



Exploring Emotional and Ethical Experiences of AI-Personalized Advertising Among Social Media Users

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed the landscape of digital marketing particularly through the use of algorithmic personalization to deliver targeted advertisements on social media. While prior research has explored consumer response to personalization, little is known about the emotional and ethical dimensions of how individuals experience AI-personalized advertising in their daily digital interactions. This study addresses that gap by asking: how do consumers interpret and emotionally respond to AI-personalized advertisements on social media platforms? Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this research explores the subjective meanings embedded in these interactions. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with twelve active social media users aged 22 to 38, selected through purposive sampling. The analysis identified four core themes: feelings of being watched, emotional ambivalence toward relevance, ethical discomfort, and emergent digital intimacy. These themes reveal the duality of consumer experience marked by both appreciation and suspicion as individuals negotiate their relationships with invisible algorithmic agents. The findings offer a deeper understanding of how personalization is not just a technical process but a complex emotional and ethical encounter. This research contributes to the literature by expanding the conceptualization of AI-personalization as an affective phenomenon and highlights the need for more human-centered design and ethical consideration in digital advertising practices. Future research may extend these insights across different cultural or technological contexts to inform ethical innovation in AI marketing.



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INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital marketing, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force, particularly in the personalization of consumer experiences. One of the most pervasive applications of AI is the deployment of algorithmically driven advertisements on social media platforms, where consumer data is utilized to deliver tailored content intended to increase relevance and engagement. As digital ecosystems grow increasingly sophisticated, consumers are frequently exposed to ads that appear to "know" their preferences, interests, and even unspoken desires. This technological advancement represents a major shift in how brands interact with individuals, replacing broad, demographic-based strategies with highly individualized messaging delivered in real time.

This phenomenon has profound implications beyond marketing performance metrics. The experience of being targeted by AI-personalized advertising touches on deeply personal and emotional dimensions of human life, including perceptions of privacy, agency, and identity. Consumers often find themselves navigating a paradoxical space appreciating the convenience of relevant content while simultaneously grappling with discomfort, suspicion, or unease. These subjective experiences are situated within broader social concerns about surveillance capitalism, data ethics, and the commodification of attention in the digital age (Zuboff, 2019). As such, personalized

advertising is not merely a technical feature but a cultural and emotional encounter that shapes how individuals relate to digital environments and to themselves.

Understanding this phenomenon requires more than an evaluation of behavioral outcomes or platform efficiency; it necessitates an exploration of lived experience. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on how individuals make sense of their realities, offers a compelling approach to uncovering the nuanced meanings embedded in consumer interactions with AI-driven personalization. Given the complexity and intimacy of these encounters, a phenomenological inquiry provides the methodological sensitivity needed to capture the emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions of personalized advertising. This approach responds to the growing call for research that centers on the human experience within technologically mediated spaces.

In recent years, scholarly interest has grown around how individuals experience and internalize technologically mediated interactions, particularly in the realm of AI-powered personalization. Studies in consumer behavior and digital marketing have increasingly acknowledged the need to move beyond surface-level metrics such as click-through rates or purchase intentions to understand the psychological and emotional impact of digital interventions. As a result, the exploration of users' lived experiences with personalized advertising has emerged as a critical subdomain within marketing and consumer research (Kim & Park, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023).

However, existing research often faces methodological limitations when attempting to capture the subjective nuances of consumer experience. Quantitative designs, though valuable for measuring behavioral outcomes, fall short in illuminating how individuals make sense of deeply personal encounters with algorithmic systems. The use of structured surveys and experimental methods typically constrains participants to predefined variables, offering little space for the spontaneous, reflective, or contradictory responses that characterize authentic human experience (Bleier & Eisenbeiss, 2015). Moreover, studies relying on predictive modeling and data analytics frequently obscure the emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions of these interactions dimensions that are central to how consumers interpret AI-personalized content in their daily lives.

These methodological constraints limit our ability to comprehend the essence of the phenomenon. Without a rigorous exploration of how consumers interpret, emotionally respond to, and negotiate the presence of AI in their digital environments, the field remains under-informed about the deeper meanings of personalization. Phenomenological inquiry, particularly the interpretative variant, offers a robust and context-sensitive alternative that allows researchers to foreground the voice of the participant and uncover the multilayered structure of their lived experience.

