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Consumer Responses to Digital Advertising in Online Retail: Channel Influence, Ad Avoidance and Persuasive Cues Among Consumers in Chennai

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ABSTRACT
Purpose. This study examines how young urban consumers respond to the digital advertising used by online retailers. It focuses on attention and avoidance, reactions to personalised and behaviourally targeted advertising, the advertising channels consumers say influence their purchases across product categories, and the advertising attributes they rate as most influential.
Design/methodology/approach. A descriptive, cross-sectional questionnaire survey was administered through convenience sampling to 150 consumers in Chennai, India who were familiar with digital advertising; 141 usable questionnaires (94.0%) were analysed with frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations.
Findings. Consumers attended to advertising but also resisted it. While 62.4% paid attention to online advertisements always or sometimes, 91.5% blocked or skipped them at least occasionally, and 48.9% either found pop-ups intrusive or used ad-blockers. Attitudes to personalisation were conditional: 45.4% answered "it depends" and 29.8% judged advertisements too personalised. Video advertising was most often named as the most influential tool (34.0% of 1,128 category-level selections), ahead of sponsored content (25.7%), Google search ads (17.6%), viral advertising (14.0%) and email (8.7%). Among nine advertising attributes, customer reviews and recommendations ranked first (M = 3.84), followed by appealing product images (M = 3.79); the confidence intervals of the top attributes overlap, so the ordering is indicative rather than conclusive.
Research limitations/implications. The sample is non-probability, drawn from one city, and 92.2% of respondents were aged 18–25. Findings describe this young-adult segment and are not tested inferentially.
Practical implications. Retailers targeting young urban shoppers should lead with video and review-based creative, treat pop-ups and unconditional personalisation with caution, and give consumers visible control over data use.
Originality/value. The study documents, in a single survey, the coexistence of attention, avoidance and conditional acceptance of personalisation among young Indian online shoppers, and links channel preference to eight retail product categories.

Keywords: digital advertising; online retail; advertising avoidance; personalisation; social proof; consumer behaviour; India

1. INTRODUCTION

Online retailers now compete for attention on the same screens, platforms and feeds, and digital advertising has become the main way they reach, inform and retarget shoppers. Digital channels allow precise audience selection, rapid campaign adjustment and fine-grained measurement, which is why marketing scholars treat them as a central rather than supplementary part of the marketing mix (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Early comparative evidence also indicated that digital advertising can be more effective than traditional media for reaching and targeting consumers, particularly younger ones (Fuxman et al., 2014).

The same features that make digital advertising attractive to retailers create friction for consumers. Advertising value depends on whether a message is perceived as informative and entertaining rather than irritating (Ducoffe, 1996); forced exposure such as pop-ups can provoke perceived intrusiveness and avoidance (Edwards et al., 2002; Cho and Cheon, 2004); and targeting that relies on personal data raises privacy concerns that can weaken advertising effectiveness (Goldfarb and Tucker, 2011). Retailers therefore face a practical question: which formats and cues earn consumers' attention and trust, and which trigger resistance?

In India, this question is pressing. Online retail has expanded quickly, and online shoppers encounter advertising across video platforms, social media, search and email. Yet much of the available Indian evidence on digital advertising is either conceptual or based on small samples that examine digital marketing in general rather than the advertising experience of online retail shoppers. Few studies set attention, avoidance, personalisation, channel influence and advertising attributes side by side for the same respondents.

