

PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ADVERTISING

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Abstract. This article examines social network advertising from a philosophical perspective, focusing on the ethical implications of passive data collection, interactivity, and hyper-personalization. The object of analysis is contemporary advertising practices embedded within social networking platforms, understood as socio-technical systems that mediate everyday communication, identity formation, and economic exchange. The study employs a qualitative, conceptual methodology grounded in philosophical analysis, drawing on normative ethics, philosophy of technology, and critical media theory to interpret existing empirical and theoretical research on digital advertising.

The primary goal of the article is to assess whether hyper-personalized advertising practices undermine human autonomy and contribute to the commodification of the self. By analyzing the infrastructural conditions of data-driven advertising, the role of interactivity in shaping agency, and the normative status of personalization, the article moves from descriptive accounts of advertising mechanisms toward critical philosophical evaluation. It argues that social network advertising does not merely influence consumer behavior but increasingly participates in the construction of subjectivity itself, reshaping how individuals form preferences, exercise agency, and understand their own identities. In doing so, the article challenges traditional distinctions between persuasion and manipulation and situates social network advertising within broader debates on autonomy, power, and moral responsibility in digital environments.

Keywords: advertising; digital advertising; social networks; philosophy; ethics; media theory

1. Introduction

Advertising on social networks has become one of the most influential forms of communication in contemporary digital societies. Unlike traditional advertising media – such as print, radio, or television—which operate as distinct and temporally limited channels, social network advertising is embedded within platforms that mediate everyday social interaction, self-presentation, leisure, work, and

increasingly political expression. Advertising messages are no longer encountered as external interruptions, but as integral components of the communicative environments in which individuals live their social lives.

This shift has significant philosophical implications. Advertising on social networks does not merely act upon individuals from the outside, but increasingly constitutes part of the background conditions of experience. Sponsored content appears alongside personal communication, news, and expressions of identity, often indistinguishable in form from non-commercial content. As a result, advertising becomes ambient, continuous, and normalized, shaping attention and perception over time rather than persuading through discrete messages.

Beyond its economic function, social network advertising structures attention, shapes preferences, and mediates the relationship between individuals and their social environment. It influences not only what individuals consume, but how they perceive themselves, others, and the world around them. In this sense, advertising participates in broader cultural processes through which meaning, value, and identity are produced and negotiated in digital space. As Petrova observes in her analysis of food representation in social networks, content in virtual environments increasingly loses its primary functional purpose and instead acquires a symbolic and identity-forming role. Food, rather than serving to satisfy hunger, becomes a medium for self-presentation, distinction, and belonging, contributing to the construction of digital identities (Petrova, 2023). This observation illustrates a broader transformation characteristic of social media environments: practices and objects are reoriented from use toward signification.

Advertising operates within – and amplifies – this transformation. Products and services are not merely presented as solutions to practical needs, but as symbolic resources through which individuals articulate lifestyles, values, and identities. In social network environments, consumption is closely intertwined with self-expression, and advertising functions as a key mediator in this process. The relevance of advertising thus extends beyond persuasion toward participation in the semiotic economy of identity construction.

While a substantial body of research has examined the psychological effectiveness and technological mechanisms of social network advertising, comparatively little attention has been paid to its philosophical implications. Much of the existing literature asks how advertising works or how precisely it can target users. Far less frequently is the question raised whether such practices ought to exist in their current form, or how they transform fundamental philosophical concepts such as autonomy, agency, privacy, and responsibility.

This article approaches social network advertising from a philosophical perspective, focusing on the ethical and conceptual consequences of passive data collection, interactivity, and hyper-personalization. It argues that contemporary advertising practices do not merely persuade consumers but participate in the

construction of subjectivity itself. Advertising becomes an infrastructural form of influence that shapes the conditions under which individuals form preferences, make decisions, and understand themselves as agents.

The central question guiding this inquiry is whether hyper-personalized advertising undermines human autonomy or contributes to the commodification of the self. By examining the infrastructural conditions of data collection, the role of interactivity, and the normative status of personalization, the article seeks to move from descriptive analysis toward philosophical evaluation. The article proceeds by examining passive data collection (Section 2), interactivity and agency (Section 3), hyper-personalization and autonomy (Section 4), and finally the ethical implications of these developments (Section 5).