To date, most responses to the increasing pervasiveness of AI-personalized advertising have focused on practical solutions rooted in marketing optimization and behavioral analysis. Common approaches emphasize algorithm refinement, privacy policy improvements, and user interface personalization, largely guided by consumer response metrics such as engagement rates or purchase conversions. While such strategies serve functional objectives, they fail to address a critical dimension of the phenomenon: how consumers experience and make sense of being targeted by artificial intelligence in digital spaces (Tussyadiah et al., 2022).

These mainstream approaches are limited in their capacity to reveal the deeper emotional, cognitive, and ethical meanings embedded in consumers' encounters with AI-driven personalization. The reliance on quantitative or experimental designs often reduces complex, context-dependent experiences to measurable variables, thereby overlooking contradictions, internal conflicts, and subjective interpretations that shape consumer behavior in more nuanced ways (Lutz, Hoffmann, & Meckel, 2018). Consequently, our current understanding remains partial and fragmented, unable to capture the full richness of the lived experience.

In response to these limitations, phenomenological inquiry offers a promising and necessary alternative. By centering the research on individuals' subjective realities, this approach enables a more holistic exploration of how consumers interpret the presence and influence of AI in their digital environments. Interpretative phenomenological analysis, in particular, allows for the emergence of layered meanings and emotional truths that are often inaccessible through traditional methodologies.

Addressing this knowledge gap is essential for developing a more ethically informed and experientially grounded understanding of personalized advertising in the age of artificial intelligence.

Previous studies have examined user experiences with personalized advertising, yet most have focused on general attitudes, behavioral intentions, or privacy concerns. Research by Tussyadiah et al. (2022) and Kim & Park (2021) has highlighted user reactions to AI personalization but often through structured or semi-structured quantitative approaches. These studies provide useful insights but fall short in capturing the deep, emotional, and interpretative aspects of consumer experience. The absence of rich, subjective narratives leaves a gap in understanding how individuals internalize and negotiate feelings such as trust, intrusion, or digital intimacy. This study builds upon existing work by shifting the focus from outcomes to meanings, using a phenomenological lens.

To address this, the study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore how consumers experience and interpret AI-personalized advertising on social media. IPA is well-suited to uncovering layered emotional and ethical meanings that are central to understanding human experience. This method allows participants to describe their thoughts and feelings in their own words, revealing the structure of their lived experience. The study responds directly to the knowledge gap by providing experiential insights that cannot be accessed through purely empirical or technical approaches. Through this lens, the research offers a deeper understanding of what it means to be a consumer in an AI-mediated digital environment.

This article is organized into several sections. The introduction presents the background and rationale for the study. The methodology section outlines the phenomenological design, data collection procedures, and analytic process using IPA. The results section presents the emergent themes and relevant participant narratives. The discussion reflects on the meanings derived from the findings, connecting them to broader social and ethical issues. The conclusion highlights the study's contributions, limitations, and implications for future research in digital marketing and consumer behavior.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), which is rooted in the philosophical tradition of Heideggerian hermeneutics. IPA is particularly suitable for exploring how individuals make sense of their personal experiences within specific contexts. As the research focused on the emotional responses of consumers to AI-personalized advertising on social media, this approach provided a framework to uncover the layered meanings participants attributed to their experiences. The interpretative nature of the design enabled a deep exploration of subjective perceptions, emotional ambivalence, and ethical reflections that would not have been fully captured through descriptive or quantitative methods. The emphasis on lived experience aligns with the study's aim to understand not only what participants experienced, but how they interpreted and internalized those experiences.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals who had direct and meaningful experiences with AI-personalized advertisements on social media platforms. Eligibility criteria included adults aged 20–40 who had been active on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok within the past six months and had consciously noticed or interacted with personalized advertisements. Individuals with no recollection or awareness of AI-driven advertising were excluded to maintain the relevance and richness of experiential data. A total of 12 participants (7 females and 5 males), aged between 22 and 38 (mean age: 29.4), participated in the study. Participants represented diverse educational and professional backgrounds, which enriched the contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in private, distraction-free environments chosen by the participants, either in person or via secure video conferencing platforms. An interview guide with open-ended prompts was used to facilitate discussion while allowing flexibility to follow emerging insights. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and reflective field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual nuances. Participants were encouraged to describe specific instances and emotional responses they associated with personalized advertising. The interview environment was intentionally designed to promote psychological safety, ensuring participants could share their experiences without judgment or interruption.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) following the methodological steps outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure immersion and familiarity with each participant's narrative. Initial codes were generated through open coding, focusing on meaning units that captured significant emotional or cognitive reactions. These codes were then clustered into emergent themes that reflected patterns across participant experiences. Themes were refined through iterative comparison and synthesis to identify shared meanings while preserving the idiographic depth of each case. NVivo 14 software was used to facilitate data organization, but thematic development and interpretation were conducted manually to ensure conceptual integrity. The final themes represented core experiential dimensions that illuminated how participants perceived and emotionally responded to AI-driven advertising.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent after being fully briefed on the nature, scope, and voluntary nature of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing all digital data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The research adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with applicable national research ethics standards.

