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DIGITAL DILEMMAS: EVALUATING THE ETHICS AND EFFICACY OF PERSONALISED POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN MODERN DEMOCRACIES

Václav MORAVEC – Nik HYNEK – Beáta GAVUROVÁ – Matúš KUBÁK

ABSTRACT:

This study explores the realm of personalised political advertising, examining societal perspectives on clear regulation, enhanced transparency, and empowerment in the digital media sphere. Analysing existing international literature and responses from our own unique survey of 1,213 participants in the Czech Republic, it provides a detailed picture of public perceptions towards the customisation of political messages and control over online content. Findings indicate a significant demand for transparency in the adaptation of political messages, coupled with apprehension towards personalised content, highlighting privacy and manipulation concerns. The research shows divided opinions on the necessity of stringent regulations for targeted political ads, yet there is broad agreement on the importance of disclosing advertising sources and labelling ads clearly to enhance awareness. The study also reveals that most respondents feel they have limited control over the content they encounter online, though a minority report feeling more in control than the content providers. Furthermore, by employing multinomial regression analysis, the paper finds age, gender, and education as key predictors influencing perceptions of potential risks related to personalised political advertising. This investigation sheds light on the complexities of digital personalisation in political communication, offering insights for future policy and regulation.

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1 Introduction

With the advent of technology, there has been a significant surge in personalised messages. Advertisers increasingly scrutinise online behaviours, utilising collected data to present tailored advertisements to individuals (Ham, 2017). This rise in Online Behavioural Advertisements (OBA), along with a notable increase in online personalised political advertising, underscores the complexity of the interactions between advertisers and their audience (Ostfeld, 2017). Despite the acknowledged benefits of OBA, privacy concerns remain a prevalent issue among users. Such apprehensions extend to personalised political advertising, pointing to the complex relationships that exist between advertisers and recipients. Such a dynamic is shaped by a variety of factors, including advertising strategies, tools, socio-demographic profiles, and the political inclinations of the audience.

Existing studies on online personalised advertising – regardless of its nature – have explored the predictors of user behaviour towards such ads. However, user responses to advertising can shift due to numerous influences, including societal and political factors. The perception of different advertising types and the attendant attitudes towards personal data collection can vary, not only over time but also across different social and ideological spectra. Auxier (2020) notes that while social media users generally pay scant attention to political content, there is a widespread resistance against the use of personal data for political ends. An effective strategy to alleviate privacy concerns involves empowering users through transparency about their data usage. The recent trend of tailoring political advertisements to meet the specific interests and needs of target demographics via social media has emerged as a cornerstone of digital campaign strategies (Stubenvoll et al., 2024).

Targeted political advertising occupies a distinct niche within the broader realm of targeted advertising. Unlike consumer choices, the repercussions of electoral decisions have profound and lasting societal impacts, potentially leading to greater scrutiny and criticism of targeted political ads compared to their commercial counterparts (Hirsch et al., 2024). Research indicates that political advertising can exert significant emotional influence, supporting the importance of engaging with, critically analysing, and making informed choices about sharing such content. The Digital Services Act (DSA) represents a legislative measure aimed at safeguarding consumers within the digital advertising domain, addressing three key areas: (1) the emergence of influencer marketing as a novel form of native advertising, (2) the personalisation of advertising content, and (3) hybrid advertising that straddles the line between influencer marketing and personalised ads (*Regulation 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC – Digital Services Act*, 2020). Recent analyses of the DSA highlight several challenges in consumer protection, including issues of coherence versus fragmentation, minimal benefits to consumers, and questions regarding the Act's long-term viability (Duivenvoorde & Goanta, 2023). These challenges make urgent the need for the development of robust digital advertising strategies at national levels and the formulation of effective policies. Such policies should aim to mitigate the adverse effects of targeted personalised ads, including political advertisements, and enhance literacy in both advertising and political domains.

These observations serve as the catalyst for our study, which aims to explore population attitudes towards various aspects of political advertising. We investigate perceptions of potential risks, the possibilities for regulation, and other critical factors underpinning the establishment of a comprehensive political marketing literacy system. The objective of our research is to shed light on these areas to facilitate the development of regulatory frameworks and mechanisms. By examining public stances on political advertisements, including their perceived risks and possibilities for regulation, we aim to contribute valuable insights necessary for crafting a robust system of political marketing literacy. This, in turn, is expected to support the development of effective regulatory measures.

2 Literature Review

The rapid advancement of technological innovations and the ongoing digital transformation are significantly influencing every sector of the societal economy. The surge in information complexity is increasingly challenging the decision-making models of individuals and groups. While there has been a rise in information literacy across various population segments in different countries, there is growing pressure to acquire additional forms of literacy, including digital, media, algorithmic, and environmental literacy (Dogruel et al., 2022; Rasi et al., 2019). Notably, the need for political advertisement literacy is becoming more pronounced (Nelson et al., 2021). This need stems from the growing impact of political advertisements on individuals' perceptions, behaviours, and decision-making processes, alongside the rise of numerous political, economic, and psychosocial risks. Existing research outlines specific research trajectories that emphasise the multidimensional nature of personalised content perception and political advertisement, emphasising the importance of their systematic examination (Metz et al., 2020; De Keyzer et al., 2022).

Political marketing significantly differs from commercial marketing, not just in terms of the product but also in its scope and long-term impact. Political marketing deals with a complex, intangible product – be it a candidate or a political party – whereas decisions in elections carry far-reaching and serious consequences. Online Behavioural Advertising (OBA), a product of digital evolution, is widely used in commercial marketing to deliver highly customised advertising messages to individual consumers. OBA encompasses two main processes: monitoring or tracking consumer behaviour online and analysing collected data to target advertisements individually (Varnali et al., 2021). Recently, the techniques utilised in OBA have started to be applied in political advertising, giving rise to the dimension known as Targeted Political Advertising (TPA) on social media (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2018). Some researchers suggest investigating TPA in relation to voter preferences, the theory of self-similarity (Yang & Jiang, 2021), social identity theory, and persuasion knowledge to comprehend its causal relationships (Hirsch et al., 2024).