2. Passive Data Collection and Targeted Advertising

Passive data collection refers to “the process of gathering information about participants without requiring them to actively input it themselves” (Williams et al., 2014, p. 180). In digital environments, such data collection is embedded in everyday technologies, including smartphones, applications, browsers, and social networking platforms. Location data, browsing histories, interaction patterns, biometric signals, and temporal routines are recorded continuously as by-products of ordinary activity.

From a philosophical standpoint, passive data collection constitutes a distinctive epistemology of the subject. Individuals are no longer primarily known through narrative self-disclosure or reflective self-understanding, but through statistical correlation, behavioral inference, and predictive modeling. Knowledge about the individual is produced externally, often with greater predictive accuracy than the individual’s own self-knowledge. This development challenges classical philosophical accounts of subjectivity grounded in reflexivity and first-person authority.

Technically, passive data collection is legitimized through user consent, typically granted via the acceptance of terms of service or the installation of applications. Philosophically, however, the legitimacy of such consent is problematic. Meaningful consent presupposes understanding, voluntariness, and the genuine possibility of refusal. In digital environments characterized by informational asymmetry, opaque data practices, manipulative interface design, and the practical necessity of participation in social life, these conditions are significantly weakened (Nissenbaum, 2009; Floridi, 2013).

Passive data collection can be analytically divided into three interrelated domains: spatial data (where users go), behavioral data (how devices and platforms are used), and background data (data collected without continuous awareness). While each category may appear innocuous in isolation, their aggregation enables detailed behavioral profiling, long-term prediction, and continuous optimization of influence.

Social networks represent particularly dense environments of passive data extraction. Platforms such as Facebook integrate demographic data, behavioral signals, social graphs, and third-party data sources into unified user profiles. These profiles are continuously refined and monetized, allowing advertisers to target users not only based on who they are, but on who they are likely to become. Advertising thus becomes anticipatory rather than reactive.

The distinction between demographic and behavioral data remains analytically useful but increasingly porous. Behavioral data reflects the user's life within the network, while demographic data connects online activity to offline life through data brokers and commercial partnerships (van Dijck, 2014). The convergence of these data streams collapses traditional distinctions between public and private life.

From a normative perspective, this collapse raises serious concerns. Activities once confined to specific social contexts are repurposed for economic optimization. As Foucault's analysis of power through visibility suggests, the production of legibility is a central mechanism of governance (Foucault, 1977). In social network advertising, visibility is generated not through coercion but through participation, rendering power diffuse and difficult to resist.

The individual is increasingly addressed not as a reflective subject, but as a probabilistic entity whose future behavior can be anticipated and shaped. This anticipatory logic undermines the openness of the future, a core condition of moral agency. When individuals are treated according to predicted behavior rather than deliberative choice, autonomy risks being reduced to statistical regularity.

3. Interactivity and Advertising

Interactivity is frequently presented as one of the defining features of digital media and a key normative justification for contemporary advertising practices. In contrast to traditional mass media advertising, which is often described as one-directional and passive, social network advertising emphasizes participation, responsiveness, and user engagement. Consumers are invited to click, like, share, comment, customize, and respond. This participatory dimension is commonly interpreted as evidence that users are no longer passive recipients of persuasive messages, but active agents involved in the communicative process.

Etymologically, the concept of interactivity combines *inter* and *action*, indicating action between or through participants. The term "interactive" thus denotes reciprocal activity and responsiveness, involving the actions or input of a user. Action appears to be central: play, participation, and engagement are only possible through action, whether individual or collective. From this perspective, interactivity seems to promise empowerment, agency, and control.

From a philosophical standpoint, however, interactivity in advertising cannot be evaluated solely in terms of activity or technological sophistication. It must be examined in relation to agency, autonomy, and the conditions under which

participation occurs. Agency presupposes not merely the capacity to act, but the capacity to act meaningfully within a field of alternatives, including the possibility of refusal, interruption, and critical reflection. Action alone is insufficient to guarantee autonomy.

Karimova (2011) argues that interactivity is inherent in both traditional advertising and new media, proposing seven dimensions of interactivity: active engagement and reaction; physical action; flow; involvement; consumer control; two-way communication; and feedback. While this framework is analytically useful, several of its components require philosophical reconsideration. The model risks conflating participation with autonomy and responsiveness with empowerment.

