

# SCROLLING PAST RELEVANCE

## *AD BLINDNESS, ALGORITHMIC CURATION AND THE LIMITS OF BEHAVIOURAL TARGETING*

**Ojaswini Shingare, Dr. Sadiya Nair**

UG Student, Assistant Professor

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Jain (deemed to be) University, Bangalore India

### **Abstract**

Digital platforms are really good at figuring out what we like.. Even though they are good at this we have gotten good at ignoring the ads they show us. This is a problem with digital ads today. The more digital platforms know about what we like the more we tend to ignore the ads they show us. This paper looks at this problem. Tries to understand why it is happening. It uses ideas from psychology, media studies and advertising research to ask a question. The question is whether showing ads that are related to the content we are looking at is better, than showing ads that are related to our interests. The idea is that digital platforms have gotten too good at showing us ads that're just for us. Now we are avoiding them without even thinking about it. Digital platforms and their ads are a part of our lives and digital advertising is a big business. The paper thinks that maybe digital platforms need to change the way they show us ads because the way they are doing it now is not working well.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

When you open Instagram, YouTube or TikTok in the evening it feels like the app knows what you are thinking. The algorithm notices that you watched a travel video for a bit long that you were looking at shoes and that you usually scroll through your feed late on weekdays. It then shows you a feed that's all about you.. If you look closely at your feed you will see ads that you probably did not even notice.

This is not an accident. Some research on social media apps found that people are not very good at telling ads from posts and they get even worse at it as they keep scrolling through their feed. This research was done by Szladvics and palmer in 2024. Our brains have gotten really good at ignoring ads after scrolling through our feeds for thousands of hours. We can spot ads. Ignore them before we even realize it.

The people who make ads have always thought that the more information they have the better they can target their ads and the better the ads will work.. Maybe this is not true. This paper says that the way social media apps curate our feeds has actually made it harder for targeted ads to work. It suggests that of targeting individual users ads might be more effective if they are placed in environments where people are already interested in that type of thing.

There are three questions that this paper is trying to answer. First how do social media apps contribute to us ignoring ads? Second what is going on in our brains when we ignore ads?. Third is placing ads in relevant environments really more effective than targeting individual users? The paper is looking at curation and its effect, on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok and how it affects the ads we see on these platforms specifically on these social media apps.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The Attention Economy and Cognitive Saturation

Herbert Simon said something important. He said that when there is a lot of information it is hard to get people's attention. This is more true today when we can scroll through things forever. Websites and apps are made to keep us looking at them. They are really good at it.

A study, in 2024 found out that people who watch a lot of videos have a harder time focusing. This is because it affects the part of the brain that helps us focus and control our impulses. People are not just sitting there looking at things they are quickly trying to make sense of what they see.

The Attention Economy is affecting how we see things. When we see ads they just seem like noise. The more we see things that're just for us the more we notice when something is not what we want to see. Even if an ad is really good and for us it still feels like an interruption.

### 2.2 Ad Blindness: From Banners to Algorithms

People tend to ignore things that look like ads. This is called banner blindness. This was first noticed in the 1990s. Now people are using algorithms to choose what they see. Something new is happening. People are getting really good at ignoring ads without thinking about it. They do not even see the ads so they do not have to decide to ignore them.

There was a study by Szladovics and Palmer in 2024. They used a Facebook page that you could scroll through to see how well young adults could notice ads. The study found that people were not just ignoring ads sometimes they were ignoring them all the time. It did not matter where the ads were on the page people were still bad at noticing them. The people who used media a lot were the worst at noticing ads. This means that people learn to ignore ads over time and they get better at it.

This is important because ads are usually shown to people based on what they like. The idea is that if an ad is relevant people will notice it.. If people are ignoring ads without even thinking about it then the whole idea of showing people relevant ads does not work. Ad blindness is a problem, for ads that are meant to be relevant because people are ignoring them anyway. The way that ads are targeted to people is based on the idea that relevant ads will get attention. If people are ignoring ads without thinking then this idea is not true.