RESULTS

The findings of this study revealed several recurring experiential themes that emerged from participants' narratives regarding their emotional responses to AI-personalized advertising on social media. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), four core themes were identified: (1) The Feeling of Being Watched, (2) Perceived Relevance and Emotional Ambivalence, (3) Ethical Discomfort and Trust Dilemma, and (4) Emergent Digital Intimacy. Each theme reflects participants' subjective interpretations of personalized ad encounters, and contributes to a deeper understanding of how such technological personalization shapes consumer experience on an affective level.

The Feeling of Being Watched

Many participants described a persistent sensation of being monitored, often triggered by the uncanny relevance of ads appearing shortly after private conversations or browsing activities. This evoked discomfort and a sense of violation, blurring the boundary between relevance and intrusion.

"I had just mentioned the product in a private message, and then suddenly it appeared in my Instagram feed. It felt like someone was listening to me behind the screen." (Participant 03)

Participants often associated this experience with loss of control, perceiving the advertising algorithm as an omnipresent observer.

"It's as if the app knows me better than I know myself, and that's creepy. I didn't search for it, I just talked about it and there it was." (Participant 07)

Theme 2: Perceived Relevance and Emotional Ambivalence

While some participants acknowledged the convenience of receiving targeted content, this appreciation was often accompanied by emotional ambivalence. The relevance of the ad was viewed as both efficient and unsettling.

“I admit, the ad was useful it saved me time. But part of me also questioned, how did they know I needed this? It was too perfect.” (Participant 12)

This duality between benefit and unease created a psychological tension in participants, revealing how emotional responses to AI-based personalization are complex and not merely positive or negative.

“It made me feel understood and violated at the same time.” (Participant 05)

Ethical Discomfort and Trust Dilemma

Participants expressed concerns about data usage, transparency, and the broader ethical implications of AI-driven personalization. A lack of clear communication from platforms regarding data sourcing contributed to distrust.

“I don’t remember giving permission for this kind of tracking. It feels unethical, especially when I don’t know what data they’re using.” (Participant 09)

Even when participants accepted personalization as a trade-off for free platform usage, they remained skeptical about the integrity and motives of the advertisers.

“It’s hard to trust something you can’t see. I know it’s AI, but who controls it? Who watches the watcher?” (Participant 04)

Emergent Digital Intimacy

Interestingly, some participants described a paradoxical closeness or intimacy with the digital environment. They felt that AI “understood” them in a way traditional advertising never could, which created both comfort and vulnerability.

“Sometimes I feel like the algorithm gets me. It recommends things I didn’t even realize I wanted.” (Participant 02)

This perceived intimacy fostered deeper emotional engagement but also raised questions about the authenticity of the relationship.