Within political advertising, there is a notable concern amongst voters about maintaining the privacy of their political beliefs, driven by fears of being unfairly targeted based on their political views. This vulnerability breeds apprehension about potential discrimination, manipulation, polarisation, breaches of privacy, or the impacts of disinformation (Roemmele & Gibson, 2020; Brkan, 2020). Microtargeting within Targeted Political Advertising (TPA) aims to address specific needs of diverse voter groups and engage those less interested in politics. However, the effectiveness and electorate's acceptance of this form of advertising remain underexplored, leaving its impact as a campaign tool uncertain. Key concerns with TPAs include the risks of misaligned personalisation or targeting unsuitable ads to individuals. Hirsch et al. (2024) suggest that addressing these issues requires assessing whether TPA aligns with user preferences, its perceived manipulative intent, and evaluating its benefits and risks to democracy. A deeper understanding of these dynamics can shed light on how the electorate perceives promises and threats related to TPA (Borgesius et al., 2018; Roemmele & Gibson, 2020).

In democratic countries, political advertising is intended to provide accurate information, enabling voters to make informed decisions about candidates. However, not everyone possesses equal knowledge of political matters, and varying levels of political advertising literacy can lead individuals to accept political messages without critical assessment, potentially believing misleading advertisements (Nelson et al., 2021). In this regard, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) becomes relevant, as it explores the interplay between knowledge of political subjects, strategies for managing political knowledge, and understanding of both subjective and objective persuasion within political advertising. Research by Nelson et al. (2021) indicates that individuals with a higher understanding of politics are likely to have a greater grasp of both objective and subjective persuasion knowledge in political advertising, with subjective persuasion knowledge producing increased scepticism towards political advertisements. Efforts to delve deeper into belief structures aim to comprehend how populations perceive political advertising. Jin et al. (2009) found that voters assess political advertisements at both institutional levels, such as cynicism and monetary policy, and instrumental levels, including aspects like information accuracy, truthfulness,

and entertainment value. Moreover, while perceptions of political advertisements may vary based on the topic, the type of advertisement might not significantly impact these perceptions (Shen et al., 2011).

The impact of political involvement on shaping population beliefs and attitudes is significant, leading to numerous studies investigating the relationship between negative political advertising and voter turnout. Stevens et al. (2008) highlighted that negative political advertising influences the composition of the electorate in noteworthy ways. Matthes and Marquart (2015) explored how opinion-congruent and -incongruent political advertisements affect voting decisions and turnout, finding that while incongruent ads do not influence voting decisions, congruent ads significantly mobilise voters. Beyond these immediate effects, Dermody and Scullion (2003) emphasised the importance of considering the long-term implications of political advertising, particularly the detrimental effects of negative ad strategies that support doubt, fear, and anxiety, urging an evaluation of the balance between short-term electoral gains and the prolonged social consequences of such strategies. Furthermore, political media has the potential to divide and polarise politicised groups within society. Ostfeld (2017) stressed the necessity of investigating how political media shapes perceptions of political homogeneity and power, offering initial evidence of a causal link between targeted political media and the perception of targeted political groups, flagging the complex dynamics at play in political advertising's influence on society.

The perception of political advertising also varies depending on the country's state, such as during peace or war. Mahmoud et al. (2020a) found that during wartime, the perception of political advertising negatively affects attitudes due to sarcasm amongst less politically engaged voters. This negative attitude is associated with lower levels of perceived truthfulness in advertising amongst voters and higher levels of cynicism amongst those deeply involved in politics. Such negative perceptions can decrease the likelihood that voters will engage with political ads, support candidates, or participate in elections (Mahmoud et al., 2020b). Additionally, the type of state institutions can influence perceptions of political advertising and its anticipated effects. Esarey et al. (2016) studied political advertising in relation to Chinese perspectives and propaganda, finding that the Chinese population generally supports state efforts to shape public attitudes through television ads, though support varies by gender, age, and educational background.

Negative political advertising can lead to psychological and social repercussions, with research highlighting its impact on public sentiment. Dardis et al. (2008) explored the effect of negative political advertising on feelings of alienation and apathy towards government or political regimes, and distrust in the political system of the country. The type of political advertisement might influence these adverse outcomes. Political ads can prioritise certain public policy areas, yet the connection between these ads and actual policy outcomes often shows a marked discrepancy. Fowler et al. (2021) observed that advertisements discussing determinants of population health seldom made a direct link to expected health outcomes, leading to a potential disconnection in public policy impact. As individuals form their mental constructs, the intended effects of advertisements on public policy understanding may be diluted. Understanding the response of audiences to political advertisements necessitates an examination of marketing contexts and audience reactions, even on a micro scale (Peng & Hackley, 2009). Rarely do the same marketing strategies apply uniformly across different contexts, underlining the need to consider their role not just in political science but in cultural-social aspects as well. Such an approach, focusing both on the macro and micro levels, including consumer perspectives, allows for a broader exploration of geographical and other diverse viewpoints.

