How Do Users Evaluate Personalized Facebook Advertising? An Analysis Of Consumer- And Advertiser Controlled Factors.

Structured abstract

**Purpose**: This study investigates the role of five highly relevant advertiser- (i.e., personalization and ad placement) and consumer-controlled (i.e., privacy concerns, perceived relevance and Facebook motives) factors in the evaluation and perceived outcomes of personalized Facebook advertising as well as how these factors interrelate.

**Design/methodology/approach**: Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews, in which elicitation techniques were used, were carried out among 25- to 55-year-old Facebook users.

**Findings**: The findings point to a complex tradeoff between the risks and benefits of personalized Facebook advertising, in which perceived relevance and Facebook use motives play a vital role.

**Research limitations/implications**: This study focused on the general Facebook advertising experience, yet the elicitation techniques were applied only on the desktop website. Future research should look further into mobile advertising formats.

**Practical implications**: Personalization and retargeting algorithms could be improved and ads should be designed with the customers’ interests in mind in order to improve their effectiveness and reduce privacy concerns.

**Originality/value**: Social media advertising innovates at a high pace. Yet, the literature shows an urgent need for research into which ad formats and characteristics appeal to users and why (or why not). Qualitative studies into the determinants of advertising outcomes are scarce but highly needed because they can uncover complex interactions between factors and thus provide a deeper understanding.

**Paper type:** Research paper

How Do Users Evaluate Personalized Facebook Advertising? An Analysis Of Consumer- And Advertiser Controlled Factors.

# Introduction

The nature, evaluation and effectiveness of behavioral advertising—such as personalized advertising on social networking sites (SNSs), with Facebook as the most popular medium—have received much attention over the past years. Despite extensive research on the use of personal data in online advertising (Boerman et al., 2017), recent literature indicates that more insight is needed, not only on the optimal use of personal information in SNS advertising but also on how these personalized ads are best presented to attract attention and limit ad avoidance (Boerman et al., 2017; Jung, 2017). Boerman and colleagues (2017) identified two groups of factors that explain consumers’ responses to behavioral advertising, based on the interactive advertising model (IAM) of Rodgers and Thorson (2000): 1) factors controlled by the advertiser (how the ad is designed and communicated) and 2) factors controlled by the consumer (how the ad is perceived, related to consumer characteristics). The influences of both groups of factors on advertising outcomes are often difficult to assess separately from each other. Moreover, the interconnection between both groups of factors is especially apparent in personalized advertising. The technique of personalization, an advertiser-controlled characteristic that uses users’ personal data to create tailored ad messages, is aimed at tapping into consumer-controlled perceptions of usefulness and relevance but is also related to perceptions of privacy beliefs (Boerman et al., 2017). In turn, these privacy beliefs depend on contextual factors, which are in large part controlled by the SNS or the advertiser (Acquisti et al., 2015).

In order to complement the current body of advertising research, which is often based on predefined (fictitious) scenarios studied in a controlled experimental setting, various authors have called for studies that focus on actual real-world behavior and first-hand experiences with SNS advertising (Masłowska et al., 2016; Ying et al., 2009; Zhu and Chang, 2016). Qualitative research into the mutual influence of both groups of factors on SNS advertising effectiveness is scarce but can provide new insights into their role and into the interplay between both groups of factors (Belk, 2017; Hadija et al., 2012).

The present article uses a qualitative research design with elicitation techniques to study the interplay among five highly relevant characteristics in both groups of factors and their relations to evaluations and the perceived outcomes of personalized SNS advertising. These evaluations and perceived outcomes were approached from an advertiser’s perspective. Respondents may provide valuable information for advertisers on which ads they avoided or sought to avoid, liked, preferred, accepted or acted on by, for example, clicking. The focus lies on Facebook advertising since this is the most popular SNS in the world and within the geographical region of this study (Statista, 2018). For the advertiser-controlled factors, the influences of personalization and ad placement will be investigated. Among the consumer-controlled factors, the roles of privacy concerns, perceived relevance, and Facebook use motives will be assessed. The central research question of this study is: What is the role of both advertiser- and consumer-controlled factors in the evaluation and perceived outcomes of personalized Facebook advertising, and how do both factors relate to each other?(CRQ).

## Advertiser-controlled factors

Boerman and colleagues (2017) identified two types of advertiser-controlled factors in the context of online behavioral advertising: 1) specific ad characteristics that can differ between ads and 2) the form of transparency about how personal data are used for advertising purposes. Regarding the first type, the influence of personalization has been widely studied in the context of research on Facebook advertising’s effectiveness (De Keyzer et al., 2015; Tran, 2017). However, questions remain on the optimal use of personalization techniques (Boerman et al., 2017; Jung, 2017). Yet, since advertising studies on print, television and Internet advertising have indicated that variables such as ad placement, location and position are highly influential on advertising outcomes (Abernethy, 1991; Cho and Cheon, 2004; Speck and Elliott, 1997), it is unsurprising that recent studies have highlighted that simple advertiser-controlled variables such as ad placement continue to play important roles in determining advertising outcomes in a SNS environment (Van den Broeck et al., 2018, 2017). Therefore, two ad characteristics were selected for the present study: personalization and ad placement.

