

Manipulation of Behavior Through AI Generated Targeted Content

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According to the American Psychological Association, “manipulation” is defined as the “behavior designed to exploit, control, or otherwise influence others to one’s advantage” [1]. In the world as we know it today, where the internet is a place of ever-growing information, behavioral manipulation is a massive problem. The problem mainly arises due to targeted content. Research depicts that such tactics are employed to control outcomes of specific situations and can influence a consumer’s decisions - ranging from as little as purchasing a product to voting in a specific way [3]. It has also been shown that not only targeted ads make a consumer more likely to buy stuff, but they can also change how they think about themselves [2]. This essay uses the words “content” and “advertisements” interchangeably from this point on.

I. MANIPULATION

Generally, targeted content is served through online advertisements handled by giant corporations like Meta (earlier, Facebook), Google, etcetera. According to reports, Google Ads is currently the biggest search advertising provider, with more than 2 million Google Ads accounts [4][5]. 98.4% of ad-enabled websites use Google Ads as their primary source of income – which means 46.1% of total websites on the internet run Google Ads [6]. These numbers are highly worrying as a lot of data collected through these Ads directly enhances the targeted content, and half of this content is controlled by a single entity.

Such a vast market share allows corporations to control a massive profit margin and manipulate consumers’ behavior. Reports show that 64% of US digital ad spending, accounting for 211.20 billion dollars, was controlled by Google, Meta and Amazon alone in 2021 [7].

According to reports, more than 50% of people between the ages of 18–34 can not differentiate between an ad and an organic result on Google [8] and Google Ads results receive 65% of the clicks that started with buying keywords with 11.38% Click Through Rate (CTR) [9]. In comparison, organic results only receive 35%. It has also been noticed that users are four times more likely to click on a paid search ad on Google (63%) than on any other search engine – Amazon (15%), YouTube (9%), and Bing (6%) [10].

The numbers provided above demonstrate that targeted web adverts are used to control and affect human behavior. Advertisers must have a say in creating the code of ethics that should govern us all as long as the technology sector survives on this type of tailored material. Having an ethical code for such a thing may seem utopian, given that organizations must produce money to maintain their staff, but so is the whole concept of morality. We know that the intelligent era is here, and the industry has to band together to create a code of ethics to regulate AI use [11].

Advertisers and companies may argue that targeted material is utilized to increase sales while also providing customers with what they require. However, according to Cass Sunstein, a Harvard Law Professor and former Administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Obama administration, “Manipulating consumers can not be considered marketing” [12]. Sunstein claims that deception is commonplace in everyday life, mainly in marketing, both in the public and private sectors. “Those who sell items engage in at least debatable types of manipulation,” Sunstein says. [13]

II. THE ETHICAL PROBLEM

Today, AI poses a substantial ethical concern in digital marketing, which include but is not limited to:

1. **Privacy Concerns and Sharing of Data:** It is expected for the marketing companies to protect their consumers’ data, but generally, the gathered data is shared with other companies to make a profit. This behavior is okay until the shared data is for a non-harmful reason and the user has provided consent. However, consent is not everything, as the users generally tend to overlook the extended and legally binding “privacy policy” statements. However, this is a marketeer’s responsibility to share the data ethically, as unethical sharing can harm the consumers. For example, showing ads for a gambling or alcohol selling website is unethical as it can exploit and harm vulnerable consumers [14].
2. **Bias and Prejudice:** While artificial intelligence is portrayed as neutral and unbiased, the algorithms that power it are designed by real humans. By acquiring biases from various sources, AI algorithms may potentially educate themselves on what is preferred. Racial and gender prejudices, such as failing to recognize individuals of color or transgender people, may be taught to AI [15]. Machine prejudice can also have more serious, possibly life-altering consequences, like racial bias in criminal risk assessments [16].

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- 3. Fake News and Misinformation:** Artificial intelligence (AI) systems might learn how to create fake material, posing a risk to corporations and computers alike. Bots may also spread hate speech and abuse and cause strife among specific groups or organizations. Automated social media accounts and bots on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, in particular, can be used to promote misinformation [17].

III. LAWFUL INTERVENTION

Cambridge Analytica, a (now defunct) British consulting business, gathered personal data from 87 million Facebook users without their knowledge in the 2010s [18], primarily for political advertising. The information was gathered through an app called “This Is Your Digital Life”, created in 2013 by data scientist Aleksandr Kogan and his business Global Science Research. The app consisted of questions designed to create psychological profiles on users and collected personal information from the users’ Facebook friends using Facebook’s Open Graph network.

Since then, public awareness about the possibility of internet manipulation has risen, and subsequent legislation has focused on safeguarding consumer data from unethical usage.

The California Consumer Privacy Act, passed in 2018, established new consumer rights around personal data [19]. These include regulations controlling businesses’ rights to access, delete, and exchange personal information.

The Genetic Information Privacy Act [20], which was just approved in Illinois, prevents businesses from hiring, terminating, or retaliating against employees based on genetic information.

Similarly, Vermont enacted the Protection of Personal Information Statute, which requires that some personal information be kept safe and secure under Vermont law [21].

All of this legislation is designed to safeguard customer data from corporate intrusion.

IV. CONCLUSION

As artificial intelligence for targeted marketing becomes more ubiquitous, further regulations concerning consumer privacy, data collecting, and algorithmic prejudice may emerge.

Many customers are unaware of how artificial intelligence works, what their data is used for, or if they have the option to give their data at all. When it comes to personal data, customers increasingly demand transparency in marketing. Businesses should apply the best consumer data and marketing practices to establish customer trust and prevent costly reputational harm. This includes ceasing third-party data usage and instituting new processes that allow users to select which bits of data to disclose.

Businesses may also request and integrate user input for data usage in digital marketing. Customers may be prepared to provide a certain quantity of data in exchange for the numerous benefits of artificial intelligence. They may, however, be wary about exposing sensitive personal information such as their mental and physical health, geographical location, or social conduct. Businesses can utilize consumer feedback to adopt a degree of data gathering to give helpful recommendations without infringing on privacy.

Despite the risks, it is clear that artificial intelligence is here to stay, and it will undoubtedly continue to affect marketing in the future. In marketing, several benefits linked with AI include better product and content suggestions, improved social engagement, customer service, and search. However, marketers must exercise caution when employing AI to prevent undermining customer confidence. This involves being transparent about data gathering and usage and using ethical marketing strategies.

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