The examination of socio-demographic factors, particularly gender characteristics, holds significant importance in the study of political advertising, especially targeted political advertising. Research in this area offers multidimensional insights into how gender influences the reception and effectiveness of political messages. Holman et al. (2015) investigated how campaigns resonate with female voters, uncovering that while candidates of both genders can appeal to this demographic, only female candidates successfully engage female voters' gender identity. This suggests that political parties may tailor their advertising content to specifically appeal to women, with strategies varying across genders. Erfort (2023) highlights the distinct gender strategies in political party communication and their impacts. Further exploring gender differences, Nelson et al. (2021) identified disparities in political interest, information seeking, and persuasion knowledge, with males generally scoring higher.

McGregor et al. (2017) found that male candidates might perceive greater strategic value in personalising political advertisements than their female counterparts, also noting qualitative differences in the personalisation approaches between genders on social media. Such socio-economic intergroup differences can be analysed through Stereotype Threat Theory (STT) (Swab et al., 2022), offering explanations for observed behaviours and attitudes. The role of gender extends into the realm of social media platforms, which often categorise users by gender. Bivens and Haimson (2016) examined how gender categories are constructed and sustained through social media design, impacting the broader social media ecosystem. Recent controversies surrounding gender-based targeted advertising highlight varying perspectives on gender-neutral online spaces versus gender-based ad targeting.

Online targeted advertisement platforms sometimes discriminate against users from sensitive groups, such as those defined by gender, race, or other sensitive attributes, by excluding them from receiving certain ads. Speicher et al. (2018) argue that antidiscrimination regulations should focus on the target population rather than specific attributes used in advertisement targeting. Many users of social media view both commercial and political advertisements as a privacy threat. Meier et al. (2023) explored social media users' privacy perceptions of commercial and political targeting through protection motivation theory, finding that perceived advertisement transparency and manipulability positively influence users' motivation to protect their privacy. Research highlights the importance of examining regulatory processes related to political advertising. Dobber et al. (2019) investigated data protection rights, freedom of speech, and sector-specific rules for political advertising. They note that while online political microtargeting is protected under freedom of speech rights, these rights are not unlimited. European human rights perspectives allow legislators to restrict political advertising. Public attitudes towards stricter regulation of online targeted political advertising may vary, with some concerns being motivated by partisan interests (Baum et al., 2021). Proposals from legislators across various countries aim to address information asymmetry and the negative impacts on freedom of speech by ensuring transparency (Dommett, 2020; *Regulation 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC – Digital Services Act*, 2020; *Regulation 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC – General Data Protection Regulation*, 2016) which could enhance persuasion knowledge (Dobber et al., 2023).

The research findings highlight the intense evolution in understanding personalised media content in the population. They emphasise the urgent need to comprehend the motivations behind individuals' decision-making processes regarding media consumption, shifts in response to varied content offerings, growing concerns about rising risks, and the effectiveness of current regulatory frameworks. Political advertising, a distinct part of personalised content, unveils a broad avenue for in-depth exploration of individuals' beliefs at both institutional and instrumental levels, their political involvement, and their levels of cynicism towards political messages. Additionally, it is vital to investigate individuals' perceptions of political power and homogeneity within the scope of political media, aiming to unearth the potentially divisive impact of these dynamics on the polarisation of politicised groups.

Three research questions are formulated based on the outlined considerations:

RQ1: How are individuals' perceptions and judgments regarding political advertisements, encompassing their assessed significance, impact, propensity for manipulation, and the call for oversight, interconnected with their apprehensions regarding the ethical dilemmas and privacy encroachments associated with political advertising?

RQ2: How do individuals perceive their level of control over the content manifested on the Internet, and in what manner does this perception differ amongst respondents with varying levels of education?

RQ3: Which sociodemographic determinants influence individuals' perceptions of the detrimental effects wrought by the personalised tailoring of content and advertising on websites or social media platforms?

3 Data and Methodology

This study explores the concepts of personal autonomy and the right to informational self-determination in the context of personalised media content. The central aim is to assess the general public's awareness of personalisation practices, their preferences towards such personalisation, and the perceived influence of these practices on individual rights. The research further explores the level of trust in personalisation mechanisms and delineates the desired control mechanisms over personalisation processes. Additionally, it introduces new inquiries, especially regarding the monitoring of online behaviour. In the context of this study, personalisation is defined as the adaptation of online content to individual users through algorithmic means, while personal autonomy is understood as the capacity of an individual to control their own life. Informational self-determination is the principle that allows individuals to control how information about them is collected, shared, and used, ensuring they can make informed choices about their personal data.

This research utilises a mixed-methods approach to gauge individuals' perceived control over online content and their views on the potential risks and benefits of personalised content and advertising, with a special focus on political messages. Data from 1,213 participants in the Czech Republic, collected from February 20 to February 27, 2023, through the CAWI technique, form the basis of this endeavour. Targeting the general population over 15 years old, the study applied quota sampling to ensure diverse representation across gender, age, education, and regional demographics. Multinomial regression analysis facilitated the achievement of the study's objectives, providing insights into the population's perception level of content personalisation.

The research inquiry proceeds as follows: The first segment of our analysis scrutinises individuals' beliefs and opinions about political advertising, focusing on its perceived importance, influence, manipulative nature, and the necessity for its regulation. This section also addresses individuals' concerns regarding the ethical implications and privacy issues surrounding political advertising. The second part of the analysis is meant to examine the extent of control respondents feel they possess over the content displayed to them on the Internet, examining their perceptions of autonomy in digital content consumption. The final segment of the analysis employs multinomial regression with the aim of identifying the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents that underlie perceptions of the harmfulness of personalised content and advertising on the web or social media. This comprehensive approach aims to elucidate the multifaceted relationship between personal autonomy, informational self-determination, and content personalisation within the context of modern media technologies.