### Personalization

Personalization is a technique used by advertisers to tailor advertising to an individual’s characteristics and interests (De Keyzer et al., 2015; Sundar and Marathe, 2010). In broad terms, it has dual influences on consumer-related factors: 1) positive outcomes on different advertising effectiveness variables such as attention; attitudes toward the brand, the ad and the message; behavioral intention; and use intentions (Masłowska et al., 2016; Tran, 2017; Walrave et al., 2016; Zhu and Chang, 2016); and 2) negative outcomes in terms of privacy concerns, intrusiveness and reactance (Bleier and Eisenbeiss, 2015; Tucker, 2014; Zhu and Chang, 2016). Recent literature has indicated that the effects of personalization on privacy concerns are more nuanced and depend not only on how the personalization is done but also on how the advertisement is presented, in terms of context, placement, position or location (Bleier and Eisenbeiss, 2015; Rainie and Duggan, 2016; Van den Broeck et al., 2017, 2018). This inspired us to readdress the fundamental questions regarding Facebook advertising personalization: What is the role of personalization in determining Facebook advertising outcomes? [RQ1]. What conditions have to be met for personalization tactics to be perceived as successful? [RQ2].

### Ad placement

Facebook uses the term “ad placement” to indicate a combination of position and the corresponding appearance of advertising on the platform (Facebook, s.d.). Although Facebook provides a range of image and video advertising formats, it only provides two ad placements: message stream ads for the desktop and mobile websites and sidebar ads on the desktop website (Facebook, s.d.; Lafferty, 2015). Ad placement and ad positioning are a fairly unexplored area in Facebook advertising research (Cho and Cheon, 2004; Fan et al., 2017; Gazley et al., 2015; Van den Broeck et al., 2018). However, the positioning of ads on websites affects ad processing, clicks, attitudes, attention and perceptions of nuisance (Agarwal et al., 2011; Lin and Chen, 2009; Smit et al., 2014). Website ads placed centrally on the screen can be perceived as intrusive since they can be an obstacle in acquiring the website’s information (Cho and Cheon, 2004). As message stream ads are placed in the content flow of the Facebook News Feed, this placement is more likely to be perceived as goal impeding (Van den Broeck et al., 2017). A third partial research question was formulated: Do users perceive advertising placement to play a role when processing Facebook advertising? And if so, what is this role? [RQ3].

As mentioned, the second type of advertiser-controlled factors indicated by Boerman and colleagues (2017) is the form of transparency about how personal data is used for online behavioral advertising purposes. The Facebook platform standardizes ad transparency by providing cues (e.g. “sponsored post”) and tools (e.g. “Why am I seeing this?”) to users. As the Facebook ad platform does not allow transparency to vary in type or level, this factor was not assessed in the current study.

## Consumer-controlled factors

Boerman and colleagues (2017) further identified three consumer-controlled factors in the context of online behavioral advertising: 1) advertising knowledge and abilities (e.g. persuasion knowledge and the ability to hide ads), 2) perceptions toward advertising in general and toward specific ads (e.g. perception of usefulness), and 3) consumer characteristics (e.g. desire for privacy). With respect to knowledge and abilities, our qualitative approach allowed these to be taken into account when analyzing the transcripts. For example, this occurred by evaluating the ease of browsing the Facebook News Feed or the fact that users were aware of the option to find out which personal data were used in the shown ad.

To assess the second factor, the perceptions of perceived relevance and the consumer characteristic of privacy concerns were considered. Both factors are characteristic for personalized advertising since they both depend on the use of personal data. The two factors were found to be crucial consumer-controlled factors in predicting those outcomes of online behavioral advertising (Boerman et al., 2017).

In terms of consumer characteristics, the third factor, this study investigates the role of motives for Facebook use. Boerman and colleagues (2017) pointed to the need for more research into the role of motives in determining advertising effectiveness.

### Privacy concerns

In terms of consumer-controlled factors, privacy concerns have always played a prominent role in the existing literature on personalized SNS advertising effectiveness, as a backlash to personalization, which negatively influences advertising’s effectiveness when users perceive that advertisers are not keeping to the norms of information practices (Barnes, 2006; Boerman et al., 2017; Zhu and Chang, 2016). Simultaneously, recent studies on SNS usage and data-sharing behavior add nuance to the role of privacy concerns (Choi et al., 2017; Church et al., 2017; Hallam and Zanella, 2017). Van den Broeck and colleagues (2015) even suggested a potential shift in stance concerning the use of personal data in SNSs and found evidence (Van den Broeck et al., 2017) that the use of personal data did not significantly influence the acceptance of personalized SNS advertising. Moreover, privacy concerns did not seem to influence adolescents’ attitudes toward highly personalized ads on Facebook (Walrave et al., 2016). In this study, the recent nuancing of the influence of privacy concerns on the acceptance and effectiveness of personalized advertising will be approached using two explanatory models.