This paper addresses that gap using survey data from 141 consumers in Chennai. It asks four research questions:

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RQ1. How do consumers shop online and how do they attend to, share and avoid online retail advertising?
RQ2. How do they react to intrusive, personalised and behaviourally targeted advertising, and to customer reviews shown within advertisements?
RQ3. Which advertising tools do they report as most influential across retail product categories, and how aware are they of, and how do they use, the main tools?
RQ4. Which advertising attributes do they rate as most influential in online retail?
The study contributes in three ways. First, it documents attention and avoidance together, showing that they coexist rather than being opposites. Second, it maps perceived channel influence across eight retail categories, which most single-category studies cannot do. Third, it provides practical, evidence-based guidance for retailers targeting young urban consumers. The paper proceeds with a literature review (Section 2), the method (Section 3), results (Section 4), discussion (Section 5), implications (Section 6), limitations and future research (Section 7) and a conclusion (Section 8).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Digital advertising in online retail

Digital advertising covers paid placements on search engines, social platforms, video services, websites and email. For online retailers its appeal lies in targeting and measurability: campaigns can be directed at defined audiences, adjusted quickly and evaluated against purchase outcomes (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Data-driven marketing extends this logic by using large customer data sets to identify needs and preferences, although organisations report difficulty turning that capability into practice (Grishikashvili et al., 2014). Comparative survey evidence suggests that digital advertising can outperform traditional media in reaching and targeting consumers, with young consumers an especially suitable audience (Fuxman et al., 2014). Retargeting illustrates both the power and the risk of the model: advertisements showing products a consumer has already viewed can be more effective than generic banners, although the audience that receives them is already close to purchase (Lambrecht and Tucker, 2013).

2.2 Advertising value, intrusiveness and avoidance

The advertising value model holds that consumers' attitude to web advertising depends on whether it is seen as informative and entertaining, and on whether it is irritating (Ducoffe, 1996). Avoidance is the behavioural counterpart of low advertising value. Studies of internet users show that perceived goal impediment, perceived clutter and prior negative experience lead people to avoid online advertising (Cho and Cheon, 2004), and that forced exposure formats such as pop-ups heighten perceived intrusiveness through psychological reactance (Edwards et al., 2002). Research on Turkish consumers using Ducoffe's model found overall attitudes to Facebook and mobile-application advertisements to be negative (Aydin, 2016). This literature implies that attention and avoidance may coexist: consumers may notice advertisements while still skipping or blocking many of them.

2.3 Personalisation, targeting and privacy

Personalisation can raise relevance, but it relies on personal data and can feel invasive. Evidence from privacy regulation suggests that limiting the data available for targeting reduced the effectiveness of online banner advertising (Goldfarb and Tucker, 2011), which indicates that targeting contributes to effectiveness. At the same time, giving users greater control over how their data are used can improve responses to personalised advertisements (Tucker, 2014). Acceptance of personalisation is therefore likely to be conditional on perceived control and relevance, rather than uniformly positive or negative.

2.4 Evidence from India and the research gap

Indian studies generally report favourable consumer responses to digital marketing. Small-sample surveys associate digital advertising with awareness, interest and purchase decisions (Jain et al., 2016; Mahalaxmi and Ranjith, 2016) and with consumer satisfaction (Deekshith and Kinslin, 2016). Research on Indian online shoppers also shows that perceived usefulness and website functionality raise satisfaction, whereas perceived usability can lower it (Tandon et al., 2017). These studies, however, mostly treat digital marketing as a single construct, use samples of 50–200 respondents, rely on convenience sampling and seldom examine avoidance, personalisation and channel influence jointly. The present study addresses that gap by measuring attention, avoidance, reactions to personalisation, perceived influence of five advertising tools across eight retail categories, and the relative importance of nine advertising attributes in one sample of young urban consumers.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

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The study used a descriptive, cross-sectional survey design. The aim was to describe consumers' experiences of and responses to digital advertising in online retail, not to test causal hypotheses. A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data from individual consumers.

3.2 Population, sampling and sample size

The target population was consumers in Chennai, India who were familiar with digital advertising. Because no sampling frame of such consumers was available, convenience sampling, a non-probability method suited to exploratory descriptive work (Etikan et al., 2016), was used. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed and 141 usable questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 94.0%. Non-response arose mainly from potential respondents declining because of work commitments. Data were collected between [month, year] and [month, year] through [mode of administration: online form / paper / both].

