Empowering the Cynical Consumer: The Role of Ad Customization in Privacy Protection and Ad Engagement

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Abstract

With the rise of personalized advertising and algorithmic targeting, research has focused on heightened privacy concerns. Yet many consumers adopt privacy cynicism—a sense of powerlessness and mistrust toward online data practices that makes privacy protection seem futile. To address this issue, we examine whether ad customization can empower consumers with privacy cynicism through one single-factor between-subjects field experiment using Google's My Ad Center (N = 171; absence vs. Google's My Ad Center cue vs. Google's My Ad Center action). The results show that when consumers recognize that ads are controllable distinct psychological heuristics are activated, leading to improved advertising experiences. Notably, customization actions are particularly beneficial for highly privacy-cynical consumers, reducing privacy concerns and fostering more favorable platform attitudes. Overall, these findings offer theoretical and practical insights into how ad customization can reconcile privacy protection with advertising effectiveness.

Keywords: Ad Customization, Privacy Cynicism, Privacy Concern, Cognitive Heuristics, User Agency