Active engagement, defined as the interpretation and co-creation of meaning, is a feature of all communicative processes. From a philosophical perspective, interpretation alone does not constitute agency. Genuine interactivity presupposes the ability to act otherwise – to resist, reinterpret, or disengage. When advertising environments are designed to guide, anticipate, and reward specific responses, engagement may coexist with diminished freedom. The user may actively participate, yet only within a narrow range of pre-structured possibilities.

The dimension of physical action further illustrates this ambiguity. Interactive advertising frequently involves tangible actions, such as tapping screens, scanning codes, or participating in interactive campaigns. However, physical activity does not guarantee autonomy. Actions may be scripted, anticipated, and strategically incentivized. The user acts, but the form, direction, and meaning of action are largely determined in advance by the advertiser or platform.

This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the use of gamification. Gamification techniques – such as points, badges, rewards, rankings, and feedback loops—encourage participation by associating actions with immediate gratification. While gamification increases engagement, it also aligns user behavior with predefined commercial objectives. Action becomes instrumental rather than self-directed, oriented toward rewards rather than reflection (Fuchs, 2017).

The concept of flow, developed by Hoffman and Novak (1996), introduces focused attention as a condition for immersive experience. Flow describes a psychological state in which individuals are fully absorbed in an activity, experiencing enjoyment and loss of self-consciousness. In advertising, flow is often treated as a marker of success, indicating deep engagement with content. Philosophically, however, flow raises ethical concerns. A subject absorbed in flow may suspend critical reflection, acting efficiently but not autonomously. Autonomy requires not only action, but the capacity for distance, hesitation, and critique.

Hannah Arendt's distinction between action and thought is instructive in this context. For Arendt (1958), judgment requires the ability to interrupt ongoing activity and reflect on its meaning. Highly immersive advertising environments may reduce this capacity by minimizing moments of interruption. The smoother

and more seamless the interaction, the fewer opportunities remain for critical distance.

Involvement and immersion are often treated as indicators of successful interactivity. Yet increased immersion may also increase dependence, blurring the line between voluntary participation and behavioral steering. Immersive environments may create emotional attachment, habit formation, and routine engagement, making disengagement increasingly difficult. Participation becomes normalized, while non-participation appears as friction or loss.

Consumer control is another frequently invoked dimension of interactivity. Digital platforms offer users tools to customize interfaces, manage preferences, and curate content feeds. This apparent control is often cited as evidence of empowerment. However, such control is exercised within architectures designed to maximize engagement and monetization. Users choose within predefined parameters, while the underlying structures that shape visibility, relevance, and priority remain opaque.

As Lessig (1999) famously argues, code functions as law: it regulates behavior by shaping what actions are possible or probable. In social network advertising, algorithmic systems determine which content appears, in what order, and with what frequency. While users may feel in control, their choices are continuously guided by invisible systems of ranking and recommendation. Control thus becomes partial and asymmetrical.

Two-way communication and feedback are similarly ambiguous. While social network advertising allows users to respond to content through comments, reactions, and shares, this bidirectionality does not entail symmetry of power or knowledge. Feedback often functions less as dialogue and more as data extraction. User responses are absorbed into predictive systems that further refine targeting strategies, reinforcing asymmetrical relationships between platforms and users.

In this sense, interactivity functions as a mechanism of data generation rather than democratic communication. Participation becomes valuable not primarily for its expressive content, but for its informational yield. Every interaction contributes to profiling, prediction, and optimization.

This article therefore proposes adding personalization as a crucial eighth dimension of interactivity. Personalization transforms interactivity from a communicative feature into a mechanism of individual address. When advertising messages are tailored to specific users or micro-groups, interactivity becomes inseparable from profiling, prediction, and behavioral modulation. Participation is no longer merely expressive; it becomes productive, generating data that shapes future interactions.

From a philosophical perspective, this development suggests that interactivity in social network advertising should be understood as a form of *soft governance*. Influence operates not through coercion or explicit instruction, but through the

shaping of environments, incentives, and affordances. Users are free to act, but their actions are guided by architectures designed to anticipate and steer behavior.

Interactivity thus occupies an ethically ambivalent position. It can enhance engagement and participation, yet it can also obscure power relations and normalize influence. The challenge is not that users act, but that the conditions under which they act are increasingly structured in ways that limit reflection, autonomy, and genuine choice.