3.3 Instrument and measures

The questionnaire contained four groups of items aligned with the research questions:
Respondent profile and shopping behaviour: gender, age group, frequency of online shopping and attention paid to online advertisements.
Advertising experience: likelihood of sharing online advertisements, blocking or skipping advertisements, reaction to pop-ups, effect of customer reviews and ratings shown in advertisements, views on personalisation, and reaction to advertisements targeted by browsing history. These were single-choice categorical items.
Perceived influence of advertising tools: for each of eight retail categories (grocery; food and beverages; health, beauty and skin care; books and music; fashion clothing and accessories; baby and kids care; electronics and audio; pharmacy), respondents selected the one tool that most influenced their purchases from five options: video advertising, sponsored advertising, email advertising, Google search ads and viral advertising.
Awareness and usage, and advertising attributes: respondents rated six advertising tools (online display, social media, video, sponsored content, email and Google search ads) for awareness and usage, and nine advertising attributes for their influence, on a five-point scale [anchors, e.g. 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree].

3.4 Data analysis

Analysis was descriptive. Frequencies and percentages summarised the categorical items. Means and standard deviations summarised the rating-scale items and were used to rank tools and attributes. To judge whether the ranks reflect real differences, approximate 95% confidence intervals were computed from the reported means and standard deviations (mean $\pm$ 1.96 $\times$ SD/$\sqrt{n}$, n = 141). Overlapping intervals were treated as indicating that adjacent ranks cannot be distinguished. No inferential hypothesis tests were performed.

4. RESULTS

All percentages are of the 141 respondents unless stated. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.
4.1 Respondent profile and online shopping behaviour (RQ1)
The sample is predominantly young: 92.2% of respondents were aged 18–25, and women formed a slight majority (56.7%) (Table 1). Online shopping was habitual but not intensive. A little over three in five respondents (61.7%) shopped online at least a few times a month, while 38.3% shopped rarely or never (Table 2). Attention to online advertisements was moderate: 62.4% paid attention always or sometimes, and 37.6% rarely or never.

Table 1. Respondent profile (n = 141)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	80	56.7
	Male	61	43.3
Age	18–25 years	130	92.2
	26–35 years	7	5.0
	36–45 years	3	2.1
	46 years and above	1	0.7

Table 2. Online shopping frequency and attention to online advertisements (n = 141)

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Variable	Category	n	%
Frequency of online shopping	Multiple times a week	9	6.4
	Once a week	13	9.2
	A few times a month	65	46.1
	Rarely	53	37.6
	Never	1	0.7
Attention to online advertisements	Yes, always	18	12.8
	Yes, sometimes	70	49.6
	No, rarely	39	27.7
	No, never	14	9.9

4.2 Avoidance and intrusiveness

Advertising avoidance was widespread. Only 8.5% of respondents never blocked or skipped online advertisements while shopping; 39.7% did so frequently and 51.8% occasionally, so 91.5% did so at least occasionally (Table 3). Reactions to pop-up advertisements were split. The largest group was indifferent (31.2%), but 29.1% found pop-ups intrusive and annoying and 19.9% used ad-blockers to avoid them, so 48.9% reacted negatively, compared with 19.9% who found pop-ups helpful and informative.

Table 3. Avoidance of advertisements and reaction to pop-ups (n = 141)

Variable	**Category**	**n**	**%**
Block or skip advertisements while shopping online	Yes, frequently	56	39.7
	Yes, occasionally	73	51.8
	No, never	12	8.5
Reaction to pop-up advertisements	Indifferent	44	31.2
	Intrusive and annoying	41	29.1
	Helpful and informative	28	19.9
	Use ad-blockers to avoid them	28	19.9

4.3 Personalisation, targeting, sharing and reviews

Views on personalisation were conditional rather than polarised (Table 4). The modal response (45.4%) was "it depends"; 29.8% said advertisements are too personalised and 19.1% said they are not. Reactions to advertisements targeted by browsing history were more evenly spread: 31.9% found them helpful and informative, 27.0% intrusive and annoying, 21.3% were indifferent and 19.9% were comfortable with the amount of personal data collected. Taken together, 51.8% responded positively (helpful, or comfortable with data collection) and 27.0% negatively.