### 2.3 Behavioural vs. Contextual Targeting

Behavioural targeting is when we track what people do online like what they search for what they click on and what they buy so we can show them ads that're just right for them. On the hand contextual targeting is when we match ads to what people are looking at not who they are. For example we might see an ad for sportswear when we are reading an article about fitness or an ad for coffee when we are watching a video about morning routines.

Some researchers, Haglund and Bjorklund wrote a paper in the Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising in 2024. They said that people are starting to use targeting more often. This is because of laws, like the GDPR and because we cannot use third-party cookies anymore. They also found out that when ads are shown in the context people are more likely to pay attention to them. For instance if someone is looking at a website, about cars they are more likely to click on a car ad than if they saw it on a kind of website.

Funnel.io did a report in 2025 that said most advertisers think contextual targeting is going to be really important. They also said that people are spending money on contextual advertising. This is not just because of the rules it is because contextual targeting actually works. Contextual targeting is when we show ads that're relevant to what people are looking at and this makes the ads more effective.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a synthesis method. It looks at studies from experts reports from the advertising industry and research on how people think. The studies were published from 2018 to 2025. The sources came from places like SAGE Journals and ScienceDirect. The studies that were chosen had numbers and experiments to back up their claims about advertising. They looked at how people pay attention to ads try to avoid them and how well ads are targeted.

No new data was collected for this study. It is based on analysing and interpreting what others have already found. The goal is to bring all the existing evidence to make a clear point, about advertising

### 4. ANALYSIS

The problem with targeting is not that it is done poorly. It is an issue. People get used to scrolling through things on platforms that use algorithms. They learn to decide what they want and what they do not want fast. When people scroll they notice things like the label that says "sponsored" or how an ad looks different from things. They can ignore these things in a split second. The time people spend on these platforms the better they get at ignoring ads.

Behavioural targeting cannot fix this problem by being more precise. Even if an ad is perfect for someone it is still an ad. If people see that it is an ad before they even look at it then it does no matter how precise it is. The problem is not whether the ad is relevant to the person. The problem is whether they even look at it enough to decide if it is relevant.

Contextual targeting does things differently. It looks at what people are doing right now and tries to fit in with that. Research shows that people are more likely to accept things that fit in with what they're already doing. If an ad feels like it belongs with the content people are less likely to ignore it.

Contextual targeting is not perfect. It does not know much about people as behavioural targeting does. It can make mistakes.. It has an advantage because it works with how people actually use platforms that use algorithms. This advantage is important even if contextual targeting does not know much about people as behavioural targeting does.

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## 5. FINDINGS

Three important things come out of this study. First people ignoring ads on media is not something that just happens. It is something that people learn to do over time. The time people spend on social media the better they get at ignoring ads. This means that the people who use media the most are actually the hardest to reach with regular ads.

Second trying to show ads to people based on their behaviour is not working well as it used to. Just because we have a lot of data about someone does not mean they will actually see the ad. The problem is not that the ad is not relevant. It is that people are not paying attention to it.

Third putting ads in places where they make sense is an idea. For example if an ad is, for a product that is related to the content of the page people are more likely to notice it. This approach works because it is natural and does not try to trick people into looking at the ad. As a result people are less likely to ignore the ad without thinking about it.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The digital advertising industry has spent twenty years making good tools to know the people they are advertising to. This has given them some abilities but it has also made them not see something important. The people who have been advertised to the most are the ones who have learned to ignore the ads they see.

The way things are picked for us to see has not just made our content more personal it has also made people get used to avoiding ads. This has slowly made the idea of targeting people based on what they do not work well. The question now is not how to make targeting but if targeting the person is still the right way to do things or if we should target the moment instead.

There is another way to do targeting it is called targeting. It does not fix all the problems with advertising but it does fix one big problem: the difference between ads being relevant and people actually paying attention to them. For people who are making ads and are dealing with rules about privacy and cookies not being used anymore and people being overwhelmed with information making sure ads are relevant and get attention may be more important than any one piece of information, about a person.

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