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INTRODUCTION



Introduction to Special Section Regarding Surveillance and Ethics in Advertising

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Recent technological advancements have had a profound impact on advertising (Huh and Malthouse 2020; Huh et al. 2023). The digital traces consumers leave behind while interacting with digital devices are monitored, collected, stored, and processed to optimize advertising to fit the preferences and needs of consumers, to improve services, or (pre-)train artificial intelligence (AI) models (e.g., Boerman et al. 2017; Huh et al. 2023; Yun et al. 2020). These developments contribute to the gaining relevance of surveillance, and specifically the idea of *dataveillance* in advertising, which is a form of surveillance in which an enormous amount (*volume*) of different types of data (*variety*) is collected in real time (*velocity*) automatically and continuously with the purpose to regulate or govern behavior (Strycharz and Segijn 2022). The collection of consumer information is not new, but the nature and extent of it has been transformed with the rise of new technologies and devices (e.g., internet, smartphone, social media, wearables), as well as increased computer capabilities and low processing costs (Huh and Malthouse 2020; Huh et al. 2023). Although research has shown benefits of data-driven advertising for both advertisers and consumers—such as convenience and economic benefits (Strycharz et al. 2019a)—these developments also raise new ethical issues (Segijn and Strycharz 2023).

Ethical issues related to surveillance can be examined through different stakeholders, including advertisers and consumers, as well as regulators and the tech industry (Figure 1). Advertisers collect and process data to persuade or inform consumers (Yun et al. 2020). Ethical issues concern fair usage of these data as well as transparency of such usage toward consumers. Consumers

are impacted by surveillance data-driven advertising, which can create new divides and digital vulnerabilities (Helberger et al. 2022; Strycharz and Duivenvoorde 2021; Wang et al. 2024), raise questions about privacy (Boerman and Smit 2023), and affect consumer autonomy (Büchi et al. 2020). Additionally, consumers can play an active role in data management through privacy protection (Boerman et al. 2021; Strycharz et al. 2019b), stopping or changing the way they use media (chilling effects; Büchi et al. 2020), or self-empowerment strategies (Zhang et al. 2025), which may impact the data stream and quality of data. Regulators face challenges around data security, the legal protection of consumers, and transparency requirements, while at the same time aiming for the promotion of technological innovations and stimulation of the new data economy (Helberger et al. 2020). Finally, the dependence on data and the “black box” nature of algorithms and AI may create a new shift in the information asymmetry that moves the tech industry to the top of the chain above advertisers and, subsequently, consumers. This shift makes the tech industry (e.g., hard/software companies, data management platforms, social media companies) an important stakeholder when discussing surveillance and ethics related to advertising (Segijn and Strycharz 2023).

The topics of surveillance, ethics, and advertising are also gaining attention among advertising scholars, which is reflected in the publications in *Journal of Advertising*. Over the years, advertising scholars have examined the implications of digital advertising, mobile advertising, social media, personalized and targeted advertising, computational advertising, and AI, to name a few. Additionally, themed and special issues have been devoted to topics such as AI (Li 2019;

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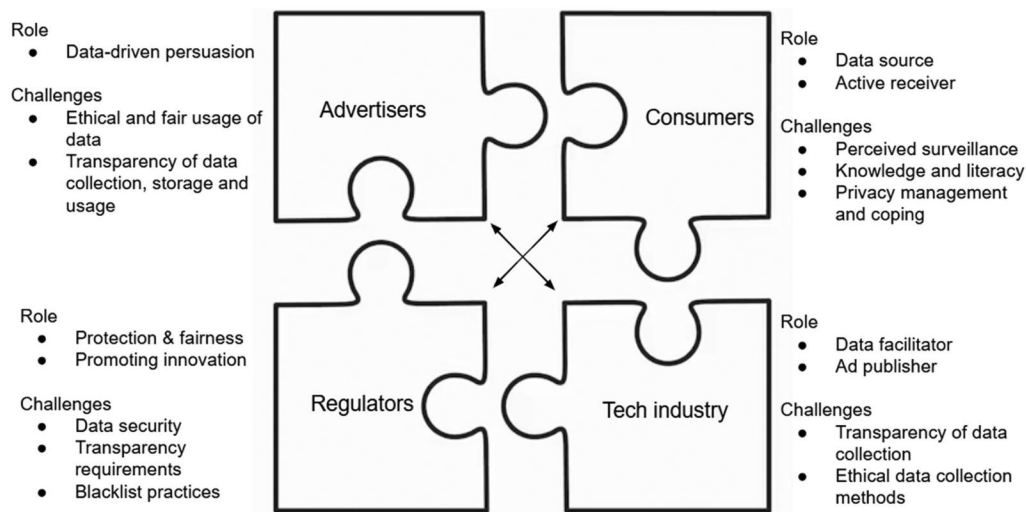


Figure 1. Overview of stakeholders, their roles, and challenges related to surveillance and ethics.