4. From Interactivity to Autonomy: The Commodification of the Self

Hyper-personalized advertising marks a qualitative shift in the relationship between advertisers and individuals. Unlike traditional mass advertising, which addresses audiences as relatively homogeneous groups, hyper-personalized advertising targets individuals as dynamic data profiles constructed from behavioral traces, inferred preferences, and predictive models. This transformation is not merely technical; it is ontological, as it reshapes how individuals are addressed, understood, and valued within digital environments.

From a philosophical standpoint, this shift raises fundamental questions concerning autonomy. In the Kantian tradition, autonomy is grounded in rational self-legislation and the capacity to act according to reasons one has reflectively endorsed (Kant, 1785/1996). Autonomous agents are not merely caused to act; they are authors of their actions. Hyper-personalized advertising challenges this ideal by intervening not at the level of explicit reasoning, but at the level of preference formation itself.

Rather than persuading individuals through reasons or arguments, hyper-personalized advertising operates through anticipation. Desires are predicted before they are consciously articulated, and behavioral tendencies are reinforced through repeated exposure to tailored stimuli. Over time, this process subtly narrows the horizon of choice. Certain options are made salient and familiar, while others remain unseen or cognitively distant. Choice remains formally intact, yet the conditions under which choices emerge are increasingly shaped by algorithmic systems.

This dynamic aligns with Harry Frankfurt's influential distinction between first-order and second-order desires (Frankfurt, 1971). According to Frankfurt, autonomy requires not merely acting on desires, but reflectively endorsing them. Hyper-personalized advertising risks shaping not only what individuals want, but what they come to want to want. When desires are continuously reinforced by personalized environments, reflective distance becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. The subject's capacity to critically evaluate their own motivations is weakened, not through coercion, but through repetition and familiarity.

Under these conditions, the self risks being transformed from a decision-making subject into an object of continuous optimization. Preferences are no longer merely expressed; they are produced, refined, and stabilized through feedback loops in which past behavior determines future stimuli. This dynamic creates what has been

described as a behavioral enclosure, within which individuals are guided toward predictable patterns of action (Zuboff, 2019).

This transformation leads to what can be described as the commodification of the self. In the Marxian sense, commodification involves the transformation of human activity, capacities, or relationships into exchangeable economic value (Marx, 1867/1990). In the context of social network advertising, personal identity, emotions, interests, and life events are translated into data that can be analyzed, traded, and monetized. The individual does not merely consume advertising; they become a source of value within advertising ecosystems.

Importantly, this commodification does not rely on overt coercion. It operates through convenience, relevance, and participation—features often experienced as empowering. Personalization promises to reduce friction and increase relevance, aligning content with perceived interests. Yet this very alignment risks enclosing the subject within a data-driven mirror of their past behavior. Influence is experienced as relevance, and control is simulated through interaction, making the erosion of autonomy difficult to perceive and resist.

Hyper-personalized advertising thus destabilizes traditional distinctions between persuasion and manipulation. Whereas persuasion appeals to reasons and allows for critical resistance, manipulation operates by bypassing deliberation and exploiting cognitive or emotional vulnerabilities (Sunstein, 2015; Susser, Roessler, and Nissenbaum, 2019). Hyper-personalization occupies a liminal space between these categories. It reshapes environments rather than arguments, guiding behavior without explicit instruction. Autonomy is preserved in form, but increasingly hollowed out in substance.

5. Ethical Implications: Manipulation, Responsibility, and Moral Agency

The ethical evaluation of social network advertising cannot be reduced to compliance with data protection regulations or formal consent mechanisms. At stake are deeper moral principles, including respect for persons, non-manipulation, justice, and responsibility. Ethical analysis must therefore move beyond legal frameworks and address the normative structure of influence in data-driven environments.

From a deontological perspective, particularly within the Kantian tradition, individuals must be treated as ends in themselves and not merely as means (Kant 1785/1996). Hyper-personalized advertising risks violating this principle by instrumentalizing personal traits, emotional states, and moments of vulnerability for economic gain. Even when users formally consent to data collection, the subsequent use of that data to shape behavior raises concerns about respect for agency and moral equality.

A broader philosophical tension appears here: many postmodern frameworks excel at deconstructing grand narratives and exposing hidden power, yet they often

provide limited normative criteria for evaluating systemic influence embedded in socio-technical infrastructures. As Gradev warns, postmodernism can appear “ethically underdeveloped” when critique is not matched by an account of responsibility and the suffering of concrete others (Gradev, 2006). This limitation becomes especially visible in platform advertising, where influence is not primarily exercised through overt ideological claims but through ambient, continuous modulation of attention, desire, and choice. In such cases, critique must be paired with normative resources capable of distinguishing persuasion from manipulation and of grounding responsibility within complex systems.