First, *social contract* theory states that users and the company that collects personal information form a social contract when there are “expectations of social norms (i.e., generally understood obligations) that govern the behavior of those involved” (Caudill and Murphy, 2000, p. 14). In this case, users receive multiple services from Facebook (e.g. facilitating communication with friends or offering news from pages that users like) in exchange for their personal and behavioral data and their tolerance for advertising messages on the network. Users can perceive the social contract as having been breached when they think their personal information is being used in a way that is not fair, or when the benefits of the SNS experience are not balanced with the costs of disclosing their personal information (Malheiros, 2014; Malheiros et al., 2013). An example of the latter is a SNS experience in which personalized ads are shown to the user but which the user nevertheless perceives as irrelevant to his or her needs, such as retargeted ads for products users already bought (Kumar and Gupta, 2016; Zhu and Chang, 2016). A perceived breach of the social contract could result in increased privacy concerns, lower trust and lower usage intentions (Büchi et al., 2017; Dhillon and Moores, 2003; Miyazaki, 2008). The recent nuancing of the influence of privacy concerns on the acceptance and effectiveness of personalized advertising in this regard can be explained by SNS use having become an everyday practice. The once unclear social contract has become more transparent due to 1) growing experience with SNS and SNS advertising and 2) the recent attention to privacy (mal)practices in the media, e.g. the US Congressional hearing on Facebook (Büchi et al., 2017). Users have gradually gained knowledge of data-processing practices due to this increased transparency, which results in their expectations about personal data processing being more in tune with today’s reality.

A second explanation can be found in the *privacy paradox* (Barnes, 2006; Norberg et al., 2007), which describes an inconsistency between users’ general privacy perceptions and privacy-related actions in a specific situation. Facebook users can value privacy and show high levels of dispositional privacy concern yet have no problem with disclosing personal information on the SNS in concrete situations (Debatin et al., 2009; Taddicken, 2014) or with letting Facebook use personal data for advertising purposes if the ad is funny or relevant (Walrave et al., 2016).

Based on the cited literature, two partial research questions were formulated: How does the existence of a social contract manifest itself in the relationship between privacy concerns and Facebook advertising outcomes? [RQ4]. Does the privacy paradox explain the perception of the role of privacy concerns in determining advertising outcomes? [RQ5].

### Perceived relevance

For personalized advertising, perceived relevance is defined as “The degree to which consumers perceive a personalized advertisement to be self-related or in some way instrumental in achieving their personal goals and values” (Zhu and Chang, 2016, p. 443). The main purpose of implementing personalization techniques is to increase an advertisement’s perceived relevance. Perceived ad relevance was found to lead to lower perceived intrusiveness (Edwards et al., 2002), higher purchase intention (Pavlou and Stewart, 2000) and more favorable attitudes toward the ad (Campbell and Wright, 2008). Several studies have pointed to the relationship between ad relevance and privacy concerns in personalized SNS advertising (Jung, 2017; Walrave et al., 2016; Zhu and Chang, 2016). Zhu and Chang (2016) found that ad relevance could mitigate the negative effects of privacy concerns on ad evaluations, thus playing a key role in determining the effectiveness of personalized advertising. Moreover, Van den Broeck and colleagues (2018) found the first evidence that a shown ad’s relevance and the motives for SNS use could influence the effectiveness of different ad placements on SNSs. A partial research question was formulated: How do users perceive ad relevance in the interplay between consumer- and advertiser-controlled advertising factors of Facebook advertising? [RQ6].

### Facebook motives

Smock and colleagues (2011) identified nine principle Facebook motives. Motives were categorized ranging from low-cognitive motives like relaxing entertainment to motives that require mental effort, such as expressive information sharing. An example of an activity related to high-cognitive motives is searching for information about a person, brand or event. For low-cognitive effort motives, activities could include browsing the newsfeed, or killing time on the platform (Fan et al., 2017). Watching advertising messages is not a principal SNS motive for Facebook users (Wilson et al., 2012). In the Facebook News Feed, ads are shown in between or next to the original content that users are motivated to process. Therefore, when using Facebook for one of their original goals (e.g. communicating or seeking information), users must tolerate advertisements appearing alongside the authentic user-generated content. This makes the motives for using Facebook important to consider when studying ad effectiveness (Bleier and Eisenbeiss, 2015; Chi, 2011; Rodgers and Thorson, 2000). Yet, the roles of situation-specific motives and subsequent behavior on online advertising effectiveness remain a gap in the literature (Cho and Cheon, 2004; Fan et al., 2017; Seyedghorban et al., 2016). Van den Broeck and colleagues (2017) found that motives for Facebook use could play an important role in determining 1) the advertising outcomes and 2) the role of privacy concerns in personalized advertising’s effectiveness. When users are goal-oriented and thus focused on a specific task, such as searching for updates about an upcoming event, they can perceive interruptions in their task as goal-impeding, which can lead to poorer attitudes toward the ad and higher ad-avoidance intent (Duff and Faber, 2011; Edwards et al., 2002; Van den Broeck et al., 2018). However, when users are aimlessly browsing the Facebook News Feed, interruptions have less of an impact on advertising outcomes than ad avoidance does (Van den Broeck et al., 2018).