Rodgers 2021), computational advertising (Huh and Malthouse 2020), and computational advertising research methods (Huh et al. 2024). Moreover, the journal has published work that contributes to the theoretical understanding of the impacts of surveillance in advertising. In the journal's 50th anniversary special issue on reimagining advertising research, the Dataveillance Effectiveness in Advertising Landscape (DEAL) framework (Strycharz and Segijn 2022) was proposed, which is a new theoretical framework that helps to understand how perceptions of surveillance have implications for advertising effectiveness. Similarly, advertising scholars have examined various ethical issues in advertising over the years (see Hyman et al. 1994 for an overview), such as implications of advertising on consumer well-being, advertising targeted at children, stereotyping, deceptive advertising, or advertising of substances (e.g., tobacco, alcohol). Nevertheless, there is ample opportunity to combine the issues of surveillance and ethics in the context of advertising, which was the aim of this special section. The call resulted in a diverse collection of papers that touch upon different stakeholders, consider ethical issues, make use of different methods, and include perspectives from researchers around the globe and from different disciplines.

Papers in This Special Section

In the first paper, Zard (2025) focuses on the regulators as stakeholders in the advertising ecosystem. More specifically, he examines to what extent different surveillance advertising practices meet the requirements of European Union laws related to the protection of consumer autonomy and prevention of

exploitation of consumers. The author defines *exploitation* as “an agent’s intentional influence that renders its target incapable of exercising personal autonomy or making authentic choices” and concludes that such advertising practices as targeting ads based on psychological profile or on vulnerability characteristics (e.g., one’s financial situation), if not transparent, can be classified as highly manipulative and exploitative. Taking the regulators’ perspective, the author calls for more empirical insights into autonomy-violating and autonomy-preserving forms of advertising focusing on exploring the appropriateness of the current dataveillance and advertising practices from both legal and consumer perspectives.

In the second paper, Hardcastle, Vorster, and Brown (2025) take a consumer perspective and combine semi-structured interviews with a customer journey mapping approach to examine consumer touch and frustration points related to AI-driven personalized advertising. They find that AI could play a positive role for consumers in the discovery phase specifically for new unfamiliar brands. However, a frustration point are recommendations that are inaccurate, generic, or repetitive. Perceived misuse or exploitation of consumer data is a frustration point in the latter stages of the customer journey. The authors provide ethical guidelines for advertisers to safeguard consumers, which include *enforce* (i.e., how to handle consumer data), *empower* (i.e., provide transparency tools to empower consumers), and *engage* (i.e., provide consumers with agency over personal data). In sum, this study provides an overview of the touch and frustration points of AI-powered personalized advertising from the consumer perspective that

inform advertisers to adopt ethical guidelines to navigate the tension between optimizing impact and privacy issues.

In the third paper, Zhang and Zhang (2025) focus on consumers' perceptions of algorithmic personalization. More specifically, they introduced the concept of *misestimation*, which describes the gap between consumers' perceptions of algorithmic recommendations and the actual content recommended. They focus on misestimation by female consumers because gender might be a source of bias in targeting algorithms. Building on 25 in-depth interviews, the authors propose several drivers of misestimation of algorithmic recommendations, including attitude toward the algorithm, algorithm literacy, perceived surveillance, gender bias, and motivation to use the platform on which the algorithm is deployed. Overall, this study provides insights into how users perceive algorithmic recommendations they encounter and what the role of among others surveillance is in forming this perception.

Finally, Wang et al. (2025) empirically tested some of the key factors of the DEAL framework (Strycharz and Segijn 2022) by studying consumers' perceptions and usage of advertising transparency tools that provide information about how companies collect and use personal data to display personalized ads. Their study shows that consumers are knowledgeable about ad transparency tools and feel slightly satisfied with them, but do not use them often. In addition, Wang et al. (2025) show that extensive transparency information increased knowledge about ad transparency efforts and self-efficacy in using such tools. Moreover, although transparency information did not change perceived surveillance, the authors show that perceived surveillance is associated with perceived benefits and risks of personalized advertising, interest in ad transparency information, desire for privacy regulation, negative affect, and intention to protect privacy and use ad transparency tools. Their data also show the important moderating role of privacy concern and privacy cynicism in these relationships. Altogether, this study provides useful insights regarding how consumers respond to regulative measures that aim to explain the practices of advertisers.