4 Analysis and Results

First, we explore individuals' perceptions and opinions on political advertising, encompassing aspects like its significance, impact, manipulative potential, and the need for regulatory oversight, alongside concerns over ethical implications and privacy issues related to political advertising. Figure 1 showcases responses from survey participants to a series of statements concerning their attitudes towards political advertising, preferences for regulation, ethical and privacy concerns, and engagement with political content. The boxplots in Figure 1 represent responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1, indicating "strongly agree", to 10, denoting "strongly disagree". These visual aids offer a glimpse into the variability of opinions amongst the surveyed individuals about political advertising, with the median and quartiles being included.
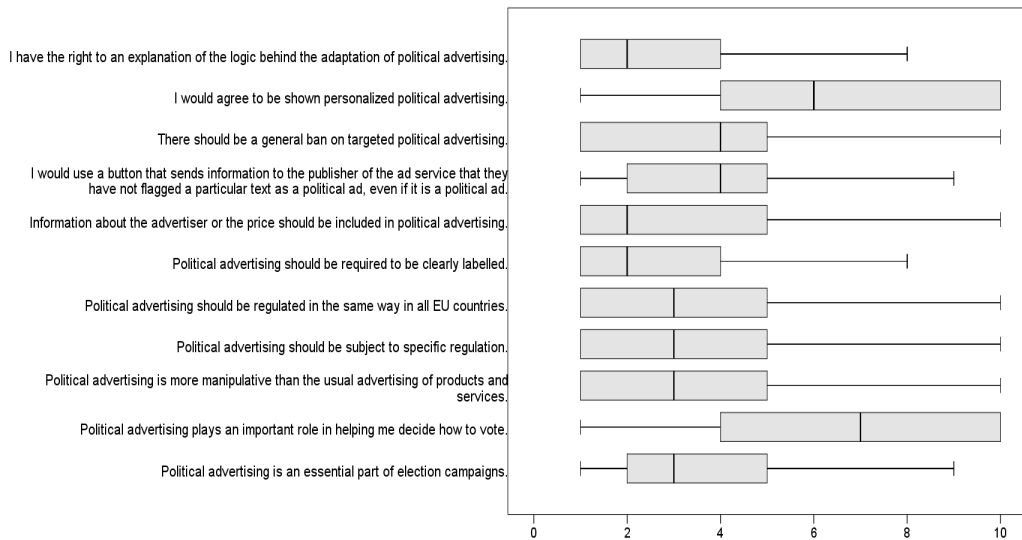
Figure 1. Overall sentiment
Source: own processing, 2024

Regarding the statement "I have the right to an explanation of the logic behind the adaptation of political advertising", the results show a moderate agreement amongst participants, with a median value of 2. This indicates that a significant portion of respondents believe they are entitled to understand the reasoning behind how political advertising is tailored to them, highlighting the value they place on transparency in advertising targeting practices. The assertion "I would agree to be shown personalised political advertising", with both a mean and median of 6, reveals that a considerable number of respondents are disinclined towards receiving personalised political advertising. This suggests a reluctance to engage with tailored political content, likely due to concerns regarding privacy and potential manipulation. Continuing with the statement "There should be a general ban on targeted political advertising", the data shows a moderate level of agreement, with both the mean and median resting at 4. This indicates a division amongst respondents about the necessity of banning targeted political advertising, highlighting varied opinions on its effectiveness and ethical considerations. Concerning the statement "I would use a button that sends information to the publisher of the ad service that they have not flagged a particular text as a political ad, even if it is a political ad", the data leans towards agreement, with both the mean and median at 4. This suggests that a significant number of respondents would favour a tool that notifies publishers of unlabelled political ads, demonstrating a potential demand for greater transparency and accountability in political advertising.

In the case of the statement "Information about the advertiser or the price should be included in political advertising", the data shows a strong inclination towards agreement. This indicates a clear preference amongst respondents for transparency in political advertising, emphasising the importance of including details about the advertiser or pricing information. For the affirmation "Political advertising should be required to be clearly labelled", there is significant agreement amongst respondents, as indicated by a median value of 2. This suggests a widespread belief that political advertising should be transparently and unequivocally identified, potentially to enhance clarity and public understanding of its political nature. In respect of the statement "Political advertising should be regulated in the same way in all EU countries", the data reveals a trend towards agreement, demonstrated by a median value of 3. This indicates a consensus amongst respondents for the need for standardised regulations for political advertising across EU countries, highlighting a desire for uniformity and equitable standards in the political advertising landscape.

Regarding the statement "Political advertising should be subject to specific regulation", the data shows a trend towards agreement, with both the mean and median at 3. This indicates that a significant number of respondents

favour implementing specific regulations for political advertising, likely due to concerns about ensuring transparency, fairness, and accountability in political messaging.

As for the assertion "Political advertising is more manipulative than the usual advertising of products and services", the data shows a consensus towards agreement, with both mean and median at 3. This reflects a recognition amongst respondents that political advertising tends to be more manipulative than standard advertisements for products and services, highlighting concerns over the ethical dimensions and the potential for undue influence in political messaging. Moving on to the statement "Political advertising plays an important role in helping me decide how to vote", with a mean and median of 7, the data indicates a predominant disagreement amongst respondents regarding the influence of political advertising on their voting decisions. This suggests a level of scepticism or detachment from the impact that political advertising has on shaping their electoral choices. Finally, opinions on the statement "Political advertising is an essential part of election campaigns" reveal a supportive stance, suggesting that the majority of respondents recognise the critical role of political advertising in the dynamics of election campaigns.

The second part of our analysis focuses on understanding users' perceptions of control and the possible risks associated with the customisation of online content and advertising. Initially, we assess how much control users believe they have over the content that appears to them on the Internet. Following this, we evaluate their views on the individual customisation of online content and advertising, specifically whether respondents consider these practices to be potentially harmful.