A final partial research question was formulated: “How do users' motives for accessing Facebook influence the way they evaluate the shown ad?” [RQ7].

# Methods

## Participants and materials

In-depth interviews were used because they allow to uncover concepts and relationships between concepts and to directly elaborate on the findings during the interview (Mortelmans, 2007). The partial research questions described in the first part of this manuscript provided the basis for 23 preset questions that formed the basis of the further analyses (e.g. “Have you ever bought something after seeing an ad on Facebook?” and “Do you feel that a lot of information is being collected about you in order to personalize the advertising?”). During the interview, 12 other questions were asked on general Facebook use and attitudes, as part of a different study. Both studies are part of a PhD project on perceptions toward Facebook ads.

Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted among a sample of adult Facebook users. Each respondent was between 25 and 55 years old. The respondents were chosen to obtain an even distribution over three age categories (25–34, 35–44 and 45–55), and each age category contained an equal number of men and women. Respondents were recruited from the interviewers’ wide personal networks. Generally, the respondents were experienced Facebook users. All the respondents had a minimum of 5 years of Facebook experience. Most of the respondents had signed up for Facebook around 9 years ago (i.e. 2010). Most of them used Facebook daily, while a few of them only used it occasionally. The data-gathering was part of an academic bachelor’s course on research methodology. Each of the 14 interviewers received theoretical and practical training during weekly courses in the months leading up to the interviews. For three consecutive weeks, the interviewers were trained specifically on using the research instrument for this study. The questions in the interview script were discussed during the course, so that a common understanding was achieved. The interviews were practiced beforehand by organizing training interviews during the weekly meetings. Moreover, extensive quality checks were performed before analysis of the interviews. The audio recordings of each interview were evaluated and compared to the written notes of the interviewers. The demographic information of each respondent was checked.

Elicitation techniques were used to interrogate the respondents on specific behaviors and choices and to facilitate the generation of meaning. Instead of showing generic ad examples, the respondents had to evaluate Facebook ads on their personal News Feed and using their own computer equipment. The respondents were subsequently asked to open the “Why did I see this?” dialogue box and evaluate the personal data used to personalize the ad. Using the respondents’ own Facebook accounts and devices increased the realism and involvement, as the shown ads were personalized to the respondents. Moreover, the ads were presented next to content with which the respondents were familiar. The fact that the interviews took place in the respondents’ homes further added to the study’s ecological validity. The interviewer could furthermore observe the ease with which the respondents surfed the social network and recognized the shown advertisements.

## Data collection and procedure

All 28 interviews were carried out between 21 February and 13 March 2017. Each interview took between 30 minutes and 75 minutes. Before the interview, the respondents were asked to sign an informed consent form that explained the study goals and informed the respondents that their data would be treated confidentially, participation to the study was voluntary and they could quit the study at any time. The audio of the interviews was recorded for transcription purposes, with the respondents’ explicit consent.

At the start of the interview, the interviewer asked the respondent’s age and gender and introduced the respondent to the study by explaining the flow of the interview and the question types. Furthermore, the interviewer instructed the respondent to take an Internet device, preferably a computer, turn off any ad blocking software and open the Facebook homepage. The interview consisted of three parts. The first part of the interview assessed the respondents’ Facebook experience and mainly consisted of factual questions about their usage patterns and their motivations for using Facebook (e.g. “What kind of activities do you undertake on Facebook?”, “What is your motivation to surf to Facebook or open the Facebook app?”). The second part contained questions about how the respondents perceived advertiser-controlled factors of Facebook advertising in general and the respondents’ knowledge and perceptions of advertising formats and placement in particular (e.g. “How do you recognize advertising on Facebook?”, “Have you ever clicked through to a Facebook ad's website?”). In order to have the respondent evaluate advertising outcomes from an advertiser’s perspective, the respondents were asked which actions advertisements had triggered in them. The interviewers could then use more specific questions to find out about click behavior, purchase (intention), sharing of advertisements or the intention to search more information about the advertised product. Subsequently, their Facebook ad preferences and privacy perceptions regarding the use of personal data for personalization purposes were assessed; follow-up questions were asked on the role of ad relevance (e.g. “Do you think personalization can add value to your advertising experience?”). Furthermore, the respondents were asked to describe their ideal presentation of Facebook advertisements. In the third part of the interview, the respondents were invited to open their Facebook News Feed. The respondents were instructed to scroll through the News Feed until they encountered an advertisement. They were directed to stop at the first ad that caught their attention, whether they found it interesting or not. Although respondents were not specifically instructed to read the News Feed content, content had to be processed to a certain degree in order to distinguish ad content from original content. This exercise had to be done twice. When the respondents selected a message stream ad initially, the interviewer asked the respondents to scroll until they saw a sidebar ad subsequently, and vice versa. The respondents were asked in both instances to evaluate the ad in terms of likeability and to specify why they liked one ad better than the other. This technique was used to gain insights into the interplay of factors that lead to perceived advertising outcomes. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to open the “Why did I see this?” dialogue box next to the last ad they picked, evaluate the personal data used to personalize the ad (“What do you think about the information that is being used in this ad?”), and elaborate upon their awareness of data use and acceptance of personalization in that specific situation. During the exercise, the interviewer took notes. In the notes, an evaluation was made of how easily the respondent navigated the News Feed. Characteristics of ads that were not noticed, and thus skipped, were also written down. Moreover, interviewers were instructed to write down other ‘peculiarities or things they found striking’. These notes were mainly used in the analysis of the elicitation exercise and were read next to the written interviews. For example, by comparing the interview with the notes, it could be discovered whether the advertisement one described was indeed the first advertisement the person saw. The notes were always read together with the interview, and thus not disconnected from the individual transcriptions.

