assert another prominent factor of resistance to persuasion: a distrust of commercial stimuli. This face of resistance alerts consumers to be guarded and cautious when faced with a persuasive message, especially if the persuaders' goals are mistrusted. As people are usually poorly informed about how companies deal with their private information and data online, they often lack a sense of trust in the advertising industry with regards to targeted advertising (Bergström, 2015; Ur, Leon, Cranor, Shay, & Wang, 2012). Again, this confirms our premise that adolescent consumers might engage in skeptical reasoning when they are confronted with retargeted advertisements on SNS, more so than non-retargeted ads, because it –usually unbeknown-

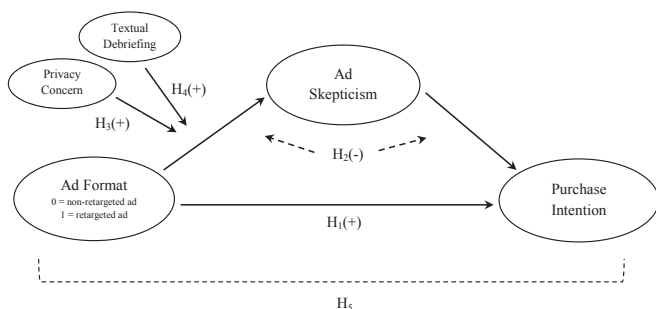


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of adolescents' processing of retargeted ads on Facebook.

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