Table 1 delineates respondents' perceptions of control over Internet content, segmented by educational attainment. The largest group, 46.9% of respondents, feels they possess only limited control over what content is shown to them online. This sentiment is most acutely felt by those with a university degree, at 56.1%, while the least, 42.0%, is reported by individuals with just primary education. Respondents with partial high school education perceive limited control at a rate of 37.3%, and those with a complete high school education, at 48.2%. About 24.2% of participants believe they have no control whatsoever, a perspective consistently observed across educational levels, with the lowest at 15.9% amongst primary-educated to a high of 25.8% amongst both segments of high school-educated respondents. Conversely, university-educated respondents are at 21.5%. A minor portion, 13.0%, asserts they have as much control as the content providers themselves. This view is somewhat more prevalent amongst those with less formal education, with primary school and high school without diploma respondents indicating this at 15.9% and 18.6%, respectively. High school graduates with a diploma and university degree holders express this sentiment at 10.8% and 10.4%, respectively. These insights suggest a widespread perception of limited control over online content across different educational backgrounds, with a notable division in perceptions based on the level of education achieved.

A smaller subset of respondents, 4.9%, believes they exert more control over the content that appears to them online than the providers themselves do, signalling a group that feels particularly empowered in navigating their online environment. This belief in having more control than the content providers shows there are marked differences across educational backgrounds. Remarkably, 55.2% of high school graduates feel they have more control, contrasting sharply with just 3.1% of university degree holders sharing this sentiment. Amongst those with only primary education, 5.8% think they have more control, and this percentage slightly increases to 6.1% for high school graduates without diploma. Additionally, 11.0% of participants are unsure about their control level over the content they encounter online. Uncertainty peaks amongst primary school-educated individuals at 20.3%, then lessens as education level increases, with the lowest uncertainty, 9.0%, reported by university degree holders. High school graduates with a diploma reflect a similar trend of uncertainty at 9.1%. This data indicates varied perceptions of control over Internet content, with distinct differences evident across educational demographics, from a notable confidence amongst a minority in having greater control to a considerable portion expressing uncertainty.

Table 1. Control over displayed content on the Internet

How much control do you have over what content you see on the internet?	Education	Percentage
I have no control over how online content is displayed to me. It is completely in the hands of the content provider.	Primary school	15.9
	High school without diploma	25.8
	High school with diploma	25.8
	University degree	21.5
24.2%		
I have little control over how online content is displayed to me. Content provider has more control.	Primary school	42.0
	High school without diploma	37.3
	High school with diploma	48.2
	University degree	56.1
46.9%		
I have the same control over how online content is shown to me as the content provider.	Primary school	15.9
	High school without diploma	18.6
	High school with diploma	10.8
	University degree	10.4
13.0%		
I have more control over how online content is displayed to me than the content provider.	Primary school	5.8
	High school without diploma	6.1
	High school with diploma	55.2
	University degree	3.1
4.9%		
I don't know.	Primary school	20.3
	High school without diploma	14.1
	High school with diploma	9.1
	University degree	9.0
11.0%		

Source: own processing, 2024

Thirdly, the research then investigates respondents' attitudes towards the personalisation of online content and advertising, questioning whether they consider such practices potentially harmful. Figure 2 displays the distribution of opinions on the potential harm caused by personalisation of content and advertising on the Internet and social media, classified according to the educational levels of respondents.
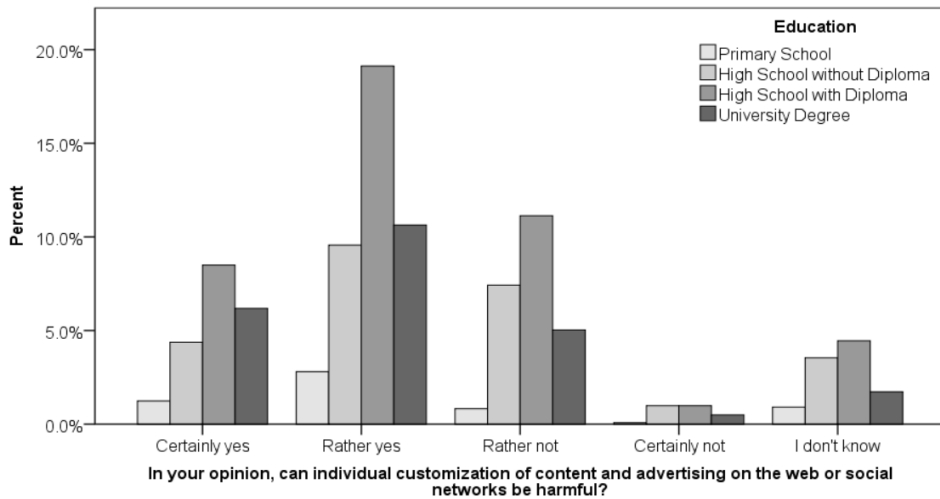
Figure 2. Harmfulness of personalisation of online content
Source: own processing, 2024

The key findings are that a minority of respondents (20.3%) strongly believe that personalisation can certainly be harmful. A significant proportion (42.1%) are leaning towards the view that customisation is potentially harmful. A smaller group (24.4%) is less concerned, suggesting that personalisation may not be significantly harmful. Very few respondents (2.6%) reject the idea of harm altogether. A significant proportion remain uncertain about the impact of adaptation (10.6%). Figure 2 shows how opinions on the harmfulness of customisation vary by level of education. Some patterns emerge, but there is also some variation between categories. A more detailed analysis of the harmfulness of personalisation of online content and advertising is presented in the next chapter.