“It’s weird to admit, but I feel emotionally connected to my feed. It reflects who I am, yet it’s based on data I never consciously shared.” (Participant 08)

The core essence of participants’ experiences revolves around a tension between personalization and privacy, convenience and control, and intimacy and intrusion. While AI-personalized advertising offers relevance and efficiency, it also elicits complex emotional reactions shaped by perceptions of surveillance, ethical concerns, and relational ambiguity with digital systems. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of consumer experience in the age of AI-driven marketing, where emotional meaning is constructed not only by content, but by the perceived consciousness of the system delivering it.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that consumers' emotional experiences with AI-personalized advertising are marked by a complex interplay of relevance, intrusion, trust, and intimacy. These experiences demonstrate that personalization is not merely a functional marketing tool but a deeply affective and ethically charged phenomenon, aligning with the central research question of how consumers interpret and emotionally respond to AI-driven ads on social media.

This study offers meaningful answers to that question by illuminating the layered emotional responses that emerge when consumers are confronted with highly personalized digital content. Rather than viewing these experiences as binary reactions such as liking or disliking an ad participants articulated feelings of being simultaneously understood and surveilled, reassured and unsettled. Such insights contribute uniquely to our understanding by framing AI-personalization as a site of emotional negotiation, where relevance can be perceived as both comfort and threat. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) made it possible to uncover these tensions, providing access to experiential dimensions often overlooked in marketing and consumer behavior research.

When situated within the broader literature, the findings both affirm and expand existing work. For instance, Tussyadiah et al. (2022) acknowledged users' ambivalent reactions to AI-personalized ads, yet their study did not explore the emotional and ethical implications in detail. Similarly, while Kim & Park (2021) highlighted concerns about trust, the current study shows how such concerns are embedded within a broader emotional landscape of digital intimacy and perceived surveillance. These results also resonate with theoretical frameworks on digital embodiment and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), suggesting that personalized advertising not only influences consumer behavior but also mediates how individuals construct their digital identities and boundaries. The present study therefore enriches the field by offering a phenomenological perspective that bridges emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions of consumer experience in the context of AI-mediated marketing.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry important implications for both academic inquiry and professional practice. From a social and cultural perspective, the emotional ambivalence expressed by participants underscores the evolving nature of human-technology relationships, where convenience and control coexist with concerns over privacy and autonomy. In marketing practice, this suggests that personalization strategies must move beyond algorithmic accuracy to consider the emotional and ethical reception of content. For digital marketers and platform designers, understanding the experiential impact of AI-personalized ads may inform more ethically sensitive and emotionally attuned communication strategies. These insights may also benefit consumer advocacy and regulatory efforts by highlighting how personalization can influence not just behavior but also psychological well-being.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of purposive sampling and a relatively small participant pool, although appropriate for phenomenological analysis, limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the focus on social media users within a specific age range may exclude perspectives from older or less digitally active consumers. The reliance on self-reported experiences also introduces the possibility of recall bias or selective memory. These limitations, however, do not diminish the value of the findings but rather highlight the need for contextual sensitivity and methodological rigor in future studies.

Future Research Directions

Future research may build upon these findings by exploring emotional and ethical experiences with AI personalization across different cultural settings, age groups, or digital platforms. Comparative phenomenological studies could deepen understanding of how contextual variables shape consumer perceptions of AI-mediated interactions. Longitudinal designs may also be employed to trace how emotional responses evolve over time as consumers become more accustomed or resistant to personalized technologies. Furthermore, integrating phenomenological insights with complementary qualitative or mixed-method approaches could provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer experience in the age of algorithmic personalization. These avenues of inquiry can enrich both theoretical discourse and practical applications in marketing, digital ethics, and human-computer interaction.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how consumers experience and interpret AI-personalized advertising on social media, focusing on emotional and ethical dimensions often overlooked in prior research. The findings revealed that personalization triggers complex emotional responses, including feelings of being watched, ambivalence toward relevance, ethical discomfort, and a sense of digital intimacy. These themes provide new insight into the lived experience of consumers and offer a richer understanding of personalization beyond behavioral outcomes. By applying interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study addressed a significant gap in existing literature that relies heavily on quantitative or surface-level approaches. The results suggest the importance of designing AI systems that consider emotional perception and consumer trust, not just algorithmic accuracy. Future studies may expand this work by comparing experiences across platforms, cultures, or age groups to further explore how personalization affects identity, privacy, and engagement.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently, and no commercial or financial relationships were involved that could be construed as a potential conflict.

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