## Data analysis

The interviewer transcribed the interviews in the days after each interview, based on the interview recording, and the transcripts were verified by the authors of this manuscript. This manuscript’s corresponding author carried out further data analysis. A final data set of 28 transcriptions was created and imported into NVivo software for coding and analysis. NVivo is a computer software package created by QSR International, that allows to examine relationships in qualitative data by facilitating the coding process and by allowing for transcripts to be searched, annotated and linked to other sources (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2019). The corresponding author coded all 28 interviews, although the other authors closely monitored the coding, and discussed different interpretations. The analysis started with an initial open coding of the interviews. Afterward, an iterative interpretivist process started in which codes were structured, renamed, refined, merged and split. While this was an inductive process, the final codes were undeniably influenced by the topics that were asked about. Yet, the inductive approach also allowed for insights to spontaneously emerge from the codes. Afterward, for each code, the authors analyzed and summarized the references in the interviews until an answer emerged for one of the research questions.

# Results

***Personalization***

The respondents’ evaluations of personalization tactics often started from the idea that advertising personalization is an unavoidable advertising tactic that is part of the Facebook experience. Respondents expected advertising personalization to happen and accepted it. Some did so reluctantly; others expressed fewer problems with personalized advertising.

Yes, I accept [personalization], you have no choice. One cannot keep away from Facebook. (Woman, 51 years old)

In general, the respondents declared that personalization could increase the relevance of advertisements. They feared that without personalization, they would receive ads in which they were not at all interested. Personalization was perceived as a clear benefit for the consumer and an essential part of the “social contract”: if ads were needed for the free use of Facebook, then the respondents expected the ads to be personalized. The evaluation of personalization subsequently depended on the tactic’s success in increasing advertising’s relevance. When personalization was attempted but the offer in the ad was nevertheless perceived as irrelevant (for example, by retargeting a product that was already bought), the respondents raised questions regarding privacy and indicated that they felt disappointed or frustrated about what companies did with their data. They felt disappointed because their investment of providing personal information was not put to good use.

A proper screening should be done. I mean, they should look very well into what a person is interested in, put a lot of data behind it. […] And they should make it really personal and not too broad. (Man, 32 years old)

When negative experiences were too frequent, some respondents indicated that they would change their Facebook ad settings. Although most of the respondents saw the benefits of increased relevance due to personalization, several of them feared being targeted and manipulated.

Based on the above, RQ1 and RQ2 were answered: Most of the respondents perceived personalization as convenient because they received more relevant and interesting product offers. If advertisements had to be shown, then personalization was even expected. This finding points to a complex social contract between the user and Facebook, with relevant advertising as part of the agreement between them. The respondents even indicated that they felt irritated or worried about their privacy when this social contract was violated: specifically, when their personal data were used but the ads failed to be relevant.

***Ad placement***

Respondents perceived ads placed in the message stream differently from those placed in the sidebar. Often, the respondents would spontaneously compare ad placements in terms which placement was the easiest to avoid. The right sidebar ads were easier to avoid looking at. Centrally placed ads stood out more than sidebar ads did. Respondents indicated that they accidently looked at centrally placed ads more because they were served in the content stream and looked similar to other posts. Beyond the respondents’ answers, it was also striking that during the ad-search exercise the respondents had to perform, the respondents noticed less frequently and more easily skipped right sidebar ads.