Regression Analysis

To reveal the characteristics of individuals that are on the background of their attitudes towards the harmfulness of personalisation of online content, we perform multinomial regression. Multinomial regression analysis is a statistical method used to examine the influence of different factors on the probability of selecting one of several categories or outcomes. This analysis yields odds ratios that quantify how the response variable, which has multiple potential categories, is influenced by a set of predictor variables. The coefficients represented by odds ratios indicate the extent to which the logarithm of the odds of selecting a particular category changes with changes in the predictor variables. The model assumes that the probability of each category is determined by the explanatory variables and follows a multinomial distribution. Standard errors are used to measure the uncertainty or variability associated with the coefficients. The model parameters are estimated using maximum likelihood estimation. In our analysis, the dependent variable is the answer to the question: "In your opinion, can individual customisation of content and advertising on the web or social media be harmful?" Five possible answers were offered: "certainly yes", "rather yes", "rather not", "certainly not", "I don't know". The reference category in this regression analysis is "I don't know".

Let us denote the categories of dependent variable in our regression – "certainly yes", "rather yes", "rather not", "certainly not", and the reference category "I don't know". The model equations for predicting the log-odds of each category are as follows:
- "certainly yes":

$$log\left[\frac{P(Y = certainly\ yes)}{P(Y = I\ don't\ know)}\right]$$

$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1\ Age + \beta_2\ Gender + \ +\beta_3\ Education + \sum_{i=1}^{n}\beta_i \times X_i \tag{1}$$

- "rather yes":

$$log\left[\frac{P(Y = rather\ yes)}{P(Y = I\ don't\ know)}\right]$$

$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1\ Age + \beta_2\ Gender + \ +\beta_3\ Education + \sum_{i=1}^{n}\beta_i \times X_i \tag{2}$$

- "rather not":

$$log\left[\frac{P(Y = rather\ not)}{P(Y = I\ don't\ know)}\right]$$

$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1\ Age + \beta_2\ Gender + \ +\beta_3\ Education + \sum_{i=1}^{n}\beta_i \times X_i \tag{3}$$

- "certainly not":

$$log\left[\frac{P(Y = certainly\ not)}{P(Y = I\ don't\ know)}\right]$$

$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1\ Age + \beta_2\ Gender + \ +\beta_3\ Education + \sum_{i=1}^{n}\beta_i \times X_i \tag{4}$$

- and for the category "I don't know" which is not explicitly modelled because it serves as reference category:

$$log\left[\frac{P(Y = I\ don't\ know)}{P(Y = I\ don't\ know)}\right] = 0 \tag{5}$$

where *age, gender* and *education* are socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, and X_i are respondents' opinions on the political advertising perception and regulation preferences. The set of variables X_i (political advertising perception and regulation preferences) is defined by statements that were the subject of the analysis on the Figure 1 and aimed to gather individuals' perspectives on various aspects of political advertising. They explored attitudes towards political ads, preferences for regulation, ethical and privacy concerns, and engagement with such advertising. Essentially, they sought to understand people's beliefs, opinions, and feelings about the importance, influence, manipulative nature, and need for regulation of political advertising.

Table 2. Multinomial regression model

In your opinion, can individual customisation of content and advertising on the web or social networks be harmful? [a]		B	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% CI for Exp(B)	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Certainly yes	*Intercept*	2.866	.000			
	Age	-.018	.021	.982	.967	.997
	Gender					
	Male	.575	.013	1.777	1.126	2.803
	Female	0[b]	.	.	.	.
	Education					
	Primary school	-.836	.090	.434	.165	1.139
	High school without diploma	-.972	.003	.378	.199	.718
	High school with diploma	-.459	.133	.632	.348	1.149
	University degree	0[b]	.	.	.	.
	I would use a button that sends information to the publisher of the ad service that they have not flagged a particular text as a political ad, even if it is a political ad.	-.099	.023	.906	.832	.986
	I have the right to an explanation of the logic behind the adaptation of political advertising.	-.245	.000	.783	.696	.880
Rather yes	*Intercept*	2.737	.000			
	Age	-.016	.024	.984	.970	.998
	Gender					
	Male	.675	.001	1.963	1.297	2.971
	Female	0[b]				
	Education		.	.	.	.
	Primary school	-.610	.166	.543	.229	1.287
	High school without graduation	-.730	.015	.482	.267	.869
	High school with graduation	-.198	.488	.820	.469	1.435
	University degree					
	Political advertising is more manipulative than the usual advertising of products and services.	.087	.060	1.090	.996	1.194
	I would use a button that sends information to the publisher of the ad service that they have not flagged a particular text as a political ad, even if it is a political ad.	-.111	.004	.895	.829	.966
	I have the right to an explanation of the logic behind the adaptation of political advertising.	-.128	.010	.880	.799	.970
Rather not	*Intercept*	2.030	.000			
	Age	-.015	.049	.985	.970	1.000
	Gender					
	Male	.683	.002	1.981	1.275	3.076
	Female	0[b]	.	.	.	.
	Education					

		-1.08 / .014 etc				

		B	Sig.	Exp(B)	Lower	Upper
	Primary school	-1.08	.038	.338	.121	.944
	High school without graduation	-.211	.507	.809	.433	1.512
	High school with graduation	.013	.966	1.013	.557	1.844
	University degree	0[b]	.	.	.	.
	Political advertising is an essential part of election campaigns.	-.101	.018	.904	.831	.983
	Political advertising is more manipulative than the usual advertising of products and services.	.110	.023	1.116	1.015	1.227
	I have the right to an explanation of the logic behind the adaptation of political advertising.	-.100	.059	.905	.815	1.004
Certainly not	*Intercept*	-1.322	.249			
	Age	.014	.367	1.014	.984	1.045
	Gender					
	Male	.688	.099	1.990	.878	4.511
	Female	0[b]	.	.	.	.
	I would use a button that sends information to the publisher of the ad service that they have not flagged a particular text as a political ad, even if it is a political ad.	-.254	.007	.776	.646	.932

a. The reference category is: "I don´t know."
b. This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant.