Utilitarian defenses of personalized advertising often emphasize efficiency, relevance, and consumer satisfaction. By delivering content that aligns with users’ interests, advertising is said to reduce informational overload and increase overall welfare. While such benefits may exist in the short term, they must be weighed against long-term and structural harms. These include the normalization of pervasive surveillance, the erosion of autonomy, and the concentration of informational power in the hands of a small number of platforms (Mill, 1861/2001; Zuboff, 2019).

Manipulation becomes ethically salient when influence operates covertly and resists awareness. Susser, Roessler, and Nissenbaum (2019) define manipulation as influence that subverts an individual’s capacity for reflective choice. Social network advertising often operates precisely in this way, exploiting cognitive biases, emotional triggers, and contextual vulnerabilities without offering users a clear opportunity for critical reflection or refusal. Crucially, manipulation in platform environments need not involve falsehood; it may operate through selective salience, timing, repetition, and personalized framing, shaping the user’s attention and motivational landscape while preserving the appearance of voluntary choice.

Responsibility within such systems is diffuse. Advertisers design campaigns, platforms construct infrastructures, engineers build algorithms, and users generate data through participation. This diffusion complicates traditional models of moral responsibility, which presuppose identifiable agents and clear causal chains. Ethical evaluation must therefore address responsibility at the systemic level, recognizing that harm may arise from the interaction of multiple actors rather than from malicious intent. In this respect, accountability requires more than identifying individual wrongdoing; it requires evaluating how design choices, incentive structures, and opaque optimization processes jointly shape user agency.

Moreover, the continuous shaping of preferences raises concerns about moral agency itself. Moral agency presupposes the capacity to deliberate, choose, and act in light of reasons. When environments are designed to anticipate and steer behavior, the space for moral deliberation may be reduced. Individuals may continue to act, but their actions are increasingly guided by predictive systems rather than reflective judgment. This threatens not only consumer autonomy but also civic autonomy,

insofar as the same infrastructures shape political communication, public attention, and social norms.

From the perspective of the philosophy of technology, this suggests that ethical evaluation must focus not only on individual actions, but on the design of socio-technical environments. As Winner (1980) argues, technologies are not neutral tools; they embody political and moral values. Social network advertising infrastructures encode assumptions about efficiency, predictability, and profit maximization that shape human agency in profound ways. If autonomy and dignity are to remain meaningful ideals in digital societies, then advertising systems must be assessed not merely by outcomes (clicks, conversions, engagement) but by whether the conditions of influence preserve the possibility of reflective self-determination.

Conclusion

Social network advertising represents a profound transformation in how influence operates in contemporary digital societies. Through passive data collection, interactivity, and hyper-personalization, advertising becomes an infrastructural force that shapes not only consumer behavior, but autonomy, identity, and moral agency. Influence is no longer episodic or external; it is continuous, ambient, and embedded in everyday digital life.

This article has argued that hyper-personalized advertising risks undermining human autonomy by intervening at the level of preference formation rather than deliberative choice. By transforming individuals into data profiles and translating personal experience into economic value, social network advertising contributes to the commodification of the self. These processes are subtle, participatory, and often experienced as beneficial, which makes them ethically complex and philosophically urgent.

Importantly, the critique developed here is not a rejection of advertising per se, nor of personalization as such. Rather, it is a philosophical examination of the conditions under which influence becomes ethically problematic. The central concern is not that individuals are influenced, but that the structures of influence increasingly bypass reflection, obscure responsibility, and normalize the instrumentalization of subjectivity.

A philosophy of social network advertising must therefore move beyond questions of effectiveness, optimization, and compliance toward a critical examination of power, agency, and responsibility in data-driven environments. Such an examination is essential not only for ethical theory, but for democratic societies that depend on autonomous citizens capable of reflective judgment.

Future research should explore alternative models of digital advertising that respect autonomy, enhance transparency, and preserve the openness of human self-formation. Only by addressing these philosophical challenges can social network

advertising be aligned with the values of human dignity and moral agency rather than subordinated solely to economic imperatives.

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