Future Research

Although this special section explored some ethical issues related to surveillance in advertising, we believe that many more topics could be examined in this context. To further our understanding of surveillance and

ethics in advertising we need more empirical, analytical, and conceptual work using different quantitative and qualitative methodologies through different interdisciplinary and cultural lenses. We want to end this editorial with some future directions that we identified based on the articles in this special section as well as the different stakeholders and their challenges, as displayed in Figure 1. We hope that the articles in this special section and complimentary research agenda will inspire advertising scholars to further explore surveillance and ethical issues in advertising.

Future Direction 1: The Role and Challenges of Advertisers

Advertisers take part in surveillance by processing consumer data to optimize personalized advertising to persuade or inform consumers (Yun et al. 2020). Future research could benefit from their perspective on the topic of surveillance and ethics through qualitative research. Additionally, research should think about corporate digital responsibility (Lobschat et al. 2021) in relation to surveillance, AI, and advertising. This responsibility includes ethical and fair usage of data, such as the ethics and implications of the usage and implementation of psychological targeting (Kosinski et al. 2013) or repurposing of data (Tucker 2018). Finally, more research is needed on the concept of *ethics washing*—which we define as the act of misleading consumers regarding the ethical practices of a company or ethical nature of the product or service—especially in relation to data collection and data processing practices.

Future Direction 2: The Role and Challenges of Consumers

Next to being the (active) receivers and target audience of personalized advertising, consumers are also the source of the data used for personalization. With everything they do online, consumers (un)wittingly share information that can be collected, shared, and processed. Although this special section provides useful insights into consumers' perceptions of and coping with personalized advertising (Hardcastle et al. 2025; Zhang and Zhang 2025) and their knowledge of transparency tools (Wang et al. 2025), there is still a need to gain more insights into consumers' understanding and perceptions of data collection practices and surveillance. Additionally, because research has shown that people differ in their understanding of and ability to cope with digital developments, creating so-called

digital or AI divides (e.g., Wang et al. 2024), more research is needed to gain more insights into particular vulnerable groups of consumers (Zard 2025). Furthermore, while Wang et al. (2025) emphasize the important role of perceived surveillance, there is still ample room to investigate what causes people to perceive surveillance and what the consequences are of this feeling.

Future Direction 3: The Role and Challenges of Regulators

The regulators have always been important actors in the advertising ecosystem, through both formal government regulation and co- or self-regulation of the industry (Helberger et al. 2020). As Zard (2025) in this special section highlights, the goal of government regulations and industry self-regulations in advertising is to ensure fairness for consumers. For reaching this goal, regulators could take a multi-disciplinary, evidence-based, empirical perspective on the legislative process (Becher 2021). This creates a need for advertising scholarship that contributes to such policy-making by providing empirical evidence on (un)ethical and (un)fair advertising practices. Investigating advertising practices that might exploit consumer vulnerabilities and how they are perceived and experienced by consumers, as well as studying their harms, could contribute to such policy-making. Furthermore, because the relationships among the tech industry, advertisers and consumers need further conceptualization, advertising research could contribute by investigating how new forms of relations (e.g., pay-or-consent model) impact the advertising ecosystem.

Future Direction 4: The Role and Challenges of the Tech Industry

With the centrality of the tech industry to facilitate and publish data-driven advertising, we call for more research that includes this stakeholder in topics related to surveillance and ethics in advertising. Research into algorithms of social media platforms could shed more light on what data are collected and how these data are processed for advertising. This information will help open the “black box” nature of these algorithms and reduce the information asymmetry that exists between the advertising and the tech industry (Segijn et al. 2024). Another form of asymmetrical power dynamics that also requires attention is the *platformization* of advertising and retail, whereby advertisers compete with the platforms they

are dependent on and entangled with (Carah et al. 2023). Additionally, research could focus on ethical questions related to affordances of new technologies, such as data tracking or built-in cameras and microphones, which could be repurposed for surveillance practices (e.g., smartphone, smart speakers, smart watches, augmented reality glasses). In addition, advertising scholars could look into the idea of privacy-by-design and dark patterns on brand/shopping websites or social media platforms and study how this context affects data inputs or consumer relationships with brands. Finally, research is needed to explore ethical solutions related to surveillance, such as consensual advertising models.

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