Yes, if it is placed centrally, it attracts your attention, and you are going to check it out “Am I going to click on it? Does it interest me?” And if they are on the sidebar […] maybe you will see it subconsciously, but you will not really pay attention, and you will not feel like looking at it and clicking. (Man, 40 years old)

An interesting pattern could be observed when the respondents were asked which ad placement they perceived as the most effective. In order not to limit the respondents in sharing their experiences, no predetermined definition of ‘effectiveness’ was given. Yet, as described earlier, respondents were guided towards reflecting about the advertisers’ perspectives on effectiveness. While our respondents defined effectiveness in multiple ways (as attention, conversion and tolerance, among others), they applied the same reasoning. Our respondents’ attitudes toward the ad placements, in terms of which ad placement they preferred, were not consistent with their considerations about which they thought was more effective. Some respondents preferred sidebar ads, while others preferred newsfeed ads. Our respondents did agree that the placement they each individually preferred depended on the ease of skipping the ad in that placement. Some respondents preferred the sidebar ads because they were able to not look at the ad if they did not want to, while others preferred the message stream ads because the participants could easily scroll past them, while sidebar ads stayed on the screen. The recurring importance of the possibility of skipping the ad indicates the key role of perceived control in determining ad placement preference.

It has to be in the sidebar, and the ad should catch the eye and raise my curiosity to click. But I should be able to decide by myself if I want to go to there; it should not be on my wall. (Woman, 42 years old)

To answer RQ3, the perception of control is a recurring concept linked to the role of ad placement in determining attitudinal advertising outcomes. No consensus existed on the preferred ad placement from a consumer perspective. Yet, individual respondents preferred the placement that provided them control in terms of ease of avoiding or skipping the ad, or, by contrast, enabled them to decide when to pay attention to the ad.

***Privacy concerns***

Although most of the respondents did not worry about privacy issues regarding advertising personalization, several respondents voiced privacy concerns. They acknowledged that advertising is a part of the Facebook experience and that one can expect a certain degree of data collection and personalization for advertising purposes when registering a Facebook account. However, they stated that not every use of personal data is acceptable. As a way of evaluating Facebook’s advertising practices during the interviews, respondents compared Facebook’s practices with their own personal set of rules regarding which information is acceptable to use and which they found too private. For example, a male respondent concluded that using information about medication he searched for to trigger health advertising was “a bridge too far.” The existence of a social contract was apparent in two recurrent lines of reasoning during the interviews. First, the respondents indicated that they had complied with Facebook’s data-management practices by using the platform and therefore felt that they had lost the right to oppose data collection and personalization.

I think this one [ad] appears because I once searched for it on Google. I understand, and it is kind of OK. I have probably agreed to it. (Woman, 27 years old)

Second, respondents articulated that, in a more general sense, data collection for personalizing advertising has become inescapable. They were convinced that the only way not to get their data used in advertising was by not sharing data in the first place.

I do not think they should [use data for advertising practices], but we cannot oppose it. It’s just something from 2017. (Man, 47 years old)

During the elicitation exercise, the respondents were made aware of the personal information that was used in the presented ads. Even when the data used in the shown ad were not perceived as complying with the respondents’ personal set of privacy rules, the respondents articulated that they would not do much about it. Some respondents indicated that they remained unaffected and tried not to think about privacy because they perceived themselves as not be able to do anything about it. Furthermore, the elicitation exercise showed that failed advertising personalization efforts led to the scarce moments when attention was given to the data collection and privacy issues were raised. The use of personal data was perceived as a problem either when the information used in the ad was either wrong or, interestingly, when the information was perceived as not specific enough.

If I could choose, it would just be ad-free. But on the other hand, you start seeing the advantages. You think, “Oh yes, that is also an option,” or you see a lot more things than you would have come across in normal daily life. But then, I still also find privacy an important aspect. (Woman, 29 years old)

Based on the above, RQ4 and RQ5 were answered: The respondents perceived data collection as inescapable on Facebook and privacy as something they trade for Facebook’s services when registering for the platform or, in a broader sense, when using the Internet. Respondents indicate that personalization is part of the social contract: if personalization is present, it should be done properly. As many of the respondents were uncertain about how personalization practices work and how the practices influence their experiences, they could have perceived personalization as an unclear part of the social contract, unbalancing it in favor of the social networking site. In this finding, the privacy paradox could be perceived in our respondents’ answers. The respondents perceived personalization an intrusion of privacy, yet when confronted with personalized ads, less concerns arose if the personalization resulted in more relevant or valuable ads.

## Ad relevance

In terms of ad relevance, respondents suggested two ways in which an ad could be relevant: 1) by serving information that fulfills a certain need and 2) by addressing the respondents’ interests in a certain product or category. Most of the respondents perceived relevant ads as less annoying and intrusive. Moreover, in terms of effectiveness from an advertiser’s perspective, respondents said they were more inclined to click on such ads. In the same manner, respondents stated that higher involvement with the product led to more attention, more favorable attitudes and higher readiness to perform a certain action. An often-repeated prerequisite for positive advertising outcomes was “serving a product that interests me.”

