

## MEDIA RELEASE

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### **Findings from the largest collection of online targeted advertisements revealed**

The Australian Ad Observatory at the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society has generated the most extensive known collection of targeted ads that people encounter on Facebook in Australia and built world-first research infrastructure that involved citizens in doing so.

The project has uncovered harmful or illegal advertising content that includes unlawful scam content, harmful and, in some cases, potentially unlawful gambling advertising, and concerning patterns of alcohol and unhealthy food advertising.

This project pioneered a way to observe the targeting of social media advertising across populations of users. With access to 357,849 unique ads from more than 2,000 participants collected between July 2021 and December 2023.

The Australian Ad Observatory benefits our understanding of platform-based advertising and has enabled independent research into the role that algorithmically targeted advertising plays in society.

While many social media platforms have policies against serving unlawful and harmful advertising content to Australians, in some cases, advertising that should not be allowed by the social media platforms' policy and is or may be unlawful, such as scam content and some gambling advertising, has still been served to Australians. In other cases, potentially harmful advertising, such as for alcohol, gambling and unhealthy food, has been targeted at vulnerable consumers such as young people.

Professor Daniel Angus is a Chief Investigator at the QUT node of the ADM+S and co-researcher on the Australian Ad Observatory project.

"The project has enabled observability and accountability of online advertising in a way that has not been possible through reliance on platform-provided transparency tools," said Professor Angus.

In collaboration with the ABC, CHOICE, Centre for AI and Digital Ethics (CAIDE), Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC), Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), and VicHealth, the Australian Ad Observatory has led to significant findings and impacts as it has uncovered hidden advertising practices on Facebook.

"Our work is revealing how sequences of ads are 'tuned' to work in tandem with people's identities and daily rhythms, leading to a more sophisticated understanding of potential issues that may result within this computational advertising ecosystem."

Professor Christine Parker is a Chief Investigator at the University of Melbourne node of the ADM+S and a co-researcher on the Australian Ad Observatory.

"The recommender systems that drive targeted advertising on digital platforms affect the wellbeing of Australians.

“For example, alcohol advertising has a significant impact on our wellbeing. Greenwashing affects consumer capacity to reduce their impact on the environment. And unhealthy food ads can normalise unhealthy eating patterns,” said Professor Parker

With the emergence of new forms of automated advertising, including Generative AI, this project continues to play a crucial role in the observability and accountability of online advertising.

Responding to significant recent and ongoing developments in automated advertising, the Australian Ad Observatory has developed new approaches for studying contemporary media and information environments where there are no longer shared flows of content or stable texts.

At this upcoming webinar, [The Australian Ad Observatory: Key Insights and Future Plans](#), the Australian Ad Observatory research team will share new methods and approaches behind their research and explain how they managed to uncover hidden patterns of advertising on Facebook.

The team will share the next steps in their research as they combine citizen science with data collection to provide visibility into the targeting of harmful products to particular groups and further explore experiences of advertising to understand its cultural impact.

Key findings from the Australian Ad Observatory:

- Alcohol companies publish almost 40,000 unique ads on Meta platforms per year and use the algorithmic advertising models of digital platforms to more frequently target Australians who drink at high-risk levels;
- Unhealthy food advertising frequently uses child-oriented themes and appears to be designed to appeal directly to children, while some ads are ads designed to appeal to parents and carers who need a quick, convenient snack or meal for their children;
- The Australian Ad Observatory identified up to 40 commercial sectors making environmental claims via social media ads. A substantial amount of these claims were false, unsubstantiated or vague;
- The Australian Ad Observatory has identified more than one hundred unlawful scam ads featuring photoshopped images of celebrities and advertising unlawful ‘get rich quick’ style scams;
- The Australian Ad Observatory uncovered illegal offshore gambling advertising in Australia and ‘grey zone’ gambling ads that have an uncertain degree of compliance with Australian law; and
- Some credit-related financial advertising appears to target Australians based on protected characteristics, with women disproportionately targeted by Buy Now Pay Later ads and men disproportionately targeted with credit card ads. Targeted advertising of particular credit products also demonstrates concerning trends for financially vulnerable cohorts.

*The Australian Ad Observatory: Key Insights and Future Plans* will be held Thursday 11 July 11am to 1pm. [Register here to join this webinar event.](#)

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**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:****The ADM+S Centre**

The ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S) is a cross-disciplinary, national research centre, which aims to create the knowledge and strategies necessary for responsible, ethical, and inclusive automated decision-making (ADM). Funded by the Australian Research Council from 2020 to 2027, ADM+S is hosted at RMIT in Melbourne, Australia, with nodes located at eight other Australian universities, and partners around the world. The Centre brings together leading researchers in the humanities, social and technological sciences in an international industry, research and civil society network. The Centre aims to contribute to the mitigation of the social and economic risks in the development and implementation of ADM, and to improve outcomes and efficiencies in four key focus areas where automation is already well advanced: news and media, mobilities, health care, and social services.