Source: own processing, 2024

For the "certainly yes" category of the dependent variable, we observe that for each unit increase in age, the odds of believing that personalisation of content and advertising can be harmful decrease by about 1.8%, and being male increases the odds of holding this belief by about 77.7% compared to being female. Having a primary school education decreases the odds by about 56.6% and having a high school education without a diploma decreases the odds by about 62.2% compared to having a university degree with respect to the "I don't know" category. Not believing that one has the right to an explanation of the logic behind political ads significantly decreases the log odds of choosing "certainly yes". This suggests that respondents who do not value transparency in political advertising are less likely to believe that individual customisation of content and advertising is harmful. Respondents who are not inclined to have and use a button to notify publishers of unlabelled political ads are less likely to believe that customisation of content and advertising is harmful. This suggests a positive relationship between willingness to use the button and the belief that customisation is harmful.

As for the "rather yes" category, we find that for each unit increase in age, the odds of believing that personalisation of content and advertising can be rather harmful decrease by approximately 1.6%, and being male increases the odds by approximately 96.3% compared to being female in the "I don't know" category. Having only a high school education decreases the odds by about 51.8% compared to having a university degree. Not believing in the right to an explanation of the logic behind the customisation of political advertising decreases the odds of believing that individual customisation of content and advertising on the web or social networks is harmful by about 11.5%. Not believing in the manipulative nature of political advertising increases the odds of believing in the harmfulness of individual customisation of content and advertising on the web or social media. Respondents who

are not willing to have and use a button to notify publishers of unlabelled political ads are less likely to believe that individual customisation of content and advertising is harmful.

For the "I don't know" category, we document that for every unit increase in age, the odds of believing that personalisation of content and advertising can be harmful decrease by about 1.5%, and being male increases the odds by about 98.1% compared to being female in relation to the "I don't know" category. Having only a primary school education decreases the odds by about 66.2% compared to having a university degree. The weaker belief that political advertising is an essential part of election campaigns is associated with a lower likelihood of disagreeing that personalisation of content and advertising is rather harmful. Respondents who do not perceive political advertising as more manipulative are more likely to choose "rather not" compared to the reference category ("I don't know"). Specifically, they are 1.116 times more likely to choose "rather not" for each unit increase in this belief. Those who believe that individuals do not have the right to an explanation of the logic behind the customisation of political advertising are less likely to choose the option that individual customisation of content and advertising is "rather harmful" compared to the reference category.

Finally, the results for the "certainly not" category are as follows. Being male increases the odds of selecting this category by about 99% compared to being female relative to the "I don't know" category. Respondents who are not willing to have and use a button to notify publishers of unlabelled political ads are 22.4% less likely to believe that customisation of content and advertising is not harmful compared to those who don't know.

4 Discussion

The study offered a comprehensive examination of respondents' viewpoints on diverse facets of political advertising and customisation of online content. It illuminated attitudes towards transparency, regulation, control, and perceived risks linked with personalised content, as outlined by the three research questions. The outcomes of the analytical processes focused on these questions revealed several interesting findings. Not only were trends in the further development of personalised aspect perception evident, but also the necessity for creating many regulatory and support mechanisms was highlighted.

Regarding the adaptation of political advertising, a notable call for transparency emerges, indicated by the moderate agreement amongst respondents asserting their right to understand the logic behind political advertising customisation. This demonstrates a widespread desire for clarity in how political advertisements are targeted. However, a general reluctance to accept personalised political advertising prevails, with the majority expressing unwillingness to engage with such content, likely due to privacy and manipulation concerns. This scenario reveals an intriguing conflict: the desire for transparency does not necessarily translate into an openness to personalised advertising, highlighting concerns over privacy and potential manipulation. As noted by Segijn et al. (2022), transparency and control in personalisation are often confused, yet enhancing transparency does not automatically lead to increased control. It is crucial first to elevate awareness amongst individuals. Dogruel (2019) argues that providing detailed explanations about behavioural advertising can increase trust in the platforms presenting these ads. The pursuit of transparency in personalisation intersects with algorithmic communication, calling for a unified approach to understanding and negotiating the transparency-control paradigm within digital advertising (Segijn et al., 2022).

The discussion around regulation reveals a division amongst respondents on the potential prohibition of targeted political advertising. While a segment of the population supports such a ban, reflecting concerns about its ethical implications and effectiveness, another part remains sceptical, hinting at a diverse range of opinions on this matter. Yet, a common thread amongst many is the push for specific regulations for political advertising, suggesting widespread demand for greater transparency and fairness. This perspective is bolstered by Dobber et al. (2023) findings, which highlight that transparency disclosures, especially those grounded in legal proposals like the Honest Ads Act (HAA) and the Digital Services Act (DSA), can significantly enhance persuasion knowledge. Several studies

have demonstrated the importance of increased persuasion knowledge in mitigating fears of undue influence from political advertising, advocating for clear and transparent advertising practices (Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2019; Boerman et al., 2017; Eisend, 2015). Despite concerns that transparency might amplify privacy worries or dampen advertising efficacy, Dobber et al. (2023) suggest that transparent information tends to be most beneficial. However, attitudes towards stricter regulation of online targeted political ads may sometimes be swayed by partisan interests, indicating that privacy concerns may be overlooked if it benefits a favoured political party (Braun et al., 2021).