Yes, you scroll faster when the ads do not interest you […]. It depends on if you have time or not, and if it is interesting, you scroll slower than when it is not. (Woman, 38 years old)

Product involvement played a crucial role in how the respondents reacted to advertising. When the product was deemed interesting enough, the respondents indicated that it did not matter under which circumstances or in which format an ad was served. On the other hand, when personalization failed and the products were not at all interesting, the respondents indicated that it could be hard for the advertiser to achieve any success with its advertising. Several respondents confirmed this finding by using variants of the sentence “Normally, I would not [click], but if it really interests me, then I would” in their answers. In this regard, one respondent gave an interesting insight while reflecting on why he prefers advertising for products in which he is interested:

[Ads draw my attention] probably because these ads fall within my area of interest, and therefore, they manifest themselves less [as being advertising]. (Man, 40 years old)

To answer RQ6, the advertisement’s perceived relevance is a key prerequisite for personalization to lead to positive advertising outcomes for the advertiser. Involvement with the product category is an important aspect of ad relevance. Prejudgments concerning the intrusiveness or obtrusiveness of ads can be lifted if the ad is perceived to be relevant in terms of serving an interesting product or in fulfilling certain needs.

## Facebook motives

Our respondents articulated that how they are using Facebook at the moment when they are confronted with ads influences the ad’s outcomes. Respondents indicated that when an ad interrupts their search for specific content, they perceived it as disturbing and as impeding their goals. As one respondent said, there is no single solution for effective advertising; it depends on situational factors like motives, mood and context.

It interrupts me in my occupation. […] I did not ask for it, and I am not looking for it, and still they try to seduce me or pull away my attention. I will not easily allow that. […] When I am searching with a goal and I notice it, it will annoy me. (Woman, 49 years old)

To answer RQ7, ads being perceived as impeding the respondent’s situational goals when accessing Facebook can lead to negative advertising outcomes for advertisers. Ads were evaluated as intrusive when they interrupted searches for certain information or entertainment, which is more likely to happen in the message stream placement.

## Perceived control

Perceived control was a factor that was not hypothesized about but was found to be recurrent in determining the perceived outcomes of personalization, ad placement and privacy concerns. Generally, the respondents perceived a lack of control over Facebook advertising. Their desire to control which ads were shown to them was apparent in the evaluation of advertising-personalization tactics and ad placement.

I’m opposed to personalization because I would rather choose myself which ads I want to click, and I don’t think that people should address me. I prefer making my own choices. (Woman, 42 years old)

A perceived lack of control over the shown advertisements led to negative attitudes toward the ad and the advertiser and to decreased purchase intent. Users indicated that they reclaimed control by actively avoiding the advertisements. The ability to avoid ads, such as by skipping message stream advertisements, gave users a minimum sense of control. Strikingly, when asked to describe the ideal way of consuming advertising on Facebook, several respondents gave similar answers that reflected the underlying need to feel in control. They described the idea of an “advertising feed,” a separate part of the website dedicated to advertising that could be voluntarily accessed when they want to discover new products.

Just a separate segment, which you can browse and look if there is something that interests you. (Man, 38 years old)

The perception of control turned out to be more important than actually being in control. Respondents indicated they found it important to have control over advertising appearances on Facebook. However, the feeling of being in control also made users more compliant with ads that did not reflect their preferences.

In general, I’m not a big fan of personalized ads. But on Facebook, I certainly think this should be no problem because you can adjust them [in the Facebook settings]. (Man, 28 years old)

# Discussion

To answer the central research question of this study—about the role of both advertiser- and consumer-controlled factors in the evaluation and perceived outcomes of personalized Facebook advertising and how both factors are related to each other—28 in-depth interviews were carried out among Facebook users aged 25 to 55 years old. For an ad to deliver a valuable outcome for an advertiser, an interesting interplay was observed between advertiser-controlled factors, in terms of personalization and ad placement, and consumer-controlled factors, in terms of ad relevance, privacy concerns and Facebook motives. Our respondents’ answers point to a complex tradeoff between both risks and benefits, which were found to be highly dependent on perceived control and ad relevance.

Ad relevance played a crucial role in the emergence of privacy concerns or feelings of intrusiveness. In this regard, one of this study’s most interesting findings lies within the relativity of the convictions and rules that the respondents applied to guide them in evaluating intrusiveness and in their acceptance of personalized advertising. Our results match the findings of Acquisti and colleagues (2015) that privacy choices and perceptions are often context-dependent and are developed under a high degree of uncertainty about what personal data are being used for. An indication of this uncertainty was the fact that perceived control was not a hypothesized factor but emerged as an underlying explanatory factor in our respondents’ answers. Yet, the importance of perceived control in influencing the reactions to personalized advertising was nuanced when respondents were confronted with a highly relevant product or offer.