Willingness to share advertisements was low. Only 17.0% were very or somewhat likely to share an online retail advertisement with friends or family, 41.8% were neutral and 41.1% were unlikely to do so. Customer reviews and ratings embedded in advertisements were viewed favourably: 75.9% said they would definitely (34.0%) or maybe (41.8%) be more likely to purchase, 16.3% said it would make no difference and 7.8% said they would be less likely to purchase.

Table 4. Personalisation, targeting, sharing and review cues (n = 141)

Variable	**Category**	**n**	**%**
Are advertisements too personalised?	It depends	64	45.4
	Yes, too personalised	42	29.8
	No, not too personalised	27	19.1
	Use ad-blockers to avoid them	8	5.7
Advertisements targeted by browsing history	Helpful and informative	45	31.9

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Variable	Category	n	%
	Intrusive and annoying	38	27.0
	Indifferent	30	21.3
	Comfortable with data collected for targeting	28	19.9
Likelihood of sharing advertisements	Very likely	7	5.0
	Somewhat likely	17	12.1
	Neutral	59	41.8
	Somewhat unlikely	48	34.0
	Very unlikely	10	7.1
Purchase likelihood if reviews and ratings appear in the advertisement	Yes, definitely	48	34.0
	Yes, maybe	59	41.8
	No difference	23	16.3
	Less likely to purchase	11	7.8

4.4 Perceived influence of advertising tools by product category

For each product category, respondents chose the single advertising tool that most influenced their purchases (Table 5). Video advertising was the most frequently chosen tool in seven of the eight categories, and was tied with sponsored advertising in books and music (35 selections each). Across all 1,128 category-level selections (8 categories × 141 respondents), video advertising accounted for 34.0%, sponsored advertising 25.7%, Google search ads 17.6%, viral advertising 14.0% and email advertising 8.7%.

The strength of video varied by category. It was strongest for grocery (44.0%) and weakest for books and music (24.8%). Google search ads drew a comparatively larger share in books and music (22.7%) and pharmacy (22.0%), and viral advertising was most prominent in fashion (19.1%). Email advertising was the least chosen tool in seven of the eight categories; in books and music it ranked fourth (14.9%), ahead of viral advertising (12.8%).

Table 5. Advertising tool reported as most influential, by product category (n = 141 per category; n and row %)

Product category	Video	Sponsored	Email	Google search	Viral
Grocery	62 (44.0)	30 (21.3)	6 (4.3)	19 (13.5)	24 (17.0)
Food and beverages	55 (39.0)	45 (31.9)	8 (5.7)	20 (14.2)	13 (9.2)
Health, beauty and skin care	45 (31.9)	42 (29.8)	14 (9.9)	23 (16.3)	17 (12.1)
Books and music	35 (24.8)	35 (24.8)	21 (14.9)	32 (22.7)	18 (12.8)
Fashion, clothing and accessories	48 (34.0)	33 (23.4)	11 (7.8)	22 (15.6)	27 (19.1)
Baby and kids care	46 (32.6)	38 (27.0)	12 (8.5)	27 (19.1)	18 (12.8)
Electronics and audio	46 (32.6)	33 (23.4)	17 (12.1)	24 (17.0)	21 (14.9)
Pharmacy	47 (33.3)	34 (24.1)	9 (6.4)	31 (22.0)	20 (14.2)

4.5 Awareness and usage of advertising tools

Mean awareness and usage scores were moderate to fairly high for most tools (Table 6). Social media advertising (M = 3.67) and online display advertising (M = 3.66) ranked first and second, followed by video advertising (M = 3.57) and Google search ads (M = 3.46). Sponsored content (M = 3.39) and email advertising (M = 3.00) ranked fifth and sixth. The approximate 95% confidence intervals of the top four tools overlap almost completely, so the data do not separate them. Email advertising is the only tool whose interval (2.80–3.20) lies clearly below that of social media advertising (3.52–3.82).

