The Human Behind the Data: Emotion AI-Driven Advertising and Its Cost to Privacy and Wellbeing

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Abstract. Emotion AI, technology that infers human emotional states through facial analysis and biometric signals, is rapidly transforming digital advertising personalization, raising critical questions for consumer wellbeing in the digital age. This study addresses an empirical gap through qualitative interviews with fifteen participants across three stakeholder groups: consumers, advertising professionals, and legal experts, conducted within the EU context. Findings reveal that consumers draw an intuitive boundary between emotional matching and emotional manipulation, one that existing consent mechanisms fail to protect. Advertising professionals normalize emotional exploitation as an extension of current practice, while legal experts identify a fragmented regulatory landscape in which no single instrument, including the GDPR, the EU AI Act, and the DSA, adequately governs affective targeting's wellbeing risks. Across all groups, autonomy emerges as the central value at stake. The study calls for a reorientation of how advertising understands its relationship to consumers' inner lives.

Keywords: Emotion AI, affective targeting, consumer wellbeing, digital advertising, privacy