The present study adds to the literature on perceived control’s role in influencing advertising outcomes. Perceived control reflects the internal and external constraints on a user’s behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Control, in terms of permission, was found to be the most important success factor for mobile marketing (Huang, 2012 in Lin et al., 2016). Perceived control had been described in the context of personalized advertising as a variable that limits media disturbances (Carroll et al., 2007) and privacy concerns (Xu et al., 2009), and positively affects several advertising-effectiveness outcomes, such as consumer acceptance (Boerman et al., 2017; Leppäniemi and Karjaluoto, 2005; Wei et al., 2010), attitudes toward advertising (Tsang et al., 2004) and purchase intention (Lin et al., 2016; Noor et al., 2013).

Perceived control is not necessarily equivalent to actual control. Perceived control is a malleable state. Acquisti and colleagues (2015) described this in their discussion on the malleability of data disclosure. The perception of control, which the social media provider can influence (e.g. by deciding on the default option for sharing), is therefore more important than actual control. This idea finds support in earlier findings by Brandimarte and colleagues (2013). Our results highlight the relatively greater importance given to control over how the ad was presented than control over the personal data used for the ad.

When we set aside the advertiser’s perspective for a moment and look at outcomes from a consumer perspective, the respondents’ general view toward personalized SNS advertising was consistent with the “ad as noise” rationale (Cho and Cheon, 2004; Speck and Elliott, 1997). The respondents generally saw advertising as obtrusive and as hindering their Facebook experience. However, they indicated that when ads were relevant, they had no problem with goal-impeding ad formats, less-skippable ad placements or ads that did not look like advertising. Ad relevance served as a “wildcard”: if the respondent was highly involved with a certain specific product or category, or if the ad was relevant to their personal needs, consumer and advertiser interests were complementary and it was less important that the other prerequisites be met. In contrast, when ads failed to be relevant, this was perceived as violating an implicit social contract between Facebook and the user and served as a trigger for users to question Facebook’s advertising practices and personalization as well as their lack of control over Facebook advertising. Ads that retargeted the user with, for example, the exact same shoes that the respondent saw earlier on a Web shop were not evaluated as relevant. Rather, they were perceived as a way to show how much information advertisers had on the users.

Respondents made it clear that they wanted advertisers to do something with their personal information and to provide real value, such as by showing different shoes in the same style. When ads were not relevant, the respondents’ cognitive processes were used to motivate their evaluations. In this regard, this study adds to earlier findings showing that acceptance of product ads that scored lower on product involvement was evaluated through cognitive processes that estimated the ad’s intrusiveness, whereas for ads for high-involvement products, intrusiveness was not a predictor of ad acceptance (Van den Broeck et al., 2017).

# Conclusion

Our findings indicate a general openness among users toward being influenced by commercial messages on Facebook. It was found that perceived control and ad relevance could reduce the perceived risks and increase the benefits of advertising. Unsolicited ads were no problem for the respondents, as long as the ads were unintrusive, which means either 1) relevant or 2) less relevant but not interrupting the content flow. Perceived control was an important factor in the second situation. Just because the respondents felt that they could change the ads if they wanted to, they more willingly allowed advertising that did not fully respond to their preferences, thus confirming the control paradox described by Brandimarte and colleagues (2013). The control paradox indicates that a (false) perception of control over the publication of personal information is a key factor in explaining one’s propensity to disclose personal information (Brandimarte et al., 2013).

To conclude, our findings regarding the roles of personalization, privacy concerns and use of personal data in determining advertising outcomes can be related to the insights of Acquisti and colleagues (2015) regarding the roles of uncertainty, context and the malleability of privacy perceptions. Uncertainty about data processing and personalization practices was perceivable in our respondents’ answers. Respondents’ evaluations of data practices often referred to contextual factors such as ad placement. The important role of advertiser-controlled factors in influencing consumer perceptions indicates the “malleability” of privacy perceptions. Advertisers can create and present ads in a tactical way to reduce the user’s privacy perceptions, such as by using a different ad placement for the same ad.

## Managerial implications

Our results confirmed that two of the most important points of attention for the sector will be the ability to improve the personalization and targeting algorithms, on the one hand, and to offer messages that provide sufficient benefits for the customer, on the other hand. The users rejected their principles and prejudices about ad appearance when ads showed relevant information and users felt in control over their data. Our findings in this regard complement the recent legislative taken in the European Union to increase the value of personal data sharing for customers and reduce risks. Our results show that the increased transparency due to this legislation should be no problem, as it may increase perceived control. In this regard, it may even be interesting for the advertising sector to put more effort into educating users about their privacy and advertising settings.

## Limitations and recommendations for future research

Although the study considered the Facebook experience on both the desktop website and the mobile app, the study’s elicitation techniques only focused on the users’ ad experience on the desktop website. Future research could look further into the differences between these two channels. Moreover, the methodology did not allow a distinction to be made between conscious and unconscious ad avoidance. The “banner blindness” effect for the Facebook sidebar ads may have been more influential than the conscious choice to avoid the ads. Future studies could complement the current qualitative findings by, for example, using eye-tracking.

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