Table 6. Awareness and usage of advertising tools (n = 141; five-point scale)

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Rank	Advertising tool	Mean	SD
1	Social media advertising	3.67	0.914
2	Online display advertising	3.66	1.006
3	Video advertising	3.57	1.030
4	Google search ads	3.46	1.150
5	Sponsored content	3.39	1.107
6	Email advertising	3.00	1.219

4.6 Attributes influencing digital advertising in online retail

Customer reviews and recommendations ranked first (M = 3.84), followed by appealing product images (M = 3.79) and customer quality (M = 3.78) (Table 7). Intention to purchase and product specification were tied at 3.74. Informativeness (M = 3.68), catchy headlines (M = 3.65), trustworthiness (M = 3.62) and social interaction (M = 3.56) ranked lowest. The total spread between the highest and lowest mean is only 0.28 scale points, and the confidence intervals of all nine attributes overlap, so the ranking indicates a tendency, not a statistically established order.

Table 7. Attributes influencing digital advertising in online retail (n = 141; five-point scale)

Rank	Attribute	Mean	SD
1	Customer reviews and recommendations	3.84	0.958
2	Appealing product images	3.79	0.970
3	Customer quality	3.78	1.015
4=	Intention to purchase the product	3.74	0.944
4=	Product specification	3.74	1.012
6	Informative	3.68	0.959
7	Catchy headline	3.65	1.035
8	Trustworthiness	3.62	1.079
9	Social interaction	3.56	0.929

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Attention and avoidance coexist

The most striking pattern is that most respondents both noticed advertisements (62.4% attended at least sometimes) and avoided them (91.5% blocked or skipped them at least occasionally). Aggregate data cannot show whether the same individuals do both, but the pattern fits the advertising value perspective: consumers screen advertising selectively, engaging with what is useful or entertaining and discarding what impedes their goal (Ducoffe, 1996; Cho and Cheon, 2004). The reaction to pop-ups supports this reading. Nearly half the sample (48.9%) found pop-ups intrusive or used ad-blockers, against 19.9% who found them helpful, consistent with evidence that forced exposure raises perceived intrusiveness (Edwards et al., 2002). The negative attitudes reported for mobile-app and Facebook advertisements by Aydin (2016) point in the same direction, although that study used a different population and design.

5.2 Personalisation is accepted conditionally

The leading answer on personalisation was "it depends" (45.4%), and responses to browsing-history targeting were spread across helpful (31.9%), intrusive (27.0%), indifferent (21.3%) and comfortable (19.9%). The data do not identify the conditions respondents had in mind, but the literature suggests two candidates: perceived relevance, which explains why targeting can raise effectiveness (Goldfarb and Tucker, 2011), and perceived control over personal data, which can improve responses to personalised advertisements (Tucker, 2014). The finding that a majority did not describe advertisements as too personalised, yet a sizeable minority did, suggests that personalisation is neither uniformly welcomed nor rejected by this segment.

5.3 Video leads, and category fit matters

Video advertising was the most influential tool overall (34.0% of selections) and led in seven of eight categories, which accords with comparative evidence that digital formats are effective for reaching young consumers (Fuxman et al., 2014). Its share was highest in grocery (44.0%) and food and beverages (39.0%), categories where appearance, preparation and use can be demonstrated, and lowest in books and music (24.8%), where sponsored content tied with video and Google search ads drew an above-average share (22.7%). Pharmacy showed a similar search share (22.0%). These contrasts are tentative, since they come from a single forced-choice item per category, but they suggest that categories where consumers seek information or recommendations before buying give more

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room to search and sponsored formats. Email advertising was the weakest tool both in perceived influence (8.7%) and in awareness and usage (M = 3.00), the only tool clearly separated from the others on the latter measure.