Furthermore, there is a broad consensus that political advertisements should clearly disclose advertiser information or pricing, emphasising the need for transparency in political communications. Likewise, there is a strong agreement on the necessity of labelling political advertisements clearly to enhance transparency and public awareness of their political nature. Additionally, respondents generally support the idea of harmonising regulations for political advertising across European Union countries, highlighting the significance of consistency and fairness in political discourse. The effects of tools designed to increase transparency in political advertisements are not unequivocally clear and vary amongst different segments of the population. Research by Jost et al. (2023) investigating the role of transparency disclaimers within the regulatory framework for digital political advertising found that such disclaimers do not significantly influence the adoption of digital political advertisements, despite indicating that an advertiser has targeted the recipient with a specific intention. The influence of technological advancements and political factors specific to each country on regulatory efforts makes the efficacy of such regulations a matter of debate (Dommett & Zhu, 2022). Minimal regulations may be inadequate to curb the proliferation of electoral disinformation, but more stringent regulations could conflict with democratic freedoms (Pender, 2022). Regulating political advertising remains a contentious issue, as it involves determining the extent to which political actors can finance communication with voters. Differences in national electoral systems amongst countries and the absence of a unified regulatory approach lead to varied strategies for managing political advertising. This includes everything from outright bans on political advertising during election periods to self-regulated or completely unregulated practices. Therefore, the impact of Regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising (RPA) on the diverse legal frameworks and systems governing political advertising in individual European Union member states has been actively addressed (Van Drunen et al., 2022).

In terms of perceptions of control over online content, the majority of respondents feel they possess limited control, with a substantial portion expressing uncertainty about their level of influence. This suggests a prevailing sense of powerlessness in managing online content. However, a minority feel empowered, perceiving themselves to have more control than content providers, indicating diverse perspectives on control over online content. Perceived control can mediate the negative impact of personalisation on privacy concerns, while the interaction between personalisation and information transparency depends on the customer's need to know, as supported by existing research (Chen et al., 2022; Strycharz et al., 2019). The research studies confirm that perceived control is usually lower on the customised websites than on non-customised websites, leading to the privacy concerns (Lambillotte et al., 2022). Nevertheless, an incorporation of transparency messages into this process can diminish the negative personalisation effects for the customer, especially for those with a low need for knowledge (Kim et al., 2019). Therefore, behavioural and cognitive control will significantly influence the effectiveness of personalised messages.

The multinomial regression analysis highlighted several factors influencing perceptions of the harmfulness of personalised online content. Younger individuals and males were more likely to find such customisation harmful. In contrast, a belief in manipulative potential of political advertising lessened the perception of harm. This aligns with findings by Segijn and Van Ooijen (2022), who noted younger generations' greater acceptance and lesser need for oversight of personalisation. Additionally, males demonstrated a higher engagement and knowledge related to political advertising, suggesting gender-specific attitudes towards political advertising regulation, the finding further corroborated by Nelson et. al. (2021). The study emphasised the importance of addressing the personalisation paradox and privacy protection cynicism. It highlighted the necessity to explore how different socio-demographic and socio-political constructs impact perceptions of personalised content, underscoring the need for ongoing development in understanding these dynamics (Van Ooijen et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023). Despite

significant strides in examining the impacts of political advertising, numerous questions and logistical challenges remain unaddressed, as noted by Motta and Fowler (2016). The evolving digital media landscape and regulatory measures pertaining to political advertising flag the urgency for enhanced political advertisement literacy. Such literacy is crucial for voters to critically assess political messages and resist disinformation. Nelson et al. (2021) further revealed that increased political knowledge correlates with higher discernment in recognising political advertising, making central the critical role of political advertisement literacy.

5 Conclusion

The research offered insights into the complexities of political advertising and the customisation of online content. It showed the importance of transparency, regulation, and individual agency in shaping digital spaces for informed decision-making. This study provided a thorough examination of respondents' perspectives on political advertising and online content customisation, revealing challenges surrounding transparency, regulation, control, and perceived risks associated with personalised content. The findings indicated a significant demand for transparency in the adaptation of political advertising, along with reservations about receiving customised content. This dichotomy emphasises the tension between the desire for transparency and concerns about privacy amongst participants. Although opinions on regulation varied, there was a noticeable preference for specific regulations to promote transparency and fairness in political messaging. The broad agreement on the need for advertiser disclosure and clear labelling of political advertising reflects a collective call for transparency and accountability. Furthermore, the study revealed a common sentiment of limited control over online content amongst respondents, with many expressing uncertainty regarding their influence. However, a subset of participants believed they had more control than content providers, indicating diverse views on control in digital environments. Through multinomial regression analysis, predictors were identified that shape attitudes towards the perceived risks of personalising online content.

Although advertisement literacy has advanced, its progression has primarily targeted educational initiatives for children and adolescents. The concept of political advertisement literacy remains largely undeveloped, scarcely appearing in academic literature. Yet, its necessity is increasingly evident, as highlighted through the development of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Nelson et al., 2021). Today's complex geopolitical climate, heightened by global threats such as climate change, disinformation, pandemics, military conflicts, and political tensions, intensifies the relevance of political topics. These subjects are often leveraged in sophisticated political advertising campaigns, pointing out the urgent need for systems and tools dedicated to political advertisement literacy. Such frameworks should aim to elucidate not only the significance of and concerns regarding political advertising but also the role of regulatory mechanisms like the Digital Services Act and other legal measures at both national and international levels. The findings of this study offer crucial insights for policymakers, regulatory bodies, political entities, media institutions, and researchers examining political advertising's impact on both the macro- and microeconomic facets of national economies. Research indicates the general public's limited awareness of scholarly discoveries, leading to misjudgements in evaluations and political stances. Scientists should actively engage in public discourse, potentially participating directly in decision-making processes to bridge the gap between scientific insight and public knowledge.

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