5.4 Reviews are the strongest persuasive cue

Three findings converge on customer reviews as the leading cue. Three in four respondents (75.9%) said reviews and ratings shown within an advertisement would make a purchase more likely, only 7.8% said they would make it less likely, and customer reviews and recommendations had the highest mean among the nine attributes (M = 3.84). This agrees with evidence that online reviews influence sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006) and with Indian survey findings linking positive reviews to satisfaction (Anjali, 2017). The practical reading is that reviews act as a credibility cue in settings where products cannot be inspected. Two cautions apply: the attribute means differ by only 0.28 scale points and their confidence intervals overlap, and trustworthiness itself ranked eighth, which indicates that respondents may not distinguish trust from the specific cues, such as reviews, that create it.

5.5 FAMILIARITY IS NOT INFLUENCE

Social media advertising had the highest awareness and usage score (M = 3.67), yet video was the tool most often named as most influential. The two measures capture different constructs, familiarity on a rating scale and perceived influence in a forced choice, and they are not directly comparable. The contrast nonetheless warns retailers against equating the visibility of a channel with its persuasive power. Low willingness to share advertisements (17.0% likely) further suggests that viral amplification should not be assumed for retail advertising in this segment, even though viral advertising was chosen as the most influential tool by 14.0% of category-level selections.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Theoretical implications

The results are consistent with the advertising value framework (Ducoffe, 1996): formats perceived as engaging and informative (video, reviews, appealing images) rank high, while formats associated with intrusion (pop-ups) draw negative reactions. They also show that attention and avoidance are not mutually exclusive outcomes, so studies that measure only one of them may misrepresent how consumers handle advertising. Finally, the prominence of the "it depends" response on personalisation supports treating acceptance of targeting as a contingent attitude, to be modelled with moderators such as perceived control and relevance, rather than as a single favourable or unfavourable evaluation.

7. Limitations and future research

Several limitations qualify the findings. The sample was a non-probability convenience sample from one city, so results cannot be generalised to Chennai's population or to India. It was also highly homogeneous, with 92.2% of respondents aged 18–25, which prevented meaningful comparison across age groups or genders. Data were self-reported and may reflect social desirability or recall bias, and non-response (9 of 150 questionnaires not returned) may have introduced further bias. The analysis was descriptive: no hypothesis tests were run, and the confidence intervals reported here are approximations from summary statistics. Some response sets mixed attitudes and behaviours (for example, "I use ad-blockers" appeared as an option in questions about attitudes), which complicates interpretation. The channel-influence item forced a single choice per category and so cannot show combined effects of several tools. The study did not compare specific retailers or measure actual purchases.

Future research can address these limits in five ways. First, probability or quota samples across several Indian cities and age groups would allow generalisation. Second, inferential analysis (chi-square tests, ANOVA or regression by age, gender and shopping frequency) could test whether avoidance, personalisation attitudes and channel preference differ across segments. Third, structural models based on the advertising value framework could test how informativeness, entertainment, irritation, perceived control and trust affect attitude and purchase intention. Fourth, behavioural data from campaigns or experiments (for example, A/B tests of reviews in advertisements, or of controllable personalisation) would show whether stated preferences translate into action. Fifth, comparison of mobile-first platforms such as short-video and messaging services would update the channel picture for fast-changing media.

8. CONCLUSION

This study of 141 young consumers in Chennai shows that digital advertising for online retail is noticed but selectively resisted. Most respondents paid attention to advertisements, yet nearly all blocked or skipped them at least occasionally, and pop-ups were disliked more than liked. Personalisation was accepted conditionally. Video advertising was the tool most often named as most influential across retail categories, sponsored content and search followed, and email trailed. Customer reviews and recommendations were the most valued cue, both in direct responses and in attribute ratings. For retailers, the message is to earn attention with relevant, engaging and

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credible content, rather than to increase exposure. For researchers, the results provide a descriptive base for testing, in larger and more varied samples, how perceived value, control and trust shape responses to retail advertising.

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